

# Business and Pleasure

by Laralee

A story in which business isn't always kept strictly professional.

## The Sacking

Chapter 1 of 1

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Business and Pleasure

Chapter One

*The Sacking*

"Idiot!" His fists came down hard on the aged wood of the desk, scattering the parchments he had previously been reading. "Do you have a proclivity for being a dimwitted sod or are you just *that* fucking stupid?"

The portly man sitting across from him shrank back in his chair as though he had been slapped in the face. If he could have clawed his way through the wall behind him to escape, he would have. The round, red-faced gentleman shook his head, sending the beads of sweat that had formed on his brow flying in all directions. "I... I..."

Severus Snape leaped from his chair and almost over his desk until he was looming over his cowering guest. "You what, Mister Lowsley?"

Gregor Lowsley, a middle-aged Potioneer with an unsightly receding hairline and protruding midsection, sputtered to form a response. His bulging eyes darted around the room looking at anything but the irate wizard in front of him.

Severus returned to full height, folding his arms across his chest. His expression, if such things could happen, would have caused serious bodily harm. "You will explain yourself, Gregor, lest you want to find employment elsewhere," he snarled.

Severus had never cared for Lowsley, but his prime benefactor had all but insisted Gregor was the wizard for the job. Severus knew otherwise and made it a point to seek out his shortcomings on a daily basis. He was as an oaf who did the bare minimum to skim by...something Severus truly couldn't stand. Potions, he believed, required a certain skill and precision one couldn't simply learn or do half-heartedly. You were either born with the art of brewing flowing through your veins or you weren't. As far as Severus was concerned, the only thing flowing through Gregor's veins was the incredible ability to form an excuse.

Disgust rose in Severus like a raging flood the longer he had to wait for an explanation, and apparently, Gregor could sense it. The lumpy wizard nervously tugged on the sweat-soiled collar of his shirt as he tried to come up with best way to honeycoat his mistake.

This particular lapse in judgment was far more than a mistake. In fact, it was exceptionally heinous because he knew Snape would consider it a potentially fatal blow to the reputation and credibility of Twin Serpents Apothecary. The business, when Gregor had first come on board, was up and coming. Now, Twin Serpents had become a

household name and regularly found mention during the annual convention of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers. Gregor realised if he breathed in any way that would jeopardize the project Severus Snape had worked nearly five years to create, there would be a fair amount of hell to pay.

Gregor looked up at Severus, trying to hide his discomfort. He smiled meekly as he sat up a bit straighter in his seat. "The Mulpepper account."

"Yes, the Mulpepper account. Do elaborate." Severus took his seat behind the desk once more with a rather bland expression on his face. If it were up to him, he would have skipped the formalities and sacked him on the spot. As it happened, and by rather happy chance for Gregor Lowsley, that power did not lie solely with Severus.

"You see, Florence Mulpepper placed an order for seventy-five units of the Deflating Draught."

Severus summoned the Mulpepper invoice that had fallen to the floor during his initial conversation with the wizard. He read the sheet of parchment with exaggerated expression, paying careful attention to the part that mentioned the lack of prompt delivery. "How odd," he said tracing the outline of his thin lips with a single finger, "Florence Mulpepper did not receive his units of Deflating Draught...and to clarify, it was an order of ninety-five units, not seventy-five. Why did Mister Mulpepper not receive his desired shipment, Gregor?"

The seemingly calm demeanor of his supervisor told Lowsley he was venturing into fairly dangerous territory. He had heard stories from those who had worked under Severus Snape, and he thought he knew what to expect. Truthfully, he always guessed if he ever found himself in such a predicament, it would all end in a blazing fury of hexes and curses. He had to admit it was fairly disconcerting to witness the alternative. A calm Snape, in Lowsley's opinion, was just as intimidating as a Snape with his wand aimed between your eyes.

Lowsley blinked heavily to calm his nerves. "The order didn't get shipped out because the Draught was made with defective ingredients."

Severus's eyes narrowed as his fist clenched around the Mulpepper invoice. Gregor, on the other hand, felt his stomach plummet to the soles of his feet.

Severus could sense an excuse from a mile away, but he had not expected what he heard next. What had come tumbling out of Gregor Lowsley's smacking gob was nothing but a bold-faced lie. Severus made it a point to check each ingredient they supplied; even going as far as establishing a rotation system to ensure everything was up to par. It was what set Twin Serpents Apothecary apart from all the rest, their timely service and impeccable stores. Lowsley had not only managed to muck up the first, but he had also taken a stab at the other.

