Honey, You're Familiar (Like My Mirror Years Ago)

by hester_latterly

Summary

Adam Beaumont needs a temporary wife to fulfill a bizarre condition of his father's will. Unfortunately, his best option is his personal assistant Belle Villeneuve, who loathes him just as much as he does her. Or at least, they thought it was loathing...

Otherwise known as a modern marriage of convenience AU.
Once upon a time, in the not-so-hidden heart of England, there lived a family by the name of Beaumont. The Beaumonts were an ancient family, with a lineage dating back to the Norman conquest, and a family seat, Thornleigh Hall, that had first been constructed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Though they somehow never managed to acquire a title, they did, over the centuries, manage to accumulate a frankly unseemly amount of wealth. “To strive and to conquer” was their family motto, and they lived it.

But by the twentieth century, it seemed that their luck was running out. For years, their fertility had been declining, and the Great War had not been kind to them. In 1920, Reginald Beaumont, the only Beaumont son to make it through those tumultuous years, assumed the mantle of head of the family. He was twenty-two years old, and within a year, he had married his sister’s best friend, a gentle and unassuming girl named Phyllis, and set about the vital business of producing an heir. But alas, over the years that followed, their nursery was visited only by daughters, one after the other. Reginald was not a religious man by nature, but faced with the very real prospect of the extinction of the dynasty, he got down on his knees in the family chapel and begged, and pleaded, and promised, if only God would see fit to bless him with a son. And in due course, Phyllis became pregnant one final time, and in the winter of 1936, she finally gave birth to the long awaited baby boy. He was christened John, after the grandfather who had died long before his birth, and in the ensuing commotion, Reginald promptly forgot the promises he had made.

Young John (and it was always John, never Jack) was raised to believe in the unerring rightness of the Beaumont cause. Unfortunately, learning to do things like strive and conquer left very little time for learning such concepts as kindness and humility, and as John grew older, he also grew more arrogant and unbending. As the only son among four children, he was also raised to believe that his greatest duty to family was to save the Beaumont line, just as his father had done. To this end, in 1965, he married a young woman of suitable age and good breeding. But in this regard, he was to prove not as lucky even as his father, for aside from a single miscarriage in 1968, there was not to be even a hint of pregnancy before his wife’s death of cancer in 1979.

At the time of his wife’s death, John Beaumont was forty-three years old. His father had died four years previously, and his sisters had all married and spread across the country. He rarely talked to them. He was, for all intents and purposes, the last Beaumont. It was imperative that he marry again and father an heir, or the male line would die with him. But times had changed since he had married a white-gloved finishing school graduate. Now, on the cusp of the Eighties, there were fewer families of note who were willing to offer up their daughters to a man in his mid-forties, no matter how impeccable his lineage. So he was still unmarried when he decided to take a business trip to America in the spring of 1983. And it is here that our story really begins.

Her name was Rose Michaels, and she was a twenty-two year old American stewardess serving her first transatlantic route. She also had the most beautiful blue eyes he had ever seen. They
went to dinner when their flight reached New York, and from there to bed, and a transatlantic affair was born. Six months later, she was pregnant, and John Beaumont, recognizing that her womb might contain the last salvation of his once-proud family, promptly married her and installed her at Beaumont House, his London home. On July 19, 1984, the day an earthquake rattled Britain, the young Mrs. Beaumont gave birth to her first and only child in a private London hospital. It was a healthy baby boy, and when they handed him to her, a completely overwhelmed Rose promptly burst into tears.

“Oh no, ma’am, don’t cry!” said the startled nurse. “You have a beautiful son. Look, see?” And indeed, the baby was looking calmly out at the world from the safety of his swaddling blankets, almost as if this new place were a puzzle he was trying to solve. His eyes were a bright, clear blue like his mother’s. Rose sniffled. “Have you given any thought to what you might like to name him, ma’am?” asked the nurse gently.

“Adam,” said Rose without hesitation. It was her father’s name, and the only thing, aside from her eyes, that she would be allowed to give to this most Beaumont of children.

On July 20, 1984, Maurice Villeneuve, newly returned to his hometown of Chicago after graduating from art school on the east coast several months earlier, let an old friend from high school talk him into going to a party. “It’ll be great, man,” his friend told him. “Girls, booze, a band. You’ve gotta come!”

It was not a great party. The beer was cheap and the band was terrible. But there were girls, or to be more precise, there was one girl who mattered. Antoinette Hamilton—Toni to her friends—was a secretary by day and an aspiring musician by night. She and Maurice met in the line for the bathroom, and for both of them, it was love at first sight. They married in 1986, and had their first child in 1990. She was born, small but perfect, on April 15, a bright and balmy spring day.

“You did amazing, my dear,” Maurice told his wife, leaning over from his perch on the corner of the bed to drop a kiss to her forehead. “She’s beautiful.”

Toni looked down at the sleeping bundle in her arms. “She needs a name to match,” she said. Together, they studied their baby in companionable silence, until Toni suddenly looked up at her husband, the light of inspiration in her eyes. “You said she was beautiful. Let’s make it official. How about Belle?”

“Yes,” said Maurice slowly, testing out the feel of the words against his tongue. “I like it.” He stroked a gentle finger against his daughter’s cheek. “Welcome to the world, little Belle.” And as if on cue, the tiny girl awoke and began crying to be fed.

One evening in June 1991, Toni Villeneuve left her baby daughter with her husband and headed to a friend’s house to rehearse with her band. She never made it. On her way there, she had stopped at a convenience store to buy snacks for the rehearsal, the same convenience store, unfortunately, that two young men had just decided to rob. Late that night, Maurice found himself identifying his wife’s body in a downtown morgue. She had been shot three times.

In the months that followed, Maurice felt as if he were only half alive. It was only Belle’s presence and Belle’s needs that kept him tethered to reality. “I don’t know what to do,” he finally admitted to Toni’s friend Sarah when she stopped by to bring him some food.
Sarah looked at him, at the rough growth of beard along his jaw and the dark circles under his eyes. “I think you need a fresh start,” she finally said. “Somewhere new, away from this city.” He looked up at her, eyes lost and uncomprehending, and she explained. “You’re an illustrator; you can work from anywhere, right?” He nodded. “Then take Belle and find somewhere where you can raise her to be safe and happy.”

By Christmas, Maurice and Belle were settled in a restored turn of the century house in the little town of Pleasantville, Iowa, population 1,536. It was certainly not Chicago, and in the years to come, Maurice would never quite be sure whether that was a blessing or a curse.

In August 1991, Rose Beaumont came to a decision: she was tired of living life in a gilded cage. So much had changed since that day in 1983 when she had looked down the aisle of her plane and seen a handsome older gentleman watching her out of dark, inscrutable eyes. Back then, it had all seemed like a fairy tale, the prince on his white horse come to spirit her away to his castle, where she would never want for anything. But she had wanted, oh, how she had wanted. Like all fairy tales, in the end it had been too good to be true. Her prince was by turns distant and cruel, and her castle was lonely.

But there had been two joys in her life these last years. One had been the beautiful rose gardens at Thornleigh Hall. She had loved them, and cared for them, given them her time and her energy, and they had rewarded her by flourishing, brilliant blooms of red and white and pink and yellow. But dear as they were to her, they paled in comparison to the love she felt for her son. Such a dear, sweet little boy, with nothing in him of his father, neither in looks nor in personality. And Rose wanted to keep it that way. She wanted them both to be free. So that August, she visited a solicitor.

But in the end, none of Rose’s dreams came to pass. Two weeks after that meeting with the solicitor, Rose Beaumont was dead. And as seven-year-old Adam Beaumont watched them lower his mother’s casket into its grave, he knew—just knew—that his father was somehow responsible. The man’s grip on his shoulder was like a vice, and a little part of Rose’s innocent boy died with her.

“I’m moving to New York.” Adam swirled the wine in his glass—red wine, like blood—and regarded his father across the table with level blue eyes. It was 2006, and he had graduated from Cambridge with a first in English literature a month ago. He had also come into his trust fund.

John Beaumont set his silverware down with an ominous clink and fixed his son with an icy glare that would have made lesser men shy away in fear. But this man had been Adam’s only family for fifteen years now, and he had seen that look before. He kept the expression on his face carefully neutral, steeling himself against his father’s wrath. “I’m sorry,” said his father, voice dangerously calm. “I don’t think I heard you correctly. I thought you said you were moving to New York, but that can’t be right.”

“Then you might want to get your hearing checked, old man,” replied his son. “Because that is exactly what I said.”

“What the hell would you do that for? Useless country, America.”

Because I hate you. “Because I can. I’ve recently come into some money, or don’t you recall?”

His father picked up his silverware again and cut into his steak with vigor. “You know I can
end that trust anytime I want to, right?”

Adam shrugged. “You won’t. You need me. I’m the last of—how did you put it? Ah yes, this family’s illustrious line. You’ll keep the trust.”

The older man chuckled, a sound to make the blood run cold. “Ah, but you’ll always have to wonder, won’t you, whether that’s true or not.”

“It’ll take my chances.”

And he did. He moved to New York City and drifted aimlessly for a while, awash in a sea of bright lights and women and just a little too much of everything. Despite his nonchalant posturing, there was a part of him that lived in fear of the day his father would decide to cut off his trust fund in a fit of pique, and he intended to drown that fear in a barrage of feeling. But that day never came, and one morning, through the pounding in his head, he came to a realization: he was bored.

He rolled over and looked at the bare back of the woman laying next to him, wishing he could remember her name. Julie? Jessica? Jennifer? Yes, Jennifer, definitely Jennifer. “I’m bored,” he announced.

She rolled over and looked at him. Her black eyeliner was smeared halfway down one cheek. “What are you talking about?”

“What am I even doing? What’s the point to all this?”

Maybe-Jennifer flopped back against the pillows with a groan. “Oh, don’t get all existential on me. It’s too fucking early. If you’re so bored, get a job.”

It was a comment that would change his life. Yes, he did need something to occupy his time. But he was a Beaumont, and Beaumonts strove, Beaumonts conquered. They did not simply get jobs at some other person’s company. So Adam took some of his trust fund money and put it to good use, and in early 2009, Beaumont Media was born. Over the next few years, it grew by leaps and bounds, and Adam became more wealthy in his own right than he had ever imagined he could be. And yet, in all that time, he and his father never spoke, not even once.

In 2012, the same year that Beaumont Media went public, Belle Villeneuve graduated magna cum laude from Grinnell with a degree in English and French. Directly after that, she moved back home to Pleasantville and took a job as the town’s assistant librarian. Her friends from college were horrified. “Out of all the places you could go, all the things you could do,” they said, “you’re going to do that?”

Belle just shrugged her shoulders, unable to fully explain herself. “I don’t want to leave my dad,” she finally said. “It’s hard for him to be alone.”

And she didn’t mind, really she didn’t. After all, Pleasantville had been her home since she was a year and a half old; for good or ill, it was really the only home she had ever known. And if she sometimes lingered over the travel section while she was reshelving, well then, that was only natural curiosity. It didn’t mean anything, no, not at all. Months passed, and life seemed fixed in its pattern. Then she met Neal Gaston.

She had known who he was already, of course, even though he had been several years ahead of her in school. Everyone in the tri-county area knew who Neal Gaston was. He had been Pleasantville’s star quarterback, and then Pleasantville’s war hero for having done several tours of
duty in Iraq, and now he was Pleasantville’s bartender slash manager. And for some reason, he had decided he wanted Belle.

At first, dating Neal had seemed almost like a game, an exercise in seeing how far she could push something before it got away from her. Just one date, and then another, and then another after that, and so on ad infinitum. He wasn’t particularly bright by any stretch, but the attention was flattering, and it added some color to her life. But then he said something that made her realize maybe it had all gotten away from her after all.

They were sharing a pizza (half Hawaiian for her, half meat lovers’ for him) at the corner table of Pleasantville’s one good pizza place. Belle had let her attention wander, as she often did while Neal was talking, when she heard him say, “And once we get married—”

“Excuse me, what?” she asked, horrified.

“Once we get married,” he repeated. “We are getting married, aren’t we? Not right now, of course, but, like, eventually.”

Belle threw down her napkin and stood up quickly. “I, uh, I have to go,” she said, and beat a hasty retreat for the exit.

When she reached her home, she immediately stormed into her father’s studio. Though it was nearly nine o’clock in the evening, he was still working, opera music blaring loudly from the stereo. Belle hit pause and waited for him to look up. “Dad,” she said, “I think it’s time I moved.”

Maurice looked at her over the tops of his reading glasses. “Did something happen on your date tonight, chickadee?”

“He thought we were going to get married. Married! Can you even imagine what a disaster that would be?”

“Now, now,” her father cautioned her. “Marriage isn’t all that bad. With the right person, it can be very rewarding.”

She fixed him with a level stare. “Neal Gaston is not that person.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right there. But when you do meet that person, you’ll see what I mean.”

“I don’t think I’m going to meet them in Pleasantville, Dad.”

His smile was a little sad, yet resolute, as if he already knew what she was about to tell him. “So, chickadee, where are you going to go?”

In October 2014, Belle moved to New York City and fired up Indeed. The first listing that came up was for a position as an administrative assistant. The company was Beaumont Media.

“So, this is your desk,” said Marie, indicating the little cubicle with a wave of her hand. She waited for Belle to set her tote down, then thrust a stack of papers into her hands. “These are the instructions for setting up your login, as well as the employee handbook. I suggest you read it carefully.” She saw the flicker of trepidation that flashed across Belle’s face and tried to smile encouragingly. “Really, honey, you’ll be fine. You seem like a smart girl; they wouldn’t have hired you if you weren’t. I’ll just give you one piece of advice, and that’s try your best to stay out of his
Marie threw back her head and laughed so hard that Belle was actually a bit offended. It had been a genuine question. “Girl, you are funny,” said Marie when she finally stopped. “Where did they find you?” She turned and pointed through the wall of glass that looked onto the lobby one floor below them. “Adam Beaumont. Who else would I mean?”

Belle followed the direction of her finger and found herself looking at the portrait that adorned the wall directly above the company logo. He was younger than she would have thought, perhaps no more than thirty, and handsomer too, with dark blonde hair brushed back from his face and the bluest eyes Belle thought she had ever seen. And yet…there was something about his face, a certain coldness to the eyes and an arrogant set to the mouth, that made her want to look away. She shivered.

Marie seemed not to have noticed. “Like I said,” she told Belle, “just stay out of his way and you’ll be fine.”

In April, Adam Beaumont’s personal assistant Katie quit in rather spectacular fashion, storming out of the private area where his office was and declaring that she would never work for “that monster” again. Twenty-four hours later, Belle found herself with a promotion of sorts as her replacement. She was well aware that it wasn’t a compliment to her work so much as it was due to the fact that no one else would agree to do it. After all, he had, as Marie had told her, gone through three assistants in the past two years. As she lifted her hand to knock on his office door, Belle was determined that she would not be the fourth to let Adam Beaumont break them. She was made of sterner stuff than that. She brought her fist down and knocked confidently, once, twice, three times.

The answering voice was a deep, foreboding rumble. “You may enter.” Belle pushed open the door and stepped inside. It was the first time she had ever been in this office. It was done all in black and white, very sleek and modern, with one entire wall of tinted glass that looked out onto the city below. He was sitting at his desk, his blond head bent over his laptop. “Close the door after yourself,” he said in that same low voice, not even bothering to look up. Belle seemed to feel the vibration of his words all over her body, and then wanted to slap herself for having such a stupid thought.

“Good morning, Mr. Beaumont,” she said as she shut the door, not knowing how else to begin.

That finally earned her his full attention. She could tell from the way his hands paused and then stiffened in midair over his keyboard. Then he looked up, and Belle felt as if all the air had been knocked from her chest. His gaze was startlingly, shockingly blue. She had never been close enough to really notice before now just how much. There was a searching, almost probing quality to it, as if he were able to look down into the heart of her and see and take whatever he wanted. She felt his eyes travel the entire length of her body before coming up to rest on her face. She could not have looked away even if she had wanted to.

For a long moment, Adam could not speak, and he wondered if this strange young woman felt it too. She was very pretty, in a clean, fresh sort of way, with wide brown eyes like a startled deer. But it was not that which caused the odd, almost fluttering sensation in his chest; it was that she seemed wholly familiar to him, although the rational part of his brain knew that they had never met before. Their gazes caught and held, and the sensation in his chest intensified. It made him feel
vulnerable, and that in turn made him want to lash out, to push away that feeling until he felt he had regained the upper hand. When he finally found his voice, it was rough, caustic. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

Belle stiffened. “Belle Villeneuve, your new assistant. Katie Miller’s replacement? Did you not know I was coming?”

In truth, he had forgotten. This made him even more intent on lashing out. “I see they’ve taken to sending just about anyone in here for that job,” he said in a sarcastic drawl. “You look like you should still be in college.”

To Belle’s everlasting horror, two bright spots of red appeared along her cheekbones. “I’m twenty-five,” she bit out. “And I’m here because no one else would agree to do it.” Ordinarily, she would be horrified to hear herself talking to her boss like that, but there was something in him that provoked her.

He felt as if she had slapped him. As if he needed another reminder that no one at his company really liked him. “You can set yourself up at the desk in the antechamber,” he said icily. “I’ll let you know when I need something.” She didn’t move, just continued looking at him with those big brown eyes that saw too much. “What are you waiting for?” he asked, making a shooing motion at her. “Go!”

“He’s an arrogant bastard,” Belle wrote that evening in an email to her father, “but I’ve no doubt it will be an interesting job.”

She had no idea just how interesting her acquaintance with Adam Beaumont was going to become.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: The real plot begins. Until then, dear readers.
Howling Ghosts They Reappear

Chapter Notes

Thank you to all who have read, commented, left kudos, etc. It is much appreciated, believe me. Special shout out to acogna for correctly identifying the source of the title: it is indeed Hozier, more specifically his song "From Eden," which just seemed so appropriate for this story.

Anyway, here's chapter two...

On the morning of January 25, 2016, in an old Georgian mansion in Kensington, London, Beatrice Louise Potts awoke at her usual hour of 6:30. As she did every morning, she brushed her teeth, washed her face, dressed in her customary uniform of a white shirt and black pants, and pulled her hair back into a low bun against the nape of her neck. Sliding her feet into a pair of sensible black shoes, she slipped quietly out of her room and down the stairs to the kitchen.

The house was silent, the rest of its occupants not yet awake. Outside, the streetlights were still on, though the pale pink light of a winter sunrise was beginning to color the horizon. Beatrice turned on the kitchen lights and turned up the thermostat, shivering while she waited for the hissing and popping noise that meant heat was working its way into the ancient radiators. Then she set about her work, her movements characterized by a fluid assurance born of years of practice. On went the kettle, out came the breakfast tray. She hummed a little as she worked.

She brewed a pot of strong black tea for the tray, and a cup of gentler Earl Grey for herself, which she sipped as she made toast. Two pieces, sliced and buttered, with a little dish of marmalade on the side. She added a small pitcher of milk and a bowl of sugar cubes, and then the finishing touch: the crisply folded newspaper, still slightly chilled from sitting on the back doorstep. At precisely ten minutes before eight, she hefted the tray into her hands and began her ascent to the master bedroom.

Up and up she climbed, her footsteps muffled in the thick oriental carpeting. On the third floor, she stopped and knocked twice against a heavy white-painted wood door. There was no answer. That was unusual. She knocked again, a little louder. “Sir? It’s Mrs. Potts with your breakfast.” She frowned. “Sir?” Still no answer.

Now truly concerned, she tried the door handle, half expecting it to be locked, but it opened easily enough, ushering her in. Inside, the bedroom was still nearly pitch black, the heavy curtains pulled tight to block out a sun that had not yet risen. Her back to the bed, she set the tray down on the round table by the window, as she always did, and tugged at the thick cords of the drapes until they began to slide open. Only then did she turn around, and the sight that greeted her eyes was so horrifying that for a long moment she stood as if frozen, unable to move or speak.

Her employer sat propped up in bed, dressed in his pajamas, the book he had been reading laying on the duvet next to him where it had slipped out of his hand. His dark eyes were open, but their stare was fixed and unseeing. He had gone quite pale, and she knew that if she touched his body, she would find it rigid and cold. Beatrice Louise Potts considered herself a rational person, not prone to flights of fancy or fits of hysteria. But now, for the perhaps the first time in her life, she
began to scream, loudly, over and over again.

John Beaumont was dead.

On January 27, at 11:30 in the morning east coast time, the telephone on Belle’s desk rang, startling her so much that the highlighter she was using jumped and skittered across the page. Damn it, she thought, looking down at the line of bright orange that now cut across a dozen rows of Excel spreadsheet. Now I’ll have to reprint the whole report.

The phone rang again, and Belle put down her work and clicked the button on her headset to answer it. “Beaumont Media, Belle Villeneuve speaking.”

The voice on the other end of the line had an English accent, not crisp and precise like Mr. Beaumont’s, but looser, broader at the edges. “I’m looking for Adam Beaumont. Is this his office?” When Belle didn’t answer immediately, the voice went on. “I—I wasn’t sure. I just called the main number, and then I got transferred several times, and—”

Belle cut her off before she could go any further. “Yes, you’re in the right place. I’m his assistant, Belle. May I ask who’s calling?”

The woman let out a long sigh of what sounded like relief. “My name is Beatrice Potts, but you can just tell him Mrs. Potts is calling.”

“One moment, let me see if he’s available to take your call.” Belle pressed the hold button, and then the button for her boss’s extension. It rang three times before he picked up.

“Yes, Miss Villeneuve?” he said frostily.

“There’s a Mrs. Potts for you on line one,” Belle told him. There was silence on the other end of the line, and had Belle been in his office, she would have seen that all the color had drained out of his face. The silence stretched on for so long that Belle finally said, “Sir? Are you there?”

“What did you say?” His voice was very quiet, but without its customary deadly bite. She had never heard him sound like that before.

“Mrs. Potts,” she repeated. “She said her first name was Beatrice.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of what her first name is,” he snapped. “Put her through.”

Belle did so, shaking her head a little as she clicked off her headset to complete the transfer. That was weird.

Inside his office, Adam stared at his phone as it rang, sorely tempted to let it go to voicemail rather than confront what he was sure must be on the other end. He let it ring six times before snatching it up at the last possible second with a sigh. “Yes? Hello?”

“Oh, Adam,” came the voice in his ear, warm and a little sad. “It’s been far too long.”

Though close to a decade had passed since he had last heard that voice, Adam was instantly transported back to his boyhood. Mrs. Potts had been the Beaumont family housekeeper for as long as he could remember, and after his mother’s death, it had been she who had been his de facto parent.
until his father had decided he was old enough to take an interest in. Until he had been sent to Eton at
the age of thirteen, he had lived largely at Thornleigh Hall while his father rarely ventured away from
his business in London, and it had been Beatrice Potts who had helped him with his homework and
made him dinner and tucked him in at night. “Hello, Mrs. Potts,” he said, feeling very much like a
child instead of a man on the verge of turning thirty-two.

“How are you, my dear? We’ve all missed you very much since you moved to America.”

His chest ached suddenly with something that felt an awful lot like guilt. He tried to ignore it.
“I’m fine,” he said sharply. “But surely that isn’t why you called.”

Mrs. Potts was silent for a long moment before she said softly, “It’s about your father,
sweetheart.”

Adam’s laughter was utterly devoid of mirth. He picked up a pen from his desk and began
twirling it idly between his fingers. “How is the old bastard these days?”

“How is the old bastard these days?”

“Sweetheart, he passed away.”

The pen clattered to the desktop. “What?”

“I took up his breakfast tray on Monday and found him in bed. He died during the night. If
it’s of any comfort to you, the coroner assured me he didn’t suffer, that his heart simply stopped and
he died very suddenly. He didn’t feel a thing.”

“That isn’t very comforting, actually. I had hoped he’d feel something.”

“And Adam!” she said scolding. “That is a horrible thing to say.”

He pretended he hadn’t heard her. “What is it that you want me to do? I assume it must be
something, or you wouldn’t have called.”

“Really, Adam, what has gotten into you? Of course I want you to do something—I want
you to come home for your father’s funeral! And then there’ll be the whole business of the will to
sort out, and as his only child, you’ll need to be here for that.”

“No, no I won’t,” he said, his voice quiet and deadly.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m not coming to any funeral. In fact, you can bury him in a pauper’s grave or leave him
out for the birds for all I care. He was a terrible father. He never gave a damn about me as anything
other than ‘the heir,’ and you and I both know that he’s the reason my mother is dead.”

Mrs. Potts didn’t bother to dispute this. “He was still your father, dear. Doesn’t that count for
something?”

“No, no it does not. As I said, you can do what you like for his funeral. And as for the will, I
have attorneys for that sort of thing. I’m not getting involved.”

“Adam—”

He cut her off. “I’m not changing my mind. Good-bye, Mrs. Potts.” And before she could
say anything else, he hung up the phone.

For a long moment, he just sat there, staring off into the middle distance without really seeing
anything. Then, with an anguished cry, he stood and raked his arm across his desk. By some miracle, he missed his laptop, but everything else was sent clattering to the floor.

Belle was through his office door in an instant, a look of alarm on her face. “Mr. Beaumont! Are you alright?”

Adam brushed a fallen lock of hair out of his face and looked up at her, chest heaving. The touching look of innocent concern on her face just made him feel worse. “I’m fine,” he snarled at her. “And why the hell are you in my office? Didn’t anyone ever teach you to knock?”

The look on her face changed instantly, concern vanishing, replaced by a cold fury that made her eyes flash fire. Good. He didn’t want her pity anyway. “Well excuse me,” she said sarcastically. “Next time I hear yelling and crashing coming from my boss’s office, I’ll just stay put, or maybe I’ll go down the hall and get some more coffee. Would that suit you better?”

“That’s enough, Miss Villeneuve. You may return to your desk.” She whirled on her heel, her French braid slapping against her back, and he could have sworn he heard a distinctly muttered “whatever” as she walked away. “And I’ll thank you not to mention this to anyone!” he called after her. She didn’t respond.

Adam looked down at the ruins of what had once been his tidy workspace and sighed.

Weeks passed, January becoming February becoming March, and from the vantage point of New York City, the death of John Beaumont was like a stone dropped into a lake, disappearing swiftly from view without leaving any ripples in its wake. There were no more phone calls, no e-mails, no letters, and if Belle noticed that her boss was a little testier even than he usually was, she wisely chose not to say anything. Life went on as it always had, and it might have continued to do so indefinitely, had it not been for the delivery of a letter by certified mail just after lunch on the second Friday in March.

Ten minutes after signing for the manila envelope, Adam threw open the door to his office with such force that it nearly hit the opposite wall. He was wearing his coat, and had his leather work bag slung over one shoulder. “Clear my schedule for the rest of the day, Miss Villeneuve. I’m leaving early.”

“But—but, sir,” she spluttered in surprise.

“I don’t pay you to ask questions,” he said, not even bothering to look at her. “Just do it.” And then he stalked off, leaving her to gape after him in stunned silence.

He was silent the entire ride home, his head pressed against the cool glass of the car window. He was silent as the doorman ushered him into his building, and silent as the mirrored elevator glided swiftly to the top floor. But once he was inside his own apartment, the door firmly locked behind him, he let out a howl of rage, and then another. “That goddamn motherfucking bastard!” he yelled. There. That felt better. But what he really needed was a stiff drink. And maybe a call to Nastia, the Ukrainian model he had gone out with a few times. Yes, he thought, pulling his phone out of his coat pocket, definitely a call to Nastia.

The next morning, Belle, as she did most Saturdays, picked up Mr. Beaumont’s dry cleaning and delivered it to his apartment building. Most people probably would have balked at having to do such
a task for their boss, but Belle didn’t really mind. There were definitely worse parts to her job. She was a morning person by nature, and New York City on a Saturday morning had a peculiar sort of magic to it. And besides, this was one part of her job she could do without ever having to set eyes on her boss: she simply handed the dry cleaning bag to the concierge in the lobby and went on her way.

But on this particular Saturday, something was different. The concierge, busy with a phone call, only looked up briefly as Belle came in, then held up a notepad with an apartment number written on it, gesturing her head toward the elevators with an apologetic look on her face. Belle hesitated only a moment before heading for the bank of elevators. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner she could have the rest of the day for herself. And besides, she would be lying if she said there wasn’t a part of her that was curious to see where her boss went when he left work every day.

The elevator let her out into a wide, pleasantly-lit hallway carpeted so thickly that Belle’s feet didn’t make a sound. The doors were spaced widely apart, and Belle found the one she wanted: a corner unit all the way at the far end of the hall. Just as she was about to knock, the door opened, and Belle found herself face to face with one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. She was tall and thin, yet curvy—the kind of body that just screamed swimsuit model—with wavy blonde hair that cascaded down the open back of her short black dress. The only indications that she had probably not been doing much sleeping the night before were the smudges of makeup beneath her eyes and the fact that she was holding her shoes (stripper heels, said an uncharitable part of Belle’s brain) in her hand. She looked Belle up and down for a moment, her lip curling in barely concealed disdain as she took in the other woman’s old jeans and cable knit sweater. Then she laughed, the sound harsh and cynical in the quiet morning air.

“Well, isn’t that just like Adam, taking his women one right after the other. You’re welcome to him, sweetie,” she said in a thick Eastern European accent. “I warmed him up for you.” And then with another bark of laughter, she sauntered off down the hall toward the elevators.

Hesitantly, Belle pushed open the door the woman hadn’t bothered to latch behind her and stepped into the cool darkness of the apartment. It was massive, the entryway alone nearly as big as the tiny studio Belle called home. She took a few steps further in. Everywhere she looked, it was all white walls and glass, stainless steel and sleek modern furniture. Objectively beautiful, but hardly warm or inviting or at all lived-in. She began to feel the first stirrings of doubt. She shouldn’t be here. She needed to dump these clothes and leave. But where to put them? And where was Mr. Beaumont?

“Hello?” she called. There was no answer.

Belle walked through the living room, which was bright with sunlight from its floor to ceiling windows, and down another hallway until she saw the shoji-style door that she felt sure must lead to the bedroom. It was half open. She paused in the doorway, looking into the dark interior. “Hello?” she called again.

This time she was answered with a half-muttered, “Is that you, Nastia?”

“Um, no, it isn’t.”

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she could make out the figure of a tall, lean man, dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt, sprawled across the king size bed. At the sound of her voice he slowly propped himself up on his elbow and turned to look at her, squinting blearily. “Jesus,” he said when he recognized her. “Don’t you ever knock?”

Feeling infinitely foolish, Belle extended the dry cleaning bag toward him as if she were offering him a tray of hors d’oeuvres at a party. “I brought your dry cleaning,” she said.

“Yes, I can see that, but—you know what, never mind,” he replied, flopping back down
against the bed. “You may as well bring it in here, since you’re here anyway.”

Belle came all the way into the room, looking about for a place to set down her burden. From what she could see, the bedroom was just as elegant and soulless as the rest of his apartment. “Where…?” she asked.

“Just hang it on the edge of the closet,” he muttered into the bedclothes, pointing vaguely. “And then you can get me some aspirin. My head is fucking killing me.”

Belle hung up the clothes as indicated, then turned to face him again, her manner all business. “Aspirin?”

Again he flung up his arm and pointed across the room, though his face stayed firmly planted against the bed. Belle followed the direction of his finger and found herself in an almost comically extravagant master bathroom. “On the counter,” came his muffled voice.

Belle filled the glass next to the sink with water, then dumped two pills out into her palm. Taking her burden back into the bedroom, she stopped by the edge of the bed and cleared her throat. With a groan, her boss pushed himself up into a sitting position and took the water and pills from her outstretched hands. His eyes were red and his hair was mussed, and the combined effect somehow made him look simultaneously more and less intimidating than he usually did. Belle didn’t want to examine why that was. She also tried not to focus on the fact that he was dressed far more casually than she had ever seen him before. “You’re hungover,” she observed.

“Gold star, Miss Villeneuve. I am indeed.” He cocked his head consideringly. “And possibly still a little drunk. I haven’t decided yet.” Belle took the empty water glass from him without comment and went to return it to its place by the sink. From inside the bathroom, she heard him say, “I don’t understand how you can be so goddamn functional this early on a Saturday morning.”

“Yes, well, I’m single,” Belle said wryly, “so my Friday nights aren’t nearly so interesting as yours.” She paused in the bathroom door to see him looking at her quite as if he had never seen her before. She didn’t know what that look meant. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. “I’m going to go now,” she told him.

When she had reached the bedroom door, she heard him say, so softly that she almost didn’t hear it, “Nastia isn’t an escort, you know.”

She turned, eyebrow raised. “You’ll notice I never said she was.”

“Yes, well…still,” he mumbled.

“Goodbye, Mr. Beaumont. I’ll see you on Monday.”

After Belle left, Adam promptly fell back asleep, and when he awoke again three hours later, he felt steadier, the room no longer spinning quite as much. The strange interlude from that morning seemed like a dream, and he almost could have believed that it had been, were it not for the dry cleaning bag hanging from the doorframe of his closet.

“Oh God,” he groaned. Why, out of all the people in the world who could have found him like that, did it have to be his assistant, with her sharp brown eyes that saw too much? He detested the air of virtuous smugness that clung to her like a second skin. It needled him. She was just so irritatingly wholesome, with her freckled face and braided hair, so neat and tidy and capable. Sometimes he would see her and just be struck by a sudden, and frankly alarming, desire to ruffle her, muss her,
undo her hair, do **something** that would keep her from looking so composed. She had been the thorn in his side for nearly a year now, and yet… But he needed coffee before he went down that road.

Two cups of the strongest possible black coffee later, he was finally ready to consider the problem that had been dropped on him by yesterday’s letter from his father’s solicitor. He had been named the sole beneficiary in his father’s will. That had been expected. But there was a catch, a condition. That had not been expected. At first he had thought it proof that his father had finally succumbed to senility. But now he realized that it was actually his father’s long-awaited revenge. All those years he had waited for his father to pull his trust fund, and in the end it turned out the old man had been playing the long game.

The condition of the will was thus: in order to inherit, Adam needed a wife. If he married within two months of his father’s death, and stayed married for one year, he would inherit the entirety of the Beaumont family fortune, as well as all of its associated properties. If he failed to meet either stipulation, the homes would go to the National Trust, and the money would go to his second cousin Eloise, and he wouldn’t get a penny. It was his father’s cruelest trick of all: an attempt to trap him into a marriage as hasty and loveless as his own to Adam’s mother had been.

At first, Adam had been tempted not to play along, to just let the chips fall where they may. After all, he had made millions of dollars of his own money; he didn’t need his father’s. But on the other hand, it was an awful lot of money. He would be a fool to just let it go without a fight. And then he had thought of Thornleigh Hall. Though he had been only seven when his mother died, he had been an intelligent and observant child, and he had known that she had been unhappy. But even in the depths of her sadness, she had loved Thornleigh Hall, and loved its rose gardens most of all. And he himself had been happy there, all those years ago, first with his mother and then with Mrs. Potts, in the days before his father had decided to take an interest in him. He would do practically anything to keep Thornleigh Hall.

Which brought him to the heart of the matter: where was he going to find a woman who would agree to do such a thing? He had quickly dismissed Nastia as an option, along with the long list of other models and model-adjacent women in his contacts list. There was too much of an element of risk to them, too much of a chance that they would get greedy and demand more than he was prepared to give. No, he needed someone with no pretensions to grandeur. Strangely enough, he had not thought of Belle until she had made that remark about being single, but the more he thought about it now, the more he realized she might just be his best option. She was sensible and intelligent enough, and there was no attraction between them, and thus no chance of complications from that quarter. It wasn’t a perfect solution, by any means, but time was short and he had no other options.

But would she agree to do it? He would have to go about this carefully. Plan A, he decided, would be to go to London and meet with his father’s solicitor in person. There might still be some way of having the will declared null and void. His father had been eighty, after all—senility was not out of the question. Belle was his assistant; it would be the easiest thing in the world to have her accompany him. If he was not successful in having the marriage clause overturned, he would have her there, alone, thousands of miles from home. She might be more willing to assent in those circumstances. He could offer her money, not anywhere near the amount he stood to inherit, but enough to look like a fortune to someone from whatever god-forsaken corner of America she came from. Everyone had their price. She almost certainly had student loans or something. Yes, money would do nicely as an inducement.

All that weekend, Adam turned this plan over and over in his mind, and by the time he went to bed on Sunday, he had decided he could make it all work out perfectly, or close to. He was more
than a match for some fresh-faced farm girl, and as he drifted off to sleep that Sunday night, he was sure he had the situation well under control.

He didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Adam tries to put his plan into action. Keep reading, my dears.
As she rode the subway to work on Monday morning, Belle thought about what had happened on Saturday. Truth be told, she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about it all weekend. Why, oh why, oh why had she just walked right into her boss’s apartment? She should have just let that Nastia woman pull the door closed all the way and then knocked like any normal person would. But instead she had let her curiosity and impatience get the better of her, and she had been rewarded—or was it punished?—with a situation so awkward that even now the thought of it caused her entire body to burn with embarrassment.

She had known about her boss and women already, of course, having heard her share of office gossip before she had ever become his assistant, and over the past eleven months, she had been called upon not infrequently to buy tickets or make reservations when he had wanted to take one of them out somewhere. But it was one thing to have abstract knowledge of your boss’s weekend escapades, and quite another to almost literally run into the evidence of them in the hallway. Not that it mattered one bit to her what Adam Beaumont did with his free time, of course. He could sleep with every woman in Manhattan for all she cared. No, really, he could. It wasn’t as if they had any kind of personal relationship; he was her boss was all. Until Saturday, she had never even seen him outside of work before.

So, no, it wasn’t so much coming face to face with her boss’s sex life that disturbed her about what had happened on Saturday (although that was fairly horrifying in its own right, when you put it like that). What was it then? Why had she been unable to stop replaying the whole thing in her head all weekend? Belle watched the dark subway tunnel click by outside the car window as she thought about it.

She supposed it was the way the whole incident seemed to both confirm and upend things she had spent the better part of a year believing about Mr. Beaumont. She had long thought him cold and forbidding, driven by little aside from a propensity for mocking derision and an arrogant sense of his own superiority. The apartment she had wandered through had seemed to fit the man thus described to a T. Everything in it had been beautiful and expensive, but despite the art on the walls (at least some of which, she suspected, was real), it had seemed strangely bare, and it had taken her until just now to realize what had been missing: he had no pictures of family or friends anywhere. Belle didn’t have many friends in New York, but evidence of her father was all over her apartment, from the greeting cards on the fridge to the framed picture of the two of them on a hike that sat on top of her dresser. Mr. Beaumont’s apartment, by contrast, had looked like a model home staged to sell, not a real place where a real person lived.

But then he had seemed very much like a real person two days ago, raw and oddly vulnerable in the fresh light of a weekend morning. The memory of having seen him like that, with
his hair sticking up at odd angles and a crease along his cheek from where it had been pressed against the pillow, the muscles in his arms flexing as he pushed himself up, caused a peculiar feeling to form in the pit of Belle’s stomach. It was uncomfortable, and she wasn’t at all sure she liked it. It was much easier to think of him as he usually was, buttoned-up and inaccessible. Easier and a lot safer. She didn’t want to think of him as a real person; it was too confusing. He existed to boss her around and make her life miserable, and that was all.

She was so distracted by her thoughts that she nearly missed her stop.

Belle had no sooner finished starting up her computer and logging in when the man in question came through the door with long, confident, ground-eating strides. The man from the weekend had vanished as suddenly and completely as if he had been a figment of her imagination or a trick of the light, and in his place stood an elegant, almost sensuously graceful creature in a slim-fitting black suit. The only indication that he was maybe not entirely himself was the pair of large, dark sunglasses he wore. He pulled them off now as he walked past her toward his office. “You will come to my office in ten minutes,” he said without really looking at her. “That’s not a request.”

Belle felt her stomach plummet all the way to her shoes. “Yes, sir,” she said quietly.

At his office door he paused and turned to look at her over his shoulder. The smirk on his face was infuriating. “And this time, Miss Villeneuve, why don’t you knock?”

He vanished into his office, and Belle spent the next ten minutes staring blankly at her computer monitor, certain that her doom was about to be revealed. This is it, she thought. He was going to fire her for her utter presumptiveness in barging into his apartment, and her career in New York would be finished. In her head, she could already see herself being forced to return to Iowa in disgrace, where she would have to marry Neal Gaston and give birth to his brood of future football stars. Oh God. She shuddered. She would almost rather her boss struck her down where she stood than consign her to a fate like that.

When precisely ten minutes had elapsed, she stood, wiped her sweaty palms against her thighs, and knocked, just once, against Mr. Beaumont’s office door. “Enter,” he said briskly, so Belle did.

Closing the door gently behind her, she came to stand directly in front of his desk. Better to get this over with, like ripping off a band-aid. “Look, sir, if this is about what happened on Saturday, I just want you to know that I am so—”

He looked up at her through long lashes, blue eyes puzzled. “What? No, this has nothing to do with that.” He pushed himself to his feet. “Although, all joking aside—”

“There was joking?” she interrupted him dryly.

The look he gave her could have cut glass. Oops, probably should not have said that, she thought. When will I ever learn to keep my mouth shut?

“We probably do need to talk about your aversion to knocking,” he finished crisply. “I’d ask if you were raised in a barn, but knowing that you come from a small town, that might be hitting a little too close to home.”

Belle immediately felt her face turn scarlet, whether from anger or embarrassment, she couldn’t tell. “Excuse me?” she snapped, and was gratified to see the smug smile fall from his lips. “I’m not going to stand here and let you insult me. If you’re going to fire me for what happened on Saturday, just go
ahead and do it so we can both get on with our lives."

Adam felt like face-palming himself. This was not going at all as he had planned. Why was it that whenever he tried to have an actual conversation with her, he ended up saying the absolute stupidest shit? He opened his mouth and tried again. “I’m not going to fire you. On the contrary, actually.” He watched her brows draw together in confusion, though she didn’t say anything. He crossed to the wall of windows and looked out at the city. It looked as if it was going to rain later, great dark clouds gathering at the edge of the sky. Down in the street below, one car had rear-ended another and the drivers had gotten out and started yelling at each other. He turned to look at Belle over his shoulder. “How long have you been my assistant now?”

The question clearly took her by surprise, for he watched her mouth open and close once or twice before she answered. “It will be a year next month.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought. And in all that time, we’ve only ever called each other by our last names, yes?”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, I thought we might change that. How would that suit you?”

Her eyebrows shot up and then drew back down again. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

He turned all the way around and came closer. “I thought we might switch to just plain Adam and Belle.” She didn’t respond, and he was afraid for one long, panicked moment that he had gotten her name wrong. “It is Belle, right? A nice name, that. It means beautiful, did you know?”

Belle crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Do I know what my own name means?” she asked incredulously. “Yes, of course I do. French was one of my majors in college.”

“One of? What was the other?” he asked.

“English.” She watched as his blue eyes widened slightly. He was watching her with that strange look on his face again, the one from Saturday morning, as if he were looking at her for the very first time. She found it just as unsettling now as it had been then; it bothered her that she didn’t know what it meant. “You needn’t look so surprised. Even those of us who have been raised in barns go to college sometimes.”

“No, no, that isn’t it at all. It’s just—” He broke off, looking almost pained. There was a pause, and when he spoke again, his voice was restrained, careful. “A change seemed appropriate, is all. Do you think you might agree?”

He means because of what happened over the weekend. And Belle, considering that her agreement might be in her best interests if she wanted to remain employed, uncrossed her arms and said, “I think I could try.” She felt a wicked smile begin to creep across her face and added, “Adam.” The word sounded strange in her mouth, but not unpleasantly so, she decided.

Adam felt the sound of his name chase over his skin, a warm and pleasant murmur. He tried not to focus on just how pleasant it felt, and tried to turn his attention instead to the next item he needed to discuss with her. “Good. Now that that’s settled, Miss—Belle, we’ll turn to business.” He began to pace back and forth in front of the windows, hands folded behind his back in a vague approximation of some eighteenth-century aristocrat. “I have had urgent business come up in London, and my presence there is required immediately. You will accompany me.”
The strange ease of the previous moment had vanished, and everything was as it always was once more. There was a part of Belle that was strangely glad of it. “Me?” she asked, perplexed. “But why?” He had never asked her to accompany him on a business trip before.

His gaze slide sideways toward her, crystal clear and challenging. “Because you’re my assistant. I didn’t think I needed a reason other than that. Was I mistaken?” A terrible thought suddenly occurred to him. “You do have a passport, don’t you?” God damn it. Of all the things for his plan to get hung up on. Why had he not thought of that possibility?

“Yes, of course I do,” she said quickly. It hadn’t been used since she had done a semester of study abroad in Paris half a decade ago, but he didn’t need to know that.

Oh thank God. “Good. Then we’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” This was not how Belle had seen her week going at all. “Isn’t that rather soon?”

“Well, I did say urgent. Is that going to be a problem?” The idea that it had better not be a problem was clearly implicit in his words.

Belle sighed. “No, not at all. Shall I book the tickets?” She usually handled the reservations for his business travel.

“Oh, no, actually. I’ll, uh, I’ll take care of it this time.” His gaze had slid away from her again, and it seemed to Belle that there was something odd in the way he stumbled over his words. She wished she could put her finger on what it was.

“Fine, then, Mr. Beau—Adam,” she said demurely. “As you wish.”

When Belle opened the back door of the sleek black Town Car that was going to take them to the airport, she found her boss looking up at her building with undisguised disgust on his face. “You live here?” he asked incredulously.

Belle slid into the plush black leather seat, a flash of anger running through her at his words and causing her to slam the car door a bit harder than was strictly necessary. It seemed she spent most of her time being angry at him for one reason or another. It was hard not to be, when he said such stupidly arrogant things. She wondered how he got through life. After all, she imagined it would be pretty difficult to breathe with your head so far up your own ass. “This is where the salary you pay me means I can afford to live,” she corrected him. “Plus I find it very convenient, living above a laundromat,” she added primly.

Adam didn’t answer that, instead turning his face toward the window and indulging in a small, private smirk as the car pulled away from the curb. This was better even than he could have hoped. If this was where she was accustomed to living, then the money he could offer her would prove a powerful incentive indeed.

They were almost to JFK before either one of them spoke again. “Here,” he said, reaching into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulling out a few folded pieces of paper. “Your boarding pass,” he told her, passing one of the papers to her. “I took the liberty of checking both of us in online already.”

“Yes, of course you did,” Belle retorted. Then she saw what was printed on the piece of paper, and her eyes widened. “First class,” she breathed, unable to keep the wonder out of her voice. She had never flown first class anywhere before.
Adam looked down at her, amusement at her almost childlike amazement causing his lips to quirk in a genuine smile he hoped she didn’t see. He had never flown first class anywhere. Truth be told, he had briefly considered buying her ticket for coach, but had then decided that if he was going to entice this woman to marry him, sticking her in the back of the plane while he had champagne and steak and slept like a baby at the front of it was not the way to go about it. Judging by the look on her face, he had made the right decision. He stubbornly refused to parse out how much of the warmth spreading through him right now was self-congratulation for his forward thinking, and how much of it was genuine happiness at the look on her face. The hazy late-afternoon sunlight was catching on stray wisps of her hair, turning it into a sort of halo. “Of course it’s first class,” he said gruffly.

Belle lifted another bite of dark chocolate cake to her mouth and tried to surreptitiously study her travel companion as he ate his own dinner across the aisle from her. They were leaving eastern Canada behind and heading out across the Atlantic, which meant it was almost time for the dinner service to conclude and sleep to begin. She could already feel fatigue settling over her, the effect of her marathon packing session Monday night, but she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from Mr. Beaumont. Or Adam, as she was making a concerted, but not entirely successful, effort to think of him. It still seemed so peculiar to think of the two of them as the sort of equals that a first-name basis implied, and she wondered, not for the first time, why he had asked for the sudden change. Surely it couldn’t all be because of what had happened on Saturday? If anything, that incident was all the more reason for them to stay behind the careful barriers of mister and miss.

She also wondered just what the hell kind of business trip this was. As far as she knew, he didn’t even have any business in London, let alone urgent business. She briefly wondered if this was going to become some sort of Taken situation, and was struck by a sudden, absurd image of her gentle artist father heavily armed and tracking her boss across Europe, before quickly dismissing such a thought as being clearly the product of too much imagination and too little sleep.

But the fact remained that Adam had been acting very strangely. He had hardly said two words to her between when they had gotten out of the car in front of the terminal and now, not while they had stood in line for security, not while they had had drinks in the pre-departure lounge, and not since they had boarded this plane and sat down to a type of luxury Belle had previously only dreamed of. Well, she supposed the not talking to her wasn’t exactly strange behavior coming from him, but there was just something about the way he held himself, almost as if he were bracing for a blow. Almost as if he were afraid. Afraid? That didn’t make any sense. Belle felt very much as if there were something going on here that she didn’t understand, something only half-glimpsed and partially seen. But what?

“May I take your tray, ma’am?”

Belle started at the flight attendant’s friendly question. “Uh, yes, please do,” she replied after a startled pause, handing the remnants of her dinner to the woman. “Thank you.”

All across the cabin, lights were dimming as the passengers turned their seats into beds and prepared to sleep away the remaining hours of their flight. Belle joined them, slipping down beneath the blanket and settling her sleep mask around her head. The last thing she saw before she pulled it down over her eyes was Adam, slouched and scowling and an utter mystery.

Adam lifted the shade on his window just enough to peer out. It was early morning, and somewhere far below them was the Irish Sea, or maybe the western edge of England. The sun was coming up, the entire sky brightening from dull gray to pale pearl pink. This had always been the part he liked
most about the overnight flight to Europe: the stillness of the world beneath the hum of the jet engine, the way the clean new light made it seem like you were flying straight into the dawn. But this morning it failed to bring him the comfort it usually did. Instead, it was merely a reminder of how close they were drawing to their destination, and how little he wanted to get there.

It had seemed like such a perfect idea at the time: bring the girl to London, and then if he really had to marry, spring the idea on her when she was all alone and far from home. He could have the deal closed and a ring on her finger before they even went back to New York. He had spent the weekend congratulating himself on his cleverness, but now he saw that there were aspects of this plan he hadn’t fully considered, namely the fact that he would have to return to London to carry it out.

It had been nearly ten years since he had moved to America, and in that time, he had never returned to Britain, not once. He had been back and forth to the Continent multiple times, but he had always bypassed the country of his birth as if it hadn’t even existed. He also hadn’t called or written anyone from his old life. He had acted, for all intents and purposes, as if he were an orphan and an immigrant. Well, now he had become an orphan in truth, with no living parents to his name, but once he stepped off this plane, he would be an immigrant no longer. There would be people there who knew him, who had in some cases known him since boyhood, and knew all the secrets of his past in a way that no one in America did.

On an objective level, he knew he had no reason to be ashamed to see them. He was, after all, returning to them wealthy and successful beyond what even he had imagined for himself. And yet, there was an unpleasant feeling pulling at the back of his mind that he couldn’t quite place the source of. He had nothing to be ashamed of, and yet here it was, fear and shame. He didn’t want to dig too deeply into why; he just wanted it to stop.

Across the aisle from him, Belle was waking up. “Are we there yet?” she asked, pushing her sleep mask up onto the top of her head, and he was struck, not for the first time, by her eyes. Not so much the color (a pretty but common chocolate brown) but by the way they looked at him, as if they saw things about him that even he didn’t know. As much as he disliked her most of the time, those eyes still drew him. He feared them and was captivated by them in equal measure. “Not yet,” he replied, turning his face toward the window again. “But we’re getting closer all the time.”

Outside the terminal, the pearlescent dawn had turned into a typical March morning, one where the weather couldn’t decide whether it wanted to be winter or spring. Belle practically had to jog to keep up with Adam’s long, determined strides. “Where are we going?” she asked his back. He didn’t answer, and since he also couldn’t see her, Belle stuck her tongue out at him. Jerk. A jerk who had bought her a first-class plane ticket, but a jerk nonetheless.

At the end of the taxi rank was a sleek black Jaguar that was clearly not a cab. Leaning against it was a bored-looking man with reddish-brown hair, perhaps ten years or so older than Adam. As they drew nearer, he turned his head and spotted them, and his face broke into an almost disconcertingly wide smile. “Ah, the exiled prince returns!” he said in an almost comically thick French accent. Despite his smile, there was an undercurrent of sarcasm to his words, and Belle once again got the sense that there was something going on here that she didn’t really understand.

“Clever, Lumière,” replied Adam dryly. He turned to Belle for the first time since they had collected their luggage. “Belle, may I present Philippe Lumière, known to all and sundry simply by his last name. He is a long-time employee of my family.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” interjected Lumière.
Adam ignored this. “And Lumière, this is my assistant, Belle Villeneuve.”

“Enchanté, mademoiselle,” he said, taking her hand and kissing it, which was eye-rollingly corny, but flattering. Then he glanced between her and Adam, a sly look spreading over his face. “Are you two…?” He let his voice trail off into a hand gesture that clearly communicated what he was getting at.

“Oh, God no!” Belle practically yelped in embarrassment, wishing the sidewalk would open up and swallow her whole.

Adam set his mouth into a thin, firm line. “Enough of that, Lumière,” he said in a tight voice. “Now let’s get out of here before anyone realizes you’re clearly not supposed to be parked here.”

Inside, the house was just as much a time capsule as it looked from the outside, except that the
decorating was not Georgian, but a mixture of Victorian and Edwardian styles, all dark wood and heavy fabric. Belle caught glimpses of a drawing room and a dining room before Mrs. Potts began to lead them all up the staircase. “Now,” she said to Adam as they climbed, “I have taken the liberty of giving you your old room, though I suppose you are entitled to the master bedroom now. I didn’t think you would want it, after what happened.”

“You thought correctly,” said Adam stiffly, and behind him, Belle cocked her head, listening. Here was another clue, if only her brain hadn’t been too addled by jetlag and a rush of new sights and experiences to understand it.

“And for you,” Mrs. Potts said, turning to Belle, “our finest guest bedroom. And here we are!” She opened a neatly painted white door and ushered Belle inside. The room was lovely, as light and airy as the downstairs of the house had been dark and close. The furniture was bird’s eye maple, the bedding white with a pattern of pink flowers sprinkled over it. Morning light filtered in through the white lace curtains at the windows.

“It’s beautiful,” said Belle, and meant it.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Mrs. Potts kindly. Lumière came into the room, puffing a little, and laid Belle’s suitcase down across the end of the bed. “You’ll find the bathroom just through that door,” she added, pointing, “should you wish to take a shower. But if I were you, I would start with a nap. It’s still early, dear.”

“Oh, I’m not that—” Belle started to say, then broke off as she looked again at the soft and inviting bed.

Mrs. Potts smiled as she left the room. “Sleep well, love.” She closed the door behind her, and Belle could hear three sets of footsteps as she and the two men moved off down the hall. She was now completely alone for the first time since Adam had picked her up outside her building the previous afternoon. There was still so much she didn’t understand about this whole situation, like why she and Adam were really there, what Lumière’s comment about the “exiled prince” had meant, and what had happened in the master bedroom. But she did know that she might be able to better figure it out if she were well rested.

She unlocked and unzipped her suitcase, silently thanking her past self for her foresight in putting her pajamas right on top. Quickly, she divested herself of her traveling clothes and replaced them with a pair of loose cotton pants and an old Grinnell College t-shirt, worn thin and soft from years of repeated washings. She redid her ponytail, and then pulled back the covers and slipped into bed. The sheets were cool and smooth, and Belle couldn’t keep from letting out a wide yawn as her head touched the pillow. What a strange week it’s been so far, she thought, and then she fell backward into the waiting arms of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: We come to the heart of the matter. Yes, it will be the conversation you’ve all been waiting for...
London Loves the Mystery of a Speeding Heart

Chapter Notes

Well, here it is. This chapter was only meant to be about as long as the others, but it kind of got away from me a bit, and wound up being a little over 8000 words. I hope you enjoy; it's all written for you, with love. Thanks to all for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

While Belle slept off her jet lag, Adam showered, shaved, and changed his clothes. By all accounts, he ought to be more tired than she was, for he had slept far less on the plane, but he seemed to be running on some combination of adrenaline and sheer force of will that was keeping him on his feet, though how long that would last, he couldn’t say. But he knew he needed to make the most of this strange energy while he had it, for he had things to do and no time to waste.

It had been somewhat inaccurate of Mrs. Potts, he reflected as he buttoned his shirt, to refer to this as his old room. He had spent little enough time at Beaumont House, having lived primarily at Thornleigh Hall, and later, at Eton or Cambridge. And though the room seemed practically unchanged from the last time he had been here, there was certainly nothing about it that suggested it had ever belonged to a little boy, a university student, or anyone in between. Unlike the room Mrs. Potts had given to Belle, which had been used by his Aunt Abigail until her death when he was fourteen, this room was furnished in the same dark Victorian trappings as the rest of the house, down to the heavy red and gold wallpaper and the claw foot chair in one corner. He hated this room, actually; it reminded him of his father’s heavy, glowering presence. But there weren’t any better options. Sleep in the same room where his father had died? Impossible!

He found Mrs. Potts taking tea in the morning room, the angle of the sunlight throwing the lines on her face into sharp relief. Many of those lines had not been there ten years ago, and he was suddenly flooded with guilt, both for the length of time he had been away without so much as a word, and for possibly being the cause of some of the wear etched into her face. As usual, though, he covered up his feelings by speaking sharply. “You shouldn’t speak so, Adam. That kind of sarcasm is unbecoming on you,” Mrs. Potts said imperturbably. “I know I raised you better than that.”

“You should speak so, Adam. That kind of sarcasm is unbecoming on you,” Mrs. Potts said imperturbably. “I know I raised you better than that.”

“You may have,” Adam said, pushing himself off the doorframe he had been leaning against and coming into the room, “but my father certainly didn’t.”

Mrs. Potts set down her teacup with a soft clink. “Yes, let’s talk about your father. What are you doing here, sweetheart? Because I distinctly remember you telling me that you didn’t want to be bothered with anything having to do with his death. You said, and I quote, ‘I have attorneys for that.’ Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad that you’re here. But what changed?”

Adam came further into the room and sat down in the chair she indicated for him, directly across from hers. He sighed. “What do you know about my father’s will?”

“Why, absolutely nothing. I mean, we all received a letter from the solicitor’s office saying
"Ah, well I was, and it seems that daddy dearest has decided to have a little fun at my expense."

“What do you mean?” she asked in confusion, so he told her. “Oh my,” she said when he was done. She took a long sip of her tea. “I suppose that explains why you’ve brought the girl with you. Is she really your assistant?”

“Yes, of course she’s my assistant. She’s been my assistant for almost a year. Why would I lie about that?”

Mrs. Potts let the question hang in the air for a moment before saying, “Does she know why she’s here?”

“Are you kidding? Do you think she would have come if she’d known? She and I don’t exactly get on. I told her it was a business trip. And I’ll thank you not to tell her differently,” he added. “It will ruin my plan if she finds out at the wrong time."

“Oh, Adam,” said Mrs. Potts ruefully, shaking her head. “You know, for such a smart man, at times you can be awfully foolish.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Now, the situation you find yourself in is, admittedly, more than a bit bizarre. But why, out of all the women in the world, would you choose someone who not only works for you, but who you know doesn’t like you?”

“Because she was my best option!” he said defensively. “I don’t exactly know a lot of women who would make good temporary wife material.”

“Now whose fault is that?”

He shot her an unamused look. “This will only work if I can control the situation, and that means choosing someone who won’t start getting any ideas above herself, who won’t—God forbid—start thinking that this is a permanent arrangement. It’s a temporary deal and nothing more, and oh, Mrs. Potts,” he said, a little bit of gleeful laughter creeping into his voice, “if you could only see where she lives, you’d understand. You’d see just how easy this will be. Such a sad little apartment! This is the deal of a lifetime for her. All I have to do is offer her enough money, and she’ll jump at the chance. You’ll see.”

Mrs. Potts studied him, her lips pursed in contemplation. “Hmmm,” she said finally. “Well, I’ve no doubt that you think you’ve thought this through, but I would caution you that you may get more than you bargained for here. I’m not sure she’ll be as easy to control as you think she’ll be.”

Adam rose abruptly to his feet, tired of this line of conversation. To his mind, there was no use in contemplating the possibility of failure when there were no other options. “Well, with any luck, we won’t need her at all. I have a meeting with the solicitor today. There may yet be a way to get this whole thing declared invalid.” He paused, and then added consideringly, “You wouldn’t have happened to notice Father acting…oddly before his death, would you? Perhaps not quite in his right mind?”

“Well, you would know,” snapped Mrs. Potts, patience finally worn thin, “if you had been here, like you should have been, instead of halfway around the world, doing God knows what with
God knows whom! Honestly, Adam, do you want your father to have been demented?"

“Well, it’s that or contract a fake marriage to a woman I don’t even like. Which would you choose?” he said acidly.

“No one’s forcing you to do this, right, sweetheart? Why don’t you just let it go? I hardly think you need the money, and you live in America now. What are you going to do with old English houses?”

He had already started for the door, but now he whirled to face her, eyes snapping with barely concealed rage. “It’s the principle of the thing!” he exclaimed bitingly. “I’m the last true Beaumont; that inheritance is mine by right. I’m not going to let that man beat me, not this time. Not again. Besides,” he added, his expression softening just a little, “she loved that house and those gardens, you know she did. What kind of son would I be if I didn’t at least try to keep them for her?”

And suddenly, Mrs. Potts understood. He was being compelled toward the same end by two separate and contradictory forces: hatred of his father on the one hand, and love of his mother on the other. The two were so tangled together in his mind that it was impossible to say which was stronger, or which would win out in the end. She thought of the young woman sleeping peacefully upstairs, who had no idea of the minefield she was about to walk into. And yet, if she had been Adam’s assistant for nearly a year, she had presumably already walked through minefields, and come out the other side still standing. Mrs. Potts realized swiftly that Miss Belle Villeneuve could actually be a very good thing for Adam, maybe even the best thing.

And he for her? Well, now, that was harder to say. She had barely met Belle, and she certainly didn’t know at all what the other woman’s likes and dislikes were when it came to men. Hell, she could have been a lesbian for all Mrs. Potts knew, which in and of itself might be a good thing for Adam, to realize that there were in fact women out there who were impervious to his charms and machinations. But while she didn’t know Belle, she did know Adam, and she knew that while he could be, and often was, sarcastic, ill-tempered, and arrogant, there was also another side to him. She wondered if Belle had ever seen it. Maybe it wasn’t even there anymore. But maybe it was, the part of him that was intelligent, sensitive, and thoughtful, that was capable of great kindness, that wasn’t exactly quick to laugh, but would laugh wholeheartedly when he did. That Adam Beaumont, she knew, would be a very good thing for any woman, but perhaps especially for the woman who had the patience to discover him, the wit to match him, and the courage to fight for him. Mrs. Potts decided she was going to make it her mission to discover whether Belle was that woman.

But she didn’t say any of this to Adam, of course. Instead, she stepped forward and wrapped him in a hug. “It’s okay, my lamb,” she said soothingly, and felt some of the tension leave his body as he leaned into her. “It will all work itself out in the end.” She held him off at arm’s length. “But really, I wish you didn’t have to go see that solicitor. Now, I’ve only met her once, and far be it from me to speak ill of other people, but there really is something very unsettling about her.”

He shrugged. “I think I can handle it.”

“I know you can; I’m just warning you. Do you want me to have Lumière bring the car around?”

“No, I’d rather no one knew where I was going. I’ll take a cab.” At the doorway, he stopped and turned. “Now, seriously, not a word of this to Belle,” he said severely.

“Of course, dear.” Mrs. Potts mimed locking her lips and throwing away the key.
At precisely 11:15 in the morning, Adam exited the cab in front of the building that contained the offices of Overton, Bancroft & Faye, one of London’s most prestigious law firms. He squared his shoulders, rebuttoned his suit jacket, and looked up at the building. It was a typical City office building, he decided, all glass and steel. Exactly the kind of place where his father would have done his legal business, and for once, Adam couldn’t fault the man. It bore a great resemblance to his own attorney’s office in New York. Shaking his head in disgust at the idea that he had anything in common with his father, he yanked open the door.

The interior of the building was much the same as the outside. Softly lit and outfitted with expensive looking leather furnishings, the lobby seemed to practically vibrate with a barely suppressed hum of activity. He headed for the bank of elevators on the far wall, and took one up to the seventh floor, which was the lowest of the three floors occupied by Overton, Bancroft & Faye.

In contrast to the business of the ground floor, the law firm’s offices were cool and quiet, save for the occasional stray ring of a phone. The real world and its concerns suddenly seemed very remote, unable to encroach upon the muffled stillness of this place, and Adam let out a soft sigh that felt almost like relief. He approached the semi-circular reception desk and cleared his throat. “Adam Beaumont for Agatha Faye,” he said when the dark-haired young woman at the desk finally looked up.

“Oh, of course, Mr. Beaumont,” said the woman, schooling her features into a polite smile. “We’ve been expecting you.”

He was ushered down a series of hallways and into a frosted glass conference room. “Ms. Faye will be in shortly,” said the receptionist. “Can I get you anything? Glass of water? Tea? Coffee?”

“Coffee, the blackest you have.” The consequences of a transatlantic flight were beginning to catch up with him.

She nodded and disappeared, returning only a few minutes later with a cup of gratifyingly hot and strong coffee. He sipped it while he waited. It took another quarter of an hour before Ms. Agatha Faye finally deigned to put in an appearance.

She was not at all what Adam had expected. In his head, he had pictured a serious, perhaps somewhat dowdy, middle-aged woman. The woman standing before him, on the other hand, was almost otherworldly in her beauty, tall and slim with pale blonde hair twisted into a tight knot at the back of her head and icy gray eyes. But there was also a certain fragility—a brittleness—to her, as if her skin was stretched too tightly over the bones of her face. He could not place her age; it could have been anywhere from thirty-five to fifty. In a way, she seemed strangely ageless, as if she existed apart from the river of time in whose current everyone else in the world was caught. Adam did not consider himself a man who frightened easily, but now he felt a cold finger of fear trace its way down his spine. She could have told him she was about to strike him dead, and he would have believed her.

“Good morning, Mr. Beaumont. Or is it afternoon now?” Her voice was low and slightly husky. “May I extend to you my deepest condolences on the passing of your father.”

Adam stood and shook the slender hand that was offered to him. “Thank you, but there’s no need for condolences,” he said, sitting again. “My father and I were not close; his death was hardly a great blow to me.”

If she was shocked by this pronouncement, she didn’t show it. Instead, she simply smoothed her narrow skirt and took the seat next to him, at the head of the table. Her suit was black wool, very New Look in style, with a peplum flaring out from the sharply drawn-in waist. Pinned to the broad
The collar was her one piece of jewelry: a large brooch shaped like a rose, with a curving golden stem and garnet petals, each one like a perfect drop of blood. “I imagine the thing that has you more concerned is his will,” she said observationally.

Ah, so she was direct. Well, he could work with that. “Exactly so,” he told her. “I have serious concerns about the legality of it. Could it have been that my father was not in his right mind when he wrote it? I hadn’t seen him in quite some time. Is it possible he could have been slipping into senility and I just didn’t know it?”

Agatha Faye chuckled softly. “Oh, I assure you, your father’s mental condition was perfectly sound. I would go so far as to say that he was quite sharp for his age. I witnessed the document myself, and I never would have done so if I had had any concerns about his ability to make legal decisions for himself.”

Adam didn’t trust this woman, with her inscrutable gray gaze and softly mocking laughter. He tried again. “Then is it possible he was coerced, either by yourself or someone else? My father would never have agreed to such a ridiculous stipulation.” He knew he was grasping at straws even as he said it. That document had been one hundred percent the product of his father’s own petty and vindictive mind.

This time her eyes flashed with a burst of cold anger. “I would be very careful in flinging about those kind of accusations, Mr. Beaumont. As your father’s solicitor, it was my job to advise him, yes, but I could not force him to do anything he did not wish to do. This will was entirely your father’s idea. In fact, he was quite adamant about it. He wanted this stipulation, as you call it, above all else.”

*Yes, I’m sure he did.* “I’d like to see his signature on this thing, though, if you wouldn’t mind. Just to satisfy myself that it really was his doing.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.” She flipped open the leather portfolio sitting before her on the table and withdrew a thick sheaf of papers. Turning quickly to the last page, she laid it on the table before him. “I trust you will find this satisfactory.”

Adam looked down at the piece of paper. The name John R. Beaumont stared back up at him. It was indeed his father’s signature, exactly as he remembered it: thick and bold and upright. It was the signature of a man who was doing exactly as he pleased and getting exactly what he wanted. And below that, in a slanting, spidery hand, was the name of the witness: Agatha Faye. Rare were the times when Adam Beaumont was rendered speechless. This was one of them. His gaze shot back up to Agatha, and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly as he searched fruitlessly for something to say that would stave off his impending doom.

“You know, Mr. Beaumont,” said Agatha, and he could have sworn he saw amusement flicker in her eyes, “I’ve met a lot of individuals like you, adult children who have spent their whole lives believing that Mummy and Daddy’s money is going to always be there for them, no questions asked. And then when the time comes, and their parents’ plans are revealed, they learn that there are strings attached, and they struggle to come to terms with that. I’ve seen it all before, countless times.”

“With all due respect,” said Adam, though he didn’t think she was due very much, “you may think you’ve seen this before, but I highly doubt you’ve seen anything quite like this. And even if you have, you don’t know me at all. Do you realize how much money I’m worth in my own right? I could not take a damn cent of my father’s, and still have more than enough for the rest of my life.”

“You say that, and yet here you are, trying to figure out how to get around your father’s last wishes and get your hands on his money anyway. Why are you here, Mr. Beaumont?”
“Never mind why,” he said almost savagely. “My reasons are my own. Just tell me what I need to do.”

She smiled, her lips curving upward into an expression of almost malevolent glee. “Excellent. I’m glad you’ve decided to see reason. Now, as I’m sure you realize, you are working with a very short timeline if you want to meet your father’s conditions. Do you have someone in mind?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And she has agreed to marry you?”

Adam thought of Belle, who was probably still asleep in Aunt Abigail’s bedroom. He thought of the horrified look on her face when Lumière had asked if they were sleeping together. He thought of her apartment building, old brick with a network of fire escapes and window air conditioners criss-crossing the front, and on the ground floor, the Wash Rite Laundromat. “Let’s just say it won’t be a problem,” he said finally.

She raised a skeptical blonde eyebrow. “Well, for your sake, I certainly hope so, because you’ll need to marry her by next Friday.”

“I’m sorry, but next Friday?”

“Well, yes, the will stipulates that you must be married by two months from your father’s death. He died on January 25, and next Friday is March 25.”

“I didn’t even know that this will existed until March 11, and now you’re expecting me to have the whole thing locked down by the twenty-fifth? That isn’t two months; it’s two weeks!”

“There were some…delays in processing the will that meant we weren’t able to notify you in as timely a fashion as we would ordinarily like, and to compound the problem, you aren’t a very easy man to get in touch with. But I thought you said this wasn’t going to be a problem?”

Not an easy man to get in touch with? What complete and utter bullshit. Adam bit back a sharp retort and forced himself to speak calmly. “Theoretically,” he said slowly, “what’s to stop me and her from marrying and then carrying on with our separate lives, exactly as we did before?”

“Oh, you are your father’s son, aren’t you?”

“Don’t say that!” he snapped.

“Why not? It’s more true even than I think you know. You see, he anticipated that you would ask exactly that and made sure to address it. Take a look.” She flipped to another page of the document and pushed it across the table to him, pointing to a paragraph toward the bottom of the page.

Adam skimmed it quickly, then read it twice through more slowly. His father really had anticipated this line of thinking. In order to fulfill the terms of the will, he and Belle would have to live together at the same address for the entirety of their one year marriage. He tried to picture Belle in his home, in his life, her face across the dinner table from his every night, and felt his heart unaccountably begin to beat a bit faster. Then another thought occurred to him. “Did my father,” he began, feeling awkward for even asking, “say anything in this will about whether my wife and I would be expected to, uh, consummate the union?”

Agatha smirked. “Oddly enough, that’s one area he doesn’t address. I suppose that will be left to your discretion. Certainly no one is going to check in on that.”
To his utter horror, Adam found himself blushing. He never blushed. “So let me make sure I have this straight. I have to get married by next Friday, and then she and I have to stay married for an entire year while living in the same house. Is there anything else I need to know, any other rules for this nonsense?”

The solicitor made a show of flipping through her notes. “Ah, yes,” she finally said, looking up. “There is one more thing.”

“And that is…?” he asked impatiently.

“This was another condition that your father was quite adamant about. In order to inherit, you and your wife must live in the United Kingdom for the duration of your marriage.”

“We have to what?”

When Belle woke again, the sun was high in the sky, and a quick glance at the clock on the bedside table revealed it to be just after noon. “Damn it,” she swore softly, flinging back the covers and stumbling out of bed. She never slept this late, jet lag or no jet lag. Grabbing her toiletries, she headed for the bathroom, where she took a long, hot shower. It felt so good to wash away the dirty, gritty feeling that came from travel, revealing clean skin and hair once again. Afterward, wrapped in a towel, she studied her suitcase and tried to decide what to wear. Adam hadn’t exactly given her any direction as to what, if anything, was planned for the day, but then again, neither had he mentioned anything about any meetings, so she skipped over the dressier business clothes she had brought with her and settled on jeans and a slouchy pale blue sweater. She pulled her damp hair back into a loose braid, and then opened the bedroom door, deciding to go see what—or who—she could find.

Despite the bright midday sun outside, the upstairs hallway was dim and shadowy, save for a patch of light directly beneath the window at the top of the stairs. Belle paused there and looked up, and saw a column of dust motes swirling. The whole house seemed eerily like a tomb, she thought. A beautiful mausoleum, a musty monument to God only knew what. It was Adam’s family home, that much was obvious. The fact that Mrs. Potts had said she was giving him his old room was proof enough of that. Belle tried to picture her boss walking through these halls as a child, tried to picture a little boy with tousled blond hair turning at the landing past what she was pretty sure was a genuine Ming vase, but she couldn’t do it. Hell, she couldn’t picture Adam as a little boy in any setting. She supposed in her mind, he had just burst into life fully formed, like Athena from Zeus’s head, but with a suit and a sneer.

She tiptoed down the stairs, strangely unwilling to disturb the silence that seemed to fill the house like a mist. On the ground floor, she peered into the series of rooms she had glimpsed as Mrs. Potts had led them upstairs earlier. There was a drawing room, with walls papered in dark green and a heavy gilt mirror above the fireplace; a formal dining room, with a long dark-wood table, set for no one, and a glass-fronted cabinet full of china and crystal; and a room that Belle supposed was what British novels called a morning room. This room was lighter, with lace curtains and furniture upholstered in rose-colored velvet. It looked warm and cozy, and Belle made a mental note to do some reading there if she got the chance.

All of these rooms were open, though there was no one in any of them. But on the other side of the hallway from the morning room was a closed door. Curious, Belle tried the handle. It was locked. Hmmm. She made a mental note to investigate that further later. As she walked softly down the hall, she wondered again what she and Adam were doing in London. Every other time she had sent him off on a business trip, he had stayed in a nice, but impersonal, hotel. But this time, here they were in his family home. And yet, it was unlike any family home she had ever been in before. Did he not
have parents? Not only were they not there, but there was no evidence that they had ever been there, no pictures of them anywhere. Not that different from Adam’s apartment in New York, actually, but mahogany and brocade where that had been glass and steel. No, the more she thought about it, the more certain she became that their purpose in London had nothing to do with Beaumont Media. It had something to do with his family, or lack thereof. But what did that have to do with her?

At the end of the ground floor hallway, tucked away behind the stairs, was another closed door. As Belle reached for the handle, it opened, and she found herself face to face with Mrs. Potts. She started and tried not to look guilty for having essentially been caught sneaking around the house. The other woman didn’t seem to notice, though. “Oh, hello there, dear,” she said. “I was just going to come upstairs to see if you were awake. You must be hungry. Would you like something to eat?”

Suddenly, Belle realized that she was indeed quite hungry. Starving, even. “That sounds great,” she said.

“Then follow me, and we’ll find you something.” She turned and led Belle through the door and down another hallway, this one long and slightly sloping. They had clearly entered the below stairs part of the house, a fact made all the more evident when they turned a corner and found themselves in the kitchen, which, despite the age of the house, was thoroughly modern. “Would you like breakfast or lunch?” she asked.

Belle decided on breakfast, and a few minutes later found herself presented with a bowl of oatmeal packed with fruit and a pot of steaming hot tea. Mrs. Potts watched her eat in silence for a few minutes before asking, “So, how long have you known Adam?”

Belle swallowed. “I’ve worked at his company for about a year and a half, but I only really met him when I became his assistant last year. I still wouldn’t say that I know him very well. That’s why I was so surprised when he asked me to come with him on this trip.”

“Would you say he’s a good boss?” Mrs. Potts asked nonchalantly as she cut some fruit for herself.

