Death Becomes Him

by MarieQuiteContrarie (SeaStar1330)

Summary

When Belle French witnesses three-time widow Zelena Kelly poking around the home of her next door neighbor and longtime crush Mr. Gold with a gun, she takes matters into her own hands and tells Zelena that Gold is already dead. Now all she has to do is convince her grouchy neighbor to fake his own death--with herself as his willing accomplice.

2018 TEA WINNER - BEST COMEDY

Notes

A Rumbelle Christmas in July present for Nerdrumple, who prompted “Coming back from the dead.”

This is a ridiculous, comical premise and not meant to be taken as a serious crime drama in any way. ;)

SO MUCH THANKS AND LOVE to still-searching47 and magnoliatattoo for their
extraordinary work as betas and to im2old4this for the encouragement.
Chapter Summary

Belle is minding her own business, until she can't any longer.
“A slip of the foot you may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over.” – Benjamin Franklin

Saturday Afternoon
An odd scraping sound interrupted her whistling.

Belle puttered around her small porch, watering can in hand, while the scorching afternoon sun beat down on the back of her neck and bare shoulders. She should have paid attention to her plants earlier, but she’d been distracted by baking a cake and rereading *Wuthering Heights* and lost all track of time. Belle shrugged and smiled down at the wilting plants, brushing her fingers over the yellow petals of a daisy. She didn’t have much of a green thumb, but she didn’t let it bother her. Hopefully a long, cool drink and a happy tune would revive these beauties. If not, they were only plants—not pets or people. Belle tipped the watering can again, showering her hydrangeas with water and a song until the soil was dark and excess moisture dripped onto the porch.

There it was again. The scraping noise.

A flash of movement at Mr. Gold’s house next door caught her attention, and Belle stopped whistling. She shaded her eyes and scanned his front porch. Their houses were only about fifteen feet apart, her modest peach-colored two-bedroom ranch-style home almost comical next to his gigantic salmon mansion. Belle squinted. She could see the outline of a figure on the porch, but she didn’t have her contacts in.

Damned nearsightedness. She picked up her birdwatching binoculars for a closer look.

Zelena Kelly was peering in the front windows, running her long, pale fingers along the green and burgundy frames. What was she doing, casing Gold’s house? Zelena gave the locked front door an accusatory glare, and Belle snorted in disgusted amusement.

To say Belle wasn’t Zelena’s biggest fan was an understatement.

With long, flaming red hair and a willowy figure, Zelena was a classic beauty, but ugliness clung to her spirit. Her sour expressions and obnoxious, cutting remarks left people cold. Plus, the woman was infamous for losing books—she had misplaced the library’s prize copy of *The Wizard of Oz* and refused to pay the fine. What she did manage to return was always warped and dog-eared, as though she took all her books to the beach and dunked them in the surf. She had buried no fewer than three husbands, each of whom had mysteriously died a few months into their marriage, leaving Zelena to gleefully collect on their estates. She even kept her maiden name—Kelly—to signify her continuous availability to the male population at large. Some of Storybrooke’s less intelligent residents, like Keith Nottingham and Howard Hades, were stupid enough to trot after her like lovesick puppies. *Future victims*, Belle thought grimly.

If those sins weren’t enough to damn Zelena for eternity, she had been throwing herself at Mr. Gold for months like the snake and her proverbial apple. Several times, Belle had seen Zelena accost him at Granny’s and in his pawnshop, her spindly fingers and nails the color of fresh blood always digging into his arm or his chest. Now she was poking around Gold’s house like she owned the place!

Belle sharpened the focus on her binoculars as Zelena rummaged through the large, emerald handbag slung over her shoulder. Clenched in her hand was a sturdy, metal nail file and she was running it along the seams of the door and the front windows. *Scrape, scrape, scrape.*

What the hell was she doing, trying to break in?
Belle eyes widened when Zelena fumbled around in her bag again and pulled out a small handgun. No, she wanted to do more than break in.

She wanted to kill Mr. Gold.

Belle gasped, adrenaline kicking in, her heart slamming against her ribcage. She banged her leg against the patio table, upsetting the watering can, and water splashed across the front of her shirt. Zelena whipped her head in Belle’s direction. Belle jumped back, then dropped the binoculars to the porch with a clatter.

“You there—Bess!”

Please don’t let her mean me. Belle craned her neck down the road and prayed Zelena was shouting at someone else, but the sidewalk and neighboring yards were quiet. Zelena’s narrowed stare was fixed on her, the gun no longer in her hands. The metal file was gone, too. Belle’s throat clenched. Had Zelena seen her spying?

“Have you seen Gold?” Zelena hollered.

“He’s not home, Miss Kelly,” Belle answered from the safety of her porch. Her heart thrashed a nervous beat as she wiped her wet hands on her shorts. “And it’s Belle.”

“What’s Belle?”

“My name.”

Zelena waved a dismissive hand. “Did he say when he’d be back?”

“Mr. Gold doesn’t clear his schedule with me. But if the door’s locked and he’s not answering when you ring the bell…” It seemed rather obvious Gold was out of the house, but Zelena continued to patrol his porch like a bloodhound. Unless…was he hiding inside? Belle certainly couldn’t blame him for not wanting to open the door for that.

Then again, Gold never opened the door for her, either. Belle pushed the cloudy thought away and forced a smile. He may not answer the door when she knocked, but he always picked up whatever she left for him to enjoy—a wedge of peach pie, a plate of cookies, or a square of vanilla bean cake thick with fudgy icing. Belle could only consume so many baked goods on her own, and sharing was the neighborly thing to do. There was a solid explanation for his caution—he simply hadn’t taken the time to get to know her in the three years they’d been neighbors. If he gave her a chance, Belle felt certain he would like her as much as he seemed to like her treats.

Zelena abandoned her useless trolling of Gold’s porch, then slid up the steps of Belle’s porch, her long, pointy nails scratching against the banister. Belle squeezed the handle of the empty watering can and took an automatic step back. The only sound on the porch was the slow drip of water from the quenched plants.

“You don’t know where Gold is?” Zelena persisted.

“Did you try the shop?” Belle asked, her tongue feeling two sizes too large for her mouth. Her eyes darted around looking for the gun. She wished she’d gone inside to telephone Emma Swan at the sheriff’s station, but it would have been an act of cowardice. An eyewitness account would be more help, and by the time Emma arrived, Zelena would be gone.

“Well, duh.” Zelena glanced down at Belle’s wet chest and made a face. “I went there first, Bonnie.”
Belle opened her mouth to correct her again, then decided against it. There was a cold, eerie glint in
the woman’s pale blue eyes and her overbearing presence was suffocating, making the already
diminutive porch seem like a postage stamp. Even in the oppressive afternoon heat, Belle shivered,
the cool beads of water feeling like pricks of ice on her skin. She was about to order Zelena off her
property, when Gold came strolling up the sidewalk toward his home.

Oh no.

Gold moved down the street with a loose-hipped, charming gait, reminding Belle of a Regency
gentleman out for a summer stroll. Good lord, he was handsome. Zelena faded into nothingness for a
moment as Belle admired the view. His shoulder-length hair glinted in the afternoon sun, his dark,
three-piece suit pressed and crisp, without a wrinkle in sight, the gold-tipped cane he carried an
elegant accent. Even in this stifling August weather he looked cool and calm, but then he wasn’t
expecting to come face-to-face with a homicidal maniac.

Belle flapped her sweaty fingers in front of her flushed face.

Gold froze on the pavement, his steps stuttering to a halt, his brown pupils growing large as saucers.
His eyes landed on the back of Zelena’s head, and he went stark white under his tanned complexion.
Belle read the panic in his eyes, then watched in helpless fascination as he hobbled through the side
yard like a band of wild dogs was after him.

Zelena glanced around just as Gold disappeared behind the side of his enormous house, then turned
back. “Brenda? God, you have the attention span of a gnat. With all that time you spend with your
nose in a book…I thought reading was supposed to improve one’s concentration.”

Belle glanced in the direction where Gold had disappeared, thinking furiously. He was hidden and
safe for now, but what about later today, tonight, tomorrow?

Zelena snapped her fingers in front of her face. “Hellooooom! What are you staring at?”

She had to save Gold’s life, Belle decided, and she had to act fast. It was now or never. Do the brave
thing.

Sweat dripped into her eyes, the salt stinging and making her tear up. She wiped her eyes, then
allowed a tear to roll down her cheek, sniffling for effect. “It’s…I didn’t want to be the one to have
to break the news.”

“What news?” Zelena tapped her foot against the porch floor, her stiletto heels echoing against the
floorboards. Her eyes were feverish and wild, and twin spots of crimson popped out on her cheeks.

“About Mr. Gold.” Belle looked down, her fingers twisting through the hem of her tank top, and
heaved a labored sigh. “He’s dead.”

“Impossible,” Zelena scoffed, crossing her arms over her ample chest. “I saw him yesterday.”

“It happened this morning,” Belle said. She fixed Zelena with a melancholy stare. “Massive brain
aneurism. So sudden.”

“But…” Zelena swayed on her feet and gripped the porch railing with white knuckles. She grappled
for one of the patio chairs and sank into the wicker seat, her knees wobbling as she hugged herself.
“I can’t believe it.”

“Well, I’d hardly make up something like that, would I?” A hysterical laugh bubbled up in Belle’s
throat, the irony of the lie almost too much to contemplate.
Zelena’s lips were pinched and white. “He was a bit strange last night when I saw him. Still, I can’t get over it.”

Belle blinked; God, she’d been here last night, too?

The red spots on Zelena’s face gave way to a greenish pallor, and Belle almost felt sorry for her. Then she remembered who she was talking to—a woman who had tricked her third husband into marriage with an ’accidental’ pregnancy, then done him in. Soon after they’d tied the knot, Robin Locksley had ended up at the bottom of the old wishing well with a broken neck.

“Guess we all have to go sometime,” she said, giving the chair a nudge toward the porch steps. She prayed Zelena would take the hint and leave. “Can’t mourn all day, now, can we?”

“But Gold was so…so wonderful. Talented. Handsome,” Zelena choked. Fat crocodile tears chased each other down her cheeks as she rocked herself in the chair.

“Yep, he was a real piece of ass.” Belle’s warm cheeks contradicted her casual tone, but she’d say or do just about anything to derail Zelena from committing murder.

Zelena seemed not to hear. “You know, Becca,” she leaned forward and dropped her voice to a stuttering whisper. “I-I was the last person to sleep with him.”

Bile climbed up Belle’s throat. She may be nothing more than Gold’s invisible next door neighbor, but she had enough sense to know when Zelena was telling an outright lie. She began to gag, then doubled over with a belly-deep cough, a hand plastered across her mouth.

Zelena twisted her mouth like she was sucking on a lemon. “If you’re going to vomit, could you do it over the railing? I’ve had the shock of a lifetime and a little compassion would not be out of line!”

Belle lowered her hand once the retching ceased, and drew two long, deep breaths. “Excuse me. I had one of those grocery store sushi rolls for lunch,” Belle said to explain away her disgust. “Must have been some powerful orgasm you gave Mr. Gold to shut his brain down.” Composure recovered, she shook her head and clucked her tongue in mock shame. “I’ve heard stories of people dying in flagrante delicto, but I’ve never actually met someone it happened to. At least you’ll always have the memories.”

“You’d best not be implying I had something to do with this tragedy.” Zelena’s tone was icy, and she stalked toward Belle, one of those long, skeletal fingers creeping in front of her face. “You are the one who found the body.” She tapped her handbag, her tearstained face suddenly dry. “I’ll be taking my concerns to the sheriff, Bria. And in case you’ve forgotten, my sister is Mayor Mills—she’s the mayor in this town.”

“Mayor Mills is the Mayor. That’s right, Zelena.” Belle spoke in the tone she reserved for when the kindergarten class came to the library. “Regina is actually a friend of mine.”

“Not for long! Wait till I tell her what you’ve done!” Zelena flung her hair over her shoulder and clattered down the steps and Belle gulped, the weight of her half-cocked ruse beginning to sink in.

“You do that,” she announced to the empty porch.
Mr. Gold is none too pleased with Belle's solution.

Saturday Afternoon

“You told her what?” Gold looked up from the cup of tea Miss French was pouring and stared at her through the wisps of steam. The hot, damp air made tiny tendrils of chestnut hair cling to her dewy skin.

“I told her you died,” she repeated, calm as you please. She set the filled teacup at his elbow.

“Milk?”

“A splash,” he heard himself reply.

“Sugar?” She nudged a flowered porcelain bowl in his direction and passed him a dainty spoon.

He dumped in four spoonsful of raw sugar and stirred with the ridiculously tiny spoon. He took an experimental sip. Orange peel and vanilla. It was delicious, but he wasn’t about to admit it to this strange, ethereal creature who had accosted him in his own home.

He’d been too far away from Zelena and Miss French to make out their conversation, but his neighbor had said something to send the harpy scurrying away. A sharp wail reminiscent of a wounded seal had rung out, and he’d observed Zelena fleeing Belle’s porch, her hair a red streak as she ran across the grass. She ducked into her car, and drove away, the engine screeching as she rounded the corner.

Crisis averted, he’d unlocked the back door and gone inside to fix himself dinner, then Belle barged in behind him shouting his name at the top of her lungs. “You have to come with me! We have to hide you!” She had turned off the stove and slammed the refrigerator door closed, clasping both his hands in a tight grip. Flabbergasted by her urgency and the outline of her breasts in a soaked tank top, he abandoned his leftover pot roast, grabbed his cane, and followed.

Now they were sitting her house in a cozy white and yellow kitchen, where she’d informed him that he was a dead man walking.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now, Miss French?”

Belle stood at the counter and blew on her tea, watching him above the rim with guileless blue eyes.

“Fake it?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, pretend. If you’re already dead, she can’t kill you herself.”

“You think she wants to kill me.” Gold ground the butt of his cane into the white linoleum while Belle pattered around the kitchen, gathering plates, napkins, and utensils. She was being completely nonchalant about the entire situation, as if she hadn’t been the one to get him into this ridiculous
mess. From somewhere she produced a cake, the smell of ripe peaches, cinnamon and burnt sugar perfuming the small kitchenette. His mouth watered against his will.

“She had a gun!”

He banged his cane on the floor. “So does half the population of the state of Maine. The town florist has a gun!”

“Well, you don’t have to shout at me.” She set a piece of cake down next to his teacup. “I thought you had a problem. I was simply making it go away for you.”

“Faking my death.” He waved a mocking hand. “Like it’s really so bloody simple.”

She blinked her long dark lashes. “You wanted me to get rid of Zelena. Isn’t that what you were begging me to do when you ran away to hide behind your house? I was doing you a favor.”

Indignant, he grunted. “I did not run away. And announcing my death to the town blabbermouth isn’t on an equal plane with dropping off a plate of sugar cookies, dearie.” Disgusted, he pushed the cake away.

“I’m so sorry. I was…trying…I was being neighborly,” she said, hands outstretched. “I thought I was doing the right thing! Would you have rather I said we were dating?”

“Dating?” Gold sputtered, choking on his tea. “God, no.”

“Maybe I should have let her see you, then.” Her eyes flashed and her nostrils flared in her pale face. “She’s already buried three husbands, do you want to be number four?”

He scoffed. “Hades is next in line to marry Ms. Kelly. He follows her around like a stray.”

“Whatsoever.” Belle crossed her arms and looked away, tapping her small foot on the floor.

He squirmed in perverse fascination as she worked herself up to a full boil. Without even trying, he’d made his annoyingly cheerful little neighbor angry.

During the three years since she’d come to Storybrooke as the resident librarian and bought the house next door, he’d lost count of her spirited attempts to engage him. A blueberry crumble left on his porch. An invitation to join her for coffee penned in a loopy, elegant script on crisp blue stationery. The offer of seeds called across the wrought iron fence on the rare occasion he was outside in the yard. The only overtures he ever accepted were the sweets, and he never offered her anything in return except for a washed plate.

She was a pretty little thing and his monstrous sweet tooth adored her baked goods, but he wanted nothing more. He preferred his quiet, uncomplicated, womanless life.

“There’s a great book at the library on pseudocide,” she offered, interrupting his thoughts.

