

Unsettling

by DeeMichelle

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Chapter 1 of 1

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It all began right after the Halloween celebration. The year 2006 was almost near an end, and the Ministry of Magic had begun to change their Rules of Conduct.

Arthur Weasley had been elected Minister of Magic one year after the fall of Voldemort, and he had been able to implement many changes to correct problems that had plagued him over the years. One such plan was to have an inter-office Holiday Exchange. This exchange required Ministry employees to interact with one another both during and outside of the regular Ministry hours of operation. This meant that employees would actually have to communicate and intermingle with co-workers with whom they may not have anything in common save working for the Ministry itself.

The Ministry employees groaned and presented their arguments. Most did not have, nor did they want to make time to participate in frivolous activities, such as afternoon picnic luncheons instead of the regular department head meetings they were accustomed to attending. This occasion ended in such failure the Minister was reminded of it quite frequently. However, Minister Weasley could not be persuaded to change his mind.

Thus, the New Year's Eve Masque Ball was born.

The minister employed his twin sons, Fred and George, to devise masks out of which the wearer could see, but through which none of the wearer's features could be detected even their eyes until the stroke of midnight on 31 December. At that time, the partygoers would have the option of revealing themselves partially or entirely to their fellow employees. The twins had just come back from a trip to America, where they had watched Muggle television in their hotel and had gotten a great idea for masks from a movie called *The Mask*. Arthur was impressed with their simple, yet adaptable design.

The occupants of each table were chosen in a systematically random fashion. Luna Lovegood-Weasley had made the suggestion one night at the Burrow while she and Ron sat closely by one another on the sofa.

"Well, I believe that there should be groups of people at each table, not just couples mingling and dancing at the ball," she had said to the room at large.

"Why is that, Luna, dear?" Molly Weasley had asked as she put the final touches on dinner.

"I just think there wouldn't be so much pressure to socialize with just one person," Luna had stated matter-of-factly.

Ron had sat up next to her with a look of pride upon his face. "What a clever idea, love." He had turned his attention to Arthur. "Hey, Dad, how about if one person from each

department joins each group?"

Arthur had sat back in his high-backed chair, strumming his fingers in thought. "You know, that just might work."

Molly had entered and sat on the arm of Arthur's chair. "I agree. I think it's a lovely idea," she had interjected. "If the committee doesn't agree, Arthur, you can always threaten pairing up all of the single men with the single women," she had added mischievously.

"What's wrong with that idea?" Arthur had asked, sounding a bit hurt. Obviously, that had been his plan all along.

Molly had patted his shoulder consolingly. Luna had let out a small laugh, and Ron had begun to verbalise a list of names of Ministry employees who would be very put out by being forced together outside of work. His lengthy list had ended when he had said, "Hermione, Harry, and, Dad, must you really invite Mal...?"

Arthur had interrupted him by raising his hand silently in the air. "I know how you feel, son, but all Ministry employees are eligible to attend." Arthur had waited for Ron to settle back at Luna's side before he had finished. "Besides, it is an historical fact that Slytherins make the best Hit Wizards. Draco is no exception."

"Do we get to come?" Fred and George had chimed.

Before Arthur could answer, Ginny had inquired, "Are spouses invited?" as she had snuggled closer to Neville Longbottom.

"Please?" Neville had asked. "I would prefer not to leave Ginny at home."

"Fine!" Arthur had said as he looked at his wife and their growing family. "Who exactly is in charge of the Ministry again?" he had added sarcastically.

The entire room had filled with laughter at his obvious indignation.

Draco Malfoy sat in his office on the second floor of the Ministry of Magic. He headed the Magical Law Enforcement Squad as the Ministry's Head Hit Wizard. He was proud of his position and all that it implied. He had an entire department at his disposal.

"I wasn't sorted into Slytherin for nothing," he said aloud as he finished his post and slid it towards the waiting owl.

"Do you know who she is?"

"No, Zabini," Draco answered. "That's what you're for."

Blaise let out a husky laugh. "Yes, well, I'm not your lap dog." He held a hand up to stop the expected verbal lashing. "I am, however, your best friend, and isn't that what friends are for?" he finished in a high-pitched tone.

Draco exaggerated a shiver of disgust. "You sounded just like Parkinson."

Blaise smirked proudly. "I'm just trying to keep the dames in your life straight in my mind, mate."

"Sod off, Zabini," Draco said dismissively.

Blaise stood and had only followed the owl a short distance when he spotted Harry Potter standing in the hallway and speaking to another office head. Blaise tried to keep an eye on the owl, but it had flown past Potter and round the corner, disappearing from sight.