Severus breathed carefully, in and out, as he counted to ten very slowly in his head. However, the Muggle calming technique he had heard mention of some years before was proving to be unbelievably useless. Instead, he found himself trying desperately not to reach for his wand that lay on the desk beside him. By evidence of his hands squeezing the oak armrests of his office chair, he was waging a vicious battle. "Defective ingredients, you say?" The words came out measured and deliberate, as though he were waiting for Gregor to take the bait. He would; there was no doubt, and that was all Severus needed to send him packing, power to do so or not. He would deal with his benefactor later.

*Again with the collar, you dullard,* Severus thought as he watched Gregor's stumpy fingers wrench at the fabric around his scarlet neck. He wished that he could reach out and wring his stout head off his shoulders and be done with it.

"Yes, the salamander blood had been left sitting too long," said the unnerved wizard before adding, "aged nearly a week too long from the look of it, I'd say."

Severus erupted from his seat, and the rolling chair smashed into the wall behind him with a crash. "If that were the case, and you knew the ingredient had been compromised," Severus bellowed, foregoing all sensitivities and etiquette for polite conversation, "why, in God's holy name, Gregor, would you use it!?"

The wizard wobbled in his chair from sheer fright, his voice coming out as an indecipherable wheeze. "... I didn't know it at the time!"

Severus turned ostentatiously away from the heaving, sweaty man, his hands clenched in fists at his sides. He could feel the white-hot irritation juddering in the depths of his stomach. His harsh tongue, however, was using every ounce of that rage as fuel as it prepared to unleash a raw, tailor-made string of malice. He whipped around with a sudden fury of fierceness and black. Severus's hands slammed against the desk as they came down to support his weight, and Gregor nearly toppled backwards in his chair.

"You moronic lout!" The words spewed from Snape's mouth with an aggression that rivaled anything Lowsley had ever had the misfortune of witnessing. "Do you take pride in the fact that you can single-handedly make my life difficult?"

Lowsley sat for several petrified seconds, staring at the string of his left shoe that had worked itself from its knot. His jaw grew taut and relaxed several times, as though he were working up the nerve to defend himself. Instead, Gregor remained silent, and Severus watched with rigid contempt as the wizard chewed on the inside of his cheek, secretly hoping Lowsley would go on and bite his own head off and save him the trouble.

"The units were thrown out," said Lowsley, matter-of-factly, though the sickly, greenish pallor of his skin said otherwise. In all reality, however, he had just hammered the final nail in his coffin. The order hadn't been thrown out, and his only hope in escaping Severus Snape's wrath lay solely in the other invoice he had nicked off Snape's desk a few days prior. "Tossed them with the rest of the rubbish when I noticed they were a touch off."

Severus muttered something Lowsley couldn't quite make out before he stormed from his office, the door slamming with a deafening blow behind him. Several loud bangs and thumps rang out from beyond the closed office door, and by the sound of Snape's muffled voice as he returned up the hall, Gregor was about to pay that fair amount of aforementioned hell. The visceral instinct that told him he needed to flee arrived a moment too late, and Lowsley found himself, once again, within cursing distance of his frighteningly angry supervisor.

When he returned to the room, Severus held a wooden crate under his arm that had the monogram 'TSA' printed in emerald block lettering on the slats. The other hand held a balled up piece of parchment. Snape launched the wad of parchment at the wizard sitting before him, and it sprang off his heavy midsection before falling to the floor by his feet. Lowsley picked it up, though he already knew what it was, and opened it. Apparently, Severus Snape was far more diligent than Gregor had first given him credit for.

"Your paltry ability to lie nearly eclipses your blinding stupidity. Tell me, did you truly think you could successfully pull the wool over my eyes, or do you take me as some gullible nitwit?"

"No... No... " Lowsley's voice came in a shallow hiccup. "..."

Severus approached his desk abruptly, and once he was in reach of it, he pried open the lid and dumped the contents of the crate all over it. The ninety-five crystal phials containing the defective potion spilled over the surface and a fair few shattered when they rolled off and connected with the hardwood floor. Lowsley's wide eyes looked to the putrid, slug-coloured liquid that had splattered on the hem of his pants, only to see a pair of shiny, black dragon hide boots come into view. "You are an imbecile, and by far the worst fraud I have ever had the displeasure of knowing... and that is saying something given my past company."

Lowsley had always struck Severus as a relatively simple man. Now, however, Snape realized he was not merely simple, but obtusely dense. He often felt like he was talking to a brick wall when speaking to Gregor, and given the current dumbfounded expression on his meaty face, that was a proper observation. The wizard was hopeless and had managed to turn Severus's patience into a raw, festering wound that oozed with discontent.