“I have Amazon Prime.” He forked a bite of cake.

“We’re on something of a time constraint and ordering a book on how to fake your death is a giveaway. Zelena is on her way to the sheriff’s station now and will be tracking every move you try to make.”

Gold pursed his lips, then took another bite of cake. He avoided the public library like the pestilence. Libraries, he reasoned, were for children and poor people. And if he went to the library he might
have to talk to people. He was a self-proclaimed loner, and moving between his home and his shop with the occasional lunch at Granny’s suited him fine. His home library boasted an extensive collection of literature, and he was flush enough to order anything that struck his fancy. Thanks to Miss French, however, his days of writing checks and using credit cards were over.

He went for another bite of coffee cake, but his fork met porcelain. He’d devoured the entire square. He looked accusingly at the empty plate, then at his neighbor, and cursed himself again for his terrible judgment. Now he was stress eating and it was all her damn fault. He should get up and leave, but Belle was staring at him with those bright, sympathetic eyes, as though Zelena was waiting outside with a Saturday Night Special, ready to end him the moment he crossed the threshold.

“Would you like another piece of cake?”

“No!”

“Faking your death doesn’t have to be so bad, you know,” Belle’s voice was light, as though she was recommending a new diet plan instead of ruining his life. “It works for female dragonflies. They—whooosh—drop out of the sky and then pretend to be dead to escape being coerced for sex. They lay motionless on their backs until the male gives up, and then they go about their lives once more.” She smiled. “I read it last month in New Scientist.”

He ignored her coxing smile and looked away. “Of course you did.”

“But she—”

He held up a hand in protest and moved to rise from the table. “I don’t want to hear anything more.”

“I see.” She smirked at her teacup. “You don’t want to risk finding out what she has planned for you.”

“Excuse me?” He smirked right back at her and pushed back his chair. The little minx was trying to trick him into going along with her charade, but no one outsmarted the great outsmarter. Contracts and loopholes were what he lived for.

“It’s just rather ironic, isn’t it? You don’t want to admit you’re afraid of her, yet you’re angry with me for helping you.”

“You think I’m afraid of Zelena Kelly?” He bristled. “On the contrary, Miss French, the only thing that frightens me about this entire scenario is that I would kill her myself and wind up in the state penitentiary.” He was pleased by the stunned look on her face. “Yes, that’s right. With my bare hands. Choke the life right out of her.”

“So do it,” Belle dared, her azure eyes as wide as the sea, her breath quickening. “Threaten her.”

He laughed, low and menacing. “You still don’t get it, do you? Women like Ms. Kelly thrive on that kind of sick chase. It would only intrigue her more.” He rose and walked to the kitchen doorway. “Thank you for a most entertaining afternoon. I’ll see myself out.”

“Wait!” She scrambled toward him and laid a hand on his arm. “You should think this through. Zelena is unpredictable. She won’t give up until she gets what she wants—whether that’s you at the altar or in a casket. And then there’s me...she thinks I caused your death and she wants revenge. Yes, it was a reckless decision to tell her you were dead, but the way I see it, both our problems can be solved if we keep up the charade. Unless I’m wrong—” she paused—“and you are afraid.”

The challenge hung in the warm, sugar-scented air. His clever little neighbor had twisted the
situation, transforming him into the victim and presenting a fait accompli in one fell swoop. Few people surprised him and he was amused by her efforts—enough to see how far she was willing to go. “I’m listening.”

The doorbell rang before she could speak again.

“Hurry! Hide! It could be Zelena!”

He rolled his eyes and gestured at the tiny kitchen. “Where do you suggest I go?”

“I don’t know, be creative. Oh, I know! Squeeze into the pantry!” She looked at the front door. “I’ll see who it is and get rid of them.”

Belle tried to keep her steps calm and slow as she moved to the door, but she could still feel the sensation of Gold’s hand in hers as she’d swept him out of his house and into hers, his palm cool and firm. His spicy-sweet scent of cardamom and bergamot was making her lightheaded in the small, warm kitchen, and she was thankful for an excuse to answer the door and get those haughty, knowing eyes off of her. He was compact and wiry, only a few inches taller than herself, but he seemed larger than life in her small house.

Every time Gold was anywhere near her vicinity, she turned into a sweaty, nervous mass of feelings—anxious to please him, yet always falling short. She had a pathetic crush on a man who scarcely acknowledged her existence.

But for once, he needed her.

Belle peeked through the keyhole and thank goodness, it was only Jefferson standing on the porch. If it had been anyone else, she would ignore the visitor, but Jeff was her best friend. Her car was in the driveway and if he knew she was home he would stand there, pounding and calling her cell phone, until she relented. She darted a glance toward the closed pantry, and opened the front door.

“Belle, good afternoon.” Jefferson tipped a straw-colored fedora in her direction.

“Hey, Jeff.”

“‘Hey Jeff?’ What kind of sour greeting is that?” he complained. “Where’s my kiss?”

“Hello, Jefferson.” Belle stretched up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “What can I do for my dearest friend?”

“That’s better.” Appeased, he grinned. “Believe it or not, this isn’t a social call, ma chérie. I’m here on official police business.” He flashed a sheriff’s badge at her.

“Impressive. You’re acting sheriff?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” He shook a finger. “Emma left this morning on a trip to the Big Apple and she left me in charge.”

“And what sent Emma to New York City?”

“Online dating rendezvous. She’s been seeing some Wall Street stockbroker and they’re making it official.” Jefferson waggled his eyebrows, moving toward the kitchen before Belle could stop him. “Do I smell peach cake and tea?”

“Yes, but I thought you were here on business?” Belle asked, wondering if Zelena had made good
on her threat to report Gold’s death to the station.

“Oh, that’s right.” Jefferson walked to the stove and cut himself a large square of cake and took a bite. “There’s been a potential robbery in the neighborhood. An antique necklace was reported stolen. Knew it was your day off, so I thought I’d check in with you.” He licked cake crumbs off his fingers. “Seen anything suspicious?”

“Not that I can think of, but thanks for stopping by. I was about to take a long soak in the tub. Can I wrap up some cake for you to go?” She grabbed Jefferson’s elbow and tried to steer him toward the door.

He glanced at the table where Gold’s empty cake plate and cooling cup of tea remained. “There’s nothing you want to talk to me about?”

“Um, no?”

“Two cups of tea? Darling, have you taken a lover without telling me?” Jefferson’s wink was lascivious.

“Of course not.” Belle felt her cheeks heat. “I was just extra thirsty is all.”

“Too bad.” Jefferson ambled to the table and selected Gold’s cup, then took a sip and grimaced. “Wow, you’re suddenly taking your tea with a lot of sugar. When did that start?”

“It’s this new black orange pekoe,” Belle said. “Bitter. I think it’s quite bitter. I was considering trying it iced since it’s summer but don’t you think it’s bitter?” She gulped from her own cup, scorching her tongue, and made a face. God, she was babbling like an idiot.

“Too bad.” Jefferson frowned in disappointment. “I’d hoped Gold had finally taken the hint that you’re desperately in love with him.”

She bit her lip and shook her head wildly, begging Jefferson with her eyes to please stop talking. No doubt Gold could hear every syllable of his blabbering from the pantry.

“I mean, how many cakes and cookies can you bake for a man before he realizes you’re interested?”

“I don’t… I’m not…”

“Yes, you do and you are.” He cut himself another piece of cake. “You want him and that tight little backside of his. You have for ages. It’s written all over your face, ma chérie.”

Belle covered her blazing face with her hands. No, Gold wasn’t dead. She was the one dying and she was dead and she was going to stay dead forever.

Jefferson narrowed his eyes. “You’re lying to me. I can tell because you do that sexy thing where you bite your lip. It’s very distracting.”

Belle pressed her lips together. Great. Now Gold thought she was a crazed, lovesick stalker, too.

“Awww, ma chérie, don’t stop.” Jefferson grinned and took another sip out of Gold’s teacup. “You were saying?”

“But it’s not like… I’m not Zelena!” she cried.

Jefferson squinted. “Zelena Kelly? Who said anything about her?”
“Well, she was here earlier and I…”

“Belle, if you’re going to help Gold fake his death, you’d better get your story straight.” He cupped his hands into a makeshift megaphone and turned toward the pantry. “Gold, I can smell the onions you ate at lunch today; you can come out now!”

“How did you find out already?” Belle asked, crestfallen. Gold ducked out of the pantry brushing flour off his lapels, and Belle winced, chancing a peek at his face. How much of Jefferson’s announcement about her ridiculous crush had Gold actually heard?

Jefferson hooted. “I heard it from Zelena, who came running into the station to demand I – and I quote – ‘Arrest that horrible spinster Beth who banned me from the library. She murdered poor Mr. Gold this morning!’” He mimicked her squawking.

“And what did you say?” Gold asked.

“I told her Belle was divorced so could no longer qualify as a spinster.” He rubbed his cheek. “I guess that wasn’t the right response, because she slapped me and stormed out.”

“Oh.” Belle slid her eyes toward Gold to gauge his reaction to the news of her failed marriage, but his blank expression revealed nothing.

Gold sighed and brushed more flour off his suit, his ankle cramped from stuffing himself into Belle’s pantry and his head spinning from Jefferson’s claims of Belle’s undying love and devotion. His neighbor was in love with him? Could it be true? He didn’t want to think about it. What he did want to think about was getting the hell out of here.

“Can I go home now?” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Honestly, Belle, you’re an abysmal liar—the worst I know.” Jefferson continued to babble as though he hadn’t entered the room. “It’s a miracle Zelena believed a single word you said.”

“What was I supposed to do? She had a file, some bobby pins, and a gun! I saw her trying to break into Gold’s house!”

“Proves nothing.”

“Ha! That’s what I told her,” Gold said, shooting Belle an accusing glare.

“An eye witness of an attempted breaking and entering is proof. You said something had been stolen. Jewelry. Zelena had a pricey piece around her neck today—a massive emerald.” Belle crossed her arms. “Can’t you just arrest her?”

“Not without probable cause.” Jefferson sniffed.

“See that on one of your television crime dramas?” Gold asked. “On one point I agree with Miss French: I can’t believe Emma Swan left you in charge.”

“This is Mayberry, freakin’ Maine, Gold. Nothing ever happens here. Less than nothing. Until now. But Belle has the right idea…faking your death is a sound plan.”

“Are you crazy?” Gold asked.

“My sanity is beside the point. Just give this arrangement a few days, till I can figure out what Zelena’s up to.” Jefferson locked eyes with him over Belle’s head, humor glinting in his friend’s
murky grey depths. “Besides, if you don’t cooperate, I’ll have to arrest you for fraud.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” Gold snarled.

“Word’s already made it around town about your untimely demise, and since I see you are very much alive…” Jefferson tapped the pair of handcuffs hanging at his belt.

“Blame her!” Gold pointed at Belle. “She’s the one who started this!”

“I was being neighborly!” Belle roared.

“Now, Gold, don’t be hasty. Stay here with the nice young lady,” Jefferson urged, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “She’s cute as a button. A terrible liar, but that’s what you’ve got me for. You’ve been griping for months about wanting a respite from all the Storybrooke busybodies.”

“It’s not everyone,” Gold retorted. “Just Zelena. She’s telling everyone she slept with me. I wouldn’t take her to bed if she were the last woman on the planet and the propagation of the species was dependent on my efforts alone.”

“Thank God!” Belle turned tomato red. “I mean, uh, not like I care. You can sleep with anyone you want.”

“Thank you for your permission,” Gold told her dryly.

“So give the bitch something else to talk about. She loves to play the grieving widow. Had plenty of practice.” Jefferson chuckled. “Stay here with Belle. I’ll corroborate your death in town. Think of it as a nice, long holiday weekend.”

The faintest prickle ran over Gold’s neck. He reached up to brush it away. *Holiday indeed.* Certainly he didn’t like the idea of staying with Miss French. Not one bit. He glanced around the untidy kitchen. The place was small and messy and being the houseguest of this wishy-washy, sweet and sunny manipulator was not his idea of a vacation. If he was going to lock himself up in a house, he wanted it to be his own.

“But my things…” He whined, wanting his suits and his aftershave and all the comforts of home. He cast a longing look out the window at the spacious Victorian; he was maybe twenty feet to freedom, if only he could outrun Jefferson.

“I’ll bring you a suitcase and a garment bag with all your fancy duds. You can’t go home. Crime scene and all. It’s taped off. Law enforcement only.” Jefferson patted his shiny badge.

“Come on, Mr. Gold.” Belle’s small hand squeezed his forearm. “Jefferson’s your friend and—”

“My ex-friend is the worst person I’ve ever met,” he growled, jerking out of her gentle grip. “And my nosy neighbor is running a close second. When I get out of this mess, I’m doubling the rent of every tenant in town and telling them you two are responsible!”

“We’ll both feel so much better if you stay here where Zelena can’t hurt you. And who knows? It might be fun,” she said, choosing to ignore his tantrum.

Gold clenched his fists. Must she be so damned cheerful all the time?

“Or I could keep you safe from Zee from behind bars.” Jefferson leaned against the kitchen cabinets and shrugged. “The choice is yours.”
Gold threw up his hands in surrender, making their teacups rattle. “Fine!” There was little he could do against the two of them in the face of Jefferson’s outrageous threats and Miss French’s well-meaning concern. “I’ll stay here, pretending to be dead. Just until I decide on a more permanent solution,” he added hastily.

“Excellent choice.” Jefferson turned to Belle. “And you? If you were an egg, ma chérie, you’d be sunny side up. Tell her, Gold.”

“Wouldn’t want to interrupt your flirting.” Gold rolled his eyes as Jefferson made a show of kissing Belle’s hand. His friend was an outrageous philander—the town’s male version of Zelena, only infinitely more appealing. Gold had zero interest in Miss French. But why did Jefferson have to turn on the charm with everyone?

“Be back with your Armani and jammies in thirty minutes, my friend. And that ratty brown bathrobe with the holes.” Jefferson threw the words over his shoulder and banged out of the house.

“Well, Miss French.” Gold raised an eyebrow at his unflappable hostess. “Now what the hell do we do?”

She grinned. “If we’re going to live together for a few days, you really should call me Belle.”
The Houseguest

Chapter Summary

In which Mr. Gold becomes Belle's reluctant houseguest and meets Uncle Melvil.

Saturday Afternoon

"Here’s your room.” She flung open the door to a mint green room large enough to fit a full bed, a modest dresser, and a small nightstand. “Sorry if the mattress is a bit on the lumpy side. You’re welcome to take the master, if you prefer.”

“No, no. I won’t put you out of your bedroom, Miss French.” He would confess to being particular, but he wasn’t a total bastard. Frowning, he set down the suitcase Jefferson had brought inside the door and hung the garment bag in the small closet, which creaked when he opened it.

The library didn’t pay well, but this house was positively miniscule—too small for two polar-opposite personalities to live in at the same time. The entire tour from the porch to the laundry room had taken a grand total of three minutes. The front hall melted into the family room, which served as the main part of the house. The little yellow and white kitchen was to the right, and to the left of the family room was a small hallway with three doors, each leading to the guest room, bathroom, and master bedroom. Still, being temporary roommates with Miss French—Belle—was preferable to a room at Granny’s or a jail cell.

“And the final leg of our tour,” Belle said dramatically, sweeping her arm toward the surprisingly spacious bathroom which featured a deep claw-foot tub. A sudden image of Belle soaking in the tub, rosy nipples peeking above the water, popped into his mind’s eye.

“Your towels will be the blue ones,” she continued. “We’ll have to share the bathroom. It’s normally just me here.”

“That’s not entirely true,” he said. “Who is that?” He pointed at a framed photo of a bearded gentleman garbed in late nineteenth century attire on the wall opposite the toilet.

“Oh!” She beamed. “That’s Uncle Melvil.”

He must have looked confused, because she elaborated.

“You know, Melvil Dewey—creator of the Dewey Decimal System? Some libraries want to do away with his system because they think classifying books according to numbers is impersonal. But libraries aren’t bookstores and—”

Gold held up a hand to silence her. “He needs to leave while I’m staying here. I’m not doing my business with Uncle Merlin staring at me.” Gold thought about his luxurious en suite with the Jacuzzi tub and massive shower, free of strange photographs of librarians both living and dead, and sighed.

