

# The Better Man

*by ayerf*

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Crookshanks agrees.

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Disclaimer: JK Rowling owns it all. While this was written for the winning bidder of an auction, I personally earned nothing from it.

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A suffocating darkness lay heavily upon him. The agony of Nagini tearing open his throat mingled with the bitter sting of seeing Lily's eyes in Potter's face.

*'No!'*

He didn't want that to be the last thing he saw. He didn't want to die. Hadn't he atoned for his sins? After all he had done, he still deserved death? Arthur Weasley survived that accursed snake's bite, why not him?

But bumbling Arthur was well liked. Plenty of people cared about what happened to him.

*'No one would care if I die.'*

He was doomed. To slowly exsanguinate, if the venom didn't steal his life away first. Potter and his little friends wouldn't try to save Dumbledore's murderer. It was a wonder they bothered to collect his memories.

Sensation abruptly returned. First the taste of blood, tinged with something else. Salt?

Then burning softness against his lips, accompanied by something pinching his nose closed. Air blew into his mouth, down into his lungs blown in by another person, he realised. Muggle first aid, artificial resuscitation.

Then he was coughing, choking, gasping for air. He could smell the stale, musty air of the Shrieking Shack again, mixed with the tang of his own blood. And something else... Something... feminine? Not perfume, but the natural scent of a woman.

He cracked his eyes open, squinting to focus on the face so close to his.

"Miss Granger?" he rasped, his throat dry. So one of Potter's little friends *did* care, after all.

She sat up, as if suddenly aware that she was still close enough to kiss him.

He grimaced, suddenly aware that he lay in a sticky pool of his blood, the floorboards oddly soft beneath him. Cushioning Charm, presumably. She really did care, even for his comfort.

He blinked. His throat... it didn't hurt. He hand flew to his neck, fingered the smooth skin where Nagini had struck*How?*

A movement on Granger's shoulder drew his attention, a flash of scarlet. A phoenix... Fawkes!

Even if Potter didn't think he deserved to live, Dumbledore's phoenix clearly thought otherwise. And someone else, of course. He looked back at Granger, grubby from battle and stained with his blood from her efforts to keep him breathing.

She looked beautiful.

His cheeks burned at that realisation. Where did that come from?*Lily* was beautiful. Granger was... was...

Here. Alive. Cared enough to save him. Lily was long dead, and...

*'Be honest, Severus.'*

Lily hadn't cared enough to try to save him from a path of darkness. Hermione had, from a path so dark death awaited him at the end of it.

"Thank you," he murmured.

She blushed, mumbling something about it being nothing, and reached down to help him to his feet. He needed the support, light-headed as he was, with spots dancing in his vision. Phoenix tears were all very well for healing wounds, but they did nothing for the blood he'd lost. He swayed. Too much.

He landed on top of Hermione, the floor still conveniently cushioned under them.

*'I should get up. Poor girl must be winded, despite those soft floorboards.'*

He made the mistake of looking at her, to check that she was uninjured. A blush stained her cheeks most becomingly. She met his eyes, a matching heat flaring in them. He suddenly felt as though the breath had been knocked out of him, instead of out of her.

It had been a long time since he had a woman in his arms. Too long. And now, such temptation... He really should get up.

Her hands cupped the back of his head, fingers threaded into his hair. She pulled his head down to hers, her soft lips touching his. A gentle kiss.

He deepened the kiss, delighted when she touched her tongue to his. Almost of their own accord, his hands found their way under her clothes, and...

Severus jerked awake, hips thrusting against the pillow under his body. Where Hermione had been.*Damn, damn, damn.* No, where she hadn't been. A dream. Only a dream. *Damn!*

He rolled aside, flopping onto his back, cock hard and aching. Severus glared down at it. He reached for his wand and flicked it at himself. His erection wilted. While far more pleasurable to deal with it manually, waking to the grim reality that Hermione was not in his bed and likely never would be made it impossible to slip back into the fantasy world of his dream.

Damn dream. Taunting him with what he wanted but could not have.

Still, it had been a good dream... A *very* good dream, even with the disappointing lack of a naked Hermione. Far better than the reality of him staggering to his feet with her help and leaning on her, weakened by the blood loss, before Fawkes took them to the hospital wing in a disorientating flash of oddly cool flame. Where he'd been sick on Hermione's shoes on arrival.

