Me and Mine

by wandering_gypsy_feet

Summary

Modern Day AU. RMS Gold is a wealthy man, known in the city of New York for his deals and ruthlessness. Crippled and in pain, he doesn't believe in New Age nonsense and scoffs at yoga. This is, until he meets the beautiful Belle French, who carries dark secrets behind her lovely smile. Rumbelle, Snowing, Red Slippers, etc. Will be rated M for later chapters.
AN: Title after the Brothers Bright song, which I feel is a very Mr. Gold song. Written in response to the wonderful season 6 finale, which made me cry all the tears.

Mr. Gold is in a terrible mood. His personal physician, Dr. Whale, is dithering in the corner, sprouting off nonsense. He wants the cold, harsh truth. He wants answers and solutions. But Whale is blabbering on and on and his patience is wearing thin, so he snaps his fingers.

"The pain." He says, through gritted teeth. "It's getting worse. You're my doctor. Tell me what to do."

"Mr. Gold." Whale sounds nervous, hands trembling. "Unless you're willing to try opiates, this is all I have for you."

"I shan't." His brogue thickens as he recalls the darkest days of his life. "No drugs, you know this."

"If the pain is getting worse, Mr. Gold, I cannot do anything if you don't let me prescribe you something." He's begging now and Gold grabs his cane, resisting the urge to swing at Whale's head.

"Then you're useless to me." He spits, heading for the door. "And I'll be taking my services elsewhere."

"Wait!" Whale cries, as Gold's hand hovers over the doorknob, trying to call him back just as he'd thought he would. "There might be… Something. I don't know if you're willing to try it."

"Is it drugs?" Gold demands coldly, not bothering to turn.

"No. Not drugs."

"Then tell me."

"There's a physical therapist." Whale says haltingly, unsure that this won't also get him a blow to the head. "She was one of the hospital's best. She left and opened a yoga studio, just a couple blocks from your office. She's very New Age but she's properly trained. She's young and gorgeous-" Gold snorts. Of course Whale knows every pretty young girl in the city, gold band on his hand be damned.

"And she works."

"You want me…" Gold says slowly, rounding on Whale like he's prey. "To go sit in some yoga class with a bunch of pot smoking millennial hipsters to relieve the pain in my knee?"

"You can do it privately." Whale is scrambling now, trying his hardest to backtrack. "It was just a suggestion, if you need something else, I can-" He falls silent when Gold sticks his hand out.

"Give me her number." He says quietly and Whale stares at his hand, utterly bewildered.

"What?"

"Her number. Hand it over, if you can so willingly part with it." Gold's voice drips with distaste. Whale snatches a business card from his desk and hands it to him. Gold looks down and registers the bright colors, the golden lotus flower, and a name.
"Mr. Gold, sir, if there's anything else..." Whale trails off as Gold leaves his office, cane tapping on the tiled floor. He tucks the card in the breast pocket of his suit and walks out of the hospital, waiting for his car. The days are getting brisk and soon the leaves will change. He'd appreciate fall in Manhattan more if the cooling weather didn't send stabbing pains into his knee. During the ride to his office, he gently massages the joint, hoping that will do him some good.

He walks into the office at a fast pace, nodding to his doorman. When he's in the elevator, heading to the top floor, he allows himself to sag, just slightly, against the wall. Today will not be a day for venturing out around the city. When the doors open however, he is tall and proud once more.

"Good morning Mr. Gold." His assistant, Mary Margaret, is already waiting for his with her ever-cheerful smile. He'd been apathetic to her when he'd first hired her on a whim to take calls, but after she'd weathered a scandal of stepping out with freshly divorced David Nolan, his estimation of her had risen. She'd never once lost her sunny disposition and had shown him a steel backbone that he found himself amused by.

"Ms. Blanchard."

"Did your appointment go well this morning?" She enquires, handing him a sheaf of papers as he goes to sit behind his large mahogany desk.

"Dr. Whale is an incompetent idiot who only made it through medical school by sharing the last name of his far brighter father."

"So not well." Mary Margaret doesn't skip a beat. "I'll bring you a warm compress for your knee when your coffee arrives." Before he can protest she breezes out, responding to the shrill call of the phone. He sighs, stretches his leg out, allows himself to admit that yes, a compress would be nice, before sorting through the papers on his desk.

He is the king of the castle here, atop his tower, looking out over the New York skyline. He'd fought and clawed his way here to the top, the owner of half the buildings in the city over the last decade. He had once been one of the many people in the floors below, staying on their level. He'd risen above by being a ruthless and shrewd businessman, able to cut a deal with ease. He'd started small, a couple properties here and there. Then he'd grown his empire until half the island of Manhattan was owned, operated, or leased by Gold Estates. His pride and joy, his business.

He's halfway through the cup of coffee Mary Margaret has brought him, adjusting the compress, when he gets his first call of the morning. He answers it with a bellow, yelling at the owner of some apartment complex that if the rent is due, the rent is due, and there isn't a force in the world that will convince him to change his mind. He slams his phone down and in response, his assistant simply places a cinnamon muffin on his desk.

He's hardly made it through the first stack of papers when she drops a second one off, smiling easily as she does, without fear. He knows how he's talked about, outside the domain of the office. He's the beast out there, a snarling man who denies vacation time and holidays. He doesn't mind it. Fear is a better motivator than love, he's found out over the years.

"Mary Margaret!" He yells, when his assistant doesn't respond to his high priority emails.

"Sir." She pops her head around the door, a polite but firm smile on her face. "I am leaving for lunch. Would you like me to order something to be delivered for you or will you be dining out?"
"Who in the blazes are you going to lunch with?" He thunders, slamming his fist. "I need you here!"

"David is taking me to lunch." She doesn't budge and her smile doesn't slip. "I would be happy to order you something. Otherwise I will be leaving."

"Order me something then, you infernal woman." He says, but it's without the bite he had before.

"Of course sir." She bobs her head and ducks back out. He flinches as his knee twinges. For a brief second, his hands shake and ache for something that could take it all away. Then he reaches inside his suit pocket and pulls out the card Whale had given him, swallowing his pride and dialing the number.

"Shanti Yoga, this is Belle, how can I help you?" Her voice is sweet, with an accent he can't quite place yet. She has the same everlasting cheerful tone as his assistant and for a second, he debates hanging up.

"Ms. French. This is RMS Gold. My physician, Dr. Whale put me in contact with you." He says stiffly, not sure now what his plan is.

"Yes, Mr. Gold! Dr. Whale informed me you might be calling." She has an uncanny knack for making him feel like he can sense that she's beaming, even just through the phone. "He gave me a couple details about your case."

"And what did he tell you?" He demands through clenched teeth. He's a private man and if Whale told her anything out of line, he'd have the man's credentials ripped from him so fast his head would spin.

"Just that you were looking for some therapy for an old injury. He suggested that I take a personal interest in your case." He resists the insane urge to smile at that. Whale had probably begged her to do something, anything to make his most wealthy patient quit threatening to sue him. "I would be happy to meet with you to discuss things personally."

"Would you?" He asks, tapping his fingers idly on his desk.

"Of course. I like to get to know everyone that walks through the doors here. My studio hours are located online, if there's a time that fits for you. Or we can arrange a meeting, I can-"

"How about lunch?" The words are off his lips before he can catch them and he curses internally. Idiot mistake.

"Right now?" There's a brief moment of clicking, like nails on a keyboard. "Sure. I'm free until a class at 2:30. Where would you like to meet?"

"Your choice, dearie." He says, already regretting what he's done.

"Well there's a wonderful little hole in the wall a couple blocks from me. Are you in any way adverse to sushi?" She asks him and again, the words fly out before he can stop them.

"Not at all. Give me the name of the place and I'll meet you there."

"Oh, wonderful!" She sounds surprised but gives him the name and hangs up. Gritting his teeth, having given his word and now obligated to make good on it, he stands and grabs his cane.

"Sir, I ordered you your favorite-" Mary Margaret says, as he sweeps out.
"Cancel it." He barks and she's taken aback. "I've decided to go out for lunch today Ms. Blanchard."

"Well, alright." She dashes after him to catch the elevator, fingers tapping her phone rapidly, coat flying behind her. "I'll call your car right now, where are you planning to go?"

"To get sushi." He says tightly and she nearly topples over.

"I had no idea you liked sushi." She says, recovering quickly. "I'll be sure to make a note of that, if in the future you'd like reservations."

"Do that." He doesn't bother to correct her and they fall quiet, until the doors open and he strides across the foyer, Mary Margaret's heels clicking along quickly behind him.

"Text me if you need anything." Mary Margaret says, as the driver opens the door for him.

"I will." He says shortly. "And Mary Margaret?" She glances at him, having been ready to hail a cab. "Tell Mr. Nolan hello."

"I will, sir." She says, smiling before the door slams shut. The entire ride, his hands are sweaty for no apparent reason and he fiddles with his cane, an old bad habit. When they finally arrive at the place, he's worked himself into a foul mood and he slams the door, marching inside.

"I'm here to meet a Belle French." He snaps at the longhaired youth who's positioned at the front door.

"Right this way, sir." He's unfazed by Gold's scowl, leading him to a back, secluded corner. "Here she is."

Belle French rises from the booth, turning and smiling at him. For a second, he's quite forgotten how to breathe. She's short, having to look up to him, something he's rather unused to. Her auburn hair is pulled away from her face in a neat braid, but the baby hairs that line her forehead are curly. She's not wearing a drop of makeup, not even mascara to line her bright, ocean blue eyes. She's wearing a wrap like a ballet dancer might, with brightly colored leggings and little boots. Her lips are turned up in a knowing smile and before he can blink, she has his hands in hers with a large smile.

"Mr. Gold, it's nice to meet you. I'm so glad you could see me. Please, sit." She ushers him into the booth before turning to the waiting woman. "We'll have two waters please."

"I presume you to be Miss French?" He says dryly, once his throat unsticks.

"That I am." He was right to assume over the phone that she's constantly smiling. It's a genuine, wide smile, not the fake, forced cunning ones he sees all day. "I have to admit, I was a little surprised but delighted that you wanted to meet for lunch so soon."

"No sense in waiting." He says shortly, not wanting to explain himself.

"This is true." She doesn't seem put off, but more so amused. "So, while we wait for food, would you like to talk about your needs?"

"My needs." For some reason, his mouth has gone dry again and he snatches the water their waitress has brought them. "What do you think my needs are, Miss French?"

"Could we have an order of edamame?" Belle asks the hovering woman politely. "I think we'll be ready to order then."
"Of course." The waitress smiles warmly and he wonders idly if Belle is well known here that it's a personal thing or if she is simply so warm and inviting to everyone, they feel like a close friends after just moments.

"Sorry if you feel I'm being bossy." She apologizes as he opens a menu, unsure of even where to start. "But this is my favorite place to eat."

"What do you recommend then?" He asks, hoping to avoid looking foolish by having no clue what to order.

"Well, I always get the JB roll." Her eyes light up and she leans across the table, pointing to it on the menu. "I love salmon and if you don't like cold sushi, it's delicious. But I also like the samurai roll, and the blue sun roll is amazing too. It all depends. Do you like tuna or eel or veggies?"

"You've done such a good job ordering so far, dearie." He closes his menu in an attempt to look haughty and hide his ignorance. "Don't let me snap your streak now."

"Well alright then." Her eyes twinkle mischievously. "You'll just have to trust me then."

"It seems so." He says jerkily and she consults the menu for a moment longer before closing it with a smile.

"Now where were we?" She muses, pursing her lips and he chances a glance at them, noticing the fullness. "Oh, yes. I was about to discuss your needs."

"Yes, that was where." His stomach is in all forms of knots, twisting as she thoughtfully sucks her straw.

"You, Mr. Gold, seem like a man with many needs." He clenches his cane beneath the table and wishes for an impassive expression. "You must be a man of patience to deal with the bumbling oaf that is Dr. Whale, but not too much patience, if the amount of fear in his tone is anything to go off of." He watches her in amazement. She's got him pegged after only minutes, and she knows it. She's grinning, a smirk in the corners.

"Observant." He says, with a touch of wariness and a touch of admiration. He appreciates it when someone can keep up with him, a rare occurrence. She shrugs, not denying it.

"Old injury. Left knee." She says and his leg twitches in response. "It's flaring up in the cold, isn't it? I have just two questions, Mr. Gold and I hope you will answer them, though I truly understand if you don't." She leans forward and her blue eyes take him in, finding himself swimming in the depths.

"Yes, dearie?"

"How did you come about this injury?" It's quiet, without judgment, but he still tenses all the same. She doesn't take the question back but she doesn't push, simply watching him quietly.

"That's a long story." He responds, after a long pause.

"Most are." She says simply. "Perhaps it's one to be told a different time." She straightens up, picking up her straw wrapper and folding it.

"What is the second question?" He asks, curious despite himself.

"You're a wealthy man, Mr. Gold." She states it factually, without hatred or greed. "Surely you can afford the best medications there are. With an injury like this, chronic, surely Dr. Whale has tried to
recommend a regimen of painkillers. Since you sit before me with clenched teeth and a strong grip on that cane, I know you're not taking a one. Why?"

"No." He says and he's even surprised at how harsh it sounds. Belle simply pauses in her folding, and then resumes.

"I didn't mean to pry. Most come to my services because they dislike drugs or seek natural treatment. I simply wanted to feel out which you were." She finishes folding the wrapper and then, with a cheeky grin not befitting the tense mood, flicks it across the aisle, watching as it lands on the plate of an older couple already looking sour.

"Miss French." He admonishes before he can help himself.

"I'll give you a dollar if you can make it on his food." She says lowly and he gapes at her. She raises an eyebrow in an unspoken challenge, so he snatches the wrapper and begins to fold it. Then, with ease, he flicks the paper in a soaring arch. It lands perfectly in the soy sauce dish.

"And that is how it's done." He says smugly and she claps quietly.

"You get more impressive by the minute Mr. Gold." She comments and he refuses to let himself be flattered.

"Glad to know my education, vast wealth, business smarts, or years of experience are not what impresses you Ms. French, but my ability to flick garbage." He says dryly.

"It's far more interesting." She responds teasingly, then beams when their waitress returns with a small bowl of what look like pea pods covered in salt. "Thank you Maggie!" So it was familiarity then. "Could we get a JB roll, half a California roll, and the Unagi roll?"

"Of course." Maggie jots it down then smiles at them. "You yell if you need anything."

"Sure." Belle grins as she walks away, and then grabs a pea pod. "Have some." She encourages him and he stays still, waiting to see what she does. He nearly falls off his seat when she pops the pea pod in her mouth and sucks, eyes closing for just a moment before discarding the empty shell on a napkin. "Really, please have some! I got it to share."

"If you insist." He takes a small one, feeling slightly unrefined as he puts it in his mouth. It's salty and buttery in the best possible way, and when the pods slip from the shell, they taste fresh. He can't imagine that he looks as well as Belle when he eats it, but it's good all the same.

"Do you like it?" She's watching him with a little smile.

"Yes, it's rather… Different. But good." He says slowly.

"Good." She says happily, taking another. "They're my favorite snack ever, plus they're salty enough that I stop craving chips."

"I can imagine as a yoga instructor, you are very health orientated." He guesses, watching her reaction, feeling like he deserves to know some things about her since she's figured him out.

"Of course." She smiles, open and inviting. "As a kid, I was kind of chubby. My mom died young, so it was just my dad to raise me. A lot of pizza and mac and cheese. Edamame isn't as delicious as Pringles, but it's a lot easier to keep down in a yoga class."

"I am so sorry about your mother." He says honestly, stunned that she's opened up to him in a matter
of minutes. She shrugs.

"It was a long time ago. Besides, I know she'd be proud of me if she was here." Her smile has slipped just slightly and he sees the sadness that darkens her eyes to a stormy blue.

"By opening your own studio?" He asks, trying to turn the conversation back to the positive.

"No, though I'm sure she'd be amused by the idea." Belle's smile returns and he finds himself glad. "She was the one who pushed me towards medicine. She was always encouraging me to read and write and learn. The day I graduated, I knew she was looking down in joy."

"Then why did you leave the hospital?" He asks curiously and waits for her to recoil and tell him that it's none of his business. Instead, she makes a funny face and chuckles.

"Would you believe me if I said I hated it? Good money, I know. Comfortable apartment, nice car, new clothes, all that stuff. But it was…" She plays with her straw. "It was boring. I hated feeling like I was this robot, another cog in the big hospital machine. So I decided that I would do something that I love. I'd taken up yoga in high school, after I couldn't dance anymore, and yoga and therapy went hand in hand. Now I wake up every day and I love what I do." She gives him a brilliant smile.

"Well," He pronounces, a little lamely, because how can he follow that? "I hope to benefit from what you do Miss French, but I have to warn you, my mobility may be limited."

"Oh, that's not an issue." She waves a hand. "I have a plan."

"Pray, tell me." He leans forward and she follows his lead, grinning, inches from him. He gets a whiff of something earthy, like sandalwood, mixed with cinnamon. It's a heady combination.

"Does that mean you intend to engage my services, Mr. Gold?" She asks playfully and he firmly stops his mind from wandering anywhere it shouldn't go.

"If you're more effective than the idiot Dr. Whale, you will find yourself handsomely rewarded Ms. French." He says lowly and she throws her head back, laughing. He finds himself missing her closeness. She's like a breath of fresh air or a little personal sun.

"That shouldn't be difficult." She looks amused, holding her hands in front of her. "Well, depending on the depth of your pain, I think we should begin with three sessions a week. I have time Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday in my schedule for private sessions. They will include gentle, restorative yoga, therapy, and a massage."

"Well." He's looking at her in surprise, because he's not sure what to say. "Is there anything else I should be prepared for? Chakra cleansing? Crystal healing? Hot stones?"

"You think I'm a sham." She says, a little coolly and he winces at his choice of words and tone.

"No, that's not it. It's just... As you notice, I'm not young." He struggles to pick his words. "And I'm not exactly... Comfortable with this."

"I get that." She's forgiven him already, nodding along. "I understand. But I just want you to have an open mind about all this. If it turns out to not work at all and I'm an utter failure, well then I'm sure you'll just jack up my rent." He chokes on his water and she grins, delighted in the fact of surprising him.

"So you know who I am?" He says, trying to stop himself from gasping and look like an oaf.
"Of course." She says easily, offering him the last edamame. He waves it off, eyes watering. "Everyone knows about you, the real estate mogul of the whole island. I guessed from the amount of panic in Dr. Whale's voice that you were fairly important and when I heard your name, well, it's not hard to put 2 and 2 together, you know."

"Smart girl." He says approvingly. "Well, since you know, I'm sure you'll understand that I require absolutely privacy. Our sessions are to remain completely private. If word leaks to the press, I will assume it was you and our parting will be less than pleasant. I won't have those tabloid vultures knowing my business, not if you think it will line your pockets or pay off a student loan."

"You know, I did go to medical school." She says mildly. "I do know the ins and outs of patient confidentiality. I assure you, your privacy is of utmost importance to me. I will not betray you." Her words are passionate and he's quite glad that Maggie arrives to clear their table before sushi so he doesn't have to say anything in response.

Belle was right, he finds himself loving the sushi. She cajoles him into trying hers, with eel, and they split the California roll. While they eat, they keep polite conversation, talking mostly about Belle's years at the hospital. They've both got enough stories of Dr. Whale's incompetence to last the whole lunch. He finds himself, for the first time in what must be ages, smiling and laughing. He may even be flirting, but it's been so long, he's not sure.

"I'll take the check." He says, when Maggie circles back to them at the sight of their empty plates.

"Oh, not necessary." Belle insists, grabbing her purse. "It was my idea to eat here, I can pay."

"I won't hear of it." He brushes her hand away and hands Maggie a credit card. "Consider it a thank you, for opening my eyes to this place." Reluctantly, she sets her purse back down.

"Well, thank you." She says and he inclines his head graciously. While they wait for Maggie to return, he realizes that he doesn't quite want the lunch to end. So when he signs the receipt and leaves Maggie a tip, he manages to ask,

"I have a car waiting. Would you care for a ride back to your studio?"

"Oh no." She smiles widely. "I couldn't inconvenience you like that. I'm sure you have important things to get back to."

"Not at all." He lies, as his phone buzzes in his front pocket. Likely Mary Margaret is wondering if he's dropped dead. Taking lunch and not answering his phone, she probably thinks he's being held against his will or is suffering a mental break. "Besides, if I am going to be spending some significant time there, I'd like to see the facilities."

"Oh." This surprises her and then she smiles. "Well then, how could I say no? A ride would be lovely." She loops her arm with the arm not holding his cane. He's stunned, but says nothing. His driver is waiting, but he's sure to open the door for her, before limping to the other side. She gives the driver the address of the studio and Whale hadn't been exaggerating— it really is mere blocks from his office. And she had been correct— it is one of the properties he owns.

"I will be back out shortly." He instructs his driver, Jefferson, who nods and Belle hops out, smiling as she leads him up an elevator and on one of the higher floors, shows him the space.

"It's small, but it's mine." She says proudly. He looks around, impressed, seeing the open studio with large windows and shiny wooden floors. There's a smell of jasmine in the air and a pretty white desk at the front. He imagines that Belle is usually perched there, beaming at people who enter.
"It is quite lovely." He agrees.

"There's a massage room in the back, and I can heat the studio to 90 degrees fairly easily." She's rambling now, just a little bit. "I can close the shades, that offers a degree of privacy, and as I said, everything will be private, so…"

"Ms. French." He cuts her off gently. "It's quite perfect. You said Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays?"

"Yes." She's a little flustered now, going behind the desk to open a sleek, silver Mac laptop. "Yes. I have times in the morning, I think that would work best, except for Sunday evenings."

"I do work." He reminds her and she looks up at him, completely disregarding the warning tone in his voice.

"Obviously. I'm simply saying that the times I'm suggesting have an hour gap on either side of them. That way no one will be arriving or leaving from a class and chance seeing you." She explains placidly. "As of now, I have two other teachers with their own class times. I can change class times to accommodate your schedule, but I would prefer not to."

"No, that will not do." He feels a little abashed. Of course she was thinking about his strict privacy demands.

"Good. Then I will schedule an hour-long private session at 6 am on Tuesday and Thursday. Sundays work better to do night, say 8 pm?" She offers and he doesn't bother to consult his calendar.

"Here is the number of my assistant, Ms. Blanchard. Please send her appointments. She will coordinate it within my schedule." He instructs, handing her a card. She nods, setting it on her computer.

"Then I will see you tomorrow morning." Se says brightly and he swallows deeply, nodding.

"Yes, at 6 am sharp."

"I'll walk you down." She offers and he waves a hand.

"Quite unnecessary. I think I can see myself out." He hovers awkwardly at the door, not sure of how to walk away from this. "I look forward to tomorrow, and thank you agreeing to take my case."

"Thank you for lunch." She beams, settling herself behind the computer. "It was a real treat. See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Ms. French." He nods and bows out. As he heads for the elevator, he hardly notices his knee. His phone however will not be ignored and as he punches the button for the lobby, he pulls it out. As he had assumed, Mary Margaret is in a tizzy, bewildered as to where he is.

"Sir." She answers his phone in relief. "I was wondering if I had missed something. Is everything alright?"

"Quite." He walks outside and to his waiting car. "I was simply having lunch. You will receive appointments for me shortly from a Ms. French; I will need you to enter them in my schedule. They are my first priority. Move whatever else you need, but I will be attending them, is that clear?"

"Of course." She sounds a little stunned. "Will you be coming back to the office this afternoon?"
"Of course I am, don't ask stupid questions."

"Yes sir."

AN: First OUAT story. Updates will likely be Monday night. Please leave me reviews, I would love to hear thoughts on this!
Sessions

He hardly sleeps the night before, tossing about fretfully in his sheets. He blames it on his room being too hot, on the pain in his knee, on creaking pipes and a dripping sink somewhere in the penthouse. He refuses to let his mind settle on the fact that a one Belle French makes him nervous.

He arrives to the yoga studio at 5:50 sharp, wearing a nice suit, ill at ease. For a long moment, when he tries the door and finds it locked, he fears that she has forgotten him or decided to go back on her decision. Then she bounces into view, grinning widely.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Gold." She ushers him in. "I usually keep the door locked as long as possible. I have a fear that someone is going to force their way in. I'm here alone and sometimes I get just a little scared." She divulges.

"No worries, dearie." He says, while making a mental note to find a way to beef up security.

"Do you have anything to change into?" She asks, pulling her hair up into a thick ponytail.

"I wasn't sure what would be the appropriate attire." He says dryly. She's wearing more colorful leggings, these a purple mosaic pattern, with a cowl neck sweater in a heather grey. He's certain he has nothing like that in his closet. Belle's mouth twitches up into a smile.

"I should think not. No worries, this happens more than you would think. I have clothes for it." She disappears into a little closet, emerging with grey shorts and a black tee shirt. "Bathrooms are in the back, you can change there. The studio is ready. Oh, but you'll need to remove your shoes."

"My shoes?" He asks, glancing at his shining leather shoes.

"Yes." Belle is clearly amused. "I ask it of everyone. No shoes beyond my desk. Please, Mr. Gold."

"I am uncertain why I need to." He's pushing back, just slightly, but Belle remains firm and gracious.

"Shoes off, please. Go change and we'll begin our session promptly. I assume you're a punctual man." She knows she's got him there, because he grumbles and complains, but goes. He slips out of his neat suit, folding it crisply so there won't be any wrinkles in it. The fabric of Belle's clothes feels strange, like silk but different. He feels half naked, with his mangled knee on full display, all twisted flesh and puckered scars. He limps back out; halfway sure of telling Belle he's changed his mind.

"Miss French, I think." He begins, then stops in his tracks. She's pulled the sweater off and underneath is a tank top, with half the back cut out in elaborate patterns. She's got creamy skin and curves and he has to stop his eyes from roving to inappropriate places.

"I think we're ready." She's unrelentingly cheerful, opening the door to the studio. He limps in, taking in the shuttered windows and the wave of heat that rolls over him. A chair is in the middle of the room, alongside two mats. She's got several items beside the mats.

"Do I—" He gestures to the chair unsurely and she nods encouragingly, guiding him there. Once he's lowered himself in, she sets his cane up in the front before returning to him.

"How's the temperature? I prefer it to be warm. A good sweat always starts my day off right." She tells him and he scolds himself inwardly for thinking of all the ways they could work up a sweat in the morning.
"It's fine, I too prefer to be warm." He says, shifting around uncomfortably before trying to still himself.

"Great." Belle's face splits into a smile. "Then let's begin, shall we?" She picks a little bottle from her pile of things and gently taps two drops on her wrists. It's the same scent as yesterday, but now it's stronger and he wishes he could consume the bottle. She takes his hands, rubbing her wrists onto his, until some of the oil has transferred to him. He can't breathe, just watching. Once that's done, she takes a deep breath and instructs him to close him eyes.

He's not 100% sure that it isn't complete nonsense. She makes him twist, breathing deeply, as her hands guide him to sit up taller, tilt one way and then the other. He doesn't mind her gentle teasing about his inflexibility- it means that she'll put her hands on him to correct it. Before long, he's sweating, but so is Belle, glistening as she directs him.

"What now, dearie?" He asks, when she finally allows for him to take a break for water.

"Now we'll go on our mats." She explains, grabbing pillows and blankets, arranging them. "I'm going to show you a couple stretches you can do that will relieve some pain and do some therapy. Then we'll end on a massage. You'll have plenty of time to shower and be to the office by 8." She promises and he gingerly lowers himself off the chair to the floor, admitting that his back feels better than it has in years. Belle helps him sit.

"This better not be the same program Dr. Whale tries to force onto me, visit after visit." He warns and her laugh is twinkling.

"I thought beginning with you in a chair would be difference enough." She says jokingly and he smiles.

"Oh yes dearie."

"Ok, now bend your knee like this…" The exercises are similar to what Whale has ordered in years past, but no one can compare to Belle, magically pulling and pushing him into stretches. He feels relaxed in a way he hasn't been for nearly 15 years.

"This is… Nice." He admits tentatively, his eyes closed as he lays in something called 'corpse pose', which had sounded sinister but amounts to lying on his back, like he's sleeping.

"Typically, you don't talk in savasana." Belle mummers and he falls silent, a little abashed. "But it's just us. I'm glad you've enjoyed it. Would you like to begin the massage now?"

"Yes." He sits up, his cane out of reach. Belle grabs it and helps him up with ease; not seeming bothered in the slightest.

"Then right this way." She leads him to the room she'd pointed out early and he lies down on a table, a little worried. No one has touched the scar tissue of his knee in years. Belle covers his eyes with a cool towel and he lets himself enjoy the faint scent of mint. He almost misses that she's massaging his thigh and knee, her touch gentle but firm. He nearly floats away in bliss, forgetting for a moment just who RMS Gold is.

"That was… Something else, Miss French." He mutters, when she wraps his knee in a warm towel.

"Leave it on for a couple minutes." She sounds breathy, near his left ear. "I'll be waiting outside whenever you're ready." There's a quiet noise as she sneaks out and for a long while he doesn't move, not ready to relinquish himself back to the real world. With a groan, he finally does, swinging his feet off the massage table and grabbing his cane.
"Ah." He puts weight on his bad knee, testing it. The pain doesn't seem as overwhelming as before, but he's not been miraculously cured either. He reflects that would be a shame, because then he would never have a reason to see Belle French again.

"Oh good. I was worried you'd fallen asleep." Belle is outside, organizing supplies, smiling as he emerges.

"Tempting, yes. But business does call." He reminds her and she nods in agreement. "I will be out shortly." He inches towards the bathroom and shower. She lets him go, engrossing himself in the stacking of mats. He rinses off in the shower, tossing his worn clothes in a hamper and making a note to give Mary Margaret the afternoon to go buy him more. He gets out of the shower, refreshed, toweling off and redressing himself in his suit. It feels odd.

"Look at that, right on time." Belle checks the clock when he exits, straightening his tie. "You were not kidding, Mr. Gold."

"I tend not to." He lowers himself onto the bench to pull his shoes back on. Belle sits atop her desk, legs folded, smiling.

"Mr. Gold, I hope you found this session beneficial. I really do think we've made a lot of progress today and I hope to see you back at it." She says quietly, as he ties his loafers.

"Miss French, I have made a commitment to attending these sessions. Unless there is something absolutely unavoidable, I will be here." He vows and that makes her grin, ducking her head.

"Wonderful. Have a good day then." She uncurls from the desk to open the door for him. As he walks past her, his throat constricts, so all he can do is tilt his head and walk away. He curses himself blue in the elevator, before arriving at the conclusion that even if he had said or done something, she is nothing more than his physical therapist. There must be young, strong, whole men that attend her yoga classes. She likely has a boyfriend. He is just an old cripple, a snarling beast who charges her too much for rent and doesn't bother to provide a doorman.

"Good morning sir." Mary Margaret greets him with a smile and cup of steaming hot Earl Grey. "I have moved everything around this morning to accommodate your appointment, I have the revised schedule on your desk."

"Thank you." He says shortly and she stops. He turns to her, a little frustrated that she is surely about to make some quip about his politeness or his manners. Instead, she's looking at him quizzically.

"Sir, forgive me for saying so, but do you smell like… Cinnamon?" She sniffs again and he realizes that he still smells, faintly, of Belle.

"From my appointment." He doesn't elaborate on the subject and Mary Margaret doesn't push it, leaving him to review his new schedule for the day. It's lunch before he has a break from the calls, meetings, and emails. Mary Margaret wisely gets him a favorite soup and sandwich combo, which he eats at his desk, reviewing contracts and documents. He doesn't notice until it's well into the afternoon that he hasn't had to rise and stretch his knee. Smiling, he does a couple of his chair stretches Belle had taught him.

"Mr. Gold, sir." Mary Margaret catches him as he goes to make his afternoon tea, apprehensive.

"Out with it." He orders, flipping between the green, chamomile, and fruity teas in the cabinet.

"Sir, your Tuesday morning appointments will delay your call with Ms. Mills." That's why she'd been treading lightly- Regina Mills is a real estate developer across the river, in New Jersey. Power
hungry and desperate to make it in the city, she'd apprenticed under him before her mother slept with someone to get her where she is today. She still comes to him for advice and to try to tempt him into offers, despite his repeated statements that he will never set foot in New Jersey as long as he is breathing.

"So?" He raised an eyebrow, deciding on green tea. Belle would approve of that. Mary Margaret flinches.

"Sir, I'm not sure she'll take kindly to you moving the call for... An appointment." She says carefully.

"I do not care if she takes it kindly or like a three year old being told to part with their favorite toy." He says smoothly, swirling his tea. "Because I will not be speaking to her. You will tell her, in no uncertain terms, that my private business is always more important that her half-baked schemes to turn New Jersey into the jewel of the US. And you will deal with the fallout and the temper tantrum, have I made myself clear dearie?"

"Yes." Mary Margaret looks like she's fighting back the desire to say something. "Very clear, sir."

"Wonderful." He heads back to his office with his tea. "There is only one thing in the world that I will miss these appointments for Ms. Blanchard, and I think you know what it is."

"Of course sir." Her face softens slightly. "Sir, can I ask, how is—" He feels no desire to answer and so it is without remorse that he lets his door close in her face. He's nearly done with tea when his phone rings. One look at caller id has him rolling his eyes, but he answers regardless.

"Regina."

"Tell me, what is more important than your business?" She doesn't bother with the preamble.
"Because the man I know would let the world around him burn down before declaring something more important than our work."

"My work," He is careful to emphasis the difference. "Will be here when I come in and out of the office, Regina. Can you say the same? If you'd like to rage that I do not rank your weekly bitching and pleading session very high on my priorities, I will have to tell you that I truly do not care."

"I do not bitch or plead." She sounds huffy. "Sometimes things move quickly, I need your input and time is of the essence."

"When things go through the proper channels, dearie, it usually slows it considerably." He remarks and he knows that has set her fuming, judging at how she falls silent.

"I hope your appointments are with a nice escort, dearie." She spits finally, mocking his accent. "Because you're an absolute bore when you're not getting laid." With that, she hangs up. He sets his phone down, shaking his head. At least Mary Margaret has gotten her revenge for him forcing her to call the evil witch. She'll screen his calls correctly now.

He's tired, as he heads out of the office. He's mentally calculating labor costs and permits when he gets in the elevator, noticing vaguely that Mary Margaret has gotten on with him.

"Sir." Her tone is clipped and so he leaves his train of thought with a sigh, in no mood to take grief for her having to deal with Regina.

"Ms. Blanchard, I would—"
"Where are these appointments?" She demands bluntly and he's blindsided, confused.

"These appointments?"

"Where were you?" She tries again and he frowns.

"You are my assistant, not my mother. You keep my schedule, you do not question it. Not my private life." He growls.

"I am your assistant." She agrees, not scared in the least. "And you are certainly entitled to privacy. But I am worried that you are regressing to a... Bad place. For my sake and to be able to sleep at night, I need to know that is not true. And for his sake, because I don't want him to worry over you any more than he already does. He frets, you know."

"I know." He avoids her eyes, because she is speaking a very painful truth he'd rather not face.

"So if you're painting in Central Park or doing a flash mob in Times Square or are larp-ing in Chinatown, I do not care. And I will not ask another question. But I need to know that you are not doing anything... Regretful." She chooses her words carefully, but she's not backing down.

"I am not doing any of the above activities." He almost smiles at the idea of him participating in any sort of flash mob. As they get out of the elevator and head across the lobby, she looks a little more at ease. "I am working on self improvement during these times." It's only a half lie.

"Well good." Mary Margaret manages a smile again. "I look forward to seeing where this goes then."

"Not to you getting a raise." He warns and she simply wiggles her eyebrows before greeting a strapping young man outside. "Mr. Nolan." He sticks his hand out, as Mary Margaret grins up at her lover.

"Mr. Gold." David Nolan has an easy smile and kind eyes, the kind of boy that spent college drinking on a couch in front of his frat house. He doesn't begrudge him for this however; it seems to make Mary Margaret happy and he'd never liked the shrew from before, Abby. "How are you?"

"Quite well." He glances around for his car. "Yourself?"

"Good." He smiles down at Mary Margaret. "We're about to head to dinner. Celebrating our anniversary."

"How lovely." Gold doesn't bother to point out that his divorce hasn't been finalized for a year. "Enjoy yourselves."

"See you tomorrow sir!" Mary Margaret calls, getting into a cab. He raises one finger in response before climbing into the waiting car. He wants his TV, couch, and a large glass of scotch. Perhaps he'll even do those exercises Belle had given him. The thought makes him smile.

Friday seems to drag by and he can't explain why. He barks out orders at a rapid pace, but midway through the afternoon, as he's waiting for his oolong tea to cool, he finds himself with an empty inbox and a clear desk. He taps his fingers, agitated, fiddling with his cane.

"Mary Margaret!" He yells and she walks in, one eyebrow raised. "What else is there to be done?"
"Well sir, these documents need reviewing." She points to a growing pile that he's been putting off. He grunts, so she tries again. "There's a proposal for Ms. Mills if you'd like to review it."

"I'd rather bungee jump from the Brooklyn Bridge." He grumbles and that makes her grin. "Anything else."

"Well, you could always sort through complaints and berate people for not handling them in the correct fashion, I know that's a personal favorite pastime for you." She says brightly and he remembers this sass, in the face of his moods, is why he had kept her.

"Yes, I think I would quite like that." He decides.

"Or you could call him." She doesn't hand him the papers in her arms. She's watching him with a careful expression and he grits his teeth, hands curling into fists despite himself.

"He'll be in class."

"Class gets out at 2:30 on Friday's. He doesn't have soccer—"

"Football."

"Practice until 4 today. He'll be back in his room now. He deserves a call. You haven't spoken since you sent him back." Her tone is a little scolding, a little pleading, and a little annoyed.

"He knows why." His teeth are gritted. "He gets along just fine without me Ms. Blanchard, you know this."

"Sure." She agrees easily. "But he shouldn't have to." With that, she spins out of the room. "Oh, and you could leave early like a normal human being!"

"I will fire you." He fires back and she just shuts the door. Grumbling, cursing her for her ways, he spends the next ten minutes sipping his tea and staring down his phone. He jumps when it rings and for a heart stopping moment, thinks that it could be him. But it is just Whale.

"Mr. Gold."

"Dr. Whale."

"How are you feeling today? I understand you had your first appointment with Miss French." He sounds nervous, likely waiting for Gold to snap at him and threaten to sue once again.

"It was lovely."

"Lovely?" Whale sounds stunned. "Oh."

"I quite enjoyed it. Miss French's studio is much more preferable to your office." He says, enjoying making Whale squirm.

"Well I am sure." Whale attempts to sound calm. "I am sure she is also more preferable than myself."

"Dr. Whale." He says it through gritted teeth, recalling the way Belle had talked about him at lunch, making faces. "Have you had a relationship with Miss French at any point?"

"What? No. I'm married!" Whale blunders.

"Honesty Whale. Have you, or have you not laid a hand on Belle French?" He questions and Whale
hears it in his voice that if he answers untruthfully, there'll be hell to pay.

"No." He says quietly.

"And do you understand that if you ever do, if you ever so much as breathe in the direction of Miss French in a manner that she does not want, I will personally make sure that your practice ends, you marriage ends, and your ability to talk to any female in the city of Manhattan ends." He promises silkily.

"Mr. Gold, are you threatening me?"

"No. I am promising." With that, he hangs up. He has the matter of Belle's building to sort out.
"Mary Margaret!"

"Sir." She walks back in, exasperated.

"Here's my card." He passes her his credit card. She raises an eyebrow. "I'd like for you to purchase me workout clothes."

"Workout clothes." She echoes, taking the card like it may bite her. "For you. Can I ask what for?"

"For working out." He says dryly and she frowns at him.

"I didn't know you were working out sir." She tucks the card in her purse. "But of course, I'll do that."

"Good. You have the rest of the afternoon to do so." He informs her and she stares at him in outright shock. He's never given her time off. "Please get the clothes delivered to my home as I will require them this weekend. I'm assuming you know my measurements. That will be all."

"Alright sir." She takes the charge and runs with it, even if she is a little flabbergasted. "Have a great weekend."

"You as well, Ms. Blanchard. Oh, and one other thing." She turns back around, looking wary. "The complaints."

"Don't try to terrorize anyone too terribly awful." She protests, as she hands them over. "It is Friday."

"See you Monday." He dismisses her with a wave of his hand and so she goes. She does her job well, for when he arrives at home, several neat packages are waiting in his foyer. He sorts through his new clothes, folding them neatly in a new spot in his closet, then picks one out and sets it aside. Sunday evening will be a long time coming.

AN: So I'm pretty excited for this story- I would love feedback and I'd welcome suggestions or moments you all would love to see as this progresses... Leave me reviews? Thanks!
He's jumpy all weekend, fretting and fussing over the smallest things. Both his driver and the housekeeper threaten to quit if he doesn't knock it off, so he buries himself as deep as he can in contracts and legal documents, hoping the tediousness of it will bring him peace of mind. He's not sure why he's so antsy, because he has never been made nervous by a woman, not since he'd transformed into RMS Gold. But, he reluctantly admits, he's never met a woman like Belle French. So on Sunday, he puts on his new clothes, feeling a little bit ridiculous, and gets in his car, headed for her studio.

"Well," Belle's voice is the sunshine that cuts through his mood. "Look at you! Did you take a trip to Lululemon?"

"To where?" He asks, slipping off his shoes. She's sitting on the desk and today it's stripped leggings that make her legs look endless and another intricate top, straps where they shouldn't be and parts of her shirt missing where it should be. Her hair is braided again, and she's beaming.

"Lululemon. Your shirt and pants are." As he hobbles to her, she takes the hem of his shirt and shows him the little symbol, a horseshoe-like emblem. "It's a yoga store. Pricy, but name brand. I love it, but it's always a little bit too expensive for a broke girl living in New York." She says mournfully and he decides that he'll buy the whole damn thing.

"Yes, well," He tries to bluff his way through it. "If it's advertised as the best, then I mean to have it."

"Uh huh." Her eyes are sparkling in that way again. "That's why you didn't know the name. You know, a guy like you isn't exactly their focus demographic. A pretty woman though, in her twenties, working her first serious job and has a little money each month to set aside…"

"Ah." He curses Mary Margaret mentally, seeing what must have happened. Belle bursts into laughter.

"Oh, don't be mad at her." She lays a hand on his arm and it's like he's on a beach. "She had my contact info from when I sent her the appointments, she just reached out and asked what kind of clothes I told her yoga." She's suddenly serious. "I hope that's ok. I know you didn't want it getting out that you were here, but I figured since she's your assistant…"

"Quite fine dearie." He assures, wondering what kind of reception his plucky assistant will give him at work tomorrow.

"Oh good." Fears assured, Belle hops off the desk, her bright smile returned. "Then we can get started. How was your weekend?"

"Good." He thinks of the contracts and his jitters, determined not to let it show. "And yours?"

"Ugh." She makes a face as she leads him back into the studio. Same setup as last time, chair and two mats. "An absolute disaster."

"Why's that?" He hides his alarm with an impassive mask.

"Well my friend Ruby, we've been friends since birth, she's an amazing human but kinda a hot mess." Belle grins, shaking her head. "Anyways, she's been on and off with this guy for years. Her grandma never liked him and I think that's why Ruby dated him. But they broke up for good a couple months ago and we thought that was all. Then this weekend she invites us all for supper at
her place for a serious talk. Naturally, we all think she's going to announce they're back together. And then she introduced us to Dorothy."

"Dorothy?" He asks, sitting down with a confused expression. Belle grins as she grabs the essential oils.

"Her new girlfriend." She clarifies.

"Oh." He comprehends as Belle laughs.

"Oh is right. So needless to say, I spent the rest of the weekend try to calm Granny down. She comes from a different time and well, Ruby's never given a sign before that she um, swings that way." Belle muses, absentmindedly rubbing their wrists together. It sends shocks through him.

"Really?" He asks.

"No." Belle shakes her head. "Growing up, we both had boyfriends, but Ruby always had more. I'm still trying to figure out if it's just another plot to make her grandma mad."

"Children like to defy their parents." He says wryly and for a second Belle looks ready to ask a question. Then she masks it with a pretty smile.

"Well, let's get started."

It's mostly the same as before, him stretching and Belle gently guiding him, asking him if he feels tense, where his pain level is at, if he's felt anything over the weekend. He thinks he manages to play it off fairly well that he's been wound tighter than a spring. Belle asks some questions about work, which makes him tense, but it's not intended to be prying. She asks him his level of stress, how often he gets up and moves during a day, his pain level.

He starts to hate her studio, with its dim lights and heat. Belle speaks in low tones, light caresses as she guides him through stretches. It's deceptively easy to start thinking of them as intimate. And he hates it, hates how he responds to the little touches, her mummers, the throaty chuckle when he makes a smart quip about what she's forcing him to do.

"Whenever you're ready." Her breath tickles his hair and ear and he actively tries not to shiver. He knows she's talking about the massage, but he can't stop his wandering mind. Bella pads away from him and he stays where he is, berating himself for a manner of things.

How stupid it is to even think of Belle that way. She's young, and gorgeous, and he is an unsightly old man with a limp. Although, he reflects, she's already seen more of him than he'd willingly let anyone see since his injury, so he supposes that means something. With a groan, not liking where this train of thought is taking him, he gets up and hobbles to the massage room.

"So, what are your thoughts then?" She asks him, halfway through, and he cracks his eyelids into slits. She's smiling at him from her position at his knee, and for a brief second, he throws logic to the wind and fears that he's found someone that can actually read minds.

"About?"

"What I should do with Ruby and her girlfriend." Belle explains, a wry smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

"Well, dearie, I can't say that I am the best person to ask that." He says carefully, gritting his teeth when she hits a particularly tender spot. She eases up instantly and he ponders how she's managed to
"I don't exactly have a lot of experience in that matter."

"In your best friend coming out as gay?" She teases and he wonders if informing her that it's been years since he's had a real, true friend, would be too sad. So he settles for a different approach entirely.

"Perhaps you'd be better asking friends your own age. A boyfriend, perhaps." He says it offhandedly enough, and silently congratulates himself for that feat. To his surprise, Belle gives a very un-zen-like snort.

"The closest thing I have to a boyfriend is an ex, and I'm fairly certain that if I asked him about this, he'd have two responses. He'd make some gross and crude comment about wanting to watch girl on girl sex and then call them a derogatory name." She mutters and he very carefully smoothes the tendril of happiness that had risen in his belly.

"He sounds delightful." He sneers, and means it with every ounce of derision in his body.

"He was, in high school and college." She says thoughtfully. "But I think I only stuck with him because he made my dad happy. I was halfway through PT school when I discovered he'd been cheating on me with 3 different girls. I don't think I was so much hurt as I was impressed- he is a bumbling oaf, but he'd kept 4 girls in the dark for a decent amount of time."

"He sounds like he doesn't know the first thing about respect." He mutters, hands itching for his cane.

"Not particularly, no." Belle's laugh tinkles like wind chimes. "So I think I'm on my own with this."

"Well, if you have indeed been friends for so long, I think your only choice is to accept her." He says carefully.

"Of course I'll accept her." Belle sounds a little offended. "She's my best friend in the whole world. I'm just trying to figure out how to approach it."

"Would she support you if you did the same?" He wonders and she's startled into laughter.

"Mr. Gold, I assure you, my tastes lean very firmly to the male. But she's supported me through all of my crazy decisions and I'd owe her the same." She rubs his knee in an absentminded sort of way. "I mean, really, this isn't even the strangest thing she's done honestly. Or me."

"That sounds like a story that needs telling, Miss French." He teases and she gives him a mischievous look.

"You know, I don't think you're suppose to talk during a massage. It's supposed to be calming."

"I find your voice soothing." He closes his eyes to prove his point.

"You..." The word dies on Belle's lips and when he peeks through his eyelashes, she's got a smirk. "Fine. But I expect a story back, then."

"Deal. Go on, Miss French."

"Well, Ruby and I have been friends since we were young. Which means that she has more secrets and blackmail on me than anyone else in the universe. She can guilt and threaten me into almost anything she wants to do." Belle says ruefully. "So of course, when we're in high school, she gets
the idea in her head that we should sneak out and go to a concert in the city. We were 15, had no money, dumber than hell, and impulsive. I had no desire to see some shitty band, but Ruby reminded me that she could tell my father exactly how I wound up in the hospital needing 25 stitches in my leg, so I snuck out and we made our way into the city, dressed like we were a lot older than we were.

"First half went smoothly. My dad didn't wake up, we used public transportation to get into the city, and we even got to the concert. It was actually pretty good, and I was just thinking that maybe, for the first time in our friendship, Ruby had a good idea and plan. Of course, Murphy's Law, it all went to hell after that. Ruby started taking shots with this guy, and I had to pull her away. She was so drunk she could hardly stand, and it's not like I'm an imposing figure now, so you can imagine what I was like at 15."

"I can." He chuckles at the idea of an even smaller Belle, clinging to her friend, grumbling.

"So of course these guys keep trying to tell me that they can take care of her, that they've got an apartment nearby that we can crash at, the likes." She continues and his fists clench at the implication of where this is going. "But I'm not an idiot, and I'm sober, so I figure if I can just get her in a cab, we can go home, I'll fess up to my father, and face the punishment, but Ruby won't get kidnapped. As I get outside, she starts to throw up everywhere."

"As one does." He says thoughtfully.

"So now she's covered in puke, can hardly walk, and a police officer is walking towards us. I'm thinking we're about to get arrested, which will really mess up my college applications, when all the sudden a 6'5 African American drag queen comes up to me and practically scoops Ruby up. She starts yammering on about how she's so glad she found us and that poor chickadee ate that bad chicken, why don't we clean her up? Before I know it, I'm backstage in at a drag club and I have ten drag queens cleaning her up."

"What?" He tries to sit up in disbelief, but her hands are quick to push him back down.

"Hey! Relaxing, remember? This is supposed to be soothing!"

"Well then carry on."

"So Roxy, Estella, Suga Doll, Cher, and the rest got Ruby clean and closer to sober in between their acts. I mostly just sat there, wide eyed, and learned more in those early morning hours than I did in four years of high school. They were hilarious and so, so sweet. Suga Doll, the one who spotted us, kept saying how it hurt her to see such young girls stumbling around in the street when there are guys who'd prey on them, and I told her how grateful I was that they were there. They even fed us, got some crackers down Ruby's throat. Then they all pooled money in for us and got us a cab home. I managed to haul Ruby into my room. The next morning, my dad had no idea we'd left the house, and Ruby had a hangover with vague memories of sparkly dresses and teased hair. It was awhile before I let her talk me into her hare-brained schemes again." Belle says fondly.

"So that's the story?" He questions and Belle shushes him.

"A couple years later, I decided to go back. Suga Doll wasn't there anymore, but a couple of them still were, and I thanked them all so much for taking care of us that night. I think it was a formative influence on me, because I'm still friends with a couple to this day." She's smiling now.

"Often, the best people are the ones you wouldn't expect." He mutters and Belle's fingers lightly drift over his chest as she dims the lights and pauses by the door. When he dares lift an eyelid a fraction of a centimeter, he sees a funny expression on her face. One of… Tenderness?
"Yes, I do agree." With that, she eases the door open, slips through, and shuts it, leaving him once again.

When he finally drags up the energy to walk out, Belle is perched atop the desk, typing rapidly on her laptop. For a long moment, she doesn't seem to acknowledge that he's hovering by the desk, unsure of what to do. Then she closes the laptop and smiles brightly at him.

"Thank you. It was wonderful, as always." He says, for lack of anything better to say, as much as he hates it.

"My pleasure, as always." She tilts her head, and he finds that it's adorable in the best kind of way, like a little puppy. "So now you've heard why the drag queens of New York attend my classes, when am I going to hear all about the crazy stories from you?"

"I said I would tell you a story, Miss French. You never specified the genre." He reminds her as he readies to depart.

"May I pick?" She requests sweetly.

"You may not." He tells her, but with a chuckle so she knows he's not mad. She pouts briefly then brightens.

"If you'd like, we could do lunch again. I tend to have a lot of evening classes, but lunch is good for me." She offers it offhandedly, and he hopes that he's not imagining how she looks just a little nervous. His own stomach is full of butterflies and before he knows it, his mouth has opened and words are coming out that he has no control over.

"I am a busy man, Miss French, and I cannot be fitting in lunch with you simply because you desire a free meal." He clamps his mouth shut, fuming internally, but thankfully Belle has simply blinked, the tiniest furrow appearing between her brows.

"Well, I'm sure you are busy, and I certainly wouldn't expect you to buy me anything," Her tone is still cheerful, if only slightly colder than it had been before. "But a story for a story, and if I may say so myself, mine did have drag queens and teenage shenanigans in it."

"How about coffee one day?" It's a struggle to get the words out, because he's waiting for the inevitable rejection, the cold sneer, even if he may deserve it, just slightly.

"Sure I wouldn't cut into your oh-so-busy work day?" She quips and he flinches just slightly.

"Certainly coffee wouldn't hurt. And you could postpone a weekly call I've no wish to take." He reveals and that makes her smile slightly.

"So now I'm a distraction?" She smiles when he grimaces.

"I'll buy the coffee."

"Thought you didn't like buying people things."

"That was rude." He admits quietly.

"It was." Belle seems to take this as the apology he intended it as and resumes her sunny smiling. "And I will let you buy me coffee to make up for being cranky. Wednesday is the only day I am free in the morning."
"Three days straight of seeing me." He realizes. "Sure you wouldn't mind?" Belle's smile makes her eyes twinkle.

"Oh, I think for free coffee I could tolerate about anything." She assures him. "Have a good night Mr. Gold."

"And you as well, Miss French." He pulls on his coat; sure he needs to leave before he can make a bigger ass of himself. "I will see you Tuesday."

"Tuesday it is."

That morning goes much like the others and it seems that Belle has forgiven him for his knee-jerk reaction to her offer of lunch. They stay on the safe topic of their week, and he even explains to her, albeit in very vague terms, about his dislike for his Tuesday morning calls with Regina. She explains to him her schedule, and just how much of her day is taken up with classes, massages, therapy, and more. It's safe; it's nice, and above all, very polite.

