

Good Boy

by *anoesis*

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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AN: This story was created for Droxy as a 2013 Exchange Bingo prize, following the prompt: *'I like angst, hurt comfort, Crookshanks related, death fic, funeral fic, horror, dystopia, "dark fic", ghost fic, technical magic.'*

Hermione always had the feeling that Crookshanks had never quite forgiven her for leaving him behind during the hunt for Voldemort's Horcrux. He'd flatly refused to wait at the Burrow for her to return and had set off in pursuit, following as fast as four paws could carry him. Sadly, repeat Apparitions had meant it was impossible for him to catch up with her or her friends. Thankfully cats are profoundly logical creatures, and he'd simply turned north and headed for Hogwarts in the knowledge that she'd be forced to return there eventually and that he would be there to remonstrate with her when she did.

He arrived the day after the Final Battle, a little skinnier than Hermione would have liked, his long fur matted in places, and a fresh scar on his ear. Her inability to heal the scar with her new wand persuaded Hermione that Crookshanks had probably suffered through adventures to rival her own, and she was duly awed.

He followed her like a shadow after that, as if certain that she might try and escape him again if he let his attention wander even for a moment. Hermione, who had missed him more than her stolen wand, was happy to have him close. She endured weeks of spitting, hissing and puddles of pee in the corner of her room until he decided that his displeasure had been properly expressed.

Others were less keen. Ronald Weasley, for example, found it rather off putting to have his tentative forays into sexual courtship scrutinised by a silent, hostile feline. It had led to a number of arguments, one of which had seen the end of their fledgling romance.

Hermione wasn't too bothered. She had her schooling to catch up on, and Ronald had proved to be something of a disappointment anyway.

Crookshanks had been an old cat when he had chosen Hermione. By the time she had left Hogwarts and fully qualified as a Healer, he was a very old cat indeed. His back legs weakened and his eyesight started to fade. As such, it was sad but not surprising when one evening he curled up in front of the fire for a nap and never woke up.

Losing a familiar isn't the same as losing a pet. Pets can become like family, and losing a much loved cat or dog can be as heartbreaking as losing a true friend. A true familiar, as opposed to a messenger owl or a man disguised as a rat, can actually enhance a witch's magical abilities. When Crookshanks died, Hermione felt it like a magical blow to the solar plexus and knew, just knew, that she would never be as powerful without a familiar as she had been before.

Yet she could never bring herself to buy another cat or Kneazle for that matter.

"It's too early," she would reply to anyone who questioned if perhaps she wasn't lonely, working long hours then coming home to an empty flat.

"It's too early," she still replied a few years later to anyone who questioned if perhaps she wasn't lonely, living by herself in her little cottage at the end of a narrow lane.

"It's too early," she would answer the friends who kindly pointed out that one could not live the life of a little old cat lady if she didn't have any cats.

"It's too early," she would answer the wizards who watched her neat little figure dart from patient to patient and asked why a witch, still in her prime, should chose to live alone. Hermione was well aware that their questions had little to do with her buying herself a kitten, but she found it easier to occasionally feign ignorance and watch as their eyes slid elsewhere.

In truth, Hermione had considered buying a new pet. She'd even gone as far as browsing the cages at Fancy Familiars in the hope of meeting a new Kneazle to fill the empty spot in front of the fireplace. What Hermione didn't tell anyone is that no new kitten wanted anything to do with her. Oh, they'd approach her, tail in the air, all flirtatious meows and throaty purrs, but if they got too close, a change would come over them. They'd stop, tail drooping and purrs ceasing. The younger kittens would simply dart away, but the older cats would fluff up their fur and make an angry rumbling noise in their chest, occasionally crescendoing into a territorial yowl.

It had happened twice before the shopkeeper had politely asked her not to return.

Hermione, who loved cats, was rather sad at the thought of not being able to take a new kitten home with her. Still, it wasn't as if she was lonely. Maybe she occasionally caught herself talking aloud to a familiar who was no longer there, but plenty of people did that. Sometimes she would look up with a smile on her face, half believing old Crooks to be sat beside her on the sofa, only to find herself alone. Every now and then, she might catch a movement from the corner of her eye, like a cat stretching out before the hearth, but that was just the shadows caused by the flicker of the fire.

One thing no one wants to believe about hospitals is that sometimes people are rude or even violent towards the staff.

Healer Granger had been very surprised and saddened the first time a young wizard she was treating had pointed his wand at her with the intent of causing her harm. Thankfully, her experiences as a schoolgirl had meant that she was more than capable of casting a sturdy Shield Charm and Summoning his wand before the Porters arrived to subdue him.

It had been made much easier by the fact he had dropped his wand, in apparent surprise.

Hermione had been called to the head Healer's office that evening and spoken to in quiet yet firm tones. Apparently, they had found deep scratches on the back of the young man's hand that hadn't been there when he had been admitted.

Healer Simmons reminded Hermione that, although she had every right to protect herself from such an attack, she had taken an oath to heal, not to harm. It was a natural instinct to throw a curse at an assailant, but if such an incident should ever repeat itself, Hermione was to protect herself and her other patients, but never be tempted to hex, and was that quite clear?

Hermione, lost in thought, agreed that *oh yes, of course she would* and returned to the ward.

