Vigilante Rose

by rebel_diamond

Summary

The small business owners in Hyperion Heights are the targets of a major crime wave. When the police, especially a particularly irritating detective, refuse to do anything about it, Belle decides to save her bookstore and the city she loves herself. With help from her costumer friend, Jefferson, Belle develops a secret alter ego to defend Hyperion Heights from those who mean it harm.

Detective Weaver has a pile of unsolved break-ins on his desk and a vigilante who thinks she can take the law into her own hands. Now, he not only has to catch the vandals but uncover the identity of a mysterious masked woman who manages to get to every crime scene before he does. All while fighting his growing attraction to the latest victim, a local bookstore owner.

When their two trails begin to converge, revealing something even more sinister than they imagined, their mutual desire becomes the least of their problems.

Based on this Rumbelle Prompt:
http://rumbelleprompts.tumblr.com/post/173724656640/belle-is-a-librarian-who-works-at-dodgsons-books
Chapter 1

A dull thud came from outside her store as something hit the bottom of the cardboard box. Belle had placed it there last week with 'Community Food Drive' scrawled in marker on one of the flaps. She was hoping to one day upgrade the receptacle to a Little Free Pantry. She could picture it now. A cheerful, permanent wood house outside Dodgson's Books. Like the Little Free Libraries she followed on Instagram.

“Hyperion Heights thanks you!” Belle called through the window. The retreating back, if he had heard her, ignored her.

Belle stood on tiptoes to peer out the window and craned her neck to see what the person had left. The ladder she perched on while hanging window decorations creaked ominously beneath her. She clutched the sides tighter. Customers told her she needed to upgrade to a lighter, sturdier stainless steel model. But she stubbornly clung to her old wooden one. It had character and fit with the overall aesthetic of her store.

Belle was happy to see the donation, even if it was another useless can of expired pumpkin. Seemed like there were more and more have-nots in Hyperion Heights these and days. Those that 'had' were less inclined to share than ever before.

Belle gingerly descended and picked her way across the floor. Craft supplies littered the tile, and she brushed an errant piece of streamer off her sweater as she went. She stood back to admire her new book display. It wasn’t an exhibit of shiny, brand new books like some of the Seattle bookstores she’d visited, but it was hers. She’d themed this one around adventure novels. The Mysterious Island was there. As well as Moby Dick, The Hobbit, The Princess Bride, and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. She’d also added a few contemporary adventure and romantic suspense novels by Naomi Novik and Kat Martin. Belle gave priority to female author representation in all her genre displays. No reason to let men have all the fun.

Christened as an homage to Lewis Carroll’s real name, Dodgson's Books was the only bookstore in Hyperion Heights. It offered gently used books, which Belle painstakingly curated. The large, tattered collection included many from her own personal shelves. Sadly, she couldn’t afford to stock all the best sellers. But she did her best to meet the demands of the Hyperion Heights community. Which, admittedly, were few and far between. Hyperion Heights had one of the lowest child and adult literacy rates in the state of Washington. Part of this depressing distinction could be blamed on funding. The schools in Hyperion Heights were underfunded. As was the local library, usually tasked to pick up the slack. Belle was actually a librarian by trade. For several years she was the Young Adult librarian at the Hyperion Heights Free Library. Like many public libraries, they’d been a shelter for the homeless, mentally ill, and young adults with difficult home lives. She'd loved her job and the people there. She helped Hyperion Heights residents apply for jobs and connect with social services. She'd taught basic computer skills, and been an understanding ear for the kids who didn’t have one at home. All rewarding, albeit demanding, tasks. But when the library’s budget got cut by the local government, so did the library’s operating hours. As well as her position.

Belle joined the ranks of unemployed librarians everywhere. Unlike others in her profession, she was unwilling to leave the only place she knew as home. So Belle had used her meager savings and taken advantage of the low-rent in town to open up her own bookstore. She hoped to help ease some of the lost local programming through Dodgson's. She offered after-school tutoring and teen and adult bookclubs.
She dreamed of expanding the collection and services. She’d also love to have a proper coffee shop in the back. Right now she served hot chocolate out of an ancient coffee urn. Every morning she baked and arranged cookies and muffins on a tiered tray at the front desk. They came at a suggested donation of fifty cents each. Not everyone in Hyperion Heights could afford to pay. That included a lot of her friends from the library who now hung out in Dodgson’s when the library closed. Belle didn’t mind. If they needed a safe space, Belle was happy to be it.

A cheerful ringtone sounded and Belle plucked her phone off the counter. Automatically her thumb moved to slide to answer. It was most likely her dad, up early to make deliveries on the other side of the world and calling to check in. Their Australian and US time zones made catching up difficult. So they called each other at odd times of the day just to say hello. At the last possible moment her finger hovered over the screen. She stared down at the number. Familiar, but not her father’s. She stood, frozen with indecision until the call went to voicemail. After a moment, the phone beeped, signaling a new message, and making her jump. She fumbled to unlock the screen and access her messages.

“Belle, it’s—” Reflexively she deleted the message without listening to the rest of it. She knew who it was and why he was calling. She should have expected it, same as every year. She berated herself for letting it catch her by surprise. She had let it go to voicemail, same as last year and the year before that. He’d only call once. In past years it was multiple times in the weeks leading up to and after the anniversary. But now she knew he’d make the one attempt and then give up on her. She momentarily felt guilty for not answering but what was there to talk about anymore? She was talked out.