He's terrified of Wednesday though. Tuesday night he practically paces a hole in the carpet, trying to figure out what story to tell. He's got plenty, most of them dark and scary. None to fit Belle's sunny disposition. And coffee. With Belle. In public. In daylight. It goes against his entire nature.

But he is excited, in a sheltered, hesitant way. She's the first to not be put off by his moods, his sharp edges. Mary Margaret, of course, handles him better than most, but Belle hadn't reproached him or gotten huffy. She'd simply called him out on his shit, and proceeded to forgive him for it. It is unprecedented, and he's not sure if he should be terrified or thrilled.

By nature, he shows up ten minutes early, commandeering a table in the corner, as private as one can get in a coffee shop. Then he sits and waits impatiently, fluctuating between angry at his conviction that she's stood him up and scolding himself for showing up so early. He's swung back around to anger when Belle breezes in and he freezes.

For the first time, he's seeing Belle out of her yoga clothes and if he thought he'd liked the leggings and tank tops, he'd been an idiot. Non-yoga Belle wears her hair long and loosely curled, cascading down her back. She's not wearing makeup, or if she is, it's subtle enough that he can't see it. Her outfit is what gives him pause, taking his breath away.

A pretty cream dress, cinched at the waist with a brown belt, several bracelets jangling cheerily on her wrist, deep red tights on her long legs, and knee high brown boots with a heel so high, he's bewildered that she's not breaking her ankles in them. She looks like a perfect city girl, dressed in fall colors to match the trees outside. And her beautiful smile, directed at him.

"Hello." She greets him cheerfully, swinging her purse into an empty chair, sitting down across from him.

"Hello." He says back, trying not to sound floored.

"Green tea, large." She says and he frowns just slightly. "I believe you owe me a drink, sassy pants." She smiles slyly and he opens his mouth to protest the name but she shoos him towards the counter. He goes, sighing heavily.

"One large coffee, black, and one large tea, green." He tells the barista, who grins and sets about making them while another rings up his card. A minute later, he has two large steaming cups and he sets Belle's in front of her.
"Well thank you." She takes it with a grin. "How sweet of you."

"I was rude." He admits, grudgingly.

"You were." Belle nods seriously and he sighs again.

"How many times will I have to admit it, dearie?"

"Oh, just once more, unless you tell me that story." She informs him and then offers her hand, her pinky extended. He eyes it, then looks at her and raises an eyebrow. "It's a pinky promise."

"I shake hands." He says dryly and her hand doesn't even twitch.

"Pinky promises are much more binding." How she manages how to keep a straight face is beyond him.

"Do you do much business, Miss French?"

"No, but if I did, I'd make everyone pinky promise. You can break a promise, but if you break a pinky promise, bad things happen. Everyone knows this." She says solemnly.

"You are not serious." He grumbles. Belle just looks at him imploringly. "I am a respected businessman, Miss French, and I am not to be childish and immature and… Fine." He huffs and offers his own pinky. Belle swiftly intertwines them then leans forward and brings them to her lips. He stares at her, flabbergasted.

"Well?" She says expectantly.

"Are you 12?" He demands and she refuses to relinquish his pinky, sipping her tea. With a groan of frustration, he kisses his fist and Belle release him with a smug smile.

"Only when it comes to serious matters. Now, you owe me a story. Let's hear it." She says triumphantly.

"I don't think I should now." He declares and Belle arches one eyebrow and takes another sip.

"That's fine. I was going to tell you a very entertaining one about Dr. Whale, but I don't think I will." She gives a little shrug.

"Then you'd simply demand another story." He rationalizes, sipping his own coffee. She mulls that over.

"And eventually you'd be several stories in debt to me. So it would be in your best interest to start talking, Mr. Gold." She knows she's got him now, so with a deep sigh, he begins.

"Once upon a time,"

"Wait." Belle removes the lid of her tea, blowing on it and frowning at him. "Are you about to tell me a fairy tale?"

"Perhaps." He says innocently and she gapes.

"Not fair! I told you a story, an honest to god real life true tale, and you're going to tell me a fairy tale?" She glares.

"You never specified what kind of story it had to be." He points out and she huffs in anger.
"Because you wouldn't let me pick what kind of story it is."

"You can have the fairy tale or nothing."

"Fine." She snaps the lid back on and takes a tiny sip. "If you insist on the nonsense, then let's hear it. But I will warn you, I never liked princesses."

"This doesn't have princesses." He promises.

"Carry on then." She orders and with a smirk, he begins.

"Once upon a time, a mother was sitting rocking her baby to sleep. She was an ordinary woman in every way, the wife of miller. That day she did look up to see a lady of elegant and courtly demeanor, so unlike any one she had ever seen in that part of the country, standing in the middle of the room. She had not heard anyone enter, but she rose to welcome her strange visitor. She offered her the meager cottage chair, but she very politely declined to be seated. She was magnificently dressed; her dress was of the richest green, embroidered round with spangles of gold, and on her head was a small coronet of pearls. The woman was still more surprised at her strange request. She asked, in a rich musical voice, if she would oblige her with a bowl of oatmeal. A bowl full to overflowing was immediately handed to her, for the woman's husband, being both a farmer and miller, had plenty on command."

"Really? The magical fairy godmother wants oatmeal?" Belle interrupts and he gives her an incredulous look. "Ok, fine, sorry, keep going."

"As I was saying… The lady promised to return it, and named the day she would do so. One of the children put out her hand to get hold of the grand lady's spangles, but told her mother afterwards that she felt nothing. The mother was afraid the child would lose the use of her hands, but no such calamity ensued. It would have been very ungrateful in her fairy majesty if she had struck the child powerless for touching her dress, if indeed such power were hers. The very day mentioned the oatmeal was returned, not by the same lady, but by a curious little figure with a yelping voice; she was likewise dressed in green. After handing the meal, she yelped out, 'Braw meal; it's the top pickle of the sin corn'."

"What does that even mean?" Belle demands in disbelief. "You're making this up, that's gibberish."

"It's a fairy tale." He reminds her dryly. "Is it meant to make a rather large amount of sense?"

"Well, no, but that's nonsense." Belle says adamantly. "But since you're already a ways into this, keep going."

"Alright, fine." He relents. "It was excellent; and what was very strange, all the family were advised to partake of it but one servant lad, who spurned the fairy's meal; and he died shortly after, the miller and his wife firmly believed it was because he refused to eat of the meal. They also firmly believed their first visitor was no less a personage than the Queen of the Fairies, who, having dismissed her court, had not one maid of honor in waiting to obey her commands. A few nights after this strange visit, as the miller was going to bed, a gentle tap was heard at the door, and on its being opened by him, with a light in his hand, there stood a little figure dressed in green, who, in a shrill voice, but very polite manner, requested him to let on the water and set the mill in order, for she was going to grind some corn. The miller did not dare to refuse, so did as she desired him. She told him to go to bed again, and he would find all as he had left it. He found everything in the morning as she said he would. So much for the honesty of fairies."

"That's it?" Belle asks, once she's sure he's done. "That's the story you decided to tell me?"
"It was a favorite of mine growing up." He says and takes a sip of coffee, having clearly thrown her off with that response.

"Who in the hell told you that story instead of, I don't know, little red riding hood?" She questions in bewilderment.

"I'm from Glasgow." He informs her and her head tilts slightly, blue eyes bright. "I had two older grannies that would watch me for most of my early years. Perhaps they weren't fans of little red riding hood."

"Ok." Belle leans forward and he's transfixed by how the light glistens on her full lower lip. "New game, since I feel like the next story is going to be about, I don't know, unicorns."

"I do have a rather good one." He warns her and she rolls her eyes, lips quirked up into a smile.

"You can ask me a question. Any question in the whole wide world and I'll answer it." She explains and he goes tense.

"Miss French, if this is your way of trying to wheedle information out of me, I assure you, it will not work."

"No wheedling." Belle promises, her mouth curving up into a sly smirk. "Because you can pick what questions I ask you."

"Ah." He's taken aback by her suggestion. He pretends to ponder it, taking another long sip of coffee. He's probably got three quarters of a cup left, and if he takes some for the walk to the office… It can't be that many questions. "And at the end of it all, your intent is to do what with this information?"

"Well, I intend on causing mass destruction and chaos for you, Mr. Gold." She is determinedly shredding a napkin, seemingly unable to keep her hands still. "Nothing brings me joy like watching empires falls. Think my mother might have had some Russian in her."

"Miss French." He nearly snorts out his coffee and then looks at her. Her eyes are dancing, clearly pleased at what she's done. "You're a minx of a woman, do you know that?"

"I've been called many things." She says offhandedly. "But never really a minx. Do you want to start or should I?"

"Very well." Trying to stifle his urge to chuckle, he takes another sip of coffee. "You may ask me what my favorite color is."

"What if I think I already know the answer?" She protests.

"You may ask me anyways."

"Fine. Mr. Gold, what is your favorite color?"

"Black." He says easily and Belle feigns surprise.

"What? I would've said gold." She teases and then takes a sip. "Alright, your turn. Ask me a question. And no repeats!"

"Fine. If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?" He questions and that stumps her for a good long moment.
"Thailand. To see the temples. Maybe do some humanitarian work while I'm there. Or Argentina, because the culture just seems amazing. Or maybe Madagascar or somewhere where I could see a really wide range of animals. Or somewhere truly different from New York, like the plains of Montana." She lists off in rapid fire and he raises an eyebrow.

"I meant one place." He says, not cruelly, and Belle blushes.

"Sorry. I've always wanted to travel and well, my father isn't very, well, interested in that." She says carefully. "So I just keep adding places to my list and looking at airfare in hope."

"I like that." He says thoughtfully. "That you want to travel, see the world. Most prefer cars and houses."

"I would live in a shack if I meant I would be handed a plane ticket to any destination I prefer." She says wistfully. He observes her for a long moment then speaks again.

"You may ask me where I would prefer to live, if not New York City." He permits and she looks intrigued at this one.

"Where would you live, if not here?"

"Blue Hill, Maine." He tells her and she takes her phone out, tapping on it. Before he can get annoyed that she is ignoring him for social media, she gasps and slides the phone to him. "That's beautiful." She's pulled up a photo of the view of the coast, one he is particularly fond of. "How on earth did you find such a place?"

"A lot of research." He admits. "I have certain… Tastes, and big cities are good for some and bad for others. When I began to think about life after work, I turned my attention to the perfect destination. I think this is it."


"Where were you born?" He asks, before he can help himself. She's got a beautiful accent, even if he can't quite place a finger on what it is.

"Australia." She reveals, smiling slightly. "My dad's from there. We were there until I was 4, then we came over. I've got a little bit of my mom in my accent, a little bit of my dad, a little bit of New York. I bet I could confuse the hell out of a linguist if I really tried."

"That would be a sight." He says admiringly. "It's very pretty, nonetheless, and you're very articulate."

"Thank you." She seems genuinely pleased with his compliment, even as strange as it may be.

"You're welcome. You may ask me about my musical tastes." It seems like an arbitrary one, something to give her that doesn't reveal anything personal, but from the way Belle leans forward and looks at him with a glint in her eye, he's suddenly very nervous.

"Do tell, Mr. Gold, what music you listen to when angry." She implores and he blinks, confused.

"I listen to angry?"

"Yes." Belle doesn't seem phased. "You don't listen to the same music when you're happy as you do when you're sad. So let me have three sub questions- angry music, happy music, sad music."
"Then I get three questions." He retorts and she holds a finger.

"Sub questions." She corrects and he narrows his eyes, wondering how this slip of a girl is maneuvering around him so effortlessly.

"Fine. Sub questions." He corrects. "And if you must know, when I am happy, it's usually classical music. Helps me concentrate at work. Angry usually means jazz, and sadness is more traditional Scottish music."

"I see." Belle is ferreting away information and he dislikes it. Usually he is the observant one, so he strikes back with a personal question.

"What are your goals Miss French, specifically in the sub questions of work, relationships, and financial?"

"Oh." Her mouth forms a perfect O and she takes a sip of tea to distract him. If her tactic is to draw his attention to her mouth, he will grudgingly admit that it works, and well.

"You did promise to answer any question." He says smugly and she shoots him a look he can't quite interpret.

"I know I did. Well, financially, I guess, I still need to pay off school. Lots of loans. And keep renting my studio and paying to keep the lights on. Enough savings for a car is a goal, and not getting evicted is good too. I guess as far as money goes, for me, it is usually baited breath and a prayer." She tries to joke but he squirms, suddenly uncomfortable. "Work is simple. Keep the studio open. Offer classes. Maybe attend a retreat or two. Keep doing what I love."

"Understandable." He's aware of what part she's missing and wishes desperately he'd kept his mouth shut. This is too personal and he'll drive her away, like he drives everyone away.

"As for relationships, I don't know." Belle plays with the shredded napkin on the table. "I've no intention to get into one, really. I'm too busy, and they take so much work. Besides, I practically live through Ruby." She offers him a wry smile. "I'll just be destined to be a spinster."

"You'd never." He wants to make up for his intrusion. "You're far too pretty. You must beat the boys off with sticks."

"Boys, yes." For a brief second, he sees something flash in Belle's eyes, but then she brings up her tea and it's gone before he can blink. "Men, hardly. And I think that would be interesting."

"Men." He repeats, heart in throat. "Is that why you agreed to take my case? Because I'm not a boy?"

"I took it because it would make Whale owe me a favor." She clarifies, but now he can see the damned twinkle, on full display. Whatever is about to come out of her mouth next is going to stun him, he can feel it. "I decided to keep with it because you're a mystery, Mr. Gold. And so few men are." With that, she gets up, rattling her clearly empty cup. "Thank you for the tea, it was so appreciated, but I have a studio to get to and I know how you like to get to work early."

"It was lovely." He says, a little faintly and she gathers up her things. "Belle, wait." He says, before she can depart. She looks at him quizzically. "You may have one question. One you pick. I'll answer it."

"Really?" She reaches across the table and takes his hands. Startled, he looks at them, then at her. "So you can't bolt." She explains.
"I don't bolt." He frowns at her, but her head is tilted and he is regretting everything, regretting that she makes him soft, regretting that he is desperate to connect with her in some way, to reassure himself that she is interested in him like he is in her, regretting it all.

"Just making sure. This may be my only opportunity, I'll be taking it." She's teasing him and it's as endearing as it is annoying, but before he can get a jab in back, she's asking her question. "What does RMS stand for?"

"Rodric Mackay Sloan Gold." He says quietly, and it feels like it's been years since he's admitted this name, even if it isn't his real, true name.

"RMS Gold." Belle says quietly. "It's a pretty name."

"Thank you. I picked it myself." He allows her just a little bit more, just to see her eyes light up and sparkle.

"I will see you tomorrow, Mr. Gold." She says, the two of them standing and heading for the door. He's grateful that she seems to know that using first names are too personal, that it would be too hard for him.

"And you as well, Miss French." He inclines his head graciously.

"Oh, and thank you for the tea." She gives him a beautiful smile that makes him go weak at the knees. "We'll have to do it again."

"Yes, certainly." He says, and then watches her walk away; her high heels and curly hair making her stand out.

They don't go out or do anything of the sort for another couple weeks. The tea, however, stays. Belle gets in the habit of making them cups for after their appointments and they will sit, sipping tea. Belle claims it's for detoxing. It gives him another glorious quarter hour with her, and he will never complain, even if Mary Margaret is bewildered why he's so casually late to work two days of the week and doesn't need coffee those mornings.

The tea gives them a chance to talk a little more, sharing stories of their days, nothing too personal. He discovers not only is Belle sweet, she's sassy and funny, and fiercely intelligent. He delights in her love for a broad spectrum of topics, from her opinion on politics to a passionate love affair with all things Italian renaissance. He's never sure what's going to come out of her mouth.

He finds himself depending on her, in a strange way. He's not close to her, no. He would never allow that. But he makes little notes of things to talk to thing about with her, finds tea blends he brings her to try because it's mutually beneficial, and does his stretches at her bidding. And when the weather turns bitterly cold and they receive the first snow, he reluctantly admits that yes, Belle French is a part of his life he very much likes.

AN: Sorry for the delay in posting, I'm currently traveling overseas and clinging to wifi wherever I may find it! Leave reviews? Also, ten points to whoever spots the Firefly reference!
"What's wrong dearie?" He asks her one morning. He can tell that something is off, because Belle has her usual sunny smile, but she's quiet, not eager to tell him about Ruby's latest drama or what book she's reading now.

"Nothing." She flashes him the brightest and biggest smile she can, before focusing very intently on his knee as he does exercises.

"You know, doctor-patient confidentiality can extend both ways." He offers and that makes her actually smile, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

"Does that mean you'll keep my secrets?"

"So long as you keep mine."

"I'm bound by law to keep yours." She reminds him lightly.

"And that's how I like it." He smirks. She gives him a disapproving look halfheartedly then sighs heavily. "Now please tell me dearie, I can see something weighs on your heart."

"Mold." She admits, after a long pause. "My apartment complex is infested with mold. Apparently, now it's so bad that the city has stepped in. We have 60 days to vacate and I've already wasted two weeks trying not to think about it. But with my roommates moving out, I'd be an idiot not to see the inevitable. So I'll be essentially homeless in a month and a half."

"Stay with your father. Or Ruby." He suggests and she smiles, handing him a resistance band so he can switch exercises.

"I thought of that too. But Ruby has five roommates even more dramatic than her." She muses and he raises an eyebrow at that. "And my dad is so far out. It's not that I don't love him, it's just that… I love being in the city more. I love being close to my studio and places to eat and stuff. I hate being that far out."

"There is a charm to the city." He agrees and she hums in agreement.

"So I guess I'm on the hunt for an apartment that I can afford in addition to paying all this off," She gestures to the studio around them. "And my student loans and living in New York in general. No wonder the last place had mold." She gives him a rueful smile and he watches as her gentle hands take his knee, monitoring it, feeling for strength and weakness.

"Live with me."

"What?" Belle looks like he's burned her, staring up at him with wide eyes and a shocked expression. He shrugs, trying to be casual, while his insides are screaming bloody murder.

"It would give you time to find a suitable place without the fear of encroaching mold, and it would give me a personal therapist and masseuse on hand at all times. It… Gets worse in the winter." He admits, twitching his leg.

"We can't live together." Belle looks scandalized, wringing her hands and it's rather endearing, so different from her normally unflappable self. "You're my client, I'm your physical therapist!"
"Plenty of rich men employ personal physicians." He says innocently. "I assure you Miss French, you'd have the utmost privacy if you chose to stay with me. I can give you an entire wing."

"A wing?" She says faintly.

"I wouldn't impose in any way. You could even take my car with me into the city, since the studio is mere blocks from my work and we already arrive at the same place most mornings." He's scared how well he's thought this out. "You'd have use of my chef and driver, and it would be completely free. You could repay me by letting me use your services more often."

"You're going to let me live with you." Belle states, as though she's heard him wrong. "For free. You're going to feed me, drive me, give me a wing of wherever you live, in exchange for me massaging your knee when it hurts?"

"Perhaps tea every now and then." He adds in as an afterthought and that does nothing to stop her stunned expression. "Miss French, I find you to be funny, smart, articulate, feisty, endearingly sweet, and most of all, a good human being. As you can imagine, I encounter few of those in my line of work. You are a good person and you deserve good things to happen to you. If you are in need, then I will help you. It's as simple as that."

"I just..." Belle tilts her head. "How long?"

"However long you need." He assures her. "And if you need help finding a place, I may have a few connections in the area."

"Thank you!" Suddenly, she launches herself forward and is hugging him tightly, swaying side to side. He hangs onto her, not so much to return the hug to but to remain upright. "I promise I will be on my absolutely best behavior. I'll only be there a couple weeks, tops. You'll hardly know I was there!"

"I'm sure." He mutters and she untangles herself from him. He lets her go, just a little reluctantly.

"Ok." She's beaming, shaking a little with excitement. "Ok, I have so much to do. First, let's finish you off."

"Yes, that would be nice." He says distantly, her words killing him, in disbelief of what he's done.

"Good morning sir." Mary Margaret says cheerfully, when he strides into his office, still in a daze. "Do you need coffee this morning or have you already had tea at your appointment?"

"I have done something very stupid." He announces, without looking at her, and she leaps up, following him into his office.


"I need your help." He's surprised at how easily he admits it, and he can tell how stunned Mary Margaret is, but he knows when he's in over his head and this is that moment.

"Ok, with what?" She asks eagerly. He sits down with a heavy sigh and rubs his temples, trying to figure out where to start.

"Do you remember when I began these appointments?" He says tightly and she sits down carefully
in a chair across from him, looking at him imploringly. "You asked me what they were."

"I did." She says slowly.

"And I told you self improvement. And I was not lying. But it's something more. I've been going to…" He trails off, not noticing that Mary Margaret has a small smile, hiding it with her hand.

"Yoga." She says, when he doesn't seem able to say it for himself. He looks at her in astonishment. "Oh, don't get all huffy about how I am encroaching on your privacy, I had Belle's contact info that you gave me. I just looked her up. I've been taking a couple classes of my own there."

"You're what?" He can't quite wrap his head around what's going on, but Mary Margaret is grinning.

"I go to Belle's yoga classes, usually after work. She's lovely. Yoga is lovely." She says cheerfully.

"Yes, she is." He says, a little dumbly, forgetting for a long moment what he brought her in for in his irrational jealousy that he has to share Belle with Mary Margaret. "And I've invited her to live with me."

"What?" Mary Margaret leans forward, amazed. "Why?"

"Her apartment has… Mold." He says jerkily, replaying the conversation in his head. "She needs a home. And…"

"You offered her one." A smile the likes of which he's never seen before graces Mary Margaret's lips. "That's very kind."

"I don't know what to do." He admits frankly. "It was impulsive and rash and stupid and… Ms. Blanchard, I think you know very well that I have no idea how to live with a woman, much less a woman like Miss French."

"Yes, your dispositions are quite… Opposite." Mary Margaret comments and he gives her a look but it lacks bite.

"I need advice. If she is going to live with me, no matter how temporarily, I cannot… I just cannot." He puts his head in his hands and Mary Margaret gives him a pityingly smile.

"Alright, fine, let's discuss." She clasps her hands together. "For one, you're going to want to cut down on the yelling and bellowing when you take a call, especially when you come home from work to keep working."

"I don't get many calls at home." He protests and she levels him with a look, before carrying on.

"And you have to be nice. Actually nice, not just tolerable. Talk to her, sit down for a dinner or tea, and take an interest in what she says." She advises and he frowns at that.

"I am interested in what she says." He defends himself and she raises an eyebrow. He adds, carefully, "She is… Very smart. And very opinionated. And I find that I can converse with her on a number of topics. And I have no doubt that I will find any matter of conversation a delight."

"Well than that's good." Mary Margaret tilts her head slightly, giving him a strange look. "You already know you get along well enough and you shouldn't be worried there. What are you worried about?"

"I don't know." He grumbles. "I don't know why I did it, why I suggested it, why she agreed. It was
a terrible idea."

"No, it wasn't." She says firmly. "You did the right thing. And I know why you did it, and I know why she agreed."

"Do enlighten me." He says dryly.

"Belle is an amazing person. She really, truly is." Mary Margaret's smile softens. "And if you've been doing physical therapy with her three days a week, and yoga, and I'm assuming that was who you got lunch with, I can completely understand why you'd want to help her. Because under the big, scary façade of Mr. Gold, there is a good man."

"I am not a good man." He corrects her.

"Yes you are. You have a heart of gold, once you've decided someone's worthy of it. That's why you send him to the best school and give him everything he'd ever want, even if you don't go about it in the right way." Her tone moves from admonishing to sweet. "And you kept me around even when most of New York thought I was a scarlet woman, a harlot, and a slut, not because I'm the only person that knows how to keep your calendar but because you think I have gumption and loyalty, and you value that." She cuts of his protesting. "We don't have to talk about feelings, I know you hate it, but whatever you're scared of, don't be."

"Very well." He folds his hands. "If there's anything I can do before her stay, please let me know. I think you should be in contact with her to arrange that, I am a very busy man." He picks up a pen, to let her know that their conversation is over and she's dismissed.

"And I'll leave you to your work." Mary Margaret gets up, smiling. "I'll let you know if Belle needs anything."

"Very well." He repeats, not looking up, and Mary Margaret eases the door of his office closed.

He spends the rest of the day working on deals and agreements and bids, steadfastly ignoring the pounding of his heart every time his phone rings or Mary Margaret pokes her head into his office. He's on edge, wondering when Belle is going to call and cancel or back out. He's not sure if he's hoping for or dreading it. But it doesn't happen and eventually he has to resign himself to going home. He packs up his things and heads for the door.

He stands in the foyer, looking around at it with a critical eye. He'd never paid much attention to his home, not really. He'd paid an interior designer to come in and have her way with the place. It is tasteful enough, for him, with lots of rich dark woods and classical art, with just a touch of modern. He hadn't given it a second thought at the time, but now everything seems strange.

He tries to picture Belle here, her bright, sunny smile amidst the heavy curtains and gilded mirrors. He thinks she needs more light to live, not like him, a creature of darkness and habit. He moves deeper into the house, trying to figure out where Belle will stay.

"Mr. Gold?" His housekeeper, an elderly woman named Mrs. Potts, appears from one of the guest rooms. "Good, you're home. I have a question."

"Yes?" He follows her into the bedroom, looking at it. It's got a big window, letting in plenty of light, and a nice comfy bed. If Mrs. Potts would put some flowers on the bedside table, air out the bed sheets, and dust the pretty vanity, it would be fitting for Belle.
"Mary Margaret called me, said that I should be expecting a guest and you would provide me with more details. My question, sir, is who exactly am I to be expecting? Is... He... coming home for Thanksgiving? Should we expect him Thursday?" She asks carefully and his hand tightens on the cane.

"No, he will not be coming home. You may have the day off to be with your family, I can handle my meals for a day." He says dismissively. "But, yes, we will be having a guest. My... Physical therapist Miss French will be staying with me to provide in-home rehab."

"Oh." Mrs. Potts looks surprised. "Well, when can we expect her then? Should I ready this room or would you prefer another?"

"This room will do." He looks around at it, imaging the way Belle will fill the space, books piling up on all surfaces, a yoga mat in one corner. It fills him with a thrill of dread and excitement.

"I'll work to clean it up immediately." She bobs her head and he pauses for a long moment.

"Mrs. Potts, I will also require you to clean the library, thoroughly." He decides and she looks at him, wide eyed.

"The library, sir?" She asks and he nods. "If I can beg you pardon and ask why the library?"

"Miss French is of a very studious nature. Once she discovers my extensive collection, I have a feeling it's going to be very hard to drag her away." He smiles wryly.

"Is there anything else I should know?" Mrs. Potts requests and he muses on that for a moment. "Meals I should cook, items I should provide, anything of that sort for the Missus?"

"I will introduce Miss French to the staff upon her arrival." He gets a small smile when he imagines how Belle will greet everyone, excited to meet them, hear their stories, and become their friends in no time. "If she needs something, I am sure she'll make it known."

"Yes sir." Mrs. Potts inclines her head. "If there's anything else that I can do, please let me know."

"Thank you." He lets her go with a wave a hand and she disappears. He spends the rest of the night wandering through his home, wondering about Belle being here, and if it will result with him pushing her away, like he does with everyone. He can't bear the thought, and finally collapses into bed.

The next day at work, Mary Margaret treads very carefully around him for most of the morning. She brings him his favorite tea and a cinnamon muffin, smiling warmly. He's got no idea why she seems so determined to put him in a good mood, and goes with it, until late afternoon, when she comes in with an apologetic smile and a phone call.

"Mr. Gold, it's Belle."

"Miss French?" He looks up, trying to stay calm, even if his stomach is somewhere 30 stories below him. "Tell her I'll take her call now."

"Of course." Mary Margaret disappears back to her desk and a second later, his phone rings. He takes a deep breath and picks it up.

"Miss French."
"Hello, Mr. Gold." Her tone is bright and bubbly. His spirits are bolstered, even if he's sure she's about to tell him she has decided to pass on his offer. "How is your day going?"

"Good, and yours?" He asks carefully and she laughs.

"Oh, good. You'll never believe what Ruby did yesterday, after your appointment." She says, amused.

"And what is that?" He asks, setting aside his pen, knowing his full attention will go now to the sweet voice on the other end of the phone.

"She brought in Dorothy, and we had a nice little chat. She asks why I was at the studio so early, and I mentioned I was seeing a client." He tenses, ready to remind her of his privacy clause. "She asked me if a client was a code name for something else."

"Well," He responds, stunned. "I'm sure you corrected her that it certainly is not, Miss French."

"Well of course." She teases. "I thought it was amusing, that of course Ruby thinks we'd be involved in some sordid affair. She doesn't even know if it's a guy or girl. Which, I suppose, to her, doesn't much matter…" She muses and he can't help but chuckle.

"I'm glad you've had a laugh."

"I hope you did too. You don't laugh enough." She says thoughtfully. "Anyways, I wanted to talk to you about tomorrow- it completely slipped my mind yesterday after the whole apartment fiasco."

"What about it?" He asks, trying to appear calm and collected.

"Well, with it being Thanksgiving, I thought you'd like to reschedule." She pauses for a second. "You do remember it's Thanksgiving tomorrow, right?"

"Of course." He says, a little affronted.

"I just checked, because I'm not sure if you observe public holidays." She says it in her sweet way, and he doesn't take offense to it. "So I thought we could move it to a different day."

"Yes, of course." His heart sinks, just a little because he's found himself looking forward to their sessions more than he would ever care to admit. "You have a lovely holiday, Miss French."

"What are your plans?" She asks, before he can hang up.

"Um," That causes him pause, thinking about what he will be doing tomorrow. "The offices will be closed, I'll likely be working from home. A small dinner, perhaps. A quiet day. And yourself?"

"Oh, dinner at Granny's." She sounds contemplative. "Ruby will be there, maybe Dorothy, my father, the rest of little family. If you'd like, you'd be more than welcome to come."

"Thank you Miss French but I hardly think that's necessary." He says quickly, before she can get any ideas. "And hardly appropriate for a patient to attend your holiday celebrations."

"Sure." She seems casual, dismissing his rejection. "But for a friend to attend my celebrations seems fairly appropriate."

"Well." That throws him, unsure how to react to her calling him a friend. "Then I do appreciate the offer, but I still respectfully say no."
"Well, alright then." There's a long pause from Belle and he very nearly takes her up on her offer, but then she speaks again. "Then I'll see you this Sunday at our next session?"

"Of course, Miss French. And if you'd like to discuss the details of your moving at that time, perhaps that would be best." He is cautiously optimistic, and is further reassured when Belle gives a little hum of happiness.

"That's a great idea. What are you thinking?" She asks curiously and his heart leaps into his throat.

"Well, if you'd like, I could send someone to help you with your things Sunday morning. Help you move to my home, perhaps get supper, and then head to our session?" He's picked up a pen and is clattering it about in his fingers, twiddling with it frantically, terrified of her answer.

"Well, that does sound great." Belle pauses and he can hear typing on her end of the phone. "Classes are canceled for the holiday weekend, so I'll put everything I don't need into storage. Do I need to bring anything? Furniture? Bedding? Anything like that?"

"No, no." He assures her. "Just bring yourself, Miss French, and anything else you'd like."

"Well that sounds good then." Belle is grinning, and even the thought of her smile makes him smile as well. "I'll see you Sunday then, Mr. Gold."

"And you as well, Miss French."

"Oh, and have a happy Thanksgiving!" She adds quickly, before he can hang up. He thinks about the empty house, the quiet phone, the plate of leftovers Mrs. Potts will leave in the fridge for him to reheat in the microwave.

"And you as well, Miss French." He repeats, quietly. With that, she hangs up, and he gently sets the phone back down, going back to his work. When he finally packs up for the day, Mary Margaret is still sitting at her desk.

"Sir." She stands when he exits, looking at her in surprise.

"Ms. Blanchard, what on earth are you still doing here? I thought you would've left at 5 like the rest." He comments.

"I wanted to talk with you and I know better than to disturb you during work." She tells him. He doesn't say a word, just gives her a sly smile. "And I don't have anywhere to be tonight, so a couple extra hours organizing my desk before a break isn't too bad."

"Nowhere to go?" He raises an eyebrow. "Where is Mr. Nolan?"

"Oh, home." She smiles just slightly as they get on the elevator. "Tomorrow his mother will come over for a meal. But tonight we don't have anything. Small families, you know."

"Yes." He says simply. He does know that both of Mary Margaret's parents have passed on, her mother at a young age and her father far more recently. She's an only child, and with both David's father and twin brother having left after a falling out when the twin boys were in college, he can imagine that their Thanksgiving table will look much like his own this holiday season. "What is it you wanted to talk about then?"

"You know who I'm talking about." She states and waits for his inevitable blowup. Instead, he heaves a long sigh and gestures for her to carry on. "I know you didn't bring him home this holiday break, but Christmas break won't be far behind, and it's weeks, not days. You really should bring
"He will be quite content at school." He says tightly.

"No, he won't." Mary Margaret says flatly. "And you know that. He wants to come home with you."

"Well, he has studies." He grips the cane a little harder, bracing himself for the cold that will come once they set foot outside.

"And you are lonesome." Mary Margaret comments back, pausing and holding the door for him. "And even when Belle is there, you'll still be missing him. Besides," She gives his driver Jefferson a small wave. "I think those two would enjoy meeting each other. Have a good Thanksgiving."

"You too, Ms. Blanchard. And tell Mr. Nolan and his mother hello from me." He requests and she nods, disappearing for a taxi. He climbs inside the car, heading for home, trying not to think that if Belle does stay, just what she may see. For a man who thinks of everything, he truly did not think this through.

AN: Oh, now we're cooking... I have so enjoyed reading reviews, keep sending them by that boatload, and if you have any moments you'd like to see, I'll do my best to write them!
"Is this all?" He stares at the few boxes Belle has hauled in from the car he'd sent to retrieve her.

"Is this your place?" She looks up, shading her eyes, stunned, her parka's hood falling back off her face.

"Yes." He says simply and she stares at him, flabbergasted. "The boxes, are they all?" He looks at the meager three medium sized boxes and Belle glances at them then back at him.

"Yes, it's mostly clothes and a couple other things. What were you expecting me to do, move my entire apartment in?" She is teasing him but he's not sure her words are entirely untrue.

"At least an entire library." He comments back and her hand dips into one box, emerging with an e-reader.

"Entire library, nice and compact." She beams. "And a beloved gift from Ruby. Do I get to explore your castle now?"

"Of course." He goes to get the door. "After you, dearie. Jefferson can get the boxes. Let me show you around."

"Do you need any help?" Belle calls over her shoulder to Jefferson, who smiles and waves a hand.

"You go on, Miss French."

"Thank you!" She lets Mr. Gold guide her inside. They're barely in the foyer before she's exclaiming over the art and the architecture, distractedly letting him take her coat as she wanders deeper.

"You have almost as strange tastes as I, Miss French." He comments and she turns to him, clasping his hands.

"Please, please call me Belle." She insists. "I know in the studio I'm your physical therapist, but right now I'm your friend. Please call me Belle, it's going to be weird if I'm 'Miss French' in your home."

"I don't…" He hesitates, unsure of how to go about it, but Belle is already fawning over the kitchen.

"This is a beautiful kitchen." She gushes. "Amazing, absolutely amazing, I can't believe how nice this is."

"I'll take the credit for that." Mrs. Potts rounds the corner, looking Belle over carefully. "I'm Mrs. Potts, the housekeeper and cook. I'll be making your meals. If there's anything you need, you let me know."

"Oh!" Belle claps her hands delightedly. "Oh, that's too much, honestly. I don't want to be a burden."

"You're a guest." Mrs. Potts seems to soften at the honest, childlike delight on Belle's face. "We'd be happy to."

"And to think that I could've been staying with the half dozen girls at Ruby's place." Belle looks around in awe. "I'm beginning to think that physical therapy on demand isn't going to be enough to pay you back."
"Nonsense." He steers her to the living room, smiling as she ogles everything in sight, before showing where his home office is located, and finally to her room. She steps inside, gasping, and he has to admit that Mrs. Potts has indeed outdone herself with it.

"This is…. Beyond words." She says haltingly. The bed is half turned down, with cheery bright sheets for Belle. A vase of roses are beside the bed, and the open window lets the light stream in. "I can't… I can't accept all this, it's far too nice for me."

"No, it's not." He says quietly and she looks at him in surprise. "Come, let's let Jefferson in to drop off your boxes. I have one more thing to show you before you unpack." He offers her his hand and she takes it easily, smiling. He leads her to his personal favorite room in the house. With a smile back at her, he opens the door.

"Oh my god." Belle's hands cover her mouth in shock and for a second, he feels irrationally proud, that he's managed to surprise and please her so. "Oh my… Mr. Gold!"

"Yes?" He leans against the plush leather armchair so his knee can rest, smiling at her.

"You didn't tell me that… This." She gestures to the walls of books and the evenly spaced chairs and tables.

"You brought an e-reader." He says innocently.

"Screw the e-reader." She mutters, running her fingers along the spines. "Oh my god, you've got every book imaginable in here… Is that a first edition Sherlock Holmes?" She stops, looking at him in astonishment.

"Indeed."

"You have made a big mistake." She informs him, pulling a book on the history of Scottish kings. "I may never move out."

"I should've known." He mummers, picking up his own book he'd left off reading and settling in in the chair kitty corner from her. They settle into a comfortable silence, reading until Mrs. Potts appears.

"Miss French, if there's anything I can wash for you, please let me know." She says and Belle jumps up.

"Oh no, no, I can do that." She insists. "You don't want to be washing my dirty yoga things, I'm sure of it."

"I'd be quite happy to." Mrs. Potts grabs Belle by the arms. "More than happy, sweet girl."

"Well, if you need any help." She slowly nods and Mrs. Potts pats her cheek before looking over at him.

"Do you need anything for supper tonight, sir?"

"No." He closes his book with a small smile. "We will be dining out tonight, but home after our appointment. Perhaps a spot of tea before bed?"

"Of course." She nods and disappears. Belle turns to him and he can't help but smile back at her.

"You, Mr. Gold, are full of surprises."
"That is the aim." He stands. "Go, unpack. I'll let you know when Jefferson is ready to take us to supper."

"Oh yeah." She gathers up the seven books she's already picked out. "Speaking of that, where are we going?"

"Is Tamarind alright?" He asks and Belle trips.

"What?" She looks at him. "You've got reservations there?"

"Yes. If you'd prefer that we go somewhere else, I can arrange that, though it may take me a little longer." He admits and she snaps her jaw shut.

"No, Tamarind is perfect." She seems a little stunned. "I just… I don't know if I have anything fancy enough for it."

"You'll be fine." He pauses at her room and a little distractedly she meanders in. "You let me know if you need anything."

"I thought you didn't like buying me things." She teases and he flinches at the reminder of his previous mistake.

"That was a stupid thing to say, and that was before I considered us… Friends. And as I recall, you made me pay for it with tea and a story." He reminds her and she gives a little shrug, and then hesitates.

"Thank you." She spills the books onto the bed and then turn and grabs him into an abrupt hug. "Thank you, thank you. This is crazy, you doing all this for me. And I can't thank you enough."

"No need to." He says, slightly uncomfortable. "You just… Make yourself at home, alright?"

"Of course." She leans back from him, grinning, before humming and opening one of her boxes. He leaves her to it, walking away with the smell of her hair still filling his nose.

When they get home from dinner and the studio, he asks Mrs. Potts to bring them tea. He's unsure of what they're going to do now, if Belle will want to be with him or left alone. He gets his answer when Belle appears from dropping things off in her room, beaming at him and taking up what he suspects will become her spot, in a large, red chair near the fire.

"This is unbelievable." She murmurs, grabbing one of the many books she's already marked.

"I'm glad you like it." He responds, and it's true. He does, because so few things seem to give him happiness, but the delight on Belle's face over these books, more so than expensive restaurants or nice cars, has created a bright ball of light somewhere near his heart.

"Tea?" Mrs. Potts edges into the room for the tray and Belle leaps up, helping her with it.

"Thank you so much for this, but I'm sure you're exhausted." Belle says quickly. "Go home, get some rest. I've got this."

"Sir?" She looks over Belle's head at him and he gives a nod. "Then I'll take my leave. Have a nice night, the both of you."

"And you." Belle grins and Mrs. Potts departs with a smile. "This is a beautiful tea set, Mr. Gold."

"Why thank you." He watches as she fills up a cup. "And I think you're right, it does seem strange to
use such formal names at home. I'm sure you know I'd prefer you not use it in public."

"Of course." She says easily, moving to fill a second cup. "And what is it you'd like for me to call you?"

"How about Sloan?" He suggests and she makes a little face, setting the pot down gently.

"Sure, but it just doesn't feel like you." She protests, picking both cups up. "I could call you…"

"Master?" He tries and she drops a cup in surprise.

"Mr. Gold, I—"

"That one was a quip, dearie." He says quickly and Belle laughs after a breathless moment, bending down to grab the cup.

"I'm, I'm so sorry, but it's chipped. You can hardly see it." She holds up the cup with remorse.

"Well, it's just a cup." He reminds her and she smiles reassuringly, cleaning up the mess before refilling it and bringing it to him. He chooses the chipped cup and they settle in their own chairs, opening their own books. He glances at her out of the corner of his eyes, admiring how the lights flicker across her hair and features. For a moment, he feels a strange sensation. He's content.

Over the next couple weeks, they settle into a routine, easy as breathing. Belle is up when he's going to work, usually getting ready to head to the studio. They share breakfast and tea, moving around in quiet companionship. They ride to work together, and depending on the day, either have their appointment or go their separate ways. Belle makes it home before him, and he will usually find her one of two places when he gets home - the library, curled up with a new book every night or in the kitchen, cooing over photos of Jefferson's daughter or Mrs. Potts's several grandchildren.

He'd been right to assume that everyone would love her within days of her beginning her stay. He realizes in amusement that his own staff would pick her over him in a heartbeat. Even his own assistant Mary Margaret has turned traitor, won over by yoga classes and friendly emails. When he had asked Belle how she does it, makes everyone love her with a flutter of her eyelashes and a smile, she tartly reminds him of just how many people do dislike her and he thinks about how he could evict every one of them.

Their nights after work are his favorite. Once they've both eaten, sometimes together, often separate, they'll retire to the library to read together in front of a crackling fire, sipping on tea. His favorite nights are when he'll stretch his leg out with a grimace and Belle will be by his side in the blink of an eye, massaging it. He doesn't allow himself to think that perhaps he's just a little dramatic.

He knows, however, that this peace won't last forever. Something is going to happen, someone is going to overstep and then, in order, there will be awkwardness, strangeness, and regret. He's not sure when it will happen, just that it will. Then, on a gloomy winter day, it does.

He's gotten out of the shower; towel wrapped around his waist, recalling that he'd fallen asleep that night wondering and worrying about a collection of contracts on his desk. He grumbles and secures the towel around his waist, grabbing his cane and going to make sure that the papers are in his briefcase, least he forget and get to the office without them.

"Oh- god!" Belle shrieks, when he exits his study. She's standing in the hallway, still in her pajamas, staring at him in astonishment.
"Belle." He gasps. "You—I didn’t—Papers!"

"You have a lizard tattoo?" Belle has apparently completely forgotten he's nearly naked, turning to look at him, eyebrows furrowed curiously. He gapes at her then looks at the ink on his arm briefly.

"Aye." He's beyond bewildered, mostly because he's standing in the hallway of his home, naked, wrapped in a damp towel, and a suddenly very awake Belle is looking at him with far too bright eyes.

"I did not envision you as the kind to have a tattoo." She's got her head tilted, lips pursed. "Not with the whole three piece suits and sleeve garters and the like, tattoos didn't come to mind."

"We all have our wild years, Miss French." He says wryly and she grins, nodding at his point.

"Yeah, and I spent the first two years of college with a god awful lip ring. Even Ruby hated it, that's how you know it's bad." She reveals and he wonders what she'd look like with one. "Tell me about it."

"The tattoo?" He asks in disbelief. "Are you aware, dearie, that I am rather naked right now?"

"Sure." Belle shrugs, maddeningly unflustered. "But you're air-drying and I'm a curious doctor who's seen plenty of naked bodies before. Where'd you get that, and why a lizard?"

"I… Don't remember." He mutters, dry mouthed now that she's moving closer to him.

"Don't remember where you got it?" She raises an eyebrow, a couple steps away, looking at the tattoo curiously.

"Scotland." He says shortly and she nods, like she'd been expecting that. She looks at the tattoo intently, a little gecko like thing.

"Don't remember why then."

"Not particularly no." The words to explain it are there, on his tongue, to tell her the story of the young boy, so brass and intent on changing the world, ready to make his mark, thinking himself invincible. It'd been a lizard for some inane reason, nothing special. He's only kept it all these years because it reminds him, a little fondly, of the years before he became broken.

"I like it." Belle declares. "Do you have any other surprises that I should know about? Is there a back piece I've been missing?"

"Into tattoos?" He teases, before he can stop himself and Belle wags her eyebrows suggestively.

"Don't hate them." Then she bursts into a sunny smile. "My ex, the one I told you about before, got this massive tribal tattoo. He's a complete idiot, but it kind of sparked something in me. With the people that come into my studio, you get all kinds. No judgment from me, ever."

"No judgment." He echoes, thinking how nice of a thought that is. To tell her everything.

"Nope, not even on tattoos that have seen better days." She leans just a little closer, close enough to touch, and squints. "It really could use a touchup, if you want a little judgment."

"This thing is older than you." He scoffs and is surprised when Belle laughs in delight, a twinkling sound.

"Unlikely." With a wink, she disappears back into his room and the moment has passed. He drifts
back to his room to get dressed, his only reassurance that his worst nightmare has come true, him basically naked in front of Belle, and it'd ended far better than he could've ever hoped.

They learn to live together a little better after the tattoo incident, more relaxed with being in each other's space, passing with ease. The days are getting colder and the snow is piling up, making walking difficult. It's getting closer and closer to the Christmas season, and he's delighted to realize that Belle is going to likely be here for the holiday. No mention of an apartment has been made and he wants to keep it that way.

"You know, you really should have Christmas decorations up." Belle leans against the doorway of his home office one night, not stepping foot inside, but watching him carefully.

"Should I?" He says absentmindedly, focused on his papers.

"Yes. Especially if he's coming home." Belle says quietly and his head snaps up, looking at her. She doesn't say a word, just stands there in those cotton pajamas with her robe tied loosely around her. Her hair is down and loose, still wet waves from her shower, and her feet are covered in fluffy socks with the face of a bunny on them.

"He." He repeats and Belle stands her ground.

"Yes. Mary Margaret told me there's a he. She told me that I should talk to you about bringing him home. And everyone around here whispers about him when you're not here. Little Gold, they call him." Belle's expression is impossible to read. "You have a son."

"You have no right sticking your nose there." His tone is sharp, but Belle doesn't seem to care.

"Probably not, but I know how lonely it is, being an only child. Not having a mother. Good parents don't shut their children out, trust me. Perhaps you should consider doing the same." She declares and then strides away in her ridiculous socks before he can retort. He grumbles, trying to go back to his documents before realizing she's completely thrown his focus. He gets up and heads for the kitchen, fully intent on yelling at her, before finding her sitting there with a cup of tea in her hand and the chipped one waiting for him.

"Miss French." He snaps and she does nothing but observe him from over her teacup. "You have no right poking about in my personal life."

"No, Miss French your physical therapist does not." She agrees easily. "But Belle your friend does. Now sit, drink the tea, and talk to me."

"I am not going to—" He starts, but Belle cuts that off with a sharp look. He marvels, even as he slumps into a chair, that she missed her calling as a middle school teacher.

"Tea." She points to it and he drinks, noting with disgruntlement that she'd made his favorite of her blends, a calming minty one. "Now talk."

"I don't have to tell you a damned thing." He snarls, mostly out of habit, and Belle doesn't seem to mind that his tone would send a normal person running for the hills.

"No, you don't. But you're going to go mad one day from all the things you keep inside. I shudder to even think what your hips must be like." She takes another sip of tea and he looks at her, offended.

"What's wrong with my bloody hips?"
"We hold emotions in our hips. And with everything you repress, you must be nothing but knots. But that is a discussion for another yoga session." She quickly prevents him from changing the subject. "Tell me about your son. You don't have to tell me anything personal, like his name or where he is. I just want to know why you've never mentioned him."

"It's not a topic I'm open to discussing." He shifts uncomfortably.

"That implies there is a subject you're open to discussing." Belle doesn't bat an eye when he shoots her a dirty look.

"He is… My pride and joy. My greatest and best accomplishment. They say when you become a parent, your heart lives outside your body and that was never more true than the moment I held him. Everything that I've done since that moment has been for him. The houses, the cars, the art, the everything. It's for him."

"You love him very much." Belle realizes quietly, swirling her tea. "So why isn't he here?"

"I did something." He's running his finger over the chip in the cup. "He asked something of me, to give up something. And… I couldn't. I wouldn't. I betrayed him, and that was the last we saw of each other."

"But he's your son." Belle frowns slightly, looking at him. "He loves you, unconditionally. Nothing you could do would change that. You are each other's family."

"Yes, it can." He's got no energy left to be angry; he's been worn into deep, deep sadness by now. "He is a 14 year old boy, Belle, and he begged me not to send him to boarding school. He pleaded with me to leave the city and move with him, conduct work from afar. He cried the week before I sent him away, and then the day of, didn't say a word to me. We haven't spoken since."

"Surely you've spoken. To know he's alright, that he got settled." Belle looks a little alarmed.

"To Mary Margaret, yes. He's always liked her. But to me, directly, no." He admits, taking another swig of tea and wishing it was something stronger. "He has nothing left to say to me, I'm afraid."

"Bullshit." She declares and he looks at her, a little alarmed by the language. "I call bullshit. You adore him, obviously. And he loves you, clearly. He wanted to stay with you. Why didn't you let him?"

"Because." He looks away from her, pained, but he can't stop the words. "Because I am a monster, and if I had kept him around, he'd learn from me to be wicked and cruel. I have always wanted him to have the best shot at life he could possibly have. The best shot is being nothing like me. I'll work myself into the ground and then he'll be left with enough money to never worry about making a name for himself like I did."

"Why do you do that?" Belle demands and he looks up quizzically. "Why do you throw money at a problem instead of handling it? He doesn't want an inheritance, he wants a father."

"Because I am a coward." He says flatly. "And money is power and power is bravery, when you have enough of it. I cannot bear to fail him, so instead I buy him a place at the best school, I dress him in the finest clothes, and make sure he wants for nothing."

"He wants you!" Belle is yelling now and he's a little confused by it, but he rises to the challenge all the same. "He doesn't want fancy things. He wants you and you're blind to that!"

"No one wants me! I am a gimp, a cripple, a shark and a beast." He snaps. "I am an asshole and a
miser, the villain in everyone's lives. He does not want me. No one does."

"I do." Belle says quietly and he nearly falls off his chair. "I want to know you. I want to be your friend. You are not a gimp or a beast, though a case can be made for an asshole when the weather is cold and you haven't had your morning coffee." He snorts despite himself. "You are a man, and a father, and a thoughtful, considerate human when you want to be. And I know that your son wants you too."

"His name is Baen." He says softly, her revelation shattering a layer of ice around his heart. "I call him Bae. Baen Matheson Gold."

"That is... The most Scottish name I have ever heard." Belle comments and that breaks the tension in the air. "You might as well have named him 'Scotty McScottish' and done away with it."

"I did consider it." He says dryly. "Lacks good nicknames however."

"How far away did you send him?" Belle asks and he knows there's nothing malicious there, nothing to put his son in any danger.

"Massachusetts." He tells her with a heavy sigh. "Andover. It's one of the best schools in the country. He should've been thrilled. He's smart, and this means he'll get into any Ivy League of his choice. He knows it's for the best."

"He's four hours away." Belle says quietly. "And you won't say a word to him. He's angry, I'm sure, but he can't be too mad. You're his father. Is he close to his mother?"

"She's dead." He says harshly and Belle physically leans away from him at this, bringing her teacup up in front of her as if it's a shield. "I'm sorry, but that's a story you do not want to hear."

"Try me." Belle stands up and gets the teapot from the stove. "I think I've about heard it all."

"Alright." He suddenly throws caution to the wind, wanting to see her startled or scared, for once in her life. He wants her to lose her damn control. "You want to hear one of your damn stories Belle?"

"Yes." She sets the teapot and cups out of his reach and if he hadn't been furious with her, he would've been amused to see how she's picked up on his habit of shattering things when he's in a temper.

"Once upon a time, in Glasgow Scotland, a drunk and drug addict hooked up. That union resulted in a screaming baby boy. The mother loved heroin more than her child, so she would disappear for months. The father, a drunk, didn't do much better and the little boy was left to his own devices, raised by the spinsters next door who kept him alive with scraps and fairy tales. He was a cunning child and what his parents didn't teach him, the streets did. He grew up tough and fast, learning that the only power in this world is money, and nothing else matters.

"He's barely in his twenties when history repeats itself. He's an addict, she's a drunk. They get together and decide that a new life would be better. They come to New York, living in squalor, high and drunk. And lo and behold, he's his father's son. She gets knocked up, and it's a blessing and a curse all at once, because he gets sober, finally, and drags the bitch, kicking and screaming, into sobriety with him. 9 long months, slapping needles and bottles out of her hands, trying to scrape together enough money to buy diapers.

"And then he holds his son. And he knows there's nothing in this world he won't do to protect him. And he's done evil, vile things. And in that moment, he becomes someone different. He spends the first year of his son's life trying to pull them out of poverty by their bootstraps. The mother disappears
to the docks, whoring herself off to anyone that'll have her. And one night, as they sleep in the flimsy apartment building, he awakes to smoke.