Several more seconds had passed before Severus cleared his throat, and Gregor turned his gaze to finally look him in the face. "This shipment was returned just today from Bobbins Apothecarium," Snape said severely, as though he thought his tone was full of some vile poison and would cause Lowsley to drop dead on the spot. "Not only was it returned, but it was done so on the basis of faulty craftsmanship! My seal is printed on the phials, and it was your feeble attempt at brewing a potion normally taught to third-years that nearly ruined me, not defective ingredients!"

Lowsley, who looked like he was on the verge of tears, spluttered to form a rebuttal.

"Calling you a Potioneer is like calling a malodorous, maggot-infested bucket of dragon dung a four course meal!" Severus roared, his teeth bore like some wild beast's. "First, you fail to fill an order for a contact that was notoriously difficult to obtain...that could have been absolved with the proper amount of groveling. But what you did next is idiotic even for someone of your incompetence! Who in their right mind would send a defective shipment to an entirely different but equally prestigious retailer, knowing full-well of the possibility of it being returned? Better yet, who would do such a thing, and then do an even shittier job of covering his elephantine tracks!?"

"I... I..." Gregor's intense fear caused him to stammer during his attempt to formulate an excuse, but Snape allowed him to get no further.

Severus released an exasperated sigh as he worked the tension from between his eyes with his fingers. "Spare me whatever steaming heap of codswallop you plan on spewing from your gob. Your incompetency and attempt to undermine the integrity of this business have left me no choice: You are fired. I would tell you how sorry I am to have to do this, but the truth is that this has been a long time coming, and I would be lying if I said it didn't give me a great amount of pleasure to see your gelatinous arse walk out that door for the last time. You have ten minutes to gather your things and get the hell out of my apothecary."

Gregor Lowsley spent the next several moments in silence, his head hung in dejection. A great many thoughts swirled in his head. How would he explain this to his wife? Where on earth would he find a new job after being unceremoniously fired from this one? His thoughts were interrupted by the harsh voice of his former boss. "Seven minutes, Mister Lowsley, I'd get the lead out of that enormous backside if I were you before I round up your possessions myself and toss them into the street."

Lowsley stood up and shuffled to his office. He worked as quickly as he could to remove his belongings from his desk, hoping to escape any more verbal lashings from Snape. A few minutes later, after he had finished gathering his things, Lowsley walked to the door, doing his best to avoid making eye contact with Severus. Severus could not stifle the grin that appeared as Lowsley struggled to open the door and nearly burst into laughter when the portly man lost his grip on the box that held his things, sending them clattering to the pavement.

The only thing left for Severus to do was to tell Lucius, his benefactor and business partner, of the decision to sack Gregor, and he was sure that would be a particularly pleasant conversation to have.

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"Very unfortunate," Lucius Malfoy said, gazing at Severus through the reflection of the mirror hanging above his study's fireplace. "Very unfortunate, indeed."

Severus had just finished explaining the fiasco that had transpired during the day's business. He was in a foul mood, and Lucius's indifference was only grating on his nerves further. "Could you please act as though you give a modicum of concern? Your name is just as much a part of this business as mine, and this man you vouched for nearly caused it to go belly up."

"It is one contract, Severus. Besides, Florence Mulpepper is not the only rich wizard looking to expand his inventory," said Lucius with a considerable amount of amusement to his tone. "That is business. You win some, and you lose some."

Severus sulked in the plush armchair, his arms folded across his chest and a scowl set firmly in place. He hated it when Lucius approached his livelihood with reckless abandon. Lucius may have had an age-old family fortune backing him up, but Severus's income was directly tied to Twin Serpents' success. He had poured the last of his savings into nothing more than a chance. In the end, it had paid off, and Severus felt as though he had become much more conscientious of his money and where he put it. Lucius, in Severus's opinion, would rather let the shit hit the fan and scrape it off later than do anything proactive to keep it from getting there in the first place.

"That is not the way I do my business," Snape grumbled. "It's a thousand wonders you are ever successful at any of your endeavors considering the way you conduct your affairs."

Lucius rolled his eyes as he strolled to his arrogantly stocked liquor cabinet. He always used spirits to flaunt his wealth and privilege, and though Severus thought it was an unnecessary indulgence, he was in the mood for something stronger than tea. Lucius retrieved two crystal glasses and a matching decanter that held an impressive vintage of Firewhisky and made his way to the empty armchair beside Snape. "On the contrary, I am successful at my endeavors because I let the business run itself."

"I think you mean you let me run the business," Severus corrected snidely.