Hermione's little cottage was at the bottom of a long, leafy lane. On sunny days, Hermione liked to walk along the lane before Apparating to work, to appreciate the flowers that grew in the hedgerow. In spring there were bluebells, celandines and wild garlic, poppies and dog roses in summer, and rosehips and blackberries in autumn. It helped put her in the right frame of mind for work in the mornings and helped her unwind on her way home.

Some people might query her safety, walking alone, especially as the nights drew out, but Hermione always felt safe as she walked. She had her wand, after all, and besides, she never felt truly alone.

Hermione realised that something was wrong the moment she saw Harry.

Their friendship had endured over the years, but once school had ended, they were no longer in each other's pockets and could happily go for months without seeing one another. For him to arrive at her place of work in his Auror's robes could only mean one thing.

"Is someone hurt?" she asked as he led her into the Healer's lounge.

"It's nothing like that," he calmed her, gingerly tapping the tea urn with his wand. Bringing two cups of slightly stewed tea over to the low table, he bid her sit beside him.

"We have a man in custody downstairs. He was found on Knockturn Alley, his face shredded to ribbons. When Jenkins tried to bring him in for treatment, he grew violent and had to be restrained. He's being treated at the moment, but I thought I ought to let you know, he's blaming his injuries on you."

Hermione's eyes grew large. "Me?"

"He's already known to us as a violent criminal, so his testimony isn't being taken too seriously. We're getting a Veritaserum order as we speak, but I thought you might be able to help the investigation. See if you recognise him?"

Hermione knew that in the Muggle world, she would never be brought face to face with her accuser, not even if she was friends with the Auror leading the investigation. She also knew how little Harry liked to have things like that pointed out to him, so she agreed to accompany him without comment.

They arrived just as the Veritaserum was being administered. The man's face had been healed and Hermione was able to place him, despite the fresh pink scars that puckered his skin.

"I can't be certain, but I think he was here a few months ago, asking for pain potions. He claimed to have residual curse damage, but I couldn't find anything. There were a few signs of potions abuse, so I refused to give him anything stronger than an Infant Ailment Alleviator. He became agitated and was escorted from the hospital."

"His name is Arnold Peake," Harry clarified. "He's spent the last six months in Azkaban for a robbery at a Potion's shop in Middlesex. Known user, turned career criminal to feed his habit."

"I wonder what happened to his face."

At that moment, Peake caught sight of them and began to struggle against his magical restraints.

"You!" he spat. "You bitch!"

Hermione took a step back, overwhelmed by the vehemence of his attack. "What did I do?"

"I got arrested because of you! Six months they say I spent in that place, but I know it was longer! Months and months I was locked away on that filthy island because of you!"

Suddenly he ceased his struggles and looked around in fear.

"It's not here, is it?"

"We're miles from Azkaban," Harry placated. "If you've served your time, you don't have to worry about going back."

"No, not Azkaban!" Peake hissed. "That monster! He nearly clawed my eyes out!"

"Mr Peake." Harry's voice was stern. "I want you to tell me exactly what happened. How does it involve this Healer?"

"I was waiting for her, wasn't I? I found her cottage, but the warding was too tight to get inside. Then I saw her walking home along the path, all alone, like. I decided to teach her a lesson. That house is miles from anywhere; no one would have heard a thing."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face, but the man continued, pushed into his confession by the Veritaserum.

"I waited til she got close. It was dark already and she didn't see me among the bushes. I was going to let her pass me before I cursed her when I noticed this big, ugly cat by her side." He paused to shiver, his face twisted with anger and fear. "The thing saw me. At first it just stopped and stared at me, hissing, but when I saw that the woman was practically at the door, I knew I'd have to hurry to catch her. That's when the bloody thing attacked."

His hand flew to his face.

"It wasn't natural. No cat should be that strong. I reckon it was an illegal breed or something. I thought it was going to kill me. I got out of there as soon as I could and landed in the Alley."

He returned his gaze to Hermione. "If he hadn't been there, I would have got you. If he hadn't been there, I would have made you scream."

"Right, that's enough!" Harry caught Hermione by the arm and steered her from the room. "Get me a full statement," he called over his shoulder. "I want him to confess to everything he's ever done. Don't worry, Hermione," he added. "His memories of you will be removed. If he gets out of Azkaban after this, he won't even think of reprisals."

They ended up back in the Healers' Lounge, drinking more strong tea.

"I have to ask, Hermione. Do you own an illegal crossbred cat?"

"You know I could never replace Crookshanks," Hermione whispered. "Perhaps he was hallucinating. Did they find any other potions in his system?"

"A few," Harry admitted. "One of the Healers treating him thought the wounds might have been self-inflicted. He had blood under his nails."

"The poor man," Hermione murmured.

Harry looked sceptical. "Look, I don't want you walking around alone at night anymore, okay? If you won't move closer to your friends, then at least use your Floo or Apparate like a normal person, alright? It's not always safe out there for a witch alone."

That night, Hermione used the hospital Floo as requested. She lit all the lamps in the house and drew the curtains tight against the night. Although it wasn't cold, she lit the fire, more for comfort than for warmth.

In a rare fit of self-indulgence, she had her tea on a tray before the fire. As the wood burned down to embers, she allowed her gaze to fall to the shadows before the hearth.

"Good boy," she said.