

Something Like Love

by Isis and Neit

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The waiting room at St. Mungo's was full, and unless you had a medical emergency, it was a first come, first serve basis to see a Healer. Hermione tapped her foot irritably and glanced at her watch for the tenth time in as many minutes. Her face twisted into a sour expression. There were barely enough hours in a day to get all her work done, let alone spare an entire morning ignoring the man seated across from her, who seemed to be sporting two heads.

Bugger. I've just missed the weekly Department Heads meeting, and I'm going to have to cancel on this afternoon's appointment as well at this rate. He's one of Slughorn's protégés ... not good. I'll have to send the old fart some crystallized pineapple and that triple distilled Firewhisky that he likes so much if I don't want an hour's long lecture about connections and keeping promises.

After the war had ended, her inclusion into the Slug Club during her sixth year had proven most advantageous for her. Only twenty-four years old, she was now the Head of the Department of Magical Patents ... a new department that regulated and controlled the licensing and availability of patented potions and charms; those that had taken their inventors years and Galleons to research. Hermione had moved up through the ranks of the Ministry quickly, aided by a whispered nudge from Horace Slughorn in some cases and by her own high standard of work in the rest.

She shot the frizzy-haired idiot at the reception desk another dark glare. The Welcome Witch had told her (rather rudely, she fumed) that she had to wait her turn. Hermione Granger did not have time to wait her turn, and likely would not have had to wait had she used her real name.

She pointedly ignored the dog-eared copies of *Witch Weekly* that were piled on the coffee table and slouched a little lower in her chair. Although she was wearing a very good glamour, she couldn't help but be paranoid about being recognised. It was two years since the war had ended, and the wizarding press still kept an eager eye on the heroes of the wizarding world.

Some days, she wished she could take her Order of Merlin, First Class and stick it up the bum of the next photographer that was interested in what book she was buying from Flourish and Blotts. *Fuck, they'd have a field day if they got wind of this*, she thought morosely. Blaise Zabini, the arrogant wanker, had done a relatively good job of cleaning up the *Daily Prophet* somewhat, but even he wouldn't pass up on reporting *this* kind of scandal.

She sighed and shoved her hands into her robe pockets, her scowl clashing with her honey-blond hair and blue eyes. Her fingertips encountered something plastic,

something foreign to the world she now called home ... she bloody hoped that the blasted Muggle thing was wrong. Otherwise ... she didn't know what she was going to do. Glancing around to check that nobody was watching, she pulled the damn thing from her pocket and stared at it, willing it to have changed its mind. No. Still two stripes. Two stripes that meant ... according to the side of the box ... that she was pregnant.

She'd been horrified and dazed this morning, although on some level, she'd been expecting the result. It was amazing what you could talk yourself into believing sometimes, she realised. She rubbed her forehead and ignored the gnawing sense of anxiety. It would be fine ... she was going to sort it out, and then her life could get back to normal. She was too busy for a baby, and besides, it wasn't like she had any sort of relationship with the father. *I am so not going to think about him right now. No.*

She spent the next five minutes convincing herself that the Healer would fix this, and then, she could get back to work at the Ministry, passing and testing patented potions and charms for the wizarding world.

The elderly Healer examined her dancing spectral aura and beamed at her. "Congratulations, Miss Janes. Your suspicions are confirmed ... you are indeed pregnant ... six weeks, to be exact."

Although the Muggle test had told her that she was pregnant, Hermione felt like she'd been hit with a Bludger at hearing it from a wizarding Healer. "But ... how?" she muttered to herself. The Healer gave her a look that made it obvious that she rather thought *that* bit was obvious.

"No, no," Hermione countered. "I was on the pill, *and* I drank a contraceptive potion just ... after. It should have been double protection." That made sense to Hermione's orderly mind.

"The Muggle pill?" the Healer asked sharply, disapproval echoing in her voice.

Hermione nodded sharply. "Yes, I've taken it for a while now ... to regulate my cycle," Hermione said, frowning a little. "But I don't see what that has to do with anything."

