The Broken Road

by Britt1975

Hermione's Christmas doesn't go quite as she planned.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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Authors Note: This was written for the 2005-2006: Celebrate the Season with Draco and Hermione fic exchange at the DMHGficExchange on Livejournal. My prompt can be found at the end of the story. My lovely betas were SnarkyWench and Bunney and God bless them for putting up with me.

The snow fell thickly, muffling the sound of the slamming door as she escaped from the brightly lit holiday hell that equaled Christmas with her parents. Rather than the fluffy stuff of clichéd Christmas movies, though, this snow was cold and wet and sticky, clumping dirty and gray in streets already littered with the detritus that came naturally with the holidays.

"Even the weather isn't cooperating with me tonight," thought Hermione as she pulled up her collar and trudged toward home.

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Christmas with her parents had been a bad idea from the start, but her loneliness had overruled her common sense when she'd gotten Ron's last owl. As the Cannon's Lead Publicist, he spent a lot of time on the road with the team. Hermione normally didn't begrudge his time away from home. He was doing something he loved, and she rather enjoyed the quiet peacefulness that reigned over their shared flat in his absence. Besides that, her job as a Curse Breaker for the Ministry kept her busy and out of town almost as often as Ron. Not to mention that she had plenty of company when she wanted it. In the years since the war, she'd kept in close touch with a number of Hogwarts alumni whom she called friends, even if that hadn't been the case at school.

The war had changed a lot of people, and following the events of sixth year, many truths had come to light, not the least of which was the vow that Snape had made to protect Draco, and the lengths that he'd been forced to go in order to fulfill it. In the heated days and weeks that followed Dumbledore's death, Aurors had searched fervently for the ex-Potions master and his charge. The headquarters of the Order had been moved from Grimmauld Place to Hogwarts in the event that Snape decided to lead Voldemort to their door. Hourly reported sightings of the fugitive duo had had members of the Order Apparating all over the British Isles at rates that proved to be detrimental to their magical health. It hadn't been until almost a month after Dumbledore's funeral that Hedwig had arrived with a tattered roll of parchment clutched in her talons. Rather than deliver the missive to Harry, she'd landed in front of Hermione and bowed her head, hooting a tired greeting. Hermione had taken the letter, a look of puzzlement settling over her features. The handwriting had been immediately recognizable, having spent six years in a classroom following instructions written in that distinctive hand.

Hermione had looked up at the Order members that were crowded around the table. "It's from Professor Snape," she'd said, voice trembling. "It says, 'Check his Pensieve "

"Check whose Pensieve?" Ron had roared over the surprised chatter that erupted around the room at Hermione's announcement. "Snape's? Like we can believe anything that traitor left behind."

Harry's quiet voice had sliced easily through the noise. "He means Dumbledore's."

Harry had risen from the table and strode to the Headmaster's former office, still crowded with his things. Minerva McGonagall had been unwilling to change anything, including the password. Harry had closed the door firmly at his back, and when he'd emerged less than an hour later, there'd been a look of resigned determination on his face.

"Send a reply, Hermione," Harry had said, meeting and holding her gaze. "Tell him to come and that Draco is welcome, as well."

Few would argue now that Harry had done the right thing; the contributions that both Snape and Draco made to the war effort had been invaluable. But at that moment in time, with only his mentor's memories to guide him, Harry had carried the future of the wizarding world on his shoulders, and he couldn't help but question the wisdom of his decision.

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Hermione shook herself from her reverie. Swimming in the past wasn't going to solve her current issue, which was: what was she going to do with herself for Christmas?

Hermione knew that any of her friends would be pleased to see her, not to mention how thrilled Molly would be if she showed up at The Burrow. She wondered, though, how long the welcome would last when it was discovered that she was suffering a major case of the holiday blues? That's why she'd gone to see her parents. Wasn't the purpose of family to see you through the hard times?

Ron's letter had urged her to go stay with her parents for a few days, just until he could finish up team business. He had apologized again for not being able to get home for Christmas and for not having had time to get her gifts wrapped. In a classic Ron "I haven't got the emotional range of a teaspoon" Weasley move, he'd written where her gifts were hidden and asked her to "nip them over to The Burrow so my mum can wrap them." Hermione had simply rolled her eyes and placed her unwrapped gifts under the tree. Her practical side had insisted that it was better this way. She was forever finding bits and bobs of the Christmas wrapping for months after the holidays were over. This way, there would be less to clean up. But the little girl in her had wanted to stamp her feet and rail at the unfairness of it all. Especially when she saw her sad unwrapped presents nestled beside the festive boxes, adorned with ribbons and bows, which held Ron's gifts.