A faint red glow was visible through the open door of his bedroom. Either he'd forgotten to extinguish the fire in the sitting room, or Fawkes had yet again refused to find a better home. Much as he did not deserve a phoenix, Severus only put up a token resistance: it would be madness to try too hard to get rid of Fawkes, for the potions ingredients apart from anything else. Any feathers or tears were entirely dependent on Fawkes's cooperation, of course, as rather than Fawkes being his familiar it was more like Severus was the pet. Especially as he owed the damn bird a life debt, or a half-life as it was shared with Hermione.

Not that he really resented being in their debt. He just wished that Fawkes didn't come in Gryffindor colours. And that Hermione... His cock twitched*Think of something else.* Which was not easy. Hermione was almost always on his mind, and as evidenced by that damn dream, those thoughts were not pure.

After he helped Hermione return her parents' memories and convinced them that her actions had been necessary for their safety, reconciling them, she had told him that he could count his debt to her as fulfilled. She had tried to convince him that his actions against the Dark Lord did that even before she helped save his life, but he still felt something binding him to her. Or was that lo...*attraction?*

*'How pathetic can I get? No point lying to myself.'*

Fine, then. Love. Just his luck to fall for another unattainable woman.

Severus fumbled for his wand. A quick slash of it drew his thick curtains apart so that daylight streamed in through the window. Although his quarters were deep in the Hogwarts dungeons, the window took the view from the top of the astronomy tower. Something that still pained him, after doing what Dumbledore asked of him. As long as he didn't actually look out of his own window, the light source was fine.

He rolled out of bed and stumbled over to his chest of drawers, selecting fresh underwear and...

That wasn't a pair of socks. He pulled back his hand, staring down at the hard, heavy lump resting on his palm. Gold glinted up at him: his Order of Merlin, First Class, awarded to him six months ago with his pardon by the then new Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Much as Severus did appreciate finally having one after all his considerable pains, he'd give it up in a heartbeat if it meant he could have Hermione. Not that she was a possession to win.

He threw the medal back into his sock drawer. It was depressing to handle it anyway, considering how many had been awarded posthumously, which was precisely why he kept it buried among his socks. Bloody thing kept trying to escape, though, as if it had a mind of its own and wanted to be framed or otherwise proudly displayed. Maybe that was why Weasley flashed his own about so much, although Hermione had resisted with her own.

Resisted so much, in fact, that she'd lobbed her own into the lake shortly after she'd been given it. Severus still wondered if it had found its way back to her of its own accord, or if it was instead prized by the giant squid or the merpeople.

Later, when their friendship was close enough, she'd confessed that it reminded her far too much of one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes. Understandable, if strange... as Weasley had been affected far worse by that same Horcrux, yet couldn't get enough of his precious medal. Come to think of it, that might explain why he was so

susceptible to the medal's influence as well. Weak minded fool.

He finished dressing, throwing on his robes. Although a Sunday, he'd be teaching those who'd taken the faculty up on their offer of private tuition. Due to the mess the Dark Lord had made of the curriculum, all students had to retake whatever year they had been in or should have been in but it had been recognised that some of them just would not fit in as ordinary students any more.

Thankfully Potter and Weasley had accepted Shacklebolt's offer of honorary NEWTs and leapt straight into training as Aurors. Hermione, unsurprisingly, had regarded that as cheating and jumped at the chance to finish her schooling with one-to-one teaching.

From eavesdropping in the staffroom, Severus gathered that Hermione was once again studying every subject she possibly could, save Divination, meeting him most days for Potions and Defence... and also lingering afterward to talk about anything and everything. Everything except the reason why her presence was such sweet torture for him.

She was with Weasley. Unattainable. Telling her of his feelings would only drive her away, or worse, she'd pity him. Clearly she only thought of him as a friend and mentor.

If only she'd realise how unsuited Weasley was for her, she'd...

*'Forget it.'*

In his bitter experience, such thoughts on what could be only twisted the knife. Especially when they turned into 'could have been'. One day Hermione would no doubt marry Weasley and have his red-headed brats (even if her brown hair should be genetically dominant, all Weasleys were red-haired).

All Severus could do was to accept that she was unattainable. Perhaps he should pluck up the courage to make it clear to her that she had other options, but he had no right to dictate to her whom she should choose. It would be a fine line between voicing his feelings maybe asking (fine, *begging*) her to pick him and telling her to ditch Weasley and take up with him instead.