“Melvil,” she corrected. “And all right, fair enough.” She whisked the photo away and clasped her hands. “How about some dinner?”
After a passable shrimp scampi accompanied by garlic bread and salad and a blueberry cobbler so meltingly tender and sweet he could have wept, Belle had suggested letting the dishes soak in favor of a game of Scrabble. Much to his chagrin, she’d trounced him. He wished for his classic version of Stratego—now there was a game—but he was too exhausted to think clearly. When she offered popcorn and a movie as a peace offering, he agreed. Perhaps a quiet evening in front of the television would drown out his maddening thoughts and keep him from going stir-crazy.

The clatter of a dish startled him awake as the closing credits of When Harry Met Sally droned on the screen. He was curled on a sofa, a soft blanket draped across his lap. He drained the tumbler of whiskey on the coffee table, stretched his bad ankle, and padded into the kitchen to put the glass in the sink.

“Sorry,” Belle said, “I came in here because I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Now what are you doing?” He rubbed his bleary eyes and peered over her shoulder. She was at the kitchen table—the center of all her activity—bent over a yellow legal pad and chewing a pen cap, a cup of tea at her elbow.

She turned to face him, obscuring his view of the paper. “Writing your obituary, of course. Gotta make this fake death look authentic. Don’t worry.” She winked. “I’ll make you sound amazing.”

“I’m sure,” he scoffed. “Good night, Belle.”

She caught his hand and pulled him toward her, then pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Night.”

The kiss was soft and surprisingly affectionate. Heat spread from his cheekbones to his hairline and he pressed his fingers to his face and left the kitchen without another word.

In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth and splashed tepid water on his face, then patted himself dry with the lavender-scented blue hand towel Belle had set out for his use, the imprint of her lips still warm against his face. In the mirror, he spied a few scraps of lace hanging over the shower curtain rod. Ladies’ underwear, he realized. Feeling like a creep but unable to resist, he lifted one of the soft undergarments and pressed it to his nose. The same lavender scent that clung to the towels was on these as well and mixed with the scent of Belle—a fragrance he could only describe as sunshine and burnt sugar. An image of Belle on her back, writhing and screaming for him, came unbidden to his exhausted brain and he hardened in his pajama pants.

What had he gotten himself into? He ground his back teeth and cursed Zelena, Jefferson, and Belle—all of whom had contributed to this ridiculous mess in their own way.

With nothing left to do but try to sleep, he retired to the tiny guest bedroom, and tried to settle into a comfortable spot on the sagging mattress. No matter which way he turned, he rolled into the dip in the center and ended up on his back. Where was his California King cooling foam mattress when he needed it?

He folded his hands behind his head, feeling melancholy and ill-at-ease. What was Belle writing about him that would be fit for an obituary, anyway? Those write-ups were meant to a celebrate a life well-lived, but his meagre existence was peppered with greed, unkindness, and broken relationships. His wife, Milah, had left him years ago and the townspeople knew him only as the crabby pawnbroker and haughty landlord. It wasn’t as though he was anyone people would miss. Hell, some might even cheer and toast to his demise. His son Neal had carved out an independent and fulfilling life for himself in New York, always promising to visit but never quite making it back to Storybrooke to visit his old man. The long-ignored thoughts bothered him more than he cared to admit as he drifted into a fitful sleep on the lumpy bed.
Belle’s alarm startled her awake and she flopped out of bed, hitting the floor with a echoing thump. From her position on the carpet, she rubbed at her tailbone, then peered at the clock on the bedside table and groaned. Nine o’clock. It was Sunday, but she’d overslept considering she had a guest. And not just any guest, but one whose mere presence turned her into a giggling, eyelash-batting flirt.

Gold.

It had taken her eons to finally fall asleep, thanks to her brain conjuring visions of him sleeping in nothing but his expensive silk boxers. She’d wasted hours, her body thrumming with awareness of the attractive man sleeping on the other side of a thin wall, before finally succumbing to the urge to slip her hand between her thighs and find her pleasure before falling into a deep slumber.

Belle staggered to her feet and picked through the pile of clothes on her bureau for a clean t-shirt and shorts. Gold’s snapping and snarling didn’t frighten her; in some ways, it only added to his appeal. He was authentic, real, which was more than she could say for her last relationship.

Gareth, her ex-husband, had been pleasant and kind on the surface, presenting a gregarious face to the world. Beneath the kind, friendly mask, he was a raging inferno, his words and deeds putrid and filthy. But Belle had learned her lesson much too late. Gareth was a lying, cheating, scumbag but he had a clever way of twisting the truth to make everything seem like her fault. She’d lost count the number of times he’d called her crazy.

Belle eased the shirt over her head and padded into the shared bathroom to splash cold water on her face. At least with Gold, she knew what she was getting, didn’t she? While he didn’t pretend to be anyone other than who he was, she sensed there was more to him than a simple pawnbroker. He seemed cold and hard, but there was a softness tucked beneath his cool façade. She couldn’t explain it, but she felt safer with Gold than she did with anyone else.

During the movie last night, he’d fallen asleep on the sofa. The care lines on his angular face were smooth, making him appear far younger than his years. For a little while she’d indulged in watching him sleep, before dragging herself away from gawking to work on his fake obituary.

Kissing him had been a maddening impulse, and one she’d instantly regretted. The memory of him holding his cheek afterward, recoiling as though she’d burned him, made her own face flame with embarrassment. Then he’d stalked out of the kitchen without saying a word. She had made him uncomfortable—he was essentially on house arrest for the duration of his faked death—and it was wrong of her to take advantage of a vulnerable person. Yes, she was attracted to him, but she wasn’t going to force unwelcome advances on the man. She wasn’t Zelena, for goodness sake.

“Be a good hostess,” she told her reflection in the mirror as she tamed her wild bedhead into a ponytail. “Under no circumstances will you touch or flirt with your guest.” Belle adjusted her tank top and shorts, plastered a smile on her face, and sailed into the kitchen. If she pretended nothing had happened, maybe he would go along with it too.

“Morning!” she greeted in her most cheerful voice.

“So it is.” Gold’s face was like a storm cloud, his tone tight and clipped. He was dressed for the day in his trademark three-piece suit and polished Italian leather shoes.

“Did you sleep well?”

He grimaced, sparing the slightest of glances in her direction. “On a strip of cardboard that passes for a mattress? Hardly. My back hurts; do you have anything for the pain? Ibuprofen? Aleve?
“Of course.” From the cabinet above the microwave she produced a bottle of pills and poured him a fresh glass of water. She pulled out her canisters of flour, sugar, and oats. “How about some baked oatmeal for breakfast?”

“No, thank you, dearie. I was up at six o’clock and I’ve already had breakfast.” An empty bowl at his side held the remnants of cold cereal.

“Then how about brunch? It is Sunday, after all,” she said. She smiled wistfully, though her back was turned. “I’m sorry about the bed and for making your scrounge around for your own breakfast.” And for kissing you, she added silently. “Let me make it up to you.”


“I don’t have either of those, but how about The Storybrooke Mirror?” She held out the thick Sunday edition for his perusal. “Wait!” She yanked it back and scanned the header. “Is this today’s issue? Where did you get it?”

“Hold the latest conspiracy theory, Miss French. It was in the driveway. Such as it is.”

“You went outside?”

He tilted his head and pursed his lips. “Maybe.”

“You can’t go outside, remember?” She gestured toward the front window and rushed to close the blinds. “You’re dead. As in not alive. Unless you want people to see you and ladle ghost stories on top of this drama.”

“Your drama.” Gold’s eyes jumped down to her chest and then to the floor, and Belle was suddenly aware of her unrestricted breasts covered only by a thin, white tank top. She lowered her arms to her sides, then crossed them in front of her, gooseflesh breaking out from her wrists to her shoulder blades.

“Never mind.” She sighed, then tossed the paper back to Gold and turned away to focus on the oatmeal.

He scanned the headlines and snorted. “Tales of me haunting this town would make better news than what’s fit to print in this rag. ‘Henry Mills, son of esteemed Mayor Regina Mills leaves next Sunday for Beijing.’ Also, ‘Tomorrow we celebrate everyone’s favorite psychiatrist Archie Hopper’s birthday. Granny Lucas will host a gathering with cake from 12 noon to 2 p.m.’” He tossed the paper down on the table.

Belle felt a secret thrill at his obvious annoyance. “Archie Hopper is a terrific guy. Want me to stop by and bring you back a slice of cake?” She flashed him her brightest smile.

Gold dipped the corner of the page, to peer at her over the fold. “Cake made by Widow Lucas? I’d rather eat a bag of cotton balls. It’s lucky for you I didn’t go over to my own property and get my newspapers.”

“Will you listen to yourself? Me, my, mine.” She clucked her tongue and moved behind him, setting down a fresh cup of Earl Grey. She began to massage his tense shoulders, working out the knots with her fingers. She’d forgotten all about her promise not to touch him. “If I go next door to retrieve your precious papers, will you stop complaining?” she purred.
“Not even if you beg,” he said in a strained voice.

She backed away and removed the baked oatmeal from the oven, warm and fragrant, and nudged the door closed with her hip. “You’re just upset because you know I’m right. I saw her…you know what? Forget it. You don’t believe me.”

She served his brunch and then her own, taking her place across the small kitchen table. She cut into the tender square of baked oatmeal, then blew some of the heat away before taking a bite. Glancing over her spoon, she caught his stare just as his eyes darted away. She had caught him looking, and the blush staining his tanned cheeks proved it.

Forcing back a grin, she watched his firm lips close around the spoon, thin yet sensual, and heard his quiet groan of approval. Belle smirked; she knew exactly how good her baked oatmeal was, even if her houseguest would never deign to admit it. A bit of cream clung to his upper lip and she wanted to blot it away with her fingers, or better still, lick it off and bring a true smile to his lips.

“Yes, Miss French?” Gold lifted a napkin to wipe his mouth.

Belle choked on her bite of oatmeal, then quickly slurped down some tea to clear her throat.

“Sorry,” she wheezed between coughs and breaths.

An undefinable emotion flickered in his eyes. “Staring is impolite, dearie.”

He brought the paper up once more to eye level, and a charged silence filled the air as they ate the rest of the meal.

“Can I get you anything else, honey?” she teased, desperate to distill some of the tension. She picked up the plates and dumped them in the sink, her back to him as she washed the dishes.

“This isn’t some cozy domestic scene.” She couldn’t see his face, but his tone was ice cold. “I’m stuck here in this shack because of your harebrained imaginings that Zelena Kelly wants me dead.”

“Just being neighborly,” she threw over her shoulder, then instantly felt bad for being flippant. She hated the taste of the lie on her lips, but Gold’s determination to be surly seemed to bring out the worst in her. Shack? At this moment she had no idea why she ever thought she liked him.

He spun her around to face him, her breath coming in shallow jerks when his fingers dug into her upper arms. His grip was firm, squeezing her flesh, the slightest hint of pain causing her breath to quicken even more.

“Doesn’t anything ruffle your feathers, Miss French? Anything at all?”

His eyes darkened and flickered down to her mouth, and her nipples hardened into tight peaks. She flushed, embarrassed by her body’s eagerness to be touched.

A devilish smirk stretched across his handsome face, as though he knew precisely what kind of affect he had on her. He leaned in close, his warm breath grazing her forehead, and for a moment she thought he might kiss her. Belle’s eyes drifted shut.

“Thank you for the brunch.” He released her with a small push.

Her eyes flew open as she staggered back, palms meeting the edge of the counter. Gold flashed her a grin, tucked The Storybrooke Mirror under his arm, and strolled out of the kitchen.
Gold planted his book in front of his face as Belle pranced across the living room, kicking her spandex-clad legs toward the ceiling with a series of grunts. The noises she was making reminded Gold of her morning voice, low and throaty like she’d swallowed a frog or spent all night screaming in passion.

He moaned in exasperation. He was trying desperately to concentrate on reading a volume of Burns he’d found on one of her bookshelves, but the heavy beat blaring through the speakers and the saccharine encouragements of the instructor telling her sweaty victims to “reach deeper” and “pull in the core” made his temples throb.

Not to mention the vivaciousness of his hostess. Beads of perspiration rolled down her slim, pale neck, and her cheeks were pink with exertion. Her fitted tank top was soaked through with sweat, outlining every curve of her lithe body. He pretended not to notice her erect nipples and the dark pink flush creeping up her chest.

This is natural, he told himself, as he felt himself swell at the sight of her firm, rounded buttocks in the tight-fitting clothes. The small space between her upper thighs welcomed his fantasies, and he wondered if something other than sweat had darkened the fabric there.

He needed to move. Or scream, or yell, or throw something. It seemed as though all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. He wasn’t one for exercise, but his muscles were tight and strained, as though he’d completed hours of calisthenics. His skin prickled, but there was no place else to go. He was limited to four rooms—the kitchen, the bathroom, his bedroom, or here. He hated passing time; sitting around waiting for life to happen was a foreign concept. He missed the shop, missed terrorizing his tenants when he collected rent. His fingers itched to do something. At a loss, he tugged on his tie and flipped another page.

Belle blotted her face with a towel and sipped on her water, then lay on the floor to stretch, pushing her hips up.

He swallowed and shifted uncomfortably, adjusting the front panel of his trousers. “I never should have sold my cabin.”

“What was that?” she asked in a distracted tone. She was on one of those iPhone devices now, her finger flicking and sweeping across the screen.

“Nothing.”

“Dammit!” she yelled. “Oh no, this is bad!”

“What are you screeching about?” he muttered. He’d just slipped into his favorite poem, *Thou Gloomy December*.

“It’s Sunday!” She threw her towel on the floor and took off her sneakers, hurling them at the wall hard enough to place little half-moon dents in the plaster.

“You know how to read a calendar.” He scratched his chin and returned to Burns. “Felicitations.”

“But it’s Sunday the 23rd!” She hopped up and down on one foot.

He set down the book and steepled his fingers. “Do tell. Another birthday party for one of our illustrious townsfolk?”
“It’s a party…of sorts.”

“So clean yourself up and get going,” he urged, eager to have the miniscule house to himself for a while.

“You’ll have to help me if we’re going to be ready on time.” She raced to the kitchen and began rummaging through the refrigerator.

He abandoned his reading and rose from the sofa, leaning in the doorway. “We?”

“It’s a jewelry party,” she said, as though that was a sufficient explanation. “I promised Ariel I would host. She’s trying to make extra money for this exotic singles’ cruise and—”

“Reschedule.”

“They’ll be here in an hour.” He dodged the bag of tortilla chips she tossed on the counter. “It’s too late to cancel now!”

“Say you’re sick. Or dead.”

“Aww, you’re making jokes.” She rolled her eyes as she wrestled with a jar of salsa. “Adorable. Could you help me, please, while you complain? Make yourself useful?”

“And where am I supposed to go whilst you entertain a gaggle of women dripping in plastic and fake gemstones? People who want quality jewelry buy it from a reputable dealer. Like me.” He took the jar from her hands and popped it open.

“Not everyone can afford exquisite antique pieces and authentic gems.” She pulled butter and eggs from the refrigerator. “That’s probably why Zelena started stealing from people. She’s burned through all three of her husbands’ estates. Speaking of which, Jefferson called earlier. There’s been another theft reported. Mary Margaret Nolan’s cameo brooch is missing.”

“I don’t like Ms. Kelly any more than you do, but supposition multiplied by conjecture does not equal the facts. You have no proof.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and scanned the countertop. It looked like a snack factory had exploded in the kitchen. “What are you doing now?”

“Baking a chocolate cake for my company.” She waved a spatula coated in chocolate at him. “If you’re good, I’ll save you a piece.”

He sniffed. “Haven’t you ever heard of planning, Miss French?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of tact, Mr. Gold?” came the cheeky response. She thrust another jar into his hands. “Here. Open this queso!”
The Jewelry Party

Chapter Summary

Belle hosts a jewelry party in which she is forced to answer questions about Gold's death and entertain an unwelcome visitor.