Initially, Hermione had also resisted Ron's suggestion that she spend a few days with her folks. But she had finally given in when the silence in their flat had become less peaceful and more oppressive. She'd packed a bag and sent him an owl, telling him to contact her at her parents' house as soon as he was home. After she'd rung up her parents to let them know she was on her way, and triple checked to make sure that everything had been shut off, Hermione had Apparated to the small shed that her parents had installed in the back yard after she'd received her Apparation license. It wouldn't do for her to be seen suddenly appearing on the front porch of the Granger household, and her parents found it unnerving for her to "pop out at them." So they'd installed the shed that marked the beginning of the breakdown of her relationship with her parents.

Things had not been easy with them since the end of her sixth year. She'd come home after Dumbledore's death and explained everything to them. Hermione had always enjoyed the support and encouragement of her parents, so it'd come as a great surprise to her when they didn't agree with her decision to leave school and search for the Horcruxes. They'd taught her to believe in and fight for her causes, but this had been too much for them to accept. She'd reassured them that she would finish school as soon as the war was over, but that hadn't been their main concern. Her parents had always believed that once her time at Hogwarts was through, she would put aside her magical heritage and return to their world and settle down into a nice Muggle occupation, with a nice Muggle boy.

In fact, they had the boy all picked out.

Henry Lancaster was the son of her parents' best friends. Every time she was home, her dad would go on and on about Henry and how well he was doing at Oxford. And then her mom would mention that they had seen Henry and he'd become so handsome. Finally, one or both of them would tell her that Henry had asked about her, and should they tell him that Hermione said hello? Therefore, they didn't think that she should risk her life to save a world that she would be leaving in few short years anyway.

Hermione had been stunned to say the least. She couldn't imagine why they would think she would leave the world that had become her home. Why would she leave the world that she had fought to belong to for the last six years? Every bit of her education since going to Hogwarts had been to prepare her for a future in the magical world. What kind of Muggle job did her parents think she would be qualified for when she graduated from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry? she had asked from between gritted teeth. Well, of course, they had had an answer to that, as well. Henry would be done at Oxford by the time she graduated, and he'd be making a fine living as a barrister, so there would really be no reason for her to work unless she wanted to. She could volunteer, or perhaps work on the board of a charitable organization, since she wanted to do good works.

Hermione had gripped her hair in her hands and sighed in frustration. She had gone on to explain to her parents that she was sorry if they couldn't accept her decision, but that she was going to fight for the world that she loved and that she hoped that they would be proud of her. She had hugged them both and said that she loved them before walking to the door. Unable to resist one parting shot, though, she had turned and said, "Please don't tell Henry that I said hello."

Her relationship with her parents had never been fully restored. They saw each other for a few hours at a time on major holidays and birthdays. They spoke on the phone at least once a week and went out for the occasional dinner. But Hermione had avoided spending more time with them than that, as the conversation inevitably turned to when she was going to "come to her senses," as her mother was so fond of saying.

Today had been no different.

Her major mistake had been calling her parents to let them know that she was coming home; she should have just surprised them since that wouldn't have given them time to surprise her. Within an hour of her arrival, Henry and his parents had arrived. She'd spent the next two hours trying to avoid being pulled into a conversation with her parents' ideal son-in-law. She'd been polite, of course, but she'd also brought Ron's name up as often as possible. That is until Mrs. Lancaster had made a pointed observation that if she and Ron were so serious, he was certainly taking his time about proposing.

