

The Angel Investor

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A comedy of labors, love and lobster.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

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The Angel Investor

Written for the Summer 2014 SSHG_Promptfest on Livejournal. Based on the following prompt: *Gallivanting with Granger: write a magical screwball comedy. No angst, no violence, no noncon/dubcon etc; instead lots of witty banter, snappy dialogue and romance (SS/HG).*

I had a lot of fun watching screwball comedies in preparation for writing this two-chapter fic. To JK Rowling, I'm grateful you never get your knickers in a twist over Potterverse fanfiction. A big thank you to my alpha and beta team: teddyradiator, tychesong and dragoon811. Ladies, you're the best! Finally, many thanks to iulia_linnea for hosting the Promptfest once again.

Chapter One

Hermione slowly revolved and took in the restaurant's dining room. She admired the walls, which had been freshly painted in a warm gold and hung with gilded mirrors. Tables were draped in luxurious linens and topped with candles, bottles of olive oil, and springtime flowers in vases. Wrought-iron chandeliers cast a cheery light over all.

"Just gorgeous, Marcie," she said. "They did a fantastic job on the floor as well." Burnished, dark-colored floor tiles glowed with sunlight from tall windows.

"I'm over the moon!" replied Marcie Jones, arms outstretched as if to embrace the whole building. "All the customers have remarked on it. Everything's done, thanks to you, and just in time for our grand opening."

"How can you have a grand opening if you've already been open a month?" asked Hermione teasingly.

"Oh, that was just the soft opening," replied Marcie with a shrug. "You know. The vagaries of a free market and all that."

"Well, soft or grand, I'm so glad I was able to make it back in time. I hope tonight goes well."

"It will, thanks to you, dearest. If not for you, Gallivant's would not be a reality today." Marcie gave Hermione a warm hug. "Well now, we only have an hour before we open. Would you like to see the kitchen?"

"Lead on, my dear."

"The walk-in has finally been repaired. No more schlepping in food every afternoon! The rolling shelves fit perfectly. There's still some last-minute prep before the dinner crowd turns up, so ..."

The two women threaded their way around the white-suited tables to the double doors which led to the kitchen. Here was Marcie's pride and joy...a realm fit for the creator

of delicious Italian specialties.

They peeked into a tiny office, which was cluttered with recipe cards and regional Italian cookbooks, as well as toys, movie disks and video games that had been scattered about by Marcie's young children. Then they walked the length of an industrial workstation with its caddies, knife blocks and shelves. Under the gleaming countertop was open space for pots and pans of all sizes. Two middle-aged women in maroon uniforms were chatting while donning starched white aprons. One was plump with dark hair pulled back in a messy bun. Her companion was rail-thin and had short, spiky grey hair.

Marcie proudly opened the door to the newly-repaired walk-in refrigerator, a generously-proportioned appliance already loaded with racks of food. A little man in chef's whites stood inside, stacking shelves with boxes of cheese and eggs.

Marcie beckoned everyone over. "Barb, Doris, Arnie? I'd like you to meet our angel investor, the mysterious Hermione Granger."

Hermione laughed. "She always introduces me that way. Pay no mind! I'm never a mystery to my friends."

"You are positively an enigma," replied Marcie as Hermione shook hands with the staff. "You left me when we were eleven... cruelly left me!...to go off to some boarding school nobody ever heard of, and when you came back around in the summers, you refused to tell me anything about your life and loves in the wild north."

"Nothing to tell...most particularly with regards to love. I mean, have you *seen* Scotland?"

The staff easily fell into conversation, taking turns showing their boss's investor around the kitchen as they chatted. Barb, the grey-haired waitress, slid open a small panel to reveal a window to the dining room beyond. "Two-way glass," she explained. "Lets you just take a peek. Oh, hell's bells." She frowned. "I could've sworn I locked the front door."

"Who is it? Is it the *Times*?" asked Marcie.

Doris joined Barb at the window and they peered out together. "No, it's our mysterious stranger," reported the larger woman with a surprisingly girlish giggle.

"Oh, well. Let me know if that *Times* fellow turns up tonight, yeah? I would absolutely kill to see Gallivant's written up in tomorrow's paper."

"Another mysterious person?" asked Hermione. "Let me see. Who is it?"

Arnie, the little assistant, groaned loudly as he chopped tomatoes at his station. Barb ignored him. "That's just it," she whispered. "Unlike you, Hermione, this bloke really's mysterious. He's our most regular customer. He comes in every night." She peered out the window and sighed dramatically, fogging the glass for a moment. "He speaks in a *posh* voice that makes you weak at the knees. Long black hair, always dresses in black, bib to boots, no matter the weather..."

"Maybe he's in mourning," replied Hermione. "Let me see."

"Budge over." Marcie nudged Doris and Barb to one side. "Oh, him. I've talked to him a few times. Lives here in the neighborhood. He's tried every dish on the menu, you know."

"He has?"

"Go on, then!"

"Not what you'd call handsome, is he."

"But still, there's something about him. Dignity ..."

"*Gravitas* ..."

"Let... me... see." At last, Hermione managed to edge an eyeball over the sill. "Ha! I was right. I guessed who it was just from your description."

The other women bumped heads in their surprise. "Ow! You mean you know him?"

"Yes," she laughed. "He's my... he used to be my professor at school."

"Oh, posh voice *and* a brain," sighed Doris.

"So is he in mourning?" asked Barb.

"No." Hermione shrugged. "Black is just part of his overall charm."

Marcie rubbed her head as she returned to her work station. "Well, now, that's interesting. That man works at the school that took you away from me? And he lives around here? What an odd coincidence."

Hermione looked away. "Yes, isn't it?" she remarked casually.

Doris was busy collecting a tray and a menu to serve their one customer. "Bet he has a tragic past," she said with a dreamy air. "A mysterious, romantic, tragic past."

"You have no idea," replied Hermione. Her eyes lit up. "Wait, Doris, do me a favor. May I wait on him? I haven't seen him in so long."

"Oh, darling, no," laughed Marcie. "You'd be a terrible waitress. I mean, I love you, but you know this."

Still, Marcie needed little persuasion. Barb helped Hermione into another long white apron and set a water glass on her tray. "And we'll want *th~~at~~ull* story on this romantically tragic past when you get back," she whispered.

"Well, no, I really shouldn't..."

Doris gave a mighty shove and Hermione burst out the swinging door, nearly spilling her tray.

He had seated himself at a corner table, his back to the wall. There was a book open on the tablecloth, and as he read, his long fingers idly played with a fork. Hermione carefully set down the water glass and laid a menu next to his hand. "Good aft..."

"I'll have the chicken tetrazzini and the spinach gnocci," he replied without glancing up. "Wine to start. Coffee after, no dessert."

She smirked. "A man who knows what he wants." He raised his head at the sound of her voice. "Hello, Mr. Snape."

His eyes widened as he came to his feet. "Hello, Mrs. Snape," he replied.

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"Well, the mystery is solved," she said cheerfully.

"The mystery?"