Sunday Evening

An hour later the doorbell rang. Belle scanned the tidied living room and nodded in satisfaction. Gold was hovering in the doorway of the guest room looking emotionally exhausted. “Did you pee?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon.”

“You heard me.” She ignored his aghast expression, then picked up a pile of magazines and thrust them into his arms.

“What am I, five years old?”

He set the magazines down on the foot of the lumpy bed and accepted the tray of snacks she offered, grumbling under his breath.

Belle put her hands on her hips. Two could play at exasperated. “I’m just saying, they’re going to be here for several hours and you can’t be seen. You’re supposed to be dead! Sooo…did you pee?”

“Have a pleasant evening, Miss French.” He glowered, then slammed the door in her face. Belle didn’t move to answer the front door until she heard the click of the lock. The knocker rapped against the door again and a battalion of butterflies skipped down the hallway with her to open it.

A chorus of “Hey Belle!” rang out as Ariel, Mary Margaret Nolan, Merida Dunbroch, Ruby Lucas, and Mayor Regina Mills all piled into the entryway. Thank goodness it was a small party, because the house already felt stuffed full.

“I really appreciate you not canceling on me,” Ariel said in a rush. She opened her bag and started arranging jewelry samples on the coffee table. “Especially after what happened with Mr. Gold next door yesterday.”

“No problem,” Belle lied, keeping her attention off the guest room door. “It was a shock learning about Mr. Gold’s death, but we weren’t close.”

“Yeah, his big, goofy house is all taped off.” Ruby looked out the side window and whistled. “Belle, I’ve always wanted to know something about Mr. Gold…”

Oh God, Belle thought. What now? “I’m sure I wouldn’t have…whatever information you’re looking for.” She smoothed her sweaty hands over her skirt.

“But you—”

“Ruby!” she snapped. “I barely knew the man, all right? Let it go!”
Her friend stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated moue. “I was just asking if the place is as pink on the inside as it is outside.”

Belle snickered in relief, thinking of Gold’s well-appointed home in leather and walnut. “Oh, ok. I thought you were asking…never mind. The interior is quite lovely. Very, um, masculine.”

“Swanky and manly, huh? Not to be all shocked and everything, but the place looks like it was hosed down with Pepto Bismol,” Ruby said.

“Who cares what his house looks like? Finding his dead body like that…just ewwww.” Ariel crinkled her nose.

“What made you suspect something had happened?” Merida asked. “Why did you go over there in the first place?”

“Was there a gross smell?” Ruby uncorked a bottle of wine.

Belle kicked the door closed on a sigh as her guests filed into the living room and made themselves at home. Instead of arguing with Gold all afternoon, she should have been preparing for the barrage of questions.

“Wait.” A heeled foot wedged inside the door and a gurgling baby was shoved into Belle’s arms.

Zelena.

“Hold her for me, would you?” she asked with a pitiful sniffle. A diaper bag slipped from her shoulder and landed on the floor with a decisive thump.

Belle’s jaw dropped. A shuddering breath pulled everyone’s eyes in her direction.

Zelena ripped opened a bottle of Midori with her teeth, spitting the edge of the wrapper onto the carpet, then sauntered into the family room and stretched out in her swivel rocker, cradling the bottle of liqueur to her chest. She took a large swig, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

The other ladies averted their gazes. Mary Margaret coughed into her fist. Ariel fiddled with a necklace in her jewelry display. Belle looked down at Baby Robin, who studied her face with serious eyes, the skin around her mouth shining with drool.

“At least she waited to start drinking until after she brought the baby here.” Ruby shrugged and flopped on the sofa.

“Mother of the fockin’ year,” Merida said, popping a potato chip into her mouth.

Regina pulled Belle aside into the hallway, a few short feet from where Gold was hiding. Belle gulped and glanced at the guestroom door, praying he had enough sense to stay quiet.

“Belle, I’m sorry, I had to bring Zelena. She begged me for an evening out. She’s so broken up about Gold’s death. You know how…attached she was to him.”

“Yeah.” Belle rolled her eyes. “She mentioned her attachment yesterday when she stood on my porch threatening to report me to the police for killing him.”

Regina pressed her lips together. “I know Zelena can be difficult…”

Belle jiggled Robin on her hip. “Difficult is an understatement, Madam Mayor.”
“Yes. But she’s my sister, and she hasn’t had an evening out since Robin was born.” Regina patted the baby’s hand. “Seven months without a babysitter—that’s bound to make anyone crazy. Check out Exhibit A.”

Regina and Belle peeked into the living room. Zelena was dancing in circles with her bottle, her neck draped with more colorful beads than a drunken reveler at a Mardi Gras parade.

“Fine,” Belle agreed through gritted teeth, “she can stay.” She was playing a dangerous game by allowing Zelena into the same house with a very-much-alive Gold, but inventing excuses for why she couldn’t stay would only arouse Regina’s suspicions and make Zelena even more determined to cause trouble.

“Thank you. I’ll see that she doesn’t drive home.” Regina squeezed Belle’s hand as they reentered the living room. “We’ll be out of your hair in two hours max.”

Belle refrained from saying she didn’t give a flying fig if Zelena wrapped her car around a tree, but she gave Regina credit for looking out for her niece. Little Robin was adorable and the fact that she had a horrible mother wasn’t the baby’s fault. She was a victim of circumstance like everyone else who had the misfortune of knowing Zelena.

“What the heck is Zelena drinking?” Mary Margaret whispered behind her hand.

“It’s Midori—muskmelon liqueur. Usually for teenage girls trying to get their buzz on before they take their fake IDs to the clubs.” Ruby raised her glass of merlot in Zelena’s direction. “But whatever floats her boat, ya know?”

Belle smiled and settled in to enjoy the festivities, trying on a jade necklace and earrings. Baby Robin stared at the shiny baubles and cooed in approval.

A knocking sound came from the direction of the guest room.

“What the hell was that?” Zelena emerged from the kitchen carrying a full bowl of tortilla chips, eyes narrowed into slits.

“Just my cat.” Belle said quickly, jumping up to jiggle the guest room door. Still locked. She hoped Gold was all right.

“Damn, girl, that’s some big cat!” Ruby whistled.

“When did you get a cat?” Ariel asked.

“Yesterday. At Gold’s. The poor thing was shaking and hungry,” she said, defending her decision. “I couldn’t just leave him there.”

“Unlock the door and let’s see him.” Ruby jumped to her feet. “I love cats.”

“No!” Seven pairs of eyes swung to look at Belle. “It’s…he hasn’t had his shots and the baby…she could be allergic.” Robin gurgled approvingly at Belle and everyone laughed.

“Oh yeah. Right.” Ruby nodded and gave Belle a fond smile. “Wow, she adores you, Belle. You’ll make a great mother someday.”

Belle’s wistful thoughts turned to Gold. There was only one person whose child she could see herself mothering, and he had less than zero interest in her. Suddenly depressed, she cuddled Robin closer.
“So tell us more about Gold’s death.” Merida’s eyes glittered with morbid fascination. “Was, like, his flesh already rotting off his body when you found him?”

“Merida.” Mary Margaret shuddered and tsked in censure. “It’s disrespectful to speak that way about the dead.”

“Oh my God, Gold!” Zelena dropped the bowl of chips and wailed, wrapping her arms around herself. “Gooooooood!” She stumbled backwards into a chair, missed it, and slid to the floor. “Gooooood!”

“She’s distraught.” Regina reached down to pat her sister on the hand and smiled at the others. “She’ll be all right. Eventually.”

“She’s drunk,” Ruby whispered to Belle behind a sip of wine.

Thank goodness for Mary Margaret’s sensibilities, Belle thought, glad to have requests for the details come to an end. Gold hadn’t even been cold in his imaginary grave for forty-eight hours, yet lies were dripping from her tongue. She didn’t want to push this ruse any farther than was necessary.

“Today at Granny’s, Jefferson was swaggering around, telling everyone who would listen that Gold’s house isn’t to be disturbed until cause of death is confirmed. Seems like serving as acting sheriff has kinda gone to his head,” Ruby reported.

So much for shutting down the conversation.

Zelena silenced her blubbering and set Belle a piercing look. “You said he died of a brain aneurism.”

Belle chewed her lip. “I’m not a doctor; it was simply a guess.”

“Yes, but why would you guess—”

“Enough, Zelena.” Regina cleared her throat, coming to the rescue once more. “Regardless of the cause of death, Mr. Gold is gone. I, for one, will really miss having him on the town council. He knew every inch of Storybrooke and always exercised impeccable judgment when it came to looking out for our citizens.”

“I always found him a little standoffish, but he was very generous in his support of community programs,” added Mary Margaret, who was a third grade teacher at Storybrooke Elementary School. “The anonymous donation that came through last year to build the science wing—no one else could have afforded it.”

“To Mr. Gold,” Ruby agreed, raising her glass.

A chorus of “Here, heres,” swelled through the room, but Zelena staggered away on unsteady legs and shut the bathroom door.

“To Gold,” Belle said softly, ignoring Zelena’s dramatic exit. The musical sound of glasses clinking in a toast brought a grateful smile to her lips. She rocked Baby Robin in her lap, wondering if Gold was listening to the ladies sing his praises.

“Just one more question, then I promise we can focus on the jewelry.” Merida took a sip of wine and grinned. “Do you think we’ll get a break on our rent since he’s gone?”

Ruby nodded and wiggled her fingers in the air. “Actually, I have another question, too, Belles. Who’s the beneficiary of Gold’s estate? He owns this place.”
“This house?” Ariel, who had only lived in Storybrooke for four months, looked confused.

“No, the town,” Ruby corrected.

“His son will take over, I expect,” Belle said slowly. She kneeled down to lay a sleeping Robin on an afghan Ruby had spread on the floor, and kissed the baby’s soft brow. Belle fidgeted with the corner of Robin’s blanket, tucking it around her and smoothing it over her soft, chubby legs. She was relieved to have an excuse not to face her friends.

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten Gold has a son. Neal.” Regina’s comment was punctuated by Zelena’s nasally snore; she had returned from the bathroom and curled up in the swivel rocker again. The empty Midori bottle slipped from her fingers and hit the floor with a dull thud. A drop of neon-green liquid dripped onto the carpet.

Belle fidgeted with a bracelet, thinking of the dark-haired young man with Gold’s eyes she had once seen at Granny’s when she’d first moved to town. Gold and his son had been sitting in a booth arguing, twin sets of brown eyes filled with fury. “Anyway, this isn’t an estate planning class, it’s a party.” Belle forced a smile. “Let’s get back to the jewelry.”
Monday Morning

Belle looked at her watch and pounded on the bathroom door with an unladylike growl. Yesterday’s evening of entertaining had felt interminable. After a challenging weekend of dealing with Gold, it was little wonder she was still exhausted despite oversleeping. Impatient, she jumped up and down in front of the closed door. The library was scheduled to open in fifteen minutes.

“Gold!” Belle yelled, pounding on the door again. “Please, let me in! I have to get ready for work!”

“Miss French.” Gold emerged from the bathroom in a veritable cloud of scent, and a wave of warm air hit Belle in the face.

“I’m running late!” She barely spared him a glance as she barreled past him into the bathroom. Her bare feet skidded on something cold and wet, her legs splaying into an unnatural split, and she landed on the floor in a heap, her groin screaming in agony.

A firm pair of hands squeezed her waist. Gold stood behind her, witnessing her embarrassment as another jolt of pain shot through her hip. Because of course.

“Up we go.” With surprising strength for a man who walked with a cane, he hoisted her to her feet, his hands under her armpits, and dragged her backwards into the family room, with the heels of her feet leaving streaks of white foam on the floor in her wake. He dumped her onto the sofa on her backside.

“Ow!” She cried as she rubbed at her tailbone. He picked up her feet and swung her legs around on the sofa, then stepped back.

“What the hell happened to you?” He stood there looking at her like some sort of science experiment, rubbing his thumb and index finger together. Although he had nowhere to be, he was once again elegantly dressed for the day, while she was sprawled on the couch wearing a ratty grey tank top and cotton pajama pants, her bottom wet from where it hit the bathroom tile.

Belle pressed her lips together; they needed to rethink the bathroom schedule.

“There’s a puddle on the floor. Didn’t you see it?” she asked, wheezing as wave of pain washed over her thigh.

“No.” He swiped a bit of white stuff off her big toe with a finger and sniffed. “This is shaving cream.”

“If this is your idea of a joke, it’s not funny! I noticed you didn’t trip and fall.”

“I assure you, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” He spread his hands. “I was trapped in that closet you call a guest room all night while you got drunk with your friends and flirted with a
“I was not drunk,” she retorted, hissing in pain. “And what was I supposed to do with the baby? Drop her on her head?”

“Martyrdom is not an attractive quality, Miss French.”

She sighed. “Don’t change the subject. You were the last one in the bathroom. Can you get me some ice, please?”

He was back in moments with a bag of frozen peas. “Will this do?”

“Well, if it wasn’t you, then… what? It leaked?” Belle pressed the bag of peas to her inner thigh, chewing her lip as she thought. “Unless Zelena did it. She spent a long time in the bathroom last night. Do you think she knows you’re here?”

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions again, dearie.” He chuckled. “Although, it serves you right for allowing Regina to talk you into letting Ms. Kelly to stay.”

“I made the best of a challenging situation,” she countered.

“No, what you did was cave. You know what your problem is?” He shook a finger at her. “You’re too damn nice.”

“I catch more flies with honey than I do with vinegar.” Belle propped a pillow behind her head.

“Only hillbillies sit around thinking up ways to catch flies, Miss French.”

Belle pressed her fingers to her forehead; a headache forming between her eyes. “You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“Maybe so,” he agreed with a curt nod.

It was all too much. The pressure of their close quarters, his annoyed glare, being late for work. Belle sniffled and drew her knees up, pain and mortification bringing scalding tears to her eyes. It seemed she could do or say nothing right. No apology or attempt to make amends for her mistake was good enough, and his cold, dark eyes held no warmth for her whatsoever.

“Is there anything you like anything about me, Gold? Anything at all?”

She cut a flustered figure as she lay in a collapsed heap across the sofa. Gold watched her curl into a ball, her hair falling forward in a curtain across her forehead, like a daisy withering from lack of sunshine.

By all accounts, she was a disaster. She was clumsy, she soaked in the bath until her fingers and toes wrinkled. She made a mess when she cooked and baked and left the dishes in the sink until the end of the night, sometimes even until the next morning. Jefferson’s comments when he’d been hiding in the pantry hinted that Belle found him attractive, even cared for him, but she hadn’t done or said anything to make him believe it was true. Not that he wanted it to be true. Did he?

“Forget it,” she mumbled, turning her head toward the back of the couch.

_Shit._ Belle’s cheerfulness irked him, but her sadness was even worse. His acerbic comments had hit the mark, and he had never felt so low in his entire life. He was supposed to respond, to say something, but he’d never been good at socializing or comforting others. Especially when it came to
people he cared about.

“Come on now, get up; time to dress for work.” He clapped his hands in encouragement, a desperate attempt to rally her. He glanced at the clock. The library was due to open in five minutes and it was a fifteen minute walk from the house to the center of downtown.

“I’ll call in sick.” Looking defeated, she rubbed at her eyes before rolling into a fetal position.

“You can’t. If you don’t go in, people will wonder what’s going on.” He crouched down beside her where she lay, his knee popping on his descent. He winced, knowing he would pay for it later. “Thieves thrive on normal patterns of behavior. If we want Zelena to reveal herself, you need to behave as normally as possible.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she said, turning hard eyes on him.

Seeing her there, so small and vulnerable with her lip curved downward, made his heart clench. “I’m not. At least, it wasn’t my intention.” He took her hands and gently pulled her upright to a seated position. “That’s better,” he said approvingly.

Favoring her right leg, she rose from the sofa and glared at him, but there was more hurt in her eyes than anger. “I have to go to work now. I’m late.”

Minutes later she limped out of the bathroom, dressed in a blue slip dress that accented her bright blue eyes and her slender waist, her chestnut curls glossy and bouncing. Had she always been so pretty? His trousers were starting to feel constricted, mimicking the tightness in his chest.