Following that rather rude comment, Hermione had excused herself to the restroom where she'd splashed water on her face and counted to a million. Reminding herself that she had survived a war and surely she could handle three days with her parents, she had opened the door. She was dismayed to discover Henry lurking in the hallway waiting for her. She couldn't imagine what her parents saw in this man. Clearly there was a problem... After all, he was twenty-five years old and his mother was still cutting up his meat for him! **This** was the man her parents thought she should spend the rest of her life with? Hermione had tried to scoot past him, but he had wedged himself into her path and pointed up to where a sprig of mistletoe had been hastily affixed to the doorframe. He'd leaned in with eyes closed and lips puckered, and Hermione couldn't help but laugh. Henry's eyes had shot open and then he'd scowled at her before gripping her shoulders and pulling her to him. Hermione had put both hands on his chest and pushed him forcefully away before bolting down the stairs. When her parents had made it clear that they would not be asking Henry to leave, and had insisted that she should just give him a chance, it had been the final straw. She'd grabbed her bag, still sitting next to the stairs where she'd left it, and stormed out the door.

Hermione huffed out a breath at remembering. She and Ron had discussed marriage several times. But between his job and her job, there just never seemed to be enough time to get serious about it. Not to mention that, in the past year, they had been living more like flat-mates than lovers. As Hermione moved through the thickly falling snow,

she struggled to remember the last time she and Ron had been intimate with one another.

She kicked at a clump of dirty slush and wondered what it was that made it so hard for her parents to accept the life that she had chosen.

"I'm happy, I make a good living, I can cut my own damned meat," she muttered as she stomped her foot, trying to dislodge the dirty slush that was now sticking to the toe of her boot. "Bollocks!" Hermione cried, stopping and bending down to swipe at the streak of what was little more than mud. "Is nothing going to go right for me tonight?"

"Well, I don't know about for you," a patrician voice drawled into her ear as a hand came to rest lightly on the curve of her hip. "But they seem to be going well for me."

Hermione stiffened and reached for her wand when she felt the hand, but relaxed considerably when she recognized the voice.

"Malfoy," she sighed, peering up and over her shoulder at him. "What is it with men feeling the need to paw at me this evening?" She straightened and flipped her hair out of her face.

Draco arched a brow and sniffed delicately. "Malfoys do not paw. Although it doesn't surprise me that Weasley does."

"For your information, Ron doesn't paw at me, either." Hermione glared at the mud that was now smeared all over her boot. "And even if he did, he's not around to do any pawing. Team business came up and he's going to be gone a few more days."

"You're letting other men paw at you?" Malfoy asked, waggling his eyebrows playfully at her. "Is there a list I should sign up on?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and swatted at his arm. "Since Ron is out of town, I was trying to have Christmas with my folks. But Henry and his parents showed up and bad went to worse when he discovered the mistletoe."

Hermione and Draco had developed an odd sort of friendship after he'd joined the Order. She never expected him to make apologies for his early behavior to her, and he'd never offered any. From the moment Draco had arrived with Snape, his behavior had been above reproach. Hermione had been sure that his stiff formal manner was concealing hurt pride and disillusionment with the world as he had known it. She had treated him just as she did all the other Order members, and eventually he had relaxed and adjusted back to life at Hogwarts.

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By the time the green Forbidden Forest gave way to the gold and reds of autumn, they had settled into a relative truce with each other. Most days, Draco worked quietly beside Hermione in the cavernous Hogwarts library researching historical texts for any trail of information that could lead them to the next Horcrux. To Hermione's amazement, Draco was as focused and organized as she was when it came to research. He also had a sharp wit that he turned on everyone, including himself. His self-deprecating sense of humor was perhaps the thing that surprised Hermione the most. Even Harry cracked a smile when Draco had done a spot-on imitation of Snape in full glower mode. Ron, though, was not willing to let bygones be bygones, and it didn't help that of the Trio, Ron was the only one whom Draco still delighted in deliberately provoking.

Draco had always been a flirt, and while Hermione had seen it from a distance, his natural charisma had never been directed at her. But with his change of heart, and the amount of time they'd spent cloistered in the library, she had been constantly subjected to his particular brand of charm. Ron hadn't liked the attention that Draco paid to his girlfriend, and he'd made it clear to Hermione that he would rather she not spend so much time with the Slytherin. He had particularly hated the way that Draco would brush his hand across Hermione's shoulder or forearm when he wanted to point her attention to something. More than once, he'd come in to the library to find Hermione passionately arguing her point with Draco's arm draped over the back of her chair, his fingers brushing the tips of her hair.

