

Crookshank's Legacy

by magalena

Years have passed since the end of the war. Two lonely people meet, brought together by circumstance—or was it fate—or through the interference of a meddling familiar?

Original prompt used: California, a bungalow and a fat, grey tabby cat

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Warning for character death.

Thanks go my beta deemichelle for all her help. And thanks also to Talesofsnape for cheerleading. Any mistakes are my own.

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Hermione watched Crookshanks hop down and meander slowly across the room. He got halfway to the archway leading to the kitchen area when he stopped dead in his tracks. Just froze there really, and stood unmoving for a full two to three minutes before finally, with a little shake, he continued on his way.

Hermione sighed. He did that more and more often these days. It was as if he'd simply forgotten for a moment where he was going and how to get there. Kitty dementia, she called it. He moved more stiffly and slowly too, and she knew his joints probably ached. To be honest, she really had no idea how old Crooksie was. She'd gotten him from The Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley before the school year in 1993, but he'd been no kitten, even then. They'd said they had no idea how old he was, but he'd been there in the shop for a long time.

She'd had him for nearly seventeen years, but figured he had to be close to twenty at least, and most likely much older. He was thought to be half Kneazle, and they were known to live longer than regular Muggle cats. But the witch at the shop had hinted to Hermione that her choice for a familiar had already had several owners, and he had been returned multiple times before she'd bought him and bonded with the orange furball. It was quite possible that he was as old as twenty-five or more.

She had never regretted the purchase of her dear familiar, but she knew now, all these years later, that his time was growing short. The thought saddened her. Just last night, he'd been lying on the arm of her favorite comfy chair as she read, when he'd suddenly fallen off. Just...bang...down onto the floor. She had been scared to look, thinking that he'd dropped over dead. But when she finally got the courage to look see, he was there staring up at her with a confused look on his face, as if wondering how he'd gotten there.

"Mrrrowww," came Crookshanks' call from the kitchen. Hermione went to see what he wanted. The cat stood by his dish, looking up at her expectantly and meowing sorrowfully.

"Oh, Crooks. I fed you already, boy. Look there's still some in here." She bent down and jiggled the dish a little, rattling the kibble around. He gobbled the last few bits up then stalked over to the door and circled around, looking at her, waiting for her to let him outside. With a sigh she opened the door.

She had reservations about letting her pet out to wander about. She feared he might actually forget how to find his way home. He couldn't even find his way from the living room to the kitchen half the time anymore, after all. Still, he had always roamed free: at Hogwarts, at home in England, here in California. It seemed cruel to try to contain him now. Hopefully he'd find his way home without any trouble. Besides, she was fairly sure that he rarely left the yard anymore. He did occasionally slip through the hole in the back fence. He couldn't get into much trouble there, as the neighboring bungalow had sat vacant for the last several months, ever since Neville and Pansy had moved further up the valley.

Thinking of her two friends, who were the most unlikely pairing on the face of the earth, made Hermione break into a big silly grin. They were truly an odd couple, but that was another story entirely.

Hermione turned back to sit at the table and drink her tea before it cooled. Sitting there, she reflected on how quickly time had passed and how she and Crooks had ended up in this place. Not that she was unhappy with her life, but it had been a rather long and twisted journey.

Seventeen years since she had acquired Crooks. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and he'd acquired her, she thought with a tender smile.

Twelve years since that terrifying day when Harry had saved their world and defeated Voldemort.

Ten years since she'd finally accepted that she would never be able to reverse the memory charms on her parents. They were forever lost to her. Although she could take some consolation, however hollow, in the thought that at least they were alive.

Eight years since the greatest humiliation of her life, and her turning point, the day when Ron had neglected to show up for their wedding. That was the event that had been the catalyst to her leaving England.

Seven years since she had finally settled here in this small northern California town called, ironically enough, Potter Valley. She just couldn't seem to escape that Potter influence. She'd never thought she would ever end up settling in the U.S. She'd thought Americans were brash and headstrong and altogether too bossy, always thinking they knew what was best for everyone else. But then a lot of people had described her just that way. She had found the folks here in the valley to be friendly and kind and very willing to welcome a stranger into their community.