Clutching her phone, Belle painfully missed her father anew. So much so that she couldn’t bring herself to call him right away because she knew she’d cry the second she heard his voice. Her gaze automatically wandered to the elaborate flower arrangement on the desk. It was one of many scattered around the store. Passersby often mistook Dodgson’s for a flower shop. Her parents had owned a flower shop in Hyperion Heights when she was growing up. There were flowers around the shop and her apartment year-round. They made anyplace feel like home. She thumbed the soft petal of a purple Aster. She shook her head. She’d have to call her dad after she cleaned up the mess she’d made creating the window display.

She left the phone on the desk. Belle crouched down as well as her heels would allow and scooped up the scraps of neon fliers. She’d recycled them into window display material. Old black ink shown through most of the pages. Detritus from various book drives, fundraisers, and petitions she’d sponsored over the years. Government officials believed they could solve crime by increasing police. Instead of investing in social programs that prevents crime from happening. Belle had nothing in particular against the local police. But over the past several years she watched money get siphoned away from community services and given to law enforcement. She hadn’t seen a corresponding drop in crime. In fact, it was getting worse. Break-ins and robberies of local storefronts were on the rise.

As a librarian she’d pleaded with the local precinct to partner with the library. Instead they’d financially strangled her branch until they were forced to cut her position. So Belle had found herself in an impossible cycle. How could the people of Hyperion Heights read more, graduate high school, or get their GED, if they had limited access to books? How would they ever get ahead in life and thereby no longer rely on nefarious means? So, when she was let go from the library, Belle had poured her heart, soul, and entire savings account into Dodgson’s.

An account that was quickly dwindling. A situation most of Hyperion Height’s small business owners found themselves in. None of them helped along by Victoria Belfrey, CEO of Belfrey Developments. Victoria was buying out many of the older businesses in Hyperion Heights. It was
her effort to gentrify the neighborhood. Many well-established business people had sold out already. Roni, the local bar owner, was currently debating on whether to sell to Victoria. Her decision would be the canary in the coal mine for the rest of Hyperion Heights. The situation did not bode well for any of the burgeoning entrepreneurs.

When a community falls on hard times, art, music, and books are usually the first things to go. But Belle knew firsthand how instrumental books could be. In helping people find jobs, yes, but also helping people escape their troubles. To imagine a world bigger than themselves. To discover the possibilities of the world when your reality is telling you that you can’t. Her gift was to share this with her home, and Hyperion Heights was her home. And it needed books, and her, now more than ever. Books had helped Belle at a time in her life when nothing would be alright ever again, when she lost her mom. Her mother had shared books with her when she was alive and now they were her comfort after she was gone. If she could give one person that same iota of comfort, then her little bookstore was a success. Maybe not financially, but a success nonetheless.

It wasn’t just her. Most of Hyperion Height’s entrepreneurs were struggling. At one point, Sabine, another businesswoman, had gone so far as to run a pop-up beignet shop out of Mr. Cluck’s. This was after her food license was unfairly denied by the local government. Belle couldn’t blame her for taking her future into her own hands. She was working around a system designed to not help her. The only one seemingly never selling and leaving was Hilda, the battleaxe who ran the bakery. She’d terrified generations of children, Belle included. Her intimidating nature had kept Victoria at bay.

The bell above the front door rang. Belle stood and stashed the craft supplies on the front desk. Tilly rushed in, grabbing a muffin from the plate at the front desk as she passed by. She pocketed it without breaking her stride. She knew she didn’t have to hide taking food from Belle, but she guessed habits were hard to break.

Tilly was one of the kids that Belle knew well from the library. When she’d moved on and opened Dodgson’s, Tilly had loyally followed her. They shared a mutual love of the travel section. They could spend hours pouring over books and talking about places they’d never been to. Tilly was homeless and struggled with mental illness. She got into scrapes with the law sometimes, but she was a really sweet kid. Most worryingly, she had no access to consistent health care and was prone to manic episodes. But she also had a gentle heart that would protect a giant. She saw the good in people, a characteristic that Belle recognized in herself. Belle supported traditional medicine. But she also believed in the transformative power of books. She knew what it had done for her mother and for herself. Reading also seemed to give Tilly some great sense of relief on her more manic days. The other balm was Tilly’s friend, Robin. Belle thought there might be more to to relationship than that, but didn’t want to push.

“Miss B., did you hear what happened?” the words came out in a rush but Belle understood. ‘Miss B.’ was a holdover from her days at the library, when the smaller kids called her Miss Belle.

“Hi, Tilly,” Belle greeted calmly. Tilly was easily excitable. You never knew if it was something legitimately serious, or it could be one of her less coherent days. Either way, Belle preferred to be a reliably serene presence in her life. “No, what happened?” Belle waited, letting Tilly have her complete attention.

“Sabine’s got blown up!”
“Blown up?” Belle repeated, abandoning her tranquil tone. She must have heard Tilly wrong. She was just thinking about Sabine. She's just seen Sabine. She'd bought a beignet off her just last night on her way home from the bookstore.

“Yes,” Tilly hurried on. The girl grew impatient when you didn’t understand her right away. “Blown up! You know,” she mimed striking a match on her leg and throwing it. “Boom!” she made a loud explosion noise and threw her hands wide, making Belle jump.