"The place has gone up like tinder. All he can do is grab his son and try to run. Run like hell to protect his heart, his life. He gets to the door and the ceiling comes down, trapping him. All he can do is push his son to safety. Watches as he toddles outside and prays. Gets himself free. Gets outside, grabs the toddler, and runs. For his life. Never looks back. 15 people die in that fire, he never walks on two healthy legs again, and he receives another blessing and curse that night.

"Gets taken in by a seemingly kind old man, with a soft spot for kids and father's who are made of steel and venom, ready to cut from the world what they think is their due. And within a couple years, he's learned. He's built the beginnings on an empire. And he's become a beast. The first thing he does is cut his child's mother from their lives with nothing more than a flourish of a pen. And when he gets word, three years later, that she's perished of an overdose, he feels nothing but sick joy, because now the boy is his, and no one can take him.

"By the time the boy is old enough to go to school, his father owns buildings and is known for beating those who cannot pay. He's a monster. A beast. Everyone is terrified. But he's not done climbing. When the wolf disguised as an old man dies, the kingdom triples in size. And the beast grows too, until no one dares approach the castle, with it's walls of thorns and gates. He builds his empire on fear and rules and no mercy.

"So do you see Belle, do you see why I sent him away? Because I am my father's son, but I will never let Bae become my son. I will force him to break this cycle. He will do amazing things; he will live a bright life. He will be someone like you, someone who is nothing but pure light and goodness. I will not ruin him, like I ruin everything else. So that is why he won't speak to me, why he's not coming home, and why I don't need Christmas decorations."

He ends his rant panting with anger and Belle is still holding the teacup, looking at him with a carefully closed expression. He waits for a second, sure that she is going to bolt, or slap him, or report him to the police, or take his story and run to the tabloids. He does not expect her to put the teacup down, carefully, and then walk over to him and gently take his face into her hands.

"You are not unworthy of love." She says softly. "And you are not this untamable beast you make yourself out to be. You are a good man."

"You know nothing, you naive, sweet girl." He mutters and her mouth threatens to twitch up into a smile. "I am a beast. It's my nature."

"No it isn't." She's still got his face captured between her two hands and he realizes this is as close as they've ever been outside of her studio, in the light where he can see just how blue her eyes are, how long her lashes are, how beautiful she is. His nerve endings are on fire, blazing, trying to adjust from his temper to this, his attraction to her.

"No?" He breathes and she shakes her head slowly, not breaking eye contact with him. One thumb begins to stroke his cheek while the other hand travels down to carefully splay across his chest. They both look at her small palm on his black silk shirt.

"You have something good and beautiful, hidden inside of you." She mummers and he raises his eyes to hers, hardly daring breathe. "Just as I have something dark and wicked inside of me."

"You have nothing of the sort." He whispers back, thinking about how this girl, this beautiful, stunning girl who is nothing but his own personal sunbeam, could have anything twisted inside of her.
"I think I could surprise you, Mr. Gold." Her breath almost tickles him.

"You already do." He finds himself hoping, wishing, wanting for her to lean in, to finally brush her lips over his.

"Now it's your turn." Her hand drifts from his cheek to run through his hair, tugging at the roots ever so slightly. "Surprise me and surprise him. Bring him home. I promise you'll spend Christmas with people that want you." Then, with a flash of something in those stunning blue eyes, she's disappeared and he's left standing in the kitchen with a cold cup of tea and an ache in his stomach that he hasn't felt in years.

AN: Ok, this was my favorite chapter to write so far, and I even slipped in a Sense8 reference, for those of you who can spot it! Hinting at the direction and things to come... Your reviews are better than heroin, leave me some?
"Good morning sir." Mary Margaret says cheerfully when he strides past her desk and into his office.

"With me. Right now." He growls and she blinks in surprise and then does as told. He throws his jacket in the vague direction of the coat stand and slams his briefcase on the desk.

"Sir." Mary Margaret looks at him in shock. "What in the world is going on, is everything ok?"

"No, it is bloody well not ok." He says from between gritted teeth and she looks alarmed.

"Is it your knee? What can I do?" She asks and he collapses into his chair, glaring at her.

"It's not my knee and you know it. It is about what you did, how you broke my trust!"

"No, I do not know what I did." She says calmly. "Please enlighten me sir, so I can at least defend myself."

"You told Belle about Bae." He spits and she raises one eyebrow. "You told her to convince me to bring him home."

"Oh, that." She casually sits across from him. "Yes, Belle and I had this conversation a couple days ago. I told her that you are a stubborn bastard when you want to be and that too often the wrong people end up paying that price."

"How dare you?" He yells and Mary Margaret looks up at him, eyes flashing. "That is not your place!"

"Not, it's not, it's yours, but since you sure as hell aren't going to do it, I thought I would give someone a nudge." Her iron spine is coming out now, straightening her up to face him. "Bae is the best child in the world and he deserves happiness, even if you don't think he can find it with you. He wants to come home and I'll be damned if you don't let him. And since clearly I can't talk sense into you, I thought I'd see if Belle had better luck."

"I will not let the chattering of two women tell me how to parent my son!" He roars and she rolls her eyes.

"We're not telling you how to do anything. We're just trying to tell you what to do." She grins as he gapes and flounders for something to say. "Bae should come home for Christmas."

"He'd be happier at school." He grumbles.

"Every kid wants Christmas at home." She reaches out and takes his hand. "Bring him back. If it goes poorly, I'll stop my crusade about all this and never bring it up. Deal?"

"Deal." He says between gritted teeth. "Arrange his travel plans. And call Belle, since I'm assuming she's going to want that information."

"Of course." Mary Margaret does a little curtsey before heading to the door. "Oh, and one more question, sir?"

"Yes?" He demands, irritated.

"When did she become Belle?" With a wink, she shuts the door. He hefts a glass paperweight for a
second, then takes a deep breath and thinks better of it. He settles down with work, thinking wryly
that someone will pay for the foul mood he's in today.

"Well hello you." Belle smiles when he walks into the kitchen. "I sent Mrs. Potts home, your meal is
in the oven. I thought I'd make us some tea tonight, since I have a feeling that I'm in for a fight again
tonight."

"Oh, so are we calling what happened last night a fight?" He questions and she turns to him with a
smile.

"Our first fight. I have to admit, it was a doozy." She hands him his cup and sits across from him. "I
want to talk about it. I want to talk about what you told me last night."

"I'd rather not." He declares and Belle raises an eyebrow.

"I don't care. We're going to." She fixes him with her blue eyes and he's transfixed despite himself.
"Because you told me a story last night. And we're built on stories and trust and a lot of tea, aren't
we? So talk to me about this. Not long, I promise. But then I'll tell you a story."

"You're going to ask questions now aren't you?" He says tiredly. He's learned in the months since
meeting Belle that once she has something that puzzles her, she will stop at nothing to research and
figure it out.

"Yes, I am." She's watching him carefully. "Should I remove all breakables within reach or go find
the stuff you'd be comfortable breaking? I know you hate that vase in the living room."

"Leave the vase." He traces the rim of the teacup, grazing the missing chip. "My anger is…
Controlled now. What questions do you have?"

"You were an addict. That's why you wouldn't take the drugs Whale prescribed. Because you're
sober and don't want to relapse." She says quietly and he nods jerkily.

"Nearly 15 years."

"That's amazing, that you've been fighting something that dark inside you for that long." She reaches
out and takes his hand, running her thumb over him. The contact sparks something inside him, but
he's too busy quelling the urge to run to dwell on it.

"Do not think I am some noble man, Belle. I am a bad, awful man. Do you not understand that I
have done horrible, awful things?" He demands and she finishes off the cup of tea before standing
and opening the cabinet above the frige, pulling out a bottle of Johnnie Walker, the expensive blue
label. He admires her taste almost as much as he dreads what's coming.

"We're going to need some of this, aren't we?" She muses and he's already grabbing tumblers. "I'm
assuming if you have it in your house, that means you won't relapse on it?"

"Pills send me. The drink does nothing. Now what?" He demands. "What else do you have
questions about?"

"You." She tosses back her scotch in one go and he watches, impressed, as she refills it without
blinking.
"Well then ask away, if you're going to get me drunk." He holds out his glass so she can pour him a
double.

"Why do you think you're so awful? Why are you so certain that your son is going to be so miserable
if he stays with you?" She asks and he groans. She sits next to him, their knees brushing. "Why are
you so insistent on pushing everyone out, that people don't want to be with you?"

"Because in my experience, they don't." He snaps and she just bats her eyes. "My parents didn't
want me, my wife didn't want me, I didn't even want me! That's why I turned to the drugs, that's why
I turned to work, all to distract me from the fact that I cannot bear the sight of me."

"And what sight is that? What do you see when you look into the mirror, Rodric Mackay Sloan?"
She questions.

"I see a boy named Rumford. I see a scared little coward who couldn't do anything." His brogue is
thickening in his anger. "I see the crippled man who had to take shelter with someone stronger, the
man who couldn't protect what was his. I see a weak bastard."

"Your real name is Rumford. You changed it. Why?" She leans forward, hand on his good knee.

"Why would I keep the name my parents gave me when that was all they did for me?"

"Because names mean something. That's why you picked a new one. Because you think it will
separate you from the man you were." She brings her hand up to his face.

"Anything." He whispers. "Anything to keep me from going back to that. Anything in the world."

"So why do you think you're a monster?" She presses and he stares down into his scotch.

"Because I am. Because I know what people say about me. That I'm a beast, I'm the wicked man that
takes their money and waits, with baited breath, to steal their homes and businesses out from under
them. I am wicked and I take joy from accumulating power and favor and money from people. I like
it, I'm not like you, I don't like helping people like you do." He sighs and can't help but lean into her
touch, just a little. "You talk about that good inside of me Belle, and it's not there, it just isn't."

"Do you remember what else I said?" She asks and gets up. Air rushes to fill the space where she
was and he gasps, just a little, because it seems colder when she's gone.

"You said you have darkness in you." He eyes her as she refills their glasses and comes back,
scooting herself just a little closer again, her knee between his legs. "And tell me Belle, how can
someone like you have anything dark in such a beautiful, light soul?"

"Because no one is good and pure all the time." There's a look on Belle's face that makes his skin
crawl in a pleasurable way. "And sometimes I am bad and wicked and I like it. Just like sometimes
you are good and kind and you like it. That's why I'm here and you smile when I make your coffee
in the morning. And that's why I laughed when you threw that glass chess set against the wall. What
did Regina do that made you so mad?"

"She has the incredible talent of being short-sighted and dim. And I have the incredible misfortune of
being the one she most likes to consult with." He explains, watching her lips twitch in amusement.

"So do you see?" Belle leans until their foreheads are pressed together. "We are all good and bad and
lovely and wicked. Do you see, Rum? You're not a monster, you're a man."

"And you are too good." He stares at her with open admiration. "How? How is one person so good
"Yoga." She grins widely. "A lot of yoga. You're already on the right track. So you see? We'll figure it out. Together."

"You, Miss French, know more of my secrets than one person does." He looks at her with open fear and she raises a glass to that. "And even if admitting it makes me a coward, I am terrified you won't keep them."

"Don't be." Belle closes her eyes and moves so her head is resting in the crook of his neck. "I'm contractually obligated by law to keep them, remember?" He can't help the chuckle that escapes him.

"There really are no women like you, are there?"

"I'm sure there are lots of yoga teaching, sushi loving, broke former med students that are essentially homeless." She grins at him, getting up and putting their dishes in the sink. "I'm just the one you got stuck with."

"He's coming home." He admits, the drink going to his head finally. It dulls his senses, simplifying it down to three trains of thought. He wants to tell Belle who his son is, he wants to scoop her up into his arms and kiss her senseless, and he needs to go to the bathroom.

"Baen?" She looks at him in surprise. "Really? You're going to bring him back for Christmas?"

"I'll leave you a credit card. You can get decorations. Take Mrs. Potts, I'm sure she'll love the outing." He gets up, stumbling just slightly and Belle is there to take his hand in support.

"Do you mind me being here for it? Honestly?" She asks, as they stagger down the hallway together.

"Belle, I'm not sure I'd get through it if you weren't here." He stops them at his doorway, her face blurring around the edges. "Please, don't go." She gently runs her fingers through his tangled hair.

"Don't worry. I won't. I'll stay." She assures him and then trudges to her own room. He's too much of a coward to tell her that he hadn't wanted her to leave his side at all.

He's awoken the next morning with a pounding headache and a blaring alarm clock. He groans loudly, rolling over and attempting to stop it. After fumbling around with it for a couple long moments, it goes quiet and he leans back, holding his temples firmly between his hands so his head doesn't fall apart. Without bothering to get dressed he heads for the kitchen, thinking only about coffee and getting something in his stomach.

"Tell me there's coffee." He mutters, peeking through his cracked eyelids and seeing that Belle is slumped at the table.

"There is." She slides him a cup and he takes it gratefully. "I know I am obligated to do therapy with you this morning but how mad would you be at me if I asked that we do it here instead of the studio?"

"I will make you a new deal." He flinches at her voice. "We both go back to bed. Have a sick day. Promise to never drink scotch again, and do our session tonight, when I don't feel the overwhelming urge to vomit."

"Well, you drive a hard bargain Mr. Gold." She mummers and he looks at her in surprise.
"I thought we decided on a different name last night." He says softly and she looks up, pushing a curl that's escaped her messy bun out of her face.

"I didn't know if I was allowed to use it in the daylight." Her face breaks into a sunny smile. "If you don't like it, I'll go back to Sloan, but Rum..." She gets up and stands beside him, putting her palm on his cheek. "Fits."

"If you say so dearie." He holds very still, not wanting to scare her touch away. She pauses a moment longer then yawns.

"Then I'm going to go read, very, very quietly." She informs him and disappears. It's not until she's gone does he realize she's one of the first women in recent memory to know his real name.

Mrs. Potts, surprised to see the two of them sitting contentedly in the library with coffee, makes them a brunch and seems amused that Belle can only stomach down toast. If she saw the empty scotch bottle on the counter, she says nothing and simply puts it in the recycling. Afterwards, he decides that work can wait no longer and leaves Belle in the library to head to his office.

"Sir, are you sick?" Mary Margaret sounds worried when he calls and he smiles, just slightly at her concern.

"Simply feeling under the weather. I will be working from home. I just wanted to check in."

"Oh, well, everything's under control!" She sounds relieved and cheerfully updates him about the status of things. She ends with a long pause and then requests, "And could you put Belle on speaker?"

"For?" He asks, standing and bringing the phone with him to the library, where Belle is engrossed in a book.

"I've got Baen's travel plans. I figured that Belle would want to hear them too, if she's staying." Mary Margaret explains and Belle looks up, closing her book and raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, Mary Margaret, I'm here." She calls and he sits in the chair nearest her. "We both are."

"Well, Baen's flight will arrive at 7:30 pm at LaGuardia on Tuesday." She explains and Belle looks at him.

"If you'll still be at work, I can accompany Jefferson to pick him up." She says quietly and he pats her hand.

"No, I think it's best I go. You remain here, we can have tea when we return." He manages a nervous smile and Belle nods.

"He'll fly back out in three weeks." Mary Margaret tells them. "And not a moment sooner."


"Yes, hey Belle, are you under the weather too or will there still be class this evening?" There's humor in her voice and Belle disguises a smile with a pretend cough.

"I think I've caught what Mr. Gold has. I'm sure I'll be over it by class tomorrow. I'll see you then?"

"Of course. Have a good day!" She hangs up and with a wry smile, he sets the phone next to Belle.

"I do believe that the presumptuous tone my assistant is taking is directed at us." He tries to make it
into a joke, and Belle laughs, throwing one hand across his chest before getting up and stretching.

"Well, sharing a little bug sounds better than admitting we're hung over and needed rest." She smiles and holds out her hand. He looks at it then her face with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"Credit card, remember? I have your blessing to turn this place into Christmas." She reminds him merrily. "So you go work so you'll be in a better mood, and I will make this place look like Rockefeller Center."

"Tree and all, I'm sure." He hands over a platinum card. "No decorations in my office, I beg of you."

"We'll see." She says mischievously and disappears.

"Why do I keep making stupid decisions in regards to that woman?" He wonders aloud, heading back to his office.

"What in the world is going on in the foyer?" Mrs. Potts asks, appearing with more tea and he looks up.

"Let me guess. Belle has returned with boxes. Lots and lots of boxes. Probably green and red boxes, full of tinsel, sparkling, and smelling of pine." He sorts the papers on his desk neatly.

"Yes, how'd you know?" Mrs. Potts frowns slightly at him.

"You better go help her set up Christmas, unless you want your house steamrolled, Mrs. Potts." He informs her and she goes, astonished. When he finally leaves his office, he sees the beginning of Christmas.

"I think that'll be all today, Mrs. Potts." Belle looks around at the few decorations they have put up. "Why don't you go? I can make us some leftovers and we just have our session tonight."

"Are you sure?" The elderly woman looks at him for confirmation and he gives a little wave of his fingers. "Well, I have to say Miss French, I've never gotten to leave so early so often."

"That's because I'm here now to remind him to eat." Belle grins at her. "Go home, put your feet up."

"You two have a nice night." She beams and totters off.

"This doesn't seem like much." He comments, looking around at the decorations she's put up in the foyer.

"You wait. I'll have tomorrow while you're at work to complete the rest. I was thinking though, we'd save the tree for when Baen gets home. I wasn't certain if you had any traditions you'd prefer just be the two of you but..." She disappears behind the fridge door. "Let me know."

"No, no traditions." He admits. "Usually just gifts the morning of, not much more. What about you Belle, don't you have a family to celebrate with?" Belle pokes her head out, forehead wrinkled.

"If I'm intruding, please just tell me."

"No, not at all." He says hastily. "I just don't want to take you away from your family." The lie is sweet in his mouth.
"Oh, you won't." She breaks into a smile. "My dad is going down south this year. He… Misses my mom pretty bad around this time. He's wanted to go to this convention for gardening for years now, and I told him this year to go. I figured that being somewhere warm would help take his mind off things."

"You're a good daughter." He observes as she starts cooking.

"No, not at all. We fight more often than we should, and I'm trying to change that, but he just… He's so invested in what he thinks is my best future. If he'd had his way, I'd be married with a dozen kids by now, and never have gone past my high school graduation."

"A mind like yours should not be wasted." He says fiercely and means it. She gives a little shrug.

"Well, I like to think that it hasn't. I certainly wish I could travel more, but living in New York can be enough." She turns and gives him a sly smile. "Besides, a certain man once told me that I'm needed to make sure he doesn't run. And I keep my promises."

AN: A little explanation in response to a couple reviews -(which are so amazing, please keep them coming!) This Mr. Gold is derived from the wonderful character of Rumple/the Dark One/Mr. Gold in our lovely OUAT universe, but since it is an AU, I've also added elements of Bobby himself and other characters that he's played- Gaz, Begbie, etc. Hence the addiction, the tattoo, the Johnnie Walker reference, and more that you'll see coming up! Please send in a review, they're bright shiny parts of my day!
Snow Day

Keep her promises she does. When he comes home on Friday after work, it looks like Christmas has blown up in his house. Glitter, reindeer, trees, twinkling lights, the works. All except a large pine Christmas tree in the library and a crate of ornaments that mock him. Belle leaves for the weekend to spend a little time with her father before he flies out, meaning he has a weekend alone. He decides to take advantage of it and go Christmas shopping, getting gifts for his son and his immediate staff.

He's about to head home with packages for Mrs. Potts to wrap when he passes a bookstore and a jewelry store, side by side. For a moment he stops to savor the irony of it, then heads into the bookstore. He finds Belle's gift within minutes and purchases it, walking home with a whistle and a jaunt in his step. Sunday night when he meets her at the studio for their session, he walks in and is alarmed to find her sitting at her desk, sniffling.

"Belle." He says instantly. "What's wrong? You're upset."

"It's nothing!" She says promptly, jumping up and swiping at the tears. "It's nothing at all. I just… Saw my ex boyfriend when I was home."

"And he made you cry?" He growls, walking over to her until he is kneeling in front of her, taking her chin so she will look at him.

"Stop, your knee!" She stands, making him rise, and he doesn't let go, tilting his head in wonder than even as she's upset, she's thinking of him and his pain. "Don't… Don't hurt yourself."

"What did he do?" He enunciates his words carefully and she blinks, one more tear spilling out of her big blue eyes.

"He's getting married." She whispers and he stops himself from taking a step back. She's crying over his engagement- that can only mean one thing…

"And you wish it was you?" He asks through numb lips.

"No!" She says ferociously, cheeks going pink and he relaxes. "Not at all, never in a million years. It's just… Everyone kept commenting at how she's such a perfect match for him and how well they go together and making snide comments about how I seem destined to be alone forever and it's stupid but… I have just never felt so unwanted."

"I want you." He says quietly, heart in throat, and she snorts, wiping away her tears and turning her head so his hand rests on her cheek.

"And you're a good friend for saying so, but I am being silly, so silly. I am not the kind of girl who puts stock in what a boy thinks of me." She takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry, let's get on with your appointment." She gets up and goes to the studio door, drying her face on her shirt.

"Let's." He says quietly, wishing that for once, she'd understand.

Tuesday dawns overcast, threatening snow. When he limps to the kitchen, Belle is waiting with coffee and a warm compress. He sits down and she lays the compress over his knee instantly, pouring him coffee and sitting down across from him with a nervous expression.
"Therapy today?" She asks and he shakes his head.

"No, I don't quite think I'm in the mood."

"I didn't think you would be." She gets up and moves around, grabbing an apple and a knife, slicing it. "I think we could cut back on the sessions, if as long as I'm here, since we can do therapy at home most nights anyways. The heat is always beneficial, but you're making progress."

"Yes, I can feel the progress through the stabbing pains in my knee." He says archly and she gives him half the apple slices.

"I know it's tight this morning. If it's really bothering you that much, let's go massage it. However, if it's just your nerves about seeing your son tonight, then stop being a dick." She takes a bite of a slice.

"You are insufferable." He snaps and she takes another bite, looking at him balefully. "My knee is destroyed and you have the audacity to deny my pain? Who do you think you are?" He throws the apple slices across the kitchen, looking at her, fuming. She observes them for a moment, and then gets up.

"So it does hurt that bad." She says quietly. "C'mon then, let's go."

"To where?" He says crabbily, taking her hands and letting her haul him up reluctantly. She takes him to his room, stepping inside without hesitation, guiding him to his bed. For a wild second, he imagines just what she's going to do- push him down, climb on top, bend down to kiss him...

"Lay down. This is as good a massage table as we're going to get. I'll see if I can loosen it up before you go to work today, but you'd best call Mary Margaret and have a compress on hand at work." She advises.

"Belle." He calls, when she reaches the doorway. "Why? Why do you do that? Stay when I don't want you to?"

"Because that's when you need me most." Her face softens into a sad smile. "And Rum?"

"Yes?"

"I'm nervous too." With that, she heads to the kitchen to get her things. By the time she's done, the pain has lessened to manageable and he needs to head to work. Before he gets out the front door he stops and turns, going back into the kitchen where Belle is making her lunch.

"Belle." He says quietly and she turns to him. "How many times have I told you thank you?"

"I'm not sure." She smiles, drying her hand on the towel. "I usually just assume that not getting something thrown at my head is a thank you."

"Come here." He requests and a little slowly, she does. Unsurely, because he hasn't done this willingly in what feels like ages, he takes her into his arms and holds her to his chest tightly. After a second, she throws her arms around him with gusto and squeezes. "Thank you." He whispers.

"Always." She gives him one last squeeze before leaning back and beaming at him. "Now go to work. Get your son. I'll see you and him soon."

"Ok." Stomping down his fear, he brushes her hair back, gives her a trembling smile, and tries not to think about how in 12 hours, Belle will be meeting his son and he will be home for the first time in months.
"Don't be nervous." Jefferson stands behind him at the airport. He resists the urge to turn and look at his valet.

"I'm not."

"Then try to look like you're not expecting to get shot." Jefferson mummers and he sighs. "He'll be excited to see you."

"You have been spending far too much time with Belle if you believe that." He grumbles and spots Jefferson's grin out of the corner of his eye.

"Can't blame me from that, can you?" This makes him turn around sharply but Jefferson nudges him to turn back around and he's frozen, watching the small figure heading towards him. Baen is carrying his bag slung over his shoulder and pulling a suitcase, his jacket loose and unbuttoned. He swallows, unaware that he's been holding his breath.

"Papa," Baen says cautiously and he stumbles forward to pull his son in a tight hug. "Oh, papa."

"Bae." He kisses his son's curls, holding back tears. "Oh, son, I am so sorry. So sorry. Do you forgive me?"

"What for?" Bae leans back and looks at him. "For sending me to school? I know I was upset, but I just missed you… And I didn't want to show it. I didn't know how to tell you."

"We can talk about it at home." He promises. "Over the next weeks, we will have all the time in the world to talk about it. Now c'mon, there's tea and someone I want you to meet waiting."

"Miss French." Bae says, as Jefferson leads them back to the waiting car. He looks at his son in surprise.

"Yes, how'd you know that?"

"Mary Margaret." Bae grins at him. "She told me not to be surprised that there's a lady living with you, and that you hadn't gotten married without telling me. She's your therapist, right?"

"Yes." A little relieved that he doesn't have to explain it all to his son, he throws an arm around his shoulders. "Yes, her name is Belle and I really think the two of you are going to get along."

"Then I can't wait to meet her."

"Belle!" He yells, when they walk into the house. He's giddy with happiness, that Bae is here and not furious with him, that he hasn't lost his son completely. It's like a high he hasn't felt in years.

"Oh, you're home!" She calls from the depths of the house and Bae glances up at him, raising an eyebrow. He just grins. A second later, Belle materializes, beaming. She's wearing a pretty burgundy red dress, her hair curly and pulled back in a loose pony. She looks gorgeous, and he's suddenly overcome with the urge to grab her and kiss her silly.

"Hi." Bae looks a little surprised, taking Belle in as she hurries for him. "You must be Belle."

"And you must be Baen." She pulls him into a hug. "Sorry, your father hates this too, but I hug."

"She hugs." Bae twists to look back at him and he gives a shrug, watching the scene unfold. Belle, chattering, pulls Baen into the kitchen, where Mrs. Potts has prepared several snacks. Belle is grilling
him with questions about school, about activities he participates in, and more. Baen eats and responds, while his father sits off to the side and watches, perfectly content.

"Ok, you must be tired." He interjects, when the debate about their Hogwarts houses doesn't seem to die down. "Why don't you wash up for bed, Bae? I'm sure you'll have plenty of time tomorrow to discuss Hufflepuff and Gryffindor."

"He's a Slytherin, isn't he?" Belle is watching him with a thoughtful expression and Baen nods seriously.

"I don't know what that means, but I am the father, now bed. Get." He orders and Baen grins at Belle, scrambling for his room.

"You did tell me he was amazing." Belle mutters, watching him go. "And you were not lying."

"He is." He agrees and Belle turns to him with a wide smile.

"You know, I've seen a lot of sides of you. I've seen Mr. Gold, RMS Gold, Sloan, Rum, and occasionally, you've been a little beastly. But I think my favorite side of you is papa."

"It won't last." He warns her, because he must. "It won't last, and soon you'll have no illusion of the man I am."

"Who said I had illusions of you in the first place?" Belle questions, standing. He does the same and she takes a step towards him, placing her hand on his cheek. This time, however, he reciprocates, gently stroking her cheek. "Thank you for letting me meet him. I know you don't like it but… Why are you so determined that the world not see the best part of you?"

"Because the world would take it and ruin it." He whispers. "He must be protected, good must be protected."

"You can protect something without hiding it away." She stretches up on her tippy toes and kisses his forehead. "Goodnight, Rum."

He's relieved to find that having Bae with them doesn't change their routine much. The adults get up in the morning and go to therapy and then work. Belle will be home before him and within just days of Bae returning, they're thick as thieves in a way that makes him just a little nervous. It's a natural rhythm, until the night he returns home after battling a blizzard to get in the front door.

"Dottie!" Bae is yelling, somewhere deep in the house and he's slightly convinced his son has gone mad, because he's never known a woman named Dottie a day in his life. He changes course from his office to the living room, where the source of the yelling is. His son must be in distress or drugged or something, because who the hell is Dottie?

"Ernie!" Belle's voice rings out from somewhere within the depths of the house and he stops, for a long second, trying to put two and two together before Belle appears in the hallway, holding a large bowl of popcorn. She stops at the sight of him and grins.

"Dottie, I presume." He says dryly and she beams.

"Yes, that's me. Are you here to watch movies with us?"

"What?" He asks but she's on the move again so he has no choice but to follow her into the living
room that is in a state of chaos. All of the furniture, his nice, expensive furniture has been rearranged so that essentially, in the middle of the room, is a fort or a nest of some sort. Bae is curled in the middle of it all, a blanket wound around him, in a comfy shirt and flannel pajama bottoms. An empty pizza box is strewn on the coffee table beside the couch, as well as empty bottles of pop, candy wrappers, and discarded bowls.

"Papa!" Bae says delightedly when he follows Belle into the living room, trying to take in the destruction. "You're home finally!"

"And I'm too late, it seems." He remarks, looking around in amazement. "Do you realize, Miss French, that that chair is worth more than your previous apartment?" Belle gives the embroidered chair that currently houses a stack of books within reach of the couch a second look.

"Mr. Gold, your left shoe is worth more than that apartment was." She says dismissively then grins at him with a twinkle in her eye. "That is why, as I recall it, I'm here in the first place."

"And what are you doing, now that you're here?" He looks out over the mess to give him an excuse not to have to look at Belle.

"Since I'm sure you didn't notice, the entire city of New York has come to a standstill." Belle looks out the open window at the feet of snow. He grunts to let her know that yes, he had noticed, and so had Jefferson. Mary Margaret had already yelled at him this morning, when he called from the office and demanded to know where she was. She'd given him some strong words about boundaries and then informed him that the city was essentially shut down and traveling was all but barred.

"It was indeed a peaceful day." He remarks and Belle rolls her eyes.

"You shouldn't have left. Tomorrow, you're staying. It's going to start snowing again tonight and you are not facing that tomorrow." She declares and when he opens his mouth, she holds up a hand. "Or Jefferson. His deserves a day with his daughter. You are staying home. Work from you office or, if it doesn't kill you, take a day off from deals."

"Yeah, papa." Bae is grinning, having found a staunch ally. "And you can stay with us in the dark castle."

"The what?" He turns to his son and Bae gestures to the mess that qualifies as a fort around him.

"Sorry. We started off a little dramatically, with some fairy tales." Belle admits. "But we're making our way through all the classics!"

"Am I to understand that in the hours I've been working, you've been having a movie marathon?" He's trying to wrap his head around it.

"Only the best." Bae pronounces. "Dottie likes sappy romance and comedy, but I'm making her love action."

"Yes, Dottie does love the romance and comedy." He says, glaring at Belle, who doesn't seem bothered in the slightest.

"We're about to start 12 angry men." She says innocently, hoisting up the bucket of popcorn. "Join us."

"What are my other options?" He grumbles and Bae consults his phone.

"Well, we could do Finding Nemo, E.T., or the Godfather. The second one." He lists off and he
turns to face his son in bewilderment.

"What kind of list are you going off of?"

"Nope, no switching, this is a classic, will completely change your mindset." Belle presses play on the remote and the large flat screen TV he'd bought on a whim lights up. She settles in next to his son with a well practiced ease and he's startled to recognize how calm and content Bae looks. They pass the bowl of popcorn between each other and he realizes that if they've really been doing this for the last 12 hours straight, of course they're comfortable with each other.

"Can I ask something?" He mummers in Bae's ear, when the movie is well underway.

"Yeah?" Bae replies, his eyes not leaving the screen.

"Why on earth are you calling each other Dottie and Ernie?"

"A League of Their Own." Bae explains. "It was the first movie we watched today. It was her mother's favorite."

"It was?" He turns to look at Belle sharply and she's a got a sad smile that twists her mouth.

"Yes, she always liked the idea of women getting to do exactly what men do. She was a very early feminist, and a staunch one. She raised me to be the same. We called each other Kit and Shirley."

"I didn't want to copy them, but she called me Ernie while we made sundaes and I called her Dottie and well," Bae shrugs. "You can't pick your nicknames, or I'd be something other than Little Gold."

"What's wrong with that?" He questions, affronted, and Bae kicks his legs, showcasing how long and gangly they are. Clearly he's gotten his height from his mother's side.

"Not so little." Belle remarks. "Now shush, this is an important part!" They obligingly turn back to the TV, though he's distracted watching Belle and Bae eating popcorn and mummer comments on the movie back and forth.

"You're right, that's amazing." Bae says, when the movie ends and Belle gets up. "Humans are insane, and the way one person can change the minds of everyone just by talking? Makes me realizes how easy it is for people like Hitler or Stalin to take over."

"Humans are amazingly strong and blindingly weak." Belle agrees easily, gathering up the garbage. "We can do amazing and terrible things, like create art or music. And then we wage war. It's hopeful and hopeless all at once."

"And what do you favor?" Gold asks her, curious despite himself to know her take on the world. "That we as a species are hopeful, or hopeless?"

"That depends on the day." Belle settles down on a chair, folding her legs up and absentmindedly braiding her hair. "And what media I choose to consume. There are hopeful days, when I read about the rescuing of rare dolphins in the Cape of Mexico, and feel hopeful. Then I am reminded that still yet thousands are slaughtered and taken captives in a cove in the Pacific, and I want to weep at the hopelessness of it all."

"But the true nature of man, when you strip it all away, what would you say remains?" He presses.

"I am no warrior poet." She has a small smile now, knowing what kind of game they're playing. Bae is seated between them, watching them volley back and forth. "I do not hold that you need to torture
a man to find out who he really is. But you can never know someone else, not truly. Humans behave
differently when we operate under the expectations of others. We seek to please them or disobey
them or manipulate them."

"So then what? The nature of humans is this universe's greatest mystery?" He tilts his head and Belle
pauses, thinking.

"I certainly think it ties to the eternal pondering of mankind. Why are we here, what is our purpose? I
think humans have been trying to answer these questions since the dawn of time. We try always to
convince ourselves we are here for a higher purpose than to just eat, sleep, reproduce, and then die.
We need to make sense of it all. I would say that if you think we are hopeful, our task whilst on earth
is to do good. And if you think we are hopeless, our task is to destroy." She pauses, gathering breath.
"But that is a rather narrow-minded approach to take when it comes to the complexity of humans."

"You really think we are so complex?" He folds his hand.

"You don't." Belle says simply. "But I see every day, just how good and bad and flawed we are.
What other species feels love like we do? Or shame, or remorse, or guilt, or joy, or that breathless
sensation of when you realizes that you get one chance, one shot at this all?""

"Plenty of the animal kingdom feels love and sadness. It's been observed from dogs to elephants to
monkeys." He points out.

"But our love?" She insists. "Tell me, have you ever seen a dog in love, that restrains that love,
because they are timid and fearful to not receive love back? Hide it away and go on pretending to be
friends even at the cost of the pain of living a lie daily? No, they love openly and wholeheartedly.
That is their nature. Dogs are far more hopeful than humans. They don't hide themselves away,
pretend the broken edges aren't there. Elephants grieve for their dead, and not once do they tell
themselves to have a stiff upper lip, that they need to be strong for others. We take simple emotions
and make them complex and that is a blessing and a curse and I think more our nature than anything
else."

"Making simple things complex." He echoes. "So tell me. Will the world end in fire, dearie, or ice?"

"Oh, fire." She stands up and gathers the garbage again. "Mr. Frost certainly was thinking of you
when he spoke of a world ending in ice, but I am a firm believer in fire." With that, she strides out
and he realizes, a little belatedly, that Bae is staring at him with an awestruck expression.

"You like her." He says finally and he frowns at his son.

"Yes, Bae, of course I do. She's an excellent therapist and quite smart, as you can see."

"No, you like like her." Bae clarifies. "You don't talk like that to anyone, and neither does she. You
like her, and it's cause she's awesome."

"I don't… I don't… Like…" He tries to protest weakly and Bae gets up, cracking his neck.

"Oh, don't worry papa." Bae pats his head like he's the father. "She like likes you too."

"Ernie, do you want some tea before bed?" Belle calls and Bae grins before yelling back,

"The minty one!"

"Ok, ask your father."
"Tea is great." He says distractedly and Bae disappears, yelling something about tomorrow's movies being all things Marvel.

He wakes from a nightmare with a gasp. He can't remember it now, slipping away, or why it'd been so terrifying, but just that Belle had been in a high tower and he'd been trying to reach her while a man with a hook advanced. He does not dwell on the implications of it but rolls over to check his alarm and see how much time he has left to sleep.

7:52. He's going to be late for work, especially with the snow. He sits up, fumbling for his phone, wondering why on earth no one has woken him up. Before he can find it, the door to his room peeks open and Belle's face appears, looking for the source of the noise quizzically.

"I'm late!" He snaps, drawing the covers up despite himself. He sleeps with very little clothes on, a habit left over from childhood, he supposes.

"No you're not." Belle opens the door fully and leans against the doorframe. She's got on loose sweats and an oversized crewneck, holding a steaming mug of tea, tousled hair around her face. "I turned your alarm off."

"You what? You were in my room? Miss French!"

"Oh, don't 'Miss French' me." She's watching him in amusement, not thrown off in the slightest by his temper. "You're not going to work, we got nearly a foot of snow again last night, they can't even get the plows out, and I've already called Jefferson and Mrs. Potts to tell them to stay put. We've got enough food in here to last a month and there's no reason to go anywhere. You have a home office, emphasis on the home part. Mary Margaret is home as well, and she will not bear the brunt of your wrath for this. Now either go back to sleep or come have coffee and breakfast. Mrs. Potts made cinnamon coffee cake before she left."

"Miss French!" He is still fuming and Belle just bites her lip with a grin and turns to leave.

"Oh, and if that alarm clock comes flying at my head, I swear to God I'll flush all the coffee in this house down the toilet." She says without turning around. He huffs, knowing that she's teasing, but wanting to throw the damn thing across the room regardless.

When he finally does make his way to the kitchen, Belle has breakfast waiting. He sits down with a wince and then jumps when her hand trails across his shoulders when she gets up to get a warm compress. They've been doing this a lot lately, absentminded touches through the day, fingers brushing when they hand each other teacups or other things, nudging each other out of the way as they move through the kitchen, comfortable when they pass in the hallway, bumping shoulders or hips to get the other's attention. He hadn't thought anything of it, because it'd happened so naturally after therapy, bleeding from professionalism into real life when she moved in.

"And now that you've successfully tricked me into staying home for the day, what do you plan on doing with me?" He asks, taking the coffee she's given him, brewed black, just the way he likes it.

"Well, you have the morning to work, I promise you that. Bae won't wake up until noon, if we're lucky, and he won't be truly awake until like 3." She reveals and he frowns.

"He doesn't need to sleep that long, he should be up, doing…"

"What? Building a robot? Curing cancer?" She smiles as she fills a plate with eggs. "It's a teenagers natural body rhythm to sleep late. Besides, have you seen how much he's grown? He needs sleep."
“Yes, of course I've seen how much he's grown.” He says slowly. "But how have you?"

"Mrs. Potts showed me a couple photos, before he arrived." She admits and he tenses. "I didn't want to hug the wrong child! Just a couple pictures. He's grown a foot since the pictures, and he's lost the baby face."

"He has. He's becoming a man." He says sadly and Belle smiles at him, handing him a plate.

"He looks like you though. Handsome boy."

"Are you calling me handsome?" He teases and she laughs as she sits with her own light breakfast.

"Yes, and you know I am. I've always found you handsome." She takes a bite of toast and he changes the subject hastily.

"And what will you do with your morning, since it doesn't appear we'll be leaving anytime soon?"

"I think I'm going to have a nice, long practice." She hums happily at the thought. "I've been neglecting it, honestly, with the excitement of Bae and this storm. I've got a couple hours, I should spend them on my mat."

"Where will you practice?" He asks, thinking about how if he can't go to work, Belle can't go to her studio.

"The library is big enough for my mat." She grins. "I'll have to rearrange the furniture and resist the temptation to read instead, but then I won't disturb you or Bae."

"Hardly think you could." They lapse into silence, enjoying the silence. The city itself is quiet, muffled by a thick layer of snow. With how peaceful it is, he lets himself relax.

"I was thinking today you could set up the tree with Bae." Belle mummers, after they've both finished eating.

"If he'll be dragged away from your movie marathon." He replies and she hides a pleased smile.

"It won't take long. I'll make sure everything is in place." She assures him and when she gets up to put her dishes in the sink, he holds out a hand. Uncertainly, she places her hand in his.

"Please be there."

"Are you sure?" She's searching his face for some sort of answer, and he tries to be as open and honest as he can. "That's... Personal. Are you sure there's not boundaries that I'm crossing?"

"No lines." He releases her hand with a quick little squeeze. "Besides, I doubt two men that have never decorated a tree before will do a good job. We need your expertise."

"Meaning you want me to do the hard work of stringing the lights, don't you?" She asks him wryly and he smiles widely.

Belle is right about Bae's sleeping, and he doesn't hear a peep from his son's room for the first part of the morning. He checks on him once, when he's gotten up to stretch and go to the bathroom. Bae is asleep on his stomach, sprawled amongst the blankets, pajamas twisted, drooling just slightly. With a smile, he quietly closes the door.

It's nearing lunch and with his stomach rumbling, he goes to find Belle and request her input for what they should make. He goes to the library, the noise of his cane muffled by the music she's playing
from her laptop. He pauses, out of sight, to observe her in awe.

She’s wearing skintight shorts and a tank top, but his gaze can't linger on her curves for too long, because she's upside-down. She's balancing on her hands, a perfect line. Then, with care, she splits her legs and slowly bends at the waist, until her thighs rest on the backs of her arms and she's bent, holding this pose.

Then abruptly, she shifts forward so she's on her head, knees on arms. She moves into a headstand, holding it, before bring her knees to arms and lifting her head, legs supported by arms. After a moment here, her legs shoot out so she's in plank, and then she does an upward dog before flipping back to a downward dog. Knowing this is a good place to interrupt, he purposefully pretends to have just walked through the door, thumping his cane extra loud.

"Oh, hi." Belle rights herself, face flushed red, grinning. "Are you getting hungry too?"

"Thought we'd see if the smell of food could wake Bae from his coma." He says dryly. "Am I interrupting?"

"Nope, I was just finishing up. A little play at the end, practicing some skills I'm pretty rusty on." She hops up, smoothing back the flyaway hairs.

"You know," He says carefully. "You've seen me do yoga countless times, yet I've never seen you."

"Would you like to come to one of my classes?" She asks, as they walk to the kitchen together.

"And not participate?" He taps his knee with his cane. "I doubt anyone will want some old man sitting in the corner to watch."

"Stop, you're not old." She complains. "How do fajitas sound? I'm in the mood for something warm."

"Sure." He stands back and let's her pull out ingredients.

"Besides, it's just yoga. What do you want see?" She grabs the peppers and a sharp knife.

"It's your livelihood. I'd like to see exactly how good you are when you aren't trying to coax a cripple into a seated fold." And, he adds silently, if it's anything like what I just saw, I would watch till the end of time.

"You are not old and you are not a cripple." She slices the pepper with just a little more force than necessary and seeds go flying. He puts a hand over hers, alarmed that she'll cut herself. She takes a deep breath then turns to him. "I'm sorry. If you'd like to see more advanced yoga, I would be happy to. But if you're going to see me work, I want to see you work."

"Signing papers and reviewing contracts don't offer much to see." He warns her and she grins.

"No, but being cunning and smart and resourceful does. And you're the best at that." She tweaks his nose and then leaves his side. "And it would be nice to finally see all the things that put you in such an awful mood in real time."

"You don't mean that." He says guardedly. She shrugs.

"It would go a long way to help me understand you. Can you finish chopping that up? I'm going to go shower." She requests and he nods, shooing her away, taking up the knife and trying to get rid of the image of Belle sitting on his lap, running her fingers through his hair while he works.
"Oh sweet, breakfast." Bae stumbles into the kitchen with messy hair and a sleepy smile, rubbing his eyes.

"Lunch." His father corrects him, making sure the peppers don't sear. "It's nearly noon."

"Is it?" Bae checks the clock. "Man, I love sleeping in on break."

"Lazy bones." He comments and Bae rolls his eyes, going to set the table.

"Belle says it's my natural rhythm. Besides, just because I'm not up at the crack of dawn like you two doesn't mean I'm lazy." Bae points out.

"I'm beginning to feel ganged up on."

"Good." Bae grins at him. "It's good for you."

"What's good for him?" Belle asks, wandering in. She's combing through her wet hair with her fingers, curious.

"Not getting his way." Bae explains and her eyes light up.

"That's very true. Hey, how do you feel about decorating that Christmas tree today, Ernie?"

"Ok, so how in the world do we do this?" Bae puts his hands on his hips and stares the tree down. Both Belle and Gold had been surprised to see how easily Bae took to the idea of decorating the tree, sure that a 14 year old boy would whine and complain and want to spend the day on video games. Instead, he'd made a deal with his father, which had made Belle snicker, that if Bae helped with the tree, they would all spend the rest of the day on the couch, taking in the glory of the Marvel cinematic universe.

"Ornaments are there." Belle points to one box. "You look it over, and I'll finish up the lights." She holds up a string of them. "I'll tell you when I'm ready for ornaments."

"Got it." Bae pulls his father to the box as Belle untangles lights. "Hey." He hisses under his breath so Belle won't hear.

"Yes?" He dips his hand into the box and pulls out a garland of white baubles that shine like diamonds in the light.

"How come we have a tree this year? Usually we don't." Bae reminds him and he feels guilty for how confused Bae is about having a normal Christmas, so he tells him the truth.

"Belle insisted. I realized how I haven't been... In the spirit for the past couple years, and well, when you give Belle French your credit card, you get this." He gestures to the library, that's been transformed into something out a Hallmark commercial. Holly and pinecones cover every surface, as do little glittery trees with tiny red bows. It's appealing, he won't deny it, but it certainly is out of place when it comes to typical Christmas at the Gold's.

"I like it." Bae declares, carefully pulling out delicate glass balls in varying colors and sizes. "Dottie, are you going to be here for Christmas?" He raises his voice, laying the bulbs out.

"Um, yes." Belle is standing atop a stool with the lights, her balance precarious enough to worry him. "If that's alright."
"It is." Bae grins in an impish sort of way that means he's plotting. "Are we all going to get gifts?"

"Gifts?" Belle repeats while Gold glares at his son. He's a clever boy, but he gets that from his father and he can see as clear as day what's going on. "Well, sure, that could be fun."

"Bae, you don't need to make Belle buy you things." He admonishes him and Belle's toes nudge his shoulder.

"That's not what he was trying to do, you Grinch." She chides. "We'll all do gifts then."

"Belle." Bae helps untangle the string of lights she's working on. "Where's your family?"

"My family?" She seems surprised by the inquiry and before either Gold or Bae can open their mouths', she adopts a thoughtful expression. "I have a small family, Bae. My mom died when I was young, and my dad misses her. He never remarried and I never had any other siblings. He goes down south, in the winter, and it's better for him."

"So you'll stay with us?" He questions with boyish eagerness and Belle looks down at him, her sad smile regaining a little more light.

"If you'll have me."

"Sure, but only if you're team Cap when we watch Civil War." He warns her and her smile is bright again.

"Alright, then start stringing the strands your father's holding on the lower branches, then work your way up." She gestures to the lowest level and both of the Gold men do as told.

After the tree is completed and boys are complaining of tiredness and hunger, Belle sends them to the living room to ready to next chunk of movies while she makes snacks. She comes back with crackers and dip on a little tray, as well as hot chocolate for herself and Bae, and black coffee for Gold. He's surprised that his hands don't itch for a pen and paper. He's perfectly content nestled in with Belle and Bae.

"Ok, we start with Captain America." Bae announces, pressing play. They all settle in to watch.

His hands may be calm, but Belle's are not. He watches as she plucks at the errant strings on the blanket, then the pillow, then fiddles with her mug, then her nails. He's sure she doesn't even realize she's doing it, since she's as engrossed in the movie as Bae is.

"Belle." He mummers, reaching out and taking her hands. She looks down and seems confused as to what he's doing before noticing that she's arranged the crumbs of the crackers into patterns.

"Ah." She dusts her hands off and carefully sets the tray aside.

"You're missing it! This is important!" Bae protests, as a red-faced man begins to monologue.

"Sorry." Belle apologizes before muttering out of the corner of her mouth, "Give me your knee."

"What?" He demands and she gives him an exasperated look.

"I'll massage it. You get a massage and I keep my hands busy. C'mon, you've been slacking on therapy lately."

"When you guys have questions three movies later I'm not answering them." Bae declares and Belle gives him an imploring look. He grunts and shifts so his leg is in Belle's lap and she returns her
attention to the screen while her fingers deftly work the damaged tissue.

They spend the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening watching movies. He’s amused to note that Belle will debate and argue with anyone who gives her the chance, and on any subject that arises. Dinner is eaten over an impassioned debate about the necessity of superheroes in everyday affairs. Then it’s back to the couch for more movies, popcorn, and ice cream.

It hits him halfway through a film with a blond Norse god that he has a family. Bae is curled into his side, tipped sideways with one arm dangling to the floor so he can occasionally bring a handful of popcorn to his mouth. Gold himself is seated with his good leg slightly bent and his bad knee in Belle’s lap. She’s leaning into his side, head resting on his arm, distractedly rubbing slow circles on his knee, occasionally drifting to his upper thigh ever so slightly. If anyone were to stumble in, they’d see a happy little family.

He gets up abruptly, startling both of them. They look up with wide eyes and he mutters excuses about the bathroom before he stumbles off, forgetting his cane in his desire to get air. He finds himself in his bedroom, sitting on his bed, gasping. His heart is hammering and he feels strange, like he wants to throw something and sink to the ground and leap into cold waters and scream all at once. Terror. The idea of having a whole family once again has terrified him into a fight or flight response, and he’s chosen flight.

"Bae's only going to pause the movie for five minutes." Belle's voice is a twinkle from the direction of the doorway but he can't drag his head up to look at her. "Then I'm afraid we'll be left to Google our questions."

"Let him start it again." His voice is ragged, like he's been running a marathon. "I needed air."

"I gathered that." Belle doesn't come into his bedroom and he thinks that's just as well, because he's not sure if he could control himself if she did. "I brought your cane."

"Very well. Leave it. Go back to the movie. Go back to Bae." He orders and there is a pause before her voice, so timid and unlike her, asks cautiously,

"Can I come in and tell you something?"

"Fine." He groans. "What is it?" He hears her move across the hardwood floor, until she kneels in front of him and takes his chin, like he had to her that day he’d found her crying about being unwanted in her studio.

"I meant what I said, about the boundaries and lines I'm crossing, and telling me when to stop." She says openly and he's caught in the softness of her face in the low light, how her eyes sparkle and her lips form a perfect cupid's bow. "But I know what it's like, when suddenly you start opening your heart after years of closing it off. It is scary. You feel like you're losing control of something, something important and that you're opening yourself up to hurt again. Yoga cracks those layers and when they're shattered, you feel vulnerable. But you're not. You're strong. Don't be scared."

"I'm not." He says quickly and Belle's face turns curious.

"No, you're not. You're so incredibly strong, Rum." She brushes his hair back and the combination of the touch and the name, the name only she calls him, makes every hair on his body rise. "Tell me to leave and I will."

"No." The word escapes him forcefully. "No, Belle, I didn't mean… I didn't mean to push you away. Like I do everyone."
"You don't." She goes further now, running her hands through his hair, nails gently scratching over his scalp in the most pleasurable way. "You don't, not when I understand what you're doing."

"And how does someone like you understand such?" He questions and her eyes flicker for a second before she's back to comforting him.

"I've seen it enough, I understand. Now come on. I'm sure Bae's restarted the movie and we're going to miss something very important in the love story of the Norwegian god and science girl." She helps him up and he leans heavily on her until he's got his cane under him.

"You just can't wait to get back to watching his biceps."

"Ooh, blond body builder, not my type." That joke, spoken with Belle's customary pretty smile, settles him like nothing else.

AN: World's longest chapter, coming right up, but I just can't help myself with the fluff! Your reviews are amazing and day makers, please leave me 100 more.
"I need $20." Bae sits down with him at the kitchen counter and he raises an eyebrow, folding his newspaper down.

"For?"

"Dottie's present." Bae pulls one of the many newspapers towards him, skimming it with a thoughtful expression. "I thought Jefferson could take me to get it and Mrs. Potts could help me wrap it."

"Two questions." He holds up two fingers. "One, where is your own money Baen Matheson Gold? And two, what are you getting her?"

"I am putting some of my own money into this." He assures him, taking a clementine and peeling it. "But I need a small loan. Only $20, and I'll pay you back once I've gotten Christmas money. Think of it as an advance."

"Talking business to me?" He looks at his son with amusement. "Bold move. And the second question?"

"What I got her?" Bae arches an eyebrow in reply. "Won't that ruin the surprise of Christmas morning?"

"Am I the one opening the gift?"

"Fine." Bae blushing a shade of red he's never seen on his son before. "This." He produces his phone and hands it over. On the screen is a statue, small, probably the length of his arm. It's a ballet dancer, balancing on her pointe shoes, her leg lifted in a beautiful arabesque, arms high above her. However, her tutu isn't silk and tulle, but beautiful flower petals, fanning out around her. It's stunning and he hands the phone back to Bae, surprised.

"That's... Bae, it's gorgeous."

"Thanks." Bae is grinning, relieved to see that he's hit the mark. "She loves ballet, did you know that? And flowers. And she said she needs decoration for her room, so I thought...

"She loves ballet." He says slowly, mind whirling to several places. Yes, she'd told him when the first met that she'd danced. Of course she loves ballet, she's got the natural grace of a dancer. How well does ballet transition to yoga? Ballet. Tickets. He suddenly gets up, breathless. "You're a genius."

