

Wreck a Malfoy

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Wreck a Malfoy

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Summary

His hand came back. Fingers trailing slowly up her calf. A silent touch that felt less like control and more like praise. Like he was telling her - this is good. You're good.

A shaky breath escaped her lips. Technically, she wasn't even doing anything, right? This wasn't sex. There was no skin-to-skin. No real touching.

Foot stuff didn't count—did it?

Or... Hermione stumbles messily into something that feels a lot like love.

Notes

I'm on Instagram now. Come and say hi! [@ramelle_kammae](#)

Chapter 1: Seconds



London smelled like rain and regret tonight.

Or maybe it was just her.

Hermione Granger had spent the last fifteen minutes power-walking through Soho, her mind a mess of bad decisions, leading her to the doorstep of a bar she should absolutely not be entering at this time of night.

She wasn't the type of woman who made impulsive, self-destructive decisions based on sexual frustration. And yet... tonight had been the last straw.

John had been nice. If she thought about it now, that was the worst part. A decent man. Stable, intelligent, emotionally available. He had listened when she spoke. He held open doors for her.

She had given him a chance, convinced herself that attraction could grow, that maybe she had been unfair to dismiss him a few weeks ago when he had asked her out for dinner the first time. She had forced herself to ignore the missing spark when he had kissed her at her door earlier tonight. She had let him press her back against the frame, let him trail his hands down her sides.

She had allowed him into her space, allowed him to take her to bed after an awkward amount of kissing and touching in the hallway.

Thirty seconds. *Thirty.*

Hermione stared blankly at the ceiling, her hands folded neatly on her stomach, blinking slowly.

"That was amazing." John sighed, rolling off her stiff body.

She just couldn't stand the idea of having him around, for him to think that he had done a good job. "I need you to leave."

She sat up with her sheets pressed to her chest to cover her breasts. "Now."

One moment, she had been furiously scrubbing her skin raw in the shower, washing away the scent of him. The next, she was outside a bar, arms crossed, trying not to inhale the thick haze of cigarette smoke from the group of blokes loitering near the entrance.

She should have just stayed home. Read a book. Masturbate. Anything else but what she was about to do. Because if she was here – if she had truly come this far – it meant one thing and one thing only.

She was officially out of options.

Hermione was sick to death of going on dates with men who never lived up to her expectations. They weren't even high at this point of her journey.

The last time she'd had half-decent sex had been during the on-again, off-again mess with Ron – *four years ago*.

Ron, who was now engaged to Lavender Brown and had moved across the country for his football career.

With him, things had been simple. Well, until they weren't.

He had broken her heart the day he told her that he wanted them to see other people, that he wasn't ready for anything serious.

Two months later, he was in Lavender's bed.

That had been the moment Hermione stopped believing in fair chances. She had taken a break from men, just like Ginny told her to. *Processed her emotions*.

Then she had tried again. Tried to fall in love, to make it work, to give people a shot. And every single time – whether it was the first date or the third – it always ended the same way; she wasn't a priority. Not in bed. Not in life.

She had made her decision. She'd walk into the bar, find a willing man, and try this again. It couldn't be worse than what had transpired in her flat less than an hour ago.

Her male friends did it all the time. Theo, Harry... heck, even Blaise before he had found Ginny.

Determined she put one foot in front of the other. The bar was packed and smelled like cheap beer. It was the kind of place where no one asked questions. Perfect.

Hermione pushed through the crowd, her eyes scanning the room with a single goal in her mind. She wasn't here for pleasantries or polite conversation. She was here for someone who wouldn't feel the need to pretend. Someone who would take what was offered, scratch the itch, and disappear into the night without lingering expectations.

Her pulse thrummed as she swept her gaze over the bar – past the large group of friends, past the men clinging to their pints, past the ones who looked too charming, too eager, too willing to play the game. She needed desperation. Someone just as fed up as she was.

A man who wouldn't try to win her over with empty promises, wouldn't ask her what she did for work or pretend to care about her favorite book.

Hermione Granger didn't need to be courted. She needed to be ruined. So her eyes landed on *him*. White-blond hair, sharp jawline, a lazy sprawl against the bar like he owned the place. Draco *fucking* Malfoy.

Hermione stopped mid-step, stomach twisting, every rational part of her screaming to turn around and find someone else. But if there was a man in this world who was easy, it was Malfoy.

He was the worst mistake she had never made.

Last year they had been a tad too cozy at Blaise's annual Halloween Bash. The drinks had been strong. She had been in the slutty angel costume Ginny had forced her into, wearing too much lipstick. It had cost her every ounce of self-restraint to balance a cocktail in one hand while trying not to be irritated by how Malfoy looked in a half-unbuttoned black shirt and tailored trousers. His half-hearted attempt at a costume - a pair of devil horns – had been the final push.

"Come on, Granger – just once. Are you not curious after all these years?"

She had snorted, taking a sip of her drink. "Not even if you were the last bloke on earth, Malfoy." It had been a lie – he was ridiculously attractive. She was afraid for him to break her heart, like he had done with so many women over the years. And that just didn't sit well with her, considering that they were forced to hang out with each other at least once a week.

He had smirked at her reply, leaning in, voice dropping to an absolutely obscene level of filth. "You wouldn't last five minutes with me."

She had choked on her drink. "Excuse me?"

Malfoy had shrugged his broad shoulders, unbothered by her rejection, fingers grazing the rim of his own glass. "I just mean-" he took a sip and watched her over the rim. "You'd be wrecked, and we both know it."

"Malfoy stop this non-sense."

He had laughed, setting his drink down on a shelf behind her head. The scent of his cologne had hit her hard in that moment.

"No, no, let's discuss this." He had tilted his head, mocking her. "Is it that you don't think I'd be good, or are you just afraid you'd like it too much?"

She could have sworn she saw a different dimension when she rolled her eyes at him.

“Damnit, your ego-“

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“I am not-“

“See, if you truly didn’t want me, you wouldn’t be arguing. You’d just leave.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“You haven’t moved...”

“I- That’s because – it’s a party, you absolute twat! I don’t need to go anywhere!”

He had grinned, like he was winning. But then he had leaned in again, his lips just barely brushing her ear.

“Tell me to stop.”

Hermione’s entire body had betrayed her, spine shuddering, her grip tightening around her drink.

She had hated him for it.

Which was why she had done the only thing she could think of at the time... She had thrown back the rest of her drink, turned on her heel, and marched away without another word.

They had seen each other often since then. Blaise and Ginny were dating, but Malfoy and Hermione barely spoke a word with each other. He had never felt the need to apologize to her, nor did she need him to.

But tonight, she was standing in a bar, actively trying to find a man who could make her forget tonight’s disaster. Life was cruel.

Hermione huffed out a breath, glaring at him from afar.

Maybe the universe presented him to her on a silver platter because she needed a good shag. Maybe this was meant to be easier than she had expected.

Without overthinking the consequences of her endeavor, she walked straight toward him. If she was going to do something reckless tonight, she might as well do him.

Draco Malfoy was still leaning against the bar, utterly oblivious to the fact that he was about to become the solution to her problem. She wouldn’t leave this bar without Malfoy at least considering the possibility of getting her naked.

So, she slid onto the stool next to him, casually, as if she wasn't planning to spread her legs for him tonight.

He didn't turn to look at her, not even when she stared at him from the side.

Annoyed at his indifference, she did the next logical thing... she reached for his whiskey glass and took a sip.

That got his attention.

His head turned slowly, silver eyes flickering from his drink – now in her hand – to her face, brow raised.

“Granger,” he drawled, watching as she set the glass back down.

She licked a drop of whiskey from her lower lip. “Malfoy.”

Malfoy's brow furrowed deeper, as if assessing the situation for potential threats.

Then – finally - his gaze dipped lower. Just for a moment. She could have missed it if she hadn't been waiting for it.

The way his gaze dragged down the slope of her throat, along the neckline of her dress before snapping back up, almost irritated with himself.

Hermione suppressed a smirk.

“Didn't expect to see you here tonight,” he said at last, leaning back slightly, his expression still suspicious. “Thought you had other plans.”

What an odd comment.

She let her shoulders relax, letting her body shift toward him just enough to make the movement seem natural. “And yet, here I am.”

Malfoy's brow stayed furrowed. He blinked once. Then twice.

Then his gaze dropped again - lower this time, like his brain was processing her presence. Another flicker over her dress. Her legs. The way she was sitting. Then his head tilted slightly, like he had just noticed something strange.

“...Are you hitting on me?”

She blinked. Damn it. He was not supposed to ask that so directly.

“Hitting on you?” she repeated, feigning innocence, running a careless finger along the rim of his glass. “Is that what I'm doing?”

His brow stayed furrowed, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Hermione exhaled, adjusting her position again - this time fully invading his space, letting her knee press firmly against his thigh, letting her hand drift to the bar between them, her fingers brushing his wrist ever so slightly before pulling away.

Malfoy's fingers twitched. Another reaction. Good.

"You do know how these things work, right?" she murmured as she leaned in closer. She was surprised he hadn't taken the bait yet. Was this him playing hard to get? Had she truly bruised his ego back then?

His mouth parted slightly, as if he was about to respond, but instead -

"You're acting weird," he said bluntly.

Hermione groaned internally. Seriously?! She was practically draping herself over him, using every single trick Ginny had ever told her, and this was his response?

"Am I?" she mused, trying to regain control, letting a small smirk tug at her lips. "Or are you just not used to women being direct with you?"

He snorted. "Granger, I've had women throw their knickers at me. That's not the issue here."

Hermione arched an eyebrow at that, leaning back slightly so she could bring some space between them. This wasn't as easy as she thought it was going to be then.

"Oh? And what is the issue?"

His gaze flickered to the drink she had stolen from him earlier. His jaw twitched before raising his hand to gesture to the waiter; he wanted two more glasses.

Malfoy sighed, shaking his head as the bartender set down two fresh glasses of whiskey. He pushed one toward her, his fingers lingering on the rim, silver eyes still filled with suspicion.

He leaned back against the bar, lazy, completely at ease.

"Now this is unexpected."

She exhaled slowly. "What is?"

He hummed, dragging his gaze down her frame, just slow enough that it felt intentional. His smirk deepened. "You." He took a sip of whiskey, watching her over the rim. "Looking at me like that."

She cleared her throat. "Like what?"

"Like you're considering something reckless," he murmured, like he was having fun with this.

She lifted her chin, leaning closer, invading his space the way he had done to her last year. "What if I am?"

He chuckled, a pleased sound. His fingers tapped once against his glass, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

“Then I’d say—about time.”

Hermione’s breath hitched, her fingers tightening around the stem of her glass.

His smirk deepened, his eyes flickering between hers, holding her there like she was pinned in place.

“You came all the way over here for me, Granger?” he hummed almost in satisfaction, reaching for his whiskey again.

“What if I did?” she asked, willing herself to keep up with him.

He took a slow sip, his throat bobbing, his gaze pleased. Then, he set it down calmly.

“How are you going to make it worth my while?”

This wasn’t how this was supposed to go. Malfoy was supposed to be easy. He was supposed to roll his eyes, make a crude joke, and suggest they find a back alley or grab a cab.

He wasn’t supposed to be teasing her, making her work for it. And the worst part? She was falling for it. That’s how desperate she was.

“I don’t know, Malfoy,” she said, crossing her legs and watching his eyes flick down for just a fraction of a second. “You tell me after all the talk on Halloween last year. Aren’t you curious after all these years?”

He exhaled through his nose, his smirk curling dangerously.

“You’re really trying, aren’t you?” he murmured with mock appreciation, his eyes shamelessly drinking her in now.

Hermione felt a triumphant burn in her chest. It was working. He was considering it. She could practically hear her vagina scream at her.

But then his gaze focused on something over her shoulder. And just like that, something shifted.

The smirk remained, but something behind it sharpened.

“Then again...” He swirled his drink in his hand. “Maybe tonight is not the night you and I finally give in.”

He nodded toward something behind her, and her stomach dropped at realization dawned at her. He wasn’t alone.

Slowly, she turned.

And there they were. Ginny. Blaise. Harry.

All sitting not ten feet away, laughing, drinking, completely oblivious to the absolute catastrophe happening at the bar.

Hermione stiffened, her entire body locking up.

Malfoy had allowed her to make a fool out of herself. Of course he did. He had let her walk straight into this like a lamb to slaughter.

She turned back to him, heart hammering, face burning, and he was grinning like the absolute bastard he was.

“Oh, don’t stop on my account,” he murmured, mocking her with a slow sip of whiskey. “You were about to seduce me, weren’t you?”

Hermione’s stomach curled into itself, heat flooding every inch of her skin.

“You’re an asshole.”

“And you’re adorable when you’re flustered,” he countered, casually adjusting his sleeves like he hadn’t just ruined her night.

“Fuck you, Malfoy.” She pushed herself off the chair and didn’t look at him again as she walked away with her glass clutched to her chest.

“If only you had the chance, Granger.” He called after her, laughing as she marched toward the group, trying desperately to calm her racing heartbeat.

Malfoy was never going to let her live this down.

Ginny was the first to notice her.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked, genuine confusion etched into her face.

Hermione plastered on the best neutral expression she could manage, sliding into the open seat next to her. “Having a drink.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “Right... and what happened to your date with - what was his name again? Josh?”

Hermione didn’t dare to look at Malfoy when he settled on the chair at the head of the booth between her and Harry.

“John,” she corrected her friend, taking another sip of her whiskey.

Ginny leaned forward, picking up on something instantly. “And? I thought you wanted to take it to the next level tonight.”

She felt Malfoy's gaze burn into her at that. She felt it - the weight of his piercing stare, the quiet but undeniable shift in energy. And suddenly, before she could think better of it, she made a decision. She wouldn't give Malfoy the satisfaction of thinking she had been interested in him, not really. Just that he had been at the wrong place at the right time.

"It was terrible," she blurted before putting down her drink.

Ginny perked up "Oh?"

Blaise, ever the shit-stirrer, grinned lazily and leaned back across from his girlfriend. "Do tell."

Hermione exhaled sharply, gripping her glass. "It started fine - dinner, decent conversation. He was *nice*."

Ginny grinned. "And then?"

Hermione stared into the drink in her hand, lips tugging into a humorless smile.

"Thirty seconds."

A beat of silence before... "What?!" Ginny blinked.

Harry coughed into his beer, and Blaise outright choked on his drink.

He let out a bark of laughter, smacking Harry on the back as he spluttered. "Oh, brilliant."

Ginny's jaw dropped, and she turned toward her in outrage. "You're kidding."

Hermione shook her head, sighing heavily. "Nope. Thirty. Seconds. He was very excited."

Blaise wheezed, still recovering. "Granger. Please tell me you're exaggerating."

"Wish I was." Hermione took another sip, grinning now.

"Hold on," Ginny said, narrowing her eyes. "Why are you here? Where is he?"

Hermione felt it again – Malfoy's eyes as his head snapped up. It almost hurt something in her chest. Something in her stomach flipped, but she shoved it down.

She shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Kicked him out, took a shower and came here to finish what he started."

Ginny's eyes widened, ignoring the chuckles from the men at the table. Or at least the ones from across the booth. Her eyes just briefly darted to Malfoy who didn't seem to share the same amusement as his mates as he seemed to realize what truly had transpired at the bar between them. This hadn't been about Malfoy, it could have been anyone, really. That realization must have stung a little. Because if she knew anything about Malfoy, it was that he was used to being the first choice. After all there was a reason why he took himself so damn serious all the time.

Hermione focused on Ginny again as she lifted her chin, forcing herself to say it. "I figured if I was going to suffer through that, I might as well find someone who could -" she gestured vaguely, "make up for it."

Another beat of silence.

"Who are you and what did you do to my best friend?" Ginny giggled, shaking her head.

Hermione flushed, but she refused to back down now.

"Figured if guys can treat people like objects, so can I."

Malfoy, who had been silent the entire time, set his drink down a little too deliberately. His shoulders tensed. His expression didn't change - not really - but something about it was... off.

His easy, mocking demeanor from earlier was gone. And in its place was something colder.

She glanced at him again, expecting a smug smirk, some crude joke at her expense. But there was nothing. Just a flicker of something unreadable in his silver eyes, something that made her stomach twist unpleasantly.

She opened her mouth, about to say what?

"I think Theo's currently single, Granger," Blaise said, grinning. "If you're desperate."

Hermione rolled her eyes, grateful for the distraction. "Oh, piss off."

Blaise shrugged, unfazed. "Well, you never know how bad it gets. He used to have a little crush on you back in the day, isn't that right, Draco?"

Hermione barely had time to process the words before she saw the shift.

Malfoy's knuckles went white around his glass, the air between them suddenly too thick. But his expression remained indifferent. He didn't look at her when he shook his head.

"Doubt he'd be interested."

Hermione stiffened. But he wasn't done yet.

"Even Nott has more self-respect than to go for sloppy seconds."

The words landed like a slap to her face. The conversation around them died instantly.

Blaise froze, mid-drink, blinking like he hadn't expected the joke to take such a turn.

Ginny's head snapped toward Hermione, her lips parting slightly, like she couldn't quite believe Malfoy had actually said that.

Harry's entire demeanor shifted, his beer glass paused halfway to his lips, brows knitting together in something dangerously close to disapproval.

And Hermione... she felt it like a punch to the gut. Her stomach plummeted. Her chest burned with something hot and ugly, a mix of humiliation and anger, twisting inside her so fast she barely knew what to do with it.

Her fingers curled around her glass, her jaw tightening, a sharp retort rising to her tongue - to snap back. How dare him make such a remark, after all the horrible stories he had shared with the group. She didn't throw herself at just anyone. Not like him. She didn't... She hadn't... She swallowed around a growing knot in her throat. His words had been cruel.

Ginny grasped for her knee under the table, reassuring and grounding her. Later. They would talk about this later.

"How's training going, Blaise?" Harry's voice cut through the tension like a blade, smooth, too loud, too quick, a calculated attempt to defuse the situation before it could explode.

Blaise blinked, glancing between them, then let out a forced chuckle, shifting in his seat.

"Same as usual," he muttered, still side-eyeing Malfoy with mild confusion, like he wasn't entirely sure what the fuck just happened. Nobody knew. Nobody but Malfoy and Hermione.

She let out a slow breath, steadying her grip on her glass, fingers straining. She wouldn't react. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Instead, she lifted her drink to her lips, taking a slow sip as if she hadn't just been gutted in front of everyone. As if her skin wasn't burning, her pulse wasn't thudding violently against her throat.

The conversation picked up around her, a thin veil over the tension still thrumming beneath the surface. Ginny nudged her knee again, silent reassurance, but Hermione barely felt it.

She could still feel Malfoy's presence - still sense him sitting there, unmoving, his attention no longer on her, as if she were nothing. But she didn't look at him again for the rest of the night.

Chapter 2: Silence

Chapter Notes

It warmed my heart to see so many familiar "faces" commenting on the first chapter. I'm so excited for this story, and I cannot wait to read all of your thoughts and reactions. You had me laughing out loud at some of the comments. If there is one thing that unites us all, it is the toxic love for a toxic Draco.

Hermione woke up with the worst headache of her life.

The ceiling was too bright, her mouth was dry, and the blanket wrapped around her smelled distinctly like Ginny's lavender-scented laundry detergent.

She groaned, rolling over on the foreign couch and nearly falling off it in the process.

"Oh, good. You're alive," Ginny's voice came from the kitchen, far too perky for this ungodly hour.

Hermione let out a long, suffering groan, pulling the blanket over her head.

"That's what happens when you attempt to drink Blaise under the table," Ginny called, stepping into the living room with two cups of coffee.

Hermione reached out blindly for one of them, grumbling a thank you as she sat up, wincing at the pounding in her skull.

Ginny plopped down next to her, watching her closely.

"So," she said after a long sip of coffee. "Are we gonna talk about last night, or do you want me to pretend like none of it happened?"

Hermione groaned again, slumping back against the couch.

"I don't want to talk about Malfoy if that's what you're on about."

Ginny scoffed "Well, I do. I cannot believe what he said to you."

She flinched, even though she tried to look indifferent to the memory. It still stung, overshadowing even her pounding headache. Shame curled beneath her skin. It wasn't just about what he had said, but how he had said it. So dismissive. So cruel. Like she was nothing.

“I mean, what the fuck?! ‘*Not even Nott would go for sloppy seconds*’? He’s lucky Harry switched topics because I was ready to throw my drink his way-“

Hermione sighed, dragging a hand down her face. She put down the coffee mug without trying it, not wanting to upset her stomach further.

“And why didn’t you say anything? Why are you not more upset about this?”

“Can we just drop it?”

“No.” Ginny studied her in a way that left no room for Hermione to argue this away. And maybe she shouldn’t. Maybe she should tell the whole truth. Because she always shared everything with her best friend. Malfoy or not.

“Fine... I may have, possibly, attempted to use Malfoy to fix my problem before I realized you guys were all at the bar.”

There was a long silence in which her redheaded friend blinked twice. “Excuse me – what?!”

She winced, rubbing her temple “It wasn’t - I didn’t...”

“You were flirting with Malfoy?”

“I wouldn’t call it flirting...”

Ginny stared. “Then how would you call it?”

She shifted uncomfortably, pulling the blanket tighter around herself. “Okay, maybe I hit on him, thinking he would be a willing participant to end the night with.”

A breathless laugh escaped Ginny, “Holy shit!” She let out a low whistle.

And then they fell quiet for a while. Until Ginny sighed. “I mean, it makes sense now.”

She frowned “Excuse me?”

Ginny shrugged, taking another sip of her coffee. “Don’t get me wrong... I still think he was a dick for saying what he said, but...” she trailed off, studying Hermione with caution. “It probably didn’t feel nice to hear that you didn’t hit on him for a genuine reason?”

Hermione snorted, regretting it instantly as it vibrated through her head in punishment. “Ok Ginny, it’s Malfoy we’re talking about. If anyone should be used to looking for easy hook ups, it’s him.”

Ginny shook her head, unconvinced.

Hermione frowned. “Oh, come on. He’s had his fair share of meaningless encounters. I didn’t exactly shatter his worldview.”

“Has he?”

“Of course he has. He’s Malfoy.”

Ginny hummed, taking another sip of coffee. “And you know this how?

She opened her mouth, then shut it again.

Ginny tilted her head, watching her carefully.

“When was the last time you had an actual conversation with him, Hermione? Not just banter. Not just insults. A real conversation.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t need to have a conversation with him. I know exactly what he’s like.”

“Do you?” Ginny challenged, leaning forward. “Because you’ve known him for what...seven years now? And yet, you’ve never spent any real time together outside of these group outings.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Hermione muttered.

Ginny gave her a pointed look. “Which is?”

She sighed. “Because he’s an arse, Ginny. He’s shallow, self-absorbed, and the only reason he even sits with us is because it’s important to Blaise.”

Ginny let out a sharp laugh. “That’s what you think?”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

Ginny shook her head. “You really don’t pay attention, do you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Ginny sighed and shifted on the couch to face her. “I mean, you talk about Malfoy like he’s some outsider who we just put up with. Like he’s only there because of Blaise. But Hermione... all of us are friends with Malfoy.”

She blinked.

Ginny continued, “Yeah, it took him a while to open up. But he did. And once he did, we all realized he’s actually a decent guy. He’s a good friend, and despite whatever you think about him, he has standards.”

Hermione scoffed. “Standards?”

Ginny nodded. “Yes. Just because he likes to have fun doesn’t mean he’s some sleazy, desperate womanizer who will shag anything that moves. He’s picky. He’s never hooked up with anyone in our circle, despite what Blaise likes to joke about. He has boundaries. He’s good to people he cares about. Just because he’s confident and doesn’t apologize for who he is doesn’t mean he’s some... soulless fuckboy.”

Hermione set her jaw. "He humiliated me in front of everyone."

Ginny's eyes softened. "Yeah. And you humiliated him."

She stiffened.

Her friends voice turned gentler now. " You were angry last night because of how Malfoy treated you - like you weren't worth it. So why do you think he reacted the way he did?"

Ginny leaned back, sipping her coffee. "Maybe it's time you stop judging Malfoy by the cover you decided on years ago."

"If he's so bloody decent, then what was all that Halloween bullshit about?"

Ginny's smirk faded slightly, but she didn't look surprised by the question. "What about it?"

Hermione huffed. "Oh, I don't know - maybe the fact that he cornered me at that stupid party, spent half the night trying to get into my knickers, and then had the nerve to act all smug when I walked away?"

Ginny let out a small hmm, tapping her fingers on her mug. "Did you ever think that maybe that night wasn't just about sex for him?"

Hermione scoffed. "Oh, come on, Ginny. You weren't there. You didn't hear the way he talked to me."

"Did he ever try again?"

Hermione froze, lips parting slightly. Because... no. He hadn't.

"Malfoy's an arse," Ginny continued. "But he's not that kind of arse. He doesn't throw himself at people unless he's sure they want him back." She sipped her coffee. "And I think, maybe, he thought you did. When you showed him you weren't interested, he didn't try again. He respected your boundaries."

Hermione pressed her lips together.

"Look, all I'm saying is - you don't actually know him, Hermione. You've spent years assuming he's this shallow, womanizing prick. But what if he's not? What if that's just the story you told yourself because it was easier?"

Hermione didn't respond. Because, for the first time in years, she wasn't sure if she could .

Week 1

Hermione had never been one to avoid confrontation. She knew how to own up to her mistakes, how to take responsibility. At least, that's what she told herself as she waited outside Malfoy & Greystone LLC, arms crossed, stomach twisting with irritation she refused to acknowledge as nerves.

She had known that Malfoy worked at his father's law firm, but she had never wasted a thought on it. Not until she had asked Ginny for the address. Turned out, he worked just down the street from her office.

She was going to apologize to the guy. Properly. She knew she had fucked up, and maybe she hoped for an apology from him in return. She was still butthurt about what he had said to her. In front of all their friends.

She spotted him the second he left the glass tower of an office building, in his tailored suit, looking as if he owned half of London. Maybe he did. He certainly carried himself like someone who didn't need to look down to know the world bent at his feet.

Hermione straightened her shoulders, stepping directly into his path as he crossed the square where she had waited for him.

"Malfoy."

He looked up once, but just stepped around her. "Nope."

"I wanted to talk."

"Not interested."

She exhaled, forcing herself to match his stride. *Breathe. Ignore how good he smells. Ignore how much taller he is. Ignore that his cologne probably costs more than your monthly rent.*

"I came to apologize."

Malfoy let out a humorless breath, not even sparing her another glance. "For what, exactly?"

She hesitated. The way he said it made her feel like she'd already lost whatever battle this was.

"For what I said at the bar," she continued. "It wasn't personal."

That made him stop, almost having her bump into him. She caught herself just in time.

He turned, looking down at her.

"Not personal," he repeated calmly.

Her mouth felt dry.

"I-

“Tell me, Granger,” he interrupted, taking a step closer, “is that what you tell all the men who fuck you? That it’s nothing *personal*?”

She inhaled sharply, stomach twisting as her eyes widened. Well, he had been honest about not being interested in her apology. She had to give him that.

“Just another body, another warm place to shove inside for thirty seconds. Just another name to add to the list?”

“Malfoy, stop being cruel! I clearly hurt your feelings, and that wasn’t my-”

“Because you didn’t think I have any?” he cut her off again. “That I would be grateful to take my turn after some other bloke came inside you? Like I should thank you for the opportunity.”

Hermione’s blood ran cold, unable to say another word. She just stared at him.

“You thought I’d be tripping over myself to fuck you right after him, like I was worth the pavement under those fancy little heels that still don’t make you tall enough to look me in the eye.”

Her fingers curled into fists at her sides. It was too much. Too cruel. She forced her jaw to unclench, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

“That’s not what I thought,” she said, and she hated how quiet it came out.

His cheeks had a rosy color to them, his jaw twitched. He was so angry with her.

“No?” he said, arching a brow. “Then what did you mean, Granger? I still haven’t heard that promised apology from you.”

Hermione’s pride flared, a last, desperate attempt to regain some semblance of control. “I am apologizing, Malfoy. I came here to-”

“No I understand,” he interrupted smoothly. “You came here to make yourself feel better.”

Her throat tightened.

“But if you were actually sorry,” he continued, “you wouldn’t be standing here trying to make excuses for yourself.”

Hermione hated the way her eyes burned. Hated that he could affect her like this.

He was already turning away, “Apology not accepted.”

Week 2

Hermione hesitated outside the pub, heart thudding uncomfortably against her ribs.

She had told Ginny. All of it. Every sharp-edged word, every biting syllable Malfoy had thrown at her like knives designed to cut deep.

And Ginny had been furious .

“You’re joking,” she had hissed, halfway through her second glass of wine. “That asshole-”
But then she had sighed, pinched the bridge of her nose, and made Hermione promise to let it rest.

“He’s stubborn,” she had said. “And maybe... maybe it hit harder than we think. I’ll have Blaise talk to him.”

Hermione hadn’t shown up last Friday night, her first time missing pub night in two years. But this week? No. She was going. She decided that if Malfoy had decided that she thought she above him, she could give him that version of herself. He had repeatedly insulted her; and she hadn’t even had the opportunity to slap him for it. Too stunned to do anything but stare.

Still, it didn’t stop her from feeling like an idiot as she stood outside the pub, debating whether to step inside or walk straight back home.

It was fine. She was fine.

They were all meeting up for drinks, just like every Friday. Malfoy wasn’t even the point. Except, he kind of was. At least tonight. Because this was the first time she’d have to face him since he had eviscerated her outside his stupid law firm, and fuck, she wasn’t ready.

Not for the reminder that he had looked her in the eye and accused her of thinking he wasn’t worth the pavement beneath her feet.

She had decided to wear the highest pair of heels she could find tonight.

“Hermione?”

She startled, turning her head to see Theo Nott stepping out of a cab.

“Hey,” she managed, her voice not quite as casual as she’d have liked.

Theo looked her over, lips quirking. “You waiting for me?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, straightening her shoulders. “No, I was just—”

Theo didn't wait for her excuse. He reached for the door, pushing it open with a lazy smirk. "Come on then."

No turning back now.

They stepped inside, her stomach twisting as the warmth of the pub lulled her in, the smell of beer and something fried filling her lungs. It was packed, just like every week. Laughter, the low hum of music, the clinking of glasses.

But the moment she spotted their usual booth, her throat tightened. Because he was already there.

Malfoy, seated between Blaise and Harry, his arm draped casually along the back of the booth, a whiskey glass resting between his fingers.

He hadn't seen her yet. Good.

Maybe she could just slide in next to Ginny, keep her head down, and... Malfoy's gaze lifted.

The moment his eyes landed on her, Hermione looked away. Her stomach sank, her cheeks burning hot. But all she could think about was the promise she had made to Ginny – to be the bigger person in her high heels.

She was going to be civil. She was going to let it rest. Even if it killed her.

She could feel Malfoy's presence across the table, stiff and unbothered all at once, like a black hole of indifference .

Theo slid into the seat beside her, arms draping along the back of the booth, she felt a prickle of unease.

"So, Hermione," he said, casual as ever. "Where are your thoughts on going on a date with me?"

Hermione froze. Not literally, but her drink caught in her throat as her eyes searched for Blaise who was smirking into his drink.

Of course this was his doing.

Hermione sighed, turning back to Theo, who was watching her with a lazy grin, as if this were the most normal thing to ask someone in the world. She liked Theo. She had always liked Theo. He was funny, sharp, easygoing in ways that made it impossible not to feel comfortable around him. But this? This was not Theo's idea.

Which meant Blaise was meddling.

She shouldn't have looked. She shouldn't have checked. But her gaze flickered before she could stop it. Malfoy was sitting back in his seat, fingers tapping once against his glass. He wasn't looking at her. Or Theo.

But something in his posture...

She knew that tension. That barely-there spark of irritation.

She thought about it. About flirting with Theo. Just to annoy him. Just to see if he'd react after all. But the truth was - she didn't actually want to do that. Not really.

Not after last week. Not when she was still trying to patch things up. Not when all she wanted was for all of them to get along again.

"I-" Hermione hesitated for only a fraction of a second. "I don't think that's a good idea, Theo."

Theo raised his brows. "Oh? And why not?"

"Because she has taste," Harry muttered into his drink before Blaise elbowed him.

Theo rolled his eyes. "I'll ignore that." Then, flashing her a grin, he pressed, "Seriously, though - what if I made it worth your while?"

She gave him a pointed look. Theo smirked, but before she could reply, Ginny swooped in to save her best friend.

"Actually, I've got a better question," she said, looking around the table. "What does a perfect date look like to you lot?"

The response was instant.

Blaise snorted. "Expensive."

Theo grinned. "One that ends in bed."

Harry groaned. "Jesus Christ, can you lot take anything seriously?"

"Not when you're so easy to wind up, Potter," Theo shot back.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Come on, though. Actual answers."

Blaise stretched an arm around her shoulders. "Fine. Dinner. A few drinks. Something entertaining enough that neither of us realizes how much time has passed."

Theo hummed. "Preferably with something dangerous thrown in. Adds a little spice."

Harry sighed again. "A movie, with popcorn."

Malfoy snorted. "Right."

Harry gave him a flat look. "Not everybody enjoys sex dungeons, Malfoy."

There was a ripple of laughter, but Malfoy only smirked, finally taking a sip of his whiskey. All of it without acknowledging Hermione's existence of course.

Ginny leaned forward, leveling him with a look.

“What about you, Malfoy?”

He raised a brow, amused. “What about me?”

“Your perfect date,” she pressed. “And please don’t tell me it’s a sex dungeon.”

There was a beat of silence, and Hermione couldn’t help but look at him again. Just to take a peek.

Malfoy waited.

Then, as if it were the simplest thing in the world, he said, “Sunday afternoon. Late start. A walk. Maybe a market.” He shrugged. “Home-cooked dinner. Some wine. Just... quiet.”

Hermione blinked, caught off guard by how honest it had sounded. Too honest.

Nobody spoke at first, until Theo let out a breathless laugh.

Malfoy’s eyes snapped to the man beside Hermione, smirking. “What? Not flashy enough for you, Nott?”

“Not believable enough,” Theo shot back.

Blaise looked equally suspicious, narrowing his eyes.

Malfoy shrugged, unconcerned. “Why not?”

Theo let out a laugh, shaking his head. “Mate, you’re full of shit.”

But Malfoy didn’t argue. Didn’t rise to it.

“I think that’s lovely, Malfoy.” Ginny smiled at him, earning herself a roll of his eyes before taking another sip of his drink.

And Hermione... She stared at him. Truly looked at him. For the first time that night. For the first time since she’d hurt him. And something inside her shifted.

Maybe Ginny was right. Maybe she didn’t know anything about Draco Malfoy after all.

Week 3

It had been another week of silence.

Hermione had seen Malfoy twice in passing.

Once at the pub on Tuesday night when she had met her friend Luna. He had deliberately ignored her.

Once at Ginny's when he had stopped by to drop of something for Blaise. He had acknowledged literally everyone in the room but her.

It was starting to make her feel deranged. She had apologized - sort of. Maybe not well, but she had tried. And yet, Malfoy decided to keep being deeply offended over the fact that she had... what? Assumed he was an easy shag? The hypocrisy was maddening.

So when she spotted him Friday morning at the coffee shop near work , standing in line with his hands in his pockets, utterly at ease , Hermione took it as a sign from the universe.

She squared her shoulders, determined, and stepped into line behind him.

"Hi Malfoy."

He stiffened, clearly caught off guard by her proximity. But he didn't turn around.

Hermione gritted her teeth. Fine. If he wanted to play this game. She took a step closer, making sure he could feel her presence at his back.

"I know you can hear me," she muttered.

His shoulders tensed.

"Are you seriously going to ignore me forever?"

Silence.

She exhaled sharply , crossing her arms. "I know I screwed up, but I did apologize."

Nothing.

"You can't be this stubborn."

Still nothing.

She opened her mouth, ready to keep arguing, but then- "Save your breath, Granger."

Her stomach flipped. Because it was the first time in a week that he had actually said her name.

Her lips parted, hope rising. "I just want to--"

He turned, "Apologize?" he cut in, arching a brow. "Again?"

Like he was bored of her efforts. Like he was unimpressed. Like she was just some nuisance.

"Well, excuse me for trying to make amends," she snapped.

Malfoy sighed, tilting his head. “That’s the thing, though, Granger.” He leaned in just slightly, voice mockingly soft. “You didn’t actually apologize for the thing that mattered.”

She knew exactly what he meant. But she didn’t want to admit it. Not when he was standing there, looking at her like that.

So instead, she huffed, digging her heels in.

“Well, maybe if you’d stop being such a dramatic arse about it, we could-”

He snorted, shaking his head, already turning away again.

“You’re unbelievable,” she muttered.

“And you’re wasting my time,” he replied dryly, stepping up to the counter. “Getting it all off your chest, are you, Granger? Feel better?”

He was evil, cruel and self-absorbed. *He* had hurt her feelings just as much with the vile things he had said to her. He hadn’t even thought about apologizing to her.

Hermione clenched her jaw, watching as Malfoy placed his order like she wasn’t even there, like she wasn’t currently seething in the very same space as him.

This absolute, insufferable prick.

She had tried. Tried to be mature. To smooth things over. To be the bigger person. But here he was, still acting as though she had personally ruined his life.

“Oh, I feel fantastic. I especially love how you get to be a smug bastard without ever looking at your hypocrisy.”

The barista called out the total for his order, and just as Malfoy reached into his pocket, Hermione swiftly stepped forward, slapping her card onto the counter.

“I got it,” she said coolly, ignoring the way Malfoy’s head snapped toward her.

The barista hesitated, glancing between them in confusion, but took her card anyway.

Malfoy scoffed, shifting to face her fully. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Hermione ignored him. She was done with him and his drama.

His jaw ticked when she stepped past him toward the pick-up counter.

She could feel his glare burning into the back of her head as she waited for their drinks. She could practically hear his teeth grinding when she grabbed his cup along with her own and turned to face him again.

And because she was still far too angry to let this go, she took a slow sip of her coffee, met his gaze head-on, and said, “You know what I think, Malfoy?” She studied him. “I think you

like holding grudges. I think you feed on them. Because then you never have to do any actual self-reflection. You get to sit on your high horse, throwing insults like you're some untouchable prick."

She tried to speak as calmly as humanly possible with the anger flooding her senses. "It gives you an excuse to be a cruel, petty arsehole without having to admit that maybe, just maybe, you're blowing this way out of proportion. If anyone else had said what I said, you'd have brushed it off with that smug little smirk of yours and gone on with your night. But me? You've been seething for weeks, acting like I committed some grand betrayal."

She took a step closer, her voice dipping, her anger thrumming just beneath the surface.

Malfoy said nothing.

Hermione scoffed, shaking her head. "And let me make something very clear," she continued, voice lowering further. "If you *ever* make another comment about who does what *inside me*, I will slap you so hard your ancestors will feel it."

His lips parted slightly, as if he hadn't expected that.

"Or maybe I'll just kick you in the dick," she added, shrugging. "You know, just to make sure no one ever has to suffer the horror of *you* coming inside them."

And then, in one swift movement, he stepped closer, and leaned in. Just close enough that she could smell the faint trace of his cologne beneath the bitter scent of coffee around them.

"If you're done with your little performance, Granger," he murmured, taking his coffee out of her hand, "I'd like to get on with my day."

Hermione inhaled sharply, pulse spiking despite herself. Because he was standing too close. Because she was still mad. Because she refused to let him be the one who got the last word.

"You're acting like I did something unspeakable to you," she whispered. "Like I personally wronged you in some way. But let's get real, Malfoy - you and I? We aren't friends. We aren't anything. So forgive me if I didn't think your delicate feelings would be hurt when I made an assumption about you that, frankly, everyone else in our group has made at some point."

She noticed the way his fingers flexed, the way his breath came just a little sharper. "Are you done now?"

"Yes, I'm done Malfoy. And if you want to keep ignoring me, keep acting like I don't exist? Fine." She exhaled. "But don't you dare look at me like I'm the villain in your little story."

For a second, just a second, she thought he might actually say something.

But she walked out of the café, and left him standing there, still gripping his coffee like he wanted to crush it. For a split second, she thought he might call her back. But he didn't.

And yet, even after all that, as she stormed down the street, heart pounding, pulse roaring in her ears, one thought kept circling in her mind, infuriating and inescapable.

That maybe she had been too harsh on him. Again.

Malfoy had cancelled pub night that Friday. He was stubborn, she knew that by now. But was he really still angry? Or was he just enjoying making her feel like shit?

For the first time in weeks, Hermione pretended to feel content. If she ignored the nagging guilt clawing at her chest, she could almost believe it.

Week 4

Ginny had warned her earlier today that Malfoy would be back for pub night this week. As if pleading with her to behave. She hadn't exactly been thrilled when Hermione had admitted the vile words she had thrown at his face in the middle of a coffee shop - with curious ears listening, no less. But she'd also been glad Hermione had stood up for herself. In her words, neither of them had any right to be upset with each other anymore, that they needed to keep it together and get over whatever tension was brewing between them.

And now Hermione was late.

She hated being late. She was never late. But after the week she'd had - after everything with Malfoy - she had stood in front of the mirror for a full twenty minutes, debating whether to go at all.

In the end, she had gone. *In sneakers*. Just in case she needed to make a quick escape.

She took the stairs two at a time, shoving the door open... And immediately regretted everything.

The first thing she registered was Malfoy as she walked towards their booth.

He stood at the head of the table in front of their friends, gesticulating wildly, his entire body animated as he told some apparently hilarious story.

The second thing she registered was that nobody noticed her arrival - which was unfortunate, really, because the third thing she registered was Malfoy's fist coming straight for her face .

C R A C K

Pain exploded through her nose as her head snapped back, her vision whitening out for a split second before she stumbled, tripping over her own feet and landing flat on her arse.

Horried, frozen silence surrounded her for a long second.

And then a high-pitched voice rang through her head.

“FUCK!” Malfoy sounded panicked.

Hermione barely processed the first few seconds. There was just pain - hot and throbbing and humiliating - as she cupped her nose and groaned.

And then she saw the drops of red splattered all over her snow-white sneakers.

“Oh, shit!” Blaise breathed.

Ginny gasped. “Oh my God!”

“Malfoy, what the hell?!” Harry barked.

“I DIDN’T MEAN TO!” Malfoy shouted, practically lunging toward her, dropping into a crouch. His hands hovered over her, useless really, like he wanted to help but didn’t know how. “I didn’t see you!”

Hermione groaned louder, tipping her head back, squeezing her eyes shut against the sting.

“Oh, great. I’m gonna die on the dirty floor of a pub.”

“You’re not gonna die,” Ginny assured her from the booth, leaning down to inspect the mess.

“She might,” Blaise muttered. “That was a solid hit.”

“My face hurts!” Hermione snapped, voice nasally.

Malfoy made a strangled sound. “Fuck, fuck, fuck ...hold still...”

Before she could react, he grabbed her chin almost delicately, tilting her face up to examine the damage.

Hermione froze.

Because Malfoy wasn’t mocking her. He wasn’t rolling his eyes or making some smug remark. He looked... *horried* at what he had done to her.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath, eyes scanning her face. “It’s bleeding, like a lot.”

“Really?!” she snapped. “I hadn’t noticed!”

“I wasn’t talking to you!” he shot back, glaring, before turning his attention back to her nose. He pulled a handkerchief - a fucking handkerchief - out of his pocket and pressed it lightly against her face. “Here. Hold this.”

She snatched it from him, pressing it against her nose, glaring up at him through watery eyes.

“I can’t believe you punched me in the face Malfoy! ”

“I didn’t punch you! ”

“You did! ”

“It was an accident! ”

“I am bleeding, Malfoy! ”

“I KNOW! ”

“Oh, for the love of god,” Ginny sighed, stepping in. “Malfoy, help her up here and get her another drink. Hermione, just... stop talking. Your voice sounds weird .”

Malfoy stood up immediately - like he needed something to do to make up for the fact that he had just assaulted her in public – and helped her up in one smooth motion as if she weighed nothing. She ignored the way her entire body hummed at the contact. Adrenaline was a funny thing.

Hermione let out a long, suffering sigh , pressing the handkerchief tighter against her nose as she slowly slipped into the booth next to Ginny. She didn’t care that Malfoy stalked off to the bar, or that he threw two glances back at her as he did.

“I mean... as painful as that looked, it might have been necessary.” Ginny whispered.

Hermione glared. “How. ”

“At least now you two are talking again.”

Before Hermione could find the strength to throw something at her, Malfoy returned, looking deeply uncomfortable as he held out a fresh glass of whiskey.

Hermione took it, downed it in one long breath, and then pointed a finger at him.

“I’m taking my apology back.”

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. “I never accepted it in the first place, so you can’t take it back.”

He sighed, rubbing a hand down his face before mumbling, “I am sorry, though.”

She stared at him, watching the way he looked away as he said it, like the words were foreign in his mouth.

“Yeah, well,” she muttered, swallowing. “You should be.”

He scoffed, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he reached for her empty glass and slid his own drink toward her.

Hermione stared at it, the ice clinking softly against the sides.

“You really think a drink makes up for this? ” she asked, waving a hand toward her nose, still cradling his posh handkerchief.

Malfoy leaned against the edge of the table, arms crossed. “No. But if you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to start thinking you want me to let you hit me back.”

She did. Briefly. But she also really wanted another drink. So she grabbed the glass, took a slow sip, and let the warmth spread through her chest before fixing him with a glare.

“I’ll decide later if I still want to hit you.”

“Fair.” Malfoy breathed, rubbing his jaw.

Ginny, who had been quietly enjoying the entire ordeal, leaned toward Blaise and murmured “This might be the closest thing to progress we’re gonna get.”

Blaise hummed. “Might even be the start of a friendship.”

Hermione scoffed with her nasally voice. “Oh, please. ”

Malfoy stayed quiet.

Ginny beamed, nudging Hermione’s knee under the table. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up before Harry offers to take you to the hospital. He looks a bit pale staring at your bloody face.”

From across the table, Harry - who had just opened his mouth - sighed, sitting back in his chair. “I was literally about to say that.”

Hermione waved him off. “I don’t need a hospital, I need another drink.”

“That’s the spirit, ” Blaise said approvingly.

Ginny dragged Hermione toward the bathrooms, but she still heard Blaise putting down his beer behind them.

“So. You and Granger. Good times.”

Malfoy sounded exhausted when he mumbled “Shut up, Zabini.”

Harry clapped a hand on Malfoy’s shoulder. “I think I’m just relieved she didn’t break your nose instead.”

Inside the bathroom, Hermione was scowling at her reflection in the mirror.

“I swear to God, I have never met a man more infuriating.”

Ginny hummed, dabbing at Hermione’s nose with a wet paper towel.

Hermione winced, fisting the stupid handkerchief in her right hand. "That hurts."

"Oh, sorry," Ginny said, not sounding sorry at all.

Hermione groaned, pressing the heels of her hands to her temples. "I hate him."

Ginny smirked. "You keep saying that, but I'm starting to think you don't really mean it. You know..." she mused, inspecting her nose more roughly than Hermione appreciated. "He doesn't hate you, Hermione. If he did, he wouldn't have looked like he wanted to undo time itself after hitting you."

Hermione lingered a for a while longer, staring at herself in the mirror, before taking a deep breath and following Ginny. This was not how she'd expected the night to go.

She slipped back into the booth, doing her best to ignore the looks being thrown her way; some amused, some pitying, and some downright entertained at her expense. She wasn't sure which was worse. She kept her eyes down as she took another sip of her drink, trying to pretend like the entire night hadn't gone entirely to shit.

Ginny, next to her, nudged her knee in silent reassurance, but Blaise was smirking outright, and Harry looked like he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

Malfoy, on the other hand, was watching her. She could feel his gaze like static in the air, pressing against her skin.

"Let me see," he said suddenly.

Hermione blinked, turning toward him in confusion. "What?"

Malfoy gestured to her nose. "Your nose, Granger. Move the damn paper towel."

Hermione hesitated, narrowing her eyes. "Why?"

"So I can check if it's still bleeding or if you need actual medical attention."

Hermione scoffed. "What, and suddenly you're a doctor now?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "No, but I'm the one who punched you, so just..." He sighed, irritated, but also... something else. Something she didn't have the energy to decipher.

He reached forward before she could protest, prying the paper towel away himself.

Hermione tensed as his fingers brushed the side of her face, as his eyes flickered over her nose, assessing. There was a beat of silence.

His mouth pressed into a firm line, brows drawing together. "Well damn."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What?"

He quietly mumbled "...It's bruising."

Hermione sobbed, tilting her head back against the booth. "Fantastic. "

Malfoy frowned, but his gaze still was locked on her face. "Does it still hurt?"

She shot him a flat look, pressing the paper towel back against her nose in case it would start bleeding again. "What do you think?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, like he wanted to smirk but didn't quite let himself.

Harry stood up, stretching his neck. "I'll grab you some ice to keep the swelling down."

"Thank you, Harry." Hermione smiled up at him from underneath the towel, hoping it reached her eyes.

"You're taking this surprisingly well," Malfoy muttered, almost to himself.

Hermione huffed, shifting in her seat. "You apologized."

Malfoy looked at her then, properly, something almost amused behind his eyes. "That's all it took?"

Hermione lifted a shoulder. "I'm not a monster, Malfoy."

He arched a brow. "Debatable."

She snorted, shaking her head despite the shooting pain in her face. Why did it feel so easy to talk to him again? Why did it feel like, just for a second, they weren't both too proud and stubborn to exist in the same space?

The rest of the table was still struggling not to laugh.

Blaise perked up. "Oh, Malfoy! You were mid-story when the tragic accident occurred!"

Ginny nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, what were you even talking about before you attempted premeditated murder?"

Hermione crossed her arms, ignoring how much her face hurt, and glared daggers at Malfoy.

"Yes, Malfoy," she said sweetly, laced with a thick layer of sarcasm. "Please, enlighten us. From a safe distance. Preferably across the room."

Malfoy pinched the bridge of his nose only to stop himself mid-motion when he realized he was mirroring her injury. His eye twitched. And Hermione, for just a moment, felt a little too pleased about that.

He sat back, arms folding lazily.

“If you must know,” he drawled, “I was in the middle of explaining how Potter accidentally sexted my father this week.”

Hermione blinked. Slowly, all heads turned to Harry.

Harry, who had been sipping his beer innocently, immediately froze. Then turned bright red.

“Oh, come on, Malfoy-”

“You did what?! ” Ginny cut in, scandalized.

Blaise howled with laughter, pounding the table in delight, and Hermione forgot her throbbing nose completely.

Something foreign twisted in her stomach. It wasn’t just the whiskey.

It was him.

And she wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Chapter 3: Bruises

Chapter Notes

trigger warning

this chapter contains a scene contains unwanted physical contact M/F. If this is a sensitive topic for you, feel free to skip the bar scene (starting at 'Hermione pushed off her seat...' until 'Jesus fucking Christ'....

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione had barely been sitting for two minutes before the guys started in on her.

She had almost skipped tonight, but after a week of Ginny badgering her about “clearing the air” and Blaise sending her daily photos of boxers with better defense than her, she figured it was better to show up than let them have more ammunition.

Clearly, she’d been mistaken.

Theo admitted that he wouldn’t skip any more pub nights, like he had last week, just because he had missed the most epic night with Hermione getting punched by Malfoy.

Malfoy and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, so she was stuck with Blaise, Harry and Theo gawking at her.

“Hermione, darling, you look...” Theo didn’t even try to hide the glint in his eyes as he leaned in across the table to study her nose. “Radiant.”

Blaise chuckled, “It gives her an edge, doesn’t it?”

Harry took a sip of his drink before pointing at her nose. “Well, it’s definitely still there.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I tried to cover it with make-up, it doesn’t do much.”

Blaise hummed, examining her with an exaggerated squint. “Mm.”

She sighed, fighting the urge to press her ice-cold beer glass against her face. It wasn’t that bad anymore, but the bruising was still visible, blotches of fading purple and ugly yellow-green that made her look a bit like an exhausted raccoon.

She crossed her arms, leveling a flat look at Theo. “Are we done?”

Theo smirked, not even remotely done.

“Not yet. I still haven’t decided what your new name should be. One-Hit Wonder?” He tapped his chin, eyes gleaming. “Or, and hear me out, Muhammad Granger.”

Blaise choked on his drink, shaking his head.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Harry when he laughed a little too loud at that. “Why are we not talking about Harry sexting Malfoy’s dad instead of Luna?”

“It was a typo!” Harry hissed before putting down his drink, his face flushed crimson within seconds.

“Nope,” Theo cut in. “Nice try, Granger. But we’re not letting you off the hook yet. We can still talk about Potter when your face is healed.”

“You’re just upset you weren’t here to witness it,” Hermione said dryly, lifting her pint in a fake cheer.

“Oh, come on, Granger,” Blaise grinned. “You should be milking this for sympathy points. Free drinks, free cab rides-”

Theo perked up immediately. “Oh, right! Speaking of-” He leaned in conspiratorially, and Hermione immediately regretted showing up. “We need to talk about your game plan.”

She blinked. “Game plan?!”

Blaise nodded, grinning. “The plan where you actually go out and get laid, Granger.”

At that she almost dropped her drink. “No?!”

Theo stretched, looking far too pleased with himself. “Oh, don’t be shy now. It’s a safe space, Malfoy is not here after all. We’re all here to help.”

Hermione turned to Harry for support, but he just looked vaguely horrified, probably regretting every life decision that led him to sitting at this table.

“Look,” Theo continued, completely ignoring her distress, “We’re happy to assist in your little... let’s call it a *quest*. But you need a strategy.”

“A strategy?” Hermione deadpanned.

“Of course,” Theo said without mocking her this time “You can’t just hope it happens. You need tactics, precision-”

”Lower standards,” Blaise cut in.

“And above all,” Theo finished, “confidence.”

Hermione buried her face in her hands, ignoring the dull pain from her nose.

“This is not happening.”

“Oh, it’s so happening,” Theo assured her. “And lucky for you, we’re experts in this field.”

“I feel so blessed,” she mumbled into her palms.

Hermione didn’t know why she was still entertaining this conversation.

Maybe it was the beer on an empty stomach, maybe it was the persistent ache of the bruise on her face, or maybe she just liked watching Theo and Blaise argue like idiots. Either way, she had now somehow found herself participating in their ridiculous selection process.

“Alright,” Theo declared, cracking his knuckles. “So back to our game plan.”

“We do not need a game plan,” Hermione muttered.

“Too late, it’s happening,” Blaise cut in. “So, let’s assess our options.”

Theo, Blaise, and even Harry all leaned back, casually scanning the bar.

Hermione, for her own amusement, decided to do the same.

And then - just to be annoying - she pointed at the first half-decent guy she saw.

“Leather jacket at the bar,” she said, taking a sip of her drink.

There was a long pause.

“Absolutely not,” Theo said. “Not the guy you’re looking for.”

“Nope,” Blaise agreed, shaking his head.

Even Harry made a face. “Definitely not.”

Hermione blinked. “What? Why not?” She looked back at the guy. He looked decent enough. She didn’t want to marry him after all.

Theo turned to her, dead serious. “Look at him, Granger. That’s a man who says ‘*I don’t believe in labels*,’ and disappears for a week after two good dates.”

“He definitely plays the guitar at house parties,” Blaise added.

“And he probably calls women ‘females’ in casual conversation,” Harry muttered.

Hermione snorted. “This is about getting laid, not about getting involved.”

Theo grinned. “Yeah, but we know what we’re talking about.”

Blaise gestured around lazily. “Nah, nobody here is good enough. We should wait for the next guy who walks in. First eligible single bloke who walks through that door, you go for, Granger.”

Hermione scoffed. “Absolutely not.”

“Those are the rules,” Theo said, wiggling his finger in front of her face. “No takesies-backsies.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, “I never agreed to this, and I won’t-“

The pub door swung open. All four of them turned their heads in unison. Ginny walked in, and Hermione sighed in relief. “Well, too bad...”

But then, not even two seconds later Malfoy strolled in behind her.

The entire table went dead silent, aside from Theo choking on his drink. Blaise let out a quiet, amused hum. Harry, for his part, just looked deeply entertained.

And Hermione felt the blood rush to her face, heat spreading like a wildfire.

Blaise grinned. “A deal’s a deal, Granger.”

Theo chuckled. “He definitely will do anything you ask him to do; he still feels guilty about knocking you out.”

Hermione whipped around to glare at them.

“I never agreed to this. You go and get laid by Malfoy yourself if you’re so eager for a show.”

Theo wiped a fake tear. “Alright, alright.”

Hermione contemplated murder but forced herself to take a deep breath.

Theo bit his lip like he was holding in laughter as the two friends arrived at their booth.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes, flicking them toward Hermione briefly as if she had all the answers. “What’s so funny?”

She stiffened.

Ginny slid into the booth next to her, eyebrows pinched. “Yeah, what’d we miss?”

“Oh, don’t mind us. We were just discussing Hermione’s dating prospects.”

Ginny glanced at her. “You could use some fun you know, you had a rough few weeks.”

Malfoy barely reacted. He just looked exhausted before dragging a chair out and sitting down. But instead of addressing the conversation, he turned straight to Hermione. And before she could even prepare herself, he tilted his head, assessing her face.

Her stomach tightened. Malfoy didn’t say anything. No sarcastic comment. No smirk. Just a critical, silent once-over of her nose. As if he was still trying to figure out how much damage he’d actually done.

And then he reached for the food menu like he hadn’t just done that.

Hermione blinked. Theo, of course, caught all of it. “Aw, look at that,” he said with mocking delight. “Told you, Malfoy still feels bad.”

Harry grinned dumbly. “Bet you twenty quid he spent all week debating if he should text her about it.”

She just glared at them, trying to ignore the fact that Malfoy didn’t show any interest to engage in the conversation. He wasn’t as impulsive as she was. He dealt with things internally. Which seemed to be smarter in the light of their chaotic friend group.

He just kept studying the food menu he knew inside out, like all of them, and looked like he regretted showing up tonight.

Theo cleared his throat “Malfoy, weigh in - Granger wants to become a reckless woman, but she’s in desperate need of guidance.”

Malfoy ignored her completely, glancing up at Theo who had addressed him.

“What’s the problem this time?” he asked unimpressed. She didn’t even have time to get offended at the question, because Harry chimed right in.

“She’s trying to widen her...*horizon*.” he explained, pushing up the glasses on his nose. A nose Hermione desperately wanted to punch right now.

Malfoy hummed, flipping the menu without paying attention to it. “You mean that mission of a one-night stand with the next best guy without overthinking it into oblivion?”

Hermione threw up her hands to remind them that she was sitting at the table, that she could hear it all. “Why are we all discussing my sex life?!”

“Lack thereof,” Blaise corrected.

Ginny giggled but caught herself mid-breath when Hermione snapped her gaze to her like a dagger. Her gaze lowered to her lap.

Malfoy smirked to himself, still not looking up. “None of this non-sense is going to help her fix her little problem.”

Hermione’s head whipped around at that comment, seizing him up.

“And what exactly do *you* think my problem is?” she asked.

Malfoy shrugged his shoulders, picking invisible lint from his dress shirt. “Stranger or not. If you don’t learn to communicate your needs in the sheets, how are the blokes going to give you what you truly need? I doubt you walking up to a stranger in a bar will be helpful in this case.”

Hermione, stunned into temporary silence, could only sit there, gaping at Malfoy while Blaise clapped him on the back like he’d just won some kind of award.

“God, mate,” he grinned. “Say it with your chest next time.”

“I hate all of you,” Hermione gritted out. “I just need someone to not suck in bed. Standard stuff. I don’t need to be tied to the bed or spanked into oblivion.”

Theo opened his mouth, but she raised her hand and glared at him one more time. “And no, Theo. I don’t want to jump into bed with you, but I appreciate the offer. I’m very much capable of finding someone to hook up with that I don’t have to see again the next day.”

Ginny composed herself, wiping at her chin. “Well, whoever it is, it should probably last more than thirty seconds.”

“Alright,” Theo wiped at his eyes again, “so, new plan. Granger, go on. Test the waters. Walk up to some bloke at the bar. Prove us wrong.”

Hermione was frustrated with them, but more frustrated with herself. Just because she wasn’t ready to share all her deepest and darkest secrets with a guy she didn’t trust, didn’t mean she couldn’t have a decent shag without strings attached. Right? Maybe this game, proving she could do it without their stupid plan, was exactly what she needed.

She forced herself to stop thinking, to act first, pushing off her seat and making her way to the bar.

Her friends’ gazes burned into her back, but she kept walking - straight toward the leather jacket guy. The one Theo and Blaise warned her about. Maybe that was the point.

The guy turned toward her as she approached, eyes flicking up and down before he gave her a slow, lazy grin.

“Hey,” she said with an unnatural chirp “I’m Hermione.”

The guy tilted his head, intrigued. “Well, hello, Hermione.”

Alright. So far, so good. She didn’t really care about his name anyway. A shag was all she wanted. Quick and easy.

“You looked like you could use some company,” she said, leaning against the counter.

The guy’s eyes drifted down, slowly. His gaze raking over her like she was something to inspect. His smirk deepened.

“Be my guest,” he shot back.

Okay. Decent start. She could do this. He ordered her a drink without asking what she wanted. She ignored it.

It was fine. The flirting was working, the tension wasn’t terrible, maybe she could actually pull this off... Until she noticed it.

His eyes kept flicking to her face. Over and over again. At first, she thought she was imagining it, but he wasn't even being subtle. He wasn't fixated at her lips, or her eyes. But at her bruise.

Hermione felt her stomach twist, an uneasy heat creeping up her neck.

"You know," the guy mused, leaning in closer, "I don't usually go for girls who look like they just got out of a bar fight... but you're kind of pulling it off."

Her pulse jumped. Something about his tone made her hairs rise, the playfulness not quite right anymore.

"What do you mean?" she asked, faking a soft laugh in hopes he hadn't meant to sound creepy.

The grin widened, something smug curling at the edges. Like he knew something she didn't.

"Oh, don't play dumb." He chuckled, shifting closer again, until she could smell the alcohol on his breath. "You must like it a little rough, right? A slap or two to go with that pretty bruise? Tell me what you're into, and I'll tell you what I can give you."

Hermione's blood ran cold. Her fingers twitched against the countertop. The air suddenly felt thicker, the bar noise muffled, like she was hearing it from underwater.

"Um" She tried to step back, but his hand shot out, catching her wrist before she could move.

The sharp pressure sent a bolt of pain up her arm. Her breath stumbled in her chest.

"Can you let go of me, please?"

The guy just grinned, rolling his eyes. Like she was being difficult. Like this was his game, not hers. He yanked her sharply.

Hermione stumbled forward, colliding against his chest. Too close. Way too close. She turned her head to avoid his breath against her cheek. Her free hand came up instinctively, pushing against his chest.

"Whoa," he laughed, mocking, his grip tightening just slightly. Just enough. "You came on to me, baby, not the other way around. Getting cold feet?"

Hermione flinched, pushing harder against him. His grip became punishing, like he enjoyed her reaction.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The people around them kept talking, laughing, drinking. Nobody was looking. Nobody was noticing.

Hermione's heart was pounding, hammering in her chest. Her other hand shook slightly as she tried to pry his fingers off her wrist.

"I said, let go."

His grip didn't budge. If anything, it tightened further.

"Let. Me. Go."

The guy sighed, shaking his head like she was being difficult on purpose. His fingers shifted, twisting her wrist just enough to send a bolt of sharp pain up her arm.

Hermione sucked in a breath.

"Relax," he said smoothly, leaning in again, pressing the words too close to her ear. "You started this. What's the point in acting like you don't want it now?"

She could feel her own pulse against his fingers. The pain flared again, and a wave of panic shot through her chest.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything...but a firm voice cut through the moment like a knife.

"Hey, babe," Theo drawled, an arm draping around her shoulders like he'd been there all along. "What's taking so long?"

Hermione stiffened as the guy's grip finally loosened, and he pulled away. The relief around her wrist was instant. Where before he had been smug, controlling, leaning into the power imbalance, now he was visibly calculating.

Theo's grip tightened ever so slightly on Hermione's shoulder. His tone was cool, but sharp beneath the surface. She leaned into her friend without thinking twice, her body craving the safety he provided.

"Sorry I took so long," he said, smiling, but his gaze was focused on the guy. "Who's this?"

Hermione's stomach clenched. She had never been more relieved in her life.

The guy huffed. "Uh... sorry, man. You should keep an eye on your female."

"Yeah, yeah," Theo cut him off dismissively. His arm still rested protectively around Hermione. His fingers gave the lightest squeeze, like a silent question: Are you okay?

Hermione nodded once, though her chest still felt tight, her wrist throbbing.

The guy hesitated for half a second, then scoffed, shaking his head like she had wasted his time.

"Whatever," he muttered, grabbing his drink from the bar and turning away.

Theo waited until he was a few steps away before finally turning his head, fixing the guy with a cold stare.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he muttered under his breath as he guided her away from the situation.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Theo muttered, running a hand down his face as he let go of her. His usual cocky tone was gone, replaced by something tighter.

She shook her head. “I... I don’t know what happened. I didn’t think it would-”

Theo clicked his tongue, but he wasn’t mocking her now. His expression was serious, the amusement from earlier completely gone.

“You good?” he asked, and for once, there was no teasing. Just a genuine question.

Hermione nodded quickly, even though she wasn’t sure if it was true.

Theo sighed, rolling his shoulders before gesturing with his head. “C’mon. Let’s get back to the table.”

Her wrist still ached, the tension in her body refusing to leave. She had thought she’d been playing a game. She had been wrong. And as she slid back into her seat, still shaken, she felt it; the quiet weight of Malfoy’s gaze burning into her skin.

She felt humiliated. A little numb.

Theo slid in next to her, scanning her face. He didn’t ask if she was good again, but she nodded anyway.

She didn’t dare to look at any of them. The only sign of people sitting on their table was Malfoy’s wrist movement as he swirled the liquid in his whiskey glass.

Hermione stared at the glass in front of her, pulse still racing, not wanting to talk about it.

Ginny whispered to no one in particular, “This joke went too far.”

She hated that they were all looking at her now, waiting for her to say something.

She forced a tight smile. “It’s okay. It was stupid.”

No one believed her. But no one pushed, either. Not until Malfoy moved and their eyes met “You keep trying to prove a point that doesn’t need proving.”

Hermione’s pulse spiked with something closer to shame. It lodged itself in her throat before she could fire back, not even brave enough to keep his gaze. Her eyes dropped back to the table.

Theo let out a low whistle. “Damn, mate. Might as well kick her while she’s down, won’t you?”

She had walked into this situation without thinking, without a plan, without knowing how to handle it if things turned south.

“It was just a joke, Malfoy,” Theo said after a beat, still watching Hermione carefully. “Didn’t need to be a reality check.”

“Maybe it should be,” Malfoy mumbled into his glass. “And you lot shouldn’t have encouraged her ridiculous idea to throw herself at strangers.”

Theo scoffed. “Easy, Malfoy. I thought we were just roasting her, not giving her trauma.”

Hermione forced a tight smile, though her hands still felt unsteady. Hermione’s fingers curled into fists under the table, her nails cutting into her palms to ground herself.

“Fucking hell,” Blaise muttered under his breath, as if just now realizing how wrong this had gone.

Ginny’s gaze didn’t leave Hermione. “You wanna go home?”

Hermione shook her head immediately. Because if she left now, if she went home and let herself think... she might break. Because this was the tip of the iceberg. She had been arguing for weeks, got punched in the face and now had initiated her own assault that could have gone way further if Theo hadn’t watched her, if he hadn’t intervened right away. And all of it because she hadn’t had a decent shag in a while.

Or because Malfoy had made her feel like she was above her head with his comment earlier. Because she was so stubborn, that she would do the opposite of whatever he was expecting of her to not lose control over their dynamic. She had been foolish.

“I’m fine,” she said it like she meant it. Even if she didn’t.

“Let’s get another round,” Blaise announced, standing up. “Or at the very least, something strong enough to make this conversation disappear from our memories.”

Hermione let them change the subject, let them move on, but she still felt the quiet weight of Malfoy’s unimpressed gaze, lingering for just a second too long before he finally looked away.

She hadn’t spoken much after that. She let Theo and Blaise steer the conversation into something lighter, let Ginny make a few offhand comments about work, let Harry mumble something about Luna’s cooking skills...

And she sat there, nodding along, pretending like she was fine. She wasn’t.

They all knew it.

They weren’t obvious about it - none of them were the type to coddle - but there were small things. Harry subtly ordering her another drink without asking. Theo not making another joke at her expense. Blaise glancing at her once or twice, like he was gauging how much she wanted to be included.

And Malfoy... he didn’t say anything at all.

But she felt it. The way he judged her. The way his gaze kept drifting toward her, barely noticeable, like he was trying to figure something out. Like he knew. Like he had called it

before she even realized it herself.

By the time the night stretched past midnight, Hermione had made up her mind.

She needed to go home.

She pushed back from the table, grabbing her bag. "I'm heading out."

Ginny frowned. "Already?"

Blaise tilted his head. "You good?"

"Yeah," she said, forcing a small smile. "Just tired. Clearly this is not my month."

Theo gave her a long look, like he didn't fully buy it, but let it go. "You need someone to walk you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'll be fine. I'm grabbing a cab."

Ginny hesitated, clearly debating whether to push, but finally nodded. "Text me when you're home?"

"I will."

She made her way outside, stepping into the warm late-summer air, and leaned against the curb, pulling out her phone to call a ride.

She wasn't sure how long she had been standing there, scrolling absently, when she heard his voice. "You didn't need to sit there pretending you were fine when you weren't."

Hermione flinched. She turned to find Malfoy standing a few feet away, hands in his pockets. He had followed her.

"Didn't think I needed to announce it," she muttered, turning back to her phone.

"You didn't," Malfoy said simply, stepping closer. Hermione exhaled, her grip tightening around her phone.

"I really don't want to do this right now, Malfoy."

"I know."

Hermione blinked at him. Because for once, his voice didn't sound sharp or teasing or distant. He was just there, sounding almost as tired as she felt.

The cab was still five minutes away. She hated standing here, lingering in the sticky summer air, trapped in her own head, replaying the night over and over again like some kind of cruel joke.

She shifted her weight, sneaking a glance at Malfoy. He stood just a foot away, hands still in his pockets. Hovering like a bodyguard.

“You don’t have to wait with me,” she said finally.

Malfoy didn’t even blink. “I know.”

She sighed. “Then why are you?”

“Because I’m not an arsehole, despite what you might think.”

Hermione huffed out a dry laugh, but didn’t argue with him.

Silence stretched between them for a moment, and it was more bearable now that she had told him she didn’t need a babysitter.

But, suddenly and a tad too casually he asked, “Do you bruise easily?”

“What?” She looked at him, frustrated with him talking to her again.

Malfoy glanced at her, but his expression remained carefully neutral. “Just wondering. You still look a bit like you lost a bar fight with a moving vehicle, so I was curious if it always takes you this long to heal.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Thanks for the concern.”

“Anytime.”

She was about to retort, about to tell him that her bruise was actually healing quite nicely, when she noticed the way his gaze flicked downward.

Not at her face. Not at her bag or her body. But at her wrist. Something shifted in his expression. It was subtle, a flicker of assessing something.

Hermione followed his line of sight. Her stomach twisted uncomfortably. There, wrapped around her wrist, darkening by the second, was a fresh bruise. A perfect imprint of fingers. The stranger’s grip.

Hermione stared at it, her pulse spiking. She hadn’t even noticed it was there. She yanked her arm back, fingers curling over the mark like she could erase it. How had she not noticed it before? Her wrist had ached, but she hadn’t looked – not really. Not until now.

Malfoy’s jaw ticked. He didn’t say anything. Just stared at the bruising imprint. Still unreadable, but not indifferent. His arms flexed, barely... a small movement, but enough for Hermione to catch it.

She hated the way he had seen it before she did. Hated the way he had been staring at it. Her throat felt tight.

He waited, like he expected her to say something. But she didn’t. She just stood there, staring at the screen of her phone, willing the ride to hurry up.

Malfoy shifted slightly. “Are you-?”

“I’m fine,” she cut in automatically.

“No, “ he said, quieter this time. “You’re not.”

Hermione sucked in a breath. Something coiled in her chest – *tight*.

And then her cab finally pulled up to the curb. She looked up, really looked at Malfoy, and said, quietly, “I just want to go home.”

And he just stepped back, giving her space.

“Yeah,” he murmured. “Of course.”

Hermione climbed into the cab, shutting the door behind her.

She didn’t look back as they pulled away. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed forward, the city lights blurring past the window, her mind too full and too empty at the same time. The pressure in her chest hadn’t lessened, nor had the tight coil in her throat. She pressed her fingers against her wrist, covering the imprint left there, as if that could make it disappear.

It didn’t.

And she hated that Malfoy had noticed it first. Hated that he had waited outside with her. Hated that, for once, he hadn’t mocked her or thrown another sharp remark. Hated that it made her feel something else entirely.

The cab took a turn, streetlights casting flickering shadows over her face, and Hermione closed her eyes.

She just wanted to go home.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp - Hermione clearly is going through a rough patch in this story so far. But I love this version of Draco. He's seeing things she doesn't want others to see, and it gets me. I like that he calls her out - rightly or wrongly at times. I just love writing him because he's not easy. He's messy. He's infuriating. Hermione needs to hold onto something soon.

Chapter 4: Break

It was barely noon when Ginny banged on Hermione's door.

Groggy and exhausted, she peeled herself off the couch, still in her pajamas. She opened the door with a glare, only to find her friend standing there, smug and far too awake, holding a coffee and a bag of pastries.

“What—”

Ginny breezed past her without waiting for an invitation. “How are we feeling today?”

Hermione shut the door with a sigh, rubbing her eyes. “Never been better.”

Ginny sighed, tossing the bag onto the coffee table. “Well, lucky you, I brought caffeine and sugar to fix your shattered soul.”

Hermione grabbed the coffee and took a grateful sip before dropping back onto the couch. She had barely slept. Her body ached from the sheer weight of the past few weeks.

Ginny perched on the armrest, watching Hermione roll the warm cup between her hands.

“So,” she said casually. “Blaise made me promise to not say anything, but you're going to find out anyway and I think the last thing you need right now is more surprises.”

Hermione stilled.

“Just – don't be mad, okay?”

Hermione breathed slowly. “What's going on?”

Ginny took a sip of her own coffee before continuing. “Malfoy got us banned from the pub, for at least... a year?”

Hermione's stomach dropped. “What?!”

Ginny nodded, pulling a grimace. “Yeah... it was wild.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you that first, because he seemed quite upset when he came back inside after you left. Did you guys go at each other's throats again?”

“No, we didn't. Not this time. Tell me what happened, Gin.”

“He came back inside looking like he was one second away from murder. Didn't say a word at first. Just grabbed his drink, sat down, and did his brooding thing.” She shuddered.

Hermione swallowed.

“I mean, yeah, he always looks vaguely irritated,” Ginny continued, “but this was – different.”

Ginny sighed dramatically, then propped her elbow on her knee and leaned in. “Leather Jacket Douche? The one who grabbed you?”

Hermione stiffened. The warmth of the coffee suddenly felt scalding against her palms. “Yes?”

“Well,” Ginny drawled, “he didn’t exactly get to leave unscathed after all.”

Hermione blinked.

“Because Malfoy handled it.” Ginny said so quickly that she almost had missed it.

She felt something jolt in her stomach – something sharp and uneasy. “Handled it?”

Ginny nodded; brows raised. “Handled it.”

Hermione’s grip tightened around her cup. “What are you talking about?”

Ginny sighed, setting her coffee aside like she was preparing to tell the story of the year. “Alright. Leather Jacket Douche finally decided to leave. But as he’s walking past our table, Blaise – purely on accident of course – might’ve stuck his foot out.”

Hermione frowned.

“He deserved it,” she said unapologetically. “Anyway, the guy goes down. Hard. Face–first, arms flailing, the whole humiliating package. And he started throwing a tantrum, yelling at our booth and getting quite nasty. He was pissed. But then...” she paused and folded her hands on her knees “Malfoy stood up calmly.”

The coffee turned sour in Hermione’s mouth.

“Okay...,” she muttered.

“Okay,” Ginny repeated. “And before we could even blink, Malfoy decked him.”

Hermione stared at her in disbelief. “He punched him?” Her own nose throbbed at the question, remembering the force of his punch without trying to hurt someone.

“Punched, shoved... threw in some colorful insults – honestly, it was a blur. The guy didn’t even see it coming. One second, he was brushing dirt off his jacket, the next, he was kissing the floor again.”

Hermione set down her coffee before she could spill it. A slow, creeping dread curled around her ribs. “Why the hell would he do that?”

Ginny lifted a brow. “Oh, I don’t know, Hermione. Maybe because this guy manhandled you in front of half the bar, and Malfoy was apparently not cool with that.”

Hermione’s pulse spiked, frustrated with that turn of events. “Ginny, he wasn’t worried in the slightest when I was still there. He behaved like an arse the entirety of the evening, like always.”

But he had noticed her bruises. She remembered the way his jaw had ticked when he saw her wrist outside. The way his posture had stiffened, barely, like he was holding something back.

Ginny sighed”Look, yes, he can push it too far. And I should have said something right there and then. It just seemed like you were having fun with the boys when we arrived and I shouldn’t have let you walk up to that stranger in the first place.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I did this to myself.” She stared at the floor, heart pounding against her ribs.

But she could hear Ginny’s careful smile in her voice when she muttered,” You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just glad Theo understood what happened before anyone else did.”

Hermione shook her head, her stomach aching,” So. Is everyone else mad at me now?”

Ginny blinked. “What? No.”

Hermione frowned. “But if I hadn’t–”

“No buts,” Ginny cut in. “Malfoy is a grown man. He made a choice. You didn’t make him do anything. He did what we all wanted to do, but didn’t because we were cowards and didn’t know how to handle it.”

Hermione stayed quiet, her throat tightening.

Ginny softened. “Can I be honest?”

She forced a wry smile to her lips. “Since when do you ask for permission?”

Ginny ignored that. “You haven’t been yourself lately. Not really. And I don’t know how to help. You’re still sharp, still witty, but there’s something else. You’ve been so frustrated – with us, with Malfoy, with yourself. And it makes you impulsive.”

Hermione pressed her lips together, swallowing down the painful lump threatening to burst inside of her. She didn’t even remember the last time she had a good, cleansing cry.

Ginny hesitated, then sighed. “I just don’t want you to shut me out.”

“I don’t know, Ginny. I feel like I haven’t been myself since the whole thing with Ron. And I know he’s your brother, and you don’t want to get in the middle of it. And I’m over him, don’t get me wrong, but... I feel like I’m still trying to pick up the pieces.”

Ginny just listened. And when Hermione looked up, there was no pity in her gaze – just understanding.

“Maybe we should do something together,” she offered ”Just us girls. No guys. No Blaise.“

Hermione shrugged. “I don’t think that’s the problem. I think... I just need a break from everything. From the usual routine. From dating guys and trying to fill voids.“

Ginny watched her for a long moment, then nodded. “Well, whatever you need – I’m here. We’re here.“

The night after Ginny left, Hermione couldn’t sleep.

She lay in bed, staring at the ceiling her mind replaying everything in a loop; the pub, the bruises on her wrist, Malfoy’s words, Ginny’s words.

At some point, exhaustion finally won, and she drifted off. But when she woke up the next morning, the first thing she did was pull out her phone and dial her mother.

She answered immediately. “Sweetheart, it’s been ages.“

Hermione rubbed her sleepy eyes. “Mum, it’s been two weeks.“

“Well, two weeks is ages when you don’t check in properly,” her mother countered. “Everything alright?”

She hesitated. “I need a break.“

That was the easiest way to put it.

Her mother didn’t ask, didn’t prod. Just hummed knowingly and said, ”Come home, sweetheart. For as long as you need. Dad can pick you up.“

Hermione exhaled, feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders from just being wanted. “Thank you.“

It was strange, being back home.

Her childhood bedroom looked exactly the same – books stacked on the shelves in careful, color-coded rows, the old armchair by the window where she used to read for hours. The only thing in this room that had changed was her.

For the first few days, Hermione let herself do nothing.

She had called in sick for the week, slept in, curled up under too many blankets, wrapped in the familiar scent of home. She let her mother make her tea, let her father comment on how pale she looked, let herself be doted on without protest.

But by the fourth day, her mum walked into her room, arms crossed. “Alright, enough moping. You’re coming outside with me.”

Hermione blinked. “Outside?”

And just like that, her mother tossed a dirty pair of garden gloves onto her bed.

“You need some fresh air. There’s no better way to get out of your head than getting your hands in the dirt.”

Hermione almost argued. Almost said she didn’t need to *‘get out of her head’*. But she did.

The garden was in full bloom, filled with the smell of fresh soil and wildflowers. And for the first time in weeks, she let herself breathe.

She spent hours in the garden that day, and the next, and the one after that. Pulling weeds, planting herbs, pruning roses. By the end of the week, her hands were covered in dirt, her nails a disaster, but she didn’t care.

Because for the first time since her arrival she wasn’t wondering how she’d gotten here. She just was.

Even though she was taking a break, she still had to work.

Her father had set up a makeshift office in the sunroom so she could answer emails, keep up with projects and pretended everything was fine as she had calls with her coworkers.

But the frustration was still there. A simmering energy under her skin, restless and daunting, with nowhere to go.

And so, one morning, on a whim, she signed up for a boxing class.

Her dad raised a brow when she told him over breakfast. “Boxing?”

Hermione shrugged. “Why not?”

She didn’t know what to expect when she showed up to the small gym a few towns over, but the second she slipped on the gloves, she understood.

It was cathartic. The pounding of fists against the bag, the jabs, the weight of her body moving. It was something to focus on, something to throw herself into.

By the end of the first session, she was drenched in sweat, muscles aching, but her head felt clearer than it had in weeks.

She went back the next day. And the next.

She kept up with Ginny and Theo, texting, occasional FaceTime calls.

Ginny filled her in on the state of their friend group.

“Harry and Luna are finally together, if you hadn’t guessed. He hasn’t been out much because of it.”

Hermione had smiled. “Shocking.”

“Oh, and we’ve officially replaced pub nights with Friday game nights at home. It’s... weirdly wholesome. Blaise is an absolute nightmare to play with, Theo cheats, and I think Harry is trying to be a better person now that Luna’s involved. It’s gross.”

“And Malfoy?”

A pause.

“He’s been... weird. Not in a bad way. Just quieter.”

Hermione didn’t ask again.

By the end of the third week, something settled in Hermione’s chest.

It wasn’t an epiphany, nothing dramatic. But it was a realization.

She had spent the last few months throwing herself into things to numb out her actual feelings.

And she was just exhausted from it.

And so, on a warm afternoon, sitting in her parent's garden, hands covered in dirt, she allowed herself to stop pretending. To feel. And she cried. A lot.

Hermione hadn't let herself break in a long time. Not really.

She had spent so much time holding everything together – keeping herself in check. Even when Ron had ended things with her. Even when her career felt stagnant. Even when she kept making terrible decisions just to feel something.

She cried until her throat ached, until her chest felt raw. It wasn't pretty. But afterwards, she felt so calm, that she sat there in silence for long minutes without having a single thought flooding her mind.

By the end of the week, Hermione felt different. Not fixed or healed, but steadier. More herself.

She had fallen into a new rhythm – mornings in the garden with her mother, afternoons working from home, evenings boxing. It had become more than an outlet. A way to let things go without explaining herself. When she was done, sweaty and exhausted – it all made sense in a way nothing else had in months.

For the first time in a long time, she wasn't chasing something.

She wasn't searching for distraction, the next person, the next moment that might make her feel better.

She felt good.

Ginny and Theo checked in regularly, though they never pushed.

“Theo is getting absolutely destroyed at trivia night. It's embarrassing.”

“Blaise is trying to convince us all to go bowling next week. I told him we consider it if he stops cheating at charades.”

“Ginny is a sour loser, Granger. Should have seen her throw a hissy fit tonight.”

By the end of week four, Hermione made another decision.

She was staying celibate for a year. Not just from sex, but from dating. From searching. From needing someone else to validate her.

She wasn't doing it to prove a point, nor was it out of bitterness or spite.

She was doing it because she needed to know who she was outside of all of it.

Outside of relationships, expectations, outside of the endless cycle of chasing after something that never quite fit.

It was just... for her. And that was enough.

It was the fifth week when Hermione finally packed up her things, preparing to return to London.

Her mother hugged her tightly at the door, her father carrying her bags. "Take care, sweetheart. You don't have to have everything figured out right away."

Hermione nodded against her shoulder, inhaling her warmth. "I love you, Mum."

Her father drove her back, and the entire ride was filled with comfortable silence and the hum of old music playing on the radio.

The first thing she did when she got back was text Ginny.

I'm home.

It took less than a minute for the response to come through.

Ginny:

Finally. Want to come over? We're at Theo's place

She hesitated for only a second before replying.

Be there in an hour.

Theo opened the door when she arrived, looking unusually comfortable in sweatpants and a hoodie.

“Come here,” he said, grinning and pulling her into the tightest hug he had ever given her.

Hermione chuckled, hugging him back and patting his back. “You’re suffocating me.”

He let go reluctantly, letting her in, and the second she walked through the door, Ginny was already pulling her into another tight hug.

“I was starting to forget what you look like.” She muttered into Hermione’s hair, kissing her cheek with a loud peck.

She laughed. “I’ve missed you too.”

Ginny pulled back, giving her a once-over without letting go of her arms. “You look good.”

She smiled. “I feel good.”

They walked into the living room, where Blaise lounged on the couch closest to her. “There she is.”

As he got up and hugged her gently, she caught a glimpse of a white-blond head.

His hair was longer than before, falling past his ears and starting to curl slightly in a way that made him look softer, less polished. He wasn’t wearing a suit for once, just a plain black shirt and dark jeans, looking... well. Different. Less sharp around the edges. As if he had softened into something more... no. She wasn’t thinking about Malfoy that way. Absolutely not.

He sat at the far end of the couch, watching her quietly. He forced an awkward smile onto his lips that didn’t reach his eyes.

Not his usual smirk, not something arrogant or condescending. Just... small. Nothing she knew how to read.

Then he nodded, like some kind of acknowledgment. “Thought you’d gone off to live in the wild forever.”

“Malfoy,” Ginny sighed.

Hermione blinked, thrown off by his words, but before she could even attempt to respond, Theo’s hands landed on her arms.

“You been lifting bricks out there?”

She snorted, turning to face him. “Boxing, be careful.”

Ginny raised a brow as she pulled her gently next to her on the couch. “Okay, seriously. Whatever you did out there – I want it too. You look so happy, Hermione.”

Blaise smirked. “And you’ve got some color in your face too.”

Theo whistled. “Yeah you look... different. Brighter.”

“Where’s Harry? And Luna?” Hermione distracted from the compliments, not wanting to make it awkward as she started blushing.

And then, Malfoy’s voice reached her ears. “They are visiting her father for some family stuff.”

Hermione slowly turned to face him, trying not to show surprise at the fact that he spoke to her like a human being. But he was already looking away, leaning forward to grab a snack from the coffee table. Like nothing had shifted at all. Like she hadn’t been gone for over a month.

She hadn’t expected to enjoy the evening as much as she did.

The warmth of Theo’s flat, the easy laughter, the familiar chaos of their group – it all settled around her like an old, well-worn jumper. One she cherished but had forgotten about in her closet. She felt present. Like she wasn’t forcing herself to have a good time.

She sat between Theo and Ginny, sipping her water while Blaise attempted to explain the rules of a card game no one was listening to.

“You’re making this up,” Theo accused, narrowing his eyes.

Blaise scoffed. “I would never.”

“You literally just changed the rule five minutes ago,” Ginny argued.

“Fine,” Blaise sighed dramatically, tossing his cards down. “Clearly, you’re all too simple-minded to grasp the complexities of strategic thinking.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “Or maybe we just don’t trust you.”

Hermione laughed, shaking her head as Ginny nudged her with a grin. It was easy. Comfortable. And for the first time in longer than she cared to admit, she felt... content. Even with Malfoy there.

He wasn’t dominating the conversation, wasn’t goading her into a fight or making her skin crawl with irritation. He was just there, quiet but present, occasionally joining in with a remark when Theo or Blaise pulled him into it.

It was strange thought – how it didn’t feel like a battle anymore.

The tension between them that had been sitting so tight in her chest whenever he was around had loosened. It wasn’t gone, but it wasn’t suffocating her either.

Maybe she was just tired of holding onto it.

At some point during the evening, she excused herself to the loo.

The hallway was quieter than the rest of the flat, and when she returned, she found herself heading toward the kitchen, deciding she might as well grab another water before going back.

She didn't expect to run into him there.

Malfoy stood by the counter, one hand resting against the edge, his back partially turned toward her. His head lifted slightly at the sound of her footsteps, and when he turned, his gaze landed on her like a weight.

Hermione hesitated for only half a second before stepping inside. It wasn't like she was going to leave just because he was there.

She walked past him toward the fridge, feeling the space between them shrink in a way that was both noticeable but insignificant at the same time.

She grabbed a bottle of water, twisting the cap off, feeling the awareness of his stare settle against her spine.

Then, Malfoy spoke.

"Your face."

She turned slightly, brows furrowing. "What about it?"

He was still looking at her, watching her every move. "Looks like nothing ever happened."

Hermione blinked, the words landing in a way she wasn't entirely prepared for. For a moment, she didn't know what to say. There wasn't an edge to his voice, no trace of mockery or condescension. Just... observation.

Her fingers tightened around the bottle in her hand. "It healed," she said simply.

Malfoy nodded, huffing out air he had been holding. "That's good."

A silence stretched between them.

Something about the way he was standing there – hesitating, choosing his words carefully – made her stomach twist. Like she knew what was coming before he even said it.

"Listen, Granger."

Her fingers curled slightly against the bottle at the sound of her name in his voice.

She lifted her gaze to him, watching as his jaw shifted, as his hands flexed slightly against the counter.

"I had a lot of time to think while you were gone and—"

"Malfoy." She cut him off before he could say it.

His eyes flickered. Not with irritation, but something close to it.

For a split second, she saw the instinct flare in his expression – like he was about to snap at her, argue, turn this into something else.

But she didn't let him.

"I don't want to do this right now," she said, voice calm but firm.

That seemed to catch him off guard.

He stared at her like he was waiting for her to walk it back, to say something biting, to start a fight just as easily as he had been prepared to meet her with one. He was bracing for her words to hit.

She sighed, shifting on her feet, rubbing her temple before glancing back up at him.

"It's not that I don't want to talk about it." She clarified, softer this time. "Just... not tonight. Not here."

Malfoy studied her for a long moment, his head tilting slightly – not in challenge, but in consideration.

Then, after a beat, he exhaled sharply and gave a single nod.

Hermione nodded back, then turned and walked out of the kitchen without another word.

And Malfoy let her go.

Chapter 5: Flowers

Chapter Notes

Thank you for being patient while I wrestled this chapter into shape. It's a slow burn... until it's not. Enjoy the spiral. ♥♥

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hermione loved the quiet of Sunday mornings. When the city was still waking up, allowing her to enjoy coffee and a book without noise or expectations. That had been the plan for today. A few hours to herself before she promised to help Ginny clean out her closet.

London however had a peculiar way of affecting those who resided there for extended periods. As if the city intended to remind her of that fact, on her way to the café, she encountered none other than Malfoy.

At first, she almost didn't recognize him. The florist on the corner near her building was one she passed every day without much thought, its window overflowing with pretty arrangements. And yet, today, he occupied the space she hadn't paid much attention to, standing right in front of the shop with his hands buried in his pockets. He wore a hoodie and sweatpants, both in grey – which was not an unpleasant sight, but surely an unusual one. If she thought about it, she'd never seen him in anything else but business attire until a few days ago at Theo's place. His newly acquired hint of curls looked disheveled, and he was wearing large aviator sunglasses. He looked cozy, as if he had fallen out of bed not too long ago.

For a moment, Hermione thought about just walking past him. Pretending she didn't see him. But something deep inside of her urged her to stop. She didn't want this lingering unease to follow her every time their paths crossed. If it was going to change, she needed to get over herself. Game night had already been a start – and she didn't have many opportunities to talk to him without their friends around. Not that she had much to say to him anyway.

She took a deep breath, “Hey Malfoy.”

His head snapped up; forehead furrowed as he turned to face her. He clearly hadn't expected to run into someone at this time of day, especially not *her*.

“What are *you* doing here?” His tone wasn't sharp, but it wasn't exactly warm either. It was *cautious*. Almost as if he hadn't decided yet if running into her was going to ruin his day. She could relate to the feeling.

A few cars drove past as the traffic lights kept changing their colors, and a soft wind blew around them, making Hermione's hair dance.

“I live here,” she said, tucking away a stray curl behind her ear.

Looking up slowly, he took in his surroundings. Malfoy had never been to her place before, nor did he know her address. So she couldn't accuse him of stalking her just yet.

His gaze flicked back to her, hidden behind those stupidly handsome aviators.

"Right," he muttered. "Didn't know that."

Hermione nodded, unsure what else to say. "What brings you to this side of town?"

"This flower shop," he threw a glance inside, "is the only one in London to sell my mother's favorite flowers and it's her birthday today."

"Oh, very thoughtful of you."

He huffed out something close to a quiet laugh, but there wasn't much humor in it. As if she had said something incredibly stupid. His eyes dropped, hidden behind glasses, examining the pavement like he wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

"I forgot until this morning. Now they are behind on orders so I'm just killing time."

She should've said goodbye then. Let him escape. But the words tumbled out before she could stop them. "There's a café just around the corner," she blurted. "I was... heading there. If you want to tag along."

Malfoy's head snapped back up, "What?"

"Coffee," she clarified, swallowing the urge to take it back. A small part of her had already regretted asking him before her lips had parted. She was just waiting for him to throw a dismissive excuse her way. "I'm going there now, if you don't have anything else to do." Her words hovered in the air for too long – casual, but somehow massive for them. She couldn't even remember the last time that they had been able to hold a conversation without arguing it apart. *It must have been years.*

"Alright."

She blinked. "Alright?"

Malfoy smirked, just barely. "I could use some caffeine."

She really tried not to let the surprise show as he fell in step beside her. The quiet that followed wasn't too heavy, just careful enough. She wasn't used to it, not with him. Almost like if they had done this before. She couldn't help sneaking glances at him from the side, surprised by how different he looked and acted today. Almost... *relaxed*. For a fleeting second, she wondered if he'd gotten laid last night to be this un-Malfoy-like. But she shoved the thought away immediately, refusing to even think about him that way.

Noticing her stare, he stiffened, wary. "What?"

"Nothing," she muttered quickly, flushing. "Just... not used to seeing you like this."

"Like what?" Tone still dry, if not slightly amused by her awkwardness.

"Human?"

He laughed then – a real, low sound that startled her enough to glance over again. She quite liked the way it sounded.

The small café smelled like freshly baked croissants. Hermione ordered a black coffee and paid for it herself. Malfoy chose a vanilla latte, adding more sugar at the counter than necessary. She thought about asking him about the necessity for this crime, but decided the newfound peace was too fragile to push her luck with him. Instead, she settled with her coffee on a table in the corner by the open window.

They sat in peace until Malfoy cleared his throat, taking off the sunglasses to break the calm.

"So..." he started, sounding like he hated himself for asking. "Boxing?"

She looked up at him, puzzled. "Hm?"

“Should I be worried that you spent the last few weeks learning how to throw a proper revenge punch?”

She cradled her coffee between her hands. “Well, I figured it was time to train my reflexes properly... you know, just in case I find myself walking into someone’s fist again.”

She grinned at him, almost proud of her clever comeback. But the second the words left her mouth, he sat up straighter. His jaw muscles tensed.

She realized too late that the joke wasn’t as harmless as it had sounded in her head. Because it wasn’t just that night. Not just her bruised nose. He had punched that leather jacket guy after he had seen her bruised wrist. Her wrist, which she pulled under the table now, rubbing the skin as if in memory. Then she saw how his lips parted like he was about to speak, the way his shoulders rose with the breath he dragged in. He wanted to take the opportunity to bring up the apology she hadn’t let him speak out loud in Theo’s kitchen a few days ago.

But she couldn’t - not right now.

Before he could get the words out, Hermione forced a small smile and cut in, voice too bright, “Anyway. Did you try that new Thai place Theo keeps talking about? I ordered from them last night, and it was better than I expected, given the recommendation came from him.”

It was dumb, really.

He thought so too, clearly confused by her odd switch in topics.

The tension held for a beat longer, one second, two...until he exhaled slowly, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “No... haven’t been. But if Theo’s the one recommending it, I’m assuming it’s because the hostess flirts with him.”

Hermione snorted, relief washing through her. “Yeah, probably.”

Malfoy made the decision not to push or try again. And she was grateful for it. Because... she wasn’t ready. Not for that conversation. Not today. Not when, for the first time in what felt like forever, this didn’t feel heavy. It almost felt like she’d been someone else back then. That version of herself - the one who bruised easily, who had lashed out, who had nearly drowned in anger - felt like a ghost she wasn’t ready to summon. Today, she just wanted to sit here. Drink her coffee. And maybe just enjoy this side of Malfoy she was starting to see. The one who could be normal.

The café around them was busier now, people filtering in and out, filling the quiet with conversation. But somehow, their little corner still felt... private.

“I should probably grab those flowers before they forget about me.”

Hermione’s stomach sank for no good reason, but she forced a nod. “Right. Of course.”

He didn’t stand, though. Instead, he glanced at her book sitting on the table. “What’re you reading?”

Surprised, Hermione watched him linger. “Oh. Just... *Never Let Me Go*.” She ran her fingers along the worn cover. “It’s a re-read. I don’t know why, but... it’s one of those books that sticks with me, even if it guts me every time.”

Malfoy’s gaze snapped to the cover, then back to her, something clicking into place.

“Ah,” he muttered. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for an Ishiguro fan.”

Hermione’s breath hitched. “You... know it?”

He scoffed. “What, you think I’ve never picked up a book, Granger?”

“No-I just-”

“My mother read it,” he interrupted calmer now. “Insisted I read it too. Said it was... devastating. But beautifully written.”

Hermione smiled carefully. “It is.”

He nodded, tapping his fingers lightly against the cup. “The bit at the end... when Kathy’s standing in that field, looking out at everything she lost? That stuck with me.”

For a beat, she just stared at him, unsure what startled her more - his memory of the book or the fact that he’d admitted it out loud. Something about the way he said it - the quiet devastation in his voice - told her he hadn’t just read it. He’d felt it, too.

“I... yeah. Same,” she murmured. “That part wrecked me the first time I read it.”

There was something soft in his gaze now. “Makes you think about all the shit you waste time on.”

She just couldn’t speak. Couldn’t find a single clever thing to say. Because for the first time... it hit her just how little she actually knew about him. That he wasn’t just suits and smug remarks.

And somehow, that understanding made her chest flutter *uncomfortably*.

“Wasn’t a big fan of the movie though,” he added quickly.

“I didn’t watch it – I never do with my favorite books, they never live up to my expectations.”

He gave a quiet hum, almost approving. “It’s... dull, honestly. Pretty. But it misses the whole point for me.”

Hermione smiled again, tucking her hands around her coffee cup. It had become less strange. Like he wasn’t *Malfoy*.

Breaking the moment, he stood. “Alright... I’m on my way now.”

He paused, meeting her eyes when she looked up at him. “Thanks... for this.”

Seconds passed before she found her voice again. “Yeah... you too.”

His mouth twitched as he turned around, like he was hiding a real smile. “See you around, Granger.”

Malfoy disappeared and blended into the flow of people. It felt like it hadn’t happened. Like he hadn’t just showed himself from a completely different side. One she actually found worth spending time with. Hermione sat there for a long time, staring at the space he’d left behind.

By the time Hermione arrived at Ginny’s flat that afternoon, the sun had begun to set. She was already knee-deep in clothes, tossing things into piles labeled ‘keep’, ‘maybe’ and ‘*what was I thinking?!*’ on torn scraps of paper.

“Finally,” Ginny muttered when Hermione walked in. “I thought you bailed on me.”

Hermione kicked off her shoes and settled on the floor next to her. “Sorry, I lost track of time.” Blaise was sprawled on the couch on the other end of the room, lazily playing video games. “You didn’t miss much, Granger. I’ve been here nearly an hour and I’m still not sure if she’s cleaning or creating new laundry.”

“If you would stop playing your stupid game with Harry we could have already been close to

finished.”

“Is he coming on Friday? I haven’t even seen him since I got back,” Hermione admitted, leaning back on her hands. “Feels... strange. We used to be much closer.”

Ginny sighed, “Meh, he’s in love with his Luna. We’ll give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Blaise drained a bottle of water, offering nothing to the conversation.

“So,” Hermione started carefully, fingering the sleeve of a blouse Ginny had thrown aside, “I ran into *Malfoy* this morning.”

Ginny perked up from sorting through a small pile of shirts. “Oh?”

“He was buying flowers for his mother, we ended up grabbing a coffee together,” she added with a sigh, “it wasn’t *planned*.”

Her best friend shot her a quick look. “And... how was it?”

She shrugged. “It wasn’t terrible. We didn’t fight. I’d say it was almost *normal*.”

Ginny let out a quiet laugh. “Well, maybe there’s hope for you two after all.”

At that Blaise snorted but stayed quiet, his eyes fixated on his game.

It was Theo who ruined Game Night. Or, his apartment’s plumbing did.

“It’s flooded,” Theo sighed dramatically in his audio message over the group chat. “Unless anyone’s keen on ankle-deep water, it’s not happening at mine this Friday.”

By the time Friday rolled around Hermione somehow found herself hosting. Not *Game Night* though, because Ginny and her had enough of losing every game with the made-up rules and cheating from the others. They had agreed to call it repetitive.

And because Theo got sentimental about ‘*epic storytelling*’ and Harry claimed he’d never seen the extended editions it was decided. Hermione was hosting a Lord of the Rings movie marathon.

Seven adults, pizza, and the promise that no one was allowed to leave until Return of the King’s credits rolled. Twelve hours in Hermione’s tiny living room. She wasn’t sure why she had agreed to it.

She had left work earlier that day to blow off some steam at her new boxing gym; and now she was running late to take a shower and get her living room ready to accommodate two air mattresses. She had no idea where they would all fit. But they would make it work. *They always did*.

As she climbed up the stairs to her flat, taking two at a time, heart racing until she froze halfway up the landing.

Malfoy stood at her door, knocking once, then twice. He turned at the sound of her rushed steps, brows raising in surprise to see her at her own place. But what caught her off guard wasn’t his surprise. It was the way his gaze dropped as she slowed down, trailing down her

body like he couldn't stop himself. Taking in the sweat-slick skin, the flush on her chest, a pair of black leggings clinging to her thighs.

His mouth opened, but she was faster.

"You're early," she blurted.

He looked puzzled. "Am I? It's seven..."

"We said eight."

He didn't seem convinced, but drawled, "Now I'm here."

Hermione nodded, still catching her breath. "How'd you even get in?"

"One of your neighbors held the door. Asked if I was your boyfriend," he added casually, like it hadn't thrown him off. "No worries, I corrected him."

The air grew thick, leaving her throat dry. "Right. Well." She brushed past him, fumbling with her keys but hyper-aware of his eyes trailing her side profile. His attention on her equaled a physical touch on her exposed neck.

She shoved the door open and stepped inside, suddenly hyper-aware of what he was seeing for the first time. Seven years of knowing and not knowing each other, all colliding in this simple moment as he followed her into her haven.

She glanced over her shoulder. He hovered near the doorway to her living room, gaze sweeping the walls lined with bookshelves, the worn couch half-covered in a throw blanket, plants in mismatched pots.

It should've felt wrong. Invading even. But it didn't.

"Cozy," he said after a pause.

Hermione waited for the condescending lilt to land, the smugness she had learned to expect from him, but it never came. Just those words with his eyes taking in her home curiously.

She'd probably do the same if she'd ever step foot into his place.

She didn't reply, but watched him slowly stepping into her living room. As if he wasn't sure what the hell to do with himself; hands shoved into the pockets of his navy-colored joggers, his shoulders broad beneath a matching, fitted long-sleeve shirt. His sleeves pushed halfway up his forearms like he'd done it absentmindedly. He looked annoyingly handsome like this. She shoved the feeling - and whatever it might mean - far away, too many things on her mind to decipher it now.

She hadn't seen him since Sunday morning. But it had stuck with her; and she hated it. How *he* stuck with her since then. Like a thought always present at the back of her mind, unnerving and curious at once. And now he was here. In her flat. Wearing *that*.

Hermione cleared her throat. "If you're here already, you could help me make some space for the air mattresses the others are bringing?" She waved toward the floor.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Give me something to do."

They silently moved the coffee table and folded back the rug. But she felt his eyes, the way they caught onto her thighs, her waist... like he was fighting the urge to look but kept losing. She was very aware of her sweatiness then.

But she couldn't resist either. She snuck a peek at the curve of his neck and how his shirt molded perfectly to his form when he leaned forward.

"Can you text the group to pick up the pizzas? I need a quick shower."

He sighed with relief. "I'll get the pizza while you're busy."

"Great." She tossed him her keys. "No need to knock." Watching him catch them felt oddly intimate.

He cast one last lingering glance at her before turning away, his eyes briefly locking with hers. "Enjoy yourself," he murmured, the words hanging in the air.

Once the door clicked shut Hermione let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. She *craved* that shower, craving water so hot it could sear away the imprint of his gaze from her skin.

"Pull yourself together," she whispered to her reflection in the glass shower as the water poured over her body. *It's Malfoy.* The same git who had made her life a living hell for months. The very man who hurled his words with the precision of a sharpened knife. And yet... Since returning from her parents' house, something had shifted between them. She just couldn't put her finger on it. Nor did she try to solve the puzzle. It wasn't hers to solve. And by the time Malfoy came back, pizza boxes in hand, she was fluffing pillows, trying to stay busy. She had put on sleeping shorts and an old, oversized hoodie. Her towel dried hair clung damp against her skin.

His eyes caught - *just for a second* - on the skin of her bare thighs. But he said nothing, walking straight into the kitchen as if he'd been there a hundred times before.

When he returned, his attention drifted as if he was looking for something to distract himself with. He ended up in front of her bookshelf next to the TV. Eyes wandering over spines, pausing on photographs she hadn't looked at in a while. *Her parents. Her and Ginny. A younger Hermione she barely recognized anymore.*

She watched him explore her space in silence, getting lost in the way he pushed back his hair from his forehead whenever it bothered him; or to busy his hands. She wasn't even sure yet which way she liked his hair best. But she had a feeling that it couldn't get much better than this.

The doorbell rang, startling her and breaking the strange moment.

Malfoy looked over his shoulder, hands slipping back into his pockets.

"Your circus," he murmured. "Guess the clowns are here."

Blaise and Ginny spilled in first, both carrying the air mattresses and a tote bag stuffed with snacks.

"Did you get lost?" Hermione teased, stepping aside.

They were a few minutes late, and she didn't even question if they would make it through all three movies. As competitive as they all were, the older they got too.

Ginny huffed, "Blame him. He made me stop for wine."

Blaise just grinned. "You'll thank me later."

Behind them came Theo. "I swear the whole city's out tonight."

Hermione's small living room shrank with every new arrival.

Harry and Luna followed shortly after, hands linked and looking too comfortable already. Harry gave a crooked grin. "Sorry we're late. Luna made us stop. Some old man was doing readings on the corner."

Luna beamed. "He said... *desires lie hidden in the night*." Her voice was light, almost sing-song. "I thought it was rather lovely, don't you?"

Theo blinked. "That's... unsettling."

Ginny snorted. "Sounds like the start of a bad romance novel."

Luna just smiled. "Maybe."

"Malfoy?!" Blaise blinked when he finally clocked him by the bookshelf. "You're here already?"

Hermione replied before Draco could speak.

"He grabbed the pizzas, they're in the kitchen."

Malfoy stayed quiet, watching them from where he stood. He looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. She felt him glance her way but ignored it, forcing herself to focus on the space.

"Alright," she clapped her hands once. "Air mattresses go down first before we open any snacks."

Theo groaned but followed orders, setting his bag down by the armchair and helping Blaise unroll the first air mattress.

"My back's shit. Ginny and I call this one." Blaise declared immediately.

Ginny didn't argue, just smirked. "We're not moving once this starts."

"Harry?" Hermione looked over. "I assume you and Luna want to take the other mattress?"

Harry beamed, pulling Luna closer. "If you don't mind."

Luna smiled absent-mindedly. "It's perfect."

By the time both air mattresses were pumped and covered with duvets and pillows, the room already looked cramped. Hermione stood with her hands on her hips, surveying what little space was left.

"Where d'you want me?" Theo called, already sprawled out in her favorite armchair like it was his birthright. It was the most comfortable spot in the flat - but Hermione was too busy making sure everyone else was settled to fight him for it.

"Keep the chair," she sighed.

Theo grinned. "Don't twist my arm."

That left the couch. A small, two-cushion thing barely meant for one person to sleep on - let alone two. Hermione knew it before anyone said a word.

Her gaze flicked to Malfoy. He was still standing near the wall, arms crossed, watching the whole thing unfold.

“Well,” Ginny said finally, a little too lightly. “That just leaves you two.”

Hermione’s stomach dropped. But Malfoy didn’t even flinch. “We’ll manage.”

Theo snorted. “That’s a first.”

The others laughed, but the sound died off quickly as everyone busied themselves opening snacks, setting up drinks, and getting comfortable.

Once everyone was finally in place, Hermione stood in the shrinking middle of her own flat, turning off the lights. “Alright,” she exhaled. “Let’s start.”

Ginny was already sprawled against Blaise. Harry had Luna tucked into his side on the other air mattress. Theo had sunk so deep into the armchair it looked ready to swallow him whole.

For a moment, it felt... *perfect*. At least until Malfoy brushed past her to get to the couch, barely grazing her front with his backside. It was nothing. Accidental. But in the dark, it felt far too intimate.

He sat with wide legs, taking up more space than necessary. Hermione shot him a glare before sinking down beside him, careful not to touch. Whatever had shifted between them... didn’t affect her in the slightest. She had enough on her plate. Malfoy’s odd behavior wasn’t something she had the time, or the patience, to worry about.

By the time the first movie started, the living room had settled into a comfortable hum of chatter and rustling snack bags. Hermione tucked herself against the far armrest, knees drawn up beneath the heavy blanket she’d grabbed earlier.

But the space felt small. Too small.

She tried to focus on the movie, tried not to be so aware of *him*. But he was everywhere- in her peripheral, in her head, in her entire energy field. She was painfully aware of every inch of him, even without looking.

Theo yawned dramatically from his claimed throne. “My money’s still on Granger. She’ll be the first one to pass out.”

“Rude,” Hermione shot back, though her voice lacked bite.

“Not really. You read too much - no stamina left.” He smirked.

“She’s got more stamina than you,” Ginny grinned. “Remember last summer? Paddleboarding?”

“Barely counts,” Theo groaned.

“You’re just bitter she didn’t fall off first,” Blaise added, lazily tossing a chip toward him - only to freeze when Hermione shot him a glare that promised *death* if he made a mess.

Theo caught the chip, grinning wide before popping it in his mouth.

The banter washed over Hermione, comfortable and familiar. As she relaxed into the space, she sank deeper into the couch, stretching after a while to get more comfortable.

That’s when it happened.

Her foot brushed the outside of Malfoy’s thigh. The contact was innocent. Completely accidental.

Instinctively, she twitched her foot back - until he shifted just enough to chase the contact. It wasn’t obvious, but bold.

Only then did she realize the blanket covered more than just her. Somewhere between sitting down and shifting, it had tangled over Malfoy’s lap too. She hadn’t noticed. *God, how hadn’t she noticed?*

Hermione’s body froze. The movie played on; chatter continued quietly around them. But it all became background noise.

Someone laughed at something, but she barely heard it. Every nerve ending sharpened, focused entirely on the warm, solid feel of his thigh against her foot.

For some reason, she shivered - because of the contrast, the heat, the sheer boldness of it. As if to say *yes, this is happening - and I know you feel it too.*

And she did.

Hermione had to focus on her breathing, on anything but this *feeling*.

“I - still think Legolas is the most boring character,” she blurted into the room, trying to steady her voice. To do anything but draw attention to the way her toes curled against the fabric of his joggers in response to the *feeling*.

Blaise gasped, scandalized. “That’s elf slander.”

Malfoy chuckled, the movement of it vibrating through her own body.

“I agree with Granger,” he added, his voice maddeningly even, like he wasn’t doing this. Like his leg wasn’t pressed against her foot under the blanket. “Elf boy is dull. I’d take Aragorn’s brooding any day.”

“Oh, of course you would,” Ginny mumbled. “Because you see yourself in him.”

Theo laughed out loud. “Yeah, Malfoy broods harder than anyone I know. Thinks he’s dark and mysterious when really he’s just moody.”

The group burst into laughter, and even Hermione managed a weak smile. But her heart hammered too loudly in the small room. She was surprised nobody commented on it.

Malfoy’s thigh shifted when she laughed, and his leg pressed further into the touch. She could feel him - the strength of him - like a reminder of just how stable he was. How easily

he could turn this around. He did nothing but hold that connection. *What else could he do, really?* It was nothing. Just a very intimate feeling of a thigh against a foot. It wasn't a big deal.

Just that it was a big deal. This was Malfoy's thigh under the blanket.

Hermione shifted, desperate to clear her head, but the movement only dragged her heel up the side of his thigh instead of pulling away. The contact sent an unexpected spark through her, settling deep in her core.

Malfoy's hand slowly enveloped her foot, and for a moment, she was certain he'd push her away. She held her breath, pulse pounding in her ears. But his fingers curled around her, holding her there - not forceful, but steady. Encouraging. Telling her, without a word, that if she wanted to, she could stay. Or not. It was her choice.

Something unspeakable simmered between her legs so sudden it startled her. She clenched instinctively, trying to will it away, but it only made it worse.

Stop thinking about it.

All she had to do was to pull her foot away, to stop wondering why his long fingers around her felt like they caressed something deep inside of her.

She forced herself to focus on the screen, on the battle scenes, the sweeping music. But all she felt was *him* - heat radiating off him as if he wanted her to burn.

He carried on like nothing was happening; answering Blaise's stupid questions, laughing when Ginny teased Theo, snorting at Luna's comment about Harry's strong arms. As if he wasn't right there, massaging slow circles into the arch of her foot with his thumb.

And Hermione? She couldn't speak. Couldn't contribute. Every time she tried, her throat felt too dry, her lips too numb. Because *damnit*, her body was betraying her.

Malfoy squeezed her foot gently, making her melt into the couch. He didn't look at her. Not once. But she swore she saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

This was going to kill her. And no one noticed. That, somehow, made it worse. Made it... addictive.

They were halfway through the movie, the energy in the room everchanging. The lighthearted banter died down, replaced by the film's soundtrack and the occasional rustle of blankets around them.

It was Theo who gave in first - his head dropping back against the armchair, mouth slightly open, soft snores already creeping into the quiet. Blaise chuckled, nudging Ginny, but even she was fighting sleep.

The tension simmering beneath Hermione's skin refused to settle. Until she couldn't take it anymore. Needing an excuse to breathe, she shifted awkwardly and peeled herself out from under the blanket. *Away from him.*

“Loo,” she mumbled, barely finding her voice.

Malfoy’s eyes flicked toward her at that, watching as she escaped their little pocket of madness - but he didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. His hand slipped away from her foot, releasing her without protest. No reaction. Just letting her go.

The second she stood, cold air hit the bare skin of her thighs. Her shorts clung far too damp where they shouldn’t be. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to walk as normally as possible toward the bathroom, praying no one noticed the way her legs trembled.

Once inside, she locked the door with shaking hands, the click far too loud in the quiet. She stared at her flushed reflection, chest heaving. Her skin felt too hot.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispered, pressing her palms to the cool porcelain of the sink. “I need a priest.”

But not even divine intervention could fix this.

Her thighs pressed together instinctively, seeking relief that wouldn’t come. The ache between them pulsed stubbornly, humiliating in its persistence.

You promised yourself, she thought bitterly. *No guys. No distractions. A whole bloody year to get your shit together.*

And yet here she was – trembling - because of *Malfoy*. Of all people.

Loathing curled low in her stomach.

Stupid, stupid girl.

The ache between her legs mocked her when she cleaned herself up quickly, gritting her teeth, ignoring the way her panties stuck or how her pulse thrummed like it was trying to embarrass her further.

Get it together, she hissed at herself. *It was nothing. Just a foot rub.*

That’s all it had been - if she said it enough, maybe she’d believe it. A foot rub between... well, between *whatever they were*. Not friends. God, not that. People who tried to get along for their friends’ sake.

Squaring her shoulders, she yanked open the door, heart still racing as she forced her face into something resembling neutral. When she stepped back into the living room, everything was exactly the same - except it wasn’t.

Malfoy was still there, exactly where she’d left him but ...

He’d gotten comfortable. His long legs stretched out; one knee bent lazily. He’d claimed her blanket for himself, the heavy fabric draped over his lap like it belonged there. Like *he* belonged there.

Hermione swallowed hard, forcing her eyes away. She could survive this.

It was just a foot rub.

Still, she crossed the room on tiptoes, jaw tight, every muscle screaming at her to stay angry. To sit far away. To prove, mostly to herself, that none of this mattered.

But the second she saw him - the way he sat back, legs stretched out like he owned the place, the blanket rumbled in his lap - something snapped. The anger flickered, broke apart, and what remained was that same unbearable pull.

He lifted the blanket without a word, without looking at her, his jaw clenched so tight she swore it must have hurt him. It wasn't a peace offering; it was a challenge.

A silent *your move, Granger.*

And she hated herself, hated her body for *wanting* it.

Her heart stuttered. Because she wanted it. Craved it. The weight of his hand on her skin, the way he touched like he *knew* what it did to her. The ache between her legs flared up like it never left.

Screw it. What did it matter? It wasn't like anything was going to happen. Not here. Not now. Not ever. They were surrounded. It would be innocent. Harmless. Just touches.

So she did the only thing she could. She gave in.

Hermione slipped under the blanket. Slowly. Carefully. Until her leg was there - right there - close enough that she didn't have to ask.

His hand moved instantly, like he'd been waiting. No hesitation. No warning.

Fingers found her foot again, curling around her ankle. His grip was soft at first - testing. A silent question. But then... his thumb moved. Slow, deliberate circles, tracing her skin like he needed to relearn every inch.

Hermione bit her lip, body stiff, frozen until she forced herself to meet his gaze.

He wasn't watching the screen. Not anymore. He was watching *her*.

His eyes searched for something. Rejection, maybe. Permission. An answer to a question neither of them dared to voice.

Her lips parted as she dragged in a shaky breath, tongue darting out to wet them.

Tell him to stop. Say something. Pull away.

She couldn't.

Instead, she shifted. Scooting toward him, just enough for him to *know*. She was letting him touch her.

Malfoy's gaze flicked back to the screen, jaw twitching once, like it took everything in him not to react.

Carefully he rolled onto his side - her lower leg still in his hand. That simple shift caged her in, trapped her leg between his, his thighs warm and solid against her skin.

Her breath caught. Her skin *burned* where he held her.

She shouldn't be here. Shouldn't be doing this.

What the hell is wrong with you, Hermione?

Her toes curled against the soft cotton of his joggers, seeking him out like her body had made the decision for her.

He tensed, but not to stop her. No, he *loosened* his grip, thumb grazing her ankle as if to say, *go on*.

So she did.

Almost without thinking, she dragged her foot higher, searching for a reason to stop. Her toes skimmed along his thigh, feeling the heat of him through the fabric.

And when she felt the subtle shift of his body - *the invitation* - it was like her brain short-circuited. His fingers curled around her foot, guiding her gently, until she felt him.

There.

Oh, God.

He was as hard as she was wet.

She shivered, every nerve ending flaring to life. Her breath caught in her throat as he pressed her foot in *just enough* for her to feel the full weight of it; thick, straining against his joggers.

This was *insane*, but she couldn't stop. Couldn't *hold back*. She felt him adjust subtly to not draw attention to them; angling himself so she could feel *every* inch of him. He gave her room to explore.

In a reassuring motion, he dragged her bare foot along the length of his confined cock - showing her just how much pressure he wanted her to use on him.

Hermione's brain spun; heart racing as need pooled low in her belly.

This isn't happening. It can't be happening.

She'd promised herself it would be easy to not engage with men. To not have unfulfilling sex, to not be unsatisfied.

So why did she melt at the way he used her foot like this.

It's just a touch, she lied to herself. *Just... this. It doesn't count.*

But her body knew better. Because she wasn't just *letting* him - she was *hoping* he'd continue. She *wanted* more.

Her eyes fluttered shut, breathing shallow as she fixated on the feel of him beneath her foot. Testing the shape, the size... the *weight* of him straining through soft cotton.

First, she didn't notice when he stopped guiding her foot. That she had taken over the movement; dragging her foot in a slow, deliberate stroke along the length of his cock without waiting for him.

Malfoy exhaled hard through his nose, hips pressing subtly into her touch, chasing the friction she gave. But he didn't push her. He just *let* her.

A bolt of power shot through her.

Her foot moved again, bolder now. Tracing the outline she could feel through his joggers. Curling her toes around the thick ridge, testing the length of him, feeling the way his cock twitched under every pass.

He was big.

The realization hit hard, and for a stupid second, she felt annoyed, because *of course* he would be. But then she dragged her toes higher, pressing firmer.

She shouldn't enjoy feeling him like this. *She was supposed to be focusing on herself.*

His hand came back. Fingers trailing slowly up her calf. A silent touch that felt less like control and more like *praise*. Like he was telling her - *this is good. You're good.*

A shaky breath escaped her lips. Technically, she wasn't even *doing* anything, right? *This wasn't sex.* There was no skin-to-skin. No real touching.

Foot stuff didn't count - did it?

Malfoy's fell back against the couch, his face calm but his body told the truth. The way his cock strained against her foot. The way his hand flexed against her skin like he was holding himself together by a thread.

Hermione wet her lips, feeling the ache between her legs pulse painfully.

When was the last time she'd been this turned on?

When had *anyone* made her feel this kind of raw, unbearable *want* without even touching her properly?

And he wouldn't. *Not here.* Not in front of everyone.

That should've calmed her. Should've made it easier for her to pull away. But instead it thrilled her. The danger. The power. This was *her* pushing it, and him losing it.

Hermione kept going. *Chose* to go further.

She slid her foot lower, slowly. Until the graze of her foot drew a sharp breath from him when she caressed his balls.

A strangled, guttural sound escaped him; a sharp exhale that sounded too loud in the quiet of the room.

They both froze.

Her chest heaved as she stared at nothing - terrified someone had heard. Terrified of what it meant that she'd *wanted* that reaction. *Had gone chasing for it.*

But no one stirred. No one noticed. And Hermione wanted to do it again.

It wasn't until the film's end credits rolled that they both seemed to snap out of it. The others stirred, shifting under blankets, groaning softly as the music amplified.

Malfoy's hand slid away, forcing Hermione's foot to slip free slowly, almost reluctantly. She pulled her knees to her chest, breaking the contact with effort. It felt like cutting a thread pulled taut, the loss of his warmth leaving her achingly unsatisfied.

She watched him through lowered lashes as he sat up, rolling his neck with a quiet groan. His hips shifted awkwardly, adjusting himself under the blanket. One hand ghosting over the front of his joggers like he needed to ground himself. He didn't even realize she was still watching.

The sight made something *soft* and foolish bloom in her chest. *She had done that to him.* *She* had turned him into this mess of restless limbs and clenched jaws.

Blaise groaned from the floor, stretching long over Ginny, who swatted him half-heartedly. Theo mumbled something incoherent from the armchair.

"Break," someone yawned. "Five minutes. Then finish strong."

"No breaks," Ginny argued. "No sleep."

"That's rich," Theo huffed without opening his eyes. "You were snoring ten minutes ago."

Hermione stayed silent. The ghost of Malfoy's hand still tingled against her skin, like her body refused to forget.

Their secret clung to the air between them.

And no one noticed.

By the time the third movie started, the room fell quiet again. Everyone sank into new versions of comfort. Theo gave up pretending, head tipped back, mouth slack with sleep. Blaise and Ginny tangled together, limbs a mess. Luna curled tighter into Harry's side, sighing quietly.

And then, just when she thought it was over, thought maybe Malfoy had come to his senses; he moved.

Hermione's throat bobbed when he shifted beside her, careful not to make a sound. His hand, resting idly on his thigh, reached for her. Fingers brushed her ankle. Light. Like it might've been an accident.

But it wasn't. She *knew* it wasn't.

She refused to meet his eyes. If she looked at him now, it would all become too real.

But he did it again. Slower this time. Purposeful. The pad of his finger traced her skin like a question, daring her to pull away.

Hermione was unable to deny him then. Because she had always been the *exception* for him. The girl he *tolerated* at best. The one he barely spared a glance.

And now... he *wanted* her.

Her chest ached with it. With the absurdity of how good it felt to be the thing that made him crack.

A quiet squeeze around her lower leg, a tug followed.

Come here.

She felt the shift before he even moved. The subtle rise of his chest. The faint adjustment of his weight. He slid lower along the couch, slow and careful, until he was angled just enough - close enough - that if he pulled, she'd follow.

And she did.

Her legs moved almost on their own, bending at the knee as he tugged gently, coaxing her forward until there was room for him behind her.

Her back barely brushed his chest when he settled into the space behind her. It was impossibly intimate.

Malfoy's hand settled on her hip, feather-light.

Hermione's throat felt dry, her entire body locked in place as she waited for him to do something. Until she caved and let herself sink back against him.

He exhaled shakily, his breath ghosting over the back of her neck like it startled even him. She felt his chest rise and fall too fast as he adjusted - his thighs framing hers now, his arm sliding forward to settle low on her waist. Just like that. Tangled beneath the blanket, pressed together like it had always been meant to happen.

Hermione blinked toward the screen, but the movie was meaningless. Every inch of her burned where he touched her over her hoodie. His palm broad and heavy as it stroked down from her waist to her hip. Holding her there like he was terrified she might change her mind.

For a while, they stayed like that. *Pretending*.

The world beyond the couch didn't exist. Not the movie. Not their friends asleep just feet away. Nothing but the feel of him breathing against her, his mouth dangerously close to her skin.

His nose nudged a stray curl aside, his lips ghosting the shell of her ear.

But he didn't kiss her.

Hermione gripped the blanket tighter, knuckles white, her heart thundering in her chest. Because *that* was somehow worse. The *almost*.

His fingers dragged lower, over the fabric of her shorts, until he reached the bare skin of her outer thigh.

"Can I touch you?" he breathed. A whisper, barely there.

She could shake her head; he'd given her an out.

She nodded barely, arching slightly to press into him. He was still hard, or hard again, she couldn't be sure. Pushing against the curve of her ass.

Teeth grazed the back of her neck, feigning the phantom of a bite.

Then his fingers moved, sliding up until they met the band of her shorts. His breath caught somewhere in his chest... and then he dipped inside.

Hermione bit down hard on her lip, enough to sting, when he brushed the edge of her panties. Her hips shifted without thought, seeking him, begging without a sound. Her entire body flushed, heart hammering in her chest.

His fingers pulled out from underneath her shorts, just to find a better angle. To slip inside again from the top, shifting behind her to even out their height difference.

This was insane. This was where it *should* stop. Logic screamed it. But it didn't.

She moved. Deliberately. Lifting her upper leg until it hooked over his thigh. It was awkward in the cramped space, but enough. Enough to answer him. Enough to give him access. Enough to spread herself open for *him*.

Malfoy's breath hitched and a shudder wrecked through her as he let out the softest, filthiest sound she'd ever heard from a man - half groan, half sigh.

His hand slid into her panties, fingertips exploring her smooth skin. Trailing lower until-

A sudden rustle. The soft groan of leather.

Malfoy froze. Every muscle in his body locking down tight. His fingers halting mid-descent. Not breathing. Not moving. Not touching her properly yet.

Hermione's heart shot into her throat; breath caught mid-gasp. Staring at the same spot he was.

Theo.

In the dim light, she made out his slumped shape in the armchair. Head rolling lazily to the side. He mumbled something incoherent... shifted once... and then stilled again. Slow, steady breathing resumed. *Deep. Asleep.*

Malfoy's hand trembled against her. She could feel the indecision bleeding off him. This is it. The moment he could pull away.

Seconds dragged, stretching thin.

A slow exhale ghosted over her ear. He was relieved, control almost slipping.

Malfoy's fingers flexed. Slowly reaching over her mound before sliding into her slick folds.

Hermione's lips parted soundlessly, a flush rushing over her skin, her entire body buzzing. This moment - their secret in the dark - felt more intimate than *anything* she'd ever done.

Hermione bit down hard on her lip, squeezing her eyes shut.

He traced her folds with maddening precision, fingertips barely skimming, collecting the wetness gathering there for hours. Gentle strokes, slow and exploratory. Like he was learning her. Mapping every inch of her sex.

Two fingers parted her folds so slowly, spreading her open like she was something precious. Hermione held back a deep gasp, trembling as cool air kissed where no one had touched in months.

"Fuck," he whispered so quietly she almost missed it. A raw sound, full of awe.

Instead of rushing, his thumb dragged upward, coating itself in her slick before circling lazily around her clit.

Hermione's hips flinched, a soft, barely-there sound stuck in her throat.

It was unfair - how good he was at this. How *he knew*. Most men *fumbled*. But not him.

Malfoy took his goddamn time.

He did it again. Gathered her slick, spread it slowly. Up and down. Up and down. Every pass sending sparks of pleasure zipping up her spine.

By the time his thumb circled her clit again with more pressure, she was biting her lower lip so hard she was afraid she'd bleed. Her spread legs trembled. And just when she thought she couldn't take any more of his torturous teasing, his fingers slipped lower. Positioned perfectly.

Her breath caught, body stiffening, every muscle tensed.

Slowly his fingertip pressed inside. Her body clenched around him instantly, so tight his breath faltered behind her. She was so wet, so messy because of him.

He pressed his forehead to her shoulder as if grounding himself.

Then, carefully, he added a second finger. The stretch was enough to make her hips roll instinctively into his hand.

His kept faltering, using his palm to spread her arousal all over her before he gently pushed his fingers in and out of her. The pace was maddeningly slow.

All Hermione could do was feel. His fingers were so long, and so skilled. It was unfair. The way his hard cock strained behind her, pressing into her ass.

She wanted him in that moment. More than she had ever wanted anyone else in her life. It was so absurd, how this guy could touch her in secret and be so much more attentive than any other lover before him. She couldn't remember the last time a man took the time to just finger-fuck her nicely, without rushing through it to get to the main part of the show. *Because they wouldn't get to the main part of the show*. Because they were doing this in secret, under a blanket that would smell of them tomorrow.

Hermione's jaw grew slack as his touch grew bolder, exploring her like he had all the time in the world. She pushed back against him, desperate for more friction, and she felt the way his cock jerked against her.

Her body burned. Every breath, every drag of his fingers, every press of his hips made her unravel sweetly. It felt tender. Intimate in a way that terrified her. Because for once... it wasn't about winning. Or hating.

His breath shook against her neck as he carefully pulled his fingers out of her, leaving her empty. Hermione's body clenched involuntarily at the loss, a soft whimper nearly escaping her lip - but she bit back the disappointment.

For a moment, she thought it was over. That maybe even he realized how insane this was. But then his other arm shifted, sliding beneath her, curling around her hip as the other slipped under her thigh.

Hermione froze as he adjusted her to his liking, lifting her leg just enough to change the angle. Offering him the access he seemed to prefer.

Her breath caught, head tipping back as his hand trailed back between her thighs. Deeper this time when he pushed his two fingers into her. The new angle made it feel more intimate, more controlled.

And then his other hand found her. Settling low, cupping her mound with a possessive ease that stole the air from her lungs. He held her there, grounding her, fingers spreading ever so slightly, like he needed to feel all of her.

A shiver ran down her spine. She'd never felt safer. Not like this. Not with anyone else.

What the hell was wrong with her?!

Ginny snored on the mattress. Theo shifted in the armchair. Blaise breathed deep somewhere just a few feet away. Harry and Luna didn't move.

She struggled not to make a sound as his fingers stretched her so perfectly, she could cry. His forehead pressed to the curve of her shoulder, his chest rising faster against her back. But neither of them dared to breathe too loud.

She could feel his racing heartbeat against her back, echoing through her to match her own. The rise and fall of his breathing turned ragged, his exhale hot against the shell of her ear.

She turned her head until her cheek brushed his nose. That was all the invitation he needed. He leaned in, dragging the tip of his nose along her jaw, breathing her in like she was the first thing that had made sense in a long time. The low sound that rumbled from his throat said enough. His lips brushed the corner of her ear.

Hermione's hips rolled once, seeking more, and he cursed under his breath. His hand spread wider over her, anchoring her. Holding her still.

"Don't," he barely mouthed against her neck. "Stay still."

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as he thrust slowly, filling her, dragging it out like he had no intention of rushing. No one had ever touched her like this. Not this slow. Not this deep. It wasn't just about getting it done. This was their secret. Hidden in plain sight. *Sacred.*

She shook, trying to stay still, but every pass of his fingers made her want to cry out. Made her thighs tremble. He felt it, felt everything, and still, his pace didn't falter.

"Don't wake them," he breathed only for her.

Hermione whimpered, muffling the sound in the blanket as his cock pressed hard against her ass, his hips bucking involuntarily. Her entire body was on fire, nerve endings lighting up in

places she hadn't known could feel this good.

Somewhere in another universe, Hermione Granger was passing out pamphlets about inappropriate touching... and here she was, spread open on her couch because of Draco bloody Malfoy's fingers.

He found a spot – *oh* - and curled his fingers as he kept fucking her, until her walls clamped down hard, until she knew she couldn't stop it even if she tried. His other hand began to press down on her mound, applying enough pressure to make her eyes squeeze shut. The weight of it, combined with the steady rhythm of his fingers inside her, created a pressure she'd never felt before. A feeling she couldn't control.

It was *too much*, too intense and at the same time not nearly enough. A sensation so foreign it terrified her, pleasure cresting high and sharp until it felt like something inside of her might snap. Like she was full everywhere - his hand, his fingers, his weight, his heat - all of it, pulling her apart and holding her together at once.

His heart raced against her back, his lips brushing, almost shaking, against her ear.

"That's it," he whispered so quietly she wasn't sure she even heard it.

Her eyes fluttered shut, rolling back as the unbearable pressure inside her finally snapped. Her entire body arched, instinct demanding release - but she couldn't make a sound. Couldn't scream like her body begged her to.

Instead, Hermione bit down hard - burying her face in the blanket, muffling the desperate cry that clawed its way up her throat. Her teeth sank deep into the fabric, the taste of cotton filling her mouth as she *shattered*.

Her free hand clawed at him, fingers digging hard into his forearm, anchoring herself as the wave ripped through her. Hips jerking helplessly, thighs trembling, as Malfoy held her in place - his fingers fucking her through it like he *wanted* to feel every desperate pulse around him.

Tears stung her eyes, the aftershocks wracking through her until she could barely breathe. She gasped silently against the blanket, desperate for air, her body spent and trembling.

Every roll of his fingers prolonging the bliss until the tremor in her thighs subsided. He held her steady, grounding her shaking limbs like he'd done this before.

Malfoy's head lowered, resting against her shoulder, his chest rising fast as he fought for control. But he never once asked for more. Never moved to pull her hand or demand anything in return. He just stayed there - hard against her, breathing her in, hands gentle now, like he didn't dare let go.

Hermione opened her eyes slowly, blinking through the haze as she scanned the room; every muscle rigid with fear that someone might've seen. *Might've heard*.

Everyone was still asleep. Oblivious.

Malfoy's hands felt heavy on her. Like letting go would undo whatever fragile, forbidden thing had just happened.

It should've felt like a mistake. *But it didn't.*

Chapter End Notes

If you made it this far... I'm so sorry - and also you're welcome.
They're a mess. I'm a mess. We're all a mess.

Chapter 6: Friends

Everything felt heavy. Too warm. Her mind still thick with sleep. For a moment, she forgot where she was... until the steady ghost of breath against her neck brought everything crashing back. *Malfoy*.

His arm was still around her waist, palm splayed low over her stomach, fingertips nestled into the hem of her sleeping shorts. She could feel his chest rising and falling peacefully against her back. Their bodies still hidden underneath the shared blanket.

She blinked. It was still dark in the room, the only light the weak grey of early dawn sneaking through the windows.

But a slow shuffle of footsteps accompanied by the slight creak of floorboards made her look up with a painful stutter in her chest.

Theo moved slowly through the mess of blankets and bodies on the floor as he'd returned from the bathroom. He was trying not to wake anyone. Their eyes met briefly, but he didn't hold the gaze. It flickered to Malfoy behind her, then to their bodies melting into each other.

Shit.

For a split second, she thought he might say something.

Hermione's entire body flushed hot. She could feel the heat crawl up her throat, threatening to suffocate her. But she couldn't move. It was too late already.

Theo's gaze lingered before he padded back to the armchair, collapsing with a sigh - like he hadn't just seen her tangled up with Malfoy.

Hermione's heart hammered in her chest. Carefully she freed herself from his hold on her, biting her lip to keep from making a sound.

He mumbled something behind her, his hand *searching* but not reaching for her.

She refused to glance Theo's way, but she could still feel his eyes on her - watching her like a hawk.

Hermione stood, wrapping her arms around herself as if it could hide the lingering ache of what had happened last night. Barefoot, she tiptoed out of the room.

Only when the bathroom door clicked shut did she finally release the breath she'd been holding. Her face was red. She looked wrecked. Like the night was still written all over her skin. Like *anyone* could take one glance at her and know exactly what had happened under that blanket. She could still feel him - his breath against her neck, the way his fingers had moved inside her like he'd known her body better than anyone.

And Theo. He wasn't stupid. In what universe would she be waking up in Malfoy's arms, sharing a blanket. It would be enough for Theo to know *something* must have happened.

Hermione splashed cold water on her face, trying to scrub the night off her skin, but it was useless. The memories were stitched deep. She stayed in the bathroom longer than necessary, counting the seconds, trying to slow her heart. But when she finally found the courage to return to the living room, the sun was creeping higher.

Everyone was already stirring awake by then.

Blaise groaned as he stretched, joints popping in the silence. "Didn't fall asleep first, by the way," he muttered. "That was Theo."

Theo just grunted from the armchair and waved him off.

Harry, rubbing sleep from his eyes, asked when he sat up and looked around, "So... who *finished* last night?"

The words were innocent, said without a second thought.

She could feel it – how Malfoy's attention snapped to her in the doorway. Willing her to look. Daring her to meet his eyes and remember exactly what he did to her last night.

But the air shifted. Hermione stiffened where she was standing, every muscle tensing as if *physically* bracing herself. She didn't look up. She *couldn't*.

Her skin felt electric - like a live wire barely contained. She could almost hear his voice in her head.

'Go on, Granger. Tell them how you finished. On my hand. Soaking this couch while they snored.'

She didn't dare to give in.

Because she knew the second their eyes met, it would all be *there*. The way his hand had moved between her thighs, the way her body had *shaken* around his fingers, the way his breath had been shaken by it all.

Blaise snorted lazily. "Pretty sure everyone passed out before Frodo even got to Mordor, mate."

Luna's soft voice drifted through the air – dreamy like always made Hermione flinch. "That old man yesterday..." she mused. "The one doing readings? Remember what he said, Harry?"

Harry blinked, confused. "What?"

"*'Desires lie hidden in the night.'*" Luna quoted, tone lilting, eyes unfocused like she was remembering it for herself. Luna's words, accidental or not, cut through the air like a blade. Hermione stiffened, breath catching.

“Clearly, he meant our desire to finish the movies.”

Blaise groaned, breaking the tension with a stretch, "Christ, Luna. Could you *not* sound like you're narrating a ghost story at eight in the morning?"

Luna just smiled. "I wouldn't call it a ghost story."

Ginny yawned, "Well, he definitely didn't mean Theo's snoring. Because that's not a secret."

Hermione caved. She *had* to look at him. Just once. It was only a second - just long enough for her stomach to flip - but then he blinked, looked away, and just like that... *nothing*. No smirk. No glint in his eye. No trace of the man who had fallen asleep tangled up in her.

Hermione fled into the hallway. "I'm making coffee," she muttered, retreating to the kitchen before anyone could respond.

The morning dragged, awkward in ways she didn't name to think about any longer.

Hermione busied herself with the coffee, pouring it into mismatched mugs. She stayed in the kitchen for a long time, avoiding the couch - avoiding *him*.

When she finally emerged, most of the group was shuffling around lazily, stretching and gathering their things. The air smelled of stale sleep, cold pizza, and something unspoken still; clinging stubbornly to the walls.

Malfoy was nowhere to be seen when she set the coffee down on the table and pushed open the windows, letting in the cool morning air.

Ginny was the first to move, reaching for her mug like it was a lifeline. "Malfoy left already. Said he had somewhere to be."

Somewhere to be.

Hermione nodded, throat tight, swallowing against the sharp sting curling low in her stomach. She didn't know what she'd expected instead. Of course, they'd pretend nothing had happened. She knew that now.

