Truths and Comforts

by ivorymorning

Summary

Five year old Colette Gold starts kindergarten, but the other children aren't as inviting as they could be and she learns things about her family she never wanted to know. She has her best friend Neal to protect her, but she must also learn to protect herself against people who will judge her without getting to know her.
Chapter 1

"What's it like?" Colette rolled over onto her tummy, swinging her legs in the air and propping herself up on her elbows. She was pulling daisies out of the patch where they grew wild in her and Neal's special place in the woods and twisting them into a long strand with careful fingers.

"It's not so bad," Neal replied, lying on his back and looking up at the sky. "You get a desk with your name on it, and you have to raise your hand whenever you want to talk or ask a question or if you have to go to the bathroom."

"Are there lots of books?" Her eyes were sparkling as she held onto Neal's every word. He was only a few months older than her, but had started the year before. Tomorrow was the first day of school for both of them; first grade for Neal and kindergarten for Colette. She'd been asking him questions for weeks but he didn't mind. He knew she was nervous, just as he had been.

"So many books," he said, looking over at Colette and smiling. She grinned. Her mother had been reading to her since before she was born and Colette had been reading on her own since she was four much to the chagrin of her father, who discovered that he couldn't skip pages anymore while reading her bedtime stories. Neal had never known her to travel anywhere without a book. "There are books in the teachers' rooms and there's a library you get to go to if you finish your work and you don't get in trouble and it's amazing."

"What about the teachers? Are they nice?"

"Well my mom is one so I think—"

Colette threw a handful of grass at him. "I MEANT THE OTHER TEACHERS, NEAL."

He laughed. "Okay, okay! I liked mine last year, she was really nice. Maybe you'll have her."

"What about the other kids? Did you make a lot of friends?"

"A few. Some of them are nice and some aren't and some just keep to themselves. You'll have to see who's in your class."

"I really want a friend," Colette said softly, frowning slightly as she twisted a new daisy into her chain.

"Hey! I thought I was your friend!" It was Neal's turn to throw a handful of grass at Colette, who squealed.

"You are, you are!" she laughed. She scrambled to her feet and ran away from Neal, who chased her with pocketfuls of grass that he continued to throw at her. She paused by a berry bush and when he got closer began pelting him with berries. They laughed and shouted and ran around the clearing, enjoying their last carefree day of summer.

When both of them could run no more, they collapsed in a heap on the soft ground and giggled breathlessly. Neal had red spots on his shirt from the berries Colette threw and was grass in Colette's hair but neither of them cared. Colette retrieved her daisy chain and kicked off her shoes. Neal crawled over to sit beside her.

"So it's not so bad?" She put the daisy chain in her hair and held out the ends for Neal to tie in the back.
"Not at all," he said, looping the strands into a bow and adjusting the now daisy crown in Colette's hair. "You're going to love it."

Belle didn't bother to ask why her daughter came home grass-stained and covered in dirt. She knew she'd been out with Neal. The two of them had been inseparable since the day they met. They were at each other's houses so much that Colette kept a toothbrush and a pair of pajamas at the Charmings' and Neal did the same at the Golds'. When Colette let herself in through the back door Belle had marched her straight up to the bathroom, cleaned her up, washed the dirt out of her hair, patched up her scraped knees, and promised not to throw away the daisy crown. Rumple had been held up at the shop and wouldn't be home until after Colette's bedtime, but had promised to take her to the bus stop the next morning on his way to work. Colette spent the entire time telling her mother everything Neal had said about what school would be like in excited and rushed tones.

"And, and, and they have a library there too! And if we're good and finish our work we get to go there and pick out any book we want!" Colette said breathlessly while Belle towel-dried her hair. She'd already pulled on her purple polka dotted pajamas and was sitting on her bed with her mother.

"Do they now?" Belle smiled. No one was prouder than her that Colette shared her love for books and learning.

"Neal also says you get a desk with your name on it and that you have to raise your hand if you have to go to the bathroom."

"So you're excited for school tomorrow?" Belle stood and went to go hang the damp towel in the bathroom.

Colette paused. "I think so," she said finally. "I mean Neal makes it sound fun, I guess. I don't know. He also said some of the kids can be mean, and I'm afraid they won't like me."

"Now hold on there just a minute," Belle said in her stern "mom" tone of voice. "You are an intelligent, funny, bright, beautiful girl with many gifts. There is no reason why anyone shouldn't like you. Don't you dare worry about a thing like that."

Colette nodded, but frowned still. She'd been thinking all day about that one thing that Neal had said, about how some of the other children weren't very nice. Even though she spent most of her time with her family and Neal and his family, Colette had never met another child who wasn't nice. She couldn't imagine anyone being anything other than nice, for that matter. She tried to put it out of her mind, but the thought kept coming back and making her worry. She snuggled in under the covers and clutched her stuffed monkey extra tightly.

"I'm going to have a great day at school tomorrow," she thought to herself. "I'm going to make lots of friends and read lots of new books and everything will be fine."

Both of them walked her to the bus stop the next morning. Her mother held her left hand and her father held her right, and Colette couldn't help but smile to herself as they walked down the sidewalk. Her new red T strap shoes made clicking noises on the pavement and she was wearing her favorite dress, and her backpack made her feel like a big kid. She had mostly forgotten about what Neal had
said, but as the bus stop grew closer and she could see it parked on the street waiting for her, it all came flooding back and she tensed.

"Colette? What's wrong?" Belle said, instantly picking up on her daughter's change in mood. Colette looked up at her with a look on her face that almost broke Belle's heart. Rumple opened his mouth to ask what was wrong but Belle cut him off.

"She's worried the other children at school won't like her," she said softly, shooting him a meaningful look. Rumple's expression darkened when he saw that Colette was so worried she looked like she might cry.

"Who gave her that idea?" he asked in a quiet, dangerous tone. "Was it that Charming boy, because--"

"Daddy, it wasn't Neal," Colette said. Her father's expression softened and he knelt down to look her in the eye and take her hands in his own.

"Now why wouldn't the other children like you, my darling?" he asked in a gentle tone. She shrugged and looked at her feet, sniffling.

"Listen to me, Colette. There are certain traits you inherited from me but the thing you inherited from your mother, other than her brains and beauty, is her kindness. Never forget that, my love. You are smart and good and kind. Any one of those children would be lucky to be your friend."

Colette wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, daddy," she whispered, planting a kiss on his cheek. His words made her feel a little better and being wrapped in his arms made her feel safe. Over his shoulder she could see Neal walking towards them with his mother, and she smiled and called out to him. Her father stiffened at the sound of his name and exhaled loudly. "Be nice, daddy," Colette whispered in his ear before giving her mother a hug goodbye and running to meet her friend. Belle laughed at him and slipped her hand into his as he straightened and together they watched their baby girl get on a bus to go to her first day of school.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Colette's first day of kindergarten goes smoothly, at first...

When the bus dropped them off, Neal took her to the kindergarten hallway and found her name on the list outside one of the rooms. There were parents and children standing shoulder to shoulder outside the classrooms talking loudly and shoving against each other and Colette suddenly felt very small. She looked at Neal with a panicked expression and he gave her a reassuring smile.

"You'll do great," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets and rocking back and forth on his heels. "You have Ms. Walker, she's really nice and she has a bigger bookshelf than the other teachers."

"Really?"

"Really."

Colette smiled in spite of herself and Neal rushed off to the first grade hallway. She took a deep breath, gripped the straps of her backpack, and pushed open the door to her classroom.

Her first impression was books. Books everywhere. There was a reading loft in the far corner with a nook underneath, all surrounded by shelves of books. Picture books, chapter books, magazines, anything a kindergartner could ever want to read, all in one place. If she stood on her tiptoes, Colette could see into the reading loft, where more books were stacked in neat piles. There was a whiteboard at the front of the room and an enormous blue rug spread out underneath. "Welcome, class!" was written across the board in scrolling script. Her teacher's desk was decorated with flowers. Colette let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Maybe she would like it here.

In the center of the room were clusters of tables pushed together. Colored notecards with students' names were spread out, and Colette wandered among the rows until she found hers. It was purple, with a butterfly sticker in the corner. There were other children coming in and parents demanding to speak to the teacher before leaving. She pushed her backpack under her chair, took a seat, and sat very quiet and very still with her hands in her lap.

"Hi."

She looked up to see a girl sitting across from her smiling shyly.

"I'm Sarah," the girl said. Colette took a deep breath and remembered what Neal taught her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Colette."

"I like your dress, Colette," Sarah said. Colette smiled and thanked her. Maybe this friend thing would be easy. Sarah seemed nice.

"Hello there dear, I don't believe I caught your name." The teacher appeared beside Colette holding a clipboard and peering through reading glasses perched at the end of her nose. "I'm trying to make sure everyone is here and sitting in the right seat."
"I'm Colette."

"It's very nice to meet you, Colette. I see you're sitting in the correct seat, too, that's very good."

"I can read," Colette said proudly, looking up at the teacher, who looked down at her clipboard again and smiled.

"Well, I would expect nothing less from the daughter of our town librarian," she said. "Maybe you can help the other children who can't read yet. I'm Ms. Walker, by the way. We'll be starting soon, so just sit tight." She left to go talk to the remaining parents in the room.

"You can read?" Sarah looked at her with an awed expression.

Colette blushed. "My mama taught me, she loves books. Sometimes I go with her to the library to help out. My daddy reads me bedtime stories every night, too."

"That is so cool," Sarah whispered. "I can only read a little bit."

"I can help you if you want," Colette said shyly, looking at her feet.

"Would you? That would be so nice!" Sarah's eyes sparkled and the grin on her face stretched from ear to ear. "I guess this makes us friends, Colette."

Colette could feel happiness spreading throughout her entire body and making her toes tingle. This is all she'd wanted. A friend. And school hadn't even started yet and she had one! Neal was right, she had nothing to worry about.

The rest of the morning went smoother than Colette could have ever dreamed it would. Ms. Walker had started by asking if anyone could read a part of the welcome message on the board, and Colette proudly raised her hand and read the whole thing. They had circle time, they colored with their new boxes of crayons, they were assigned cubby holes to put their backpacks, and Colette even got to climb up into the reading loft for a little while. When it was time to line up two by two for lunch, she found Sarah and the two of them agreed to be line buddies. They followed Ms. Walker down the hallway, up a flight of stairs and into the cafeteria. After a quick speech about which tables the kindergarteners were assigned to (the small tables up front), Ms. Walker took the kids buying their lunch through the lunch line and told the others to pick their seats. Colette and Sarah found a table towards the center, and others soon followed.

"I'm starving," Colette said, opening her lunchbox to see what her mother had packed. Peanut butter and jelly, an apple, a bag of mini oreos and a grape juice box. Taped inside was a note.

"What's that say?" Sarah asked through a mouthful of bologna sandwich. The others leaned in to watch Colette read the note, still amazed that she was the only kindergartener in the whole class who knew how.

"Dear Colette, I hope you have a wonderful first day at school. Your father and I are so proud of you and we know you'll do great. I packed extra oreos for you. Love, Mom. P.S, your father wanted me to tell you that he's taking you to the shop after he picks you up at the bus. He knows how much you love it there."

"That is so cool," said a boy named Jacob. "She didn't even pause between words."

"Colette is an amazing reader," Sarah said, grinning. "Remember when she read the board this morning?!"
"I've never known anyone who can read in kindergarten," said a girl named Molly. "How come you can?"

"My mama taught me," Colette said, blushing but secretly glad to be the center of all the attention. "She's been reading to me for as long as I can remember, and when I started picking up on words and stuff she started teaching me. My daddy reads to me too, bedtime stories."

