Extenuating Circumstances

Written for the OQ Week Masquerade prompt on Tumblr. Robin Locksley, grieving widower, attempts to steal from Leopold King during his masquerade party, but gets more than he bargained for when he runs into King’s wife, Regina, who has a secret of her own.
Chapter 1

The kitchen smells like his mother-in-law's tonight. Heavy Italian spices cling to the heat radiating from the industrial ovens and billowing from large pots bubbling on the stove top. Robin breathes deep, his hand resting on the marble counter near the tray of meatballs he's to take out to the party, and shifts through the different scents in the air. Oregano, basil, thyme, and something with more heat. Chili power, perhaps?

"Do you need a moment alone with the food or are you ready to do what I'm paying you for, boy?"

Granny's sharp comment brings him out of his moment. She's standing in front of him, glaring at him over her square, silver framed glasses, meaty arms folded across her chest.

The older woman isn't his grandmother, but a family friend on Marian's side. He'd met her for the first time when his son Roland was still in the NICU. She'd bustled into Marian's hospital room and pried him from the chair next to her bed, saying he was to go home, shower, eat, and then return with Marian's mother, Isolde. Robin had protested, but Granny, as she'd insisted being called, had none of it and set about spreading an olive green knit blanket over a sleeping Marian and settling into his vacated chair.

Since Marian's death he's been temping as a server for her catering business, an arrangement he's thankful will be coming to an end with the start of his job as a park ranger next month. He's not sure he deserves the intensity of her stare right now, but it would behoove him to not agitate her further.

"Are you using chili powder in the sauce tonight?" he asks. He slides the tray off the edge of the counter and perches it near his shoulder.

"Red pepper flakes. Why?"

Robin shakes his head. "Reminds me of Isolde's sauce."

Her stern expression clears, replaced with a smile. "I've been trying to get her to spill her secret for this recipe for twenty years."

"And you've been successful?" he asks.

Granny huffs and uncrosses her arms. "It's still missing something. This is the closest I've come to reproducing it, but it's always a big hit at these fancy shindigs."

"For good reason. It smells and tastes fantastic." Robin squeezes Granny's shoulder with his free hand and smiles. "I'll see if I can't butter her up with Roland next time we visit."

The older woman laughs and shoos him out of the kitchen. He dodges other servers returning with empty trays in the large hallway leading to the ballroom and stops before entering, schooling his features into something between pleasant and vacant. Two double door entrances open to the ballroom where the main event is taking place. He waits by the southern doors, watching shadows of people dancing flick across the column of light spilling into the hallway.

This masquerade is the most opulent affair he's attended in his time as a server with Granny; he's wearing a rented a tuxedo. Roland had gawped at him when he came out of his room all fancified, and his babysitter, Belle, had fussed over his bow tie for a full three minutes before allowing him out of the apartment.
The comforting aroma of home wafts over him from his tray, and for a blissful moment he's sitting in his mother-in-law's kitchen with Marian, giggling as they hold hands under the table while they're supposed to be folding napkins under Isolde's watchful eye, but the matriarch has turned her focus more toward the stove and less toward them, allowing a few chaste kisses to slip through her watch.

God, he still misses Marian like a phantom limb, but he can't afford to be lost in his memories if he's going to accomplish his goal tonight.

Robin steps inside the ballroom, the kinetic energy in the room buoying him as he slips into the stream of people walking around the edge of the dance floor. He stops every few feet and offers the hors d'oeuvres to seated guests, taking care to not dump the soused bites into anyone's lap as they reach for the meatballs. He's never considered himself a clumsy person, but carrying red sauce through a room filled with people dressed like they walked off a runway in Paris feels a bit like trying to smuggle a nuclear warhead beneath his coat.

His tray is empty before he reaches the front of the room and he switches to retrieving abandoned glassware from empty tables. He follows the current of people as they move through the room, never straying too close to the dancing. A large orchestra occupies most of the forward section of the room. Not a full one, he thinks, but at least half, maybe a third if he had to guess. An older fellow with wiry gray hair at the temples and a flute in his lap has a crossword puzzle propped on his music stand, and each time Robin makes the circuit he glances at his progress. He's started a new puzzle this time, "Celebrity Bingo."

Once he's reached the back of the room again, the bartender flags him down. Ruby is Granny's actual granddaughter, a tall, willowy sort of girl with long brown hair styled in an elaborate updo tonight. She's dressed in a tuxedo tailored for her slim figure with a bright red bow tie around her neck that matches the colored stripes streaking through her hair. "Robin, Granny needs you in the kitchen."

"I'm already on my way there," he says, holding up his tray of empty champagne flutes and wine glasses.

She tosses a shaker in the air and catches it behind her back to a smattering of applause from the guests leaning on the bar. "Good, because I think you're about to get your dinner break, and I can't take mine until you've had yours."

"I'll make haste, then." He flips her a smile, and she winks at him as she pours two martinis. It's a little earlier than he'd planned for a dinner break, but if can get a whole half hour to himself the shift in his private schedule will be worth the timing issue.

In the kitchen Granny confirms that yes, he can take his dinner break now, and it will be a whole thirty minutes because they need time to finish preparing the dessert for the big reveal.

Robin grabs a paper plate and throws a few morsels together, snagging a few of the fancy toothpicks they've been using to skewer the finger foods and making a face at the tiny white masks glued to their ends. The effect comes off somewhat like a discount Phantom of the Opera party favor, and he'd said as much when he'd unpacked the box containing them. Granny had rolled her eyes muttered something about the folly of allowing teenagers to choose decorations. Seems they'd been a request from Mr. King's daughter, Mary Margaret, and Granny hadn't been able to talk her out of the notion.

Robin wolfs down his food in the back stairwell leading from the kitchen to upstairs and then disposes his plate in the trash, checking his watch.
Twenty minutes left. He'll have to move quickly.

He ducks out of the kitchen and walks down the hallway, past both sets of doors to the ballroom until he reaches the first floor powder room. The catering staff is supposed to be using another lavatory further down the other direction, away from the guests, but he's caught a lull in the crowds of people venturing from the ballroom to other areas of the house to mingle away from the frenetic heat of dancing and drinking. He slips inside unnoticed and locks the door behind him.

The powder room is spacious for a two piece set, but wallpapered with a burgundy pattern overlaid with a gold filigree reeking of good taste and mild claustrophobia. The vanity is large, marble topped, and gifted with generous cabinet space below the sink. He crouches and pulls the doors open to retrieve his previously stowed gym bag from behind the spare hand towels and three ply toilet paper rolls stacked four deep.

Robin unzips the bag and pushes aside his (clean) gym clothes to uncover a large square box. He whistles low as he lifts the lid. John's gone all out with this one, he thinks as he lifts the mask from the box with his fingertips, careful to not displace any of the sparkly bits.

The half mask is fashioned after a lion, fitting since most of the guests are dressed as animals and he's seen quite a few lions among the pride during his rounds. Less chance of sticking out. Robin fastens the mask around the back of his head, applying gentle pressure to the bridge of the nose to align the dark sockets with his eyes, and then zips the gym bag, replacing it underneath the vanity.

Betraying Granny's trust like this after she's given him work for the past few months turns his stomach, but the money isn't enough, not nearly enough. He can't be late with the rent again, Roland will lose his place in preschool if his tuition isn't paid, and all the medical bills from Marian's stay in the hospital are still in an unopened stack wedged between the toaster and the refrigerator waiting for litigation to come through.