The old witch sighed heavily and shook her head slightly, as though she were dealing with a half-wit and reluctantly had to explain each little detail. "It is widely documented that the two interact destructively with each other, much like the Muggle antibiotics render the pill ineffective," the Healer said. "Surely you would have taken care to check up on that before "

"It wasn't exactly planned," Hermione snapped at the Healer. She sighed and removed the nasty look from her face with quite a bit of a struggle. "I just want to terminate the pregnancy, please," she said politely, as though she were discussing nothing more than wiping away a spilt glass of pumpkin juice.

The Healer's lips pursed into an expression that reminded Hermione of Professor McGonagall at her most formidable. "You will have to make another appointment, and bring the father of the child with you to countersign the document."

"I beg your pardon?" *What the hell is the old bat on about now? Probably some sort of misguided, old-fashioned moral thing. Well, if she thinks ...*

"If you wish to terminate a magical pregnancy, both the mother and father have to sign the form," the Healer said tersely.

"But ... why?" Hermione felt a black rush of foreboding flood her mind, but she just clenched the arms of the chair tightly and waited to hear what the Healer had to say.

"The birth-rate in the wizarding world is very low; we can't afford to terminate any pregnancy unless it is fully supported by both biological parents. Perhaps the father of the child may want to keep it, even if you do not." The Healer glanced up with a reproving look when Hermione snorted. "And even in that case, we encourage you to have the child and put it up for adoption."

"That's outrageous ... medieval," Hermione spluttered.

The Healer's expression hardened. "Consider yourself lucky that they didn't pass that Marriage Law, Miss Janes."

"Well well then, I'll just go to a Muggle doctor ... in France if I have to," she said, her nostrils flaring with the tell-tale sign that Hermione Granger was about to lose her temper solidly. "My body, my choice," she said, glaring at the stupid cow.

The Healer shook her head and sighed heavily. "I'm afraid that you can't do that. Again, it is likely your Muggle heritage that has caused your lack of knowledge in this," she said patronisingly, making Hermione want to reach across the table and smack her.

She tightened her fists into balls and breathed through her nose. "Why. Not?" Hermione ground out through clenched teeth.

"There is greater than a seventy percent chance that your child..." the Healer gestured towards Hermione's stomach, "...will be magical, depending on the blood of the father, of course."

Ice-cold, Hermione thought savagely. *Like his heart.*

"Four weeks after conception, your magical energy and that of your child's become inexorably intertwined until birth. That is why a witch's magic is so much more powerful during her pregnancy. If a Muggle doctor performs an abortion, you stand a chance of losing your own magic entirely."

Hermione's mouth fell open and she swallowed dryly. "And ... if I get those forms signed? What's so different about the magical method?" she demanded.

The Healer sighed. "We use a potion, young lady, developed and patented for that specific task ... it's not only an abortive agent, but also a protective agent against a witch's magic." The Healer smiled sweetly. "So get the forms signed, or have the baby: the choice is yours, Miss Janes."

Hermione stood, her blood pressure rising at the Healer's condescending tone. Her wand hand itched to hex that superior, disapproving look off the old Healer's prissy face as she snatched up the cursed form instead. "Thank you for your time," she managed as she shut the door with perhaps a little more force than strictly warranted.

She stalked to the bathroom located next to the Healer's office and slammed the door of one of the stalls closed. Sitting on the toilet seat, she leant forward, covered her eyes, and clenched her teeth.

Fuck (yes, that's what had gotten her into this situation). She was going to have to contact Snape. Yes, ex-Professor Severus Snape: ex-Death Eater, ex-Order of the Phoenix member, ex-Hogwarts teacher, ex-convicted murderer of Albus Dumbledore, ex-one night stand. What the bugging fuck had she been thinking? She sighed. It had started innocently enough...

Hermione was working in her office (where she spent up to sixteen hours a day sometimes), looking over the latest patent requests, when a flurry of black robes at her office door caught her attention. Looking up, she sighed when she saw the unchanging Professor Snape standing before her with a dark glare on his face...the glare she had become used to after six years of study under him. But it was a little old now, and it really didn't scare her anymore.

