

# The Servant's Secrets

*by phoenix*

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## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

A/N: Many thanks to my wonderful beta for listening to my ideas and helping me make this story better. Also, I took a liberty with Prompt 71. I decided that five years was too long to have someone be a private servant and reduced that to one year.

71. As a condition of release from Azkaban after the final battle, Lucius Malfoy must act as the private servant of a wizard or witch for five years. Who gets him? What happens?

87. Researching the history of the Death Eaters, Hermione wants to find out why Lucius turned to Voldemort in the first place and finds herself becoming more and more enchanted by him. What happens?

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After defeating Voldemort and dealing with the obligatory praise for her work in bringing about his downfall including attending a formal celebration and the less glamorous but equally necessary funerals, Hermione had left for Australia to bring her parents back home.

Even though she had stayed a few weeks after Fred's funeral, Ron had still given her grief over leaving. He just didn't understand how difficult it had been for her to relocate her parents and wipe all memory of her from them. They had not left on a good note, with him claiming she was abandoning him. She thought that was rich given how he had actually abandoned her and Harry during the Horcrux search.

Now she stood outside her parents' house in Perth trying to decide the best course of action. The memory charm she had cast on them had been incredibly complex and she feared that removing it all at once would be very traumatic and might even damage their real memories. Besides, she wouldn't feel proper just stealing away an entire year of their lives, not to mention there would be far too many questions to answer. And merging the two lives abruptly could send them in a catatonic state. She would have to start small and take her time.

Walking up to the door, she rang the bell. Her father answered, and it was all she could do not to give him a huge embrace. "Mr. Wilkins?" she asked cautiously.

"Yes. May I help you?"

"Mr. Wilkins, I'm a good friend of your brother, and he's asked me to give you some very important information."

"I'm not interested in anything my brother has to say," he said tersely and started to close the door.

Hermione put her foot in the door, having expected this reaction. "Please, Mr. Wilkins. I know the two of you haven't spoken in years, but he told me this was very urgent. I won't take much of your time, please?" For a moment she thought the memory charm was working too well. She had hoped a feuding brother would provide her enough of an opening to get in the house where she could slowly begin to reveal the truth and undo the memory charm.

He looked into her imploring face for a few moments before opening the door to let her in. "Monica, we have company with news from Alan."

"Alan?" her mother's voice came from the kitchen. "What sort of news could he send?" she asked bitterly.

"I don't know. This young lady what did you say your name was?"

"Hermione Granger," she replied simply, knowing they would not recognize it.

"Hermione Granger says it's urgent. You might as well come listen, too." Her father led her into the living room. She noticed that when her mother joined them, there was no tea, clearly indicating she was not a welcome guest.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins, your brother wanted you to know that I am a witch and that you have been under a spell for nearly a year." She braced herself for their reaction.

They looked at her as though she had grown a second head. "A witch? Is this some sort of sick joke?" he father asked angrily.

"Not in the least," she replied as she pulled out her wand and turned the flowers on the table into butterflies. "Magic is very real, and there is a very small part of the population that can do magic. I am part of that population."

Emotions danced across her parents' faces: fear, revulsion, disbelief and more. "Wh-why are you here?" her mother finally asked.

"I am here to remove that spell. But it is a very complex spell and will take time since it will need to be done in stages. You see, it's a memory charm. You knew important information, information that could have gotten you killed. That knowledge was hidden and you were relocated to Australia to save your lives."

"But we have a happy life. Why would we want to change it?" her father asked, clearly a little afraid of magic being done on him.

"Because even though your lives are happy, you feel as something is missing, something that you can't quite remember." She saw them glance at each other and she knew that she was right. Even the best memory charms left some sort of residual trace on the affected person. "If you would like to discuss this, I can come back tomorrow." She really didn't want to leave, and she hadn't considered that her parents would not want to have their memories restored. If they didn't would she undo the spell anyway despite the potentially disastrous outcome? She thought she might. She had to have her parents back in her life.

"Our life before, tell us something about it. Were we happy?" her mother asked.

Hermione smiled broadly. "Oh, yes. You were very happy. You were dentists in England and had a very loving family. You didn't want to go, but you did it out of the need to protect yourselves from harm. You would want to go back to that life."

"Give us a moment," her mother said as she led her husband into the kitchen.

Hermione waited impatiently for them to return, forcing herself not to use magic to eavesdrop on them.

"I don't know why," her father said when they returned, "but we trust you. What do you have to do?" he asked as he and her mother regained their seats.

She sat forward on the edge of the sofa, eager to begin. "Due to the complexity of the spell and the fact that I don't want you to lose the last year of your lives, it will have to be done in stages. This will allow you to tie up your affairs here while you still retain the memories of being Wendell and Monica Wilkins. You will retain the memories of what you have done in the last year, but the personalities and memories of Wendell and Monica will be removed. When you are ready, we'll move back to England."

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Hermione and her parents spent close to a year in Australia. With Hermione removing the charm in stages and allowing her parents time to wrap up their life in Australia, it had taken close to six months. The rest of the time they spent getting to know each other again.

Hermione hadn't realized how far apart from her parents she had grown and how much it had hurt them. They had accepted that she was different and belonged in a different world. Only now did she realize how much time she had spent away from them.

Due to the distance, it wasn't feasible to get owls from Britain. She did get the occasional copy of the *Daily Prophet*, but her heart wasn't in it. She wanted to escape a little while from everything in the wizarding world. Interacting with the Australian wizards didn't feel like the burden it had been in Britain where everyone recognized her and wanted to shake her hand. Here she was just another witch, not one of the heroes of the war.

Finally her parents felt ready to return home. Because they had arrived by magic, she took them home the same way.

When they arrived home her mother looked around the living room and started crying as she touched various pictures and mementos. "Everything looks like it did when we left."

"I put a spell on the house," she replied softly, allowing her parents to come to terms with being home for the first time in nearly two years. Now that she was back in Britain, she really wanted to get in touch with Harry and Ron. They three of them had communicated intermittently while she was gone since neither of the young men was much for letter writing.

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After ensuring her parents were settled, she decided to head over to Grimmauld Place and see if Harry or Ron were there. If they weren't there she would check The Burrow.

Arriving at Grimmauld Place she was pleased to see a light in the window. Hermione knocked on the door and waited for Harry or Ron or even Kreacher to answer the door. She got the shock of her life when the door opened.

"How may I help you, Miss Granger?" Lucius Malfoy asked pleasantly.

Her mouth hung open for a few seconds before she realized how she must look. "I... er... Harry?"

"Mr. Potter is up in the sitting room. Shall I tell him you are here?"

She searched Malfoy's face for any hint of emotion, but it was completely impassive. "Er, no. I know the way." As she headed up the stairs, she noticed that he went down to the kitchen. She found Harry and Ginny in the sitting room playing wizard's chess. The two of them looked up and upon seeing her rushed her and nearly knocked her from her feet. She couldn't understand a word they were saying because they were both speaking at once.

"It's good to see you both," she said once she was able to take a breath.

"It's good to see you, too," Harry replied and Ginny agreed. "When did you get back?"

"This morning. My folks are pretty well settled. Sorry it took so long. Um.... Malfoy?" She looked out the door of the sitting room and towards the stairs down.

Harry scratched his head and looked at his feet. "Er, yeah. Well... The Ministry decided to do some creative sentencing. He's er... well..."

"What?" Hermione asked impatiently.

When it was clear that Harry wasn't going to answer, Ginny said, "He's Harry's servant for another two months."

"He's what?" Hermione asked, completely aghast. "How on earth...?" She was so flabbergasted that she couldn't complete a coherent sentence.

"Sit down. It's a long story," said Harry with a tone of voice that indicated he would rather sit through one of Binns's lectures than have to explain everything to her.

As she listen to him review the trial and how all the Malfoys had been exonerated, declared that they had been under duress during the war never mind that Lucius Malfoy had been convicted of breaking into the Department of Mysteries and attacking members of both Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix how they had not participated in the final battle other than to aid Harry and the Order never mind that Draco, along with Crabbe and Goyle, had tried to kill Harry, Hermione and Ron in the Room of Requirement and how both Lucius and Draco had been more or less exonerated and sentenced to one year of servitude to a member of the Order. Harry had been assigned Lucius.

She didn't know where to start with how ridiculous the whole thing was, but she could not believe that the Malfoys had gotten off scot-free. "And he lives here?" she finally asked.

"There's a room off the kitchen. He cooks and cleans I'm sorry, Hermione, but Kreacher passed away shortly after the war, but he died a free and happy elf. He gets his wand back if he fulfills the terms of his sentence," Harry finished.

"I see," she replied reluctantly. "And the Ministry just believed his story after it was clear that he had lied the last time since you said he went straight back to Voldemort upon his return."

"You weren't there. You didn't see the trial..." Harry started.

Hermione interrupted. "I didn't need to be there. He hosted that madman at his house..."

Ginny interjected, "It's not like he had a lot of choice, did he? Let him in or be killed."

"You don't believe this nonsense, too, do you, Ginny?" Hermione looked at her friend in disbelief.

Ginny sounded more confident than Harry had. "Harry said it you weren't there. You didn't get to see the testimony, see his body language."

"But he tried to kill you!" shouted a clearly exasperated Hermione.

"I don't think he had the foggiest idea what the diary would do. And his actions, well our families have been at odds for a long time. I think he just felt it would cause some mischief, get me expelled." She sounded incredibly nonchalant about the whole affair.

"I cannot believe the two of you are supporting him. I'm going to the Ministry tomorrow and read through that testimony, and then I'm going to punch holes in it. ~~He~~*does not* deserve to go free." She crossed her arms, letting them know her she could not be dissuaded. She would definitely look into this more deeply. It just didn't make sense that once again Malfoy was getting away with his transgressions. Surely she could go through the evidence and find some way to get Malfoy locked up. "And what about Ron? Where is he?" she asked to change the subject.

Ginny reached over and put her hand on Hermione's knee. Harry said, "He's, er, out."

She had half expected this. They hadn't parted on the best terms and it was unreasonable to think that he would have waited this long for her. "With who," she asked as she sighed.

Harry looked back down to his feet and she shifted her gaze to Ginny.

"With Lavender," she replied in a whisper.

"Oh," said Hermione softly. She had half expected that. A part of her thought that there was more they had to say. "And?"

"They're going to be married at the end of August," Harry replied without looking up from his shoes.

"Oh, I see. Well, I wish them the best." Her relationship with Ron was one thing she had had plenty of time to think about while in Australia, and she had come to the conclusion that it was probably for the best if they just remained friends. Now that seemed like a certainty, assuming Lavender would allow him to be friends with her.

"Did you want to stay for dinner?" Harry asked.

Hermione wasn't sure she was ready to deal with Malfoy and knew it would be awkward if Ron came home. "I really should get home and make sure my parents are doing all right. How about we meet somewhere tomorrow evening?"

Harry sounded a little disappointed. "Sure. There's this new place in Diagon Alley that's pretty good. It's next to Madam Malkin's. Seven?"

"Sounds great. I'll meet you there." She gave them both hugs. "It was great to see you both and I look forward to catching up. I hope you understand that the move has been a bit taxing on us all."

"Sure thing. Take your time getting used to being back," Ginny said. "Let me know if you want to get together during the day. It's the off season for the Harpies so practice doesn't start up for a few weeks yet."