John had tried to talk him out of his plan when he'd gone to pick up the mask yesterday. He was an old friend from Robin's days of nicking smokes and dirty magazines from gas stations. These days he works as a costume designer for Avington Theater downtown and had agreed to let Robin borrow a prop from an old production.

"Robin, be careful," John had warned him, setting the box on the kitchen table at his downtown apartment. "Leopold King is no one to trifle with."

"I know what I'm doing."

"If you're hurting for money enough to consider this, let me help you."

"I can provide for my own family. There's no honor in asking for money."

"And there is in stealing? When you met Marian you promised her you were leaving that all behind."

"Yes, I did, John, and then she died!" Robin pushed himself from this chair, feeling the cords in his neck tighten as he raised his voice. "It's my fault that Roland has no mother and I'll be damned if I don't do everything in my power to make it up to him however I can. King's lawyers have tied up our case in court with so much red tape my son will be in middle school before it's resolved. I'm going to steal from Leopold King as he has stolen from me, though I promise you his loss will be incomparable to mine."

John sighed, but offered up no further argument. "You can't blame both yourself and King for her death. You got Roland out of the car first, which is what she would have wanted. This is not the
way," he'd said, sliding the box across the table.

Maybe John was right, though.

Maybe this disgraces Marian's memory, stealing when help is available elsewhere. Regressing to who he was before she came into his life, will it sully every happy memory of the three of them together?

Marian sitting at the top of the yellow plastic slide at the park, Roland anchored to her chest with her arm secure around his belly as she whispers reassurances in his ear, and the sweetness of tears turned to delighted shrieks as they slide over the humps in the slide.

Her smile as he holds Roland up to the blue monkey bars, paint flaking off under his son's tiny grip as he swings him from bar to bar.

Their mutual wide eyed joy as Roland toddles toward him for the first time on shivery legs. Their miracle who almost wasn't. He remembers glancing up and seeing her hands lifted to her mouth, but this time her face contorts into a silent scream as she throws her arm out in front of him from the driver's seat as the black pickup truck crosses the median, crumpling into their compact sedan, and all he can hear is Roland's screams from the backseat when he comes to in the wreckage.

He blinks the image away, leans on the vanity to steady himself. Two years later and the memory is stronger than ever. Maybe Marian would consider this wrong (there's no maybe, he knows she would), but he has to move forward. As King has taken from him, so he will take from King.

A chatty group of people move down the hallway, the women's shoes clacking against the Brazilian cherry wood floor. Robin slips out of the powder room and trails behind them until he reaches the staircase to the upper floor. What he's looking for won't be on the lower level. He needs small things, items easily slipped into pockets or concealed in a shirtsleeve, and for those he needs the family's bedrooms. He's not interested in a heist, wants nothing ostentatious enough that he won't be able to fence it through his old connections.

The stairs dead end into the middle of a massive hallway wallpapered in deep blues and reds with the same gold filigree overlay. Mirrors line the walls, each hanging over a small table with tasteful brickabrack arranged on polished wood. He curses under his breath. Anyone walking down the hallway will have a chance of catching a glimpse of his reflection in the mirrors despite the deep alcoves around the doors.

Left or right, Locksley? He glances both directions, decides, Left. If he's correct, the last door should be the top of the back staircase leading into the kitchen.

The first two doors are locked and so is the third. His old lockpicking kit rests heavy in his coat pocket. Habit keeps it on him at all times now after he'd locked himself out of the apartment when he was signing for a package. He'd spent the next hour singing Sesame Street songs to Roland through the door until maintenance arrived with a spare key.

He pulls out the leather case and tells Marian to look away if she's watching him from heaven. His mask slides against a light sheen of sweat dappling his brow as he manipulates the pins. He's out of practice, but gains access without too much fuss. He closes the door behind him and surveys the room.

This is King's daughter's room from the decor. Pink framed nursery rhymes jammed up against posters of female musicians with their tongues hanging out and Audubon charts of the Birds of North America coat the walls. He zeroes in on the white lacquered dresser against the far wall.
The top is dripping with glittery jewelry. He can picture her standing in front of the mirror propped against the wall, trying on and rejecting necklace after necklace until finding one that satisfies her vanity. Marian's voice chides him in his mind, scowling at him for assuming he knows what this girl's life has been like from the state of her bedroom. That he's broken into, no less.

He selects a plain platinum bracelet first, poking through the mess of jewelry, trying not to disturb the mess she's made, but upon closer inspection most of it looks to be sentimental pieces. Several have inscriptions. Not much he can take without escaping notice. He'll have to try one of the other bedrooms.

A quick look around on the floor reveals a pair of diamond studs wedged behind the dresser, pressed into the seam between the carpet and the baseboard. One of the earrings has a dust bunny snagged on a prong. He picks it off and slides the spoils into his right pocket, his mood a little brighter. The earrings look to be at least half a carat and if they're set in gold should fetch him close to a grand. He takes a moment to admire the Audubon posters before exiting, taking care to re-lock the room from the inside before the door closes.

By his watch he has about twelve minutes before he's due back. He'd prefer to find King's room and take something from there, but Ruby is waiting on him to return for her dinner break. He's always been one to push his luck, though, and walks toward the second doorway he'd passed until a high, cheerful voice freezes Robin between two mirrors. The King girl and some kind of suitor from the deep voice accompanying her. He backtracks and prays he's correct about the last door leading to the kitchen stairs. The knob turns freely, thank goodness, and he ducks into the stairwell.

Only it's not a stairwell, it's another bedroom, and it's not unoccupied.
Chapter 2

Yawning french doors reveal a large balcony with a marble pillared railing edging the landing. A woman dressed in white with some kind of flowing, shimmery fabric coasting along her curves stands on the railing, her arms held out in front of her. Robin's heart thump-thumps as she leans forward.

She's going to jump.

Should he alert her to his presence? If he calls to her mightn't she fall, expecting to be alone?

No, best stay quiet and try to pull her back.

The plush white carpet muffles his footfalls. As he closes in on her, an eerie purple light throws her figure into relief, a dark silhouette against the moon's light. Carpet gives way to hard marble (what is it with this house and marble?) at the french doors. He takes extra care with his footsteps even though she's given no sign she's aware of his approach.

He's behind her now, close enough to touch her, and for a second before he grabs her it almost looks as though the purple light is coming from her (impossible), but then her weight shifts subtly and it's now or never. His hands are on her hips pulling her backward as she chokes out a scream.

His body cushions her fall as he lands hard on his tailbone. At the last moment he remembers to tuck his chin, saving his head from a nasty crack on the floor, but he can't help a faint groan as she rolls off him, yelling at him. She's somewhere around What the hell are you doing in my room when he catches his breath enough to join the conversation.

"Saving your arse," he says, rolling to his side and grunting as he stands, hand on the back of his hip. "At the expense of my own."

"Who are you? What did you see?" she demands.

Robin readjusts his clothing, pushes his mask back in place so he can see through the eye holes, and his breath catches.

She's beautiful. Positively vexed at him, to be sure, but lovely. Dark curls are piled high off her neck, and deep brown eyes glower at him from behind the simple white mask crossing the bridge of her nose, leaving the rest of her face bare save some kind of glittery substance covering her skin like dew. Her hands are perched on her hips and she somehow manages to stare imperiously down her nose at him despite being a few inches shy of his height.