A tray appeared on his bedside table, with his usual breakfast of toast and Marmite, glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee. A house-elf's not-so-subtle hint that he was late for breakfast, and that, if he wanted to eat before Hermione arrived, he'd better get on with it. He tucked in.

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"Oh, *damn it*, how could I have forgotten?" Hermione slapped her forehead and turned back to Severus, closing the door to his office behind her.

"Clearly you must have remembered whatever it is, as you haven't even left the room yet." Severus beckoned to her. "Come, sit. What is it?"

Hermione perched on the edge of his desk. "Thing is, I'm in need of my own personal Potions master. I can brew most things myself, but... I don't quite trust myself with these...this. Not when I know you can do far better."

"What can your pet Potions master do for you?"

"It's Crookshanks. He's getting on, and..." Her throat moved as she swallowed. Severus had to force himself to focus back on her face, or he wouldn't be able to resist the impulse to caress that delicate length of smooth, bare skin. "It's his joints. He can still move well enough, but they're clearly paining him. I know I should brew something myself to help him, or get something from the Magical Menagerie, but..."

"I could do better. And I will, don't let it worry you. He's a half-Kneazle, yes?"

She nodded.

"As I thought. That's important for exactly what kind of potion he needs, and what dosage." It would be more complicated to brew, but no reason to make Hermione feel any more reluctant to ask this of him than she already was. Although quite why she'd feel guilty about a Feline Arthritis Easing Draught was a mystery to him.

"Thank you." Her smile was oddly hesitant. Something was clearly bothering her. But what?

He thought back on what she'd said since remembering her request. Was it just a slip of a tongue that she'd implied there was more than one thing she'd wanted him to brew?

"What else can I do for you?"

"I... Nothing. I can..."

"Brew whatever it is yourself? I'm sure you can. And do an..." He barely swallowed the word 'adequate' in time. Old habits died hard. "You'd do better than many of the potions sold in apothecaries. But while your technique is Outstanding, you're not... you lack... you aren't..." How to say it without insulting her?

"It's all right, Severus." She smiled genuinely at him and patted him on the head. Not so very long ago, she wouldn't have got away with that. He still glared at her for taking the liberty, but there was no real heat behind it. "I know I'm not as good as you when it comes to Potions. I could brew Polyjuice in my second year, but I bet you were already modifying it then."

"Flatter me all you want, *my dear*, but it won't distract me. What potion can be so terrible that you can't bring yourself to ask me for it? Have you finally come to your senses and decided to poison Weasley?"

"I won't deny that it's tempting sometimes, but no. I know I do complain about him, but I do... he's..."

"He's your boyfriend," Severus stated, only a tinge of the contempt he felt bleeding into his voice. "You love him."

Hermione nodded, looking away. "I'm just not sure what kind of love it is. I don't think I will know for sure until after..." She flushed crimson.

"You think you'll know if it's romantic love if you..." He couldn't say it. He didn't want to even think it. Hermione, having... with Weasley. The thought made his blood boil. It sickened him.

"I hope so. And it would get him to shut up about wanting to show me how much he loves me. Somehow it's even more irritating when he's trying to cover up his moaning about me not being ready... and, well... I'm curious about what it's like."

"Sex, Hermione. Copulating. Intercourse. Shagging. *Making love*," he spat, stomach turning at associating the words with Weasley. "If you can't even say the word, you can't be ready."

"Fine, sex, then."

So much for that argument... perhaps he should have kept his mouth shut, as challenging her only set her further on the path to Weasley's bed. But he'd had to say something, to stop himself from falling to his knees and begging her to let him satisfy her curiosity.

"The fact is that besides not being ready before now, I didn't want to run the risk of the infamous Weasley fertility. If I'm not sure I'm in love with him, I certainly don't want to

end up trapped into marriage with Ron."

*'There's always abortion.'* He bit his tongue. Besides being insensitive as Weasley, that would not serve to discourage her from this madness.

"I don't trust any contraceptive I know of, as none of them are one hundred percent effective. Do... do you know of anything?" She managed to raise her eyes back to his, much as she looked as though she wanted to bolt from the room.

Severus sighed. It was so tempting to lie and tell her that nothing was reliable enough. But this was Hermione. She likely already knew the answer and was fishing to find out whether he could supply her with it.

"There is," he choked out.

"Are you all right?" She looked at him with such warm concern that he wished it was out of more than friendship.

"I'm fine." He still sounded as though he were being throttled. He cleared his throat. "Because it's for you, I'll brew it."