"Thanks, Ginny. I'll send you an owl once I know my folks are going to be fine. And I guess I should start thinking about a job." This was something she hadn't considered until now.

"You know the Ministry would hire you. I think Kingsley could see to that," Harry offered.

"Thanks, Harry. I'm sure you're right I just don't know what I would like to do. I've always had some goal before me whether it was acing all my courses, helping you find Horcruxes or bringing my folks back. It's just hard to realize that I can make my own choices."

He smiled weakly. "I know what you mean. See you tomorrow."

Hermione left and was glad that she didn't run into Malfoy on the way out. She still could not fathom what the Ministry had been thinking. That would be what she would do first thing in the morning.

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It was late when Hermione returned home, so late that her parents were already asleep. And she knew that she would be up early in the morning. They had already indicated they wanted to get the house in order and weren't planning on going out. It suited her fine because she would be free to go to the Ministry.

When she arrived there, she saw that security had returned to pre-War standards. The watch wizard weighed her wand and then sent her to the archives. The witch in charge of the archives brought her the requested transcripts and Hermione carried them to one of the tables and began reading. It was very dry, but she was used to reading dry history texts.

As she read through the transcript, she was in utter shock. Malfoy had argued that he had no choice, that he had been forced to join the Death Eaters the first time around by his father, thus the Imperius Curse he had been under. He further argued that he had been forced to return to Voldemort and carry out his orders in order to ensure Draco and Narcissa's safety. Both of them had corroborated his statements and the fact that Draco had been forced to also join the Death Eaters was entered as proof. Obviously since Draco was underage when he took the Mark, it was not by his choosing.

A part of her had to admire Malfoy's argument that had gotten them both off with their light sentences. But she just couldn't bring herself to believe Malfoy had not willingly joined the Death Eaters. Though she did have to admit that Voldemort was not his contemporary, but she was sure that all the young Slytherins were clamoring to join Voldemort's pureblood agenda.

She returned to the desk with the transcript. "I'm researching the Malfoy family and was wondering if you had any other information from about the last fifty years." She figured that would be a safe number so that it didn't look like she was researching Lucius Malfoy specifically.

Hermione spent the rest of the day poring through Ministry records on the Malfoys. The witch at the desk had recognized her and had provided her with various Ministry investigations which had never led to charges.

She rubbed her eyes at the strain of reading so many pages. Looking up at the clock, she couldn't believe how late it was. She had been in the archives nearly the entire day. Finally noticing the rumbling of her stomach, she decided to get up and leave. It was still a couple of hours until she would meet Harry and Ginny for dinner, so she decided to have a light snack.

As she took her tea, she tried to assimilate and analyze everything she had spent the day poring over. Her notebook had page after page of notes about the Malfoys. While it had been enlightening, she still wasn't sure that she believed Malfoy's profession that his actions had not been his choice. After all, no one had made him give Ginny that diary he had done it out of spite and hatred for the Weasleys. Clearly doing nasty things was in his nature.

Though she did have to admit that after they saved Draco, she could not recall having seen a Malfoy actively participate in the battle and Harry had told her about Narcissa saving his life. She needed time to digest this new information. And she thought a visit to the *Daily Prophet* was also in order. Perhaps she could ask Aberforth what he knew of Abraxas Malfoy as well.

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It was close to midnight when she returned home from dinner with Harry and Ginny. They told her about the wizarding Britain's recovery and how Kingsley was the best thing to have happened at the Ministry in a long time. Even Percy wasn't being a prat anymore and was one of Kingsley's top aides. George and Ron were running the joke shop and Hogwarts was going to reopen on September first with an entirely different way of sorting students.

Eventually the conversation had turned to Malfoy. Every argument she made to condemn the man, they had countered, offering insight not in the official record, but personal observations about his emotional state and that of the other witnesses. She just could not believe that her friends had bought into Malfoy's lies. She knew he was capable of sweet-talking the Ministry since he had done it during the last war, but she was sure that Harry, Ron and Ginny would know better. Clearly the Ministry records had not provided her with all the information she needed.

It was strange for her to think that so much had happened in the last year. She hadn't expected everything to stand still though she had not expected to be gone for an entire year but it was still strange for her. All her friends had found jobs and some of them had gotten married surviving a war tended to do that to people and she had done none of that. And instead of trying to get her life started, she was trying to... She wasn't sure what she was trying to do. Malfoy had been good to his word, so why was she so obsessed at proving that he was evil. It's not like he had ever shown the ambition to be an evil overlord he seemed to prefer letting others get their hands dirty.

Finally she drifted off to sleep, details of the Malfoy family rolling through her mind.

## Chapter 2

### *Chapter 2 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

### Chapter 2

Hermione stood down the street from the Hog's Head, reluctant to enter. The last time she had been there had been the night they had destroyed Voldemort. And the night she had also learned the ugly truth about Albus Dumbledore, something that had been hard for her to accept. But she knew that if anyone had the answers, it would be Aberforth.

Pulling her hood over her head so she would not be recognized, she walked towards the tavern.

The interior was dark and dirty, every bit as seedy as she remembered from her Hogwarts' days. Taking a seat at the bar, she was careful to ensure that her bare skin didn't touch anything.

Aberforth took his time getting to her. "What'll it be?" he asked in a bored tone of voice.

"I need some information. Do you have a few minutes?" she said quietly, not wanting to be overheard or recognized.

"Hmph. I heard you were back," he said gruffly as he picked up a dirty glass and wiped it out with a dirtier rag.

"Please, it's important," she implored. She knew of no one else she could turn to for help.

He glanced around a moment. "Come back in an hour. Come to the side door."

She spent that hour wandering around Hogsmeade, amazed by how much of it looked the same – apparently untouched by the battle. Businesses that had closed under Voldemort were open and flourishing along with several new ones. Signs of rebirth were everywhere, making her more aware than ever of the stagnation in her life.

She froze as she approached what had once been Zonko's. It was now Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Deciding she still wasn't ready to face Ron, she quickly turned back the way she had come. Because she wasn't paying attention to what she was doing, she bumped into someone hard enough that she fell backwards.

Ron caught her before she fell over. "Hermione! What are you doing here?"

"Good to see you, too, Ron," Hermione replied sarcastically as she straightened her cloak.

"Oh! Er... Welcome back. It's... er... good to see you." He mussed his hair as he ran his hand through it, clearly uncomfortable with meeting her unexpectedly.

Hermione decided to take control of the conversation and get the awkward moment out of the way. "Congratulations to you and Lavender."

"Oh, thanks. You wouldn't..." He shifted nervously, unable to finish the question or look her in the eyes.

She deduced that he was trying to ask her if she was interested in attending the wedding and pre-empted, "No, that's okay, but thanks for the offer. I hear you and George are doing well," she said to change the subject and pointed towards their new shop.

He smiled proudly. "Yup. Business is booming. Everything's been getting steadily better since all the fuss died down. What are you up to?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'm still getting used to being back. It's only been a few days, but I have a lot of options." Knowing her hour was almost up, she added. "I'll see you around, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," he replied uncomfortably to her retreating back.

She mused that it hadn't been that awkward – at least for her. She wasn't entirely sure that Ron had moved on from her, but at least she knew for sure that she had made the right decision by walking away from a relationship with Ron. Besides, she was young. It wasn't like she had to find the right man for her right now.

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When she knocked on the side door, Aberforth answered it right away and led her to the sitting room. "So what is it you want to know?" he asked without preamble.

"I was wondering what you could tell me about Abraxas Malfoy," she replied simply.

"Abraxas?" he asked in shock. "Why do you want to know about him? He's been dead for years."

"I know that. If you could, I just think it's important." The less she had to explain to him the better, not that she thought he would go around telling people she was trying to convict Lucius Malfoy.

"I thought you'd be asking about Lucius. That'd make more sense," he said as though he knew why she was there.

"If you don't have any information about Abraxas then I won't waste your time," she replied curtly and rose to leave.

"Sit down, girl!" Aberforth said gruffly. "I didn't say I didn't have information. I'm just surprised you'd be interested in Abraxas. Anything particular you want to know?"

"What was he like? Was he into the Dark Arts and such?"

Aberforth snorted. "Wouldn't be a Malfoy if he wasn't. All those Slytherins are into the Dark Arts to some degree. As to what sort of person he was, if you think Lucius was bad, his father was ten times worse. Back in the days of... *Grindelwald* there was a segment of the wizarding world that wanted to join with him. Abraxas was one of them, and he was pulling strings in the Ministry trying to make it happen. They never got enough support to put their plan in motion, but that didn't stop Malfoy from working behind the scenes. For a while there he was the Minister in everything but name."

"He used the Imperius?" Hermione asked, sitting on the edge of her seat.

"No, that's all but impossible. Too many Aurors are around the Minister, and they would notice that. Malfoy had the Minister blackmailed. Thankfully for the rest of us the Minister died unexpectedly, leaving Malfoy out of direct power. But that's the same strategy he used to build up his empire. He bribed and blackmailed his way to the top. Ministry decrees were passed that would hurt his competition. Oh, the Malfoys have always been rich, but he really expanded their reach and their fortune. Lucius is nothing compared to his father. He likes to pretend to be like Abraxas, but he's always fallen far short."

She knew how ruthless and cold-hearted Lucius could be. After all he had tried to kill Ginny and had shown nothing but hostility towards Muggle-borns. How anyone could be worse than that, she didn't know.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. And believe you me, it could be worse. To the best of my knowledge Lucius has never had anyone murdered. Oh, he's threatened curses and cursed a few families, things of that nature, and he's spread his share of social lies, but Abraxas wouldn't bat an eye at having one of his rivals *disappear*. And had he gotten his way... Well, let's just say that I don't think you would have ever ended up at Hogwarts. Is that enough information for you?" he asked as he arched an eyebrow, almost daring her to ask for more.

She was still trying to digest how a person could be that horrible and still be respected publicly, but she forced herself to ask, "How did he treat Lucius?"

Aberforth gave her a knowing smile. "Naturally he expected Lucius to follow in his footsteps and tried to instill his cruel nature. Lucius pretty much had his life laid before him from childhood. It wasn't until after the first war with Voldemort that Abraxas stepped into the shadows. I think he was devastated that he wouldn't get a chance to finally implement his anti-Muggle ideas. He stepped out of the limelight after Lucius was exonerated, supposedly in ill health, but I know better. He was perfectly healthy until unexpectedly dying of dragon pox." Aberforth stared into space above her head, as though remembering something from the past.

Could it really be possible? Could Lucius have been telling the truth about being forced to become a Death Eater? But even if he had, he clearly did support the pureblood superiority ideals. "Do you think that Abraxas pushed his son to be a Death Eater?" she asked cautiously.

Aberforth rubbed his chin in thought. "I honestly don't know. I wouldn't put it beyond Abraxas, but Voldemort gathered up a lot of the young men from Slytherin. It's just as likely that Lucius joined because it was the vogue thing to do. He's made no secret of espousing the Slytherin belief that purebloods are better. Does that answer your question?" He gave her a knowing smile, very much like his late brother's.

"As much as you could. You've given me the information I wanted, and I'll have to determine if it answers my question or not."