Five years since Neville had come here to visit and never left, first living at her house for six months before buying the bungalow across the back fence. There was a large garden, and Neville had turned it into a herbalist's delight, growing all kinds of things, both magical and Muggle. Before long he'd moved Pansy in, much to Hermione's disbelief. She never in a million years would have imagined Neville and Pansy as a couple, but somehow they just worked, despite being complete opposites, or perhaps because of it.

The community here in Potter Valley was a rather eclectic group: winemakers, herbalists, jewelry makers, basket weavers, soap-makers, candle-makers, farmers. All in all, there was a rather large variety of artisans and other artsy types of individuals. And a fairly good concentration of magical folk was here, living amongst a rather accepting population of Muggles. (Aging hippies, her mum would have called them).

Hermione was one of the resident writers. She'd actually begun to make a name for herself, writing young adult fantasy and science fiction stories. She lived more in her imagination than in the real world these days.

She had little to no contact with most of the people from her former life. Harry came to visit about once a year all by himself. Ginny always refused to come with him, supposedly too busy, but always sending her love, according to Harry at least. Hermione doubted deep down that was very sincere. It was as if she blamed Hermione for the break up, like it was her idea to have Ron walk out on her on their wedding day. But Harry was married to Ginny and thus to the whole Weasley family by proxy; so, he had little choice in the matter but to go along with whatever Ginny and Molly deemed proper. And although he didn't like what Ron had done to Hermione, Harry was still close friends with him.

She'd told Harry she understood his position, and she would never expect to him choose between his wife and her. But deep down it hurt; it felt like a rejection. She'd stood by him through everything, but he was unable to do the same for her. In a sense she felt she'd been betrayed by Ron and then Harry by association. She knew it probably wasn't rational, but it was the way she felt. In one fell swoop she'd lost the man she loved, her adopted family in the wizarding world and her best friend.

With a sigh, Hermione powered up her laptop and worked on the next chapter of her newest book for the next couple of hours.

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"Mrrowww..." Crookshanks called from the screen door. Getting up to let him in, Hermione noticed that he wasn't alone.

"Well, who's this then, Crooksie? Have you brought a friend?" Bending down, she let the big grey tabby cat sniff her fingers before she scratched him behind the ears, eliciting a purr of approval. "Aren't you a handsome boy?" she asked as she picked up the cat to cuddle in her arms and scratch his tummy. "Whoops," she declared. "So sorry, your highness, not a boy at all I see, but a pretty princess instead. My deepest apologies, your majesty."

The cat jumped from her arms and circled around her ankles, rubbing up against her. "Is this a date, Crooks, you handsome devil? Have you promised her a meal?"

Crookshanks sat before her, and blinked his eyes as if in agreement. "Well, all right then. I guess this calls for the very best. I wouldn't want to skimp for your guest," said Hermione with a smile as she opened the cupboard and took out a can of tuna. She grabbed two of her gran's best china saucers and divided the fish in half, setting them down on the floor. Crooks waited for the tabby to choose first. Then he took the other dish. Both cats ate daintily until the plates were empty.

Princess, as Hermione began calling her, became a regular visitor. She showed up every couple of days either on her own or tagging along with Crooks. Hermione liked the cat, who reminded her a lot of Professor McGonagall's Animagus form. And having the other cat's company seemed to perk Crookshanks up considerably. As far as Hermione was concerned, that was a real blessing. She considered adopting the tabby, but Princess never stayed around too long and she looked well taken care of, so Hermione assumed that there was an owner somewhere.

It wasn't long before she realized that the signs of activity around the bungalow and the appearance of Princess were linked. She recalled then that Pansy had mentioned something about renting the house out since they hadn't found a buyer, and she'd mumbled something about a friend of hers needing a place. Hermione hadn't been paying attention at the time because she'd just had the inspiration for a new story line pop unbidden into her head. She'd been busy trying to work out the details in her mind while at the same time trying not to appear to be ignoring whatever her friend was going on and on about. Now she desperately wished she had listened a bit more attentively.