"I mean, I think my last math test may disagree, but thanks." Bae trails him as he hurries to his office. "What'd I do?" Gold yanks open one of his drawers, fishing around it in until he triumphantly pulls out an envelope.

"How do you, my boy, feel about the Nutcracker?"

"Hey guys, I... Where are you?" Belle yells and they exchange grins, sitting in the library. It'd been Bae's idea, to draw her here, where they could see her reaction up close and personal. And it'd been his idea for them to pretend to read, drinking tea and feigning obliviousness to the fact she'd been
Christmas shopping while they stayed home.

"Library." Bae yells back and she wanders in, stopping and beaming at the sight of them.

"Hold still." She orders, fumbling for something. They watch her in confusion, until she produces her phone and takes a picture of them. "Ok, I'm sorry, but that was so perfect."

"You might want to keep the phone out." Bae grins, producing his own and Belle tilts her head.

"Come sit down, dearie." Gold encourages and she comes to sit on the edge of his chair, looking about quizzically. "We have something to talk about." Bae leans forward, grinning.

"Rum, you're scaring me." She takes his hand with concern. "What's wrong, did something happen? Ernie, something?"

"Belle." He cuts her off. "Every year for Christmas, I get those around me gifts, typically my assistant, housekeeper, driver, the like. This year, it's grown to include you."

"Yes, but it's still three days until Christmas." She says patiently. "And I thought we were opening gifts then."

"This one is early." Bae bursts and she looks at him in surprise before her attention is diverted by Gold producing an envelope.

"Go on, open it." He encourages and with a slight frown, Belle does as bidden, carefully slitting it open and peering inside.

"Oh tickets." She says, smiling. "To where?" He and Bae remain silent, waiting. When she reads the name, she gasps.

"Do you like them?" Bae demands.

"You're taking me to the Nutcracker?" Belle stares at them in astonishment. "The New York Company Ballet?"

"Well, there's three tickets, but you don't have to take us." Bae says quickly. "You could take Ruby or Mary Margaret or—" Belle cuts him off by throwing her arms around his thin frame.

"I'm taking you two, even if you don't want to go, because this is one of the best gifts anyone has ever gotten me." She lets go of Bae and launches herself at Gold, who tenses immediately. "This is too much. I can't possibly accept that and still more gifts!"

"No, you will." He carefully pulls back from her so he can see the shining joy in her eyes. "Belle, your loyalty, your grace, your perseverance and dedication to healing even in the face of the beast… You deserve the world."

"Oh, Rum." She's holding back tears, bringing her palm to his cheek before turning and grabbing Bae's hand. "And you Bae. You guys, I can't even begin to start. So how about instead we go to my favorite sushi place and we can get frozen yogurt afterwards?"

"The only downside to her is that she likes frozen yogurt over ice cream." Bae observes and Belle playfully punches his shoulder before hauling him up. He goes to grab his coat, yelling about what sushi rolls he's going to get. Belle stops Gold before he can leave the library, placing two hands on his chest.
"You…" She says softly and he holds up a hand.

"Belle you don't need to."

"I want to." She smiles at him. "You are a complicated human, and I am never more glad for it than these moments. I know you don't want thanks or praise or anything like that. But for two seconds, before you slip back into your shell, will you please just be here and let me tell you how thankful I am for this and know I mean it honestly?"

"Two seconds." He relents and Belle takes a deep breath, staring into his eyes eagerly. In them, he sees happiness, joy, childlike delight and wonder, admiration, adoration, gratefulness, and something else, something with a little more kick, something like…

"Ok, see there, that wasn't so bad." She releases him and he blinks, dazed. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome." He says quickly, not ready to think about what any of this means. "Now let's go, I believed you promised a boy some frozen yogurt, and you did say you'd buy."

The morning of the ballet, Belle suddenly goes into a panic about having nothing to wear, calling him from the studio to let him know that yes, she's still coming home but she will be delayed. He chuckles and assures her that he won't give her ticket away, and that he'll see her tonight. He doesn't realize how nervous he really is until she arrives home, running through the house and yelling at Bae about Dalmatian puppies.

"Ernie, I'm not kidding, you really should talk your dad into— Hi." Belle skids to a stop when he appears out of his office. He raises an eyebrow, taking in her bags in their varying colors and sizes. He sees a flash of stripped pink and his hands tighten on his cane, briefly, before he chides himself internally. Not for him.

"He is not getting a dog." He states flatly and Belle grins.

"You like dogs."

"No dogs."

"Fine. Are you going to get ready?" She disappears into her room.

"We still have hours." He consults his watch.

"Then I have just enough time!" Belle's door slams shut and he sighs as music drifts out.

"Women." Bae sticks his head out of the living room.

"And what do you know about women, my boy?" He turns and asks his son in amusement.

"Not much, but enough to know that one is far too good for you." Bae smirks and ducks back to his video game. Grumbling, because his son is right, he goes back to work.

"We're going to be late!" He yells, standing in the foyer, checking his watch repeatedly. "Baen Matheson Gold! Miss French!"

"Enough with the yelling, we're coming." Belle replies and Bae bounds into the foyer first, wearing
his nice dress shoes, black slacks, a dress shirt neatly tucked in, and a smart bowtie. He gently
tweaks it, and Bae grins.

"Dottie says bowties are stylish."

"I trust she knows what she's doing." He says dryly, looking down at his own suit, grey with a red
tie, the only concession he'd allowed for the Christmas themed ballet.

"I like to think I do." Belle says cheerfully, striding in, pausing to grab her knee-length pea coat from
the closet. "Shall we?"

"Come on, papa." There's no impatience in Bae's voice, just a knowing smile, because he must see
that the woman in front of them has physically stopped his father in his tracks.

If he thought he liked yoga Belle, and was stunned by coffee shop Belle, and adored sleepy, pajama
clad, needing coffee early morning Belle, all of them pale in comparison to this Belle, the dressed up
Belle. His gaze travels from her feet, in stiletto black boots that travel up and over her knee,
elongating her already flawless legs. Her skirt is black lace, with a slit in the back to allow for
walking, and tight to her hips.

A satiny tank top is tucked into the skirt, a deep green and lacy. She's thrown a cardigan over the
ensemble, and her coat over that. Around her neck is a single pearl on a gold chain, hanging
enticingly below the hollow of her throat. She's wearing more makeup than he's ever seen her and he
realizes Belle could do her makeup expertly everyday, she simply chooses not to. Her skin is
flawless, like a doll, and her lips are a deep red, taunting him. Her eyes seem larger, emboldened by
black eyeliner and a smoky eye. Her hair is curled up into a tastefully messy style, and a few errant
curls escape and fall down.

"Is it too much?" She asks nervously and he snaps his attention from the way one creamy collarbone
is catching the light to stare at her.

"You look…" He trails off, finally getting enough control to stumble forward and take her hand,
inviting her to do a little twirl. "No words, Belle."

"Oh, thanks." She laughs breathlessly and grabs the black clutch sitting on the table. "I think I let
myself get a little carried away with the makeup, Ruby sent me this new tutorial to try and well, it
took a couple tries because winged eyeliner is a bitch, and—" She chatters as they head to the car,
Jefferson waiting to help them in. Belle goes first, giving Bae just a second to turn to his father,
grinning.

"Papa, just kiss her."

"In." He orders his son, smacking his calves lightly with the cane. "And enough of that."

"You look absolutely stunning, Miss French. Truly, no one could hold a candle to you." He hears
Jefferson's compliment and Belle's laughter and flattered reply. He quells any jealousy and gets in the
car, smiling warmly at her.

"I don't know how to say thank you." She whispers, reaching out and taking his hand.

"Simply enjoy yourself, dearie, and that will be enough." He mutters and she hums with happiness,
turning to watch the city go by out the window. She doesn't release his hand.

When they get to the theater, she jumps out and eagerly takes Bae's hand, telling him facts about the
building, the ballet company, and more. Her knowledge is seemingly boundless. When her eyes light
up, the whole New York skyline seems to dim in comparison. He takes his place at her other side; resting one hand lightly on her back to guide her into the venue. They're waiting to enter when a smooth voice loudly attracts their attention behind them.

"Mr. Gold, what on earth are you doing here?" He tenses, turning to face the woman behind them, Belle and Bae turning with him. Regina is clad in a long, crushed velvet dress of deep purple, her hair in a twist. She wears her makeup like war paint, a nasty smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

"To watch the ballet, why of course." He pulls on the snarling veneer of Mr. Gold with ease, resting heavily on his cane and looming over her. "I didn't know you enjoyed such an art form, dearie. I rather thought you enjoyed performing… On your back."

"Ooh, you'd like that wouldn't you?" She hisses and he simply arches an eyebrow, not dignifying that with a response. "Or have you found someone else to do just that?" Her gaze sweeps over Belle, taking her in and he feels the physical urge to stand in front of her, protecting her from Regina's malice. But he should remember who stands beside him.

"Belle French." Belle steps forward and offers her hand to Regina without fear. "You must be Ms. Mills."

"I am." Regina shakes her hand with blatant distaste. "And you are… A working girl?" The insult is so thinly veiled it may as well be transparent, but Belle just smiles sweetly.

"A friend." Belle seems hardly put off by Regina and his heart constricts in pride. "It's nice to finally meet the woman of legend."

"Legend?" Regina repeats, preening. "Gold, you shouldn't have."

"Yes, your temper tantrums are truly inspiring." Belle maintains her pretty smile. "Really, I know a couple 3 year olds you put to shame."

"Do you now?" Regina's smile is slipping, and in turn so is her mask. "Spend a lot of time discussing it, perhaps as pillow talk? Or do you take your money and run before that?"

"Oh no." Belle's smile has shifted to sweet and kind into something a little darker, a little more twisted. He finds himself inexplicably attracted to it. "No, but I'm curious as to how you know how that works. Perhaps your very… Willing date could shed some light on it."

"Mr. Graham." He looks at the man across from him, who's wearing a pained expression. "See she's still got enough blackmail to force you into the public eye with her."

"Gold." That's all he says, but it's all that's needed. Anyone can see how uncomfortable he is, here.

"We'll be going. Have a nice night." Regina has pulled herself together enough now that she can get that out, pulling her upper lip into a sneer. "With your whore and your boy."

"You too." Belle somehow manages to keep herself between Regina and Bae the entire time Regina storms past them and he wishes desperately there was a dark corner he could pull her into and kiss her senseless.

"I don't like her." Bae declares.

"If you have to deal with her every day, I can see why so many phones, glasses, cups, and pictures have met their end in your office." Belle watches as Regina disappears with narrowed eyes. "I'd
quite like to throw something."

"No throwing." With a flash of courage, he reaches out and takes Belle's hand. "You held your own against her, and that is rare."

"Please." Belle is grinning at him, fingers tight so he can't pull away. "I've stared down Ruby during that time of the month. Nothing, and I mean nothing, in this world could scare me."

"Belle, you're kind of a badass." Bae says casually and both of them admonish him with a,

"Language!"

He'd gotten the tickets as a thank you from a client a while ago, and he'd nearly thrown them away. But now, sitting and watching Belle as much as he's watching the ballet, he's thankful he didn't. She gasps with delight, occasionally reaching out and squeezing his hand or knee. She will let out a little sigh of appreciation during a particularly beautiful sequence and he watches with amusement as her fingers flutter and legs twitch. Does she know these combinations? Learned them, practiced them, her muscles never ever truly able to forget them? So much about her to know and suddenly he is hungry for it, hungry for her.

"Do you know the steps?" He asks her during the intermission and she looks up, surprised.

"Do I what?"

"Know the steps. The combinations." He repeats. "I remember you saying you danced. The way you watch it, how you hold yourself during it, it seems like you know the steps."

"Oh." She blushes, shaking her head. "No, I was never good enough to be Marie. I was usually a snowflake or gumdrop or something of that sort, which was enough. I always wanted to be the Sugarplum Fairy." Her eyes light up. "I know those steps, I use to watch the older girls practice. I suppose it was enticing, to think about living in a land full of candy."

"Why did you stop?" He asks, wondering what she'd look like in a tutu and tights, hair in a bun.

"Stop dancing?" She clarifies and he nods. "Because I was good, but not very good, and I was smart. I knew that I was better at reading a book than I was at spinning on my toes, and so when I reached the age of choosing between ballet and school, I chose school. It's what my mother would've wanted."

"You still love it." He notes how her eyes rove hungrily over the stage, how her eyes sparkle at the music, her chest rising and falling rapidly like she remembers how much it takes to perform.

"Of course." She says instantly. "You never stop, you know. Not the best ballerinas. You go back to the basics, time and time again. Point, extend and lengthen, tight core, long neck, stretch and stretch and stretch some more. It took years for me to be ok waking up without my muscles feeling like taffy. There are days when I would like nothing more than to put my pointe shoes back on and dance and forget everything."

"You must have been a beautiful dancer." Here, in the slightly darkened theater, such words don't seem so hard for him to get out.

"Implying that my beauty has diminished since?" She teases.
"No, never. Simply that with your lines must have been stunning. You still carry yourself like a dancer, do you know that?" He takes her hand and she leans forward, her lips pulled up in a rose-red smile.

"No, and no man has ever told me such a thing. You can converse on the state of the Chinese markets, digress on the importance of dark ages era religious writings, and compliment a girl using ballet as a touchstone. Is there nothing you can't do, Mr. Gold?" She mummers, and his name, the name he's always associated with a beastly businessman, sounds like honey when it comes from her lips.

"I'm sure you'd discover something, Miss French."

"Could I?"

"Hey guys," Bae returns to his seat and their spell is broken, both of them leaning away and letting their hands go like they'd been burned. "Can we get dessert after this?"

"Dessert?" His father raises an eyebrow.

"Yes." Bae says easily. "You like dessert. We could get gelato or pie or something. I think it'd be a fun end of the day."

"Well, it's Belle's day." He looks to her and she beams.

"Can we get cheesecake?"

"Well then, who am I to say no? " He asks, as the lights dim and a hush falls over the theater once more. The second act captures as much of Belle's attention as the first, but midway through she takes his hand and holds it tightly, without once taking her eyes from the stage. Her hand is small and warm, and he curses that the second act isn't as long as the first and when the curtain falls and they rise to their feet, she lets go of his hand to clap.

"You know, ballet is pretty cool." Bae comments when they file out, Belle eagerly researching cheesecake places on her phone.

"I'm glad you think that." She looks up at him with a smile. "A man that can appreciate art is always far more interesting than a man that solely cares about sports."

"I mean, I would've rather watched soccer." Bae warns her. "But ballet is impressive too."

"It really is." She holds out her phone for their inspection, a nearby shop pulled up. "Shall we go here?"

The cheesecake is delicious. Belle gets hers covered in raspberry, while Bae's is chocolate everything. Gold chooses himself a peanut butter variety, which Belle eagerly takes a bite of. She insists they get Jefferson something and jealousy flares up in him until, while on their walk back to the car, Belle presses into him when the wind swirls snow around them.

"Can I play video games before bed?" Bae asks, the moment they get home and shed their coats.

"No." He says firmly and Bae moves into a pout.

"Please? I won't stay up long. Besides, it's my natural body rhythm!" He insists and Gold turns to look at Belle incredulously.
"Look what you've done to the boy." She just grins, so he sighs and caves. "You get an hour, that's all. And tomorrow, you do chores, I won't have you becoming some spoiled lay about."

"Thanks." He grins at his dad and kisses Belle's check, dashing off. When he's gone, Belle brings a hand up to her cheek with an awed expression.

"What?" He asks her softly.

"You can't send him back to school at Andover." She mutters. "You can't, I want to keep him."

"You do?" He leans against the wall to rest his knee, looking at her thoughtfully. She laughs and entangles her fingers in her hair, pulling out the pins that must've been holding the style up.

"Yes, he's such a good kid. Sweet and funny and sassy and willing to admit that he's not always right. That takes a lot for a kid, you know." She informs him and he can't help the smile.

"It helps that he likes you." He tells her and she goes pink, pleased at the compliment.

"I like him. He's such a good kid, I wish I could see him every day." She says longingly.

"He is a wonderful boy, yes, but he must go back." The words tug a little at his own heartstrings but he remains firm. "But I think he'll come home more, now, since we've settled things."

"You silly man." Belle says fondly and before he can get offended, adds, "You thought you lost him. How in the world did you ever think that?"

"We can have wicked tempers." He admits ruefully. "He gets that from me, I'm afraid. Or perhaps his mother, I'm not quite sure. And he may be quick to give you his loyalty, but it is not easily regained when lost."

"Now that he gets from you." She is teasing him with a twinkle in her eyes and he'd be damned if it isn't the most appealing thing he's ever seen.

"How so?"

"Because within the hour of you calling me to talk about needing my help, you took me to lunch, let me order for you, trusted me with your body, and despite all those demands for privacy, trusted that I wouldn't go running off to tell the world that the scary Mr. Gold likes yoga." She wanders closer to him and his hands tighten on the cane.

"You cannot do that, legally." He reminds her with a warning note.

"I know." She smiles, toe to toe with him. Even with her sky-high heels, he's still got a couple inches on her. "And I'm sure if I ever did, there would be no forgiveness for me."

"There wouldn't." He agrees, marveling at how beautiful she is up close, even as they talk about his worst nightmare.

"But someone that has your loyalty gets treated to her favorite ballet, a night on the town, cheesecake, and more." She tilts her head and some vague part of his mind informs him she's at the perfect angle to be kissed. "And she doesn't know how to thank you."

Kiss me. It hovers on the tip of his tongue but he bites it back. "I said you simply had to enjoy yourself, and if you did, then consider me paid in full."

"You're maddening." She's not backing down or away from him, remaining there on those high
heels, the cardigan slipping off one shoulder, curls messy around her face.

"That is not my intent."

"Oh, yes it is."

"How so?"

"You intend for everyone to see the strong, scary exterior of Mr. Gold." Her hand slips into his hair. "And yet you stand before me as Rum, and you know you allow so few to see you as this man. Only me, and Bae, and maybe Gracie." He does like Jefferson's daughter, with her bright blonde hair and eagerness to bring him cookies and hear a story. "You close us into this little shelter and protect us and yourself from the outside world."

"You saw tonight, the world and how its people can be cruel." He thinks of Regina and then, with goose bumps, of how Belle stared her down without hesitation to defend him and Bae.

"Sometimes I think that you could use protecting, just a little." Belle gently runs her fingers through his hair.

"And you would?" He asks breathlessly. Belle smiles up at him.

"For you? For him? Gladly."

"You are maddening." He tells her, because if the conversation dies, he'll pull her in for a kiss.

"Good." Her lips lift into a smirk. "Bae is right, it's good for you to not get what you want."

"And you know what I want?" He asks the stupid question despite himself, because she must see how badly he wants and desires her, how he grips his cane to stop himself from grabbing her, how his eyes follow her when she walks into a room, how he would spend every day until the end of time trying to coax smiles and laughter from her.

"Of course." She rocks forward on her heels and her mouth is pressed against his cheek, just a little close to the corner of his mouth, and he's frozen. "I enjoyed myself more than you could ever know. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He wants desperately to pull her close and never let go, but he can't. He mustn't. Not when tonight has been so perfect. He can't do anything to ruin it.

"Goodnight." She turns for her bedroom, the cardigan sliding off. He sniffles a groan when he glimpses the clasp of a lacy black bra and heads into his own bedroom so that she won't see the lust in his eyes.

AN: Oh, and I'm adding in the real life talents of EDR cause she's cute and adorable. Also, favorite chapter so far to write, so leave me all the reviews letting me know what y'all thought?!
"Wake up, wake up, its Christmas!" Bae is bellowing and Gold wants to groan and shove his face back in the pillows, but he knows he can't. It's Christmas morning and his son is going to open his gifts whether he's out of bed or not. He'll just bring Christmas to him, it's happened before, and he's got little desire for both Belle and Bae to be in his bedroom.

"Yes, I'm awake." He moans when Bae's face appears in the doorway. "I'm getting up, give me just a minute."

"Hurry up." He orders then storms off with the grace of a bull elephant. "Dottie! It's Christmas!"

"Christ." He hauls himself out of bed and throws on the one pair of sweats he owns, tying his robe over the top of that.

He exits his room and makes for the kitchen instead of the library, following his nose and the scent of coffee. He's not disappointed; Belle is standing in her pajamas, hair piled on top of her head, and she looks even more beautiful with the cup of coffee she's holding for him.

"You have maybe five minutes to drink that." She warns him and he raises an eyebrow, taking a long pull, savoring it. "And then I think he's going to open his gifts and ours."

"He's done it before." He tells her and Belle chuckles, handing him a plate with a cinnamon muffin on it.

"Here, I know they're your favorite." She says sweetly. He takes it, looking at her in surprise.

"Mary Margaret knows they're my favorite." He corrects and she shrugs, grinning, taking her own muffin.

"And Mary Margaret and I like to share tips on how to keep you happy, and these muffins are on the list." She informs him, taking her mug of tea.

"Oi." He says, affronted. "I'm not some child, you don't need to nanny me and pass along my nap schedule."

"What nap schedule?" With a smart look over her shoulder, she heads for the library and he has no choice, crabby and grumbling, to follow her.

"Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up." Bae sits them down eagerly in their respective chairs. There's a small stack of presents for each, though the pile by Bae's chair is by far the largest.

"Alright, alright." Laughing, Belle sits and takes a sip of tea. "Merry Christmas sweetheart."

"Merry Christmas." Bae says back happily and Gold sips his coffee, smiling. It's not lost on him that they look like a perfect little family. But rather than scare him, he can only think about how well Belle fits as Bae's mother and his wife. He shakes his head to clear the fantasy.

"I do believe we have gifts." He mummers.

"Ok, who goes first?" Bae is practically bouncing with excitement, which makes both Gold and Belle chuckle.

"You." Belle says, grinning. "But open mine first!"
"Got it." Bae picks up the brightly wrapped box with white wrapped paper and a large green bow. Belle looks as eager as Bae and the sight of it warms his heart. She's too good for an old man like him, but she is everything Bae deserves in a friend and mother figure.

"Well, let's see it." He orders, when Bae doesn't lift the gift out of the box, just stares at it with an awed expression.

"Belle." Bae looks at her. "I... What?"

"Do you like it?" Belle asks, grinning and knowing the answer. Bae nods reverently and carefully lifts up a box.

"What is it?" Gold asks, breaking the moment between the two of them.

"A go pro." Bae explains. "It's like a camera, you can attach it to stuff and it records you doing things, like playing soccer or tricks and stuff."

"And you wanted this?" He asks, inspecting it. He has no clue what it is, nor did Bae ever indicate wanting such a thing.

"Yeah, but this is the newest model and it's so expensive, Dottie, you didn't have to do this!" Bae tries to hand the box to her, but Belle grins and sips her tea, not taking it back.

"You said you wanted one so you could make videos." She reminds him. "There are attachments in the bottom of the box."

"So cool." Bae digs through the straps and attachments quickly. "Belle, this is awesome!"

"Well, I expect to see some videos of your exploits at school." She teases and he launches himself at her, hugging her tightly. She sets her tea aside to hug him back. The scene sends an emotional jolt through Gold. She's given his son such a great gift after only knowing him for weeks.

"Ok, now you open yours from me!" Bae orders her, once he's settled back in his chair. She raises an eyebrow but picks up the gift bag.

"Did you wrap this or did Mrs. Potts?" She questions and he grins.

"I did, but that's why it's in a bag."

"Oh, of course." Belle removes the tissue paper and gently pulls the statue out, gasping. "Ernie, it's... This is stunning!" She runs her hand over the tiny carved details. "How in the world... It's perfect!"

"You love dance." Bae states. If anything, the trip to the Nutcracker has painted that in a very obvious light. "And you love flowers." She keeps a vase in her room, occasionally rotating them. It occurs to Gold that he could start buying her flowers, to show her his feelings. A tentative start to a courtship.

"And you are quite possibly the best gift giver." She carefully sets the statue on the table next to him.

"Maybe." His eyes sparkling, he turns to his father. "Papa, open yours."

"Alright." His gift is wrapped and when Belle glances at Bae, he shrugs and shamelessly admits, "Mrs. Potts wrapped that one."

"Glad to see your time and effort went to Belle." He tells his son, but it's a joke. He's glad that his
boy and his… Belle get along so well. It's a blessing, one he's acutely aware of. He pulls the neat paper off, pulling out the long, thin box. He lifts the lid and smiles at the gift inside.

"What is it?" Belle demands impatiently and he carefully lifts out the silk tie. It's a blue color, and he recognizes it as the school color of Andover. "Oh, that's very pretty!"

"Yeah, I thought you could wear it, papa, if you came to visit me." Bae says carefully. "I think next year I'll be good enough to make the soccer team."

"I'm sure you will." Belle assure him and Bae's attention is diverted back to his gifts, leaving his father to gently run a finger along the tie and know that all has been forgiven.

"Thank you, Bae." He says quietly, carefully putting it away. "Go on, open the rest." Bae eagerly dives into his presents; opening everything his father has given him—video games, books, sport equipment, clothes, shoes, and more. He spoils the boy, certainly, but he couldn't help himself. He had been worried when he was buying gifts that he'd need to make up for Bae's anger with presents. He's relived to know it isn't so.

"Thank you papa." Bae gives him a big, eager hug, still hanging onto the go pro, once everything is opened.

"Go." He grunts. "Go play with your toys." Whooping, Bae gathers everything up and goes running for the living room.

"I thought Christmas was the best when you were a kid." Belle observes. "I didn't know it got better when you had kids."

"Brings the joy back." He tells her then spots the still wrapped gift at her elbow. "Speaking of which, I believe you have another gift to open."

"As do you." She gestures to the box at his feet.

"Ladies first." He says graciously. With a quirked eyebrow, Belle picks up her gift. He has a sudden flash of nervousness, wondering if she's going to like it. When a soft gasp leaves her lips, he relaxes and knows that he's done well.

"Rum…" She carefully lets up the antique atlas book he'd gotten her. A rare edition, knowing for the notations in the margins that provide insight to the mind of whoever had created it, ages ago. "This is... How in the world did you... Where in the world... What is this?"

"A gift for a girl that has always wanted to see the world, and deserves to." He must be careful here, because all his adoration for her may spill out if he isn't. "I thought it was fitting."

"But you already got me the tickets." She looks at him earnestly. "I thought that was my gift."

"I have a bad habit of over giving." He watches as she thumbs through the book. "Forgive me."

"Oh, always." She sighs in appreciation then looks up at him with a grin. "Now open yours."

"You didn't have to get me anything." He says, picking up the heavy box.

"Don't try that." She wags a finger. "Now open it."

"Well, someone is demanding this morning." He comments, but it's with a grin. He loves the way she orders him about, fearless and casual, doing what no other person would dare.
"Always." She jabs back and he pulls off the bow and then glances at the little gift tag.

"To Rum, from Belle." He reads and smiles at her. Carefully, he tucks that aside and then pulls the paper off, opening the box and pulling out its contents. With a laugh, he realizes it's a marble chess set, white and black pieces, intricately carved, beautiful and heavy in his hands.

"To replace the last set you smashed." She explains and he chuckles. "I'm hoping these will withstand your anger a little better."

"I would think so." He hefts a rook in his hand. "Though I feel they could do damage elsewhere."

"No throwing." She orders, playfully. "This set is meant for playing, and teaching. Not violence."

"Teaching?" He catches the word and turns to look at her.

"I've never learned." She says simply. "I thought if we're trading skills, you can teach me chess and I'll teach you yoga."

"I teach you strategy and manipulation, you teach me flexibility and peace. There's a metaphor in there, somewhere." He mutters and Belle huffs.

"I know I'll never be good enough to beat you, I just want to try." She informs him and he smiles, a twisted thing, because it seems like such a natural progression of their relationship.

"Of course." He pulls more and more pieces, arranging them correctly on the board. Belle scoots so she's across from him, watching with rapt attention. "I assume you know the basics?"

"I know nothing."

"Alright, if you're sure then we will start with the pawns." He shows her a handful of the pieces.

"Wait, Rum." She quiets him with a touch and he looks at her, worried that something is wrong. He shouldn't worry, not when she has such beautiful blue eyes and a smile that could drive him to his knees. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." He responds softly and she smiles, before turning back to the chessboard.

"Ok, where do the pawns go? I feel like they're unimportant."

In the remaining days of Bae's vacation, they focus on him, pushing aside the humming tension in favor of family-like outings. Belle takes them figure skating at Rockefeller Center and he stands outside the rink, watching in amusement as Belle showcases another one of her strange skills- she's a talented skater and keeps both herself and Bae up.

There are trips to art galleries and museums, dragging Bae along as he good-naturedly complains he's not a little kid. Belle shushes him, reminding him that he needs to be well rounded. There's a Rangers game, not his Glasgow football team but hockey, a sport that Belle likes but he can't seem to grasp the point of, and several movie nights, including watching the ball drop and ringing in the new year with just the three of them.

In return, Bae teaches Belle his videos games, though she never gets beyond the beginner levels. He even attends a yoga class, coming back to inform his father that Belle is crazy for willingly spending so much time in a hot room. When Bae is otherwise distracted, the adults have therapy with yoga,
chess lessons, and quiet afternoons reading, accompanied by lots of tea and gentle teasing mixed with very light flirting.

He finds himself dreading the day printed on Bae's plane ticket. He's not sure what will happen now, with him gone. He's like a barrier between them, providing them with a reason to always keep each other at arms length. He is their buffer, and with him gone, Gold isn't sure if he'll kiss Belle or push her away.

Belle too seems upset at the impending separation. She refuses to speak on it, the couple times he's mentioned it during their nightly sessions. She'll make a glib comment and then distract him with something in her book or the chess set. It makes him happy, that both Belle and Bae seem to like each other so much. He doesn't dwell, however, on what that means for the future.

He takes Bae shopping for a new wardrobe the day before his departure, since the boy is growing like a weed. His height baffles him, but he's glad. No one will ever accuse him son of having short man syndrome. Bae shuts himself in his room to pack, and Belle mutters an excuse about Ruby drama to avoid coming home until late in the evening.

"He has to go back." He tells her, that night and Belle sets aside her book, scowling. They haven't spoken, both reading as the sound of Bae's video game drifts from the living room.

"I know." She looks away, suddenly blinking away tears. "It's stupid of me, he's not my kid."

"No, he's not." He says softly and she looks at him sharply, misunderstanding his words as a snide comment. "But you two are friends now, anyone would be silly to not see that."

"We are, aren't we?" Belle gives him a watery smile. "Funny, I know he's not leaving forever, but it's just… Next time he comes home, I won't live here, will I? I won't be able to have late movie nights and cooking lessons with Mrs. Potts and hating his habit of slamming doors at 2 in the morning."

"You're always welcome here." He says instantly, because that's easier than begging her to stay, to never leave, to be with him always.

"Oh, thank you, but crying is silly." She says firmly, closing her book. "And moping about is silly too. C'mon, I'll make us sundaes and we can watch one final movie before he leaves. I think I should subject him to Pride and Prejudice, or maybe Jane Eyre."

"Now that is unforgivable." He comments dryly.

"No, think about it." She says, offering him her hand so she can pull him up. "A poor girl come to look after the child of a wealthy man who is always crabby and dark that is much older and distinguished?"

"I didn't adopt Bae and I didn't bring you here to teach him." He points out, not sure he likes the comparison to Mr. Rochester.

"Fine." Belle switches tactics, walking with him to the kitchen. "Then poor girl from a not so great family that attempts to know a stoic rich gentleman… No, that fits worse."

"I am not a Mr. Darcy." He complains.

"No." Belle's eyes sparkle as she pulls out the ice cream and toppings. "You are Mr. Rochester, you must accept that and deal with it."

"There are more similarities there than I care to admit." He relents and Belle simply prepares three
dishes. "But I do not keep my deranged wife locked away, you were not abused nor are you an orphan, you are not a governess, and I do not own a castle in England."

"And that is a shame." Belle taps his nose with a spoon as she moves past him to open the pantry. "Though I'm pretty sure this place is a castle by New York standards."

"It seems you will have to find another sappy, romantic film to compare yourself to." He says triumphantly and Belle laughs sweetly.

"Oh, I am very certain there is no movie that does you justice." She hands him his bowl, holding hers and Bae's and heading to the living room. A little speechless, because he's not sure how the conversation has turned, he follows, chuckling when he hears how fiercely Bae protests Belle's movie choices.

The dreaded morning dawns sunny and nice, a mockery of their glum attitudes. Mrs. Potts sends Bae off with a bundle of treats and home cooked items, muttering about how the school doesn't feed him enough, despite Gold's insistences that he pays them handsomely to do just that. Belle hands her class off to someone else to teach so she can accompany them to the airport, smiling and laughing brightly to hide her sadness.

"You know I can call and text and FaceTime and everything, right?" Bae reminds her when Belle's face turns cloudy at the sight of the airport.

"Yeah, but I'm lame." She laments. "You'll get back to school and all your friends and you'll completely forget about lame Dottie, who makes you watch romantic chick flicks."

"Ok, it was an alright movie, even if it was a chick flick." He admits. They'd watched Pride and Prejudice and Gold is grateful, because watching Jane Eyre might have killed him. "And I'll be sending you videos and stuff from the go pro. You can even call me, sometimes."

"So kind, you are." Belle pulls him in for a hug, kissing his head before sighing as Jefferson pulls to a stop. "Alright, let's get you boarded."

They move through the airport, looking, for all intents and purposes, like a little family. Belle and Bae chatter for as long as they can, but eventually they are stopped and can go no further. Belle takes a deep breath and shakes her head. Bae says nothing, just gives her a tight squeeze and a bright smile. She nods and Bae turns to him.

"Be good." He says quietly, needlessly. His son is an angel, or at least as close as a teenage boy can get to one. He is a good kid, and that makes his heart swell with happiness.

"I will." Bae gives him a hug as well, then hikes his backpack up and waves, heading towards security. Belle waves back, and once Bae is finally out of sight, lets her tears fall.

"Hey." A little alarmed, because he hasn't dealt with a crying woman in ages, he touches her shoulder. "Belle, it's alright."

"I know." She sniffs, leaning so her head rests on his shoulder. "I know. But look on the bright side, now that Bae's gone, I'll have time to find an apartment and be out of your hair."

"Yes," He says faintly, desperately wishing he had the courage to beg and plead with her not to go. That he would be strong enough to tell her all the reasons he wants her to stay. All the reasons why his life is so much brighter with her in it. "There's that."
Thankfully, he doesn't have to worry about that. Not a week after Bae leaves them, Belle gets sick. She tries to wave it off, telling him it's fine. She calls it a little cold; the doctor calls it walking pneumonia. Triumphanty, he declares that she must stay until she's better, strengthened by Mrs. Potts's homemade chicken noodle soup and a lot of rest. She complains, worried that she'll get him sick, but he tells her not to fret. There's something adorable in the way that Belle reverts back to a five year old when she's sick.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" He asks, when she shuffles into the library one night, in her customary fuzzy socks, her comforter wrapped around her tightly and hair in a messy bun.

"Shouldn't you?" She mutters darkly, collapsing in her chair.

"I'm not sick." He says mildly and she wrinkles her nose.

"I'm not sick either." She declares, then dissolves into a coughing fit, body shaking violently.

"No, not at all." He watches her with worry. "Tea?"

"Yes please." She says meekly, drawing her legs up and he closes his book, heading to the kitchen to make a soothing, honey infused blend. He brings her an extra big mug, pouring his own in the chipped cup. "Thank you."

"Of course." He tugs the blanket up so it covers her shoulder. "Why don't you go to bed dearie?"

"I'm sick of bed." She complains. "I'm sick of laying down, sleeping, head fuzzy, body aching. I want to be able to do stuff and..."

"Ok, ok." He says reassuringly, reaching for the chess set she'd gifted him for Christmas. "Want to continue our game?"

"You're taking it easy on me because I'm sick." She accuses, but she's sitting up with some light in her eyes.

"No, I'm taking it easy because you're awful." He says mildly and she gasps, glaring at him and he chuckles.

"I'm a beginner."

"Yes, you are." He mummers, to appease her. "Now where should you move that pawn?"

"To the left."

"No, then I can destroy it."

"Well you shouldn't. That's rude."

"Belle, it's chess!"

They play in silence for a little bit, Belle refusing to take his help and advice and him carefully losing as to keep her with him for a little longer. Finally she glances at him, a little smile on her face.

"Thanks for the flowers, by the way." She mutters, and he debates how to avoid checkmating her.

"What?" He tries to play dumb, heart pounding. Belle hasn't acknowledged the rotating variety of
flowers he's had Mrs. Potts place in her room since Bae's departure.

"The flowers." Belle moves her knight into a very vulnerable position and he bites his lip, resisting the urge to win the game in one fell swoop. "Peruvian lilies. Beautiful. And the anemone? The pink ones are amazing. And I know it's you doing the flowers, because Mrs. Potts doesn't know that tulips were my mother's favorite flowers, you do. Plus, of the French variety? A subtle touch that can only mean one thing. You."

"Oh." He tries his hardest to not blush. "And the roses?"

"Beautiful." Belle smiles and moves to take his bishop, shocking him. "Absolutely flawless. Did I win?"

"No." He can't help but grin at her, impressed that she's used his distraction to her advantage. "But we're getting there."

AN: Dragging out the fluff people, but I can't help it, I love writing it so much! I also published a new Belle/Gold story, HIST 3014, so go check that out if you want a little something extra! And as always, reviews are loved, cherished, and much appreciated.
It's a clear February morning when the doorbell rings and he limps to the door, curious about who is disturbing what has been, so far, a quiet Sunday morning. He pulls the door open and stops, taking in the woman before him. She's tall, with long dark hair and piercing eyes. She's wearing a red coat and dark jeans with high-heeled boots, and her makeup is flawless.

"Ruby, I presume." He says dryly, leaning on his cane.

"And Mr. Gold, I presume." She replies, sizing him up. She's taller than he is, but he's use to that. "I came to visit Belle, to make sure she's actually sick and you're not holding her hostage."

"I'd do no such thing." A little amused to find that Ruby is indeed as feisty as Belle's stories make her out to be, he moves aside and lets her in. "How did you find my home?"

"I sent her the address you walnut." Belle shuffles into the foyer.

"And you're meant to be resting." He reminds her. Belle makes a face, grabbing Ruby's hands.

"I told you I was fine." She states and Ruby takes in the messy bun, Belle's pale skin, the fluffy robe, the flannel pants, and fuzzy socks.

"A picture of health you are." Ruby says sarcastically and Belle glares at the two of them.

"Fine. We'll be in my bedroom then. I'll be resting." Belle sticks her tongue out at him and he gracefully bows his head. Belle flounces off, pulling Ruby behind her. He wishes that he could follow, to listen to them gossip and chatter, but he refrains and instead goes to his office to work and give them privacy.

"Hey." He looks up and is surprised to see Ruby in the doorway to his office, arms crossed, looking more than a little hesitant.

"Ruby." He sets his pen down. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk about Belle." She states and he raises an eyebrow. "Don't worry, she's asleep in her room."

"Well that's impressive." He glances at the clock. "Usually she fights taking a nap around this time."

"I'm persuasive." Ruby states and he's sure she is. "And she knows I'm right. Which is why I wanted to talk to you."

"Alright, then let's talk." He folds his hands and looks at her imploringly. Ruby is just as fiery as Belle, which he can appreciate, but she lacks Belle's warmth and sweetness.

"I don't like that you're keeping Belle here." She declares firmly and he raises an eyebrow.

"Should I throw her out on the streets then? She'd last all of 10 minutes." He says archly and Ruby scowls.

"Not what I meant. Belle is good and sweet and kind and she deserves the world. If you're some weird creepy sugar daddy that likes having a pretty young thing in your house, I will kill you."
"Well," He has to hold back a chuckle at that. Belle had said that Ruby was blunt. "It's nothing of the sort. As you know, Belle's apartment was infested with mold. I simply offered her a chance to stay here and do private therapy while she searched for a new place."

"That was months ago." Ruby folds her arms, not buying it. "Why hasn't Belle left yet?"

"My… Son was home for Christmas." He says carefully. "He and Belle became close. I saw no reason for her to leave while he stayed. And once he returned to school, Belle fell ill."

"She always gets sick like this." Ruby admits and he tilts his head in curiosity. He knows little about Belle's past, outside of what she's told him. "Belle can't just catch the sniffles. When she goes down, she goes down hard. Once, when we were in middle school, a bunch of us got the flu. Belle didn't get it, but a month later she came down with mono."

"Hence the walking pneumonia." He says wryly and Ruby nods.

"She's impressive that way. What are your intentions towards her?" She demands and he practically chokes on his sip of tea.

"Intentions?" He repeats and Ruby steps into his office, till she's leaning forward on the desk, staring down at him.

"What do you plan on doing with her?" She clarifies. "Are you going to make her pay rent in sexual favors?"

"Ms. Lucas!"

"Hey." Ruby slaps an open palm on his desk. "I am protecting her. Belle doesn't always have the sense to do it herself, and she's gotten in trouble because of it before. If you're going to force her into doing something she doesn't want to do, know that I will tear you limb from limb."

"I would never." He says vehemently, even as he desires nothing more than to lock Belle away with him and never let the world touch them again. "Belle is entirely free to come and go as she pleases. She's even free to invite friends over, which is why you're here. I will never force her into anything she does not want. I may be a beast, but I am not that kind of monster."

"Good." Ruby seems satisfied with his answer, straightening up. "Then I think we're done here."

"Ruby." He calls her back before she can leave the study. "Be honest with me, will you? When you talk about Belle, how this has happened before… Was Belle ever… Hurt?"

"Mr. Gold." Ruby's face softens into a smile, and it makes her look years younger and sweeter. "You seems like an ok guy, and the way Belle talks about you makes you seem like you're a damn knight in shining armor, but I'm not fooled. Don't hurt her, ok?"

"Never." He promises, and means it.

"Then you can ask her about that stuff. She'll tell you when she's ready." Then, with a smile so warm it nearly reaches her eyes, she gives him a little wave and disappears.

With a pause, he waits until he hears the front door slam and Ruby is out of the house. Then he gets up and pads to Belle's room, carefully pushing the door open so it doesn't squeak on its hinges. Belle is nestled in the blankets, hair a tangled mess around her, breathing a wheeze, but peaceful nonetheless. She's pretty, heartbreakingly so, and he feels a surge of protectiveness at what Ruby's implied. If anyone has hurt his Belle, he'll break them. She just has to say so.
She's almost back to healthy when Valentine's Day arrives and he hesitates about if he's going to cross a line by asking her to dinner. So he waffles between making reservations at the finest romantic restaurant in all of New York City and casually ordering pizza and pretending that February 14 is just another normal day on the calendar.

"Hey, Jefferson." Belle says, as they ride to the studio early in the morning. "What are you doing for Valentine's Day?"

"Is that an offer?" Jefferson teases her and Gold tries to keep his temper in check, hands clench.

"Of course." Belle teases back. "Though I wouldn't want to steal you from the pretty blonde you go home to at night."

"Ah, she would be pretty bummed." Jefferson smiles back over his shoulder. "We're going to make cupcakes with pretty pink frosting. She's going to take them to school, so I'll spend my time surrounded by hearts and pink and probably some edible glitter."

"So same thing as Mr. Gold." She jokes and his eyebrows fly up, looking at her in shock.

"Begging your pardon." He gives her a stern look and Belle is grinning at him innocently.

"I think that'd be fun. And I'm making you do it with me, because I know Mary Margaret is dying for a romantic evening with David, so I'm making sure you're entertained as a favor. So I expect you home. And could you grab butter? I think we're out."

"Can't Mrs. Potts?" He complains and Belle grins, patting his cheek, humming a happy tune.

When he gets home, Belle is already in the kitchen. He sets the stick of butter on the table, heart jumping a little at the sight of her. She's got flour streaked across her forehead and she's wearing a tank top and bright red shorts, hair braided down her back. She looks utterly domestic, and for a brief moment, he allows himself to envision a little girl sitting on the counter, a baby in a highchair, and Bae laughing while cracking eggs carefully.

"Hello." She grins at him, glancing over her shoulder. "There you are. C'mon, you can make frosting."

"I have to say," He takes off his suit jacket and sets it aside, loosening his tie and rolling his sleeves up. "Cupcakes are not exactly how I planned on spending this night."

"Is there a better way of spending a night?" Belle points out and he pretends to ponder that.

"Yes, and it starts with Johnnie and ends with label." He says flatly and Belle reaches for something and turns holding a tumbler filled with brown liquid. He bites back a praise that would reveal too much, taking a sip.

"Now you're on frosting duty." She orders. He acquiesces, taking another sip and then grabs the butter.

Baking with Belle is surprisingly fun, and she keeps his tumbler filled while he tops off her wine glass. By the time the cupcakes have cooled, they're both slightly tipsy and grinning. They sit in the living room, wrappers discarded on the coffee table and Belle's legs over his lap.

"You shouldn't be drinking." He chides her and she laughs, her already red cheeks going a shade
"I'm not even sick anymore. I'll just get extra sleep tonight." She promises. "Shush. Let me have wine."

"Alright." He chuckles. "Those cupcakes are delicious, by the way. Where on earth did you learn to bake like that?"

"I told you, when mom died, it was sink or swim. Sink or starve, actually. I know my way around a kitchen for that reason only." She scoots closer to him, smiling lopsidedly.

"I'm glad to benefit from your skills." He brushes away a remnant of frosting on her cheek.

"Did I ruin a big date with my cupcakes?" She asks him imploringly and he nearly snorts up his whiskey.

"You know that I would never have a date." He sneers at the very idea of it and Belle laughs. "Did you have to turn down some sad sap because you had to do a favor for a friend and mind the beast for a night?"

"No." Belle sighs and leans so her head is on his shoulder. She smells like the cupcakes and the lemon tinged essential oils she's been favoring in class lately. "I volunteered actually. It was my idea. Not the cupcakes; that was Jefferson. But I wanted to spend the night with you. I didn't know how to ask you. So I told Mary Margaret it'd be a favor but I was really excited about it. Don't tell her though. It's nice when she owes me favors. It usually means fruit baskets and I love those baskets. I hope that's ok. I know cupcakes probably weren't your first choice but thanks for doing it with me."

"Yeah." He whispers, as her eyelids droop and she snuggles closer. "This is exactly what I wanted to do tonight."

"Dearie." He looks up at Belle, pausing in cutting up his steak. She's sitting across from him with her laptop open, drinking one of her exotic green teas and occasionally spearing a salad. "Let's talk."

"What do you think about this property?" She asks, spinning the laptop to show him a bare little apartment.

"No." He says promptly. "Far too much for far too little. Look at that horrible crown molding Belle."

"Well not all of us can afford penthouse suites." She grumbles crabbily. "Loans and rent, remember?"

"Belle." He says and she looks up at him curiously.

"Yeah?"

"You could stay." The words are pulled from him rather unwillingly, and he disguises his terror by stabbing the steak and cutting it viciously. He'd been thinking on it for weeks, unable to say it out loud but wanting desperately to keep her where she is, safe and with him. He avoids looking at her, because he's not sure what she's doing.

"Really?" She looks surprised, her bite of salad forgotten halfway to her mouth. "You'd just let me live here, for free?"
"Not free." He cuts himself ever-smaller bites. "I'd still expect therapy and massages and the like. Mrs. Potts could use your help cooking and cleaning, she's not as spry as she once was and you know Jefferson, he's rather attached to— Uff!" Belle has launched herself at him. He drops his silverware and after a moment of hesitation, hugs her back slowly.

"You are…” She pulls back, his head clasped firmly between her hands. "Something beyond words. Where did you come from?"

"I told you, the great north, Scotland." He jokes weakly. "Thought the accent gave it away."

"You know what I mean.” Belle rolls her eyes, letting him go and backing away, grabbing her laptop again and thoughtfully typing something in.

"What are you doing?” He asks curiously, forgetting his steak in the desire to see what's stolen Belle's attention away from him.

"Well, if I'm going to stay, I'm going to need stuff." She gives him a wicked grin. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

"No." He says honestly. "But I offered it once and it's worked well in my favor, it seems simple to continue the agreement."

"Continue the agreement." Belle smiles at that, rolling her eyes. "Is that all I am, some agreement?"

"No!" He splutters, ready to correct himself, but Belle is already getting up for more tea.

"You are probably going to regret this, Rum, but I would stay here until you kicked me out." She says sweetly. "Home is where the chipped cup is, right?" She holds it up and he knows there's something more there, but all he can do is accept the tea and smile at her.

Once it's decided that Belle will stay, he expects things to change dramatically. He's sorely disappointed. The only difference is that Belle's things leak from her room into the rest of the house—scarves tossed on chairs, books on tables, heels kicked off under tables. It fills him with a sense of happiness to see how comfortable she is with him.

The last quiet weeks of February lull them into a sense of contentment. The snow barricades them into the house and they pass it with tea and books. A couple times Belle will hover before saying goodnight, like she wants to say more but can't. It's a cruel fate, them being the picture of domestic bliss while at the time skirting each other. He keeps up with fresh flowers in her room, but other than that he's floundering for how to make his feelings known.

The therapy isn't helping. Sure, his knee feels newer than it has in years. There are days when he's nearly painless. Mary Margaret worships Belle for this, delighted that his moods are dulled. Belle works wonders, but he's also convinced that she's got a degree in how to torture a man. During their sessions, when he sits in the chair, he dreams of her tossing her hair and straddling him. He thinks about her hips above him, her lips on his neck, all of it.

It's maddening and he hates most of all that he spends his days mooning over her, thinking about what flowers to get her, how to court her in a way that she'll notice, picking up books and treats for her. It's a crush and he hasn't had one of those in ages.

In response back, Belle rewards him with all the smiles and laughter he could want. She falls into the habit of leaning against him whenever she can and he delights in it, how her tiny body fits so well
with his. They invade each others space, time and time again, but neither has the courage to push it further and make it into something more.

"And that's how that ended, with the two of them storming out of my office, acting like I stole her firstborn child." He finishes his story, chuckling, and Belle listens, shaking her head in astonishment.

"But I mean, you do feel bad for her, right?" Belle questions him and he gives a little shrug.

"Why would I? All her mistakes her own, and if she insists on continuing when I've advised otherwise, I can hardly be to blame for that, can I?" He points out and Belle shakes her head.

"No, I mean for her as a human." She explains. "Her mother, she's... Awful. She sounds like the worst mother I've ever heard of. She's controlling and manipulative and demanding... She's got all the traits of someone that's been emotionally abused all her life."

"Regina?" Gold raises an eyebrow and Belle nods.

"I think that's why she acts the way she does, because of her mother. It's not an easy thing to shake, when a parent gets in your head like that." Belle declares and he watches her massage his knee, eyebrows furrowed.

"And you would know how, my dear?"

"Oh, you know." Belle says evasively then goes to get warm towels, refusing to answer. He watches her quizzically. "But I don't think you should be as hard on her. She's just..."

"Belle." He says slowly and Belle smiles brilliantly.

"Sit. Relax." She orders, disappearing out the door. He reclines, mind turning over her words. When he finally exits the massage room, she's sitting at her desk on her computer.

"I'll see you at home tonight?" She questions, smiling when he straightens his tie. He nods, pulling on his jacket.

"See you there dearie. Have a good day."

"And you." She waves as he heads out the door. He's gotten to work before he realizes he's forgotten something critical at Belle's studio- his briefcase full of contracts.

"Bloody hell." Cursing, he pulls his phone out and dials her number. After a few rings, she picks up.

"Well hi you." She sounds a little surprised and concerned. "Is everything alright? What's wrong?"

"I am fine." He smiles at the worry in her voice. "I just realized I forgot my briefcase at the studio."

There's a brief pause and a scuffle.

"Oh, yes, it's right here." Belle assures him. "Do you need it?"

"Yes." He says quickly. "And I know you have class, but is there any way you could run it to me?"

"Of course, next class isn't for an hour and you're only a couple blocks away. Text me directions to you?"

"Of course." He goes limp with relief. "Thank you Belle, I appreciate it."
"See you soon." Belle hangs up and he sits back, texting her how to get to him, before calling Mary Margaret.

"Yessir?" She answers.

"Could you please inform Mr. Leroy at the front desk that Miss French will be arriving shortly with my briefcase?" He requests.

"Oh, did you forget it at your appointment?" She sounds far too cheerful. "Won't you be terribly embarrassed that if she brings you your briefcase, your yoga secret will be revealed to the whole world?" It's a mark of his good humor that he responds to Mary Margaret's teasing with some of his own.

"I am fairly certain that no one is here this early, unless they're insane." He quips and Mary Margaret hums in agreement.

"Or have bosses that are." She gets the last jab in. "I'll notify him sir and greet her when she comes up."

"Thank you." He hangs up and shakes his head with a small smile. Not 15 minutes later, Belle bounds into his office with a bright smile and his briefcase. She sets it on his desk then looks around and whistles.

"And I thought my office was pretty." She comments and he glances out at the rather stunning view of the New York skyline.

"I suppose." He says glibly and she rolls her eyes. "Thank you for bringing me this Belle."

"Sure." She inspects the curios and knickknacks he has on his shelf, smiling and touching the roughhewn figure that can only be from Bae. "I like to see where you spend all your time."

"Less, lately." He informs her and she goes pink at the implications of his point, but doesn't press it.

"Still, it's fun, I—" She states, but Mary Margaret scrambles into the room, looking alarmed.

"Sir, Regina is coming." She says breathlessly. "She's in the elevator."

"What?" He asks sharply and Mary Margaret nods. Swearing, he gives Belle an apologetic look, before unceremoniously shoving her into a coat closet and shutting the door. A second later, Regina storms in with a commanding,

"Gold!"

"Yes, dearie?" Gold sits at his desk, poised, seemingly having just opened his briefcase.

"You're ignoring my calls." She accuses then catches sight of Mary Margaret in the corner, head down, quiet. "And what the hell is she doing here?"

"She is my assistant." Gold says dryly. "Mary Margaret, please go get coffee for our guest. Preferable decaf, as she seems a little excitable."

"Yes sir." Mary Margaret disappears hastily and Regina's attention is turned back to Gold.

"My calls." She reminds him. "Why aren't you taking them?"