Theo caught her glance as he shrugged on his jacket in the hallway once they had finished cleaning up. He didn't say a word, but something in his smirk set her teeth on edge. The fact that he didn't make a comment in front of everyone or teased her about how he had seen her wrapped up in Malfoys arms, gave her hope that maybe he hadn't read into it after all.

"Alright," Blaise yawned loudly, steering Ginny by her shoulders, "next time, *no* extended editions. My back's wrecked."

Harry chuckled, lazily rubbing his hand over Luna's waist as she hummed her agreement. "Speak for yourself. We should do this again - maybe start earlier next time, so we all survive it."

One by one, they shuffled out - muttering goodbyes, pulling on jackets - until only Theo lingered, hovering in the doorway. His gaze flicked to Hermione, a slow smirk curling his mouth as he gave a two-fingered salute.

"You looked... comfortable last night."

Hermione stiffened; throat dry. "Don't."

Theo's grin sharpened, but his voice stayed light. "Wasn't going to."

And just like that he was gone. The door clicked shut, leaving her alone in the wreckage of the night, her pulse hammering in the silence.

Hermione stood there in the wreckage of the night - the faint ghost of his cologne still clinging to the couch.

She didn't answer any of their texts that day. Ginny had sent a –

'Theo's being weird. Call me.'

But Hermione didn't have it in her. Not yet.

Instead, she cleaned. Like it could chase away the ghost of his hands, breathing down her neck.

By Sunday, the flat was spotless...but her head wasn't.

Monday, she dragged herself to the boxing gym before work. Gloves tight around her wrists, ponytail pulled back so sharply it gave her a headache. She lost herself in the dull thud of her fists against the bag, the sting of skin against leather. Over and over.

She remembered how she used to fall apart after moments like that, scrambling to erase one memory by drowning in another. Drinking too much, making reckless choices, doing anything to claw back a sense of control. Before she left for her parents' place... that's exactly what she would've done.

But now... now it was different. Now she forced herself to sit with it. Boxing until her lungs burned and her arms trembled. She didn't let herself cry, or scream, or call Ginny begging to understand what the hell she'd done. No. Not this time.

She'd need to tell her best friend eventually, because not speaking to anyone wasn't doing her any good. It gnawed at her. Like she was the only one left haunted by that night.

On Tuesday, the friend group met for a spontaneous dinner in Mayfair. She didn't go.

Ginny texted her because she hadn't reacted in the group chat.

You coming? Feels weird without you.

She stared at the screen too long before typing out.

Sorry, work. Next time.

It was a lie. She'd cleared her calendar. But the thought of facing him - of pretending nothing had happened - made her stomach churn. She wasn't ready to see his face. Not when she still woke up feeling his hands.

She wasn't angry at *him*. Not really. *She was angry at herself*. For not keeping her own promise, and for not regretting it either.

No men. No sex. No messy, regretful bullshit that left her questioning herself in the morning. And she'd lasted what? *Two weeks?*

But usually, her encounters were plagued with regret, because it had been awful. Leaving her emptier than before; but Malfoy had made her feel things she didn't think were possible. She didn't remember the last time she'd felt anything comparable, no orgasm this strong and necessary.

It was pathetic, she thought at night as she sat on her armchair, the book on her lap still untouched. She stared at the couch, hating that her core ached at the memory of what they had done.

No. Not pathetic. She was dealing with it, sitting with it, processing her feelings about what had happened. To a certain degree. For once in her life, she wasn't tearing down everything around her to feel better. She wasn't making him the villain in her head. He didn't make her come undone. She had wanted him to touch her like that.

Tuesday bled into Wednesday, dragging her straight to her weekly group class at the gym. By the time she stumbled out, she was drenched in sweat, arms so heavy it hurt to lift them.

Four days. She'd made it four days without facing anyone - ducking calls, ignoring texts, avoiding every familiar face.

Until she saw Ginny.

Sitting on the bench outside the entrance like she'd been waiting.

"I figured I'd find you here," Ginny called, voice light but knowing.

Hermione froze, shoulders hunching. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, glad you asked," Ginny shot back. "You skipped dinner. Ignored my texts. Dodged my calls."

Hermione sighed, tugging her sweatshirt tighter around herself. There was no point denying it; Ginny wouldn't be here if she was letting this go. "I just... needed some space."

Ginny's eyes softened. "Cool. *Why?*"

Hermione's throat bobbed. "It's... *complicated.*"

"Bet it is." Ginny's voice dropped as she pushed off the bench, falling into step beside her. "What happened Friday night?"

Hermione hesitated. "Why? Did Theo say something?" Of course, it had to be Theo. There was no way Malfoy would admit to any of it.

Ginny shrugged. "Well... yeah. Sort of."

Hermione's stomach dropped. "What did he say?"

"Nothing specific. Just... some weird comment at dinner. About something happening while the rest of us were out."

Hermione let out a frustrated breath. "Can't he just keep his mouth shut for once?" The anger spiked but fizzled just as fast. She was too wrung out from training to hold onto it.

Ginny squinted at her. "So... *you and Theo?! Friday night?!*"

"Oh my God, no! What-" Hermione choked, throwing her hands up. "Are you insane?"

Ginny stared at her, then let out a breath, relief washing over her features. "Okay, okay! Just ... had to ask." She paused... brow furrowing... then narrowed her eyes. "Wait. If it wasn't Theo..."

Hermione opened her mouth. Closed it. Stared straight ahead as they kept walking.

Ginny blinked, processing... then gasped. "No. No." She skipped half a step, eyes wide. "Shut up! You and *Malfoy?!?*"

Hermione winced. "Please don't say it out loud."

"*Malfoy?!?*" Ginny whisper-screamed, grabbing Hermione's arm like she needed physical proof. "Are you *kidding* me right now?"

Hermione groaned, yanking her arm free and scrubbing both hands over her face. "Ginny... can we not do this here?" She glanced around, heart hammering. "Not where anyone can hear?"

Ginny blinked, then grabbed Hermione's wrist. "Fine." She all but dragged Hermione down the pavement, weaving through the quiet evening streets. Hermione stumbled once, still dazed, but Ginny didn't slow.

The tension stretched tight between them. The only sounds were hurried steps and the distant buzz of London.

"Fucking idiot," Ginny muttered finally, still staring ahead.

Hermione let out a humorless laugh. "Yeah. Thanks for that."

"No, I mean - *him*," Ginny snapped. "How the *hell* does that even happen? What did he do? Charm your knickers off with that *posh* voice?"

Hermione snorted despite herself. "Ginny--"

"No. Save it. I need the whole story, Hermione."

Hermione groaned, dragging a hand through her hair. "You're insane."

"And you're worse." Ginny shot her a sharp look. "I thought grabbing a coffee meant you two were *civil* now. Not that you'd jump each other like wild animals the first chance you got."

Hermione didn't answer. She couldn't. The memory of his breath against her neck, his fingers buried deep inside her, was still too fresh.

They rounded the corner to Hermione's building, Ginny still clinging to her like she might bolt at any second.

"I'm not judging you, alright? I just... didn't see that one coming." Ginny exhaled, her voice softening. "But we're in this now. Together."

Hermione swallowed hard. Because honestly? She was so relieved she wouldn't have to carry this secret alone anymore.

The second the door shut behind them, Hermione's shoulders sagged - exhausted, sweaty, and already regretting this. Relief barely edged out the anxiety gnawing at her chest. Because no matter what Ginny said about not judging, Hermione knew better. Knew this wasn't just some secret anymore. Next time they were all in a room together - Malfoy included - someone else would know. It made it real. Too real.

Ginny kicked off her trainers and walked straight into the living room, stopping dead when her eyes landed on the couch.

Hermione hovered awkwardly; memories rushing back in.

Ginny's lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't sit. Just stood there, glaring at the stupid, innocent-looking couch like it had personally betrayed her.

"Did it happen here?" she asked flatly. "Or did you two sneak off to your bedroom?"

Hermione flinched. "Ginny!"

"Bloody hell, Hermione." Ginny shook her head, still frozen in place. It had been answer enough for her. "How am I ever supposed to sit on that couch again?"

Hermione groaned, sinking into the armchair. "Do you *mind* not making me feel worse?"

Ginny huffed, arms crossing tight over her chest. "Sorry. I just..." Her gaze flicked back to Hermione. "What the hell *happened*?"

Hermione stared down at the carpet, throat working hard. "I don't even know where to start."

Ginny took a step forward, voice low. "Hermione. You guys did it? With all of us right there?"

"No." Hermione's head snapped up. "No. We didn't... We didn't have sex." She dragged in a shaky breath.

Ginny's brows furrowed, but then her lips twitched, like she couldn't help herself. "Then what? You kissed?"

Hermione's cheeks burned. She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek, tasting blood. "He... touched me."

Her throat bobbed. She didn't elaborate - because there was more. The part she'd never, ever say out loud.

The part where her foot had slid against his cock. The part where he'd let her. *Guided her.*

Ginny blinked. "Touched you?"

"Under the blanket." Hermione's voice cracked.

Ginny froze, color draining from her face. "What?"

Hermione closed her eyes, shaking her head. "His hand was down my shorts, Ginny." Her voice barely carried. "While everyone was asleep around us."

For a second, Ginny just stared speechless. "Holy. Shit." She half-laughed, half-gasped. "You're joking."

Hermione shot her a look, jaw tight. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

Ginny's gaze darted back to the couch, like it physically pained her not to sit - but also repulsed her. "That smug bastard. He... he just did that? What- how-"

"I let him," Hermione whispered. "I wanted him to."

Ginny's mouth opened. Closed. She exhaled slowly, shaking her head. "Okay. Sit tight. Because... what the fuck do we even do with that?"

Hermione buried her face in her hands. "I don't know."

Ginny let the silence stretch, then huffed. "And you skipped dinner over this?"

"Wouldn't you?" Hermione shot her a wild, desperate look. "How the hell am I supposed to sit there while he's acting like it didn't happen?"

That quieted Ginny. She finally lowered herself onto the arm of the couch, grimacing. "I can't believe I'm saying this... but... do you have a crush on him?"

That startled a wet laugh out of Hermione. "No! I just..." She sighed, dragging a hand through her hair. "I promised myself I wouldn't do this. No men. No messy, regrettable moments." Her eyes burned. "I lasted two weeks, Gin."

Ginny exhaled slowly. "Alright. First - stop beating yourself up. Second... do you regret it?"

Hermione blinked. Opened her mouth. Closed it. "...I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe?"

Ginny nodded, her gaze softening. "Okay. Hermione... You have to talk to him."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and taut. Then Ginny's eyes sharpened.

"I'm serious - stop punishing yourself for it."

"I'm not-"

"You are," Ginny cut in, her voice softer but steady. "And you're doing that thing... where you spiral so hard you forget this is real life. Not every mistake ends in disaster. Sometimes... shit just happens. And it's not the end of the world."

Ginny shifted uncomfortably on the arm of the couch, eyes flicking toward Hermione like she was weighing whether to say it at all. Finally, she let out a long sigh. "You know... Blaise and I? We didn't exactly start off as... this." She gestured vaguely around the flat, at the comfortable mess of it all - something settled, something safe.

Hermione blinked, caught off guard. "What are you saying?"

Ginny snorted softly. "I mean... did you really forget? Seven years ago, he was an arrogant, lazy arse, and I was... well, fresh off that trainwreck with Michael. Convinced I was done with men for good."

Hermione's lips twitched despite herself.

"Right?" Ginny grinned. "Anyway... it started stupid. Drinks. Arguments. Harry dragging us out together. You joined the group, then Theo and Malfoy. And then... one night, I was drunk, he was less of a twat than usual, and we... talked. Really talked. Next thing I knew, we were sneaking around. Telling ourselves it was just fun. Nothing serious."

She shrugged, a small, crooked smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "We were idiots. But it wasn't this big, life-changing thing overnight. It was messy. Stupid. Kinda fun. And terrifying."

Silence stretched between them, thick with the weight of it.

"Why are you telling me this?" Hermione asked, voice quieter now.

Ginny's gaze softened as it landed on her. "Because you're acting like one night defines everything. Like you can't undo it, or fix it, or... talk about it. And maybe... maybe it's just one of those things, Hermione. A moment that happened. You deal with it. You don't burn the whole house down over it."

Hermione bit her lip, staring hard at the floor. "It's not that simple."

"It is," Ginny said gently. "You're just making it hard because it's Malfoy."

"That's the problem. It's Malfoy." Hermione whispered.

"You think Blaise was any better? You think I didn't have a list a mile long of reasons why he was the worst idea I'd ever had?"

Hermione nodded, her mind drifting - remembering Ginny, years ago, eating an entire bowl of ice cream while they watched some awful rom-com, ranting about Blaise.

"We figured it out," Ginny sighed. "My point is... stop acting like you ruined something. You didn't. You just... crossed a line. Now you decide if you stay there or not. Blaise and I? We crossed it. Gave it a try. But you and Malfoy... you could just decide not to. Either way, Hermione - the world's not ending."

Hermione stayed quiet, the words settling heavy in the air.

Ginny watched her carefully. "You're not a machine, Hermione. You're human. You're allowed to want things."

Hermione's throat worked, and after a moment, she gave a slow, brittle nod. "I'm scared if I talk to him... it'll make it worse. We don't exactly have a great track record when it comes

to... conversations."

"Or," Ginny shrugged lightly, "you'll find out he's just as confused as you are."

They sat in silence, the weight of it lingering - until Ginny finally broke it with a twisted grin.

"I just have to ask - was he... good?"

Hermione let out a weak, breathless laugh, burying her face in her hands. "God, Ginny... don't ask me that."

Ginny grinned, leaning forward on the arm of the couch, elbows braced on her knees. "That good, huh?"

"Ginny," Hermione groaned.

"I'm just saying," Ginny teased. "Malfoy actually knew what he was doing? I mean, he's always got that smug, mysterious thing going - but I was curious if there's anything behind the arrogance."

Hermione shot her a dry look. "That's... not the point." She swallowed hard because, honestly, she'd wondered the same thing. Especially when she'd felt him - how big, how thick -

"Isn't it?" Ginny smirked. "You don't regret what happened. You regret that it happened... because it was him."

Hermione sighed, slumping deeper into the chair. "Exactly. It was supposed to be easy. I was supposed to hate him. Now I can't stop..." She trailed off, cheeks burning. "Thinking about it."

Ginny's expression softened. "Yeah. That's how it starts."

Hermione blinked up at her. "What?"

"That... twist in your stomach," Ginny shrugged. "The fact you're thinking about it at all. The way it's eating you alive."

Ginny leaned back, exhaling slowly. "I told you... it wasn't love at first sight with Blaise either. Hell, the first year we were sleeping together, I still thought he was a bloody mistake waiting to happen." She snickered faintly. "He almost was."

Hermione gave a soft laugh at that.

"But we figured it out. Because I stopped running from it and... started talking to him. Actually *talking*." Ginny eyed her carefully. "You should try it. Not the bar talk. Not sniping at each other. Just ask him."

Hermione rubbed her face, sighing in defeat. "I don't even know what I'd say."

“Start with ‘what the fuck was that?’” Ginny deadpanned.

Hermione wrinkled her nose but didn’t argue. She sat there, chewing on the words, weighing if she could actually do it.

Ginny sighed, crossing her arms. “Who knows... maybe this will be good for him too. After everything that happened with Tiffany.”

Hermione paused, completely thrown. “*Tiffany?*”

Ginny’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “Yeah. His ex?”

Hermione blinked, heat creeping up her chest. “Since when does Malfoy have an ex?”

Ginny scoffed lightly. “Oh, right. You spent the past years pretending like he didn’t exist. Why would you know anything about his personal life?”

Hermione opened her mouth... then shut it. Because Ginny wasn’t wrong.

Ginny sighed again, softer this time. “Look, he doesn’t talk about it. Not really. Blaise barely gets shit out of him. But yeah... they were together. On and off. Tiffany’s dad’s a partner at his father’s firm. It was... messy. Ugly, if you ask me.”

Hermione stared down at her hands. “And nobody thought to mention that? Ever?”

Ginny shrugged, her tone sharpening. “Why would we? It’s not like you cared, Hermione. You were too busy hating him, remember?”

That hit harder than she expected. Because it was true.

“He was an arse.” Hermione muttered.

“Still is, most days,” Ginny shot back. “But that doesn’t mean he’s not... I don’t know... more complicated than you thought.”

Hermione swallowed hard. “So... what happened?”

Ginny sighed. “Far as I know? She cheated on him. Some guy from the firm. She’s dating him now, parades him around like a trophy. They run into each other at those company events Malfoy hates going to. Blaise says it irritates the living shit out of him.”

Hermione’s throat felt too dry. “Ginny, when he tried to hook up with me... after Halloween. Was that... after her?”

Ginny shook her head slowly. “No. That was before they made it official. They got together... pretty much right after, I think. Honestly? I figured he was spiraling that night when you told me. Classic Malfoy - burning it all down before he even knows why.”

Hermione’s stomach twisted. “Hm.”

Ginny glanced over, her expression softening. "I think... he cares a lot more than he lets on. They broke up a few months ago. Officially, I mean. But it was messy. Dragged on way too long."

Hermione forced her expression blank. "A few months?"

Ginny nodded. "Yeah. Maybe... three? Four? You were pretty caught up in your own stuff, if I remember right." She gave Hermione a pointed look. "You weren't exactly paying attention."

Hermione bristled but stayed quiet. She had been paying attention - just not the way Ginny meant. To every sharp word. Every cruel glance.

"Does that change anything right now?" Ginny asked quietly.

A sharp breath caught in her chest. "No. It doesn't matter."

Ginny tilted her head, curious. "You know... I've always wondered... who does he talk to when shit gets bad? We have each other. Theo's got Blaise. Harry's got Theo. And Malfoy?" She scoffed lightly. "Blaise barely knows half of it, and I sure as hell don't. I think... sometimes he just keeps it all in. Lets it rot."

Hermione's chest ached as she forced herself to meet Ginny's eyes. "That's... not good."

"No," Ginny agreed quietly. "It's not. He could probably use a girl talk like this. Maybe the boys should stage an intervention."

A heavy silence settled between them, the weight of it making Hermione stare hard at her hands. After a long beat, she whispered, "Maybe... maybe I should try."

Ginny's brows lifted. "Try what?"

"Being his friend?" Hermione shrugged, her voice brittle. "Properly, I mean. If he even wants that. Clearly, I don't know who he is, and he doesn't know much about me. Maybe we just... need a reset. Maybe something good can come out of this mess..."

Ginny let out a breath, her eyes narrowing as she studied Hermione like she was really seeing her for the first time in days.

"You sure that's what you want, though? A reset? Not... something else?"

Hermione's head snapped up, cheeks flushing. "I'm serious, Ginny. I meant it. I don't... I don't want anything else. I just-" She exhaled sharply. "I made a mess of it. And if we keep doing this... weird thing where I avoid him and he ignores me, it's just going to get worse."

Ginny hummed, unconvinced but letting it slide. "Okay. So what? You gonna text him? 'Hey, Malfoy, wanna be mates now?'" She grinned. "Bet he'd love that."

She leaned back, finally dropping onto the couch, her earlier aversion forgotten.

"You know what's funny?"

“What?”

Ginny smirked. “I always figured if you two ever... did anything, it’d be explosive. Screaming. Furniture breaking.” She laughed under her breath. “Not... secret touches under a blanket while Frodo tried to save Middle Earth and Theo was snoring.”

Friday night came faster than she expected.

The new pub - some sleek, too-modern place tucked into a side street had been Malfoy’s suggestion. He’d suggested it in the group chat earlier that week. Blaise had responded with a sarcastic *‘posh bastard’*, Theo and Harry just a thumbs-up, and Ginny with a simple *‘Fine with me.’*

Hermione... she’d *liked* the message.

She’d stared at that screen for way too long before tapping the stupid little heart. It felt like a peace offering. Small. Insignificant. But it was something.

And she was on a mission now. She had many friends – she could add Malfoy to the list if he was willing to try.

The second Hermione stepped into the place; she regretted wearing the black blouse. It clung to her back uncomfortably with sweat, nerves prickling across her skin.

The pub was nicer than their usual dark wood and leather booths, expensive whisky bottles displayed like trophies behind the bar.

The group was already scattered near the back, half-drunk pints on the table, laughter spilling over. She caught Ginny’s eye first; her best friend raising a brow with a knowing smirk.

“Look who finally made it,” Blaise called, tipping his glass toward her. “Thought you’d gone into hiding.”

Not yet, Hermione thought.

Theo grinned lazily. “About time. You owe us a round for skipping Tuesday.”

Hermione forced a smile. “Yeah, yeah.”

She didn’t look at Malfoy because he wasn’t even sitting with the others. He stood by the bar, separate, watching from a distance. She’d spotted him the second she walked in but refused to let him know she’d been looking.

Still... when she *did* finally glance, there he was - lounging against the bar, a half-empty glass in hand, eyes fixed on her like he was already bored.

Like this was a game she was losing before she'd even sat down.

Ginny nudged her with an elbow. "Go get us drinks?" she whispered. "Good chance to... you know."

Hermione shot her a glare. "You're enjoying this."

"Maybe." Ginny's grin was shameless.

Steeling herself, Hermione made her way toward the bar - right past Malfoy, who didn't move. Didn't flinch. Didn't even acknowledge her.

She stood there, pulse hammering as the bartender passed her twice.

"Hey," she started quietly.

Malfoy finally glanced at her.

"Don't." His voice was flat. Dismissive.

Hermione pulled back, thrown. "What?"

He grabbed his drink and turned away; not leaving, just... *stalling*.

"Not in the mood for whatever this is," he muttered.

Hermione's jaw tightened. *Fine*. She didn't expect him to make this easy for her.

"I wasn't-" she started, but Malfoy cut her a sharp glance, his mouth twisting.

"You weren't what? Going to make this weird?" His voice dropped lower, just for her. "Bit late for that, Granger."

She swallowed hard, eyes darting toward their friends. No one was paying attention but Ginny, who kept stealing glances their way.

Malfoy huffed, looking back to his drink. "Anything else?"

"Actually, yeah," she bit out. "If you'd stop cutting me off for half a second, I was going to-"

Malfoy snorted, finally turning toward her. "Oh, *now* you want to talk?" His lips curled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's rich."

"Malfoy," she snapped, cheeks flushing. "You're the one who left Saturday morning without a word. What was I supposed to do? Sit down at dinner and *what* - ask you if *fingering* me was part of the extended cut?"

Malfoy's mouth twitched, cutting off the laugh that almost escaped. "Maybe don't yell *that* across the bar..."

“Maybe don’t *be* like this,” Hermione hissed. “I - damnit - I’m *trying*, okay?”

“For what?” He swirled the last sip of his whiskey lazily. “Another round of Granger’s guilt trip?”

“No,” Hermione bit out. “Now’s the part where I say I’m sick of this back and forth. If you’re gonna be an asshole about it, at least say it to my face.”

Malfoy’s gaze flicked to hers then, assessing. He watched her for a long beat before sighing. “Fuck it. Fine. You want to talk?” He tipped his chin toward the back door. “Go. Now.”

Hermione blinked. “What - outside?”

“Unless you want an audience for this trainwreck, yeah.” Malfoy drained the glass, slammed it down with a dull thud, and stalked off.

Heart hammering, Hermione followed.

The night air hit her hard, cool against overheated skin. Malfoy didn’t wait. He was already leaning against the wall by the dumpster, smirking like it was all a joke.

“Well,” he drawled. “Fitting spot, isn’t it?”

Hermione glared. “Could you - just once - not ruin everything with that mouth?”

“Force of habit.” He shrugged. “So? What’s the speech?”

She exhaled hard, grounding herself. “If you... if you still wanted to apologize for things... I’d listen now. I won’t shut you out again.”

His brows lifted in disbelief. “That’s it? That’s why you dragged me out here?” He huffed a bitter laugh. “Christ, Granger. I don’t owe you anything. Not anymore.”

“You’re right,” she rushed out quietly, steadying the shift. “You don’t. But I’m trying not to run for a change. I shouldn’t have shut you out when you tried to apologize. At Theo’s. Or the café.” Her throat bobbed. “I’m not proud of that. I just... I wasn’t ready to listen then.”

Something flickered across his face. It was barely there. But it was enough. His shoulders sagged, the fight bleeding out of him just a fraction.

“I’m not apologizing just because you want me to,” he muttered, sounding rough.

“I know.” She forced a shaky breath. “I’m not asking you to. I just... wanted you to know that we *can* talk about it. *If you want*. Because if we’re going to survive another night like this, without tearing the group apart, someone has to make a start.”

Malfoy stared at her, long and hard, before nodding once.

They stood in silence, the weight of it pressing down hard. But his silent agreement emboldened her. Maybe this was the shift she'd been hoping for.

She cleared her throat. "You know... we... we could just be *friends*. Start over?"

For a beat, the world went still. Malfoy froze, like he was actually considering what that would look like. Something almost softened in the way his eyes raked over her. And then... he snorted.

"Friends?" he echoed, disbelief cutting through every syllable. His mouth curled into something amused. "That's your big solution?"

Hermione's throat worked. "Yes?"

"No."

The word cut sharp through the air.

Her eyes snapped up, startled. "No?"

He pushed off the wall, closing the space between them until she could see the faintest stubble along his jaw. She tried to ignore the smell of his cologne.

"No, Granger. We can't be friends."

"Why not?" she whispered, genuinely caught off guard.

His gaze dropped, and almost lingered on her mouth before snapping back up. "Because I don't finger my friends under blankets, Granger. And you don't come like that for friends either."

Hermione flinched, face flushing deep red. She mumbled, "You're an asshole."

Malfoy didn't smirk but leaned in just enough for her to feel his breath on her face. "Yeah. But at least I'm honest."

Hermione stared at him, throat tightening, chest burning. "I'm not playing this game with you."

Malfoy arched a brow. "And what game is that? The one where I make you admit you liked it? Or the one where you pretend you didn't?"

Her mouth opened... then slammed shut, her entire body trembling with restraint. She turned, ready to walk away, but his voice stopped her cold.

"Say it, Granger," he called after her, softer now. "Say you didn't think about it. Once. All week."

She froze, staring at the pub's back door like it might swallow her whole.

"That's what I thought," Malfoy finished, voice just loud enough to carry.

With that, she yanked the door open and slipped back inside - face burning, hands shaking - leaving him alone in the alley.

Chapter 7: Storm

Hermione hadn't meant to be this riled up. After tossing and turning all night, replaying every maddening second of that conversation with Malfoy, her brain felt battered, her chest still buzzing with leftover adrenaline. She'd offered him something simple. A chance to start over. *Friendship*. He'd looked at her like she was mad - like the idea was completely absurd.

And the worst part? He'd followed her back inside after like the conversation had never happened. No acknowledgment, no look - he had just slipped back into the group chatting with Harry and Luna.

It was like rewinding months back to when they barely spoke - when avoiding each other had been the unspoken rule.

But things were different now for Hermione. After everything. After that night in her flat, the fight, the strange almost-peace they'd circled around. Something had shifted between them - she'd felt it. She refused to believe she'd imagined it.

By the time she'd even thought about pulling Ginny aside to talk about her failed attempt to reconcile, Theo had made it his mission to talk her ear off. She kept herself in check, answering his questions about her week without so much as a hint of the disaster she'd just endured. It was embarrassing enough as it was, and she didn't want anyone else to know how her peace offering had been dismissed like it was nothing. He still hadn't cracked a single joke about her laying in Malfoy's arms - and that silence said more than a punchline ever could. Even he didn't think that it had changed their lingering feud.

She'd left early. Mumbled her goodbyes, caught Malfoy's gaze just once before slipping out into the night.

Now she was pacing Ginny's living room like a woman possessed, words tumbling out with no brakes.

"I mean - who does he think he is?!" she snapped, spinning to face her. "Why wouldn't we be able to be friends?!"

Ginny sat curled up in the corner of her own couch, blanket pulled up to her chin, wide-eyed. "Hermione... maybe you should just... let him cool off?"

"No," Hermione snapped. "I was actually trying this time. I offered him a *reset*! A clean slate. And he looked at me like I was *delusional*." Her jaw clenched so tight it ached. "He said *no*. Just... 'No, Granger.' " Her imitation of his voice made Ginny snort. "Like it was *that* simple."

Ginny sighed, looking at her with pity. "Maybe... maybe it *is* that simple for him."

Hermione stared, the words hitting her like a slap. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

“I’m just saying... you proposed to *not* cross that line again. If he says he can’t be friends with you, maybe... he really can’t. Not yet at least.”

“He hasn’t even *tried*,” Hermione ground out, pacing again. “I’m a *great friend*.”

“*You are*.” Ginny smiled carefully, nodding along.

Hermione dropped next to her, breathing hard. “*Thank you!*”

They sat there in silence for a beat, Ginny watching her cautiously from the side. Then, slowly, she offered, “So... what’s the grand plan? You gonna just... force him to hang out with you until he has no other choice but to be your friend?”

Hermione’s mouth twitched. “Maybe that’s not the worst idea. I mean, of course I know we won’t be the best of friends, but I can’t accept that he doesn’t even think it’s worth a try...”

Ginny laughed, despite herself. “I can’t believe I’m friends with the two most stubborn people on earth.”

Monday AM

She stared at the gleaming glass doors of *Malfoy & Greystone LLP*, the law firm she now *officially* despised. Mostly because she was about to walk in like some lunatic with a sugary vanilla latte peace offering she hadn’t been asked for.

It hadn’t sounded this idiotic in her head Sunday night - even with Ginny warning her that Malfoy probably just needed space.

The plan was simple enough. The law firm was just down the street from her own office. Barely a detour. She’d drop off a coffee for him with a witty note, another charming peace offering for him to reconsider. She’d do this until he’d talk to her. One normal conversation was all she was looking for. She couldn’t force him to change his mind, but she wouldn’t accept his no without a fight.

The receptionist looked up immediately when she entered the big building; a pretty woman, mid-thirties, blonde ponytail sharp as the blazer she wore. She had the polite but slightly bored expression of someone paid very well to handle nonsense like this.

“Um... hi.” Hermione cleared her throat, holding up the coffee. A pink *Post-it* stuck to the side.

Friendships start with caffeine. Don't choke on it.
-HG-

“How can I help you?” The receptionist arched a brow.

“I - this is for *Mr. Malfoy*. I'm just dropping it off.”

“Which Mr. Malfoy?”

Hermione blinked. Right. “Um... Draco Malfoy?”

“And you are?”

“Oh. Hermione.” She winced at how breathless she sounded. “We're... *friends*.” *Saying it out loud felt like a victory because he wasn't here to deny it.*

The receptionist hummed, unimpressed, but took the cup. “I'll make sure he gets it.”

Hermione nodded, a stubborn smile tugging at her lips. She was being the *bigger* person.

Tuesday AM

Hermione had convinced herself that - after yesterday - she'd get *some* kind of acknowledgment from him. *Maybe a text*. Instead, there'd been radio silence.

Which was why, against her better judgment, she found herself standing in front of the same glossy reception desk, vanilla latte in hand, heels punishing her for making the detour the second day in a row.

She should've just let it go; but she couldn't. Stopping now would feel like letting him win. That they couldn't be friends. She refused to believe that.

The same receptionist from the previous day watched her carefully.

“Morning,” Hermione offered, trying for breezy and landing somewhere around awkward.

The woman's gaze flicked to the coffee cup. “For Mr. Malfoy again?”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Yep.”

She didn't move to take the coffee immediately. Instead, she braced slightly on the desk, assessing Hermione slowly. "Can I ask... *why*?"

Hermione held onto the coffee, startled. "What?"

"Why're you bringing coffee for him?" Her tone was polite, but the curiosity was loud. "He didn't seem *too* excited when I dropped it off yesterday."

Hermione bristled. "He secretly enjoys it."

"Uh huh." Her lips twitched. "Sorry. We just... had a woman last year claiming to be his dad's mistress. Had to call security. Twice."

"Oh." Hermione's eyes went wide, color draining from her face quickly. "I'm not - It's not like *that*. I'm not here to cause any trouble."

The receptionist let her squirm another second before relenting with a soft laugh. "Didn't think you were." The woman leaned on the desk; her sharp eyes still amused "It's just... You don't really strike me as *his* type."

Hermione huffed, loosening her grip on the cup. "His *type*?"

The woman shrugged with an easy grin. "You know. The ones who usually come sniffing around. Blonde hair, tall, daddy's credit card..." She glanced Hermione up and down - not unkindly - taking in her favorite pair of black heels and the loose bun Hermione had thrown her hair into. "You're... *different*."

"I'll take that as a compliment?" Hermione offered, not sure if it really was. She'd seen a few girls that Malfoy had flirted with at bars over the years. They truly were the opposite of her.

"*Please do*." She smiled then, more genuine. "Look, I'm just the gatekeeper. You drop it off, I deliver. But..." she tapped the counter lightly. "You keep showing up like this, I'm gonna need your name again."

Hermione blinked. "Right. Sorry. Hermione. Hermione Granger."

There was a pause - amusement flickering, though the woman didn't comment. She stuck out her hand instead. "Liv."

Hermione shook it, a little surprised at the warmth.

Liv's lips curled. "Alright, Hermione Granger. I'll get this to him. Again. But fair warning... He's a prick before noon."

Hermione smirked. "And after."

Liv laughed, actually laughed, and took the cup. "No note today?"

Hermione hesitated, then pulled a small folded Post-It from her coat pocket. She'd rewritten it three times on the walk over. "Here."

“Because apparently one coffee wasn’t enough to fix your personality.”

-HG-

Liv snorted, grinning wide as she read it. She glanced up, eyes gleaming with new appreciation. “You know... I kinda hope he reads this while on a call.”

Hermione couldn’t help the small, almost guilty smile tugging at her lips. “If it spills on his suit, that’s just a bonus.”

Liv chuckled, tucking the note against the cup. “So... is this gonna be a daily thing now?”

“I hope not,” Hermione admitted, cheeks flushing again. “I’m sort of winging it.”

Liv leaned in, elbows on the counter. “Well... for what it’s worth, it’s the most entertaining part of my week so far.”

Hermione huffed a laugh, relaxing a little. “Sorry if this is weird.”

“Honestly? It’s weird in the *best* way.” Liv winked. “*Others* show up trying to flirt their way past reception. You’re just... weaponizing caffeine and sarcasm. I can respect that.”

Hermione sniffed. “Well, it’s all I’ve got.”

As Hermione turned and walked off, she could feel Liv’s gaze burning between her shoulder blades the entire way out.

Wednesday AM

Liv was already leaning on the reception desk when Hermione pushed through the glass doors - vanilla latte in one hand, a second cup cradled in the other.

“Hi Hermione,” Liv called, grinning like she’d been waiting for this.

Hermione sighed, adjusting her grip. “I didn’t know what you like so I went for a Flat White with no sugar.”

Liv blinked in surprise but took the cup with a genuine smile. Then she took a careful sip and hummed in appreciation. “You’re growing on me.”

Hermione glanced toward the hallway leading back to the offices. “Is... um... he in?”

“Oh, he’s in.” Liv smirked, then sobered slightly, eyeing Hermione. “I have to ask again... *why are you doing this?*”

Hermione blinked, caught off guard. “The coffee?”

Liv nodded, resting her cheek on her palm. “It’s like watching you walk to your own execution. Did you key his car or lose a bet?”

“I’m trying to prove a point.” She hesitated. “It’s not working so far.”

Liv studied her for a moment, something softening in her expression. “You know... for what it’s worth - *he reads them.*”

Hermione paused. “The notes? He does?” She shouldn’t have sounded so hopeful. She would read them too before tearing them up and throwing the coffee away.

“Yep,” Liv clarified, gesturing lazily at the cup. “Every single one. Doesn’t even take a sip ‘til he’s read it.”

Her eyebrows raised. “He drinks the coffee?”

Liv leaned in slightly, her smirk returning like a shared secret. “Pretends he doesn’t care. Acts like it’s a hassle. But trust me... I’ve seen it. He reads - then he drinks.”

Hermione stared down at the cup in Liv’s hand, heart doing something stupid. “Good to know. Thank you for telling me.”

“So?” Liv prompted. “What’s it say today?”

Hermione sighed and passed over the sticky note she’d been crumpling in her fist.

‘You can stop the coffee deliveries whenever you want. All it takes is one conversation.’
-HG-

Because in all her spiraling, she’d thought he needed a better hint.

Liv didn’t laugh out loud; the smile tugging at her lips was one of pity. She tucked the note carefully against the cup, then added with a wink, “I’ll make sure he gets it right away.”

Hermione managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Liv.”

“Anytime.” Liv saluted her with the Flat White. “See you tomorrow?”

Hermione groaned but nodded. “Probably.”

Thursday AM

She didn’t expect Liv to greet her this time, and she didn’t. The receptionist glanced up, gave a faint, almost sympathetic smile, and reached out for the cup like this had become routine.

Hermione set the vanilla latte down wordlessly, sliding the folded note across the polished counter.

For a second, Liv didn't move. She just stared at Hermione, something unreadable flickering in her eyes.

Then, so quietly it caught Hermione off guard - Liv said, "You know... he's not *just* reading them anymore." Liv bit her lower lip, fully invested. "Yesterday... I saw him. The note? He pinned it to his laptop." She paused, then added, "Sat there drinking the coffee, just... *staring* at it."

Hermione blinked, mouth parting slightly, throat suddenly dry. "Oh."

"Thought you'd want to know."

Hermione swallowed hard, glancing down at today's cup. She hadn't even wanted to write the note this morning, but her stupid pride wouldn't let her stop.

"I'm starting to think I'm just fueling your caffeine addiction at this point. But hey - here's another one. Since talking seems impossible."

-HG-

Liv read it, lips twitching. "Should I tell him to... maybe send a thank you one of these days?"

Hermione gave a weak laugh. "He won't."

Liv nodded, slipping the note against the cup.

Friday AM

Today's note had been a difficult one for her to write. It already stuck to the cup as she just stood outside *Malfoy & Greystone LLP* for a full five minutes, debating if this was officially the most humiliating thing she'd ever done.

If Hermione had known what awaited her behind the glass doors, she'd never walked through them.

Because the second Hermione stepped into the lobby, something felt off. Liv wasn't at her usual perch behind the desk. The reception area was quiet, deserted. The hush of Friday

morning pressing too tight.

She stood there for a beat, debating whether to leave the coffee or drink it herself - when a voice behind her made her flinch.

“Liv’s off on Fridays.”

Hermione turned, heart thudding.

Malfoy was there. In the middle of the lobby. No suit jacket, just shirt sleeves rolled up, tie loose. He looked like he hadn’t slept. And not in a charming way - more like he’d worked all night and was on his way home rather than starting the day.

Her hand tightened around the cup, feeling caught doing something forbidden.

He didn’t look pleased to see her.

“You need to stop this,” he said flatly. “Seriously. You keep showing up like this, it starts looking weird. I could file a restraining order, you know.”

The silence between them cracked.

Hermione swallowed, pulse skittering. Instead of responding to the jab, she lifted her chin.

“Does that mean you’re finally ready to talk to me?”

He met her eyes. “Every time things got real, you bolted. So don’t stand there acting like I’m the one avoiding a conversation.”

A beat passed, just long enough for it to sting, before he continued “Whatever point you’re trying to prove...” he nodded toward the cup in her hand, “give it up. I don’t need your coffee, and I sure as hell don’t need you showing up like this.”

Her heart pounded so loudly she could barely hear herself breathe.

“You want me to accept that you’re a lost cause? Fine, consider it done.” She said, her voice cracking around the edges. “You don’t even know how to accept kindness without twisting it into something ugly.”

He looked like he wanted to say something - but she shook her head before he could.

“It’s alright. At least I can say I’ve tried.”

She thrust the untouched coffee onto the counter.

“Enjoy the caffeine,” she muttered whilst turning, leaving him behind without looking back.

She didn’t want to see the triumphant smirk on his face once he would read her final note to him.

“Consider this closure. You win.”

-HG-

Hermione sat at the conference table later that day, blinking at the projection screen like it might suddenly catch fire and free her from the last meeting .

The new website launch for one of their clients had been dragging for weeks, and now, in what was supposed to be the *‘final stretch’*, they were arguing about fonts. *Fonts*.

“...I just think the button should pop more,” Miguel was saying. “We’re missing visual urgency on the homepage.”

Hermione nodded absently, jotting down something meaningless in her notebook. The truth was, she wasn’t really here. Not mentally. Her body was upright, her pen moving, her head tilting at the right times, but her brain felt like it had been scraped hollow that morning in Malfoy’s lobby.

Her phone buzzed on the table again.

And again.

And again.

She resisted the urge to flip it over.

It had started maybe ten minutes ago - Ginny, Luna, Harry, and Theo blowing up the group chat like they were fifteen again. Hermione caught glimpses every time the preview flashed across her screen.

Ginny

Dinner tonight? Before the city floods and we’re all stuck indoors until Sunday?

Harry

I heard buses are already rerouting in East London. It’s gonna be a nightmare later.

Theo

I’m down.

Luna

I saw a bird build a nest on a car tire this morning. That can’t be good.

Hermione exhaled slowly, eyes flicking to the upper corner of the room where rain lashed quietly against the windows. Everyone had been talking about this damn storm all week -

train disruptions, flooding risks, wind warnings. It was all over the news.

Storm of the year. Maybe the decade. The kind of thing that made Londoners brace like the apocalypse was coming, despite owning seventeen different umbrellas they never remembered to carry.

Her phone buzzed again.

Ginny

Hermione? Malfoy? You guys in?

She tapped out a quick reply beneath the table, fingers tight:

Hermione

Fine. Dinner. But early, I have to be up early tomorrow.

There was still that ugly twist in her gut when she saw his name in the chat list, inactive and silent. *DM.*

Her thumb hovered over her phone screen, then retreating. If he showed up tonight, fine. If he didn't... *fine.*

Either way, she wasn't going to care.

At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

The restaurant was warmer than expected - full of the buzzing energy of end-of-week exhaustion - and already nearly full when Hermione arrived, despite the weather. The worst of the storm wasn't supposed to hit until after midnight, but it already felt apocalyptic outside.

She'd left the office with time to spare, but the rain had already started - sheets of it smearing across taxi windows, swallowing the streets whole.

The kind of storm that felt personal, like it existed just to soak you through and spit you out.

The kind people were meant to stay inside for.

She stepped into the private back corner, where Ginny had somehow snagged a table, her hair still damp from the short run between the tube station and the restaurant.

"Oh good, you're alive," Blaise called from one end of the table, raising his glass.

Hermione offered a tight smile, already dreading the inevitable as she scanned the seating arrangement - and sure enough, the only open seat was across from Malfoy.

Someone had decided to come after all. *Wonderful.*

He didn't say anything. Just looked up as she hesitated, unimpressed.

Theo, seated to her right, gave a little scoot and grinned up at her. "I don't bite. Unless you ask nicely."

Hermione rolled her eyes and sat down. Her heart was still hammering somewhere too close to her ribs, but she kept her face neutral as she draped her napkin over her lap and reached for the wine already poured into her glass.

Across the table, Malfoy was staring.

Not obviously. Not in a way anyone else would've noticed. But *she* felt it. The occasional flick of his gaze. The stillness. Like he was waiting for her to say something to him.

Instead, she turned to Theo and asked him about the new bookshop he'd mentioned in the chat earlier in the week. His face lit up.

"Oh - right! Yes, it's this little place in Hampstead. Total fire hazard. Books stacked to the ceiling, no system, smells like tea and mildew - absolutely perfect. I'll have to take you there one day."

Hermione laughed, and for a second it felt normal. Easy. Theo leaned in and kept the conversation going. She felt herself relax a little more with each sip of wine.

Ginny cleared her throat loudly and lifted her glass. "Alright, listen up, because I actually have news."

That got everyone's attention.

Ginny grinned. "Bill's wedding's coming up. And yes, I know you all forgot the date again, but that's not even the fun part."

"Oh no," Blaise muttered.

"The fun part," Ginny said, eyes gleaming, "is Fleur's bachelorette party. I've got it all planned."

Luna perked up. "Ooh, are there flower crowns involved?"

"Of course. And cocktails. And we're doing a weekend in Brighton, I just booked the cottage today. Hermione. Luna. You're coming."

Hermione smiled, her shoulders lifting slightly. "Sounds amazing."

“Will there be pillow fights in underwear?” Theo asked before sipping his wine. “May I come?”

Ginny ignored him.

While everyone chuckled and threw out ridiculous suggestions for the weekend, Hermione reached for her wine again.

That’s when she noticed it.

Everyone had wine.

Everyone... *except*... Malfoy’s glass held only water. Untouched.

He hadn’t said a word all evening, just sat there with that same tight expression, occasionally glancing at her like he wanted to say something.

Not that she cared.

She didn’t.

She turned back to Theo and asked him what he thought of the latest season of ‘*Black Mirror*’ everyone was raving about. He leaned in, animated again, and she nodded along, smiling when she could, pretending the storm outside wasn’t half as loud as the one still rolling through her chest.

And across from her, Malfoy kept watching.

Theo was still talking beside her... something about the chaos of an independent bookshop in Camden and how the owner used receipts as bookmarks. Hermione wasn’t really listening anymore.

Her eyes drifted. Again.

Malfoy sat stiffly, water glass untouched, fork pushed to the edge of his plate like he’d forgotten how meals worked. His jaw looked tight enough to crack, his stare fixed somewhere just over Blaise’s shoulder, and he hadn’t spoken a word since she sat down.

His silence was deafening. She could feel it through the table. The way he was very deliberately *not* looking at her now.

It was Harry, seated beside him, who finally broke the tension - not loudly, just low enough that only she and Malfoy would catch it. He leaned back in his chair, resting his arm along the back.

“You’ve been brooding since we got here,” Harry said quietly. “You alright?”

Malfoy didn’t move at first. Then he gave a little shrug, eyes snapping to his plate, picking up his fork.

“Just a long week,” he said clipped. “Dealing with something... unnecessarily complicated. Pain in the arse, honestly.”

Hermione’s eyes dropped to her own plate - but her ears burned.

Her stomach tightened.

“What kind of case is it?” Harry asked.

Malfoy took his time, as if choosing his words carefully.

And Hermione couldn’t help but let her eyes find him one more time. He took a slow sip of his water, his gaze flicking up to meet hers briefly before focusing on Harry.

“Hard to explain,” he said. “It shouldn’t be this difficult. But every time I think I’ve sorted it... it gets messy again.”

Hermione blinked slowly. Tried to breathe around the hot coil twisting in her chest. She could feel the words slotting together beneath his voice. Not about a client. Not about a case. About *her*.

She forced herself to nod at whatever Theo had just said and gave a polite little laugh she didn’t mean.

“...just grabbed it off the highest stack and nearly brought the whole thing down...books flying everywhere, cat howling like I’d murdered someone. I left with three paperbacks and a bruised ego.” Theo laughed at himself and Hermione smiled.

Her wine glass sat untouched now, condensation slowly trailing down its sides, the warmth in her cheeks no longer from the wine.

Theo asked if she’d ever been to that part of town.

“Once,” she said, voice thinner than she meant it to be. “Years ago.”

She hated that she noticed that Malfoy’s tie was still loose like he hadn’t bothered to put himself together properly all day.

It wasn’t just frustration. She was hurting. *Sadness* wasn’t something she was used to when it came to Malfoy. *Irritation*, sure. *Fury*? Constant. *Confusion*, of course.

But this? This quiet ache spreading in her chest was new. She’d given up. That’s what he wanted. She’d left the coffee. The note. She’d walked out without looking back.

So why was he brooding like *he* was the one who’d been shut down?

Her fingers curled around her napkin, twisting it beneath the table.

She thought about what she’d said that morning in the lobby - *that he was a lost cause*.

Had she crossed a line? *No.*

He had wrecked that.

She set her napkin down and excused herself, brushing a hand along Theo's shoulder with a soft "I'll be right back" before slipping out of the room.

The corridor was dimmer, quieter. She passed the bar, the storm outside rumbling, like a monster asleep under the city. The restroom was empty, lit in a harsh fluorescent wash that flickered once as thunder cracked close by.

Hermione braced her hands on the sink, watching a droplet of water slide down the mirror. Her reflection looked tired. Like a favorite jumper slowly unraveling at the seams.

She heard the door open behind her and met Ginny's nosy eyes through the mirror.

"No progress in mission *Befriend a Malfoy*?" she asked less teasing than usual, but not pitying either.

Hermione exhaled, straightening, then turned to face her.

"He told me to leave him alone."

Ginny studied her before she sighed and stepped closer.

"For what it's worth, Blaise said he's been off all week. That he's not sleeping. Snapped at him twice. Tried to ditch dinner at first."

That... didn't make sense. He was the one who told her to stop. Shut her down without so much as a pause. *This wasn't about her.*

The overhead light buzzed and flickered once more, casting sharp shadows across the tile.

Ginny leaned beside her against the sink. "You really thought he'd give in that easily?"

Hermione didn't answer.

Because maybe - yes. Maybe some part of her had hoped he'd meet her halfway. That he'd see her standing there, offering him a way out of whatever awful, messy silence sat between them, and he'd just take it.

But he hadn't. He'd stood there in that lobby, cold as ever, talking about restraining orders.

"I don't know what I expected," Hermione murmured, thinner now. "But it wasn't this."

The storm outside howled against the window, glass purring in its frame.

Back at the table, dessert had come and gone. Conversation had thinned, wine glasses emptied, and the storm outside had grown teeth.

Ginny checked her phone and grimaced. “Alright, we’re heading out. Cab’s here and Mum’s enlisted us to help prep for some massive dinner tomorrow.”

“She says ‘us’ but it’s actually me,” Blaise muttered, rising from his seat. “Apparently my ability to chop onions makes me the family MVP.”

“She doesn’t trust her own children with a knife,” Ginny whispered.

Harry shrugged on his coat and Luna wrapped her scarf around her neck. “The rain sounds so dramatic tonight,” she mused. “Like it’s rehearsing something.”

Hermione gave a soft smile.

Ginny leaned in to squeeze her shoulder when saying goodbye.

“Text me when you get home.”

The four of them left in a flurry of goodbyes and damp jackets, tumbling into a shared cab as wind howled against the windows, and the restaurant suddenly felt *too* quiet in their absence.

It left only three of them at the table.

Theo pushed his empty wine glass aside and glanced at the downpour beyond the window.

“Want to grab a nightcap? There’s a place just across the street. Good scotch. Cozy booths.”

Hermione hesitated. Malfoy still sat soaked in silence.

She gave a small nod. “Alright. One drink. But we should be heading out soon, the weather is getting worse.”

Theo nodded, sitting up straight as he watched Malfoy for a long second. “What about you?”

The thunder outside rolled muted, like it was waiting for his answer too.

“Sure,” he said finally, voice clipped. “Why not.”

He pushed back his chair with a quiet scrape that felt louder than it should’ve, then stood - still without meeting Hermione’s eyes.

She rose a second later, tugging her sleeves down, unsettled by the weight in the silence between them.

Theo grinned like he hadn’t noticed a thing. “Great. You’ll both like this place. Feels like something out of a noir film. Questionable clientele, strong pours.”

They stepped outside together; the cold rain instantly slapped her cheeks pink. Malfoy flipped his collar up without a word and started across the street, his strides brisk, hands shoved in his coat pockets.

They bundled up and dashed through the sheets of rain, Hermione's coat barely shielding her, Theo laughed too happily as his shoes splashed straight through a puddle.

By the time they reached the pub, it was clear they were too late. People were spilling out onto the sidewalk, some half-laughing, others arguing with staff, umbrellas flipping inside out under the force of the wind.

A bouncer waved them off. "Sorry, mates. Flood warning. Streets are backing up. We're closing."

Inside, patrons were downing the last of their pints, shrugging on coats. A group near the door was hunched over their phones, swearing under their breath at the unavailability of cabs.

"Tubes are closed, mate! Where do you want us to go?" A man near the bar was red-faced, gesturing wildly at the bouncer.

"You want us to swim home?"

The waiter sighed. "Not my call, sir. We've got a basement that floods if the drains back up. Council's warning everyone to shut early. I'm just doing my job."

Malfoy stepped aside as a couple shoved past, laughing breathlessly as their umbrella snapped backward in the wind, almost hitting him in the face.

Hermione pulled her coat tighter, hair whipping across her cheeks, and exchanged a look with Theo.

"Well," he said with a grin, squinting up at the rain cascading from the pub's awning, "this turned into a disaster."

Hermione huffed, wiping water from her lashes as her phone screen stubbornly refused to load the ride app. "Not a single bloody car in service."

Theo shook out his coat. "We could go to mine. I've got whisky. You two can crash if the storm doesn't let up."

Before she could answer, Malfoy spoke. "I'm driving. I'll take Granger home."

Startled, Hermione turned to him.

"You're driving?" she repeated, blinking up at him.

He nodded once.

“Parked a few blocks down. Top level of the garage - less chance of getting trapped if the streets flood.”

And just like that, it clicked on why he hadn't touched the wine tonight.

Her mouth opened to protest... to say it was fine, she could wait out the storm, call someone, figure something out, take the tube when the lines reopened. But then he looked at her.

And whatever she'd been about to say vanished. This wasn't up for discussion.

“Thank you.” A small flicker of hope sparked somewhere in her chest. Maybe... maybe he *had* come around.

Maybe her words that morning hadn't just been tossed into a void. Maybe they had landed somewhere, cracked something open. Because even if he hadn't said anything. He was here, and he was making sure she didn't get stranded.

Theo wrapped Hermione in a hug, tighter than usual. His arms lingered, warm and solid, the kind of hug that felt like a hold.

“You sure you're good?” he murmured near her ear.

Hermione nodded against his shoulder. “Yeah. I'm good.”

He pulled back slowly, then gave her a look that almost bordered on something unspoken - before jogging off into the storm, disappearing into the night like the others before him.

And just like that, she was left standing in the rain, soaked to the bone beside Malfoy who seemed unbothered by the weather.

They stood close, side by side, watching the rain fall in relentless sheets across the street - as if staring long enough might will it into letting up.

Hermione shivered, arms folded tight, coat clinging damply to her frame. The wind tugged at her scarf, and her boots were beginning to leak.

Malfoy didn't move. Didn't say a word. Just... waited, like he had nowhere else to be.

“Which garage?” she asked finally, voice barely above the wind.

“North entrance. Five-minute walk if we don't die first.”

She gave a small, almost unwilling laugh. “Comforting.”

He glanced sideways at her, then started walking. Hermione tried catching up beside him. Water splashed with every stride, cold and seeping into her socks.

A beat passed before he spoke again.

“You didn’t have to come tonight.”

She looked at him sharply. “Neither did you.”

He didn’t respond, not right away. But his jaw shifted, like he was grinding back a thought.

“Yeah,” he said finally. “I did.”

He didn’t say why. Didn’t elaborate. Just let it hang there between them, swallowed by the storm. And Hermione didn’t think he’d explain himself even if she begged.

By the time they reached the parking garage, Hermione was half-convinced her coat weighed more than she did. The stairwell door slammed behind them with a metallic echo, muting the howl of the wind outside. Rain still streamed from their clothes, pooling in little rivers across the concrete floor.

They stood in silence in front of the elevator, both catching their breath.

Hermione leaned back against the cold wall, chest rising and falling, damp curls stuck to her cheeks. Malfoy stood beside her, one hand braced on his hip, the other slicking his wet hair back from his face.

The elevator didn’t come.

He glanced at her sideways.

“You look *tragic*.”

She huffed. “Thanks.”

“Is that suede?” he nodded at her boots. “Bold choice for a flood.”

“I didn’t exactly think I’d be wading through the end times when I left the office.”

He made a low noise in his throat, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. Then, after a moment, he looked down at himself.

“I look like hell too.”

She looked at him and meant to say something sarcastic, but instead blurted out:

“*You don’t.*”

It came out too fast. Too honest.

He turned his head slightly, brows raised.

Hermione froze, color rushing to her cheeks. “I mean-” she scrambled, “you look like a wet finance ad.”

He shook his head. “*A wet finance ad?*”

She covered her face with one hand. “Don’t make me unpack that.”

The elevator dinged. Blessedly.

Malfoy stepped inside without a word, but she caught the way his mouth twitched.

“A wet finance ad,” he repeated under his breath as the doors slid shut behind them.

Hermione stood stiffly in her corner, arms crossed, acutely aware of the water dripping from her coat, the way her hair clung to her neck.

When the doors slid open with a dull ding, he walked ahead without waiting, shoes echoing sharply across the concrete.

The car was parked alone under a flickering light - of course it was sleek, of course it was black, and of course it looked like it hadn’t seen a single fingerprint since the day it was purchased.

“Take off your coat before you get in,” he said, unlocking the doors with a beep. “You’ll ruin my car.”

Hermione shot him a glare. “Seriously?”

He was already shrugging out of his own, rainwater dripping from the sleeves. “I’m not having it smell like damp wool for the next month.”

She muttered something under her breath but obeyed, peeling the soaked fabric from her shoulders just as he tossed his into the boot with a wet slap.

Without another word he opened the passenger door. With a lazy flick, he loosened his tie further, the knot slipping undone beneath his fingers. Then, with no ceremony at all, he tugged it off and tossed it into the backseat. The movement was practiced. Like it wasn’t the first time he’d peeled himself apart like this after a long day.

Hermione stared at him for a beat too long.

“I can open my own door,” she muttered, brushing past him as she slid in.

“Suit yourself,” he said dryly, slamming the door a bit harder than necessary as he shut it close behind her.

He got in on the driver’s side, movements clipped.

The car was warm, annoyingly warm, the heat already blasting against her damp skin. The silence sat between them like a third person, *elbows out, taking up all the space.*

“You can just drop me near Finchley,” she said, pulling her seatbelt across her chest.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

She turned sharply. "I'm not asking for a favor, Malfoy. I'm giving you a shortcut."

"It's a storm, not a cab shortage. I'm not leaving you on some dark corner like we're in a crime documentary."

He shifted into reverse, one hand on the wheel, the other resting along the back of her seat. It was unfair how handsome the gesture was.

The car pulled out of the garage, the storm greeting them with a fresh blast against the windshield.

"If something happened to you, I'd be the prime suspect."

She folded her arms. "You're so dramatic."

"Says the woman who left five coffees on my desk because she didn't get what she wanted."

Hermione flushed. "I was trying to show you that I've meant what I said."

"You were trying to make yourself feel better."

That landed harder than she expected.

"And what were you doing tonight?" she muttered. "Keeping score?"

He exhaled through his nose, knuckles white against the steering wheel.

"I stayed because I knew you'd walk into a storm without a plan. And now I'm driving you home because, apparently, I'm the only one who gives a shit when you do that."

The quiet pressed in on all sides. Rain hammered the roof. The wipers swept back and forth. Hermione sat very still, the words hitting her like a blow made of warmth.

She blinked, once, then again, like she wasn't sure she'd heard him right. Her throat closed around every word she thought she had, leaving only the sound of her breath catching slightly in her chest.

She turned toward the window instead, blinking hard as the headlights ahead blurred into streaks of red and gold against the storm. And beside her, Malfoy said nothing more.

Once they hit the main street, it became clear that this wasn't going to be a simple drive home.

Flooded intersections. Flashing hazard signs. Streets closed off with makeshift barriers and cones. The storm had turned the city into a maze.

Malfoy muttered something under his breath and took a right. Then another detour. Then another.

The traffic slowed to a crawl.

Red taillights glowed through the misted windows like distant embers. The windshield wipers moved steadily, rhythmically, the only sound for long stretches at a time.

Hermione leaned her head back against the seat.

The cabin was warm, now humid from their soaked clothes, the windows just beginning to fog at the edges. It smelled like rain and leather, and his aftershave.

"You can turn on music, if you want," Malfoy said after a while.

She ignored him or the sigh that followed. Instead, she glanced at the window, at the motionless line of red brake lights ahead of them. The hum of the heater, the low tick of the hazard lights - it should've felt suffocating.

But it didn't. It was almost disarmingly calm.

They were two people soaked to the skin, stuck in a car in a storm, not saying a word. And for them? It was the most harmonious thing they'd done in weeks.

Maybe silence had always been their safest language. No barbs. No tension. No trying to read between the lines. Just... existing. Side by side.

"Your phone's buzzing," Malfoy's voice cut through the quiet.

Hermione fished it out of her soaked purse, heart skipping a beat when she saw the name.

She checked the time - 9:00 PM - and managed a faint smile. Her mother wanted to check in on her during the storm.

She answered. "Hi, Mum, I'm fine-"

"Hermione."

The way her mother said her name made her stomach drop. Her voice was tight.

"Mum? What's wrong?"

"It's your father," she said quickly, voice breathless. *"The hospital just called me."*

Hermione's heart dropped in a way she never experienced before. So fast, so painful, she wanted to stop breathing all at once. "What - what do you mean?!"

"There was an accident," her mum rushed on. *"They said a car lost control on the bridge - someone swerved into his lane. He hit the barrier. They don't know how bad it is yet."*

"Wait- what? Is he-"

"I don't know, love," her mother said, too quickly. *"The storm's made everything a mess, and the A&E is overloaded. I tried asking for more details, but they couldn't tell me anything."*

Hermione's heart pounded like it was trying to break out of her chest. "Which hospital?"

“Luton A&E. I’m already on my way. I’ll call you again as soon as I know more.”

“I- I’m coming right now,” Hermione said, fumbling to sit up straighter. “I’ll be there as soon as I can-”

“No.” Her mum’s voice cut across hers, firm this time. *“Hermione, don’t. Please. The roads are a nightmare. It’s too dangerous out there.”*

“I don’t care,” she choked out. “Mum, I have to-”

“I’ll call you the second I know anything, alright?” Her mother’s voice cracked. *“Just please, don’t do something reckless. I need to know you’re safe too.”*

Hermione blinked fast, but the tears came anyway - hot and sharp, despite the cold. She realized she had no way of getting all the way out to her hometown tonight. Not in this storm.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Okay. Just... call me.”

“I will. I promise.”

The line went dead.

Hermione sat frozen; her phone still clutched to her chest like it was the only thing tethering her to the earth. Her mind couldn’t grasp how the world was still turning when hers had just stopped. Her breath hitched once and then the panic came rushing in, hot and dizzying, curling around her ribs like it belonged there.

It was a specific kind of fear. Bone-deep. It didn’t just sit in her chest, but carved itself into every fiber, like it was trying to take up permanent residence.

The thought of losing her father, of not being able to say goodbye, of not hearing his voice again, of his last memory of her... it split something open inside her.

Her father drove her back, and the entire ride was filled with comfortable silence. Old music played low on the radio, the soft hum of Fleetwood Mac or maybe Elton John threading through the air like background warmth.

Her parents had never asked why she’d shown up out of nowhere and stayed for weeks. Her father just glanced at her once at a stoplight and said, “He wasn’t worth your heart, was he?”

Hermione blinked, caught off guard. “There’s no he.”

“Mm.”

As they pulled up to her flat, he tapped the steering wheel and smiled faintly.

“Be careful with those slick London boys. You know the ones. Think they’re clever ‘cause they wear cufflinks and don’t say what they mean.”

She rolled her eyes and opened the door.

“I’ll pick someone boring and safe. You’ll love him.”

He laughed. “I doubt that.”

Her grin was tired. “I doubt it too.”

That was it.

The last thing she ever said to him. A stupid joke instead of goodbye.

She turned to Malfoy, eyes wide but unfocused, breath shallow. Her heart was crashing against her ribs like it was trying to claw its way out.

He was already watching her with his brow drawn tight. Solid in all the places she felt like she was coming apart.

“What is it?” he asked.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Just a sharp exhale. Her fingers clenched around her phone like it might anchor her to the moment.

Malfoy didn’t move. He just watched her, waiting for her to say something.

Finally, her voice broke through, barely above a whisper.

“It’s my dad.”

Chapter 8: Gravity

Chapter Notes

Robert. I hope you understand you were mostly a metaphor. A writing tool, really. You were the door I needed to crack another door open. You made space for silence and softness and grief. You were never the point... but you made the point possible. It was nothing personal.

So thank you, Robert Granger - for doing your part.

The silence that followed her breathless words wasn't soft or cinematic.

It was heavy.

Hermione's fingers still clutched tight around her phone as if it might vanish if she let go. The moment felt surreal, sitting in Malfoy's car, out of all places, with the weight of the world crashing down on her shoulders. She wasn't quite sure if she was in the middle of the storm or had somehow become a part of it.

Malfoy didn't say a word. Not right away. He just reached across the console and tapped the hazard lights on. Then he shifted the car into gear, turned the wheel, and pulled out of the queue of traffic without a word. Turning into the opposite direction from where they needed to go.

Hermione blinked at the road ahead. "What are you-"

But he was already cutting across the stalled lane. He pulled the car onto the shoulder, away from the endless line of blinking brake lights, the storm still hammering the roof like it had something to prove.

"What happened?" he asked, too steady for how fast her own heart was thudding. For how much everything around her was rushing past her.

"There was an accident," she said barely above a whisper. Her fingers clenched tighter around her phone. "My dad's been taken to Luton A&E. My mum's on her way but... she doesn't know anything yet. It sounded bad."

She didn't even realize how much she was shaking until his eyes flicked to the way her entire body trembled. He nodded and shifted the car back into gear. He was maneuvering them into a narrow side street, ducking out of the main road chaos. The wipers squeaked. The hazard lights clicked off.

Hermione found her voice again, though it barely held.

“You don’t have to—”

He didn’t look at her. Just kept his eyes on the road, jaw tense.

“I know.”

She hesitated; throat constricted. “I just... I don’t want to drag you into this.”

His grip on the wheel tightened. “You’re not.”

“But I—”

“I know I don’t have to,” he said again. “I’m doing it anyway.”

Something about the way he said it made her pause. A decision already made.

For the first time since receiving the dreadful call, Hermione didn’t feel like she was *falling*.

He hadn’t asked. He hadn’t waited for *her* to make the decision, or asked if she needed help, or offered her some hollow variation of *let me know if you need anything*. The things people always said when they didn’t know what else there was to do.

It should’ve irritated her. Should’ve made her feel boxed in, like someone was pulling the reins out of her hands when she wasn’t ready to let go. But instead, it felt like air.

He’d made the decision she couldn’t – not in her state. And that, rightly or wrongly, felt like a kind of safety she’d never known.

She was used to holding it together. The one who asked the questions, made the plans, showed up. Even now, her brain was halfway to calculating the quickest route to the hospital, the best number to call, the right words to say when – or if – they got there in time.

But she was in shock. Her body frozen, her thoughts looping in useless circles. All she was truly capable of in that moment was sitting in the passenger seat of an unfamiliar car, watching the world streak past in chaos.

Malfoy – out of all people – had seen her in that moment. Had stepped into that terrifying space with her. A quiet surety of someone who wasn’t afraid to lead when she couldn’t.

She glanced sideways at him, and her stomach twisted painfully.

Because it hit her all at once; how good it felt. To not be in charge. To let someone else carry the weight for just a moment. To not have to be prepared.

It wasn’t weakness or shameful. It was grounding. The realization nearly broke her open more than the situation herself. Because she couldn’t remember the last time someone had done that for her.

She’d always called it independence – this constant bracing for impact – but the truth was uglier. No one had ever stepped in before. No one had ever looked at her without demanding

answers, or instinctively chosen to carry the weight for her.

But the part that hollowed her out was realizing how terrifyingly good it felt to be looked after, because it meant she'd gone her whole life without it.

Hermione hated how unsteady her voice sounded when she spoke again. "I don't even know if they'll let me in. It's chaos out there. My mum said—"

Malfoy didn't respond at first, eyes fixed on the road, jaw working as the wheels kicked up water from every turn.

"You'll get in," he said, too evenly. "And you'll see him."

She looked at him. *Really looked*. The way his throat bobbed as he forced a breath through his nose. The way his hands held the wheel with more restraint than force.

He was struggling with this moment – with being this kind to her.

Hermione turned her face back to the window. Her breath fogged against the glass. The rain was getting heavier. The streets tighter. The world outside shrinking down to this car.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Malfoy didn't respond right away. His grip on the wheel flexed, she heard the leather creak under his fingers.

"What for?"

"For dragging you into this."

"You didn't."

"I did."

The quiet that followed wasn't peaceful. It sat on her chest like weight waiting to crush her.

And she hated how much she needed him there.

"I can't breathe properly," she said suddenly, swallowing around a growing lump in her throat.

Malfoy's jaw shifted. "Try."

Hermione laughed, hollow and panicked. "*I'm trying.*"

"What's his name?"

She blinked. "What?"

“Your dad. What’s his name?”

“...Robert.”

He nodded once. “Tell me about him.”

She hesitated. “Why?”

“Because you’re spiraling,” he said. “And I can’t talk you out of it. But you can talk yourself back down.”

She exhaled harshly. It wasn’t a sob, not quite – but close.

“He makes awful French press and calls it artisanal. He reads the Telegraph and shouts at the headlines like it makes a difference.”

Malfoy didn’t laugh, but she felt the air shift as she tried to inhale.

“And he’s soft,” she added, breath catching. “He kisses my mum on the cheek every time he passes her in the kitchen. Doesn’t even notice he does it.”

She swallowed hard. “He was probably doing that this morning. And now—” Her voice cracked again. “Now I don’t even know—”

“Stop.”

She turned to him, startled, chest heaving.

Something snapped in her. “Don’t—don’t order me around right now.”

“I’m not,” he said, but his voice didn’t soften. “I’m trying to keep you here with me.”

She blinked hard, her throat closing. The panic was thick and sour in her mouth.

Malfoy kept his foot on the pedal. Eyes on the road. Jaw tight like it physically hurt to keep it together.

And Hermione didn’t ask him what he was thinking, or why he seemed to know exactly how to function in the middle of chaos like this, or why his silence didn’t feel indifferent – it felt practiced. The dark thought flickered through her.

She couldn’t ask him about it. Because if she opened her mouth again, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to close it without falling apart completely.

So instead, she whispered, still shaking – “I just don’t want him to die.”

And Malfoy, eyes still forward, said nothing.

But the car sped up.

And somehow, that was enough.

Luton Hospital appeared out of the storm like something from a nightmare. Harsh fluorescent light and wet concrete, rising against the night like a slab of steel.

Malfoy pulled into the lot, tires hissing through the puddles. Hermione was already unclipping her seatbelt before the car had fully stopped. Her hands fumbled at the door handle. She couldn't feel her legs after sitting locked up for over an hour.

By the time she slammed the door shut, rain was already soaking through her blouse – her coat left behind in the car. There was no time. She didn't care.

The wind hit her and for a second, everything blurred – the glass doors, the figures moving behind them, the sound of thunder rolling somewhere deep.

Malfoy's presence was anchoring in a way she wouldn't have dared to admit to him. Steady in a way she didn't realize she needed until she paused just inside the automatic doors, blinking in the harsh lighting, her breath catching.

The A&E waiting room was too bright and smelled like antiseptic and anxiety.

The reception was packed. Nurses buzzed between rooms. The screen above the triage desk blinked with patient numbers, flashing in angry red.

She scanned the crowd like she might find her mother's face in it but saw nothing.

A nurse called out a name that wasn't hers. Somewhere, a baby cried. A man in a suit cursed at his phone in the corner.

Hermione took a step forward, then stopped, frozen. She didn't know where to go. Who to ask. What to say. The moment she'd been racing toward had finally arrived – and she had no idea what to do.

Malfoy's hand brushed her back. Not a push, not even a guide. Just there. A strange contrast to the chaos pressing in from every angle.

"Reception," he murmured low, nodding toward the desk at the far end of the corridor.

A woman in pale scrubs barely looked up as they approached, her expression worn and pinched from the kind of shift no one wanted to be working during a storm like this.

"My father," Hermione managed. "Robert Granger. He was brought in – my mother said they brought him in—he—there was an accident—"

The woman didn't even blink. Her nails clicked against the keyboard like it was just another Friday.

"We don't have any updates yet," the woman said flatly. "If he's been admitted, he'll be in emergency care. You'll need to wait in the holding room."

Hermione's stomach flipped.

"Can't you check? Just check—he was supposed to—my mum's here—"

"If he's being assessed, there's nothing we can tell you yet."

Something inside her splintered.

"I need to know if he's breathing," she said, louder than she meant to. "You don't understand, I—"

"*Granger.*" His voice didn't cut across hers. It moved beneath it.

She turned to Malfoy, blinking, gasp caught in her chest. Her heart was thundering somewhere near her ears now, too loud for the hospital noise.

Hermione opened her mouth, but Malfoy touched her elbow lightly – just enough to make her still. She was one step away from crumbling.

"Let's go sit down," he said quietly.

"I can't just sit—"

"*I know.*" His eyes held hers. "But you're shaking, and you need to breathe."

If the moment hadn't been so painful, it would have been disturbing that the only steady thing in this entire godforsaken hospital was him.

Her legs moved on autopilot as they turned down the corridor, the lights overhead humming. Malfoy didn't rush her. Just walked beside her, close enough to be there without smothering.

The holding room was stale, grey, too many chairs with bad padding. A muted TV flickered above the coffee machine. Two other families sat scattered across the room, eyes haunted.

And in the corner—

"*Mum?*"

Her mother looked up. Her coat was wrapped tight around her, hair half-loose, her eyes swollen and red. She stood up too fast, and Hermione practically collapsed into her arms.

"Oh, sweetheart," her mum whispered, voice hoarse from crying. "I didn't want you driving in this—"

"I had to come." Hermione pressed, clinging to her tighter. "*I had to—*"

Her mother held her like she was trying to hold the world in place.

“I haven’t heard anything,” she whispered into Hermione’s ear. “They won’t say a word. Just that he’s being looked at. It’s been over an hour.”

Hermione nodded numbly. She didn’t realize how much she was shaking until her mother took her face in both hands and whispered, “You’re freezing.”

That’s when she noticed the man standing behind them. Hermione turned to look at him too.

Malfoy hadn’t moved. His soaked white dress shirt was clinging to him. His face unreadable. He looked like someone used to waiting – to watching things fall apart in slow motion.

Hermione faced her mother again. Her voice was thin. “This is Mal–” she paused when she caught herself. Her mother valued manners more than Hermione valued her pride. So, she corrected herself, “– *Draco*. He brought me. He drove. I was with him when you called.”

Her mother gave him a long, slow once-over.

And then, softer, “*Thank you, Draco.*”

Malfoy dipped his head slightly. “It was the least I could do, Mrs. Granger.”

They sat after that. Hermione and her mother stayed pressed together on the plastic chairs. Malfoy stood near the door, arms crossed, eyes flicking to the hallway every time a nurse passed. Like he could will someone into giving them an answer.

Hermione’s hands wouldn’t stop twitching. She stared at them. At her nails. At the bruise-colored stain on her jeans where the rain had soaked through.

It didn’t feel real.

Her father – her *dad* – was somewhere behind those walls. Maybe awake. Maybe not. Maybe something worse. Her breath started to stutter again.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered. Her throat burned. “I can’t just sit here while he’s – while he might be–”

She felt the panic climbing again, up her chest.

Her mother reached for her hand. “Sweetheart. You have to hold on.”

“I’m trying,” Hermione choked.

She didn’t see Malfoy cross the room. Just felt it. The weight of him settling down beside her. His hand came to rest near hers. Not touching. Just... *there*.

He didn’t look at her. Didn’t say a word. But his presence filled the spaces where her panic wanted to live.

And it was strange. Because he again didn't comfort like most people did – no soft words, no back pats, no empty promises.

He just stayed.

Like the worst thing that could happen wasn't the news – it was being *alone* when it came.

Time passed differently in waiting rooms.

Hermione had no idea how long they sat there – only that her legs had gone numb, her mother's fingers trembled in her lap, and Malfoy hadn't moved from her side other than to organize them a decent tasting coffee from the nursing station down the hall.

She could see her mother's fingers twitching with the need to *do* something. It was the same kind of helpless energy Hermione had been carrying since the phone call. And maybe that was the worst part of it – watching it mirrored in someone who'd always known how to keep things together, seeing her mother's composure pulled thin.

“So,” her mother said suddenly, too brightly, “did it take long to get here?”

Hermione blinked at her. Her mind was too full. Her voice, when it came, was cracked. “What?”

Her mum gave a tight little smile. “From the city, I mean. With the rain. The roads looked... well, rather dreadful.”

Hermione stared at her for a beat, trying to figure out if that was a real question or a desperate attempt to keep her grounded. But her mother was already looking away, wiping at her eyes again with the corner of her sleeve, trying not to let Hermione see how frayed she was.

Hermione opened her mouth – then closed it.

She couldn't do small talk. Not right now. Her skin was stretched too thin. Her thoughts felt like broken glass rattling in a drawer.

But then her mother shifted in her seat and turned toward Malfoy, voice trembling but polite. “You're from the city, aren't you?”

Malfoy stirred once like he had been ripped away from his own thoughts. Not expecting to be spoken to. But when he looked up, his expression didn't flicker.

“Yes.”

“Did you—” her mother cleared her throat, “—grow up there?”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “Just outside London.”

Her mother nodded like she was filing that away. “Is your family still there?”

Hermione stared at her mum, confused. This was not the conversation they needed right now.

But then Malfoy nodded, slow and polite. “They sure are.”

“I imagine it must be nice. Being close to home.”

“It depends on the day.”

Hermione frowned.

Her mother gave a small, surprised laugh and Hermione’s heart twisted sharply. Because now she got it.

Her mum wasn’t really interested in Malfoy’s childhood or where he grew up. She was trying to distract her. Maybe herself. *Maybe both of them.*

And the horrible, beautiful thing was... Malfoy seemed to understand that.

He didn’t stiffen or deflect. Didn’t give his usual bored sarcasm or sneering one-liner. He let her mum ask awkward, wandering questions. He let her lead the conversation with broken manners and watery eyes, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Her mother shifted again, dabbing under her eyes with the corner of her sleeve like it might hide the way they were still red. Her voice was softer now, almost casual, like they were just chatting in a sitting room instead of a sterile hospital waiting area.

“And what is it you do, Draco, when you’re not—” she gave a vague little gesture toward Hermione, “—taking care of my little sweetheart?”

Hermione’s lashes fluttered. “Mum—”

But Malfoy didn’t miss a beat. His eyes cut to Hermione for the briefest second before he said, tone dry, “I’m a lawyer, specialized in M&A.”

“Mergers and acquisitions,” her mother echoed. “That sounds important.”

“Mostly just long hours and expensive coffee,” he said with a shrug “But it pays the bills.”

Hermione stilled. There was something oddly fascinating about watching him this composed, polite, almost charming. Conversational, even. Like he could slip into civility as easily as snapping at her if he wanted to.

Her mother tilted her head slightly. “Are you *seeing* anyone?”

Hermione’s eyes darted to Malfoy, who raised a single brow in surprise at the turn of topics.

“Mum,” Hermione hissed again, absolutely mortified.

“What?” Her mother gave a tiny shrug. “I’m just making conversation.”

Malfoy, to his credit, didn't smirk. His expression stayed unreadable, though something flickered in his eyes – the faintest glint of surprise, maybe curiosity – before he glanced at Hermione's mother and replied with quiet politeness, "Not at the moment, no."

He didn't look at Hermione when he said it.

And for some reason, that made her stomach tighten.

"Well," her mother said, settling back against her chair with a little nod of approval. "You're very well-mannered."

The air shifted.

Hermione could feel the heat blooming up her neck. She glanced sideways, heart thudding, wondering if Malfoy had heard the tiny sigh her mother added next—"You could do worse, sweetheart."

But if he had, he didn't show it.

Didn't so much as twitch.

Just leaned back in his chair slightly, eyes flicking once toward the hallway like he was reminding himself to stay focused.

But Hermione caught the way his jaw ticked once, barely. The way he swallowed like he was bracing against something unnamed. And maybe that was the moment she realized... he had heard it. He'd just chosen not to react.

Her mother turned her attention back toward him with a new glint in her eye. The kind that meant she was far from done.

"It's refreshing, I'll admit," she said, tapping her leg absentmindedly, "to meet someone who answers a question without grunting. The last boy Hermione brought home could barely form a sentence without a mouthful of shepherd's pie."

Hermione closed her eyes in horror. "Mum – *please* –"

"Oh, come on, sweetheart," her mother continued, "you know I never said anything at the time. But Ronald—well. Lovely boy, but I've had more engaging conversations with our plumber."

Malfoy cleared his throat delicately, but before he could make it worse for her, the double doors at the far end of the holding room opened. Everything stilled.

A nurse appeared first. Clipboard in hand, expression neutral but brisk. Behind her, a doctor stepped forward in dark blue scrubs, his ID badge swinging slightly with every step.

"*Granger?*"

Hermione was already on her feet, heart slamming into her ribs.

Her mother rose beside her. “Yes—yes, that’s us.”

A quick nod. “I’m Dr. Patel. I’ve been overseeing Robert Granger’s care tonight. I’m very sorry it took this long. A&E is overwhelmed with storm-related injuries, and we needed to stabilize him before releasing any details.”

Hermione nodded stiffly, but her throat was too tight to speak.

Dr. Patel glanced between the two of them, voice gentle now. “He’s stable. Awake, though a little groggy. We’re moving him to an observation room as we speak.”

“He’s okay?” her mother asked, fingers digging into Hermione’s arm.

“He was very lucky,” Dr. Patel said, and there was warmth in his voice now, something soft that made Hermione’s knees weak. “There’s no head trauma. He has two broken ribs, but nothing life-threatening. He also has a dislocated shoulder. We’ll keep him overnight, manage pain, and he’ll be referred for physiotherapy.”

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. *Just a second.* But the doctor kept talking.

“There’s one thing I should prepare you for,” he said, tone shifting slightly. “He’s on blood thinners, and when he came in, he was bleeding quite heavily from multiple cuts. Mostly superficial lacerations on the face from broken glass.”

Her mother flinched, visibly.

“We’ve treated the wounds,” Dr. Patel continued, “but it took a while to control the bleeding. He’s stable now, truly, but he’s going to look worse than he is. Just... don’t be too shocked when you see him.”

The room was quiet. Thick with relief but laced with dread.

“Pain management is under control,” he added. “But he’ll be a bit out of it. I didn’t want either of you walking in unprepared.”

Hermione tried to speak. Nothing came. She nodded instead, blinked hard, and reached for something, anything to hold her upright.

“Someone will come get you in a few minutes once he’s settled,” Dr. Patel said, offering them both a tight, understanding smile. “He’s already asked for you.”

Hermione’s mother nodded, lips trembling, and murmured a soft *thank you*.

Dr. Patel gave a short nod and turned back toward the corridor, the nurse following him.

The doors hissed shut.

For a moment, Hermione stood frozen. Her hands shook. Her chest and face burned.

She was aware that her mother sagged back into her chair in relief. She couldn't stop herself from the overwhelming number of thoughts rushing through her mind. *Why didn't she feel better?*

It wasn't over – he was alive, yes, but it had come too close. Too bloody close. And that image, a flash of her father's car twisted against a barrier, his voice replaced by sirens. It wouldn't stop playing in her head. Something's she'd made up without realizing it. He must have been so scared, maybe still was.

She turned away sharply, needing air, needing space, needing something.

Malfoy was there and caught her by the elbow the second her knees buckled slightly.

"Hey," he said quietly. "It's alright."

Hermione shook her head, eyes wild. "It's not. I thought– I thought I'd never see him again. I didn't even– I wasn't there–"

"You're here now."

She looked up at him, vision swimming, chest convulsing with another wave of panic. "My last words, they were ridiculous – I can't go in there if he's–"

"Granger."

Her name in his voice didn't sound like a warning or a lecture. It sounded like gravity – pulling her back down, anchoring her to something solid.

She blinked at him, unsteady, heart thudding too fast for her chest to hold. Her breathing was short and broken, like it couldn't find a rhythm.

Then – he stepped forward. It didn't feel like a dramatic gesture. Just reaching, steady and unflinching, arms folding around her like it was the most obvious thing to do in the world.

And Hermione didn't resist. She *collapsed* into him, struggling to inhale as her forehead pressed into the corner of his neck, her hands clutching at his back. Her fingers dug into his shirt like she might fall apart without something to hold onto.

He wrapped both arms around her tightly – tight enough to still the shaking, to hold every jagged breath inside her until it smoothed out. One hand pressed low on her back, the other curled protectively around her shoulders. His fingers holding the back of her head, cradling her.

And God, it was warm. Safe. Like nothing bad could get through the layers of rain-soaked cotton and the space he made just for her. Like they hit pause from their endless fights and tension. Like she wasn't too much. Like he could take it. Like he wanted to.

Hermione buried her face deeper into his chest, letting herself feel it – the way he held her like he wasn't going anywhere, like she could finally stop bracing for the next terrible thing.

“I thought he was gone,” she whispered, broken and raw.

“I know,” he muttered against her hair. “I know.”

The panic hadn’t vanished, but it started to dull, like the edges had been softened by the pressure of his arms around her.

His chin rested lightly against her temple, and for a moment, Hermione just... existed there. In the quiet thrum of his heartbeat, the smell of rain and heat.

Then, barely audible, his voice stirred the strands of her still damp hair.

“You have another chance.”

His hold didn’t shift, but something in his voice cracked – hoarse, like it had been buried.

“You can walk in there tonight,” he whispered, “and tell him how much you love him. Anything you didn’t get to say. Anything the fear tried to take from you today.”

Hermione felt it like a jolt – the weight of his words, the pain threaded through them that had nothing to do with her. It wasn’t sympathy. It was knowledge. Lived-in, hollowing. Like he’d stood where she stood once – *and hadn’t been so lucky*.

She swallowed hard, chest pulling tight again – but not from panic this time.

She wanted to ask. Wanted to know what it was he didn’t get to say. But the moment was too fragile, and she couldn’t do it – not now. Maybe not ever.

So instead, she just held on and tightened her grasp. Maybe he needed the tight embrace as much as she did tonight.

The hallway was narrow and too bright.

Hermione walked between her mother and Malfoy; her legs stiff like they no longer belonged to her. The storm still raged beyond the windows, thunder low and distant, like the world was trying to stay quiet for this.

As they neared the door, Malfoy slowed his steps, then nodded toward the bench just across from where the nurse had stopped. “I’ll be right here.” he murmured.

Before she could say anything, her mother turned back and reached out; pressing her hand to his shoulder in silent gratitude.

It startled Hermione a little, but he only dipped his head in response.

And then they stepped inside.

Her father was a pale shape against white sheets.

Hermione stopped cold in the doorway.

He looked worse than she'd imagined. His skin appeared waxy and drawn, oxygen tubing running beneath his nose, white bandages covering half his face and wrapping around his temple. His left arm was in a sling. One side of his face was mottled with angry red scratches and thin lines of stitches. There were bruises blooming along his collarbone, his eyes heavy-lidded with medication.

But he was breathing.

Her mother made a soft sound and hurried to his bedside, brushing hair gently from his forehead. Hermione followed, legs weak, breath tight in her chest.

His eyes fluttered open.

"...Jean?" he rasped, blinking blearily. "Is it... Are you real?"

"I'm here," her mother whispered strained. "I'm right here, Robert."

He smiled faintly. His eyes drifted again, trying to focus.

"...Hermione?!"

Her name snapped something inside her. She stepped closer.

"I'm here, Dad."

He reached for her hand, fumbling slightly until she caught it in both of hers. His fingers were cool in comparison to the hot tears that spilled down her cheeks now.

"I'm okay," he said with a soft slur. "They've got me all patched up."

Hermione stared at him, heart in her throat.

"You scared the hell out of us," she whispered.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "Bloody car came out of nowhere."

"You're not allowed to go anywhere," Hermione said, trying to sound light, but her voice broke. "Do you hear me?"

That made him smile. *Tired.*

"How... how'd you get here?" he asked, brows furrowed. "It's awful out. The rain—The storm's still going, isn't it?" he added, gaze drifting toward the window like he could see past the walls, confusion and meds muddling his voice. "You didn't drive, did you?"

Hermione hesitated, brushing her thumb along the back of his hand. “No. I didn’t.”

Her mother tucked the blankets around him more tightly. “A very kind, very tall gentleman brought her in,” she said gently, glancing toward the door.

Robert blinked slowly. “Tall... gentleman?”

Her father’s head lolled slightly as he shifted to look toward the wall. “*Can-I-see-him?*”

Hermione’s eyes flicked toward the door – the wall that separated her from Malfoy, from the steady presence that had carried her through the chaos of the night.

Her mother hummed. “Not today,” she said softly, brushing his hair back gently. “You need to rest.”

Hermione felt it then – how strange this all was. How odd it felt to be here, anchored at her father’s bedside, and still feel the pull of someone sitting just beyond the door. If anyone had told her even days ago that he’d be the one she’d feel tethered to in a moment like this, she’d have laughed.

And yet...it was there. That pull. That *gravity*.

Her father gave a faint exhale, voice slurring again as he blinked slowly. “Bloody tall city boys... always trying to charm their way in.”

Hermione let out a quiet, broken laugh as new tears slipped down her cheeks. She ducked her head, pressing her forehead gently to the edge of the mattress, his fingers still wrapped loosely in hers.

Her shoulders shook as she sobbed into the crisp hospital linen, a mixture of fear and relief and exhaustion finally breaking wide open. Her father’s hand squeezed hers weakly. That was all she needed to fall apart.

He was alive. He was here.

“You’ve still got it, you know,” her mother murmured from the other side of the bed. “Even half-drugged and stitched up, you’re still cheeky.”

Her dad gave the ghost of a laugh, but then hissing in pain.

Her mother laughed, small and choked. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again, Robert Granger.”

“I’ll do my best, Jean,” he whispered, followed by rustling of the bedding as if they settled into something more comfortable.

Hermione didn’t lift her head, but she listened to them – her parents, murmuring to each other in the soft language of people who’d weathered decades together. *Reassuring, teasing, loving*. The sound wrapped around her like a blanket.

And through the pounding of the storm against the windows and the low beep of monitors and the pain still curling through her soul, Hermione breathed in that fragile, sacred quiet.

She was here.

With the two people who had loved her from the very beginning.

And for the first time in hours, the weight in her chest loosened.

She closed her eyes, still curled over the edge of the mattress, her father's hand in hers and her mother's voice low and warm.

What a gift, she thought, to be *loved* like this.

And what *luck*, to still have it.

The door closed softly behind her, the hum of hospital lights returning like static around her. The hallway was quieter now, the distant storm no longer rattling the windows but whispering low and steady like a memory still lingering outside.

Hermione stepped into the corridor, blinking into the sterile brightness.

Malfoy had sunk down onto the bench across from the room, his long legs stretched out in front of him, one ankle crossed over the other. His head was tipped back against the white wall, arms folded across his chest. The sharp line of his jaw looked softer in the overhead light, his lashes casting faint shadows on his cheekbones.

He'd fallen asleep.

Hermione stood there for a moment, motionless.

Something in her twisted as she watched him.

He looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. Like someone who'd been carrying too much for too long, and only now – when no one was watching – had let himself be still. His shirt was still damp in places from the storm, creased at the collar. There was a smudge of her mascara on the fabric by his chest.

She should've let him go home.

Should've told him she'd be fine.

But now, looking at him, she wasn't so sure that was true.

Hermione's hand found the wall beside her, her fingers brushing lightly over the cool plaster. She watched the slow rise and fall of his chest, the tension still ghosting across his shoulders even in rest.

And God, he was handsome. Devastatingly so. That shouldn't have mattered, not tonight, but it lodged in her chest all the same.

She crossed the corridor slowly, her shoes silent on the tile. Kneeling down beside the bench, she reached out and laid her hand gently on his forearm, just above the wrist.

"Malfoy," she said softly.

Nothing. She let her fingers curl slightly, brushing the inside of his sleeve.

"*Draco.*" It rolled off her tongue easier than she'd expected.

His lashes fluttered.

For a moment, he looked dazed, like he didn't remember where he was. His gaze landed on her.

Hermione offered a small, tired smile. "Hey. Sorry to wake you."

He straightened, blinking hard as he scrubbed a hand over his face. "How long—?"

"A little while. You fell asleep sitting up."

Malfoy exhaled, the sound low and rough in his throat. "How's your dad?"

She nodded. "He's stable. Bruised, stitched up, on a lot of pain meds...but... he's okay. He's going to be okay."

The tension that left his body was almost imperceptible. But she saw it.

And when his gaze flicked to her again, searching, it was to check her. To see if she was okay.

Hermione swallowed, her voice catching. "Thank you. For waiting."

Malfoy blinked the last of sleep from his eyes, running a hand through his hair as he sat up straighter.

He glanced toward the closed door, then back at her. "How's your mum?"

Hermione sighed, leaning her shoulder against the wall beside the bench. "She's staying. They're letting her sleep in the chair next to him. She said she won't leave unless they drag her out."

Malfoy gave a faint nod. "Figured." He watched her carefully. "What about you?"

Hermione hesitated, drawing in a slow breath. “I don’t want to leave either. Not really. But they’re not letting stay more than one next of kin after visiting hours.” She rubbed her hands together absently, eyes tired. “They said we can come back tomorrow. Maybe late morning. We could... grab some clothes. Bathroom things. Come back after we’ve slept.”

Malfoy nodded again, quietly taking her words in.

Then she added, almost awkwardly, “Mum told me she doesn’t want you driving back to London in this weather. She said...” Hermione hesitated, then glanced over at him, a faint flush rising in her cheeks. “She said you should stay the night. At the house.”

His brow lifted just slightly. “Did she now?”

Hermione gave a small, tired smile. “She was quite firm about it, actually.”

Malfoy was quiet for a moment, eyes on hers. “And is that what *you* want?”

The question landed heavier than it should have. Not pushy. Not flirtatious. Just... honest. To check if she still needed him. If she wanted to continue to stay in this odd limbo of ceasefire.

Hermione looked at him, something thrumming through her entire body. Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. “Yeah. I do.”

He exhaled once, a breath that felt like it had been sitting in his chest for hours.

“Alright. Let’s get you home then.”

The house was dark when they pulled up. Rain dripped steadily from the gutter above the front step, puddling against the brick path in soft, patient splashes.

Hermione took a breath and stepped out into the quiet. Malfoy followed, shutting the car door gently behind him. Neither of them spoke as she unlocked the front door with the spare key her mother had handed her. The house creaked open around them, warm with the scent of lavender and wood polish, still and settled like time had slowed down while the rest of the world had turned upside down.

Inside, Hermione switched on the hall light. It spilled over the narrow corridor lined with old family photos and scuffed edges. Her shoes felt too loud on the wooden floor as she slipped them off, and Malfoy followed suit, quiet and respectful.

Everything was still. Still and tired.

She turned to him in the entryway, rubbing a hand over her face. “Okay,” she said softly, not even sure what came next. “There’s my room. And the guest room. And... the couch if you

want. Whatever's most comfortable. Or least uncomfortable. It's your choice."

Malfoy looked at her, lids low with exhaustion, one hand braced on the doorframe like it was holding him up. But his voice, when it came, was careful.

"Where do *you* want me to sleep?"

The question didn't carry weight in the way he usually wielded words. Drafted like something fragile.

A simple choice.

Hermione became suddenly aware of how big this house felt with just the two of them inside. The air smelled like her childhood, and her eyes burned with the kind of exhaustion that came from being awake too long under fluorescent lights.

"I don't want to be alone," she said honestly underneath her breath.

Malfoy didn't seem to be surprised, didn't blink. He just waited.

She swallowed. "Would you mind staying... *with me*? In my room?"

It came out small, hesitant.

And not at all how she used to imagine inviting someone to sleep beside her.

But there was no pretension left tonight. No armor. Just stripped-down fear and gratitude, and the overwhelming weight of how much had almost been lost.

His jaw flexed once. Then he nodded, slow and sure.

No snide remark, no joke. Just the kind of answer that made her stomach pool with something warmer than relief.

She led the way upstairs, the banister cold beneath her palm, the house quiet as if it were listening. Her childhood bedroom had been left untouched since she'd left it for a second time in her life all those weeks ago.

She flicked on the lamp by the bed and turned to him, suddenly aware of the intimacy of it all.

"I'll, um. I'll grab something for you to sleep in," she said, already moving to the dresser. "If you want it."

He didn't answer, but she could feel him behind her. Lingered at the doorway like he didn't want to break whatever this moment was becoming.

She handed him a worn old T-shirt and a pair of her dad's unused flannel pajama bottoms.

“I’m gonna take a quick shower and change,” she said, voice too loud in the quiet bubble they were in.

“Okay,” he murmured.

Hermione returned from the bathroom in one of her old school shirts – faded and soft from years of washing – and a fresh pair of shorts. Her skin felt warm and clean, the sting of hospital antiseptic losing its sharpness in her nose.

Malfoy stood in the middle of her bedroom, still dressed in the damp clothes she’d left him with. His dress shirt clung to his frame. There was something about him that looked... unguarded. Not just tired. Like whatever version of him that had been steady through the night had now retreated, and all that was left was this.

“You must be freezing,” she said carefully.

That was when he looked at her, only hesitantly disregarding the study of pictures on her wall. Like it took effort to lift his eyes to meet hers.

He glanced at the shirt that barely skimmed her thighs, her hair damp around her shoulders, eyes swollen from crying.

He looked... *lost*.

She didn’t know what made her step forward. Only that something inside her had split open the second he looked away from her, shoulders heavy with something unspoken.

He’d carried her through the worst night of her life, steady and silent.

And now, standing here in the room she grew up in, he looked like a man unraveling at the edges.

Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was gratitude.

Maybe it was something much more dangerous than that.

But her hands rose anyway, slow and cautious. She wanted to help. To be near.

To give him the smallest bit of comfort in return.

If he stopped her, she’d pull away. She wouldn’t push.

But he didn’t.

She started from the top. Each button came undone beneath her fingertips. One after the other, careful, like she was unwrapping something breakable.

The fabric parted, sticking slightly to his skin. She peeled it away gently from his shoulders. Her knuckles brushed against his chest, his ribs. His skin was still damp and warm from the trapped heat of his body.

His skin was pale, smoother than she expected, save for the slight shadows of muscle shifting beneath the surface as he breathed. The kind of lean strength that came not from vanity, but tension. Almost like his body was built to brace for things. Built to withstand.

A faint scar curved just above his waist, just to the left of his navel. It disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers, and for a second, she couldn't stop staring at it.

His chest rose slowly under her eyes and hands, a subtle tremble in the breath he let out—like the weight of the day had finally settled beneath his skin.

He was beautiful in a way she hadn't prepared for.

His eyes followed her every hand movement, even as they dropped back to her side.

She whispered, "You said all the right things tonight. How?"

His throat worked around a swallow. His eyes softened, but the answer came slow.

"Good instincts," he murmured. "Or maybe... just what I would've needed. If it had been me."

She didn't ask what that meant, wasn't brave enough to push him through his exhaustion. He deserved a break.

Instead, she turned and handed him a towel from her drawer. "You should take a hot shower and warm up. Bathroom's just across the hall. I put a new toothbrush out for you."

The quiet still stretched between them by the time he slipped into the hall, the door clicking softly shut behind him.

She listened to the shower switch on. The rush of water against the tile sounded like relief. Like warmth. Like something he had earned after the night he'd just endured with her.

By the time he returned, he was barefoot, wearing only his briefs. His hair was towel dry and curling at the edges.

Hermione was already beneath the covers, trying not to stare at his body. The lamplight skimmed the curve of his shoulders, catching the slope of muscle that stretched across his upper back, the long lines of his arms, the way his collarbones framed the smooth skin of his chest.

Her eyes flicked down against her will. His thighs flexed slightly as he moved. They were long, sculpted in a way that made her look away.

Her core pulsed once – *traitorously* – and she pulled the covers higher, trying to mask it with exhaustion. With the very real weight of the day.

He crossed the room, and she watched the muscles shift along his stomach as he moved, another faint scar tracking along his hip bone before vanishing beneath the fabric.

He climbed in slowly, careful not to jostle the bed, careful with everything. Like this moment was fragile for both of them. He settled beside her, the blanket small and shared between them. They lay in silence. Listening to the wind outside. The distant crack of thunder. The soft, rhythmic breathing between them.

Until her voice broke it.

“Has this ever happened to you? Something like... tonight?” she asked.

She just couldn’t shake the hug they’ve shared, the words he had said as if they had pained him somewhere deep inside.

His arm lay between them, resting on the pillow, his hand only inches from hers. His eyes stayed close when he finally spoke, so quiet she could barely hear it.

“Ten years ago, today.” His voice was low. Worn thin. “Car accident.”

The words lingered in the space between them, soft and fleeting like ash.

It wasn’t just what he’d said – it was *how* he’d said it. Like each sentence was something he’d never planned to share, not with *her*.

He exhaled slowly, like it hurt to speak. “Didn’t see it coming. Didn’t get a chance to say anything. Didn’t get a miracle.”

Ten years ago. Today.

Her heart ached at the realization that he’d carried that thought inside him all night without saying a word. He had driven her through the storm, had stood in that hospital corridor, had let her fall apart... while quietly surviving the memory of his own worst day.

She turned her head toward him, slowly, like the moment might shatter if she moved too fast.

“But *you* did,” he added quietly. “You got the ending. The one I didn’t.”

He had known, intimately, what kind of quiet tears apart a waiting room. What kind of silence follows the worst phone call of your life. What kind of hug feels like the last thing you’ll ever get.

He hadn’t been steady for her because he was calm. He’d been steady because he remembered.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat, maybe two. It was painful.

Her fingers itched to reach for him, to press into the space between them and curl around his hand. But something stopped her. Not because she didn't want to. But because she understood what it cost him to say any of this.

"I had no idea," she muttered. He blinked then, meeting her eyes finally. He looked so *exhausted*.

"Nobody knows. Just Blaise..."

Hermione stared at him, at the shadow of his expression in the low light of her bedroom and felt something *change*. Because he hadn't just told her something private.

He'd told her something *sacred*.

And for a man like Malfoy, stubborn in all the worst ways, it wasn't just a confession. It was a surrender.

Her voice shook as she whispered, "I won't tell anyone."

His brow twitched, just slightly.

"I promise," she said. "Not even Ginny. Not a word. It's yours."

He lowered his chin, eyes glancing over her. Like he was too tired to do acknowledge her whispered promise. Like the words themselves had drained the last of his reserve.

Hermione felt her heart splinter along a new line. He had trusted her with something so private, so deeply buried, that even speaking it aloud seemed to have carved something out of him.

And he'd done it without asking for anything in return.

Just... laid it at her feet. *And looked away*.

Her eyes began to sting, but she forced the ever-growing knot in her throat down with almost aggressive resolve. She knew the last thing he'd want was for her to cry. Not for the boy he must've been back then. The one who'd carried this weight in silence. The one who'd been everything she needed tonight, even while quietly bleeding from his own old wound.

She didn't know how to hold it – the heaviness of it all, the raw honesty he'd handed her without ceremony. It swelled in her chest like something alive, grief and gratitude and quiet devastation all tangled together.

And for once, words felt useless. Useless against the storm they'd both weathered tonight. Hers loud and immediate, his buried and still bleeding somewhere beneath his skin.

So she reached out. One trembling hand rising to his jaw, her fingers brushing the stubble there. Just enough pressure to tilt his face toward her. Just enough to ask him, silently, to see

her. To see that she saw him.

He didn't flinch.

His eyes fell close as she dragged her touch down, past the stubble of his throat, pausing at a spot just below his ear.

"For someone who doesn't want to be my friend," she murmured, breathing the wrong way might break it "you've been the best one I could've ever asked for tonight."

His eyes snapped open at that. Found hers in the dark. And she felt her stomach sink, like she ruined it all with bringing it up again. He was so confusing, and—

"I could never be *just* your friend."

Hermione froze.

The words hit her like a slap and a lifeline all at once.

She stared at him, eyes wide, breath caught somewhere between disbelief and something much deeper – something dangerous. He wasn't pulling away. He wasn't trying to take it back. He just looked at her like he'd already said *too much* and was waiting for her to run.

But she didn't. Not tonight.

Her heart was pounding so fast it terrified her. Every second stretched, taut with the weight of everything they hadn't said.

And maybe he didn't move because he didn't want to scare her.

Maybe he didn't move because he was scared, too.

She couldn't take more pain. She couldn't erase what he'd lived through or fill the hollow it left behind. But she could make him look at her. She could remind him, just for a second, that he wasn't alone tonight.

She leaned in slowly, like a thought turned physical. A question shaped by breath. Her hand brushed his cheek – carefully – and then her lips found his. Her lips met his softly, hesitantly, as if asking permission with every inch. Not a hungry kiss, not rushed or desperate – but something far more intimate. Her mouth just barely brushed his, warm and trembling, like the shape of a thought unspoken.

He exhaled, and she felt it against her lips before he tilted his head, just slightly, to meet her properly.

Their mouths parted and met again – this time deeper, surer. Her hand slid to the back of his neck, fingers threading through his hair.

She wasn't sure when comfort had become need. But as her fingers brushed his skin, it wasn't just empathy anymore. It was hunger. Slow and aching.

He made a low sound in his throat, not quite a moan, not quite a sigh—something wounded and full and real.

He kissed like someone who hadn't let himself be kissed in a long time. Like he'd forgotten how, and was relearning it through her. Their noses bumped. Their breath tangled.

And when she tilted her face a bit more, giving him space to deepen it, he did without hesitation. He pressed his lips more firmly to hers, letting the kiss unravel just slightly, heat curling beneath all the quiet. One of her thighs brushed his, and she felt his muscles flex under the thin blanket. Skin caressing skin.

His hands rose, one curling around the back of her neck, the other cradling her cheek like she was something precious. His thumb brushed just below her eye, where tears had dried but still left the memory of salt and softness behind.

And for one suspended second, he pulled back to look at her.

Then he leaned back in, pressing his forehead to hers, his breath uneven now. He kissed her once more – slower this time, deeper. A kiss that trembled with restraint. With something that felt dangerously close to longing.

But then he broke it, just when her tongue wanted to cross a line.

His hands were still on her face, but he pulled back just enough to look her in the eyes, jaw tight.

“You’ve been through a lot today,” he whispered, like it hurt to say. Like it killed him not to want more.

Hermione blinked at him, breath still shallow, lips tingling from the loss of his. *“So did you.”*

He closed his eyes, like the words had knocked something loose inside him.

She leaned in again searching for his mouth, searching for more of that grounding heat, that steady ache in his kiss that made her forget everything but him. That made her forget that unknown fear that had poisoned her blood all night until now.

But he held her there, gently – his hand cupping her jaw, his other arm sliding around her waist, drawing her against him. Not pushing her away. Just... holding her. Pressing his lips to hers once more, barely a breath between them.

And when he spoke again, it was against her mouth.

“You’ll regret this in the morning.” Like he thought she’d regretted what they’d done during movie night, hidden from the others under a blanket.

Hermione froze, heart thudding wildly beneath her ribs. His touch was tender, his mouth close, but his words had turned to smoke in her lungs.

She could feel the tension in him. His hand was still on her waist, the other at her cheek, and yet he held her like she might vanish if he let the moment go too far. Like if he let himself want too much, he wouldn't be able to stop.

So she whispered, without moving away, "I don't regret what we did that night."

His expression flickered. Like something cracked through the armor he wore so tightly around her. His brow creased, every word accompanied by hot breath against her lips brushing his. "You avoided me for a week."

"*You avoided me*," she shot back, softer than a challenge, but enough to spark something electric between them again. It made her relax into him.

Malfoy's jaw worked beneath her hand. His fingers tightened at her waist, drawing her closer without even meaning to.

"You're so fucking stubborn," he murmured, lips brushing the edge of a ghost of her smile now. "*Infuriating*."

Her half-smile wavered, eyes fluttering close at the way his thumb brushed the corner of her mouth, catching the shaky breath that escaped her.

"*Insufferable*," he whispered, but his mouth was already brushing hers – barely, just the tease of it. "How you pick the worst nights to change your mind."

Her hand slid from his jaw to his chest, fingers spreading against the heat of him.

His chest rose sharply under her palm. She felt it—the way his breath caught, the subtle tremor just beneath his skin.

"You're trembling," she whispered, her hand grazing downward.

"So are you," he said, voice rough, his mouth ghosting across her jaw. "Doesn't mean you should be touching me like that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll let you," he murmured, low and filthy, lips brushing the shell of her ear now. "And I'm not sure you want to know what I'd do if you really let me."

A shiver rolled through her that had nothing to do with the storm still whispering outside. Her fingertips found the ridge of muscle just above his waistband. She paused there. Daring him. Daring herself.

"What do you want to do?" she whispered, her fingers brushing lower.

His lips grazed her neck, just beneath her jaw. "You sure you want to go there?" he murmured.

She nodded, her voice lost somewhere between anticipation and breathlessness. Her heart pounded in her chest; she was sure he could hear it. The moment was so fleeting, no walls to push the other away.

He inhaled slowly, like he had to drag the thought from wherever it lived in the dark.

“I’ve thought about pulling you into a cramped restroom at the pub. Not classy. Not private. One of those disgusting little stalls with graffiti on the walls, a busted lock, and the smell of spilled beer in the air.”

She shivered but didn’t stop him. His voice crawled underneath her skin in the best way possible. Her own fingers brushed the skin underneath his waistband teasingly.

“I’d shove the door shut, crowd you up against it, and slide my hand under that little skirt of yours. The one you pretend isn’t begging to be lifted.”

Her thighs clenched involuntarily, knuckles brushing something hard. He shifted, almost searching that friction again.

“You’d be flushed, drunk off your third whiskey, already wet. I’d hook a finger under your knickers and feel it again.” *Again*. Because he had made a mess out of her before. He paused to press a kiss way too gentle just under her jaw. “Dripping. All for me.”

She whimpered without being able to hold the sound back. He hummed in acknowledgment.

“I’d make you turn around, palms flat on the metal door, legs spread just enough. And then I’d sink into you from behind,” his voice faltered for a breath, “– no prep, no teasing. Just so I can get finally inside of you.”

Her nails dug into his bicep. Her mouth parted, but no words came. Her hand twitched, stuck in his waistband. She was afraid that if she’d wrap her hand around him now, he’d stop talking. And she couldn’t want that.

“I’d fuck you *so* deep. Hard. Just enough that you have to bite skin to keep from sobbing my name.” He almost groaned the words.

He slid his hand down then, grazing the outside of her thigh like he was half a second from grabbing her harshly.

“I’d fuck you hard enough that your knees buckled, hard enough that you wouldn’t look anyone in the eye when you walked back out to our friends – because you’d still feel me dripping down your legs.”

Hermione gasped softly, stunned by how much she wanted that. How it had taken root in her core like a fever.

She moaned, soft and broken, when he pulled away – grasping for her hand to draw it from his waistband, away from the heat of him. He adjusted himself in the same movement, jaw tense.

“Don’t...” she whimpered, devastated by the loss.

His voice like silk over gravel. As if he had snapped out of it without warning.

“You asked.”

“But—”

He shook his head, pulling her close, wrapping her up like she might slip through the cracks if he didn’t.

“If you really want to cross that line,” he murmured, “you’ll still want it after this weekend. Not tonight. I won’t give you another reason to run from this.”

A pause. His lips brushed her temple. *This*. Whatever this was.

“You’ll thank me tomorrow.”

She was trembling, but too stunned to speak. So he did it for her, “Try to sleep, Granger.”

He held her like he wanted to give in, like it was killing him not to – and that restraint burned hotter than anything else.

Chapter 9: Draco

Hermione cradled her phone between her cheek and shoulder as she opened the fridge one-handed, eyes scanning for milk. She wore one of her dad's old sweatshirts, the frayed neckline slouched off one shoulder. Her old jeans fit more snugly than she remembered, and her hair was scraped into a high, slightly crooked bun.

The kitchen felt smaller than it used to. Or maybe that was just the effect of Malfoy, shirtless and out of place, sitting at the same table where she'd once read fairy tales to her mum, voice high and eager, while the scent of rising dough and warm sugar wrapped the room in safety.

Her first call of the day with Ginny had lasted long enough for her to start washing Malfoy's clothes – so he wouldn't have to spend the day in the rain-soaked shirt from the night before.

He sat at the table, drinking coffee and chewing a piece of toast, watching her.

She pretended not to notice his eyes tracking her every movement.

After Ginny's back-to-back calls woke them far too early, Hermione hadn't had a chance to talk to Malfoy. He'd groaned and turned over when she slipped from his arms, but by the time she came back from starting the dryer, he was downstairs making coffee.

She'd barely managed a shy “*morning*” before Theo's name lit up her phone next.

Apparently, he'd texted her a few times last night.

“I'm at my parents' place right now.”

Theo's voice crackled back through the speaker. “Why?”

Hermione rubbed her thumb against her brow. “My mum called me when we were on the way home. My dad had an accident and rushed him to A&E. Malfoy made sure I got to Luton right away,” she hesitated, flicking her gaze toward him.

“Is your dad alright?”

“Yeah,” Hermione replied quickly, stretching to grab a clean mug from the cupboard. “He's banged up, but stable. Broken ribs, dislocated shoulder. A lot of cuts from glass, but he's going to be okay.”

Theo let out a breath. “Shit. I'm glad he's okay. And your mum?”

“She stayed the night at the hospital. We're planning to go back later and bring them some fresh clothes. She won't leave his side until she can take him home.”

A long pause, like he was thinking. “We as in *you and Malfoy*?”

Her eyes darted instinctively toward Malfoy again, her chest twinging with something sharp and strange. Heat crept up her neck at the memory of the filthy things he'd whispered into her ear last night.

"Yep... He's here."

"So... Malfoy stayed the night?"

Hermione's brows furrowed, "Yes?"

"Want me to come out there instead? I can get on the next train."

"Oh... um." She trailed off at the sudden worry that maybe Theo was onto something. Maybe Malfoy was ready to head back to London. It wasn't like she'd given him another choice yet. "We haven't really talked about the logistics. Let me ask him."

Malfoy raised a brow in silent question when their eyes met again.

"You don't need to—"

"Hang on," she interrupted. Lowering the phone she bit her lip. "Hey. Theo offered to come out here so you can head back. We didn't really discuss..." Her voice faltered. "Do you want to? You must have plans, and I know it's been... a lot."

She noticed the way his shoulders tensed, a flash of surprise behind his eyes.

"No need," he said simply. "I'm already here. And Theo doesn't have a car. Seems impractical."

Something in her muscles unwound. Gratitude softened something inside her. The kind of something that lingered after kisses shared in the dark, after whispered things she wasn't sure she was supposed to remember.

She sucked in her bottom lip without thinking.

His eyes flicked there, catching the motion like it meant more than it should.

"Okay," she said quietly, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

She turned back to her phone. "Theo? Are you still there?"

"Yeah?"

"It's okay. He's... staying. You don't have to come all the way here. I'll text you when I'm back in London?"

There was a pause. "Alright. Just... call me if something changes?"

"I will." She hesitated. "Thank you."

"You're alright, then?"

“Yeah,” she whispered. “I think so.”

Hermione put the phone down on the counter and reached for the kettle, busying herself even though the water was already starting to boil. She moved on instinct, like muscle memory might override the chaos still humming beneath her skin.

Her fingers were steady, but her insides weren't. She hadn't eaten since yesterday, but the thought of toast or eggs turned her stomach. Her nerves were still fluttering. From the hospital, from the call, from last night.

Her heart gave a weak thud at the memory of his mouth on her throat, of her fingers dragging down his chest... of the obscene things he'd murmured against her skin that she still hadn't found a way to process.

She stirred her coffee slowly, lips pressed into a line.

Maybe it was smarter to leave it buried – chalk it up to stress, adrenaline, the storm... a need for something *human* in the middle of chaos.

Maybe he was already thinking that.

She thought again of what he'd told her. About the car accident ten years ago, that he had lost someone. He hadn't said much else, but something in his voice had stuck with her.

She didn't know who he'd lost. But maybe he had needed that human connection – that distraction – too.

Malfoy dragged a hand through his hair and leaned back in the chair, exhaling like something in him had finally given way. “I didn't mean to push things last night. If I did.”

She wasn't sure what he meant... The kiss? The way he'd touched her? Or the way he'd just... stayed? Her stomach twisted anyway.

She gripped the mug a little tighter.

“You didn't push anything. Quite the opposite.”

His eyes searched hers as if he wanted to figure out if she was telling the truth.

He set his mug down and said, almost casually, “And I've told you you'd thank me in the morning for it.”

Hermione blinked, startled by the comment.

He didn't elaborate, just tore a small bite from his toast like they were discussing the weather and not what almost happened between them in the dark.

“I don't.” The words spilled out before she could think better of them. He glanced back up at her then, brows lifting in something close to skepticism.

“I mean—” she fumbled, setting her own mug down with more force than intended.

“There’s a lot going on in my head right now,” she admitted.

Like the fact that she’d sworn off men. Dating. Anything remotely complicated.

One year. That had been the plan. No distractions.

And yet, here she was again, barely weeks in, already tangled up in something that didn’t even have a name.

His lips curled at the edge, not quite a smile. “Right.”

Hermione’s chest tightened. The butterflies from last night were still there – winging wildly – but now they fluttered lower. Slower. Like they weren’t just panic and adrenaline anymore.

She shifted her weight and finally sat down across from him, tucking one leg up beneath her.

“Can we talk about it?” she asked finally, quieter now.

Malfoy held her gaze, then shook his head just once. “Not today.”

Hermione wasn’t prepared for the way the two words stung. She pulled back on instinct.

“Your dad’s in the hospital,” he added a little softer. “That’s the only thing that should be on your mind right now.”

Hermione nodded, even as her stomach dipped.

He looked away, picking at the edge of his toast. “Doesn’t mean we won’t. Just... *not now*.”

Maybe he was only staying because he felt bad. Maybe this was pity wrapped up in quiet moments and making coffee like it was his place.

Her voice came out lower than she intended. “You don’t have to feel obligated to stay.”

Malfoy looked up, but his expression didn’t change much. Just the smallest tilt of his head, like he wasn’t sure if she was pushing him away or testing if he *would* go.

“I’m not exactly a hostage,” he said finally.

That should have eased something in her, but it didn’t.

She took another sip just to fill the silence. “I just wasn’t sure *why* you’re staying.”

“Does that matter?” he asked, and for the first time since finding out the accident, his voice held something faintly sharp beneath the surface.

Her gaze dropped, fingers tightening around the ceramic. Her mind scrambled for distance, for logic, for something that would make this feel less exposed.

She hadn't even *liked* him twenty-four hours ago.

He was insufferable. Arrogant. Sharp-tongued and emotionally unavailable and—
And not the kind of man you let see you unravel in a hospital corridor.

Not the kind of man who should make your stomach flip just by sitting quietly in your parents' kitchen, sipping coffee like he belonged there.

"You're thinking too hard," Malfoy said, breaking the silence like it had been bothering him too.

She hadn't even realized how tightly she was gripping her mug until she looked down. Her knuckles strained pale against the ceramic.

"I'm not—" she started, but the look he gave her stopped her cold. A single brow raised.

She let out a weak breath of resignation.

Malfoy leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming once on the table.
"You'll drive yourself mad if you try to make it all make sense today."

She looked at him then – *really* looked. Barefoot in her parents' kitchen, hair a mess, shadows under his eyes. Not smug. Not cocky. Just... *there*.

"Do you regret it?" she asked, voice barely above a whisper.

He stilled. Only for a second. But it was enough for her breath to catch in her throat like a thread pulled tight.

"No," he said. The word wasn't careless. It sat heavy between them, landing somewhere low in her stomach.

He rose before she could say anything his chair scraping gently against the floor. The moment slipped like water through fingers.

"I should get dressed," he murmured, already turning away.

Hermione opened her mouth, maybe to stop him, maybe to ask what the hell this was – but nothing came. She sealed her lips, jaw tight.

Malfoy paused in the doorway, one hand resting lightly against the frame. He didn't turn around at first.

"The shirt's in the dryer, right?"

He lingered a beat longer than necessary, fingers tapping once against the wood.

Softer, speaking more to himself, he said, "I meant what I said last night."

Her heart thudded.

She wet her lips. “Which part?” That they couldn’t be *just* friends? That he wanted to do do unspeakable things with her in a public restroom?

He finally glanced back, a flicker of something unreadable crossing his face. A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“All of it,” he said quietly. “But that doesn’t mean I expect you to.”

The elevator groaned under its own weight as it climbed to the third floor of Luton’s hospital.

Malfoy stood beside her, his hands tucked in the pockets of his slacks, shoulders tense. He looked ahead, but she could see his jaw clench just slightly every time the lift rattled.

“I hate hospitals.”

Hermione glanced sideways. His face didn’t move, but the words hung in the small space between them like a truth he hadn’t meant to share.

“Me too,” she admitted.

The muscle in his jaw flexed once more before the doors opened with a sharp *ping*.

She stepped forward, her arm brushing his as she passed. Barely a touch, just fabric against fabric, but it sent a spark of awareness down her spine.

Hermione led the way, her arms crossed loosely over her chest like a shield.

“Don’t let him intimidate you,” she said after a moment.

Malfoy glanced at her, one brow ticking up. “Your dad?”

“He means well,” she said quickly. “But he can be... intense.”

He gave a soft huff of a laugh, more breath than sound.

“Sounds familiar.”

That made her smile, barely. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” he said, but the look he gave her was softer now.

They slowed as they reached the room. Her father's name was printed neatly on the whiteboard just beside the door, along with the date and the name of his nurse.

She stood there for a second longer than necessary, fingers twitching slightly at her side.

Without looking at him, she raised her hand and knocked.

A faint "Come in," came from inside.

Her mum was out of the chair the second they stepped into the room.

"There you are," she said, already crossing the space.

Hermione barely got the door closed before she was pulled into a hug, arms wrapping tightly around her.

"Hi, Mum," she murmured, pressing her face into her shoulder.

Her mother pulled back just enough to kiss her forehead, both hands framing her daughter's face like she needed to see her.

Then she turned and opened her arms to Malfoy.

"I'm glad you're here, Draco. I didn't have the opportunity to thank you yesterday."

But she didn't wait to wrap him in a quick, firm hug.

He looked completely stunned, arms awkward at his sides before cautiously patting her back once, like he was afraid of doing it wrong.

"You've been so kind," she said as she let him go. "Thank you for looking after my girl."

"It was—nothing, Mrs. Granger," Malfoy muttered with pink cheeks.

When they pulled apart, her mother gave him a pointed look. "Please. It's Jean for you."

As if on cue, her father's voice rasped from the hospital bed behind them.

"Is that the tall one?" he called.

Hermione turned, already half-smiling.

"Yes, Dad. He's standing right next to me. He can hear you."

Her father shifted against the pillows, a faint wince pulling at his features. His voice was worn, dry from sleep or discomfort. But still himself.

"Looks taller than I imagined."

Malfoy didn't quite know how to respond to that. He offered a nod that could've meant anything.

Her mother clicked her tongue and crossed the room toward her husband.
“Robert, stop squinting at the poor boy like you’re sizing him for a headstone.”

Her father was propped slightly upright, bandages still covering parts of his face, one eye swollen, bruises vivid along his collarbone and neck. But he was alert. And his usual dry sense of humor clearly hadn’t been dulled by morphine.

Her father extended his uninjured hand toward him. “Robert. Nice to meet you properly.”

Malfoy stepped forward and shook his hand, something almost careful passing across his face. “Draco Malfoy. Likewise.”

Hermione watched them, something strange blooming in her chest. She was seeing the overlap of two very different parts of her life that were never meant to meet, and somehow... it wasn’t a disaster. *Yet.*

Her father tilted his head, looking him up and down with false suspicion. “You behave yourself in my house?”

Hermione’s stomach dropped. “Dad...”

But Malfoy only quirked a brow, lips twitching. “I didn’t steal the silverware.”

He huffed a breath – which might’ve been a laugh if it hadn’t ended in a wince. Hermione exhaled, stepping closer to the bed and reaching for his hand.
“How are you feeling?”

His attention shifted back to her, his expression softening just slightly.
“Like I got hit by a lorry,” he said. “But I’m all right. Better now.”

His thumb brushed lightly over her knuckles, and Hermione’s throat tightened.

From just behind her, Malfoy stood respectfully distant, but close enough that she could feel his attention.

Her father glanced up again, eyes flicking between the two of them. His voice dropped a little.
“You were the one who drove her here last night?”

Malfoy nodded once.

“Thank you. For bringing her. For sitting with Jean. For driving through that storm.” There was something gentle in the way he spoke now. “That’s not a small thing.”

Her mum chimed in, already unpacking the bag Hermione had handed to her. “How did you two sleep?”

Hermione paused. Malfoy was already eyeing the chair in the corner like it was a tactical escape route.

"I slept great," she said slowly, brushing her fingers over her bun like it might help her hold composure.

"In *your* bed?" her mum asked, too casually.

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes."

Her mother looked over at Malfoy, one brow raised.

Malfoy, to his credit, only smiled politely. "Your couch is quite comfortable."

Hermione watched her father carefully as he nursed his tea. The bandages had been redressed; the bruises were deepening in color.

Her mother had relocated from the visitor chair to the foot of the hospital bed and was shuffling a worn deck of cards with practiced ease.

Malfoy was sitting opposite her, in the second plastic chair, legs sprawled and sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms now that the hospital heat had settled in.

"Do you play?" Her mother asked him with a twinkle in her eye, fanning the cards.

"Not well," he replied dryly, though his mouth twitched in something like amusement.

"We'll be a perfect match, then," she said, already dealing. "Let's see if you can bluff better than my husband."

Her father groaned from the pillow. "She cheats. Just warning you."

Hermione hovered near the windowsill, half-smiling as she watched Malfoy lean forward, brows furrowed as her mother began explaining the house rules of some old family version of gin rummy she'd made up years ago. The whole scene was strange but in the kind of way that felt like slipping into a parallel life. One where this man, this *Malfoy*, played cards with her mother and didn't look wildly out of place doing it.

She turned back to her dad.

His eyes were sharp despite the bruising. "You should go home," he said under his breath.

Hermione shook her head. "What?"

"You've done the daughter thing," he said gently. "And you've done it well. But there's nothing more for you to do here except watch me heal at a glacial pace and argue with your mother about what I'm allowed to eat."

She frowned. “But—”

He cut her off, quiet but firm. “You’ve been here for everything. You held your mum together, brought her clean clothes, spoke to every doctor. It’s enough.”

He smiled. “I’ll still be here when you get back. Less battered, hopefully. Less charming? Probably not.”

“Dad—”

“I mean it,” he said. “You’ve got a job. A life. Friends. One who—” He flicked his eyes toward Malfoy, who was currently muttering something about the rules and being ruthlessly corrected by her mother. “—clearly has better things to do than babysit your broken dad and lose at cards with your mother.”

Hermione flushed when her father raised an eyebrow.

Before she could respond, Malfoy’s voice cut through.

“Don’t mind me. We can stay in Luton as long as *Hermione* needs to.”

Her head turned and for a moment she just stared at him.

Hermione.

And he’d said it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Not *Granger*. Just her name. Like it belonged to him as much as it belonged to her.

Her mother leaned forward, fanning her cards slightly. “Do you have siblings, Draco?”

Malfoy shook his head. “Only child. Which I’m sure explains a lot.”

Her father made a noise like he was biting back a laugh. “What about your parents? They still around?”

“Yes,” Malfoy replied carefully, adjusting his cards. “They live just outside London. Haven’t quite figured out retirement yet, but they’re working on it.”

Malfoy paused before he added calmly, “Maybe they’ll settle when they have grandchildren to chase around.”

Her mother’s entire face lit up like someone had just handed her a bouquet of her favorite flowers.

“Well,” she said with a grin that could only be described as gleeful, “that’s a lovely thought.”

Hermione turned slowly, willing her mother to stop talking.

“I mean, I’m not saying I’m in a *rush*, but I’ve always said Hermione would make such a brilliant mother. She was practically one already at age five. You should’ve seen her on the

playground...telling off other kids' parents for letting them skip sunscreen."

Hermione stared at her. "Mum, please."

She waved her off, delighted. "I'm just saying, whoever she ends up with better be prepared to co-parent with a tiny, brilliant general."

Hermione wanted to be swallowed by the linoleum floors.

Malfoy, somehow, didn't miss a beat.

"I've been told I take direction well," he said calmly, like he was unimpressed by the fact that they were discussing hypothetical parenting compatibility.

Her father almost choked on his sip of tea and had to set it down with a cough.

Hermione glared at Malfoy, who gave her a smirk and wink at once – and she knew, *knew*, he was enjoying the fact that she was drowning in embarrassment. It clearly gave him some deeply perverted satisfaction.

"Whoever told you that lied," she muttered under her breath.

Malfoy's brow lifted, just slightly, like he welcomed her protest.

Her father muttered something unintelligible into his tea, but Hermione could swear it sounded like, "Takes one to handle one."

Before she could process any of it, her mother began dealing cards again, grinning like it was Christmas morning and she'd just caught them under a mistletoe.

Everything smelled like damp pavement and lilacs when they crossed the parking lot of the hospital in the afternoon.

The air was fresh in that clean way only storms could leave behind, the sky finally clear, clouds thinning into streaks.

Hermione walked beside Malfoy, her thoughts still tangled somewhere between relief and exhaustion.

He unlocked the car with a quiet beep before they both slid in without a word.

The engine hummed to life as he adjusted the mirrors.

And just like that, they were heading back to London with Hermione sitting in the passenger seat; one leg curled beneath her as rows of hedges blurred into the countryside.

Everything about him felt reserved then. More closed off the longer they drove. Like whatever version of him had held her last night had already been packed away.

And she was aware that it shouldn't hurt so much, but somehow it did.

They passed a petrol station. A field with an old oak tree bent sideways from wind. A road sign pointing toward the motorway.

Her thoughts grew louder, the quiet too sharp to ignore much longer.

Hermione glanced over at him, the weight in her chest pulling her strings the farther they got. She just had to tell him.

"I don't want to go back."

Draco's eyes flicked toward her, briefly.

"To London?"

"Yeah." A pause. "No. Not really."

He glanced again, brow tightening. She shifted in her seat to face him.

"I mean... I don't want to go back to *how it was* before all of this."

His eyes fixated the road ahead of them, a welcoming distraction now that she had opened that door.

"Before what?"

"Before last night."

"Then don't go back to it."

As if it was her fault alone. Hermione huffed, the sound caught somewhere between a laugh and something far more fragile.

"You say that like it's easy," she muttered, tucking her leg in tighter beneath her. "Like I can just decide not to feel weird about everything that happened and everything's normal."

Draco didn't answer. His hands stayed steady on the wheel.

She took a shallow breath and continued, "I know you said you didn't want to talk about any of this today," she said, "and I'm not trying to push. I just..." She shook her head, teeth sinking into her lip. "Everything feels really... loud. In my head."

Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve. "Maybe you were just... being kind. And I've assigned all this meaning to things that weren't actually there. And that's fine. Honestly. I get it. You've got your walls and your timing and your – *whole you thing*."

He sighed through his nose but didn't interrupt her.

"I just—I needed to say thank you," she said, quieter now. "Not for the ride or the way you showed up for me. I mean for...*everything*. For not letting me fall apart alone." She paused.

"I know it wasn't easy for you. Being there." Her pulse hammered, but he didn't make a move to acknowledge her words and she couldn't live in the silence without filling it.

"I keep thinking that when we get back to London, it'll just be over. Not because you'll vanish, but because you'll *fade*. You'll go back to pretending like none of this touched you and I'll — I'll follow your lead, because I'm not going to make a fool out of myself. And maybe I'll wonder for the next six months if I imagined it all." She let out a dry, bitter laugh. "So that's gonna be fun." Hermione sighed and dropped her head back against the seat.

"And it's fine. I don't need a speech or some kind of dramatic revelation. I just don't want to pretend it didn't happen. That's all. I don't want to go back to sitting across from you at some bar and pretending I haven't cried into your shoulder or watch you play cards with my mum like it was your job or that I kissed you because the world was falling apart."

Her voice broke. "I don't want to go back to pretending. I just... I didn't want to leave it unsaid... before we go back to fighting and arguing all the time..."

Draco's hand twitched on the gear shift.

The car rumbled beneath them, eating road. Trees flitted past in shadow.

She let out a shaky breath and focused on the hedgerows blurring past her window.

Until Malfoy pulled over without a warning. Like he'd made the decision mid-breath.

The tires hissed against wet gravel.

Hermione turned toward him, checking the dashboard for any kind of warning signals that something was wrong with the car. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, unbuckled and turned to face her. Her eyes flickered to his hand rising and finding the side of her neck. Then they fluttered close as soon as his fingers slid into her hair. She wasn't sure if he had pulled her or if he had leaned in.

His mouth found hers with a force that made her gasp. Her hands flew up to his arm instinctively, fingers tightening as her lips parted beneath his.

His grip on her neck didn't falter. It anchored. His thumb brushed behind her ear, grounding her.

Her heart stuttered, pulse hammering in her throat, in her lips, in the spaces between their shared breaths. It felt *urgent*, like kissing her was the only language left. And just when her fingers curled into his sleeve — not to push him away but to hold him close — he retreated.

He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing heavily.

Their eyes met and for the first time in miles, she *saw him*.

Not Malfoy, but Draco.

“You talk too fucking much,” he whispered, but the way he stroked her neck softened it.

She would’ve laughed if she could *breathe*.

But her hands were still clinging to him. His thumb was still at her pulse, most likely feeling the panic and the want beneath her skin.

She blinked, breath catching. “That’s why you kissed me?”

His mouth ghosted over hers again – not quite another kiss, not yet.

“Something like that,” he murmured, before playfully biting her lower lip.

His hand stayed cradled at her neck, thumb stroking the skin there in slow circles. His breath mingled with hers. Warm and ragged.

Softly, like he wasn’t sure if he was making a mistake, he whispered, “*We’ll figure it out.*”

It landed in her chest like a secret finally said out loud.

Her eyes searched his, wide and stunned. She nodded. Wordless. Barely more than a breath of movement.

He looked at her for a second longer, as if committing the moment to memory. Then he exhaled and sat back in his seat like he hadn’t just shaken her worldview.

Like he hadn’t just kissed her like a man starving for the taste of her.

Hermione sat frozen in the passenger seat, air rushing through her lungs like it didn’t belong to her anymore. Her skin buzzed, pulse pounding. She felt every inch of her neck where he’d touched her.

She kept her gaze fixed outside, anywhere but him. But by the time they reached the city her pulse had calmed, her skin still tingled. The memory of his mouth on hers lingered like the echo of a dream she wasn’t quite ready to step out of.

But when he pulled up to the curb of her flat and eased the car into park, he spoke, “Do you have plans tomorrow?”

Hermione turned her head toward him, caught off guard to hear his voice.

“We could meet up. Have a proper conversation about this.”

The words didn’t sound casual, but they also weren’t overly weighted. Just... offered. Like a step forward.

Her heart fluttered again – stupid and traitorous. She nodded, steadier than she felt. “Yeah. I’d like that. Dinner?”

He hesitated. Something flickered behind his eyes. “I have plans tomorrow night,” he said carefully. “Something I can’t move.”

She didn’t ask what, but then he added, “I’m free for lunch, though. If you’d want that.”

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, nodding slowly, “Lunch works.”

Outside, a car passed with a hiss of wet tires. A dog barked down the street. London was still London, uncaring and ordinary and loud. But inside this car, it felt like something delicate had just been held out between them.

“Text me?” she said quietly, hand on the door handle.

“I will,” he said. “Get some rest.”

Everything in her flat was exactly how she’d left it days ago. The laundry basket untouched, a half-read book face down on the arm of the sofa. She stood inside the threshold for a full minute. Her legs, her body—none of it felt like it belonged to her anymore.

She dropped her keys in the bowl by the door and moved like a ghost toward the bedroom. Past the cluttered table and the stack of unopened mail.

Her own bed looked lifeless. Sheets she hadn’t slept in. Pillows gone soft from too many hours alone. She lowered onto the edge of her mattress, pressing her fingers to her lips like she could still feel him.

She was utterly and totally fucked. The realization crawled into her awareness slowly as she curled her legs up and pulled her sleeves over her hands. Her forehead dropped against her knees.

Everything hurt—her body, her heart, her brain.

And still, underneath it all, there was *Malfoy*. No... *Draco*.

She’d spent the last twenty-four hours bracing for grief after receiving the worst phone call one could get. For the image of her father lying unconscious in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines. She’d imagined blood. Wires. A memory that would ruin her forever. But instead, she’d walked into a hospital to find her mother still standing and her father still breathing.

She curled tighter.

He'd seen her fall apart. Held her through it. Slept in her bed. Kissed her.

But what did any of it actually mean? Especially when she wasn't even sure who he really was?

She knew his arrogance paired with dismissive sharpness. His temper and his wit. But she didn't know what made him tick. She didn't know who he was at seventeen, or twenty, or yesterday morning before her world cracked open.

But she wanted more of him. *This* version of him.

The one who took charge and stepped in when she couldn't think. Who held her not because she asked, but because he *knew* she'd fall without him. The one who let the curtain fall just far enough to show her that he was capable of compassion because he had experienced darkness himself. A darkness she might not be able to fathom herself.

She'd kissed him. She'd let him into her room. Into her life, really.

Whatever *this* was, felt like something she couldn't afford to get wrong.

Not after the way he'd looked at her. Not after the way he'd kissed her.

She closed her eyes. Let the ache sit in her chest for a minute. Then she reached blindly for the blanket and curled beneath it fully clothed, too tired to care.

And somewhere between memory and panic and want, she fell asleep.

Chapter 10: Lunch

Hermione woke slowly. The light was already pouring in through the slats of her blinds, washing her bedroom in pale gold. *The sun was shining.*

For a second it was as if nothing had happened. No hospital. No panic. No soaking storm or near-miss or bruises on her father's body. But slowly it kept creeping in. The weight of the past twenty-four hours settling like concrete in her chest.

She blinked against the light and rolled over, reaching blindly for her phone on the nightstand.

1 new message.

DM:

I'll pick you up at 12

It was too early for meaning. Or maybe just too early for her. But it cracked the heaviness just a little.

The floor was cool under her feet as she padded into the kitchen, hair still a mess of sleep.

The city outside had moved on, as if the storm had never happened. As if the weekend hadn't fractured something inside of her.

She settled by the window with her knees drawn up and a mug cupped between her hands.

She glanced at the clock above her fridge.

9.38 AM

Hermione took another sip of coffee and let the warmth spread from her fingers to her toes.

She needed a shower. Something clean to wear. And a quick check-in with her parents.

11.05 AM

The toothbrush was still in her mouth when her phone buzzed on the bathroom counter.

Hermione leaned over to squint at the screen, toothpaste foam catching at the corner of her lips.

DM

Draco was calling her. He'd never called her before. Not once. Texted occasionally, when absolutely necessary, and always in that clipped tone that made her want to throw her phone across the room. But a call?

Her stomach dropped at the thought that he was canceling their lunch. One hour before he was supposed to pick her up, and he was going to say something polite and indifferent, like *something came up*, and she'd say *no worries* and hang up and sit on the edge of her bed wondering why she felt hollow.

She swiped to answer, toothbrush clenched between her fingers. "Hello?"

His voice came through calmly. "I'm starving."

She blinked, confused. "I-what?"

"I'm downstairs."

Hermione nearly dropped the toothbrush.

"You're-*now*?" She twisted to glance at the screen. "It's *eleven*."

"I ran some errands nearby. Figured I'd check if you wanted coffee before food."

She stared at her reflection, mortified.

"Oh," she said, then cleared her throat. "Yes. I mean-sure. Um. Do you just want to come up? I'm not quite ready yet."

There was a pause.

"Yeah. Okay."

She wasn't even sure if she had properly hung up when she bolted from the bathroom, and immediately tripped over a pair of jeans on the hallway floor.

"Shit-" she hissed, catching herself against the wall.

A frantic three-minute whirlwind followed. She launched a bra off the arm of the sofa, shoved two mugs into the dishwasher without rinsing them and slammed a drawer shut that didn't deserve to be slammed.

She ran to the intercom, buzzed him in, then darted for her bedroom, quickly throwing on a clean sweater over a flimsy top and combed her stubborn curls with her fingers.

Hermione hurried back to open the door, slightly out of breath, flushed from running through the flat.

Draco stood in the doorway, casually dressed in a light blue Oxford, sleeves rolled to his elbows. One hand in his pocket, the other balancing a takeaway coffee tray. She hated the way her chest reacted to that stupid shirt.

He held out one of the cups for her without saying anything.

She stepped forward to take it, only noticing the note tucked under the lid as her fingers brushed the side.

It wasn't one of hers. Not a pastel Post-it like the ones she'd used to pester him at the office all week. Just a folded receipt from the coffee shop.

Hermione took it with the drink, peeling the slip of paper loose with one hand.

Neat handwriting stretched across the back, the lines surprisingly clean and steady for someone like him.

I'm sorry.

-DM-

She stared at it for a beat too long, the heat from the cup barely registering anymore.

"What are you apologizing for?" she asked, eyes still on the receipt. Her voice wasn't sharp, just... careful. Too careful.

Draco took a small breath, then slipped his sunglasses off with a single hand. The movement was annoyingly smooth, like he'd practiced it in a mirror. The sun caught the edge of the lenses as he clipped them lazily to the front of his shirt, right where his collar had been left open.

And suddenly, there he was.

"I'm not sure yet," he said calmly. "But if you hang onto it, I'm guessing it'll come in handy one day."

Hermione looked up, startled by the way something behind her ribs flickered suspiciously. Like he'd just handed her a map to something sacred, *just in case*.