"What is the meaning of this?" he bit out in his usual disdainful tone. He was waving a thick sheaf of documents at her. Hermione knew well what they were ... that morning had been the fourth time she'd owed them back to Snape for revision.

Rubbing her eyes ... she was feeling tired and frustrated ... she sighed again, wishing it was five o'clock so that she could nip out to the pub for a spot of fresh air and to order take-away before settling in for her favourite part of the day ... the three hours after the rest of the Ministry workers had gone home, when there were no more

applicants to interfere with her work schedule. And most of all, she wished the nasty, surly, glowering man in her office would just go away.

"That means that you will be required to show me evidence of the test trials for your potion before I can issue the patent, just like everyone else does. What part of the notice and my subsequent four owls did you fail to comprehend?" While normally not rude (to clients, at least), Hermione's day had already been long and tiring, and dealing with a prima donna Snape was not her idea of starting off a blissful evening of solitude.

"No one in this department ever asked me for my test trials before. My reputation alone is proof of my work," Snape spat out.

"No," Hermione said firmly, "that was before the war. And I'll wager that your reputation cowed the former Head of this Department. I, however, do not fear you, and will hold you to the standard applied to anyone else applying for a patent." She stood up and looked him in the eye. "Now, if there is nothing else that needs to be clarified, the office is closing now. I bid you good evening, sir."

He spun on his heel and stalked from the office, leaving her with a half-elated feeling at having put him in his place, and a half-surprised feeling that he'd actually left when she'd asked him to.

Hermione yanked a stream of toilet paper from the roll viciously and blew her nose, feeling more than a little sorry for herself. She had been so stupid to have thought that, for once, she might have gained the upper hand against the sarcastic git.

As she was casting the final anti-intruder jinx on her office's back door (just in case Snape was lying in ambush outside the main door), a silky voice surprised her from the shadows of the darkened corridor. "Really, Miss Granger, you truly are very predictable. Did you not consider I might guess you would try to avoid me?"

Letting out a low sound of annoyance, Hermione turned with a glare on her face. "In case you didn't hear me earlier, Professor Snape, the office is closed. If you care discuss your patent issues ... and if anything about the procedure confuses you ... we can do that tomorrow. I am certain I can fit you in ..."

Swooping around in a swirl of black fabric, Snape towered over Hermione and gripped her arm tightly, his long, tapered fingers digging into her bicep painfully. "You will not dismiss me like I was nobody, Miss Granger!"

Yanking her arm out of his grasp, Hermione snarled back, "Actually, Professor Snape, that's exactly how I am going to treat you. You have never done anything for me that would warrant special attention." Hermione didn't realise that she was echoing Slughorn almost to the letter. She would have been horrified.

With a roar, Snape loomed over her again. "I have done nothing? What would you call risking my life for thirty years for your continued survival? You would call that nothing?"

Backing up, Hermione kept a cautious eye on her livid ex-Potions master. His raging temper was nothing new to her, but it was disconcerting nonetheless. "Professor, I am fully aware of your large contribution in the war. I also know you were generously rewarded for that contribution. I do not owe you anything, having fought by your side in the war."

Thinking about the war took some of the wind out of her sails. It was a topic that she avoided. The memories of that time were not pleasant; breaking up with Ron, losing Harry, and so many others. She wasn't in the frame of mind to stand in a corridor at the Ministry of Magic and debate who had been the better soldier for the light, especially with this nasty, caustic man. As Snape opened his mouth to deliver another tirade, she cut him off. "Fine, I'll look at your work tonight then. Happy?"

Hermione tossed the used toilet paper into the bin and sighed again. She'd gone with Snape to his laboratory, still seething, with the feeling that she'd been manipulated somehow. She had been very impressed with his work ... conceding to herself that he really was brilliant ... but the laws had prescribed that clinical trials be performed nonetheless. In the midst of another raging row about the trials and the time that it would waste, he'd grabbed her again, his face close to hers, ranting about Ministry red tape.