"What did I see? I saw someone in need of help."

"What are you talking about?"

"You looked as though you were going to jump," he says, jutting his chin toward the railing.

"How dare you suggest such a thing."

"A simple 'thanks for your concern' would suffice."

"If such concern was warranted, it would, but it wasn't. Now answer my question before I get my husband's security team up here to throw you from the property."
Bugger. She had been yelling about him trespassing in her rooms, hadn't she? He's stumbled into Leopold King's wife's room, accosted her, and then accused her of attempting suicide all while carrying stolen goods in his pockets.

He now has about zero chance of pulling this off without some kind of miracle.

"Any day now," she prompts, hands still on her hips, ire rolling off her like a steam cloud.

A vengeful angel.

"I was looking for the loo," he says.

That's the best you could come up with? Christ.

"The loo?" Her eyebrows raise as her lips purse around the vowels.

A flash of heat ignites in his chest before flickering out.

That's unexpected.

"You stumbled up a flight of stairs, down a hallway, missing all three powder rooms on the first floor, mind, and found yourself here just in time to play the dashing, yet redundant hero." She steps closer to him, tips her face toward his as though she's going to kiss him (he's not even thought of hugging a woman since Marian died and still he feels his neck flushing as he swallows and remembers a moment ago he'd had his hands on this woman's hips), but as he feels the moist heat of her breath on his skin she pulls away. "All that without a single drop of alcohol on your breath."

To be fair, he's stopped breathing.

Exhale, Locksley.

She walks into the bedroom without a word, leaving him standing outside. He follows, cautious of her now, keeping his distance while he tries to figure out how the devil he's going to make it out of this room alive. She seems the type to play with her food before devouring it.

"Did Leo send you?" she asks, glancing back at him as she takes a seat at a large vanity.

"Uh, no, he didn't."

"Oh," she says, and in the mirror he catches a glimpse of her face as the haughty, pinched expression dissolves into disappointment before going blank. "First door on the right after the stairs."

"Come again?"

"The loo."

"Of course." He should go. She's given him the perfect out and seems content to send him on his way without further provocation, but he doesn't move. Finds himself asking, "Your costume doesn't imitate fauna like many of the guests'. May I ask what you're supposed to be?"

"I am nothing," she says.

The frankness in her voice breaks his heart, compels him to dig this hole deeper. "Mrs. King, I can assure you that you are far from nothing."

"That's awfully bold of you to say."
He shrugs. "I have a compulsion to speak the truth."

"Really?" She turns in her seat to face him with her arm draped over the back of her chair, a wicked grin lightening her face. "Then tell me, lion, what are you really doing here tonight? I know everyone on the guest list for my husband's birthday party, and you weren't included. Are you gate crashing or the help?"

"The latter," he says. "I'm here to provide for my son."

"You have a son," she says, quiet now, some of the feral edge in her expression softening. The moment is short lived. Her eyes snap up to his again, all business. "And does your son share your proclivity for my step-daughter's jewelry? I heard you bumping about in there a moment ago."

Damn, damn, damn. He should have left when she gave him the chance. He can hardly deny her statement when a simple search of his pockets will out him.

"I'm afraid not," he says. "My son's appreciation of the finer, more delicate things in life pale to his love for Tickle Me Elmo."

She makes a noise low in her throat that might be a laugh. "A young son, then."

He says nothing, doesn't want to drag Roland into this crime any more than necessary should her mercurial nature shift out of his favor again. This was a foolhardy plan he should have never considered. Perhaps he can maneuver his way out of the fallout, though.

"What did you take?"

"A bracelet and a pair of diamond earrings I rescued from a villainous dust bunny behind her dresser." This time he's watching for the corner of her mouth to turn up in a smirk, and a small thrill dances in his stomach that he's managed to amuse her. He's shaky from adrenaline, possibly a little giddy, and, God help him, he feels alive for the first time in months. Which is the only explanation for what comes out of his mouth next. "Dance with me."

"Excuse me?"

"Dance with me," he repeats, stepping forward. "You fear no one misses your presence, yes? That your husband hasn't noticed your absence?"

Her lip curls but she doesn't deny his words.

He steps forward again. "I promise, one dance with me and everyone in that room will be aware of your presence, after which I will return your step-daughter's jewelry and you will never see me again."

"An intriguing idea. I'm not one to make deals," she says, rising from her chair and stalking toward him. "But I could make an exception on one condition."

"Name it."

"Keep the baubles."

He cocks his head to the side, frowns at this unexpected turn. "Why?"

"That's none of your concern. Now, do we have a deal?"

"As milady wishes." He can't help the small bow he gives her before offering his arm. His behavior
is throwing the sensible side of him into hysterics, but he's enjoying himself.

She rolls her eyes and takes his arm. "It's a masquerade, not a historical reenactment."

"For all you know, this is the way I converse with all the beautiful women in my life."

"I'm not in your life. You're not as suave as you think you are," she says as they enter the hallway.

"And you're not as scary as you think you are," he replies, leaning close enough for his breath to tickle her ear, and is rewarded with the barest of shivers from her.

He escorts her down the hallway and they're approaching the bottom of the stairs when a man dressed in purple tones approaches them (Jester? Genie? It's difficult to tell with the elaborate scheme of feathers and jewels), stopping their descent. "Regina," he says. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

Mrs. King (Regina, Regina, Regina, he must remember her first name) sighs. "Sidney, I was just giving our friend a tour of the manor."

Sidney frowns, looks Robin over. "I don't believe we've met. Sidney Glass, executive assistant to Mr. King."

Robin extends his hand, hoping it isn't too sweaty. "Robin Locksley," he says. Truths are easier to remember than lies.

Mrs. King (Regina) tightens her grip on his arm for a moment before relaxing, and he makes a note to ask her about it later.

Sidney shakes his hand briefly, a weak squeeze of the fingers that makes Robin want to wipe his hand on his pants. "I'm not familiar with your name," Sidney says. "And I made the guest list myself."

"He's a last minute addition of my own, Mr. Glass," Regina says. "If you'll excuse us, I promised him a dance before retiring."

Robin raises his eyebrows, realizes Glass cannot see them through his mask, and settles for nodding at him as Regina pulls him away, leading them into the ballroom and onto the dance floor. In the thicket of dancing bodies the stuffiness in the room is even more oppressive than the fringes he'd kept to while serving. They need to start moving before he breaks a sweat.

"I assume you know the waltz?" he asks.

"You assume correct," Regina says, smiling at him.

"Very well. Let the show begin."

He pulls her a smidgen closer, out of the path of another couple whirling their way, as she places her right hand in his left. Her other hand skims up his right arm and stops just above the bulge of his bicep. He raises his arm and settles his hand on her upper back, fingers curling around her shoulder blade. "Ready?"

She presses her hand against his and he pushes back, and then they're dancing, turning and moving and flowing and he'd forgotten what it was like to dance with a woman. Regina is skilled, responsive to his touch as he guides them across the dance floor. The waltz doesn't call for bodies pressed close together, but with the music swelling around them and the grin on her face he can't help but indulge
in a tiny fantasy, imagining her pressed flush against him as they turn in much slower circles on a less crowded dance floor.

"That Glass fellow seemed rather intense," he says once they've settled into a comfortable cadence with the music.