"When you have something of value to talk about, I'll take them." He says innocently. "But until that
"time, my time can be spent doing things that are far more productive. Good day."

"Oh no," Regina scowls, refusing to be dismissed. "What is your deal Gold? You're slipping."

"Slipping." He chuckles humorlessly. "Not slipping Regina, just a little more… Cautious."

"Slipping." She hisses.

"Really? Because I didn't take part in that property flipping scheme that, if I do believe, is now undergoing an investigation?" He asks icily and Regina slumps slightly.

"That's what I came to talk to you about." She says quietly. "They're going to bury me Gold, bury me. I'll lose everything. I cannot and will not go to prison. Even if I avoid time, I could lose everything, absolutely everything. I need… I need your help to get out of this."

"Out of it." He repeats. "Because you can't take responsibility for your actions Ms. Mills?"

"It wasn't my fault." She snaps. "It was Mal and her stupid investors, the idiot from Saudi Arabia, Mr. Balthazar, Khan, and that asshole from Nottingham. It wasn't me Gold; I just need your help proving that. My mother, well she seems to think that I can downplay my involvement and knowledge."

"And the rest?" He asks curiously. "You'd leave them to hang?"

"Sure." Regina waves a perfectly manicured hand. "What do I care about anyone else's happiness but mine?"

"Oh, fuck off Regina!" Belle's voice bursts from her, loud and forceful from such a tiny body. Belle emerges from her hiding spot and both Gold and Regina stare at her in astonishment. Before Regina can so much as curl her upper lip and sneer something, Belle has launched herself on a tirade. "You come in here, miserable, and you blame it on everyone but yourself! For five minutes, take some responsibility and see where that gets you. It's not Gold's fault you didn't think this through, it's not the mayor's fault for the zoning laws, it's not the President's fault that rain delays construction, it's no one's fault but your own and you could try for some accountability!"

"Excuse you." Regina hisses but Belle isn't done. Gold sits back, amused at Belle's rage.

"Of course, you wouldn't know anything about that because your mother sheltered you from blame or fault all your life, which did you no favors. But if you can't grow up and see how your actions hurt others, than maybe you can at least realize how your mother's actions hurt you." Belle states, standing with her legs wide and arms crossed. Defiant even in leggings and a tank top, and startling beautiful while doing so, he realizes.

"What about my mother?" Regina is trying to dismiss Belle with her trademark sneer, but Belle isn't having it.

"She's emotionally abusive Regina, and she has been since you were a child. No mother would force you into something like this; no mother would so willingly force you into things you don't like. She manipulates you, trust me, I would know." Belle's gaze flickers to him, just briefly, and he wishes he could ask her what this means, why she's so furious over this. "You shouldn't have to deal with that, with her. You deserve love."

"Is this what you've been doing?" Regina points to Belle and looks at him incredulously. "You've got a little pocket Buddha hidden in your office, so she can spring out and give you reassurance and self affirmation? Gold, that's pathetic, even for you."
"Careful." He growls, but Belle isn't done.

"No, you stop that Regina. Stop stomping around like a toddler in a sulk, and start taking responsibility. You're being ridiculous, and you know it. Own up to it. Cut your mother off. Stop taking her shit and being such a witch. You can be a boss ass bitch in charge without sacrificing every inch of your happiness and softness. Who knows, maybe you'll even find love. But not if you keep being a bitch!" Belle yells, throwing her hands up.

"Who the hell is she?" Regina regains some composure, gesturing to Belle incredulously.

"This is Miss French, you met at the Nutcracker." He reminds her, hesitating. Once again, Belle takes charge of the situation.

"I'm Belle, and I'm sick of your shit. I listen to him complain—" She points an accusatory finger at Gold. "About things all the damn time and I am sick of it. Listen, I know how hard it is to get out of shit with your parents, especially those that have mastered the art of guilt tripping. But you have to do it, or she is going to drive you into something you don't want to be, like she has with this whole project and why you're in trouble. Tell me, when was the last time you did something without seeking her approval first?"

"There… There was a boy, Daniel." Regina says softly and Belle nods encouragingly while Gold is stunned. Apparently Belle's gift for opening people up extends beyond him and wait staff. "We dated, in college. He was going to be a vet. I… Wanted to be with him forever. My mother, she… She threatened my scholarship if I kept talking to him. She threatened to get him expelled, that he'd never help animals. His studies, they were his life, his heart, and I couldn't let her crush them, so I ended things. We never spoke again." Regina ends her tale nearly in tears and Belle steps forward, gently taking her hands.

"Do you see, that when you give her power, she's going to take it. You have to take a step back from her. My father, he was the same way. Parents think they know best. It's up to you, to us, to set boundaries. I have a wonderful therapist, Dr. Hopper, who's helped me with things with my father." Belle reveals. "Here, here's his number. Just give him a call and see, ok?"

"You want me to see a shrink?" Regina's moment of vulnerability is gone with a snarl.

"Yes." Belle's bravery that he's always so admired apparently means she will back down to no one. "And you're going to talk, actually talk. And stop being so crabby with Mr. Gold, because I am incredibly fond of my tea set, and I'm already down a sugar bowl."

"I replaced it." He reminds her quickly and she rolls her eyes.

"Yes, after you made me dodge it first."

"It was at the opposite wall!"

"Therapy." Belle gestures to all of them. "Go. Do. Learn. I have classes to teach. I'm ordering Thai food for supper." She breezes out of the office without hesitation and Regina turns to him.

"Are you doing that?" She demands and he sighs.

"What, getting Thai food for supper? No. She knows I hate that, that's why I'll be ordering pizza."

"You are in over your head, Gold." She says quietly.

"Don't I know it." He mutters. "Regina, I will arrange a meeting time to discuss this with you. I trust
you can see yourself out."

"Your coffee." Mary Margaret stumbles into the room, holding a cup. Regina glances at it then nods to Gold.

"I'll talk to you later." She says, bypassing Mary Margaret and walking out. His assistant visibly slumps, then looks at him.

"Wait, where's Regina going?"

"She's leaving." His mouth twitches up in a smile as he sits to inspect his papers. "That will be all."

"Thank god." Mary Margaret mutters, taking a sip of the coffee before making a face. "Wow, decaf is awful."

He leaves work early, stopping to get pizza on the way. He knows Belle isn't kidding about the Thai food and with its tendency to make him queasy, it's best he avoid it entirely. However, it also gives him an excuse to dismiss Mrs. Potts early and give him and Belle alone time to talk.

He's determined to figure out what she means with all the thinly veiled references to her father. She does therapy; he'd never known that. How has he not known- why has he not thought to ask? He chases thoughts in circles around his head all the way home, distracted.

"Mrs. Potts." He pokes his head into the kitchen, where his housekeeper is busy sorting groceries and bustling about. "Belle and I will be eating out tonight. Go home. Get some rest."

"Sir?" She pauses, surprised by this, but he just gives her a thin-lipped smile and heads to the library, when he knows Belle is. Indeed, she's buried in a book already, oblivious to his entry until he clears his throat.

"Hi." She looks up in surprise. "I didn't think you'd be home so early, I haven't even ordered supper."

"No worries." He assures her. "I already have my pizza. I just wanted to come home and talk to you."

"Is it about what happened with Regina?" She says apprehensively. "Because I'm sorry but it's just, all the stories you tell me, I just couldn't keep my opinions to myself!"

"I know." He chuckles, sitting in his chair beside her. "And that, Belle, is why I find you so refreshing. It doesn't have to do with Regina… In a sense. Rather, I wanted to talk to you about what you said today."

"Which is?" Belle asks hesitantly and he struggles with how to begin. Finally, he throws caution to the wind.

"Belle, you said you were in therapy. How did I never know that?" He demands and her face falls.

"I didn't want to scare you away." She mutters, rubbing her forehead. "Making you think I was crazy."

"Belle, I would never." He says eagerly, and with a spurt of bravery, he leans forward and takes her hand, kissing her knuckles.
"It's not like it's a good topic for small talk." She's avoiding his eyes, but leaves her hand in his. "Last guy I brought it up to liked to remind that therapy made me… I don't know, broken. Or weak. Or something."

"And he was an idiot who didn't deserve you." He says fiercely and the corners of her mouth quirk up into a smile. "I was just alarmed to think that there is so much about you I don't know." They're edging into dangerous territory now, and he knows, but doesn't care.

"No, you know pretty much all of it." Belle says carefully and he catches the wording but chooses to let it go. "But if we're on that subject, then we should talk about how little I know about you. Being in your office today made me realize…. We've known each other for awhile now and I hardly know what you do with the majority of your time."

"Nothing I want you involved in." The very idea of Belle in the slimy world of deals and alliances and power struggles alarms him. She is too good, her light too bright, for his world.

"I get that." She pats his hands. "I'm just saying, it's not very often that I get a glimpse into you without Bae being here to open that up. I guess I'd just appreciate some trust."

"Ah." He draws back before he's even aware he's doing so. "Well, I think I'll see that Mrs. Potts puts that pizza in before she leaves. Would you like her to order your favorite from the usual place?"

"Sure." Belle is smart enough to see that the conversation has changed course and goes with it.

AN: Ok, I know y'all are dying, but trust me, it's necessary, very, very necessary... Check back in next week for a big surprise, and in the meantime, reviews are like bread and butter, thank you!
Nothing more is brought up about Belle's therapy or the Regina incident. They revert back to normal, teasing and joking with each other. The days start to get a little longer again, the wind and snow dying down at the seasons move steadily towards spring.

With her birthday in early March, she divulges that she'll be spending a weekend with Ruby. He doesn't think anything of it, not until the Thursday appointment before, when she recounts a story of her turning 21 and the chaos that Ruby had brought down with it. He panics slightly, imagining that she'll do something crazy while they're gone. So tentatively, he asks her plans.

"I don't know what we'll do for my birthday." She frowns slightly, curling her legs up under her as he loops his tie around his neck. "Ruby will probably drag me to a club to see if she can pick a guy up for me."

"No doubt you'll be awash in potential suitors." He says wryly, to disguise the flair of jealousy rising in him.

"Well, you know what I always say." She says sweetly. "I like my men like I like my whiskey."

"And how is that?" He asks, thinking about how they haven't drank together since Valentine's Day with the Johnnie Walker.

"Scottish and twice my age."

"Belle!" His hands slip on the silk and he's forced to start over, the tie a useless knot around his neck.

"And that one was a quip." She gets up, taking pity in him and using her long, nimble fingers to gently pluck at the knot that is his tie. "You cannot take what you dish out, can you?"

"Belle." He's trying to keep his temper under control, trying not to fly off the handle. She doesn't deserve it. He has no claim to her. Except one. "I don't know what kind of impression you have of me but I will not tolerate you bringing strange men into my home."

"What?" Belle gapes at him in shock. "No, I— Never would— No! No! God, no! I'm not Ruby!"

"So you understand why I forbid it?" He's a little surprised at that she's agreeing to his possessive boundaries so easily.

"Yes." Belle finishes off the tie and leans back against the counter. He pulls his jacket on slowly.

"It's your house, if you lived with me and had a parade of random women traipsing through I'd be disgruntled too. Beside, I don't take guys home. Never have. I am not a one night stand kinda girl."

"No." His face is unexpectedly warm so he winds a scarf around it to shield himself from Belle.

"Glad you think so." Belle watches him with amusement. "But I'll probably spend the night at Ruby's regardless. Don't want to disturb you with the whole short girl in high heels shtick."

"You walk like an expert in high heels." He reminds her. "In fact, I'm partial to believing that if you're not barefoot, you're in heels, no in between. They litter the house. You've more heels than I suits."
"Not possible. And I like being tall." She says defensively. "I don't get that chance very often."

"I know." He smiles at her, amused. "You two have fun, dancing the night away." He's got to leave her now, before he makes an ass out of himself, demanding that she stay with him.

"You know me, I'd rather be in bed by 9:30." Belle grumbles and he smiles at her, the old lady.

"Go, live while you're young." He gently pats her cheek. "And call me if you need anything."

"Will you bring me greasy hangover food?" She asks innocently and he chuckles, gently swiping a thumb over her cheek, thinking about how adorable she must be hung over, grumpy and crabby and sleepy. He wants to see all sides of Belle, including this one.

"You just have to call."

The house is quiet without her in it and he finds he hates it. He sits in the library, drinking a tumbler of bourbon, trying not to look at Belle's open chair. He feels like a lovesick teenager once again, pining over his crush. He's a grown man and she's a grown woman. She's free to do as she pleases. He has no reason to be sitting here, waiting on a call that's never going to come.

At 1:38 am, the chiming of his cell phone awakes him. Groggily, he rolls over, mind going to the worst, always. Bae. Something has to have happened, at school. He might need his father, he might be hurt, or he might be—

"Belle?" He reads the caller id and answers it, bewildered.


"Belle." He wants to be amused, but he's sleepy and tired and if this is a drunken call to ramble, she can do that on his voicemail.

"What name do I call you when I need you?" She asks curiously and he sits upright, startled.

"Belle, what's going on? Are you all right? Did something happen? Are you hurt? Belle!"

"No, no, no." Belle makes a humming sort of sound, drowned out by the thumping bass from a club. She must be outside, calling him from the streets. "But I need a ride. I got separated from the girls. I want to come home."

"Home?" He knows he should be worried not thrilled, or concerned at the very least, that tipsy Belle is outside a club alone, but he can't resist. He's a weak man, and Belle is an honest drunk. "Here is home?"

"Yes." Belle rambles as he gets up and gets dressed, pulling on layers and even a hat. He limps to the foyer; phone nestled between his ear and shoulder. "Home is where the heart is, and all that jazz."

"Why don't you call a cab?" He asks, realizing the stupidity of himself driving through Manhattan at 2 in the morning.

"Oh, a cab." Belle sighs. "I lost my wallet. The guy at the bar, his name was Will. Did he steal it from me?"

"He better not have." He says darkly. "You tell me where you are?"
"I sent you my pin!"

"What in the bloody hell is a pin?" A second later, his phone dings and he has the option to view her location, and the fastest route to her. Thanking the marvel of modern technology, he sets the directions for her location and goes for the Cadillac. Rarely does he drive on his own anymore, but it's not a forgotten luxury. It takes longer than he likes, but eventually he arrives at the dingy club. A moment later, he spots Belle's small figure, tottering on high heels in the alley beside the club, and a man hovering over her.

Rage fills him, hot and furious. He slams on the breaks, throwing the door open. He hardly needs the cane to cross the sidewalk, uncaring that he's practically left the car parked in the middle of street. As he gets closer to Belle, he can hear what she's saying.

"Please, I'm sorry, I don't have my wallet. I don't have it, I'm sorry, I can't… I'm sorry, I can't, I don't have it." She's stuttering.

"C'mon, I'll get you a cab. A ride home." He's trying to be persuasive and smooth and Gold hefts his cane, readying his swing.

"Who?" The man scoffs and the golden hilt of the cane shines in the lights of the city at night as it makes contact with the man's skull.

"Me." Gold growls, and brings the cane back to strike him with savage pleasure, again and again, until the man's groaning and partly unconscious. Only then does he remember that Belle is standing off to one side, watching him. He briefly closes his eyes, not wanting to see the expression on her face. Then, small fingers close around his wrist.

"Rum." Belle is whispering in his ear, rubbing his back. "C'mon. Get in the car. We need to go."

"What?" He turns to her in bewilderment.

"We need to get out of the street before anyone sees. We need to go." She carefully tugs him back to the car, putting him in the drivers seat. "Drive. We need to go home."

"Home?" He asks, a little dazed.

"Yes. Take me home." Her hand is on his knee and it anchors him to the world, letting him know that this is real. Once he gets a couple blocks away, real life sets in and he realizes what he's done.

He's beaten a man. In front of Belle. She pulled him away, so that no one would see. She probably saved him from an assault charge. He hasn't lost his temper like that in years, but he did tonight, in front of her. She's not going to see it as sweet or kind or protective, she is going to see him as possessive and psychotic. He has messed it up, he has messed it all up.

By the time they get home, he wants to pull over and throw up. Belle is still sitting in the car beside him, hand still on his knee. It's the only ray of hope in the darkness and he's certain that the second they get home, she will bolt away from him. She has to be disgusted with him. There's no way she'll forgive him after this. He has ruined everything.

"Belle." He says quietly, once he's parked the car.

"Come on, come inside." She orders quietly and he obligingly follows her, meek as a mouse, desperate to stay with her for as long as he can until she kicks him out. She leads him inside and sets
about making tea. He sits at the kitchen table, hardly registering what she's doing until she comes to him with a wet washcloth and he realizes he has blood on him.

"Belle." He repeats quietly. "Belle, please, talk to me. I need you to say something to me."

"Drink the tea." She points to it and he realizes in relief that she's given him the chipped cup. Surely all hope isn't lost if she's giving him the cup that has been there from the beginning. He does as told and lets Belle clean him up. The tea relaxes him, but the way Belle moves is setting his teeth on edge.


"I think…" She says slowly and quietly. "That we should go to bed. We can talk about this in the morning."

"I don't want to go to bed." He states and Belle sighs, leaning her head against the fridge.

"Rum." She sounds tired and the blue sequin dress she's wearing must've been alluring in the strobe lights of the club but here looks trashy and his heart clenches imagining the looks she must've received from the men in the club. He wants to make this better, he wants to be a good man for her, but he can't. Not right now, when his emotions are running so high.

"Belle." He says, trying to reach out to her but she stays out of reach, staring down into her tea.

"I would really appreciate it if we both went to bed and talked about this in the morning." She says firmly and so he watches her, dismayed, as she disappears quietly into her bedroom.

He hardly sleeps the night. He keeps straining for the sound of Belle, desperate to hear her. When he wakes up in the morning, he knows instantly what's happened. The house is empty. Belle has left. Her personality fills the space, and he knows when she's gone. All that's left is a letter on the table beside her chair in the library and he picks it up with trembling hands.

Rum,

I'm sorry to leave in the middle of the night like this but I had to go. I'm sorry but I couldn't think straight. I need time, away, from this all. I'll be at Ruby's. I'll let you know when I'm ready.

You are a good man. I mean that. I just need some space.

Don't do anything stupid. Don't lash out. Do not take this out on Mary Margaret. I'll see you soon.

-Belle

Vision blurry with rage and tears, he stumbles to Belle's bedroom, desperate to smell her, to reassure himself that she once was here. Her room is flawless, organized and beautiful. He collapses onto the bed, burying his face in her pillows and pulling his knees to his chest to contain his grief. Then, through the haze of tears, he spots it.

The ballerina sculpture. It sits on the bedside table, turned to face the bed. He realizes, belatedly, that she must look at it every night before she falls asleep. A little bit of the tension releases. Belle wouldn't leave forever without taking Bae's gift with her. She will be back. He pulls himself back together enough to sit up, taking a deep breath.
It's a week however, a week of no Belle. No therapy, no yoga, no chess lessons in the library, no dinners together. Jefferson and Mrs. Potts wisely keep quiet about Belle's disappearance, though Mary Margaret makes only one thinly veiled reference to it, commenting that he shouldn't let his anger get the best of him. She also refuses to bring him cinnamon muffins.

Halfway through the week, he gets it in his head to order her back. She's an employee, damn it, she should listen to him. She lives with him, she works for him, and he could destroy her if she doesn't come back. But then he remembers just whom he's thinking about. Belle. Good, sweet, beloved Belle. And he restrains every base urge to lash out and instead stays where he is, giving her space, doing as she wishes, even if it kills him.

Then, on a random Wednesday afternoon, as he sits in his office, he receives a text, from Belle. It's only two words, but it sends him into a nervous rant. Mary Margaret seems to know what's happening and watches him run around, yelling at underlings, until she finally catches him and points to the phone.

"Read it. Out loud." She orders and he does as told.

"I'm ready." He says and looks at her with wide eyes.

"Go." She orders and so he does.

He shifts from foot to foot in the elevator, nervous beyond reason. It's silly, of course. She'll be here; he double and triple checked the schedule to make sure this is when her class would end. Of course, this means that people will see him at a yoga studio, but that's worth it. If it means Belle will look at him and smile and laugh once again, it will be more than worth it. He just needs to see her.

When the elevator stops on her floor, a gaggle of women with yoga mats slung over their shoulders stand aside and let him walk out of the elevator. They're chattering and pay him no mind. They're followed by the assortment of typical New Yorkers. He glances at a couple men, wondering in the part of his brain not panicking if they are drag queens. Then he pushes the door to the studio open and is greeted with the sight of Belle.

She is indeed sitting atop the white desk, chattering with everyone who's still pulling on coats and boots. She's laughing at something a middle-aged woman has said, oblivious to his entrance. He hovers, not sure what to do, and waits for her attention to fall on him. When it does, she goes quiet.

"Hello." He says gently.

"Kim, I'll see you tomorrow? At candle flow?" Belle asks the woman who's heading out the door.

"For sure! Have a good rest of the week Belle!" The woman breezes out and Belle is sure to thank the remaining stragglers for coming, smiling and answering questions as they trickle out, in pairs and alone, until finally he is the only one remaining in the lobby. Belle looks at him, wide eyed.

"What are you doing here?" She questions him, looking a little angry but more so surprised.

"You said you were ready and I needed to see you. I needed to talk." He says honestly and she folds her arms, her lip coming out in the little defiant pout he's always adored, except when it's directed at him.

"I didn't think it'd be right now. People saw you. They might go shouting from the rooftops that big, scary Mr. Gold was spotted at some yoga studio." The words are meant to string like barbs, but he is
prepared for this. He is prepared for her anger, because he is deserving of it.

"Let them." He says eagerly. "Let them, because it's true. I am here, I like yoga, and I am desperate to see you."

"That doesn't sound like you." She remarks, her shoulders dropping some. "Mr. Privacy."

"I know." He braves a step forward, reassured when she doesn't get up and storm away. "Belle, I was…" Words fail him, so Belle steps in and helps.

"You were an ass, you were insane, you were out of control, you were rude, and way out of line?" She suggests pointedly.

"All of the above." He admits and Belle sits back, satisfied with that answer. "But Belle, you have to know why I reacted the way I did."

"No. Tell me." She commands and he struggles for a moment, trying to evade her, but it's futile.

"You call me and ask for help. Me." He lets the awe slip into his voice and Belle cautiously lets a smile creep onto her face.

"I live with you, you silly man. Of course I call you."

"Still." He holds up a hand. He's got to get this out. "You're scared and want me. So I pull up to see you… His hands, on you! And Belle, if it had been what you wanted, I would've driven off then and there, I would've left you to it, I never would've said a word. But you didn't. And I saw that. I saw how you didn't want to be touched, and I lost it. I told you, I do dark and terrible things to protect the people that deserve it. You are a sunbeam, sweetheart, and I couldn't stand the thought of anyone diminishing that, even for a moment. So you must understand, that's why I reacted the way I did. And I was an ass, insane, over the line, completely uncontrollable. But I lost my head when I saw you in danger." He tries to explain to her eagerly and she just blinks, unimpressed.

"Why?" The single word makes him almost moan. He needs to tell her the truth, but he is terrified, hanging onto memories of the past. How will she react? How could she ever react positively, after all this?

"Because you are mine." The words come out unexpectedly possessive, not a question but a statement. She's already seen how beastly he can get, how awful he can be, so there's nothing left to hide from her. "Because I don't want another man to touch you, ever. Only me. Because when men do, especially against your will, I see red. Mine, Belle, I want you to be mine. And if I overreact and fly off the handle in regards to you, it's because I'm fairly certain that if anything happens to you, I won't survive it."

"So what are you trying to do?" Her face is impassive as she carries on her honesty crusade, making him flinch, but he's already this far in, so he might as well finish it out.

"I am trying to court you, Belle. And I know that usually you don't start off with the whole beating a man senseless in an alley, but that is the man that I am. And I desperately need you to know that, because I don't think there is a soul on this earth that knows me like you. And I need you. So please, please," He's begging, standing in front of the desk, pleading. "Please be mine. Come home."

"Are you 13?" The words burst from her and he has to stop himself from physically recoiling. A little bewildered, he tilts his head. "You can't go about smacking people with your cane when they touch your toy."
"You are not some godforsaken toy." He says darkly. "You are a human, Belle, and you are mine."

"No." Belle wags a finger at him. "No one decides my fate but me."

"Belle, of course, I simply meant—" He tries to fix his blunder, trying to backtrack, but then Belle's hand darts out and snatches his tie, pulling him closer to the desk. Stunned, he's absolutely silent as her legs snack around him and pulls him until he's flush with her. He looks down at her wordlessly, wondering what this means, with her wide eyes and quirked lips.

"No one decides my fate but me." She reiterates and he nods eagerly. "Now get down here and kiss me senseless." He complies without hesitation, bowing his head and meeting her lips. Soft, supple, tasting like the berry shake she usually has for lunch instead of a meal. He feels like he's floating away, because his beautiful Belle is sighing into his mouth and tangling her fingers in his hair, pulling ever so slightly until he can't help but moan.

"Belle…" He drops the cane so that one hand can grab her waist and the other can find her neck, anchoring her to him. She makes a little noise of satisfaction, further exploring his mouth and when her legs tighten around him, he thinks wicked thoughts.

"Oh, your hair." She mutters when they lean back, gasping for breath. "Do you know how many times I've wanted to do this?" Both hands run through his long locks, scratching his scalp, and when she reaches the end, she pulls just slightly. He has to stifle a groan by burying his head in her neck. "And how many times I'd hoped you react just like that?"

"Darling Belle." His hands ghost up and down her arms before stopping on both sides of her face. She looks up at him with wide eyes, innocent in every sense, and he has to suppress blurring out three words that will likely alarm her. "If you want to run, now is the time. Because after this…" He trails off, but his unspoken words hang heavy in the air. He's not a one-night stand kind of man and he means to take her forever.

"You want me to run?" Belle questions and he is quiet, because there's nothing more than he wants to do than throw her on the floor and have his way with her, but he must respect her if she decides to leave. "You are not allowed to beat strangers for touching me." She states and he raises an eyebrow. "Belle, he could've hurt you."

"I'll not be having you get arrested for assault." The way she says it, with a hint of a dark smile and a flash of her eyes makes him weak in the knees.

"Belle." He whispers, fast losing control. "Belle, tell me to leave. Tell me I am an evil, dark old man. A bastard."

"Come here." Belle drags him down to kiss her again, but this time her hips are pressed to his and he feels like a teenage boy again, breathless at the possibility of being near a woman. "Mine." She marks his skin with her kisses, his lips, cheek, jaw, neck, the space beneath his ear that draws something akin to a whimper from him. "Mine, mine, mine."

"It's forever, dearie." He says roughly, more to her hair than to her as her lips trail down his neck.

"Good." She says honestly.

"What a woman. You force of nature." He mutters and then tries to show her his appreciation for her with more kisses. Belle responds in kind and he's lost in the beauty of her.

AN: Bring on the yelling! I welcome it! I encourage it! Please don't think we're done- we're only
halfway. If you haven't left a review before, now is the time! Thank you for reading all my exclamation mark sentences! I am excited!
Whiskey and Wine

Warning! Smut ahead! (Spoilers?)

"Mhmm… Rum?" She draws back slightly and he follows her, not ready for the kiss to be broken yet.

"Yes, my sweet Belle?" He mutters, running his hand over her hair gently and marveling at her beauty.

"There will be plenty of time for this at home." She reminds him and his heart jumps at the words. Home. She's coming home with him. He is home. No more separation. "But I have to finish some stuff up here before I can come back with you. Is Jefferson waiting?"

"No." A little dazed at the reality of it all, he shakes his head. "No, I drove here myself."

"Alright." Belle touches his face gently, beaming at him. "Then let me do some laundry and clean up the studio, yeah? Then we can get something to eat and go home and talk."

"Talk?" He answers a little sadly and Belle untangles herself with him, laughing slightly.

"Yes, about ground rules and things. It's just a load or two, it'll be quick." She reassures him.

"Fine." He sighs heavily, like it's a great pain. "Laundry it is then. Our relationship can wait."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Belle's eyes are sparkling. "I can think of a couple things to do while we wait."

"Belle French." He says with open admiration as she gathers up the used towels and mats.

"I was going to massage your knee." She says with faux innocent. "Mr. Gold, what a dirty mind you have!"

"Wait and see." He mutters and makes to follow her.

"Shoes! Off!"

"Seriously?"

"Yes." She glares until he groans and kicks his loafers off, standing in his stripped socks.

"Happy?" He demands and she shakes her head, stretching up on her tiptoes, pecking his lips.

"Now I am." She whispers and he doesn't even care that he looks like a lovesick puppy as he follows her back deeper into the studio.

"We have to talk." Belle mummers and he groans loudly, pulling himself away from her lips.

"Alright then, talk, and quickly." He orders. "I've wanted to kiss you in every room of this house, amongst other things, and I'd like to get to it."

"Is that why we started here?" Belle looks around at the library fondly and he smiles, kissing her
"All those quiet nights reading and playing chess, just out of reach, do you know how crazy you were driving me?" He mutters and she laughs, tightening her arms around his neck.

"Probably as crazy as I was driving myself." She replies. "That's why I don't want you to overreact to my next words."

"What?" He asks, drawing back warily.

"I'm going to move out."

"What?"

"I said don't overreact!" She chides and he keeps his arms locked in an iron grip around her, fighting the urge to panic.

"Why do you want to move out?" He manages to get the words out in a reasonably calm tone.

"Because now we're together." She suddenly ducks her head shyly. "We are together, right?"

"Yes." He kisses her cheek, then when he's not satisfied, kissing her again. "Yes, yes, yes. Sweetheart, of course we are."

"Ok." Her cheeks are red. "And that's why I need to have somewhere that's my space. If we fight or get angry or need to be apart, for a little bit, I think it would be smart. I don't want to rush into this, I don't want to ruin it."

"You being here doesn't ruin that." He cradles her close and sighs in contentment. "You being here makes it perfect."

"We've been together for oh, two hours, and I'm already living with you?" She points out dryly and he nods happily.

"Belle, I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here, with me, with Bae. You don't need some apartment for 'space' because you won't need to use it. We've lived together for months now, why would we regress?" He's using all of his charm and wits on her and beams in triumph when it works and she snuggles her head into his chest.

"I'm still going to look for apartments." She informs him after a pause and he suppresses a groan.

"Why?"

"Because I'm not going to be some sugar baby that mooches money off of you and lives rent free and gets nice clothes." She says firmly and he snorts in laughter at her terminology.

"You are not that." He informs her, kissing her nose. "You are my Belle, my darling Belle."

"Exactly." Her face softens slightly and she runs her fingers through his hair. "And would you like me half as much if I was in it for your money? I need my own space besides, for my own sanity. To know that I can do it, on my own, without my boyfriend paying the way."

"Boyfriend." He cringes at the verbiage. "I hate that word. Suitor. Paramour. Hopeless devotee. All better than boyfriend."

"You're ridiculous." Belle grins and kisses him deeply. "I'll still be here, most of the time. I like being
with you, I don't see any reason to pack my things and run, but I'll just start looking, ok?"

"Fine." He relents unhappily. "But I won't have you settling for some death trap in Brooklyn. Or god forbid, Queens. I won't. So you can look, but it has to be for a good one."

"A good one that I can afford." She corrects and he nods eagerly. Belle laughs and kisses him and he greedily winds his fingers in her hair, because no such apartment will exist if he has a say in things.

Dating Belle is heaven. Even though he hates the terms dating and boyfriend or girlfriend, he will gladly refer to him and Belle that way. Though not much changes in their everyday, therapy is now interspersed with kisses and giggles, days at work and at the studio are now spent sending flirty text messages that make Mary Margaret snort with laughter when she gets a glance of them, and evenings at home, cooking for each other before retiring to the library. The biggest difference is now, Belle tucks herself into his side wherever he goes, nose in a book or her e-reader, and he's never felt so happy.

People notice, at work and elsewhere, that the beastly Mr. Gold is much more tame. He even smiles occasionally, and Belle laughs when he comes home one night to recount the sheer terror on his receptionist Ashley's face when he asked about the little baby girl she'd had. Belle had scolded him for his quip about stealing the baby, but he'd thought it fitting.

He leaves work a little earlier now, eager to get home and to his Belle. A couple times they've gone out for supper, holding hands and sitting in tables tucked in corners, but for the most part they stay home, in their own world, safe and sound from the chaos outside. Belle is his haven, with her laughter and love. He has never ever felt the way that he does with her.

"Darling." He pauses in the kitchen, leaning on the counter and watching as she stretches up and reaches for the spices.

"Yes?" She glances over her shoulder and smiles, looking at the recipe pulled up on her tablet with a frown.

"Stop, for two seconds." He orders and she goes back down on her flat feet, tilting her head curiously.

"I was going to make us shrimp scampi." She explains and he chuckles, kissing her head.


"Are you mad?" She stares at him, gaping. "One, reservations. Two, my outfit. Three, madness."

"Do you really think I haven't thought all of those things through?" He smiles at her and kisses her forehead. "I'll get us a table. I took the liberty of sending Mary Margaret out to pick out an outfit for you. I believe it's on my bed."

"You did what?" Belle is eyeing him skeptically and he maintains an innocent smile. "You planned this, didn't you?"

"Planned a date night for myself and my woman? I didn't think you'd protest." He comments and Belle looks ready to argue the point, then pauses.

"Wait. Mary Margaret picked me up an outfit?" She frowns slightly. "What does that entail?"
"I don't know." He says honestly. "I told her that I wanted to take you on a proper date and to shop accordingly. There's a box and large white bag, something about pearls?"

"What?" Belle frowns and then heads for his bedroom. He follows at a slower gait, though he's eager to see what Mary Margaret has done with his credit card and a free afternoon. Belle is staring at the two bags and a box on his bed with apprehension.

"Well, don't make me wait. I'd love to see." He says evenly from the doorway. Biting her lip, Belle slowly reaches into the larger of two bags and pulls out a beautiful white dress that will likely fall to right around her knees, with a cinched waist and lace sleeves.

"This is… Amazing." Belle runs her hands over the fabric in reverence. "This is Lela Rose."

"Very pretty." He comments, the name meaningless to him and Belle looks at him, aghast, then shakes her head and grabs the shoe box, popping it open. Sky-high nude Louboutins are nestled carefully amongst tissue paper and Belle's jaw drops as she pulls one out, inspecting it in awe.

"These are… Too much." She says distantly and his lips draw up in a smirk at the image of Belle in such shoes.

"They are not." He picks up the other shoe and inspects it. "You've walked in far higher heels dearie."

"This all costs too much! Plus dinner, I can't." She says firmly, putting the dress on the bed but cradling the heels.

"Think of this as a bonus. A gift, for dealing with the monster." He tries and she frowns, kissing him.

"You are not a monster." She mutters. "You are mine."

"What's in the last bag?" He asks, after kissing her. She frowns slightly and peeks inside, then goes bright red.

"Out." She orders, giving him a shove. "Out, out, out."

"What?" He frowns at her, carefully stepping backwards. "Are you kicking me out of my own bedroom?"

"Yes. Out." Belle gives him a firm jab to the chest.

"Belle." He says incredulously. Still blushing furiously, she forces him over the threshold and shuts the door. He stares at it in astonishment and when he hears the lock click, fishes his phone out of his pocket.

"Hello sir." Mary Margaret answers cheerfully.

"What did you do?" He demands and there's a careful pause.

"In reference to?" She asks and he sighs.

"What did you buy Belle?" He clarifies. "I saw the dress and the shoes and then she looked in the other bag and now I'm outside of my own bedroom. What was in that damn bag?"

"Oh." Mary Margaret's tone turns amused. "Have you ever heard of La Perla, Mr. Gold?"

"No." He says, recalling that name on the bag.
"Google it." She orders and before he can protest, she laughs. "And then thank me later. Have a
good date!" She hangs up without remorse and he leans against the wall, grumbling but typing in the
name nonetheless. A second later, when a rather expensive lingerie site pops onscreen, he decides
that his plucky assistant is getting a raise.

Belle relinquishes his bedroom back to him when she's mostly dressed, heels dangling from her
fingers. He eyes the empty white bag still left on his bed hungrily and wonders if waiting through
dinner is worth it all, but gets himself dressed, choosing dark shades to contrast with his vision in
white. When she emerges from her bathroom, her hair has been pulled into a curly side pony, her
makeup natural and effortless.

"Stunning." He comments lowly, taking her and spinning her. Even in the heels, she still doesn't
clear him.

"Thank you." She whispers and he knows it's for more than the compliment. Instead, he kisses her
cheek and leads her towards the car. He delights in the wonder in her eyes as he guides her into the
restaurant; her surprise at the respect the wait staff gives them. He picks a good wine for them and
Belle watches as her glass is filled, startled.

"Do you like it?" He asks, watching as she takes a sip.

"I think Ruby would have my head if she knew what I was drinking." She laughs and he chuckles
with her. "It's amazing. This is amazing."

"Drink up." He says, smiling as she quirks an eyebrow.

"Trying to get me drunk, Mr. Gold? Hoping for something to happen after this date?" She teases and
he reaches across the table, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles.

"That you are even in my life is more than I ever could've hoped for." He says honestly and Belle
goes pink, ducking her head in delight. They order appetizers and their meal, sharing bites while they
laugh. Belle guides the conversation and he is happy to sit back and listen to her stories about Ruby
and yoga and her life as a whole. He's just happy to have her.

For dessert he orders them maceconia di frutta, remembering Belle's love all of things sweet. She
gasps and moans at the first bite and he debates ordering the whole thing to go. When it's finally
cleared away and she's got a little wine left while he nurses a whiskey, she glances at her stomach.

"No yoga in the world is going to work this off." She laments. "That was the best meal I've ever had.
And to think I was going to make us some overcooked shrimp scampi."

"It would've been amazing." He assures her and Belle laughs, swirling her wine absentmindedly.

"Not like this." She says quietly then glances up at him. "You know, you don't have to do this. I
would be perfectly content at home. I don't need the dresses and shoes and fancy wine."

"And that, my love, is exactly why you deserve them." He stands and offers her his hand. "Shall
we?"

"How in the world did I get so lucky?" Belle questions, tucking herself in his side as they head for
the door.

"As I recall, you steadfastly refused to be intimidated by me." He chuckles and Belle smiles, turning
her head up to brush his neck with a kiss.
"You're not that scary once you're out of the suit and into the yoga clothes." She reminds him and he sighs heavily.

"Seems you know my weakness, Miss French."

"Seems I do." She whispers, then kisses him and slips her hand into his. "Take me home, Mr. Gold."

The car ride seems both too slow and too fast, Belle's hand on his knee like that awful night, but she's smiling and humming. His hands are trembling, nervous and scared, but also giddy with anticipation. All he wants to do is hold her, because she has the uncanny knack for making everything in the world melt away, until it's just them.

"Tomorrow I intend to sleep the morning away." Belle declares boldly, once they walk in the front door and he pauses to turn on the security system. He snorts in amusement.

"You'll be up before the sun dearie, your body doesn't know how not to be." He reminds her.

"And how exactly do you know about my body?" She's wrapped him in a hug from behind, squeezing just slightly. Her breath tickles his ear and he shivers, turning carefully to face her.

"Because I have worshipped it from the day I met you." He says quietly and Belle raises any eyebrow.

"Is that so?"

"All those tops with the missing panels?" He informs her and she grins. "Torture, Belle, exquisite torture."

"Come on then." She takes his hand and pulls him to his bedroom carefully. "There's more to be seen."

"Belle." He mutters and she shushes him with a kiss, then several more, until he hardly realizes that she's drawn him to his bed. She pushes him down to sit and he does as told, watching her in awe. Shyly, she reaches for the zipper of her dress, lowering it before tugging the dress off.

His heart stops in shock. Belle is wearing a bra and panties of lace in the palest blue, contrasting with her eyes spectacularly. She stands in her heels, peeking out at him from under her eyelashes. He can do nothing but stare at her in astonishment, from her long legs and round butt, to her flat stomach and small, perfect breasts. She pulls her hair from its pony and shakes it out.

"Well?" Her voice isn't timid but he catches the note of fear that he's going to dismiss her. Speechless, because that's the last thing he would ever do, he beckons her closer.


"You know, there is quickly going to come a day where I won't be able to bring myself to leave your side." She informs him and the beast inside, dormant for most of the night, roars to life.

"Good." He says roughly then flips her onto her back and kissing her deeply. "Belle, my darling, are you sure?"

"Yes." She whispers fiercely, tangling her fingers in his hair and pulling, just slightly. He kisses her again then kisses her cheek before moving to her earlobe. He takes his sweet time moving down her
body, because Belle makes the most wonderful sounds as he kisses every inch of her fair skin, and he wants time to calm the nerves suddenly arising.

"Belle." He pauses when he reaches her hipbones, looking up at her for one last affirmation.

"Please." She moans and he carefully removes her panties, digging his nails into her hips before he can stop himself. Belle jerks beneath him and he looks at her in alarm, wondering if he's hurt her, but she's panting now and he holds back a smile. His sweet Belle doesn't mind a little pain on the road to pleasure. He makes a careful mental note of that before he nips at one hip and then lowers his face between her legs.

Belle squirms and writhes, hips bucking wildly as he teases her carefully, but he holds her down firmly. He's dreamt of this for months and he's taking his damn time to savor every moment of it. He commits everything to memory, how she tastes, how his name sounds when she's moaning it, how if he flicks his tongue just so, she'll gasp. He can feel her get closer and closer, until with some gentle pressure, she comes undone.

"Belle." He groans, feeling just how wet she is. Suddenly, she's yanking him by the hair back up to her face and she kisses him, hard, hands going to the tie around his throat.

"Off, all of it, get it off, now." She growls and he works on the tie while Belle does the buttons on the shirt beneath. Once the top half is discarded far across the room, Belle works on his pants. Every brush, even accidental, on the fabric over his crotch causes him to gasp. Belle's mouth twists up into a smile when she realizes what she's doing to him.

"You are a force of nature." He mutters, when Belle finally manages to rid him of his pants. Her bra goes flying moments after.

"And you are incredible. Absolutely incredible." She whispers, kissing him before snaking her hand between them and grabbing him firmly. He restrains himself from whimpering, but when Belle begins to stroke him, slowly, he can't help but to gulp for air.

"Belle." He whispers, as she rolls him over so he's on his back. "Belle, do you need a… You know?"

"No." Belle's face splits into a huge smile and she rests her forehead against his. "I'm on birth control, no worries. No babies."

"Oh, good." He says, a little vaguely, because the idea of Belle having his children proves to be a distracting thought. Then she's kissing him again and all he can focus on is how soft and supple she is in his hands, how he can palm her breasts so perfectly, how delicious the ache in his stomach feels. Belle teases him with kisses until it's all he can do but grab her tightly and take his turn begging.

"Belle. Please. Belle. I need you."

"I need you more." She whispers back and he buries his face in her neck, because the words make him feel like crying, and Belle lowering herself onto him is the kind of bliss he never expected. She's moaning in his ear about his size, about good he feels, but he can hardly pay attention. He's got Belle and the world seems to slow to that fact and that alone.

"Belle. Belle. Belle." He whispers her name over and over again, thrusting, clasping her close to him. She can't be close enough, not when every inch of her that touches him is like a soothing balm, making him feel younger, happier, better. She is a drug and he is her addict, and he will fight until the end of time rather than give her up for anything.
"Yes, please, yes, yes, god Rum, please." She bites his earlobe and he moans, holding her. He's close, but he doesn't want this to end. Until Belle gives his hair a little tug and with a shudder, he lets it all go. Belle rides him until he's spent and collapses back onto the pillows. She stays where she is, tracing patterns on his chest as he gently strokes her sides.

"Do you know what you mean to me?" He asks her softly and she looks at him, blue eyes slowly clearing. She smiles slowly.

"I'm beginning to think I mean quite a lot, considering the amount of money now crumpled on your floor." She remarks and he spares a glance at the clothes and shrugs.

"Mrs. Potts knows how to clean such things. You mean everything Belle, everything." He says eagerly.

"I know." She whispers, leaning down to kiss his forehead before carefully moving to lie next to him.

"You're not moving out." He says sleepily, pulling her into his arms and sighing in contentment at their positions.

"I'm getting a little apartment. For emergencies." She says it very unconvincingly and he smiles, closing his eyes.

"Emergencies, yes. All the emergencies we will be having. I said I'm never letting you go." He reminds her.

"And you never break a deal." Belle kisses his temple and snuggles closer, tucking the blankets around herself.

"No, never."

"Then make me a deal that things will always be like this."

"Deal." He holds her tightly. "Goodnight, my beautiful Belle."

"Goodnight Rum."

AN: Oh, do you like? Reviews are where you can tell me, hint, hint, hint....
"We can't tell Bae." Belle looks at him in vague alarm and all he can do is raise a lazy eyebrow, not really in the mood to do anything but admire her naked form amongst his bed sheets.

"Sure." He agrees easily, nuzzling her neck and pulling her closer.

"No." With a firm hand, she pushes him back so she can see his eyes. He looks at her imploringly; quite intent on getting back to his plan to spend the morning making sure there isn't a patch of her flawless skin he hasn't kissed. "Rum, are you listening to me?"

"No." He says honestly. "You said my son's name in bed, I'm doing as best I can to completely ignore that."

"Rum." She grabs his chin and makes him look up at her, forcing him to keep eye contact.

"Yes?" If his eyes can't appreciate her, his hands at least can and so he puts them to work, exploring familiar territory that still causes him to lose his breath, following familiar paths.

"Enough!" She bats his hands away and rolls until she's astride him, pinning him down by the wrists. It has the exact opposite of the desired effect and he moves his hips in slow circles, showcasing his erection. Belle's eyes go hazy, like she's going to let herself be distracted by it, but then she blinks and shakes her head, looking down at him in disapproval.

"Please?" He tries, knowing there's no harm in asking.

"We are not telling Baen about this." She gestures between their bare chests. "Got it?"

"Why not?" He's genuinely surprised at that. "He'll be thrilled, you know he adores you. In fact, he thinks you're entirely too good for me, and he's not wrong, but I—" Belle cuts him off with a kiss and he wants to get lost in it but then she's pulling back and giving him a stern look.

"I don't want to alarm him. We're what, hardly a month into this? We barely know what this is, if Bae comes into it I'm worried that, well, it'll complicate things." She admits and he pulls his hand from her grasp carefully, then tenderly runs a hand over her messy bedhead.

"Belle, I intend on this lasting a long, long time." He whispers and Belle hides a beaming smile.

"Bae deserves to know."

"And we'll tell him... Eventually." Belle draws thoughtful patterns on his chest, biting her lip. "But let's just get through this long weekend and see how it goes, yeah? Then we can worry about how to tell him that I'm staying in a more... Permanent capacity."

"Is that what we're calling it?" He mummers, amused, and she laughs, dipping down to kiss him.

"Would you prefer I call you my boyfriend?" She teases and he makes a face at the word.

"I haven't been a boy in ages." He mutters, pulling her close to him. "Bae knows you're my Belle, my darling Belle. That's enough."

"That means no kissing in the kitchen, no cuddles in the library, no surprising me in the shower, and no sleepovers." She says sternly, between kisses, and he groans in protest.

"You are trying to get an addict to quit his new drug." He warns her and Belle smiles into his mouth.
"We could always go to the studio." She suggests. "I know a couple uses for those chairs we haven't gotten around to."

"I've dreamt about that, you know." He confesses and Belle grins.

"Good. I was trying to put those thoughts in your head." She whispers and he sinks his nails into her hips.

"I'm not going to make it." He says honestly and Belle chuckles, low and deep and utterly seductive.

"It's only four days." She reminds him and when she brushes over him he moans in want.

"I'm not going to make it." He repeats adamantly and Belle's sly smile is a thing of beauty.

"Think of how much fun it'll be when we have to wait a couple days." She tries to cajole him and he ignores her completely to focus his rapt attention on her perfect breasts.

In the car on the way to the airport to get Bae, Belle holds his hand and hums a thoughtful tune, scrolling through some article on her phone. He watches her with a small smile, trying not to think about how, for the first time ever, he's not completely excited for Bae to come home. He wants more time, more time with her, more time alone. But Bae is coming home and Belle will be Dottie and he will keep his hands to himself. It seems a little ridiculous, but necessary, and it will please Belle.

"Is that him?" Belle is practically bouncing in her heels while using his arm for balance, craning her neck in a desperate attempt to see over the heads of the milling crowd.

"Don't know, hard to tell when I'm being jostled so." He says dryly and Belle frowns at him, giving him a small punch.

"Papa? Dottie?" Bae's voice draws their attention as he emerges from between two men and Belle squeals loudly, running for the youth who's now far taller than her despite her heels.

"Ernie!" She pulls him into a tight hug and sways on the spot. "Oh, you're home, you're home, you're home." She pushes him away so she can get a better look. "And taller. How?"

"I eat." He says simply then goes to hug his father. Belle beams, throwing her arms around the two of them.

"Oh, my boys back together." She says happily, kissing both their heads. "Let's go home."

The car ride back is filled with nonstop chatter from Belle and Bae, practically talking over each other in an attempt to spill all their secrets. When Bae casually asks her if anything new has happened, she catches Gold's eye and remains impressively impassive when she informs him no, nothing new. He sits back, smiling, and listens to Bae's story about his latest science class and the resulting explosion.

The first night is deceptively easy. He'd spent the morning loving Belle anyways, and he can still taste her on his lips. Supper with Bae is a breeze, since they all have stories to tell. He gets a work call halfway through that turns his mood sour and when he returns to the kitchen, all he wants to do is bury his head in Belle's hair and let her comfort him, but he can't, because Bae is sitting there, rambling about his next book report.
They go to bed separately for the first time since they'd slept together and that's when he decides this will be worse than anticipated. He hates that Belle's warm form isn't there for him to find when he rolls over, sleepy and looking for cuddles. He misses the way she steals the blankets, he misses her three little snores before she falls asleep completely, he even misses her cold feet pressing into his thighs when she comes to bed. He misses her, badly, and it's ridiculous when she's a hallway away.

The next morning he tries to catch her in unawares, sneaking up for a kiss, protesting that Bae sleeps the day away anyways, that there can't be any harm. Belle lets him get close enough to smell the oil she must've dabbed on her wrists before darting away laughing.

"Addict Belle, addict." He reminds her darkly. She floats back over and hugs him tightly from behind, some of the tension leaking out of him at the mere contact with her.

"You've been sober for 15 years. Three days will not kill you." She reminds him, kissing between his shoulder blades.

"I should go to work. You and me, same space, not able to do anything?" He turns and looks down at her with a pout. "It's agony Belle."

"And you're being dramatic." She grins and taps his nose, grabbing the toast that pops up.

"Cruel woman." He accuses and she drizzles honey on the toast, feigning deafness. "I thought the whole upside of us living together—"

"Temporarily!"

"We'll see about that." He snorts. If he has it his way, she won't be going anywhere. "The bright side is that I get to see you, every day. Kiss you, hold you, be with you, love on you."

"You do that." She says dryly. "But not while your son is here. And you're not going to work today, you've already taken it off, I've told Mary Margaret she can have a date with David, and Bae will be disappointed if you ditch on our plans. So go in your office, pout like a baby, and get some work done."

"I can't focus." He whines.

"Try." She relents a little and kisses his cheek on her way out, but that's all she allows and he heads to his office, grumbling the entire time about stubborn women and stupid rules.

"Hey." Bae pokes his head in a little while later and he glances up at his son. "We're going out for lunch. Wanna come?"

"Where would we be headed?" He carefully sorts the remaining papers into done and not done piles.

"Belle wants to go to this quick-fire pizza place, you make your own pizza and then they fire it in a really hot oven for like 90 seconds." Bae explains excitedly. "It sounds awesome."

"Traditional pizza too good for us?" He remarks and Belle emerges from the library, rolling her eyes.

"Don't be cranky because we're making you try new things." She orders. "And Jefferson is bringing Grace, so best behavior."

"I don't have good behavior." He reminds her and Belle raises an eyebrow, waiting until Bae leaves
to respond to the slamming of the front door and excited yells of a young girl.

"Yes you do." She mutters, snaking past him and letting her hip brush against his purposely.

"Not if you keep this up." He warns and Belle's laughter lingers as she goes to greet Jefferson and Grace. He follows, frowning until Grace's lanky arms wrap around his neck, excitedly jabbering about her newest adventure. He likes the little girl and always has, with her sweet disposition and general innocence. The good in the world.

"Are you excited for pizza?" Belle asks, helping her into her light jacket and Grace nods, practically buzzing.

"I like mine with the pepperonis on it." She says seriously. "Daddy likes his with olives and those are gross."

"You should try peppers," Bae says, guiding her outside while the adults wait for Belle to grab her purse and a scarf.

"Peppers?"

"Peppers and pepperoni, let's try it."

The pizza place is near a park, so they take it to go. Bae successfully talks Grace into the peppers, which she's eyeing with distrust now. He laughs and cajoles her into eating it, showing her his own meat-covered creation and letting her try a bite. Belle, of course, gets one of the Mediterranean varieties, and Jefferson does indeed get olives on his. Gold settles for Hawaiian, a choice that seems to surprise and delight Belle.

"What?" He demands when he catches her watching him eat his pizza with revelation.

"Never pegged you for a pineapple on his pizza kinda guy." She says easily, grinning at him.

"I am full of surprises." He informs her and she raises a wicked eyebrow in a challenge.

After they eat, Grace and Bae set off to explore the park. It hardly matters to Bae that he's playing with a girl half his age; he's content to scramble over the playground and play Grace's silly games, laughing and climbing atop a high tower where she can't reach.

"He's good with kids." Jefferson comments, watching them with a smile. Belle tilts her head, smiling.

"He is. He deserves a gaggle of younger siblings to command and get into trouble with." She says it casually; seemingly unaware that Gold has started choking on a pineapple.

"He really does." Jefferson smacks his boss's back nonchalantly while Belle hides a secret smile.

After the park, they visit a couple shops, Belle getting books, Bae a game, and Grace a new doll. Walking takes its toll after several blocks and so he pauses on a bench to rest, Belle sitting beside him wordlessly and carefully easing the pain with her hands. Bae and Grace hardly notice, distracted by Jefferson taking them to get ice cream.