Being something of an insomniac herself, Hermione first noticed more activity late at night: lights on and off, the radio playing, someone moving around. She noticed all of these things before she ever saw Princess's owner in the light of day. Then, one morning she saw him through the foliage between the two yards. He was tending one of the massive herb beds that Neville had lovingly created and nurtured. He looked rather tall and lanky, and was wearing jeans and a black tee shirt with his dark hair pulled back into a pony tail. As her mum would have said, another aging hippie.

A couple of days later, Hermione was becoming frantic when she couldn't find Crookshanks. She realized that he'd been gone since late morning. She had been bitten by sudden inspiration and had become lost in writing, managing to type her way through two and a half chapters in one sitting. Before she knew it the afternoon had slipped away while she sat at her keyboard, and Crooks had never come back from his morning walkabout during all that time.

"Crooks, where are you?" she muttered as she hurried to check all his favorite haunts. He wasn't on the patio where he liked to lie on the sun warmed slate tiles. And he wasn't out by the fish pond that Neville had installed, where he like to sit and watch the koi swim lazily back and forth. And he wasn't in the crook of the tree by the kitchen window where he liked to climb and sit while he surveyed his own little kingdom, reminding Hermione of the Cheshire cat. Hermione was just about at her wits' end when

she remembered Princess.

Crooks always brought her through the hole in the back fence near the old gate. The gate hadn't been used since Nev and Pansy had moved out, and it had become overgrown with vines. Hermione sliced them away with a wave of her wand in her haste to check the neighbor's yard for her lost familiar. As she stepped through she saw him lying in the yard with the man bent over him trying to pour something down his throat.

"Hey, you! What do you think you're doing? Get away from my cat," she cried as she rushed forward. She knocked the vial out of his hand as she scooped Crooks up in her arms. "What is that? Were you trying to poison my cat?" she demanded angrily.

"How dare you accuse me of poisoning that mangy furball," he snarled. "I was trying to help him."

That voice! She knew that voice without a fraction of a doubt. Turning to her mystery neighbor, she looked up into the face of none other than Severus Snape.

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"Professor Snape!"

"Miss Granger!"

They both shouted at the same time. Hermione stepped back, stumbling as she caught her foot on the gardening tools he'd left lying there. He quickly reached out and grabbed her arms to steady her before she could fall, pulling her forward until their bodies nearly touched.

"Thank you, sir," she mumbled as she eased out of his hold nervously.

"What in the name of Beelzebub's hairy butt are you doing here?" he asked bluntly.

"I could ask the very same of you," she retorted. "And for your information, I live here, have for seven years now."

"Seven years, you say?" Glancing down at the cat still nestled in her arms, he asked, "That can't possibly be the same mangy furball you owned back at Hogwarts. Is it?"

"Yes, this is Crookshanks. He's part Kneazle, they live longer than normal cats, you know."

"Yes, I do know. But for all of that, he's not well, as I'm sure you're aware. His joints are stiff; I've noticed how he moves when he's with my Minnie. I was just trying to give him a potion to help with his arthritis when you barreled in here accusing me of poisoning him."

"Oh..." Hermione realized she had jumped to conclusions. "I do apologize for that. I was just frantic to find him, and when I saw you trying to give him something... I just thought... well, I don't really know what I was thinking. But I'm sorry I said that. Please accept my apology, professor."

"Severus."

"What?"

"My name is Severus."

"Oh, right. Of course it is," she replied dumbly.

"I accept your apology, Miss Granger."

"Hermione."

"What?"

"Hermione, you may call me Hermione, Severus."

"Very well then."

They stood awkwardly for a several seconds before they both tried to talk at the same time again. Severus gallantly allowed her to go first.

"Yes, well... Well, thank you for trying to help Crooks. I'm sorry I spilled the potion you were trying to give him." Hermione suddenly recalled his earlier comment. "Is Princess your cat?"

"Princess?"

"Well, the big, grey, tabby cat. That's what I've been calling her. What did you say her name was? Minnie? You know the very first time I saw her I thought she looked an awful lot like Professor McGonagall's Animagus." Suddenly a most twisted thought jumped unbidden into Hermione's brain. "Oh my God! That's not possible... Is it?"