“Oh no,” Belle lowered herself into one of the nearby chairs.

Not again, thought Belle automatically. It could have been an accident, but she strongly doubted it. There’d been a series of incidents around town that on the face of things looked like accidents. Only to be revealed later by the police that there had been tampering and malicious intent. Hyperion Heights was riddled with crime, it wasn’t her imagination. It was absolutely getting worse. The people who financially could handle it the least were suffering the most. Even if you had great insurance, which most of them did not. The loss in business alone while you fixed the place up was enough to sink a vulnerable business.

"Tilly, could you hand me my phone," she reached across the room towards the counter. She wasn’t sure her legs would hold her if she stood up. Tilly jumped across the room and back. It only took her a minute to find the local news lead story. It featured truly horrific photographs of the charred remnants of Rollin’ Bayou.

Sabine, like herself, was one of the newer business owners. Young people like them had begun taking advantage of the low rent in the ungentrified part of Hyperion Heights to start the businesses of their dreams. Sabine was one of Hyperion Heights’ greatest success stories. She'd gone from a Mr. Cluck’s Chicken Shack employee to owning her own food truck. Belle had gone to the grand opening and had the most delicious beignet she’d ever eaten. Sabine was a symbol of what Hyperion Heights could be if given the chance.

Now it was gone.

Problems had started when Victoria began increasing rent for no reason. Which was why Sabine had decided on a food truck instead of a storefront. Now, on top of that, there was a serial vandal on the loose, targeting local businesses.

“Poor Sabine. Is she okay?” Belle asked, her heart breaking for her fellow small business owner.

Tilly tended to know everything about Hyperion Heights. Even things she shouldn't. A combination of her naturally curious nature and living on the streets.

“She’s real torn up about it," she offered. "But nobody’s dead if that’s what you mean,” she added flippantly. She flopped down in the chair across from Belle and took a huge bite of muffin.

Belle could only hope Sabine had the means and willingness to rebuild. Many before her hadn’t. They’d pulled up stakes and left Hyperion Heights instead. More and more of the neighborhood’s best and brightest were leaving. Brain drain, they called it.

Belle didn’t know what she’d do if she was in Sabine’s place. With no library, and no bookstore, she wouldn’t know what to do next. She could try the WorkBunny app for odd jobs, but how long would that sustain her? Would it even cover her rent? She didn’t have enough money left in her
bank account to afford Belfrey’s rent hikes elsewhere in town.

Belle knew one thing. She didn’t want to leave. Hyperion Heights, despite its faults, was her home. She wouldn't abandon it. She wanted it to get better and she wanted to be part of the revitalization. A part of the solution, not the problem.

Belle recognized how blessed she was. She was raised by two incredibly loving parents. Who had protected her from the atrocities of the world...until they couldn’t. She remembered the phone call and her hands began to shake. She quickly stuffed them under the thighs. She had to stay calm for Tilly. If she got upset, Tilly would get upset.

During Belle’s reverie Tilly had pulled a book about Nantucket off the shelf. She had abandoned any conversation they were having for photos of whales and lighthouses. Belle smiled wistfully. Would Tilly ever get to see anything outside of Hyperion Heights in person? The bookstore itself was travel themed. The back wall had a mural of the Eiffel Tower. Her good friend Jefferson, a talented artist, had painted it. There was bistro seating scattered around the store to invoke the vibe of a Paris street. Belle had decided a long time ago that if she couldn’t travel and see the world, she wanted to make her part of it better. Studying the sweet, troubled girl devouring her muffin only solidified her decision. Belle would do whatever she could to help save Hyperion Heights and the people in it.

"Miss B., have you ever thought about marmalade?"

The bell dinged and few customers had entered the store. It didn't take long to decipher their conversation. They were gossiping about what had happened to Sabine. The topic quickly turned to fretting over the downward spiral of Hyperion Heights. One of the women mentioned selling her house and moving to a better area with a better school district for her son.

"What, Tilly?" Belle asked, distracted by the non sequitur and the two women.

“Marmalade,” Tilly responded, not a care in the world.

She was eating a jam filled butter cookie now. It was a recipe Belle had been working on for weeks. It was a habit she had when she felt stressed or helpless. A problem could start at work, but before she knew it, she was in her microscopic kitchen, wrists deep in dough. The internet called it anxiety baking.

“I’ll look on Pinterest,” she promised absentmindedly.

Sabine. Her own finances. The phone call. Her city in general. Between all her stressors, Belle was sure she could make three different marmalade recipes tonight. But baking wasn't enough. What could she do?

Belle thought over all she'd done...and how little a difference it had made. She feared that no matter what she did, it wouldn’t be enough. That all the bake sales, food pantries, and job fairs in the world couldn’t fix what ailed Hyperion Heights. Belle sighed. At the very least, she could help these two women find the book they were looking for. Belle pressed herself out of her chair. She could do her job today and take on the world again tomorrow.

“You can’t save us all, you know,” Tilly commented, licking her fingers and dotting crumbs off the table.

Belle froze halfway out of her seat. The girl had bizarrely mirrored her own thoughts.

“What was that, Tilly?”
“Not alone anyway,” she muttered, still not looking up from her food.

“What?” Belle's voice rose unconsciously.