"Well, I'd best get back to the bar," he said by way of dismissing her and showed her to the door.

After she left, she walked aimlessly down the street and out of town. She wasn't sure where she wanted to go. The deeper she dug into the Malfoy past, the more likely it seemed that Lucius was telling the truth – as unlikely as that had seemed. Even presented with this compelling evidence, she just didn't want to believe him. It was much easier for her to believe that he was evil, that he had willingly become Voldemort's servant and relished that position of power in the shadows, and that he was just waiting

for his opportunity to show his true colors.

She sighed as she realized she had walked nearly to the Shrieking Shack. There was really only one thing left for her to do she would have to speak with Lucius Malfoy. Since it was getting late, she would wait until tomorrow when she was reasonably sure that she would not be interrupted by Harry or Ginny.

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Ringling the bell at number 12, Grimmauld Place, she forced herself to be calm. She had to approach this objectively no matter how much she despised Malfoy and thought he was liar.

Lucius opened the door. "Miss Granger, I regret to inform you that neither Mr. Potter nor Miss Weasley are here."

"That's fine. I didn't come to see them. I came to see you," she stated calmly.

Lucius looked confused. "Me?"

She thought she could almost see a flash of panic in his eyes. "Yes, you. I have some questions I'd like to ask you."

As though he knew what she wanted to ask about, he said coldly, "I have already satisfied both the Ministry and Mr. Potter."

"I know that. But you haven't satisfied me," she replied firmly. "If you are going to be difficult, I'll just get Harry to order you to answer my questions. It's really easier if you do it voluntarily, don't you think?"

He sighed knowing that she would get her way. "Very well." Standing aside, he held the door open for her and followed her down the kitchen. He sat at the table across from her.

Just like with Aberforth, she was not offered anything to eat or drink, but then again Malfoy was Harry's servant, not hers. He said nothing, forcing her to make the first move. "I reviewed the record of your trial." Pausing, she gauged his reaction, but there was none. "You claim that you had no choice in becoming a Death Eater." She waited for affirmation, but there was none. While she hadn't expected him to offer up his life story, she had expected some level of cooperation.

She sighed and decided to get to the point. "Did your father force you to become a Death Eater?"

"You read the transcript of my hearing," he replied evasively.

She slammed her hands on the table and jumped to her feet so she was looking down at him. "Damn the transcript! Your life has been full of nothing but despicable acts. You bullied the Hogwarts' Governors into removing Dumbledore so that Slytherin's heir could get on with killing the Muggle-borns and half-bloods. You attacked a bunch of children in the Ministry. I know that you lied to the Wizengamot the last time. Imperius Curse, my arse! That was the easy, coward's way out."

"Easy?" he growled menacingly as he rose to his feet and leaned over the table so that he was staring her in the eyes. "You think that was the coward's way out? You know *nothing* about my life. That was anything but the coward's way out."

When he didn't elaborate, she crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "I find that hard to believe." She was going to force him to defend himself. And by getting him emotional, she was more likely to get the truth out of him.

"You have been in the wizarding world for a handful of years. You know nothing about our history that you did not read in a book. Even now, you have never ~~really~~ been in the wizarding world. You fled Britain as soon as the war was over," he said accusatorially, regaining his seat.

"I did not flee!" she replied defensively. "I owed it to my parents to bring them home as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible? You spent nearly a year hiding from the reality here in Britain. You have no right to judge me. Potter and the Wizengamot have taken me at my word, yet you still live in the past trying to judge me for my past actions."

"And you had some epiphany that makes you a better citizen?" she asked skeptically, raising an eyebrow at him.

"You, who defended Severus Snape many times to your friends, are now unwilling to believe that a person can change?" he shot back.

"You bet I am. You only do what is best for you. Once you saw that Harry was going to prevail, you switched sides."

"You're wrong," he said quietly.

"Excuse me?" she asked, leaning forward, not entirely sure she had heard him correctly.

His piercing grey eyes bore into hers. "You're wrong. You have no idea the horrors of Azkaban. What he did to Draco..." He shuddered and after a few moments of silence where his focus seemed to be elsewhere, he continued. "Changed me. It is true that my father wanted me to be a Death Eater. I will not lay the blame entirely with him, though. When the Dark Lord began gathering followers, it was not as an army of destruction, but a group dedicated to preserving wizarding purity something I had been raised to believe in. As time went on, it... changed. The Death Eater name was adopted, and it became clear that he wanted to take over through violence, that operating behind the scenes was no longer an option. At that point, I was trapped. To leave would mean death or dishonor if I could possibly hide from him as unlikely as that was. I ingratiated myself to him, trying to keep my hands clean of direct violence. But at the same time, I tried to plan my escape, find a way to maintain family honor. If I could not do that, I knew that I might as well be dead because my father would see to that if I did anything to dishonor the family.

"When the Dark Lord returned, I was once again faced with the choice of join him or die. As I am quite fond of living, I chose the former. Again, I tried to keep my hands clean of the violence, but obviously failed at the Ministry. I underestimated Potter and the rest of you and paid for it. While in Azkaban, I had nothing but time to think. I knew without a doubt that supporting him was wrong, but I had no escape."

"Only because you had been abandoned!" she shot back at him.

"No! Because what he was doing was wrong. What the group of you showed me is that blood doesn't matter. A group of... misfits was able to best some of the most talented purebloods. In prison I began to rethink everything that I had been taught, everything that my father had pounded into me as the way things should be. It was then that I realized Voldemort was going to fail that he was blind to the truth.

"When I was finally released from Azkaban, I saw how right I was. Bella had offered him my home, something I could not change and something that I wouldn't have been able to prevent had I been there. I was a prisoner in my home, forced to watch the genesis of the horror he wrought." He stared into the distance, as though reliving events.

"I did everything in my power to resist him. I tried to keep my family safe and out of the battle."

"Well you failed with Draco. He tried to kill us," she said sarcastically.

"Did he? Or was it one of the others? Unfortunately, Draco was given a very difficult burden at a young age. My failure and the price he had to pay for it have caused him a great deal of difficulty. I have not been as good a father as I could have been," he said morosely as he looked down at his hands, clearly ashamed.

Hermione had to concede that Lucius did have a point about Draco. And Draco had not tried to kill them. His tale was so compelling that a part of her wanted to reach

across the table and give his hand a squeeze. "Why did you agree to be Harry's servant?" That was one thing that was not covered in the trial transcript.

"Given the choice between a year of servitude and returning to Azkaban, it was really not a difficult decision," he replied simply.

She was somewhat surprised at his blunt honesty. "But why Harry?"

"It was not my decision, but his. You would have to ask him," he stated simply

"And what happens when the year is up?" She was truly curious.

"I rebuild, redeem the Malfoy name, start a new life. Does that satisfy your curiosity? Are you now convinced that I have no intention of killing Potter in his sleep?"

She was stung by the last comment. While she hadn't trusted Malfoy, she had never thought that he would actually harm Harry. To do so would be to put his life in jeopardy. "Thank you," she replied simply and rose from the table to leave.

Once again, she was given a lot of information to digest and decided to take a walk while she tried to understand her newfound sympathy for Lucius Malfoy.

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**A/N:** As always thanks to my wonderful beta who I cannot wait to name for her invaluable assistance.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

### Chapter 3

Hermione spent the next couple of months trying to readjust to life in Britain. She was spending a fair amount of time with Harry and Ginny, but she was beginning to feel like she was intruding on them, taking away from their time with each other. There was also the fact that they had finally set a wedding date now that she was back. Not wanting to upstage Ron's wedding, but not wanting to wait until the following summer, they had opted to have it over the Christmas holidays. Ginny had asked Hermione to be Maid of Honor. Whenever Hermione visited they spent a lot of time on wedding plans, which once again served to remind Hermione how much her life was standing still.

Everywhere she looked her friends were creating lives for themselves. Ron had Lavender. Neville had Luna. Dean, Seamus, Padma... They all seemed to have someone and she was all alone.

Not only that, but she still had no idea what it was she wanted to do. Since her return she had received offers from the Ministry to work in the department of her choice, St. Mungo's and several other businesses which she assumed wanted her because she was famous. Her parents, who were still adjusting and restarting their practice, had little time to question her about her future especially since they knew very little about the wizarding world.

Checking her watch, she saw that it was time to meet Ginny. They would be Flooing to Paris for Ginny to select her wedding dress.

As usual, Lucius answered the door. "Miss Weasley has been delayed. Would you care for some tea while you wait?" he asked politely.

Since she had heard his side of events, she had been more cordial to him, finally understanding why Harry and Ginny had defended him, but this was the first time she had been alone with him since that day. "Yes, please." She followed him down to the kitchen.

"I'll bring it up to the sitting room," he offered.

"I'd prefer to wait in the kitchen," she replied. Over the years, she had grown the most comfortable with that room. Of course, it was the one room that really did not reflect the Black family. And she still didn't like being in the sitting room alone.

"As you wish," he said simply.

Once in the kitchen, he poured tea from a pot and Hermione noticed that he had a cup already. They sat in silence at opposite corners of the table. She started at her cup while he read the *Daily Prophet*. Obviously she was the only one who found the silence uncomfortable. "What do you plan to do when your time of service is up?" This was something she had been thinking about lately now that he was only obligated to serve Harry for another two weeks.

He was taken aback by her question and set the newspaper aside. "Are you that concerned about me, Miss Granger?"

"Well... Yes. I mean..." She had no idea how to continue because she knew that Malfoy would be not welcome her pity. "It's just that I know what happened after the sentencing." She stared into her cup, not wanting to meet his gaze.

"There are always ways to earn money for someone with the skill and desire," he replied simply.

While she had known the Ministry had taken away most of his fortune and that he had been removed from the board of directors for most of his businesses, that was not what she had been referring to. "I meant Narcissa," she said softly, only peeking up briefly with her eyes to judge his reaction.

He looked away from her. "Ah. Yes, well... That was for the best. Narcissa and I had grown apart over the years. Since divorce still carries a heavy stigma, we made do. With events of the war and the ensuing stress, the stigma in our case was removed, freeing her to move on with her life. She is much happier in France."

"And you?"

He smiled weakly. "I am a survivor. Now you on the other hand have been wandering aimlessly since your return. Surely you have at least been offered a job at the Ministry."

"That's none of your business," she replied gruffly, not wanting to discuss her life.

He ignored her and continued. "Your problem is that you have very little knowledge of the wizarding world and what careers are available. Since you missed your final year at Hogwarts, you did not have the benefit of career counseling. I assume that because of your strained relationship with Ronald Weasley that you do not communicate with his family, so you have no mentor to direct you towards a career path."

She wanted to argue with him, but she knew that he was right. Harry had been pushing her to just take a Ministry job until she could decide what it was she wanted to do. It was something she was on the verge of doing, feeling guilty about living off her parents. "I'll figure something out."

"I could offer you advice, help you make an informed decision."

She froze with the teacup nearly to her lips. "Why would you want to help me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because you are a highly intelligent witch who deserves something more than being stuck in a boring Ministry job. Jobs like that are fine for people like Arthur Weasley and Harry Potter, but not you."

She looked into his eyes and could tell that he was being sincere. "And how would you know that?"

"When I was on the Board of Governors I was privy to student grades. Not to mention that Draco would complain about the number of times that you did better than he did."

