### Cupcakes

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences  
**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Category:** F/M  
**Fandom:** Once Upon a Time (TV)  
**Relationship:** Belle/Rumpelstiltskin | Mr. Gold, Jiminy Cricket | Archie Hopper/Red Riding Hood | Ruby, Huntsman | Sheriff Graham/Emma Swan  
**Character:** Rumpelstiltskin | Mr. Gold, Belle (Once Upon a Time), Red Riding Hood | Ruby, Emma Swan, Jiminy Cricket | Archie Hopper, Huntsman | Sheriff Graham, Widow Lucas | Granny, Mad Hatter | Jefferson, Maurice | Moe French, Aunt Elvira, Alice, Princess Aurora (Dawn), Princess Ariel (Marina), Abigail | Kathryn Nolan, Frederick | Jim, Pinocchio | August Booth, Snow White | Mary Margaret Blanchard, Prince "Charming" James | David Nolan, Henry Mills (Once Upon a Time), Nova | Astrid, Grumpy | Leroy  
**Additional Tags:** Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Rumbelle - Freeform  
**Series:** Part 2 of Tales from the Cake Display  
**Stats:** Published: 2013-02-03 Completed: 2015-01-12 Chapters: 50/50 Words: 105511

### Summary

AU. Following on from 'Carrot Cake', a series of one-shots charting the further adventures of Gold and Belle as they continue to live, love and generally get to know each other. Mainly romance and mainly Rumbelle, occasionally other characters will pop up demanding attention…

### Notes

I welcome prompts and ideas, so if you have a particular scene you'd like to see, please feel free to suggest it.

I have just two guidelines - please keep within the pairings established in Carrot Cake, I don't mind picking up new characters and new pairings but I won't re-pair the established relationships.

I won't guarantee to write anything that would be rated E. This is purely due to my own lack of writing ability rather than any prudishness on my part.

This first chapter was requested by many of my Carrot Cake reviewers over on FF.net.
Mohnkuchen (German Poppy Seed Cake)

Moe French had been having a comparatively good day until the van had decided to die on him. He was delivering (or, at least, he was meant to be delivering) a large order to a hotel in the town centre who were handling a wedding at the weekend, and his Belle had promised to drop in and see him after she'd signed her paperwork. There was even the possibility of sizing up her new man, but Belle had said that it was a bit early for meeting the parents and she didn't want Moe scaring him off.

Which was a shame, because Moe quite enjoyed watching Belle's boyfriends sweat whilst he scrutinised them with secateurs in hand, ready to snip.

If he couldn't get the van started, however… He kicked the front nearside tire but all that succeeded in doing was making him stub his toe and let out a few choice words telling the van exactly what he thought of it. A couple of passers-by muttered their disapproval at his language under their breath.

The van had been his old faithful for as long as Moe could remember, but it was now very old, and he was now rapidly losing faith in it. With a sigh, he opened up the bonnet. The battery was probably flat again. That was happening with an alarming regularity. Moe couldn't understand it; where did the power go for crying out loud? He prodded about a bit, trying to work out what was wrong and how he could fix it, if it could even be fixed without having to call out the mechanic.

Moe sighed and went to the door of the shop.

"Brenda!" he called.

"Yes boss?" came the reply.

"Can you find me a wrench?"

"Why would you have a wrench in a flower shop?"

"I don't know, can you just find me one please?"

He returned to the van so that he didn't have to listen to Brenda grumbling about going above and beyond the call of duty, finding wrenches when she was only paid to work the till and water the plants. On the one hand, having Brenda as an assistant was a blessing, as Moe knew that he could leave Game of Thrones in her capable hands whilst he made deliveries. On the other hand, she would ask him inane questions… He was sure he had a wrench somewhere in the back room…

"Here you go." Brenda came out of the shop with the wrench. "Honestly, the things I do."

"Thank you, Brenda." Moe sighed and began tapping the various visible pieces of the engine with the wrench. He wasn't the world's best mechanic, but he was enough of a petrol-head to know how to change a spark plug and measure the oil, and that was more than some people. Besides, if he was holding a wrench, then passers-by would think that he was attempting to fix the van, rather than waiting next to it like a lemon for the real mechanic. Moe frowned as his tentative tapping didn't yield any results. It was definitely the battery.

He was still pondering whether or not to call the garage, who would undoubtedly charge him a small fortune for the privilege of having his van started, when he heard a car pull up behind him, the driver's door open and shut and the incredibly annoying beep of central locking.
"Excuse me."

Moe turned to face the man. "Can I help you?"

"How long can I park here for?"

"Half an hour free, no return within three hours," Moe intoned. He'd had more than enough run-ins with the particularly nasty traffic warden who controlled the parking spaces outside his shop when the woman simply would not accept his parking permit and kept trying to slap fines on him for leaving his van somewhere it shouldn't be. That the Transit was emblazoned with the same name as the shop had somehow been overlooked.

The newcomer looked from Game of Thorns to his car and back again.

"That should be enough time," he said, but he didn't sound too sure of himself. Moe chuckled.

"She's hard to buy for?"

"You have no idea." The man sighed. "I've never been more terrified of buying a woman flowers in my life."

"Right." Moe hit the battery with the wrench. Nothing happened so he tried again slightly harder. "So she's either allergic to just about everything or incredibly picky. I have one customer who orders her flowers to match the curtains."

"It's not that. She reads into everything, knows what all the flowers mean. I don't want to accidentally tell her I hate her."

Moe hit the battery for a third time, sending the wrench flying out of his hand and sailing past his prospective customer onto the pavement.