"Just bloody great," he mumbled.

Potter looked towards Blaise and scowled before shaking hands with the other fellow and heading in the same direction as the owl.

Blaise soon followed and hoped that he would find the owl before it found its addressee. He quickly walked down the corridor, glancing into open doors and flashing his winning smile at some of the rooms' female occupants. He turned left and began the trek down yet another long hall just in time to see the tiny owl fly out of a door at the far end.

"This is going to be fun," he said aloud as he turned to report his findings to Draco.

Hermione Granger had turned twenty-seven in September, and her life-plan was successfully on course. After completing her degree at the University, she had attained a job working for the Ministry of Magic. As a young girl, she had sworn she would never work for them, but Mr. Weasley had made some dramatic changes that appealed to her philanthropic nature. She had taken a job working as Mr. Weasley's assistant and soon worked her way up to the head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts position. Hermione knew this was not where she would play out her career, but she had to start somewhere, right?

A spotted-grey owl flew in through Hermione's open door. Just as she began to reward the bird for bringing the note, seven more owls flew into her office and began dropping parcels and notes alike. "Oh, for heaven's sake," Hermione said, exasperated. She shuffled the correspondence aside, impatiently shooed the birds away, and continued to mark up her report on the latest use that an "inventive" wizard came up with for a vacuum cleaner. She usually found her job quite amusing. However, lately she was becoming bored with the monotony it presented on a daily basis. She had always dreamt of marriage and starting a family. However, she never thought about wanting those things this soon.

Hermione finished her report and began sorting through her rather large pile of post, which she had been neglecting for a few days now. While arranging them into separate piles—junk mail, Ministry memos, personal mail, and numerous parcels—a bright smile graced her face as she saw a familiar blue and silver package. Hurriedly scooting the unsorted items out of the way, she carefully unwrapped it. A long gold chain was encased in a blue velvet box. She gently removed the necklace from the box and laced it through her fingers. As she admired the chain, the blue parchment quickly turned into a pretty shade of lavender as it transformed into a familiar shape—but Hermione knew *this* was no Howler.

"Dear friend," it began to speak in a deep male voice, "thank you for the pleasant gift exchange we have shared over the last few weeks. Your gift ideas were inventive and spot-on, I might add, given the anonymity of the receiver—me. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I have. I will miss your kind notes filled with witty humour. I will forever remain your secret friend. Oh, and please accept this as my final gift to you. There is no need to reciprocate the exchange; it has been my pleasure."

Hermione sat back and listened to the message with her eyes closed; she always closed them when she listened to his voice. She liked to imagine that he was there with her. Each time she thought she had figured out the identity of her mystery beneficiary, he would do or say something to put her off the trail.

"'Frustratingly secret' is what you *should* have said," she admonished the lavender parchment as it folded itself neatly.

Harry stood watching Hermione from her office doorway. She looked relaxed as she listened to the cryptic note. From what Harry gathered, the note was from her exchange partner. Jealousy flared a bit as he heard the voice say, "It has been a pleasure," and then watched as the note folded itself onto her desk.

She opened her eyes and criticised the note, "'Frustratingly secret' is what you *should* have said."

"Talking to yourself again, Hermione?" he asked, interrupting her reverie.

"Harry!" she said, jumping at the sound of his voice. "You startled me."

"Sorry, doll," he apologized. "I didn't mean to. You just had this dreamy look about your face, and I thought I'd bring you back to reality."

"Nice try, but reality is something I have a firm grasp on," she answered with more gloom in her voice than she intended.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked as he seated himself.

"Yes. You can tell me that you're the one with whom I've been exchanging gifts," she began, "and then you can deal with knowing that I've finally fallen for you," she finished dejectedly.

"As good as that sounds, I have to say sorry again. My exchange partner was male."

"And just how do you know that?" she asked suspiciously.

"I don't know *who* he was; I just know that it was a bloke," Harry defended himself. "He sent me man-type gifts. Nothing like a lady would have sent."

"So, you don't know who it was, but you know it was a man." Hermione spoke more to herself than to Harry.

"Yep, that about sums it up," Harry replied cheerfully.

"Do you *want* to know who he is?" Hermione asked.

"Not really. It doesn't matter to me." Harry looked at her incredulously and asked, "Do *you* know who your partner is? I thought that was against the rules," he said perturbed.

"Don't give me that look, Harry. You know how much I dislike secrets!" Hermione defended. She then held up her hand, draped with the chain, and showed Harry her new gift. "He sent this to me today, and the exchange has been over for a week now. However, he could have sent it to me days ago," she spoke as if she were speaking to herself again, "because I haven't checked my mail for some time."