She almost thought there was something more he wanted to say. Even though he had changed, it still didn't seem like him to just offer his assistance. "What's in it for you?"

"Always suspicious," he said with an amused chuckle before taking a sip of his tea.

"Where you are concerned, yes. I just have a hard time believing you would do this out of the goodness of your heart," she replied honestly.

"While it may not be entirely altruistic, I have no desire to see your intellect wasted as a junior paper pusher at the Ministry. You have the capability to be truly great in the wizarding world. What you need is a partner to help you reach your full potential, someone to help you navigate the laws and regulations of the wizarding world, someone with business savvy." He was so excited that he was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning on the table, a gleam in his eyes.

"In other words, someone like you."

"Quite right." He raised his teacup in salute. "We could form a business partnership that would be advantageous to us both."

"You would really work with a Mudblood?" This all seemed too good to be true, like he was setting her up for something.

He set his cup down and looked at her sternly. "My dear, I have already told you that my opinions of those who are not pureblood has changed. It is not blood that matters, but ability. If you do not wish to join in a partnership with me, that is your choice. I was merely seeking a way to assist you and show my appreciation of what Harry Potter has done for me. Helping you is one way I can repay him he has been quite concerned about your future and lack of direction."

She considered his offer for a few moments. Upstairs she could hear the door open. "Let me think about it."

"Don't take too long. I intend to begin rebuilding as soon as my wand is returned."

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Normally Hermione would have relished a trip to Paris and taken in the sights, but she was distracted by thoughts of Lucius's offer. If she accepted she still wasn't sure what she would be doing, but the mystery of accepting his offer appealed to her. He was correct that she would not be happy pushing paper at the Ministry, and her personality was such that she didn't think she would make a good Healer she preferred dealing with facts to dealing with people. Which made a partnership with Lucius appealing he had excellent people skills. But then he was still Lucius Malfoy. Yes, his reputation had taken a hit, but he was a Malfoy and that name still retained some power. From what she had seen in the *Daily Prophet* articles following his trial, many people had some sympathy for him. And if he was still reviled, sure the *Prophet* would have made an issue about his impending release from servitude.

"Hermione? Are you alright?" Ginny asked.

"What? Oh, yes... I'm fine," she replied as she returned her attention to Ginny and the latest dress she was trying on.

Ginny looked at her doubtfully. "Are you sure? Your mind hasn't been completely here."

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I'm just thinking about the future." She looked at Ginny's dress. "It's not bad, but I liked the second one better." Forcing herself to concentrate on now and enjoy this outing with Ginny, she started looking at some of the dresses the seamstress had brought out more closely. "Try this one next," she offered handing the dress to Ginny.

For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, she was able to push Lucius from her mind and help Ginny select a dress. While watching Ginny try on dress after dress, Hermione found herself thinking of the day in the future when she would be shopping for a dress of her own, whenever that might be.

They took dinner at a small sidewalk café in wizarding Paris. "So, what were you thinking about the future that was taking your mind off dress shopping?" Ginny asked inquisitively.

Since they were nearly to the bottom of the bottle of wine, Hermione didn't even stop to think before answering, "Lucius has offered a business partnership."

"What sort of partnership?"

"I have no idea. We didn't get a chance to discuss it. But whatever it is, it will have to be more interesting than dealing with paperwork at the Ministry." After her brain reminded her that Ginny's father, brother and fiancé worked for the Ministry, she added, "No offense."

"None taken. That's why I joined the Harpies. I just couldn't see myself working in an office day in and day out." She took a sip of her wine. "So, you gonna take it?"

Hermione swirled her wine as she considered her reply. "Do you think I should?" A small voice in her brain tried to tell her that making decisions for one's future while drunk was a bad idea, but she ignored it.

Ginny shrugged. "What have you got to lose?"

That was exactly what Hermione had thought. Lucius seemed sincere, and she couldn't imagine he would ever do anything to harm her. Right now she had nothing to lose. "Nothing, I guess."

"Then go for it," Ginny urged.

Hermione's alcohol laden mind thought this was a fantastic idea. "I will. First thing tomorrow morning, I'll let him know that I'm in."

Ginny leaned over and gave Hermione a hug. "That's great. I'm sure that you'll be wonderful no matter what you end up doing with Lucius." Ginny pulled back, blushed and



giggled, covering her mouth. "Not that I meant *that*."

Hermione giggled as well. "Though it's not like he's bad looking or anything. He's actually quite handsome isn't he?"

Ginny's expression took on a dreamy look. "He is, but you really aren't thinking of him that way, are you?"

"Not until you mentioned it." They both fell into a fit of giggles. "I can't believe we're talking about Lucius Malfoy this way."

Ginny flashed a mischievous grin. "You haven't seen him without his shirt on."

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Well, I was up early one morning and decided to make tea and he was leaving the loo with only his trousers on." She shrugged. "What can I say, I stared. I am a woman after all." She took another sip of her wine. "And I have to say that he didn't seem to mind."

"Ginny, you're horrible." She tried to sound aghast, but now she was curious about what Ginny had seen. "I think we should get going. It's very late."

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As Hermione lay in bed that night, wanting to go to sleep, her mind instead was thinking of Lucius Malfoy. She tried to push him from her mind. After all, he was a man that she had despised until only a few weeks ago. Now she was not only thinking about forming a business partnership with him, but she also could not stop thinking of him shirtless. She knew that it was the wine and that it would pass. At least she hoped it would. After all, he was old enough to be her father. With that thought she started imagining Lucius's head on her father's body and found herself able to forget him so that she could go to sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, she had a headache from her over-indulgence and dug through her potions for an anti-headache potion. By the time she had showered and dressed, she felt almost normal, aside from the butterflies in her stomach. She was nervous not only about making a decision for her future, but also about tying her future to Lucius Malfoy.

Walking from the Apparition point to Grimmauld Place, she started giggling again as thoughts of shirtless Lucius drifted back into her mind. "Quit it," she chided quietly. This was a very serious situation and the last thing she needed to think about was Lucius as anything other than a business partner.

Knocking on the door, she was shocked to see Harry answer it. "Er, Harry, hi!" she managed to say brightly.

"I'm surprised to see you here this early. Ginny's left for practice already."

"I'm, er, not here to see Ginny," she said as she shifted nervously.

"What can I do for you? Though I do have to leave soon for work."

"Actually, I'm here to see Lucius."

Harry sighed. "I thought you had put all that nonsense behind you and accepted that he's changed."

"Oh, I have." She thought quickly, trying to determine how she wanted to phrase her reasoning for being there. She wasn't sure that Harry would be as accepting of her business partnership as Ginny had and getting into an argument with him first thing this morning was not on her list of things to do. "We were having a rather interesting debate when Ginny came home and I wanted to hear the rest of his points." She hoped that excuse would be good enough to not raise any suspicion and to be uninteresting enough that Harry wouldn't want to stay.

Harry seemed thoroughly uninterested. "Only you can make a mountain out of a molehill. He's down in the kitchen. Oh, I was going to send you an owl, but since you're here, I ran into Marcus Belby yesterday and I thought maybe you'd like to double date on Friday."

Hermione knew she had to get out in the wizarding world more than she had and she thought Marcus was a nice young man. "Sure. Sounds like a good idea." It was much better than being set up on a blind date. At least if he turned out to be a boring date, she would have Harry and Ginny for company.

When she entered the kitchen, she saw Lucius scrubbing pans with his sleeves rolled up. Out of curiosity she checked his forearm for the Dark Mark, but his skin was blank.

He looked up and flashed her a smile. "It's completely gone now; it vanished after his death."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied, embarrassed at having been caught.

"Quite alright. I assume that you are here to see me." He dried his hands. "There is still some bacon and coffee, but I'm afraid the eggs are gone. I can make more if you would like."

The thought of Lucius cooking still didn't sit right with her. "No, thank you. I'll just have some bacon and some toast." She went to the pantry to get the bread herself, not liking to be waited on outside of a restaurant. When she returned to the table, a plate was waiting for her, as was a cup of coffee. Lucius was seated across from her chair. Ignoring the fact that he was sitting with his fingers laced on the table and not joining her for breakfast, she said, "I've been thinking about your offer and wondering if you had any business ideas before I make my decision."

"The ideas are actually quite limitless. I thought we could spend the next couple of weeks brainstorming ideas to see where your interests lay and go from there."

"Are you going to contribute anything other than your business savvy?" While she didn't mind working, she didn't want to do all the work if this was going to be a partnership.

"Part of it will depend on what business endeavor we choose. I have decent but not extraordinary Potions skills. Believe or not, Severus spoke quite highly of your skills, though he did mention your unwillingness to think outside the instructions. I am quite good at both Transfiguration and Charms. But whatever our business endeavor, it will require a good deal of marketing and investment work early on so that initial development will fall largely to you."

She had a few bites of her breakfast while she considered his offer. It was very tempting and sounded much more interesting than a traditional job. And he was probably right about his marketing skills. She was reasonably sure that he could sell water to the merpeople. "I'm in," she finally said.

He grinned broadly. "Excellent. I do have a small amount of capital and if necessary can mortgage the estate. I presume that you have little capital to invest."

"No. I don't have anything to add," she replied quietly.

"Pity. You would have thought they would have rewarded you for your efforts to destroy Voldemort."

Hermione didn't want to tell him that the Ministry had, but she had declined payment wanting the money to go to the victims since she knew she could easily get a job and support herself. "Well then, I guess I'd better finish breakfast and we can start making plans." Hermione could scarcely believe she had just agreed to be a business partner with Lucius Malfoy.

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Over the next two weeks, they floated dozens of ideas, each feasible, but each with some serious drawbacks. She was starting to feel a little frustrated.

"Hermione, a business does not blossom overnight. It takes work. And this is nothing compared to the work we will have once we decide what our product will be," Lucius reassured her.

She tried to run her fingers through the tangled mess of her hair. "I know that. It's just that it should be easy to figure out what we want to sell. Tomorrow you are officially a free man and we still have nothing." She shoved the various scraps of parchment with ideas away from her in frustration, a few fluttering to the floor.

Lucius moved behind her and massaged her shoulders. "You need to relax. Stress does not lead to clear thinking. And just because I'm going to get my wand back tomorrow does not mean that we have to open our business tomorrow. I am not entirely broke."

His touch was firm, yet tender and she found herself relaxing. "I know that. I just feel like all my friends are accomplishing things in life and I'm standing still. I was the best in my class. I'm supposed to be the one having success."

"You will," he whispered into her ear.

She looked over her shoulder at him, thinking how kissable his lips were. He pulled back a little and put his finger under her chin, tilting it up slightly.

"Now, my dear, we will have to continue this tomorrow. There is work to be done around the house before Mr. Potter returns. I'll owl when I return home and we can resume our work."

She swallowed nervously. "Your house?" Until now she had not thought that she would have to go to Malfoy manor. She had been tortured and nearly killed when she had last been there.

He sat beside her and took her hands in his. "Hermione, it is not the same house. There will be no one there but the two of us. All traces of his occupation of the house have been removed. I assure you that you are perfectly safe there."

She drew strength from his words and confidence. "Okay. Tomorrow."