How Belle could look so stunning from the moment she rolled out of bed was a mystery for the ages. It took him at least twice as long to look respectable, and even in all his layers of bespoke clothing he never felt attractive. His self-conscious gaze strayed to the small paunch forming at his middle and he sucked in his gut.

Belle was halfway to the front door when she turned around and limped back to the collection of bookshelves that lined the walls behind the sofa. “Almost forgot.” She whisked a red, leather bound volume off the shelf, and its companions teetered like dominos and crashed to the floor. She flung up her hands to protect herself, and he lunged behind her to keep the shelf from toppling.

He steadied the bookshelf, adrenaline and exertion making his breath quick and shallow. “Belle! Are you all right?”

He was pressed against her back, her musky, vanilla fragrance enveloping him, and he clenched his fists to keep from running his hands over the soft skin of her arms. Why was he acting this way? He hadn’t touched a woman in years, but he wanted to touch her. A bookshelf had almost collapsed on her, and he wanted to grope her? His mouth ran dry, a combination of shame and the unfamiliar tug of want pulsing through him.

“Fine,” she bit out, ducking away. She scrambled to pick up books, piling them into stacks on the floor, then tried to shovel them back onto the overstuffed shelves, but they kept slipping out of her grasp and back to the floor like wet bars of soap.

He grasped her hands, stilling her frantic motions. “Belle, Belle. Leave it,” he said quietly, cradling her wrists in his palm, his thumb resting against her pulse. “I’ll take care of it.”

“All right.” Her nod was stiff as she pulled her hands out of his grip. “Try to…” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t care what you do.”
He was still pondering his next move when the door slammed, rattling the windowpanes of the little house.

Anger crowded in to replace desire, as swift and hot as a swarm of bees. How dare she? Belle had created this dilemma, trapping him here in her web of lies, and she had the nerve to act like the injured party? He wanted to be furious with her, but he wasn’t. He was angry with himself. Over and over she’d apologized, but he hadn’t forgiven her, nor had he done a single thing to be helpful or kind. The only contributions he’d made since the moment he arrived were trouble and snide remarks. No, the problem wasn’t Belle. The problem was him.

His thoughts returned to the snippets of conversation from last night’s party. Stunned. That was the only word he could use to describe how it felt to be the proverbial fly on the wall as Belle’s friends extolled his virtues as town philanthropist. As though he’d spent his life behaving as something other than a selfish bastard. He shook his head ruefully—Coinneach Gold was nothing like the altruistic, kindhearted man Belle’s guests had described when they toasted to his life last night. But for the first time, he wanted to be. Wanted to be the kind of man others respected and liked, rather than feared.

Gold looked at the ramshackle bookshelves and sighed; he had work to do.

Monday Evening

“He hates me.” Belle sank to the floor in the corner of her office and moaned into the telephone.

“Gold does not hate you,” Jefferson answered, a smile in his voice. “If he hated you, he wouldn’t have stayed.”

“Ha! You aren’t there. You don’t hear him grumbling every five minutes about how this entire situation is my fault.” She stretched her legs out in front of her, leaning over her sore thigh, still tender from taking a fall this morning. “And what’s worse is he’s right.”

“Ma chérie, I’ve known him for ages, and whether it’s inking a business deal or selecting the pattern for his tie, there’s no convincing him to do anything he doesn’t want to do.” He chuckled. “Anyway, it’s your house. He’s the interloper, so slap him around a little. Show him who’s boss.”

“Jeff, I talked him into faking his death. I’m not really in a position make demands.” She twirled a curl around her index finger. “He practically shoved me out the door this morning, he was so anxious to be alone.”

“The man is accustomed to his solitude. Besides, even married couples need a break from each other every now and then.”

The bizarre idea of marriage to Gold made her pulse skitter. “Maybe I jumped to conclusions about Zelena, but I did tell him I was sorry.”

“He’ll get over it. As for your suspicions about Zee being wrong, don’t be so sure. Another theft was reported this morning.”

“You’re kidding! What was stolen?”

“Mayor Mills’ golden tree necklace.”

“That’s not good news.” Belle groaned. “Zelena is Regina’s sister. Even she wouldn’t be so low as to steal from her only family.”
“So far she’s still the only suspect. Want my advice?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Doubtful. Belle, it’s after five o’clock. Go home, feed your face, and snog your houseguest. Sex is fantastic for stress relief.” The line went dead.

Belle hung up the phone and side-eyed the mountain of paperwork she’d been dreading. Anything to keep from going home and facing Gold. Don’t be such a baby, Belle. She looked at her car keys, then she looked at the paperwork. She plopped down at her desk with a heavy sigh.

By the time she turned the key in the lock two hours later, it was as if she was coming home to a different house. This morning’s avalanche of books had been re-shelved, the streaks of shaving cream that were tattooed across the floor had been cleaned, and the mouthwatering aroma of curry spiked with lemongrass perfumed the entire house.

Belle dropped her handbag and followed her nose to the kitchen. The pile of dishes she had left in the sink after last night’s jewelry party were washed and put away and the counters sparkled. Gold was sitting at the table, his tongue between his teeth in concentration, tinkering with an antique desk clock that hadn’t worked since she was a child.

“Evening,” he greeted without looking up. “I borrowed your tweezers. Hope it’s all right. I don’t have my toolkit. Ah, there it is. The suspension was out of whack.” He closed the face of the clock and met her eyes, a cautious expression in his sable eyes, as though he feared she might take Jefferson’s suggestion and slap him.

“Wow.” Belle murmured, blinking in surprise as she glanced around again at her tidy home. “That clock hasn’t ticked since my mother was alive. I can’t believe you fixed it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He cleared his throat and rose, walking to the stove. “I also anchored your bookshelves to the wall. They’ll support more weight that way and prevent another collapse. And dinner should be ready soon. I hope you like Thai curry.” He stirred a simmering pot and flashed a devastating smile, and Belle fought against every instinct not to giggle like a fool.

This reception was most unexpected. He moved like water around the room as he pulled dinner plates and cutlery from the cabinets, graceful as a shark and just as deadly. She leaned against the counter to steady her wobbly knees. “How can I ever repay you?”

“All the ingredients for dinner came from your cupboards and refrigerator. Stir fry kit—no chopping required—so I just dumped everything in the pot and turned on the gas. As for the repairs, I’m a fair hand with tools and being a dead man I’ve a lot of time on my hands.” He smirked, then turned serious once more. “Belle, I owe you an apology.”

“It’s okay; really, I was just being neighborly,” she insisted automatically.

Neighborly. It had become her excuse for everything and the word flew to her tongue with practiced ease. The trouble was, the word was starting to taste hollow as she couldn’t pretend anymore, not even to herself, that she was just doing this for “neighborly” reasons.

“No, it’s not, and I’m sorry. From now on, I’m going to cooperate.” He pulled out a chair for her, sweeping a small bow and flourishing his hand. “Please have a seat. Dinner is almost ready.”

Beads of sweat pooled on her upper lip as she ate. Belle told herself the steam and the spice from the curry was to blame, but it was a lie. Gold’s rich brown eyes glittered with intensity and she was so transfixed by his mouth as he spoke and ate she didn’t even notice when he whisked their empty
plates away. If a grouchy Gold made her pulse race, then him turning on the charm transformed her into a sweaty pre-teen at her first Taylor Swift concert. *Get a grip, Belle.*

She lurched to her feet, needing an excuse for activity. “How about some dessert? We don’t have any chocolate cake left, but I’ve wanted to try this peach almond galette.” Belle reached for the knife block, grasping her chef’s knife. The handle was slick, her fingers slipped on the hilt, and she fumbled, the blade scoring her left hand.

She dropped the knife with a hiss and clenched her hand into a fist, blood squeezing through.

“You’ve cut yourself!” Gold was at her side in an instant, reaching for her.

She jerked her hand away, pulling it against her racing heart. The edges of her vision blurred. “It’s nothing.”

“Damn it, Belle. Let me see.” He unfurled her clenched fist. A red slick glared angrily against her white palm, hot and sticky, and she swayed on her feet.

Then there was pressure against her palm, her white kitchen towel printed with the rooster soaking crimson as her hand throbbed. Gold’s voice was in her ear whispering reassurances, rough and tender all at once, while his thumb grazed over her knuckles. The metallic tang of blood flooded her senses. Her nostrils flared and she bent her head against a wave of nausea, trying to peel the towel away to examine the scored flesh in the center of her palm.

He tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. “No, sweetheart. Don’t look down. Look at me.” He stabbed a finger at his forehead and she focused on the furrow between his manicured eyebrows. *Sweetheart.* Warmth flooded her at the whispered word. It was a nothing phrase, a mindless endearment, but she seized on it like a lifeline.

She tried to do as she was told, panting through her mouth, but she pitched forward again, her eyes watering. Hot streams fell over her cheeks. When he eased her closer, though, his spicy, comforting scent overwhelmed the raw throb of pain. One hand came around her back, drawing her against his chest, while the other clasped her hurt hand, continuing to apply pressure to her wound. For an unknown amount of time, they stood in the middle of the kitchen in a macabre facsimile of a dance. Gold’s shirt was soft, open at the throat, and his Adam’s Apple bobbed as he rubbed soothing circles on her back.

“I-I’m sorry. The sight of blood makes me dizzy.” She felt stupid, panicking over a little scrape. “The knife was oily and I lost my grip. I think someone…” Her voice sounded tinny in her ears and far away. Gold thought she was an accident prone moron; hell, maybe she was. She was starting to feel crazy. Maybe the whole situation with Zelena was only in her head.

“Shhhh.” The hand moving across her back slid up into her hair, and he gently pulled her head down to rest on his shoulder and brushed a kiss across the top of her head. She could feel him tracing the cut, his touch as soft as a butterfly’s wings. “There now. Bleeding’s stopped. I don’t think you’ll need stitches. Let’s bandage you up, then how about a bit of Shiraz and a soak in the tub?” His voice was deep and barely a whisper. She shivered as he soothed her.

Belle nodded, allowing him to lead her into the bathroom like a child. There were few things more pleasurable than sliding into a deep, hot bubble bath in her claw foot tub—that and a glass of red wine were precisely what she needed. He dressed her wound, filled the tub, and turned to leave the bathroom.
“Gold?” Her voice was small, vulnerable.

“Yes?”

He leaned against the doorjamb, his eyes dark and somber. He was being extraordinarily kind and she didn’t know how to act around him anymore. She focused on the bubbles glistening on top of the water.

“Could you…I can’t unzip my dress with one hand.”

“Of course.”

She held her breath while he moved behind her, as he had earlier this morning when the bookshelf had narrowly missed clubbing her on the head. His large hands were warm, fingers dancing near her nape, and she could feel the calloused heat of them through her dress. With gentle care, he gathered her hair and shifted it to one shoulder, lowering the zipper until it reached the top swell of her buttocks. It slipped off her hips and pooled at her feet. On instinct, she crossed her arms over her chest.

“All right?” he asked over her shoulder, his voice thin and tight.

She hesitated. The air thick was with steam and tension, belaboring her next confession. “No. I can’t unhook my bra, either.”

His fingertips were like hot pokers against her naked skin and he plucked the fastener open as though he’d done it a thousand times, and her bra followed her dress to the floor. “Good night, Belle.”

Belle waited until she heard the quiet thud of the door closing before she unhooked her panties from her hips and slid into the tub, her whole body taut with need. She had almost turned around to let him see her, her nipples tight and cherry red, her chest rising and falling with desire, the place between her thighs aching and damp, yearning for him.

The change in temperature rippled her with gratifying goosebumps as she sank her tired, sore body into the hot silk of the water. Knowing that Gold had drawn the bath for her made it even more arousing, and she lay back and closed her eyes, imagining the heat to be his presence, the flow of water around her body his gentle caress. Careful to keep her injured left hand far above the water line, Belle slid her other hand deep into the tub, fingers seeking the slippery wetness within her core. She found her bundle of nerves and rubbed lightly along the edge, imagining Gold sitting next to the tub, those hooded eyes missing nothing as they roved over her figure, his hands plucking and pinching and rubbing her clit. Images of him flooded her mind, his sable eyes and how they could turn dark as midnight, his long, slender fingers as he thumbed through the morning paper. She stroked herself, slow at first, then faster and faster, water sluicing around her hand, until she jerked her hips and came with a silent scream, convulsing around her fingers.

The cut on her hand throbbed, reminding her of the strange predicament with Gold and she opened heavy, sated eyes, slowly returning to awareness. Zelena had slipped into the kitchen during the party to oil the knives in the hopes that Belle would injure herself, she was certain. The witch had been in her home as a guest and she’d taken full advantage, pretending to be grief-stricken in a room full of people so she could gain sympathy and sneak around Belle’s house without suspicion.

Now all Belle had to do was prove it.
Granny's

Chapter Summary

Belle sneaks Gold out of the house.

Thursday Evening

Gold finished polishing the coffee table and sat down on the couch, stretching his bad ankle out with a soft groan.

For two days it had been raining, beating down mercilessly on Belle’s little house, but now the sun was shining and she was due to be home in about an hour. It didn’t matter anyway—he wasn’t supposed to leave rain or shine.

Faking his death had seemed like his worst nightmare, but to his surprise, disappearing had been a pleasant escape. A part of him hoped Neal would call, but he couldn’t answer even if he did. His flip phone battery had long since drained, his charger useless to him where it sat in a drawer in his desk at the shop.

Life in town had gone on; the town council had met without him, rent checks continued to roll into his untouched bank account, and he and Belle had fallen into a pleasant, if fragile, routine. Every morning she slept until the last possible minute, then raced out of the house like a drunken rabbit, a sesame bagel clenched between her teeth. While she worked at the library, he puttered around the house, sometimes cleaning and sometimes making minor repairs. In the evenings she came home and they ate dinner, she baked a mouthwatering dessert, and they played a game of Scrabble or his favorite, Stratego, which Belle had unearthed from the top of her closet.

Last night she had managed to bake chocolate croissant bread pudding without incident. It was a minor blessing—Tuesday she had opened a cabinet door, causing it to fall off the hinges, then later she’d fallen through the seat of a small antique chair.

Gold had fixed the cabinet and repaired the webbing on the chair, as well as sharpened and checked every one of the kitchen knives and rubbed down the handles with a soft, wet cloth. He didn’t want Belle hurting herself again. The corners of his mouth turned up in a smile. She was adorably clumsy and accident-prone and if he was honest, he rather liked coming to her rescue.

He rather liked a lot of things about her.

“You folded my laundry? Wearing a three-piece suit?” There stood Belle, car keys in hand, eying the pile of folded garments sitting beside him on the couch.

“They say you should dress for the job you want.” He gave her a lopsided smile. Verbal sparring was one of life’s greatest joys, and talking with Belle was always interesting and exciting. “You’re back already? I didn’t even hear the door open.”

“The sunshine was so tempting, I left a little early today. It’s really clean in here.” She beamed at him and looked around the tidy house. “What else have you been doing to keep busy?”
“I scrubbed the bathroom and ran the vacuum.” Gold flushed under her praise.

The tub had needed to be cleaned after he’d pleased himself to fantasies of Belle relaxing in her evening bubble bath. Since the night he had bandaged her cut, and drawn her bath, he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the graceful slope of her back and her long, shapely legs. He’d fought to keep his eyes closed when he unzipped her dress and left the bathroom, hard and aching. Ogling Belle’s loveliness made him feel like a dirty old man, but there had been a tension in the air suggesting his attentions wouldn’t have been unwelcome.

Of course, he had been too much of a coward to find out.

“I worked some more on your obituary today,” she said, eyes sparkling. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Well do I need an obituary if I’m not dead?” he asked, raising a brow in curiosity. It was mind-boggling, her genuine interest in his life. She was one of the few people he’d ever met who challenged his perceptions and he never knew what she would say.

She sat down on the couch beside him, crossing her legs. A pad of paper rested in her lap. “I want to know you better, and I think the people of this town should, too.”

“I don’t know about this. My passing seems to be universally unlamented, or did I miss the candlelight vigil and bouquets of flowers?” he asked with an edge of sarcasm. He hadn’t been a terrific person in general, or a caring landlord, and he’d been a completely abysmal neighbor.

“Please?” She turned the full force of those stunning blue eyes on him and he was lost.