She folded the receipt carefully, eyes not leaving his. "I better hold onto this."

His lips curved, barely as she motioned for him to step inside.

“You can sit down if you want. I’ll be, like, five minutes.”

Draco nodded once and stepped inside.

She didn’t wait to see how he entered her living room. She just turned on her heel and disappeared down the hallway, her mind buzzing and her heart in some kind of slow-motion free fall.

She made it back to the bathroom and let the door open.

Her hair was still a mess and her cheeks looked flushed. She grabbed her mascara and swiped on a coat, trying not to stab herself while her hand was shaking.

She tied her curls up into something slightly more intentional, then undid it and did it again. She shook her head, then called out through the open bathroom door, “So—what do you want to eat, anyway?”

Something about the moment of it all made her chest tighten with that strange, breathless feeling.

There was a pause, and then his voice came back, smooth and maddeningly casual from the living room.

“I made a reservation.”

Her mascara wand froze mid-air.

Hermione blinked at her own reflection like it had betrayed her. Of course he was the kind of man who made reservations. Who brought apology receipts and wore sunglasses like armor and sat on the couch they’d sullied weeks ago like it didn’t still echo with something unfinished.

She tried to breathe around whatever was happening in her chest.

“Okay,” she called back, voice a little higher than she wanted. “Great.”

She closed the mascara, set it down a little too carefully, and reached for her perfume. Her favorite scent to make her feel composed.

When she returned she grabbed her sneakers from where they were kicked under the radiator. She crouched in the doorway to shove them on.

Draco glanced over from the couch, where he sat like he belonged there. His arms were spread out lazily over the back, legs crossed at the ankle.

She met his eyes across the room. “So, where are we going?”

“Drunch. Just off St. John’s Wood,” he said simply. *“It’s a decent place. Thought you might like it. I’ll drive.”*

She grabbed the cup of coffee from the shelf, still studying him.

Then he added, almost offhand but not quite, *“And it’s close to Regent’s Park. Thought we could walk after. Sun’s out for once.”*

He had promised they’d talk. She pressed her lips together, reminding herself that she’d already said more than enough in the car the day before. His eyes flicked to her mouth, and then he rose from the couch in one fluid motion.

Drunch was the kind of place Hermione might have walked past a dozen times without thinking twice. It was unexpectedly warm and charming inside. The walls were painted matte black, broken up with soft gold accents and playful art. Deep red velvet chairs and benches made the space feel like a lounge. Slow music played in the background, just loud enough to be noticed, not enough to distract.

Hermione ended up tucked into a bench along the wall, the velvet smooth under her fingertips. Across from her, Draco lounged in one of the armchairs, his legs stretched out casually to the side to accommodate his long legs. He looked so at ease. The opposite of what she felt like inside.

The waitress greeted them with water, menus, and a smile that lingered a little too long in Draco’s direction. Hermione watched her glance at him again as she walked away in a not-so-subtle way. For some reason her fingers tightened slightly around her menu against her will. It was stupid, really.

The kind of attention he drew wasn’t necessarily new to her. She had seen the way women reacted to him in pubs, or on the street. He was beautiful; high cheekbones, well dressed, tall and that blonde hair of his.

She glanced down at the menu even though she already knew what she wanted.

Draco’s voice broke the quiet. *“Did you hear from your parents yet today?”*

Hermione looked up.

“Yeah,” she said, resting her forearms on the table. *“I spoke to Mum this morning. Dad’s doing better. Less swelling, more sleep. They hinted that he might be home by the end of the*

week.”

A faint smile tugged at Draco’s mouth. “That’s good.”

Hermione nodded, the tension in her shoulders easing a touch, but before she got the chance to say anything else, the waitress returned to take their order.

Hermione handed over her menu and offered a small, polite smile. “I’ll have the avocado toast, please.”

“Add a poached egg to that?” the waitress asked, already scribbling it down.

“Sure,” Hermione said, then reached for her water.

The waitress turned to Draco fully then, eyes lingering, face lighting up. “And for you?”

“I’ll have the shakshuka,” he said, handing over his menu without even glancing at it. His eyes were lingering on Hermione.

He must have been here before. And she didn’t want to wonder if the waitress knew him well by now – if he’d brought other girls to the same place, the same table.

Hermione didn’t say anything. She wasn’t jealous. Just... a little annoyed at the idea that this wasn’t special. That maybe he did this all the time.

Draco’s eyes met hers across the table. “You okay?”

“Yep,” she said quickly. “It’s just... *weird*.”

His brow lifted slightly. “Weird *good* or weird *bad*?”

Hermione shifted, fingers tracing the condensation on her glass. “I’m not sure?”

He tapped his knuckles against the table once. “What can I do to make it lean toward good?”

It was a thoughtful question. One that softened whatever had tightened in her chest over the last few minutes. But she had to think about it for a long moment before answering – before walking herself two steps back, past their first kiss, past the second one.

“Tell me something about you that I don’t know.”

Draco leaned back in his chair; one arm draped over the side as he toyed with the corner of his napkin. “What do you want to know?”

“Okay,” she said, voice quieter. “What do you do on weekends when you’re not being dragged to hospitals or playing cards with emotionally intense mothers?”

Draco gave her a half-hearted smirk. “I work. Or I pretend not to work and read contracts while watching sports.”

Hermione tilted her head. “Do you have friends outside of the group?”

Draco gave her a look like she'd caught him off guard – not enough to rattle him, but enough to make him hesitate before answering. “That group is quite tough to keep up with on good days, don't you think?”

Hermione huffed a quiet laugh. “You didn't answer the question.”

Draco shrugged, eyes dipping behind her to follow the movement on the street. “I've got a few. Some from uni. Work stuff.”

“That's not an answer either.”

His gaze drifted back to her. “The kind of friends who don't expect me to text back right away. It works.”

Hermione thought back to what Ginny had said – that even Blaise didn't know half of what went on in Draco's life. It sounded lonely.

“Anyone you'd trust enough to tell about... *all this?*” she asked, gesturing loosely. She meant her dad. The weekend. Maybe even the way he'd kissed her yesterday.

Draco paused like he was choosing his words carefully. “We can keep it between us, if that's what you're really asking.”

“That's not what I meant,” she said softer now. “I just... wondered who you turn to. When things get heavy.”

He kept her gaze. “I'm not great at that.”

That didn't surprise her. But hearing him admit it so plainly left something raw hanging in the air between them.

“I'm not either sometimes,” she admitted.

She didn't want their conversation to grow too heavy too early, she had a feeling they'd get there eventually. She leaned forward and propped her chin up in her hand. “Your turn.”

Draco quirked a brow. “For what?”

“To ask something. Or are you afraid of the answer?”

His lips twitched, “Alright... favourite holiday?”

Hermione snorted. “That's your big follow-up?”

“Some of us are easing into it.”

She smiled, just slightly. “Christmas. My mum still goes overboard every year. It's warm. Familiar.”

He nodded, like that tracked. Then he added, “Mine's New Year's.”

She tilted her head. “Really?”

“Yeah. I like the idea of starting fresh,” he said simply. “Not the party part. The other bit.”

Hermione waited. “That’s a little ironic, don’t you think?”

A faint crease appeared between his brows as if considering her. “Is it?”

She shrugged. “You weren’t exactly interested in a clean slate when *I* offered one last week.”

Draco studied her for a moment. “I wasn’t interested in ignoring what happened between us, there’s a difference.”

“So, what are you interested in?”

She didn’t mean for it to sound like a challenge.

Something in his expression shifted. Like he was weighing cautiously what he could afford to say.

“I think about you more than I should. And it scares the shit out of me, because I don’t trust myself not to wreck it.”

Just then, the waitress reappeared with their food, breaking the moment with the soft clink of plates and a polite smile neither of them quite returned.

Her brain still lagged a full beat behind her body as she murmured a thank you to the waitress and reached for her fork.

I think about you more than I should.

Hermione stabbed a piece of toast with more force than necessary.

What did *that* even mean. In what way did he think about her more than he should? Why shouldn’t he think about her? Was she a passing distraction? Something he didn’t want to admit out loud?

She’d promised herself this wouldn’t get messy. That she’d stay rational. But now her pulse was uneven and her appetite was gone, and he was sitting across from her like he hadn’t just flipped her inside out in one sentence.

I don’t trust myself not to wreck it.

The way he looked at her didn’t feel meaningless. But the past didn’t lie either.

Some part of her already knew she’d never stop wondering. She’d heard too many stories about his flings over the years, saw how he flirted with women if he thought nobody was watching to tease him for it later.

Hermione pushed the toast across her plate. She wanted to keep talking – to trace the outline of who he really was without asking the kind of questions that demanded too much, too soon.

She set her fork down. “Can I ask something else?”

His eyes flicked back to hers, guarded but open enough. “You’re already going to, so…”

“What are your parents like?”

Draco looked up; a bit slower this time.

She smiled carefully, “I mean… you’ve met mine under very odd circumstances. I’m just wondering what yours are like.”

He didn’t answer right away. His fork scraped gently at his plate, movements suddenly more careful.

“My mum means well. She had to worry about me a lot, so I can’t blame her for being overly invested in my life if I let her in.”

Hermione watched him closely. There was no bitterness in his voice, but there was distance. Like he was carefully describing someone else’s mother, not his own.

“And your dad?” she asked, quieter this time.

Draco’s mouth twisted, but not in a smile. “He prefers achievement to affection. Makes for very productive dinner conversations.”

Hermione gave him a dry smile, but she was cautious when she asked, “What’s it like… working with your dad?”

That pulled his posture back a bit. His fingers stilled where they’d been turning his water glass. A faint tension tugged at his jaw.

“Direct,” he said finally. “Efficient. Cold, most days.”

She didn’t speak, letting the silence say *go on*.

“He’s one two partners at the firm,” Draco added, like that explained everything. “Which, to him, means unquestioned authority. He treats the firm like it’s a kingdom. I’m the heir. And everyone knows it.”

Hermione tried to follow, “So they treat you differently.”

He gave a humorless chuckle. “They treat me like a ticking clock. Counting down until I either take over or fuck it all up.”

She frowned. “That’s–”

“Unpleasant?” he offered, lifting his glass with a dry glance.

“—a lot of pressure,” she said instead.

He shrugged. “Maybe. But I also didn’t do myself any favors these past few months.”

Hermione watched him taking a sip of water. “What do you mean?”

Draco didn’t answer right away. His gaze dropped to his plate, expression unreadable, then back to her. “Fucked up pretty well by dating the daughter of my father’s firm partner.”

Hermione kept her face neutral, the inside of her cheek caught between her teeth. *Tiffany*, Ginny had said. But she didn’t flinch, didn’t interrupt, didn’t let on that she knew the name or the story that came with it. Because she probably didn’t.

“What happened?” she asked simply.

Draco turned back to his plate. “Messy breakup. Strained firm dynamics. General failure to secure my father’s vision of a legacy. One of those. Maybe both.”

Hermione frowned at that, letting it sink in.

“Were you... together for long?”

“Off and on. A year,” he said, clipped.

“What’s her name?”

“*Tiffany.*”

Hermione nodded slowly, careful not to react, even though hearing it confirmed what she already knew. Somehow, hearing *him* say it made him more real. More layered.

“What’s she like?”

He hesitated, just for a breath, like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to protect himself from answering that question. But he continued calmly, “She was... easy in rooms where I wasn’t. Knew what to say, what to wear, how to smile the right amount without it seeming fake. My father loved her, of course. My mother thought she was... *nice.*”

Hermione kept her expression still, even as something unsettled low in her stomach.

Draco continued. “She was good at the events. The ones where everyone’s pretending they actually like each other. She’d lean in, laugh at the right jokes, pull me aside when my mouth got too sharp. It helped, I guess. I hate those things.”

There was no bitterness in his tone. No fondness, either. Just facts. A portrait sketched in thin line, because she had asked him to. “She made things easier. Predictable.”

Hermione sat with that for a moment, watching the way he didn’t look away.

“And you liked that?” she asked softly.

He met her eyes. “Yeah. I think I did.”

She nodded, slow and measured. Of course he had. Tiffany sounded like someone designed to fit—polished and presentable, with smooth edges and practiced charm. The kind of woman who knew how to match the room and make rich men nod in approval.

And Hermione... wasn't that.

She knew it. She knew she was letting her thoughts run five steps ahead, comparing where she didn't need to. But the contrast had lodged somewhere uncomfortable, and she couldn't quite un-feel it.

“Did you love her?” Hermione asked.

Draco's eyes dropped, like the answer was somewhere buried in the grain of the table. When he looked up again, it was slower.

“I wanted to,” he said. “Or maybe I just wanted to believe she loved the version of me I was trying to be.”

Hermione let that sit for a second. “So... what happened?”

He hesitated, jaw tightening before he spoke. “She cheated.”

The word landed without venom. No anger. No flinch. Just truth, worn smooth with time.

Hermione blinked. She hadn't expected him to say it so plainly.

“Did you find out yourself?” she asked, gently now.

He let out a breath, short and humorless. “Not right away. The signs were there. I just didn't want to put them together.”

Her hands folded in her lap. “So she told you?”

Draco's mouth twitched – not a smile. Something far more hollow. “Eventually. Same day we'd slept together.”

Hermione froze. “Wait—”

“She'd been with someone else that morning,” he said, voice steady. “Showed up at mine like nothing had happened. I didn't know until after.” A pause. “Never wanted to shower something off more in my life.”

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable. But it was full.

Hermione looked down at the table, letting the words sink in slowly. She didn't rush to respond. Something stung in her chest. Not because she didn't understand, but because her mind, traitorous as ever, flicked to that night at the pub. The way she'd tried to throw herself at him after that awful date. Desperate for distraction.

She hadn't known.

But that didn't erase the sting of how cruel he'd been after. How fast he'd shut her down.

She didn't say any of it aloud.

Instead, after a pause just long enough to feel, she asked quietly, "Do you two still talk?"

She had no right to ask. And yet—she needed to know. Even if he could hear it in her voice.

"God, no," Draco said flatly. "She's with someone else now. Shows up to every firm event like it's Fashion Week. They make a good match."

The sarcasm was thin. It couldn't quite cover the strain threading through his voice.

Hermione didn't ask if it still hurt. Or if he ever missed her. She didn't want to know the answer. Not really.

Ginny had told her they got together right after Draco had tried to hook up with Hermione on Halloween.

And now, Hermione had to ask for herself while pretending she wasn't hoping he'd lie. That he'd give her a version of the story that made everything simpler. That gave her permission to walk away and shut a door she was afraid to opening fully.

"Were you already seeing her last Halloween?"

"We weren't exclusive yet," he said. "Nothing official. A few dates."

He would've slept with Hermione that night – if she'd let him. They both knew it.

Hermione looked down at her half-empty glass.

"I wouldn't have cheated on her, if that's what you're thinking," he added, watching her carefully.

"I wasn't—" she started, then caught herself. "I was just curious."

He sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. "If this is the part where I'm supposed to explain myself, I probably won't do it well."

"I wasn't asking you to," she said quietly.

"Is it still fresh?" she asked after a beat.

His eyes flicked up. Something in them shifted. "What part?"

She shrugged. "All of it."

Draco leaned back, exhaling slowly. "Not fresh. Just... a mess that still follows me around."

She didn't know what to say to that. She just nodded, letting the silence carry the weight of it.

The waitress returned then, asking if they wanted anything else.

Hermione shook her head and slid her plate forward.

Draco declined too, offering a small, polite smile that didn't reach his eyes.

The moment stretched with the scrape of plates, the shift in music, the muted clatter of cutlery in the background.

He paid for their food, even though Hermione offered to split. He didn't even acknowledge it.

When they were alone again, Hermione leaned forward, narrowing the space between them just slightly.

"You still want to walk?"

He looked at her, something settling behind his eyes.

"Yeah," he said finally. "I do."

They made their way toward Regent's Park, following the curve of the path without speaking. It felt like they had said just enough for now. Words still clung to them from lunch, unspoken thoughts trailing behind like kites floating too high to catch.

Sunlight filtered through the trees, shadows slipping across the gravel path.

Draco walked like he had nowhere to be, like his thoughts didn't press against his ribs the way hers did.

They passed a man selling roasted peanuts by the bridge and a couple sprawled on a picnic blanket nearby, sun-drunk and half-asleep. A teenager tried to tempt a squirrel closer with crumbs from a croissant.

Hermione found herself smiling without meaning to.

"You ever been on one of the boats?" he asked, nodding toward the lake ahead, where the rowboats drifted lazily across the water under a wide patch of afternoon sun.

"Not since I was, like... twelve," Hermione said.

"Tragic," he side-eyed her with a faint smirk. "We should fix that."

She raised a brow. "You want to rent a boat?"

"I do."

“Why?”

“Because it’s sunny, and you haven’t been on one since you were twelve.” he said easily.

Hermione gave him a look. “Only if you’re rowing.”

“Gladly.” He turned toward the boat kiosk, then glanced back over his shoulder. “I’m told I have good stamina.”

The line landed with a casual sharpness, like he knew exactly where it would hit. Then he turned, as if nothing about it had been suggestive at all.

She stared after him, pulse beginning to stutter faintly.

It was a throwaway comment. And she tried not to think about him that way again, not until she knew what he actually wanted from her.

Draco moved ahead, shoulders relaxed beneath his rolled sleeves, one hand sliding into his back pocket like it had every right to be admired.

There was no reason for her stomach to flip.

None. Except maybe... There was. Because ever since movie night, her body remembered *exactly* what he could do with his hands. The way his fingers had curled deep inside her while his hot breath had hit her ear. The memory of it sent a shiver racing through her. Draco had only ever touched her once, properly, and it had wrecked something. Set a bar that no one else had come close to reaching. She hated that her body remembered it so vividly. Hated more that she could feel that awareness coming alive now, just watching him laugh at something the man in the booth said, flashing that sharp, wicked grin like he hadn’t just short-circuited her entire nervous system.

There was no going back after that night, no reset button. Not with him still orbiting the edge of her world, tugging at her resolve just by existing in her peripheral. She could chant her celibacy vows like a mantra, but they meant nothing around him. Because the truth was, her body had already made the choice the second his name started tasting different in her mouth.

The rental attendant, sunburned and chewing something lazily, cracked a joke Hermione couldn’t hear. Draco actually laughed, short and genuine, then handed over the money and turned to her with a grin that had no right being that confident. Like a problem she didn’t want solved.

She pulled in a breath, trying to quiet whatever was waking up inside her.

“You look like you’re thinking very hard over there,” Draco said as he returned.

Hermione forced herself to breathe, to look normal.

“I’m wondering how I got roped into this without even agreeing,” she said, trying for dry. But it came out a little huskier than she’d intended.

Draco smirked. “You said you’d get in the boat, if I did all the work.”

“That doesn’t mean I said yes.”

“But you didn’t say no.” His eyes dipped to her mouth and then up again. “Besides, I like the idea of you sitting back and watching me do all the rowing.”

It was clear that he was doing it on purpose now. Just toeing that line. Teasing her like it was a game.

She rolled her eyes half-heartedly but started walking towards the boats already. He caught up beside her easily, still grinning like the sun had decided to shine just for him today. He gestured to a small, green wooden boat waiting at the edge, its oars resting inside like it had been placed there specifically for this scene.

“Your chariot awaits.”

Hermione shot him a look, but her lips twitched despite herself. “You know this is going to be a disaster, right?”

“You’ll climb in and behave or what?” he said, stepping a little closer.

“I might push you in,” she said flatly. “And blame the wind.”

“I’d love to see you try.”

He held out his hand, palm up, waiting for her to step in first. It was flirting, sure, but something else hummed underneath. A kind of tension built from too many alms and things left unsaid. Like everything was waiting to tip. Hermione slipped her hand into his.

He was warm and steady. Familiar in an unknown way.

They pushed off from the dock and floated quietly into the lake.

The oars dipped through the water with the sun stretching across the surface.

He rowed without rush. Hermione watched the way his hands gripped the oars, the subtle flex of tendon and forearm, the way his collar shifted each time his back pulled taut. It was the kind of movement that shouldn’t have felt intimate. But it did.

She caught herself staring and looked away too quickly, forcing her gaze to the water instead. Like it hadn’t just occurred to her how it might feel to straddle his lap and kiss him senseless, right here, right now, in the middle of a lake.

Across from him, she tucked her legs up and let her fingers trail the edge of the boat, trying to will the thought away.

But her body remembered too much.

And the way he moved wasn’t helping.

Eventually, he let the oars rest in his lap. The boat drifted on its own.

“Didn’t mean for lunch to get that heavy,” he murmured. “Wanna balance the scales a little?” Hermione’s eyes flicked toward him. “Ask away.” She braced herself.

But when he looked at her, there was no teasing glint.

“Tell me something true,” he said quietly. “About your past. Relationships. Whatever you want.”

She sighed and tugged her sleeves up to her elbows. The sun had warmed the boat, and her chest felt tight for reasons that had nothing to do with temperature.

Her gaze drifted to the rippling water as the boat swayed gently.

“I think I’ve just spent a lot of time trying to build something,” she said eventually. “And it never really stuck. Not the way I hoped.”

He didn’t move, just listened.

“Felt like everyone just wanted to... hook up.” She huffed out a breath. “Connection is harder to find than it should be.”

He tipped his head. “Well. Sex is fun.”

Hermione shot him a dry look. “Not when it hasn’t been fun in a long time.”

“Oh?” His voice dipped lower, just brushing smug. “That’s not what it felt like on your couch.”

Her face flushed instantly. “I meant *before* that,” she muttered, sitting up straighter.

Draco hummed, clearly pleased with himself.

She crossed her arms, shifting under the weight of his gaze.

He leaned back, one hand resting on the edge of the boat, slow and comfortable. Like he had hours to spend unraveling her.

“Why wasn’t it fun?” he asked.

She blinked. “What?”

“Sex,” he said simply. “You said it stopped being fun. Why?”

Hermione hesitated. “It just... isn’t,” she said quietly. “It stopped being fun when I realised no one actually cared if I was into it. Or if I... you know. Got anything out of it.”

He didn’t answer right away. The silence stretched, filled only by the soft splash of water against the boat.

“Did you ever tell them what you needed?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

He glanced at her. “I mean, did you ever say it? Out loud. What you like. What works for you.”

His tone was even, maybe even conversational, but his eyes didn't waver.

Hermione's stomach curled tighter. Heat bloomed low.

"I mean," she said, fumbling slightly, "it's not that complicated."

He quirked a brow. "So you've had full-on conversations about it?"

Her cheeks flushed. "Not really. No. It was more... guesswork."

Draco nodded, unsurprised. Then, softer—almost thoughtful: "Where are you most sensitive?"

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

He didn't smirk exactly. It was more like a quiet, knowing look. "Not trying to be crude, Granger. I'm just asking. Where do you like to be kissed? Touched? What actually gets you going?"

She looked away, out over the lake, pulse quickening. Her throat tightened. She wanted to tell him — part of her *ached* to — but it still felt strange, voicing something so private, so physical. Like speaking it aloud might make it too real, too intimate.

"I don't know," she said first, a weak deflection, then paused. "Actually... that spot under the ear. My neck. It's always—"

She broke off, suddenly unsure why saying it felt so much more vulnerable than *showing* it ever would have. But he was still watching her, calm and patient. No teasing. Just... listening.

The air hung quiet between them, warm with meaning.

When the silence stretched, she cleared her throat. "What about you?"

The sunlight flickered through the branches above them, glinting off the surface of the lake. When he spoke again, his voice had dropped to something quiet and more intentional.

"Along the underside of my jaw," he murmured. "Right by the neck."

Her gaze shifted before she could stop it.

She found herself staring at that spot — that precise stretch of skin just beneath his jawline, where his pulse might jump if someone pressed their lips there. She imagined leaning in, kissing him there slowly, the edge of her tongue tracing soft cursive lines over his skin until he tilted his head to give her more.

The thought hit her so hard her thighs squeezed together on reflex.

"And I like being held onto," he added, tone more casual now, like he hadn't just thrown a lit match into her bloodstream. "Anywhere. Arms, back, hips. Just... grip me like you mean it."

Hermione felt heat bloom across her chest, crawling up her throat.

She cleared her throat way too fast. “You’re... very specific.”

Draco finally looked at her, voice still quiet, like he wasn’t sure she’d let him say it.

“I just think...” he paused, glancing down at his hand loosely curled around the oar, “if you ever want something to feel different with someone it might help to say some of this out loud.”

Hermione’s heart stuttered. There was no edge in his tone. No suggestion. Just... something honest.

He cleared his throat, barely loud enough to cover the shift. “But half the fun’s figuring it out together anyway.”

She looked down, lips pressing together, trying to steady herself against the warmth that bloomed behind her ribs. She hadn’t meant to say it. Not like that. Not when the boat was quiet and his knees were so close to hers and everything in her body already felt like a secret straining at the seams.

She cleared her throat, fingers brushing her own knee like that could ground her.

“You’re... good at this,” she murmured.

His brow quirked, lazy and curious. “At what?”

She hesitated. “Talking about this stuff. What works and what doesn’t. You say it like it’s not terrifying.”

His mouth curved, just slightly.

Her cheeks warmed. “You never flinch,” she added. “Even when you’re being... absolutely filthy.”

He smiled at that, really smiled, like he had every right to enjoy her discomfort.

“You liked it,” he said, low and unbothered. “The things I said to you the other day.”

Her eyes snapped to his. “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again. She could still *hear* it – his voice in her ear, that bathroom fantasy whispered with such deliberate laziness it made her knees weak even now.

“I didn’t know words could do that,” she admitted. “That someone’s voice could... get under my skin like that.”

Draco's gaze dipped to her mouth, then back up again, slower this time.

"I secretly like it too," he added after a beat, a touch of amusement curling into his voice.

Hermione raised a brow. "Which part?"

He winked. "Take your pick."

She felt her pulse stutter. Because he could've meant hearing himself say it. Or hearing her unravel from the sound of it. Or maybe both. And she wasn't sure which answer would undo her more.

Her voice was just a breath when she asked, "Do you like being talked to that way?"

Draco's eyes stayed on hers. "Depends on who's talking."

Her throat went dry.

"And if they say the right things."

Hermione looked away, too flustered to hold his gaze, but smiling despite herself.

"You really are the worst," she muttered, barely audible.

Draco tipped his head, voice dipped low again. "Can I ask you something else?" he said, quieter.

She raised a brow. "Aren't we past permission?"

He didn't smile. Not really. But his mouth pulled, just faintly.

He let the beat stretch. Then tipped his head. "How'd you like what we did at movie night?"

His gaze dipped to her mouth, then returned to her eyes. "That was pretty risky with everyone in the same room. Just a blanket between us and them."

She let out a shaky breath, couldn't deny the way it made her insides ache for something.

He leaned in slightly – not enough to close the space, just enough to make it feel like she'd fallen into something heavier. Something private.

"I was knuckle-deep inside you," he murmured, voice low and unrushed. "And you didn't stop me."

Hermione's skin flushed. Her fingers tightened on the edge of the bench.

"I was..." she breathed, then swallowed. "I didn't want to stop."

Draco's eyes gleamed, sharp and slow.

"Yeah?" he said. "You like that kind of risk?"

Hermione held his gaze, heart hammering. Her voice came out softer than she intended.

“I won’t lie, there was a thrill to it. But I didn’t like that I had to stay quiet.”

That did something to him. His jaw tightened, his oar hand stilling.

He didn’t smirk. Didn’t gloat.

And just like that, the boat wasn’t the only thing she felt off balance in.

“Next time, you won’t have to stay quiet,” he mumbled.

Next time.

He smirked, just slightly, but his eyes never left hers.

And Hermione knew, with sudden terrifying clarity, that if she asked him right now, in this moment, he’d show her exactly what he meant.

He said it like a warning and a promise all at once. Like he knew what he was capable of but wanted her to know that she’d always be the one holding the match.

Her foot moved before her brain gave permission.

She didn’t mean to do it, not entirely, but her ankle brushed against his under the bench. Barely there. Just the softest graze.

She could feel it. The heat of his calf through the fabric of her jeans. His body was so close. That point of contact now the loudest thing in the boat.

Their eyes dropped at the same time, to the place where her ankle rested against his, and then lifted slowly, meeting in the space between them. Her body had already reacted. The flush between her thighs, the ache low in her belly, the tightening heat she hadn’t been able to quiet since he had touched her underneath that blanket all those weeks ago.

Her eyes dropped to his lips, then wandered to his neck.

Then, slower this time, his ankle nudged back. The contact deliberate and answering.

A question passed between them, or maybe a promise.

She wasn’t sure how long she could hold this tension inside her. But the idea of ending it felt worse than letting it swallow her whole.

Draco’s gaze fell to where her ankle leaned into his. The smallest point of contact, and yet it felt like the whole boat tilted around it.

Her phone buzzed sharp against the wood of the boat.

Hermione flinched, startled, eyes flicking down.

The sound pierced the air between them like a snap of cold water, dragging them back to the surface. She pulled it from her bag, glanced at the screen.

“You should take that,” Draco murmured, even though his eyes lingered on her flushed skin like he wasn’t ready to let her go yet.

Hermione’s thumb hovered over the screen. For a breath.

Then she hit silence and placed it face-down in her bag without a word.

When she looked back up, Draco was still watching her – but something had shifted. Just slightly.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, low.

She held his gaze. “I know.” She could call Theo back later.

He studied her like he was afraid to misread the moment, like he wasn’t used to being the one someone chose in real time.

Then his jaw tightened. Not out of frustration. Something closer to restraint.

He leaned in, one hand brushing against her knee, steadying himself as the boat rocked.

And Hermione knew she had to tell him then, to admit it out loud after everything he had shared with her today.

So, she held her breath, and whispered, “I think about you too, you know.”

“Yeah?” he asked above a whisper too.

“I know this weekend has been a lot, but all I can think about right now is kissing you.”

Draco’s fingers tightened just slightly against her knee. “So why don’t you do it?”

That was the big question, wasn’t it? She pulled back slightly, sitting up straighter.

“Because I don’t want to want this more than you do. And I’m scared I already do.”

His eyes dropped to her mouth again. Slower this time. Hungrier.

Draco’s hand stilled against her knee.

“You’re not the only one scared,” he said, voice low. “I’ve been terrified since the moment I realized this wasn’t just in my head.”

Hermione inhaled, throat tight, as her heart gave one slow, heavy thud.

This wasn’t something she could outrun anymore.

Chapter 11: Private

Days passed without texts, but it didn't feel like distance.

It was the calls at night that made everything feel real.

It always started with a quiet “Hey” on the other end of the line.

Their conversations weren't long or profound, but something about hearing his voice settled her in ways she couldn't explain. They spoke about work – exhausting clients, meetings, co-workers. The other night, she'd fallen asleep with a book on her chest while he brushed his teeth on the other end.

And by Wednesday, she found herself getting excited on the way home, the anticipation of whether he'd call carrying her through the day. The ache for him was subtle but constant. A beautiful thing that tingled at the edges of every fleeting thought.

She constantly thought about the way his hand had rested on her knee in the boat that Sunday. The way his eyes had raked over her. The way he hadn't kissed her. She had hoped he'd ask when they'd see each other again. But he hadn't.

And still, he called. Every night.
It made her feel like she was falling.
Like maybe he was, too.

Theo hadn't let go of the idea of seeing her, to make sure she was okay after the weekend, even after she'd tried to suggest another week might be better.

The café across from her office was mostly glass and quiet on weekdays. It was the kind of place where the staff already knew her order. Where she liked the window seat.

Theo was already there when she arrived, tucked into a corner table with two drinks and his white polo shirt. He looked up the second the bell over the door chimed.

“You're late,” he said, smiling.

“I'm two minutes late,” Hermione sighed, hugging him tightly before sliding into the seat across from him.

Theo nudged the second drink toward her. “I got you the hibiscus tea.”

Hermione gave him a grateful look, exhaling. “You're too good to me.”

He arched a brow. “I know.”

They talked about her dad at first, then about the weather and how Theo's neighbor was trying to start a rooftop chicken garden now that the plumbing in their building was fixed again. She laughed easily, but the longer they sat, the more aware she became of the weight in her chest. The tug of anticipation she couldn't name but didn't bother denying.

Theo's voice drifted in and out, his words blurring as her mind wandered, catching the way he tossed her a glance now and then to make sure she was still with him.

And she was. Mostly.

But every so often, she felt herself slipping.

Back to Sunday, to the boat, to the way his hand had rested on her knee like he'd forgotten to move it.

Back to the nights that followed, his voice low and tired in her ear, speaking softly about nothing and everything.

She hadn't told anyone what was happening between her and Draco. It felt too fragile, too private to name out loud. Not even Ginny knew what had been brewing inside her since the weekend. But it was starting to feel like she was losing her grip, like keeping it all to herself was beginning to unravel her from the inside.

Last night, he had told her he couldn't stop thinking about how soft her skin looked. That he liked touching it. Like the thought had slipped out before he could stop it, because it had been sitting on his tongue for days.

She hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since.

There was no pretending anymore. They would be alone again, sooner or later. It felt inevitable now. Like something waiting just beneath the surface, ready to tip.

The group chat had come alive again, buzzing with messages about Game Night at Harry's this Friday. And unless something changed, that would be the next time she saw Draco.

She wasn't sure how it would go, all of them together again.

The thought made her stomach flutter and twist.

Would they be able to speak the way they needed to, with so many eyes around?

Would he even look at her the same way?

Maybe they could find a moment to slip away, to steal a little time, just the two of them. Just enough to quiet the ache.

Across from her, Theo was watching her carefully as she tore off a corner of her scone and let it sit uneaten in her hand. His eyes stayed on her a little longer than usual.

"You alright?" he asked finally.

Hermione startled. "Hm?"

"You're somewhere else."

She offered a faint smile, more habit than anything. "I'm just tired, sorry."

He nodded, but then leaned back slightly before adding too casually, "Meant to ask you about movie night."

Hermione took a sip of her tea, keeping her tone light. "What about it?"

She knew exactly what he meant. She hadn't forgotten the way their eyes had met that morning when she'd woken up tucked against Draco under the same blanket. She'd half-expected Theo to make a joke about it by now, loud enough for the entire group to hear. *But he hadn't.* Not until now.

“You and Malfoy were...” Theo hesitated, pretending to check something on his phone.

“Pretty close on the couch.”

She paused. “Obviously. There wasn’t much space.”

Theo looked up at that. “Right.”

Hermione tore another piece from her scone, her fingers overly focused.

He didn’t press immediately, but then added, “And he stayed with you in Luton. After your dad’s accident.” His voice was softer now. “That just seemed... out of character.”

Hermione shook her head. “He was just... being decent. It was late and you know how awful the weather was.”

Theo nodded, but his brows drew together faintly. “Yeah. It’s just—he’s not usually like that... with *you*.”

Hermione’s pulse picked up. She stared at her tea. “He was there because it was a crisis. Anyone would’ve.”

He tilted his head, unconvinced. “I’m just wondering if something’s going on between you two. That’s all.”

Hermione felt it before she even spoke; the twist of panic low in her chest, the way her throat tightened at the outside threat. She hadn’t expected to feel like this, to have to *say it out loud*. And the lie came faster than she meant it to.

“There’s not,” she said.

Theo just watched her patiently.

Hermione added more softly, trying to recover, “There’s nothing going on.”

But the heat in her cheeks gave away more than she liked, and her fingers wouldn’t stop fiddling with the corner of her napkin.

Something in the air between them had gone tighter.

“If you say so,” he said eventually.

And Hermione hated how her heart kept racing, like she’d just gotten away with something. The lie didn’t sit as easy as spoken. But somehow, she had grown protective of what was happening between her and Draco. It wasn’t anyone else’s business, and it was far from simple. It was theirs. And that, somehow, felt more important than anything else.

On Thursday night, just as she was drinking her tea by the kitchen window before heading to bed, her phone lit up with a text message.

DM:

*Still at the office. That case blew up, probably here another hour.
Didn’t want you thinking I forgot. Just didn’t have it in me to call tonight.
If you’re going to game night tomorrow, I’ll be there.
But honestly, I’d rather see you. Just us.*

She stared at the screen for a long time, her tea cooling in her hands.
She read the message again. And again.
The kitchen was quiet except for the faint hum of the fridge. Everything else had gone still.
She set the mug down, thumb hovering over the keyboard, heart stuttering out something close to hope. She started typing.

You could come over instead.

She stared at it for a second. Then added:

Only if you want to.

And then, before she could think better of it, she hit send.

Immediately, her stomach flipped.
She locked her phone and set it facedown on the counter, as if that might protect her from whatever came next.
A moment passed. Then another.

DM:

It's a date.

Hermione's breath caught somewhere between a laugh and a sigh as she bit down on her lower lip, cheeks warming. She stood there barefoot in her kitchen, tea long forgotten, heart skimming against her ribs like it had somewhere to be.
An hour later, he sent the group chat a message.

DM:

Won't make it tomorrow. Family thing. Sorry, next time.

Hermione stepped into her flat just after six on Friday, the door clicking shut behind her as she exhaled. Her heels were already in one hand, her tote bag slipping off her shoulder as she crossed the room and dropped everything onto the hallway bench.
She stood there for a moment, still in her work clothes, hair windblown from the walk, heart thudding fast.

Then she pulled out her phone, opened the group chat, and typed:

Hey guys, I think I'm coming down with something –stuffy head, scratchy throat, all that fun stuff. Staying home just to be safe. Don't want to get anyone else sick.

She sent it before she could second guess herself, then placed her phone down on the console table.

It buzzed almost immediately.

Her chest gave a small, ridiculous squeeze when she saw his name. She answered on the second ring, still standing by the door with her coat half unbuttoned.

“Hey,” she said softly, smiling already.

“Hey,” he echoed with a hint of amusement. “So... you’re contagious now?”

Hermione gave a breathy laugh.

“I could be there around eight?” he offered, voice quieter now. “Unless you’d rather—”

“I want you to come over,” she said, not letting him finish. “I really do.”

Her flat was too quiet. Like it knew what was coming.

By 7:15, she had already changed tops three times.

Her reflection in the bathroom mirror looked flushed. Not from heat, but from nerves and the simmering excitement. If someone had told her a few weeks ago that she’d be so excited to have Draco Malfoy come to her place to be alone with her, she’d have laughed.

She was halfway through pacing the living room when the buzzer finally went off. He was a little early again, but she came to anticipate it now.

The single *bzzt* felt like the perfect opportunity to take a steadying breath.

Hermione exhaled once, then went to press the intercom.

“Come up,” she said, and her voice was steadier than she’d expected it to be.

The second the buzzer clicked, she turned and walked quickly down the hallway, nerves kicking up in her chest like flutters against a windowpane.

She caught her reflection in the hallway mirror and paused. Her hand flew up to smooth the front of her silk top, then to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. It bounced free immediately. Her fingers skimmed the hem of her top again, adjusting it, then ran lightly over the edge of her lips. Her chest still felt tight, but not in a bad way. Not anymore. It was the kind of tight that came from knowing he was steps away.

She glanced once more in the mirror, heart skittering as she heard his unhurried footsteps on the stairs.

When she opened the door with her heart in her throat, he was just taking the last few steps up.

He was wearing a slate-grey jumper and dark jeans, casual in a way that should’ve been illegal on someone with cheekbones like his.

“You’re not looking very sick,” he said.

Hermione stepped aside to let him in, her smile tugging wider. “I made a miraculous recovery in the last hour.”

“Lucky me.” He passed her the wine as he stepped inside. “Brought reinforcements, just in case your condition worsens.”

“Thoughtful,” she murmured, fingers brushing his as she took the bottle. She didn’t miss the way his gaze lingered a little longer than necessary.

She turned toward the kitchen, trying to keep her breathing steady. “I’ll open this.”

Draco followed slowly, hands sliding into his pockets as he ended up leaning against the counter, watching her move.

Hermione busied herself with the corkscrew, but her hands felt clumsy under the weight of his gaze.

“You know,” he said after a beat, “I wasn’t sure if tonight would actually happen.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Why?”

He tilted his head, eyes softening. “Thought you might change your mind.”

Hermione’s fingers stilled on the cork. The bottle shifted in her grip slightly, but she caught it easily.

“I wasn’t going to,” she said quietly. “I’ve been thinking about you all week.”

Draco’s gaze dropped for a beat, a breath passing between them like he wasn’t sure what to do with that kind of honesty. When he looked up again, his voice was softer. “Yeah. Me too.”

She smiled small, a little shy. The cork gave way with a soft pop, and the sound seemed to settle the moment between them rather than break it.

She poured two glasses and handed him one.

“Cheers,” she said, her eyes finding his.

Draco tapped his glass against hers, eyes never leaving her. “To tonight.”

They both drank. And for the first time in days, her heartbeat finally started to slow in that way it only ever seemed to when he was this close.

Hermione turned to set the bottle down, and the second her back was to him, she felt the shift.

He stepped closer. Not in a rush or demanding. Just *there*, a few inches behind her, the heat of him brushing her skin.

Her breath caught.

Then gently, without a word, his hand rose and swept her hair over one shoulder.

She froze with anticipation. Her eyes fluttered shut as his fingers grazed the back of her neck, slow and careful.

His voice was a breath at her ear. “Glad we’re alone tonight.”

A quiet shiver rolled down her spine.

She turned to face him, slowly, heart thudding somewhere deep.

He was closer now. His wineglass dangled loosely at his side, forgotten.

Her voice was soft. “Me too.”

There was a pause. Charged and sweet and close.

Then he asked, barely above a whisper, “What are we having with the wine?”

She blinked, flustered. “Oh–Thai? I was just about to order.” She reached for her phone.

He didn't step back. Just stayed there, crowding her gently against the counter in a way that made her toes curl.

"Let me see."

Her hands were slower now, less steady. She opened the app and felt him shift behind her again...one hand brushing her hip, the other ghosting over her arm as he leaned in to look over her shoulder.

His chin nearly brushed her temple. His breath warmed the side of her neck. "Get the pad see ew," he murmured.

She selected it with trembling fingers. "Anything else?"

"You pick." His voice dipped.

When she placed the order and set the phone down, she felt him still behind her. Close enough that his wine glass clinked gently against the counter. Close enough that she could lean back just slightly and feel him, solid and quiet and undeniably there.

She didn't lean back.

But she didn't move away either. She couldn't think clearly with him so close.

His hand still rested lightly at her hip, his body brushing hers in a way that made her pulse race in her throat. And yet, neither of them spoke. The silence stretched, filled with the weight of every glance and nearly-crossed line that had led them here.

Slowly, Hermione turned her head, not fully, just enough for her temple to almost graze his cheek. Her voice, when it came, was quiet. Measured.

"Food's on its way."

He hummed in acknowledgment, the sound low in his chest, but he didn't move.

So she did – reluctantly. She stepped to the side, just a few inches, enough to shift the balance. Enough to reclaim just a little space. Her wineglass was still on the counter, and she reached for it, lifting it with fingers that were only now beginning to feel steady again.

She leaned her hip against the edge of the counter, letting the glass cool her palm, and tried to collect herself.

She needed to ground herself, so she said the next thing that came to mind. "I had lunch with Theo this week."

Draco looked up from his wine, where he'd eventually shifted back a step, but he didn't say anything right away.

She took another small sip, buying herself time. "He asked about you."

That got a reaction; a faint lift of Draco's brow.

His eyes didn't leave hers, but something about his face changed. Like a curtain had been drawn halfway. Not cold, but in a way that made her stomach dip.

"He asked if something was going on between us," she added, more careful now. "I told him no."

That made him look at her more directly. A flicker of something unreadable passed through his eyes. Not irritation exactly, but not nothing either.

Hermione shifted slightly where she stood. "I mean... I didn't know what to say. It's not even—" She cut herself off. "I just didn't want anyone meddling."

Draco leaned against the counter to mirror her posture, gaze steady. The pause stretched long enough for her to start second-guessing herself.

"Was that... alright?" she asked, quieter now. "That I didn't say anything?"

His brow lifted in something close to surprise. Then his mouth softened just slightly, enough to take the edge off whatever tension had started to build.

"Of course it is," he said calmly. "I wouldn't have said anything either."

She exhaled, slow and quiet, but it didn't fully settle her. Not when part of her still wondered if he minded. If maybe... he'd hoped she'd said something different.

Just when the silence started to settle between them again—

"You know Theo has a thing for you, right?"

She blinked. "What?"

Draco shrugged a little too casual. "Theo. He likes you."

Hermione scoffed, more confused than reflective. "That's ridiculous."

"You really didn't know?"

"No," she said, unconvinced. "I mean, he's never—he's always just been sweet. That's how he is."

He gave her a look. Not smug but faintly entertained.

"Oh, come on," she added. "We're just friends."

Draco didn't argue but looked at her like she was the most oblivious thing he'd seen all day.

Hermione frowned, scanning his face for any sign he was teasing. "You're serious?"

"I'm not judging," he said, holding up a hand. "I just think it's kind of... adorable. How you've apparently been blind to it this whole time."

Her mouth opened to argue, but then she paused. Her brow furrowed. "No," she said, slower now. "He's just like that. With everyone."

Draco tilted his head. "Is he though?"

Hermione opened her mouth again to just close it again. A flush crept up the side of her neck.

"That's not—He's never said anything."

"Doesn't need to," Draco murmured, entirely too calm about it. "He wears his heart on his sleeve."

She stared at him, "So what, you just *know* this sort of thing?"

He gave a lazy smirk. "I pay attention."

Hermione scoffed again, but it lacked faith. "Well, if he does... I didn't mean to lead him on."

"I don't think you did." Draco's voice had gone softer. "But you're so bloody oblivious sometimes, it's almost impressive."

She stared at him. "That's not true."

It was absurd, she knew Theo wasn't interested in her like that. There never had been any kind of spark between them.

Draco's lips curled into a tight smile. "You've got this way about you. You don't even notice when someone's falling sideways just trying to keep up."

Hermione stared at him, lips parted, but the words didn't land the way he seemed to expect. "That's not—" She shook her head. "No, I don't think that's true. Not with Theo."

Her voice wasn't sharp, but firm in that quietly certain way she used when she was sure of something. The idea simply didn't register. It didn't align with what she knew. Theo had always been sweet, yes. Attentive, even. But he was like that with everyone – or at least, with her in a way that had never felt complicated. She'd never once read a look or gesture and thought *maybe*. Never felt that electric pull. There had never been... *tension*.

She looked back at Draco, brow creasing. "He's my friend. That's all it's ever been." For a fraction of a second she wondered why Draco would read so much into this absurd idea.

Hermione's voice was quiet. "Would it matter to you? If he really had a thing for me?"

Draco's reply came just as softly. "Depends. Are you planning on doing something about it?" Their eyes locked. The moment hung between them, barely held together by silence and the space of a breath.

"No, of course not," she said then, honestly.

"Then I guess it doesn't matter," he said. "If there's no game to play, I'm not worried about who's on the field."

Hermione didn't reply at first. Just reached for her wineglass and finished what was left in it, her fingers brushing the rim with unnecessary focus.

"You want to sit down?" she asked quietly, the air still thick between them. "Before the food shows up?"

Draco nodded once and followed her into the living room.

She curled up on one side of the couch, and he sat near the other, their knees just barely angled toward each other.

She glanced at him, then at the stretch of cushion that wasn't much of a barrier at all, and reached for the remote.

"I put something on earlier," she said. "Some random film. You probably won't like it."

He settled further into the cushion. "You say that like I didn't just choose a Thai order based on name alone."

Hermione gave a quiet huff of a laugh. "Pad see ew is the safest thing on the menu."

"A gamble," he murmured, sipping his wine. "But ... I've taken worse ones lately."

That earned him a look from her, a curious one.

He set his glass down on the coffee table and leaned back, letting his arm drape loosely behind the couch.

"Is it weird?" she asked after a beat, eyes still flicking toward the screen. "That this feels... not so weird at all?"

Draco glanced at her. The corner of his mouth curved slowly. “No,” he said. “It’s not.” She nodded, turning back to the screen, letting the dialogue wash over them as some scene she couldn’t remember the setup for played out in low volume. Her refilled wineglass was cool in her palm. The cushion dipped slightly every time he shifted. And then the waves started to reach for her slowly. The awareness of him. Of how close he was. Of how her body had gone warm again in places she didn’t want to acknowledge just yet. Her mind was already moving.

She didn’t care about the movie or dinner. What she really wanted was to climb into his lap. Pressed against him like she belonged there, like her body had known that long before her head had caught up. They hadn’t talked about sex again since that boat ride. But it had stayed with her, curled in her thoughts, tucked behind every glance he gave her that lasted a second too long.

Celibacy had been a joke the moment he had whispered filth into her ear in her childhood bedroom last week. The way she’d yearned to be touched by him, to touch him too. The memory made her thighs press together slightly. She shivered.

And then the buzzer echoed from the hallway.

She startled just slightly as Draco moved to stand, the sudden absence of his warmth beside her sharper than it should’ve been. He made a quiet sound and stood. “I’ll get it.”

Hermione just nodded, her fingers curling tighter around the wineglass as if that might steady her. But as she watched him cross her living room, the way he moved through her space, she hoped this night would stretch on forever. She let herself sink back into the cushions. There was something almost boyish about the way he murmured a thank you to the delivery guy and how he didn’t quite know what to do with the oversized paper bag as he returned.

They ended up back on the couch with their plates balanced in their laps. It felt strangely easy. Like a rhythm they’d already fallen into without needing to name it. Hermione shifted slightly, nudging her knee into his, searching the contact. Draco gently bumped his back against hers, like a silent acknowledgment.

The movie played quietly in the background, but Hermione barely registered it. Not when she could feel the warmth of him, or the occasional flex of his hand when he reached for his drink. Not when her body responded to his presence like it had been waiting for it all along.

By the time the takeout containers sat nearly empty on the coffee table and their wine glasses had been refilled, they’d settled into something more comfortable.

Draco had stretched out a little more, making room for her between him and the armrest. She didn’t hesitate and slid into the space. Her head found his shoulder, his arm eased around her waist, fingertips resting lightly on the curve of her side. It felt... safe and nerve wrecking at

once. Hermione could feel the soft rhythm of his breathing, the occasional shift of his chest against hers. The movie went on.

She focused on the screen, but she wasn't really watching. Her body had gone warm and floaty, too aware of every breath he took beside her.

Halfway through a quiet scene, right when the music dipped low, Draco leaned in slowly and pressed his lips to that spot right by her ear. Barely a kiss at all. But it stole the air from her lungs just the same.

He didn't pull back right away; he lingered and made her feel every hot breath against her skin.

Her own breath caught. Just a hitch in her throat but it echoed, loud and undeniable in the stillness of her living room.

She couldn't move. His lips stayed there for another beat, pressed just beneath her ear, like he was learning the shape of her.

When he pulled back barely, his mouth hovered near her skin, breath warm against the edge of her jaw.

"Is this okay?" he murmured.

She shivered slightly, her eyes fluttering closed.

Hermione swallowed, her pulse thudding between her ribs.

"Yes," she said, too quietly. Then again, stronger. "Yes."

Draco still didn't move. "Not too much?"

She shook her head, but the movement was small, almost imperceptible. "No. It's perfect."

Then he shifted, mouth barely grazing the shell of her ear, voice dipping into something rougher. More intimate.

"We don't have to do anything tonight," he whispered. "If you want to wait I mean."

Hermione's fingers tensed where they rested against his chest.

His thumb stroked gently at her side. "This is... nice. Just like this."

She tilted her face toward his chest and let her hand curl lightly against his shirt. "Yeah," she whispered. "It really is."

He kissed her temple once, then looked straight ahead. The glow from the screen flickered across the walls, casting soft light over the two of them curled together. The way he held her was more possessive than protective, but she craved it.

His fingers occasionally traced slow, absentminded shapes against her hip, and the more they sat in it, the worse it got. Her pulse hadn't slowed since he'd whispered into her ear. Every nerve in her body was leaning into the memory, searching for the same sensation.

She swallowed and glanced up at him. His eyes were half-lidded, trained loosely on the screen, but his jaw was clenched tighter than before. He wasn't watching either. Not really. She could see the muscle ticking along his jaw.

That jaw. That spot right beneath it, where he'd said it got to him. Where he liked to be kissed. The one she'd caught herself staring at days ago, aching to taste it.

Her heart kicked hard against her ribs.

Her lips grazed the spot before she even fully sat up, soft at first, just a breath against his skin. As if to return his caress. Draco stilled, his whole body pulling taut beneath her. She pulled back just far enough to catch his eyes falling shut. Then she kissed him slower than before. Her lips parted, tongue brushing lightly over the warm stretch of skin just under his jaw, following a slow line she could feel him strain toward.

Draco let out a choked breath, like air had caught in his throat and refused to leave. His head tipped slightly, exposing more of his neck to her to allow her better access. “Fuck,” he whispered roughly. “Should’ve known you’d use that against me.” Hermione didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. Because she was already leaning in again, kissing lower. Right into the heat of his pulse, her lips dragging, her tongue tracing where the skin was most sensitive.

He groaned then, one hand clenching around her hip as if to anchor himself. “I’m trying really fucking hard to be patient here,” he said, breath shaky. She believed him. But she *couldn’t* stop. She didn’t want to. Not when he tasted like clean skin and aftershave. Not when the soft graze of stubble against her mouth made her lips ache and burn. Not when every part of her was trembling, pulled tight with the kind of want that left no room for logic.

This didn’t feel rushed. It felt long overdue. Like her body had been waiting for the promise of him.

Her hand moved slowly, hesitant at first, fingers trembling as they traced the shape of him through his jumper, down the line of his chest. She felt his stomach twitch under her touch, felt the shallow rise and fall of his breath as her palm dragged lower, over his abdomen.

And then she touched him right through the denim.

Draco’s whole body tensed beneath her like she’d knocked the air from his lungs. Her fingers flexed, slow and searching, applying just the faintest pressure, and she felt him harden beneath her hand. Like his body had been aching for her, just waiting for permission to show it.

A sound broke in his throat, not a word, not a moan, but something raw and involuntary. It slipped out like he couldn’t hold it back, like her touch had cracked something open inside him.

One of his hands shot out, covering hers. His fingers slid over hers, pressing down, guiding her palm harder against him. She felt the full weight of him then, thick and undeniably hard, as he pushed into her touch with a single quiet, desperate grind of his hips.

She’d known from movie night how hard and heavy he’d pressed against her, but she’d half-convinced herself that her foot’s accidental measurements might’ve been... generous. Slightly skewed by wine and adrenaline and the dizzying way he’d whispered her name.

But he was exactly as big as she'd remembered. Maybe bigger.
Her breath hitched against his jaw, chest tightening with the realization that he wanted *more*.
That he couldn't help it either.

His grip tightened around her hand, fingers squeezing hers in a silent, desperate plea the moment she sighed against his skin. Then, as if the last of his control had snapped, he dropped his hand away again, arm going slack like he no longer trusted himself to move.

Her thighs pressed together at the way he held tension across his entire body – neck taut, hand curled into a fist against the cushion, like he was on the edge of something dangerous and trying so hard to keep it together.
And she liked the feeling of power it gave her far too much.

She had never wanted someone like this before. Not with this ache that went beyond lust. She kept devouring the skin of his neck, with more tongue and more need. It felt messy – her hand dragging slowly over the thick seam of his jeans, her fingers trembling as they stroked the full length of him. And the heat that roared back at her from his body nearly undid her.

He didn't stop her palm dragging slowly up his length again, the thick ridge beneath his jeans impossible to ignore. Her throat felt dry at the feel of him getting impossibly harder. He made a sound low in his chest, not quite a groan, more like a growl swallowed down through clenched teeth. Then his hips shifted, just slightly, like his body was fighting instinct. Like he didn't want to thrust up into her hand even though every muscle in him was begging to.

She stroked him again – slower now, more pressure, the way he'd shown her that night on her couch. His head tipped back with a sharp hiss, teeth clenched, chest rising like he couldn't get enough air.

Hermione leaned in, teeth grazing his jaw. "I want you," she whispered.

His entire body jerked beneath her. He didn't answer.

So she kissed him again – warm, open-mouthed, hungrier now – and whispered it again, this time into the heat of his neck as her thumb swept over the tip of his length through the denim. "Do you want to come to my room, Draco?"

A groan tore from him then. His hips bucked up, hard enough to make her hand slip. He caught her wrist, firm but careful, and pressed her palm flush to his cock with a quiet, helpless noise. When his eyes opened, they were black with want.

"Do you really want to?" he rasped, voice broken at the edges.

Hermione pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth, her lips curling slightly, her heart pounding hard enough to feel in her fingertips.

"Please," she whispered.

For a moment, he just looked at her, like he was trying to memorize the exact way she said it. The quiet plea. The way her lips brushed his. The way she meant it. Then he moved with a purpose that made her breath catch.

He slid his hand up her wrist, trailing his fingers to her elbow, then up to her shoulder, as if grounding her first before he gently nudged her hand away from him. A soft exhale escaped him when the contact broke, like even that took effort.

“Come on,” he said roughly as took back his control.

He stood and offered her his hand.

Hermione placed her fingers in his without hesitation.

He pulled her up with ease but didn’t let go. He just kept her hand in his as he led her down the hall, every step silent but weighted with tension so thick it was dizzying. The only sound was the faint buzz of the film still playing behind them and their quiet breaths.

Her bedroom door clicked softly shut behind them. Then came the soft sound of his footsteps across the rug. Her skin tingled with every step he took.

When he reached her, he didn’t touch her. Just stood close enough that she could feel the heat of his body behind her.

His voice, when it came, was a little rough.

“Look at me,” he said, almost at her ear.

Hermione turned slowly.

Draco stepped forward and raised a hand to tuck a loose curl behind her ear.

“Still time to change your mind,” he murmured. His palm lingered against her cheek, thumb brushing just once along the soft skin beneath her eye. “Tell me and I’ll back off. No questions.”

Hermione leaned into his touch, her lips parting on a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “I’m not changing my mind. I want you,” she whispered.

Draco’s lips were on hers before she could draw another breath, and it wasn’t gentle. It was slow and heavy. His hand slid into her hair, angling her head just enough to deepen it, and her arms came up instinctively to wrap around his shoulders.

She gasped when the back of her knees met the mattress. His hands found her waist, thumbs brushing beneath the hem of her top, and the contact sent a shiver racing through her spine.

He pulled back just barely, foreheads resting together, his voice a breath against her mouth.

“Tell me if you need me to slow down.”

“You’re perfect,” she whispered. “This is perfect.”

Their mouths met like they’d already done it a thousand times in their heads – messy, gasping, no time for caution. Her hands tangled in the front of his jumper, tugging him closer, until his hands slid to her hips, pulling her flush against him.

She kissed him like she’d been starving for weeks. And he let her. Let her claim him. Let her mouth trail up and over his cheek, his jaw, her breath shivering against his skin.

He pulled back just enough to drag his jumper and shirt over his head in one clean motion, the fabric catching slightly on his elbows.

Before she could say anything, she pressed her lips to his collarbone openly. She was so desperate for this.

She latched just beneath the edge of his clavicle, fingers sliding over bare skin like she didn't know where to touch him first. Her palms moved greedily up his chest, over the lean muscle, her fingertips catching on the line of his ribs like they were counting them.

Draco made a sound in the back of his throat, half restraint, half surrender. But then his hands came up to cup her face, thumb brushing her cheek as he kissed her again. Slow, then hungrier.

He moved one hand to the back of her neck, the other cradling the base of her head as he tugged her in, holding her so close her toes left the floor. Her body molded to his, soft curves against warm, flexing muscle.

And there, pressed chest to chest, breath mingling, Hermione could feel it.

His heartbeat. Fast and wild between them.

Draco's hands dropped to the hem of her top, reaching while she nodded her approval and lifted her arms. He pulled it over her head, the cool air hitting her bare skin without wearing a bra.

He didn't rush, but his gaze dropped to take her in. Her chest rose and fell, flushed and bare before him, nipples tightening under his stare. She used to be a little self-conscious about her chest – not overly large, but full enough to feel noticeable.

His gaze lingered like he wanted to remember the exact curve of her, like her bare skin was something he'd been craving in secret. And when his thumb brushed along the swell of her breast, slow and deliberate, tracing the soft edge before sweeping over the peak – her breath hitched.

He leaned down, mouth trailing open kisses along her collarbone, working his way down until his lips closed gently around one nipple. She gasped, fingers tightening in the waistband of his jeans.

He sucked lightly, tongue flicking just enough to make her thighs press together desperately. Then he moved to the other, his hand teasing the one he'd left behind.

Her voice broke on a silent moan, her fingers sliding up his back, nails dragging.

He looked up, mouth still brushing against her breast. "Bed."

She let herself fall back into the pillows; her hair splayed around her like some messy, divine halo. He hovered above her, watching her like he'd snap at any second. But he didn't. He followed, knees sinking into the mattress on either side of her thighs, hands braced beside her head.

His mouth found hers again. Deeper now.

One of his hands trailed down her body, across her ribs, over her hip, and then he tugged at the button of her jeans, dragging down the zipper.

Hermione sighed with relief as the denim loosened at her hips, his knuckles brushing her skin before he got a hold of her waistband and started tugging down her pants and underwear together.

She lifted her hips without being asked, and the sound Draco made went straight to her core. He dragged everything down in one smooth motion, his eyes never leaving her as he knelt to slide the denim past her knees, her calves, and finally off her feet.

When he looked back up her thighs had parted slightly, instinctively, and he couldn't seem to look away. One hand came up to stroke along the inside of her leg, slowly, until his fingers brushed her lower lips.

She gasped.

"Oh shit," he muttered, half in awe, half in need. His thumb swept gently through her slick folds, watching her hips twitch in response. "I love how wet you get before I even touched you properly."

He shifted lower, settling between her thighs like he belonged there. He spread her with both thumbs, teasing and demanding in the way he opened her.

Hermione's lips parted; her eyes drawn to the way he looked up at her from between her legs. "I always wondered what you'd taste like."

The first stroke of his tongue made her hips jolt. He groaned in response, anchoring her with one hand splayed flat on her stomach as his mouth on her got messier.

"Draco," she whispered, breath trembling. Her fingers tangled in the sheets as he showered her with open mouthed kisses. She writhed when he slid his tongue inside her.

"Draco—Oh—"

Her back arched off the bed, thighs trembling around his shoulders as he devoured her – not with patience, but with purpose, like he'd been dreaming of this, like he couldn't get deep enough.

His tongue moved with slow, devastating precision; every stroke calculated to make her lose herself. He licked into her again, groaning as she clenched around nothing, his mouth wet and relentless, his hand pressing her hips down each time they tried to lift off the bed.

"Draco," she whimpered again, her voice catching on his name. It sounded like music now, chanting it.

She felt his infuriating smirk against her, felt the warm exhale of breath when he dragged his tongue back up to flick gently over her clit before circling it with maddening control.

"You taste like fucking heaven," he muttered into her, the rough scrape of his voice vibrating through her skin. "So sweet—shit, I could live right here."

She gasped, fingers flying to his hair, tangling as her thighs tried to close around his head. He

groaned in approval and gripped her harder, thumbs digging into the tops of her thighs to hold her open.

Then he flattened his tongue and dragged it over her again, almost heavy this time. She cried out, back arching fully, chasing the pressure, the friction, the *heat*.

She was close. Already. Embarrassingly fast. But she couldn't stop it – didn't *want* to.

Her body was on fire, every nerve alive and demanding.

"Please–please, don't stop–" she choked out, not caring how she sounded, not caring about anything except the way he kept worshiping her with his mouth, with the filthy noises he made, like this was the only thing he'd ever wanted.

And the way he moaned in response with that low, needy sound nearly undid her.

She was right there.

So close she could taste it, feel it coiled tight and trembling in her spine, her thighs shaking, breath shattered – and then–

He stopped.

His mouth left her with a slow, lingering kiss, like he hated leaving her just as much as she hated him for doing it. Her body pitched forward in confusion, her hips chasing his tongue, but he was already sliding up her body, dragging heat and open-mouthed kisses over her stomach, between her ribs, over the swell of her breast.

"No–" she gasped, voice cracking. "Draco, please–"

He kissed the underside of her breast, then her collarbone, until his mouth was at her ear.

"Shh," he whispered, his fingers stroking up her sides, slow and soothing. "I know. I know you were close."

She whimpered beneath him, her legs still twitching, her body aching with the frustration of being denied.

"But you're not coming like that," he murmured, teeth grazing her earlobe. "Not yet."

Her breath hitched again, tears almost stinging at the corners of her eyes from the sheer *want* of it.

"You think I don't want to taste you fall apart?" he whispered, fraying with his own need.

"Fuck, I do. But I need you soaking for me when I slide in."

His hips rocked forward just enough that she could feel his clothed cock pressed against her wet and swollen folds. He was thick and hard through his jeans, dragging a choked moan from her throat.

"I want to be so deep when you come you forget how to speak," he breathed, mouth brushing over hers now. "You're already dripping. I just want to make sure you're nice and ready for me."

Her body shivered beneath him. She tried to kiss him, to pull him down, to beg again, but he caught her wrists gently and pinned them beside her head as his mouth ghosted across her jaw.

"I'll give it to you," he promised, voice like silk over fire. "Soon."

He kissed her again. "You'll come *so hard* for me."

And the best part was that she believed him.

He hovered above her, chest heaving.
Draco groaned, grinding against her soaked center. "Fuck. You're unreal."
Then his voice dropped. "Do you want me to put on a condom?"
She blinked, dazed, chest still rising and falling.
"I'm on birth control," she muttered in a haze.
His gaze stayed locked on hers. "That wasn't my question."

Warmth bloomed in her chest, something that had nothing to do with lust. The fact that he was still thinking clearly. Still giving her the chance to decide.

She shook her head. "If you're okay without it... I just want to feel you."
His lips, still wet with the evidence of what he did to her, covered her neck and jaw. His tongue swept up the side, teeth grazing the skin just beneath her ear. "You're so desperate for this," he murmured, grinding into her again. "It's so fucking hot."

Hermione whimpered, her hips lifting to meet him, trying to find friction against the denim.
"It's been so long," she admitted, cracking as she clutched at his sides. "I need—"
"I'll make this good," he promised quietly, kissing her temple.
She didn't realize how hard she was shaking until he touched her again.

Draco had just stripped off the last of his clothes, jeans dropped somewhere at the edge of the bed, leaving nothing between them but air and heat.
He moved slowly as he crawled back over her. His skin warm, flushed. His eyes hungry with want, even in the dark room.

Hermione tried to breathe evenly, but her pulse was frantic. Not with fear, not entirely. But with the weight of how much she wanted this, how much she wanted *him*. And still, a small voice curled tight in the back of her mind, whispering past doubts.
Her thighs tensed the second his fingers brushed between them again. Not from discomfort – she was as he rightfully had stated *soaked* – but from something else. Hesitation. A subtle lock in her hips she hadn't meant to happen. She'd been worried about this turning to disappointment at some point. That she had made it all up in her head. That he'd finish quickly and leave her out to dry.

Draco caught her shift immediately, eyes flicking up to her face to watch her closely.
"Hey," he whispered with such warmth it almost broke her. He leaned in, pressed a soft kiss to the edge of her jaw. "Still with me?"
She nodded half-heartedly with her throat tightening around nothing. "I'm fine. I just—"
The breath she let out wavered slightly. She opened her mouth to explain, to rationalize, to deflect like she always did, but it caught in her throat. He was still watching her. Not impatient. Not frustrated. Just present. Quiet and grounded and reading every line of her body without her saying a word.

And that was the thing, wasn't it?

No one had ever noticed. Not like this. Not the way her breath hitched. Not the way her thighs tensed when a thought got too loud. Not the way she turned in on herself when her

brain started running.

He saw it all. And he hadn't even asked why. He'd just asked if she was still with him.

Her lips parted again to explain, to fill the silence, but then something broke loose inside her. The pressure, the swirl of want, the ache to be understood for once instead of just touched. She surged forward, catching his face in both hands and pulling him down to her. The kiss was anything but delicate. It was messy and sudden and full of everything she couldn't say. Her fingers tangled in his hair, her mouth open against his, teeth catching slightly on his lower lip before she sucked it in apology. Or maybe in punishment.

Draco only froze for half a heartbeat, like he hadn't expected it before he made a sound low in his throat and kissed her back with a kind of desperate care, like she was both a challenge and something sacred.

His hand found her hip again, the other curling around the back of her neck, anchoring her to him as he deepened the kiss, mouths slanting, breath catching, the press of his body unmistakable now.

He didn't ask again. He didn't need to.

He reached down again, slower this time, and slid a single finger between her folds. Hermione gasped softly as he circled her, then pressed inside. "So tight," he muttered, half to himself, like he wasn't sure if he could handle how she clenched around just one finger.

A beat later, a second finger joined, and she moaned, the sound caught between surprise and relief. He moved with intention – curling, coaxing, building her back up inch by inch. She whimpered, hips moving with him, body betraying how much she wanted it. His mouth trailed down her neck again, tongue flicking over the spot just beneath her ear.

Hermione's fingers tangled in his hair, tugging him closer. Her body felt molten, her skin vibrating with need. She arched into him, lips brushing his ear.

"You're so big," she whispered. "I'll need your help."

He groaned like he'd been holding back too long.

And Hermione... Hermione let herself fall.

"I'll help your pretty little pussy," he murmured against her cheek like velvet.

She nodded, eyes fluttering closed, her body arching as he shifted over her again. His hand left her only long enough to guide himself between her legs, the head of him brushing against the soaked heat of her core.

He dragged the tip of his cock through her folds, slicking himself in her arousal as he watched her shudder beneath him. Hermione's hips twitched, her breath catching every time he nudged against her clit.

"Fuck yeah," he murmured, dragging his length over her again.

She moaned, hips chasing his movement, her thighs tensing around him.

He pressed forward just enough for the thick head to catch at her entrance. He didn't push in,

just rested there. Her body clenched at the tease of it, greedy to pull him in.

"Please," she whispered, breath ragged.

But he only moved his hand back between her legs and thumbed slow, lazy circles over her swollen clit, watching the way her body bucked at the touch.

"You think I can just slide into this tight little cunt without taking my time?" he said low against her neck, though he was the one shaking now.

His thumb circled tighter, then slipped lower to spread her open with a filthy sound. He rubbed the head of his cock along her folds again, smearing her arousal everywhere, deliberately *not* pressing in.

"Draco—" she cried, frustrated.

"You feel like you'll break me the second I'm inside you," he rasped before he kissed her mouth again, then reached down to stroke himself once, guiding the tip to her entrance.

"I'm going to stretch you so full," he whispered against her lips. "And then I'm going to fuck you."

And finally, *finally*, he began to press in properly.

Her lips parted with a small, startled sound. He was too thick, her body said for one panicked second, and her walls clenched instinctively.

"Shhh," he soothed, brushing her hair back from her face. "It's alright. We've got time."

Her hand gripped his forearm, nails digging slightly. He didn't push. Just waited. Let her body adjust.

Hermione opened her eyes slowly. "It's... a lot."

"I know," he whispered, kissing the edge of her jaw. "You're doing perfect. Just let me take care of it."

He rolled his hips slightly, not to push deeper, just to give her the pressure, the stretch, the promise of more.

Her breath caught again.

His voice dipped. "You feel so fucking good."

A soft, unbidden moan escaped her throat. Her hips shifted toward him.

"There you go," he breathed, kissing her collarbone. "That's it."

He pressed forward again, inch by inch, careful as ever. His muscles strained with restraint. And she felt that control. How turned on he was. How badly he wanted to move harder, faster, but didn't.

"I'm not going anywhere," he whispered into her skin. "You'll take every inch."

Her nails dug deeper into his forearm as he eased in, her breath catching with every inch. The stretch was thick and unrelenting, her body fighting to take him but wanting it all the same. He didn't stop. He just kissed along her throat, murmuring filth like comfort.

"That's it. You're taking my cock so well."

Hermione moaned helplessly at the praise, her walls fluttering around him. Her thighs were trembling now, wrapped around his hips, trying to stay open for him even as her muscles tightened reflexively with every slow, steady push.

Her head fell back against the pillow, lips parting in a wordless gasp and he groaned against the curve of her neck.

“*Fuck*,” he hissed.

Her body pulsed around him, adjusting, clenching, burning with the stretch. He didn’t move. Didn’t even *breathe* for a second. He was letting her feel every inch of him. Letting her *realize* just how deep he was.

“Can you feel that?” he whispered against her ear. “How deep I am inside you?”

She whimpered, her hands flying to his back, nails dragging as she clung to him.

“So deep,” she managed.

He pulled back just barely, then rolled his hips forward again and she *cried out*, overwhelmed by the way he dragged against every nerve inside her.

Her hips lifted without thinking, chasing more. His mouth brushed her ear again, words nothing more than a broken whisper.

“You alright?” he asked roughly.

She could only nod, her eyes wide, her body on fire. “You can move.”

“Oh, fuck—”

Her legs wrapped instinctively around his waist, needing him closer, needing the friction. His breath stuttered near her ear.

“That’s it,” he rasped. “Take it.”

Hermione exhaled shakily, her legs trembling around his hips, thighs tight with tension. He was so deep already, and she swore she could feel every ridge, every beat of his pulse.

“I–Draco,” she breathed, forehead pressing to his.

His hand slid up to cradle the side of her face, thumb tracing her cheekbone. “It’s okay.” He kissed her gently.

He moved in her just the slightest bit, drawing back and then forward again with care, as if testing what her body would allow. Her breath hitched, back arching with the stretch.

“You feel...” he groaned, burying his face in the crook of her neck, “so tight around me.

Fuck, Hermione.”

She whimpered, one hand fumbling at his back, nails dragging lightly down to his waist. His body was hot but covered in goosebumps. Hearing him say her name while being inside of her did something to her. His voice, the weight of him, the way he held himself back just for her...it was all too much and not enough at once.

“I want to,” she whispered, voice tight. “I want all of it. It’s just—too much, too fast—”

“We’ll slow down.” He kissed the corner of her mouth. “I’ve got you.”

He shifted again, easing out nearly all the way before rolling his hips forward with a gentle push, the movement deeper this time, more fluid. Her jaw slackened as the pressure built again, new and overwhelming and burning in the best way.

Her fingers curled into the muscles at his waist as he rocked into her again, slower this time but deeper, the motion steady and *anchored*, like he needed her to feel every inch he was giving her.

She gasped. Not from pain, but from the *how full she felt*. The way her body clenched around him as if trying to memorize his shape.

Draco groaned low against her throat, his breath hot and shaky. "There you go," he whispered. "That's it. Take it, just like that."

She nodded against him, her eyes fluttering shut, her body beginning to *open up*. The burn was still there, but it was sweeter now, sharp at the edges, but softened by the heat building between them.

His hand was still on her cheek, holding her like she was something precious. The other slid between their bodies, fingers grazing her lower belly, then dipping down to circle her clit in slow, coaxing strokes.

Hermione cried out, her back arching into him as her hips instinctively chased the rhythm. "I want you to come like this," he whispered, lips brushing her ear. "With me inside you. With you so fucking full of me."

She moaned, body seizing at the idea, at the way his words alone lit something *desperate* inside her. He had to let go of her all together as he shifted, supporting himself on his elbows next to her shoulders, caging her.

When he pulled back and pushed back in from the slight shift in positions, he found something inside of her.

Her body jolted like she'd been struck by lightning, her mouth parting around a gasp she didn't even have time to release.

"There," Draco groaned above her. "That's the spot?"

Her eyes fluttered open, wide with disbelief, as if her own body had betrayed her. "Oh—God, yes."

He didn't rush it. He kept the rhythm slow, maddening, dragging every motion out with purpose as he hit that spot again and again.

"Tell me," he murmured, breath hot against her ear. "Tell me if it's too much, or if you want more."

Hermione's head tipped back as her eyes fluttered shut again. "More," she gasped. "Draco, please."

A deep sound left his throat. "You're so perfect like this. You know that?"

Her hips moved to meet his, instinct taking over even as her mind threatened to spiral – it was too good to be true. What if she couldn't come? What if she ruined it?

She hesitated, breath faltering. He noticed instantly.

"Don't think right now," he said softly, voice patient, like a tether keeping her from floating too far. "You don't have to chase anything. I'll chase it for you. I'm not going anywhere."

He leaned down briefly to kiss her sloppily, then his hips rolled again, deeper this time. Her fingers found his arms, clinging to him, and her body began to yield again, the tension melting into something needier, something liquid.

"I'll stay hard for hours," he whispered, "with this perfect little pussy gripping me like that." Heat flooded her spine at the sheer filth in his voice.

Her gaze dragged down to where she was holding his arm, catching on the tight line of his

strained biceps, trembling slightly under the weight of holding himself above her. But he didn't falter. He didn't break. The muscles shook with effort, not weakness, as if he needed that restraint to stop himself from collapsing into her completely.

He shifted slightly – just a subtle change in angle, a rhythm that sent her back arching in response. Her lips parted on a quiet gasp, the sound low and drawn out.

Draco groaned softly, the sound vibrating from somewhere deep in his chest. “That,” he shook. “That feel good?”

She nodded, but words didn't come. Not when she was shaking, too wrapped around him, overwhelmed in the best possible way.

His forehead dropped to hers for a moment, his breath fanning across her cheek. Then he pulled back just enough to look at her again, his eyes heavy-lidded, jaw clenched, but soft in a way that made her ache.

She squeezed his arms gently, still clinging. “Don't stop,” she whispered.

“How could I ever stop,” he murmured back, his pace unrelenting, like he was pouring every quiet confession into the movement.

She felt so safe with him, her body arching into him as she whispered within a broken moan, “Right there. Don't stop. That–Draco, that feels so good...”

Hermione's legs fell open as he began to thrust. The angle dragged him right over that devastating spot, and it made her nerves feel like they were sparking under her skin.

Her whole body clenched around him, hips tipping involuntarily to chase the sensation.

“That's it,” he rasped. “Right there–yeah, I feel you.”

She whimpered. Her fingers clung to his strong arms, her hips moving on instinct now, trying to meet each slow thrust.

He brushed against her clit, not directly, but with each slow press of his hips, the base of him caught just enough to send flickers of pressure through her core. That, combined with the steady glide of him inside her, was dragging her toward something terrifyingly intense.

“Oh...” she breathed. “I–” She was shaking her head, breath stuttering. “It's so much. I don't want to lose it–”

His hand cradled her jaw, tilting her face so their eyes met. His own were heavy, dark with want but clear. Focused. “Talk to me. What do you need?”

Her lips parted, but the words tangled behind her teeth.

“Say something,” she managed hoarsely. “Just keep talking.”

That did something to him. He breathed out a strained laugh.

“You want me to keep running my mouth?” he asked, dipping his head to kiss the corner of hers. “That what gets you off?”

She moaned, and he thrust in again, grinding into her in that exact rhythm that kept brushing her clit just enough to drive her wild.

“I can feel how close you are,” he whispered. “The way you're fluttering around my cock? Fuck, Hermione. You're a tight little thing.”

Her head dropped back into the pillow, lips parting on a broken sound. The heat in her

stomach curled tighter, climbing toward something inevitable.

“Oh shit,” he growled. “You’re getting wetter every time I move. You feel that?”

She nodded, eyes squeezed shut, but he caught her chin again and made her look at him.

“Keep looking at me while I fuck you,” he said.

Hermione whimpered again, thighs trembling, her nails digging into his arm.

He shifted his angle one more time as he came back down, his naked chest pressing against her breasts. He hugged her, his hands diving into her hair and neck, holding her in place while his thrusts turned a little sharper, brushing that sweet, devastating spot that made her legs quake.

“You feel that? That perfect fucking spot—God, I could spend all night right here, watching you come undone.”

Hermione gasped, her whole body trembling as her fingers clutched at his back as she let go off his arms with him covering her fully.

Draco leaned in, his lips brushing her ear as he groaned, “I love how messy you get for me... how you sound when I’m deep inside you like this.” He licked her ear then, kissing it and sucking her earlobe in. The sounds together with the way he kept hitting that spot inside her made her eyes roll back into her head.

“There,” she choked. “Draco—*oh my god*, right there—”

He didn’t let up. He kept his rhythm brutal in its accuracy, *right there*, hitting that spot again and again until she could barely breathe. Her body lit up with every thrust, every sharp drag of him against the place that made her fall apart.

He was saying something but she couldn’t make sense of the words anymore. She could only feel. The stretch, the fullness, the pressure of him driving into her like he was trying to *break her open*.

Her hands clawed into sweat-slick skin as her legs locked around his waist. She was spiraling, her body trembling, slick and shaking beneath him, clinging like he was the only solid thing in the world.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped, her voice barely there. “Draco—*please*—”

“You’re so hot,” he growled, teeth scraping against her jaw. “Come for me.”

Her stomach clenched.

“I’m gonna—*fuck*, I’m—”

And then it crashed through her.

The orgasm ripped her apart, violent and total. Her whole body seized, her cunt clenching hard around him, pulsing in frantic waves. A cry broke from her lips, as she convulsed beneath him.

Her fingers gripped him tighter. Her legs trembled and her vision whited out, mouth slack as the waves kept coming, dragging her deeper.

She felt every inch of him through the climax, every thrust making her walls spasm again, sending aftershocks down her spine until her whole body melted beneath him.

A rush of slick heat spilled between them – almost a little gush – and she felt it, felt how

soaked she was now, how wet she'd made him, how easily his cock slid in and out of her as she clenched around it.

Draco groaned like he'd lost his mind.

"Fuck!" he growled, moan breaking. "That's—god, that's so hot. You're making such a mess for me."

He didn't stop moving. His rhythm stuttered only slightly before he picked up again, hips pressing deeper, more desperate now, chasing that friction, that slick heat. His own control slipping, the feel of her climax pushing him closer.

Hermione shivered beneath him, panting, dazed, completely wrecked.

And he was still hard inside her.

"Can you give me one more?" he rasped, dragging his mouth along her jaw. "Think you can take another?"

Draco's pace stuttered, his breath turning jagged against her cheek as every movement dragged a whimper from her throat. Her body was still trembling from the first climax, hypersensitive now, her thighs twitching with every thrust.

"Can't—" she gasped, shaking. "I don't think I can again."

He didn't stop. Didn't even hesitate. Just kissed the edge of her jaw, whispering roughly, "That's okay."

His hand cradled her head, his other gripping her hip like he needed her to stay grounded, to stay here with him while he unraveled.

"Fuck—you came so hard for me," he breathed, fraying at the edges. "I nearly lost it. You don't know what that does to me."

Hermione moaned softly, her hands sliding over his back, fingers curling against the sweat-dampened muscles there. "Draco—"

"I'm close," he whispered. "So fucking close."

She could feel the way he tightened against her, the urgency creeping in now, his body thrumming with it. Every thrust deeper, more desperate, and she was fluttering around him again, not from climax, not quite, but from the sheer overwhelming intensity of it. His voice. His body. The way he was *losing himself* in her.

"I can pull out," he gasped, barely getting the words out. "Just—tell me, I'll—"

"No," Hermione whispered breathless. Her hands held him tighter. "Please don't pull out. Come inside me. Please come inside me."

He groaned, *loud* and unfiltered, something almost broken in the sound of it. His rhythm faltered, hips grinding in deep, and he buried his face in her neck as the orgasm hit him.

"Fuck—Hermione—*fuck*—"

He came hard, hips jerking against her as he whimpered and grunted, loud and desperate, nothing held back. She felt the rush of it, the way his body locked up, trembling through every inch of him.

The sound of him so wrecked, dragged a small, helpless whimper from her chest. Her body

clenched around him again, not a full orgasm, but a flutter of pleasure so sharp and fragile it made her eyes sting.

She held him through it, kissing his temple, his jaw, murmuring quiet nothings as his body finally stilled.

He didn't move. Just stayed there, still buried inside her, his breath hot against her collarbone.

Her fingers slid gently into his hair, damp with sweat, her palm cradling the back of his head as she pressed her lips softly to his temple. He was panting against her, chest heaving, body heavy on top of hers in the best way, like they were still fused together, like he couldn't bring himself to let go.

And neither could she.

The high had started to fade, but it left something sweeter in its place. A hum in her bones, a flush beneath her skin. Their bodies had stopped moving, but they hadn't let go. One of her feet was still tucked behind his calf, and his fingers brushed her hip absently, like he didn't even realize he was doing it.

Her walls fluttered again around him, over-sensitive and still stretched, and he groaned quietly, the sound raw and buried in her skin.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath.

She could still feel every inch of where he'd been, the echo of how he'd moved inside her.

The mess between them. The slick heat. The tremble in her thighs.

And the way he was *still* inside her.

Draco shifted slightly, just enough to rest more of his weight on his forearms, still buried deep, still breathing like he hadn't come all the way back down yet.

She looked up at him, gently brushing his hair back from his face. His eyes were closed, jaw slack, expression wrecked... He looked like he'd just handed her every part of himself.

Hermione felt her throat tighten. She leaned up and kissed the corner of his mouth, just once.

He opened his eyes slowly, gaze heavy, glassy, and searching.

"I didn't know it could feel like that," she whispered.

A breath of a laugh escaped him, almost disbelieving.

Hermione slipped out of bed slowly, careful not to jostle the mattress too much as she padded toward the bathroom, bare and flushed and still aching faintly between her thighs.

She winced as she sat, *already sore*, the stretch of him still lingering in her body. She felt every inch of it. The fullness, the pressure, the way he'd stayed deep and slow until he came so hard.

She exhaled as she used the loo, bracing one hand against the sink. Her body was still catching up, the warmth between her legs a constant reminder of just how completely he'd claimed her.

When she finished, she wet a soft towel under warm water and grabbed a clean dry one too, wrapping them both in her arms before heading back into the bedroom.

Draco was lying on his back, one arm tucked under his head, the other stretched across the empty space where she'd been. His chest rose and fell in that slow rhythm.

She crossed the room, and he looked over at her.

"I brought you these," she murmured, holding out the warm towel first.

His brows lifted slightly, surprised, and something like fondness flickered across his face. He took the towel from her slowly, sitting up halfway. "Thanks," he said, still a little rough.

She smiled, sinking to her knees beside the bed as he cleaned himself off. She handed him the dry towel after, then stood up and turned to go. But Draco reached for her wrist and tugged gently.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I was going to get water—"

"Later," he muttered. "Just come here for a moment."

Hermione climbed back in, the sheets still warm, and he wrapped himself around her before she'd even settled.

His skin was warm and bare, his arms strong around her waist. She pressed her cheek against his chest and listened to the sound of his heartbeat.

"You okay?" he murmured after a while.

She nodded. "Mhm."

His hand brushed lightly over her hip, then down along the curve of her thigh. Her heart thudded hard in her chest. She reached up, fingers tracing his jaw, thumb brushing beneath his lip.

"Are you okay too?" she whispered.

Draco leaned forward and kissed her slowly instead of answering her. His hand cupped the back of her head, holding her close, like he was afraid she'd slip through his fingers.

Hermione shifted slightly, curling closer to him beneath the covers. But when her thigh brushed his, and the motion dragged his leg against her center, she winced – just a tiny intake of breath and a stiffening of her spine.

Draco noticed immediately. His hand stilled where it had been tracing slow lines along her back. "Hey," he murmured, pulling back just enough to look at her. "Did I hurt you?" She shook her head, cheeks flushing. "No, not hurt. Just..." She bit her lip, hesitating. Then, more honestly, "Sore."

A furrow appeared between his brows. "Sorry. I really tried to go easy."

"You did," she said quickly, laying a hand on his chest. "You were... amazing. It's just—" Her blush deepened. "I'm not exactly used to your size."

There was a beat of stunned silence. Then Draco's mouth curved in that infuriating, completely smug way. "Well," he said with just the barest hint of teasing, "I can't exactly apologize for that."

Hermione rolled her eyes, groaning softly. "Don't gloat."
"I'm not."

She buried her face in his shoulder to hide her laugh. He brushed his knuckles gently down her spine again, a lazy rhythm that made her toes curl even now.

"Are you staying?" she asked softly, not looking up. The question had slipped out before she could check it.

Draco's body went still for a second. Then, "Did you think I wasn't?"

Hermione lifted her head just slightly, searching his face. "I just thought maybe you'd want to sleep in your own bed. Or you'd want to leave before... before morning."

That's how it had usually been with other guys. They'd come, they rested, they left before sunrise.

His expression turned unreadable for half a second. Then his brow arched, his tone just the faintest bit dry. "Unless you're trying to kick me out, I wasn't planning on going anywhere." She blinked. "No! I didn't mean—"

He reached up and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his touch gentle. "I know," he said. "But just so we're clear – I'd kind of like to fall asleep with you."

Her heart did something weird in her chest, something soft and sharp all at once. "Okay," she whispered. Then again, quieter, "Good."

Draco settled deeper into the pillows, tugging the blanket up around them. She curled into him again, more carefully this time, and felt his hand find her waist beneath the sheets.

"Next time," he said against her hair, already drowsy, "I'll try not to wreck you."

Hermione gave a breathless laugh, her nose brushing the curve of his collarbone.

"I don't mind that part."

"You say that now," he yawned, shifting slightly without letting go of her. "We'll see what you say in the morning."

She smiled into his skin, her chest full of something that felt too big, too impossible, and yet entirely *right*.

Chapter 12: Haze

The morning light slipped through the curtain in pale, hazy streaks.

Hermione's entire body was aching, tender and stretched in the most delicious way. Every shift of her hips reminded her of how deep he'd been. She could still feel a dull throb between her legs, the faint, sticky heat clinging to her thighs.

She winced slightly as she rolled onto her side. The soreness felt like heaven. Her lips curved against the pillow.

Draco was still asleep next to her, flat on his back. One of his arms rested crooked above his head, the other lying on the sheet that had slipped to his waist. His chest rose and fell in a slow rhythm of peaceful sleep. There was a pink flush at the base of his throat.

She watched him for a while. Something about seeing him undone like this with his lips parted slightly in sleep, made something twist in her chest.

He looked different in sleep. Younger, somehow. Like the sharp edges of him had dulled overnight, smoothed by exhaustion.

Her heart ached. He had been so good to her.

It was terrifying, because she couldn't remember the last time someone had made her feel like that. Like she was worth slowing down for. She'd spent so long being the one who held everything together. The one who didn't need anything. The one who was fine when she was second choice or not put first.

But now, watching him, his arm draped carelessly above his head, she didn't feel fine. She craved more of him, needed to feel the connection one more time. And that need settled in her chest like a secret she wasn't ready to say out loud yet.

She shifted carefully, biting back a wince at the ache. It wasn't just her body that was sore, it was her heart. Stretched open in places it hadn't been touched in years. Maybe ever.

She wanted to be seen like that again. Held like that again. Not just for the night, but for real. And that scared her more than anything. Because what if this was just one perfect moment? One soft sliver of something that would disappear once they stepped out of this room?

What if she'd already let him in too far?

And maybe that was why her body still throbbed for him. Not out of lust, but out of something deeper. Something hungry. Because she wanted to be touched like that again. Held like that again.

She shifted slowly, cautiously. Her thighs ached, tender from the night before, but she didn't even think when she moved, slowly swinging one leg over his hips, bracing her palms on his

chest as she straddled him carefully. Her body protested with a faint sting as she settled her weight over his lap, but she exhaled through it.

His bare cock stirred beneath her almost immediately. She rolled her hips once against his shaft, just to feel the friction.

He groaned in his sleep, like the sound had been pulled from somewhere deep in his chest. His cock twitched beneath her, hardening slowly under the slow grind of her hips.

Hermione bit her lip, her hands splayed against the warmth of his chest. She could feel his heartbeat there, steady and strong, just beneath her palms. The rhythm grounded her. So did the way his body responded to her, even before he woke.

Her hips moved again, slower this time, dragging her slick folds against the length of him. Her breath hitched at the heat, at the way her body still ached from the stretch but welcomed it anyway.

Draco's brows drew together, his jaw twitching faintly as sleep began to fade. His hand slid up to her thigh, heavy and warm, fingers curling reflexively.

His eyes blinked open, still hazy, and met hers.

She was wet, her arousal spreading along his shaft. He stroked his thumb across her leg, then higher.

His palm curled around her waist, guiding her forward and up so his other hand reached down between them, wrapping around himself. They both took a shaky breath when he brought the head of his now hard cock to her entrance and waited for her to take over.

It burned low and slow through her belly, enough to drown out the sting. She sank down slowly. A quiet gasp escaped her lips as he stretched her again. Her thighs trembled as her body resisted for a moment but his hands were steady at her hips, holding her.

She clenched around him involuntarily, the burn sharper now, and he hissed beneath her. His eyes rolled shut, his jaw flexing as he fought for composure.

Her breath came shallow as she sank lower, inch by inch as he filled her again. Her thighs quivered, her fingers digging into the muscles of his stomach.

He looked like he was in beautiful pain from it. Like the sight of her slowly taking him back inside, still swollen from the night before, was undoing him.

His hand moved between them, fingers finding her clit with practiced ease. He circled gently, coaxing her deeper onto him, easing the ache, drawing her higher at the same time.

Her eyes fluttered shut. Her head dropped forward as her hips moved again, slower now. A lazy, needy roll that dragged him perfectly inside her.

His breath came uneven at the same time as her breasts bounced softly with each movement.

Hermione's mouth fell open in breathless pleasure, wincing and gasping but she kept going.

His hands squeezed at her hips, then slid upward, fingers brushing over her ribs, her breasts down to her thighs again, like he didn't know where to touch first. His jaw clenched hard when she dropped down fully, her walls fluttering as she bottomed out, his cock buried deep.

He dragged his thumb over her clit again, just enough pressure to make her hips stutter. A moan escaped her throat as her body started to shiver. She ground down, slow and languid, chasing the pleasure even through the sting.

She opened her eyes. He was staring at her like she was something otherworldly.

His face was slack with awe, chest heaving. One of his hands brushed up to cup her breast, thumb sweeping gently over the nipple. His other hand was still at her clit, stroking her in tandem with her movements, coaxing her toward a wave as she trembled.

Her hips moved helpless now, a slow rock forward that made her thighs quake as she dragged herself over him, the thick weight of him deep inside making her gasp. Her body was still adjusting. Marked by him in every way. But the pain had dulled into something sweeter now, numbed by his thumb circling her clit just right. She swore she could feel every ridge, every vein as her walls fluttered around him.

Draco groaned under her. His fingers tensed at her hips, but he didn't guide her. Didn't rush her. Just watched with his mouth slack, his jaw working as he tried to keep still. His chest rose and fell hard, eyes locked on the way she moved.

Hermione tipped her head back slightly, her spine arching as she bounced a little higher now, taking him slower than last night, but no less desperate.

One hand dragged up her waist again, spreading across her stomach before sliding lower to meet his other, both hands now moving in tandem between her legs. His thumbs pressed against her clit and she whimpered, jolting, her nails digging into his chest as she rode him.

Her rhythm faltered, not from hesitation, but from too much. Every roll of her hips sent another jolt of sensation through her overstimulated nerves, her body still tender and swollen from being taken so thoroughly.

But the way he looked at her... Like the sight of her wrecked on top of him, trembling and flushed, was something he never wanted to forget.

She moved faster now, chasing the relief, the edge, the need to fall again.

And Draco watched every second.

His hands never left her, fingers stroking, rubbing, guiding her toward the peak she was fighting to reach. Her breath turned to soft gasps, her thighs shaking on either side of him, her inner muscles clenching hard around his cock. The slick sounds of their bodies filled the room, shameless and filthy and too perfect to stop.

She collapsed forward, chest against his, her hips still grinding in tight, desperate little circles as her orgasm hit her like a wave, slow at first, then all at once.

Her whole body convulsed; the moan that tore from her throat muffled against his neck. Her nails scraped down his ribs, her thighs locking around his hips as she came, slick heat gushing around him, her walls fluttering uncontrollably.

Draco hissed and bucked beneath her, a few sharp thrusts of his hips upward, and then he lost it too. He came with a broken grunt, hands gripping her ass as he pulled her down hard onto him, burying himself as deep as he could go. His cock pulsed inside her, hot and thick and spilling everything he had into her while she shook and clenched through the aftershocks.

Neither of them moved. She lay collapsed on top of him, her hair a curtain between them, his arms wrapped around her back, breath ragged against her temple.

His heart thundered beneath her ear, his chest still rising and falling in uneven waves. And she could feel the twitch of him still inside her, the mess between her thighs, the tenderness in every inch of her skin.

“Good morning,” Draco mumbled into her hair, barely more than a rasp.

Hermione smiled against his chest but didn’t move, still catching her breath, her body warm and heavy over his.

He shifted slightly beneath her, groaning low. His hands smoothed down to her thighs, then back up to her hips, like he was trying to make sure she wouldn’t pull away just yet.

He exhaled slowly. “Bloody hell.”

She hummed, satisfied, cheek pressed to his shoulder.

His fingers tightened. The heat of his spend and her slickness was thick between them, she could feel it, already starting to slide out around the edges, slippery and warm where their bodies were still joined.

Hermione hummed against his skin, her face moving to the curve of his neck, lips ghosting over his pulse. Her body felt like liquid, boneless and aching. She’d never been so full. Not just physically, but in the quiet, the weight of what it meant to stay like this. Still connected and him holding her like she was something fragile.

His hand came up to brush her hair from her face, pushing the curls back from where they’d stuck to her damp skin. His fingers were gentle.

“Still alive?” he whispered.

The smile still tugged at the corner of her mouth.

She huffed a breath against him. “Barely.”

She shifted slightly, gasping quietly as the movement made her feel everything again, the stretch, the sting, the slick heat still pooling inside her. He groaned beneath her, a soft, broken sound.

“Don’t move,” he said under his breath, hands gripping her hips again. “Not yet.”

Her breath hitched at his tone. She could feel how hard he still was, how her body was clenching instinctively around him even now. His cock throbbed once more, impossibly so, and then he pushed into her deeper as if to remind her that he was still there. They both sighed.

“You’re still so hard,” she whispered.

Draco gave a slow, slow exhale. “You’re still wrapped around me like this—what the fuck do you expect?”

Her laugh was more of a shaky breath. She turned her face into his neck and kissed him softly there. His grip on her hips tightened.

Then, after a long pause, his voice came again, lower this time. “Sit up for me.”

She blinked, lifting her head just barely.

“Why?”

He met her eyes. His own were half-lidded, flushed with sleep and something heavier. He looked wrecked and in awe at once.

“I want to see,” he murmured. “The mess we made.”

Heat flashed through her at that.

Slowly, she sat up, knees braced on either side of his hips. Her thighs ached, her whole body trembling as she straightened her spine. He groaned at the sight of her, flushed, nipples tight in the cool morning air, his cock still buried deep inside her, her slick thighs trembling from where she straddled him.

His hands didn’t stop moving, one sliding up to cradle her hip, the other smoothing down her thigh as his eyes dropped.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

He tilted his hips just slightly, hands easing her up.

The moment the head of his cock slipped from her, thick and glistening, there was a slick sound, a slow spill of cum sliding out of her, dripping down onto his cock in slow, sticky threads.

Hermione whimpered. Draco groaned, long and low, his head tipping back against the pillow.

His cock slapped against his lower abdomen, still half-hard, still heavy with the remnants of what they'd done. A smear of slick painted across his skin.

"Holy fuck," he said, almost to himself.

She stared down at him, flushed and still shaking, her body open and leaking everything they'd made between them.

And the way he looked at her made her clench again, even now, with nothing inside her.

His hands guided her to settle back on him.

"You're so fucking hot," he whispered.

Hermione watched him through heavy lashes. The heat of him smeared along the inside of her thighs, the tacky warmth cooling against his stomach where it had spilled.

He looked completely wrecked.

One hand trailed upward to her waist, while the other slid back between her legs.

He rubbed her gently over the mess, his fingers gathering their combined slick and spreading it over the sensitive skin there, teasing her folds. She hissed, thighs twitching, body jolting as he found her again, circling slowly, deliberately.

She whimpered.

"You're unbelievable," he muttered shredded with awe. "Still fucking soaked."

He curled his fingers back around her waist then, dragging her forward slightly so her slick folds brushed the length of his cock. It had softened a little, but it was still thick, still flushed.

Hermione moaned as her folds caught against the head of him.

Draco guided her, rolling her hips forward just enough to drag her cunt along the length of his shaft, sliding her through the mess, back and forth. Her breath caught. The pressure was low and sweet and overwhelming, her clit sensitive, her walls already clenching from the stimulation.

He hissed beneath her, his cock beginning to twitch and getting harder and thicker again. It stiffened against the smear of slick heat as she rocked forward instinctively.

"That's it," he whispered, rubbing her against himself again. "Fuck... just like that."

Her body shook, overworked and overstimulated, but she didn't stop. Didn't want to. The way his cock dragged along her, the way his jaw clenched beneath her as he watched it, it made her feel powerful and so wanted.

But when she shifted again and whimpered, just slightly, Draco sat up halfway, his hands steady on her back to support her.

“Come here,” he breathed, reaching for her.

She blinked, breath catching. “What—”

“I’ve got you.”

She winced as he rolled them over so that she was underneath him, but he already was pushing himself off to give her space to move.

“Hands and knees,” he said, so softly it felt like a secret. “Turn around.”

Hermione nodded, moving carefully to turn around on the bed, planting her hands against the sheets as she braced herself. Her thighs trembled again, stretched wide and spent.

Behind her, she heard the faint rustle of the sheets, the shift of his weight, the quiet drag of a sharp inhale through his nose.

“Fuck,” Draco whispered.

His hands found her hips again, brushing reverently over the curve of her ass, down to the slickness between her thighs.

“You’re dripping,” he groaned. “I can see everything.”

Hermione gasped when his thumbs spread her open gently, exposing the swollen, flushed center of her body. She was still leaking a creamy mess. She felt the cool air kiss her folds, and then the hot, hard length of him pressing against her again.

Draco dragged the head of his cock through the slick, rubbing slowly up and down, coating himself in it.

Hermione sobbed, her arms shaking slightly as she braced herself on the mattress. “Oh.”

He lined up at her entrance and started to push in slowly. His cock was rock hard as he worked into her again. She gasped, her back arching as he stretched her open again.

Her hands clenched in the sheets, her mouth falling open.

“Draco—”

“I’ve got you,” he whispered behind her again, already breathless.

He bottomed out with a groan that nearly made her come undone right then with his hands steady at her hips, guiding her back onto him, inch by inch, until he was fully seated inside her once more.

Her walls fluttered, the pressure intense.

“You feel even tighter like this,” he choked. “Fuck, Hermione...”

He gave her a second to breathe, to adjust.

Then he pulled back and thrust in. Slow and deep, but it felt careful.

Hermione gasped, her arms trembling beneath her, her breath catching on every motion as he began to move. His pace was unhurried, his rhythm devastating. The slap of skin against skin was louder now, wetter, filthier. The sound of their mess only making it worse.

Draco gripped her hips, thumbs digging into her skin as he fucked her in long, unrelenting strokes. Each thrust dragged over every nerve inside her, his cock dragging so deep it made her legs quiver.

“Look at you,” he rasped, one hand sliding up her back, curving over her spine as he leaned forward. “Taking me so good.”

Hermione whimpered, her forehead pressing into the sheets, body shaking as he buried himself again. He was buried so deep she could barely breathe.

Hermione clutched the sheets tighter, her arms shaking beneath her. Every slow grind of his hips had her arching, gasping, her body clenching around him like it never wanted to let him go. She was still sore. Still wrecked. But the way he filled her had her dizzy with want.

Behind her, Draco’s breathing was ragged. He dragged one hand up her back, fingers tracing her spine with almost lazily... before it disappeared again.

She barely had time to process it before his palm came down on her ass with a sharp, open-handed slap that echoed softly through the room.

Hermione panted more from shock than pain. Her eyes flew open, her hips jerking forward at the sudden crack of it, a rush of heat blooming beneath her skin.

Then came his voice.

“You can take a little more,” he said roughly. “Can’t you?”

Hermione whimpered, biting down on her lip as she nodded, her cheek pressed into the mattress as her arms gave way and she dropped with her chest onto the bed. “Yes,” she whispered, breathless. “I can.”

Another slap landed on the opposite cheek, a little firmer this time, the sting trailing into heat. Then his hands smoothed over both cheeks like he was soothing her, admiring her.

“Look at this,” he muttered, dragging his cock out slow, then pushing back in with a wet, obscene sound that made her moan into the sheets. “So fucking pretty when you take it like this.”

Hermione gasped, her knees spreading wider instinctively, her ass arching higher in invitation.

“You’re making such a mess on me,” he hissed, fucking her deeper now, his hips snapping harder. “You hear that?” Another thrust. “That’s how wet you are.”

Her body trembled at his words, every filthy syllable sliding through her like electricity. Her cunt clenched tighter around him, dripping slick onto his thighs.

He leaned forward, pressing his chest to her back, his hand sliding around to find her throat. Not to squeeze but to hold her steady.

“You want it rougher?” he asked at her ear, his cock buried to the hilt. “Can you take it?”

Hermione’s answer came as a broken whimper. “Yes. Please.”

He growled low in her ear, then gripped her hips with both hands and started to move. Harder now. Deeper. The angle brutal and perfect. Each thrust sent her forward on the mattress, her breath punched from her lungs as he fucked into her again and again, the slap of their bodies loud and soaked and obscene.

She was crying out now, not from pain, not even from surprise, but from the overwhelming pressure building in her again, sharp and all-consuming. Her body was too sensitive, too raw and he was fucking her like he owned her.

“Fuck yeah, take it,” he panted. “Take my cock. So fucking tight—Jesus.”

He reached around, fingers diving between her legs again, rubbing hard circles over her clit as he drove into her from behind. She jolted, hips jerking back against him with a strangled moan.

“Come for me like this,” he growled. “Bent over, full of me, dripping down your thighs.”

She was shaking under him, completely limp but still grinding against every deep thrust, her body too overwhelmed to stop. The pressure inside her exploded again, wave after wave crashing over her.

Hermione was sobbing now, moaning and rambling as she shattered around him. Her cunt clamped down on him so hard.

“Fuck—yes—just like that—”

Her orgasm tore through her like it had been waiting in the wings, coiled tight and ready to strike even though she hadn’t believed she *could* come again. Not after everything. Not with how raw she was, how sore, how slick and stretched and utterly used.

But she did.

Her thighs trembled, her body locked, her back arched into the press of his hips as her cunt fluttered violently around him. Pulsing in waves that wouldn’t stop. She cried out, voice cracking, her cheek pressed to the mattress. Her fingers clutched blindly at the sheets as her body seized, clenching down on him so tight it was nearly too much.

But Draco didn’t come.

He hissed above her, choking on a groan, his whole body going taut. His hands gripped her hips like he was trying to stay grounded, like he could barely hold himself back.

“Fuck—Hermione,” he gasped. “*Fuck*. You’re squeezing me so tight—oh my god—”

His hips faltered for a moment, then stilled, still buried deep, thick and throbbing.

She blinked, dazed and shaking. “You didn’t—?”

“No,” he laughed faintly. “I don’t know how I’ve got anything left. I just—need—” He groaned.

Hermione’s mouth fell open against the sheets. Her mind was fuzzy, her body twitching with aftershocks. Hermione blinked, still trembling beneath him, her cunt fluttering around his cock, slick and spent. Her body was limp, but her heart was still racing.

“What do you need?” she whispered.

Draco’s fingers dug into her hips, his breath catching. “Can you just.., say something,” he rasped. “Fuck—just—say some filthy shit. Please.”

She turned her face just enough to look over her shoulder at him.

He looked *wrecked*. Flushed, slick with sweat, jaw clenched, eyes dark and glassy. Still hard as stone inside her. Still holding on. His hands trembled where they held her hips, like he wasn’t sure if he was going to make it.

Her brows were drawn, lips parted, skin flushed from the aftershocks still rippling through her. “I—what?” she breathed, not quite sure she’d heard him right.

Draco’s jaw clenched. His eyes were wild, dark, pleading.

“Say something filthy,” he panted, almost raw with desperation. “I need to hear you. Please.”

Hermione blinked. Her instinct was to retreat into herself, to scoff or joke or shake her head. But she felt the way his cock was still hard inside her, the way his hands gripped her hips like he was hanging on for dear life. And she realized he meant it. That he *needed* it.

She swallowed, her throat dry. “I don’t know what to say,” she admitted, a little too quietly.

Draco leaned forward, his chest brushing her back, his voice broken at her ear. “Anything. Anything filthy. Doesn’t have to be perfect—just you.”

Her face flushed. She’d never said things like that before, not out loud. But the look on his face... the way his cock twitched inside her at the thought... Hermione hesitated but then said, tentatively, “You’re still so deep inside me.”

A sound tore out of him, guttural and half-swallowed. “Yeah? You like that?”

Encouraged, her voice shook a little as she continued, testing the words like they might burn her. “I can feel... everything. You’re thick. Still hard. Still stretching me open.”

His hands trembled where they held her. “*Fuck*,” he choked.

Her confidence grew, fueled by the effect she was clearly having on him. Her hips tilted back slightly, her breath catching as she felt his cock twitch deep inside her again.

Hermione moaned faintly, her hips shifting just slightly to encourage him to move again.

“You’re *so big*,” she whispered. “You’ve been inside me for hours and I’m still not used to it. You’re still—still *stretching* me open.”

“Fuck—” His hands clenched tighter on her hips. She closed her eyes. Let herself lean into the heat.

“I can feel how deep you are,” she breathed. “I can feel your cock everywhere. It’s too much—but I don’t want you to stop.”

Draco groaned, *loud*, hips jerking forward instinctively, grinding deep, dragging a sharp little gasp from her lips.

She whimpered. “Please. Come for me. I want it—I want to feel all of it.”

His thrusts returned, slow but *deep*, hitting a spot that made her sob into the sheets.

“Keep going,” he growled, panting. “Say more—fuck—you have no idea what your voice does to me.”

Her breath hitched again, her body overwhelmed, but her words kept spilling, low and desperate.

“Want you to come inside me,” she whispered. “Want to feel it leak out while you’re still inside. Want to be so full of you, I can’t hold it all.”

Draco’s rhythm stuttered.

“You’re going to fuck your come into me,” she gasped. “So deep.”

“Oh *my god*,” he snarled. “Hermione—*fuck*—”

And then it happened.

He thrust into her one last time, cock buried deep, and came with a groan so guttural it echoed off the walls. His body locked over hers, his arms bracing around her as his cock pulsed inside, spilling hot and thick until she *felt* it flooding her again.

He shook with it.

And for a long moment, neither of them moved. Just the sound of their breaths tangling. Her trembling thighs. His hand smoothing up her spine like he didn’t know how else to ground himself.

Finally he collapsed, chest pressed to her back, still inside her, still breathing like he'd just run for his life.

Hermione blinked, her mind blank, her body wrecked, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted around nothing.

"I can't feel my legs," she whispered after a long beat.

Draco let out a breathless laugh against her skin. Then kissed her shoulder, over and over, like he didn't know how else to say *thank you*.

The bedroom was thick with heat and silence. Only their breathing broke it.

Draco lay half-draped over her, the sheets tangled low around their waists, her body slick and flushed. She could still feel the echo of it, the weight of him, the stretch. She hadn't been aware that sex could be this intense. That the things from her spiciest novels actually existed.

Draco's hand was stroking slowly down her spine, his chest still rising and falling next to her. She shifted slightly, wincing as her thighs brushed together.

He felt it. The way she twitched. The little hitch in her breath.

"Come on," he murmured, hoarse but gentle. "Shower."

Hermione groaned against his skin. "I can't move."

"You can." He sat up just after pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "I'll carry you if I have to."

She lifted her head, blinking at him sleepily. "You're not serious."

He arched a brow, already swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "Try me."

She made a noise of protest as he tugged the sheet from around them, lifting her with one arm around her waist and the other under her knees.

"Draco—" She buried her face in his shoulder, laughing softly despite herself. He carried her down the hall like she weighed nothing.

The bathroom light was low, dimmed to a soft glow that barely reflected in the mirror. He turned the water on first, adjusted the temperature, while she reached for fresh towels.

Hermione stood leaning against the counter, blinking at her reflection.

Her hair was wild. Her lips pink and swollen just like the rest of her flushed skin. She looked debauched.

He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing the nape of her neck. "You alright?"

She nodded, her body melting back into him.

He guided her to the shower gently, like he was worried she might collapse. The steam was already rising, curling around them as he opened the glass door and stepped in first, reaching out for her hand.

She followed.

The warmth hit her skin like a balm. The water rinsed down over her shoulders, her back, the curve of her spine. And behind her, Draco reached for the soap and began to lather his hands.

His touch came gentle at first as she began washing her hair. He started with her shoulders. Broad palms rubbing slow circles into her skin. His thumbs pressed into the knots at the base of her neck.

Then lower.

He dragged the soap over her arms, down her sides, over the curve of her hips. She swayed forward slightly, breath catching as his fingers trailed between her thighs.

Draco leaned in close behind her, his mouth brushing her temple. "Let me."

She said nothing. Just nodded.

Draco's hand moved slowly between her thighs. Slick fingers pressing gently over her clit, circling again and again until her legs trembled beneath her.

Her body was already wrecked, wrung out, oversensitive from being taken so many times. Her cunt was raw, her thighs sticky with their mess, her knees weak beneath her.

And still, his hand was there. Still touching her like she was something he'd never let go of.

Hermione moaned softly, her cheek pressed to his shoulder as his arm wrapped around her waist, keeping her upright.

Draco's voice was a whisper at her ear, hot and ruined.

"You're so fucking sore now, aren't you?" he murmured.

She whimpered.

"I know," he breathed. "But I can't stop touching you."

His soft but heavy cock rested against the curve of her ass, dragging across the slick skin there as his fingers kept working slow, filthy circles over her clit.

"I wish I could have you like this every morning," he whispered, nuzzling into her cheek. "Naked. Wet. Still dripping with me."

She moaned again, breath catching.

“Would keep you full of my come for days,” he whispered. “You’d still feel me between your legs when you go to work. Still sore when you sit down. Still leaking.”

His hand gripped her tighter.

“If you let me,” he rasped, voice breaking, “I’ll fuck you *everywhere*. Every room. Every surface. Over and over. Until you can’t keep track of how many times I’ve come inside you.”

Her body jolted.

That earned a soft laugh from him, wrecked and dark and far too pleased with himself.

“You want that, don’t you?”

She nodded faintly, lips parting.

He kissed her neck. “Say it.”

“I want it,” she whispered. “I want you to.”

Draco groaned, long and low, then leaned into her ear. “I’ll fuck you against your kitchen counter. With the window open.”

Her breath hitched.

“I’ll bend you over your couch. Pull your knickers down just enough. Not even take my jeans off all the way. Just push in. Hard. Fast. Fill you up while the kettle’s boiling.”

Her knees nearly gave out.

He didn’t stop.

“In your hallway. On the floor,” he hissed. “Barely through the door before I’ve got your skirt up and my cock inside you.”

Her thighs were quivering now, cunt throbbing faintly under his fingers, but not enough. Not yet.

She whimpered. “Where else?”

He chuckled, the sound low and filthy in her ear.

“Oh, *you* want the list now?”

She nodded again, helpless.

“In the shower,” he added, nipping her earlobe. “Again. But next time I *will* fuck you. I’ll take you from behind while the water’s running, and you’ll have to bite your lip so the neighbors don’t hear.”

His fingers moved faster, still gentle, but firm now to build her up with purpose.

Her head dropped back against his shoulder with a strangled sound.

“Oh god—”

“But you want to know the one I keep thinking about?” he murmured.

She nodded, lips trembling.

“My car.”

Hermione’s breath caught.

Draco’s mouth curled into a smirk against her skin. His fingers never stopped moving.

“Back seat,” he whispered. “Fogged up windows. Your skirt around your waist, my hand over your mouth while I fuck you deep and filthy.”

Her stomach clenched.

“I’ll drive us somewhere,” he said, voice tighter now. “Pull you into the backseat. You’ll be riding me before I’ve even shut the door.”

Hermione moaned.

“You’ll ride me while the car rocks,” he rasped. “While your tits bounce for me. While I fuck up into you and fill you so full you leave a stain on the leather.”

Her hand flew to his wrist, gripping him, hips jerking forward into his hand.

“And then,” he whispered, “when you’re too wrecked to move, I’ll lick you clean. Right there. Kneeling in the backseat. Tongue deep inside you. Tasting myself in your pussy while you shake all over again.”

“*Fuck*,” Hermione gasped. “Draco—”

He groaned into her neck, his hand working her clit faster now, tighter circles.

She shattered, slowly this time, but not less intense. Her knees went first, and he caught her easily, holding her close as she trembled against his chest, whimpering through the last, sharp waves of release.

His arm wrapped around her middle. His mouth kissed her temple.

“If you let me,” he whispered.

And Hermione, still shaking in his arms, could only smile and nod.

Because she was already his. Completely.

The kettle clicked off with a soft pop.

Steam curled into the air as Hermione poured the water over the coffee grounds, her hands steady despite the dull ache in her thighs. Her hair was still damp, her skin scrubbed pink and clean. She was barefoot in her jumper, the sleeves pushed up clumsily past her elbows, and her panties, the only thing she'd managed to pull on after the shower.

Behind her, she could feel his eyes.

Draco was leaning against the counter, a banana half-peeled in one hand, a smirk permanently carved into his face as he watched her.

"You keep looking at me like that," she said without turning, "and I'm going to spill this coffee."

He didn't even try to hide the heat in his voice. "You keep wearing that jumper with those legs out, and I *want* you to spill something."

Hermione snorted under her breath; cheeks warm as she reached for the mugs. The familiar clink of ceramic grounded her, but everything else still felt too soft. Too floaty.

They hadn't really spoken yet. Not about *what* this was. Just touch, and heat, and whispers.

She handed him a mug. His fingers brushed hers.

"Thanks," he murmured. "For last night."

She gave him a small smile, turning to the fridge for milk just as a buzzing sound broke through the air.

Draco groaned. "Ignore that."

Hermione glanced back. "Your phone?"

"Mhm."

But it buzzed again. And again. A second later, it lit up on the counter.

Draco sighed and grabbed it.

"Mate," Draco answered, voice already tinged with amusement. "What?"

Blaise's voice was audible even from across the kitchen. "*What the fuck happened to you last night? Family thing? You disappeared off the face of the planet.*"

Hermione turned back to her coffee, suddenly too aware of her bare legs, the ache still blooming between her thighs. She pretended to study the milk label like it held the secrets of the universe.

Draco's smirk returned instantly. "Yeah, had to. Something... came up."

Hermione gripped the fridge door.

“Uh huh.” Blaise sounded entirely unconvinced. *“So what are you doing right now?”*

Draco’s eyes flicked to her bare legs as she moved to the cupboard. His grin widened.

“Breakfast,” he said, too casually. “Coffee. Recovery.”

Hermione shot him a look over her shoulder. He just winked.

Blaise kept talking, but she couldn’t hear it anymore – not over the sound of her own heartbeat, not with her body still aching and her stomach suddenly tight.

Draco laughed, carefree. Like this was all some inside joke between him and the world.

She reached for her phone to anchor herself. Something to hold. Something that wasn’t him.

She hadn’t checked it since last night. Since she’d lied and said she was too sick to make it to game night.

The group chat was still there, waiting.

Harry: *Feel better soon. Let us know if you need anything.*

Blaise: *Rest up.*

Ginny: *Need me to bring you tea and a guilt-free excuse to skip work Monday?*

Theo: *I can swing by this weekend with soup if you’re out of it. Just say the word.*

The last message was from two hours ago.

Hermione stared at the screen, the words blurring. They were checking in. They cared. And she’d lied to all of them. Was she really doing this? Hiding? Playing house while the real world waited for an answer she didn’t have? Letting him kiss her and carry her and whisper filthy things into her skin like she was his.

She was hiding. And she didn’t even know from what anymore.

This wasn’t a joke to her. It wasn’t nothing. But it definitely wasn’t what she’d told everyone it was.

Draco was still on the phone.

“Yeah,” he said, too lightly. “No. I’ve been... busy.”

She looked back at the messages again, and guilt pressed hard against her ribs, folding over itself like an old wound.

Draco was still smirking. Still playing and pretending this was simple. It was so easy for him to hide this. And maybe that was the difference between them, that she was in too deep already.

Her coffee suddenly tasted bitter. And she had no idea what she was going to say.

Draco finally ended the call, tossing his phone back on the counter with a satisfied hum.

“Blaise thinks I’m having an affair with someone married,” he said with a smirk, reaching for his coffee.

Hermione didn’t smile.

She was standing at the sink, facing him, both hands wrapped around her mug. The air in the kitchen felt suddenly too still. Too quiet. The silence sharpened around her shoulders.

Draco’s brow furrowed slightly.

“Is this you panicking?” he asked.

Hermione blinked. “What?”

“You do this thing when you’re overthinking.” He gestured vaguely to her. “You get quieter. Like your thoughts are too loud to leave room for anything else.”

She flushed, looking down.

Draco tilted his head. “You’re not regretting anything, are you?”

Her eyes flew to his, wide. “No–no. It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

She hesitated, then looked toward the hallway, as if the air outside the room might be easier to breathe.

“I hate lying to everyone,” she said finally. “About being sick. And now I’m just... standing here. With you. And I don’t know what happens next.”

Draco’s expression didn’t shift much, but his posture did. A quiet adjustment, like he was steadying himself too.

“Nothing has to happen next,” he said calmly. “If you don’t want it to.”

She frowned. “That’s not exactly reassuring.”

He smiled faintly. “I didn’t mean we leave it open-ended forever, I just—” He dragged a hand through his hair. “I thought you didn’t want people meddling. I thought that’s why we kept it to ourselves.”

“I *didn’t*.” She rubbed her forehead. “I don’t. It’s just—” She paused. “I didn’t expect it to feel like this.”

“You think I did?”

She looked up, surprised.

“I didn’t know what last night would be,” Draco said, softer now. “But that wasn’t just sex for me. That wasn’t... casual.”

He let that sit there for a beat.

“I’m not trying to make this more complicated than it needs to be. All I’m saying is—” He paused. “It’s Saturday morning. We’ve got the whole weekend.”

Her brow furrowed.

“Why don’t we just... stay here?” he offered. “Stay in this bubble a little longer. Figure shit out. Before we drag anyone else into it.”

She sighed, “What if this thing between us gets messy?”

He smiled crookedly. “It’s already messy.”

She laughed just a little. “And you’re okay with that?” she asked.

“More than okay.”

The forecasted rain hadn’t started yet, but the sky had that low-hanging grey tint that made the flat feel like a cocoon.

They’d spent most of the morning wrapped in blanket, dozing off and tangled together with no urgency. But eventually, Hermione had declared they needed real food.

Draco was trying to help.

“You’re butchering the onion,” she laughed.

“I’m *cutting* it.”

“You’re *shredding* it,” she corrected, biting back a smile. “That’s not even close to a dice.”

She nudged his hip with hers as she reached for the olive oil, sliding past him at the counter with ease. Her bare feet made soft sounds against the tile. Draco had rolled the sleeves of his jumper up to his elbows, and his hair was still wild from the towel-dry hours earlier.

He looked up just in time to catch the corner of her smirk, her curls twisted into a lazy knot at the top of her head.

“You’re such a control freak,” he said mildly, flicking an onion shard off the cutting board.

Hermione grinned, tossing a few properly diced onions into the pan and turning on the flame. “I think you secretly like that about me.” she said casually.

He leaned in, voice low. “I do. I love being micromanaged before I’ve had breakfast.”

“You had breakfast,” she said. “You ate my last banana.”

“I *rescued* it,” he argued. “From neglect. It was sitting there cold and lonely.”

She huffed, amused, and shook the pan, letting the onions sizzle. Draco moved to her side, more helpful now, reaching for the cherry tomatoes.

He took the knife and glanced sideways. “Do I pass the tomato test, or will I be publicly shamed again?”

Hermione gave him a look. “I only shame you privately now.”

Draco grinned and got to work, his motions more careful this time.

They moved in sync more than she expected. Trading spices, brushing elbows, stepping around each other like they’d done this before. Hermione stirred the sauce while Draco handed her a spoon to taste. She licked it thoughtfully, then nodded.

“More thyme,” she said.

He grabbed the jar and sprinkled it in, then tilted his head. “So. Serious question.”

“Mm?”

He leaned against the counter. “If you weren’t in marketing, what would you be doing?”

Hermione blinked, surprised by the question. “That’s random.”

Draco arched a brow.

She pursed her lips. “Okay... maybe I used to want to open a café. But that was during a very particular kind of quarter-life crisis.”

Draco let out a soft huff and reached for a spoon, dipping it in the pan to taste. He licked it thoughtfully, then pointed it at her.

“I can see it,” he said. “Judging people’s coffee orders from behind the counter.”

Hermione grinned as she stirred the sauce. She bumped his hip with hers. “Alright, your turn. If you weren’t a lawyer with a superiority complex, what would you be?”

“Pilot.”

Hermione’s brow lifted. “Really?”

“Yeah. Something about the controls. I like the idea of leaving everything on the ground behind.” He paused, then added, “Didn’t quite pan out.”

“Still time,” she said quietly.

He smiled, a little softer now, and reached over to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. His fingers brushed her cheekbone, lingering for a moment longer than necessary.

“You always this bossy in the kitchen?” he asked.

“Only when I like someone,” she said, too easily.

He blinked once, eyes flickering to hers, then down to her mouth. But he didn’t say anything.

Instead, he reached for the wooden spoon. “Let me stir.”

She handed it over, amused, and watched as he took over with exaggerated care. The sauce bubbled gently, the rain starting to tap against the windows at last. She leaned her hip against the counter beside him, just close enough to feel the brush of his arm.

They ended up eating on the sofa, bowls in their laps, a random playlist humming in the background.

It wasn’t until halfway through that Hermione looked up.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday.”

Draco raised a brow, mid-bite.

She gave him a look. “About Theo.”

He chewed. Swallowed. “What about it?”

“You really believe he’s got a thing for me?”

Draco didn’t immediately reply. He set his bowl down on the coffee table, leaning back with one arm draped across the back of the couch.

Hermione waited.

“You don’t see it?” he asked finally.

“No,” she said.

Draco tilted his head slightly.

Hermione frowned. “So what, he’s been... waiting around? Why would he never say anything?”

Draco’s mouth twisted, not quite a smile. “Because you never made it easy to.”

Hermione shook her head. “Made *what* easy?”

He gave her a look, one of those infuriatingly perceptive ones, like he was seeing something she hadn’t even registered yet.

“To make a move,” he said simply. “You’re not exactly the queen of emotional availability.”

She narrowed her eyes. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Maybe,” he admitted, still leaning back, fingers lightly drumming against the sofa. “But I wasn’t trying to be your best friend while secretly falling for you.”

Hermione’s heart skipped once, not because she thought it might be true about Theo, but because Draco’s voice was so casual. Like he wasn’t trying to stir the pot, just stating a fact he’d already filed away.

“I just...” She shook her head. “I don’t see him that way.”

“Which is probably why he never said anything,” Draco said. “Because he knows you don’t. And I think –” he paused, eyes flicking toward her, “–that was enough for him.”

Hermione didn’t respond right away. She picked up her wineglass instead, swirling what was left at the bottom, letting the silence sit.

“Do you think I’ve been cruel?” she asked after a beat.

Draco’s gaze softened. “No,” he said. “Like I said. Just... oblivious.”

She let out a breath, half a laugh. “Great.”

“It’s not a crime,” he said, shifting forward to reach for his bowl again. “You weren’t responsible for feelings you didn’t know about. And even if you had known, it’s not like you owed him anything.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “I guess.”

Draco studied her for a second before adding, “You don’t have to feel guilty for not returning something that was never asked of you.”

The words landed softer than she expected. Like he wasn’t trying to make her feel bad, just untangle something she didn’t know she’d been holding.

She looked over at him. “You really think about all this?”

He gave a slight shrug. “I watch. I notice things.”

“You’re surprisingly decent at this part,” she said, lips quirking.

“What part?”

She tilted her head. “Observing, saying the right things.”

She leaned into the cushions again, her eyes dragging over him slowly. He looked comfortable here, casual and warm and maddeningly attractive, his sleeves still rolled up and a faint smudge of tomato sauce near the collar of his shirt.

And suddenly, the space between them felt too wide.

She reached over and plucked the bowl from his hands, setting it on the coffee table next to hers.

Draco gave her a look, one brow lifted. "You're done with your emotional inquisition?"

She climbed into his lap before answering, knees bracketing his thighs as she settled over him. "For now."

His hands immediately found her hips, warm and easy. "Any other shocking revelations you'd like to unpack?"

She hummed, pretending to consider it. "I'm still processing the fact that you're secretly a sap."

Draco leaned in, brushing his mouth against the corner of hers. "Shut up."

Hermione smiled against his skin. "Make me."

Hermione lay sprawled across Draco's chest, one leg thrown over his, her cheek tucked against his shoulder. His hand rested low on her hip, drawing lazy patterns against the hem of her panties. The credits of *some noir film* he swore she had to see were finally rolling, and she was just buzzed enough on wine and warmth to admit it had been good.

"I told you the cinematography would ruin you for anything else," Draco murmured, smirking into her hair.

"It was so pretentious," she mumbled sleepily against his chest.

Before he could respond, her phone buzzed from the coffee table.

She groaned softly; words muffled against him. "Do not make me move."

Draco grinned into her temple. "Maybe it's Theo checking in on you."

She pinched his side as she reached for her phone. Her body shifted, pressing against his in ways that made him exhale sharply.

"Oh," she said, straightening just a little. "It's my mum."

Draco's hand slid under the back of her shirt the moment she sat up, warm fingers spreading over her bare skin. She arched slightly at the contact but answered the call, trying to focus.

"Hi, Mum," she said, breathlessly.

"Hello, sweetheart. I hope I'm not interrupting anything –"

Draco's fingers dragged slowly down her spine. Hermione's hand flew behind her, batting him without force. He didn't stop. His palm flattened against her back, his thumb tracing teasing little circles near the edge of her waistband.

She tried to clear her throat. "No, not at all. Just... watching something."

"Well, I just wanted to call while I had a quiet moment. Your father's finally back home."

Hermione smiled, warmth blooming in her chest. "That's wonderful."

"He asked about you and Draco."

Her spine straightened slightly.

Draco's thumb dipped a little lower.

"Okay," she said carefully.

"We were thinking," her mother went on, *"of doing something small next weekend. Sunday afternoon, maybe just a quiet tea at home. To thank him for everything, you know. You, of course, but especially him for being there when things were so uncertain."*

Hermione's eyes flicked down toward where Draco was very deliberately not paying attention. He was tracing slow shapes against her lower back like he wasn't actively causing her to short-circuit during a phone call with her *mother*.

She coughed softly. "That sounds lovely, Mum. I'll... I'll ask him."

"Just let me know when you can."

"I will."

Draco raised a brow. His fingers slipped just under the waistband of her panties. Hermione bit her lip, but scooted forward and away from his distracting hands.

"Alright," her mother said warmly. *"No pressure. Just something to think about. And tell him he's always welcome in our home. Your father wants to meet him properly while wearing pants this time."*

Hermione flushed but she laughed underneath her breath. "Okay. I'll tell him."

They exchanged goodbyes, and Hermione ended the call with a long exhale.

She set the phone down on the coffee table, then turned slowly to Draco, who was *not* even trying to hide his amusement.

"You tried to get your hand down my panties while I was talking to my *mother*."

"You were *barely* talking." He smirked. "I was helping."

Hermione gave him a light shove, which did absolutely nothing to move him. She settled back beside him, this time on her side, head propped up on her hand. “So. My parents are inviting you to tea.”

Draco blinked once. “Like, tea tea? Scones and floral china?”

“Scones are likely,” she said. “China optional.”

“Mm.” He stretched again, this time with a sigh. “That’s nice of them.”

She hesitated. “It is. But I can tell them you’re busy if you’d rather not.”

Draco turned his head, eyes narrowing slightly. “Why would I not?”

Hermione shrugged, suddenly unsure of how to phrase it. “Because it’s... a bit soon? Parental tea and gratitude? I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to avoid that.”

He didn’t answer immediately. Just studied her face. “They matter to you.”

She blinked. “Well. Yes.”

“So I want to go.”

Hermione’s mouth parted, but no sound came out right away.

Draco reached for her hand, lacing their fingers easily. “I mean, your dad saw me very sleep-deprived while he was stitched up in a hospital bed. He probably deserves to know what kind of man his daughter’s brought home.”

She gave a soft, disbelieving laugh. “You’re okay with it?”

“I’m not just okay with it,” he said. “It’s... nice of them. I didn’t expect that.”

“You really want to?”

“Yeah. And you’re not taking the train alone either,” he added casually, brushing a thumb over the inside of her wrist. “Not with half the country’s creeps lurking, pretending to be rail staff.”

She tilted her head, smiling faintly. “You don’t trust British public transport?”

“I don’t trust strange men with too many keys on their belt eyeing you while you’re waiting for a delayed train,” he said simply. “I’ll drive.”

“You’re being...” she trailed off, unsure how to name it.

He tilted his head. “Insufferably thoughtful?”

“Something like that,” she murmured.

Draco smiled, that rare one, the soft one, the one that didn't pull to one side or carry a punchline.

"Tell your mum I'll come," he said. "And that I like my tea strong and my small talk limited."

Hermione grinned. "You shouldn't have told her about grandkids to embarrass me further. She's hopeful now."

Draco just chuckled and shook his head.

"She *loved* you. Which is *very dangerous for me*."

He grinned. "Well. I am devastatingly likable."

"You're not," she said. "You're just tall and sarcastic and know how to handle my mother."

Draco was quiet for a beat, his hand settling again on her back. "I'll be good. Promise. No jokes about eloping or joint mortgages."

The rain still tapped gently against the bedroom windows, a rhythm that matched the slow rise and fall of their breathing. The lights were low. The wine glasses empty on the bedside table. And Hermione's skin was warm from Draco's hands, even though their clothes were still on.

They were sprawled sideways across the freshly made bed. He was on his back. She was half-draped across his chest, her cheek resting just below his collarbone, her hand drawing lazy lines across the front of his shirt. Her legs tangled with his. A kind of perfect, aching stillness.

He poked the tip of her nose playfully. "You've got a smug little know-it-all nose."

Hermione stilled before she pushed up slightly onto her elbow, giving him a long look.

"Thank goodness it's not crooked from when you punched me that one night."

Draco blinked. "Wow."

"I'm serious," she said, but her voice was light. "You punched me hard."

Draco groaned and covered his face with his forearm. "You ran into my fist. There's a difference."

He muttered something into his sleeve that sounded vaguely like *'I still feel like shit about that,'* before dragging his hand down his face to look at her again.

Hermione was watching him, half-smiling but not teasing now.

“And then you got us banned from that pub a week later.... Ginny told me what happened with that idiot you punched... you never said anything to me about it.”

He reached up and brushed his thumb along her cheekbone, “You never let me apologize for anything after you ran off to stay with your parents. I didn’t get the chance to.”

He rolled on top of her before she could dodge, bracing his elbows on either side of her head as he pinned her gently into the mattress.

“I’m sorry I accidentally punched you at the pub,” he said solemnly, dipping his head to kiss her nose.

She scoffed, amused.

Draco grinned, leaning his weight into one arm so he could run the back of his fingers down her cheek. “I’m also sorry for making that sloppy seconds comment in front of all our friends. That was... shitty.”

The words still stung a little, even now.

He watched her closely. “I knew it would get to you. I meant for it to. I was in a mood, and you were wearing that dress. Saying those things.”

Hermione sighed, lips parting. “I didn’t know about you and Tiffany then.”

His voice dropped, gentler. “It doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Then she whispered, “You really were a dick.”

“I know.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m sorry I was a dick.”

But he was here now. Apologizing in kisses. Holding her like she wasn’t a mistake to regret but a choice he’d make again.

He kissed her jaw, and she stretched her neck for better access, sighing at the way his lips lingered. “I’m also sorry that I called you a *selfish cunt*.”

She stilled, peeking up at him. “You never called me that.”

He kissed the corner of her mouth, humming “Not out loud.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but her smile betrayed her.

“You were awful,” she murmured, her hand smoothing down his back. “Like... memorably awful.”

Draco nuzzled her cheek. “I’m trying to be better now.”

“You are,” she said before he could make a joke of it. “It’s unsettling.”

He snorted against her skin. “I can be awful again, if it helps restore the natural order.”

She gave a mock gasp.

“You know I don’t think of you like that, right? Sloppy seconds. Or selfish. Or anything even close.”

Hermione looked up at him, fingers drifting toward the edge of his shirt. “I know,” she said, voice nearly a whisper. “Now I do.”

Draco nodded once, eyes flicking between hers. “Good.”

She studied him a moment longer, then spoke carefully. “Tiffany must’ve been... completely mad.”

He stiffened, just barely. The shift in his shoulders, the way his gaze flicked away for half a second.

Hermione hesitated but didn’t pull back. “I mean it,” she said gently. “Sorry, I just... I’ve been thinking about it.”

Draco didn’t speak right away.

Hermione let the silence stretch, let him sit in it, not to punish, but to make space. She didn’t want to press too hard. But she also didn’t want to pretend she hadn’t noticed the way his body had gone still.

Then, finally, he spoke. “It wasn’t like this. With her.”

Hermione’s brows pulled slightly. “What do you mean?”

His hand skimmed down her side, like grounding himself in her before answering. Draco’s mouth tugged into a faint line.

He looked over her, eyes flicking back to hers. “I don’t think she ever really wanted *me*. Not the real me. Just the version her parents liked. The polished one in a suit.”

Her throat tightened. “That must’ve hurt.”

Draco’s mouth curved wryly. “Didn’t feel great, no.” He reached up, brushing a bit of her hair behind her ear. “But I wasn’t all in either. I just didn’t know it yet. We looked good on paper. Comfortable. Safe. It wasn’t passion, it was convenience, dressed up like something else.”

Hermione swallowed, not sure she wanted to know. “And now?”

He didn’t look away from her this time.

“Now I wake up wrecked by a girl who makes the prettiest fucking sounds when I’m inside her,” he murmured quietly. “And I’m already thinking about how fast I can get her like that again.”

Hermione bit her lip, heat blooming everywhere. Her stomach flipped. Not just from the heat of it, but from the weight behind his voice. Like he didn't even realize she was already falling for him.

Draco gave her a small, crooked smile. "So yeah. I'd bite myself in the ass if I'd missed this."

She didn't know what to say, not with her heart pounding like that, not with his words still echoing in her chest.

So, she just kissed him. Like her body was answering before her mouth could catch up.

He kissed her back like he didn't want to let her go. And for the first time, Hermione didn't flinch from how much she wanted to stay.

Chapter 13: Halfway

The pub was already busy when Hermione stepped inside, the air thick with laughter, the soft clatter of glasses, and indie rock playing low in the background. She paused near the door, cheeks pink from the wind, scanning the room.

Theo and Blaise stood at the bar, arguing with the bartender over beer foam; Ginny perched at a high table waving her over with a wide grin; Harry and Luna were tucked at the ender end of the long table, sharing a basket of chips, heads tilted together in some quiet conversation.

Everyone was there except Draco. Her chest gave a small, traitorous tug.

For one brief, cowardly second, she wished he wouldn't come. But then that thought twisted, sharp and mean, because she wanted him there too badly for it to make any sense.

They'd spoken on the phone all week. She had fallen asleep to the sound of his voice last night, low and tired and closer to something vulnerable than she ever thought she would hear from him. And earlier today, just as she was leaving the office, a text had buzzed against her thigh.

Can't wait to see you tonight.

The memory of it still burned, stubborn and bright, behind her ribs.

But the ugly truth was that she was dreading tonight.

Not because she didn't want to see him, but because she did. Because she didn't know how she was supposed to sit across from him, to watch him laugh and argue with their friends like nothing between *them* had shifted, like he hadn't kissed her forehead and whispered things against her bare skin she couldn't forget even if she tried.

Hermione squared her shoulders and made herself move, weaving through the crowd until Ginny caught her in a tight hug.

"Hey," Hermione murmured into her shoulder, closing her eyes for half a second, letting herself breathe in the grounding smell of cider and her floral shampoo.

"I'm so glad you're feeling better," Ginny said, squeezing her once more before letting her go. "We've missed you last week."

"Oi!" Theo called from the bar, raising a pint triumphantly. "Look who survived!"

Hermione huffed a laugh as he made his way over to the table. "*Barely.*"

He handed her one of the pints but didn't let go immediately. "You sure you're not going to collapse on us? I have a client review Monday, and if you get me sick, I will have to sue you."

"It was just a cold," Hermione lied again, rolling her eyes. "Not the plague."

His answering grin was easy as always, not knowing that she'd been a horrible friend.

Hermione took the pint from him with a grateful nod and sat next to him. He handed her a chip like it was a peace offering.

Harry gave her a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, one hand tangled loosely with Luna's on the table.

It should have been easy to relax here with them. But Hermione couldn't stop glancing toward the door.

Blaise slid in next, mid-sip, looping an arm around Ginny's waist with that easy kind of affection Hermione craved more than she wanted to admit.

"Well, look who decided to rejoin the living," he said, grinning.

"I missed you too," Hermione said, slipping into her chair.

"You missed *me*," Theo declared beside her. "You can admit it. I wouldn't judge you."

Hermione rolled her eyes, feeling a pang of guilt in her chest at the way he was looking at her now. She tried to shake it, turning to Ginny instead.

"He lost so badly at charades last week," Ginny said, smirking into her pint, "he tried to mime *Titanic* by throwing himself at a chair."