Tilly sat bolt upright, suddenly breaking out of her trance. She looked around, her blonde hair whipping across her shoulders. Her wide eyes landed on Belle. “What?”

“What you just said,” Belle prompted, more forceful than she meant.

Tilly blinked, confused. “I said something?” Her eyes were glassy. "Did I say something wrong?” the last word broke. Tilly was getting agitated. If Belle didn't soothe her quickly she could spiral into one of her episodes. Sometimes she ran off and didn't return for days. Belle never knew where to find her during these disappearances. As far as she understood Tilly had several hiding places.

“No, Tilly,” Belle sighed, placing a hand on her shoulder. That was as much for Tilly's benefit as to calm her own nerves. It was just confusion and coincidence that what she’d said lined up with Belle's own thoughts.

Tilly slunk in her seat. Her body relaxed but but she looked at Belle warily , as if she hadn't fully believed her. She looked so small and vulnerable.

That's it, Belle thought determinedly . If she couldn't save Hyperion Heights, she would find someone who could.
A stack of blue folders landed on his desk with a foreboding thud.

Weaver glanced up at Desk Sergeant Ryce, who had delivered them, then back down at the pile. He gave them both a withering gaze. He slowly sat up in his chair, deliberately set down his pen, crossed his arms, and leaned on the paperwork that he had been looking at before being interrupted.

“What’s this?” he demanded, his Cockney accent more pronounced when he was tired or angry or, really, any emotion past left alone to do as he pleased.

“More break-ins,” Ryce told him, unperturbed by Weaver’s growl.

“Break-ins?” he asked doubtfully.

Break-ins weren’t anything special in Hyperion Heights. The residents were regularly stealing drugs, cash, credit cards, and laptops from each other. Then they got mad when the police couldn’t immediately charge anyone with the crime. People watched too much CSI. DNA results took a long time to process and were often misinterpreted. That was if anyone called them at all in the first place. Law enforcement used to be portrayed as the good guys, not that he considered himself one, but it had made his days a little easier. Now, they were mistrusted before they even showed up. He couldn’t solve a crime that hasn’t been reported.

When people weren’t harping on their incompetence, they were complaining about where their tax dollars were going. Well, the backlog of rape kits weren’t going to process themselves. The pressure came from all sides. Cops were supposed to be symbols in the community for doing the right thing. Well, sometimes that wasn’t an option. They were dealing with the dregs of humanity on a daily basis. Stranded motorists, car accidents, excessive noise, child abuse, vandalism, domestic violence, robbery, car theft, crowd control, traffic management, sobriety tests. Because crime never slept, they kept odd hours - who else do you think is answering your domestic at two in the morning? - and were prone to burnout, alcohol, and drugs themselves. No wonder they had a divorce rate significantly higher than the national average.

A trap he himself had successfully avoided. At his age, he considered himself safe from matrimony. Who would want to marry a workaholic in a dangerous profession with a penchant for too much Scotch and being a miserable bastard besides? On nights when he was feeling particularly self-loathing, he wouldn’t wish himself on himself, his worst enemy, let alone someone else.

But none of that pertained to the problem facing him right now. Why have a few break-ins been added to the pile of more serious crimes on his desk? Minor crimes were dealt with by the officers below him. It was their responsibility to show up, take statements, make a copy for the insurance company, then file them away in the depths of the basement with all the other unsolved petty crimes that were of no major consequence in the grand scheme of things.

“These ones come with an arson bonus,” Ryce told him with fake cheeriness. “One is an anomaly, two is coincidence, three is your problem,” he said plainly and walked away. “Talk to the Captain if you got a issue with it, I’m just following orders,” he called back.

Weaver heaved a great sigh and lifted the stack of reports and began sifting through them. First was a report on a small fire in an abandoned restaurant. No witnesses, just some kids skating by
that saw flames through the window. The official ruling was the fire had been started by matches and gasoline. No suspects.

Then there was a break-in at Hilda Braeburn’s bakery, where the gas from the ovens was turned on overnight. Luckily she smelled it before she lit the burner the next morning, or the whole block would have gone up. But the blind old bat claims it wasn’t her that left the gas on and that she’d seen nothing suspicious.

The newest was a break-in and arson of a food truck. The pictures were impressive. The was obvious use of an accelerant. Nobody hurt, but no witnesses either. Well, he was sorry to see that particular food truck go. The owner used to park it in front of the precinct every Wednesday. Damn good beignets. Weaver didn’t have much sympathy for the owner though. What did she think was going to happen, parking her livelihood in the middle of the street with flimsy locks?

The three incidents could be completely unrelated. They could potentially be chalked up to kids screwing around, accidents, or insurance fraud. Or the evidence could be building. The same person, or group of people, were targeting businesses, and they were getting better at it. He looked for patterns. What did the businesses have in common? Seemingly nothing. One was a new businesses, one open for decades, another closed. The owners? Also nothing. They ranged in age and race. The only thing the victims all had in common was their location in Hyperion Heights.

Then what would make anyone target them? To what purpose? If you left a business in Hyperion Heights well enough alone, chances are it would fail in its first few years. That was survival of the fittest.

If that sounded cold, it was because he was a cold bastard. He’d been left on his own at a young age and fended for himself in London’s East End. That was probably for the best considering his parents were a couple of small time con artists. The irony wasn’t lost on him that he’d decided to become a cop. It was probably a way to punish his parents metaphorically since he couldn’t do it now since they were both dead.