"Your note said he's taking you to the shop after he picks you up," said a boy named Charlie. "What does he do?"

"He has the pawn shop in town. People come in to buy things and he sells stuff to them. He lets me sweep the floors and sit behind the counter, I love it in there."

There was an odd silence. Colette looked up from her sandwich to see everyone glancing at each other.

"Like... The pawn shop?" Jacob asked.

Colette frowned. "I guess. I don't think there are any other pawn shops in town."

"And your dad works there?" Molly asked.

"He owns it. It's his shop." Colette took another bite, unaware that the rest of the table were looking at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Wait, your dad is the owner of the pawn shop? Your dad is Mr. Gold...?" Charlie asked. There was a note of apprehension and even a little fear in his voice and Colette frowned again.

"Yeah... I'm Colette Gold. Mr. Gold is my daddy and Belle Gold, the librarian, is my mommy."

The other children glanced at each other and looked down at their laps. None of them said another word.

"What?" Colette looked around the table. No one would look at her. They all stared at their food and picked at it silently. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing..." Jacob said. "We just... We don't know if we should... talk to you anymore."

Colette felt her heart sink into her stomach and tears pricking her eyes. "What? But... Why? What did I do?"

No one said a word. They all just continued to look down. Overhead, one of the fluorescent lights flickered, casting a faltering glow on the table.

"Sarah?" Colette turned to see Sarah looking down as well. "Sarah, I didn't do anything! Why won't anyone talk to me?"

Sarah shrugged and then did the thing that broke Colette's little heart into pieces. She scooted her chair away from her.

"I thought you were my friend," Colette whispered as tears began to fall down her cheeks. The flickering light above them went out in a flash of sparks and cast a dark shadow on the table as Colette pushed her chair back and ran to the bathroom before anyone could see her cry.

She was glad that kindergarten ended after lunch, meaning everyone got to go home. She didn't want
to have to go back to that room and see the looks on Molly and Jacob and Charlie and Sarah's faces. After the bell sounded, she'd snuck back into the cafeteria and grabbed her things. She saw the extra oreos her mother had packed and sniffled again. She wanted a hug. She needed a hug. But she didn't want to tell either of her parents about what happened at lunch. She was hoping her classmates would forget about it by tomorrow. She wanted to talk to Neal but he was a first grader, and first graders didn't get out until later. So she snapped her lunchbox closed, walked back to the classroom, hefted her backpack over her shoulder, and went to go stand outside to wait for her daddy to pick her up.

As soon as she pushed the door open, the kindergarteners fell silent. Thirty heads turned at once to look at her, and Colette could hear hushed whispers passing from group to group. Her face turned the color of beets and she looked down, going to stand over by herself against the wall. She tried not to look at them or hear what they were saying. The kids at her lunch table must have told everyone, but Colette still didn't know what it was that they were acting so funny about. She didn't have much time to think on it, though, because at that moment her father pulled up in the car rider line and got out of the car. Had Colette been paying attention to her classmates, she would have noticed every single one of them taking a noticeable step back and staring at her father with fear in their eyes, but she wasn't focusing on that. Her eyes were filling with tears as she ran towards him as fast as she could.

"Daddy!" She wrapped her arms around him and felt herself being lifted into the air.

"Colette, my sweet girl!" He swung her around and planted a kiss on her cheek. "Darling, what's wrong?" he asked, alarm creeping into his voice. He wiped her tears away with his thumb. Colette closed her eyes. She didn't know why her classmates were acting so strangely but none of that mattered now because she was in her daddy's arms where she felt safe and secure.

"Nothing. I just missed you," she said quietly, burying her face in his shoulder and snuggling in close. He smelled of cologne and peppermint and comfort.

"I missed you too, love. Are you ready to go to the shop? I've got some things that need dusting, and you can help me sort through inventory later."

Colette nodded and tightened her grip around his shoulders as he carried her to the car. She buckled her seatbelt and pushed her backpack to the floor, and stared straight ahead as they pulled away so she wouldn't have to see any more faces staring at her and acting as if she was going to hurt them.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Rumple and Colette have daddy daughter time after he and Belle wonder if something might be going on at school.

Colette was very, very quiet the entire time she was at the shop and after she got home. Belle and Rumple wondered why their normally talkative, rambunctious five year old was acting so strangely, but attributed it to the fact that she'd had a long and exhausting day full of new experiences. More than a little concerned by this, Rumple was itching to ask her how her first day of school had gone, but convinced himself she would tell him in her own time. He didn't want to pry.

"She's never this quiet," he said in a low voice as they cleaned up the kitchen after dinner. Colette had picked at her food and asked to be excused early. "What if something happened?"

"It's probably nothing," Belle said, piling plates on top of each other and carrying them to the sink. "Kindergarten is a huge culture shock. I mean think about it. She's only five, she's never been to school before. She's never had to sit in a room full of other children she doesn't know, she's never had to raise her hand to ask for permission to speak, she's never had to discipline herself when it comes to doing work, she's never had designated reading time. It's a huge adjustment."

"She was crying when I picked her up," Rumple said, carrying glasses to the sink and rinsing them out.

Belle whirled around to face him. "What?!"

"She saw me coming and sprinted to me and wouldn't let go until I put her in her car seat."

Belle rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Did you talk to her about it? Maybe she just missed you... I mean... don't know, honey, this is totally new territory for me."

"I think this is new territory for everyone, I don't see anyone else in town with previous Excellent Parenting Experience," Rumple said dryly, waving his hand in a sarcastic manner. "Myself included. Which makes me that much more concerned. I didn't exactly do a bang up parenting job the first time, I'd rather not screw it up again if our daughter is having more serious problems than separation anxiety."

Belle took a step back and glared at him with her "that hurt my feelings, that was uncalled for and you know it" face. His expression softened and he put down the glasses he was washing to put his hands on her shoulders. He was doing better– he was trying his best to do better– but every now and then his temper got the best of him.

"I'm sorry, Belle," he said softly, taking a deep breath. "This is new for both of us, I didn't mean to say that. I'll go talk to her."

Belle kissed him on the cheek, making him blush. "Thank you."

Rumple pulled something out of his pocket. "I brought this home from the shop to help with that. I thought she'd like it."
Belle eyed the object with a mixture of apprehension and fear, and a shadow crossed her face. "Rumple, I don't--"

"This doesn't require anything from me," he said, pocketing the object again and taking both of Belle's hands in his own. "The spell has already been enacted, the only thing I'll be doing is releasing it by opening the stopper. There's nothing to worry about, I promise."

Belle had heard those words so many times in the past that she was immune to them, but looking into his eyes, she knew he was telling the truth. They'd come to the mutual decision that magic was an addiction for him that could never be satisfied and that maybe it would be best if he didn't give into the temptations. When Belle found out she was pregnant she gave Rumple an ultimatum. She was tired of the lies, the deceit, the betrayals masked as acts of love, and when the stick turned pink she knew this was the only way she could ever truly have him back. She knew not a day went by that he didn't think about magic, but that he also knew it was best for his wife and daughter. They'd agreed to revisit the issue in a few years if he wanted to, but until then he was off magic, cold turkey. Belle closed her eyes and allowed Rumple to wrap his arms around her and hold her tightly.

"I love you," she whispered. "Just make sure she's okay."

"And I love you," he said, stroking her hair and rocking her gently. "That's all I want to do."

When Rumple knocked on Colette's door, there wasn't an answer at first. When she finally said "come in" and he pushed the door open, she wasn't anywhere to be found.

"Colette?"

"Under here." She peered out from under her bed, holding a book and a flashlight. She was already in her pajamas; she clutched her stuffed monkey and held it close to her chest.

"What on earth are you doing under there, darling?"

"I wanted to make a blanket fort but the chairs are too heavy and I couldn't move them," she said in a small voice, crawling out from under her bed to sit crosslegged on the floor and looking up at him.

"Well, as it so happens, blanket forts are my specialty," Rumple said with a twinkle in his eye. "How about we build one now?"

"Okay."

Rumple went downstairs and came back, over the course of a few trips, with several chairs from the dining room and a handful of blankets from the living room closet. He arranged the chairs in a half circle beside her bed, and helped her drape blankets across them. Colette was humming as she worked and Rumple couldn't hide the smile that crept onto his face. When they were finished, he crawled inside after her and they sat crosslegged facing each other.

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"It's really dark in here."

"Oh, come on, it's not that dark," Rumple teased. He reached his hands out and felt around the tent, poking and prodding and tickling Colette and tweaking her nose and making her giggle. "I do have this though, I picked it up at the shop today." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle
made of opaque blue glass, capped with an onyx stopper. He lifted one of the blankets and let a little light in so Colette could see.

"It's so pretty," she whispered, reaching out a finger to carefully trace the swirling patterns on the glass. "What is it?"

"This," he said, turning the bottle over in his hands, "is bottled starlight. Now mind you, these are not real stars, it's just a spell. But the effect is the same."

"But daddy, I thought you couldn't use magic," she said in a worried tone so like her mother's that Rumple almost chuckled.

"I can still use magic, I just choose not to, for reasons I'll explain when you're older," he said quietly. "All you need to know now is that I choose not to use magic because I love your mother, and you. And you don't have to worry, because I'm not using magic here. This is a spell that has already been enacted, it's just being contained in this."

He unstoppered the bottle and Colette watched as thousands of tiny, twinkling, star-like orbs were released into the blanket fort. They swirled around them and shone through the darkness with a soft, pale glow and Rumple wished he had a camera to capture the look of pure wonder and awe on his daughter's face. She laughed and held out her hands and tried to catch them. Rumple stretched out his legs and leaned against her bed. He opened his arms and she crawled onto his lap, snuggling in close, and together they watched the stars.

"Colette?"

"Hmm?"

"Did something happen at school today?"

She tensed and didn't say anything at first, instead cuddling in closer.

"Does this have anything to do with you being worried that the other children wouldn't like you?" he asked softly.

There was a noticeable pause before she answered. "No," Colette whispered. "I just missed you, daddy. There's a lot of people I don't know at school and I was really glad to see you."

Rumple rubbed her back and took his time choosing his words. "You know, I have some experience in dealing with people who don't like me," he said, smoothing her hair. "Once upon a time I told myself it didn't matter, and that I didn't need people to like me as long as I was getting what I wanted. But lately I've found that that's not the way to live. Do you want to know what your mother always says?"

Colette nodded slowly.

"She said the best thing to do is to be kind. You can't make everyone like you, but you can show kindness even though they don't. It might not change their behavior, but it changes how you feel about it."

Colette lifted her head to look up at him. "Really?"

"Really," he smiled. "Your mother is a smart woman, she's never wrong about these things."

Colette yawned and stretched. She felt a little better. Her daddy was good at that. He always knew
what to say. And who knew, maybe things would be better tomorrow. She knew she hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe the others would forget about whatever it was that had them in such a weird mood. She rested her cheek against Rumple's chest and closed her eyes.

"Ready for bed?"

"Uh huh."

Rumple pulled back the blankets and gathered Colette into his arms, carrying her out of the blanket fort and back into the real world. The stars followed them, dancing through the air to rest in the space just below her ceiling to create a patchwork map of galaxies and nebulas. Rumple set her down gently on the bed and tucked her in, kissing her forehead and brushing her hair back from her face.

"Daddy?" she said sleepily.

"Yes?"

"Will you sit with me?"

Rumple smiled. "Of course, sweetheart."