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**A/N:** Once again, many thanks to my lovely beta. It has been wonderful having someone to brainstorm with. :D

## Chapter 4

### *Chapter 4 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

### Chapter 4

She watched the eagle owl fly away from her window. Lucius was home, and she knew she would have to face her fears. It was just a building. The building had not hurt her. It had been that lunatic Bellatrix, who was dead.

Holding onto those thoughts, she disappeared. Surprisingly she found Lucius waiting for her at the gate. "Thank you for coming," he said warmly. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "I think so." Muttering quietly to herself, she said, "It's a building. It's a building."

"What's that, my dear?" asked Lucius.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." She half expected him to criticize her for that, but he remained silent, instead offering her his arm.

Entering the house, Hermione noticed it looked nothing like it had that night, much to her relief. And Lucius led her deep into the manor, away from the rooms she had been in last time.

They worked late into the night, taking meals in the office and Hermione decided not to make an issue of the house-elves. She heard the clock on the mantle strike one. "Goodness! Is it that late?"

"I'm afraid so, but I believe it has been worth it. I think we have a good product line," he said as he stretched out in his chair.

"I do, too. It seems that my time in Australia was useful after all." While she had been there, she had indulged in the study of some of the Australian flora, and this evening she had realized that some of it would be useful in beauty products. "It'll be expensive starting it up, though."

"Not much more than any other business. I have a Potions lab here where you can start work. There is more than enough room on the estate to set up greenhouses. We will have to import materials until we can grow them ourselves, which will incur a significant expense by using the international Floo, but nothing too outrageous. Since you have contacts in Australia, it would be fitting for you to set up our supply chain there. I will take care of the permits. But we can work out the details tomorrow after we've gotten some rest. Let me show you to your room."

"My room?" she asked, completely surprised by the idea of staying in the manor.

"It is late enough and you are tired enough that I don't want to risk you Apparating home. Splinching is a rather unpleasant experience. And there is no shortage of room here."

"I suppose you have a good point." Once again, he offered her his arm and smiled warmly at her. The change in him was remarkable. In the two weeks they had been working together, he had been the perfect gentleman and had shown her the utmost respect. It was as though he was a completely different man, one whom she felt attracted to rather than repulsed by. But that was silly. He was far too old for her. He would never be attracted to her. He was handsome, still wealthy, from a respectable family and could probably have any witch he wanted. She was plain, young enough to be his daughter and a nobody. It was time to push those thoughts out of her mind as

a juvenile fantasy.

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The next morning Lucius left early to go to the Ministry to secure the needed permits to import both plant material and seed stock. He would then go to a builder to have the greenhouses designed. While he was gone, Hermione tried to brainstorm names for the company. Lucius had insisted it would be best to use her name since it had recognition in the wizarding world. It felt a little dishonest, but she knew that he was right.

She paced and muttered to herself, "Granger's Grooming. Sounds more like it's for pets than people. Hermione's Hair Care. Too specific. Granger's Great Looks. Not specific enough it could be a salon with that name." She screamed and cursed her name. If she could have used his name, she could have come up with several decent name candidates. "Think, Hermione. You're bright, the brightest witch of your age. How hard can naming a business be? Obviously a lot harder than you think."

She started wandering around the house, seeing if anything in it could give her some inspiration. A house-elf popping from nowhere in front of her made her jump out of her skin. "Mr. Malfoy is waiting for you in the office," it squeaked before vanishing.

When she entered the room, he beamed at her. "We have our permits, work will begin on the greenhouses by the end of the week and I have secured some financing," he beamed.

"That's wonderful news." She gave him a warm embrace, aware of the muscles beneath his clothes and recalling what Ginny had said about his chest. Forcing that thought away, she added, "Now all we need is a name."

He released her. "You haven't come up with anything?" he asked gently.

A part of her missed his touch, but she noticed that he had not rejected her affection. "Nothing that's any good for our business. If we were going to be dog groomers, I have the perfect name," she replied sarcastically. Once again she started pacing.

Lucius gently stopped her as she walked by him. "Have I not taught you that relaxing is the best way to think?" He slipped behind her and massaged her shoulders again. "Just think of words that begin with 'h' and 'g'."

His skillful hands quickly relieved the tension headache she had felt forming, and she let her mind drift, searching for words. As she was thinking, she had an epiphany and pulled away from him, turning to face him. "Do you have a dictionary?" She couldn't believe she hadn't thought of that before. Books had always been her closest friends.

He turned to the bookshelves. "Here." He handed her a tattered tome.

She eagerly turned to the 'h' section and began skimming. "I've got it!" she announced triumphantly. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Hermione's Herbals."

He arched an eyebrow. "That has potential, but herbal what? We need to be clear what we are marketing and people may believe we are selling herbs."

Her elation waned. "Oh, right."

After a few moments, he offered, "How about, Hermione's Herbal Beauty? It is specific, yet still has some of the alliteration."

She smiled broadly. "I think that'll work. Though... it's really odd thinking that a shop is going to have my name on it."

He handed her a glass of wine that she hadn't noticed him pouring. "To Hermione's Herbal Beauty," he offered in salute.

She clinked her glass with his. "Hermione's Herbal Beauty." It was really happening. She was getting on with her life. Looking over at Lucius, she said, "Thank you."

He looked confused. "You're welcome, but for what?"

"For giving me the kick in the arse to get on with my life."

"And thank you for putting aside your prejudices and agreeing to work with me."

She felt a little embarrassed by his praise. "You're welcome."

They sat in awkward silence for a few moments. "Now, I believe a celebratory dinner is in order for tonight. Tomorrow you can determine which supplies you need. When you're in Australia, I'll begin getting the shop set up and the marketing."

"Dinner here?" she asked, not entirely sure if that was what he had meant.

"I thought perhaps a nice dinner out, give the house-elves a night off."

"Oh. Er, well..." she said nervously.

He arched an eyebrow and couldn't keep the pain completely out of his voice. "Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

Placing her hand on his knee, she reassured. "No, no, it's nothing like that. It's just that I don't really have anything to wear to a nice dinner out." She was ashamed to admit that her wardrobe was still very basic. She knew that would have to change, but she had felt guilty about buying clothes with her parents' money.

The smile returned to his face. "You need not worry about that. Narcissa left behind many of her clothes, and I'm sure you could find something suitable. Come." He led her upstairs to what she presumed was the master suite and an enormous closet that was more than half-full with magnificent clothing. "Feel free to help yourself. If anything needs tailoring, Tiggy is an excellent seamstress."

"Oh, but I can't. These clothes are far too nice," she protested.

He placed a finger on her lips to silence her protests. "The first rule of being successful is to look as though you already are. I am afraid that you will have to cease wearing your current wardrobe when doing business. Besides, it is not as though I will be putting them to use."

She found his playful smile infectious and picked up a particularly daring evening gown. "I don't know. I think this blue really brings out your eyes," she said playfully as she held the dress up to him.

He laughed softly and pulled her into his arms. "I think it would look much better on you, but that is perhaps a bit extravagant for tonight. I'll have the clothes moved to your room so that you may go through them at your leisure."

Her room. "Oh. My parents! They must be wondering where I am." She couldn't believe that she had forgotten about them.

"Ah, yes, of course. Will you be staying with them?" He sounded as though he had forgotten about them as well.

She could honestly say that she hadn't thought about it. A part of her drew comfort from her childhood room, but she knew that now that she was moving on with her life, she needed to move out of her parents' house. "I suppose I'll look for a place once we start generating some income."

"Since you will be working here, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like," he offered.

"But what will people think?" she asked.

"Why would people need to know where you are living?"

She had to concede that he had a good point. Both on people not needing to know she had to admit that her reaction came from having spent close a year in the Muggle world and being exposed to their obsession with celebrity gossip and that it would make sense for her to live where she was working. "Let me think about it."

"Of course. I'll arrange for dinner at seven, so that should give you plenty of time to visit with your parents." He gave her a small bow before leaving.

Hermione was overwhelmed with emotion. Deciding that she might as well choose a dress first, she started going through the clothes, and she had to admire how beautiful they were. Narcissa definitely had impeccable taste, and Hermione reminded herself these were the cast-offs.

Finally she decided on a lovely emerald green dress, subconsciously selecting it because she thought the green would appeal to Lucius. After trying it on, she knew that it was the one. It made her eyes sparkle and amazingly it fit like a glove. It then occurred to her that she didn't have any shoes. "Tiggy!" she called out.

The elf popped into the closet. "How may Tiggy help, miss?"

"Did Miss Narcissa leave behind any shoes?"

The elf smiled brightly. "Oh, yes, miss! Miss Narcissa left behind many things. Tiggy knows the perfect shoes for that dress." The elf scurried away and returned with a magnificent pair of purple shoes.

Hermione tried to put them on, but found them a little too small.

"No problem, miss. Tiggy will fix it." The elf snapped her fingers and Hermione felt the shoes expand to fit her feet. "Now, miss, there is more."

Hermione watched as the elf began digging through other boxes, emerging covered in jewelry. As the elf worked various pieces of jewelry into her hair and draped various necklaces around her neck, she couldn't help feeling a little bit like a princess.

"There you go, miss. Perfect for a night out," the elf said proudly.

Hermione looked in the mirror and hardly recognized herself. The elf had expertly tamed her hair, bringing out curls Hermione hadn't realized were there. "Thank you," she said breathlessly. She had intended on changing back into her clothes to visit her parents, but she couldn't bring herself to touch anything.

"Tiggy is here to serve," the elf said obsequiously before vanishing.

Checking the clock in the bedroom, Hermione saw that it was late enough that her parents should be home but not too late that she wouldn't have any time with them.

With a quiet pop she Apparated into her bedroom. She could hear her mother call out, "Hermione, is that you?" Her parents had gotten used to her coming and going by Apparition.

"Yeah, Mum. It's me." She left her bedroom and went downstairs.

"Goodness, Hermione. Don't you look lovely," her mother said breathlessly.

"Special occasion?" her father asked, looking up from his newspaper.

She suddenly felt self-conscious. "I guess you could say that. I'm going into business, and my partner and I are going out to dinner to celebrate."

"That's wonderful," her mother said as she pulled Hermione into a congratulatory embrace. "What sort of business?"

"I'm going to take what I learned in Australia to make lotions, salves and such."

"That sounds wonderful," her father said. He eyed her clothes appraisingly. "A little fancy for a celebratory dinner, isn't it?"

"Well, we are going to a rather nice restaurant," she replied evasively.

"Have you found someone?" her mother asked hopefully.

"Maybe. He's a nice man." She realized it sounded almost absurd for her to be saying this about Lucius, a man her father saw insult them and get into a fight with Arthur Weasley. "But right now we are just business partners."

"Do you want it to be something more?" her mother prodded.

"I don't know, Mum. We'll see." And that was the truth. She didn't know. She still wasn't entirely sure this was the real Lucius Malfoy, but if it wasn't, he was carrying out one very convincing act.

She spent the next hour with her parents telling them more about her business and promising to take them to Diagon Alley once the shop was open. They seemed very proud of her.

When Hermione returned to the manor, she found Lucius waiting in the salon for her. "You look... stunning," he said and looked as though he was really seeing her for the first time.

She couldn't help blushing. "Thank you. Tiggy helped a lot."

"Shall we?" he asked as he offered her his arm, clearly intending to Side-Along Apparate her to their destination.