"Well, I'm not all that clued up on them, I just make sure they're fed and watered and sold," he said, rushing to retrieve the tool. "Erm… Not poppies. They're something to do with death, oblivion, eternal sleep, bad stuff like that. And not balsamine and lime-blossom together, they mean 'I can't wait to get into bed with you'. Or is that marigold and apple-blossom? Best steer clear of all of them."

"Ok… Oh screw it, I'll get her a pot plant."

"Not basil. That's eternal hatred. And I believe sweet marjoram is pregnancy and birth, so she might get the wrong impression." Moe shrugged. "My daughter's the one to ask really, she can reel them off. But definitely not poppies."

He hit the engine again but it was still to no avail.

"Are you having trouble?" The other man came up beside him.

"I think it's the battery." Moe sighed. "Do you know anything about engines?"

"Nope. Not a thing. It's a shame the 'turn it off and on again' rule doesn't work for cars." He looked back at the black BMW he'd just parked. "I love her, but she's been more trouble than she's worth sometimes."

"Really? I'd heard the 3-series was really quite reliable."

"It is, for the most part. But when there's a problem, there's a big problem." He shrugged. "I think
"cars just don't like me."

"Well, this van doesn't like me at the moment." Moe tossed the wrench into the passenger seat. "I'll let you get on. Doesn't do to be holding up custom, after all. Brenda can probably help you with the hidden meanings. Actually, on second thoughts, if you've got a minute…"

Moe looked from the BMW to the Transit and back again. The other driver raised an eyebrow.

"Would you like a jump-start?" he asked plainly.

"Well…"

"Don't worry, I've learned to read people very well in my line of work."

"What's that then?"

"I'm a solicitor," the other driver said as he walked back towards his car to open the bonnet. "Have you got jump-leads?"

It was in that moment that Moe started to wonder. Solicitor, Scottish accent, limp…

"Well, this is cosy. I thought I said we weren't going to do a 'meet the parents' today?"

Belle was standing on the pavement outside the shop, with a patented expression of amusement on her face.

"Hi love," Moe said brightly.

The BMW driver looked from Belle to Moe, then back at Belle, then down at his car, then back at Moe, then planted his face in one hand.

"I don't believe it," he muttered.

Belle was nearly crying with laughter, and thereby doing nothing to make the situation any easier.

"What's going on out there?" Brenda's voice came out of the shop, and even though he couldn't see her, Moe could tell she had her hands on her hips. "You're scaring away all the customers!"

"Hello, Brenda," Belle called. "Don't worry, we'll tell you later."

"Brenda, be a dear, find me some jump-leads, please," Moe called.

"Why do you have JUMP-LEADS in a FLOWER SHOP? All right, all right, I'm looking."

Belle came over and patted her boyfriend – he was more of a man-friend, really – on the shoulder and he looked up at her.

"I swear I didn't realise," he murmured.

"I know. Dad probably didn't either, since he hasn't broken out his shears. But since you're both here, we may as well do a formal introduction." She hooked her arm through his and pulled him back over to Moe. "Gold, this is my dad, Dad, this is Gold."

"Pleased to meet you."

They shook hands, and Moe decided against going and getting his secateurs. The mortified look on
Gold's face was enough. Belle stepped into the awkward silence and began to tell them how her meeting with the lawyers round the corner had gone.

"Right, I've found your blinking jump-leads, now..." Brenda came out of the shop tangled up in wires and stopped on seeing Belle and Gold. "You must be the mysterious Mr Gold-with-no-first-name," she said, taking a few steps closer. "You know, I think that's very... enigmatic... Like James Bond. Except he was called James, obviously..."

Gold took a minute step backwards towards the safety of the BMW.

"Brenda, stop flirting, you're scaring him and he's traumatised enough as it is," Belle scolded. "Right, let's get this van started so Dad can go and deliver, Brenda can go and tend to her pet Venus flytrap..."

"It's nearly four inches tall now!" Brenda said proudly.

"...And you can go and buy me some flowers, as was probably your original intention. I think some pink roses and iris would be particularly appropriate today."

Moe busied himself untangling Brenda from the jump-leads, watching his daughter and her man out of the corner of his eye.

"So what precisely do pink rose and iris mean?" Gold was asking.

Belle was grinning. "Oh, I'll tell you later. I can't believe you met my dad without realising. I told you our shop was called *Game of Thorns*, I'm sure I did."

"Yes, well..."

"You've seen a picture of him!"

"Once!"

Moe smiled as they continued their banter. He had a good feeling about this one.
"Ruby! Ruby! Ruby!"
"Yes? Yes? Yes?"
Belle rushed behind the kitchen partition, her tinsel halo slipping down around her ears and her glittery wings fluttering dangerously close to the stack of cups that Ruby was washing up.
"Ruby, it's snowing!"
"I know. I saw it ten minutes ago."
"But don't you see what this means? We're going to have a white Christmas!"
Ruby looked up from the sink and surveyed Belle sagely from under her Santa hat. It was the twenty-third of December, and the last working day before the café closed until the New Year. In honour of the occasion, the staff had decided to dress up in a festive fashion. Ruby had dusted off her Mrs Claus outfit, Belle had realised a childhood dream and was doing a passable impression of a Christmas tree angel, and both girls were most disappointed in August, whose sole concession to the seasonal spirit was a pair of reindeer antlers.
"Belle," Ruby said, "we will not have a white Christmas. We hardly ever have a white Christmas in this country. You've been here long enough to know that. The snow isn't even settling, it's just making everything cold and wet."
Belle pouted. "I don't care." She grinned as a thought came to her. "Ruby, I'm going to take my break now."
Ruby's eyes narrowed.
"What are you planning?" she asked.
Belle sighed. "It's silly really, but I've always wanted to walk in the first snow with someone I lo… someone special." It had been nearly two months and they hadn't actually said the L-word, although Belle was definitely thinking it. She had yet to tell Ruby that she was now certain that this was definitely a relationship that could, and would, go the distance; that in Belle's eyes at least, it was true love.
Ruby rolled her eyes. The café was busy, but not unusually so, and August was there to help out as well.
"Well, if you want to get cold and wet, that's your problem. Bear in mind Gold might be busy, though. It's still only half-past four."
Annoyingly, Ruby was right. Belle shook her head as she took her wings off in order to put her coat
on. She wondered whether or not to re-don the wings (ninety-nine pence from the post office) before deciding that it was Christmas and a time for being jolly and wearing wings. She pulled them on again and rushed out of the café door, waving back at Ruby and August.