The scoffing noise was out of Belle’s mouth before she could stop herself. “Well, I’m not afraid of him, if that’s what you mean, but I wouldn’t exactly say he’s easy to work for. He can be an ass most of the time.” As soon as she realized what she had said, she clapped a hand over her mouth in dismay. “Oh my God, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Mrs. Potts found herself liking this young woman. She chuckled. “No, my dear, that’s quite alright. I’m well aware that Adam can be a difficult man to know.” She paused, and then added softly, “It wasn’t always that way, though.”

Belle cocked her head in thought. “You speak as if you’ve known him a long time. That hug you gave him when we got here seemed liked something you’d do for family.”

Oh Adam, you idiot. I told you she was sharper than you think she is. “I have known him a long time. I’ve known him his whole life, actually. His father hired me just a few weeks after Adam was born, to come in and help take care of the baby. His mother wasn’t coping well, you see. So I came, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“But what about your actual family?” Belle asked. She assumed there was one, since she went by Mrs. Potts.

A shadow passed over the older woman’s face, and Belle felt a twinge of guilt for asking such a personal question. “I was married once, a long time ago, but it didn’t last. Gene—my ex-husband—lives in Brighton now. He makes ceramics. They’re quite good, actually. He wanted me to leave this
life and go with him. And I did think about it. But that was around the time that poor Adam lost his mother, and I couldn’t just leave him here alone with that father of his.” She paused. “I don’t regret it, necessarily. Adam is, for all intents and purposes, as much my son as if I had given birth to him. But sometimes I do wonder how it all might have been different. That’s my advice to you, Belle: if you ever have the chance, hold on to love. Don’t let it go.”

But Belle’s mind was still caught up on something Mrs. Potts had said several sentences ago. “Lost his mother? What hap—” But she never got to finish her thought, for at that moment, they both heard the sound of Adam’s voice. It sounded angry.

“Mrs. Potts!” he bellowed.

“In the kitchen, sweetheart,” she called back calmly.

An instant later, he came barging into the room, swinging the door open so hard that it nearly slammed into the wall. “It’s worse than I thought,” he fumed. Then he saw Belle. “Oh,” he said, stopping short. He looked at her, bemused, as if he wasn’t quite sure what to make of her presence. “I didn’t realize you were in here.”

“I was hungry,” she said simply. “What’s worse than you thought?”

“None of your concern,” he said tightly. The longer he looked at her sitting there at his kitchen table, the stranger he felt. With her bare feet and damp hair, and the neckline of her sweater slipping to one side to expose an expanse of creamy skin dotted with freckles, she looked utterly at home, as if she had always been there. Unexpectedly and inexplicably, his heart twisted in his chest. With effort, he redirected his gaze toward Mrs. Potts. “I’ll be in the library,” he said curtly. “I’m not to be disturbed until dinner.”

“As you please,” said Mrs. Potts imperturbably.

He stalked out of the room as suddenly as he had entered it, and Belle went back to eating her oatmeal. The moment for questions had passed.

That evening, Belle ate dinner alone, feeling more than a little ridiculous as she sat all by herself at one end of the absurdly long dining room table. Dinner was a delicious roast chicken with vegetables, but she found herself wishing she had someone to share it with, even if that someone was Adam, who had decided not to reemerge at dinner time, but rather, to remain in the library and have Mrs. Potts bring him his meal on a tray. Antisocial asshole, she thought sharply, and wondered for the millionth time why he had brought her here if he was just going to ignore her the whole time.

She was lingering over a slice of pear tart when Mrs. Potts came into the room, looking, Belle thought, a little bit nervous. “Adam has asked me to bring you to the library,” she said.

Belle felt a sharp stab of annoyance. So he thought he could just order her about? Well, they weren’t at work right now, and she wanted to finish her dessert. “He’ll have to wait until I’m finished eating,” she said, trying to sound lofty.

Mrs. Potts’ lips quirked in an amused smile. “As much as I would love to tell him that, my dear, he didn’t seem as if he was making a request. He said now, and I believe he meant it.”

Belle sighed resignedly and pushed herself to her feet. At least this way she could try to force some information out of him. “Lead the way.”
The library turned out to be the room that lay beyond the locked door Belle had tried earlier. If the morning room was a feminine space, the library was clearly its masculine counterpart. The walls and ceiling were all paneled in dark, polished wood, with three walls containing built-in bookshelves and the fourth containing an unlit brick fireplace. The air was thick with the smell of leather, of old ink and paper, and underlying it all, the barest hint of pipe tobacco. Mrs. Potts left her at the doorway, whispering, “Good luck,” before hurrying away.

Belle stepped into the room. Adam was standing at the far end, leaning forward with his hands braced against the large wooden desk. He had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, and as he raised his head to meet Belle’s gaze when he heard her enter the room, she saw that the top few buttons of his shirt were undone. For a long, confused moment, Belle couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from the triangle of skin exposed there.

If he noticed where her eyes were at, he didn’t say anything. “Come in and shut the door, Miss Villeneuve.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “I thought we were on a first-name basis now.”

He picked up the partially empty glass of scotch at his right hand and took a long swallow. She had a feeling it wasn’t his first drink of the night. “Fine, then, come in and shut the door, Belle. Happy now?” Wordlessly, she shut the door. “Good. Now come closer, if you please.”

Belle came as far as the middle of the room, and then stopped. If he wanted to be closer, he would have to meet her halfway. “What do you want?” she asked him tersely.

Adam drained his glass, feeling the almost comforting burn of the scotch as it slid down his throat. How to begin? He knew where he wanted this conversation to end, obviously, but he was realizing now, far too late, that he had no real idea how to get there. He decided simply to start with a true statement, and see where that led. “I haven’t been completely honest with you about my reasons for bringing you to London.”

To his astonishment, she rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m well aware of that.”

“You are?”

“Seriously? You said you were bringing me here for business, and yet here we are staying in your family’s house, and all you’ve done so far is disappear for hours on end without so much as a word. So yes, to say you’ve not been honest with me would be an understatement.”

God, already he wanted another drink. “My father died,” he blurted. Her eyes widened. “In January.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Her expression of sympathy was more than he could bear. “No, you’re not,” he told her. “But I’m not either, so it’s alright. He left me everything, of course.”

God, already he wanted another drink. “My father died,” he blurted. Her eyes widened. “In January.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“However lovely for you,” she said dryly. “But I don’t see what any of this has to do with me.”

Ah, so they came to the heart of the matter at last. He came out from behind the desk and began to pace. “There is a, um, condition attached to my inheritance.”

“A condition?” she repeated slowly, puzzled.

“Yes, something I must do if I wish to see a cent of that money. That’s where you come in.” He
stopped his pacing and turned swiftly to look at her, and the expression in his crystal blue eyes was almost overpowering in its intensity. “Belle, I need you to marry me.”

Time seemed to stand still. Belle felt as if she could neither think, nor move, nor speak, nor even breathe. Outside in the street, someone slammed a car door. Inside the library, the silence was so tangible that it seemed almost a living thing. She felt as if she were standing outside herself, watching a scene play out as if they were two actors and this were a movie. Because there was no way any of this was real. “Excuse me?” she said at last.

“My asshole of a father, in a fit of more than usual pique, decided to make me suffer. So either I find a wife by next Friday and stay married to her for a year, or everything goes to my second cousin Eloise and her nine cats. And I dislike Eloise almost as much as I like money, so after dismissing the other women of my acquaintance, I ultimately decided on you for my temporary wife. You should be flattered.”

Belle felt her mouth drop open in stunned amazement, then snapped it shut again before he could make a comment about the stupid look she knew was on her face. “Okay, I have some questions. First of all, that is insane. You are insane.”

“That’s not a question,” he interrupted crossly.

“Do you deny it, though? I mean, just listen to yourself. What do you even need the money for—you’re already rich as hell.”

“It’s not just about the money.”

“What is it about then?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said almost savagely.

Belle shook her head. “No, perhaps I wouldn’t. I don’t think I understand you at all. I’m supposed to be flattered? That what, I’m your last choice? That you rejected the idea of marrying literally every other woman you know before deciding to ask me? Why did you think that would work? Why were you so sure I’d say yes?” She could feel her voice growing louder with each successive question, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. His worse-than-usual arrogance had awakened something in her.

He matched her, blow for blow. Usually, a woman this troublesome would cause him to rethink the whole thing, but there was something strangely thrilling, he was discovering now, about engaging in a bout of verbal fencing with her. They were no longer boss and employee, but simply man and woman, and the blood began to pound in his veins as he answered her. “Oh, come now,” he said snidely. “Surely you know why. Everyone has their price, and I can assure you, you will be well compensated for this.”

She gaped at him. “Well-compensated? Like I’m one of your women, and if you buy me enough pretty things, I’ll fall into bed with you?”

He laughed mockingly. He had come closer to her as they spoke, and she could feel the sound of it chase across her skin in harsh, bitter waves. It was a sound that chilled her to the bone. “You think I want to fuck you?” he asked incredulously. “Oh no, this isn’t going to be that type of arrangement at all. Trust me, sweetheart,” he added sarcastically, “you’re not my type.”

Belle winced involuntarily at his choice of words, then quickly recovered. “Why not? Because I have more than two brain cells to rub together, and my tits aren’t fake? In that case, sweetheart, I think I’m glad not to be your type. You’re not exactly mine either.” This was only partially true.
Physically, he was very much her type. It was his personality that made him repugnant.

Adam felt almost as if she had slapped him. He had deliberately tried to shock her, and she had responded by shocking him. He had never had a woman say such a thing to his face before. He tried to speak calmly in an attempt to regain some semblance of control over the situation. “You asked why I was so sure you’d say yes. Well, I’m still sure. You forget, I’ve seen that horrible building you call home. Your life, your world—they’re small. I can offer you more for one year of commitment than you can make in ten years on your own. For someone like you, this is the best offer you’re ever going to get. You’d be a fool to turn it down.”

“Someone like me?” Her voice was almost shrill, and he saw instantly that his words had not had the effect he’d intended. If anything, she seemed angrier than before. “You don’t know the first thing about me. My life may be small, as you put it, but it’s mine. That apartment is mine. I don’t need your charity, and I don’t need you to pretend that you have any concern for my welfare. You’ve decided you need me, and you’re trying to buy me off. That’s all this is. But I’m not sure you could offer me enough to make me agree to be the wife—even the temporary wife—of someone like you.”

He crossed back to the desk in two angry steps and fumbled around until he found a notepad and a pen. He scrawled something on the pad, then tore off the paper and thrust it at her. “Here. Does this change your mind?”

Belle looked down at the piece of paper and felt her knees go a little bit weak. “Oh my God,” she said quietly. The number on the paper had seven figures.

A smug smile came over his features. “Half is yours once you say ‘I do,’ and you’ll get the other half once the year is up.”

She lifted her gaze to meet his, and he saw that her brown eyes were troubled, as she battled between her convictions and the prospect of more money than she had ever seen in her life. He knew the money would win. As he’d told her before, everyone had their price. “And in exchange,” she asked, “what?”

The smug smile grew wider. He had her, and he knew it. “One year as my wife, not a day more or a day less. We’ll be living here in Britain—”

“Britain?” she interrupted sharply.

He waved a hand dismissively, as if it were nothing. “Another one of my father’s ideas. It doesn’t signify.”

“Doesn’t signify? But what about my home, your home, the business?”

A furrow of annoyance appeared between his brows. Why did she have to ask so many questions? “I’ve spent all afternoon making arrangements in that area. We’ll work remotely. Your apartment will be taken care of, though God knows I’d be doing you a favor if I let it go.”

“But what about my clothes? I didn’t exactly come packed for an entire year.”

The furrow grew deeper. “I’ll take care of it. We’ll have them shipped here. Hell, I’ll buy you a whole new wardrobe, if that’s what it takes. Don’t get hung up on that.”

Belle didn’t respond to this, instead choosing to ask a new question. “What happens when it’s over?”

“I’m sorry?”
“You said a year and not a day more. What happens when the year is up? I mean, I couldn’t exactly go back to being your assistant as if nothing had happened, now could I?”

For all his planning and machinations, that was exactly what he had thought would happen, and her question caught him unprepared. “That’s a fair point,” he finally said slowly. “When the year is over, we’ll annul the marriage. It will be like we were never married at all.”

“And my job?” she pressed.

“You want a promotion, you’ll get a promotion. You want a reference to help find another job, you’ll get the most glowing reference ever written. You’ll never have to work as my assistant again.”

“And no sex?”

“Oh, for the love of God, no sex! How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t want or need you in my bed?”

“Well, knowing you, I can never be too sure,” she said primly. “When would we marry?”

“As soon as possible, but no later than next Friday, as I said. The sooner I can start the clock on this, the better, though.”

Belle looked down at the piece of paper in her hand, then back to him. “I need time to think about this.”

“I don’t exactly have the luxury of time, sweetheart.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, there’s nothing that can be done about it tonight, at any rate. I’ll give you my answer in the morning.”

He’d allow it; he knew what her answer would be, even if she didn’t know herself yet. “Fine.”

That night, Belle slept poorly. At about four o’clock, she finally gave it up as no use. Sitting up in bed, she turned on the lamp and reached for the piece of notepaper on her bedside table. The hastily scrawled number stared back up at her. She sighed. What a goddamn mess.

She knew a part of her was crazy for even considering his offer. A fake marriage to a man she despised? Even if it was only temporary, it was the most insane idea she had ever heard in her life. She had half a mind to find him in the morning, quit her job, and demand he put her on a plane back home. How would it even work, the two of them in one house for a whole year? One of them would probably murder the other before the end of the summer.

And yet... She looked at the paper again and thought of everything she could do with that much money. She could pay off her loans. She could help her father. Illustration was not exactly the world’s most lucrative business, after all. She could travel, see some of the places she’d always wanted to go. Maybe she could even go to graduate school. Adam was quite right about one thing: she would never see that much money at one time again in her life. Maybe she would be a fool to turn it down. After all, what was a year in the grand scheme of things?

She sighed again and turned the lamp off, then lay there in the dark looking up at the ceiling, dollar signs and zeroes dancing in front of her vision. What to do, what to do, what to do?
In the morning, she woke with purpose, dressed quickly, and went in search of Adam. She found him eating an omelette in the dining room. “Excuse me,” she said.

He lifted his gaze from his plate and set down his fork. “Ah, yes,” he drawled. “The promised decision. What will it be, my dear?”

Belle swallowed thickly, wondering if the next words out of her mouth were going to be her salvation or her ruin. “I’ll do it.”

The smile that curled the corners of his mouth was so predatory that for an instant Belle wanted to take back her acceptance and flee the room. “Excellent,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: There's a wedding to plan. As always, I love hearing from you guys; let me know what you think!
“So, what happens now?” Belle asked. There was a part of her that was inwardly panicking, unable to believe what she had just agreed to, but the larger part of her knew that there could be no going back, no hesitation, lest she lose her nerve. The only course left to her now was to forge ahead at full speed.

The smile faded from Adam’s lips. “I’m not quite sure, to tell you the truth.” His expression turned a little sheepish. “I’ve never gotten married before.” When he was like this, self-deprecating and unguarded, Belle thought that she could almost like him. It lent an appealing, almost boyish quality to his face. “And, I’m guessing, neither have you,” he added.

Belle raised an eyebrow at him. “You don’t know that.”

He smirked, and just like that, the warm feeling vanished, and Belle found herself looking once again at her cold, arrogant boss. And future husband, a little voice at the back of her mind reminded her. She shivered. “Yes, I do know,” he told her, his voice threaded with a little mocking laughter. “It’s those virginal schoolmarm vibes you give off.”

To her chagrin, Belle flushed. Fortunately, she was saved from having to give a retort by the opening of the dining room door. “Oh, good morning, dear,” said Mrs. Potts when she saw Belle. “Would you like some breakfast? An omelette perhaps?”

Before Belle could answer, Adam rose to his feet. “Congratulations are in order, Mrs. Potts,” he said grandly.

“Oh? And why’s that, dear?”

“Miss Villeneuve,” he said, gesturing in Belle’s direction, “has agreed to marry me.”

Really? How interesting. Mrs. Potts hadn’t been at all sure the girl would agree to do it, despite Adam’s supreme confidence on the matter. The sound of raised voices coming from the library the previous evening, and the haunted look in Belle’s brown eyes when she had passed her in the hallway afterward had been enough to cast doubt on what her decision would be. She cast a swift glance in the younger woman’s direction. Belle was standing with her arms crossed, the expression on her face difficult to read. Defiant was the word Mrs. Potts eventually settled on. It was the face of a woman who made no apologies for having just made a deal with the devil, and who was under no illusions about the nature of the arrangement she had agreed to enter into. Theirs would not be a marriage based on love or even friendship, but if that bothered Belle, she certainly wasn’t letting it
show. Mrs. Potts felt a sudden surge of affection for the brave young woman, and for Adam, too, who hid his lonely heart behind a façade of arrogant indifference and snide remarks. A conventional engagement, this most certainly was not, but perhaps some good could yet come of it in the end. She could still make sure they had a lovely wedding. “Oh, what wonderful news,” she said, giving Belle her very kindest smile. “Have you decided on a date yet? You wouldn’t believe the amount of work that goes into planning a wedding. There’s a venue to find, a dress for you and a suit for Adam, rings for both of you. And that’s not to mention flowers, which can be very hard to find depending on what you’re looking for, and something for the reception. Oh, and we’ll have to put an announcement in the newspaper. Sweetheart,” she said, addressing herself now to Adam, “you couldn’t have brought her here earlier?”

“Mrs. Potts,” said Adam firmly, “you do realize this all has to happen as soon as possible, right? There is no time for flowers and venue-shopping and reception planning. And even if there was, I am not inclined to go through all of this wedding rigmarole for a marriage that isn’t even real. And I am sure as hell not going to put an announcement in the paper declaring my eternal commitment to a woman when she and I both know we’re never going to speak again once this godforsaken year is through.”

“Now wait just a minute, young man,” Mrs. Potts interjected when he had finished speaking. “I will grant you that this is not exactly a normal marriage, but if you think you’re going to deprive me of the opportunity to watch you get married at all, you’ve got another thing coming. You’re the closest thing I have to a son, and God knows you’re probably never going to do this again. There are some wedding traditions that you’re just going to have to observe.”

Desperate to find an ally, Adam turned his gaze to his bride-to-be. “Perhaps we should ask Belle what she thinks.” The look in his eyes told her very clearly what he expected her to think, and she wondered how many times over the course of the next year she would be called on to do this, to play the supportive, compliant wife. She was inclined to agree with him, though, should the truth be known. While he might never get married again, she thought that someday she might like to, might like to fall in love with someone who loved her too and have a real wedding, the kind where “till death do us part” really meant forever and not twelve months from now. She wasn’t so sure she wanted to waste her first time being a bride—not just getting married, but really being a bride, with all the special planning that entailed—on Adam Beaumont, of all people.

But Belle also possessed a certain contrarian streak, and she was still smarting a bit from being called a virginal schoolmarm, so she smiled and said, “Well, I do agree that there isn’t time to plan anything very fancy, but I also don’t think there’s any harm in doing some simple things like getting new clothes.”

The look on Adam’s face was priceless, and worth all of the trouble it would surely be to find a wedding dress. “There, you see?” crowed Mrs. Potts triumphantly. “You must do as your lady wishes, Adam.”

“She’s not my—”

“No, not another word from you. I won’t hear it. I am going to make Belle some breakfast, and then the two of you are going to pay a visit to Cogsworth. You can’t have a wedding without rings.”

And with that, she sailed from the room, leaving Adam and Belle to stare awkwardly at each other from opposite ends of the dining room table. “Who’s Cogsworth?” Belle asked.
“You never did answer my question,” Belle said later. “Who is Cogsworth?” They were sitting as far away from each other as humanly possible in the back seat of the Jaguar as Lumière ferried them across town to the appointment Mrs. Potts had made for them while they had finished breakfast.

Adam picked at a stray white thread that had somehow attached itself to the knee of his dark trousers. Belle could tell that he was purposefully avoiding looking at her. He had been like that all morning, finding creative ways to elude her gaze. She was pretty sure there was a part of him that was still sulking at being outwitted on the issue of the wedding plans. “Henry Cogsworth,” he said finally, “has been working for the Beaumonts longer than I’ve been alive. A lot longer than I’ve been alive, actually. He’s nominally the manager of the family’s business interests, but in reality, he wears a lot more hats than just that. Today we are going to see him in his capacity as the keeper of the family vault.”

“The family…vault?” Belle repeated in confusion.

“Yes,” he said, as if it were obvious. “Where the family jewels and other valuable heirlooms are kept.” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, and there was that damn smirk again. “What?” he asked innocently. “Doesn’t your family have one?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Belle said dryly. “It’s where we keep such rare and valuable treasures as my dad’s state quarter collection and the mood ring I had in seventh grade.”

He made a noise that sounded almost like a laugh and turned to look out the window again. They rode the rest of the way there in silence.

If Agatha Faye existed outside the constraints of time, then Henry Cogsworth was from a different time altogether. Well into his seventies, with a sharply waxed moustache, he met them in the lobby of a redbrick building in Holborn, dressed in a three-piece suit with a large, ornate pocket watch on a chain. “Master Adam,” he said in a deep, resonant voice, clapping the younger man on the back. “And to think I despaired of ever seeing you in these halls again.”

“Hello, Cogsworth,” replied Adam in the same vaguely sheepish tone that Belle had heard him use with Mrs. Potts. She wondered just how long it had been since he had been home. Lumière had seemed put out by the length of his absence, Mrs. Potts sad and wistful, and now here was Cogsworth, whose jovial tone concealed what seemed to Belle to be genuine hurt. As improbable as it seemed, they had missed him. She couldn’t imagine ever missing Adam Beaumont. Was it simply residual affection for the child they had known long ago, or was there a kinder side to him than the one she had seen so far? If there was, she couldn’t picture it.

“Cogsworth,” Adam was saying now, “this is Belle, my, uh, my fiancée.” He stumbled a little over the unfamiliar word, finding the feel of it strange against his tongue and teeth. “And Belle, this is Cogsworth, keeper of the family coffers.”

The older man stepped forward to shake Belle’s hand firmly. “Ah, so you’re the one who has agreed to help Adam out of his little predicament. Beatrice explained everything to me on the phone. Can’t say as I understand what would possess you to do such a thing, but it’s a pleasure to meet you all the same.”

“As Adam is so fond of reminding me,” Belle said with a wry quirk of her lips, shooting the man in question a look out of the corner of her eye, “this is the best offer I’m ever going to get.”
Cogsworth studied the two of them for a moment. They were clearly uncomfortable around each other. It was plain to see in the stiffness of their bodies, in the way they held themselves so as to minimize any chance they might accidentally touch. Beatrice had told him on the phone that she thought she saw potential here, but Cogsworth wasn’t so sure, although he supposed it was a good sign that the girl didn’t seem to be at all cowed by him. There was antagonism in the way she looked at him, to be sure, but there was no trace of fear. That was encouraging, actually, in its own way—Adam needed more people in his life who wouldn’t give in to the force of his personality. But to take that as a foundation upon which love could be built? Cogsworth had a great deal of affection and respect for Beatrice Potts, but, well, it seemed that even she could be wrong sometimes. “Really?” he asked, raising an eyebrow in Adam’s direction.

The younger man’s face remained inscrutable, but if Cogsworth looked hard enough, he could see the tiniest twitch of a muscle at the corner of his jaw. Oh, Beatrice. I know you only want what’s best for the boy, as do we all, but I think you’re off the mark here. Out loud he said, “Well, sir, madam, shall we get down to business and attend to the reason you’re both here?”

“Please,” said Adam. “Let’s get this over with.”

Cogsworth led them down a warren of twisting hallways, periodically swiping his keycard at various access points as they went. At the end of one hallway, he stopped in front of a door, swiped his card again, and then punched some numbers into a keypad. The lock on the door opened with a soft clicking sound. Inside was a small, windowless room, the walls lined with safe deposit boxes. On a table in the center sat several black velvet trays of jewelry.

“I’ve taken the liberty of pulling everything that might be suitable,” Cogsworth told them as he ushered them into the room. “There are, of course, more options for the lady than the gentleman, but I’ve no doubt you will both be able to find something that meets your needs.” He paused in the doorway. “Lumière and I will be taking tea in my office. Please buzz if you require assistance.” Then he left, shutting the door behind him and leaving Adam and Belle alone in the tiny space.

Belle stepped forward to get a better look at the contents of the trays, and could not suppress a gasp. She didn’t think she had ever seen so much glittering splendor in one place before. Certainly she had never seen so much bounty removed from the confines of a glass display case, freely available for her to touch and peruse. One tray held a selection of men’s rings, while the other three held an assortment of their women’s counterparts.

“This isn’t even the half of it,” said Adam from over her left shoulder. He was very close; she could feel the heat radiating off him in the enclosed space. Belle turned to look up at him in wordless wonder. “Well, go on,” he commanded, nodding his head toward the trays. “Choose something. We don’t have all day.”

“You first,” she said quietly, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the evidence of so much wealth.

He shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, stepping forward. His eyes skimmed quickly over the rows of jewelry, searching for the best option. His criteria were simple: something unobtrusive that wouldn’t serve as a constant reminder of his married state, and something that he had never seen on or near his father. In under a minute, he found it: a slender, classic gold band. “Done,” he said, depositing the ring into one of the black velvet ring boxes Cogsworth had set out on the table and slipping the box into his pocket. “Your turn.”

Belle raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “Aren’t you going to try it on?”

“Sweetheart,” he said dryly, “you vastly overestimate how much I care. I would suggest
adopting a similar attitude; it will save you a lot of grief in the long run. Now, please, for the love of God, make your choice.”

Her gaze swept over the rings slowly, one by one. How to choose? Where to begin? There were rings of every conceivable type, most set with diamonds, but some set with stones of other colors: blood-red rubies, forest-green emeralds, sapphires as blue as the ocean. Some of the rings looked like they were from the twentieth century, many were Victorian, and some looked even older than that. Belle stretched out a tentative hand, withdrew it, then reached it out again and selected what appeared to be the simplest one: a plain gold band set with a small solitaire diamond.

“Stop,” said Adam firmly, his deep voice almost echoing in the tiny room. “Not that one.”

Belle turned her head sharply in his direction. “No? Why not?” Her voice was a mixture of genuine curiosity and annoyance at having her decisions questioned. Hadn’t he just gotten done telling her to choose?

Adam could scarcely believe he had just spoken. The words had left his mouth before he had even really been aware that he was thinking them. He had just seen her reaching out for that ring and had known, immediately and instinctively, that it was the wrong one. It was a feeling he could not explain, a prickling sensation against the back of his neck. It made him feel strange, unsettled and ill at ease, and he tried to cover by speaking harshly. “I bring you here, show you all these beautiful pieces of jewelry, and you pick the most boring one? No, no, no. Most girls would kill for a chance like this.”

“How mercenary do you think I am?” she asked, offended.

He gave her a skeptical look. “You are literally standing here right now because I’m paying you. What would you call it? Now, show me your left hand, and I’ll choose.”

Belle rolled her eyes, but did as he asked, holding up her left hand with the fingers slightly spread. “Happy now?”

He didn’t respond, instead turning his attention back to the rings. The Art Deco emerald cut he rejected as too modern, the marquise cut as too sharp and pointed. This one was too small, this one too big. The Victorian one shaped like a golden snake with diamond eyes was just too weird, though he supposed that it would look amazing on the right woman. But though he ultimately knew very little of Belle, he knew that it was not right for her. But what was right? She was…unusual, something distinctive, then. But there was also a sort of brisk freshness to her, that made one think of the feeling of clean air after a spring rainstorm or the smell of newly mown hay baking in the late summer sun. That called for something classic, with simple lines, no curlicues or a million tiny diamonds covering every possible surface. Distinctively classic, or was it classically distinctive? He wasn’t sure why he cared so much. After all, he had picked his own ring with no more than a moment’s thought. It was a point of pride, he supposed. He couldn’t have people who didn’t know the truth of their marriage thinking that he had given his wife anything less than the best.

He found what he was looking for in the bottom right corner of the second tray. As soon as he saw it, he knew it was the one. It was a band of slightly burnished antique gold, with a large flat diamond at the center, surrounded by eight smaller, ever-so-slightly pointed diamonds, like the points of a compass or the petals of a flower. Unique, but still with a simple, uncluttered look. He turned to look at Belle, and found her looking at him intently, her head cocked slightly to one side as if she were trying to understand something. “Your hand, please,” he demanded.

Belle had been watching him, confused by the expression of quiet concentration on his face
as he worked. For someone who had just gotten done telling her how little he cared, he seemed to care quite a bit, though she didn’t understand why. Well, alright, she’d play along. It wasn’t as if she had a better idea. Wordlessly, she extended her left hand, and Adam took it in his. It was the first time he had ever touched her, and from out of nowhere, Belle suddenly felt a bolt of awareness shoot up her arm and spread throughout her entire body, rooting her feet to the floor as her lips parted in stunned surprise. Where had that come from? His hand was a study in contradictions: large yet elegant, strong yet surprisingly gentle as he supported her outstretched fingers.

She stole a glance upward at him through her lashes, but his face was impassive, save for one slightly raised eyebrow. If he felt what she felt, he gave no sign of it. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or disappointed. Keeping his easy grip on her hand, he reached across and plucked the ring from its slot on the tray. “This is the one you want,” he said softly as he slipped it onto her finger, pushing it down easily until it came to rest at the base. “What do you think?”

Belle dropped her gaze to their still-joined hands, and felt another rush of heat pulse through her body. The room suddenly felt too close and much too warm, the high neck of her blouse too constricting. The ring was beautiful, sparkling even in the unnatural florescent lighting, and perfectly proportioned to her hand. It fit as if it had been made for her, and in spite of herself, Belle wanted it immediately. She swallowed thickly and forced herself to speak, and her voice sounded strange to her own ears, as if she were hearing someone else speak from very far away. “It’s a perfect fit,” she said in little more than a whisper. “I-I think I would like to have it.”

Adam lifted her hand a little higher, turning it this way and that, his thumb brushing across her knuckles. He could feel the blood pounding in his ears as he looked at that ring on her finger. He had been right—the ring was perfect for her. In fact, it was a little too perfect, as if it were meant to remain a permanent fixture on her hand. He cleared his throat. “It’ll do,” he said roughly. “But don’t get too attached; you don’t get to keep it. I’ll expect it back when the year is through. I’m already paying you enough.”

Belle snatched her hand away as if burned. So he hadn’t felt it, then. “Don’t worry,” she said acidly. “I won’t want to keep it. There’s not a ring in this world beautiful enough to make up for the fact that it will just remind me of a year spent being married to you.”

He made a noise at the back of his throat that sounded almost like a growl and turned away from her again. “You’ll need a wedding band, too. I believe this is the one that goes with it.” He did not reach for her hand again, but simply handed her a thin gold band engraved with tiny flowers.

Belle slid the ring onto the same finger, just to get a sense of the size, though she knew that the two rings were meant to be worn in the opposite order. “It’s fine,” she said quietly, suddenly wanting nothing more than to get out of this place. She felt a hollow ache growing in her chest and didn’t know why. “Can we leave now?” she asked, handing the wedding ring back to him.

Adam put the ring in a box and put the box in another one of his pockets. “I thought you’d never ask,” he said.

They did not eat lunch together. Adam ate alone in the dining room, while Belle, not wanting to be alone with him, insisted on eating in the kitchen with Mrs. Potts and Lumière. “That’s a beautiful ring, dear,” Mrs. Potts said, handing her a plate. “You chose well.”

Belle flushed a little, still not used to how conspicuous the ring felt on her finger. “Thank you,” she replied, turning her hand and watching the diamond in the center wink as it caught the light. “But Adam picked it, actually.”
“Did he really?” said Mrs. Potts with great interest as she sat down on the other side of the table.

“You sound surprised.”

“No, no, it’s just that, well, Adam’s taste frequently tends to be a little…dramatic. But that ring, it suits you perfectly. I wonder how he knew.”

Belle looked at her hand again, and thought of the intent expression on Adam’s face as he had looked at the trays of rings. “How indeed,” she mused.

There was silence for a few minutes, save for the sound of chewing, before Belle spoke again. “Mrs. Potts, may I ask you something?”

“Of course, dear.”

“I’ve been thinking about what I’m going to wear for the wedding, and I realized, I don’t know the first thing about buying a wedding dress. I don’t even know what store to go to.”

Mrs. Potts considered this for a moment. “You’re right, of course,” she said at last. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. Fortunately, I think I have the perfect solution. Don’t you think so, Lumière?”

“What?” asked Lumière, who had been eating his roast beef sandwich with gusto and not paying one bit of attention to the two women’s conversation.

“Call your girlfriend,” said Mrs. Potts.

“Belle,” said Lumière with a flourish of his hand, “I would like to introduce to you the answer to all your wedding woes: my lady love, Plumette.”

Plumette was one of the most beautiful women that Belle had ever seen, with perfectly applied highlighter along her high cheekbones, and glossy dark curls that bounced when she laughed, which was often. She was wearing a turtleneck, wide leg trousers, and a collarless wool coat, all in flawless, spotless white. At Lumière’s introduction, she laughed and rolled her eyes. “My actual name is Plumeria,” she told Belle. “Plumeria Watson. My parents were what you might call hippies.”

“Why Plumette, then?” Belle asked.

Lumière had his arm around Plumette’s waist, holding her close, and she bumped her hip playfully against his. For some reason, the lighthearted familiarity of the gesture brought the ache back to Belle’s chest again. “You can blame this one,” said Plumette laughingly. “He nicknamed me Plumette pretty much within a week of meeting me, and it just kind of stuck.” She looked Belle up and down appraisingly, but it was a gentle appraisal, borne out of simple curiosity, far removed from the probing, almost malevolent way that Adam sometimes looked at her. “Oh yes,” she said with confidence. “We can definitely find you something.”

Belle had expected Plumette to take her to a department store, and was surprised when the other woman brought her to a little vintage boutique in Soho instead. “Not what you expected, huh?” said Plumette, seeing the look on Belle’s face. “Now, I have to tell you, I’ve never bought a wedding
dress before, but this is my favorite shop for so many other things. We’ll be able to find you something one of a kind, something you can remember for the rest of your life.”

Oh dear. “Uh, Plumette,” said Belle hesitantly as she followed her newfound friend into the store, “Lumière did tell you, didn’t he, about the, uh, unusual nature of this wedding?”

Plumette turned to look at her with an expression that was a curious mixture of pity and respect. “He did,” she said. “Look, I’m not going to pretend that I completely understand it. Having found the kind of love I have with Lumière, I can’t imagine marrying without that. But at the same time, presumably you have your reasons for doing what you’re doing. You’ll get no judgment from me on that score. We’re all just doing what we can in this world.”

“I’ve never really been in love before,” Belle said softly. “Maybe that’s the difference.”

Plumette’s eyes were soft and full of compassion. “I know I hardly know you, Belle, but I’d like to get to know you better. And just because this isn’t going to be a forever kind of thing, it doesn’t mean that you can’t wear something special.” She grinned suddenly, white teeth flashing. “After all, you have to look so good that you make baby boy wish this was forever, right?”

Belle laughed, blinking away sudden tears at the other woman’s unlooked for kindness. “Trust me, Plumette,” she said, “I don’t think there’s any chance of that happening.”

Plumette shrugged. “Well, you never know. Now come on—let’s shop!”

“So,” began Belle as she wriggled out of yet another ill-advised wedding dress attempt, this one a flowing prairie-style number. “Do you know Adam too, or just Lumière?”

Plumette was standing on the other side of the fitting room door, ready to come assist if needed. “It’s funny you should ask,” she replied. “It’s more that I know of him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He and I were at Cambridge at the same time, but we didn’t run in the same circles. I knew him only by reputation.” She paused. “Let’s just say I wasn’t his type.”

Belle put the rejected dress back on its hanger. “Oh. Was it because you…” She trailed off, unsure of a way to finish the question that wasn’t extremely rude.

But Plumette knew what she meant. “Oh no, not that,” she said. “Trust me, race was not a factor in who that man chose to take to bed with him. No, it was more that I was too poor. I was a scholar student, you see, and so I spent an awful lot of time in the library. Adam preferred women who didn’t have to try so hard at life. Do you know what I mean?”

Belle made a somewhat undignified snorting noise. “Believe me, that hasn’t changed.”

Plumette laughed. “Well, as long as you know what you’re getting into. So yeah,” she continued, “after university, I kind of bounced around for a bit, and then about five years ago, I got hired to work for Cogsworth. That’s how I met Lumière.”

“But you didn’t meet Adam?” Belle asked from the other side of the door. “At least, I’m assuming you didn’t, since you said you only know of him.”

“Oh, Adam had long since moved to America by then. I don’t think he ever came home to
see his dad. From the bits and pieces I’ve been able to gather, I don’t think they got on at all. Not that I’m surprised. I used to have to do business with his dad sometimes. That guy was a real piece of work—asshole doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“You and Adam are of the same opinion on that one.”

“Sometimes, especially when he got a little bit drunk, he would go on these rants about his son, about how much of a disappointment he was. He used to call him a disgrace to the family name, say that Adam was throwing away his bloodline by moving to the States, just all kinds of crazy shit like that. Like I said, piece of work.”

Belle stilled, her fingers clenched around the fabric of the next dress to try on, still on its hanger. She had figured that the elder Mr. Beaumont had not exactly been a paragon of fatherly virtue, if for no other reason than that loving fathers typically didn’t try to force their children into marriages they didn’t want. But when she had pictured him in her head, she had pictured what she thought was a typical example of detached aristocratic British parenting, not the monster that Plumette was describing. Suddenly, the blue sparks of rage that snapped to life in Adam’s eyes whenever the conversation touched even obliquely on his father made a lot more sense. Made more sense, and yet she still wasn’t sure what to do with this information. It wasn’t an excuse; it wasn’t even really an explanation. But it was another piece of the puzzle, more information than she’d had previously. Maybe in time she would come to understand the whole.

Plumette knocked softly against the fitting room door. “Hey,” she said teasingly, “are you just asking me these questions to put off having to try on dresses? I know you’ve still got one in there.”

Belle shook her head as if to clear it. “Yeah, sorry. I’m coming.” She pulled the dress from its hanger and stepped into it, pulling it up over her body and slipping her arms into the sleeves. Bending over, she tugged the zipper up as far as it would go, and then stepped outside of the little room so Plumette could zip it up the rest of the way.

“Now turn around and let me get a good look at it,” ordered Plumette once she had done up all the fastenings. Belle obeyed, and she could tell immediately by the way her shopping companion’s eyes lit up that this dress was different from the others. “This is the one, girl! Get over here by this mirror and see how good you look.”

When Belle saw herself in the mirror, her eyes lit up too. The dress was pure Sixties mod, a white satin shift with a high, almost mandarin-style collar. Loose, flared sleeves of floral lace ended just above her wrists. But what made the garment so distinctive was its length: it was quite short. Scandalously short, even. Belle didn’t think she had ever worn anything so short before in her life. Short, but not vulgar, thanks to the high neck and long sleeves. It made her feel beautiful, sexy, daring. Her lips curved in a satisfied smile. *Virginal schoolmarm, my ass.* She turned to Plumette, who was waiting expectantly. “Oh yes,” she said, “this is the one.”

They rode back to Beaumont House in a cab, rather than try to take a garment bag onto the Tube. Plumette leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, while Belle watched the streets slip past outside her window without really seeing them. Her mind was full of a series of jumbled images: her father telling her that she would understand marriage when she met the right man, the cold cruelty of Adam’s laughter, the malice of his sharp-toothed smile, the warmth and protective strength of his hand on hers. She thought of the pride and adoration in Lumière’s voice when he spoke of Plumette, the gentle affection in Plumette’s eyes when she looked at him. All of a sudden, she felt tired and confused. “Plumette?” she asked.
“Hmmm?” replied Plumette without opening her eyes.

“Do you think you and Lumière will ever get married?” There was a startled silence, and Belle wanted to smack herself. “You don’t have to answer that, of course,” she added hastily. “I know I have a habit of asking questions that are way too personal. My dad’s been trying to break me of it since I was about five, but as you can see, he never did have much luck.”

Plumette’s dark eyes snapped open, but there was no anger in them, only thoughtfulness. “Truthfully, I don’t know,” she said slowly. “Lumière has this unfortunate tendency to think of himself as not good enough for me.”

“Because you went to Cambridge?”

She nodded. “Because I went to Cambridge, and he barely finished secondary school, among other reasons.” She sighed, a soft little puff of air. “I wish sometimes that he could see himself the way I see him. I look at Lumière, and I see a man who is so kind, so thoughtful and generous, who makes me feel safe, but who also makes me laugh. A man who is clever and hardworking, even if he doesn’t have a fancy degree to show for it.” She turned her head to look out the window, and the westering sun cast a golden glow over her brown skin. Her next words were spoken almost as if to herself, as if Belle wasn’t even there. “What he doesn’t realize is that I’d love him whether he had two pounds to his name or two billion. I can’t help loving him—he’s the other half of me.”

Belle didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t imagine it, being that much in love with another person. The idea seemed as remote and inaccessible as the stars in the sky. Wordlessly, she reached out and took Plumette’s hand in hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. After a moment, she felt her friend return the pressure. It wasn’t much, but it was enough.

That evening, Belle again ate dinner alone, despite Mrs. Potts’s repeated exhortations to Adam to “have dinner with your fiancée, and at least try to be civil,” because, “you need to get to know the woman you’re going to marry.” But Adam had simply fixed her with a glare that stopped even the formidable housekeeper in her tracks, and retreated to the library, demanding his dinner be brought to him at precisely eight o’clock.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Potts,” Belle said as the older woman served her dinner in the dining room. “I’m not much interested in getting to know him either.”

Mrs. Potts looked at the young woman, so small at the end of the massive polished wood table, and sighed. Oh, Adam, Adam, Adam. She’s right here—why won’t you at least try? What are you so afraid of? “I’m sorry, Belle,” she said out loud, setting out the dinner dishes with a practiced hand. “I wish he wasn’t like this. You must believe me when I say that he wasn’t always. I know that side of him is in there still; it’s just a matter of bringing it back out again.”

“That may be,” Belle said a tad waspishly, “but it doesn’t do me much good if he won’t even spend an hour in the same room with me. But really, Mrs. Potts, it’s fine. The less time he and I spend together, the greater our chance of actually making it through this year still married.”

After dinner, Belle climbed the stairs to her room and opened her laptop. It was time for a conversation she’d been dreading all day but could put off no longer. It was time to call her father. “Hey, Dad,” she said when the call connected and his picture burst into life on her computer screen.
“Belle!” said her father. “What a surprise! What’s up, chickadee? How’s merry old England?” She could see that he was in his studio, the mid-afternoon sun filling the space with the natural light that was perfect for his work. There was a smear of ink down his left cheek.

“Merry isn’t quite the right word,” Belle said wryly. “Dad, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course you can.”

Belle swallowed. This is never going to get any easier. Just get it over with. “If someone gave you a million dollars, what would you do with it?”

Her father’s brows knit together as he considered this. “Well, that’s an interesting question,” he said finally. “I suppose I’d probably pay some bills, make some improvements to the house, maybe go to some of the places your mother and I always talked about going. There are a lot of things you can do with a million dollars.”

“Well, let me ask you this: If someone offered you a million dollars, but to get it, you’d have to spend a year of your life doing something unpleasant and a little bit scary, would you take them up on it?”

The furrow between his brows deepened. “Well, I mean, I wouldn’t become an international assassin or anything, but you’d be surprised what people will do for that much money, and I’m probably no exception to that. Why do you ask? Surely someone hasn’t offered you a million dollars, have they?” When she didn’t answer immediately, his expression changed, his eyebrows shooting up toward his hairline. “Have they, Belle?” he asked.

Belle thought of the advice she had given herself that morning in Adam’s office—had it really only been a few days ago?—when she had thought he was going to fire her. Just think of it like ripping off a band-aid. She held up her ringed hand. “Adam asked me to marry him.”

His stunned silence was so heavy it was almost suffocating. “What the hell?” he finally said. “I’d think you were making that up if it wasn’t for that ring. I mean, Jesus, look at that thing. But really, Belle, what the hell are you talking about? Are you in some kind of trouble? Do I need to come over there?”

“No, no, you do not. I am not in trouble,” she told him as firmly as she could.

“Then what on earth is going on?”

She sighed. How to explain? “It turns out there was no business in London—it was just a ploy to get me over here, which, to be honest, I’m still kind of pissed about. But, um, apparently his dad died, and it’s in the will that Adam has to get married and stay married for a year in order to inherit his money. And for reasons that I still don’t really understand, he chose me for his fake wife.”

Maurice stared at her, dumbfounded. “Okay, that is crazy,” he said finally. “You do see that that’s crazy, right?”

“There’s more,” Belle said hesitantly. This was the part she really didn’t want to tell him. “We have to live over here in England.”

Her father was quiet for a long time. “Belle,” he finally said, “you know I’ve always been rather lenient with you, maybe because it’s always been just the two of us. I’ve always tried to give you space to do your own thing, and to make your own way in the world. But, sweetie, I just can’t let you do this. It’s too much.”
“Daddy, please,” Belle said. “Please try to understand. I’m not really asking for permission; I’m telling you how it’s going to be. It’s a million dollars, Dad. A million dollars. It’s the kind of thing that could literally change my life. I need this, I need the freedom it will buy me.”

“You know, for most girls, moving halfway across the country to New York City would be freedom enough. But then again, you never did do things by halves, chickadee.”

“I’m doing this for you too, Dad. I want you to have some of the money. I want to pay you back for everything you’ve done for me over the years. I mean, I know it doesn’t even come close to really paying you back, but it is something, and—”

“Belle,” her father interrupted her firmly. “You do not need to do this on my account. I love you too much to want to have you alone in a foreign country with a man who, by your own admission, you can’t stand. You told me he was, and I quote, “the biggest dick I’ve ever met.””

She felt two spots of pink appear along her cheekbones. “I won’t be alone. He has a housekeeper who lives here too. She’s really nice—you would like her. And it’s going to be a marriage in name only, so you don’t need to worry about that aspect of it.”

He sighed. “Oh, sweetheart, that’s actually one thing I’m not worried about. I’ve always trusted you to use your own judgment in that area. I’m more worried about the emotional toll that living a lie is going to take on you.”

Belle cocked her head a little. “What do you mean?”

Maurice’s face grew serious, and a little sad. “I loved your mother very much. In a way, I loved her from the first moment I saw her. The years I had with her were wonderful. We just… understood each other. Do you know what I mean? That’s what I want for you, not this sham. I just want you to find someone who loves and appreciates you, Belle.”

Belle blinked furiously so her father wouldn’t see her cry. “It’s only for a year,” she promised him. “Just one year, and then we’ll annul it and it will be like it never even happened. I still have plenty of time to find someone who will love me. This is just a pit stop, a temporary diversion, that’s all.”

Her father sighed again. “I take it you’re determined to go through with this?”

“I am.”

“Then I suppose I can’t really stop you. You’re a grown woman, and old enough to make your own choices. But you know that I love you, and if you ever want out, if it ever gets to be too much and you want it to stop, you let me know, and we’ll have you on the next plane home. And I want you to check in with me periodically and let me know you’re okay. Can you do that?”

She nodded, still blinking back tears. “Of course I can.”

He tried to smile, though his eyes were still tinged with sadness. “And send me a picture, will you? I want to see the bride and this fake groom of hers.”

Belle laughed shakily. “Maybe we’ll start a new trend in marriages.”

“What, till one year do you part?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” said Belle, and then they both laughed together.
Father and daughter talked for a few minutes more about other things before Belle decided she wanted to get ready for bed, and they said goodbye. But after they had hung up, and Belle was left looking at the dark screen where her father’s face had been, she felt tears pricking at her eyes again in spite of herself. In its own way, his kind supportiveness had been harder to take than if he had just gotten angry with her. She swallowed hard and pressed the heels of her hands against her closed eyes until she was quite sure all her tears were gone. She would be strong. Adam may have been a dick, as she had told her father, but words were his weapons, and words Belle could fight. A year was not such a long time, and then she still had the rest of her life ahead of her to shape how she pleased. It would all be fine, so long as she kept her wits about her and her resolve firm.

But all the same, she lay awake in bed a long time, staring at the ceiling in the dark and twisting her new ring nervously around and around her finger.

Thousands of miles away, in a little town in Iowa, Maurice Villeneuve decided he needed a drink. Putting away his work, he grabbed his coat from the hall closet and walked the short distance from his home on its tree-lined street to downtown and Pleasantville’s sole bar. Inside, the bar was warm against the early spring evening, and surprisingly crowded, given that it was only six-thirty. He found a seat at the counter and flagged down the bartender.

“Mr. Villeneuve!” said Neal Gaston. “What can I get you?”

“Anything with alcohol,” replied Maurice.

Neal brought him a rum and Coke, and then leaned against the counter, watching him. “What’s up, Mr. V? You seem like something’s bothering you.”

Was it that obvious? “Oh, it’s nothing really, Neal. I just had a call from Belle today.”

“Belle?” said Neal sharply, his casual posture stiffening. “What’s wrong with Belle?”

Maurice took a long drink and, against his better judgment, kept talking. “She’s getting married.”

Had Maurice been looking up at Neal instead of down into his drink, he would have seen the younger man’s expression darken with barely concealed anger. “Married? To who?” Didn’t Belle know she was supposed to be with him?

Maurice took another long drink. “She’s marrying her asshole boss and moving to England.” He turned to look up at Neal, and his eyes were so haunted that Neal almost felt sorry for him, insofar as Neal Gaston ever felt sorry for anyone. “I’m proud of her and her accomplishments, don’t get me wrong,” he said, “but sometimes I almost wish she had stayed in this town and married you. It would have just been so much easier.”

Neal was saved from having to make a reply by someone yelling for him from the other end of the bar. He didn’t have a chance to speak to Maurice again that evening. But later, long after Belle’s father had left, Neal stood leaning against the counter, phone in hand, looking down at a picture of himself and Belle that had been taken a week or so before she had broken up with him for reasons he still didn’t really understand. Though he had not spoken to her since she had moved to New York a year and a half ago, he had always just figured she would one day grow tired of the city and come back to Pleasantville, back to him. But now she was getting married to someone else, and she would be lost to him forever. How could she? Didn’t she realize it was their destiny to be together? Even her father thought it was good idea. He had to get her back! But even as he had that
thought, he knew he would find a way. After all, destiny was destiny, and not even Belle Villeneuve could fight what was meant to be.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today... And more Adam, I promise.
Hello again, my lovely readers. Thank you again for all of your wonderful comments. I have been going through some struggles at work lately, and it always cheers me up to come on here and read what you have to say. You’re all so kind and thoughtful, so keep those comments coming, please. As for this chapter, I think (or hope, anyway) that you’re really going to like this one. You can probably guess from the title what it's about...

Despite nearly an entire week of blue skies, the residents of Beaumont House awoke on the morning of Tuesday, March 22, to rain drumming on the roof and sliding down the windows. It was the kind of rain that threatened to last all day, no sudden cloudburst, but a steady, incessant flow of water that showed no signs of abating. From their four separate bedrooms, each of the four residents of the house had a different reaction to this development.

In his attic bedroom, up under the eaves of the house where the noise of the rain was loudest, Lumière awoke with a start, then cursed the rain for having woken him so early. True, Mrs. Potts would be in before too long, telling him to get up because there was still much to be done before Adam and Belle’s wedding that afternoon, but in the mean time, another half hour of sleep was another half hour of sleep, and he meant to take it. Besides, he didn’t feel like expending much effort on a sham wedding, even if it was a means to beat that old bastard John Beaumont at his own game.

That being said, however, it was definitely interesting to watch the two of them interact. They bristled like cats whenever they were forced to come within ten feet of each other, but it was the kind of energy that Lumière suspected could easily be turned to other, more enjoyable, activities. They might not have slept together yet, but they would, of that he felt quite certain. Although, he thought as he drifted back to sleep, that girl is way too good for Adam. I wonder if he's realized that yet.

In a larger bedroom down the hall, the sound of water rushing through the gutters filled Mrs. Potts with a sort of bustling nervousness as she thought of the day that lay ahead and all the ways in which the weather would make it more difficult. She and Plumette would have to concoct a plan to keep Belle and her satin dress dry during that precarious moment between building and car. And then, of course, there could be no outdoor pictures, which was a shame. She wondered if there would be somewhere suitable inside. It would need to be a spot with plenty of natural light, she mused, though that would certainly prove difficult on such an overcast day.

Oh, if only there had been more time to plan, more time to prepare! They could have had a church wedding. The chapel at Thornleigh Hall would have been perfect. She could picture it now: the whole space filled to the brim with pink roses, Belle in a lovely long dress and delicate lace veil, Adam serious and handsome in a dark suit. He would see his bride coming toward him down the aisle, and his face would light up, and he would look at her with such love in his eyes… Oh, who was she kidding? That was a fantasy every bit as unrealistic as a fairy tale. Real life was the Kensington and Chelsea Register Office, a bride and groom who looked at each other with mutual antipathy, a sky like a bruise, and rain, rain, rain. She sighed, suddenly feeling old, and tired down to her bones. Ah, well, at least she had Adam back, something she had thought might never happen.
She would have to be content with that, and let the rest fall where it might. And in the meantime, she needed to wake Lumière. He had an order of flowers to pick up.

One floor below the housekeeper’s room, Belle lay curled up in a tight ball in bed, her knees drawn into her chest, watching the rain slide in fat drops down the window panes. She knew it was foolish to think so, but she couldn’t help but feel that it was an omen, this never-ending torrent of cold water, that covered the whole earth and made everything damp and dark and dreary. Or maybe this was just the way the weather usually was in England. That would be fitting, then: proper English weather to herald the beginning of her new proper English life. She wondered vaguely if this was how aristocratic brides of a century or two ago felt on their wedding days, right before they were handed over to men they didn’t love or even understand.

And she didn’t understand him, not one bit. He hadn’t even deigned to eat a meal with her until last evening, when she had come down for dinner to find him sitting in dismal silence at the head of the dining room table, fingers steepled contemplatively before him. And even then, he had sat through the whole thing with a rather pinched look about his mouth, as if it pained him to sit at the same table with her. His mouth had still been as sharp as ever, though, and it had brought out a certain sharpness in hers in return. It was strange, she reflected now, how he seemed to draw out that side in her more often and more effectively than did any other person she knew. It was as if he knew exactly how to provoke her into saying more than she knew she ought to. She wondered what that meant, and then decided that she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. It certainly meant nothing good. Her mind drifted back over their conversation the previous evening.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked him.

“Doing what?” he replied with a raised eyebrow, selecting a roll from the basket on the table and reaching for the butter.

“You know very well what,” she said ill-temperedly. “This. Having dinner with me. You never have before. Why now?”

The eyebrow arched even higher, practically disappearing into his hairline. “Why, sweetheart,” he said with a perfect innocence she knew he didn’t feel. “Isn’t it customary in America to have a rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding?”

Now it was her turn to raise an eyebrow. “What are we rehearsing? How to behave civilly to each other?”

He tore the roll apart with a little more force than was strictly necessary. Despite herself, Belle could not keep her traitorous eyes away from his hands as he did so. He really did have beautiful hands. She had been unaccountably aware of them since Thursday, the day he had put the engagement ring on her finger. He was speaking now, his deep voice faintly tinged with laughter, as it so often was, though the laughter was never kind. “What, do you think you need practice?”

The reply she made to that showed that she probably did.

Though she was wrapped up cozily in bed, Belle shivered, and rolled over so that her back was to the window and she was facing away from the rain. Well, she might have something in common with the aristocratic brides of yore, but there was one important distinction between them: her marriage came with an escape hatch, an expiration date. She thought perhaps she ought to buy a calendar so that she could cross out each day as it passed, like a child counting down to Christmas.

Belle would probably have been surprised to learn that she and the man who would very shortly become her husband agreed on one thing, which was that the rain was a sign of things to
come. He was lying stretched out lazily in bed, hands folded behind his head, staring up at a very thin crack in the ceiling, listening to the rain rather than looking at it. He had awoken pleasantly surprised to find that he didn’t have a headache, which had been no guarantee, for he had sat up nursing not one but several drinks long after the conclusion of his dinner with Belle, in an attempt to calm his unsettled mind. It hadn’t worked.

He still had no real idea what had possessed him to have dinner with her, other than to say that it had been the product of simple curiosity mixed with a momentary lapse in judgment. The trouble had all started, he supposed, when they had gone to pick out those damn rings. First he had felt the desire to actually choose one for her, which was strange in and of itself, for there was no real reason why it should have mattered which one she wore. And then he had felt compelled to choose that particular ring, which was stranger still. It was almost as if it had called to him, with an insistent humming that had filled his head as he had stretched out his hand.

But the very strangest thing of all had been what had happened next. He had merely intended to put the ring on her finger for expediency’s sake (after all, why hand the thing to her to put on when he could cut out the middle man and do it himself?), but the instant their hands had met, he had felt a jolt run through him, as if his heart had stuttered. It had felt almost like the time his primary school class had gone on a field trip to a farm and he had accidentally touched an electric fence. Just a little leap, a turning over of his heart in his chest, lasting only an instant before the ripple smoothed itself out and everything was as it had been once more, save for the fact that his heart had felt as if it were beating harder, each thump almost painful.

He knew she had felt it too, or at least something akin to it. He could tell from the way her lips had shaped themselves into a wordless O of surprise and her eyes had blinked rapidly several times, lashes fluttering against her cheeks. Her hand in his had been soft and warm, her fingers offering no resistance as he had pushed the ring all the way down to where her finger met her palm. And the way that ring had looked on her hand! It had taken all of his self-control not to let her see how much all of it had caught him off guard. But then he had said something unpleasant, and she had responded in kind, and the strange intensity of the moment had vanished, as fleeting as something half-glimpsed from the window of a moving train.

Adam had spent the days since avoiding her as much as possible. He wondered if she realized the reason why. It was bad enough that he had felt a prick of something when their hands had touched, but if she had felt it too, then that was doubly dangerous. He couldn’t account for why it had happened, could offer no explanation that made any amount of sense, but he figured it ultimately meant nothing. It had to. A few days of minimal contact, and it would be like it had never even happened. That had been his hope, anyway.

Dinner last night had been the test of that hope. It had been only partially successful. There had been no brushing of hands, even unintentionally, but she had still perturbed him, even from the other end of the table. She was just too quick at everything, too quick to notice, too quick to wonder, too quick to ask questions. Her mere presence demanded things of him that he didn’t think he could give, even if he wanted to. The simpler, more protective thing was to not even try.

He pushed himself up into a seated position so that he could see his wedding suit hanging on the door of the dark mahogany wardrobe on the opposite wall. Things seemed less simple now than they had even a week ago, the day he and Belle had left New York. He had chosen her for this because she had seemed the least complicated option, someone easy to understand and to control. He wondered now if perhaps he had been wrong. But no, no, he was never wrong. The situation would just require a little more effort, that was all. He ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end, then flopped down onto his back again with a sigh. Effort! Was there anything worse in the world?
For Belle, the day passed in an almost dreamlike haze, as if she were moving very slowly while everything happened very quickly around her. Mrs. Potts brought her breakfast in bed, a neat and tidy tray with a full spread of eggs and bacon and toast. “Don’t get me wrong, Mrs. Potts, this is lovely, but I think I’m still fully capable of coming downstairs for breakfast,” Belle said teasingly.

“No nonsense, my dear!” Mrs. Potts replied emphatically. “It’s your wedding day, after all, and if that doesn’t merit special treatment, I don’t know what does. Besides,” she added conspiratorially, “I’m trying to keep you and Adam apart. You’re not supposed to see each other before the ceremony, you know.”

Belle would have ordinarily thought that to be a ridiculous superstition, but today, with the rain still streaming down the windows and thoughts about omens and fate still running through her head, it seemed less so. “Thank you,” she said solemnly, spreading jam on a piece of toast.

Belle lingered so long over breakfast that it ended up functioning more like brunch by the time she was done. She took so long to eat, in fact, that Mrs. Potts ended up having to stick her head in the door and remind her that Plumette would be there soon to help her get ready. “And you haven’t even showered yet!” she exclaimed nervously, mentally calculating just how far behind schedule Belle was, and if it was still possible for her to get caught up. Then she took a closer look at the young woman, saw the apprehension shadowing her face, and felt all her other emotions vanish in a sudden rush of motherly concern. Coming all the way into the room, she closed the door behind her and took a seat on the end of the bed. “Is something bothering you?” she asked gently. “Are you having second thoughts? You can tell me if you are; it’s okay.”

Belle shook her head. How could she ever in a million years tell Mrs. Potts about the way it had felt when Adam had taken her hand? How could she ever explain how it had felt as if her body had known him, every nerve ending jumping to attention, raw and vulnerable just below the surface of her skin? How could she put into words how it had both thrilled and frightened her all at once? So instead she shook her head again. “No, no second thoughts.”

Mrs. Potts gave her a searching look. “Are you sure? I know it may feel as if Adam is counting on you, but you really don’t owe him anything if you don’t want to give it. You can still change your mind if you want to.”

Belle thought of the prospect of a million dollars in her bank account. Wasn’t that enough to overcome some temporary discomfort? “I’m fine, Mrs. Potts, really I am,” she said, trying to put some conviction into her words. “I’m just having a hard time wrapping my head around the idea that I’m going to be married in a few hours.”

A somewhat horrifying thought suddenly occurred to the housekeeper. “Belle,” she said a little hesitantly, “I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with me. Adam isn’t pressuring you to do anything you don’t want to do as part of this deal, is he? In a, uh, marital relations sense?”

To her surprise, Belle laughed. “Oh, trust me, no. Just the opposite, actually. He was very adamant about how little the idea of doing that with me interested him.”

Mrs. Potts thought she understood what was bothering the girl, or at least she understood a little of it. “I know you may not believe me, but deep down, he’s lonely too. And a little bit afraid, I think.”

Belle furrowed her brow in confusion. “Afraid? Why would he be afraid? He’s the one who
proposed this whole insane plan in the first place."

“I know he did, but do you think he would have done that if he’d felt he had any other choice? Marriage, whether it’s for a year or a lifetime, means sharing your life with someone, and part of that is letting the other person in and allowing them to see all the parts of you that you keep hidden from the world at large. Adam has never been very good at that. I think that’s what scares him.” She paused, and then added softly, “I think maybe that’s what scares you a little bit too.” Belle didn’t answer, and finally Mrs. Potts patted her on the knee and said, “At least promise me you’ll think about what I’ve said, okay? You don’t have to believe me, now or ever, but at least keep it in mind.”

Belle nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good girl. Now give me a hug, and then you’d better go take a shower. Plumette will be here soon.”

They hugged warmly, and then Mrs. Potts left, taking the breakfast tray with her. Belle showered quickly, trying not to combine the words Adam and fear in her mind.

Plumette breezed into Belle’s bedroom carrying an assortment of bags and cases that contained everything she needed to get them both wedding-ready. She smiled at Belle, who was sitting on the bed in her bathrobe, her wet hair draped over one shoulder. “Are you ready to become a bride?” she asked.

Belle threw up her hands. “Make me beautiful!” she cried laughingly, trying to focus on anything other than the nervousness that had wrapped itself around her like a shroud.

Plumette set her things down on the bed and began rummaging around in a duffle bag. “I don’t think you need much help,” she said kindly, “but I’ll be glad to do my best all the same.” She emerged from the duffle bag wielding a hairbrush like a scepter. “I think we’ll start with your hair.”

Plumette’s best turned out to be something close to magic, a kind of transfiguring alchemy that made Belle feel as if she were being transformed into someone truly extraordinary. She had never had someone work over her like that before. Out came the hair dryer, the curling iron, the almost comically large can of hairspray. On went eyeliner, blush, lipstick. Plumette put on some music and danced and talked and laughed while she worked, treating the whole thing as if it were any other normal wedding, an occasion to be celebrated. Belle thought it was the most wonderful wedding present anyone could have given her.

After several hours of painstaking primping, Plumette gave Belle’s face one last spritz of setting spray, removed with a flourish the voluminous black cape she had used to protect Belle’s dress while she worked, and surveyed her charge with an appraising eye. Then she grinned. “He’s going to fall in love with you the moment he sees you.” She nodded toward the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. “Go see for yourself.”

Belle privately thought that was a laughable idea, a load of stuff and nonsense, but she stood, on legs unsteady from having stayed seated for so long, and crossed to the mirror. What she saw took her breath away. The woman who stared back at her from the other side of the glass was truly beautiful, but more than that, she was sensual, in a soft, kittenish sort of way. Plumette had pulled her hair back into a high, voluminous ponytail, then curled the ends so that they hung full and bouncy above her shoulders. She wore no veil, but in place of a regular hair tie, Plumette had used a diamond cuff that she had managed to persuade Cogsworth to let her sign out of the Beaumont vault.
for the day. The matching chandelier earrings sparkled in her ears, their long lines showing off the swanlike arc of her neck to best advantage.

Her face was a combination of sultry and innocent, extravagantly winged eyeliner and pitch-black lashes on the one hand, softly flushed cheeks and whisper-pink lips on the other. She blinked, and the deep brown eyes in the mirror blinked back at her, wide and wondering in their thickets of lashes. Those same eyes arced downward, taking in the perilously short white satin dress with its dramatic wide sleeves. Since it was March, and still a little cold for totally bare legs, Plumette had found her a pair of pale pink tights, so soft and sheer it was practically like wearing nothing at all, but still enough to give her legs a little color and warmth. On her feet were white leather shoes with low, square heels and large, flat bows spreading over the toes. Practical, yet stylish and beautiful, exactly how Belle liked it. The entire effect was enchanting: sophisticated and delicate, but still with a little edge of danger. She was under no illusion that it would have any effect on Adam, nor was she even sure she wanted it to, but it made her feel wonderful, and in the end, that was almost certainly the most important thing. Plumette had done her job, and done it well: for perhaps the first time, Belle truly did feel like a bride. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“You look nice, man, I must say,” Lumière said somewhat grudgingly, stealing a glance at his employer and erstwhile friend in the rearview mirror. The two men were in the Jaguar, en route to the registry office.

“Thank you,” replied Adam a touch stiffly. “You as well,” he added after a long moment, making a show of adjusting his cuff so he didn’t have to meet Lumière’s eyes in the mirror.

For a long while, silence filled the car, but it was a living silence, the silence of two people not at peace with each other. Adam could tell Lumière wanted to say something else to him, and finally, when they had stopped at a light, the driver took a deep breath and began.

“Look, I know it’s probably not my place to say this, but—”

“No, probably not,” Adam agreed, his voice laced with warning.

“But,” Lumière repeated, “I’m going to say it anyway, because it needs to be said, and God knows no one else is going to say it.”

“Then stop telling me you’re going to say it, and just have out with it,” Adam said irritably. Despite his repeated insistence that this wedding meant nothing to him, nerves were beginning to gather in the pit of his stomach after all. It was making him snappish.

“What are your intentions toward this girl?”

“My…intentions?” repeated Adam, utterly befuddled.

“Oui, your intentions.” The light changed, and Lumière pulled forward, hitting the accelerator a little harder than necessary and making the car jerk. “Plumette and I both like her, Adam. She is not only beautiful, but she is clever and kind as well. But there is also a certain innocent quality to her. She’s not like you, Adam, she’s not from your world. She still feels things.”

“I feel things!” protested Adam sharply.

Lumière gave him a long look in the mirror. “Do you? Sometimes I am not so sure.” Adam refused to dignify that with a response, and after a while, Lumière continued. “All I am saying is that you had better decide what you want from this, what you want from her. If you want to fall in love
with her, then fall in love with her. If you want to leave her alone, then leave her alone. But don’t do anything half-heartedly, because you will confuse her, and she will fall in love with you, and you will break her heart.”

Adam thought of the derision in Belle’s voice when she had told him he wasn’t her type. Then he thought of the flicker of her lashes when he had taken her hand. There it was again: that damn painful thumping of his heart. He looked up swiftly at Lumière, and his blue eyes were bright in his long, narrow face. “You think she’d fall in love with me?” he asked, something like apprehension coloring his voice. “You think she even could?”

“What I think,” said Lumière, turning onto the street where the registry office was, “is that you had better decide what she is going to be to you, and act accordingly.”

In the vestibule outside the room where the ceremony was to take place, Belle watched anxiously as Mrs. Potts lifted the lid of the box from the florist. “Oh Belle,” she said with a happy sigh as she lifted the box’s bounty from its nest of tissue paper, “it’s beautiful. Roses were exactly the right choice.”

It was beautiful, Belle had to agree as she accepted the bouquet from Mrs. Potts. It wasn’t large, as befitted the scale of the wedding, but it was made from exquisitely beautiful pale pink and white roses, their petals like velvet, their stems bound together with white satin ribbon. There was a matching, slightly smaller version for Plumette, who in the absence of anyone else, would be acting as maid of honor.

Mrs. Potts put her arms around the two younger women’s shoulders, one on either side of her. “You both look beautiful,” she said in her kind, motherly way. “Now, don’t be nervous.” She addressed her words to both of them, but they all knew they were meant mostly for Belle. “It’s a short aisle, just a few steps and you’re there. Just wait for the music, and then stand tall and walk proudly.” Then she lowered her voice, so that this time, she was truly speaking only to Belle. “And remember what I told you. Remember that he’s afraid too.” Belle could only nod, not trusting herself to speak. She was full of so much nervousness that she thought she could taste it, thick and bitter against the back of her tongue.

Mrs. Potts gave their shoulders one last squeeze, and then vanished through the door into the room beyond. Then Belle and Plumette waited for what seemed like hours, though in reality it must have been only minutes, until they heard the stirring yet somewhat tinny strains of the pre-recorded wedding march. Plumette gave Belle’s hand one last reassuring squeeze, then turned, drew herself up to her full height, and pushed through the door with all the confident self-assurance of one who wasn’t going to meet her doom. Belle tried to mimic her posture—shoulders back, neck long, head held high, like a queen—and followed her.

The walls of the room were a peachy gold color, to match the heavy golden drapes that hung on the floor to ceiling windows along one wall. It was not a large room, though the rows of chairs for guests, empty save for Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth, made it seem deeper than it really was. At the front of the room stood three people, though two of them—the officiant and Lumière—she saw only briefly before her gaze was drawn to Adam as if by a magnet. Oh, he looked handsome, like a modern day fairytale prince, in a taupe-colored suit woven all over with a tiny black houndstooth pattern, slimly cut to emphasize the long, lean lines of his body. He wore a simple white shirt and a black tie with it, and pinned to his lapel was a single pink rose, an exact match to the ones in her bouquet. His sea-blue eyes were full of shadows, and she could tell the exact moment when he saw her, for the shadows became storms, and he flinched as if he had been struck. Just a tiny movement,
but she saw it. She had surprised him, then. Good, that was good, because the sight of him there, golden and perfect even in the gray light of a rainy afternoon, was suddenly making the room feel too hot and close again, just as it had when he’d put the ring on her finger.

Adam wasn’t just surprised; for a long, desperate moment, he was filled with the perfectly insane thought that they had given him the wrong bride. This was not the same woman who had sat at the desk outside his office for the better part of the past year, wearing a cardigan sweater and sensible shoes. It simply couldn’t be the same woman, because if it was, then how the hell had he never noticed before how exquisite she was? She was wonderfully ethereal, a gossamer creature from another world, all pink and white and glowing. And those legs, dear God, those legs! They seemed to stretch on forever beneath the hem of that almost criminally short dress, slender yet strong. His mind was suddenly assailed by a vision of her in bed, stretched out naked and flushed beneath him, those long, perfect legs wrapped around his hips as he thrust into her. And no sooner had that thought entered his head than it was followed by the sharpest, deepest ache of lust he had felt in quite some time. It confused him. It terrified him. Hadn’t he told her in no uncertain terms how much he didn’t want her? Hadn’t he chosen her in part because she did nothing for him? And yet, and yet—

But there was no time to think about it further, for she had reached the front of the room and come up alongside him, looking out at him from behind a veil of dark, sooty lashes. There was something so incongruous about such a direct, level gaze coming from such sultry brown eyes. It had him utterly bewitched. Wordlessly, moving as if in a trance, he extended his hands to her, and equally without words, she handed her bouquet to Plumette and slipped her small, slender hands into his. As soon as their hands met, he felt the same shock as before, radiating up his arms and settling in his chest. He realized she was trembling, and he tried to grip her hands tighter to stop them from shaking, but then realized he was trembling too. The officiant cleared his throat. “Are you ready to begin?” Adam nodded, and thus began the magical ceremony that would transform him into a husband and her into a wife.

Belle thought that if anyone were to ask her later to recount her wedding, she wouldn’t be able to tell them a damn thing. She heard the officiant speaking, but his voice seemed faint and indistinct, as if he were at the other end of a bad telephone connection. Then came Adam’s voice, far more immediate, deep and velvety and seemingly everywhere at once. He spoke briefly, then without letting go of her with one hand, he turned and took something from Lumière with the other, and she felt the cold pressure of the wedding band slide down her finger. She had moved her engagement ring to her right hand, and he took it now and moved it back to her left, pushing it down on top of the wedding ring as if to seal it there, and seal her fate with it.

The officiant spoke again, and then it was Belle’s turn. Though she was hardly aware of what she was saying, she must have somehow gotten it right, for suddenly Plumette was pressing a small object into her palm, and Adam was staring at her expectantly, his eyebrows raised. Feeling immensely slow and clumsy, she lifted his hand, feeling a shiver run over her at the strength of it, lying in wait just below the surface. It felt a bit like an act of possession, putting that ring on him, except that she wasn’t sure what it was she was possessing, or if she even wanted it. She released his hand the instant her task was done, and watched as he curled it into a fist, as if testing the way it felt to have the ring there.

The officiant, who clearly had no idea of the peculiar circumstances that had brought this couple before him, smiled broadly. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

For a long moment, they could only stare at each other in stunned horror. Somehow, despite all their planning, they had neither of them given any thought to this moment at all, let alone discussed it. This now seemed like a glaring oversight. How could they not have anticipated
something that happened at literally every wedding? The moment stretched on, and Adam realized he was going to have to make a decision, for Belle clearly either could not or would not. *Play along,* his eyes warned her. *It’s just a kiss.*

*This was not part of our arrangement,* her eyes telegraphed furiously in response. *I want you to know that I’m objecting to this.*

*Just one kiss. What’s the big deal?* And without giving her time to protest further, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. He had meant to barely kiss her, just the merest brush of his mouth against hers, enough to satisfy the curiosity that seemed to have been kindled into wakefulness by the sight of her walking down the aisle, but the instant their lips met, he realized he had badly miscalculated. Her mouth was achingly soft and sweet, and though at first she was utterly rigid against him, he could feel the moment when all the resistance ebbed out of her, replaced by a curiosity that mirrored his own. Adam had kissed and been kissed many times before, so many times, in fact, that all those kisses had long since blurred into each other, an endless string of faces without names. This one, however, was different. She kissed, not with the practiced artifice he was accustomed to, but rather, with a sort of raw, untutored instinct, making no attempt to parse out what she thought he wanted from her. Ironically, in so doing, she was giving him exactly what he wanted. His whole body was humming with want, and as they moved against each other, learning the strange contours of each other’s mouths as one learns the topography of a foreign country, he realized that one kiss was never going to be enough.

For Belle, it was a kiss that simultaneously changed everything and nothing. Intellectually, she still disliked and distrusted him, every corner of her mind rejecting the idea of being this close to him, this vulnerable to him, but her treacherous body, it seemed, had ideas of its own. It seemed to trust him completely, wanted nothing more than to be close to him, wanted to learn every possible new thing about him and catalog it for future reference. Like the fact that he tasted like cinnamon, for instance, sweet with just a little bit of spice, or the way that the pressure of his lips on hers felt comforting and uncomfortable all at once, like the answer to one question and the origin of a thousand more. She felt his arms come up around her, his broad hands spanning her back and pulling her closer to him, and she pressed her hands against his chest, fingers folding around his lapels, and let the kiss consume her.

She had no idea how long they had been kissing, but it was only when she felt him against the seam of her lips, trying to gain access to her mouth, that she remembered who and where they were, and pulled away from him, trying to catch her breath and douse the fire in her veins. He looked exactly like she felt: utterly stunned, his pupils dilated and the blue of his eyes shockingly dark. It both amazed and frightened her that she was the cause of it. What on earth had they just done?

Adam looked down at her and found her looking back up at him, her deep brown eyes dazed and also a little curious, as if she were trying to solve a complicated problem. Well, she might not understand what it all meant, but he did. He wanted her. Badly. Oh God, he was fucked, though unfortunately—or was it fortunately?—not literally.

*“The new Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont!”* proclaimed the officiant, and after a startled pause, their guests began to clap.