Hermione had spent more time than she'd wanted to soothing Ron's bad humour and had confronted Draco about it on more than one occasion. Their last confrontation had been on the eve of the final battle. She and Draco had been researching last minute protection and shielding spells in hopes of doing everything they could to protect Harry. When Hermione's stomach had given a fierce growl, Draco had pushed away from their table.

"We need food and sleep, Hermione," he had said, rising to his feet and offering his hand to her. "We have to fight tomorrow, as well, and we've done all we can here."

Hermione had considered protesting, but she'd known that he was right. They had gathered their materials together and left the library, each of them pausing in the doorway, wondering if they would ever pass through those doors again.

They had made their way to the Great Hall, hurrying as they realized that the dinner hour was rapidly coming to a close. Draco had opened the door for Hermione and placed a guiding hand on her back as they'd entered the room. Harry and Ron had already risen from the table and were making their way out of the Hall. When Ron had caught sight of the casual way that Draco had been touching his girlfriend, lightning had flashed in his eyes. Hermione had put out a hand to stop him, but he'd stormed past her without pausing.

"You've got to stop this," Hermione had said, staring after Ron.

"Stop what?" Draco had asked innocently, lifting an eyebrow and tilting his head to one side.

Hermione had sighed, exasperated. "You know what," she had stepped away from the hand he still had on her back. "You only do that to upset him. It's childish and it's got to stop."

"Hermione, you have no idea what motivates me," Draco had said, stepping past her and moving into the Great Hall. "Perhaps you should consider that, for once, Weasley is more perceptive than you are."

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The two of them, against all of Ron's objections, had remained good friends after the war. That friendship was perhaps sustained by the fact that they both worked as Curse Breakers for the Ministry. Because of the time that Hermione spent in his company, Draco was well aware of the Henry-saga.

"I fail to understand why Weasley doesn't pay Henry a visit and teach him some manners." There were, in fact, a number of things that Draco couldn't understand and didn't like about Ron Weasley, none of which had anything to do with childhood grievances and everything to do with the woman standing in front of him.

Draco couldn't exactly pinpoint the moment his feelings for Hermione had changed. They had started out as reluctant allies, and before he knew it, they had become friends. Hermione was the first of the Trio to accept that his views of the world had changed and the first to offer him a hand of friendship. Draco was grateful that he wasn't forced to grovel and beg for forgiveness, and he worked hard to show through his actions that he wanted to make amends for past transgressions.

Draco definitely hadn't wanted the life of a Death Eater, not after he'd seen what it had to offer. A little distance and a great deal of time spent with Snape had opened his eyes to the truth. Voldemort's followers were nothing more than pawns in his ploy to gain immortality and cleanse the wizarding world of all those he considered inferior. While Draco had been on the run with Snape, he had spent more than one sleepless night trying to understand why all the best families in the wizarding world had chosen to follow a megalomaniacal half-blood dictator who casually placed pureblood wizards in the line of fire and nonchalantly ordered the torture and death of any of his supporters who displeased him. How could the pureblood Death Eaters be the pinnacle of the wizarding world when they were bowing and scraping before their half-blood master? The answer that had come to him in the bleak hours before dawn haunted him. Everything he'd been raised to believe, everything that his father had taught him, had been a lie. But however grateful he was to escape that future, however aware he was of the truth of the matter, it didn't make it any easier for him to swallow his pride

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"So what kind of super important work is Weasley doing on Christmas Eve, Hermione?" Draco asked, sarcasm dripping from his every word. "Even the players get to spend the holidays with their families. And would you explain to me why Weasley bothers with an Apparation license when he doesn't bother using it?"

Hermione shrugged and tilted her head as she studied Draco's attire. "Why are you in Muggle London?" she asked suddenly, ignoring his question. "And what on earth are you wearing?"

"I'm going to a Christmas party." Draco spread his arms wide, his black overcoat falling open to reveal a dark blue shirt and black slacks. He looked down at himself. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Nothing," Hermione said, tilting her head to the other side and enjoying the sight of Malfoy in Muggle clothing. "Who do you know in Muggle London?"

"Are you checking me out, Granger?" Malfoy asked, waggling his eyebrows at her again.