"Yes. Now I know where a Potions master goes for dinner."

"Well, one does need to eat." He sat down, seemed to remember she was still standing, stood up again and offered her a seat.

"No, thank you," she said, waving him off. "I'm working."

"Do you work here?" he asked as he settled into his seat once more. "I never noticed you before."

"Er, yes!" She impulsively decided to see how far she could take the farce of being his server. "This is my first day. White or red?"

"Oh, the wine? What do you recommend?" he asked.

"Generally, white wine complements chicken. What do you do for the other two?"

"Other two what?"

"Meals. I hear you eat dinner here every night. What do you do for breakfast and lunch now that you have to fend for yourself at home?"

"Oh, I make do," he replied evenly. "I broke down and bought a microwave last month. Frozen meals are marginally appetizing. And the grocer delivers, which is a bonus." He leaned back in his chair with a casual air, yet his eye missed nothing as it took in her complexion, her hair in its hasty bun, and her decidedly non-standard uniform of a flowery skirt and blouse. "You're looking well," he remarked at last. "How are you, Hermione?"

"I *am* well, Severus, thank you. Keeping busy. Delighted I finally found a flat that doesn't smell of curry."

"Good call. Italian is much better. Speaking of which, I'll order now, if you don't mind," he said politely.

"Right. The tetrazzini. Do you want to see a wine list?"

He waved a negligent hand. "Surprise me."

"Right. I'll be back in a moment." She retreated to the kitchen.

Inside, the waitresses pounced. "What did he say when he saw you?" "Did he recognize you right away?" "Why does he come here every night?" "Did he mention me?"

"Tab, please," called Marcie, cutting through the chatter.

Hermione gave Marcie the order and asked her to select a nice white. "He said he comes here every night because the food's so good," she offered lamely, ignoring the other questions. It was really too embarrassing to tell strangers...or even Marcie...she was temporarily married to Mr. Posh Voice.

She stepped into Marcie's back office, seeking a few moments to collect her thoughts, but the clutter of toys and books was too disturbing to tolerate.

Soon Hermione's tray was loaded with a wine bottle and glass. At the table, she humiliated herself when she tried to open the wine the Muggle way and broke the cork into the bottle. "Allow me," said Severus. He removed the bottle from her hand, poured himself a glass, and then silently hovered his index finger above the liquid, causing the little pieces of cork to disappear.

Hermione forced a laugh. "Subtle. I'll probably need to remember that charm tonight during the dinner rush."

"Or you could just use a charm to remove the cork intact."

"I could try that too, I guess, except for all the Muggles who'll be watching. The Ministry tends to frown on such behavior. So! How goes the contract work?"

"Very well," replied Severus. "Parkinson's firm demands too much, as always."

"I remember. You used to work twenty hours a day when we were together."

"More like fourteen," he replied pedantically. "It's a big contract. Potions must be monitored. If they spoil, there are cost overruns."

"You're still such a slave to those never-ending orders. Why haven't you told off Parkinson and quit yet?"

"Well, maybe it's because when all the other... careers in my life could finally be dropped, it turned out I liked brewing. Parkinson pays adequately. And you and I need the funds to start our domestic life together. Or we used to." He raised his glass and sipped. "My compliments to the sommelier."

She fixed him with a knowing look. "Don't give me that. You didn't sign that ridiculous contract for my sake, or for the sake of our domestic life. I was there, remember? I begged you to reconsider the production schedule, or at least hire help, but you were so stubborn..." She pursed her lips. Fighting was for couples, which they no longer were. She was above such petty behavior now that she had achieved some distance.

Instead, she laid a hand on his arm. "Listen, Severus, I've had time to figure this whole thing out. And the truth is, you brew twenty hours a day..."

"Fourteen."

"...because you like it, that's all. You like being your own man, setting your own hours, beholden to absolutely no one. For the first time in your life, you get to do exactly what you want. And why should you not?" She shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with it."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Thank you for the special dispensation."

"I've had time to work this out since I left," she assured him. "It's just, the life you like wasn't the life I could lead. We were married but living apart, do you see?"

"Flatmates, I believe, is how you referred to us at Christmas. Except you screamed the word then, as I recall."

"Well, I'm sorry for screaming, but it was true! We were nothing but flatmates. Getting on each other's nerves, not doing each other a bit of good. Now that I'm out of your hair, I'm sure you're getting much more work done."

"Oh, I am, I really am," he drawled. "You're so right. One of us had to be the logical one and put the thing out of its misery."

She picked up the tray, missing the gleam in his eye. "Thank you, Severus," she said modestly. "I'm sure you would have come to the same conclusion, in time. Sometimes relationships are just not meant to be." She hitched up a bright smile. "I'll see to your chicken now."

She escaped to the back office again, where she compulsively dug up all the loose movie disks, put them back in their cases and arranged them on a shelf next to the portable DVD player until she felt settled.

When the main course was ready, Hermione placed Severus' plate in front of him carefully so as not to slosh anything on his front and embarrass herself further. She turned to go, but he put a quick hand on her arm.

"Stay, please, won't you?" he asked. "Irreconcilable differences aside, I really would like to hear how you're doing these days."

"Well, alright. But only for a moment." She sank into a chair and fidgeted with the bow on the front of her apron.

"Now, whatever happened with the Ministry? You were going to look into a job there, as I recall. Did you ever apply for an internship?" He placed his napkin in his lap, picked up utensils and gestured for her to talk while he ate.

"No, the Ministry didn't suit me. Oh, I did interview here and there, but it turns out I don't like taking orders from people who ignore me unless they want something," she said pointedly. He rolled his eyes and she grinned. "That should come as no surprise to *you*."

"No, indeed. You always were particular about how you were treated in school. And after."

"Especially after! By the way, is it true you've tried every dish in this restaurant?"

"Hmm? I believe so. Some of them twice. So, what do you do now?" he asked.

"I'm a waitress," she reminded him.

"How extraordinary," he replied. "Not much to recommend in the way of a career track. Still, what a good fit for you. It gets you out, making money to feed all those friends you used to tell me one just had to socialize with, et cetera. Where do you work?"

"Severus!"

"Am I supposed to read your mind?"

"I work *here*."

"Do you really? Well, one never knows. You might have borrowed that apron just for an excuse to visit with me." She looked away, hoping he did not spy her sudden blush. "When did you start? I haven't seen you here before."

"Haven't we been over all this? I started today. It's Gallivant's grand opening. Tonight will be my first dinner rush."

"And am I your very first customer? Extraordinary. Do you always serve just one customer at a time?"

"Severus, really! Are you testing me? In case you hadn't noticed, there's no one else here." She gestured to indicate the empty restaurant. "In fact, Gallivant's doesn't open until later. They were surprised to see you in here. They said they could have sworn the door was locked."

"How odd."

"Yes, very odd." They shared a smirk. "Well, if there's nothing else, I should get back," she said.

"Your exquisite attention to my every need will not go unnoticed when it comes time for the gratuity," replied Severus with a mocking air.

She stood abruptly and frowned. "Give us a shout when you remember me again. I won't be holding my breath."