"Is it feeling better with it being warmer?" Belle mutters and he tears his gaze away from her hands to look at her.

"Yes, but now that the knee doesn't hurt, my heart does." He switches gears to be romantic but Belle doesn't do anything but just smile sweetly.
"I think Bae and I are going to have another movie night tonight." She says thoughtfully.

"Are you telling me that I have to sit beside you on a couch whilst you're in your pajamas, and I can't even so much as hold your hand?" He demands, sure she's doing this on purpose now.

"It will be a movie night with Bae." She says carefully and he gives her a look that usually sends mere mortals running. Belle, on the other hand, grins cheerfully, then thanks Grace for getting her lemon sherbet.

For movie night, they're still on that strange list of 'classics' and tonight's viewing is Edwards Scissorhands. Bae makes the popcorn while Belle does hot chocolate and tea. He sits on the couch, unsure of where to go or what to do. Bae collapses on one side of him and Belle the other, pressing play.

"I don't think Johnny Depp can get any better than Pirates of the Caribbean, I'm just saying." Bae announces and Belle gasps.

"Baen Matheson Gold, you take that uncultured nonsense back right now or I will disown you."

"You can't disown me." Bae laughs.

"I'll get your father to disown you." She threatens and Bae glances at his father with a raised eyebrows.

"Yes. Disowned over the acting choices of a one Johnny Depp." He deadpans and Bae rolls his eyes.

"Pirates of the Caribbean is good, you can't tell me it's not." He argues and Belle snorts.

"Yeah, it was good after the third one, now that they're on like the 8th one it's overstayed it's welcome."

"I like them." Bae says resolutely. "We should watch them next."

"Focus." Belle gestures to the TV. "Focus on the good."

He tries to pay attention to the first half of the movie, he really does. A curious girl and a timid beast, all parallels he doesn't want to dwell on. However, he gets distracted running one finger up and down Belle's arm, watching in enjoyment when goose bumps arise. To his surprise, Belle doesn't say a word and he realizes with amusement it's because she doesn't dare tell him off, not with Bae sitting right there.

He makes a game out of it then, seeing what he can do to get a reaction from her without Bae noticing. He sees her pupils dilate but she keeps her lips firmly shut, refusing to allow him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm. When the movie is over, she practically leaps up.

"Well, busy day tomorrow, better turn in early, time for bed, see you tomorrow, goodnight!" She says quickly.

"I thought we were going to watch Pirates." Bae says disappointed and Belle shakes her head.

"Tomorrow, but I think I need to go to bed first." She takes a deep breath, smoothing out her pajamas.
"Alright, then I'm gonna play my new game." Bae gets up to fiddle with the video game controller and Belle pats his head before departing.

"Goodnight." He tells his son and Bae gives him a distracted wave, most of his attention focused on the game now. He follows Belle to her bedroom, where she's flopped down on the bed, the picture of defeat. He observes from the doorway, amused.

"You think I'm cruel? You're a thousand times worse." She accuses without removing her arm from across her eyes.

"I believe all of this was your idea, dearie." He reminds her and Belle sits up, glaring daggers.

"You protect that kid like the mob is after him, but you want to introduce him to your girlfriend of like a week." She accuses. "Forgive me if that surprises me just a little."

"Yes, I'll reintroduce him to the woman that he met months ago, that he's been in near constant contact with, who is not my girlfriend but rather my serious companion." He corrects and Belle throws a pillow at him.

"Serious companion sounds way worse than girlfriend." She huffs and he picks the pillow up, tossing it back.

"Are you ashamed?" He asks her and she looks at him, aghast.

"Of us? No!"

"Then why don't you want Bae to know?" He presses. "You are my girlfriend Belle, though I loathe that word, and he deserves to know that you are staying in our lives in a very serious capacity."

"What if he doesn't want me?" Belle whispers.

"What?" He nearly drops his cane in surprise. "That's your worry, that Bae will be upset we're dating?"

"I mean, I'm fun Belle." She waves a hand as he comes to sit on the bed beside her. "And we get along so great, but what if this ruins it? What if I'm not the girl he had in mind for a stepmother? What if he prefers that it just be you two, like it always has? What if he doesn't want me? Because you'll pick him over me, you must, and I just..." Tears well in her eyes unexpectedly. "I want things to be perfect, for us, and I don't know how to do that yet."

"Belle." He takes her hands. "My beautiful Belle, he loves you. Adores you. I am absolutely certain that he will be delighted in this. You are everything he deserves; I've thought that since Christmas. He will want you, just like I want you. You fit, you fit into this family, and we all know it. So whenever you're ready, sweetheart, we can tell him." He kisses her forehead and she smiles.

"A little bit longer." She requests. "Before he leaves, I promise. But just, tomorrow, let's see how it goes."

"Fine." He agrees then offers her a hand. "Now, let's go to bed."

"Goodnight then." Belle shoves him off her bed without preamble. He whines loudly and she smiles.

"Please, Belle, come to bed." He pleads.

"See you in the morning." She shoos him out and he goes, cursing the air blue, destined for another
night alone.

Saturday means the baseball game Bae and Belle have been so eagerly discussing since Bae got home. Gold whines and complains about the disgrace of raising an American child and the pointlessness of baseball, but is told to shush and come with or complain and stay behind. Grumbling, he goes with, adamantly refusing to put on the Yankees cap Belle holds.

It's a beautiful spring day, the first of the year where shorts are acceptable and even needed. It takes all his willpower to not stare at Belle as she skips along in dark shorts that showcase her long legs, arm in arm with Bae. They have good seats and he stretches out, remarking on the poor selection of whiskey they have at the stadium.

"Order a beer then." Belle doesn't miss a beat, before turning to Bae to discuss the chances of their team winning the World Series this year. He chuckles at her; relaxing into his seat, though he remarks after every inning that football is far more entertaining.

"Soccer." Belle and Bae correct him at the same time and he gaps at them in astonishment.

"Really, Bae? My own flesh and blood, calling it soccer! A right disgrace!" He accuses darkly.

"I was born in America." Bae grins at Belle then rolls his eyes at his father. "We call it soccer here."

"And you?" He turns to Belle.

"We call it soccer in Australia too." She informs him. "And I have lived in the States nearly all my life."

"Traitors." He grumbles. "Incorrect traitors."

Despite the snacks they had at the stadium, Belle decides that they're getting supper. On the way home, she suggests the sushi place where they'd first had lunch and Bae agrees with ease, flicking through the pictures he'd taken at the stadium and asking Belle which to upload on his social media.

"This is where your father and I first met, did you know that?" Belle informs Bae as they walk inside and pause, waiting to be directed to a table.

"Just three?" The hostess asks them with a smile.

"The three of us." Gold responds, looking at them with a smile.

"Follow me." The hostess leads them towards the back and Belle points to the booth as they pass it.

"That booth, right there."

"You guys met over sushi?" Bae's forehead crinkles in confusion.

"Not exactly. We met when Dr. Whale gave me her number for therapy." Gold explains, winching as he lowers himself down into their booth. "I was in a bad mood—"

"Imagine that!"

"And so I called her. I wasn't about to trust someone that I'd never met with my injury, so I suggested lunch." He explains.
"He trusted me enough to order him sushi." Belle remarks, grinning. "Of course, he had to, since he'd never had sushi a day in his life."

"How'd you know?" He demands.

"Mary Margaret brought it up a few weeks after we started your appointments." Her eyes twinkle in amusement. "She mentioned that you'd never expressed a want for sushi before, so I figured all of that trust was to keep yourself from actually having to order."

"Don't act like you know me." He grumbles and Belle grins, taking a sip of water. "Tell him what you did then."

"I ordered us sushi." Belle says innocently.

"After." He specifies and she chuckles.

"There was an old couple, sitting over there." She points to where they'd been. "And they were just crabby. Your father was being an uptight stick in the mud, so I decided to show him that I was fun."

"By doing what?" Bae asks curiously and Belle raises an eyebrow, folding her straw wrapper before glancing around. Satisfied that no one is watching, she lobs it towards the table of teens diagonal from them, grinning in triumph when it lands on the plate of one.

"Your father is a much better shot." She informs him and Bae looks at him, raising an eyebrow in a silent challenge. Gold carefully folds his own wrapper then aims it for the glass in the table next to them. When it sinks in, he simply takes a sip of his own water while Bae struggles to hide his glee.

"Is that what you guys did on your first date, threw stuff at people?" He questions and Gold chokes on his water.

"It wasn't a date." He says quickly, once he can breathe and Bae simply blinks before turning to Belle.

"We did some throwing, yes." She admits. "But there was a lot more talking, mostly on my part. And delicious sushi, which we will now have again."

After sushi, on the way home, Bae requests if he can go see some friends. He hesitantly offers to stay, since they only have tomorrow remaining on his break, but Gold practically forces him out the door, reassuring him that it's good he gets out of the house. Belle gives him a kiss and laughs, reminding him that they've had all day together, and seeing old friends is good. Bae's hardly out the door when Belle pounces.

"On the sofa, really, darling?" He comments dryly, as Belle's little shorts go flying and his shirt follows.

"Less talking." She urges him, forcing him down onto his back and kissing his neck. "More kissing."

"Demanding." He teases. Now that she's the one that's desperate, he reclaims his power victoriously.

"Shut up." Belle grabs his face and holds it tightly, eyes wild. "I have not kissed you in 48 hours. That is 47 hours and 45 minutes too long. So, for the love of god, kiss me."

"Gladly." He gives into her wishes.

Though the first round is on the couch, he quickly moves her to the bedroom, desperate not just for
sex but the cuddling afterwards. He wants to hold her again, have the soft curves of her body against all his sharp edges, soothing him. He wants them to talk, and laugh, and hold each other.

"One more night." Belle mutters, once they're curled up in the sheets together, her head on his chest.

"Just stay." He runs his fingers over her shoulders. "Just stay, and be with me, and stop acting like you don't want Bae to know."

"I do want him to know, just not yet." She reminds him, snuggling closer. "I like it just being us."

"He's my son." He glances at the clock. "Besides, look, it's late. He'll stay with his friends. It'll be fine. Stay Belle, stay."

"Can't." Her lips quirk up and she gives him a light kiss. "Besides, I thought you'd be delighted to finally get your fair share of bed and blankets."

"It has been a delight." He teases. "But lacking my own personal furnace in the middle of the night has been hard."

"I'm not that warm." She protests, smiling.

"Belle, you're like a small bonfire."

"Papa? Dottie?" The door slams and Bae's voice drifts up to them. Belle goes rigid, eyes wide and looking at him in terror. He makes no movement, just grinning. "Where are you guys?" At that, Belle makes a mad scramble out of bed, looking around frantically for her clothes.

"Clothes! Where are they?" She hisses, gesturing to her body only half hidden with a blanket.

"Living room floor, I believe." He props himself up on one elbow, grinning. "You were the eager one, if I do recall."

"Rum!" She glances around in a panic. "What are we going to do?"

"Hey, are you guys— Oh." Bae stops in the doorway and takes in the scene in front of him. His father, chest bare, sitting amongst the pillows of his bed. Belle, off to one side, wrapped in a blanket, hair messy and eyes wide.

"Bae." Belle gasps. "It's not— We're not— You—"

"Ok." Eyes closed, Bae puts up his hands. "Ok. Everyone, dressed, please, in the kitchen."

"Give us a moment then son." Gold requests and Bae flees.

"Oh my god." Belle mutters, bringing her hand up over her mouth and closing her eyes. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, that didn't just happen. It didn't. Pinch me, I must be dreaming."

"As much as there are certain parts of you I'd love to pinch, dearie, I think it's best we talk to the boy." He says easily, grabbing pants and shirt. Face flaming red, Belle retreats to her room. He makes it to the kitchen first and decides that tea would be a good idea.

"So." Bae sits at the table, watching his father as he puts the kettle on. "It's about time."

"For?" He feigns obliviousness.

"For making a move on Belle." Bae sits back, satisfied. "I've had a bet going with Jefferson and
Mary Margaret, she didn't think you'd do anything till summer or later."

"And you had faith that your old man would make a move?" He raises an eyebrow, flattered.

"Faith that Belle would." Bae grins and he shortles, going to grab cups. That sounds more like his son.

"Bae, I am so sorry." Belle comes flying into the kitchen in shorts and crewneck, hair a mess atop her head. "That is not how I wanted you to find out. I was picturing a fun day, maybe another Yankees game or something cool, I'd ask your opinion, I'd answer questions, we'd get treats, I'd listen to everything you had to say." She rambles.

"Well, you did take me to a Yankees game today." He reminds her carefully. "And you can still listen to me and let me ask questions. I'm sure there's ice cream in the freezer, but if this means we can get cake, I won't complain."

"Wait." Belle stops, staring at him. "You're not freaking out? Traumatized that we were—"

"Don't say it or I will be scarred for life." He flinches, making a face. "But I'm 14 Belle, not 4."

"Ok." Belle sits across from him eagerly. "Ok, then ask questions. Ask anything. You want to know, I'll tell you."

"Just one thing." He announces and Belle takes a deep breath, nodding. "Who made the first move?"

"I did." Both Belle and Gold declare, and then look at each other.

"I came to your studio." He reminds her.

"After I texted you!"

"I told you my feelings first."

"I pulled you down to kiss me!"

"Belle made the first move." Bae decides. "Because that means Mary Margaret owes me $15."

"Did you two bet on our relationship?" Belle asks him, half amused and half affronted.

"Yeah." He says nonchalantly. "I mean, I could see it coming a mile away. He was basically in love with you at Christmas."

"What?" Belle goes red again, hiding a smile.

"Please. I'm just glad you guys finally acted on it. This whole weekend, pretending not to be together was ridiculous. You cuddled all last night and then today we went to where you had your first date. I'm a kid, not an idiot." He scoffs and Belle's jaw drops.

"Wait. Not only did you know about us, but you approve?" She demands, glancing at Bae then at Gold then back at Bae.

"Of course I do." Bae rolls his eyes and gets up, opening the freezer, pulling out the vanilla bean ice cream. "Belle, you know I like you. A lot. Are you really surprised that I'm this happy that you like my dad?"

"I thought you'd be upset." She admits, still staring at him disbelief. Gold places a teacup in front of
Belle while Bae dishes up ice cream. "I thought you'd be mad or that you'd think I was taking your dad or ruining your thing or, I don't know." She flounders.

"Caramel?" Bae asks her and she nods mutely. He grabs it from the fridge. "Belle, you talked him into bringing me home for Christmas. You make him happy, like really happy, and he smiles more when he's with you. I'm super happy you're here." He offers a bowl. "Are you staying, like forever?"

"Yes." She says firmly, setting the bowl aside and pulling him into a fierce hug. "Yes, I am, whether you like it or not. You two are my boys, and I am never going anywhere."

"Good." Bae hugs her back tightly but when she lets go, he turns pink. "Could you guys, just not, uh, do stuff when I'm home?"

"Yes!" Belle says instantly while Gold mutters,

"No promises."

"Good." Bae relaxes and grabs his ice cream. "Well, it's only like 11, want to watch a movie?"

They decide to let Bae pick the movie, since he claims he's suffered the most today. He picks Pirates of the Caribbean, much to Belle's chagrin, and settles in with them to watch. Belle curls into Gold's side and he secures his arm around her tightly, thinking quietly to himself that he is a wicked man, he does not deserve the happiness seated on his left and right, and despite all that he will fight until the end of time to keep it.

Sunday morning he treats them to brunch, delighting in the simple pleasure of holding Belle's hand while they wait for coffee. He's transfixed by her smile, the way it lights up the whole room. All he has to do is sit back and watch as she and Bae transform the space into beauty.

"Are you packed?" He asks, as Bae finishes scarfing down his eggs. He nods, mouth full.

"Even the things Mrs. Potts was washing?" Belle questions, putting a thin layer of jam on her toast.

"Yes." Bae grins at her. "She packed it for me last night."

"Baen." He says sternly. "She is not your maid. I think it's time this summer that you start having your own chores."

"Speaking of this summer." Bae changes the subject with flawless ease, leaning forward and looking between his father and Belle.

"Yes?" Gold says slowly, unsure of where this is going.

"Belle, are you going to live with us?" Bae questions. Belle goes pink, glancing at Gold and raising an eyebrow.

"Um, for right now, well, we were thinking that I would, you know, stay for a little bit, until I—"

"She's staying." Gold says firmly and Belle puts her head down, grinning uncontrollably.

"Good." Bae takes the rest of his father's breakfast potatoes.

"Ok, you have everything right?" Belle asks Bae worriedly at the gate, pushing his hair back.
"Yes." He assures her for the hundredth time, grinning. "I've got all my socks, all my books, I even have that book report that you helped me write. I've got everything, I swear."

"And whatever he has forgotten, because he has, we can ship to him." Gold says dryly and Belle pulls Bae into a hug.

"Don't forget to write." She reminds him and he makes a face.

"Belle, I'll call, it's not the 1850's." He says sarcastically and Belle gives him a tap on the nose.

"Alright sassy, get through security." She orders and he kisses her check, then turns to his dad.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" He asks lowly and a little surprised, Gold nods, following him a few steps away from Belle.

"What is it?" He asks worriedly and Bae glances back at Belle then fixes his father with his most serious look.

"You're dating Belle now." He declares and Gold can't help the corners of his mouth from turning up.

"Aye, I am."

"She's the best person in the whole wide world." Bae states and the grin takes over Gold's face.

"Aye, she is."

"Don't mess it up." Bae waves to Belle and Gold pulls him into a fierce hug. He's been proud of Bae many times, but this moment is the sweetest.

"Wouldn't dare."

"Ok." Bae pulls back and starts walking to security. "Bye!"

"Love you." Belle yells, as Gold returns to her side. "Be good! Text us when you land! Be safe!"

"Belle." He takes her hand and she looks at him with big eyes, tears threatening in the corners. "Thank you. Thank you for this, for all of it, for everything. It means the world."

"Hey." She rests her hand on his cheek. "I should be thanking you, for this, for everything."

"What in the world do you mean?" He questions, entangling their fingers and walking with her back to the car.

"You know I come from a small family." She says carefully, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Yes." He says slowly, wondering where this is going to go.

"Just me, my dad. No mom, no siblings. Ruby was the closest thing I ever had to any of it, but here…” She squeezes his hand. "I have you, I have Bae, I even have Jefferson and Grace and Mrs. Potts. I… I'm home when I'm with you. I haven't had that in a long time."

"You deserve it." He says honestly, looking at her imploringly. "You deserve the whole world Belle."

"I have you." She says frankly. "That's all I want."
"Then let's go home, darling." He brushes her hair back, beaming at her. "Let's go home."

AN: Thank you for all the reviews, but can I please have some more? Always appreciated!
Shattered

AN: Trigger warnings ahead for lots of things! (Spoiler alerts.) Read on!

"I have a question." Belle is sitting in the middle of the bed as he picks out his clothes for tomorrow. Her own clothes are laid out over a chair and he hides a smile that her things have migrated across the hallway with relative ease. He pauses in picking a tie and glances back at her.

"Yes?" He asks, smiling at how adorable she is, in a large tee shirt and a pair of his boxers.

"Your accent." She declares and he sets out a red tie before turning to look at her in surprise.

"What about it?"

"Have you… Lost some of it?" She questions and he frowns slightly, unsure of the question.

"Lost?" He proceeds to take off his clothes, stripping himself down to his boxers before bed.

"Well, if you were born and raised in Glasgow, but moved here, you'd lose some of your accent." She explains. "I don't know, I just feel like you're really easy to understand, and I wanted to know if there's a thick Scottish accent buried somewhere deep!"

"Do you now?" He gives her an amused look, limping to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

"Yes." Belle follows him, leaning against the doorframe, arms folded. "I want to hear what the real Rumford Gold sounds like."

"You won't understand a word I say." He warns her, wetting the toothbrush and putting a dot of toothpaste on it.

"Somehow I think that I'll be too busy thinking about other things than trying to understand you." She says, with an arched eyebrow and he stays silent, brushing his teeth, making her wait. Then, once he's brushed every tooth in his mouth, he spits and rinses.

"Would you like to go to bed?" He offers, in his most refined, Americanized accent and Belle's lower lip juts out in a pout.

"I just wanna hear the Scottish." She protests and he backs her to the bed, until she sits and he's still standing.

"Ye mah hen lassie hae nae idea whit yoo're in fur." He growls and Belle's eyes go wide, her jaw dropping just slightly. "Ye feel in loove wi' a scottish cheil. dae ye e'en ken whit 'at means? gie in th' scratcher dearie an' 'en ye can see exactly whit a scottie can dae."

"Oh my god." She bursts into giggles, pulling him down for a long kiss before tugging him into bed.

"That's amazing. Honestly, amazing. How are you doing that? Do it again."

"Whit mair is thaur tae say, except hoo bad ah want ye?" He mutters, mostly to her hair as he kisses her neck.

"I have no idea what you're saying." Belle confesses, squirming underneath him so she can pull her shirt off and he follows a familiar trail down her neck towards her clavicle.

"Aam talkin' abit ye, ye bonnie hen, abit hoo much Ah want ye, hoo amazin' it is 'at yoo're in mah
scratcher wi' me, wantin' tae be wi' me, an' hoo Ah am quite honestly th' luckiest cheil in th' warld." He's taking his time getting to Belle's chest, but he appreciates the way it vibrates with laughter.

"Ok, I understand some of that, sort of." She sighs when his fingers ghost along her sides. "Something about amazing, and lucky… Oh!" He smiles at her little gasp of surprise, having finally made his way to her breasts and taking one gently into his mouth.

"Haud yer sheesht an' lit me hae ye." He rumbles and with that, Belle falls backwards in the pillows with an arched back and muffled groan. He spends his time between her legs, muttering in his deep Scottish accent and Belle alternates from laughing and trying to translate to gasping his name, practically screaming it as he strives to please her.

When she finally comes, he growls more Scottish at her until she's whimpering and trembling. Then he flips her onto her hands and knees, riding her hard from the back and pulling her hair until both of them are panting. Belle tries to bury her face in a pillow to quiet her screams, but he keeps her held firmly where she is, wanting to hear every word. When he finally lets himself go, with an explosion of color behind his eyelids and a loud groan, he sinks as deep as he can into Belle and stays there.

"The Scottish thing." Belle's voice sounds husky. "Wouldn't be upset if we broke that out more often."

"Oh?" He pulls himself out of her with remorse, wanting to stay in that happy, blissful place for as long as he can.

"Yeah." Belle twists beneath him so that he can see the marks of his work, the blush on her chest, the love marks on her neck and hips. "I mean, you're sexy with the normal accent, but the other one… Uff."

"Glad you like it." With a chuckle, he slides down next to her. "Though if I were to take you to Glasgow with me, it's a lot less sexy talk and a lot more liberal use of the word cunt."

"I'd find you sexy in any corner of the world." Belle mutters, kissing him as she gets closer. "Can I ask you another question?"

"I can't do any other accents but this one." He warns her and she grins into his chest before sitting up.

"No, not that. These." Belle's hands splay over his chest and even in the dim light, he knows what she's referring to. The littering of scars, from the largest on his ribs, to the small cluster near his hip, to the faint puckered pink line that traverses his stomach.

"What about them?" He keeps his voice even and resists the urge to roll away from Belle. That will only make it worse, since more scars cover his back than his front, and Belle knows the locations of all of them. She traces them at night, when she thinks he's sleeping.

"Well, you certainly didn't get them inspecting real estate in New York." Belle is winding herself around him and it's a smart move on her part, he thinks. Prevents him from bolting.

"No, I didn't." He says softly. "Is that why you wanted to hear my real accent? Because you want to know the man that got these scars?"

"Yes." Belle is honest, as always, and he appreciates that even if it terrifies him. "I want to know about you. I live with you. I'm dating you. I adore your son. I sleep with you, and still I don't know about you."
"You know most." He mutters.

"Not all." Belle reminds him brightly, the warning tone just barely evident. "And I would like to."

"I was an addict Belle, you know that." He sighs heavily, glad at least for the darkness and not having to see her face react to these stories. "Accidents happen far more often to addicts."

"Accidents." Belle rubs a thumb over the scar on his ribs, sparking phantom pain. "Like?"

"Like a dealer outside a club that hadn't been paid for the last high and takes that payment in blood." He says flatly and Belle gasps quietly, hand retracting from the scar. He expects the rest of her to untangle from him, but she stays put and after a second, meekly asks,

"How many times have you been… Hurt?"

"Going to have to get more specific dearie." She's opened the door to his past and his darkness is spilling out like floodgates. "Are we talking beaten? Stabbed? Tortured? Or just broken down, kicked aside?"

"Rum." Her voice is horrified and that's the final straw. He rolls away from her, turning his back to her.

"I told you Belle, I am not a good man."

"Are you really not going to talk to me about this?" She sounds a little peeved and he frowns. What right does she have poking about in his past anyways? "Fine. Goodnight then." She rolls away from him and he stays still, wondering if she'll leave the bed entirely and go back to her own room. He's relieved when she stays with him, even if they sleep on separate sides of the bed.

They don't say anymore on the subject, until Saturday he suggests they go to supper and a play as an apology, and Belle agrees happily. She wears a stunning dress and heels, a vision. He slips a possessive arm around her, eager to show all of New York that she is his, and he is hers, and that they are together.

Belle is chatty through dinner and quiet for the show. She stands beside him while he greets the higher-ups of New York, smiling and charming them in her special Belle way, until he's beaming with pride. He idly wonders if there are ring shops nearby, but dismisses that idea. Bae will want to be involved with the ring and proposal; he shouldn't deny his son that.

He gets the first sign that they're in for a battle when they get home and Belle pours them both a generous quantity of scotch. He raises an eyebrow when Belle downs the whole thing in one go, then refills hers and gestures for him to drink his. A little worriedly, he does as told.

"We're going to need more of this." Belle declares, reaching to his prized stash of Johnnie Walker.

"Why?" He asks hesitantly and she takes a deep breath, carrying the bottle to his bedroom before turning to him.

"You need to tell me things." Belle's voice is soft and desperate, pleading with him. "You need to tell me things and trust me. Trust me, Rum, that I'll keep secrets not because I have to but because I want to. Please, I need something or…” She trails off, the threat hanging in the air, unspoken. He knows. Knows that she needs to see progress from him, or she'll leave.
"You want to know my deepest, darkest secrets?" He asks harshly, finishing off his scotch and she reaches up, unclasping the neck of the halter dress. It slides off her and he stifles a groan, the sight of her in nothing but her silky undergarments killing him.

"Yes." Belle steps out of the heels and he debates asking her to put them back on, to distract her a little longer, but he mustn't. "I want you to trust me, really trust me. I need you to."

"It's not that easy." He gets up and paces in the moonlight, hands itching to grab the scotch. Belle stays still, watching him carefully. After his third pass, she catches his wrist and holds him still. Unbidden, his hands ghost over her arms then dares to hold her hips.

"Deepest, dark secret." She's breathless, cheeks flushed, looking up at him, absolutely vulnerability in his arms. "A secret for a secret, Rum, and afterwards I'll help you forget."

"How?" He's lost control, his hands roving her whole body now, seeking to remove the few scraps of fabric.

"Secret." She urges, letting his mouth lower to her neck, letting him mark her. He groans and clutches her, but she doesn't make a move to touch him back and so he reluctantly draws back, looking at her pleadingly.

"I don't want to." He whispers, gripping her so tightly she's sure to bruise. "I'm… Scared. Belle, I'm scared."

"I know." She carefully guides him to the bed, but there's nothing lustful in the way that he lays with his head on her chest, her reassuring him with gentle passes through his hair with her fingers. "But you need to tell me. Please." There's a long pause, in which he realizes how unfair it is, that she's demanding such things from him. His lips curl up in a sneer and he leans back, glaring at her. She doesn't seem surprised, in her bra and underwear, watching him.

"You want my secrets to destroy me? To use them against me?" He yells and Belle blinks.

"I want your secrets because they are going to devastate you." She states flatly. "Because if you don't tell me, this is never going to work. And trust me when I say all I want is for this to work."

"Fine." He can't help the way he bares his teeth, looking a little mad. Belle wants to see the beast, and the beast he will give her. "You want my deepest, darkest secret Belle? You want it? Here it is. I. Killed. Milah."

"Bae's mother?" Belle leans away from him in surprise. "You said she died of an overdose."

"Oh, she did." His eyes are glinting darkly and he keeps his arms on either side of Belle, locking her in so that she can't go anywhere. She'll face this truth with him. "She died when she hit that plunger and all those drugs entered her system but Belle, I let it happen. I encouraged it. I knew where she lived, I knew what she was taking, I knew her dealer, and her little cracked out friends. I, at any moment, could've walked in and dragged her out. I could've afforded any rehab facility in the world. I could have gotten her clean, you see, I could have gotten her sober. But I didn't. I sat back and when someone finally came and told me the bitch had died, I. Was. Glad."

"Why?" Belle's eyes search his face.

"Because then I had Baen all to myself. I'd never have to worry about him getting taken ever again. She could never touch him. He'd never have to worry about a druggie mother flittering in and out of his life, breaking his heart, hoping for change." He droops, all of the fire out of him at the confession. "Not like my parents."
"So you let her die before she could hurt Bae." She says carefully.

"That's the lie I tell myself so I can sleep at night." He laughs harshly. "Mother of my only child, and I let her die rather than risk a second chance of her taking him. I told you Belle, I will do dark, unspeakable things when it comes to protecting those I love."

"I was molested as a child." The revelation falls from Belle's lips with ease, but he is physically blown back, staring at her in shock and horror. "By an older gentleman that my family trusted. My dad called him the cleric. I never told anyone until after my mother died. I tried to hurt myself and wound up in a padded cell for a couple long weeks."

"Belle…" He wants to advance, to hold her, brush the hair away from her face, cradle her and promise that he'll destroy whoever raised a hand to her. This must be the therapy; this must be the thing that has driven such a wedge between her and her father, the secret that she's hinted at.

"I don't tell people usually. Ruby knows, of course, and Granny. Gaston knew that I'd tried something after my mother's death, he doesn't know the rest. My own father… Didn't believe me, for a long time. It took a lot of family counseling and even now, he doesn't handle it like I wish he would. But you need to see that secrets, the kind that rot you from the inside out, they are better shared. When someone else can share the burden."

"Oh, Belle…" Carefully, as to not startle her, he gently takes her head in his hands, cradling in against his chest and kissing the crown of her head. "Oh, Belle, sweetheart, my darling Belle…"

"See, now you hold my secrets and I hold yours." Belle guides him down so they're lying next to each other and his earlier thoughts of sex are gone. All he wants to do is comfort her, and then tomorrow he'll go cave someone's skull in.

"And I hold you." He brings her to him so she fits snugly into the nooks and crannies of him perfectly, until there isn't a way for them to get any closer. "My beautiful Belle…"

"I don't begrudge you for letting Milah die." Belle whispers and his breathing hitches. "I understand, because I use to wish all the bad people in the world would just die and we'd never have to deal with them again. And I don't think it was the right thing to do, but I get why you did it."

"You are… Entirely too good for me." He whispers. "There is no one more perfect than you, do you know that?"

"You could want someone whole, who isn't as broken." Belle whispers back and he squeezes her tightly, trying to show just how whole she is.

"If you are broken, my dear, I am shattered."

"No." Belle turns and covers his lips with hers fiercely, fingers tangling into his hair. "You are mine."

AN: It's revealed... And maybe a little darker than anticipated? Give me thoughts, I love my reviews and reviewers!
In the morning, he sends her off with a mug of steaming green tea and a long kiss. She tilts her head, confused as to why he's not going to work, but he makes up some excuse about client meetings and seeing new properties. The second she's in the car with Jefferson, he dials a number in his phone that he's never had cause to call before.

"Hello?" Ruby seems perplexed, doubtlessly by the phone number she doesn't recognize.

"Ms. Lucas. It's Gold, Belle's…"

"Boyfriend?" Ruby fills in and he flinches at the word.

"Suitor."

"Mr. Gold, what can I do you for?" Ruby asks, drawling her words out in an amused way.

"I want to meet Belle's father."

"What? Is Belle coming with?"

"No. She won't know about this, and I trust you to keep this secret. Belle can't know I met her father."

"Mr. Gold." Ruby sounds hesitant. "I can't let you meet Belle's dad if she isn't ready for that. What do you want with Moe, besides?"

"I want to beat him senseless for neglecting to protect every blessed hair on Belle's head." The words come out from between clenched teeth and Ruby responds with a sharp intake of breath.

"Mr. Gold, did Belle… Tell you things?" She says carefully. "About when she was a little girl?"

"Oh yes." His hand tightens on his cane. Now, in the morning light, without Belle's soft smile to hold him back from this rage, he wants to destroy everything within the vicinity.

"And you want to meet her father in private and discuss those things?" Ruby guesses.

"Yes." He admits honestly and there's a long pause where he's unsure if Ruby will allow this, will arrange it.

"Good." The bite in Ruby's voice surprises him. "That bastard always got off light in my opinion. If Belle won't make him pay, then I'm glad you will." Ruby gives him a time and an address, then makes one last request. "Don't actually kill him though, ok? He is Belle's dad, even if he's a really shitty one."

"No promises." He declares and Ruby makes a noise of amusement, seemingly content with that.

"Tell him hi from me, Mr. G. Call me if there's anything else."

"Thank you Ms. Lucas." He hangs up and types the address in his phone's GPS feature. No needed for Jefferson to witness this.
Ruby has directed him to a small property. Not many people passing through, which he appreciates. Quiet, subdued, free of witnesses that could tie him to a potential murder, everything the way he likes it. He limps into the building, where a rather confused middle-aged man sits.

"Can I help you?" He asks, squinting at Gold. "You that guy Ruby said I should talk to about renting this space?"

"Yes." He smiles at the lie and his estimation of Ruby, already fairly high, rises. Smart girl. "I am RMS Gold."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Moe French." Belle's father extends his hand and Gold shakes it.

"Mr. French, it's nice to meet you. Let's take a look around." He suggests and Moe glances at him, catching the cane.

"Sure you wanna?" He asks dubiously and Gold's hand tightens briefly on the handle.

"Stronger than I look." He assures him and so they walk through the abandoned office space, Gold pulling numbers and facts from his ass, sprouting off nonsense while Moe pretends to listen. It's all pointless, until Gold can finally sit him down and inspect him with a critical eye.

"So…" Moe squirms uncomfortably under the scrutiny. "What else is there to talk about?"

"Let's get to know each other." Gold leans back, folding his hands on the cane. Moe doesn't resemble his daughter very much, but that doesn't surprise him. Belle had mentioned that she's a clone of her mother. The fact that he doesn't share Belle's bright blue eyes or kind smile will make this easier. "You have children, Mr. French?"

"A daughter." He says cautiously. "Belle, a good girl."

"A good girl." Gold muses. "Got a son, myself. Great boy. Beloved, in every way, by everyone that meets him. Nothing like his old man in that sense. The light in my life. You know the feeling you get when you look at your child and your heart swells with pride and you know there's not a thing in this world you wouldn't do to protect them?"

"Sure, I mean, I guess." Moe seems bewildered by the change in conversation but goes with it.

"No, you clearly don't." Gold snarls, leaning forward and bringing the cane up so it's held to Moe's throat. He looks at him in terror. "Because you let someone harm Belle, and that is unforgivable."

"How do you know about my Belle?" Moe is demanding in disbelief and Gold bares his teeth, but the words that fall from his lips are surprisingly tender and incredibly honest.

"I am a man, deeply, deeply in love with her." With that confession out of the way, all of his goodness wrapped up in that one sentence, he's free to become beastly again. "And I would die rather than see anyone lift a finger against her. Like you should've!" His yelling is punctuated with a blow and Moe shouts in surprise and pain.

"I didn't do anything! I didn't touch her! I didn't do it!" He protests and that enrages Gold further.

"No, you didn't do anything. You just stood aside and let a monster touch her!" Another blow that seemingly does nothing for the anger he's feeling. "She is light and goodness and the whole world, wrapped up in a woman! How could you let that happen? How could you let someone hurt her?"

"I didn't mean too!" Moe is sobbing, trying to defend himself from the cane. "I didn't know, she
didn't tell anyone, she could've been making it all up for all I know! She reads a lot, maybe..."

"Wrong words." Gold growls, the cane slamming into Moe's face brutally. He crumples like a doll and remains motionless on the floor. "From this moment on, you never and I mean never doubt Belle again. Every word that comes from her mouth you take as god honest truth, do you understand me? You have an angel for a daughter you bastard, an absolute angel, and you will treat her as such. Say a word to Belle about this and I will take everything from you without so much as batting an eye."

"You… Can't." Moe mutters and Gold pushes the cane to his throat to prevent anymore speaking.

"Try me." He threatens. "Breathe a word of this to Belle and see just how great my rage can be." He takes the cane away, wiping it of blood. "Oh, and Mr. French?" Moe coughs by way of response. "Ms. Lucas says hello. I'd recommend you go home, rest and recuperate. I imagine I'll be seeing you again soon."

"Hi you." Belle seems surprised that he's home before her, and actually cooking nonetheless.

"Hello." He sets down the spoon he'd been using to stir the soup and comes to her, pulling her into his arms and sighing in contentment once she's exactly where she should be. Where she should always be.

"What are you doing?" She asks, turning her face up to him. He pecks her on the lips then turns.

"Chicken wild rice soup, your favorite." He explains and she raises an eyebrow, looking in the pot. "With bread bowls."

"What in the world did you do?" She laughs, opening the oven to see the bread warming. "Or what did I do, to deserve this?"

"You are you." He runs a hand down her hair carefully, taking in her every expression, every tiny feature of her. He should tell her what he did today, why he's making her soup, but he can't bear to, so instead he kisses her forehead. "And you deserve soup."

"Is it because of what I told you last night?" She asks, folding her arms and watching him suspiciously. "Because I don't need to be coddled over it. I deal with it like a big girl."

"No." He says honestly, taking her hands and gently rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. "It's because Belle, you deserve the world and if you give me the chance, I intend to give you it."

"The world?" She smiles, stepping closer and winding her arms around his neck. She kisses him, and then drifts along his jaw until she's at his ear. "Ruby thinks I should ask for a yacht."

"A yacht?" He chuckles then groans when Belle nibbles on his earlobe. "If she wants a yacht, then a yacht I will get her."

"Seriously?" Belle leans back in surprise.

"Ms. Lucas and I are… Friends." He says carefully and Belle blinks twice in astonishment.

"I had no idea you even talked." She says honestly and he uses the dinging of the oven timer to duck away from her and pull the bread bowls out, carefully ladling soup into them.

"For you." He presents her hers and she smiles, taking it before going to find some wine.
"I have no idea what's gotten into you." She laughs, a happy bright sound, and it makes everything that's happened worth it. "But if it gets me soup and Ruby a yacht, I guess I can't complain."

He waits with baited breath the next couple days, expecting Belle to come home furious one day, throwing out accusations that he'd hurt her father, that he's a monster, something along that vein, but it doesn't happen. Belle is her usual cheerful self, planning for Bae to get done with school and move home. He allows himself to relax and settle in.

He can tell their relationship is moving towards something more, and soon, in the way that he thinks about her constantly. Mary Margaret has grown closer to Belle in the recent months and when she suggests a double date, he tries to refuse. With a wicked grin, she informs him that Belle has already said yes to one this Friday evening.

"Belle!" He yells, storming into the library. He stops in his tracks, because Belle is lying on her mat with her legs extended above her. In one fluid movement she presses her hips into the air, then curls until her toes rest on the floor behind her head, her hands propping up her hips. After a pause, she bends her knees so that they rest on either side of her ears.

"I'll come out when you're ready to not yell." She warns him and with a huff, he drops into a chair.

"I won't yell." He grumbles.

"Or pout."

"I don't pout." He gives her an indignant look she doesn't see.

"You are right now. I'll come out of plow pose when you're done." She declares and he wrinkles his nose.

"I know a far more fun plow pose you seem to be fond of." He chuckles darkly and with a little shout, Belle uncurls.

"You!" With her face flushed and hair messy, he can't help but grin at her, the anger washing out of him.

"Am I wrong?"

"Not entirely." Belle mutters than continues to stretch. "I presume your bad mood has to do with the beans Mary Margaret spilled today, about our date tomorrow night?"

"You could have asked me." He says, trying to be reasonable, and she gives him a firm look.

"You would've never agreed. Besides, her and David are excited, and I don't see why we shouldn't go." She rattles off.

"Because I dislike spending two hours basking in the radiant glow of true love." He mutters darkly.

"Stop it." Belle moves into the splits with ease. "You're being so childish. It's going to be fun. You like her and him and me."

"I love being home." He reminds her and Belle gives him a baleful look but doesn't say a word.

"And I love being home with you. Belle, we could just stay home, cook supper, watch a movie…"

"No." She says firmly and he groans when he sees there is to be no talking her out of this today.
"I don't want to." He resorts to whining, shamelessly, and Belle rolls her eyes, getting up from her mat.

"I know." She practically coos. "But we're going and we're going to have fun, I promise."

"I will go but I will not have fun." He says adamantly.

"You sound like Bae." She exits the library without a backwards glance. "Showering in 2!"

"Seducing me with a shower won't get rid of my anger, dearie." He mutters, but follows her nonetheless.

On Friday, he finds himself crabby but following Belle in a nice suit. He'd tried to ambush her in the bedroom before leaving but she'd been too smart for that and had changed in her old bedroom, smirking at his mostly naked form from the door before ordering him to get ready. The only redeeming quality of the evening that that Belle's wearing the short, dark skirt she'd worn to the Nutcracker, and this time there's no tights covering her legs.

"You'll like the place." She promises him, holding his hand as Jefferson guides them through the city.

"I won't." He juts his chin out stubbornly.

"You will too." Belle rolls her eyes, but she's smiling. "If you'd stop being a big baby about it, you'd see."

"I am not." He gives her an affronted look, but Jefferson is stopping in front of the restaurant.

"Is there anything else I can do?" He asks and Belle hushes Gold before he can order them home.

"Thank you." She says sweetly, exiting the car and Gold follows her, still a little hostile.

"Hi." The delight on Mary Margaret's face is hard to deny though, so he let's Belle have her moment and greets David with a firm handshake. "I'm so glad you guys could make it."

"Us too." Belle is beaming and he keeps his mouth shut. They're led into the restaurant, to a booth, and they slide in. When the waitress takes their drink order, he is quick to get the finest scotch on the menu and make it clear to her that his glass is to be filled at all time.

"Is Ari feeling better?" Mary Margaret asks Belle, who nods. "Oh, good, I was wondering when Jasmine started teaching all her classes."

"Just a little bug." Belle reassures her. "She'll be back to teaching soon enough, we just don't want to spread it."

"Good idea." He mutters, looking over the menu and David and Mary Margaret turn to look at him. "Belle has a tendency to go from health to near death without warning."

"Only sometimes." Belle insists and he gives a look. She sticks her tongue out at him childishly then turns to the opposite couple. "How was your weekend trip to Boston?"

"So wonderful." Mary Margaret looks away from the two of them then pulls of her phone. "I have the best picture of..."
"That scotch." David says quietly, once the women are engrossed in Mary Margaret's photo album. "Any good?"

"Very." Gold nods. "Like some?"

"Why not?" David says and Gold signals the waitress to pour another tumbler for him. "Thank you." David takes a sip, then his eyes go wide and he nods his approval, setting the tumbler down.

"He's a man that knows his scotch." Belle says proudly, having evidently seen their exchange and the reference to their drink of choice isn't lost on him. He smirks at her before she turns back to Mary Margaret.

"That you do, Mr. Gold." David compliments and he realizes that David is likely as uncomfortable here as he is. So he manages a tiny, halfhearted smile that's closer to a grimace.

"Your trip to Boston." He mutters. "Did you enjoy it?" David looks at him, seemingly surprised.

"I did, thank you." He says, as Belle and Mary Margaret laugh over something. "We appreciated you giving Mary Margaret a few days off work to go, I know you're busy."

"It wasn't a problem." He says easily. "She deserves a few days off, especially with what she deals with." He looks at David quizzically, thinking about all the times he's held her at work, snapped at her, and been rude, probably until she was to point of tears. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." David says easily.

"You... Don't hate me." He says slowly and David snorts into his scotch, trying to regain composure.

"Yes." He raises an eyebrow. "I'd even go so far as to call ourselves acquaintances, or comrades in the face of our girlfriends."

"But I am awful to Mary Margaret." He says frankly. "If I knew Belle's boss, if she had one, treated her like I treat Mary Margaret, I would end them before they could even start."

"Well, I trust Mary Margaret to fight her own battles." David glances at her with a sidelong smile. "She's not one to need me for that. And I get the feeling for all the ranting and raving she does after hours, she likes her job. And she knows she's damn good at it."

"That she is." Gold gives Mary Margaret a rather fond smile, and David notices, smiling.

"So yes, occasionally when she comes home and tells me that you've yelled at her, I want to tell you off for being a jackass. But then she tells me about how she yelled right back and I remember that she's fierce as hell and I don't need to swoop in to rescue her." David glances at Belle. "I have the feeling that you know what that's like."

"Yes." He thinks about Belle, strong, competent Belle, and the fact that she's never needed him to rescue her, but he still manages to fuck it up by savagely beating her father.

"Are you two bonding?" Mary Margaret teases and the two men glance up at their girls.

"No," Gold says quickly. "We are still protesting this whole event." David nods to show his solidarity.

"You have nice expensive scotch and we'll get dessert." Belle promises him, her lips turning
upwards. "Something fruity?"

"Or chocolaty." Mary Margaret thinks, completely oblivious to the fact that Gold's eyes have gone hungry at the implication of Belle's words.

"Sure." Completely ignoring her love's eyes hungrily roving over her body, Belle sets aside the menu with a bright smile. "Darling, could I try some of that scotch? It does look just the way I'd like it."

"I didn't know you liked scotch." David seems surprised but delighted by the revelation.

"Like I like my men." She says cheekily and Gold slides her his glass with an impressively blank face.

When they get their food, the conversation takes a more natural flow towards work and the like. Gold relaxes, discussing the pros and cons of running businesses with Belle and David, while Mary Margaret shares amusing stories of the three of them with a wicked grin.

"Honey," Belle says innocently, when they're nearly done with their food. He looks at her, tilting his head. "I know your knee bothers you now, should we walk to stretch it?"

"Oh?" His forehead scrunches up in confusion, because his knee is fine, and Belle knows this, but she's still standing, offering him her hand, so he takes it and follows her away, towards the back.

"You know, you could work on your acting skills." She tells him breezily, leading him by hand to a back hallway, pausing and looking at the doors.

"I like to know what I'm acting out." He says, watching in astonishment as Belle carefully checks each door, finding one unlocked. She smirks, grabs him by the tie, and hauls him into a coat closet, abandoned in the warm weather.

"You're acting like your knee hurts, not like your girlfriend is dragging you for a quickie in the closet." She answers, hot breath on his neck as she works to loosen his tie.

"My, what has gotten into you?" He lets her back him against the wall and determinedly keeps his hands to himself, letting Belle set the pace. She's succeeded in dropping his silk tie to the floor and unbuttoning the first couple buttons of his shirt.

"Well, you see," Belle keeps kissing his neck and working on his belt. "I got it in my head that I would bring you here if you were acting up… Fuck you in the closet; keep you happy, you know. But then you were so damn well behaved, you robbed me of my plan and it just seemed like such a waste."

"Plan?" He lets himself nip at her neck and Belle throws the belt away, grabbing his hand and guiding it to her thighs. He looks at her blue eyes, a little confused, wondering why she's practically humming with excitement. She stills her hands and kisses, seemingly wanting to watch as he works his hand up and under her skirt slowly.

"Surprise." She whispers when he gasps. There's no resistance, no panties to shift aside. It seems that it's not just her legs that are bare but rather all of her, and he wants to moan.

"Belle." He can only utter her name in shock and appreciation, but she's got her hand down his pants now and he's dipping just one finger into her, wondering, delightedly, if she's been this wet all night.

"Now." She growls, pushing his pants down and hoisting one leg up. "I want you, in me, now."
"You're going to be the death of me." He mutters, guiding himself to align with Belle. Her warmth and wetness threatens to overwhelm him that instant, and when she eagerly thrusts forward to take all of him inside her, he bites her shoulder so he doesn't scream.

"You'll go out happy though." Belle mutters into his ear, interspersed with groans as she sets the rhythm.

"With a chorus of angels singing." He groans. "That's how good you feel Belle, do you know that?"

"Faster." Belle turns so he's riding her from behind and it works for him, seeing her bare ass, skirt around her hips, her heels allowing them to align perfectly. He wants to come then and there, but he holds back, reaching around to find Belle's clit so he can rub it as she slides up and down him.

"Belle. Darling Belle." He moans. "Do you even know how bad I want you? How much I love this?"

"Beginning… To…" Belle gasps, keening when he applies firmer pressure and picks up the pace. "Jesus, Rum!"

"Is that how you want it?" He croons, the other hand tangling up into her hair and pulling slightly. "How you've been thinking about since we've got here, sitting through dinner?"

"Yes." She's shaking, practically vibrating. "I… I… I…"

"What?" He asks and he gets his answer when Belle starts to clench around him, fast and hard. With no other reason to hold back, he buries himself as deep as he can in her and lets himself go, riding the sweet bliss of his orgasm as Belle rides out her own aftershocks.

"Ah." Belle loosens around him and takes a step away. He wants to call her back, but enjoying the sight of her tugging her skirt back down and smoothing out her hair is a different pleasure.

"You wonderful woman." He mutters, staying where he is as Belle locates his tie and belt. She grins as she redresses him.

"For jumping your bones in a closet while on a date with your assistant and her boyfriend at a fancy restaurant?" She raises an eyebrow. "I didn't know sex in public could make a man smile so much."

"Sex with you wherever is a recipe to make me smile." He says softly and Belle can't help but grin, kissing him.

"You just did me in the closet, I think the soft and sweet ship has sailed." She drapes the tie around his neck.

"Never." He declares, kissing her nose.

"I'm going to the bathroom to, uh, clean up. Order me something for dessert please." She winks, opening the door. "You know what I like, don't you?" She disappears with a grin.

"Oh, I do." He mutters, finishing off his tie.

"How's the knee?" Mary Margaret asks, when he gets back to them. He sits, biting back a smile.

"Better, thank you. Belle's in the ladies room, shall we order dessert?" He offers, opening the dessert menu.

"Sure." Mary Margaret hides a smile. When Belle comes back, smiling and looking more put
together, Mary Margaret raises her hand. Belle high fives her and Gold looks between the two of them, stunned.

"Chocolate cheesecake sounds good." David says, oblivious.

"It does…" Belle mutters, smiling demurely down at her hands. Gold hides a snort of amusement.

"Well thank you for a lovely evening." David says, wrapping an arm around Mary Margaret as they wait for their cars.

"Thank you." Belle leans into Gold's side. "It was really fun, I enjoyed it a lot. We should do it again."

"Yes, we should." Gold mutters, grinning into Belle's hair as his nails dig into her side. "And soon."

"Have a good night!" Mary Margaret calls, waving as Jefferson pulls up. Belle waves back as Gold helps her in.

"Have a good night?" Jefferson asks, sliding back into traffic. Belle beams and takes Gold's hand.

"Yes." She says firmly. "It was wonderful."

AN: Some smut because angst is hard and I love fluff. Give me opinions I love them!
"Darling." He rolls over, early morning light filtering in. "Darling Belle, what are you doing?"

"Shush, shush, go back to bed." Belle hushes him from the doorway and he frowns, sitting up.

"Dearie, come back to bed." He orders and she waves a hand.

"No, now that you're up, this will actually work a lot better." She grins, pausing in the doorway.

"What?" He's still watching her worriedly.

"I'm going to go to Bae's room, I want to see if I can hear you in here. So we know if we need to be quiet when we're having sex." She explains, matter-of-factly and he frowns.

"How were you going to do it when I was asleep?" He wonders and Belle snorts in amusement.

"Do you know how loud you snore?"

"I do not." He says, indignant.

"Keep talking and try to, I don't know, rock the bed or something. Whatever it is we sound like!" She disappears and he buries his head in his hands, glancing at the clock. 5:06.

"Belle, come back to bed." He calls. "Belle, we have half an hour to cuddle. We can talk about feelings, we can talk about the future, the past... Please, come back to bed. This is ridiculous, I... Bloody hell." He rubs his temples. "Belle, why on earth are we doing this?"

"Keep talking!" He hears Belle yell from a distance. "And do some shouting, like I do!"

"Belle," He snorts, but raises his voice nonetheless. "This is silly, and quite useless. Come back to bed, and we can do all the yelling we'd like in here. Why in the world are we doing this stupid experiment? What is the point of it? Belle? Belle. Belle! Belle? Good god woman, for the love of all things holy, would you please come back to bed and at least let me get some more sleep?" Silence greets him, so he raises his voice another notch. "BELLE FRENCH COME BACK TO BED THIS INSTANT YOU MADDENING WOMAN, YOU FORCE OF NATURE, YOU FLAWLESS GODDESS, SWEET BELLE THIS IS NOT HOW I INTENDED TO START MY MORNING WITH THE WOMAN I LO—"

"You what?" Belle appears in the doorway with a quirked eyebrow and he goes silent quickly.

"What were you doing?" He demands, trying to change the subject and Belle laughs, bounding back into bed.

"Well, Bae comes home in a week." She reminds him and he groans, rolling over so he half covers her in bed.

"Yes, I do remember, considering the cost to ship all his things home." He mutters darkly.

"Well, we haven't exactly... Been together when he's been home." She says pointedly and he raises any eyebrow.

"Belle, he walked in on us, post sex."
"Yes, but he was not here during the actual sex." Belle explains patiently. "So my concern is that he's doing to be able to hear us from his room, so I figured I'd check before he got back!"

"You get the strangest ideas in your head in the early hours." He grumbles and Belle kisses him.