How it had gone from that, to having sex ... well, no, fucking ... on an empty laboratory table was all a blur. In the weeks that had followed, she'd reasoned that it had been all the excess stress and adrenaline of the moment ... an insane moment that she could write off as a one time experience never to repeat, and get back to her work. As a concession to Snape...perhaps in the hopes he'd keep his mouth shut about what had happened ... she'd wangled the paperwork and passed his patent.

She sniffed and leant sideways against the cool tiles of the bathroom stall. The aftermath had been awkward, she remembered.

Still sweat-slicked and panting, lying next to a half-naked Snape with her robes rucked around her waist, Hermione's brain kick-started again, and the realisation of what had just happened flooded in. She'd slept with Snape...Merlin knew, she respected the man for his brilliance and his efforts during the war, but if she could have picked anybody that she'd never have considered having a thing with, then Snape would probably be him. Regardless of the fact that it had been pretty awesome sex, Hermione was dismayed, ashamed, and wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

She sat up, not looking at the man panting next to her and pulled her robes back down, then slid off the table and gathered her bag. "I have to get going," she said, making a show of smoothing down her robes. "I - I'll see what I can do about your patent application."

And with that, she'd turned to Apparate, and missed the look of surprise regret, disappointment, anger, loss? on Snape's face.

Her brain had skittered away from the events of that evening in the last few weeks ... Hermione was focussed on her career, and she didn't have much time for anything else. She didn't have time for men, not after the fiasco with Ron. They were still not on speaking terms, and he'd gone off to Romania to live with Charlie for a while, to Hermione's relief. She hated running into him in Diagon Alley, where he'd stare at her accusingly for not wanting a family at the age of twenty. A family ... if she ever had one ... would come much later. After all, she'd rationalised, she was going to live much longer than normal Muggles.

There had to be something that she could do ... she was the Head of the Patents department. She couldn't afford the time, or the irritation, of having a baby. And she wasn't going to share a baby with Snape, of all people.

Yes ... patents, she realised, sitting up straight, feeling more clarity than she'd had since taking that damned Muggle pregnancy test ... the abortive potion was patented ... but she *had* access to all the patents. And it was for a good cause, wasn't it?

Hermione stepped into Slug and Jiggers, and almost retched. Where the scents of the apothecary had been glorious to her before, now they made her feel cooped up, nauseated. It was the fucking morning sickness.

She'd found the potion she'd been seeking, and covered her tracks well, erasing all the tracking charms on the patent filing system. She had all the ingredients she required, save one. The problem was, it was a Class A Non-Tradeable, *and* it was extinct in the Muggle world, so there was no hope of acquiring it there. It was expensive and very rare, cultivated by very few Herbologists and Potioneers in the wizarding world. She was going to have to lie about why she wanted the silphium, perhaps even forge a work order from the Ministry. Her stomach fluttered as she approached the counter, still arguing the ethics with herself.

The wizened old wizard at the counter was counting Knarl quills, but he glanced at her approach and beamed at her. "Miss Granger, what can I do for you today? Back to making your own potions, or are you still checking on those of other wizards?" He cackled at his own joke, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of a sale.

Hermione paused, took a deep breath...she was teetering on that narrow edge again ... her instinctive reaction to lie warring with her sense of right and wrong. For a moment, she was back in Umbridge's office, making the decision to take that awful woman into the forest ... telling Ron that it wasn't him, it was her ... scribbling a reply to Ginny that she couldn't make tea because she had to go and visit her parents. All lies ... but justifiable in her mind at the time.

She smiled at the old wizard as she succumbed to her Slytherin tendencies ... the Sorting Hat had whispered that in addition to possibly belonging in Ravenclaw, that had she not been Muggle-born, she'd have made a jolly good Slytherin too. "A bit of both, actually," she said, studiously ignoring the display of dragon liver. "Where I normally visit a lab just to check on the brewing, this potion is bound to be a little more ..." she leant forward slightly and lowered her voice, "... lucrative, and I want to brew a batch of it myself, just to be sure that it works properly."