After the ceremony, it was time for pictures, at Mrs. Potts’s insistence. The rain had finally stopped, the gray clouds parting to reveal slivers of pale blue sky and a sort of milky post-shower sunshine. The bride and groom were both still too dazed to protest as strenuously as they might have
otherwise, and so between Lumière’s camera and everyone else’s phones, they ended up getting quite a lot of pictures, some in the halls and lobby of the beautiful old building, and some on the grand steps outside. “Trust me,” Mrs. Potts told the somewhat skeptical couple as they posed for seemingly the hundredth time. “You might not think so now, but someday you may very well be glad you have something to look back on.”

By the time they were finished with that, it was time for their dinner reservations. They were having French cuisine at one of the nicest restaurants in the city, no expenses spared. It was very good, and the rest of the group ate ravenously, but though French food had been her idea, Belle hardly ate a thing. Every bite turned to ashes in her mouth. She stole a sideways glance at Adam, who was eating a plate of duck confit with perfect table manners. He gave no indication that he was paying any attention to her, but she found that she couldn’t seem to stop paying attention to him. Since they had kissed, she had been hyper-aware of his body, where it was, what it was doing. My husband, my husband, my husband, sang the refrain in her head. She reached for her wine.

They returned to Beaumont House with a good portion of the evening still ahead of them. Belle fled to her room to change her clothes, wishing she had Plumette there still to help her, but Plumette had gone back to her place after dinner, taking Lumière with her, so she was on her own. At least someone gets to have a wedding night tonight, she thought wryly. She hung up her dress as neatly as she could, put her heels back in their box, and put the jewels in their locked case to take back to the vault. She would probably never wear any of it again, but it had been beautiful while it lasted. She exchanged her wedding finery for her pajamas, and then wondered what to do with herself. It was too early to go to bed. Perhaps she would read for a while. And then it came to her: she would take her book down to the morning room. After all, she was now the mistress of this house, was she not, and could go where she pleased.

Reading material in hand, she tiptoed barefoot through the silent house until she came to the morning room, then shut the door after her and sprawled out along the velvet sofa. However, she had only read for about half an hour when the combination of a long day and the slightly immoderate amount of wine she had had with dinner caused her eyelids to droop, and before she knew it, she was fast asleep.

When she woke again, she could tell instantly from the way the sky looked through the lace curtains that it was late, and indeed, the clock on the mantel read just after one o’clock in the morning. It was well past time to be in bed. Pushing herself to her feet before she could fall back asleep again, she stepped out into the hallway and turned to close the door after her as quietly as she could. Just as she did so, however, she heard a noise from the other side of the hallway, and turned to see Adam exiting the library. He had exchanged his suit for a henley and jeans, and his hair was tousled, a lock of it falling across his forehead. Belle felt she should say something to him, but she didn’t have the slightest clue what.

Seconds passed in utter silence, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock, while they studied each other. Adam didn’t understand it at all. All of her wedding finery was gone, her hair was standing up funny on one side where she had slept on it, she had eaten off her lipstick, and her eye makeup was smeared. By all accounts, the pull of attraction he had felt that afternoon ought to be gone, and yet, here it was, as strong as ever. He felt a muscle twitch in his jaw, and then, before either of them realized what was happening, he had closed the distance between them, taken her face in his hands, and kissed her again.
It was not a gentle kiss. In fact, it was harsh and demanding, almost punishing, as if he were angry that he wanted her. But who was he angry at, Belle wondered fleetingly, himself or her? But despite the aggression of it, Belle knew that all she had to do was pull away or say stop, and he would, instantly. Despite all his faults—and they were legion—he was not the kind of man to take his pleasure where he wasn’t wanted. As the kiss stretched on however, and Belle made no move to stop him, she came to a horrifying realization: she didn’t want him to. Not yet, anyway. This time, when he pressed his tongue against her lips, she opened for him, and he explored her mouth in long, hard strokes. He tasted like a gin and tonic, bitter and sweet mixed together.

As before, it was Belle who broke the kiss. “No,” she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. It took all her willpower to make herself say her next words, but they needed to be said. “That was…a one-time thing. It was very explicitly not part of our deal, and we are not doing it again.”

He smirked, and began backing away from her, holding out his hands in a deceptively disarming gesture. “Fine, fine. Suit yourself.” He made it all the way to the stairs before adding, “There’s just one problem with that, though.”

“What’s that?” Belle asked.

He had turned away from her, and didn’t bother to turn back, instead tossing his answer over his shoulder with an infuriating nonchalance. “Now I know how you taste,” he told her.

Chapter End Notes

So, what did you think? Just a quick note here to let you know that there will probably be a longer than usual wait for chapter seven. I am leaving on the 15th for a week-long vacation, and I don't think there's any way I will be able to write a whole other chapter before I go. But rest assured, it is coming. I will not abandon you.

Up next: Married life is hard, yo.
If Wanting Ever Taught You Anything, It's Wanting More

Chapter Notes

Back by popular demand, it's chapter seven. Thanks for being patient with me while I was on vacation. I hope you think this chapter was worth the wait. A big welcome to all my new readers, and a big thank you to all the continuing readers who are still here. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the morning of Wednesday, March 23, Belle was eating a breakfast of tea and scones when Adam entered the dining room. He was wearing a pale blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and charcoal gray pants, and he had brushed his hair back neatly from his face. There was a hard set to his mouth and a certain icy coldness to his eyes that instantly made Belle feel as if they were back in New York. This was not the man who had kissed her in the registry office yesterday. This was certainly not the casual, unguarded man who had kissed her in the hallway last night, with stubble along his jaw and his hair falling in his eyes. This was her boss, remote and aloof, in all his cruel, glittering splendor. Belle was once again struck by the feeling that she ought to say something to him, but what did one even say to such a man? “You had your tongue in my mouth eight hours ago. Let’s talk about it,” was clearly out, so instead she settled for the obvious. “Good morning,” she said crisply.

He didn’t answer her, simply nodded curtly and sat down on the other side of the table, selecting his own breakfast from the dishes Mrs. Potts had set out for them. They ate in silence for a while, avoiding each other’s eyes. It was ridiculous, thought Belle. They were acting more like two guests at the same bed and breakfast than they were two people who were legally bound to each other. Finally, she could stand it no longer, and set her teacup down so hard it rattled against the saucer. “Are we just not even going to mention it, then?” she asked.

“You kissed me,” she said, trying to make it sound like the accusation she intended it to be.

Oh. That. The one thing Adam didn’t want to talk about. He tilted his gaze toward her over the top of the newspaper, blue eyes glinting palely in the morning sun. “Yes, one generally does kiss the bride at a wedding. Or is that not how it’s done in America? Honestly, sometimes I wonder about you people.”

“But then you kissed me again,” she said insistently.

The newspaper hit the table; he was definitely giving her his full attention now. “And you want to know why, is that it? You want to know why I kissed you in the hallway last night? Well, what is it that you want me to say?”

“The truth would be nice, if that’s not too foreign of a concept to you.”

“Tell me this, then: does it relieve you or terrify you to hear me say that I have absolutely no idea?”
“How can you not know?” she asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “Call it a moment of temporary madness, if you like. I saw you, and I just thought to myself, ‘Why not?’” This was not exactly the truth, but it was close enough. He looked at the expression on her face and added crossly, “Oh, spare me the lecture, sweetheart. Haven’t you ever done anything on impulse before? Made a bad decision? Or do you just think everything through half to death, and only ever do exactly as you ought?”

“How can you not know?” she asked incredulously. “I married you, didn’t I?”

“That kiss was fucking fantastic. You filthy fucking liar,” said a voice in his head.

Belle wished Mrs. Potts had set out two newspapers so she could engage in her own bout of mass media based warfare. She settled for some aggressive tea stirring instead, her spoon clicking loudly against her cup. “You started it,” she said tartly.

On Monday, March 28, after nearly a week of being married, Adam came to an uncomfortable realization: he really had been lying to himself. It wasn’t so much the lying that was the uncomfortable part—he was no stranger to lying to himself about any number of things. No, the uncomfortable part was that he had been lying to himself about Belle.

After he had left her in the hallway on their wedding night and gone upstairs to bed, he had lain awake in the darkness for a long time, turning the moment over and over in his head, stunned to his core. It was one thing to have kissed her at the wedding. That had been the normal and expected thing, a necessary face-saving move in front of an officiant who didn’t know they weren’t really in love. He certainly couldn’t be faulted for that. But to have kissed her again—! There had been no one around, no audience to play to. Why, then, had he done it? He had stayed awake long into the night, until the light outside grew more gray than black, trying to understand himself.

All the conclusions he had drawn had been so disturbing that his mind had wholeheartedly rejected them, and in the end, he had settled on something much more palatable, something that didn’t send shivers of some blank, indescribable fear racing up his spine. He had kissed her because it had been late, the very tail end of a long day, and he had been sitting in the library and drinking, one gin and tonic after another. He had seen her standing there, all sleep-rumpled and unsuspecting, and the thought of her warm, soft mouth had been too much to resist. It was the same reason why he might kiss any woman, and in fact, it was more or less the reason why he had kissed any number of women in the past. The opportunity for a little fun had presented itself, and he had taken it, and that was all, full stop. This was the version of events he had presented to Belle the following morning, and the version he had almost come to believe was true, the version in which none of it meant anything and none of it had anything to do with Belle specifically. He would have kissed any woman who had been standing outside the library that night; that woman had just happened to be Belle.
But on that Monday afternoon—the first afternoon London had seen that year where it seemed like spring might really be coming—Adam realized that he had been gravely mistaken. He and Belle were working in the library, he behind the massive wooden desk, she curled up in one of the armchairs with her laptop balanced on her knees. Or rather, she was working, and he was trying to summon enough self-control to keep from looking at her as she did so. He wasn’t having much success. He watched, transfixed, as she pursed her lips into a pout of concentration, then took her bottom lip between her teeth and began to worry at it, gently nibbling at it as she typed furiously. He stared at the soft pink curve of her lip as it rolled back and forth beneath a row of even white teeth, and felt the horrifying truth hit him with all the force of a bullet.

He liked her mouth. He liked the gently curving shape of it, the flushed pink color. He liked its rose-petal softness, and the way it tasted, all naturally sweet, like the first strawberries of summer. He liked the way her mouth felt against his own, at once both firm and yielding. He liked her little intake of breath right before their lips met, and the wondering look in her eyes when they broke apart. In short, there was nothing about kissing her that he didn’t like, and *that* was why he had kissed her the second time. Contrary to what he had tried to make them both think, that incident had had everything to do with Belle. Would he have kissed any woman who had been standing there in the hallway that night? Probably. Would he have enjoyed it half so much as he had enjoyed kissing Belle? Suddenly he wasn’t so sure of the answer to that.

His feelings were as baffling as they were infuriating. Why, out of all the women in the world, did his body have to have this reaction to *her*, the one woman who could never make him happy, whose very existence seemed designed to torment him? Why couldn’t it have been any other woman instead of the one woman who, ironically, was essentially off limits to him? And why, for the love of God, did she have to be licking her lips right now? He suppressed a noise in the back of his throat that sounded suspiciously like a moan. This was very, very bad, and he had better put a stop to it. With a noise of frustration, he slammed his laptop shut, the better to glare at her with nothing in the way.

“*This* is not working,” he said firmly.

She looked up at him swiftly. “Excuse me?”

He gestured between them. “This. You and me in the same room, it’s not working. You’re going to have to go work somewhere else.”

“You’re the one who wanted me in here in the first place. Why the sudden change of heart?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because I want to kiss you, and I don’t want to spend any more time thinking about why that is. You breathe too loudly. It’s distracting. You’ll have to go somewhere else. Might I recommend the morning room? It’s right across the hall, so you’ll be able to hear me if I need anything.”

This time it was Belle’s turn to slam her laptop shut. Clearly angry, she rose to her feet with a startling rapidity and drew herself up to her full height, like a queen. “If you want something,” she said, each word enunciated with icy precision, “you can get it your own damn self.”

“You’re my assistant!” he protested.

She had reached the door, but now she turned to look at him over her shoulder. “I’m also your wife.” And then she slammed the door behind her.

Adam let out a long sigh. She was upset with him. Well, that was just fine. He didn’t want her to like him anyway.

Didn’t he?
On the morning of Sunday, April 3, Belle awoke warm and breathless from a most disturbing dream. In it, she had been transported back to her wedding night, and had found herself once again in the downstairs hallway. As before, Adam had come out of the library, and as before, he had kissed her. In her dream, she had relived every delicious moment of that kiss, the taste, the feel, the hard, masculine power of his mouth against hers. But this time, she hadn’t stopped him. She had let that kiss go on and on, had laced her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck and tugged his head down to keep his mouth right where she wanted it. She had felt him already half hard against her lower belly, had felt his fingers toying with the hem of her t-shirt, tugging it up, up, up to expose the satiny bare skin beneath. He had backed her up against the wall, his knee between her legs, and had just been about to lift his hand to cup her breast when she had suddenly, wrenchingly, woken up.

The transition between dream and reality was so startling that she literally sat bolt upright in bed, chest heaving as she tried to regulate her breathing back to something resembling normal. Her entire body felt flushed and hot, and she could feel her heartbeat everywhere, but nowhere stronger than between her legs. “Oh God,” she breathed, followed shortly by, “what the hell?” The clock on her bedside table said ten minutes to seven. Outside, the sun was coming up, the whole sky full of the fresh light of a new spring day.

Still trembling a little, Belle pushed herself out of bed and went in the bathroom. Without turning on the light, she filled a glass with the coldest water she could get to come out of the tap and held it to her warm cheeks and neck before drinking it down in two long swallows. She didn’t know what to think or feel or do. She had never had a dream like that before, not about Neal, not about anyone. It had been so real, so vivid, so full of life and color and feeling. But what did it mean? Was it just the product of her overactive imagination? Had she eaten something a little off at dinner the night before? Or was the dream indicative of some deeper problem?

Despite how pleasurable and wonderful that dream had been, she would just as soon have not had it. It was a complication she didn’t want. She was here for a business deal, and nothing more. Adam had told her, multiple times and in no uncertain terms, that she should expect nothing more, and to think that he hadn’t meant it or would change his mind was a fool’s venture. That way lay only ruin. And besides, even if she wanted his body—and she wasn’t necessarily saying that she did—she would never, ever want the rest of him. But all the same, she did wish, just a little, that he would try to kiss her again. Yes, she had told him it wasn’t happening, but Adam didn’t seem like the kind of person who would let that stop him from trying again—if he really wanted to, that was.

Belle sighed and ran a hand over her face. She needed to stop thinking about this; it would do her no good. She stepped back into the bedroom and looked at the clock again. 6:57. Too early to start working, but she knew there was no way she would be able to get back to sleep now. Pulling open some dresser drawers, she rummaged around until she found her workout clothes. The park wasn’t far from here, and now would be the perfect time to go for a run. A nice, long run: the perfect vehicle for working out some of her…frustrations.

She ended up going for a run every day that week, and into the next. Adam didn’t try to kiss her again.

On Friday, April 15, Belle celebrated her twenty-sixth birthday. Or perhaps celebrated was the
wrong word, since she was the only person in London who even knew it was her birthday. She thought about telling one of the people that she knew in the city, but when she ran through the list in her head, she rejected the idea of telling any of them, for various reasons. It made no sense to tell Cogsworth, whom she didn’t know that well and hadn’t seen since the wedding. Lumière she didn’t tell because she didn’t trust him to be circumspect about it. Knowing him, he would probably wind up throwing her a party with dancers swinging from the chandeliers or some such nonsense. She would have told Plumette, except that she didn’t quite trust Plumette not to let it accidentally slip out to Lumière. And Mrs. Potts was definitely out, because while she liked the older woman immensely, and was grateful every day for her presence at Beaumont House, her brand of motherly concern was exactly what Belle didn’t want on this occasion. She didn’t want the pitying looks, the sad shakes of the head that she would be sure to get when Mrs. Potts realized she was turning another year older thousands of miles away from home. That left only Adam, and what would be the point of telling Adam? Most likely, he would do nothing with this information, which would, in its own way, be worse than if he did nothing because he didn’t know, or he would make some half-hearted attempt at a present, which he wouldn’t want to give and she wouldn’t want to receive. So, no, there was nothing to be gained by telling Adam.

Instead, Belle decided to mark the anniversary of her birth in her own way, quietly. After all, twenty-six wasn’t exactly a landmark birthday. And if her life at twenty-six wasn’t anything like she had thought it would be from the vantage point of twenty-five, twenty-seven was sure to find her life completely different yet again. A birthday was a good reminder that all things were temporary. So she went for a long run, from one end of the park all the way to the other and back again, and stopped for coffee afterwards. She did tell the barista it was her birthday. He drew a birthday cake for her in the foam of her latte.

That afternoon, a package arrived in the post for Belle. The American stamps told her who it was from even before the return address did: her father. Taking the box from a bemused Mrs. Potts, she hurried up the stairs to her room so she could open it in private. Alone behind the closed door, she fumbled to slit the tape and open the flaps as quickly as she could, feeling tears come into her eyes when the smell of home wafted out of the open lid to greet her. It smelled like her father’s aftershave, old-fashioned and spicy, mixed with the dry, woody smell of his art supplies. A folded piece of his good stationery lay on top of the box’s contents. She picked it up and began to read, blinking furiously to stop the tears from sliding down her cheeks.

Dear Belle,

Happy birthday to my wonderful daughter. It’s hard to believe it’s been 26 years already since your mother and I met you. I know she would be just as proud of you as I am. Ordinarily, I would buy you something for your birthday, but since you are (or soon will be) a woman of independent means, I thought I would make you something instead. I hope you like it.

Love,

Dad

Unfolding the layers of bubble wrap, Belle found a pair of framed watercolor paintings, exactly the perfect size to hang above her bed. One was of classic white and yellow daisies, the other of brilliant pink sweet peas. Together, they were the two birth flowers for the month of April. Each one had been painted perfectly and with obvious love, and each was signed by its creator, a scrawling “M. Villeneuve,” in the bottom left corner. Overwhelmed with gratitude for her father’s thoughtfulness, Belle put her face in her hands and began to cry.

Later, when her tears had subsided, and she had fixed her mascara and powdered over the
redness of her nose, she opened her laptop and called her father. Belatedly, she thought perhaps he might be busy, since it was only 9:30 in the morning in Iowa, but he answered on the third ring. “Hey, birthday girl!” he said warmly. “What’s up?”

“I got the package you sent,” she replied.

“Oh good, I’m glad I timed it right. I was afraid it would get there like tomorrow or something. Do you like them?”

“I love them! They’re beautiful!” she said enthusiastically. “Two Maurice Villeneuve originals—how lucky am I?”

Her father chuckled. “Well, let’s not overstate it. But I am glad you like them. I wanted to give you something you couldn’t get in London.” He didn’t say, “that you couldn’t get from him,” but the implication was there. An awkward silence hung in the air for a moment before his face and voice turned serious, and he said softly, “Really though, how are you? Are you okay? Are you hanging in there?”

How to answer this? She settled for evasion. “I’m hanging in there. I’m still working, which helps. That part of it pretty much just like being back in New York.”

“But how is the rest of it? Is he being nice to you? Treating you well?”

Belle tried to smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. To really answer that question would involve saying so many things that she just couldn’t tell her father. “Next you’re going to ask me if I’m getting enough to eat and taking my vitamins,” she joked. “He’s fine, really. We kind of leave each other alone most of the time, if you want to know the truth. He stays in his part of the house and I stay in mine.”

“Are you lonely, then? You sound lonely.”

Belle wasn’t lonely, per se. She was someone who had always been comfortable being by herself, and when she wanted company, Mrs. Potts and Plumette were proving to be excellent friends. But still, there was a hunger inside of her, for lack of a better term, a nagging emptiness that she didn’t know how to fill. She would wake in the middle of the night sometimes with the sense that there was an answer to this problem, something that she ought to see but didn’t, but every time she tried to think of what it was, it eluded her, like a figure vanishing around a corner. But this wasn’t really the same as loneliness, so she shrugged and said, “I have as much company as I want to have. Really, Dad, I’m fine. I would tell you if I wasn’t, okay?”

Her father regarded her in silence for a moment, studying her face as if he were trying to decide whether or not she was telling him the truth. Then, seemingly satisfied, his expression changed again, growing lighter and less troubled. “Okay,” he said slowly. “If you say so. Now tell me about your birthday night plans. Are you doing anything fun?”

Belle repressed a sigh. She should have known this wouldn’t get any easier.

That night, Mrs. Potts made pork medallions in mushroom sauce for dinner. Adam felt his gaze slipping down the length of the long table toward Belle as they ate without speaking. Over the past few weeks, since the day he had come to his horrible realization and kicked her out of the library, he had done his best to avoid her, in the hope that some time and distance would free him
from the strange hold she and her delectable mouth had begun to develop over him. The whole thing was so strange, he reflected now, because as long as he kept to his side of the house, well away from her, he was more or less fine. But every time he found himself in the same room as her, it all came flooding back. His eyes, unaccountably, seemed to want to follow her every move; his body, of its own accord, seemed to know where she was relative to him at any given moment. He wondered if it was the same for her. He didn’t know whether it would be better or worse if it was. Better, he supposed, in that it would make him feel like less of a damn fool, but worse, in that then he would have to decide what to do about it.

“You’re staring.”

“Huh?” he said, startled, as his dinner companion’s words dragged him out of his thoughts and back to reality. Had he been staring? See, this was what he meant. He certainly hadn’t meant to stare at her, it had just kind of…happened.

“You’re staring,” she repeated, reaching for her water glass. “Why?”

What to say, what to say? After a somewhat panicked moment, he just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I was just wondering what was up with you tonight. You seem sad.” And she did. Or perhaps not sad exactly, but definitely subdued, as if her thoughts were somewhere very far away from this dining room.

She gave him a puzzled look, as if she were surprised that he had noticed, opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, then thought better of it and closed it again. She didn’t speak for a long time, and when she did, Adam could tell that the words that came out of her mouth were not what she had initially wanted to say. He wondered vaguely what was.

“Oh, you always know just what to say to be charming, don’t you?” she said caustically. “I’m surprised you can even recognize my emotions, since you seem so determined to spend as little time as possible around me.”

He speared a few green beans onto his fork angrily. “Trust me, sweetheart, it’s better this way.”

“Is it? To live in the same house as someone and never see them? To be married to someone and never want to learn even the smallest thing about them?”

He stared her down across the table, his blue gaze direct and very bright. “This is not a marriage,” he snapped. “It is a business arrangement. You knew that going in, and you’d do well to remember it. And besides,” he added, “there is absolutely nothing to be gained from us learning anything about each other. Believe me, the more you know about me, the less you will like me.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Belle with false nonchalance. “I think I’m doing a pretty good job of not liking you based on the limited amount of information I do have.”

He scowled at her, she returned the gesture, and they went back to eating in silence.

Late that night, after the rest of the house had gone to bed, Belle opened her bedroom door and stuck her head out, peering up and down the hallway to make sure it was clear. Seeing that it was, she closed the door behind her and crept silently on bare feet through the house, down stairs and through hallways until she reached the kitchen. There was one more thing she wanted to do to
finish off her birthday. Relying only on the streetlights outside to light her way, she got to work.

Mrs. Potts had baked that day, and her handiwork was sitting in covered trays on the counter: an array of miniature Bakewell tarts. Lifting the lid, Belle selected one, then reached into her pocket for the two things she had stopped at the drugstore on her way back from her run that morning to buy: a package of birthday candles and a lighter. She stuck a single candle into the top of the tart and lit it, watching the pale flame flicker and dance in the dim kitchen. “Happy birthday to me,” she murmured quietly.

Belle was not a very religious person, but that night, her thoughts shaped themselves into something that was half wish, half prayer. Please help me make it through this year. Please let it all be worth it. Please let this year change my life. Then, closing her eyes, she blew out the candle, plunging the kitchen into darkness.

On Friday, April 22, the one month anniversary of Adam and Belle’s wedding, both husband and wife received communications from old acquaintances each thought they might never hear from again. Belle’s took the form of a Facebook message, and when she saw who it was from, she actually had to sit down on her bed, rather than try to support herself on her suddenly unsteady legs.

Hey Belle,

Haven’t talked to you in a while. How’s it going? I’ve thought about you a lot since you moved away, and I would love to catch up. What’s new with you? Hit me up!

Neal. But how? Why? And most importantly, what was she supposed to do about it?

Downstairs in the library, Adam was attempting to do some work when a message popped up in the corner of his screen. I hear you’re back in London.

It was from Emily Chowdhury, a classmate of his at Cambridge and a sometime presence in his bed. Curiosity piqued, he typed out a response quickly. How’d you hear that?

I have my ways. What brought you back? I thought you’d abandoned us for America’s proverbial greener pastures.

I did, but dear old Dad decided to shuffle off this mortal coil, and leave me all his loose ends to tie up. Et voila, here I am.

Ah, but I hear you’re not here alone.

Seriously, how the hell do you know that?

People talk, Beaumont. Where’d you find her?

Wouldn’t you like to know, Chowdhury?

I would, and that’s why I’m inviting you to a little get-together at my place tomorrow night. Just you, me, her, and, oh, about 30 of my closest friends. What do you say?

What did he say? On the one hand, he wasn’t exactly crazy about the scrutiny such an evening would bring to his life and his marriage. On the other hand, though, it had been such an
awfully long time since he had been to a party. Decision made, he typed out his response and hit enter.

Belle was laying sprawled out over her bed, trying to decide what to do about her sudden Neal-sized problem, when there was a pounding at her bedroom door. “Who is it?” she called.

“Who do you think?” came a deep voice from the other side of the door.

Belle rolled her eyes but didn’t get up. “What do you want?” she asked.

If he thought it was strange that she didn’t answer the door, he didn’t say anything about it. Perhaps he found it easier to say what he was going to say with a panel of wood between them.

“You’re coming to a party with me tomorrow night.”

Now she sat bolt upright and stared at the door as if he could see her glaring at him through it. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Someone I know from university is having a party tomorrow night. I am going, and you are going with me.”

“What on earth makes you think I am going to do that?”

“The half a million dollars I put in your bank account.”

Belle got up from the bed and came closer to the door so that her voice would have more force. “You paid me that money to marry you and live in this house. I did the first, and I am doing the second. What I am not going to do is pretend to be your adoring trophy wife at some posh party.”

He scoffed. “Oh, sweetheart,” he said derisively. “You are hardly a trophy wife. I paid you to be my wife, and that includes helping me maintain the kind of image I wish to project. Just think of it as your version of wifely duties, since I’m not demanding any wifely duties of a different sort from you.”

“You’re an ass,” Belle told him. Then an idea came to her. “I’ll go, but it will cost you.”

“Excuse me?”

Belle threw open the door and smirked at him. He looked surprised, which was lovely. “You heard me,” she told him, enjoying the opportunity to throw that line back in his face immensely. “I will go to your stupid party, but I expect to be compensated for it.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why, you little gold digger,” he said almost admiringly. “What makes you think I would agree to that?”

Belle took a gamble. “Because you’ve already said yes—for both of us—and you don’t want to look bad.”

She knew she had guessed correctly from the look on his face, as if he were mentally calculating which was the worse outcome of the two. Finally he said, “How much do you want?”

She thought quickly. “Ten grand, in my bank account before we leave for the party, and I get to decide when we come home. Deal?”
“Deal, but I’m not shaking on it.”

“That’s just as well,” Belle replied, and shut the door in his face.

After a few startled seconds, she could hear his footsteps move off down the hall, leaving her alone again. Alone, but not in peace. A party! What was she supposed to do at a party? And for that matter, what was she supposed to wear? It was time to place an emergency call to Plumette. But first, there was the matter of Neal to attend to. Should she answer him? On the one hand, she didn’t really want to talk to him. There was a reason she hadn’t done so since she’d left Pleasantville. On the other hand, though, it would probably really annoy Adam if he ever found out about it. An evil little smile came over her face. Decision made. Grabbing her phone from where she had tossed it on the bed, she opened up Facebook and began to type.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Party time! As always, thoughts are welcome. I really do treasure each and every comment.
Have You Ever Been Alone in a Crowded Room?

Chapter Notes

I am just absolutely blown away by all of your enthusiastic comments on the last chapter. Your support keeps me writing. Hey, uh, don't hate me for what's about to happen next, ok?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh God, Plumette, what am I even doing?” Belle said miserably as her friend put the finishing touches on her hair for the evening.

“What do you mean?” Plumette asked around a mouthful of hairpins, her dexterous, confident fingers gently tugging on the edges of Belle’s braid to loosen it a bit.

“I thought I was being so clever,” Belle explained, “making him pay me to go to this stupid party, but now I’m thinking I should have just flat-out refused to go. If nothing else, it would have been amusing to watch him try to make me.”

“No, no, no,” said Plumette firmly, tucking a pin into Belle’s hair. “You need to go. It’s good for you to go—you can’t just stay shut up in this house until the time runs out on your contract.”

Belle shot her a look in the mirror. “That’s an argument for why I should hang out with you, not an argument for why I should go to a party full of Cambridge snobs.” She winced when she realized what she’d said. “Sorry. Present company excluded, of course.”

The other woman smiled wryly. “No, that’s okay, I know what you meant. I’m not exactly your typical Cambridge student, after all.” She inserted another pin. “But you’ll be fine, you really will be. They’re not better than you; they just sometimes try to act like they are. And it’s not like you’ll be alone—you’ll have Adam with you.”

“I’m sorry, do you mean Adam Beaumont? About six feet tall, blond hair, blue eyes, my nominal husband? That Adam Beaumont? Oh, Plumette, I know you try to see the best in people, and it’s one of the things I love about you, but with all due respect, I think this time you’re wrong. Having Adam there is essentially like having no one at all. It might even be worse, actually.”

The look Plumette gave her was tender and a little bit sad, and Belle wasn’t sure whether to resent it or be grateful for it. “Oh, Belle, honey,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry. I wish all of this was easier on you. I don’t think he’s a bad guy, per se. He’s just…” She trailed off, unable to come up with a suitable word for what she meant.

Belle laughed. “See? That’s my problem—the man just sort of defies description. I just wish—” She stopped.

“You just wish what?”

Belle took a moment to gather her thoughts, wanting to say exactly what she meant and not be misunderstood. “I just wish…that he would talk to me sometimes. It’s like, we’re stuck in this thing together, so we might as well try to know who the other person is, at least a little, but with him
it’s like banging my head against a brick wall. He goes out of his way to avoid me, and I don’t understand why.” Yes, you do, said a voice in her head. You know why. He avoids you for the same reason you want to talk to him. It’s like Mrs. Potts told you the morning of your wedding: he’s afraid. You both are.

Belle tried to push down the uncomfortable thought, though she knew it was more true than she would have liked to admit, at least on her part. She was afraid, not so much of him, but of herself. There was a darkness in him, yes, something untamed that simmered just beneath his careful façade, but she wasn’t afraid of it. Instead, she feared whatever was in her that drew her to it. She feared how much she had enjoyed kissing him, how he had stolen into her dreams, not once, but several times. She thought perhaps it was the novelty of the thing, and that if she could just unravel the cloak of mystery in which he wrapped himself, then the spell would be broken, and her fear would vanish like so much dust in the wind.

And Adam? What did he fear? She wished she knew. Was it something specific to her that repelled him, that caused him to spend so much time alone behind closed doors, or would he have been this way no matter who he had taken as his bride? What did he feel when they were in the same room together? She wasn’t asking for passion—she had no expectation of it and wasn’t sure she even wanted it, all those dreams to the contrary—but she thought she would have settled for a friend.

But there wasn’t time to think about that now, for the look on Plumette’s face was coming dangerously close to pitying, and she didn’t think she could face that. “What can you tell me about the woman who’s hosting this thing?” she asked, hoping a change of subject would help.

“Emily Chowdhury?” Plumette asked, pushing the last pin into Belle’s hairdo. “Not much, actually. I don’t know that I ever really met her, although I remember hearing the name. I think she was a year younger than me and Adam, maybe even two years. Very pretty, very smart, and she knew she was both. That’s about all I really remember.”

“Was she…” Belle hesitated. “I hate to even ask this, and I’m not asking because I’m jealous or anything, I just need to know.”

“Yes?” asked Plumette, a smile toying at the edges of her lips.

“Was she one of his…women?”

In spite of the gravity of the question, Plumette almost wanted to laugh. Not jealous, my ass. Perhaps there was more going on between the two of them than met the eye. She tried to school her features into something more serious and said, “Oh, almost certainly. But on a casual basis, you understand. He was never at all serious about any of them.” She paused and looked at Belle very intently, hoping her friend understood the full magnitude of what she was about to say. “I’m not sure he has it in him to be serious about anyone or anything.”

“Oh,” said Belle in a small voice. But of course that was true; she knew that already. So then why did she feel just the tiniest prick of disappointment? “No, I don’t doubt it,” she said slowly.

“Well, regardless of how serious he feels about Emily Chowdhury or any of the rest of it, I think he’s probably waiting downstairs for you, so you’d best get going.” She waited for Belle to stand and then wrapped her in a hug, giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek. “If you need me for anything at all, you have my number, ok?”

Belle nodded.
Adam stood at the foot of the main staircase, wearing a midnight blue suit and white shirt with no tie. Where was she? They were late enough already. Not, of course, that lateness was in and of itself a problem. Far from it, in fact. Ordinarily, he would have no qualms about being late, because being the last one to arrive meant making a guaranteed dramatic entrance. Tonight, however, he found himself in the almost unprecedented position of wanting to blend into the background a little. The thought of walking into this party with his American wife by his side, the stares and questions and comments they would get, was suddenly very unappealing.

He almost felt as if he were living in two worlds. There was the outside world, the world he came from, populated by beautiful people who lived for the moment and took pleasure in their sense of superiority. It was a world of free-flowing alcohol, snide glances, and the kind of inside jokes it hurt to be excluded from. But Adam had always been one of the beautiful people, and so he had never minded it. He had drank more and laughed harder than almost anyone. But that had been a decade ago, before America, before his company. It had been another life, really. He had assumed it was so much a part of him that it would be easy to slip back into it, like shrugging on a suit jacket. But now he suddenly wasn’t so sure.

And it was all due to the other world in which he lived, the one he shared with Belle. It was strange, and more than a little bit alarming, how quickly he had come to take her presence in his home for granted. When they weren’t fighting—which was, admittedly, pretty often—it was actually not so unpleasant of a thing to come downstairs to breakfast and find a face waiting for him across the table, or to be able to walk across the hall and see her hard at work at her new setup in the morning room. But the thing about Belle, he was coming to learn, was that she was a self-contained person, comfortable with solitude and capable of mustering all the resources she needed for her own defense from within. She wasn’t like him, and she didn’t belong in the kind of world he had come of age in, the world that had shaped him. He wondered now if it weren’t something akin to cruelty on his part to take her there. Her attitude of quiet contemplation, of studying a person with her wide brown eyes as if they were a puzzle whose pieces she could fit together if only she had enough time would not serve her well where they were going. He began to tap his foot nervously. What had seemed like a brilliant idea, a bit of good fun, only twenty-four hours ago now seemed as if it had all the makings of an exhausting, embarrassing disaster. He had half a mind to call the whole thing off, lest they both wind up humiliated.

But it was too late now, as the new sound of footsteps descending the stairs made abundantly clear. Heels, obviously, though they were muffled in the thick carpet. He looked up, and instantly felt as if he had taken a hit to the solar plexus, all of the wind knocked straight out of him. Without meaning to, without having any knowledge ahead of time of what the other was going to wear, they had somehow matched their outfits perfectly. Her dress was the same rich blue as his suit, with a full, knee-length skirt flaring out from her narrow waist. Large, glossy round buttons marched in two rows down the bodice and fastened the ends of the long, tight sleeves. But the feature that most drew his eye was the neckline. Wide and off the shoulder, it exposed several inches of very tantalizing skin, all of which lay achingly bare, since Plumette had arranged her hair into a braid that circled her head like a crown. He wanted to press a kiss against the place where her neck and her shoulder met, wanted to taste each one of her freckles, and fit his tongue into all the grooves and valleys created by her collarbone. Dear God, what in the hell was wrong with him? This was not the time for that kind of nonsense.

Her eyes met his, questioning and even a little bit shy. “Will this do?” she asked.

Would it do? Would it do? What kind of a stupid question was that? What wouldn’t it do for? It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her how phenomenal she looked, but for some reason, when he
opened his mouth, all that came out was, “You might want a jacket with that.”

The light in her eyes dimmed just a little. “Right,” she said stiffly. “Of course. My cape is on
the coat rack.”

He helped her into it and watched as her nimble fingers did up the fastenings, hiding her bare
shoulders from view. Angry and confused about so many things, he took her by the arm and led her
out the front door and down to the street outside, where Lumière was waiting with the car. The
evening air was cold, and a chill breeze whipped Belle’s skirt around her legs and caused
goosebumps to pop up on every bit of skin that wasn’t covered. Everything felt damp, as if rain
could start falling at any moment, and drifts of gray cloud scudded through the darkening sky. It was
unpleasant, and Belle shivered, half with cold and half with trepidation.

“Good evening,” said Lumière, holding the car door open for her. “You look very nice
tonight, Madame.”

“Thank you, Lumière,” Belle said pointedly, throwing a glance over her shoulder at her
husband as she ducked her head and slid into the back seat.

As he followed Belle into the car, Adam made sure to shoot a glare in his driver’s direction.
Why was it so easy for Lumière to say the words that he himself couldn’t seem to get past his lips?
Lumière, well-accustomed to Adam’s various moods, simply grinned and shrugged as he slammed
the car door, shutting husband and wife into the darkness of the back seat together.

From the vantage point of the drawing room window, Mrs. Potts and Plumette watched as
the Jaguar pulled away from the curb. They stood there watching until it turned the corner at the end
of the street and was lost to the flow of evening traffic, vanishing from view. “Mrs. Potts,” said
Plumette after a time, “what do you think is going on with those two?”

“Hmmpf?” said Mrs. Potts softly, still looking out the window. “What do you mean?”

“What’s their deal? Are they enemies, business associates, friends? Something more than
friends?” She paused. “Something less than friends?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, you have to admit, that kiss at the wedding was super weird. It was, uh, not exactly
the peck on the lips you would expect from two people in their situation.”

Mrs. Potts cast her mind back over that kiss, the way it had seemed to go on and on, bride
and groom clinging to each other as if they could mold themselves into one body. She remembered
how surprised they had seemed when they had pulled apart, as if even they couldn’t believe what
they had just done. It had been quite the kiss, that was for sure. She told Plumette as much. “But do
you think,” she added, “that there’s more to it than that? Do you think it’s an ongoing thing?”

“I don’t know,” the younger woman replied. “You’re the one who lives with them!”

“Right, right, of course. Well, I don’t know,” she said honestly. “They fight all the time,
Plumette, like you would not believe. I’ve never heard the like! And when they’re not fighting, they
avoid each other like the plague. It’s not exactly the recipe for success I had hoped it would be.”
“You want them to be together?” Plumette asked curiously.

“I want them to be happy. Adam is like a son to me, as you well know, and the more I get to know Belle, the more I like her. So I want them to be happy, and I just can’t seem to shake the feeling that they could be happy together. But how they get there, I don’t know. Do you?”

Plumette shook her head. “No,” she admitted, “I don’t.” She thought of the long string of women who had gone in and out of Adam’s flat at Cambridge. “I’m not even sure if it’s possible,” she added.

Mrs. Potts sighed. “That’s what I was afraid of. Well, come on down to the kitchen, and I’ll make you some cocoa.” In the drawing room doorway, she paused and turned back to Plumette. “You know, it’s funny how the world works. It takes two people like Belle and Adam, who act as if they can’t stand each other, and throws them together instantly, and yet it’s taking its sweet time with you and Lumière, who’ve loved each other practically from day one.”

Plumette swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. “I don’t really want to talk about that,” she said.

Emily Chowdhury lived in a large white house in Primrose Hill. “So, what’s our story?” Belle asked as they climbed the steps to the front door.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, his mind clearly elsewhere.

“Our story,” she repeated slowly, as if she were speaking to a child. “Are we going to tell them the truth, or are we going to somehow try to convince them that this marriage is totally real?”

He turned and looked down at her. In the yellow haze of the streetlights, she looked very young and very innocent. Don’t you understand, he wanted to say to her. It doesn’t matter what we tell these people. They’re just going to pick apart everything we say anyway. But out loud he said, “Well, I for one can’t have people thinking I had to pay a woman to marry me, so you’ll just have to grin and bear it, sweetheart. I think ten grand is sufficient reward for a few hours of playing the adoring wife, don’t you?” And before she could say anything to contradict him, he reached out a hand and rang the doorbell.

The door was answered by a young woman in a long-sleeved black jumpsuit with a shockingly low neckline. Effortless chicness clung to her like a second skin, from her long dark hair, flat-ironed pin straight and pulled back into a glossy ponytail, to her smoldering kohl-rimmed eyes. Belle suddenly felt hot and foolish, her outfit all wrong, too studied, too rehearsed. But then she realized it didn’t really matter, because Emily Chowdhury was looking only at Adam.

“Adam, darling!” she crowed, pressing herself upward to kiss him once on each cheek. “How wonderful!” Her eyes raked over him from head to toe, slowly, hungrily. “You look phenomenal, darling, you really do.” There was a beat of silence before she turned her gaze to Belle, as if noticing the other woman’s presence on her doorstep for the very first time. Instantly her entire demeanor changed. “And you must be…?” she said with icy formality.

“Ah, yes,” said Adam when he had managed to tear his eyes away from his hostess’s décolletage. “This is Belle, my, uh, my wife.” He stumbled over the words as if he found them difficult to say, or distasteful. It made Belle feel as if she were an inconvenience, an impediment
Standing in the way of the evening he really wanted to have.

Emily’s dark eyes sparkled with a kind of devilish light, as if this whole situation were proving to be better even than she had hoped for. “Your wife, huh?” she laughed, and the laughter was not at all nice. “I think there’s a story there, and I think you, my dear,” she said, linking arms with Adam, “are going to tell it to me.”

Then she turned and walked into the house with Adam on her arm, leaving Belle to trail after them, her nails digging little crescent moons into her palms. *God damn it,* she thought as the door closed behind them. *It’s going to be a long night.*

_Ten thousand was clearly not enough. I should have asked for twenty. No, make that thirty. Hell, I should have just stayed home._ It was a little after eleven, and all of Belle’s most dire predictions for the evening seemed to be coming true. Dinner had been bad enough, since she and Adam had been seated at opposite ends of the table, depriving Belle of the only person at this whole wretched gathering that she even knew at all. He had been seated so far away from her, in fact, that she could neither speak to him nor hear him, and instead could only watch in helpless silence as he had carried on a very animated conversation with Emily and several other people whose names she didn’t know. She wondered what they had been talking about; whatever it was, it had been punctuated by loud bursts of increasingly tipsy laughter.

She herself had been placed between a very thin young woman who was apparently the daughter of a baron and who drank like a fish, and a man in a three piece suit who blinked owlishly at her through round spectacles as if she were a curious scientific specimen he hadn’t yet decided what to make of. “I just can’t believe he married someone,” the woman had said midway through the main course. “Him, of all people!”

“What do you know him?” Belle had asked. She had an unaccountable hunger for any potentially demystifying piece of information about Adam that she could get her hands on.

“By reputation. He took my sister Amelia to Ibiza once. You wouldn’t believe the stories she told me.” Here she had paused and looked up at Belle from beneath a pair of suggestively raised eyebrows. “Or maybe you would…”

“Don’t be vulgar, Lydia,” the man had said warningly.

“Don’t be boring, Jeremy,” Lydia had shot back, before turning back to Belle and adding, “That’s Jeremy. He’s boring. But I’m not, so you have to tell me how you got someone like that to fall in love with you. I’m dying to know.”

“What a ridiculous notion.” That had been Jeremy interjecting again. “He’s not in love with her.”

“What?” the two women had said in unison, Lydia aghast, Belle merely curious. Was it really that obvious?

“Of course he isn’t. No man is so stupid as to fall in love with his own wife. It’s a ridiculous fairytale notion that has no place in the real world.”

“Who hurt you, Jeremy? I mean, he is in love with you, right?” When Belle didn’t answer that, she had added, “Is he at least good in bed? I bet he’s into some really freaky shit, yeah?”
Belle hadn’t know what to say or do. Tell the truth? Or lie? But how could she even make up a convincing lie when the sum total of her sexual experience was limited to Neal’s painful and inelegant thrusting? “Depends on what you mean by freaky,” she had finally mumbled, keeping her eyes glued to her plate.

It had been the exact wrong thing to say, she had realized as soon as the words had left her mouth. Her dinner companions had looked sideways at each other across her as if she weren’t even there, and then they had smirked, slowly and with menace. “Isn’t that interesting?” Lydia had said.

“Quite so,” Jeremy had added.

So that had been dinner, and it had been bad enough, but it was afterward that the real trouble had started. It turned out that neither Lydia nor Jeremy knew the value of discretion, and within half an hour, the entire party was humming with a variety of rumors of varying degrees of salaciousness and veracity. No one seemed to want to talk to Belle, but everyone seemed to want to talk about her. Time wore on, and the party grew crazier and crazier, and Belle felt sicker and sicker, her head pounding in time to the bass in the music someone had turned on. She had tried to make herself as unobtrusive as possible on one corner of the living room sofa, her legs tucked up beneath her. At the other end of the furniture, a couple had their tongues firmly jammed down each other’s throats.

It didn’t help that Adam seemed to have completely disappeared. Not only had she not spoken to him since they had sat down to dinner, she hadn’t even laid eyes on him since they’d all left the dining room. She wondered where he had gone, and what he was doing, and hated herself for caring. She hated him for bringing her to this stupid party, and she hated herself for agreeing to go. In short, she hated pretty much everything.

At the other end of the sofa, the woman of the couple let out a breathy moan as she climbed onto her partner’s lap, turning so she was straddling him. That was enough for Belle. With a sigh, she pushed herself to her feet. She didn’t care where she wound up, she just knew she didn’t want to stay there.

Despite its traditional façade, the interior of Emily Chowdhury’s house was thoroughly modern, a series of interconnecting open spaces. To create the perfect party mood, all the regular lights had been turned off, replaced by ones that glowed purple and blue, making everything seem unearthly, even ghastly. As she drifted silently through the labyrinthine lower floor of the house, faces seemed to leer at her out of the shadows, and everywhere she went, scattered bits and pieces of conversation reached her ears. A good bit of it was about her, in one way or another.

“Well, I just think it’s weird. He goes away for like ten years, and then all of a sudden he wants to come back and act like everything is fine? Like we’re not going to wonder who she is or where he found her?”

“Where did he find her, anyway? I mean, she’s clearly not one of us, if you know what I mean.”

“She’s pretty, I’ll grant her that, but oh my God, she’s so awkward.”

“Do you really think they’re fucking?”

“Why wouldn’t they be? They are married, right?”

“I don’t know, it’s just this feeling that I get. He’s clearly not that into her. He didn’t look her way once during dinner. And then he just kind of…disappeared. She’s been sitting all alone on that
same fucking sofa for like three hours.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but I’ll just say that no one has seen Emily for a while.”

“You know, for all the awful shit he used to say about his dad, they really are a lot alike. I don’t know what it is about that family, but there’s just something not quite right about them.”

“Let’s just hope things turn out better for her than they did for the last Mrs. Beaumont. Seriously, it’s so creepy what happened to her.”

“Yeah, see, that’s what I’m talking about. Something not quite right about that family, for sure.”

Ah, now that was interesting. Disturbing, but interesting nonetheless. Trying to hear more from the unseen speakers, Belle pressed herself farther forward in the shadows, but just as she did so, her phone buzzed, startlingly loud in this relatively quiet corner of the party. Realizing that someone was close by and listening, whoever had been talking fell silent.

Damn it, Belle thought frantically. She needed to make herself scarce before they realized just who had been eavesdropping on them. In a slight panic, she took a step backward and felt something press against her back. A door handle. Unable to think of any better options, she pushed down on it and let herself into the room beyond, closing the door after her with a soft click.

Once inside, she leaned her back against the door and pulled her phone out of the black satin clutch she had borrowed from Plumette. There were two messages, actually. The first was from Neal, a response to the one she had sent him the previous day. She set that one aside to deal with later. The second was from Plumette. Hey, how’s it going? You hanging in there?

Belle wasn’t sure quite how to answer that. The reality of it was too difficult to explain over a text. Well, I’ve seen about three different acts of public indecency, and I’m pretty sure I saw a viscountess do a line of coke off a coffee table, but other than that, I’m ok. Leaning her head back against the door, she let out a laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of it, but suddenly that laugh turned into a choking sob, and then she was crying, her vision blurring with tears.

“Are you alright?”

Belle looked up and let out a startled, somewhat snotty, yelp of surprise. In her haste to get to her phone, she had neglected to look around the room. It had seemed dark, and she had assumed it was empty. She saw now that this was not quite the case. The room appeared to be some sort of office, and though it was mostly dark, there was a light on in the corner, illuminating an armchair. Sitting in the armchair was a man around the same age as Belle. He was holding a closed book with his finger in the pages to mark his place, and he was looking at her with concern, and also a little bit of alarm, as if he couldn’t quite fathom who this strange crying woman was.

“Who are you?” Belle asked, pressing her knuckles against the corners of her eyes to stop herself from crying.

He laughed softly. “I could ask you the same question. I’m Emily’s cousin Josh.” She must have looked confused for a moment because he laughed again and added, “Her cousin on the white side of her family.”

“Oh. I didn’t—”

“You didn’t realize? Emily would be so happy to hear you say that. She wants people to
In spite of herself, she laughed. “I’m Belle,” she told him.


She sighed. “Yes, unfortunately I do. But how do you know that? I haven’t seen you at all this evening.”

“I was at dinner. I saw and heard enough. Decided I’d rather come back here and read.” He shrugged. “Honestly, this kind of thing isn’t really my scene. I think Emily only invites me to them out of some weird sense of guilt. Which, come to think of it, is also pretty off brand for her.”

“Guilt?” Belle asked, brow furrowed.

“You’re not very observant, are you?” He turned a little so that the other half of his body was more in the light, and Belle could see that his left arm was completely missing. “Car accident three years ago.”

“Oh,” she said, simply because she didn’t know what else to say. “But why would—” Then she stopped as the pieces clicked together and a sick feeling began growing in the pit of her stomach.

He nodded. “Ah, there you go. Well done. Yes, Emily was driving. And drinking. Drinking and driving. She only got off because daddy paid off a judge.”

The sick feeling in Belle’s stomach grew worse. “That’s horrible!” she couldn’t help saying. He shrugged again. “That’s Emily for you. That’s all of these people, really. They go through life making a mess of everything in their path because they only care about themselves.” He paused and studied her, his eyes apologetic. “Sorry to tell you that, but you married one of them, so maybe you already know. If you don’t already, you will.”

Belle felt as if she needed to sit down. “You really think he’s that bad?” she asked dazedly, gropping around in the dimly lit room until she found the desk chair and managed to plant herself in it.

Josh narrowed his eyes at her. “You don’t know him very well, do you?” he asked perceptively.

“No,” Belle said softly, too tired and upset to lie. “I don’t.”

“And you married this guy?” he asked incredulously.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she said defensively. “It was a very sudden thing.”

“Trust me, when it ends, it’ll be just as sudden. That’s how it always is with people like this. They take what they want, and then they drop you.”

“No offense,” Belle said through the pounding of a headache that was beginning to take shape behind her temples, “but aren’t you one of them?”

“Nah, if I was, I wouldn’t be in here reading a book. And I can tell you’re not one of them either, or you wouldn’t be in here with me.”

She felt cold fear beginning to settle over her, spreading up and down each limb. “How well do Adam and Emily know each other?” she asked.
“Well enough. They went to uni together, and they both like to sleep around. Those kind of people always find each other.” He paused, and then said gently. “Do you know where he is right now?”

Belle shook her head. “I haven’t seen him since dinner.”

“Look, I feel really bad about telling you this, because you seem like a nice girl who just got mixed up in some stuff you didn’t understand, but I’d bet you money the two of them are together. Emily was always weirdly into that guy.”

She felt some of the fear drain out of her, replaced by burning anger. “Where?” she said tightly. “Where would I find them?”

“Probably upstairs, I would imagine.”

Belle rose to her feet. “It was very nice to meet you, Josh,” she said with all the dignity she could muster. “But you’ll have to excuse me. There are some things I need to take care of.”

After dinner, Adam found himself carried along in a crowd of people that wound up in one of the rooms at the back of the house, where some people got a poker game going. For a while, he just sat slouched down in one corner of the sofa, long legs crossed at the ankle, and watched the interminable progress of that poorly played card game. At one point, he looked around and realized that Belle was nowhere to be found. He wondered where she was, and if he should go try to find her. He had stolen one sideways glance at her during dinner, had seen the discomfort on her face as the two people sitting on either side of her had verbally picked her apart. It had done something to his heart, seeing her like that, as if someone had closed a fist around it and squeezed. It was a feeling he was not familiar with, and not one he wanted to explore, but the compulsion to go to her was suddenly very real. He was about to stand up when he felt a hand press down on his shoulder, and then soft, feminine fingers ghost along his neck and up to his ear.

Belle, he thought breathlessly, and there was a part of his brain that was strangely glad.

But the hand did not belong to Belle, and the voice that purred in his ear was Emily’s. “You look bored,” she murmured. “What do you say we get out of here?”

He didn’t turn his head to look at her, but he could well picture her, picture the full curve of her lips and the feline slant of her dark eyes. “But you’re the hostess,” he said dryly. “Don’t you know it’s rude to abandon your guests?”

“Don’t think of it as me abandoning them. Just think of it as me being very attentive to one of them in particular. Now come on, Beaumont, come upstairs with me.”

Now he did turn to look at her, and his resistance wavered. With Belle, everything was complicated. He never knew what to say to her, or what to do when she was around. But here was Emily, offering him something that seemed, in that moment, so blessedly simple. “Okay,” he said, and got to his feet.

She took him upstairs and down the hallway to the master bedroom, shut the door behind them, and turned on a lamp, casting the king-size bed into a circle of golden light while leaving the rest of the room in shadow. Then, kicking off her heels, she flopped down onto the bed and patted the empty space beside her. After only a moment’s hesitation, Adam followed, still fully clothed.
a minute or two, they just laid there, staring at the shadowy ceiling in silence. “I still can’t believe you got married,” Emily finally said.

“Neither can I,” he admitted.

She reached over and took his left hand, twisting his wedding ring around and around his finger idly as she spoke. “The two of you don’t go together.”

“Don’t we?” he asked, pulling his hand away.

Emily laughed. “You’re not seriously asking that, are you? I mean, all you have to do is look at her. She doesn’t belong here, and she knows it. Where’d you find her, anyway? You never did tell me the whole story.”

“We worked together, actually. She was my assistant.”

“Oh, look at you, marrying the help. How progressive of you. But Adam, honey, I have to tell you, you fucked up.”

He turned his head to look at her, and saw that she was looking back at him, eyes dark pools in the dim light. “How’s that?” he asked. He had a feeling, growing stronger all the time, that she was right, but perhaps not for the same reason as she thought.

She turned onto her side and moved just a little bit closer to him, so that their bodies were almost touching, every inch of her pressed along every inch of him. “That’s the kind of girl you fuck once, maybe the kind of girl you have give you a blowjob in your office. It is not the kind of girl you actually marry. I mean, really, what were you thinking?”

Now Adam turned on his side. They were so close now that if he wanted to, he could reach out and wrap his arm around her. It would be so easy, he thought, to open his mouth and tell her the whole story, every part of it, why he had done it and all the horrible, inexplicable longing he’d felt since. It would be so easy, and yet he couldn’t do it. Some things, he was realizing, were just too private, and for some reason, this thing with Belle was one of them. “You’re just jealous,” he told her.

“Jealous?” she scoffed. “Why on earth would I be jealous?”

“Because all you and I ever had was sex, and you want to know what makes her different.”

She reached up a hand and started toying with the buttons on his shirt. “No, see, that’s where you’re wrong. Marriage is a joke. How stupid and naïve do you have to be to think that you can only be with one person for the rest of your life? You might think you love her now, but I know you, Adam, and you don’t love anyone. It’s just lust, and it will fade, and then you’ll have nothing, and you’ll wonder what in the world you were thinking.”

“You think I don’t love her?”

“You idiot,” she said with gently mocking affection. “I know that you don’t. Come now, can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me you love her?”

He couldn’t, and she knew it. He didn’t know what he felt for Belle, to be quite honest. Some of it was lust, yes. When he lay awake in the middle of the night and traced the curve of her lips in his mind’s eye, or when he saw her come down the stairs tonight and wanted to take the neckline of her dress and slip it further off her shoulders, that was lust. But lust could not account for the protective clenching of his heart when he had seen her at dinner, or the strange frustrating thrill
that ran through his veins whenever they provoked each other into some verbal altercation. None of that was love, though. How could it be? Why would he want it to be? “No,” he told Emily simply. “I don’t love her.”

She smirked, eyes bright with some savage gleam, victory finally hers. “See, I told you,” she said. “That’s why you’re here.” And then she kissed him.

In the instant after their lips met, a million thoughts raced through Adam’s mind. His very first reaction, almost automatic, was to be shocked. But really, he thought later, as he brought his hand to her hip, why should he be? This was always how the night was going to end. This was really who he was, deep down, who he had always been, who he always would be.

She tasted wrong, though, he realized as their lips moved together. Her mouth had none of Belle’s fresh sweetness, none of her guilelessness. Emily kissed as if she knew exactly what she was doing, kissed exactly as she had ten years ago the last time they had done this, but this time, it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t what he wanted. He was about to lift his head away and tell her so when he felt her hand run down the front of him before coming to settle against his groin. “Emily,” he hissed pleadingly from between his teeth, “Emily—” But her practiced fingers were already undoing the zipper of his pants, were already slipping around him in that way she had remembered that he liked. He said her name again, and this time it ended in an involuntary moan.

Suddenly, someone flung open the bedroom door and snapped on the overhead light, causing both of the people on the bed to blink furiously at the sudden brightness. Adam rolled over to confront the intruder, and found himself staring into the furious eyes of his wife. Emily was right, he thought vaguely as he tried to cover himself up. I really did fuck up.

Looking down at the two of them on the bed, Belle actually felt strangely calm. In some strange way, it was like she had needed to see this, needed to see who the man she had married really was. It was like a bucket of icy cold water thrown over all her stupid delusions. “Get up,” she said, no emotion in her voice. “We’re going home.”

“What if I don’t want to?” he asked, because he suddenly felt hot and sick with shame and didn’t know what else to do besides be contrary.

“I don’t care. We had a deal, remember? I’ve already called Lumières; he’s waiting outside. Get. Up.”

What else could he do but comply?

They walked in silence down the curving main staircase, through the foyer to the front door, where Belle collected her cape from the hall closet. Crowds of partygoers seemed to stick their heads out of every room to watch them as they passed. “Leaving so soon?” someone yelled drunkenly. Neither Belle nor Adam answered, but it was clear to all from their body language that something had happened, and that a fight was imminent. They left without a word, and as the Jaguar pulled away from the curb, someone at the party pulled out their phone and dialed the number of a contact of theirs at the Daily Mail.

“You ever hear of the Beaumont family, Freddy?” There was a pause while they waited for the person on the other end of the line to respond. “Yes, yes, that’s them exactly. Why am I calling? Cause I’ve got a tip for you, that’s why. The son’s back in London, and you’ll never believe what he’s done…”
Up next: You'll see. The darkest hour is just before dawn, right?
Werewolves of London

Chapter Notes

I know a lot of you have been really clamoring to find out what happens next after last chapter left off in such a bad place. I love that, and I meant to have an update before now, but midway through writing this chapter, my cat, who is like a child and a best friend to me, was diagnosed with cancer. I was so devastated, as you might imagine, that I needed to step away from writing for a little bit and wait for my muse to find me again. Once it did, finishing this chapter was a little bit therapeutic for me. I hope you like it, and that it leaves you with a better taste in your mouth than perhaps chapter eight did. Enjoy!

“Belle,” Adam tried to say once they had gotten into the car. “Belle, I—”

“No,” she said firmly, keeping her head turned toward the window so she wouldn’t have to look at his face and feel her resolve waver at the sight of his blue eyes. “No. You don’t get to speak right now. I’m not ready to talk to you yet.”

“Is everything alright, Madame?” Lumière asked as he merged into traffic.

“No, Lumière, everything is not alright,” Belle told him. “But that’s Adam’s fault, not yours.”

Lumière’s eyes met his in the rearview mirror, questioning and confused. “Adam,” he said slowly, his voice low, “what did you do?”

“Oh, Adam’s not going to want to tell you what he did, Lumière,” Belle said, her voice tight and so icy it sent chills down Adam’s spine. “So I will. He decided tonight’s festivities would be a perfectly appropriate time to start thinking with his dick.”

This time when Lumière’s eyes met Adam’s in the mirror, they were narrowed and full of anger on Belle’s behalf. “Seriously? That’s messed up, man.”

Adam didn’t want to look at him, didn’t want to confront the idea of someone else knowing what he had done. It was bad enough that Belle knew. “Leave it alone, Lumière,” he said warningly. “Just leave it alone.” Lumière’s eyes dropped back down to the road without another word, and Adam leaned back in his seat, that small victory won. It was hardly a comfort.

For the remainder of the drive home, an uneasy silence reigned in the Jaguar. Lumière tried turning on some music, only to quickly turn it off again when he realized that neither of his passengers wanted to listen to Daft Punk. As the car glided through the streets, moving from the brightly colored commotion of London on a Saturday night to the hushed quiet of upscale residential neighborhoods, Adam chanced a sideways look at Belle. She was sitting very straight and very still on her side of the car, her hands folded in her lap. She was so still, in fact, that he almost would have thought her a statue, were it not for the fact that he could sense the vibrating waves of angry energy emanating from her. Every time they passed under a streetlight and he could see her face better, he could almost swear her cheeks were wet, the sheen of tears glistening in the strange artificial yellow light, but he could never quite be sure. At any rate, she made no sound, and so neither did he.
When the car pulled up outside Beaumont House, it was immediately apparent that Mrs. Potts and Plumette had gone to bed, for the lights above the front door were on, but the rest of the house was dark. The instant the front door was unlocked, Lumière practically bolted away from them, the look on his face one that clearly indicated he wanted to be far, far away when the fireworks started. When he had gone and they were alone in the foyer, Belle, as if she had been waiting for this moment, kicked off her heels and whirled on him with a howl of rage, smacking him in the chest with her clutch. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she cried.

“Hey!” he protested, taking a step backward. She hit surprisingly hard. “Look, I know you’re mad, but—”

“Mad? Mad? That’s all you think this is? You have no idea how I feel right now!” She pulled back her arm, ready to go after him with her purse again, but he sidestepped her gracefully, his arms outstretched in a placating gesture.

“Then tell me,” he said.

That drew her up short. “What?” she said blinking at him in confusion as she dropped her arm. That hadn’t been what she had expected him to say at all. “What do you mean?”

“Tell me,” he repeated firmly. “Tell me all you want. But do it like an adult—none of this childish yelling nonsense.”

“Oh, so you’re an adult now, are you?” she said with deep sarcasm. “I’m sorry, I must have been mistaken. I thought you were a horny teenager.”

His lips compressed themselves into a thin line. “Library. Now.”

The first thing he did once she had closed the library door behind them was pour them each a drink. “Here,” he said, handing her a whisky neat. “Drink this.”

Ordinarily, Belle detested the taste of whisky. To her, it felt like drinking smoky dirt, heavy and uncomfortable against her tongue. Tonight, however, she downed a healthy amount of what had been put in her glass in one long swallow, feeling it burn the back of her throat and spread like liquid fire all the way down to the tips of her fingers and toes. Oddly enough, it was the first thing Adam had done all evening that hadn’t made her want to kill him. When she set the glass down on the desk with an audible thud, she felt that strange sense of calm come over her again, all the tangled thoughts in her head coalescing into something she could actually say out loud. Taking a deep breath, she began. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” That had been nearly the last thing he had expected her to say. “Thank me?”

“Yes, thank you. This evening has been very eye opening. It’s shown me exactly the kind of man I married. So thank you for helping to make that clear.”

Adam set down his glass and crossed his arms over his chest. He knew how to end this, of course. All it would take was an apology. All he had to do was say the right words, and the storm cloud would dissipate. They could both go to bed, and in the morning, they could wake up and put this all behind them. It would become nothing more than a blip in the long trajectory of the year they had to spend together. It could all be gotten over, and all he had to do was say the right thing. But
there was a part of him, a contrarian part, a self-loathing part, that wanted to drag this out, wanted to
take the knife in her hand and twist it into himself a little more. There was a part of him that wanted
to pick open every wound they had caused each other, let it all bleed out into the open. There was a
part of him that wanted to suffer. So instead he said, “I would have thought you’d have known
already what kind of man you married. I did warn you. I told you that the more you got to know me,
the less you would like me. So why are you surprised when all I’ve done is prove the point?”

Belle crossed to the window so she wouldn’t have to look at him. The curtains were pulled
back, but it was so dark outside that she couldn’t see much beyond the reflection of her own pale,
tensely drawn face in the glass. The wind from earlier had died down, and everything was eerily still, not even a rustle from the leaves of the trees in the little park
across the street. It was a still night, but not a peaceful one. She almost felt as if she were being
watched, sharp, glittering eyes hiding somewhere in all that waiting darkness. Still not looking at
him, she watched her face in the windowpane as she asked, “Why did you even want me to come to
that god-forsaken party in the first place? Like, what did you think was going to happen? How did
you think it was going to end?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it, opened it and closed it again, finding that, for once,
he had no ready answer. “I didn’t,” he finally said, “I didn’t think—I didn’t mean—it’s not like I
planned this!”

She turned back from the window. “No,” she said, and he could tell she was angry again, her
outward calm only a thin surface veneer. “Of course you didn’t. You never do. You never mean to
do anything, and nothing is ever your fault. And the worst part is, I think you honestly believe that. I
think you’ve created this world in your head in which you’re the aggrieved party. But not this time,
oh no, not this time. Because now I finally understand who you really are. Do you want to know
what I had to go through tonight, what I had to endure while you got off with our hostess?”

It was phrased as a question, but he knew she didn’t really care what his response was. “I’ve
a feeling you’re going to tell me regardless,” he said dryly.

But the next words out of her mouth were another question. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what?” he asked, surprised.

“The way those people would be. You knew all along. You grew up with them; you had to
have known. In a way, I think that’s the most damning thing I can say about what happened tonight.
You knew they would rip me to shreds, and you did nothing to protect me or support me or even
warn me. You threw me to the wolves and laughed while you did it.”

What could he say? It was all so damnably true. He had known; he had felt it pricking at his
conscience as he had waited for her to come downstairs, what felt like a lifetime ago, though it had
really only been a few hours. He had known about his so-called friends’ propensity for cruelty, had
known how they would stare, not just with curiosity, but with malice. He had known how they
would whisper petty, cutting things at her from the shadows, their words seemingly coming from
everywhere and nowhere at once, the exact source impossible to pin down. He had known all of this,
and he had done…what, exactly?

Nothing, that was what. He had done nothing. From the moment they had walked through
Emily’s front door, he hadn’t done a damn thing for her. He had ignored her utterly. He had wanted
to believe that he owed her nothing, no loyalty, no protection, that the money he had given her
would be enough to cover all ills. He had wanted to believe that they didn’t need each other, that he
could be Adam for an evening, instead of one half of Adam-and-Belle. He had been wrong,
stunningly, stupendously wrong. If he had only stayed with her, if he had only followed his own
advice to make their relationship look like a real marriage, if he had only accepted that, for now at least, he was one half of Adam-and-Belle, then none of this would have happened. Until this moment, he had thought of his marriage as something that existed only in an abstract sense, names on a piece of paper, a convenient legal fiction. Now he realized that they were bound together by more than that, though he wasn’t exactly sure what “more than that” entailed. But nevertheless, the knowledge was there, filling up his head, pulsing in his veins, unable to be ignored. “I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it.

But Belle was not convinced. “Do you know what they said about me?” she asked him, her voice rising angrily. “Do you? They said I didn’t belong there; they wondered where you found me, as if I was some piece of trash you picked up by the side of the road. They said they didn’t know what you saw in me, that I wasn’t good enough for you. Half of them thought I was a gold-digging whore, while half of them thought I was a frigid bitch and you couldn’t possibly be interested in me. It was a complete and utter mystery to them why we were even married at all, and you know what, I’m inclined to agree with them.”

For some reason, he felt a chill run through him. “You don’t mean that,” he said, half question, half placating statement. “You don’t. They’re just words; they ultimately don’t mean anything.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” she retorted sharply. “Words might not mean anything, but actions do. How can you tell me to make our marriage look real, and then turn around and fuck Emily? Do you know how that looks? Do you even care?”

Adam bristled at her words. She had a point, of course, and yet it was all so horribly unfair. “First of all,” he said icily, “we did not ‘fuck,’ as you so indelicately put it.”

She gave him a withering look. “That’s just a matter of semantics,” she insisted. “Do you really think that’s the most pressing concern here, the minute details of what you may or may not have done with Emily? You went upstairs together and I found you both in bed. Isn’t that enough?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “We hardly did anything. Some high school stuff at best.”

“That’s not the point!” she exploded.

He slammed his hands down on the desk and leaned forward to glare at her across it. “Then what is the point? Are you jealous, sweetheart, is that it?” Even as his next words were leaving his mouth, he knew he shouldn’t be saying them, that they were as cutting and cruel as anything that the party guests had said that evening, but it was too late, and they were out there in the open before he could stop himself. “News flash, my dear, it’s not real. None of it is real. We’re not two people in love; we’re not two people who have a future together. We’re just two people who made a deal to get what we each wanted. All I owe you is money. You don’t get to dictate what I do with the rest of my life.”

“I’m not jealous,” Belle protested, though she was coming to understand that the initial burst of anger she had felt when she had looked down at Adam and Emily in bed bore a striking resemblance to jealousy, though she would never admit to it. “I’m not jealous,” she repeated. “But that doesn’t mean I’m happy about being humiliated.”

“Again, none of this is real. I’m sorry you had to see it, but it’s not as if I broke a solemn promise.” Lies, whispered his brain. You’re grasping at straws, making excuses for the inexcusable.

“But no one else knows it isn’t real!” Belle exclaimed, and to her everlasting horror, she
began to cry. “You said make it look real. I did, you didn’t, and now everyone thinks that I have a husband who doesn’t love me.”

He suddenly wanted to take her in his arms, smooth her hair, let her cry into his shoulder. But he knew that if he tried to touch her, she would draw back in disgust, so instead he said, “You never have to see them again if you don’t want to.”

She wiped furiously at her eyes, leaving long streaks of mascara along the backs of her hands. “You’re damn right I’m never going to see them again. Josh was right about you people, every one of you.”

“Josh?” he said sharply, eyebrows darting up. “And who, may I ask, is Josh?”

“Ah-ha!” she crowed triumphantly, feeling a little bit hysterical. “Now who’s jealous?”

“I’m not—” he protested, but she continued as if she hadn’t heard him.

“Josh is Emily’s cousin. He’s the one who told me I could find the two of you together. And he had some other very interesting things to tell me as well. For instance, did you know that he and Emily were in a car accident that forced him to have his arm amputated? Did you know that Emily caused it by driving drunk?”

No, he hadn’t known that. Finding it out now made him feel sick inside. He had always known that Emily’s moral compass didn’t exactly point straight north, but he had not thought she would do something so disgusting, so depraved. “Why is she not in prison?” he asked.

“Her father paid off the judge.”

“Belle,” he said slowly, having some idea of where her mind was going with this, “that’s not me. You know I would never do that, right?”

“No, I don’t think I do. I think I just think you’re capable of anything. And besides, even if it wasn’t that, it would just be something else. Josh said that people like Emily, people like you, people like all the guests that were at that party, only care about themselves. You all go through life, sowing chaos in your wake, taking what you want and not giving a damn what consequences it has for other people. You may not look like monsters on the outside, but you are on the inside, every one of you!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” he snapped. “I know you’re upset, and I don’t blame you, but you are being hyperbolic and overly dramatic. I am many things, yes, all of which I own. I am quick-tempered, arrogant, sarcastic. Oh, don’t look so surprised—I do have some degree of self-awareness. I am well aware of what people say about me. I am many things, and I am not a nice man, but I am not the monster you are describing.”

Belle’s brown eyes flashed with an angry fire. “Aren’t you, though?” And then suddenly they weren’t just talking about the events of that evening, but about all of it, every last wretched bit. “Then tell me again why you kissed me, or why you’ve done any of the things you’ve done since you decided to bring me to London. Tell me why you lied to me to get me to come here, told me it was for work, made me think it was only for a few weeks, when all along you knew better. Tell me why you thought throwing money at the situation absolved you from making any effort at friendship or emotional closeness. Tell me why you can’t seem to make up your mind when it comes to me. You go from ‘I would never fuck you,’ to an absolutely amazing kiss, to ‘I did it because I was bored.’ All of it, every single thing, has been about you, what you want, what you need. You never once stopped to ask about me. It’s as if I don’t exist as a person to you, just a tool that you can use to get what you want.”
Adam felt her words like a punch to the gut. “You thought that kiss was amazing?” he said softly. It was the first real, unequivocal confirmation he had yet had that she had felt the same thing he had. It made him feel very strange, almost off balance, as if the rules of the game had changed just as he had thought up what had seemed to be a winning strategy.

Belle instantly felt her entire face turn bright red, an embarrassing heat spreading from her cheeks down her neck and over her exposed shoulders. Stupid, stupid! You idiot, why would you give that much away? Grasping about furiously for some way to change the subject, her mind, in its throes of agitation, seized upon the most shocking thing she could think of. Unfortunately, it was also quite possibly the worst thing she could have said, though of course she had no way of knowing just how bad it really was. “I overheard someone at the party say that they thought you were like your father. And at the time, I thought to myself, ‘No, that can’t be true. He’s bad, but he can’t be anywhere near as bad as the kind of man who would design an entire set of terms and conditions just to psychologically torture his son from beyond the grave.’ That’s what I thought then, but now I’m not so sure. Maybe you are like your father.”

His blue eyes grew very dark with sudden anger. If she had wanted to turn his mind to something else, she had certainly succeeded. “I am nothing like my father,” he said tersely, each word enunciated with icy precision. “Nothing like him. Do you understand? You are talking about things you don’t understand.”

Belle should have stopped there, but she plunged ahead, heedless of the consequences. “They said that they hoped things turned out better for me than they did for the last Mrs. Beaumont. Your mother, I’m assuming? What happened to her, anyway? I mean, I can easily imagine her being miserable, because God knows Beaumont men are no prize, but I get the sense that it was more than that. What happened to her, Adam? Do I need to be afraid?”

This time, the look on his face was so furious that for a long, panicked moment, Belle was actually afraid that he was going to strike out at something. When he spoke, his voice was rough, almost savage, every trace of his good breeding and careful self-preservation gone. “Don’t you dare talk about my mother!” he snarled at her. “You have no right!”

Belle put her hands on her hips, refusing to back down. “I’m your wife!” she cried. “I’d say that gives me every right!”

He took another step toward her, but Belle held her ground. “You have no right at all!” he repeated. “I never want to hear her name out of your mouth again, do you understand me? Never again, or so help me God, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” she questioned defiantly. Suddenly, she realized what she was going to do. It hadn’t necessarily been what she had planned on when they’d walked through the front door of Beaumont House, but she saw now that it was the only way this whole thing could end. She should have seen it from the start, really. “Whatever it is, you’ll never have to do it, because I won’t be here. I’m done. I’m leaving.”

Adam instantly felt an icy cold hand close around his heart and squeeze. Hard. It was a violent, wrenching sensation that drew him up short. Something was suddenly very, very wrong. “You’re what?” he asked slowly, his voice low and dangerous.

“You heard me,” said Belle. “I’m leaving. Our deal is off. If this is how bad it is after a month, I am not going to wait around for eleven more to see how much worse it can get.”

He was suddenly filled with an emotion that could truly only be described as panic, a gaping chasm of emptiness opening up inside him at the prospect of her leaving. Was it panic because he
would not be able to fulfill the conditions of his inheritance if she left, or was it for some other reason, something to do only with her? Was he this panicked because it was she who was leaving? “You can’t do that,” he said blusteringly. “You can’t. I won’t let you.”

“You won’t let me?” she said incredulously. “What are you going to do, lock me in the attic? You can’t stop me—I’m my own person.”

“We had a deal,” he said, and was astonished to find that his voice had grown desperate, almost pleading. “I gave you money. We made vows. You can’t leave. You can’t. You have to see this through.”

“Then you should have thought of that before. I can leave, and I will. You can have your money back; I don’t want it. Those vows you mention are nothing but empty promises, words without meaning, and an unconsummated marriage is easy enough to undo.” She shrugged. “If that means you don’t inherit, then that’s your problem, not mine. That will be your punishment.”

“Please,” he said raggedly, finding that he was begging, and realizing with astonishment that he didn’t care. “Please. I need you.”

She looked at him witheringly. “You don’t need me. You just need a warm body.”

“Belle—” He broke off, finding he had no more words left to say.