Hermione made a "pfft" of denial and ducked her head, hoping that the darkness would hide the flush on her cheeks, or that Malfoy would attribute it to the cold, if he saw it. After all this time, Hermione should be used to Malfoy's appeal; she could usually resist his harmless flirting and suggestive comments with ease. However, there were times when he would turn the full force of his smile on her, and she would see something in his eyes that made her wonder what might happen if she were single. It didn't help that the time of the year, coupled with loneliness, was making her even more susceptible. She lifted her head and tried to focus on what Malfoy was saying.

"...so where else would Maddox and his Muggle wife live?" he was asking her.

"Maddox?" Hermione gueried back at him, causing Malfoy to throw up his hands.

"Weren't you listening?" He sounded exasperated, but there was a decided gleam in his eyes that indicated he knew exactly where her thoughts had been wandering. "Maddox, who works in the Accidental Magic Reversal Office? Christmas Party? Muggle wife? Ringing any bells there, Granger?"

Hermione laughed and nodded. "I'm sorry. My brain is short circuiting from the cold. Didn't you say that you had other plans for Christmas Eve? Some hot date? I didn't realize you and your hot date were going to Maddox's party." Hermione looked around. "Where's your hot date?"

"Plans changed. The woman I really wanted to be with was unavailable." Draco said cryptically, reaching out to brush some snow off of her shoulder. "How about you be my hot date and we'll go to the party together?"

Hermione shook her head and glanced down at herself. "I'm not really dressed for a party," she said, spreading her coat open. "I get the feeling that the attire for Maddox's party is a little more posh than jeans and a jumper, not to mention the mud that's smeared all over my boot."

Draco scowled at her. "Are you a witch or not? Transfigure your clothes and Scourgify your boot. We'll get drunk and I'll paw you under the mistletoe, and then when we see each other at work, we'll both act like we don't remember any of it."

Hermione laughed at him and shook her head again. "As much fun as that sounds, Malfoy, I'm going to take a pass. I just want to get home and snuggle up with a good book and wait for Ron. Maybe he'll decide to Apparate home after all." She reached out and squeezed his gloved hand with one of hers. "Thanks for the offer, though. Happy Christmas, Draco."

"He doesn't deserve you, Hermione. You're too good for him," Draco said, pulling her to him and wrapping her in a hug. "One of these days you're going to realize that. And what are you going to do if I'm taken by then?" He raised his eyebrows and then winked at her. "But I'll wish you a Happy Christmas just the same."

Hermione rolled her eyes and gave a quick wave before she disappeared with a sharp crack.

Draco stared thoughtfully at the space where she had been standing. "See, I told you the woman I wanted was unavailable." And with a swish of his coat that would have made Snape proud, he disappeared into the darkness.

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When Hermione appeared in front of the building where she and Ron shared a flat, she was still smiling. She passed her wand over the security sensors and pulled open the heavy outer door, shaking her head over Draco's antics and teasing. They had a fun and comfortable relationship that extended, amazingly, to Harry; however, the same couldn't be said of Ron. Regardless of Draco's heroics during the war, or the trust that had developed by necessity, the two men still snarled and snapped at each other whenever they were forced to be in the same room. Or rather, Ron snarled and snapped; Draco simply flayed Ron to the bone with his caustic wit that always dug under Ron's otherwise thick skin. It didn't help that Draco never failed to flirt shamelessly with Hermione whenever Ron was around. As Hermione boarded the elevator, she mused on the fact that Draco actually flirted shamelessly regardless of whether Ron was around or not.

Hermione was happy that she'd run into Draco. He'd definitely lightened her mood and made her feel a little more at ease with spending the holidays alone. She'd been tempted to throw caution to the wind and go to the party with him, but it didn't seem fair. Ron was stuck working the holidays, and it wouldn't look good for his girlfriend to be seen out and about with a man whom he was well known to loathe.

Hermione slowed as she approached her door. She could sense that the wards that she'd left in place were no longer protecting the entry to her home. She hadn't been sorted into Gryffindor for nothing; she drew her wand as she traveled the last few feet to the door.

"Dissendium!" she whispered before moving cautiously into the opened doorway. What she saw caused her to drop her wand and cover her mouth as a gasp of hurt surprise escaped.