"What's not possible? What are you on about?"

"Your cat... It's not... her? You haven't somehow..."

"By Circe's tits, what are you accusing me of now?" he demanded. "Do you honestly believe that I have somehow cursed Minerva into her Animagus form and kept her prisoner or something? I merely named the cat that because she reminded me of her, for no other reason."

He turned to storm off into the house but was stopped by Hermione's hand on his arm. While holding on to him to keep him from escaping, she let Crooks slide gently to the ground with her other arm. "Please, Severus, wait. Once again I must apologize for my abysmal behavior and for allowing my mouth to get ahead of my brain. Of course I don't really believe you capable of doing such a thing to Minerva, even if it were possible. Sometimes my imagination gets the best of me. I make my living with it you see? I write stories and sometimes I just don't think, but just spout whatever pops into my head. I really am sorry. Again."

He studied her closely before he finally nodded. "Very well. Once again apology accepted," he said gruffly.

"Thank you, Severus. I know I shouldn't even ask since I ruined it myself, but do you have any more of the potion you were going to give Crookshanks for his arthritis?"

"I do and I will get some for you. So, is that true what you said? You write stories for a living? I would have thought you'd be busy freeing house-elves, or spending your days babysitting your hapless friends, or even running the entire Ministry. At the very least, why aren't you married to Weasley by now? You aren't, are you? I haven't seen him around here at all."

Her hand had remained on his arm, but she jerked it away now with a gasp as if she'd been burned. Everyone...absolutely everyone...knew about the debacle of her would-be wedding day. How she'd been rejected by the love of her life, who hadn't even had the decency to tell her to her face that he couldn't bring himself to go through wedding. He had instead slunk out of the country the night before without a word and let her go through the humiliation of waiting all afternoon for a groom who had no intentions of showing up. And everyone in the entire wizarding world knew the whole sordid story that while he couldn't marry the girl he'd supposedly been in love with since their school days, less than three months later he was married to a Romanian witch he'd just met. For Snape to ask her that was little more than a slap in the face.

Hermione spun on her heel and left without a word, stalking across the yard.

"What?" he shouted after her.

She gave him an icy glare as she slammed the gate.

"What did I say?" he asked.

Hermione stomped up her steps and slammed her door even harder.

Severus looked down at Crookshanks who still stood there, looking up at him with a sour look on his face.

"What did I say?" he repeated, as if he expected an answer from the ginger menace.

Severus stared after her, wondering what in the hell he'd said to illicit that reaction. He could have just shrugged it off and walked away. That's what he would have done in the past. But instead he decided he had some homework to do on Miss Hermione Jean Granger. She intrigued him; he had no idea why, but he was quite determined to figure it out.

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Hermione spent the rest of the day banging things and slamming around her house in anger. Every time she began to calm down she would recall Snape's question *"At the very least, why aren't you married to Weasley?"* The nerve of that man! He was an infuriating, impossible, arrogant prat, and she couldn't believe she was going to have to put up with having him living just across her back fence.

Maybe she could convince Pansy and Neville to evict him. In lieu of that she began constructing a story plot in her mind involving a smart assed Potions Master who was attacked by flying zombies. Never mind the fact that zombies didn't fly. If vampires could sparkle in current-day fiction, then, damn it all, zombies could fly in her little world.

As she sipped her afternoon tea, she'd just worked out the part in her head where the flying zombies were about to carry the bastard away somewhere to eat his face off, when she was interrupted by a meowing at the door. Looking up she saw Princess...scratch that...Minnie there.

Hermione tried to ignore her, but the cat was persistent and would not go away, meowing louder and louder. Hermione finally gave up and opened the screen door admitting the feline. Tied around her neck were a roll of parchment and a vial of potion.

"Well, Miss Minnie, I guess I can't hold your Master's actions against you, now, can I? That would hardly be fair," said Hermione with a sigh. "What's this you've brought me?" Untying the bow she removed it from the cat's neck, and setting the vial carefully on the table she unrolled the parchment. Unsurprised, she recognized the spiky script of her former teacher.