Belle felt hot and shaky all over, whether from anger or fear, she didn’t know. The walls of the library felt too close, the smell of pipe smoke too overwhelming. “I’m going for a walk,” she found herself saying, taking a step toward the door. “And then in the morning, I am making a reservation for a plane ticket home.”

In a move so lightning swift she had no time to see him coming, he lunged forward and grabbed her arm, spinning her back around so that they were face to face and very close. “You little fool,” he hissed, his breath warm against her lips. “It’s after midnight, and you don’t know this city. Don’t be an idiot! Go to bed, and in the morning, you’ll see that you were overreacting, and everything will be as it was before.”

Belle tried to wrench her arm away, but his grip held fast. He wasn’t hurting her, not really, for all that she knew he could if he really wanted to. “Let go of my arm,” she hissed back at him. “Let it go now, or I shall scream. I am going to go for a walk, and you are not going to stop me. In fact, I would suggest you be in bed when I return. Now let me go.”

For a moment he did nothing but continue to stare at her, and she feared he really wasn’t going to let her go, and that she would have to scream, which she didn’t really want to do. But at last he released her arm with an exaggerated motion, his fingers splayed as if he were dropping something hot. “Fine,” he said bitterly. “Do what you want. You will anyway. But I still say you’re being an idiot. Don’t expect me to come to your rescue.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she practically spat at him. “You’re about the furthest thing from a knight in shining armor that I can imagine.” And then she fled the library, slamming the door behind her.

The first thing he did after she left was pour himself another drink, which he consumed with uncharacteristic slowness in order to give himself time to think. His thoughts were a tangled jumble
racing through his head at a million miles an hour, but one thought in particular somehow stood out above all the others: she could not—she must not—leave. If she left, the consequences would be staggering. His father’s estate would be utterly lost to him. And it wasn’t just the prospect of losing the family fortune that scared him, though it numbered in the billions and would be a bitter pill to swallow. No, it was the thought of losing Thornleigh Hall, his mother’s rose gardens, the woods and fields where he had played as a child, the one place in the world where, ironically for a family seat, he’d really been free of his father, who had rarely left London. The place was in his blood, in his bones, was the whole reason he’d even begun this stupid game, and he’d probably just gone and thrown it all away for a mildly enthusiastic hand job from someone he didn’t give a damn about. How stupid was he?

But it wasn’t just about losing the money, and it wasn’t just about losing the mansion. Somehow, against all odds and unseen by him until this very moment, it had become about losing Belle. Why had he ever let her out of his sight that evening? He should have kept her close beside him from the moment they had stepped out of the car. Now she was furious with him, as he had known she would be, as she had every right to be. But what he had not known was how much it would hurt to be on the receiving end of her anger. He found that he cared what she thought of him, that he wanted to defend himself against her accusations, even the ones he knew to be true, just so she wouldn’t hold him in miserable contempt.

She had called their kiss amazing. He didn’t know what to do with that information. Oh, it was a sentiment he wholeheartedly agreed with, but even if he was to tell her that, he didn’t know where that left them. She had said it with such pain in her voice, as if she didn’t want it to be true. And truth be told, he wasn’t sure he wanted it to be true either. He had chosen her for all this precisely because he had thought he wasn’t attracted to her. To realize that he was, and then to realize it was mutual? It was all too much to take in.

And besides, there was a part of him that was still so furious with her. He was furious with her for trying to force him into a real marriage he wasn’t even sure he wanted. He was furious with her for saying he was like his father, for alluding to his mother and what had happened to her. No one was supposed to speak of that! And he wasn’t like his father, he wasn’t, he wasn’t, he wasn’t. He would never hurt Belle like his father had hurt his mother. But then, with a sinking feeling in his chest, he realized that perhaps he had already started to. After all, hadn’t his father’s weapons of choice usually been emotional, not physical? Hadn’t his father alternated between ignoring his mother and toying with her feelings? Hadn’t he made her a prisoner in a gilded cage, giving her his riches, but never really giving her himself? Wasn’t he just the same as his father, making a woman miserable in the service of his own selfish aims?

Outside, there was a distant roll of thunder, and suddenly, it was a summer night in 1991 again, and he was a little boy, creeping down the hallway toward the sound of his parents’ shouting. He could see it all so clearly: the hallway opening out onto the grand staircase, the whole scene lit by the unearthly glow of lightning, his father leaning over the railing at the top of the stairs, something—a crumpled heap that his mind had not yet accepted was his mother—lying at the bottom. A burst of light, and he could see his father turning to look at him, except this time, the face that turned to look at him was his own, and though he couldn’t see her face, his mind told him that the body at the bottom of the stairs was Belle.

No! With a horrible, anguished cry, he hurled his glass at the wall and watched it shatter, spraying the remnants of his drink all up and down the spines of his father’s leather-bound books. He wasn’t that man, he wasn’t, he couldn’t be. He was an imperfect man, yes, but he refused to believe that he was that kind of monster. Monsters lived and died alone, as his father had, and he found that it mattered to him now, in a way it never had before, that he find some way to escape that fate. She can’t leave, she can’t leave, she can’t leave.
Thunder rumbled in the distance, and Adam felt something in him shift. Belle was out there somewhere, alone, and the need to find her, protect her, was so strong it was almost overpowering. It was primitive, for lack of a better word, something he felt rather than thought. His feet seemed to move of their own accord, taking him out of the library and back down the hall to the foyer. Belle’s purse was still on the hall table, but the spare house key and the pair of sneakers she kept inside the front door were both gone. Without even a moment’s hesitation, he flung open the door and hurried out into the street.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected to find, but he was surprised nonetheless to find himself standing in a quiet street that looked pretty much exactly as it looked every night. The lights in most of the houses were either off or obscured by curtains, leaving only the streetlights to guide his way. The wind had picked up, rustling the leaves on the trees and lifting his hair away from his forehead. It wasn’t raining yet, but it would be soon. But most importantly, and most alarmingly, there was no sign of Belle. There was a part of him that had been half expecting—or was that half hoping?—to find her sitting on the curb. Which way had she gone? He closed his eyes and tried to think. Then his eyes snapped open again, and he took off at a run.

Belle had only gone a few blocks when she realized that her plan to spite Adam by storming out of the house had been a colossally bad idea. First of all, she had forgotten to grab any kind of jacket, so focused had she been on getting the fuck out of there, and her bare shoulders and legs were freezing. Second of all, she could hear thunder and feel the oncoming rain in the air, and seeing as how she had no jacket, she certainly didn’t have an umbrella either. And third of all, she just couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that there was someone—or something—watching her. But she was too stubborn to go back to the house until she was sure Adam had gone to bed, so she kept walking, not even really sure where she was going, just so she would have something to do.

She had gone another couple blocks when she began to cry again. Despite everything, she still didn’t really want to leave England. Mrs. Potts and Plumette had become like family to her, the mother and sister she had somehow lived twenty-six years without. Even Lumière, so endearingly dramatic, had worked his way into her heart. And then, of course, there was the sense of failure that came along with not seeing the thing through. When she had first started working as Adam’s assistant, all those months ago, she had made a promise to herself that she would never let him get the best of her, and yet, now he had. Leaving him felt like running away, and she didn’t want to run. She always finished what she started, if for no other reason than sheer determination.

And yet she couldn’t stay. She couldn’t stay because she feared what would happen if she did. The feeling that came over her when she thought about Adam and Emily—or about Adam and any woman, really—was alarmingly close to jealousy. And if she was that close to jealousy after only a month of being married, imagine what it would be like six months from now, or when the year was through. She didn’t want to get any more attached to him. She didn’t, she didn’t, she didn’t. God only knew why she would, anyway. He was so far removed from everything she had ever thought she would want in a man, and yet—

*Wait, what was that?* She could have sworn she saw something move in the quiet street out of the corner of her eye. Then she turned the corner, and got the worst surprise of her life: a group of about six men waiting for her, and she with no phone, and no real idea where she was. *This is it,* she thought. *This is how I die.* But the men didn’t have guns, or knives. They had cameras. “Mrs. Beaumont!” one called out, and Belle had just enough presence of mind to put her hands up to hide her face before the flashes started going off.
At first she stood as if paralyzed, trying to shield herself against the bursts of light that were stunningly bright in the darkened street. Then they began to yell things at her. “Mrs. Beaumont! Belle! What are you doing out here? Why are you crying?” That was when the feeling suddenly came back into her legs, and she turned to try to flee. She made it only a few steps before she was hemmed in by another semicircle of paparazzi, cameras raised. They must have come from across the street, the flash of movement she had seen in her peripheral vision. She couldn’t see a thing through the blinding explosions of their flashes; beyond their cameras, the world had gone completely black. The lightning that laced across the sky could not have been brighter.

“Let me through!” she yelled in an uncharacteristic panic, but that only made them press around her more tightly. They moved around her as a unit, matching her step for step, not letting her get away. And all the time they were yelling and snapping picture after picture. She decided she was going to have make a break for it, push through the line and just run like hell. She started forward, but no sooner had she begun then the toe of her sneaker caught in a crack in the pavement, and down she went. But just before she hit the ground, something astonishing happened, on a day that had already been filled with several astonishing things. A large, strong hand closed around her arm, supporting her and lifting her back to her feet. Belle lifted her head, and found herself looking directly into the brilliant blue eyes of her husband. Her amazement was total and complete.

He set her back on her feet, but did not release her arm, and for a long moment they just stared at each other, each trying to read the look on the other’s face and failing utterly. Then the paparazzi intruded again, seizing on this new and potentially interesting development. “Mr. Beaumont! Adam! Why are you back in London? Why now?”

Adam’s lips set themselves into a thin line, and Belle knew him well enough by now to know that meant he was furious. Without saying a word, he shrugged off his suit jacket in one fluid motion and draped it over her shoulders. Then he wrapped his arm around her, tucking her tightly against his side, and started to walk, quickly and with purpose. Belle had to work to keep up with his long-legged strides. The voices followed them as they went, seemingly coming from everywhere at once.

“When was the wedding? Why weren’t we invited?”

“How did you meet?”

“Are you going to live in London now?”

“Look over here!”

“Can we see the ring?”

“Is it love? Are you in love?”

“Show us a kiss!”

“Do you have a pre-nup?”

“Aren’t you worried she’s just using you for your money?”

“Over here, over here!”

“Is Belle pregnant? When can we expect to see a baby from you two?”

And finally, “Why was she out here alone? Why was she crying? Was there a fight? What did you do to her?”
Something changed in Adam at that one. Belle could feel it in the way he slowed his pace and stiffened, his entire body going tense against her side. Then he released her abruptly and spun on his heel, his eyes scanning the crowd for the source of the taunting series of questions. Belle realized what he was about to do only in the instant before he did it, and by then it was far too late to stop him.

Now, Adam was a tall man, but he was not a large one. His muscle was all of the lean variety, which gave him a sensual, elegant look, but did not, Belle would have thought, lend itself well to physical violence. But apparently she had been wrong about that. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, all the yelling and the clicking shutters and the rumbling thunder fading away into utter silence as Adam pulled back his arm. It was a moment Belle would remember for the rest of her life, etched against the back of her eyelids for her to see any time she closed her eyes. Then he let go, and all hell broke loose.

His aim was true, and the punch found its target easily, hitting the photographer square in the face. He went down with a shout, his camera hitting the sidewalk with a sickening crack that Belle knew meant the lens had broken. But he was up again almost instantly, bleeding from a split lip and with murder in his eyes. “You’re gonna regret that,” he said ominously, and then his fist connected with Adam’s face, and Adam’s head snapped back at an angle Belle was pretty sure heads were not supposed to move at. And then they were fighting, really fighting, and Belle was screaming, horrible black fear filling up every inch of her.

“Stop it!” she yelled, trying to position herself between them to break up the fight, but nothing helped. It seemed to go on forever, until finally the entire sky lit up with a tremendous burst of lightning, followed by a clap of thunder so loud it made Belle jump, and then the rain that had been promised all evening started coming down in sheets. The photographers scattered like cockroaches, and for the first time since Belle had stormed out of the library, she and Adam were alone.

He was sitting on the curb, trying to catch his breath, and Belle came and knelt beside him. “Are you alright?” she asked quietly, trying to ignore the cold rain that was slithering over every inch of her skin.

He turned his head to look at her, and she winced at the sight of the two streams of blood that were pouring out of his nose. He coughed. “I think saying I’m not alright is actually a bit of an understatement,” he said dryly.

“Well, for God’s sake,” Belle said, though not unkindly, “at least try to stop your nose from bleeding.”

“Do you have any idea how much this shirt cost?” he grumbled, but he pressed his cuff against his nose nonetheless.

“Up you go,” Belle said gently, helping him to his feet. “Let’s go home.”

When they reached Beaumont House, Mrs. Potts came hurrying down the stairs to meet them. She took one look at the two of them, both soaking wet and covered in blood, and practically blanched. “What happened?” she demanded. “I’ve heard nothing but slamming doors and angry voices all evening. And which one of you is bleeding?”

“There was an altercation,” Belle said succinctly, already headed down the hallway toward the
kitchen, Adam trailing in her wake and trying not to drip blood on the floor. “Do you have a first aid kit?”

She sat Adam down in one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “Don’t move,” she told him firmly, and stepped away to take the box of first aid supplies from Mrs. Potts.

The housekeeper studied the pair of them as Belle began her ministrations. There were so many questions that she wanted to ask, but she found that she just couldn’t. Whatever was going on between the two of them, it was clearly still playing out, and she didn’t want to interrupt it. They were clearly in their own world, so she simply slipped out the kitchen door, leaving it swinging gently in her wake. Neither one of them noticed.

Belle wet a rag and used it to gently wipe the blood from his face. There wasn’t much—the rain had already done most of her work for her. But the repetitive motion was calming and gave her time to think, so she kept at it. “Give me your hands,” she said softly, and she wiped at his scraped knuckles too. His hands were so much larger than hers, she thought out of nowhere, and so comfortably warm. She inspected each long, elegant finger to make sure he hadn’t broken them throwing punches, and settled his wedding ring against the base of his finger where it belonged. “Well, the good news is I don’t think you broke anything,” she said finally.

“What’s the bad news?” he asked her.

“You’re probably going to have one hell of a black eye unless I get some ice on there.” She turned away to rummage through the freezer a bit and came back with a bag of frozen peas.

He looked askance at it. “Seriously?”

She sighed at him. “Really? You’re doing this? Mrs. Potts apparently forgot to fill the ice cube tray. But you’re not really in a position to be choosy at the moment. Put it on your eye.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said with only a little sarcasm, and took the peas from her.

Belle watched him hold the bag to his eye for a few minutes before finally admitting, “I don’t really know what to say here. I mean, I guess I should say thank you, and I do, but I’m just so confused and full of questions.”

His non-injured eye popped open and regarded her, icy blue and questioning. “Like what?” he asked.

“Um, well, first of all, why the hell did I get chased down by paparazzi? How did they even know where I was going to be?”

He sighed and closed his eye again. “Do you mean why tonight? That I can’t tell you. I certainly didn’t call them, if that’s what you’re wondering. But I have to tell you, I’ve been worried about that exact thing happening since the day we landed in London. In a way, I’m surprised it’s taken this long.”

“I didn’t realize you were so famous.”

He shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable. “Well, it’s not so much me as it is my family as a whole. We’re apparently just infamous enough to attract some media attention every now and then.”

“That wouldn’t have anything to do with what happened to your mother, would it?” she dared to ask.
Now he pulled the peas away from his eye and glared at her. “We are not talking about that again.”

An hour ago, Belle would have argued the point, would have poked and prodded until something gave. Now, though, it suddenly didn’t seem to matter. Oh, she still badly wanted to know the answer, but maybe not now. No, not now. She stepped closer to him and brushed a lock of sodden hair back from his forehead. “I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He studied her for a moment, squinting past the pain in his eye. What was left of her eye makeup had arranged itself into smudgy black rings around her eyes, and some of the pins in her hair had come loose, giving her wet and frizzing braided crown a somewhat lopsided appearance. She was pale and shivering with cold, despite being wrapped in a jacket much too big for her, and her sneakers made a sort of wet, squelching noise every time she shifted her feet. To anyone else, she would have looked a real mess. To him, she seemed the most beautiful woman in the world. He deserved every bad thing it was in her power to throw at him, and yet here she was, brushing the hair out of his face with a touch as light as a bird’s wing. He took both her wrists in his hands and pushed the coat sleeves back so he could slide his hands down to lace his fingers through hers. She didn’t pull away. “I’m sorry too,” he said, and meant it more than she could possibly have known.

They were silent for a minute or two before Belle began to laugh. It began as a quiet chuckle, and gradually morphed into something louder and almost hysterical. “I don’t see what there is to laugh about,” Adam told her crossly.

“Don’t you? I do. I can’t believe you punched a photographer for me! I can’t believe you did any of that!”

He couldn’t believe it either, truth be told. He had never looked at a person before and felt the sudden rush of protectiveness that he felt when he looked at Belle now. When he had seen her in the street, so desperate and afraid, there had been nothing he wouldn’t have done to keep her safe. But he couldn’t tell her that, of course, so instead he smirked, wincing a little when the motion contorted the more injured side of his face. “But of course I did,” he said lightheartedly. “You’re my investment, beauty, and I take care of what I’ve put my money into.”

Belle raised an eyebrow at him. “Beauty?” she said skeptically. “That’s a new one.”

He shrugged. “Well you are, aren’t you?”

She made a sort of derisive half snorting noise, but inside she felt her stomach swoop, like the kind of feeling one got from missing a step while descending a staircase. “I think the pain is making you delirious,” she said hurriedly.

Was it? “Well perhaps,” he said consideringly, and settled the bag of peas over his eye again.

When Belle awoke the next morning, she did not feel at all well-rested. After she had left Adam the night before, she had practically collapsed into bed once she’d gotten out of her wet clothes, so exhausted was she. But a peaceful, restorative sleep had eluded her, and instead she had tossed and turned the rest of the night away, seeing bursts of light explode against the insides of her eyelids. Whether they had been lightning or camera flashes, it was impossible to say, but they had kept her restless just the same.
To her surprise, Adam was sitting at the dining room table, his laptop open in front of him and an untouched cup of coffee to the side. He looked up when she came in, and they both flushed with embarrassment as the events of the preceding evening came flooding back. “Come here,” he said gravely once the initial rush of feeling had subsided. “You need to see this.”

Belle came over to his end of the table, and he turned the laptop around so she could see what was on the screen. It was the Daily Mail’s website, and it was covered in photos of the two of them from every conceivable angle. There was Belle by herself, obviously in tears, with red eyes and black trails of mascara running down her cheeks. There was Belle trying to cover her face, the light of a thousand flashes glinting off the diamonds in her ring. There was the moment Adam had caught her as she stumbled, her eyes wide with astonishment, his narrowed with anger. There were pictures of him trying to shepherd her through the crowd, her frightened face pressed against his shoulder. And then, finally, there was picture after picture after picture of the fight, in all of its gory detail.

“Oh my God,” Belle murmured, a sickening feeling washing over her. “This is bad.” She didn’t even need to read the accompanying article to know that.

Adam slammed the computer shut so they wouldn’t have to look at the parade of horrible pictures anymore. “You’re damn right it’s bad,” he said tersely. “It’s not just the Mail either. It’s all over the Sun, the Mirror, pretty much any tabloid you can think of.”

“Are you going to be arrested?” she asked in tiny voice, all thoughts of booking a plane ticket home today leaving her mind. She couldn’t leave him if there was going to be legal trouble.

“I don’t think so,” he said, but he didn’t sound at all sure. “I don’t think they’ll want to go down that road and open up the possibility of me pressing charges in reverse.”

“What do we do?”

He smiled grimly. Perhaps this was what it took to get her to stay. “Pack your bags, beauty,” he told her. “We’re going to Thornleigh Hall.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: The curtain rises on Act II of our story. I start school on the eleventh, so updates might have to stay a little sporadic, but I will do my best to bring you chapter ten soon rather than later. Love you all.
Anybody still out there? I sure hope so. I wanted to have this ready long before now, but working forty hours a week and taking two classes on top of that, one of which is anatomy & physiology, does not leave a lot of time for much else. Poor me, I have been forced to study bones and muscles and nerves, when I would much rather be writing the next chapter for all of you.

Before we begin, I wanted to thank all of you for your very kind words about my cat. Unfortunately, her cancer turned out to be much more aggressive than anyone initially thought, and my family eventually made the very hard decision to end her suffering on September 22, five weeks after we first found her tumor. My dad stayed with her the whole time, so she died peacefully with someone that she loved close by, and for that, I can only be grateful. Again, thank you for all your kind words; I wish I had better news to give you.

I hope you enjoy Chapter 10.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This has all the potential to be a very, very bad idea, Belle thought later that morning as she folded a sweater and added it to the growing pile of clothes in her suitcase. Not even twelve hours ago, she had been dead set on leaving this man, on giving back his money and his ring and his name, and flying back to New York to try to pick up the pieces of her old life. And now, in a turnaround so rapid it was almost whiplash inducing, she was packing her things so that he could take her with him to a family estate she hadn’t even known existed two hours ago. If agreeing to marry him in the first place, when she had had only a half-formed idea of what he was really like, had been the height of stupidity, then surely agreeing to go with him now, when she knew what he was capable of, was an act of stupidity so great it could probably be seen from space.

And yet, what choice did she have? Thanks to the events of last night, everyone in Britain—hell, maybe even around the world—knew her name and face now. There might even be an army of paparazzi still lurking in the shadows around Beaumont House, for all she knew. The distance between the tenuous sanctuary of these four walls and the safety of her father’s house in Pleasantville suddenly seemed insurmountable, a sea of inhospitable faces, each one with the image of her tear-stained face and wild eyes in their mind. The odds of her making it to Heathrow unrecognized, let alone making it through the thousands of miles that came after that, were not high. And if she was seen making her escape, and another story about them wound up in the tabloids, it would just compound the problem, perpetuate the cycle, and neither she nor Adam would ever be free of it. So it would seem that, for the moment at least, she was stuck.

Strangely enough, though, she found that she didn’t mind the prospect as much as she thought she would. Was there a part of her that was still furious with him for the way he had acted? Oh yes, of course. Perhaps there always would be. It had been no small thing that he had done, after all, and there was still a long way to go before it would stop being the first thing she thought of every time she looked at him. But angry as she was, there was another part of her, a walled-off, secret part she tried not to think too much about, that was drawn to him, fascinated by him, wanted to know all
his thoughts and secrets. Take, for instance, the reasons why he had defended her against the paparazzi last night. He had so far refused to tell them to her (though, to be fair, she hadn’t really asked), and she had not the faintest idea what they might be. But it was suddenly vitally important to her, in a fierce, desperate kind of way, that she know and understand them. He was a puzzle, to be sure, and Belle had always liked puzzles. Somewhere deep down, buried so deep that it was almost lost, there was a real Adam, Belle was sure of it, a fully fleshed-out individual with likes and dislikes and a thousand little quirks. Someone who could be kind and caring, and with whom time spent together could never be said to be wasted. She had seen glimpses of this, but they were always elusive, gone too soon before they could be fully appreciated, like dew burned off the grass by the rising summer sun. If she could just capture those moments, use them as clues to solve the puzzle—!

She thought that if there was anywhere in the world where she might finally come to understand the real Adam, then Thornleigh Hall—ancient, remote, treasured—would be that place. She shrugged. And if she didn’t like it, well, she could still always go home.

She straightened up with a sigh, casting her eyes around the room to see if there was anything left that she had neglected to pack. Her gaze landed on the empty wardrobe, more specifically, on the garment bag hanging within it, which had been pushed all the way to one side so that it was almost not visible. Ah, yes, that. The one piece of clothing in her possession that she would almost certainly never wear again. Well, she might as well take it with her. It was a very pretty dress, after all, and she might never pass this way again.

In his room at the other end of the hallway, Adam’s hands trembled a little as he threw his belongings into his suitcase in a rather haphazard fashion. He hated to be so hasty, as he was normally a very fastidious packer, everything very neatly folded and tucked away, but these were clearly not normal circumstances, and speed was of the essence. So he filled his suitcase with balled up underwear and mismatched socks and shirts that would have to be ironed again before he would even dream of wearing them. He checked his watch several times as he worked. They needed to be out of London before the city, exhausted and hung over from its Saturday night excesses, decided to wake up, crawl out of bed, and take in the newest gossip.

I wonder if I did the right thing, he thought suddenly, adding some t-shirts to the growing pile in his suitcase, and the thought seemed strange to him. He was not generally a man given to wondering about the rightness or wrongness of things. And yet here he was, wondering. It was just the latest in the series of increasingly bizarre turns his life seemed to be taking.

It wasn’t his actions from the night before that he was questioning, or, at least, not the ones that had taken place after Belle had left the library. The fierce desire to protect her, though it had come on so suddenly as to be almost overwhelming (like being hit by a train, really), felt very real and very natural. He would do it again in a heartbeat, all of it. He didn’t think he would ever forget the choking rush of fear that had filled him as he had searched the streets for her, the furious anger when he had come around the corner and seen her being harassed by those horrible men, or the astonishing relief when he had been able to put his arm around her and feel her solid and real and safe against his side. Strangely enough, he didn’t even regret the fight, even if it did somehow wind up having legal consequences for him. He usually abhorred violence, thought it small and disgusting and beneath him. Why use fists when you could use words? But there had been something so cathartic, so freeing, last night in hitting and being hit, as if it had been the first step in the long process of atoning for all of the wrong he had done. He had almost wanted to laugh when that first fist had connected with his nose and a burst of bittersweet pain had radiated up and down his face. Yes, last night had been a cleansing, a washing clean by blood and rain. It had been necessary, and
he did not regret it.

So what, then, was he not sure about? He tucked his toiletry case down amongst the folds of a pair of sweatpants and decided it was the wisdom of his response to this morning’s crisis that he was having doubts about. He didn’t know what had possessed him to google himself over his morning coffee. Idle curiosity? A sneaking suspicion? Had he known what he would find before he had even hit enter? Regardless, his and Belle’s newfound level of infamy changed the game completely. If this had just been about a party and a fight, if it had all stopped last night and not bled over into today, then they could have stayed put and tried to carry on. But now that everyone in Britain knew their names and faces and circumstances (or thought they knew them, anyway), that was no longer an option. They would have to go to ground, and since they couldn’t leave the country, that left Thornleigh Hall as the only real choice of refuge that he could see.

He was surprised, in a way, that she had agreed to go with him. For him, the decision to take her to Thornleigh had been easy, almost automatic. It was a way to keep her figuratively tucked against his side, safe from the world for just a little while longer. But though he had broached the subject to her with something like wild hope thumping away in his chest, he had still half expected—maybe more than half expected—her to reject it and carry on with her plan to leave. But instead she had looked at him in that strange, considering way she had, as if she saw him, really saw him. She had looked at him in silence for quite a while, and she must have found whatever it was she had been looking for in his serious, hopeful face, for she had quirked her lips in what he thought was the ghost of a smile and said, “Alright.” And that had been that.

But as the hour of their departure drew nearer, and the prospect of Belle at Thornleigh became less theoretical and more real, he had begun to feel the first cold stirrings of fear. It wasn’t doubt; he didn’t understand much about his own feelings, but he understood enough to know that he didn’t want to let her go, that he wanted to take her somewhere safe. But Thornleigh Hall had not truly had a mistress since his mother’s death. Oh, Mrs. Potts had stepped in, and she had run things as best she could, but it hadn’t quite been the same thing. There had been no Mrs. Beaumont to sleep in the great bedchamber in the East Wing, to preside over dinner from one end of the long dining room table, to attract curious and admiring stares when she went into the village to shop, in twenty-five years—an entire quarter century. For so long, there had been no Mrs. Beaumont, and now all of a sudden there was one, reluctant though she might be. Would Belle be the mistress that the magnificent old house deserved? And perhaps more importantly, did he want her to be? Ah, now those were the questions at the heart of his fear. He wanted her to stay, yes, but did he want her to stay forever? What would happen if she worked her way into his life even more than she already had? And how the hell was he ever going to make amends enough that she would even want to stay?

He had no real answers for any of these questions. But, he thought as he zipped his suitcase shut with savage force, he figured he was about to find out. It was time to leave.

When he went downstairs, he found the foyer full of people and luggage, for Belle was not the only person who would be going to Thornleigh with him. Mrs. Potts and Lumière were obvious additions, of course, and Cogsworth was going on the grounds that he needed to compile a catalog of all the objects in the house for legal purposes (though privately Adam suspected that he mostly wanted to get away from his husband for a while). That left Plumette, who was ostensibly coming in order to assist Cogsworth, but whose presence was clearly more motivated by the desire to spend time with Lumière. Adam didn’t know whether to be glad of their presence, hoping it would provide a buffer between himself and Belle, or to resent it for the same reason. But judging by the pile of
luggage in the entryway, which Lumière and Plumette were industriously moving to the car parked just outside, he didn’t seem likely to get a say in the matter either way. His entire staff looked as if they were all planning to stay a while.

Mrs. Potts came bustling out from the direction of the kitchen, neat and tidy in her customary black and white, and with all the authority of a general on campaign. “Ah, Adam, there you are!” she said briskly as he reached the foot of the stairs. “Come here; I want to speak with you.”

He allowed himself to be drawn away from the staircase, back into the hallway and out of the way. “Yes?” he asked, regarding her with a raised eyebrow.

“Look,” she said seriously, “I know it’s not really my place to ask too many probing questions. If you say there’s an army of paparazzi crawling around London looking for you, and we need to go lay low at Thornleigh, then we need to go lay low at Thornleigh. I’m absolutely not questioning that. But Adam, sweetheart, are we ever going to talk about what happened last night?”

He shook his head, his lips compressed. “If you want details, you can google it. I don’t want to talk about it right now. Or ever,” he added after a moment with a considering tilt of his head.

Deterred but not defeated, she tried a different approach. “Are you sure you’re ok to drive then? No offense, honey, but your eye looks awful.”

Oh yes, he was well aware. Despite keeping that stupid bag of peas on his eye last night, the sight of his face in the mirror this morning had been enough to cause him to recoil in horror. But though it hurt like a bitch and looked like a terrible mess of purple and red, he could open it without difficulty, and that was enough for today’s purposes. “I’ll live,” he said crisply.

She looked at him in silence for a long moment, her expression flickering back and forth between sad and hopeful. Then she smiled. “You will,” she finally said, and it was not just the eye she was talking about. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“Ok,” said Lumière as he came back in the front door, “that’s the last of it. You ready to go, Mrs. Potts?”

“Just a moment, Lumière,” she told him. “I’ll be right there.” Turning back to Adam, she said, “Now, you do remember the plan, right?”

“Of course I do,” he said irritably. “How could I forget?” The plan was this: in an effort to confuse any paparazzi that might still be lurking around Beaumont House, the Jaguar would leave first, filled with everyone except Adam and Belle. Hopefully the photographers would see it, and if they were going to follow anyone, would follow them. Lumière would bring them to Thornleigh Hall via a circuitous route designed to throw anyone following them off the scent. Meanwhile, Adam and Belle would leave in Cogsworth’s Peugeot and travel to the house taking the speedier, more direct route. It wasn’t a foolproof plan by any means, but it was the best option anyone had been able to come up with.

If Mrs. Potts noticed his tone, she wisely didn’t comment on it. “Here,” she said, thrusting a brown paper bag into his hands, “I made you and Belle some sandwiches for the road.”

“It’s not that long of a drive,” he said skeptically. “I’m sure we can find something to eat on the road if we get hungry.”

“They’re roast beef.”

Well, that changed things. Mrs. Potts’ roast beef sandwiches were his absolute favorite.
“Thank you,” he said contritely.

She hugged him quickly. “Be good,” she whispered in his ear. “Take care of her.”

“I will,” he promised, his voice equally soft, even though it would only be a few hours until they all saw each other again.

He didn’t watch them leave, not wanting to get close enough to the windows to risk being seen from the street. Instead, he waited until the noise of the car had receded into the distance, and then turned back toward the stairs. Belle was standing at the top of them, dressed for comfort in a loose t-shirt dress and sneakers. Her luggage was sitting next to her, and she was already turning to try to maneuver her heavy suitcase down the steep flight.

“Stay there!” he called, and taking the stairs two at a time, he was beside her in an instant. “I’ll get that,” he said, taking the handle of the suitcase from her.

“Thank you,” she said, and there was surprise mixed in with the gratitude in her voice and face. She was surprised that he would do something nice for her? It shamed him to realize that she had every reason to be.

“What’s in the garment bag?” he asked when they had reached the ground floor.

“My wedding dress,” she said a touch sheepishly, wrinkling her nose. “Not like I’m sentimental or anything,” she hastened to assure him, “but it’s just such a beautiful dress that I hated to leave it behind.”

“It is beautiful,” he agreed, thinking of the rush of astonishment that had come over him when he had seen her for the first time on their wedding day. “And you looked beautiful in it,” he added.

She blushed. “I didn’t realize you’d noticed,” she said quietly, her fingers nervously crinkling the fabric of the bag.

He lifted a hand as if to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear, then dropped it to his side again without completing the gesture. “Belle,” he said at last, and then, quickly, “thank you for coming with me. I realize that you have every reason for wanting to leave, and I’m—I’m glad you didn’t. Do you think we can make it through three hours in the car without fighting with each other?”

Belle studied him critically for a moment. When he was like this, she thought, so gentle and so kind, she could almost forget about the events of last night. Almost, but not quite. “I think we could probably manage that,” she said appraisingly, “or at least try. But are you sure you’re up to driving? No offense, but that eye looks terrible.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” he cried in exasperation.

As the Jaguar pulled out onto the motorway, Plumette turned in her seat and looked back so that she could see if any cars were following them that had been with them since the start of their journey. Seeing nothing suspicious, she turned back to Lumière, who could give her his attention now that he had finished merging into traffic. “If there was anyone back there, I think they’re gone now,” she said.
Lumière took his own look in the rearview mirror and then lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. “If there was ever anyone back there,” he agreed, and then added, “which I doubt.”

Plumette looked at him curiously. “If you didn’t think anyone was going to follow us, then why did you suggest this whole plan with us being the decoy car and Adam and Belle going off on their own?”

Lumière grinned, the corners of his eyes crinkling with barely concealed mirth. “Come now, Plumette,” he said in mock chastisement, “surely you can guess why. Think about it!”

Plumette did, and then she gasped. “Lumière!” she exclaimed, swatting him on the arm, “that is so positively devious! I love it!”

“I thought you might,” said her boyfriend.

“What’s that?” piped up Cogsworth from the back seat. He’d been sitting there with his eyes closed, and Plumette hadn’t even realized he’d been listening. “Why did he send them off by themselves?”

“Oh, Henry, you old fool,” Mrs. Potts said affectionately, “he wants to give them a chance to be alone together.”

“But why?” he protested. “They hate each other.”

“No, they don’t,” Plumette interjected gently. “They just think they do.”

“Come now, Cogsworth!” Lumière said sternly. “Even you cannot be that dense. I know you have not been around them as much as we have, but you were at the wedding, you saw them kiss. I ask you, have you ever seen two people who truly hated each other kiss like that?”

Cogsworth considered this. “No, I suppose not,” he finally admitted. “And a most unseemly thing it was, too.”

“That’s not all that was unseemly,” said Lumière conspiratorially, and told them what he knew about the events of the preceding evening.

There were sharp, stunned gasps from both of the women in the car. “That is not the young man I raised,” Mrs. Potts said sadly, shaking her head. “Why he persists in doing these things, I will never understand.”

“Oh, poor Belle,” added Plumette. Then she whirled on her boyfriend. “Lumière! How could you leave her alone with him?”

“Hey!” he protested. “A minute ago you thought I was wonderfully clever for doing that, remember?”

“That was before I knew he’d been quite such an ass.”

“Listen,” said Lumière, with all the air of a man forced to ruin the mystery and magic of his genius by explaining it to a crowd of ordinary people. “If they are never alone with each other, they will never talk to each other. And if they never talk to each other, they will never move past this thing that has happened. And if they never move past this thing, then they will never become friends, and if they never become friends, there is absolutely no chance that they will stay married for a whole year. Need I remind you what happens to all of us if they don’t stay married?”
“The entire estate goes to that awful Eloise, and we lose our jobs,” Mrs. Potts said solemnly. “But my dear,” she added after a moment, “do you think it’s possible for them to fall in love, or is the best we can hope for that they will eventually be able to make it through dinner without sniping at each other?”

Lumière shrugged. “Who can say? The potential is there, I think; the kiss showed us that. But we will never find out if they don’t talk to each other, now will we? So, you see, all you have to do is follow my lead. I know what to do.”

“So wise,” laughed Plumette, leaning over to give him a kiss on the cheek. But as she settled into her seat again, and leaned back to watch the road fly past outside, she wondered why he couldn’t see their own relationship with the same clarity.

Meanwhile, in the Peugeot, Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont were not exactly making good use of the time alone that Lumière had been so good to obtain for them. As Adam had put the car into drive, he had asked Belle if she had fastened her seatbelt, she had responded affirmatively, and then they had lapsed into a predictable, uncomfortable silence. They had now made it about as far as the turnoff for the town of Long Buckby, whatever the hell that was, and still not a word had been exchanged.

It was a lovely spring day, with fluffy white clouds adrift in an ocean of brilliant blue sky. All around them, the countryside spread away from the road in an endless green carpet, dotted alternately with trees and fields in different shades of green and brown. It was all very beautiful, a side of England that Belle had not yet seen. And yet, in spite of all that, she still found her attention dragged, quite against her will, to the man in the seat next to her. Despite the fact that she had seen him dressed casually many times now since they had come to Britain, it was still somehow vaguely shocking to see him wearing jeans and a t-shirt that identified him as an attendee of the 2011 New York Film Festival. She wrinkled her nose a little at that; it was hard to picture him ever attending something so fun that it had the word festival in its name. She tried not to notice that the shirt fit him awfully well for a five-year-old piece of festival merchandise. He hadn’t shaved, and the sharp angle of his jaw was covered in a layer of golden stubble. Combined with the large, very expensive looking aviators he was using to hide his damaged eye (which really did look awful), it gave him a sort of dangerous look, as if he were familiar and unfamiliar all at once.

In a way, she was surprised he had been content to let Lumière drive them all the time when they were in London, because he was, she could see now, actually quite good at it, weaving the car in and out of traffic with practiced skill. She looked at his left hand where it lay on the gearshift, watching as the narrow gold band of his wedding ring glinted as it caught the fresh spring sunlight. That was another thing that surprised her, now that she really thought about it. He had made such a big deal to her about their marriage being a sham, a necessity of circumstance that ultimately meant nothing. She remembered how quickly he had picked out that ring the day they had gone to the vault, the studied nonchalance with which he had dropped the box into his pocket. He had acted as if he hadn’t given a damn about the whole thing. And yet, he had worn that ring every day since, even when they had been at home alone, just the two of them. Why? She had not asked it of him. She wondered how many other surprising hidden depths he had, before reminding herself very firmly that she really ought to try not to care. She wasn’t sure being pleasantly surprised was worth all the complications that would surely follow.

Her gaze drifted back up to his face, but his eyes were firmly fixed on the road. She doubted he had looked at her even once since they’d been in the car. But that was good, right? Why then
should it cause her to feel a tiny flutter of disappointment? With a little inward sigh, she turned and grabbed her phone out of the cup holder. If she wasn’t going to get any conversation this way, then she supposed now was as good a time as any to answer the message Neal had sent her last night. She didn’t know why she was talking to him, really. It wasn’t like she had very many good memories of their relationship or anything like that. But in such an uncertain time, and when she was so far from home, it felt comforting to be able to talk to someone familiar, someone connected to the life she had left behind. It was just too bad that someone had to be Neal. She pulled up his message and started tapping out a reply, hoping that he hadn’t developed a sudden interest in British tabloid journalism.

                   
Hi Neal,

So nice to hear from you again. It sounds like life has been treating you well. You’ve certainly been very busy! I didn’t even know it was possible to bag that many deer in one season. In answer to your question, yes, I do like living in New York. It’s a very interesting city—always something going on. However, I’m not living there at the moment.

Here she paused and bit her lip. How much should she tell him? If he knew she was married, he hadn’t mentioned it, either directly or indirectly, in either of the messages he had sent her. And if he didn’t know, she didn’t think she wanted to tell him. Doing so would involve either blatantly lying and proclaiming it a love match, or telling him the whole truth, which really was stranger than fiction, and something she didn’t want to do. Indeed, she wasn’t even sure she could do it. The thought of betraying Adam’s trust in that way was somehow strangely unappealing. Taking a deep breath and praying that Neal hadn’t talked to her father recently, she settled for something halfway in between.

I’m living in the UK right now. I’ve got a business deal that will keep me here for the rest of the year. I—

“When are you talking to?”

Belle was so startled she nearly dropped her phone. “Excuse me?” she said, turning to look at him.

He was looking sideways at her from behind his sunglasses, his eye a crystal-clear spot of blue in the center of a ring of red and purple. “Who are you talking to?” he repeated. He didn’t sound angry, Belle thought. He sounded…almost curious.

“Neal is an old friend of mine, I guess you could say,” she told him, and flushed as she said it.

“You guess you could say?” he asked, his voice a low rumble of gently mocking laughter.

“Fine, he was my boyfriend for a while,” she admitted, unsure why she was so reluctant to tell him that. After all, she was sure he had had lots of girlfriends, if you could even call them that.

“In New York?” he said, frowning. He hadn’t realized she’d had a boyfriend in New York. He knew he shouldn’t be surprised, but there was something so strange about the idea that he had seen her sitting at her desk outside his office nearly every day for an entire year, and had never once realized that she might have had her own private life that he was excluded from, and indeed, knew nothing about. There was a lot he didn’t know about her, actually. It was a sobering thought.

Belle shook her head. “No, from before, back home in Iowa where I grew up. We broke up because I wanted to move to New York.”
“Oh,” he said, and felt a sudden, shocking rush of what could only be described as jealousy of this Neal character, who had had Belle’s affection and thrown it away. Actually, that second part made him a damn fool, so perhaps there was no need to be jealous of him after all. He wanted to ask her if she had been in love with him, but he couldn’t seem to make his mouth form the words, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer anyway.

Desperately wanting to change the subject, Belle cast about furiously for something else to say. The sight of another road sign flashing by outside her window gave her an idea. “Never mind where I’m from,” she said. “You still haven’t told me exactly where it is we’re going. Your family home, yes, but where the hell is it?”

“Thornleigh Hall,” he said, with all the pompousness of the lord of the manor, “is located in Yorkshire, several miles from the village of Thornton-le-Clay.”

“Oh,” said Belle, turning over the unfamiliar place name in her head. “Tell me about it.”

He changed lanes, and then turned his head toward her again. “Really?” he asked. “You really want to know?”

“Well, of course,” Belle told him, puzzled that he should sound so amazed. “I’m going to be living there for God knows how long—I might as well know a little something about it.”

Adam felt a small smile lift the corners of his mouth. “There have been Beaumonts in England for a very long time,” he told her. “We’re mentioned in the Domesday Book, actually. But it wasn’t until the Elizabethan period that the family acquired enough money to build a real family seat. The cornerstone for Thornleigh Hall was laid in 1575.”

“Over four hundred years ago,” murmured Belle, trying to wrap her mind around the idea of living in a house that old. “That’s a very long time.”

“It is,” he agreed succinctly, “but the house hasn’t stayed exactly the same that whole time. Successive generations made changes and additions and all that sort of thing, so that what you’ll see today is kind of a mishmash of styles. Don’t get me wrong, a lot of the Elizabethan part is still there, but you’ll see the other influences if you know where and how to look. There’s all sorts: Jacobean, Georgian, Neoclassical.” He grinned suddenly, white teeth flashing. “I should quiz you,” he proposed. “See how many you can pick out.”

Belle found herself grinning too. That was just the sort of challenge she enjoyed best. “Is it very big?” she asked. “Your home?”

This time he just laughed, but for once, there was no trace of mockery or derision in it, just light-hearted amusement. She realized that this version of his laugh actually sounded rather nice. “You’ll see, beauty,” he said teasingly. “You’ll see.”

Just north of Chesterfield, they stopped for gas. Belle stayed in the car while Adam went inside to pay. When he reached the front of the line, the clerk, a young woman with teased burgundy-red hair and lots of black eyeliner, gave him a strange look, one that made Adam glad he had decided to keep his sunglasses on.

“I just have to tell you,” she said, “and maybe you’ll think this is, like, really weird, but you look exactly like that guy what was all over the internet this morning.”
“Oh?” said Adam nonchalantly, bypassing the credit cards in his wallet in favor of some anonymous cash. “What guy is that? I’ve been on the road all day.”

In answer, she reached below the counter for her phone, and held it up so that he could see a picture of himself landing a solid blow square in the face of his photographic nemesis. “This guy!” the clerk said excitedly. “He punched a bunch of paparazzi in the face! Looks super crazy, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. Are the, uh, police looking for him or anything?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t say. I kinda hope they don’t arrest him. Seems to me you should have a right to defend yourself if someone’s following you down the street and harassing you.”

“Quite right,” said Adam, grabbing a candy bar from the rack next to the counter. “I’ll take this too, please.”

She continued to stare at him the entire time she was ringing him up, her green eyes curious. “You really do kinda look like him,” she said when she handed him his receipt. “The guy from the internet. I mean, it’s hard to tell with those sunglasses on, but you really do kinda look alike.”

“Huh,” said Adam, pocketing his change. “What a strange coincidence.”

When he got back to the car, he found Belle sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat, eating one of Mrs. Potts’ roast beef sandwiches. He decided not to tell her about his conversation with the clerk. It would only alarm her if she thought there was any chance that they had been recognized. “Here,” he said, handing her the candy bar as he slid into the driver’s seat. “A little dessert to go with your sandwich.”

She looked from the candy bar to him and back again, her eyes wide and puzzled. It was a Lion bar, one of her favorites. She wondered if he knew that, or if he had just picked it at random. “For me?” she asked. “But why?”

He shrugged. “I thought you would like it,” he said, turning the key in the ignition. “Didn’t think I needed any other reason than that.”

After she ate her sandwich and her chocolate, Belle drifted off to sleep, lulled by the warmth of the sun through the window and the hum of the tires on the road. Last night she had dreamed of exploding flashes of light, but that afternoon, she dreamed instead that she was in a huge house, almost a castle. It wasn’t all the way dark, but it was very dim, the light coming in at odd angles that created a mess of slanting shadows. She wandered through a series of hallways and rooms that all seemed to be empty, searching for something, but she could never seem to find it, or even really articulate what it was. Every time she thought she had it, it vanished again, leaving her alone in the dark and cold, condemned to search again around the next corner. Suddenly, everything began to shake, and the ground crumbled away beneath her feet, and she was falling, falling, falling into a black void of nothingness.

She slammed back into wakefulness with a start, only to find that the shaking sensation was just Adam jostling her shoulder a little. “Wake up,” he said softly. “We’re here.”

Belle swallowed past the sour taste of sleep in her mouth and looked around. They had long
since left the motorway behind, and were now driving along a single track road. It wound through
what could only be described as forest, trees dark with the new growth of spring crowding close on
either side of the car. The road continued like this for a little while, then it crested a small rise and
came out into the open, and Belle finally got her first glimpse of Thornleigh Hall. “Dear God,” she
breathed, as the car went over the little hill and made its descent down to the flat parkland
surrounding the house.

It was magnificent, beyond anything her usually overactive imagination had been able to
envision. She could see now how the treed-in land surrounded the house on all sides, almost like a
ring, but as you drew nearer, the trees fell away, so that the immediate vicinity of the house was
covered only in a carpet of soft green lawn, save for one massive oak tree that grew close in, partially
obscuring her view of the building itself. But what she could see was marvelous enough.

The house was built of a limestone that shone an almost golden hue in the afternoon sunlight,
which also reflected dazzlingly off its many windows. From Belle’s vantage point, it appeared almost
square, with a turreted tower at each corner, and another pair of towers rising on either side of the
front door. In fact, there seemed to be towers everywhere, towers and windows and elaborate
looping stonework all along the gables. Adam turned the car off of the road, which continued straight
on through the open lawn before vanishing again into the trees, and pulled up into the semi-circular
forecourt in front of the house. From this perspective, Belle could see that while the main part of the
house was indeed rectangular, there was another low wing that extended along one side. So many
wings, so many rooms! How was it possible for a house to be this big?

Adam stopped the car directly before the front doors, cut the ignition, and hopped out without
a word, leaving Belle sitting in stupefied silence. A moment later, however, he appeared outside her
side of the car, and she watched, amazed, as he opened her door and extended a hand to her. Without
a word, she took it, and allowed herself to be helped to her feet. “Welcome home, beauty,” he said,
his smile so wide that for a moment Belle hardly recognized him as the man she’d spent the past
month or so living with.

She turned and looked up at the house, squinting a little in the bright sunlight. From this close, it
seemed to almost blot out the sky, a towering monolith that made her feel infinitesimally small by
comparison. She opened and closed her mouth soundlessly several times, trying to find the words to
describe the impression it made on her. “Is it big enough for you, then?” he asked.

Belle turned to him, her eyes like bright stars. “People live here?” she asked in amazement.

He chuckled. “They do indeed. I grew up here, in fact. Shall we go in?” She nodded, unable to
say another word, and he reached into his pocket and withdrew a very heavy, old-looking key.

The front doors of the house were very solid dark wood, overlaid with a layer of gold that had
been carved into an intricate, twisting design that Belle realized must be the Beaumont family crest.
Adam fit the key into the lock and turned, and with a shuddering creak of long disuse, the two halves
swung open, revealing the darkened interior. They stepped inside, and Belle immediately began to
cough from the stale, dust-filled air. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she looked around, and then
swung her head back around to Adam, her eyes wide with shock.

His lips were compressed into that long, thin line that she knew meant he wasn’t pleased. But
it was more than just simple displeasure that filled him, she could tell. His face stood out very white
against the darkness, all the color drained out of it, and his eyes were even wider than hers, if such a
thing were possible, and filled with a haunted, horrified look that made her blood run cold and her
legs begin to tremble under her. “I don’t understand,” he finally said.

Belle didn’t understand either. Thornleigh Hall may have looked alright from the outside, but
inside, it was an utter mess.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Some decisions are made. Please keep being patient with me and my sporadic updates. Also, if anyone is interested, Thornleigh Hall is based on the real-life Burghley House, though it is not a direct copy of it. My house describing skills are not stellar, so hopefully that gives you a better image to keep in your head as you read.
I'm back, I'm back, I'm back! I hope there are people out there who are still reading this. I didn't mean to let it go so long between chapters, but I was really busy with school, and then the impending release of Star Wars kind of sent my muse in a different direction for a bit. But I'm back now! This chapter isn't super long, but it is some forward movement at least. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the Jaguar pulled up outside the house forty minutes later, its occupants found their boss on the verge of an epic outburst, and their Belle on the verge of tears. “Don’t look now,” Plumette whispered to her boyfriend as they pulled into the forecourt, “but I think your plan to put them together didn’t exactly work out.”

“Merde,” said Lumière with feeling as he stopped the car.

Belle was sitting on the front steps, her back against the gaping black chasm of the open front door. Her knees were drawn up, with her arms resting on her knees, and her head resting on her arms. She looked as if she would rather be anywhere else in the world. “Oh dear,” said Mrs. Potts when she saw her. “Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.” Cogsworth said nothing, but his expression was grave.

In contrast to his wife, Adam was pacing up and down outside the house in long ground-eating strides, his head bowed and his hands laced tightly together behind his back. His entire body seemed to practically vibrate with a barely suppressed, tightly coiled kind of energy, which became even more apparent when he all but sprang at them as soon as he heard the sound of a car door opening. “Does someone want to tell me what the fuck is going on?” he thundered, his eyes flashing like twin tongues of blue flame.

“Adam, sweetheart,” said Mrs. Potts imploringly as she climbed out of the backseat. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“That’s what I would like to know! What the hell is this?” he cried, flinging his arm dramatically toward the house. “What did he do? What did you do?”

Suddenly, Belle appeared beside her husband, grabbing his arm and forcing it back down to his side. “Stop being so melodramatic!” she snapped, the voice of a woman who had had quite enough nonsense for one day, thank you very much. “Can’t you see they have no idea what you’re talking about? Hell, I saw it and I still don’t know what’s going on. So can you please stop storming around and actually communicate like a real human being for once?”

Adam turned and looked down at her in momentary confusion, as if he had completely forgotten she was even there. Then, as his staff watched in silent astonishment, a strange look flitted across his face, soft and tender, regretful and a little bit sad. The expression vanished as swiftly as it had appeared, replaced by his customary tight-lipped scowl, but Lumière saw it, and wondered if Belle had too. He wondered if she realized what that kind of look meant coming from him, if she understood just how rare it was. If she did, her turbulent, challenging expression gave no indication
of it.

“You’re right,” Adam said finally, and his voice sounded strange, as if it were coming from a great distance. “Let’s show them.” Then in one swift movement, he took the hand that was still somehow inexplicably holding onto his arm and tucked it into the crook of his elbow, causing Belle to give a little gasp of surprise. “This way, my dear,” he said with sarcasm that was only very thinly veiled, and steered her toward the house, leaving the staff to trail after them with looks of apprehension on their faces.

“But Adam, the luggage.” Mrs. Potts was making one last ditch effort to distract him from his anger, but to no avail.

“Leave it,” he snapped back over his shoulder.

Upon entering the house, Mrs. Potts realized immediately why Adam and Belle had been waiting outside in the bright spring sunshine. Crossing the threshold of Thornleigh Hall was like stepping into a tomb. How long had it been, she wondered, since someone had last stood inside this foyer? She cast her mind back rapidly over the more than thirty years of her acquaintance with the Beaumont family, trying to remember. In July, it would be ten years since Adam had moved to America, and she knew for a fact that his father had not ventured up from London since then. But it had been longer even than that. While Adam had been at Eton, he had still come home to Thornleigh for every school break, unless his father had specifically requested his presence in London. But that had all changed once he went away to university. Once he was at Cambridge, with his own flat, his own friends, his own concerns, he had not come home at all, not once. And once it had become clear that he wasn’t coming back, his father had either fired all the house staff, or, in the case of Mrs. Potts and Lumière, recalled them permanently to London, and that had been that. Which meant, if Mrs. Potts’ calculations were correct, that there had been no one at Thornleigh in a dozen years, or even more. But still, she hadn’t thought—had never imagined…this.

The first thing one noticed, really, was how cold it was. The warmth and light of the day outside seemed utterly unable to penetrate the gloomy chill within, trapped as the air was by the thick stone walls and the heavy black and white marble tiles of the floor. It was a damp, musty sort of chill, the kind that made one think of moldering vegetation and dripping water. Mrs. Potts took a deep breath, and then hastily stifled a cough when the smell of mildew hit the back of her throat. Yes, there was water damage somewhere in this house, or she very much missed her guess.

Lumière, the last one in, closed the front door after him with a heavy thud, and then, realizing his mistake, groped about furiously for a light switch. “Don’t bother,” came Belle’s voice from out of the gloom. She had disentangled her arm from Adam’s with a yank as soon as they were through the door, and was now standing with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, as if she could generate enough heat that way to vanquish the goose bumps that were crawling up and down her arms. “We already tried that,” she continued. “There isn’t any power.”

No power? For some reason, this possibility had never occurred to any of them, and for a long moment there was nothing but stunned silence as they each tried to figure out what in the world they were supposed to do next. Then Lumière, ever the optimist, clapped his hands, the sound echoing jarringly in the still space. It made Mrs. Potts want to tell him to be quiet, lest he wake the dead who she was sure slumbered somewhere within the bowels of the house. “Then we’ll just have to make our own light!” he said stoutly. “Plumette, if you please?”
“Huh?” said Plumette, who was still looking around with wide, vaguely horrified eyes. “Oh right, right!” she added hurriedly when she saw what he was gesturing at. “Coming!” Working together, the pair pulled on the thick, twisted drapery cords at the tall window to the left of the front door, sending the moth-eaten drapes sliding slowly open. Then they did the same for the window to the right of the door. Sunlight flooded into the entry hall, causing the little group assembled there to blink furiously as their eyes adjusted. Unfortunately, being able to see their surroundings in an improved light only served to make things worse.

For one thing, the windows were absolutely filthy. Nearly a story tall and divided into rectangular panes that intersected into diamond shapes near their arched peaks, they were covered in more than a decade’s worth of dirt, grime, and more than one instance of bird shit. A thick brown-gray film coated every square inch of glass, save for the places where the rain had worn meandering channels into it. It gave the late afternoon sunlight a hazy, sickly quality, as if it were the light of a dying star. Several of the windowpanes were cracked, as if someone had thrown rocks at them, and a few more were even missing entirely. Belle cast her gaze down to the floor and saw the telltale shards of ancient glass there, scattered like pebbles against the tile. She wondered vaguely why she hadn’t noticed them before. It was a wonder no one had stepped on them.

The act of opening the drapes had released all the dust that had accumulated in the folds of fabric. It billowed out now, thick and choking, swirling and twirling in the amber light as it drifted downward to settle in a gritty layer over everything in the hall. Not, of course, that it made much difference. Everything was already covered in a coating of dust so thick it had to be inches deep. It was in every crevice of the stone walls, every divot of the marble floor. It coated the round mahogany table in the center of the hall, blanketing the ormolu clock with its hands permanently stopped at a quarter past two, the matching tarnished candelabra, the porcelain vase full of petrified flower stems. It seemed to practically drip from every crystal of the massive chandelier high above their heads, to cloak the elaborately carved banister of the sweeping main staircase, and to mask the subjects of the paintings on the walls. It was in Belle’s hair, in her eyes and throat, in every pore of her skin, and oh God, how was she ever going to get it off, because if there wasn’t any power, then there almost certainly wasn’t any water, and—

Adam was speaking now, his voice cutting across her thoughts like a jagged knife. It was clear from his clipped tone that he was only just barely keeping his emotions in check. “Someone start talking,” he ordered. “I want an explanation, and I want it now.”

For a long, uncomfortable moment, no one spoke. Then Mrs. Potts stepped forward. “I’m sorry,” she said simply. “I didn’t know. None of us did.”

“How the hell could you not have known?” he demanded. “You’ve been with this family nearly as long as I’ve been alive, and Cogsworth even longer than that. How is it even possible that neither of you knew anything? Wasn’t it your job to manage my father’s affairs?”

Now it was Cogsworth’s turn to step into the fray. “Now wait just a minute, young man,” he said sternly. “That isn’t entirely fair of you. Your father’s instructions in this area were very clear. Management of all matters pertaining to Thornleigh Hall was to be his province, and his province only. No one else’s. Those were our direct orders, and you know how your father felt about having his orders disobeyed. We couldn’t possibly have foreseen that this would be the outcome. Why would it have been? It makes no logical sense.”

“There’s something that I don’t understand,” Belle interjected, causing Adam’s head to whip around toward her as if, in his distress, he had once again forgotten she was there. “The landscaping —”
“What about it?” he asked impatiently.

“Well, the fact that there even is any. The lawn around the house has all been mowed; there aren’t any weeds in sight. Someone has clearly been keeping up with exterior maintenance. Why would your father do that, and then neglect the interior of the house like this?”

“Don’t you see?” he said imploringly, and then, thinking better of it, added, “No, of course you don’t see. How could you? You didn’t know him. This is exactly like my father. He did it to punish me, like he’s done everything else.”

“I don’t follow,” Belle said hesitantly. And she really didn’t. Her relationship with her own father had always been so close and supportive that it was nearly impossible for her to picture a family where a father would go to such lengths to deliberately hurt his own son like that. Then again, this was the father who had used the English legal system to essentially orchestrate his son’s unhappy marriage, so what did she know? Maybe upper-class families were just strange like that.

Adam started pacing again, back and forth and back and forth in front of the mahogany table. “He knew how I felt about this place,” he said. “Just as I know how much he always hated it. He decided to destroy it from the inside out, but because God forbid the neighbors notice anything amiss, he paid someone to keep up with the goddamn bloody landscaping!” His voice rose as he spoke, reaching a frenzied, almost frantic pitch by the time he finished.

“Oh Adam,” said Mrs. Potts, for lack of anything better to say. She knew he was right, of course, but that didn’t make the situation any easier to understand or to accept. She was filled with an almost paralyzing guilt. How could she have let this happen? While it was true that the elder Mr. Beaumont hated to be contradicted (like father, like son), she still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something she ought to have done and hadn’t. She had just assumed, however, that even though he had closed up the house to occupants, he had still been paying someone to look after it. She hadn’t thought that he would forget what he owed to himself, to his family and its legacy, just to satisfy some petty grievance against his only child. She had been horribly, horribly wrong. Perhaps there was some truth after all to Adam’s supposition that his father had been suffering from dementia. But she didn’t want to think about that. It was far too painful, and besides, the damage was already tragically, and perhaps permanently, done.

“He only closed up the house because you left,” Lumière said, a note of bitter reproach in his voice. “If you hadn’t run away from your responsibilities and left the rest of us holding the bag, none of this would have happened.”

“Lumière!” Plumette exclaimed sharply. “Why would you say such a thing?”

But the damage was already done. Adam stopped his pacing, turned, and brought his hands down against the table with a resounding slap. “You think I don’t know that?” he shouted, his words echoing off the high ceiling, and the anguish in his voice made Belle want to put her arms around him. Wait, where had that thought come from? But there it was, as strong as it was inexplicable. He was standing with his back to them, his shoulders slumped as he leaned against the table with all the defeat of a man trying to pick up the pieces of a life he no longer understood or even recognized, and all Belle wanted to do was wrap her arms around his waist and rest her head in the depression between his shoulder blades. She shook her head as if to clear it. What an odd reaction.

Without turning around, Adam heaved the most bone-weary sigh Belle had ever heard and spoke again. “I’m not going to get into this right now,” he said, his voice strangely calm and devoid of all the anger it had carried just a few moments ago. “I have neither the energy nor the inclination. Take my things to the West Wing master suite, and Belle’s to the East Wing suite. The rest of you can choose whatever bedrooms you want from what’s left. And someone get on the phone and get them
to turn the damn power back on.” For a long moment, no one moved, their feet all rooted to the floor in shock, dismay, and probably more than a little bit of fear. As if sensing their hesitation, he turned his head just enough to look back at them over his shoulder. “Now, please,” he said pointedly.

Adam paused before the tall double doors to the West Wing master suite, his hands resting on the ornately carved tarnished brass handles. He had told them to put him in this set of rooms because it had seemed the most logical choice. After all, who was the master of the house now if not him? But now that he was actually standing here, one swift downward press of the handles away from entering the room, he was second-guessing the wisdom of that decision. These were his father’s rooms, not his. His old bedroom was on the other side of the house, just down the hall from the suite that had once belonged to his mother. The suite that he had just given to Belle. He was awash in a sea of frightened, contradictory thoughts about the past and the present, about families and legacies and destiny, about what you could and couldn’t outrun. For so long, he had tried everything he could think of to get away. He had moved to another continent, founded his own company, slept with whatever women struck his fancy, never called, and never written. He had run away as hard and as far as he possibly could, and yet in the end, it seemed that all roads were circular, and he had wound up right back where he had started. Here he was, sole inheritor of a legacy centuries old, about to take his first steps into the lonely prison of the master’s rooms, while the beautiful, unhappy wife he had wronged languished in her own cage on the opposite side of the mansion. Perhaps this was the way it was always going to happen, the fate he couldn’t escape. And yet, Belle wasn’t his mother, and he certainly wasn’t his father, right? Right? With a heavy sigh, he pressed down on the handles and opened the doors.

Inside, it was lighter than he would have thought. Someone—Lumière, most likely—had brought up his luggage and opened all of the curtains, although the windows, like those on the ground floor, were so filthy that it didn’t make all that much difference. Adam walked slowly from the sitting room to the bedroom, letting his fingertips trail over objects bathed in sickly yellow light and furred with dust as he went. These were his father’s rooms through and through, he thought. The man’s personal touch was all over every last grandiose Victorian detail, right down to the arrangement of red wax roses under glass that sat on the marble-topped coffee table. As he watched, one of the wax petals detached itself from its stem and drifted slowly downward to rest at the bottom of the bell jar. What a piece of garbage, he thought. The sooner that was gone, the better.

In the bedroom, he paused in front of the looking glass on top of the dresser. It was a heavy old thing, set in a solid wood frame with carved feet like lion’s paws. The reflection staring back at him from the dirty, water-stained glass was somehow unsettling, a wavering, fragmented, unreal thing. He had his mother’s eyes, blue as the sea, and her tawny golden hair, but the rest of him was entirely his father. His long, narrow face; his straight nose; his wide, curving mouth with its thin upper lip and fuller bottom one: they were all classically Beaumont features. Why had he thought that coming here would be a good idea? There was no sanctuary here, no second chance or fresh start. There was only an endless circle, bringing him back and back again to a destiny he didn’t want. There was only his father’s face staring back at him from the other side of the glass. With a strength and speed that surprised even himself, he picked up the mirror from the top of the dresser and hurled it at the wall, where it shattered, spraying shards of glass and splinters of wood in an arc across the floor. Then he sank down onto the edge of the massive canopied bed and wept.
The sound of a soft knock at the door brought him back to himself, and he looked up with a start. Outside the window, the sun was low in the sky, bathing everything in an eerie orange light. He felt utterly unmoored from time, unable to tell whether it had been minutes or hours since he had sat down on the edge of the bed. Whoever was at the door knocked again, louder and more insistently. “Go away, Mrs. Potts,” he called ill-temperedly.

“It’s not Mrs. Potts,” came a voice from the other side of the door. “It’s me.”

“Belle?” he said with surprise and more than a little alarm, rising from the bed and stepping into the doorway with the sitting room so that he could see the closed door to the hallway. “What are you doing here?”

He could practically feel her rolling her eyes at him. “What do you think? I came to check up on you. Now are you going to let me in, or not?”

Adam looked back over his shoulder at the bedroom floor, where broken bits of mirror glinted in the dying sunlight. He brought his hand up to his face and felt that the tender skin around his damaged eye was still wet with tears. “No,” he said with as much forcefulness as he could muster. “I’d actually rather you went away.”

There was a moment of startled silence. Then he heard a soft thump from the other side of the door. “Belle…” he said warningly. “What are you doing?”

“Just having a seat,” came her voice, light and nonchalant. “You can not let me in, yes, but I don’t think there’s any rule that says I can’t sit in the hallway, is there?”

“I guess not,” he managed to say, coming closer.

“Good,” she said. “Then I’ll just have a seat right here.”

He came closer still, then turned and slid down the length of the door until he was sitting with his back to it. If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, he supposed. Even through the heavy wooden door, he would have sworn he could feel her presence, her back pressed against his back, so scorching hot as to be almost searing. “What are you doing here?” he asked again.

“I have some things I need to tell you. Updates and stuff. Are you sure you won’t let me in?”

“I’m sure,” he told her. “Don’t ask me again.”

There was a bit of a huffy sigh. “Fine,” she said, then seemed to recollect herself and continued in a calmer voice. “Lumière called the utilities people. They can’t do anything today because it’s Sunday, but they’ll send someone out tomorrow to give us electricity and water again. He also went into the town and got us some supplies and stuff. There’s pizza and beer down in the kitchen if you’re interested.”

“I’m not,” he said in a flat voice, even as his stomach let out a betraying rumble.

On the other side of the door, Belle lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. “Suit yourself.”

Silence fell again, and stretched on and on for so long that each wondered if the other had gotten up and walked away. Finally Adam said, in a voice so quiet it was barely more than a whisper, “I’m sorry for bringing you here.”

“Are you?” asked Belle. “I’m not.”
Adam let out a little broken-sounding laughter. “You don’t have to lie to me, Belle.”

He heard her shift, felt her turn so that she was looking toward the door. “I’m not lying,” she insisted quietly. “I would never lie to you. You’ve done a lot of shitty things, don’t get me wrong, but bringing me here isn’t one of them.”

“I don’t understand you,” he told her bluntly, letting his head fall back against the door with a soft thunk.

“I think it’s more that you don’t understand yourself,” she replied. Another long moment of silence, and then, “Why won’t you open the door? What do you think I’ll see if you do?”

“Nothing that you want,” he told her. “Just leave well enough alone, Belle.”

He heard her push herself to her feet and brush the dust from her clothes. “Suit yourself,” she said. “But at least let me leave you these candles I brought. It’ll be dark soon. Goodnight, Adam. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Seconds passed as he heard her footsteps recede down the hallway. Then suddenly, a wave of feeling washed over him, so strong as to be almost a compulsion. He didn’t understand why, but he knew he didn’t want her to leave, that he couldn’t let her leave. “Belle!” he cried, throwing open the door. “Wait!” But then he drew up short.

Outside his door, the hallway was shrouded in the gathering evening gloom. At his feet, just beyond the door frame, Belle had left an elaborate five-branched candelabrum, a box of candles, and a lighter. But in the shadowy recesses of the hall, nothing stirred, not even a single speck of dust. Belle was gone.

Thousands of miles away, in a little bar in a little town in Iowa, a slightly overweight young man with curly black hair that wouldn’t stay out of his eyes was wiping down glasses behind the counter. It was early evening, and the bar was mostly silent, when all of a sudden, a loud, strident, “LeFou, get in here!” split the air.

Leo Fulton, who had acquired the nickname LeFou after an unfortunate French class incident a decade or so ago, set down his rag and lifted his head with an involuntary sigh. He and Neal had been friends for a very long time, and he did genuinely care about him, but sometimes he wondered if it was too much to ask to be called by his real name every once in a while. “Coming,” he called back.

He found Neal in his office, hunched over his laptop, an irritated expression on his face. “Get over here and read this,” he snapped when he sensed Leo’s presence in the doorway.

Without a word, Leo came around behind him and read over his shoulder. It was a facebook message from Belle Villeneuve. “I don’t get it,” he said when he had finished. “Why are you even talking to your ex-girlfriend again?”

“Ugh, that’s not the point, dumb ass. The point is that she’s lying to me, that bitch.”

Leo read it again. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but I still don’t get it.”

Neal sighed exaggeratedly. “Look,” he told him, jabbing at the screen. “Right here. She says she’s
living in the UK for business, but her own father told me it’s because she married her fucking boss.”

Leo considered this, his brow crinkling in confusion. “No offense,” he said finally, “but I don’t really understand why you care. I mean, she’s your ex for a reason, yeah?”

Neal’s fist came down on the desk, startlingly loud in the tiny office. “She’s supposed to come back to me! She’s not supposed to marry someone else, and she’s not supposed to lie about it!”

His friend took a step back, out of arm’s reach. “But what are you going to do about it?” he asked. “Tell her you know what she’s doing? Let it go? I really think you should just let it go.”

Neal’s lips curled in a vindictive smile. “But LeFou,” he said in a low voice, “where’s the fun in that?”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Belle discovers another part of Thornleigh Hall. I'll try not to leave you hanging too long. Love you all. Comments are appreciated, as always.
A Truth Universally Acknowledged

Chapter Notes

Sorry I'm late, but I brought a nice long chapter with me to make up for it. I really do appreciate everyone's continued interest in this story. It helps me keep pushing through when I have moments of doubt. A couple of you asked in the comments if I had gone to see The Last Jedi. I did! I saw it twice, once with my mom and once with my sister. I would say that I liked it, but didn't 100% love it. I did love all the Rey and Kylo stuff though. I have half an idea for a modern Reylo AU (all my best ideas are modern AUs, apparently), but it still needs some time to percolate before it's ready to be written. Perhaps after I finish this. And I will finish this, I promise. Anyway, I really love this chapter. I hope you do too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the morning of May 16, Belle awoke feeling discontented. Rolling over in bed so that she was facing the window, she reluctantly pulled the covers down from where they had been heaped up over her head and tried to identify the source of her melancholy.

It wasn’t the weather. Over the past few weeks, the full weight of an English spring had settled over Yorkshire, more beautiful and pure and incandescent than anything she had ever known before. She had left the rose-colored brocade curtains pulled back and the tall windows cracked open before she had crawled into bed the night before, and her chambers were filled now with a soft, warm breeze. It smelled like freshly cut grass, like rich, dark earth, like the old wood and new leaves of the forest. The only thing missing was the scent of spring flowers, for no flowers grew on the grounds surrounding Thornleigh Hall. But Belle could tell from the way the landscaping was laid out that they once had, that the estate had once contained gardens of every shape and size, filled to bursting with flowers of every kind and color. The idea of it tugged at the back of Belle’s mind, though she could not figure out why, or what she was meant to do about it. But even so, that was not enough by itself to explain her feelings. She had to look deeper.

It wasn’t the house either, at least not really. Oh, she had been shocked and dismayed by it at first, there was no denying that. She hadn’t realized before that there could be this much dirt and decrepitude in the whole world. She remembered their first night here, how she had almost cried as she had peeled back the musty counterpane and slid her body down between the cold, stiff sheets. But with each passing day, the house revealed a little more of itself to her, and she was beginning to realize that there was a hidden depth to it, if you only knew where to look. Take her suite of rooms, for instance. Though no one had ever said as much to her, she had a more than sneaking suspicion that she was currently sleeping where Adam’s mother once had. Three months ago, she would have found it strange, the notion of a married couple sleeping in their own separate bedrooms with an entire house in between them, but now she thought perhaps she understood. Being married to Adam was nothing like what she had ever imagined marriage was supposed to be like. She wondered if Adam’s mother, whoever she was, had felt that way too, if she had ever lain awake late at night and wondered what her husband was doing in his wing of the house. Had this room been a place of refuge and safety for her, somewhere where she could be totally alone with her own thoughts? Or had she sometimes rolled over in bed and imagined what it would be like to have the warmth and strength of a male body lying next to her? But then, that was the difference between the previous Mrs. Beaumont and herself. Her predecessor had known what it felt like to have your husband in
your bed. Adam’s very existence was proof enough of that. Belle would never know that feeling, nor was she sure she even wanted to.

But at any rate, and for whatever reason, she had decided to do what she could for her new apartments. Whether it was because she felt some strange affinity for Adam’s mother, a woman about whom she knew next to nothing and would never meet, because something about the room itself spoke to her, or simply because she was bored and needed something to do, it was impossible to say, but the end result was the same. She and Plumette had dragged all the furniture out of the suite and polished the floor until it gleamed. They had carried the carpets outside and beat the years of accumulated dust out of them with old-fashioned wicker carpet beaters. Mrs. Potts had helped her to wash all of the bed linens and to fix the holes in the long, heavy curtains, while Lumière had washed the windows, even going so far as to lean precariously over the casement in order the clean the outside of the glass, despite Plumette’s furious protests. Even Cogsworth had helped, in his stately, dignified way, by working the tarnish off of all the metal fixtures and cleaning every individual bead of glass in the crystal chandelier. Working together, the five of them had turned the East Wing suite into a beautiful sanctuary that Belle could be justly proud of. Belle had been touched by their kindness, by their care and concern and help. Indeed, she had been almost overwhelmed by it, and just the tiniest bit embarrassed, to think that all the struggles of her marriage were laid so bare as to make other people feel sorry for her.

Which brought her to the fly in the ointment of her life. It wasn’t Yorkshire, it wasn’t Thornleigh Hall, and it most certainly was not the staff, who in their own strange way had become the family Belle had never had in twenty-six years of living only with her father. No, the problem was most decided and without question her husband. The morning they had left London, she had been so sure that if they could just get out of the city, escape to a new place, that things would be different. And they were, but not in the way that Belle had expected, or, if she was being totally honest with herself, in the way that she wanted. She had been astonished at how quickly her anger had vanished. She had fully expected it to be, if not a permanent fixture, at least a long-lived one. But all it had taken had been one look at the pain in his eyes when he saw what had happened to his home, and her rage had gone out in a puff of air like the candles on a birthday cake, replaced by something infinitely more complicated.

He had been less…adversarial ever since they had come to Thornleigh, less confrontational, less likely to snipe at her in that sarcastic, mocking way of his. But it had not escaped her notice that the reason for this was largely because she hardly ever saw him. It was almost as if he were avoiding her. No, scratch that, he was definitely avoiding her. She thought perhaps he meant it as a punishment for himself, a way to do penance for his actions in London by depriving himself of her company. She also thought maybe he was trying, in some strange way, to give her what he thought she wanted, which was not to have to look at his face. He couldn’t have been more wrong. In seeking to punish himself, he had instead succeeded in punishing her. Though she was surrounded by new friends from morning until night, and she never had to be alone if she didn’t wish it, there was a part of her that still hungered for the one thing she did not have: the beautiful, mysterious, golden man who had such sadness in his brilliant blue eyes. It was foolish and nonsensical in the extreme. After all, she had known him for over a year, and she had never felt this way before. Why now?

She didn’t know why now. But that didn’t change the fact that something was different, had become different the moment they said their vows, and was only continuing to grow in intensity the longer they spent in this house. She was drawn to him, god damn it, wanted to know him, for whatever that was worth. It thrilled and terrified her in equal measure. If even his actions in London couldn’t drive her all the way away, then what would it take? What kind of hold did he have on her? Did he sense it too? Was that part of the reason he had hidden himself away? But it wasn’t fair, she thought almost savagely, her nails digging little crescent moons into her palms. He didn’t get to make
that decision for her.