In the back office, she attacked Marcie's cookbooks, arranging them by height, then by regional specialty, and finally in alphabetical order by author.

At five o'clock, it was time to unlock the glass-fronted doors and open for business. Severus had finished his meal, settled his bill and was laying a few Muggle coins on the table. Hermione found herself offended at the prospect of accepting a tip from him. "Please keep it, Mr. Snape," she snapped. "I'm sure I don't need your money,"

"You're entitled to more of my money than this, Mrs. Snape."

Her eyes widened. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Just, have you ... started proceedings?" he asked diffidently.

"No!" she replied hastily. "I mean, I should, I suppose it's time, but I've been traveling. Yes. Traveling quite a bit. You?"

"Oh, no," he replied. "If the deed is to be done, it shall not be done by me. But reassure me, please. Are you able to see to your needs?"

She looked out a window, unable to meet his eyes for the moment. Outside, a spring rain had begun in earnest but the umbrella stand near the door was empty. Making sure she could not be observed from the kitchen window, she conjured a red plaid umbrella for his use. She handed it to him with an innocent smile. He took it in two fingers, frowning in distaste. The umbrella hastily turned black.

Hermione laughed, suddenly cheerful again. "I'm fine, Severus. More than fine." She patted his lapel. "Your attention is unusual, shall we say, but lovely. Take care and stay dry."

He favored her with a lingering look. "It was a pleasure seeing you." He bowed over her hand. "Take care, Hermione, and good luck tonight."

He turned and exited without a backward glance. Hermione watched him pause outside under the wide green awning as if contemplating where to go next. She wondered why she had chosen not to tell him the truth about Gallivant's...that she was the investor, not a waitress. Perhaps she just wanted to keep some part of her new life to herself.

She still remembered the first time he had favored her with that smoldering look and that courtly gesture. It was in St. Mungo's while they were each convalescing after near-fatal injuries. A ghastly snakebite to the throat had knocked out his voice for weeks...not that he had needed a voice to convey his feelings for her. Those were heady days following the war against Voldemort; so much so that Severus and Hermione had succumbed to folly and surprised all their acquaintances by marrying each other right there in the hospital.

Nearly two years later, the bloom was decidedly off the rose. They had wed before truly getting to know each other. *Marry in haste, repent in leisure*, her grandmother used to say. Of course, Hermione still cared for him. But Severus Snape had turned out to be completely impossible to live with, with his workaholic schedule and his ridiculous need to keep secret the details of his convoluted plans. But they had been apart for months now, and there was no sense in fretting. It was all in the past. Hermione was determined to chalk up the whole failed relationship to experience, that was all.

Unconsciously, she reached up and rubbed a spot just above her heart. Would he go straight home now? Would he forget this was not an Apparition point and disappear right in front of everybody? She wondered how much sleep he was getting. Clearly, he was eating at least one decent meal per day. But Italian food every night was really much too rich for his blood. His arteries would soon turn hard as rock. He really ought to vary his diet a little, she thought, at least few nights a week ...

He turned slightly, as if to look at something. She shook herself from her reverie and hastily stepped away before he could see her.

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The door swung shut behind Severus Snape, and he paused beneath the restaurant's green striped awning, staring without seeing at the rainy street. He had been coming here every night for a month, wondering when she would finally turn up at the little *ristorante* she had bought, and here she was, as feisty as ever. And just in time. Unconsciously, he reached up and rubbed a spot just above his heart. Italian food gave him horrible indigestion.

She had been born and raised in this neighborhood before an invitation at age eleven from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry spirited her away. And she remembered it so fondly that they had decided to settle down here after their whirlwind courtship. Each of them felt the Wizarding world had used them rather ill, all things considered; the idea of moving out of the mainstream and into a Muggle community suited them both very well. Severus had resigned from Hogwarts and purchased a modest townhouse two streets over, using the sale of his childhood home on Spinner's End as a down payment.

Unfortunately, Hermione had never taken to the lifestyle he had always dreamed of. She kept complaining she did not see him enough, he did not talk to her enough, they did not get out often enough as a couple, they did not entertain her friends at home. Friends...those infernal friends who seemed to require constant rescue, Floo calls and tea. Most of them were his former students. Weren't these people adults now? Why did they still need all this attention?

She could never be made to understand that he was working toward their future. No matter how reasonably he explained that she should leave the details to him, she refused to appreciate the value of his long-range plans. So she gotten fed up with him and left.

And now Severus was decidedly unhappy. Long-range plans meant nothing without his beautiful young wife to plan them for. He found life apart from Hermione absolutely intolerable, and he suspected she felt the same way about him, deep down under the thick layer of denial she had going.

He wondered how to get her to own up to the truth and come back to him.

As patrons began to arrive, converging at the restaurant door and chattering happily, he opened his umbrella and stepped into the rain. Setting off around the corner, he made his way down a narrow alleyway to the back door of Gallivant's.

What would he say to her when he saw her again? He had no idea. But Severus knew when their eyes met, he would think of the perfect thing to win her back.

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"Hermione, if you really want to pitch in, grab a tray and follow me." Marcie picked up a long tray of pastries and threaded her way to the back of the kitchen. She began to slide it on a rolling rack that already held fragrant loaves of bread. Hermione turned to pick up the next one and follow.

There came a mighty crash, a man's voice and a cry of pain. Hurrying to the back door, she saw Severus, his hand on the doorknob and a look of surprise on his face. Marcie was leaning against a countertop, grasping her upper arm tightly.

"What happened?" Hermione asked.

Severus looked at Hermione with dismay. "Oops," he replied.

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Hermione quickly moved to the injured woman's good side and put an arm about her waist, helping her to stand. "Are you alright, Marcie?" she asked.

"Surprised ... lost my footing," said Marcie. "Slipped and came down on this counter ... at just the wrong angle, I guess ... God, it really hurts ..."

"Let me see," said Severus, coming closer.

"I think you've done enough, Mr. Snape," snapped Hermione.

"Don't be ridiculous," he replied with asperity. "Mrs. Jones, may I?" Marcie reluctantly pulled her hand away, letting Severus examine the arm with the lightest of touches. "The bone is fractured or broken," he informed her. "It will have to be seen to right away."

"Oh, it can't be!"

"I'm afraid so. Is there someone who can take you to the hospital?" he asked gently. "By all rights, it should be me, but I'm afraid I don't know how to drive."

Marcie sighed. "My husband Dave can take me. He's on his way here anyhow."

"I'm one step ahead of you, luv." Barb held up her mobile. "He says he'll meet us round back in five minutes."

"How did it happen?" asked Arnie. He brought a stool and Marcie sunk down gratefully.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't understand. This door is always kept locked from the inside! How did you manage to come in, Mr. Snape?"

"Oh...How odd. It wasn't locked when I tried it," he replied evasively. Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I'm so terribly sorry about this, Mrs. Jones."

"I know. It was just an accident." Marcie's face was twisted with pain. "Oh, it's good and busted. I'm done here." She turned to Hermione, tears in her eyes. "There's no choice but to close tonight."