Dear Hermione, (you did grant me leave to use your given name)

I now find our positions are reversed from earlier, and I am the one who must offer an apology.

You may find it difficult to believe, but honestly, I had no idea. Please believe me when I say that my comments regarding you and Mr. Weasley were totally innocent and not an intentional dig at you. I am sorry if my words caused you any pain, as that was certainly never my intention. I might add that what I have since learned has merely reinforced my belief that Ronald Weasley is indeed an idiot.

As promised earlier, please accept this potion for your cat. Administer two times daily, one to two drops either directly into his mouth or it may be mixed with his food.

S.S.

Hermione sat with a thump and reread the note. Was it possible that he truly hadn't known and had just been making idle conversation? And then she'd stomped away in a huff, probably looking like some kind of deranged idiot.

With a sigh, she covered her face with both hands before sliding her fingers back through her hair, pulling it hard. Oh, God! What in hell was the matter with her? Why couldn't she just get over it? It had been eight years, eight fucking years, and she still fell apart whenever someone brought it up. Other people managed to get on with their lives. Ronald certainly had without any difficulty whatsoever. Why couldn't she?

Even Neville who had shown up on her doorstep, broken hearted after being jilted by Hannah Abbott, had bounced back and fallen in love with Pansy. Here she was years later, single, with only her aging cat for company. It was time to let go of the past and get on with the job of living. And she had Severus Snape to thank for this epiphany.

In her mind she put the flying zombies on hold to save them for some future story. So, Severus was safe from having his face eaten off, for the time being anyway. Hermione pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and penned a short note, thanking Severus for the potion. She rolled it up before tying it back onto Minnie's neck, telling her to deliver it to her master.

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Dusk was falling as Hermione made her way through the gate into Snape's yard with a plate of brownies. They were a peace offering and a thank you for Crookshanks' potion. When she was upset, baking calmed her, but there was no way she could possibly eat all the results herself.

Crooks had followed her and was now joined by Minnie, both cats twining around her feet as she walked. "Stop it, you two. Are you trying to kill me off by tripping me so you can steal the kitty treats I have?"

"Hermione?" Severus' voice came not from the house but from the yard, off to the side. She hadn't seen him, both due to the cats' distraction and to the falling gloom of night. But, she now noticed him sitting in an Adirondack chair, a glass of wine in his hand, the bottle sitting on a low table next to him. A second chair sat on the other side of the table. "Would you care to join me?" he asked, indicating the other chair. At her nod he conjured a second glass and poured the wine for her as he explained, "I enjoy coming out here in the evening to watch the sunsets; they're spectacular. I often stay to stargaze. I find it quite relaxing."

"Yes," she agreed. "It is beautiful." She tipped her head back to look up at the evening sky.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" he asked.

Setting down the plate of brownies and sitting in the opposite chair, she explained, "Brownies...a peace offering. It seems I've done nothing but cock things up and ended up having to apologize for my actions over and over since meeting you this afternoon, and now I must repeat myself, yet again. I am sorry for my reaction to your question about Ronald. You must think me quite full of myself to believe that everyone in the wizarding world is aware of my past humiliations. I overreacted and I'm sorry once again."

"No, need to apologize," he replied. "You were probably right. Everyone does know your story, thanks to the *Daily Prophet* and Rita Skeeter's tabloid journalism." He smirked at her little gasp of outrage. "But I myself have been absent from the wizarding world for many years, and thus have not kept abreast of gossip. Hence I had no idea my words would wound you; that was certainly not my intention. And for my ignorance I am sorry."

Hermione sighed. "I'm sure I should have developed a thicker skin by now. It's been eight years. I don't know why it continues to bother me so much after all this time." As

she spoke she bent to scratch both cats in turn behind the ears. Then, reaching into her pocket she produced the aforementioned kitty treats and divided them equally between the two.

Sipping his wine, he gave her a sideways glance and asked, "Do you not, really?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you really not know why it continues to bother you so much?"