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The dinner was exquisite, one of the best Hermione had ever had. And during dinner she had noticed that Lucius couldn't keep his eyes off her, not that she really minded the attention. He looked quite striking himself in his crisply tailored clothes, nothing like the more casual clothing he had worn while in service to Harry. This look suited him much better.

When dinner was over, he offered her his hand. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"A surprise," he replied, a twinkle in his eyes. "It's nothing dangerous or unseemly."

Deciding to trust him, she took hold of his hand, and he led her back into Muggle London and down a rather non-descript street. She was about to ask him where they were going when they stopped before a formidable door. He discreetly tapped it with his wand, and she could hear the door unlock.

Inside she found a rather decadent club. "I thought perhaps you might enjoy a little dancing," he offered.

She realized he was alluding to more formal dancing and less what young people tended to do. "Oh, yes, but, er, I'm not very good." She had managed her way through the first dance during the Yule Ball, but she was afraid a simple waltz was all she could manage.

"Not to worry. I shall teach you," he offered gallantly.

As he led her into the club, many people greeted Lucius, some more warmly than others, and most of them seemed to be whispering behind their backs.

During their first dance, she pulled close to him and quietly said in a concerned voice, "They're whispering."

"Let them whisper. They always whisper about something," he replied with an air of confidence that indicated he didn't care what others were saying about him.

They danced long into the night, Hermione becoming more confident as the evening progressed. Once they were out in the quiet of the night, she said, "Thank you very much for a wonderful evening."

"It is I who should be thanking you. It has been a long time since I have felt so alive." He patted her hand as it rested on his arm.

She laughed softly. "It seems we have both done the other a favor."

"Indeed." He glanced at her, a smile beaming on his face.

They walked in silence for a few moments. She broke the silence. "It's been a lovely evening, but I really should be getting home."

"Of course," he replied, trying to hide the disappointment. "Allow me to see you home."

She wasn't sure how to turn him down gently since she Apparated straight to her room and didn't need her parents thinking she would make a habit of bringing men home. Besides she also didn't want to ruin the mood of the evening. A part of her knew how easy it would be to return to his manor, but she was afraid of what might happen if she did. "My folks live in a Muggle neighborhood, and there really isn't a good place to Apparate."

He smiled at her, but the smile no longer reached his eyes. "Then I wish you pleasant dreams." He brought her hand to his lips for a kiss.

She placed her free hand on his cheek. "We should do this again... Soon," she said softly.

He straightened up and took a half-step closer to her, the passion back in his eyes. "I agree."

She looked up into his grey eyes, no longer seeing the cold malice that had been present for so long. Tipping her head back, she half closed her eyes, hoping he would kiss her goodnight. He gently brushed his lips against hers, and she placed her hand on his back, letting him know she approved.

When he once again pressed his lips against her, he held and deepened the kiss, gently slipping his tongue between her lips, his fingers lacing into her hair. She eagerly returned the kiss

After they broke the kiss, Hermione found herself breathless. The kiss had been amazing, much better than she had imagined it would be. Quickly she tried to gather her wits about herself. "Er, goodnight, Lucius."

"Goodnight, my dear Hermione. See you in the morning." He brushed her cheek before letting her go.

"Yes, the morning." She walked down the street a short way before Disapparating, wanting to ensure that she didn't Splinch herself.

When she returned home, she danced around her room as she took off the jewelry and wrapped it safely in a scarf for return to Lucius. She was a little sad when it came time to take the dress off as it had made her feel more beautiful than she ever had.

She drifted off to sleep with sweet dreams about how much brighter her future was looking. For the first time since her return, she didn't regret the time she had spent in Australia. It had freed her from Ron and given her the idea for the business she was starting with Lucius. And after that kiss, she knew that she wouldn't mind him becoming more than a business partner.

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**A/N:** Thank you beta! You are wonderful.

## Chapter 5

### *Chapter 5 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

### Chapter 5

Hermione was at her parents' house packing for her trip to Australia. It was strange to be going returning so soon, especially since she was finally getting used to being back in England.

"Hermione," he mother called up the stairs, "Harry is here to see you."

"Harry?" she said to herself. "I'll be right down." After zipping up her bag, she headed down to see Harry. "Harry? What a surprise to see you here."

He flicked his wand and cast the Muffliato. "I heard you were out with Lucius last night."

She could hear the disapproval in his voice. "Yes, we were celebrating our new partnership," she replied simply. "We have decided to go into business together."

"You? Going into business with Malfoy? Are you serious?" he asked in disbelief.

"What's wrong with that?" she asked defensively. After all, Harry had been one to insist the Wizengamot had been correct in exonerating Lucius.

"Well... it's Malfoy," he offered weakly.

She crossed her arms. "I thought you were the one who said I should trust him."

Harry was trying very hard not to lose control. "There's a big difference between trusting him and going into business with him. That's one step too far."

"Why?" she asked defensively.

"Why? Well... He's... Malfoy!" Harry sputtered as if that was all the explanation that was required.

"What sort of reason is that?" She wanted to know if there was a good reason for Harry's behavior or if it was just an emotional reaction. After all, Lucius had lived under his roof for a year.

Harry explained, "Well, I mean it's one thing to trust him to not start up a new dark organization, but it's completely different to entrust your future to him. You know what he's done."

"I do, Harry, but I've also worked with him the last few weeks and I really do think he's changed." The Lucius Malfoy she had been working with was nothing like the one they had encountered while in school.

Giving up, Harry said gently, "Just watch out for yourself, okay? I don't want to see you getting hurt. Though I still think it would better for you to work for the Ministry, at least for a little while."

"I think I am more than capable of taking care of myself. Was there anything else since I have to leave in a little while?" She tried not to sound rude, but she felt that Harry was the last one who should be lecturing her on trusting Lucius.

"No. I just want you to be careful, that's all."

She let go of her anger. "I'm always careful, Harry. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," he replied as he turned to leave.

Hermione sighed after he was gone. This was one of those days where she was sure she would never understand him.

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The weeks after Lucius and Hermione formalized the plans for the store, both of them were incredibly busy. Permits in hand, Hermione headed to Australia to secure suppliers for everything she would need.

Mitch Winters, an elderly Herbologist she had befriended, had been more than happy to supply her most of what she needed.

"Now, I'm not going to lie to you, some of these plants you aren't going to be able to grow in a hothouse, no matter how hard you try. And a few of these you might want someone with some good Herbology experience."

"I know just the person. But the rest of them I should have no problem growing?"

"Not if you treat them right. Though for a few it will take a couple of years before you can have a good crop. Not to worry, though. I'll have no problem filling your orders," he offered proudly.

"I appreciate it, Mitch, but we have no idea how quickly the business will grow." While he was a decent sized Herbologist, she wasn't sure how long he could meet her needs. "But you have first precedence."

It took Hermione most of a week to arrange suppliers and clear everything on the Australian end. Every day Lucius would send her a letter letting her know how everything on his end was going he was finalizing a lease on a shop in Diagon Alley and saying how much he couldn't wait for her to return. She cherished those letters. They weren't love letters, but they showed that he respected her something that Ron had never done.

When she returned to the manor, it was early in the morning. She was sorting through her luggage when several house-elves appeared. "Please, miss, let us take care of your luggage. You be telling us where it goes."

"Those boxes need to be stored someplace cool and dry. The luggage... Well, it's mostly dirty clothes."

"We are taking care of it," the elf replied and her luggage was gone in a flash.

She shook her head at the departed elves. She just could not understand how serving people made them happy.

"Welcome back," Lucius said warmly from behind her, wearing a dressing gown over his pajamas. "You should have Flooed ahead and let me know when you were returning." He kissed her on the cheek.

"I didn't want to be a bother. The elves have taken the supplies someplace. I think I'd like to take a bath and then a little nap to try to make it through the day so I can reset my internal clock."

"Of course. Once you've rested, I'd like to show you the shop."

"You have the lease finalized?" she asked optimistically.

"I sign the papers this morning. The terms are quite favorable." After the look she gave him, he added, "Rest assured I did nothing untoward." He took her hand and led her out of the room.

After her bath and the light snack that was waiting for her, she had no problem falling asleep. When she woke she saw that it was nearly ten o'clock. While a little disoriented, she thought that she should be able to last the rest of the day.

She found Lucius in the office, poring through paperwork. "Good morning," she said cheerily.

He put down the paperwork he was looking at. "Good morning. Feeling better?"

"I don't know. That's the downside of long distance travel it takes a few days for you to figure out what time it is, but I think I can make it the rest of the day."

"Good. Are you ready for a little trip?" he asked eagerly.

"I can't wait. Meet you there?" She had always preferred Apparating alone.

"Of course. I'll meet you at the Leaky Cauldron."

She had a few moments before Lucius arrived and memories of spending time with Harry and Ron during summers came rushing back to her a happier, more carefree time of her life.

"Ready?" Lucius asked as he placed his hand on her elbow.

"What? Oh, yes. Sorry." This was the present and she couldn't live in the past. She could only hope that over time she and Ron could rebuild their friendship. "Let's go see our shop."

He led her down Diagon Alley and they stopped across from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. She could have almost guessed that this would have been the location. He dangled a key from his fingers. "Shall we go in?" he asked proudly.

Her first impression was that it was large, perhaps too large. "Are you sure we need something this big?"

"I was able to secure a good price. This will allow us to have a more open area, make it more inviting. I had also thought that it would provide room to possibly add a spa area." He pointed to the back left. "And you could have a waiting area here with a tea bar." He pointed to the left of the door. "That would leave the rest of the area for the merchandise. And if you are unsure about a spa area, that part of the building could be closed off for inventory."

"No. I like that idea. It introduces people to the product. When we open we could do a promotion where anyone purchasing a spa treatment would get a discount."

"Exactly the type of thinking we need. I'm glad you approve." He smiled proudly.

She walked around the empty space, making notes in her head. "Yes. I can start to see it. Do we just have this floor?" Images flew through her mind as she decorated the shop.

"There is the basement, which would be best suited for storage. The upstairs is configured as a two room flat."

"Let's take a look. Perhaps that can be changed to a work area, or if the spa takes off that could also become treatment rooms." When they got upstairs she saw that the bedrooms weren't that large, the kitchen was very basic, but the living room area was quite spacious. "I think we should concentrate on the store itself at first. I think I'll need you to take the lead on that while I work on the product."

"Of course, but I would appreciate your input on selecting a decorator. And I will also allow you say on all employees as you will be working closely with them."

It seemed that Lucius had considered all aspects of setting up the business and was more than willing to include her. Surely Harry's concerns had been utterly unfounded. "Sounds good. We're really doing this, aren't we?" she asked as she turned away from the window that faced Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

"We are fully committed now. Any regrets?"

"None at all. Let's get back to the manor so I can start going through everything I brought back and get the lab set up." As they exited their new shop, Harry came out of the Weasley store.

"Hermione? What are you doing here?" he asked in shock.

"We're going to be setting up shop here," she said proudly as she pointed over her shoulder.

"Really? Congratulations," he said, though he did not sound entirely sincere.

Hermione had known that Harry did not entirely approve of what she was doing, but she had not expected the sting in his voice. "Thank you." Lucius moved behind her and placed his hand possessively on her shoulder.