"I can take over for you, Marcie," Arnie told her.

"Oh, Arnie, you're getting to be a good assistant, but I don't know ..."

"Never mind, darling, I'll see to the place," Hermione assured Marcie. "You're not to worry about a thing." Soon a horn beeped in the alleyway, and everyone had their hands full getting in Hermione's way as she helped Marcie into the car.

As the car sped away, the staff stepped back into the kitchen. Arnie huffed. "I could have done it," he muttered. "Why doesn't she believe in me?" He pulled down a few plastic food bins and began stowing vegetables with jerky motions.

Doris sighed. "Well, guess I'll go and tell 'em we're closed."

"No!" Hermione resolutely moved to face them all. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we've had a setback tonight, but there's no reason to close. Tonight's our grand opening! Marcie's big night! With our resources, we are more than capable of rising to the challenge and running this place for one evening."

"You can't be saying what I think you're saying," said Arnie, his hands full of zucchini.

Hermione took a chef's cap from a hook and covered her head with a determined air. "I'm saying, we will remain open. It will be business as usual."

Severus found his voice at last. "What?"

"What?" echoed Doris. "Who's going to cook, then? You?"

"Well, we have Arnie for that. He's a sous chef!"

"Sous chef? He's just an assistant!"

"I can do it," he replied defensively.

"He can do it," affirmed Hermione. "And I can help him. And you ladies can handle anything else." She fixed each of them in turn with a zealous glare. "It will work. ~~It~~ to. For Marcie's sake."

Severus recognized the fanatical gleam in her eye. She had worn that look from time to time, beginning in her student days when she had single-handedly tried to fight for the rights of house-elves. It had usually preceded disaster.

But all at once he saw the perfect means to spend some quality time with his wife. It was mad, but if running Gallyvant's for one night would make Hermione Snape happy, then he, Severus Snape, would see to it.

Clearly, though, the wait staff would have to be dealt with decisively before they could hope to succeed. Severus donned a second chef's cap.

"What gives you the right to order us about, eh?" demanded Doris.

"This little hat does," he replied, pointing to his head. "Here, look closely. Don't you think it suits?"

She fixed him with a glare, her hands on ample hips. "I don't know what you're playing at, but you can't just waltz in here, with your posh voice, and take over ... not if I have anything to say about ... I don't care if ... if you are ... her favorite ... customer ..."

Doris's tirade slid to a halt and her eyes took on a faraway look. "What were you saying?" asked Severus politely. She shook her head slowly, a dreamy expression suffusing her face. "Then let's be about our business. Please go to the dining room and refill water glasses. Don't let on that Mrs. Jones is not here! Tell anyone who asks there was a regrettable delay but we're back on schedule now. Hermione, go and help."

He turned to the assistant chef to discuss the menu, but Hermione grabbed Severus by the sleeve and hauled him to the first private room at hand...an exceptionally large refrigerator.

Inside, Hermione snapped on the overhead light. "Mother of God, Severus," she hissed. "Did you just use *arOblivate* on a *Muggle*? You *know* how I feel about that."

"Certainly not. Just a mild *Confundus*. Really, Hermione, we need amenable waitresses, not puppets."

"What's this *we* business?" she demanded.

"You need all the help you can get," he countered blandly, "if you're going to..."

"The *I* part of *we* thinks the *you* part of *we* has done quite enough for one evening," she snapped. "Why are you even back here? I covered for you and your convenient *Alohomoras* once; I should not have done it again. After all, it weren't for you, we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Severus ignored the question of why he had barged in. He was not entirely sure why except he had needed to see her. Instead, he took the defensive. "She was lurking much too close to a door. It's not my fault she startles so easily." Hermione's eyes narrowed. He raised his hands in supplication. "But I realize the position this puts you in. As a waitress, I mean. On your first night on the job. I do assume some small responsibility for the mishap. And I wish to make amends. That is why I fully support you. Your determination to keep this place going on such an important night is admirable, and I want to help. It's the least I can do after all this inconvenience. I am your biggest supporter, my dear," he added, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She blinked, trying to sort out the myriad sentiments. "Well, you most certainly owe me a favor. And we could use another set of hands tonight. There's just one little problem."

"You think I can't cook."

"I *know* you can't cook!"

"You're wrong," he replied archly. "I *can* cook. I simply choose not to." She pinned him with a glare. "I am capable of cooking." She shook her head. "Well, I brew potions for a living. How much different could it be? You read the recipe, you use the correct ingredients, you boil everything, and *voilà*, dinner."

"Said the man who lives on microwave meals."

"Besides, we have this Arnie fellow to help."

"To help? Oh, no. Arnie will be the chef; *you* will be his assistant. You've had a lifetime of practice chopping small things to size. And *noOblivates*, I mean it! These are nice people who don't deserve their memories wiped."

He carefully hid his triumph. "It seems I have no choice, then. I'll do whatever you say."

"Ha!" She patted his cheek with one cold hand. "Severus, my dear, you won't last twenty minutes."

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

The only thing worse than the Wizengamot is a bad review.

When Doris returned from the dining room, she seemed to have no more objection to the new order, and Barb followed her lead. They brought in five tables' worth of tabs...and so, the evening began.

Hermione stepped into the dining room to lend a hand. But within minutes, she came back and moved to Severus's side as he diced onions at a prep station. "Merlin, there are a lot of people out there."

"I thought you knew what we were getting into," he murmured. "But if you think we can't handle it, we'll just close the place and turn them all away."

She straightened and took a breath. "No! Absolutely not. We can absolutely do this. Absolutely." The next moment, the zealous look was back. "I can't believe you had any doubts, Severus."

She turned and stalked back out, still wearing her ridiculous chef's hat. Severus smiled as he watched her go. He loved watching her try and patch the world together with Spell-o-Tape. It almost made up for having agreed to take orders from a jumped-up little bottle washer with a paranoid streak.

"Do you have that water boiling yet, Mr. Snape?" he called from across the kitchen. "Where are my onions? Bring out the veal cutlets. That greasy hair must be put up...we have a health code to mind! And why aren't you wearing an apron yet?"

Severus stared at the assistant chef until the other man suddenly remembered urgent business elsewhere. He surreptitiously pulled his wand from his sleeve and tapped the large pots, causing the water to jump to attention. Then he hung up his black coat, tied his long hair back in a queue, donned a long apron and fell to work.

-oOo-

After the third upended plate of eggplant ricotta, the seasoned waitresses of Gallivant's pulled Hermione Granger into the kitchen and encouraged her, politely yet firmly, to look for a new line of work. They set her up at a station nearest the dining room door, where she was to tally receipts, fetch wine bottles and put the final touches on plates that were ready to go.

"Stop smirking," she ordered Severus without turning around.

"What makes you think I'm smirking?"

"They have a system out there, like a well-oiled machine. I'm much more useful back here."

"I agree. The dishes have never been so well-garnished."

"Presentation is important!"

"You're the princess of parsley."

"Shut up."