Hermione snorted. "Oh, Theo."

"The chair didn't make it," Blaise added, deadpan. "Neither did his dignity."

"It was creative!" Theo protested.

"It was tragic," Ginny corrected, reaching for another chip.

The conversation flowed easily, laughter threading around the table, and for a moment, Hermione let herself sink into it, the warmth of familiar voices and stupid inside jokes wrapping around her like a shield.

But she felt the shift before she saw it. The subtle way Ginny's hand slowed midway to her glass. The flick of Blaise's eyes toward the door. Even Luna seemed to pause, looking up, like a bird sensing the change in the air.

Hermione kept her head down, pretending to listen to Harry talking about something mundane, but her heart started beating harder against her ribs.

She didn't turn around. Not immediately.

She *felt* him everywhere already. The thrum of awareness beneath her skin sharpened as surely as if someone had called her name.

When she finally glanced up and toward the door, her eyes found him at once.

Draco stood just inside the door, still wearing his office attire like he often did on Friday nights. His hair was mussed like he'd run frustrated fingers through it. His jaw was tight, eyes scanning the room with a casualness that didn't reach the line of his shoulders.

He headed straight for Blaise, said something low that made them bark a laugh, and then dropped onto the stool across from Theo without ever glancing her way.

Hermione's chest twisted painfully, although she tried to remind herself that this was what they had agreed upon. That they would pretend like everything was the same, as if the last two weeks hadn't happened at all.

And yet... Watching him settle in like nothing had changed hurt worse than she'd thought.

Theo bumped her shoulder, oblivious to what was going on inside her. "You have to see this," he said, thrusting his phone into her space. "My neighbor finished the chicken coop."

Hermione leaned in automatically, craving the distraction. On the screen, a squat hen strutted proudly across what looked suspiciously like a converted IKEA bookshelf, surrounded by flower pots and a sagging lawn chair.

Ginny raised a brow. "That looks aggressively unstable."

Theo beamed. "She named this one after me."

Hermione frowned. "You're joking."

"Theodora," he said proudly. "Apparently she's feisty, dramatic, and eats everyone else's food. I'm honored."

Hermione snorted before she could stop herself and it earned her a fond, amused look from Harry.

"She only responds to musical theatre," Theo added, looking far too pleased with himself. "I've been whistling *Les Mis* from the fire escape all week. I think she's in love with me."

Blaise gave him a slow, disbelieving nod. "You're projecting onto poultry now."

"It's mutual," Theo mumbled.

Ginny was grinning, shaking her head like she wasn't surprised at all.

Across the table, Draco lifted his pint to his lips and said, dry as ever, "If she starts loitering outside your flat, let me know. I'll file the paperwork."

Theo grinned. "You'd help me take out a restraining order on a hen?"

"If she's anything like your exes," Draco said, finally glancing up, "I'll do it pro bono."

Hermione was still laughing when she caught the way Draco tilted his pint toward his mouth, the way his eyes flicked briefly toward her without turning his head, like he couldn't help himself.

The smallest brush of connection, before it was gone again. As if it never happened. It lit something painful in her chest.

Theo started scrolling, showing her a video of the chicken flapping aggressively on beat to what might have been *One Day More*, and Hermione let herself focus on it. On the safety of it.

She didn't notice Blaise sliding closer to Draco until she heard the shift in his voice, easy and low.

"Girl at the bar's been staring since you walked in."

Hermione kept her eyes locked on Theo's phone, pretending to find a chicken pacing between flowerpots fascinating.

Draco's voice came after a beat, rougher than it should have been. "She's fit. Good legs."

Something splintered low in Hermione's stomach. Not jealousy, but something close to disappointment.

Blaise laughed. "You should go say hi."

Draco shrugged his shoulders, "Let me finish my pint first."

Hermione forced a small, nonchalant sip from her glass, though the liquid tasted sour on her tongue. Her heart was pounding like she was running up a hill that had no end in sight.

The ache curled deep. Not because she wanted him to parade her around the pub. Not because she wanted their friends whispering behind their hands.

But because sitting across from him, pretending not to know the feel of his hands on her skin, the weight of his forehead against hers in the dark, felt suddenly unbearable.

She pushed her chair back carefully, willing her smile to stay easy.

"Loo," she said lightly.

No one stopped her or noticed the way her knees trembled as she rose.

She made it past the cluster of pub loos without slowing, slipping through the back door instead and gulping down the cool night air like it might steady her. The door swung shut behind her with a soft thud, sealing her in the damp, quiet alley.

The alley behind the pub was gleaming under the glow of the streetlights, the air thick with the smell of damp stone and something fried lingering from the kitchen vents.

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself, staring at her favorite pair of boots. The cold from the stones soaked through the soles, but she barely felt it. She hated how shaky she was. How small she felt. How *stupid*. She wasn't supposed to feel like this.

Or was she?

She didn't really believe Draco would be that cruel. That he'd flirt with another woman right in front of her just to keep up a façade. She knew better. She did. And yet... an ugly doubt gnawed at her anyway.

It was the same voice that always found her when she let someone in, just before they disappointed her. A voice she had discovered the first time she tried to make Ron see her all those years ago. A voice that hadn't left her since but had only grown louder. The one that told her not to get used to being wanted. Not to trust that she wouldn't be replaced the second something easier, prettier, or less complicated came along.

But what was she to Draco, really? They hadn't put a name to any of this, hadn't drawn any lines or made any real promises. She didn't even know what, exactly, he would be replacing if he chose to move on. It wasn't like they were in a relationship. It wasn't like he owed her anything.

But that sharp little ache in her chest was impossible to ignore. Because no matter how many times she told herself she was being ridiculous, that it was fine, that it was all part of the plan... another part of her, smaller and meaner and closer to the truth, whispered something she hated hearing. *That she didn't really trust him.*

Not when it came to this fragile, terrifying need to be enough for once.

And maybe that was her fault. Maybe it was just what happened because her heart lived too close to her mistakes. Somewhere close to her vagina instead of her chest, because Hermione knew that men didn't attach meaning to physical intimacy the way she did.

The door creaked open behind her.

Hermione tensed, scrubbing a hand over her face quickly, trying to wipe the thoughts off her skin before anyone could see them.

But of course it was him. She didn't even need to turn around to know.

Draco's shoes scuffed against the wet stone as the door thudded close.

"You alright?" he asked.

Hermione nodded automatically.

"Just needed a minute," she said but kept staring at the ground.

There was a long enough pause that she thought he might leave her. That he'd take the easy way out, just like she half-expected everyone to, eventually.

But then she heard the soft shift and the scrape of his shoulder against the brick as he leaned back against the wall beside her.

"You want me to go?" he asked after a second, quieter this time.

Hermione shook her head slowly and hugged herself tighter, biting the inside of her cheek.

Another beat of silence stretched between them.

Then Draco said, almost carelessly, "You're acting weird. I'm perfect, obviously. But you—"

She huffed a breath that could barely be called a laugh. She could hear herself how sad it must have sounded to his ears.

She risked looking at him from the side.

If he had been smiling before he wasn't anymore. He was watching her too closely, trying to figure out her dark and secret thoughts.

His brow furrowed slightly.

"You don't have to tell me," he said calmly. "But I'd rather you did so I don't have to guess."

Hermione stared down at her boots again, heart thudding painfully against her ribs.

"It's stupid," she whispered. "I know it's stupid."

"Still want to know," he said simply.

The words felt stuck somewhere between her lungs and her teeth, but he just waited patiently and quiet. The way she didn't know how to ask for but desperately needed.

Finally, she forced the words out, clumsy and real.

"I know we agreed to keep things *private*," she said, her voice catching on the last word. "But hearing you... wanting to talk to that girl..." She broke off, sighing. "Like it was easy to pretend that the last two weeks had never happened."

The confession hung between them, too ugly and way too much too early.

For a long, awful second, Draco said nothing.

And Hermione hated herself for saying anything at all.

Draco's mouth tightened before he pushed off the wall slowly, stepping in front of her.

Close enough that she had to tip her head back to keep looking at him. Close enough that the cold disappeared a little, just because he was there.

He hooked two fingers into the waistband of her jeans, tugging her a step closer.

She licked her lips. "It's too good. And things that feel good don't usually last for me."

"What's scaring you the most?" he asked, so solid it made her chest ache.

Hermione swallowed, her heart thudding hard against her ribs. She didn't want to say it. Didn't want him to see the parts of her she usually kept stitched up and hidden away. The messy, unlovable bits that had been shaped by every time someone chose not to stay.

"Of you deciding to end this before it even started," she whispered.

"I know that voice," he said, so quietly she almost missed it. "I fight with it too."

He brushed her hair back from her face, gentle and sure. "You think I care about that girl at the bar?" He asked with a sad smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Hermione tried to shake her head, but it was too small to be convincing.

"You think I noticed anything," he said, "except you sitting there pretending not to care if I looked at you?"

She flinched, but he didn't let her drop her gaze.

"I saw you the second I walked in," he muttered. "Saw you. Missed you."

Hermione's breath hitched painfully, her chest tightening against the cold inside and out.

Draco's hand lifted, cradling her neck until his thumb brushed along her jaw, coaxing her chin higher when she tried to look away.

"I said what I said because Blaise was watching," Draco said. "Because I knew if I looked at you the way I wanted to, he'd figure it out in about thirty seconds."

She blinked up at him, lashes damp with the sting she refused to let spill. The backs of her arms itched with the need to fold in on herself, to protect the stupid, aching part of her that wanted so badly to believe him.

But he just stayed there, with nothing more than the light press of his fingers, like he wasn't going to let her run from this.

"You really think this is nothing to me?" he asked.

Hermione gave a small, broken shake of her head, but her throat was too tight to answer properly.

His other hand slid from her waistband to the small of her back, drawing her closer still until there was barely an inch left between them.

Her fists curled helplessly into the front of his dress shirt, anchoring herself in him.

"I don't want easy," he said, forehead dipping to rest against hers, their breaths clouding the cold night air between them. "I want something *real*."

The words broke something inside her in the softest way possible.

She closed her eyes, a shaky breath slipping out, and let herself press into him, not trusting herself to speak yet, but hoping somehow he could feel it anyway.

She wanted to believe all of it. She just didn't know if she knew *how*.

Draco exhaled slowly, some of the fire bleeding out of him.

"This is scary for me too," he said softly.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, trying to keep the stupid tears from burning past her lashes.

She stayed very still, forehead pressed lightly to his, the alley spinning quietly around them. It would be so easy to fold into it.

But the fear stuck in her chest stubbornly.

After a moment, he slid his hand back to her waistband, tugging lightly and stroking along her jawline with the other.

"Stop running," he said quietly. "Please."

Hermione squeezed her eyes tighter. "I'm not," she whispered. "I'm trying."

"That's all I want," he murmured, thumb brushing slow across her cheekbone. "For you to meet me halfway."

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Because wasn't that the problem? She didn't know if she *could*, even though her whole body was already reaching for him.

But deep down, a colder voice still whispered...*He'll change his mind...*

She hated how much harder it was to fight the voice when it was Draco standing here, when it wasn't supposed to matter that much, but somehow it already did.

Draco's hand slid higher, curling fully around the back of her neck, thumb stroking just below her ear in a slow, grounding rhythm.

He didn't act like she'd ruined anything.

And somehow, that quiet, unshaken way he stayed exactly where he was, undid her more than it should have. For a second, he just breathed with her, their foreheads brushing lightly.

"Looks like we're scared of the same thing," he said. "So let's just get this out of the way."

Her fingers bunched helplessly into his shirt.

"It's *not* going to be perfect," Draco muttered, so close she could feel every word vibrate against her skin. "I'm going to mess up a lot. You will too. But I'm not leaving the first time it gets hard. I'm not looking for a reason to walk away."

Hermione's gaze dropped to where she held onto him, overwhelmed by him and the terrifying, blinding hope unfurling inside her chest.

He tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his haunting eyes once more.

She made a soft, broken sound before she could stop herself, her chest tightening so sharply it almost hurt. She pressed closer instinctively, like some part of her believed him already, even if the rest of her was still scrambling to catch up.

He cupped her jaw in both hands, anchoring her there, like he could hold her doubts at bay by sheer will alone.

"I want to believe you," she whispered carefully, as if saying it too loud might crack them both open. "I just—I need some time to build that trust."

Draco ducked his head slightly, brushing his nose against hers, ridiculously tender for someone who looked like he could level cities.

"All I'm asking is for you to give me a real chance," he murmured.

Hermione nodded, shaky against him. "I'm trying," she breathed.

"Thank you," he said, so soft it splintered something between them.

In this small sliver of space, it felt like the only thing that mattered was the way he was still holding her. The way he hadn't let go.

Then Draco let out a slow, shaky breath and tugged her fully into him, arms locking around her waist. He pressed his face into the curve of her neck like he was anchoring himself too.

Hermione let herself melt into him, feeling the way his heart hammered against her cheek, the way his breath shivered across her skin.

And for the first time all night, the voice in her head went quiet.

They stood like that for another moment, wrapped in the quiet.

Then Draco tilted his head, voice low near her ear. One of his hands dipped lower, fingers slipping around the back of her jeans. "Come here."

His fingers shifted, trailing lightly under the hem of her shirt. "You need a lot more attention than I've given you..."

"I'm fine," she lied, the words just slightly broken.

Draco didn't say anything at first, just tucked his face back into her neck, breathing her in.

"No, you're not," he said quietly. "But you will be."

She let out a shaky little laugh, helpless.

He smiled against her skin; she could feel his lips brushing there faintly.

"There you are," he whispered. "Missed your skin."

Before she could say anything, he caught her chin, tilted her face up, and kissed her hard enough that she gasped into it.

His hand at her back pulled forward, fingers dragging and popping the button of her jeans in one swift movement.

"Let me take care of you," he muttered against her mouth, already backing her against the wall.

The brick pressed cold against her back as Draco crowded her in, kissing her deeper, harder, until Hermione couldn't think of anything but him.

His hand slid lower, catching the edge of her zipper and dragging it down one tooth at a time. The metallic rasp of it filled the charged air between them, loud against the quiet of the alley.

Hermione whimpered softly into his mouth, her hips tilting toward him before she could stop herself. She had missed his touch too much all week, her own hands not enough to make her relive what he had done to her.

Draco groaned low in his throat like she was the sweetest fucking thing he'd ever tasted and slipped his hand beneath the denim, beneath the thin line of her knickers, until his fingers found heat and slickness that made him swear under his breath.

His fingers dragged slow along the soft, soaked seam of her.

"Wish I could fuck you right here," he muttered against her mouth.

Hermione gasped, the kiss breaking on a shuddering breath, her forehead thudding softly against his shoulder as his hand kept moving. He started out slow, almost lazy, like he had all the time in the world to work her open in the alleyway.

She could imagine it too vividly. *The rough scrape of brick against her cheek, the way his hands would shove her jeans down just enough from behind, the filthy slap of skin against skin in the dark. How he'd grip her hips hard enough to bruise. How she'd choke on her own sounds, legs shaking, taking everything he'd give her.*

She whimpered against his jaw, clutching his shoulders, aching for all of it with a need so sharp it almost hurt.

"You don't even know," he rasped, fingers searching deeper, parting her gently, teasing her with maddening circles. "How much I've been thinking about you."

Her hips rolled into his hand instinctively and so desperate for him to feel more of him.

Draco's other hand slid up under her shirt, splaying hot over the bare skin of her back, anchoring her there against the wall, against him.

"Missed you," he said again, almost like he couldn't help it, the words tumbling out low and raw. Two of his fingers entered her without resistance, curling just right before pushing deeper, and Hermione's knees buckled slightly.

He caught her weight easily, pinning her there with his body, his touch, his mouth moving down to her jaw, her throat, open-mouthed and hungry.

"You're fucking perfect like this," he growled against her skin. "Beautiful."

Hermione let out a choked sound, something desperate and sweet at once, her body tightening around his fingers, her pulse thundering in her ears.

Draco's mouth found her throat.

"Exactly," he murmured, dragging his teeth lightly along the skin just beneath her ear.

And then he really started working her, his fingers moving with a filthy squelching sound that made her whimper into his shoulder. He curled them just right, brushing the spot inside her that made the world go white around the edges. His thumb never lost its rhythm on her clit either, circling and coaxing more slickness from her with every desperate little roll of her hips.

The obscene sounds filled the tiny space between them, slick and unashamed, and Hermione's face burned with how shameless she must have sounded in the quiet. Broken noises slipping from her throat with every flex of his hand.

"Just like that," Draco rasped against her ear, his voice strained as if he felt it too. "Let me make you feel good."

She tried to hold onto him, arms wrapping around his neck in desperation. Because his hand was relentless now, like he *wanted* her to lose it all over him.

The seam of her jeans strained against the movement of his wrist, the whisper of fabric shifting adding another layer of filthy sound to the mess they were making. She felt everything, the pressure of his hand pinning her, the scrape of brick at her back, the way his mouth brushed her jaw in hot, open-mouthed kisses as he worked her closer and closer.

Hermione whimpered his name, barely a breath, barely even a sound, but it was enough.

He groaned, deep in his chest, and slid his fingers deeper still, pumping into her with a firm, obscene wet pop before curling back against the place that made her knees go weak all over again.

“You’re shaking,” he murmured, mouth brushing the shell of her ear.

Her fingers curled into his shirt. She was close already, the thrill of where they were, the way he touched her, wrecked her faster than anything else could.

Hermione choked on a moan, hips grinding helplessly into his hand, the world narrowing down to the steady, ruthless pleasure he gave her.

He caught her mouth again in a messy, claiming kiss, swallowing the broken sounds she made as she came. She trembled with every pulse of it, thighs clenching around his hand. He held her steady, coaxing her through each wave until she sagged into him completely.

Hermione tried to laugh, but it caught in her throat while trying to catch her breath. “You’re way too good at that.”

He brushed her hair back, smirking. “Don’t tell anyone.”

She laughed softly into his shoulder.

They stood like that for another beat, the night still pressing in around them, but it didn’t feel cold anymore. Then, just as he tugged her shirt hem back into place to cover the evidence, he lifted his hand to his mouth. Without breaking eye contact he slid his middle and ring finger into his mouth.

Hermione winced, unable to look away.

Draco hummed low; eyes not leaving hers. “The best thing I’ve tasted all week.”

They slipped back into the pub quietly, Hermione leading the way, doing her best to look casual even though her skin still hummed. The uncomfortable, aching heat between her legs was a constant reminder of what he’d done to her outside, making the air inside feel stiflingly warm.

Draco peeled off toward the bar with an easy stretch, ordering another pint like he hadn’t just wrecked her in an alleyway. A perfect, practiced move to avoid drawing any suspicion.

Hermione made a beeline for the table, slipping back into her seat beside Theo, her heart still beating faster than it should. She tucked a curl behind her ear and reached for her pint, praying that her hand didn’t shake from it all.

Ginny, thankfully oblivious or just merciful, passed her a crooked grin and shoved a chip into her hand like nothing at all was out of place.

Hermione accepted it with a small, grateful smile, pretending to focus very hard on the pub's low music instead of the way her body was still thrumming.

Theo was still talking about the chicken, but Hermione wasn't really listening. Not when she felt Blaise's gaze on her. He took a slow sip of his beer. His eyes lingered on her for a beat too long, something unreadable passing over his face, before he glanced away. Sharply. Toward something or *someone* behind her.

And then she felt it.

The lightest brush of fingers across her lower back. Barely there. A whisper against the thin fabric of her jumper. But it still jolted through her like a live current, her body recognizing the touch before her mind could even catch up.

Draco had taken the long way around the table, not the straight path back to his seat next to Blaise. Just so he could touch her. A silent claim, secret and fleeting, but grounding in a way that made her pulse kick hard against her ribs.

Hermione kept her face carefully blank, not daring to turn her head or react, though every cell in her body strained toward him.

She reached for her pint, hand steadier than she felt, and brought it to her mouth just to have something to do. She focused on breathing slowly through her nose, like she wasn't burning alive under her skin.

By the time she glanced up again, Draco had dropped into his seat next to Blaise, slouching back casually, the picture of someone who had no secrets at all.

Their eyes met once. A brief, cutting glance over the rim of his glass, before he turned away just as easily, smirking at something Ginny said.

Hermione caught a flicker of movement at the edge of her vision. Blaise was still watching her. Not openly. But his mouth quirked, just slightly, around the rim of his pint.

And for one terrifying second, she thought that he knew what they had done. That it was written all over her face.

But then he blinked, leaned back lazily in his chair, and the conversation rolled on like nothing had ever happened.

Almost like it had all been in her head. She might have believed it if she didn't still feel it, the humiliating slickness between her legs when she shifted, her knickers clinging to her like a secret nobody else could see.

The conversation had shifted by the time she refocused. Ginny was recounting a nightmare train journey from earlier in the week. Luna chatted with Theo, sharing random facts about the mating habits of underground rodents.

Theo, looking almost disturbed, turned to Hermione. "Is that true?"

Hermione frowned. "How would I know?!"

Theo snorted, shrugged. "You're smarter than me."

Luna, completely unflustered, added, "Technically, their ultrasonic mating calls can be interpreted as song."

Theo leaned back in his chair, looking deeply disturbed. "That's creepy."

Harry, who had been half-listening while draining the last of his pint, snorted. "Mate, you literally serenade a chicken from your fire escape. Why are you so shocked about rodents singing to get laid?"

Theo pointed a finger at him crossly. "That's different."

Hermione laughed so hard she nearly dropped her glass.

Even Draco let out a low, huffing laugh. A sound that warmed something deep and stupid inside her.

"You realize," Harry said, grinning at Theo, "that means you're basically in a relationship with a poultry version of a sewer rat?"

Theo just grumbled something when Ginny patted his shoulder in encouragement. "We still love you, you know."

"I feel like this is the worst table in this bloody pub," Theo muttered, shrugging off Ginny's hand.

"I feel like you're the reason we're banned from three others," Blaise said, leaning back lazily. "Sit with that."

Harry lifted his glass. "Pretty sure *Draco* was the one who got us booted from the last one."

There was a beat.

Hermione felt the air change slightly, just enough that her gaze flicked to Draco before she could stop it.

He didn't look back at her. But she saw the way his jaw twitched. The stillness in his hands. Because it was true.

Ginny grabbed the last chip. "He was also the only one who did what all of you *should've* done after what that prick pulled with Hermione."

The table went quiet for a second.

“And really,” she added, eyes narrowing slightly, “if we’re playing blame bingo, it was Theo who told her to go flirt with strangers in the first place.”

Blaise nodded, lifting his glass in a lazy salute. "What she said."

Ginny snorted. "Please. Like you didn’t participate in this non-sense."

Theo stiffened slightly, then let out a quiet breath. “Yeah, whatever” he muttered, a little too quick to be convincing. “Didn’t exactly have a crystal ball on that one.”

Hermione glanced at him, her smile softening despite herself. This had been her fault alone.

He glanced at her. “I tried to offer my services to Hermione first, didn’t I?”

The words landed a little heavier than she expected.

She didn’t know what to say to that but caught the smallest flicker of a smile at the corner of Draco’s mouth. He didn’t say anything, but threw her one sharp, knowing glance over the rim of his glass. The kind that said, *Do you see it now?*

Her stomach flipped, heat rushing to her cheeks. She looked down fast, suddenly very interested in her drink.

Ginny clapped her hands. “Anyway—festival. Sunday. Live music. Cider tent. I’m going, and I expect at least two of you to pretend to be fun.”

Theo and Luna murmured their vague commitments, and the tension slowly eased into something lighter again.

Blaise stood, stretching. “Back in a sec.”

As Blaise peeled off toward the bar, Hermione caught Draco shifting, pulling his phone from his pocket under the table. She didn’t pay it any real attention, just watched the soft light of the screen reflected in the curve of his jaw for a moment too long before looking away again.

Then her own phone buzzed in her pocket.

Hermione shifted, pulling it out discreetly. One new message.

DM:

*Can I stay at yours tonight?
Not for anything. Just because.*

Her heart flipped.

She looked up slowly, but he wasn’t looking at her anymore. He was laughing at something Harry had just said, elbow on the table, pint cradled in his hand like nothing in the world was wrong.

Hermione typed her reply quickly, making sure Theo wasn't paying attention right next to her.

Maybe sneaking around could be fun for a little while.

Yes.

It was nearly midnight by the time the group thinned out entirely, one by one peeling off with hugs and goodbyes and vague promises for Sunday. Hermione had the perfect excuse to not get drunk with them – her planned afternoon tea at her parents' house loomed politely over her weekend. Draco, ever strategic, had claimed he had work to catch up on. Neither of them pushed their luck by offering anything more.

Ginny and Blaise were the first to leave, arms slung lazily around each other's shoulders, Blaise saying something low that made Ginny laugh and swat at his chest. Harry and Luna trailed close behind.

Theo lingered a bit longer, finishing the last dregs of his drink before his ride pulled up outside. He shoved his arms into his coat, offered them a lazy salute, and disappeared into the cold with a final, "Off to woo my rooftop soulmate. Try not to die of jealousy," tossed over his shoulder.

And then it was just the two of them.

Hermione shifted slightly in her seat, fingers tracing the rim of her glass. Across from her, Draco stretched out in his chair, looking unfairly handsome for this time of night.

They were both, supposedly, still waiting for rides they had never actually called.

Hermione swallowed a smile, cheeks warming, before glancing around the mostly emptied pub. Only a few stragglers remained at the bar. The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable. But it felt like they were waiting to make sure nobody turned around. That their friends were gone for good by the time they would leave the pub.

After several minutes Draco drained the last of his pint and stood, stretching one arm overhead as he shrugged into his coat. "You're not wearing heels tonight."

Hermione blinked at the statement, confused. "Correct?"

His mouth quirked. "Good. Let's walk to yours."

She almost asked why, but the air outside had cooled and softened into that strange in-between stillness, where the night belonged only to the few people quiet enough to notice it. So, she nodded and followed him out.

They walked in silence for the first block, the pavement damp beneath their feet, the city quieting around them under a sky of bright stars covered by clouds. Hermione's hands were tucked deep into her coat pockets, shoulders just barely brushing his with each step.

"Are you hungry?" Draco asked.

She glanced up at him. "A little. Why?"

"I didn't really eat. Was thinking of seeing what was still open. Or convincing you to feed me."

Hermione smiled. "I've got leftover pizza."

He looked over. "Yeah?"

"Half margherita, half Hawaiian."

He flat out paused on the sidewalk.

Hermione blinked at him, confused. "What?"

"You eat pineapple on pizza?" His tone was cautious.

"Obviously," she said. "It's the superior topping."

He stared at her, then let out a quiet, content sigh. "That's such a relief."

Hermione laughed, shaking her head, and nudged him with her shoulder as they started walking again, their steps falling back into an easy rhythm.

Their arms brushed occasionally, neither of them pulling away.

"I've ended things over less," Draco added casually, hands tucked in his coat pockets. "You just saved our entire relationship."

"Relationship?" she repeated, half-teasing... or at least trying to. Her voice came out a little thinner than she meant it to.

Draco glanced at her, face unreadable for a beat, then hummed. "If you want to call it something else, be my guest."

Her breath stumbled for a second, like her ribs had forgotten how to work properly. Because it wasn't nothing. It was *this*.

It was him saying *relationship* like it wasn't the most dangerous, terrifying, wonderful word he could have said.

Part of her wanted to run, but most of her just stayed there with a hammering heart in her chest and burning lungs, pretending she wasn't already his.

And then, like it was the most natural thing in the world, he slid his arm around her shoulders

and pulled her closer into his side. She didn't have time to think about what this little back and forth truly meant, just that it felt right. He didn't let her dwell on it either.

"You walk fast for someone with short legs," he said, the tease near her ear. "Impressive."

Hermione scoffed, elbowing him gently in the ribs. "Maybe you're just slow."

"I'm literally adjusting my entire gait for you," he deadpanned.

She grinned, eyes fixed ahead, but she leaned into him more deliberately now. Letting his body absorb some of the weight of her day. Of the week. Of everything that had been unspoken between them in the pub and everything that was... less unspoken now.

His arm was draped over her shoulder like it belonged there, thumb occasionally brushing the fabric of her coat in absent circles.

"Do you think they know?" she asked eventually.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "If they were going to say something, they already would have. They're not interested in outing us. They're not cruel."

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. Then Draco added, completely deadpan, "Although, let's be honest... they're probably following us right now."

Hermione exhaled slowly, something easing in her chest.

He looked down at her, straight-faced. "Blaise with a trench coat and fake moustache. Ginny narrating into a voice recorder like it's a true crime podcast."

Hermione grinned, shaking her head at the imagery.

"I can hear her now," he said, dropping his voice to a dramatic whisper. "*'Suspect has arm draped over the victim. Intimacy level: scandalous.'*"

Hermione was laughing properly now, the tension finally cracking apart into something easier.

"If Ginny and Blaise *are* following us, they're probably placing bets on how far we make it before I drag you into bed."

Draco raised a brow, amused. "Oh, so now you're the seducer?"

She smirked. "I walk fast for a reason."

They rounded the corner onto her street, the streetlight of her building glowing faintly ahead.

Then Draco said, more thoughtful now, "You know Blaise was the same way with Ginny."

Hermione glanced up at him, curious. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged; the motion easy but something more serious flickering in his eyes. “Pretended not to care for a while until he admitted to me that he was in it for real.”

Hermione smiled, her chest warming. It had been so long ago now that she barely remembered the details. It was around the time she’d been heartbroken about Ginny’s brother. “They’re good together.”

Draco hummed in agreement, steering her gently around a puddle. “Yeah. He needed someone to tell him to shut up once in a while.”

Hermione laughed softly. “She’s very good at that.”

“She’s good for him,” Draco said simply. Then, without missing a beat, added, “I think we’d be better, though.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. She just pulled one hand out of her coat pocket, slow and almost shy, and wrapped it around his middle as they walked. Let herself hold onto him properly this time without pretending it was for warmth.

Draco’s hand just shifted his arm lower around her back, tucking her fully into his side like she belonged there.

They walked the last few hundred meters like that, Hermione’s cheek brushing his coat sometimes when the wind picked up.

“But for the record,” he said, voice dipping just enough to ground the moment, “I’m not coming over to sleep with you.”

Hermione glanced up at him, her smirk fading into something quieter. “I know.”

“I mean—I’d *happily* sleep with you. Frequently. With enthusiasm,” he clarified.

That earned a quiet laugh from her, but his face didn’t change.

“I don’t expect it,” he added, gentler now. “Even when you look like that. Even when I want you so much that I feel stupid about it.”

Somewhere along the way, the world stopped feeling like it might crack apart at any second.

It was just him.

And her.

And *this*.

The flat door clicked shut behind them with a soft thud, and neither of them moved to turn the lights on. The city’s faint glow crept in through the windows, bathing everything in a soft, silvery blue.

Hermione kicked off her boots by the door, shrugged off her coat and padded toward the kitchen, the worn wood floor cool under her socks. She tugged the fridge open, the light spilling out harshly into the dimness, and reached for the pizza box she'd stashed earlier.

She barely had time to straighten before she felt him behind her.

Draco reached around her, plucked the pizza box off the counter with one hand, and set it aside without ceremony. Then his hands were at her waist, steady and certain.

Before she could say a word, he lifted her clean off the floor and set her on the empty counter with an easy strength that stole her breath.

Hermione let out a soft, surprised sound, her thighs parting instinctively to make room for him as he stepped in closer, crowding her against the cabinets like he had every right to.

"I like you up here," he murmured in a way that made her toes curl in her socks. "Perfect height."

"For what," she teased, her hands finding the edges of his collared dress shirt and pulled him closer, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He just brushed his nose lightly against hers, the gentlest, almost shy sort of nudge.

Then he kissed her slowly, full of restraint. It seemed like he just wanted to feel her mouth against his, to drink her in like he'd missed her with every fiber of his being. The same way she'd missed him.

Hermione tightened her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, her heart squeezing painfully.

Because who else had ever touched her like this... kissed her like she was precious?

Draco's hands stayed steady at her waist at first, squeezing lightly, thumbs stroking along the hem of her shirt like he couldn't help himself. One hand slid higher, pressing flat against her ribs, feeling the warm, steady beat of her heart against his palm.

Hermione let out a shaky little breath against his mouth and kissed him deeper, her fingers threading through his hair at the nape of his neck.

He made a low sound in the back of his throat that almost sounded needy, but still held himself back, still giving her all the room in the world to just be kissed.

He wasn't going to ask for anything. He wasn't going to take anything.

And something inside her broke a little with how much she wanted to give him something. A selfless act like the one he had offered her earlier in the alley behind the pub. He had never asked for anything in return, had cared more about her than about being satisfied himself.

Hermione pulled back slightly, staring at him in the darkness. His pupils were blown wide, his cheeks flushed, his mouth kiss-bitten.

For the first time in a very long time, she wanted to make someone else feel wanted.

Her hands slid down his chest, slow and deliberate, feeling the steady heat of him even through the crisp fabric of his dress shirt. She found where it was neatly tucked into his trousers and slipped her fingers beneath, tugging it loose.

He shivered slightly against her, the muscles of his stomach tensing under her touch.

Hermione smiled against his lips as he came back for another kiss, her hands slipping lower still, skimming the warm skin of his hip just above the waistband. She felt the subtle but unmistakable press of him, thick against the seam of her thighs.

He shifted almost imperceptibly at the contact, a broken sound escaping into her mouth, like he was struggling to keep the reins tight.

She pulled back again, just enough to brush her nose against his, her lips still ghosting his skin, and murmured, "Help me down?"

Draco blinked, a little dazed, like he wasn't sure she'd said something. But he set his hands on her waist and lifted her off the counter like she weighed nothing.

Hermione let herself slide down slowly, dragging along the front of him, feeling the heat of him, the tension thrumming just beneath the surface.

Her feet barely touched the floor before her hands slid down his chest, smoothing the rumpled fabric of his shirt where she had untucked it. She straightened it a little, an almost silly, domestic gesture, and then let her fingers trail lower.

She could feel the way his breath stuttered, the way his hands, still resting lightly at her hips, flexed once, like he was struggling not to grab.

He deserved this. After everything he'd given her outside in the cold, with no demands or expectations, he deserved to be touched like this. Worshiped a little. *Loved*, maybe, in all the ways she wasn't ready to say out loud yet.

Hermione dipped her fingers, her knuckles brushing the warm skin just above his waistband, feeling the way his body tightened in response. She pressed her mouth to his throat, open-mouthed and slow, feeling his pulse hammer under her lips.

Draco shivered, a sharp exhale escaping him.

"You're—" he started, voice rough, but broke off when her fingers found the button of his trousers and toyed with it lightly, not opening it yet, just feeling the way he trembled there under her hands. Like she had trembled for him earlier.

Hermione smiled against his skin.

"Let me," she whispered. This was about him. Because no one had ever made her feel as safe, as wanted, as he had tonight. And she wanted to give something back in a way that was slow and real and hers to give.

Draco made a soft, broken noise at her words, something helplessly wrecked, and finally dropped his forehead to her shoulder like he couldn't hold himself up otherwise.

She kissed his jaw once more, then again, and finally eased to her knees in front of him, her hands smoothing down his thighs as she went.

He didn't move.

He just stayed there, breathing hard, one trembling hand lifting to bury itself in her hair in a touch so gentle it nearly broke her heart all over again.

Hermione looked up at him through her lashes, the world around her fading into nothingness.

She pressed her mouth just above the line of his trousers.

Draco's body shook like he might shatter if she touched him any more gently. The tiles bit into her knees, but she barely felt it over the heat rushing through her as her breath ghosted over the front of his pants.

Her hand settled on his thighs when she nosed gently against the zipper, nuzzling against the strained bulge.

When she finally looked up at him, her lips already parted, he looked like he'd forgotten how to breathe.

"Jesus—"

That was all he managed.

She worked open his pants with quiet focus, dragging the zipper down with shaky fingers. She hadn't done this in a while, and surely not with someone his size. But she never had wanted to take care of someone else like she wanted to in this moment. This time it wasn't about proving herself or being worthy enough of his affection.

Her fingers dipped beneath the waistband, brushing the soft cotton of his briefs already tented with how hard he was for her. She leaned in, her breath hot against the bulge, and nuzzled once, slow and teasing.

Draco's hand flexed on the counter behind her, leaning into her as he hissed her name through his teeth. "Hermione..."

She curled her fingers into the waistband and tugged. The briefs clung stubbornly for a moment, stretched tight over the thick line of him. She had to ease them down slowly, knuckles grazing the underside of his cock.

He reached down to help, pushing his pants and briefs lower with a single, urgent motion. The fabric slipped halfway down his thighs, exposing the full, flushed length of him, thick and leaking at the tip.

Hermione looked up at him again and wrapped her hand around the base of his cock, thumb gliding over the slick head as her breath ghosted over him.

Draco groaned, head tipping back.

She leaned in and licked the length of him once as she held him steady, avoiding the tip.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy,” he rasped, eyes dropping to watch her closely. “On your knees, looking at me like that.”

She leaned in and pressed a kiss to the tip of him, open-mouthed, tongue trailing slow and wet. Encouraged by how much he seemed to enjoy the attention.

Then she pulled back slightly, broke their eye contact for a breath, and spat. It landed across the head of his cock and hit with a soft sound. Draco’s hips shifted forward involuntarily.

“You’re so filthy,” he rasped. “I love it. I fucking love it.”

Hermione stroked him with firm fingers, slicking him.

She leaned forward and dragged her tongue up the underside of him, pausing just beneath the head to swirl gently before taking him partway into her mouth.

He whimpered a high sound; his hand slid into her hair, not to guide her, just to anchor himself.

She hollowed her cheeks and moaned softly around him just to feel the way he twitched from the vibration. She tried to keep her eyes on his face, watching every unraveling breath, every shattered exhale. And when his hooded gaze met hers again, she felt her pulse spike from the adrenaline flooding her.

She was making a mess of herself and didn’t care. Not with the way he looked at her like she was the most beautiful, most unholy thing he’d ever seen.

Not with the way he muttered her name like it meant something more every time it left his mouth.

Draco hissed again as she took him deeper, lips slick and the slurping sound filling the air between them. It felt like he was holding back not to thrust into her mouth, to not hurt her. He was trying to be good, to let her ruin him at her pace.

Hermione eased her mouth lower, taking more of him in. Her jaw began to ache in the most delicious way around him. Her throat tightened instinctively when the head of him brushed the back of her tongue, and she gagged softly, pulling back with a small, wet sound.

Draco’s whole body jerked.

But she didn’t stop. She licked a slow circle around the head of him instead, gathering herself, then tried again pushing down, taking him deeper, her fingers tightening at the base to ease the stretch.

She whimpered quietly against him, the effort of it obvious, and Draco swore under his breath, raw and reverent.

"God," he rasped, staring down at her.

His hips gave the smallest tremble forward before he stilled himself again, fighting not to move, not to force it down her throat.

Hermione breathed slow through her nose, mouth stretched wide, the pressure of him so much she almost thought she'd lose control of it. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes from the sheer fullness, but she didn't stop. She wanted him to feel how much she meant it.

When she hollowed her cheeks and sucked it sounded messy and almost obscene. Draco's breath fractured completely.

"Shit—" he groaned. His hand tightened in her hair, like he physically needed something to hold on to or he'd fall apart completely.

She didn't answer with words. Just moaned low around him and took him deeper, her hands still tight around the base, stroking in the same rhythm like her lips now. His thighs trembled with the effort to stay still.

"Almost there," he warned with another hiss. "Almost—"

He watched her, jaw tight, completely undone. She looked up through her lashes, lips stretched wide around him, spit running down her chin.

She felt it building in him, every strained breath, every tremble in his thighs, the way his fingers curled tighter in her hair and struggled to not pull her deeper. His voice had dropped to fragments, her name slipping from his lips like it was the only word he remembered.

His hips stuttered, "Oh shit—please—don't you dare stop—so close—"

Hermione didn't stop, and when she pushed down just a little too far, she gagged again, the sound wet and quiet, her body flinching for half a second before she steadied herself.

Draco swore, loud this time. His hand clenched in her hair. "Oh.Fuck—"

She breathed through it, watery eyes fluttering up to meet his, and did it again. Gagged softly around him as she took him deeper, like she *wanted* to feel it. Like she wanted *him* to feel it. Saliva slicked her lips, dripping down her hand where she stroked and squeezed him.

"Open wide—fuck—take it—there it is—fuck—*fuck*—" he growled, voice cracking as the first pulse hit, fingers flexing at the back of her neck like he couldn't let her go.

Draco's thighs trembled under her palms, muscles locking and jerking helplessly as he spilled onto her tongue. Hermione tried to swallow him down, tried to take all of it, but it was too much, some of it leaked past her lips, slicking her chin. It tasted like him and a little overwhelming, warm and salty, bitter at the back of her throat, like every reckless, beautiful

mistake she'd ever wanted to make. And she didn't know why it made her chest ache so badly, but it did.

When he stilled, she let him slip from her mouth with a soft, wet sound, panting quietly as she looked up at him through her lashes, her chin messy, her hands wrapping around the backs of his thighs.

Draco looked down at her like he wasn't sure if she was real. Then, without hesitation, he dropped to his knees onto the cold tiles *with* her.

His hand came up, thumb brushing at the corner of her mouth with devastating gentleness, wiping the remnants of him from her skin.

He didn't look disgusted.

If anything, his thumb lingered, almost fascinated, before he slipped it between her lips, letting her taste the last of him from his hand as he watched her with something fierce and wrecked in his eyes.

Hermione closed her mouth softly around his thumb without thinking, cheeks still burning. Draco's tongue darted out to wet his lips as he kept his eyes locked on the way her lips wrapped around him.

He withdrew his thumb slowly, reluctant, and then he was cradling her face fully in his hands, tilting her chin up, staring at her like she was made of glass and fire all at once.

And then he kissed her so slowly, it hurt. He kissed her like she mattered. Like he couldn't believe he was allowed to.

His mouth moved over hers with unbearable tenderness, unhurried and deep, no urgency left.

Hermione whimpered into him, arms looping around his neck instinctively. Draco caught her closer, nearly pulling her into his lap there on the cold kitchen floor, like he didn't know how to let her go *now that he had her*.

When they finally broke apart, he rested his forehead against hers, both of them breathing unevenly, the dark and quiet of the flat wrapping around them like a blanket.

"You're gonna destroy me," he whispered, more to himself.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, overwhelmed, holding him tighter, burying her face in the curve of his warm neck.

Neither of them said anything else. They didn't need to.

Tonight had changed everything.

Chapter 14: Home (1/2)

Saturday morning crept in slowly, painting the walls with strokes of grey where the early light slipped through the half-closed blinds. Everything felt quiet and a little out of focus, like the world hadn't fully woken up yet.

Hermione drifted somewhere between sleep and waking, her limbs tangled in the sheets, the body behind her warming her in ways no blanket could. She barely registered the lazy drag of fingers along her shoulder as Draco shifted behind her.

His hand moved slowly, tracing the thin strap of the tank top she'd thrown on before they collapsed into bed last night. His palm settled over the curve of her breast, fingers splaying without urgency until she shivered in his grasp.

A soft sigh slipped from her lips as she arched into the maddening touch.

Draco murmured something low against her hair, his mouth brushing just behind her ear, and she felt him smile lazily against her neck. His teeth grazed her shoulder in a teasing scrape before he pressed a kiss to the spot.

The phone on the nightstand buzzed sharply, rattling against the wood and jolting Hermione fully awake in his arms.

His hand stilled abruptly before his mouth broke from her skin with a muttered curse.

Hermione stayed very still, heart thudding as the lazy heat between them cooled immediately. She felt the tension slide into his body even before he moved, pulling away from her.

He reached for his phone, exhaling sharply through his nose as he silenced the call without answering.

Hermione cast a tired glance over her shoulder without lifting her head from the pillow, just in time to catch the screen flash with a blur of unread notifications. Too quick to read, but not quick enough to miss the sharp flicker in Draco's eyes as he set the phone down face-first, with a careless thud.

Hermione swallowed, trying to find her way back to the softness they'd been wrapped in just moments ago, but it was like a thread had snapped. That slow, melting affection left something brittle in its place.

After a moment, Draco's hand returned to her hip, squeezing lightly, like he was trying to pick up where they'd left off. He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple but he was already half-somewhere else.

He tucked his face into the crook of her neck, and pressed a soft kiss there, but the moment he'd been building toward was already gone. He pulled her closer with a sleepy sort of affection.

Hermione stroked the back of his hand on her hip lightly. They stayed like that for another few minutes in the quiet.

Until his phone rang again, shattering the fragile peace all over again.

“Fuck’s sake,” Draco muttered, dragging a hand through his hair as he reached for the phone. Hermione rolled onto her back, her arm brushing against his side with the movement. He answered without checking the screen, voice rough with sleep. “What.”

Blaise’s voice crackled through the air, bright and obnoxiously awake, *“Good morning, sunshine. Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”*

Draco sighed and dropped back against the pillows. Hermione watched him from under her lashes, a soft smile tugging at her lips.

He dragged a hand over his face. “What do you want, Zabini.”

“You, lover boy. With a functioning car,” Blaise said. *“Ginny found some monstrosity on Facebook Marketplace she wants to pick up. A dresser or a bookcase or – hell, maybe it’s a piano. I need a second pair of hands and a car that’s not ancient. You free later this morning?”*

Draco sighed again, like it physically pained him. “Yeah, what time?”

“Come by ours around ten? I’ll owe you one. Ginny says she’ll bake cookies or something if that sweetens the deal.”

His fingers found her bare thigh under the blanket and squeezed gently, absentminded. He was always warmer than her, like he could easily burn through her if he wanted to.

“Alright, I’ll pick you up in a bit,” Draco muttered.

“Legendary,” Blaise said cheerfully. *“Text me when you’re close.”*

Hermione stayed curled against him, and his fingers—still wrapped around her thigh—gave another soft squeeze, like he was anchoring them both.

He rubbed the heel of his palm into his eye and muttered against her hair, “Need to grab a shower. Change. Before those two idiots start asking where the fuck I spent the night.”

Hermione nodded sleepily between the pillow and his chest, stretching one bare leg to brush against his under the covers. Her fingers moved absently along the line of his ribs, tracing the slow, steady rise and fall of his breath beneath her palm. She followed the faint curve of a scar by his hip bone and felt him shiver slightly at the touch.

“You always come here,” she said softly, almost shy. “We could spend time at your place too.”

Draco hummed low in his throat, thumb stroking a slow line down her lower back. “Your place is better.”

She tipped her head up, giving him a look. “I’ve never seen how you live.”

“It’s not as cozy as this,” he said, nudging his nose against her temple. “Not even close.”

Hermione let out a quiet, amused sigh and pressed her forehead to his collarbone. But the thought lingered—odd, now that she noticed it. For all the nights he'd stayed over, not once had he suggested she come to his.

Then Draco shifted beside her, the mattress dipping slightly as he sat back against the headboard. He raked a lazy hand through his hair, leaving it even messier than before, and looked down at her with a crooked half-smile that made her stomach flip.

"If you don't have any plans for today..." he said, voice still rough with sleep, "we could have dinner at mine tonight. After I survive Blaise and whatever fresh hell he's roped me into."

The slip of worry inside her eased. She smiled, soft and surprised, and let her fingers curl lightly around his wrist.

Hermione stayed where she was, sprawled out against the pillows, looking up at him. He looked *ridiculously* good like this, rumpled and unguarded, half-naked in the soft morning light.

The faint scent of his cologne clung to his skin from last night, something warm and clean and unbearably him. It made her head spin a little.

She opened her mouth, then hesitated, hating the quiet pang of disappointment curling in her chest.

"Actually..." she began, dragging a slow fingertip along the inside of his wrist. "I promised I'd help at my boxing gym tonight. They're doing an open house thing for kids and their parents. I signed up for it weeks ago."

She watched his face carefully, bracing for a flicker of frustration. But he didn't even flinch.

He just let out a low hum and leaned his head back against the wall, eyes fluttering closed like he was soaking her in anyway.

"Sounds exhausting," he said, a soft grin tugging at his mouth.

Hermione tilted her head, smiling up at him despite herself.

"I could come over after," she offered, brushing her foot lightly against his calf beneath the covers. "Might be a bit later, though."

He opened his eyes and the way he looked at her made her breath catch.

"Later," he murmured, reaching down to tuck a stray curl behind her ear with a touch so careful it bordered on aching soft. His thumb lingered for a second at her cheekbone, tracing the faintest line before pulling away.

Hermione shifted closer without thinking, nuzzling her face gently against his hip before pressing a kiss to the warm skin there.

Hermione wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her jumper, stepping back from the chaos of the gym. The teenagers were still shrieking and flailing at the punching bags. She made for the bench against the wall and dropped down with a soft huff, tugging her phone out of her bag.

A handful of notifications blinked up at her.

She thumbed one from Theo open and grinned. It was a photo of him on his rooftop, knees bent, *Theodora* perched on his lap like a queen. Theo's hair was a windswept disaster, his smile wide and boyish, one hand stroking her feathers and the other flashing a peace sign at the camera.

Hermione snorted, thumbs moving fast.

You guys make such a great couple.

Still smiling, she flicked to the next message from Ginny. A photo of a brand-new dresser wedged into a corner of their bedroom; drawers already half-pulled out with clothes exploding everywhere.

Ginny:

Victory. (Blaise says he threw out his back for this.)

Hermione laughed under her breath, liking the photo before flicking to the next message.

Her thumb hesitated over the last notification.

DM:

*Hey. Something came up tonight. Going to grab dinner with an old friend.
Please text me when you're home safe, yeah? I'll pick you up tomorrow for tea at your
parents.*

The smile slipped, just a little. The words sat there on the screen like an afterthought, typed quickly, carelessly, as though she were a meeting he could reschedule.

Something in her chest deflated. She read the message again. Not because she thought there was anything else hidden between the lines, but because... well. She wasn't sure why.

She told herself not to overthink it. That people had lives. That she wasn't the kind of girl who spiraled over vague texts and old friends.

But still. Maybe it hit harder because it was the first time she would've gone to his. Because a tiny part of her – that traitorous voice – wondered if this was his way of quietly dodging it now. Of keeping her at arm's length.

She knew that thought wasn't fair. That he'd invited her because he'd meant it. And she'd promised him and herself she'd *really* try to trust him when he gave her no reason not to.

She locked her phone and slid it back into her bag, spine straightening as she stood. There wasn't time, and she didn't have the urge to sulk.

There were a dozen moody teenagers waiting to start their next drama on the mats.

Hermione was curled up on the couch with a blanket around her legs and her laptop open but mostly forgotten when her phone lit up beside her just past midnight.

She didn't hesitate for a second before answering.

"Hey," she said quietly.

There was a pause on the other end, then his voice came through, maybe a little slower than usual.

"Hi."

She could hear the rustle of fabric, the faint click of a door closing. He sounded tired.

"Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No," she said honestly. "Just... nearly."

Draco sighed, the sound soft and sincere. "I shouldn't have cancelled."

Hermione tucked her knees up and settled the phone between her shoulder and cheek. "It's okay. Things come up."

"I just—" He stopped, then she heard the soft creak of a mattress, the dull thud of him sitting down hard. "I thought about coming over. After."

A beat passed in which she bit her lower lip at hearing his voice. To know he had thought about her too.

"I really did. But it didn't feel right. Had a few drinks. Didn't want to drive."

His voice was quieter now, almost careful, like he was weighing each word.

Hermione smiled faintly. "Very responsible."

"Yeah."

Then, softer, like it slipped out before he could stop it: "I really shouldn't have gone."

Before she could reassure him that she wasn't mad at him, he exhaled again, and the tone shifted to a sort of tenderness. "I missed you."

Her chest tightened.

“I kept thinking about you the whole time,” he added, voice barely above a whisper now. “Wishing I was with you instead.”

Hermione blinked up at the ceiling, smiling despite herself. “You’ll have me tomorrow.”

There was a quiet rustle on the other end, like he’d leaned back against the headboard, sinking into the call.

“You know...” he started, slower now, “after tea with your parents tomorrow...” He trailed off, and Hermione could practically *feel* the hesitation.

He paused.

“Yeah?” she whispered.

“...Would you want to stay at mine after?” he asked, almost sheepish. “We could cook something. Talk.”

She smiled, letting the silence stretch just long enough to draw him out.

“And you could...” he continued, voice lighter now, “I don’t know. Look around. Go through my shelves. Pull open drawers. Snoop a little.”

A soft laugh escaped her. “You’re actually inviting me to invade your privacy?”

“Not invade,” he said, amused. “Just... roam.”

A warm, fluttery ache bloomed in her chest. God, this boy.

“Anything I should avoid?” she asked, playing along.

There was a beat before he replied a little wryly, “Maybe not the nightstand. Not yet.”

The line hung between them for a moment.

Hermione’s breath caught, her skin suddenly too warm beneath her imagination. Her cheeks flamed, and she instinctively pressed a hand to her face, grinning helplessly.

“Now that sounds suspicious,” she said, voice caught somewhere between mortified and amused.

“Isn’t it?” he murmured, pleased. “Nothing bad. Just... the kind of thing I want to show you when I can actually watch your face when you see it.”

Her breath hitched. That quiet, steady intimacy pulled her under like a tide.

“I’ll pack a bag,” she whispered.

Draco hummed. “Good.”

The soft click of the door shutting behind her barely registered before Hermione's gaze found him.

Draco looked up immediately – and for a second, the world narrowed to just him.

He was leaning against the side of the car like he had all the time in the world. Simple clothes, technically, but there was nothing simple about the way he wore them. A black sweater, sleeves pushed carelessly to his elbows, stretched over the lean strength of his arms. Dark slacks and crisp white trainers, but devastatingly polished in a way that made her heart give an embarrassing little lurch.

His hair had been swept back neatly; tamed into something softer, straighter, but not too much. Just enough that she still knew how his curls would fight their way free if she ran her fingers through them.

And he'd shaved. Clean lines, sharp cheekbones, the smoothness of his jaw making her toes curl in her boots.

For one long, silly moment, Hermione forgot how to breathe properly.

He looked like every reckless thought she'd ever had on a Sunday.
He was standing there, holding a single white daisy between his fingers.

Hermione's heart did something traitorous in her chest.

She smiled as she walked toward him, tugging her bag higher on her shoulder. "Is that for me?" she asked, her voice light though a little breathless, despite herself.

Draco raised one brow, mouth twitching at the corner.

"Well, I figured you'd either find it sweet or mock me for it," he said dryly, extending the daisy toward her with a shrug, like he wasn't currently wrecking her entire morning just by standing there.

Hermione laughed under her breath, accepting the flower carefully like it was something delicate.

"You're going to ruin me with this charm, you know," she said, brushing her thumb over the soft petals.

He only gave a small, lopsided grin, the kind that made her feel like the ground wasn't quite steady under her feet.

Then he dipped his head closer and murmured near her ear, "There's a whole bouquet for your mum in the backseat."

Hermione blinked up at him, caught between amusement and the warm, unsteady feeling blooming under her skin.

"You're dangerously good at this," she said, and meant it more than she probably should have.

Hermione's fingers tightened slightly around the thin stem of the daisy, and before she could overthink it, she stood up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Quick and so soft it just brushed the corner of his mouth.

Draco went still for a beat, surprised. Then he tilted slightly into her, like he didn't want her to move away just yet.

"Thank you," she whispered against his skin.

When she pulled back, his hand found the small of her back automatically, guiding her gently toward the car without a word. He tangled her bag from her shoulder without asking, tossing it into the backseat with an easy swing.

Then, as if he couldn't help himself, he caught her hand lightly and tugged her into a quick hug. It wasn't the kind of hug you gave before an event or when other people were watching. It was something warmer, like he just needed her close for a second without excuses.

Hermione let herself sink into him, smiling into his chest. His arms wrapped around her easily, one hand smoothing up the back of her sweater, pressing her closer like he didn't want to let go.

"Been looking forward to this since I left your flat on Saturday," he muttered against the top of her head, the words almost sheepish.

"Me too," she said into his chest, her voice muffled but real. "I never asked you how your dinner was. With an old friend, you said?"

He leaned back only a little to look down at her, thumb brushing absently along the curve of her hip. "Don't make me feel like a wanker for it," he said, half-teasing, half-serious.

"I'm not," she said gently. "You're here now. That's what matters."

He kissed her cheek. then gave her hand a final squeeze before pulling open the car door for her.

Hermione ducked her head, hoping he didn't see the ridiculous smile tugging at her lips as she slid into the passenger seat. She caught a glimpse of the bouquet in the backseat. Wildflowers and small soft blooms all tangled together in a bright bundle. The contrast between the daisy in her hand and the riot of color behind them made her chest squeeze painfully tight for a moment.

She tucked the daisy carefully into the cupholder between them.

Draco slid into the driver's seat, one hand resting easy on the steering wheel, the other draped over the gearshift. His fingers brushed lightly against her thigh every time he shifted.

As they pulled away from the curb, Hermione sneaked another glance at him. The sharp line of his jaw, the careful set of his mouth, the way his thumb tapped lightly against the wheel in

time with the soft hum of the radio.

For a moment she let herself believe that this could be real. That she could have this. That maybe, just maybe, this could last.

"So..." she said lightly, eyes still on him. "Dinner. How was it?"

There was the smallest pause. Barely noticeable if she hadn't been looking right at him.

Draco's fingers tightened briefly around the gearshift, a subtle clench before he smoothed it away, flashing her an easy glance out of the corner of his eye.

"Fine," he said. His thumb kept tapping against the wheel without missing a beat. "I'm more interested in hearing about your boxing event. How'd that go?"

Hermione blinked, caught off guard by the swift deflection. She hesitated for half a second but then Draco glanced over at her, and there was something so warm and open in his eyes that the question slipped from her mind.

"Yeah," she said. "Moody teenagers. Way more terrifying than a right hook to the ribs."

Draco huffed a laugh, glancing at her quickly before focusing on the road again.

But Hermione found herself staring out the window a little too long, wondering why he hadn't really answered. And why she wasn't going to push.

Her fingers traced slow, distracted shapes against her knees. Outside the window, her familiar street slid away behind them, fading into the broader pulse of the city.

She didn't ask again about the dinner again.

Draco had told her once that he didn't have many friends. He'd said it like a joke, an offhand comment she hadn't understood at the time.

But she realized how little she knew about who *did* have a place in his life. About the people who could still call and pull him away without warning.

He had become part of her world so easily. But she wasn't sure if she was truly part of his yet, or if he was only carving out a corner for her, just big enough to visit, never big enough to stay.

Hermione glanced sideways at him. He looked so familiar to her now.

And yet, sitting beside him, she couldn't help but wonder who else knew that version of him. Who he still answered the phone for after midnight.

Who had a place in his world that she hadn't even glimpsed yet.

It wasn't distrust. Not really.

It was the slow, careful ache of wanting *more* of him.

Of realizing she had built a space for him inside her life – inside herself – and needing to know if he was building something for her too.

She pushed the thought down, tucked it somewhere quieter.

Today wasn't the day to unravel any of it.

Hermione barely had time to unbuckle her seatbelt before the front door swung open.

Draco reached into the backseat of the car just before they got to the door, carefully pulling out the bouquet he had tucked safely away.

Her mother was already standing there, apron dusted with flour, beaming as if it had been years instead of weeks since she'd last seen them.

"Robert!" Her mother called over her shoulder, waving them forward with a wide grin. "The kids are here!"

Hermione's chest burned a little at the sound of it, but in the best way. She caught Draco's small glance toward her as they made their way up the front walk.

When he stepped up beside her, Draco offered the bouquet to her mother with a polite, almost old-fashioned bow of his head.

"Jean," he said with that endearing edge he had talked to her before at the hospital. "It's good to see you again."

Her mother's face lit up in a way Hermione hadn't seen in a long time. She barely even looked at the flowers before she was pulling Draco into a hug, laughing when he stiffened for half a second before returning it with surprising warmth.

"Oh, that's far too lovely. You didn't have to," she said, patting his back.

Hermione bit her lip, fighting the stupid rush of affection swelling inside her at the sight of it.

The last time they all had been together had been in the sterile, terrified hush of the hospital corridors. Draco had been kind and steady, but everything had been tight with worry. Now, there was lightness in her mother's laugh again.

This was who her mum really was. Light in her eyes, warmth spilling out of her like it was effortless. And for some reason, Hermione was achingly glad that Draco got to see *this* version of her. The way things were meant to be.

A small, dangerous thought crept in before she could stop it.

That if the accident had never happened... if her mother hadn't called that night, voice shaking with fear, then maybe none of this would have ever existed.

Maybe she and Draco would have kept fighting, kept pushing each other away.
Maybe they never would have let each other in.

Maybe this softness, this strange and tentative beginning between them, would have slipped by entirely.

And she would still be alone.

Not just in her flat or in the long, quiet hours of the night.

But in that invisible kind of loneliness – the kind no one ever noticed. Aching for something she'd started to believe she'd never experience herself.

Draco pulled back a little sheepishly, glancing at her like he didn't quite know what to do with all the easy warmth being handed to him.

Hermione just smiled and reached for the flowers.

"I'll put these in water," she said, squeezing her mother's hand briefly before heading toward the kitchen, leaving her happily ushering Draco inside.

"Robert, where are you?!" her mother called again, already bustling after them. "Come say hello properly!"

By the time Hermione found a vase beneath the sink and was filling it with water, she heard the low thud of the television volume dropping and the slow shuffle of footsteps coming down the hall.

Her father appeared in the doorway, and for a moment she couldn't speak.

He looked stronger than the last time she had seen him. His color was better. He moved more easily. The strain and stiffness that had clung to him after the accident seemed finally to be lifting.

It made her throat tighten, just for a moment.

"Sweetheart," her father said softly, if not a little rough around the edges.

Hermione turned before she even realized she was moving. She crossed the kitchen in three quick steps and wrapped her arms tightly around him.

He hugged her back with the kind of care that always startled her. His hand settled at the back of her head like he used to when she was small.

"Hi, Dad," she murmured into his chest, her voice catching.

"I'm alright," he said quietly, answering the question she hadn't asked. "Better."

She pulled back just enough to look up at him, brushing her thumb along the crease at the corner of his eye.

"You look it," she said, smiling. "You really do."

Only then did her father glance past her where Draco stood just behind.

"Well, look who it is," he said with a dry kind of cheer, offering Draco a firm handshake and a brief clap on the shoulder. He was sizing him up out of habit instead of distrust.

"Good to see you again, boy," he added, giving a small, approving nod.

"You too, sir," Draco said easily, stepping back politely.

Hermione watched her father's gaze flick to her briefly before he turned back to Draco, already moving toward the sitting room again.

"Come watch the game with me," he said, tossing it over his shoulder in a way that was both casual and a little bit of a test. The way fathers tested boys who showed up with their daughters.

Draco glanced at Hermione, who arched a brow at him in a quiet challenge. But he only smirked faintly and followed her father into the living room without a flicker of hesitation.

The kitchen smelled faintly of lemon and sugar and yeast, the familiar smells of a Sunday tea in her parents' house.

Home.

Her mother bustled around her, pulling plates from cupboards and checking the oven timer. "Your dad likes him," she said under her breath, handing Hermione a stack of napkins to fold. "And before you ask, yes, I can tell already."

Hermione snorted softly, trying to hide her blush by focusing very hard on folding the napkins neatly. It wasn't like she had asked. But she wasn't going to deny how good it felt to hear it.

Down the hall, she could hear the low murmur of the game, her father's voice more animated than it had been in weeks, explaining some stat or play.

Draco's voice followed, tossing back a comment that made her father let out a sharp laugh.

Hermione smiled to herself and finished setting the table.

When tea was ready, her mother called them back with a cheery, "Come on, enough sports—tea's ready!"

They gathered around the small sunlit table in the wintergarden, a steaming pot of Earl Grey between them, a plate piled high with scones, tiny sandwiches, and an almost ridiculous number of miniature pastries.

Hermione caught the way Draco's eyes widened slightly when he saw the spread. Clearly, she'd forgotten to warn him about her mother's tendency to go slightly overboard.

Her father chuckled behind his mug. "Hope you've got a sweet tooth."

He reached for a jam-stuffed biscuit, and her mother beamed at him like he had passed some secret test.

They ate and chatted, falling into a surprisingly easy rhythm, the room warmed by the sun slanting through the glass.

It wasn't until her father set down his mug and leaned back in his chair, watching Draco with a more thoughtful glint in his eye, that the next topic surfaced.

"So," he said, folding his hands loosely over his stomach. "Are you any good with tools, Draco?"

Draco paused mid-sip of his tea, blinking once before setting the cup down carefully. He lowered his head slightly, "Decent enough."

Hermione had to bite back a grin, unable to imagine him getting his hands dirty if he couldn't pay others to do it.

But the thought faltered almost as quickly as it came.

Because the truth was that she didn't really *know* that.

"Jean here forbade me from trying to fix the bloody shed after the storm," her father said, gesturing loosely toward the garden behind them. "And frankly, I could use a hand before the door falls off its hinges and crushes someone."

Her mother let out an odd sound before rolling her eyes.

"I'm happy to help," Draco said, mouth twitching.

Her father just grunted, noticeably pleased.

And when Draco finally rose from the table a little later to follow him out back to survey the damage, Hermione stayed behind for a moment. She drifted toward the doorway, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed, letting the warm breeze spill in from the garden.

It was the same patch of grass, the same crooked paving stones, the same scent of flowers and soil clinging to the air. She had sat out there months ago, hands covered in dirt, heart splintering quietly inside her chest, asking the universe to have mercy with her. She'd cried into the wind where no one could hear. Tried to stitch herself back together under the open sky because she hadn't known where else to go.

And now she was here again with a different kind of ache. Her heart felt full in a way that almost frightened her.

She watched as Draco stepped into her childhood garden, rolling up his sleeves without complaint, easy and unbothered.

And for the first time in a very long time, she thought that maybe *letting someone in could feel a little bit like coming home after a very long time.*

For a second, she let her thoughts wander with her eyes. To the way his forearms flexed as he lifted a fallen plank of wood and propped it against the fence. To how *ridiculously unfair* it was that he could make even *that* look good.

The late afternoon sun dipped low as they drove south, shadows stretching long across the motorway.

Hermione rested her head back against the seat. The sweet scent of her mother's pastries still lingered faintly in the car, clinging to the folds of the paper bag tucked by her feet.

Draco's hand rested on her thigh, fingers squeezing every so often. He hadn't let go of her much since they left.

Hermione sat curled toward him in the passenger seat, her hand resting over his, thumb stroking slow, absent patterns against his knuckles. The late-day light slipped through the windshield in warm bands, softening the sharp lines of the city ahead.

Her heart felt full in a way that left no room for doubt anymore. There were no sharp corners, no sneaky voice trying to lure her in. Just a deep, aching contentment. Like she belonged for once.

"You're lucky," Draco said quietly after a while, still watching the road.

Hermione looked up at him. "Hmm?"

"Your parents. That house. All of it. It's... kind. Solid." He exhaled slowly. "Like a place that wants you to stay."

She smiled, small and real. "They are."

He nodded once but didn't look at her. A faint crease lined his brow, his mouth thoughtful as he changed lanes.

"My house never really felt like that," he said after a pause. "It was beautiful, sure. Expensive. But too quiet. Like everything inside it had been instructed not to feel too much."

Hermione didn't interrupt. She simply listened; her fingers now threaded tightly through his.

"My father always played the part well in front of guests," Draco continued, his voice low. "And my mother—she tried in her own way. But I think I always knew I wasn't supposed to let too much of myself show. It just... didn't feel like home. Not in the way yours did."

Hermione's throat tightened. She wanted to reach over and kiss the side of his face, the place just beneath his jaw where his voice hollowed out when he said things like this.

“You probably wouldn’t enjoy being around them,” he added with a ghost of a smile, a hint of defensiveness flickering behind his eyes.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she said gently.

He glanced at her then, slower this time.

“They’re your family,” she continued, her gaze following the motorway ahead. “And I care about you. So even if it’s stiff or awkward—I’d want to try. If it meant something to you.”

A soft breath left him. He raised their joined hands and pressed a kiss to her knuckles, lingering just a moment before letting them fall again onto her thigh.

His eyes didn’t leave the road, but his voice was quieter now. “Sometimes I don’t know what to do with you.”

Hermione blinked. “What do you mean?”

She looked at him, and something in his jaw eased when their eyes met briefly.

“I’m not afraid of your parents,” she said gently. “Even if they don’t like me...” Her voice faltered for half a second. “I feel like you’ve seen so much of my life already. And I’m still on the outside of yours, looking in through a window.”

Draco’s fingers tightened just slightly around hers. Not in withdrawal, but enough to let her know he’d heard what she was saying.

“It’s not because I don’t want you in. It’s just... I’ve never done this before. Not like *this*.”

She gave a soft smile, something longing in the way she looked at him now. “You’re doing fine.”

He exhaled a breath that sounded like it had been waiting years to come out.

Up ahead, the lights of a small grocer came into view on the outskirts of the city. Draco flipped on the turn signal.

“What do you feel like for dinner later?” he asked lightly, trying for casual.

Hermione considered for a moment, resting her head back against the seat. “Something light. I’m still full of scones.”

Draco hummed as the car slowed. “Perfect. My roasted tomato and red pepper soup is life-changing.”

She raised a brow. “Life-*changing*?”

He shot her a look as he pulled into the lot. “Roasted tomatoes, red pepper, a splash of cream. I’ll serve it with crusty bread and inappropriate levels of eye contact.”

Hermione bit her lip, already smiling before he even finished speaking. “You’re trying to make soup seductive now?”

Draco cut the engine, unbothered. “I don’t have to try. You’re already blushing.”

Her mouth fell open in mock offense, but the heat in her cheeks gave her away.

The automatic doors slid open with a soft whoosh, and Hermione stepped into the embrace of fluorescent lights and quiet music.

It felt strangely cinematic how nothing dramatic happened, and yet everything *felt* significant anyway. The wheels of the trolley squeaked faintly as Draco steered them toward the produce section, one hand in his pocket, the other lazily pushing the cart like they did this every weekend.

Hermione trailed her fingers along the cold edge of a display of zucchinis, wondering how this had happened. Grocery shopping on a Sunday with *Draco*, of all people. He calmly reached for a bag of tomatoes like it was the most natural thing in the world.

She watched him examine a red pepper with a furrowed brow and had to look away before she smiled too much. It was ridiculous how warm she felt. How deeply *his* she was starting to feel without even meaning to.

"You're doing that thing," Draco said, without looking up.

Hermione blinked. "What thing?"

"The not-staring staring thing," he said, holding up the pepper like it was damning evidence.

She rolled her eyes, reaching past him for a bunch of basil and brushing his arm in the process. His skin was warm, the scent of his cologne distracting. She needed to focus—on anything else.

"So," she said, inspecting a baguette to give her hands something to do. "This famous soup of yours..."

"Roasted tomato. Red pepper. Bit of cream. Some magic." He was suddenly right behind her.

She turned slightly, only to still at how close he'd gotten. He reached past her to grab garlic, his fingers grazing her arm as he did. Heat prickled at the back of her neck.

By the time they reached checkout, she was distinctly aware of every brush of his fingers, every shift of space between them. She started unloading groceries—tomatoes, garlic, basil, wine—her heart thudding a little too fast for the setting.

Ahead of them, a young woman juggled a toddler on her hip, the little boy squealing and knocking over a bag of crisps while she tried to scan pasta with one hand. The child giggled,

blissfully unaware of how much pressure was simmering behind Hermione's composed exterior.

She reached for the divider.

Draco stepped in closer behind her, chest brushing her back. His voice was low, amused. "I like these jeans."

Hermione's stomach flipped. She could feel the heat in her cheeks rise instantly.

"Draco."

"What?" His voice was maddeningly light. "I'm just making conversation."

His hands slid to her waist, fingers settling just above her hips. Just resting. A quiet possession. Her breath hitched as the toddler squealed again and she became *very* aware of the contrast – messy innocence ahead of her, and something entirely less innocent where she stood.

She dared a glance over her shoulder.

His smirk curved against her neck, lips barely grazing her skin. He didn't budge. In fact, he leaned in further with his hips brushing her backside.

"You feel that?" he whispered, breath warm, the words threading into the space between her skin and her thoughts.

She nodded without meaning to, feeling everything she shouldn't feel in a grocery store.

"Good," he said, low and pleased. "You drive me fucking mental."

She gripped the edge of the counter tighter, pulse thudding in her throat as the toddler ahead of them let out a delighted squeal and knocked over a bag of crisps.

Draco didn't move.

She swallowed and tried not to shift back into him.

The conveyor belt lurched forward with a beep, breaking the moment.

He exhaled a quiet laugh and stepped back half an inch. Just enough to give her space again. Just enough to remind her he could take it away just as easily.

Chapter 15: Home (2/2)

When they got back to the car, the sky had been tinted in a deep blue. Streetlights flickered to life one by one across the lot, casting long shadows between rows of parked cars.

Draco loaded the groceries into the boot without a word while Hermione slid into the passenger seat, still feeling the ghost of his touch from the store.

When he got in, he didn't start the engine right away. The car clicked shut around them, quiet and dim, the air charged with everything left purring between them.

He turned toward her, one hand resting loosely on the steering wheel. The other reached for her knee, slow and deliberate, fingertips grazing the inside as he leaned in.

She met his mouth without hesitation.

The kiss started soft, but it deepened fast, like a dam breaking open. His hand on her knee slid higher, fingers skating along the seam of her jeans, pressing in where her thighs met.

Hermione sighed, her hips reaching into his touch before she could stop herself.

He groaned softly against her mouth. "Yeah?" he asked, not really needing an answer.

She whimpered, nodding against him, breath hot and shaky. The need had been coiled too tight for too long, and it snapped the moment he pressed his palm more firmly between her legs. There was nothing delicate about it. Just pressure and urgency. She arched into his hand with another soft sound, aching for more, for anything he would give her until they'd be behind closed doors.

But then he pulled back slowly.

Her lips parted in protest, but Draco simply turned the key in the ignition.

Without a word, he drove around the edge of the building, past a row of dumpsters, toward a quiet corner that backed up to a small patch of undisturbed forest. One tree stood crooked near the curb with bare limbs cutting over the pavement.

He shifted into park, then looked over at her with dark eyes, mouth already parted like he couldn't quite catch his breath. himself.

"Backseat?" he asked, voice low.

Hermione blinked, breath still shallow. "Are you serious?"

He leaned in slowly, one hand sliding along the top of her thigh, just enough pressure to make her pulse stutter one more time.

"It's quiet," he muttered. "We're tucked under a tree. Nobody's around."

He looked utterly composed, but his voice came out rough.

“I just need to get you underneath me,” he murmured, brushing his nose against hers. “Need to feel you wrapped around me again. Right now. Right here.”

His palm slipped higher, warm through her jeans. “Don’t care if it’s messy. Don’t care if the windows fog up or someone walks past. I just want to watch you fall apart while I’m still hard from thinking about the sound you made the last time I was inside you.”

Hermione’s breath hitched audibly. Her whole body tightened.

She leaned back slightly, glancing around. No traffic. No nearby cars. No open windows. The parking lot was deserted, the light from the streetlamps barely reaching where they sat.

She hesitated.

Not out of fear. Not really. It was something else, like a weightless, dizzy kind of anticipation that spread beneath her skin like heat.

Draco tilted his head slightly, voice dropping to a whisper. “Backseat, Hermione. Unless you’d rather ride me up here like a fucking menace.”

Oh, she climbed.

The console dug into her ribs awkwardly as she slid over it. Her foot knocked the cupholder, and she cursed softly under her breath.

But then his hand was there. Grasping her arse firmly, a light smack making her gasp. Half from surprise, half from the way it lit something low in her belly.

“Take off your pants,” he demanded, and the rasp in his voice sent a shiver through her. The daisy from earlier had tumbled to the floor somewhere. Her heart was beating too loud to think about it.

She collapsed gently into the backseat, breath catching as her fingers fumbled at the button of her jeans. The metal was cold against the heat blooming under her skin. She got them halfway down when Draco opened his door.

Hermione bit down on her lip as she watched him through the window, her legs still trembling from how quickly she’d stripped off her shoes, socks, and jeans. She was half-lying back, her sweater tugged low to cover her chest, her flimsy knickers doing nothing to protect her from the cold bite of the leather seat.

Draco took a careful glance around the lot as he opened the door closest to her. Streetlights flickered far in the distance, but this corner was swallowed in shadow. Nothing moved except the wind through the trees.

Then his hands went to his belt.

Hermione’s stomach dropped, breath catching. Her thighs clenched on instinct.

She couldn't look away.

He unbuckled the leather with a swift flick, undid the fly, and then paused briefly, eyes scanning again, before sliding in.

She didn't want to think about that he already knew how to navigate the tight space like this. His movements fluid and coiled with purpose. One foot wedged on the ground of the car, the other knee between hers, already prying her legs wider.

The door dug into the side of her head as he leaned over her, but she didn't care.

Not when his mouth crashed into hers, not when his hands were already on her...gripping and possessive in a way she'd never been touched before him. His hips pressed down into the seat between her thighs, and it was all heat and urgency.

His hand dragged down her bare hip, then rubbed her above her knickers with a hissing sound leaving his chest.

"Fuck," he muttered, teeth scraping her jaw. "You're just as filthy as I am."

Hermione whimpered, fingers scrabbling at the fabric of his sweater, not sure whether she wanted to push him closer or tear it off. They didn't have time for this.

But Draco stilled, just for a second.

He leaned back slightly, eyes dark and blown wide in the shadows. His hand kept moving, unhurried now but more devastating for it.

"We don't have long," he murmured. "So be *good*. And be *quiet*."

The thrill of it nearly stole the air from her lungs.

She nodded, lips parted, already shaking from the adrenaline rushing through her.

And then his mouth was on her again, hungry in a way that tried to make more room for him, the back of her head thudding against the window behind her, the door panel digging into her shoulder awkwardly.

Hermione arched beneath him with a stifled cry, the heel of her bare foot sliding uselessly along the leather seat. Their kisses began to feel uncoordinated, distracted by the way he let go of her core to push down his pants and briefs.

"You're so fucking pretty," he whispered, like he didn't mean to say it out loud but couldn't help himself.

Hermione made a helpless sound, her head tipping back into the glass as his fingers moved again to pull her knickers to the side. She gripped his forearm, nails digging in, needing something to hold onto.

“You want me like this?” he asked low against her ear, lips brushing the shell of it. “You’re gonna let me fuck you like this? Out here?”

She nodded, biting her tongue to stop from moaning out loud.

“God, you’re perfect.”

He smacked her cunt with an open palm, not hard, but enough to make her flinch and whimper. His belt rattled against the seat as he shoved his pants down just enough to free himself. And then he was nudging at her entrance, one hand spreading her open as the other holding her panties to the side.

He groaned, eyes flicking up to make sure nobody would see.

And then he pushed in.

Just the tip at first, but the sharp stretch was immediate, even with how wet she was. Hermione gasped, her back arching as her nails bit harder into his forearm.

“Oh—my,” she breathed, the sting catching her off guard.

He froze, jaw clenched, his breath ragged as his eyes flicked from where he was barely inside of her to her face. “Too much?”

She shook her head quickly, fingers clinging to him. “No. God, no—I love this part,” she whispered, her voice shaking. “When you first stretch me open. I love it.”

Draco made a guttural sound in his throat, eyes dropping to where he pushed in a further.

“We don’t have time,” she reminded him, almost laughing with how wrecked she already felt.

“We always have time for this,” he said roughly. “I’ll make time for this.”

“Just fuck me,” she begged, her hips rolling up to push herself deeper onto him. “*Draco—*.”

His breath caught as he sank in deeper, inch by inch, her slick heat sucking him in. Her mouth dropped open, her fingers scrabbling to grip him and then the seat. And when he bottomed out, she moaned low in her throat, head tipping back into the window with a soft thud.

Draco exhaled a shuddering breath, still buried deep inside her, like he needed a second just to survive the feeling. He pulled out just an inch, then eased back in with a quiet groan, hips tilting until he settled into a snug, perfect fit.

Hermione whimpered, her thighs trembling as her body adjusted around him, every inch of him thick and pulsing inside her. Her head dropped forward, dazed eyes flicking down between them. The sight made her suck in a shaky breath.

“Look at how big you are,” she whispered, words hoarse and wrecked. “You’re stretching me open like I’ve never—”

Draco's fingers fumbled down between them, rubbing at her clit with sloppy, uneven pressure, like he couldn't focus enough to do it properly.

"Fuck," he hissed, hips jolting against hers. "You're gonna make me come too fast if you keep talking like that."

Draco fell awkwardly between her thighs, one foot sliding, a soft grunt escaping him as he shifted to keep from crushing her. She saw his hand reach blindly for something to hold, gripping the top of the seat for leverage, the other flattening against the door panel to keep them from toppling sideways. And then his mouth was on hers again, hard and urgent.

Hermione gasped into the kiss, fingers flying up to grasp the back of his neck, pulling him closer, needing him closer. Her legs tried to spread wider instinctively. The weight of him, the solid press of his body, the heat. It was all too much and not nearly enough.

And then he started to move. His hips rolled forward, dragging against her just enough to make her choke on a sound she didn't mean to make. Testing the space and her. The car rocked with the motion, creaking faintly beneath them.

She clenched around him, breath stuttering as her head hit the cold window. "Shit—"

Draco groaned low, kissed her jaw, tongue darting out to sloppily claim what was his. "You always take me so fucking well."

The hand on the door panel pushed away, caressing her hips before pushing up her sweater until he could see her lace bra, her breasts almost spilling out in the position she was in.

He rocked forward again, just a little. Her body trembled, thighs tensing.

Hermione's whole body tightened. Her fingers curled harder around the back of his neck as his hand left the door panel, skimming down her side. She felt his fingers push her sweater up, rough and impatient, until the hem bunched above her chest. Her bra was lace, pale blue, her breasts half-spilling out in the way she was folded under him. He stared down at them just for a second.

"Fuck me," he whispered, not even to her. To the sight of her like this. Legs open, flushed and trembling and stuffed full of him.

Hermione exhaled shakily, her thighs twitching with the effort not to move, not to make noise. Still clinging to his neck, she dragged him back down.

He rocked forward again, just a little. Barely more than a nudge. But it sent a shockwave through her, sharp and deep, her breath catching painfully in her throat.

"It's so good—" she gasped.

"I know," he whispered, kissing the hollow of her throat. "I know."

His hips moved again, a little deeper this time. Slower.

All she could focus on was the way he was moving inside her. Her body was taut with tension, every nerve alight. She buried her face against his neck, trying not to make a sound. But it was so much. Too much.

His mouth was everywhere, jaw, cheek, collarbone...hot and wet, like he couldn't decide what part of her he needed more. One hand fumbled between them, slipping down to where they were joined.

When his fingers found her clit again, she nearly came undone.

Hermione's cry was muffled by his shoulder as she bit down, hard. Her legs tried to lock around his waist, hips jerking involuntarily.

"Quiet," he breathed, grinning against her neck. "I said be good."

"I'm trying," she whispered, shaking. "I'm trying so hard."

"Yeah?" he murmured, wrecked as he started to thrust again, and his lips crashed against hers.

"You can be a little rougher," she mumbled between them.

"You want it rougher?" he groaned into their open-mouthed kiss. "With the doors unlocked and your legs spread for me."

Hermione whimpered, clenching around him, her thighs were quivering from how much she tried to be still.

Draco hissed through his teeth and rolled his hips forward.

"Harder," she whispered, her voice barely audible above their breathing.

And that was it. Draco pulled back just enough to see her face, and then he gave her exactly what she asked for.

The car rocked again.

Faster now. Deeper.

And somewhere in the blur of bodies and fogging windows, she realized it wasn't just the thrill of being caught that had her close to the edge. It was the way he wasn't *just* fucking her. He was choosing her.

Again and again.

She barely heard herself moan over the sound of the leather seat creaking beneath her. Her back arched, sweater bunched under her arms, the cool car door panel pressed against her ribs as she shifted. Every thrust made her slide slightly, the friction of the leather against her skin only heightening the sensation.

Draco was everywhere, his hands demanding. He tugged at the cups of her bra until they gave way, spilling her into his palms.

“Fucking hell,” he hissed, like he’d just caught sight of something holy. His thumbs brushed over her nipples, circling, pinching, making her writhe against the seat. “Look at you.”

Her breath hitched as she felt the cold air kiss her. The windows were already fogging up, but it wasn’t enough. Anyone could walk by. See her...shirt pushed up, tits out, legs open for him.

She rocked against him without thinking, chasing the next drag of pressure, the next high. “Draco—”

He glanced out the back window, then down at where they were joined, then back at her face. His voice was rough, edged with something sharp. “You’re about to come, aren’t you?”

She nodded, gasping, lips parted and pink. “I can’t stop—feels too—God—”

“So good,” he muttered, watching her fall apart.

His fingers squeezed her tits, not gentle, not apologetic. “Come for me,” he growled. “Just like that. Rub against me. Show me how bad you need it.”

He thrust again, deeper, and her whole body jolted with it, her bare chest catching the dim light as it bounced in his hands.

And outside, the street remained quiet. But the world inside that car was wild and burning.

He was right there, deep inside her, hips flush to hers, pressing her into the seat as she reached for something explosive, her breath catching, when he suddenly went still.

Her breath caught violently in her throat, her eyes flying open, chest heaving with disbelief. Her body clenched around Draco, involuntarily.

He hissed under his breath. “Fuck. Don’t do that.”

“I was—” Her voice broke. “I was about to—”

“I *know*.”

She fluttered around him again, helpless. It felt unbearable to stay so full, so still, her whole body screaming for motion. For *more*. He hadn’t even moved and she was already throbbing again.

“I can’t—please,” she whispered, her hand finding one breast. She rolled her nipple between her fingers, breath quickening. “Draco, *please* keep going.”

He swallowed hard, still not looking at her, his jaw locked. “Stop touching yourself,” he muttered.

Her hips shifted, just a fraction, and he grabbed her by the waist to still her.

“Don’t move,” he warned.

His eyes had flicked back toward the fogged rear window, body tensing above hers. Through the haze she could make out movement...two figures crossing the far edge of the lot, one pausing, maybe lighting a cigarette.

Too far to see them clearly. But close enough to make her shiver, squeezing him again.

She clutched at him, fingers digging into his shoulder, dragging him back down. “Please don’t stop, please, please, I can’t—”

Her thighs clenched around him, her whole body quivering. Her orgasm had been *right fucking there*, ready to obliterate her. And now her cunt throbbed around him, empty of friction but still so full she couldn’t think straight.

“Please,” she begged, voice barely a whisper now. “I was gonna come so hard—please—*keep fucking me*—”

His gaze snapped down to her. Her body was playing tricks on both of them. Draco had done the right thing to stop, but she was selfish. So selfish, that she knew if she just kept talking dirty words, he’d snap for her. He’d give her what she craved most.

Her hands were already sliding down his sides. Her legs tightened, locking him in place. She rolled her hips beneath him, feeling every inch of him still buried inside her. *Still there*. Still so hard. And it was unbearable.

His jaw clenched. “They’re right there.”

“I don’t care,” she whispered. “Let them watch. Let them see us.”

His breath punched out of him, the sound feral.

“I was so close,” she almost cried, her voice cracking as she shook beneath him. “I was right there. I’m begging you, just move. Just a little. Anything.”

His hand trembled where it gripped her hip, still holding her down.

Hermione was shaking, legs trembling, nipples flushed and aching, her cunt fluttering desperately around him. Still so full. Still so denied.

“You don’t understand,” she whispered brokenly, dragging him back down to her, her nails scraping over the back of his neck, her lips brushing his ear. “You were about to make me see stars.”

She felt him twitch inside her, thick and aching, and it gave her hope.

“I don’t care who’s out there,” she whispered again, breath ragged. “I don’t care if they see me like this. Just move.”

Draco's breath hitched hard against her neck when he finally gave in. He buried his face in her neck with a low, guttural groan and *thrust*.

Deep and hard, the car rocking with the movement. "Is this what you wanted?" he muttered, mouth at her throat.

Her gasp shattered against his skin.

Hermione didn't answer with words—she couldn't. She just moaned as he finally kept going, a little faster, but not less deep as the entire car rocked with them.

Her body seized.

She didn't even have time to think, to brace, to catch her breath.

Her orgasm hit her instantly, violently, like her body had just been waiting for *permission*.

"*Oh my God—*" she gasped, her voice breaking open as she clung to him, nails scraping down his arms. Her legs tried to lock around his waist. Her hips bucked helplessly as pleasure tore through her in waves.

"*Fuck—Hermione—*" Draco choked, his voice cracking.

She was tightening around him so hard he could barely move, and it only pushed her further over the edge. The way he groaned, how his grip on her hips faltered, how he suddenly looked like he was *barely holding on*.

"You're gonna make me—oh shit—you're gonna make me come—," he rasped, breath punching against her skin.

"Please come," she whispered, dizzy and desperate, her body still pulsing.

Draco swore, something savage and raw, and rocked forward one last time. He came with a full-body jolt, his hips jerking against hers as he buried himself deep, spilling inside her with a broken groan that vibrated through her chest. His head dropped to her shoulder. His whole body shuddered.

She felt every throb of him inside her.

Felt the way his arms gave in but forced himself to not crush her in the tight space.

Felt her own aftershocks still fluttering through her, her thighs trembling, her breath catching over and over as her body tried to come back down.

Inside this car was nothing but chaos. Heat. Breath. Shaking limbs. Fogged glass and damp skin. They stayed like that, bodies pressed together, panting into each other's skin. Her fingers curled into his hair. His mouth trembled against her shoulder until Draco finally lifted his head.

Her chest rose and fell beneath him, sweater bunched beneath her arms, bra still yanked out of place, eyes glassy and flushed from the tears she hadn't even realized she'd shed as her orgasm hit.

She hadn't meant to cry. It had just—*spilled out*.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered, reaching for her face to wipe away the senseless tears that had escaped the corner of her eyes from nothing but pleasure.

Hermione blinked up at him.

“I didn't mean to make you cry,” he murmured, something disarmed in his voice. Almost stunned. “Did I hurt you?”

She smiled and let her eyes flutter closed. His weight pressed over and inside her. He was so warm, and whole. Still trembling with her from the aftershocks.

“No,” she whispered. “You were perfect.”

The car hadn't even rolled to a stop before Hermione was unbuckling her seatbelt, squirming uncomfortably.

Draco parked in a shadowed space beneath the building, the underground garage lit with soft, clinical lighting.

She shot him a sideways look as he cut the engine. “You have an *underground garage* in London?”

He turned; one brow raised.

“You're too rich for your own good,” she muttered, grabbing at the door handle with urgency. “But I really, really need the loo, so I'll bully you about it later.”

He chuckled and stepped out, coming around to her side. “I'll carry your bag and the groceries. You just... try not to—”

“I *am* trying,” she whimpered, not unkindly, but with the kind of desperate bite only someone trying to keep a full load of him inside her could have.

Her thighs stuck with each step in her jeans. The mess between them clung to her soaked knickers, warm and insistent, and her gait was an awkward half-waddle, half-squeeze that made her wince every few steps.

Draco didn't comment, at least not out loud.

But as they reached the elevator tucked into the corner of the garage, he glanced at her gait, then shot her a look that made her pause mid-step.

“What?” she asked warily.

His mouth twitched. “Nothing. Just...” He tilted his head slightly, voice quieter now. “You walking like that—makes me feel kind of possessive.”

She blinked at him, heat flaring up her neck.

He leaned in, brushing his hand lightly against the small of her back. “I like knowing you're still... full of me.”

Hermione gaped at him. “You’ll hate it when I end up with a UTI.”

“I’ll drive you to the pharmacy,” he said without missing a beat, thumb rubbing a slow circle through her shirt. “And make you tea. And carry you to bed if you need it.”

She stared, caught between embarrassment and affection.

“I’m just saying,” he murmured, pressing the elevator button. “I like leaving a mark. But I’ll take care of you after, too.”

He guided her inside without a word, into a space that felt instantly like him with clean lines, low lighting, dark hardwood floors, and a hush that wrapped around them like a *secret*. She barely registered the details before he was beside her again, his touch steady as he gently steered her down the hall.

“Here,” he said, nudging a door open. “Bathroom. First cabinet has towels if you want a shower.”

She didn’t answer. She was already halfway through the door, shooting him a look of grateful agony over her shoulder.

The door clicked shut behind her and Hermione didn’t even bother locking it. She yanked down her jeans and underwear in one frantic motion, collapsing onto the toilet with a ragged exhale.

“Oh *thank God*,” she whispered, forehead tipping against her palm as her body finally, *finally* relaxed.

It wasn’t pretty, but she’d been holding it together, *literally*, since the car.

When she stood again, she glanced down and grimaced at her ruined underwear. The cotton was soaked, sticky with the remnants of him. A flush rose up her throat, hot and strange. Part humiliation, part something else entirely. Something deeper.

She peeled them off with a sigh and caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Mascara slightly smudged under her eyes. Lips red from kisses. Flushed cheeks. She didn’t look composed. Or elegant. Or even particularly like herself.

But she looked... *wanted*.

Hermione reached under the sink and found the towels just where he said they'd be—neatly rolled and dark blue, plush and absurdly nice. She turned on the shower, letting the water heat as steam began to fog the mirror, then stepped in.

The spray hit her skin and she groaned, tipping her head back as warmth rolled down her spine.

His soap was on a metal rack near the tap, simple and expensive smelling. Something vaguely woodsy and sharp, the kind of scent that lingered in shirt collars and stayed on skin for hours.

She poured a little into her hands, lathering slowly, rubbing it down her arms, over her collarbones. Breathing it in.

He smelled like this.

That clean, smoky warmth that had sunk into his car, his clothes, his skin. Now it was clinging to *her*, swirling through steam and hot water, mixing with her own scent as she tipped her face into the spray and closed her eyes.

For a minute, she let herself be bare and feel the lingering echo of what they had done today. How reckless, how alive she'd felt.

Wrapped in one of his oversized towels, Hermione stepped quietly into the hallway, her bare feet sinking into soft runner rugs as she moved. The ambient lighting glowed low along the baseboards, guiding her through the dark.

His place was quiet. Like the flat was designed to mute the world outside.

She padded slowly, fingers brushing along the wall as she followed the distant sound of something shifting.... cupboards, glass. *Him*.

As she turned a corner, the hallway opened into a wide, open-plan kitchen and living space that took her breath for just a second.

The kitchen stretched along one side, matte black cabinetry.

The far wall was nearly all glass, revealing the London skyline glittering in the dark, high above the city. A built-in bookshelf ran floor to ceiling on the other wall. A record player sat on a low console beneath a mounted piece of abstract art. There was a single deep green armchair with a blanket folded carefully over the back.

And Draco.

He stood at the kitchen island, sleeves pushed up. His hair was still messy from the car, but his posture was relaxed now, his expression quiet.

Hermione leaned against the frame for a second, watching him unnoticed, the towel clutched tighter around her chest. She still felt damp, her curls dripping down her back, the scent of his soap wrapped around her.

And even with her face bare, her body raw from pleasure, her limbs tired and her knickers somewhere in the bathroom with a fate too unspeakable to revisit, she'd never felt quite so *seen*.

"You live like a Bond villain," Hermione said softly.

Draco turned, one hand still on the fridge door, catching sight of her in the ambient light. His eyes dragged over her slowly, like he couldn't help but take her in. Like she belonged there.

"Didn't hear you come in," he said, closing the fridge. "Feel better?"

Hermione nodded, adjusting the towel at her chest. "A little wrecked, but perfectly content."

He grinned faintly and reached for a glass on the counter, filling it with water from a sleek tap before walking it over to her. "Here, don't forget to hydrate."

She accepted the glass with a soft laugh, their fingers brushing.

Draco leaned a hip against the counter beside her, his eyes lingering on her face. "You smell like me."

Hermione took a sip of water to hide the way her stomach flipped. "I used your soap."

His voice dropped, more reverent than teasing. "Suits you."

She looked down into the glass, then back at him, heart hammering in a way she couldn't blame on anything but the way he was looking at her.

Draco shared a crooked grin with her and nodded behind her. "Come on. I'll give you the tour."

He gestured for her to follow, and she trailed behind him, the towel tugged tighter around her chest, the floor cool against her toes.

"That's the bathroom—obviously," he said, passing the one she'd just occupied. "Laundry through there. Living room, which you've seen. Kitchen."

He led her down a second hallway, past a door that he bypassed without comment.

"That one's... just my office," he said, a little too quickly. "Don't go in there. It's chaos."

She gave him a curious glance but didn't press. The rest of the flat was so curated, so restrained...it intrigued her that he might have one room untouched by control.

When he pushed open the door at the end of the hall, she stepped into his bedroom.

It was even darker here, softer somehow. Still minimalist, charcoal walls, simple framed photographs, a tall dresser, and a wide bed with a neatly made slate-grey duvet. Her overnight bag sat at the foot of it, right where he must have placed it.

The sheets looked crisp. The mattress wider than hers. And suddenly, the towel around her felt both too much and not enough.

Draco stepped close, close enough that she could smell himself on her skin.

“I’m gonna take a quick shower,” he murmured, bending to kiss the spot just beneath her jaw. “Feel at home, yeah?”

She nodded, dazed by the brush of his mouth.

She found herself smiling as she walked back into the kitchen, wearing her pajamas already. Everything glowed in warm gold and amber. Still no music, just the hum of the city outside the windows and the muffled rush of water down the hall.

The wine was still in one of the brown paper bags on the island. She pulled it out, a deep red with a minimal label, something French, and started opening drawers until she found the wine opener tucked neatly beside the cutlery.

She twisted the cork free with a satisfying pop and reached for the upper cabinets. Two shelves in, she found the wine glasses, crystal-clear and absurdly tall stemmed. She took down two, setting them carefully on the counter.

The first glass filled with a quiet glug of deep red when her phone buzzed on the counter where she had dropped it just a moment ago. She reached for it without looking, half-listening to the shower, half-smiling to herself as she wiped a drip of wine from the glass rim.

Only when she glanced down did she notice that it wasn’t hers.

The lock screen lit up in her hand.

Zabini:

so how was your date with tiff last night?

Chapter 16: Pattern

Hermione's world narrowed down to the glowing screen and a sentence she couldn't unread even if she tried to.

so how was your date with tiff last night?

Last night. Yesterday. The same day he'd texted her to say something came up, to cancel on their evening plans... all that to go on a date with his *ex-girlfriend*?

But... he'd called her late that night, murmured that he shouldn't have cancelled on her, that he'd missed her.

God. He had said all the right things again. His tone and the tenderness had all been perfect.

Draco had asked her to give him a chance, to trust him. He had told her he wanted something *real*. Just two nights ago she'd stood in the dirty back alley of a pub, fighting the insecurities her past had gifted her with. And he had calmed her, had made her believe him against her better judgement. And she had *tried with all her heart to give him that chance*.

And with that she had done the one thing she never let herself do; she had started to rely on him. For him to be there when she was falling apart. *Where was he now?*

Her thoughts were shredding themselves apart. They were too loud to sort and way too fast to follow.

Hermione didn't even register the shower down the hall turn off at first. She was still trying to make sense of it. Was there any good reason for him to meet with Tiffany? And if there was, why had he lied to her?

Her stomach twisted in ugly knots; nausea crept up her throat with every second that all of it didn't add up. None of it made sense.

A voice inside her whispered *Run*.
Another hissed *Stay*.

The bathroom door opened in the distance, the sound of him humming something echoed down to the kitchen. His phone slipped from her grip and clattered onto the counter. She barely had time to snatch it back up before Draco appeared in the doorway, toweling his hair, still damp and shirtless, joggers slung low on his hips.

She backed up a step from the counter, then another. As if putting physical distance between them would somehow slow the crumbling inside her.

She'd been *so* stupid. It always ended like this for her. Lies, and not being enough. Another woman. She should've known better, should've listened to the voice inside her head that had *never* lied to her before. It was so much wiser than she'd ever be.

He moved straight to the fridge, opened it, grabbed a bottle of water.

He lifted it to his lips, took a slow drink, long enough to miss the way Hermione hadn't moved since he entered. But not long enough to miss the way she was looking at him now.

His eyes flicked to her over the bottle's rim.

Hermione didn't say anything. She couldn't yet. The words were still forming, raw and jagged in her mouth.

Draco swallowed and capped the bottle again, slowly. "You look like you saw a ghost."

She didn't smile or blink. Just stared, fingers clenched around his phone in her hand.

His voice was quieter now, careful. "What is it?"

Her whole body felt like it was vibrating just beneath the skin, like she might either scream or shatter if she dared to take a breath too deep.

He took a step toward her, radiating warmth she didn't feel anymore.

She stepped back.

That stopped him cold. "What's going on?" he asked, eyes scanning her face, fast and alert, like he was trying to read a foreign language he'd once been fluent in.

Hermione held out the phone and pushed it into his bare chest, hard enough to make him take it. Her voice came out quiet.

"Blaise wants to know," she said, pausing just long enough for her stomach to twist again, "how your date went."

Draco glanced down at his phone.

She watched it hit him when his eyes scanned the screen. The recognition, the way his mouth parted, the breath he didn't take, the muscle twitch just beneath his eye. And then that unbearable stillness, as if freezing would somehow keep the moment from getting worse.

The silence stretched, pulsing between them.

And Hermione hated that he didn't deny it right away. That he didn't *say anything*.

Her throat clenched. She shook her head once, a single, sharp movement, like she could knock it all loose. The suspicion, the sting, the *stupid* hope that maybe it wasn't what it looked like.

She stepped around him.

"Hermione—"

But she was already brushing past, her shoulder grazing his forearm as she shoved through the doorway, not bothering to hide the force behind it. The tears hadn't fallen yet, but she could feel them gathering. They felt hot and urgent at the edges of her eyes.

Draco turned in place, stunned, bottle still in one hand, phone in the other. "Fuck—can you just *wait* a second?"

She didn't look back.

Because if she did, she might fall apart right there on his kitchen floor.

Draco swore under his breath the moment she turned the corner. The water bottle hit the counter with a dull thud, and he was after her in three strides, her heart pounding louder than his footsteps.

"*Hermione*, stop."

But she didn't. She was already in his bedroom, grabbing for the edge of the bed where her bag sat half-zipped. Her movements were frantic, like if she could just *move fast enough*, none of this would catch up with her. Not his voice behind her or the betrayal curled tight in her chest.

"For fuck's sake - *just listen* to me. It's not what it looks like."

She ignored him. Socks. Her phone charger. Lip balm, and her dress she was going to wear to work tomorrow. All shoved back into the bag without folding, without thought.

"I can explain—"

"Explain what?" she snapped, the words sharp and breathless as she yanked the zip halfway closed, then paused, her hand frozen mid-motion. "Explain why you lied to me?"

Draco was in the doorway now, one hand braced against the frame, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed any further. His chest was rising fast, like he'd jogged all the way here.

"I didn't lie," he ground out. "I just - *didn't* tell you."

She laughed short and humorless as she turned, bag half-packed. "Right. Of course. Thanks for the clarification."

Her heart gave a sharp twist.

Draco stepped in further. "Hermione, please. It wasn't what you think—"

"Don't," she said quickly, holding a hand up to stop him. "Just - *don't*."

He stopped cold.

"I need to get my things," she added steadier now, but only just. "And then I'm going home."

Draco's hands dropped to his sides. "What?"

She disappeared into the bathroom before he could stop her again, leaving the door open, not caring. She bent down, scooped up her jeans, her shirt, her bra. Her knickers soiled with lust and shame. Her fingers were trembling now, and the ache behind her eyes had turned to pressure.

She wouldn't cry here.

She *refused* to cry here.

Her eyes snapped back up to see him standing in his bedroom, watching her. Waiting.

As if there was anything left to wait for.

She brushed past him one more time, shoving the rest of her clothes into her bag.

He ran a hand down his face, still half-damp from the shower, eyes wide with disbelief. "You're really just leaving. Without even letting me explain?"

Hermione froze by the side of the bed, back to him. Her shoulders had locked like armor.

"Yeah," she said, without turning. "I am."

He stepped in. "You're just going to - *what?* Walk out?"

"Yes."

"Without even letting me fucking talk?"

She spun on him then, eyes sharp and blazing, the fury finally catching up with the heartbreak.

Draco's jaw snapped shut.

Her voice was shaking now, but the words came fast and hot, like a dam breaking.

"Don't try to guilt me for not sitting quietly while you hand me another version of the truth. I *believed* you, Draco. Over every single instinct screaming not to." Her breath hitched. "And now look at me."

She gestured down at herself, at the half-zipped bag, at the ruins of what had been so tender just hours ago.

"You told me not to run. Told me to trust you. Told me this was real."

Draco looked stricken, like her words had physically hit him. "It is real, Hermione. If you let me explain, we can talk - just don't run from me."

"Running seems like the smartest thing I could possibly do at this point," she whispered.

He swallowed hard. "It wasn't a date... Blaise is an idiot."

"Ah." She pressed a hand to her stomach, nausea coiling deep. Hermione's hands clenched into fists at her sides, nails digging into her palms. "What was it then?"

Draco let out a rough exhale, "It was nothing."

"That's not an answer," she bit out in disbelief, eyes snapping up to meet his.

Her arms crossed, but her hands gripped her elbows. A weak effort to hold herself together.

"So, you're saying you didn't meet your ex yesterday?" She sounded broken, rough as if she'd cried for hours whereas she was just holding back the sting in her eyes to where it had risen from her chest.

The silence echoed. And her heart, already cracked, splintered a little more.

"It was nothing, Hermione. *I swear.*" he whispered.

The pressure kept building like a vice around her ribs. She forced herself to breathe, even though every inhale felt like it scraped her lungs raw.

Finally, she forced herself to meet his gaze again, and the way his eyes softened when he saw her face, made her throat close up. "You were with *her*, not an old friend" she whispered.

Draco hesitated, just a fraction, before nodding. "Yeah. I was."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and she forced herself to keep standing, to keep her spine straight.

His jaw clenched, frustration seeping into his voice. "I was going to tell you. I just - fuck, Hermione, it wasn't anything. I didn't want to make you feel like there was something to worry about when there wasn't."

Her fingers dug into her own arms, trying to keep the ache contained. "You canceled on me," she managed, her voice barely more than a whisper. "You said something came up." She needed to say the obvious out loud, to remind herself how awful the reality truly was.

"It did." His voice dropped like he was afraid of the way his words were cutting her open. "Something came up."

"You mean *she* came up."

She couldn't take this.

Draco stepped into the doorway, blocking her exit when she turned with her bag in her hands.

She startled, going entirely still at the way he unintentionally took away her only escape route.

His own breathing seemed uneven, his hands twitched like he didn't know whether to reach for her or let her go.

"Can you-," he said louder now, almost desperate. "Just-stop for a *fucking* second, please."

Hermione couldn't stand the way his tone wavered between frustration and fear. She forced herself to breathe, but the air barely reached her lungs. "I can't... I can't be here right now."

Her whole body ached, like her muscles were wound too tight and ready to snap. She didn't trust herself to say more, didn't trust her voice not to crack and betray how close she was to breaking.

Draco took a hesitant step closer, like he wasn't sure if approaching her would make it worse.

She was so close to shattering. To sob and cry and scream like a version of her long buried.

His tone was calm and the complete opposite to the way his muscles tensed throughout his half naked body. "Is that what you *really* want right now? To leave without hearing the truth?"

A sound slipped from Draco's throat, something like a scoff but too hollow, too pained to carry any bite.

Her grip on the bag tightened until her knuckles turned white. Her entire body felt brittle, ready to splinter under the weight of her own disbelief. "What do you want me to say?" she whispered like a thin rasp.

He moved closer then, until he was right in front of her, his hand lifting like he wanted to touch her, but she flinched back instinctively, a sharp, involuntary recoil.

"Stop," she whispered, half-hearted and tired.

Draco's jaw flexed, a muscle ticking there as he fought the urge to reach for her. His hands hovered in the air for a moment before he decided to ignore her words, placing his palms on her shoulders, soft but unyielding.

"If you really want to go, I'll drive you. I swear, I will." he said quietly but insistently. As if he wanted to make sure she heard every single word over her thundering heartbeat. "But I want you to hear me out before you decide to walk through that door."

Hermione's breath came too shallow, but she still couldn't meet his eyes again. She squeezed hers shut, holding back the tears threatening to spill. His hands on her shoulders, the way his fingers dug into her gently... it was all too much.

"Give me five minutes. That's all. Just... hear me out. *Please*." Draco whispered, his hands sliding down her arms slowly, like he was trying to ease the tension from her body.

His hands settled on her elbows, thumbs tracing gentle circles on the inside of her arms. The softness in his touch didn't match the rasp in his voice, didn't match the desperation that

made his words crack. “If you still want to leave after that, I’ll take you. I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. Just... *please* don’t go without hearing me out.”

Draco stepped even closer, his forehead nearly brushing hers, and the proximity was suffocating and comforting at once. His breath was warm against her cheek, and his hands moved from her elbows to cup her face, his thumbs brushing over the curve of her jaw.

She bit her lip, hard enough to hurt, because she didn’t trust herself not to break. Not when he was looking at her like this, like she was something fragile and precious, like he couldn’t bear the thought of her slipping away.

“Don’t leave like that,” he whispered, so low it barely reached her ears. “I know how bad this looks, okay? I should’ve told you about this, but I swear to god it’s not what you think. It wasn’t a date or anything like that.”

Hermione finally forced herself to blink, and the pain in his face was unbearable for her to see. She felt like she was drowning, and his hands were the only thing keeping her anchored, keeping her from completely falling apart. Hands that weren’t only hers, never had been.

“You told me you wanted me to trust you. You asked for a chance, and I... I gave you one.” She managed, thick with the tears that started to run down her cheeks as she blinked.

Draco’s hands held her gently, his thumbs catching the tears and rubbing them away. “I know. I know you did. I know how hard that was for you. And I wasn’t trying to throw it away. I swear I wasn’t.”

A sob lodged in her throat, but she swallowed it back, refusing to let it out. “You went on a date with your ex after you left my bed that day, cancelled on me for it. And then today you-”

“No, Hermione. I didn’t go on a *date* with her.”

“Then why did Blaise text you something like that?”

Draco let out a frustrated scoff, forcing her to look at him when her gaze slipped away. “Because Blaise is a *fucking* idiot. He thinks it’s funny. He thinks winding me up about it is some kind of joke.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened, and she tried to pull away one more time, but his grip stayed unrelenting. She blinked, trying to ignore the hot tears escaping her. “He wouldn’t just make something like that up. Why would he say that if you told him it wasn’t—” Another tear slipped down her cheek, dropping without permission.

“That’s exactly the kind of thing he would say to rile me up.”

Hermione blinked, her eyes stinging, throat too raw to speak. She hated the way he looked at her like he was shocked she could even think such a thing.

And maybe she hated herself for it, too.

Her mouth opened, closed again. The words felt too ugly, too humiliating but they clawed their way up anyway, uninvited and burning.

“Did you use protection?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

The silence screamed. Her mind filled in every gap with images she didn’t want, scenes she hadn’t witnessed but couldn’t stop picturing.

Draco froze, his brows knitting in utter confusion. “What?”

She bit down on her bottom lip, hard enough to bruise. “With *her*. Did you use protection?”

He stared at her like he didn’t understand the question, his mouth opening and closing as if he was struggling to process it.

Hermione’s voice wavered, her pulse pounding so hard it made her feel sick. She tried to pull away again, but he didn’t let her. He held her face, never hurting but not allowing her to break their gaze either. “I just... I need to know. If you were careful. If I need to... get tested.”

That’s when the first sob escaped her chest, with his hands holding her and his eyes realizing what exactly she was asking him. The accusation behind it.

Draco froze, her words hitting him like a slap. For a moment, his face fell, something fragile and wounded flashing in his eyes before the anger took over. “You really think I’d do that? You think I’d fuck her and then come back to you?”

His voice was strained, like he was trying to keep it together, but the betrayal of her question was written across his face.

Her stomach twisted, “Can you just answer the question,” she whispered, trying to hold the breath in that shook her shoulders and chest. She was falling, hot and heavy in the way her feelings sank to the bottom of the pit in her stomach.

Draco’s grip on her face loosened slightly, but he still didn’t let her go. His brows were still drawn tight, eyes searching hers like maybe, if he looked hard enough, he could unhear what she’d said. Undo what was unraveling between them. “I didn’t fuck her. I never fucked anyone else while I was with you. I can’t believe you think that low of me.”

“How could I *not* think that?! You seem to have a pattern, Draco.”

Draco’s face contorted with confusion and hurt. “What are you talking about?”

Hermione could feel herself shaking, the words spilling out before she could stop them or another wave of tears from falling. Maybe deep down she tried to push him away with words since he didn’t let her pull away otherwise. “Is it that crazy to think you’d hook up with someone else while getting involved with me? You tried to hook up with me at Halloween, remember? And then—what—got together with Tiffany right after?”

Draco’s jaw tightened, his hands finally letting go of her before dropping at his sides like he didn’t know what to do with them. “Hermione, that’s not—”

She cut him off, “You must have already been sleeping with her. You wouldn’t have considered it cheating if it wasn’t official, right? Maybe this is just how you do things—keeping your options open until you make up your mind...”

Draco’s eyes widened, a storm of emotions flashing through them. Maybe anger, pain, and something that looked dangerously close to heartbreak. “You know that’s bullshit.”

Hermione shook her head, grinding her teeth to keep from breaking. “How am I supposed to know who you really are, Draco? You haven’t let me peek behind the curtain until today. I’ve been walking blind, trusting you because you asked me to. And now, the first time I’m in your space—your world—I find out about your lies. About what you were really up to while I was at home, missing you and hoping you had a great time with your *old mate*. You know how stupid I feel for that?” Her voice broke, and she couldn’t hold his gaze. “I just—God, I’ve been so afraid of this from the start. Of getting pulled into something real and then finding out I was just a convenience. I’ve been trying not to think like that. Trying to believe you. But then this happens, and it feels like I’d been right all along. Like I should’ve known better than to let myself want this.”

Draco’s expression softened; his hands relaxing where they had been clenched at his sides. He opened his mouth, but she kept going, her words raw and tumbling out. “I don’t know how to trust this. Or you. Or myself.”

He let out a harsh, frustrated breath, stepping back just enough to put some more space between them. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone, jaw clenched so tight it looked like it hurt.

Without another word, he shoved it toward her, pressing it into her chest with enough force that she had to take it. Just like she had done to him earlier.

“Here,” he said through gritted teeth. “Go ahead. Scroll. Check everything. Read my messages, look at the calls. Look at my fucking camera roll if you want.”

Hermione’s breath caught.

“I’m serious,” he snapped. “Go ahead, knock yourself out if that’s how little you think I respect you.”

Her fingers curled around the phone, but she didn’t look down.

“That’s not—” she started, but then faltered.

“That’s *exactly* what you just said,” Draco cut in, eyes sharp. “You saw one fucking message, and that was all it took. You made your mind up.”

She swallowed, forcing her words to stay even. “Because you lied to me.”

“I didn’t lie,” he said quietly. “I just... didn’t tell you. And maybe that’s worse. I don’t know.”

“You said something came up.”

“It *did*,” he growled.

Hermione flinched; the phone still heavy in her hand.

Draco turned away from her for a second, like he needed to physically stop himself from losing it. When he finally turned back, he looked smaller somehow. Not physically, but like something in him had caved in under the weight of it all.

He moved closer again, cautiously this time, like he was afraid of pushing her too far.

“Hermione,” he said, quieter now. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... I just... I don’t know what else to do.” His voice cracked at the edges. “I’ve told you the truth. I didn’t sleep with her, nor did I even think about her that way. I didn’t... fuck, I didn’t even want to see her.”

Hermione wiped at her face, not bothering to hide the tear tracks anymore. “Then why did you?” she whispered. “Why did you cancel on me and lie about it?”

Draco let out a breath like he’d been holding it for hours. He lowered himself onto the edge of the bed. His elbows landed on his knees, hands clasped tight, like he was trying to physically hold the moment in place.

“It wasn’t planned,” he said carefully, like each word cost him. He dragged a hand down his face. “She’d been reaching out since Thursday.”

Hermione didn’t say anything but dropped right next to him. Anything but sitting seemed too heavy to bear then. Whatever he was about to tell her would break her, she knew it.

Draco glanced over at her, the guilt was written in every line of his profile. “I didn’t want you to worry. You were already freaked out Friday after the pub—after Blaise’s shit and that girl looking at me. I didn’t want to make it worse. I wasn’t talking to her, Hermione. I thought if I ignored her, she’d get the message.”

Hermione’s lips pressed into a hard line.

Draco looked down at his hands, like he didn’t want to see her face anymore. “Yesterday, when I was helping Blaise move that dresser, she kept calling. He saw it, gave me shit. Said I needed to deal with it. Said if I was serious about starting something real, I had to stop leaving doors open behind me.”

Hermione didn’t flinch, but something in her chest pulled tighter.

“I was pissed,” Draco went on. “I didn’t want to see her. I didn’t want *anything* to do with her. I just wanted her to fuck off and leave me alone.” His jaw clenched. “But then... when I got in my car, she sent me a voice note.”

Hermione’s throat tightened.

“So?” she asked quietly, barely above a whisper.

Draco's eyes flicked to the phone now in her lap. "Just listen to it," he said quietly, almost a plea. "Please."

Hermione didn't want to. Didn't want to hear her voice...posh and confident, soaked in everything Hermione wasn't.

Draco tapped the message for her.

The voice that crackled through the speaker was unmistakable. Polished. Lazy. Dripping with privilege and the kind of careless charm Hermione had never trusted in people.

"Draco. Darling."

Hermione's stomach turned before the girl even finished the greeting.

There was a breathy little laugh, followed by the faint clink of glass. *"Stop ignoring me, you absolute prat. I'm not trying to fight, I swear. I just want to talk, like two normal adults who used to mean something to each other."*

Hermione closed her eyes.

The voice continued, slightly slurred now. *"I'm at that shitty pub near our favorite restaurant - you know the one. With the sticky floors and the music that sounds like it's coming out of a tin can? Yeah. There."*

A pause. A longer breath. *"Honestly, I wouldn't even bother telling you if it wasn't important. But-"* she sighed, and it came out like a pout, *"I think I need to see you. I'm just going to finish this drink and then drive over, alright? Don't be a coward."*

The message ended with a click, a brief silence that rang far too loud.

Hermione stared at the screen, at her profile picture that accompanied the voice that had just curled itself around her spine.

Tiffany was leaning over the back of a boat, champagne in one hand, laughing at something out of frame. Her hair, sun-kissed blonde, was caught mid-whip in the breeze, effortlessly messy. Big sunglasses pushed to the top of her head, no makeup Hermione could see, and still she looked like the kind of girl who'd never taken a bad photo in her life.

She looked like money. Like legacy. Like somebody *you don't compete with*, you just try not to hate.

Draco didn't move.

Her own reflection in the dark screen flickered back at her for a second with her hair tied up messily from the shower, no makeup, shadows under her red eyes.

She looked like someone who *tried*.

Her voice, when it eventually came, was thin. "Why did you go?"

“Because she said she was going to *drive*,” Draco said immediately, like he’d been holding it back. “Because I knew she would. And I couldn’t - I *couldn’t* let that happen.”

She looked up at him then, and he looked wrecked.

“I drove to the pub,” he said. “But she was already gone. And when I got home, her car was outside. She was upstairs already. Sitting in the hallway. She still knew the building code but not the new flat code, so she just... waited.”

Hermione sighed, trying not to picture the girl from the photo in his hallway.

“I lost it,” he muttered. “Took her keys. Told her she was out of her fucking mind.”

Silence fell again.

“She started crying,” Draco said, softer now. “Said she didn’t feel safe going back to *Eric*. Said she just wanted to talk.”

Hermione couldn’t stop another tear slipping past her defense, but she rubbed at it with the back of her hand before he could see it.

“When she refused to leave without her keys... I let her in. Made her a coffee so she wouldn’t choke on her own tongue, and she passed out on the couch.”

Hermione looked away.

“I didn’t want you to see that,” he admitted. “Didn’t want you anywhere near it. Near *her*. So that’s when I texted to cancel.”

He exhaled, jaw tightening. “It was a shit move. I know that. But I was trying to keep you out of a mess I should’ve cleaned up a long time ago.”

Her voice came out small. “And then what?”

“I called Blaise,” he muttered. “Tried to get him to come over. Thought maybe if she saw him, she’d leave faster.”

Hermione said nothing.

Draco let out a humorless huff. “He wouldn’t come. Said he was done with her drama and told me to deal with it myself like a *big boy*...”

He rubbed the back of his neck, eyes darting away.

“So I waited until she woke up, we talked, she cried again.”

Hermione’s entire body felt like it had gone still. “What did you talk about?”

Draco’s fingers flexed at his sides. He hesitated too long.

“Draco,” she said, sighing. “Just tell me.”

His throat worked around the words. “She said some things. About the past. About... regretting how it ended.”

Hermione said nothing. Just watched him, her face unreadable.

“She said she missed me.” He admitted like it hurt to say out loud. “That she wasn’t sure she’d ever really stopped.”

He glanced at her again, cautiously, but she didn’t flinch.

“And?” she prompted.

Another pause. His jaw clenched.

“She said she wanted to talk properly. About maybe... trying again.” He met her eyes without wasting a breath. “I told her I wasn’t interested. That I was seeing someone else, that I was seeing *you*. That it wouldn’t happen.”

Hermione’s question came quiet, but sharp as glass. “Did she touch you?”

Draco inhaled through his nose, shaking his head slowly. “She tried.”

Hermione blinked.

“She leaned in. I pulled away. That was it.”

He didn’t reach for her. Didn’t try to justify it further. Just sat there, barely breathing, like he knew that anything more would be a mistake.

“And then?” she asked, still too calm.

“I told her she needed to go. And she did.”

Hermione’s hands tightened in her lap without new tears this time. Just a dizzying silence settling into the hollow space inside her.

She didn’t know what to believe. His phone still sat like a loaded weapon on her legs.

“You should’ve told me,” she whispered.

“I *know*.”

“And you shouldn’t have lied.”

“I *know*, Hermione.”

Draco looked gutted. He shifted where he sat, tension rolling off his shoulders. “There’s more.”

Hermione looked up, wary now.

“She sent another voice note earlier today. While I was driving to get you.”

He reached for the phone still sitting heavy in her lap. His hand brushed hers as he picked it up, eyes flicking up to meet hers briefly. “You don’t have to listen to it. But I’d rather you hear it than wonder what else I’m not telling you.”

Hermione didn’t answer.

Her eyes dropped again to Tiffany’s profile picture. Still laughing, still sunlit and sea-washed, still everything Hermione wasn’t. The ache beneath her ribs returned in full force.

Draco hesitated, then tapped play.

There was a beat of background noise... maybe a car indicator, the rustle of fabric, and then Tiffany’s voice filled the space.

“Draco. Okay, so... I’m trying this again. I know yesterday was a disaster. I was - God, I was ridiculous. I get that now.”

A sigh.

“I don’t know why I expected anything different. I just... I saw you, and it all came rushing back. I didn’t even realize how much I missed you until you were right there. But I know you didn’t ask for that. I know I was unfair. I was drunk, and needy, and –ugh, I’m sorry.”

Hermione’s jaw clenched.

“I didn’t mean to stir everything up. I promise I’m not trying to make your life harder. And I’m not expecting anything. But I wanted to ask... the Gala’s in two weeks, and I’ll be there with my dad. You probably will too. Maybe we could go together? Just as friends. It’s silly, I know. I just thought I’d ask.”

Another pause. Then that smooth little laugh again, not quite self-deprecating. Always charming, even when pretending not to be.

“Unless, of course, you’re taking your new lady.” She drew out the last words delicately, like honey poured over barbed wire. *“If you are, that’s totally fine—just let me know so I can ask someone else and avoid looking like a total idiot.”*

There was another breath, softer this time.

“I hope she’s good to you. Whoever she is. Honestly, I do. Call me when you’re ready.”

The message ended with a faint click.

Hermione stared at the screen.

She didn’t speak. Didn’t blink.

Tiffany's voice lingered in the room like perfume, heady and expensive and impossible to ignore.

"She sounds..." Hermione's whisper was thin, almost flat. "*Mindful*. Even when she's being manipulative."

Draco exhaled sharply. "She's good at that."

Hermione's gaze dropped again to the photo. That stupid boat. That effortless hair. The kind of girl who got drunk and messy and still got forgiven for it. Who could call her ex-boyfriend *darling*, suggest a Gala date, and still sound like she was doing him a favor.

"She always like that?" Hermione asked, not looking at him.

Draco's reply came low. "Worse, when it mattered."

A silence stretched.

The weight in her chest felt heavier than before.

He let out a harsh breath, his voice dropping even lower. "By the time she left last night, I knew I had made a mistake by not telling you. I just... needed to hear your voice. I called you and I meant every word I said."

Hermione stayed quiet, her fingers loosening their grip on her thighs. The tears had dried, leaving her skin tight and hot, and her heart still thudding unevenly. Shame prickled at her edges, not for how she'd felt, *because God, it had hurt*, but for how easily she'd believed the worst of him. How quickly her own fear had convinced her that the tender, careful thing they'd been building was nothing more than a mirage.

She wasn't entirely wrong. He hadn't told her the truth. He hadn't let her in. But he hadn't done what she'd thought, either. And that realization was almost harder to swallow than the truth.

The air between them hung thick and brittle, neither of them quite knowing how to cross the space.

Draco shifted, hands falling to the mattress, looking away. His jaw clenched like he was fighting something back. "Do you still want to go home?" he asked barely above a whisper.

She looked at him and something in her chest ached at how tightly he was holding himself together, as if afraid that if he moved wrong, he might fall apart completely.

Her fingers hovered in the air between them. Hesitating.

And then they touched his just barely.

He didn't move.

So she kept going. Let her fingers lace between his, gently, like a truce. Like a test. Like something bruised and breathless still trying to feel.

Draco looked down at their joined hands, his mouth pressed tight.

Hermione blinked slowly, another single tear slipping down her cheek. She didn't wipe it away.

"She sounds like the kind of girl you don't get over easily."

He flinched. It was small. Barely a ripple in his expression. But she saw it.

Hermione looked down, forcing herself to sound steady. "I think that's what scares me the most. That no matter what you say—she'll always know you in ways I never will."

"She didn't know me," he said quietly. "She only ever wanted the parts that looked good in public."

Hermione's eyes lifted. Met his. He looked exhausted but honest in a way that stole her breath.

He looked down at their hands, like he couldn't quite believe she was still touching him. But he didn't let go. He gripped back, gentle but firm, like it meant something.

Her thumb dragged across the back of his hand just once.

He didn't speak.

And she didn't know how to ask what she really wanted to know. The question felt too large, too fragile in her throat. So instead... she leaned the slightest bit closer. Let her shoulder brush his. Let her knuckles rest against the inside of his thigh.

"What version of you do I get?" she asked quietly, without looking at him.

Draco didn't hesitate. "Everything. If you want it."

Hermione's eyes closed. A small, broken breath escaped her.

Her hand tightened in his. Like maybe she could anchor herself there. Like maybe it would be enough.

And then, without warning, his voice dropped low.

"You want to know what I hate most right now?"

She didn't answer.

"That you thought I'm like every other piece of shit who ever broke you. That you decided it was easier to believe I cheated than to believe I cared. That you didn't even hesitate."

Hermione's heart clenched. The words landed soft but heavy, and the way he said them knocked something loose inside her. She didn't look at him. Just kept holding his hand like it was the only thing she trusted to keep her in one piece.

"I don't want to be that girl," she whispered. "The one who panics and spirals and assumes the worst. I've been working so hard not to be. But it still lives in me. That voice that says don't get too close, don't trust too much. And then something like this happens and...it's like I forget how to breathe."

Draco shifted beside her, the fingers of his free hand curling into the fabric of his joggers like he needed something to anchor himself. Like her hand wasn't enough.

"I didn't say that to blame you," he said.

She finally turned to him then, just enough to see the tension in his face, the way his brows pulled together like the pain in her had landed somewhere in him too.

"I just..." he continued, shaking his head. "I hate that you thought I could be like that. That you'd been hurt enough times to assume I would be like that."

Hermione's breath wavered. Her grip in his hand tightened.

"It feels like I'm beginning to fall for someone I barely know anything about," she said quietly.

Draco's eyes flicked to hers and stayed there.

"What can I do," he asked finally, "to make you *not* feel like that?"

Hermione exhaled slowly. She didn't have a neat answer, not really. But the question hit something deep inside her.

"I don't know..." she admitted.

Draco didn't move for a long moment.

Then, without looking at her, he spoke. "I've been in therapy."

Hermione blinked. "What?"

"Eight years," he said. "Started after uni. I wasn't sleeping, couldn't eat, couldn't stop losing it at the smallest things. Got in fights. Shut people out. My mum gave me an ultimatum - either talk to someone or she'd cut me off. So I went out of spite."

Her gaze dropped to their entwined fingers when he squeezed hers once as in reassurance.

Their fingers threaded tighter.

"I stopped going," he murmured. "Thought I was fine. Thought I didn't need it anymore. But I started again weeks ago."

Her gaze lifted slowly. “Why?”

He looked at her then, really looked. “Because I punched that guy at the pub. For putting his hands on you. And I couldn’t breathe after. Couldn’t think. I was so fucking angry and afraid and I didn’t know what to do with it. So I called my therapist.”

Hermione didn’t say anything. She didn’t need to. She just let herself sink into him as he pulled her close until she was curled against his bare chest, skin to skin, all the warmth of him pressed against her like a balm. He shifted them both up the bed, his back hitting the headboard, and wrapped his arms around her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other splayed low on her back like he couldn’t bear the idea of letting her slip even an inch away.

She pressed her face to his collarbone, breath catching at the heat of him, the sharp scent of clean skin and something unmistakably him. Her fingers hovered uncertainly before they spread across his ribs, grounding herself in the ridges of him, in the way he felt alive under her hands. Real.

She wanted to stay like this. But her thoughts wouldn’t let her.

Hermione’s throat thickened. She shifted, her hand sliding up to his chest, feeling the quiet thud of his heart.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For telling me this.”

Draco looked down at her, brows drawn. “It’s yours. That part of me. No one else knows. Not even Blaise.”

The silence between them stretched, warm now instead of sharp.

But that stupid voice note still echoed in her head.

Hermione hesitated, small when she finally spoke again. “Are you... going to respond to her?”

“No,” he said simply. “What is there to say?”

Hermione shrugged, trying to ignore the knot in her chest as it tightened again.

Draco scoffed softly, his fingers brushing the side of her jaw. “That’s the shit she pulls to get away with everything.”

Hermione bit her lip. “So that’s it?”

He tilted his head, reading her. “Are you asking if I’m done with her?”

She didn’t answer. Not really. But her eyes did.

Draco didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. It’s done. It was already over. I just needed to say it out loud this time.”

Hermione looked at him for a long beat.

Then she pressed her hand flat against his chest, over his heart. “I think I’m still learning how to believe things like that.”

“I know,” he murmured. “And I’ll keep saying it until it’s easier.”

Then he reached behind him, tugged them both up the bed, and pulled her fully into his arms, tight against his bare chest, her head tucked under his chin.

Hermione let herself be moved, let herself be held.

“She’s just...” Hermione’s voice wavered, quiet and brittle. “She looks like the kind of person you fall in love with at first glance.”

Draco didn’t move, but she felt the muscles in his chest go taut beneath her cheek. After a long pause, his hand came up to cup her jaw, coaxing her to lift her head so he could look her in the eye.

“You mean someone with expensive hair and a fucking boat?” he said dryly. But his eyes were soft. No mockery in them.

Hermione gave another weak shrug. “She looked like the sort of girl who doesn’t even have to try. Who just... walks into a room and everyone already loves her.”

Draco’s gaze didn’t waver. His thumb brushed just beneath her eye, the gentlest stroke. “Yeah, well,” he said, gently, “she also walked out of my life and I never wanted her back. You walked in, and I don’t know how to breathe when you’re not here.”

Her breath caught, her heart stuttering like it didn’t know how to take that in.

Draco didn’t wait for her to reply. He bent his head, lips brushing against her temple first. Then her cheek. Then the corner of her mouth. Not rushed. Not demanding. Just there. Steady kisses, like he was laying them over every ache she’d never spoken aloud.

“I don’t give a fuck what she looks like,” he whispered against her skin.

She wanted to believe that, but she couldn’t. And she hated herself for it.

Draco paused. Then pulled back just enough to see her face.

“You know,” he murmured, his mouth tugging slightly at one corner, “I had a thing for you years ago.”

Her brows drew together. “What?”

He nodded once, still watching her. “Blaise’s party. Seven years ago. You showed up in that short navy dress with the zip down the back and your hair up like you didn’t give a damn what anyone thought.” His mouth curved into something crooked, almost sheepish. “I thought you were the hottest thing I’d ever seen.”

Hermione blinked. “You’re making that up.”

“I’m not,” he said, half laughing under his breath. “I spent the whole night pretending not to look while you pretended I didn’t exist.”

She stared at him, stunned. “You never said anything.”

“Because you had your eyes glued to Ron Weasley the entire time,” he said flatly. “Didn’t even glance at me for months after that.”

Her lips parted, her brow furrowing. “That’s not true.”

“Oh, it absolutely is.” He smirked, brushing a thumb along her jaw. “You were completely gone for him back then. I was just the snarky guy pouring drinks and fucking off to smoke with Blaise on the balcony.”

She stared at him like she couldn’t reconcile the memory with what he was saying.

Draco’s expression softened. “You really think I didn’t notice you? I noticed *everything*, Hermione. I just didn’t think I had a chance. You were brilliant and loud and impossible to ignore, and I was—”

He broke off with a shrug, like he didn’t want to finish the thought.

But Hermione’s hand moved, slid around his ribs, fingers curling against the bare skin of his back.

“You never even looked at me,” she whispered, still half disbelieving.

Draco smiled gently, like he couldn’t believe she was still struggling to see what he saw. “Yeah,” he murmured low, “you never stopped looking right through me.”

He leaned in, brushing his lips to her jaw.

Hermione’s voice was barely audible. “You really remember what I was wearing... seven years ago?”

Draco hummed, his thumb drifting across the curve of her cheek. “Short navy dress. Bare shoulders. Gold hoops. You kept tugging the hem down every time you laughed.” He leaned closer, voice like velvet. “Drove me fucking insane.”

She made a mortified noise and tried to bury her face in his chest.

“Stop,” she muttered.

He smirked. “Not my fault I had eyes.”

“You never said anything.”

“You had eyes for Ginny’s brother,” he said, not bitter, just matter-of-fact. “Didn’t even look at me. Not for months.”

Hermione went still. “You were wearing a leather jacket.”

He pulled back slightly, clearly surprised. “You remember that?”

She nodded without lifting her head. “You leaned against the wall like you knew you were being watched. I thought you were an arrogant prick.”

Draco huffed a quiet laugh. “I was.”

They stayed like that for a moment, their breaths syncing, his bare chest warm beneath her cheek.

Then her voice dipped again. “Do you still have photos of her? On your phone?”

Draco stilled. His fingers, which had been trailing her spine, paused. “If I do, I wouldn’t know. I haven’t looked.” He tilted his head slightly. “Why?”

She hesitated. “I just... wondered what you looked like together.”

He inhaled, then let it out slowly. Reached for his phone on the nightstand, thumb unlocking it with practiced ease.

“Let’s change that, then.”

“What?”

“Let me show you what *we* look like together.” His voice rough but so certain. “Let me give you something better to remember.”

She blinked up at him, stunned.

He lifted the phone, switched the camera, and brought it close. “C’mere.”

“Draco—”

But he was already shifting her, one arm wrapped low around her waist as he tugged her half into his lap, bare chest against her shirt, her thigh sliding across his. His hand slid to her jaw, tilting her face toward him as his eyes dropped to her lips.

“You’re the one I want,” he murmured, and then he kissed her.

The camera clicked as his mouth found hers, slow and deep and sure. Not a flash, but a capture. Her body arching into his. His hand in her hair. Her fingers curling at his shoulder. That unspoken ache between them printed into pixels.

He took another. And another.

Kisses that weren’t just kisses but evidence.

When he finally pulled back, Hermione's eyes were glazed, her breath short.

He handed her the phone to show her the photos. At her flushed cheeks and parted lips. At his hand in her hair. At the way he looked at her like nothing else existed. Something twisted in her chest. Sharp and sweet and terrifyingly real.

She didn't say anything. Just swallowed, hard.

Draco was watching her. Closely. Like he already knew what she was thinking.

Then he broke the silence, "What you said earlier..."

His thumb brushed the inside of her wrist. "About beginning to fall for me."

She froze.

Her breath held suspended somewhere between her ribs. But his eyes didn't leave hers. "I need you to know something."

He leaned in, close enough that his next words spilled against her lips, warm and wrecking.

"I'm past that beginning stage, Hermione. I'm already in too deep."

Her heart nearly stopped.

"I think about you all the fucking time," he continued, his hand slipping under the hem of her shirt, dragging warmth across her back. "In the middle of meetings. When I'm brushing my teeth. When I'm trying to sleep. It's really pathetic."

Hermione's breath trembled against his mouth.

His hand slid higher, splaying across her bare spine. "This is different. *You're* different."

She blinked once. Slowly. Like she was still trying to believe this was real.

He kissed the corner of her mouth. It felt anything but rushed or greedy. Just soft. Like she was something rare.

Her fingers gripped his waist. "Draco," she whispered, like his name alone hurt to say.

"I'm in," he murmured. "Completely. Irretrievably. I've never said that to anyone. Not even her. Not like this."

He exhaled shakily, brushing his nose against hers. "And I'm done hiding it."

Hermione stilled, her heart hammering in her chest.

"I mean it," he said, eyes searching hers. "Whenever you're ready I'll tell everyone. Ginny. Theo. The whole fucking world. I don't need time to figure it out. I don't need space to be sure."

She inhaled sharply, chest caving with the force of it. Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

Draco kissed her again slow and aching like he was trying to tattoo the promise into her skin. His hands curled in her hair, at her jaw, down her back like he didn't know where to anchor himself.

"I'm already in too deep," he breathed. "I'm not telling you this to rush you, but so you can take your time. So you don't ever have to doubt where I stand."

Hermione looked at him, stunned and burning, and knew in that moment that he wasn't just breaking down her walls. He was rebuilding something in their place. Something terrifying and whole.

Chapter 17: Fool

Wednesday evening

Hermione stared at the blinking cursor in her draft email, the body of it rewritten five times already and still utterly useless. The sentence on her screen was both overly formal and entirely meaningless.

She backspaced until only her name remained at the bottom.

The office lights above her buzzed softly and the muted chatter of the hallway beyond her glass door gave a steady backdrop to her stalled brain. Her hand hovered over the keyboard, but her eyes drifted back to her phone.

Just to look at it one more time before she finally shut down for the day.

The photo was still up. The one Draco had taken Sunday night.

His mouth against hers in a kiss that had felt like wordless reassurance.

She looked flushed and messy and completely disarmed in the frame with her hair tangled over one shoulder. Her eyes half-lidded like she hadn't realized he was about to kiss her until he already had. She didn't even remember smiling, but in the photo, she was. Like someone who'd let herself be caught in a moment without thinking to brace for it instead of being tangled in the middle of something she didn't know how to hold yet.

Draco on the other hand looked like a painting. Like light and shadow had agreed on him for once. All his sharp angles, one hand cradling her jaw like she was precious. His lashes cast delicate shadows over his cheekbones, unfairly long and dark, and even mid-kiss, the corner of his mouth was curved with his signature smirk, just warmer than usual.

As if none of her sharpest doubts could make him see her any differently from the version he had created in his head.

And she desperately wanted to live up to that version of herself. She wanted to live in the picture the way he seemed to...like it wasn't lopsided, like she wasn't just half as beautiful as him. Like her demons didn't matter when he was just close enough to carry the burden with her.

She had stared at the photo more times this week than she was proud to admit. But every time she did, something soft and breathless rose in her chest, like a hush just before the curtain lifts. Like the moment just before falling with nothing to hold onto.

It felt like wings beating beneath her skin, fragile but so insistent.

They hadn't talked about the things he'd said to her, that he was ready to make it official. She hadn't given him an answer to the unspoken question because something about going public made it feel real in a way that still scared her.

A soft knock on the doorframe pulled her out of her spiral. Hermione's head snapped up to see Ben from Finance leaning in, his scarf already looped around his neck with his bag slung over one shoulder. They often commuted home together if their schedules aligned as they lived just one stop apart.

"You heading out soon? The Tube'll be a mess if we leave any later for the BFI's."

"You can go ahead," she said, rubbing her temple. "I need a few more minutes. I'm... meeting someone after work."

He gave her a thumbs-up and disappeared down the hallway.

A few minutes later, just as she reached to shut down her computer, her phone buzzed softly against the desk.

DM:
I'm here.
Take your time.

She bit back a smile and grabbed her coat.

It didn't take long to make him out in the distance.

Leaning against his car like he had nowhere else to be. Like the city hadn't moved an inch without him. One hand tucked into the pocket of his coat, the other wrapped around a takeaway coffee he sipped from lazily, the lid brushing his mouth just as his eyes scanned the lot for her. And when they found her, he didn't wave or straighten.

He just grinned.