“All right.” He consented with a groan. “Do your worst.”

“How old are you?”

“Right to the heart of the matter, eh, Miss French?” He winked, silently chiding himself for being a fool. “I thought old enough to know better, but now I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?” She crinkled her brow in confusion.

“Never mind. Bad joke. I’ll be forty-nine in September. You?”

The pen in her hand paused. “This isn’t about me, but all right. I turned thirty-one in March.”

He scoffed at her. “A mere child.”

“Depends on your point of view.” She nibbled on the point of the pen. “Eighteen years isn’t much of a difference.”

“I guess not.” His pulse picked up speed. Was she implying what he thought she was?

“And what about your first name?” She flashed her dimples winningly. “Will you share?”

“Ugh. Can’t you use ‘Mister’? It is, after all, a fake obituary.”

The look on her face was best described as unimpressed.

“Fine. It’s Coinneach. CON-ak,” he repeated it slowly, then winced. “Means handsome, believe it or not. My mother had quite the sense of humor.”
“Coinneach.” Her pretty mouth formed a delicious little ‘o’ as she echoed him, and he had never enjoyed the sound of his name more. “I like it and I think you more than live up to the name.”

Those guileless blue eyes roved over him, seeming to lay bare everything he wished to keep covered, and he felt the tips of his ears burn. “Thank you, Belle.”

She set the pad of paper aside and folded her hands in her lap. “And will you tell me about your son?”

“Neal? Not much to tell, really. He lives in New York City and works on Wall Street as a stockbroker. We have a strained, stilted telephone conversation about six times a year. On occasion I ask him to come visit, he promises he will soon, and soon never comes. A small, stupid part of me hopes he’ll come back to Storybrooke and run the shop with me, but he likes his fast-paced life and big city bagels.” Bemused, he leaned against the back of the sofa. He had never talked this much about himself to anyone, and he rarely discussed his son. Sharing with Belle was different, though. Somehow he knew his secrets and shameful confessions were safe in her care.

“When was the last time you spoke to Neal?” Her voice was quiet, thoughtful.

He considered. “I think it’s been about three months or so?”

“I’m sure he’ll come and see you soon.”

He snorted. “Doubtful.”

“You’re his father. He loves you. Of that I have no doubt.”

She blew a bit of hair off her forehead and he took a moment to study her. “Are you always like this?”

“Like what?”

“Positive. Hopeful.” He splayed his hand over his heart. “Wanting to see the best in people and looking for goodness in others.” Including me. His treatment of her earlier this week and during the past three years of their acquaintance had been disgraceful.

“What about Neal’s mother? Where is she?” A rosy blush painted her cheeks as she maneuvered the topic back to him.

“She left when he was a boy and I think he still blames me for not working harder to stop her. Ran off with some hot-shot private investigator who she was paying to follow me. She claimed I was having an affair, but she was the one fooling around.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “How’s that for irony?”

“I see.” Belle pressed her lips together. “Sounds a little like my ex-husband.”

“Yes, Jefferson mentioned him on my first day here. Bad break-up?” he asked sympathetically. The idea troubled him more than he cared to admit. He didn’t want to think of some other man touching her, kissing her, or worse still, treating her as anything less than the goddess she was. Belle deserved to be cherished.

She sank her teeth into her lower lip. “Let’s just say he wasn’t who he pretended to be and I learned my lesson a little too late.”

“I’m sorry.” He laid his hand on top of hers, letting it rest there for a long beat.
“This might sound odd, but I’m not. Gareth made me stronger and braver because he taught me about who I want to be. Authentic, genuine—not someone who hides who they truly are. And now…well, I can sit at a stoplight without someone screaming in my face, as though traffic patterns are a personal insult.” She scooted closer to him on the sofa with a wobbly smile.

“Have you considered marrying again?” he dared to ask.

“I would…if the right person came along. But what about you? This is your obituary.” She smacked his arm, a gentle scolding as she shifted the focus away from herself once more. “Why did you never remarry? I’m sure it’s not escaped your attention that you’re a handsome, intelligent man. Zelena Kelly certainly thinks so.”

He laughed at her teasing tone. “Even the town monster can do better than Zelena Kelly,” he joked. “But I suspect her obsession with me is more to do with my turning her down as an apprentice in my shop than anything else.”

“You’re not a monster. Didn’t you hear the ladies when they were here for the jewelry party the other evening? You’re respected. Perhaps a bit aloof but that’s easily changed.” Her left hand shifted from the couch to his knee. “And you’re smart not to trust Zelena to work with you.”

He lifted her hand and turned it over, thankful for an excuse to examine her palm. Only a small square bandage protected the three-day-old cut now. “I should check this,” he offered huskily. Tracing her lifeline, he peeled back the bandage pressed a kiss to the center of her hand. The tension was back, electricity crackling between them, the air thick and heavy as it was before a storm.

Who could think of Zelena Kelly when Belle French was in the room?

“Death certainly becomes you, Coinneach Gold.” Belle inched toward him, closing the distance between them, and he encouraged her nearness, spanning her narrow waist with his hands and giving a light squeeze. Her stomach growled in complaint, and she pushed back, crossing her arms over her belly. “Ooops, sorry,” she said with a chuckle.

“I didn’t do anything about dinner,” he said apologetically. “We’re short on fresh food, but I can heat us up some soup. I saw cans of tomato and chicken noodle today when I was oiling the pantry door.”

“No, it’s my fault. I’m the hostess and I should have gone to the market.” She chewed her lip, a trademark tell announcing she was thinking. “What do you say to grabbing dinner at Granny’s?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Gold asked from the backseat of her fire engine red MINI Cooper, his voice muffled by the blanket she’d thrown over his prone form.

He didn’t know why he was asking or why it mattered. The mysterious jewel thief hadn’t acted in two days, Zelena hadn’t come after Belle again, and this charade had to end at some point. Meanwhile, Coinneach Gold had landed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to spend every waking moment with Belle French, and he wasn’t ready to give her up, not quite yet.

“Long as you stay hidden, we’re good.” She peeked at him in the rearview mirror. “You need to get out of the house, and I want a burger and I’m not in the mood to cook.”

“So asking you to put the top down is out of the question, then?” He pouted, feigning disappointment.

“I can take my top down,” she mumbled, pulling out of the driveway.
“What did you say?” He grinned wolfishly in the dark, pretending he hadn’t heard.

“I said it’s a beautiful evening. Clear skies, no rain in the forecast.” She met his eyes again in the rearview mirror and smiled.

In ten minutes they were at the diner, and five minutes later, Belle emerged without incident. “No problem,” she said with a giggle when he asked. “I called ahead. Believe it or not, I’m such a hog that when I order two cheeseburgers with two large fries and a chocolate milkshake, no one looks at me twice.”

“You don’t say,” he deadpanned. Never in his life had he seen a person eat more frequently and in greater quantities than Belle. He swore he’d gained twenty pounds in the span of four days of living with her and added a roll of flab to his already softening middle.

“Quiet!” Her demand was a giggly whisper.

A hot French fry landed on his forehead, and he popped it into his mouth. “Mmmm,” he said with his mouth full. “Is there any ketchup?”

Silence reigned in the front seat.

He swallowed the fry. “Belle?”

“Don’t move a muscle, Gold.” Belle’s worry-laced voice was drowned out by the sound of sirens.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” he said. The sirens wailing in the distance edged closer and Belle slowed the car to a stop.

“We’re in trouble,” Belle confirmed. “Sheriff Swan’s back from New York and she’s pulling me over.”

“Deep breaths, Belle,” she told herself under her breath as she killed the engine and veered off to the side of the road near a cluster of pine trees. She rooted in the glove compartment for her license and registration. “We’ve got this.”

Nervous, she took a sip of her Coke, swishing it around in her mouth. If she thought Gold was annoyed with her for convincing him to fake his death before, he was really going to be angry when he wound up behind bars for his trouble. Her fingers clenched and unclenched the black leather steering wheel as she waited for the sheriff to emerge from the yellow Volkswagen Bug parked several feet behind her.

She squinted into the dark backseat to make sure Gold was completely covered, still, and silent. Like a dead body. Belle barked an anxious laugh as adrenaline surged through her veins. She had no idea what to say to Emma, so she prayed the sheriff would have no reason to look in the backseat.

There was a tap on the glass and a flashlight shone in Belle’s eyes, and she slammed them closed against the blinding light, feeling on the door for the window control and rolled it down.

“You’re under arrest,” said a male voice. “For smuggling gold.”

Belle gritted her teeth, her heart pounding with a mixture of anger and relief. “Jefferson! You scared the hell out of us! I thought you were Emma.”

“Evening, folks. Acting Sheriff Jefferson Milliner at your service.” He bowed, his eyes glittering
with mischief in the dark as he scanned the interior of the car. “Did you like my little pun, ma chérie? Smuggling gold. Get it?”

“Stop calling her that,” Gold poked his head out from under the blanket and glared at Jefferson.

“Calling her what?” Jefferson feigned ignorance and stole a handful of French fries through the open window. “I’ll just come and sit with you two.” He walked around the front of the car and opened the passenger side door.

“You know—that chérie business,” Gold growled after Jefferson swung his long legs into the car.

Belle couldn’t tell in the dark, but she could swear Gold was blushing. She hid a smile of pleasure.

“Aww, aren’t we protective? I don’t mean anything by it, Gold,” Jeff said, turning around in the seat as he munched on his fries. “It means ‘my dear’ but it’s a term of respect.”

“Ah, yes.” Gold’s tone was thick with sarcasm. “It sounds respectful.”

“Belle, I do believe your Mr. Gold is jealous.” Jefferson’s wink was exaggerated. “Gold, I swear, I’ve never even seen Belle naked. She has eyes only for—”

Belle slapped her hand over Jefferson’s mouth, cutting off any further comments. He licked the hand covering his mouth, a hot, wet swipe.

“Ewww!” She wiped the slime on Jefferson’s shirt. “You are disgusting. And I can’t believe you’re going to sit here in my car eating our dinner and act like you didn’t almost give us a heart attack. Pulling me over! You knew full well I would think it was the actual police.”

“I like to keep your life interesting, ma chérie. Nice kitten blanket, by the way.” Jefferson gave Gold a thumbs up and a Cheshire cat grin. “Hot pink is your color.”

“Jefferson, get the hell out of my car,” Belle ordered.

“Fine, fine, but I want something for my trouble. Keeping the pair of you out of the clink is hard work and you owe me a favor.” His nod was decisive.

“I’m the dealmaker in this town,” Gold snarled.

“Someone has to take the reins from the dead guy,” Jefferson shrugged. “And if you’re cooperative, I may have some information about a certain thief…are you going to drink that chocolate shake?”

“Out with it!” Gold ordered.

“Okay, okay. I put the word out to jewelry stores and pawnshops in surrounding towns about the thefts. Random Hearts Jewels in Portland contacted me about a woman matching Zelena’s description who came in with an item resembling Mary Margaret Nolan’s brooch. She was inquiring about its value, but the salesperson didn't get a name and they don’t have CCTV, so it’s still circumstantial.”

“In summary, you have no proof.” Gold sighed. “I never thought I’d see the day I would miss Emma Swan meddling in everyone’s affairs, but the day has assuredly come.”

“Yes, but in the meantime…” Jefferson rubbed his fingers together, indicating that payment was due. Belle rolled her eyes. “What do you want, Jeff?”
“Maybe put in a good word for me with the smokin’ hot redhead who took over the fish and chips place next to your shop, Gold?” Jefferson studied his nails. “You know, the one who sells costume jewelry on the side.”

“You mean my friend Ariel?” Belle raised an eyebrow.

“That’s it, Ariel.” Jefferson slapped his own leg. “Wants to turn the place vegetarian. ‘‘Fish are friends, not food,’ she says.” He shook his head. “Why are all the crazy ones redheads?”

“If she’s crazy, why are you interested?” Gold wanted to know.

“’I’m a little like our good friend Belle, here,’” Jefferson said meaningfully, looking like the cat who got the cream. “I like a challenge.”
Another Level

Chapter Summary

Belle and Gold give into the tension and feelings mounting between them.

Chapter Notes

This is the love scene. If it's not your thing, I've marked with asterisks *** where you can stop reading without missing any plot points.

Thursday Night

Back at the house, Belle and Gold finished their burgers and fries in silence. Belle toyed with the edge of her hamburger wrapper, picking at a bit of dried cheese. Something was bothering Gold, she could tell.

“What did Jefferson mean about you liking a challenge?” Gold dumped the takeout bags into the trash and stood next to the sink, his brow furrowed in uncertainty. “Is—is that why you wanted me to fake my death? For a challenge?”

And there it was. Belle felt a sinking feeling in her belly, her heart dipping at the misunderstanding.

He sounded confused, perhaps even hurt, and Belle crossed the kitchen to take his hand. “No! Of course not. I care about you. Zelena is behind all this. Jefferson said—”

“Belle, Jefferson is not law enforcement; he’s a playboy with a pair of handcuffs. This thief hasn’t stolen anything in a few days, and we haven’t seen or heard from Zelena, either. I don’t think these situations are related.”

“What are you saying?” Belle shook her head, trying to process his words. No matter how high the evidence mounted, he still didn’t believe her claims. “The shaving cream, the chair, the knife, the bookshelves, her crashing my jewelry party—you’re telling me all of it was coincidence?”

“A series of accidents then,” he said soothingly, rubbing his thumb in circles over the fleshy part of her hand. “Why don’t you get ready for bed and lie down? I’ll boil us a pot of tea. Lemon? Peppermint?”

“No! Please…don’t-don’t do that. Don’t make me feel stupid. Gareth used to…” She gulped and snatched her hand away, wrapping her arms around herself. “Zelena wanted to kill you and now she’s after me. Until we get to the bottom of this, I’m always going to wonder and worry—about both of us.”

His hands gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “I need to get back to my life and my shop. To normalcy. We can’t keep hiding here, waiting for a lunatic to make her next move.”
“Who-who said anything about hiding?” she stammered, hating the weakness in her voice.

“What are you afraid of? I’m not Gareth, Belle. Talk to me.” His gaze sought hers, dark and urgent.

Tears threatened, her lower lip wobbling, and she swiped at her eyes in frustration. She didn’t want to humiliate herself by crying, but the truth had to come out at some point. She wasn’t being neighborly, she was in love with him. “I’m afraid you’ll leave and go back to your life and it will be the way it was before. You’ll pretend not to know me and I won’t see you anymore. We’ll be strangers living side-by-side.” She hiccupped, the words falling out of her mouth in a rush.

“Sweetheart, no, I would never do that to you.” He wiped tears from her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs and pulled her into his arms, and Belle collapsed against his chest sniffling. “Belle, the last few days—”

The sound of an avalanche cut him off; a terrible cracking followed by a thunderous roar that shook the whole house.

He grabbed her hand, and together they rushed in the direction of the horrible noise, stopping short at the threshold of her bedroom. Chunks of sheetrock covered her bed and chalky dust filled the air. Another piece of the ceiling fell, splintering the headboard and sending another plume of dust flying. Cotton candy wisps of insulation floated to the floor and the bedspread was littered with debris.

“My room.” Her chest started to rise and fall, and she held her breath to steady it. Gold said nothing, but turned serious eyes towards her, his brow furrowed with thought. He looked predatory when he concentrated, like a wolf stalking a doe, and she started to feel dizzy, black pin pricks obstructing her vision.

“It must have been those two hard days of rain.” Gold climbed down from the ladder where he’d been examining the small attic space above Belle’s bedroom and returned to her side. “The roof is still intact and the support beams haven’t budged. I’m not a builder, but structurally, I think we’re all right till morning.”

Belle sagged against him, all the blood draining from her face, and he looped a comforting arm around her. The whites of her eyes were shiny and red, her mouth working, but no sound came out except for a strained whimper. “Not the rain,” she rasped. “It was her. I was thirty seconds from…I could be dead.”

The pained expression on her face broke him.

“Don’t talk that way,” he said fiercely, genuine concerns about Zelena beginning to surface.