"Intense? Perhaps, but he's ruthless and loyal. Two traits my husband values above all else."

"Ah, but who is he loyal to? He seemed to miss your presence acutely, milady."

Regina says nothing, but her cheeks redden.

"And you? What traits do you value?" Robin asks, shifting the topic away from something that seems uncomfortable for her.

"Honesty. People who aren't afraid to stand up against me."

"You like a challenge?" He lifts her hand and pushes against her shoulder to spin her under his arm, and then pulls her back.

"I like someone who can provide the right amount of tension," she says, pressing her right hand harder against his, and he matches her force for force, keeping their frame in balance. She smiles wider, a barest hint of a giggle slipping through, and he smiles back. Her happiness is infectious.

Then her eye catches something over his shoulder and the vibrancy drains from her face, her smile flattening into nothing. He swings them around to see what's caused her transformation and sees Glass at the front of the room whispering into a red faced Leopold King's ear, pointing toward them.

"Hold on," Robin mutters, tightening his grip on her hand. He may have come to rob the man, but he has no desire to be face to face with him. After all, he'd promised Granny he wouldn't interact with him, given their history (even though the man wouldn't know him from Adam), and he's kept to his word. He shifts their trajectory toward the back of the room, closer to the double doors but not so close to the bar that Ruby would potentially recognize him. He's late from his break by now.

Regina tenses under his hands and loses her footing. He relaxes his hands, tries to return them to their easy movements from earlier, but she's distracted now, turned inward. Over her shoulder he can see her husband carving a path through the dance floor.

"This isn't going to be pretty, is it?" Robin asks.

"When he throws you out of the house and applies for a restraining order, remember that this was your idea."

"Best idea I've had in months."

A strong hand lands on his shoulder, erasing the headiness of the moment.

"Allow me to cut in on my wife," Mr. King says as they come to a jarring halt.

A flash of something crosses Regina's face, but it's gone before he can decipher the meaning. She steps out of his embrace, but Robin refuses to drop her hand.

"Surely you can allow us to finish out the waltz, sir," Robin says. He makes a conscious effort to not grit his teeth.

King ignores him and grabs Regina's other hand. "I've been looking for you everywhere."
"I wasn't aware you'd noticed my absence."

"Of course I did."

The man is lying, and Regina can see it, too, from the way her jaw clenches.

"You look feverish. Why don't you let Sidney take you up to your room for a lie down. You'll feel better."

"I'm not ill, Leo," she says, pulling her hands from both men's grip.

King's face darkens, and he turns his attention back to Robin. "You'll excuse my wife and me, Mister..."

"Locksley," Robin says, holding out his hand.

King makes no motion to take his hand. Probably for the best since all Robin would've done is try to crush his hand. "Mr. Locksley, enjoy the rest of your evening."

Even not knowing the pain he'd caused his family, Robin knows he would still find King a vile representation of humanity. With that thought raging in his mind, he bows to Regina, clasping her hand to his mouth and ghosting his lips across her knuckles. "Thank you for the dance," he says, locking his eyes with hers.

Her face may be slack, but there's fire in her eyes. He releases her hand and straightens his spine, considering her. She says she likes someone to stand up to her, yet she doesn't stand up to her husband. The transformation is disquieting, carves wrinkles into his forehead that he can feel against the press of his mask.

King snaps his fingers and Glass materializes beside him. "Mr. Glass, please escort my wife upstairs. I'll be up shortly."

Regina's face flushes, and Robin can feel his own face heating as well.

"Is something burning?" Glass asks, sniffing.

Robin inhales and catches a whiff of smoke, but fails to see the source.

"Make a note to not hire this caterer again if she can't manage to not burn the kitchen down around our ears," King says to Glass. As the man escorts Regina out of the room her hands curl into tight fists at her sides when his hand lands on her lower back, and a sliver of envy embeds itself in Robin's chest.

Granny's cooking isn't what's burning; there's no odor of burnt food. The faint trace of smoke has dissipated already. Robin hopes whatever Granny's cooked up for dessert is impressive enough to keep this man as her client. While distasteful as a human being, the man has connections Granny's business could profit from, if all goes well.

King continues to stand near Robin, so he gives him a tight smile and a nod before starting back toward the powder room on the first level.

Ruby is going to kill him for returning late. Granny is going to kill him for causing Ruby to commit murder. He is then going to be fired. How did tonight get out of control?

Before he makes it more than half a step away, King's hand is back on his upper arm, and all Robin's
self control pours into not punching him in the face.

"I don't know how you know my wife or what you were doing upstairs with her, but you will leave this house at once."

He can't resist jerking his arm out of King's grip, managing to refrain from further violence. "You should take a good look at what you have, Mr. King."

"Good night, Mr. Locksley."

Robin presses his lips into a passable smile and walks toward the exit. King doesn't seem interested in ensuring he makes it out the door, already walking back to the front of the room where his daughter waits, her head bobbing like an anxious bird as she tries to see what happened.

He walks into the powder room, but before he can close the door behind him someone shoves him forward. Robin bounces off the back wall, turns, and presses his assailant face first into the wall. He holds him for a moment and then releases him.

"Is there something you'd like to say to me as well, Mr. Glass?" Robin asks, keeping his voice mild with a modicum of success.

"Stay away from Mrs. King," Sidney sneers, straightening his suit coat and readjusting his mask.

"As you can see, I'm on my way out as soon as you let me get on with my business."

"Make sure you don't find your way back into the party. Mr. King would be most displeased."

"Mr. King or you?" Robin asks, lowering his voice. "Granted, he'd be upset at my return, but how do you think he'd feel if someone were to let slip how his right hand man, his trusted executive assistant harbors feelings for his precious wife?"

Sidney pales, presses his lips together. "You know the way out, I presume."

"I've said as much. Enjoy the rest of the party, Mr. Glass."

Robin closes the door behind Glass, locking it before anyone else can barge in on him. The mask goes back in the box, and since he didn't think to bring a comb, dammit, he settles for wetting his fingers and combing them through his short hair. Satisfied with his appearance, he leaves the bathroom and walks back to the kitchen.
Chapter 3

Granny sends him back into the ballroom to help Ruby with the drinks, the late hour prompting more drink requests than snacks with the promise of dessert to be served soon.

"Did you already get your break?" Robin asks Ruby when he slides behind the bar.

"Yeah, August was nice enough to cover for me while you were gone. Here, start making Jack and Cokes."

He grabs two glasses and uses the soda nozzle to pour cola. "I can't do the fancy twirling," he warns her as he adds whiskey and hands the drinks across the bar to the couple wearing matching blue and black jeweled masks. Peacocks, maybe?

"We are aiming for accuracy, not entertainment at this point in the night," she says. "Leave the fancy handiwork to me."

She shoots him a toothy grin as she tosses a nearly empty bottle of tequila in the air and begins mixing a margarita for a fellow in an orange mask that's supposed to be a fox (maybe) but comes across looking more like a rejected Muppet.

The bar is busy, and he's a bit clumsy with the first few orders until he picks up the rhythm. His knowledge of the recipes is lacking next to Ruby's (he's no bartender), but the simpler requests are handled with grace and charm as he churns out the alcohol. He keeps an eye on King while he doles out drinks. The man seems to have forgotten about his wife once again, now ensconced in a tight group of people, including his daughter, regaling them with some story that seems centered around the young woman.