But how to make him see? She feared they were doomed to continue on like this, parallel lines never meeting, unless one of them broke the spell. And it would never be him, so it would have to be her. Pushing herself into a seated position, she pulled her hair away from her face and looked around for something to tie it back with. As she grabbed a hair tie from her nightstand, her gaze fell on her Kindle, and a slow, easy smile spread across her features. \textit{You know}, she thought, snapping the elastic around her ponytail, \textit{that just might work.}

As she had expected, Adam was nowhere to be found at breakfast. Instead, she ate her morning meal with Cogsworth, who regarded her with curiously alert hooded gray eyes from the other end of the long table. “You seem nervous this morning,” he remarked as he dropped a lump of sugar into his tea. “Are you quite alright?”

“Oh yes,” said Belle, resolutely devoting herself to spreading jam on her scone so she wouldn’t have to meet his gaze. “Never better.”

“Hmmm,” her friend responded, raising his cup to his lips. “As you say, my dear Mrs. Beaumont. As you say.”

Belle ate as quickly as she dared, and declined Cogsworth’s offer of a second cup of tea. “Oh, no thank you,” she demurred, standing up and pushing in her chair so fast that it made a skidding sound against the floor that caused a chill to run up and down her spine and made Cogsworth visibly cringe. “I have, uh, places to be, things to do. You know how it is.”

“No, not really,” he told her. And he really didn’t. There was precious little going on at Thornleigh Hall these days now that the initial frenzy of cleaning up Belle’s suite was over with. He felt sometimes as if this place existed outside of space and time, as if they were all suspended within the protective glass bubble of a snow globe. Although in this instance, perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it a dust globe. All of which was to say that he was fairly certain the lady of the house didn’t have anywhere in particular that she needed to be. What he wasn’t so certain of was what she was trying to cover up instead.

“Oh,” said Belle, and then paused awkwardly. “Well, I do. Have things to do, that is.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You’re acting very strangely.”

“Yes, totally fine,” she insisted, and then beat a hasty retreat before he could ask any more questions.

Cogsworth offered up a slight shrug as he selected another scone. He liked Belle very much, but sometimes she really could be quite peculiar. Ah, well, Americans were often strange, in his experience. At least hers was a harmless sort of oddity.

Belle walked quickly down the hall, trying to decide where in this gargantuan house she was most likely to find Adam. All these closed doors, and even after several weeks in this place, she still didn’t know what lay behind all of them. She just hoped he wasn’t in his bedchamber. She didn’t
think she had quite the nerve to go barging in there. If she remembered correctly, there was a study somewhere on this floor, which seemed to her to be the most logical place to start. But where was it? It was so easy to get turned around in here. Perhaps down this hall? She turned quickly, and as she rounded the corner, she collided directly into another person. “Oh!” she gasped in surprise “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

It was Plumette, dressed in old clothes and with a kerchief tied around her curls. “Belle!” she exclaimed happily. “Don’t be sorry! I was just looking for you, actually.”

Belle felt her heart sink, and then immediately felt guilty about it. Any other time, she would have been happy to see Plumette, who was quickly becoming the kind of female friend she had always wanted in college and had never been able to make. But this morning, she was a woman on a mission, and that mission did not include whatever it was Plumette wanted her to do. But she cared about her friend, and so out loud, she only said, “You were? What’s up?”

“You and I are starting a project in the kitchen, and we want your help.”

“My help?” Belle said faintly.

“Yes, of course your help!” Plumette replied, linking her arm with Belle’s and turning so they were walking back the way she had come, toward the kitchen. “We’re finally going to tackle that pantry. You wouldn’t believe how old some of the stuff in there is.” She kept talking, but Belle couldn’t really focus on her words, only on the way all of her plans for the morning seemed to be slipping out of her grasp.

“You do want to help, right?” Plumette finally asked when she noticed that Belle was doing nothing but nodding vaguely and making the occasional confirmatory noise. “I mean, let’s be honest, I’m pretty sure you don’t have anything else you need to be doing today. I know Adam has stopped making even a pretense of giving you work to do.”

What could Belle say? It was all true. She couldn’t exactly tell her friend, who had worked so hard to help her fix up her suite, that she couldn’t help her in return because she had to talk some sense into the fake husband who was making her feel some very real things. And, she had to admit, another few hours wasn’t going to make a real difference when she and Adam had been dancing around each other to no apparent end for several months already. “It would be my pleasure,” she said, squeezing Plumette’s arm fondly.

It wasn’t until just after lunchtime that Belle was able to free herself from the kitchen, making vague excuses that she wasn’t sure her friends totally believed. And indeed, the first thing Mrs. Potts said once she was sure Belle was out of earshot was, “That girl is up to something.”

“You think?” Plumette asked with mild sarcasm, pulling her head out of a cupboard. “I’d bet you fifty pounds it has something to do with Adam.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Potts, shaking her head sadly. “Of course it does.”

Plumette raised a curious eyebrow. “You say that as if you think it’s a bad thing. I thought you wanted them together.”

“I did. I do! But I’ll be honest with you, my dear, and tell you that I’m starting to lose hope. Wouldn’t something have happened by now if something was going to happen at all?”
Plumette considered this. The older woman did have a point. “It’s still only May,” she said finally. “Sometimes these things take time.”

“I thought coming up here would make things different,” Mrs. Potts told her. “But if anything, Adam’s worse than before. He’s been so…withdrawn ever since we got here.”

Plumette didn’t disagree. “I think he feels badly about the house,” she conjectured. “We all do.”

Mrs. Potts stared at the kitchen door, as if she could see through it to wherever Belle was on the other side. “Do you think she can get through to him?”

There was a long pause. “I think she’s quite literally the only one who can,” Plumette said at last.

Meanwhile, Belle had retraced her steps from the morning, and was now standing outside a closed door. Though she couldn’t hear any noise from the other side of the heavy wood panel, she felt fairly certain that this must be Adam’s study, and was therefore the most logical place in the house to start searching for him. Taking a deep breath, she drew herself up to her full height and opened the door swiftly, before she could lose her nerve. What she saw when she did brought her up short.

Adam was sitting behind a very large, very heavy-looking antique wooden desk, his laptop in front of him, and stacks of papers strewn out on either side. “I told you, Lumière,” he said sharply when he heard the disturbance at the door, “I don’t want any lunch. I’m not hun—” Then he looked up, and whatever words he had been about to say died in his throat, replaced only by a startled, “Oh.”

Belle could only stare at him, feeling as bemused as he looked. She had thought about this moment all morning, carefully planned out what she was going to say and do (for Belle was nothing if not a planner), and yet now that it was finally here, she found all of her careful thoughts deserting her in the face of a reality she had not anticipated. He was looking at her intently, confusion and something else she couldn’t identify written in his features, one golden brow arched expectantly, and all she could think to say was, “You’re wearing glasses.”

He was indeed, thick black plastic frames that gave him a vaguely professorial air and made Belle’s stomach do that curious swooping thing again. “Oh,” he said again, bringing a hand up to touch the side of his face. “Yeah, I, uh, wear them sometimes when I read.” Another long pause followed, and then, “What are you doing here, Belle?”

But Belle did not answer him, at least not directly. That pause has been enough time for her to recollect herself, and remember what it was she had come here to do. Without speaking, she crossed to the windows. Though the day outside was bright and cheerful, he had all the windows tightly shut, and all the curtains drawn, leaving the room illuminated only in the sickly yellow glow of the sconces on the walls (old gas lights that had been converted to electric, she suspected) and the lamp on his desk. Moving quickly, her movements deliberately brisk and purposeful to give him no time to argue, she threw back all the curtains and unlatched and opened all the windows, instantly filling the study with the fresh smell of spring. The windows were old glass, leaded into diamond shapes, each one studded at the top with a circular pane of colored glass in the design of the Beaumont crest. “There!” she said brightly when she had finished, clapping her hands together as if to shake the dust off them. “That’s so much better. It would be a shame to be all shut up in here when the weather is so nice outside.”
Adam watched her as she worked, feeling, as he so often did in Belle’s presence, a vague sense of panic, as if he had figured out what to do, only to have all his suppositions and plans overturned in his face while fate laughed at him. These past few weeks had been absolute torture for him. He had wanted to bring her to Thornleigh, had been so strangely proud and excited at the idea of showing her where he had grown up. But that had been before he had seen the house, had seen the ruin of every good thing he had left behind, and had realized it was all his fault. The guilt and the shame had been overwhelming, strong enough to plunge him into a malaise so deep that all he had known how to do was withdraw. And so he had closed himself off from Belle. From everyone, really.

He had thought he had been doing the right thing. He wouldn’t have done it otherwise, right? Thornleigh Hall had been the last thing he had to give, the only gesture of atonement he knew how to make. And then, as it turned out, he hadn’t had even that. He had tried to look at things from Belle’s perspective, and the idea of what she must think of him had made him feel sick inside. He was the monster who had been slowly destroying her life from the day they said “I do,” culminating in him consigning her to some kind of half existence in this moldering wreck of a house. Adam thought that if he were Belle, he would certainly never want to lay eyes on him again. So he had tried to make it easy for her to do just that. It had cut him deeply in a way he had not expected, had felt strangely like denying a part of himself, but he had persisted. After all, he had reminded himself day in and day out, all of this was only temporary. If it hurt now, it was nothing compared to how it would hurt six months from now, or eight months, or ten. And besides, it was what she wanted, and Adam didn’t think he had it in him to deny her that which she wanted.

Except that perhaps it wasn’t what she wanted after all, because here she was in his study, bright and cheerful and throwing light into every hidden dark corner. The sight of her made his heart beat faster in a way that was terrifying and wonderful all at once. But she still hadn’t answered him, had instead simply laid down on the red velvet sofa beneath the windows, an embroidered silk pillow beneath her head and her bare toes curling beneath the cushion at the other end. “Seriously, Belle,” he tried again. “What are you doing?”

Once again, he was greeted with radio silence. Without even looking at him, she flipped open the cover of whatever electronic device it was she had brought with her (dear God, was that a Kindle?), and snuggled down against the sofa cushions, looking for all the world as if she intended to stay there permanently. The fragile, fraying thread of his nerves finally snapped. “God damn it, beauty!” he thundered. “What the hell?”

This time she turned to look at him, her head tilted to one side and her eyes exaggeratedly wide. “Can you keep it down?” she asked innocently. “I’m trying to read.”

Oh, she was infuriating! “Yes,” he said, exercising every bit of self-restraint he possessed to keep from yelling again. “I can see that. What I want to know is why you are reading here.”

She lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. “Why not? This is my house too, isn’t it? I promise I won’t bother you. What are you going to do, have me bodily removed?”

Tempting, but he supposed she did have a point. “Very well,” he said gruffly. “But I’m working, and I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Belle turned back to her book, the corner of her lip twitching in what he thought might be amusement at his expense. It needled him. “I won’t say a word,” she promised.

“Good,” he replied. “So I should hope.”
He lasted eighteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds. “Alright, I give up,” he said, setting his glasses down on the desk with a click. “What are you reading?”

Belle felt her mouth curl up into a small, private smile. Victory was hers at last. The book she had chosen to read that afternoon was an old, old favorite of hers. “Pride and Prejudice,” she said fondly, a little sigh of pleasure in her voice.

His reaction wiped the smile right off her face. “Ugh!” he said forcefully, tipping his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose as if the very mention of the book was enough to make him feel ill. “Not that garbage! You’re killing me, Belle.”

Belle slapped her Kindle closed and tossed it to the other end of the sofa. “Excuse me?” she said dangerously, pushing herself into a seated position. “What, may I ask, is wrong with Pride and Prejudice?”

“Oh God,” he groaned, taking his hand from his face and leaning forward. “What isn’t wrong with that book? Where do I even start?”

“It’s the most wonderful book in the world! I bet you’ve never even read it,” she accused.

“Not true!” he exclaimed defensively. “I never attack where I don’t understand. I had to read it for school when I was sixteen.”

She made a noise of derision. “Oh, please. That was, what, thirteen years ago?”

“More like sixteen years,” he admitted with a wry smile.

“Oh.” She hadn’t known before exactly how old he was. “Well, that just proves my point. That was half a lifetime ago. I have read this book ten times, and I have an English degree from Grinnell. I wrote my senior thesis on Austen’s work. Why would I trust your opinion over my own?”

“Because I have an English degree from Cambridge,” he said with a smirk. “With first class honors. I do believe that trumps.”

For a long moment, Belle could only stare at him, trying in vain to keep her mouth from dropping open. “Y-you studied English?” she finally managed to say.

He shrugged. “Yeah. What did you think my degree was in?”

“Economics?” suggested Belle, feeling flustered and suddenly out of her depth. “Business? Whatever it is rich people study? I don’t know.”

He seemed amused. “I daresay there’s a lot you don’t know about me, beauty.”

But Belle was quick to hurry over the implications of that. “Well, I still think you’re wrong,” she said boldly. “In fact, I know you are.”

Adam leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands in front of him, his work utterly forgotten. “Then prove it.”

“What?” she said, startled.

“You heard me. You think that book is so great, then convince me of it. Put that degree of yours to work.”
Belle felt her blood rush hot through her veins. It was a challenge, a chance to do battle, and a battle of wits had always been her favorite kind. They were crossing swords once more, but this time it was different. It wasn’t mean-spirited or angry or hurtful, it was just…exciting. “Gladly,” she told him, shifting so she was sitting cross-legged. “The thing about Pride and Prejudice is that a lot of people unfairly dismiss it as ‘just a romance.’ But it’s also a very insightful social commentary on marriage, and the pressures and constraints women faced. Take, for instance, Mrs. Bennet’s preoccupation with seeing her daughters well married. She’s a ridiculous figure, yes, but she does have a point. Marrying for economic security was reality for a lot of women.”

“Ah, I think I begin to understand why you like this book so much,” Adam said dryly.
“Do you?” Belle replied, skepticism coloring her voice.

“Yes, of course. After all, marrying for economic advantage is kind of your specialty, isn’t it?”

His voice was serious, but his eyes were laughing, and Belle took the comment in the spirit with which it was obviously intended. “Oh, shut up,” she told him, but there was no heat to it. She looked at him intently for a moment, and then said, “You know what, forget what I just said. I have a feeling that I could spend the rest of the day making every pro-Austen academic argument I can think of and it still wouldn’t be enough to convince you. So I might as well dispense with that and just tell you why I like it. On a personal level, that is. May I?”

He inclined his head toward her slightly. “By all means. Be my guest,” he found himself saying, and realized, with no small degree of surprise, that he meant it. He actually wanted to hear her talk about this book that he loathed.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile of triumph, and shifted again so that she was lying on her side facing him, her head propped up on her hand. “I know I said it isn’t just a romance, but the fact remains that it is a romance too. It’s my favorite romance I’ve ever read. Just thinking about it makes me feel kind of giddy.”

“But…why?”

“Why?” she asked incredulously, looking at him as if he were crazy for even asking. “Well, let’s start with Mr. Darcy.”

“Must we?”

“I thought you were going to let me speak. And yes, we must. Mr. Darcy,’” she told him firmly, “is the absolute pinnacle of literary romantic heroes. There’s just something very sexy about him. In the beginning of the book he’s such a spectacular asshole, but you come to understand very quickly that it’s really in large part just a coping mechanism to cover up how awkward he feels. And then of course, he meets this girl, and she’s everything he never thought he wanted, but he can’t get her out of his head. There’s something so immensely satisfying, as the reader, to watch how she humbles him. ‘You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased,’ he tells her. It’s marvelous.”

“Why Belle,” he said teasingly, mostly for the sake of being contrary. “I never knew about your humiliation kink before.”

She started to sit up in indignation, then dropped back down and rolled her eyes once she saw that he was kidding. “You’re gross,” she said mildly. “And it’s not humiliation. It’s learning, and it’s growth. Darcy’s pride makes him so certain that he can get through life based solely on his lineage, his wealth and consequence. Meeting Elizabeth forces him to learn that those things don’t mean nearly as much as he thought they did, if all they do is serve to isolate him and keep someone who
really matters from seeing who he truly is. His big gesture towards the end of the book is so swoon-worthy because it’s him confronting what he disdains most in order to help the woman he loves. And he does it without seeking any approbation, simply because it’s what’s right. Doesn’t get any better than that.”

Adam felt a strange sudden ache in his chest. Big romantic gestures and a man with a hidden heart of gold? Well, if that was what she wanted, she wouldn’t find it here. There was no way he could ever compete with the image that stupid book had put into her head. But no, wait, that wasn’t right. He wasn’t trying to compete with anything or anybody. That wasn’t what this was about. Wasn’t it? The room suddenly felt too warm, Belle’s gaze too bright. “What about Elizabeth?” he asked quickly, hoping his face wasn’t as red as it felt. “It doesn’t seem fair that he has to do all the changing, while she gets to remain exactly as she is.”

Belle’s smile had the smug look of someone who had anticipated her opponent’s next move and was already two steps ahead of him. “But that’s just it; that’s why I love it so much. She has to change too. Her flaw in the book is thinking that she knows him when she really doesn’t. He wounds her pride by saying something stupid, and she responds by believing all his bad press, so to speak. But when they meet again at Pemberley, and she gets to spend time with him without any distractions to get in the way, she very quickly realizes that he’s not the person she thought he was, in the best possible way. That’s what makes for the best love story, I think. Love at first sight is all well and good, but I think it’s more interesting if the two people involved don’t see it coming, until one day each one realizes that things have changed, that the other person isn’t their enemy anymore, that perhaps they never really were. Do you see what I mean?”

He did. Or rather, he wanted to. He wanted to believe in forgiveness, and second chances, and a world where he could just start over. There was just one problem with that. “That’s complete and utter bullshit,” he said.

She blinked at him, startled. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“I say all of that, and all Mr. Cambridge over there has to say is ‘bullshit’?” she queried with raised eyebrows. There was a challenge implicit in her words and in her expression.

“Yes, Miss Grinnell, bullshit. Thinking that the world works that way is little better than believing in fairy tales. People don’t have hidden sides to themselves, just lying in wait for you to discover. They are who they show themselves to be. What was it your Mr. Darcy said? Ah, yes, ‘my good opinion once lost is lost forever.’ That’s real life. If you dislike someone, it’s usually because they’ve given you a reason. You would do well to hold on to that.”

For just a split second, a look of great sadness flitted across her features. “What the hell happened to you to make you so cynical?” she asked. He didn’t answer. “I call bullshit on your bullshit,” she added. “Haven’t you ever once been wrong about someone?”

The answer came to him in an instant. Yes, he thought. I was so wrong about you. He had thought her infinitely practical, the kind of woman who wore snow boots on the subway and ate packed lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and carrot sticks. And she was that. But she was also the woman reclining like some pagan goddess on his sofa, all fresh-faced and seemingly unaware of the effect she produced. The soft cotton of her shirt had ridden up a bit, caught in that valley created by the inward curve of her waist as she lay on her side, exposing a tantalizing strip of smooth skin. He wanted to run his fingers over it. He wanted to lay down next to her on that sofa and feel the entire length of her body against the entire length of his. She was so beautiful, he realized, when she was talking about something she was passionate about. It was the way the color rushed up into her
face and her eyes grew bright. He had never seen her like that before, and he realized suddenly that he wanted to see that look on her face again and again and again. It was alarming, but only mildly so, like the feeling of climbing to the top of the high dive for the first time.

She was looking at him expectantly, as if wondering where his mind had gone to. Oh yes, she had asked him a question. “Not that I’ll ever admit to,” he said, a trifle more stiffly than he had intended. “I’m not going to make it that easy on you.”

Belle laughed. “Fair enough. It’s a cop out, but I’ll allow it.”

“I will turn your question back on you though. Have you ever been wrong about a person?” He found himself holding his breath while he waited for her answer, which irritated him. Why should it matter? Except that it did. It mattered enormously.

Belle studied him in silence, taking in every detail: the seemingly insouciant slouch that could not quite conceal the tense rigidity of his shoulders, the impossibly long legs crossed at the ankle with studied nonchalance, the golden hair that was standing slightly on end where he had run his hand through it and which her own treacherous fingers longed to smooth down, the faded yellow shadows of mostly healed bruises which lingered beneath one of the blue eyes that watched her with a strange hesitant curiosity. In her mind’s eye, she could still see the horrible stunned look on his face when she had found him in that woman’s bed. But she could also see the look of determination in his eyes right before he had thrown the first punch at that photographer, could feel the gentle warmth of his hands when he had laced their fingers together that night in the kitchen of Beaumont House. Who was the real Adam Beaumont? “I don’t know,” she said finally. “I haven’t decided yet.”

The moment seemed to hang suspended in time, frozen like dust motes in a beam of sunlight. The room was completely silent save for the sound of their breathing, as each one tried to work through all the implications of what Belle had just said and decided what to do next. For his part, Adam has a thousand different thoughts and feelings rushing through his head, most of them contradictory and all of them troubling. But one stood out sharper than all the rest. He couldn’t—it was too much, and not at all what he had intended to do when he woke up this morning. And yet, somehow it suddenly seemed like the only thing he could do. Reaching into the top right-hand drawer of his desk, he extracted a large old-fashioned key. “Belle, may I show you something?”

Belle’s eyebrows drew together in confusion when she saw what he was holding. “Yes, of course you may.”

He crossed to the sofa, and with a smile, held out his hand to help her to her feet. “Then come with me.”

He didn’t release her hand even for an instant as he led her through the maze of hallways, and for once, Belle was content to let him lead, his long fingers wrapped securely around her own smaller ones. On and on they walked, deeper and deeper, into a part of the house Belle was utterly unfamiliar with. Where on earth could he be taking her? She turned her head to steal a glance at him as they went, but his face betrayed nothing.

Finally, they stopped in front of a set of heavy double doors, which Adam, producing the key from his pocket with a flourish, unlocked with an audible clunk as the ancient locking mechanisms slid into place. “May I present to you,” he said with a flair for the dramatic that made Belle want to roll her eyes and smile all at once, “the greatest treasure in all of Thornleigh Hall.” And with that, he
flung the doors open wide and ushered Belle in.

What Belle saw when she crossed the threshold caused her to blink in astonishment, and then gasp when she realized what she was looking at. In front of her was a massive rectangular room, two stories high, with a large rococo marble fireplace at one end. Above the fireplace hung an equally large portrait of a man in the curly wig and extravagantly embroidered waistcoat of the early eighteenth century. But Belle barely noticed this. All her attention was instead focused on the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined every wall. Made of wood the color of rich honey, supported by gilded columns and topped on the second level with elaborate gilded cornices, they were filled with books of every conceivable size and color. Old leather bound volumes shared shelf space with newer paperbacks, slender volumes of poetry were jammed in between heavy atlases and dictionaries. Impossibly delicate spiral staircases led to the upper story, which was ringed by an equally delicate wooden railing carved into fanciful scrollwork designs. In between some of the bookcases were tall uncovered windows, which cast wide swathes of sunlight across the pink and green and white marble mosaic of the floor. It was as dusty as any other place in the house, but Belle still thought it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Adam’s voice came from somewhere behind her left shoulder. “I think there’s enough here to keep you so busy you never have to read that awful book again.”

Belle turned swiftly toward him, too enraptured even to resent the dig at her favorite novel. “Oh Adam,” she breathed. “It’s wonderful!”

“Look up,” he told her, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

She did, and promptly gasped again. Painted across the ceiling high above their heads was a beautiful mural of the night sky, complete with all the constellations one might see from Yorkshire. While she was looking at the mural, Adam was looking at her, feeling a pull from somewhere in the vicinity of his heart at the sight of her excitement. Watching her, the way her lips were parted in astonishment and her eyes were brighter than any of the stars in the painting above them, he was reminded of how much he had always loved this room, of how many hours he had spent in here as a child. “If you like it so much,” he found himself saying impulsively, “then it’s yours.”

She spun to face him with almost alarming speed. “What did you say?”

“I said it’s yours. Yours to do with as you see fit. You can clean it how you like, organize it how you like, bar the rest of us from the room if that’s what you want. I give you complete and total control.”

For a moment, she looked as if she wanted to run into his arms, and he thought perhaps she might, and he thought perhaps he wanted her to. But then she spun away again and rushed to the closest bookshelf, running excited fingers over the spines of the volumes there. “Oh thank you, thank you!”

“Belle,” he said once he had let her look for a few minutes. His voice was very quiet even in the stillness of the library, but it was enough to get her to stop what she was doing and turn to face him again, head tilted to one side inquiringly. “Belle,” he said again, “I have been a damn idiot, and a fool. And an asshole,” he added for good measure.

“If you’re looking for me to dispute that,” she said, “I’m not going to.”

He winced. “Ok, that’s fair. I deserve that. God, the things I’ve done to you--!”

She put the book she had been holding back on the shelf. “Yes,” she told him solemnly. “You hurt me. I won’t pretend otherwise.”
“I would never ask you to.”

Taking a step toward him, she said, “And you know, perhaps the strangest thing is, I don’t even think I’m angry anymore, only sad.”

“Sad?” That he hadn’t expected.

“I don’t understand you,” she said bluntly. “You fucked up so badly, and then you fixed it, and then you just went and fucked it all up again. I thought that maybe things would be different when we came here, but they haven’t been, not really. From the moment we walked through that front door, it’s like you’ve been hard pressed to even acknowledge I exist.”

His first instinct, selfish and unhelpful, was to protest at the unfairness of her assertion. Hadn’t he had so much else to do, so many other things to worry about? Hadn’t he only been doing what he thought was right? But no, she had a point. He had been hurt by what he had discovered when they came north, and he had run away from comfort instead of toward it. “I was only doing what I thought you wanted,” he said slowly.

She laughed in disbelief. “What you thought I wanted? Ah, you thought, but you never asked, did you?”

“No,” he said with great sadness. “No, I never did.”

“Well, then you might try that. God, it’s like I’ve been nothing to you these past few weeks. You haven’t even given me any work to do.”

Now he scoffed incredulously. “Given you work? Given you work? Why on earth would I do that, Belle? You’re not my assistant anymore.”

She took another step or two towards him and crossed her arms over her chest challengingly. “Then what am I?”

His answer was immediate. “My wife,” he said softly. “I should have thought that was obvious.”

“No, I never did.”

“Not to me it wasn’t.”

Adam fought the sudden absurd desire to fall on his knees before her in supplication. “Then I’m asking now. Tell me what it is you want, and I’ll do my best to give it to you.”

She came closer still, close enough for him to reach out and enfold her in his arms, had he been so bold. “Just don’t shut me out again,” she said. “For better or for worse, right? Until next March, we’re a team, whether you like it or not.”

“A team, huh? That’s what you want?”

She nodded. “That is what I want. God knows why, but I do.”

He held out his hands to her. “Then I’ll do you one better. Come, beauty, let us be friends. What do you say?”

She hesitated for only the barest instant before slipping her hands into his and giving them a gentle squeeze. “I’d like that,” she said shyly.

“So would I,” he said, and then lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them gently, first one, then the other. “So would I.”
They stood like that a moment more, holding tightly to one another’s hands, still and quiet in this landscape of late afternoon sun and shadow. It felt strangely like making new vows, Belle thought, and then wondered whether the fact that they meant these ones made them somehow more binding.

“Well,” said Adam finally. “I have a conference call at five, so I think I’ll leave you to get acquainted with your new kingdom. Tell you what, pick a book, any book, and you can tell me all about it at dinner.”

“You’re going to have dinner with me?” Belle asked, hardly daring to believe it.

“I am. Tonight, and tomorrow night, and all the nights after that.” He leaned down and kissed the crown of her head. “I promise.”

And then he was gone. As soon as the heavy doors closed behind him, Belle clapped her hands to her mouth and let out a little yelp of joy as she looked at her library. Thornleigh Hall seemed suddenly a little more like home than it had when she’d woken up that morning.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: It's the start of a beautiful friendship. Like I said, I promise I will finish this work. I'm far from done with Adam and Belle, for sure! Thanks for your interest and patience. I'll see you next time.
Hoo boy, this chapter turned out to be MUCH longer than I had anticipated. At fifteen pages and over 10000 words, it's the longest chapter thus far. Once these two started talking, all I could do was listen, and well, here we are. Enjoy.

“It occurs to me,” Adam said one morning over breakfast, “that you haven’t had a proper tour of the house yet.”

Belle lowered her copy of The Yorkshire Post so that she could look him in the eye. It was actually rather wonderful, she had discovered, to be able to share her meals with him. She liked being able to look up and see him sitting across from her, his blue gaze bright and interested. Even when they were silent, each absorbed in their own reading or thoughts, it was a friendly sort of silence, warm and companionable. It hadn’t been like that any of the times they’d had dinner together in London, and she wondered at the change. But then again, perhaps the city had shown neither of them to best advantage. “I’ve seen some of it,” she said now. “Mrs. Potts showed me.”

“Which is all well and good,” he replied, “but I haven’t shown you, is what I’m saying.”

“No,” Belle said slowly. “No, you haven’t.”

“Okay, I’m going to choose to believe you’re being willfully obtuse right now,” he said. “I’m trying to tell you that I want to give you a tour of the house because I want to spend time with you.”

“Oh,” said Belle softly, feeling, much to her chagrin, a blush begin to spread across her cheeks. “I’m sorry, I’m just still not used to this whole being friends thing.”

“Neither am I,” he admitted. “I think we both need practice.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I would love a tour of the house, if you would like to give me one.”

“Then put on your most sensible shoes, my dear, and I’ll show you just what it is that you are mistress of.”

Twenty minutes later, they met again in the entryway, Belle having taken him at his word and laced up her oldest, most comfortable pair of sneakers. “Where to first, tour guide?” she asked him. “I am yours to command.”

His lips quirked at that, giving him a look that was somehow both amused and predatory, and which made Belle’s face feel hot when she realized the interpretation that could be put to her words. Then he smiled slowly. “I think that’s the most faith you’ve placed in me the entire time we’ve known each other. I thought, given the weather, that we might begin outdoors.”
Belle looked out one of the tall windows that flanked the front door. Lumière had washed them as high up as he could reach, but it would take a taller ladder than they currently possessed to get all the way to the top. They also needed to do something about replacing the missing panes of glass. The gaping holes were currently covered by black plastic sheeting, which reminded Belle disconcertingly of a mouth full of missing teeth. But from what she could see out the window, she had to concede that Adam’s point was a good one. The sky was full of dark gray clouds that sat low on the horizon. Belle had seen enough of England in the springtime by now to know what that portended. Rain was coming soon, and a lot of it. “I think we’d better hurry,” she told him.

Outside, it was cool, a gathering breeze heavy with the scent of the coming deluge lifting the hair from his forehead and her neck. Adam paused, then turned to look down at her. “Just out of curiosity, and because I’m not sure what ideas you’ve gotten into your head about this place,” he said, “if I asked you to guess, how big would you say the estate is?”

Belle craned her neck to look up at the huge golden stone house, then turned her gaze out toward the wide expanse of green lawn, and then finally brought her eyes up to meet her husband’s. “I have no idea,” she admitted with a shake of her head.

“Oh, come on,” he urged her. “Just take a stab at it.”

She threw up her hands in a helpless gesture. “Oh, I don’t know! Three hundred acres?”

Now he laughed, long and heartily, in what was obviously a spontaneous reaction. “Three hundred! God, you’re adorable.”

She glared at him. “If you’re just going to make fun of me, I’m going back inside.”

“No, no, no,” he protested. “Don’t. I’m not making fun of you. You are adorable. It’s not a bad thing. I’ve just never met someone quite like you before. It’s refreshing.” Seeing that she was still looking at him with narrowed eyes, he hastened to change the subject. “At any rate, sweetheart, try adding a zero to that number.”

“Three thousand?”

“Quite so, unless my asshole father decided to sell them.” Belle winced at that. She, who loved her father so much, didn’t think she would ever grow used to hearing Adam talk about his own father that way. “Three thousand acres,” he continued, “and someday I’ll show you every last one of them. But for today, just the gardens, I think.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Belle said as they walked around to the back of the house, “but I’m not sure it’s strictly accurate to call them gardens. Doesn’t the use of the term garden imply that, you know, something is growing there?”

At first, she feared she had said the wrong thing, for a shadow passed across his face, a look of infinite melancholy that made Belle’s heart ache. Then it vanished, like a cloud sailing across the sun, and he was himself again. “A fair point,” he conceded, “but I think when something has been laid out by Capability Brown, it deserves to be called a garden in perpetuity, don’t you think?”

“Capability Brown? Seriously?” She gave him a skeptical glance.

“Seriously. He came to Thornleigh and designed the gardens in 1772. He even supervised the planting. I think the plans are somewhere in your library.”

Belle took a look around. They were standing in the middle of the gardens, where all the gravel paths converged around a stone fountain of dolphins spitting water toward the sky. Or at least they
would have been spitting water, had the fountain actually been turned on and working properly. All around them were the ruins of what must have been a very impressive garden, once upon a time. Adam had said that his father had paid someone to keep up with the landscaping, and she supposed this was technically true, in the sense that one could still see where the outlines of the garden had once been. But all of the artistry of it had long since been lost. The topiaries had given up their shape and become ordinary shrubs again, reaching out long, tangled branches across the path at Belle’s feet. The ornamental flower beds were now nothing more than patches of dirt and stray bits of mulch. “I’d like to find them,” Belle mused, reaching out to rub the leaves of a boxwood between her fingers. “I wonder if it would be possible to recreate the original design.”

Adam turned from where he had been staring off into the middle distance to look at her in surprise. “You garden?” he asked.

She lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. “Eh, a little,” she demurred. “Nothing like this, obviously. But my dad and I had a combination flower and vegetable garden when I was a kid. We used to grow tomatoes and cucumbers. Still to this day the best tomatoes and cucumbers I’ve ever eaten.”

The melancholy look flitted across his face again. “My mother grew roses,” he said suddenly, and the soft, sad tone of his voice caused Belle to pause in her studied examination of the boxwood leaves and look up. It was the first time he had ever willingly, almost casually, mentioned his mother to her. “Beautiful roses, as big as your hand, and in every color: red, white, pink, you name it. She was named for them, you see, and they were her favorite flower.”

In what was becoming a distressingly familiar pattern, Belle had to fight the urge to close the distance between them and put her arms around him. “I wish we could make the roses grow again,” she told him instead.

He looked at her strangely. “Why can’t we? I mean, yes, it’s probably too late for this season, since we would have to essentially start from scratch, but there’s always next year, if you’re so determined.”

“Adam,” she said, speaking very slowly and with strange pauses between her words as if they were hard for her to say, “I won’t be here next year.”

Oh. Right.

He knew that, of course. That was the nature of their deal, after all: one year, not a day more or a day less. He had been the one to phrase it in those terms, that night in the library of Beaumont House that already felt like a lifetime ago. So why did hearing her say it out loud suddenly feel like an unwelcome reminder? “Yes, yes, you’re quite right,” he said finally, striving for more flippancy than he felt. “A year from now, I imagine all of this will seem like nothing more than a half-remembered bad dream to you.”

Belle’s fingers closed suddenly around the boxwood leaves, accidentally tearing several of them from the branch. A month or so ago, she would have agreed with him wholeheartedly. The night of the party, the night she had almost left, still had something of the shadowy quality of a nightmare. But now she had a wonderfully intriguing house full of treasures to discover, a beautiful library with enough books to keep her occupied for the rest of her life, and maybe, just maybe, a new friend. She didn’t want to forget those things. She didn’t want Adam to want her to forget them. “Yes,” she said stiffly, “like it never even happened.”

A strange, almost uneasy silence settled over the garden, each one aware that they had said not quite the right thing, but neither one knowing just how to fix it. Belle released her grip on the shrubbery and walked off a little ways down the path, casting about furiously for something to say that wouldn’t be a reminder of the finite nature of her time here. “What’s that building?” she asked
finally, pointing.

Adam followed the direction of her finger towards a low gray stone building in the distance, nestled cozily against a rise in the lawn where it vanished into the forest. “Ah yes,” he said with a smile, taking a few long steps toward Belle, until he was close enough that she could feel his breath stirring the delicate hairs on the back of her neck. “That would be the stable.”

Belle turned to look up at him. He really was very close. “You have horses?” she asked with interest. “I mean, obviously you don’t have horses now, but you did?”

Adam let out a little inward sigh of relief, glad to turn the conversation to something hopefully a little less fraught. “My father had a horse,” he said, “because all good Englishmen do, but he hardly ever rode him because he was hardly ever here. My mother hated to ride because horses scared her, but my father insisted she have a horse too. I was the only one who really liked it, I think. I had a pony when I was a little boy. His name was Gumdrop.”

Belle threw back her head and laughed, a loud, happy sound that made Adam’s chest ache for reasons he didn’t really want to interrogate just then. “Gumdrop?” she asked incredulously. “I can’t picture you ever having a pet anything named Gumdrop, no matter how young you were.”

He grimaced. “Well, it wasn’t my choice. He came with the name, and Mother wouldn’t let me change it.” His expression softened. “I loved that pony, though. He used to eat slices of apple right out of my palm.”

“What happened to him?” she asked.

He shrugged. “My father sold him. Not all that long after my mother died, actually. He said ponies were for boys, and it was time I had a man’s horse. So Gumdrop went off to live with some other family, and I got Midnight instead.”

“How old were you?”

“Seven,” he said simply.

Belle stared at him in horror. “Seven? Oh, Adam…” Her heart felt as if it were breaking for the frightened, bewildered little boy he must have been. She wanted to travel back in time and comfort him. Hell, she wanted to comfort him now.

“No, don’t,” he told her. “I don’t want your pity. That’s just the way things were done among families of our station. And Midnight wasn’t a bad horse. He and I got on famously, and I had him for years. He’s the horse I really learned to ride with.”

“And?” Belle prompted.

“And what?”

“What happened next? Finish your story.”

“You ask a lot of questions, you know that?” he protested mildly. Belle just smiled. “Very well,” he continued, “I left him behind when I went away to Cambridge. He died the summer between my first and second years, and I wasn’t here for it. Mrs. Potts called me to tell me he was sick and that I should come home, but I didn’t want to be bothered. I was nineteen, and I had my own flat for the first time, and, well, you know how it is.” Belle didn’t, but she nodded anyway. “And so I didn’t come, and he died without me. I don’t know who was with him at the end. I sometimes think about him, and wonder if he knew I wasn’t there, if he wondered why I didn’t
come.” He broke off suddenly and looked down at her, an expression of vague bemusement in his eyes. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told that to,” he said softly.

His hands were jammed in his pockets, but Belle reached out and gave his forearm a comforting squeeze. “Thank you,” she said simply, “for letting me be the first.”

Adam felt a small smile curling the corners of his lips. He actually did feel lighter, as if a weight he had been carrying around for over a decade was suddenly gone. “What about you?” he asked. “Do you ride? I’m guessing from the way your eyes lit up when I said stable that you might.”

“Well, I never had my own horse, obviously. That would have been so far outside the realm of affordable that I would have known better than to even ask. But when I was in seventh grade, I begged my dad for riding lessons. Have you ever heard of the Saddle Club series?” Adam shook his head. Belle rolled her eyes in self-deprecation. “Yeah, of course. Why would you? Anyway, it was this series of books about these three best friends who rode horses. I read all of them, and I do mean all of them, and I wanted to learn how to ride so badly. I think my dad finally agreed just to shut me up. But he made me promise that I would take the lessons seriously, because they were really a stretch for our budget, and he wasn’t going to pay for them if I didn’t commit. So I did. I treated my time at the stable just as seriously as I treated school. I had one horse that I rode all the time. His name was Philippe. A big gentle giant of a horse, not a bad bone in his body.” She paused, and her expression grew wistful. “I miss it sometimes. I stopped lessons when I went away to college, and then once I moved back home, I went back a few times, but it wasn’t the same. I haven’t ridden at all since I moved to New York.”

“I think the last time I went riding was probably, oh, 2012 or so,” he mused. “I was seeing this Swedish model, Ingrid, really lovely girl, and she really liked to—”

“Yes, yes, okay,” Belle cut in, holding up a hand to forestall any more commentary. “That’s enough of that, I think.”

Adam smirked. “Why, beauty, are you jealous?” How interesting.

She felt her face grow hot. “No,” she protested strenuously. “No, I am not jealous.”

“I think you are,” he teased. She crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re flattering yourself,” she told him. “I’m sure I couldn’t care less what you did with Ingrid, or any other—wait, what was that?”

“What was what?” And then he felt it too, a great fat raindrop splattering across his forehead. And then another one. “Uh-oh.” And then the heavens opened up into a massive spring cloudburst.

A wicked grin spread across Belle’s features. “I’ll race you back to the house,” she challenged him, her eyebrows raised provocingly, and then took off at a dead run before he could respond.

The gardens were large, and the distance to the house was greater than she had anticipated, but she hadn’t gone jogging all those times in London for nothing. It was like flying, she thought, her feet sure and swift over the rain-slick gravel path, easily clearing the overgrown branches that threatened to block her way. There was the back of the house, several sets of large French doors, the same grimy glass as the rest of the windows, but a welcome respite from the rain all the same. She wondered vaguely where Adam was, and then realized that it didn’t much matter, as long as he was behind her. She was going to win. Just a little bit farther, and—

Just as she was about to claim victory, a heavy, muscular arm reached out and wrapped itself around her waist, bringing her up short and arresting her fingers only inches from their goal. “Ah-
ha!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “Gotcha!”

“You dirty cheater!” Belle protested vigorously. “I was going to win!”

“And yet,” Adam said calmly, reaching out with his other hand to touch the side of the house, “you didn’t.”

Belle squirmed a little in the circle of his arm, making a somewhat halfhearted and ultimately futile effort to get free. “Are you going to let me go?”

He spun her swiftly around to face him. “I don’t think so. Not just yet.”

His face was very close above her, water dripping from his hair and beading on his eyelashes. Despite the damp chill in the air, he was wonderfully warm, as if the raindrops ought to dissipate into little puffs of steam where they hit his skin. And, Belle realized with surprise and something faintly bordering on alarm, he looked very much as if he wanted to kiss her, and she wasn’t at all sure she was ready to make the decision about whether or not to let him. Half of her, the half that remembered their wedding day, longed to kiss him again, ached to feel the strangely wonderful sensation that was his lips on hers. Unfortunately, the other half of her remembered Emily Chowdhury’s party, and that half was desperately afraid. That’s how it always is with people like this. They take what they want, and then they drop you.

God damn that night! Were they never to be free of it? And yet, it would just be so easy, so easy to tilt her face up towards his and let her eyes slide closed. She swallowed thickly and made herself speak, though the words felt heavy and wrong in her mouth. “Perhaps we should go inside?”

He blinked, once, twice, the spell broken. “Yes, no, you’re quite right.” Releasing her waist, he removed the by now ever-present ring of keys from his pocket, selected one, unlocked the closest door, and opened it wide. “After you, my dear.”

“Well, would you look at that!” exclaimed Lumière, gesturing with a soup spoon. “Finally, some forward movement!”

Mrs. Potts and Plumette were by his side in an instant, looking out the second-story window down into the gardens. “What? Where?” Plumette asked excitedly.

Her boyfriend gestured with the spoon again. “There! By the back of the house.”

The two women followed the direction of his line of sight. They had not been quick enough to see the actual moment of the catch, as Lumière had, but they were in time to see the aftermath. “Oh my,” said Mrs. Potts with raised eyebrows when she saw how close the two were standing. They watched through the veil of raindrops on the window as Adam and Belle stood locked in that strange embrace, his arm around her waist keeping her close, though they were almost surely both soaked to the skin by now. They were too far away to be able to see the look in his eyes, the one that was currently making Belle’s heart beat a little bit faster, but the way his head dipped just slightly was apparent even from the second floor, as was the fact that Belle didn’t move her head away in response. “Oh my God,” whispered Plumette. “Are they going to—?” But then in the next instant, Adam withdrew his arm from his wife’s waist and stepped away toward the house and out of their field of vision. “Never mind,” she sighed, “I guess not.”

The sound of a throat being cleared loudly caused all three of them to start and turn around.
“Yes, well,” said Cogsworth, “if you’re quite done over there, can we get back to the business at hand?”

Lumière rolled his eyes. “Ah, yes, the all important cataloging of the silverware. Where’s your sense of romance, man?”

Cogsworth sniffed dismissively and applied his polishing cloth to yet another salad fork. “They’re both fools for being out there in this weather. Now Master Adam never did have much good sense, but I didn’t take Belle for someone quite so careless.”

“Oh, Henry!” Mrs. Potts admonished him as she took her seat on the other side of the table. “Don’t be such a stick in the mud. This isn’t 1800—no one is going to catch their death of pneumonia. I for one think it’s lovely that Adam and Belle are finally spending more time together. After all, who better to show her the house than him?”

“Yes, Cogsworth,” Lumière added, waving his spoon about once more, “the house he loves so much that he left it up here to rot for ten years.”

“Stop doing that!” Cogsworth snapped, snatching the spoon from his hand. “This set of silver is from 1743, and I’ll thank you to show it a bit more respect!”

“Oh Lumière,” lamented Mrs. Potts, “can’t you let that go? He’s here now, and so is Belle, and isn’t that the most important thing? I don’t really understand how you can seemingly root so hard for the happiness of someone you’re also seemingly still so angry with.”

He shrugged. “Why can’t I be both? I mean, aren’t you? I care about him a lot, don’t get me wrong. I’ve known him since he was twelve, so how could I not? But that doesn’t change the fact that I think he’s been a huge asshole who has hurt a lot of people and caused a lot of damage. That doesn’t just disappear because he’s decided to come play lord of the manor for a while.”

Plumette was still standing by the window, watching the place where Adam and Belle had been standing before they had vanished into the house. The energy of the moment had been startlingly familiar to her. She was reminded of the first time Lumière had kissed her, on a spring day much like this one, and just for an instant, she longed for the fresh, hopeful feeling of new love. “He didn’t look like much of an asshole out there to me.”

Belle stood disoriented for a few moments while her eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the house. When her vision cleared, she saw that they were standing in a large rectangular room with a high ceiling and a marble floor emblazoned with yet another Beaumont crest. The bank of French doors provided the only windows, but the massive gold-framed mirrors on the red damask-papered walls ensured that the light coming in would be magnified and reflected all about the room. If all the crystal chandeliers, currently swathed in dust covers, were lit, Belle saw that the effect would be quite dazzling indeed. She also saw that the room would be a bitch to heat in the winter, but she supposed that was what it meant to be rich: you never had to worry about how much things cost or how to pay for them. A low dais along one wall, which contained a dust cover-draped piano, provided the final clue to the room’s purpose. “This is a ballroom,” she said, turning to look at him over her shoulder.

“Got it in one,” Adam replied as he locked the door behind him with a soft click. “Although it’s been a very long time since it was last used for that purpose. One of my earliest memories is of my
parents hosting a Christmas party in here, but I think by the Eighties, people had kind of given up on the concept of balls.”

“I’ve certainly never been to one,” said Belle, trying to imagine gliding across the polished floor, the heavy skirts of a ball gown swishing about her legs as she moved.

He stepped closer, leaving a track of wet footprints in his wake. “Ah, but you Americans have prom, yes? It’s kind of the same thing. Like a junior ball of sorts.”

Belle gave a wry little half smile. “That’s true, but I didn’t go to my prom. Or to any other high school dance either, actually.”

He seemed genuinely surprised. “What? Why not?”

She shrugged. “Well, mostly for one very obvious reason: no one ever asked me to one. My date for prom night was Turner Classic Movies and a bowl of popcorn.”

She said it so matter-of-factly, as if it were something that he ought to have known or guessed already. He looked at her, standing so straight and stiff in front of him, her hands in fists at her sides, her chin tilted up almost defiantly, as if daring him to find fault with her. Only the tiniest flicker of uncertainty in her eyes betrayed the fact that she wasn’t quite as sanguine about the situation as she let on. He suddenly felt an almost overwhelming rush of tenderness, and an absurd desire to make it up to her. “Oh Belle,” he said softly.

She shook her head tersely. “Don’t,” she said firmly. “I’m going to turn your words from earlier back on you and tell you I don’t want your pity. I wasn’t very popular in high school, but so what? It is what it is, and what it is, is hardly the end of the world.”

“I would have asked you,” he blurted out suddenly, almost without meaning to.

This time she laughed. “Oh Adam, stop making it worse. No, you wouldn’t have.”

Her words brought him up short. Would he have? He turned the question around and around in his mind, looking at it from all angles. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, that he would have known how to value her, but deep down, he knew that she was right. As she was about most things, he was coming to find. He wouldn’t have asked her, not at eighteen, and not at twenty-eight or thirty either. He thought of the long line of women who had wandered in and out of his life over the years, all the ones Belle knew about, and all the ones she didn’t. There had been nothing really wrong with any of them, per se. They’d been fun. But that was really all they’d been. An endless string of women, and not one of them had been the kind of woman you could share things with and confess things to, the kind of woman you could fight with one minute and make up with the next, the kind of woman you wanted to take to bed, but maybe all you would do once you got there was burrow down beneath the covers and talk. In short, none of them was the kind of woman that Belle was. He felt as if he had been going through life willfully blind, and the knowledge shamed him. “Perhaps not,” he admitted, “but I thought we had already established that I’m a huge idiot.”

To his immense relief, she smiled. “Well, I mean, yeah. Obviously.”

He extended his hand to her. “But I’ll ask you now,” he said seriously. “We’re in a ballroom, so would you care for a dance?”

She crinkled her nose at him. “You’re soaking wet,” she said, trying desperately to ignore the way his wet shirt was clinging to his abs. “Or hadn’t you noticed?”

He looked down at her, one eyebrow raised and the corner of his mouth tilted up into a little
smirk that made her feel strangely weak at the knees. “I could say the same to you.” The smirk grew wider. “Because I assure you, I noticed.”

Belle followed his line of sight and immediately felt her face go up in flames. “Oh God,” she muttered, crossing her arms tightly across her chest. Perhaps a thin, pale blue blouse on a cool and rainy day had not been the best choice. Strangely enough, though she was embarrassed as all hell, she wasn’t angry with him for pointing it out. There was something focused and intent in his gaze, almost hungry, for lack of a better word, and it made her feel suddenly warm all the way down to her toes. She opened her mouth to give what she was sure was going to be an immensely clever retort, and sneezed instead.

Adam’s smirk changed into a frown of concern. “Or perhaps you would prefer the kitchen.”

“The kitchen?”

“Oh yes,” he said with mock seriousness. “The Thornleigh Hall kitchen is renowned far and wide. Don’t you know we serve the best tea in the county? And I have a feeling you could do with a cuppa.” Belle stifled another sneeze, and he added, “And perhaps a detour for a vigorous toweling and a change of clothes.”

She looked up at him with a grateful smile. “Lead the way,” she said, tucking her hand against his offered arm. “You are my tour guide, after all.”

“Oh wow,” Belle said softly, her face tilted up toward the soaring ceiling. “Adam, it’s so beautiful.”

That was exactly what he had hoped she’d say, and he couldn’t help the little thrill that ran through him at her words, spoken in a hushed and reverent tone. God, he’d been such a damn fool. He’d avoided her for weeks, convinced that she hated this worn out, run down mess of a house, and that she hated him by extension for bringing her here. He had never before in his life been so glad to be so stupendously wrong about something. They had spent the rest of the morning and a good portion of the afternoon exploring Thornleigh’s nooks and crannies, and she had never once looked anything less than fascinated. From scullery to drawing room, she had taken everything in with her quick, observant brown eyes, tracing sensitive fingertips over woodwork and stone, brocade and velvet, crystal and china. It was almost as if—and it felt strange to even think it—she could see the house as it once had been, as it ought to be still. In other words, it was exactly as he had hoped and feared the morning they had left London: She belonged here. The house reached out to embrace her, as if welcoming back its own. But no, he reminded himself firmly. That was nothing more than fanciful nonsense. The house was just a house, and it was still a mess that he wasn’t sure he would ever be able to fix, and Belle wouldn’t be here forever, and neither would he. This was all just… well, he didn’t know what it was.

She had dropped her gaze from the ceiling and turned to look at him, probably wondering why he wasn’t saying anything. He shook his head as if to clear it. He had saved the best for last on their tour, which meant they were currently standing in the chapel, the delicate curves of fan vaulting high above their heads and tall stained glass windows surrounding them on three sides. There were so many things he wanted to say, but they all sounded so desperate, so sentimental, so stupid. In the end, all that came out of his mouth was, “It would look better if the sun was shining. It’s a little dull in the rain.”
Belle shot him a look of fond exasperation. “Don’t,” she told him with quiet firmness. “You’re selling it short, and I wish you wouldn’t. Things can still be beautiful even if they aren’t ideal. The gray light gives this place a sort of somber quality that I think is actually quite lovely.”

Adam couldn’t stop a burst of amazed laughter from escaping his mouth. “Sometimes I can hardly believe you’re real,” he said. “How are you so much of a damn optimist all the time?”

She looked at him as if she had expected to find herself offended by that, and was surprised to realize she wasn’t. “Oh no,” she said. “Not all the time. But you apparently never are, so I have to make a special effort.”

Up went his eyebrows. “You’re really quite something, you know that?”

Her lips twitched. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Actually,” he said, completely serious, “I’ve never said it to any of them.”

Feeling suddenly shy, she quickly ducked her head and moved away from him, trailing her fingers over the carved ends of the pews as she walked slowly down the aisle. “Regardless,” she said without turning around, “this is really wonderful. Not every house comes with its own church, you know.”

He followed her. “Yes, I know. For centuries, this was more or less the heart of the house.”

She whipped her head around towards him, her eyes wide, as if something had just occurred to her. “Are they buried here, your family? I know some of these old houses have crypts in them.”

He shook his head. “No, the Beaumonts have their own graveyard at St. John’s, the Anglican church in Thornton-le-Clay. Both of my parents are buried there.” He paused. “I haven’t been able to bring myself to visit either of their graves, but for different reasons.”

“Oh,” said Belle, and once again she felt that strange desire to put her arms around him.

“This place is actually more closely associated with weddings,” he told her, trying to think of something more cheerful. “Generations of Beaumonts have been married here.”

“Including your parents?”

“Ah, not my parents, no. They were married in New York,” he said, but didn’t elaborate.

Belle looked up at the rose window over the altar, a dizzying wheel of color that made her eyes go a little strange, and then glanced back at her husband. “Why weren’t we married here?”

Adam swallowed thickly. He should have known she would ask that, and he wasn’t sure he knew how to explain it to her in a way that made sense. “There wasn’t time,” he said finally, “and it wasn’t—our wedding wasn’t—” He didn’t know how to continue.

She crossed her arms over her chest and gave her eyebrows a wry quirk. “No, you can say it. It wasn’t really real.”

He winced. “It sounds so awful when you put it like that. Of course it’s real. Don’t we have the rings and the certificate to prove it?”

She gave him a look. “You and I both know there’s a difference between that and what truly makes a marriage. We didn’t enter into this—whatever this is—with the intent that it would last
forever. It was a business deal. And while I’m sure that countless of your ancestors approached their marriages in much the same way, you didn’t want to bring the ire of the House of Beaumont down on yourself by violating this space with vows you never intended to keep.”

Her words were blunt, but spoken without any trace of anger, and for a long moment, he could only stare at her. She did understand, and the knowledge of it made his heart sing. Somehow she understood how trapped he was by a legacy he had done nearly everything in his power to reject, but which had been so drilled into his head almost from the moment of his birth that it was still warping his thoughts in the most insidious of ways. He didn’t think he would ever be free of it, this constant need to please the very same people he despised. But somehow, like the miracle she was, she just knew. She knew, and he didn’t know what to say.

She was looking at him intently, curiously, and he was reminded once again of just how much her brown eyes always seemed to see. For so long, he had feared that, shrank from it. Now it felt like something of a relief. Tilting her head to one side, she said, “You love this house, don’t you?”

He smiled. “My love for this house is a good part of the reason why you’re standing here.”

That threw her. “Huh?”

“You know the terms of the will; I’ve explained them to you. I stay married to you, or I lose everything. And yes, I want that money, I won’t deny it. But more than anything, I don’t want to lose this house.”

“Then why won’t you do anything for it? We’ve been here for weeks, and…nothing. The house needs help, Adam.”

Adam sank down into the dusty velvet cushion of a pew. “You think I don’t know that?” he said with a sigh. “The problem is that I’ve never been very good at fixing things, beauty.”

She sat down next to him and laid her hand over his where it rested on his leg. It was a small hand, but a strong one, delicate and yet capable. Her words from that day in the library came back to him. “We’re a team, whether you like it or not.” Gently, almost experimentally, he turned her hand so that their fingers were laced together. The intimacy of it, the rightness, was startling, like two pieces of something sliding into place. He squeezed softly, and felt the gentle whisper of her hand’s answering pressure. This had been the farthest thing from his mind the night he had proposed marriage to her. He hadn’t expected a partner, or even wanted one. But it seemed that perhaps he had gotten one just the same.

“Come with me,” he said, tugging her to her feet as he stood. “There’s one more thing I want to show you.”

He brought her to a long, narrow room, with walls papered in soothing sage green, softly lit by the tall window at one end and by the skylight that stretched the entire length of the room above their heads. Each wall was lined with paintings of various sizes. “What is this place?” Belle asked. “It looks like a museum.”

Adam smiled wryly. “You’re not far off. That’s essentially what it is. Welcome to the Beaumont portrait gallery.”

She felt her mouth drop open a little. “All of these are portraits of your ancestors?”
He nodded. “And this isn’t even all of them. There are a lot more in storage.” He paused. “Or at least there used to be. At any rate, these are the best of the lot.”

Belle took a few steps further into the room. “Why are you showing me this?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I realized that I’ve spent all day showing you the house, its rooms and the things in them, but I never stopped to tell you anything about the actual people who lived here.” Because I want you to understand. I want you to see where I come from, what I’ve had in my head all these years.

Almost as if she had heard his thoughts, she smiled, her expression warm and encouraging. “Then you’d better start at the beginning. I love a good story.”

“Well,” he said slowly, trying to decide how far back to go. Deciding that she really meant it when she said to begin at the beginning, he continued with, “as you may have figured out already, the Beaumonts are originally from France. Normandy, to be precise. In 1066, Jean Beaumont was part of William the Conqueror’s force at the Battle of Hastings. He was a younger son who had been disinherited back home, and he came to England to try to make his fortune.”

“And did he?”

“He did. Married a local girl, had something like twelve children, and set up shop as the medieval equivalent of a gentleman farmer. And over the next five hundred years, his descendents built on what he started, which brings us to this gentleman right here.” He indicated a painting of a bearded man in early middle age, dressed all in austere black, save for the massive white ruff around his neck. “Meet Thomas Beaumont, who had either the incredible foresight or the incredible luck to make some very profitable early investments in overseas exploration, with the result that by the time he was forty, he had amassed a sizable enough fortune to build a home befitting the image he wanted to project. He began work on this house in 1575. It cost an enormous amount of money, but he was rewarded for his efforts by a visit from Queen Elizabeth on one of her tours of the country.”

Belle studied the man in the painting. He looked benevolent enough, but there was something vaguely unsettling about his eyes. Something hard, something cunning. It was the face of ambition, she decided. She turned to look back up at Adam. “Well, it sounds like so far, so good,” she said. His lips twitched. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you? And I bet they thought so too,” he added, gesturing toward a row of paintings of men and women dressed in the extravagant clothing of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

“Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?”

Clever girl. “Are you familiar with the English Civil War?”

She made a vague motion with her hand. “More or less.”

He paused in front of another painting. “This is Thomas’s great-grandson, Robert.”

The man in the portrait was young, probably no more than twenty-five, and very handsome, with flowing dark curls beneath a sweeping plumed hat, and piercing dark eyes. He was seated atop a large bay stallion, his hand on his saber hilt. A wartime portrait, then. “He looks like something out of The Three Musketeers.”

“You’re close. He was one of the king’s Cavaliers. He died in 1644 at the Battle of Marston Moor, not far from here.”
“Oh dear,” she said softly.

“That’s putting it mildly. After Parliament won the war, those who had supported the losing side were subject to heavy fines and confiscation of property.” He snapped his fingers. “Everything that Thomas and his descendents had worked for—gone, just like that.”

“What did they do? Who was left to pick up the pieces and take charge?”

He took a step toward the next picture. “Robert had been married in 1640, and when he died, he left behind a wife and a two year old son. It was his wife Elizabeth who held the family together.”

Elizabeth Beaumont was tiny, blonde, and ethereal, almost like a fairy. “She must have been stronger than she looks,” Belle remarked.

“She was an earl’s daughter, and the life she expected wasn’t the one she got. I imagine she had to find a strength no one in her life up until that point had expected her to possess.”

Belle looked sideways at him. “I think maybe there’s a lesson there.”

Without looking at her, he said quietly, “For you or for me?”

She shrugged. “Whichever one you like. Maybe both.”

He studied Elizabeth’s delicate features. She had been born into luxury, had never been expected to do anything more strenuous than flower arranging or fine needlework, and had found herself thrown into a world ravaged by war, with a dead husband, a vulnerable son, and a severely compromised livelihood. And she had held it all together through sheer strength of will. Maybe Belle was right, maybe there was a lesson in that.

“So what happened next?” she asked, pulling him back to the present. “I mean, looking around, it’s pretty obvious that the family recovered. How did they do it?”

“Ah, yes, a very good question. The monarchy was restored in 1660, when Robert and Elizabeth’s son David was eighteen. She sent him to London, and told him not to come back until he had done whatever was necessary to restore the family’s fortunes. Which he did, but I think he found a good deal more than he expected.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain exactly, but I’ve always felt that this was the point where the tone of the family kind of changed. Don’t get me wrong, Beaumonts have always been ambitious. Our motto is ‘to strive and to conquer,’ after all. But before this point, they were always ambitious for the sake of the family as a whole. Starting with David, they became ambitious for themselves too.”

Belle felt a strange chill run down her spine. “What did he do?”

“He persuaded the king to return his family’s lands to him, for starters. But he didn’t stop there. He stayed in London for many years, and became a, well, a sort of courtier, I guess you would call him. In 1665, he married a woman named Mary Wolcott, Lady Sutherland, who was six years his senior, the widow of a baron, and something of a social climber. The two of them kind of fed off each other, I think. At any rate, they didn’t return to Yorkshire until after 1680, when Elizabeth died.”

It was on the tip of Belle’s tongue to make some kind of remark about the kind of person who could stay away from their own family for that long, but she swallowed back the thought, knowing
that it was unkind and would probably destroy the fragile bubble of trust that was forming around
them. She didn’t want anything to ruin that, to take away from the extraordinary fact that she was
standing here, listening to him spin her a story in that wonderful voice of his that wrapped around her
like dark velvet. So instead she only said, “I suppose this is when the Beaumonts really became the
Beaumonts, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, and his voice seemed almost sad. “I suppose you could say that.”

They strolled on, past a parade of men and women dressed in increasingly elaborate, ever more
ridiculous fashions. Life had clearly been kind to them. They looked handsome, fashionable, and
prosperous, but also, Belle thought, strangely cold and almost calculating, as if all this was just an
image they wanted to project. Then they came to a painting that was so startling it brought her up
short.

It was enormous, nearly life sized, easily dwarfing all the other portraits in the gallery. In it, set
against the backdrop of Roman ruins on a stormy night, stood a young man whose presence was so
compelling that Belle instantly felt drawn to him as if by a magnet. He was tall and slim and very
dashing, dressed in a long coat of midnight blue velvet that was spangled all over with gems, like
stars in the night sky. Intricate gold and white embroidery adorned the front and the deep cuffs,
which were held back with large gold buttons. Beneath the coat, he wore a matching embroidered
waistcoat and breeches, dark stockings and shoes, and a snowy white neckcloth, elaborately tied.
“Who is this?” she asked, fascinated.

A genuine smile crossed Adam’s face as he took a step forward to stand at her side and look up
at the painting with her. “He’s quite something, isn’t he? This is Sebastian Beaumont, and of all the
people in here, he’s undoubtedly my favorite.”

“He looks—”

“Ridiculous, I know, but this was probably considered the height of fashion in 1760.”

_no, I was going to say he looks like you._ Oh, the resemblance wasn’t exact, of course. For one
thing, where Adam’s eyes were so blue they were almost turquoise, like the Mediterranean Sea in
summer, this man’s were a deep obsidian black. And it was impossible to tell the real color of his
hair, hidden as it was beneath a long, curly wig. But he had something of Adam’s lithe sensuality,
and looking at his face, she was reminded of her husband in a way she couldn’t quite place. Then it
hit her. The proud set of the chin, the arrogant smirk curling the edges of the mouth, the infinite
coldness in the eyes: it was all Adam, but not the Adam currently standing next to her. No, this was
Adam as she had known him in New York, when he had been still just a shadowy phantom presence
at the edges of her life. Something about him had changed since then, she realized, and the
knowledge of it made her feel suddenly shy, as if she were meeting him for the first time all over
again. “Why is he your favorite?” she asked.

“Because he has the best story. He was something of a degenerate rake, to borrow a phrase one
of your novels might use. And, as you can tell from the picture, he was dramatic as hell. We have
tons of portraits of him, but I believe this is the last one that was done before.”

“Before what?”

“I’ve always called it The Incident. A year after this portrait was done, he contracted smallpox.
It was touch and go for a very long time, and I believe they honestly didn’t expect him to live. But
somehow, for whatever reason, he pulled through, though of course he was left with scarring.”

Belle studied the handsome face on the canvas, so smugly self-certain and utterly unaware of
what was about to befall him. “Bad scarring?”

He shrugged. “It’s hard to say. He certainly felt it was bad—he became something of a recluse for a while. Just retreated into himself. Went nowhere, saw no one.”

“How horrible,” she said softly. “How long did that go on for?”

“About four years. And then everything changed again. Can you guess why?” She shook her head, and he smiled and gestured toward a smaller painting to the right of Sebastian’s. “He met a girl.”

The woman in the painting was one of the most beautiful Belle had ever seen, pale as ivory, with large dark eyes, full red lips, and jet-black hair piled on top of her head in an elaborate arrangement interwoven with red ribbons. “Who was she? Another earl’s daughter?”

He seemed amused. “No, not at all. Her name was Isobel, and she was just an ordinary girl from Thornton-le-Clay. Her father was a shopkeeper.”

Belle took another look at the face of the kind of woman who could bring a man back to life. There was intelligence in that face, she saw, and wisdom, and pride, and a sort of quiet self-confidence. Isobel had known who and what she was, and had defied anyone to find fault with it. “Not so very ordinary, I wouldn’t think, to win the heart of one of the greatest rakes in all of England. How did they meet?”

“Her father died, and she needed some way to support herself. He needed a housekeeper. Et voila.”

“And it was love at first sight?”

“Oh, hardly. They fought like cats and dogs at first. He either threatened to fire her, or she threatened to quit on a number of occasions. But in the end, I think they simply realized they couldn’t live without each other.”

Belle sighed happily. “What a beautiful love story.”

His expression softened. “Yes, it is.”

She turned to him, hand on hip. “Wait a minute. So when we had that conversation the other day about people changing their opinion of each other, you disagreed with me, and all this time, you had a real-life example? I don’t believe you!”

“It’s like lightning, you know? It never strikes the same place twice. Maybe each family tree only gets one great love story, and we used ours up two and a half centuries ago.”

“At least you acknowledge that love exists. I wasn’t sure you believed even that. But tell me, did they live happily ever after?”

“As happily as two people can. They had eight children and remained devoted to each other until their dying day.”

“And what about their children? Were they happy?”

“Now that’s a different story altogether, unfortunately.”

“That definitely doesn’t sound good.”
“As I said, Sebastian and Isobel had eight children. The first six were daughters, and the final two were twin sons, born in 1785. Edmund and Matthew were their names; Edmund was the elder by about a quarter of an hour. Fast forward to 1815. Matthew was a war hero newly returned from Waterloo, and Edmund had just taken over the running of the estate after his father’s death. That summer, they met a young woman named Amelia Prentice, and they both decided they were in love with her. Now, which one of them do you think she was in love with?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Belle. “Matthew.”

He gave her a startled look. “You sure answered that quickly.”

“What can I say? The dashing war hero is always going to more exciting than the dutiful eldest son. But let me guess, she married Edmund? After all, eldest sons may be boring, but they do inherit.”

“Right again. Edmund and Amelia were married, and she became pregnant. All well and good. But then Edmund died, very unexpectedly, in a hunting accident. Amelia suffered a miscarriage, and after what most people considered a shockingly short mourning period, she and Matthew were married.”

“Okay, I’m just going to be honest here and say that sounds incredibly suspicious. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not, but no one was ever able to prove anything. Matthew was present on the hunt when his brother was killed, yes, but hunting accidents aren’t unheard of. The timing of the miscarriage was convenient, but that could have just been the stress of her husband’s death. And the remarriage may have been hasty, but it tied up a number of loose ends and was convenient for all concerned, so people eventually got used to the idea. There was certainly talk, though.”

“What do you think?”

“What do I think? Oh, I think Matthew and Amelia were guilty as hell, at least of Edmund’s death. The miscarriage may very well have just been an accident. But I think they wanted Edmund gone so they could have both the estate and each other, and they made it happen. At any rate, perhaps as punishment, they were only able to have a single child: my great-great grandfather, Simon.”

They kept walking, past the unfortunate Edmund, past Matthew and Amelia and Simon, and into the ranks of the Victorian Beaumonts. “I have to ask,” Belle said hesitantly, aware that she was stepping on perilous ground, “how you know all this. Listening to you talk is like hearing something out of a particularly dramatic history book.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched uncomfortably. But no, why shouldn’t he tell her? After all, he did want her to understand, didn’t he? “My father,” he said slowly, “didn’t have much use for me when I was a child. But there was one thing he always had time for, and that was teaching me what I owed to my family legacy. He used to bring me up here and walk around the room with me, telling me the names and important facts about everyone in every picture. And then when I got a little older, I would have to do the telling, and repeat it all back to him. Believe me when I say I’m giving you the abbreviated version. As for the more sordid details, I broke my ankle playing football the summer I was seventeen, and I found a whole stash of old papers in the library to keep me busy while I was laid up. They were very…illuminating.”

“What a shitty thing to make a child do.”
His eyes darkened. “He believed in the importance of family, just not in the same way you’re probably thinking of.”

Belle couldn’t think of anything to say to that. They walked out of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth in silence, watching as the paintings turned into photographs. “This is my grandfather and his siblings when they were children,” Adam said, indicating a photo of three little boys in short pants and a girl with a gigantic bow in her hair. “Reginald—my grandfather, his brothers Martin and Henry, and their sister Alexandra,” he added, pointing to each one in turn.

“They’re adorable,” said Belle. “Reginald is such a preposterous name for a child that small.”

“And here they are again as adults,” he said. Alexandra, who had become an elegant young woman, was seated, surrounded by her three brothers in their military uniforms.

“Oh,” Belle murmured, feeling a touch of foreboding. “World War I?”

“Indeed. And I think you’ll probably know what it means when I tell you that my grandfather was the youngest.”

She was able to work it out quickly. “They died, didn’t they? Martin and Henry?”

He nodded. “They were both killed at Passchendaele. And it wasn’t just them. Alexandra died the following year in the influenza pandemic.”

Belle clasped her hands together. “Poor Reginald! He looks so young to be left all alone.”

“When the war ended, he was twenty. Two years later, his father died, and he became head of the family. Well, such as it was. He ended up becoming very close with Alexandra’s best friend Phyllis, and in 1921, he married her. They had four children as well: Mary in ’23, Louise in ’25, Abigail in ’29, and finally, my father John in ’36. So you see now where my father’s strange sense of family duty came from: He was the long-awaited heir, the savior of the line. It quite literally became an obsession with him. I think he loved the idea of the dynasty more than he ever did the actual family that was right in front of him. Which brings us to the final picture.”

It was a large photo of a middle-aged man in a somber, expensive looking suit, and a much younger blonde woman with a fragile, pinched look about her, wearing a ludicrous pink confection of a dress. In her lap was a blue-eyed baby in a long white gown. “That’s you,” Belle said in wonder. “And your parents.”

“This was taken the day of my christening,” he confirmed.

Belle swallowed hard and hoped he wouldn’t take what she was about to say the wrong way. “I didn’t realize before how much older your dad was than your mom.”

“Twenty-five years, and believe me, you felt every one of them. It wasn’t so much a gap as it was a chasm.”

“She was beautiful, your mom.”

“Yes,” he said softly, and his smile was wistful and sad. “She was.”

“What happened to her? Won’t you tell me?”

“Ah, beauty,” he said, with the just the tiniest thread of warning in his voice. “Don’t press your luck. I don’t like to talk about it.” _Can’t you just appreciate how vulnerable I’ve already been with_
Belle looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Can I tell you something?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Yes, of course you can.”

“I lost my mom too. She died when I was a baby.”

“Oh, Belle,” he said sadly, feeling his heart ache for her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, of course you didn’t. But I’ll make you a deal. Someday—and I’m not saying when exactly, just when the moment is right—I’ll tell you what happened to her, and you can tell me what happened to your mom. Fair?”

“Sweetheart,” he said, quietly but firmly, “come here.” And Belle finally did what she had wanted to do for weeks, and stepped into the circle of his waiting arms. He held her to him tightly, his embrace warm and safe, and she closed her eyes and listened to the steady thump of his heartbeat against her ear. “It’s a deal,” he murmured against her hair. “Someday, I’ll tell you everything.”

“You know,” Belle mused after a moment, “it’s a good thing I’m here, I think.”

He hummed inquisitively. “And why’s that?”

She leaned back a little so she could look up at him. “I’ve always been good at putting broken things back together again.”

He pulled her back against his chest, and she felt the soft rumble of his laughter all around her. “That is good,” he said simply.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: A rather unique gift. Please feel free to speculate as to what that could mean. See you next time!
There's Nothing Very Much I Wouldn't Do to Catch Your Eye

Chapter Notes

I've realized that I'm not as good as some authors at responding to comments and interacting with readers. I really value your feedback, and I read (and reread!) everything you write, I'm just bad for whatever reason at being social in return. The other thing I realized is that this story had its one year anniversary on May 12. So in honor of that, for this chapter only, every comment left will get a reply. So comment away! Ask me anything you want to know, about myself, the story, my writing process, anything. I promise I'll answer them all. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is a pretty big day for you, huh?” Mrs. Potts asked gently as she handed Belle a travel mug filled with coffee.

Belle accepted the beverage gratefully and took a long swallow, her lips curving in a tiny smile of pleasure as the hot, fragrant liquid slid down her throat. “Yes, it is,” she agreed. “I can hardly believe it, to be honest with you. I'm happy and amazed and nervous all at the same time.”

“Trust me,” the older woman said with a smile, “I think that's kind of how we all feel. I was beginning to give up hope that anything would ever change. And then, well…” She trailed off and looked at Belle curiously. “How did you do it, anyway?”

“Do what?”

Mrs. Potts gave her a look that suggested she thought Belle knew very well to what she was referring. She gestured around the foyer, where they were currently standing while they waited for the arrival of the crew who had been hired to wash the windows. “How you got him to agree to finally do something for the house. It had to have been your influence, I'm sure.”

Belle wasn’t sure she wanted to know why Mrs. Potts was so certain she had the power to make Adam do things. The idea was both flattering and terrifying. Feeling herself start to blush, she took another drink of coffee as an excuse to avert her face and cast her mind back over the conversation she had had with Adam a few days prior.

After dinner, they had retired to the drawing room (or the blue room, as Belle had taken to calling it, since the walls, drapes, and much of the upholstery were all blue) to read, as they did most evenings. Adam was sitting at one end of the sofa, reading something for work on his iPad, while Belle was lying at the other end, a volume of Shakespeare’s plays that she had found in the library propped up against her knees. Her bare feet had somehow found their way into Adam's lap, but he didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he had been absentmindedly tracing patterns from her ankle bone down to her instep and back up again for the better part of twenty minutes when he said, nonchalantly and without looking up, “I've been thinking.”

Without lifting her eyes from her book, Belle turned the page and said dryly, “Always a dangerous proposition. Thinking about what?”

This time he set down his tablet and turned to look at her. “Perhaps it’s time we had someone
out to do some work on the house. After all, it seems as if we’re going to be here for the long haul, so we might as well act like it, wouldn’t you agree?”

Belle slapped her book shut without bothering to mark her place and looked up at him with wide brown eyes. “Really?” she asked. “What did you have in mind?”

“Something simple to start. Maybe hire someone to wash the windows? You know, all the ones that are too high or large for mere mortals to clean. That’s relatively uncomplicated and would make a big difference, I think.”

The book landed on the coffee table with a heavy thud, and Belle pushed herself up onto her knees so that she was more on a level with him. She smiled. “I think that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

He returned her smile with one of his own, white teeth flashing and the corners of his eyes crinkling just slightly. The effect was very endearing, filling Belle with a warm rush of protective tenderness. Boldly, she moved a little bit closer and put her arms around his neck. “I’m very proud of you.”

He looked up at her, his eyes filled with the slightly dazed look of a man who couldn’t quite believe that what he was seeing was real. “Really?” he said softly.