In the hearth, there was a cozy fire dancing, casting a warm glow over the naked skin of the couple, so wrapped up in each other that they hadn't heard her enter. One of the participants she recognized easily, as he was the man with whom she'd shared a bed with for the last five years, ever since the end of the war. However, the hussy whom he was currently thrusting into with abandon was a complete stranger to Hermione, although it appeared that Ron was rather well acquainted with her.

Hermione stood frozen for a bare moment. Shock, fury and grief coursed through her in equal measure as she reached down and snatched up her wand. Giving a sharp stab towards the lights that were twinkling merrily on the Christmas tree, she then swished her wand in a violent twist towards Ron and shouted, "Incarcerous."

Ron may not have heard her enter, but he certainly noticed that he was suddenly immobilized by the string of still-lit Christmas lights that were constricted around his body.

"Bloody hell!" Ron shouted, trying to disengage from the woman beneath him without the use of his hands, which were now bound to his body. For her part, his tart was struggling to get away from him as well. It didn't help, however, that he was floundering around like a fish that had been well and truly netted.

The tart won, and as soon as she rolled Ron onto his back, she leapt to her feet. She stared wide-eyed towards the door before beginning to search frantically for what Hermione assumed was her wand.

Hermione silently Accio'd the woman's clothes and wand to her hands as she stalked further into the room. She wadded the witch's belongings together and tossed them at her as the woman cowered in front of Ron.

"Get out of my house!" Hermione demanded, pointing to the still open doorway.

"'Mione?" Ron questioned, still unable to get up, or even to see around the woman in front of him.

"I'll deal with you in a moment," Hermione snapped before returning her attention to the woman who had, quite literally, opened her eyes to the truth.

"Who in the hell are you?" the woman demanded as she struggled into what only the most generous soul would call a dress. Hermione herself had handkerchiefs with more material.

"I'm the witch who's going to reverse that badly done charm you've got on your chest if you don't get the hell out of my home this very second."

"Your boyfriend?" the little hussy exclaimed before shoving Ron with her foot. "You told me that you two were over!" With that last little bit of information imparted, she flounced towards the door, clutching her wand and her shoes. "Don't call me again, Ron, not until you've really broken up with her! And I mean it this time!"

Hermione turned back to Ron as the door shuddered in its frame.

"Well?" Hermione said in a calm voice that would have frightened anyone that knew her. And while Ron was quite often obtuse, he wasn't completely stupid.

"Listen, 'Mione...just untangle me and...we'll talk. I swear I can explain everything. It's not how it looks.... It was an accident." Ron stammered through as many explanations as he could think of while frantically trying to think of something that she might believe.

"Hmmm..." Hermione tapped her wand against her lips as she surveyed him. "No, I don't think I will untangle you. I don't want to talk or listen to you explain, nor do I think that you tripped and tumbled into a conveniently placed naked woman in our flat. So for the time being, I'm going to leave you exactly where you are."

Hermione held up a hand against the torrent of apologies and explanations that tumbled from his unfaithful lips. "How long, Ron?" Hermione asked quietly. "How long have you been cheating, and was she the first?"

"Hermione, I'm a man, I have needs," Ron started, trying for authoritative and failing, as he was still twinkling and prone on the floor. "None of them were serious. They were just flings until I could get home to you. Or until you could come home to me."

"Are you telling me that you've had women here? In our bed?" Hermione's voice remained calm, but she was white knuckling her wand, and Ron noticed.

"I always washed the sheets before you came back!" Ron exclaimed, as though that was Hermione's biggest concern.

"Oh, well, how thoughtful of you!" Hermione snarked. "I suppose I should be thanking you then! What about my needs, Ron? You're not the only one who enjoys sex and companionship. There were plenty of nights that you were away when I would have enjoyed having a warm body next to me. But I remained faithful, although I've had plenty of offers and opportunities to stray."

Ron snorted. "From whom, Hermione? Malfoy? He may flirt and touch when I'm around, but we both know it's just to piss me off. Have you seen the women he dates? They all look like her." He jerked his head in the direction of the door.

"Draco is my friend Ron; whatever else you want to say about him, he's my friend." Hermione gestured with her wand and Ron flinched. "He's been there for me over and over again when you've been off on 'business,' but neither of us has ever done anything to justify your jealousy. And I'll tell you something else *Ronald*, Draco may date women who look like your little slag, but he has the decency to date them one at a time!"