Harry's eyes flicked between the two of them. He finally settled on Hermione. "Can I talk to you... alone."

Lucius took his cue from Harry. "As it turns out, I have some business to attend to elsewhere." He nodded courteously to Hermione. "Hermione." Glancing over at Harry, he said curtly, "Potter."

Harry led Hermione down Diagon Alley to a secluded table in the Leaky Cauldron. "Are you really sure about this? I mean, it's a big step."

"I know it is, but it feels right."

"Did you get a chance to think about what I said earlier?" he asked, obviously hoping to get her to change her mind.

"Sorry, no. I was incredibly busy in Australia. But he has given me no reason to mistrust him."

"Australia? What were you doing there?"

"Getting the botanicals for our business, if you must know. Really, Harry, you were the one who convinced me to forgive and forget." She wanted to use his argument against him, prove to him that there was nothing wrong with what she was doing.

"I know, but forgiving is a lot different than going into business with him. Remember what he did to Dumbledore."

She sighed. He was trying to use her arguments against her. "I do. The two of us have had many conversations about the past and I truly do believe he is repentant."

Harry reached out a hand and placed it on hers. "Hermione, I care about you and I'm concerned about your future. I just don't know that you will find what you are looking for partnered with Malfoy. He's been pretty ruthless in the past. He could just be using you to get himself back on his feet."

"I told you before: I can take care of myself. I'll be fine, Harry," she reassured him. Nothing in Lucius's behavior suggested he was using her.

He didn't look as though he believed her, but he clearly didn't want to beleaguer the point any longer. "Well, I have to get back to work. Take care of yourself."

She leaned back in her chair and stared into her tea, trying to convince herself that she was doing the right thing. After all, Lucius had given her no reason to doubt him or suspect him of anything that was not honorable.

Pushing Harry's doubts out of her mind, she headed back to the manor so she could start getting organized and determine which domestic supplies she needed to formulate their product line. There was plenty of work to be done, and she had to push Harry's doubts from her mind so that she could concentrate.

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Hermione was spending most of her waking hours working on the product line. When they opened the store, she knew she needed to have a full line of products. Once they had established themselves, she could start work on different lines. Lucius was focusing on getting the store set up and the two of them rarely saw each other.

Entering the lab, he leaned against the doorframe and waited for her to acknowledge him. "Hermione, I believe that you should take a break."

"I'm fine for another few hours. I think I'm almost there on this shampoo." She had been trying to find something especially for frizzy hair something in surprisingly short supply in the wizarding world. For whatever reason the wizarding world didn't seem to have the same retail options that Muggles did for personal care products, which is why she and Lucius felt their business was sure to succeed.

"Hermione, you still have time. Working the long hours you have down here is not healthy. For the rest of the evening, I don't want you working on potions or thinking about them. I want you to take some time for yourself."

Realizing that he was unlikely to go away, she scribbled some thoughts in her notebook before closing it and taking his outstretched hand. "I presume you have something planned?"

"Would I do that?" he asked innocently as he led her back upstairs.

"Where are we going?" she asked curiously.

"It's a bit of a surprise," he replied, grinning broadly, as he led her towards the back of the house. The door to the outside opened as they approached it. "I thought you might like to take tea in the garden?"

She was breathless when she saw the garden. There were not only the standard Muggle plants that you would find in an English garden, but also just about every variety of magical plant that would grow in Wiltshire.

He smiled proudly. "After tea, I wanted to show you the greenhouses. They are complete and planting will begin tomorrow."

"That's wonderful," she said brightly. "And the shop?"

"The basics are in place. When you feel the time is right, we can begin interviewing staff."

"And how is the money situation?" she asked cautiously.

"Leave that to me. You are concerned with enough right now without having to worry about finances. But rest assured that I have everything well in hand." He smiled at her reassuringly.

Hermione had to admit that this break was exactly what she had needed. She hadn't realized how exhausted she had been. After examining the greenhouses, she forced herself to take a look at the store and had to marvel at the transformation. "Lucius, it's... perfect."

"Well, not quite." When she looked at him quizzically, he continued. "The shelves are still empty and there are some finishing touches, but the decorator has done a marvelous job, hasn't she?"

She admired the soft beauty of the store. It was feminine, but not overly so. There was nothing about the store that should make a man uncomfortable unlike Madam Puddifoot's. "I should get back and finish work on the shampoo," she said, suddenly filled with a sense of urgency.

He gently took hold of her arm to keep her from leaving. "Hermione, just because the store appears nearly ready for opening, does not mean we need to open immediately. There is still the hiring of staff, designing of packaging, procuring the packaging, producing the product and pre-opening advertising. I imagine we are still close to a month or more from opening."

Once again, she was reminded that she was not the expert in everything. Most of what he had listed she had not even considered because her mind was so concentrated on product development. She blushed. "Oh, right. I guess I was just getting carried away."

He laughed softly, but in a pleasant way. "And that is why we are partners. Now, I believe an early dinner tonight and then you need to get a good night's sleep."

As they walked out of the shop, his arm around her shoulders both guiding and supporting her, she glanced at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and thought she caught a glimpse of Ron looking out the window, but it was gone in a flash, perhaps only a figment of her imagination. For a fleeting moment she recalled that Ron's wedding was in a few days, but it was put out of her mind as Lucius Disapparated them.

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As opening day neared, Hermione found herself incredibly grateful for Lucius. He was taking care of the details, leaving her time to work on the product line. His taste was impeccable she loved both the packaging and the labels. Both were distinctive and eye catching.

She was finishing up the first batches and getting them ready to be sent to the store. She had insisted that until they knew how popular they were going to be that she could handle the workload of producing everything. Her one concession to cost had been the hiring of help for the shop. She realized that it was unrealistic for either her or Lucius to be there constantly. Besides, it was not like either of them knew anything about being a spa attendant.

The day prior to opening, Hermione was in the store finalizing the displays, making sure everything was organized perfectly. She was so engrossed in her work that she nearly jumped out of her skin when there was a knock at the door. Looking outside, she saw that it was Harry and Ginny and let them in.

She said brightly, "Harry, Ginny, how wonderful to see you, though I'm afraid we're not open until tomorrow."

"That's why we came to see you," Harry said, concern in his voice.

"We've been talking to George and have a few questions to ask you," Ginny added as they took seats in the waiting area.

"Is Malfoy here?" Harry asked, looking around to see if he was hiding behind a display.

Hermione crossed her arms defensively. "You aren't going to start into that again, are you?"

"Hermione, please, this is very important," Ginny said gently, placing her hand on Hermione's arm. "We have to ask you some very important questions. These are things that we had no idea about until we started talking with George."

"Fine," she replied defensively. "Ask away."

"Do you have a business plan or a contract that protects your rights?" Ginny asked.

"What?"

"Hermione, I spent a year living under the same roof as him. I know how he can be. I mean, have you thought this through all the way to ensure that he doesn't take advantage of you?"

Hermione started to feel a little concerned as she realized that they had no formal agreement she had been taking him at his word. "Well..."

"Are you telling me that you don't have anything written down?" Harry asked cautiously.



"We've talked about our agreement." She knew how weak her words sounded.

"Have you? Has he been completely open with you?" asked Ginny.

Hermione was starting to get annoyed. She wanted to defend Lucius, to be upset at her friends, but they were making wonderful points. And there was the fact that he had been very reluctant to discuss finances with her, simply ensuring her that everything was fine.

"You do realize that he could be manipulating you. Without the agreement, what's to keep him from taking the formulas to your lotions?" Ginny asked.

Harry reached over and placed a hand on hers. "Hermione, we both care about you and don't want to see you hurt. I just fear that by working with Lucius, you are opening yourself up to pain. I don't think he's any less manipulative than he has ever been."

She wanted to be mad at them, but she couldn't. Her stomach was doing somersaults. He was right. Was she really being that big a fool in deciding to go into business with Lucius? "You've given me a lot to think about." And time was running out.

"I'm sorry we couldn't come to your sooner," replied Ginny. "We just didn't know this information before."

Hermione smiled weakly at them as they left. Once they were gone, she started reviewing everything that had happened since she had agreed to go into business with Lucius. And it seemed that he had gone out of his way to keep her in the dark, to keep her focused only on producing the beauty line that they were going to sell. It really did seem as though he was manipulating her, telling her what she wanted to hear to get her to work harder.

He was the one who knew about business in the wizarding world. He was the one who should have brought up the agreement, made it formal. Instead, he had done none of that. And she had blindly listened to him, swayed by his story of change. She was angry at herself for being so naïve. Harry had tried to warn her, but she had ignored him, wanting to see the good in Lucius.

And it wasn't like she didn't know how silver-tongued he could be. That had been one of the reasons she had been eager to go into business with him in the first place, but she hadn't thought she would be one of his victims.

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 6 of 6*

At the end of the war, Hermione went to bring her parents home. In the year that she was gone, a lot changed, including Lucius Malfoy who has been sentenced as Harry's servant. Can she accept all the changes and that everyone's lives went on without her?

### Chapter 6

Returning to the manor, she learned from the house-elf that he was not there, attending to whatever *business*. The longer she waited, the more irate she became, chiding herself for blindly putting her faith into someone she had long considered untrustworthy, chiding herself for succumbing to his charm.

When he walked into the office, he had a broad smile on his face. "Hermione, darling, I thought you would be at the store ensuring everything is ready for tomorrow's opening."

The smile evaporated, replaced by confusion, as she turned on him. "Don't darling me. I have a bone to pick with you."

"Courtesy of Mr. Potter, I presume," he said in a tone that was carefully neutral.

"In part. It's something I should have seen long before now, but I allowed you to divert my attention from what is really important."

Careful not to provoke her ire any more, he asked, "And what might that be?"

"Our *partnership*. What assurances do I have that you won't just steal my ideas and sell them on your own? You admitted that you aren't great at Potions and that you were looking for a good business idea. Was your idea to get me to trust you enough that you can make off with my hard work?"

"Steal?" he asked, the sting of being insulted in his voice. "My dear, I would not ~~steal~~ from you. When I enter a partnership, I honor that partnership."

"But I only have your word and I know how little that can be worth," she interrupted, as much upset with herself as she was with him. Memories of the Lucius from her childhood were coloring her view of him.

It was his turn to lose control. "My word is my bond," he said through gritted teeth. "If you thought so little of my word, why would you have agreed to partner with me?"

"Because of your damned silver tongue. You could sell water to merpeople and I fell for it, utterly and completely." She was on a roll now, ready to counter every argument he could give her.

He pulled an envelope from his inside pocket. "Perhaps this will cause you to reconsider and remember that Potter is little more than an emotional teenager." For a moment it seemed as though he was going to say something else, but instead he dropped the envelope on the desk and spun on his heel before storming out of the room.

After he was gone, she snatched the envelope from the desk and pulled out the parchment inside it. On the parchment was a business contract, the very thing that she was upset over not having. It clearly stated that they would split the profits evenly, that she had control and ownership of the product line it was everything she had expected when she had agreed to the partnership with him.

Now she berated herself for blindly listening to Harry and Ginny and letting them get her worked up. First Harry had wanted her to trust that Malfoy had changed, but then he had warned her not to trust him too much. And now because of her behavior, she might be losing this chance at something great.

Rather than rushing around the manor to try to find Lucius, she called for Tiggy.