"Thank you..." she yawned again, slurring her words together. Rumple carefully scooted her over and lay down beside her, folding his hands across his stomach and staring at the stars clinging to the ceiling. Colette curled up in a ball against his chest and promptly fell asleep. Rumple didn’t think he was all that tired, but when Belle came in to check on them later she found both of them sound asleep and snuggled against each other. She decided to leave them be.
Chapter Summary

Colette tries to follow her mother's advice about kindness, but that becomes difficult when she learns firsthand how cruel children can be, and she also discovers something about herself that changes everything she's ever known about herself and her family.

Whispers followed Colette wherever she went. Her mother had decided to take her to school that morning instead of making her ride the bus, and Colette silently stared out the window for the duration of the ride. When they reached the car rider line, Belle got out of the car, knelt down to be on her level, and tucked her daughter's hair behind her ear.

"Remember what your father told you?" she asked softly, placing both hands on Colette's shoulders.

"Be kind," Colette said in a small voice, looking at her shoes. Unlike the first day of school, today would be a full day. That meant recess and gym class, so she was dressed in overalls with daisy patches on the pockets and red sneakers.

"That's my girl." Belle pulled her close for a long hug and stood. "Have a wonderful day, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you too, Mommy," Colette smiled for the first time all morning. She gripped the straps of her backpack, waved to her mother, and walked through the door.

That's her.

That's his daughter?

Oh my...

She's so tiny.

I wonder if she's anything like him.

Whispers and voices and murmurs and hushed mutters. Colette walked down the hallway catching pieces of each from the kids standing around. They weren't talking to her directly, but instead stood in groups and talked about her. And not just kindergarteners; big kids were pointing and whispering too. Colette crossed her arms and stared at the floor and hurried to her classroom, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. She didn't know what everyone's problems with her father were, but she was certain it shouldn't have to have anything to do with her. Maybe they thought her father's pawn shop was boring? Or maybe they'd tried to buy something that wasn't for sale? Or maybe they'd found out about that time her father had accidentally hit a squirrel when they were on their way to the park? Whatever it was, Colette was trying not to think about it too much. When she pushed the door to her classroom open, she discovered she was the first one inside. She grabbed a book off of the bookshelf, put her backpack in her labeled cubby, and took a seat.

"Good morning, Colette," her teacher peered over her reading glasses and smiled from her desk. Colette smiled back, feeling relieved to see a happy face. "What have you got there?"
Colette held up the copy of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* she'd taken, and Ms. Walker grinned.

"Oh, that's one of my favorites!" she exclaimed. "Do you like Eric Carle?"

"Ohhh, yes!" Colette said breathlessly, sitting up straight and clutching the book. "He's my favorite author, I love his pictures!"

"Me too! I also have a copy of *The Grouchy Ladybug* at home, would you like me to bring it for you to borrow?"

"Oh yes please!"

Colette's smile couldn't get any wider. She loved talking about books and she was so excited to meet another Eric Carle fan that she forgot all about her worries. She and Ms. Walker discussed their favorite books and authors and illustrators until the first bell rang. The other children were quiet, and some wouldn't look at her, but Colette refused to let it bother her. They'd come around. At least she hoped they would.

When the bell rang for lunch, Colette stayed behind to clean up the markers and crayons from coloring time because it was her turn on Cleanup Duty. She hummed to herself as she gathered them all up in the pink plastic box, put it in its place on the craft shelf, retrieved her lunchbox from her cubby, and turned the lights off before closing the door behind her. She skipped down the hallway, continuing to hum, and followed the purple post-it notes Ms. Walker had placed along the walls to help the kindergarteners find the cafeteria. When she got there, everyone had already claimed their tables. She wove her way around them, looking for an empty seat. When she found two empty seats at the last table and tried to sit down, a boy slapped his hand across the spot and glared at her.

"I'm saving this for someone," he said bluntly. Colette frowned.

"But everyone's already here..."

"I'm saving it for someone," the boy repeated, louder this time, causing the other tables to turn and stare.

"Okay, what about the one beside it? Can I sit there?" Colette gripped her lunchbox so tightly her knuckles turned white.

The girl next to the second empty spot copied the boy's actions by putting her hand across the chair and glaring at her..

"I'm saving this one too," she said snidely, looking Colette up and down and wrinkling her nose. No one noticed the sudden charge of electricity in the air or the lights that faintly flickered overhead. They were all too busy staring at Colette. She felt close to tears, but said nothing as she ducked her head and slowly walked towards the door.

"Colette!"

She halted in her tracks and turned to see Neal standing in his chair and waving. When he started to make his way towards her, she had never felt more relieved about anything in her life. She missed seeing her best friend every day.

"I didn't know we had the same lunch time!" he said excitedly, giving her a hug. "Where were you going?"
"Oh, I was just... There weren't any spots left and I was—"

"But there's two spots open over there," Neal interrupted her with a puzzled tone, pointing at the table she'd just come from.

"They said those spots were taken," Colette frowned and picked at her fingernails. A shadow crossed Neal's face and he looked frighteningly serious.

"Are those kids being mean to you?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know!" she said, throwing her hands up. "They were so nice to me yesterday and I made a friend and it was so good and then they found out daddy owns the pawn shop and now they're all acting funny. The big kids are doing it too!"

Neal grabbed her hand.

"Come on."

"Where are we going?"

Neal didn't answer her. He instead pulled her by the hand over to the table with the two empty seats.

"H. My friend and I would like to sit at this table," he said firmly, still holding on to Colette's hand. Everyone at the table stared at him, unsure of what to make of him. Colette didn't think her face could get any redder than it already was.

"These spots are taken," the snide girl said, sniffing and narrowing her eyes at Colette and then at Neal.

"No, they're not," he said calmly. "There's no other kindergarteners. And everyone in my class is already here."

"Yeah, well—"

"Great, thanks." Neal plopped down in one of the empty chairs and motioned for Colette to do the same. Colette noticed that he had forgotten to go get his lunch from his table, so she passed him half of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"We didn't say it was okay for you to sit at our tabl—"

"I'm in first grade." Neal leaned forward to fix the boy beside him with a piercing glare. "I can sit wherever I like. And you can't tell my friend that she's not allowed to sit with you when no other spots are available, or I'll tell your teacher." The table gasped.

"You wouldn't tattle..." the boy said in a horrified whisper.

"It's not tattling when you all are being horrible meanies," Neal said matter-of-factly. He took a bite of his sandwich half.

"You're friends with her?" the snide girl asked, shooting Colette another look.

"I sure am. This is Colette Gold. She's my best friend." Neal made eye contact with everyone around the table, putting emphasis on the last two words. "Colette is the nicest person I know, and she doesn't deserve to be treated like this."

"What did you say your name was, again?" The boy casually scooted his chair away from Neal and
Colette put a hand to her mouth to stifle a grin at the intimidated look on his face.

"I didn't. I'm Neal Charming."

"YOU'RE Neal Charming?" The boy's mouth dropped open, as did everyone else's.

"Yep." Neal took another bite, making it clear that that was the end of the discussion. Colette knew he hated being treated differently for being a Charming, and she was starting to understand what that felt like if the other kids were going to treat her differently for who her father was. Even if she didn't understand why they didn't like her father. He was just a pawn shop owner.

The rest of lunch was awkward, but Colette was glad she had Neal beside her. He ate half of her sandwich and a handful of the jelly beans her mother had packed for her, and smiled when he saw the note in her lunchbox. They talked about their teachers and their classrooms and promised to meet each other at Neal's house when school was over to play with the wooden swords he had gotten for his birthday. The other kids at the table sat in moody silence. When the bell rang, he helped her carry everything to the trash cans.

"Hey Neal? Thanks for that," she said, falling into step beside him as they walked toward the door.

"That's what best friends are for," he grinned. "I don't know why some people can be so mean."

"I don't even know what their problem is," Colette said. "They've never even met my daddy, why are they so afraid of him? Do they think he's horrible?"

"I've heard some whispers in my class, but I don't know either. I've always liked your dad."

"They don't even know him." Colette grumbled. She had been wracking her brain all day trying to think of reasons why anyone could hate her father and couldn't think of a single one. Not her daddy. He tucked her in every night and cut the crusts off of her sandwiches and read her bedtime stories and bottled the stars just for her. What on earth could he have done to make everyone so afraid of him? The question was still on her mind when she said goodbye to Neal and walked over to line up by the door with the rest of her class, but having lunch with her best friend had put her in a good mood and she was determined to stay in a good mood. She would do what her mother told her to do. She would be kind.

Recess came towards the end of the day and by that time the kindergarteners were fidgeting and wiggling and otherwise unable to sit still in their seats for much longer. They'd worked on their letters (today was B day), they'd had circle time and they'd even had a lesson in tying shoes after Ms. Walker discovered half the class didn't know how. When it was time to line up to go out to the playground, Colette was so excited she could hardly stand it. She went to stand in her place in line while the students on clean up duty finished tidying up.

"Are you excited for recess, Sarah?" Colette turned to her line buddy and smiled.

Sarah shrugged and stared straight ahead.

"Is that a no? I'm excited, I really wanna try the swingset." Sarah turned to face her. "My parents said I shouldn't talk to you, okay? Just leave me alone."

Colette felt like she'd been punched in the stomach. "What?" She clenched her fists and set her jaw to keep from crying.
Sarah opened her mouth didn't have a chance to answer because at that moment Ms. Walker clapped her hands and opened the door to lead them out to the playground. Colette shoved her hands into the pockets of her overalls and made a game out of not stepping on the cracks in the tiles. When they reached the playground, a massive section of play equipment and open field and trees that bordered the woods, Ms. Walker quickly went over playground rules and etiquette and turned them loose.

Colette took out running for the swingset but some of the bigger kids with longer legs beat her there and filled up all the swings. She skidded to a halt and approached one of them.

"Hi, can I swing after you're done?" she smiled shyly.

"We're probably gonna swing the whole time. Sorry," the boy said. The other children snickered.

"The whole time?" The smile fell from Colette's face. "I thought we were supposed to share."

"We don't share with people like you," the girl beside him said. Colette recognized her as the girl who tried to prevent her from sitting at her lunch table.

"People like me?" Colette's bottom lip quivered but she would not cry in front of them. She just wanted to know why everyone suddenly hated her.

"Exactly," the boy said. "Now go somewhere else and let us swing."

A deep red blush spread across Colette's cheeks as she ducked her head and walked away. All around the playground there were groups of children playing on the merry-go-round and the parallel bars, taking turns on the slides, sitting under the trees and talking, and throwing a baseball back and forth. Everywhere she turned, Colette was either ignored or given dirty looks, so she kept walking until she found a shaded spot under a tree by a group of kids playing kickball. She sat crosslegged on the grass with her chin in her hands, looking for four leaf clovers and pulling up yellow dandelions to make a flower crown. The kickball game looked like fun, but Colette couldn't take anyone else being mean to her today, so she sat in her little spot under the tree and twisted dandelions together and wondered if she'd be able to go to the shop after school. Colette had never felt this sad before and being in the shop always cheered her up.

A sudden bout of squealing and cheering caught her attention and she looked up to see a girl kick the ball way way waayyyyy over the outfield and run across all the bases. The ball bounced several times before landing near Colette. She jumped to her feet and went to go pick it up at the same time the kids from the game ran over.

"That's ours, give it back," said the girl who kicked the ball.

"I know, I was just going to--"

"Were you going to steal it?" said a tall boy who stepped forward to lean over Colette. There was suddenly a crowd of about six or seven kids surrounding her and Colette felt very small and very, very nervous. She glanced over at Ms. Walker and the other teachers sitting on a bench on the other side of the playground but they weren't looking in her direction.

"No, I was just--"
"I wasn't going to keep it, I thought you wanted me to throw it back to you!" Colette shouted, clutching the ball until her knuckles turned white. She held it out and everyone in the crowd jumped back.