"Don't tell me," Harry began to complain. "You've landed yet another love-sick puppy at your feet."

Hermione gave him a sheepish grin and replied, "You're one to talk, and besides, I don't even know who he is. So, I haven't 'landed' anyone."

"You could land me, you know," Harry said as his manner changed to sincerity.

"We would never work out, Harry," Hermione argued. "You know that as well as I. We tried. Remember?"

Harry stood and took the chain from her. "Let me put this on for you," he offered as he moved in behind her.

"You can't change the subject that easily," Hermione maintained.

On New Year's Eve, Hermione stood in the doorway of the ballroom and listened to the soft music floating to her from the far corner. She was amazed at the sight before her. True, she had seen some creatively decorated ballrooms before. She *had* attended Hogwarts for seven years, after all. Albus Dumbledore had taken great pride in his decorating abilities back in the day, yet this room was more elegant than anything she had ever seen. It was elaborate. The far wall of double doors opened to an area magicked to reveal an enchanted garden. There were portraits on each wall of past Ministers of Magic. The portraits were watching the room's occupants with different levels of curiosity, scrutiny, and pride. Hermione smiled up at the nearest portrait and then continued to glance around the room and found that she recognised no one.

"Why would you?" she chastised herself. "Everyone is wearing a mask of some sort. Isn't that what Arthur intended?"

She had to commend the twins on their Charms abilities. They had made general masks that would transfigure into whatever the wearer imagined, automatically harmonizing with the wearer's attire. Hermione's mask covered her eyes and extended a bit below her cheeks and above her brows. It was trimmed in the same shimmering diamond-like jewels as were on her gown and had taken on the same glorious shade of blue. She was very pleased with the overall effect it had achieved. Her eyes turned a shade of deep blue; her coiffure glistened under the candlelight and with the addition of a well-placed glamour, her skin glowed golden as if she had just returned from a sunny vacation.

She moved further into the ballroom and noticed that several heads turned her way. She could not help the satisfied smile that played on her lips as she brushed her hands lightly over her gown. It was a light fabric that she had found in Muggle London while shopping with her mother. They had stopped at a quaint little shop that advertised unique fabrics. After only a few minutes, her mother had held up the midnight blue cloth that now hung freely on Hermione's body. Her mother had almost begged to sew the gown for her daughter. She had informed Hermione that she, herself, had never been to a formal dance and would love to have a small part in making the night a wonderful success for her only child. How could any daughter argue with that?

Hermione stood a bit taller at the memory of her mother and the dressmaking endeavour. The design was simple and semi-strapless. Hermione had argued with her mother that she would not bare her shoulders to the entire Ministry. Her mother had just laughed and conceded, adding a wrap made of the same fabric to complete the ensemble. Hermione had sewn the additional fabric at the point of the bodice where a strap would connect and wore it over her left shoulder, allowing it to fall gracefully down her back, where it almost reached the hem. Her favourite addition to the gown was added with a magical touch. Her mother had mentioned a vision she had had of the midnight blue fabric turning almost pitch black under certain lighting, and how it would look like the midnight sky kissed with pixie dust. "If only we could apply a little magic," her mother had finished with a twinkle in her eye. So, Hermione had muttered an incantation and waved her wand, beginning at the right hip, making a slight wave-like motion to the left and ending at the hem. The charm left a trail of small, diamond-like jewels that sparkled and shimmered in even the dimmest lighting.

Hermione took a deep breath, found her assigned table, and took in the sight of the group of Ministry employees with whom she would dine and converse for the evening. She nervously touched the thin gold chain around her neck. This small gesture once again boosted her confidence as she began to mingle with the others.

Shortly after the dinner dishes cleared, Hermione noticed the other women around the table became distracted. She glanced over her shoulder and felt her heart skip a beat.

Could that be him? she wondered to herself as the man moved toward her with purpose.

He was tall and regal looking. He appeared to be wearing a ship-captain's hat. Hermione knew it must be part of his mask. His eyes were visible, though his mask, in a dark, masculine design, covered the rest of his features. The closer he came, the more his mask changed, seeming to melt into shimmering silver.

Without saying a word, the tall stranger stopped by her side and extended his hand. She looked back at her mesmerised dining companions and politely excused herself as she took his hand. He held her chair for her as she rose to stand next to him.

"Thank you," she said, searching his eyes in vain for some clue to his identity.