So he took what he needed from his parents and ditched the rest. Some of what they had taught him had come in handy. The acceptance of the atrocities of the world. The ability to manipulate people. The importance of looking out for number one.

It was the last bit that primarily had made him become a cop. Having seen the other side, he preferred to be on this end of society’s food chain and he liked the independence being promoted to detective got him.

He closed the folders and set them to the side. The explanation could be a single arsonist who just got off on blowing things up and he’d picked these three places at random. He’d look over the evidence, re-interview the owners, and investigate until the case was solved or dropped.

Chances were the perp would eventually slip up and reveal themselves or simply move on.
Chapter 4

Belle was exhausted. Every few yards her purse slipped off her drooping shoulder. She struggled to pick up her feet so she wouldn’t scuff the soles of her heels on the pavement. Besides books, her other not so guilty pleasure were shoes. On the few occasions when she had extra money, she bought a pair. Never new, usually from a vintage shop in town she liked to support. Belle hiked her bag back onto her arm and tried to literally keep her chin up.

After she’d gotten Tilly settled with another muffin and a book about Nantucket, Belle got out a piece of paper and began to make a plan. Just having a store in Hyperion Heights wasn’t going to be enough. She had to be an activist too.

The first thing she did was start a petition from local business owners against Victoria Belfrey’s outrageous rent hikes. If her price gouging was brought to the attention of Hyperion Height’s local government, they would understand the negative effect it was having on the local economy. They’d have the ability to step in and stop the monopoly Belfrey Developments had on Hyperion Heights real estate. She’d spent her entire day off going door to door gathering signatures. Her goal was to get 85% of her fellow business owners to sign. By the end of the day, she only had 32%. Sabine signed without hesitation and Belle’s good friend Jefferson had written his name with a flourish (“So the bitch will be able to read it without her spectacles!”). But many of the other businessmen and women were so terrified of Victoria that they refused to sign. Belle understood their hesitation as well as any of them, this was people’s livelihoods on the line. But that was exactly why she believed they needed to take a stand now before they were priced out of their own neighborhood.

Despite the low commitment, she’d gone to the local government anyway, seeking someone with local economy, small business, or real estate interests to talk to. She’d been given the runaround by several offices. She’d even ended up back at the same office twice. Only to be told that she couldn’t be seen today or anytime this week. In the end she had a list of six names but not a single person that would see her or return her phone calls. Belle had a sinking suspicion that they were afraid of Victoria as well. Or in her pocket.

In a last ditch effort, she’d even gone to Belfrey Towers to meet with Victoria herself. Maybe she could be reasoned with. Perhaps she could be convinced of the financial gains of working with local businesses. Belle only made it as far as the reception area, where she’d been promptly turned away by Victoria’s step-daughter, Ivy. She’d acted like Belle wouldn’t remember her from when Ivy was a confused teen hanging out in the young adult section of the library, reading books on Wicca because no one in her family understood her.

Two days of her life and it had gotten her nothing. All legal avenues had led to dead ends.

The only positive thing that had come out of it, besides giving her an excuse to talk to her neighbors, was the support she’d received for her plan to set up a regional office of the Small Business Administration in Hyperion Heights. At the very least they could all come together regularly and commiserate with each other.

Belle knew what really had motivated all of her efforts lately. They were her way of trying to feel in control of the situation. She couldn’t regulate rent. She couldn’t stop the shops from being robbed or vandalized. She couldn’t make it so Victoria Belfrey had less money. So she tried to do what she could. But the last few days have taught her that she had even less influence than she thought.
Usually when her alarm went off in the morning, she was chipper and bounded out of bed. She loved her bookshop in the early morning. She made herself a cup of tea and had a few quiet moments alone with her books. She could even squeeze in some reading of her favorite adventure story or fairy tale before the rest of Hyperion Heights woke up. But this morning she was dragging herself to the store.

While people in the neighborhood had been overall supportive of her efforts, they were overwhelmingly scared. They were worried about bringing attention to themselves in case Victoria raised their rent in retaliation. They were also concerned about becoming the next shop to get robbed or burned down. So all they wanted was to keep as low a profile as possible.

The streets were quiet this early in the morning and Belle lived close enough to the store to walk. People would tell her it was too dangerous to be on the streets by herself, but she believed that less people on the streets is what made them more of a threat.

She admired her little store from down the street as she approached. The big front window looked particularly clean today. She could see right through to the front desk where the hot chocolate, baked goods, and cash register were. As she got closer, a heaviness began to settle in her stomach. Where were the smudges from Tilly leaning against it? Where were the rain spots that were impossible to remove in Seattle? Her chest tightened. She ran the rest of the way down and across the street, stumbling to a stop at her storefront. The window wasn’t clean...it was gone!

Belle cried out, thought there was no one on the street to hear her. She rushed to the glass front door, which was still blessedly intact. She fumbled with her keys, dropping her purse twice and then crouching on the ground to rifflle through it. With shaking hands she undid the locks, then struggled with the locks of the security gate. She swung the gate back.

At her feet was a floor strewn with broken glass. She stood there in shock, unable to comprehend what she was seeing. At first glance nothing else seemed to be remiss. But there was so just much glass. The window display had been knocked over and books were scattered all over the floor. She knew she should check the register, to see if anything of value was missing, but her feet were stuck to the floor.