"Well, I did have other ideas." She says sweetly and he groans as he pulls her closer to him.

"Like?"

"Taking you up on that offer to talk about the future or the past." Belle puts a sliver of space between them with a grin.

"So you can hear us in Bae's room?" He asks and Belle laughs, far too awake and happy in the morning.

"No, not once the door is closed. I missed some stuff between your annoyed orders to come back to bed and the terms of endearment there at the end." She reassures him.

"It would be a shame to make him relocate to a new room simply because someone is vocal in bed." He pretends to muse thoughtfully and jumps when she pokes him, hard, in the side.

"You're the one who's always going on about how much you love hearing me scream like that!"

"And I do." He assures her, gathering her in his arms. "It's my favorite sound in the whole wide world."

"No, your favorite sound is the word 'deal'." She says dryly and he chuckles into her shoulder, not bothering to deny it.

"Perhaps."

"But I meant it. Can we talk about some stuff?" She asks him hesitantly and he loosens his grip on her.

"Like?"

"Future. Past. Present." Belle is still close to him, eyes wide, searching his face intently.

"What about those?" He tries not to squirm and give away his discomfort, but he can't help it.

"Well, we are in a rather unique situation." Belle states factually. "We've been dating for less than three months. We've lived together for six months. And we've known each other for nine months. I met your son and adored him before I kissed you. I learned to take care of you before we ever so much as hugged. We've done this backwards, upside down, and inside out."

"Meaning?" His palms are moist with worry; sure that this must be the moment where Belle leaves him. Instead, she snakes herself around him tightly and drops a kiss to the hollow of his throat.

"Meaning you can't blame a girl for being a little confused as to where we might stand. I mean, I know how I feel about you. I guess I just want to know how you feel about me."

"Really?" He looks at her in disbelief. "Really? You have any doubts, darling? Sweetheart?"

"A girl could stand to hear it." She grins at him.

When I talk about my future Belle, well… I'm talking about Bae. And now you."

"Ok." She squeaks in happiness, then turns abruptly seriously. "And I have a question about the past."

"What?" He asks guardedly and Belle quickly takes his hands in hers, soothing him with a touch.

"I just want a story. About you. Who you were then. Doesn't have to be important. But I have this vision of you in my head…" She searches his eyes. "And I know it's not true. So please, correct it. Tell me a little bit about you, in Scotland, before Bae and America."

"It… Wasn't a pretty time." He admits, sinking lower into the blankets, glancing at the clock. They'll be late to work, but Belle is a solid weight in his arms and surely he can let some of his past darkness out, when all of the brightness of the future is wound up in the woman in his arms. "When I say I'm not a good man now Belle, imagine me then."

"Still with the long hair?" She mutters and he stops a faint smile.

"No. Shorter then, but not buzzed or anything. Had a moustache though, thought it made me suave or something." He reveals thoughtfully and Belle looks up at him, wrinkling her nose with dislike.

"Did it?"

"God no. Awful."

"Are there photos?"

"None that survived the move. Addicts aren't exactly very invested in what gets packed."

"Oh."

"Had some mates in Glasgow though. All addicts of course. When you are one, normal people, they don't cut it. Can't have good influences in your life, tends to ruin it. Had about six good ones, besides Milah and myself. Three died before we even left. Overdose, suicide, and a murder. Can't go out any other way when you're an addict, not really. It's not like I have fun stories from that time Belle, like when we went to the beach or the park or had a holiday. When you're an addict, it's getting high and the space between." He tries to explain to her, to this sweet girl who's never experienced such a thing.

"Just something." She's treading carefully, like she knows how gentle she must be with him here.

"Fine." He sighs heavily and thinks about something that doesn't made the rage in him rise and send him spiraling. "There was this time. Don't remember what we did, just that we were all in good moods. Went to a shite club somewhere, got piss drunk on watered down whiskey, and were young and wild and reckless. I'll never forget the time someone accidently seduced a cross dresser. There was hell to pay that night."

"Was it you?" Belle twists to demand and he snorts with laughter.

"No, I had Milah, who'd lose her mind if I so much as glanced at another woman, never mind all her looking. It was my twin brother." He had expected an overreaction and he's not disappointed. Had she been any closer to the edge, she would've fallen out of the bed.

"You have a twin brother?"
"No," He chuckles. "Though I suppose I could have half siblings, not like I kept tabs on my parents. No, not a brother, honestly. Just a friend. But still. Made a funny story for us, even if we all picked up a handful of scars in the fight he started after. He had some… Behavioral issues."

"And you?" Belle is still sitting up, an expression he can't read on her face. "Is that where you learned to fight?"

"Yes." He says simply. "It's Scotland Belle, and I didn't come from the castles. Some places, it's know to fight or die. Simple as that."

"Sometimes," Belle's voice is quavering. "I imagine you there and it terrifies me. But then I imagine myself there and it's worse. Then I wonder what a man like you, such an interesting, deep, complex, complicated man like you would ever see in a simple girl like me."

"Better things." He takes her into his arms carefully. "Belle, you can look at my past and see complicated and deep. I just see broken. Regrets. Mistakes. And what I see in you is bliss. Warmth. Belonging. I'm safe, with you. Loved, with you. Home, with you. So never think that I find you boring. I find you to be perfect, in every way. Never forget that."

"Ok." She whispers, leaning forward to kiss him deeply. "We're going to be late for work, aren't we?"

"I'll let Mary Margaret know."

He tries to tell her bits and pieces as the next weeks go by. Funny stories, though the one about him and a mate stranded atop a sinking car doesn't seem to amuse her as much as he'd thought it would. She responds, however, with little stories of her childhood, and he's beyond relieved when she starts asking about Bae as a young boy, because at least that topic he can talk on forever.

So he tells her stories about the little boy who loved putting crackers in his tomato soup, stacking them before smashing them with a spoon. Who didn't like going to bed on time, but would settle after a fairytale or two. Who was clumsy as all get out, covered in bruises and scrapes, but with a constant smile on his face. Who was smart and clever and kind, despite everything.

The impending arrival of Bae distracts them in the best kind of way. Belle is excited, counting down the days, making him smile. Bae is excited too, and when he finally gets off the plane on a rainy June day, he barrels headlong into their open arms, grinning.

"Hello son." He says affectionately.

"Are we going out for supper?" Bae questions and he laughs, ruffling his hair while Belle takes his bags.

"Of course." Gold walks with them out of the airport. "Belle got reservations at your favorite place. Let's go get settled at home and we can go."

"Awesome." Bae grins at them. "Belle, did you see my last video I sent you? Wasn't it sick?"

"Were you on top of a building, Baen Matheson Gold?"

"Well, no, we were…. Well, ok, no, listen!"

They head home and Bae throws all his stuff into his room, changing into nice clothes. Gold doesn't
have to change, but he sits and watches as Belle changes into a pretty red dress. When she's dressed
Bae walks into the bedroom, grinning at the both of them, fiddling with his phone.

"Oh, shit." Belle mutters, glancing at her dress then at Bae, eyes wide. "Do not repeat that!"

"I'm 14." He complains. "I hear a lot worse in the locker room at soccer practice, you know."

"No you don't." Belle swats at him.

"What is it?" Gold pauses in knotting his tie to walk over and inspect what has Belle swearing. The
seam of her dress has ripped and her pretty lower lip juts out in a pout.

"I love this dress." She laments. "It's my favorite."

"Mine too." He mutters, leaning back just enough to see how wonderful the swell of her ass looks in
it and she gives him a wry look before sighing heavily and looking at the closet regretfully.

"Alright Bae, out, I'll have to change before supper. And I'm going to need to pick out new shoes
then and my hair should—" She rambles thoughtfully and Bae groans loudly.

"Now we're never going to get food." He grumbles. "And I am starving and I spent all day on a
plane and now we're gonna have to wait two hours to eat and I'll die of hunger first."

"Nonsense." Gold stills Belle's hand when it goes to find the dress's zipper. He moves across the
room, reaching into a drawer and pulling out a sewing kit. "I'll stitch it back up and we can leave in
10 minutes. I'll make sure it's properly repaired when we get home." He pulls out a needle and
thread, gesturing for Belle to hold the dress so he has easy access to the rip. She watches
incredulously as he threads the needle, tongue poked ever so slightly between his teeth.

"Where you'd learn to sew?" Belle asks him, still a little stunned.

"Prison." Bae comments from the bed where he's buried his face in a pillow and Belle makes a tiny
noise of surprise.

"Cheers, Bae." Gold mutters, not bothering to look at his son and Belle nearly falls off her heels.

"What?" She demands and he looks up at her, trying to seem as innocent as possible. "Prison?" She
accuses.

"Addict." He reminds her shortly and there's utter silence as he repairs the seam, Bae knowing that
he's done something he shouldn't and trying not to make it any worse. They get in the car in silence,
Bae determinedly keeping his nose in his phone.

"What was it for?" Belle asks, as they wait for a light to turn green. "When was it? How long?
Where?"

"Belle," He glances back at Bae, who does his best to look like he's gone spontaneously deaf.
"Now?"

"Well, clearly he already knows." Belle folds her arms, a mulish set to her mouth. "Were you ever
going to tell me?"

"Of course." He tries to give her a reassuring smile. "You know I would've, it's just that…"

"That you have so many secrets I feel like I haven't even opened the door to a fraction of them?"
Belle narrows her eyes until they're blue slits. "How many more are there, Rum?"
"A lot." He admits quietly. "But Belle, you can't pull all my secrets from me, it doesn't work that way. It can't. I can't."

"Then tell me about prison." She challenges. "If he knows all about it, it can't be too awful."

"It's not." He sighs heavily and Bae perks up slightly, leaning forward. "I didn't spend more than a couple months there each time. Scotland, of course. Addicts Belle, we get tossed in for all sorts of things. Being piss drunk, stealing things, the like. You pick stuff up when you're inside. It's a useful skill to have for a wee bastard like me, knowing how to hem pants."

"Each time?" Belle latches onto that. "As in multiple imprisonments? How many times, total?"

"Three." He shifts uncomfortably. "Arrested more though. But never after I came to America and god, never, ever after Bae. I was a stupid teenager Belle, I made mistakes!"

"I know." She pats his knee, looking just a little dazed. "I just… It'd be easier if you said something about the old ladies that raised you teaching you or something. It'd be an easier lie to swallow than prison."

"I thought you didn't like lies." He mutters and she gives him a stern look.

"I don't. You know that."

"I do." This time, he pats her knee. "They did teach me spin though."

"What, like thread?" Belle tilts her head, trying to see if he's lying now though. He just hums and let's the silence fill the car for a long while. Belle gets lost in her own thoughts, but once they park and are walking to the restaurant, he offers her his hand.

"Are you angry with me?" He asks her, searching her face. "For not telling you about prison? It seems so long ago."

"No." Belle takes his hand and presses herself into his side. "I just… I don't quite know what to make of it."

"Of what?" Stomach sinking, he tries to stop himself from pulling away.

"Of you." She runs a thoughtful hand over the fixed seam. "Of you in prison, of you with a sewing kit, of everything."

"Well, take your time." He says carefully. "No need to rush, of course."

"I know." Belle looks up at him with a faint smile. "I don't think there's ever going to be enough time to figure you out."

"There might be." He says quietly, when Bae opens the door for them, looking relieved that he doesn't seem to be in trouble anymore.

"Hey, so I've been thinking." Belle pokes him with her toes. "Bae can watch himself for a night, right?"

"The house may not be standing when we get back, why?" He asks her, closing his book and watching her carefully.
"Well, I think we need a night for…” Belle takes a deep breath, fiddling rapidly with a pen. "Well, to go to Staten Island."

"God, why?" He wrinkles his nose.

"That's where my father lives." She gives him a baleful look. "And Granny. I think it's time you met them."

"Oh." His palms are suddenly sweaty and he strives to pull on an impassive mask. "Well, I suppose I can trust Bae for a couple hours and allow myself to be dragged to that godforsaken realm."

"It's just Staten Island." She rolls her eyes. "It's not New Jersey."

"I don't think I could ever have fallen for you if you were from New Jersey." He tells her, kissing her head and limping to the bedroom.

Friday comes too quickly for him and when they depart with a frozen pizza out for Bae and implicit instructions to text them when he turns the oven on and when he turns the oven off, he's in a bad mood. Belle smiles, chit chatting to him about home and memories, but he's only half listening.

"Well, this is it." Belle pauses outside the house, looking up at it. It's small and a little run down, the fence around the property rusted and sagging. A dented truck sits in the driveway. Belle gives him a wobbly smile, offering him her hand. He takes it, kissing her knuckles.

"Are you sure?" He asks lowly, seeing the hesitation in her eyes. She closes her eyes and leans forward to touch their foreheads together.

"I'd rather go home, crawl onto the couch, have a huge bowl of ice cream, and bicker with Bae about the importance of narration in films." She mutters then plasters a fake smile onto her face. "But I said I'd be here and Granny makes some great pie, so let's go."

"I'm right behind you." He keeps a tight grip on her hand, because that's the only way to keep him from running.

"Hey, dad." Belle calls, opening the front door. "We're here." He looks around at the entry. It's bare, with a threadbare rug and a couple boots kicked in a corner. Belle moves down the narrow hallway and into a living room that houses a ratty lazy-e-boy, a couch, and a rocking chair. He waits, awkwardly, while Belle ducks into the kitchen.

"Hey." Ruby appears down the stairs, the grim twist of her mouth worrying him. A pretty, dark haired woman follows after her. "We need to talk, now. Babe, can you distract Belle?"

"Sure." The woman kisses Ruby's cheek then extends her hand to him. "Dorothy, by the way. I believe you owe us a yacht?"

"RMS Gold." He shakes it, grinning at her. Pluck. "Let me know what harbor to dock it in."

"I'm partial to Fiji." Dorothy grins, then disappears into the kitchen with an, "Oh, Belle! I haven't seen you in ages!"

"Upstairs." Ruby grabs his bicep and pulls him up the stairs. He goes, wide eyed, trying to take in Belle's childhood home before Ruby has yanked him into a bedroom. Specifically, Belle's old bedroom.

"Well Ms. Lucas," He leans against a desk, covered in a thin layer of dust. "What can I do for you?"
"Do you realize what kind of situation we're in?" Ruby hisses, jabbing her finger in his chest. "We're in the frying pan Gold and we're one dry meatloaf away from the fire!"

"Explain, please." He looks at the plain white walls, the dingy carpet, and periwinkle curtains and bed sheets, trying to get a sense of the girl who lived here before yoga and med school and him.

"Do you recall the beating you gave Belle's father?" Ruby arches an eyebrow. "The one that I basically facilitated?"

"It may have crossed my mind on the tortuous journey here." He mutters, looking at the empty bookshelf with a faint smile.

"Belle is going to find out. She's going to be pissed. Why aren't you more worried that Belle is going to find out and be pissed?" Ruby demands and he takes a deep breath when he sees a picture of young Belle, smiling with gap teeth at the camera, hanging on the wall.

"This would've been how old she was when it happened, right?" He asks quietly, pointing to the picture. "Young. Her mother died before her teens, and the abuse happened before that, correct?"

"Yes." Ruby whispers.

"So you're telling me… He let this child, this beautiful, precious little girl, be hurt?" He gently traces the faded outline of Belle's face. "He looked at this child and didn't do everything within his meager capabilities of protecting her? Unforgiveable, Ms. Lucas. Absolutely."

"I'm not saying it is." Ruby picks up a picture frame that has her and Belle, laughing high school students, in it. "And I'm not saying he didn't deserve it. I just don't know how Belle's going to take it."

"She can take it however she pleases." He finally manages to tear his eyes off of the photo and back to Ruby. "The fact does not change that he deserved every last second of that."

"Agreed." Ruby's eyes darken and he sees something predatory about her. He smiles, wondering if her closeness with Belle is because she too needs someone good and kind to balance out her true nature.

"So if she says anything, we will take it however it comes." He's lying, because he's never been brave before and this seems like too much. "But Moe knows, deep down, why I did it. Why we did it. Because we love her more than he ever can and we'll protect her."

"Ok." Ruby nods, glancing at the photo on the wall. "You're right. She'll be mad, but she'll understand. Besides, she's head over heels for you. You got a ring yet, or just that yacht?"

"Pardon?" He asks, sounding strangled, and Ruby grins at him, then walks past and pats his back.

"Hope it's silver. Getting a gold ring would be too cheesy." She says then stomps down the stairs, leaving him no choice but to follow.

AN: Reference all of the RC movies! Sorry! Couldn't resist! Hey, reviews make Monday all that much brighter, so if you leave me one, I'll love you forever....
"Hey, where were you guys?" Belle asks, turning once they enter the kitchen. Dorothy is sitting on a counter while an older woman pulls lasagna and garlic bread from the oven. Moe sits at the table, avoiding their eyes.

"Showing your boyfriend your old bedroom." Ruby teases and Belle rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "Thank god all my posters of boy bands and teen pop sensations were ripped down." She mutters then wipes her hands on her dress. "Anyways, Granny, this is RMS Gold, honey, this is Ruby's grandmother."

"Please, call me Rodric." He says, offering her his hand.

"Granny." She shakes it, a little gruffly, and sets the lasagna on the table. "Ruby, plates, be useful."

"Yes ma'am." Rolling her eyes, Ruby opens a cupboard and starts pulling out plates, Dorothy grabbing glasses.

"And this is my father," Belle says quietly and Moe looks up at Gold. All the remains of the beating that's visible is a faint scar above the eyebrow where the cane had struck him. "Moe. Dad, this is…"

"Yes, I know." Moe doesn't offer his hand and neither does Gold. "Your boyfriend. Though if anyone were to see you together, they'd think he belonged to Granny, not you."

"Certainly no harm in that, you're a lovely woman Mrs. Lucas." Gold tries to be charming and Granny snorts while Belle's eyes flash.

"Everyone, sit. Eat. Lasagna isn't half as good reheated." They all sit around the table, Belle glancing suspiciously between Gold and Ruby every couple minutes, but for the most part, feigning obliviousness. The only one who seems to not be aware of the tension is Dorothy, who turns to Gold with a smile.

"Belle tells me you have a son. She never shuts up about him, usually. Do you want more kids?" She asks innocently and Belle chokes on her water while Gold has to work to swallow the clump of garlic bread in his throat. Ruby sits back, grinning at her girlfriend.

"I… Would." Gold says slowly and Belle looks at him with wide eyes. "I had Bae when I was pretty young, and very unsettled. I would like more kids now, a chance to raise them in a stable environment and be a more involved dad. Besides, my son, he's great with kids. I believe someone once said he deserves a small brood to command at his whimsy." He takes a drink of the wine and pointedly avoids looking at Belle's flabbergasted face.

"That's good." Ruby drinks her own wine. "Belle's always been good with kids, you know."

"I do." He says quietly, but it's drowned out by Moe slamming his fork down on the table loudly. "Enough." He glares furiously at Ruby. "Enough. I don't want to hear about this anymore."

"Dad." Belle chides, frowning.

"No, Belle, I won't listen to this." Moe bellows, spitting. "I won't listen to them talk about you having his children, not this… This… This monster! You need to go to Hopper more often. The only
reason you're with him is because clearly you're still... Traumatized by your childhood."

"Dad!" Belle cries, while Granny's hand tightens on the cutting knife and Dorothy throws out an arm to restrain Ruby.

"A normal man could love you. Gaston did." He can't be deterred, despite the shock and horror on everyone's faces. "You could've been normal. Could've had kids, stayed at home. But now you're some gold digging whore because what? He can pay your bills?"

"Alright." Gold sets down his own fork, stretches out his long fingers, then balls them into fists and stands, clocking Moe across the face. "Well, that's all too familiar, I'm afraid to say."

"Rum!" Belle catches his eyes, looking at him in shock. "Stop it! Don't. He's still my father."

"Didn't stop him last time." Moe groans. "Course, you probably don't know about that. Ruby can share."

"What—" Belle's voice is trembling. "Is going on?"

"Belle, sweetheart." Gold reaches a hand out to her but Belle doesn't move, staring at him, wide eyed. "Belle, he, uh, he..."

"Gold called me. The morning after you told him about the cleric. Asked me to help him meet your father." Ruby pips up and after a long pause, Belle tears her eyes from him and looks to Ruby.

"And?"

"I told your dad there was a space in the city where he could open another shop for cheap. He went." Ruby takes a deep breath. "Gold was there. I knew Gold was pissed, and I knew he had a wicked temper. And I knew how protective of you he is. But Belle, you have, for decades, let Moe control so much of your life! For Christ's sake Belle, he's your dad and he doesn't even believe you! And that's wrong. And fucked up. So I let him pay for it."

"And what did you do?" Belle rounds on him and he flinches uncomfortably, but gives her the truth.

"I encouraged him to work harder on your relationship. And made my point. Using my cane."

"Jesus." Belle moans. "Can you, for I don't know, ten minutes, not be some crazy Scotsman and resist the urge to beat people?"

"Belle." He wants to be amused but he can't quite, because he's terrified of her fury. Thankful, she rounds on Ruby first.

"You're my best friend, how could you do that?" She demands and Ruby folds her arms.

"Because I hate your bastard of a father, honestly. And I think he deserves everything your possibly sociopathic boyfriend gave him. And I think you think that too." She points out and Belle is silent, turning to Gold first.

"You're my best friend, how could you do that?" She demands and Ruby folds her arms.

"Because I hate your bastard of a father, honestly. And I think he deserves everything your possibly sociopathic boyfriend gave him. And I think you think that too." She points out and Belle is silent, turning to Gold again.

"Were you ever going to tell me?" She questions hotly and he blinks twice in confusion.

"That I beat your father to a pulp, then came home and pretended it never happened because I was so angry that he has spent your entire life neglecting to protect and cherish you? No Belle, not when we were happy and content. I planned on seeing if your cowardly father would ever own up to his mistakes." His anger is growing again, unstoppable, and his voice is rising. "I didn't plan on telling
"He's not a good father." Granny says idly, turning the pointed tip of the knife into the wooden table. "But he's Belle's father and you boy, need to learn to walk the fine line of respecting her wishes that we not kill him, and reminding him that it's always possible we will."

"Oh, and a granny walks that line?" Gold looks at her, eyes rolling, annoyed at having been called a boy for the first time in three decades.

"Ever crossed your mind to wonder why you haven't had to punish the man who abused her himself?" Granny asks glibly, brandishing the knife with an ease that contrasts with her warm smile and Gold tilts his head, looking at her with newfound respect but Belle waves her hands.

"Everyone, stop." She orders and they fall silent. "Just shut up. My best friend and boyfriend just conspired to beat my father. I need a minute."

"Have several." Ruby declares, scooping meat and noodles onto her garlic bread and taking a large bite. Granny just cuts another piece from the loaf and hands it to Dorothy while Moe gets frozen peas from the fridge for his bleeding nose. Belle and Gold stand across from each other, Gold rooted to the spot with fear and Belle with her chest heaving.

"I can't do this." Belle mutters, running her hands through her hair. "I can't, I can't do it. I... I'm going home. I will talk to you about this later." She points to Ruby, who raises a fork in acknowledgement. "Dad, don't... Just don't. Dorothy, I'm sorry about all this."

"No worries." Dorothy takes a sip of the wine. "My family fights too, just not over, you know, murder and stuff."

"Alleged." Granny corrects, getting the pie off the counter and cutting large slices to place in a tupperware. "No body was ever found. For all we know, he finally completed his lifelong goal of moving to Portugal. Take some pie, sweetheart, and come out to visit more often."

"Of course Granny." Belle kisses her cheek. Then she takes Gold's hand and pulls him out of the house. They ride back into the city in silence, before Gold can't keep a burning question in any longer.

"Granny, she... She..."

"Mob daughter." Belle says absentmindedly. "Grew up in it. Ruby's parents were in it too, but when they died, Granny got Ruby and got out. We grew up knowing about the things Granny's father and brothers had done. Her husband too, before he died. When she found out what had happened, she took care of it. Stopped my nightmares."

"Oh." He says a little dumbly. "And your father doesn't take her to the police because..."

"No proof." Belle looks at the pie in her lap. "And even if he could, he'd have to admit knowing about the abuse. And Granny could coordinate him getting murdered even from behind bars. A part of me hopes it's because he's glad the man is dead, that he's protecting me somehow. A long shot though."

"So the woman you call Granny, who helped raised you, who makes you pie and frets when you don't eat enough... Is the daughter and wife of mobsters?" He asks, trying to get it straight.

"Why do you think I didn't flinch when I saw you beating a man bloody with your cane?" She asks
calmly and he can't think of a response, so he's quiet, stunned. When they get home, Bae is in the living room, playing video games. He looks up, surprised at their entrance.

"What are you guys doing home so early?" He asks then looks in the direction of the kitchen. "I swear I turned the oven off."

"I'm sure you did sweetheart." Belle kisses the top of his head. "Supper wasn't much fun. There was a lot of yelling. Punches were thrown. Death threats were made. You know, the normal."

"Actually, I don't know." Bae is looking at her like he can't decide if she's joking or not. "No grandparents, no aunts or uncles, no cousins or siblings. Pretty small family."

"One day Bae, I think you'll have so much family you won't know what to do with them." Belle says with a small smile then heads to the bedroom. Bae glances up at his father.

"Is she ok?"

"I don't know." He sighs heavily and rests a hand on Bae's head. "There's pie in the kitchen. One slice before bed, that's all. Get some sleep. I'm going to go check on Belle."

"Night!" Bae calls, as Gold heads for his bedroom. He slips inside, seeing Belle sitting on the bed in her bra and panties, head in hands, shoes and dress discarded haphazardly.

"Dearie…" He mummers and she looks up at him with wide, glistening eyes. "I am so sorry for everything that happened tonight, and if you want me to sleep in a spare room or on the couch, I will, because you have every right to be absolutely furious with me."

"Furious with you?" Belle sounds strangled, voice squeaking. She stands, hands on her hips.

"Yes." He says slowly. "I was out of line. I was disrespectful. I was an ass—a beast, yet again."

"Yeah, you were." Belle is advancing now, a strange look in her eyes. "You absolutely were."

"Belle, and I am so—Oh?" Belle kisses him, hard, hands snaking into his hair and pulling, hard.

"Shut up." She pants, leaning back just enough to get the words out. "Shut the hell up and get my clothes off right now."

"You've already started." He defaults to wit out of habit and Belle groans into his mouth, hands working on his belt.

"Fuck you and all your layers." She mutters, ripping the shirt open. Buttons go flying and he's bewildered but sure as hell not about to stop whatever this is. He pinches the clasp of her bra behind her back and it springs open, granting him access to her perfect breasts and he dips to take one in his mouth as Belle succeeds in pulling his belt off.

"Darling." He gasps, as his pants fall to the ground and Belle drops to her knees. "Belle, are you… Are you… Ok?"

"Lock the door." She orders, before lowering her mouth around his cock and he groans at the sensation of her tongue on his head, swirling. With trembling hands, he clicks the bolt into place.

Belle has him shuddering and moaning, close to finishing in her mouth, when suddenly she leans back. He gasps at the loss of friction, whimpering, but Belle's already pushing him to the bed.

"Belle, I—"
"Shut up." She rasps, pushing him flat so that he's lying on his back. He watches, entranced, as she climbs onto of him. Rather than settle over his hips, she wiggles until she's hovering over his face. With a groan, he grabs her hips and pulls her firmly down onto him, nipping none to gently between her folds. She yelps but stays where she is until she's shaking and he's stuffed his tie in her mouth to keep Bae from hearing them.

"What do you want, my darling?" He croons and she jerks her hips down lower, gasping.

"Please, please, please." She begs and he curls his tongue so he hits the spot that makes her cry out. She shakes on top of him and he keeps up a rapid pace, wanting to see how long he can drag out her orgasm. When she finally stops twitching with the aftershocks, she slides down until she's hovering over his aching cock, eyes lidded.

"Belle." It's his turn to beg now.

"You know," she says contemplatively. "I've been thinking my yoga skills have been woefully under utilized in the bedroom."

"Remember the knee?" He grumbles. "Limits the kama sutra vibe in the bedroom my dear."

"I can compensate." Belle grins savagely. "Now leg, up. Arms, there. Down, lower, lower… Oh, God, Rum!"

It passes in a blur of lips, sometimes kissing, sometimes biting, and Belle's body in his hands, supple and sure. It's bliss, heavenly, and he never wants it or her to end. When he finally comes, aching, he's got Belle twined tightly around him, lips leaving a tender trail down the side of his neck.

"That was… Something." He mutters as she moves off him, careful not to jostle his knee.

"Let's shower." She offers, extending her hand back. He follows her to the bathroom, where she runs one so hot the room steams. She steps inside and helps him in so he doesn't slip, the showerhead big enough for two of them to stand in the stream of water. She's sweet, lathering him with body wash, massaging his scalp gently as she rubs in shampoo, kissing between his shoulder blades when he turns his face up to the water.

"Is everything alright darling?" He asks her worriedly, when he realizes how quiet she's fallen.

"Let's massage your knee." She lays him back in bed, grabbing her oils from the bedside table.

"Sweetheart please, I want to talk about this." He says, relaxing even as his worry grows.

"Well, I don't." Belle says quietly. "Or at least not yet. So let me rub your knee, please, and hush."

"If that's what you'd like…" He trails off, as Belle works on the tissue. A couple minutes pass in silence, then she asks,

"Does it feel better? After all these months of this and yoga and therapy, does it feel better?"

"I think the only thing I can do to truly feel better is get a knee replacement." He mutters, eyes drooping shut. "But yes, it's much more manageable now. I can walk longer, sit longer."

"And the pain?"

"Better, though that may be in part to the fact that for the first time in a long time Belle, I have had something good to draw the focus away from that pain." He glances at her, seeing her small smile.
"You had Bae." She mummers.

"Bae is my son, and a good boy. You are my light Belle, my superhero, my keeper. You make sure I do right, I do good." He says eagerly. "You keep me away from all the bad that I could seek to do."

"No I don't." Belle whispers, hands never once stopping the massage of his joint. "I didn't today."

"Today was…" He struggles to find a word to describe the disaster of supper. "Not good. But it's just a day Belle."

"Just a day." She repeats and silence falls again. He doesn't break it, until she finishes the massage and climbs into bed next to him.

"Hey." He draws her close, so her head is on his chest. "Come here. I am sorry you know."

"I do." For some reason, her shoulders are as taut as a bowstring, like she's barely restraining herself. "I am too."

"Darling, whatever for?" He asks worriedly and instead of answer, Belle turns her face into his chest and is quiet. He whispers reassurances into her hair until he drifts off into sleep.

When he wakes up in the early hours of the morning, he knows something is off. For one, Belle isn't curled up in his arms like she usually is, nor is she just out reach on the other side on the bed. In fact, her side looks to be untouched, like no one has slept there at all. His confusion deepens, until he sits up and properly looks around, taking it all in. Belle's things are gone.

He gets up, a little confused, but not worried. Perhaps she's simply moved back into her old bedroom, needing a little space after yesterday. He can't begrudge her for that, even if he does dislike it. He opens the door to the spare bedroom, sure he'll see her sprawled out in the center, but it too is as empty of Belle and her objects as his room.

He turns about, confused, refusing to believe what his brain is screaming at him. Belle isn't gone. She can't be. It's not possible. It's a break, like last time. She just needs space, but she'll be back. He turns to the bedside table, needing to be reassured, but crying out and dropping to his knees instead.

The ballerina statue is gone, and so is Belle.

AN: This felt like an oddly personal chapter to write, as my boyfriend and I are over a decade apart and though our families are fine with it (now) I can imagine that the age gape here would be a cause for pause. With that being said, #1- yes, angst! We needed some of it. And #2- this isn't the end. Whoo boy, not even close. Reviews are good for yelling!
Letters

Bae won't speak to him, which is all good and well. He doesn't deserve his son, honestly. Mary Margaret won't speak to him either, but for the first week she holds his calls and cancels all his meetings and that's good and well because he's been sober for maybe 20 minutes in the last 150 hours and he plans on keeping that impressive streak up.

The pain is the worst part of it. For the first seven days, it's blinding, overwhelming pain, physical, like he's being flayed from the inside out and nothing can stop it. He feels like keening over, curling into a ball and holding as still as possible, because if he moves he'll shatter.

How stupid had he been? To open his heart, to let her in, to spend months in love with her, making love to her, and have never said those words aloud? How many times should he have? Would that have made her stay? Regrets and missed opportunities chase themselves around and around his brain, until he shuts up the voices by drinking.

Bae goes to stay with Jefferson and he can't even bring himself to protest. He's not fit to be a father, and Jefferson will treat Bae like his own. Grace will be glad of the company. And yet when Mrs. Potts pulls away the bottle of vodka- not scotch, because scotch is Belle and Belle is pain- and tells him that his son is gone, he knows it's for the best. That doesn't stop him from throwing the fine china at the wall and smashing a display case. No matter. Whatever mess he creates, Mrs. Potts will clean up.

After the pain comes the guilt. Waves of it, cresting and swelling. For all the wrongs he did her. For all the evil he brought her. He should've known, a heart as black as his, couldn't be too close to a heart as pure as hers. He pushed her away and he deserves it.

Then comes the anger, weeks after she's left and he pulls himself out of his wallowing. The bottles go in the trash, Bae is ordered home, and he goes into the office with a plan. He will be vicious. He will be a beast and a monster. He will be what they all expect of him, because the brief flicker of brightness amidst the ocean of darkness has been snuffed out by his hand. With a predatory smile and an aching knee, RMS Gold returns.

Then one day it all changes. Mary Margaret walks in with his customary tea and before he can get off a smart remark and quip about her moral character, she slams a letter down on his desk. He looks at it, then her, then back at it in confusion. After a deep breath, she explains.

"It's a letter. From Belle. To Bae. He gave it to me. I'm making you read it. You won't tell him I showed you it. If you do, I will deny it to my grave. But you need to see this. Read it. And then you need to stop being practically suicidal, because I can only stop so many assassination attempts when you bite someone's head off.” With that, she spins on her heel and stomps out. With trembling hands, he unfolds the paper, soaking in her looping handwriting.

Dear Ernie,

I have so many things to tell you. And I know you're going to have so many questions. I wish I could answer them all, I really do. But know the most important thing, and know it well.

I love you. I love you as if you were my own.

And maybe if you were, this would be easier to do. You could trust that I would always be your mother, even if I weren't there. You'd trust that I'd fight for you or love you or protect you. And Bae,
just because I'm not your real mom doesn't mean I don't wish I could do those things. But I cannot take you from your father. So I leave you with only my reassurances that everything that I said - am saying - is from my heart. You are the son I had always hoped for and more.

I have to go. I don't know if I will see you again. I will try. If you never speak to me again, I understand. I can't explain to you why I left. Please don't ask your father either. And I know it will be too much to ask you to not be angry with him, but I do want you to try. Find forgiveness in your heart. You have it in you, with your heart of gold.

I know you must be confused. I know we had promised forever. Believe me Bae, I meant it. I would have gladly stayed with you, both of you... But that isn't possible. And it is a hollow sentiment, but it is for your own good, and his too. Trust me, I would not have done this unless I absolutely had to.

I hope you grow up strong. I hope you grow up brave. I hope you grow up kind and sweet and good. I hope you love ballet and always pick fro-yo over ice cream. Bae, you cannot fathom the impact you've had on my life in this short amount of time. Know that I love you.

And I love your father. I do. For everything that he is, for the parts that belong to you, to Grace, to the people he makes into a family, and even the parts that belong to his darkness. But Bae, love is layered. Love is complicated. And it is rarely ever straightforward. One day you will understand it and maybe then you'll know why I had to leave.

Take care of him. Take care of yourself. Be angry, but not violent. Be sad, but not weeping. I am still here Bae, only ever a phone call away. If you want me in your life, I will fight for a place to belong there. If not, know that you can always call on me if you need.

I love you.

Dottie

He sets the letter down and refuses to look at it again. Mary Margaret snatches it away when she comes to take his empty teacup and when it's out of his reach, he breaks down in tears and let's himself shake with sorrow and anger, until his emotions are spent. Then he makes a choice and picks up the phone before his cowardice can stop him.

Belle strides through the lobby, shoulders back, chin up, ponytail swinging. She keeps a pretty smile on her face, even if her hands are curled into fists and her lip twitches, threatening to pull up into a sneer. The guard tries to stand, protesting, asking for identification, but Belle flashes an ID badge Mary Margaret had forgotten after class once and continues through to the elevator. She punches the top floor button with a vengeance.

"Excuse me, who are you?" The receptionist, the pretty blonde haired girl Ashley asks. Belle stands in the lobby, looking around at the stunned faces of Gold's workers.

"I'm here to see Mr. Gold." She states.

"Do you have an appointment?" Ashley asks, as whispers flood the room, nameless minions looking up from their work to chance a look at whoever is challenging the notorious RMS Gold.

"Tell him its Belle French." She doesn't budge and Ashley hesitantly picks up the phone, dialing a short, three-digit number.

"Mary Margaret? It's Ashley. There's someone here to see Mr. Gold… I know he doesn't want to be
disturbed, but she's... Well, her name is Belle French. What? Oh. I didn't- Well, um, ok." She covers the receiver and looks at Belle in awe. "She says to come on back."

"Oh no." Belle stands her ground. "Send him out here."

"What?" Ashley blanches and Belle simply stares her down. "Um, Mary Margaret? She wants him to come to her. Yes. No. Ok. Ok." With relief, she hangs up. "Mary Margaret will be here to talk to you shortly."

"Thank you." Belle gives her a curt nod and now every eye is on her, even the people in the enclosed offices off to the sides. Even Regina has always failed to draw him out. It can't be done. He won't agree to anyone's terms but his own, and this is unprecedented. After a couple pregnant pauses, Mary Margaret emerges from the back, looking startled.

"Belle." She cuts a quick path to the front, heads turning as she passes. "What are you doing here?"

"Get him. Tell him to come out." Belle orders and Mary Margaret takes a deep breath.

"Belle, you know I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Belle snaps. "Because you know as well as I do, he is just a man. A cranky, irritable man, but he is human. Ashley." She turns and looks at the receptionist, who looks all but terrified. "Tell him to come out here right now. Don't bother with please."

"I really—" She begins but one look from Belle cuts that off in short order. She picks up the phone and dials, while Mary Margaret bites her lip and hovers. Within moments of Ashley's hushed request that he come, there's the unmistakable noise of a slamming door. Terror is written across almost every face in the office, expect Belle, who is grinning with savage pleasure.

"HOW DARE YOU?" The yelling starts before he's even rounded the corner and everyone is quick to duck their heads, though a few bravely peek up. Belle stands, all five feet of her, with her arms crossed. "CALLING ME, DEMANDING TO SEE ME LIKE I AM SOME DOG TO COME WHEN ORDERED!"

"Mr. Gold," Mary Margaret tries to placate him when he comes striding for Belle, cane wielded like a weapon, teeth bared, practically growling. Instead of retreating, Belle steps forward, pushes Mary Margaret behind her, and looks up at him without an ounce of fear.

"How dare you." Her voice is nearly unintelligible after his shouting, it's so quiet. "I didn't ask anything of you. Not once. And yet you think you can solve this like another one of your issues? That if you throw money at me, I'll owe you and be forced to stay, like some common whore?"

"What?" Mary Margaret, behind her, pokes her head up, looking between the two of them in apparent bewilderment.

"I didn't demand you stay." He growls, both of them ignoring her. "Never asked that of you."

"Then why did you give me the money?" She demands. "I wasn't once late on my rent, I made my payments, I didn't violate my lease. I don't owe you on anything else but my studio. I. Didn't. Need. Your. Money." Each word is punctuated with a hard poke to his chest.

"You want to do this here?" His eyes glint with maliciousness intent. "Really, dearie?"

"Where would you prefer we do this? Central Park? Chinatown? The Met?" She quips and it's like watching a furious tennis match, the words volleying between the two of them. "Since you don't like
to be seen in public, I figured this was the best option!

"This is my work place." His voice is silky and dangerous, but Belle seems blithely oblivious to the line she is toeing. "I can get you escorted out."

"Fine." Belle folds her arms and stands so resolutely she may as well be a tree. "But first, take the money back."

"What?" That throws him off balance more than anything and for a brief second, his eyebrows knit together, deepening the crease between his eyebrows, his mask of fury slipping.

"The money." She articulates clearly. "Take it back. I don't want it. I may owe you, but I will pay it off, on my own, the right way. I won't owe you like that. Not like everyone else."

"Belle." He slips and calls her by her first name, looking a little stunned. "I didn't mean…"

"You didn't mean a lot of things." She says quietly. "But I am not to be bought or paid off. No man owns me."

"I didn't..." He repeats, his rage evaporating slowly as he sees how Belle has interpreted his gesture of apology.

"Sorry I came to your workplace." Belle dips her head and turns to Mary Margaret. "If there's anything else, Mary Margaret can communicate that. I'll leave you alone." With a nod, she walks out, leaving him in an office so quiet he could hear a pin drop, and thoughts so loud his skull may split.

He takes the money back and decides the best course of action is to put Belle out of his mind, forever. He ignores the pain in his knee, worsening by the day, and throws himself back into work. He hasn't worked this hard, so fervently, since Bae was a child and Zoso was teaching him the tricks of the trade. He even agrees to take a meeting with Regina, though he's disappointed.

She's gone soft. Something about her mother dying, then nonsense about finding love and motherhood. He makes his opinions known by savagely cutting her ideas to shreds without remorse and throwing her out with some well aimed barbs about her intellect and upbringing. Then he settles back into his desk and tries to shake a vision about a dark haired woman with blue eyes and what kind of mother she'd be.

"Ok, that's it." Mary Margaret storms into his office, practically blowing the doors off the hinges. "Enough is enough."

"Yes, it is." He slams his pen down, rising to the prospect of a good fight with relish now that Regina's gone and he needs a distraction. "You damage those doors Ms. Blanchard, you pay."

"Screw the doors." She says bluntly, stopping to glare at him. With her heels, she's just a little taller than him, but he retains his distance, refusing to look up to her. "You stupid man!"

"Excuse you?" He spits. "Get out, and don't bother grabbing your things on the way out. You've forfeited your claim to them."

"Oh no." She folds her arms. "You're not chasing me away like you chased Belle away."

"GET OUT!" He roars, the mention of Belle's name too much. "GET THE BLOODY HELL OUT!"
"NO!" She yells back. "I'M NOT LETTING YOU DO THIS!"

"You damned woman." His eyes are glinting dangerously, hands clenching the cane. "Do not make me do something I'll regret."

"Like what?" She gives him a sneer. "You've already done the worst thing imaginable, you made the only woman you've ever loved leave you. You robbed Bae of a good mother, robbed yourself of your only chance at happiness, all because you were a coward."

"Don't." The words are ripped from him and he gives a moan like a wounded animal, the waves of pain and grief crashing over him. "Don't, please…"

"That's what you think, isn't it?" She asks him, still wary of getting near, but her eyes have turned soft. "That's what you're thinking, that's why you're so miserable, because you blame yourself for this. You think it's your fault."

"It is." He whispers. "My temper, my darkness… It rears its ugly head. How can I expect anyone to love me then, to face it, see it in all it's dark glory, and love that part of me?"

"Oh, no." With a look of pity, Mary Margaret steps closer. "No, that's not it. Belle doesn't think you're a monster."

"I am." He says bluntly. "I am a monster, and once she saw that, she ran. Who am I to blame her? All fault lies with me."

"Perhaps." Mary Margaret is close enough now that she reaches out and rests a hand on his shoulder. "But did you ever think to even ask her about it? To ask for forgiveness? Or did you just assume that she'd deny you that, and you sent her away without even asking for it?"

"Why would she forgive me?" He asks, bewildered. "I betrayed her trust. I lied to her. I went behind her back. I violated her rules."

"Yeah, you did." Mary Margaret says firmly. "You idiot."

'You—"

"Shush." She cuts him off without remorse. "I'm just saying that's what happened. Even David, this most charming man on this planet, is an idiot. All men are. The difference is what are you going to do?"

"Going to do?" He looks at her through a curtain of hair, not comprehending what she could mean. "To get Belle back." Mary Margaret, as though it should be obvious.

"Don't." He whispers, closing his eyes as another wave of pain rolls over him. The idea of Belle being back in his arms, grinning at him over the rim of a chipped teacup, eyes sparkling while debating a new novel with him, the vision of her hovering over him in bed, perfect lips brushing against his, the scent of her around him…

"Mr. Gold." Mary Margaret rests her hand on his cheek, softly and he trembles, feeling like he's going to collapse from the weight of holding everything in. He needs Belle- he needs her like he needs air, and he's gasping.

"Go away, dearie." He mutters finally, absolutely defeated. "Leave an old beast to lick his wounds."
"No." Mary Margaret grabs his chin and tilts it up so he's looking at her. "No, I'm not going to. Because you are miserable, and so is she."

"What?" He feels like an electric shock has run through him. "You've… Talked? To her? To… Her?"

"Yes." A tiny smile turns up the corners of Mary Margaret's mouth. "I mean, I did ask the girl to be a bridesmaid in my wedding. And I was oddly rather hoping you'd walk me down the aisle. But she's just as heartbroken as you, so for the love of all things holy, go to her. Talk it out. Because I'm not giving either of you a plus one at my wedding, got it?"

"Yes." He's dazed, scrambling for his coat before remembering it's August, dashing for keys before remembering he has a private driver, fumbling with his cell phone to dial a taxi before remembering she's within walking distance at her studio, frantic. "We've got to talk. Talk. To Belle. She's miserable, can't let that stand, can't… Won't…"

"Go." Laughing, Mary Margaret shoos him out of his office, clapping her hands. "I'll clear your schedule for the rest of the day."

"Wait!" He skids to a stop in front of the elevator, twisting to look at her in disbelief, words finally catching up to him. "Are you engaged?"

"Have been for a week, thanks for noticing." She wiggles the ring on her finger, the emerald catching the light and glinting. His minds is racing, thoughts disjointed, but one important thing bypasses even Belle.

"And you want me to walk you down the aisle?"

"It was a thought." She shrugs. "My father's gone, and I can't exactly ask David's, now can I? You're the next best thing."

"I…" His mouth open and closes like a fish out of water, stunned. "Ms. Blanchard- Mary Margaret- I never thought- I—"

"Elevators here." She informs him and he steps inside, still staring at her in astonishment. "Tell Belle you love her."

"Yes." That clears the haze and refocuses him. This is about Belle, getting her back. Or at least stopping her pain, even if that means leaving. He will respect her. He won't violate her trust again.

"Good luck!" With a cheerful wave, Mary Margaret disappears from view and the elevator starts to drop as his stomach starts to turn.

AN: Filler chapter? Gah, I thought I wasn't going to have those. Also, in a weird turn of events, I am writing the 'Rum gets mad, pushes Belle away instead of being a big kid and talking about his feelings' trope that I so hated over the course of the show but 1) it's fun to write and 2) it's canon? Ok, promise that next chapter will be sunshine and rainbows! (Maybe.) Reviews are love!
Belle's Day

It's not her alarm that wakes her, but the heat. It's too hot to sleep, even naked, with a thin blanket. Her tiny apartment hardly has air conditioning, and it's not worth the increase in her utility bill to turn the damned thing on. But she likes to sleep cold, and the heat is killing her.

With a groan, she gets out of bed. No use staying there if sleep's going to keep denying her. She can scrub the floors or something. She checks the microwave clock as she starts her tea- 5:21 am. She rolls her eyes at herself- her sole day to sleep in, not teach the early classes or have appointments, and she's up at the same time as always.

Of course, she refuses to let herself think that her body rhythm is accommodated to rising early on Thursday mornings. After all, she has for almost the last year, give or take, gotten up early on Thursdays. She takes a deep breath, tries to forget, and makes herself breakfast.

She sits and eats at the tiny window that overlooks her street, aimlessly pushing her fruit and granola around in her yogurt. She could read, she could go for a walk, she could get groceries, she could clean up the sty that her apartment is becoming… She looks at the dirty dishes piled in the sink and sighs. She should, but she has no motivation for anything.

By midmorning it's stifling in her apartment and forces her outside. She puts on a breezy summer dress with sandals and heads for the studio, yoga clothes stuffed in her bag. She purposely avoids the route past the high-rise office building, now a sort of ritual. Avoid the building, avoid the corner where they'd kissed goodbye most mornings, avoid the little coffee shop where they'd had what had been a date/interrogation hybrid, and get to her studio with tears only threatening twice or so. A challenge and she rarely wins.

She's swiping the tears away when she walks into the studio. Jasmine, a beautiful young woman who'd spent a few years teaching yoga on the beaches of Aruba, sits at the desk, checking people in for her class. She looks up, seemingly unsurprised to see Belle.

"Hi." She says, as Belle slips behind the desk and pulls out her tablet. "Feeling better?"

"Never felt bad." Belle says, with the biggest smile she can manage. A lie, one Jasmine doesn't believe, but she doesn't push. No one does, not anymore, because Belle is brittle and one touch might shatter her.

"Oh, well Rory is going to come in after me for a barre class." Jasmine explains and Belle nods, taking over the chair. "I think I'll stay for it. I could use a good death by Rory session."

"Then we can all die together." Belle says, still overly cheerful, pulling up a novel on the tablet. "I'll lock the doors."

"Thanks." Jasmine disappears into the studio and Belle takes a deep breath, reminding herself that this is a safe space. Her feelings are valid. She has every right to feel like shit. But here, in this space, she can be herself; she doesn't have to hide from anyone.

Except she vividly remembers the way she'd felt when she'd finally kissed him on this desk, remembers the times she'd climbed atop him on a chair or the massage table, the long showers before he'd have to go to work, the smell of him lingering during her first class after his appointments and how her cheeks would hurt from smiling.

Nowhere is safe from him anymore and she chokes back another sob, resting her head on her arms.
Barre class helps, and she forces herself to do more reps, the more challenging variations, because maybe if her body hurts, her heart won't be so bad in comparison. It doesn't work, but she notes with satisfaction that her legs tremble when she showers.

"Hey, Belle." Rory is waiting for her when she gets out of the shower, doing mindless cleaning tasks. Belle shakes out her hair, raising an eyebrow.

"Rory, I thought you had class right after this." She reminds the grad student, who nods.

"Yeah, I do, but I wanted to check on you. Wanted to see if you wanted to get lunch or something." She says carefully. "It's just reviewing the syllabus today anyways. Let's go for sushi."

"How about some Caribbean food?" Belle braids her hair. "Kind of sick of sushi right now."

They sit outside a quaint little Cuban place to eat, both quiet. Belle knows that Rory is going to have a comment soon, but for right now she enjoys the peace and quiet. She'd never gotten the chance to take Gold to this place, so for right now, it's a safe haven of sorts, one where her heart doesn't feel like it's being turned to dust in her chest.

"Belle, we're worried about you." Rory says gently and Belle hums in acknowledgment but says nothing. "Jas, me, even Ari, we're worried. You're not yourself."

"I'm allowed to be sad." Belle snaps without meaning to and Rory doesn't recoil, just sighs.

"Yes, of course you are. But Belle, there's sadness and then there's… This. You're devastated. Your teaching shows that, your attitude shows that, and we just want you to know that we're here for you, always, for anything." She says earnestly. "Do you want to… I don't know… Talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." Belle says dully, dropping her fork loudly against her plate. "There was a man, there's always a man. I loved him and I thought he loved me. And then, well, he proved he didn't. Couldn't, wouldn't, I don't know. But look where I was left."

"Heartbroken." Rory rests her hand over Belle's own, trying to soothe her. "Belle, I get it."

"Do you?" Belle gives her a cold look. "Do you know what it's like to get wrapped up in someone? To be a part of them and have them be a part of you? To love them fiercely, wholly, entirely? To go from having a family, people that you love so much you would die to protect them, to this? To having them wrenched away from you?" She chokes back a sob, thinking of Bae.

"Belle." Rory looks mildly alarmed, throwing an arm around and hugging her close. "Oh, Belle."

"I loved him." She leans into Rory and doesn't stop the tears. "I loved both of them. My boys, my boys…"

"It's ok. It's ok." Rory is shushing her, rocking her gently, and stroking her hair. "You're ok."

"It hurts." Belle whimpers and Rory gives a humorless chuckle, pulling her into a tight squeeze.

"It's life honey, you're not breathing if you're not hurting, somehow. Now c'mon." Rory leans back and holds Belle by her shoulders, eyebrows furrowed. "Chin up. Pretty smile that I know you have. Deep breaths. I have to go to class, but I want you to keep breathing, ok?"

"Yeah." Belle throws a couple dollars down on the table, nodding. "You're right. I think I'm going to go to the park, walk for a little bit. Clear my head. Try to balance myself."
"That's a good idea." Rory pats her hand, smiling. "I'll see you soon. Call if you need anything?"

"Of course." Belle gives her a hug. "Thanks for this, Ror. I mean it."

"Anytime." With a wave, Rory hails a taxi and disappears.

Belle spends most of her afternoon reading in the park, watching as little families run by, parents sweating and kids laughing, enjoying the bright summer day. She watches them, albeit a little sadly. She wonders what Bae is up to, if he's taking solace in the air conditioning or if he and friends are causing havoc at a skate park, showing off for girls.

She tucks her tablet back into her bag, standing and stretching. It's almost time for her class, and she might as well spend some time before students arrive doing her own practice. Her body feels stiff and she knows it's because she's curling back around her heart, back to the protective instincts. Going back to in her shell, Dr. Hopper calls it. She's leaving the park when her phone vibrates. Her heart is in her throat when she sees Mary Margaret's name but she bites back hope. She's just checking in.

"Hello." She answers and then jumps when there's just long shrieking on the other end of the phone. "Mary Margaret?"

"Ok, ok, ok, I can actually tell you." Mary Margaret calms down with a deep breath, pitch returning to normal. "It's a little bit of old news, but David wanted to keep it quiet for a couple days, but we've told his mom, so now I can finally tell everyone- We're engaged!"

"Oh wow." Belle pauses, a brief but real smile on her face. "That's great! I'm so happy for you. Mary Margaret, that's wonderful."