Nodding his head in acknowledgement, he led her to the dance floor, where they moved gracefully into the dance. Hermione felt like a princess as the other dancers began to clear a path for the beautiful couple. When the song ended and another began, Hermione was startled to see another man interrupt and move in to replace her partner,

who bowed once more, kissed her hand, and then gave it to her new partner.

"Hello, Miss," the new man said. "Shall we?"

Hermione blinked slowly and smiled in acceptance, moving into his arms as a slow waltz began. He held her correctly, at arm's length, and as they moved about the room, Hermione surveyed the crowd, looking for the man with whom she had just danced.

"You look distracted," her partner mentioned.

Hermione smiled at him and politely told him that she did not mean to ignore him, but thought she had recognised someone she knew. *That was a dumb thing to say*, she thought and then promptly apologised. "I'm sorry," she said smiling up at him. "I just thought I knew the man you replaced. I'm usually not this rude."

He chuckled at her sincere apology and replied, "That's all right. I'm usually not so forward in asking women to dance."

The remainder of the song went smoothly as the couple discussed the evening's meal and other things to pass the time. They both agreed that it had been superb food and then parted amicably when the song was over.

Hermione made her way back to her table and was delayed when two more men approached her for the next dance. One conceded her hand to the other, and she was once again swept onto the dance floor. Her partner brought her close and swayed with her to the beat of the slow tune. His right hand moved up her back just enough so that she felt its warmth on her bare skin. The gentle touch sent a shiver down her spine. He pulled away just enough to look in her eyes. He seemed to take in her flushed appearance and used his free hand to finger the golden chain around her neck.

"You are beautiful," he whispered to her so softly that she almost missed hearing the compliment. He reached his hand to gently trace the outline of her necklace, then moved his fingers up her throat with a light caress and softly kissed her lips.

Harry stood and took the chain from her. "Let me put this on for you," he offered as he moved in behind her.

"You can't change the subject that easily," Hermione maintained.

Harry pulled back slowly and rested his chin next to Hermione's temple. He could feel her pulse quicken and smiled. He closed his eyes and remembered the last time he had seen that necklace.

Harry gently brushed her hair to one side with his hands, put the chain around her neck, leant into her, and whispered, "I wasn't trying to change the subject. I'm trying to convince you that we should try again."

Hermione moved away from him, pushed her hair back over her shoulders, and took his hand in hers. "As good as that sounds Harry, we just can't."

"I won't stop trying," he replied as he leant down and kissed her softly on the lips. "Keep that in mind."

Hermione looked into the eyes of the man who had just kissed her, searching for a sign that he knew who she was. Could he have been her exchange partner? What she saw amazed her; the colour of his eyes was changing in the candlelight shades of deep blue, to green, to a smoky black, and when they turned a beautiful shade of familiar green, Hermione stopped and stared at him for a moment. The music had stopped and before she could say anything, she found herself in the arms of another man, who had been waiting for his turn about the floor with her.

Hermione tried to be polite, but she needed a break. "Please excuse me from this one, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," the gentleman said. "You're in high demand this evening."

"It would seem so," she replied as he escorted her back to her table.

"Would you care for a drink?" he offered.

"Yes, please," she said, then gasped, "Oh!" as a drink appeared in front of her.

Her companion turned to look over at the bar, then moved aside and said, "It appears that I've been outdone yet again."

Hermione followed his gaze and found the man to whom she had given the first dance. He raised his glass in acknowledgement, and she nodded a polite thank you. She turned to speak to the other man once more, but he had disappeared. When she glanced back towards the bar, she found that man had left, as well.

This is turning out to be an interesting evening, she thought to herself. The men were not to be found, yet she felt no disappointment at this realisation.

Leaving her drink untouched, Hermione stood and went outside to catch her breath.

Blaise approached the railing and stared out into the shimmering gardens. "Are you going to reveal yourself to her?"

Draco pulled off his mask and held the captain's hat in his hands. "I hadn't planned on it," he replied as he looked in his friend's direction. "Do you honestly think she'd even give me the time of day if she knew?"

"She does look amazing tonight," Blaise commented as he, too, removed his mask. "These masks really do come in handy."

"Yeah," Draco agreed. "A lot of bloody good that does me. She's been dancing with that other bloke, and there's a line just *waiting* to get their filthy hands on her," he responded.

"Well, your idea to use the masks to our advantage has helped, so far. She's only danced with the three of us you got the first, just like we planned, and until *he* cut in, I was doing just fine."

Draco turned and said in a hushed whisper, "You were supposed to keep her away from everyone else while I changed my appearance. She wasn't *supposed* to dance with anyone else."