Belle opened the door of the solicitors’ office opposite. She should probably have phoned Gold to check he was free first, but all such thoughts were banished when she saw the scene unfolding in reception. There was a man leaning over the desk with his lips locked against Kathryn's, the latter holding a sprig of mistletoe over their heads. She saw Belle out of the corner of her eye and pulled away with a muted squeak.

"Oh, it's only you, Belle." Kathryn gave an embarrassed cough. "This is my boyfriend, Jim."

"Merry Christmas." Belle was trying very hard to keep a straight face, but her efforts were in vain when Kathryn's brow furrowed.

"Belle, why are you wearing tinsel and wings?"

"It's a long story. Is Gold free?"

"Hang on." Kathryn sat back down behind her desk and picked up the phone. "Hello, Mr Gold. Are you free? Excellent." She hung up and nodded towards the stairs. "You can go on up."

Belle headed for the stairs, but before she could ascend, she had to step aside to allow Jefferson to come down.

"Can't stop, I'm taking Grace to the carol service and I'm already late. Happy Christmas and a very merry New Year!" He was halfway out of the door when he turned back, pulled a little wrapped package out of his coat pocket and put it on Kathryn's desk. "Thanks for a great first year here, love." He kissed her cheek without making contact and sprinted out of the door, jamming his hat on his head.

Kathryn raised her eyebrows. "Well, I've certainly been showered with gifts today. Never let it be said that my line of work is not rewarding."

Belle left her and Jim and went up the stairs towards Gold's office. Dawn was on the phone but waved as Belle passed her desk. The other two desks in the open office were empty.

"Well, hello there." Belle saw Gold standing in his office doorway, smiling in a very inviting manner, but the smile soon dropped into an expression of perplexity. "Why are you wearing tinsel and wings?"

"Because I'm an angel," Belle said, her tone completely matter of fact. "Come on, get your coat. We're going out."

"I'm working, Belle."

"Yes, well, technically I'm working too. And you can't be working that hard, it's your last day of business before Christmas."

"All right. Where are we going and why are we going there?"

"We're going out, and we're going there because it's snowing."

"It is?" Gold came out into the main office and peered around the blind that covered the window.
"You can't tell me you've been so engrossed in your work that you haven't looked out of your window," Belle said, folding her arms.

"My window looks out over the precinct," Gold pointed out. "I couldn't see snow from it if I tried. Blimey, you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Now, come on and walk with me. It's the first snow, and I've always wanted to walk through the first snow with someone I lo... someone special," she corrected quickly.

Gold smiled.

"All right. I'm hereby holding you responsible if Fox sacks me for shirking off early."

Belle, sitting on an empty desk, merely raised an eyebrow in reply to this statement.

"You're right, he went off for a liquid lunch with his golf mates and hasn't been back since. Poor Kathryn, she'll have to go and drag him out of the Old Ship Inn soon."

Gold went back into his office and collected his coat and umbrella.

"Merry Christmas!" Dawn called after them. "What? No, sorry Mr Shaw, one of my colleagues just left the office for Christmas. Yes, well, it is the twenty-third of December. Yes, I know your case is very important..."

Belle and Gold left her to it and descended back down the stairs. Jim was still leaning on the reception desk, and Kathryn didn't seem to notice their leaving the building.

"Seriously, Belle, why the wings?" Gold asked once they were outside and heading along the main street, cuddled together under the umbrella. "They're making life slightly difficult."

"Oh, don't be such a spoilsport." Belle kissed his cheek. "You like them really."

"They're lovely, darling, but why are you wearing them?"

"Finally fulfilling a childhood fantasy." Belle laughed. "I always wanted to play the Angel Gabriel in the school nativity when I was little, but I always ended up being stuck as part of the crowd. Now I'm twenty-seven, I'm damn well dressing up as an angel. Unfortunately, now I'm twenty-seven, I know that Angel Gabriel was actually a bloke, so I've compromised. I'm a Christmas tree angel."

"Right..." Gold looked at her askance. "Why are you dressed up as an angel in the first place?"

"It's the last working day before Christmas! You've got to dress up!" Belle exclaimed.

Gold merely raised an eyebrow at her. Belle rolled her eyes and settled for simply enjoying the snow. Ruby was right, it was melting as soon as it hit the ground, but from the proclamations of wonder she could her from the other pedestrians, Belle was not the only one marveling at the weather.

"Where are you taking us?" Gold asked presently.

"Well, I'm aiming for the cathedral," Belle replied. "It'll look pretty with the lights and the snow."

"Fair enough." They walked on towards the cathedral green in silence for a few moments before Gold spoke again. "So, I'll see you tonight? I could use some help with my decorations."
Belle gasped in mock horror.

"You haven't even got your Christmas tree up?" she whispered.

"Not yet, no, but I'm sure you can help me with that."

"And presumably, once you get it up you'll want an angel on top of it."

Gold grinned.

"You read my mind. And stole my line."