“Miss F., I think you dropped this,” a voice came from behind her.

Her arm shot out and Tilly skidded to a halt behind her, Belle’s purse dangling from her fingertips.

“Tilly, stay where you are! I don’t want you to get hurt.”

What should she do? Clean it up? No, the police, of course. She had to call the police.

Belle tiptoed her way across the floor on shaky legs to the store’s phone on the front desk. She gently swept away some of the glass that hand landed there. With trembling hands and trying desperately not to cry, she began to dial the emergency number she kept taped to the phone.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Tilly was speaking softly to herself. “It makes complete sense now.” She began to pace agitatedly. The stress of the break-in must have shook her. “Don’t know why I didn’t see it before.”

Belle’s head snapped up. “See what? Did you see something Tilly?” Maybe she’d seen the person who did it.

“Weaver,” she announced instead.

“What?” Belle asked distractedly. Tilly wasn’t making any sense. She started dialing again.
Tilly launched herself across the floor.

“Tilly!” Belle exclaimed.

Tilly clamped her hands down around Belle’s to keep her from pressing the last numbers. She swung her bag around and dug inside. Finally she fished out a small piece of paper and handed it to Belle.

It was a business card. It was crinkled and dirty, like she’d been carrying it around a long time.

Detective Weaver
Major Crimes Division
Hyperion Heights 42nd Precinct
Seattle Police Department
Service Pride Dedication
Phone: (206) 555-0176
Direct Dial: (206) 555-0148

“Anything bad happens, call Weaver,” Tilly recited. She was picking up on Belle’s anguish now. “He fixes everything.”
A bunch of men and women, who didn’t look like they appreciated the written word, clomped around her store, taking pictures, moving things, and generally putting Belle as off-kilter as the broken window had.

She’d called Weaver’s direct line like Tilly had instructed. He hadn’t been at his desk so she’d been routed to the main dispatch. Belle hadn’t known that dropping Weaver’s name would bring the whole Hyperion Heights precinct down upon her ears.

She’d taken refuge behind the counter, but quickly got kicked out of that spot. So she’d spent the next hour hopscotching her way around the store, trying to stay out of the way.

“All this for a broken window?” Belle wondered aloud from the middle of the store as cops buzzed around her.

She’d calmed down now that some hours had passed and she’d checked over the rest of the store. No vandalism, minus the window and the brick that had caused it. Nothing had been stolen. The cash register wasn’t even tampered with. Which made her wonder what the point of breaking her window had been anyway?

Not that any of the officers were giving her any indication they had any ideas. Every once in a while someone would approach her and ask a question. She tried to answer quick and keep her responses short. But after she’d told them that she was at home when the window smashing occurred, she’d been mostly ignored.

A man in jeans and a denim jacket walked through the door. His confident demeanor told her he wasn’t a confused customer. The other officers parted as he walked further into the shop. He took his sunglasses off, hooking them on a chain around his neck, and assessed the room. His blue collared shirt was untucked and buttoned carelessly so you could see the white undershirt he wore beneath it.

It didn’t take long for his discerning eyes to find her. She stood, pinned to the spot like a butterfly, as he approached. His brown hair was graying at the temples and curls emerged at the nape of his neck. He was either growing it out or not very good about staying on top of getting his hair cut. She was aware of his brown eyes evaluating her and she smoothed her yellow ruffled shirt and tugged self-consciously on her skirt.

“You the proprietor?” he asked.

His accent threw her off. She pushed down the urge to ask him about where he was from and how he’d ended up in Hyperion Heights like her.

“Yes,” she stammered, clearing her throat.

“Any of these cameras work?” he gestured to the corners of the store where she’d installed cheap fake security cameras as a deterrent. She noticed his left hand had rings on his pinkie and middle fingers. On his right ring finger was a large flat stone. She’d read quite a few detective novels. No Raymond Chandler story had ever described a detective like the one in front of her now.

“No,” she admitted.

“Would the brick through the window have set off any alarms?”
His line of questioning sounded accusatory. As if she’d been asking to get a brick through her window.

“No,” she bristled.

“Just the security gate on the door?”

“Yes.”

“But not one on the window,” he observed. The only thing missing, judging by his tone, was 'you imbecile.'

“Obviously,” she fought not let her annoyance show through in her voice. Unlike him. She was afraid she was failing. “Officer-”

“Detective,” he corrected, “Weaver.”

So this was Tilly's detective.

“What’s this about?” She gestured to the three ring circus around them. “I’ve had to call the police for vandalism before and it didn’t warrant this kind of turn out.”

He crossed his arms, suddenly interested in what she had to say. “So this isn’t the first time something like this has happened.” He said it like a statement, not a question.

Belle stared down at the broken glass on the wooden floor of Dodgson's. The first time, not long after she opened, someone had tried to pick the front door lock. That’s when she’d invested in the security gate. A year after that there’d been some graffiti on the windows.

“This is the third time since I opened,” Belle offered grudgingly. “And I assume you’re going to try to make me believe those were my fault as well,” she told him hotly.

He took a step closer to her, breaching her personal space. “Look, Miss-” he drew out the s’s in one long hiss between his teeth.

“French,” this time her voice was confident.