Blaise shrugged. "We weren't fast enough," he said as he leant back against the railing and looked out of the corner of his eye to gauge Draco's reaction. "Oh shite," he said almost under his breath as his eyes fell upon Hermione, who stood near the doorway staring at them.

"What?" Draco asked as he turned to follow the direction of Blaise's gaze and heard the familiar pop of Disapparation.

Harry had followed Hermione onto the terrace, thinking to himself, *Finally I can be alone with her. I'll just tell her it's me maybe she'll understand*. But when he had walked

outside and stood admiring her while gathering his courage to speak, he saw that she was listening to the deep conversation of two men near the balustrade. He heard the loathed voice at the same moment he identified the speaker.

"She wasn't supposed to dance with anyone else."

Malfoy! Harry thought and began to move forward just as he heard Hermione Disapparate.

Harry hesitated when he saw Malfoy's reaction to Hermione's departure. *Could it be?* Harry thought to himself. He looked at Malfoy and realised that he and Zabini must have known the woman on the balcony was Hermione. *But Malfoy actually looked somewhat sad when she left. Why would he...* Harry stopped mid-thought when he noticed Malfoy's mask. Malfoy had been dancing with her!

"Hey!" Zabini shouted as he caught sight of Harry. "Who are you?"

Harry moved past Zabini without a glance and stood before Malfoy.

"So, you're the one," he said.

"What are you on about?" Malfoy asked, "And why do you care?"

Harry reached up and slowly removed his mask.

"Potter," Zabini practically spat the name, "always the saviour."

Draco held up his hand to quiet Blaise's sarcastic comments. "What makes me 'the one,' Potter?" Draco asked in a serious tone as he straightened to face Harry.

Hermione Apparated back to her apartment in a huff. "Of all the..." she stopped short before she began to curse uncontrollably. She rubbed her arms to remove the chill she had experienced while out on the portico. She had only gone out there for a bit of fresh air. What she had overheard had kept her outside for longer than she had planned, and in her haste to get away, she had forgotten her wrap. She kicked off her shoes and sat next to Crookshanks on the sofa. Stroking his fur, she leant back and stared at the ceiling.

"Oh, Crooks," she said, "how am I going to handle this one?"

The cat just looked at her and slowly closed his eyes, enjoying the attention.

"Draco Malfoy," she whispered almost dreamily. "Why did it have to be him?"

She turned and picked up her familiar, looking him squarely in the eyes. "Harry. Why couldn't it have turned out to be Harry?" she asked him.

He blinked once and then returned her stare as if the answer were an obvious one.

She brushed her nose against his. "I know. I know. We tried. It didn't work. Blah blah and all that."

Crookshanks closed his eyes a bit at her tone.

"Are you laughing at me?" she demanded as she set him in her lap. Her hands felt the familiar rumbling of his happy purring as she began to scratch him between his ears. "Happy New Year, Crooks."

Draco had never felt this happy. Granger. She liked him well, liked her exchange partner anyway from what Potter had told him. Draco sat on his bed, remembering the care he had taken in choosing the *right* gifts for her during their exchange. True, he had not known it was Granger at the time, but she had been on his mind ever since Blaise had discovered her identity. He settled himself against the headboard and rested his hands behind his head, thinking about how he was going to seduce her.

He laughed at himself. "Your ego is going to get in the way of having the only woman who has ever challenged you, Malfoy," he said aloud. "She's not the simpering fool mother was when father was around. That's for sure."

"Sorry, Mum," he said to the picture of his mother on the stand next to his bed, "but you know it's true."

Moving to his writing desk, Draco did the only thing he felt would work with Granger. He began to write.

Harry Apparated into his living room shortly after his revealing conversation with Malfoy. He removed his cloak and gloves and threw them onto the sofa, and then sat down with his head in his hands.

Why does my life have to be so bloody complicated? he thought to himself as he rubbed his temples. *Hermione is in love with Malfoy. How ironic is that?*

"She loves you like a brother," he said aloud. "Isn't that what she's told you your entire life? And reminds you every time you bring it up again?"

Harry surged to his feet and paced frantically back and forth, his mind in turmoil. Years of love and longing battled with years of antipathy and aversion. At last, he fell again onto the sofa. *There's only one thing left to do,* he concluded.

"Help Malfoy."

Hermione sat at her desk, staring at the open door and the people walking through the hallway. A familiar spotted-grey owl flew into the room and landed on her desk. It hooted softly and held its leg out for her to remove the blue parchment.

"He's got a lot of nerve," she said to the owl as she released the note, sat back, and watched it transform. This time she did not close her eyes. There was no need she knew who had sent it, this time.