"Your lines are rubbish. I'm doing them a favour by liberating them. Honestly." Belle nudged his side. "You are behind on your Christmas preparations though. Normally you're so precise about everything."

Gold gave a snort of laughter. "Normally I don't tend to bother with Christmas. For the last ten years I've spent every Christmas in Glasgow with my Aunt Elvira. We exchange bottles of alcohol, complain about our various leg-related ailments and fall asleep in front of *Miracle on 34th Street*. What?" he protested on seeing Belle's appalled expression. "Everyone needs traditions, and Christmas is a time for spending with people you love."

And this year, he was spending it, or at least part of it, with her. Belle heart skipped. Maybe she could broach the L-word after all… She pushed the thought aside for the present and thought of her own Christmas traditions. Up until moving south, she'd spent all her Christmases with her dad. For her first Christmas in the West Country, Ruby and Granny had persuaded her to join in their festivities, and what had begun as a simple invite to Christmas lunch had extended into Belle sleeping on Ruby's sofa for a week whilst a constant stream of guests – invited, uninvited and self-invited – had rushed in and out. It was the best Christmas that she'd ever spent, simply because it had been so different. This year would be different yet again. This year, she had Gold.

"Well, here we are."

The man in question interrupted her train of thought and Belle looked up at the cathedral, brightly floodlit in the dusk with Christmas decorations hanging all around. The snow had practically stopped without leaving a trace, just the odd flake falling now and then.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Belle breathed.

"Not as beautiful as you," Gold said nonchalantly.

Belle batted his arm. "All right, charmer." She rested her head on his shoulder with a contented sigh. "Now, this is Christmas. Don't you feel that this is Christmas?"

"Right now, I feel that your tinsel is tickling my ear."

Belle shifted her head to look at him.

"Be careful now, sir, some might think that's a euphemism for something."

Gold merely raised an eyebrow and Belle had to break his gaze to avoid a fit of the giggles.

"I'm standing in the snow with a mad fairy," he said drily. "Yes, this is Christmas."

"Well," Belle began, "if I'm a mad fairy then you, with your black suit, your black coat, your black gloves, are the very antithesis of Santa and therefore must be Father Whip."
Gold raised the other eyebrow.

"You know," Belle protested. "The imp who delivers coal to children who've been bad. Ok, I know he's more a European thing, but…"

"I know who you mean, dearie. I was just amused at your giving me that particular title considering the previous discussion on euphemisms."

"Hmmm." Belle turned her eyes back to the cathedral rather quickly.

Gold sighed. "You're ridiculous, but I love you for it."

Belle froze, and turned to face Gold fully.

"Say that again," she whispered.

"You're ridiculous."

"No. The second part."

There was a pause as Gold's eyes searched hers.

"I love you."

Belle's heart decided that skipping was overrated and performed a double loop-the-loop instead. It occurred to her that she really ought to say something. I love you too, her brain prompted helpfully, but for some reason her tongue refused to work. The corner of Gold's mouth twitched slightly. Yes, she definitely needed to say something before he got the wrong end of the stick.

Since words were still eluding her, Belle decided against saying something and instead grabbed both his lapels, pulling him into a kiss.

"I'll take that as a good sign?" he murmured as she released him.

"Of course, you ridiculous man. I nearly said it earlier. I've always wanted to walk in the first snow with someone I love, and I love you."

Gold abandoned the umbrella in favour of having a free hand to pull her in against him and return her kiss. A little way off, a group of patrons from the Old Ship Inn, already very much in festive spirits, started wolf-whistling, but Belle didn't care.

It was Christmas, after all.
Gold invites Belle for dinner and she sees his house for the first time. Prompted by KittyMama213 on FF.net

Chapter Notes

The cupcakes do step back and forth in time a little, much like OUAT itself. This one takes place prior to the Carrot Cake epi.

"Why pink?"

"It was that colour when I bought it and I haven't got round to doing anything about it. It's probably protected by some kind of listing anyway."

"Why did you buy a pink house to start with?"

"Because, as with everything, my dear, it's what's on the inside that counts."

Belle was standing in the middle of Gold's driveway, staring up at the pink building in front of her. Its owner was leaning in his front doorframe, failing to keep a straight face on seeing her reaction to the colour of his home.

"If you don't stop gawping and come inside soon, I'll have to leave you out there to check that I'm not burning the kitchen down with my culinary skills."

"All right, all right, I'm coming in."

To be honest, Belle was slightly nervous about setting foot in Gold's house. Not because she was scared of him, but because she was acutely aware of her surroundings. Before, whenever they had met, they had been either in a domain Belle was familiar with – the café – or on neutral ground. Gold's home was his alone, a place he felt safe and relaxed in, and he was allowing her into it too. Becoming a comfortable part of someone else's private life was a marker of trust; Gold had willingly removed a barrier of social convention between them and was laying out his entire life for her scrutiny. Belle felt a certain responsibility to be on her best behaviour. She made her way towards the front door, and Gold stepped back to let her inside, closing the door after her.

"You have so much..." Belle began, looking around the hall and up the stairs.

"Junk?" Gold supplied helpfully. "I live in a pawnbroker's paradise."

Belle peered at the china on the hall windowsill.

"Were you an antiques dealer in a former life or something?" she asked.
"Probably. Either that or a magpie." He took Belle's coat and hung it over the banister. "Would you like to see the rest of the house, or are you content to stay exploring the hall?"

Belle smiled.

"Well, as long as you're not in danger of burning the house down, I'd love a tour."

"It'll be fine," Gold said airily. "Follow me, my intrepid fellow traveller."