His blood freezing in his veins, he suddenly recalled that Zelena’s mother, Cora Mills, had owned this house when Zelena and Regina had been children. He wondered if Zelena had spent any time in the house, then pushed the crazed notion away. Cora had lived in a mansion across town and this place had only been a rental property. Belle was already frantic with worry and he wouldn’t add to her fears by throwing this in her face.

Coward, he chastised himself.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” His mouth was a savage murmur against her fluttering eyelids, then he dragged his lips over her tearstained cheeks, gathering her fully into the circle of his arms. “Sweetheart, don’t cry. I’m here.”
“For all we know, tomorrow we’ll find the stolen jewels.” Belle flattened her palms against his chest, hopeful blue eyes framed by dark webs of lashes. Her face was haggard, hunger mingling with despair, and he was desperate to sate it, to burn away her fear of Zelena, her doubts, her thoughts of anything except him.

Her gaze plummeted to the floor. “Will you just… Could you please hold me?” she asked in a small voice, fiddling with the buttons of his waistcoat.

Belle’s heart-wrenching request elicited a groan from deep in his throat, and he wrapped his arm around her slender back to guide her across the short hallway into his room. A few shuffles and they were standing at the foot of the lumpy bed. She yanked back the duvet and lifted a knee to crawl onto the mattress, her sluggish movements announcing her exhaustion, but he snagged her wrist, finding her pulse with his thumb.

“Wait.”

He drew his thumbs downward, sweeping slow, twin lines from her temples to her jaw, then cupped her chin in his hand as he molded his lips to hers. Her lips were warm and soft, the plump firmness of them stoking a fire deep within. Belle opened her mouth for his kiss, and the delicate flavors of lavender and burnt sugar burst upon his senses. She came alive in his arms, making tiny breathy sounds and moans, and he thrust his tongue deeper into the soft recesses of her mouth.

Gold’s breath was ragged when he pulled back from their kiss, his pupils blown wide and dark with carnal, predatory fire. Paralyzed with want, Belle stared back; he held her with his body, with his eyes, and the hot, sweet ache of desire surged through her veins, liquefying her core.

Soft strokes of his long, tapered fingers against her neck made her skin pebble. He eased his large hands downward, mapping her chest, meeting the swell of her breasts still covered by her shirt and bra. He ghosted over her nipples, hard nubs already jutting forward beneath the layers of fabric and begging for his touch. He began plucking at the buttons of her blouse, his eyes still burning into hers as he undressed her. A shock of adrenaline rushed through her body, the heat under her skin blooming in response to his touch.

She felt him smile against her cheek, a wicked curve of his lips. “I love the way you blush when we kiss.”

“Let’s do it again,” she whispered, drawing his head down for another kiss.

It was her turn to plunder him and she did, tasting and seeking, stroking the roof of his mouth with her tongue, then sucking on his lower lip as she glided down his chest, undoing buttons, exposing more and more skin in her wake. She whipped off his waistcoat and it hit the floor with a careless whisper.

Belle thrust her chest forward and unhooked her bra, a lacy white balconette with scalloped edges. Next time, if there was one, she would tantalize him with lingerie. Today, however, the bra joined the pile of clothes on the floor, as did her ruffled blue skirt.

“Do you want to touch me?”

He made a choking noise. “God, yes.”

Belle’s breasts were a gorgeous weight in his hands, perfectly sized and round, and he loved the contrast of his dark hands against her milky white skin as he cupped and squeezed, her sweet sighs
and moans telling him how much pressure she enjoyed. She laughed when he stroked the undersides of her breasts, and her nipples tightened and swelled, taut rosy peaks needing his touch. His mouth watered for a taste and he obliged, licking, sucking, and scraping his teeth against each small pink bud until she cried out.

He walked her backwards until her legs pressed against the foot of the bed, lowering her to the mattress and shifting her hips forward so she teetered on the edge. Her slight weight made the uneven mattress sag forward, angling her toward him as he knelt in front of her to run his fingers along the damp gusset of her panties.

“I wanted to take these off of you the other night in the bathroom. Were they wet, Belle? Wet for me?”

Belle flushed hotter, soaking her panties as the stubble on his cheeks rubbed and tickled her inner thighs. “Yes—yes, they were,” she confessed between long, heavy breaths. “I touched myself in the tub that night thinking of you. I’ve touched myself every day you’ve been here. Sometimes twice.”

“Oh, my Belle.” He nosed her soaked panties, inhaling her sweet, musky fragrance, then hooked a finger around the waistband. A quick tug drew them down around her ankles, and he rubbed his thumbs against her pubic bones, parting her folds, opening her like a present. She was glistening, swollen with arousal.

“Yes, yours.” She lifted her hips and reached for his belt, more than ready for them to be one. “Make me yours. Please.”

He brushed her hands away, cradling them in his own and pressing an open-mouthed kiss to her bandaged palm. “First I need to taste you, sweetheart.” He guided her hands into his hair, then bent his head to her sex, his first experimental lick extraordinary. Belle was warm, rich, and coppery and he growled, lapping her slowly, savoring her essence.

Quick little licks burned into long, slow strokes with the flat of his tongue and she threw her head back with a whine. There was a sharp scrape of his teeth against her labia, his warm breath and clever tongue slipping and swirling against her engorged flesh. “Feels so good,” she breathed. This was a pleasure beyond anything she had fantasized about. Fistfuls of his hair, soft and dark, slid through her fingers, and she tugged every time he circled her clit with his tongue, keeping him close.

Her ex-husband had never even attempted to pleasure her this way. Those perfunctory, faceless fumbles in the dark couldn’t compare to the glory of sharing herself with Coinneach body and soul, giving and taking pleasure from one another, and she never wanted it to end.

She glanced down, momentarily worried for his leg—kneeling as he was at this angle couldn’t be good—but he wasn’t protesting and she didn’t want him to stop the incredible things he was doing with his mouth and hands. Imagining his touch was pleasurable, but nothing had prepared her for the fiery sensation of his greedy, velvet tongue devouring her. Desperate to be filled, her body pulsed, chasing its climax, even as she relished the warm pleasure coursing through her and never wanted it to end.

Belle was writhing for him as his mouth moved over her, keening and tossing her head, her hips jutting against his face. He’d done this to her, made her forget about the disaster in the room next door and Zelena, and he reveled in the strange, senseless power he possessed to make her desire him as he did her.

“Please, oh, please, Coinneach,” she begged.
Gold slid a finger into her, his eyes rolling back as she parted like melting butter. She was tight, and wet, and so, so hot. He added a second finger, crooking them slightly and then began to pump in a rhythm that made her cry out. Every little moan and sigh of pleasure made his cock swell and twitch and he palmed himself with his free hand, losing himself in the pleasure and in the beautiful woman moaning for more of him. He sucked at her clit, hooking his fingers within and finding that spot that drove her wild. When she whined, high and long, then bit her lip and called his name, he nearly spent himself. No lover had ever screamed for him. Not his wife, nor either of his short-lived mistresses, but Belle’s enthusiastic responses were making him mad with desire.

“Come in my mouth, sweetheart,” he breathed against her swollen flesh. “Let me hear you scream.”

Belle broke at his words, sobbing and bucking her hips against his face as a gush of liquid came pouring out of her, and he drank every luxurious drop. He gently held her, coaxing her through the aftershocks with lazy licks at her inner thighs. She looked down at him with heavy, sated eyes.

“You’re still wearing too many clothes,” she said, struggling to recover. He was disheveled, his shirt unbuttoned to reveal his lean torso, one of the tails jutting upward atop his cock, which looked ready to burst through his trousers. She palmed him with a giggle and he closed his eyes, his chest heaving. “This can’t be comfortable, my love.” She leaned forward to unzip his trousers, peeling his pants and silk boxers down in one swift motion.

Belle drew him out and wrapped her hand around his length, then dipped her fingers into herself and painted her essence, sticky and warm, all over his cock.

A pleasurable shudder coursed through him and he swore.

“Did you?” Her hands were a tender tease, her thumb flicking over his weeping slit.

“Did I what, angel?” He sucked in a breath and slammed his eyes shut. She was running her fingers along the underside of his cock and he could barely form a coherent thought.

“Touch yourself thinking of me?” A light scratch of her nails against his balls, then another. He opened his eyes to watch her, and she licked her lips, her gaze dark and hungry.

“Yes,” he confessed, his back arching as he strained toward her.

He was beautiful, the head of him thick and purple with need, glistening with their mingled fluids. Belle ran her teeth over her lower lip, wanting to taste him, the fantasy of taking him in her mouth making her throb anew between her legs.

She slid from the foot of the bed to the floor, both of them on their knees facing each other. She helped him to stand, catching a drop of pre-cum with a finger as he rose, then sucked it into her mouth while he watched.

“God, Belle.”

Her laugh was low and throaty as she squeezed his arse, then licked a long strip up his cock from base to head, then swirled her tongue around the tip until he cried out.

Panting, he grasped her wrists and hauled her to her feet so they were eye-to-eye. “Get on the bed!”

A new wave of desire flooded her at his rough, frantic tone. She purred like a kitten, circling his nipples with her nails, then giggled when he gave her a light, gentle push. She swatted at his backside then pitched backward, bouncing on the bed with another laugh. He climbed on the bed slowly, joining her, lowering himself until every inch of their bodies touched, the weight of him
pressing her into the mattress, pinning her down. He laced his fingers through hers, squeezing her hands and lifting them over her head, lowering his lips to her nipples as her breasts lifted higher in the new position.

Belle felt herself grow wetter at the sensation of him blanketing her, holding her down as he licked one taut nipple. His licks and nips grew stronger, and he opened his mouth wide to take in as much of her breast as possible, sucking hard. Her back arched slightly, as much as she could beneath the hot press of his hips, and she felt the searing heat of his cock throb against her thigh. She began to writhe, the pleasure beginning to overtake her, and she lost herself in arousal. Her hips began to undulate beneath him, and he raised his head, her breast still in his mouth, and pulled back from her nipple, suckling so hard that the release was just on the pleasurable side of pain. She was drenched, dripping and running down her slit, the slick friction as she writhed beneath her lover driving her body to begin the climb again.

“Please, please. Coinneach, please,” she breathed, shame and pride abandoned; she was begging for him.

“Tell me, sweetheart,” he said, bringing his lips to hers, kissing her slowly as he pushed her back into the mattress, trying to still her undulating body. She was desperate, close to losing control, and he loved keeping her there, right on the edge of glory. “Tell me what you want.”

“You,” she whimpered. “Inside me. Now!”

Gold released one of her hands and rolled to his side, watching this beautiful creature, her desperate pleas and soft skin and sweet smell overwhelming his senses. His cock surged even harder, swelling at the sight of her red engorged nipples against her breasts. He could come just by listening to her beg, he thought, as he reached between their slick bodies to slip two fingers inside her dripping core. Her back arched like a bow as he fingered her.

“Yes! Yes!” she cried out, her need to be stretched and filled the only reality that mattered.

He was teasing, he knew, but he couldn’t get enough of her. She was so wet and tight and responsive, her channel hot and throbbing, and he groaned as she tightened around his fingers. He had to be inside her now, so he withdrew, and Belle’s disappointed whimper was music to his ears. He brought his fingers to his lips, licking off some of her sticky, sweet juices. He then lowered his shining fingers to her mouth, pressing one between her lips.

“See how wonderful you taste?”

Belle started as he pushed the finger past her lips, her own salty sweetness melting in her mouth, then he swept his fingers down her chin to lightly grasp her neck.

“You’re mine,” he said.

Belle gasped at the feeling of his fingers cradling her throat, then dragging down toward her collarbone, relishing the deep, satisfying feeling of finally belonging to him, to abandoning control and giving it to her desires.

“Yes, always. Yours,” she breathed, and he kissed her, long and deep. Belle rose, and he rolled to his back, pulling her with him. She broke the kiss, the glint in her eye mischievous and determined, and she threw a leg over him, straddling his hips, and moved in small motions over his cock, her nipples teasing his chest as she coated him with her arousal.

“And you’re mine.” She sat up straight, her hands planted on the smooth plane of his belly as she
positioned herself on top. Her eyes fluttered closed as she began to rock, his rough pubic hair and the hot, hard column of his cock underneath her quickly reigniting her flame. She raised up, readying herself, and grabbed his cock, rubbing the head against her clit before positioning him at her opening.

She impaled herself upon him with a long moan. “Oh God, yes!” She mewled, arching her back, bringing her hands behind her to support herself on his legs. He lurched forward to suck on her neck, feeling her pulse beat against the tip of his tongue. She bounced and rolled her hips on him as she rode his cock, dipping and rising, her wet heat striking the base of him on every glorious down stroke.

Higher and higher she climbed, rising and falling on his cock, and Gold’s mouth dropped open as he watched himself stretch her, their bodies glistening with sweat and arousal in the low light.

“God,” he groaned, knowing he couldn’t last, and wanting Belle to be satisfied again before taking his own release. With one hand he grabbed and squeezed her breast, pulling and tugging the nipple until it was twice its normal size. Then he reached down to where they joined, where Belle had shifted into a rolling pattern, and his thumb pressed against her clit, hard.

Belle’s head rolled back, exposing her gorgeous, long neck. He pressed her clit harder and felt her flutter, her walls beginning to tighten around him. Small, throaty cries were wrung from her throat with each thrust, and he moved his thumb back and forth over her fleshy bundle of nerves, quickening the pace and increasing the pressure.

“Coinneach!” She screamed, a low, guttural cry.

Her channel clamped around his cock and she stilled, so Gold began to pump from underneath, prolonging her orgasm and making her squeeze him impossibly tight. Gold’s balls were tight, aching, and hot as she rode out her pleasure, and then he broke, the heat and the pressure and her beauty too much to hold back.

“Belle!” he cried as he pumped and snapped his hips in a primal rhythm, shooting his seed deep inside her. The bloom of warmth from their mingled pleasure flooded them both and they moaned in unison.

She panted as she began to come down and he pressed his forehead against hers, gasping as she quieted against him, breasts heaving, their breathing fast and hard, eyes locking. He gave her a small smile—words had escaped them both. Belle lowered and rolled to his side, and his arm slid underneath her to curl around the small of her back, holding her close, keeping her safe and warm.

“That…that was amazing,” he sighed when his breathing slowed enough to speak. “No coming back from that.”

She hitched a breath and wrapped her legs around his, snuggling against his chest. “Agreed. Much better than I imagined in the tub.”

She sounded content and sated, a thread of rawness in her voice from crying out in pleasure, and he felt a smug jolt of satisfaction for pleasing her.

“But this bed is terrible. How could I make you sleep here?” she asked.

“Beats a coffin,” he deadpanned, pulling the duvet up and smoothing it over Belle’s shoulders.

She giggled. “Just barely. Time to invest in a new mattress.” She nestled against him, fitting herself between the groove in the mattress and his body. Then her laughing gaze turned serious, searching.
“What’s on your mind?” He stroked her arms with light, butterfly touches.

She laid her head down on his chest and hid her face. Her curls tickled his chest, her voice no more than a whisper. “If you say anything now, I’ll believe it.”
Friday Morning

Belle woke at dawn, the room barely light and the sky streaked with high clouds, yellow and pink reflecting the rising sun. She reached for Gold but he was gone. The sheets on his side of the bed were cold, and the only evidence he had been there was the dented pillow beside her and the lingering scent of his aftershave.

Rising, she slid her arms into Gold’s worn brown bathrobe and tied the threadbare sash, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she padded out of his bedroom and into the hallway, her body still sluggish and sore from their lovemaking. She paused in front of her closed bedroom door where the ceiling had caved and shuddered, then checked the living room, kitchen, and bathroom. Gold was nowhere in the house, and a peek out the side window confirmed her suspicions; the black, hulking shadow of his black Cadillac was missing, the crime scene tape that had been stretched across his property for most of the week pooled in the gravel at the bottom of the driveway.

Worried for him, her heart quickened to a staccato beat and she wrapped her arms around herself. Gold had warned her that he intended to end the charade, to admit his death had been faked, but he still wasn’t convinced Zelena was a danger. She had to find him before Zelena discovered he was still alive.

The shop. Instinct told her it was the first place he would go, just as she somehow knew he had a good reason for leaving her in bed without a word. It was too late to save her heart, but it wasn’t too late to admit the truth to herself or to him: she’d convinced him to fake his death because she wanted to be close to him.