"You looked amazing Sunday night, Granger truly stunning." Malfoy's voice his true voice spoke tenderly. "I've never been very good at apologies not that you're in need of one or anything but there's a good explanation for my secrecy."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath to ready herself for the looming explanation she was about to receive.

"I didn't know it was you until just the other day."

Hermione opened her eyes at the clear sound of his voice.

Draco Malfoy stood mere feet from her desk. He leant against the doorjamb, his tall, lean frame relaxed, yet Hermione felt as if he towered there by his very presence. She felt her body fill with joy at the sight of him.

"You're a bit unsettling, Malfoy," she said to him as she tried to maintain a calm appearance.

His eyes lit up at her comment. "Haven't I always been that way for you?" he smirked.

"Well, not that I'd admit it publicly..." she flirted.

"May I?" he asked as he moved into her office, placing his hand on the back of a chair.

"By all means," she laughed and gestured for him to sit.

He sat and surveyed her for a moment, trying to read her reaction to his interruption. "Look, Granger, this is just as difficult for me as it seems to be for you," he began.

"I thought you weren't here to apologise," she said with more malice in her voice than she intended.

Draco cocked his head to the side and raised both brows. "Are you quite finished?"

Hermione squared her shoulders, clasped her hands on her desk, and returned his look.

"You certainly are stubborn," he said as he took in her haughty posture.

"You're one to talk," she laughed and relaxed a bit. "Why are you here, Malfoy?"

"An explanation is in order," he began. "I didn't know how you would react when you found out it was me."

"And?" she prompted, a bit annoyed at his reasoning.

"And nothing," he answered, "but, now that you know, how about it?"

"How about what?" she asked, a bit more annoyed.

"A date," he replied.

"Excuse me?" Hermione's voice went two octaves higher in disbelief.

Draco laughed and repeated, "A date. You and I, together on an official date."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" she asked sceptically.

"Whichever would generate a 'yes' from you works for me." He winked and flashed her that smile she had seen him bestow upon others.

"You're a bit unsettling, Malfoy," she said as she felt a shiver of excitement.

"I think we've established that, Granger," he replied cheekily. "So, which is it?"

"Which is what?" she asked, laughing at his conceit.

"Is it 'yes' because I asked you, or will you say 'yes' because I told you?" he asked as if those were the only available choices and 'no' would not be an acceptable reply.

"It's 'yes' because I want to, Malfoy," she answered softly, "and for no other reason than that."

Draco felt himself relax at her response. "Well, good; I'll be going then," he said and stood to leave.

"Draco..." Hermione all but whispered his name, stopping his departure. "When?"

He turned and winked at her once more. "I've got a few things to take care of first. I'll let you know. Okay?"

Hermione nodded and watched as he left her office before quickly seizing a quill and penning a note to Harry.

It's Malfoy, Harry. Draco Malfoy is my, was my... oh, I don't know what to call him, but he's asked me out on a date!

I accepted.

Now what?

I'm worried.

Hermione

Harry folded the note for what seemed like the tenth time in just as many minutes. He had stood to make the trek to her office when he heard a soft knock on his door.

"Come in," he authorised.

Hermione poked her head in and said, "I couldn't wait. Are you sure you have time?"

Harry smiled warmly at her and nodded. "Always."

"So, what do you think?" she asked as she helped herself to a chair. "You got my note, right?"

Harry held up the note that was still in his hand. "Yes."

"And?" she fidgeted in her seat. "Don't keep me waiting. What do you think?"

Harry sat quietly for a bit, studying her face and remembering why he loved her.

"Hermione," he said, finally breaking the silence, "you know I love you. No, hear me out, please?" he said as she began to interject. "You know I love you, but you were right. We can never work." Harry did not look at Hermione as he spoke. He seemed to be replaying a conversation he had already had with himself. "I grew up without a real family; then I met Ron and you, and you both became my family. I think I've always loved you, but I've never been *in love* with you."

Hermione nodded to him when he finally looked at her. "I know. Me, too." She stood and went to him. "So, you'll be all right with this? I mean, it *is* Malfoy," she said, trying to lighten the situation.

Harry did not laugh. He just pulled her to him and held her close. "I saw the way he held you when you danced with him the other night. I watched him watching you while you danced with Zabini." He moved her away from him just enough so that he could look directly in her eyes. "And, I saw the way he looked when you left. He was sad, Hermione. He actually looked hurt just for a moment, mind you but it was there. I know that look and even more important I know how that feels."

"Harry," Hermione began and then stopped when he shook his head and placed a finger upon her lips.