Malfoy frowned, as though Severus had just committed some great travesty against him. Actually, he had spoken the truth, and Lucius knew it. Malfoys didn't give slipshod performances in anything they aspired to do, but they especially despised being called out on lackluster performances when they actually happened. Lucius looked at Severus from the corner of his eye, and it was clear he had no intention of letting the present conversation slip by without the attention he felt it deserved. This, for some reason, made Lucius feel oddly relieved, though he refused to show it.

"It isn't my fault you have this disposition of a mountain troll," Lucius said as he sat the decanter down on the table with more force than necessary. A bit of the smoking liquor sloshed out of the opening and onto the ornate table which inwardly pleased him; it was good for the performance he was trying to sell. "I put Gregor in place to assist you when I wasn't available, but you wanted to lop the man's head off the moment he walked through the door."

Severus knew exactly what Lucius was trying to do, and he wasn't going to rise to his bait. In Snape's opinion, this was all Lucius's fault, and he intended to keep it that way. "The man had less skill than a glazed biscuit," Severus said as he poured himself a glass of Firewhisky. "I will never understand why you insisted on hiring him."

Lucius drummed his fingers on the side of his snifter, as though he were truly searching for a reason. He had nothing apart from the fact he owed Gregor Lowsley's father a favor, and he certainly wasn't about to let that little secret slip. "I am not as skilled as you when it comes to the *subtle science of potioneering*, and Gregor appeared to have the knowhow and determination to match yours."

Severus looked particularly miffed. That was a weak attempt to butter him up, especially for someone of Lucius's caliber. *What is he playing at?* he wondered. It wasn't lost on Severus that Lucius had the attention span of a gnat when it came to his pet projects. It was quite obvious his current association with Twin Serpents was becoming more of a hassle for them both. Lucius wanted to appear as though he was offering help, but Severus wished he would let him handle the daily goings-on. There was no denying Lucius had lost interest, but the two of them had been skirting around the issue of where to go from there for a long time. In some distorted and highly illogical way, they each felt as though they owed the other.

After the war, Severus had left Hogwarts in pursuit of a career outside of teaching while Lucius, on the other hand, had to practically rebuild his family's reputation following the fall of the Dark Lord. As it happened, they found themselves in need of one another. Lucius, in casual conversation, had mentioned the prospect of starting a project that would clear the family name or at least cover up the scars that pockmarked it. He had approached Severus one night over dinner with the possibility of opening an apothecary in the name of 'repairing the damage done to his reputation and the Wizarding world.'

Severus, of course, had refused at first. He had nothing of substance to offer in terms of monetary support, but most of all, he wasn't entirely comfortable with placing himself in the public eye so quickly. With a bit of hard nudging from Lucius, however, Severus eventually gave in and agreed to come on board as the chief potioneer for the newly dubbed Twin Serpents Apothecary. Severus, against his new partner's wishes, refused to be a charity case and put down the last of his savings on a prime location in Diagon Alley. Lucius furnished a hefty amount of money for the startup supplies, and the rest, as they say, was history. Twin Serpents grew into a booming business, eventually beating out Slug and Jiggers for apothecary supremacy.

"Spare me the flattery, Lucius. As much as you may hate to do so, we need to have a serious discussion about the future of this business. If you are going to insist on being an absentee partner, we need to hire someone to assist me that actually has a clue what they are doing. And this time, Lucius, I want to have input before you make a unilateral decision without my knowledge or approval."

Lucius's mouth fell open and he looked utterly scandalized. "After all these years, Severus, this is what you think of me? When have I ever made a decision without consulting you first?"

"Overly dramatic is what I think," said Snape lazily just before he took a sip of his drink. "And a piss-poor play-act if you want to get down to it. I have neither the time nor the patience for this, Lucius."

The blond frowned and then sighed heavily, knowing his little charade was coming to its end. "Oh, very well!"

Severus cast a withering glance in Lucius's direction, though his full attention was still elsewhere. "Was all of that necessary?"

"That depends on your definition of necessary," the wizard responded with a raised brow. "I, for one, find it wholly necessary to ruffle your black tail feathers. If you were wound any tighter, you could eat coal and pass diamonds!"

Severus glared tempestuously over the rim of his glass. "You are such a crass bastard. How do you call yourself a civilized gentleman? Perhaps I should consult Narcissa about the immature rubbish that spews from her husband's lips."

"For the record, a crass bastard maybe, but I never claimed to be a gentleman. And you are splitting hairs. We are not talking about me, we are talking about you."

Severus lips pursed as he sat his crystal glass on the table with a thump. "I don't want to talk about me. This issue is not me. The issue is..."

"Clearly you," Lucius interjected, his arms folded across his chest, as though he were daring the dark wizard beside him to protest. "Admit it, Severus. You've allowed this to go to your head."