Belle wondered if 'it'll be fine' was always Gold's maxim when it came to cooking, but she said nothing. He'd been taking care of himself for at least fifteen years and was still here to tell the tale, after all. She was still thinking about cooking when they entered the living room and it took her a few seconds to realise what she was looking at.

"Is that a tiger?" she asked.

"Yes," said Gold, as if having a near life-size plush tiger in the centre of one's living room was entirely commonplace.

"Why?"

"Why is it a tiger? Or why is there a tiger in the living room?"

"The latter."

"Well, I won it on Blackpool Pier a very long time ago, and I use it as a footstool."

Belle gave him an incredulous look that hopefully asked why without having to repeat herself.

Gold shrugged.

"Why not?"

Belle glanced around the room; she was fairly certain that she could spend about three hours in there asking after every little trinket, but Gold was standing patiently in the doorway and she realised that her guided tour of his home wasn't intended to be quite that in depth just yet. She ducked out of the room and let him lead her through the rest of the house quickly, just giving her enough of a look into each room for her to uncover its secrets and whirl through a myriad of questions – mainly 'what's that?' and 'where did that come from?' – that a laughing Gold promised to answer in due course

She was, however, rendered completely speechless by the main bathroom, and spent several seconds staring in open-mouthed wonder at the antique clawfoot tub.

"That's the most beautiful bathtub I have ever seen," Belle murmured eventually.

"Glad you like it," Gold replied. She could tell he was holding back a laugh, even if she couldn't see his face. "I think it's beautiful too, and I shall keep it until I am too old and creaky to get in and out of it anymore."

Belle twisted and looked over her shoulder at him, before glancing back at the tub. It was amply proportioned, and would definitely take more than one person...

She blushed involuntarily and ducked back out of the room to follow Gold back down the stairs and into the kitchen, leaning on the table to watch him as he worked and she told him about her day. He'd hooked his cane on the worktop to have both hands free, and Belle noted the way he
moved without it, the way he leaned and balanced his weight, the way his limping gait became more pronounced when he walked a few steps. It was only when he glanced at her, head cocked on one side, that she realised she'd tailed off talking.

"I'm all right," he said, tapping the flat of his kitchen knife against his bad knee. "It doesn't generally give me any more pain like this, I can walk without it, I'm just more unsteady."

At that moment, they were interrupted by the oven timer beeping before Belle could find out any more.

The meal was nothing extravagant, chicken in a lemon sauce with vegetables, but it was well-cooked and tasted good, and that was what was important in Belle's eyes, and she let Gold do the talking as she enjoyed her food. By the time he had finished telling her the latest chapter in the ongoing saga that was Regina and Sid's on-again-off-again relationship (apparently Jefferson had found them entwined in his consulting room that morning and had had to take the rest of the day off to recover), they'd both finished eating and were watching the candles on the dining table burning down.

"Shall we move to the living room for dessert?" Gold asked. "You can test out the tiger."

Belle laughed. "I'd love to." She slipped the two empty plates together as Gold stood and leant over the table to sniff out the candles. A thought swept across her mind unbidden and made her giggle again. Gold raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Just a silly thought," she explained.

"Now I'm intrigued, dearie," he purred. "The silly thoughts are always the most interesting."

"All right then. I was thinking about your tie catching fire."

"I'm not wearing a tie," Gold said. "Dear me, has it really got to the stage where you've seen me wearing one so often you start imagining them?"

Belle shook her head with a smile and stayed staring after Gold's back after he left the room with the plates. She liked him looking like this, because she knew she was generally the only one who got to see him in his shirtsleeves and open collar, his off-duty uniform, so to speak. This relaxed, softer Gold was hers, as opposed to the exquisitely tailored Gold whom she shared with the rest of the world. Idly she wondered what he looked like in his pyjamas, and indeed, what he looked like out of them. She'd imagined often enough when she'd written her little flights of fancy, but now she actually knew him, and knew that the day when she could find out for certain was definitely coming, her daydreaming was infinitely more satisfying.

She pushed the thought aside with an embarrassed little cough before she could get too carried away, and she went to find Gold in the kitchen.

"I'm afraid my expertise don't stretch too far," he said, indicating the plastic dividers he was peeling away from a couple of slices of cheesecake. "Supermarket's finest."

"I'm sure it'll be lovely," Belle reassured him. She took up one of the bowls without a word; she knew he wanted to be a gentleman and wait on her but when he only had one hand free, she might as well save him a trip back to the kitchen.

Gold picked up his own bowl and she followed him into the living room. He gestured towards the sofa with a little bow.
"Do take a seat, dear lady, for your tiger awaits."

Belle nearly bent double with laughter and had to swallow hard to compose herself to sit primly on one side of the sofa. Gold scooted the tiger across the floor towards her with his cane and she kicked her shoes off to rest her feet on it, neatly crossing her ankles. She waited for Gold to sit down beside her, stretching his right leg out but keeping his other bent, and they began to eat by mutual consent.

Presently Belle twisted round and looked at the bookcase beside her, scanning through the titles, but she found her attention drawn to the picture frame on top. She tilted her head on one side to get a better look.

"Is that Bae?" she asked.

Gold followed her eyeline and nodded. He reached across, taking the frame off the shelf and passing it to her.

"It was taken at St Mary's Stadium on his thirteenth birthday. It was pouring with rain and Southampton lost but we had a good time nonetheless."

Belle laughed and studied the picture, a boy in a red and white football shirt grinning from ear to ear. That Bae was Gold's son there could be no doubt; his dark eyes could've been a mirror for his father's. She glanced up to find Gold watching her, his expression unreadable.

"He looks a lot like you," she said simply, and replaced the frame on top of the bookcase.