"You don't understand, Hermione," Ron's voice became contrite once more. "Women like Tiffany are constantly throwing themselves at me. Every time I turn around, women like her are touching me and passing me notes and handing me the keys to their hotel rooms." He dropped his head back to rest on the floor. "I never thought that women who looked like that would be interested in me."

Hermione drew away from Ron as though she'd been slapped. Ron began struggling again as he saw the effect of his words. "Not that you aren't pretty, 'Mione, you are! And I love you. Please, Hermione," Ron begged as she moved away from him. "We can work this out!"

Hermione turned and walked briskly to their shared bedroom, closing the door against Ron's voice that was alternating between pleading forgiveness and demanding freedom.

Once she was alone, she leaned back against the door and let the tears come. She'd known for a long time that she and Ron didn't have some overwhelmingly passionate love story for the ages, but she'd had no idea that he'd been so dissatisfied with her. Hermione swiped at her eyes before looking down at herself and then stalked over to her closet. She flung open the doors and glared at the row of dresses staring back at her.

In the last few years, he'd started returning from road trips with odd gifts for her. Skimpy little dresses and shoes with spiked heels that he knew she'd never be comfortable in. She hadn't understood his motivation then, but she did now. He'd been trying to mold her into one of his little groupies.

This was what he wanted? To see her all tarted up in a short dress and mile high heels? She grabbed an armful of slinky material and flung it to the floor. But when she started to reach for the next armful, she caught a glimpse of a dress that had been a gift from a different man.

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"You know you want to try it on, Hermione," Ginny had wheedled from just over her shoulder.

The two friends had been window shopping when Hermione's eye had been caught by a display. Actually, by one item in particular that was on display. The window arrangement was artful. Sexy, but in a tasteful way that alluded to intimacy rather than screamed it in one's face. Timeless Classics was the name of the store. They were a high end retailer for items that needed a 'second home.' Hermione had met the proprietress of the store on several occasions in the course of business and had liked her immensely. When you dealt in 'gently used' items in the magical world, it was a good idea to be on friendly terms with a Curse Breaker. Sonia Donovan was nothing if not smart. She was also an artist who knew how to convey a message. The window display consisted of an elegant black chaise lounge and a cherry wood Queen Anne occasional table. Gracing the top of the table were two champagne flutes and a sparkly pair of earrings. On the floor next to the chair was a sexy pair of red strappy sandals. But what had really caught Hermione's attention was the red dress that was draped over the back of the chair, next to a man's bow tie. Sonia's windows always told a story. This story was of a man and a woman enjoying a glass of champagne after a night at some swanky affair. The couple had snuggled on the chaise, touching, kissing. Her shoes had been removed, then his tie, her earrings, and finally he'd removed her dress, trailing kisses over her body before scooping her up and carrying her away to bed.

Hermione had sighed and held her hand to her chest with the romance of it all before leaning in to get a closer look at the dress that garnered her attention. Lost in her inspection of the dress, Hermione hadn't seen Sonia waving her into the shop, but Ginny had.

"Hermione." Ginny had poked her in the shoulder and then pointed into the interior of the shop. "I think she's trying to get your attention."

Hermione had looked up and smiled at the petite blonde that had been approaching the front doors.

"Come in!" Sonia had exclaimed, grabbing Hermione by the arm. "What do you think of the display?" she'd asked, gesturing wildly as was her habit. "I finished it up just in time for the Christmas shopping season!"

"I love it!" Ginny had exclaimed. "But I think you might be about to lose that dress," she'd added, dragging Hermione over to get a closer look at the confection of red silk.

Hermione had nodded at Sonia. "The window is beautiful." She'd turned back to study the arrangement. "If feels as though the couple has just left."

Sonia had beamed. "That's just what you're supposed to feel." She'd craned her neck and looked past the display once more. "And wouldn't he work nicely, cast as the gentleman in my little tableau?"

Hermione had turned and glanced out the window, surprised to see Draco inspecting the display as she had done earlier.

Hermione had waved to catch his attention before turning to Ginny. "If I didn't know better, I'd think he was following us!"

It was the third time the two women had seen him that day. They'd run into him at Flourish and Blotts, and then again at the Leaky Cauldron when they'd been having lunch.

Ginny had pursed her lips and studied Draco thoughtfully as he'd caught sight of them and waved back.