“Miss French,” he repeated, like her name was too cutesy for him to bring himself to say out loud. “You probably heard about the recent arson. It’s my case. You also asked specifically for me. We’re here to see if your window is connected to the other break-ins or arson attempts.”

“Is it?” she pressed.

“Considering the lack of firefighters,” there was that contemptuous look again, “I don’t believe so, no. Where exactly did you get my numb-”

Tilly, who’d been ducking in and out of the store as the excitement waxed and waned, poked her head in. Seeing Weaver, she was slowly creeping back out the door.

“Oi, Tilly!” he barked.

Belle jumped. God, he could be commanding.

He pointed at Tilly’s frozen back. “I wanna talk to you!”

Belle looked between the detective and the teen. “So you do know each other?” Honestly, she
hadn’t been entirely certain the card Tilly had handed her hadn’t been picked up off the street, since the girl tended to hoard things.

“Oh, yes,” he replied ruefully, “we know each other.”

Tilly skipped up to them, “Good morning, Detective,” she greeted as if it was completely normal for him to be there. “I thought you two might want to be alone?” she asked hopefully, glancing back and forth.

He gave Belle a truly dismissive look. “No,” he said with finality, “I’m through with Miss French.” He turned back toward to door, expecting Tilly to follow.

Belle jaw dropped. “So that’s it?” She crossed her arms. “You’re taking all your police and heading home? I bet if I was Victoria Belfrey you’d do something,” Belle grumbled when he didn’t respond.

The detective sighed, turning back to face her. “Miss French, believe it or not, I am understaffed as it is. I’m trying to catch an arsonist. While your situation is unfortunate—”

“You mean criminal,” she inserted.

“There is nothing more I can do at this time,” his accent thickening. “You have no security cameras and no witnesses. This doesn’t even fit the profile. You had the misfortune of some bad kids messing around. Sweep up the glass, put a tarp over the window, and send a copy of the report to your insurance,” he paused, looking around, “if you have any.”

She let the last dig slide in favor of the first. “Detective, I know the youths of this neighborhood. They wouldn’t do that,” she pointed at the window. “And there’s no such thing as bad kids,” she added, “just bad situations.”

He squinted at her, as if trying to place her. “Didn’t you work at the public library?”

That brought her up short. He’d seen her? He remembered her?

“Yes,” he drawled, stalking towards her. “I remember you.”

Belle took a few steps back.

“The librarian that worked with all the teens,” he continued. “We ran more than a few drug busts on some of your precious ‘bad situations’ if I recall.”

“Yes,” she sniffed, “well, Hyperion Heights doesn’t support its library. That includes funding for positions.” She didn’t mentioned that the bookstore, at the moment, wasn’t doing much better. At this rate her premiums were going to go through the roof.

“So you were fired,” he stated bluntly.

She gasped.

“Look,” he interrupted her, “you seem like a nice girl.”

Belle fumed at that condescending and placating description.

“Maybe you should think seriously about taking your business somewhere else,” he finished.

The suggestion of giving up and moving out of the neighborhood like so many before her set Belle
off. “I will not! This is my home and I am not going to let anyone scare me away.”

He shrugged, leaving her to seethe, and moved to the front of the store to round up his officers to go.

“Well, what am I supposed to do then?” she cried to his denim covered back.

He picked a book off one of the end caps, weighing it in his hand. It was the MinaLima edition of *Beauty and the Beast*, unabridged with full-color artwork and 3-D features. He tossed the books aside in disgust.

“Stop reading so many fairy tales.”
Chapter 6

Belle curled up in the corner of her couch and hugged a pillow to herself. The adrenaline of the day had worn off and she felt tired and violated and alone. After the cops had left she’d spent a long afternoon sweeping up glass and putting the store back to rights as much as she could with a big hole in it. She’d made some calls and she didn’t know if she’d be able to afford getting the window replaced before the insurance check came through, which could be months. So for now a blue tarp and a wooden frame had to be good enough.

If her store had been outright robbed she could almost understand. Someone was desperate and felt they needed the money more than her. But to just destroy something that belonged to someone else for no reason. That seemed particularly heinous to her. Nothing anyone had said to her, including the cops, had been comforting.

She thought of Detective Weaver so flippant and cocksure with his upturned collar. He’d studied her with such cool disinterest.

Stop reading so many fairy tales.

She glared at the space in front of her. The way he’d drawn out the ‘Miss,’ like he’d meant to offend her. Like it was a character flaw she was single! The nerve! He was the law. He was supposed to be helpful!

Which reminded her of all the ways the proper channels had failed her lately. The government, the police, her fellow business owners. No wonder people were giving up and moving out of Hyperion Heights.

Maybe she should finally take the hint and follow suit.

No, she shook herself. She’d pitied herself long enough for today. The money and the insurance she had limited control over. But if her store went down it will be through no fault of her own. She focused on the most pressing issue she could do something about. Maybe a neighborhood watch would help with the crime problem? She thought of the lackluster response to her petition. She didn’t expect more enthusiasm from her neighbors over a nightly watch than she had gotten from her fellow store owners with an attempted rebellion against Victoria.

Belle worried for her books. There was so little standing between someone pushing past the tarp and further vandalizing her store. She could put real security cameras in, but that wouldn’t stop people from committing crimes, that would just give the police a little more evidence after the fact. Also, it would only protect her store - what about everyone else’s? What could she do to help her neighborhood now? The neighborhood watch idea wouldn’t leave her. Even if it was just a small, dedicated group of them. Even if it was just her.