"It's enough to know that you'll have someone strong looking after you."

"I don't need anyone *looking after me*, Harry, especially not Malfoy," she said angrily.

Harry's voice remained soft and calm. "I know, and that's not how I meant it anyway. You know that."

Hermione sighed and nodded in agreement. "I do. It's just..."

"It's just nothing, Hermione. You need to follow this path whatever that means," Harry laughed, "and just go with it. See where it takes you. You'll regret it if you don't."

Hermione stepped back from him and took his hands in hers. "Thank you," she said as she gave him a squeeze, then turned and left his office.

A short time later, Harry sent an owl to Malfoy.

It's done.

Draco read the note and smiled to himself.

Blaise nodded to the note. "You look like the cat that ate the canary. What gives?"

"Nothing," Draco said mysteriously, "nothing at all."

When Blaise began to probe further, Draco told him to leave. "I have plans to make. Go away."

Hermione was busy working late at the Ministry. She had not heard from Draco since he left her office two weeks ago, and it was making her nervous. *What could he be planning? Why was he taking so long? Why am I making such a big deal about it?*

She gathered her things and was locking up for the night when she felt someone behind her.

"It's about time, Granger. Were you planning on working all evening?"

Hermione turned and found herself in Draco's arms. "You're invading my space, Malfoy," she said as she looked up into his smiling eyes.

"That was my intention all along, Granger," he replied huskily.

"Will you stop calling me 'Granger'? I have a first name, you know," she scolded and tried to pull away.

He bent so that their foreheads touched, looked into her eyes, and said, "Hermione."

Hermione closed her eyes and felt his voice wash over her body like a warm summer day. She whispered, "Finally."

"Come with me tomorrow," he commanded more than asked.

"Are you asking or telling?" she laughed.

He smiled mischievously and repeated, "Come with me tomorrow."

"All right," she agreed. "Where are you taking me?"

Draco smiled and Hermione felt her body tingle with anticipation. "You'll see. Wear those Muggle jeans you like so much."

Hermione gave him a look that set him to laughing. "What?" he asked innocently. "You look good in them, and besides, we'll be outside for most of the day. Dress warmly."

"All right," she said again, "but only because you're being so nice about asking me."

"Meet me at the Manor bright and early," he instructed.

"Yes, sir," she saluted mockingly.

They made their way to the Apparation area and said their goodbyes.

"See you in the morning," he smiled once more and Disapparated.

"I can't wait," Hermione said pensively.

Hermione arrived at the Malfoy Estates earlier than she had anticipated. "Bright and early," she laughed aloud. "Is this early enough?"

"Not for me."

Hermione jumped at Draco's voice.

"Unsettling, yes, I know," he laughed.

Hermione smiled at him and turned toward the front gates. "Very regal, Malfoy."

"Come with me," he said softly as he guided her through the front gates. They chatted about the grounds and the improvements he had made since his parents' deaths.

Hermione found herself in the Malfoy gardens, which were covered with a light snow. The sight took her breath away, and she turned to tell Draco just how wonderful she found the design. She caught him staring at her with a small smile upon his lips.

"What?" she asked boldly, "Do I have leaves in my hair or something?"

"No," his reply was soft, "you're beautiful. I never really realised that until just now seeing you here at my Manor, in my gardens."

"If that is so," she began, somewhat embarrassed, "what were all of those compliments you so graciously bestowed upon me after the gala?" She looked at him, daring him to recant his previous flattery.

"You looked nice then as well, but this is different," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, thank you," she laughed, "I think."

Draco chuckled as well and took her hand in his, "May I?" he asked.

Hermione nodded her approval and followed him as he directed her through the remainder of the gardens and down a path that followed a large hedge to another opening.

Draco stopped right before they went through and stood in front of Hermione.

"Do you trust me?" he asked in a sombre tone.

"Are you serious?" she asked him with the same tone in her voice.

He smiled at her and nodded, "Yes. I am, actually. Now close your eyes."

Hermione chuckled, closed her eyes, and nodded, "Ready."

"Good," he said and she felt him move behind her and place his strong hands to cover her eyes. "Move forward."

Hermione heard and felt the crunch of gravel under her boots as she slowly walked on. She could feel the heat radiate from the closeness of his body behind hers.

Don't trip over your own feet, Hermione... don't trip... don't trip... she repeated to herself.

"We're almost there," he coached. "Just a few more steps."

Draco felt Hermione's smile against the palms of his hands and a sense of pride well up inside of him. He slowed just a few feet from their destination and lightly ran his thumb over her upturned lips.