Perhaps she was no better than Zelena Kelly, but she loved him, and whatever happened next, she wasn’t going to let him face it alone.

The pawnshop was unlocked but silent except for the low hum of the air conditioner, which was already chugging in the humid summer air. Belle’s arms pebbled with gooseflesh; the normally pristine display cases were dulled by a thin coat of dust and the store smelled slightly musty from being closed up for almost a week. She rubbed her chilly arms and crossed the curtain barrier into the back room. She’d been in Gold’s shop as a customer several times, but she’d never ventured into his work area. She had no idea what she would find or what she was looking for, but her instinct cried
louder and louder with each passing moment. She would start her search here.

“A visitor.” Zelena was perched at a desk in the corner, legs crossed with practiced ease, as though she owned the shop. “How deliciously unexpected.”

Fear dried Belle’s mouth to cotton, but she lifted her chin and met Zelena’s icy gaze. “What are you doing here, Miss Kelly?”

Zelena shot her a scornful look and evaded the question. “Look who’s sniffing around Gold’s shop like a dog begging for scraps.”

Belle smiled coldly. “I think you must be projecting.”

Zelena’s answering laugh was low and mean. “Gold’s had every type of woman there is, Brittany, but I don’t believe I’ve ever seen him with a prissy little librarian.”

White hot fury surged through her, and she nearly blurted that they’d spent the night together. No, Gold was supposed to be dead. Gloatting about their fledgling relationship would make her no better than the woman standing in front of her.

“Right. He’d be much better suited for a…what is it you do for a living again? Belle snapped her fingers. “Oh, yes, gold-digger.”

Zelena glared.

Belle willed herself to calm down. “What difference does it make now? Mr. Gold is dead.” She found a small, sharp edge of a fingernail to pick at.

“Yes, I know. Pity.” Zelena’s smile was a cruel, red line as she reached for an account book in the corner of the desk and began paging through it.

The pulse in Belle’s throat began to jump again, and she scanned the room looking for clues or something to help. “I thought you were devastated.”

“It’s called acting, Bridget.” Zelena was still looking at the ledger. “You really should learn to lie, you know. Did he hire you or something? Are you the executor of his will? Funeral planner?”

“No,” Belle said, still searching the cluttered workspace for a trap or a distraction. “We were only neighbors.”

There it was. Belle’s eyes landed on a small tape-recorder in the center of the worktable. While Zelena’s head was bent over Gold’s books, Belle whispered a quick prayer as she pressed the record button. She blew out a silent huff of relief when the tape started to roll.

“So what are your plans now that Gold is dead?” Belle stopped hugging herself against the sharp air and took a step forward, trying to look more at ease.

“Why to take over the shop, of course. It would be a shame for it to sit here empty.” Zelena stood up and ambled to the work table, then picked up a broken mantel clock and fingered a gear. “Gold’s things should be cared for properly. He would want it this way.”

Belle wondered how Zelena knew anything about what Gold wanted, but she swallowed and waited for her to continue. Experience had taught her that uncomfortable stretches of silence usually kept people talking. Be patient.
“I asked him to make me a partner,” she continued, her voice dripping with disdain. “To be an apprentice in his shop. I thought he could teach me about antiques, jewelry, the art of the sale. But he cast me aside, said he wanted his son to join the family business. But his son isn’t here. I am.”

Belle winced at her shrill, possessive tone. “His son is family. You can’t simply take over someone’s business, Zelena. You don’t have a right to it.”

“Family?” Zelena’s high-pitched, hyena-like laugh caused Belle’s insides to tremble. “What does family mean anyway? I was her daughter, too, but she always loved her more than she loved me.”

Zelena leaned down and murmured into the speaker of an antique radio, then pressed her ear to it with a manic giggle. “Regina got everything. Everything! Now it’s my turn.”

Belle’s eyes widened with awareness. “Is that why you stole Regina’s necklace?” she asked softly. “The one from her mother?”

“Stole?” Zelena’s head snapped up with a whine. “I didn’t steal. I claimed what was rightfully mine. Mother should have given it to me. I’m the oldest!”

“I see.” Belle nodded around the knot in her throat. “And Mary Margaret Nolan’s brooch? Leroy Kline’s bracelet?” She ticked off the items Zelena had taken from people in town. The tension in the air grew more palpable, and Belle bit her lower lip with worry; the tall redhead was beginning to pace nervously, eyes blown wide and hands flailing.

Zelena dragged shaking, spindly fingers down her skirt, her motions becoming increasingly agitated. A frenzied gleam sparked in her eyes. “They’ll get over it. By the way, how did you like your little surprises?” She giggled, punctuating her threatening posture.

Belle’s blood ran ice cold as she tried to stall for time and keep Zelena talking. “So it was you. The knife, the shaving cream, the bookshelf.” Belle suppressed a shiver. “The roof. H-how?”

Zelena cackled, a shrill hysterical noise. “You’re somewhat new in town, Beverly, but I’m not. I grew up in that pathetic little shack you call a happy home, while my sister grew up across town with our mother in a big, fancy house like Gold’s. I know every inch of your little house, including all the best haunts and hideouts.” Zelena ran a long nail the color of new blood along the top of Gold’s battered walnut desk.

“My attempts to behead you in your sleep with your own bedroom ceiling weren’t successful, but perhaps the exposure to asbestos will catch up with you. Drip, drip, drip.” She cackled again. “It’s a much more agonizing, slower death. The rain was the perfect excuse to fiddle with the water tanks.”

Belle was now sandwiched between the shelves lining the wall and the worktable, and Zelena began to advance toward her, a menacing glint in her eyes.

“Then again—” Zelena pulled out her gun with a casual wave—“I don’t like to leave things to chance.”

Belle faltered, her feet losing purchase on the polished wood floor, and she reached behind her to steady herself on the shelf at her back. Her fingers found the metal supports and she squeezed hard.

“Then again, you lumbering into Gold’s shop,” Zelena said. Her eyes were strange and otherworldly as she pointed the gun at Belle’s heart. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I don’t imagine you expected me at all, dearie.”

Gold. He was here. He’d come to rescue her.
The blood drained from Zelena’s face, her smug expression melting away, and she jumped back, shuffling until she was pressed against the worktable, still stretching the gun toward Belle with a shaking hand. Belle’s trembling body made a desperate jerk in his direction.

Forcing himself not to meet Belle’s searching, fearful gaze, he aimed his gun at Zelena’s head with a grimace. “You were right, Belle,” he said without taking his eyes off his target. “Faking one’s death does have its uses.”

“You…but she said you’re….” Zelena dropped the gun, hysteria reflected in her eyes, black pupils swallowing cold-as-ice blue, her pale face twisted with rage.

“It was a ruse,” he replied flatly.

“Why?” she whined again, beginning to snivel.

“I have Belle to thank. She suspected you were a jewel thief who wanted me dead. Turns out she was right.”

He glanced at Belle’s pinched, frightened face and anger burned in his gut, hot and raw. Zelena’s antics had crossed the line from creepy to attempted murder. In the wee hours of the morning he had left Belle, warm and sleeping in his bed, to pick through the rubble in her bedroom, unable to deny the mounting evidence of Zelena’s depravity. Among the debris he had found a lockbox stuffed with jewelry, some of it matching the description of the stolen items.

“No! You’ve got it all wrong, Gold.” Zelena stretched out desperate hands. “All I wanted was a chance to prove myself to you. I was heartbroken when she told me you’d died.” Zelena slid a malicious look in Belle’s direction.

“So in your grief you hid a box filled with stolen jewelry in Belle’s ceiling?” He barked a harsh, humorless laugh. “Did you really believe you could frame her for theft and get away with it?”

“You two are the ones who should be arrested! For fraud!” She screamed, lunging toward him, her teeth sinking into his bicep. The sharp, stinging bite forced him to lower the gun, and she slammed her head into his chest, forcing him off-balance. He staggered back, catching himself before he hit the floor.

When he looked up, Zelena was slumped on the floor unconscious and Belle was standing over her limp form holding an antique volume of Shakespeare in her quivering arms. She dropped the book to the floor with a high-pitched cry.

“Belle!” Gold ran to her, wrapping both of his arms around her waist and hauling her against his chest. She buried her face against his shirt, shaking and sobbing. “Just breathe, baby, I’m here. It’s okay. It’s okay. She can’t hurt us anymore.”

After several long minutes, she raised her head and sniffled. “Thank you for getting here when you did,” she said to his shoulder, still shaking like a leaf in a winter squall.

He ducked his chin, his lips desperately seeking hers, and punished her mouth with a bruising kiss. “It was nothing,” he said, masking his own relief behind a teasing smile. “I was being neighborly.”

“Is that so?” She was smiling at him, but her eyes carried a haunted strain, as though she feared what might come next.

During a brief lapse in judgment after they’d made love, he’d lain in bed watching her sleep, all the
while rehearsing the hollow words he would say. *I'm not good enough for you. Eventually you’ll leave. We have no future.* Coward that he was, he had decided to walk away first to save them both the heartache.

Looking at her now, he knew he could never force those words past his lips, however true they might be. His brittle, underused heart was filled with his wonderful neighbor, each frustrating, adorable aspect of her, from her silly clumsiness and her jaw-dropping smile, to the way her hair fell around her shoulders in lush, radiant waves that framed her face and neck. She’d ruined his boring, empty life with her kisses and her sunshine and her brûléed banana oatmeal.

“Belle, I’m sorry. I should have left a note this morning, woken you, said *something.* When I remembered that Zelena’s mother Cora once owned your home, I realized you were right—Zelena had been the one to play all those dirty pranks. On a hunch, I picked through the rubble in your bedroom looking for evidence and I found this.” He gestured toward the lockbox filled with stolen jewelry. “I shouldn’t have doubted you. You were right all along, sweetheart.”

Her eyes hit the floor. “I’m no better than she is,” she said sadly. “I lied too.”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed and twisted her fingers together. “I was worried about Zelena hurting you, but it’s not the reason I asked you to fake your death. I know you can take care of yourself.” Her wet, vulnerable gaze met his. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for so long…I convinced myself…I thought maybe if you stayed with me I could make you love me, or at least I could pretend for a little while. I’m so sorry, Gold.”

“You’re sorry for loving me?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She looked away again.

“I can assure you, Belle, nothing that happened between us was me pretending.” He lifted her hands and cradled them against his chest. “Do you remember when you asked me if there was anything I liked about you?”

She nodded miserably and tried to withdraw her hands, but he held her tight, massaging her knuckles in small, slow circles.

“You should have been asking if there was anything I liked about *me.* I’m not a great catch, Belle. I’ve had a short but terrible string of relationships, I have a grown son I rarely see, and I’m an old, crabby cripple who’s twenty years older than you.”

Her eyes clouded with confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t, sweetheart—that’s why I love you. None of my shortcomings matter to you. You don’t even see them.” He drew her fingers up his chest to his lips. “Belle, the thing I like best about myself is you.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes glinting with happy tears.

The Sheriff’s yellow Volkswagon bug arrived as Belle tucked her head under Gold’s chin with a contented sigh, sirens blaring in the otherwise sleepy street.

From the floor, an unconscious Zelena moaned, and Belle reluctantly moved out of Gold’s arms long enough to check the strength of the ropes tied around her ankles and wrists.
Gold stepped behind her, making Belle’s neck prickle as he nuzzled her hair. “Oh good,” he said wryly when the car pulled into the alley beside the shop. “Jefferson’s here just in time to be no help at all.”

Belle clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle.

The side door of the shop burst open, swinging so hard it rattled the walls of the store. “Papa? What the hell is going on?”

A young man bounded toward them and Belle gasped. Gold’s son, Neal.

“You’re alive, thank God!” The younger man ran a rough hand through a thick crop of dark curls, making them stand on end. “I’ve been worried sick.”

“Neal? What are you doing here?” Gold’s jaw was slack, his cheeks mottled with color. Belle couldn’t hold back her smile at the sight of the man she loved flushed with surprise.

“A friend of Emma’s—Sheriff Swan, I mean—called and told her you were dead. Who’s this?” Neal pointed his finger in her direction.

“Belle, this is my son, Neal. Neal, this is Belle. She’s…” Gold reached for her hand and she squeezed his fingers in reassurance. “We’re…I…”

“I’m his favorite neighbor,” Belle said, coming to his rescue. She offered her other hand to Neal with a welcoming smile. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Oh!” Neal’s grip was warm and firm and he flashed her a dimpled smile so like his father’s that her heart flip-flopped. “You’re the cute next door neighbor. Great to meet you, Belle. Papa told me about you.”

“Did he now?” She tilted her head toward Gold and smirked.

“No,” he sputtered, the tips of his adorable pixie ears turning pink.

“No to what?” Belle blinked at him, unable to resist the chance to tease him. “No, we aren’t neighbors? Or no, I’m not cute?” For years she’d believed herself to be invisible to him, but apparently she’d been quite the topic.

“You’re the one who bakes all those fantastic desserts, right?” Neal asked. “Papa was talking about this blueberry cake you make with orange zest.”

“Stilted conversations, huh?” Belle swatted Gold’s arm playfully, remembering his worries about his relationship with Neal as they worked on his obituary. Despite what Gold believed, Neal clearly loved his father and listened to what he had to say.

Gold pinched the bridge of his nose, his wary expression reminding her of a cornered puppy. “One time. I mentioned you one time.”

“Belle is the only person in Storybrooke you ever talk about, Papa.”

“Perhaps I understated things a fraction,” Gold allowed as Emma Swan handcuffed Zelena and hoisted her to her feet. “I did have to help you make the obituary interesting, Belle. Can’t have my reputation as the town hermit completely in tatters.”

“You also said she was beautiful.” Neal elbowed his father, and Belle blushed at the compliment.
“Not helping, son.”

“Wow, it’s miracle you two fell for each other,” Emma drawled, holding a semi-conscious Zelena upright. She looked at the tape recorder on the workbench and smiled at Belle. “I’ll be back for the taped confession. Quick thinking, Belle. And when you’re ready, come down to the station and make a statement. I’m so glad you’re all right.”

“No thanks to you!” Gold barked. “Flitting off to New York City and leaving that gigolo Jefferson in charge!”

“Easy Papa,” Neal said quietly, his big brown eyes shining toward the sheriff. “Emma’s entitled to a vacation too.”

Belle looked between Emma and Neal with a knowing smile. “I know you’re trying to protect me, love, but I think Neal might have been the subject of Emma’s vacation,” she said, rubbing Gold’s arm in a soothing pattern.

“Yes, yes, fine,” he told Belle. Then to Emma, “I’ll consider forgiving you, Miss Swan, if you give your deputy a special project.” He scowled. “Something that chains him to a desk for the next month or so should suffice.”

Emma winked and pushed Zelena out the side door. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Don’t be too hard on Jeff,” Belle said, stroking a sensitive place on her neck where Gold had marked her last night. “He was rather instrumental in pushing us together.”

“Fair enough,” Gold said gruffly, then gave her a soft, sweet peck on the lips.

“So Papa,” Neal said, clearing his throat. “How would you feel about me moving back home?”

“I would love nothing more, but what brought this on?”

Neal slid a glance out the side window into the alley, where Emma had finished reading Zelena her rights and was pushing her into the car. “I need to be closer to family and…other things in Storybrooke.”

“Things like Miss Swan,” Gold said baldly. “I should have known it was about a woman.”

“How’s that?” Neal retorted.

“Because it’s always about a woman. How do you think I wound up faking my own death?” He pulled Belle into his arms with a lopsided grin and kissed her again. “I’m a lucky man.”

Neal raised an eyebrow. “This sounds like a story I need to hear.”

“Maybe we could continue this conversation over breakfast,” Belle offered as her stomach rumbled. “I can make my famous baked oatmeal?”

Gold’s answering smile was wicked. “We’ll stop for bagels at Granny’s first.”

“You sure you’re ready to reveal yourself to the entire town?” she asked, in surprise.

He flashed her another grin and nodded. “No time like the present to come back from the dead.”

*The End*
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this little caper! I hope you liked reading it as much as I liked writing it.

Comments are always welcome!

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