Guilt creeps into his chest and lodges like a boulder between his lungs and spleen. If he'd just left Regina alone in her room instead of asking her dance, she'd be up there by choice, not force.

An idea seizes him and he turns to Ruby.

"I think I see Mr. King trying to catch my eye," he says. "I'll go see what he wants."

Ruby tries to look over the heads of the people crowded around her, but can't see him from her vantage point even with the four inch heels. "Ok, but hurry back," she says as Robin walks around the end of the bar. "And pick up some empty glasses on your way back."

He nods and makes a short circuit around the room, avoiding King completely, and then walks back to the bar, remembering to snag a few abandoned, half-drained glasses perched on one of the tables.

"Do we have any whiskey left?" he asks Ruby.

"Third shelf on the right," she says, pouring a cocktail into a martini glass.

Robin ducks behind the bar and finds an unopened bottle of Fireball, grabs two lowball glasses and sets them on an empty tray.

"Hey, where are you going with that?"

"Mr. King's request."

Ruby shakes her head. "That's not protocol. Bottles stay behind the bar."
"Do you want to be the one who tells him that?"

"I don't have time to talk to clients who don't read the contract, Robin. I'm a little busy here."

"So charge him extra and be done with it."

Ruby growls and starts on her next drink. "Fine, but just this once. And tell Granny, because she's doing the invoice on this one."

Robin nods and takes the tray with the whiskey and the tray with the empty glasses into the kitchen. After depositing the latter with the lad on dish duty, he finds Granny standing behind him with her hands on her hips.

"Where do you think you're going with that Fireball?"

"Special delivery for Mrs. King on her husband's orders," Robin says. "I already cleared it with Ruby."

"But she didn't clear it with me, and you were supposed to stay away from Mr. King."

"I couldn't help it, Granny. There was no one else near him and I thought you'd appreciate keeping his business. You're going to charge him extra for the bottle."

Granny sighs and pushes her glasses further up her nose. "No exceptions. Mr. King will just have to be disappointed."

This won't do at all. Robin slides his arm around her shoulders and walks her over to a quieter corner of the kitchen, leaning close. "I didn't want to say anything, but I overheard Mr. King say he wasn't impressed with the service tonight. I think this one small favor might go a long way to sway his opinion back in your favor."

"Oh he did, did he?" she asks, crossing her arms across her chest. "Well we'll see what he thinks once his birthday dessert has been served."

"I'd get it out there, sooner rather than later."

"Leroy! Let's finish plating those custards some time tonight."

She's walking away from him, but he needs one more thing from her. "Granny, would it be alright if I ducked out after this?"

"What's wrong? It's not Roland, is it?"

"No, he's fine, it's me. I'm feeling a bit off color."

"Maybe I should get August to take the whiskey then."

"No!" Robin says, perhaps a little too loud because she frowns at him. "No, I can do this last thing and then I'm straight off home. If that's alright."

"Go on," she says, and returns to commanding her kitchen.

Robin takes the back staircase this time, opening the door at the landing with care in case someone is in the upstairs hallway. The coast is clear and he emerges directly across from Regina's door.

You were so close to getting away earlier.
He walks across the hallway and taps his knuckles against her door. "Mrs. King?" There's no answer, no sign or sound of movement inside the room. He leans out of the alcove to count the doorways to make sure he's at the correct spot, and he is, so he raps his knuckles again, asks a little louder, "Regina?"

"Who's there?" Her voice is quiet, almost muffled, as if she's pressed herself against the door.

"Robin Locksley," he says. He places his palm flat on the door. "May I come in?"

"You may not. What are you doing up here? We had an agreement."

"Extenuating circumstances. My code of honor will not allow me to leave a woman in distress."

She snorts. "I'm hardly a damsel in distress."

"Then allow me to make my personal apology for the situation I've created. I wasn't aware your husband would react in that manner, and wouldn't have suggested the dance if I'd known."

"It wasn't your fault. I agreed." She sighs and then there's a rustling sound as if she's sliding down the door to sit on the ground.

"I've brought you something to make amends."

"Is it something else you've stolen?"

"No, it's a gift from your husband, only he won't know it until he receives the invoice tomorrow and finds he's been charged a little extra."

"How thoughtful."

He smiles at her sarcasm and shifts the tray to his other hand, leaning closer to the door. "As this is a somewhat covert operation, may I step inside to deliver it?"

There's a pause long enough for him to wonder if she's punishing him, leaving him hanging in the hallway, ripe for discovery with the pilfered whiskey. "The door is locked," she says.

"And you are incapable of unlocking it?"

"It's locked from the outside," she snaps.

"Oh," he says. Oh indeed. "Is it common in this house to have doors that only lock from the outside?"

"You're the one who's been breaking in. What do you think?"

*I think your husband is a prick and an ogre, that's what I think.*

He sets the tray on the floor and kneels in front of the lock, reaching into his jacket pocket for his kit. "Hypothetically, if your door were unlocked, would you let me in?" He selects the proper slivers of metal and waits, resting on his heels.

"Perhaps."

He threads the picks into the keyhole and is rewarded with a hearty snick as the door unlocks quicker than the previous room. This time when he knocks on the door with tray in hand, it opens.
Regina's mask is off, her hair free of the curled updo and tumbling past her shoulders in waves. She's scrubbed the glittery film from her face and neck, but dabs of sparkles linger near her temples, lines the skin alongside the collar of her dress.

"A whiskey service?" she asks, eyebrows raised.

"You didn't strike me as the vodka type. May I come in?"

She nods and steps back, pulling the door wide.

"Thank you," he says, nodding as he walks past her. On his first visit he had no chance to pay attention to the furnishings in the room, but now he's struck by how few pieces of furniture there are, though what's present screams elegance and expense.

"You're one of the caterers."

"For tonight, yes. I know the owner and she's been doing me a favor by letting me serve while I'm getting back on my feet, a favor for which I am repaying her in a most unprofessional way."

A dark coffee table sits in front of a white upholstered couch, modern in outline, but deliciously soft when he sinks into the cushions after placing his offering on the table. "I may never move again," he says, looking up at the trey ceiling, his head resting on the back cushion.

"Won't you be missed?" Regina closes the door, and then walks over to the side of the couch, her left hand pressed against her stomach.

"I told them I felt a bit dodgy." He sits forward, groaning, and begins to pour the whiskey. "I've been released from my duties and my babysitter isn't expecting me for another few hours." He hands her a glass and clinks his own against it. "Besides, the least I can do is let you buy me a drink after our dance was interrupted."

She cracks a smile and proceeds to down the spirit in its entirety, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand when she lowers the glass. Robin raises his eyebrows as he lowers his glass and reaches for the bottle to refill hers. He'd planned on nursing his drink and trying to draw her out of her shell a little more after what he'd seen downstairs, but it's clear she has other ideas. She's still standing next to the couch, holding her empty glass with her fingertips clenched around the rim, one eyebrow raised as she nods at the whiskey bottle. Get on with it, her expressions says. He takes the glass from her, fills it, and hands it back.

"So," he says.

"So?" She's sipping this one, thank goodness.

"How on God's green earth did you end up married to an ass twice your age?"

She lowers her glass, her face composed in the most serious expression he's seen her wear tonight. "Why, Robin," she says. "I'm surprised you can't tell true love when you see it."

He freezes, whiskey halfway to his lips.