She nodded. “Really really.”

He smiled again, and then, before she had time to work out exactly how he’d done it, he had somehow maneuvered her so that she was sitting next to him, her head against his shoulder and his arm around her shoulders. “If I had known that’s all it took, I would have started a new home improvement project every week. No, scratch that. A new project every day.”

Belle laughed and snuggled a little closer against his side, breathing in the rich spice of his cologne, and underneath it, something warm that she could only assume was the scent of his skin. It was almost frightening how quickly she had become accustomed to moments like this one, to the simple pleasure of being close to him. Whatever this was—and she was genuinely at a loss as to how to describe it—she would miss it when it was over. Ah, there it was: the thin thread of sorrow in the cloak of her happiness. She decided not to think about it right now. Rolling her eyes, she said, “You’re ridiculous.”

He smirked. “Not that you mind, of course.” Belle couldn’t dispute that.

Face hot, she looked back up at Mrs. Potts and shrugged. “I don’t know what I did,” she said honestly. “Certainly nothing special.”

Mrs. Potts gave her a kind smile. “You were yourself, my dear. I think perhaps that’s all you need.”

While Belle was trying to think of something to say to that, the rest of the staff came to join them in the entryway. Lumière and Plumette were ready for work, dressed in clothes very similar to Belle’s own uniform of a t-shirt and jeans with a hole in the knee, while Cogsworth, in his customary natty attire, was clearly anticipating taking a more supervisory role. “So what’s the game plan?” Plumette asked.

Belle’s eyes went wide. “Why are you asking me?” she asked in genuine surprise, realizing that they were all looking at her. “You all know this place better than I do, I’m sure.”

“Well,” said Lumière cheekily, “not all of us have had a personal tour from the master.”
“Lumière!” Plumette admonished him with an elbow to the ribs.

“Sorry. What I’m getting at, Madame, is that you’re married to him, so really, the house is half yours. You’re queen here just as much as he is king.”

“You know, I never thought about it that way,” Belle said slowly. And she really hadn’t. All this time, she had thought of herself as a guest in Adam’s house, Adam’s life. But she saw now that this wasn’t precisely true. Getting that tour of the house had changed things. It was as if a door had been opened, or a new level unlocked. She understood the house better now, knew its ins and outs, its intricacies, the stories of the people who had lived and loved and died here. And the more time she spent with him, the more she was coming to understand Adam too. They were one and the same, really, the house and the man: beautiful and proud, damaged and broken, but not beyond hope. Thornleigh was in her blood and bones now; she cared about what happened to it. And, she had to admit, the same was also true of its master. The two of them were tangled up with each other—his fate was her fate. Perhaps, Belle thought, that was what marriage was: the edges of your two separate lives became blurred, so that eventually it became impossible to tell where one stopped and the other began. Adam had thought he was only giving her money, but in reality he had given her much more than that. He had given her a home, a place to belong, if only for a little while. She wondered fleetingly what she had given him.

“And since it seems your husband has decided not to show up this morning,” Lumière continued as if he had expected nothing else from the man, “it would appear to be all up to you, Belle. What will it be?”

Belle considered this for a moment. “Well,” she said finally, “there’s no point in cleaning the floors since we’re just going to have crews in dirty work boots moving in and out of here. I vote we start with the blue room. There’s a lot of dusting and polishing to be done in there. Do we have any furniture wax on hand?”

“Some,” Lumière acknowledged.

“Good, then we’ll start there.” But just at that moment, there came the sound of loud, mournful chimes, which echoed off the high ceiling, filling Belle’s head with a vibrating clang that made her teeth knock together. “What was that?” she asked with no small amount of alarm.

Cogsworth smiled in wry amusement at her reaction. “That was just the doorbell, my dear. I’m amazed it still works. Your window washers must be here.”

Belle smoothed an anxious hand over her hair, which was drawn up into a messy bun. “I thought Adam would be here for this,” she said in a small voice. Where the hell was he? This whole thing had been his idea, after all, and she didn’t want to have to go it alone.

Mrs. Potts turned her toward the door with gentle, yet firm hands. “You’ll do fine,” she said encouragingly. “You know what needs to be done.”

Taking a deep breath, Belle opened one half of the heavy double front doors, and looked down at the grouping of five men in blue coveralls who were standing at the bottom of the front steps. “May I help you, gentlemen?” she asked.

The oldest of them, whose name patch identified him as Bill, stepped forward and spoke for the group. “Yes, ma’am. We’re looking for an Adam Beaumont?”

“He’s not available at the moment,” Belle told them. “But I can help you.” Her next sentence left her mouth with startling ease, as if it were something she said to strangers every day. “I’m his wife, Belle.”
Mrs. Potts watched as the younger woman took control of the situation, shaking hands with each of the men in turn and then stepping out into the forecourt with them so they could look up at the house and discuss the plan for the day. *Oh Adam, what you did when you brought this girl here.* Belle was beautiful and intelligent, clever and kind, a dreamer but with a strong practical streak. And what was more, she loved Thornleigh. In short, she was everything Mrs. Potts had hoped she’d be, and so much more besides. Watching her now as she talked to the workmen, a bright smile on her face despite her nervousness, Mrs. Potts was more convinced than ever that she was Adam’s perfect match, the one woman who could bring him to his knees, the one woman it would be worth falling to his knees for. She hoped he had the good sense to realize it. After all, finding a woman who could go toe to toe with Adam was a once in a lifetime sort of thing.

Belle was several hours deep into waxing the coffee table when she decided it was time for a break. Pushing herself to her feet, she stretched luxuriously and crossed to the window. The day outside was beautiful, warm and bright with fluffy white clouds in a clear blue sky. She could see Bill and his crew hard at work, scrubbing away the years of accumulated filth they had had the professional good sense not to look appalled at. One of them had turned on a radio, and the sound of classic rock drifted across the lawn and through the open window. Behind her, her friends were busily polishing and dusting. Mrs. Potts and Cogsworth were debating the best way to clean the porcelain vases on the mantle, while Lumière and Plumette were talking softly about some subject known only to themselves, punctuated by occasional laughter. In other words, all was as it should be, with one very glaring exception: her husband was still nowhere to be found. Belle didn’t know what to think about that, let alone what to do about it. Lumière had acted as if his absence were a foregone conclusion, his unreliability a fact of life that could not be changed, only accepted with a weary sigh of resignation. But Belle didn’t feel resigned. She felt…what, exactly? Annoyed, yes, but also strangely disappointed, almost deflated, like a balloon that had had all the air let out of it.

But before she could work out where that feeling was coming from, a pair of large, solid hands descended over her eyes, blocking out the light. “Guess who,” a deep voice murmured in her ear. Despite her confused feelings, Belle couldn’t help leaning back a little, letting her body relax against his. “Hmmm,” she mused, “I want to say Adam, but it’s been so long since I’ve heard his voice that I can’t be sure.”

He lowered his hands from her eyes and instead wrapped his arms around her from behind, crossing them loosely over her chest. “You’re angry with me,” he said, and it was half statement, half question.

Belle considered this. “No,” she said finally, “not angry. I just missed you, that’s all.” Yes, that was really the heart of the matter. She had missed him. She had wanted him by her side, and he hadn’t been there.

“You missed me?”

She brought her hands up and curled them over his forearms, tightening his embrace just a little. “You sound surprised.”

“No,” he insisted. A pause. “Ok, well, yes. I didn’t think you would.”

“Why would you think that? Of course I would. We’re partners in this, after all.”

“Yes,” Adam acknowledged, “but I didn’t think you’d miss me on a personal level.”
Belle tipped her head back against his shoulder. “Well, I did. Very much.”

His lips brushed against her hair, so softly that she almost thought she had imagined it. “Would it make it better,” he asked, “if I told you I’m late because I have a surprise for you?”

She slipped deftly from his grasp and turned to face him. “A surprise?” she asked suspiciously.

“A surprise,” he confirmed. “It was supposed to be delivered tomorrow, or so I thought, but apparently there was a mix up with the dates. Lucky for you, I suppose, since now you get your gift a day early.”

“My gift?” she repeated slowly, as if she couldn’t quite believe it. “You got me a gift? But why? What’s the occasion?”

Adam raised his eyebrows. “I wasn’t aware I needed one,” he said with a slight shrug. “Can’t I get you something nice just because I want to?”

“And you want to?”

He smiled, a lazy, crooked smile that felt like a caress. “Oh yes,” he said. “Shall we go see it?”

Belle felt her own smile droop a little as she looked around guiltily. “Adam, I can’t,” she protested, though it was clear her resolve was not strong. “I’m in the middle of something. I can’t just take off and expect the rest of them to keep working.”

“Oh, yes, I see your point,” he said. “Except that that’s what I pay them for. You, on the other hand, are most decidedly not my employee. Come on, beauty,” he implored her. “Live a little. They’ll be fine. Look, I’ll prove it to you.” He turned toward the others, who were all very studiously trying to look like they weren’t eavesdropping. “Attention, everyone,” he said grandly. “I’m taking Belle now, and I may or may not bring her back. That alright with you?” The look on his face suggested that it had better be.

“Yes, of course, dear,” said Mrs. Potts with practiced blandness. “We’ll be quite fine. You two run along and have fun.”

“Or you could always stay here, young man,” interjected Cogsworth. “Plenty of work to be—” He broke off abruptly when he realized that literally everyone in the room aside from Belle was glaring at him.

“We will be fine,” Mrs. Potts reiterated. She waved her hands at them in a shooing motion. “Now go.”

Adam looked down at Belle, his eyebrows raised as if to say, “See? I told you so.” Belle’s resistance wavered, teetering back and forth like a person on a tightrope, before finally falling to one side. But she should have known that it would go that way, she reflected. He was like a magnet, his pull too powerful to resist. “You’re a corrupting influence,” she said with a smile, holding out her hand.

He took it, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Don’t tell Mrs. Potts. She’d never let me take you out un-chaperoned if she knew.”

“I heard that!” Mrs. Potts cut in.

“That, my dear,” he said to Belle, “is our cue to exit stage left.” And with that, he swept her out of the room before anyone else could say another word.
When they were quite sure that Adam and Belle were out of both sight and earshot, the four people remaining in the drawing room turned to each other, their faces showing all of the astonishment they felt. “You guys saw that too, right?” Plumette said finally. “It wasn’t just me?”

“No, my dear,” Mrs. Potts replied. “It was definitely not just you.” She looked from her companions to the doorway and back again. “Where did that come from? I knew they were getting along better—”

“I would hope so,” Plumette interrupted her. “They spend so much time together.”

“Yes, exactly! I knew they had moved past the constantly fighting stage, but I didn’t realize they had—” She broke off in confusion and tried again to find the right words. “That wasn’t just getting along better, it was—”

“Intimacy,” Plumette finished for her. The word hung heavy in the air as they all digested what it meant and realized that Plumette was exactly right. The casual touches, the shared smiles, the easy back and forth—it all spoke of some new level of understanding and ease. “And the most interesting thing about it,” Plumette went on, “is that I don’t even think they really realize what they’re doing. It’s like some sort of subconscious thing.”

“I remember the first time I saw them together,” put in Cogsworth. “It was the day they came to the vault to pick out rings. They were so stiff. Wouldn’t come within two feet of each other for fear they might accidentally bump elbows or some such.”

“Yes,” agreed Mrs. Potts soberly. “I think we all remember those days.” She could easily picture coming in to clear the dinner dishes to find them sitting at opposite ends of the long table, purposefully not looking at each other, or how they would avert their eyes and cling to the walls when they passed each other in the upstairs hallway of Beaumont House. Something had changed since then. But what?

Cogsworth echoed her thoughts. “How did they go from that to this?”

Lumière burst out laughing. “Oh Cogsworth, you old fool!” he cried, causing the older man to give him an affronted look. “Can’t you see they like each other? They’re holding hands like a couple of teenagers, and he’s buying her expensive presents, and you, like a damn idiot, are suggesting they stick around here and clean! What the hell, man?”

Cogsworth gave a self-righteous little sniff. “I still think it wouldn’t hurt for him to remember that he has responsibilities here.”

“A fair point, I’ll grant you,” Mrs. Potts replied. “But I think you’re forgetting his most important responsibility of all.”

“Which is?”

She shrugged. “Everyone deserves a honeymoon.”

“You think it’s gone that far?”

“I think it’s getting there.”
The others, absorbed in their conversation, didn’t notice the way Plumette ducked her head and turned away at the mention of the word honeymoon, but Lumière saw it, and it pierced him to the heart. Coming to Thornleigh may have done wonders for Adam and Belle’s relationship, but it was having just the opposite effect on his relationship with Plumette. It was hard, he was coming to realize, to watch your friends falling into what might very well turn out to be love, when your own relationship had reached a state of stagnation. He loved Plumette. God only knew how much he loved her. But she was too good for him by far, and one day, she was going to realize it. He was a forty-year-old man with an ill-defined job title who had never finished school, while she was thirty-two, and a beautiful, brilliant Cambridge graduate. It wasn’t fair of him to expect someone like her to spend the rest of her life with someone like him. He didn’t know how to even ask.

But where did that leave them? On borrowed time, apparently. For once in his life, he wished he could lead Adam’s charmed life, where even when he lost, he still won. The man had been essentially forced to marry, had chosen, out of sheer desperation, the one normal woman he knew to be his bride. Lumière, still nursing some bitter feelings about Adam’s decision to abandon his home for the greener pastures of America, had thought it no more than he deserved. And yet, somehow, whether through sheer dumb luck or a knack for getting on the good side of the universe, he had managed to choose the one woman in the world who might actually be perfect for him. He didn’t deserve her, even more than how Lumière felt he didn’t deserve Plumette. And yet, it seemed as if he was going to get her all the same. Lumière shook his head. Charmed life indeed.

“Where are we going?” Belle asked, hurrying to keep up with his long strides as they walked, hands still linked, out through the gardens and into the wide green sward beyond.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” he said with a smirk.

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “What are you, ten?”

“What part of surprise do you not understand?” he retorted. “You’ll find out when we get there, and not before.”

“You’re taking this whole secrecy thing very seriously, I see,” she observed. “I’m surprised you didn’t blindfold me.”

“You jest, but I did think about it, actually.”

“And?”

He shrugged. “I decided it would slow us down too much.”

“You’d have to carry me,” she said with a laugh.

He looked from her off into the distance and back again, trying to judge how far they were from their destination. Close enough, he decided, to make the idea that had just popped into his head feasible. “Hold still,” he told her.

“Adam…” she said warningly.

“Don’t blame me; it was your idea,” he said, and scooped her up into his arms before she could say another word.
“Put me down!” she protested, even as she instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck to keep from falling.

He threw her a sideways glance, his expression challenging. “Can you honestly tell me you want me to?”

Belle considered this. It was actually rather nice, being held by him quite as if she weighed nothing. One of his arms was curled around the backs of her thighs, supporting her legs, while the other was wrapped around her waist, his fingers tantalizingly close to grazing the curve of her breast, his touch burning hot through the thin fabric of her old t-shirt. Very slowly, she gave a tiny, almost imperceptible, shake of her head. “No,” she said softly.

His eyes flashed with triumph. “I thought so,” he said smugly. “Now close your eyes, sweetheart,” he told her sternly. “And no peeking.”

“Can I open my eyes now?” Belle asked when he very gently set her back down on her feet again several minutes later. She could tell from the feeling of a solid stone floor beneath her sneakers and the way the darkness beyond her eyelids had gotten deeper that they had gone indoors again.

“You may,” he said, and she could practically hear the smile of anticipation in his voice. She opened her eyes, and immediately clapped her hands to her mouth in a futile effort to stop a rush of amazed laughter from bubbling out.

“Adam!” she exclaimed, feeling somewhat stupefied. “What is this?”

“What does it look like?”


“Your powers of observation astound me, beauty,” he said dryly. “They are indeed horses—two of them, to be precise. The one on the left is Sultan, and the other is Chip. How? Well, let’s just say you can get your hands on pretty much anything for the right price. As for why, I thought that was obvious. You said you missed riding, so I thought I’d make it so you didn’t have to.” He rubbed the back of his neck with an anxious hand. “I hope I wasn’t mistaken?”

Belle shook her head vigorously. “No, no, of course you weren’t mistaken. They’re wonderful! But are they just for today, or did you buy them? Because if you bought them, I have to tell you, I can’t let you do that. Adam, it’s just too much.”

“Then rest easy, darling, because I did not buy them, although I do take issue with your assertion that doing so would have been anything more than you deserved. I leased them, I guess you could call it. They’re ours for the summer.”

She turned swiftly from her examination of the horses to look at him, intrigued. “Are we staying here for the rest of the summer, then?”

He did his best to look casual. “I thought perhaps we might, if you like.” He paused, then added, “I’m coming to find that the countryside actually has some considerable charms. I feel like an idiot for not seeing them before, and I’d like to make up for lost time.”

“I agree,” she said. “The country’s turned out to be nothing like I ever thought it would be. I
think I, uh, would like to stick around and get to know it better.”

Their gazes caught and held, and they smiled shyly at each other, their hearts beating just a little bit faster. “But do you like your present?” he asked after a moment. “Chip is intended for you. I didn’t really have a lot to go on, but I tried to pick a horse I thought would suit you.”

Belle stepped closer to the stalls and looked at the horses again. Sultan’s name suited him, she thought. He was a tall, powerful looking thing, pure black save for a perfectly pointed white star on his forehead, with a coat that gleamed like heavy satin. He was regal, majestic, dramatic—in short, the perfect horse for Adam.

Chip, who occupied the stall next to him, was slightly smaller, perfectly sized for Belle’s slender frame. He was a smoky gray color, dappled all over with gray spots so pale they were essentially white, though his mane and tale were almost black. He regarded her with thoughtful, intelligent dark eyes, and when she drew close enough, nickered softly and reached out his head to nuzzle at her outstretched palms, hoping she might have a treat for him. She reached up and rubbed his velvety nose, wanting to laugh and cry all at once. He was perfect, another new friend for her to love, and she could already tell it was going to break her heart to say goodbye to him once the summer was over. Why did everything in her life seem to come with an expiration date these days?

“He likes you,” said Adam from over her shoulder.

Belle turned back to him, her eyes shining. “That’s good,” she said a little unsteadily, “because I like him too.”

“Shall we take them out for a spin, see what they can do?”

“Obviously! Can we make it a picnic?”

His eyebrows shot up. “A picnic?”

“A picnic. You know, take some food, eat it outdoors in the sunshine? Or is that not something you upper crust types do?”

He laughed. “For you, beauty, I will even condescend to sit in the grass.”

Adam finished changing his clothes before Belle did, and he was waiting at the bottom of the main staircase when he heard the sound of her bedroom door closing. Looking up, he saw her come into view and descend the stairs, and his breath caught in his throat. He didn’t know what he had expected her to wear to go riding, but it certainly wasn’t this. She was dressed in a pair of black skinny jeans and a fitted gray t-shirt with an off the shoulder neckline, cropped just slightly to show off a sliver of skin above the high waistband of the jeans. With them, she wore a pair of tall black leather boots, which blended perfectly with the jeans to turn her legs into one long, fluid line. When combined with the way the ensemble highlighted the narrow span of her waist and the gently rounded curve of her hips, the effect was mouthwateringly enticing. He swallowed thickly. “I don’t think I’ve seen that outfit before.”

She smiled, a little smugly, as if she knew exactly what kind of effect she was having on him. “You haven’t. I did a little online shopping the other week.”

“Well, it suits you,” he said simply.
She felt herself flush. “Thank you.” Looking him up and down, she added, “I have to be on my game to keep up with you, apparently. How the heck do you have actual riding clothes?”

“You’re not the only one who knows how to use the internet. And unlike you, I knew what was coming. You can’t seriously think that I would willingly be seen on horseback in anything less, can you?”

Belle forced herself to look away from the way his tan breeches were outlining the hard muscles of his thighs before he caught her staring. “Seriously, though, all you need is a riding crop.”

There was that damn smirk again. “If you want to buy me one, then by all means, go right ahead.”

She reached up and patted his cheek. “Awww,” she murmured, gently teasing, “it’s so cute that you think I’m going to buy you a present.”

He turned his head to brush his lips against her palm, so quickly that once again, she thought perhaps she had imagined it. “You wound me, beauty. And after I got you that picnic lunch you wanted and everything.”

“You did?”

He turned to the hall table behind him and held up a pair of paper bags. “Ta-da. As requested.”

She arched her eyebrows at him. “Impressive. I’m amazed you were able to drag Mrs. Potts away from arguing with Cogsworth about those vases long enough for her to make that for you.”

He flashed her a triumphant smile. “Ah, but I didn’t. I made it myself.”

Now she really was impressed, or at least astonished, for the second time in as many hours. “You made lunch? I didn’t think you even knew how to do that.”

“You didn’t think I knew how to make a sandwich? Okay, now I really am hurt. How did you think I survived in New York?”

She shrugged. “To tell you the truth, I always figured you had servants.”

“Nope!” he said brightly, popping the p at the end. “Alright, well to be fair, I did have a woman who came in and cleaned, but other than that, no. As I’ve told you before, my dear, there’s a lot you don’t know about me. I’m full of surprises.”

Belle no longer had any doubt that this was true.

The mounting block outside the stable had long since disappeared, so Adam linked his hands and used them as a stepping stone to boost Belle up into the saddle before mounting his own horse in a fluid motion as easy as breathing. With one accord they turned Chip and Sultan out of the stable yard and headed for the paths through the trees, keeping to a walk while they got a feel for how the animals behaved.

She rode well, he was pleased to see, her back straight, her heels down, the reins threaded loosely through her slender fingers in a grip that was easy yet controlled. She also looked especially
beautiful today, he thought, watching surreptitiously as the sunlight filtering through the leafy canopy above their heads cast patterns of light and shadow across her skin. She wasn’t looking at him, and he took the opportunity to study her profile, the fan of her lashes against her cheek, the pert upturned tip of her nose, the gentle curve of her lips as she smiled with pleasure at being out for a ride on such a fine day. He didn’t think he would ever grow tired of looking at her. She was just lovely, for lack of a better word, in a way no other woman of his acquaintance could quite match. There was something about her, a curious combination of vulnerability and strength, that made him want to possess her. Possess, but not control, like a bird perched on one’s finger, free to fly away, but staying because it wanted to. It hadn’t been like this in New York, a fact he marveled at now. How could there ever have been a time when he had known her and hadn’t wanted her? Something had changed since then—something big—and he had the uncomfortable suspicion that it was largely to do with him.

And yet, she was different too, somehow. Oh, he couldn’t say how exactly, but it was there, subtle and indefinable. This new outfit, more daring than her usual wear, was part of it. So too was the fact that she had switched out her customary messy ponytail for an intricate fishtail braid thrown over one shoulder. And was that…lip gloss? She had clearly dressed with care, almost as if this were a—oh. The truth of it suddenly hit him with all the force of an arrow. Almost as if this were a date. As much as his mind wanted to reject the idea, he couldn’t deny it. After all, he had orchestrated this entire day in order to spend time with a woman whose company was quickly becoming like oxygen to him, and what was that if not a date? But this revelation raised more questions than it answered. For instance, how exactly did one go on a date with one’s own wife? It was hard—if not impossible—to know what to do, when it seemed as if they’d already done so much else out of order.

She must have felt his eyes on her, for she tore her gaze away from the path in front of her and turned to look up at him. “You’re doing that staring thing again,” she said gently, her brown eyes soft and questioning. “What are you thinking about?”

Oh, nothing. Just having another in an increasingly long string of uncomfortable realizations. And they all have to do with you. Funny, that. But out loud, he only shrugged and said, “Nothing in particular.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe you,” she said bluntly. “But I won’t press you.” A pause, then, “May I tell you what I’m thinking, though?”

His heart did a sudden somersault in his chest. “Yes, of course,” he managed to say.

She tipped her head toward the edge of the woods. “I’m wondering which way we’re going to go once we get to the end of this path.”

Adam stopped himself just in time from letting out a burst of nervous laughter. That was all? What had he thought she’d been about to say? She was right though: they had nearly reached the edge of the trees, where the little forest gave way to the green parkland beyond. He thought quickly, the answer coming to him almost in an instant. If this was a date, then there was really only one place to take her. A wry smile curled the edges of his lips. Sebastian would approve, he thought. Grinning now, he prodded Sultan into a canter as they emerged from beneath the canopy of the trees. “Follow me,” he tossed back over his shoulder. “If you can keep up, that is.”

Oh, it was wonderful to be riding again, Belle thought as she urged Chip to keep pace with Adam and Sultan. The fresh breeze on her face and in her hair, the warm June sun beating down out of a flawless blue sky studded with cotton wool clouds, the earthy smell of new things growing, all combined to make the day feel like something out of a dream. The sky formed a dome above their heads, running from horizon to horizon where it touched down to meet the emerald green carpet of
the grass. There were no rules within this dome, no consequences. Anything could happen, because sometimes, on days like today, it was enough to just live.

He led her on a merry chase, across the open fields at a gallop, through a tiny rivulet of a stream with a splash that sent droplets of water dancing through the air, and finally up a gently sloping hill, at the top of which was what appeared to be a small columned temple, like something out of ancient Greece or Rome, open to the center to reveal a statue of some ancient goddess. Belle reined in Chip and stopped to stare at it. “What is this?” she asked after a moment. “It’s not enough that your house looks like a museum, now you have to have actual ruins too?”

“Its official name is Temple to Minerva, but we always just called it Beaumont’s Folly. The name works on multiple levels, you see. It was built in 1758. Yes,” he added with a grin, answering her unasked question, “by our good friend Sebastian. At considerable expense, too.”


“You know,” he said thoughtfully, jumping down from his horse with lithe gracefulness, “that’s just what Isobel said the first time she saw it.”

“Isobel was a woman of good sense,” she pronounced, watching as he tied Sultan loosely to a ring that had been fixed in the wall of the temple.

“Yes, well, this is where he proposed to her several years later. I doubt she found it so ridiculous then.” He took hold of Chip’s bridle and led the horse over to be tied up next to Sultan. “Alright,” he said, holding up his arms. “Down you go.”

She shot him a look. “Adam, I am perfectly capable of dismounting a horse by myself.”

He gave her a look of fond exasperation and reiterated the upward motion of his arms. “Yes, I’m sure you are,” he said, “but I’m in a gallant sort of mood today. Don’t discourage me, sweetheart.”

“That’s a good point. I should cherish this rare instance of gentlemanly behavior,” she said with an affectionate roll of her eyes, swinging her leg over the saddle and sliding down into his waiting arms.

He held her gently suspended in midair for a moment, his hands fitting neatly around the curve of her waist, his fingers lingering over the bare skin above her waistband where her top had ridden up a little. Their faces were very close, her deep brown eyes looking into his with an expression of such joyful mirth that it made his heart ache. She made him want, oh, impossible things! But looking at her face in the sunshine, her lips curved in a small, private smile that was for him, only for him, he could almost believe in the impossible. “Hi,” he murmured.

His eyes were so blue, Belle thought. She knew this already, of course, but from this close distance, it was impossible not to be mesmerized by them. It was impossible not to be mesmerized by him. She liked him, she realized, and the knowledge filled her with an almost frightening little thrill. She liked looking at him, she liked talking to him, she liked making him smile and laugh so that those little creases appeared in the corners of his eyes. How had that happened? It had been coming on so gradually that she hadn’t known how to put a name to it, but now she saw it for what it was. She liked him, and what the hell was she supposed to do about that? “Hi,” she murmured back.
They ate their lunch sitting on the steps of the little temple, the midday sun warm against their backs and heating the stone beneath their legs. From their vantage point at the top of the hill, they had a good view of the park as it sloped away from them on every side, rich and green. The land nearer to the house had been essentially flat, but farther out, where they now were, the land took on a gently rolling quality. Away in the distance, she could see the patch of trees they had ridden through, and other groupings of trees dotted the landscape like clumps of jewels. There was the little stream they had splashed through, and if she turned her head in the other direction, there was a larger stream, more like a river, crisscrossed by several gently arching stone bridges and ending in an ornamental lake with a stone boathouse at one end. She wondered if there was still a boat in it. It might be nice to take a boat out across the water, she thought. Everything was calm and peaceful, the only sound the faint hum of insects and the occasional burst of song from a rogue bird. She felt almost drowsy in the afternoon heat, and full of a great surge of contentment as she watched the sun glittering on the water. “I can’t believe I get to live here,” she said suddenly. “It’s so beautiful that it almost doesn’t seem real.”

“Yes, it is,” he agreed, and he wasn’t looking at the scenery when he said it. “There’s a reason, I think, why they call Yorkshire God’s own country.”

There was a moment of silence while Belle digested this piece of information. Then she said, “Also, I owe you an apology.”

Adam turned to look at her sharply. “An apology? For what?”

She laughed. “For doubting you about the food. This is actually an exceptionally good picnic lunch.”

He flashed her a smug smile. “I told you I was full of surprises.”

And it was indeed a good lunch. He had made them sandwiches on flaky croissants, layers of thinly sliced ham topped with lettuce and tomato and tangy, spicy mustard. There were carrot sticks and strips of bell pepper too, and slices of crisp, sweet apple. He had taken the peel off the apple, and Belle wondered if he knew that was her preferred way to eat it. And for dessert, there was an assortment of Mrs. Potts’ homemade cookies. They ate these in easygoing silence, and when they had finished, Belle stood and brushed crumbs from her jeans. “Come lay in the grass with me,” she said.

“Beauty,” he said warningly, eyeing the grass skeptically. “Do we have to?”

She flopped back onto the green sward and stretched her arms above her head. “You said you would,” she reminded him.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, “but then I was glad I didn’t have to.”

Belle ran her hands through the soft grass, releasing a wonderful burst of fresh, herbal fragrance. “It’s perfectly dry,” she told him. “You won’t get muddy.”

He looked down at his treacherously light-colored pants. “But the grass stains, beauty,” he said in what was almost a whine.

“Oh, come on, Beaumont, live a little,” she goaded him, in a reversal of their positions from that morning when he had convinced her to come to the stable with him.

Adam looked at her, stretched out languidly in the grass, the pale gray and deep black of her clothes a stark silhouette against the bright green of the lawn. His eyes traced the curves of her
breasts, her waist, her hips—one long, sensuous line. “Damn the grass stains,” he said almost savagely, and lowered himself to lie next to her, folding his arms beneath his head.

“Thank you,” said Belle, bringing her arms down from over her head to rest them lightly on her stomach. She was silent for a moment, staring up at the white clouds as they sailed like ships through the blue sea of the sky, then said quietly, “Did you ever miss it sometimes when you were in New York?”

He too was looking at the clouds. “Miss what?” he asked.

She lifted one hand slightly and made a vague gesture at their surroundings. “This,” she said, as if it should be obvious.

He considered the idea. “I think I did,” he said finally. “I think I missed it without really knowing that I did. I lived in New York for nearly a decade, and the whole time, there was this discontent, this dissatisfaction, in the back of my mind. I thought founding the company would fix it, but now that you mention it, I think perhaps what I was really missing was this—the solitude, the open skies, the guileless people who aren’t all trying to get something from you. Don’t get me wrong, I liked New York too, but, well, you lived there, you know how it can be.”

“Oh, yes,” said Belle, thinking of all the nights she’d lain awake in her narrow bed in her tiny apartment and wondered if she’d done the right thing by leaving home. “I’m well aware of how New York can be.”

He turned his head a little to one side so he could look at her. “But enough about me,” he said. “Tell me something about yourself.”

She moved her head in a corresponding fashion. “What do you want to know?”

“How does a nice girl like you go from the cornfields of Iowa to the concrete jungle of New York?” He paused. “It is cornfields, right? It just occurred to me that I know absolutely nothing about Iowa.”

“There are cornfields, yes, but I didn’t live on a farm, if that’s what you’re thinking. My dad is an illustrator, and we lived in town.”

“And what town would that be?” It was amazing how he was suddenly filled with the desire to know every little thing about her life.

“Pleasantville,” she said simply, watching a cloud drift past that she thought was shaped rather like a swan.

He laughed. “Okay, I refuse to believe that that’s a real place.”

“I assure you, it’s quite real. We moved there after my mom died, and it’s only about an hour away from where I went to college, so it was essentially the only home I ever knew until I moved to New York.”

How very different, Adam thought, from his own childhood. Yes, he had had the safety and security of those early years at Thornleigh, first with his mother and then with Mrs. Potts, but they had ended all too soon, and then it had been years of being shuffled between an Eton dormitory, his old childhood bedroom, and occasionally Beaumont House, on those rare instances where he had been summoned to stand in his father’s presence and account for himself. There was something comforting, he thought, about the notion of one constant home, with a parent you loved and who you knew loved you. But perhaps that was not how Belle saw it. “Was that good or bad?” he asked.
She shrugged, the motion made awkward by the fact that she was lying on her back. “It just
was. Pleasantville is one of those small towns where nothing ever happens, and every day is just the
same as the one before it. Do you know the type? When I was in high school, I used to dream about
the day I got to leave, but then when I finished college, I just couldn’t do it.”

“How not?”

“Oh, I tried to act like it was because of my dad, that I didn’t want to leave him by himself, but
really, the issue was me all along.” She was silent for a long time, and he reached over and picked up
her left hand where it was lying on her stomach, tangled their fingers together, and brought their
joined hands to rest on the grass in between them. She turned her head to give him a tremulous smile.
“It was one thing to imagine I was the heroine in one of my books, bold and brave and ready to
change her destiny, but it was quite another thing to actually live it.”

“And yet you did, you know. You changed your destiny in ways I don’t think you could have
foreseen in your wildest dreams when you first came to New York. So why did you do it? Why did
you finally leave?”

Belle felt her cheeks go red. She had really walked herself into that one, hadn’t she? How could
she possibly tell him about Neal and what he had said to her? “I can’t,” she protested, hiding her face
with her free hand. “It’s too embarrassing.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Belle,” he said softly. “I’m your husband. And, granted, I
don’t exactly have a lot of prior experience in this area, but I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to be
able to tell your husband anything. I won’t laugh, I promise.”

She took her hand away from her face and looked at him, trying to judge whether or not this
was true. In all her life, she’d never really had the kind of friends you confided in. There had always
been her father, of course, but there were some things a girl just didn’t tell her father, and everyone
else had found her too odd to really want to be friends with her. But when she looked at Adam now,
she saw only perfect sincerity in his blue eyes. Perhaps here at last, as improbable as it would have
seemed to her only several short months ago, was that one friend with whom she could find perfect
trust and understanding. The idea of it filled her with a strange, giddy kind of joy that overrode her
embarrassment. “There was this guy,” she said.

“Neal,” he surmised, feeling the jealousy swirling through his chest like molten metal.

“Neal, yeah,” she agreed. “I didn’t love him, I never loved him. But he was the thing, you
know, as far as Pleasantville was concerned. Big football star, big war hero, that kind of thing. And
for whatever reason, he decided he wanted me, and I just went along with it. In retrospect, I’m not
proud of it, but I was twenty-three and stupid, so.” She shrugged again. “It was just one of those
things.”

“If that’s your idea of something you’re not proud of, I won’t tell you all the things I got up to
when I was twenty-three. But then what happened? What made you leave?”

The hand covered her face again. “He wanted to marry me. To marry me! Can you believe
that? I was horrified. I had this sudden vision of my life flashing before my eyes, living this small
little life with a man I didn’t even really like, let alone love, and I panicked. I think I thought that
when I moved to New York, I’d meet my prince charming, like something out of a modern day fairy
tale, but that didn’t happen.”

Adam smiled wryly. “Instead you met me.”
Belle almost laughed at that. It was true, in a way, though she’d never thought about it quite in those terms before. “Instead I met you,” she confirmed.

He turned his gaze back to the sky. “Do you remember the day we met?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.”

“You threw me for a loop,” he confessed. “Like no one ever had before. You walked into my office, I looked up and saw you, and it was as if I already knew you. You were familiar, you see.” He broke off. “That probably sounds stupid as hell.”

She shook her head. “No, it doesn’t. What I remember isn’t quite that, but it’s similar. I remember thinking that it was as if you could see me, really see me, in a way that no one else could. It scared me, to be quite honest with you.”

“Really? You never acted scared. That was the other thing that was different about you. All the others seemed frightened half to death of me, but you—you always gave as good as you got.”

“What can I say? I love a good challenge.”

He turned to look at her again, and his gaze had that same probing quality that it had had that first day in his office, a lifetime ago. “What’s your next challenge, eh, beauty? Surely you’re done with the assistant game. In truth, I’d say you were too good for it all along. You’re meant for better things, I know. So what will it be?”

Belle sighed. “If you know, then kindly fill me in. I’ve been trying to figure it out for years.”

“Hmmm. Well, try this. If you could do anything in the world, really anything, what would it be?”

She thought for a moment. “Do you promise not to laugh?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” he said solemnly. “Husband, remember?”

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, if I could do anything in the world, I’d like to write a book.” She was silent for a moment. “I’ve never told anyone that before,” she added softly. “You probably think it’s stupid.”

“It isn’t stupid at all. I think you’d write a terrific book, even if I have a sneaking suspicion it’d be one of those damn romances you seem so fond of.”

Belle arched an eyebrow. “Maybe I should write a book about us. Call it My Year with the Millionaire, or something like that.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he said in mock chastisement. “Don’t you know that if we pull this off, that’s billionaire with a b?”

No, that she hadn’t known. “And you’re only paying me a million?” she asked, and her indignation was only partially feigned. “Perhaps I need to renegotiate my contract.”

But suddenly Adam didn’t want to think about that. He didn’t want to think about contracts, or money, or timelines, or what his life or Belle’s were going to look like when this year was through. He didn’t want to think at all, truth be told. He wanted to feel. “Perhaps you should,” he said, propping himself up on his elbow so that he was looking down at her.
Belle looked up at him looming over her, his broad shoulders blocking out the light. As before, she could tell what he intended, but this time, she realized with surprise, she wasn’t afraid. She softly closed her eyes and angled her face upward, the clearest signal she knew how to send, and let him brace his hands on either side of her head and slowly lower his lips to hers.

It was the third time they had kissed, but in a way, thought Belle, it was really more of a first kiss than anything else. She hadn’t really known him then, and so kissing him had been a kiss between two curious bodies, and that was all. This was different. This was a kiss between friends and companions, between two people who understood each other perfectly, their mouths moving in perfect harmony. She had thought she knew what a life-changing kiss was before. She had been so, so wrong. This was it, the kind of kiss you never recovered from. “Why, Mr. Beaumont,” she said when he had pulled away and she could speak again. “Did you bring me all the way up here just to seduce me? It’s a bit public, don’t you think?”

He smiled down at her with an expression of laughing tenderness, as if this were all a wonderful joke they shared together, just the two of them. “I don’t see anyone up here but the horses, and believe me, my horses don’t gossip. And besides,” he added witheringly, “if a man can’t make out with his wife a little in his own fields, then what even is the point?

Belle twined her arms around his neck, her fingers ruffling the shorter hairs at his nape. “Ah, yes, that’s true,” she said. “And it’s such a good point that I think you ought to kiss me again, just to prove it.”

Her husband was all too happy to oblige.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: It's pure poetry. Leave your comments below!
Kisses Are a Better Fate Than Wisdom

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Thank you all for being so patient with my sporadic updates. Between work and school, it is sometimes hard for me to find sustained time in which to write. But I love this story and these characters, and I love creating for you guys, so I'll see this thing through till it's done. You don't have to worry. Enjoy chapter fifteen!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If there was one thing in the world that Adam Beaumont really hated, it was feeling like he didn’t have control of a situation. He had been that way for years, ever since he was a child. If he had cared to psychoanalyze himself (he had not), he would have discovered that this character trait had perhaps originated with his mother’s death, a child’s effort to cope with unendurable trauma by seeking to impose some sense of order on a world that suddenly made no sense at all. His mother had died in an instant, without any warning, and he had been powerless to prevent it, and just as powerless to prevent what came after. He had not been able to make his father love him, had not been able to stop his father from sending him away, had not been able to make anyone—save perhaps Mrs. Potts—see him and value him for who he really was, instead of what he represented: the last male-line offshoot of an ancient house, and the sole heir to an almost unimaginably vast fortune. And so he had vowed, perhaps subconsciously, that he would never again let a situation get away from him, or let a person get the best of him. It was a decision that had come to color all the years of his life since.

If he could not make people love him, he had reasoned, with all the faulty logic of someone who knew a lot less about the world than they thought they did, he would at least make them do as he wished. It was why he had kept his father at arm’s length and refused to be the dutiful son he had wanted. It was why he had made it his business to know everything about everyone, from his school acquaintances to the people he worked with, all their weak points and the ways in which they could be bought. It was why he had been wildly successful in business and wildly unhappy in his personal life. But perhaps nowhere had it had a bigger impact than on his relationships with women.

Because if there was one other thing that Adam Beaumont really hated, it was feeling awkward. He had been an eighteen-year-old virgin once, and he had no desire to repeat the experience. Her name had been Roxanne, or at least, that was the name she had given him, and his friends had pooled their money to buy him an evening with her for his eighteenth birthday. She had been older, perhaps close to thirty, and hard and experienced in a way that had made him feel curiously vulnerable. He had not liked feeling vulnerable, and from then on, whenever he’d had a woman in his bed, he’d been sure to have the upper hand. He’d been told he was good at sex, and he ought to have been, for he’d had plenty of practice, but he’d always felt strangely detached from it, so great was his need to not let his control slip. He knew all the right words to say, all the right places to touch, all the right movements to make, to make a woman come apart in his arms, but he found that he’d meant very little of it. And when it came to his own release, he let the mask slip only for an instant before retreating again behind the wall of his customary icy reserve. He had never lost himself inside a woman, never forgotten himself, never made love with total, complete, and reckless abandon. He had always been the one who called the shots, the one who decided what was going to happen, when it would begin and when it would end, and everything that came in between. This had been his modus operandi for nearly fourteen years, and it had always worked. Until now.
Adam could identify with absolute clarity the day that everything in his life had gone completely aftagley, to borrow a phrase from Robert Burns. It was not, as may have been expected, March 11, the day that the letter had arrived from his father’s solicitor. That had been a shock to be sure, a severe blow to a man who prided himself on never being surprised, but it ought to have been survivable, endurable. But then, for perhaps the first time in his adult life, he had lost control of the narrative. It was not March 11 he was thinking of, but rather, March 12, the day he had decided to ask Belle (or perhaps tell would be nearer to the truth) to marry him. He had thought she would be pliant, easily managed, someone he could force into the background of his life while he continued on just as he always had. He saw now that it could only have been the sheerest hubristic folly that could possibly have made him think that.

For now that he knew her better, and had lived in the same house with her for months, when, he asked himself, did Belle ever recede into the background of anything? She was in his thoughts in some capacity from morning until night, even when he was working, and sometimes even when he was sleeping, too. Even during those horrible days at Beaumont House, when they had hated each other—but no, that wasn’t quite right. Looking back on it now, he didn’t think that hate was really an accurate term to describe what had passed between them. They had fought bitterly, to be sure, and each one had said horrible things to the other, the kind of things that made Adam feel cold and sick inside to think of now. But even then, it had not been hatred, at least not on his part. She had annoyed him, infuriated him, exasperated him, and confused him. But most of all, he thought, she had intrigued him. Yes, even then, it had been hard to get her out of his mind.

And once they had started actually getting along, it had become so much worse—or perhaps it had become so much better. He had been right in his assessment from their wedding day: one kiss with her had not been enough. So he had kissed her again that same night, and realized that two kisses were not enough either. The idea of kissing her again had been simmering in the back of his mind ever since, but at some point it had tipped over into a full-blown obsession. It was hard to say when, exactly. Perhaps it had been that night in the Beaumont House kitchen, when she had wiped the blood from his face and brushed the wet hair out of his eyes. Or perhaps it had been the day they had fought about *Pride and Prejudice*, when he had felt that particular thrill that comes from matching wits with an intellectual equal. It had been there for sure the day he had shown her the garden, when he had caught her about the waist and she had turned her rain-wet face up towards his, her brown eyes so wide, so soft, so questioning. And it had been there a thousand times in between and since, every morning at breakfast, every evening in the drawing room, every time she had laid her head on his shoulder or laced her fingers through his.

So when he had seen her lying there in the grass, an inviting tangle of long limbs and soft curves, it was perhaps not surprising that he had wanted to kiss her again. And when she had made that crack about renegotiating her contract, he had not been able to resist. He supposed that in a way, he had merely been agreeing with her. After all, what was a kiss if not an opportunity to change the rules of the game yet again?

Her lips had been just as soft and sweet as he remembered, and yet there had also been something different about kissing her this time. He had tried to put his finger on what it was, and had been unable to reach any certain conclusion. It had been something vague, ephemeral, indefinable, but it had been there all the same, warm and comforting, and yet a little dangerous too. He had kissed her just once, but thoroughly, before lifting his head and gazing down at her, an implied question in his eyes. He had half expected, or more than half expected, if the truth were known, that she would be offended, that she would be appalled, that she would sit up and push him away. So he had been quite unprepared for what she had actually done.

She had opened her eyes, but only halfway, looking up at him with a sleepy, sultry expression. “Why, Mr. Beaumont,” she had said, in a tone of voice which he had not heard from her before, and
which had shot straight to his groin. “Did you bring me all the way up here just to seduce me? It’s a bit public, don’t you think?”

Adam had smiled down at her with fondness and relief. “I don’t see anyone up here but the horses,” he had found himself saying, “and believe me, my horses don’t gossip.” Her lips had quirked at that, and hoping to amuse her further, he had adopted an expression of mock severity, though secretly, he had wanted to grin. “And besides, if a man can’t make out with his wife a little in his own fields, then what even is the point?”

Belle had smiled, as close to a smirk as he had ever seen from her. The feel of her fingertips against the nape of his neck had sent a pleasant shiver down his spine. “Ah, yes, that’s true,” she had agreed. “And it’s such a good point that I think you ought to kiss me again, just to prove it.”

He had not needed any more encouragement than that. Gently, as if she might break, he had gathered her into his arms, and kissed her again, and then again. For a long time, they had simply lain there in the sweet-smelling grass beneath the warm June sun and become reacquainted with each other’s mouths. It was strange, Adam reflected later. He had usually long since ceased to think of kissing as anything other than a prelude, a preamble, the appetizer before the much more rewarding main course. But that afternoon, it had been enough—indeed, it had been almost too much—just to kiss her. He had taken his time, been methodical, almost worshipful, as he had kissed her smooth forehead, the impossibly delicate skin of her eyelids, the pert upturned tip of her nose, the curve of her jaw, and the long column of her neck, before returning his attention to her lips. And then, finally, when he had finished his explorations, he had lifted his head enough to look down at her lying there in the circle of his arms, flushed and smiling, and said, “Well then?”

“You kiss by the book,” Belle had replied, and he had grinned with amusement to hear her quote Shakespeare to him. “But not any book I ever read.”

Adam had arched an eyebrow. “Is that good?”

She had lifted one slender hand and traced a fingertip from his brow bone to his cheekbone, across the corner of his lips, over his chin, and down his neck to the hollow at the base of his throat, which she had then leaned forward and kissed. “Draw your own conclusions. I know better than to stoke your ego.”

They had ridden home through the forest slowly, so that they could each control their horse with one hand and hold hands with the other. As they had made their way through that quiet landscape of dappled sun and shadow, Adam had felt that not even the grass stain he had incurred down the side of one knee could diminish the great sense of quiet peace in his heart.

The peace, however, had been short lived. He had to confess that he didn’t understand it. She felt something for him; he knew that she did. It was in her kiss and the touch of her hands, even if it wasn’t in her words. And yet, in the days since their visit to the folly, she had suddenly grown distant and skittish again. She had even begged off from sitting with him in the drawing room after dinner, citing a headache—three nights in a row. If he didn’t know better (and now that he thought about it, he supposed he really didn’t know better), he would have thought she was purposefully avoiding him. At any rate, whatever the reason, her actions had once again put him in an uncomfortable position. It ought all to have been so simple. He had finally kissed her again, it had been wonderful, and there was no reason why it shouldn’t continue to happen on a regular basis. Ensuring that this was so ought to have been child’s play to a man like him. And yet he couldn’t shake the suspicion that she was the one calling the shots, not him. He felt like that awkward eighteen-year-old boy again, and that would never do. No, it would never do at all.

He walked quickly down the main staircase and halfway across the entry hall, trying to throw an
authoritative weight into each tread of his Italian leather shoes. “Mrs. Potts!” he thundered. “Where is my wife?” It was not so much a question as it was a demand.

Mrs. Potts turned to look at him. So did Cogsworth. So did the trio of workers who were re-hanging the curtains on either side of the front door. Even the elderly Scottish art restorer who had been brought down from Edinburgh to see what could be done about cleaning the paintings paused in his work and looked up, his pendulous mustache practically quivering with curiosity. “I—I—” Mrs. Potts stammered, for once at a complete loss for what to say. “I’m not sure I ought to tell you,” she said finally.

The look on his face was dangerous in the extreme, and would have struck fear into the heart of many a man. Indeed, the youngest of the workers was glancing back and forth between Adam and Mrs. Potts in terror, and even the old Scotsman looked faintly alarmed. “Are you refusing to answer me?” Adam said in a low voice every bit as menacing as his expression. He was in full-on New York businessman mode now.

But Mrs. Potts was made of sterner stuff, and she was not so easily cowed. “I’ll not be bullied, young man,” she said firmly. “Belle gave strict instructions that she was not to be disturbed.”

He could not stop his face from falling a little. “She’s ignoring me?” he asked, trying to sound angry rather than hurt. “I don’t understand how she can do that, not after—” But here he stopped abruptly, remembering that Mrs. Potts didn’t know about what had passed between them at the folly.

Mrs. Potts surveyed him critically, as if she were trying to form an opinion about something. “I don’t think she’s doing it deliberately, sweetheart,” she said finally. “She told me she just wanted somewhere where she could think in peace. I’m sorry, dear, but I won’t betray her confidence, even for you.”

She had expected this to make him even angrier, but instead he only smiled, which in a way was almost as disconcerting. “No, no, Mrs. Potts,” he said. “It’s quite alright.” For Adam, with a sudden flash of brilliant inspiration, had realized where Belle must be. Without another word, he turned and took off in that direction. The others watched him go.

“What a strange young man,” said the art restorer, adjusting his spectacles.

He walked quickly toward his destination with his customary confident, long-legged stride, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides the only indication of any nervousness he may have felt. He reached the doors of the library, flung them open wide, and burst in like he owned the place, which, to be fair, he did. Although he had given Belle free reign of it, which complicated things a bit. He called her name, and received no answer. “Belle?” he tried again. She had to be here somewhere; he could not be wrong in thinking that, surely.

This time, he heard her say, “Up here!” He turned in the direction of her voice, and blanched, horrified. She was on the second level of the library, and not only that, but she was currently balanced precariously at the top of one of the tall ladders that leaned against the shelves. She was wearing a pale yellow cotton sundress with white buttons down the front, and had her hair tied up with a white silk scarf. She looked beautiful, and suddenly every clever thing he had wanted to say completely vanished from his mind. “What the hell are you doing up there?” he heard himself say, and as soon as the words were out of his mouth, cringed inwardly at how clumsy and rude they sounded.
She answered his question with a question of her own. “Why are you here?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious? To see you, of course. I have the most uncomfortable feeling that you’ve been avoiding me, beauty.”

Belle felt her entire body go hot, then cold. He was right, of course. She had been avoiding him, and now she knew that he knew it. But what she thought perhaps he didn’t know, and what he must above all never find out, was the reason why. It was her own shameful secret, equal parts complicated, unsolvable problem and instinctual, elemental truth. It was this: she wanted him, and it terrified her.

Belle had never been in this position before. She had had crushes before, certainly. In elementary school, it had been a boy named Brett Richards, who had lived down the street from her and whose mother had sometimes invited her over to play on the swing set in their backyard. In middle school, it had been Eric Bailey, who practically all the girls in her grade had fancied themselves half in love with because he knew how to do skateboard tricks. For most of high school, it had been Chris Wilson, who had been the closest thing Pleasantville High School had to an intellectual. They had been debate team partners; she had thought he might ask her to prom. He had not. He had asked Sarah Mazzano instead. In college, there had been David Wong, who had kissed her once at a party, and then pretended he hadn’t known her when he saw her the following Monday. That one had stung. And then finally, there had been Thibault Deschamps, whom she had met while on study abroad, and who had taken her out for coffee once before rapidly losing interest when she had not wanted to immediately have sex with him. Like all the others, what had initially seemed promising had fizzled out into nothingness.

And then after college, there had been Neal, of course. Why had she done it? It was so hard now to say. She supposed she had been intrigued by the fact that he had seemed interested in her, which was something that had never really happened before. She had told Adam that she had never loved Neal, and that had been the truth. She had never been in love before, least of all with him. But had she at least wanted him? In retrospect, she thought she had not. Her decision to have sex with him had been made, not out of some grand, consuming passion, but rather, out of a sense of almost academic curiosity. She had been twenty-three years old and a virgin, and had figured it was as good a time as any to finally see what all the fuss was about. She knew, even with her very limited experience, that what she had gotten had not been all that great, but it had not been terrible either. At least it had been over quickly each time. She had managed to get sufficiently into it so that it wasn’t painful, but she had always remained strangely detached from the whole thing, as if she were outside herself watching two other people as an anthropologist might observe a new and unfamiliar culture. There had been nothing in those brief, strange interludes to captivate her, to keep her thinking about either the man or the deed when not directly confronted by them.

But with Adam—oh, with Adam it was decidedly different. His tall, broad-shouldered, leanly muscled form radiated a sort of sensual energy that was palpable even from her perch high up on the ladder. She thought about him with startling frequency, wanted him in ways that seemed to her quite shocking. She wanted to kiss him again, quite desperately, but it was more than just that. For the first time in her life, Belle wanted another person in her bed. She wanted to feel his strong hands on her, those long, sensitive fingers roving over her body. She wanted him on top of her, the delicious weight of him pressing her down into the mattress. But most scandalously of all, she wanted the hard length of him between her thighs. Yes, even that she wanted. Just the thought of it was enough to make her blush violently.

He was looking up at her expectantly, waiting for her to say something, to offer some excuse or explanation for her behavior. “I—I—” she stammered. “No, you’re wrong. I haven’t been—”
His eyebrows shot up. “You’re a terrible liar,” he said bluntly. “Absolutely terrible. Now come down from there.”

“I’m busy,” she protested.

“I’m not asking,” he said firmly. “Now, if you please, before you hurt yourself. I’m not sure those ladders are really safe to be climbed on.”

Belle rolled her eyes. “Yes, sir,” she said a touch sarcastically, and began her descent, a few books tucked into the crook of her arm. He noticed as she came down that her feet were bare, and he found the comfort and ease the sight betrayed to be strangely moving.

“What were you doing up there?” he asked once she was back at ground level.

“The organization of this library is abominable,” she told him. “Which is really just a more polite way of saying it flat out sucks.”

“Not so!” he exclaimed, offended. “I can tell you where everything is in this place.”


Adam looked around, the confident expression on his face vanishing as he realized he didn’t know. “There…?” he said finally, pointing in a random direction.

Belle laughed, a mischievous glint coming into her eyes. “That was a trick question,” she grinned. “It’s here in my hand.”

He looked amused. “Very funny, sweetheart,” he said affectionately. “But really, what are you trying to do here, reorganize the whole library? There are literally thousands of books in here, you know.” She didn’t say anything, only smiled, and an expression of vague horror crossed his face. “Oh my God, that’s exactly what you’re trying to do, isn’t it?”

There was a very large, very solid looking wooden table at the far end of the room, and Belle crossed to it, Adam trailing along in her wake. The top of the table was covered in stacks of books of every conceivable size and thickness, and Belle added her armful to the shortest stack. “Of course I am,” she told him. “I have to have something to do with my time, after all. With any luck, I’ll be able to leave you with a whole new library when the year is through.” But as she said the words, something in her gut twisted painfully, as it always did now when she thought of the time when she would have to leave.

No, don’t go! You can’t! The strident urgency of the thought startled him, and he realized that it cut like a knife to hear her refer so casually to a time when she would no longer be here, and everything would go back to the way it had been before. Once, he had longed for just such a time; now the idea of it filled him with a sort of nameless dread, a gnawing, aching emptiness that threatened to obliterate him. He spoke quickly in an effort to chase the feeling away. “I have no doubt you will, my dear. You always were a whiz at organization. The best assistant I ever had, by far.” He had meant to compliment her, but he saw from the way she turned away from him, her shoulders set stiffly, that his words had had the opposite effect. He swallowed and tried again. “Can I help you with it?”

Her voice when she answered sounded strange, far away and almost muffled, and he realized she was pressing her hand against her mouth. “If you like,” she said.

Frowning, he crossed to the other side of the table so he could look at her. Her head was down, her
eyelashes dark fans against her cheeks. A section of her hair had come loose from where she had tied it back with the scarf, and it hung in a curling, waving tendril against her cheek. He wanted to reach over and tuck it back behind her ear, but dared not. Her slender hands were running absently over the covers and spines of some of the books on the table, as if she didn’t know what to do with herself otherwise. He read some of the titles as best he could upside down, and felt himself smile. “Poetry,” he said softly.

She looked up swiftly, a cautious hope flaring to life in her brown eyes. “You like poetry?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, I do,” he affirmed. The look on his face was almost shy. “Do you?”

She traced a reverent finger down the spine of one leather-bound volume. “Very much so.” She smiled wryly. “But if our divergent opinions on Austen are anything to go by, probably not the same kind of poetry as you.” He’s not for you, whispered a little voice in the back of her mind. No matter how badly you want him. You’re just too different. You like different things; you come from different worlds. What future do you think you have here? After Neal, Belle had decided that she did not want to take that final, irreversible step with anyone with whom she did not—could not—see a future. Not because she was prudish, although perhaps she was a little, but because it made things more complicated, drew the bonds of entanglement ever tighter so that when the break came, it was painful indeed. And there would come a break, make no mistake about that. There would have to come a break. She had not loved Neal, not by a long shot, and still it bothered her to think that he had seen her so vulnerable, so exposed. How much worse would the break be this time? How much more would it take from her? She did not want to find out.

Adam shrugged. “I don’t know about that,” he said, lifting up the cover of one very heavy tome before letting it fall back down with a soft whump. He lifted his gaze to her, and his eyes held a challenge. “My tastes are…eccentric, let’s say. Are yours?”

“I don’t think anything I do could ever be varied and interesting enough for you,” she said a little more tartly than she meant to, and it wasn’t just poetry that she was thinking of.

He looked amused for a moment, and then grinned as a flash of inspiration lit his eyes. “Shall we test that?”

“What do you mean?”

He started rifling through the many books on the table until he found one that looked like it would suit his purposes. “Impromptu poetry reading,” he declared firmly.

In spite of her worries, Belle found herself smiling. “Oh, yes please!”

“I hoped you’d say that. You start,” he offered magnanimously.

Belle studied the books on the table, thinking fast. “Can it be about anything?”

“Yes, of course. Anything at all.”

“A classic, then,” she decided, because she knew she would find it in the book that happened to be right in front of her. Opening the little book to a point midway through, she cleared her throat and began to read.

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error, and upon me prov’d,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d.”

She had a strong, clear voice, with just a hint of a musical lilt, and a good sense for the rhythm of the piece, and Adam discovered that he liked to listen to her. “Sonnet 116,” he said when she had finished.

She nodded, smiling. “Right you are. One of my favorites. I loved it from the first time I read it, though it’s been so long now that I’ve forgotten when exactly that was. My senior year of high school, maybe?”

Adam tried to picture Belle at seventeen. What had she been like? A little awkward perhaps, a bit of a loner, the kind of girl who ate lunch alone with a book every day. But the essence of her would have been exactly the same as it was now, he thought. She would still have had the same clever mind, the same lively intelligence, the same fresh-faced prettiness. What a pity it was that he had not known her then. He wondered vaguely how his life might have been different if he had known someone like Belle back then, when he had still been young, before Roxanne and all the other women who had followed her. But then, of course, when he had been seventeen, Belle had been only eleven. Their lives had simply never aligned before now. “What makes you like it so much?” he asked, genuinely curious.

Belle looked a little embarrassed. “He speaks of love,” she said finally. “Strong love, permanent love, the kind of love that never falters, and never seeks to change the other person, but values them for exactly who and what they are.” She lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. “The idea intrigues me. I’ve never known that kind of love before.”

Adam’s throat suddenly felt unaccountably tight, and he swallowed thickly and with some difficulty. “Neither have I,” he said softly. “When I was younger, I thought that it didn’t matter, but the older I get, and especially lately, the more I think that maybe it does.” His words were followed by a perfect silence in which the walls of the house seemed to breathe in and out with them, pulsating with newly glimpsed possibility. Then Adam smiled a little mischievously. “But if it’s a poem about love and time you want, then I think I have an even better one.” He flipped through the book he was holding and began to read. “Had we but world enough, and time, this coyness, Lady, were no crime.” It was Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.”
“Oh, stop!” cried Belle in flustered mortification, hiding her burning face in her hands. “Now you’re just being mean to get back at me for avoiding you.”

“Ah-ha!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “So you admit you were avoiding me! We’ll talk about that later. First, I intend to finish reading this poem.” And so he did. Belle had always thought that she was fairly good at reading poetry out loud, and in truth she was, but Adam was in a different class altogether. It was something about his rich, resonant voice, his sophisticated accent, the way he seemed to know exactly where to put each little pause and emphasis. She could have listened to him forever, and she thought perhaps he ought to stop publishing books and make a career out of reading them instead. “Thus, though we cannot make our sun stand still, yet we will make him run,” he finished, and then looked up at her, his blue gaze startlingly direct, and yet impossible to read. “What do you think?”

Belle felt a sudden surge of adrenaline pulse through her. “I’ll tell you what I think,” she declared, already searching furiously through the stacks of books for a way to answer him with a poem.

It went on from there, a mad, careening dash to find the best works to share with each other. They read long poems and short ones, old poems and new ones. They read well-known classics, and they read some that were quite obscure indeed. They read poems about weighty subjects like love and fate and the great fathomless mystery of time, and some poems that were about light and inconsequential things, or about nothing much at all. Time seemed to pass in a golden blur while they read, until at last Belle, breathless with laughter, pushed the loose strands of hair out of her eyes and asked shyly if she could read him her very favorite poem of all.

“Yes, of course, by all means. I’d love to hear it.” He wanted to add that everything about her was suddenly fascinating to him, that he hungered for any little glimpse he could glean into the way her mind worked, but he didn’t know quite how to form the words. It was still too new, this feeling that fluttered in his chest when he looked at her.

“Thank you,” she said, and opening the book, she read without further explanation or preamble.

“I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not wean’d till then?
But suck’d on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?
’Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be;
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, ’twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown;
Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mix’d equally;
If our two loves be one, or thou and I
Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die.”

Her voice was quiet and solemn, but full of feeling, and Adam felt caught by it, trapped and held like the dust motes that hung suspended in the columns of light from the windows. It sounded wonderful, this vision her words painted. There was a coziness to it, a narrowing of the entire world down to one place and one person, and yet it was expansive too, with that one person containing enough excitement and possibility that it was as if they were the whole world all on their own. He thought of the two of them as they now were in the library, of how the entire outside world seemed to have receded to somewhere far beyond its walls. He had no idea how long they had been there, or what time it was. He was aware only of her. “I don’t think I know that one,” he said, his voice as quiet as hers had been. “What is it?”

Her eyes were bright. “‘The Good-Morrow’ by John Donne. Isn’t it lovely?”

For once in his life, Adam Beaumont felt no desire to be sarcastic or contradictory. “Yes, it is.” He paused, then smiled and said, “But I think I might know one that tops even that. I don’t know why I didn’t read it earlier. May I?”

Belle arched her eyebrows. “I can’t imagine what could possibly be better, but by all means, surprise me.”

He cleared his throat. “Since Feeling is First, by E.E. Cummings.”

“Since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a far better fate
than wisdom
lady I swear by all flowers. Don't cry
--the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death I think is no parenthesis.”

When he had finished, Belle stood in stunned silence. She had read the poem before, of course, and she thought perhaps she had even heard it read out loud. But she knew for a fact that she had never heard it read out loud like this. Adam had taken the words on the page and brought them to life as something dangerous and erotic, a rich, dark assemblage of words that made her heart beat faster and her body feel warm all over.

“Well?” he said. “Shall we test his theory?”

She blinked, startled. “What?” she asked. Her thoughts had been very far away.

“His idea that it is better to be kissed than to be wise. Shall we test it?”

She only had time to say “Oh, well, I—” before he had set down his book, come around to her side of the table, taken her face in his hands, and kissed her. Belle swayed toward him in speechless surprise and an equally speechless delight. It seemed that despite all her doubts and fears, all her resolve not to be vulnerable with him, he had only to touch her, just once, and her body went up in flames, helpless to do anything but respond.

He kissed her only once, a relatively chaste kiss, for all that Belle felt her blood pulse hot through her veins. “Hmm,” he mused when he pulled away. “Almost, I think, but not quite.”

“Huh?” said Belle, who was struggling to think of ways in which the kiss could have been improved.

Adam grinned at her, a wicked grin that made her realize she was perhaps in some danger. With one swift motion, he swept aside some of the stacks of books to create an expanse of bare table top. Then he fit his hands deftly around her waist and lifted her easily so that she was sitting on the table, her legs dangling below and her face more on a level with his. Her knees, unconstrained beneath the loose skirt of her dress, fell to either side of their own accord, and he stepped neatly into the newly created space between her legs. “Oh yes, that’s much better,” he murmured against her lips, and kissed her again.

This kiss was deeper, more insistent, almost hungry, and when she felt him demand access to her mouth, she gave it to him. As she did so, she wondered how many more times they would get to do this, and if it would continue to have such a startling effect on her every time. His kiss was a study in contradictions. There was something strangely comforting about it, a warm and tender intimacy that quieted her fears and smoothed out the wrinkles of doubt in her mind. But beneath that, equally strong, there flowed a current of danger, a sense of the daring and unknown. Every time their lips met, it was as if they walked right up to the edge of a precipice, beyond which lay a vast, undiscovered world, a world that would be theirs for the taking if only they went just a little bit farther. How much farther would they go? How much farther did he want to go? How much farther did she? Surely there would come a time—there would have to come a time—when all this would vanish, when his kisses would no longer hold any magic and would instead become merely ordinary, commonplace things. But if that was so, the time was not yet. Why, oh why, Belle wondered with an almost savage frustration, out of all the men in the world, did it have to be this particular man whom her body seemed to recognize as some long-lost part of itself that it ached desperately to be reunited
Adam kissed her lips one last time, then her jaw, before turning his attention to her neck. The firm pressure of his mouth was surely hard enough to bruise, and when Belle considered the idea of being marked by him in this way, she felt a secret, forbidden thrill run through her. If she closed her eyes and tipped her head back, the library, and indeed, the world at large, seemed to recede until there was only blissful, wonderful sensation. She tangled her fingers in his hair and held his head against her, showing him exactly where she wanted his mouth. He let her guide him, obligingly lavishing attention over every inch of skin. But then after a while, he stopped, and she felt him lift his head a little. “Belle, sweetheart,” he said in a low voice, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What’s that?” she murmured, not opening her eyes.

He pressed a gentle kiss, soft as a butterfly’s wing, against the hollow at the base of her throat where her pulse beat. “Can’t you guess?”

She smiled. “I’m not going to pretend that I ever know what you’re thinking.”

“Well, it’s this: I like you, beauty.”

Belle’s eyes snapped open, and then she blinked, trying to focus her vision as the library, the world, and all her fears flooded back into view with stunning, awful force. “What did you say?” she asked weakly.

“I like you,” he repeated. “Can you doubt it?” he added, nuzzling against the shallow curve where her neck met her shoulder. She didn’t answer, and finally, when the silence had stretched on for so long that it seemed to have acquired form and substance, he stood up straight and took a step back from her. “But I can see that you do,” he said softly.

It isn’t fair! Belle almost wanted to weep as she looked at his handsome face with its kiss-swollen lips and disheveled golden hair. He had turned out to be so different in so many ways from the man she had thought she’d known. She had thought him shallow, selfish and self-absorbed, heartless and cruel. And to be fair, he hadn’t exactly given her much reason to think otherwise until relatively recently. But she now knew that beneath his cold and forbidding exterior, there was a warm heart, capable of great passion and exquisite tenderness. There was a clever mind and a quick wit, and talking with him was never, ever boring. Life with him was never boring. There was so much about him she could like, so much about him she could even love, if she let herself.

But there was a darkness in him still, a great current of pain and anger that seethed and rippled just below the surface. There was a stiffness to him, too, a rigidity, as if he could never quite fully forget who and what he was, could never quite let himself relax and be happy, even when they were alone together. He was deeply cynical, distrustful of humanity and human nature, and though he had a wonderfully pleasant laugh, he had not yet learned to laugh at himself. All of this she knew, and accepted. She had agreed to come to Thornleigh in the hope that she might discover the real Adam Beaumont, and having found him, she had realized that the good and the bad were intermingled in him, impossible to separate without destroying the fundamental essence of the man himself. And Belle found she had no desire to do that. He had suddenly become real to her these past few weeks and months, a real flesh and blood person in a way he hadn’t been before. He was the tortured, brooding hero of all her literary imaginings, except even better, because he was here, and possessed a presence that threatened to overwhelm all her senses.

But there was one other thing about Adam, and here was the sticking point. She had no reason to believe that he meant what he was saying to her, other than what her treacherous heart tried to tell her. He didn’t speak of love, only liking, and she didn’t know whether to feel disappointed or
relieved. He had been so many other women’s before he was hers. If he was hers, she corrected herself hastily. She knew about some of them. There was Emily Chowdhury, of course, and Nastia. There were all the times he’d had her make dinner reservations “for two, if you please, Miss Villeneuve,” and the times she’d seen articles of women’s clothing in his dry-cleaning bags. Sometimes he’d even had her order flowers on his behalf, and when she had asked what kind she should get, he’d simply shrugged and told her she could choose. Just to be perverse, she had always picked the most elaborate and expensive arrangements she could find. So many women, so many, many women. And those were just the ones she had found out about during the year she had worked for him. God only knew how many others there had been before that. How many of them had he done this exact same thing with, how many had he gotten alone and kissed in exactly the right way and made think they were special? “It’s not that I want to doubt you,” she said desperately.

“And yet…?” he prompted her.

She searched about furiously for the words to express what she was feeling. “You don’t like me!” she finally blurted.

It had not been the right thing to say. A muscle twitched at the corner of his jaw. “That’s a rather arrogant presumption on your part, to think you know my heart better than I do.”

The way he said the words, so feelingly, caused her to look at him in surprise. “Your heart?” she echoed like an idiot.

“Yes, beauty, my heart. Or didn’t you think I had one?”

She felt her face go bright red. “No—no—of course I don’t—of course I don’t think that,” she stuttered, tripping over the words.

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the table on either side of her so that she was trapped in the cage of his body, unable to move away unless she scrambled backward over the table. “Then tell me what it is you do think, because apparently I don’t know.” She didn’t—couldn’t—answer. “You think I’m indifferent to you, then?” he asked incredulously. He kissed her, hard enough to take her breath away. “Does that feel like indifference to you?”

“No?” she ventured, feeling hot and confused.

He slipped the whisper-thin strap of her dress from her shoulder, then cupped her breast in his hand and dipped his mouth to the bare skin exposed where her bodice had fallen away. “How about this, hmm?” The last word was little more than a warm hum against her skin. “What would you call this?”

“No?” she ventured, feeling hot and confused.

He lifted his head and stepped back from her again. “Then what is it?”

Belle tried to pull the strap of her dress back over her shoulder, but her fingers felt thick and clumsy. She answered his question with one of her own. “Why now?”

A look of confusion flitted across his face. “What?”

“How long have we known each other?” He didn’t answer. “I sat right outside your office nearly every day for almost a year. And in all that time, you never once showed any sign of being at all interested in me.”
“You were my employee!” he spluttered defensively. “I couldn’t possibly!”

“But you were never even nice to me!” Belle wailed despairingly.

He recoiled as if she had struck him, and the utterly lost expression of regret and sorrow in his eyes cut her to the heart. She couldn’t bear to look at him when he looked at her like that. Ducking her head so she wouldn’t have to meet his eyes, she said, “So why now? What’s changed?”

He was silent a long time. “I don’t know,” he said finally.

“You don’t know?” The outrage in her voice made him cringe.

“I don’t know,” he said again. “I have no explanation for it. All I know is that I can’t get you off of my mind. No matter where I go, no matter what I do, there you are.”

“It’s this place,” Belle declared authoritatively.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s why you didn’t give a damn about me in New York or in London. We’re so isolated up here, cut off so completely from the rest of the world that we might as well be in our own little bubble. You’ve felt it, haven’t you?”

“But I thought you liked it here!” he exclaimed, and his voice was as full of as much anguished despair as hers had been earlier. “I thought—I thought you liked Thornleigh as I did,” he added in a calmer voice. “Please don’t tell me I was mistaken.”

“I do! Of course I do. But don’t you see? You only think you like me because there’s no one else around. Once we go back to civilization again, you’ll get bored and change your mind and go after someone else.”

He stared at her in stupefaction for a moment, and then his mouth set itself into that firm, thin line that she knew meant he was displeased. “You don’t honestly believe that,” he said, and it was equal parts statement and question.

For a tiny moment, Belle’s resolve wavered. Did she believe it? She thought of the clever, kind, affectionate man she had come to know, who had arranged for her to have a horse because she had mentioned that she liked to ride. She thought of the wicked, arrogant part of him that flitted from woman to woman like a moth to candle flame. There were two questions here, as she saw it. One, did she really think he would do it, and two, how would she react if and when he did? “I don’t want to believe it,” she said finally in a small voice.

The thin line of his mouth relaxed a little before straightening back out again. “Ah, yes, now we finally come to the heart of the matter. What is it that you want, beauty? For my part, I assure you that I want only you. But what do you want? Because it seems to me that not only do you not know my heart, you don’t even know your own.”

“You can’t possibly know what’s in my heart,” said Belle, though she had a strange, uncomfortable sensation that perhaps he did. After all, hadn’t she told him that he saw her as no one else ever had?

He smiled sadly. “I wish I did. I thought I did, but perhaps I’m losing my touch.” He stepped towards her again, back into the space between her thighs. “You let me kiss you,” he said, softly accusatory. “You kissed me in return. And then you bolted like a spooked horse. That’s enough to give a man a complex, sweetheart.”
“I never meant to do that,” she protested. “It’s just that—I—I can’t.”

“You can’t what? Was it that repugnant to you? Perhaps it’s your indifference I need to worry about? But no,” he added after a tiny pause, one corner of his mouth turning up. “I don’t think that’s what this is.” He leaned forward and kissed her, just once, but it was enough to make her body sway toward him. “You can’t tell me that makes you feel nothing.”

Belle could not argue with him on that point. “It isn’t—” she said weakly, and then could not go on.

He ran his fingers over the instep of her foot, then slowly began sliding them up her leg. Everywhere he touched, her flesh burned as if it were on fire. His eyes remained locked on hers, his gaze never faltering. “Make me understand,” he pleaded with her. “I thought you enjoyed what we did.”

Oh, how could she explain it to him? That day at the folly had been like something out of a wonderful dream, a holiday from reality. She had enjoyed it, truly she had. But the aftermath, when she had realized what she had done, had realized the implications of it, had been like being awakened by having cold water thrown in her face. If only they could have been two people who met on the street, or bumped into each other in line for coffee, with no baggage or backstory or deadlines or expectations. The unfairness of it all made her want to weep. She knew she lacked the words to explain it all to him. She thought perhaps he knew it already.

His hand had strayed beneath her skirt now, warm and solid against the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, and Belle realized he was dangerously close to discovering the proof that she was not at all indifferent to him. His fingers moved higher, higher, and Belle closed her eyes against the sudden heady rush of arousal and embarrassment as he reached the apex of her thighs and found the wetness there. Just a little to the right, she thought helplessly, and then whimpered when he did just that, almost as if he had heard her speak the thought out loud. A slow, lazy grin of triumph spread across his features. “I knew you felt it too,” he said.

“But what is it?” she asked, desire making her thoughts slow. She wanted more than anything to shift her hips so that her body moved against his hand, but she dared not give him the satisfaction.

He pushed aside the thin layer of damp cotton that separated him from the very heart of her, and Belle realized he was dangerously close to discovering the proof that she was not at all indifferent to him. His fingers moved higher, higher, and Belle closed her eyes against the sudden heady rush of arousal and embarrassment as he reached the apex of her thighs and found the wetness there. Just a little to the right, she thought helplessly, and then whimpered when he did just that, almost as if he had heard her speak the thought out loud. A slow, lazy grin of triumph spread across his features. “I knew you felt it too,” he said.

“Adam grinned at the sound. A lock of his hair had slipped over his forehead, giving him a sort of wild, untamed look. “I don’t know,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her as he gave her another stroke. “But wouldn’t you like to find out?”