"Yes, as far as looks were concerned there was never any doubt he was mine. Temperament, though… Liz always used say he'd inherited her good points and my bad ones."

Belle shifted a little closer to him on the sofa.

"Should I be worried about these hereditary bad points of yours?" she asked.

Gold grinned. "Short temper, a lawyer's innate ability to bend the truth…" he began.

"Good at lying, you mean."

"Now, that's not what I said. Technically."

"Yes, I know you thrive on technicalities." Belle paused. "So, Bae was going to be an excellent one to follow in the family profession then?"

"God no." Gold shook his head with a laugh. "No, being a lawyer was the last thing he wanted to do. He couldn't sit still – and I swear he didn't get that from either of us. If the career as a professional footballer didn't work out, he wanted to be a fireman."

Belle smiled and turned her attention back to her cheesecake.

"Did you always want to be a solicitor?" she asked after a while.

"I wanted to be everything under the sun, up to and including Prime Minister. But once I started studying law then yes, I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life. What about you?"

"Well, didn't intend being a waitress my whole life. When I was really little I wanted to keep camels."
Gold looked at her.
"Why camels?"

Belle tapped her toes on the tiger's head. "Why not?"
"True, true."

They lapsed into silence.

"Librarian," Belle said eventually. "I wanted to be a librarian. I love books, and my attempts to write them didn't go to plan, but I knew I wanted to work with them."

"You still could," Gold said. Belle looked at him sharply but he was in earnest. "There's nothing stopping you."

"Really?"

"Says the woman who one day decided to move a hundred miles south to start a new life. If you can do that, you can do anything. Applying to the library should be a piece of cake in comparison."

Belle laughed. "Well, Astrid always said that you can do anything as long as you can dream it, and I believe that if you do the brave thing, bravery will follow."

"Well then." Gold took her empty bowl. "I see no reason why you couldn't be a librarian if you wanted to."

He smiled, and Belle smiled back, and somehow they managed to fall into a kiss without either really being sure who initiated it.

"Coffee?" Gold asked once he'd broken away.

Belle nodded. "Please."

He got up and left the room, and Belle made to follow and help, but she was distracted by the mantelpiece, which was playing host to a rather familiar chipped teacup. She shook her head in despair at the memory and let her gaze wander over the rest of the trinkets whose origins she would hopefully learn in due course. Coming to the end of the mantel, she found a small picture frame with an sepia photograph in it, a very old portrait style. She looked at the woman in the frame, trying to establish any familial likeness.

Presently a coffee cup appeared in her eyeline.

"Thank you." She took the cup and continued to look over the mantelpiece. "Gold…"

"Hang on."

She heard him leave the room and return a few moments later, and he came up alongside her holding his own coffee cup.

"Yes?"

Belle nodded towards the photograph. "She's beautiful. Who is she?"

Gold failed to hide a smile in his cup.
"That's my grandmother. I never actually knew her, but from all accounts she was a very beautiful and remarkable woman in many ways. It's the only sepia photograph I own, which is the main reason why I keep it. Like I said, she'd died before I was born."

"How old is it?"

"It's from nineteen-eighteen."

Belle could tell that there was a story behind this woman; that her tale had far more to be told even if Gold had never met her.

"What's her name?" she asked.

Gold smiled at a private joke. "The Battleaxe."

Belle frowned. "She doesn't look like a battleaxe."

"She's only sixteen in that picture," Gold pointed out. "By the time she'd moved to Scotland and married off her only daughter to a ne'er do well shipbuilder, she wasn't quite as sweetness and light as she is there."

Belle looked at Gold's grandmother for a while, wanting to ask the story but at the same time wanting to keep the mystery, think up a tale for herself as her imagination was so often keen to do. She went back over to the sofa and resettled her feet on the tiger.

"You're right, it does make a good footstool."

"Told you so."

Belle sipped her coffee, glancing occasionally at the photographs whose stories she'd been told. One day she'd really know the people behind the glass, just as Gold would come into her house and know the stories of her family. But there'd be plenty of time for that in the future. For now, they were content to just learn about each other.
Belle and Gold's first Christmas/ New Year together, prompted by Wingless Demeter on FF.net.

It had just turned midnight, and Christmas Day was over. Belle curled her legs up beneath her on the sofa, snuggling into Gold's side and chinking her tumbler against his. She felt his free hand snake round behind her and come to rest on her hip.

"Now," she began. "You can't try to tell me that this wasn't better than getting drunk with your Aunt Elvira in Glasgow."

"Hmm." Gold sounded distinctly as if he was reserving judgement, and Belle thumped his shoulder playfully. "Ow! Yes, I admit, this was definitely better than getting drunk with Aunt Elvira. Just don't tell her that." He paused and took a sip of whiskey, gifted from the aforementioned aunt that morning. "I could've done without the wake-up call this morning though."

Belle laughed and fell to remembering. They'd had a rather unexpected start to the day courtesy of a slightly hyperactive Ruby…

The phone was ringing. Why was the phone ringing in the middle of the night? It could only be an emergency. Still half-asleep and wondering what could possibly be drastic enough to warrant being woken up early Christmas morning, Belle rolled out of bed and padded through the darkness towards her dressing table where she'd left the phone.

"Hello?" she said, although the last syllable was swallowed in a yawn as she made her way back across the room and got back into bed to keep her feet warm.

"Belle, it's Ruby, we've got a supply crisis on our hands."

"What?" Belle's brow furrowed. "Ruby, it's…" She reached over Gold, who gave an incoherent grumble in protest, and checked the time on her alarm clock. "It's only just gone seven o'clock. It's still dark."