Even if it meant he could not help but imagine what she would use it for. Again, he flinched away from the thought of her in Weasley's bed.

Maybe he could tamper with the potion so that it would repel Weasley? But no. It would hurt her to be rejected by the boy. That was something Severus did not want. All he could do was to hope that she would see sense and refuse Weasley. It might still hurt her, of course, but not as much as it would if her heart was the one being broken.

Surely Weasley couldn't hold her interest forever. Even if she did make use of this contraceptive potion with him, it was not being a woman's first that was important, but her last. Of course, Severus's problem was that he wanted to be her first, last, and only one himself.

With that in mind, it was worth attempting to get her to have second thoughts.

"But I do want you to think about this very carefully. You shouldn't feel you have to sleep with that twit just to shut him up."

She glared at him. "I told you! That's not the only reason, not even the main reason. I do want to have sex. I want to know what all the fuss is about. And who better to have it with than someone who loves me?"

Severus slammed his fist down onto the desk. Hermione jumped, almost falling off the desk, staring at him with wide eyes. He'd scared her, but it was either that or shout that he loved her.

*'Remember, that fine line... It's her choice.'* But he had to make sure she'd thought this through. And maybe, just maybe, make it clear that she had another option.

"He doesn't deserve you. He left you and Potter. What kind of spineless fool deserts not only his friends but a girl he professes to love?"

"I told you. That wasn't Ron's fault. He was under the influence of the Horcrux locket."

"Don't lie to me. Or to yourself. He was not wearing that when he left, was he?"

Her shoulders slumped. "No."

"And even if that malevolent influence was still on him with it off, can you honestly tell me that it created anything that wasn't already there?"

"It amplified the worst in us. But it doesn't matter. He came back."

"I beg you, think hard before you entangle yourself any further with that boy. He left you. He could do it again. You need someone more... constant."

"Like who? I can't imagine you mean Harry. Or Draco your precious godson would never want a Mudblood, and he's hardly constant either. Not that I fancy either of them anyway. No one I'm attracted to is like that. Except..." Her breath caught, and she stared at him, horrified, her face pale.

"Oh, no," she whispered. "Except you. And you... you're not just protesting because you think Ron's not right for me, but because you... I... we... Oh, God, what a mess. I'm sorry."

Severus opened his mouth to try to tell her that she was mistaken, but he couldn't get the words out. He had a feeling that she'd know he was lying anyway. And that would only make her pity him all the more. He didn't know how many more stricken apologies he could take.

Yet... that wasn't pity in her gaze. It was guilt. Wait... Her words echoed in his mind *'No one I'm attracted to is like that. Except you.'* Attracted. To him. *Merlin.*

And that guilt... she was attracted to Weasley too. The brat was her boyfriend, after all. Knowing Hermione, being attracted to anyone who was not her boyfriend was something she felt very guilty about. What a mess indeed...

The solution was obvious to him. She should ditch Weasley and...

*'No.'*

It was her choice. Forcing her to choose between them would only destroy their friendship. While Weasley was clearly not the right man for her not a man at all, in Severus's eyes she had to be the one to see that for herself.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she repeated, sliding off the desk and standing in front of him. "So, so sorry. I... I didn't know. I... you..." She hesitantly reached out to stroke his cheek with her fingers. He'd never felt such a tender caress. He leaned into her hand, eyes sliding closed.

When she next spoke, her voice was right by his ear, her breath brushing his hair. "I... is this love?"

He opened his eyes. She was standing close enough for him to pull her into his lap. He clenched his fists, resisting the urge. Her head was right next to his. He only needed to lift his head and he could... No. It had to be her move.

Her lips brushed his for a mere, tantalising second before she jerked away as if burned, bumping into the desk behind her. Tears welled in her eyes.

*'Typical.'* Bile burned in his throat. As always, kissing him made the girl cry.

"I can't," she croaked. The tears spilled over, trickling down her cheeks.

That... that was guilt, again. He was familiar enough with it to recognise it when he heard it. Of course. Weasley was still her boyfriend, and she'd kissed someone else. Or almost had, whatever the brief contact between their lips counted as.

"I've got to go. I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

She fled.

\* \* \*

Crookshanks sniffed at the spoon his human offered him. At least she'd stopped trying to hide the nasty stuff in his food, an untrustworthy act he refused to fall for. That, and it made his meals smell revolting.