Belle’s blood seemed to have turned to liquid fire. But there was something, some question, some concern, pricking at the edge of her mind, and she forced herself to concentrate enough to ask it before desire took over completely. “And when the year is up? What happens then?”

He blinked, startled. “Why do we have to decide that right now? Hell, why do we have to decide that at all? If we both like what we’re doing, why can’t we just continue on exactly as we are?”

Belle’s ardor was doused in an instant by a wave of cold disappointment. She pushed herself away from him, forcing him to remove his hand from beneath her skirt. “Then it seems we’ve reached an impasse.”

“What?” The look of dismay on his face was almost comical, or at least it would have been, had Belle not felt so terrible.
“I don’t do casual,” she informed him. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t. I don’t do casual, and you never seem to do anything but. So, as I said, we are at an impasse.” When he didn’t say anything, she hopped down off the table and pushed past him. “I should go,” she said, her voice tight against the ache in her throat.

She was all the way to the door when Adam finally found his voice. “But beauty,” he said, “this is your library.”

She turned, her hand on the door handle, and he could tell from the way that her eyes were shining that she was trying not to cry. “Oh no,” she said. “I think I’ve had enough for one day.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Secrets of a summer night. Comments appreciated, as always!
I just want to take a second to say thank you to everyone for reading, and a special thank you to all those who have taken the time to write such lovely, thoughtful comments. Reading them really does make my day. Enjoy chapter sixteen!

It was soon common knowledge at Thornleigh that the master and mistress had quarreled about something. The entire house seemed to hum with curiosity about the incident, much as England’s great houses had thrilled for centuries to the domestic dramas, both major and minor, of their wealthy inhabitants. Oh, no one said anything about it, of course, or at least not at first, but the truth was there nonetheless, plainly visible for anyone to see if they cared to look. Mrs. Potts saw it when she came to clear the dinner dishes one evening and found them sitting at opposite ends of the table again, as opposed to directly across from one another, as had become their habit of late. Cogsworth saw it in the way Adam retreated to his study and buried himself in work, in the tense set of his mouth and the shadows beneath his eyes, and in the way Cogsworth caught him looking rather wistfully at the brilliant summer day outside when they were supposed to be discussing business. Plumette saw it in Belle’s sudden propensity for taking Chip out for long, solitary rides over the estate, almost as if she were trying her hardest to escape something. She usually returned from these rides looking pale, and with red-rimmed eyes that suggested she had been crying, and Plumette wanted desperately to ask her what was wrong, but it was as if the entire house were under some kind of spell that made it impossible. Lumière, for his part, saw it in the way their eyes automatically gravitated toward each other when each thought the other wasn’t looking, in the naked longing in Adam’s eyes and the hesitant curiosity in Belle’s. It was clearly killing both of them to be apart from one another, and yet something had obviously happened to put a halt to their fledgling intimacy. The house and all its inhabitants saw this, but no one knew quite what to do about it. So instead they watched, and waited, and held their breath, and did nothing.

Until one night, when Plumette finally could not take it anymore, and her natural sense of burning curiosity finally overrode her carefully cultivated ability to be circumspect and mind her own business. “What in the world,” she asked out of nowhere, “is going on with Belle and Adam?”

Lumière turned to look up at her face, which was lit unevenly by the small circle of light from the lamp beside their bed. Summer was in full swing now, and Yorkshire lay sweltering in the middle of a heat wave. It was one of those breathless, stiflingly hot summer nights, where evening had done nothing to leach the heat of the day from the air. It was too hot even to make love, and so they had settled for flinging back the covers and reclining naked on the smooth cotton of the sheets. “Isn’t it obvious?” he asked. “They’ve had a fight about something.”

Plumette rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I know. It doesn’t take a genius to figure that part out. What I don’t understand is why. It seemed like they were getting along so well, and then all of a sudden they weren’t.”

Her boyfriend was silent for a long time, thinking. “You’ve seen the way they look at each other, yes?” he said finally. She nodded. “Well, what do you make of it?”
She considered this, picturing the way that Adam looked at Belle as if he were drowning in her, the way that Belle looked at him as if she were struggling mightily not to fling herself headlong into the abyss of giving in. “It’s like they’re...orbiting each other,” she said slowly. “They want each other, but they’re afraid.”

Lumière nodded. “Exactly what I was thinking. Very clever of you to read my mind like that, my love.” He picked up her hand where it was lying on the sheet beside her and kissed it. “I think one of them said something to disturb the—the—” He couldn’t think of the word in English and resorted to making a vague gesture with his hand.

“Equilibrium?” Plumette supplied.

“Yes, that’s it exactly! The equilibrium! Thank you,” he said, kissing her hand again. “They were fine as long as they didn’t say it out loud, but once someone said something to bring it into the open, they couldn’t pretend anymore that it wasn’t happening.”

“Okay, two questions,” Plumette said. “One, what exactly do you think is happening? And two, which one of them said something?”

“They’re falling in love, of course,” he said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “And I would put money on it being Adam.”

“Why’s that?”

He shrugged. “Belle is an angel. There’s absolutely no reason for Adam not to trust her. But she has, it has to be said, every reason in the world not to trust him. He said something, she freaked out, and now he feels rejected. And that’s why they’re back to eying each other from across the room.”

Plumette pondered this. It made a great deal of sense, and yet, “Falling in love? I can’t quite believe Adam would do that. Not because of anything to do with Belle, of course. She’s lovely. But Adam is, well, Adam. I guess I just never would have thought to put him and love in the same sentence.”

“But to be fair, I don’t think he’s ever met a girl quite like Belle before. You know, sometimes all it takes is that one right person to change your entire life.” He wrapped an arm around Plumette’s waist and pulled her down from her semi-seated position against the pillows to lie next to him. “Ask me how I know.”

Plumette let him kiss her. “I wonder,” she said softly, “if being married doesn’t also have something to do with it.”

“Plumette,” said Lumière warningly. This was dangerous territory.

“No, no, I’m just saying that perhaps it’s easier to love someone when you know they’re not going anywhere.”

“But except you forget, dear, that Belle is going somewhere. A year doesn’t last forever, you know.”

That was a sad thought. “Maybe she doesn’t have to,” Plumette said, though she wasn’t sure she really believed it. “It all just depends on whether or not he gives her a reason to stay.”

Suddenly, Lumière wasn’t sure whether they were necessarily talking about Belle and Adam anymore, and a great well of panic bubbled up inside him. “Ma cherie, you know I love you, right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, “I know.”
Lumière shifted their bodies so that she was lying beneath him, and positioned himself between her thighs. He felt desperate to hold her, to feel her, to keep her. She could not leave—no, not Plumette! “Then let me show you how much,” he told her. “Hot weather or no.”

And Plumette wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him down to her, and the sensation of sliding into her was the warmth of bliss mingled with the ache of despair.

In the West Wing, Adam was dreaming. He was back in the library again, standing between Belle’s legs, his hand beneath her skirt, his fingers against her clit. She was so warm, so soft, so wet, and each movement of his fingers caused her to make the most fascinating sounds, little gasps and pants and sighs. She clung to him, her small hands clutching his shoulders as he found just the right rhythm to make her thrust her hips forward. In his dream, she didn’t pull away, didn’t second guess, didn’t ask questions that neither of them could possibly know the answer to. Dream-Belle lived only for the moment, for the pleasure he could give her, pleasure that built and built like cresting waves until she came apart against his curled fingers with a sharp, keening cry, her head thrown back and wisps of unruly brown hair clinging to her flushed cheeks. She righted her head again to look at him with deep, liquid brown eyes, and Dream-Adam was utterly lost. He felt himself fumbling with his belt, with his zipper, found himself pushing her back onto the table and pressing her knees apart with a haste that would have embarrassed his waking self. She offered no resistance, seeming wholly willing to go along with his plan, even helping him to hitch her skirt up onto her thighs.

But just before he was able to bury himself in her where he belonged, the scene changed. He was no longer in the library at Thornleigh, but rather, back in his apartment in New York. It was night, and the light from the street outside fell in slanting bars across the wide expanse of his king size bed. And he was not alone in the bed, he realized. Beside him lay a small mounded shape, largely hidden beneath the bedclothes. A person sleeping on their side with their back to him. “Belle?” he whispered. The shape stirred, rolled over, pulled the duvet away from their face, and Adam blinked in sudden horror. It was not Belle, nor was it Emily, or even Nastia. It was a woman he had never seen before, a horrible, pale facsimile of Belle, with her brown hair and eyes, but with none of her lightness, none of her effervescence, none of the sunlit warmth that seemed to spill from her every pore.

“Belle?” said the woman in annoyance. “Seriously? You can’t even get my name right?”

“But I—” spluttered Adam, and then stopped, realizing that it was, of course, highly illogical to argue with a dream. He swallowed and tried again. “Where is Belle?” he asked.

The woman looked at him with something akin to revulsion. “Did you honestly think,” she said derisively, “that she’d want you?”

Adam could only stare at her. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Does it matter? I won’t be here long. And there’ll just be another one after me, and another one after that. Because that’s who you are, Adam, and she knows it.”

He blinked. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She knows what you really are,” the woman said again, “and it disgusts her. You’re a monster—all you do is make her cry.”
“But I—I didn’t mean—!”

“No, of course you didn’t. You never do, but you just can’t help it.” Her voice became vicious. “She’ll leave you, you know. Sooner or later, one way or another, she’ll leave you. You’ll never make her want to stay.”

“No,” he said, feeling a sob in his throat that threatened to choke the air from him. “No, no, no. It can’t be as bad as you say; it can’t be as bad as all that. There’s something there; I know there is.”

“But she’s just such a good girl, Adam, and when have you ever been good?” She smiled, revealing a row of strangely sharp little teeth. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?” he asked weakly.

“No, and you know why? Because you’ll always have this,” she said, gesturing at the large bed, at the cold splendor of his New York apartment. “This is where you really belong. And when you’re done trying to pretend that you can be the man she deserves, it’ll be here waiting. I’ll be here waiting. Just remember that.” She reached for him, and as she did so, her hands became sharp claws, reaching, grabbing, scrabbling at his skin, trying to drag him under into the dark abyss that lurked at the edges of his vision. He pushed at her, trying to fight back, but her grip tightened, scoring gouges into his arms, and she was no longer a woman, but a demon, some creature from the very depths of hell, and then he was falling, falling, falling into nothingness.

He awoke with a muffled cry to find himself back in his bed at Thornleigh, the bedclothes tangled around his legs. He sat up, breathing heavily, and pressed his fingers against his temples as if to clear the horrible vision from his mind. He shouldn’t be surprised, really. This was not the first such dream he’d had. In fact, he’d been having them nearly every night for weeks now, ever since that day in the library. They were all much the same, variations on a theme: Him and Belle in a compromising position that ended just when it started to get really interesting, followed by a scene that seemed expressly designed to remind him of just how badly he’d fucked up. He hadn’t had a peaceful night’s sleep—or indeed, a peaceful moment at all—since Belle had walked out of the library.

With a sigh, he removed his hands from his face and looked around him. Though it was the middle of the night, the full moon outside lit up the room nearly as brightly as if it were day, bathing everything in a glow like silver sunshine. Though he had, with Belle’s help and Belle’s encouragement, begun the complex and lengthy process of restoring the rest of the house, he had barely touched his own rooms in the West Wing. He had swept up the broken shards of glass from where he had broken the mirror, of course, had gotten himself clean bedclothes and fulfilled his vow to rid himself of his father’s horrible wax flowers, but beyond that, he had done essentially nothing. If he were being honest with himself (which was a state so profoundly unsettling that he tried to enter it as little as possible), he supposed that he feared becoming too at home in what had once been his father’s rooms. To become comfortable in his father’s space was to come perilously close to becoming his father, and to become like his father was in some ways a fate worse than death to him.

Strangely enough, perhaps the worst thing about the dreams, he thought, was how horribly big and empty the bed always felt afterward. It was like that now. His side of the bed was all crumpled, sweaty sheets, while the other side lay cool and smooth and unoccupied. He hated it. He wanted to be able to fling his arm out into the darkness and find another body there, warm and alive. But no, not just any body. He wanted to wake up and find Belle beside him. He wanted to see her stretched out against the sheets, with her pale skin gleaming white in the moonlight and her chestnut hair spread out over the pillows like a satiny waterfall. He wanted to reach out and wrap his arm around her waist to pull her close against him, and feel her body come to him easily, with no resistance or hesitation. He wanted her to turn her face up yieldingly to his to be kissed, and he wanted to make
love to her, slowly and tenderly, and then fall asleep and wake up again beside her in the morning.

But he could not do or have any of these things because, as the woman in his dream had been at such pains to remind him, Belle despised him and wanted nothing to do with him.

Heaving another great sigh, he pushed himself to his feet. Though it was somewhere in the neighborhood of three o’clock in the morning, he didn’t want to stay in bed—or indeed, in his rooms at all—for one second longer. In deference to the oppressive heat, he had been sleeping in the nude, but now he grabbed a pair of cotton pajama pants that had been hanging on the back of a nearby chair, and yanking them on, stumbled through the door of his suite and out into the hallway.

In the corridor, it was no cooler, and indeed, it might even have been worse, since here there were no open windows to admit even the faint breeze that had pushed feebly at the heavy curtains in his bedroom. He walked blindly at first, neither noticing nor caring where he was going, knowing only that he wanted desperately to get away from the West Wing. So it was with a great deal of surprise and a faint sense of horror that he came back to himself again and found that he was standing outside the door to the East Wing suite—Belle’s suite—with his hand poised as if to knock, and no clear sense of how he had gotten there. He blinked, startled at his own foolishness, and ran the fingers of his raised hand through his hair instead, causing it to stand on end. What the hell was he doing? She was almost certainly asleep, and even if she wasn’t, what then? He couldn’t just go barging into her bedroom, the one place where she was accustomed to having absolute privacy, in the middle of the night and demand to speak to her. What would he even say? He wanted to apologize for upsetting her, but yet he just couldn’t find it in him to be wholly sorry that he had kissed her, that he had found that warm, velvet softness between her legs. She was exquisite, every bit of her, and he supposed that if he were to say anything at all to her, it would be to ask her how he could convince her that what he felt was real. But that was not the kind of thing to say at three o’clock in the morning, and so he simply lowered his hand and walked away.

He walked on, slower now, but just as aimless, trying to clear his mind of impossible thoughts. He walked down another airless corridor, then descended the main staircase into the entrance hall where the moonlight lay in rectangles across the black and white marble floor. Though it was probably cooler outside, the effort of unlocking and opening the heavy front door didn’t seem worth it, so instead he turned and let his feet carry him toward the back of the house. Everything looked so different at night, a strange, disconcerting landscape of menacing inky black shadows that the pale light could not penetrate, though it did try, and he picked his way along cautiously, putting his hand out to let his fingertips trail along the wall as he went.

Due to all of its French doors and tall mirrors, the ballroom was by far the lightest part of the house, and he walked easily out into the middle of it, right over top of the center of the family crest. The house was full of ghosts tonight; he could feel them lurking in the shadows just out of sight. All his ancestors, probably wondering how their home had come to be in such a sorry state. He tried to picture this room as it had been all those years ago, back when there were still balls and parties here. If he looked hard at his surroundings, and then closed his eyes, he could just see it: the bright glow of all the crystal chandeliers, reflecting in the heavy mirrors and bouncing off the polished floor; the gentlemen in their dark, elegant evening clothes; the ladies in their elaborate ballgowns, a sea of alternating jewel tones and pastels, adorned with lace and ruffles and ribbons and gems. He could feel the warmth of the lights and of bodies pressed together, hear the hum of the orchestra laid over the click of shoes and the swish of skirts, taste the blessedly cold champagne that was being distributed by a small army of uniformed waiters. And then he opened his eyes and saw that everything was empty, gray, and silent. There might very well never be dancing in this room again. He knew he had let the house and his ancestors down, but he had not realized until just now just how much. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, but there was no reply.
He walked over to the piano and stared at it, then pulled off the dust cover and stared at it some more. Someone had left some sheet music on the rack, and he looked at it thoughtfully, considering. Then he sat down and paused with his hands poised over the keys. Memories of a childhood’s worth of piano lessons rushed over him. How long had it been since he had sat at a piano like this? He had been good at it, he remembered now, so why had he ever stopped? *Because it’s something your father made you do.* And he had, of course, rejected everything that had reminded him of his father as soon as he got the chance. But his father wasn’t here now. There was nothing and no one left to rebel against. He flexed his fingers and began to play.

*In the East Wing, Belle couldn’t sleep. She had tried, of course, but it was just so swelteringly hot that she finally kicked all the covers to the foot of the bed, rolled over, and turned on the lamp, creating a circle of yellow light that mingled at the edges with the silver moonlight. She sat up, plumping up the pillows to make a support behind her back, and turned her attention to the stack of books and papers sitting on her bedside table. This was her own private stash of research materials, though what Adam would say if he knew that she had them, she didn’t really like to think about. But perhaps he never had to find out, given that they were currently on the outs with one another. It hurt to think about that, though. In the weeks since that day in the library, she’d found herself missing him so badly that it was like a physical ache, not just in her chest, but throughout her whole body. She missed talking to him; she missed touching him. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d come to rely on all the little intimacies they’d begun to share until she was forced to do without them. It wasn’t just kissing him, and it wasn’t just having his hand between her legs. It was the gentle whisper of his lips against her hand or her forehead; it was her head on his shoulder; it was the deep rumble of his laughter when he had his arms around her. She missed it all so much that it was almost enough to convince her that she’d been wrong to reject him. Almost, but not quite. Every time she thought that perhaps he was right, that she didn’t need love and commitment from him because there was no way that something as transfiguring as his kiss could be wrong, she reminded herself, forcefully if necessary, that it was—it must be—that better this way, that some pain now was worth it if it meant avoiding a worse pain later. She ached for him, but her pride would not let her give in.*

All of which was a very long-winded way of explaining the presence of the stack on her nightstand. She had found this miniature treasure trove one day during her continued quest to reorganize the library, and she was pretty sure it was the same stash that Adam had been referring to when he had mentioned reading about his family while recovering from his broken ankle. With barely more than a second thought, she had scooped it all up and carried it up to her room so she could peruse it in absolute privacy. If she couldn’t have the man, she could at least have the next best thing: his past. One of the books contained a family tree, a big fold-out thing written on parchment in a series of neat, tidy hands. Belle could take her finger and trace the family line all the way down to Adam’s name at the bottom. *Adam Philip Henry Beaumont,* it read, and beneath that, in smaller letters, *b. 19 July 1984.* His birthday was coming up soon, she realized. She wished she had the nerve to add her own name into the empty space beside his: *Belle Marie Villeneuve,* *b. 15 April 1990.*

Above Adam’s name were the names of his parents: John Frederick Arthur Beaumont and Rose Elizabeth Michaels. No one had filled in his father’s death date, of course, and so his entry indicated only that he had been born on February 2, 1936, but both of his mother’s dates were there. It was a painfully short life: May 6, 1961 to August 25, 1991. The death date had been written in a handwriting that appeared nowhere else on the chart, and the first time she had seen it, she had realized with some surprise that it was Adam’s writing. Belle ran her fingers over the elegant, swooping letters for what felt like the thousandth time. *What happened to you, Rose?*
Beside John Beaumont’s name on the other side was the name of another woman, a first wife that Adam had not mentioned to her that day he’d shown her the portraits. Alice Catherine Woodhouse, b. 3 September 1943, d. 18 December 1979. John Beaumont had not kept either of his wives to any great age. She’d died just before Christmas. Had he mourned her? She had not given him any children, so Belle thought perhaps not. It was strange to think that if she hadn’t died, Adam might never have been born. Was that what life was, a thousand little twists of fate that added up to put you right where you were supposed to be? Had meeting Adam been a twist of fate, and if so, in what direction was it twisting her?

She set aside this fascinating but ultimately unanswerable question with an effort, and ran her finger farther up the page, past John Beaumont and his three sisters, past their parents, and their grandparents too. Further and further back she went, slipping seamlessly into the past until her finger stopped on the name she’d been unable to forget since she’d first learned it and seen his picture. Sebastian Arnaud Francois Beaumont, b. 22 March 1737, d. 8 April 1815. The handsome man from the portrait who had reminded her so much of Adam. Beside this inscription was the name of his wife: Isobel Augusta Leighton, b. 4 August 1747, d. 8 April 1815. The ordinary, extraordinary woman who had helped a broken man put his life back together, and in the process found a love greater than anything she’d ever dreamed. And what a love it was! They’d even died together. Their story captivated Belle, and she was hungry for any information she could get her hands on about them. She even wanted to write about them, to turn their story into the novel she’d always dreamed of creating, but Adam would have to give his permission if she ever hoped to publish it one day, and she knew he never would. So for now, she settled for what she did have: Isobel’s diary.

It was a small book, but thick, bound in leather, and with gilt-edged pages, and Belle knew it must have cost a pretty penny for a shopkeeper’s daughter. She liked the woman she was coming to know from reading the pages of small, neat handwriting. Isobel’s observations about life in Thornton-le-Clay reminded her very much of her own thoughts about Pleasantville. She had read up through the winter of 1765 now, when Isobel, motivated by impending poverty and already-present loneliness following the death of her father several months earlier, had decided to do something utterly reckless and respond to the advertisement seeking a housekeeper at Thornleigh Hall. “It was like stepping into a tomb,” she wrote of the day she first arrived at the house. “There was no wind, only softly falling snow that muffled everything, even the sound of the cart as it pulled into the carriage sweep. When I crossed the threshold and the door closed behind me, it was as if I had entered a completely different world. My old life, everything that was familiar, was blotted out, and only the terrifyingly new and unknown lay before me.”

Belle meant to keep reading, really she did, but her eyes felt heavy all of a sudden, and before she knew it, they were drooping closed. The book fell from her hand and landed harmlessly on the mattress, her back slipped down the stack of pillows, and before she had time to even realize what was happening, she was fast asleep.

She dreamed of Thornleigh that night, but not Thornleigh as she knew it now, or even Thornleigh as it must have been when Adam was a child. No, this was a Thornleigh of a different, vanished age. The chandeliers were full of real candles, which lit everything up brilliantly, if somewhat unevenly. Oddly enough, she was not part of the events of the dream, but rather, watching them as one might watch a movie or a TV show. She was looking at what appeared to be a bedroom or a dressing room, where a tall young man stood gazing at himself in a full-length mirror while his long-suffering valet brushed off his midnight blue velvet coat. He was stunningly handsome, and Belle somehow knew without it needing to be said out loud that this was Sebastian Beaumont. The valet finished his work and stood back a little, and Sebastian gave himself a critical examination in the glass before signifying with a curt nod that the appearance of the coat passed muster. Belle noticed that the valet let out a sigh of relief at this. Then he crooked his fingers in a beckoning gesture, and another servant stepped forward, carrying a long, curly wig that he proceeded to arrange over his master’s own rich
mahogany brown hair. Sebastian’s lips were curved in a supercilious smirk, and his dark eyes glinted with cruel avarice.

The scene changed, and Belle found herself looking at the exterior of the house in the soft light of a winter afternoon. Snow was falling, big, fat flakes that coated the trees, the paving stones, the roof tiles. A small cart, driven by a rustic looking man who was clearly some kind of farmer, pulled into view, stopping in front of the house to let down its passenger: A tiny, delicate figure wrapped in a heavy brown wool cloak with the hood up to shield her face. The driver handed down her baggage—a single valise—and she gave him a parting wave in response before walking up the drive and pulling the heavy rope that rang the doorbell. No one answered, so she tried again, and then a third time, before finally squaring her shoulders and pushing open the massive front door with an effort.

As she vanished inside the house, Belle’s perspective changed so that she could see her in the foyer. Out of the snow, she lowered her hood, revealing a small, pointed face that was dominated by a pair of enormous dark eyes beneath thick lashes. Her hair, as black as a raven’s wing, was pinned back at the sides, while the rest hung in long, fat curls down her back. “Hello?” she called tentatively. “Is anyone there?”

No one answered, but all of a sudden, there came the sound of music, faint but unmistakable, from somewhere deep within the house. Isobel (for that was who she was, of course) turned toward the sound, and then began to walk toward it, slowly and cautiously, but steadily. Leaving her luggage behind, she felt her way down the dark, shadowy halls, the music growing louder as she went. Finally, she stopped in front of a closed door. The music was loudest here, and its source must lie within. Isobel opened the door, and then she gasped. But Belle never saw what made her do that, for at that moment, she woke abruptly with a gasp of her own.

Belle sat up slowly, rubbing the back of her neck where it was sore from sleeping in a semi-seated position. What a strange dream! It had all seemed so real. She set Isobel’s diary back on the nightstand and then leaned over to turn off the lamp. If she was going to sleep, she might as well sleep in the dark like a normal person. But then she paused with her hand on the lamp chain, listening. Was that…? No, it couldn’t be, and yet. She stood and tiptoed silently to her bedroom door, opened it just a crack, and cocked her head. There it was again! From somewhere in the house came the sound of someone playing the piano.

Most people would probably have tried to ignore the sound and go back to bed. But Belle was not most people. Still half-immersed in her dream world, she began to follow the music. It led her down the corridor, then down the main staircase. In the foyer, she paused, a pale, almost ghostly figure in the silver light, and listened again. Then she smiled wryly. Moonlight Sonata. Well, that was certainly appropriate. And it didn’t sound like a recording, which meant it had to be coming from the one room of the house where she had seen a piano. Sure-footed and quiet as a cat, she stole down the hallway on her right.

In the doorway to the ballroom, she paused, watching and listening. It was him, of course, just as she had known it would be. His face was hidden from her, his head bent over the music, but she could see the moonlight shining on his golden hair. She did not think he had seen her yet, or even knew she was there. It was not too late to turn around and go back to her bed. She could do that, and then wake in the morning and pretend that she had not seen anything, that none of this had ever happened. It would be so easy, and yet, somehow it wasn’t what she wanted. She felt as if she were in a dreamscape still, a world of melting light and shadow where nothing was quite real. And in dreams you could do whatever you wanted, right? She made the words leave her mouth before she could second guess them. “Your piano needs tuning.”

He broke off with a discordant crash of keys and looked up at her, startled. “Belle!” he exclaimed, with the air of a little boy who had been caught doing something he shouldn’t. “What are you doing
here? Although,” he added with a self-deprecating smile, “I suppose I should thank you for interrupting me before I had to attempt the fast section.”

“What am I doing here? Your piano playing at three in the morning woke me up, if you can believe that.” She took a few steps farther into the room and then stopped, her mouth suddenly going dry as her eyes of their own accord slid over his bare torso. With his shirt off, she could see that she had underestimated the strength and solidity of his muscles. There were all sorts of fascinating details here, things to catalog and memorize in case she never saw them again. The faded white line of an old appendectomy scar just above his low-slung waistband, for instance, or the tiny tattoo of an octagonal prism, inked in thin black lines and only just visible in the faint light, that adorned the side of his rib cage. She wanted to touch him, to run her fingers over the hard planes of his stomach and feel the muscles just below the surface jump at her touch. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again. He was still there. “Why,” she asked, “are you not wearing a shirt?”

He saw where she was looking, and a brief flash of smug triumph lit his eyes. “In case you haven’t noticed, beauty,” he replied, “it’s really fucking hot out.” He looked her up and down, his gaze hot and penetrating. “And besides, you’re a bit of a hypocrite, don’t you think?”

“What are you talking about?”

He shrugged and turned back to the piano, but not before she saw the edges of his lips turn up into a smirk. He ran his hands over a few exploratory scales. “You’re not wearing any pants, my dear.”

Belle glanced down at the lavender cotton chemise she was wearing, grateful that the moonlight hid her blush. It really was rather short, now that she looked at it. “It’s a nightgown,” she said irritably. “Besides, I wasn’t exactly planning on running into you.”

He launched into Beethoven again, his long fingers pounding out the rhythm with a bit more force than was necessary. “You climbed out of bed in the middle of the night to investigate some mysterious music, and you didn’t think you were going to run into anyone? What did you think I was, a ghost?”

“You do kind of remind me of one. That or a phantom. This whole thing is like something out of a gothic novel, or maybe a dark fairy tale.”

Adam made a noise of faint derision. “What does that make me, then? The cursed prince, last of his line, wasting away in his ruined castle while he waits for the spell to be broken? I’m far more likely to be the monster of the story, don’t you think?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous! And you’re not the last of your line. Well, I suppose you are for the moment, but not forever. One day you’ll have a——” She broke off abruptly as she realized that this was something they had never discussed before.

He stopped his playing again and turned to give her his full attention. “A child? No, don’t deny it, that’s obviously what you were going to say. But you’re wrong. There’s never going to be a child.”

“You can’t have children?” she said in some confusion.

He looked appalled. “Oh, God, no! Not that! It’s not that I can’t, it’s that I won’t.”

Now she was really confused. “But—but—what about this house, the house in London, your family name, all the money? Surely you must want a child to come after you, to inherit all that.”

“I think we can both agree that I’d be a terrible father. I see no reason to inflict that—to inflict any of this—on a kid. No, it all ends with me. It’s my last fuck you to my dad. He always said I didn’t value
family highly enough. I guess he was right.” When she was silent, he added, “I can see I’ve shocked you. Let me guess, you can’t imagine why anyone would purposefully not have children. You’ve probably had your own two point five kids and a dog planned since you were in nappies.”

Belle felt her face grow hot. “No, no, no,” she protested. “It’s not like that. *I’m* not like that. I always assumed I’d probably have kids one day, because most people do, but I’ve never given it much thought beyond that.” But this wasn’t quite true, because in that moment, just for an instant, she could picture them, her future children. She could see them quite clearly. They had tousled dark blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes. But that was insane, quite literally insane. If she had children, they would, of course, not be Adam’s. There would have to be another man, as yet unknown to her. But how could there be? How could there be another man in all the world whose presence filled a room like this one’s did?

Adam could see from her expression that something was upsetting her, though he wasn’t sure what it was. Something about the whole thing was upsetting *him*, truth be told. At some point in that hazy, hidden future that would come after the end of their deal, Belle would have a baby, and he would have nothing to do with it. But that had always been the way it would be, so why did the idea seem somehow wrong, almost distasteful? He should send her away, tell her to go back to bed. Instead, he tried to smile at her. “Let’s not talk about this anymore.” He moved over a little on the piano bench and patted the empty space beside him. “Come sit with me for a while.”

She obeyed the summons, sliding onto the bench next to him. The leather seat felt hot and sticky against the backs of her bare thighs. “I didn’t know you could play the piano,” she said after a beat of silence.

He shrugged. “To be honest, I’m as surprised as you are that I still can. I hadn’t touched one of these things in years before tonight.”

“Why not? You’re pretty good at it.”

His eyes darkened. “It was part of a past I was trying very hard to forget.” He noticed her eyeing the keyboard tentatively. “Do you play?”

Belle laughed. “No, I’m not very musical, I’m afraid. I tried out for the school choir when I was in seventh grade and they told me they were looking for people who could ‘better match pitch.’ Telling you that the piano is out of tune is about the extent of my musical skill.” She tried to play a scale, and hit a wrong note halfway through. “See?”

Her husband chuckled. “Try it like this,” he suggested, gently reshaping the position of her hand and demonstrating how to slip her thumb underneath to play the whole range of notes.

“I did it!” she said proudly when she had successfully followed his advice.

Adam took her hand and pressed it to his lips. “I’ve missed you so much these past few weeks,” he admitted softly.

The words hung in the air for a long moment while Belle tried to think what to say. “I’ve missed you too,” she said finally, deciding she might as well be honest. “But I thought—”

“You thought what? That this was how I wanted things to be?” He shook his head. “No, this was never *my* preference. I’d keep you with me all the time if I could.”

She looked at him incredulously. “How are you like this?”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “What am I like? I’m curious.”
“You’re just—you’re so good looking,” she blurted in desperation. “And then you look at me like that, and you say the most romantic things, and I don’t know what to do. Sometimes I think it was easier when we hated each other. At least then I knew how to feel.”

He looked at her in disbelief. “You’d rather go back to being strangers? You’d rather go back to the yelling, and the fighting, and the accusations, and the anger? Good God, why?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Of course I don’t really want to go back to fighting with you. That was a horrible time. But—it’s just—this is all so sudden, and so new, and so uncertain. I guess I’m just… afraid,” she admitted.

She was looking down at her hands when she said it, and Adam placed a couple fingers beneath her chin and gently lifted her head so she was looking him in the eye. “Oh, sweetheart, darling,” he murmured, “you don’t need to be afraid of me. I would never hurt you.”

She blinked at him, but made no move to pull her head away. “No, I don’t think you’d hurt me physically, if that’s what you’re thinking I meant. I don’t even think you’d hurt me on purpose, necessarily. But there are other ways to be cruel.”

“What do you mean?”

And now, in her torment, she did pull away from him, a sharp movement that was so sudden and unexpected that it made him flinch. She seemed to be struggling to find the right words to express just what she felt. “Sometimes I’m afraid,” she said finally, “that there are two Adams. New York Adam and Yorkshire Adam. I like Yorkshire Adam; I like him a lot. But what if he isn’t real? We have to leave this place eventually, you know. What if when we do, that version of Adam disappears? In a way, that would be worse than if he had never existed at all.”

“What if I told you,” he said slowly, “that Yorkshire Adam was the real one, and that the other version was the fake? That he was an illusion, an act?”

“But how could I be sure? I’ve seen the way you are with women. You act like it’s all one big game, and maybe that’s fine for you, but it isn’t for me. I don’t want to be another one of your women. I don’t want to be just another name in a long list that you probably can’t even remember. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Adam felt his stomach churn with a horrible, roiling combination of shame and regret. He should have known that one day he would have to face the consequences for the way he had lived his life, and now here they were. His nearly fifteen-year-long libertine streak may have cost him any chance with the one woman who had come to occupy all his thoughts in a way no one else ever had. He reached down and took both her hands in his, lacing their fingers together. “Beauty,” he said, his voice perfectly serious, “please believe me when I say that you are not just another name on a list. That he was an illusion, an act?”

“You never were. I won’t deny that I’ve done some shitty things in my past, and I won’t deny that I’ve done some shitty things to you. But I have never, ever approached any of this with the aim of turning you into a notch on my bedpost. I don’t know how to put a word to what it is I feel for you, and I’m not sure I want to try because, like you said, this is all so new, and it’s fragile. But I can tell you that it’s real, and that I’ve never felt it before.” He paused, and when she did not speak, he squeezed her hands gently. “How can I convince you that I’m telling you the truth?”

Belle looked at him. The expression of sincerity and hope in his eyes was almost overwhelming. She wanted to trust him, as both her body and her heart urged her to do, but she didn’t know how to let go of the fear that ruled her head. She swallowed past the sudden lump in her throat. “I’m not sure you can,” she said in a choked whisper.
She was crying now, and he reached up and wiped the tears from her cheek with his thumb. “But
will you let me try?”

He was cradling her cheek in his palm, and she leaned into his touch like a cat, feeling the
comforting warmth of it. She was tired of running, tired of being separate from him, tired of denying
that she felt something too. “Yes,” she said, barely more than an exhale of breath. “Yes,” she said
again, stronger now. “I will.”

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers, like the ghost of a kiss. “Thank you,” he
whispered. She had pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail for sleeping, and he reached up and
pulled the elastic from her hair and looped it around his wrist. Then he tangled his fingers in her
loose brown waves and kissed her again, and it was as electric as it always was.

When they finally broke apart, they sat for a long moment with their foreheads touching, trying to get
their breath back. “Let’s go riding in the morning,” he said after a while. “There’s this section of the
river I want to show you. There’s this tree branch with a ninety-degree bend in it, like a seat, that
sticks right out over the water. I just want to sit there with you for a while.”

Belle nodded. “I’d like that,” she told him, but it turned into a yawn as she said it.

He smiled. “Off to bed with you,” he said with mock sternness. “It’s late.”

She stood, with some reluctance. “Aren’t you coming to bed too?” she asked.

He gave her a look that, sleepy though she was, suddenly made her feel very alert. “Not unless it’s
with you.”

Her eyebrows drew down into a slight frown. “Adam,” she said hesitantly, “You understand, I hope,
that I don’t—that I can’t—that I’m not ready for that,” she finished lamely.

His answering smile was wicked. “Not yet,” he said, “but you will be.”

When Belle woke next, it was with the sensation that something pleasant and exciting had happened,
though she couldn’t think exactly what. Then it all came back to her in a rush: Adam, and piano in
the moonlight, and earnest conversation, and kissing. She sat up and raked her fingers through her
hair. What a shame it had all been a dream. Then she stopped with her hand halfway through her
hair and gasped. Her hair! It was loose, and if it was loose, then—Oh my God.

She threw the covers back
and searched frantically through the sheets, looking for her hair tie. She didn’t find it. “It was all
real,” she whispered. She felt suddenly shaky with excitement.

She wondered if he was still asleep. If they were going riding, she needed to take a shower. But first,
she had a phone call to make. It took a few minutes of searching to find the number, but she was
pleasantly surprised that they could make a same-day appointment. Now she just had to keep Adam
out of the house until they were done.

She showered and dressed herself in a pair of navy blue pants with pink stripes down the sides and a
sleeveless chambray shirt tied in a knot in front. She zipped up her riding boots, put her hair up in a
braided top knot, and finished it all off with the rose-colored lipstick she knew Adam liked. Then,
with as much confidence as she could summon, she marched off down the hall to the West Wing and
knocked on Adam’s door.
When he answered, it was clear that he had still been in bed, because he was still dressed in those same pajama pants and no shirt, and he was blinking at her sleepily. “Yes?” he asked.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” she teased. “Are we going riding, or aren’t we?”

The look of relief on his face was somehow gratifying. “Oh, thank God,” he said. “I was beginning to think I’d dreamt you.”

It was several days after that before Adam discovered the secret. It was late one afternoon, and he had thought he might attempt the final movement of “Moonlight Sonata” again. And yet when he sat down at the piano and put his fingers to the keys, something sounded different. He stopped, lifted his hands, and then brought them down again. Still different. Then he realized: the piano was in tune. Where before there had been nothing but discordant sharps and melancholy flats, now every note sounded rich, melodious, and exactly as it should. He ran through a few scales, testing the full range of the instrument. It all sounded beautiful, and there was one person, and one person only, who could have made it happen.

Adam Beaumont smiled and went to go find his wife.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Many happy returns
No Man is an Island

Chapter Notes

It seems I picked up a higher than normal number of new subscribers after last chapter, so welcome to all my new readers. I'm glad to have you. And to those that have been with me for a while, thanks for sticking around. I hope you enjoy.

Belle looked up at her husband from beneath the wide brim of her new extravagantly floppy straw hat. She liked doing this sometimes, watching him when he wasn’t aware of it. It was a beautiful summer day, cloudless and warm, and they had taken the boat from the little stone boathouse and rowed it out into the ornamental lake. They were sitting there now, adrift in the middle of the water, reading Shakespeare to each other beneath the sun. It was a thing they had taken to doing recently, reading plays out loud to each other, dividing up the voices between them. Or rather, what usually ended up happening was that Adam, who had a natural talent for this sort of thing, would read, and Belle would listen, letting his rich voice transport her to another world. But right now, they were reading Much Ado About Nothing, which had such a natural back and forth to it that Belle was called on to be the Beatrice to his Benedick. Only now she had let her attention wander.

In her defense, it was an easy thing to do when the scenery was this distracting. He was growing tan from all the time they had been spending out of doors, and the new golden bronze hue of his skin made his eyes seem even more vividly blue in comparison. The white shirt he was wearing, deeply unbuttoned and with the sleeves rolled up, completed the picture. In other words, he was stunning, a god come down to walk amongst the mortals, and Belle didn’t think she would ever get tired of looking at him. In fact, if she were being honest, she wanted to do more than just look at him. She wanted to put her arms around him, press herself against his chest, taste the salt of his skin with her tongue. And the strange, wonderful, terrifying thing was that she could. She could touch him any way she pleased, and she knew he wouldn’t stop her. She could lean over right now and kiss him, and he would kiss her back. She didn’t know which was more astonishing: that she should want to, or that he would welcome it. They had come so far from where they had started, and the thought caused a great wondering joy to bubble up in her that really did make her want to kiss him. If she hadn’t been worried about upsetting the rowboat, she thought perhaps she would have done exactly that.

Or perhaps not. It was still early days yet. Their late-night conversation in the ballroom had brought them back together, but it had changed things too. All their previous intimacy had come rushing back, but it had moved out of the subconscious and firmly into the realm of the real and undeniable. Before, they had been two people stumbling around in the dark, bumping into something huge without realizing what it was. Now, every touch, every word, every look, every minute spent in each other’s company had suddenly acquired new significance. They were trying each other on, sizing each other up, trying to decide just what it was they had stumbled upon and just what it was they were going to do about it. Belle still wasn’t ready to take that last and final step with him. She didn’t know if she ever would be, or if it would ever come to that point. But what she did know, what she could sense without it ever being explicitly put into words, was that he was somehow just as uncertain as she was, and the idea that she could have a partner in this, that they would find their way together, was both terrifying and exhilarating. So if she didn’t quite know how to be bold enough to rock the boat (literally), that was okay. There was still time.
His voice cut across her thoughts suddenly, making her jump. “Belle, darling, you’re not paying attention.”

She flushed guiltily. “Yes, I am,” she insisted.

He gave her a disbelieving look. “Then what’s your next line?” he asked with the calm self-assurance of a man who knew himself to be right.

She looked down at the page, but the words all seemed to swim together. In truth, she had no idea where he’d left off. She’d been thinking and looking, not listening. “Ummm,” she began, and then could not find any words to go on with that wouldn’t betray the fact that she had somehow tuned him out.

Adam smiled at her fondly. “I do love nothing in the world so well as you. Is not that strange?”

Belle looked up at him swiftly, her face grown suddenly pale. “What did you just say?”

This time he laughed, a deep, warm sound that made her body tighten in anticipation of something she could not name. “Now I know you really haven’t been paying attention. Don’t worry, sweetheart, that’s just the play talking. A little bit rude of you to zone out in the middle of such a good bit of dialogue, though, don’t you think? I’ve been sitting here watching you, wondering when you were going to come back to me.”

Her blush returned with a vengeance. “Oh God, Adam, I’m so sorry.”

He made a waving motion with his hand. “No, don’t be. I know it’s not run of the mill daydreaming. You’ve got something more serious on your mind.”

Up went her eyebrows. “And how do you know that?” she asked.

“Yes, he probably did, Belle realized, and the idea that he could know her so deeply, so intimately, seemed much less frightening and much more thrilling now than it would have several months ago. What would it be like to be able to rely on that all the time, to have a person in your life who could read you without a single word? In an enemy, such a quality would be formidable. In a friend, in a companion, in a—dare she even think it?—lover, it would be something else entirely. She wanted to tell him what she was thinking, ask him if he had ever thought it too, but she didn’t know quite how to form the words. So instead she blurted out the other thing that had been running through her mind. “Your birthday is coming up soon.”

For a long moment, he simply stared at her in silence. “My birthday?” he said, clearly startled. “How do you know about that?”

“I—I didn’t think it was a state secret,” she stuttered, confused by the defensive vehemence of his reaction. “I found your family tree in the library. You know, the big one that folds out?” She lifted her chin and made herself speak boldly. “I’ve been reading a lot about your family, actually. I assume you know that Isobel kept a diary? It’s fascinating reading. I’ve wanted so badly to talk about it with you.”

Adam felt the hot prickle of an emotion he couldn’t quite identify begin to spread up the back of his neck. Back in March or April, that emotion would have been anger, but now, in July, anger didn’t really seem like a fitting descriptor. He supposed it was more like fear, but fear of what? Fear of letting someone in. You’re afraid she’ll become so tangled up in your life that you’ll never be able to...
She gave a desperate sort of shrug. “I wasn’t trying to be nosy. It’s just, the stories you told me were so interesting, and—” She broke off, feeling her voice growing high and anxious, and tried again. “Look,” she said, calmer now, and then the words just came pouring out. “We weren’t really speaking to each other at the time, and I missed you. I missed you a lot. My life felt…empty without you, and I thought that if I couldn’t have you, I could at least have something that was you-adjacent.” She squared her shoulders. “If I was snooping, it’s only because you intrigue me. Everything about you fascinates me. If you don’t know that, you should.”

For a long moment, he could do nothing but look at her, a thousand thoughts swirling through his head. “Oh Belle,” he said, and then could not go on.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” she implored him.

“Sheart, of course I’m not angry. I could never be angry with you. I’m just—” Just what? “I think you’re the first woman I’ve ever met who told me they found me fascinating.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “I refuse to believe that. All of those women, and not one of them ever told you that when you so obviously are? No, not possible.”

“Well,” he admitted wryly, “perhaps they thought it, but I think the reasons why began and ended with my bank account balance.”

“Hmm, it is certainly an enticement,” Belle mused, pretending to consider it.

“Oh, come on, not you too!” he exclaimed, but he was laughing as he said it. “Surely I have some other good qualities?”

“Yes,” said Belle softly. “You do.”

“Are you going to tell me what they are?”

“Not a chance.” They were silent a moment, then Belle said, “So, July nineteenth.”

“What about it?” He was guarded now, wary, his joking demeanor from only a few moments ago utterly vanished.

“It’s your birthday.”

“It is indeed.”

“Were you ever going to tell me that?”

“No,” he said succinctly. “I was not.”

“But why?” She thought of the way she had spent her own most recent birthday. “No one should be alone on their birthday.”

“I’m not alone,” he insisted. “Of course I’m not. I have you. But I don’t celebrate my birthday.”

“Now you’re just being a martyr,” said Belle. “That’s silly. You’re going to be thirty-two. That’s hardly ancient.”

“Thank you for reassuring me I don’t have one foot in the grave,” he said dryly, though his eyes had a vaguely hunted look. “But it’s not about my age. I just don’t celebrate my birthday. I haven’t for
“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“You don’t say anything, that’s what. You just accept it for what it is: an unchangeable fact of life.”

“Nothing about life is unchangeable. I think the fact that we’re sitting here right now is proof enough of that.”

“Maybe so,” he shrugged. “But this is about as close as you’ll get.”

“Surely you know me well enough by now to know I won’t just accept that answer.”

“Yes,” he said genially. “I know. But this is one clash of wills you won’t win, my dear.”

Belle smiled, a small but confident smile. “We’ll see.”

“You know,” he said after a time, “there’s one more issue here that I think we need to address.”

She looked up at him, suddenly watchful. “What’s that?”

He tried to look stern, but he couldn’t stop a smile from tugging at the edges of his mouth. “Your hat.”

“My hat?” she asked in disbelief. “What in the world is wrong with my hat? It’s very stylish.”

“Stylish it may be,” he conceded, “but I’m afraid I just can’t get on board with it.”

“Why not?”

“It makes it too damn hard to kiss you,” he protested.

Belle raised an eyebrow. “And what if that’s the point?” she asked archly.

“Oh, beauty, that’s a dangerous thing to say.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you should know by now that I love a challenge,” he said with a grin. And carefully, so as not to disturb the boat, he leaned forward, lifted the brim of her hat as one might lift a wedding veil, and kissed her lips.

That was all very well and good, but Belle still wasn’t satisfied. Far from putting her off, Adam’s evasiveness had only made her more intrigued. He was hiding something, of that she was quite certain, and though he had essentially warned her not to pursue it, she just couldn’t let it go. She had meant it when she told him she fascinated her, and she was hungry for any scrap of information she could glean about him, about what lay lurking in the shadowy recesses of his past that made him who he was. If she wanted answers—and she did—there was only one place to go.

She found Mrs. Potts in the kitchen with a pot of tea and a book. “What are you reading?” she asked softly.
Mrs. Potts looked up, startled, and then relaxed when she saw who was speaking. “Belle, how lovely to see you.” She looked down at the book in her hand. “Just a bad romance novel, I’m afraid. They’re my guilty pleasure.”

Belle smiled. “Hey, no judgment from me. I totally get it.” She hesitated, and then plunged on boldly. “Can I talk to you about something?”

“Of course you can, dear.” She gestured toward an empty chair. “Please, sit. Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you,” replied Belle with a shake of her head. “But I will have a cookie, I think,” she added, selecting a biscuit from the plate in the middle of the table.

They were silent for a minute while Belle chewed. Then Mrs. Potts said, “You have something serious on your mind, I can tell. What is it?”

“It’s about Adam.”

“Ah, yes,” the older woman nodded. “I thought perhaps it might be. You’re not fighting again, are you?”

“No,” Belle assured her, “I think we’ve moved beyond the fighting stage. I would say we’re getting along quite well, actually.”

The way her cheeks colored as she said it told Mrs. Potts everything she needed to know. There was something different about Belle lately, and about Adam too. They both seemed lighter, somehow, almost effervescent, as if they were made buoyant by joy. Belle in particular had such a glow to her that she almost seemed lit from within. This, coupled with the fact that Mrs. Potts had seen the two of them kissing in several interesting locations (behind hedges, behind bookshelves, in darkened hallway corners) when they thought no one was watching them, led her to form some very interesting conclusions indeed. Though she had no way of knowing what exactly had been said between them, she thought perhaps they had agreed to give this thing between them a real try, and she was glad of it. Except apparently all was not as well as it appeared. “Then what’s the problem?” she asked.

Belle chewed her lip for a moment, suddenly reluctant to say something that would cause trouble and shatter the wonderful, miraculous peace between herself and Adam. But no, she had come this far, and now she had to go on. “His birthday is coming up soon,” she said, the words coming out in a rush.

Mrs. Potts turned to look at the calendar hanging on the wall beside the kitchen table. “Yes,” she said thoughtfully, doing some quick calculations in her head. “Yes, it is.”

“He told me,” Belle said, and then hesitated. “He told me,” she began again, “that he doesn’t celebrate his birthday. He said he hasn’t for a really long time.”

“And you want to know why.” It was a statement, not a question. Belle nodded. Mrs. Potts sighed, wrapping her hands around her cup of tea as if she could draw strength from its warmth. After a while, she spoke again, softly. “I think the last truly happy birthday Adam ever had was the year he turned seven.”

“Really?” Twenty-five years ago. Such a long, long time to be unhappy.

“It was about a month before his mother died. Such a sweet woman, Belle; you would have loved her. And she would have loved you, I really do believe.” She paused, and Belle felt the full weight
“She loved her son with all her heart. Indeed, I think he was the only bright spot in her life, poor woman. At any rate, every year, she would do whatever she could to make sure he had a special birthday. Every July nineteenth, they would have one day where they did whatever Adam wanted to do, ate all his favorite foods, the whole bit. His mother made the most beautiful, delicious cakes for him. She had a real gift for cake decoration. She also knew, more than anyone else, what his father was like. He was, as I’m sure you’ve probably gathered by now, not a warm man, and Adam’s mother wanted to protect her son, to make sure that he knew he was loved and valued just for being himself, that his opinions, his likes and dislikes, mattered.”

Belle felt sick inside, a cold dread settling in the pit of her stomach like a leaden weight. “And after his mother’s death?” she asked, though she was no longer sure she wanted to know.

Mrs. Potts lifted her shoulders in a slight sorrowful shrug. “I tried, really I did. My now-ex-husband wanted me to walk away, to leave and move somewhere else with him. But Adam, oh, he had the saddest eyes of any child I ever saw. So I stayed and tried to be a mother to him. But it’s hard, so hard, to really be a mother to a boy like that. If he had been a little younger, perhaps it would have been easier. But he was old enough to know the difference, to know what he’d lost. We muddled through, and then one year, I believe it was the year he turned thirteen, he came to me and asked if we could just please not do anything for his birthday that year. ‘Not even a cake?’ I asked. No, not even a cake.”

“And you did it? Just like that?”

“It was what he wanted, and he was always a very strong-willed child. I thought we’d try it one time, and he’d be back to asking for a cake and all the trimmings the following year. But then his fourteenth birthday rolled around, and he still didn’t want any celebration. And then it was fifteen, sixteen, and so on from there. I never celebrated another birthday with him, and while I don’t know for sure what happened once he went away to university or after he moved to New York, I would imagine it was similar.”

“But what about his father? Didn’t he do anything?” Belle asked in some confusion.

The housekeeper shook her head. “You have to understand, dear, that the Beaumonts do things a bit differently perhaps than your family would, or mine. For instance, when you were a child, did you sometimes have birthdays that were special because you got additional privileges now that you were older?”

Belle nodded. “Yes, I did. I remember being so excited when I turned ten because my dad let me get my ears pierced.”

“Yes, exactly like that! Well, in Adam’s family, it was kind of the opposite, I suppose you might say. For them, having a birthday meant you lost something: the privileges and freedoms of childhood. Every time Adam had a birthday, his father gave him new responsibilities, came up with new rules for what he could and couldn’t do. Some things were for boys, you see, and his son was becoming a man.”

Belle thought of the story Adam had told her about how he had had to relinquish his beloved pony because his father had wanted him to have a more grown-up horse. “Yes,” she said softly, “yes, I do see.” She was silent for a long time after that, letting all that she had learned wash over her. Poor Adam! In a way, he had been just as much a prisoner as she, though his cage had taken a different form. She had grown up constrained within the boundaries of a town that was small in both size and
outlook, and though she and her father had not been poor, per se, they had not had a lot of money for extras. But what they had always had in great abundance had been love. Belle had always known that her father loved her and supported her in everything she did, even something as foolhardy as marrying a man she barely knew. Adam, on the other hand, had had all the benefits of wealth and privilege—trust funds, mansions, private schools—but he had also had all the crushing burden of a legacy, of expectations. He had had a father who had looked right at him and still not really seen him. In fact, wasn’t that essentially what she herself had done? Beneath his arrogant posturing, his flashes of anger and his cold disdain, beneath even his clever mind, his wicked flirtations, and his strangely perceptive kindnesses, there was a part of him that was still that same lonely little boy with the sad eyes. Well, the past was the past, and she couldn’t change it, but maybe there was still a way to shape the future. “Mrs. Potts, you said Adam’s mother used to make him cakes for his birthday, yes?”

The housekeeper nodded. “Some of the best I’ve ever eaten, to tell you the truth.”

“How kind was his favorite?”

“Hmm,” mused Mrs. Potts, considering. “She made a double chocolate flavor that he was particularly fond of.”

“Will you show me how to make it? Please?”

Mrs. Potts studied the younger woman in silence for a long moment, watching the earnest appeal and shy hope that played across her features. As she looked at her, she felt a warm burst of hope spread through her own chest. Perhaps life really did have a way of working itself out. *Joke’s on you, John Beaumont, you old bastard. You thought you were punishing him, but instead you just helped him find the one thing—the one person—he’s needed all along.* And oddly enough, though he couldn’t possibly have envisioned Belle as a bride for his son when he sat down to write his will, he had ended up giving her what she needed too. Adam and Belle could have continued orbiting each other indefinitely, so close and yet still separate, never meeting, if it hadn’t been for this bizarre twist of fate. Now they had found each other, and they had the chance, if they were sensible enough to seize it, to never be lonely again. What a wonderful possibility! “You care about him,” she observed.

A soft, shy smile curved the corners of Belle’s lips. “I do,” she admitted.

Mrs. Potts answered Belle’s smile with one of her own. “Then I’ll show you how to make that cake,” she told her. “With pleasure.”

From the moment he awoke on the morning of the nineteenth, Adam was on his guard. Though he had told Belle to drop the matter of his birthday, he had still been surprised when she actually had. He had expected some pushback, had expected her to try to persuade him to mark the occasion in some way, but in fact, the whole thing had been like a stone dropped into a lake, sinking without a ripple. After their conversation in the boat, she had not breathed another word about it. She had acted as if nothing had been out of the ordinary at all, and in fact, she had been so studiously normal that he had begun to grow suspicious, hence his current state of wariness. He couldn’t shake the feeling that a surprise was going to leap out at him from behind every corner, and he couldn’t decide if he was being paranoid or simply prudent.

But when he had come down to breakfast, Belle had simply smiled, wished him good morning, and
lifted her cheek to be kissed before returning to her perusal of the newspaper. They had gone for a long ride that morning, and taken their lunch on the terrace, but there had been nothing unusual about that either. After lunch, he had excused himself to take some conference calls and get some work done, but she had merely smiled a soft, contented smile and said that suited her perfectly, as she had some things of her own she needed to work on. That had caused a prickle of suspicion, as had the fact that when they reunited for dinner, the meal was composed entirely of his favorite foods. But still she had said nothing about it, not even in response to his pointedly raised eyebrow, and they had retired after dinner to the drawing room as they usually did, just as if it had been any other day, and Adam tried to tell himself that he was imagining things.

They read in companionable silence for a while before Belle, with a sidelong glance at the clock on the mantelpiece, pushed herself to her feet, leaned down to press a kiss against his forehead, and told him she would be right back. He had gone back to his book and thought nothing of it, until ten minutes passed, and then fifteen, and she still had not returned. At the twenty-minute mark, he was just thinking that perhaps he ought to go look for her, when he heard a noise in the corridor outside, and then there she was in the doorway, pushing a tea cart on which sat an unmistakable silver-domed container. His heart leapt in his chest and he felt absurdly like grinning, though he wasn’t really sure why. Then he remembered he was supposed to be upset. Setting his book aside, he crossed his arms across his chest and tried to look stern. “Belle, what is this?”

“What does it look like?” she replied, her voice faltering only a little.

“I thought I told you we were not doing anything for my birthday.”

Despite her anxious expression, the corners of Belle’s lips quirked. “And you thought I was going to listen to you? Oh, my sweet summer child.”

Rolling his eyes, Adam stood and closed the distance between them in a few steps. “True, true,” he said, taking her in his arms. “I suppose I should know by now that you never listen to a damn thing I say.”

Realizing that he wasn’t mad, only surprised, Belle relaxed into his embrace and let her eyes spark with mirth. “No, never,” she agreed cheerfully. “Aren’t you glad?”

His arms tightened a little. “You know,” he said, letting his hands roam over her back, “I actually think I am.” It was true, he realized with amazement. For years, he had tried not to think about, or otherwise have anything to do with, his birthday. It reminded him too much of a happier, simpler, more innocent time, and that in turn reminded him too much of what he had lost. When he had been younger, newly arrived at adulthood and full of youthful stupidity and a craving for oblivion, he had done things on his birthday that made him cringe to think of, things that had been meant to fill a gaping hole in him, but which had only left him feeling even emptier than before. There had been his eighteenth birthday with Roxanne, of course, and his twentieth, when he’d gotten stunningly drunk and ran into a glass door. He’d been lucky not to wind up with scars from that one. And then there had been his twenty-third birthday, when he’d gotten high on pills and woken up between two women he didn’t know. That had been his last birthday before he started his company, the one that had made him realize he was getting too old for the little boy lost act. He had not wanted to even think about his birthday after that. But this, oh, this was a revelation. He thought that he would be quite content to celebrate his birthday like this—just him and Belle, her slender body warm and willing in his arms, her beautiful face beaming up at him happily, her brown eyes filled with a kind of affection he couldn’t quite put a name to, but which made him feel grateful and comfortable and excited all at once—for the rest of his life. He kissed her. “Thank you so much,” he said, and when she couldn’t help looking just a little bit skeptical, he added, “Really. I mean it.”
“How can you thank me? You haven’t even seen what it is yet.”

He kissed her again, deeper this time, and felt her give a lovely little tremulous sigh against his mouth. “I’m thanking you, you little fool, for there even being an ‘it’ in the first place. I’m thanking you for somehow knowing this was exactly what I needed, even before I knew it myself.”

Belle smiled, pleased with herself. “Well, in that case, would you like cake or presents first?”

He arched an eyebrow. “You got me a present?”

“Actually,” she said, reluctantly disentangling herself from his arms and holding up a pair of wrapped packages that were sitting on the tea cart, “I got you two.”

Adam fell back against the sofa like an emperor on his throne. “Let’s have presents, then,” he declared.

“It was so hard to know what to get you,” Belle admitted as she watched him unwrap the first gift. “What do you get for the man who has everything?”

“I don’t have everything,” her husband replied, though he thought perhaps he had more than he had realized even ten minutes ago.

“Well, I did finally think of one thing you were missing.”

“What’s that?” he asked, removing the wrapping paper and holding up the gift to inspect it.

She grinned. “Good literary taste,” she said. “So I decided to help you acquire some.”

“A Companion to Jane Austen,” he read, and then burst out laughing. “Oh, you think you’re just so clever, don’t you?” he teased, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close against him.

Her smile widened. “I am,” she told him, sparkling. “It’s so good of you to recognize it. But you have to promise me you’ll actually read it.”

He lifted her hand and kissed it. “Of course I will. I don’t think I have it in me to deny you anything anymore, you know. You’ve completely overpowered me.”

It was said lightly, half-jokingly, and yet as soon as he said it, the mood changed instantly, and there was a moment of quiet intensity in which Belle felt she could see past his tone, down into the substance of the words themselves. She knew he meant them, and she knew they were absolutely true. At the start of their relationship, if you wanted to call it that (and, Belle realized with amazement, she did), the balance of power had been completely in his favor. He had been the one who had employed her, the one who had brought her to England, the one who had talked her into marrying him with the promise of more money than she had ever or would ever see in her life. She supposed that, technically, the ultimate power had been hers, as she could have vetoed the whole thing and demanded to be sent back home, and he couldn’t have stopped her, but it certainly hadn’t felt that way. She had been in his orbit from the very beginning. It had all been on his terms.

But somewhere along the way, the balance had shifted. She didn’t know exactly how, and she didn’t know exactly when, but it had. Somehow, without even trying, just by being her own self, she had made him care about her. She saw now that her presence gave him strength, and that her leaving would crush him. She felt a great power flow through her, wonderful and terrible at the same time, a power that was of her and yet also somehow greater than her, the power to give and also to take, the power to create and also to destroy. She shivered. “Open the other one,” she told him.
This too was a book, a handsome volume bound in leather and with gilt-edged pages. *The Complete Poems of John Dunne*, it was called. “Look inside,” Belle said. On the title page, she had written, “To Adam, for your 32nd birthday. Remember, ‘No man is an island entire of itself.’ Your wife, Belle.”

He didn’t say anything at first, and after a moment, Belle looked at him a little anxiously. “Do you like it? You liked ‘The Good-Morrow,’ I thought, and so I thought maybe you’d like to read some more of his work.” Her voice faltered. “And if you don’t like it, you can always just put it in the library. That’s—that’s why I got the leather binding.”

Adam traced his fingers over the inscription one more time. *Your wife.* Such simple words, but so blessedly, achingly sweet. In that moment, he somehow felt less alone than he had ever felt before in his life. He lifted his head, and saw Belle watching him with anxious eyes. “Oh darling,” he said, kissing her worried brow. “It’s perfect.”

She tilted her face up towards his with a smile of relief, and he read the message implicit in the gesture and kissed her lips, his arms sliding automatically around her. He would have kept going, lost in the taste and feel of her, but after only one kiss, she pulled away, though the way she was breathing told him she did it only reluctantly. “Now look here,” she said firmly. “Before we go too far down that road, there’s one more thing we need to do first.”

“What’s that?” he asked, devoting the better part of his attention to the side of her neck.

“The cake of course. You can’t have a birthday without cake.” Even as she said it, her body swayed toward him of its own volition, her eyes slipping closed.

“You have the strangest ideas about things sometimes. What do I need cake for? You’re sweet enough already,” he replied, nibbling at the sensitive skin at the base of her ear.

She opened her eyes, and summoning feminine wiles she didn’t even know she possessed, fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Come on, just one piece? Please?”

He laughed. “Why, you little minx! Clearly you were paying attention when I told you I couldn’t resist you. Very well, then, let’s have cake.”

Belle hopped to her feet and removed the silver cover with a flourish, revealing a layer cake thickly spread with chocolate frosting. Adam made suitable admiring noises. “Wait, wait,” Belle admonished him, and from seemingly out of nowhere, she produced a pair of candles shaped like a three and a two, as well as a lighter. “There,” she said with great satisfaction once the candles were lit, “now that’s a birthday cake.”

He gave her a sideways glance, not wanting to take his eyes from the cake, from this beautiful thing that she had made for him. “Are you going to sing to me?” he suggested cheekily.

“I’ll spare you that horror,” she said dryly, and then added, with a sideways glance of her own, “but I do think you should make a wish.”

“Wishes are for children,” he protested.

Belle felt her heart clench. “But I think,” she said carefully, “that perhaps you didn’t use up all of your allotment in childhood. I think you’re overdue.” She prodded him gently with her elbow. “Go on, wish for something.”

Adam looked down at the cake, watching the candle flames flickering back and forth. Then he
closed his eyes and wished for the first thing that came into his head. It wasn’t a wish for anything specific, not really. It was a wish for a person, for a mood, for something he felt in his heart but had no idea how to explain in words. Then he opened his eyes and blew out his breath in one long exhale, and the flames wavered and vanished, leaving two little trails of smoke in their wake.

“What did you wish for?” Belle asked.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” he admonished her gently. “If I do, it won’t come true.”

It took Adam only one bite to discover what made the cake so special. “Belle,” he said in amazement, his fork suspended in mid-air above his plate, “this is—”

“Yes,” she replied with a pleased smile, “yes, it is.”

“And you made this? But how? I haven’t had this in years.”

“I talked to Mrs. Potts. She helped some,” Belle said with characteristic honesty. “But the idea and most of the work were mine.”

He took another bite of cake. “But why?” he asked once he had swallowed. “Why would you go to all this trouble for me?”

Belle flushed. “Because I care about you,” she said softly, shrugging, as if it should be obvious. “You’ve not had an easy time of it; I know that now. I wanted to make it up to you, just a little.” When he didn’t say anything, she added, “I didn’t want you to feel like I did on my last birthday.”

He studied her face quizzically for a long moment. “Beauty,” he said finally, “this is going to sound like a very stupid question, and I’m really quite ashamed that I don’t already know the answer, but when is your birthday?”

Oh dear. She had walked right into that one, hadn’t she? “April fifteenth,” she admitted in a small voice.

“So when you say you didn’t want me to feel like you did on your last birthday, you were talking about this year?”

“I was.”

“But we were together then; we were in London. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She looked at him incredulously. “Why didn’t I tell you? How can you even ask that? Think back to what our lives were like in April. We’d been married for like three weeks, and we were barely speaking to each other. What was I going to do, be like, ‘Oh yeah, by the way, it’s my twenty-sixth birthday tomorrow. What are you going to get me?’ To be honest, I just figured you wouldn’t care. Was I wrong?”

The stricken look on his face made her instantly regret being quite so blunt. He set his cake on the coffee table, then took her plate and put it beside his so that he could take her hands. “No,” he said sadly, “you’re not wrong. I’m so sorry. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

She gave his hands a gentle squeeze. “No, it’s alright,” she said. “You don’t have to. The past is the
past; it doesn’t matter anymore. We’re neither of us the same people we were then.”

He wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged so that she was sprawled across his lap with her head against his shoulder. “Do you remember how I spent my last birthday?” he asked.

Startled by the abrupt change of subject, she looked up at him in some confusion. “Adam,” she said with a burst of nervous laughter, “how on earth would I remember that? I don’t know what you were doing last summer.”

“You don’t remember? Oh, beauty, I’m hurt. You were there, after all.”

“Okay, now I’m really confused. What the hell are you talking about?”

He chuckled. “Cast your mind back, if you please, to the summer of 2015. What big project were we working on?”

Belle thought for a moment. “The Dettmer account,” she said finally.

“Just so. And do you remember how much I asked of you while we were working on that?”

She took up the thread eagerly. “Yes, of course I do. One night you even made me stay late, like really late. I don’t think I even got home until close to one in the—” She broke off abruptly as she suddenly realized how all the pieces fit together. “That was your birthday?”

Adam nodded. “That was my birthday.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, swatting him lightly on the chest. “Do you have any idea how mad I was at you for that? I had a date that night, I’ll have you know. A very nice guy I met online, and we never did reschedule.”

He pressed a kiss to her hair. “Well, thank God for that! After all, how nice a guy could he have been if one cancelled date was enough to put him off ever seeing you again?”

“But why,” Belle wanted to know, “would you spend your birthday like that?”

He shrugged. “It was that or sit at home alone and drink too much.”

“But surely—you know so many people—surely there was someone you could have called.”

“I think,” he told her seriously, “that being with some of those people would have been worse than being alone.”

“So instead you picked me,” she said, still in disbelief.

He shrugged again. “You were there,” he said simply. “You were there, and I could make you stay without having to explain why. What could be easier than that?”

“But I was so angry with you!” she protested.

“Yes,” he said with a laugh, “you were. You were glaring daggers at me all night.”

“Adam, it’s not funny!”

“Oh come on, how is it not funny? I’ve never heard so much annoyed pen tapping in my life.”

Belle felt tears prickling at the backs of her eyes. “It’s just, I was so lonely, and you were so lonely,
and all this time, we could have been not lonely together, if we weren’t so unbelievably stupid.”

Adam knew exactly what she meant. Her pronouncement a few minutes ago that the past didn’t matter anymore was not entirely correct. The past was the past, yes, but that didn’t mean you could just make it disappear. You could try to make up for all the wrongs you had done, all the hurt you had caused, but you could never go back in time and wave your hand and have it all be undone. He carried the past with him still, and it would take more than one single birthday to get him to lay his burden down.

And yet, all of a sudden, the past and the present seemed to mingle, blending together until he could no longer tell where one ended and the other began. His mother’s cakes, Belle’s cake, new books for an old library, Belle’s exasperation at having to work through the night, the stunning surprise of their first kiss, the anger that had sparked in her eyes when she had threatened to leave him, his hand between her legs, his mouth on her breast: it all flashed through his mind, faster and faster, until it was all a blur. And then suddenly there was no past and no present, only the future: vague, amorphous, and constantly shifting, but real, and possible. “I think you were right,” he said. “We’re different people now. Maybe it wouldn’t have worked then.”

Belle sniffled a little, then smiled. “Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure,” she quoted blithely, sitting up and swinging around so that she was straddling him.

Adam arched an eyebrow at her. “What’s that from?” he managed to ask, his hands going automatically to the curve of her waist.

She smirked. “Pride and Prejudice. If you’d read your Austen, you’d know that. Aren’t you glad you have me to help you out?”

“I’m glad I have you for a lot of reasons,” he said seriously.

There followed a moment of quiet intensity as they looked at each other, and the expression on her face was so heart-stoppingly lovely that it made his throat ache. She reached up and brushed her fingers through the hair at his temples. “Happy birthday, my darling,” she murmured. She had never called him that before.

She could feel his hardness even through the layers of their respective clothing, and instinctively, she canted her hips toward him, pressing close, and felt his grip on her waist tighten. “Beauty,” he said in a somewhat strained voice, “I would highly suggest you not move around like that unless you want to take this all the way.”

Realizing what she was doing, Belle froze, shocked at herself. “Oh God, I’m so sorry,” she blurted, feeling herself go red.

“Oh no, don’t be sorry,” he told her. “You never have to apologize for doing that. I’m just saying, are we doing this or aren’t we?”

“I—” Belle began, and then clamped her mouth shut abruptly, realizing she had no idea what she wanted to say next.

He saw the doubt flicker through her eyes and smiled wryly. “I’ll take that as a no, then.”

“Adam, I—it’s not—it’s just—”

He smoothed his hands down her sides to her hips, and then down further still, past the hem of her shorts to her bare thighs. His touch was warm and reassuring. “Shhh, darling, shhh,” he said softly. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. More than anything, I want you to be sure.”
She cocked her head, puzzled. “You’re not upset? It doesn’t bother you that I don’t know?”

He traced gentle circles across her bare skin. “To be completely honest with you—and this surprises me even more that it probably does you, believe it or not—I am neither upset nor bothered. I know why you’re hesitating, but you know, really I’m just as inexperienced as you.” He held up a hand to forestall the objections he knew were coming. “Yes, yes, I know what you’re going to say, and yes, it’s true, but I’ve never—” He swallowed thickly. “There’s never been you before. That’s the difference. You’re teaching me a very important lesson, you know.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

The look on his face made her heart clench again. “Some things—the best things—are worth waiting for.”

“Oh, Adam…” And impulsively, she leaned forward and dropped a kiss on his lips.

He reached up and took her face in his hands, tucking her hair behind her ears gently. “So when it does happen, I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it’s going to be spectacular. Utterly phenomenal.”

In the silence that followed, Belle could hear the heaviness of her own breathing, could feel the liquid heat pooling at the apex of her thighs. “Is it going to happen, then?” she asked. “I mean, you seem awfully sure of yourself.”

He traced the shape of her mouth with his fingertips, then kissed her, slow and deep. “Oh, my dear,” he said, “haven’t you realized yet that I know you? I know you better than you know yourself. It’s going to happen, you just haven’t realized it yet.” He grinned suddenly. “And in the meantime, lucky for you, I’m not an all or nothing kind of man. There’s so much room between zero and one hundred. But you’re going to have to take your shirt off first.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, scandalized. “The door’s open!”

He turned and looked. It was. “Well, that’s hardly my problem,” he told her lightly. “You should have thought of that before you decided to climb on top of me. Shirt off, if you please.”

This time, Belle obeyed. *Live a little*, she told herself. *Just this once, be a little bit wicked.* She reached for the hem of her shirt, and with Adam’s help, drew it over her head. He tossed it aside, leaving her in only her bra. It was pale pink, edged in lace, rosy against the creaminess of her skin. In other words, it was a very pretty little garment. Adam wanted it gone immediately. With uncharacteristically clumsy fingers, he fumbled with the clasp, then slid the straps down her arms. And then the bra had gone to join her shirt in some corner of the room or other, and the entire upper half of her body was bared to his gaze and to his touch.

Her breasts weren’t large, but they were full and perfectly rounded. He cupped them both in his hands, relearning the feel of them after that all-too-brief moment in the library that already felt like half a lifetime ago. “So perfect,” he murmured, running his thumbs across her rosebud nipples, teasing them into taut peaks. He felt her answering shiver of pleasure as if it had come from his own body. “Tell me what you like,” he urged her. “Is it this?” Again that teasing motion of his fingers. “Or maybe this?” And placing one of his broad hands across her back to steady her, he leaned forward and replaced his fingers with his mouth.

She swayed toward him, hands clutching at his shoulders. “Oh, both,” she gasped. “Both is good.” She paused, and then added, “There is just one little thing…” He lifted his head and arched an eyebrow at her in silent inquiry. “Why,” Belle wanted to know, “am I the only one taking my clothes
off?"

This time he laughed out loud. “You really are something else, you know that?”

She smiled, feeling daring and powerful and deliciously feminine. “I’m only thinking of what’s fair, you know.”

He took her hands and guided them to his shirt buttons. “Your commitment to egalitarianism is admirable,” he said. “But what are you going to do about it?”

Belle undid all of his buttons, her hesitant fingers gaining confidence and speed as she went, and then paused and ran her hands over his chest. His skin felt like warm satin beneath her fingertips. “I’ve wanted to do this for a while,” she confessed.

“What’s that?”

“Touch you.”

With a groan, he lifted her, and maneuvered them both so that she was lying on her back, and he was poised above her. She looked up at him inquiringly. “What?” he said. “You can’t just say something like that and expect me not to do something about it.”

She pushed the shirt from his shoulders, and when it was gone, drew her arms around him so that she could feel the muscles of his back. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“I believe in show, not tell,” he told her, and sinking his head down to the level of her waistband, began to kiss his way back up her body. “You have a mole right here, did you know that?” he asked, showing her with his tongue exactly where he meant. “And another one here.” This time he traced his fingertips over it, tickling her lightly.

“I did know that, yes,” Belle said with the one part of her brain that was still thinking rationally.

He reached her breast and put his mouth to it, laving her nipple with his tongue and making her squirm beneath him in a vain attempt to ease the ache that was building between her thighs. “Such little, tiny things,” he said after a time. “Why should they affect me so much? But they do. Everything about you enchants me. It’s like you’ve got me under some kind of spell.”

He kissed the side of her neck. “I want to learn your body like a student learns a new language. I want to become fluent in you.” He laid his lips against the base of her throat. “Teach me your grammar, beauty.”


He leaned his forehead against hers, and they let their breath mingle. “I know,” he said quietly. “I know.”

She put her arms around him again and held him close, running her hands over his back. “If you had asked me a year ago where I thought I’d be tonight, this would have been about the furthest thing from my mind.”

“If I’d only known,” he said, shaking his head. Then he smiled. “But next year, I think, will be even better.” And before Belle could work out just what he meant by that, he kissed her again.
Cogsworth, who happened to be passing through the corridor on his way to kitchen at just that moment, saw entirely more than he’d bargained for.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: I'd pluck a fair rose for my love

I think many of you are probably wondering why the hell Adam and Belle haven't had sex yet. Trust me, I get it. There are a couple reasons. One is that the first time they do sleep together is meant to correspond to a particular moment in the original story, and we're not quite there yet. As to the other reason, I'll just refer you to Lisa Kleypas' Devil in Winter, one of my favorite romance novels: "Women had always come far too easily to Sebastian. If she made him wait for her, would he lose interest? Or was it just possible that they might come to know each other, understand each other, in an entirely new way? She longed to find out if he could come to value her in ways beyond the physical. She wanted the chance to be something more than a mere bed partner to him." Just be patient; it's coming (so to speak). And like Adam said, there's a lot of room between zero and one hundred, so I think you'll want to stick around for the next chapter.
Chapter Notes

Starting the new year off right, guys. It's amazing how much faster I can write when I'm on break from school. Thanks to everyone for reading; I hope you all stick around to see what 2019 has in store.