"Oh, wonderful," he croaked hoarsely. "You young crowd are doing so much good work over at the Ministry," he praised. "What ingredient were you wanting, my dear?"

"I need one hundred grams of silphium," she said, surreptitiously checking that there were no patrons to overhear her while he bent down to retrieve his ingredients ledger from the bottom shelf.

His smile faded as he stood up again. "That's ... a Class A Non-Tradeable ingredient. I'll have to order it in special from the supplier," he said. "And you'll need all the documentation ... silphium's rare, and dangerous, deary. Why, only St. Mungo's uses it these days," he said, scratching in his ear with a long, knobby finger. "There's only one wizard in the entire British Isles that grows it these days."

Hermione pulled a sheaf of documents from her robes and handed them to Mr Slug. "It should all be in order," she said, ignoring the vague sense of guilt she felt. She just had no other choice. Having the baby was not an option. A Muggle abortion was not an option. Telling Snape was not an option. She told herself that this was her last resort and that she just had to cover her tracks carefully and everything would be over within two weeks ... thank Merlin the potion didn't have to stew for longer than that.

She left the apothecary with her receipt and the promise that she'd be contacted as soon as the silphium order arrived. Her plan was coming together, she thought. Soon she wouldn't have to worry about anything ... she'd fix it all on her own. In her preoccupation, she didn't notice a tall figure appear from behind a tall shelf and gaze after her with a thoughtful frown.

When she returned to the office, Hermione put the work order for the herb, together with the illegal copy of the patented abortive potion recipe in her bottom drawer, locked it and then set several layers of charms and jinxes. She went back to her work, but every five minutes or so, she had to satisfy her growing discomfort and anxiety by double-checking that the drawer was locked and that the charms were still intact.

She was just starting to get that itching feeling again, the compulsive need to check that her safeguards were still in place, when she shivered and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up with the awareness of another strong magical presence. Hermione was hit with a sense of déjà vu as she glanced up and saw Snape standing in her doorway once again.

She sighed and ignored the urge to reach down and touch the smooth wood of the drawer. "Dare I ask what is wrong now?" She couldn't call him Professor now (even if he was teaching at Hogwarts again, poor bloody students), not after having seen him, well, half-naked. And most certainly not when it was his fault that she was in her current predicament. Gods, when she'd pushed his patent application through, she had hoped that she wouldn't have to deal with Severus Snape again.

Snape shot her a dark glare before he entered and sat across from her. For once, he seemed to be picking out the words he wanted to say, and Hermione braced herself for his worst.

"Dare I ask what kind of work you are planning for the silphium you ordered? You can imagine my surprise when I found out the order was for you," he said, leaning back in the chair and surveying her intently through curtains of black hair.

Hermione's mouth fell open and her heart rate ratcheted up to 'blood thundering in ears' tempo. That had been the last line of conversation she'd expected. His voice had been blandly neutral and only mildly questioning. His facial expression was indifferent now; there was no indication of where he might be going with this.

Sputtering, Hermione scrambled to avoid telling him why she had placed the order. "I hardly see that it is any of your business what I use an ingredient for. It is confidential Ministry business." She crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "I expected that the apothecary would be more discreet when it came to placing their orders. Client confidentiality my arse," she muttered, scowling. "See if I renew the Ministry contract with him again."

Snape smirked. "It's my business because I am the supplier for the silphium, and I don't believe that rot you told Slug about testing a patent. So, why don't you try again, Hermione, and tell me the truth. You Gryffindors were never very good at telling lies anyway."

Hermione realised that he'd used her first name ... a bloody sneaky way of reminding her that they weren't simple acquaintances any longer, or even just former teacher and student. For nights, she'd tried to erase the images of their brief interlude, but it was impossible. Her dreams were always flooded with deft, tapered fingers touching her, making her feel so ... alive. Across from her, those elegant fingers tapped on the arm of the chair as he waited for her answer.