Yes. If no one else was going to do anything about the rising crime in Hyperion Heights - she would! Even if she just went down to the store and looked around to make sure no one was messing with Dodgson’s or any of the surrounding businesses. She could scare anyone with nefarious purposes off by her presence alone. She wouldn’t stay downtown all night, just wait around and see if anyone came by. Like a patrol, the kind the police refused to do. Before she registered what she was doing she was on her feet and standing in front of her bedroom closet.

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She looked at the contents critically. Bright knits and loud patterns stared back at her. On the floor at her feet was an impressive array of heels. What does one wear to an anti-burglary? Nothing in
her entire wardrobe was appropriate for the kickboxing class her friend Ruby kept insisting she take with her, let alone an anti-theft adventure. She could go to the Goodwill and pick up some black jeans and a hoodie, but that wasn’t her style. That wouldn’t give her confidence. This was a special excursion. It called for a special outfit.

The answer was, of course, The Mad Hatter, a costume rental shop run by her friend, Jefferson. In any other town, he’d be a couture designer. It seemed like Hyperion Heights didn’t allow for anyone to reach their potential.

She found him in the back behind heavy velour curtains. He was hunched over a tattered Batman costume, a needle and thread in his teeth. She thought again how Jefferson should be spending his time making clothes for the Governor’s Ball. Not scrambling to make ends meet for him and his sweet daughter, Grace, through Halloween parties. This just steeled her determination further. She wasn’t doing this for just herself but for all of Hyperion Heights.

Upon noticing her, the needle and thread dropped out of his mouth and he let the costume fall to the floor.

“Belle of the ball!” He greeted in his hyperbolic manner. “Did you get everything with the insurance figured out? Do you need me to march down there and give someone a strict talking to?” That’s what was great about Jefferson. He was always willing to go to war with you. Not that she would ever ask him to. He was a single father. Putting his name on a petition was one thing, leaving his young daughter to prowl the streets at night with her was another.

“Actually, I was wondering if you could make me something.” The walls surrounding them were covered floor to ceiling with shelves of fabric, ribbons, and jewels obsessively organized by type.

“For you? Anything!” he clapped.

She wandered the shelves, searching for inspiration. “This isn’t really a heels thing. More athletic.” She tilted her head to better admire a pair of brown scuffed knee high boots that looked like they belonged to an Annie Oakley costume. “But no sneakers,” she added hastily.

He mock gasped, “I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“I need a whole outfit,” she continued, warming up to the idea she’d hatched at the apartment.

She stopped at the row of leather and faux fabrics, admiring the different shades from black to burgundy to brown. “Something strong. Something sturdy that won’t rip when I stretch and move around.”

“Have you met someone?”

“What?” Belle’s mind automatically went to the detective she’d met earlier that day. His face creased and crinkled with intensity and intelligence. Intrigue and something akin to attraction flared in her. But then she remembered how rude he’d been to her and she forced it all down.

“A little BDSM?” Jefferson wagged his eyebrows.

“Oh!” she jerked away from the leathers. “No,” she stammered, “I mean, this isn’t about him.”

“But you have met somebody?” he drawled.

“No, I mean yes, but it’s not like that,” she closed her eyes to compose her thoughts. “He came by the shop today to ask questions about the window.”
“Oh, a cop!” Despite her efforts to the contrary, Jefferson was growing more and more intrigued.

“Detective,” she corrected automatically.

“Even sexier.” He looked impressed and vastly too emotionally invested in her story.

She ignored his comment. “You should have heard him today, Jefferson,” she complained, “he was so…” she searched for the right word to encapsulate his overwhelming masculinity, the very definition of a rogue, “impertinent!”

Jefferson nodded, deep in thought. “I always thought you needed someone more your opposite. Two nice people together is just...blah,” he made a face.

She couldn’t let him go down this path. Next thing she knew he’d be designing and sending her lingerie for this imaginary love affair. “But this isn’t about him, not like that,” she insisted again, pushing astute brown eyes and soft hair out of her mind. “I’m doing something for the neighborhood. But you can’t tell anybody!”

“Not nearly as interesting, but,” Jefferson mimed zipping his lips and throwing away an imaginary key.

Belle took a deep breath. She hadn’t spoken her idea aloud to anyone yet. Was she crazy? Could her idea actually work? Would she make any difference at all? “I’m going to catch whoever has been breaking into our stores.”

She was met by complete silence.

Then, “How?”

Well, she hadn’t thought that part all the way through yet. “A stakeout,” she decided on the spot. “I’ll catch them red-handed. I’ll call the police to come immediately, or take their picture or a video, and turn it in,” her speech grew impassioned. “The police can’t be everywhere at once and security footage hasn’t helped them catch anyone yet. Maybe I can make a difference. Even if I prevent one vandalism it will be one less reason for people to give up on Hyperion Heights.”

Jefferson considered her soliloquy. Would he shoot her idea down? Try to stop her? She really felt she could do this, she could make a difference, she felt it in her bones.

“This detective really got you riled up, didn’t he?”

She deflated on the spot.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” he assured her. He stood in front of her, taking her shoulders in his hands and gently shaking them until he got a small smile out of her. “Well, if you’re going to save the world,” he said finally. “You better look fabulous doing it.”

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