“So you can see, I hope, the seriousness of my dilemma,” Adam concluded. “She said it didn’t matter, but I’m not so sure I should take her word for it.” He turned to look briefly out the window at the low wall of gray clouds that had descended to blot out the sun and turn the afternoon quite dreary before turning back to stare down the man sitting across the desk from him, his expression very serious and intent. Steepling his fingers in front of him, he said, “Your insights, please.”

Cogsworth tried without much success to keep the hunted look out of his eyes, wondering why on earth Adam had come to him with this problem, and not to Lumière, or Mrs. Potts, or Plumette, or really, just about anyone else on planet Earth. It wasn’t as if he had any real experience with either women or happy, functional marriages. He supposed it was some kind of testament to his discretion, but at the moment, he was finding discretion to be very much an overrated virtue. He was also still trying to recover from having seen the master and mistress sprawled all over the drawing room sofa in a state of semi-undress. Clearly, they were getting along better than he had thought they were. And if that was the case, then he didn’t know what Adam was so worried about. “Do you—” He stopped, coughed a little, and tried again. “Do you have any particular reason to doubt Mrs. Beaumont’s assertion that she isn’t angry that you didn’t celebrate her birthday?”

Adam was silent for a long time, gnawing a little at his bottom lip. When he finally answered, it was with his face turned back to the window again, as if it was hard for him to say the words while looking Cogsworth in the eye. “Belle may very well be fine with it,” he said finally. “She’s such a wonderfully forgiving person that I can actually believe she would be.”

“Then I’m sorry,” Cogsworth interjected, “but I fail to see the problem.”

Adam still wouldn’t look at him. “Belle might be fine with it,” he said tightly, “but I’m not.”

“But why? You certainly can’t be blamed; you didn’t know.”

Adam brought his fist down against the desk with a thud, the surest sign Cogsworth had had yet that he was keeping his emotions in check through sheer force of will, and even then only just barely. “She said she didn’t tell me because she thought I wouldn’t care, and I can’t even argue with that. In London, she was an annoyance to me, a hindrance, a complication I hadn’t asked for and didn’t want. So yes, if she had approached me then and told me it was her birthday, I would have responded accordingly.” He grimaced. “It disgusts me now to think about the way I’ve acted toward her, but,” and here he gave a little sorrowful shrug, “there it is.” He turned to look at Cogsworth imploringly, and the older man was startled by the open anguish in his face. “I don’t want to be that man anymore; I want to show her that I’m not. But what if I still am? I mean, fundamentally, unchangeably, what if that’s still who I am?”

Cogsworth, who had never been very comfortable with emotion, had no idea how to respond to this.
Taking refuge in the practical, he said, “I think you ought to buy Mrs. Beaumont a birthday gift.”

“Yes, but what?” said Adam in a despairing wail. “I don’t have the slightest idea where to begin.”

Cogsworth wrinkled his brow in confusion. “I would have thought you’d have a lot of gift giving experience. All of those…” He trailed off awkwardly, realizing he had been about to say something that was not quite polite.

Adam arched a sardonic eyebrow. “Go on, finish it.”

“Well, you have dated quite a lot,” his companion informed him.

“Not quite the same thing. In fact, it’s not the same thing at all. You’re married, Cogsworth. What does one buy for one’s spouse?”

Ah, there it was, the true reason he had been given the somewhat dubious distinction of attending the master at a time like this. “You might start by considering the usual things,” he suggested. “Flowers, chocolates, promises you don’t intend to keep.”

“Very funny,” said Adam, in a tone of voice that suggested it was anything but. He was silent a moment, and then said quietly, “You know, I never actually picked out any of the gifts that I gave. I always made my assistant do it. I always made her do it.” He put his head in his hands, which muffled his next words. “God, Cogsworth, I’ve treated her so shamefully. How can I ever make up for it now?”

Cogsworth took pity on him. “If you could get her anything at all,” he asked very gently, “what would it be?”

Adam looked up, red-eyed and despondent. “So much,” he said feelingly. “There’s so much I would like to give her. The life she’s lead, the world she’s lived in, have been so small until now. It makes me furious to think of her wasting away in that tiny, God-forsaken town. I want to give her all the things she’s been forced to do without. I want to show the world who she is and what they’ve been missing all this time. That’s what I’d do for her if I could.”

Cogsworth stared at him. “You’re in love with her,” he said in amazement.

Now the younger man’s eyes widened in alarm. “No,” he protested. “No, no, I’m not. That’s not what this is.”

“Alright, maybe you’re not,” he conceded. “But I think perhaps you’re falling.”

“Cogsworth, no. I can’t be. I can’t. It’s impossible.”

“Why is it impossible?”

Adam made an exasperated gesture of frustration. “I’m Adam Beaumont,” he said, as if that explained everything. “I’ve never been in love before, and now would be the worst possible time to start. There’s an expiration date on all this, or had you forgotten?”

“I haven’t forgotten anything,” the other man said, affronted. “But aren’t you a businessman? I think perhaps you’ve forgotten one of the most important tenets of the business world: contracts can always be renegotiated.”

“Ah, yes, but only if both parties are interested in doing so.”
“And you don’t think she is?”

“Think of what I’d be asking of her, Cogsworth. I don’t see how she could be.”

Cogsworth stood. “I see no sense in continuing this conversation if you’re going to be so damned stubborn, not to mention maudlin.” His expression softened a little. “At least think about what I’ve said, young man. And let your feelings be your guide. I think you’ll find that this is uncharted territory for Mrs. Beaumont as well.” And with this little speech, which concluded the most emotionally open conversation he had had in a number of years, Cogsworth retired, leaving Adam alone with his thoughts.

Several weeks passed, slipping by in that easy, dreamlike haze that had come to characterize their time at Thornleigh. Then, one evening, Adam asked Belle if she would like to have lunch with him in York the following day. She hesitated over her answer longer than he had thought she would, her pleasure at being asked warring with her sense of caution. “I’d love to,” she said finally. “But is it safe?”

“Safe?” he repeated in some confusion, before realizing that she was referring to the circumstances that had brought them to Thornleigh in the first place. “It’s perfectly safe,” he told her. “We shall be quite anonymous. And besides, I highly doubt anyone is still interested in us. It’s been months. We’re old, old news as far as the tabloids are concerned.”

“Old, old news,” Belle said carefully, “and yet we’re still here.”

He reached for her hand across the table. “I’m not ready to share you with the rest of the world just yet. Do you mind?”

“Oh no,” said Belle. “I don’t think I’ve ever minded anything less in my life.”

It wasn’t until Adam had parked the car in the forecourt of the house again and come around to help her out that Belle began to grow suspicious that perhaps there was something else at work here besides a simple lunch (although the lunch had been lovely, as had the hand-in-hand stroll along the city walls that had followed). The house seemed strangely quiet as it sat there shimmering in the afternoon sunlight, for once without a workman to be seen. And the Peugeot was missing from the driveway, too. “Where is everyone?” she asked.

Adam shrugged, releasing her hand so he could take the key from his pocket. “Not a clue,” he said nonchalantly. Perhaps a little too nonchalantly…

“You’re up to something,” she accused him as they stepped into the foyer.

“I’m not up to anything at all, darling,” he told her breezily. “Perhaps you’re being a bit paranoid?”

“Oh, come on,” she protested. “That’s just mean.”

“Sorry,” he chuckled, catching her around the waist and kissing her softly. “How can I ever make it up to you? Shall we change and go riding? It’s been too long since we’ve been out to the folly, I
Belle felt herself relax. Perhaps she was being a bit paranoid. After all, nothing particularly strange had happened, and Adam was always more or less a bit mysterious. And besides, she really did want to go riding. She nodded. “Yes, let’s.”

They parted at the top of the stairs, he to the West Wing, she to the East. Belle opened the door to her suite and then bent down to undo the ribbon ties of her shoes. Thus preoccupied, she did not immediately notice what was different about her room. It was only when she realized that she couldn’t really bend over to mess with her shoes with her purse still over her shoulder, and straightened to toss her purse onto the bed, that she saw it. “Oh my God,” she breathed, and her purse slid from her shoulder and hit the floor of its own accord as her entire body went slack with shock.

Her room was filled with red roses. There had to be hundreds of them, perhaps even a thousand or more. In crystal and porcelain vases, and in arrangements of varying sizes, they covered every available flat surface: both the bedside tables, the top of the chest of drawers, the coffee table and end table, the escritoire. Some particularly large vases had even been placed directly on the floor. And of those hundreds and hundreds of roses, every last one was flawless. They were rich and full and perfectly crimson, with petals like velvet, their spicy scent filling the air around her.

Slowly, as if in a trance, Belle kicked off her shoes and moved forward into the room, letting herself become enveloped in roses. What is this? There on her bed, bright and shiny against the pink and white duvet, was a small stack of packages wrapped in gold paper and tied with rose-red ribbon. Propped up against this stack was a matching crimson envelope with her name written on it in gold. With trembling hands, she opened it. Inside was a single sheet of heavy cream-colored stationery with an elaborate monogram emblazoned across the top. But Belle didn’t need a monogram to tell her who the author was. There was only person in the world who could have done this. She was beginning to think that perhaps, for her, there would only ever be one person.

Dearest Belle, read the note. There are one dozen roses here for every day between April 15th and today. Consider it a down payment on all the many, many things I still owe you. Every day that you’re still here with me is a gift, truly, so it’s the least I could do. I know I don’t deserve you, but you make me want to try to, and I promise I will never forget your birthday again. Adam. There was a postscript, too. Woman cannot live by flowers alone, so I got you a few other little things besides.

Belle could tell she was crying from the sensation of great, fat tears slipping silently down her cheeks, but for the life of her, she couldn’t think why she should be doing so, not when she was so filled with thankfulness and joy and wonder, not when her heart was fluttering so fiercely in her chest that it felt like a caged bird beating its wings against her ribs. This was incredible, amazing, far beyond anything she had ever dared to hope for or expect or even imagine, from Adam or anyone else. She took a deep breath and reached for the first of her presents, and then remembered all the times she had had to buy flowers on Adam’s behalf because he couldn’t be bothered, and started crying all over again.

Eventually, she gathered herself together enough to open the first package. It contained a pair of black leather riding gloves, as soft and smooth as butter, with a small gold “B” embossed on each turned-back cuff. She slid them on, flexed her fingers, made a fist. They were a perfect fit. The next box opened to reveal a bottle of Tom Ford Venetian Bergamot perfume. She remembered telling him offhandedly one day that it was her favorite, but far, far too expensive, so she’d been hoarding her tiny sample bottle, which was almost gone. “I can’t believe he remembered that,” she marveled, and sniffed the rich citrus rapturously.
There were two presents left. The next one felt like a book, and once unwrapped, it proved to be a copy of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Writing a Novel*. On the title page, he had written her a note. *Not that I’m implying anything about my wife, of course, but I think even someone as brilliant as you might find this useful.* Belle smiled a little tremulously as she read the words a second time, and then a third. She recognized the gift for what it really was, of course: not just a book, but a vote of confidence in the dream she had been so reticent to tell him about. Writing her own novel had always been an idea so abstract that it was more akin to a fantasy than a workable plan, but maybe it didn’t have to be. Perhaps she just needed someone to believe in her more than she had believed in herself.

How wonderful—and wonderfully strange—that that someone should turn out to be Adam.

She reached for the last present and tore the gold paper from it slowly, deliberately, savoring that last moment before all her surprises were revealed. Once she had done so, she found that she was holding a large, flat crimson velvet box with a little gold clasp. She undid the latch and lifted the lid, and then had to press her knuckles against her mouth to muffle her involuntary shriek of astonishment. There in the box, resplendent against its bed of velvet, was an exquisitely beautiful diamond necklace. It was a single medium-length strand of large, rounded jewels, with an even larger teardrop-shaped pendant hanging from the center. There were matching teardrop-shaped diamond earrings, too. The pieces were fairly simple in design, but the stones were enormous, and Belle could tell from the way they sparkled in the afternoon sunlight that they were absolutely real, and of the highest quality. It was by far the most extravagant present she had ever received, and it made her actually feel a bit faint to think how much it must have cost. It was all so overwhelming, and she didn’t understand any of it. Or rather, she understood it well enough, for there was really only one possible interpretation to put to this rose-scented, diamond-encrusted fantasy, but she had trouble connecting it to herself, trouble understanding that she was the object of it. Six months ago, she had been living an ordinary life in her tiny apartment above the laundromat, and now here she was, in an English mansion, being showered with beautiful things by a man who was handsome, brilliant, and fabulously wealthy. It was like a modern-day fairy tale, and he was clearly the prince, but she wasn’t so sure she knew how to be a princess. She felt as if she were living in a wonderful dream, but surely all dreams had to end eventually, didn’t they?

Suddenly, all she wanted was Adam. She wanted to see his face, and hear his voice, and feel his arms around her. She wanted to touch him and be reassured that he was solid and real, an anchor in the midst of a tide that threatened to sweep her away, the lodestar around which her entire life seemed to pivot. Setting the jewelry box gently back on the bed, she turned and ran. She burst through the doors of her room and ran in her bare feet through the corridors of the house, past the main staircase and into the West Wing, where she pounded on the heavy double doors of the master suite.

He opened them almost immediately. He had not changed into his riding clothes, but then, of course, he must have known that she wouldn’t have either. Belle practically threw herself at him, and felt his arms come up around her automatically. For a long time, neither one spoke, while they used their mouths for other, more pleasurable, activities. When they finally broke apart for air, still locked tight in each other’s embrace, Adam said, “I take it you found your presents?”

“I did! Thank you!” she exclaimed, kissing his cheek. “But I have so many questions.”

“Didn’t you find my note?” he asked. “I thought that made my intentions pretty clear.”

“Yes, but still–! All this for me? How? Why?”

He kissed her again, gently at first, then a little more firmly. “You still don’t understand? Then I see I shall have to be clearer. Come with me.” And he took her by the hand and whisked her into his rooms, closing the doors behind them.
Inside, Belle blinked a little as her eyes adjusted to the new surroundings. It was the first time she had ever been inside the West Wing suite, which was much larger than her own, and had a completely different ambience. Her suite was light and airy, decorated in shades of white and pink and cream, and always open to the fresh air. However, it looked like the spirit of rebirth and renewal that had begun to permeate the rest of the house had not yet made it to the West Wing. Everything here was dark, heavy, and very somber, but Belle could see that, with just a little time and attention, it could be turned into something quite dramatic and decadent, which suited what she knew of Adam. He led her over to the brocade settee and sat, tugging her down into his lap as he did so. There followed another brief, yet interesting, interval of kissing, and then he said, “What has you so confused, sweetheart?”

“First of all, how the hell did you pull that off?” she asked. “I had no idea.”

He chuckled. “That’s what made it so easy.” At her puzzled look, he explained. “You weren’t expecting me to do anything, so you weren’t on the lookout for it, and thus missed all the signs. I thought perhaps you’d find something out eventually, but you didn’t get suspicious until almost the very end. What tipped you off, anyway?”

“It was the house,” she informed him, running her finger idly around the rim of one of his shirt buttons. “It was far too quiet.”

“It’s been quiet for years,” he pointed out.

“Not since I’ve known it.”

He kissed her temple. “That’s because of you, genius.”

Belle felt herself blush. “Well, anyway,” she said ducking her head. “No one is here.”

He smiled, looking enormously pleased with himself. “No,” he said, “they are not. And that’s by design, I’ll have you know. I arranged the delivery of the roses for after we’d left for lunch, and told the others that after they’d set everything up, they could have the rest of the day off. I don’t know where they’ve gone, and to be honest, I don’t particularly care, as long as they don’t come back anytime soon.”

She looked at the way they were sitting. “What, so they don’t come home and find us in a compromising position?”

Adam followed the path of her gaze. “Oh, darling,” he said, his eyes glinting in that predatory way that made her feel hot and confused and desperate for something she didn’t know how to name. “I have not even begun to compromise you.”

Her blush grew deeper. “No one’s ever done anything even remotely like this for me before.”

“Good, so I should hope.” At her affronted look, he laughed. “No, no,” he said. “Not because I don’t think you deserve it, but because I’m honored to be the first. Maybe the only, if I play my cards right.”

Deciding he couldn’t possibly have meant that quite the way it sounded, Belle struggled to tamp down the fluttering that was building in her chest again. “It’s too much, though,” she protested. “I can’t even believe that you—!” She broke off, at a loss for words, and tried again. “Adam, that jewelry must have cost a fortune.”

“A fortune, huh? Well then, it’s a good thing I have one of those. And no, I will not tell you how much it cost. That set used to belong to a duchess, though, I will tell you that. I would have had all of
this for you sooner, but I had to wait for exactly the right pieces to come up for auction.” When she
didn’t say anything, he drew his arms more tightly around her, holding her even closer, and let his
face and voice grow serious. “Beauty, you are worth every cent I spent on you, many times over. Do
not ever let me hear you suggest otherwise. I got you those things because I wanted to, and the only
thing that matters to me is that you like them.” He hesitated. “You do like them, right?”

Oddly enough, that hesitation, that little slipping of the mask, almost touched her more than any of
the other wonderful things he had done for her. “No,” she said with a little shake of her head, and
then couldn’t bear to tease him any longer. Cupping his cheek in her hand, she looked into his eyes
and told him, with perfect sincerity, “I love them. They’re perfect. But,” she added, her practical
streak stubbornly asserting itself, “where will I wear them?”

This time his kiss landed on the soft and sensitive skin at the base of her ear. “Hmmm,” he mused, a
low hum that she felt against her skin as if it had touched her physically. “I’m sure we’ll think of
something.”

There was one more question that Belle still had, and in the comfortable safety of his arms, she
finally felt brave enough to ask it. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?” he replied easily enough, though he was pretty sure he already knew what she was
referring to.

“Those things you wrote. Did you mean them?”

It was sobering to realize that she could still doubt him, even now, but he supposed it was no worse a
punishment than he deserved. Truth be told, he himself was still growing used to the idea of
sincerity, of saying things and finding that he meant them from his heart. Well might she question
him. He would do the same if he were in her shoes, without the benefit of being able to see what was
going on inside his head—and his heart. She could not know, for instance, that he had sat brooding
over Cogsworth’s words long after the older man had left the room. This is uncharted territory. Let
your feelings be your guide. What would you get her if you could get her anything at all? The
answer had come to him suddenly, in a flash of inspiration so crystal clear that he wondered how he
could have missed it at first, for as soon as he had thought of it, he had felt as if he had always
known that this was what he would do. When you wanted to convince a once-in-a-lifetime kind of
woman that you weren’t a completely irredeemable asshole, no ordinary birthday gift would do.

The roses had been his first idea, and he was immensely proud of them, but even they had seemed
somehow incomplete. He had wanted to give her things she could keep, and so he had bought the
gloves (hand-stitched Italian leather), the perfume (sophisticated and sensual), and the book (practical
and, in its own way, strangely romantic). But even then, it had not seemed like enough. Enter the
necklace and earrings, a gift so extravagant, so over the top, that she could not possibly fail to
understand what he meant by it. The amount he had paid for those diamonds had been, quite frankly,
obscene, but what was the point of being this wealthy if you couldn’t do something completely crazy
every once in a while? He had never done anything even remotely like it for a woman before, but
when it came to Belle, oh, he’d buy Belle a different diamond necklace every day of the week, if that
was what it took.

Sometimes he thought that perhaps Cogsworth was right, that he was falling in love with her, though
he didn’t think he’d ever seen enough of love to be able to know for certain. Had his father ever
loved his mother? He didn’t think so, except perhaps as an object, a thing he could control and
possess. Belle was not that to him. He had no desire to bend her to his will or force her to be
something she was not. So what was she, then? Only everything, he was realizing. He wanted to
protect her, do things for her, shower her with presents, talk to her for hours, make wild and
passionate love to her, go on adventures with her. Was that love, or at least the beginnings of it? He’d never felt less certain of anything in his life, or more afraid of putting a foot wrong and destroying this thing between them before he even had the chance to really figure out what it was. But he did know one thing, small as it was. “Yes,” he said, “I meant them. Every word.”

She lowered her eyes shyly, but he could see that she was pleased. “I’m glad to hear that,” she said with a small, intriguing smile, “because they made me cry, and I’d hate to think I cried about nothing.”

“Happy tears?” he suggested hopefully.

It was hard for Belle to talk about her feelings, for her past romantic history (or lack thereof) had not given her much experience in doing so. But he had been so wonderfully open with her that she could do no less for him. “The very happiest,” she assured him. “The kind you cry when you realize that someone you really care about really cares about you. The kind you cry when you feel like the luckiest woman in the world.”

Adam felt a wave of some indefinable emotion wash over him, so strong that it brought tears to his own eyes, just as it must have done to hers. “Then we’re even,” he said a little unsteadily, “because I feel like the luckiest man.”

Belle twined her arms around his neck. “I don’t know how to ever thank you,” she said. “Today—this whole summer, really—is something I’ll never forget. I’ll cherish the memory of it for the rest of my life.” So that someday, when all of this is over, and I have to wake up and go back to reality, I can remember what living in this dream world felt like. But that was a melancholy thought, and she didn’t want to think melancholy thoughts, not right now and not just yet. Oh God, let the dream last just a little while longer. Please. Feeling suddenly bold, and just the slightest bit desperate, she leaned forward and kissed him.

His response was immediate, his hands seemingly everywhere at once as his mouth devoured hers. This kiss was different from the ones that preceded it, filled as it was with all the different emotions neither one of them knew how to put into words. There was affection in that kiss, and tenderness, and a wonderful desire to support and protect, but there was also passion, and longing, and pure, unadulterated need. “Now see here,” said Adam after a time, “we’re certainly not done making memories.”

“No?”

“Of course not. In fact…” He paused, trying to judge the situation, trying to determine how receptive she would be to what he wanted to suggest. In the end, he decided to go for it, wagering that if the truth was in her kiss, she’d like what he had in mind very much indeed. And after all, nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? “In fact,” he repeated, “there’s one more present I want to give you.”

Her eyes widened. “Another one? But how? I mean, what could possibly be left?”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry, this one doesn’t cost a thing. And I have a feeling I’ll like it just as much as you, or nearly so.”

She shook her head a little, puzzled. “I can’t imagine.”

“You can’t? Ah, but you will.” He gently slid her off his lap and then stood, holding out a hand to pull her to her feet. She took it without hesitation, as naturally as breathing. “Do you trust me?”
Ah, yes, the eternal question. If he had asked her that only a few months ago, her answer would have been an unequivocal no. But now, after all that had happened, after all the long conversations had, the meals shared, the long rides taken, the cozy evenings spent reading, after everything he had given her and everything he had shared with her, after all the little ways he had already let her in, she realized that her answer had changed. She still didn’t think that she had been, strictly speaking, wrong in her initial assessment of him. He had been an arrogant asshole, and he had behaved very badly. But looking at him now, she found it impossible to remember what it had felt like to be angry with him. He was simply not that man anymore, and maybe she wasn’t the same woman either. Now when she looked at him, she saw only her friend, her companion, her partner, her almost-lover, and so the words that left her mouth were ones she could not have imagined saying at the start of the summer. “I do.”

Without even a moment’s hesitation, he swept her up into his arms and carried her toward a partially open door along the right-hand wall. Pushing the door open with his foot, he said, “Just what I needed to hear. I’ll reward you for that.”

Belle started a little when she saw that he had brought her into his bedroom. It was a large room, and though one wall was composed of tall windows flanked by pulled-back burgundy drapes, the semi-sheer white panels that had been left down to cover the glass bathed the room in a pale, moody light. It reminded Belle of an art museum, where the rooms were cut off from the outside world to protect their contents from bright sunlight. It could have been any time of day or night outside these four walls, and you would never know which. The furnishings were rich and luxurious and masculine: thick red and blue oriental carpets; heavy, ornately carved walnut furniture; a burgundy and gold damask bedspread. There were little touches of Adam here and there too, which fascinated Belle, who had been inside exactly two men’s bedrooms in her life: Neal’s house and Adam’s New York apartment. This was worlds removed from either. Neal’s house had had antler furniture and a wall of high school sports trophies; Adam’s apartment had been a study in minimalism so comprehensive that it had seemed as if no one had lived there at all. This room, in contrast, had a towering stack of books on the nightstand, a very expensive bottle of cologne on the dresser, and stray pairs of equally expensive-looking shoes strewn about the floor. A real, flesh-and-blood man lived here, and though she knew him well by now, Belle realized that she still did not know him nearly as well as she would like. She was suddenly hungry for even the most minute slices of domesticity, for pajamas and toothbrushes and dresser drawers full of neatly folded clothes, for glasses and reading in bed and watching her husband shave.

Said husband laid her horizontally across the bed and gently positioned her so that she was near the edge, her legs dangling over the side. Then he got down on his knees before her and reached for the hem of her skirts. “How fortunate that you’re wearing a dress today,” he said in a silky murmur. “Legs apart, please, darling.”

She propped herself up on her elbows so that she could see him better. “I’m sorry, what?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Oh, was that not clear? Allow me to be a little more explicit: Your legs—spread them.”

Belle was by no means afraid, but she was confused. “Adam, what is this? What are you doing?”

His eyebrow practically disappeared into his hairline. “Isn’t it obvious? I’m about to go down on you, sweetheart.” Her eyes widened, but she didn’t say anything, and he suddenly understood. He could have kicked himself for not considering the possibility. “No one’s ever done this for you before, have they?” he asked carefully.

Belle felt as if she were blushing with her entire body, from the roots of her hair down to the tips of
her fingers and toes. “No,” she admitted, and then tried to explain. “Obviously I know that that’s a thing, but, um, with Neal, it just—it never came up, and then there wasn’t anyone else, and—” She stopped, aware that she was probably just making the whole thing worse. Her embarrassment was so acute that she wanted to sink straight down into the bedspread and keep right on going.

Okay, that settled it, this Neal guy was definitely a fucking moron. But he supposed that in a weird way, he owed the man for being so terminally stupid that he had missed his chance and thus allowed Adam to be the first to give Belle this particular kind of pleasure. The first, and perhaps the only? Oh, that was a dangerous, intriguing thought. “My poor dear,” he lamented, “you’ve been so shamefully neglected. I can rectify that, if you like.”

Beneath her embarrassment, Belle felt a stab of desire. She was curious, and yet also strangely disbeliefing. No man had ever suggested such a thing to her before; no man had ever looked at her the way Adam was looking at her now, as if he wanted to devour her a million different ways just for the sheer thrill of it. “You don’t have to,” she said. “I mean, if you don’t want to. Not on my account.” She didn’t know why she said it, really. Perhaps she was testing the limits of the dream world, trying to find out what was real and what was too good to be true.

He looked at her in silence for a long time with an expression that was not quite pity, but which was tender and sad and regretful nonetheless. Finally, he said, “Let’s get a couple things straight. First, you are infinitely desirable, and any man who doesn’t think so is a goddamn fool. Second, when, in all the time we’ve known each other, have you ever known me to do anything I didn’t want to? I was not lying when I said I’d enjoy this almost as much as you, believe me. Let me give you this.” When she didn’t answer, he added, “Remember when I said I’d never hurt you? I wasn’t lying then, either. So if I do anything you don’t like, just tell me and I’ll stop, alright?” Belle nodded, transfixed. He smiled wickedly. “I think you’ll like it, though.”

That did it. “Oh, God, please,” she implored him.

His hands returned to her skirts. “Well, since you asked so nicely, I suppose I could.” With a bit of assistance from her, he gathered up her dress and pushed it out of the way so that it was rucked up nearly to her waist. Then he reached for a pillow. “Lift your hips a little, sweetheart,” he told her, and slid the pillow into place. “There we go,” he said with satisfaction, leaning back a little to survey his handiwork. “Now we can begin.”

He started by reaching up and hooking his thumbs around the waistband of her underwear. It was not, Belle realized belatedly, a particularly sexy pair of underwear. In the interests of creating a smooth line beneath her chambray dress, she had chosen an old, but reliable, pair of navy blue high-waisted briefs, not thinking, of course, that anyone else would see them. But Adam didn’t seem to care. In fact, he barely seemed to notice what she was wearing at all. He drew her underwear down past her hips, over her thighs, across her knees, and off, discarding it by tossing it somewhere over his shoulder. She didn’t see where it landed. He put his hands on her knees and pressed outward slightly, gently coaxing her to let him in. “Lay back,” he urged her. “Just lay back and let me do all the work.” Belle took a deep breath and opened her legs, hitching up her knees a bit to make herself more comfortable.

In this position, she was totally exposed to him, and the reality of it took his breath away for a moment. He wanted to jump straight ahead to the main event, put his mouth to the core of her, her most sensitive place, but she was new to this, he reminded himself, and so he forced himself to slow down and give them both something to savor. He pressed a kiss against the inside of her right thigh, and then another and another, moving closer to her center as he did so. He could hear her sharp intake of breath when he reached the place where her thigh met her body, and he chuckled softly. “Not just yet. Patience, darling.” He turned his attention to her other leg and kissed a similar path up
her left thigh, each touch of his lips a featherlight whisper, a tantalizing tease, a promise of something even better yet to come. This time when he reached the top of her leg, he switched from his lips to his tongue.

At the first touch of his tongue against her folds, Belle couldn’t help letting out a little yelp. She had touched herself before, of course, but it was one thing, she realized, to explore with her own fingers, and quite another to have Adam do it with his mouth. He kept up the teasing, varying between gentle lapping and firmer, harder strokes, circling her clit but never quite landing on it. She could feel warmth building between her legs and spreading outward throughout her whole body, enveloping her in a cocoon of pleasure. With her eyes closed, the outside world faded away, and she drifted in a warm sea, untethered from reality. It was wonderful, blissful, and yet, somehow not enough. She squirmed, trying to get closer to the source of the sensation, her fingers fumbling for his hair in an attempt to guide his mouth right to the very heart of her. His burst of amused laughter sent rich vibrations dancing up and down her spine.

“What is it?” he asked. “Tell me what you want, sweetheart.”

“More,” she pleaded. It was the only coherent thought she could form.

“Ah, but where? Here?” He swept his tongue just to the left of her clit. She shook her head, her hair rustling against the bedspread. “No? Perhaps it’s here, then.” He moved a little closer, still deliberately keeping his mouth away from that sweet spot where he knew she wanted him.

“Adam,” she begged him, surprised to hear how ragged with need her voice sounded, “please just —”

He was enjoying teasing her now, and he wanted to hear her beg, just a little. “Please just what? Say it and it’s yours.”

He was really going to make her say it, she realized. It was part of this game they were playing. She hadn’t realized before that things like this could even be a game, that they could involve that same back and forth, that same matching of wits and wills that had come to characterize so much of their other interactions. They were, God help them, as compatible in bed as they were outside of it. It was that knowledge that gave her the confidence to be bold. “For God’s sake Adam, just put your mouth on me. A little to the right. Oh yes, right there…!” Her words broke off in a stuttering moan as he finally gave her exactly what she needed.

Everything became more intense after that. The warmth was no longer a boundless sea. It had form and direction now, concentrating itself between her legs, at the point just beneath Adam’s firm, insistent tongue. All her muscles were coiling and tensing, her entire body tightening in anticipation of what she knew was about to happen. She was perilously close to the edge, and yet something in her was holding back, resisting, keeping her from being swept over the cliff into sweet oblivion. She knew what it was: she had never climaxed before with someone else in the room, let alone someone else who had had his head between her legs for the better part of the last quarter hour. To do so would require a new level of vulnerability, would create a new level of intimacy. It would be yet another bridge crossed, and if she crossed too many more, she didn’t know if she would ever be able to find her way back. All this she knew, but release beckoned, more tantalizing by the second. She didn’t think she could hold it back anymore, and she wasn’t so sure she wanted to.

Adam, with his uncanny ability to read her like an open book, must have sensed something of this, because suddenly his mouth was replaced by curling, stroking fingers. In and out they thrust, first one, then two, while his thumb kept up its steady, circling rhythm against the bundle of nerves at her center. When he spoke, his voice was simultaneously a million miles away and right beside her ear. “Let go, beauty,” he coaxed her. “I’ll catch you.” So she did.
It was like nothing she had ever felt before, like flying and falling both at the same time. She had thought she knew what to expect, but this was far beyond anything that had ever resulted from her tentative explorations in the privacy of her own bedroom. One moment, she was all tightly coiled inside, like a spring, and the next, she was being stretched, her entire body expanding as heat and light rushed in to fill every pore, every crevice, every secret place. Her legs shook, and she thought perhaps she screamed, but she couldn’t be certain. She felt as if she had no control over her own body; she was powerless to do anything but lie there and let wave after wave of pleasure wash over her.

Gradually, she became aware of Adam’s strong arms wrapping around her, shifting her so that her entire body was more comfortably on the bed, and when she opened her eyes, she found him looking down at her, his hands braced on either side of her head, his blue eyes soft and filled with an emotion she was afraid to put a name to. His mouth was curved into a tender smile. “Hey,” he murmured. “Welcome back.”

Belle could still feel her body trembling as the aftershocks worked their way through her. “Adam,” she breathed, her mind whirling with astonishment at what had just happened. “That was—oh my God, I don’t even have words. I had no idea it could be like that.”

“Neither did I,” he admitted. In truth, he had been utterly lost from the very first taste of her. This was far from the first occasion he had performed this particular act on a woman, and he had enjoyed it immensely each time, but usually just as the prelude to something else, the prerequisite to his own release. This time, however, was different. This time, the look on Belle’s face—totally sated and completely stunned—filled him with an immense sense of satisfaction. It touched something new and forbidden in him, something dangerous, to be able to put that look on her face. He’d never, in all his life, met a woman before whom he wanted to give things to the way he wanted to give them to Belle. And it wasn’t just about diamonds, though he’d gladly buy her any piece of jewelry her heart desired without a second thought. No, what he wanted to give her most was…himself. Oh, he was doomed, he thought, so very, very doomed. Because Cogsworth was right: he was falling in love with her, and in the end, it would destroy him. But just at the moment, he was finding it difficult to care. “You look so beautiful when you have nothing on your mind but your own pleasure.”

He dipped his head to kiss her. Belle could taste herself on his lips, and somehow, out of all the things he had done, that was the most shockingly, thrillingly erotic thing of all. Suddenly she understood what it meant to want—no, need—someone. She wanted to be even closer to him, so close that they were as one in body as they were in mind. She wanted to give him the same transcendent rush of bliss that he had just given her. She had never felt that before, that overwhelming desire to give herself to another person. It was new, and it was frightening, not least because there was only one word she could think to use to describe it. But no, it couldn’t be that. There was no way; it wasn’t possible. How could it have happened in so short a time? But maybe the potential had always been there, just waiting for him to show her who he truly was, just waiting to give her a reason to feel it. She brought her legs up, pinning his hips between her thighs, hoping he would understand what she was trying to communicate. He rocked forward, pressing his body against her still very sensitive lower half, and she felt a moan build in her throat. “Oh Adam, Adam, I want—” she began.

But she never got to finish the thought, for just at that moment, the sound of the heavy front doors being slammed reverberated throughout the house. They both started, then looked at each other in dismay. “I’m going to kill them,” Adam mumbled into the side of her neck.

“Play nice,” Belle ordered gently, running her fingers through his hair.

“Fine,” he acquiesced grudgingly. “I’ll make it a quick death. I mean really, how difficult is it to
understand that when I say ‘take the whole day off,’ what I mean is, ‘I don’t want to see your face until nightfall at least’?”

Belle’s emotions on the subject were a little more complicated. Even more stunning than what had already happened was the knowledge of what would have happened, of what she had been prepared to do had they not been interrupted. “I want,” she had started to say when they had heard the front door. How had she been going to finish that? *I want you. I want your body. I want you inside of me.*

Take your pick, because they all led straight to the same inescapable conclusion: she would have let Adam make love to her, and she would have done it without a second thought. When she was totally alone with him like this, completely cut off from the world in their own little private bubble, it was so easy to know what she wanted. But she was not brave enough to take it in broad daylight with the staff roaming God only knew where about the house. It was terrifying enough that she wanted it at all. “We should go down there,” she said, swallowing thickly. “I wouldn’t put it past them to come looking for us.”

“Must we?” he groaned. But Belle knew he knew as well as she did that the moment—this particular moment, anyway—had passed.

“We must,” she informed him, pressing a kiss against his temple to show him she felt bad about it.

He sighed and rolled off of her, dropping a glancing kiss along the edge of her mouth as he went. “Very well. But on two conditions.”

Belle propped herself up on her elbows and arched her eyebrows at him. “And what would those be?”

He met her stare with a raised eyebrow of his own. “One, this is just a temporary tabling of this particular discussion. As I recall, you started to tell me what you want, and I will hear you finish that sentence. Two, if I have to go play the role of benevolent employer, we’re going to make this a little bit more interesting.” He bent to pick something up from the floor, and when he straightened, she saw that he had a bit of navy blue fabric in his hand. “I think I’ll hold on to this,” he told her.

Belle held out her hand. “Give me that,” she insisted.

He whisked the garment away behind his back, well out of her reach. “Sorry, no can do. If we’re going to go down there and make small talk, I want you to have a little reminder of what you could be doing instead.”

“Adam!” she exclaimed, the irritation she knew she should feel warring with a sharp, piercing stab of arousal.

He took a step toward her, still holding her underwear behind his back. “Just think of it. Our own little delicious secret.” Another step. He smirked at her. “That turns you on, doesn’t it?”

Belle pressed herself up onto her knees, smoothing her dress back into place. “I admit nothing,” she said, but the drowned, helpless look on her face was proof enough.

Adam stepped to the edge of the bed, his smirk turning into the kind of smile that made Belle wish they had more time and no interruptions. He cupped her cheek in his free hand and kissed her deeply. “Happy birthday, beauty,” he said.
Neal Gaston wandered up and down the aisles of the Pleasantville Shop n Save, tossing items into his cart. So far, he had managed to accumulate two cases of beer, a value pack of venison jerky, a box of cereal, and an ungodly quantity of eggs. In other words, he was working his way through the essentials. He was on his way toward the meat case when he spotted a familiar figure inspecting the packages of chicken breasts. “Hey, Mr. V!” he called, speeding up a little.

The figure looked up, startled, then relaxed when he saw who it was. “Hello, Neal,” said Maurice Villeneuve. “How are you today?”

In truth, Neal was not exactly well. All summer long, he’d felt simultaneously listless and restless, which was most unlike him, and he didn’t quite know why. If pressed, he supposed it had something to do with the question of Belle, or rather, the absence of Belle. She’d stopped responding to his messages some time ago, and she’d gone dark across all the social media accounts he knew she had, which admittedly, was not many. It was as if she’d fallen off the face of the earth, and it needled him that he didn’t know what she was doing. Which was why the sight of Mr. Villeneuve was so welcoming. Who better to press for information than Belle’s own father? “I’m doing alright,” he said with a nonchalant shrug. “How about you, Mr. V?”

“Oh, I can’t complain,” said the older man, setting down the package of chicken he was holding and picking up a slightly smaller one. “I’ve just signed a contract to illustrate a whole new series of children’s books. But that’s still top-secret information, so you didn’t hear it from me!” He chuckled a little at the idea.

Neal was not interested in this in the slightest. “And how is, uh, how is Belle?” he asked with what he hoped was a casual, disinterested tone.

Maurice should perhaps have found it a little strange that his daughter’s ex-boyfriend had just cornered him in a supermarket to ask about her, but he was, for better or worse, a trusting person by nature, so he gave the question an honest answer. “She’s doing very well, thank you. I think she’s very happy with her new life in England, which is something of a surprise. But a welcome one, don’t get me wrong,” he added hastily.

Neal felt a hot rush of anger. “Happy?” he said sharply. “How do you know?”

“You know, I’m not entirely sure, but they were a gift from her husband, so you can probably draw your own conclusions.” He laughed. “I try not to dwell too much on that aspect of it. It’s enough for me to know that she seems to be happy and cared for. Believe me, that was not a given when she told me she was getting married. I’ve never met the man, but I’d spent a year or better hearing stories about him, none of them good. To be honest, I’m still not convinced, but what are you going to do?” he finished with a shrug.

The thought of another man touching Belle made Neal furious. “Doesn’t it bother you that she’s so far away?” he blurted out.

Maurice blinked a little at the younger man’s sudden vehemence. “Of course it does. It bothered me to have her so far away when she was in New York, let alone across the ocean. But, well, I’ve come to accept that at this point, probably the only thing that would get her home again is if something were to happen to me.” He tossed the package of chicken into his cart. “Well, that was the last thing I
needed. Have a nice evening, Neal.” And then he was gone.

Neal watched him go, the wheels turning in his head. Mr. Villeneuve’s remark had been casual, offhand, a dark joke more than anything else. And yet, something about it sparked an idea in Neal’s mind. The only thing that would get her home again is if something were to happen to me. What an intriguing idea that was. Neal selected the largest package of ground beef he could find and went whistling toward the bread aisle. Suddenly, he felt better than he had in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: A different kind of intimacy. Reactions welcome, as always.
Belle was reading Isobel’s diary in bed again, propped up against a thick stack of pillows. She was deep into the squat little volume now, and had reached a section where Isobel was explaining how her feelings for her employer had begun to change. “It is no exaggeration to say that I hated him at first. I do not use that word lightly, but there it is. His very being was repulsive to me. It had nothing to do with his appearance. Oh no, that mattered not one whit, and was easily overcome. It was his demeanor, his manners, his arrogance and condescension, his infuriating desire to prove himself right in every situation, even with regard to matters about which he knew absolutely nothing, that made him so odious. But this afternoon when I brought him his tea in the garden, something very strange happened. He was reading a book, the story of Guinevere and Lancelot, and I could not help it, I teased him for reading one of my favorite romances. I thought he would be angry, but instead he did something I did not expect at all: he laughed. And oh, God help me, but it was a deeply pleasant sound, warm and rich and unlike anything I had ever heard before. I don’t know what it means, and I don’t know where it will take us, but for that one moment, we were in perfect harmony with one another.”

The knock at the door of her suite, though soft, seemed to echo so loudly in the quiet stillness of the house that Belle started and nearly dropped her book. Suddenly, wrenchingly, she was dragged forward two and a half centuries in an instant, swimming upward through the dark morass of time as she left behind the long-ago sunlit garden, with its hazy, heavily perfumed air and bees buzzing in the rosebushes, and found herself once again in her bedroom, the lamplight casting shadows on the walls, the sounds of nighttime stirring faintly in the darkness outside. For a moment, she felt disoriented, almost dizzy, as she tried to remember where she was. The diary had been that engrossing.

The knocking at the door was repeated, a little louder this time, a little more insistent. “Coming!” Belle called, putting Isobel’s diary on the nightstand and scrambling out of bed. She opened the door to find Adam standing on the threshold. He was dressed—rather uncharacteristically, Belle thought—in a hoodie and jeans, and he was smiling at her. She smiled back at him, a little puzzled. “What are you doing here?”

He put an arm about her waist, drawing her to him. “Come now,” he said, gently teasing, “is that any way to greet your husband?”

She pressed her hands against his chest, her fingers toying with one of the strings on his sweatshirt. “Even when he knocks on my door in the middle of the night?” she asked.

His grip tightened, pulling her flush against him. “Especially when he knocks on your door in the
Belle was enjoying playing along now. “How should I greet my husband, then?” she asked demurely, looking up at him from beneath her lashes.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he mused, “maybe a little something like this?” He bent his head and kissed her, and Belle felt her arms come up around his neck almost automatically. She had once speculated that there would have to come a time when his kisses would cease to thrill her. Now she thought perhaps she would have to revise that assessment. If anything, his hold over her was only growing stronger with time. Even this kiss—little more than a soft, gentle brushing of lips—made her feel warm and breathless. She leaned into him, feeling his protective strength close around her. She let out a little sigh of perfect happiness, and then said, “So why is my husband knocking on my door in the middle of the night?”

Adam blinked, as if for a moment he had utterly forgotten why he had ventured into the East Wing. Then he grinned at her, his teeth flashing very white in the dim light of the hallway. “Ah, yes,” he said, “there’s something I want to show you. Would you care to go on a little midnight adventure with me, sweetheart?”

She looked up at him with eager interest. “As if you even have to ask,” she said.

Hands linked, they wandered through Thornleigh’s maze of corridors, Belle following Adam’s lead. She had to, for she quickly realized that he was bringing her into a part of the house with which she was utterly unfamiliar. Judging by the sudden narrowing of the passage, the bare stone floor, and the simple wall sconces, she thought perhaps they were in what had once been the servants’ quarters, though she couldn’t be certain. “How is it possible,” she asked in amazement, “that I’ve lived here for months now, and there’s still whole sections of this house I’ve never seen before? It’s like living in a palace.”

Adam squeezed her hand. “You’ll get used to it eventually,” he said, shrugging slightly. “I’ve known this place my entire life, and it still surprises me sometimes.”

Her heart twisted in her chest. How she’d like to have a lifetime here, a chance to uncover all its secrets. Wait, said a small voice at the back of her mind, whose secrets? The house’s, or the man’s? Belle shook her head a little, as if to clear it. It was no good thinking like that, she told herself. She didn’t have a lifetime, and that was that. She had known that fact from the start; nothing had changed. Except…maybe it had. There was a relationship between them now, a beautiful new thing, rare and precious as a jewel, where before there had been nothing. There was affection, and tenderness, but also, it had to be said, passion, and even desire. Would all of that just cease when the year was through? How could it? How could they want it to? Or, at least, how could she want it to? Even now, she couldn’t presume to speak for Adam, which was a sobering thought.

As she had been thinking, they had been walking, and now they came to what appeared to be a total dead end. In front of them was only an undecorated wood-paneled wall, and to either side, closed doors that Belle was pretty sure just led to small bedrooms, the kind that had once upon a time housed housemaids or footmen. What on earth could he want to show her here? She looked up at him, her brow furrowed. “Are we lost?”

He made a slight scoffing noise. “Of course not.”
Her expression turned deeply skeptical. “Really?”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” he chastised her. “Haven’t you learned by now not to doubt me?” He smirked at her. “You see that sconce there?” Belle followed the direction of his pointing finger, then nodded. “See that ring on the bottom? Take it and give it a twist to the left.”

Confused but intrigued, Belle did as she was bid. It moved stiffly at first, then all at once. There was a soft clicking sound, and then, before her amazed eyes, a door appeared in the wall where there had not been one before. She gaped at it, then at Adam. He grinned, clearly pleased with himself. “Pretty cool, huh?” he suggested, lifting his eyebrows.


“I can’t tell you exactly how it works,” he admitted. “But as for why, well, this feature is original to the house, so apparently my Elizabethan ancestors were not above doing some skulking in dark, secret passages.”

She shot him a sideways glance. “That explains a lot about you, actually,” she said.

“How’s that?”

Her lips quirked in amusement. “You apparently come from a very long line of incredibly extra people. It explains why you’re so damn dramatic: it’s in your blood.”

“We Beaumonts are not ‘extra,’” he said a trifle stiffly, crooking his fingers into quotation marks around the word. “We simply have a well-developed sense for the theatrical.”

“What ever you say, my darling,” Belle replied.

Adam wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close so that he could kiss her forehead. “I love it when you call me that,” he said softly.

She was touched by the vulnerability of his words. It was a spontaneous admission, straight from the heart, and it made her own heart flutter in response. “You are my darling,” she told him seriously, her voice low and earnest. Then she flashed him a mischievous smile. “Drama and all.”

He laughed and kissed her again, this time on the mouth. “Shall I show you where this particular secret passage leads?”

She pulled away from his grasp and peered cautiously around the edge of the door. Inside, it was pitch black, and smelled more than a little musty. “Sure,” she said, but some of her hesitation must have showed in her response, because he reached over her head to pull the door open wider. Taking a flashlight from his pocket and switching it on, he stepped into the breach.

“Come on,” he coaxed her. “You’ll be fine—it’s perfectly safe and we won’t go far. Just stick close behind me.”

Belle acquiesced gladly, keeping one hand flat against his back and the other against the wall as she followed him down a short corridor, and then up a flight of stone steps, their centers worn into deep grooves from the passage of untold numbers of feet over the centuries. At the top of the stairs was another door, of the regular variety this time. A small gap between the bottom of the door and the floor was silvery with moonlight. Adam opened it, the ancient hinges squeaking a little in protest, and they stepped out into the summer night.

They were on the roof of the house, Belle realized, on a narrow walkway that picked its way
between the slate tiles. If she looked down to her right, she could see the interior courtyard, and to her left, the wide expanse of the lawn stretched away into the shadows. They walked carefully halfway down the length of the wall, to a place where the path widened into a kind of bump-out surrounded by a low stone railing. Belle blinked with surprise when she noticed that a blanket and a couple pillows had been spread out over the hard surface. She arched an eyebrow in Adam’s direction. “You’ve been up here already this evening,” she said.

“Guilty as charged,” he replied easily. He extended a hand to help her down the short step to where the blanket lay. “But aren’t you glad? Come sit with me. It’s such a beautiful night.”

Yes, Belle thought as she sat down on the blanket and drew her knees into her chest, it was a beautiful night. A soft breeze sighed gently through the trees, rustling the leaves like so many sheets of tissue paper. Somewhere far off, unseen, an owl hooted. Above them, the sky was a vast, cloudless expanse of deep midnight blue, spangled with stars like a velvet cloak sewn with diamonds. The moon hung in one corner of the sky, so full and bright that Adam switched off his flashlight, so golden that the shadows it cast looked almost like day. She could see the moonlight glinting on the slithering ribbon of the river, on the mirror-like surface of the lake. She shivered. August nights were not as warm as July ones.

Behind her, she heard Adam shrug out of his hoodie, then felt him lay it across her shoulders. She thrust her arms into the sleeves eagerly and drew it close around her, wrapping herself in Adam’s warmth and scent. “Thank you.”

“Yes, Belle thought as she sat down on the blanket and drew her knees into her chest, it was a beautiful night. A soft breeze sighed gently through the trees, rustling the leaves like so many sheets of tissue paper. Somewhere far off, unseen, an owl hooted. Above them, the sky was a vast, cloudless expanse of deep midnight blue, spangled with stars like a velvet cloak sewn with diamonds. The moon hung in one corner of the sky, so full and bright that Adam switched off his flashlight, so golden that the shadows it cast looked almost like day. She could see the moonlight glinting on the slithering ribbon of the river, on the mirror-like surface of the lake. She shivered. August nights were not as warm as July ones.

Of course,” he replied. He dropped down to sit beside her on the blanket, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

For a long time, they simply sat in comfortable silence, watching the otherworldly moonlit landscape, listening to the occasional nighttime sounds whose sources lay hidden in the darkness. The outside world seemed very far away and very unimportant. “The stars seem so close it’s like you could reach out and touch them,” Belle said finally.

Adam turned his head to look at her. His gaze was considering, as if he were trying to decide whether or not to say what was on his mind. Whatever he was looking for in her face, he must have found it, for he said quietly, “My mother taught me something about the stars.”

Belle stared at him. He talked about his mother so rarely that she knew that every mention of her was uniquely precious, something to be cherished. He would not say her name if it wasn’t somehow important to him, and what was important to him was important to her. She found his hand where it lay on the blanket and covered it with her own, her fingers gently caressing his. “What’s that?” she asked.

“When I was a little boy—this would have been, oh, that last spring before she died—I asked my mother about death. I don’t remember why, exactly. I think maybe we found a dead animal one day while we were out for a walk. A bird or a mouse or something. At any rate, whatever it was, I was a sensitive child, and it bothered me.” He broke off suddenly, shooting her a self-deprecating half-smile. “I bet you find that hard to believe, don’t you, that I could care so much about something like that?” Belle said nothing, instead continuing to simply stroke his hand. After a while, he went on. “I got worried and asked her if she was going to die.”

“What did she say?” Belle asked in barely more than a whisper. She was afraid that if she spoke any louder than that, her voice would pierce the thin, fragile bubble of the moment.

“She told me that, yes, she would someday, that we all would, because death was only part of life.”
“That’s a pretty heavy thing to tell a six year old.”

He shrugged. “She told me not to worry, though, that she wouldn’t—that she wouldn’t die for a long time yet.” His ragged voice caught and stumbled over his words, and Belle felt a sudden, wrenching stab of almost overwhelming pity. Her reserve broke, and she threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Oh, Adam,” she said, trying to put all the weight of her feelings into that one simple phrase. She lifted her head a little from where it was pressed against his shoulder and dropped a few gentle kisses along the side of his neck.

He held her close, one hand stroking her hair. Not for the first time, he noticed how perfectly she seemed to fit in his arms, all her soft curves smoothing out all his hard edges. He turned his head so that his mouth could reach her cheek, the soft skin at the base of her ear. Keeping her folded in his embrace, he said, “But you’re right, she must have known that wouldn’t be very comforting, because that night, she took me outside into the garden and had me look up at the sky. It was full of stars, much like tonight. She told me that when someone died, they became part of the stars, and that whenever you looked up at the night sky, you could see all the people who loved you looking down on you and watching over you.”

Belle pulled away from him so that she could look up at the glittering tapestry unfurled far above their heads. “I like that,” she said quietly. “Your mother and mine, they’re both up there somewhere keeping an eye on us. That’s comforting, I think.”

Fighting the urge to pull her back against his body, Adam followed the direction of her gaze up to the heavens. “It is, isn’t it? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought of it over the years. In times when I needed her, all I had to do was look up at the sky and it was like she was still with me.” He smiled ruefully. “Unfortunately, it’s hard to see the stars when you’re in the city. I think I lost my way there for a while.”

Belle’s heart ached for him. “I think perhaps you’ve found it again,” she said in a gentle whisper.

He studied her face in silence for a long moment. “Do you?” he said at last. “You know, when I look at you, I can almost believe that’s true.”

The possible significance of his words caused Belle to blush. “I wish I could have met your mother,” she said suddenly.

His smile grew sad, and a little bit wistful. “I do too. She would have loved you. You have quite a bit in common, actually. She was American too.”

“She was? I didn’t know that. Will you tell me about her? Please?”

Adam considered this. In some ways, this was the most extraordinary conversation he had ever had with a woman. The vast majority of the women who had meandered in and out of his bed over the years had not even known that his mother was dead. And of those that had known, not a single one had ever asked about her. He had certainly never wanted to volunteer any information to any of them. His mother’s memory was all he had left of her, and he had always felt, in some strange way that he could not fully explain, that to share that memory with others was to diminish it. The women in his life had always been transitory figures, here one day and gone the next, dropping in and out of his life without any rhyme or reason. He had never wanted to give any of them a piece of himself to take with them when they left.

So then what made Belle different? For there was no denying that she was different, of course. The
very nature of their original agreement would seem to imply that her presence in his life would be 
transitory too, and yet, it didn’t feel that way. It didn’t feel that way at all. She had come to fit into his 
life so easily, so seamlessly, that it was as if she had always been and would always be here. He 
didn’t want her to leave, he realized. Looking into her deep brown eyes, he saw nothing but genuine 
curiosity and tender concern, and it was this that brought him to another, even more stunning, 
revelation. He was going to tell her everything, every last bit. He wanted to tell her everything, 
because, out of all the women he had ever met, she was the only one he trusted to be the guardian of 
this particular tale. Tonight, he would give her a piece of himself, not of his body this time, but of his 
heart and his soul.

Decision made, he lay down on the blanket, sliding one of the pillows beneath his head and placing 
the other one beside him. Belle looked at him curiously. “It’s a long story,” he explained. “We might 
as well get comfortable. Come here and lie down with me.”

Belle did as she was told, sliding down beside him, pressing her body against his. She nestled her 
head against his shoulder, draped her arm across his chest, and hitched her leg over his, as if she 
were trying to fuse their separate bodies into one combined entity. Adam responded in kind, 
wrapping one arm around her shoulders to pull her even closer to him, and bringing the other up to 
tangle his fingers with those of the hand that was lying on his chest. Once they had entwined 
themselves as close as they could manage, then, and only then, did he begin.

As he had promised her that day in the portrait gallery, when he had taken her in his arms for the first 
time, he told her everything, laying open the past for her to do with what she pleased. He told her 
about his mother’s childhood, how she had come from a middle-class family in upstate New York, 
how she had been the youngest of five children, how he had a whole host of aunts and uncles in 
America that he had never met. She had been a dreamer and a bit of a rebel, had Rose, and she had 
not been content to settle for the sedate suburban life her parents had wanted for her. At the age of 
twenty, she had dropped out of college to become an airline stewardess. “She wanted to see the 
world,” Adam explained, “and I think she would have done it too, if she hadn’t had the tremendous 
misfortune to meet my father before she’d even really begun.”

“How did they meet?” Belle asked. She was so comfortable tucked against his side that she could 
have fallen asleep, had she not been so riveted to his story.

“He was a passenger on her first international flight. He saw her, he wanted her, and he had her 
almost before she really even understood what was happening. She never stood a chance. They were 
marrried eight months later.” He paused, and then added, “They were married in January, and I was 
born in July.”

“Oh,” Belle said softly. Then she did some quick math in her head. “Oh,” she said again.

Adam inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. “Exactly. So you see, I was never planned. I 
was the complete and total accident that caused my forty-seven-year-old father to make his twenty-
two-year-old mistress his wife. In a way, I ruined her life.”

“Don’t say that!” Belle cried fiercely, feeling that tremendous surge of pity again. “How can you 
even think that?”

He didn’t answer her right away, seeming to need some time to gather his thoughts. Finally, he said, 
“None of what happened next would ever have transpired if she hadn’t gotten pregnant. Sometimes I 
think about what she might have done, what she might have become, if it hadn’t been for him. She 
might have seen the world, had adventures, met someone her own age, been happy. I sometimes 
wonder what my life would have been like if I’d been raised solely by my mother in her little flat in 
New York, and I’d never heard the name Beaumont or had the weight of half a millennium of
His wife considered this. What would Adam have been like in those circumstances? Who would he be without that fine, well-modulated accent, without all those years of Eton and Cambridge education, without the imperious arrogance that could only come from being an aristocratic blue blood to one’s very core? Who would he be if he hadn’t been John Beaumont’s last great hope for saving the family name? Would he have been happier? Well, perhaps. Or perhaps he would only have been unhappy in a different way. But either way, he wouldn’t be Adam, not the Adam she knew, not the Adam she cared for (and she had come to care for him very deeply indeed). She squeezed the hand that was linked with hers, hoping he would understand all that she meant when she said, “I like you just the way you are.”

Adam kissed the crown of her head, hoping that the darkness would keep her from noticing the sheen of tears in his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered, not trusting himself to say any more than that just at the moment.

“But what happened?” Belle could not resist asking after a long pause. “What was so terrible? You still haven’t told me.”

He drew in a deep breath. She was right, of course. He owed her the whole story, or nothing at all. So slowly, hesitatingly, he told her. He told her how his father had married his mother within forty-eight hours of finding out she was pregnant, and had immediately spirited her across the ocean, forcing her to leave everything that was familiar about her life behind. He had then proceeded to keep her a virtual prisoner in her new home. At first, he had kept her isolated at Beaumont House, on the grounds that she had to be kept as protected as possible to ensure the safety of the precious baby she carried. And besides, he had still loved her then, insofar as John Beaumont had ever loved anyone, and he had wanted her close by. But after Adam’s birth, he had, suddenly and without warning, moved both her and her son to Thornleigh Hall, while he had stayed in London.

“Well didn’t he come too?” Belle asked.

Adam lifted his shoulders in as much of a shrug as he could manage while lying down. “I don’t quite know, not exactly.”

“Did he—did he have a mistress in London?” she persisted softly, and then bit her lip, unsure whether the question would upset him.

To her surprise, he laughed. Not a particularly happy laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. “You ask very direct questions, beauty. I don’t know whether he did or not. It wouldn’t surprise me, though. No, I think, fundamentally, he just got tired of her. She suffered from what I believe was postpartum depression after I was born, and it’s hard to be the hot young wife when you’re barely keeping your mind together. Whatever connection they might have had wasn’t strong enough to survive that. And me, he took absolutely no interest in until much later. He didn’t want either of us, but because he was a jealous, possessive bastard, he couldn’t let us go. And what do you do when you don’t want someone, but you don’t want anyone else to have them either?” Belle did not answer, and indeed, the question seemed to be rhetorical, because after a moment, he went on. “You keep them out of sight and out of mind. You keep them in a gilded cage.”

“But it was the eighties!” Belle protested in disbelief. “It’s not like you were living in a Gothic novel. How could you keep someone a prisoner like that in an age of cars and telephones?”

“You’d be surprised,” he said grimly. “For someone of my father’s name and position, it was shockingly easy. The key was in making it not look like a prison. Who would have believed her if she had told them that her beautiful country mansion, her fabulously wealthy husband, and her
precious son were not enough, that something was not right about the whole thing? She had nowhere to go and no one to turn to, and he knew it. She also had no money of her own, just the allowance he gave her, and she had to account for every cent of that. He controlled her completely. She became just one more beautiful thing for him to own.”

“But that’s—that’s horrible!” Belle cried. “No, more than horrible. It’s monstrous!”

“Yes,” her husband agreed succinctly. “It is. And not only did he break her spirit, he also killed her.”

Belle remembered the whispers she had heard at Emily Chowdhury’s party, and felt a sudden wave of cold nausea break across her. “H-how did he do that?” she managed to ask. “And why?”

Adam swallowed thickly. This was by far the hardest part of the story to tell. Everything he had described to her thus far had been information he had gleaned secondhand, but now he had come to the point in the narrative where the events of his parents’ lives intersected with his own memory. And it wasn’t just any memory, either. No, it was the memory, the seminal event of his life, the event that had made him who he was and that had shaped every single thing he had done or said or thought since. This was the hardest part of the story to tell, and yet, when he opened his mouth, it all came spilling out.

It was a proverbial dark and stormy night, and Adam was afraid. As well he might be, for he was only seven, and this was the fiercest storm Yorkshire had seen yet that summer. Rain lashed against the windows in a sharp staccato, as if someone were throwing pebbles at the glass. Great flashes of lightning, visible even through the drawn curtains, illuminated the entire room in a ghastly white light, followed by tremendous claps of thunder so resounding that they seemed to make even the ancient stone foundations of the house rattle. Adam huddled beneath his blankets, his eyes shut tight and his hands over his ears, trying desperately to shut out the mad cacophony, but it was no use. Not only could he still see and hear the raging storm, but he was almost unbearably hot, trapped as he was beneath his bedclothes in the stuffy, closed-up room. No, it was no use at all. He wanted his mother.

Flinging back the covers, he fished around under the bed until he found his slippers, then opened the bedroom door and crept out into the hall. The corridor was dark, having no windows to the outside, and while he knew it well enough that he could have navigated it in his sleep, the intense blackness still seemed somehow sinister. He went as quickly as he dared, keeping the fingers of one hand against the wall to help guide himself. He could see his mother’s room at the end of the hallway nearest the stairs, and beyond it, a soaring column of silvery gray where the staircase disappeared into the great hall. There was a strip of light along the bottom edge of his mother’s door. That was strange. It was very late. He tiptoed forward, and was just about to knock on the door when he heard a voice from within. It was his father. He sounded very angry.

“You stupid bitch!” This was followed by what sounded like a very loud and painful slap. “Did you really think I wouldn’t find out what you were doing?”

“It was a risk I had to take.” That was his mother, so brave, although her voice shook a little. “I’m leaving, John, and you can’t stop me.”

Adam backed away from the door hurriedly and looked around for a place to hide. He knew he would be in an almost unimaginable amount of trouble if Father discovered him eavesdropping. The only suitable hiding spot in all that long corridor was behind an old tapestry that hung on the wall opposite his mother’s room. He slipped behind it as fast as he could. It did not hang all the way to floor, leaving the bottom half of his legs perilously exposed. He could only hope that no one would notice in the darkness.
Inside his mother’s suite, the angry conversation continued. “You won’t leave me,” his father said, low and menacing. “You can’t. It’s impossible.”

“I can and I will. You don’t own me,” she said derisively.

A sudden burst of mocking laughter. “What? Of course I own you. I own every damn thing in this house, every bloody thing in your life.” There was a crashing, shattering sound, as of something breaking. Adam thought perhaps it was the vase of flowers his mother kept on her coffee table. “You see that, my dear? Because I own that, I can break it. Remember that. I can break you just as easily.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” said his mother, but Adam could hear a note of fear creeping into her voice, and realized she was bluffing. His heart lurched up into his throat.

Another crash. “You think I wouldn’t? Try me.”

“Go to hell, you old bastard. I wish I’d never met you.”

His father didn’t respond to that. He went on speaking as if he hadn’t heard her, his low voice all the more terrifying for being so controlled and so normal. “Come now, Rose, be reasonable,” he cajoled her. “You must see that it’s impossible for you to leave. What would you do? Where would you go?”

“I’ll go back to New York,” Rose said defiantly. “My family will help me if no one else will.”

“Ah, yes, family,” her husband replied. “Which brings me directly to my next point. I suppose you think you’ll take the boy with you.”

“Of course I will. He’s my son, and there’s no way in hell I’d ever leave him here with you.”

From his vantage point behind the tapestry, Adam gasped. Go to New York? That sounded scary. He had never been outside of England before. But, on the other hand, if his choices were to go to New York with Mummy, or stay in England with Father, he would choose Mummy every time. He had no desire to be left alone with a parent he barely knew and was more than half afraid of.

Something else shattered, followed by the sickening sound of human flesh hitting human flesh. His mother gave a shriek of pain. Adam didn’t know what to do. Did he run and get help, wake up one of the staff who was sleeping elsewhere in the house? Did he call the police? Mummy had shown him how. Regardless of which option he chose, he knew he needed to do something, anything. But he found that he couldn’t move. His stubborn feet seemed bolted to the floor. He clenched his small, powerless fists around the ancient fabric of the tapestry and felt hot tears of fear and anger sting his eyes.

“I still don’t think you understand, so let me be clearer.” This time, all trace of affability was gone from his voice. “I own you. Without me, you have nothing. Can’t you get that through your thick head? No fancy house, no beautiful clothes, no allowance. No son. That boy is a Beaumont. He belongs to me, to the dynasty, and you will never have him.”

“You’ll have to take him from me over my dead body,” said his poor, brave, foolish mother. She was no match for his father’s horrible power, and she must have known it. But still she kept fighting.

“Over your dead body, eh? Well, if that’s the way you want it, that can certainly be arranged.”

“I won’t let you take my precious child and twist him up into your own horrible image.” A pause, then the sound of something—his mother’s body?—being slammed up against a wall. “Let me go,
John, you’re hurting me!” She was sobbing now, and behind the tapestry, Adam was sobbing too. He was so afraid. His father hit his mother again, and then again. On and on it went, a nightmare without end. Surely someone would hear? Surely someone would come? But no one did.

Suddenly, the door to the suite was wrenched open, casting a rectangle of yellow light across the corridor, and someone stumbled out. He recognized his mother’s light footfalls. She was running, actually running, down the hallway toward the stairs. He almost burst from his hiding place and called her name, but the sound of his father’s heavier tread close behind stopped him. He stayed in the shadows, hardly daring to breathe, hoping he wouldn’t be seen.

Then a loud scream pierced the air. Shrill and panicked, hardly human, it was the worst sound Adam had ever heard in his life (twenty-five years later, he would still be able to say this). Abandoning all caution, he threw the tapestry aside and ran toward the noise.

His father was standing at the top of the stairs, his hands gripping the polished wooden railing so hard that his knuckles were white. Heedless of the danger, Adam ran to his side so that he could see what his father was looking at. The sight made his blood run cold. His mother lay at the bottom of the impossibly long flight of stairs. He knew as soon as he saw her that she was dead. Arms and legs and heads were not meant to bend at such angles. A pool of blood was already spreading outward from her fractured skull, gleaming darkly in the lightning flash that lit up the sky. A rush of anger, as impotent as it was instantaneous, welled up inside of him. He turned and kicked his father in the shins as hard as he could. “You killed her!” he cried.

His father’s hand clasped his shoulder, hard and heavy. “What are you doing out of bed, Adam?” he asked in that voice that was so terrifying because it was so calm.

Undaunted, Adam tried again. “You killed Mummy!” Kick. “You hit her and then you pushed her down the stairs!” Kick, kick, kick.

John Beaumont held his son off at arm’s length, seemingly impervious to the volley of poorly-aimed, child-sized blows. “I don’t know what it is you think you have seen, Adam,” he said, still calm, “but you are mistaken. You shouldn’t be up this late, and I think the lack of sleep has confused your brain. Your mother has merely taken an unfortunate tumble down the stairs.”

“But—but—” Adam spluttered.

The grip on his shoulder tightened, hard enough to hurt, just a little. “Go back to bed. Now.” He turned Adam in the direction of his own bedroom and gave him a little push to get him going. Not knowing what else to do, Adam went.

“Son,” his father added once Adam had begun to recede back into the shadows of the corridor. He turned. His father’s dark eyes flashed a silent warning. “I don’t think you should mention any of this to anyone. We wouldn’t want to give anyone a mistaken impression of what happened here tonight, would we?”

Adam nodded. “Yes, Father. No, Father,” he said.

“Nothing ever came of it,” Adam concluded sadly. “My mother’s death was ruled an accident, and life went on.”

“They couldn’t do anything about it?” Belle asked in disbelief. “At the very least, didn’t it look incredibly suspicious?”

“I’m sure it did. There have been rumors about it ever since. You’ve heard some of them yourself.
But rumors and suspicion are no match for the Teflon Beaumonts.” His voice was so ragged and bitter that Belle could hardly stand it. Then she realized something. His reference to her hearing rumors took her back to the night of the party, that last horrible night when they had said every last horrible thing to each other before they had been reborn in the cleansing rain of a spring storm. She clung to him, feeling a surge of regret so strong it was almost painful.

“This is why you got so upset that night I accused you of being like your father! Oh God, Adam, darling, I am so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, of course you didn’t.” He paused, swallowing hard past the lump in his throat. “But now you see why I was—why I am—so afraid.”

Belle extricated herself from the comfortable circle of his arm and pushed herself up onto her elbow so she could look down into his dear, familiar face. “Please don’t be afraid,” she implored him softly. “Please. You have no reason to be.”

He reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear. His thumb ghosted over her cheekbone, as if he were trying to memorize every detail of her face. “I’m his son, Belle. His blood runs through my veins. I’ve had that night in my head for so long. It’s been a constant reminder of what he was capable of, what I might be capable of. All my life I’ve feared becoming him, and in the end, I think I did anyway.”

“No,” Belle cried. The vehemence with which the word left her mouth surprised her perhaps even more than it did him. She stopped, and then tried again, softer this time, but just as impassioned. “You are not him. Not even close.”

“I hurt you,” he said. That was all, but she knew enough now to be able to hear all the words he didn’t say. I hurt you like my father hurt my mother. I took you away from everything you knew, trapped you here with me, thousands of miles from home. I made you my wife for my own selfish purposes without once stopping to think how it would affect you, without ever considering your thoughts and your feelings.

“You did,” she acknowledged. “But in the end, I think no worse than I hurt you. And I’ve forgiven you. Honestly, just the fact that you even acknowledge that, that you even understand it, already makes you ten times the man he was. And I know you would never lay a hand on me, Adam.”

His fingers traced the outline of her lips, so gently, so tenderly that it brought tears to her eyes. “No, never,” he agreed.

“You haven’t taken anything from me. Don’t you see? You’ve only given me things. You’ve shown me a whole world I never knew existed.” She could see from the bemused expression on his face that he didn’t quite believe her. “Shall I explain?”

“No,” he agreed. “Please do.”

She lay back down beside him, dropping a kiss on his mouth as she went. “My mother died when I was just a baby. I’ve told you that before. What I haven’t told you is that she was murdered. She was shot to death in a convenience store robbery. It broke my father. Just about shattered him really, if you can picture that.”

Adam was afraid he could picture it all too easily. He had a sneaking, profoundly uncomfortable suspicion that if something like that happened to Belle, he’d find himself in much the same boat. God forbid he’d ever have to find out. He tightened his arm around her protectively and felt her relax into him, as easy as breathing. He didn’t think he would ever grow used to that feeling of absolute trust,
knew he would never even come close to deserving it. After a moment, she went on.

“My parents were both native Chicagoans, and that’s where I was born too. Dad loved that city, but after Mom died, he couldn’t stand to be there anymore. That’s why we moved to Pleasantville. It became something of an obsession for him, actually, keeping me safe. And I get it, I really do. He’d already lost one of the people he loved most in this world, and he was desperate not to lose the other. But, oh Adam, you can’t imagine what it was like. The horrible, suffocating claustrophobia. The terrible feeling that no one understood me but my own father. Sometimes, in my more desperate moments, I thought I would die there, and wouldn’t that be a waste, to die with so many things left undone.”

“Like what?” Adam could not resist asking.

“So many places I’d never been, mostly.” Her voice grew quiet, and she was thankful that the darkness hid her blush. “That and the fact that I’d never truly been in love, that I’d never had someone truly be in love with me.”

“Not Neal?”

She made a noise of deep derision. “No, not even close. I knew even then that that wasn’t what love was supposed to feel like.”

“Even then?” he said, pouncing on her words. “Do you mean to imply you know more about it now?” There was a startled, embarrassed silence. “Forgive me,” he said hurriedly. “You don’t have to answer that, of course. But I can’t help but observe that you did get out of that town, and you did it all on your own. Your move to New York had nothing to do with me.”

She laughed softly. “No, it most certainly did not. But in a lot of ways, New York was a disappointment. I didn’t live like you did. All I ever really did was wake up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, and go to sleep. Rinse and repeat ad infinitum. Imagine that, me in the greatest city in the world, still trapped in my own little bubble.” She turned her head a little to look up at him. “And then you said to me, ‘Belle, I need you to marry me.’ And it turned out that you—this—were the adventure I’d been waiting for my whole life.”

“Me?” he said in amazed disbelief.

“Yes, you. There’s so much I’ve seen and done now that I couldn’t have even imagined when I agreed to your terms. London and Yorkshire, not one but two beautiful old houses, a library I could get lost in for days. Horses and diamonds and good conversation.” A wicked smile curved along the edges of her lips. “The kind of conversation you don’t even need words for.”

He smiled too and kissed her lightly on the lips. “Ah, yes, I see what you mean. I will confess to having a certain fondness for that kind of conversation myself.”

“Good,” she said, almost grinning now. Then her tone changed. “Seriously, though, Adam, out of all the things you’ve given me, the one I cherish the most is the conversation. I feel as if we can say practically anything to each other, and never think the other person is being stupid, or boring, or strange. Is that as astounding to you as it is to me? I’ve never felt that with another person before in my life. I never in a million years thought I’d feel it with you.” She lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. “And yet here we are. The universe sure is weird, huh?”

For a long moment, Adam could not answer her. His thoughts were in such a tumult that it was impossible to speak. She was right, of course, just as she always was. Once they had bothered to actually talk to each other, the rest had been shockingly, stunningly easy. Their minds seemed to
merge and mingle, so that thoughts ran seamlessly back and forth between their two selves with hardly any effort at all. Except, perhaps, for the most important thought of all. *I think I might be in love with you.* Part of him ached to say it, but he just couldn’t. Not yet, and maybe not ever. He had so little experience with love. Perhaps that was why he had resorted to giving her things. Things he understood, but the heart, not so much. “I think asking you to marry me was the greatest thing I’ve ever done,” he said finally.

“Well,” said Belle, honest to a fault, “you didn’t so much ask as tell. You have a bit of an autocratic streak, if you didn’t know.”

He laughed. It was amazing, he thought, how easily he laughed when he was with her. “Because I had faith in my own impeccable judgement,” he replied. “And you have to admit, I was right. I can’t imagine being here with anyone but you.”

“No,” she replied, perfectly serious this time. “Neither can I.”

They kissed, and then he said, “You said there were so many places you’ve never been. Where would you like to go most?”

She considered this. “Oh God,” she murmured, “I don’t know. How could I ever pick just one?”

“Well, give it some thought,” he ordered, “and let me know.”

She looked up at him, brows drawn together in confusion. “Why?”

“Because, dearest, I have to know where I’m going to take you once we’re free to move about the world again.”

She tried to sit up so that she could see his face more clearly, but his strong arm held her tucked against his side, right where she belonged. “Really?” she asked.

“Of course.” He chuckled. “We still have to find somewhere for you to wear that diamond necklace.”

“Sometimes I can’t even believe that you’re real,” she murmured. “That this is real. I’m so afraid I’ll wake up one day and find out it’s all been a dream.”

“Trust me, sweetheart,” he assured her, his hand sliding comfortably back and forth across her shoulder. “Nothing has ever been more real than this.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: "Think of the one thing you've always wanted, find it in your mind's eye, and feel it in your heart." Reactions appreciated, as always.

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