It still made his nose turn up, but it wasn't contaminating his chicken. And judging from his human's pleas, taking her dubious offering would make her happy. He took a cautious lap at it with his tongue.

He stared at the spoon, eyes narrowed, his fur standing on end.

It didn't taste how it smelled. Suspicious...

Yet his Kneazle senses whispered to him that the maker of that stuff could be trusted.

He took another lick at the spoon, a clearer picture forming in his head of the maker. Dog-Man's rival, the one with the big hooked nose and greasy hair.

Crooks cleaned off the spoon with another stroke of his tongue, savouring the pleasant taste and gleaning what else his instincts could.

*Interesting...* Hook-Nose wanted to mate with his human. More than that, he wanted to keep Bushy-Hair as his mate, rather than mate with as many females as he could. Humans were strange, but at least Hook-Nose had good taste.

Of course, by that argument, Red-Haired-Brat also had good taste. Crooks growled to himself, too low for his human to hear. Fine, he'd give Brat that much, but Hook-Nose was better, giving him nice tasting syrup, even if it did smell horrible.

Crooks turned away from his human, and padded into the sitting room, and jumped up onto his chair. He paused mid-paddle at the cushioned seat. The stiffness. The painful joints. Gone! So that was what the nasty-smelling-nice-tasting stuff was for.

*Right.* This was Hook-Nose's lucky day.

Crooks leapt down from the chair, dipped a paw into the pot of grey powder sitting next to the fireplace, and flicked it in until green flames roared up. His fur bristled, but he leapt into the fire even as he yowled his destination.

He rolled to his feet in Red-Haired-Brat's home, sneezing *Ugh*. He'd have a tongue coated with soot with his next cleaning. Bushy-Hair and Hook-Nose had better appreciate this...

Crooks darted upstairs until he reached Brat's bedroom door. He jumped up, catching hold of the door handle. A quick scrabble and it opened. He dropped down inside, padded over to Brat's bed and crawled under it.

A few swipes with his claws dislodged the piles of glossy magazines filled with naked women, until he could reach his target. He sunk the claws of one paw into the cover and tugged it out from under the bed.

During his time at Brat's home after Bushy-Hair had been forced to abandon him by those bad men, he'd made a point of finding this dubious book's hiding place. Before his long months away from Bushy-Hair, he'd seen Brat give it to Lightning-Scar, but he could tell from Brat's voice that he'd kept his own book and given Scar another.

The mere act of hiding the book made it dubious, but his Kneazle senses had screamed when he first saw it. What Brat had said when talking about it to Scar only made them scream all the more.

So far Crooks had done nothing with the knowledge of the dodgy book currently in his claws, but that was only because he hadn't known of a better mate for his human. With what he now knew of Hook-Nose, that changed.

He caught the book between his two front paws, holding it so that he could put the spine into his mouth. Lifting his head, Crooks was thankful that it wasn't a thick book. He set off downstairs, leaving the ransacked room behind him.

Crooks had to put the book down to retrieve the Brat family's pot of powder, knocking it off the mantelpiece and pushing some of the scattered powder into the fireplace. He hooked his claws into the book again so that he could meow clearly, then reluctantly rolled into the green fire, taking the book with him.

\* \* \*

*Whatever you decide to do, I will always be here for you. As a friend, or as more. Your choice.*

*Yours,*

*Severus*

Hermione traced his signature with her fingertips. Ever since the note had arrived with the potions the one for Crookshanks and the contraceptive she'd reread it at least once per hour. She carefully folded it back up and pocketed it.

What to do...

She'd normally talk to someone about a mess like this, but she couldn't talk to Ginny or Harry about it. They were too biased in Ron's favour, apart from anything else. As for Severus, while he was who she'd go to for anything else now, he was part of the problem.

All things considered, it was just as well that her parents were overrun with work. If her mother wasn't so tired and preoccupied, she'd insist on helping... But she wasn't at all sure that Mum and Dad would take it well that their new friend Severus was in love with their daughter.

Was it love? Or 'just' attraction? Whatever it was, Severus's feelings were more than platonic friendship.

And a mere brush of her lips against his had rocked her world more than Ron's most passionate snog. Did that physical spark mean that trashy romance novels were right about the existence of grand passions? Not that she owned any such purple prose, of course, but was it any better that she'd read such books confiscated during her time as a Prefect?

She wanted more of that spark. More than that almost kiss.

Except... Ron. Guilt tightened its chains around her again. It wasn't right that she felt this way about Severus when she was with Ron.