"And I think we're going to run out of booze," Ruby said. "We drank a bit more than we intended last night and we need to know how much we can drink today so we've still got enough for Boxing Day. Will Gold want red or white wine with lunch tomorrow?" There was a pause. "Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Merry Christmas." Belle lay back against her pillows with a groan. "Gold won't want either, he'll be driving."

"Thank goodness," Ruby said, and Belle heard her calling to her grandmother. "It's ok, Granny, we've got enough!"

"Ruby, how can you and Granny, of all people, misjudge the amount of alcohol you need? You are unbelievable."
"I know," Ruby said cheerfully. "So, what have you got for Christmas?"

"I don't know." Belle yawned again. "I haven't opened any presents yet; I'm still in bed."

"But it's Christmas!" Ruby exclaimed.

"It's time for a lie-in," Gold muttered darkly from under the covers. He turned over and tugged the phone out of Belle's hand. "Merry Christmas, Ruby," he said, and promptly hung up. Belle gave a mental shrug as she pulled the blanket back up to her nose for another couple of hours' sleep before Christmas began properly. Presents could wait for a while.

"You didn't do yourself any favours there," Belle pointed out. "We're going to her house for lunch tomorrow and the fact you were in my bed on Christmas morning will provide her with enough ammunition to last till New Year's. Be prepared for lots of jokes about you trimming my Christmas tree."

"I consider myself duly forewarned." Gold stretched out his feet on the stuffed tiger. "I thought I'd seen the last of early mornings on Christmas Day when Bae realised I was Father Christmas and that the presents would still be there later than half-past six."

At this declaration, Belle was gifted with an image of Gold in a Santa outfit, complete with beard, and she burst out laughing, to the extent that he took her glass for fear of her upending his Scotch over the sofa.

"Don't tell me, you were imagining me dressed up as the man in red," he said drily. Belle nodded.

"Did you ever do what my dad did one year, and get so plastered on Christmas Eve that he fell over whilst trying to put my stocking at the end of my bed?" she asked. "Remaining 'asleep' during that was a masterpiece of acting, even if I do say so myself. I hung my stocking on my bedroom door after that, though, just in case."

Gold shook his head. "I never did that, but I did manage to drop half the presents on Liz's head one year." Belle gave him a perplexed look and he continued. "We used to hide the packages in the top of the spare wardrobe. Getting them down under the tree was an interesting exercise in logistics some years. Especially when we'd have a few."

Belle sipped her whiskey. She was not much of a spirit drinker, but whiskey at Christmas seemed to fit somehow, somewhere along with the image of candlelit Christmas trees, roaring fires and leather armchairs – none of which featured in their current tableau. The day had been a hotch-potch mix of traditions; its unorthodox beginning had been an indicator of the strange day to come in itself. They'd started the day in Belle's house and finished it in Gold's, unwrapping gifts here and there between long-distance phone calls. (Moe had spent Christmas with Brenda, as he'd done the previous year, and was half asleep on the sofa having eaten what sounded to be an entire Christmas pudding on his own when Belle rang. Gold's Aunt Elvira had spent half their conversation berating him for leaving her on her own with no excuse not to take up her weird neighbours' invitation to lunch, and the other half thanking him for her gin and telling him that maybe the neighbours weren't as bad as she'd first thought because they liked the Wombles.) But in the end, it didn't matter, because Christmas was a time for spending with people you loved, and the idiosyncrasies were all part of the picture.

Speaking of people in love, however…

"There's one present we haven't opened yet," Belle said conversationally. Gold looked at her through narrowed eyes.
"We?" he asked.

"Well, I bought it as a present to myself, but I rather hope you'll enjoy it as well," Belle replied. "You remember when Ruby and I went to London to see the lights and Harrods' Christmas window displays?" she continued.

"Yes. I came to pick you up from the station at three in the morning because you'd missed your train home and had to catch the sleeper."

"Yes, but that aside, whilst we were in London, we did a bit of Christmas shopping for ourselves."

"Yes…"

"And we might just have happened to have gone into Ann Summers…"

"Yes…" Gold sounded slightly strangled as he looked her up and down, taking in her warm and fluffy dressing gown, and only now realising that there was something definitely not warm and fluffy underneath. "Somehow," he managed, "I don't think you'll appreciate me ripping the wrapping paper on this one."

Belle stood and undid the belt of her gown, flashing him the briefest of glimpses of the red and white lace ensemble beneath before covering up again.

"Oh, believe me darling," she said sweetly, "if you can shred my dressing gown, I won't stop you."

"You want to be careful, Miss French." Gold was practically growling as he pulled her back down onto the sofa with him. "That sounded remarkably like a challenge…"

X

As tempting as it had been to cancel Boxing Day lunch at Ruby's in favour of spending the entire day in bed, the twenty-sixth of December found Belle and Gold in station road.

"Now, I know Ruby and Granny can be overwhelming," Belle began, "but Archie, Emma, Graham and Henry will be there as well, so you shouldn't feel too outnumbered."

"Ruby and her grandmother are not in themselves overwhelming," Gold said as he parked the car. "It's only when you put them together and give them alcohol that they begin to give the impression that they could eat you alive."

"Belle!" Ruby was waving from the doorstep of number ninety-three. Sure enough, there was a bottle of Bristol Cream in one hand and a sherry glass in the other. "Over here!"

"Ruby, I know where you live," Belle said. She raised an eyebrow as Ruby refilled her glass "Are you making up for lost time because you had to limit yourselves yesterday?"

"Perhaps," Ruby said. "Come in, warm up, have some sherry. Or not," she added as Gold came up the garden path behind Belle. She cocked her head on one side. "What do you drink when you aren't drinking Scotch or tea?" she asked, before waving the question away. "Ah well, Granny's in charge of everything that isn't sherry at the moment. I've been banned from the kitchen after my little misadventure with the sprouts yesterday."