"I suppose you are going to tell me," she responded, taking a fortifying sip of her wine.

"You care for him."

She choked on her wine, coughing, then pounded on her chest to clear her breathing. "Are you insane? Care for him? I don't. I hate the bastard."

He gave her that look, with an arch of one eyebrow. It reminded her of his teaching days and made her feel like his student again; she wanted to slap him silly. The last thing she wanted now was to feel like his student. She gulped down the rest of her glass of wine instead and reached for the bottle to refill it; she was going to need it. "Okay, Dr. Freud, let's hear your theory."

"I'm not saying you are still in love with him. But think about it. You cared for him deeply at one time, enough to plan to marry the man. And honestly, I believe that Weasley cared for you as well, but not enough or at least not in the way he should have to make a life together. And because of that he ran, he hurt you...rejected you in one of the worst ways possible. On your wedding day for Merlin's sake! What is more important to a woman than her wedding day? Instead of coming to you, telling you of his doubts, his fears, talking to you like an adult, he ran away like a scared little boy. He snuck away in the dead of night, leaving you to suffer the backlash of it all."

"Yeah, well Ron's a runner. It's what he does when he can't handle things. It wasn't the first time. I guess I should have seen it coming," she explained sadly.

"And that's precisely why you can't let it go. In your mind you are still trying to figure out the why of it all. Why you didn't realize there was a problem. Why you didn't see it coming. Why things happened the way they did. You wonder if you could have changed things, done something differently. It haunts you, and when you are reminded of it by others, it angers you. You are right about one thing though, Hermione, you need to find a way to get over it. It's not healthy to dwell on the hurts of the past. They fester."

Hermione opened her mouth as if to speak, but then stopped. She started again and stopped. Finally she just slumped back in her chair with a deep sigh and took another gulp of her wine as she stared up at the stars. Crookshanks jumped up onto her lap to rub his head against her. She petted him, mindlessly drawing solace from the act without even realizing. Finally she spoke, "I suppose you might have something there. But then you would know, huh? The voice of experience and all that."

Severus folded his arms across his chest and gave her a weak glare. He wanted to throw her one of his best bastard teacher stares from days gone by but he just didn't have it in him any longer. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"Well, who would know better than you, after all, about dwelling on past relationships and lost loves."

He made as if to protest, but then gave it up, muttering something about "Harry-Bloody-Potter..." and, "should have minded his own sodding business."

"So, is that how it was for you? You couldn't let it go. You just couldn't stop yourself from wondering why? About Lily, I mean. Wondering what might have been, if you had done things differently."

"Well, fuck. When I started telling you all of this I wasn't thinking of it in relation to my own past... but I suppose there are certain similarities. You should learn from my mistakes, Hermione, if you can. I know it took me too many years to let go of the past and to move on with my life. Far, far too many years."

Hermione turned to look at him. As he reached for the bottle to refill their glasses, she laid her hand on his and gave it a little squeeze. "Thanks for the advice, Dr. Freud," she said with a little smile. "I'll try to take it to heart."

He looked down at her hand on his, and for just a split second, she thought he might sneer at her, or push her away. But he didn't, he turned his hand in hers and gently squeezed back, as he nodded his approval. Then, he poured the wine, finishing off the bottle.

Hermione's heart beat a bit faster and her mind was racing. *I just touched Severus Snape, and he let me, in fact he touched me back. I think I liked it! Hell yes, I know I liked it.*

Lifting her glass, she said, "I propose a toast, Severus. To the future. To letting go of the past and making a new and better future."

He clinked his glass to hers and echoed her words, "To the future."

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The two spent the next several weeks getting to know each. Not as teacher and student or even as compatriots, fighting for the same cause. But as two adults, who both now lived a rather solitary, isolated life. Two who had been hurt by relationships in the past and thus were now more tentative, cautious of rushing into anything. So they did the getting-to-know-you-better dance, sometimes getting very close and other times keeping their distance, sometimes they just circled around each other warily.