"Did you see that? She almost hit me!" the tall boy said. The crowd took a step back but the boy stayed where he was. He grabbed the ball from Colette's hands and shoved her, hard. Colette let out a sharp yelp and fell to the ground, landing on her hip and bursting into tears. At the moment she hit the ground, a small branch overhead snapped and fell, landing inches from the boy who shoved her. The entire crowd gasped and fell silent.

"Did you do that?" the boy whispered. He was white as a sheet, staring at Colette with a mix of anger and fear on his face. Colette shook her head furiously.

"No! It just fell, I didn't do anything!"

"She made it fall!" said a girl in the crowd. "I saw you! It snapped the second you hit the ground!"

"No, I didn't, I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to!" Colette pleaded, trying to push herself to her feet. Her hip hurt and she looked down at her hand to see dirt and blood smeared on her palm from the rocky patch she'd fallen on.

"You're just like him!" the boy shouted, taking a step back. "He's a monster and so are you! You almost killed me!"

"No, I didn't!" Colette managed to say between sobs. "Who's a monster?"

"Your father, stupid! You're just like him! It's only natural that The Dark One's kid would turn out to be just like him."

"Who's the dark one?"

"Your father," the boy said slowly, enunciating every word as if he was talking to a baby. "Rumplestiltskin. The Dark One. Responsible for ruining everyone's lives back in the enchanted forest." Colette stared at him blankly and he rolled his eyes. "Owns a crooked dagger? The most powerful man in our world? A terrible, horrible awful person? Spins straw into gold? Please tell me you know about The Dark One."

Colette slowly shook her head. They were talking about someone else. Her father wasn't The Dark One, or whoever they were talking about. Her father was her most frequent guest at the tea parties she had in her room. Sometimes at night when she would sneak down to the kitchen for something to eat she would find her father dancing across the kitchen floor with her mother, both of them in their pajamas and smiling and holding onto each other like they would never let go. When her favorite teddy bear got a hole in his tummy, her father had gotten a needle and thread out of the hall closet and stitched him up as good as new. Her father was not The Dark One.

"The Dark One is the reason we're here and not in the enchanted forest," the boy said in a dangerously quiet voice, taking a step toward Colette. "He's an awful, terrible man who only cares about himself. He's killed more people than anyone and has torn apart too many families to count. I think he enjoys it."

"You're lying..." Colette started to shake uncontrollably and she could feel her heart beating in her throat. They were lying, all of them. They were talking about someone else. Her father wouldn't kill anyone. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

"He's a monster," the boy said, crossing his arms and looming over Colette. "He probably tricked
that woman into marrying him, there's no way anyone in their right mind would marry someone like him."

Something in Colette snapped. Her eyes flashed and a shadow crossed her face and her breathing quickened and when she screamed at the boy with all the breath in her body, a bolt of lightning snaked down from the sky and split a nearby oak tree down the middle. The crowd shrieked and dispersed, with everyone running in different directions trying to get away from Colette. Further away, Ms. Walker finally looked in their direction, jumped to her feet and ran toward them with the other teachers. All the blood drained from Colette's face as she looked at the smoldering tree on the ground and then at her shaking hands. Did she really do that? Did she mean to do that? She could have hurt someone. She could have killed someone. She hadn't meant to do that. Had she?

"See?" the boy said with a leering grin. "Monsters. Both of you. Like father like daughter."

Colette couldn't breathe. She felt dizzy and sick to her stomach and she sank to her knees and tried to take deep breaths but she couldn't force the air into her lungs. The world spun around her and she saw several adults running toward her and she saw children running away with fear in their eyes and when she tried to stand up, she fell against a tree. As soon as she hit with the bark, a shower of sparks exploded from the place her skin made contact with and she started to cry in earnest. She looked up to see her teacher standing in front of her with concern and apprehension on her face but before she could say one word, Colette disappeared in a cloud of red smoke.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Colette Gold has magic and everyone is afraid of the ramifications of what this might mean. Meanwhile, Rumple considers a decision with drastic consequences.

*sorry about the delay, it's been a busy summer

When Colette opened her eyes, she found herself in different surroundings than she was before. The children surrounding her were gone, as was the smoldering tree she'd accidentally struck with lightning. There was also no more ringing in her ears. Her muscles ached; she'd disappeared with her hands over her ears and her body curled into a ball on the ground. Around her were towering trees and warm sunlight and tall soft grass. Not her and Neal's special place, but somewhere like it. If being in the shop made her happy, then being in the forest calmed her down. She must have known that somehow, even through her panic attack, and transported herself here. Above her, the sky was a cloudless blue and sunlight filtered through the trees surrounding the clearing, but if she looked off in the direction of town she could see swirling grey clouds and hear low rumbles of thunder. She could feel her breath catch in her throat as she realized those angry clouds were the remnants of the lightning she'd accidentally conjured. The more she thought about it, the more the memories came flooding back and the faster her breathing became until she was crying again and pressing her hands to her ears to try to block everything out.

"What do you mean 'she's missing?'"

When Rumple's phone rang that afternoon he hadn't anticipated it being the principal of Storybrooke Elementary. Belle was generally the only person who ever called him, usually to ask him about his day or tell him about her plans for dinner or ask if he was cooking that night or just to talk. Hearing the principal's voice on the other end of the line caught him off guard.

"Mr. Gold, I'm calling you to inform you of an incident that occurred earlier at school today involving your daughter," the principal said. Rumple could hear his voice shaking slightly. He was used to people talking to him like that, but this sounded different. And what did he mean by "incident?" Was Colette okay? He put down the cloth he'd been using to clean the glass cases and stood, leaning on the counter and frowning. His heart began to race.

"What kind of incident?"

He heard the principal swallow. "The kindergarteners were out at recess and it appears that Colette was involved in some kind of altercation. The teachers' attention was focused elsewhere and we're getting conflicting stories from the children involved, but it appears that one of the older children pushed Colette to the ground and she... made something happen."

When Rumple spoke, it was a low hiss through clenched teeth. The thought of someone shoving his daughter made him want to... No. He hadn't had those thoughts in years. He'd done a very good job of burying those dark thoughts deep within the recesses of his mind, but he was entertaining some of them now as he imagined someone hurting his little girl. He took deep breaths.
"Made something happen?"

"Um, yes, it... She... It seems she made a branch fall dangerously close to the child who pushed her and then struck a nearby tree with lightning and split it in half." The principal sounded like he would have rather melted into the floor than have to deliver this news. Rumple, on the other hand, staggered against the counter and sank into a nearby chair as he felt all the breath in his body rush out of his lungs in one gasp. Magic. His daughter had magic? A thousand emotions coursed through his brain, but Rumple didn't know how to feel. He didn't have time to process them either, because of what the principal said next.

"Mr. Gold... We need you and your wife to come to school immediately to assist the sheriff's department in locating your daughter--"

"What?"

"Colette is missing. The children on the playground said that after she struck the tree with lightning she disappeared in a cloud of red smoke. No one has been able to find her, or even knows where to look for her."

Rumple sank to the floor. He felt dizzy, like he wanted to cry and scream and strangle someone all at once, but one thing was certain. He'd never been this terrified in his life.

"What do you mean she's missing? She's five years old, where could she go?" He tried to keep the desperation out of his voice, but it was difficult. Rumplestiltskin had cried in very few situations in his life, and this was going to be another if he couldn't get his emotions under control.

"We were hoping you could help us with that," the principal said. "We're searching the grounds of the school as we speak, but we haven't found her yet."

Rumple ran his free hand through his hair, grabbing a fistful and setting his jaw. He somehow found the words to tell the principal that he'd be there as soon as he could, he just had to call Belle. He somehow managed to stand on steady legs, taking deep breaths and trying to calm his racing heart rate. He clenched his phone in a fist for a moment before throwing it across the room, watching it shatter on impact as it hit the wall.

In the forest, Colette had cried herself out long ago, but remained curled up in the same position. The grass all around her was soft and cool and tall; she'd matted down a small patch and created a tiny nest and she felt more at peace here than she'd felt since she started school. The other children whispered and pointed and called her a freak. Maybe they were right. Normal children didn't make branches fall or lightning strike trees. They didn't accidentally disappear in clouds of red smoke. Her mommy had always said she was a special girl, but is this what she meant? Or was Colette a freak because her daddy was the Dark One? She'd always known he had magic, but she'd never seen him use it. He never used it anymore because he promised her mother he wouldn't. Was her magic like his? Was his magic evil? Was that why they called him the Dark One? Had he really killed people like those kids said he did? Was he a monster like they said he was? Was she? Colette felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach. It suddenly occurred to her that people would be looking for her, but how could they find her if not even Colette herself knew where she was? The more she looked around at the unfamiliar trees and landmarks, the more lost and alone she felt and the calmness she'd briefly enjoyed evaporated. She wanted to go home. She wanted her mother. She wanted her father, but first she wanted answers from him. She wanted to crawl into her bed in her bedroom with her stuffed monkey and her favorite book and read until she fell asleep. She just wanted all of these feelings to go away.
No sooner had Rumple's phone hit the wall did the bell above the shop door jingle as Belle walked in, carrying an armful of books and a takeout bag. Her eyes were bright and there was a "hello" on her lips until she saw Rumple's expression and her gaze traveled to the broken phone on the floor. Rumple was gripping the counter with white knuckles and breathing heavily and there were equal amounts of rage and fear in his eyes that Belle had never seen before. It frightened her.

"Rumple? What's wrong?" Her voice was low. She put the takeout bag on the counter and held onto her books, worry shadowing her face when he didn't speak for several moments. "Rumple?"

He took a shaky breath. "It's Colette. She... Something happened, at school... They don't..." He sank into a chair behind him. "She's missing."

The books in Belle's arms fell to the ground in a crash that shook the entire room and she bit her lip in an effort to keep the tears that suddenly filled her eyes from spilling onto her cheeks. It was her turn to brace herself against the counter, but Rumple jumped up and grabbed her shoulders so she wouldn't fall. She looked at him.

"What do you mean she's missing?" she whispered. She was shaking and looked away.

"The school called. There was an incident. No one knows exactly what happened, but..."

"But what?" Her eyes met his and in that moment, Rumple didn't know how to tell her what the principal had said.

"Some of the other kids were bullying her..." Belle's eyes flashed at the thought of someone hurting her baby girl. "One of them pushed her to the ground, and she... She made a branch fall that almost hit him. Something else happened they're not sure of, but... She struck a tree with lightning and brought it to the ground."

She stared at him as if she hadn't heard him properly. "She did what..."

"Struck a tree with lightning and caused it to fall. She has magic, Belle."

Belle's eyes filled with tears again and this time she didn't do anything to stop them. She didn't know how to feel or what to think. Her brain was clouded and all she wanted to do was find their daughter.

"She must be so scared," she whispered. "What happened after she... after she made the tree fall?"

"She disappeared in a cloud of red smoke and no one has been able to find her."

Belle closed her eyes. "That's the same color as your magic," she said in a barely audible whisper. Tears fell silently down her cheeks and Rumple wrapped his arms around her, rocking her gently.

"We'll find her," he said, rubbing her shoulders. "We'll find her."

"Do you have any idea where she is? I know she and Neal play in the woods all the time but I don't know if he would know where to look. She could be at home, I haven't looked there since I left this morning. She could be at the Charmings', they've always been so welcoming."

Rumple shook his head. "Raw unrefined magic is unpredictable. Volatile. Young raw unrefined magic is twice that. But I've never heard of someone developing magic on their own so young, so this is completely new territory."