"Thank you." She can practically hear the beam in Mary Margaret's voice. "We're going to have a small wedding, you know, not a lot of family, and I wanted to do something cute but I don't have a lot of time on my hands, at least not right now, so I'm just going to do it- Belle, will you be a bridesmaid?"

"What?" Belle nearly drops the phone. "You want me? To be in your wedding? As a bridesmaid?"

"Of course." Mary Margaret says, nonplussed. "You're my friend Belle. I don't have sisters and well, work keeps me busy, but you're my friend. You always have been, not just because of him."

"Of course." Touched at the declaration, Belle smiles. "Of course, I would love to be in your wedding."

"Good." Mary Margaret says firmly. "Because I'm not having the happiest day of my life without my friends there. Oh— I have to go. Break's over. I'll talk to you soon! I'll send you wedding stuff!"

"Ok." A brief flicker of happiness burns in Belle's chest. Good things still happen. Life still goes on.

"Bye!" Mary Margaret yells and then there's a crash and the line goes dead. Still smiling, Belle hangs up. She's excited for her friend. Mary Margaret and David are a perfect match, even if they did get together in a non-ideal way. She knows that her friend will be delighted to marry David, and she's surprised but thankful that Mary Margaret sees her as such a close friend.

The walk back towards her studio is consumed with thoughts of weddings. Belle wonders, idly, what color her dress will be and where it'll be held. She firmly keeps herself from wondering if he will be there- surely he'll be invited to his assistant's wedding.
She doesn't realize she's taken the route in front of his building, lost in thought, until she practically tumbles over someone in front of her, outside the gate to a small park a corner away from her studio.

"Regina." Belle stops in her tracks, looking at Regina in surprise. Regina is kneeling, holding a chocolate ice cream cone in one hand and a stuffed grey monkey in the other. In front of her is a young boy; adorable with big brown eyes and dark curls that peek out from under his cap. His face is covered in ice cream and he looks perfectly content, licking his cone.

"Belle." Regina glances up at her and recognition flashes across her face. "I'm sorry, I…" She shrugs helplessly at her full hands and Belle smiles, grabbing for napkins in her bag and kneeling so she's at the height of the little boy.

"You, mister, are quite messy." She comments and the little boy grins, offering his hands so she can clean them.

"We got ice cream." He explains. "Are you friends with Gina?"

"Yes, I am a friend of hers." Belle carefully wipes his face of most of the ice cream. If Regina is surprised at Belle's declaration, she hides it. "I'm Belle, who might you be?"

"Roland!" He pronounces, grinning, and Regina smiles at him.

"That is the best name I have ever heard." Belle taps his nose and stands, throwing the napkin away. "You are one cool little dude."

"You're pretty!" He blurts out and Belle gasps, putting her hand to her heart, overly flattered.

"Why thank you, handsome!" She grins when he looks to Regina for approval. She chuckles and tucks the monkey in her purse.

"You can have Nikko back when you're not so sticky, got it?" She informs Roland, who nods seriously. "Ok, go play on the playground then, but be careful, and stay where I can see you."

"Ok!" With a yell, he goes running for the little park where other kids are already playing.

"Roland and Regina." Belle tries the combination out. "It certainly fits well together."

"Thanks." A little hesitantly, Regina allows herself to relax enough to lick her own dripping ice cream cone carefully, sitting on the bench. "His father Robin keeps up the alteration."

"I love it." Belle says honestly. "Can I ask about that?"

"About why I'm shuttling a toddler around New York outside Gold's office?" Regina smiles at her. "We had a meeting this afternoon. Robin dropped Roland off with me afterwards, and so I decided that after a meeting like that, we deserved some ice cream and playtime."

"Beastly?" Belle guesses hollowly, her stomach in knots at the simple mention of Gold.

"Worse than ever, actually." Regina frowns slightly. "Would you know anything about that?"

"Nope. So, this Robin." Belle changes the subject and Regina's face softens into a blush. "How long has that been happening? I believe the last time we met I may have had a couple strong words for you."

"Would you believe me if I said I took them to heart?" Regina tries and Belle gives her an incredulous look. Regina chuckles. "Ok, fine. No change of heart. My mother… Died."
"I'm so sorry." Belle briefly recalls the night months ago when Gold had came home and said a work acquaintance had died and that he would be attending the visitation alone. She'd hardly thought it would be Regina's mother.

"Don't be. It was for the best, honestly. I couldn't put it past me, not when I had so many questions. So I took your advice and I went to Dr. Hopper to work out my… Mommy issues." Her lip curls at the words.

"He works wonders with parental problems." Belle agrees. "My daddy issues are much better."

"He does." Regina laughs, opening to Belle a little more. Roland waves to them from the top of a slide and they both wave back. "Anyways, my sessions always followed Roland's. His mother died, so Robin had been sending him to Dr. Hopper, just to make sure he keeps his sunny disposition. I got to talking to Robin more and more and we bonded. Roland is just the cherry on top. We're moving pretty fast, I'll admit, but…"

"When you know, you know." Belle says firmly. Regina looks at her in surprise. "Trust me, I get it."

"Oh. Well, here we are. You were right, all it took was my mother getting out of my life, and I found happiness." Regina's face softens as Roland pretends to fight off imagined foes, his ice cream melting everywhere.

"I'm sorry it took her death for you to find happiness." Belle says quietly and Regina doesn't take her eyes off Roland.

"I'm not. She was poisonous influence all my life. Emotionally abusive. Dr. Hopper tells me all the time that he's so impressed that I don't revert back to her tactics when I'm with Robin and Roland. If she never had died, I never would've had this. Me, dating a single dad, who drives a Prius and campaigns for the conservation of forests?" Regina gives a humorless chortle. "She'd have shot an arrow through his heart or something."

"He seems good for you." Belle says honestly, catching a glance of Regina's phones lock screen, a beaming portrait of her, Roland, and a handsome man. They look completely happy.

"He is." Regina beams when Roland comes running for her.

"Gina!" He yells, brandishing a stick. "Look, a sword!"

"Be careful." She chides him, laughing. "Kid with a sword, are you going to go slay some dragons?"

"Not without daddy." Roland stops, looking a little fearful and Regina opens her arms. He goes to her side easily and she finishes cleaning off the remaining ice cream.

"Do you miss him?" She asks him quietly and he nods, curling into her chest. "Me too. Should we go pick up some food for supper and then go home and surprise him with it?"

"Surprise him with food and a fort?" He asks hopefully and Regina nods. "Ok, I'm gonna go put my sword back where I got it. Someone else might want it!" He declares, running back towards the playground.

"Food and a fort?" Belle asks, raising an eyebrow and Regina smiles wryly, eyes never leaving Roland.

"His favorite way to eat. We get takeout and make a fort in the dining room." She explains.
"What a sweet kid." Belle mummers as Roland comes running back, launching himself into Regina's arms with a wild shout only a boy can make. "I'm so glad to see you happy, Regina."

"Me too." She nuzzles Roland's neck, making him squeak with laughter. "Say goodbye to Belle sweetheart."

"Goodbye Belle!" He yells and Belle waves until they're gone in the crowd of people. She stops a sob from rising and heads towards the studio, trying not to envision a little boy with Gold's eyes and her curls.

During her quiet, solitary practice in the dark, she tries to open up her heart, to crack away the layers that have grown since that day, that horrible day, when she'd felt nothing but a fierce desire to protect herself from a blinding pain. She ends up feeling exhausted, giving up to lie on her mat and resist the urge to draw up into a fetal position.

She forces herself to get up and put a smile on her face, lighting the candles for the evening flow. She turns the heat down, slightly, and goes to sit on the desk to wait for her students. She pulls up her email, smiling when she sees that Mary Margaret has already sent her ideas for the wedding, noted with exclamation points or question marks.

She checks people in, talking to her regulars, managing to conceal everything from them, being her normal, bubbly self, laughing and joking with everyone as they filter in. When it's nearly time for class to start and the last stragglers are heading into the studio, she closes down her emails and checks the clock. Two more minutes, then she'll lock the doors and start class.

The door opens and she looks up in surprise, wondering who would cut so close to class time. She's expecting someone new, unused to arriving early or a flustered regular yelling about traffic or work. She is not expecting Mr. Gold, in a slightly rumpled suit, with wild eyes and beads of sweat on his upper lip, staring back at her in astonishment.

"We are not doing this now." She is surprised at how forceful her voice is, how firmly she says it, how easily it rolls off her lips. He says nothing, just nods. She nods back, mainly because she has no idea what else to do.

"Should I go then?" He asks, jolting like he suddenly remembers where he is, taking a half step to the door.

"Do you want to?" She can't quite form coherent sentences, her thoughts leaping all over the place, her heart's hammering and the rushing of blood making it hard for her to hear.

"No." He says honestly and Belle tilts her head, still bewildering.

"Your… Clothes… Are still in the back." She says haltingly. "Are you going to join class?"

"Sure." He says quietly, kicking off his shoes and walking past her silently to the back. Belle watches his retreating back, before rousing herself. She has a class to teach. She gets up, locking the door, setting a mat and towel outside the door for him to grab on the way in. She opens the door, staring at the prone bodies on the floor like they're not real, unsure how to spend the next hour teaching when her stomach is located somewhere near the subway system.

"Hello class." She says quietly, heading to the music to lower the volume slightly, picking the essential oil that smells like cinnamon. "We will have one last straggler joining us shortly, sorry for the delay. I have admit, I am feeling a little… Odd today. Good news, bad news, emotions rising up
that I hadn't resolved… So stick with me while we see how this practice goes."

She's going around, applying oils, when he sneaks in, limping to roll out his mat in the back corner. She carries on with the oils, saving him for last. With trembling hands, she kneels and gently takes his hand, shaking the bottle so a couple drops fall on his wrist. Touching him is electric and soothing all at once, like she's been shocked and hugged.

"Stay where you are, but let's do some meditation." Her voice is trembling and so is her entire body, so she makes passes through the rows of students to work out the nervous energy. "Let's think about home." She pauses, choosing a new playlist for the class.

He physically jumps when the strains of the music becomes distinguishable. Soft, poignant, melancholic strings that call to mind the gently rolling hills, the haunting moors, the proud highlands. Scottish music. The kind of music he listens to when sad. She remembers this about him—of course she remembers, this is Belle. Perfect Belle.

"Home." Belle is saying. "Where is home for you? Is it where you grew up? Is it where you were born? By that logic, then my home is Australia, a harbor I cannot remember, and an opera house I've never been to. Is it what's familiar? By that logic, it's a little house in Staten Island, pink tulips in the front yard, a blue bed set and a teddy bear on my pillow. Think about home; think about where you were born, where you were raised. Are those places home?

"Or is home somewhere else entirely? Is it where, as the saying goes, the wifi connects automatically? Perhaps, but maybe it's where the heart connects. You know when you walk into a place, where your heart and soul relaxes entirely, when you stop and think to yourself… Ah, safe. Happy. Home.

"Think of that place. Hold it in your heart during this practice. Hold it tightly, burrow it deep into your heart, and let that feeling of acceptance, of contentedness, of belonging radiate out from the center of your being. You are here. You are welcomed. You are home."

AN: Ok, so we're getting close to the end, but here is a little Belle's perspective, because why not? Read, review, like, favorite, spread, share, blah blah blah?
He feels unexpectedly overwhelmed with emotions. Belle is home, of course she is. She's the best thing to ever happen to him, and she has to know that. She has to know that she, and Bae, are the only bright spots of light in his otherwise dark and miserable heart. A tear leaks out, unbidden, and he surprises himself by letting it. Belle's right- he's safe here.

Belle falls silent, leading the class through slow stretches, warming them up gently, but he can tell, by the little glances he sneaks of her, that she's flighty. She wants to run; he can see it in her eyes. She wants to bolt, and it's taking all of her self control not to.

Instead she's wandering between them, careful not to stray to close to him, returning to her mat to join them whenever it seems like she's going to be tempted to do so. For the most part, he can follow along, and his knee is already relaxing in the familiar heat, like his body knows this space and has been craving it. Wanting to come back to where everything is all right, where he is home. It's familiar and he releases all his tension.

When they move into more standing and balancing poses, he takes the modifications that he remembers Belle whispering in his ear when she first taught him. He closes his eyes, listening to the strings of a violin that reminds him of a different home, and tries to forget that there are 40 other people in the room. It's just him and Belle, just them, no one else.

"I think too often, we get caught up in the world." Belle is speaking softly again, and he appreciates every syllable. He'd taken for granted her soft accent, the breathy sighs between words, how calming it is. After weeks of not hearing her voice, this is heaven. "We forget the simplest things, we rush, we take them for granted. We have roofs over our heads, floors beneath our feet. We have a space that we carve out, that we've made ours.

"We have people that are home. People that our souls recognize ours. That make you relax and think, yes. Mine. I am safe. I am happy. And those people become home. Think of them, hold them in your heart. They are home."

He thinks of Belle so intensely he's not quite sure how she doesn't sense it, feel it somehow. He thinks of her books littering every flat surface, the heels that have been kicked off in front of the door, under the table, beside the couch, at his bedside. He focuses on the blue mat that had it's own space in the library, on the strange fruits in the fridge, on the incense that had burned when she woke in the morning and right before she went to bed at night.

He thinks of her, of her smile, the twinkle in her eyes when she'd say something sassy and wait for his retort, how she could curl herself in the tightest ball and sit that way, content to read for hours. He thinks of her sleeping, tucked into his side, and her body beneath his. He thinks of her hand in his, the smell of her hair, her lips pressed to his.

They've moving poses and he tries it, tries to put a slightly heavier amount of weight on the damaged knee, to see how much it can handle. He knows, when he shifts, that it can't take as much stress as he's trying, and so he splays his hands out, ready to tumble to the ground embarrassingly.

In a heartbeat, Belle is there, catching him, hands steady on his ribs and chest and he looks up at her. Her mouth is slightly open in surprise, eyes wide, and he's never wanted anything more than to lean in and kiss her deeply. He can almost taste her. Then, after a breath, she stabilizes him and withdraws her hands like she's been burned.
"Thanks." He manages a rasping whisper, sounding strangled, and she gives a clipped nod, moving back around the room with apparent ease, like she hasn't experienced a life changing tremor.

"Know that you're safe, you're loved, you're home." Her voice is trembling now and when she steps on her mat, she has to take a deep breath. "Safe, loved, home. Safe, loved, home."

He's dripping in sweat by the time the class is nearing its close and he aches all over, body already sore. He desperately wishes for Belle's tender touch, soothing the hurts, but she's at the front of the class, her hair exploding with curls as she pulls it from the tight bun that she favors in the heat.

Belle gives the word for them to all recline, corpse pose, and chest heaving, he gratefully lays down. He closes his eyes, trying not to be disturbed by the rivulets of sweat down his scalp, arms, back, and legs. There's no stopping it, so he simply accepts it. He jumps slightly when Belle comes around, sliding a cool, minty towel over his eyes.

"We are going to leave this space, go back to the real world." Belle's voice is trembling, but with what emotion he can't tell. "We all have to leave our safe spaces, go out into the real world, accept that we have to put ourselves at risk if it means we will live. But don't let that scare you, worry you. Home is where the heart is. Our hearts reside in us, in other people. We are safe, we are loved. Always. Stay as long as you'd like. Namaste."

"Namaste." The class choruses back to her but he seems to be having a hard getting his throat to unstick and words to work, so he stays silent, laying in the heat as people around him, quietly murmuring, get up and leave.

He stays where he is, unable to move. Not only because his muscles have turned to liquid and he's melted into the floor, but because if he moves, he may vomit. Belle is just out that door and now, after his fledgling burst of courage has past, he's terrified that he's going to get cast out.

As she should. As she did, once, months ago, when she'd left. God, he'll never forget the look on her face when she looked up at him, devastated, disgusted, broken and furious, knowing what he'd done to her father. Never coming back. Empty heart, an empty life, a furious son, and a chipped cup. Remnants of Belle. The hole in his life, the one carved out by her, seems too large to be filled. A fool's hope, that she'd want him here.

She'd told him they weren't doing this now. He keeps that forefront in his mind as he slowly sits up. Only a few people remain in the heat of the studio. For the best. Less to see him limp. Less to see his devastation when Belle casts him out. Less to see his weakness. The hallway to her little desk stretching out for miles in front of him, and he walks to the gallows.

To his shock, however, Belle is sitting at her desk with two steaming mugs of tea. Their mugs, in fact, the ones they'd used after their sessions. Green tea in hers, fragrant with the lemons she's so fond of adding. And strong, dark oolong tea for him. Like always.

"Belle," He licks his lips, trying to hide the fact that he's quivering from head to toe. "I don't…"

"Even know where to start?" Belle is still fixated on her screen, but she nudges the tea towards him calmly. "I gathered."

"I…" He trails off and decides to shut up and grab the tea, sitting carefully down on the desk.

"Do you know who I saw today?" She snaps the computer shut, looking up at him and her beautiful blue eyes, even sharp with anger, make him completely forget any thoughts.

"Who?" He asks hesitantly. Mary Margaret? Bae? Oh god, if it was Bae, he's in for a well-deserved
lash when he gets home.

"Regina." Out of all the names out of Belle's mouth, he hadn't been expecting that one. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, trying to think of a good response and coming up short.

"Oh."

"And do you know who she was with?" Belle presses and he briefly recalls the meeting with Regina today. He'd shattered a glass after her exit. She'd been alone though.

"No." He admits quietly and Belle purses her lips.

"Roland. Her boyfriend's son."

"Graham doesn't have a son." He knows that much, that her boy toy is a single bachelor.

"Not Graham. Robin." The name is unfamiliar, and he frowns slightly, trying to figure it out. "Her normal, stable boyfriend. Which brought me to the realization that Regina, crazy, occasionally evil Regina, who is spoiled and pouts and ruins lives for fun because she can and had an emotionally abusive mother, has found peace and happiness. And where are we, Gold?" The name tears through him, causing him physical pain.

"I don't know." He admits quietly.

"In hell." She spits and her anger is both good and bad because it's finally an emotion he can identify, that he knows. He can work with angry at least. But angry Belle is a force of nature indeed, and he already feels rocked.

"I'll go." He says quietly, going to head back to his neatly folded clothes. Belle's hand catches his shoulder and she spins him with a glare.

"I said we weren't doing this now." She reminds him and mouth dry, he nods. "I changed my mind. I want to fight, now."

"Ok." The words come out like they're stuck somewhere back around his molars, but Belle nods and then takes a deep breath and he just prays to survive this storm in one piece.

"I am angry with you, trust me when I say that was a huge part of why I left. I am furious with you! You beat my father! You threatened him! What the hell were you thinking?" She fumes at him, arms folded tightly and after a beat of silence, he meekly speaks.

"Belle, I wasn't."

"Clearly!" She bursts then falls back into sulking silence, so he carefully resumes speaking.

"Belle… You have to know first of all, that I don't regret it." He admits and her eyes practically jump out of her skull. "I don't, for however much of a monster that makes me seem. Belle, my whole life has been black and white. Wanted, not. I have food to eat, I don't. I didn't grow up like you." He pauses, closing his eyes to the painful memories. He has to face them, for her. "Survive or die. Punch or be punched. It was only ever that simple, to me at least. It is an instinctual reaction. Something hurts me, I hurt them worse."

"So if I slapped you, your reaction would be to smack me back?" Belle asks coolly, folding her arms.

"No, never." He's flabbergasted. "Belle, I haven't — and will never— raise a hand to a woman, not
even Milah when she would leave Bae alone to get high." He's getting sidetracked now, but Belle's
eyes soften somewhat at the mention of Bae, so he plows on. "But Belle, I am not accustomed to
letting people think they can get away with hurting those I love."

"He is my father." Belle reminds him, from between clenched teeth. "He never even laid a hand on
me."

"He let someone." His hands are clenching and unclenching tightly on his cane, fast losing control.
"He let someone, didn't stop it, and then he didn't even have the backbone to believe you. If it had been Bae—"

"It wasn't." She cuts him off and he sighs, nodding to her point.

"Aye, it wasn't. It was you." He goes to reach for her face before remembering he doesn't have that
privilege anymore and lets his hand drop between them. "And I overreacted, I'm sure I did. But Belle, I was furious. I wanted him to know— to see— that you had someone that believes you. That would force him to face the consequences you are too good to thrust upon him."

"Because I never made him pay, you thought you had the right to?" She cries. "You don't! You and
Ruby both, you don't!"

"Ah." He sees that they've arrived at Ruby's involvement and with a twinge of shame, he wishes he
would've reached out to her, to see if Belle was angry with her too, if they could've talked.

"Both of you, it's frustrating." Belle suddenly rubs her eyes, seemingly holding back tears and his
heart breaks. "I am a big girl! I was handling it."

"You were in therapy." His voice rises, some of his own anger bubbling up at the reminder of Belle's
hurts. "You had attempted suicide! You were doing yoga seven days a week and putting all your
energy into fixing other people instead of yourself, because that miserable, wretched man put it into
your beautiful head that somehow abuse was your fault!"

"I didn't say I was handling it well." She snaps. "But I was handling it, in my own way. And then
you take it into your own hands."

"Oh, so did you want to beat him with the cane yourself?" He demands sarcastically and Belle's
chest heaves as she glares at him, but he catches a glimpse of that dark thing that lives in her heart,
only occasionally flashing a claw or a snarl of teeth. He's drawn to it, but before he can even realize
he's seen it, it's gone and Belle is practically caving in on herself.

"I was upset." She says quietly and for the first time, he moves a step closer to her, the air between
them crackling.

"Because I beat him? Or because you were glad that I did? Or because you wished you could?" He
isn't sure if these questions aren't going to get him slapped, but he asks nonetheless. He needs to
know.

"All three." She whispers, avoiding his gaze. "Do you see why that's so awful? Why I had to leave
you and Bae? Because you need someone that is good for you, who is sweet and kind and sunshine
and bright light, not someone who finds out that you beat her father and wants to say thank you and
tell you she loves you, and jump your bones!"

"Belle." He can't get anything else out, not when he's too surprised and stunned and shocked.

"That's why I had to leave." She's rambling now, but he's just staring at her in astonishment.
"Because I am too dark, and you deserve someone who's all light. I was glad, a little bit, that'd you done something like that. And very turned on that it was to protect me. And I thought about what you'd be like if someone ever really truly hurt me or Bae, or if you ever lost us, and I got swept away in that. I got caught up in how strongly I felt for you, even after that, like it was nothing, and I just… I realized I don't make you a better person. And I'm not going to make you a better person, not when I can't even hate you for beating my father. Not when I am still in love with you."

"Oh, darling." Ever fiber of his being is encouraging him to reach out to Belle, to clasp her close to him and curl her to his chest, shush and reassure her that it's ok, he's here now, the world can't touch her.

"No." She stops him from reaching to her, closing her eyes and he steps back like he's been burned. "No, it's not a good thing. Not at all. Don't you see? What if we are poisonous together? What if I just encourage your worst behavior? What if you encourage mine? What if we just end up miserable and Bae ends up fucked and what if it all goes horribly wrong?"

"You don't do anything of the sort." He glares at her, furious that she doesn't see how perfect she is, how wonderful and precious. "Firstly, because you and I both know you encourage the best in me. You only ever have. The closer I am to you Belle, the better I am." He thinks of every object that Regina, Mary Margaret, Jefferson, and Mrs. Potts has had to duck in the last weeks. "And the further I am from you, the more dangerous I am."

"You beat my father and I'm not… Repulsed. I'm angry, sure. Peeved, yeah. But I'm not disgusted or horrified." Belle's eyes swim with tears. "And doesn't that make me… Well, broken?"

"No." He says fiercely. "Never. Belle, that man let you suffer horrific abuse, and even after you told him about it, didn't believe you. You have every right to distance yourself from him after that. It's completely reasonable. He didn't help you— why should you feel bad?"

"Because he's my father." Belle slumps, defeated. "I should feel, well, something for the man."

"No, not for that sad sack of a man." He sneers. "You're too good for that. That's why you're not awful or broken Belle, because even after he betrays you, you want to love him, want to treat him right. You believe in second chances and I don't even believe in first. As for me influencing you, well dearie, I don't think even this much darkness can snuff you out."

"You're not dark." She still doesn't meet his eyes but she's not pulling away anymore, sparking a tendril of hope in his belly. "You're not. Anyone could see it, if you'd let them."

"No one else deserves to see it." He says honestly and she looks at him with wide eyes, something unreadable in her expression. "Listen Belle, I came here to say sorry and I will do just that. I am sorry for breaking your trust, for lying to you, for doing what I thought was right, for losing my temper, for twisting your words, for misinterpreting how you wanted to be protected, and much, much more. Please know that. And I am sorry if I ever made you feel uncomfortable. Or unsafe. Or unwanted or unloved or dark. You are none of those things, sweetheart. You are an angel incarnate, whatever darkness you think you have and all. And I love you. And I will never stop loving you. And if you never want to see me again, I promise that I will make it so."

His piece said, he decides it's time to go. He sets aside the remaining dregs of his cold tea, carefully getting his cane underneath him. He limps back in the silence to his neatly folded suit, putting his damp clothes in the dirty clothesbasket and trying to calm his shot nerves. Never seeing Belle again is the worst punishment he can force upon himself but it'll never be enough repentance for the hurt he's caused her. He slips back into the hall, expecting Belle to ignore him completely on the way out.
He doesn't deserve a goodbye.

"How is he? Bae?" She sounds half strangled, sitting there clutching her tea mug like a shield.

"He is… Ok. He says slowly, trying to draw out the last remaining moments he has with her. "Furious, honestly. Hasn't spoken a word to me. He's been with friends and Jefferson. Doesn't seem to want to spend a whole lot of time with dear old dad, but for a teenager, what does one expect?"

"He's mad at you… About me?" Belle says slowly and he only manages a rueful smile.

"Believe I used the word furious dearie." With a dark chuckle, he bows his head. "He'll get over it eventually. He must. He'll go back to school, far from me, and we will carry on that way. You, certainly, are welcomed to contact him. I would never, ever take that from you." The words pain him, honestly, because Belle could do something awful, could hurt Bae, but he knows she wouldn't, not even to get back at him.

"I want to see him." She says suddenly and he can only nod in allowance. "Dinner. Movie night."

"Of course." He tries to keep the hurt from his voice. "I will arrange that with Mrs. Potts. Let me know a night, I can certainly be elsewhere."

"No, with you." Belle looks a little uncertain, fingers trembling. "I am broken. Horribly so. I am not a good person sometimes. And I will never be the perfect guiding light that you think you need because I have darkness in me. I can only be me, and I can only be human. I don't know how we make this work. I don't have a damn clue. All I know is that I'm in love with you. I have been miserable. And you have been too. And all I want is to come home, to you, to Bae. I want us to try to make us better."

"Belle, for you, I would be the best man I can." He says eagerly. "Do you want… Want me? Do you want that?"

"If I do, we take it slow." Belle takes a deep breath. "I stay where I am for a bit. We see how it works with Bae for a bit. You do not talk to my father and you sure as hell don't do anything stupid."

"Of course." He takes no offense to any of it. "Belle, anything. We go by your rules. Anything you need."

"You." She launches herself at him, grabbing his by the tie and yanking him so her mouth crashes to his and they collide with more teeth than lips, but it's Belle and it's bliss and he will never question it.

"I love you." He draws back to look at her, wondering if he's ever said the words outright before. "I love you. I will always love you. In this life or the next, this world or the next, no matter what, I will love you."

"I love you too." Belle kisses him again and again, until they're both breathless and grinning. "Make me a deal. Promise me forever again, promise that we can do this, we'll fight and figure it out but always together."

"It's forever dearie." He kisses her as gently as possible.

"Deal." She breathes, pulling him closer like she can't get enough of him.

AN: Ok, I'll have the epilogue up next week, please as a request to you all- if you want to see more moments, please let me know and I'll write them! This was intended to get me through a short writer's block and became this, and then I loved it so much I decided to share, but now I want to
return. Leave suggestions and prompts, and I'll keep writing! Thanks, and leave a review?
“You look… Wow. You look beautiful.” Mary Margaret takes a step back and looks at her in approval. “You look absolutely stunning.”

“Shouldn’t I be saying that to you, seeing as it’s your wedding day?” Belle teases gently, setting the bouquet of flowers she’d retrieved from the floral woman moments before onto the dresser.

“I know, I know. But I did such a good job with your dress, it sets off your hair wonderfully.” Mary Margaret gestures for her to spin and Belle does, the skirt of the ivy green dress fanning out before resting down just above her knees.

“But you look like a dream come true, or a song come to life.” Belle announces, making Mary Margaret blush prettily. “David is going to faint when he sees you.”

“You think?” She looks a little surprised, spreading her arms wide. Her wedding dress is stunning, with tiny flowers on the bodice and a wide, full skirt that she manages to expertly maneuver. Belle laughs and gently brushes her lips to her best friend’s forehead.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“I’m so glad this has all worked out.” Mary Margaret says happily, going to put on her bracelet and secure her earrings. Belle waits nearby, in case the bride needs anything. She knows what exactly Mary Margaret is referencing, and smiles.

“Me too. Today is going to be the happiest day of your life.” She assures her and Mary Margaret looks thoughtful.

“So far.” She amends and Belle grins at that.

“Yes, so far.”

They finish getting ready, the two of them. Mary Margaret is fidgeting, whether it’s from excitement or nerves, Belle can’t really tell. It doesn’t matter, because Belle knows that a couple doors down, David is probably doing the same thing. The happiness of her two friends is enough to make her smile constantly, until her mouth starts to hurt from the effort of it.

When it’s finally time to leave the little cabin and head towards the woods where the ceremony will be held, Belle carefully gathers up the train of the dress, to make sure it doesn’t dirty. Mary Margaret twists her engagement ring, looking rather nervous.

“Is it raining?” She suddenly asks loudly, and Belle hides a smile. “Because I knew it was going to start, we never should’ve had decided to get married in a forest, that’s crazy, we should’ve—”

“It’s not raining.” Belle smiles, and takes her hand. “You love him. You’ve never been more sure of anything in your entire life.”

“I know.” She whispers. “Ok, let’s go get me married.”

“Yes please.” Belle beams and helps her to the meadow, just off of where everyone is seated for the big event. They can both hear the quiet murmur of the small crowd. Not many people, just the closet friends and family members sitting on chairs beneath fairy lights, amidst trees and tulle. Belle is straightening Mary Margaret’s hair when a soft voice says,
“Well, aren’t you radiant?” Both of them turn, smiling at seeing Gold walking towards them. Belle drinks in the sight of him, hardly caring that he’s doing the same to her. His suit is a dark grey, with a tie that matches the color of Belle’s dress. His cane shines, as do his shoes and the buttons on his shirt. His long hair is soft, and his brown eyes warm when they turn onto Belle.

“I know you’re talking to her.” Mary Margaret softly ruins the moment with a little smile. “And yes, she is the most beautiful woman on the planet. But it’s time to walk down the aisle.”

“Of course.” He tears his eyes from her and Belle can’t stop blushing and smiling. “You do look lovely, dear.”

“Thank you.” Mary Margaret gets them in place, while Belle takes the arm of Will, one of David’s frat brothers, who smiles at her rather sweetly. She decides to keep the fact that they’d went on one blind date during the wake up of the breakup to herself. She’s still not sure she trusts Gold not to beat a man with his cane yet.

She pushes such thought away, focusing on the beauty of the day. It does look like something straight out of a storybook, with the twinkling lights, the smell of pine, and a simple wooden alter that only enhanced the natural beauty of the wilderness. When her and Will reach the alter, he gives her arm a little squeeze and she smiles at him. He had been nice, after all, when she’d ended their date after one drink, rambling on about trust issues and boundaries.

She takes up her spot off to the side, looking out over the crowd while David squirms in anticipation beside her. Bae is sitting in the row, beaming at her and her heart swells with pride to see how handsome he looks in his little suit, though he’s nearly the size of his father now. Then, the music swells, and Gold and Mary Margaret come down the aisle.

Everyone is looking at the bride in adoration and Belle does too, for a moment. She is beautiful, and wonderful, and lovely. But Belle’s eyes are mostly for her love, since he doesn’t like to be called her boyfriend any more the second time around than he had the first.

He’s so handsome, with those quick eyes and a sly smile. He’d been worried before, about all those eyes on him limping with his cane, but right now, he stands tall and walks with mostly ease, even giving a smile to a few of the people gathered. But he too is looking at Belle with that soft, kind smile, and she wants to melt into a puddle.

He hands Mary Margaret off to David with a firm handshake and a couple muttered words that makes the couple laugh. Then he goes and sits next to Bae, watching Belle the entire time.

Vows are said, songs are sung, kisses are given, and cheers signal the end of the ceremony. The new Mr. and Mrs. go down the aisle in a shower of rice, and everyone moves into the reception hall for drinks, food, and music. Belle isn’t inside for more than a moment when she’s suddenly caught in the tangle of Bae’s arms.

“Oh, well, hello!” She laughs, careful not to topple off her high heels.


“You look so pretty.” Bae tells her, eyes shinning.

“Thank you.” Belle cups his cheek, smiling at him as well. Still, she takes every opportunity to cherish his face, to memorize it should she ever be parted from him again. “You are very handsome yourself.”

“Think so?” He plays with his suit, then looks up at one of Mary Margaret’s young, pretty cousins.
“Yes.” Belle says firmly, while his father narrows his eyes. “You should go say hello.”

“Think so?” Bae hesitates then nods, seemingly steeling himself. He strides for the punch table first and Belle hides a giggle behind her hand.

“If there are tears tonight, from either, you’re handling it.” Gold informs her, passing her a champagne flute with a kiss on her cheek.

“Gladly.” Belle beams. “Look, he’s adorable.” Bae is trying, rather awkwardly, to offer a drink to the young girl. She’s not frowning, which Belle takes as a good sign.

“He’s something.” He snorts and Belle reaches down, entwining their fingers tightly, still happy with all the contact they have. Some days she keeps him in bed with her, and hangs on tightly and never wants to let go.

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?” Belle hums, watching as David twirls Mary Margaret for their first dance.

“Not my style perhaps.” He says delicately and Belle turns to look at him, arching her eyebrow.

“No? And what is your style?”

“Smaller.” He says, after a thoughtful pause.

“There’s hardly 60 people here.” Belle laughs. “How much smaller can you get?”

“Myself, you, Bae. Does anyone else need to be there?” He asks her, with all the innocence in the world.

“Yes.” Belle says instantly, then launches into her list. “Ruby and Dorothy, and Granny, and then we have to invite Mary Margaret and David, and Jefferson, and Grace would be the flower girl, and Regina and Robin and Roland as the ring bearer, and Mrs. Potts and—”

“Alright, alright.” He cuts her off with a little laugh. “You win, my dear. You may invite whoever you’d like.”

“Could I?” Belle looks at him and he smiles down at her, reaching over and gently stroking her cheek.

“You could do anything, my darling Belle. I would marry you, here or now, any time or any place. I would marry you in my office, or a yoga studio, or in the middle of Times Square.” He leans forward and kisses her sweetly on the nose. “I love you, dearie.”

“I love you.” She whispers, cheeks flaming. She hastily goes back to watching Bae, because an ache has opened up in her chest, and she knows what it is.

She wants to be the one in the while dress, and she wants to be Mrs. Gold, and she wants to never leave his side.

Ruby had scoffed, actually laughed, when he’d suggested going for tea. She had promptly reminded him of who she was, and who she wasn’t, then instructed him to meet her at a punk coffee shop. So here he sits, holding a mug of black coffee, scowling at the youths who lounge around with facial
studs and neck tattoos, drinking ridiculously named things. Ruby is, as usual, 15 minutes late, and he has an acute realization that he loves Belle, he loves her for all that she, and for all that she isn’t.

Ruby breezes in, her wide brimmed red hat drawing people’s attention, and her low cut top and tight red leather jeans keeping it. He is not so easily swayed, and gives her a wry look. She smirks, unbothered, and gestures to the barista, who looks a little star struck as he comes over.

“I’ll have an Irish coffee, heavy on the Irish.” She drawls, setting her purse on the table. “On him, please.”

“Of course.” He stammers and Gold growls softly, but hands over his card regardless.

“And a piece of the coffee cake!” Ruby gives a bright smile, watching the man leave with a rather wolfish smile. “I hope he makes a better Irish coffee than my woman.” She says airily. “For an adorable Irish woman, she cannot make one to save her life.”

“Perhaps you’ll leave her for him.” He says dryly and Ruby pretends to look scandalized.

“I would never. I’ve seen the light, I’m never going back to men.” She informs him. “Strictly a woman’s woman, if you will.”

“Change the subject.” He orders her, taking a drink of his coffee.

“Alright,” Ruby agrees easily, inspecting her nails. “Then let’s talk about why the hell we’re having coffee at 3 pm on a Thursday, without our significant others, who are undoubtable our better halves. What, are we going to conspire to beat Mo again?” She says it without hesitation and he appreciates Ruby’s wildness, though he loves Belle for her absence of it.

“Not yet.” He says with a small sip. “Perhaps another day. I wanted to speak about this.” He reaches into his coat pocket and sets a small box on the table between them. After a pause, Ruby glances at him and opens it slowly.

“Well, I’m flattered, but didn’t I just finish telling you that I’m a woman’s woman?”

“Very funny.” He says, rolling his eyes and Ruby smirks, picking up the box to get a better look at it. The ring inside is sparkling, stunning, even in the low light of the coffee shop. She inspects it, sparing the barista a short noise when he sets her coffee and cake down. He looks between the two of them, eyebrow furrowed at the sight of two people and a wedding ring.

“Waiting for something else?” Ruby asks, nothing his hovering.

“Uh— Congratulations?” He offers slowly and Gold snorts, while Ruby pretends to gag.

“I would never.” She says firmly. Stammering his apologies, he leaves them to it and Gold raises an eyebrow.

“Well?”

“I mean it’s very pretty.” Ruby looks at it critically and he feels vaguely defensive, because it had taken both he and Bae weeks to properly pick this ring. “But how many carats is it?”

“Four.” He tells her. The diamonds around in a halo, and the diamonds on the band, were smaller, but he’d thought it to be sizable enough. It was perfectly clear, and had no imperfections, but if Ruby thought it not enough, he’d gladly spend more.
“Only four?” Ruby chokes on her coffee cake.

“Should it be more? Belle has small fingers, I—”

“How much did you spend on this?” Ruby demands and he falls silent, as Ruby suddenly sets it down and shoves it back at him. “Fuck, I shouldn’t touch that. That’s worth more than my entire apartment and my car and everything I own bundled into one.”

“Perhaps.” He doesn’t try to deny it. “Will she like it?”

“I think any woman walking around New York would like that.” Ruby still eyes it as though it’s going to devour her whole. “Is it ethically sourced?”

“Yes.” He’s a little offended at such a question, as though he hadn’t thought to make sure of that with Belle’s preferences.

“And conflict free?”

“Yes.”

“And you went through all the proper channels?”

“Of course.”

“Why’d you get it that big?” She asks suddenly and he pauses, unsure of what it means. “Do you think she’s like kind of girl who needs a big ring? That having a massive rock on her finger is important, because she needs to show off that she’s got a sugar daddy?”

“Do not call me that.” He says, mildly alarmed. “I am not that.”

“That ring make it seem like you’re compensating for something.” Ruby takes a sip of her coffee, finally, and sighs in happiness. “Ah, that’s good. Do you think he’ll give me his recipe?”

“Can we focus on the ring and not on your day drinking?” He snaps and Ruby takes another sip, before offering him some coffee cake, which he takes a little grudgingly.

“The ring is beautiful, I’m not denying it. But I want to make sure you got it for her for the right reason.” Ruby states and he gives her an annoyed look.

“I want to marry her, that’s why. Because I love her, and I never want to be apart from her, ever again. And because, by some miracle or dark magic, she loves me back, and I will never jeopardize her again.”

“Yeah, yeah, save it for your speech.” Ruby licks her fingers clean of coffee cake, oblivious to the fact that the punk boys sprawled on the couch are staring. “That’s not my point.”

“Then what is?”

“This ring, does it say Belle to you? Can you picture her wearing it to yoga? Can you picture her giving massages with it, doing physical therapy? Do you picture her reading by the fire in it? Or do you think she’s going to lock it in a safe and be terrified to ever lose it?”

“I have insurance on it.” He tells her, though he’s fast seeing Ruby’s point. Belle, for all that she is and all that he loves her for, is kind and sweet and utterly low maintenance. A big ring might be more of a hinderance than a blessing to her.
“I am Belle’s best friend.” Ruby says grandly. “And she will love that ring, but because for all the things you said before. Because, and god only knows why, she loves you more than anything. She’d marry you with a shoe lace. But is this ring really Belle?”

“Yes.” The words are out before he can even think about them. “Yes, it’s stunning and beautiful, just like her. And it’s not a symbol of my—our—wealth, it’s a symbol of our love. That I love her more than anything, that this is just the smallest token of my affection for her. And I know that she will end up with a rubber ring on her finger most of the time.” He smiles, loving her for it. “But this is the ring I want to see on her finger. She deserves all of this, and more.”

“Alright.” Ruby lets him get away with it. “Then it is absolutely perfect, and even if it makes her lopsided from the weight of it. She’s going to love it. How are you going to propose?”

“I haven’t got there yet.” He admits, shifting uncomfortably.

“Here or elsewhere?” Ruby asks plainly.

“Elsewhere.” He decides. “A trip.”

“Take her to Scotland.” Ruby is doing her best to impersonate a very innocent soul, sipping her coffee delicately. “Go to a loch, read her some poetry with that burr of yours, sweep her off her feet, and put that shiny rock where it belongs, way the hell away from me.”

“Well,” He huffs, trying to sound annoyed and failing because the suggestion is rather perfect, and he had thought about taking Belle and Bae to his homeland. “Fine.”

“Will you wear a kilt?” The devilish glint is back in Ruby’s eye and he glares, finishing off his coffee and looking down at his phone.

“I need to go get Belle.” He declares. “Or I’ll be lately and she’ll know I’m up to something.”

“You are very welcome for my amazing advice as a best friend.” Ruby reminds him pointedly.

“Yes, yes, now that yacht has a hot tub and jetksis and—what do you want to add now?” He questions, securing his coat and standing with the use of his cane.

“A full service coffee bar, and him to make me whatever I please, whenever I please.” Ruby jerks her thumb towards the barista, who still looks bewildered at what’s passed.

“Deal.” His stern look softens some at the sight of her, still sipping her coffee. “Thank you Ruby.”

“Name a kid after me.” She waves a hand. “It’s the least you can do.”

“Not a bloody chance.” He leaves at the sound of her laughter, one hand firmly resting over the little box in his pocket, mind already planning when they will visit his home, and how exactly he will do it.

"Hello!” Belle cheerfully breezes into the office, arms ladened down with shopping bags. She receives smiles and greetings back- it's common knowledge that while the charming Mrs. Gold is far more approachable than her husband, she's to be treated with the utmost respect or face the full wrath of the beast.
"Why hello you." Mary Margaret is grabbing something off the printer and she falls into step with Belle as they head to the back corner office.

"How are you?" Belle hands her a green tea, which Mary Margaret takes with a mummer of gratitude.

"Emma is very impatient." She remarks, resting a hand on her large belly. She and David have already named their firstborn daughter, who's due in a short week. "Half the time I'm convinced she's just going to kick her way out."

"Poor child, never had a chance." Belle leans down to her friend's belly. "Neither of your parents are good at waiting, so do us a favor, and come out already."

"We've tried that route." Mary Margaret says ruefully. "Next up, David's famous spicy chili for supper."

"You let me know if you need me to come over for a massage." Belle implores her and she waves a hand, carefully lowering herself down into a chair.

"I've got a lovely and attentive husband to do exactly that. Go. I know how big of a deal is today." Mary Margaret looks at her fondly. "They're both excited, you know."

"I'm excited." Belle beams. "And a little nervous. But I better go get him. You know how long it takes to drag him away."

"You've got good motivation today." Mary Margaret calls as Belle eases open the door to his office and sticks her head in.

"Hello you." He doesn't bother to look up until she sets the bags down on his desk. "I see you've been… Shopping?" He says slowly, tilting his head slightly. That's rare for Belle- he often remarks half the wealthy men in New York want Belle because she's a beauty, and the other half want her because she's a rather notorious spendthrift.

"Today is a special day." She says seriously, opening the first bag. "I've treated it accordingly. For you…" She produces a new tie, a deep red one that he knows will set off his eyes in a way she likes. There's also a tie clip, the inside engraved with the date.

"The day we finally became a family." He mummers. "However will I choose between this one and my wedding date?"

"You can rotate." Belle's eyes sparkle. "For me…" She's gotten herself new shoes, stunning red pumps the color of his tie. "I'll wear them with my dress." She produces a tasteful black number, one that will hug tight to her curves without seeming trashy. She'll look flawless, and it makes his eyes shine. "Then of course just makeup and other things, the standard. But here's where I may have gone a little overboard."

"A little." He eyes the remaining bags, of which there are several.

"It's a big day." Belle says defensively and he waves a hand, gesturing for her to continue. She pulls out, in rapid-fire succession, a large photograph frame, with the date engraved on the bottom, a shadow box for the items from the day, spiffy new shoes for Bae, a new tie, a new game for his favorite gaming system, cupcakes for them to celebrate with afterwards, and a nice new shirt for him to wear.

"You were busy." He says dryly and Belle ignores him, grabbing her dress and makeup. "You spoil
"We spoil him." Belle corrects, heading for his bathroom to get ready. "And perhaps if he had siblings, he would learn to share." With that, she closes the door, apparently unaware that she's left him stricken in his chair. He's hardly recovered from the idea when Bae bounds in, grinning.

"Are we ready?" He demands.

"Nearly." His father responds, tying his tie. "Belle got you a new shirt, tie, and shoes."

"Where is she?" He asks, picking up the tie with appreciation.

"Bathroom!" She calls and emerges a second later. Bae holds up the shoes, grinning.

"They're a size bigger than what I'm wearing right now."

"Give it 15 minutes, they'll fit." His father remarks dryly and Belle pulls him into a hug.

"Are you ready?" She looks into his eyes searchingly and he's smiling, ignoring the fact that he's barefoot and shirtless.

"Yeah, I'm ready."

Half an hour later, they're standing in the courthouse, Bae and Belle both squirming impatiently while he and a judge watch them in amusement.

"Are you ready?" The judge asks and Bae nods while Belle squeezes his hand. "Alright, then if you'll sign these papers, Baen Matheson Gold will officially be adopted by Belle Adaile Gold." Both of them scribble furiously, then look at each other, grinning. It takes everything in him to not reach out and pull both of them into a tight hug. Instead he stands back, and let's them have their first moments as mother and son.

Some had thought it ridiculous, that Belle was so adamant that she adopt Bae. At 16, nearly 17, he is almost of legal age anyways and it wouldn't have truly made a difference. But Bae and Belle know. Know that it cements their bond, gives Bae the chance to call her 'mother' open and honestly, makes her more than just a 'stepmother'. She is the best mother for his son that he could've dreamed up and as they pull him into their hug, he reflects that she should have a chance to be a mother from the start.

"Happy New Years, my love." He whispers in her ear and she grins, looking up as the sky above them explodes into colored explosions of light.

"Happy New Years, my husband." She tilts her head back to kiss him, as fireworks go off behind them. They're sitting on the balcony of the hotel, watching the spectacular show over the water, a blanket loose around them. He's never felt quite a deep sense of contentment before, Belle in his arms while Bae and a couple friends laugh on their own balcony next door.

"Happy New Year!" Bae yells, his face appearing to grin at his parents.

"Happy New Year." They call back then Belle asks,

"Bae, will you come here quick?"

"Sure. What's wrong?" He asks worriedly but Belle smiles.
"Nothing, just come here." Without looking reassured, he disappears and he looks down at her wife, alarmed.

"Belle, what's wrong?" He demands anxiously.

"Nothing." She laughs lightly. "I just want to have a moment in the new year with my family."

"Papa? Dottie?" Bae calls, practically sprinting for the balcony.

"Bae, it's fine." He says reassuringly. "Grab the bottle of wine and some glasses, we just want a moment together."

"You two stress me out." Bae huffs, emerging with the bottle and three glasses.

"We stress you out?" Belle raises an eyebrow and he grins at her, pouring three glasses, though his is far less filled.

"To our family." He toasts and they murmer it back. Both the men raise their glasses to their lips and drink, but Belle carefully sets hers aside with a small smile.

"Do you not like it?" He asks immediately. "It's red dearie, I know you prefer that over whites. Do you want a moscato?"

"No, I don't want a moscato." The corners of her mouth are twitching like mad. "And I don't want a white and I don't want champagne or vodka or anything alcoholic and I doubt I will for the coming months."

For a second, there is a long pause, as both father and son try to work out what she means. Bae gets it first, nearly dropping his wine glass and looking at her in shock.

"Are you… Are you pregnant?"

"By the end of this year, there'll be a little Gold running around." She reveals and he feels like he's been clubbed over the head.

"I'm going to be a brother?" Bae yelps. "We're going to have a baby?"

"Yes." She whispers but now her attention is on her husband. She's scared of a number of things, but his reaction remains high on the list, and he's frozen. "I thought that you wanted this." That shakes him out of his revere and he pulls her to him, kissing her with such passion Bae groans.

"You better go, son." He says, between kisses.

"Not on the balcony, not on the balcony." Bae protests, stepping over them and grabbing the wine bottle. "I think I deserve to take the rest of this."

"Shoo." He waves a hand and Bae goes, but not before yelling,

"I want to name it!"

"He's not naming it." Belle laughs but he's too distracted trying to show his wife just how thankful he is that for her and this baby.

"And you remember that Gideon has soccer until 4, right?" Belle says and he nods, kissing her head.
"And you're getting Zara from ballet at 1 correct?" He responds and she nods.

"She'll stay at the studio with me until class is done at 3, then we'll be home to pack things up before you get back. How do you think Bae and Evander's day went?" She asks him nervously.

"I'm sure wonderfully." He pulls her so she's sitting on his lap, running his fingers through her hair. "Bae adores him. I bet he put him in the pram, walked him to the park, read him stories, the whole works. You know him. He loves kids."

"I do." She mutters back. "Sometimes I'm a little worried he'll make grandparents of us sooner than we'd like to be."

"He wouldn't." He says, only a little alarmed.

"He is 25." Belle reminds him gently. "When you were his age—"

"I had him, yes, I know." He scowls at her. "I was also a drunken addict."

"Two things Bae isn't." She calms him with a feather-light touch. "But I think the next girl he meets, things will get serious."

"We're never going to get out of the diaper stage." He says despondently and she laughs, such an honest and pure laugh, this his heart soars at the sound of it. That's why he'd fallen in love with her, the sound of her laughter, and he'd been delighted to note that both Gideon and Zara have inherited the joyful sound.

"Don't sound so upset, if there's anything in this world you love more than work, it's babies." She teases and he tightens her arms around her.

"Try me and see, Mrs. Gold."

"Tonight." She promises, kissing his nose, but giving his hair a tug for good measure. "Tonight, when we're far away from work and the city, when all the kids are finally to bed. Remind me again why we don't live in Maine full time?"

"Because you love the city." He draws her in for another long kiss. "And this is where Gideon has soccer and Zara has dance and I have work and you have sushi and…"

"Ok, ok, ok." She leans back with a smile. "We stay, until I realize it's madness to raise 4 kids in the city, even if our oldest doesn't live with us."

"Given the chance I think he would." He shakes his head at Bae. "As is, he already has Gideon spending weekends there and sleepovers with Zara. If we let him, he'd take the whole brood."

"He's as good a big brother as you are father." Belle sighs in contentment. "I absolutely cannot wait for a week in Maine. It's so needed."

"To think, a whole week of just our family." He sighs and buries his face in her curls. "We just have to get the 25 year old, 7 year old, 4 year old, and 8 month old out of the city first."

"Mhmm." Belle doesn't seem excited by the prospect either and so the two of them remain tangled up in his chair, content to be together in the peace of his office. No peace can last, and when the chime of her phone goes off, both of them groan.

"No." His arms tighten around her. "Don't go."
"If I don't, your daughter will be left to join the corps." Belle mutters, amused.

"Isn't that the goal?" He points out and she laughs, kissing him deeply before she clambers off him.

"Finish up work. If I so much as see a loan agreement or proposal at the house, I'll tie you down the rest of the week." She informs him, a wicked glint in her eyes.

"Threat or promise?" He asks idly.

"Oh, threat." Belle feigns innocence. "A promise would be letting you tie me down."

"You minx of a woman." He says, with open admiration and once she's gathered all her things, she pauses for one last kiss on the way out.

"I like it better when you call me a force of nature." She mutters into his mouth before pulling away. "Now work, and don't forget your son at 4! Car will be packed, we'll leave the second you get home."

"I love you." He calls as she bustles out the door.

"I love you more!"

"Never." He says quietly, turning back to his papers, now able to focus.

At 4:30 pm, they're in the car, headed for the airport. They're sitting in the backseat, Evander's seat between the two of them. Bae is in the third row with Zara and Gideon, listening intently as the two of them fight over who gets to tell him stories first. Gold watches his youngest son sleep, a peaceful and calm little boy. He reaches out over the carseat, taking Belle's hand. She looks at him and raises an eyebrow with a small smile.

"Are you happy?" She whispers, so none of their children hear them and he strokes one finger down Evander's smooth, creamy cheek.

"You know, I thank a higher power each and every day for Dr. Whale's uncompromising stupidity and how it brought me to your doorstep, Miss French."

"It's Mrs. Gold, you silly man." She pulls him in for a kiss. "And it will be forever."

AN: Well friends, this is it... The grand finale. This was originally just a short thing, inspired by yoga and the song 'Me and Mine' that spiraled into this, and I've never been so glad. Please, leave a review, or a request for a story- the reason why this is a bit delayed is because I was prompted by 'Gold and Ruby' and I decided Monday's aren't for working anyways, right? Thank you all for reading and reviewing, and if you'd like more, please request it! I love nothing more than to write my OTP.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!