God, she'd missed him even though it had only been two days. She'd spent Monday night with Ginny and Luna, drinking wine and mapping out Fleur's bachelorette weekend with a chaotic spreadsheet and glitter pens. On Tuesday had been her new boxing class, brutal in the best kind of way.

Today they were heading to dinner at Ginny and Blaise's place, the full group. It was the first time she and Draco would be arriving together and not apart from each other. He'd texted that morning asking if he could drop his things at hers first. "*Your place is closer,*" he'd said. "*And I'm planning on drinking, so Tube makes more sense. I can pick you up from work and we can make a quick stop at your place before heading over.*"

She liked the idea of him staying during the week, of him wanting to.

And here he was.

Standing there like he belonged in the scene of a movie she didn't realize she'd been casting him in all week. Like the city was just a blurry backdrop to the very specific gravity he had on her.

As she approached, her stomach flipped once, then again, and the week's noise slipped off her shoulders.

Draco pushed off the car as she approached, his gaze dragging down her body and back up like he was reacquainting himself with every inch. He looked stupidly good in charcoal slacks and a black sweater under his coat, collarbone peeking out just enough to make her bite her lip.

"You're going to make it very hard to behave tonight," he said, low and smug, passing her the coffee like a peace offering he fully intended to break.

Hermione tipped onto her toes automatically, her hand curling around his jaw as he bent to meet her. His lips brushed hers in a kiss that tugged at the corners of her mouth and then deepened, just enough to make her forget where they were.

Her heart did that annoying little skip.

"I missed you," she said, before she could stop herself.

Draco pulled back just enough to meet her eyes, the smirk on his mouth softening. "Yeah?" he asked, tilting his head, mock amusement curling his voice. "I missed you too, Granger. Long week already."

She arched a brow, lips still curved from the kiss. "Granger?"

He shrugged, lazy and unbothered, the corner of his mouth twitching. "I don't know. Kind of missed the sound of it."

Hermione tilted her head, unimpressed. "I didn't."

"Well," he murmured, brushing a knuckle down her arm, slow and deliberate. "I need to ease myself into character for tonight."

Hermione gave him a look. "Character?"

He nodded, and with a smooth, unhurried motion, reached for the strap of her laptop bag. His fingers brushed her shoulder as he slid it down her arm, the gesture so natural it barely felt like a decision. Just something he did now. Something she let him do.

The weight lifted from her body and settled into his, and somehow that felt like something more than kindness. Like he was saying *I've got you* in a language that didn't need a name.

"You know," he said, adjusting the strap over his wrist as he glanced down at her warm with mischief, "quietly smitten frenemy who's absolutely not sneaking around with you behind everyone's back."

She huffed out a laugh, half an eye roll already forming.

Maybe he was giving her another chance to say something, to finally respond to what he'd said Sunday night. Maybe this was him asking again without asking.

And maybe she was supposed to say it now, to finally admit that she wanted it too. That she was tired of pretending, tired of holding back just because naming something meant it might fall apart.

Because she did want it.

But somehow, every time the words got close, something pulled her back. Fear. Timing. The quiet, steady truth that once something was said, it couldn't be unsaid. And wanting it, no matter how badly, didn't always make it safe.

Still, here she was, standing in the waning evening light, his fingers brushing the fabric of her sleeve, the warmth of his smirk curling into her ribs like sunlight through glass. And God, she wanted to say it. She wanted to give it a name. She wanted him.

Draco leaned in, just enough to bump her nose gently with his, the gesture so boyish and deliberate it made her heart stutter.

"I'll be on my best behavior," he murmured, eyes glinting. "Promise."

Hermione unlocked the door to her flat and stepped inside, the quiet click of the latch sealing them into the stillness of her space. She toed off her boots, fingers brushing the wall for balance, then glanced back over her shoulder.

Draco was already setting his bag down by the couch, like he belonged there. Like this was something they did now...weeknights and unspoken routines.

She lingered in the hallway. "I just need to change before we go."

He let his eyes trail over her. "You need any help with that?"

The words weren't filthy. But the way he said them, low and half-smiling, like he could already see the fabric pooled at her feet, made something coil inside of her. She probably should tell him that she was on her period since yesterday. That he needed to stop looking at her like he did right now or she would combust. That heat curling at the edges of her logic.

But they were already cutting it close.

Hermione huffed out a soft laugh, brushing her hair over one shoulder as she turned toward the bedroom.

"Not unless you want to be late," she called back, voice warm but lightly warning.

"I'll be quick."

She pulled the door to the bedroom half closed and reached for the hanger with the polka dot blouse she'd picked out earlier today and slipped into her favorite pair of denims.

Her mind was miles behind her, back in the back seat of his car, pressed against the door panel, his hand braced above her head and his mouth dragging filthy, perfect words against her throat.

They hadn't touched each other like that since the fight. Not in the way she'd been craving ever since. No messy, toe-curling make-up sex that could've followed everything they'd said. And she'd thought about it more times than she could count. How quickly he'd undone her. How easily he'd turned her body into something she couldn't quite control anymore. How rough he'd been when she'd asked for it. How she'd begged for him to keep going even though people probably saw the car rocking from his thrusts.

And now?

Now her period had decided to show up like clockwork... inconvenient, and cruel. Like her body was mocking her for wanting something too much.

She wanted him desperately. The weight of him. The stretch. The maddening, grounding way he filled every part of her and made everything else shut up.

She tugged the blouse over her head with a quiet sigh and stepped back into the hallway, her voice lighter than the ache still curling beneath her skin.

"Ready when you are."

Rush hour still clung to the carriages like static, every inch filled with the tired weight of commuters and the city's underground pulse. Hermione barely managed to wedge herself near the wall, her hand curling around the overhead rail as the train jerked forward. Her body brushed Draco's as she reached up, and he just let the contact linger.

She could feel the tension in his body even through his coat. Not stiff, exactly. Just taut like he was holding back something with effort. His cologne curled around her, warm and clean, and she exhaled slowly, letting it settle in her lungs like a tether.

It was ridiculous, how safe he made her feel.

He wasn't even touching her properly. But her whole body recognized the nearness of him by the way he stood just close enough that she could have leaned her head against his chest if she let herself.

A man a few feet down shifted, jostling a bag against her hip. Draco's arm moved immediately, slipping between her and the stranger, his palm bracing lightly on the wall beside her head. A shelter made of elbows and instinct.

She glanced up at him.

He didn't look at her. Didn't say anything. But she saw the way his jaw ticked once. The quiet scan of the space around them. The flick of his gaze to anyone who looked too long.

And then like he could feel her watching he glanced down at her.

"You okay?" he asked just low enough for only her to hear.

Hermione nodded. "Yeah."

The train rocked again and she stumbled slightly. Draco caught her by the waist without hesitation, steadying her before she could even register the movement. His touch was brief. Careful. But it buzzed all the way through her.

"Thanks," she muttered.

He didn't answer. Just gave the barest nod, like it was obvious. Like it was what he did now.

Then he leaned in, his lips brushing her ear.

"I like this blouse on you."

"Do you?" she managed, heat creeping into her cheeks.

With one finger, he traced the edge of the one that hid the soft line of her cleavage, then gave it a gentle tug, like he was checking how easily it might come undone.

"Yeah," he muttered. "It's distracting."

She wanted to laugh, but the train jolted again and all she could do was lean into the safety of his frame, biting back the smile threatening to bloom.

There were so many things she wanted to say. About how the blouse wasn't new, about how she'd chosen it in the morning without thinking. About how steady he made her feel in this crush of strangers and noise.

His hand dropped and his fingers brushed hers. She didn't pull away but curled her pinky around his.

The street was quieter, a welcome shift after the crush of the train. Their steps fell into rhythm as they walked toward Ginny and Blaise's from the station.

They weren't touching now. The fact that any second, their friends could turn the corner and see them had her not reach for him again.

She sighed instead. A soft, unguarded sound that slipped out before she could tuck it back.

Draco glanced over, his pace slowing just slightly. "You know," he said easily, "we can tell them whenever you want."

It was quiet reassurance. A reminder that he still stood by what he'd said on Sunday. And she hated that it eased something in her. That she needed to hear it. He'd been nothing but patient and kind with her, loving even. That was if she was willing herself long enough to ignore the way they had almost drifted apart on Sunday because of his unnecessary lie.

She opened her mouth, something warm fluttering in her chest, but before she could speak, a familiar voice called out from behind them.

"Hermione!" came Luna's bright voice. "Oh good, we're not the last ones."

They both turned at the same time to see Harry and Luna crossing the street, Luna wrapped in a scarf the size of a small planet, Harry with two bottles of wine clinking in a tote bag.

"Hey!" Hermione smiled, too quickly. "Perfect timing."

"We saw you from across the road," Harry said, panting slightly. "Didn't think we'd catch up. Did you arrive together?"

Draco gave them a polite nod, expression unreadable now.

Hermione tucked a curl behind her ear, pulse still tapping beneath her skin. She forced a light laugh, glancing over as if it were the most casual thing in the world. "We bumped into each other near Holborn. Tube timing worked out."

"That's lucky," Luna said brightly.

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Draco's eyes flicked sideways, catching hers for a fraction of a second. There was something careful in the glance, like he was checking in without saying a word.

Luna kept chattering as they reached the steps to Blaise and Ginny's, scarf trailing behind her. "I brought my tarot deck, by the way. In case anyone wants their fate meddled with after dessert."

Harry groaned. "Last time you said I was cursed and then I twisted my ankle two days later."

"It was a *warning*, Harry. Honestly."

Draco stepped forward and rang the buzzer, his posture relaxed. "I, for one, would love to know what's coming for me."

She looked away just as the buzzer crackled and the door unlocked with a loud click.

"You joke," Luna said as she started up the stairs, "but you're very readable. Your energy is all clean lines and shadow work. Like an old cathedral that only looks abandoned."

Draco raised his brows, watching her take two stairs at a time with unexpected determination. "That's either very flattering or vaguely threatening."

“It’s a compliment,” Luna said cheerfully over her shoulder. “I’ll do your cards after dinner. You’ll be shocked. You’re probably full of unresolved karma.”

Draco deadpanned, “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

Hermione snorted softly, biting her lip to hide her grin as she followed with Harry, the four of them making their way up the narrow stairwell.

“You’ll be up all night thinking about it.” Harry muttered as they climbed.

Draco glanced back. “Only if I get good cards.”

“No such thing,” Luna called back. “Only accurate ones.”

At the next landing, she turned to Draco, eyes wide with excitement. “You’ll have to be open, though. The cards pick up on resistance.”

“I’m nothing if not emotionally available,” he said drily.

Hermione caught the way Luna’s eyes sparkled.

They stopped in front of the familiar black door and knocked twice.

Luna tilted her head. “Are we early?”

Harry checked his watch. “Nope. Ginny said seven. It’s seven-oh-three.”

Draco gave the door another knock, louder this time.

Hermione sighed, “Blaise probably got distracted in the kitchen again.”

Loud music surged briefly from the other side, then cut off with a thud, followed by muffled shouting and the sound of someone stumbling.

Draco raised one single eyebrow at them.

Then came Blaise’s voice, deadpan and loud. “I SWEAR TO GOD, THE TIMER IS NOT AN EXCUSE TO OPEN THE OVEN DOOR EVERY FOUR MINUTES.”

A clatter. Laughter.

Then the door yanked open.

Ginny stood there in socks and an apron, one hand holding a wooden spoon.

“Finally. You’re late,” she said, grinning.

“We’re not late,” Hermione protested.

“Tell that to the burned garlic bread,” Blaise called from somewhere inside.

“It’s not burned, it’s just right,” Ginny shouted back.

Theo’s unmistakable bark echoed from within.

Ginny stepped aside to let them in, eyes flicking over Draco just a beat longer than necessary. She handed him a folded kitchen towel like it was some kind of guest pass.

“You’re on salad duty,” she announced, already pivoting toward the others.

Draco looked mildly affronted. “Do I look like someone who makes salad?”

“You do, if you really want to know,” Ginny called over her shoulder without missing a beat.

“Get your arse in here, lover boy,” Blaise’s voice chimed in from the kitchen, loud and unapologetic.

Draco sighed dramatically and shrugged off his coat. “I drove your girlfriend’s dresser across half of London on Saturday. I thought this was my thank you dinner.”

At that, Hermione’s stomach flipped just slightly. She wondered if Blaise had told her about what had transpired with Tiffany after Draco had left their place.

She ducked her head and moved toward the living room to keep walking. She didn’t want to think about Saturday. Or Sunday.

Ginny appeared beside her a moment later, holding out a wine glass. “You good?”

Hermione nodded, a little too quickly. “Yeah. Just a long day.”

Ginny didn’t press. She hadn’t pressed in a very long time if she thought about it.

“I added extra garlic to the bread,” she said instead, clinking her glass to Hermione’s. “You’re welcome.”

Dinner was loud in the way only this group could manage. Half-conversations overlapping, forks clinking against plates, someone always talking with their mouth half-full. The table was cramped but cozy, dishes passed hand to hand with unnecessary commentary, a bottle of wine already emptied and another breathing near the sink.

Hermione let the noise wash over her, the rise and fall of it oddly comforting. Across the table, Ginny was gesturing with a fork, halfway into a retelling of something absurd Blaise had said in the kitchen earlier, eyes alight, wine glass clinking as Luna burst into laughter beside her.

She was glowing. Not from the wine but from the familiarity of the easy rhythm of teasing voices and overlapping stories, the warmth of being known in a room that never quieted. Hermione watched her with quiet awe.

This was how Ginny had grown up. With six brothers and too many shoes by the door. With chaos as a love language and arguments that ended in laughter. It lived in her bones, in the way she interrupted people mid-sentence and passed plates without asking, in the way she didn't flinch at raised voices or contradicting opinions. She thrived in this chaos.

Harry leaned in from across the table, spearing another carrot like it had offended him personally.

"So," he said, his tone a blend of suspicion and amusement, "Fleur's bachelorette weekend. Luna told me something about... tiaras and a yurt?"

Luna beamed. "It's more of a canvas bell tent, actually."

Ginny snorted into her wine.

Hermione shook her head with the same amusement. "You make it sound like we're going on a spa retreat for forest fairies."

Harry grinned. "You're not?"

"We're not," Ginny said unimpressed. "There will be tequila and an absurd amount of glitter."

"Body glitter?" Theo joined in, grinning. "Please tell me there'll be stripping lessons. I'm just saying—if you need volunteer test subjects..."

Ginny didn't miss a beat. She swatted him on the shoulder with her napkin. "We're not stripping, Theo. It's Brighton. Not Vegas."

Blaise hummed thoughtfully, elbowing Draco. "Maybe we should crash the weekend. Purely scientific interest. I'd pay good money to see that."

"You wouldn't dare," Ginny said sweetly.

Draco didn't say anything, just glanced sidelong at Hermione with the faintest smirk. She refused to look at him.

"It's going to be a very balanced weekend," Hermione said, reaching for the garlic bread. "Glitter and yoga. Bonfires and skincare. You know...empowerment, with a side of hydration."

Luna nodded solemnly. "And a full moon ritual, if the Airbnb allows open flame."

Theo furrowed his brows. "Sounds like a coven."

"Exactly," Luna smiled.

Draco finally spoke, tone mild as he topped off his own glass. "Maybe we should plan our own weekend then. Just us men."

“Like what?” Harry asked, amused. “Beers and bad decisions?”

“Beers, bad decisions, and no glitter,” Draco said, with a glance at Blaise. “Maybe a rented cabin. Poker. Bonfire. Beer.”

“Boys in the woods,” Luna said dreamily. “What could go wrong?”

“Everything,” Ginny muttered. “You’d light something on fire by accident or forget how to cook pasta.”

Blaise put his hand dramatically to his heart. “I’ll have you know, I made half this meal myself.”

Ginny arched a brow. “Yes. Under *very* close supervision. You can cook when I’m there to give you proper directions.”

Blaise pointed his fork at her, grinning. “Only because you’re so bossy—”

“You’re just so good at following directions,” she corrected sweetly.

Theo groaned loudly. “Please. Save the foreplay for when the rest of us aren’t digesting.”

Draco sighed, “Let’s be honest, it’ll devolve into whiskey, bad poker, and someone crying about their ex.”

Theo raised his glass. “Which means you’ll fit right in.”

Draco’s lips twitch but the half-hearted smile didn’t reach his eyes. He didn’t look at Theo.

Hermione glanced between them, mildly thrown off by the silent tension clinging to the banter. Or maybe she’d imagined it. She dropped her gaze to her plate. It was stupid.

After dessert, a lopsided berry tart that Ginny swore had looked better in the pan, the group started clearing the table. Blaise handed out dishtowels, Harry loaded the dishwasher, and the music volume nudged upward just slightly.

Hermione excused herself quietly, slipping down the hall to the bathroom. Her back ached. Her stomach felt like a distant throb. Nothing dramatic, just enough to make her skin feel too tight, her limbs heavier than usual. She freshened up quickly, adjusted her blouse, and ran cold water over her wrists before stepping out again.

She padded back toward the living room just as the clatter of plates grew louder.

Theo appeared by the doorway, blocking her path with an easy smile and a glance over her shoulder.

“You alright?” he asked casually.

She nodded. “Fine. You?”

His smile almost faltered, like he was steeling himself for something. “Can I borrow you?”

Hermione blinked. “Borrow me?”

He gestured toward the balcony. “Just a chat. Couple minutes, I promise.”

She hesitated, glancing back. Draco was perched on the floor now, knees bent beside the coffee table, watching with half-feigned suspicion as Luna shuffled her deck of tarot cards. He looked like he wasn’t quite sure whether to laugh or lean in...

“You’re going to love this,” Luna was beaming.

Draco’s mouth twitched.

Harry sat behind Luna on the couch, wine glass balanced on one knee, watching the scene with a bemused, skeptical sort of interest.

Luna tapped her lip thoughtfully. “That one’s sticky,” she said, almost to herself. “A bit tangled in past promises. Or guilt. Sometimes both.”

Draco didn’t flinch. Just watched her with that quiet focus he wore in rare moments, like he was giving her his full attention.

Hermione’s eyes lingered for a beat longer.

The balcony door clicked open behind her, and Theo gestured for her to follow, his smile reassuring and easy as always.

She stepped outside, the cold air hitting her cheeks like a reset. London’s autumn inched its way toward winter. The light from the flat behind them bled weakly through the glass as Theo closed the door. It left them in a hush of city sounds and distance. Just the two of them.

Hermione crossed her arms on instinct, trying not to fidget in the cold.

Theo didn’t look at her at first. He stepped toward the railing, palms braced on the cold metal, his back curving as he leaned forward slightly. His breath fogged the air.

He was quiet for a moment, his eyes tracking something beyond the rooftops. He looked tired. Or maybe just bracing for impact.

Then he spoke.

“Are you happy?” he asked softly.

Hermione blinked. “What?”

He turned to look at her fully. His face was open in that way she’d always admired, so unguarded. “Right now. In your life. Are you happy?”

“I—” Her arms tightened across her chest. “Yeah. I think so. I mean, I’m trying.”

He nodded once, the motion small and unreadable. He pulled out a slightly battered pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tapped one loose, placed it between his lips, and lit it with a flick of his lighter. The flame flared briefly, casting his face in a strange, golden flicker.

Then his shoulders lifted with a slow breath, “Okay. I just needed to hear that. Because I’m about to say something very selfish.”

Hermione’s lips parted.

“I’ve been sitting on this for a while,” Theo said. “And I’ve gone back and forth a hundred times, telling myself it would ruin something if I said it out loud. But not saying it hasn’t exactly spared me either.”

Hermione’s heart thudded painfully in her chest. “Theo—”

“I like you,” he said simply. “More than I should. More than I planned to.”

Her stomach dropped, but their eyes stayed locked with each other.

“I don’t expect anything,” he went on, quickly but not unkindly. “I’m not asking you to make a choice or explain yourself. I’m just... I’m telling you.”

She exhaled shakily and looked away, focusing on the faint shadows of Luna’s cards and Harry’s silhouette through the glass.

Hermione swallowed hard and tried again. “Theo—”

She hated that it hurt. Not because she didn’t care for Theo... of course she did. But not like *that*. Not in the way he deserved. And she hated that she couldn’t fix it, couldn’t make it less cruel just by meaning well.

She swallowed. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Sure you did,” he said, but without heat. “You just didn’t want to look too closely at it. Which is fair. I probably wouldn’t have either.”

A beat passed.

Hermione felt like something was cracking open in her chest.

Theo shook his head, softening again. “I’m not mad. I’m not even surprised. I just...” He dragged the cigarette between his fingers. “I should’ve something sooner. Maybe it wouldn’t have changed anything, but I’d have liked to try before he did.”

Hermione froze, eyes snapping back to Theo. “What?”

“Malfoy,” he said, the word dry and casual, but there was something sharp underneath. “The one you like is Malfoy.”

She blinked, pulse flaring. “That’s not—”

“Don’t,” Theo said again, a little firmer this time, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth. “Don’t lie to me, Hermione. You’re shit at it. I’ll ask you this only one more time. And I swear, after this, I won’t bring it up again. But I need you to be honest to me. Is there something going on between you and Malfoy?”

The words landed like a stone. She opened her mouth, reflex more than intention, but he saw it. That flicker of hesitation.

“Don’t lie,” he said quietly. “Please.”

Hermione looked away again. Her pulse was ringing in her ears.

Theo’s tone didn’t change, but there was a thread of something older in it now. Sadness, maybe. Or resignation.

“I see the way he looks at you,” he said. “Like the rest of us don’t exist. Like you’re the one thing that makes sense to him. I see the way your whole posture changes when he’s in the room. I’m not blind.”

She just looked back at him, her jaw locked like if she let it go, everything inside her might fall out.

And Theo saw it. Of course he did.

He gave a slow, bitter little smile. It wasn’t cruel, but tired.

“That’s what I thought,” he said softly, almost to himself.

And Hermione... she didn’t correct him.

She closed her eyes for a beat, then forced them open again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. And she meant it. In a way that hurt more than she expected. For not telling him sooner, for not being honest with him. For not feeling the same for him.

Theo shook his head. “Don’t be.”

Hermione’s throat clenched.

His gaze settling somewhere out over the rooftops again, the cigarette burning low between his fingers.

“I just needed you to hear it,” he said again, like he’d practiced it before. “Just once. So I don’t look back later and wonder if things might’ve been different if I’d said something.”

He glanced down, exhaled a soft breath through his nose.

Hermione swallowed hard, the burn behind her eyes sharper now.

“At least I won’t spend the next year trying to rewrite a story that was never mine to begin with.”

She let out a shaky breath, arms still crossed tight across her chest like they might hold her together.

“I never meant to hurt you,” she said quietly.

Theo really looked at her then. And despite everything, there was still something soft in his eyes.

“You’re still one of my favorite people,” he added, softer now. “That won’t change.”

Hermione’s eyes shimmered, but she blinked quickly, like that might stop the crack working its way up through her chest.

She nodded once. “You’re one of mine too.”

Theo gave her a small smile at that.

Then he looked down at his hands. Turned the cigarette slowly between his fingers like he was stalling for breath.

“Can I ask you something?”

She hesitated, but nodded again.

“Would you think about it?” he asked. “Just for a night. Not forever. Not to change anything. Just... to imagine what it might be like. If you changed your mind.”

The words weren’t bitter. They weren’t even hopeful. They were quiet and tired and human.

She didn’t want to lie to him. But she couldn’t give him what he wanted either, not even in a hypothetical. Not when her whole body still remembered the weight of someone else’s touch. Not when she couldn’t stop thinking about someone else who had her already in every way that mattered.

“I don’t think I can,” she said softly.

He drew in a breath, slow and steady, like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to say the next thing but couldn’t stop himself now.

“Why him, Hermione?” he said, finally looking up at her again.

She opened her mouth, but he cut her off gently.

“I mean it,” he went on. “After all those years. After the way you used to talk about him. What is it about him now that makes you look at him like that?”

Hermione’s heart knocked against her ribs. The air felt colder now, sharper against her skin. But the question stayed, steady and true, hanging between them like a held breath.

“I didn’t plan it,” she said finally, her voice low. “And I didn’t want to feel the way I did. I tried not to. We both did.”

Theo watched her, still and quiet.

“But something shifted. And by the time I realized it... it wasn’t a choice anymore. It just—” she let out a breath “—it just *was*.”

A silence stretched between them, but it didn’t feel angry.

“I’m sorry,” she added softly, almost a whisper. “I really am.”

He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“Is this something you’re going to keep sneaking around about? Or are you two planning to lie to everyone forever? Wait until someone catches on? Or until he breaks your heart?”

Hermione flinched, just barely.

“Sorry, I’m not trying to be an arse,” Theo said, more gently now. “I just... I’ve seen the way he was with his ex, with other girls. He’s dragging a lot behind him, Hermione. And whatever it is, it’s not something you can fix for him.”

Hermione swallowed, the words catching in her throat.

“I’m not trying to fix him,” she said, though it sounded thinner than she meant it to.

Theo gave a quiet hum. “No, but you’ll try. Because that’s who you are. You’ll try to solve him like a puzzle that doesn’t want to be solved.”

He didn’t say it like an accusation, just something true. Something he knew about her.

Hermione looked down at her hands, her fingers curled into her sleeves.

“Just... be careful, okay?” he said finally. “With him. With yourself.”

Before Hermione could even find words to respond, the patio door creaked open behind them.

“Christ,” Blaise’s voice floated through, warm and amused, “are you two having a secret affair or just freezing your arses off? Weekend planning, let’s go. And for fuck’s sake, Theo... are you smoking again?”

Theo didn’t even flinch. Just took another slow drag. “I’ll be in. Just a minute.”

Hermione turned toward him.

He didn’t meet her eyes this time. But his voice was soft when he spoke again. “Go on. I’m alright.”

She lingered for half a second longer, her stomach twisted in quiet knots, then nodded once and turned toward the door.

As she stepped inside, she caught Blaise giving Theo a look over her shoulder, and then the noise of the flat swallowed her up again.

But as Hermione rejoined the group, she couldn't shake the way her skin was crawling with something like grief. Not over the moment itself but the shape it had taken. What Theo had said, what she hadn't said. What it meant to be cared for like that by someone she couldn't love in the right way. What it meant to want something complicated instead.

The living room had become a patchwork of crossed legs, shared cushions, and half-empty wine glasses balanced on every available surface. Ginny had pulled up her laptop now perched on her lap, Luna had seized one of the floor pillows with a blanket like she was nesting, and Blaise had taken the armchair with a second round of dessert balanced on his chest.

Hermione dropped onto the couch between Draco and Harry. Draco's arm was draped casually over the backrest, fingers resting near the cushion behind her. Not touching. Just... there. Like a presence, like a question. A quiet tether she could pretend not to notice.

Without a word, without even turning his head, he was doing that thing.

That maddening, intimate thing where he didn't need to touch her to unravel her completely. As if her pulse belonged to his hands. As if her body was somehow leaning toward him, even when she told it not to.

She didn't look at him. She couldn't stop thinking.

About Theo. About the way he'd looked at her on the balcony, eyes steady and kind and honest. About what he'd said. About what he hadn't needed to say at all for her to understand.

Theo was safe.

He was uncomplicated, emotionally available, steady in a way that made sense. There was no second-guessing with him, no uncharted darkness. He was a good man. She knew that. And deep down, maybe part of her had always known that he was an option. That if she wanted to, she could take a breath, walk toward him, and never have to worry about being hurt the way she had been before.

But she didn't want Theo.

Not like that.

And the worst, most confusing, maddening part was that she couldn't even rationalize why.

Draco Malfoy was so many things. Complicated. Closed off. Occasionally infuriating. He didn't hand out pieces of himself easily, and he didn't always say the right thing. But when he did... when he looked at her like he did sometimes, when he softened in a way no one else ever got to see... It undid her.

Because no matter how tangled or guarded he was, he'd been nothing but caring.

Gentle with her when she cried. Steady when her world cracked open. Tender in a way she hadn't even known how to want until he offered it freely. And despite how much of himself he kept locked away, he'd tried to make space for her. Chosen her, again and again, even when it would've been easier not to.

Their beginning had been a mess. But what they'd built since then...

It wasn't comparable to anything else she'd ever had.

It wasn't just chemistry or convenience or timing. It was... something else. A bond, maybe. Something that tied her to him in quiet moments like this, where no one else would even notice how close they were sitting or how his hand hovered just behind her shoulder like a held breath.

If last weekend hadn't happened, if she hadn't seen that message from Blaise... maybe she'd have argued with Theo. When he had said that Draco would break her heart in the end... it had felt like a truth she'd already known.

Draco shifted beside her, just enough that his knee brushed hers.

His presence was pressed into her skin like a fingerprint. And even with a foot of space between them and the quiet noise of the room rising up again, Hermione knew.

She'd already made her choice.

She just hadn't said it out loud yet.

The door opened behind them, and she heard the faint shuffle of Theo returning. She didn't look up.

Draco's posture changed. His attention locked on something that made the space between them feel suddenly taut.

She stared at the wine in her hand. Her throat burned. Her fingers tightened slightly around the stem.

This wasn't how she wanted any of it to happen. Not the timing, not the hiding, not the fact that she'd walked back into the room and pretended nothing had happened while one of her closest friends was hurting.

Theo moved around the table and sank down on the rug beside Luna without a word, stretching his legs out casually like nothing had happened at all.

Hermione glanced at Draco from beneath her lashes. His expression was neutral, unreadable.

Theo laughed at something Luna said, and when she looked over at him, his smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

And Hermione's heart splintered just a little more.

Ginny clapped her hands together with theatrical purpose. "Right. Friday. We're not doing another pub night. We need something different."

"Something different how?" Blaise asked, lounging like a king in the corner chair. "You want to go bowling? Laser tag? I'd rather talk about the plans for the annual *'Blaise's Halloween Bash'*."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "You do this every year mate—pretend you're open to input when you're already done planning it."

Blaise shrugged, shameless. "What can I say? I like things done right."

Ginny groaned. "We can talk about that on the weekend."

"No, we should talk about costumes now," Blaise countered, sitting up a little. "So Harry and I don't end up both showing up in pilot uniforms again. Matching badges. Matching aviators. It was humiliating."

"You both looked good," Hermione said, sipping from her wine glass. "It was very Top Gun meets boy band."

"Still," Blaise muttered. "It haunts me."

Ginny looked around the room. "Anyone already have their costume sorted?"

The room stilled.

No one answered.

"Exactly," she said, exasperated. "So, back to our plans for Friday."

"No movie night," Theo said immediately. "Too passive. And last time I fell asleep during the trailers."

"That was the best part," Blaise muttered. "You snored in surround sound."

"Another Game night?" Harry offered.

"We did that two weeks ago," Ginny said, flicking a stray breadcrumb off her jeans. "And it ended with Theo's tragic acting skills."

"I was role-playing under pressure," Theo replied dryly, propping himself up on one elbow. "Some of us are method."

Blaise smirked, tipping the neck of his beer toward Ginny. “What about that new escape room you mentioned the other day? The one in Surrey? The murder mystery with the multiple endings.”

Ginny’s eyes lit up. “Oh! Yes. It’s supposed to be half puzzle, half immersive theatre. Different rooms, timed reveals, people dying off as you go.”

“Dying off?” Harry said, frowning. “That sounds intense.”

“That’s what makes it fun,” Ginny grinned. “You solve clues to find out who’s the killer before they strike again.”

“I’d like to be the killer,” Luna said, from her perch.

“Yeah you would,” Draco murmured, his voice low but amused.

Luna beamed when she turned toward him. “You’d be an excellent detective. You’ve got morally ambiguous lead energy.”

Draco snorted. “Tortured genius or the secret sociopath?”

“Probably both,” Ginny grinned at him before sticking out her tongue playfully.

Hermione found herself smiling, despite the knot still lodged under her ribs. The shift in topic, the laughter echoing in the small flat...it grounded her. Enough to breathe again.

“What’s the group size?” Blaise asked, already reaching for his phone. “Can we all book into the same room?”

“I think 4 per team, max,” Ginny replied. “So we’d have to split.”

“Oh good,” Theo muttered. “That’ll go well.”

Blaise chuckled. “Just don’t get stuck with the killer, Nott.”

Hermione glanced down at her hands, knotted in her lap.

“I’ll check if they’ve got space,” Ginny said, grabbing her laptop from where it had been forgotten beside a half-eaten tart. “But I call not being on a team with Theo unless I’m allowed to sedate him.”

“You’re not,” Blaise said.

Theo raised a glass in mock salute. “Then you’re not solving shit.”

Beneath the laughter, Hermione sat perfectly still, feeling Draco’s quiet presence beside her like gravity, and Theo’s smile across the room like a bruise.

And somewhere between the two, her heart held its breath.

The streets were quieter when they made their way toward the tube.

Draco walked beside her with his hands in his pockets, coat collar turned up and eyes ahead like he wasn't thinking about anything in particular. But Hermione knew better. He'd been quiet since they'd left, and it wasn't his usual brand of silence.

"So," she said, bumping her shoulder lightly with his arm, "are you going to tell me what Luna's cards said?"

Draco gave a little smirk but kept walking. "Didn't take you for a tarot girl."

"I'm not. But I *am* curious."

That earned her a small laugh.

They fell into a few steps of companionable silence that didn't feel as awkward. Then Draco exhaled, like he was giving in.

"She pulled *the Fool*." He huffed a laugh. "Of course."

Hermione smiled. "Oh?"

"Yeah." He sounded amused, but only just. "Apparently I'm on the brink of a great unknown, and the only way through is to leap and hope I don't land on my arse. New beginnings, trust yada yada. I think she told me to walk off a cliff, basically."

Her mouth quirked. "Sounds very dramatic."

They were halfway down the steps to the platform when Draco added, almost too casually, "And what did Nott want to talk to you about?"

Hermione slowed for just a moment before answering, her hand trailing the cold metal of the railing as they descended.

"You were right," she said quietly. "About him. About how he felt about me."

Draco didn't look at her, but his jaw flexed.

She turned her gaze forward, focusing on her steps. "He just wanted to say it. Once. In case there was ever... a chance."

He said nothing.

"He also asked me if there was something going on between us." Her fingers curled together. "I didn't deny it."

A long silence stretched between them when they stepped onto the platform.

"He said he sees how I am around you. How you look at me. He just wanted me to hear it, I think. So he wouldn't regret staying silent."

The rush of the arriving train filled the pause.

“And I told him the truth,” she added, her voice a little firmer now as they moved toward the carriage. “That I didn’t plan this. That I tried not to let it happen. But it did. And it’s not something I can walk back from now.”

They found an empty stretch of seats, and he let her slide in first before sitting beside her, his knees spread slightly, hands still shoved into his coat pockets.

Hermione looked at him. “He told me to be careful with you.”

Draco’s jaw ticked barely.

He let out a sharp exhale through his nose and gave a tight, humorless smile. “Did he.”

“He said I wouldn’t be able to fix you.”

Draco didn’t respond at first. His gaze stayed on the window across from them, spine straightening.

“Well, he’s not the first to think I’m broken.”

Hermione blinked. “That’s not what I—”

“I know what you meant,” he cut in, still not looking at her. His hands still in his coat pockets. “I just didn’t realize Theo was handing out relationship advice now.”

Her brows pulled together. “You’re angry.”

Draco let out a dry laugh and finally turned to her. “Should I not be?”

“I didn’t—” She swallowed. “I wasn’t trying to hide anything from you. Sorry.”

“I’m not mad at you,” he said softer than before. “I’m not.”

She waited, her entire features filling with sadness.

“I just—” he pulled one of his hands out of his pockets, his elbow brushing her side before scrubbing a hand over his face. “He waited until now? Until *after* he knew we were—?” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “Forget it.”

Hermione nudged him gently with her shoulder.

“I feel awful for hurting him,” she said quietly. “Because he’s kind. And decent. It’s not like he can change the way he feels. He’s our friend, Draco.”

Draco’s eyes were fixed on the floor of the carriage like it had personally offended him.

“I just think it’s convenient. That he waited until he could sense something is going on between us to suddenly realize he had something to say.”

Hermione's heart sank. "It wasn't like that."

Draco gave a humorless huff of breath, still not looking at her. "Wasn't it?"

She flinched at the quiet edge in his voice.

"I think he wouldn't have said any of that if he thought you felt completely off-limits," he muttered. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't piss me off."

Hermione stared at him.

Draco looked at her then finally and his face softened a fraction.

"I told you. I'm not mad at you." He paused. "But I won't pretend it doesn't sting. Watching him pull you aside. Talk to you like that. Knowing exactly what he was doing."

She swallowed, but said gently, "He just... needed to say it out loud. To let it go. The least I could do was listen."

Draco's head tilted slightly, like he almost agreed but couldn't quite untangle the resentment from his pride.

Hermione nudged his arm with her shoulder, trying to soften the moment. "Come on. You've got me now. Isn't that punishment enough for both of you?"

Still, he didn't respond. Not even a smirk.

So she leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek gently. He still didn't move.

Her chest ached, but she tried again. Slower this time with more certainty. Her lips lingered just long enough to ask a question without words, her breath warming his skin.

Draco's jaw flexed beneath her mouth.

In one sudden breath, he turned toward her. His hand came up, strong and certain, fingers wrapping around the back of her neck as he pulled her into him, mouth catching hers.

The kiss was deep and slow, like he wanted to brand the taste of him into her mouth and take every ounce of doubt with it. His thumb brushed her jaw firmly, as his lips parted hers, breathing her in like she was oxygen and ruin all at once.

When he pulled back, just barely, his forehead rested against hers. His voice was a low rasp.

"You're mine. You know that, right?"

Hermione blinked, stunned and breathless from the way his eyes searched hers. Or from the way the claim made her ache.

She nodded once. "Yeah," she whispered. "I know."

She turned off the tap and smiled to herself, putting down her toothbrush before she stepped into her bedroom.

Draco was already in bed, one arm tucked behind his head, the other resting against the flat of his stomach.

The blanket sat low on his hips, revealing smooth skin and sharp lines, the waistband of his briefs barely visible. He looked up when she entered, eyes finding hers immediately.

She always had thought he was hard to read. And he was when they were around others. But when it was just the two of them, she liked to think she began to hear the thoughts he didn't say. And whatever he was thinking right now... it made her thighs press together without meaning to.

She was left in nothing but a thin cotton camisole and knickers, both suddenly too flimsy for the way he was looking at her. Like she was something worth revering. Or devouring.

He didn't wait for her to properly settle. Instead, he rolled toward her, catching her waist in a secure grip to pull her flush against his chest.

His hand slid beneath her camisole, fingers spreading over the curve of her ribs when his lips brushed the shell of her ear, then drifted lower.

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath. "Hi," she whispered, barely managing the word.

His lips ghosted across her jaw. "Hi."

The kiss that followed was slow and wrecking, his mouth coaxing hers open with unbearable care. His hand ran down along her hip and thigh, guiding her leg over his, aligning their bodies in a way that made her tremble. Every point of contact was lit like a fuse.

She would've made a mess of herself already if not for the tampon, but even that couldn't stop the heat pooling low in her belly, the aching wetness pressed tight and throbbing with every subtle grind of his hips. The pressure of it made her shiver.

His fingers drifted to the edge of her knickers, tracing lazy patterns into her skin. She wanted to move into him, wanted to surrender, but she stilled, breath catching as her forehead pressed against his and her hand pressed against his bare chest to catch his attention.

"I—" Her voice broke the haze. "I'm on my period."

Draco's eyes scanned her face, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

"That's good," he murmured.

Her brows pulled together. "Good?"

He nodded once, his voice dipping lower, impossibly intimate. "Yeah. "Means I haven't knocked you up yet."

Her brows lifted, lips parting before she let out a breathless laugh, shaking her head.

His thumb dipped under the hem of her knickers again, knuckles brushing skin. "I can still make you feel good."

Hermione shivered.

"If you want me to that is," he whispered, teeth grazing her lower lip.

She let out a quiet, helpless sound, her hips rocking forward on their own accord before she pulled them back in an equal measure of hesitation. Nobody had ever... not when she was... did *he* really want to?

For half a breath she was convinced he'd just said it to make her feel better. To be polite.

"You can just tell me," his other hand settled across her lower back, "if and how you want it."

His other hand wandered underneath her top, palm splayed flat across her back, holding her there. Her fingers tightened in the muscle of his shoulder. The friction of his leg dragged hot against the inside of her thigh as she shifted, her own legs unconsciously parting around the shape of his knee.

"I want—" she started, but the words tangled in her throat, catching on the heat blooming through her chest.

His hand slid down between her thighs, still above the thin fabric. He cupped her, fingers firm and his breath catching in time with hers.

"You want me to touch you like this?" he asked, head dipping again to kiss her... slower now, filthier.

Her breath broke against his mouth.

"Yes," she whispered, barely audible.

His fingers pressed more deliberately, rubbing soft, slow circles that made her arch into him without thought. He made her underwear cling to the shape of her. He groaned into her mouth when he caught her swollen clit through the fabric.

"I've missed your pretty pussy," he muttered, his tongue teasing her lips.

She felt the words hit somewhere low and deep, doing something forbidden to her already unsteady pulse. Her hands roamed his back, nails raking lightly, and he sighed against her throat.

"Do you want more?" he asked with a rasp. "Or just this?"

Hermione whimpered, that soft, desperate sound that only came from her when she wanted too much and didn't know how to ask for it. Her thighs shifted wider on instinct, but she hesitated.

She didn't know how to voice what she wanted. More of him, more of this. She just nodded quickly, allowing her lips to crash against his.

And then his hand pulled her knickers to the side, finding and rubbing where a soft string rested just by her clit, turning it into something else entirely. Something obscene. Something brilliant. She sucked in a gasp, eyes fluttering shut as pleasure twisted up her spine.

"Yeah?" He smiled against her lips, the pads of his fingers circling her clit with just the right amount of pressure. "Good?"

Her hips jerked into him at the sound of his voice.

Another circle, firmer this time. "Can you come like this?"

She nodded against him, mouth falling open.

She gasped when he pressed even harder, the friction intense and unbearably good. Her hand flew to his wrist without any real intention of stopping him...just needing something to hold onto aside from his shoulder.

The ache in her back dulled, the tightness in her chest unraveled, and everything narrowed to the rhythmic glide of his fingers and the weight of his body beside hers.

The heat was unbearable, the pressure beautiful. Every pass of his fingers built higher, made her tighter, until she was panting against his mouth, shaking with it.

Her own fingers slid down his stomach, tentative at first in their search. He tensed under her, not in protest, just in quiet anticipation. She nudged at the waistband of his briefs and slipped her hand beneath.

"Fuck," he breathed, looking down between them, resting his forehead against her cheek. His hand never stopped his own rhythm between her legs.

There was an odd newness and vulnerability of letting him touch her like this. Of touching him underneath clothes like they did this for the first time.

He sounded ragged, a smile in his tone. "You're shaking."

"This feels so good." she whispered, breath hitching when he adjusted his rhythm one more time.

His free hand slid to her waist, anchoring her there, grounding her as he pressed. Her hips arched into his hand, the friction somehow *numbing everything else*.

Hermione curled her fingers around him, the cotton of his briefs catching against her knuckles as she began stroking him with a firm grip. He felt like velvet around the veins and hardness.

He groaned into her neck, hips bucking forward, helpless and seemingly unable to control the motion.

“I don’t want to make a mess on your sheets,” he mumbled, voice rough.

“I don’t care,” she cut in, sharp with need. Her eyes were glassy in the dark.

He stared at her, lips parted, breath uneven.

“Are you sure?” he asked, but his hips were still moving. His fingers were still massaging and rubbing, pressing and gliding.

Hermione nodded.

That was all it took.

His mouth was on hers again, hard and messy, teeth scraping her bottom lip as she pulled his cock free and stroked him faster, twisting her wrist at the head to spread the precum for proper lubrication. She felt him twitch in her hand. His fingers sped up too, pressing tighter circles between her thighs, his other hand cupping the back of her neck like he couldn’t bear not to be touching her everywhere at once.

Their breath tangled. Her thighs trembled. He was cursing under his breath, his hips starting to stutter, their bodies grinding in that desperate, ridiculous way that felt like they were seventeen and out of time.

“Oh Draco,” she gasped. “It’s—it’s—”

“Yeah.” He bit the edge of her jaw, teasingly and possessive at once. “I’ve got you.”

The coil inside her snapped with a force that stole her breath. She came with a strangled sob, her thighs locking, caging his wrist in.

Her hand was still curled tightly around him, slick and pulsing in her palm, and when she stroked again, finding her rhythm again, he groaned. Her thumb brushed the tip with a kind of awe that made his jaw clench.

“Wait—fuck—wait,” Draco gasped, his chest heaving, eyes screwed shut. “I’m gonna—”

“Just come,” she whispered, breath hot against his jaw.

And he did. Hard and messy with his body jolting forward with a groan that cracked something in her chest. He came in her fist, across his stomach, like she’d torn the breath out of him and he didn’t want it back.

For a long moment, all they could do was gasp for air.

She reached for the tissues on her nightstand, but he caught her hand gently and took them from her, brushing a kiss to her wrist before cleaning her hand and fingers first, like she was the one who needed taking care of. Only then did he wipe himself off, his half-hard cock still twitching in aftershock.

She watched him, eyes still glazed.

When she handed him another tissue, he groaned and muttered something under his breath as he cleaned the rest of himself.

“You okay?” she asked quietly.

Draco gave a slow blink, eyes still blown and reverent. “Define okay.”

She laughed, breathless and warm, and leaned in to press a kiss to his shoulder.

“You really didn’t mind?”

He looked at her then and pulled her in like he couldn’t bear not to. One arm anchored around her waist, the other drawing slow lines down her spine.

“No,” he said, low and certain. “I didn’t mind. I’d fuck you bleeding, Hermione. Doesn’t bother me.”

Hermione swallowed, her cheek pressed to his chest. His words shouldn’t have made her feel this warm, this wanted...but they did.

Because it wasn’t just the filth of it. It was the fact that he meant it.

“Wouldn’t that weird you out?”

“No,” he said simply.

She thought about it for a moment before she dared to ask, “Have you... done that before?”

“No.”

Before she could read too much into it, he added, “If you ever want to try it with me, we can. But not if you don’t feel comfortable going there.”

“You’re filthy,” she mumbled.

Chapter 18: Ghosts

The old brick building in Surrey was tucked just off the high street.

Hermione spotted Theo before she even reached the door. He was sitting inside the lobby on one of the benches just to the side, legs stretched out carelessly in front of him, elbows resting on his knees. His jacket was half-zipped, headphones hanging loose around his neck. A takeaway cup steamed between his palms. He looked up at the sound of her footsteps, and the quick flick of his eyes to hers made something uncomfortable shift in her chest.

There was an awkward pause.

“Hey,” he said finally.

Hermione tucked her hands deeper into her coat pockets, offering a cautious smile. “Hey.”

“You’re early.”

“So are you.”

Theo’s lips twitched. “Right.” He looked down at his cup, then back up. “You come straight from work?”

Hermione nodded, stepping closer before sitting down beside him on the edge of the bench.

“How was your day?” she asked after a beat, keeping her voice light.

Theo tilted his head as if considering how to answer. Then he exhaled through his nose. “Fine,” he said vaguely. “Meetings. Emails. The usual office drama on Fridays.”

She waited for him to say more, but he didn’t.

Instead, after a short silence, he glanced sideways at her and added slowly, “Anything I should be bracing myself for?”

Hermione glanced at him. “What do you mean?”

He let out a short, dry breath that passed for a laugh. “You know what I mean. Just wondering if I should duck when he walks in. Did you tell him? About... what I said?”

His voice was easy, but the tension underneath it wasn’t. Like he wasn’t sure whether he was joking or actually preparing for a fallout.

Hermione’s expression softened. “Yeah,” she said gently. “I want to be honest with him.”

Theo’s brow arched, but he didn’t look at her directly. He stared at the far wall with his lips pressed into a thoughtful line.

He gave a small nod.

She inhaled slowly. “Are you okay? Are *we* okay?”

He gave a little shrug. “Not about to burst into tears in the middle of an escape room, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Her heart twisted at the sarcasm. “Theo.”

He glanced over, and after a beat, offered a crooked smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I told you, nothing’s changed. We’re still friends. Still not sure what you see in him, though.”

She shook her head, swallowing her nerves, and forced the words out. “Just... Can you not bring it up around the others, okay? We’re keeping it private for now.”

Theo’s reaction was immediate. His eyes narrowed just enough to show his irritation. “Right,” he said coolly. “So that’s his call then?”

Hermione stiffened. “It’s not like that.”

He gave a humorless huff of air, shifting his coffee between his hands. “Sure it isn’t.”

“It’s *not*,” she insisted, sharper than she meant to. “It’s just... we need more time to figure this out.”

He stared at her for a long beat, unreadable.

Hermione opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Shame bloomed hot in her chest for her own foolishness.

And then the door opened behind them with a quiet creak.

They both looked up as Draco stepped inside, his eyes landing on Hermione.

Theo leaned back slowly when he muttered, “Perfect timing.”

Draco didn’t so much as glance at Theo. His gaze locked onto Hermione alone as he stepped inside, unbothered, like Theo wasn’t even there. He reached up, tugged off his gloves with steady fingers, and offered her a faint, familiar look that made something twist low in her stomach.

Theo didn’t hide his scoff, but Draco didn’t bite. He didn’t even blink.

She’d been on the receiving end of his practiced indifference before. Draco had mastered the art of silence as sharp as any insult.

She remembered the way it felt to say something and have him walk right past her like she didn’t exist. Back when they barely spoke. When the air between them crackled with loathing

or worse, nothing at all. And now, watching Theo flinch under that same weightless cold, she felt an unexpected pang.

Her throat felt tight as she stood.

Draco's eyes softened when she stepped toward him, like he could see everything she wasn't saying. The tension in his jaw eased. He looked unfairly handsome with his coat open over a slate-grey jumper, hair just messy enough to suggest he hadn't tried.

"Hey," Draco said as his gaze lingered. "You beat me."

Hermione tucked a curl behind her ear, trying not to look as smitten as she felt by the way he softened for her. "Only by a few minutes."

Draco stepped closer, not touching her, but there was something in the way he looked at her. The smallest twitch of his mouth that suggested something private and claimed. That she was *his*.

Theo looked down at the floor and then pulled out his phone like it had just vibrated, even though Hermione could see the screen was dark. The awkwardness hung in the air, heavy and invisible.

She hated this part, where her heart split between history and heat, between people she cared for in very different, difficult ways.

The door clattered open behind them.

"Hellooooo, losers!" Ginny's voice rang bright against the brick walls of the entryway. Her high ponytail swayed with every step, cheeks flushed and glowing from the cold. She held the remains of a ham sandwich in one hand and a water bottle tucked under her arm.

Blaise strolled in behind her, sunglasses on despite the gloomy, grey afternoon. He looked absurdly stylish in his charcoal wool coat and dark jeans.

"The winning team has arrived," he said smoothly, tossing a nod toward the group. "And you lot look... well, bless your hearts. You tried."

Hermione rolled her eyes just as another pair slipped through the door. Harry and Luna, hands clasped, cheeks just as pink from the chill. They were smiling like whatever chaos existed in the world couldn't touch them.

"Looks like we're all on time for once," Harry said, reaching out to give Theo a friendly nudge as he passed.

Theo, mid-sip of his drink, jolted slightly and nearly lost his balance, catching himself with a hand on the bench.

At the front desk, a young woman looked up from her clipboard with a bright smile and pierced lips. "I just need to have you sign the waivers and run through a few things before we lock you in."

She gave them all a quick once-over, eyes sparkling with practiced enthusiasm. “Once we’ve got team names, I’ll give you the backstory and the room rules. Bonus points if they’re ridiculous.”

Draco, standing close enough behind Hermione that she could feel the edge of his coat brushing her arm, lifted a brow. “Team names?”

Ginny pivoted toward the group, sandwich in her hand half-forgotten. Her eyes lit up like she’d just remembered her life’s purpose. “Okay, who’s with me? We are officially naming our team Puzzle Bitches.”

Luna beamed. “I like that. It sounds like a really cool band.”

Harry looked around with raised brows. “Should we draw teams?”

Hermione nodded. “Definitely.”

From the bench, Theo let out a low chuckle and stood, stretching. “Sure, Harry. You just don’t want to be a Puzzle Bitch.”

The receptionist, who’d been watching them with mild amusement, reached into a drawer and pulled out a clipboard and a blank sheet of paper. “Here. Write down your names, tear them up, and we’ll let fate do the rest.”

Hermione stepped forward, grabbed the pen, and quickly jotted down all their names on the back of a blank waiver sheet. “Here.”

The receptionist tore the sheet into neat slips, folded each one, and dropped them into a glass jar sitting beside the register. She shook it with deliberate flair. “Alright. Team One - three members. Let’s see.”

She drew the first name.

“Ginny.”

Ginny raised both arms like she’d just scored a goal. “Puzzle Bitches, let’s go.”

The receptionist cracked a smile and pulled the next slip. “Luna.”

Luna clapped softly, delighted. “Oh, lovely.”

“And... Blaise.”

Blaise pointed dramatically at the ceiling, as though summoned by divine right.

Draco exhaled next to Hermione.

She allowed herself a faint smile, even as her stomach curled tight. Of course she would end up on the opposite team. Which meant—

“And that leaves Team Two,” the receptionist went on, drawing the final slips of paper with a cheerful grin. “Draco, Theo, Harry, and... Hermione.”

Hermione’s spine straightened a fraction. She glanced toward Theo, who was readjusting the headphones looped around his neck with studied indifference. His jaw twitched, but he didn’t say a word.

Harry clapped his hands together. “Brilliant.”

“You’ll need a team name too,” the receptionist added, handing them a clipboard.

“I vote *Think Tank*,” Harry offered.

Draco didn’t even hesitate. “Absolutely not.”

Theo leaned an elbow on the counter, not bothering to hide his smirk. “What about *Room for Error*?”

Hermione rolled her eyes and snatched the pen. Without comment, she scribbled something down and handed the clipboard back.

The receptionist glanced at it and read, “*Just Here to Beat Blaise*.”

Blaise gasped in mock betrayal. “I thought we were friends, Granger.”

“Don’t take it personally,” Hermione said sweetly.

“Petty,” Draco murmured approvingly. “I like it.”

“Perfect. *Puzzle Bitches* versus *Just Here to Beat Blaise*. You’ll be in separate rooms. Each team will have 60 minutes to solve a series of puzzles and riddles in order to unlock the door.”

Hermione perked up. This part she loved.

“Everything you need to solve the puzzles is in the space, some of them in plain sight, some of them tucked away behind locks you’ll have to figure out.”

“Do we get clues?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” the receptionist nodded. “You get three official clues from staff if you get stuck. Use them wisely. And no brute force please. If you break anything, you automatically forfeit.”

Blaise crossed his arms. “Define *brute force*?”

Ginny elbowed him. “Stop.”

“Once your time is up, if you haven’t escaped, the game ends. If you make it out in time, you win. Fastest team wins bragging rights.”

Luna clasped her hands together. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Her eyes were fixed on an oak door at the end of the long corridor. It loomed like something out of a period drama. A small brass plaque above it read *Langley Manor*.

The receptionist stopped, pulling a small remote from her pocket. "This is where it begins. The rooms are fully immersive with lights, sound, a few moving pieces. Nothing will touch you," she added quickly, "but you might get a few surprises."

Blaise leaned a fraction closer to Hermione, mouth parting like he was about to crack another joke.

"Reminds me of—"

"Each team will be in their own connected space, following clues that may or may not intersect. You have sixty minutes to uncover the truth of what happened to Miss Harrow. Solve the puzzle. Find your way out. Impress me." The receptionist said brightly, pressing a button on the remote. A faint mechanical click sounded behind the door.

Hermione stepped forward first, scanning the dimly lit room. A vintage study, it seemed. Bookshelves lined two of the four walls, an old desk sat near the window, and a locked chest rested in the center.

A faint ticking echoed from somewhere in the room, as if time had already started counting down.

Harry cracked his knuckles. "Alright. Let's go."

Hermione headed straight for the bookshelf, scanning titles for codes or patterns.

Harry crouched beside a chest, inspecting the lock. "Triple dial combination," he muttered. "Could be a date. Or initials."

Theo, up until then leaning like he didn't care, straightened from the desk and squinted at the nearby globe.

Then, overhead, something clicked.

The lights dimmed further, and a soft static crept in from the corners of the room like fog. The speakers crackled.

"Welcome, esteemed guests."

Everyone stilled. Theo, who had been leaning lazily against the desk, straightened.

"You have entered the private study of Miss Genevieve Harrow, a governess of her time. In the autumn of 1876, Miss Harrow vanished without a trace. Somewhere within this room lies the truth. Find it before the hour ends or lose it like the rest of them did."

A faint *ding* sounded, followed by the flicker of a single overhead bulb warming to life. It buzzed like an insect and cast a yellow cone over the desk.

Then silence.

Theo cleared his throat. "Okay, that was a bit dramatic."

"I kind of liked it," Harry said, already moving toward the desk.

Draco hadn't spoken. Hermione glanced over and found him standing utterly still, eyes locked on the paneling along the far wall. He looked wary. Too still, like he was bracing for something that might not come from the room at all.

She stepped closer, whispering. "Are you claustrophobic?"

Draco blinked, his expression tightening as if he was only just realizing he hadn't breathed in a while. "No," he said, shaking his head. "No. It's just—"

His voice trailed off, and Hermione waited.

"This room reminds me of my father's study," he said finally. "Same wood. Same shelves. Same—" he exhaled, "Not the best memories."

Hermione's chest tightened, fighting the urge to reach for him in front of the others.

Draco straightened, gave a small shake of his head like clearing a fog, then nodded once toward Harry. "What've you got, Potter?"

Harry was already walking toward them, brow furrowed as he held something between his fingers. An envelope, yellowed with time, its seal snapped.

"Found it tucked behind the chest over there," he said, offering it out. "Looked like it slipped through the floorboards, but it's wedged between them with purpose."

Hermione took it carefully, unfolding the single sheet inside. The paper felt thin and brittle, as though it might vanish if she breathed too hard. The handwriting was a delicate script, rushed in places, ink slightly smeared in the corners like the pen had trembled.

She read aloud,

"My dearest,

*Sleep eludes me still. I find myself ever haunted by the memory of your voice in the corridor,
your step upon the stair. Your absence presses upon me more heavily than any presence
might.*

*You asked, before you left, whether I repent of the affection we shared. Whether I would see it
undone were I given the chance. I cannot answer simply, for my heart is torn.*

My only sorrow lies in my own cowardice. I ought to have spoken. I ought to have acted. But fear is a ruthless jailor, and I allowed it to bind my hands.

I write now to say that I mean to make this right. I do not yet know how, but I will find the means. If you can bear to wait, oh wait for me.

Yours,

RL”

“Oh, perfect,” Theo muttered. “Secret relationships. Just what we all signed up for.”

Hermione’s stomach twisted but she didn’t dare to look at him. His comment stung, secretly slicing her chest open.

Draco’s voice came too easy. “Struck a nerve, did it?”

Theo didn’t look up. “Not mine.”

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly. “So... RL. L for Langley? He and the governess had a thing?”

Draco crossed the room to stand beside Harry, his gaze dropping to the letter still in Hermione’s hands. “Seems that way.”

Hermione smoothed her thumb over the bottom corner, careful not to tear the edge. “It reads like a promise. Or... an apology.”

Silence reclaimed the room. Even the ticking faded, like the story had been passed to them and the walls were now listening.

Hermione moved toward the shelves, fingers already scanning for titles that didn’t match the rest. She knelt, peering closer.

Across the room, Theo sighed and stepped toward the covered window, tugging the fabric back to reveal blacked-out glass. “Doesn’t seem like our dirty governess wanted to let the light in.”

Draco brushed past him, heading for the old writing desk. His fingers ghosted over the ink blotter, pausing at a narrow drawer.

“Locked,” he murmured.

“Try the other one,” Harry called.

“It’s empty.”

Hermione ignored them, tugging out a worn leather-bound volume. It fell open in her hands, and a folded piece of parchment slipped from between the pages. She caught it midair.

“Got something,” she said, already unfolding it. “It’s a floor plan of Langley Manor. But there’s a note in the margin ‘*meet me where the sun never rises.*’”

Draco stepped closer, reading over her shoulder. “The cellar maybe?”

Their eyes met for half a second, his gaze lingering, something unspoken flickering beneath it before she turned away, pulse quickening.

“Look,” Harry called from the chest again. “There’s an indentation here, like a missing piece.”

Hermione crossed the room and knelt beside him. “Could be a key?”

Draco ran his hand under the desk lip. “Found a switch.” A panel in the side slid open, revealing a second compartment.

Inside was a weathered ledger. Theo reached in before Draco could.

“Seriously?” Draco said flatly.

Theo didn’t respond. He tugged the worn book out, flipping it open with. A slip of yellowed paper fluttered out from between the pages. He snatched it before it hit the ground.

Unfolding it, he read aloud with no emphasis, “*The world isn’t ready to be ours today.*”

He gave a sharp, theatrical scoff. “Christ. Langley was stringing her along. Playing noble while keeping her tucked away like a secret. Classic.”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Or he was protecting what they had. Ever think of that?”

Theo let out a cold laugh. “Right. The poor misunderstood romantic, breaking promises to keep her safe. How original.”

“Maybe don’t project,” Draco muttered, just loud enough to provoke.

Theo’s gaze snapped to him, but before he could speak again, Harry cut in with a baffled glance between them. “You’re pulling all that from a line of ink?”

Hermione turned with a heavy sigh. “He probably had his reasons.”

Harry blinked. “Sorry, what now?”

“Maybe they wanted privacy,” she went on, quieter. “Maybe they weren’t ready to say it aloud.”

Theo muttered, “Or maybe he just didn’t love her enough.”

Hermione’s mouth pressed into a line, sharp with restraint.

That was when Draco moved. A slow step forward, his gaze settling on Theo with the kind of cold precision that made the air shift.

“Alright, Nott,” he said calmly. “You’ve dragged your cynicism all over the furniture. I think we all got it.”

Theo's jaw ticked.

Draco tilted his head, his mouth curling at the edge. “Unless you’re planning to write your own tragic little note and slip it behind a floorboard, maybe shut up and let someone else read the next clue.”

Harry’s eyes darted between the three of them, a puzzle clearly forming in real time that had nothing to do with hidden clues. “Um,” he said slowly “is there a reason everyone’s acting like someone died?”

No one answered.

Hermione’s pulse thudded in her throat. She didn’t know if it was from embarrassment, or fear, or guilt. Probably all three.

She crouched beside the chest Harry had abandoned and opened the smaller drawer beneath it. “We’re wasting time.”

Harry crouched beside her, whispering, “What was *that* about?”

She shook her head once, “I don’t know but it’s annoying.”

She hated lying to Harry. Hated the tension curling like smoke through the room. The knowledge that this was her fault. She’d asked Theo to keep her secret. And now he was unraveling because of it. Because she’d hurt him. Because she hadn’t been brave enough. Because she still wasn’t.

Draco was trying. She could see it in the way he kept swallowing his words, kept still when he wanted to move. But it didn’t change the fact that everything inside her ached with the wish to just reach out and take his hand.

To make it simple.

But nothing about this was simple for her.

She closed her eyes for a breath. One, then another. Then she looked down at the drawer, forcing herself to focus. “There’s something etched inside.”

Hermione leaned closer, tracing her fingertip over the shallow grooves. “Coordinates. Same format as the cipher here.”

Draco finally moved, stepping around Theo. “Let me see.”

Theo didn’t even glance at him, but he stepped back.

Draco crouched, scanning the markings. “It’s not for the desk.”

He stood and moved toward the wardrobe in the far corner, where the wood looked less aged, almost staged. A faint symbol near the hinge matched the cipher's outer ring.

"I think this is it," Draco said, reaching for the latch. "There's a sliding lock on the inside. If I just--"

A sharp *click* echoed.

And then, with a groan of old wood and a sudden *thud*, the door flung open.

A figure crumpled forward out of the shadows, landing hard with a lifeless thump mere inches from Draco's boots. A porcelain-faced doll, dressed in the tattered garb of another century, its limbs grotesquely twisted, fake blood painted beneath the throat.

Hermione gasped, stumbling back into Harry, who yelped.

Theo swore under his breath. "Bloody hell--"

Draco took one sharp step back, grimacing. "Fucking hell. Warn a man."

Harry burst into half-nervous laughter.

"Well," Draco said dryly, straightening his jumper around the neck, "Nothing says eternal love like shoving your mistress in a wardrobe."

That cracked the silence.

Hermione snorted with one hand still pressed to her chest. Even Theo huffed a begrudging laugh through his nose.

"Very romantic," Harry muttered, crouching to inspect the clue tag pinned to the governess's sleeve.

She gave Draco a look when his mouth curved slightly. The tension in the room hadn't vanished completely. But it had fractured into something less cutting.

Even if her heart was still racing from more than just the dead governess.

The next thirty minutes passed in a blur of half-muttered instructions, lock combinations, and the rustle of parchment. Every now and then, the tension surged when Theo rolled his eyes too loudly, or Draco snarled an unnecessary correction, but Hermione kept her head down, determined to push through.

They uncovered a hidden compartment in the desk containing a charred corner of a diary page. Miss Harrow's final entry. Hermione picked it up, reading aloud as they pieced it together.

"The hour is late. I have waited, and yet he does not come. The fire has burned low, and I am grown cold. He swore we would be free beyond the reach of name and obligation. I should not have believed him, and yet I did. Fool that I am, my heart has not learned the

caution my station demands. His brother returned this week. I fear I have become a memory he no longer wishes to hold."

The room was silent but for the sound of her voice.

"Still, I write this so I am not wholly erased. So someone might know that I was here. That I loved and I hoped. That I believed, even when I ought not to have. If he finds this, I forgive him. If someone else does, pray remember me kindly. I have only ever sought to be more than what the world permitted."

Harry took the page from her, skimming the words. "So... she thought he was going to run away with her?"

They all looked toward the scattered evidence around them. Books, pages, keys they'd found, their story laid bare.

"But something happened. His brother came back. Maybe he was under family pressure. He stopped writing. She didn't know why. Maybe he never even meant to stop. Maybe he wasn't allowed to keep writing."

Draco stood near the hearth, arms crossed non-defensively, but like he was thinking.

"She waited anyway," Theo said.

Harry turned toward the wardrobe where the figure of Miss Harrow had fallen. "Then why leave her in that closet? Why not bury her?"

Draco's brow furrowed. "To scare the living shit out of us."

Harry looked to Hermione, quiet now. "So who... killed her?"

Hermione didn't speak at first. Her throat was tight. She looked down at the paper still in her hand.

"She did," she said finally. "She waited, but he never came. And she thought it meant everything she believed in was a lie."

A long pause settled over the room.

Harry just blinked. "That's... dark."

"It's sad," Theo murmured. "That she couldn't just live with the truth instead of dying for the hope of it."

They stood in silence for a beat longer, waiting for the click of the lock to mean something more. But the door didn't swing open.

Theo glanced up. "Was that... not the end?"

Hermione looked around, blinking against the brightness. "We solved it."

“Should we ask for a clue?” Harry asked, eyeing the timer over one of the doors. They only had three minutes left.

“Can we have a clue?!” Theo called louder now, to whomever was watching them.

A low crackle came through the overhead speaker, followed by that same voice from earlier.

*“Not worn by her yet left with her heart.
To find what’s lost, you must go back.
Behind the grief, behind the black.”*

They all stilled.

Hermione looked sharply toward the crumpled governess again.

“What the hell does that mean?” Harry asked, glancing at the others.

Draco's gaze dropped to the body, then to the warped wood of the wardrobe just beyond it. He went for a flash of dark wool behind the lifeless figure’s skirts, half swallowed by shadow.

He stepped forward, crouching low. Hermione followed with slow, careful steps.

“Not hers,” Draco muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

“What?” Theo asked, brows drawing together.

Draco reached past the governess’s stiff arm and tugged free a heavy, charcoal-grey coat. The cut was refined, the fabric far too fine.

“Is it Langley’s?” Hermione asked.

Harry’s brows lifted. “But we thought he never came back?”

“There’s something in the pocket,” Draco said, already fishing inside the lining. He pulled out something slowly.

A card, sealed in red wax.

He unfolded it carefully.

*“Lord and Lady Langley,
You are cordially invited to join us for a fortnight at Westmere Hall beginning the 4th of June.
Rooms have been prepared, and the south wing made ready for your arrival.”*

Harry blinked. “Wait. That’s - he had plans. He was going to take her with him.”

“He came back,” Hermione said, more to herself than to anyone else. “He returned. He invited her. He was preparing a life with her. The card says Lord and Lady Langley. He was going to propose to her.”

Draco kept searching the jacket, fingers brushing the inner lining until they stilled. He pulled out a small velvet box, worn at the edges. Inside, nestled against faded satin, was a ring. Elegant, timeless, and unmistakably meant for the dead body between them.

“But she didn’t know,” Harry mumbled, stepping beside her. “She must’ve thought he wasn’t coming. That she’d been abandoned.”

“She ended her own life,” Hermione whispered, her eyes on the governess’s still figure. “But he came back for her. Just... too late.”

No one spoke for a moment. The ticking had stopped.

And then, with a final click, the exit door unlocked.

Beside her, Draco exhaled slowly and murmured, “To be fair, he *did* tell her to wait until it was their time.”

Theo scoffed. He rolled his eyes and brushed past them all without ceremony. He shouldered the door open, stepping into the corridor. “Finally.”

Harry blinked after him, eyebrows drawn. He shook his head as he stepped into the hallway, still muttering under his breath. “I don’t know what the hell just happened in there, but I feel like I shouldn’t have been witnessing it...”

Draco and Hermione were left alone in the room.

She exhaled hard. “I hated all of that.”

Draco smirked. “Is that so?”

She turned to glare at him, but his expression had softened into something fond.

He nodded toward her once. “You were awesome. Bit bossy - but if that’s your new thing, I could get into it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and swatted his chest, her palm catching the fabric of his jumper and lingering just a second longer than it needed to.

Draco raised a brow, looking a tad too satisfied.

She shook her head with a half-smile and stepped away. By the time they pushed open the lobby door, they were met with smug faces and crossed arms.

Blaise leaned against the wall near the vending machine, waiting to be crowned. “Welcome back, slowpokes.”

Ginny grinned with her arm looped through Luna’s. “Took you long enough. We cracked it in twenty-five minutes.”

Luna gave an innocent shrug. “We had fun. Blaise did all the decoding and Ginny pretended to seduce a painting.”

“I maintain it was *crucial* to the plot,” Ginny said with a wink. “I was looking for clues alright.”

Hermione blinked at them all, a little dazed. Draco stepped up beside her, still looking faintly amused.

“Right,” she muttered, brushing past Theo without looking at him. “I need a drink.”

“Two drinks,” Blaise called lightly after her. “One for me. And one for your wounded pride.”

Theo shrugged his coat on with minimal effort but even less enthusiasm. “I’m heading out,” he said, eyes on the floor. “Rain check.”

Ginny blinked. “Seriously?”

“Early day tomorrow at work,” he only offered a vague lift of two fingers in parting and moved for the door.

“Tomorrow is Saturday!” Ginny called, clearly irritated with his mood.

Harry scratched the back of his neck as the door clicked shut behind Theo. “He was weird the whole time. Probably just got out of the wrong side of the bed.”

As they spilled out into the dusky evening, the group naturally fell into their rhythm. Blaise and Draco hung back in quiet conversation, Luna drifted just ahead humming a half-familiar tune while holding hands with Harry, and Hermione found herself walking side by side with Ginny.

“That bit with the coat,” Ginny said, nudging Hermione’s shoulder. “Luna found it when she was inspecting the corpse five minutes into the game. She was very thorough.”

Hermione laughed, the sound cracking through the chill. “I’m not sure if I liked it or not.”

“Please, you were totally in your element. We all know you love a puzzle.”

Hermione tucked her hands deeper into her coat. “It was sort of brilliant, in that gothic-tragic-literary sense.”

They rounded the corner, the murmur of traffic trailing behind them. Up ahead, the glow of the pub spilled out onto the pavement, windows fogged slightly from the warmth inside. A sign over the door swung gently in the evening breeze.

“Remember when we came here after Luna’s birthday last year?” Ginny said.

Hermione nodded, her shoulder brushing Ginny's. "You tried to start a conga line with three strangers. Poor lads."

They both laughed.

Behind them, she heard Blaise say something that made Draco chuckle. The sound of it curled strangely in her chest.

The pub was full, all low wooden beams and twinkling fairy lights strung across the ceiling. A fire crackled in the far hearth, casting flickering shadows over the stone floor.

Hermione and Ginny found an empty table near the back, slightly tucked away but close enough to the bar to keep an eye on the guys. As they sat, Ginny peeled off her coat with a sigh and flopped into the booth like she'd just run a marathon.

"I'm *starving*," she groaned, twisting to look over her shoulder. "Blaise! Be a gem and get me something to eat too?"

Blaise, halfway to the bar with Harry and Draco, turned and raised both hands in mock surrender. "Chips? A roast dinner? Your usual pint of garlic olives?"

"Surprise me!" Ginny grinned before turning back with a dramatic exhale. "I could eat the table."

Hermione gave her a sideways look, amused. "Didn't you literally finish a sandwich one hour ago?"

Ginny shrugged, unbothered. "Ham sandwich was just the warm-up act."

"You're insatiable."

"Tell Blaise," she said smugly, and Hermione snorted into her scarf.

They both glanced toward the bar. Harry was enthusiastically pointing at something on the drinks board, while Blaise negotiated with the bartender and Draco leaned against the counter, half-listening, half-scanning the room like he'd rather be anywhere else but didn't have the energy to complain about it.

Ginny leaned closer, nudging Hermione's knee under the table. "Hey. You okay?"

Hermione hesitated, fingers tugging gently at the edge of a paper coaster. "Yeah. Just...thinking."

"About the puzzle?"

She shook her head slowly. "Something like that."

Ginny didn't press. Just gave a hum and sat back, eyes twinkling. "Well. Tonight we drink. And eat. And not overthink a single thing."

Hermione smiled, grateful. “Sounds like a plan.”

The guys returned a few minutes later, juggling pints and cider glasses and a tray of crisps already half-demolished. Blaise slid into the booth beside Ginny, bending to kiss her cheek as he set a cider and a folded napkin down in front of her.

“Got you the pulled pork sandwich and chips,” he said, sounding far too pleased with himself. “The kitchen was closing but I used my winning smile. They’ll need a few minutes.”

Ginny muttered a sleepy, “Thank you,” already reaching for her cider and taking a small sip like it might revive her from the dead.

Hermione felt a pint slide in front of her. She looked up to see Draco set it down with a casual movement, then sink into the bench seat beside Blaise across from her. His coat was open now, sleeves pushed back, the warmth of the pub melted the sharp lines of his jaw.

“Thanks,” she said, fingers wrapping around the glass.

Harry took the last seat beside her, Luna curling up next to him with a content sigh. Her legs draped neatly over his lap, and he made no move to adjust them.

The chatter rose again. Something about the escape room turned into a joke about who would die first in a horror movie, and Luna was adamant it wouldn’t be her because ghosts respected her too much.

Ginny pointed at Blaise mid-sip. “He’d be dead in the first five minutes. He’d try to flirt with the murderer.”

“That’s how you find out their motives,” Blaise argued, feigning indignation. “Besides, I’m too charming to kill.”

Draco scoffed into his pint. “Tell that to the governess.”

Blaise grinned, then turned slightly, eyes flicking between Hermione and Draco. “Alright, but what happened with Theo today? He’s been walking around like someone pissed in his cereal.”

Hermione hesitated. The memory of Theo’s cold tone and clipped comments flickered behind her eyes.

Draco didn’t miss a beat. “That’s just his default setting.”

Blaise tilted his head. “Right, but usually it’s dialed to aloof and vaguely amused, not personal vendetta. He barely said a word to either of you. Did something happen?”

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it. The truth prickled just under her skin.

Draco met Blaise’s gaze and shrugged. “He’ll be alright.”

Hermione nodded. “It was just a weird day. Maybe he just needs a reset.”

Blaise studied them for a second longer.

“So, wait,” Harry said, frowning down into his pint at something Luna had said. “You’re all seriously defending Langley? The man told her to wait and then disappeared. That’s textbook ghosting.”

Blaise chuckled. “Except the ghosting ended with an actual ghost.”

Ginny wrinkled her nose. “She still chose to die for it. That’s the bit I don’t get.”

Hermione leaned forward slightly. “She was heartbroken and thought she wasn’t good enough for him.”

Harry nodded, but Blaise was already smirking toward her. “Sounds personal.”

“Everything’s personal when you’re trapped in a windowless room with a corpse,” she muttered under her breath.

Draco’s phone buzzed against the wood of the table. The sound seemed to slice through the conversation.

He glanced at the screen.

Hermione saw the shift happen. His mouth stilled mid-smirk; his posture straightened. He inhaled through his nose, sharp and quiet, as if preparing for something.

“Sorry,” he muttered, already standing. “I need to take this.”

Hermione’s hand stilled around her pint. She watched him slide out of the booth, already raising the phone to his ear before he even reached the door.

She told herself not to listen.

But the pub had gone strangely quiet in that moment, like the world had sensed the tension in her spine and held its breath just for her.

“I haven’t told her yet,” Draco said softly as he pulled open the door.

The words hit her like a slap.

The condensation of her glass slipped against her skin.

I haven’t told her yet.

Her mind surged with possibilities she didn’t want. Her stomach turned over, heart knocking unevenly against her ribs.

Told who what?

The door clicked shut behind him.

It felt like someone had just poured cold water over her nerves, and her thoughts raced toward the ugliest corners of her imagination.

Tiffany. It had to be Tiffany. Had she called again? Was that why he looked like that, why he'd gone so still?

He wouldn't. Not again. Not after everything.

Would he?

She tried to sit still. Tried to keep her face blank. But her body betrayed her. Her knee bounced under the table. Her breath caught and her vision blurred at the edges.

"Tell me that's not her again," Blaise muttered.

Ginny looked up sharply. "Who?"

"Tiff," he said, far too casually. "She terrorized him last weekend."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "Draco's not *that* stupid."

"No," Blaise agreed, tapping the rim of his glass, "but he might still feel guilty. Nostalgia does strange things to men with bad childhoods and good cheekbones."

Hermione didn't speak, her heart clenched so tightly it hurt.

I haven't told her yet.

The words still echoed through her, crawling beneath her skin like something alive.

She knew she shouldn't move. Knew that following him would only make it worse if it *was* her. That it would be the end for them. If he'd lied to her again.

Deep down she knew it could be about anything. His family. Work. It didn't have to be about anything he was hiding.

But her chair scraped backward anyway.

Ginny blinked up. "Hermione?"

"I just need some air," she said, already pushing past.

She left her coat behind her.

The cold would be easier to deal with than the heat under her skin. She could've scorched a snowstorm from the inside out.

Every step toward the door felt like a betrayal of common sense.

She *knew* she shouldn't follow him. Knew how desperate it would look. How wrong it felt to eavesdrop, to need confirmation like this. But knowing didn't stop her legs from moving or

her fingernails cutting into her palms.

Her breath left her in a cloud as she stepped onto the pavement.

Draco stood just beyond the window, back half-turned, phone still pressed to his ear. His words sounded softer now.

“Yes, I know,” he was saying. “Saturday. I’ll come early. Tell him I’ll wear the black one. Just... don’t let him work himself up over it.”

Hermione stopped a few feet away. Her arms wrapped tightly around herself, not for warmth, but to hold something inside from spilling out.

“No, Mother,” Draco sighed. “I’ll let you know.”

The relief came fast and hot, like a tide rushing in too fast to stand against. It left her dizzy. Her throat burned with it.

She’d done him wrong.

He shifted slightly, weight rolling from one foot to the other, then adjusted his stance.

And then he saw her.

His eyes met hers with a flick of recognition at first, and then something warmer lit behind them. The corners of his mouth curved into the softest smile, the kind she never quite saw coming until it was already pulling her under.

Without missing a beat in his conversation, he held out his free hand. Just a quiet gesture, palm turned slightly up, fingers loose in invitation.

Hermione hesitated.

Every of her bones ached with guilt. For doubting and needing to see with her own eyes what her heart should have trusted.

She stepped forward anyway, drawn like always, to the gravity of him.

The moment she was close enough, Draco pulled her in. One firm tug at her waist and she was against him, his arm anchoring her there like she belonged. He didn’t miss a beat.

“Because I haven’t had a chance to ask her yet.”

Her face found the soft fabric of his jumper, and she breathed him in. Clean laundry, and a hint of his cologne. The intimacy of it made her eyes sting.

She just listened.

“He’ll get over it.”

She hated how easily her mind had filled in the blanks and her thoughts twisted inside her like cold hands wringing out a towel.

He hung up a moment later, slipping the phone into his pocket. But before he could speak, she tilted her chin and kissed him. Her hands slid up to the back of his neck, fingers curling into the soft hair just above his collar. He startled slightly, then leaned into her, the kiss deepening as his arms tightened around her.

When they broke apart, his mouth pressed to her temple before whispering. "You alright?"

She wished she could nod and lie, just like she had to lie to everyone else around her. Say yes and move on. But the words stuck in her throat.

"I... followed you," she admitted, barely louder than a whisper. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, I swear - I just... when I heard you say you hadn't told her yet, I-" Her breath stalled. "I thought what if it was her again. And I just...panicked."

His hand stayed warm at her waist.

"I know I need to trust you," she added quickly, guilt pressing hard against her ribs. "But I didn't. I spiraled instead. I'm sorry."

A breath passed. He shifted slightly, brushing her hair back from her cheek, his touch light.

"It's alright," he said evenly. "I guess I deserve that mistrust for last weekend."

Hermione looked up at him, eyes stinging. "You're not mad?"

Draco gave a low exhale that sounded like half sigh, half something like disbelief. "No. I'm not mad. I hate that your mind had to go there, but... I get it."

The silence between them was softer now, but still laced with something unfinished.

Hermione gave a quiet breath, letting her forehead rest against his chest for a beat. Then, slowly, she looked back up.

"Can I ask you something?"

His gaze was immediate. "Of course."

She hesitated, pressing her lips together before speaking. "Are you really okay with us? With keeping this from them?"

Draco's brow furrowed slightly. "You mean... tonight?"

"I mean in general," she clarified. "Hiding this - us. Pretending we're just... friends who occasionally make biting eye contact and vanish from the table at the same time."

A ghost of a smile tugged at his mouth, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Is that what we're doing now?"

Hermione sighed. "I don't know."

Draco studied her face for a long beat.

"Do you *want* to tell them?" he asked quietly.

She looked down. "I don't know. I think I do, but the way Theo behaved today made me wish he hadn't found out."

"I'm okay with waiting," he said simply.

Her eyes lifted to his. "Really?"

He dipped his chin, something gentle and resolute in the motion. "I want you to be sure."

Hermione's chest pulled tight, but not in fear this time. It was something warmer. Something that made her want to lean in and bury her face in his neck.

Draco leaned down to murmur near her ear, "You know I'd go public tonight if you asked me to, right?"

She didn't pull away. Not even when he rocked her slightly in his arms, like he could tell she wasn't quite ready to let the moment end.

"I'm scared to tell them," she admitted finally, voice muffled against his jumper.

Draco didn't respond right away. His hand came back up instead, smoothing down her hair, then cupping her cheek to tilt her face toward him.

"Why?"

She hesitated. "Because... I think it'll change things."

He studied her, thumb tracing just beneath her eye. "It will."

Hermione swallowed. Her heart was thudding hard. Not with panic anymore, but with the weight of everything.

"It would make it real," she murmured. "More secure, maybe. But also... more exposed. And I'm not sure I know how to do this right. Not with everyone watching."

Draco's brows drew together slightly, but his voice stayed calm. "Who says there's a *right* way?"

She gave a weak laugh. "Everyone. Probably."

"Well," he said, his mouth tugging at one corner, "everyone's an idiot."

That startled a breath out of her. Not quite a laugh, but something close.

"I just don't want to ruin it," she said softly.

His eyes didn't leave hers, but he kept quiet.

"Wouldn't it be weird?"

He hummed. "Which part?"

"We haven't even talked about what a real relationship would look like for us," she said softly.

Draco's mouth pressed into a line. "Would it be so different from what we're doing now?"

His words hung between them, gentle but weighted.

She shifted slightly in his arms, not pulling away, but not quite settling either. "I don't know," she admitted. "Maybe not. But also, maybe yes?"

He gave a quiet breath of amusement, something dry and fond. He nodded once, like he understood that without needing to pry it open. "Well, I want it either way," he said simply. "I want *you*. Complicated, public, quiet, whatever it ends up being. I'm already in it."

Hermione's chest tightened. The way he said it like it wasn't even up for debate.

Draco gave a small breath of a laugh, more exhale than anything else. "Honestly, part of me thinks it might be easier to just rip the plaster off. Walk back in there and get it over with. Let them stare."

She held her breath, "If I said I wanted to tell them tonight... how would we even do that?"

He looked at her for a long moment, then let his fingers drift down her spine like he was grounding her.

"We could just walk in holding hands," he said. "Without making a big deal out of it."

Hermione blinked up at him. "That's your big plan?"

He shrugged. "Would you like me to give a speech to them?"

Her smile faltered with that suggestion, but she didn't let it slip entirely. The knot in her stomach was still there, tight and pulsing. This wasn't just a joke, not anymore.

She stared at his chest for a second, at the crease in his jumper where her hand had curled earlier. "So we just... walk in and let it be obvious?"

His hand pressed a little firmer at the small of her back. "We don't owe them an announcement, Hermione. We just stop pretending we don't exist like this."

Her heart clenched.

He said it with such quiet certainty, as if the risk didn't shake him the way it shook her. Maybe it didn't. Or maybe it did, and he simply carried it better. But as she looked at him,

felt the warmth of his hand on her body, she realized it didn't matter.

Because if this thing between them broke...if it unraveled under the pressure of judgment, her world would end either way.

They wouldn't just lose what they had now. She'd lose the friendship, the closeness, the one person who had begun to make her feel alive. And it wouldn't make it any easier if they called it something else. If they stayed in the dark. If they waited.

She was already in too deep.

That was the truth of it, whether they said it aloud or not.

Hermione looked up at him again, breath uneven. "I think I want to do that."

Draco watched her closely, then smiled honestly. "Alright."

Her fingers slipped into his. His thumb brushed along the side of hers, and then he lifted their hands slightly, like he needed to see it for himself. The soft clink of his rings shifted as he turned her palm just enough to press his mouth lightly to the back of it.

The metal of his rings was cool against her skin, his grip warm and certain. Then he let their hands fall back between them.

Draco stepped forward first, still holding her hand. He reached for the door with his free one, fingers brushing the worn brass handle, and glanced down at her with a soft sort of calm that made her stomach twist. He wasn't worried at all. This wasn't a leap for him. Like walking into that room with her hand in his would be the most natural thing in the world.

He pushed the door open.

Spilled laughter hit her immediately, then the clinking glasses.

Their table was just ahead. Ginny was laughing, her head thrown back in a way that made Luna smile wider. Blaise gestured with a chip in one hand, saying something smug across the table. Harry had his arm draped over Luna's shoulders, completely at ease.

And none of them were looking. Not yet.

Draco stepped forward, tugging her gently into motion beside him.

Their hands were still linked firmly.

Each step forward made her chest tighten. Not because she didn't want this. She did. But because everything in her screamed that the second it became real, it could go wrong. Publicly.

She could already hear the questions, the teasing, the shift in dynamic. Ginny would be supportive, of course. What if she'd be disappointed that Hermione hadn't told her properly? She'd *look* at Hermione differently. Blaise would say something cruel just to get under their skin. Harry would be worried, just like Theo was worried for her behind the hurt. And they knew Draco way better than she did, didn't they? That part terrified her most.

And what if it all fell apart? What if she made a fool out of herself? It had only been a few weeks... intense weeks, but was it necessary to announce it so soon? Did Draco want kids one day? What if Draco stopped being patient with her spiraling. What if he couldn't deal with her anymore? What if a real relationship didn't fix the fear she still carried? What if she could never truly trust him or herself? Would she do him right then?

What if they ruined the one thing that had been holding her together these past few weeks?

A few steps from the table, her body moved before her mind caught up.

Her hand slipped from his before anyone could see the tragic unfolding.

Draco stopped.

The warmth of his palm disappeared so fast it made her dizzy. Her fingers curled reflexively at her side as if to hold onto the shape of him, but it was too late. She didn't look up at him. Her face burned. Her legs felt stiff with shame.

She took a step to the side to bring more space between them.

Draco stood there for a moment longer, motionless in the narrow aisle of the pub. His hand hovered slightly before he dropped it, flexing it once like he didn't understand what had just happened.

Then his jaw clicked tight, and without a word, he kept walking.

When they reached the table, Hermione slid into the empty space beside Harry, her hands pressed between her thighs, face turned downward.

Draco took the bench across from her, next to Blaise, and dropped into it like his spine had been replaced with iron.

Ginny looked up. "Oh, there you are."

Hermione smiled or at least, she thought she did. It felt paper-thin.

Draco didn't touch his drink, didn't join the new round of conversation, or looked at her again. His expression stayed neutral. But Hermione could see how still he'd gone. How his gaze drifted toward the wall behind Blaise like he was somewhere else entirely.

Hermione's gaze fell to the tabletop.

Why had she done that? What was wrong with her?

He had *offered*. So simply. So gently. To walk in hand in hand. To let the moment speak for itself. And she had *wanted* that. She had wanted it so badly she could still taste it.

But when it came to the edge, when they were standing right there, fingers laced and hearts bared, she had *flinched* like a coward.

He'd been way too good to her. He was her *governess*, giving her the space she hadn't earned. She was *Langley* in her story.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek until it hurt.

Because what signal had she just sent? That *he* wasn't worth being brave for?

She'd let him down and she didn't know how to take it back.

Her gaze drifted toward him carefully, but he was already looking away like he couldn't bear to meet her eyes, or worse, didn't want to anymore.

Chapter 19: Mirrors

Hermione stood on the platform with her coat collar pulled up against her chin, but it didn't help. The chill wasn't from the wind.

It was from the way his hand had hovered, just for a second after she'd pulled away.

His shoulders had gone incredibly still at the table while the others talked around them. The memory of it haunted her already.

Hermione stepped onto the train and slid into a far corner seat, tucking herself against the wall like she could disappear into it. Her reflection in the opposite window was faint and unkind. Puffy eyes, lips pressed too tightly together, expression strained.

She wanted to cry but held it in. Surrey was too full of people who didn't know that her heart had cracked open quietly, like a porcelain cup in the back of a cabinet. Ruined in a way no one would notice unless they looked too closely.

Her flat was quiet when she got in. She didn't bother with lights. Just kicked off her shoes in the dark and left her coat on the floor.

She walked straight into her bedroom, pulled off her jeans, and climbed under the duvet still in her sweater and socks. The sheets were too cold, and she didn't even try to warm them. She just lay there on her side, staring at the far wall in the dark.

Draco hadn't called or texted. Of course he hadn't. She had humiliated them both.

Hermione pressed her hand flat against her chest, trying to soothe the pain from her pounding beneath it.

Maybe her *not being enough* wasn't the problem after all, she thought. Maybe she was just too much to bear. Too much feeling. Too many tangled thoughts. Too many fears she didn't know how to swallow before they came spilling out.

A painful sob crept up her chest, shaking her entire body before the tears followed.

She'd cry herself to sleep like that. Curled in the dark, grieving a loss that hadn't happened yet, but already felt real. There was no way they could recover from this. That he would have the patience to deal with her dramatic spirals, not after tonight. It felt like she had betrayed him deeply, had pushed too far.

She shouldn't even be this broken. Not when she'd grown up in a house with parents who tucked her in at night and packed her lunch and asked about her day. She hadn't been abused. She hadn't been abandoned. There was no gaping wound to point to in her early childhood to justify her irrational fear.

But as her mind went there, she felt like something in her had cracked wide open. She still didn't know how to be loved without flinching.

Still didn't know how to believe it. This wasn't new. The fear had always been there. She could trace it back if she let herself slip far enough.

Back to Callum. The first boy who'd ever looked at her like she was something worth wanting.

She'd been seventeen... bookish, bright and a little too proud of raising her hand before anyone else. Her teeth still too big for her mouth, her hair a halo of unruly curls no product could tame. But Callum had smiled at her like none of that had mattered. He'd told her she was pretty, and something about the way he'd said it made her stomach knot and her chest bloom with something dangerous and new.

For weeks, he'd made her feel seen. Courted her with charm and those late-night texts that had made her blush under the covers. He'd wait outside her last period just to walk her home. His hand had brushed hers once, and she'd thought about it for days.

And then one Friday night, in the dim warmth of his tiny room that smelled of cheap aftershave and laundry detergent, he'd kissed her. Fumbled fingers and nervous breaths, and the first ache of longing that made her say yes even though her hands trembled. She'd given him everything that night. Her first.

And then Monday had come.

She could still hear Callum's voice, cocky and distant, floating out from the open classroom door before she'd had the chance to step inside.

"Told you I could get in her knickers before mocks. Took, what –three weeks?"

Laughter erupted that was only ever about someone else's humiliation.

"You're serious?"

"Swotty-Chompers?"

"Mate, she's got great tits though. All perky and proper like she didn't know what to do with them. Didn't even have to try that hard. She was fucking desperate."

More laughter.

"Moaned like she'd never been touched – 'please, Callum,' like that."

She hadn't gone in. Just stood frozen in the hallway, spine rigid, breath caught like glass in her throat. Their words had sliced through her, over and over. And some part of her had always known she wasn't the kind of girl boys really liked. Just the kind they dared each other to toy with.

Still, years later, on a bed too soft for the hardness in her chest, Hermione curled in on herself now at the vivid memory. Like a bruise she'd pressed too hard. Her arms wrapped tight around her knees as if she could hold herself together by force.

She sobbed, soundless at first, then sharp and shuddering. For that girl in the hallway. For the way she'd laughed when Callum texted her goodnight. For how desperately she'd wanted it

to be real.

And for the echo of their laughter, still loud in her ears, like it had never stopped.

She'd hidden in the girls' bathroom that day.

Not the nice one on the upper floor; but the dingy one near the science labs, where the tap always dripped and the mirrors were clouded with age. She'd locked herself in the last stall and sat on the closed lid, her face buried in her arms, trying to sob as quietly as she could. Her whole body ached. Humiliation had soaked into her skin like a second layer, and no matter how hard she cried, it wouldn't come off.

"Are you okay in there?"

"I heard what happened."

"Callum's a fucking tosser."

"I'm Ginny," the strange girl had said. "Ginny Weasley."

That was how their friendship had started. Not with shared interests or laughter or even kindness. But with ruin and the quiet, seething promise that no one would ever make Hermione feel that small again.

Of course, the irony wasn't lost on her now.

Because the first boy Hermione had ever truly *considered* letting close after that had been Ginny's own brother.

Ron.

She'd been nineteen and had crushed on him for years without admitting it to anyone, thinking it was silly, thinking *he* would never notice *her*. But then he had. And at first, it had felt like a miracle, like someone had finally seen her. He'd made her laugh and had called her beautiful.

They'd had fun. Real fun.

Until one day he said kindly he thought they should see other people.

She always had loved boys who didn't love her. And when she looked back on it all now, lying curled on her mattress in a flat she could finally call her own, she felt foolish. Like she had spent a decade handing out little pieces of herself to people who had never planned to stay.

Or maybe she felt foolish because none of these people had anything to do with Draco. Because Draco had been nothing but good to her since they'd seen each other from a different side that night in the hospital.

He hadn't laughed behind her back, not even when they had hated each other. He hadn't treated her like a dare, or a punchline, or something to win and discard.

And she had pulled away from *that*. Because somewhere inside her, some broken, sharp-edged voice still whispered that it wouldn't last. That she couldn't possibly be the girl someone chose on purpose.

But Draco *had* chosen her. Again and again. In silence and in small ways that had never demanded anything in return until tonight.

And she was tired of listening to the voice that made her flinch from love every time it got too close.

The light was grey when she opened her eyes.

Not bright. Not golden. Just that cold sort of morning where everything felt suspended.

Like the world hadn't quite decided whether to keep turning.

Hermione blinked at the ceiling, but didn't move. Her limbs felt heavy beneath the duvet. Her sweater had twisted around her torso during the night.

Her phone was on the pillow beside her. She glanced at it with a flick of her eyes, then looked away. She really didn't want to know if he'd texted.

And she didn't want to know if he hadn't.

Because either way, it would mean something. And she didn't feel ready to face meaning just yet.

She rolled onto her side, the sheets twisting with her, and let her gaze fall to the windowsill. The glass was misted faintly from the warmth inside and the chill pressing in from beyond.

And the slow realization that she might've broken the only thing that had ever truly been serious about her...

Hermione closed her eyes again, curling deeper into the duvet like it might somehow shield her from the shame. But it was right there, lurking and judging her foolishness.

The guilt beneath it all pulsed like a bruise.

Her eyes were gritty, sore from the tears that had dried half-absorbed by the pillow still damp beneath her cheek. Her head ached dully, not from alcohol but from reliving memories she didn't like to touch.

For a moment, she simply lay there, suspended in that fragile space between sleep and waking, when the body remembered before the mind caught up. Her chest already felt tight. Her stomach was already hollow.

Her fingers searched blindly for her phone on the pillow, the screen lighting up at her touch before her vision had fully focused.

No new messages.

She shouldn't have expected one. But something in her chest still wilted as she faced reality.

Hermione lay there a little longer, the phone balanced against her chest, the ghost of his expression still haunting the back of her mind. That hurt, quiet look in his eyes when she'd pulled away. The confusion he'd tried to mask. The stillness that had said more than words ever could.

And he hadn't chased her.

He had always chased her. When she was hurting, when she was stubborn, when she was too afraid to say what she really meant. He'd followed her out of pubs and into bedrooms, sat with her insecurities and hurt, never asking for more than she was willing to give. And selfishly enough she'd enjoyed that.

Until last night. Until she'd made him feel like he wasn't worth being brave for.

Hermione sat up slowly, pushing her curls back with both hands. The ache behind her eyes throbbed with renewed clarity, but she didn't fight it.

Because it wasn't just about last night. It was about everything she hadn't said. Everything she hadn't let herself believe.

She'd told him she wasn't ready, how scared she was to face reality and then pushed it away when it had mattered most.

She'd told him she wanted this and then the moment it asked anything of her, she'd panicked again. She had crushed his spirit that had offered itself with nothing but quiet devotion.

Because somewhere inside her, that ancient, cruel voice still whispered that she couldn't have the love he offered her.

She had ruined many things in her life. She knew how quickly something fragile could turn.

But Draco wasn't fragile. And neither was what they had, no matter how often she tried to tell herself that. Not if she treated it like it mattered. Like *he* mattered. She had used that excuse to justify her own fears. To not give too much of herself.

Hermione forced herself to get out of bed and padded into the kitchen on sore feet, eyes scanning the room without a purpose.

She exhaled shakily, then glanced at the fridge where she'd stuck a list yesterday morning: *Groceries, lease renewal, pick up dry cleaning.*

None of those things felt urgent anymore.

She opened a note on her phone and started typing, then deleted the draft.

She didn't want to send a message. She didn't want to hide behind a screen and hope he deciphered her meaning. She wanted to see him. To apologize properly. To tell him not just that she was sorry but *why* she had pulled away. What she was so afraid of and wanted anyway.

And maybe... to ask if she could still have it. If he'd still let her try.

Because she *did* want this. She wanted him.

Even if she was terrified and too much and not enough at the same time.

Because it was him.

She needed to fix this. To reach back through the brittle silence she'd left behind and find the version of herself that had been brave enough to reach for him in the first place.

But she couldn't go to him like *this*. Still tangled in last night's sweater with puffy eyes. Her hair was a mess and her skin unusually pale.

If she was going to show up and stand in front of him and ask him to forgive her, then she wanted to at least *look* like the version of herself who deserved to be loved.

She stepped into the shower and turned the water hotter than usual, letting it run over her like maybe it could wash off the shame and the panic. The version of her who still couldn't believe someone like Draco could really want her.

She shampooed twice, shaved everything and spent far too long staring at the condensation-streaked tile before she stepped out and towel-dried her hair.

Back in her room, she stood in front of her wardrobe for nearly ten minutes, fingers grazing hangers like they might hold answers.

She wanted to wear something that might remind him of the girl for which he'd pulled over at the side of the road to kiss her properly. The one he had undressed and touched in the backseat of his car. The one who'd whispered his name with trembling awe as he touched her like she was something sacred that first night they had slept with each other.

She finally settled on the same sweater she'd worn at their first real date where they'd gone for lunch and they'd spend hours on the lake, ankles touching with his hand on her knee.

She didn't text him, not willing to give him the chance to say no before she'd even tried. Her curls had dried into soft waves, no makeup but a swipe of lip balm and a spritz of the perfume she thought he liked.

Maybe he wouldn't answer the door. Maybe he'd tell her to leave.

Maybe she deserved that.

But she showed up. With her heart in pieces and her palms damp inside the sleeves of her coat. The walk from the station felt long. Every step echoed her own doubts. Every shadow cast by the morning sun felt sharp and unforgiving.

She stood in front of his building just after ten, the ache in her chest making it hard to breathe. The city hurried around her. Cars, birds, the distant laugh of a child from a nearby park. All so normal.

Hermione stared up at the brick exterior for a moment longer, then stepped closer, lifting her hand toward the silver button beside the intercom. She hesitated.

What if last night *had* been the end?

The little black camera lens above the intercom caught the light. Hermione forced herself to look past it, angling her face away slightly, as though not meeting its eye might soften the truth of her being there. She lifted a hand, fingers stiff with tension and pressed the button before she could change her mind.

A shrill buzz rang into the silence.

And then nothing.

The seconds stretched out. Long enough for shame to keep blooming in her chest, for the nausea to swirl again in her stomach. She stared at the door, wondering if he was watching her right now.

The buzzing of the door lock startled her, but she didn't hesitate. Not because her nerves had settled but because stopping now would be worse. Pausing would mean rethinking, and rethinking would mean retreat. And if she turned away now, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to come back.

The entryway was cool, the scent of detergent and metal and something floral lingering in the still air. She closed the door behind her gently and turned toward the staircase without even glancing at the lift.

She couldn't bear the silence of an elevator with the illusion of time standing still. She needed motion. She needed to climb.

So she took the stairs. Her boots were a dull rhythm against the concrete, her fingers trailing the rail for balance even though her legs weren't tired. Each step became a form of penance.

By the third flight, her lungs were tight, but not from exertion. More like as if she exhaled too sharply the air might shatter around her.

And when she turned the next corner, she saw him.

Draco stood in the open doorway like something carved from tension itself, arms folded tightly across his chest as though his own body might betray him if he let it go slack. The

black t-shirt clung to him in places she knew well by now, stretched just slightly at the sleeves where his arms, tense and unmoving, flexed beneath cotton.

His grey sweatpants hung low on his hips. But none of that mattered. Because his eyes... those eyes she had fallen into without meaning to, met hers across the corridor and didn't look away.

Neither of them said a word.

She stopped a few paces away.

The silence hung between them like a thread stretched to breaking.

"Hi," she said, barely more than breath.

His voice, when it came, scraped through the quiet like gravel. "Hey."

Her heart twisted at the sound.

"I should have called," she said, her voice faltering as her fingers dug into the edge of her coat. "I know I should have. But I couldn't. I couldn't think straight. I just... I needed to see you."

He didn't flinch. Only said, "I wanted to see you last night."

She looked down, a new wave of shame flooding her cheeks. For a moment, all she could do was nod.

"I know," she said softly. "I pulled away from you last night, and you didn't deserve that."

Draco hadn't moved, but she could see the way he bit his tongue.

She took a careful step closer, like she wasn't sure if he'd let her come any nearer.

"I want this," she said. This time, she meant it. "I want *you*. Not in secret. Not just when it's easy. And I know I need to work on why I react the way I do. I want to be better."

After a long pause, he shifted just enough to step aside.

"Come in," he muttered.

The breath she hadn't realized she was holding escaped her lungs in a jagged shudder as she stepped inside. The door clicked behind her with a softness that echoed too loud in her ears.

Hermione hovered just inside the flat, the noises of the city barely filtering through the closed windows. Her heart had dropped somewhere in the hallway.

He didn't offer her tea. He didn't touch her hand. He didn't ask how she'd been.

He just walked back through the kitchen and sank down on the edge of the sofa, elbows on his knees, hands clasped like he was holding a prayer.

She followed and lowered herself into the armchair across from him, knees brushing the fabric like she didn't quite belong there.

He didn't look at her for a while. But when he did, his expression nearly undid her.

"I don't know what else I'm supposed to do with you," he said. "I've tried to be patient and give you space. I've let you set the pace on everything because I know this is terrifying for you. I know you don't trust people easily."

Hermione's hands clenched in her lap, her throat closing. She didn't interrupt him. She wouldn't have known how.

"But last night—" He broke off and dragged a hand through his hair like he did when he was frustrated. "Last night felt like a slap I saw coming and didn't move out of the way for. And I still don't know what happened."

Draco shook his head, eyes burning into hers. "Why did you say you wanted to tell them when you clearly weren't ready?"

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"You *said* you wanted to. You told me that before we went back inside. Did you just say that because you thought it would make me happy or something?"

She shook her head, barely. It didn't matter. The hurt was already bleeding between them.

"No—"

"Did I push too hard? Because *fuck*, Hermione, I'm replaying the entire evening in my head over and over again and I can't figure it out."

Hermione blinked hard, trying to clear the unmistakable sting building behind her eyes. Her voice caught before she could hold it back.

"No," she managed. "You didn't push me. I—" Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. "I panicked. That's the truth. I panicked because it felt real. Too real. And I... I didn't know how to hold it without breaking it."

Draco let out a slow breath, his jaw tight. "So you broke it preemptively. Just in case."

The words weren't cruel. That was the worst part. They weren't angry, or sharp, or even bitter. They were tired. Like he was just too damn worn out by her drama to be anything else.

Hermione looked down at her hands. They were clenched tightly in her lap, nails biting into the skin of her palms.

"I've never felt this," she whispered. "Not like this. Not where it matters so much that I can't breathe through it. And I know that's not an excuse. I know it's selfish to make you the casualty of my fear. But I didn't lie to you when I said I wanted to tell them. I meant it. I *do* mean it."

He didn't respond. He just sat there, gaze dropping and unbelieving.

She pressed forward gently, the words trembling but certain. "You have to believe me that it's not you I'm doubting. It's me. It's whether I can be the kind of person you can actually build something with."

He looked back up at her. And the quiet devastation in his face nearly broke her clean in half.

"You think I'm not scared too? That I'm just—what? Immune to all of this? That I haven't had to talk myself down a dozen times a day since the first night you kissed me?"

Hermione's chest caved with guilt. The tears came too fast for her to hide them this time.

"I just—," she whispered, wiping at her cheeks roughly with the back of her hand, her fingers shaking. "I saw everyone sitting there and I thought—I thought about how disappointed Ginny would be that I hadn't told her earlier. And then Theo's behavior at the escape room—the fact that everybody will be watching when we don't work out—"

Draco's expression hardened. "When," he repeated flatly.

He didn't need to raise his voice for her to get the disapproval pouring from him.

"That's where your head goes? Not *if*, but *when*?"

Hermione's breath stuttered. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes, *you did*." He leaned back, folding his arms tightly over his chest like he was physically shutting her out. "You meant it enough that it came out before you could stop it."

She sat frozen, mouth half open, shame rising like heat beneath her skin.

"You think I don't have those same voices in my head?" he said, quieter now, but no less strained. "You think I don't wonder how long we've got before one of us screws it up beyond repair? But the difference is that I still show up. I still fucking try. Even when it terrifies me."

Hermione looked down at the rug. She didn't know what else to do. Her throat was tight with too many words and none of them seemed like enough.

"You're already bracing for the fall," Draco continued, not harshly but with something more close to resignation. "Like the best part of this is already over and now it's just a matter of time. That's a countdown."

She shook her head, but the motion was shaky, her lip trembling despite the war she waged with her own face not to fall apart. The tears stung. "I'm sorry. I know how that sounded. I just... I've never had something like this. I don't know how to believe it's real. That you could really want me. Not all of me."

Draco's jaw clenched, and for the briefest second, something sharper flickered beneath his frustration. A heartbreak that had grown tired of being polite. "Then believe it," he said. "Or

don't. But I can't keep dragging you behind me like I'm the only one trying to make this work. I can't keep pulling you back every time you start talking yourself out of wanting me."

The words didn't explode between them. They landed heavy like a stone in water because they were true.

She finally met his eyes, her fingers brushing the salt from her cheeks. "You haven't been dragging me. I swear you haven't. I'm the one dragging myself."

Draco didn't respond right away. He rubbed a hand over his jaw roughly, like he was trying to scrub out the ache from inside his own skin. And then his shoulders shifted, subtly, as though something had begun to splinter under the weight of it.

When he spoke again, it was softer. Like he couldn't quite believe the question still needed to be asked.

"Do you even want to be with me?" he asked. "Really?"

The words hit her like wind against an open wound. Hermione's whole body jerked under the weight of them. "Yes," she said, immediately, but it came out broken like a plea. A truth dragged from the bottom of her ribs.

For a long moment, he simply breathed, shallow and quiet, his face barely holding together whatever war was playing out inside him. And then she saw the flicker of something breaking loose. The shimmer behind his lashes, the single tear that gathered at the corner of one eye like a traitor.

But he blinked it back before it could fall.

And that, more than anything, undid her.

She wanted to fall to her knees. To hold his face in her hands and promise that she wouldn't run again. That she could be brave. That he hadn't made a mistake trusting her.

He inhaled slowly through his nose. "Okay," he said at last. The word rasped like it scraped the inside of his throat. "Then let's talk about it."

Hermione blinked, startled by the way her ribs ached at the sound of it.

"I've spent so much time trying to give you space," Draco continued, leaning forward, elbows braced on his knees again as his eyes lowered. "Being patient, pretending I'm fine when I'm not because I thought that's what you needed. But the truth is, I've been avoiding my own mess. I've been so afraid that the moment I show you the worst of me, you'll leave. That I won't even get a chance to explain."

He lifted his head then, just enough to meet her gaze.

"And the thing is," he said, quieter now, "you asked me to let you in. But every time I've stood at that threshold, something in your eyes tells me you're already halfway out the door."

Draco stayed quiet for a long moment, like he was weighing whether he could risk saying more. Then his eyes lifted, steady but cautious.

“You asked me,” he said, “to let you in.”

Hermione nodded so carefully like she was afraid to make him rethink his words.

The breath caught in her throat.

He swallowed. “I want to let you in. I *do*. I want to show you the parts of me I’ve spent a decade keeping behind locked doors. But if I do that, and you flinch? If you pull away when it finally gets hard?”

His voice cracked. He looked down. “I don’t know if I can come back from that.”

Hermione’s heart lurched, a visceral twist in her chest that made it so hard to breathe or think, to do anything but listen as the man she had fallen in love with unraveled slowly in front of her.

“I don’t mean the polished stuff,” he added, his words catching slightly. “Not the curated bits I use to get through dinner with my father, or the stories I let Tiffany believe because they were easier than the truth. I mean the real shit. The things I’ve spent years ignoring. The anger I’ve never known what to do with but bury.”

His hand went to the back of his neck, rubbing hard like the motion alone might keep him tethered to the room.

“There are things I haven’t told you,” he admitted. “Not because I don’t trust you. But because I don’t know how to talk about them. And the truth is, I’m afraid if you see me like that, you’ll look at me differently.”

Hermione opened her mouth, ready to say anything, but he lifted a hand, not to silence her, but to finish something he had started.

“I’m not asking you to promise me forever,” he said. “But I need to know that when you see bits I’ve kept behind every locked door I could find, you won’t run. That you won’t flinch or mistake silence for secrets.”

His voice dropped further, as though speaking was costing him more than he could afford.

“Because if I let you see everything,” he whispered, “every dark, splintered, unforgivable piece of me—and then you walk away? I don’t think I’d survive that. Not this time.”

Hermione’s chest caved under the weight of it. Her fingers curled into the armrests of the chair as silent tears slipped down her cheeks. She wanted to reach for him. To bridge the distance he was holding like a lifeline.

“I know I’ve been slow to open up,” he continued. “It’s because I don’t know how to hand over the most fucked-up parts of myself to someone who still looks like they’re trying to decide whether or not to stay.”

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It throbbed.

"I want to let you in," Draco said again, and this time it came steadier, anchored in something deeper. "But I need to believe you won't disappear the second I do."

Hermione blinked up at the ceiling, as if the tears would stop if she could just keep them from spilling. But they fell anyway, hot and persistent, her breath coming in short, shuddering bursts.

Draco leaned back slightly, voice thick now, as though he hated how much it trembled. "I'm not shutting you out. Please don't hear it like that. I'm not giving up. I'm just—I'm trying to speak the things I've always told myself not to say to you just yet. I'm trying to draw the lines where I need to, before I lose myself in trying to be whatever version of safe you think I am."

He exhaled through his nose, the sound sharp and almost self-mocking. "My therapist would probably hand me a fucking trophy right now."

Hermione let out a wet, shaking breath that tried to become a laugh but broke in the middle. Her chin crumpled.

"You should keep her," she managed although it sounded like she had been scraped across gravel. "Your therapist. She's doing really good work."

Draco huffed out a breath, something close to a smile ghosting across his mouth. But it didn't reach his eyes.

She shifted in her chair, sleeves dragging across her cheeks as she tried to clean her face, even though there was no point. The damage was done. She was already laid bare.

"You're so brave," she said quietly. "And I hate that I've ever made you feel like you have to hold back to make me feel better about myself."

His eyes flicked up at that, and she held his gaze despite the blurry vision. It was like a dam had broken and she wasn't quite sure how to breathe through that.

"I know I've got my shit," she swallowed. "Believe me, I'm well aware. I spiral, I overthink, I flinch at my own thoughts. I'm screwed in the head in about ten different ways, and I know that. And maybe... maybe this is where you should hit pause."

Draco didn't interrupt. He just watched her, hands still loosely clasped between his knees.

"But I don't want you to," she went on, eyes burning. "And I'm not saying that so you'll keep carrying the weight of my insecurities like it's your job. It's not. It never should've been."

"I'm not hitting pause," he said calmly, but loud enough for her to hear the meaning behind it. The reassurance that even after everything he'd told her, he was still reaching for her.

Hermione swallowed, but her throat burned like she hadn't had water in days. Her voice, when it finally came again, was threadbare.

“I want to be with you,” she breathed. “Even when it’s hard. Especially then. I want to kiss you in front of people who will make fun of us, who’ll call us disgustingly in love. I want to laugh at their faces and not care.”

His throat bobbed. His shoulders eased, just barely. And though he didn’t smile, something at the corner of his mouth betrayed him.

“I never wanted to be someone who makes others question their worth just because I’m afraid of mine. I think I got so used to being the girl people tolerate until they find something easier,” she said, and the words shook as they fell. “I spent so long wanting the wrong people. Boys who liked the way I looked when I shut up. Men who liked the idea of me but never the reality. And then you came out of nowhere and just showed up without taking away from me.”

If she stopped now, the fear would take over again.

“You never ask me to be something I’m not,” she said, the words trembling through her teeth. “You didn’t even flinch when I couldn’t hide my stupid jealousy. You didn’t make me feel like I had to explain why I am the way I am every second just to earn your time. You just... let me be.”

She paused, eyes blinking fast, as though trying to clear away whatever emotion was clouding her too quickly.

“And I know that sounds small,” she added quietly. “But no one’s ever done that for me. You just... stood there and held space, even when I tried to run from it. Even when I made it hard. And I keep waiting for you to give up. I keep expecting it because that’s what’s always happened. But you don’t.”

She looked up at him, something desperate in her eyes now.

“You don’t.”

Draco kept watching her, his brows faintly drawn like he was listening with everything he had.

And maybe that’s what made her heart seize.

Because it hit her full force then, just how much she *felt for him*. It surged through her chest without warning, hot and thick and terrifying.

She opened her mouth.

“Draco, I—”

The word lodged in her throat like a breath she couldn’t bear to release. Her tongue stilled, lips parting just slightly, as if the next syllable might unravel everything. The truth sat there, poised and aching, teetering on the edge of a precipice she hadn’t realized she was standing on.

The words pulsed inside her, unsaid but undeniable.

Instead, she said, quietly, “I know that now.”

Draco’s gaze didn’t waver.

She reached for his hand then, fingers brushing his knuckles like a question. He didn’t move right away, but when he did, it was with a softness that undid her completely. His fingers curled around hers, warm and trembling.

He let out a long breath through his nose, like some held piece of him was finally beginning to exhale.

Hermione stood slowly, nudged herself between his knees, and he tilted his chin up to look at her. His eyes were red-rimmed, jaw set.

She lifted one hand to his face, thumb tracing the line just beneath his eye.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “For hurting you.”

Then, finally, he leaned forward, resting his forehead gently against her stomach, arms coming around her waist in a hold that wasn’t desperate but certain.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her hands sliding into his hair, grounding him there. She felt him shudder under the caress, and she had never felt fuller.

They stayed like that for a long moment, just holding on. And for the first time since everything cracked open, it felt like something was quietly being stitched back together.

His voice was muffled against her jumper, barely more than breath.

“Just don’t let go next time.”

Chapter 20: Gowns

Every bone in Hermione's body ached like the echo of something shattered. Her skin held the warmth of someone fevered. Not with illness, but with the afterburn of sobbing until her throat turned raw and her chest hollowed out beneath it.

She should have been humiliated by how she wept for herself, for everything she hadn't said, hadn't let herself feel fully. But Draco had pressed his face to her jumper, mouth tightening against the cotton at her stomach, clinging like he was afraid she might vanish. She hadn't asked, but she didn't think he'd made it through without crying either. Not fully. There had been too much silence between them, too many ghosts in the room, and grief had a way of reaching through even the most well-worn armor.

But it was Draco who moved first, rising slowly after long minutes wrapped around each other. He reached for her hand, fingers warm and steady against hers. Together, they walked down the hallway of his flat, their footsteps soft on the floorboards.

He paused only to open the bedroom door.

The curtains were still drawn, the bed left unmade from the morning. A hush lingered around them.

Hermione didn't dare to speak as he closed the door behind them.

He pulled back the duvet and slid onto the mattress first, lifting the edge in quiet invitation. She joined him carefully, every movement wary, as if still unsure he truly wanted her there. Her phone slipped from her pocket as she settled, landing unnoticed on the grey carpet with a muted thud.

Draco moved without hesitation, shifting closer to wrap an arm around her, drawing her gently against him. Like she was breakable and beloved in equal measure.

Their foreheads touched and her fingers found the edge of his shirt. He smelled faintly of clean laundry and the softness of sleep.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered underneath her breath. "For everything."

Draco exhaled slowly and pulled her tighter.

His hand slid up her back, resting between her shoulder blades, where it stayed.

Hermione tucked her face into the curve of his neck, breathing him in. She felt raw, stretched thin by everything she'd finally allowed herself to feel. But his arms were steady around her, warm in a way that settled deep beneath her skin. Like home...*if* home could be a person, and not a place.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen," she whispered against him.

“I know,” he replied quietly. His hand found her cheek, thumb brushing the faint path her tears had traced. His touch was so gentle, like he was trying to learn her grief by feel alone.

“We’re going to figure this out,” he said. “You and me. We’ll be alright.”

“I don’t deserve how good you treat me.”

Draco gave a deep sigh. “Not sure ‘good’ is the word most people would use.”

“Well, they’d be wrong,” she whispered. “You stayed. Even when I didn’t.”

“I thought about bailing,” he said with a faint grin in his voice. “Got as far as imagining myself locked in the bathroom with a bottle of whiskey and a truly tragic playlist.”

She let out a breath that *almost* turned into a laugh. “What songs made the playlist?”

“Oh, the usual. Sad indie men with guitars. The National. Maybe early Coldplay, if I really wanted to make it hurt.”

He tightened his arms around her in reassurance, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

But her almost smile faded. Her fingers traced an idle line along his chest, whispering “I should’ve shown up for you the way you’ve shown up for me.”

The words hung between them for a moment when Draco didn’t answer right away. He shifted slightly, weighing his next words.

“Mm.” He feigned nonchalance, fingers trailing up underneath the back of her jumper. “You know there’s that gala next weekend.”

Hermione took a shaky breath. “*That gala.*”

“Yeah,” he said. “My parents are hosting.”

Hermione’s brows lifted, ignoring the sting in her heart at the memory of how she’d found out about said gala last week. God, they had fought so much.

Draco’s fingers paused at the small of her back, then resumed their lazy path up. “I want you there,” he said simply.

She forced a smile into the darkness.

“Tiffany will be there.”

It wasn’t a question. She remembered the audio message asking him to be her date at the gala.

He hesitated but didn’t lie. “Most likely.”

His fingers moved slowly along her waist, probably feeling the way her body tensed beneath his touch.

“If you don’t want to go, I’ll manage. But I want you there.”

Hermione’s throat tightened. Her chest ached with the lingering guilt. She didn’t want him to keep doing all the giving. It was her turn, she knew that.

Her eyes flicked down, uncertain. Her words caught somewhere between her brain and her mouth.

“I don’t care if she’s there,” he muttered.

She swallowed, the heat rising behind her eyes now for an entirely different reason.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll come with you.”

His lips found hers, the touch softer than usual.

“Okay,” he breathed against her mouth.

Then his hand slid back beneath her shirt, fabric bunched and shifted, making room for skin.

His mouth claimed hers again, deeper this time because, like her, he couldn’t bear the space between them for even a breath longer. They were always good at this part. The easy surrender of bodies, even when nothing else felt simple.

A small, involuntary noise left the back of her throat as he rolled her gently onto her back, leaning over her. His knee slotted between hers without wondering. His mouth dragged down to her jaw, then lower, tracing the curve of her neck.

“I don’t even know what to wear,” she remembered at the same time as her fingers curled into his shirt. “What does one wear to a gala hosted by their boyfriend’s parents? Are people in full gowns? I don’t want to show up looking like a... like someone they let in just to see if she knows which fork to use.”

Draco chuckled against her collarbone, his teeth grazing just enough to make her gasp. Then he stilled.

His lips brushed the hollow of her throat as he looked at her. “Did you just call me your *boyfriend*?”

Her breath hitched. “Maybe,” she murmured, body tensing under the moment. The word had slipped out.

He leaned back just enough to catch her gaze in the dark room. “Just making sure you won’t bolt when I introduce you to my parents as my girlfriend.” But then his mouth quirked into a smirk. “They’ll probably assume I’m sleeping with you anyway.”

She gave a breathy laugh, but her heart was hammering beneath his palm. Her mind was already racing, darting ahead of her before she could stop the word vomit.

“I really do need to figure out what to wear,” she muttered while her hands slipped under his shirt, hands dragging over warm skin.

Draco groaned and dropped his forehead to her collarbone like it hurt him. “You’re not doing this. Not now.”

“I absolutely am,” she countered but tilted her head to give him better access to her neck. “I’ve never been to a gala. I don’t want to embarrass you. Or myself. Not if I can help it.”

He let out a slow, disbelieving laugh and pressed a hand to her waist. A weak attempt to ground her. “Do you even realize what you just said to me?”

She blinked. “What? About... gowns?”

“No,” he said, pulling back just enough to meet her eyes, something skeptical flickering behind his. “You called me your *boyfriend*.”

Hermione froze, the word echoing back like it had come from someone else’s mouth. Her pulse stuttered.

She exhaled shakily. “Right. That.”

“Yeah. That,” he echoed, fingers dragging a firm path along her ribs, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “You just slipped that in like it was nothing, and now I’m supposed to focus on dress codes?”

She let her head fall back with a groan, biting her lip just as his tongue traced along her jaw. Any retort dissolved the moment he shifted over her, weight settling in a way that made her body respond before her mind could catch up.

His hips rolled down deliberately. She gasped in response, thighs instinctively parting for him. The most natural reaction to him by now.

“I would very much like to make love to my *girlfriend* right now,” he muttered, his lips grazing her ear, voice molten. “You okay with that?”

Hermione nodded, barely breathing. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Please. Love away.”

He rocked into her again, slow and sinful.

Her back arched without thought, mouth parting in a silent moan.

Her phone buzzed sharply against the floor, the sound intrusive in the hush of heat and breath between them.

She flinched. “That’s mine—”

“Leave it,” he whispered, biting down gently at the underside of her throat, right where her pulse fluttered. “It can wait.”

The phone buzzed again.

Draco's teeth grazed slowly up her neck, a teasing path of heat and threat that sent a full-body shiver rolling through her.

Hermione whimpered breathlessly, but it caught on a moan as he pressed harder into her, grinding right where she needed him. Sparks shot up her spine, down her thighs, everywhere.

She sighed, fingers burying in his hair. "You feel... *Draco*..."

"I know," he rasped like velvet wrapped around gravel. "I've been so fucking good for you. Haven't even touched myself since you made me come all over your hand on Wednesday."

Hermione's pulse jumped anew at his words, the vivid memory of that night igniting behind her eyes like a match to dry kindling. Her fingers curled tighter in his hair as he mouthed along her jaw, so wet and warm and maddeningly slow.

"You haven't?" she managed, voice trembling.

Draco hummed against her cheek. "Thought about it a lot," he confessed, fingers dragging the lace of her bra upward like a promise. "But I'm not wasting it on my hand again. I want to come inside you. Feel you wrapped around me. That's the only thing that's going to be enough."

Her thighs clenched around his hips without permission. He smiled against her skin.

"God, Draco..."

"You like that?" he whispered, nipping at her earlobe. "Knowing I'd rather suffer every night than fuck my own hand? That the only thing that gets me off anymore is when I'm deep inside you?"

She whimpered, hips shifting to chase more of the delicious friction.

"I need—" she started, then faltered. The words crumbled under the weight of sensation.

Draco's touch dragged across her nipples, just enough pressure to make her gasp. "You need what?" he coaxed, the words curling like smoke in her ear. "Be good for me. Say it."

Hermione whimpered, back arching under the torment of his hands. "I need you inside me," she whispered with her voice wrecked and shaking.

Draco let out a raw groan, grinding into her with slow, aching desperation like he was barely holding himself back, like *not* being inside her was physically unbearable.

The phone buzzed again...*obnoxiously loud*, rattling across the floor like a curse.

Draco froze with a growl, dropping his forehead to her shoulder. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Hermione's hand slid up the back of his neck, breathless and half-delirious. "Just—I can't even think with that thing going off. One second. Let me turn it off before I lose my mind."

His hips pressed down again in one punishing motion, dragging a helpless moan from her throat like it was his to claim.

"Ten seconds," he muttered, voice wrecked. "Or I swear to God I'll start without you and make you watch."

She gasped, eyes flying wide, but then the phone buzzed again, sharp and insistent.

Groaning, Hermione pressed a palm to his chest, breathless and flustered. "Don't move. Stay exactly where you are."

Draco flopped onto his back with a tortured sound, dragging a hand over his face. "If that's not the bloody Prime Minister, I'm going to throw your phone out the window."

Hermione half-crawled toward where her phone had skidded across the carpet, her shirt riding up, hair falling into her face. She grabbed it with one hand, still panting, but didn't move right away.

The amusement drained from her face the moment she saw the screen.

Behind her, Draco shifted and reached lazily over to tease, but stilled when he noticed the change in her posture.

The mood changed with the quiet.
"Hermione?"

Three missed calls.
Five messages.

Ginny:
Are you home?
SOS
Please don't disappear on me right now. Fuck.
I really need you right now. It's bad. Like really fucking bad.
Hermione, please call me.

A cold knot formed in her gut.

Hermione's skin still felt flushed in places Draco had touched her, but the bloom of anticipation had withered into something uncertain.

She sat curled up on her own couch, staring at her phone on the coffee table. Ginny would be here any minute.

Hermione had called her from Draco's bedroom, still catching her breath, guilt prickling at the edges while his fingers threaded silently through her hair behind her ear.

Ginny had been on the other side of the city. She hadn't explained much, just said she couldn't talk on the phone, that she was coming over. There had been no sign of happiness in her voice, no attempt at composure.

"I just—can I come to you?" she'd asked without breathing. *"I really don't want to be alone right now."*

That had been all Hermione needed to hear.

Even so, it had gutted her to leave. The warmth of Draco's body still clung to her like an echo, skin flushed and nerves frayed. Standing up had felt like tearing something fragile in half. She'd mumbled a rushed apology, fumbling to tug her jumper down and slide her bra back into place, her fingers trembling with the effort of pretending she wasn't still aching for him.

Draco hadn't pressed her. He hadn't asked questions or demand for her to stay. He'd simply stood, dressed, grabbed his keys, and offered to drive her. His fingers had stayed laced with hers the entire ride, his thumb drawing slow circles against her knuckles as if he could feel the war unfolding inside her.

She'd barely managed a proper goodbye. Just a hurried kiss to his cheek, her lips still tingling with the ache of what they'd almost done, and a breathless, "I'll call you as soon as I can," before she was sprinting up her building's stairs with a tight chest.

Now she waited, heart thudding like it was trying to outrun something she hadn't even seen yet.

When the knock finally came, Hermione startled. She was already on her feet, but her legs felt unsteady, like they were still trying to remember how to move as she crossed the small space to the door.

Ginny was already crying when Hermione opened the door, standing there like she hadn't taken a breath since dialing her number. Her eyes were red and wet, mascara clinging in dark crescents beneath her lashes, and she didn't even try to smile. She just stood there, arms wrapped around herself in a hoodie that wasn't hers, breathing like she couldn't get enough air.

"Oh my God," Hermione whispered, stepping aside immediately. "Come in—come in, what—?"

Ginny moved like a ghost, brushing past her and into the living room without a word.

Hermione closed the door behind them and moved on instinct, but her brain lagged. Stuck on the image of her best friend standing in the center of the room like something hollowed out.

Ginny hadn't even taken off her shoes. Her bag hung awkwardly off one shoulder like she'd forgotten it was there.

"What happened?" she whispered, trying to sound calm. She already felt like crying with her best friend. She had never seen Ginny like this. "Is it Blaise?"

Ginny shook her head hard, hands flying up to cover her face without turning to. "No-no, it's not Blaise, he didn't do anything... I just-I don't know what to do--"

"You're okay. Just sit down, Gin, please. You're scaring me." Hermione said quickly, stepping forward, hands out as if calming a wounded animal.

Ginny finally dropped onto the edge of the couch like her knees gave out. Her bag slipped from her shoulder and thudded to the floor. She didn't say anything for a moment, just pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and let out a sound that was half a sob, half a breathless, bitter laugh.

"I'm so stupid," she cried.

Hermione's stomach flipped, but she didn't hesitate to sink to her knees in front of her, gently taking her wrists and lowering Ginny's hands. "Please tell me what's going on with you."

And then, without another word, Ginny reached for her bag. Her fingers fumbled with the zipper. Her whole body was shaking. She pulled out a handful of items and dropped them carelessly onto the coffee table. A few crumpled plastic wrappers, receipts *and... pregnancy tests.*

At least five of them.

Ginny made a choked sound and covered her face again, the sob bursting out of her uncontrollably this time. "I don't know what to *do*," she gasped. "Hermione, I don't know-I don't--"

Hermione sat back on her heels, stunned, her brain momentarily blank as she stared down at the mess in front of her.

It was like watching someone else's life explode across her own furniture. Her heart thundered. Her throat felt tight. But Ginny was breaking in front of her.

So she swallowed the shock and reached for her knee, trying to tether her to something.

"Oh... *Ginny*," Hermione whispered.

Ginny only cried harder.

Hermione didn't hesitate. She moved off her knees and onto the couch beside Ginny, pulling her in without asking.

Ginny collapsed into her, curling into Hermione's side like she was trying to make herself disappear. Hermione wrapped both arms around her and held her close, one hand stroking

slowly over her back, the other cupped protectively around the back of her head.

She didn't say anything at first. Just held her while she cried, while her shoulders heaved and her breath stuttered.

They stayed like that for several minutes, maybe more. Time felt suspended, broken into uneven pieces.

Hermione just held on, fingers combing softly through Ginny's tangled hair, murmuring little nothings whenever her friend's breathing started to spiral again.

She pulled back enough to wipe at her face with the sleeve of her hoodie, avoiding Hermione's eyes.

"I haven't told anyone," she whispered.

"Blaise has no idea?"

"God, no...I've told *you* now. But no one else."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Okay."

Ginny looked away, lips still trembling. "I thought maybe it was just stress. Or a stomach bug. Or a hangover. But then I couldn't stop crying over my burned toast, and—" her voice cracked.

Silence stretched between them.

Hermione shifted slightly on the couch, still close, but giving Ginny more room to breathe. "Do you want to talk about what you're thinking? Or do you just want me to sit with you?"

Ginny shook her head, then shrugged helplessly. "I don't know what I want. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know how I feel. I'm *so* angry and scared and tired and..." She stopped, biting her lip hard. "Blaise and I are—he's amazing, but he's not ready to be a dad yet."

Hermione's throat tightened.

Ginny finally looked at her and something in her expression cracked all the way open.

"I don't know if I can do this," she whispered.

Hermione took her hand, weaving their fingers together. "You don't have to figure that out tonight."

Ginny blinked at her, new tears slipping down her cheeks again. "You're not going to tell me it's a blessing in disguise? Or that I'll make a *great mum*?"

"I'm going to tell you that I love you. That whatever you decide, I'm here. That you don't owe anyone a smile or a plan right now."

Ginny let out a soft, broken sound. “I’m sorry I scared you, but I just didn’t know where else to go right now.”

“Don’t apologize,” Hermione whispered. “I’m really glad you called me.”

Ginny sucked in a breath like she was drowning. “I have no idea how Blaise is going to react—I don’t know if he—and I—God, I didn’t even *notice*—”

Hermione squeezed her hand and took a deep breath. “Okay. One thing at a time.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Ginny gasped, pulling back slightly, her eyes wild. “I’ve been feeling off for weeks, Hermione. My boobs were sore, I was crying over *stupid* shit—I thought maybe I was just hormonal or stressed or whatever, and then I—”

“Ginny—”

“I’ve been drinking like a fucking uni student every single weekend,” she sobbed. “Brunch mimosas, happy hour cider, a double gin and tonic the night before last—I *googled* it, Hermione, and I’m not even sure when it happened, but it’s probably been at least six or seven weeks, and I’m *so fucking stupid*—”

“Hey. Stop,” Hermione said firmly, taking her face in both hands. “You are *not* stupid. You are not the first woman in the world to miss the signs. It happens all the time. You’re human, Gin. And you’re in shock right now.”

Ginny blinked at her, tears still streaking down her face, but something in Hermione’s tone seemed to cut through the panic. She hiccupped and looked down at the mess on the table again.

“I just... I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to know right now,” Hermione said softly, brushing a strand of damp hair behind Ginny’s ear. “You don’t have to figure it all out today. Right now, you just have to breathe and let it sink in.”

Ginny dropped her forehead to Hermione’s shoulder, breath hitching. “I’m not ready to be a mum.”

“I understand,” Hermione said. “But you’re not alone. No matter what you decide. Okay?”

Ginny nodded into her shirt.

They sat like that for a long time, Hermione holding her, gently rocking her like something fragile. She couldn’t think of anything else to say, trying to replay every interaction with Ginny over the past few weeks. She’d been so busy with herself and Draco that they’d barely talked.

Hermione could feel the warmth of Ginny’s cheek pressed to her collarbone, the soft tremble of her ribs beginning to settle beneath her palm.

She cleared her throat, “So where’s Blaise right now?”

Ginny let out a low groan, the sound thick with dread. “Home.”

Hermione nodded slowly, not pushing further.

“I bought the tests this morning,” Ginny said, voice shaking. “Took them in the loo of a coffee shop down the road.”

Ginny’s hand stayed wrapped around Hermione’s, her thumb moving in slow, rhythmic strokes over her knuckles like she needed the contact to stay tethered.

Hermione inhaled gently. “When you do talk to him—how do you want it to go?”

Ginny didn’t answer right away. She shifted, sitting back a little so she could look Hermione in the eye. Her hair was a halo of chaos. But her expression, worn and unsure as it was, had a new edge to it now. Something searching.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t want to scare him. But I also don’t want to pretend I’m okay if I’m *not*. And I’m not.”

Hermione nodded.

Ginny dragged her sleeve across her face. “He’s going to freak out.”

Hermione hesitated. “Maybe. I mean—I don’t know. He might. Just... because it’s a lot.”

“That doesn’t exactly help,” Ginny muttered underneath a shaky breath.

Hermione winced. “Sorry. I’m just—I don’t know what the right thing is to say here.”

She swallowed hard. “What if he thinks I’m trying to trap him?”

Hermione blinked, stunned for a moment. “*Trap him?*”

Ginny’s voice cracked. “I don’t know. I’ve been a mess lately. We’ve got into a fight a few weeks ago about him not wanting to find a bigger place for us, said there’s no need to spend more money. What if he thinks I’m trying to ... I don’t know...”

Hermione let out a breath, half laugh, half disbelief. “Ginny... making a baby takes *two* people.”

Ginny sniffled but didn’t smile.

“I mean it,” Hermione said, gentler now. “Blaise knows you. I think you’re going through the scariest scenarios in your head right now to prepare yourself. But I highly doubt this one is an option.”

“I feel like a coward for hiding here instead of talking to him.” Ginny stared at the floor, then whispered, “I don’t even know if I want to keep it.”

Hermione didn't flinch. "That's your choice."

"I feel so selfish for even thinking that. But what if I tell Blaise and he wants me to keep it. Or if he wants me to not keep it."

"No." Hermione's voice was firm this time. "You're allowed to consider every part of this. It's *your* body."

Ginny let the words settle like a balm, her shoulders finally sagging with the weight of what she'd been carrying.

For a while, neither of them moved.

"Do you want to stay the night?" she asked quietly.

Ginny didn't answer right away but then she gave a slow, shaky nod.

"Yeah," she whispered. "If you don't mind. Did you have any other plans tonight?"

Hermione felt her exhale, a breath that came from somewhere deep and worn down.

She shook her head gently. "Not anymore. You're here. That's what matters."

Then, quieter, like she meant it more than anything she could have planned. "Nothing else is more important right now."

She meant it. But a quiet ache lingered beneath her ribs. Because she had wanted to stay in Draco's arms. She'd wanted the rest of that night, the skin and the softness and the pull of something that had started to feel like coming home.

But Ginny needed her. And there was no choice, really. Not when the person she loved showed up at her door already unraveling. Not when she was the only one she could fall apart in front of.

Hermione let her fingers trail slowly through Ginny's hair, then said softly, "You should text Blaise."

She felt Ginny tense ever so slightly.

"Not everything. Just... let him know you're not coming home tonight. So he doesn't worry."

For a long moment, Ginny didn't move.

Then, with a reluctant nod, she reached blindly for her bag. Her fingers found her phone, but she didn't unlock it right away. She just held it like it weighed too much.

"I never wanted to be like my mum."

Hermione stilled, her eyes flicking toward her.

Ginny didn't look at her. She just stared down at her phone, thumb absently dragging across the edge of the screen.

"She had all those kids and gave up everything. Her body. Her time. Her career. Her sanity, probably. And she never talked about it like it was a choice. Just something that happened *to* her." She paused. "And I swore I'd never let that happen to me."

Hermione's throat tightened. "It's not happening to you, Gin."

"Isn't it?" she asked barely above a whisper. "We wanted to travel a lot more, spend more money on us as a compromise for not getting a bigger place. It's all going to change."

Hermione stayed quiet, just rubbing slow, grounding circles across Ginny's back.

"I love him," Ginny whispered. "But I don't want to disappear."

The sound of the shower ran faintly behind the closed bathroom door, steam curling under the gap like the last sigh of a long day.

Hermione moved around the flat, folding the blanket Ginny had left on the couch, dimming the lights, collecting the tissues scattered across the floor like fallen petals. She set a fresh glass of water on the nightstand in her bedroom for her friend.

The bathroom door was still closed, the running water uninterrupted.

Hermione ended up leaning against the kitchen counter and finally let out a breath.

She pulled out her phone and stared at the screen for a second before pressing Draco's name.

It rang twice.

"Hey."

Hermione's chest loosened at the sound of his voice. "Hi," she said quietly. "I just... I wanted to say I'm sorry for how fast I had to leave."

"Yeah, already forgiven."

There was a pause, and then a soft exhale. "Is she okay?"

"She's still here." Hermione muttered into the quiet of the kitchen. "She will be okay."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Hermione's fingers traced the edge of the counter. "I do, but it's not really my story to tell."

"Alright," he said simply, without pushing.

There was something in his steadiness that made her yearn to feel his arms around her.

“But thank you,” she said quietly. “For driving me. For holding my hand the whole way like it was the most normal thing in the world.”

He let out a low, amused sound. “I think that’s part of the job now. You know—being your boyfriend.”

It made her smile, unthinking and immediate. “That does have a nice ring to it.”

She could hear the grin in his voice. “Doesn’t it?”

A beat of silence stretched between them...warm at first, then shaded by something heavier.

“Is Blaise part of all this?” he asked, quieter now, like he wasn’t sure he wanted the answer.

“Not directly,” Hermione said. “But maybe... maybe check in on him anyway? Distract him a little. Ginny’s staying the night.”

“Alright. I will.”