"Well... You are the--" Belle took a deep breath-- "Dark One... Maybe that has something to do with
"No, never," he murmured, frowning. Had he done this to Colette? Was his magic like a curse he'd unknowingly passed on to his daughter? Would her magic be light or dark? There was darkness in him but there was light in her mother. Not to mention there was less darkness in him since the day he decided to give up magic for good. He hadn't once thought about going back on his promise in six years, but with every minute that passed without any progress being made on locating Colette, he was rethinking that decision. It was actually making his palms itch and his face hot. Thinking about using magic again. Maybe just a little spell...

"Rumple?"

His head snapped up. He hadn't realized he'd been lost in thought. "Hmm?"

Belle was looking at him with a curious look on her face, one that resembled the looks she used to give him years before. It was almost apprehensive "You had a funny look on your face. Did you have an idea?"

"Maybe..." he said. He guided Belle to the chair by the counter and motioned for her to sit. "Well, we have no idea where she is, right? She could be anywhere, and while that means she's still in Storybrooke, that's still a lot of ground to cover to find one small five year old with unpredictable magic."

"Yes..." Belle said. The apprehensiveness in her tone intensified.

"What if there was a way to find her immediately? But that way would... be hypothetically breaking a promise a certain someone made to his wife six years ago..."

Belle stared at him. "You want to use a locator spell to find her."

He nodded. "Just one locator spell, I promise. I can go back to not using magic after that, but we have to find her before something really serious happens to her."

"I don't know..." Belle said slowly. When he'd made that promise all those years ago, she'd feared this day would come. She believed in him, but he'd disappointed her too many times for her to fully trust him. Years had passed without incident and that thought had almost all but disappeared from her mind, but not completely. She would like to say that she was surprised by his behavior– and superficially she was– but deep down, she really wasn't.

"What?" Rumple's face fell.

"You've gone so long without using magic," she said. "And besides... You promised. You can't break your promise now, you'd be undoing years of hard work and staying clean."

"Staying clean?" He scoffed. "You make me sound like an addict."

"You are an addict, Rumple! Magic is your addiction, it always has been! You've always chosen magic over everything else, even the people you love!"

"Not always," he said heatedly. "I chose you."

"See? Exactly," Belle said, smiling a teary smile. "You chose me. Instead of magic. You promised me that you would never use magic again because your reliance on it made you weak, and your love for me made you stronger. Remember?" She took his hands in her own and held on tightly, trying to anchor him.
"It's just one spell, Belle! If I can find her–"

"But it won't be one spell, Rumple, can't you see that? An addict can't go six years without encountering their addiction, use it again, and go back to six more years of abstaining. You won't be able to stop." Her voice faltered.

"What do you suggest, then?" he said in a raised voice, snatching his hands out of her grip. "Our daughter is out there, alone and frightened and confused, and we don't have a fraction of a clue as to where she might be and we don't have the time to search the whole town. She's five years old, Belle, what–"

"You don't have to remind me that she's missing, she's my daughter too!" Belle shouted, standing up. "There are other ways to find her, we don't have to resort to magic first!"

"I WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR IDEAS, BELLE–"

"DON'T YELL AT ME, RUMPLE" she shouted. "We can get the whole town to help us, you know how everyone loves her. We can ask Emma, we can get Regina to help, we can–"

"Belle this is our daughter we're talking about, we don't have time to ask the town or Emma or Regina for help! What if she gets even more scared than she already is and makes something else happen? What if she hurts herself this time, instead of a tree?"

"Rumple, we are going to find our daughter, I just don't think we should sacrifice six years of your goodness to do it! We. Will. Find. Another. Way." She held out her hand.

He stared at her for a long time, so long that Belle thought he might change his mind and take her hand. But his expression crumpled, he whispered "I'm sorry," and disappeared in a cloud of red smoke. Belle put her face in her hands, sank to the floor and sobbed.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

A flashback chapter. Belle makes a life-altering discovery and gives Rumple an ultimatum.

*if you'd like to make it more painful than it already is, listen to Long and Lost by Florence + the Machine while reading.

Three to five minutes. The box was vague. She wanted a precise measurement, something that was easy to calculate and quantify. She needed that right now. Facts and numbers and cold data comforted her and reassured her that some things in the world were constant and never changed, especially when she felt like her entire world could be turned on end. She didn't even know how to feel right now. Three to five minutes might as well have been three to five hours.

She hadn't seen him since... Well, since she told him she never wanted to see him again. They weren't divorced, they'd just... stopped being married. Everything was just too much; all the lies, the deceit, him leading her to believe he really had changed only for her to discover he hadn't, and each time surprising her less and less until she no longer dreaded his lies, but expected them. Her heart couldn't take it anymore. As much as she loved him, she didn't think she could take another blatant lie to her face or another betrayal. Part of her knew it wasn't his fault. He was the Dark One. He would always battle with the goodness in his heart. But part of her wanted him to try harder, to choose her for once instead of magic and power. He'd never been able to do it before, despite the chances she'd given him and the times she'd taken him back.

She glanced at the timer balanced on the bathroom sink. 4 minutes 23 seconds. She felt as if ice were running through her veins and her stomach had dropped into her feet. Deep breaths. With shaking hands, she picked up the box and the test. She checked the label six times, and checked the box six more times to make sure she was reading the label right. Even though she had suspected it, seeing the final result with her own eyes was enough to take her breath away and numb her entire body.

Two blue lines. Belle Gold was pregnant.

She spent the rest of the night on the couch, holding a pillow and staring at the floor. She'd turned off all of the lights and sat on the couch with her knees against her chest. The tv was casting a blue glow across the living room but she wasn't really paying attention. She hadn't been able to take her mind off of... well, the thing she'd been trying to take her mind off of all day. She couldn't be pregnant. They'd talked about children, of course, but that had been before he'd betrayed her for the thousandth time and she'd kicked him out. Before all this... mess. She didn't want to be pregnant. Not now, at least. It was wrong, all wrong. They were supposed to do this together. He was supposed to hold her hand at the first ultrasound appointment and help her pick out paint swatches for the nursery and keep a notepad in his pocket for baby names he thought of throughout the day. She was supposed to hold his hand at the first ultrasound appointment and tell him not to cry when the first images of their baby appeared on the screen even though she was already crying and help him pick out paint swatches for the nursery and circle the names she liked best when she fished the notebook out of the pocket of the jacket he always threw over the back of the chair in their room. It was supposed to go
according to plan, for once. Just once, she wanted things to be as normal as they possibly could be. She almost smiled in spite of herself. Since when had anything in her life gone according to plan? She married the Dark One, for heaven's sake. "Normal" hadn't been a part of the equation in a very long time. She had nearly forgotten what normal felt like. She folded her hands across her stomach. Maybe she could do this.

No sooner had she allowed herself to relax did the front door deadbolt slowly turn and the door creak open. In a rush of adrenaline, Belle jumped up, grabbed a figurine from the end table, and held it over her head. When she saw who was standing on the porch, she didn't lower her arms.

"RUMPLE?!

"Hello, Belle," he said quietly, turning red and trying to hide the lockpicking kit he was holding behind him. He looked at the figurine in her hands with wariness. "Are you going to hit me with that?"

"I might," she said menacingly, trying to lower her heart rate and calm her breathing. The thought of an intruder had sent her into a panic. This just made her furious. "What are you even doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Belle, I just needed to get a few things and I didn't want to wake you but you're already awake--"

"So you broke in?"

He was quiet. "I just thought it would be easier than having to..."

"Having to what?! Knock on the front door during broad daylight like a normal person? Would that really be so hard, Rumple?!

"Having to see you," he said, shoving the lockpicking kit into his pocket. His eyes met hers and caught her off-guard. He'd always been able to do that. "You said you didn't want to see me again, I just thought this would be easier than having to..." he trailed off. Belle felt her heart twisting into a knot. She looked at the door frame and refused to meet his eyes, though she did lower her arms.

"What do you want?" she asked quietly, turning the figurine over in her hands.

"Some clothes, a few dishes, a couple of things from my office."

Belle put the figurine on a table and held the door open for him. He still smelled the same as he shuffled past her and disappeared upstairs, and she closed her eyes briefly. There was a time when the combination of peppermint and faint traces of cologne had been all the comfort she needed in the world, but now all it did was make her sad. She could hear drawers shutting and closet doors opening and the thud of a suitcase. She put her head in her hands and rubbed her temples. This was the first time she'd seen him in weeks. He looked good. There were dark circles under his eyes and a subtle stoop to his walk, but he looked the same. She wondered if she did too. Would he be able to notice anything different about her appearance? Would he be able to tell? She hadn't decided how to tell him yet, or if she was even going to tell him at all. What difference would it make? If he couldn't change for her, how could he change for their child? Belle had given him countless chances and he had failed every time. She wouldn't let him to that to their child.

She noticed that the rummaging noises had stopped. She waited a moment, sighed heavily, and climbed the stairs. What on earth was he doing up there? 

He hadn't meant to scare her. He honestly truly thought she would be asleep. He could have used
magic to quickly appear and disappear— a faster easier way— but since magic was the thing that had caused them to end up here, he thought it was best to avoid it. In and out. That had been the plan. Get in, get his things, get out. No contact. But seeing her face as he opened the door was enough to make his chest ache, and there was no doubt in his mind that had he taken a step further she would have hit him with that figurine. He almost laughed. They'd been through so much together that it was unfair that this should be where they end up; him living in a cabin out in the woods and having to break into their house to retrieve clothes, her threatening to hit him with a bronze statuette because he was no longer welcome in their home. He missed her, but it was too late for that now. He had hurt her too many times. He knew that. His immediate reaction was that it was not his fault, that the magic and the power made him do it. He tried to be good, but the darkness inside him wouldn't let him. But he knew that deep down even he didn't believe that. He had done this to her. He had chosen magic and power over the love of his life and though he regretted his choices with every breath that left his body, he couldn't do a thing to take them back.

She looked good. He knew she would. It took his breath away how beautiful she was, even when it was weeks after she had kicked him out and she was poised to attack him with a heavy figurine. There were dark circles under her eyes and something different about her demeanor that he couldn't place but she looked the same. When she finally put the figurine down and let him in, he noticed that she still smelled the same. Light perfume and oranges and something sweet. All he wanted to do was reach out for her and pull her into his arms and hold her and promise never to let her go again, but the time for that had passed. He had screwed up, and she couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't blame her, but it didn't make him any less sad, or even surprised. There was always a certain truth to his words when he told her that no one could ever love him all those years ago in a lonely castle in the mountains, with chipped cups and nailed-shut curtains. No one could love him for very long. He would inevitably destroy everything dear and sweet to him and all that would remain would be heartbeat.

He climbed the stairs with heavy feet. Their wedding photo was still on the wall. He wondered if she had forgotten it was there, or if she couldn't bring herself to take it down. The upstairs bedroom they shared was untouched; she must be sleeping in the guest room. Rumple dragged a suitcase out of the closet and loaded armfuls of clothes into it without bothering to fold them. He took it into the bathroom— he needed shaving cream and a few odds and ends— and was throwing things into the outside pockets when something caught his eye. There was a brightly colored box in the trash can by the sink, partially obscured by bits of kleenex. Everything in him told him it would be Very Bad if he went snooping through her trash can, but Rumple's curiosity got the best of him. He bent down, pulled the box, and felt every muscle in his body go limp. It was a pregnancy test box. In that moment, Belle opened the door, calling his name.

"Rumple? What on earth are you doing up here, I thought—"

When Belle opened the bathroom door, the first thing she saw was the pink paper box in Rumple's hands. The one she'd opened earlier that day. The second thing she saw was the look on his face, like all the blood had been drained from his body. She froze.