She narrowed her eyes at him, grabbing desperately at straws. Something, anything to get him out of her office, to make him believe, so that he'd give her the damn order. "It's for a new healing potion," she said superciliously. After all, the herb was renowned for its healing properties as well, and had been widely used by the Cyrenians and Romans as such. "That's all that I can say without breaking the strict confidentiality code." She gave him her own little smirk.

She should have known that her argument was weak, and that he would not believe her. Because it was so rare, silphium had been replaced by other herbs in most healing and contraceptive potions. The only widely used potion that still required silphium was the one that induced abortion. Hermione just wasn't thinking straight at the moment. It was rather difficult to come up with a good argument while you were back-peddalling.

"I don't believe you," he said. With a smooth movement, he was out of his chair and had her head pressed between his palms before she could draw breath, let alone grab for her wand. She tried to close her eyes in the next moment, but that brief second that his eyes had locked with hers had been enough.

He was in and out of her mind with the information he sought in a matter of seconds ... her pregnancy, her working hours, her reluctance to be committed to anybody, her avoidance of the responsibility that would come with a child, her reaction to him after their encounter, her plan to make the abortive potion, everything. Her inner self lay bare before him. She never had been much good at Occlumency anyway. Harry had always teased and called her an open book in that sense. *Your mind's too full to keep it all in.* Merlin, she missed him a lot...perhaps if he'd been alive, she'd have had somebody to confide in. Ginny was her best friend, but Ginny was engaged to Draco, and Draco would certainly tell Snape about the whole story if he found out.

He let go of her face and straightened up from his awkward position across her desk. His customarily pallid complexion was now white, and his eyes were wide, genuinely shocked by what he'd seen.

"You fucking bastard," she shouted, standing up, her face red with temper, infuriated that he'd used Legilimency against her. She fought against the furious tears that threatened.

"No, *you* fucking bitch!" His face was white, but there was a corded vein at his temple that stood out, hazily blue through his pallid complexion. "You're a fucking, hypocritical bitch, lording over everybody, enforcing the rules to the last letter. But when it suits you, you're above the rules, just like you thought you were with those Gryffindor friends of yours at school," he sneered.

She opened her mouth to protest the point, but a blur of memories gave her pause: Lying to McGonagall about the troll, setting Snape on fire, Neville lying motionless on the Gryffindor common room floor, sneaking past Fluffy, stealing potions ingredients from him, making Polyjuice in Myrtle's bathroom, using the Time Turner to free Sirius, going off to the Ministry on Thestrals, hexing McLaggen ... even letting Ron and Harry break countless rules without doing more than expressing disapproval. He was right, she realised dazedly. She lauded and upheld the rules when it pleased her to do so.

She changed the topic of conversation quickly, to avoid the dead weight of realisation that had settled in her stomach. "That still didn't give you the right to break into my mind like that," she said, glaring at him, her jaw set tightly.

"It wasn't hard to do," he said nastily. "You had no right to keep that information from me, Hermione, and even less right to go about destroying my child's life without my consent."

"Well now that you know, you can sign the goddamned form and get out," she said, snatching up the St. Mungo's release form and thrusting it under his nose.

He took the form, and his lip curled with derision. He crumpled up the form, lobbed it into the air and shot a blasting hex at it in mid air. It burst into flames, and little pieces of ash swirled through the air before landing on the surface of her highly polished desk.

"I'm not signing any form, Hermione," he said softly, although his voice held a dangerous edge. "And I'm not giving you the plant, either." He pointed one finger at her stomach. "That child is as much mine as it is yours, and contrary to popular belief, I do not eat children for breakfast. I wish for my own child, now that the war is over."

She stared at him with disbelief. "You can't make me "

"Yes, I think you'll find that I can," he said, cutting her off abruptly.

"But you hate children," she argued, desperate to get him to see that the two of them having children was a bad, bad idea.

"Idiotic children that cannot think for themselves, perhaps," he agreed, giving her a pointed look that obviously said that he'd counted her amongst those when he'd been teaching.