-oOo-

Patrons turned up in droves for Gallivant's opening night, and soon the entire staff had their hands full. In the kitchen, Severus and Hermione helped keep up with orders, learning on the fly from the surly but competent little assistant chef.

"We're out of dishes," called Arnie after about an hour. "We need more dinner plates, bread plates and stemware."

Hermione glanced at the passthrough cupboard, where only a little while ago, heaps of gleaming white dishes had been stacked. "I'm sorry, did we go through all those *already*?" she asked stupidly.

"Of course we went through them all. Now they're out in the sink and they need to be washed. Hurry!" he barked.

Hermione stepped through a swinging door to the sink area, where she found dirty dishes and glassware stacked in precarious towers taller than her head.

"I think I just figured out what Dave's job is around here," she muttered.

There was nothing for it. Glancing behind her to make sure Arnie was not paying attention, she shut herself in the tiny room with an enchantment and proceeded to wash all the dishes with a household spell. Soon, the plates, bowls, flatware and glasses were jumping into their respective spaces in the passthrough. Hermione smiled as her confidence reasserted itself somewhat. She might be rubbish at food service, but at least she was still good with a wand. She fervently hoped Arnie would not wonder how she had cleaned up so fast, or she would have to break her own rule regarding localized *Obliviates*.

As she returned to the kitchen, pretending to wipe her hands on a towel, Doris stopped in with half a dozen more table orders and some gossip. "That food editor for the *Times* is here...diMarco or some such," she informed them.

Arnie seemed to freeze in place. "You mean diFranco? *Armando* diFranco? He's really here?"

"That's the one. Old codger. Roaming hands. He's ordered the *merluzzo al forno*. And he'll want to pay his compliments to the chef. Says he'd like to do a write-up for tomorrow's column."

"Oh, by all means, show him back," Arnie said excitedly. "I'll give him an interview!"

"God, no," snapped Hermione. "That's a crazy idea! He can't know the chef is missing on such an important day! Doris, you and Barb do whatever you have to, but do not let him in the kitchen."

Arnie looked supremely disappointed, but did not raise a verbal objection. Instead, he rounded on Severus, as though wishing to take out his anger on someone he could boss around.

"Mr. Snape, I asked you to chop the saffron finely," he said snidely. "This is nowhere near what could be termed finely chopped. Haven't you ever used a knife before?"

Severus's knuckles whitened on the handle of his kitchen knife. "Actually, I have, a time or two. Would you like a demonstration?"

"Don't get churlish on me, Mr. Snape." Arnie crossed his arms and looked down his nose, a gesture which had no impact as he was at least a foot too short. "I am giving you the benefit of my experience. Who could ever work with what you have prepared? This saffron isn't fit for dog food. Do it again."

Severus leveled Hermione a look fraught with meaning before deliberately scraping his cutting board and reaching for more herbs.

-oOo-

In between washing dishes and fetching things, Hermione arranged bowls of dinner salads and fancy desserts on long trays for the waitresses. In her anxious state, it was a job everyone felt she could handle without spilling more food.

"Boys, please," she growled for the tenth time, "play nice."

Arnie had continued to frequently visit Severus's work station to check his progress. Each time, he seemed to go out of his way to find grievous fault with the way Severus chopped vegetables, ground seasonings or grilled chicken breasts.

"We only have three more hours. Surely we can get along together for the rest of this evening," said Hermione diplomatically.

"I doubt it," grumbled Severus.

Barb laughed as she passed by with a drink tray. "Pay them no mind, Hermione. They're just having a pissing contest. Men are all the same! By the way," she added, "we asked that *Times* bloke to come back in a day or two, when we're not so frantic back here. He seemed to understand. So, one less man in the kitchen to worry about, eh?" Both men grunted in derision at Barb's last words as she sailed out the door again.

Hermione laughed. "Now, boys, what should I do about this pissing contest?"

Severus did not look up from his vigorous chopping. "I have one or two ideas," he growled, "all to do with knives."

"Young man, I think I ought to place you in detention for that," she teased.

"Or take points from Slytherin," muttered Arnie.

The cleaver came to a halt. A salad bowl crashed to the floor. Two pairs of eyes swiveled to the little chef, who had gone absolutely white and was staring around in horror.

"What did you say?" asked Severus in a dangerous tone.

Arnie shook his head mutely. He backed away, spun around to flee, and crashed right into Hermione. They fell to the floor in a heap, both of them swearing. Severus jumped to pull Hermione to her feet.

"Arnie!" she gasped. "Are you a wizard?"

"Yes," he replied reluctantly. He slowly picked himself up off the floor and dusted off his knees, not meeting their eyes.

"You used to go to Hogwarts?"

"Class of '89." His tongue seemed to loosen then, perhaps because his big secret was finally out. "I recognized the famous Snapes the moment you two set foot in here," he said, glaring at Hermione. "You were after my time, but *he* should have spotted me from the off. I'm not surprised he didn't, though." He glanced contemptuously at Severus. "You never spoke directly to *me*...only to my cauldron! You know how that makes a boy feel? I put up with it for five years! *Five years!* When I got a 'T' on my O.W.L.s, I was finally shut of you."

"I can't believe this!" exclaimed Hermione. "What on earth are you doing working for Muggles?"

"And what's wrong with Muggles?" Arnie retorted. "I'm going to be a chef, open my own place one day. The Muggles got it all over us when it comes to the culinary arts, don't they? I mean, you ever ate at the Leaky Cauldron? Fish 'n' chips, pumpkin pasties, and everything else boiled to death."

"Well, that much is true." Hermione passed a hand over her forehead. "Still, Arnie, I think you should have told us what you were." She gave a wry laugh. "I mean, I've been washing the dishes by charm all night, whenever your back was turned, worried the whole time that you'd notice how fast it went. But think how much faster we can go now! We can ..." Her voice trailed off when she saw the two men were still glaring at one another. Wands had yet to come out, but there might be only seconds left.

"Boys, please," she began.

"Arnold Ramekin Fassbender," Severus proclaimed in sepulchral tones.

Arnie seemed decidedly nervous now.

"There was nothing wrong with the saffron, was there, Mr. Fassbender?" snarled Severus. "Nor the basil. Nor the *œnions*. You had me re-chop those onions twice." He began to advance on Arnie.

"W-well? How does it feel, Professor, to have someone deriding your skills at every turn?" asked Arnie defensively, backing away.

Hermione hurried to place herself between them. "Severus, calm down. There was no harm done, really. Arnie, why don't you go ahead and take a short break while I talk to..."

"No, I'm done here!" Arnie pulled off cap and threw it to the floor in a fit of pique. His bunched-up apron followed. "I'm done putting up *withim* and I'm done taking orders from *you*. You and your husband just waltz in here out of nowhere and take *overmy* kitchen? I'm surprised you didn't have the *Daily Prophet* do a human interest story while you were at it! Well, I don't care if you *are* the owner. I quit!"

He turned and strode out the dining room door.

Hermione immediately rounded on Severus, poking him in the chest. "This is *allyour* fault, Severus Snape!"