Hermione had learned that, although Severus had traveled about for the first two years after he'd left England, he had ultimately settled in a small village nestled in the tropical rain forest of Costa Rica. While there he had discovered an abundance of rare and unusual plants, insects and animals that made for some interesting potions ingredients. He now had patents on at least nine new potions with several others pending; while not insanely wealthy, he could live comfortably for the rest of his life. After a decade spent living practically as a hermit, he had come to terms with his past, and finally found a sense of contentment in his life and in himself.

So, he'd decided a few months back that it was time to join the real world again. Hermione was surprised to discover that Pansy had not actually rented the bungalow to Severus directly, but to Draco Malfoy. Draco, unhappy with the state of Malfoy affairs after the war, had emigrated to California even before Hermione had. It seemed he had been living in a beach house in Manchester, California less than two hours away; that had been Severus' first stop after leaving his tropical paradise. However, not wanting to wear out his welcome with his godson, he'd been planning to leave when Draco had offered to procure a rental home from Pansy.

Severus in turn learned just as much about Hermione, aside from her well publicized and failed engagement to Weasley. He learned about how she had lost her parents to irreversible memory charms of her own making, and the guilt she bore for it. He learned about Harry's annual visits and how, other than that, she'd had virtually no contact with anyone from England, aside from the Longbottoms. He also discovered the story about how those two had ended up together, which as far as he was concerned was a match made in Hades, but they seemed disgustingly happy. He wouldn't have believed it in a million years if he hadn't seen them with his own two eyes. So happily, sloppily in love they were he probably would have poked his eyes out with his own wand to erase the image, if Hermione hadn't shushed him and told him to behave himself. *Honestly*, the nerve of the woman.

He'd also read several of her books, and although books geared toward the young adult market were not his normal choice of reading material, he found them tolerable. He had to admit her imagination was quite...well, imaginative. He could see how her mind leaped to ideas such as him trapping Minerva in her Animagus form and keeping her as a pet. She told him how, in the twisted world inside her head, he had nearly been subdued by flying zombies, a thought that caused even him to shudder in revulsion.

As the weeks passed the two got to know each other better and better. Yet, for some reason, they kept a bit of distance between them. As if each were just a little afraid to take that final step that might change their growing friendship into something more.

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"Hermione," called Severus, one morning, as he entered her kitchen. "That bloody ginger menace of yours has impregnated my Minnie! I can hardly believe him capable of the act at his age, the little bastard, but there's no one else it could be." He stopped short at the sight of Hermione sitting cross-legged on the floor, the aforementioned ginger menace lying quite still in her lap. "Hermione?"

She looked up at him, her face enshrouded in such an aura of grief it made his chest ache. "He... he's gone," she said.

"Oh... Oh no... Hermione, I'm so sorry."

"I should have expected this, after all. It wasn't a question of if this day was going to come, but when," she said in a monotone.

Severus could tell she was in a state of shock. Looking around the kitchen, he took action. "Stay here for a just minute, I'll be right back," he said. He quickly put the kettle on and prepared the tea pot, realizing that she needed sustenance. Then searching quickly through her cupboards and counters, he found what he needed and efficiently transfigured it. Coming back to Hermione, he knelt next to her.

"Hermione, you need to get up off the floor, come over to the table. I'm making some tea for you. Give him to me; I'll take care of him for you."

In a panic, she clutched the cat close to her. "No, I don't want you to dispose of him... to vanish him."

"Hermione, I wouldn't do that. Who would think of such a thing?" Then he realized, that probably would have been Weasley's solution. "I'm not Weasley, you know. I really do believe the man is an idiot. Look, sweetheart, I've got a nice wooden box here. We can put him in here, and later, we'll bury him out in the garden. Maybe next to the koi pond, I think he'd approve of that, don't you?"

Hermione looked dumbly from the box back to Severus. "Yes, it is a very good idea. Where did you find a box?"

"I transfigured it," he responded. "But, you no longer have that lovely teak wood cutting board you were so fond of. It was for a good cause though, don't you think? And that green dish towel is now the satin lining for the box."

"Oh, Severus... it's perfect," she whispered as she fingered the edge of the dark green satin.