"Where did you get that?" she asked in a low voice. "What are you doing in here? Were you going through my trash?" Her tone was sharp and biting but she had never been so scared in her life. She had only found out about the baby that morning, she hadn't had time to plan how she was going to tell him, much less when she was going to tell him. She had no idea how he would react. Would he be angry that she had kept it from him? Would he faint? So far he was doing none of those things, but standing frozen before her with an ashen color to his face.

"You're pregnant?" he said in a barely audible whisper.
Belle crossed her arms tightly across her chest and looked at the floor. She felt tears pricking at her eyes and she was determined not to cry. She bit her lip.

"Belle?"

She looked up and met his gaze. "Yes," she whispered. Tears spilled onto her cheeks but she didn't brush them away.

Rumple's expression crumpled and his stance faltered a little. "I'm going to be a father?" His voice cracked.

Belle took a deep breath, closing her eyes briefly. "Yes," she said.

She didn't get a chance to say anything else because at that moment, Rumple rushed forward and wrapped his arms around her. It surprised her to discover how well she still fit into his embrace, and for a few precious moments she felt safe and secure and like nothing in the world could ever hurt her again. As quickly as he had done it, he released her.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I just... I... You're pregnant?"

She smiled a teary smile. "Yeah."

"When did you find out?" There was a quiet exhilaration in his face, like he was barely able to contain his happiness.

"Um, this morning, actually," she said, twisting the hem of her shirt and blushing. "I took three more after that one when I got to work, just to be sure, and... yeah."

"We're going to have a baby?"

Her head snapped up and the rosy glow in the pit of her stomach faded. "We." He said "we." For a few moments she had forgotten everything that happened and forgotten why he was here and how he got here and how the idea of a "we" made her want to cry. She'd forgotten how easy it was to forgive him and let him back in.

"Rumple..." she said quietly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "We've had this discussion so many times, I don't think... I just..." She looked at him. "I can't do this again." His lip quivered.

"Belle, please..." he begged. "I can change, I can. I can. I've done it before, haven't I? I know I can do it again, I... Belle, please." He took her hands in his own. "I can't abandon this baby. I can't do that again. I can't let him grow up without a father. I can't do to him what I did to Baelfire, Belle, I just can't." Tears filled his eyes and he buried his head in his hands and sank to the floor. Belle had never seen him so distraught. "I left him alone when he was just a boy and he grew up alone and filled with so much anger and it was all my fault and when he died, I..."

Belle knelt down and pressed her forehead against his, placing hands on either side of his face and trying to calm him down. He was crying and so was she, but she knew one thing was certain. Rumple would not abandon this baby like he had abandoned his son. She couldn't let that happen. She wouldn't let that happen. He wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly and they were clinging to each other on the floor of the upstairs bathroom after he'd broken into their house to retrieve shaving cream and old clothes. Totally normal and conventional.

"What if it's a girl?"

"What?" He lifted his head to look at her, his brow furrowed. Her expression softened.
"What if it's a girl?" she said gently, wiping her eyes and smiling softly.

"Then I promise to never leave her as long as I live and to love her with all the goodness left in my heart," he said, returning her smile. "I can change this time, Belle. Just give me one more chance. Please. I know I can do it."

She looked at him long and hard. She'd heard those words so many times they no longer had any meaning, but this time felt different from the others. There was an urgency to his words, a frantic desperation that felt more believable than the countless "I'm sorry's" she'd heard in the past.

"No magic," she whispered, more to herself than him.

"What?"

"No magic," she repeated, louder this time. "If you're going to really change, there can't be magic to tempt you. It's an addiction, Rumple. It always has been. You've always loved the magic more than you've wanted to stay with me– no, you know it's true," she said, putting a finger to his lips when he opened them to object. "You can stay, and we can talk about this and everything else, if you promise. No magic."

She had expected an argument. A plea. A twisting of her words, a proposition of a new promise. Instead, he leaned forward, kissed her gently on the forehead, and put his hands on her shoulders.

"I promise," he said firmly. "No magic."

And Belle believed him this time.

They spent the next night and countless nights after that one talking. Talking about where everything went wrong, talking about how they could make as many things as they could right again, talking about the past and the future and everything else they could think of. It was slow going, but it needed to be. Rumple hadn't realized the extent of how deeply he had hurt her, and that would not go away overnight. Eventually, slowly, they reached several ultimatums and decisions. He moved back in. Belle smiled whenever she thought about him. Rumple put his clothes back into the closet in their bedroom. They agreed that there would be no magic for the foreseeable future. There were a few times where he almost faltered, but in the end he always kept his word and kept it under control.

They cleared out the upstairs guest bedroom to make room for a nursery. He went with her to the hardware store to pick out paint swatches. They both cried when they heard the baby's heartbeat at the first ultrasound. Rumple talked to the bump. They stayed up late, facing each other in bed– Belle clinging to a body pillow– and whispering baby names to each other. Rumple went on so many cravings runs he'd lost count, but the pantry was stocked with peanut butter and there was ice cream in the freezer and pickles and hot sauce in the fridge, and he never complained once. Belle sat in the rocking chair they'd put in the nursery and read to the baby in the morning, the afternoon, whenever she had a free minute. He kept his promise. And when the time finally came for their baby to be born, he never left her side or let go of her hand.

"She has your eyes."

"Rumple, she's three hours old."

"She has your eyes."

"Her eyes aren't even open."
"Nevertheless. She's going to be beautiful like her mother." He kissed the top of her head.

"We still have to name her," Belle murmured, gazing down at the tiny baby wrapped in pink blankets in her arms, who yawned and stretched and sleepily waved her fists. Rumple was lying beside her in the hospital bed with an arm around her. His free hand was in the grasp of the baby, who had grabbed his finger as soon as she was placed in Belle's arms and hadn't let go yet. They'd talked about names for nine months, but now that she was here and living and breathing and in their arms, only one made sense.

"Colette," Rumple said softly, using his thumb to stroke her tiny hand. "After your mother. Colette Gold." He turned to Belle. "Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"It's not as colorful as Baelfire, but it'll do," she said, mischief twinkling in her eyes. He wrinkled his nose and stuck his tongue out. Belle adjusted her grip on the baby.

"What do you say, Papa? Do you want to hold your daughter?"

She didn't have to ask twice. Belle placed the sleepy bundle in his arms and he thought his heart might burst. Her eyes opened and she made fussy, snuffling noises that escalated into shrill cries and Rumple rocked her as gently as if he was holding a million dollars.

"Shhhhh, it's okay," he whispered. "Your Papa's here. I've got you. And I'm never leaving, I promise. I made that promise to your older brother many years ago, but this time I mean it. I promise I will always protect you, and I will never leave you, Colette." He held her close and rocked her until her cries subsided and she drifted off to sleep once more. It was in that moment that Belle knew he would always keep his promise.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Suspense and deep talks

Rumple felt as though his body was on autopilot. He was vaguely aware of his movements and motions, but his mind was elsewhere. It was a defense mechanism he'd started using years and years ago that made being the dark one... easier to swallow. It made everything easier; all the killing, all the maiming, all of the things that would have made his past self's skin crawl and his stomach heave. It allowed him to keep going when he lost his son. It made it bearable to keep living after losing Belle the first and second and third time. He couldn't focus on the pain because he'd drown in it, so he distanced himself from it. It took practice, but practice was the one thing the universe seemed to be intent on giving him plenty of. The cold exterior, the calculated snarls, every "sorry dearie" and sinister deal made: a well-rehearsed motion that he'd become so accustomed to performing that it had become second nature. He hadn't needed this facade in years, not since Belle took him back, but it still surprised him how easy it was to slip back into being that person. It frightened him.

He reappeared in his daughter's bedroom surrounded by a cloud of red smoke. He closed his eyes, pausing for breath and breaking character for a moment as everything hit him at once. It smelled like her. There was a tiny purple sock on the floor she must have missed while carrying her laundry to the laundry chute. Her stuffed monkey was propped up on her bed, which had been made in the particular but slightly disheveled way that five year olds make their beds. Finger paintings and crayon drawings of Colette and her family were pinned on a decorative wire with clothespins above her coloring desk (Rumple thought he looked rather dashing with blue hair and a green tie). There was a stack of picture books on her bedside table beside a photo of Colette sitting atop Rumple's shoulders and laughing at the camera while he looked up at her and smiled. Rumple leaned against the bedpost and put a hand across his face, trying to maintain composure. He was scared and angry and terrified and sad and sorry and a million other things at once that he'd never felt before with such intensity. He had broken his promise to Belle. He had made her cry. He had unknowingly passed magic down to his daughter and now she was missing. All of this traced back to him. He had to make it right.

He took a deep breath and walked over to her bed. He picked up her stuffed monkey with trembling hands, closed his eyes, shut away his emotions, and pulled a crystalline bottle from his pocket. He unstoppered it with a wave of his hand, poured it on the monkey after checking to make sure it was machine washable, snapped his fingers, and waited. When it began to glow and floated over his upturned palm, he let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, clenched his fists, and let it lead the way.

Colette lay on the forest floor, surrounded by tall cool grass that whispered and rustled in the breeze. Her tears had dried long ago but there was a tightness in her chest that wouldn't go away. Her palms and the hip she had landed on ached. There was still blood and dried mud on her hands and grass in her hair and grass stains on her favorite overalls. She wanted her mother. She wanted to go home. She wanted her monkey and her pajamas and a cookie. She wanted someone to hold her and tell her that everything was going to be okay. She didn't know if she wanted to see her father. How could he have done all of those things and never told her? How could he have done all of those things to
begin with? He was her father, but he had also killed people? He tucked her in at night, but he was the Dark One? The same hands that bandaged her scrapes and tickled her tummy were the hands that hurt so many people? Colette shook her head, trying to shake loose the confusing thoughts in her head. She wished she'd never gone to school. She wished she'd never had to see so many people staring at her and whispering about her. She wished she'd never had to hear people say those things about her father. She just wanted to go home.

Somewhere close by, a twig snapped. Colette's blood ran cold and her breath halted. The sound of footsteps drew closer. She tuckered her head against her chest and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to make herself smaller as her breathing quickened. Was it an animal? A monster? Were there monsters in the woods?! Was something going to get her??!! Was–

"Colette?"

She opened her eyes. It was her father. He was looking for her? She didn't know how long she'd been out here but it was starting to feel like a lifetime and her daddy had found her. What was it Snow and Charming always said? 'I will always find you?' Maybe that could apply to her too. Maybe her daddy would always find her. But the relief she felt at the sound of his voice quickly evaporated as she remembered everything else and her breathing grew hoarse and rapid. Dark One. Hurt people. Killed thousands. Bad man. Bad man. Bad man.

"Colette? Colette?! It's okay baby, I'm here, I've got you. Colette? Everything will be okay, I promise, honey, you have to come out, please," his voice broke as the footsteps grew closer and closer until a pair of hands pulled back the tall grass and the figure looming over her faltered. She lifted her head and sat up, looking up at him and hugging her knees and sniffling.

"Colette oh my God, there you are, you... You're okay..." his expression crumpled as he started to cry, which made Colette's eyes fill with tears. "Shhhh, it's alright my darling, you're safe now," he said softly, ignoring the tears streaming down his cheeks. Colette stared at him with wide silent eyes, and began to slowly back up. A sudden gust of wind ruffled her hair. Rumple tilted his head to the side, furrowing his brow.

"Colette?"

She sniffled and hiccuped, bowing her head as she began to cry in earnest. She'd never been so happy to see her daddy in her life but as quickly as those feelings came they were replaced with the words of her classmates. She was confused and her hands hurt and she wanted a hug but she didn't want him to hurt her like he'd hurt so many others. Would he do that? Is that what Dark Ones did?