"And ... I don't want a baby," she said, shaking her head vehemently and losing steam a bit. Her voice wavered slightly. "I have my Department to run. I don't have time for children. I'm too ... selfish for children. I don't have enough hours in the day as it is."

Snape gave her a curious look then. "Tell me, Hermione," he said, "when last did you see your parents?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him like he was mad. "What the hell does that have to do with this situation they don't understand this world anyway," she said crossly.

"And when last did you do something entertaining a Quidditch match, perhaps?"

"I fucking hate Quidditch," she snarled at him. It was one of the reasons (aside from his wish to have kids so early) she'd broken up with Ron during the war ... it had seemed that his head was full of brooms, and children, and war. They'd just never spoken in the end ... sex only, which had made Hermione feel a little used. Ironic that she did the same to men at times these days. "What's your point, Snape?"

"My point is, Hermione," he drawled, "that you are a workaholic."

"Enjoying my job does not make me a workaholic!" she protested hotly.

"Alright then, why were you not at Ginny and Draco's wedding last weekend?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's next weekend" she said, shaking her head. "I'd never miss Ginny's wedding."

Snape shook his head. "No, I'm afraid it isn't. It was last weekend," he said quietly now.

"No!" She moved over to her diary and began to flip through the pages, annoyed that Snape was making her doubt herself. "It's next weekend, I know it is ... full of shit, arsehole, hate you for wanting to make me," she muttered as the pages went flick, flick, flick.

Her mouth fell open as she reached the entry for the previous weekend. There, neatly pencilled in, was 'Ginny and Draco's Wedding'. "No ... I meant to ... I just ..." She sank to her chair. Ginny and Draco were two of her closest friends ... they'd both been there with her and Ron and Harry during the war, like the Famous Five books she used to read. And when Luna and Neville had joined, they'd become the Secret Seven. *What must Ginny and Draco think of me?* she thought, tears swimming and blurring her vision.

"You didn't mean to be thoughtless and inconsiderate?" he asked. "Thinking only of yourself and your high and mighty career goals?" He shoved a white handkerchief into her hands, having walked around her desk. "Pushing away all personal relationships despite hurting your friends and countless other people?" If she'd been listening carefully enough, she'd have heard a note of personal reproach in his voice.

She sniffed and blew loudly into the hanky, hiding her tears behind her fall of curly hair. "No," she said mournfully. "No, I didn't."

Snape sighed and pulled up a chair, so that he sat almost knee to knee with her. "Well it's too late to change the past," he said succinctly. "But the future is your choice. That is more than could be said for others, who had no personal choice."

She absorbed that for a moment; he was referring to himself. He'd had no choice for many years, living life as a spy.

"I don't know what to do," she said mournfully, feeling waves of self-pity flood her senses.

"Take charge of your life," he said. "Take responsibility for your actions, and live a more balanced life." He made it sound so simple.

"But I have so much work to do."

"Then hire an assistant."

"But ... but they wouldn't be "

"As competent as you are, no, probably not," he said wryly. "But you will never be able to keep this pace up without burning out, ending up in St. Mungo's with that brilliant mind addled."

She glanced up sharply. Was that ... a compliment from Snape?

"Have the ... our baby, Hermione, take some time to relax, and the rest will follow."

She sniffed again and gave him a suspicious look. "And what do you want?"

He paused, seeming to weigh his words again. "I would like to be a father to that child," he said, and she was sure she imagined the wistful tone in his voice. "Although I doubt I'd be a very good father."

"Well, I think I'd be a horrible mother." Her laugh was wry and hollow.

"Ah, but remember Golpalott's Third Law the parenting capability of two horrible parents will be equal to more than the sum of the parenting capabilities of each separate parent." She could have sworn that a slight smile lifted the corner of his mouth for a moment.

"And what do you want from *me*?" she asked. "I don't like you very much, you know," she said, giving him a baleful look. Especially after that Legilimency trick of his, the sneaky bastard.

"Well, I don't like you very much either," he retorted. This time she definitely saw a slight smile. "That can come later," he said, pausing for a moment. "I will not deny that I am somewhat attracted to you, however."