"Yes, miss? How may Tiggy be of service?" the house-elf asked obsequiously.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Malfoy is?"

"Tiggy is sorry, miss, but she cannot. Mr. Malfoy is not in the manor." The elf sounded very disappointed at being unable to fulfill her request.

"Thank you. If you could please let me know when he returns," she replied.

"Yes, miss. Tiggy can do that," the elf replied happily and nodded vigorously before vanishing.

After Tiggy left, she began pacing, trying to determine where he might have gone so that she might apologize. Unfortunately, she did not know enough about him to have an answer. She could only hope that he would accept her apology.

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Dinnertime came and went and still Lucius had not returned home. Hermione was starting to get a slightly concerned. Deciding she had nothing more to lose, she left the manor to search for him, leaving a note with Tiggy that had a brief apology and that she was looking for him to apologize in person.

After checking Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade and even Knockturn Alley, Hermione realized a blind search was futile. There were any number of wizarding enclaves spread across all of Britain. And she had no proof that he was actually still in Britain. Besides, it was nearly midnight.

She dropped her cloak off with Tiggy and decided to return to the office. Her heart sank when she saw her note was still on the desk.

"So you finally decided to return?" Lucius said from the shadows.

Hermione jumped in surprise. "Lucius, you came back!"

He rose from his chair, a glass of whisky in his hand that clearly was not his first drink of the night. "This is my house, of course I came back. The question is, why did you come back?"

He loomed over her menacingly and she could smell the alcohol on his breath. "I-I want to apologize," she replied nervously.

"I read your... *apology*. I had thought you were above the small-mindedness that people like Potter display. It seems I was wrong." He finished off his glass of whisky and refilled it from the decanter. "I think you should go."

She placed her hand on his arm. "Lucius, please. I'm sorry. I overreacted. I should have known better, should have asked you about an agreement rather than accusing you of being dishonest."

"Yes, you should have," he said bitterly, taking a long draught from his glass. "I had thought that you might be more sensible than the others, but I was wrong about you," he said quietly.

She was on the verge of tears, never wanting to have hurt him so badly. "No, you weren't," she pleaded.

He looked into her eyes. "Your accusations, your behavior..."

She felt very small and it was all she could do not to look away from his piercing gaze.

A lone tear trailed down his cheek and he turned away from her.

She placed her hand on his upper arm and leaned against his shoulder. She didn't know what else to say.

"It hurt," he said quietly, fighting for control over his emotions.

"I'm sorry," she replied quietly, fighting back her own tears. "I know how Harry feels and shouldn't have let him influence me. I want this partnership. I want to work with you." She bit her lip and hoped that she hadn't destroyed her future.

Slowly he turned and wrapped his arms around her, resting his forehead against hers. She returned his embrace, relieved that she had not ruined their partnership. For several minutes, she took comfort in his embrace. When she felt him lift his head, she looked up at him.

Impulsively, she reached up and gently pulled him closer for a kiss. At the same time she rubbed her thigh against his leg. "I'm sorry," she said breathlessly when they parted.

"That was quite the apology." They looked into each other's eyes for several long moments. "I think we should both get a good night's sleep so that we can prepare for tomorrow's opening." He gently brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

Deep down she knew his suggestion was for the best, but she still couldn't help but feel a little disappointed and rejected.

He said softly, "If all goes well, we can celebrate tomorrow evening."

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Hermione could barely sleep since she was so nervous about the store opening. She was up well before dawn. Rather than waiting around the manor, she headed for the shop to take care of the few things she had not gotten to the day before and to get the signs ready for placing outside.

Shortly before seven Lucius joined her, looking as dapper as ever. "Good morning," he said brightly as he scanned the store. "Is there anything I can do to assist?"

"There are just a few decorations left. I like the displays the way they are." She was feeling giddy about the upcoming opening. The store looked beautiful and inviting.

It wasn't long before they finished the preparations and decided to return to the manor for breakfast before opening. Both of them picked at their food and said very little, eager to start the day.

When they returned to the store, they arrived shortly before their shop assistants did. Hermione wasn't up to giving a motivational speech so she left that to Lucius. While he did a decent job, she could tell that he was also nervous.

They placed the final signs outside and prepared for their customers. Hermione wasn't sure what she expected, but she had hoped they would have had their first customers right when they opened rather than having to wait for half an hour.

Fortunately as the day went on, the number of customers picked up. Of course, she had also sent Alice, the counter girl, outside to drum up business as well. By the end of the day they had several appointments lined up for the rest of the week and Hermione was feeling quite relieved.

After the staff was dismissed, Hermione fell into Lucius's arms. "We did it," she said, sounding utterly exhausted.

He laughed softly. "And we will do it again tomorrow, and the next day."

She laughed along with him. "That we will."

"Regrets?" he asked.

Finally pulling away from him, she replied, "None whatsoever. I'm tired, but it's a good tired."

"Very good. And once business really takes off, we can hire more help and then finally begin to enjoy the fruits of our labor."

"Mmm... That'll be nice." For a moment she let her mind drift to that day in the future.

"Well, before you begin planning the future, let's return to the present. Now, I think this day warrants a celebration. I expect that tomorrow will be busier since word of mouth will begin to take effect. A nice dinner at home is in order, wouldn't you say?"

"That sounds wonderful." A part of her would have liked to have gone dancing again, but she knew that once again they had to be up early and it would be far too frivolous. Instead she decided that might be a good way to celebrate one month in business if all went well.

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After they had been open a couple of months, Hermione found the time to have dinner with Ginny and Harry.

"Well, congratulations. You seem to be doing quite well," said Ginny.

"Yeah, I'm glad to see I was wrong," added Harry a little sheepishly.

"You aren't the only one," Hermione replied, accepting his apology. "It really is going quite well. I'm actually surprised at how well everything is going. I hadn't expected Hermione's Herbal Beauty to become so popular." They all laughed together.

"Maybe now that things are settling down we can get together more often? We've both missed you," Ginny said.

"Yeah, maybe next time we can meet at your place?" Harry asked.

Hermione tried not to appear nervous about that idea. "Maybe." She didn't want to admit to them that she hadn't had time to look for a place to live and was staying at the manor. Her living arrangements just hadn't come up. "Thought I'm not sure when I can find the time what with business picking up and final wedding preparations for you two."

"After talking with George, I do know it can take a while to settle into everything, but I'm sure we can come up with something," Ginny said. She swirled her wine. "I've been thinking it would be nice to have a pre-bridal spa day at your place, but I wasn't sure how you would feel about that."

"I have to admit that might be a little odd," Hermione replied as she laughed. "But I think it could be a lot of fun." She realized that she had never indulged in one of her businesses spa treatments.

"Uh-oh," Harry said. "You two are getting into wedding planning, so if you'll excuse me." He pushed himself away from table and kissed Ginny on the cheek before leaving the room.

Hermione and Ginny talked late into the night. At one point Hermione thought about confiding to Ginny her feelings towards Lucius. The two of them were flirting with each, but it had never progressed past the occasional kiss. She longed to ask for relationship advice, but feared how she would be judged, so she kept it to herself.

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The following evening she was dining with Lucius at the manor and they were discussing their business. It was booming and she had been forced to accept that fact that she could no longer keep up with product orders by herself, so they had recently hired an older witch, whose children were all at Hogwarts, to assist her. The woman was a surprisingly quick study and even offered some advice on the products that Hermione had to admit was quite valuable.

The spa side of the business was more popular than she could have ever imagined. The upstairs rooms were being converted, and they were looking for others to hire so they could offer more appointments. She had thought that they would do well, but this was far exceeding her expectations.

"Hermione, I have been thinking that we should look into laboratory space outside of the manor so that we have room to expand," Lucius said one evening over dinner.

"Expand?"

"I have been reviewing our numbers and our product line is very popular. If we can expand our production, we can open a second shop. The wizarding community in Edinburgh has been growing rather quickly, and I have looked into property there. The rates are not yet inflated, so this would be a good time to buy there."

Her head was spinning. She was just getting her head around the success they were having in Diagon Alley and now Lucius was talking expansion. "That sounds reasonable. Though we would lose production setting up a new lab."

"Mrs. Trumble seems to have matters well in hand right now. I'm sure she could manage while you saw to the arrangements for a new lab. This is a good time to expand before we become overwhelmed and find that we cannot meet demand. And it would allow you time to train additional lab staff without having to worry about the pressure of meeting orders," he explained.

"Well, I must say that you really do seem to have considered all aspects of this." His business prowess never ceased to amaze her. Every problem she could foresee, he had already considered and developed a solution.

He smiled confidently. "That is why you agreed to partner with me, was it not?"

She found that she had a very hard time denying him anything when he smiled like that. "And I suppose that you have already made enquiries and placed bids?"

He arched an eyebrow and asked innocently, "Would I do that?"

She smiled back at him, purposefully not answering that question. "Expansion it is, then."

They had not even been in business for four months and already they were expanding. She had presumed there would be demand for their product, but this had exceeded her highest expectations. Clearly Harry had been wrong about Lucius, and for this she was incredibly glad. He had been the perfect business partner, expertly handling finances and an excellent collaborator. He had been completely transparent about how they were doing and where the money was going when she asked. She had absolutely no reason to doubt him.

As conversation wound down, she saw a chance to bring up living arrangements. It was something she had been planning since last night, but she was still nervous to question that which had become comfortable. "I've been thinking..." She paused a little while, but not long enough for him to interrupt. "Now that the business is stable it might be a good time for me to find my own place."

"Your own place?" He was caught off guard and the shock was clear in his voice. "Is there something wrong with living here?"

"Well... I do appreciate you letting me stay here and it has been very convenient, but I think it's time I get out on my own."

He did not try to conceal the pain in his voice. "I see."

She hadn't thought it would bother him this much. Reaching across the table, she placed her hand on his. "It has nothing to do with you. It's about appearances. If people ask where I live and I answer here, well... It's an awkward answer."

"You are my partner," he replied, little emotion in his voice.

"Your business partner, yes, but you have to admit that it does seem odd for business partners to be living together. And if I want a social life..." She realized there was no way to end that sentence that wasn't awkward.

"I am terribly sorry that I have impeded your social life. I was under the impression that you enjoyed living here." He had put his silverware down and his hands were in his lap.

He was pulling away from her emotionally. This was not at all how she expected him to react. She had hoped that he would fight for her to stay here. "I do enjoy it here. I enjoy the meals we share together. I..." She didn't want to cry or appear to be begging.

"Yet you feel that needs to change," he replied in a near whisper.

"Something needs to change," she replied just as quietly, pleading with her eyes. For several long seconds they started into each other's eyes each waiting for the other to speak.

Finally he broke the silence. "I don't want you to go. I want you in my life."

"What do you mean?" she asked cautiously.

Reaching across the table, he squeezed her hand. "We make excellent partners. How you make me feel... I don't know that I have ever felt this way." He paused. "I want us to be more than business partners if you feel the same way."

She returned his smile, relieved at his admission. "I do feel the same way. I just wasn't sure that you felt that way."

He chuckled softly. "I think that perhaps we have both been a bit nervous about admitting how we feel. After all, there is quite a significant age difference."

"It doesn't bother me if it doesn't bother you," she replied confidently and more relaxed than she had in a long time.