"Come now, sweetheart, it's okay," Rumple said softly. "We can go home now. Your daddy's here, I've got you. You're safe, I promise." He leaned down to pick her up, but Colette wouldn't let him. She screamed. A bolt of lightning flashed across the sky and a loud clap of thunder boomed overhead. Colette screamed again and clamped her hands over her ears. Rumple, feeling the sudden burst of magic that charged the air with static-like electricity, sensed what was happening and tried to reach for her again but she cried out and held her hands up.

"What happened to your hands?!" he gasped. "Colette, what's going on? Are you hurt? Did someone hurt you? I need to take you home, your mother is worried sick." He bent down again but before he could get any closer, Colette wailed again and a distinct crack sounded from somewhere above.

"No! You're the Dark One!" she shied away from his touch and dug her heels into the earth and pushed herself away, crying and shaking her head and refusing to let him touch her. Rumple didn't have time to react. There was another crack and a large branch overhead fell as another bolt of lightning split the sky. In the split second before it crashed to the ground, Rumple held his hand up,
kept the branch in the air, grabbed his distraught daughter, and disappeared in another cloud of red smoke that dispersed when the branch hit the ground where Colette had previously been sitting, and cracked in two.

Colette didn't stop crying for twenty full minutes. Rumple had reappeared in her bedroom. Colette's arms were wrapped around his neck and her face was buried in his shoulder and if he gave any indication at all that he might put her down she shrieked and tightened her grip. He turned off the lights, sat on the floor by her bed with her in his lap, and with a faint wave of his finger enacted the star spell he'd shown her a few nights before. A thousand swirling glowing stars filled the room and soon the sounds of crying were replaced with quiet sniffles and hiccups. Rumple rubbed her back and smoothed her hair and rocked her gently until her breathing had steadied and he felt she had calmed down.

"Colette?"

A loud snuffle was her response.

"Would you let me look at your hands, please?"

After a few moments, she nodded slowly and lifted her head from his shoulder. Rumple crossed his legs and she did the same so she could sit facing him. She held out her hands and Rumple took one in his own, gently examining her fingers for breaks and her skin for wounds. She flinched when he touched her palms.

"How do you want me to make them better?"

Colette frowned.

"I can make them better with magic- it takes a second and a wave of my hand." Colette's eyes widened and she trembled. "Or I can make them better like Mommy does, with princess bandaids and antiseptic. Do you want me to use bandaids?" She nodded slowly. Rumple held one of his hands behind his back and conjured a bottle of peroxide, a stack of bandaids, gauze bandages and clean cloths so Colette wouldn't see them appear. She was still frightened by magic and he didn't want to upset her, and he didn't want to leave her alone to manually retrieve the first aid kit from the bathroom. He held one of her little hands and dipped a cloth in peroxide, dabbing at the dried mud and blood as gently as he could. She winced at the sting.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" he asked quietly, slowly but carefully cleaning her hands. Talking would take her mind off her hands and might finally give him insight as to what had happened and why she was so upset.

She didn't speak for a long time, but finally lifted her eyes to meet his gaze.

"I fell," she said in a tiny voice barely above a whisper. Rumple felt his heart twisting into knots.

"How did you fall?" He folded the cloth over to a clean side and set to work on the deeper cuts in her hands, still trying to be as gentle as he could.

She lowered her head. "Someone pushed me."

Rumple felt a surge of anger coursing through his body but he took a deep breath and kept his voice steady.

"Who pushed you? Why?"
"I don't know," she whispered, sniffling again and wiping her eyes. "He was bigger."

"Why did he push you, darling?" Rumple pressed.

"I was sitting by myself watching some kids play a game and they kicked the ball over towards me so I went to pick it up and give it back to them and they... got angry." She looked at her lap. "They said I was stealing their ball even though I wasn't and there were so many of them and they were all around me and I got scared... They were saying so many awful things..."

"What kinds of things?" Rumple had a feeling he knew where this was going, but hearing it from his daughter broke his heart. She was too young for this. He bit his lip as he spread antibacterial ointment over her cuts.

"He said you were the Dark One, and you killed people, and we're supposed to be in the enchanted forest but we're in Storybrooke because of you, and you only care about yourself, and that I'm a monster like you, and that..." She lowered her voice to a whisper as a tear slid down her cheek. "That you made Mommy marry you because there's no way she'd ever choose to marry someone like you. DADDY, THE CLOTH!"

There was a smoldering black burn on the cloth from where Rumple had been gripping it so tightly and not paying attention to what he was doing. An elementary school child said that to his daughter? No wonder she was so upset. Rumple had always known that she would find out sooner or later (preferably later, and after he and Belle would be the ones to tell her first), but he had no idea children so young could be so mean. And he would never be able to erase the image of his beautiful baby girl looking back at him with pure terror in her eyes because she had learned from a bully that her father was the Dark One.

"Daddy... stop it..." Colette whimpered, jolting Rumple out of his trance. The cloth was burned in several places and faint wisps of smoke were rising into the air, and Colette was trembling. As soon as he realized he was doing it, Rumple blinked twice and the charred spots were erased, leaving the cloth as good as new. He tore strips of gauze from the roll (there were too many cuts for a bandaid to do the trick) and wrapped her hands. He then pulled her into his lap and held her tightly, holding her shaking hands and softly shushing her.

"Are you really the Dark One?" she finally asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

"Did you kill people?"

He sighed, closing his eyes briefly. "Yes, I did."

She began to shake again. "Are you going to kill anyone else?" Her voice was barely audible. Rumple tilted her chin up to look him in the eye.

"No. I haven't in a long time, and I promise I will never ever again. Ever. That part of me is in the past. Do you understand?"

She nodded, though she still was still shaking slightly.

"What does being the Dark One mean? How come you're it?"

She turned to face him, and the look in her eye was less afraid and more quizzical. It occurred to Rumple that though she'd heard a few things from her classmates, Colette really had no idea what it meant or what he did or could do, or any of it, really. So he told her. In greatly simplified terms a 5
year old could understand, he wove an intricate story of how he was a simple peasant with a wife and son, who wanted nothing more than to protect his family. He told her of the lengths he went to to be that protector, and how it ultimately cost him his humanity. He told her about the dagger with his name etched into the blade. He told her about losing his son— the brother she'd heard stories of but never gotten the chance to meet— and how angry and sad and hurt and dangerous and mean it made him. He told her about meeting her mother, and how for the first time in a long time he had met someone who made him feel like a real person, and how scary it was to open himself up to loving again. He told her about losing her mother, and how it was his fault for driving her away. He told her about the anger in his heart that he let fester and grow until it consumed him whole. He told her about the deals he made and the people he hurt. He spared the gory details. He told her about the curse, about the hope of being reunited with his son, about molding an innocent girl into doing his bidding and sending her down a dark path because it would give him what he wanted in the end. He told her about the curse in Storybrooke, and when it was broken. He told her about being reunited with her mother again, and feeling like there would always be warmth in his chest as long as he lived when he laid eyes on her after so many years. He decided to leave out most of the events of the last six years— he would be keeping that from her until she was much older— and instead ended with the day they found out their family was going to increase by one.

Colette sat and listened with an intense focus much beyond her five years. She cried when Rumple told her about losing Baelfire, trembled when he told her about the people he'd killed and tortured and hurt without so much as blinking an eye, gasped upon learning that he was the one who created the Evil Queen she'd heard stories about and that the Evil Queen was Regina, and blushed after hearing Rumple refer to her birth as the happiest day of his life.

"That's about it," he said, yawning and exhaling loudly after finishing his story. "Now let me ask you this. Does any of my history change what you know about me right now?"

Colette frowned.

"Am I still your father?"

She nodded slowly.

"Do I still make you pancakes every morning for breakfast?"

She nodded.

"Will I always protect you when you're scared and find you when you're lost?"

Another nod.

"So that answers your question. I am the Dark One. I can't change that, no matter how much I wish I could. I'll always be the Dark One. But I'm also your father. And I'm married to the most wonderful, brilliant, kind, amazing woman I could ever dream of, and we will always love you with all our hearts. I can't take back what I did in the past. But I can promise to be better in the present and the future."

"So is that why I can do stuff? Because you have magic?"

Rumple tensed. He hadn't thought this one through, and he had no idea how he was going to handle it going forward.

"Yes, I think so. Dark Ones... don't typically have children while they're in power, so I can't be certain, but I would be willing to bet that you inherited my magic."
Her eyes widened and her lip quivered.

"Will I be a Dark One too? I don't want to hurt anyone."

Rumple wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly.

"No. You will not be a Dark One, and you won't hurt anyone, I promise. You're too much like your mother to hurt anyone."

Colette smiled a soft smile and Rumple thought he might burst. He planted a kiss on the top of her head, stood, and stretched. They'd been talking for so long it was now dark outside, and likely past Colette's bedtime. He promised to tell her more about magic in the morning, but growing girls needed their rest. She yawned, and he set about running her bath water and washing the grass and dirt out of her hair and helping her into her pajamas. He tucked her in, kissed her forehead, and turned out the lights. A few stars from the star spell remained, twinkling and forming constellations on her ceiling.

"I love you, daddy," she murmured sleepily.

"I love you too, darling. I promise I'll never leave you as long as I live."

He closed Colette's door and started down the stairs to the kitchen. In his effort to calm Colette down and assuage her fears, he hadn't noticed that Belle still wasn't home. He pulled out his phone. 12 missed calls and 3 voicemails. He sank into a chair and put his face in his hands. His daughter might not be afraid of him anymore, but this was far from over.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Belle attempts to find her daughter with some help

"Rumple, it's me. Call me back."

"Rumple? I don't know where you are or what you're doing but I need you to call me back okay? We can talk about what happened later, just call me back. I have to know you're okay. School still doesn't know a damn thing. Emma, Regina and I are out looking for her."

"Uh, Gold? This is Emma. Belle told me what happened, we're out looking for her. I won't let anything happen to my goddaughter, I promise. Also, uh... You should probably, um, call your wife back... Okay, bye."

Belle had to give herself credit. She only cried for five minutes after her husband disappeared in a cloud of smoke. When she pushed herself off of the floor with muscles aching from being tensed, she took a deep breath. And then another. And another, until her breathing evened and her heart rate slowed. She'd been through this before. She knew what to do. It had been a while, but she knew what to do. She wiped her eyes and pulled her phone out of her pocket with shaking fingers. Dialed. No answer, not that she'd been expecting one. But she left a message just in case. She always did.

With almost mechanical movements, she walked outside. His car was in the same place he always parked it, and his keys were in the same place he always left them, tucked under the driver's seat. It smelled like him, and she frowned, trying her hardest not to cry again. She clenched her jaw, turned the key, and somehow managed to push everything to the back of her mind and drive to Storybrooke Elementary.

There was a patrol car in the parking lot. Someone was talking into a megaphone. Parents were crowded around the main entrance. Everyone was talking or yelling or trying to shove their way inside. Belle felt all of the color leave her face as her hands started shaking again. She parked, held her keys so tightly her knuckles turned white, and started walking.

"That's her."

"She looks just like her, oh my goodness."

"Never understood what she saw in him."

" Didn't he hold her captive or something? Why would she marry someone like that?"

"He killed my second cousin, I'm not going to ask her anything."

"Her nose is red, has she been crying?"

"Wouldn't you be crying if the child you had with the Dark One tried to kill a classmate with lightning?"
"We don't know what happened..."

"My son was on the playground when it happened, Susan. He said that's what happened."