Hermione found that she couldn't deny that fact either. Her dreams had been telling her that for weeks now, no matter how hard she tried to forget. But attraction or something like it was a far cry from friendship, or love, or being enough to base a lifetime on. All of that would have to follow behind, later.

She took a deep breath and made a decision that would change her life ... forever. "Okay," she conceded, wringing the handkerchief slightly. "I'll have the baby, and hire an assistant, and try to be a better friend." She glanced up into his black eyes. "And the rest can come later."

"Good," he answered, reaching out to cover her hand with his.

And suddenly, it felt to her that later was perhaps not so impossible, or as far off into the future as she'd imagined.

Two and a half years later, more or less ...

The view from the window was idyllic. Hermione looked out to the garden and couldn't believe that this had become her life. After the confrontation in the office with Severus, she had tried to change ... starting with going to Draco and Ginny once they had returned from their honeymoon and begging their forgiveness for missing their special day. Her friends had confessed their growing concern for her, but she had convinced them that she was going to change her ways.

Facing motherhood had been terrifying, and the next visit she had made had been to her mother where she had confessed her condition and her agreement to have the baby and to try to raise it with its father. Her parents had expressed concern about the nature of her relationship with her former Potions teacher, but Hermione knew ultimately he had been right; they needed to work together in this endeavour.

For the most part, the pregnancy had been typical until her seventh month, when her body tried to go into early labour. Snape had joked about their child being eager like its mother. Hermione had not been amused. The last month and a half of the pregnancy hadn't been easy, but it had taught the pair a lot about each other. She had had to move in with Snape, and being helpless had made her more vitriolic than usual, but he'd taken it calmly for the most part. Seeing this rare vision of patience had been astounding, and Hermione had started to see Severus in a new light. It wasn't love, but the path to friendship had been established then.

The time abed had been useful for setting up ground rules and boundaries, which had included Hermione moving into Severus' house full time, and Severus agreeing that he wasn't the only boss. Together they agreed to be a united front for the child. It wasn't love, but a truce had been formed then.

Hermione delivered at eight and a half months, and the Healers had been pleased she had held on as long as she had. Throughout the delivery, she had screamed at Snape, but never once let go of his hand. Simon Tarsus Granger-Snape arrived with a head full of black hair and a very loud voice. He marvelled both his parents in his perfection, and they congratulated each other on a job well done.

Now Simon was turning two, and the garden was full of small children. Hermione could see Ginny scolding Strella for grabbing a toy from Franka Longbottom. This was the life she hadn't known she'd wanted. Hermione still worked as the Head of Patents, but she had learned to delegate. Severus had left Hogwarts and had taken an apprentice, which allowed him to contract to Apothecaries and stay home with his son. While it had taken time and patience, Hermione could not deny that Severus was a good father who was more likely to spoil his son rather than being too strict.

From the doorway Hermione started, hearing a voice. "Are you bringing out that cake sometime soon? The natives are getting restless." There was unspoken laughter in the dark voice, and Hermione turned and greeted Severus with a smile.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming. Can't believe he's two already. Still amazes me things turned out so well." She lit the candles before picking up the cake to carry it outside. As she passed Severus, he brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes before following her out to the garden, where they were greeted with glee.

It wasn't love, but it was something like it.

Silphium, an extinct plant, was an important trading commodity for the ancient city of Cyrene. Legend said that it was a gift from the god, Apollo. It was used in Greco-Roman cooking as a rich seasoning, as a medicinal agent, an herbal contraceptive and as an abortifacient.

As far as I can ascertain from the Internet, abortion on demand is not granted in the United Kingdom, but is granted during the first trimester on demand in France.

This was written for Prompt 30: Hermione is a workaholic MoM employee after the Second War. She's allergic to commitment. One day, in the course of her duties, she meets Snape, with whom she has a hot one-night stand. She gets pregnant. What happens next?

Thank you to the marvellous WickedlyWanton for beta'ing.