Hermione bit her lip, then asked softly, “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Draco didn’t hesitate. “You’d better.”

Her chest ached with how much she wanted that.

A new quiet settled between them, filled only by the faint hiss of water behind the bathroom door and the sound of his breath in her ear.

“I’m trying not to be selfish about today,” he said finally. “I think you’re a really good friend. And I respect the hell out of how you’re showing up for her.”

Hermione closed her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Another pause. Then, like the words slipped out before he could stop them, “I miss you already. My bed still smells like you.”

Her heart twisted. Her fingers curled tighter around the phone.

“Draco...”

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad,” he said quickly. “I just—didn’t want to hang up without saying it.”

“I miss you too,” she whispered.

Neither of them spoke after that. It was enough, for now, just to breathe quietly into the space they still shared even from across the city.

Hermione clicked the bathroom light off and stepped quietly into the darkened bedroom. Ginny was already curled beneath the duvet, her back to the door, one hand tucked under her cheek. She let out a quiet, unguarded sigh as Hermione slipped into bed beside her.

“Mm,” Ginny murmured and then stilled.

Hermione didn’t answer but just reached out and gently tucked the blanket up over her friend’s shoulder.

She lay back against the pillow, staring at the ceiling. Everything felt soft and slow now, like her body had finally caught up with the day and wasn’t quite sure how to carry it all.

Her phone buzzed on the nightstand. Just once. She turned her head and reached for it.

DM:

Are you okay?

She stared at the screen for a moment, thumb hovering. Then, without really thinking, she opened her contacts. His name was still listed as *DM* like a relic from when everything between them had been tainted with spite.

She tapped to edit, deleted the initials, and typed *Draco*.

She saved the change and replied.

Yeah. You?

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Draco:

Just checking in.

*

I’m in bed. Ginny’s asleep. I feel like my brain’s still going 100 miles an hour though.

She hit send, then paused, fingers hovering over the screen.

Draco:

Wish I could slow it down for you.

Hermione smiled, the words sinking in. But she didn’t miss the weight underneath them. Not after the way she’d rushed out of his bed earlier.

How would you do that?

Draco:

Wouldn’t you like to know?

She blinked at the screen, half-smiling.

Indeed. I'm curious by nature.

Draco:

That you are, sweetheart.

Hermione's stomach flipped violently. She pressed her phone tighter in her hand. *Sweetheart*. It read lovely coming from him, and she wondered if he'd stick with it. She quite liked the thought of that.

Draco:

Go to sleep, yeah?

Take care of Ginny.

She set the phone down and turned toward Ginny, curling gently into her side, careful not to wake her.

Her soul felt bruised from everything she'd taken in today. And still, beneath it all, there was a new, strange kind of peace. One she had never known before.

Somewhere beyond the windows, a car passed, its engine low and distant under the city's breath. Hermione stirred as the mattress dipped beside her.

"Mm?" she murmured sleepily, lids fluttering. "Gin?"

"Sorry," Ginny whispered. The faint shuffle of her feet crossed the hardwood floor, then the quiet click of the bathroom door. "Just had to pee. Go back to sleep."

Hermione let her head sink back into the pillow. The sheets were warm. Her body was still heavy with fatigue, and her thoughts had begun to settle again when the mattress shifted a second time.

But Ginny didn't settle.

"You alright?" Hermione mumbled underneath her breath, turning her face toward her friend in the dark room.

When she finally answered, it was barely above a whisper.

"Is it weird that I love him already?"

Hermione blinked through the dark. The heaviness behind her ribs swelled.

"*Him?*"

Ginny let out a shaky breath. "I know it's weird, and I don't even know if everything's okay yet... but... it's just a feeling."

Hermione's lips curved faintly into the pillow. "It's not weird."

That earned a quiet laugh from Ginny, the sound small but warm and alive. She shifted beneath the blanket, curling inward like she was trying to contain something tender and terrifying at once.

“You’re going to be such a good aunt,” she murmured. “Even if you end up flooding its brain with books and giving it an early existential crisis.”

“Thanks.”

They both smiled.

Hermione didn’t need to ask if Ginny was going to keep it. She already knew. The way she’d curled around the truth like it hurt and mattered...Hermione didn’t need the words.

She felt Ginny shift beside her again, voice turning a little lighter.

“Now we just need an uncle for you.”

Hermione closed her eyes, something inside her stopped moving.

“Preferably one who lasts longer than thirty seconds,” Ginny added, teasing now, the words coated in a grin Hermione could hear but not see.

The moment stretched out, held in place by the weight of her pulse hammering in her chest.

Ginny had made a joke. A line tossed out in the dark like so many others they’d shared in moments just like this.

But Hermione couldn’t laugh. Not properly. Not with the way her heart was beating now, too fast, too full, too loud.

Because this was it. The moment that had been chasing her for days. For weeks.

Her fingers curled tighter around the duvet. Her mouth was dry.

This was the moment she could tell her best friends what had been happening quietly behind her eyes since the moment Draco had driven her to the hospital. Since the way he’d held her hand in the dark and didn’t let go.

The words pressed against her ribs like they were clawing to get out, like her own body couldn’t stand the weight of them anymore.

Hermione’s voice, when it came, was barely more than a whisper.

“I’m in love with Draco.”

Chapter 21: Dungeons

The bedsheets rustled as Ginny shifted slightly but didn't say a word.

Hermione's eyes fixed on the ceiling she couldn't see in the dark, breath coming shallow and uneven.

She could feel Ginny watching her, like a question between them suspended in the dark.

She wasn't sure if she meant to say it out loud when Ginny finally murmured, "You love him."

Hermione's chest tightened at the same time as her lips parted, but no sound came out. The words hung in the air, unfinished and too loud to be ignored.

Love.

The word struck her ribs like a bruise from the inside out.

She'd nearly said it to Draco today, feeling the words clawing at the back of her throat. Now they'd found their way out anyway. Not in the moment she'd imagined, not to the person it was meant for. But it was out there.

She swallowed, barely able to find her voice.

"Yeah," she whispered, the word cracked and quiet. "I love him."

Ginny exhaled shakily and shifted onto her back, staring at the ceiling together with Hermione. "Well... shit."

Hermione's heart thudded like it was trying to escape her chest. The covers were suddenly too warm and the air too thick. Her own skin stretched taut over the unknown ache of such honesty.

"I mean, I thought you two were just fucking," Ginny muttered like she was still putting the pieces together. "But love? That's... does Draco know?"

Hermione sat up a little, heart thudding. "No. I mean, yes. Probably. Sort of." She exhaled shakily. "We're... together. As of today."

Ginny let out a sound that was part laugh, part disbelieving whistle. "Blaise is going to be insufferable. He's been convinced you two were sneaking around for weeks."

Hermione almost flinched, but forced herself to take a deep breath before finding the courage to ask, "Was it that obvious?"

"He's been watching you two like a hawk," Ginny muttered, drifting slightly, like her thoughts had wandered somewhere else. "He knows something happened at movie night."

Her stomach flipped. “You didn’t tell him what happened, right?” It felt like a lifetime ago now, but the thrill of it was still humming beneath her skin.

“You mean if I told him Draco fingered you into another dimension right next to us on the couch? Of course not.” Ginny sighed. “But I also didn’t argue when he asked if someone had a full-blown wet dream ten feet away during the night.” Her next words came quieter. “Last I heard, you were trying to fix things and not getting very far. Then suddenly you both vanish from tables, watch each other like there’s this whole conversation no one else is hearing.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.” She tugged at the edge of the blanket, twisting it between her fingers. “You’re my best friend, and I just... I kept it all to myself. And I hated it. But it felt so fragile. Like if I said it out loud, it might fall apart.”

“It’s okay,” Ginny said quietly.

Hermione could feel an unexpected, very raw lump swell in her throat.

“No,” she whispered. “Not really.”

Ginny shifted, her fingers moving slowly across the covers to search for her.

She felt the brush of skin before their hands found each other in the dark, lacing their fingers together.

“As long as you’re happy, I will be.”

Hermione blinked hard against the sudden burn behind her eyes. She squeezed Ginny’s hand back tightly.

And for a long moment, she didn’t trust herself to speak at all.

Ginny didn’t push, didn’t fill the silence with questions. She just held on patiently, giving her the space to collect her thoughts. To find the courage to speak whatever it was that still pressed heavy against her ribs, even after carrying the world on her back all day.

Hermione’s lips parted, “I’ve been putting him through so much. My jealousy. My constant second-guessing. I’ve been practically pushing him away and then pulling him back and running every time something scares me.” She swallowed. “And he’s been nothing but good to me. I don’t think I deserve that.” She looked down at their joined hands. “And the truth is, I don’t think this can work unless I do something about that. Otherwise, I’ll just keep hurting him.”

“So... what now?” Ginny asked gently. “What do you want to do about it?”

Hermione’s eyes kept tracing the ceiling like it might hold the answers. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “More boxing. More time away from him, maybe. Take care of myself for once instead of pretending I’m fine.”

“Have you ever thought about talking to someone?” she asked carefully. “Like professionally.”

Hermione turned her head, caught slightly off guard.

“I mean it,” Ginny continued, softer now. “You’re always trying to do it all alone, carrying memories you never asked for. And I love you, but I’m just one person. There’s no shame in needing more than that.”

Hermione swallowed, eyes burning again. “I’ve thought about it before.”

“Just think about it again. Maybe it would help. This sounds like it really matters to you and I just...” She paused, tightening her hold on Hermione’s hand once more. “I don’t want you to sabotage yourself. Not when you’re calling it *love*.”

Hermione felt the wall around her crumble just a little more. “I keep waiting for the moment he changes his mind or realizes I’m not what he actually wants.”

“You are worthy of love, Hermione. I just wish you could see that without needing me to say it.”

Hermione let out another long breath, her chest aching, ribs tight around something too big to name. Without meaning to, she started to cry. Not loud, just a slow, shaking unraveling. It came from deep inside, where old wounds still lived and love felt like both a gift and a threat.

Ginny sat up without a word and pulled Hermione into her arms. “Come here,” she murmured, pressing a hand to the back of Hermione’s head. “I love you so much. Do you hear me?”

And this time, Hermione didn’t hold anything back.

Morning crept in slow and gray with a pale light bleeding through the curtains. The warmth beside Hermione was gone, and the blankets were a little twisted, as if Ginny had tried not to wake her.

The air smelled faintly of burnt toast.

Pulling on a jumper, Hermione padded down the hallway, the floorboards cool beneath her feet. The kitchen was lit only by the spill of light from a cloudy sky outside.

Ginny stood by the counter in the same clothes from yesterday, her hair pulled into a messy bun, hands wrapped around a mug. She was staring out the window like she wasn’t really seeing anything, the kettle whistling softly behind her.

Hermione leaned against the doorframe. “You’re up early.”

Ginny blinked and turned, a tired smile pulling at her mouth. “Couldn’t sleep.” She reached over to switch off the kettle. “Thought I’d make tea. And, you know. Burn some toast.”

Hermione’s eyes dropped to the slightly too-dark slices resting on a plate. “Good job.”

Ginny snorted, but her gaze was gentle.

They sat in silence for a moment, sipping the tea and chewing carefully around the edges of the burnt toast. The silence still carried the weight of last night.

Hermione turned her mug slowly between her hands. "Are you going to tell Blaise about the pregnancy?"

Ginny didn't look up at the question. She stared into her tea, her expression unreadable, then let out a breath. "He texted me this morning. Apparently he got weirdly jealous of girls' night, drank one too many whiskeys, and ended up crashing on Draco's couch like an idiot."

Hermione hesitated. "Oh?"

"He wants to come pick me up in a little bit. I'm going to tell him today. I think I have to. I don't want him finding out by accident. And I kind of want him to know." Ginny set her mug down with a small sigh. "I'm much more excited to tell Blaise about you two if the pregnancy talk goes downhill."

Hermione's eyes snapped to hers. "No." She lowered her own tea to the table with a soft clink. "You have to promise me you won't tell Blaise."

Ginny tilted her head. "Why not? He basically already knows."

"No," Hermione repeated more firmly than she needed to. "You can't say anything to him."

Ginny stared at her. "Hermione."

But Hermione shook her head, more serious now. "It can't come from you. It shouldn't."

Ginny blinked, frowning slightly.

Hermione's voice softened. "I told *you*. I got to choose that. And I want to give Draco the same chance with Blaise. This thing between us, it can't just be on *my* terms all the time. He should get to decide how and when to share it with his best friend."

Ginny exhaled through her nose, long and annoyed. "You know he's even more stubborn than *you*, right?"

She huffed a faint laugh. "I'm aware."

Ginny leaned back in her chair and waved her toast at her. "If he doesn't tell Blaise *soon* and waits until I'm fat and swollen and hating my body, I swear to god, I'm going to be too hormonal and bitter to do any fun couple things together as a group."

Hermione cracked a smile. "Like what, exactly?"

"I don't know," Ginny said frustrated. "Wine tastings? Maybe we paint some mugs or just go to the movies." She paused, then wrinkled her nose. "No wine for me right now."

Hermione smiled despite herself.

“It doesn’t even matter,” Ginny went on with an irritated huff. “Point is, I want to drag all of us somewhere ridiculous just to see how annoyed Draco and Blaise get about it. You and I never had boyfriends at the same time, you realize this is kind of huge, right?”

She hadn’t thought about it like that. All those years of chaos and longing, of watching Ginny fall in love while she kept herself at arm’s length or yearned for Ron. Letting herself be strung along into something casual. Something that never really asked for her heart, but still took pieces of it anyway.

Draco wasn’t like that. He wasn’t keeping her at a distance or asking for only part of her. He really wanted to be with her, for reasons she still couldn’t fully understand. But she was finally getting too tired to keep questioning it or to keep doubting something that felt this real.

“Yeah,” Hermione said quietly, eyes drifting down to her tea.

“It’s stupid, but... I kind of want that stuff.” She hesitated, then added softly, “I want to have those moments before everything changes. Before there’s a baby and time starts running away from us. It already feels like it is.”

Hermione pressed her lips together and nodded. “It’s not stupid to want that.”

Ginny nudged her foot gently under the table. “I promise I won’t say anything to Blaise about it.”

Hermione gave her a grateful look. “Thank you. I won’t say anything to Draco, either. About... you know.”

Ginny nodded once, the corners of her mouth twitching into a brief, tired smile. But then something shifted in her expression. She looked down at her hands as if they might offer an escape, then muttered, “I could honestly use some more distraction before shit gets real.”

Hermione studied her for a moment.

“Alright,” she said while watching a hint of a smile curling at her friend’s mouth. “What do you want to know?”

Ginny only pretended to pause, glancing up. “Okay, so. This is going to sound insane. But there’s been this rumor, for like *years*.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed slightly. “A rumor?”

“Yeah,” Ginny said, drawing the word out. “You know how the boys get when they’re drunk. Convinced they know everything. They start joking around and sometimes things slip...”

Hermione’s expression shifted to something more cautious. “Okay?”

Ginny nodded, chewing on her lower lip. “Is it true that Draco has a *secret sex dungeon* where he does freaky shit to women?”

Hermione stared at her, completely frozen. “You did *not* just say that.”

Ginny raised her brows. “I mean, I’ve never had the opportunity to ask someone who has access to the source. It came up quite frequently and I’m just wondering if there’s anything to it.”

Hermione twisted her tongue in her mouth before rolling her eyes. “There’s no *dungeon*.”

Ginny’s brows lifted. “Are you sure?”

Hermione wavered, just for a second. There *was* that locked door in his flat, the one he’d brushed off as his chaotic office. But...

She blinked, then sat a little straighter. “I’m sure.”

Her fingers tapped a slow rhythm against her bare thigh before going still. “Anyway,” she said quickly, trying to take control of the conversation. “He invited me to something.”

Ginny raised an eyebrow, allowing her to move on from the question. “What kind of something?”

“A gala thing.”

“A gala?”

Hermione nodded, focusing very intently on her half-eaten toast.

“It’s next weekend. His parents are hosting.”

Ginny leaned back like she needed physical distance just to process it. “How do we feel about meeting his parents?”

Hermione shrugged in a small, thoughtful movement. “Honestly? Not as scary as I thought it would be.” She picked at the corner of her toast, “I mean, he’s already met mine. It’s just fair isn’t it? And I guess I’m also curious.” She glanced up. “About where he comes from. How he grew up. But he doesn’t speak too fondly of them, so I’m not really sure what to expect.”

“Okay.” Her expression softened just a touch. “I saw his dad once, in passing,” Ginny continued, tilting her head. “And let me tell you that *Daddy* Malfoy didn’t just pass down the bone structure. He invented the signature Malfoy brooding.”

Hermione groaned.

Ginny’s grin was quick but didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Right? I mean, maybe it’s better this way. Some big event instead of painfully formal dinner conversation.”

Hermione gave a small nod, but her smile faltered. “Tiffany will be there.”

Ginny's face stilled. "Ah."

The sound landed soft and flat between them.

"I'm trying not to spiral about it," Hermione admitted. "But I also don't know what I'm supposed to wear to a law firm gala. I don't want to show up in something too plain and feel invisible, or something too bold and look like I'm trying too hard."

Ginny nodded. "I'll help you shop for a dress."

Hermione paused. "Do you really want to? I mean you have tons of other things to think about right now."

"Are you kidding me? This is the perfect distraction from the other things I'll have to deal with."

Hermione sank into the back seat of the cab and pulled the door shut behind her. The driver glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

Ginny and Blaise were going to be parents.

The understanding settled only slowly, but with warmth. Ginny was stepping into something terrifying and beautiful. And Hermione had told her the truth about Draco. And it hadn't broken anything. If anything, something had loosened inside her. A knot she'd been carrying for weeks. A breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Her phone buzzed in her lap.

Ginny

Is it weird to ask for you to keep the tests I left on your coffee table?

Hermione's mouth twitched as she typed her reply.

I would never throw them away

Ginny

Thanks

Also... Blaise reeks of whiskey

Our boys went wild

Typing this feels oddly satisfying

Her hand hovered for almost a minute before Draco finally buzzed her in.

Long enough to stare at her reflection and wonder if she was overdressed in her wool dress, tights, and favorite pair of boots.

But the lock clicked, the door released, and she stepped inside.

When she reached his floor, he was already there.

His hair was sticking up in five different directions, flattened oddly on one side. His t-shirt clung a little crooked on one shoulder, and his eyes looked bleary.

Hermione took him in with amusement after knowing that Blaise was hungover as well. “Did I wake you?”

Draco rubbed a hand through his hair. “Something like that.”

Her mouth tugged up slightly.

He leaned forward and caught her waist with one hand to pull her in. “Come here.”

She let him, but the second his mouth brushed hers, she wrinkled her nose and pulled back.

“You need a shower.”

Draco retreated, eyeing her with a half-hearted roll of his eyes. Then he gave her a pointed look. “Blaise crashed on my couch.”

Hermione arched a brow. “So I’ve heard from Ginny. Blaise apparently smells as lovely as you do.”

Draco dragged her fully into his flat to close the door behind her. “Make yourself at home,” he said, already tugging the hem of his shirt up. “I’m going to take a quick shower.”

As he pulled the shirt over his head he walked past her, warm skin brushing hers in the narrow hall. He tossed the shirt to the floor without looking.

“Think about what you want to eat,” he called over his shoulder. “I’m starving.”

Hermione sat curled up on the couch when Draco emerged from the shower, dressed in a new pair of joggers but without any shirt. His hair was damp, curling in this adorable way she liked.

He gulped down almost an entire bottle of water, and then leaned against the kitchen counter, blinking slowly as if his brain was still trying to catch up with his body.

He looked adorable. She almost felt guilty for how much she liked this version of him, a little messy and unbothered.

He caught her staring.

“What,” he said all gravelly.

She bit her lip, trying not to smile. “Nothing?”

He grunted before he crossed the wide space between them and dropped onto the couch beside her. Everything felt warmer just from the heat rolling off his skin.

“Can I have my kiss now?” he asked, leaning in already. “A proper one.”

Hermione smiled, leaned forward, and kissed him softly, getting pulled in deeper when his fingers found the back of her neck and held her firmly in place.

When he drew away, his grin slowly returned. “How’s Ginny?”

Without warning, he shifted sideways, slouching until his head settled in her lap. One arm draped lazily across her thighs as he stretched out on his back beneath her gaze.

“She’s going to be okay.”

Hermione’s fingers moved instinctively, threading through his hair.

“I was thinking about your dress for the gala.” Draco hummed under his breath, eyes fluttering closed. “I’d come with you,” he added lazily. “If you want me to that is. I think I’d quite enjoy dress shopping with you.”

Her heart clenched once. “You’d *enjoy* dress shopping with me?”

His mouth twitched. “Don’t make it weird.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. “Actually, Ginny already offered to go shopping with me.”

One of Draco’s eyes cracked open just a sliver. A single brow lifted in question, even as the rest of his body remained completely still.

He didn’t need to say anything. His expression alone asked what, exactly, she had told Ginny to justify needing to shop for a fancy dress.

Hermione exhaled slowly. “I told her about us.”

Draco’s eyes opened fully then, the lift of his brow fading into something unreadable. He stared up at her.

“That we’re together,” she added quietly.

He just watched her, his head still cradled in her lap, chest rising and falling with calm breaths.

“You did?”

Hermione nodded, the hand still resting in his hair started to move again with slow strokes. “I didn’t plan to. But it just happened. I couldn’t keep it away from her any longer.”

Draco’s gaze stayed fixed on her, like he was still processing her words or maybe he was looking for the other shoe to drop. It took a while before he finally exhaled through his nose,

like it was the first full breath he'd taken all day.

"Okay."

She looked down at him, searching. "You don't sound happy."

He glanced up at her as if she caught him red-handed. "No. I am *very* happy."

"Really?"

A faint grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Are *you* happy about it?"

Then he closed his eyes again and nestled further into her lap, his arm tightening around her legs, as if he was bracing for her answer.

The question caught her off guard with how much it mattered. She nodded. "Yes," she said quietly, her fingers brushing his temple. "I'm happy."

He reached for her other hand, the one not threaded through his hair, and took it gently in his own. He brought it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

It was such a small thing. But it stopped her breath in her throat.

His eyes stayed on hers when he let her wrist rest against his cheek.

"I asked Ginny not to say anything to Blaise," she continued.

Draco's expression shifted slightly. A flicker in his eyes, something guarded and shutting down. "Ah," he murmured. It wasn't cold but cautious. Like he'd been waiting for a catch.

Hermione caught instantly how he read her words wrong.

"No," she said quickly. "I didn't mean it like that. I asked her not to tell him because I thought you might want to be the one to do it. He's your best friend. I figured you'd want a say in how that goes."

"Oh," he said as if that hadn't occurred to him.

"I thought maybe it would feel better coming from you?"

He was quiet for a moment, then let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh. "That's thoughtful."

Hermione shrugged, a little self-conscious now. "You can tell him whenever you want. Or not yet. I don't mean to push."

He turned her hand in his, thumb grazing over her knuckles now. "And the others?"

Her smile faltered, just a little. "I want this. Even though it scares me. I want *you*."

Draco didn't hesitate when he reached up and pulled her down just enough, without breaking eye contact. His fingers slid into her curls and brushed his lips with hers.

"You're making me very happy, Hermione."

Hermione closed her eyes and couldn't help but smile as he kissed her again.

They ended up ordering pizza.

Draco gradually came back to life as they lounged on the couch, half-watching a terrible action movie. At some point, Hermione excused herself to the loo. On the way she spotted the closed office door at the end and shook her head in disbelief at Ginny's question. Her gaze lingered on it for a second longer than it should have, but she pushed the thought down, turning away before it could take roots.

When she returned to the living room, Draco was still sprawled on the couch, but he reached out without looking and caught her wrist gently as she passed, his fingers curling around her.

He pulled her in easily, his arm slipping around her waist as he guided her into his lap. Hermione shifted sideways over his thigh, hugging him loosely around his neck.

"You know," he said quietly, lips brushing her ear, "I've been exceptionally patient."

Hermione raised a brow, amused. "Oh?"

Draco sighed deeply and maybe a tad too dramatic. "Heroic, really." He nudged his nose along the side of her jaw. "Still haven't touched myself."

She pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. "You know I don't expect that from you, right?"

He gave a small smirk. "I know. Still didn't want to waste it."

Something hot and slow unfurled inside her, spreading beneath her skin.

He reached up, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. "That said. I'm really struggling with this whole sexless relationship thing."

That made her laugh, her grin widening as she looped her arms more snugly around his neck. Her fingers toyed with the ends of his hair, gently tugging. "Must be torture."

"You have no idea," he murmured, his thumb tracing a slow line along her waist. "I'm hanging on by a thread."

Hermione rolled her eyes, though the smile tugging at her lips refused to fade. There was something dangerously addictive about him like this.

“You do realize we had sex last weekend,” she said. “And something in between on Wednesday.”

“Exactly,” he deadpanned. “And it’s Sunday.”

She laughed again, forehead dropping to his shoulder, but even as her smile lingered, Ginny’s questions from earlier crept back into her thoughts.

Hermione tilted her head, still nestled close. “Hey,” she whispered.

Draco hummed into her hair. “Yeah?”

“Why does Ginny think you have a *sex dungeon*?”

He paused, then let out a soft, low chuckle against her skin. “Haven’t heard that one in a while.”

Hermione just stared at him.

“Is it true or not?”

He gave her a look, unable to hide his amusement. “What do *you* think?”

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “I think you’re stalling.”

Draco laughed quietly, his fingers grazing the curve of her hip. “Maybe I just like hearing you ask about my kinks.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her mouth twitched like she was fighting a smile.

“Well,” he said, still smirking. “There’s no dungeon. Sorry to disappoint.” He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping. “It’s more like a closet. In my office.”

Hermione’s brows rose. “A closet?”

“Sex dungeon just sounds cooler,” he murmured, his hand brushing a slow line down her spine.

Hermione tried to play it cool, but her pulse betrayed her. “Okay... so what’s in it?”

Draco sighed, gaze flicking briefly toward the hallway before returning to her. “It’s mostly empty now.” His mouth curved. “It’s less about what’s in it now, and more about what we might want to put in it. Depending on what you’re into.”

She smiled faintly, but her eyes stayed on him. “You know you’re kind of making it worse, right? I’m imagining all kinds of things now.”

His mouth twitched. “Maybe that’s the point.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Or maybe you just don’t want to tell me.”

Draco tilted his head, clearly enjoying himself. “Or maybe you’d rather see it than keep wondering.”

Hermione held her breath. “Now?”

His gaze didn’t waver. “Do you want to?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her heart thudded louder than it should have.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “Maybe.”

“It’s not a show,” he murmured. “It’s just a space. And we don’t have to fill it unless you want to.”

Hermione searched his face. “Are you nervous I’ll judge you?”

Draco shrugged, but his fingers curled a little tighter around her waist. “Maybe. Or maybe I just want to know what you’re ready for before I open a door like that.”

She was chewing gently on the inside of her cheek. “What exactly am I bracing for?”

He tilted his head, smirking. “It’s not that dramatic. A few restraints. Some furniture. Mostly empty drawers these days, like I said.”

Her brows shot up. “Furniture?”

He looked completely unfazed.

“In a closet?”

Draco rolled his eyes, his mouth twitching again. “Maybe it’s more of a walk-in.”

She kept staring at him.

“A small one,” he added quickly. “Relax. Come on. I’ll just show you.”

Draco hadn’t been lying to her when he told her the closed door led to his office. Or that it was chaotic.

She was a little surprised by just how much clutter, paperwork, boxes, and loose stacks of books were spread across the room. It looked like a study. His desk was barely visible beneath scattered folders. Two mugs sat abandoned on a windowsill. A tie was draped over the back of a leather chair.

It was the only room in his flat that didn’t feel like him, like the rest of the organized, neat space he had created for himself. This room looked like something she might have found in her own home.

Draco stepped past her and moved toward the far wall, where an overstuffed bookshelf leaned slightly to one side. Nestled beside it was another door. He opened it slowly and flicked on the light inside, then turned back to her.

Hermione swallowed but stepped forward, the soles of her feet soundless on the wood. She crossed the threshold and stopped just inside.

This was, unmistakably, a walk-in closet not meant for clothes.

The walls were matte black. Drawers lined one side, built into the wall. A set of open shelves above them sat mostly abandoned.

And in the center, pushed neatly against the back wall, was something covered in a white sheet.

Draco didn't follow her in. He leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching her.

Hermione turned slightly, her fingers brushing the edge of one drawer as she looked back at him.

"What's under the cover?" She reached out and gently lifted a corner of the white sheet.

Underneath was a black leathered chaise lounge but unlike any she'd ever seen. It wasn't made for reading or lounging. It curved in two exaggerated waves, like uneven hills, and near the bottom edge on either side were small metal loops.

Behind her, Draco cleared his throat. "It's a shame, really. I never got the chance to use it."

Hermione didn't turn around, her eyes took in the massive chaise.

"My last partner," he added, the words carefully chosen, "wasn't quite into trying new things."

She nodded. "What exactly is it for?"

She heard him shift his weight against the doorframe, then the sound of him stepping forward. His presence behind her was immediate and warm, and when his hands came to rest on her shoulders, she didn't flinch.

His voice was near her ear when he spoke. "It's designed to make certain positions easier," he said gently, his thumbs moving in slow circles at the base of her neck. "More comfort. Deeper angles. Better access. And if one or both people want to be restrained. It helps with that, too."

Her pulse kicked. Heat curled low in her stomach.

"Are you into that?"

Draco's fingers trailed lightly down her arms, and then back up again. She could feel the tension rising between them. A magnetic pull like they both were letting down their guards at

once.

“I am,” he said finally before he pressed his lips just below her ear. “I like control.”

Hermione’s breath faltered.

“Not just the physical part,” he went on, his hands slipping around her waist. “Though that can be *very* satisfying too. I just like knowing the other person feels safe enough to let go,” he murmured. “How far they let me push. What they didn’t even know they wanted yet.”

Hermione closed her eyes for a second, unable to stop picturing the unnerving feeling of not being able to pull away. To run.

“But I’d never ask you to do something you weren’t comfortable with,” he murmured. “That’s not what this is about.”

She turned toward him slowly, and he stepped back just enough to let her.

Their eyes met, and it almost felt like he was looking right into her head.

“I’m already having the best sex of my life with you,” he said. “I don’t have a void I’m trying to fill.”

Her pulse thudded in her neck, fast and deep.

They stood there in the dimly lit space with their bodies close enough to touch if they gave in.

Her fingers drifted over the smooth leather surface without breaking eye contact. “I’ve never been tied up before,” she admitted. “I don’t know if I’d enjoy it.”

“You don’t have to,” he said matter of fact. “You never have to try any of this.”

She glanced toward the drawers built into the wall. “They’re empty?”

He gave a small smile. “Yeah. You can look if you want.”

She stepped closer, fingers curling around one of the matte black handles. The drawer slid open smoothly. Empty. Just soft lining and a faint scent of wood polish.

“What did you use to keep in here?” she asked.

“Things,” he said.

She glanced back at him. “That’s vague.”

Draco’s mouth curved, but not into a smirk this time. “Some of it was pretty standard,” he said. “Restraints. Toys. Things for impact.”

Hermione turned slightly, her hands resting on the edge of the drawer. “Why keep the space at all?”

He shrugged. "Maybe because I didn't want to erase all of myself just because the last person didn't want to see it."

She nodded slowly. That made sense in a way that stung a little.

Her gaze swept over the space again. It wasn't frightening. Just full of unfamiliar possibilities.

Behind her, Draco shifted his weight one more time. "Let's get out of here?" he asked, already stepping back.

But she caught his wrist before he could fully turn.

"You said you never used this?" Her eyes flicked to the curved chaise still half-draped under the sheet.

Draco stilled, following her glance, then looked back at her with a soft nod.

Without releasing his wrist, she leaned sideways and flipped off the closet light. The room dropped into near darkness despite the daylight pooling in from the office behind him. It cast faint shapes over the matte black walls and glinted off the metal rings and leather seams still half-concealed by the white cloth.

Draco watched her, eyes roaming her figure before her fingers reached behind her to pull the zipper of her wool dress down. She peeled the sleeves off one at a time, the thick knit falling around her legs before she caught the hem and slipped it up and over her head. Underneath, she wore a black bra and thin tights.

She wasn't sure what gave her the courage. Maybe the quiet way he looked at her, like he wasn't expecting anything. Maybe the space he'd left for her to show him that just because she wasn't experienced in any of this didn't mean she was afraid of it.

She straightened slowly, letting the silence settle between them. Her chest rose with each breath, nerves flickering under her skin, but she didn't look away.

Hermione tugged the rest of the white sheet off the chaise before settling herself on the lower curve. It took her a second to find her balance after she slid slightly down the slope, the thin tights slick against the leather. She let out a breathless laugh.

His eyes dragged over her body, almost missing the moment Hermione bit her lower lip.

Draco sank slowly to his knees in front of her. His hands came to rest lightly on them. "We don't have to do anything just because we're in here."

Hermione nodded, but then swallowed, grounding herself. "I know. I just...Maybe don't tie me to it right away. But why not make use of it?"

He reached for her, and she let him adjust her gently on the slope of the chaise.

Hermione's pulse thundered in her throat, his hands already on its way up to skim her waist.

He glanced up, and she lifted her hips without being asked.

The movement tilted her back more firmly against the curve of the chaise, thighs opening just enough. He rolled the tights down slowly, dragging the fabric over her hips.

Her eyes fixed on him, on what he was doing to her with just his hands.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said as he traced his fingers along the edge where the tights met bare skin. “How you’re trusting me like this.”

Her lips parted, the compliment striking deeper than she expected. He paused at the bend of her knees, fingers spreading softly across her skin. He looked up at her, eyes scanning her face.

“You could get on your knees for me?”

Hermione met his gaze, lips parted in anticipation.

His thumb stroked over her thigh. “On the chaise.”

He helped her up, pulled down her tights properly so she could step out of them. She braced one knee on the curved center of the lounge until her other one followed. She leaned forward slowly, the cold leather pressing into her bare stomach and thighs.

Hermione shifted, palms resting lightly on the upper slope of the leather. Her spine arched naturally, her hips rose, cushioned by the perfect shape beneath her.

“Just like that,” Draco murmured behind her.

His hands skimmed her hips, then her lower back. She could feel him shifting, making her body hum with excitement.

Her cheek rested against her forearm as the soft scrape of his hand dragged her underwear slowly down her thighs.

His knuckles grazed along the tender crease where thigh met cheek.

Hermione shivered.

The pad of one fingertip glided down the center of her, maddeningly light in between her folds.

She gasped and hoped for more, but he didn’t give in.

He pressed his palm gently to the curve of her ass to still her and force her to rest against the chaise.

His fingers dragged again along the seam of her.

A whimper caught in her throat.

Then his hands left her.

The cool air hit her skin as he shifted behind her, and she heard the quiet rustle of fabric. The unmistakable sound of him stripping off his joggers.

She turned slightly, face brushing the leather.

Draco shifted her carefully, guiding her hips just enough to tilt her open. Her underwear was tangled around her knees, and her whole body trembled as he knelt between her thighs.

He braced a hand beside her head on the chaise, and used the other to guide himself, pressing the thick head of his cock just barely to her entrance.

Hermione sucked in a breath. It had been a week since he'd been inside her. A long, torturous week of aching, want, and late-night memories.

He didn't push in. Just rubbed himself against her, collecting the slick that coated her and dragging the tip through to spread it. Letting her adjust to the idea of him again.

"We'll go slow."

Hermione nodded when all she wanted was to shake her head. Her eyes fluttered closed, jaw slack as he began to ease forward. Only the tip at first, then a little more. The stretch was pure bliss. That slow, sweet ache as her body fought to take him and begged for more in the same breath.

Her fingers gripped the chaise. "Draco." Her thighs trembled, and he was only halfway in.

Her body slowly gave and clenched, opening around him with a broken gasp.

She nodded quickly, without knowing if he was asking. "More."

Draco didn't wait for her to beg. He sank the rest of the way in, stealing the air from her lungs. Her back arched against the curve of the chaise, her body pulsing around him filling her.

He held her there so she could feel him buried deep. His front met her backside, his fingers grasping for hers on the leather.

"You feel so good," he whispered against her cheek, his breath shaking.

Hermione's moan came from deeper than she thought possible. "You're so deep."

He'd taken her from behind before, much rougher and messier.

But this felt different.

The chaise took her weight and allowed him to be impossibly deep, without her having to lift a single muscle. There was no trying or reaching. She couldn't shift or roll her hips to meet him. She couldn't help. She didn't *need* to. This didn't feel kinky at all. It felt like she was so

much closer to him than she'd ever been. In a closet, on a leather chaise that he could tie her to if he wanted to. If she wanted him to.

She trembled at the thought of it.

He pulled back slowly, dragging every inch out of her, then pushed forward again with a slowness that made her dizzy.

The length of him was still thick and deep, dragging pleasure through every nerve. The curve of the chaise cradled her hips perfectly, lifting her just enough to tilt her open without effort. It felt strange and natural all at once.

Draco's hips rolled, his breath stuttering softly above her. Every inch of him brushed places that felt newly discovered, untouched despite everything they'd done before.

He tightened his grip on her hand where it rested on the chaise, his other palm skimming down her spine.

He rolled his hips again, and she keened, soft and overwhelmed.

The rhythm he set was slow, dragging her to an edge. He was taking her.

"Can't think," she gasped.

Draco smiled faintly against the back of her shoulder, kissing the soft skin there. He sounded out of breath. "That's the point, love."

She let out a choked laugh, then whimpered again when he thrust a little deeper, a little harder. Her hand squeezed his instinctively.

"Good," he whispered, the words hit like feathers against her skin. "You're doing so good for me. Taking me so deep. Letting me have you like this."

She whimpered. The praise for taking him hit her like lightning in her core.

His hand slid to her hip, holding her still. "I can feel you shaking."

"I can't stop," she admitted breathlessly.

"You don't have to." He kissed the nape of her neck, his words brushing heat along her spine. "Not when you're mine."

Every thrust pushed her deeper against the chaise, surrounding her in heat and pressure and the rhythmic sound of him moving inside her.

He readjusted one hand above her shoulder and reached for her hair with the other, fingers anchoring gently into the curls by her neck. He stroked them slowly when his hips rolled deep and pinned her against the leather.

“You’re mine,” he said again, teeth grazing the shell of her ear. He said it with such certainty that it settled under her skin.

Hermione whimpered, her fingers twitching over the armrest and against his hold. Her throat ached with how much she needed him to mean every word.

A shudder rolled through her. She was burning alive in the best way.

“I keep thinking about being inside you,” he said, his fingers tightening in her hair.

She sobbed at the sting. Not because it hurt, but because it threatened to pull her out of the heat of him buried deep inside her. It stole her breath. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

He pressed forward again, hips grinding against the swell of her ass.

“Draco...” she gasped, arching into the pressure, chasing something she couldn’t name.

“Please don’t ever run from me,” he murmured, lips brushing her neck, fingers stroking her hair as if trying to soothe the storm he was causing.

What had started as him taking her was unraveling into something else. He was claiming her.

She never wanted to leave.

”I won’t run again,” she sighed before her jaw fell slack.

He kept claiming her so completely without ever taking more than she was willing to give.

Hermione gasped, her throat catching on something like a sob.

Draco’s palm flattened over her stomach, pulling her more flush against him as he rolled his hips again, slower again, almost aching in the way he dragged it out.

She moaned, her body tightening, trembling again around him.

“I’m yours,” she gasped, nodding as if answering a silent question. The words slipped free before she could second-guess them.

Draco cursed under his breath.

And then she shattered around him, her body clenching hard and fast, so intense it stole the world around her.

The feel of her tightening around him made him groan out loud. Almost in disbelief.

“So deep in you... fuck... you’re squeezing me...”

He drove into her harder, his hips fighting her body’s attempt to push him out and draw him in.

The sound of skin on skin filled the closet. The thick, wet pulse of her body taking him so tight. The broken moans she couldn't contain. The way he groaned behind her, bending over her to control the way her body shook underneath him.

Her eyes rolled back into her head. Her high spiraled further instead of fading.

"Hermione," he gasped, losing pace with each thrust hitting deep and uneven.

His breath broke.

He buried himself once more. Hard and deep when he came with a guttural sound against her neck, his body jerking, collapsing over her.

She felt him everywhere. The stretch of him. The weight of his chest draped over her back. His mouth pressed to her spine, whispering "I'm yours."

Chapter 22: Red

The sun hung low in the late afternoon sky when Draco pulled up beside a large, columned entryway. His childhood home seemed oddly symmetrical and too pristine to be lived in. The stone facade was pale and glowed with tall windows glinting like glass eyes watching their arrival. Even the hedges surrounding them seemed lifeless.

Draco's car, tasteful and expensive as it was, suddenly felt humble beside the row of sleek luxury vehicles already parked in perfect order.

He'd picked her up just after six, catching her mid-frantic attempt to tame her hair into something halfway elegant. Ginny had been guiding her over a shaky video call while Hermione tried to follow a YouTube tutorial.

Ginny had been unusually moody all week, not toward her, but snippy in texts, distracted in group chats, and oddly curt when asking her during their hair disaster, "So when is Draco telling Blaise?"

Hermione hadn't answered because... he hadn't. And Blaise, maddeningly, hadn't told Draco either about the baby. Ginny had told him about the pregnancy the same night she'd come home from Hermione's. According to Ginny, he'd been shocked silent for a solid minute, then weirdly sweet.

Apparently, he wanted to go with her to the doctor next week *"just to be sure of everything,"* he'd said. And Ginny, for all her bark, had softened telling Hermione about it. She'd even said, *"He brought me crackers. Like six boxes. I didn't even ask."*

Her hair looked *decent* now, but she was still in denims and a blouse. Draco had told her they'd get ready at the house.

Hermione let out a long, careful breath and smoothed her hand over the garment bag in her lap.

"I feel out of place already," she whispered, not sure whether she meant it for Draco or herself. She hadn't been nervous before, not exactly, but now the sheer scale of it pressed in from all sides. She didn't belong here.

He looked at the house for a long moment before turning to her, though he didn't quite meet her eyes.

"I know the feeling," he said finally. "But you belong where I am."

He was out of the car before she could register his words fully. She watched as he pulled his own garment bag from the back seat and slung it over his shoulder. Then he circled around and opened her door without another word.

Draco reached for her dress, their hands brushing as he helped her out.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

He only shifted the bags on his shoulder and touched the small of her back, guiding her forward. Hermione stared at the wide stone steps glowing in the last of the afternoon light.

She swallowed. “You’ve been quiet today. Are you worried about me meeting your parents?”

He stilled, just enough to make her wonder if he might pretend he hadn’t heard. But then he drew in a slow breath.

“I don’t enjoy these things,” he admitted, each word careful, as though he were choosing them from a pile of ones he’d rather not say. “There was a year I got drunk enough they locked me in my wing to keep me from embarrassing them. Unfortunately, that’s not really an option anymore. Adulthood sucks.”

His jaw flexed.

Hermione glanced at him. His expression was neutral but his posture was tense, like he was forcing calm over something he didn’t want to feel.

“They really locked you in?” she asked, quietly.

“Mm,” he murmured. “Self-inflicted, mostly. I made it easier for them.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. Not without it sounding like pity, and she had a feeling he’d hate that.

So she reached out instead, her fingers brushing his wrist as they started up the steps.

“For what it’s worth,” she said softly, “I’m glad you didn’t drink your way out of this one.”

He huffed, almost a laugh.

But his fingers caught hers just before they reached the top.

“Come on,” he murmured.

He’d been tense all day. Short with words but not short with physical affection. Every glance had been brief, every reply clipped, but his hands had found her constantly. A brush of knuckles along her hip in the kitchen. His palm at the small of her back when she’d bent to tie her shoes. Fingers ghosting over her wrist while waiting at a red light. Subtle, like he was grounding himself in her without knowing how to say it out loud.

She’d craved those touches more than ever now, standing in front of this cold, perfect place he had once called home.

“We’ve got about an hour,” he said, glancing at her. “Before the first guests arrive.”

She nodded, grateful for some structure she could cling to.

“I’ll introduce you to my mother first,” he added quietly. “Then I’ll take you somewhere quiet so we can change.”

Hermione gave him a sidelong glance. “What about your father?”

Draco’s lips twitched, but the rest of his face didn’t follow. “There’s no telling when he’ll decide to show up.”

She watched as his gaze shifted toward the grand entrance doors.

Hermione hesitated. She wanted to ask why he never spoke of his father with anything resembling kindness, especially considering they worked together at the law firm. But before she could find the right words, the doors opened.

A woman in a white blouse and dark skirt greeted them with a small nod. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun.

“Welcome home, Mr. Malfoy,” she said.

“Thank you, Meryl,” Draco replied calmly.

He gave Hermione’s hand a soft squeeze and led her forward.

As they stepped inside, she felt the temperature drop slightly. The interior was cool, scented faintly with lilies and polish. But it was the *movement* that hit her next. The house was alive with hushed coordination. Beyond a marble foyer, a ballroom unfolded in a flurry of chaos. Staff in uniform similar to Meryl’s moved quickly under soft lighting. A quartet of musicians entered from a side hallway, carrying instruments. Silver trays glinted as they passed, one lined with champagne flutes, another with still water in tall bottles, already beading with condensation.

Tablecloths were being smoothed. Candles adjusted. Someone was arguing in over the angle of a floral centerpiece.

Hermione tried not to gawk, but it was hard not to. It felt like walking into the backstage of a show she hadn’t auditioned for with invisible rules she was afraid of breaking by breathing too loudly.

She didn’t realize she’d slowed until Draco squeezed her hand again and pulled her gently forward.

That’s when the heels clicked against marble.

“Let them finish the service in the front first, please. I don’t want noise bleeding over once guests begin arriving.”

Mrs. Malfoy appeared as though conjured from thin air, already dressed for the evening. She stood at the far end of the hall in a fitted navy gown that shimmered with silver detailing at the shoulders, her white-blond hair swept back in perfection.

Hermione knew it was her before Draco even said a word. It was in her posture, in the way she held herself with a quiet authority, spine straight, chin slightly lifted, as if the world would adjust to her presence rather than the other way around.

Draco carried himself the same way when he wasn't thinking about it, or when he was around strangers.

Their eyes were the same, too. Cool and assessing, as they landed on her son.

She began walking toward them, her heels soundless now that she'd crossed onto a rug that lined the center of the marble hall. Her gaze flicked briefly to Hermione, then back to her son as she drew closer.

She leaned in when she stopped in front of him. Her lips didn't brush the side of his face when she pretended to kiss him, and she made no move to touch his shoulders or embrace him in any way. It was a gesture of etiquette, not affection.

"You're late," she said.

Hermione couldn't remember the last time her own mother had greeted her like that. The contrast felt strange, like watching a play.

"We're early," Draco corrected her flatly. There was no warmth in his voice, but no real bite either. There was only a careful neutrality that made Hermione's chest ache a little for him. And she remembered, too, how Draco had looked the first time her own mother had pulled him into one of her tight hugs. How he'd stood stiff, his arms caught halfway between returning it and not knowing where to put them at all.

She squeezed his fingers gently.

"Early enough to get dressed," his mother sighed. "I've been managing the staff alone all afternoon while your father hid in his study, pretending none of this was his idea. I had rather hoped you'd arrive hours ago to help coordinate."

She paused, her gaze sweeping over Draco's hair, his clothes, the garment bags in his hand. Like an assessment Hermione felt as much as saw. But when her eyes returned to his, they softened a little.

"I suppose I should have known you'd wait until the last minute to show," she added, her tone gentler, almost fond. "You always do."

Draco shifted the garment bags higher on his shoulder, as though bracing himself. His face hardened, then eased by degrees as he turned toward Hermione, letting his gaze settle there a moment before he looked back at his mother.

"Mother," he said calmly, "you remember that I've told you about Hermione." His hand lifted, brushing lightly against Hermione's waist in a gesture that felt almost protective. "This is her."

Hermione felt Mrs. Malfoy's eyes snap to her, the weight of sudden attention sliding to her like the beam of a stage light. She straightened on instinct, smoothing a hand down the front of her blouse.

"Hermione, this is my mother. Narcissa Malfoy."

This was no different than facing a difficult client, she told herself. An important one. She had a face for that.

Mrs. Malfoy tilted her head the barest fraction, taking her in. A practiced curve of her mouth was the only sign of acknowledgment she received.

Draco pulled her closer to his side.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Malfoy. Thank you very much for having me."

Mrs. Malfoy's head inclined. "It's lovely to meet you, Hermione. I apologize for the chaos. I hope we'll speak properly once the first storm passes."

Hermione smiled again, this one more real. "Of course."

"You two want to change before the guests arrive," she added, eyes now narrowing in on her son. "Show her the guest suite on the second floor, will you?"

Draco walked beside her without ever letting his hand drop from her back. This place felt too silent, like a museum before opening hours.

Hermione glanced at him, lips tugging at the corner, but her eyes were already wandering. The house felt too cold to be lived in. Her mother would have offered tea already. Or asked if she was cold. Or told her she looked nice. But her mother also didn't arrange galas for a family business.

She kept that thought to herself.

After a moment, Hermione drew in a breath.

"What exactly did you tell your mother about me?" she asked, careful to keep her voice from echoing.

He didn't look over right away. His gaze stayed forward, fixed on the stairs ahead.

"That you're someone I wanted her to meet," he said, as though it was the simplest thing in the world. "Someone very important to me."

Her pulse flickered, catching in her throat.

"Oh."

He finally glanced at her then, the faintest crease between his brows.

“We don’t have to stay long,” he went on, “We’ll be here for the speech and then sneak out.”

Hermione swallowed. “No, don’t worry about me, Draco. I’m okay with this.”

His hand pressed a little more firmly at her back, not quite doubting her, but not leaving space for argument either.

“I mean it,” he said, and something in his tone left no room for doubt. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to pretend to like any of this.”

It struck her all at once, how easy it was for him to be steady like this. To touch her without hesitation, to guide her forward like he’d done it a thousand times. It felt so natural coming from him, the way his hand never wavered at her waist, how his thumb traced slow, grounding arcs against her spine.

And yet, she thought, watching the measured way he moved, he hadn’t learned any of it from *his mother*.

She had to push that thought down before it could turn into something sharp and selfish. Tonight wasn’t about her insecurities. It wasn’t about her wondering how many times he’d stood in other foyers like this, offering his hand to someone else.

Tonight was about Draco.

Hermione let out a slow breath and managed a small, steady nod.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Draco’s mouth curved, just enough to soften the line of his jaw. He didn’t say anything more, only shifted his hand to catch hers for a moment, fingers sliding around hers like he couldn’t stand not to touch her.

The *guest suite* was larger than her flat in the city.

Her new dress hung from her body like it had been poured there, the red-colored silk clung to her skin, dipping low in the back, catching the light when she moved.

Draco stood in the doorway in a black tux that fit him too well to be off the rack. He’d styled his hair back, looking neat but not stiff. The light from the chandelier hit just enough shine in his hair to make it look like liquid shadow, drawing attention to the high sweep of his cheekbones.

His eyes met hers and lingered before his gaze drifted down her body.

Hermione turned slowly, smoothing her hands over her hips, her spine held tall with the posture she’d practiced with Ginny, though she felt anything but composed under his gaze.

“Too much skin?”

He was already moving toward her, pushing himself off the doorframe. His eyes narrowed.
“For my sanity? Absolutely.”

His hands found her waist from behind her, fingers settling against the silk like he craved to feel the fabric. His eyes lingered at the open back, fingers twitching.

“For the event? Tragically, no.”

Hermione laughed, pink blooming quickly on her face. She reached toward the vanity in front of her and picked up the folded square of red silk Ginny had insisted she bring for Draco. It matched her dress exactly.

She hesitated for a beat, suddenly uncertain if it was stupid. “I brought this,” she said softly. “In case you wanted to... I don’t know. Match. Or something.”

Her smile was small and a little self-conscious.

Draco blinked, then looked down at the handkerchief in her palm.

“You want me to wear this?” he asked, not mocking, just surprised.

Her heart stuttered.

She nodded, even more unsure than just a second ago. “You don’t have to, I just thought-”

He took it before she could finish, folding it once between his fingers.

“I usually mark what’s mine,” he said quietly. “Didn’t expect you to do it first.”

He looked up at her then, sharp eyes softer than she’d seen all night.

“But I’ll wear it. Happily.”

He folded it into a cleaner square and slipped it into the breast pocket of his tux, giving it a slight tug into place.

Then he grasped for her wrists and made her turn away from him before he stepped into her, close enough that the warmth of his body touched her bare back before his lips did. He kissed just beneath her ear, then lower, his breath brushing the slope of her spine.

His teeth grazed her shoulder in a tease that made her knees weak. His eyes snapped up to meet hers in the mirror.

His hands gripped her hips, pulling her gently back into him.

“I’m not going to make it through tonight,” he whispered. “Not with you looking like this.”

“Draco,” she breathed, but bit her lip at his words. “I just got dressed.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“My hair-”

“I don’t need your hair.” His voice dropped further, gravel against her neck. “I just need a few minutes. I could bend you over that bed over there right now, not a single hair out of place. I’ll be quick.”

A startled laugh escaped her, breathless and way too tempted to be appropriate at the image forming in her mind. “Draco.”

He groaned, low in his throat, when she turned in his arms against his wishes. Her palms pressed gently to his chest, stopping him with a softness that did something to the way his lips caught between his teeth.

Her fingers reached up to smooth the edges of his collar, adjusting the line of his lapel.

“How about,” she whispered, “you show me around before the gala starts? I want to see where you grew up.”

He let out a long, theatrical sigh, like a man surrendering to fate, then he kissed the shell of her ear. “You’re going to kill me.”

They passed two servants in the hallway, both of whom dipped their heads respectfully.

“Mr. Malfoy.” - “Miss.”

Hermione returned the greeting awkwardly, fingers brushing Draco’s as they walked.

“Do they all live here?” she whispered once the footsteps faded behind them.

“No. Staff rotates.”

She hummed, letting her eyes wander over the polished banister, the gleaming chandelier above the landing.

“Is this really where you grew up?”

He glanced at her; one brow raised. “Awful, isn’t it?”

Hermione didn’t answer at first. She thought of her parents’ home, the messy coat rack by the door, the fridge magnets from every holiday, the squeaky floorboard outside her childhood bedroom. This place felt like the opposite of that. It was too clean.

But she didn’t say that. She saw it already in Draco’s face, that quiet, defensive shrug that masked old bruises.

“Everyone grows up differently,” she said instead. “It would be boring otherwise.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Then, wordlessly, he reached for her hand again and laced their fingers together.

Halfway along the wall, Hermione slowed in front of a large, silver-framed photograph.

It was a formal portrait of the three of them. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy and Draco, posing stiffly in the entrance hall she had walked through earlier.

His mother looked younger in the picture, though not softer. Her hair was darker at the roots, her eyes just as sharp. Beside her, Mr. Malfoy wore the same cool, assessing expression she'd glimpsed in Draco more than once. It startled her, how much he looked like his son. Older, broader-shouldered and his face a little more lined but nearly identical in the set of his mouth.

And then there was Draco.

His hair was much shorter, neatly combed off his forehead, his skin paler than today. The suit he wore hung stiffly on his thin frame, as though it hadn't been tailored properly or he hadn't quite grown into it yet.

He wasn't smiling. None of them were.

Hermione couldn't look away. There was something about the stillness in his face that made her wonder.

"How old were you here?"

"Seventeen," Draco muttered.

"You look like you were one second away from walking out," she said.

"I was," he admitted. "We'd been shouting at each other all morning."

"About what?"

He pressed his mouth into a line, his fingers tightening around hers.

"About me not wanting to study law. Or not wanting to become him. One of those usually made up the day."

He paused.

"Sometimes both."

Hermione studied his profile for a moment.

"But you still went through with it," she said slowly. "You still studied law, still joined the firm."

"Eventually," Draco said, his mouth curving into something that wasn't quite a smile. "After I took a year off. The infamous shameful gap in my pristine Malfoy résumé." He let out a soft

breath. "I was meant to start uni right away. That was *his* plan." He glanced toward the photograph, his eyes narrowing before he added, "But after I finished school... I needed some time to figure out what the right thing was. Or at least what I could live with at the time."

"What did you do between school and uni?" she asked carefully.

"Moved out. Got my flat in the city. Tried to pretend none of this family bullshit mattered."

"And then?"

He looked at her briefly, then back to the photo.

"Then I drank too much, burned through my savings and any good life choices I had. Let my mother drag me into therapy. And eventually..."

His voice went quieter. "I caved. Started uni a year late. Got the degree everyone expected and took the job I never wanted."

Hermione exhaled slowly, watching him. There was so much he hadn't said outright, but somehow, she felt like she'd just been handed a key to part of him he didn't often unlock.

"That doesn't sound like caving," she said quietly. "It sounds like surviving."

He didn't answer.

"Is that why things are so strained with your father?" Hermione asked gently. "Because you didn't want to follow in his footsteps?"

Draco let out a short breath.

"That was part of it," he said. "But honestly, I think I could've chosen *anything* and it still would've gone to shit."

He rubbed his thumb along the edge of her knuckles.

"I did a lot of stupid things back then. Sometimes just to prove I could. Sometimes just to piss him off."

His eyes flicked to the photograph again, tongue pressing against the inside of his cheek.

"He had this way of making me feel like I was a disappointment. I believed him for a very long time."

Hermione's chest ached. She didn't know what she'd expected, but not *that*. Not the quiet exhaustion in his voice.

"That sounds really lonely," she whispered.

Draco gave her a surprised look, like the honesty of her response had caught him off guard.

"Yeah," he said, after a moment. "It was."

Hermione studied the boy in the picture again, the rigid posture, the distance in his eyes, and then looked at the man beside her.

She felt Draco shift beside her.

“Come on,” he said, gently tugging her hand. “I want to show you something more interesting.”

He led her down the hall, past tall windows and doors with carved moulding, past portraits she didn’t recognize and he didn’t slow down for. His hand stayed wrapped around hers the entire way.

At the end of the corridor, he stopped in front of a pair of tall double doors and pushed them open without ceremony.

Hermione stepped inside.

Books. Floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall. Dark wood shelves, some bowed with age. Rows and rows of old bindings and cracked leather spines. A globe stood half-tilted in the corner. There were two worn armchairs, one slightly more collapsed than the other. A fireplace with no fire.

“No one really comes in here anymore,” Draco said quietly. “Not since I moved out.”

Hermione smiled faintly, drawn to the silence and history.

“Was this your favorite place?” she asked. “Growing up?”

“Yeah.” He stepped further inside, releasing her hand to trail his fingers along the edge of a shelf. “I used to hide in here a lot. Read things I wasn’t supposed to. Stole whisky from the cabinet behind the atlas.”

His mouth twitched. “I wrote my uni application essay in that chair when my parents were out of town.”

Hermione turned to look at him, but his eyes were already on her to watch the way she took it all in.

“It’s the only place in this house that ever really felt like mine,” he said.

And though he said it lightly, something in her heart caught on the way he looked when he said it. Hermione turned slowly, the warmth of the room wrapping around her like a secret.

They walked a little deeper inside.

He turned, watching her fingers brushing the spines, her eyes tracing the lines of gold lettering.

Hermione stepped slowly, the silk of her dress whispering around her legs. Her gaze caught on a title in dark green leather.

“Wuthering Heights,” she murmured. Then, farther along, “The Odyssey. Jane Eyre. Les Fleurs du Mal...” Her lips twitched. “Baudelaire? Really?”

Draco smirked behind her. “My mother insisted for the poetry to be well-rounded.”

Hermione tilted her head, eyes scanning the shelves. “Wait, no Pride and Prejudice?”

“Top of the second shelf in the far corner,” he said dryly. “Sorted by genre, then by author. Fiction there, nonfiction along the west wall. Poetry’s closer to the window because she thought natural light made it more bearable.”

She turned to look at him.

Draco shrugged, leaning back against the edge of the nearest armchair. “When everything else in the house felt like a performance, this was the only place that made sense. You could find anything you wanted, if you knew where to look.”

Hermione’s mouth curved, soft and a little sad. “It feels different in here.”

“It is.” He glanced around the room as if he could still see himself there, younger and angry and hiding. “It was quiet. No one came in unless they had to. I could spend hours here, and no one would bother me.”

She drifted to the fireplace, inspecting the unlit grate. “You read all of them?”

“Not all of them,” he admitted. “Enough to be well-read and escape life for a few hours.”

She smiled faintly at the dry edge in his tone, but her mind was already turning.

Ten years ago, when he’d been eighteen, he had lost someone in a car accident. He had never told her more, and she hadn’t pushed. But it had stuck with her, the way his voice had gone quiet, how carefully he’d stepped around the subject.

She thought about the way he’d looked at the photograph earlier. The tension in his jaw at seventeen, the way his thoughts had wandered after mentioning the time between school and university.

And now, he was standing in the only room in this massive house that felt like it belonged to him, talking about escape and disappointment and silence like they were chapters of his life no one had ever read aloud.

She turned slightly, her heart pressing a little too hard against her ribs.

“Can I ask you something, Draco?”

He looked over his shoulder, one brow lifting slightly. The curve of his mouth deepened, not a smile exactly, but something knowing.

“I don’t know, Hermione,” he said. “Can you?”

The words were teasing, but there was something curious behind them. The way the crease between his brows eased as if he was relieved to have *that* tone in the air instead of whatever had started to coil between them.

She stared at him for a moment, lips parted, heart tightening.

That flicker told her enough.

The question she'd meant to ask, the one that had been quietly forming in the silence between bookshelves, shrunk back. It wasn't the right moment. Not now. Not with the weight of the gala hovering.

She could feel it pressing against the back of her throat. But she swallowed it down.

"Never mind," she said instead. "It can wait."

He stepped toward her then, slowly, hands sliding into his pockets as he studied her with that soft, unreadable expression.

"You sure?"

She nodded, giving him a small smile. "Yes, I'm sure."

He leaned in, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck, just beneath her ear. His hands found her waist, his fingers burning through the silk.

She exhaled, lids fluttering for just a moment.

He didn't move away, just stood there breathing her in, his thumbs brushing slow circles over her hips.

"You know," he whispered, "I'd love to bring you back here another day. When my parents are out of town."

Hermione's breath hitched. "Is that so?"

He nodded, his nose nuzzling the spot below her ear. "Just you and me. No staff. No one else in the house."

His mouth drifted lower, pressing another kiss to the side of her neck. "I'd keep you here all weekend," he went on, softer. "We wouldn't have to leave this room."

Her hand braced against the nearest shelf, her pulse thundering. "And then what?" she whispered, though her voice sounded more like a plea than a protest.

He hummed, his lips brushing her skin in a way that made her knees threaten to buckle. "Think about it. A fire going here..." His hand lifted, gesturing vaguely at the cold hearth. "You in nothing but a blanket on my lap. *Trembling.*"

"Draco," she sighed in a half-hearted attempt to warn him.

“Tell me you wouldn’t love it,” he teased, pressing a slow, lingering kiss beneath her ear. “I’d read to you between the times I had you.”

Her breath caught on a laugh and gasp. “God, you can’t say things like that.”

“No?” he asked, brushing his mouth up the side of her throat, slow and maddening.

One of his hands slid lower, splaying over her belly to pull her back more snugly against him. She felt him hard against her and had to bite her lip to keep from making a sound.

His tongue traced the edge of her ear, his voice so soft she almost didn’t catch it when she leaned into the filthy caress. “Say yes,” he whispered. “Say you’ll let me bring you back here.”

Hermione turned her head, just enough that her cheek brushed his. She could hardly think.

“Yes,” she whispered, the word ripped straight from her chest.

He paused, then grinned against her skin.

She let out a shaky laugh and tried to step forward, but he didn’t let her go.

“Draco,” she exhaled, smiling despite the heat in her face, “you have to be good tonight. The gala starts soon.”

His mouth curved against her neck. “I can try,” he said, nipping lightly at her skin, just enough to make her gasp. “But you make it very difficult.”

“You’re in a *mood* today,” she whispered, pressing her palm over the hand at her waist.

“It’s that damn dress,” he murmured. “I want to fuck you in it so badly it’s making me stupid.”

His hand swept lower, skimming just beneath the silk at her back.

His lips dragged along her throat again, slow and aching.

She turned slightly, biting back a grin, but before she could respond a throat cleared behind them.

Draco paused. His eyes stayed on hers, jaw ticking, expression irritated in a way that made her stomach flip.

Then, slowly, he turned his head.

Hermione pushed gently at his chest, stepping out of his hold. She straightened her spine as she turned, smoothing her dress, her pulse leaping violently in her neck.

Standing in the doorway, hands loosely clasped behind his back, was a man she recognized instantly. Not because she’d met him before, but because she’d seen his legacy written into

Draco's face a thousand times. And she'd just seen a younger version of him on a family portrait.

Mr. Malfoy looked like he had opinions about everything. And Ginny had been right, he definitely invented the Malfoy brooding look.

He did not look amused.

"Draco," he said mildly.

That was somehow worse than anger.

Draco's body was still tense, but his voice, when it came, was smooth. "Father."

"Your mother cherishes this room. I trust you haven't ruined it for her."

She didn't even have time to feel mortified at the way his father had found them. Hermione felt the words like a drop in temperature. Not loud, not overtly cruel, but designed to humiliate.

Draco rolled his shoulders barely as he straightened, but his expression didn't shift.

"No," he said flatly. "Everything is exactly as she left it."

Mr. Malfoy hummed, as if that answer somehow failed to satisfy, and then let the silence stretch just long enough to make the air feel thin. He looked at Hermione properly now, taking her in with a gaze that was cool and professional. Polite and distant at once.

She tried to smile, failed, and managed a small, polite nod.

"Father," he said smoothly, "this is Hermione Granger."

Hermione lifted her chin slightly, spine straight. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Malfoy."

Mr. Malfoy inclined his head. "Miss Granger." He paused without letting her out of his sight. "My wife mentioned we should expect you this evening. I see my son wasted no time giving you... the full tour."

"Father," Draco said again, this time with a warning in his tone.

The silence pressed closer. Hermione wasn't sure if she should speak or wait to be spoken to, but Draco's fingers pressed lightly at her side.

"You'll be greeting guests soon," Mr. Malfoy said after a moment, eyes snapping back to Draco by her side. "The Greystones arrived early for once. I heard Richard laughing downstairs."

"Well, Richard's practically at home here," Draco countered dryly. "Brought the whole family, I assume?"

Mr. Malfoy's brow lifted by a millimeter. "Naturally." His gaze drifted, pointed. "I trust that won't be a distraction."

Draco's lips twitched, but his voice was calm. "Not in the slightest."

Then Mr. Malfoy turned back to Hermione. "I do hope you enjoy the evening, Miss Granger. Should you require anything while in our home, please don't hesitate to let us know."

And with that, he turned, his footsteps vanishing down the corridor.

Hermione let out a breath. She hadn't realized she was holding it.

They waited until the last of Mr. Malfoy's footsteps had vanished into silence.

Hermione exhaled shakily, realizing too late that her hands were clenched at her sides.

Draco didn't speak at first. He stood there, spine straight, eyes fixed on the hallway as if still preparing for the next blow. Then, slowly, he turned to her, his hand brushing her forearm.

"Sorry about that," he murmured. "Are you alright?"

Hermione shook her head, automatic. "It's fine."

Draco's brow creased. "No, it's not." His voice was still low, but firmer now. "He hates that I brought someone he didn't pick. It's nothing personal."

Her heart gave a confused twist, touched and gutted at once.

She tried to think of something to say, something reassuring or clever or even vaguely coherent, but her mind was still stuck on the venom laced in Mr. Malfoy's voice. The chill that hadn't lifted from her skin. The way Draco had gone still while his own father tried to carve him open without ever raising his voice.

As if sensing her unease, Draco nodded toward the open door, "The Greystones... are Tiffany's family."

Hermione's stomach turned, trying to remember what his father had said about the Greystones. That he hoped it wouldn't cause issues...

Her throat tightened. "So she's really here?"

Some awful, petty part of her had hoped Tiffany might've come down with a mild fever. Nothing serious. Just enough to keep her away. The thought filled her with instant shame, and she pushed it aside, horrified by the flicker of malice.

Hermione dropped her gaze to anything but his face. Her thoughts tumbled over each other in a rising tide of jealousy and dread.

Then Draco said her name gently.

“Hermione.”

She looked up.

His expression had softened. The lines around his mouth eased, his eyes searching hers.

He stepped closer, his presence steady. “I don’t care that she’s here. I care that you are.”

Hermione swallowed hard. She didn’t know what to say to that, not when he was looking at her like that, as if she was the only real thing in this enormous house of ghosts.

And maybe she was.

She took a breath and squeezed his hand. “Okay,” she said, quietly.

Distantly, the sound of laughter echoed from downstairs.

Draco straightened, adjusting the line of his jacket, but kept her hand in his.

“You ready?” he asked.

Hermione exhaled once, bracing herself.

The grand staircase stretched out before them like the wide ocean. From below, faint laughter and the muted clinking of glass drifted upward. The gala was in motion already, music echoing through the massive house.

Draco offered his hand without speaking, guiding her to the top step.

As they began to descend, his voice found her ear.

“Just keep your chin up and don’t let anyone rattle you.”

Hermione gave a tight nod, but her grip on his arm betrayed her nerves. The sweeping chandelier above the foyer shimmered onto the dresses below.

Her stomach twisted. “I’m worried about stepping on someone’s dress.”

Draco huffed a laugh, and his thumb brushed the inside of her wrist. “If anyone gives you trouble, just look bored. It’s what my mother does.”

They reached the landing halfway down the staircase. From there, Hermione could see everything. The swell of guests, the enormous flower arrangements exploding like firework bouquets, and Mrs. Malfoy standing near the base of the stairs.

She forced herself to breathe. To keep her gaze level. Not to look for Tiffany. Hermione hated that. Hated that Tiffany existed as some phantom girl in her head, all beautiful and with an effortless familiarity with Draco’s world.

She blinked hard and shifted her focus to Draco instead.

He didn't break stride. His posture remained unshaken, his steps smooth. But Hermione could feel the tension in him, too.

Mrs. Malfoy lifted her gaze as they approached, her eyes sweeping over Hermione's dress. For one breathless moment, Hermione couldn't read her expression.

But then she smiled genuinely and reached out to adjust a small fold of the dress near Hermione's shoulder as they stopped next to her.

"Exquisite," she murmured. "Truly. That colour suits you beautifully, my dear."

Hermione tried to not look surprised. "Thank you," she said, a bit too quickly.

"Don't be nervous," she added quietly but kind. "Better to give them something worth staring at."

That stunned a real smile out of Hermione, her shoulders loosening just slightly.

Then his mother turned her attention to Draco. "Have you seen your father?"

Draco sighed. "Yes," he said, his tone dry. "We had the pleasure of bumping into each other upstairs. He offered Hermione a warm welcome."

His mother's eyes narrowed for half a second, but she didn't ask. She only said, "Try not to fight with him this early in the evening, darling."

Draco raised a brow. "I'm not fighting with anyone."

"Mmm," she replied, smoothing her hands over her own dress. "Just... try to enjoy the evening."

Draco gave a sharp, shallow nod, then turned to Hermione and offered his arm again. "Come on," he murmured. "Let's go say hello to a few of the family friends before they start cornering us."

Hermione slipped her hand into the crook of his arm again. As he guided her gently away, she glanced once over her shoulder at his mother one more time.

Mrs. Malfoy didn't smile again, but she watched them go with something guarded in her eyes.

Draco leaned in, his lips brushing close to Hermione's temple. "She likes you."

Hermione let out a soft, incredulous breath. "Really?"

"It's a first," Draco muttered.

And with that, they stepped into the crowd, the lights above casting their reflections in every polished surface. Hermione straightened her shoulders, her heart racing.

They barely made it past the first knot of guests before a voice rang out sharply.

“Well, if it isn’t my favourite nephew.”

Draco froze. Hermione felt him stiffen beside her before he turned sharply, then blinked. “Aunt Bella?!”

A woman stood just off the edge of one of the floral arrangements, champagne in one hand, her other arm already extended as she made her way toward them. Her black dress shimmered like stars, her hair swept back into a sleek twist with a single silver pin. She looked like she'd stepped out the night sky.

Draco’s eyes widened in disbelief. “What are you doing here?! I thought you’re still in Brazil?”

“Well, someone had to make this party interesting,” she said, wrapping him in a quick but fiercely affectionate hug. “I told your mother not to ruin the surprise. For once, she listened.”

Hermione felt the shift in him. The way Draco leaned into the hug, just for a second longer than she’d ever seen him allow with others. When he pulled back, his cheeks had flushed the faintest pink.

He cleared his throat, suddenly awkward. “Um...Hermione, this is my aunt, Bellatrix Black. Bella this is Hermione Granger.”

Hermione smiled and extended a hand, but Bellatrix bypassed it completely and leaned in to kiss her cheek instead.

“Hello, darling,” she said warmly. “I’ve already heard from Cissy that Draco is bringing his girlfriend tonight. She didn’t mention how beautiful you two look together.”

Bellatrix looped her arm through his with effortless ease, then hooked Hermione’s gently with the other. She would never admit how much that simple sentence meant to her in this moment.

“Now, walk with me. I need cover. I’ve been hiding from your Uncle Rodolphus all evening, he’s trying to corner the band and convince them to play the *Macarena* after dessert.”

Draco looked horrified. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“I wish I were. He had a whole pitch. Something about cultural exchange and an irresistible beat. I left mid-sentence. If Lucius finds out, we’ll be banned for at least two years.”

Hermione laughed as Bellatrix expertly flagged a passing server and plucked two flutes of champagne from the tray. She handed one to Hermione and offered the other to Draco.

He shook his head. “I’m driving later.”

Bellatrix paused. Her eyes flicked to him with something warm and unspoken, softening in a way that caught Hermione off guard.

“Of course you are,” she said gently, then set the second flute back on the tray.

Bellatrix’s gaze flicked between them. “So. Are we circulating, or avoiding Malfoy Senior?”

“Both,” Draco said dryly.

Something across the ballroom snagged Hermione’s vision.

Blonde hair, swept to one side. A green satin dress.

Liv.

Hermione’s pulse stuttered. She hadn’t even *considered* that Liv might be here tonight.

“I just saw someone,” she said quickly, already backing away. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Draco turned toward her, concerned. “What? Who?”

“A friend,” she said with what she hoped was a convincing smile. “I’ll come find you in a bit.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced. “You sure?”

Bellatrix cut in before he could press, clicking her tongue. “Don’t be clingy, Draco. It’s unseemly.”

Hermione slipped away before he could protest, already crossing the room.

Liv turned, and her eyes landed on Hermione like a cat zeroing in on something shiny.

A slow, smug smile curled over her face.

“Oh my god,” Liv said, setting down her champagne flute and meeting her halfway. “Hermione.”

Hermione barely had time to blink before Liv wrapped her in a hug, tight and warm and a little too pleased.

Liv pulled back, eyes dancing. “So the office rumors *are* true.”

Hermione stared at her, dazed. “Rumors?”

Liv grinned wider. “Please. His mood’s been suspiciously tolerable for weeks. We’ve all been wondering what miracle occurred. He still has your coffee notes scattered all over his desk.”

Hermione flushed. “Oh god.”

“And now here you are,” Liv continued, crossing her arms with satisfaction. “Definitely not just a friend. So. I take it things progressed?”

Hermione hesitated, her lips tugging into something helpless and small. “I guess you could say that.”

Liv’s expression softened for a half-second. “I’m glad. He deserves someone like you.”

Hermione laughed, nerves unraveling with every word. “Someone like me?”

“Someone kind, and caring. “

“Liv, it’s so good to see you.”

They drifted toward a quieter edge of the ballroom, the hum of conversation dimming just enough to breathe.

Hermione took a sip of champagne. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Corporate invite,” Liv said with a sigh. “Lucius Malfoy invited me here to schmooze with some rich men.”

Hermione felt a tug in her chest at the mention of Draco’s father. She turned slowly back toward the crowd.

Draco was still where she’d left him, pretending not to be watching her while letting his aunt tell him an animated story.

Hermione faced Liv again. “Are you here with someone?”

“No,” Liv said, shaking her head. “I’m single. I just wanted to show face for an hour, you know? It’s a firm thing. But I plan to sneak out after the speeches.”

Hermione smiled. “Sounds wise.”

Liv looked like she was about to say something else when her expression shifted.

Her eyes flicked past Hermione’s shoulder and cooled instantly.

In the following three seconds, Hermione did something she’d regret instantly.

She followed the look.

Her eyes landed on a woman not far from them, and something in her body recognized her before her mind caught up. It wasn’t even conscious. Her stomach dropped, her chest constricted, and then the realization hit like a cold wave breaking over her spine.

Tiffany.

The name dropped into her bloodstream like ice.

Her dress was baby blue silk, high-necked and backless, the fabric clung like a second skin. Pearls glimmered at her throat and ears. Her blonde hair was swept up in a soft, elegant twist that exposed the graceful line of her neck, a few loose tendrils artfully escaping to frame her face. It was the kind of undone that took effort.

She was laughing at something an older man in a grey suit had just said. He looked utterly enchanted by her. Tiffany's hand grazed his arm lightly, a single well-timed touch. Hermione could see other men glancing over at her.

She stood taller than Hermione. Slimmer.

"Isn't she annoying?" Liv asked quietly, eyes flicking sideways.

Before Hermione could answer, a familiar hand slid around her waist again.

"Ladies," Draco said smoothly. "Would you mind if I steal Hermione back?"

Liv grinned, lifting her glass. "Of course. You're the boss."

She winked at Hermione's and mouthed, "Catch me before I disappear."

Then she vanished, leaving Hermione still half-frozen, eyes flicking back to where Tiffany stood, radiant and entirely unaware.

Draco stepped in front of her, blocking her view. "Hey."

She blinked up at him.

"Look at me."

She did. Barely.

"She's beautiful," Hermione whispered, ashamed of how small it sounded.

Draco's jaw flexed. His hand tightened at her waist, anchoring her.

"Hey," he said, firmer now. She blinked up at him.

"Don't do that," he murmured, voice low. "Don't stand here with me and look at her like you're less."

Hermione opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

He leaned in, his breath brushing her ear. "You're the one turning heads tonight. You just don't see it because you're too busy doubting what I already know."

His thumb brushed lightly over the curve of her hip, grounding her.

Hermione didn't answer, but emptied her champagne flute in one long, suffering sip.

He leaned in, brushing his mouth just near her ear.

“I really want to introduce you to someone.”

Her eyes flicked back to Tiffany once more, but Draco turned her gently with the hand on her hip, redirecting her attention like it cost him nothing.

Hermione let herself be led, still holding her empty champagne glass and tucked herself slightly behind his shoulder as they wove through the crowd. The room sparkled with polished smiles and champagne bubbles, but Draco’s hand on her back never strayed.

They stopped near a marble pillar where a tall man with tousled grey hair and a softened tweed jacket was standing, holding court over a small circle of admirers. He looked up when Draco approached.

“Henry,” Draco said, the way someone says it when they’re used to having to compete with the man’s wandering attention. “You’re holding court again.”

“Someone’s got to,” the man replied dryly, though his face lit when he saw Draco. “They keep pouring whisky and stationing me next to ornate ceilings. Frankly, I think it’s a trap.”

Draco gave a quiet huff of amusement. Then, with a gentle but purposeful hand at Hermione’s back, he added, “I won’t keep you, but I wanted you to meet my girlfriend. Hermione Granger.”

The man turned toward her, sharp-eyed and suddenly attentive in a way that felt both curious and kind. He looked like someone who remembered everything he saw, and judged none of it.

“Miss Granger,” he said, offering a hand. “Henry Rellwood.”

Hermione had just enough time to process the name before her brain clicked into place.

Her heart did a very odd thing.

“Henry Rellwood?” she asked, wide-eyed. “As in... *The Salt and the Sea*?”

Henry grinned. “Ah. Guilty.”

“I, oh, wow.” Her laugh escaped before she could wrangle it, not even noticing the way Draco gently pushed her past the circle around Henry. “You ruined my sleep schedule with *Houses Without Windows* last year.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me at one of these things,” he said, visibly delighted. “Did you hate the ending?”

“Oh no, I loved it,” she said immediately. “And hated it. I wanted it to hurt less. It was perfect.”

Henry beamed. “That’s music to my ears.”

Draco's mouth curved with quiet amusement as he watched the exchange, eyes warm on her. "Careful," he murmured to Henry, "she'll analyze whole chapters if you encourage her."

Henry chuckled. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Hermione laughed, the flush on her cheeks deepening. "Honestly, it might be both."

Henry, still smiling, tilted his head at her. "So what do you do when you're not dissecting the trauma of strangers through fiction?"

"Oh, I work in marketing," Hermione said, still slightly breathless from the moment. "I'm the project lead for a new campaign rollout at the moment, actually. It's been a little chaotic, but fun."

"Marketing?" Henry echoed, looking intrigued. "Here in London? I've been thinking about expanding some side projects, an audio initiative, maybe a limited docuseries. You wouldn't happen to dabble in freelance consulting, would you?"

Hermione blinked. "I mean, I have. I could. I do. Sometimes."

Henry fished a card from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to her. "Let's say we have coffee. Just a conversation."

Hermione reached for it, still slightly dazed. "Thank you. I'd really like that."

Henry smiled, then turned to Draco with a glint in his eye. "Assuming *he* allows it, of course. Or better, why don't you both come to dinner? My wife, Elise, would adore you."

Draco arched a brow, amused. Henry smiled. "You've upgraded, Malfoy."

"I'm aware," Draco said, dry but proud. His fingers slid ever so slightly along Hermione's bare back.

"I'll go find my wife," Henry added, giving Hermione one last warm smile. "Lovely meeting you, Miss Granger. You're luminous."

And then he vanished.

Hermione turned to Draco, holding the business card up between two fingers. Her mouth formed the words *Oh my god* without sound.

Draco stared at her for a moment, his expression caught between smug and fond.

"I saw one of his books in your living room,"

Hermione beamed, flushed and giddy. "He said I'm luminous."

"You are," Draco said, quieter. "And terrifyingly competent, apparently."

Her eyes flicked to the card again. "Draco. He gave me his card. I might cry."

He laughed, drawing her just slightly closer by the wrist.

In the span of fifteen minutes, Hermione was introduced to a sweeping cross-section of Draco's clients.

There was the crisp, silver-haired financier who gripped Draco's hand too tightly and asked Hermione if she also worked in mergers, before launching into a story about a billion-pound acquisition Draco had helped untangle.

Then came a glamorous tech startup founder in an electric blue jumpsuit who winked at Draco and told Hermione she owed her entire patent defense to *"this shark in a suit"*.

By the time they reached a wine merchant Draco had helped dodge a brutal litigation case involving counterfeit imports, Hermione was starting to get the hang of it. Draco, meanwhile, never once let go of her. He introduced her first every time. Let her take the lead when a conversation turned toward a topic she was versed in. Smoothed over awkward transitions with charm. And with each new introduction, Hermione found herself learning more about him than she had in weeks of late-night phone calls. Not just what he did, but how people perceived him.

He made her feel like she belonged.

And slowly, Hermione started to believe it.

The tight knot of nerves in her chest began to loosen, replaced by something lighter, something steadier. She started asking better questions. She found herself laughing. Making people laugh.

Draco would glance sideways sometimes and smile when she said something clever. He didn't interrupt. He didn't correct. He let her be exactly who she was, and made it look like that was the most impressive thing in the room.

By the time they circled back toward one of the side tables, Hermione felt the champagne beginning to buzz warmly through her fingertips. She released his hand to grab another glass, grateful for the pause.

Draco reached for a glass of water instead.

"I'm starving," she said under her breath. "Tell me there's food coming before I black out and disgrace us both."

Draco smirked. "Canapés after the speech," he said, glancing at his watch. "Ten minutes, maybe less. Think you'll make it?"

Hermione nodded, lifting the flute to her lips. But before she could take a sip, a soft voice cut into their rhythm.

"Draco."

Tiffany slipped in beside him so naturally it felt rehearsed. Like there had been a cue and she hadn't missed it. Her dress shimmered faintly in the low lighting. Her hand slid onto his shoulder briefly, fingers squeezing lightly, as if it had always belonged there, before retreating.

Hermione felt her entire body still.

Draco's posture didn't change. But she saw his throat shift as he swallowed, his free hand still holding the glass of water.

"Tiffany," he said, nodding once.

She smiled, slow and smooth. "Water tonight?"

Draco's voice was even. "Designated driver tonight."

Tiffany's eyes flicked to Hermione then, briefly. "You're always so responsible."

Hermione couldn't think of a single thing to say.

And that, somehow, made her feel sixteen years old again, watching someone whose hand had been on Draco's shoulder before she even knew he had one that would make her feel safe.

She stepped back a fraction, just enough to feel the absence of his arm along her waist.

Just enough to wonder if Tiffany had noticed.

The second Hermione shifted back, the smallest half-step, he mirrored it. His hand found the small of her back again, a quiet anchor, pulling her gently back into the space she'd tried to leave.

"Hermione," he said, "this is Tiffany. Tiffany, this is Hermione. My girlfriend. I've told you about her."

There was no performative edge, just quiet pride threaded through every word.

Tiffany tilted her head slightly and offered a hand, her expression composed. "I'm so sorry - I'm being rude," she said lightly. "It's lovely to meet you."

But Hermione barely heard her. She was too aware of the way Draco's thumb brushed gently along her spine, like he didn't even realize he was doing it. Like the simple act of keeping her close was second nature.

Hermione reached out before she could stop herself, shaking her hand. Tiffany's grip was warm and confident. She smelled like expensive citrus and looked annoyingly flawless from up close as well. She was taller than Hermione by a full head, the kind of woman who stood eye-to-eye with Draco like they belonged in the same frame.

Tiffany smiled at her, really smiled, not a false social flicker but something gentler. “Your dress is gorgeous. I couldn’t pull off that shade of red in my wildest dreams.”

Hermione didn’t know whether to feel flattered or furious.

The compliment sounded real. Everything about her seemed real, generous in the way women who’d already won sometimes were.

And somehow, that made it worse.

Because Hermione couldn’t tell if it was genuine or if it was a performance so natural Tiffany didn’t even know she was doing it.

Hermione thanked her and hated that her voice came out more clipped than she meant it to. Tiffany didn’t seem to notice.

“I saw Bella earlier, Draco,” she said, turning back to him. “I didn’t know she was back from Brazil.”

Draco nodded once, before setting down his water on the table behind them. “She’s just visiting.”

“Awesome. And has my mother found you yet?” Tiffany asked, more pointedly now. “She was asking where you were earlier.”

“I’ll go find her later,” Draco said.

Tiffany’s eyes sparkled, like she knew exactly what *later* meant. It wasn’t smug, exactly, but it held something too intimate. Then she turned to Hermione again, her voice velvet-soft and just a shade too gentle.

“And how are you liking the gala? Draco doesn’t usually suffer these evenings quietly.”

Hermione blinked. “It’s been lovely, actually. Draco’s been an excellent host.”

“Well,” Tiffany said, smiling as if she meant it, “he’s clearly taking very good care of you. He never had much patience for these things when we were... well.” A pause, delicate and sharpened like crystal. “But you two look perfect together.”

Hermione wanted the marble floor to open up and swallow that woman whole.

She took a long sip of champagne to keep her mouth occupied, but Tiffany didn’t even blink.

A shift moved through the air, almost invisible, until it wasn’t. Mrs. Malfoy appeared beside them. A glass of white wine in hand.

“Tiffany,” she said, with no warmth whatsoever. “Always a pleasure.”

Tiffany straightened like she’d been pulled upright on invisible strings. “Narcissa. You look exquisite as always.”

“Mm.” Mrs. Malfoy’s gaze slid coolly over the three of them before landing, at last, on Hermione. “Hermione, darling. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes,” Hermione said quickly, pulse easing slightly in her chest. “Very much. Draco’s taking excellent care of me, as always.”

Tiffany turned back to Draco’s mother, her smile turning more forced. “Is Lucius hiding already, or has he just tired of pretending?”

She didn’t flinch. “He’s exactly where he should be.”

“Of course,” Tiffany said. “He always enjoys making an entrance.”

Draco’s hand tightened ever so slightly at Hermione’s waist before he cleared his throat, subtly positioning himself between the two women. “I think we’ll circle one more time before the speech.”

“Lovely idea,” his mother said, finally glancing at her son. “If you see your aunt, please tell her to come see me.”

Tiffany’s gaze lingered on Hermione just a beat too long as she stepped aside.

Chapter 23: Devotion

Hermione stood half-tucked between Liv and Bellatrix, shoulder just brushing Liv's sleeve, the scent of her perfume oddly calming. The curve of Bellatrix's champagne glass was dangerously tilted in one hand. All three of them were facing the front of the ballroom now, where a small stage had been erected for the band.

Draco stood off to the side, posture straight but not stiff, his face unreadable under the warm wash of chandelier light. His mother stood beside him. His father just behind, perfectly still. And somewhere on the opposite edge of the crowd, Hermione knew without looking, Tiffany was standing with her parents, the Greystones.

She hadn't looked again for her. Not directly.

Hermione's stomach still hadn't fully settled from their interaction earlier. But she kept her spine straight now, eyes fixed forward, fingers holding her flute of champagne in front of her.

She could feel Draco's gaze flit across the crowd and find her again, like he wanted to make sure she was still there. As if she would be anywhere else but right here with him.

Mrs. Malfoy stepped forward and took the microphone. Her voice, when it filled the room, was smooth and cool.

"Good evening," she said. "And thank you all for joining us tonight."

The crowd hushed at once. Hermione could practically hear the shift in posture, the tightening of shoulders and straightening of spines.

"We're honored to welcome you once again to Malfoy Manor for our annual fundraiser. As many of you know, this year's proceeds will be dedicated to the St. Sebastian Children's Hospital. Their pediatric oncology wing is in urgent need of expansion, and your generosity tonight will directly support treatment, research, and the families who rely on both."

There was a small ripple of murmured approval.

Hermione glanced down at her champagne flute, now mostly warm. Then back up at Mrs. Malfoy, who passed the microphone to her husband.

"We're pleased to announce that this evening's silent auction has already raised over three hundred thousand pounds," he said. "With additional pledges and matching donations expected to carry us beyond our projected goal."

He paused, allowing a quiet, polite applause ripple through the room.

"As always, the generosity of our guests is not just commendable. It reflects the values and legacy we share. We are proud to host this event as a family, and prouder still to stand

together in support of something greater than ourselves.” He turned slightly, just enough to gesture to his wife and Draco, the motion choreographed but oddly elegant.

“Tonight, we do not just raise funds, we demonstrate who we are. What we represent. And the kind of future we’re building together.”

His words lingered for a long moment before he turned toward his son fully. Their eyes met briefly, before he gave a single nod of approval.

Draco stepped forward, took the microphone, and lifted his chin just slightly. And just like that, the room shifted. Or maybe it felt that way because Hermione stopped breathing.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

His voice echoed in the tall space; a few octaves lower than usual.

“The cause this evening is one close to our heart. My mother and I have spent the better part of this year working with the hospital’s board to determine where private intervention could do the most good. What we found was a wing built for a fraction of the children it now serves. That is something we can fix.”

Hermione's eyes stung unexpectedly. She didn’t know that Draco had been involved. He’d never said anything to her about it.

He didn’t glance at her yet, but she saw his lips twitch for half a breath, like he wanted to. His gaze swept across the room. She felt it skate past her, then return and settle for a long moment. It knocked the air from her chest.

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“I hope tonight is not just a chance to dress up and drink good wine,” he said. “I hope it’s an opportunity to take ownership of the change we can make together.”

His mouth curved.

“And now,” Draco said, his tone dipping into something dry, “to the part where everyone pretends they didn’t come for the champagne.”

A ripple of polite chuckles ran through the room.

“I’m told the hors d’oeuvres will be in circulation shortly and yes, I’ve tested them. For safety.”

More laughter, this time warmer.

“We’ll be opening the dance floor shortly. Song requests are welcomed, though I’ve been informed by the band there is a *soft veto* on anything that requires interpretive movement or synchronized clapping.”

His gaze flicked casually toward the far end of the room, searching the crowd before it settled somewhere.

“Yes, Uncle Rodolphus,” he added, “this includes the Macarena. I checked.”

The laughter swelled, a few guests outright laughed. Even his father, standing behind him, gave a small, reluctant smirk, though he quickly schooled his features back to neutrality as his eyes stayed on his son.

“That said, if you’d like to place a matching donation equivalent to the highest pledge of the evening...” He let the suggestion trail off, a brow lifting just slightly. “I’ll personally clear the floor for you.”

The room laughed in full this time, a bright, unexpected break in the evening’s stiffness. His mother’s eyes settled on her son with unexpected fondness.

Draco nodded once, letting the smile reach his mouth now, just a bit.

“Progress is best made in style,” he said smoothly. “Thank you for helping us make it tonight.”

He handed the microphone off with the same elegance he’d received it and stepped down together with his family and the band took back their stage.

The subtle applause grew with their departure.

Liv leaned in, whispering, “Your boyfriend’s lowkey hot when he talks about children’s healthcare.”

Bellatrix, on her other side, cleared her throat and whispered, “You mean your boss.”

Liv flushed; eyes locked ahead.

Hermione almost had forgotten Tiffany. But Tiffany hadn’t forgotten *her*. She could feel her eyes on her now, like pinpricks, boring across the ballroom, just beyond light and laughter.

She was still trying to regulate the flutter in her chest, watching him step off the stage like he owned the marble beneath his shoes.

Liv leaned in close, amused. “I think you’re up,” she murmured.

“What?” Hermione whispered, blinking. “For what?”

And then she saw him cutting across the floor in long, purposeful strides. People had started to turn, a shift in the room’s axis, glances sliding toward her like magnets as Draco’s eyes locked with hers.

He was still wearing the smirk from the stage, suit impeccable, hair just slightly disheveled like he’d run a hand through it in the hallway.

Her heart thudded again.

He reached her and took her hand without question.

“Draco,” she hissed under her breath. “What are you doing?”

“Our family opens the dance floor,” he said simply, with no room for negotiation. “It’s tradition.”

“*I’m not-*”

“You’re with me,” he said, tugging her gently into motion.

And just like that, they were moving.

She barely remembered her feet following him, barely noticed the strings that began to pour through the speakers. One of the violins caught the melody a beat early.

She glanced over his shoulder.

Draco’s parents had stepped forward too. His mother floated across the floor like she was made of mist.

And Hermione? She was made of pure *panic*.

“I can’t dance,” she muttered under her breath as Draco pulled her into frame, his hand warm at her waist before his fingers splayed over the hem to graze her back. She couldn’t believe he hadn’t warned her about this part of the night. That he hadn’t considered that she couldn’t dance like that.

“You don’t have to,” he murmured. “Just let me lead.”

He was *so sure*. So smooth in the way he moved, in how he shifted their weight, in the quiet rhythm of his steps. He led her like he’d done this a hundred times. Maybe he had. But something in his firm, confident grip, unbothered by her stumbles, made her want to match him.

So she tried.

She adjusted. She let go of her own feet and focused on *his, eyes fluttering close for a beat*.

She laughed under her breath when he leaned close and muttered like an oath against her ear. “See?”

Her laugh had barely faded when she leaned in.

Her whole body felt tuned to him. Every step, every glide, every subtle shift of his hand sent sparks racing down her spine. His palm was steady, his other hand curled warmly around hers, guiding her like it cost him nothing.

She followed. She had no choice.

And then his breath hit her temple.

The world narrowed. The chandeliers dimmed in her periphery. Her chest tightened the longer his mouth hovered. Not close enough to touch, but *close enough to feel*.

Her heart absolutely stammered.

He wouldn't kiss her, not with all these people at this important event. Not with *his parents* just a few steps away, still floating through their own dance.

It would be *so* inappropriate.

But oh, she wanted him to.

Her lips parted before she could stop them. Her chin tilted up and her eyes met his.

The smirk that followed nearly undid her.

He leaned closer again, his voice a soft brush just beneath her ear. "You have no idea how many men are watching me right now, wishing they were in my place."

She shivered.

He spun her then, effortlessly, like he'd rehearsed the move. When he caught her again, she collided with his chest, and suddenly there was no floor, no music, no air.

"I thought you hated these events with all your heart," she whispered, needing to say something, anything, to steady the thrum beneath her skin.

"I do," he said, not missing a beat, not looking away.

"But you're absurdly good at all of this. The small talk, the dancing..."

He gave a half-shrug, maddening in its ease. "I'm not suffering tonight."

She lifted a brow, lips tugging into something half-curious. "You're not?"

He twirled her again and caught her like she weighed nothing. When he pulled her back, his voice dropped.

"I get to have my first of many dances with you." His eyes locked on hers. "That changes everything."

The chandelier light caught in his lashes.

She managed a whisper, raw and unsure.

"You're making it very hard not to fall for you."

His hand tightened at her waist. Just slightly.

They danced through the next song. And the one after that.

Hermione honestly lost count and track of time entirely.

Because every time she thought she might excuse herself, Draco would tug her just a little closer. Tilt his head just so. Say something quiet and unhelpfully devastating before pressing his palm firmer to the small of her back and stealing her breath all over again.

But eventually, her body gave in.

“I need a break,” she whispered, laughing as she stumbled slightly off-beat.

Draco immediately slowed. His hands lingered.

“I need the loo,” she added, trying to sound less affected than she felt.

He nodded, then dipped his mouth toward her ear. “Use the one upstairs. Off the landing.” He tipped his head toward the entrance hall behind her. “You’ll be queueing forever down here.”

Hermione arched a brow. “Isn’t this the sort of thing I should be doing to stay humble?”

Draco’s smirk deepened. “Not when you’re mine.”

And then, before she could argue, he took her hand again and pulled her with him.

They slipped from the edge of the dance floor and moved up the first marble steps, the noise of the ballroom thinning behind them.

She was adjusting to the sudden quiet, the shift in atmosphere when Draco stopped just before the landing.

He turned toward her.

“Hurry,” he said, leaning in.

Then he kissed her. Hard. His hand gripping her waist as though he’d barely held it together downstairs.

Hermione gasped into him, her hands coming up instinctively to steady herself against his chest, but he didn’t budge. He kissed her like he’d been starving. Like her mouth was the only thing that mattered now. Like he was already imagining what he’d do if they didn’t stop.

When he finally pulled back, it wasn’t far. Just enough for his breath to hit her lips.

The single look he gave her could have devoured her alone.

“Go,” he urged, thumb brushing the corner of her mouth.

Her knees barely worked.

“Come find me when you’re done,” he added, already backing away. “Or don’t. I might come find you first.”

And with that, he disappeared back down the stairs, too composed like none of it had happened.

While Hermione stood frozen, pulse thundering, lips tingling, and utterly wrecked on a landing she would now *never* forget.

Hermione stumbled into the bathroom. She wasn’t drunk. That wasn’t it.

She was just airless. Full of something bright and fizzy. Her fingers still curled instinctively like they were wrapped around the lapel of his jacket. Her mouth tingled. Her chest ached in the very best way.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and laughed under her breath.

She felt happy.

So stupidly happy she almost forgot what she’d come in here to do.

Hermione shut the bathroom door behind her and exhaled, pressing her palms to her cheeks. Her skin was flushed, and she was smiling like an idiot.

The upstairs loo was absurd, a marble sink, gold fixtures, fresh roses in a crystal vase.

When she was ready to leave, she glanced at the mirror more closely and frowned.

“Oh, come on,” she muttered, leaning in to investigate the damage done.

A large curl had broken free from the elegant twist she had managed hours ago, and another was beginning to spiral at her temple. She reached up to tuck the pieces back into place, but only made it worse.

She bit her lip, then sighed.

The creak of the door opening behind her made her look up in surprise, one hand still in her hair.

“Sorry, I thought it was free.”

Tiffany stood in the doorway.

Of course.

Her expression flickered briefly, surprise, maybe, or irritation quickly masked. But she didn’t retreat. She offered a faint, polite smile instead. “Didn’t mean to barge in.”

Hermione hesitated. “It’s fine. I’ll be done in a minute.” She gestured toward her hair.

Tiffany lingered a moment, then stepped fully inside. “You’ll only make it worse tugging at it like that.”

Before Hermione could respond, Tiffany reached into her silver clutch and pulled out two bobby pins.

“May I?”

Hermione blinked. “Um...”

“I promise not to scalp you,” Tiffany said, a flicker of dry amusement flashing in her eyes. “I’m decent in emergencies.”

Still unsure why she was agreeing, Hermione nodded once.

Tiffany approached, heels soft on the tiled floor, and began pinning the rebellious strands with a practiced hand. She smelled expensive. Fig, maybe, and something warmer like amber underneath.

Hermione kept her eyes on the marble sink. The silence between them thickened.

“I didn’t know,” Tiffany said after a beat, her tone careful. “About you. About... the two of you.”

Hermione’s shoulders tensed.

Tiffany continued, still focused on the curl. “When I reached out to him a few weeks ago, I didn’t know he was seeing anyone. I might’ve been... persistent. Not my finest moment.”

Hermione swallowed. There was something deliberate in the way Tiffany said it, like she was offering Hermione the chance to ask questions she didn’t want to know the answers to.

Was this it? The moment where she’d find out something she didn’t know yet?

But Tiffany didn’t elaborate. She just kept pinning the curl neatly into place, expression calm, almost detached.

“I only found out when I came to see him,” Tiffany added, quieter now. “He told me about you right away.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say to that, whether it was a peace offering or a disclaimer.

“You probably think I’m here trying to cause drama,” Tiffany went on, finally stepping back. “I’m not.”

Hermione turned to face her properly then.

Tiffany’s posture was immaculate, but there was a flicker of unease in her eyes. She wasn’t here to make friends. She was here to... clarify something.

“I’m not trying to get in the way,” Tiffany said. “Just figured I should say it out loud. So you don’t have to worry.”

Hermione held her gaze for a moment, uncertain. The Tiffany she’d imagined, resentful and competitive didn’t quite fit the one standing in front of her now. This version looked almost... tired.

“I’m not worried,” Hermione lied.

Tiffany gave a small shrug. “He’s... different with you. I noticed.”

Hermione didn’t respond. She didn’t need to.

After a pause, Tiffany offered a thin, resigned smile. “Anyway. Your hair looks as good as new.”

Hermione forced a half-hearted smile onto her own lips. “Thanks.”

As Hermione reached for the door, she paused. Her hand on the handle.

“I was really hoping you’d be a nightmare, you know,” Tiffany said without looking back. “Would’ve made this all easier.”

Hermione’s mouth twitched. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Tiffany glanced over her shoulder, something like a real smile breaking through. “Yeah. Me too.”

Hermione didn’t respond.

She slipped out quietly, the door clicking shut behind her, leaving Tiffany alone in the bathroom.

The hallway was dim, hushed compared to the noise below. Hermione stood still for a second, her palm still on the handle, the unease lingering.

Then she moved.

Her heels clicked softly on the marble as she made her way toward the staircase, her legs unsteady, like her body had only just remembered it could move again. She gripped the banister when she reached it, fingers curling tight around the polished wood.

She needed distance. From the bathroom. From Tiffany. From the strangeness of that exchange, which had left her feeling both affirmed and entirely off-kilter.

It wasn’t that she didn’t believe her.

It wasn’t even that she disliked her.

She just didn’t know what to do with the interaction.

Below, music swelled from the ballroom. But Hermione stayed on the landing a moment longer, catching her breath, steadying herself, unsure if what she felt was sympathy, discomfort or something else entirely.

The moment Hermione stepped out of the hallway, the sounds of the gala swept her back into music, chatter and the chime of champagne glasses. She scanned the crowd, half-expecting Draco to be standing in front of her. But before she could even start to look for him, someone gently reached for her wrist to pause her.

“I’m glad I could catch you before I’m leaving.”

She turned to find Liv with a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Hermione smiled, her shoulders dropping. “Oh, you’re already leaving?”

Liv laughed. “Yeah, getting a cab out here is a nightmare already. Do swing by the office sometime, yeah? We should grab lunch. Catch up properly.”

“I’d like that,” Hermione said genuinely. “Really.”

She took a breath and turned, and there he was.

Draco, already watching her from across the room, his posture relaxed but his attention on her. He stood beside his mother and Bellatrix, his eyes caught hers and then softened like gravity had shifted beneath his feet.

She took one step forward, only to stop short as Mr. Malfoy stepped into her path.

“Miss Granger,” he said, smooth as silk and twice as slippery. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Yes,” she said, politely but with surprise. “It’s... beautiful.”

He tilted his head. “We do aim to please.” A beat passed. “Would you grant me the honor of a dance?”

Behind him, she caught Draco’s eyes narrowing a fraction.

For half a second, she wavered. Then she swallowed and gave a small, practiced smile.

“Of course.”

Mr. Malfoy extended his hand without hesitation, and Hermione accepted carefully.

He didn’t say anything as he led her to the floor, but his silence was heavy. When the music started and they began to move, she could feel the calculation in his posture. It was an effortless glide of someone used to controlling a room and expecting it to obey.

“It’s a lovely event,” she offered, her tone as neutral as she could manage.

“Thank you,” he said, with a nod that somehow managed to feel both gracious and dismissive. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself. Draco tends to keep things... private, so I fear to confess I don’t know much about you yet.”

Hermione tried to keep her chin lifted, to not make herself small. “That’s understandable. We haven’t been public for very long.”

“Mm.” He hummed like he was cataloguing something. “And what do you do, Miss Granger?”

“I work in marketing,” she said. “I lead a small team at a firm in the city.”

“A creative mind,” he said lightly. “And your family?”

“My parents are dentists,” she replied, still polite. “They live in Luton.”

He blinked. Just once. Then smiled again. “I see.”

She knew that smile. It was the kind that said *I’ll pretend not to judge you, if you pretend not to notice.*

Still, she didn’t flinch.

Mr. Malfoy tilted his head. “You’re quite... striking,” he said offhandedly. “I can see what drew my son’s attention.”

Hermione bit back the urge to raise a brow. “Thank you?”

“I don’t mean it unkindly,” he said. “You carry yourself well. Not everyone would, in a room like this.”

She tried not to bristle.

His eyes skimmed the room, then returned to her.

Hermione met his gaze. “Draco is making it very easy for me to feel welcome.”

Mr. Malfoy’s mouth twitched like he’d made himself laugh.

“Well,” he said, tone mild but clearly amused, “I’ll admit I was curious to meet the girl who all the cleanup was about.”

Hermione frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

He looked delighted by her confusion. “Draco hasn’t told you?”

Her spine straightened, alert. “Told me what?”

Her pulse stuttered, but she kept her expression neutral.

“There was a bit of a mess some months back. A bar fight. One of the involved parties had a rather unpleasant hospital visit. Nothing serious, but enough to require a few favors and a bit of discretion. Not the sort of attention we encourage.” He said it casually, like he was discussing a poorly chosen wine.

Hermione forced a quiet breath. Her mind spun, working to place the timeline. The pub. The man who had grabbed her. The bruise Draco had noticed before she did.

“I see,” she said carefully.

Mr. Malfoy glanced at her, perhaps catching the edge in her voice, perhaps not. “We managed, of course. But one hopes not to repeat such episodes. Especially for... personal matters. That’s not something our family generally deems acceptable.”

She stiffened slightly. “I’m sorry it caused trouble. I didn’t mean for Draco to get involved in the matter.”

His head tilted, polite as ever. “It’s not an apology I’m asking for.”

She didn’t know what that meant, if it was a reassurance or a warning. Maybe both.

“I imagine you understand the importance of appearances,” he added. “You seem... thoughtful.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was a compliment or an assessment.

“I try,” she said, quiet.

She could feel herself wanting his approval and hating that she did. That she cared, even slightly, what this man thought of her.

The music began to fade.

Mr. Malfoy released her hand smoothly, that same measured smile never quite touching his eyes.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening, Miss Granger. I do hope we’ll speak again.”

Hermione nodded, her throat tighter than she wanted it to be. “Thank you.”

Before she could fully retreat, another voice sliced through the polite hush.

“Lucius,” Bellatrix drawled, sweeping toward them like a shadow. “Don’t tell me you’re hoarding the interesting guests.”

Lucius turned, his expression slipping into something almost generous. “Bella.”

“Dance with me,” she said, already reaching for his hand with fingers tipped in burgundy. “Before I start cutting in uninvited.”

Lucius chuckled and let himself be led away without protest.

Hermione took the opportunity to slip back a step, breath tight, heels carrying her just a few paces before a different hand curled around hers.

Draco.

He didn't speak at first but pulled her gently toward him as the next song began, one hand sliding to her waist, the other threading through her fingers.

She didn't fight him. But she didn't quite relax either.

"You alright?" he murmured, eyes searching her face.

Hermione gave a tight, polite smile.

Draco exhaled through his nose, then leaned in just slightly. "Don't let him get under your skin."

His thumb brushed her side absently as they turned.

Hermione looked past his shoulder, jaw tight. "You never told me," she muttered. "That there were legal consequences after that bar fight."

Draco's expression didn't flicker. "There weren't. We took care of it," he muttered. "It didn't go anywhere."

"But you never mentioned anything, Draco," she hissed.

His jaw tensed. "You ran off to Luton and hid for weeks."

Hermione's brows furrowed. "I needed time."

"And I dealt with the situation," he said, still too quiet. "By the time you came back, I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Neither did you. I didn't want another fight and you were doing so much better. I didn't want you to worry about it."

Her eyes drifted down to their feet, trying not to stumble.

"I'm sorry," he added softer. "But listen to me," he pulled her impossibly close as he turned them without effort. "I decided to handle it poorly, not you. It's alright."

Hermione let out a shallow breath. "That's not the point."

He squeezed her fingers in his. "I'll tell you everything you want to know. Just not here, not tonight."

She looked up at him, startled by the softness in his voice. He wasn't dismissive but loving. He had cared about her, even then, in his own twisted ways.

His thumb brushed over her knuckles like he didn't even realize he was doing it.

And the room felt a little less sharp than it had a minute ago.

Hermione dropped into the passenger seat with a groan, immediately reaching down to yank off her heels. The second they hit the floor mat, she sighed and slumped back against the headrest, one bare foot propped gracelessly on the dashboard.

“I am *never* wearing those again,” she muttered.

Draco didn’t answer right away. He was outside her door still, carefully tucking his suit jacket, and their things onto the back seat. When he finally slid in beside her and shut the door, the quiet thud felt like the official end of the evening.

“I could eat something proper now,” he said, glancing at her sideways as he adjusted the air vents.

“I’m *starving*,” Hermione whined. “Don’t tell your mother I complained about the food.”

Draco reached across the console, his fingers brushing her wrist. “I’m taking you for chips,” he said firmly. “Greasy ones. With gravy.”

Her stomach growled on cue.

It was past midnight by the time they reached her flat.

Hermione walked barefoot up the stairs, heels dangling from one hand, her dress hitched just enough to avoid tripping.

Draco followed behind with their things and a large takeaway paper bag.

“Living room or kitchen?” she asked, flicking the lock behind them. “I have wine and water in the fridge.”

Draco didn’t answer right away.

He stepped closer, eyes dragging down the length of her.

“How about the bathtub?”

Hermione grinned. “With the food?”

“Why not?” he shrugged simply, one brow raised.

She watched him for a moment, then nodded. “Alright. Bathtub.”

Draco tilted his head. “Yeah?”

Her voice dropped, the answer steadier this time. “Yeah.”

Draco nodded. “Go ahead then, I’ll grab some plates and drinks.”

She turned, quietly slipping into the bathroom, striking a match. The first candle flared. Then another and a third on the windowsill.

Warm light dimly lit across the room, soft and golden, catching on the edges of the tub and the curve of her collarbone where the strap of her dress had already started to slip.

She turned on the hot water, steam already beginning to curl around her ankles, when she heard him step in behind her.

“Can you help me out of this dress?” she asked without turning.

He didn’t answer. Just moved in closer, setting down the plates and a bottle of water next to the takeaway bag on the edge of the bathtub before returning to her.

The warmth of his chest grazed her spine, breath brushing the shell of her ear before his lips ghosted down to her neck. She barely managed not to lean into it.

His hands found her hips, fingers splaying there possessively for a beat too long. Then one slid to her side, found the zipper, and dragged it slowly down, metal teeth parting with as his knuckles skimmed her skin.

The dress loosened. He caught it before it fell completely, one arm gliding across her stomach to steady her, the other letting the fabric drop.

It slid to the floor with a sigh, pooling around her ankles.

The air turned cooler. Or maybe it was just the sudden absence of his touch.

“You didn’t wear anything under this all night?” His words were murmurs, right at her ear.

She smirked, eyes fixed on the waterline rising in the tub. “The lines would’ve shown.”

He exhaled once.

She turned in his arms, bare but for the flush blooming across her cheeks. Her fingers found the hem of his shirt, untucking it with trembling hands before working the buttons loose, one by one. He watched her in silence.

When the last button slipped free, she eased the shirt off his shoulders, dragging it down slowly. Her palms glided over the lines of his chest, the heat of his skin.

Her hands splayed across his sternum, over the rise of his ribs, pausing briefly where his heartbeat pulsed beneath her touch.

His breathing had quickened. So had hers.

“Tub,” she whispered, almost shy.

Draco dipped his head and kissed her, soft at first, near the corner of her mouth. Then deeper. Until she melted into him, breath caught in her throat, knees threatening to give way.

His hands found her thighs, then slipped beneath them. He lifted her easily, and when her legs parted in the warm, heavy air, she felt just how wet she was.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, arms around his neck, cheek resting against the curve of his shoulder as he carried her through the small room.

Behind them, the tub gurgled steadily.

He knelt at the edge of the bath, their skin flushed and too close, like they might tumble in.

Her mouth found his jaw, then his neck, open and slow.

With a tenderness that startled her, Draco lowered her down. His hands skimmed the backs of her thighs as she unwrapped herself from him and stepped carefully into the tub.

The water was deliciously hot. She let out a low sigh as it kissed up her calves and her thighs as she sank beneath the surface.

She stretched out slowly, her spine curving with surrender as she leaned back against the cool porcelain edge.

Draco reached for the takeaway bag.

“Here,” he murmured.

Hermione laughed softly, water sloshing around her as she shifted and took the burger from him. The paper crinkled in her hands, warm with grease as she stretched to grab one of the plates.

Draco crouched beside the tub; his trousers stretched taut over his thighs. She tried to focus on unwrapping the food, but her eyes kept betraying her, flicking back just as he rose, one hand already at his belt.

The soft click of the buckle echoed over the quiet of the filling tub.

He leaned forward and stole a chip from the bag, holding her gaze as he chewed, slowly.

She busied her fingers with the wrapping, feigning disinterest. But she was no actress, and her eyes flicked back again, drawn helplessly as he unfastened the button of his trousers, then dragged the zip down.

She bit into her burger without tasting it.

He shoved his trousers down, unhurried, like he knew she was watching now. His boxers clung to him, the outline beneath them unmistakable. Half hard already.

Hermione looked away. Then looked back.

Draco didn't speak. He simply hooked his thumbs into the waistband and pushed them down, stepping free. Something twisted low behind her navel.

He was beautiful with his hair mussed and mouth slightly parted as he stood at the edge of the tub.

"You're staring," he said.

Hermione shook her head slowly. "No, I'm not."

His mouth curled in amusement as he stepped into the water, her knees brushing his thighs as he lowered himself opposite her.

The water surged with his weight, sloshing up the wall. She sank deeper, letting the heat chase tension from her shoulders. Steam curled around them like breath, and for a moment the only sound was the quiet rustle of paper as she leaned forward to fish out the rest of her burger.

The water hadn't yet reached her chest, and she felt suddenly aware of how bare she still was beneath the heat.

And of the way his eyes hadn't left her.

She didn't need to look to know he was staring. She could *feel* it.

Draco lounged at the far end of the tub, one arm slung lazily over the rim, the other resting just below the surface. His plate sat untouched beside him. His eyes hadn't moved.

She raised a brow and took a slow, deliberate bite of her burger, if only to break the spell. It was still warm, messy, and so stupidly good that she rolled her eyes with a quiet moan of pleasure, humming deep in her throat as she chewed.

"Oh my God," she mumbled around a mouthful. "This is heaven."

Across from her, Draco mirrored the sound she made, low and amused, but the way he looked at her made it sound filthy. His gaze dragged over her mouth, down the column of her throat, then lower still, until it lingered on the soft curve of her breasts above the waterline.

His lips parted slightly. Like he wanted another taste, and it wasn't of the food.

Hermione swallowed hard.

"You're making me self-conscious," she said, trying for lightness, but her voice came out breathier than she liked. She shifted forward, burger clutched in both hands like some ridiculous shield.

Draco didn't flinch.

She sank an inch deeper into the bath.

He smirked.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she muttered, cheeks warm.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m dessert.”

Draco’s smirk deepened. “You’ve got sauce on your lip.”

She wiped at it with her thumb, glaring.

“Missed a bit,” he added, amused but strangely focused on the way her tongue darted out to get the rest.

Finally, he reached for a chip. His fingers were damp, hair curling at the nape of his neck. It was her turn to stare. The slow drag of his jaw as he chewed. The twitch at the corner of his mouth. That familiar glint behind his lashes when he caught her looking.

She focused on chewing, on swallowing, on pretending the food might steady her. The burger was greasy in a way that felt almost illegal.

She reached between them, grabbed a chip, dragged it through the pool of gravy, and popped it into her mouth. Draco’s eyes followed her fingers. Then flicked to the far corner of the bathroom like maybe it would save him.

Something warm stitched into her ribs as she leaned back against the tub, eyes fluttering shut.

“This was a great idea,” she sighed between chewing. “This is perfect.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “It really is.”

He made a quiet sound, agreement or restraint, she couldn’t tell. She cracked one eye open just in time to watch his hand dip into the water.

She stuffed the last bit of her burger into her mouth, not bothering with dignity. Maybe it was because her stomach was finally full. Or because the water was hot. Or maybe it was just the way he was looking at her, like she wasn’t a mess.

Like she mattered.

So when his fingers curled gently around her ankle, she didn’t stop him.

Draco lifted her foot gently, letting the water stream from her skin before resting it in his lap. His palm cradled her arch like it belonged there, thumb pressing instinctively into the center.

She exhaled. And let him touch her.

He shifted beneath the surface, just slightly, but enough that her heel brushed against something unmistakable in his lap.

She squinted at him, but he just raised an eyebrow. He began to rub slow, deliberate circles into her sole.

Her lashes fluttered again. A soft sigh escaped her lips before she could catch it.

“God,” she whispered, head tipping back against the edge of the tub. “You’re going to make me fall asleep right here.”

“I’ll make sure you don’t drown,” he muttered, his fingers working up toward the ball of her foot, his touch incredibly gentle.

She smiled. “That’s why I love you,” she said.

The words slipped out like breath. Too effortless, like they’d been waiting. Like they’d been living quietly inside her all along and had finally found the space to stretch.

He’d stilled. His thumb was still pressed just beneath her toes, unmoving.

Silence followed.

Her eyes flew open.

And then everything inside her seized.

“I-” She sat up, chest suddenly too tight and laced with panic. “Can we just pretend I didn’t say that?”

Draco didn’t let go of her foot when she tried to pull away.

“I didn’t mean to. I meant the burger. I love the burger. Or the idea of you giving me food. I love food. That’s what I meant.”

Still, he said nothing.

Just watched her.

Hermione’s throat went dry. Her chest tightened. “I didn’t mean-” she tried again, voice wobbling, “it just came out. I wasn’t thinking. I mean, I was, but not like *that*. God, I sound insane.”

“Hermione,” he said quietly.

She froze.

He moved slowly. Guiding her foot back beneath the water with a care so gentle it almost undid her. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, expression unreadable in the shifting light. His jaw was tight. Brow drawn.

She braced herself.

But when he looked into her eyes, it was like something had shifted in her chest. As if she had opened a window and saw him clearly for the very first time.

“Say it again,” he said calmly.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. “What?”

“Say it again.” His throat bobbed with a swallow. “Please.”

She stared at him, wide-eyed, hands sinking slowly beneath the surface like she could disappear into the water.

Despite of her trembling breath, because he looked like he might fall apart if she didn’t, she whispered, “*I love you.*”

His breath left him in a single, ragged exhale. Like she’d knocked the air from his lungs.

He closed the space between them with sudden, careful urgency, like he couldn’t wait another second.

His hands found her face, soaked and unsteady, and held her like she was something worth holding.

“You can’t just say that,” he said, raw and torn at the edges. “Not if you didn’t mean it.”

“But I did.” Her words caught. “I meant it. I just didn’t mean to *say* it. Not like that. Not this early.”

His thumbs brushed across her cheeks, still trembling. “But you did.”

She nodded slowly, his hands still holding her face.

Then he kissed her.

She let out a sound, helpless and breaking at the edges.

“You’re it for me,” he whispered against her lips, thumbs stroking her cheeks. “I didn’t think I’d ever get something like this. Not really. Not after everything.”

His lips took over hers, teeth grazing and breath tangling between them. The water sloshed violently around them, slapping against the rim, but neither of them noticed. Her hands gripped his shoulders, nails digging in. His fingers slid into her hair, holding her close.

His lips parted with a heavy pant as he pulled away enough to whisper a rough, “I love you so fucking much.”

Every nerve in her body was trying to rewrite every awful thing that had ever happened to her. Like every broken piece of her heart was scrabbling to fuse itself back together all at once.

He cupped the back of her head again, fingers sliding into her wet curls.

His mouth lingered against hers, slow and insistent, like he was trying to coax more out of her with each kiss.

She felt breathless. Drenched in steam and warmth and everything he made her feel.

“Can I-” she murmured against him, hesitant. “Can I touch you?”

Draco stilled for half a second, then grinned into the kiss with a growl.

“You never have to ask,” he said a little frayed. “But fuck, yes. Touch me.”

Her hand slid beneath the water and wrapped around him. His hips shifted instinctively, a sharp breath dragging through his teeth.

“That’s it,” he whispered, forehead tipping to hers. “God, that’s it.”

Her hand moved slowly at first, adjusting to the heat and the weight of him beneath the water. His eyes fluttered closed, jaw tightening as he exhaled through his nose like he was trying to keep himself grounded.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he murmured, breath catching as she stroked him again, a little firmer this time.

Hermione swallowed hard, watching him come undone beneath her touch. His lashes fluttered, throat working, muscles tight under her palm. She felt powerful. *Wanted*. Completely and impossibly his.

Draco’s hands slid down her back, curling around her hips beneath the water. His thumbs pressed just above the swell of her thighs.

Then one hand slipped lower.

She gasped when his fingers found her, slow but without hesitation as he spread her apart and pushed one finger inside and as deep as possible from their position.

“I can feel your pulse,” he whispered. “Right here. Beating for me.”

Hermione whimpered, her hand tightening around him as he circled her clit with his thumb before slowly beginning an unsteady rhythm.

She tried to keep her hand on him, to keep moving the way he liked. But it was difficult, the pleasure building too fast inside her. Still, she didn’t stop. The way his muscles twitched under her fingers, the way his jaw clenched with restraint, the low groan he gave when she twisted her wrist. It was undoing her as much as the pressure of his thumb and the slow, deep push of his finger.

“You feel so fucking good,” he muttered, lips dragging along the curve of her neck. “Every time. Every time I touch you, it’s like...fuck, I forget my own name.”

She moaned into his shoulder, her breath coming harder now, shallow and erratic as his rhythm pushed her closer. The water rocked around them, waves lapping softly, but all she could hear was him.

“You’re so close already,” he whispered, finger curling just right to put pressure on a perfect spot inside her. “I can feel it.”

Hermione nodded, her whole body tightening with her grip faltering slightly on him as the heat inside her swelled.

She was right on the edge, spiraling fast, hips canting forward, chasing it.

And then he pulled away.

His hand slipped from between her legs, and his fingers curled around her wrist, stopping her movements on him.

“Hey,” he whispered, even as she whimpered in protest. “Wait.”

She tried to move her hips again, to rock into him, but his free hand gripped her waist.

“Please,” she whispered.

He exhaled against her ear. “You don’t have to beg, baby.”

She opened her eyes to find his, watching her unravel. He had never called her baby before. And she didn’t think it would have turned her on so much as it did right now.

There was something about the way he said it that sent heat crawling up her spine.

“I want more,” she whispered.

“I know you do,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. “But *this* is what I want.”

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she lifted her head, lips parted in confusion and disbelief. “Why did you stop?”

Draco brushed his mouth against hers, like he was tasting her frustration.

His thumb stroked her waist under the water.

She tried to speak, but all that came out was a shaky, “You want to torture me?”

His hand skimmed up her back. “*Oh, please.* I just want you to experience what it can feel like when you give me a little control.”

She swallowed, throat dry, her mind reeling. None of her rational thoughts made it past the roar in her ears or the wet, aching throb between her legs.

“Do you trust me?” he asked quietly, fingers soothing her face, then her jaw and neck.

She nodded, dumbfounded. “Yeah,” she whispered.

He kissed just beneath her ear.

Hermione whimpered, hips twitching helplessly in the water.

Her thighs clenched around his arm as he reached beneath the water again, but this time he didn’t circle.

He slid two fingers inside.

Hermione cried out at the stretch of him filling her underneath the water.

Her whole body pitched forward. Her forehead dropped to his as he curled his fingers deliberately inside her.

“You feel that?” he sighed.

She nodded frantically, gasping against his mouth.

“I could come just from this,” he admitted, shifting beneath her again, his cock hard and waiting. “Just from the way you feel around my fingers. Just from the way you sound.”

“Please,” she choked again.

He pulled his fingers out slowly. Torturously.

“You want to ride me?”

“Yes...yes, please...”

“You want to feel me stretch you properly? Feel what you’ve done to me all fucking night?”

“Draco, please...”

“I want to watch your face when I slide in,” he said, his hands bracketing her hips now, guiding her up gently. “I want to see what you look like when you take me tonight.”

She let out something between a gasp and a whimper as he helped her position herself above him.

He just held her.

Held her while she trembled and the crown of him nudged at her entrance.

Her fingers curled in his wet hair and her mouth dropped open in anticipation.

“Look at me,” he said, waiting.

She did.

He thrust up slightly, just enough to slide an inch inside her.

Her whole body jolted.

Her eyes fluttered.

But she didn't look away.

"Good," he rasped. "Come take the rest."

Hermione lowered herself inch by inch, his hands steady at her hips, but not pulling. Just... guiding. Holding her through it.

The water made it feel different. Slippery, yes, but *less* forgiving somehow. The heat of him against her own was undeniable, but the stretch...

God.

The stretch *stung*.

She gasped, high and sharp, as the thick head of him slipped just past her entrance.

Her knees pressed tighter to his sides, fingers digging into his shoulders, trying to breathe through it in the small space.

"I know," he whispered, swallowing. "It's sharper like this. Less glide. You're so tight."

Her mouth parted again on a moan, half-pain, half-need. The pressure was *intense*, as though her body didn't quite know how to adjust to him in this new element. The water didn't cushion, it only magnified the sensation.

She felt every ridge. Every inch and twitch.

He watched her.

"Look at you," he breathed, jaw slack, holding himself still by what looked like sheer will. "You're doing so fucking good for me."

Hermione's eyes fluttered shut. Then forced themselves open again because she *needed* to see that look on his face.

She'd never seen anything like it. The want in him. The love.

Her body dropped another inch. Her breath punched out of her chest.

"Shh, I've got you," he murmured, thumbing a slow, grounding circle at her waist. "Don't rush. Let it burn. You can take it."

And she *could*.

She *wanted* to.

Every time she sank lower, every time her body adjusted just a bit more, she saw that flicker in his expression like he was watching something holy.

The sting was addicting. It lit her nerves on fire.

Her walls fluttered as she slid down farther, and he growled beneath her.

“You feel that?” he panted. “How tight you are around me?”

She nodded, desperate now, needy, lips parted and panting. “You’re so... God, you’re *big*.”

“Oh shit,” he gritted. “And you’re doing so fucking well.”

She dropped the rest of the way down with a strangled gasp, seating herself fully.

His head fell back against the edge of the tub, a hiss escaping him.

“*Fuck*, that’s it.”

She whimpered, hands braced on his chest, trembling from the sheer intensity of being completely filled.

He looked up at her then, eyes blown wide.

“All the way in,” he said hoarsely. “In your sweet pussy.”

Her breath hitched, everything in her clenching at once.

He felt it, she *knew* he did. His mouth dropped open, his hands tightening at her hips.

“Move,” he begged, just once. “Please, baby. Ride me.”

The praise with the new pet name he had decided on using for her tonight simply undid her.

She began to move.

Tentative, shallow at first, her thighs trembling, her muscles adjusting, trying to find rhythm on her knees in the water. But he caught her hips, anchored her, rolled his own gently up into her.

Water sloshed loudly over the tub’s edge. Neither of them cared.

“Oh...fuck,” she gasped, throwing her head back.

“Yeah,” he grunted, watching her like she was made of something otherworldly. “Keep going.”

Her hands fumbled for something to hold, his shoulders, the edge of the tub, *anything*. But her palm knocked the half-empty plate perched nearby. It clattered to the tile with a sharp crash, scattering across the floor like confetti.

Hermione froze. Then sighed, breathless and broken. “Fuck, sorry...”

“Don’t care,” Draco rasped, hauling her hips back down hard against him. “Don’t stop. I only care about you coming on my cock.”

Her moan cracked open from her throat like it shocked her.

He licked a path up the side of her neck. “You love this, don’t you,” he whispered darkly. “You love how deep I am like this. How good you feel when I stretch you out just a little too much.”

She nodded, frantic. “Yes. God, yes...”

“You’re soaked,” he growled, fingers sliding between them, circling her clit with unrelenting pressure. “I can feel it even in the water. You’re fucking dripping for me.”

“Draco...”

“You gonna come for me?” His tone dipped to something filthier. “You gonna sit right there and ride me like a good girl while you fall apart?”

Her walls fluttered hard around him.

“Harder,” he breathed.

She whimpered, gasped, moved harder. Faster. The water churned violently around them. Her thighs shook, her moans stuttering with every thrust.

“Fuck me,” he hissed, biting at her collarbone.

Her nails raked down his chest. Her entire body seized around him.

“Oh *fuck* - Draco, I -”

“I love you,” he muttered, hand tightening in her hair.

She shattered.

The orgasm ripped through her like a storm, splintering her vision and arching her back. The sound that left her throat was half-sob, half-scream. He held her upright as she trembled, breathless, her body convulsing around him.

“Fucking perfect,” he whispered against her ear.

Her head dropped onto his shoulder, still shaking.

And he hadn’t even come yet.

“Can you take a little more for me?” he murmured, brushing her wet hair back.

She was still shaking when he kissed the corner of her mouth. But she nodded, eyes fluttering close and opening quickly.

“Come,” he murmured, words rough but coaxing. “Turn around for me.”

Hermione blinked, dazed, but obeyed. Slowly. Her limbs felt unspooled, floating, but he helped guide her, steady hands on her hips, as he slipped out of her. He shifted her in the water, the heat of his chest pressed to her back for a beat before he pulled away.

“Knees,” he said gently. “Hands on the edge.”

She hesitated for half a second.

Then did exactly what he asked.

The porcelain was slick beneath her fingers as she gripped the rim of the tub, water dripping from her elbows. She felt open. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Draco ran his palm down her spine.

“Beautiful,” he murmured. “Fuck, you’re beautiful like this.”

She gasped when he spread her gently, water swaying around them, his cock nudging against her entrance again.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he said, mouth brushing her spine. “Tell me if you need to stop.”

“I won’t,” she breathed.

He pushed in, and she choked on a low moan.

It felt overwhelming at first before her body adjusted to take him over the water this time. She could feel every inch of him. The stretch bit into her, stung in that addictive, aching way she’d started craving. Her fingers curled tight over the edge of the tub.

Draco let out a growl behind her.

“You’re so filthy,” he hissed, bottoming out slowly. “So needy.”

“Draco” she gasped, knuckles white now. “It feels, oh -”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re squeezing me like you’re still coming.”

She nodded frantically, forehead dropping forward.

He gripped her hips, dragged her back onto him, thrust again.

The sound that left her mouth was *filthy*. Or maybe it was the sound that he had made.

The water slapped and sloshed. Waves crashed over the tub’s edge with every roll of his hips. Her breasts bounced with every movement, her breath coming in ragged moans as he set a

rougher, deep rhythm behind her.

He bent low, his mouth at her shoulder.

“Take it,” he muttered. “Take everything I give you.”

Hermione sobbed out something incoherent.

“Such a good girl,” he panted, one hand sliding up her body to wrap lightly around her throat. “Letting me ruin you in the bath. Letting me fuck you while the neighbors are trying to sleep.”

She clenched hard, and he swore under his breath.

“You *love* that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she gasped, eyes fluttering shut.

“You like when I take you like this,” he muttered, driving into her harder, water crashing around them with his wet skin skin slapping sharply against her.

Her knees nearly slipped. He caught her easily.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered.

Her body tensed like she was trying to brace herself for another storm. She could feel it rising, curling low and hot in her belly, already too close again.

“I-” she tried, but no real sound came out. Just something broken and like a breath.

Draco wrapped his arm tight around her middle, letting go of her through to hold her to him as he rocked into her, faster now and impossibly deeper, like he could feel her edge right there again.

“You’re so fucking good for me, you don’t even know,” he whispered.

“I c-can’t-” she sobbed, but it wasn’t a protest. She didn’t want him to stop.

“Yes, you can,” he said, a snarl undercutting the tenderness in his tone. “You can take it. You *are* taking it.”

His hand stroked down her stomach, then between her legs again, fingers finding her clit.

Her whole body arched into him as her legs gave out again.

Draco caught her, anchored her, shoved so deep she thought she might break.

And then he groaned, guttural, right against her spine. His grip tightened, his rhythm stuttered, and she felt the telltale pulse of him coming inside her, buried as deep as he could go.

He held there, trembling against her back, breathing hard. His hands spread wide across her stomach and chest.

Neither of them moved after that.

Water lapped gently now around their bodies, the violence of it forgotten. Her knees ached. Her arms were shaking. The shattered plate gleamed on the floor, the scent of lavender and sex clinging to their wet skin.

Draco pressed his mouth to the back of her shoulder.

“You okay?” he asked softly but a little rough with the burn of his release.

She nodded. Or tried to. Her whole body felt boneless.

“That was...” She couldn’t even finish the sentence.

He pulled out carefully, making her whimper again as her muscles fluttered around the loss. Then he gathered her up and tugged her gently into his lap again. He settled them both back in the water. She curled against him, arms heavy with her cheek against his shoulder.

“Christ,” he whispered, brushing her damp curls back from her face. “I think I saw God for a second.”

A laugh escaped her, hoarse and a little broken.

She couldn’t believe how much she loved this version of him. The one who took control but held her so carefully after. The one who whispered filth into her skin like it was worship, and then wrapped her in silence and warmth.

“Don’t move yet,” he murmured, kissing her temple. “Let me hold you a bit.”

She didn’t answer. Just nodded against his shoulder and let him.

The water around them sloshed only gently now with every slow breath he took, his chest rising beneath her cheek. The steam was fading, the air cooler, but she was warm, held there in his arms like something precious.

Her heartbeat was erratic at first, still fluttering from the high he’d coaxed out of her because it belonged to him. But under his touch, it began to slow.

He stroked her back with long, languid passes of his palm, like he wasn’t in any rush to be anywhere else. His fingers moved up to her hair, combing through the wet strands with care. She closed her eyes and let herself float.

His lips brushed the crown of her head. His thumb swept across her cheek. Then lower - along her jaw, the line of her throat.

And then, lower still.

She didn't move when his hand slipped over her breast. She just sighed softly.

His fingers circled lazily, not groping or grabbing, just feeling.

Her nipples responded again, stiffening under the water as he brushed over them with maddening patience. The peaks tightened, brushing his palm with every breath she took.

"You're still so sensitive," he rasped near her ear.

She shivered, not from cold.

His palm cupped her. His thumb dragged gently over the hard tip until she arched, involuntary, into the touch.

And that's when she felt it.

The press of him, firm beneath her thigh. Thick and heavy against her skin.

Her eyes flew open.

She tilted her head slightly, just enough to glance down. And then up at him. "You're-

"Yeah," he murmured, looking just as surprised. "Apparently."

"But... you just-" Her voice trailed off in disbelief. "How is that even *possible*?"

He gave a lazy, crooked smile. "I don't know. You're warm. And soft. And you keep making those little noises..."

She flushed hot, even in the bath.

His hand slid back down between her legs, just enough to ghost over her again.

"You want to see what else is possible?" he whispered.

Her legs twitched as he shifted beneath her again.

"Draco," she whispered, not even protesting. "I'm... I think I'm about to pass out."

Draco didn't push. He just hummed softly, kissing her temple, his hands soothing over her hips.

But then slowly, he moved her.

He slid her limp body up with surprising strength, guiding her legs to drape around his waist again. Her core brushed against him under the water, and she whimpered, overstimulated and aching.

"I know, baby," he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers. "I know."

She blinked at him, hazy and wrecked, breath catching as his hand wrapped around himself and guided his tip against her entrance. Her eyes fluttered shut.

He didn't thrust.

He just let her feel it, let the pressure tease her open again, her body pulsing in answer even as she trembled with exhaustion.

"Can you say it again?" he whispered, brushing her hair back.

She opened her eyes slowly and met his gaze. He was so gentle and hungry at once. She knew what he wanted to hear.

"I love you," she whispered.

"Let me have you again," he said, cradling her face.

And then, achingly slow, he sank into her again.

She cried out softly, legs twitching, arms gripping his shoulders.

And Draco... Draco moaned like it *hurt*, like the feel of her, tight and ruined, was going to destroy him.

"You've got no idea," he gasped, "how fucking good you feel like this."

They were both sore. Raw in a way she hadn't known before, stretched not just by him, but by everything they'd become. And yet she nodded, because her body ached for him and her heart ached more.

She gasped. The first slide stung, water making everything slick but not soft, and she gripped his shoulders to ground herself. He kissed her face. Murmured something she couldn't quite catch but felt down to her bones.

"It's okay," he breathed. "I've got you. Just breathe through it."

She did. And when he rocked up again, everything changed. Her breath hitched; her body molded to his like she was made for it. He was deep but so slow. Not just fucking her, loving her. In every movement and sigh.

She curled her fingers into the wet strands of his hair and buried her face in his neck. She kept whispering his name.

He cradled her hips as she moved with him, tender and grinding and devastating. "I love you" he whispered against her jaw.

Something splintered. Her body tightened around him.

His words came in a whisper, strangled, one hand sliding up her back, cradling the base of her skull. "Take what you need."

She whimpered, not from pain, not entirely. From the fullness. From the heat. From the way her body knew his like a memory now. She moved again, shallow, and he groaned into her hair. His hands gripped her so gently, as if any tighter might hurt her, but his body throbbed inside her, overstimulated and unbearably hard.

“Too much,” she breathed, helpless, undone. She felt everything, the tremor in his limbs, the tension behind his restraint, the way he let her lead even though she could tell it wrecked him.

“Keep going,” he murmured against her temple. “You feel too good to stop. Let yourself have it.”

And she did.

She rocked into him again and again, each drag making him twitch, curse and beg under his breath. His forehead pressed to her chest, lips brushing her skin in fractured worship. Her whole body was pulsing, drawn tighter and tighter with every thrust, and when she finally shattered again, quieter this time, deeper, like her heart was unraveling...he held her through it, his voice in her ear telling her she was beautiful, incredible, *his*.

He never asked her to stop.

Even when it was all too much. Even when he was shaking beneath her, open-mouthed and wrecked.

She only stopped when she couldn't move anymore. When they were both trembling, breathing the same air, clinging to each other like they might float away.

Chapter 24: Ties

The wind had picked up since she'd left the office an hour ago. Hermione tugged her coat tighter around her chest and pressed her phone more firmly to her ear, shifting her shoulder bag up as she crossed the street toward Theo's building.

"I'm not blowing you off," she said, her breath visible in the cold evening. "I told you that I'm coming over after I'm done packing."

Draco's sigh crackled faintly through the speaker. "And you're packing after you spend time with him."

Hermione rolled her eyes toward the grey sky. "He's my friend, Draco."

"He doesn't behave much like a friend these days, does he?"

She stopped at a red light, traffic rolling past her. "Because his feelings are hurt."

He wasn't happy with her. "What's the point of seeing him tonight anyway?"

Hermione adjusted the strap of her bag. "I want to talk to him before I leave tomorrow. He's been avoiding me since the escape room, and I think he deserves a heads-up."

"A heads-up about what?"

"About you telling the boys this weekend." She lowered her voice. "About us."

Draco didn't answer.

"The last time we talked properly, he told me I should stay away from you. I just want to tell him myself. Before it gets awkward and dramatic..."

"You mean before I lose my temper and start a fight with him."

She flinched, teeth catching the inside of her cheek.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Hermione pressed her lips together and kept walking, heels tapping against the wet pavement. She passed the restaurant where they'd eaten before Draco had driven her through the storm to Luton, when everything had started to shift.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight," he said. "But he's not exactly subtle about how he feels."

"I know."

“And I’d really rather spend tonight with you. Just us,” Draco said, tone dipping toward something more serious. “Since you’re leaving tomorrow to get drunk with a dozen girls all weekend in some sketchy party house.”