"My fault?"

"You abused him when he was a student!"

"He abused me all evening!"

"You could have been nicer to him."

"Impossible. You're lucky I didn't hex the little bastard. I can't be held responsible for the occasional student who holds a grudge against me."

"If all the students who hold grudges against you got together, they could populate Belgium," she spat.

He crossed his arms. "Fassbender was as ham-fisted making potions as he was a chef. He probably failed his O.W.L.s on purpose just to save himself further embarrassment."

"That's not fair. Arnie was a fine chef! You're just being..."

"And what was that he said about you being the owner? Hmm?" asked Severus shrewdly.

Hermione was brought up short by that. "...Well, I have no idea what he meant by that, obviously," she finally replied. "I must have gotten on his nerves a bit. I've been

told I can be rather bossy every once in a while." She gave a false laugh. "You know what? Never mind about Arnie right now. I'm sure this happens all the time in the restaurant business...People storming out and all that."

He gave her a level stare. "Quite."

"The question is," she went on, "what are we going to do about it?"

"Do? The / part of we will continue to cook, of course."

"But you can't cook."

"Merlin's beard, woman, quit assuming I can't cook! In case it has escaped your notice, I've ~~been~~ cooking all evening. Now come here." Severus took her by the shoulders and walked her over to the grill. "You have just been promoted to assistant chef. Congratulations."

"Mother of God."

"Here's your spatula. We'll have it suitably engraved later. Hurry, those mushrooms are going to burn."

-oOo-

Severus left her to it and checked on his pasta. Judging by the volume and intensity of the swearing, he estimated she would be tired of her new responsibilities within minutes. Fortunately, he had come up with a mad new idea. Before he could change his mind, he turned down the heat on the sauces, excused himself and stepped into the walk-in refrigerator, where he Summoned an old friend.

"Good evening, Headmaster," said Winky happily.

"Good evening, Winky. It was good of you to come."

She shivered and looked around, her eyes growing wide. "What does the headmaster require of Winky in this chilly room of foodstuffs?"

"We could use a hand from the best cook at Hogwarts." Another minute spent alternately flattering and instructing, and Winky the house-elf felt ready for her duties. "The important thing to remember is, never, ever let yourself be seen. We are working in the presence of Muggles."

"Oh, you can trust Winky, Headmaster!" she squeaked.

"And I'll pay you, of course."

She looked offended at that. "Though Winky is still, regrettably, a free elf, Winky has never, and *will* never, work for *pay*."

"Winky ..." Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. Hermione would kill him if he ever used a house-elf as slave labor.

"But the headmaster may offer a trade."

"A trade? Wonderful. No time to negotiate. Be thinking of what you'd like in exchange for an evening's worth of work. Come with me."

He installed the house-elf at Hermione's place at the grill. Five seconds later, an astonished Hermione marched him back to his place in the walk-in.

"What is this?" she hissed. "Now you've called in *Winky*? Have you gone mental?"

"It was the most efficient thing to do," he replied calmly. "Winky is a professional. She knows not to be seen. Besides, I'm going to pay her in trade."

"Trade? Trade for what?"

He shrugged. "I don't know yet. It's up to her."

Hermione shook her head in wonder. "Blimey, you *have* gone mental." She heaved a big sigh and smiled shyly up at him. "Perhaps I have, too, because I'm beginning to think it's brilliant."

He leaned in with a sexy smile. "How about a kiss for your mental husband?"

She paused to consider, her eyes sparkling. "Well, you are being very sporting about everything." His fingers brushed a wisp of hair behind her ear, and her eyes fluttered shut. "Oh, Severus, I've missed..."

Her words were cut off by high-pitched giggles. They both looked up in shock. Sitting high upon a shelf were two tiny, naked, snickering elf babies. Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth and backed away slowly. However, Severus immediately knew what had happened, and why. He plucked the little creatures off the shelf and, cradling them carefully in his arms, shouldered open the walk-in. Seeing they were alone, he made his way to his new assistant chef and wordlessly presented his findings to her.

"Oh, those," said Winky nonchalantly. "Those is Winky's children, Headmaster."

"Your children." He shook his head in wonder. "You failed to mention... Never mind. Is there any way you could send your children to a babysitter...er, I mean, an elf-sitter, for one night?" he asked delicately, keeping an eye on the door.

"Oh, no, sir," she replied, clearly taken aback.

"No, of course not."

"Severus, mind the sauce," warned Hermione. "Here, I'll take those off your hands." She appeared to have recovered quickly as she lifted the squirming babies gently out of his hands. "Oh, aren't they're the cutest little things. Winky, I didn't know you were married..." The dining room door swung open. With a squeak, Hermione dove out of sight under the counter. Winky joined her.

Barb looked around in consternation. "We saw Arnie storm out of here a few minutes ago. Now where's Hermione?"

"Loo break," said Severus tersely. Dividing his attention between the warming pans and the stove, he quickly made up plates and ladled sauce over pasta while Barb, and then Doris, watched him work. The waitresses left with loaded trays, shaking their heads over amateur chefs with time management issues.

Hermione and Winky popped up from behind the counter. Hermione was now cradling the elf babies with a maternal air. "Winky just told me elflings are born under a filial bond," she informed him. "They are unable to stir more than a few feet from their mother. If they leave, Winky has to leave. No choice. Oh, also, they can Apparate already. And, er, house-elves don't marry."

"This will never do," growled Severus.

"I know! If house-elves want to marry, they should have every right..."

"No! I mean, if they're seen by...Get down!"

Hermione and Winky ducked behind the counter again as the door swung open. Severus was shocked to see Arnold Fassbinder step in. For a moment, Severus wondered if the little man had reconsidered stranding them and had decided to come back and help them finish out the evening. But the malicious smile on Fassbinder's face belied that notion.

"Good evening, Mr. Snape," said Fassbinder with false good cheer. "You'll never guess who I met outside. None other than Armando diFranco, the food critic from the *Times*!" He ushered in a white-haired older gentleman in a stylish suit. "I knew you wouldn't want him to leave the restaurant without allowing him pay his compliments to the chef." Fassbinder looked around theatrically. "Oh, now, where is the chef? She must be here somewhere. Mrs. Jones? Mrs. Jones, are you available for an interview?"

Severus reached for the wand in his sleeve, only to remember it was not there. Sometime during the evening, when he had rolled up his sleeves, he had transferred his wand to the pocket of his trousers, which were bound by his sauce-stained apron. He fumbled with the bow while he fumbled for the right thing to say.

"Good evening, Mr. diFranco!" Hermione popped up from behind the counter, all smiles. She was holding a very large stock pot, her thumbs firmly tamping down the lid. "How kind of you to come in and pay us a visit. Marcie Jones, at your service."

She set the pan on the counter and held down the lid with an elbow while shaking hands with the other hand. Fassbinder watched them talk, a cross between ire and disappointment on his face. Severus finally freed his wand and held it low, ready to send a Stinging hex his way. But Fassbinder caught sight of the wand just in time. His eyes widened and, making obsequious excuses, he hastily left the kitchen.