"Because you've forgotten it entirely!"

Severus stood abruptly from his chair and walked toward the large window that overlooked the grounds of Malfoy Manor. His eyes looked past the rain that trickled down the pane to the dreary Wiltshire countryside. He had not intended to say the words that had come tumbling out of his mouth, and by evidence of the silent wizard sitting across the room, neither had Lucius. Regardless of the manner in which it presented itself, the problem had finally been brought to light. They would have no choice but to deal with it.

"You must understand my frustration," Severus said quietly as he stared out into the rain. "This is all I have, and I cannot afford any mistakes."

Lucius ran his hands over the black fabric covering his thighs; an anxious tick he had developed when he was a much younger wizard. He was grateful Severus wasn't fully aware of the vexatious state he found himself in. He was sure he looked like some damned Hufflepuff and he hoped his voice wouldn't prove his suspicion when he spoke. "Who am I trying to fool? I should have stepped down two years ago."

Severus turned to meet his gaze, clearly surprised. "You know that was not my intention."

Lucius sniffed and then poured himself a hefty share of Ogden's Old. "I'm well aware of that, but it is ultimately my decision."

"You would give it all up? You would sell your share just like that and walk away?"

"Possibly, though I know finding a suitable partner for you would be a nearly impossible feat," the blond said as he absently swirled the liquid in his glass. "Which is why I would be willing to give you my share outright."

"I refuse," Severus said flatly. "You can't forfeit everything."

Lucius smirked inwardly. He knew Severus would never be willing to take full ownership of the apothecary, and if Lucius was being quite honest with himself, he was secretly relieved that Severus had not taken him up on the offer. After all, he may have been tired of playing an active partner in the business, but he certainly wasn't tired of the money. "If you won't let me give you my half, the only other choice you have is to buy it," he suggested casually.

*Two can play at this game*, Severus thought. Snape, whose gaze was squarely fixed on Lucius, as though he were appraising the possibility of such a venture, was pleased to see the slight hint of concern behind the wizard's calm façade. He had Lucius right where he wanted him. "That would be an opportunity I would be more than willing to discuss."

"What is the estimated value for half?" Lucius asked with fake indifference. He had stumbled right into Severus's ploy. Truthfully, he hadn't seen any information relating to their investment in sometime. That was what investors and account managers were for. Lucius was content to sit back and collect the handsome sum of money that was transferred to his account each month. Apart from that, he knew nothing else.

Severus walked slowly back to the chair opposite Lucius, seemingly concentrating a great deal on the figures relating to the apothecary. "It would be close to fifty thousand Galleons," Severus exaggerated before adding, "If not more; the value increases each quarter. By the end of this year, it will most likely garner an additional twenty-five thousand Galleons."

Lucius shifted uneasily in his seat. That was a lot of money...far more than he had originally expected. He would be a fool to drop something as profitable as Twin Serpents, not to mention Narcissa would have his hide for even thinking about it. "Would you be content if I were to truly be silent partner, as you suggested earlier? I would be anonymous in every sense of the word...completely uninvolved in the management."

Severus's lips curled slightly. "Too much money to turn your back on?"

"Damn straight," Lucius replied with a coy smile. "So, I shall have the paperwork drawn up and sent to you at the apothecary tomorrow? That is, of course, if that's agreeable to you."

Severus weighed the decision for a few moments. He did not necessarily want Lucius to be uninvolved, because he and his money had played a substantial part in the apothecary's foundation. He deserved to have his share of the profits. At the same time, however, he knew his friend's full attention wasn't in the running of the apothecary, and he couldn't risk ending up with another Lowsley because of Lucius's nonchalance. "I would have complete control over staffing and contract negotiations?"

"You would have complete control over everything," Lucius assured him. "Except for half of the profits, of course, and any decisions relating to expanding or selling."

"Well, then, you have a deal," Severus replied as he extended a hand toward his now-former colleague.

Lucius returned his handshake. "Would you do us the honor of celebrating the business's new direction by staying for dinner?"

"As pleasant as that sounds, I am afraid I'll have to pass. I have to pen some letters. I have a vacancy for an assistant that needs my immediate attention."

Lucius rolled his eyes but did not press the matter further. Instead, he saw Severus to the door, and the two wizards exchanged final pleasantries before Severus stepped outside and disappeared with a loud crack.

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Author's Notes: A very special thanks to Meladara. Also, this story is a WIP in every sense of the word. Chapters will be posted as I get them finished and shipped off to Mel. That said, your reviews are welcomed in the interim. Happy reading to all!