But that guilt cut the other way too, a double-edged knife. She shouldn't be with Ron when Severus clearly returned her feelings. Tears stung her eyes. She couldn't forget how Severus looked when he'd inadvertently revealed his feelings.

She could tell he'd been trying to keep his face impassive, but his jaw line had been too stiff and his eyes... the pain she'd seen in them.

Pain that she had caused.

*'I'm sorry, Severus. So sorry.'*

She didn't want to hurt him. She'd never wanted that. But she had... And to stop hurting him, she'd have to hurt Ron.

*'Damned if I do, damned if I don't.'*

She picked up the vial of contraceptive, letting the firelight gleam on it. She toyed with the cork. Whom to make use of it with...

There was the undeniable chemistry with Severus. On the other hand, there was her relationship with Ron. Severus was closer to her parents' age than her own, while Ron was a few months younger than her. Mature versus immature. She cared for both of them, loved them even, in different ways. But what sort of love was it?

Who was she kidding? Logic couldn't help her here. Matters of the heart defied logic.

But did any of the argument for Severus matter? Ron was her boyfriend. She couldn't betray him. She couldn't hurt him, which dumping him would do especially if she did it just to take up with Severus.

Except... she'd already hurt Severus. True, she hadn't known when she'd asked him, but once she knew of his feelings she should have insisted that he forget about the contraceptive. She'd taken advantage of him. To have sex with Ron using the contraceptive Severus brewed for her was wrong.

Wasn't it?

A flare of green from the fireplace caught her attention. She looked up. The fire was green. An incoming Floo call?

Hermione frowned, quickly pocketing the contraceptive potion. That better not be Ron... he knew she wanted time alone and would go to him when she was ready. He'd been surprisingly understanding about it. Suspiciously understanding; she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He'd been behaving oddly since before Bill and Fleur's wedding, come to think of it. Except for when he'd had the Horcrux locket on. Then he'd been more normal, if being at his absolute worst.

That Floo connection was taking a long time... A glitch in the system? Had Ron got stuck somewhere? Or was it someone trying to gain entry who wasn't cleared with the wards Severus had helped her with?

She stood up and drew her wand, levelling it at the fire.

A sooty ginger blur shot out, yowling.

Hermione almost dropped her wand and sat down heavily.

Crookshanks.

She absently Banished the soot from him. He purred in response, jumping up onto her lap. He dropped something on her, slinking off to sit on the arm rest next to her.

A book, the cover bearing deep claw marks. *Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charm Witches*.

She frowned. That did not sound good. *To* charm, not charms *for*. She had a very bad feeling about this. About what she'd find if she opened the cover. But then the last few years had been full of bad feelings. She just had to steel herself and go past them.

She flipped the cover open, her eyes narrowing at the name inside. *Ron*. For his seventeenth birthday, from Fred and George.

*'Please just be a joke, a spoof self-help guide... Or even a real one. Ron is or was clueless with girls. This is just what he used to learn how to... to...'*

With each page she turned, each sentence she read, anger and hurt burned ever more fiercely in her.

The book itself and its contents were relatively innocuous. It was Ron's annotations that really did the damage. His scrawl and her own recollections.

*'How could he?'*

She'd seen every book on his bookshelf in his bedroom. Except this one. That meant he'd purposefully hidden it from her. Why else would Crookshanks find it? It must have screamed out to his Kneazle side. Something dodgy. Untrustworthy.

That he'd hidden it only proved that he'd known what he was doing was wrong. Fred and George doubtless meant it as a joke; she didn't blame them. Just Ron. He had taken it all too seriously.

Yet not seriously enough. For where the book said to charm a witch by taking interest in her interests, by caring for what she cared for... Ron's own words made it all too clear that he hadn't meant it:

*Books? Spew? Will have to practice so she can't see how bored I am.*

She took a shuddering breath, tears stinging her eyes. *Bored*. If he really cared, he wouldn't be bored.

Was any of it real?

Had he really cared about what might happen to the Hogwarts elves during the battle against Voldemort? Had their first kiss been based on a lie?

All those compliments and touches since last summer, when he must have bothered to read this book... The way he'd comforted her after she'd Obliviated her parents. Their dance at Bill and Fleur's wedding. And being relatively patient about waiting for her to be ready for her first time, even if he had kept doing his best to persuade her otherwise. His sudden improvement in table manners, basking in her approval. The gifts and apologies after their arguments...

Was it all a lie?