"Let me show you around," Hermione was saying to their guest. "Oh...would you kindly take this pot, Mr. Snape? Thank you so much." Severus relieved her of the stock pot and she linked arms with the journalist, turning to stroll with him to the other side of the kitchen.

-oOo-

"If you have a few minutes, Mrs. Jones, I just want to compliment you on a delicious *merluzzo*," said diFranco, "and ask you a few questions for an article I'd like to publish in tomorrow's paper. First, what made you decide to go into the business?" He pulled out a notepad and pen as he spoke.

"Well, I was bored at home," she began, throwing an impish glance at Severus, "and I needed something interesting to do."

"If you need your life to get even *more* interesting, Mrs. Jones, just say the word." He waggled the stock pot meaningfully. Hermione quickly looked away.

"And where did you study?" asked diFranco, scribbling away.

"Well, after school, I attended Kirklee's." Hermione knew Marcie's biography very well. "My first love was Italian cuisine, and I had always dreamed of opening my own restaurant. I was so fortunate to land an apprenticeship at Capella's. After that, I basically came up through the ranks, as we all do, don't we? Then a few months ago..."

There was a loud sound twin bangs behind them. They hurried back to find Severus wearing an astonished expression and holding the open stock pot in one hand, the lid in the other.

"Mr. Snape," Hermione began, searching for the right words, "weren't there a couple of...*oflobsters* in that pot?"

He gave her a bleak look. "There were, Mrs. Jones," he growled, "but they got away."

"My word," remarked diFranco cheerfully. "I didn't notice Lobster Thermadore on the menu! How ambitious for a first-time chef. I look forward to trying it next time." He glanced down at the floor and did not notice both the chef and her assistant were glancing up. "Well, a couple of shellfish can't have gone far, can they? Let's take a quick peek under the..."

"No!" they shouted. "That is," continued Hermione, firmly steering the man back around, "I'm sure my assistant will find them." She walked with him and gamely chattered without hearing herself, her eyes roaming everywhere. Those little buggers could appear and disappear at will, and Winky...wherever she was!...seemed ill-disposed to rein them in. Maybe Severus had given orders that she was following to the letter.

"Um ... at Capella's I once served the Parker-Bowles," she babbled. "Isn't that extraordinary? Camilla particularly liked the, erm ... You know, that's not a particularly large family, for all that they have two last names ..."

There! One of the elflings was perched on a high shelf. It had hold of a big bowl of gnocci and was eating large handfuls, slurping and giggling. Hermione gamely kept walking. "And over here is where we, er, mold the bread." Did one even mold bread? She had no idea. What did it matter? They were sunk. Within moments, diFranco was sure to spot one of the house-elf babies. He would shout bloody murder, and then there would be a panic, and then she and Severus would have to *Obliviate* every single Muggle in this crowded restaurant. Maybe even the whole street for good measure...everyone within earshot, at the very least. And then the Ministry would come crashing down upon them, and the Wizengamot would be convened, and that odious Arnie Fassbender would be called to testify... Oh, why did she ever think managing this restaurant would be a good idea?

She looked around, hoping Severus was doing his part to round up the little elves. To her shock, he was on the other side of the kitchen, nonchalantly ladling sauce onto a plate of pasta as if he had all day, while Doris stood quite close, saying something to him in a girlish voice. In fact, Doris really seemed to be taking advantage of her chance at alone time with Severus. And... was she actually batting her eyes? Was the woman *flirting*, with *her* husband, at a time like *this*?

"Mr. Snape!" she cried. Everyone jumped. "...I think I found one of those *lobsters* you were looking for earlier." She glanced sharply in an upward direction with her eyes, trying to convey nonverbally what her words could not.

"How could a lobster get up on a shelf?" asked diFranco.

"Never mind, my mistake," she growled and pulled him along. "And here is our newly-refurbished walk-in," she continued as she started to open the door. "We've very proud of...bollocks!" She slammed the door again, throwing her whole weight into it, to block out the sight of the second elfling perched on a shelf and taking big, toothy bites out of the butter. "On second thought, I'm afraid I can't let you see inside. Health code, you know." She all but pulled him away. "And so, we come to the end of our tour. What do you think of the kitchen?"

"Small, but perfectly adequate for your first place. You should be very proud," replied diFranco graciously. They made their way back to the stove, where Hermione caught her breath while she pretended to check the fire under pots Severus had had to vacate in a hurry. She glanced around for him, but neither he nor the elf babies were in sight.

The reviewer paused in his writing. "This is going to be a wonderful article. I just have one more question for you, Mrs. Jones. Readers will want to know: what was your inspiration for starting Galloway's? What made you take this ..." diFranco gestured expansively, "this leap of faith?"

His kindly face seemed open and genuine, as if ready to be regaled by a heartwarming story. Hermione paused to gather her thoughts. This was the time to really let Marcie's voice come through.

At that moment, a shimmer on the wall beside the wine rack caught her eye. As she watched over diFranco's shoulder, Severus appeared briefly, cradling one elfling firmly in each arm. He inclined his head, and look he gave her was a rare combination of gentle irony and pure love. In that moment, Hermione felt a great rush of affection for her

husband, and as he gestured with the wand in his fingers and Disillusioned himself and the elves again, she thought of just what she wanted to say. She opened her mouth and duly regaled Mr. diFranco with the truth...keyed to two sets of ears.

"From the time I was a little girl named Marcie *Granger*," she began, "the thing I loved to do best was feed my friends and family. It's funny, but while all the other little girls were playing princess, I played Court Chef. So you could say opening a restaurant has been my lifelong dream. But I could not have done it...taken this leap of faith...without two very special people in my life.

"The first is my cousin Hermione. We renewed our acquaintance just a few months ago, but she was kind enough to put up the capital to take this old building and make it the beautiful place it is today.

"And the second person," she continued, gazing steadily at the blank wall where Severus stood, "is my wonderful husband. My surprising, resourceful, darling husband, who supports me unconditionally as I try and realize my dreams... even when I'm not quite sure what those dreams are at the moment." She sighed happily and then turned her attention back to diFranco. "Will that do for your article?"

His reply was flattering enough to earn him a generous slice *oftorta Caprese* in a take-away box. Hermione and the two waitresses accompanied him to the front door.

"What was that all about?" asked Barb as they waved goodbye under the awning.

Hermione shook her head. "That was a near-miss, my dears. A very, very near-miss. I'll explain it all to Marcie when I call her tomorrow."

Though it was after nine, Galloway's showed no signs of slowing down. "Well, let's be about our business," said Hermione briskly. "Give us a moment to regroup and we'll be back on track in no time. Oh, and Doris?"

"Yes, luv?"

She lifted her hands in apology. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but it turns out Mr. Snape is already seeing someone."

"Oh, no." Doris made a moue of disappointment. "Isn't that always the way?"

"I know! All the good ones are taken."