"I'm not sure that you should discount that idea so quickly," Ginny had saidsotto voce as he'd come through the door.

Hermione had rolled her eyes at her friend, putting a stop to the familiar refrain of "Malfoy wants to steal you away from Ron" before it started.

"Hello again, ladies." Draco had greeted them with a courtly bow before turning to Sonia. "I don't believe that I've had the pleasure?"

Sonia had grinned and winked at the women before dipping into a curtsey at Draco's feet. "Sonia Donovan, owner of Timeless Classics."

"Draco Malfoy," he'd said, grinning wickedly at her display of cheekiness. "Did you design the display?"

"I did!" Sonia had said. "We were just discussing the likelihood of Hermione purchasing the dress."

"We weren't!" Hermione had said quickly. "Ginny was just having a go at me. I couldn't wear anything like that." But no one had missed the way her eyes slid back to the dress in question.

"Of course, you could, Granger. What's stopping you?" Draco had walked forward to take a closer look at the dress. "Of course, the price tag might be a little high for Weasley's pockets.... Why don't you let me get it for you?" He'd begun reaching for his wallet as he'd spoken.

Ginny had crossed her arms and glared at him. "Kindly remember that you are in the presence of a Weasley before you start running your mouth off about our finances."

"Oh pish, Ginevra. You're not a Weasley anymore, you're a Potter." Draco had arched an eyebrow at her. "And besides, it wasn't your finances I was referring to."

"You act as if you are so much better off, Malfoy. The last time I heard, the Malfoy finances just aren't what they used to be." Ginny had scoffed at him.

"Ginny!" Hermione had exclaimed, her mouth falling open in shock, surprised at her friend's vitriolic response. "That's uncalled for. Draco was only teasing."

"Well, I don't think he was, and he has no business offering to buy you things." Ginny had glared mutinously at Draco, knowing that Hermione would subject her to another lecture about how Draco was her friend and Ginny needed to stop with the spiteful little digs.

Draco had stared down at Ginny with a look in his eye that Hermione couldn't quite decipher. "I just thought that I'd give Weasley a hand, as it appears that he is spreading his resources a bit thin at the moment."

Ginny's mouth had fallen open and she'd clutched at Hermione's arm. "I think we should go," she'd said in a weak voice.

Hermione, who had been staring quizzically at Draco, had shifted her gaze to Ginny.

"Are you okay?" Hermione had asked, alarmed at Ginny's sudden shift in demeanor. "Is it the baby?"

Ginny had placed a protective hand over her distended belly and shaken her head. "I just think I've had enough shopping for one day."

Hermione had nodded and said a quick goodbye to both Sonia and Draco. As the two friends had stepped out the door, Hermione had given one last lingering look at the dress, and Ginny had given a pointed look of warning to Draco.

The next day, the dress and matching shoes had arrived via delivery owl. Hermione had, of course, tried to return the items, but Sonia would hear none of it.

And when she'd approached Draco to try and give them back to him, he'd acted as though he didn't know what she was talking about.

Finally Hermione had given up and simply hung the dress in her closet amongst the other dresses that she'd never wear.

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Looking at the dress now and thinking back on the tense exchange between Ginny and Draco that had happened a month or so ago, Hermione wondered if they both had already been aware of Ron's infidelity.

Hermione dropped her face into her hands, overcome with mortification. Was she the last to know? Was everyone laughing at her behind her back? "Poor little Hermione," they must all be saying.

"NO!" Hermione straightened her spine. She wasn't going to sit around and feel sorry for herself. She was going to do what she should have done a long time ago. She'd spent too much time playing games of 'what if' and 'I wonder.' Draco's comments and actions over the years had inspired many a heated fantasy. She'd always been attracted to the blond, but ties of loyalty and love had kept her with Ron. She still loved Ron, she always would regardless of what he had done. But she had to wonder how long it had been since she'd really been *in love* with him. If Hermione was honest with herself, she would admit that there hadn't been a spark there in a long time. She may not have taken the final steps that Ron had, but she had looked elsewhere, as well. Looked at the man who never failed to show her attention no matter what she was wearing or how her hair looked. And she'd looked his way more than once. Tonight, she was going to find out if there was more to Malfoy than charm and flirtation.