"We're here," he said and lifted his hands away.

Hermione opened her eyes and quickly turned to face him. "What are you playing at, Malfoy?"

He laughed and answered, "I've seen you fly I thought riding would be best."

"You think of everything." She rolled her eyes in response.

"You do ride, don't you?"

Hermione nodded and walked toward the large slate grey Arabian stallion, standing next to a smaller Arabian mare of a lighter shade.

"Hermione, be care..." Draco began but stopped when he saw Hermione's sure approach to his favourite horse.

She turned and whispered, "What's his name?"

"Knight," he replied. "Knight of the Silver Sands."

Hermione flashed a winning smile. "That's a superb name, Draco strong and majestic." *Like someone else I know*, she reminded herself.

"Like someone else I know," Draco said under his breath.

"May I?" she questioned after several moments of getting to know her new friend.

"Hermione, he's not used to anyone riding him save me," Draco forewarned as he went to her side. "It wouldn't be a good idea."

"I *do* know how to ride," Hermione answered.

"Maybe, but you were miserable riding both the Hippogriff and the Thestral at school," he reminded her. "Even the Slytherins knew that."

"True, but they both flew." Hermione put her left leg in the stirrup, grabbed onto the pommel, and waited for Draco to give her a leg up. He hoisted her into the saddle and she smiled down at him and said, "Let's go."

Draco moved in front of Knight, looked into the animal's eyes and murmured, "Be careful with her."

Then he mounted the mare.

The couple rode in silence as they made their way through a timbered area to a small stream that ran along a clearing.

"Just a bit further," Draco informed her.

"I know I've said this a few times, Draco, but this truly is a serene place," Hermione said. "What is that?" she asked as something in the distance caught her eye.

Draco turned and stared for a moment. "Malfoy Cemetery."

"Oh, Draco," Hermione said sorrowfully, "I hadn't realised."

Draco stayed his mount and turned to speak to her. "How would you know, Hermione? You have never been here before. Besides, it's all right. It doesn't bother me as much anymore."

Sympathetically, Hermione stretched her hand out and placed it on his arm.

"This mare was my mother's."

Hermione gently squeezed his arm but did not comment.

"Her name is Sultanah," he offered as he leant forward to rub the mare's neck. "She's Knight's mother." He spoke in a tone that conveyed his love for and loss of his own mother.

Draco cleared his throat, smiled at Hermione, and motioned for them to move on. "It really is just a bit further down stream."

Draco tethered the horses to a nearby tree and guided Hermione to the area in which he had arranged for them to eat.

"I never took you for one to like surprises, Malfoy," Hermione teased as she walked in front of him again with his hands over her eyes.

"I like *giving* them, Granger, not receiving them," he retorted and then lifted his hands from her face. "Surprise," he whispered into her ear.

Hermione turned into his embrace and inhaled his scent of man and horse it was enough to make her knees weak. "You're amazing," she said into his chest.

"What?" Draco asked.

Hermione looked up at him. "I'm hungry," she amended.

Draco explained he had instructed the house-elf to cast a Warming Charm over the area earlier that morning. So, when they entered, he and Hermione were able to shed their coats and relax while eating the light picnic meal spread on the ground. After they sated their hunger, Hermione sat back against the trunk of a nearby tree. Watching Draco out of the corner of her eye, she noticed his eyes drooping.

"Are you going to fall asleep?" she asked incredulously.

Draco let a yawn escape him and laughed, "I hadn't planned on it, and I am not accustomed to sleeping on the ground without a pillow."

"Snob," Hermione teased as she offered her lap to him. "Will this suffice?"

Draco scooted closer and relaxed his head against her thigh; then, without saying a word, he drifted off to sleep.

Hermione awoke with the feeling someone was staring at her. She smiled playfully with her eyes still closed, and asked, "Why are you watching me?"

"I've just been thinking," he answered.

She opened her eyes and asked, "About?"

"I was wondering what my mother would say if she could see me with you," he offered.

"Do I want to know your conclusion?" she asked sceptically.

"She would have been proud of me, Hermione," he said humbly. "She would have liked me with you."

"I don't know that I agree with that," Hermione gently argued.

"She wanted my happiness," he said plainly, "nothing more, nothing less."

"And I make you happy?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Unsettlingly," Draco replied, leant into her, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

A/n: Beta thanks to Subversa, who had to hold my hand through this story. She fixed a lot of things, but please note ~ some have cited that the dance scene is confusing. I like the way it is. It worked in my mind. So, please don't blame her for anything wrong in this piece. I'm stubborn. :-)