Hermione couldn’t help the smile tugging at her lips. “It’s a very cute Airbnb cottage, actually. It even has a hot tub.”

“Oh, brilliant,” he muttered. “Even better. Now I get to spend the weekend picturing you half-naked in a bikini with Luna and Ginny and...who else is going? Padma?”

“Draco.”

“What?”

“You’ve been in a mood all week.”

He didn’t answer.

“Since Sunday,” she clarified. “Since I reminded you about the hen weekend.”

He gave a noncommittal hum. “I’m not in a mood.”

“You’ve been broody and snappy and hovering so close I’m surprised you haven’t climbed inside my suitcase.”

He huffed out a breath, “Maybe I want to.”

Hermione’s heart gave a strange little twist.

She stopped walking. “I’m here now. Can we talk about this later?”

He was quiet.

“I don’t want to argue with you. Not tonight. Not before I leave.”

“I’m not angry at you,” he clarified. “I just hate the idea of that idiot saying something that ends up hurting you again.”

Her chest tightened. “He won’t.”

But inside, something curled tight and uncertain, because she wasn’t sure what Theo would say. And she wasn’t sure what Draco would say back. Or *do*.

What worried her most was not the argument itself, but that she wouldn’t be there to stop it.

But she didn’t say that.

She wouldn’t tell Draco she was afraid of leaving him alone in that conversation, as if she didn’t trust him not to unravel.

“I’ll be there soon,” she said instead.

“I love you.”

She smiled despite herself. “I love you too, Draco.”

He didn’t say anything else before the line went dead. But she could still feel him underneath her skin, brooding and tangled and waiting for her to come home.

Hermione looked up the old walls of Theo’s building. She hadn’t been here since before everything started, before Draco.

She slipped in behind a woman juggling a pram and a toddler, murmuring a quick *‘thanks’* before the door swung shut behind her.

Her boots echoed in the stairwell as she climbed. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting. A conversation. An apology. She didn’t even know if he’d answer the door.

But when she rounded the landing of the fourth floor, Theo was already there.

His hand was on the doorknob, keys jangling quietly in the other. He looked up, startled.

They stared at each other for a moment.

“Theo,” she said, breathless from the climb. “Hi.”

He was dressed in a soft grey hoodie she’d seen on him on many occasions. The one with the rip in the cuff. His curls were a little messy. His eyes flicked over her quickly.

“What are you doing here?” he asked eventually.

Hermione pushed a hand through her own curls. “You’ve been ignoring my messages.”

He shrugged and looked away. “Sorry. Didn’t have much to say.”

“I did.”

“I was just heading up. We’re taking turns with feeding the hens.”

The hallway light flickered once above them.

He started up without waiting. Hermione followed before he could stop her.

“How’s Theodora?” she asked as they climbed.

Theo shrugged. “Broody as ever. Pecked me in the shin yesterday.”

They reached the rooftop door, and he pushed it open with his shoulder. The wind was biting. Sharp enough that Hermione instinctively hunched her shoulders as she followed him outside, the door clicking shut behind her with a hollow thud.

Cold air bit at her cheeks.

Theo didn't seem to feel it. Theo crossed the roof without glancing back, tossing his hoodie sleeves up to his elbows. Hermione stayed at the doorway, watching him for a moment. The light rain misted in the air, clinging to her curls and lashes.

The chicken coop looked sturdier than the photos she remembered, still made from what appeared to be parts of an IKEA bookshelf but reinforced with actual effort. There was a soft red glow from a heat lamp inside, and strands of fairy lights framed the corners. A small, plump hen blinked out at them from the doorway, feathers fluffed up in a ball.

"She looks comfortable," Hermione murmured.

Theo crouched by the coop, brushing some straw from the ramp. "Finally. We spent last weekend winter-proofing it."

Hermione stepped outside into the cold, closing the space between them slowly. "Who's we?"

"My neighbor, Pansy. She named her after me." His mouth twitched.

Theo opened the latch, at the same time as Theodora let out a small, throaty noise and strutted down the ramp toward him. He caught her mid-flap.

Hermione watched, fascinated despite herself. She hugged her coat around her a little tighter.

Then Theo turned toward her, holding the hen like a peace offering. His eyes flicked over her face. "Want to hold her?"

"I don't-" she began, instinctively retreating a half-step.

But he was already moving, stepping closer. Their coats brushed. Without giving her time to protest, he eased the hen into her arms.

Theodora settled without fuss, tucking her head slightly against Hermione's chest. She was surprisingly calm and warm.

Hermione blinked. "She's... kind of sweet," she said, almost whispering. Her hand stroked down soft feathers, and the hen gave a contented huff.

"Don't tell her that. It'll go to her head."

She looked up. He was watching her.

The wind tugged at them both, curling around their legs. Somewhere behind them, the city kept humming. A siren. The faint buzz of distant traffic. The moment between them stretched.

"I meant what I said," Theo murmured. "That night on Luna's balcony."

Hermione's chest went tight. "Theo."

“I just needed the space,” he added quickly, shaking his head, curls rustling in the wind. “Not because I was angry. Just... watching you and him dance around each other wasn’t great.”

She lowered her gaze, fingers tightening slightly on Theodora’s warm side.

“I kept telling myself you’d come to your senses.” His voice cracked on the edges. “But it was hard, watching the person you want slowly fall for someone else.”

Her breath caught. She didn’t look away.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you,” she said softly.

“I know.” He gave a quiet nod.

Theodora let out a small, unimpressed squawk between them, like she’d had enough of the tension.

Hermione let out a shaky laugh.

“If you were mine,” Theo said, so low she nearly missed it, “I’d be screaming it into the world.”

Hermione blinked rapidly. Her arms, already full with the hen, felt even heavier now.

“That’s... actually why I came,” she said, stepping forward to pass the hen back. Their hands brushed. “To tell you.”

He took Theodora gently, resting her back into the crook of his elbow. His brow furrowed.

“Draco’s telling the boys this weekend,” she said. “Blaise. Harry. I’m going to tell Luna. Ginny already knows.”

Theo went very still.

“So... it’s official, then?” His tone wasn’t cruel. Just distant. Like he needed to ask but didn’t want to hear the answer.

“Yeah. It’s been official for a while, but...” She swallowed. “I’m ready to tell people.”

He nodded slowly, staring at the hen as she blinked up at him like none of this was her business.

“I didn’t want you to hear it secondhand,” Hermione added. “I know things have been weird. And I don’t know what happens next, but I care about you.”

Theo turned and set Theodora gently inside the coop. She strutted in a circle once, then flopped into the straw and tucked her beak beneath her wing.

He faced Hermione again. “I just really hope he doesn’t break your heart.”

She stiffened. “He won’t.”

“I hope not.”

There was something in his tone, like a blade turned inward.

“You think I’m making a huge mistake,” she said quietly.

“I think you’ve made your choice,” he replied. “And I hope he’s brave enough to deserve it.”

Hermione didn’t answer.

Her throat felt tight, like if she said one more word it would all come undone. The wind lifted her curls, cold against the back of her neck. She blinked once, slowly, trying to steady the sudden sting behind her eyes.

Theo just looked at her.

His expression softened by degrees, barely noticeable, but she saw it. The way his shoulders eased, the tension left his jaw. His hand fell from where it rested on the edge of the coop, fingers flexing like he wanted to reach for something but wasn’t sure if he should.

Then he stepped forward.

And without asking, he slid one arm around her and pulled her in.

Hermione exhaled, surprised at the strength of the relief that poured through her. She pressed into his side, her cheek finding the worn fabric of his hoodie, her hands still tucked into her coat. His body was warm and familiar in a way that didn’t hurt.

He didn’t hold her like someone trying to change her mind.

Theo’s fingers curled lightly over her upper arm. He rested his chin on her hair for a moment.

It wasn’t romantic, but it mattered just as much.

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment.

Eventually, he drew a quiet breath and eased back half an inch, loosening his hold. Hermione looked up at him, their faces close.

“Thanks,” she said softly. “For this.”

His mouth tilted, sad but not unkind. “Always.”

And then, like something had settled between them, he let go. The weight of his arm lifted. Hermione stepped back, just enough to breathe in the space again. The chill hit her a little sharper without him, but she didn’t mind it this time.

Hermione rolled her little suitcase up the last flight of stairs, breathing a little harder than she liked as she reached Draco’s floor. Her coat was half unbuttoned, curls frizzing from the

damp outside, and her bag clattered against the wall as she tugged it over the threshold.

Before she could knock, the door swung open.

Draco looked at her, barefoot, in a black t-shirt and his grey sweats. His eyes dropped immediately to the suitcase, then back to her face.

“Hi,” she started, breathless.

But he was already pulling her in.

The door slammed shut behind her, her bag forgotten somewhere in the entryway. His mouth found hers before she could say another word, his hands sliding up her sides, gripping her waist under her coat. She kissed him back, caught between a laugh and a gasp, as her back hit the inside of the door.

“God,” he muttered against her mouth, one hand curling into her hair. “I thought you forgot about me.”

“I packed as fast as I could.”

“You took too long,” he growled, kissing along her jaw, her neck, that spot just below her ear that made her knees weak. “I’ve been losing my mind.”

She laughed softly, breath hitching. “Don’t you want to ask me how it went? With Theo?”

“No.”

Her hands settled on his shoulders.

“Not right now,” he murmured, dragging her coat off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. “You’re here, it’s dark out, and you’re leaving me tomorrow for three bloody days. I don’t want to talk about him unless something happened that I should know about.”

His voice turned a little rougher. A fine line between playful and serious. Hermione froze slightly under the weight of it, just for a moment. He pulled back an inch, eyes searching her face.

“Oh?” he said, one hand rising to gently grasp her chin, tilting her gaze to his. His thumb brushed beneath her lip. “Is there something?”

She shook her head. “No.”

His eyes didn’t leave hers. “No?”

“Nothing,” she whispered, the sound soft but certain.

He watched her for another second before something in him settled. His grip eased, but he didn’t let go of her chin.

“Then,” he said, tongue darting out to wet his lips, “I don’t want to talk about him.”

His hand slid to the side of her throat. “I want to enjoy tonight with you properly. If you don’t mind.”

Her heart was already racing. She barely managed a nod before she leaned forward to chase his lips for another kiss. A deeper one as he backed her down the hallway. His fingers began trailing beneath the hem of her shirt.

He pushed her gently against his bedroom wall, mouth never leaving hers, hands roaming firmer now.

His breath ghosted over her lips.

“How do you want me tonight, *baby*?” he asked.

She blinked up at him, flushed and dizzy. The word echoed in her head. It curled warm and embarrassing deep in her stomach.

“Can you-” she bit her lip a little harsher than she intended to “-call me that again?”

He teeth grazed the shell of her ear.

“Oh, you like that?” he rasped. “You like when I call you *baby*?”

She nodded slowly, unable to do anything else.

He growled low in his throat, hands tightening on her waist. His hips pressed into hers, hard and unmistakably ready.

“Alright then,” he whispered, mouth dragging along her jaw. “Tell me what you want tonight, *baby*?”

He kissed her messier. His hand slid up under her shirt, palm splayed hot over her stomach, moving higher.

“What options do I have?” she whispered shakily, sighing when his fingertips ghosted just underneath the hem of her bra, teasing but never reaching.

He hummed low against her skin, a sound that rumbled through her chest and made her knees threaten to give out.

“Oh, I’ve got options,” he said, raking his fingers slowly up and down the slope of her ribcage. “I could take my time with you. Lay you out, taste you for hours.”

His lips found the underside of her jaw, biting just enough to make her gasp.

“Or,” he went on, whispering, “I could fuck you up against this wall. Keep my hand over your mouth while you fall apart for me, just so I can hear those perfect whimpers in my own goddamn head for days.”

Hermione's body began vibrating under his touch.

He nodded, "Care to play a little?"

"A little," she breathed, eyes flicking up to meet his. "What kind of game are we talking?"

Draco smirked, but he didn't rush. His fingers slipped lower along her waist, slowing knowingly at the button of her jeans.

"The kind where you let me tie your hands behind your back," he murmured.

Hermione hesitated beneath his touch.

He dropped his gaze, his hand still resting over her jeans. "Or not," he added quietly, pressing a gentle kiss to the side of her neck. "I can come up with something else."

She blinked. "Wait."

He'd already started pulling back.

"I didn't say no," she said, a little too fast. Her cheeks flushed. "I just... I've never done anything like that. I don't even know if I'd like it."

"That's alright," he said softly.

Her breath came shakier now, not from fear, but from the way he looked at her. She was looking for a hint of disappointment.

He grinned, leaning in to kiss her again.

"We can do whatever you want, baby. Nothing more," he said against her lips.

And just like that, he undid the button of her jeans with one hand, dragging the zipper down with exquisite patience. His other hand held her hip, holding her in place.

"You're already more than enough," he murmured. "I don't need anything else as long as you're happy."

Hermione's heart tripped over the fact that he wasn't expecting anything from her. The flush on her face was spreading faster than he low curl in her stomach.

"But... what if we *did* try it?" she asked quietly, fingers playing with his shirt. "Just... a little."

He stilled, watching her carefully.

"I'm not promising I'll like it," she added, cheeks even hotter now. "But I like the idea of letting you. Of trusting you."

Draco's expression softened, heat flashing through something deeper.

“Whatever you feel comfortable with.”

She nodded, breathless, already trembling.

“Can we try?”

“We don’t have to actually do anything,” he said calmly, his thumb tracing the bare skin above the open button of her jeans. “I can just talk you through it.”

Hermione exhaled. That helped more than he probably knew.

“Okay,” she said. “Just talking.”

Draco nodded and eased her back until the backs of her knees hit the bed. She sat without thinking, still fully clothed save for the undone jeans, her shirt had hiked up just enough to show skin.

He stayed standing in front of her, one hand grasping for her chin again to make her look up at him in the dark.

“If we did it,” he said, watching her closely, “I’d start with something soft.”

She tried to tilt her head, but he didn’t let her get away with that. “Like what?”

A small smile played at his lips. “My tie. The one I wore at the gala. That night,” he continued quietly, “I thought about how good it would look wrapped around your wrists.”

Hermione swallowed hard.

“I’d use it on you,” he said. “Tie it once around. Enough to guide your hands where I want them. Hold them above your head. Or behind your back while I kiss you.”

Her thighs pressed together where she sat on the edge of his bed, his gaze settled like a weight on her skin.

“I wouldn’t knot it too tight,” Draco went on. His fingers squeezed her chin, thumb reaching to pull at her lower lip. He was studying her every thought. “Just enough that you’d feel it. The restraint. The way it keeps you in place. But you’d still be able to move. You could stop everything at any time. Say one word, and I’d undo it.”

Hermione nodded, shaky and slow. The words caught in her throat, but she managed after taking a deep breath. “What word?”

He tilted his head slightly, considering. “Any word you want.”

She bit her lip. “What would you pick?”

He didn’t smile this time. His eyes were too serious. “It would have to be yours,” he said a new kind of tenderness. “Something that feels safe to *you*. That’s the point. You’d choose it. Not me.”

Hermione nodded, breathless.

His thumb pulled at her lower lip again. “Just something that feels like yours. Something that you won’t forget.”

Her eyes fluttered shut for a second.

“Cupboard?” she whispered, barely louder than her breath. As if saying it too firmly might shatter the moment.

Draco exhaled, something guttural and warm rolling out of him as his mouth curved just slightly. “That’s a very nice safe word, baby.”

He leaned forward, lips ghosting just beneath her ear. “God, the things I want to do to you now that I know you’ll say *cupboard* when you need me to stop.”

Hermione let out a breathy laugh, nervous and giddy. He was far too good at making her feel like a lamb walking straight into the lion’s den.

“I doubt you’d need it though,” he said. “I’d take good care of you. But it’s important that you always have a way out if you need it.”

She whimpered inwardly.

“Are you getting wet and messy for me?” he murmured, dragging his hand down her neck, “From talking about it?”

Her cheeks burned.

“You want me to check?”

That meant he’d finally touch her. She nodded, “Y-yes.”

His hand was slow as he slipped it past the waistband of her open jeans. She gasped as his fingers slid right underneath her underwear, finding her slick.

His brows rose as he dragged his fingers through the mess she’d made. She tried to spread her legs but failed miserably with his hands underneath the tight denim.

He pressed in just a little, just enough to make her hips twitch.

He leaned in, “Want me to keep talking?”

The question wrapped around her like a rope. Her thighs flexed instinctively around his hand, her fingers bunching the hem of his shirt.

She looked up at him, eyes wide. “Would you...” she swallowed, heat curling in her voice, “Would you *show* me?”

His eyes searched hers for a beat. Then he slowly withdrew his hand from between her legs, glancing down at his fingers. He brought them to his lips and sucked them clean, eyes snapping back to hers.

“I’d love to,” he said like she’d just handed him something sacred.

“But only if you mean it,” he added, brows furrowing. “Not just because you think it would make me happy.”

Hermione shook her head. “I mean it. I want to try this with you.”

“Then come here,” he whispered, guiding her up by the waist until she stood again, unsteady on her legs.

He kissed her forehead. Then her cheek and jaw. And as his mouth trailed lower, his hands slipped around to her back, fingertips brushing her wrists.

“Just your hands. Yeah?” he murmured.

She was trying to steady her breath under his caress.

He brought his hands back up, fingertips grazing the hem of her shirt. His eyes flicked to hers for permission.

“Can I?”

Hermione didn’t hesitate when she blurted an eager “Yes.”

He lifted her shirt slowly before dragging it over her head. The room was quiet except for the sound of her breathing and the soft rustle of fabric. When her curls fell back around her face, her skin shivered in the cold air.

Draco’s gaze ran over her.

He let the shirt drop to the floor, then stepped back in, mouth finding hers one more time.

His hands returned instantly, one behind her back to unclip her bra, the other skimming along her side, knuckles grazing the underside of her breast before he slowly pulled the straps down and off.

Her nipples tightened instantly, already aching for more of his wicked touch.

For a long moment, he just stared at her like stepping away required every ounce of discipline he had. Then he exhaled sharply and turned toward the wardrobe. She watched him cross the room, heart pounding, thighs clenching with her palms growing slick with anticipation.

He came back holding the tie from the gala.

“I’ll wrap it once,” he explained more clinically than before. “You know what to say if you want me to stop.”

She gave a small nod. “Cupboard.”

Draco reached for her wrists. Hermione let him guide her hands behind her back. Her heart stuttered with every second, even as she turned around.

He gave her every chance to pull away, but she never did.

The silk slid over her skin, smooth and cool. He looped it once. Then a second time. Not tight, just enough that her hands were held loosely together behind her.

Her breath trembled from the vulnerability of it, not from the restraint. She was quite sure she’d never felt more seen before.

“Too much?”

“No.” A slight shake of her head. “It’s... weirdly comforting. You can pull them a little tighter.”

“You sure?” Draco hummed faintly.

Hermione nodded. “I’m sure.”

Something in him changed at that. Like the floor dropped out beneath his restraint.

He stepped in again, chest brushing hers as he slipped behind her, adjusting the tie with just two secure hand movements. He held just enough tension to hold her wrists securely, but not enough to hurt. She felt every pull, every shift of the silk, a tether winding her body tighter and tighter to his.

When he returned to face her, his hands skimmed down her arms, bracing her. His lips ghosted over hers before descending to her collarbone, where he kissed her once with his tongue wetting the skin beneath the caress.

“You’re gorgeous like this,” he murmured into her skin, teeth just barely grazing. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Hermione’s breath stuttered, her bound hands twitching behind her back, instinctively seeking something to hold onto. She had nothing. Only him.

Draco kissed down between her breasts. His hands cradled her waist, then drifted to the front of her jeans, still unzipped from before.

Her heart flipped, something warm breaking open in her chest.

“I never thought I’d be the kind of girl who liked this,” she said, lips barely moving. “I always thought I had to be the one in control.”

“You’re always in control with me,” he whispered, hands sliding towards her chest to feel the weight of her breasts for himself. “That’s what makes it work.”

She breathed in deeply, closing her eyes. Her bound hands just kept twitching behind her. His thumbs brushed her peaked nipples, rubbed them gently, and the tension in her spine began to melt away because of him.

Draco straightened in front of her before he pressed forward slightly. His tongue slipped into her mouth, teasing her into a slow rhythm. One hand slid to the back of her neck, the other kneading her right breast with more demand and pressure than before.

When he finally broke the kiss, he rested his forehead to hers. His voice had turned husky.

“Want to lie back for me, baby?”

She nodded.

Draco helped ease her onto the bed, careful not to jostle her arms. He slid her further up the mattress until she was lying flat, her legs still draped over the edge, knees bent.

“You still good?”

“Yes.”

His fingers drifted to the waistband of her jeans, easing them down her hips. He watched her the entire time, checking for any flicker of hesitation. Her thighs lifted slightly to help him, eyes locked on his.

Her damp knickers followed.

He dropped to his knees in front of her. Her tied wrists behind her back had her arms curved slightly from the position. She felt spread open.

Draco pressed a kiss to her inner thigh.

Hermione whimpered, her knees trembling.

“You say the word if you need me to stop,” he said again. “Say it any time.”

And then he leaned in and dragged his tongue slowly through her folds. Tasting her like he had all the time in the world.

The first thing she noticed was the heat. The soft, wet heat of his mouth. The way his tongue flattened, then curled. Her thighs quivered under his touch, the cool air of the room brushing against her nipples, but everywhere else, she was burning.

Hermione cried out softly, her head falling back.

His hands gripped her thighs, holding her in place as he licked her again, until she writhed. The tie behind her back tightened with her movement, reminding her of the choice she’d

made. Of the trust she'd given.

He groaned into her, the filthy sound reaching her ears over her heavy breath.

"Sweetest fucking thing I've ever tasted," he growled. "All mine."

She moaned, body beginning to quake.

His tongue swept through her again. The slick sound made her open her mouth in a silent gasp.

His grip on her thighs was firm. His thumbs stroked slow circles against her skin, grounding her even as she unraveled. She felt every movement of his mouth, every careful lick, every flick of his tongue. He was lighting her up from the inside out.

She could feel his breath, hot and uneven, brushing against her folds between each kiss, each lick. It sent shivers racing up her spine, her wrists tightening instinctively behind her back with a soft pull against the tie. The silk didn't bite, but it held. She had nothing to cling to but the feeling. God, that wonderful feeling.

Draco groaned into her again, the vibration of it rippling through her core, and Hermione moaned in answer, her knees trying to spread wider for him. His nose brushed the top of her slit, and then his tongue circled her entrance so slowly she thought she might scream.

The air tasted of salt and skin and him. Her curls began to stick damply to her temples. The silence was filled only with the sound of her own desperate breaths, the wet sounds of his mouth against her, and the low, near-growl of satisfaction in his throat every time she whimpered.

"Draco," she choked out.

He didn't respond, not with words at least. His answer came in the way his tongue flicked again, more pressure this time. The way his lips closed around her clit, pulling a broken cry from her throat.

She swore she could feel him smile.

Her body was trembling now from how deeply she felt it. From how exposed she was, how seen, how utterly ruined it made her feel to be adored like this.

It made her moan again, broken and involuntary. Her head fell to the side, curls robbing her sight.

Her hips twitched, and Draco shifted impossibly closer, letting her ride his mouth as he flattened his tongue and began to lap at her in firm waves. As if he didn't need any air to breathe as long as she was getting closer to the edge.

Her fingers tried to curl into fists behind her back. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as the pressure coiled in her stomach.

His mouth sucked, he moaned, and she broke.

“I’m coming.”

Her orgasm hit her like a storm, all-consuming. It tore through her like lightning, electric and wild, her whole body quaking as she cried out, high and strangled. Her thighs tried to cage him in, but he held her wide open.

She collapsed back against the duvet, flushed and panting, skin dewed with sweat, her eyes wide and wet and blinking up at the ceiling as if she couldn’t quite believe what had just happened.

She ached from how loved she felt.

“Good?” he whispered against her core, flat tongue running up and down one more time to clean some of her mess.

She nodded, trying to look down at herself to meet his eyes.

He pulled back slowly, his thumbs digging into her thighs once more.

“Come here, baby,” he murmured, hands sliding beneath her hips to lift her gently. “Up on your knees.”

Her breasts swayed slightly with each slow movement. She rose to her knees on the bed, trying to steady herself.

Draco took a moment just to look at her. At her flushed cheeks, the way her lips parted, her breath uneven. The way she shifted slightly, arms pulled back, body exposed and waiting.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, sincerely curious.

She blinked at him. “That you’re still dressed.”

He tilted his head slightly, a smirk tugging at his lips. “I am.”

“And I’m not,” she added, heart still pounding.

He leaned in, his voice a breath against her lips. “And what do you want to do about that... with no hands?”

Hermione bit her lip, pulse thudding in her throat.

“I could use my mouth,” she suggested.

Draco groaned, just under his breath.

“Yeah?” he murmured, brushing his knuckles down her jaw, along the line of her throat. “What would you undress first?”

Her eyes flicked down to his sweatpants. She licked her lips.

“That,” she whispered.

His smirk deepened, but it didn’t reach his eyes. There was too much heat there now, too much excitement. “Then go ahead, baby.”

She shuffled forward on her knees, awkward at first, shoulders tight from her bound wrists, her breath catching as her legs brushed his. Her nose dipped low, nuzzling the fabric at his waist. He smelled like soap. Her lashes fluttered closed as she pressed a kiss to the band of his sweats.

Draco didn’t seem eager to help her. He decided watching her try was more entertaining.

Her mouth found the edge of the waistband and tugged, teeth sinking in, fingers twitching uselessly behind her. She exhaled against him, warm and shaky, trying not to whimper as the elastic dragged down half an inch, then snapped back against his skin.

She looked up.

Draco stared down at her, expression strained. His voice was hoarse. “You’re fucking killing me.”

His hand found her jaw, thumb tracing her cheek, then dragging across the swell of her bottom lip.

“You want to suck me off like this?” he murmured. “No hands. While I’m still dressed?”

“I want to suck your cock,” she breathed. “Like this. Please.”

He shut his eyes for a second, exhaling like it physically hurt. Then he pitied her enough to push his sweatpants and briefs down to mid-thigh, his cock flushed and heavy, already slick at the tip.

“Open your mouth, baby,” he said.

She did without needing to be told twice.

Draco guided himself to her lips. One hand in her curls, the other gently steadying her chin. Her lips wrapped around him, tongue flicking as she tried to take him deeper.

He groaned again, hand tightening in her hair. “So fucking eager. Can’t even touch me and you’re still making me lose my mind.”

Her eyes fluttered shut as he rocked his hips experimentally, letting her adjust whilst allowing her take more.

“Oh baby,” he breathed, jaw flexing. “Fuck, that’s good. Just stay there a second.”

She moaned around him, the sound breathy.

“Don’t rush,” he muttered. “Let me show you how I want it tonight.”

He rocked his hips, slow and shallow, guiding her with tiny tugs of her hair, with his other hand curling around the base of his cock. He never forced, only led.

“That's it, baby,” he hissed.

She whimpered, flushed and wet and shaky. His praise made her ache deeper.

And when she tried to take more, too fast, gagging just slightly, he pulled back and clicked his tongue, “No, no. Slow. Let me.”

He adjusted the angle, the depth, guiding her like a precious thing, fragile and filthy all at once.

“Say you want it,” he whispered. “Say it with your mouth full.”

She tried, choked a little, and he groaned like it was the most perfect thing in the world.

His hand slid back into her hair, curling tight, guiding her again.

“Open wider.”

Her jaw stretched, her tongue flattened, and the sound he made... raw and punched out, was worth every fluttering second of her nerves.

“Yeah take a little more,” his hips rolled forward with more weight.

He didn't look away from her face for a second, watched the way her lashes fluttered, the flush that bloomed over her cheeks, the way she whimpered around him.

Hermione tried to move on her own again, to take him deeper. But she faltered, gagged slightly, and tensed.

Draco stilled.

“You'll have to breathe through it,” he purred, brushing his thumb along her jaw. “Let me do the work. Just keep your mouth open and let me use it.”

He barely pulled out before sliding back in, hips rocking with practiced control.

Hermione moaned, and he straightened like it went to his spine.

“You like the idea of me using your mouth like that?” he sighed, breath ragged.

She nodded as best she could.

“Filthy girl.”

He slid back in, groaning as her throat tried to take him.

Draco smirked down at her, chest heaving. “I want you to remember this,” he said, grinding into her so slow and deep she whimpered. “Every time you're away from me this weekend.

Every time someone says your name.”

Another muffled moan from her.

“Fuck, baby...” He rocked into her slowly, his hand tight in her hair, the other bracing her jaw as he fed her inch after inch. She whimpered around him, and the sound almost broke him.

His hips started to stutter.

“Shit,” he hissed, pulling back slightly, eyes burning down into hers. “If you keep looking at me like that, I’m gonna come down your throat.”

His abs flexed. He was so close.

Too close.

Draco pulled back with a sharp gasp, cock dragging over her tongue before slipping free. He didn’t let go of her hair. Didn’t move far.

“Up,” he rasped. “Now.”

She blinked up at him, trying to suck in the string of saliva connecting them still.

He pulled her up by the tie at her wrists, then hauled her to her feet with a hand at her hip, holding her against him for a beat, his cock slick and throbbing between them, her body flushed and bare and still shaking.

He turned her with a rough kind of care, his hand guiding her to the edge of the bed.

“Bend over,” he ordered, almost sounding wrecked himself.

Hermione obeyed, slowly, resting her chest against the mattress, arms still behind her, cheek pressed to the cool sheets.

He leaned down, body covering hers as he straddled her, and his cock pressed hard between her legs.

“Look at me,” he panted.

She turned her head slightly, cheek brushing his jaw as he hovered above her.

His mouth brushed her ear, hot and filthy.

“I’m going to come so deep,” he whispered, “you’ll still be leaking me in the morning.”

Hermione moaned, eyes fluttering.

“Draco-”

“I’ll fuck it into you if I have to,” he growled. “Hold it there with my cock. Keep it inside until your legs give out.”

She whimpered, hips pushing back against him instinctively.

He hissed. “You like that?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “God, yes. Please.”

He slid a hand between her thighs, fingers dragging through the slick mess still dripping down her inner thigh.

His hand left her only long enough to stroke himself once, twice.

Then he lined up at her entrance, paused just long enough to grip the tie at her wrists and tug.

Hermione gasped, arching for him, wrists tugging against the silk tie as she pushed her hips back into his.

Draco hissed and pressed the thick head of his cock to her entrance.

And then he pushed in without stopping.

A long, slow thrust, inch by aching inch, until he bottomed out, so fucking deep. He held there, a tremor spreading through both of them.

She let out a broken sob of a moan, her body clenching around him, her face buried in the sheets.

His breath was ragged as he leaned down and kissed the top of her spine.

Then, in one slow movement, he slid his hands up her sides and dragged her upright with him. He stayed inside her until her spine arched back into his chest, her knees spreading wider on the bed to keep from collapsing.

Her tied hands rested against his stomach now, and he hooked one arm around her middle, the other snaking up to grip her jaw, tilting her face toward his.

“I’m going to take my time with you,” he murmured, licking a long, hot stripe behind her ear. “You’re not getting sleep tonight.”

Her head dropped back onto his shoulder, and she shuddered.

“Good,” she whispered. Her voice was breathless and trembling. “Make me take it.”

Draco groaned, burying his face in the crook of her neck. “Oh yeah, baby…”

He began to move, not fast but *deep* with so much purpose. Grinding up into her from below so she could feel every inch of him drag against her walls.

Each thrust made her gasp, her legs shaking where they held her up, her body helpless to do anything but *feel him take up all the space*.

“You feel that?” he growled. “How deep I am?”

“So deep.”

“That’s where I’m going to come,” he whispered, his hand moving from her jaw to wrap lightly around her throat. His other hand squeezed her stomach, pressing against the pressure of him inside her. “Right there. So deep no one else will ever reach it.”

Her eyes rolled back.

“Please.”

“Don’t come again,” he said, breath hot against her cheek. “Not until I say.”

She whimpered, the tension winding inside her so tight she could barely breathe.

He kept going, grinding into her, hand wrapped around her throat, her arms pinned behind her, tied and pliant and falling apart as her entire body leaned into him for support.

Each hard thrust punched the breath from her lungs, his cock dragging over every swollen, aching part of her.

“Please,” she whispered once more, voice broken from the overwhelming sense of falling. “Draco. I need you.”

His hand flexed gently at her throat, not tight, just a reminder. His other cinched her closer, holding her exactly where he wanted her.

“No,” he breathed into her neck, “not yet.”

A whimper slipped from her lips, high and pleading. But she held herself at that unbearable edge, her entire body twitching with restraint, every nerve lit up and trembling.

Draco’s breath stuttered against her skin. His rhythm slowed, but the depth didn’t. He pushed into her again, grinding so deep it felt like he’d never leave her body.

He pulled his face back just enough to look down at her.

Her whole body had gone pliant in his arms.

He rolled his hips into her. She cried out, head falling back again onto his shoulder.

“Remember how I feel inside you,” he went on, fucking her so slowly it made her sob. “How much you need me like this.”

Her fingers twitched against the tie. She was shaking so badly now she could barely stay upright.

He kissed behind her ear, tongue teasing, voice a continued whisper of filth.

"I'll let you come," he said, dragging his cock out nearly all the way, then slamming back in so hard her breath stuttered. "But not yet."

"Draco," she cried. "Fuck. Please, please let me come for you."

His hand slid down between her legs, middle finger finding her clit, slick and swollen and begging for attention.

She sobbed, and he kissed her cheek, gently, like he wasn't driving her to an edge she would never recover from.

"Not yet, baby," he said again. "Just a little longer."

His finger moved in tight, precise circles over her clit, coaxing her further toward the edge without letting her fall.

"Not yet," he reminded her, again, hot in her ear. "Almost."

Hermione could barely breathe, barely think. Her body was so close she felt like she was vibrating, bound and shaking, cock so deep inside her it was all she could feel. But even through the haze, something in her pushed forward.

She wanted to be good for him, to push him like he was pushing her.

"I'm going to be ruined all weekend," she said. "You know that, don't you?"

Draco groaned behind her, his hips stuttering.

"I'll be so sore from how deep you were inside me."

He bit down on her shoulder hard enough to make her wince.

"Fuck, baby... keep talking to me like that."

"I'll be sitting at brunch," she went on, almost delirious by now, "and I'll shift in my seat and feel how sore I am. And I'll know it's from you fucking me so deep."

His hips slammed into her harder, the rhythm starting to falter.

"And I'll be wet again," she continued, "just from remembering how you tied me up and didn't let me come until I was crying for it."

Draco's hand tightened on her throat, not choking but claiming her in place.

"Say that again," he hissed. "Say it."

"You didn't let me come," she whispered, "I wanted to come for you with your cock still deep inside me."

He cursed, barely holding on, every muscle in his body locked tight against the wave threatening to pull him under.

She twisted slightly to look up at him, fighting against the way he tugged at her wrists to keep her where she was. “Draco, please. I need it. I need you to let me come.”

The hand at her clit pressed harder, his other gripping her throat as he fucked her faster and much sloppier than usual.

“Then come,” he said between gritted teeth. “Right now. Do it. Let me feel you fall apart on my cock.”

Hermione cried out as she clenched around him, body spasming with a release harder than usual. She could feel how she convulsed around him. Her body tried to keep him close.

Draco groaned her name like it hurt, and then he was coming too. He spilled inside her exactly like he’d promised, fucking her through it as her body shook in his grip. Somewhere in the back of her mind she believed her numb fingertips scratched his abdomen in a desperate attempt to hold onto him.

He stayed buried in her as the last of it rolled through him, his hips twitching, breath faltering against her neck. The grip on her throat softened, his other arm sliding up to cage her against his chest.

She noticed how his palm pressed between her breasts as if to feel her heartbeat.

He caught her with a murmur, easing them both to the mattress without letting her go. He almost collapsed on top of her with their skin sticky with sweat and come.

Draco's hand slipped up into her curls, not pulling, but threading through the damp strands as he cradled her close. He exhaled hard into her hair.

“You okay?”

Hermione gave the tiniest nod, eyes fluttering shut against the mattress. “Better than okay.”

She stirred slowly to the sound of rain.

A steady pattern against the windows. Warmth pressed into her back, a slow breath against her cheek. One arm wrapped tight around her middle.

Hermione shifted slightly, just enough to feel the throb of soreness between her legs.

She felt him move behind her.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” he murmured into her shoulder.

She smiled faintly and turned in his arms, pressing her cheek to his chest.

“How long have you been awake?”

“Too long.”

His hand stroked over her back, then settled low on her hip, holding her there.

“It’s early,” she murmured, eyes slipping shut again.

“You have to leave in two hours.”

“Like I said, it’s early.”

His mouth brushed against her forehead, her temple, then lower. His lips dragged over her cheekbone, the corner of her mouth, and finally settled at her throat. She shivered.

“You don’t have to do anything,” he whispered, “except stay here a little longer.”

His voice had changed to something rougher.

She looked up at him, and her heart ached at the expression on his face, like he was memorizing her.

“Draco,” she whispered.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ll only be gone two nights.”

“I know.”

He kissed her again.

“I still don’t want you to go.”

She cupped his face gently, thumb brushing his cheekbone.

His hand slipped between her thighs, making her gasp but spread her tired legs willingly. He stroked her lazily until he could feel her grow wet again.

“I keep thinking about last night,” he said, eyes never leaving hers. “How warm you were. How full.”

Her breath caught.

“I need to be inside you again before you leave,” he whispered. “Just one more time. I need to feel you around me.”

Hermione nodded, breathless.

Draco rolled over her in one smooth motion, fitting perfectly between her legs. His cock was already hard against her thigh, but he didn’t rush. He kissed her slowly, again and again, like

they had all the time in the world.

And when he finally pushed into her, it wasn't fast or frantic. Like he wanted to carve the feeling into both of them.

She gasped at the stretch and the soreness. The heat of him filled her again so beautifully.

His mouth dropped to her shoulder as he moved.

"I'm going to miss you," he murmured into her skin.

"I'll miss you too," she whispered, wrapping her arms around him, nails dragging lightly down his back.

"I think I'm already missing you," he confessed. "And you haven't even left yet."

She kissed his jaw. "I'll come back."

He started moving a little deeper now, each thrust weighted and quiet.

"Draco—" she gasped, the sound catching in her throat as he pushed deeper, slow and steady, so far inside her it was hard to tell where one of them ended.

She could feel him everywhere.

Not just the thick pressure of him filling her up, but the weight of his chest brushing against hers with every breath. The smooth slide of his hand along her ribs, the careful way his fingers curled beneath her thigh to hold her open for him. The press of his forehead to hers.

He rocked his hips again, and she gasped at the friction as his pelvis dragged perfectly over the front of her, grinding into her just right, every movement deliberate.

Her hands found his shoulders, then his jaw, and then his hair. Her fingers tangled into the soft strands at the nape of his neck like she was holding herself together through him.

"Please don't stop," she whispered. "I don't want this to end."

His breath hitched as he drew his hips back and thrust into her again, slow but firm. "It won't," he said roughly. "I'll make sure of it."

She whimpered as the grind of his pelvis hit that perfect place again. Her back arched. Her thighs tightened around him.

"Every time I move," he said, lips brushing her jaw, "you squeeze around me like that. Do you feel how you're pulling me deeper?"

Her eyes fluttered. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

He kissed her temple. Her cheek. Her eyelid.

Hermione pulled him closer by the hair, tugging gently, her other hand running down his spine. She felt the muscles in his back ripple with effort. Felt his control breaking with every move of his hips.

“I love you,” she whispered and held onto him.

Draco groaned loudly before he buried his face in her neck and started moving harder, grinding with more intensity. The slick sound of them filled the room, matched by her soft moans and his sharp gasps he couldn’t hold back.

Her nails dragged down his back.

And then he changed the angle slightly, tilted her hips up with one hand under her thigh and drove into her again. Forward until the friction made her back bow and her mouth drop open in a silent plea.

“That’s it,” he panted. “Right there. That’s where I want you to fall apart.”

Hermione clutched at him.

His hand came up to her face, cradling her jaw. “Let go, baby. Let me have it.”

She came with a cry, her body writhing beneath his, clenching around him, soaking him. She felt everything, him pressed into every part of her, like he was imprinting himself.

Draco swore into her neck and thrust twice more before he came too. His whole body locked up tight around her, mouth open against her skin as he filled her, moving through it, holding her in place like he never wanted to leave.

They stayed like that, joined and shaking, still buried inside her, his face buried in her neck. Her arms wrapped tight around his back.

Neither of them said anything for a long while.

Eventually, he kissed the underside of her jaw and whispered, “I love you more.”

Hermione stirred again to the sound of cupboards clicking open and shut.

The warmth of his arms was gone, replaced by the rumpled weight of his duvet tangled around her hips. She blinked, disoriented, letting her fingers slide across the cool sheet where his body had been.

A cabinet door thudded softly in the kitchen. Then the rush of water. The clink of something.

She rolled over with a quiet groan, squinting toward the clock on his bedside table, except he didn’t have one. She reached for her phone on the nightstand instead, eyes widening when the

screen lit up.

8:24

Shit.

Her heart jumped. She had to be at King's Cross in forty minutes.

Sliding quietly out of bed, Hermione padded across the wood floor, limbs still loose and achy from earlier, the soreness between her legs making her wince as she reached the door. The sounds from the kitchen continued.

Her cheeks flushed as she turned the knob on the shower.

She stepped under the spray quickly, letting it rush over her skin and chase away the sleep, the sweat, the slick between her thighs. She washed fast but efficiently, and even though her mind was already racing ahead to the girls and the train and the cottage, her hand lingered at her collarbone for a moment, tracing where his mouth had been.

She was still warm there.

Towel-drying in a hurry, she wiped steam from the mirror and stared at herself.

Flushed. Damp curls framing her face. Lips kiss-bitten. There was a mark on her neck. Not glaring, but definitely there.

When she stepped back into the hallway, the smell of coffee wrapped around her immediately.

Hermione padded into the kitchen, towel-dried curls still damp against her shoulders. Her small suitcase trailed behind her, the wheels catching on the doorway before she let go of the handle and left it there.

Draco stood at the stove, shirtless, sweatpants slung low on his hips, back tense in a way that told her he'd been listening for her footsteps and trying to pretend he hadn't.

Two mugs already poured. Eggs still warm in the pan. Toast. Marmalade. A bowl of fruit, carefully sliced.

Hermione hovered in the doorway, smiling softly.

"What did you do all this for?" she asked.

He didn't turn around. "You need a proper breakfast."

Her brow furrowed in response. "I can just grab something on the way."

"Please," he sighed, a little sharper this time. "Is the thought of having breakfast with your boyfriend so appalling to you?"

The tone of his words landed somewhere deep in her chest.

Her expression faltered. "I only have fifteen minutes."

Draco exhaled hard through his nose and finally turned, setting a plate on the table a little too gently. He didn't look at her.

Hermione stepped forward. "For someone who says he's going to miss me," she said with a sigh, "you're doing a really shit job of showing it."

That got his attention.

His eyes flicked up, and for a beat, the irritation cracked open into something rawer. His posture sagged.

"I'm not trying to be an arse," he said, quieter now, more tired than angry. "I just don't like watching you get ready to leave. So I thought I'd make breakfast instead of clinging to you like some fucking stray dog."

She stepped closer but didn't sit. "Hey."

He met her gaze but said nothing.

So she pulled out the chair and lowered herself into it.

"Sit with me?" she asked.

Then, picking up a piece of toast, she added, "I'm not exactly thrilled about leaving either."

He hesitated only a second before settling into the chair across from her. His hand reached across the table, palm open. She slid her fingers into his, grounding them both in the quiet that followed.

He was tracing soft, thoughtless patterns over her knuckles when she finally broke the silence.

"Is there something else you want to talk about?" she asked.

Draco looked up.

She tilted her head. "Something about me going away this weekend. Besides the obvious."

He hesitated.

"That's not an accusation," she added quickly. "I just... I don't want to leave with something left unsaid. I'll be a few hours away, with a group of girls, and yes, we'll be going out..."

He leaned back slightly, running a hand down his jaw. "You mean... if I'm jealous?"

Her brows lifted, just a little. "Are you?"

He didn't answer at first. The soft sound of rain tapped at the kitchen windows.

"It's not like that," he said finally. "I trust you."

She waited.

"It's that I won't know where you are. I won't know what's happening around you. I won't be there if something goes wrong."

Hermione blinked. "You think something's going to go wrong?"

"I always expect something to happen," he said quietly. "I just got good at hiding it."

She bit her lip. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, eyes flicking to the window and back, "I wake up every day a little on edge. Wondering what will go wrong. Where the shift is going to come. I've just learned how to function on top of it. I bury it, but it's always there."

Hermione was silent for a long moment.

His jaw worked as he looked away. "It makes me feel sick, if I'm honest."

Her heart pinched, her shoulders softening instinctively.

"What do you think will happen while I'm gone?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It doesn't even matter. But I won't be there *if* something happens. I won't know if your phone dies. Or if you're walking somewhere alone."

Her heart cracked open in the quietest way.

"I don't want to hover," he added. "I don't want to be a problem. I just... I like being near you. Even when nothing's wrong."

"Oh Draco," she said barely above a whisper. "Where's that coming from?"

"I don't know," he muttered. "Sorry. I didn't want to throw it at you before you left. Didn't want to make it harder."

"I guess I worry about different things," she said after a moment. "Like... what it'll feel like not talking to you at night. Or if something stupid happens and I can't tell you right away." She glanced at him, biting her lip again. "Or if you notice you won't miss me as much as I will miss you and start pulling away before I'm even back."

Draco's expression shifted to confused, even a little disbelieving.

"Woman," he said quietly, "did you hear what I just said?"

She nodded.

“I’m going to keep my phone charged,” she promised. “And I’ll stay close to the group.”

He smiled a little.

Hermione looked at the slight tightness around his mouth, the way his hands had stilled like he didn’t trust them not to tremble.

He gave a small nod, eyes cast down.

“Can I take one of your sweaters?”

He looked back up.

The smallest smile pulled at her lips. “You know. Since I won’t have you hovering.”

A warmth flickered behind his eyes, chasing out the storm for just a second.

“You want one?” he asked.

She shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Might help me sleep.”

Draco didn’t say anything but pushed his chair back and disappeared down the hallway without another word.

Hermione took another sip of coffee, listening to the soft rustle of drawers opening and closing from his bedroom, the faint creak of a wardrobe door. A moment later, he returned.

He handed a navy jumper to her, smelling like laundry and him.

She curled her fingers around it gently, like it was something fragile.

He watched her, then smiled barely. “Keep it warm for me.”

She pressed the jumper to her chest, glancing at him over the rim of her mug.

“So,” she said, “how exactly are you planning to tell Blaise and Harry?”

Draco gave her a long look. “Why do I feel like this is a trap?”

Hermione raised her brows innocently. “It’s not. I just... you said you’d tell them this weekend.”

“I will,” he said, reaching lazily for his toast. “Just haven’t decided whether I’ll do it before or after getting shit-faced.”

Her head tilted. “Oh?”

He smirked, unapologetic. “Figured if I say it after drink three, they’ll assume I’m joking. Say it after five, they’ll be too confused to react. That buys me time.”

Hermione laughed, shaking her head. “That’s your strategy?”

“Relax,” he muttered around a bite of toast. “I’m figuring it out. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried,” she said, biting into a strawberry. “Just intrigued. Maybe you should open with a toast. *‘To shagging Granger, may she always be wet and wanting.’*”

Draco nearly choked on his coffee.

She grinned. “What? Too much?”

He wiped his mouth, giving her a pointed look. “I was trying to be sincere.”

Hermione softened. “I know. I’m just... distracting you.”

“Yeah. You’re doing a shit job,” he said flatly, though his mouth twitched.

She nudged his foot under the table. “I’ll tell Luna, so by Sunday the secret’s officially out.”

He leaned back slightly, giving her a longer look now. “Yeah?”

Hermione nodded. “It’s time.”

Draco’s smile was small but real. “Good. Then we can finally stop pretending.”

Her heart kicked hard against her ribs.

For a long, luxurious moment, it felt like the world had stopped for them.

Then her phone vibrated on the table.

Hermione frowned, leaned forward reluctantly, and flipped it over. Her stomach sank.

Ginny:

Where are you??? The train leaves in 5 minutes... HURRY.

“Fuck,” Hermione breathed, scrambling upright. “I completely lost track of time.”

Draco blinked. “Wait, what?”

She darted toward the hallway, half-dressed and swearing under her breath, eyes scanning wildly for her boots. “Shit, shit, shit. My phone’s going to die and I still need to find the damn...” Her voice trailed off as she spun in a useless circle. “I was supposed to meet Ginny ten minutes ago. I need to be on a train that’s coming in five and I’m...I’ll just have to take the next one.”

From behind her, she heard the faint jingle of metal.

She turned.

Draco stood near the kitchen table, arm extended, dangling his car keys in front of him like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He sighed. "Take the car."

Hermione looked at him, frowning. "Draco. No."

"Why not?"

"You can't just give me your car."

His expression didn't shift. "Can't you drive?"

"I can," she said cautiously. "But I didn't for a long time. And your car is very expensive. It probably costs more than my education."

Draco's mouth twitched. "It's an automatic."

"That's not the point."

"There's really nothing you can do wrong with it," he said, stepping closer. "Unless you deliberately drive it into the Thames. Which I would take personally."

She exhaled, looking down at the keys.

"You really want me to drive it?"

"I want you to have a proper weekend," he said, a little quieter now. "Not drag your suitcase through King's Cross alone with strange blokes checking you out."

Hermione stared at him.

"I trust you ."

Something inside her chest tugged at his words, the meaning behind his generous gesture.

Draco shrugged, and looked suddenly younger, or maybe just more uncertain. "Take it. Or don't. But I'll stand here looking like I just got dumped either way."

"I'm not dumping you," she muttered.

"I feel dumped," he said. "You're leaving me for an entire weekend. Might as well lean into it."

Hermione reached out, slowly curling her fingers around the keys. His hand lingered against hers.

Chapter 25: Perfect

Draco's car waited on display in the underground garage of his building. It looked fast, even when parked.

She side-eyed him as he carried her suitcase in one hand, the other arm slung loosely around her shoulders.

"Draco," she said slowly, "I'm still not convinced this is a good idea."

He didn't answer. Just tapped the key fob once.
The lights blinked, and the car gave a polite little chirp.

"You'll be fine," he said, already moving to open the driver's door for her. "Come on."

She stepped forward reluctantly and slid in. The leather was cold beneath her thighs through the denim. The seat setting was far too low, and she scrambled to find a comfortable position.

"Oh my god," she muttered, adjusting herself awkwardly. "This is not built for normal people."

"That's because you're tiny," Draco said, leaning into the door frame beside her. He smelled like his unholy aftershave and something sharp that might have been leftover sex on his skin despite a shower. She held back a silly grin.

"Here...press the side button. No, the longer one. That tilts it."

She fumbled with it for a moment until the seat rose with a mechanical sigh, her thighs lifting and the back shifting forward.

"Okay," she murmured. "That's better."

He reached past her to toggle the wheel adjustment. "And the steering column, you can bring it up and in."

Hermione felt his arm brush hers. Watched the ease of his fingers on controls she'd never paid any attention to when she sat on the passenger seat. The car she'd learned to drive in would be considered vintage compared to his.

He caught her watching and smirked. "Need me to adjust the mirrors for you too, Princess?"

She rolled her eyes and took over.

"Here, let me save your seat settings." He tapped a button on the side panel, holding it until it beeped twice. "There. Programmed under two. One is mine."

Her smile felt liquid for reasons she didn't care to examine. "I'm sure you'll drive it more often in the future."

She looked around the interior, as if she was expecting it to look any different from this side of the car.

Draco shifted, reaching in again to turn on the console.

“Put your foot on the brake to start it,” he said. “Then drive, reverse, neutral. Same as anything else. It won’t bite.”

“I haven’t driven in years,” she said. “Not since uni.” She couldn’t stop repeating it, so Draco understood how stupid he was for trusting her with his car. But he seemed unfazed by her admission.

“Want to take it around the block first?” he asked without any teasing. “I’ll come with you until you feel more comfortable.”

Hermione looked up at him, noticing how much closer his face was to hers than she’d expected. He leaned in to kiss her temple once.

“Like a practice lap?”

“Yeah. I want you to feel like it’s yours,” he said.

Something in her chest flinched.

Draco tilted his head toward the passenger side, mouth softening. “Come on. Worst case, you dent a hedge. I have insurance.”

She rolled her eyes but finally nodded.

“Fine. But if I stall it-”

“It’s an automatic, baby. You’d have to try.”

She bit the inside of her cheek at him calling her *that* again, this time outside of the bedroom. She absolutely melted at it.

Draco rounded the front of the car and got in beside her after he dropped her suitcase in the back. He tugged the seatbelt into place and pushed the seat a little further back.

Hermione sat still for a moment, letting the engine hum around her, letting the weight of him beside her settle like warmth in the cabin.

She checked her mirrors. Her hands were a little sweaty on the wheel.

“You good?” he asked.

“Splendid.”

“Go on, then.”

She eased the car into reverse, glancing back over her shoulder like it was second nature. The tires rolled smoothly over the painted garage floor, and her breath stilled when she switched into drive.

Draco didn't give any further directions. Just let her take a long, slow turn down the block. One hand braced on the console, the other playing with the mirror on the passenger side.

"See?" he said, after a moment. "It's like riding a bike."

The tension in her arms slackened. She turned the corner a little too wide, but the car held steady, and Draco didn't even flinch.

They circled the block twice before pulling into a free spot right in front of his building. She exhaled, but couldn't help to feel a little bit proud of herself for not embarrassing herself in front of him.

He turned to her. "I'm going to kiss you once and then sneak about before I hold you here any longer."

Her hands tightened on the wheel, then loosened.

"You really trust me to not crash your car?"

Draco looked at her. "I do. And if anything feels off you call me and I come and get you."

"Without a car?"

"I have another one at my parents place. I'm gonna pick it up later today."

"Of course you do."

Draco leaned forward, brushing his knuckles lightly along the gearshift before reaching for the console. "All right. Before I let you leave with my car and half my heart, let's get you set up."

He tapped the screen twice, then held out his hand. "Phone."

Hermione raised a brow. "Excuse me?"

"So you don't need to text and drive. Give me your phone."

She pulled it from her coat pocket, the familiar red case slightly scuffed at the edges. "You realise I'm a responsible adult who doesn't text and drive anyway."

"Humour me."

She dropped it into his palm, watching as his fingers slid over the touchscreen. He paired it with the car's Bluetooth, input her contact name, then made a small approving noise when her maps feature pulled up.

He handed back her phone and she started typing a message for Ginny to let know that she was on her way with Draco's car.

"Okay, just so you're aware...this thing has front and rear sensors, lane assist, and brake assist. The mirrors adjust automatically if someone's in your blind spot. If it screams at you, don't panic. It just means someone's being stupid."

Hermione sighed. "You're giving me a car that yells at me?"

"Lovingly," he deadpanned.

She snorted, but he didn't laugh. His face had gone quiet. "Hey. I'm sorry about earlier," he said. "I'm not doing it on purpose."

She turned her head, studying him.

"It's alright," she said gently. "I kind of like this protective side of you. Even if you do go a little overboard."

He reached for her jaw. His eyes looked tired but calmer now, like something had shifted during their lap around the block.

He ran a thumb across her cheek. "I don't want you driving off with the taste of a fight in your mouth. I love you," he said simply.

Her stomach dropped and fluttered at the same time.

"I love you too," she whispered.

He nodded once, eyes dropping to her lips before flicking back up.

"Have a fantastic weekend. Get drunk. Scream your head off at the hen party. Wear something hot. Come back in one piece. I can't wait for Sunday."

She leaned across the console to kiss him, quick and certain. "Me either."

He kissed her back, firmer now, hand in her curls for just a moment before he let go of her and slid out of his own car.

Hermione pulled up in front of the Airbnb two hours later. She sat for a beat, palms still resting on the wheel. The air inside was warm and thick from the long drive, her legs stiff from a tension she hadn't admitted to herself until now. She'd made it.

Reaching for her phone in the center console, she texted Draco.

Made it in one piece. I'll text you later.

Just as she hit send and reached for her seatbelt, the front door swung open.

“Hermione!” Ginny called, sounding both thrilled and mildly pissed.

Hermione got out of the car, and Ginny emerged onto the path, holding a cider and squinting at the vehicle. Her gaze dragged over the car’s sleek exterior with theatrical slowness.

“Jesus,” she muttered. That was all. Her face said the rest.

Hermione shut the door and shot her a look. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything.” Ginny raised her hand, smug, then extended the glass toward her. “Here. Can you please drink this for me? Fleur’s been sniffing around like a bloodhound, and if she figures it out before I tell Mum, I’m dead.”

Hermione looked down at the cider, then back at Ginny, blank. “Seriously?”

Ginny gave her the full innocent act with a tilted head, batting lashes and barely concealed grin.

With a sigh, Hermione took the glass. “You’ll hold my hair when I have to get rid of it later.”

“You bet,” Ginny grinned from ear to ear.

From the doorway, Luna’s voice floated out. “Is that *Draco’s* car?”

She stepped onto the path a moment later in wide-leg trousers and a loose tank top, holding her own cider like a sacred object. Her eyes landed on the car, then on Hermione.

A soft smile curved her lips. “That’s an interesting development.”

Ginny snorted.

Inside, someone shrieked something about shots. Music blared. The front window flew open upstairs, followed by more laughter.

But Luna remained still in the middle of the walkway, gazing at the car like it told a story. Then she turned to Hermione fully.

“It does make sense I suppose. I always thought he was in love with you,” she said as if commenting on the weather. “I didn’t think he’d ever admit it though.”

Something lit under Hermione’s skin, sharp and warm and too much all at once.

Ginny let out a low whistle. “Well. Guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

Luna blinked, as if something had just clicked. “You and Draco are a couple now.”

From inside, a chorus of voices started chanting Hermione’s name.

She stared up at the house, then took a long sip of the cider.

Turning back to Luna, she said, “Yes. We are.”

Luna’s face brightened. “Oh,” she said. “That’s really lovely.”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but the front door burst open again and someone shouted, “She’s here! We’re complete!”

A rush of footsteps followed, and two of the girls, Hannah and Parvati, came tumbling out onto the front step.

“There you are,” Parvati grinned, wrapping Hermione in a quick hug. “God, that drive must’ve been hell.”

“Two hours and I didn’t kill anyone. I’ll take the win,” Hermione said, letting them take the half-emptied cider from her hands.

Luna had already stepped around the car. “I’ll grab her suitcase.”

“I’ve got it,” Hermione started, but Ginny was already waving her off.

Inside, the house was alive with music and chatter. The living room overflowed with throw blankets, half-unpacked snacks, and at least two inflatable flamingos they wouldn’t be using in the cold weather.

Ginny led her up the narrow stairs, glancing over her shoulder. “You’re with me. Hope that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Hermione said.

Ginny led her upstairs, Luna following with her suitcase. They nudged open the door to a small bedroom with two single beds pushed under the attic. One was already a mess of pyjamas and hair clips. The other was freshly made, a stack of folded towels resting on the duvet.

“I claimed this one for you. Also, I may or may not have put our favorite chocolate in the nightstand drawer.”

Hermione looked at her, warmth spreading through her chest. “You’re the best.”

Luna hummed. “Isn’t she?”

From downstairs came the unmistakable sound of someone yelling.

Ginny winced, then glanced out the small attic window and made a face. “Right. You’ve got ten minutes to change. We’re heading out to grab something easy by the beach before it starts pissing down.”

Hermione stepped closer to the window. The sky had gone that heavy grey that didn't quite mean storm, but definitely meant *umbrella*. A fine mist was already settling on the glass.

"I thought we were staying in tonight?"

"We are," Ginny said, rummaging through her own bag for a jumper. "But we need chips. And something hot. And, according to Fleur, a round of cocktails by the sea." She made exaggerated air quotes. "So we're walking down to that dive-y fish shack."

Hermione raised a brow. "In the rain?"

"It's not raining yet." Luna corrected. "And we already found a few umbrellas downstairs to share."

Hermione peeled off her cardigan. "Alright, alright. Just let me throw on some mascara and pretend I haven't been in a car for two hours."

"Bathroom's all yours," Ginny said, already halfway out the door. "I'll meet you by the mirror. Bring your face."

Ten minutes later, Hermione came down the stairs to find Ginny standing at the kitchen counter, squinting into a small round mirror propped between bottles of prosecco and bags of crisps.

"Here," Ginny said, nudging Hermione in beside her. "You still do that glowy thing on your cheeks?"

Hermione pulled her hair forward and nodded. "Somewhere in my bag..."

"I love that glowy thing. Makes you look like you've had eight hours of sleep and a good shag."

Hermione gave her a look in the mirror. "Subtle."

Ginny just smirked.

A sudden voice rang out from the back door. "Oh my god, look who it is!"

Fleur appeared in the hallway, flushed and holding a wine glass which definitely wasn't her first. Her loose hair and linen shirt made her look like she was flowing.

"Hermione!" she declared, flinging her arms around her. "You're finally here."

Hermione laughed into her hug. "Hi, Fleur."

"You look radiant. Why do you look radiant? Have you been having glowing sex?"

Ginny snorted and clapped her hands. "Yes, it was so good that she missed our train this morning."

Fleur beamed. "Oh, I cannot wait to hear all about it."

Outside, the rain had just begun to fall.

The sea air hit them the moment they stepped outside, damp and salt-laced, with a fine mist that clung to hair and lashes despite the umbrellas they were indeed all sharing. A loose procession of girls ambled ahead, arms linked, hoods pulled up, voices rising in bursts of laughter as they made their way down the sloping path toward the boardwalk.

Hermione and Ginny fell into step at the back, sharing a borrowed umbrella that wasn't doing much of anything. Their trainers were already damp, jeans slowly darkening at the hems as the wind pushed fine spray up off the beach.

"You alright?" Hermione asked, glancing sideways at her. "We're not walking too fast, are you?"

"I'm pregnant, not geriatric," Ginny whispered with mock offense. Then she softened. "But yeah. I'm good. Baby's healthy, as far as it seems. Had my last check-up Thursday. No tails or extra limbs in sight."

Hermione smiled. "Well, that's a relief."

"Honestly," Ginny added, nudging her elbow gently, "it's weirdly perfect. All my friends are getting properly shagged now, and I get to sit back and watch it like it's some kind of hormonal rom-com."

Hermione laughed, her breath catching in the wind as they walked. "That's not why I was running late this morning, by the way."

Ginny tilted her head, squinting up at the grey sky like it might offer answers. "No? Then why were you late?"

Hermione's cheeks prickled, her smile pulling wider despite herself. "Draco was... being in a mood."

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "In a mood?"

"Yeah." Hermione hesitated. "Very worried and annoyed about the whole Brighton trip."

Ginny snorted. "Christ. He's obsessed with you."

Hermione sighed, tucking a curl behind her ear. "He's been too good to be true."

Ginny squeezed her arm. "I'm so happy for you. I'll be even happier once he tells Blaise about it."

The wind picked up again. Hermione's laugh faded into a quieter smile.

“He’s telling the boys this weekend,” she said softly. “We’re done hiding.”

Ginny’s grin returned. “Good. Because we’re all tired of pretending not to know.”

Before Hermione could answer, a sharp gust of wind came barreling off the sea, cold and sudden, whipping their coats and sending Hermione’s hair into a frenzy.

“Bloody hell!” Ginny yelled. “That’s disgusting!”

They both shrieked, laughing as the umbrella flipped halfway inside-out.

Ahead, the glowing neon sign of the shack flickered to life through the grey, spelled out in buzzing orange, half the letters struggling to stay lit.

The girls up front cheered as they reached the door and rushed inside, the smell of hot oil and vinegar already greeting them. The warmth hit them the second they stepped through the door, and *Dancing Queen* drifted from the jukebox in the corner. Fleur was already swaying dramatically by the little machine, arms in the air under the flickering lights.

Hermione ducked into the room behind Ginny, blinking through the steamy air as everyone shook out jackets and claimed a long table by the window, half of them still laughing, half already scanning the menu.

The walls were covered in band posters and rusted fishing nets.

Hermione slid into a bench seat between Ginny and Luna, who had removed her earrings and was lining them up in size order beside the salt shaker.

Across the table, Fleur clapped her hands. “Order everything! We’ll share! Life is short!”

The waiter, a twenty-something year old with a man bun and an expression caught somewhere between awe and alarm, appeared with a notepad and a crooked smile. “So… we’re doing one bill or…?”

“Ten separate cards and at least three rounds,” Parvati grinned. “Sorry in advance.”

“We’ll tip well,” Hannah added sweetly, patting the edge of the table.

Chaos erupted as menus were passed around, questions yelled across the table.

“Are we getting chips for the table?”

“What’s the difference between beer-battered and tempura?”

“Fleur, you can’t just order three portions of mussels!”

Ginny reached for the stack of menus, flipping one over. “We’re definitely getting the halloumi.”

The waiter returned, dutifully scribbling as orders flew at him, cocktails, beers, wine, extra aioli, no pickles. He raised his brows at Hermione like he was silently checking her sanity level.

“Just a cider,” she said with a smile. “And whatever they’re having to share.”

The table settled into a giddy break that came after big laughs and before the food. Everyone was talking at once, new inside jokes, wedding plans, Fleur shouting something about karaoke at the pier tomorrow.

Hermione leaned back in the booth, her hands wrapped around the cold glass of her drink. Luna’s arm brushed hers as she leaned in to whisper something about tarot readings later. Ginny tapped her foot under the table to the music.

Outside, the rain streaked sideways across the windows. Inside, it was glowing and loud and perfect.

Hermione’s glass was half-empty, condensation sliding down her fingers as she swirled the cider and let the chatter wash over her. Luna was humming quietly beside her, and Ginny had just re-tied her ponytail for the third time, complaining about the wet air. Across the table, Fleur was insisting they order another portion of garlic chips.

Hermione glanced down as her phone buzzed in her lap.

Draco:

*How was the ride? Drunk already?
Any good looking men I should know about?*

She smiled, thumbs tapping beneath the table as she leaned back in her seat.

*Much easier than the train, thank you again.
No men, unless you count the waiter who looks mildly terrified of us.*

The phone buzzed again just as she brought her drink to her lips.

Draco:

*Lucky bastard.
I’m stuck in the office pretending to care about meaningless shit.
Mostly just thinking about you.*

A flush crept into her cheeks. She shifted slightly, angling the phone away from Luna’s wandering gaze.

*You should definitely keep pretending. It sounds very professional.
Also... Luna knows now. The floor is yours.*

Three dots blinked for a while.

Draco:

Good.

I'm tired of pretending. I want us out in the open.

Go have fun tonight, alright?

Just... don't forget me while you're off being beautiful.

Ginny suddenly stood, clinking her spoon gently against her glass.

“Oh no,” someone muttered.

Hermione slid her phone facedown onto her thigh and turned as Ginny cleared her throat with mock formality.

“Okay, before the food gets here,” Ginny said, eyes sparkling, “I just wanted to say something really quick.”

The table quieted in fits and bursts with their laughter fading.

Ginny smirked. “Okay, so. I was going to write something down, but then I remembered that Fleur hates being sentimental unless it’s about skincare or her cat.”

Fleur raised her glass with a regal nod. “Oui, c’est ça”

“So I’ll keep it short.” Ginny paused. “But I want it on record that I *despised* this woman when she first started dating my brother.”

A collective gasp and some delighted shrieking from the girls.

“No, really,” Ginny went on, grinning half-heartedly. “I thought she was stuck-up, rude, wore too much perfume, and said things like ‘*your outfit is so brave*’ in a way that made me want to throw myself into traffic.”

“That jumper *was* brave.” Fleur called from the end of the table, shrugging with a warm smile.

“And *yet*,” Ginny said, pointing her spoon, “you’re now one of my favorite people on this planet. Because somewhere along the way, you became more than Bill’s girlfriend with alarmingly perfect eyebrows. You became family.”

She paused for half a beat. Hermione couldn’t help but smile at her friend’s words. Her eyes darted to Fleur, who had gone very still.

“I knew it for sure the night I brought Blaise home for the first time. I was nervous, like, sweating through my blouse nervous, and my brothers were being absolute dicks. Especially George. But Fleur?” Ginny looked at her then, a little softer. “Fleur shut it down. Just looked across the table and said, ‘*He has better manners than any of you, and a nicer jawline, too.*’”

Laughter burst around the room, and Fleur gave a graceful little wave like she’d just accepted an Oscar.

“And in that moment,” Ginny said, “I realized that whatever weird, rocky start we had...this woman had my back. And I couldn’t ask for a better sister-in-law.”

Fleur raised her glass again, her eyes a little glassy.

“But it wasn’t just that,” Ginny went on. “You helped us find our first flat in London. You marched in, argued with the landlord in French so fast he gave us a discount *and* a new boiler. You’ve been there. Over and over again. And I cannot *wait* to dance like an idiot at your wedding,” Ginny said, grinning again. “Because you deserve everything. And I hope the rest of my brothers are smart enough to find someone even *half* as decent as you. Someone we can drag into this ridiculous, chaotic sisterhood. Because thanks to you, I’m not the only girl at the family table anymore,” Ginny finished, lifting her glass a little higher. “And it’s about bloody time.”

Fleur stood up laughing through damp lashes to pull Ginny into a hug over the plates.

Hermione joined the toast with half-hearted smile, her heart full. Funny - she hadn’t even heard anything about Ron’s engagement, and she couldn’t decide if that said more about him or about how much she’d changed. For a moment, it felt like the wind and rain outside didn’t matter at all.

The Airbnb’s living room was dim except for the glow of a few candles and the flickering fairy lights someone had strung up earlier. Most of the girls had disappeared, curled up in bunk beds or passed out on couches under someone else’s jumper.

But five of them remained gathered around the low coffee table. Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Fleur, and Parvati were sprawled on cushions and beanbags, each cradling a nearly empty glass of something.

A bottle of limoncello stood in the middle of the table, leaning against a bowl of half-melted chocolates.

Fleur had her feet in Ginny’s lap and was twirling the end of her braid. “I still say wedding sex should be the wildest of your life,” she declared. “Because then you set the bar *for the rest of your life*.”

Parvati let out a cackle, nearly spilling her drink. “I’d *hope* the bar’s been set *long* before vows are involved. Preferably by the man I’m marrying.”

Fleur just grinned, unbothered. “If you’re going to commit to forever, he should at least know how to spank you properly.”

Hermione choked on her sip of limoncello. “Fleur!”

Fleur turned to her, wide-eyed and innocent, though her smile was all teeth. “What? You’re not into a strong hand? All these whispers today that you’ve got a new boyfriend, yes? One of Blaise’s friends?”

Ginny snorted beside her. “Oh, this should be good.”

Hermione flushed, caught between laughing and hiding under the coffee table.

“You’re one to talk,” Parvati shot back, laughing. “We’ve *all* heard your shower story, Gin.”

Luna giggled softly and sipped her drink.

“I’m just saying,” Fleur said, sipping her drink, “a good lover is like a good croissant. Crisp on the outside, soft on the inside, and always leaves a mess.”

Ginny wheezed. “Please never compare sex to a pastry again.”

Fleur shrugged, unabashed. “I stand by it.”

Hermione peeked through her fingers, half-laughing. “I’ve tried... a bit. Recently.”

Luna and Parvati looked over, Ginny’s eyes snapped to her, and Fleur leaned in slightly.

“Go on,” Fleur said, “Does he spank you?”

Hermione choked on a laugh. “Not exactly!”

“That means not *never*,” Ginny teased.

“It’s not like that,” Hermione said quickly, cheeks blazing. “He just... likes control, I think. In certain moments.”

“Ah,” Luna said, knowingly. “He’s the hand on the back of your neck type.”

Hermione blinked at her. “How do you know that?”

Luna just smiled and nodded toward her tarot cards. “I’ve read his cards, Hermione. He also walks into every room like he owns it.”

“Just like he has to own every argument,” Ginny added dryly.

Hermione rolled her eyes but didn’t deny it. “It’s more...” she hesitated, fiddling with her glass. “It’s like he always knows exactly what to say, or do, and somehow it shuts off the noise in my head. Like he’s paying attention to every breath I take. And when I let go a little, he just... meets me there.”

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward.

“Well shit,” Ginny said. “That sounds romantic as *fuck*.”

Fleur sighed dreamily. “Ugh, I miss being in the beginning stages.”

Parvati, from across the room where she was flopped half-asleep, mumbled, “You just miss your bruises from being pinned against the fridge.”

“Also true,” Fleur sighed.

Ginny groaned. “Okay, no, that’s enough. I cannot picture my brother doing... *that*.”

Luna tilted her head, thoughtful and ignoring Ginny’s protest. “I think it’s nice. Someone wanting to be careful with your trust. Wanting to take responsibility for it. That’s real love, in a way.”

Hermione looked down into her lap. “I mean, it’s not something I ever pictured myself enjoying... but with him?” She exhaled. “It doesn’t feel scary. It feels like... I’m safe. Like he’s got me. Even when I’m not sure what I want. It’s like he wants to let me figure it out without expecting anything in return.”

Fleur made a small, quiet sound, like her heart had been pinched.

“Damn,” Parvati murmured, “I need to stop dating men who text ‘*u up*’ at 3 a.m.”

That broke the moment. They all burst into laughter that would carve into walls of the cottage.

Hermione blinked awake slowly, the room warm with sunshine and the muffled sound of a kettle boiling downstairs. Ginny was still wrapped in blankets beside her, one foot sticking out, breathing softly.

By the time they came downstairs, most of the girls were already bustling around the kitchen, barefoot, yawning, and some in sunglasses.

“Brunch in twenty,” someone called.

Hermione smiled to herself, poured a glass of orange juice, and looked out the kitchen window. The sky was clear today. Soft blue, not a cloud in sight. The kind of rare Brighton morning that felt like a small gift after yesterday’s weather.

By early afternoon, they were out in the sun, sunglasses on and arms linked, following the winding path from the café to a nearby dive bar that Ginny swore had the best Bloody Marys on the coast. The brunch drinks had barely hit their stomachs before someone suggested tequila.

Music pulsed from the speakers. Parvati and Hannah were twirling near the makeshift dance floor, flushed and laughing, while Luna was seated on a barstool with a beer and a flower someone had woven into her braid.

Hermione sat at one of the tall tables near the edge of the room, her chin propped in her palm, sipping a spritz. Ginny was beside her, swirling a cocktail she had no intention of drinking and occasionally shooting her a look.

Fleur was on the floor, dancing shamelessly with a wide-eyed college boy in a rugby shirt. He looked about nineteen and completely smitten.

“Oh, *that* one’s going to end in a disaster photo,” Ginny said, watching them. “I hope she doesn’t use her real name.”

Hermione laughed and reached for Ginny’s untouched glass and took a slow sip.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. “Helping me now, are you?”

“I’m being a very responsible friend,” Hermione murmured, keeping her eyes on Fleur. “You’d do the same for me.”

Just then, her phone buzzed on the table.

Draco:

On my way to Blaise’s.

Imagine the heartbreak when I saw not even one missed call or message from my girlfriend.

Hope you’re having a good time.

Been thinking about you more than I probably should.

Hermione blinked down at the message, her pulse skipping.

Ginny noticed immediately. “Draco?”

Was wondering why you were so quiet last night.

Hermione nodded, reading his immediate answer come through.

Draco:

Trying to be better and stop the hovering.

Didn’t want to blow up your phone while you were out.

Still hated it. Had a hard time falling asleep without you.

...

Miss you too.

...

Draco:

Send me a photo?

Miss seeing your face.

Ginny tilted her head. “You’re smiling again.”

Hermione tucked her phone closer, snapped a quick picture with her tousled curls and a little smirk she couldn’t help. She sent it without overthinking.

Draco:

God, you’re trouble.

Come home soon.

Somewhere in the corner of the bar, Fleur let the college boy spin her around.

And just like that, the day rolled on.

The second bar was louder, darker, wrapped in coloured lights and pulsing with music that buzzed in Hermione's bones. Someone had ordered more tequila shots. Ginny was dragging her to the dance floor. Fleur was already dancing again, hair swinging as she mouthed the lyrics to a Dua Lipa song like she'd written them herself.

Hermione was tipsy now, warm and loose-limbed and laughing easily. Her cheeks hurt from smiling. It was the kind of day that blurred at the edges, where nothing hurt.

She was dancing when a guy approached. He was maybe in his early twenties, floppy hair, decent rhythm. He smiled, leaned in to ask her name, said something about how she looked like trouble. She didn't answer. Just kept dancing, swaying, hips moving with the beat, letting the bass thrum through her.

He put a hand lightly on her waist. She stepped out of reach.

But she was still smiling to herself.

Within seconds, Ginny appeared on one side of her, and Parvati on the other. Luna stood nearby, watchful and sipping something through a paper straw.

The guy got the message. He disappeared into the crowd without a word.

Hermione was still laughing when she pulled out her phone a few minutes later.

Funny. Some random college kid just told me I looked like trouble too.

She hesitated for a second before hitting send.

The message delivered. Read.

It took a few minutes before he replied.

Draco:

Funny. Some sharp bastard just told me I looked like I missed my girlfriend.

Attached to the message was a photo of Draco and Blaise at a pub table, pints in front of them. Draco was in a black jumper and his hair slightly mussed. He looked tired. Blaise was mid-eye-roll, smirking at the camera.

How did he take the message that you're off the market?

Draco:

He said he already knew.

Said it was obvious.

Then got properly offended that Ginny knew first and didn't say anything.

...

What about Harry?

Draco:

*Kept blinking and saying, "Wait, what? You and Hermione?"
Theo's here too. Didn't say much. We ran into Liv and one of her friends.
He's been busy trying to look charming ever since.*

Hermione opened the photo again, her thumb brushing over the screen like it might smooth out the tension in his shoulders. Draco looked tired, his mouth set in a way she now recognized as his attempt at looking fine. But there was something else there too, something quieter. The pub lighting caught the edge of his jaw, the slope of his brow, and it hit her how much he'd been holding in. Her chest ached with the strange, steady relief of it finally being out in the open. No more hiding. No more pretending. Just *them*, real and named and seen.

*You could at least try to look a little happy now that it's out.
I'm relieved. Really.
Like I've been holding my breath for weeks and finally let it out.*

Draco:

*When you're back, I'll be happy.
Because I might finally sleep again.*

...

Poor thing. You must be suffering.

...

Draco:

Come home and make it better.

...

One more night.

The food truck's garlic fries had been devoured somewhere between the pier and another bar, and now, somehow, the girls had wandered into a neon-lit sex shop like it was just the next logical stop on the itinerary.

Hermione had no idea whose idea it was, probably Fleur, possibly Ginny. But suddenly they were inside, stumbling through the aisles of lubricants and lingerie, still high on tequila and sunshine and each other's laughter.

Ginny had found a flogger with heart-shaped leather tips and was inspecting closely.

Fleur was asking a very polite staff member if the lace bodysuits came in bridal white.

And Luna was calmly holding a bejeweled, curved silicone *monster* that looked more like a designer kitchen tool than something someone should let inside their body.

“Oh *my god*,” Hermione whispered, eyes wide.

“I think it’s elegant,” Luna said. “And the website says it’s anatomically informed. For pleasure *and* alignment.”

Hermione didn’t want to know what that meant.

She drifted away from the group toward a quieter wall display, eyes trailing over satin ties and sleek black toys. She was trying *not* to imagine Draco’s voice in her ear, but then she got distracted by the silk tie that reminded her of Thursday night.

Ginny appeared at her side. “Pick something.”

“What?”

“Everyone’s getting something. Don’t be boring.”

Hermione sighed, pulled out her phone, and snapped a photo of the aisle once Ginny had moved on.

Look where your girlfriend is spending her day.

He replied immediately.

Draco:

Buy the one in the middle. Gold button.

She snorted, shaking her head, and staring at the toy Draco had called out. It didn’t take very long before her phone was buzzing in her hand again. He was calling her.

She ducked behind a tall display and answered, half-smiling. “You really want me to buy that?”

His voice was warm velvet, curling through the speaker with that confidence she could never quite shake. There was music and glasses clinking faintly in the background.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I want to watch you fall apart with it.”

She scoffed. “Why would I need that? I have you.”

A pause. Then a quiet, knowing laugh. “You do. But I want you to have this too. So we can use it when I’m not there. Or when I *am*.”

Her knees went warm. “You’ve thought about this?”

“I’m outside the pub right now, trying very hard not to imagine how you'd look with your legs shaking and that toy inside you. I’ll tell you where to put it, how deep, how slow. And you’ll keep your hands exactly where I tell you to.”

The heat rushed from her face straight to her core.

“And if you’re good,” he murmured, “maybe I’ll let you come.”

She swallowed hard, pulse fluttering. “You have issues.”

“I have excellent taste. And a very obedient girlfriend.”

She laughed under her breath. “You’re full of yourself.”

“You’re full of me most nights,” he said simply. “This just gives me options.”

She rolled her eyes, pressing her back against the shelving like it could steady her.

She hung up, grabbed the box off the shelf, and marched toward the register. Face flaming, head buzzing, and thighs pressed tight.

Behind her, Luna cradled that elegant sex wand like a talisman and whispered, “This is supposed be good for the spine.”

Hermione made it exactly four steps toward the register before something caught her eye. It was tucked between displays of lace cuffs and black paddles. A blindfold. Real silk, red like the dress she’d worn to the gala, with ties long enough to knot.

She paused and picked it up.

The image of his hands knotting it behind her head hit her so hard she almost dropped the box in her other hand.

God, this man was ruining her.

She didn’t even hesitate this time. She tossed the blindfold on top of the box, marched straight to the counter, and set them down in front of the cashier like she was buying toothpaste and a snack bar.

“Great choices,” the woman said cheerfully, scanning the items.

From behind her, Ginny whispered, “Oh *she’s* getting laid laid.”

“Shut up,” Hermione muttered, handing over her card.

Hermione pulled up to the curb near the train station just off the street. The sky had gone a dusky lavender, the soft glow of early evening filtering through the trees. Luna stretched in the backseat like a sleepy cat, Fleur fixed her lipstick in the passenger mirror, and Ginny leaned forward with her arm slung over the headrest.

“Thanks for the lift, Mum,” Ginny grinned.

Hermione smiled at her through the rear mirror before allowing her friend to press a peck onto her cheek.

“Thank you dear,” Fleur sung, also kissing her on the cheek before slipping out with Luna behind her. “Tell your boyfriend he has a very nice car.”

They waved and disappeared into the flow of foot traffic outside the station, and Hermione took a moment to exhale before pulling back into traffic and heading toward her flat.

It wasn't a long drive, but her pulse ticked higher with every turn. She knew he was already there. He'd texted her fifteen minutes ago for everyone to see on the dashboard.

Draco:

Outside. Bring me something worth kissing.

When she turned onto her street, her eyes found him immediately.

Leaning against the wall just outside her building, tall and still in the last of the fading sunlight. His arms were crossed, a foot pressed back to the brick behind him. His aviator sunglasses were on, even though the sun had nearly set.

He didn't move.

Not even when she parked his car with extreme care, easing it into the spot just in front of the steps. She shut off the engine and paused.

Only then did he push off the wall. Like gravity bent slightly around him.

He crossed the pavement with slow strides, boots heavy on the cracked concrete, hands slipping out of his pockets as he reached the driver's side. Hermione stepped out and barely had time to close the door before he pulled her into his arms.

“Hi,” she managed, smiling up at him.

Draco didn't waste time with words.

One arm locked around her waist, the other sliding up, hand cradling her cheek as he leaned in and kissed her. His mouth caught hers, not rushed, like he meant for her to feel every second of it. The edge of his sunglasses pressed lightly into her temple before he pulled them off with one hand and let them hang from his collar.

His fingers wove into the curls at the nape of her neck. The other hand tilted her jaw just enough to deepen the kiss.

And gods, did he deepen it.

She whimpered against him, knees nearly giving way as his tongue teased against hers, slow and possessive. He kissed like he'd been starved for it. Like there were days and nights and lonely mornings layered behind it.

Her hands curled into the hem of his coat, gripping tight.

"Missed you so fucking much," he mumbled against her lips, before kissing her again.

Hermione nodded in his hands, feeling herself melt under his caress. "You taste like mint."

He chuckled, lips brushing her jaw. "Chewing gum. Blaise said I looked wrecked."

"Are you?" she whispered, kissing him again, softer this time. "You look like you didn't get much sleep this weekend."

His mouth ghosted over her skin, jaw to cheek to temple. "Told you I've had a rough weekend without you."

Delicious heat curled in her belly.

Draco grinned and pulled her closer before he took her suitcase in one hand and her wrist in the other.

By the time they reached her flat, his palm was resting low on her back, guiding her in like she might get away if he didn't. He dropped the suitcase just inside the entryway, kicked the door shut behind them with a thud, and turned.

He caught her around the waist, dragging her into the hall wall, breath already uneven, mouth crashing to hers with a groan that felt like it had lived in his chest for days. Hermione gasped, caught off guard, one hand bracing against the wall, the other clutching the lapel of his coat again.

"God, I missed this," he breathed, kissing down the side of her neck, teeth catching just above her collarbone.

"I missed you too," she couldn't help but laugh at the way he was smothering her.

"Come here," he growled, already lifting her.

Hermione squeaked as he hoisted her up, hands under her thighs, and carried her across the hallway like she weighed nothing. He dropped onto the sofa with her in his lap, mouth already chasing hers again. She straddled him instinctively, hands tangled in his hair, moaning as his tongue swept past her lips.

"Hermione," Draco muttered against her mouth, his palms sliding up beneath her shirt, thumbs brushing under her bra. "I've been going insane without you."

She arched into him with a gasp. "You're definitely in a better mood today."

He grinned against her lips, and his hands dropped to the button of her jeans.

“Hey. Draco.”

He stilled.

Her chest rose and fell against his. Her fingers cupped his jaw. “Hold on.”

He blinked, frowning playfully and leaning back just a little to look at her properly. “Hold on?”

“I’m dying for you. You know that.” She kissed him again before pulling back just enough to breathe. “But I need a shower. And we need to eat. My fridge has, like... pickles.”

Draco groaned. “You’re telling me... I waited all weekend, didn’t touch myself, barely slept and now I have to wait for a *shower* and *groceries*?”

Hermione smirked, nipping at his jaw. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

His head fell back against the sofa with a dramatic groan, dragging his hands down his face. “Woman.”

She climbed off him, grabbing a hair tie off her wrist and twisting her curls into a bun as she walked toward the hall. “Figure out what you want for dinner and breakfast tomorrow. We’re going to the shop around the corner.”

“You’re fucking evil.”

Just before she disappeared, she glanced back over her shoulder, gave her arse a cheeky slap, and tossed him a wink. “Pick out something that gives you enough stamina to make it through the night. You’ll need it.”

Draco’s fist went to his mouth, biting without restraint as he stared at her.

Then he stood up slowly, muttering to himself, “Kill me now.”

It was only a five-minute walk, but Draco insisted on carrying the totes and keeping one hand on her lower back the entire way.

The winter sun was just dipping below the rooftops. Hermione wore his navy jumper he had given her and a leather jacket. She still wore her curls into a loose bun at the crown of her head. Her cheeks still glowed from the shower and face cream, and Draco kept stealing glances at her.

The corner shop was quiet, with soft music playing overhead. A girl stocked biscuits in aisle two. An old man at the till gave Hermione a polite nod as they stepped inside.

Draco's hand slid down her back and into hers, weaving their fingers together without a word.

Hermione tried not to smile too wide. But it was impossible, this was the kind of thing she had been craving for years. Whenever she had moved to London. Not just the touch, but the feeling. The quiet certainty of someone beside her. The easy way he kissed her temple when she paused in front of the produce section. The way he held out bananas and raised an eyebrow like he was asking if they passed inspection.

"You probably need a multivitamin after this weekend," he said, dropping them into the bag with a mock look of concern. "You're clearly suffering from severe neglect."

"Tragic, really," she deadpanned, nudging his hip with hers. "Save me before it's too late."

He glanced at her, then leaned in close enough for his breath to brush her cheek. "Oh, I intend to."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't wipe off the grin from her face.

They moved down the aisles slowly, half grocery shopping, half touching each other. He picked out fresh bread, a soft French cheese she didn't remember ever buying before. She added yoghurt and strawberries, and he snagged two of the expensive chocolate bars near the till.

They argued softly about tea brands. Hermione won.

When they reached the self-checkout, he pulled out his wallet before she could even blink.

"Draco, I can buy my own groceries."

"I know you can. But you don't have to." He smirked and scanned the eggs carefully before bagging them. "Besides, you'll let me fuck you senseless tonight. Least I can do is buy you groceries."

The girl stocking biscuits choked a little down the aisle.

Hermione buried her face in his coat, slapping his chest playfully.

He grinned, pulling her in close and pressed his lips to her forehead.

Once everything was bagged, they stepped back outside. Draco's arm was over her shoulders. Her head leaned against chest, taking one of the totes from him.

"This is nice," she murmured.

"What, groceries?"

"No. This. You." She looked up at him. "Real life. But better."

Draco turned his face toward her, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Yeah?"

“Yeah.”

He stopped walking.

He leaned down, pressed a soft kiss to her mouth, and whispered, “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“I’m trying to catch up with you,” she said, kissing him back.

He grinned and kissed her once more for good measure.

And then they kept walking.

Hermione was mid-sentence, laughing a little as she told him what Luna had said about them dating now, when a voice rang out behind them.

“Draco?”

He froze.

Like something had slammed into his chest.

His arm dropped from her shoulder as she kept walking, not realizing at first that he’d stopped. She took one more step before she noticed the sudden absence of his touch and turned around, confused.

A woman stood just a few paces back.

Dark, long hair, black coat, red lipstick. She held the hand of a small boy with tousled blond curls and curious, bright blue eyes. No older than maybe eight. He wore a serious expression that didn’t quite match his age.

But something about *her* face made Hermione’s pulse flicker.

She looked at Draco.

He was staring.

The woman blinked. “Wow,” she said, exhaling a soft laugh that fogged in the cold air with half surprise, half disbelief. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Draco didn’t answer right away.

“...Astoria,” he said finally. It sounded flat. Hermione glanced up at him. A crease had formed between his brows, deep and immediate. His gaze dropped to the small boy tugging lightly at the hem of her coat.

And he *stared*.

Not like he was looking, but like he was *trying to understand something*.

Astoria followed his line of sight, then smiled faintly. The kind of smile that had memory behind it, but none of the warmth.

“I know,” she said softly. “The resemblance is striking, isn’t it?”

Hermione’s stomach clenched. She wasn’t sure why, but the air had shifted.

Draco swallowed. Still silent. Still staring.

Astoria’s eyes stayed on him, steady. “Kind of makes you feel like time went backwards.”

His shoulders rose slightly as he took a slow breath. Then, as if waking up mid-thought, he blinked and turned to Hermione first, like he needed to confirm she was still there. Still real. Then back to Astoria.

“I didn’t know you lived around here,” he said, voice tight with restraint.

“We don’t,” she replied easily. “Just visiting one of Orin’s school friends. Playdate.” She looked down at the boy beside her, brushing a leaf from his jacket. “He’s in Year Three now. Turned seven this summer. Can you believe that?” Her voice carried something light, but it didn’t feel casual.

Orin.

Hermione’s eyes moved between them. Something was *wrong*. Or heavy. Or both.

“It’s been a long time,” Astoria said, lifting her gaze to Draco again. “You look... different.”

“You don’t,” he said too quickly.

She shook her head, laughing quietly. “Still good at lying, then.”

Hermione fought the urge to shift her weight. The comment wasn’t sharp, but it landed somewhere cold.

Astoria tilted her head, eyes sweeping over Draco like she was trying to find something familiar.

“We miss you, you know. You and your parents. Do they still live in that big, ugly house?”

“They’re still there,” Draco said, clipped and dry.

“Daphne is doing great. She’s in Milan these days. Still pretends she’s fluent in Italian.”

That made Draco huff a breath, something just shy of amusement flickering across his face like a private joke had passed between them.

Then Astoria’s gaze shifted.

She turned toward Hermione for the first time, like she was just noticing her.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m being terribly rude.”

Hermione stepped forward slightly. “Not at all.”

Astoria looked back at Orin, who was fiddling with a zipper on her coat.

“Orin, this is... an old friend of mine. Draco.”

She glanced back at them. “And...?”

“Hermione,” Draco said. His eyes had already drifted back to the boy.

Astoria nodded politely. “Lovely to meet you.”

Then she turned back to Draco again. “Do you still have the same number? I tried calling. A few months ago.”

Draco blinked. “Uh... yeah. Same number.”

“The anniversary,” she said softly. “It felt different this year.”

Hermione’s chest tightened at the word. She didn’t know what it meant but it hit like a stone dropped in deep water.

“I figured you didn’t want to talk,” Astoria added, her voice gentle now. But there was something sad in it. “But... I wanted you to know we were thinking of you.”

For a second, Draco looked like he might flinch. But he didn’t. He just nodded once.

“I was... busy,” he said. The words sounded like splinters.

Astoria tilted her head, her expression unreadable. “Of course.”

Orin tugged on her hand.

“Mum, can we go now? Dad promised we’d watch a movie before bed.”

“In a second, darling” she murmured.

Hermione was trying not to stare, but she also didn’t know where to look anymore.

Draco took a step back, like the spell had finally broken.

“We should go.”

Astoria gave a small smile. “Of course. Don’t let us keep you.”

She looked at Hermione once more. “Nice to meet you.”

Hermione nodded. “You too.”

Then Astoria turned, taking Orin’s hand. The boy glanced over his shoulder once as they walked away.

Draco didn’t speak.

He just turned toward Hermione and let the grocery bag fall between them, the thud sharp in the quiet. Then he rubbed a hand down his jaw, like he was trying to wipe something off that wouldn’t come off. His eyes stayed on the pavement.

He exhaled sharply through his nose.

Hermione's heart was racing.

And not for any reason she could explain.

Chapter 26: Smoke

He didn't look at her.

They stood in silence on the pavement, the grocery bag sitting between them like something forgotten. Hermione's heart was still pounding, so full of questions. She didn't know what she was supposed to say.

Then Draco crouched and picked up the bag he had dropped. She saw the way his hand trembled as he straightened. He didn't say anything at first. Just turned and held out his other hand toward her.

"Give me that one, too," he said, not quite meeting her eyes.

Hermione hesitated, gripping the second bag like it might anchor her to something solid. But she didn't know what exactly she was holding onto anymore.

His face was so cold and distant. She wanted to ask if he was okay, but the words didn't come. And the answer was already there, written in the way he couldn't even look at her.

She passed him the bag reluctantly and watched as he turned away.

Hermione stood there a moment longer. The air felt colder without the weight of the bags, without his eyes on her. She had to force her feet to move. One step after the other.

Draco was already ahead of her, walking calmly with an unbearable tension in his shoulders. He didn't glance back to see if she was still with him. And he didn't slow his pace.

Hermione quickened her steps to catch up with heart hammering in her throat. She tried to call him, but no word came out. She opened her mouth again, but there was too much to ask, and none of it made sense.

By the time they reached her building, her breath had quickened from the ache curling in her chest.

Draco only slowed near the steps, then finally stopped entirely.

"I'll meet you upstairs," he said, eventually turning to look at her. "I just want to swing by the kiosk real quick."

Hermione studied him, brow pinched. "You...what?"

He gestured vaguely toward the corner. "Please. I'll be right behind you."

"Okay..." Her eyes dropped to the bags. "Want me to take those?"

Draco shook his head. "No. I've got it. Go on ahead, yeah?"

She nodded slowly. "Okay," she repeated, even though everything in her body screamed at her to not let him leave right now. As if he was about to vanish down the street and never come back.

Against that unspeakable dread in her bones, she turned toward the door anyway and walked up the steps. When she glanced back once more, he was already halfway to the corner.

If there was one thing she'd learned about Draco, it was that he wouldn't talk until he was ready. And quite frankly, she wasn't ready either. Whatever had just transpired cut so deep, it felt like a parallel universe; one she wasn't sure she'd be able to breathe in.

Hermione didn't take off her coat or kick off her shoes or even drop her keys into the bowl by the door like she always did.

She just sat down on the edge of the sofa, stiff-backed, her hands still wrapped around the keyring like she might need to use it again. Her purse slid from her shoulder with a dull thud to the floor. Her eyes fixed on a point across the room; an old mark on the wall where she'd once hung a painting that now leaned forgotten behind a side table. She stared at it like it might give her answers.

Astoria.

Orin.

Anniversary.

Was she his ex? Was it possible that Draco had a child with this woman?

Hermione's lips parted as she replayed the moment. Draco's entire body had gone rigid, the way he'd dropped the bag, how his face had gone so strangely still. Haunted. Like he had seen a ghost.

Her stomach twisted.

'The resemblance is striking, isn't it?' Astoria had said, like it was something precious. As if it was meant to open something up.

But the boy's eyes hadn't been Draco's. Or had they?

Hermione swallowed thickly. He would have told her. He would have said something. They'd curled around each other in the dark and shared so many things. It would have come up.

She hadn't forgotten the night of the storm. The sound of the rain slamming against the windshield, the smell of leather and cold air, the way he'd navigated them through that storm straight into the hospital. It also had been the night they'd kissed the first time. The night he'd told her that he'd lost someone ten years ago. She hadn't pressed him then. Had let the silence swallow it whole, assuming he'd offer more when he was ready. But he never had. And now, sitting in the stillness of her flat, those words came back with a sharper edge. That mention of an anniversary a few months ago. Could it all be connected? Had she been so desperate to respect his silence that she'd missed the gravity of what he hadn't told her?

She shook her head. Stared harder at the wall. Then she took a deep breath.

This wasn't a puzzle. It was a thread. And if she kept tugging, it might unravel something she wasn't prepared for.

The clock on the far wall suddenly ticked louder than usual. Nearly fifteen minutes had passed.

Her shoes started pinching slightly at the toes.

The memory of the day she'd nearly lost him pushed its way into her already frayed mind. How she had sat trembling on the edge of his sofa, her voice wrecked from sobbing. How she had begged him not to give up on her. To let her prove she wouldn't run again. He'd been stiff and quiet at first, but then something in him cracked open, and he'd told her, that there were things he wanted to tell her, things he couldn't talk to her about because he was terrified that she'd leave. She had promised she wouldn't. Sworn it into the space between them with every bit of honesty she had left. And in the time that followed, they'd built something sacred from her fear to trust. Night after night, kiss after kiss. She had told him she loved him. He had said it back, like he meant it. So what was so unspeakable now? What was buried so deep that he'd rather hurt her than let it out? Was it Astoria? Was their history so tangled, so meaningful, that it made everything else feel fragile in comparison?

Hermione didn't hear him in the hallway. Only the sound of the door creaking open.

She jolted upright. Her body moved before her mind caught up, feet already carrying her to the hallway. She stood frozen for a second, breath caught in her throat, her heart thudding against her ribs.

Draco's jaw was locked when he brushed past her.

She flinched at the stinging smell of smoke that had replaced his usual clean scent.

Hermione's brow knit as it hit her. The same heavy scent Theo always carried after a cigarette outside.

"Draco--"

The weight of the smell trailed behind him like a ghost. Grocery bags thudded onto the kitchen counter with too much force, plastic crinkling.

She stared at him from the hallway. "Were you... smoking?"

He didn't answer, nor did he meet her eyes.

"Can you give me a few minutes," he muttered, already moving again. As if standing still would allow Hermione to trap him.

"Wait...what? Draco!"

The bathroom door closed, and the lock clicked into place.

Hermione stood in the hallway, stunned. Everything she'd been about to say caught behind her teeth.

She turned slowly, eyes landing on the groceries in the kitchen. Her coat still hung from her shoulders, her hands limp at her sides. It all felt so wrong. The silence from the bathroom was louder than anything else. And all she could do was stand there, wondering what she'd do if he never came back out.

Hermione began unpacking the groceries, her movements sharper than necessary.

She dropped the first bag onto the counter with a thud, then peeled it open and started pulling things out one by one.

Eggs. She held the carton carefully, fingers trembling as she lifted the lid. One of them had cracked, yolk spreading sticky and yellow across the bottom. She grimaced and plucked it out, tossing it into the bin.

"Brilliant," she muttered underneath her breath.

She tried to focus on the normalcy of the task. As if putting groceries in place could somehow put the rest of her back together too.

Hermione leaned both palms on the counter and bowed her head, trying to breathe through the ache beneath her ribs. Her pulse still hadn't fully settled since the moment he walked in. The space around her felt warped. Like time had stilled and she was stuck in the echo of a different day entirely.

She looked up and stared into the stillness of the room. He had brought wine the first night he'd visited her without anyone else. They had cancelled on the group gathering to spend time together.

They'd stood almost exactly here, hips brushing as she had ordered them Thai food. She remembered the way his hand had ghosted along her back as he leaned in to read over her shoulder, watching her scroll through the menu.

She would do so much to go back to that moment. To breathe that evening in again, every stupid laugh, every touch charged with meaning she hadn't yet dared to believe in.

To not waste so much of it on second-guessing. On waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She bit her lip, staring at the chocolate, at the eggs she'd saved, and tried not to cry.

Finally the bathroom door opened behind her.

Hermione didn't turn around, but she listened to the sound of his footsteps. They sounded like he hadn't quite decided if he was actually walking toward her. The faintest scent of leftover smoke still clung to him, barely masked by soap.

She kept her hands braced against the counter, eyes fixed on the groceries.

Draco hovered in the doorway for a breath, then stepped inside.

When she finally looked up, he was already watching her.

His eyes found hers for the first time since the street.

Something cracked open inside her chest at the sight. That look he wore when he couldn't hide anymore.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Hermione exhaled slowly, her grip loosening against the edge of the counter. "Okay," she said, trying to sound calm. "Can we talk about what just happened?"

Draco barely nodded. But he didn't look away this time or tried to run.

"I don't want to fight," she said, quieter now. "But I need you to talk to me."

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Yeah," he murmured. "I know."

Hermione swallowed. "Was Astoria... an ex? Or something?"

The question felt unnecessary as soon as it left her mouth, but she needed to say it. She needed to clear the fog somehow. Needed to start somewhere.

Draco shook his head. "No," he said simply.

"But you knew her well," she pressed, keeping her voice careful, trying not to spook him. "And the boy... *Orin*."

Her heart beat faster. "I'm not asking to accuse you of anything," she added. "I'm asking because I'm trying to understand the person I'm building something with. You said you loved me. I believe you. I do. But if you keep pulling away like this, if you keep leaving me behind in the dark, I don't know how to keep going."

Draco's jaw flexed.

"I never dated Astoria," he said roughly, like he was getting frustrated with her already.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Right," she said. "So is this one of those moments where you give me a carefully worded half-truth? You didn't date her, but you slept with her?"

Draco's expression hardened immediately. "Fuck's sake, Hermione--"

"Well, did you?" she asked again, unable to keep it down. "Because you clearly knew her well enough to freeze up like that. You dropped the groceries like you'd seen a ghost. You've been in a tailspin since."

He let out a short, bitter sound and looked away for a moment. “What do you want?” he said finally, turning back to her. His tone carried resentment. “A list? Of every girl I ever fucked before you?”

Hermione flinched but didn’t back down. “I want the truth,” she said. “Just you being honest with me. Is that so impossible?”

Draco looked at her like it physically hurt. Like she was asking him to give something up he wasn’t sure he knew how to.

“I’m not trying to punish you for your past, Draco,” she added, quieter now. “But if you can’t be real with me, if this is how you react every time I touch something you don’t want me to see... then what are we even doing?”

His breath came out shaky. “It’s not about not wanting you to see it,” he said. “It’s about not wanting to watch you leave once you do.”

They stood there for a beat too long.

“I won’t, Draco.” She shook her head. “I’m not leaving you.”

They stood frozen like that, the buzz of the fridge the only sound between them.

Hermione waited. She watched him, watched the storm behind his eyes gathering again, watched the tension build like he was grinding the truth between his teeth.

But he said nothing. And she was so tired of it.

So she took a breath to brace herself. “Are you going to tell me the truth or not?”

Draco stared at her, tongue pushing against the inside of his mouth as if he was debating how to tell her that he didn’t want to be honest with her. Not about this. And it hurt.

Hermione felt the ache spread from her ribs to the back of her neck.

“I don’t think I can,” he said finally. Eyes dropping to the floor beneath him.

The words landed like a slap.

Hermione stared at him. Her throat tightened, then burned. “You don’t think you can.”

She felt something tip inside her.

“I’m not some fragile little girl, Draco.”

“No,” he muttered. “You’re not. But you’re good. And I’m not going to drag you into this mess.”

“You already did,” she said, eyes widening. “You brought me here. Don’t act like I broke into your life uninvited.” She took a step forward, every nerve ending alive with the

electricity of what this moment could become. She felt like she had to fight for this with all her heart. Not let him get away with it. “I survived Tiffany, didn’t I?”

He lifted his eyes finally. But they were distant.

“You don’t think I’ll survive Astoria?”

Draco shook his head. “You don’t get it.”

“Then tell me,” she pleaded. “You hide behind silence. You hoard your past like it’s a weapon you might need later. Like I haven’t earned the truth.” Her voice was shaking now. “If you’re not ready to tell me the whole truth...then leave.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“No. I’m done begging.”

His eyes snapped to hers. “Hermione-”

She nodded slowly. “I’m not doing this again. Either you talk to me because you want to, or you don’t. But I can’t keep guessing what else you’re hiding from me. You say you love me, but you won’t let me see you. Not really. I’m telling you, I can take it. I want to take it. But only if you actually let me.”

“I’m not...fuck’s sake, Hermione-”

“Draco.” Her interruption caught him mid-rant. “I love you. I’ve said it. I meant it. But I won’t beg. I won’t dig through half-truths and silences and whatever else this is just to build a life with someone who won’t let me in.”

His hands curled into fists. “You don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

“I’m asking for the truth. The whole truth. Not curated pieces. Not safe versions.”

“And what if it ruins everything?” His voice cracked then, raw and too loud. “What if you hear it and you hate me?”

“I won’t,” she blurted.

“You don’t know that.”

Hermione held her breath. “Then I guess that’s the risk you’ll have to take.”

Draco exhaled sharply, like the words had knocked the air out of him.

Then he turned and left the kitchen.

A beat later, the crack of his boot hitting the low shoe cabinet split the silence. The sound ricocheted through the flat, shaking something loose inside her.

He was furious with himself.

But the noise still rattled her. But the noise still rattled her bones.

She felt her heart in her throat again.

And then he was gone.

The silence he left behind felt absolute.

Her chest heaved once, then again, and she realized she hadn't been breathing properly since she made him leave.

Her hand dropped slowly from where it had been clenched against her side. The air in the room felt too still. She swallowed, but her throat stayed dry.

She turned without meaning to, moved on autopilot toward the sink. Her eyes didn't focus on anything, not really. The counter. The mugs beside it. She gripped the edge and held on.

The sound of the hallway door echoed in her mind.

Maybe she had been too harsh. But how long was she supposed to wait?

She blinked. A tear slipped out before she could stop it, tracing a slow, salty line down her cheek. She rubbed it away violently with the back of her hand.

She had never seen him like that before.

Her fingers dug harder into the countertop. She felt suddenly unsteady. She sank slowly to the kitchen floor. Cold tile through the fabric of her jeans. Her knees curled in. Her arms around them. She pressed her forehead to the denim and let herself breathe. Just breathe.

A painful noise left her chest. It wasn't a sob. Not quite. Just the sound of someone trying not to cry.

He said he loved her. She knew he meant it. But maybe love wasn't enough for him. Maybe she wasn't enough. Again.

Maybe she was still the kind of person people walked away from.

Her chest cracked open around the only words left in a whisper.

"Please come back to me."

Monday morning

arrived grey and airless, and Hermione felt like she hadn't slept at all.

Her eyes were dry and sore. Her limbs ached in the hangover of an emotional wreckage. She stared at her phone on the nightstand as the alarm vibrated silently beside it.

No messages. No calls.

She reached for it anyway. Thumbed to his name and called.

It rang once. Then went straight to voicemail.

The bathroom mirror was unkind. Her eyes were puffy, and the lines around her mouth looked deep. Mascara wouldn't help today. Lipstick wouldn't fix it. Still, she got ready. Pulled on a cardigan that didn't match her blouse and tied her curls back too tightly.

Her fingers shook when she made her tea. She forgot to eat.

At work, she barely heard the first meeting. She typed three pages of notes she couldn't remember taking. Laughed when someone made a joke, then realized she didn't know what it had been about.

She checked her phone every few minutes.

By lunch, she couldn't take it anymore. She told her team she needed to run an errand and walked two blocks to his firm. Her heels tapped so fast against the sidewalk like they were trying to outrun the knot in her stomach.

Liv blinked in surprise when she stepped into the reception area.

"Oh, Hermione...hi. He's not in today."

Hermione froze. "Not in?"

"He called in this morning. Said he wasn't feeling well. Asked me to cancel everything."

Something in her expression softened further. "Is everything... okay?"

Hermione nodded and pressed her lips together. "Could you just...if you speak to him....will you tell him I stopped by?"

Liv gave her a smile of pity. "Of course."

Hermione walked back to the office in a blur. Her inbox had exploded. Her tea had gone cold. She didn't notice either.

The rest of the afternoon crawled by. At five, she told herself not to go. Not to make it worse. To give him space. To not push.

By five fifteen she was on the tube heading toward him.

At his building she buzzed once. Then again. Then three more times.

Nothing.

She checked her phone. No messages. Texted him Can we please talk? but it didn't show as delivered. She tried a second one. Please.

The next call went straight to his voicemail.

Her hand clenched tightly around her phone. She took a breath, held it, then exhaled shakily as the tone beeped.

“Hi,” she said softly, her voice catching a little on the word. “It’s me.”

She swallowed.

“I know you’re hurting. I know I pushed. And I’m sorry if I said things in anger. I meant what I said, Draco. I don’t want a version of you. I want you. All of you.”

The silence made her eyes sting.

“I miss you,” she whispered. “I’m worried. Please call me back. Or text. Or...anything. Just... don’t disappear.”

Tuesday evening

The dreadful silence had started to take shape. It haunted her wherever she went.

Hermione checked her phone. She didn’t even pretend it was for anything else anymore. There were no updates. No missed calls. No texts. The messages showed “delivered” now beneath the messages she’d sent Monday. But he hadn’t replied.

She’d gone to work, somehow. Smiled where she needed to. Spoken when prompted. She even managed a joke during a meeting; one of those throwaway comments that made a few people laugh and then immediately left her feeling like she’d lied with her mouth.

Tuesday evening brought rain to slick her curls and clung to her lashes when she stepped outside to take a walk after dinner, just to get away from the four walls of her flat. She made it two blocks before her legs stopped moving.

She stared down at her phone again.

Still nothing.

She turned around and walked home.

When she finally sat on the sofa, wrapped in his navy jumper that still faintly smelled like his detergent, the weight of it all sank into her chest like wet stone.

She opened her phone and tried to call him again.

The voicemail tone buzzed against her ear. It sounded crueler now than it had on Monday. Like a final door locking.

She tried to speak and her voice broke halfway through the first word.

“Draco...” She wiped under her eye with the cuff of her sleeve. “Sorry. I wasn’t... I wasn’t going to call again.” Her throat burned. “I just... I need to say this. And then I won’t reach out again. I promise.” Her voice cracked again, and she pressed the heel of her palm to her temple. “You clearly want space. I get that now. I don’t know what’s happening, or what part of it is about me, or not about me at all. And I’m not going to keep pushing if you don’t want me to. But please, Draco...” Another tear slipped down her cheek. She didn’t bother wiping it this time. “Don’t disappear like this. It’s not fair. It’s cruel. I’m worried about you.”

She paused, the silence thick and horrible.

“I’ll give you time. However much you need. But when you’re ready...” Her voice softened, barely a whisper now. “Please don’t let this be the end of us.”

She hung up before she started sobbing.

And then she sat on the floor, holding her phone against her chest like it was something alive.

Wednesday and Thursday blurred.

She didn’t know what else to do with herself, so she kept showing up at the boxing studio.

Both days, she moved like her body was borrowed. Too heavy in some places, too brittle in others. She kept her earbuds in and her gloves on, nodding distractedly at familiar faces and ignoring the knowing look from the trainer who’d seen her punch harder than usual.

She didn’t want to explain herself. Didn’t want pity. She wanted to break something, or maybe just feel something that wasn’t this strange, hollow ache.

On Thursday evening, as she sat on the bench tying her shoes post-workout, Theo sent her a photo.

It was blurry and dark, clearly taken in low light. Theodora stood proudly on his dining table, feathers fluffed. In the background was a half-eaten sandwich and a glass of wine.

Theo:

I turned my back for three minutes.

Hermione laughed. Actually laughed. The sound caught in her throat like a sob.

...

You’re spoiling her. Give her a hug from me.

Theo just sent a thumbs-up emoji. No further commentary.

But it meant something. It meant that he was trying to be her friend again. She needed it.

And yet... her chest ached all over again.

Theo’s words from weeks ago echoed like a whisper she couldn’t shake:

"I just really hope he doesn't break your heart."

He had. Or he was in the process of doing it.

And the worst part was, Hermione didn't even know how. There hadn't been a fight with sharp edges. No shouting, no final goodbye. Just a slow dissolve into silence. The kind that left room for hope to rot.

She hadn't told anyone. Not even Ginny.

She couldn't talk about it. It felt too big and humiliating. They'd gone public. They'd started to say I love you. And now she'd have to admit again that she wasn't enough. That even this version of her, the one who tried harder and trusted more, hadn't been enough to hold someone's heart.

Friday evening

The rain was pouring by the time she left boxing. Horizontal, soaking the backs of her calves as she walked the last few blocks home. She didn't rush. There was no reason to.

Her hands were ice cold by the time she peeled off her wet clothes at home and stepped into the shower. The heat helped, but only on the surface. Nothing could quite touch the ice behind her ribs.

She towel-dried her hair roughly, pulled on sweatpants, and made herself a cup of chamomile tea, cradling the mug in both hands as she sank into the corner of the couch.

The wind howled outside. A few drops beat sharply against the windowpanes. It would be a long night.

The doorbell rang.

Her head jerked up.

She stared toward the door, breath suspended. No one came by unannounced. Not anymore. And especially not during a thunderstorm at eight-thirty on a Friday night.

The mug in her hands felt suddenly too warm. She put it down, barely noticing the soft clink against the table.

Rising only slowly she padded across the living room and paused with her hand on the doorknob. Her heart was pounding again. Every part of her hoped and dreaded and ached.

She opened the door.

Draco stood there, soaked to the bone, shoulders broad beneath the weight of a drenched coat that clung to him. His curls were plastered to his forehead, droplets trailing down the sharp line of his jaw. Rain dripped steadily from his sleeves, pooling at his boots, but he didn't seem to care.

And then his eyes found hers.

The air left her lungs like she'd been struck.

His wet lashes clung together; eyes dull with exhaustion.

The moment stretched between them. Her fingertips tingled. Her throat closed. Every part of her felt pulled to him and shattered by him all at once.

He was holding something wrapped in plastic.

Hermione just stared at him.

Her brain couldn't move fast enough to catch up with the rush in her chest. Relief. Love. Desperation. Sadness. Frustration. Anger. It all hit her at once, an avalanche underneath her skin.

His breathing was uneven, like he'd run up the stairs.

He didn't say anything at first. Just looked at her like he was waiting for her to shut the door.

"Hi," he said hoarsely. Just that.

Hermione stared at him. Her pulse spiked like a bruise pressed too hard. Her lungs locked up.

"Hi?" she repeated, sharp and trembling. "Hi? Are you fucking kidding me?"

She stepped backward, hand catching the edge of the hallway wall to keep herself upright. "You disappear for five days. You don't call. You don't write. You're not at your flat, you're not at the office. And then you just show up at my door like this and say hi?"

Her voice cracked down the middle. She hadn't even realized she was crying until the salt hit her lips.

"Do you have any idea what you put me through?"

Draco didn't speak. He didn't move, either. Not until her voice broke completely, and her shoulders began to fold inward like she was bracing for impact.

Then, wordlessly, he stepped into the flat. The door fell shut behind him.

Hermione took another step back, her spine hitting something. She didn't even feel it.

His eyes never left her.

Slowly, like the act itself might undo him, he crouched and placed the plastic bag on the floor. He handled it like it might shatter.

Then he rose and immediately reached for her.

Her hands came up immediately, fists pressed to his chest, resisting him. Her breath hitched in warning. "Don't," she said. "Don't just -"

But her arms gave out before the rest of the sentence did.

Because the moment his arms wrapped around her, everything inside her broke.

He held her like he was terrified she'd vanish. Every part of his body curled inward around her, soaked and shivering, like he couldn't breathe otherwise.

His forehead dropped to her shoulder. His breath stuttered violently against her collarbone. She felt the first sob tear through him like something unpracticed and involuntary. Like it hurt.

Then another.

His body convulsed once, just slightly, but it told her everything.

He was crying into her neck like a boy who had lost something he thought he never deserved to keep.

Her fingers fisted into the back of his soaked coat. She pressed her face to his jaw, her own tears mixing with the cold rain still clinging to his skin.

They didn't speak. They couldn't.

They just stood there, swaying slightly, two shaking bodies clinging together in the hush of a hallway that had never held this much grief.

He gripped her like she was the edge of a cliff and he'd been falling for days.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice torn. "I'm so fucking sorry."

Her knees buckled slightly, but his arms were already bracing her.

"Please don't send me away," he breathed. The words were childlike in how small they sounded. "Please."

Her whole body trembled. She didn't answer. She didn't trust her voice.

"I didn't mean to disappear," he inhaled sharply. "I didn't know how to come back without ruining everything. I just needed time."

Hermione couldn't answer. Could only hold him harder. Could only feel the way his chest jerked with each broken breath.

"I love you," he whispered, like he didn't expect it to be returned. "I love you and I'm sorry."

They stood like that until her muscles began to ache and her breath came too shallow. Her fingertips were white from how tightly she gripped his back.

Finally, she pulled away just far enough to see his face.

It wrecked her.

He looked pale and soaked and utterly destroyed. His lashes were clumped with tears. His cheeks were blotched in color. His lips parted like he still wanted to say something, but the words had given up.

She lifted a shaking hand to his jaw. Not to comfort him.

Just to prove he was real.

Draco searched her face like he didn't think he deserved to.

Hermione took a breath. Shaky, but solid enough to carry words.
"I made tea," she said. "If you want some."

Draco swallowed. Nodded, slowly. "That would be nice."

She stepped back, and this time, he let her go.

The space between them felt strange now. Like even air might be too heavy.

She disappeared into the bedroom, her limbs moving carefully, as if any sudden motion might splinter the moment. From the chair by the window, she picked up the navy jumper he'd given her on Friday before she had left for Brighton. It smelled more like her than him now. She didn't let herself think too hard about that.

She pulled open the drawer beneath her nightstand and took out a pair of grey sweatpants she hadn't remembered folding there. She hadn't asked him to leave them. He hadn't asked to keep them here. But they were his.

She returned to the hallway and passed them to him wordlessly. Their fingers touched barely, but it felt like too much and not enough all at once.

Draco nodded with his eyes lowered. Then he turned and padded toward the bathroom.

Hermione moved to the kitchen. She poured the second cup of chamomile with unsteady hands, added a bit of honey out of habit. The stirring spoon clinked against the side of the cup.

When she returned to the living room, Draco was standing by the window.

He was in dry clothes now. The plastic bag was gone, left forgotten by the door. But in his hands was something else.

A wooden box.

Hermione stopped in the doorway.

He didn't turn around. Just spoke calmly, "I thought I could come in here and just... explain."

Her eyes stayed on him. On the tight set of his shoulders. On the way he stood so rigid.

"I rehearsed the words a thousand times," he continued, quieter now. "Tried to figure out how to do this right. How to give you everything without it breaking us."

She walked toward him, slow and careful, and held out the mug.

They stood there for a long, still moment.

Hermione's eyes dropped to the box in his other hand.

"What is that?"

Draco's mouth twitched. Not a smile. Not even close.

"This is... years of therapy," he said quietly. "Or what's left of it."

He set his tea down gently on the coffee table and sank onto the couch beside her, the weight of him causing the cushion to dip just slightly beneath her thigh. He placed the wooden box between them. His fingers brushed the lid once, then retreated.

"My therapist gave me the exercise a few years ago," he said. "Said if I couldn't say something out loud, I should write it down. Even if I never gave it to anyone. Just... get it out of my body."

Hermione glanced at him.

"So I wrote letters," he continued. "Some are sealed. Some are just pages. Half-thoughts. Confessions. Things I couldn't say to anyone. Some are to people who've died. Some are to people I never want to see again. And..." He hesitated. "Some are to you."

Hermione's fingers were clawing into a blanket next to her.

"I didn't plan to bring it," he murmured. "I almost didn't. But when I finally made myself come here, I saw it on the shelf and... I don't know. It felt right. Like if I was going to be honest with you it had to be everything."

Hermione stared at the box. It looked simple from the outside. Maybe a little battered. One of the brass corners was dented, and the grain of the wood had been worn smooth by time and touch.

Draco reached out and nudged it gently toward her.

"I don't want them anymore," he said. "They're yours."

Her eyes lifted to his face, but he was looking at the box.

"You can read them," he went on. "Or don't. I can't keep any of it from you anymore. You were right. You deserve nothing but the truth."

Hermione's throat tightened. Her pulse thudded softly against the base of her neck.

"You can burn them if you want to," he added. "Read one. Read all of them. Keep them. Rip them up. Whatever you need to do. I just... I can't carry them anymore."

She watched the tension in his jaw, the way his hands clenched together in his lap like he was trying not to tremble.

Then she reached out, slowly, and lifted the lid.

The scent hit her first. Ink, aged paper and a trace of that unmistakable smell that belonged to him.

Inside was a mess of quiet pain: folded pages, sealed envelopes, scraps of torn notebook paper shoved hastily between neater piles. Some were labeled in the upper corners. Others had names in his beautiful handwriting. Some were just creased and worn, as though they'd been opened and read and rewritten too many times.

She ran her fingers lightly across the top layer. A sealed envelope read: *Tiffany*.

There was one with no name at all, just a single word in the corner: fuck. She let out a small, shaky breath.

And then she saw it.

Hermione

Her name, in his handwriting. *Multiple times*. Tucked between pages and scrawled across folded sheets.

Her chest went tight.

He had written to her. Long before tonight. Long before he ever let her see this part of him.

It felt sacred. Terrifying. Like holding the unedited version of someone's soul in her hands.

She blinked back the new sting in her eyes and glanced at him again. He hadn't moved.

"Draco," she whispered. "I don't know what to do with all of this."

He didn't answer right away.

"It feels..." She trailed off, heart pounding. "It feels like you handed me your diary. Like I'm trespassing. And I don't want to hurt you more."

Draco finally turned his head toward her, his eyes hollow but open.

"You're not," he said. "If there's anyone who should know all of it...it's you."

Her eyes drifted back to one of the envelopes marked with her name.

It was sealed.

She hesitated; fingers unsteady over the flap.

“Are you sure?” she asked, barely audible. “About this?”

He nodded.

Hermione took a deep breath. Then carefully, delicately, she broke the seal and unfolded the letter.

Dear Hermione,

She blinked down at the page. Her name in his handwriting was jarring.

Her eyes lifted to the top right corner, where a small, neatly inked date sat on the page.

Five years ago.

She braced herself, then lowered her eyes again to keep reading.

February 3rd 2020

Dear Hermione,

I keep coming back to the same place.

You were wearing that stupid oversized jumper that swallows your wrists. The one that makes you look softer than you already are. You were standing at the edge of the table, talking too much, laughing like nothing could ever touch you.

I told Blaise you needed to stop running your mouth so much.

I wish I meant it.

Not to get the burn out of my throat. Like having your voice filling every inch around me wasn't the only thing I wanted.

*I hate this maddening, fucked-up pull I feel around you.
I can't breathe properly when you laugh.*

You make everything else feel like noise.

But that's the thing about you.

*You're careless with people like me. Not because you mean to be.
It's just what happens when someone like you exists near someone like me.
You don't notice the damage.*

You glow. I rot.

*And we're not friends.
If that's what you'd offer me, I'd rather you offer nothing at all.
There's no middle ground with you.
No neutral. No safe distance.*

-DM-

Hermione blinked down at the letter, her fingertips still grazing the edge of the paper where her own name sat in his handwriting. The words pressed themselves into her.

She remembered that time.

She'd despised having him around. He'd been everywhere. Loud and smug and magnetic in all the worst ways. Always standing just close enough to make her feel watched. Always ignoring her at pub nights, only to turn around and whisper something filthy to a girl two feet away. She'd rolled her eyes at him more times than she could count. She'd sworn to Ginny he wasn't worth the energy of being annoyed.

She had a hard time imagining that he had gone home and written this.

Draco hadn't moved. Just sat still on the sofa, elbows on his knees, watching her with an unreadable expression. Not embarrassed. Not tense. Just... quiet. He had braced himself.

"I told you," he said, almost gentle. "I had a crush on you for a while."

She gave a breath of disbelief, shaking her head slowly. "Draco... that was five years ago."

Hermione folded the letter back along its original crease. She slid it back into the envelope with care, like it might tear if she breathed wrong.

"I know how much this means to you," she said. Her voice was soft but steady. "And I can't even begin to explain what it means to me. The trust you're handing me right now."

She reached out and laid her fingertips on the lid of the box. Her hand stilled there, trembling slightly. Her fingers curled around the edge, grounding herself.

She didn't open another envelope. Not even when the name she was looking for was staring right back at her. Astoria.

"But it feels wrong," she said after a moment, eyes still on the box. "To read your thoughts like this. Without you saying them out loud. Without you giving them to me."

She turned toward him then, fully.

"Please, Draco. Tell me your story with your words. No letters. Just... you."

The room held its breath. Everything else felt muted.

He didn't move for a very long time. She could see the struggle he fought, but his eyes snapped up to hers eventually.

"Do you remember," he said finally, "that night your dad was in the accident? When I told you I lost someone ten years ago in a car accident."

Hermione nodded slowly, but the memory crashed through her like a wave.

The sound of the rain on the windscreen. The blur of lights on wet pavement. The way his knuckles had gone white on the steering wheel.

"Of course I remember," she whispered.

He nodded once.

Hermione sat perfectly still.

Draco's voice came again. Flat and almost clinical. Like he was peeling back something dead with numb fingers.

"His name was Milo."

Milo. She'd seen the name on one of the envelopes between them.

"He was like a brother to me. My best friend. We did everything together. Childhood. School. Chaos. The worst and the best parts of me were with him."

Draco's eyes finally held hers, and the pain in them felt like a direct hit to the chest.

"That night with you. It felt like the past was clawing its way back out."

Hermione didn't breathe. Couldn't. Her throat locked around it.

He took a deep breath as if he needed to steady himself.

"I never talk about him. Not because I don't think about him. I do. Every day. But because I can't deal with the pain and guilt I still carry. I'm ashamed."

"But why, Draco?" she asked. "Why do you feel guilty about the accident?"

He stared down at the floor like it might split open and swallow him whole.

"Because I'm the reason he's dead."

Hermione's lips parted to protest, but as if he had sensed it, he looked back up. And his eyes told her not to interrupt. They were rimmed red, something ruined behind them.

"He got behind the wheel that night. Drunk. And it was my fault."

He exhaled, long and uneven, like the words had cost him air.

Her whole body went still.

“I was supposed to be with him. But I wasn’t.”

“Draco—”

He swallowed, and it sounded like it physically hurt him to do so.

“Everyone says it wasn’t my fault. That I didn’t put him in the car. That I didn’t turn the key.”

A bitter laugh escaped him but somehow too soft to be a full sound.

“But I might as well have.”

The hollow in his voice was unbearable for her to hear. So she reached for him with trembling hands to cup his jaw.

His eyes were glassed over like he wasn’t fully in the room anymore.

She swallowed. “Draco...”

His skin was cold.

Their eyes met, and he pulled away from her touch as easily as he had allowed it. But it was the first time that he was really letting her see him tonight.

Hermione waited, biting her tongue not to say the wrong thing.

“You want the truth about Astoria?”

He took the box between them and found a place for it on the coffee table instead.

“Then I’ll tell you what I did.”

Chapter 27: Astoria

Hermione stayed quiet, hardly daring to breathe as she watched him brace himself, searching for the words to begin.

Seeing Draco like this was agony.

Every part of her ached to cross the space between them, to reach for him, but she didn't know if that was what he wanted. If touching him now might send him pulling away again.

He'd come back to her. But she couldn't tell what that return meant for them. Not really.

When he finally spoke, his fingers were threaded through his hair as if holding his own head together. "There was this party in Surrey. Someone's parents were away. I don't even remember whose place it was. Milo got the invite. There were four of us in the car. Me, Milo, Astoria, and her boyfriend at the time."

Hermione gave a small nod, only to show she was listening. She wasn't sure she was ready for whatever came next. And yet, shamefully, at the mention of Astoria's boyfriend, a quiet ripple of relief moved through her – unwelcome, but impossible to ignore.

He rubbed a hand over his mouth, eyes distant. "Milo and Astoria were inseparable."

She waited, sensing there was more.

"They weren't just close. They were born minutes apart. Twins. But not in the way most people think of it. It was like they'd been split from the same breath, the same thought. She could be across a room, not say a word, and he'd still know exactly what she didn't say out loud."

A flicker of a smile touched his mouth. He looked so sad. "Astoria was quieter than him. Unless she was angry. Then she was... unstoppable. Fierce. Smarter than the rest of us put together."

Hermione felt the air change in her lungs, as if the scope of what he'd lost had doubled in an instant. And maybe that was why he sounded the way he did now. Every memory of one carried the ghost of the other, and he was trusting her with both.

He fell quiet, staring past her, lost somewhere in the memory.

Her whisper was barely above the sound of the rain outside. "What happened that night, Draco?"

A faint line deepened between his brows, like he was pressing the words into shape before letting them out. When he finally looked at her, his eyes held the war between wanting to tell her and wanting to keep it buried.

“I’ve never told anyone the whole thing,” he said quietly. “Not like this.”

Her hands curled in her lap, willing herself to be patient.

He drew in a breath, heavy enough she could feel it in her own chest.

“Milo had this plan to hit two parties in one night. House party first, then another across town where a girl he liked was meant to be.” A low gust rattled the windowpane, and Hermione shifted slightly on the sofa, tucking her toes beneath her to stay warm. “He was really nervous about it. Kept fixing his hair in the mirror, asking if his shirt looked dumb – *it did*.”

Hermione tried to smile, but the twinge in her throat made it impossible.

“I should’ve never taken the car,” Draco admitted quietly. “We’d already had a few pints before we left. But I’d stolen the keys to my father’s new car earlier that night... an obnoxiously polished thing he cared about more than his own son. I wanted to piss him off. So I took it.”

Hermione’s mind flickered to the family portrait hanging in his parents’ hallway. The three of them lined up like chess pieces. That cold house with its marble floors and air that felt like it held its breath. The brittle space between him and his father had been right there in the frame.

She could picture the boy he’d been that night. Half-drunk, holding stolen keys, chasing any excuse to prove that he didn’t need his father’s approval after all.

“We actually had a great time at first,” Draco said, his tone softer as he was feeling his way back through the memory. “We drank more, stuck together for the first hour or so. We were laughing, shouting over the music, weaving from the kitchen to the garden and back again. Milo was in his element, dragging Astoria onto a makeshift dance floor she clearly didn’t want to be on, spinning her until she was glaring at him but trying not to smile.”

His mouth pulled tight. “But then we bumped into Daphne.”

Hermione’s brows drew in slightly, her mind working to slot the name into the picture. She remembered Astoria mentioning her – someone now living in Italy.

“She’s Astoria’s and Milo’s younger sister,” Draco explained. “Only a year younger, but it always felt like more. I’d known her since she was a kid. She was like my little sister too. Just like Milo and Astoria were like siblings for me. I grew up with them. Spent more time at their house than at mine. My place was... *quiet*. Theirs was loud, messy, people always coming and going. But you knew you mattered there.”

He leaned back slightly, eyes narrowing. “Astoria spotted her before we did. She grabbed Daphne by the arm and hauled her down the hallway, away from the crowd. Started tearing into her because she wasn’t supposed to be out there. Told her she needed to get her own life and stop trying to sneak into hers. It was ugly.”

His teeth clicked together, the movement barely visible. “Daphne had always... struggled. Being the youngest. Being in their orbit meant she was always watching from the outside.

The older we got, the worse it got for her. She'd push back, fight with Astoria over every little thing. And Astoria..." He paused to let out a sharp exhale through his nose. "Astoria had no patience for it. No patience for her little sister needing anything from her. That night was no different. She just... tore her down. And Daphne, she didn't know how to fight fair. She said things back. Low blows. It got loud enough that people stopped dancing to watch."

He rubbed the side of his face, almost like trying to push the sound of it away.

Hermione's eyes flicked to the clock on the wall, the seconds swept on in even beats, at odds with the uneven rhythm of his words.

"It made me worry about Daphne. So I stepped in and told Astoria to calm down, not to make a scene. That's when she turned on me. She told me not to encourage her behaviour, not to get in the middle of things I'd never understand."

Hermione bit her tongue. She didn't interrupt, but her fingers curled slightly where they rested in her lap. She had so many questions already.

He shook his head. "Milo kept out of it – he always did. He hated wading in when those two went at each other. But Daphne slipped off while we were still arguing, and before I could go after her, Milo came over saying he'd left his phone in my car. I tossed him the keys without thinking. I figured he'd be back in two minutes."

One hand lifted to the back of his neck, scratching absently. "Astoria eventually gave up on me," he said. "She grabbed her boyfriend and stormed outside – said she needed fresh air. Left me standing there. Milo was still gone, getting his phone from the car, so it was just me. Instead of checking in on Milo, I kept thinking about the way Daphne had looked when Astoria was laying into her. So I went looking for her to make sure she was alright. She was upstairs in one of the guest rooms, sitting on the edge of the bed with her head down."

The words came rough, like they were being dragged out of him. "We talked for a bit. Nothing important. I was just... trying to make her laugh, get her mind off Astoria and the fight. And she did laugh a couple of times. But then something shifted in that room."

His gaze dropped to the floor between his feet. "She said I was the only one who was always decent to her. That she wished I'd drop Astoria as a friend, and... that she missed when I'd spend time with her too."

Hermione's stomach tightened.

"I don't even remember *how* it happened," Draco's eyes closed as if he tried to escape a dull pain in his chest. "One minute we were talking... the next, she was trying to straddle me, kissing me."

Hermione forced her gaze away, staring at a spot on the far wall. She didn't want to see it in her mind, didn't want to picture his hands on someone else. But the image was already there, and with it came the creeping fear that this had been a mistake he would have regretted instantly.

“I told her it was a bad idea...that Milo and Astoria would kill us both. She said she didn’t care. That no one had to know. That it could be our little secret.” His shoulders drew in, the tension coiling through him. “And I was an idiot back then... I –” he swallowed hard “I kissed her back.”

He dragged a hand down his face, fingers pressing hard into his eyes. “And then I... I did the stupidest thing I could’ve done.”

He didn’t elaborate. He didn’t have to.

Only a year younger than Draco, Daphne had still been close enough to the cusp that Hermione felt a sudden, almost protective ache for the girl she’d never even met.

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. But when she couldn’t stand *not* looking at him anymore, she turned back toward him. His eyes found hers instantly. He did regret it. She could see it in the way his lips pressed to a thin line to hold back another word.

She felt the intimacy of that memory underneath her own skin. He was trusting her with something he hadn’t let anyone touch in a decade. And she understood, with a sharp twist in her soul, that this was the part of himself he’d kept locked away, and tonight, he was letting her see it. No matter how ugly.

“I panicked as soon as it was over. I didn’t know what the hell I’d just done, except that it was the worst decision I’d ever made.”

His knee bounced once, sharp. “And instead of... I don’t know, handling it... I treated her like shit right after. I just wanted to get away from her, like if I pushed hard enough it wouldn’t be real. I made her swear not to tell anyone. Said if Milo or Astoria ever found out, I –” He faltered but pushed on. “I wouldn’t be able to live with it.”

Hermione felt the knot in her stomach pull tighter at the way his voice broke on that last part. Like that shame hadn’t lessened in all the years since, only burrowed deeper.

“I got dressed and left Daphne in the room. I went back downstairs and ran into Astoria on the front porch, she was alone,” he paused, brows furrowing as he recalled the memory. “She’d fought with her boyfriend too. She was looking for Milo and said she couldn’t find him anywhere. She asked if I could drive her home before I went to the next party with him. And I told her I would, once he finally got his arse out here. She just... went quiet. Sat down on the stairs with me and leaned her head against my shoulder.”

The muscle in his cheek ticked. “I put my arm around her. And I hated myself for it. I’d already betrayed a friendship that meant everything to me and only dug myself deeper.”

For a moment he looked like he was back there, sitting in the dark with Astoria. “She mumbled something about me being the best friend she and Milo could ask for. And all I could think was how badly I wanted to distract from the panic building in my chest again. So I told her I was going to call him so we could get her home. But when I looked at the screen, I saw that I had one missed call from Milo. And a voicemail.”

Draco's eyes flicked to hers, before he reached into the pocket of his sweatpants and pulled out his phone. For a moment, he just stared at the screen, like even now it carried more weight than he could hold.

"I still have it," he said quietly. "I can't stand listening to it, but deleting it feels... wrong. Like it's the last real piece of him I've got."

He scrolled for a while before tapping the screen. A moment later, a stranger's voice filled the space between them. Draco closed his eyes as Hermione leaned in, drawn toward the sound. The recording was grainy, worn thin by time and technology, but the life in it still cut through.

Milo sounded warm and loose, a grin threaded through every word, the faint thump of music bleeding in from somewhere behind him.

'Oi, can't find you anywhere, you tosser.

I'm taking Daddy Lucius's shiny toy for a spin to hit that petrol station we passed earlier. I'm starving. Need one of those disgusting burritos that'll probably kill me before my sisters do. Be back in a few to scoop you and Tori so we can crash the next party. If I don't snog Chloe tonight, you'll have to stage an intervention for me.

Alright. I'll be back in five, maybe ten. Hope you're getting your dick wet at least.

Love you, bro. You know that, yeah?'

Hermione realised she'd been holding her breath when the recording died in a burst of static, and then there was nothing.

Draco's jaw was locked so tight it looked painful, his mouth flattening like the words had landed fresh in his gut. Hermione saw the recoil in him, the way shame swept over his entire being.

She kept her gaze fixed on the phone in his hand, as if staring at it might keep Milo's words from echoing in her head. There was an easy charm in it, a voice you couldn't help but lean toward. It made the normalcy of his words feel all the more gutting. He'd been minutes away from disaster, and neither of them had known. She couldn't shake the detail about that false sense of certainty. The throwaway laugh before telling Draco he *loved* him. All of it stitched together into something unbearable because she knew now how the story ended.

Draco's next words cut through her thoughts. "Astoria asked me when the voicemail was from. I checked." He rubbed his mouth, like the memory itched. "It had been an hour. I didn't even notice how long I'd been gone until then. Everything... went fuzzy. She just lost it. And I was so fucked – my head was still back in that room with Daphne, trying to make sense of everything, and I didn't know what the hell to do. I kept telling her maybe he ran into a mate, maybe he stopped somewhere else first, just... throwing anything out there to calm her down. But she wouldn't stop. She was begging me to call for help. And... I don't know. I got this strange, cold feeling in my gut, watching her like that. The way she and Milo were... it was like she could feel something I couldn't."

Hermione felt her chest constrict, a sharp ache of pity for Astoria mixing with something heavy for him. She could almost see the younger version of Draco sitting there, caught between two storms he didn't know how to weather. Without thinking, she reached for his hand, wanting to tell him without words that he wasn't alone anymore.

But he pulled away. Not harshly, just a small shift of his arm to rub at the back of his neck instead, as if her touch might unravel something he was still holding together.

He let out a long, heavy breath. "So I called my father."

She let her hand fall back to her lap.

"My call woke him," Draco said after a moment. "He was furious. Wanted to know why the hell I was phoning in the middle of the night, and when I had to admit I'd stolen his car from the driveway..." He gave a short, humorless huff. "That only made it worse. And then..." His eyes flicked up briefly, almost as if he still didn't believe it. "Then he asked if I was alright. Which was... off. He wasn't a better father then than he is today."

She believed him. Mr. Malfoy had something like cruelty written all over him. She'd never asked more questions, but her interaction with him made her not doubt a word he said about his father.

"I broke at that," he said quietly. "Told him Milo was drunk, had taken the car, and he wasn't back yet. And we didn't know what to do."

Her heart squeezed hard enough to ache. She wanted to tell him that it hadn't been his responsibility to know what to do. But his face was still turned away from her, and she didn't think he'd let those words land.

Draco stared at the floor, his next words sounded oddly detached from the memory itself. "It felt like hours before they got there. Him and my mother. I'd never seen her leave the house without makeup or properly dressed. Her hair was up and she was still wearing her slippers. And something about her felt... off, like she was holding herself too tightly."

He swallowed. "I remember how relieved Astoria had been in that moment. She saw my mother get out of the car and ran toward her, hugged her tightly and said she was so scared. My mother asked Astoria if Daphne was with us."