Then she winks and laughter spills out of her. It's not sweet, innocent laughter like his son's or the light, carefree laughter like Marian's. Hers is a bit lost, a touch hollow, a little manic.

"That was uncalled for," he scolds, lifting a finger from his glass and pointing at her before resuming his drink.
She shrugs. Moves to sit on the bed. "The look on your face was worth it." The distance between them is minimal, and yet he feels as though she's acres away.

He grunts, waits for an answer to his question. He's a patient man.

"It's political, more than anything," she finally says.

"Damn shame."

"Damn right."

"And does this political arrangement necessitate being locked in your room every night or merely nights when other men deign to notice that which your husband takes for granted?"

Her head snaps up and her eyes lock with his as a rosy pink tinges her neck. "You have no right to comment on my marriage."

"Maybe so."

"I can take care of myself."

"I never said you couldn't."

They sit on opposite sides of the room, drinking their whiskey in tense silence. She's angry, guarded, and if he wants her to open up anymore (and he does, ever so much) he'll need to tread softly. He settles back against the couch and enjoys the burn in his belly and throat from the cinnamon whiskey, his left elbow propped on the arm, empty glass dangling from his hand. Waiting for her to make the first move.

"Tell me why you're stealing my step-daughter's jewelry."

"Technically, I haven't stolen it yet," Robin says. "And hers was merely the first room that I visited."

"Don't avoid the question." Regina walks over to the whiskey bottle and refills both their glasses.

"It's for my son," he says.

"Yes, you said you have a son," she says, her voice gone soft, almost wistful with a hint of sadness.

"His name is Roland."

Oh-ho. What happened to not dragging Roland into this game? But he can't help himself, wants to tell her all about his precious demon of a boy because though she seems sad whenever he mentions him, her countenance becomes serene, and he'd like to see more expressions like that than the terrible blankness from downstairs.

"And Roland likes pretty jewelry?"

He chuckles. "No, Roland is three years old and would sooner use the bracelet as some devious plot device in his imaginings. The jewelry is for money."

"I hope you were planning on stealing more than just the bracelet and earrings. They'll fetch a pretty penny, but by no means enough to make you rich." She lifts the glass to her lips and holds his gaze as she takes a sip.

Robin lifts his own glass and toasts her before imbibing. "I just need enough for us to get through the
end of the month. I've a new job lined up, but I've run short of money for the time being despite the
catering jobs, and Roland needs things, needs tuition money for preschool and food that you can't get
from a vending machine. I'd plans to hit every room on this level, but your step-daughter interrupted
me and I had to change my plans."

"She's exceptional at ruining things. Well, I hope it's worth it," she says, turning back to the bed,
bringing the whiskey with her, and sitting on the edge. "Join me."

Tempting, very tempting, her sitting there in a dainty perch on the bed, asking him to join her.
Casual, as if she's asking him if he prefers blue or red M&Ms, as if it's even a question (blue, because
they're Roland's favorite, and he never gets to eat them because he always slipping them to him when
he's not looking), but she's married, very married, and he's a widower with a small child asleep at
home who needs his father.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

*There you go, Locksley, be strong.*

"Don't you trust me to protect your honor, thief?"

His jaw tightens at the moniker. "It's not my honor I'm worried about," he says.

She laughs the same dark, hollow laugh, and this time he frowns as she tips back her head to release
the rich sound from her throat. "You're sweet, or foolish, to think I have honor left to preserve." She
crosses her legs and leans back, propping herself up with her left arm.

"If you think you haven't got any left, then that's all the more reason for me to try to protect it," he
says.

Her laughter stops and she stares at him, eyes wide, fingers gripping her glass tighter. "You don't get
to say things like that. Not to me. Not when I can't think straight."

"You started it."

"Actually, I think you started it when you broke into my room with a bottle of liquor."

"Ah," he says, rising and walking toward her, standing in front of her, leaning forward until her
breathing quickens, and then reaches out to place his empty glass on the nightstand next to the half
full bottle. "But you invited me in."

"True."

Regina flashes a devilish smile and it makes him feel foolish things in places he thought locked away
forever. He licks his lips and her eyes flick down as she mirrors him. Kissing her would be a mistake.
For many reasons. None of which seem to matter the longer he stands in front of her, close enough to
reach out and touch, if he wanted to. And oh, he wants to.

He snaps himself out of the daydream. He's well on his way to inebriated and she's already set up
camp. Not to mention the very real fact that she's married, and he's seen enough to know starting an
affair as dangerous as this one would be suicide.

He steps back. Breathes deep. Watches her do the same.

Her eyes lower as she places her glass on the nightstand next to his. "I know who you are, Robin,"
she says.
"What do you mean?" Robin asks, suspicious.

"I know what happened to your family, and I'm sorry."

It's not so strange that she should know, he thinks. The accident made the evening and late night news, was in the local papers the next day, and there was the occasional update on the litigation that appeared in a tiny column on an unimportant page of the papers. There was also the fact that they determined the reason the truck crossed the median was a loose screw in the steering column of the truck that caused the driver to lose control of the car. Marian's death was the first linked to the issue, but still no recall had been issued because according to the CEO, one Mr. Leopold King, "there are no problems."

It shouldn't be strange for her to know, but it is to hear her say as much. Strange she has recognized his name after two years.

"That's why you came tonight, isn't it?" she presses. "You need the money, I don't doubt that with my husband dragging out your suit, but this isn't about money."

"I work for Granny."

"But you don't make a habit of stealing from her clients, do you?"

"No," he says. "No, that honor I saved for your family because of what he did to mine." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the bracelet and earrings. "It was wrong of me, and out of character. This is not who I am anymore."

It was never about the money. Pride, selfishness, desire for revenge disguised as a desire to provide for his family. Before, he would never have risked what he has tonight.

Regina accepts the trinkets, her palm upturned, then stands and walks over to the dressing table where she opens an ornately carved wooden box.

"Here," she says. "Take these to Mr. Gold at 1423 West Barrow Street after eleven o'clock tomorrow." She holds out a sparkling pair of stylized red earrings shaped like apples. "But you must promise not to go before the afternoon."

Robin holds out his hand and she tilts them into his palm. "Are those-"

"Real? Yes, and they're yours if you can hold up your end of the deal this time."

He shakes his head. "I can't accept this."

"Can't or won't?" she asks.

"It's too much," he protests, trying to hand them back.

"As much I would enjoy having you pilfer my idiot step-daughter's jewelry, you're putting yourself at risk walking off this property with them. Leo doesn't throw his punches when it comes to his possessions."

"So I've noticed. Won't this Mr. Gold be suspicious when I come in with something this valuable and unique?"

Chapter 4
She rolls her eyes. "That's why you have to wait until eleven, so I can place a phone call and let Gold know you're coming in with them."

"You're not doing this to assuage some kind of guilt, are you? Because I don't blame you for what happened."

"Your boy needs a father who's not in jail, which is what's going to happen if Leo finds out you took anything of Mary Margaret's after that display downstairs."

He closes his fist around the gift, shakes his head. "I don't deserve this."

"Then it's a good thing you don't have a choice." Regina steps forward, her hands hovering above his closed hand for a moment before she clutches his hand between hers. He can't look at her when she's this close to him, can't bear to see pity or worse, sympathy on her face when he wants her the way he does. He stares at their joined hands as she continues, "I know what it's like to lose someone you love. At least you have Roland."