Did he mean any of it beyond a way to get what he wanted?

To give him the benefit of the doubt not that she was much inclined to do so he might have meant some of it.

But a genuine change?

There was his behaviour under the influence of the Horcrux. From her own experience, she had to admit Severus was right: it hadn't caused anything that wasn't already there.

She couldn't even argue that Ron had learned from that and really changed for the better. Not when she heard how he talked about her behind her back to their friends. Mocking her. Belittling her. Something he always apologised for when she brought it up with him: he was only having a bit of fun; he didn't mean any harm.

Before now, she'd always forgiven him. Before now, she hadn't known she had another option.

*'Damn you, Severus. And Crookshanks. The pair of you had to bring up the nasty fact that my boyfriend is a manipulative bastard.'*

One thing for sure, she couldn't trust Ron any more.

Despite what she'd told Severus, it *did* matter that Ron had abandoned her and Harry. It still hurt. She might have forgiven him up until now, but she'd never forgotten.

Another flare of green lit up the room, the Floo connection firing up again.

If that was Ron, he was toast.

Ron emerged, red-faced under the soot.

*'Toast,'* she thought grimly, levelling her wand at him, snapping the book shut with one hand. She Charmed the soot from him. After all, if she was going to be wiping the floor with him, her mum would murder her if she got soot on the carpet.

"Hermione! Your bloody cat ransacked my..." He caught sight of the book in her hands and paled, freckles standing out. "Oh no."

So many hexes to choose from... Canaries again? No, she'd already done that to him. Something else...

Ron's gaze switched to where Crookshanks was still perched next to her. "Bloody cat!" His hand twitched toward his pocket, where his wand poked out.

*'Accio!'*

His wand flew past his fingers. Before it could reach Hermione, Crookshanks jumped up and snagged it in his jaws. He shot off.

"Oi! My wand!" Ron started after Crookshanks. He drew up short when Hermione jabbed her wand into his throat.

"That is the least of your concerns. *Petrificus Totalus!*"

He toppled over, rigid, arms snapped to his sides, legs together. She kicked him over onto his side, facing the fireplace.

She tossed the bloody book into the flames, and watched it burn. She turned to Ron once it crumbled into ash. Tears trickled down his cheeks. Funny she'd always thought she'd be the one devastated to see a book burned.

Hermione withdrew the contraceptive potion from her pocket, weighing it in her hand. For a moment, she was very tempted to throw it at him, but Severus bottled his potions in Unbreakable vials. As angry as she was with Ron, she didn't want to do him permanent damage. Besides, it might just bounce off and rebound at her.

"Just in case that little display didn't get the message through to you, we're finished. Find some other girl to trick your way into her knickers, because you're never getting into mine."

She dangled the vial in front of Ron's agonised stare so that he could read the label. "That's right. I had *Severus* brew some contraceptive potion for me. I was intending to use it with you, but now... Well. I'm going to use it with someone who deserves it. Like the brewer."

Hermione stood and pocketed the vial. *"Finite."*

Ron scrambled to his feet, his chest puffing up as he drew in breath, mouth open wide.

Before he could start yelling, Hermione flicked her wand at him. *'Silencio.'*

"There's nothing you could say to change my mind. Get out of my sight." She poked him in the chest with the tip of her wand, pushing him back towards the fireplace.

He mouthed something at her, his face screwed up with a mixture of pain and anger.

"Leave!" She prodded him again.

Ron pointed at her wand, then at the direction Crookshanks had vanished.

"No. If I see your wand any time soon, I'll snap it. Crookshanks did you a favour by stealing it."

He shifted as if considering pushing past her to find her cat and his wand. The Stinging Hex she hit him with made him think again. He grabbed a pinch of Floo powder, tossed it into the fire, and mouthed 'the Burrow'.

He vanished in a green inferno, the flames dying back down after him and returning to their normal state.

She absently wondered if the lack of his voice would mean Ron would be stuck in the Floo network until the Ministry could get him out, or if it could work non-verbally.

Whatever the case, she didn't care. Ron was someone else's problem now. Perhaps she should send a message to Molly, though. After losing Fred, she needed to know where her remaining children were.

It was harder to Summon her Patronus than normal. Hardly surprising after the events of the past few days, especially today. Thinking of Severus eventually worked. Her silver otter scurried off to Molly.

She might have an enraged Weasley matriarch on her tail because of what she'd done to Ron, but Hermione thought Molly would understand when she was told about the book. She couldn't imagine Molly would approve of it either, or of Ron's actions using it.