-oOo-

Quiet and order had been restored when Hermione returned to the kitchen. Winky stood on a stool, slicing bread for baskets while expertly minding the grill and the oven. Severus was working double time everywhere else to make up for all the disruptions. He waved his wand and perfectly-grilled shrimp jumped into a basket. On the stove, various sauces stirred themselves with long-handled spoons.

"Where are the elflings?" she asked.

Winky beamed. "The headmaster thinks of everything," she said simply.

Severus hitched a thumb at the office. "See for yourself."

Hermione peeked in the window of the office door. There she saw the two little elves perched together on a swivel chair, still as statues, eyes glued to a Dr. Seuss cartoon on the little DVD player.

"Brilliant. And they *do* look a little like Thing One and Thing Two," she murmured. "How appropriate."

It struck her suddenly, the lengths to which Severus had gone to keep this place running. It was true that most of the trouble had been of his own making, but somehow, that was not important. For the first time in their brief marriage, they had come together and worked as a team, and the results had been nothing short of remarkable.

She walked over to where he stood. "You really *can* cook," she marveled.

"Oh, ye of little faith," he replied with a smirk.

"Hey." She took his face in her hands and kissed him softly. "You're amazing," she said sincerely. "Thank you for everything."

"You are most welcome," he replied, and tenderly returned her kiss.

"I've thought of what I'd like engraved on my spatula," she murmured against his lips.

His hands encircled her waist and began to travel downward. "And what might that be?"

"To Mrs. Snape, with Love from Mr. Snape."

"Done."

-oOo-

The look on Severus's face was decidedly smug after that. And Hermione's dishes were rather heavily laden with parsley.

-oOo-

"Well, Hermione," called Doris, "we're cashed out. The dining room is swept and the linens are in the hamper for pickup. How is everyth..." She looked around in amazement at the spotlessly clean countertops, stove and floors. "Lord love you, will you look at this? It looks like it was cleaned by magic!"

She gazed at Severus admiringly, watching him flick an imaginary speck off the spotless counter with a clean white cloth. No, he wasn't a bit handsome, she thought, but he certainly knew his way around a kitchen. It really was too bad he was taken.

-oOo-

After the staff left and the doors were locked and warded, Hermione and Severus nestled close together at his favorite table in the candlelit dining room and split a well-earned bottle of Chianti. Presently, they were joined by Winky and her elflings. Severus scratched one of the little elves behind the ear with a lazy hand. The other elfling leapt into Hermione's arms for one last hug.

"Winky, you went above and beyond tonight!" exclaimed Hermione. "You really rescued us."

"Thank you, Miss," replied Winky humbly. "Headmaster, Winky has decided what to ask for in trade for the work she did this evening."

"Is that so?" replied Severus. "Well, I said you could name your price. What have you decided to take?"

"This!" Winky snapped her fingers. Instantly her arms were full of electronics, straps and dangling cords.

"You want the DVD player?" laughed Hermione.

"Yes! Winky has never seen a better 'elf-sitter,' Headmaster. May Winky have it in trade?"

"You may, indeed," said Severus. "Take it with our deepest thanks. Be sure and grab a few movies as well."

Winky smiled and said her farewells, and she and her babies Apparated away with loud pops.

"Do you think she'll be able to get that thing working in the castle?" asked Hermione.

"Oh yes. If anyone can do it, it's Winky." Severus yawned. "I'm rather more worried that we've potentially corrupted a whole generation of house-elves with children's films."

"One wonders what they'd make of the movie *Gremlins*."

"I shudder to think."

They sat in comfortable silence for a time. Then Hermione leaned her head on one hand and began to fill in the blanks of the story of Gallivant's. "After I... moved out... my parents retired. They sold the practice in Sydney, along with some real estate, and they sent me quite a nice pile of dosh. Said it was my early inheritance. Between that and the award from my Order of Merlin, I'm rather well-off now. I decided to use some of the capital to invest in my cousin Marcie's restaurant."

"That was an admirable thing," he replied. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. "And I already knew."

She snorted inelegantly. "Of course you did. I don't know why I bother to keep such things from you."

"So, you're Gallivant's angel investor, hmm?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I hate that term."

"Why? It suits you." He moved to take her in his arms. "Angel investor. *Angel investor*. Just listen to how it rolls off the tongue."

"Mm," she purred. "Anything sounds good when you say it with your posh voice."

"Do I have a posh voice?"

"Yes. We voted. The motion carried. Don't deny it."

"On the contrary; I've worked for years to achieve it." He kissed her ear. "Whenever I turn it to full gain, people do anything I say." He licked her earlobe, causing her to shiver. "Come back to me, Mrs. Snape," he entreated.

She giggled. "Nice try."

"It was worth a shot. But I really do wish you'd move back."

She pulled away a bit and regarded him seriously. "Tell me the truth. How long before you noticed I was gone?"

He dropped his gaze to her hand on the tablecloth and began to play with her fingers. "It might have been a day and a half," he admitted.

She cocked her head. "Had to make your own coffee?"

"No."

"Had to answer your own Floo calls?"

"No! Holy hell, woman, I don't think of you that way."

"Just checking. Then what was it?"

He sensed this was a moment to speak the absolute truth. "It was your perfume," he said with a sigh. "It had dissipated from the air. The whole house seemed bereft then, and I knew nothing but the absolute worst could have caused that."

She kissed his nose. "I understand. I think I do. Thank you."

"Do come home," he said. "Let's start again. I should not have ignored you like I did. I love you and I miss you."

She stared at the place where their fingers intertwined. "I love you too, so much, and I really want to." She sat back and picked up her wine glass. "But there have to be some changes in our lives, Severus. Real changes."

"I agree."

"I know I was a harpy about the hours you put in. I know you have some sort of convoluted long-range plan. I mean to try and respect your work more, but you need to meet me halfway."

"Obviously." He sighed and drained his glass. "To start with, I think it's time I tore up that infernal Parkinson contract," he said.

"Would you really do that?"

"I would. The whole point is to spend less time in the laboratory. Besides, I can do better than Parkinson. He is beginning to take liberties with my patent rights."

Hermione went still. "Sorry? Did you say patent rights?"

"Yes."

"You never told me you hold patents."

"I distinctly remember telling you about them. You just don't pay attention. That's your whole problem."

Oh, I don't pay attention? /I'm the one who doesn't...? He gave her a long, lingering kiss then, stealing her thunder. When he settled her head against his chest, she chuckled and snuck an arm around his waist. "Oh, never mind."

Severus reached for the bottle to refill their glasses. Drinking on an empty stomach was making them pleasantly squiffy.

"You know," continued Hermione, "you should probably be paid much better than you are. In fact, you could be contracting with others to brew potions of your own design."

What if you went into business for yourself?"

"I did think of that, a long time ago. But being in business would just make me busier. And busy is a bad thing, or so I've heard."

"But I'm not so sure it would have to work out that way. Let me draw up a business plan. Believe me, I think I can arrange for you to do less work for more reward."

"Go into business for myself, eh? Hmm. But where would I get the starting capital?"

"Well, you'd need an investor ..."

They picked up their glasses and toasted the future.

The End