Robin looks up as she pulls her hands away, sees her swipe a finger under her lashes before she steps back and sinks back down to the bed. He has no desire to speak of the accident with her, to scrape open the wounds left by grief, but she's no stranger to the emotion it seems, and given her situation, perhaps she needs someone to talk to.

"You have me at a disadvantage," he says and sits a few inches away from her on the bed. "You know about the worst day of my life, but I know nothing of yours."

Regina huffs, tucks her hair behind her ears and then folds her arms tight across her stomach. "It's complicated."

"Isn't everything?"

"No, it's not," she says, looking over at him with wide eyes. "It wasn't." She ducks her head. "This was simple."

Robin reaches out, places a hand on her shoulder, a brief, light touch to reassure her. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Regina."

"I had love, once, before all this," she says, lifting her head and straightening her spine. "Daniel. He was the love of my life."

"What happened?"

"He died."

"I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"My mother killed him when she found out we were planning to elope."

Death he had expected.

Murder, and by her mother's hand, was... well, something else entirely.

"Mother wanted me to marry up. I saw her kill him, she wanted me to watch, to show me how love was weakness." Her hands are fisted again, her knuckles white against her olive skin.

"And you never told anyone? Not even the police?"
"I tried. No one believed me, and the autopsy didn't support my statement." Regina winces and shakes her head. "Mother was rather unique in the way she killed him. And in any case, as a judge she was too powerful, had too many connections, and I was already engaged to Leopold, just another business deal under the table." She's staring up at the ceiling now, her eyes darting back and forth as if she's watching her past play out before her.

Robin moves his arm closer to her arm, near enough to feel the warmth radiating from her skin, but not quite making contact.

"Once the investigation was over, Mother streamlined the wedding and I found myself married to man old enough to be my father and a step-daughter who could have been my sister."

She glances over at him, trying to gauge his reactions, he thinks, and tries to comport his expression into something other than horror and alarm.

"Still want to know more?"

"Christ, there's more?" He can't help the outburst. Already he wants to gather her in his arms and steal her away from the pain of her past.

"I'm just getting started," she says.

"Tell me one thing before you go on."

She raises her eyebrows.

"How did your mother kill your fiance without leaving a trace of evidence to convict her?"

Regina leans into him until they're cheek to cheek and whispers, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you." Before he can say anything, she gasps and pushes him away. "Listen. Someone's coming. You need to leave. Now."


Regina looks from him to the door and then back to him. She catches her bottom lip with her teeth for a moment, then throws out her hand toward the door. A small flash of purple lights her hand followed by an audible snicking sound.

Robin stares at her hand. What just happened couldn't possibly have just happened. "Regina, what's going on?"

"You need you to not be here," she says, pulling him up from the bed and pushing him toward the balcony.

"Woah, woah, I'm in no condition to climb down the drainpipe," he says, stumbling under her ministrations.

"Oh, you won't have to climb anywhere but into a cab."

She's got him against the railing now and it's all so confusing, the door locking and the purple shimmer, and had that been what he'd seen her doing out here on this balcony earlier that night, this strangeness with the purple light?

A key scrapes the lock.
Regina looks back to the door and then back to him. "This is going to make you vomit," she says, raising her hands.

Before she can do anything, he grabs her wrists. "Regina, what happened to Daniel?"

She yanks herself free. Without breaking eye contact with him, she waves her hand behind her and a chair flies across the room to lodge beneath the doorknob.

"My mother ripped out his heart and crushed it to dust."

The vengeful angel he'd seen when he first walked into this room has returned, and once again he smells something burning, the faint sting of smoke irritating his eyes.

"The smoke. Is it you?" he asks.

She nods, slides the back of her hand against her chest and then out toward him as if she's going to blow him a kiss, and then there are flames crackling in her palm.

"Holy shit," he says, putting his hand to his mouth. "But if you can do magic, why are you putting up with this?" He waves his hand toward the door where an agitated King is calling Regina's name and attempting to force his way into the room.

"I'm not yours to save," she says, tilting her head up to meet his gaze. "And I have my reasons." She closes her hand and the flames extinguish. "Now, brace yourself."

"What?"

But she's already got her hands in the air, and before his query is even fully voiced he finds himself standing behind a large topiary, one of many lining the drive just outside the perimeter wall. She was right. About the vomiting. He bends over and empties his stomach at the base of a large giraffe-shaped bush. Once he's done, he wipes his mouth and stands, looking back at the mansion through the iron gate.

Magic. Holy shit. Holy shit. And his bag with his name on it and John's mask is still inside under the sink in the first floor lavatory. He should have grabbed it on his way up to her room. The mansion is dark now, no sign of the catering van, no one he can call inside to return it to him.

Well done, Locksley. Cavorting with a married sorceress. A married, drunk sorceress. God, should she have even been doing magic while intoxicated? Aren't there laws about that sort of thing? Casting under the influence?

He pats his pocket, finds his cell phone still there, and sets about calling Belle to say he's going to be a bit late. He assures her he will pay her double for her trouble, for extending his night out even further, and then slides the phone back in his pocket. It makes a clinking noise as though he has loose change in there as well, but he never carries cash, not anymore. He pulls out the earrings Regina had foisted upon him and he steps back. These hadn't been in his pocket when she'd... poofed him out here. He distinctly remembers sliding them behind him on the duvet when she'd been telling her story. Apparently he wasn't as sneaky as he thought.

And still isn't. He shouldn't linger here.

A short row of taxis line the street a few houses down. Perhaps the Kings had sprung for paid service home for their inebriated friends. It's worth a shot, and even if it's not already paid for, he can at least get a lift to the train station. That shouldn't put too large of a dent in his bank account, small as it is. He approaches the closest vehicle and asks about the rate, and when assured it's been taken care of
he lets out a sigh of relief that has the driver smirking in the rear view mirror as she asks where he’d like to go.

Robin gives his address and leans his head back as they pull onto the main road. What the hell happened tonight? Was this just some insane dream where he was going to wake up in a jail cell after being found black out drunk in Mrs. King’s bedroom?

Thinking makes his head pound, and for the rest of the trip back he dozes.

Once he's home he writes Belle a generous check, asks her to wait until Monday morning to cash it, and then stumbles into the shower. His pores ooze alcohol, his mouth tastes like vomit and feels like carpet.

Before retiring, he checks on Roland. The boy sleeps like the dead, his limbs starfished under the olive green blanket on the little trundle bed they have shoved against the wall. Robin runs his fingers through his son's wild brown curls, a gift from Marian, and drops a kiss on his forehead. True to form, Roland doesn't stir, and Robin is so very grateful for his son, his miracle, his almost never was.
Chapter 5

The next day, he wakes to Roland bouncing up and down on his bed, calling for cereal and cartoons.
"Papa, wake up! It's morning!"

Robin groans and rolls over, capturing his son in his arms and dragging him beneath the covers with him. "No, I'm sorry my boy, it's still night time."

Roland shrieks with laughter and squirms against his hold. "Papa, the little hand is already on the eight and the big hand is on the six."

At this, Robin cracks open an eyelid and sees that his son is right, it's eight thirty in the morning, and in ten minutes the little bell and hammer alarm clock on his nightstand is going to start ringing. "So it is, Roland." He rubs his hand over his face and opens both eyes, blinking owlishly at his son to make him laugh.

