

A Business Proposition

by Fairfield

A day late – blame the holiday.

Chapter 1 of 1

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Guy Fawkes Day. How appropriate. She would blow something up. Perhaps that sad-assed Ministry.

"Let me treat you to a tea," said a voice behind her.

She turned. "Are you certain you can be seen with me?" she asked.

A gust of cold wind blew out of the alley, causing him to wrap his cloak tighter. "We all need to come in out of the cold."

"Always the clever one with the words," she replied, but she accepted his invitation.

The conversation was hesitant. There were, after all, a number of graves to avoid stepping on, but a long time ago, they had been childhood friends, and she still considered him a relative.

A week later she was once again making her shopping rounds when she saw him come out of a building. She waved. He waved back. They were once again having tea.

"Were you having a business meeting?" she asked.

"Yes, and not a pleasant one," he said. "The war has made a mess of everything."

"Tell me about it," she said.

"I apologize," he said. "You lost more than anyone. And our biggest loss was your loss too."

She sipped her tea. "But you were talking to me, and I was listening," she said.

"The problem is getting good help," he said. "Most people, especially the capable, avoid us now."

He outlined his problem. The gift-giving season was fast approaching, but he was short of his most profitable item: fine cosmetics. Few people could prepare such delicate potions, and fewer still could be trusted to keep the family's secrets. Wizard patent law was lax, and the courts might rule against him out of spite. She wondered if the market was large enough for such luxury goods whereupon he confessed that the majority of his customers were non-wizards. Magic could produce refined solutions beyond the reach of industrial labs, and some of the magic lingered on to enhance the effectiveness. The trade with the non-wizards was another family secret that had to be kept.

"I need a person with your skill and integrity," he said.

"What," she said. Her heart raced. Was he serious? After the first round of sympathy, everyone had neglected her. She would be involved with people again. She would be making money. She told herself it was a foolish hope.

"I know this is sudden," he said, "but think about it before refusing. I think you would do an excellent job, and you could work at home."

"Look, I'm late for another meeting," he said. "Try to forgive us. We can keep your employment a secret if you wish."

She picked her grandson up from her late husband's parents, which she only saw because they enjoyed their great-grandson. They thought their son had been singled out because of his association with her, and they had glared at her with such animosity at the funeral that she had not dared to approach them, but she couldn't afford to pay someone to watch the child.

A letter was waiting when she arrived home. It cordially offered her a position as a freelance Potions Mistress to be paid upon delivery of cosmetics of acceptable quality. The envelope contained three more sheets. Two were recipes for the simpler cosmetics along with the tests that the brew was of acceptable quality. The third was an identity card for a Mrs. Elizabeth Horton to use at shops where the equipment and ingredients had been prepaid. She gasped at the amount offered for the potions, but she reminded herself that the high-end market was always there and was willing to buy the best.

She danced around the room. She made a cup of tea in celebration, but while she was sipping it, she remembered the coldness of her in-laws, and this reminded her of her even colder family. She did not, however, throw the letter into the fire. She folded it and carefully filed it. It was her secret souvenir that she had refused the family that had disowned her.

A week after receiving the letter, she heard a knock on the door. It was her surviving sister.

"I suppose you can see me now because my husband is dead," she said.

Her sister turned and walked away.

She closed the door, slumped in a chair, and cried.

Sometimes, in the afternoon, as the day wore on, she would retrieve the letter, reread it, and gloat. She examined the price list for the potions, dreamed of a productive and decent life, and floated around her house. She glowered at the price list and raged that the family thought they could buy her. She remembered the cruel words she had hurled at her sister and sank into the chair in shame. She recalled her family's haughty attitude and pounded the armrests until her clenched fists were bruised. She carefully re-filed the letter. The long afternoons with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

One afternoon, it occurred to her that since the equipment and ingredients were paid for, they would be wasted if she didn't use them. The years of struggling and doing without had her appalled at such extravagance. She and her grandson were dressed and on their way to town before she had given it a second thought. Then she had second thoughts. She didn't have to brew the cosmetics for what was no longer her family. She could sell them to anyone. She could even sell the secret recipes. If the recipes were the valuable items, she could sell some potions to what was no longer her family, collect all the recipes once she had their trust, and sell the lot to their competitors. Neglect begets treachery. She arrived back at her home with her arms full of supplies and her head full of plans.

Potions filled the next week with its disappointments and triumphs as her expertise returned – the girl with the clever hands. She had two batches of each, finely prepared and thoroughly tested, when her employer arrived and gave her two more recipes. He informed her that if she produced a sufficient quantity of these four toiletries in the next three weeks, it would pull the family out of its slump. He also suggested a reliable girl who could come to her home and watch her grandson while she gave full attention to her work. The next several weeks would be difficult, but afterwards, she could take a well-deserved holiday.

Two weeks later, she was pouring a finished product into smaller vials when she glanced at the clock. He was a half-hour late for afternoon tea. He had appeared every Wednesday and Friday to collect the cosmetics and share a cup. His visits were becoming longer and more relaxed. Where was he? Had he realized what he was doing? Had the heartless bastard decided to resume his distance?

"Is he a real wizard?" her grandson had asked.

"Yes, a powerful one," she had said.

She rushed to the door when she heard the knock, but it was her sister.

"My husband sent me," her sister said. "He, I, both of us, hope you'll accept this. It's the family cake that I make every year. And a bottle of port from our cellar." She hesitated. "My slave-driving husband says not to celebrate too much."

"Tell the super-entrepreneur that I won't open either until the end of next week after the last drop of potion has been wrung out of me," was the reply.

Her sister collected the vials and left.

The next Friday, she had wrung the last drop of potion into its vial. It was almost tea time. Perhaps it could be cake-and-port time. Perhaps it could be cake-and-port time with a handsome wizard. She told herself that she could build a fire, share several glasses of port, and have a few innocent fantasies about sweetcakes. When she answered the door, it was both her sister and her husband.

Her grandson ran to hug his great uncle.

"I hope you weren't expecting a double batch," she told the two of them.

"No, we were hoping for a double holiday," he said.

Thus it was that she, her grandson, her sister, and her brother-in-law had a holiday gathering. Yes, finishing with cake and port.

Taking my own prompt about Andromeda and the holidays.