Hermione could picture it. And it made her chest ache in a way she hadn't expected, to imagine Mrs. Malfoy like that – smaller somehow, stripped down to a mother beneath the façade.

"I wanted to follow Astoria," Draco said, "I was so afraid Daphne might say something about what we'd done. But my father held me back. I thought I was about to get that beating for stealing the car right there. Instead, he just told me to listen for once in my life. He said I needed to prepare myself for what he was about to say."

She felt her pulse quicken, her body leaning in before she even realized it. A chill swept through her, the kind that came before a blow you couldn't stop. She knew she'd never be

able to brace for it.

“On the way there,” Draco went on, “he’d gotten a call from the authorities. His car was involved in an accident. They... they couldn’t identify the driver.”

She could feel the hollow stillness that must have settled over him in that moment.

“I froze,” he admitted, the words sounding far away. “Couldn’t think. Couldn’t even breathe. And then he said we’d drive to the hospital together. That my mother had already called Milo’s parents. That he didn’t know how bad it was.”

A single twitch of his brow broke the stillness of his face. “He told me I needed to be a man now. For once. And be there for the girls. Whatever was going to happen tonight.”

Hermione’s throat burned. These words had been branded into him. Her vision blurred before she could stop it. She turned her face slightly, blinking hard, willing herself not to cry. Not now, not when he was still fighting his way through the memory.

Because she knew that moment. Knew the bone-deep cold of it.

Her mind pulled her back without permission – to that night in the storm, when her phone had rung and her mother’s voice had broken on the words about her father’s accident. Draco had been there beside her in the car, his hands steady on the wheel while she’d frozen, her mind spinning back to the last conversation she’d had with her dad. The fear that it could have been the last time.

He’d been so calm then. Calm in a way that hadn’t made sense to her at the time. But now she knew it had been the ten-year anniversary of his own nightmare. That it hadn’t been coincidence at all, but something like fate.

Because no one else could have understood her in that moment the way he had. And it had changed everything between them.

“I tried to do what he said,” he went on, his tone stripped bare. “Tried to *man up*. Astoria didn’t stop crying the whole drive. Daphne didn’t even look at me. She just stared out the window, clutching her necklace like it was the only thing keeping her together.”

He sighed a shaky breath. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt smaller than I did in that moment. Lesser than. Like there was nothing in me worth looking at.”

Hermione was hurting. Hurting to imagine how utterly confused he must have been back then. Eighteen years old, barely lived with the world on his shoulders.

“When we pulled up to the hospital... Astoria and Daphne both ran straight to their parents. Didn’t even glance back.” Each word cost him now. “Everything after that is... *blurry*. I remember walking in, but it felt like the walls were closing in on me. Bright lights overhead, that ugly yellow paint on the hallway walls. The smell of disinfectant.”

The weight pulled his shoulders down. “I just... sank into a chair. My mother sat beside me. She’d ask if I wanted water, tea. I said no every time. My father barely spoke. Just stood

there, one hand on my shoulder. Every so often, he'd squeeze. Not gently. I believe he thought he could force something into me that way. Strength. Or control."

It made her want to reach across the years and pry his father's hand away, to put her own there instead.

"We stayed in that hallway all night," he muttered. "No one told us anything. Every time a door opened Astoria would look up like it might be him. Daphne never moved. Just kept staring out at the corridor, twisting that necklace chain around her fingers until I thought it might snap."

Hermione let the silence stretch to wait for him.

"Hours later... the doctor came back for the family. Took them into a separate room." His voice dipped to a whisper. "My parents knew then. But I didn't... I couldn't..." He swallowed hard. "Not until Astoria came out again. She saw me. I saw her. And that was it. I just knew."

She still had so many questions that burned in her chest, but one look at him told her now wasn't the time. He needed space to breathe, to gather himself before the grief pulled him down too far.

So she reached for him again.

This time, he didn't pull away. His hand came to the back of her neck, urgent, almost clumsy, pulling her forward until she was pressed to him. His other arm wrapped fully around her waist. She felt the tremor in his forearm where it locked across her spine, the way his breath shuddered against her hair.

Hermione tucked herself as close as she could. She slid her arms around him, one across his back, the other curling over his shoulder, holding him as if she could keep all the cracked pieces from slipping further apart. Her fingers threaded into the fabric of his jumper, clutching hard enough to anchor. She leaned her weight into him, letting him feel every inch of her there, unyielding like a wall.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. His grip didn't ease, and hers didn't falter. She could feel his heartbeat against her cheek. Incredibly fast and uneven – but still there. And she held him like that was enough.

Gradually, she felt the rigid set of his shoulders shift. Not softening, exactly...just *settling*. He adjusted enough so they were leaning back together against the sofa, her body still close to his, his arm still around her. He didn't have to look at *her* this way.

When he spoke again, it was so quiet she almost missed it. "She just... collapsed in front of me on that ugly floor. Daphne didn't move for a long time. Just kept staring at me like she was waiting for me to say something. But I couldn't. I didn't have anything left in me to give to either of them."

His hand shifted slightly at her side, not in comfort but like the memory was physically restless inside him.

“Milo’s dad...” He broke off, then tried again. “His dad exchanged that look with my father... he took the girls and left. I don’t know if they went home or to someone else’s. The whole corridor emptied, and it was just me and my parents. I could hear the nurses laughing at the other end of the hall. It made me want to put my fist through the wall.”

Hermione felt the tension coil in his frame, even now.

“My father told me to get up. Said we had to go home. My mother was crying quietly. I remember thinking it was the first time I’d ever seen her cry and wondering if it would be the last. And then...” His expression darkened. “Then we walked past the room.”

She didn’t ask which one.

“There was a curtain pulled, but I saw one of the nurses step out, holding a clear plastic bag with his shirt inside. That stupid shirt he’d been so proud of. And I thought – for a moment – that maybe if I just got in there, maybe if I just saw him, it wouldn’t be –” His breath caught so sharply it sounded painful. “But my father didn’t let me. Said I needed to remember him the way he was.”

His hand came up, rubbing at his face, harder this time, almost angrily, as if he could scrape the tears away before they fell. Hermione caught his wrist mid-motion, pulling it gently but firmly down. She didn’t want him to hide from her.

And that was it. His mouth pressed tight, eyes glassy, and then the tears came in quiet, relentless drops.

“We left,” he said hoarsely, the words breaking apart in his throat. “And nothing was ever the same again.”

She felt like if she breathed too hard, they might splinter apart. Her heart hurt with everything she wanted to say, but none of it felt big enough. None of it felt worthy of what he’d just handed her.

So she wrapped her arms around him, tighter this time, as if she could fold herself into the empty space he’d been carrying all these years and hold it closed for him, just for a while.

He didn’t answer, but the arm around her tightened, drawing her closer until there was no space left at all.

They stayed like that, pressed together in the quiet. Hermione felt him breathe. Not shallow and fractured, but deep. Maybe telling her hadn’t broken him.

Draco’s hand tightened at her hip, not in possession, but like bracing himself for the next part.

“Back then, I thought nothing in my life could ever come close to the regret I felt for... for being with Daphne while missing Milo’s call. But I was wrong.”

The words landed like stones in her ribs.

“After the funeral, I moved to London. My father was paying for it...probably because he felt bad for me. Or because he couldn’t stand seeing my empty face every day. I wanted to be as far away from home as possible. That’s when I met Blaise. And Astoria –” He sighed. “She kept reaching out. Calling. Needing me. And I couldn’t even take care of myself.”

He leaned back slightly, his eyes not quite on her. “I carried that weight...knowing Milo was dead because I couldn’t leave my dick in my pants and I just... I stopped caring about anything. Wrong crowd. Pills to numb my head. Drunk every day for a while. I was a shell of myself. And I refused to talk to anyone about it.”

He drew in a slow breath. “Months later, Astoria came for the weekend. I don’t know how she was holding herself together. She was grieving too, but not like me. She kept moving forward. She made it her business to be okay for everyone else.”

Hermione bit hard on the inside of her cheek, but it didn’t stop the new burn in her eyes. Every part of her craved to pull him in and not let go, to take all of it from him for just a minute so he could breathe.

“That weekend I got into fights. Picked them. Got beaten up. Numbed that pain with more pills. Lashed out at strangers. I didn’t know it at the time, but Blaise and Astoria met behind my back, trying to figure out how to help me.”

Her breath shook, another tear slipping free before she could catch it. *Blaise*. She wished she could hug him too, for being there when she hadn’t been, for at least trying to keep Draco from drowning.

“Astoria told my mother. And she...she didn’t know what else to do. Forced my father to stop sending me money. He stopped by once. Took one look at the flat and dropped a bill on my desk. For the accident. The car. What it had cost him to make sure the story never went public. Said it would’ve ruined his reputation as a lawyer. Told me I needed to take responsibility for my life. And that I wouldn’t see another penny until I started uni and went to the therapy place my mother had lined up.”

Draco let out a humorless huff. “So I went. But I was pissed at Astoria for telling on me. I convinced myself I hated her for weeks. Just to be able to live another day in my own skin.”

Hermione shook her head before she could stop herself, the pain in her chest too sharp. Her hands came up, framing his face as if she could hold him still, keep him from retreating any further into the memory.

She hated that she hadn’t known this version of him then, that she’d never had the chance to try to pull him back.

His eyes fluttered closed at her touch, his breathing became uneven. It seemed like the effort of talking about it was pulling the strength from him. “My therapist was... good. Patient. Convinced me, weeks later, to start fresh. Said if I wanted to honor Milo’s memory, I should consider coming clean to Astoria. Tell her what happened that night.”

He swallowed. “So I did. Months later. Sat her down, told her there was something she needed to know. And she was... she was shocked. Not just that I’d done it, but that I’d never told her. That her own sister hadn’t told her either. She asked me how I could look her in the face for all those months and keep it from her. Asked if I thought she was stupid. If I’d been laughing at her behind her back.”

His chin flexed, a muscle ticking as he kept his eyes shut. “She said it made everything make sense – why Daphne had been so cagey, why I’d kept out of her way for months after Milo died. I watched her connect every moment, turn it over in her head. I just sat there and let her. Because every word landed like it belonged, like it had been waiting to stick.”

He let out a harsh breath. “She told me I’d betrayed her twice. First that night, and then every single day since for lying to her. And then she told me I didn’t deserve to have known Milo at all if that’s who I really was.”

Hermione felt his arm tense around her.

“She pushed and pushed – wanted *every* detail, wanted to know how I could live with myself. And I snapped. She hurt me more than I thought possible, and I felt cornered. I told her it was her fault. That Milo would still be here if she hadn’t treated her own sister like a piece of shit. That Daphne never would’ve jumped me if it wasn’t for her selfishness.”

Hermione’s stomach turned, the cruelty of those words sharp. She could feel in the way he held her that saying it aloud now still carried the same weight it had then.

Draco’s hand flexed once against her side, like the memory itself was cutting into him. “I saw it happen. The second the words left my mouth, I watched them hit her. It was like I’d reached in and ripped something out of her. She just... went still. No shouting. No tears. She stared at me like she didn’t know me at all, and then she stood up and left. She didn’t tell me to go to hell. Just left. I knew I’d done something I couldn’t take back.”

Her mind flicked between the woman she’d met in passing and the girl Draco was describing now.

“A few days later, I went back to see her,” he continued. “To apologise for the things I’d said. For being responsible for Milo’s death. I told her I didn’t deserve her forgiveness. That I’d hate myself for what I had done without her wasting any thoughts on me” His eyes stayed closed. “She was quiet for a long time, then she hugged me.”

Hermione held her breath for him.

“And then we both cried,” Draco said, almost to himself. “After that, I started uni. And I never spoke to her again. Haven’t seen her... until Sunday last week. When we ran into her.”

Hermione tried to take in everything he’d just told her, but her thoughts kept circling back to that moment outside – the way Draco had gone still, staring at a little boy like the rest of the world had fallen away.

She wet her lips, suddenly hesitant. “Did you... know? That she had a son?”

He nodded once, the movement small. “Astoria kept in touch with my mother. Holiday cards. Birthday greetings. She sends an invite every year to the memorial her family holds for Milo.” His mouth twisted faintly. “I never went. Too ashamed of myself. I just wanted to... erase it. Pretend it wasn’t still there. I couldn’t even bring myself to respond to her.”

He glanced away. “My mother told me once that Astoria had a baby. Showed me a picture.”

Her heart pulled taut, like it was being drawn in two directions “Astoria said the resemblance is... *striking*?”

“He looks exactly like Milo did when we first became friends. Same eyes. Same grin. It was like seeing a ghost.” His gaze flicked back to her, and for a moment it held. “It felt like the universe had put him back in front of me, just to see if I could stand it.”

“I’m good at burying it, Hermione,” he went on, the words heavier now. “Writing my letters when it gets too heavy. Talking to my therapist helps. But...” He hesitated, his expression caught between wanting to stop and needing to keep going. “He told me weeks ago that I had to open up to you. That if we were going to work, I had to be honest.”

His voice cracked on the next part. “And quite honestly, I *still* don’t want you to know. Because I know you’ll never look at me the same again. And I hate that almost as much as I hate knowing I earned it. I’m not ready to lose the only good thing that’s happened to me in *ten* fucking years.”

Hermione’s breath felt heavy in her chest. There were too many jagged edges to what he’d given her, too many places to cut herself if she reached out wrong. She didn’t speak right away. She let the rain against the windows fill the space, almost covering the pounding in her ears.

“I don’t believe that, Draco.”

He tried to look at her fully, but his gaze faltered and dropped.

“You say you didn’t want me to know, but at the same time you *needed* me to stop running away from my own fears. To stay with you. And I think – deep down – you wanted that too. You just... it felt too heavy to unpack. I’d like to believe that if you’d told me right away, I would’ve stayed too. I think I would have. But we don’t know that.” She swallowed, softening. “But I’m not running from you, or that part of your life.”

Draco’s eyes stayed on the floor, as if meeting hers might undo whatever was holding him together.

She reached over, her fingertips brushing the warm edge of his face.

“I’m still here,” she whispered. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

Her fingers felt steady despite the pounding in her chest, brushing the strands of hair that had fallen forward.

“I think...” She paused, searching for the right words. “I think what you’ve been through is more than most people could even stand to remember, let alone say out loud. And you just gave me all of it. You let me see the worst night of your life and everything it broke in you.”

She swallowed hard. “I think you’ve been carrying this alone for so long that you forgot it was possible for someone to help you hold it. I hate that you thought you had to protect me from this part of you because you were so sure it would make me run. Knowing you doesn’t make me want to run, Draco. It makes me want to stay. It makes me want to be the person who’s there when it gets heavy, so you don’t have to keep burying it.”

She took a breath, the rain outside a steady rhythm behind them. “Milo loved you. I think Astoria loves you still, even with everything between you. And I think if they could see you now, they’d be glad you’re still here. Glad you’ve found a way to keep going.”

The muscle beneath her palm shifted, but he didn’t pull away the way his eyes did.

“And I think,” she added softly, “you deserve more than to keep punishing yourself for the rest of your life.”

For a long moment, he stayed still, her hand warm against his face. Then his eyes flicked up, meeting hers, and it felt like the air between them shifted.

“I was drawn to you from the moment I saw you,” he said quietly. “That first time... at that party, all those years ago. You were good. Pure. Naïve, maybe. But I craved a goodness like yours.”

His gaze didn’t waver, even as something raw moved behind it. “But I don’t want to pull you down with me. That’s not what I want for you.”

Hermione felt the weight of those words press into her, not as a warning, but as a plea. She could see it in him – the fear that what he carried might one day cling to her too.

Her lips curved faintly. “You called me oblivious so many times when we first started seeing each other.”

Her mind flipped back – his smirks, his quiet observations, the way he’d watch her like he could see past every defence she’d ever tried to put up. And then there were the moments he didn’t mean her to see – the gentleness, the careful hands, the way he softened with her when he forgot to guard himself.

He’d made her fall for him with that side of himself, the one he thought was hidden.

Her breath caught before she spoke again. “It scares me, how much I love you already.”

She didn’t give him the chance to argue.

“And you can’t tell me that love is wrong. You can’t decide for me whether you deserve it or not. That’s not your call to make.” She shared a sad smile with him. “You do deserve it, Draco. More than you think.”

His eyes stayed on hers, flickering with disbelief, and when he finally spoke, it was barely a whisper. “How can you say that,” he asked, “when I just told you what I’ve done?”

Hermione shook her head before he could look away, her fingers curling against his neck like she could anchor him there. “Because you’re not that man anymore,” she said, steady and certain. “Because the person sitting in front of me is the one who’s been carrying the weight of it ever since. The one who’s been trying to be better. And that matters more to me than what you did when you were drowning.”

She wavered, but she didn’t let go. “You want me to see you at your worst? Fine. I see you. And I still choose you.”

His eyes shone with something raw and fraying, like the words had split him open, and still he tried to fight it. “You don’t understand,” he rasped, rough from holding it in. “You can’t.”

But then she was still there, still looking at him like she refused to leave him in the wreckage, and his hands were suddenly on her face too. Not gentle at first, almost desperate, his thumbs brushing along her cheekbones like he needed proof she was real.

Her fingers slipped into his hair, holding him just as fiercely. For a moment they just stayed there, forehead to forehead, breathing the same uneven air. The only thing that made sense in that moment was the warm, unshaking press of skin to skin, the unspoken vow in the way they clung to each other.

It was the closest thing to home either of them had felt in years.

“I don’t know how you’re still here,” he whispered. His fingers tightened carefully in her hair. “After all of it.”

Hermione’s breath shook, but she didn’t move away. “Because you’re worth staying for.”

His eyes didn’t let go of hers despite their closeness. The words hurt as much as they healed, his forehead pressing harder to hers. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Let me decide that,” she murmured, her thumbs sweeping across his cheekbones.

He let out a shuddered exhale, as though she’d carved a small space in all the darkness just big enough for him to breathe in.

They stayed locked there, breaths mingling – both of them clutching at each other’s faces. His thumb traced her cheek once more before his hand slid to the back of her neck to keep her close.

Hermione felt the change when the tension finally started to drain from him. His fingers softened their hold, his eyes fluttering shut for a moment as if even looking at her took more strength than he had left.

She shifted just enough to tuck herself fully against his chest, her knees bent between his, his arm still looped around her.

“Don’t disappear again,” she murmured against his neck, the words half warning, half plea.

He didn’t argue. Just pulled her closer, his chin resting against the top of her head. His breathing slowed, and when she tipped her head back to look at him, she found his lashes low, that stubborn mouth softened by exhaustion.

Hermione let her hand rest over his heart and kept it there, as if she could keep it from splintering again. Whatever came next could wait. Tonight was only about keeping him here – warm and safe.

They sat like that for a long while, saying nothing. No more questions. No more confessions. Just the steady press of her hand in his and the quiet, unspoken fact that she wasn’t leaving.

And when she felt the faint tremor in his fingers finally still, she knew he’d let her carry some of it now.

They stayed on the sofa for hours, her curled into him, his arm around her, both of them staring at nothing. The rain outside had gone from a steady hiss to the occasional soft patter, but neither of them moved. She could feel the weight in him – the way his breathing stayed shallow, the way his gaze seemed fixed somewhere she couldn’t follow.

Eventually, Hermione shifted, her cheek brushing his chest. “Come on,” she murmured, fingers finding his hand. “You need to get up.”

He made a faint sound of protest, but she stood, tugging until he let her pull him to his feet. He followed her down the short hall without a word, his steps slow, like every movement cost him something.

In her bedroom, he sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees. The low light from the hallway painted the planes of his face in shadow. She stepped between his knees, hands at the hem of his jumper. He didn’t stop her when she pulled it over his head, leaving him bare-chested, his skin cool under her palms.

They slid under the duvet, her back to his chest at first, then turning to face him in the dark. The minutes stretched. She could feel he wasn’t asleep – his breathing was too alert, too careful.

Finally, she whispered, “Can I ask you something? Or… should I wait until tomorrow?”

He sounded hoarse. “You don’t have to wait for anything, Hermione. You can ask me whatever you want to know.”

Her fingers curled lightly into the duvet between them. “Earlier… you said you’d never told anyone *all of it*.” She hesitated. “What exactly does Blaise know?”

Draco’s eyes stayed on the ceiling for a beat before he answered. “He knows about Milo. He… was there when I started to come apart. But he doesn’t know about Daphne. I never told him that part.”

She nodded faintly in the dark, processing. “What about Theo?”

“I met Theo through Blaise when I was already spiraling,” Draco said quietly. “Back then, I was just some mess Blaise was trying to keep from killing himself. Theo and I didn’t get close until after I’d finished therapy. After I’d... stopped trying to disappear. The three of us were hanging out more by then. That’s when he became a friend.”

She went still, her breath caught in her chest. The question rose before she could push it back. “...Have you never told Tiffany about this?”

His answer was immediate. “She knows a close friend of mine died from drunk driving. But I never told her the truth. Not like this.”

He shifted then, closing the small distance between them. One arm slid around her, drawing her small frame into his. She felt the solid weight of him press to her, the warmth of his bare chest seeping through the thin fabric of her top. He tucked his chin over her hair, searching for as much contact as the space between them would allow.

For a while, they just lay there like that – his breath slow and steady above her, her fingers curled into the sheet at his back. The silence felt safer now, but she didn’t want to waste it.

She hesitated, then asked, “What about Daphne? Do you have any contact with her now?”

“No.” His tone was calm, almost detached. “I didn’t even know she’d moved to Italy until Astoria told me on Sunday. She’d always wanted to learn the language, but she was shit at it.”

Hermione remembered the way he’d reacted to that detail when they’d run into Astoria outside – like it had broken the spell a little, even then.

“Do you...” She swallowed. “Have you never thought about reaching out to Astoria again?”

“No.” His answer was flat, certain.

Hermione hesitated. “Are you not curious about her life now?”

Draco’s chest shifted under her cheek as he drew in a breath. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

She tilted her head to look at him in the dim light from the streetlamps outside. “You said earlier it had been years, but... it sounded like you missed her. When you talked about her.”

He squeezed her once, like he was trying to comfort her. “I don’t deserve her trust. Or her friendship. And I have to live with that. That’s the cost of what I did. Missing her doesn’t change it.”

Hermione’s throat tightened. “I think you do deserve trust, Draco. And love. Especially after everything.”

He gave a faint, humorless huff, but didn’t answer. He pressed his face into her hair and let out a breath that felt like it had been trapped for years.

Somewhere outside, a bus hissed to a stop. The air smelled faintly of the remnants of his cologne – so faint now it clung more to the fibres of her pillow than to the man asleep beside her.

He was properly asleep. Heavy in the sheets, one arm slung over his forehead like even this dim morning was too much, the other curled against his chest, fingers twitching now and then like his dreams weren't still. His breathing was steady.

She lay on her side, watching him. For a long time.

The sharp edges of his face had eased, jaw unclenched, mouth slightly open with a tiny crease at one corner like his subconscious had wandered somewhere quieter. His lashes were absurd. Long, dark against the pale of his skin. If she reached out, she could brush the shadow of stubble on his face, feel the slow beat in the hollow of his throat.

But she didn't move. She just watched.

He hadn't pushed her away when he cracked open last night. Hadn't hidden the tears. Had held her back.

And she loved him. God, she loved him. Not in spite of the wreckage, but because of it. Because he was still here and trying. Because she could feel that boy Milo had believed in buried somewhere under all the guilt and the silence.

But under all that love, something else pulsed – an ache that hadn't healed.

Five days of nothing. Not knowing, not understanding what she'd done wrong. And now she knew it hadn't been about her at all. But knowing didn't unmake the sting. It didn't erase the nights she'd stared at her phone until her eyes burned, or the mornings she'd told herself to stop looking for his name.

She should feel relief now. She should feel whole again.

But she didn't. Not really.

Because this kind of love wasn't a balm. It didn't make the hurt vanish. It just gave her a reason to stay anyway. And she wanted to. Even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard. But that would take both of them.

A tear slid into her hairline. She didn't wipe it away.

Draco stirred. A twitch of fingers and a ragged inhale. His brow furrowed before his lashes lifted, slow and disoriented. He found her eyes, still half-asleep.

"Hi," he rasped, ruined with sleep. "You're awake."

She nodded, thumb brushing the knuckle of the hand that had somehow found hers under the duvet.

He shifted closer, knees bumping hers beneath the covers because he couldn't bear space.

The crease between his brows deepened as his gaze sharpened on her face.

"Have you been –" his words caught, still rough with sleep. He reached up, thumb skimming her temple where the tear had left a damp trace in her hairline.

She held her breath at the gentle touch, and he frowned, not unkindly but as if the sight had hooked something raw in his chest.

"Hermione..." it was barely more than a whisper. He smoothed his palm over her hair, like he could erase whatever had made her cry.

The next moment, he'd hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her in until her forehead was tucked under his chin. The duvet shifted with them, cocooning them in a pocket of shared warmth.

She felt the slow drag of his breath through her hair, the way his chest rose and fell against her. His palm pressed between her shoulder blades, not rubbing, just holding her there.

After a while, he shifted back enough to see her face. His eyes searched hers in the quiet, still clouded from sleep but alert now. His thumb brushed once at the corner of her eye.

"What's going on in there?" he asked carefully.

Hermione's lips parted, but no answer came right away. She wasn't sure she could untangle it for herself yet – love, and hurt, and the space between them that still burned.

He waited anyway, his hand still steady at her back, so she could take all the time she needed.

"I don't really know," she admitted finally. "My head's so full, and I..." She trailed off, shaking her head slightly as though even that small movement might make sense of the tangle inside her.

His brow furrowed, guilt settling across his features like a shadow. "Hermione—"

"It's not what you think," she cut in quickly, her fingers curling against his chest. "I'm not... angry in the way you think I am. I just—" Her voice broke, and she had to breathe through it. "This week was the worst of my life, Draco. Not knowing where you were, if you were going to come back, if we were even—"

Her throat tightened, and she pressed her lips together hard before she could finish the thought. "I didn't know what was going to happen. Every day I told myself not to worry, that you'd call, that it was nothing. But it didn't feel like nothing. It felt like you'd disappeared, and I couldn't reach you."

He closed his eyes briefly, like the words landed sharper than she intended. When they opened again, his gaze was fixed on her, steady but heavy with remorse. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "More than I can say."

His apology hung in the space between them, heavier than the quiet around it.

“I don’t think you know what that week did to me,” she whispered. “I tried to be logical. I told myself there’d be a reason, that I’d understand when you came back. But every hour you didn’t, my mind filled in the blanks with the worst possible things. And the longer it went on, the more it stopped being about you and started being about me. About all the ways I’m... *not enough*.”

His mouth parted, like he wanted to protest, but she shook her head quickly. “Don’t. I can’t put that burden on you too. You’ve got your own ghosts to carry – I see that now more than ever. And I don’t want to make you responsible for the ones I’ve been dragging around.”

She exhaled, slow and unsteady, eyes fixed on the place where their knees touched under the duvet. “But the truth is... my insecurities are still there. They were loud this week. Louder than I’ve heard them in a long time. And I hate how easily I let them convince me that I’m disposable.”

Draco’s fingers flexed against her back, like the words made something in him physically recoil, but he stayed silent, letting her keep the floor.

She drew in a shaky breath, her gaze lifting to meet his. “I’ve been thinking about going to therapy. Properly. Not just reading articles or trying to fix it on my own. I mean... actually sitting in a room with someone and saying these things out loud. As awful as they sound.”

There was no jolt of surprise from him. No flicker of doubt. Just a steady look that anchored her to the bed.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he muttered. “If you want it.”

“I do.” She hesitated, picking at the edge of the duvet. “I just... I wouldn’t know where to start. Or what I’m even looking for.”

His mouth twitched – not a smile, but something warmer than the heaviness of last night. “If you want, I can help. I know people. I can point you toward someone good.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course.” His thumb brushed along her cheekbone, slow and certain. “You don’t have to figure it out on your own.”

Something unknotted inside her then, something she hadn’t realised was wound so tightly.

“It feels like a big step,” she murmured.

“It is,” he said. “And I’ll be here for all of it, if you’ll let me.”

She closed her eyes, letting the weight of his promise settle between them.

The world outside could wait a little longer today.

Chapter 28: Spiral

Chapter Notes

I want to acknowledge that healing looks different for everyone. It isn't neat or linear. Sometimes it feels like progress, sometimes like starting over. What I've written here is one messy, fictional glimpse and not meant to represent every experience.

If you've ever been in therapy, or thought about starting, I hope you feel a little seen. And if your journey looks nothing like Hermione's, that's valid too. Healing is personal. You're allowed to take it at your own pace, in your own way.

Hermione sprawled along the length of his sofa; her knee hooked over Draco's lap. His thumb pressed into the arch of her foot, coaxing a curl from her toes with each pass.

On her screen, Ginny was perched at her kitchen table, a mug of tea in both hands and her hair piled on top of her head. "...and the final fitting's next week," she paused. "You're planning to bring Draco as your plus one, right?"

Hermione's eyes briefly flicked to catch his side profile. He hadn't flinched at the question. He'd been glued to his phone since they'd finished dinner and sat down after a long day in the office.

"I didn't ask him yet," she admitted, still waiting for his reaction. When he didn't so much as shift, she nudged the outside of his thigh with her other foot gently. "If you're free, you should come."

He nodded once, eyes still on the screen, missing the faint crease that tugged at her brow at his disinterest.

"When?"

"Two weeks," Ginny cut in.

Blaise's grin appeared in the frame a heartbeat later.

"Was that Malfoy's voice I just heard?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but the twitch at her mouth betrayed her.

"Maybe?"

She hadn't spoken to him since they'd come home from Brighton almost two weeks ago. They still hadn't had the chance to be a couple in front of their friends.

"How's my lover boy? Treating you well?" He wiggled his brows, only to flinch when Ginny swatted at him, trying to shove him out of view.

Draco's head turned at that, and before Hermione could adjust her grip, his hand slid into view –fingers curling around her phone, prying it easily from hers.

Hermione let her head fall back against the cushions, staring at the ceiling.

“She'd be hard-pressed to find better,” he said, mouth curving.

Blaise snorted. “Are you coming to the wedding, or what?”

“Obviously.” Draco's thumb came back to her ankle, drawing a lazy circle on the bare skin. Just below the hem of her jeans. “Wouldn't miss the chance to see you in a proper suit.”

Ginny groaned somewhere off-screen. “Are you two seriously hijacking our conversation right now?”

Hermione didn't complain. Draco's fingers where warm on her when he pulled her foot into his lap. It wasn't anything he hadn't done before, but heat still started to coil low in her stomach.

Almost two weeks had passed since they'd last slept together, the night before she'd gone to Brighton. Since then, he'd only reached for her in the quietest ways - an arm around her waist, his face buried into the crook of her neck in the mornings. She liked the closeness, treasured it even. But it wasn't enough, and the wanting was starting to ache.

She hadn't dared to push, ashamed of her own hunger when he'd only just laid bare the grief and guilt he still carried from Milo's accident.

And yet she missed him. It made no sense; they'd been together almost constantly this week, save for working hours. Still, she couldn't help wondering if she'd said something wrong, or done something to make him hold off.

She could hardly recall the last time she'd come, the ache growing heavier until it resembled hunger more than want. It wasn't the foundation of their relationship. She kept reminding herself of that every night. But in this exact moment it felt like a piece missing, one that could make her feel whole again.

Blaise was talking about the wedding's bar situation, but the conversation was just a blur to her. She let out a small sigh before finding her voice. “Can we have our call back?”

Draco's gaze flicked to her, catching the hint of a frown before it could vanish. His thumb kept moving in slow, absent circles as he said, almost lightly, “In a minute, love.”

Ginny groaned again. “This was supposed to be our catch-up, Hermione. Not the Blaise-and-Malfoy Show.”

“Oh, right. I forgot to tell you,” Blaise's voice had a grin to it. “Ginny's trying to rope us into some cheesy double date.”

Hermione huffed a laugh. They hadn't told anyone she was pregnant yet, but she knew how much little things like that meant to Ginny. If she was honest, the idea didn't sound all *that*

dreadful.

Draco, on the other hand, looked entirely unimpressed when he finally spoke. “Not happening.”

“Why not?” Ginny prodded.

Instead of answering, his thumb pressed harder into the arch of Hermione’s foot, dragging a silent sigh from her chest. “Because I don’t like to share.”

The words curled hot inside her ribs. She tipped her head, searching for his expression, but all she caught was the firm line of his jaw.

Then his hand left her foot. Just for his palm to slide higher, skimming her shin, over the bend of her knee, and landing on the outside of her thigh. He pinched just enough to make her squirm.

Her leg twitched, her foot shifting dangerously close to where she ached for him.

“You’re out of luck,” Ginny muttered from the other end. “There are going to be double dates and dumb inside jokes and board games. Because we’re getting old and you’ll end up liking it more than you’ll ever admit. Now, hand the phone back to Hermione, would you?”

“Did you just call me old?” His thumb still pressed into the place he’d pinched, soothing what he’d set alight so thoughtlessly.

Hermione’s pulse hammered in her ears. He was sitting there perfectly calm, talking to their friends like nothing was out of the ordinary, while her whole body ached with the reminder of what he could do if he wanted to.

He’d been the only thing tethering her all week – the late nights on his sofa, the mugs of tea pressed into her hands, the way his arm found her waist without thought. Every brush of his fingers, every absent graze of his knuckles, had been enough to keep her breathing.

And yet the spiral tugged harder each night. She hid her wanting in plain sight, careful not to let it spill over. If there was just the tiniest chance that she’d ask for too much...? She couldn’t stand the thought of losing even this.

“Draco,” half-hearted annoyance came through the speaker. “Hand Hermione her phone back.”

“Bossy.”

“Now.”

With a soft huff, he finally leaned closer, placing the phone in Hermione’s palm. His hand lingered on her thigh a moment longer than necessary before he shifted into a more comfortable position.

Then his palm pressed into the front of his sweats – adjusting himself. The fabric tightened for a second right where her foot was still resting. Heat shot through her so fast she pulled her leg back, tucking it against herself before she could deliberately feel the shape she'd been aching for these past two weeks.

Ginny's face snapped back into focus on the screen, giving her something else to hold on to besides the sight of him in those sweatpants.

"Ron's coming home next week," Ginny said, adjusting her mug. "He's taking the whole week off to help with the wedding."

Hermione hummed faintly.

"And he's coming without Lavender," Ginny added, voice dropping with that knowing edge. "Apparently there's some trouble in paradise."

Hermione only blinked. Nothing. No pang, no echo of the girl she used to be.

"He asked about you," Ginny went on.

Hermione felt herself go still, waiting.

"I told him you're doing great," Ginny said, then hesitated with a sly smile. "He asked if you were seeing anyone."

Draco's head lifted at that, his attention cutting clean from his phone. Hermione's eyes darted to his, caught just long enough to feel her chest tighten before she dropped them back to the screen.

Ginny grinned. "So I clarified you're very happily taken these days. You can tell Draco that part."

Hermione swallowed, nodded once. "Good."

Beside her, his knee nudged lightly against her calf, the barest press of warmth. She didn't dare look again.

Before Ginny could say more, Blaise's voice carried from somewhere off-screen. "Are we finished yet? Some of us would like to get back to our show."

Ginny sighed. "Honestly. You have the patience of a child."

"Wrap it up."

She turned back to the camera with a certain lightness to her smile. "I'll call you properly tomorrow without him hovering?"

"Alright."

Hermione let her phone slip onto the cushion, eyes following the way Draco's brow furrowed over whatever held his attention. Without looking up from his phone, he broke the quiet. "Have you thought about whether it matters to you if your therapist's a woman or a man?"

She stared at him. "I – ... Is that what you've been busy with this whole time?"

Only then did he glance up. "I'm trying to narrow it down."

Her mouth opened, then shut again.

"I haven't thought about it. Not really."

"You just have to trust your gut with these kinds of things."

She hesitated. "Maybe a woman?"

He didn't look surprised by her answer.

"I'll take the men off the list, then."

"You have a list?"

Draco inclined his head, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Yeah. You'll look it over, see if anything feels right. If not, I'll keep searching."

Immediate shame washed over her. He hadn't been distracted or pulling away. He'd been... doing this. *For her.*

"You don't need to," she breathed. "You really don't."

His eyes lingered on hers. "I'd do anything for you, Hermione. You know that by now, don't you?"

The words settled somewhere deep in her chest. He said it so simply as if it had been obvious.

What kind of person spiraled the way she had, inventing ghosts, when *this* was the man sitting across from her?

She didn't deserve him.

He was so good to her. Patient where she frayed and steady where she faltered. He tried to brace the fracture that had lived in her, yet all she could feel was the relentless pull of wanting him, of missing his body with every breath.

A painful lump rose in her throat, as if every selfish thought she'd swallowed down had lodged there at once. She hated how much she needed him, always too much to carry. Her eyes stung with something hot at the corners.

They both had gone completely still, and she couldn't help but soak in this odd feeling of being truly cared for without unspoken conditions. It was both terrifying and impossible not

to crave.

And in that moment, she realized that she'd never been more afraid of losing anything in her life.

Draco set his phone down on the coffee table, as if the list could wait.

"Hey." The crease above his nose betrayed his unease. "I don't want to push. I just thought you wanted this."

Something inside her cracked at his gentleness. Before she could think better of it, she shifted forward, crawling into the curve of his chest. His arm wrapped around her, drawing her in until she was folded against him, her cheek pressed to the soft cotton of his shirt.

The world stilled with his heart under her ear. His arms were the only place that had ever felt utterly safe, as if nothing could touch her there.

She bit down hard against the ache in her eyes, but it was useless. The tears already pressed behind her lashes. She swallowed them back, too ashamed to let them fall. While he'd been sitting there, quietly looking for ways to make her life lighter, she'd been busy drowning in doubt.

She nestled closer, hoping he couldn't feel the tremor in her breath.

His lips lingered against her hairline. "You don't have to do anything you're not ready for."

She shook her head against him. "No, I want to," she failed to take a steady breath. "I know I need help working through this."

Her arms tightened around him, as if she could hold herself together by the force of it.

His hand curved at the back of her neck, cradling her without asking anything of her.

They stayed like that, breathing into each other, the room settling around them.

Her fingers flexed in his shirt. "Your first session. What was it like?"

He huffed but it wasn't a laugh. "Shit," he said. "It was shit."

"Why?"

"Because if you've got a good therapist," his fingertips weaved through the mess of her curls, "they don't let you stay on the surface. You think you'll talk about work, or what you had for breakfast, and suddenly you're bleeding out things you've shoved down for years. It's uncomfortable as hell."

Hermione swallowed, still clinging to him.

"But if it's the right one, it'll feel worth it afterwards." He pressed his lips against her temple. "And if it doesn't feel right after... we'll keep looking."

Someone had left a stack of battered magazines on the side table. A slim vase of lilies stood on the reception counter.

Hermione sat perched on the very edge of a chair, hands folded tightly in her lap. Her stomach had been in knots all day.

It all had happened so quickly.

He'd sent her the list before she'd even had coffee. At her desk, she'd gone through them one by one, checking websites, staring at the prices, trying not to think about how much an hour of her spiraling would cost. Eventually she texted him her pick.

By afternoon he'd phoned her. *"Good choice. She can squeeze you in today at six. If you want to."*

Hermione told herself she wanted this. But wanting and walking into a therapist's office were two very different things.

The door clicked open, and a woman in her forties stepped out. Dark hair swept neatly back, glasses perched low on her nose. She carried a slim folder against her chest and leaned over the receptionist's desk, speaking in a low voice Hermione couldn't catch.

Hermione's stomach gave a violent twist. This was her. Clara Bennett.

Her gaze lifted, sweeping the room in one practiced glance before landing on Hermione.

And suddenly she was acutely aware of her own rigid posture, her clammy hands still fisted in the belt of her coat.

"Hermione?"

She stood quickly, smoothing her pencil skirt as if she was about to walk into an interview.

"I'm Clara. Come on in."

The office wasn't what she expected. No sterile white walls. Instead, bookshelves lined with well-worn spines, a single framed print of some coastline above the mantel, and two armchairs angled toward each other with a small table between. It felt more like someone's study than a therapist's practice.

"Sit wherever you like," Clara said, setting her mug down. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

Hermione settled into the armchair closest to the door, stiff-backed and her coat tight across her legs. It felt like the room was pressing in on her already.

Clara lowered into the opposite chair, crossing one leg neatly over the other. She didn't open the folder. She didn't write anything down. Instead, she let the silence stretch just long enough for Hermione to feel her heartbeat in her throat.

Eventually Clara smiled. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"No, not at all. It's... actually closer to my office than I expected."

"Good. Saves you rushing." Her gaze flicked briefly toward the mug on the side table before returning to her. "How's your week been?"

Hermione gave a small, polite shrug. "Busy. Work has been... full on."

The corners of Clara's eyes crinkled. "I've just come back from a short break – my husband and I spent a few days by the coast. Lovely, though it means the next few weeks will be very busy." Her smile softened. "That's why I'm glad we could fit you in so quickly."

She shifted in her seat, weighing whether to play it down. "I'm... very grateful, honestly. I know getting an appointment on short notice isn't easy. My boyfriend helped me find someone, and... well, here I am."

Her gaze dropped to the folder as Clara's pen began to move. "Good. He's supportive of you being here, then?"

The strokes left a small trail of ink on the paper. "Yeah," she murmured, eyes following the movement. "He's been in therapy himself for years, so... it was good to have him give me a push not to put it off any longer."

Her stomach dropped the moment the words were out. Should she have found someone on her own instead of letting Draco take over? Did mentioning him make her sound dependent or worse, incapable?

Her shoulders crept higher, and she scratched the spot just above her knee, nails dragging lightly through the fabric of her black tights.

Across from her, Clara's pen stilled. She let the quiet sit, as if giving them both room to breathe. Then she reached for her mug, cradling it briefly before speaking.

"Why don't you tell me a little about what's brought you here in the first place?"

Hermione's mouth went dry. She glanced down at her feet, and smoothed her palms over the coat on her lap as if the motion might help her sort the words.

"I don't know where to start."

Clara gave a slow nod, as if she'd been waiting for that.

"Then start there," she said simply. "Not knowing where to begin is as honest of a beginning as any."

Hermione sank deeper into the armchair, though she felt anything but comfortable.

“It’s like everyone else just—” she broke off, taking a deep breath when she felt sudden tears sting, “—knows how to be. And I can’t seem to keep up.”

She pressed her lips together, then added quietly, “Every time something is not perfect and easy, this feeling that I’m not enough creeps in. I want to be enough. And I don’t know if I am.”

The silence felt enormous.

“Enough for whom?”

The question slid beneath her skin before she could form a defense.

Her lips parted, but she had no neat answer, no quick justification. Her vision blurred, and she blinked furiously. She hated the heat in her face, the lump crawling up her throat. “I shouldn’t even be crying. It’s ridiculous. People go through worse every day. And here I am, spiraling over things I should have figured out years ago.”

Clara reached quietly to the side table, held out a box of tissues, and waited until Hermione plucked one with shaking fingers. She pressed it to her face and muttered, “Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise. That voice, telling you it’s ridiculous,” she said gently, “that you don’t have the right to feel what you feel... what if both are true? That others have their pain, and yours still matters.”

Hermione shook her head quickly, her fingers knotting tighter in the belt of her coat. “It doesn’t feel like it matters. It feels... wrong. I should know how to hold myself together.”

Clara tilted her head. “And when you say ‘*should*,’ whose voice does that sound like? Is it yours?”

Hermione’s lips parted, then closed again. Her stomach tightened. “I don’t know. Maybe mine. Maybe—” she hesitated, the words trembling on her tongue. Her eyes blurred again, fresh tears slipping before she could stop them. She caught one with the back of her hand, frustrated. “I don’t know how to win. I never have. If I’m trying to be better, I become too much. If I try to be less, it’s not enough.”

Clara leaned forward slightly, “That sounds very exhausting.”

Hermione let out a shuddering breath, her shoulders collapsing inward. She nodded quickly, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

“Can you remember the first time you felt that? Not enough, or too much. Even a flicker?”

The memories came too easily. Her hand in the air too many times, teachers sighing, classmates rolling their eyes. The boy who made her feel seen for the first time, then laughed at her. Ron telling her matter of fact that they should see other people, while her entire world collapsed.

“I think... I’ve always felt like I didn’t fit in. I had to prove I belonged. And every time I did, someone reminded me I’d tipped too far the other way.” The shame was sharp, curling around her heart. She bent her head, unable to look up. “It feels like I’m failing, whichever way I turn.”

“That belief has been with you a long time. But beliefs can be tested, Hermione. Examined. They don’t have to be truths.”

Hermione lifted her gaze after all, eyes wet. The steadiness in Clara’s tone made her want to collapse and resist all at once. She pressed her lips together hard, willing herself not to sob.

“Which part of your life feels this the most? Where does that voice show up loudest?”

The answer came without hesitation. Her stomach lurched even as she whispered it. “Relationships.”

Clara’s eyes softened. “Romantic ones?”

She nodded. “Always.”

“Tell me a little about your history there. What has that looked like for you?”

She almost laughed bitterly, but the sound jagged in her throat. “Messy. Disappointing. I’ve been with people who didn’t want more than my body. And I’ve been with people who felt crushed by my feelings.”

Clara’s gaze remained even.

“And how has that shaped the way you approach the relationship you’re in now? With...?”

Hermione swallowed hard. “Draco. I keep waiting for him to see it too. That I’ll never be quite right. That eventually he’ll want someone easier. Someone who doesn’t spiral over every silence.” She shook her head. “I hate myself for thinking that, when he’s done nothing but be good to me.”

The words splintered her, tears breaking loose again.

“If you’ve been taught to expect abandonment,” Clara said softly. “You brace for it. Many people carry that. You’re not alone.”

The words should have comforted her, but instead they twisted painfully in her chest.

“But knowing that doesn’t stop me,” she blinked up to the ceiling. “It doesn’t stop the voice. I’ll catch myself watching for signs. His tone, his expression, a pause too long before he answers me... and suddenly I’m right back in it. My brain starts spinning, and I start telling myself that I’m a burden. I start ignoring all the things that prove the opposite. It’s like... a spiral.”

Clara didn’t seem surprised, but also didn’t show any sign of judgment.

“So even when there is evidence of safety, your mind is trained to scan for threat. That spiral, as you put it, drowns out what’s real in the present.”

Hermione twisted the tissue in her hands. “He’ll say something kind, he’ll reach for me, and I’ll believe it for a moment. But then... then I’ll hear the other voice in my head again. Telling me it won’t last. That he’ll wake up one day and realise how heavy it is, how heavy *I* am.”

“Hermione, has he ever given you reason to believe that?”

Her lips trembled. “No. Never. That’s the worst part. He’s been so patient. Sometimes he notices when I spiral even if I don’t tell him. Sometimes he just... holds me until it passes. Or he distracts me and pulls me straight out of it.”

“Do you ever share your thoughts with him? Your beliefs about yourself?”

Hermione started, guilt prickling her chest. “I hide it. Most of the time, he only knows when it’s too obvious. And then I feel like a liar because I don’t tell him what is going on inside me. Like I’m cheating him out of the truth of what he’s actually loving.”

Clara folded her hands without letting go of her pen. “What do you imagine would happen if you did let him in?”

Hermione held her breath at that thought. “He’s already carrying so much from his own past. If I poured mine on top of his, I’d fear it would crush him.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to protect him from the fullness of what you feel.”

Hermione’s chest heaved. “I hate it. I care so much about him,” she said finally. “I’ve never... felt something like this before. Not with anyone. It’s like I’ve had a glimpse of what it might be like to be loved like that – to have someone see all of me and still stay. And that’s beautiful, but it’s also terrifying.”

Her fingers curled tighter into her lap. “The thought of losing it... losing *him*... that would be... the worst thing I can imagine.”

“So the stakes feel very high for you.”

“Yes.” She felt her chest crack open further. “And that makes me more... aware. More on edge. Every time there’s the smallest change, I hear that voice saying, *Here we go, you’re not enough again, or You’re just too much.*”

“Can you think of a recent time when you’ve felt like that?”

Hermione bit her lip. “Last night.”

“Tell me about last night.”

She twisted the damp tissue in her lap until it tore. “I’ve been... frustrated. We haven’t been intimate in two weeks, and that’s not like us. But he told me something painful from his past,

and since then, it's felt... different. I feel closer to him than ever in some ways, but there's this ache too, like something's missing. And wanting him and that closeness... while he's still hurting feels selfish. So instead, I told myself maybe I've been asking for too much. Or that somehow, I'm not enough anymore for him in *that* way."

That ache from last night wrapped tight around her ribcage "By the time we sat down last night, I'd worked myself up so badly I could hardly look at him. And later I found out he hadn't been distant at all. He'd been making a list of therapists because I told him I wanted to talk to someone. While I was convincing myself he didn't want me, he was trying to make my life lighter. And all I could think was how awful it was that I'd betrayed him in my head."

Clara hummed. "Do you see how the spiral changed what was really happening? Your body told you it was rejection – but he was offering care."

Her shoulders curled in. "Yes. And that makes it worse. Because it shows how broken I am. He's offering me safety, and I can't believe in it."

"It doesn't mean you're broken." Clara shook her head lightly. "It means that old story has been with you for so long it drowns out the present. But last night gives us a place to start. To pause, catch that voice and ask whether it matches what's in front of you."

Hermione drew in a shaky breath, eyes glistening. "But what if one day the voice is right again? What if I trust it isn't rejection, and then it really is?"

Clara smiled. "That is the risk of letting someone matter. But Hermione – when you treat every pause as proof of abandonment, you abandon yourself first. Last night you carried pain alone, when in fact you were being loved."

She managed a deeper breath this time, hating how simple that sounded.

"The way you see him, the way you hold him in your heart. That's a very strong and powerful feeling."

Hermione's throat tightened. She gave a small nod, unable to say anything else.

"Have you ever felt a fraction of that kind of love for yourself?"

The question landed like a stone in Hermione's stomach. Her lips parted, but only a faint, shaky laugh escaped. "No. Never. I wouldn't even know how."

"That's where much of this begins. You're offering him the whole of your heart, but you withhold even the smallest kindness from yourself. So of course the spiral feels endless – you are both the one loving fiercely, and the one starving for it."

Hermione sighed. "I don't know how to do that. To... love myself like that. It feels impossible. Wrong, even."

"Not wrong. Unfamiliar, maybe. There's a difference. You've practiced self-criticism for so long that gentleness feels foreign. But what if you started small? Not grand declarations, not

convincing yourself overnight, but in moments. What would you say to Draco if he were the one caught in your spiral?"

Hermione's eyes filled again, the ache sharp. "I'd never tell him he was too much."

"What *would* you say to him?"

"That I love him exactly as he is. That he doesn't have to hide any part of himself with me. That I'll stay, even when it's dark. Especially then." Her voice trembled as she went on.

"That nothing he carries could make him unlovable. That he's... already enough. More than enough. Always."

The words spilled faster now. "That there's nothing in this world that could make me want to let go. That he never has to earn my love –" She felt her heart clench around itself. "I'd tell him he's the love of my life."

The silence that followed felt heavy. Clara tilted her head.

"Hermione... can you hear the way you speak of him? With such conviction, such tenderness? That voice exists in you. And you deserve to turn even a fraction of it toward yourself."

Hermione's eyes closed. "I don't know if I can."

"It will take some time. But you already carry that kind of love inside you. Now part of our work will be helping you remember you're not only the giver of it – you're worthy of receiving it too."

Clara set her pen down, the faintest smile tugging at her mouth. "We don't need to solve the whole thing right now. But I'd like you to try something for the next week – think of it as an exercise, nothing big."

"What kind of exercise?"

"Here's what I'd like you to try this week. Two small things. The first is just for you. When that voice shows up – the one that says you're too much, or not enough – pause for a moment and write down what you would say to Draco if he were the one caught in it. Not what you think you should say, but what comes naturally. Even if it's just a sentence."

Hermione's fingers tightened on the shredded tissue, but she nodded faintly.

"And the second," Clara went on, "is to test out letting him in, even in the smallest way. I'm not asking you to pour out every spiral, or to hand him the heaviest parts all at once. But the next time you notice that voice whispering, see what happens if you share just one piece of it with him. Something as simple as, *I'm having a rough thought right now*. You don't need to explain all of it. Just open the door a crack."

She swallowed. "That sounds... *terrifying*."

“I know. And I’m not promising it will be easy. But I have a feeling you might be surprised by what happens when you let him see you. Why not give him the chance to meet you, before the spiral convinces you you’re alone?”

“I don’t want to burden him.”

“Think of it less as a burden, and more as a bridge,” Clara said softly. “You’ve been carrying the weight alone, and he’s not been given the chance to carry it with you. Letting him in doesn’t mean handing him everything at once. It means giving him the chance to walk alongside you, even in small steps.”

She took a deep breath, still unconvinced.

“The goal isn’t perfection, Hermione. The goal is practice.”

When Clara finally closed her notebook, Hermione felt wrung out. Like someone had pressed down on every nerve just enough to remind her they were there. She’d cried more than she’d liked to admit. Said more than she’d expected. And though Clara had been steady and kind, the hour had left her head heavy.

She stepped out into the evening air.

The little coffee shop was only a block away, tucked between a clothing boutique and a dry cleaner. Through the steamed-up window she could see Draco stretched out in a corner booth, one arm draped over the back of the seat, a book open in front of him.

He looked up as she pushed the door open.

“Hey.”

She slid in beside him. His arm came down to wrap around, pulling her into him. The smell of his aftershave mingling with the roast of the coffee was tempting her to close her eyes and let the world fade.

He squeezed her gently. “How was it?”

“Exhausting.” She let out a breath.

“It’ll get easier with time. First appointment’s always the hardest.”

She rested her palms on the dark grain of the tabletop. “I... told her things I didn’t think I would.”

“Good,” he leaned in just enough that his lips brushed her temple. “That’s the point.”

Hermione gave a soft, breathless laugh. “I don’t know if this is normal, but I feel... oddly peaceful. Like something in me unclenched.”

His mouth curved. "First therapy high. It's a thing."

"Feels strange," she admitted. "Like I shouldn't feel good after spilling all of that, but I do."

She turned her head slightly toward him, taking in the way he looked at her.

"Did you like her?"

"She's... easy to talk to." She hesitated, then added, "Thank you. For arranging it so quickly... and for waiting here. It was comforting, knowing you were so close by."

"Coffee's surprisingly good here," he said, almost offhand. "Could get used to this. Meeting you after."

Something about the way he said it made her chest ache in the nicest way.

"And that feeling you've got right now?" He closed the book in front of him with his free hand. "It'll keep coming back. And it'll last longer each time."

His presence did more to settle her than anything else could have.

They sat like that for a while, her pressed into his side, him content to hold her. He didn't push for details or asked what she'd said or how deep she'd gone.

By the time they stepped out into the street, Hermione's stomach gave an embarrassingly loud growl, making him glance down at her with a raised brow.

"Did you even have dinner?"

She shook her head, cheeks warming. "I had to rush from the office. Didn't want to be late."

"Right," he said, already steering her toward the corner. "Come on. There's that Japanese place a few blocks over."

It wasn't until they were back in his car, two steaming bags of takeaway warming her feet through her boots, that the exhaustion truly settled in. It softened her muscles even as it pressed into her bones. Her head tipped against the seat, eyes finding him like gravity.

The city lights chased across the sharp line of his jaw, the straight cut of his nose, the mouth that looked stern when he was focused. She'd never get enough of how truly beautiful he was.

His eyes flicked sideways, catching her staring. Something moved in his gaze before he half-smirked. His hand left the gearshift between them and slid across the console.

His palm settled on her thigh. The span of it nearly covered her whole leg, fingers splaying wide until she swore she could feel each one branding heat straight through her tights. His thumb traced once across the curve of her.

As if he knew she was drifting somewhere dark inside her own head.

And in the silence of the car, Hermione tried to let another thought settle.

That his hand on her thigh was proof that he chose to touch her like this. Fingers wrapped around her as though she were something precious he refused to let slip.

You deserve this, she told herself, even as her throat burned with it. *You deserve him*.

The words felt like a lie.

Steam still clung to her skin when she padded out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around her and damp curls sticking to her shoulders. The flat was quiet, save for the faint clink of glassware and the rustling of paper from the kitchen.

Draco had been buried in one of his contracts for almost an hour.

She slipped quietly into his bedroom, reaching for the hem of her sleep shirt. She paused at the edge of the bed, perching on the mattress.

The day's weight pressed in.

Clara's suggestion to start small, to share little fragments with Draco, and see what came back to her, echoed in her head. Sitting in the middle of his sheets, the thought of saying anything to him about what she was worried about, felt both impossible and essential.

She could just tell him the truth. That she'd noticed the shift, the way his hands sometimes stilled when they used to wander. In her head, the words tangled into something that could bruise if spoken aloud. She didn't want to be someone who was impossible to satisfy. She didn't want to sound needy.

She dragged her fingers along the duvet, twisting the fabric between her hands.

From the kitchen came the faint scrape of a chair. Hermione's chest tightened immediately at the sound, heart tripping over itself at the thought of him walking in at any second.

But when she saw him cross the hallway toward the bedroom, she felt something else entirely. His tie was already loosened, one hand tugging it free as he stepped inside. The other tugged at the top button of his Oxford, the white fabric falling open at the throat.

His shoulders rolled to shake off the weight of the past hour, the carved lines of muscle shifting.

She swallowed, tracking the movement like it was more than just a shrug.

He sat down beside her on the mattress, the dip pulling her subtly closer to his body.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The silence was gentle, interrupted only by the sound of him exhaling before his palms rubbed slowly down his thighs.

“Do you want to do that double date thing with Ginny and Blaise?”

Hermione started, the normalcy of the question catching her off guard. Of all the things she thought he might say, that hadn't been it.

She gave a soft huff of a laugh. “I think it could be fun. I know it's important to her.”

His brow furrowed just a little as he toyed with the cuff of his shirt. “I only ask because I don't know what matters to you in this stuff. Going out. Staying in. I don't mind either way.”

She tilted her head, curiosity tugging at her. “You mean... what kind of things I prefer doing together?”

He shrugged, thumb brushing over the button at his wrist. “That. And... how much. We've spent all week together, and I've been wondering if it's been too much too soon.” He glanced at her, his eyes searching. “I just don't want you to feel crowded. Can we talk about that?”

Her heart gave a painful twist. The fact that *he* had been worrying about *her*, when she'd been agonizing over whether she was asking too much of *him*, left her momentarily speechless.

“Crowded?” she repeated, almost disbelieving.

The corner of his mouth lifted, but it didn't reach his eyes. “It's not just about crowding you,” he said after a pause in which he had started unbuttoning his shirt. “For months all I've wanted is to be near you. But now...”

He gave a short shake of his head before continuing. “Now the idea of you not being around makes me... anxious. And I don't like that feeling. Makes me wonder if I'm holding you too close. If you're just... afraid to hurt my feelings.” His shoulders tensed. “I'd rather you tell me if you need space.”

Hermione's lips parted. The silence stretched before she whispered, “I thought *you* were the one who wanted space.” His brows drew together, but she pressed on, words tumbling fast now before she could talk herself out of it. “All week I thought maybe you didn't want me anymore.”

Draco stilled.

“You stopped touching me the way you usually do. After you told me about the accident, it was like you decided to avoid anything that might... lead to *more*. Like you were making sure it wouldn't go further.” Her fingers twisted in the hem of the sleep shirt on her lap. “At first, I told myself it was just in my head. But every night it got louder, that voice in my head. I love you so much, and all week I felt like I was the only one still wanting. I tried so hard to hold myself together. Not to say anything, not to push. Because the last thing I want is to pressure you.”

“Pressure me?” A muscle in his cheek twitched. “Hermione, the only pressure I've felt this week is in holding myself back. Do you think it's easy, lying next to you every night, wanting

you so badly it hurts, and convincing myself I have to keep my hands off you because you deserve space? You think I stopped touching you because I didn't want you? It's the exact fucking opposite."

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Draco let out a rough, disbelieving sound and shoved a hand through his hair. "I thought I was doing the right thing." He dragged both hands down his face. "A few nights ago, I couldn't sleep. You were beside me, close enough to touch, and I had to get up in the middle of the night and wank off in the fucking bathroom like I was sixteen again. I even let the tab run so you wouldn't hear me."

He frowned. "You've really been lying here, worrying about this?" He tugged the sleep shirt out of her grip and tossed it aside, catching her hands in his own. His thumbs pressed hard into her knuckles, his eyes searching hers when she didn't know what to say to that. "Why the hell didn't you just tell me?"

Her gaze dropped to the way he held her hands as shame burned her. "I don't even know what to think anymore. I'm just... I was afraid I'd be too much."

And not enough. But she couldn't say that to him. Not tonight. His long fingers curled under her chin, tilting her face up.

"Look at me." The weight of his palm cradling her cheek forced her to meet his eyes. "I don't want you to ever think or say that again."

Her lips trembled, and she tried to glance away, but his hand held firm. He wasn't done yet.

His thumb stilled against her cheek, his voice dropping so low it was almost a whisper. "You truly believed that? That you were too much for me?"

She tried to shake her head to deflect, but Clara's words echoed sharp in her skull, and instead she found herself nodding, biting her tongue hard against the pain in her soul. Her throat worked against a sob that wouldn't come, her chest hollow from everything she'd already spilled today.

"Christ, Hermione... then I've failed you. I've failed you if you've been lying here all week thinking you're not wanted."

Her eyes widened, her head jerking as she tried to protest, "No – you haven't, you –"

But he cut her off. "If you're hurting, I want to know. If you're spinning out, I want to know. That's the deal, Hermione. We actually have to fucking talk to each other if we want to make this work."

Her brow furrowed, guilt and worry flickering through her, and he softened. His thumb brushed along her cheekbone, tender even through the roughness. "I've got to work on that too. I should have asked you if you needed space or not. I thought I was doing a noble thing. But fuck, if it left you thinking I didn't want you..." His jaw clenched. "That's on me."

Her lips parted again, but no words came this time.

He gently pressed his forehead against hers. “Don’t believe yourself when you hear that voice telling you you’re not wanted. Don’t you fucking believe it. Not once. Do you hear me?” His grip shifted, holding her gaze despite the closeness. “If you ever think it again – grab me, straddle me, tell me to get my shit together and fuck you if that’s what you need. Because I will. I’ll always want you. Always.”

Her chest heaved, the air between them hot. His eyes burned into hers, and she felt the words crawl under her skin like fire, undoing her in ways she couldn’t name.

Her lips trembled against the weight of his hand, her voice barely more than a breath. “Can you kiss me?”

His hand didn’t leave her face as he surged forward, sealing his mouth to hers in a kiss that wasn’t gentle. It was heat and hunger and need, his lips demanding. His thumb kept pressing into her face like he was trying to punish her for her thoughts.

Her hands shot up, clutching at his wrist. His mouth slanted over hers, breath mingling, her gasp swallowed into the press of his tongue. It wasn’t careful.

He tilted her face higher, forcing her to take every ounce of him as his mouth consumed hers.

A broken sound left her throat, half gasp or sob, and she leaned into him. Her body bowed forward until she was climbing into his lap, encouraged by the way he almost dragged her on top of him.

The mattress dipped and then she was straddling his thighs, her knees bracketing his hips, the cotton of the towel the only barrier between his chest and hers.

The cotton slipped, loosening with the movement, until the towel slackened and gaped at her chest. Draco’s eyes caught it immediately. His hand, the one still cradling her face, slid down in one breath, dragging the fabric with it until her breasts spilled free against the heat of his open Oxford.

His breath fractured on a groan.

Then his mouth was on her chest, teeth grazing before he sucked one nipple deep into his mouth, his tongue circling. The wet pull of it dragged a startled gasp from her, her nails curling into his neck to hold on. He sucked harder, his hand kneading the weight of her other breast, rough fingers teasing her nipple until it pebbled.

Her head tipped back, a broken moan spilling free.

“Eyes on me,” he murmured between licks, his gaze locking with hers as his tongue swept over her, slow and wet.

When she rolled her eyes, falling into the sensation, his hand came up to her jaw, tilting her face toward him. “I said eyes on me.”

Her chest heaved as his tongue lashed over her again, wet and slow. The sight of his mouth sealed around her and the hollow of his cheeks working as he sucked started to make her feel light-headed.

“Oh god –“ her voice cracked, her nails dragging the fabric taut over his back.

He hummed against her, the vibration sparking through her chest and straight down her spine. Pulling off with a sharp, wet sound, he dragged his lips lower for a heartbeat, teeth scraping the underside of her breast before rising to capture the other again.

Fingers slipped around to the small of her back to press her harder against him. She could feel him thick and straining beneath her, the hard line of him pinned between her and his stupid trousers.

She gasped louder when he pinched her nipple between thumb and forefinger, rolling it slowly until she whimpered.

His hand tangled in her curls, tugging her down into another kiss. Their tongues slid messily against each other, unable to be precise by whatever knot had loosened with their conversation.

His other hand dragged down, until his palm slid between her thighs from behind. The angle forced her chest forward, her swollen nipples pressing flush to his shirt, scraping against the heat of his bare chest where his buttons hung open.

He hissed into her mouth at the contact. “Fuck – your tits. Been thinking about them all week.”

Two fingers pressed between her legs, finding her already soaked, and his groan rumbled as he smeared her wetness, dragging it lazily over the sensitive skin of her folds. His hand worked her from behind as good as he could from the awkward angle. Fingers spreading and rubbing over her. He spread her slick back and forth, coating her inner thighs until the sound of it was obscene.

Her hips started to roll without thought into his touch.

“Keep looking,” he murmured, voice breaking into a hiss as his hand dipped into the waistband of his trousers and briefs. He adjusted himself, freeing just enough that the thick, flushed length pressed up against his stomach, still half-concealed. The head was slick with arousal and glistened.

His thumb smeared her wetness across the head, spreading it over his tip until the slick shine caught her eyes.

He hissed.

“Look at the mess you’ve made.” His eyes darted up to catch hers. The hunger in them made her whole body shudder.

She couldn’t look away, even if she tried.

His jaw clenched as her awe bled into desperation, her thighs squeezing tight around his hips. “Do you want to rub yourself on it a little? Before I fuck you?”

She swallowed hard, eyes flicking from his face to his cock. She nodded slowly, almost shy at the suggestion.

His hand gripped her hip, guiding her closer. “Go on then.”

He steadied her with both hands, dragging her down until she brushed over the length of him, half trapped by his briefs, the flushed head nudging against her clit before slipping lower again.

Her thighs began to shake as the scrape of fabric from his open trousers rubbed her. The contrast of bare skin on the swollen head of him and the rough slide of his briefs against her entrance had her every nerve on fire.

“Like this,” Draco muttered, adjusting and angling her hips just enough that each forward grind made the tip of him catch directly on her clit. His fingers bit into her sides as he guided her into the rhythm, forcing her to ride the ridge of him. “Yeah, that’s it. Rub your cunt on me. Let’s get you messy...let’s make that pussy feel fucking perfect.”

Her nails dug into the grip of his wrists where he held her, gasping as the friction built with each drag. The mess of her arousal slicked over his cock and his briefs, spreading wider with every roll of her hips until the wet squelch of it was loud enough.

“Look at that fucking mess,” he rasped, his head falling back for a moment before snapping forward again, his eyes locked on their bodies melting against each other. He pulled her harder against him so she could feel every swollen vein straining beneath the thin cotton.

The shine smeared over the fabric, the flushed head of him slipping out just enough to glisten as her clit dragged across it. Heat burned her face as she choked out a sound, half laugh, half moan.

“I love your cock,” she sighed before she could stop herself, clutching tighter to his wrists as her body shook with the admission. “God – I love it so much, Draco.”

His jaw went slack, his eyes rolling back for a moment before snapping once more, wild with need. The raw reaction only spurred her on.

“I miss the stretch of you inside me,” she confessed in a rush, hips snapping forward with desperate little jerks. “I miss it so much I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Fuck–” The sound broke from him like a broken whimper. His grip on her hips turned bruising as his whole body bowed up beneath her.

Hermione’s gaze dropped just in time to see the muscles in his stomach go taut, his abs clenching hard as his cock began twitching under her. A groan tore out of him as he spilled hot across his stomach, thick stripes painting his muscles as he shuddered through it.

Arousal hummed through her veins as she spread his release with her rubbing it into the soaked fabric of his briefs, letting it spread sticky along the inside of her thighs.

Even though his hips jerked at the sensation he forced her down on the mess on his cock. “*Don’t* stop. Come on me. Rub yourself on all of it.”

Her head fell back, a strangled cry ripping from her as her clit caught on the wet mess, the obscene slide heightening everything until it detonated inside her. Her thighs clamped around his hips as she rode him messily, rocking herself through every pulse of her own release.

He held her through it, his hands dragging her against him even as he hissed through the overstimulation. His release mixed with hers, smearing slick between their bodies until she collapsed against his chest.

Her cheek pressed to his sternum, the fabric of his shirt damp where her breath came ragged and uneven. She could still feel the twitch of him beneath her, softening slowly in the soaked cling of his briefs. Everything felt sticky, and for a moment all she could do was pant against his chest, boneless in his hold.

His jaw dropped against her hair, chest heaving under her cheek. He hissed low when she shifted.

“Fuck,” he rasped into her curls.

She gave a weak laugh, her lips brushing his skin. But when she tried to move off him, his arms tightened, keeping her caged in his lap.

“Don’t.” His breath ghosted hot against her temple. “Let me hold you like this.”

She curled her fists into the open fabric of his shirt, pressing her face harder against him as though to disappear inside the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

Chapter 29: US

The table near the back had been theirs for over an hour, plates of chips pushed aside by now.

Ginny leaned across from Hermione with Blaise's arm draped loosely behind her chair, while Harry and Luna bookended the table, their voices cutting in at opposite ends.

Theo had sent word earlier not to wait – work was keeping him late again.

Beside her, Draco's hand had found its place on her thigh beneath the table. And for the first time, there'd been no need to hide it. The press of his thumb into the sheer fabric of her tights carried the smallest hint of possession, a quiet claim he made with nothing more than a touch. She caught herself pressing into it without meaning to, almost greedy for the reminder that he was hers.

This was their first evening out as a couple at the after-hours pub night. *Officially*.

She'd let herself breathe in that fact, soak it up through the warmth of his palm and the little half-smile tugging at the corner of his mouth whenever she leaned closer. Ginny had caught her eye once, lips curling in approval. Even Blaise looked genuinely content. None of them had teased them about the change of dynamics. If anything, it felt natural. As if she and Draco had simply stepped into the shape they were meant to fill all along.

The safety of it all let something in her chest finally breathe.

Which was why the voice that cut through the chatter landed like a blow she hadn't braced for.

"Didn't think I'd run into the whole gang before the wedding."

She hadn't expected him tonight.

Hermione's gaze caught on him before she could stop herself. His hair was pulled back into a bun, a style so unlike the boy she remembered that for a moment it threw her. But then the same constellation of freckles, scattered across his face, betrayed him. The one above his cheekbone was still exactly where it had always been. She had kissed that spot more times than she cared to count, and the memory of it unsettled her now, rushing back with the uncomfortable intimacy of something that no longer belonged to her.

"Ron!" Harry pushed back his chair and clapped him on the shoulder. "Didn't know you were back in London already."

"Got in last night," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "Turns out my sister's idea of hosting is leaving me to fend for myself. So I thought I'd find my own pint."

Blaise tipped his beer back with a mutter that slipped between the swallow. "Maybe try a calendar next time."

Ginny's chair scraped as she shifted forward. "Ron. You weren't supposed to be here tonight. I said tomorrow. I said I had plans."

He waved a hand as if brushing off Ginny's protest, rocking back on his heels. "Point taken. But I'm here now, so might as well catch up, yeah?"

Before Hermione could summon a shred of composure, he dragged a chair up beside her. His foot bumped hers under the table. She drew back instinctively, creating space before her mind had even caught up, her pulse leaping for reasons that had nothing to do with wanting him there. The space he filled felt stolen – space that no longer belonged to him.

And then the smell hit her. That same faint trace of cinnamon aftershave he'd worn for years. For one disorienting second, the familiarity pulled her back to evenings when she'd read her books with his arm wrapped lazily around her, while his eyes stayed fixed on the telly. Back then it had felt safe. Now the memory belonged to a life she no longer wanted.

His gaze landed.

On Draco's hand. Still resting securely on her thigh.

Draco's mouth tilted, not a smile so much as a challenge. He knew Ron was watching, and he just didn't care.

Hermione let out a silent breath. She waited to feel the sharp pang of being less-than, but it didn't come.

"You look good." Ron ducked his head, the words only meant for her. "Feels like ages since I've seen you."

Her fingers tightened slightly around the stem of her wine glass. "A few years now."

Ron gave a lopsided grin, the one he'd always given her when he wanted her to forget a fight. "London treating you alright still?"

Hermione nodded and forced a half-hearted smile onto her lips.

"Still at that marketing firm? What was it called again?"

"Yes." She didn't fill the gap she once would have. Back then she'd used the leap at the chance to make him proud. She only took another sip of her drink and set it back down.

Ron's brow furrowed, just slightly. "Heard you moved into a new place?"

"Over a year ago."

"Good area?"

"Very."

Once, he'd been the person who knew every corner of her life. Now he sounded like a man interviewing someone he barely remembered.

Draco's hand left her thigh only long enough to stretch behind her chair, drawing her into the line of his body as he responded to something Ginny said. The move was small, a natural adjustment that left her pressed closer. His other free hand returned to her leg, holding her still.

Her body answered before her mind could, leaning further into the solid line of him. When she tilted her head to glance up at him, he caught her eye just long enough to give her that very private twist of his mouth.

Her fingers slipped through his on her shoulder until they twined together, and when he gave the smallest answering squeeze, her chest loosened. She couldn't help thinking that this, right here, was what Ron would never understand. The ease of a hand always reaching.

A sigh broke across the table.

Harry, fiddling absently with his beer coaster, shook his head. "It's still weird. You two together. Not that long ago, Draco literally punched you in the face."

Draco stiffened. "I didn't *punch* her. She ran into my fist. It was an accident."

Hermione startled, as if yanked out of the undertow and into the light again. She managed a careful smile for the table, but when her eyes met Draco's it turned real.

"I don't know," Blaise drawled, lifting his glass. "Is it really *that* weird? I always thought the two of them would make a great couple."

Ginny groaned, rolling her eyes. "Of course you did."

But Luna leaned forward on her elbows, gaze fixed on Hermione. "How did you, though? Get closer, I mean. After everything?"

"She couldn't resist me anymore," Draco mused. "Simple as that."

The reactions were immediate. Ginny let out a snort, Blaise actually laughed out loud like it was the funniest thing he'd heard all week. Harry just dragged a hand over his face.

"Oh, please," Ginny scoffed. "That's the line you're going with?"

Draco only shrugged, as if it were the obvious truth.

Blaise leaned in with a wicked grin. "Alright, mate, enough of that. We all know you were the one chasing her."

Hermione felt her face warm, laughter sparking around the table. Draco only lifted a brow, letting the jab slide without a word.

But she noticed the shift in Ron – how his fingers stilled against the table, his gaze fixed somewhere that wasn't her.

Before Draco could answer, she stepped in. "It began when my dad had that accident. Draco was there for me. That was the start of it. After that, we had to figure out what it meant for ourselves first."

Luna tipped her head. "Then what was your first *real* date?"

"Lunch," she said without thinking. "And then Draco rented a boat. It was actually... very romantic."

Across from them, Blaise gave a disbelieving grunt, shooting Draco a look over his pint. Draco only nodded once, pride flickering in the tilt of his grin as if to say *yes, I pulled that off, and she loved it.*

"Luna, you should ask her the important questions – like whether she decided Malfoy was a good time *before* or *after* movie night." Blaise ignored the half-hearted swat from Ginny at that.

Hermione's eyes snapped toward him, but he only lifted his brows in response, as if daring her to deny it.

Draco didn't miss a beat though, squeezing her hand absentmindedly. "Best film marathon I've ever been to."

Heat crept up her neck, not just from embarrassment but the sharp tug of the memory. How that night had changed everything.

When she dared to glance up at him again, his smirk was still lingering but his eyes had softened too.

Ginny cleared her throat pointedly, cutting across the awkwardness. "Talking about *important* questions... Luna, Hermione. Do you two have your outfits sorted for the wedding?"

Luna beamed. "Oh, yes. Mine's already hanging by the door. Yellow, of course."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm going shopping tomorrow after work."

"Where?"

"We're still debating," Draco drawled before he reached for his pint, letting go of her thigh.

"What he means," she corrected, her eyes glancing back up at him, "is that he wants to drag me into boutiques where I'll be charged a fee just for touching the hangers."

Draco hummed, like the matter was closed, and turned toward Ginny instead. "Have you got your dress sorted?"

“Yes – bridesmaid, remember? Fleur didn’t want anything distracting, so no sequins, no glitter. Just dark green silk.”

“That’s boring,” Luna said at once, tilting her head thoughtfully. “You should add some peacock feathers. Something that hums when you walk past people.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Peacock feathers?” Ron cut in, confused amusement tugging at his mouth.

Ginny turned on him at once. “Oh, shut up. You don’t get a say.”

“Dark green will suit you,” Draco said over the rim of his glass, ignoring Ron altogether.

Ginny blinked at him, surprised, but then smiled softly.

Her fingers stayed looped through his where they rested over her shoulder, and when he leaned down, he pressed a kiss to her temple. Then he was already leaning forward to add some dry remark to whatever Blaise was saying. His thumb kept brushing hers absently.

Ron hadn’t said much since. His gaze flicked toward her now and then, carrying a hint of irritation – as if he didn’t quite recognise this version of her. The one who no longer bend herself to be noticed by him.

Draco and Hermione were the first ones to leave. She didn’t even realise she’d been holding her breath until the pub door shut behind them and the night air hit her lungs. Leaving the bickering group behind felt like stepping out of a fog.

She tugged her coat tighter around her shoulders, grateful for the space.

“Walk?” he asked, nodding toward the street. “Skip the first few stations.”

She fell into step beside him, their shoulders brushing as they started down the pavement. For a few minutes it was quiet, only the sound of their steps and the hiss of tyres on wet asphalt filling the silence. The cold seemed to clear her head, though her chest was still tight.

“We’ve never really talked about it.”

Hermione glanced at him from the side. “Talked about what?”

His eyes flicked to her briefly. “What really happened?” There was a certain weight to his words. “With you and Weasley. Not the polite version you gave everyone back then.”

Hermione focused on the sound of their footsteps echo against the wet pavement. She thought back to how many times she’d pressed him about Tiffany, and realised this must have been what it felt like. That tug-of-war inside your chest when you didn’t even want the person anymore, but the memories still made your body flinch.

She drew in a slow breath. “Do you really want to know?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.” He reached for her, their fingers sliding together until they locked.

She hesitated, then finally said it. “He told me we should start seeing other people.”

Disbelief carved across his features. “He said that to you?”

Her mouth tugged humorlessly. “Word for word.”

A low scoff escaped him. “What the fuck is wrong with him?” His hand tensed around hers before he forced it to ease, but his expression didn’t soften. “What was your relationship with him even like?”

Hermione tried to find the right words, ignoring the uncomfortable flutter in her stomach. “It was years of a crush I couldn’t shake. The one who felt out of reach. And when he finally looked at me, it felt like everything I’d ever wanted. For a while, I thought I’d won some impossible prize.”

Draco huffed a breath but didn’t interrupt her.

“But he never really chose me. Not the way I chose him. He’d take me out, but only when it suited him. He’d hold my hand if it was just us... but when we were with others, he was distant. And I kept telling myself it was enough. Because it was him. Because he was Ron and that’s just how he was.” Hermione let her head tip back, exhaling hard. “I was so desperate for him to love me the way I loved him that I ignored how lonely it felt, even when I was right next to him.”

Draco’s mouth flattened into a line, his steps growing sharper. “I can’t decide if he was blind or just spineless.”

She glanced up at him, aware of the edge in his voice.

And then he stopped. The tug on her hand pulled her back toward him, momentum carrying her straight into his chest. He caught her jaw as he bent and kissed her. Hard enough to leave no space for anything else.

By the time he broke for air, her head was spinning, her chest heaving against his. The smallest, crooked smile pulled at his mouth. “This isn’t how I wanted tonight to go. Our first time out with them as... *us*.”

None of it mattered. Not really.

“Ron doesn’t get to ruin this,” she whispered, still breathless. “This *is* our first night as a couple without hiding. And it’s more than I could have asked for. We didn’t hide. You were by my side.”

The next afternoon, she found herself standing in front of a full-length mirror, a pile of dressed draped over the sofa behind her and Draco lounging in the shop's corner chair.

His gaze snagged on the display window.

"Try that one." His chin tipped toward the mannequin.

She followed his line of sight. A short but fluid dress, white as ivory, almost shimmering under the lights. She let out a short laugh. "Draco. I can't wear *white* to another woman's wedding, you know that."

His lips curled. "I'm sadly aware. Believe me." He leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees and grey eyes glinting with something that made her skin prickle. "But I'd be lying if I said it didn't remind me of you in that angel costume last Halloween."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. "It's not the same."

"Not even close." He rose to his feet with a sigh. "Will you try it on for me?"

Her protest faltered when he was suddenly at her side, brushing a loose curl back behind her ear, the soft caress doing wicked things to her resolve.

That's how she'd ended up in the dressing room *with* him.

Hermione braced both hands on the mirror's frame as his fingers lingered at the zipper longer than necessary, the quiet rasp of teeth slowing to nothing halfway up her spine.

His eyes caught hers in the mirror. "You don't even realise how beautiful you look, do you?"

His lips brushed the slope of her shoulder, lingering. She felt her breath catch.

And only then did his hands slide lower. What began as a caress over her waist turned unhurried, his palm flattening over her stomach before skimming down. The dress whispered as his fingers trailed toward the hem, grazing her thigh and pulling up the fabric.

"What are you doing?" Heat flashed through her as she felt him press against her back, already hard.

"Just for a second," he said, his breath a warm hush against her ear. His hand eased between her thighs, the dress bunched until he stroked her once through her knickers.

Her head fell back against him, breath stuttering. "We can't--"

He caught her reflection in the mirror. "We could," he whispered, brushing the seam of fabric over her clit. "God, I really want to."

Her nails caught against the mirror's frame. A rapid flush spread over her throat as his entire palm kept rubbing her through the fabric.

"Draco," she couldn't tell if it was plea or warning.

“Hmm?” His mouth curved against her, maddeningly calm as though they weren’t seconds from indecency in the middle of Mayfair.

She tried to angle away, but his arm banded around her waist, pulling her back into the solid press of him. “Just relax.”

The mirror gave her no escape. His eyes, lit with something, locked on hers while his hand worked beneath the white dress. The contrast of his pale fingers sliding under the hem of her black underwear drew a low, strangled sound from her throat.

“There she is,” he breathed, his reflection smirking as though he’d just claimed a victory. “You do look like an angel, don’t you? God, I could ruin you right here.”

She gripped the mirror harder, her legs spreading just a little more to give him better access.

But then he slowed, easing his hand out from between her thighs, dragging the hem of the dress back down with frustrating care. The ghost of his touch lingered, cruel in its absence.

When she dared to meet his gaze again, he was holding up his glistening fingers – sucking them into his mouth with a lewd hum.

The click of heels on tile made Hermione freeze.

“Everything all right in there?” the associate called, far too close to the door.

“Perfect,” he drawled, inspecting his fingers like they were gemstones. Then, with infuriating nonchalance, he adjusted himself in his trousers without the slightest hint of shame.

Hermione turned around with her chest rising too fast.

He only smirked, hands slipping into his pockets like he hadn’t just had one of them between her thighs.

Draco’s gaze swept over her. “We should buy this one.”

“Buy it? For what?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, a wolfish glare breaking through. “Oh, I’ve got a few ideas. None you want me to say out loud right now.”

She closed her eyes with a suppressed huff.

By the time Hermione wriggled back into her jeans and jumper, she’d decided on a pale green satin dress. She tugged the curtain back, ready to argue for a fair price with the associate.

Draco was already waiting by the racks, one hand in his pocket, the other carrying two glossy bags, hanging over his shoulder, by nothing more than his index and middle finger.

Her brows shot up. “You can’t just – I chose the dress.”

“You did. Green. Which I like. Very much.” His mouth curved. “And I chose the other. Which I like even more.”

Her stomach flipped. “I could have paid for them myself.”

Draco’s expression didn’t falter. If anything, the faint arch of his brow made her feel like she’d just said something adorable and hopelessly wrong.

“You could have,” he agreed, shifting the bags higher on his shoulder. “But you didn’t. I did. And that’s the end of it.”

Her mouth opened, annoyance ready on her tongue, but he was already stepping closer. Too close for her to remember the associate hovering a few feet away.

“You’re brilliant at a hundred things,” he murmured, low enough that only she could hear, fingers lifting her chin gently. “But letting someone take care of you isn’t one of them. We need to work on that.”

Her pulse jumped hard, heat rising to her cheeks. “That’s not—”

“Shh.” He smiled softly, but his eyes stayed serious. “No arguments. You’ll wear both, and I’ll get to enjoy the view. That’s the bargain.”

She huffed, exasperated, but the weight of his gaze pinned her. Her stomach was in freefall, every nerve lit with the memory of him in the dressing room.

“And if I say no?” she asked, softer than she intended.

He seemed amused by that, nodding toward the door. “Shall we?”

Draco was already at the door, coat on, one hand in his pocket and the other tapping against the frame. The taxi had been waiting downstairs long enough for the driver to honk once.

He ignored it.

Hermione all but stumbled toward him, heels in one hand, her clutch and coat in the other, hair still half-tamed from her last-minute battle with it. “Alright, let’s go, let’s go—” she gasped, already pushing past him.

“Hold on,” he said, catching her wrist before she could reach the handle.

She spun. “Draco, we don’t have time for this, Ginny is going to kill us if we’re late.”

“Let her.” He tugged her back a step. His hand slid from her wrist up to her shoulder, steadying her frazzled rush. His eyes softened. “One second.”

“We don’t have a second.” She tried to wriggle free, but he was already pulling a slim velvet box from his pocket. He flicked it open, revealing a pair of slim, drop-cut silver earrings.

They caught the light in flashes and looked very delicate, but loud enough to notice the weight to them.

Hermione's mouth parted. "No, Draco. You can't buy me something like that."

"I can." He stepped closer, like they had all the time in the world. "Do you remember the gala? When you handed me that red handkerchief?"

Of course she remembered.

"This is me returning the favour."

She shook her head, flustered. "Draco, you have to stop spending so much money on me. It's not right."

His hand grazed her collarbone as he eased one earring free.

"Don't worry about it." He secured the clasp and shifted to her other ear. "Picked them up at the boutique yesterday. I knew they'd look better on you than on anyone else."

A protest had already half-formed on her lips.

"Besides," he added, "they'll look even better with the white dress. If you ever show mercy and wear it for me again."

Her resolve wavered, even as she tried to plant her feet. "Thank you. Truly. But *please*, no more gifts. I don't like when you spend so much money on me. You know nothing in that boutique was cheap, Draco. I don't need that."

He gave a small huff of breath, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "Noted. I'll try to consider it." He smoothed her hair back, tilting his head to study the earrings. When he seemed satisfied, his gaze flicked back to the persistent line between her brows. "Don't look at me like that. You're lucky you got that much."

Snow had started falling just before they arrived, covering the churchyard in soft white.

By some miracle, they'd slid into the chapel just in time, coats shrugged off and cheeks still flushed from the cold. Harry and Luna, bless them, had saved them seats in a middle row, waving them over with quiet relief. Blaise had ended up in the front row with the Weasley family.

The old stone chapel was glowing. Lanterns twined with evergreen branches and pale roses lined the benches. A trace of pine lingered in the air.

Hermione sat a little straighter. She glanced at Draco, thinking she'd never get used to the sight of him in his perfectly cut suit. He'd combed his hair back but left just enough disarray at his temple that it softened his sharp facial features.

Her chest swelled as the music rose and they all stood at once.

Two figures appeared at the back. Gabrielle and Ginny in dark green. They walked slowly down the aisle in step together. When Ginny's eyes flicked sideways toward them, she gave the smallest secret wave, her mouth twitching into a grin before she smoothed it away and kept walking.

Then Fleur appeared.

The silk of her dress fell like moonlight over her slender figure. Her father led her down the aisle, a bouquet of winter roses clutched in her hands, trembling ever so slightly.

Hermione felt her throat catch.

"Beautiful," she whispered as Fleur passed them.

Draco's gaze didn't leave the front, but his fingers caressed a slow arc across her shoulder.

She followed his line of sight and saw Bill waiting, utterly transfixed. The raw awe on his face made him look years younger, as if Fleur's presence alone had smoothed time away. Hermione couldn't help but smile at the sight and then she glanced back at Draco.

He had gone utterly still, his posture straightening almost imperceptibly, shoulders drawn taut. His expression was composed, but there was something distant in it.

Hermione slid her hand into his, giving a gentle squeeze.

His fingers tightened back instantly, the faintest breath escaping him as though she'd broken whatever spell had held him. When his eyes dropped to hers again, the distance was gone.

The ceremony was beautiful, but it was the vows that undid her. Fleur promised to walk beside Bill, through storms and through snow, to remind him of his own strength when he forgot it. Bill promised that her laugh would always be his favorite sound, that he'd keep making her tea the way she liked, even when she changed her mind every week.

Hermione blinked so fast her vision began to swim.

Molly Weasley dabbed at her face with a handkerchief in the front row, Arthur rubbing her arm tenderly, and for one impossible moment Hermione pictured another day, another church, and the man whose arm wrapped around her.

When she looked at Draco again, he was already watching her.

Her lips curved, helplessly smitten. She mouthed *I love you*.

The smallest smile pulled at his mouth. He bent just enough to press his lips to her temple. "I love you too."

The chapel erupted in applause as Fleur and Bill sealed their vows with a kiss. Hermione clapped with everyone else, but her heart was somewhere else entirely.

Snowed in lanterns strung in the trees guiding everyone toward the reception hall.

They'd congratulated Fleur and Bill. They were trembling with happiness. And then, just as quickly, the bride and groom had disappeared with the photographer, leaving the guests to settle in and wait.

Inside, long banquet tables were lined with evergreen runners and candles. The band was already playing in the corner, classic notes of violin and piano filling the space.

Blaise had guided them to a small table near the fire, Ginny beside him, her cheeks flushed from the cold. He was carrying her tiny silver clutch without complaint, tucking it neatly at his elbow. Hermione caught the way Ginny rolled her eyes but didn't take it back.

"Honestly," Harry muttered, flipping open the menu card as Luna leaned against his arm, "I don't care what they're serving. As long as it's more than canapés. I'm starving."

"You always are," Luna's fingers slipped into his without looking.

Hermione sat back, letting the chatter wash over her. Draco's knee brushed hers under the table. As the room filled with guests and the clink of glasses, he leaned in closer.

"Did you notice," he murmured, "that something about Ginny's been different lately?"

Hermione blinked, pulse quickening. She followed his gaze, landing on Ginny, standing a little further away from their table. Blaise's hand rested over her stomach as she laughed at something he whispered.

Hermione knew the real reason for that difference, but her throat closed around the words. It wasn't her secret to tell.

She glanced back at Draco, his eyes searching hers, curious.

She tried to nudge the menu toward him, but he only slid it back.

Hermione sighed, leaning a little into his shoulder. "Yes?"

Draco tilted his head, tone dropping to something conspiratorial, almost amused.

"You remember Ginny's little crisis... the one that cockblocked me?" His thumb dragged over her knuckles. "She doesn't really drink now. No pints, no shots. Just the occasional cocktail. Cider, if she's feeling bold." His grey eyes cut briefly across the table, sharp enough that she caught it. "Funny thing, though. The only ones she'll take a glass from are you or Zabini."

Hermione pressed her lips together, the muscles in her jaw twitched uncomfortably. Her heart gave a nervous flutter at how closely he'd been watching, how easily he put the pieces

together.

If he'd figured it out, she wouldn't lie to him. She couldn't.

Her fingers tightened around his, their joined hands tucked out of sight by her lap.

She turned, just slightly, so her eyes met his.

Draco's brows lifted the barest fraction, the understanding flashing there in the silence. His eyes shifted back to their best friends, and something unexpectedly gentle settled across his face.

Across the table, Blaise was finally pulling back the chair for Ginny to settle. Her hand rested on his forearm for a long beat.

Plates clinked softly as servers began setting the first course. Ginny and her brothers had stood earlier, delivering a joint toast that was equal parts heartfelt and chaotic. Now, forks scraped against china over conversations.

"Feels strange without Theo, doesn't it?"

Blaise swirled his wine before taking a sip. "Strange that he didn't come at all. He may not know Fleur and Bill, but since when has that ever stopped Theo? Man loves a party."

Ginny hummed with her mouth half-full. "I actually invited him."

Harry leaned in. "He's been unusually...quiet lately, don't you think?"

"Working, maybe," Blaise offered, though there was an edge to it, like he didn't believe it himself.

Draco's posture was relaxed, one arm draped along the back of her chair, but his expression was unreadable. He hadn't chimed in, content to listen. To anyone else it looked like nothing, but Hermione caught the tightness in his shoulders.

And that familiar ache stirred in her chest.

Was this still because of her? The way the whole mess had left cracks in their friendship? But she'd thought they'd begun stitching themselves back together since. Theo had been softer with her the last few times they'd spoken.

She pressed her lips together around a sip of wine, deciding quietly then that she'd reach out tomorrow. Just to make sure he was alright.

Hermione excused herself with Luna, weaving between tables. She stopped here and there to hug Molly, to compliment Fleur's aunt on her hat, to squeeze Gabrielle's shoulders when the

girl blushed at some compliment from one of the Weasley boys. It felt good to move around after dinner, though her gaze kept tugging back to where Draco was, already half-claimed by Blaise and Harry in some discussion.

“What a beautiful ceremony, don’t you think?”

By the time she and Luna reached the bar in the far corner, she had decided she needed something stronger. She leaned in, signaling to the barman, but Luna beat her to it.

“Two shots, please.”

Hermione gave a small laugh. “You don’t even like shots, Luna.”

“I like them when they’re for a purpose,” she hummed, as if that explained everything. “I wonder who’ll be married next.”

Hermione followed her eyes for a beat, then sighed happily. “Probably Ginny and Blaise.”

Luna turned, a little smile blooming like a secret she’d decided to share. “You know, Hermione... I wouldn’t be surprised if it were you and Draco. I’ve never seen two people move like that together.”

Hermione stilled, pulse catching. “Move like what?”

“In sync,” Luna said simply, with a gentle shrug, like she was pointing out the weather. “It’s beautiful, really. Like you’ve both been walking the same path longer than you realise.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, though it came out thinner than she meant. Heat crept up her neck at her friend’s words. “That’s sweet of you, Luna. But we’re nowhere close to talking about anything like that.”

The barman slid the shots onto the counter. Luna clinked hers against Hermione’s, then tipped it back with a satisfied sigh. “Lovely,” she murmured, setting it down. “I’m going to see if the band knows anything by Fleetwood Mac.” She floated off before Hermione could reply, weaving into the crowd.

She was still watching her with a grin she couldn’t quite hold back, when a familiar voice cut through and made her spine lock tight.

“Two more,” Ron told the barman, leaning one arm against the counter “Whatever they’ve got.”

Hermione stiffened, her fingers curling around the edge of the counter. Before she even lifted her head, his hand had settled on her upper arm, warm and familiar in the worst way.

Her breath caught when his thumb brushed against her bare skin. The squeeze was meant to be gentle, but it sent a jolt through her, wrong in every possible way.

She stepped back before her mind had even caught up, slipping out of reach. The absence of his hand felt like air rushing back into her lungs.

Ron's brows knit as though *she* were the one overreacting. "Relax, Hermione," he said, the ghost of a grin tugging at his mouth. "It's just me."

But that was exactly the problem.

She forced herself to straighten, though her pulse was still thrumming. "Don't," she said quietly, sharp enough to make him drop his hand back to the bar.

Ron exhaled through his nose, scratching the back of his neck like he hadn't meant anything by it. But the look he gave her was appraising.

"So... you and Malfoy, then." His voice dropped, his tone disbelieving. "Never thought I'd live to see the day."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "Yes. Me and Draco."

Ron let out a low laugh, shaking his head. "You used to hate that arrogant knob. Said he was the last person on earth you'd ever—" He broke off, looking at her like the punchline explained itself. "Guess that's changed, huh?"

Her spine went rigid, but she kept her tone level. "People change, Ron."

He leaned in a fraction, his elbow brushing hers on the counter. "Or maybe you're just convincing yourself you have. Because honestly, Hermione – Malfoy? Really?"

The words landed like a slap, but before she could say anything else, the barman slid two fresh shots onto the counter in front of them.

Ron nudged one toward her. "C'mon. For old times' sake."

Hermione didn't move.

"No, Ron. Not like old times. Because I don't want to drink with you, and I don't want to talk with you either."

His smile faltered. "Come on, don't be like that—"

"I'm *exactly* like that," she cut in. "We're old enough to share a room without pretending to be friends. You need to let this go. Tonight isn't about you and me. It's about your brother's wedding. So do yourself a favour and focus on that, instead of picking at something that ended years ago."

Ron opened his mouth, but she didn't give him the chance.

"And just so we're clear – my love life isn't up for your commentary. But since you were wondering, it's never been better than it is right now. So you can stop trying to make conversation with me, because I'm not interested. Not in small talk, not in catching up. Not in anything."

She was ready to walk away, but then paused. "Oh, but there is one thing. *Thank you.*"

Ron blinked, confused. “For what?”

“Ah, there you are.”

Blaise’s voice slid in smooth as ever, his arm looping casually around her shoulders before Ron could take a single step after her. He steered her neatly away from the bar, not sparing Ron a glance.

They walked a few paces into the crowd before Blaise let her go. “Sorry to swoop in like that. You looked about two seconds away from scratching his eyes out, and frankly, I didn’t fancy watching that play out with Malfoy in the same room.”

Hermione let out a sharp breath, some of the tension loosening from her shoulders.

Blaise grinned sidelong at her. “Besides, I was on my way to the loo. Which I still desperately need. Consider yourself my good deed for the evening.”

He winked and peeled off, leaving her standing at the edge of the room, freer than she’d felt in years.

Draco’s eyes were already on her.

Even from a distance, she could tell he’d seen it all. The stiff set of his shoulders gave him away.

Still, when their eyes locked, her heart flipped. She smiled at him, but he didn’t quite return it.

Sliding back into her seat, Hermione felt the weight of his gaze still on her. The chatter of the table went on as though nothing had shifted, but for her, the air felt taut, strung only between them.

When she finally angled toward him, his arm slid casually along the back of her chair, the picture of ease to anyone else. But his fingers tapped once against the wood, restless, betraying the temper he was holding in.

Hermione’s fingers slipped beneath the table to find his.

Draco’s hand tightened around her, a silent acknowledgment. Still, his gaze dragged briefly across the room toward the bar before returning to her, storm-grey and unwilling to soften.

She pulled him with her without wondering if he’d let her. “Walk with me? Before the cake?”

The winter air swept down the long stretch of stone in the corridor beyond.

Hermione had barely taken two steps before Draco shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it over her shoulders, the heavy fabric swallowing her frame.

“Draco—”

His posture stiffened.

“What’s wrong?”

His hand flexed at his side, as though he needed something to hit. “Weasley is what’s wrong. If this weren’t his brother’s wedding, I’d have flattened him already.” His voice was rougher than she’d heard in weeks. “For putting his fucking hands on you.”

Hermione startled. “I shook him off right away.”

“That’s not the point,” Draco snapped, and when she looked up at him properly, she realised it wasn’t jealousy. His eyes burned with something heavier. “He doesn’t get to touch you. Not after the way he treated you. Not after he made you think you weren’t worth more than that.”

He’d carried what she told him a few nights ago with him, turning it over in his mind. And now, here it was, spilling out.

“Draco...” she whispered, still the words came out with tenderness.

His scowl deepened, as if she were brushing him off. “Don’t *‘Draco’* me. You don’t understand – watching him touch your arm like he had some right to be near you, after what he did. He should never have been allowed within ten feet of you again. It makes me want to...” His hands flexed again, uselessly. “It makes me want to hurt him for every time he made you doubt yourself.”

Something in her twisted. He wasn’t angry at *her*, not for a second. He was angry at the ghosts she’d carried; the way Ron’s careless love had made her feel unworthy. And she could see it. How much it tore at him to know that even now, pieces of her were still tender from that wound.

He huffed, looking away for a moment as if he hated himself for even saying it. “I know it’s ridiculous, but I just can’t stand it. Thinking of you giving anything of yourself to someone like that.” His jaw clenched. “I wish I’d had every first. Your first date. Your first kiss. Every first time you gave him. I’ll never understand how he landed you in the first place. What you ever saw in him.”

Hermione’s rueful smile that followed was more self-mockery than anything else. “When you’ve wanted something for years, sometimes you convince yourself it must be love – even when it isn’t. He didn’t see me, and maybe I couldn’t see myself either. I’d never been... *wanted* before. And when he looked at me, I wanted more of it.”

She stepped closer, smoothing over the lapels of the jacket he’d just draped around her.

“I get it. You’ll always hate him for what he did. Just like I’ll always hate Tiffany for the way she hurt *you*.”

Draco's mouth opened, the protest already forming on his tongue.

"No, Draco. Don't you understand? If none of this had happened... if Tiffany hadn't hurt you, if Ron hadn't hurt me... we might not be here. Together. Right now."

Something unguarded flickered across his face, and for a moment he looked almost uncertain. "I like to think we would've found each other anyway. Even if Weasley hadn't botched it."

Hermione smiled carefully. "That's a lovely thought."

"Yeah," Draco said flatly. "Lovely."

Her brows lifted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

His gaze lingered, but he didn't answer. Not right away. When he did, his voice was hoarse, like he was dragging the words out of somewhere he'd buried deep.

"Hermione, I wanted you for years. I told myself I didn't. I tried to bury it under every distraction I could get my hands on, but you never left my head. I *hated* you for it – for how much power you had over me without even knowing."

Her breath shuddered, scraping against her lungs as his words sank in. He'd said it before. And she'd seen it in his letter he had written all these years ago, but she'd never *felt* it. Not until now. Maybe she didn't fully understand even in this moment. But she realised, that she didn't have to.

Draco was at war with himself. She saw it in the strained rise and fall of his chest, in the way his jaw locked against the words. And when he finally spoke again, it sounded like surrender.

"Every time you crossed my mind, it felt like some cruel joke. Like Milo had cursed me himself. That I could want someone for years and never have them... In my head that was my punishment for what I did to him all those years ago.

But then your dad's accident happened... Hermione, it was ten years *to the day* since he died. We were standing in that hospital, the doctor saying your dad would be alright. You were in my arms, and it hit me that this was the second chance I never got. And for one mad second, I felt him there. Like he was screaming at me. Kicking me in the arse to open my eyes.

That I'd had it wrong all along. You weren't my curse or a punishment – you were the reason. *The entire point.*

I don't believe in ghosts, or fate, or any of that shite. But in that moment... it all made sense. Like he'd dragged us toward each other. Like he was handing me what I was too blind to see myself."

His thumb stroked her cheek almost absentmindedly, and she wondered if he could feel the frantic thrum beneath her skin. Her pulse was everywhere at once, roaring in her ears, rattling her ribs, trying to take in every word. She hadn't been prepared for this.

Hermione had never been particularly religious. She wasn't spiritual either, not like Luna with her belief in unseen things that brushed through the veil of the everyday. Ghosts were history to her, not hauntings. She reveled in facts, in logic, in what could be proven.

And even though this wasn't logic... it was Draco's truth.

The fact that he had thought it at all, all those months ago, meant he believed it. He *still* believed it... enough to tell her now when the words clearly cost him. And it struck her, almost painfully, that even in all his pain and struggle, he didn't believe for one second anymore that he didn't deserve this. That *they* weren't meant.

And whether she believed in fate or not didn't matter. What mattered was that he did.

It was the most love she had ever felt pour from him – more than any kiss, more than any *I love you* could have ever conveyed. He was handing her this impossible piece of himself.

Her nerves stretched with the weight of it. She reached up with shaking fingers, framing his face. Her lips parted, but the words refused to come. So she leaned in and kissed him instead, with everything she couldn't say.

And when she pulled back, inhaling sharply, she needed to share *her* truth.

“You saved *me*.” Her voice trembled, but she pressed on before he could protest.
“You'll never understand just how much.”

His eyes bled into something even more vulnerable. “I'd still take *every* first if I could.”

“Give me a second tonight.”

His brow furrowed, uncertainty flickering.
She let the pause linger, then smiled almost coyly.
“Our second dance.”

The first notes of the song drifted through the hall, pulling everyone's attention toward the center of the floor.

Fleur and Bill stepped into the space together, her gown catching the light with every turn, Bill gazing at her like there wasn't another soul in the room with them.

Hermione felt herself exhale, her heart clenching at the sight. There was something so pure about it. About two people entirely wrapped in each other, as if no one else mattered.

Draco's arms slipped more securely around her from behind, his chest warm and solid against her back, his suit jacket still draped across her shoulders. She tugged it closer, sinking into the comfort of him. His chin dipped briefly to the curve of her shoulder, brushing the edge of her hair, and for a moment, the rest of the world blurred.

“They look so happy,” Hermione whispered, almost to herself.

“They do,” he agreed quietly, but she felt rather than saw the way his gaze slid down to her. His arms tightened around her.

Hermione’s heart gave a small flutter. She could feel the weight of his attention even as she watched Fleur laugh softly in Bill’s arms.

Then, just as Bill spun Fleur into his arms again, Draco’s voice broke the quiet. His tone was softer than it had been all night.

“This is going to be *us* one day.”

She froze, the words sinking in with a weight that stole the air from her lungs. Slowly, she turned in his arms.

There was no smirk, no teasing glint. He just pulled her closer.

She wasn’t even sure what she meant to say. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

He shook his head just slightly, the pad of his finger tracing the line of her jaw with a thoughtless tenderness that made her want to cry. “You look surprised.”

“I– I just... Draco, we still have so much work to do. *I* have so much work to do before we even think about–”

“I know,” he interrupted gently. His eyes never left hers. “I’m not saying tomorrow.” His lips twitched into a half-smile. “But I’ve never been just half in with you. I want the whole thing.”

“The whole thing,” she echoed underneath her breath.

“All of it,” he said quietly, as though promising her. “The good, the bad, the ugly.”

Something in her chest pinched. She gave a shaky laugh, half-broken. “You’re going to make me cry in the middle of a wedding reception.”

“Good,” he murmured, and before she could say anything else, he pulled her back into his arms.

She let herself go at once, sinking into him as if she could fold herself into the space he made for her. His chest was warm beneath her cheek, the steady beat of his heart drowning out the laughter and music. For a moment, the wedding and the people and all the noise of the world melted away.

When he spoke again, his lips pressed against the shell of her ear. “I want to be your home.”

Her fingers curled into his shirt.

“You are mine already,” he added, quieter still. “I want you to have that too. With me.”

It was just him. His arms, his breath, his weight pressing her firmly into the present.

And she let herself forget everything else.
Because here, in Draco's arms, she could finally believe him.

The last notes of Bill and Fleur's song faded into applause and cheers, but Draco didn't let her go. He swayed with her, ignoring the shift of the room as a livelier tune sparked and couples began spilling forward, eager to join the dance floor.

He was cocooning her in his scent, his warmth. She could feel the drag of his breath through her hair, the press of his chin when he rested it there as though anchoring himself, too.

Hermione smiled into his chest, her lips brushing the fabric there. He wasn't dancing with her the way everyone else was. He was holding her. Keeping her. And she didn't need anything more than that.

From the circle of his arms, the world blurred into movement and light.

Harry and Luna were dancing, Luna utterly unbothered by Harry's awkward, clumsy attempts to keep a rhythm. She beamed at him as if he were the most graceful man alive, and Harry's answering grin was so dopey Hermione couldn't help but smile too.

Her eyes slid further until they caught on Ginny and Blaise. Ginny was flushed with laughter. Her hair tumbled loose as Blaise spun her out and caught her again with far too much confidence for it to look entirely innocent. He pulled her in against his chest like he'd done it a thousand times, one hand secure at her waist. And then, as if he knew exactly where Hermione stood, Blaise's dark eyes flicked up and found hers.

The corner of his mouth lifted, eyebrows lifting just enough to make the gesture a question. But his gaze didn't linger. It moved past her and landed on Draco.

Everything and everyone brimmed with love.

And for the first time in her life, Hermione didn't feel like she had to carry anything at all. She was exactly where she was meant to be.

And maybe, after everything, this was what it had all been for.

Chapter 30: EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July 2026

—

7 months later

The bistro's tables spilled out into a cobbled square, catching the last spill of sunlight of the day as the village wound itself down for the evening.

Warm, reddened light bled over the stones, but –
Hermione found herself watching *him* instead of the sky.

Draco leaned back in his chair; shoulders finally relaxed. His aviators caught the sunset, making it impossible to read his eyes. The sleeves of his white Oxford were rolled to his elbows, baring the length of his forearms. His hand wrapped loosely around a glass of sparkling water.

Hermione rested her chin on her hand, studying him across the narrow table.

Draco tipped his head back and exhaled slowly. He was tired.

“I hate that you’ve had to work so late every night this week,” she murmured. “It feels like I only get the tired scraps of you lately.”

Draco huffed a low laugh, tilting his head toward her. “Scraps, am I? Charming.”

She gave him a pointed look, though her smile betrayed her. “You know what I mean. I’m glad you got away on time today. More than glad, actually. I’ve missed you all week.”

He adjusted the cuff of his rolled sleeve, the corner of his mouth twitching. “If you’d just move in with me, this wouldn’t be an issue. I’d at least get to see you when I come home at two in the morning.”

Work had consumed him lately, a case too big to leave behind at the office and too tangled in his head not to bring home. And now he was tacking on the move-in conversation – one he treated as if it were the simplest solution in the world. This was the second time he’d brought it up over the past few weeks.

“Not funny.”

“Who said I was joking?” His aviators dipped lower on his nose as he looked at her properly, glinting eyes catching the last strands of light.

She pressed her lips together, but before she could steer the conversation elsewhere, he went on. “You realise you’re paying three times what that flat of yours is worth?”

Hermione raised a single brow. “You don’t care about rent prices.”

He leaned in a fraction, resting his forearms on the table. “I care that you’re throwing money at a place when you could just—” He gestured vaguely between them, like it was obvious.

It was easy for him to imagine it that way. What he didn’t seem to realize was that moving in together would mean splitting the rent, and his idea of a flat would bankrupt her before the month was even over.

Her flat was small, but it was hers. The shelves stacked with her books, the chair in the corner buried in clothes, the kettle that shrieked too loudly on the stove. It wasn’t much, but it was hers.

“I like my flat,” she said finally.

Draco studied her with that unnerving patience of his. “And I like you better in mine.”

She tried to laugh, but it came out thinner than intended.

“I’m serious,” he said, resting his forearms against the table before his calf brushed hers beneath it. “Tell me one good reason why we shouldn’t.”

Hermione bit her lip. Logic had always been her refuge, so she reached for it now.

“Because I’m trying to be realistic. Do you know how many couples don’t survive their first holiday together, Draco? Almost half.”

His brows drew together, confusion flickering over his face. “What now?”

She flushed, shaking her head quickly. “That’s just an example. But you know what I mean—“

“You’re not planning to break up with me, are you?” It came out half as a joke, but not entirely.

“No – God, no. Of course not.” She shook her head quickly, leaning in. “Draco, I just... it feels too soon. I love you, and I love being with you. And I love that you even think like that – moving in, planning a future with me.”

She drew in a breath, biting her lip before going on. “But there are still things we haven’t done. We haven’t really talked about the things we’ll need to be aligned on for a future together.”

He seemed unimpressed. “Like what?”

“Travels. Money. Our parents. All those little milestones couples usually hit before deciding something like this. You want to skip straight past them.”

His head tipped to the side, like he was sure he'd misheard her. "Parents? *That's* your dealbreaker? Hermione, your parents practically want to adopt me. They'd probably start boxing up your flat themselves."

Her smile slipped as her voice gentled. "Yes, my parents adore you. But I haven't seen *your* parents since the gala – what, nearly eight months now? I know it's different for you, that you're not close with them the way I am with mine, and that it's complicated. But they're still part of you. And it nags at me that I've barely even brushed against that part of your life."

The words landed, and his expression closed in on itself, a hint of frustration flickering over his face. He hated this topic – she knew that he despised that she was forced to mourn a gap he'd taught himself to live with.

Hermione exhaled, then pushed her chair back. She stood carefully, smoothing her blue summer dress so the hem didn't ride up, and stepped around the small table. Leaning down, she let her fingers graze the side of his face. His eyes fluttered shut behind his sunglasses at the touch, and she pressed the softest kiss to his cheek.

"I'm just going to the loo before we leave," she murmured, pulling back.

His jaw flexed, but he only gave a short nod, still sitting there with a stubborn aftermath of his own irritation.

When she returned, the mood at their table hadn't quite eased, though Draco had shifted in his seat, his glass nearly empty.

She offered him a tentative smile.

"Do you want to walk a little before we head back to the city?"

He glanced up at her, then nodded, pushing himself to his feet. He rolled his neck, loosening his shoulders, and then fell into step beside her as they left the bistro square behind.

Most of the shopfronts were shut by now, the day fading to black.

"This *holiday* you mentioned earlier..."

Hermione glanced at him. "What about it?"

He kept his eyes ahead, hands slipping into his pockets. "Is that something you'd like to do?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. I think it would be nice, don't you? Especially with you working so much lately... it'd be good to get away for a while. Just the two of us. No cases, no phones, no interruptions."

"I haven't done many trips outside of work. Real holidays, I mean. Not in years."

"Not even as a break?"

He shook his head. "When I go somewhere, it's never... relaxing." His mouth twisted faintly, as if at some private memory. "More obligatory than anything."

"Well," Hermione said gently, "if we did go, I'd want to actually see things. A little culture, a museum or two, but nothing too strict. I don't want an itinerary that feels like work. And if we don't feel like leaving the hotel one day, so be it."

Draco's lips quirked. "No beach?"

"Oh, a beach is always nice," she admitted, smiling. "But I wouldn't want to just lie there for a week."

"I would," he said, deadpan. When her brows arched, he added, "A private one. Or at least a private pool. Don't need anyone else gawking at you."

Hermione rolled her eyes, bumping his arm with hers. "Oh, Draco, really?"

He only shrugged. "Let's settle on some culture then."

She let out a quiet breath of amusement. "Wait – are we actually planning a holiday now?"

"Might as well." His tone was light, but the way he looked at her wasn't. "Where do you want to go? I'll sort it."

Hermione stopped mid-step, staring at him. "No, no, no. We're not doing *that*. If we go, we split the cost. You know I don't want you paying for everything."

He exhaled, long-suffering, because they'd circled this before. "Hermione, I have the money. What's the problem if I use it?"

"Because it just feels better to me if I do my part," Hermione said firmly. "If I contribute. Otherwise it isn't a partnership, it's—"

"I get that," Draco cut in softly. His hand brushed hers before he caught it properly, lacing their fingers as they kept walking.

The cobbled square fell away behind them, giving way to hedges and narrow lanes ahead.

He glanced sideways at her. "But – and don't take this the wrong way – I do make more than you currently. A lot more. So if we're talking fair... then fair means me taking on more."

Hermione frowned, her free hand tugging at the hem of her dress as she walked. "That's not the point."

"It is, though," Draco countered quietly, squeezing her hand. "You want equality. Fair enough. But equality means we both give what we reasonably can. And if you're set on splitting things, then my share will be larger right now. That doesn't make yours less. Not in a relationship."

She bit the inside of her cheek at the firmness in his tone. He wasn't brushing her off – he was reasoning with her. And somehow that made it harder to argue.

She just went quiet, her hand still wrapped in his as her thoughts kept circling. He didn't press, only kept her close as they moved down the lane.

A few isolated streetlamps lit the path in pools of yellow, while further away house windows punctured the dark. Between them, the shadows deepened with cooler air. It was eerily quiet but for their footsteps and the rustle of the hedges around them.

The wind stirred, raising the fine hairs at the back of her neck.

Draco tipped his head back, watching the first stars pierce through the darkening sky. Before she could follow his gaze, her phone chimed in her bag. Her hand went to it on instinct – she hadn't let it out of reach in weeks.

“Ginny?” Draco asked.

She nodded. “She says she's fine. But I swear, it's going to happen any day now. She's more than ready.”

Just a few days ago Ginny had sat propped on her sofa, shifting every few minutes as though her own body had become foreign. She'd reached a point where the waiting no longer felt magical, only endless.

Hermione's thumb lingered over the message before she locked the screen again, slipping the phone back. A little sigh escaped her, half fond, half anxious.

“I found something for *her* during lunch the other day,” Hermione said, unable to keep it in. Her voice lifted with her excitement. “It's this little knitted blanket with the tiniest embroidered foxes all along the border. And then – ohh – I just couldn't resist, there was this tiny cotton hat with little ears stitched on.” Her hands even came free of his to gesture, painting the picture midair. “I mean, she'll probably grow out of it in about three weeks, but still... I think she has to have something that's just hers, you know? Something *we* gave her?”

Draco watched, the twitch of his mouth giving away how much her excitement amused him. Without looking away, he slid his sunglasses from his head and hooked them at the neckline of his shirt.

The breeze tugged at her dress again, and she pressed a little closer to him.

“Ginny says that Blaise is more nervous than she is,” she smiled. “He keeps fussing and triple-checking the hospital bag every night. The calmer she gets, the more unhinged he becomes.”

Draco snorted softly. “Doesn't surprise me. He's been unraveling for weeks.”

“It's sweet, though. Ginny says she pretends to be annoyed, but she secretly loves it.”

They walked a few more paces, gravel crunching beneath their shoes. Then Draco asked, casually, “How many do *you* want?”

Hermione faltered. “What?”

“Kids,” he clarified, turning his head just enough for her to catch his profile in the dim light of a streetlamp further up the path. “Ever think about it?”

Her mouth opened, then closed. She tucked a loose curl behind her ear, buying herself time. “I... don’t know. I suppose I used to think two?”

“Two,” he echoed, like he was weighing the word. His voice had gone lower, rougher somehow. “Girl and boy?”

Hermione let out a shaky laugh. “I don’t think that’s how this works.”

His smirk was audible. “Doesn’t mean I can’t try.”

Her face went hot, her pulse stumbling. “Hypothetical babies are off the table tonight.”

He stopped just long enough to glance at her, eyes teasing even in the dark. “What? You don’t like the thought of it?”

She looked away, pretending to watch the hedgerows shifting in the wind. “That’s not what I said.”

The silence that followed wasn’t empty. It thrummed with something different and curled low in her stomach.

A rumble of thunder rolled in the distance. The wind picked up harder, pulling at her skirt and carrying a faint tang of rain on stone.

Draco tipped his head back, exhaling like he’d been waiting for this. “Looks like we’re about to get soaked.”

Hermione glanced up. The clouds had drawn tight over the rooftops, smothering the stars.

She wondered if they should turn back, or if there was still time to make the little lap they’d taken last time...past the bend where the hedges broke open. The lane led down toward a small lake. She thought about that view quite often lately – about the lanterns strung up from the neighboring gardens, spilling their glow across the water.

They’d stumbled on the village and the lake a few months ago, looking for somewhere to have dinner away from the city.

“I’ve thought about it.”

She glanced at him. “Hm?”

“Kids.” His voice was lower than the wind, like he wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted her to hear it. “With you.”

Every nerve sparked at once. She nearly stumbled over words that wouldn’t come out.

He let out a rough, humorless breath, shoving a hand through his hair. “Not now, obviously. You’ve got a whole checklist for us to work through before you’ll even consider living together. But it’s been there anyway. In my head. And I thought you should know.”

The rain came in light spatters, the first warning shots of the storm beyond.

Draco’s hand settled at her waist, steering her beneath a tree that arched thinly over the path. It offered little cover, but she barely noticed – the rain wasn’t what occupied her thoughts.

“You’ve thought about it?”

His eyes locked on hers, teeth catching his lower lip. “You, full of me. Carrying my child. Of course I’ve thought about it.”

Heat tangled down her neck even as the raindrops grew heavier, slipping through the leaves. Some tapped against her bare shoulders before trailing into the hollow of her collarbone.

Her pulse thrashed wildly, louder than the storm gathering overhead. She couldn’t tell if his words unsettled her or if the excitement coiling low in her stomach was something else entirely.

She could hardly hear her own voice over the patter of rain. “Does that... turn you on?”

The clouds gave way in that exact moment, drenching them.

Draco’s low chuckle was nearly lost to the thunder. He stepped closer, close enough that the spray from his shirt misted her skin. The white cotton started to cling to his shoulders, slowly turning sheer as water traced down through his hair, over his forehead, and off the tip of his nose.

“What do you think?” His gaze swept over her, unhurried, and she felt it like a hand pressed to her body. The rain caught in her lashes until they clumped, mascara smudging in dark streaks she couldn’t see but feel “That I enjoy coming so deep inside you *just* because it’s nice and warm?”

Both the rain and the wind picked up further. Quickly her hair was growing heavier, strands sticking to her cheeks, her arms slick and cold to the touch. Everything around them felt... wet.

Her words tumbled out, innocent in their certainty. “It feels incredibly close. Closer than anything else, when you come inside me.”

She wanted to look away, but she couldn’t. Not when he was staring at her like that.

His gaze lingered a beat longer before he stepped into her, guiding her backwards, deeper into the shadow of the tree. The damage was already done with her skin burning with the nearness of him while the soaked fabric of her dress clung cold to her curves.

She let out a breathless laugh.

Draco's mouth twisted, urging her back further until the rough bark of the tree pressed against her spine. He shifted impossibly closer, his broad frame now trying to shield her from the worst of the gusts.

His mouth found hers before she could retort, rain seeping between their lips. She sighed into him, melting and tasting the storm on his tongue as he kissed her like he'd never stop. His breath trembled against her, and she couldn't even complain about the scraping of bark against her partly exposed shoulders.

When he barely pulled away, they both gasped. She shivered, her hands sliding up his damp forearms.

Her words were just a whisper against his lips. "But what is it about that thought that... turns you on?"

For a beat, he only breathed her in, lips brushing hers as the storm drowned out everything else. Then he whispered, filthy and intimate enough to make her knees buckle. "How could the thought of me fucking you so deep until it takes not turn me on?"

A humiliatingly broken sound escaped her throat against her will.

Draco hummed, lips dragging along the soaked skin of her jaw. "Oh yeah. That gets to you too, doesn't it?"

Hermione shook her head furiously, water flying from her curls, but her body betrayed her, pressing into him, thighs clenching under her dress.

Her lips parted, but no denial came. The words tangled in her throat, dissolved under the weight of him. Until the fight drained from her limbs.

She sighed, the sound slipping out against her will, and her eyes fluttered shut as if that might shield her from the admission. But it was useless. The picture he'd painted – his claim and her body carrying the proof – rose vividly in her mind. Shame burned through her veins, but so did the want behind it – flooding and so much deeper than she could have voiced.

It was just a fantasy. Just words. And yet her whole body yearned to feel him.

Hermione's hand moved without permission. She slid down the drenched fabric of his shirt, over the sharp plane of his abdomen, until she found him hard beneath his slacks.

His forehead pressed to hers as her shaky hand rubbed along the length of him. His hips followed her strokes, his hands digging into the bark beside her head as he braced himself.

He hissed between gritted teeth, eyes darting once around the shadowed lane. Not a soul in sight. Just the storm, the trees and the night around them.

He looked back at her, soaked and trembling against the tree.

His voice was little more than a rasp, almost hopeful. “Do you want me to fuck you here, baby?”

She bit her lip, shame burning hot, but her hand only gripped him tighter through his trousers. “We shouldn’t—”

“Oh, we should.” His mouth found the strap of her dress, teeth tugging lightly. “The way your hand’s shaking? You need it.”

He dragged the strap down, rain-slick fabric sliding off her shoulder until her breast spilled free. His thumb brushed her hardened nipple, the cold and his touch colliding until she whimpered.

“Draco—” It came out half-plea, half-warning, but her hand rubbed him harder anyway, the friction rough through soaked fabric. He tipped his head back, groaning, rain sliding down the sharp line of his throat.

His palm landed with a teasing slap over her breast, making her gasp, and her fingers flew to his belt. He laughed low, helping her fumble the buckle open while his other hand shoved up her dress, fistfuls of drenched cotton gathering at her hips.

The moment his waistband gave, she shoved at it, frantic. He freed himself, urgent, then hauled her up against the tree. Her back scraped bark, her legs wrapped tight around his waist, the slick drag of rain-soaked fabric clinging to her thighs.

“Be a darling,” he groaned, cock heavy against her. His grip tightened on her thigh, his voice ragged in her ear. “Help me get inside you.”

Her shaking hand guided him, the blunt head pressing where she needed it. “Please... just push it in.”

The plea cracked her open, shame and need tangled into one. She tipped her head back, eyes flicking toward the faint glow of houses in the distance – could they see? The thought made her clench hard around nothing, and then he clumsily pulled her knickers aside and pushed.

The stretch stole her breath. Draco’s hips stuttered, his mouth breaking on a whimper pressed against her throat. He clutched her thighs hard, hauling her higher as the bark bit through her dress. She cried out when he went deep without stopping, making space for himself with each hint of a thrust.

“Kiss me—” he shuddered, lips trembling against hers as he fucked her, first harder, then faster. She moaned into his mouth, nails clawing at his shirt, every movement wet and unforgiving, rattling through the tree at her back.

Their kisses turned chaotic – bitten-off gasps, wet mouths colliding with desperate tongues. His breath shook against hers as he groaned into her, rutting like he'd die if he stopped. Rain streamed down his face, plastered his hair to his forehead.

"Fuck, I can feel you taking me ... you're so tight, so good—" he rasped.

She whimpered, hips tilting up, barely coherent, trying to meet every snap of his. He'd never let her fall. He was everywhere... inside her, around her, claiming her.

"Say you want me to fill you up – fuck – *please* say it."

Her nails dug into him as she moaned, "Come deep inside me, Draco. Please."

Thunder split the sky as he fucked her hard, lips crushed to hers, every thrust a claim. The storm blurred into nothing but his cock stretching her, filling her so deep she swore he was carving himself into her.

Her body burned, the heat unbearable. Until she cried out, clutching him tight.

"Rub your clit for me," he groaned, voice breaking. "I'm not – fuck – I'm not going to last."

Her shaking fingers rubbed herself, jolting when the motion dragged against how wide he was splitting her. The sound that escaped her undid him – he groaned like he'd been gutted, hips pounding, fucking her through the shuddering waves as she came. Her body clamped tight around him, pulling him deeper, and his rhythm faltered into something harsher and needier.

"That's it – I'm – oh fuck –" His words broke off in a wrecked moan as he buried to the hilt, grinding deep and then stilling as he spilled his seed inside of her.

This wasn't new – he came inside her all the time. But somehow...

She sobbed his name into the storm, legs still locked around him, desperate to hold him there. "Stay... don't pull out yet, please..."

"I'm here," he muttered underneath another moan, chest heaving.

He stayed inside her as long as her body would allow, both of them trembling as the rain continued to pour. But when he eventually pulled out with a low groan he set her down.

Her legs shook under her, vision blurred, the night swaying. His hands steadied her until her feet found the ground. She blinked up at him through wet lashes, the water dripping from her hair into her eyes.

Draco leaned in, still breathless, one palm cradling her face where the other stroked between her legs. His fingers smeared the sticky and slowly dripping remainder of what they had done into her skin. He was quiet for a moment, eyes searching hers like he was trying to memorize her.

When he finally spoke, his voice was rough, snagging on the edges of what they'd just felt.

“I know,” he said, and had to stop, swallowing hard. He gave the smallest shake of his head, rain running down his temple. “I know we’ve got a lot of work to do. You and me. We’ve got to figure out everything we haven’t even touched yet.”

He breathed in, thumb dragging along her cheek. “But listen to me. I want to put in that work. Every single day. I don’t care if it’s messy or hard or nothing like what we thought it would be –because it’s *us*. And that’s the only thing that matters to me.”

Her chest ached with every word, the storm muted beneath the sound of him.

His hand slid to the back of her neck, pulling her closer, his forehead pressed to hers. His voice dropped, low and absolute, the words shaking the air between them.

“I’m going to marry you, Hermione Granger. Not now, not tomorrow. But one day. Because you and I...this? There isn’t a version of my life where I don’t choose you or the family that we will be for each other.”

The rain blurred her vision further, or maybe it wasn’t just the rain. She couldn’t tell. All she could do was hold onto his shirt, soaked and clinging to him, and try to breathe through the quake in her chest.

It wasn’t neat. There was no logic to why he knew, why she did too.

“I love you, Draco.”

They were just two people beneath a storm, holding each other like the world might split apart around them.

“I love you more.”

And when he kissed her again, slowly and satisfied this time, it wasn’t the storm, or the dark, or even the world that swallowed her whole.

The rain blurred away until there was only him. Her Draco.

Thirty-six hours later

Hermione had barley slept.

Every time she had closed her eyes last night, her mind had raced. The message had come just as they had settled for the evening. Blaise, texting from Ginny's phone, had let them know they were finally on their way to the hospital. He'd promised to let her and Draco know when the baby was here.

Sleep had been impossible after that. Her chest had thrummed with a nervous energy she couldn't quiet. Even when Draco had rolled toward her in the dark, sliding a hand down to her thigh, spreading her knees with a low murmur. He'd lowered his mouth to her, licking and distracting her in the most beautiful way known to her. He hadn't stopped until she was trembling and weak against the sheets, until her thighs had ached from clenching around his shoulders and her insides were sore from his fingers.

And still, hours later, her pulse had raced on.

Now, in the cold glow of the hospital light, it hadn't eased. Her stomach fluttered with nerves she couldn't quite explain.

This little person – this brand-new life – was already here, waiting to be met.

She'd changed twice before leaving.
What did one wear to meet a new family member?

Beside her, Draco's shoulder brushed hers. The nervous energy radiating from her didn't seem to faze him at all. He looked maddeningly composed, hands tucked into the pockets of his trousers as if they were headed to dinner, not about to meet an entirely new human being.

He caught her glance, and one brow lifted in quiet amusement.

"Relax," he murmured.

"I am relaxed," she lied, though her sigh betrayed her.

The corner of his mouth tugged higher. "You've never been less relaxed."

Her heart thudded unevenly. "How are you *not* excited?" she whispered, more to herself than him. "She's barely a day old. We'll be the first friends to see her."

His smirk eased into something softer. "I *am* excited."

Hermione's lips pressed into a thin line. Excited didn't look like this. Excited was the sleepless night she'd had, the restless pacing, the endless cycle of nerves that no distraction – not even Draco's very determined attempt to exhaust her – had managed to quiet.

"She won't remember today," he went on, voice a tad too reasonable. "Odds are she'll sleep through the whole visit. All you'll have to do is hold her for a minute."

Hermione froze. *Hold her*. The words alone made her palms sweat.

“I’ve never even held a baby before,” she admitted quietly.

Draco’s brows lifted. “Seriously? Not once?”

She shook her head, trying to not let his confidence get to her. “No. Have you?”

“Of course,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And I didn’t drop any of them, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. “Very funny.”

He hummed. “Isn’t it?”

She huffed out a sound, caught between a sigh and a laugh.

“You’re overthinking it,” he said more gently. “She’s small, not made of glass. You’ll be fine.”

Fine. As if there weren’t a thousand ways to get it wrong... her arms awkward, her nerves contagious, her own clumsy fear pressing onto someone so impossibly new and impressionable.

Her stomach swooped.

The lift chimed, and the doors slid open onto a corridor lined with pale walls and the faint scent of antiseptic. Draco gestured for her to go first, his hand brushing lightly at the small of her back. Even that steadying touch made her breath catch, though it did nothing to calm the flutter behind her ribs.

Door numbers blurred past until she spotted the one Blaise had texted this morning.

The door was cracked open, a wash of warm lamplight spilling into the hall. Hermione’s mouth had gone dry. She couldn’t help but look back at Draco. He dipped his chin toward it, brow arched again. *Well, go on then.*

Her heart pounded. She raised a hand and knocked, featherlight, barely more than a whisper.

Draco’s arm slid past hers to push the door open fully. “After you,” he murmured.

Hermione forced herself to step across the threshold.

The blinds were half-shut against the late morning sun, muting the room in a gentle glow. Ginny was propped up in bed, hair mussed and skin pale, but her whole face lit the instant she saw them.

“Hi,” Ginny whispered, pressing a finger to her lips before tipping her head toward the corner.

Blaise was sprawled on a narrow chaise, the too-short blanket leaving his shoulders and legs uncovered, his mouth slack as he snored softly.

“He finally crashed an hour ago,” Ginny muttered, exhaustion softened with affection. “He wouldn’t stop fussing.”

Hermione’s lips twitched, but any sound faltered when her gaze dropped lower. Down to the folds of blanket gathered in Ginny’s arms.

A bundle. So impossibly small it hardly seemed real.

Her heart clenched so tightly it hurt.

She hadn’t even seen her face, and already it was unbearable. A rush of love so sudden, ripping her chest wide open.

She took a hesitant step closer. Ginny shifted gently, peeling the blanket back with careful fingers.

And there she was.

The most beautiful baby girl Hermione had ever seen. Her cheeks were round and soft, skin a warm bronze that glowed against the pale blanket. A button nose, the tiniest bow of a mouth, lashes dark and long against her face. Wisps of black curls dampened her temple.

She was perfect, impossibly perfect, as though the world had conspired to place all its beauty into something so small.

Hermione’s breath trembled out of her, eyes stinging. The love cracked through her again, fiercer than before, as if her whole body was bending under the weight of it.

The only sound she managed was a trembling, “Oh.”

Draco stood close behind her, unusually silent, as if even he understood words weren’t enough anymore.

“This is Calla Maeve Zabini,” Ginny whispered.

Hermione’s vision blurred. “She’s... she’s beautiful.” The words felt inadequate, flimsy against the enormous wave of love inside her. “How are *you* feeling?”

“Tired,” Ginny said, but her eyes were shining. “Good tired, though. She’s perfect.”

Hermione couldn’t even look away from Calla for a second. “I can see that.”

Ginny adjusted her hold, wincing faintly but smiling through it. “Would you – mind holding her just for a second? I really need the loo.”

Hermione hesitated. “Oh – I don’t know if I –”

“I’ve got her,” Draco said calmly from behind.

Ginny nodded gratefully, shifting carefully as Draco stepped forward. He bent without hesitation, sliding his hands beneath the bundle like he’d done it a hundred times. His movements were unhurried, one arm cradling her weight, the other supporting her tiny head.

Calla stirred, gave a soft sigh, and settled again against his chest.

Hermione stayed where she was, hands twisting uselessly at her sides.

Draco crossed to the small sofa by the window, lowering himself carefully. He shifted so his shoulders blocked the bright spill of light, cradling Calla in the shade of his frame. His hand cupped the back of her tiny head, steady and protective, while he watched her with a concentration Hermione had never seen before.

“You know,” he murmured barely above a whisper, “your dad told me often how nervous he was to meet you. Don’t know why. You’re an angel.”

Calla stirred faintly.

“I suppose he just knew how much you’d matter. Gets to a man, that kind of thing.”

Something in the way he spoke tore straight through Hermione. She stood there frozen, drinking in the sight of him, broad shoulders bent around little Calla, his entire world suddenly narrowed to her.

Then he chuckled low under his breath. “You’ve got your dad’s calm already, I can tell. That’ll serve you well.” He shifted her slightly, thumb brushing the edge of her blanket. “And with your dad’s charm and your mum’s looks...” His smile tugged wider, unguarded. “... you’re going to break a lot of hearts one day.”

Hermione’s breath left her in a rush she didn’t mean to make. She was just utterly undone, her heart flipping, falling for him all over again in a way that felt inevitable.

The bathroom door clicked open and Ginny padded back across the room, her hair mussed but her smile warm. She sank onto the bed and patted the space beside her.

“Come sit,” she whispered to Hermione.

Hermione nodded, perched on the edge of the mattress – but her gaze never left the sofa. The sight of Draco and Calla just pulled something deep and aching in her chest.

Then, for the first time, he looked up.

His eyes found hers instantly. He didn’t even hesitate. “Do you want to hold her?”

She nodded without thinking, pushing to her feet. Her body moved before her mind could catch up. She crossed the room and sat down right beside him.

“Here,” Draco murmured. He shifted Calla and helped guide Hermione’s hands to support her head and keep her arms under Calla’s back. “There you go. You’re holding your first baby.”

The weight of Calla settled into Hermione’s arms, warm and fragile, and her heart thudded so hard she thought it might burst. She looked down at Calla’s tiny face, then back up at Draco, who was watching her now.

From the bed, Ginny's mouth twitched with something like amusement. "You're frighteningly good at this, Malfoy."

Draco shrugged, almost sheepish. "I've got practice. Babysat my neighbor's kid for a few hours a week, years ago."

A low groan came from the chaise. Blaise shifted, stretching one long arm overhead before blinking blearily at the room.

"Why didn't you wake me?" His voice was rough with sleep as he pushed himself upright.

Draco didn't even glance over, his tone dry as he adjusted the edge of Calla's blanket. "Showing weakness within the first twenty-four hours. Not a good look, Zabini."

Blaise huffed a laugh, rubbing a hand over his face as he stood. "Sod off." But his gaze softened when it landed on Calla, then on Draco, then on Hermione cradling her.

He stepped closer, and Draco rose to his feet. For a moment, neither said anything. Then Draco's hand gripped Blaise's shoulder. Blaise returned the gesture just as firmly. They pulled each other into a hug that lasted long seconds. "Congratulations you two. She's perfect."

When they let go, Blaise's eyes were suspiciously bright, though his grin was back in place.

He dragged a hand over his face as he crossed to the bed, the last traces of sleep clinging to him. Ginny shifted upright, making room at her side, and caught his hand the second he sat down.

For a moment they just sat like that, gazing down at Calla in Hermione's arms. Ginny leaned against him with a tired smile, and Blaise bent to kiss her hair. Something unspoken passed between them, a flicker of nerves, and then Ginny gave him the smallest nod.

Blaise cleared his throat, glancing back at Draco and Hermione. "So... we've, um... we've been talking about something."

Ginny's lips twitched. "More like going in circles about it," she admitted, giving Blaise's hand a squeeze. "We weren't sure if we should even bring it up yet, but..." She trailed off, eyes soft as they flicked toward Calla. "It just feels right."

Hermione's chest tightened, her arms instinctively cradling Calla closer.

Blaise rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, a rare flicker of nerves on his face. "Look, we know it's a big ask. And it's not—" He broke off, exhaling a quiet laugh at himself. "We don't want you to feel cornered into it."

Ginny picked up, her voice much calmer than Blaise's. "But we've thought about it a lot, and honestly... there's no one else we'd trust more." She glanced at Blaise, then back at them. "We'd love for you two to be Calla's godparents. If you'd want that."

Hermione blinked at them, stunned. For a heartbeat, she couldn't find her voice. The baby shifted faintly in her arms, and when Hermione looked down at her tiny face.

The tears came and held hot, one slipped down her cheeks without thought.

"Oh," she whispered, swallowing. Then again, stronger this time, "Of course. Are you sure? I mean—"

Draco's hand touched the small of her back.

"We'd be honored," he said simply with no hesitation.

Blaise let out a long breath, his grin breaking through even as his eyes betrayed him, damp at the edges. "Good. That's...*good*." He laughed under his breath, pressing his lips to Ginny's hair.

Ginny's head dropped to his shoulder. "See? I told you they'd say yes."

He looked back at Draco and Hermione, his expression soft. "Thank you. Really. Means more than we can say."

Hermione shook her head, smiling through her tears. "No. Thank you... for trusting us with her."

Calla sighed softly in her sleep, as though sealing the moment herself. Hermione held her tighter, and for a fleeting instant, the four of them sat in perfect quiet, the weight of what had just been promised settling warm and certain around them.

Blaise and Ginny rested against each other on the bed, both of them looking exhausted but blissfully content. He kept stealing glances at his daughter like he couldn't quite believe she was real, his grin breaking through again and again no matter how hard he tried to school it.

And Hermione?

Hermione's heart had widened beyond measure, love spilling into every corner of her being until she could hardly contain it. When she looked at Draco, she saw the future written in him as plainly as the moment before her. The world still turned, but at last her soul was still.

Draco was not a maybe. He was her reason.

Her home.

– PART I – THE END –

– and so begins the next part of their story –
WRECK A GRANGER
(the sequel – now on ao3)

I had the absolute joy of being a guest on The Dramione Effect podcast, which released Oct22nd 2025! 🎙️ We did a deep dive into Wreck A Malfoy, and it was such a fun conversation. A huge thank you to Tobi for being such a wonderful host and for giving authors a voice in this wild, beautiful fandom. You can listen now on Spotify and Apple if you'd like to join us for the fun before or after diving into Wreck a Granger! (and follow her on insta for all the good stuff!!! @the.dramione.effect)



Chapter End Notes

I don't have the words for this right now. And this isn't a goodbye - so I won't write it as one. I've already sobbed enough while writing these final pages.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!