He reaches over and turns off the alarm and throws back the covers, uncovering them both. "How about you go pick out what cereal you'd like, and I'll be along in a moment?"

"Ok," Roland says, scooching off the bed and scampering down the hallway to the small kitchen.

Robin slides his feet to the floor and puts his head in his hands. A quick glance at the nightstand reveals that last night wasn't a dream. The bejeweled red apple earrings are sitting next to his phone. He glares at them, wishing them back to their owner, but he does not have magic, and they stay put. With a sigh, he pushes himself off the mattress and pulls on his blue plaid robe.

Shuffling into the living room, he finds Roland sitting on the floor in front of the couch, shoveling store brand marshmallow cereal into his mouth by the fistful straight from the bag. Robin frowns and makes a detour into the kitchen to gather a bowl, spoon, and the last of the milk. "Roland, come eat at the table first," he says.

"But Papa, it's Scooby Doo," Roland whines, soggy marshmallows falling out of his mouth as he talks.

"Don't speak with your mouth full, please. Now come on."

Roland chews furiously and gulps before acquiescing to his father's request. With him settled at the table, Robin sits on the couch and picks up the remote. "Once the commercial comes up, I'm going to check the weather," he warns Roland, waving the controller at him.

"No! You always wait too long and then we miss parts."

"Roland, what did I tell you about talking with your mouth full?"

The little boy pouts and splatters milk on the table when he plunks his spoon into the bowl with a vicious little grunt of dissatisfaction.

Robin rubs a hand over his face again (God, that whiskey did a number on him) and thumbs the channel button until he finds the local news station.

"Weather and traffic are at the bottom of your screen as always. And now we turn to Janet Reagan who's on the scene at the residence of CEO Leopold King who was found deceased this morning in
the family's pool. Janet?"

"Mark, we're down the street from the King residence at the request of police as they continue to investigate the death of Leopold King. Now the information we're getting from them is that he was found by his daughter at the bottom of the pool just after 8:00am this morning. No word yet on whether this was an unfortunate accident or something more sinister, although we did see police escorting Mrs. King and her step-daughter away from the house just before this broadcast. As always, we'll keep you updated on any developments in this case. Live from Persimmon Street, I'm Janet Reagan, Channel 17 News."

The newscast moves on to the next story, a fluff piece about a police officer rescuing a kitten from a storm drain, but Robin doesn't hear it, doesn't hear anything but roaring in his ears. 

King is dead.

"Papa, Papa!" Roland tugs on the hand that has the remote. "We're missing Scooby," he says, and pushes his lower lip into a pout.

"Of course, my boy. I'm sorry," Robin says, clicking back over to the cartoon. He lifts Roland into his lap and wraps his arms around him, resting his chin on his tiny shoulder.

"Papa, you're crushing me," Roland squeals.

"I love you, Roland." Robin squeezes him and then loosens his grip, allowing the boy to settle against him in a more comfortable position. "More than anything in this world."

"Love you, too." Roland kisses his hand and reaches behind him to smack Robin's cheek, only his aim is off and his nose takes the brunt of the affection.

They snuggle on the couch longer than he would allow on a normal Saturday, soaking in the wash of cartoons late into the morning. He holds Roland tight as he waits for the phone to ring. The police will be calling everyone who'd been at the party the night before, questioning anyone who may have seen or heard something, and God help him if they found his gym bag in that downstairs powder room.

The phone is silent until the afternoon when Robin is standing over the stove mixing boxed macaroni and cheese for Roland's lunch. The boy gets to the phone first, picking it up from the cradle and crowing, "Hello, we're the Locksley's!" before Robin can stop him. Roland frowns and wedges the phone between two couch cushions, speaker end sticking up and stretching the coiled cord taught.

"Papa! A detector wants to talk to you."

"A detective, Roland," Robin says, giving the pasta one last turn with the spoon for good measure. He brushes powdered cheese from his shirt, wipes a dash of butter from the back of his hand. "Go wash up for lunch, please."

As Roland hops down the hallway on one foot (his latest accomplishment and one he's loathe to pass up an opportunity to use), Robin pulls the phone from the couch cushions and sits, taking a moment to compose himself before saying, "Hello?"

The call is brief. The detective asks a few cursory questions and then gives him a number to call if he thinks of anything else. Robin drops the phone back in the cradle and lets out a breath. That had gone well. Almost too well. Had no one spoken about the incident on the dance floor to the police? But why should they connect that with him? It had happened in the center of the dance floor, sure, but there was a lot going on at the time, and no one had raised their voice or made any threatening
motions that would have drawn attention, had they? The only people who knew his name and that he wore the lion mask were Regina and that Sidney Glass fellow, and after their little confrontation he doubted the man would try to cast suspicion on him.

Roland runs back down the hallway and skids into the kitchen on socked feet. "I'm ready," he says in a sing-song voice.

"Coming," Robin says. He pushes himself off the couch with his knuckles and joins his son in the kitchen. As he dishes macaroni into two plastic bowls he glances at the clock on the microwave.

1:30pm. After eleven, as Regina had requested.

Roland carries his bowl to the table with two hands, clutching his lunch to his chest. Robin joins him and lets his son chatter away about how excited he is to be going back to preschool next week.

He won't take the earrings to Mr. Gold, he decides, sliding four noodles onto the individual tines of his fork. He'll call John, explain about the mask, and then see if Granny will let him pick up more jobs until his new position begins.

He wants to contact Regina, ask her about the things that happened last night (magic, fucking magic is real), but until this mess with King is resolved he can't afford to do anything that will cast more attention on him and his son.

Over the next few days whenever a knock comes at the door or the phone rings he tenses, but the police never contact him again, and neither does Regina, even after Sidney Glass is arrested for the murder of Leopold King. Robin's new job begins, Roland returns to preschool (funded by extra shifts with Granny), and he works out an installment plan to repay John for the loss of the mask. The earrings he wraps in tissue paper, stowing them in the fireproof box kept underneath his bed. He doesn't want to keep them, but it feels wrong to cash them in as Regina had intended him to do, so he'll keep them safe until she figures out he still has them.

Two months later, a crow taps on his bedroom window, a message capsule secured to its leg. Robin frowns and knocks on the window, trying to scare the bird away, but it doesn't move, taps even harder on the glass. Sighing, Robin opens the window and the crow hops inside, holding its leg out in a dutiful manner. He retrieves the message, unrolling the slip of paper and squinting at the tiny handwriting.

You broke our deal, thief. Again. Why?

Robin grins and reaches for a pen. "You'll take this back to Regina?" he asks the bird, feeling only mildly foolish when the crow caws at him and flaps his wings once. "Right." He scribbles a response (Extenuating circumstances, you understand) on the back of her message, and sends it off with the bird.

Her reply comes quicker than he expects.

I made myself perfectly clear. Earrings. Gold. 11am.

He chuckles (stubborn, she's so stubborn, like him) and replies with a request that she call him like a normal human being to continue their argument. As the crow leaves, he glances at his watch. He still has thirty minutes before he needs to pick up Roland from preschool. He reaches underneath the bed for the fireproof box containing the earrings and is startled when his cell phone phone rings.

Unknown number.
Robin swallows, slides his thumb across the screen, and raises his phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"What did I ever do to give you the impression that I'm a normal human being?"

He smiles. "Nothing, nothing at all."

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