"Here, then. Give him to me, and I'll just set the box over by the door until you're ready. All right?" At her nod he carefully took Crookshanks' body from Hermione and placed it in the box. He had to enlarge it a bit so that he didn't have to stuff the cat in, but instead could lay him inside gently.

After setting the box next to the door he came back to Hermione and helped her up and over to the table. She stumbled a bit on the way, and he wrapped his arm around her waist to support her. After getting her settled, he went to wash his hands then poured the boiling water into the teapot. As the tea steeped, he brought a warm washcloth and carefully, tenderly washed her hands and face. When he noticed that she was starting to shiver and her teeth were chattering a bit, he knew that shock was setting in. He grabbed an afghan off the sofa in the living room and shook it out to place it around her before pouring her tea and offering it to her.

She sipped her tea in silence for several minutes. Her hands trembled, and he could tell that she was trying to hold back her tears as she sniffled and her body shuddered.

Severus reached out to take her hand in his. "Hermione, it's all right to cry."

She looked at him blankly before asking, "Is it?"

Puzzled, he answered, "Of course it is."

"And you won't think I'm... weak? Or call me silly, or tell me I shouldn't get so upset over a stupid cat?"

Severus growled under his breath, thinking that if he should ever meet Weasley again he would gladly hex him to kingdom come. "Hermione, of course I won't think or say any of those things. You have suffered a shock and a dreadful loss. Crookshanks was much more than just a cat, more even than a mere pet. He was your familiar. He knew you better than anyone. He could sense your emotions."

"Really, do you think so?"

"Dearest heart, I know so. I saw the two of you together. I witnessed it with my own eyes. When you were upset or anxious, he would come running immediately. He would climb into your lap and cuddle up to you; he brought you comfort when you needed it most."

"Yes, he did, didn't he?" she said, looking at Severus in wonder. "I can't believe you noticed that," she replied as a few tears slipped down her cheeks.

"He has been with you for the past seventeen years, through many difficult times. Hermione, Crooks was even more to you than just a familiar; he's been there for you through thick and thin; he was your friend. Of course it is normal to mourn the loss of a well loved friend."

"Oh... Oh... Se... Sev... Severus! Thank you for understanding, and for be... being here for me."

"Shhhh... I'll always be here for you, for as long as you want."

"What if... What if I want you forever?"

"Then I'll be here forever."

"Oh, Severus!" Hermione cried, throwing her arms around him as the floodgates finally opened. Sobs shook her body as she broke down and cried out her grief.

Severus gathered her close, pulling her across his lap and holding her tightly while she cried. His hands stroked her back as he hummed against her hair while murmuring and cooing nonsense words of comfort. "Shhhhh... it's okay, sweetheart... I've got you... Shhhhh."

~*~

Unseen by either human, a ghostly form rose from the box by the door and slipped through screen to sit next to the fat grey tabby cat.

"Finally," exclaimed the tabby, staring through the screen door at the two people cuddled together on the chair by the kitchen table.

"I know," replied the shade of Crookshanks. "I was beginning to think the two of them would never see what was right in front of their faces."

"Too bad it took your demise to get them together," sighed Minnie.

"Yes, well, let's face it, if it weren't for you, my dear Minnie, and for your master and his magical potions, I would have been gone weeks ago. Then my poor, dear girl would have had to deal with this all alone. It's better for her this way, really."

"I suppose, but I, for one, am going to miss you. You great ugly brute."

"And I you. Is it true, by the way?"

"Is what true?"

"What he said. Are you expecting a litter?"

If cats could blush, Minnie would have. "Yes, it's true."

"If one of them turns out to be a little ginger menace, make sure that one stays with her. Will you do that for me, Minnie?"

"Of course, my dear Crookshanks. Of course."

With a nod and purr he faded from sight.

~fin~

AN: Crooks' behavior in the beginning of the story is based on the actions of my own aging "ginger menace," bless him. Some may consider Severus to be a bit OOC near the end, but I do hope that after having spent many years coming to grips with his past, he might be a bit more mellow than the man we knew before. Written for the 10 year anniversary celebration of ss/hg fanfic.