Belle had never felt this way before. Her ears were red and her face was flushed and she felt invisible and like she had a target on her back all at once. Everyone was talking about her as if she wasn't there and couldn't hear them, and the tones in their voices let her know exactly what they thought about her. Parents who had welcomed her into their community with smiles and cups of tea at the parent meetings were staring at her with mixed expressions on their faces. Some looked afraid. Some looked contemptuous. Some smirked. Was this how Rumple felt when he walked down the street? To the store? To the gas station? Or was he so used to it that it no longer bothered him? What was it like to have everyone be afraid of you and whispering about you whenever you walked down the street? The Charmings and Co. might have forgiven him, but Belle had completely forgotten that other people outside their little family circle... existed. And what she found was not pretty. It made her angry, and it made her determined. She stood taller. She looked everyone standing in her way in the eye and fixed them with a piercing glare to let them know that she would not bow her head and cower before them. She didn't care what they thought about her husband. He wasn't here right now. And Belle Gold was not going to let the opinions of these parents affect her. Not today.

"Belle!"

She turned her head to see Emma and Regina standing by the double glass doors with their arms crossed. Emma waved her over.

"Belle, what is going on?" she asked, gripping a megaphone. "I just got a call from the principal and it was like this when I got here. David is inside but they haven't really told us much of anything, and they're not allowing any of the kindergarteners to leave. I'm supposed to be doing crowd control but no one really seems to be into that idea..."

"They would be if I was the one controlling the crowd..."

"Funny, Regina."

Belle shook her head. "All I know is that something happened on the playground and someone was bullying Colette and she... She used magic."

"What?!" Emma and Regina both exclaimed at the same time.

"Someone pushed her and she made a branch fall, I think... I don't know, no one's really telling me anything."

Neither said anything. Regina looked concerned. Emma looked livid. Belle closed her eyes and took a breath.

"Where's the principal now?"

"He and David are inside with the kindergarteners trying to piece together what happened," Regina said softly. "They're taking statements but getting reliable information from 50 plus five year olds doesn't sound like something destined to succeed."

"Have either of you heard anything?" Belle tried to keep the worry out of her voice but it was difficult when her hands were shaking. Regina shook her head.

"They've been in there since we got here, Emma gave me a ride. I still don't know--"
Before she could finish her sentence, the double glass doors opened and David led a small group of kindergarteners outside. At the front of the group, holding his hand, was a small girl with dark wavy hair falling down her back and dried blue paint on her nose. She saw the three of them standing off to the side, let go of David's hand, and took off running.

"Mommy!"

Regina bent down, caught the little girl, and spun her around. Belle had never seen her smile so brightly in all the years she'd known her.

"Hello my darling," she said, kissing the little girl on her forehead. "Someone's had quite the excitement today, and it's not even lunchtime."

The little girl stuck out her bottom lip. "Yeah and I didn't even get to see anything, I was inside painting."

"That's alright honey. You didn't miss anything. No one is in danger, David just wanted to talk to everyone to see if he could understand what happened. What were you painting? You left some of it on your nose." Regina held out her palm and a washcloth appeared. She used it to dab at the dried paint. Belle had only seen Regina's daughter a few times in passing, but was taken aback by how much they looked alike. People said the same about her and Colette. The little girl didn't seem to mind that the washcloth appeared out of nowhere in a puff of purple smoke; she kept on talking.

"I drew a picture of a blue butterfly with purple wings, mommy. It's in my pocket. You can have it."

"Thank you, Hope," Regina smiled that bright smile again and held her daughter close. Hope giggled. She looked at Belle and smiled at her.

"Hi! I'm Hope. What's your name?" She held out her hand for Belle to shake and Belle smiled for the first time that morning.

"Belle. It's very nice to meet you, Hope."

"Hope has been practicing her manners, she greets everyone like that now," Regina said, planting another kiss on her daughter's cheek before putting her down. Hope crossed her arms across her chest and stared at Belle, tilting her head to the side.

"You look sad," she said quietly but matter-of-factly. "Did someone hurt you? Is that why you've been crying?"

"Hope..." Regina murmured in a warning tone. Belle's heart twisted into a knot. She could be brave for Emma and Regina and David and the other adults, but children were always a bit more perceptive.

"No one hurt me," she said, fiddling with the hem of her dress. "My daughter, she... She's missing."

"Oh." Hope's face fell. She frowned, looked at her shoes, and then looked up at Belle again. "Is she the one who did the magic? On the playground?"

"Hope." Regina's eyes flashed dangerously.

"It's okay Regina, she's just being curious," Belle said hurriedly. She knelt down to Hope's level. "Yes. Her name is Colette, do you know her?"

"No, she's not in my class. I don't have recess with her either. But I've seen her in the hallway! She
looks like you. Well, sort of. Your eyes are blue and her eyes are brown, like mine except lighter.”

Belle smiled again as her eyes filled with tears. Without another word, Hope rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her, catching Belle by surprise.

"I didn't mean to make you sad," she said. "Please don't cry."

Hope was smaller than Colette and her hair was a different color, but for a brief moment Belle allowed herself to imagine that it was her own little girl's arms wrapped around her and holding on tightly. After a few moments, Hope let go to look Belle in the eye again.

"Miss Belle, it wasn't Colette's fault," she said seriously. "On the playground? She didn't mean to. Sometimes magic doesn't work the way you want it to and you have an accident."

Belle smiled again. "Thank you, Hope. That made me feel a lot better."

Hope grinned and looked up at her mother. "Can I help look for Colette? I've been practicing."

"No dear, your father will be here soon to pick you up and take you home. Henry will be by later, I think he's taking you and Roland swimming. I'll be home in time for dinner. Until your father gets here, can you go stand by David and see if he needs any help? Tell him you've been practicing, I'm sure he can find something for you to do."

"Okay."

Regina bent down and kissed the top of Hope's head. Hope gave Emma a hug and turned to face Belle. She held out her hand.

"It was nice to meet you, Miss Belle. I hope you find Colette."

"Thank you, Hope. I hope so too."

She stood by Emma and Regina and watched Hope scamper off towards David. None of them said anything for a while. Belle left another message in Rumple's voicemail. Emma put her hand on Belle's shoulder and Regina did the same.

"We're gonna find her," Emma said quietly. "Everything's gonna be okay."

They spent the next few hours at Granny's discussing where Colette could have gone and where she might be now. Emma ordered Belle a drink to calm her nerves; she held the glass with trembling fingers and stared at the contents, sipping slowly and trying not to dwell on anything for too long. Regina and Emma were talking quietly amongst themselves, bouncing theories off of each other. Suddenly, Belle looked up.

"Regina, what did Hope mean when she said she'd been practicing?"

"Hmm?"

"Hope. She said earlier she'd been practicing, she wanted to help with the search."

"Oh..." Regina tucked her hair behind her ear. "She's been practicing magic. We always suspected she might have it but she hasn't shown any signs of it until recently. It's not very strong, she can only levitate lightweight objects for a little while and make little things disappear, but it's still something.
She's very proud of herself."

Emma chuckled. Belle grew quiet again.

"So it's not something you're born with?" she said eventually. Regina frowned.

"Not exactly. Magic isn't something everyone can do, and even if you can do it, it's not something you're born knowing how to do. More like it stays dormant until you know it's there and can begin to learn how to manage and wield it."

"Well that explains why she didn't show any signs of this when she was a baby..." Belle murmured to herself.

"Well, that's the thing..." Emma said quietly, fidgeting in her seat. "We don't know if we should treat this like a normal case of magic presenting itself early, or something... else."

"There hasn't been a Dark One on record who's ever had a child," Regina said. "We don't know how to approach this because we don't know what..." she trailed off, staring down at her tightly clasped hands.

"You don't know what she might have inherited..." Belle finished in a horrified whisper, finishing her thought. "You think she inherited this from Rumple."

"We don't know, but that's a logical guess," Regina said. "It unusual for a child to use magic. And even if they do, like Hope, their magic is weak. It fits along with anything a small child would be able to do. She can levitate dish cloths and make pin cushions disappear. If she concentrates hard enough, she can make little sparks appear in her palm. Colette... Colette leveled an 18 foot diameter oak tree with a bolt of lightning that she conjured."

"She inherited this from Rumple..." Belle repeated, more to herself than anyone. It was a thought that had always lurked in the back of her mind, from the moment she first found out she was pregnant. A part of her knew no acting Dark One had ever had children— was ever supposed to have children, really. A part of her didn't care. She tried to put the thought out of her mind as time passed, but it lay there festering and gnawing at her subconscious like a sore that wouldn't heal. It was both a relief to know that she had been right all along and an incredible burden to know that they had done this to their child without knowing it.

"Belle...?" Emma took her hand in her own.

"We should... We should probably talk to Neal Charming," she said in a shaky voice, sliding out of the booth and grabbing her purse. "He might know where she is. If her magic is as powerful as you say it is, then she would have transported herself somewhere when she was upset, right? Which means she probably would have gone somewhere she knows or somewhere she feels safe?"

Regina sighed. "It's possible... It would depend on how upset she was, her intentions while transporting... There's just so much we don't know. Young magic is unpredictable to begin with, this is something else entirely."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to try. Is Neal home yet?"

"Yeah, I made sure he got home safely after they released everyone from lockdown," Emma said softly. "He's at the loft with David."

"I don't know where she is."
Neal twisted the hem of his shirt and looked at his lap, avoiding eye contact. He was sitting in Emma's lap on a barstool by the kitchen. Regina sat on the stool beside them. Belle stood behind the counter. David had gone back out to school to see if Snow needed any more help with their end of the investigation.

"That's okay," Regina said. "Do you have any idea of where she might be?"

Neal violently shook his head. "No!"

"Hey, it's alright, kid," Emma said, smoothing his hair and holding him closer. "No one's gonna hurt you, we just wanna know what you know."

Neal whirled around to face her at the same moment Belle looked up sharply with a pained and almost angry expression on her face.

"I'm not afraid of getting hurt, Emma," he said angrily. "Colette is my friend. She wouldn't hurt me. She didn't mean to hurt those kids at recess, but they were being mean to her and she got scared. She didn't know what she was doing."

Emma looked aghast. "I didn't mean--"

"Colette is my best friend," he said again, interrupting her. "She wouldn't hurt me. She wouldn't." He looked over at Belle with a stubborn expression on his face not unlike his big sister's. Belle smiled a teary smile. She knew Emma hadn't meant what she said, but hearing Neal defend her daughter like that made her heart swell.

"And you have no idea where she'd be? Where she'd go?" Belle asked him.

Neal shook his head again. "I'm sorry Ms. Gold, I don't know where she is."

"It's almost time for bed, kid," Emma said quietly after a few moments. "Why don't you head up and I'll be there in a bit to read you a bedtime story?"

Belle's head snapped up. She'd admittedly been "out of it" all afternoon, but it couldn't be that late already, could it? Had they talked that long? Had it taken them this long to get anywhere? She hadn't noticed it get dark outside.

Neal grinned and kissed Emma on the cheek before waving goodbye to Belle and Regina and bouncing up the stairs. Belle checked the clock above the stove. 8:15. If they hadn't made any progress by now, she might as well be getting home. With detached, almost robotic movements, she stood and thanked Emma and Regina for all of their help and promised to call them first thing in the morning so they could get an early start on their search. Her earlier emotion was being replaced by overwhelming numbness, and it was almost a miracle that she managed to find her way downstairs, outside and to the car. Rumple hadn't called her back. She had no idea where her daughter was. She had no idea where her husband was. Emma's "some sleep will do you good" had every good intention but Belle didn't know how she was supposed to sleep when her family was missing without a trace. She pulled into the driveway. Turned the ignition off. Looked up at the house. Made her feet take her to the front door, turned the handle, and let herself in. She'd deal with all of this in the morning.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!