With any luck Ron would have got home safely, and Molly would be occupied with comforting her 'poor Ronnie'.

*'Ugh!'*

She needed to distract herself, or she'd go to the Burrow to give Ron the hexing he deserved and had more or less escaped so far.

The vial in her pocket clinked against her wand as she put it away.

*'Use it with someone who deserves it... Severus.'*

\* \* \*

Severus shut his office door. He had only just returned from attending dinner in the Great Hall when his Floo flared. He touched his wand to the door, locking it and activating the privacy wards.

Whoever was Flooding at this hour, he did not want the Slytherins loitering in the corridor outside to be eavesdropping.

Hermione emerged soon after. As she siphoned off the soot with her wand, he mused that his precautions were just as well. It wouldn't have taken his suspicious Slytherins long to find out when Hermione's private lessons were, and to find out that she had no lesson that evening. Not that he was ashamed of his association with her, but he didn't want any nasty rumours floating around. Hermione deserved better than that.

"Good evening, Hermione," Severus murmured, as Hermione walked towards him, closing the distance between them quickly. "To what do I owe the pleas..."

Her lips on his. Not a mere brush of skin on skin this time, but a passionate kiss. Her lips parted, her tongue flickering out to taste him. He groaned, allowing her entrance to explore, stroking against tongue and teeth.

He hadn't dared to hope that she might have come because she'd chosen him. Unless this was a goodbye kiss?

He forced himself to stop duelling with her tongue and break the kiss, pushing her away, hands gripping her shoulders.

"Severus?" she asked, breathless. Her eyes were wide with... fear? Did she think he was rejecting her?

Never.

"I want you," he blurted. "But... What is this?"

"Oh, right. I ditched Ron. Found something that made it clear that he... Well, he leaves much to be desired. He'll never change. You were right, he doesn't... He's not right for me." She shrugged free of his hands, reaching inside her pocket and taking out the full vial of contraceptive potion he'd brewed for her.

"I want you too." A flick of her thumb uncorked the vial. "And I want to use this with you." She moved to drink it.

Severus swallowed hard. She wanted him. She'd really chosen him. But... No, they had to do this the right way.

He reached out and put his hand over the top of the vial before it could reach her lips. "There's no rush." Gently but firmly he lowered it, wandlessly retrieving the cork and putting it back in.

He reached out his hand to gently raise her chin, leaning down to kiss her tenderly. He drew back slightly to whisper, "I would feel more comfortable if we didn't sleep together yet. I want you to be sure that this is no rebound from Weasley..."

"It's not! I was already attracted I love you!"

He rewarded that confession with another, harder, more passionate kiss. "As do I. But I still stand by what I said."

"But why? If we both..."

He laid a finger against her lips. "Until you have taken your NEWTs, I am still technically your professor. No jumping into bed yet."

Hermione eyed his desk. "We don't have to use a bed..."

"You know what I mean! Don't tempt me, Hermione. You cannot imagine how much I want you, but I respect you too much to do that. I refuse to cheapen this."

"But... NEWTs are months away still!"

"Patience. And I said nothing about no relations at all, just no... consummation. We have time. And I promise you, it will be all the better for waiting. I'll make sure of it."

"Tease."

"Temptress," he murmured against her lips.

She deepened the contact into a passionate kiss, their tongues warring, as if they could resolve this issue by kissing one another senseless.

They eventually drew apart for air, foreheads pressing together as they panted.

"All right. We'll wait. But the minute I've finished my last exam, I expect you to proceed with the ravishing. Preferably get me to your bedroom first, but anywhere private will do."

He nodded, smirking. "Promise."

**~The End~**

AN: Many thanks to Septentrion and Juno for betaing.

For Kribu, Juno and Septentrion, for their birthdays and as a thank you for being my betas, and also as the prompt Kribu selected when she was the winning bidder for a oneshot by me in The Petulant Poetess Every Flavour Auction.

The prompts:

Kribu:

For TPP auction. AU Polyandry and Other Problems prequel.

And another Kribu prompt added into the mix:

Severus bribing Crooks to help him get Ron out of the way so he could try and get Hermione for himself.

Juno:

How about something POP!verse? something you've been WANTING to write, but that didn't really fit into the story.

Septentrion:

Perhaps an outtake from POP, a little scene/drabble between Severus and Hermione before she was struck by the plague.