"What happened?" Belle asked, hanging up her coat and accepting the sherry that Ruby had poured for her.
"You don't want to know," Granny called from the kitchen. "We have vowed never to speak of it again."

"It wasn't that bad," Ruby said airily. "Only five of them actually exploded. So, what did you get for Christmas?"

"There'll be no Christmas present discussion at the table." Granny came out of the kitchen to greet the new arrivals. "Since you two girls are both in the first throes of new love and Emma's in the first throes of newly-affianced status, there's far too much potential for making the ten-year-old ears present blush."

Belle thought of her mauled dressing gown – even Gold in the heights of ardour couldn't rip velour although he'd made a damn good go of it – and dutifully said nothing.

"Too much potential for making celibate septuagenarians jealous, more like," Ruby countered. Granny merely tutted and, having hugged Belle and gone to hug Gold but decided better of it, delved into the cupboard under the stairs in search of non-alcoholic refreshment. "So," Ruby continued. "I trust the contents of Santa's sack were satisfactory? Especially since he was still there at seven in the morning dispensing them?"

Gold suddenly became extremely interested in the Christmas cards hanging up in the hallway. Belle just laughed.

"Most satisfactory, thank you."

"Chocolates, silk underwear?"

"Yes, both of those."

"Excellent." Ruby grinned wickedly. "So what did Gold get you then?"

"And now I think it would be an excellent time for us to move out of the hallway and into the living room," Granny said loudly from the cupboard. "Archie'll be getting lonely in there."

Ruby ushered her guests into the living room, where they were greeted by Archie, who seemed extremely relieved to have a second male presence on whom he could rely to provide moral support once Granny really got started on the fortified wine. The usual Christmas pleasantries were exchanged before they were interrupted by a cry of triumph.

"Aha!" came Granny's voice from under the stairs. "I knew I had lime cordial in here somewhere. Ah... Went out of date in nineteen-eighty-two..."

Gold raised an eyebrow.

"I think I'll pass, thank you, Mrs Lucas."

"Well, at least it's supposed to be green so you can't see the mould." Granny came into the living room wiping thirty years' worth of dust off a bottle. "Hmm. Not sure it's meant to be so thick though."

Ruby took the cordial and turned it upside down.

"It has actually set solid," she mused. "We ought to send it to the government as a Site of Special Scientific Interest." She shook it slightly and a globule of cordial was dislodged from the bottom of the bottle. "Oh, it'll be fine once you stick some soda in with it."
Gold and Belle exchanged looks, and Belle just shrugged, as if to say 'welcome to my world'. It was still Christmas, after all…

X

It was New Year's Eve, and Belle was once more in Granny and Ruby's dining room – on Gold's lap, since there were nowhere near enough chairs for all the guests, who were packed into the terraced house like sardines. The majority of the people from the precinct who'd been invited to Astrid and Leroy's going away party the previous month had turned up to celebrate the passing of the old year with Ruby and Granny, along with several distant Lucas relatives whom Belle had met in various states of drunkenness the last Christmas, and some people whom she'd never seen before and who had probably been invited by August. Henry could be found hiding with Jefferson's daughter Grace under the buffet table out of the way, comparing Christmas presents and getting into an in-depth discussion about a book series they were both reading, their presence only betrayed by the occasional hand popping up from under the tablecloth to pinch some sausage rolls. Archie and Ruby were in the garden – the guests had spilled out of the house, there were that many of them – and Pongo was barking along in time with the music that was blasting out of Granny's ancient stereo in the kitchen. Perhaps the house was so full because they'd invited half the street so they wouldn't complain about being disturbed by the noise.

Gold pressed a kiss against her neck, bringing her back to the present.

"What are you thinking about, love?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied. Well, that was a lie. "Nothing important."

She was thinking about Boxing Day evening, when he'd dropped her back at her flat. (They'd both been reluctant, but they were still in their honeymoon period and terrified of rushing things, so a night apart every now and then was probably healthy. Belle knew all too well the adverse effects of too much sex on top of eighteen months' celibacy.)

"Gold…" she asked, plucking a stray shred of tinsel from his coat and rolling it between her fingers.

"Yes?"

"What do you usually do on New Year's Eve?"

"Belle, I have spent every Hogmanay for the last ten years in Glasgow with my Aunt Elvira. We…"

"…exchange bottles of alcohol, complain about your various leg-related ailments and fall asleep in front of Miracle on 34th Street. Yes, I remember."

"No, that's what we do on Christmas Day. New Year's Eve is a different kettle of fish entirely. No, on New Year's Eve we do the rounds of the neighbours, see who's got the best party and stay there until sun-up. Or until the drink runs out, when we all decamp elsewhere."

Belle looked at him sideways.

"And you do all this with your eighty-three year old maiden aunt?" she asked incredulously.

"You've never met my eighty-three year old maiden aunt," Gold said. He gave her a sage look and Belle flicked the tinsel at him.

"So, if I were to extend an invitation from Ruby to come to her and Granny's New Year's Eve
"extravaganza, you'd come?" she asked.

Gold grinned.

"It's Hogmanay," he said. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Belle was jolted out of her little daydream quite literally, letting out a shrill squeal as Gold bounced her on his good leg.

"You were miles away again," he scolded playfully. "I had to bring you down to earth."

Belle was torn between hitting him and kissing him. She'd never seen him quite like this before; she knew Hogmanay was a strong tradition in Scotland, stronger than Christmas in some places, but she'd never experienced New Year's with a Scotsman before, and she'd assumed that Gold had lived so long in the South that his enthusiasm would have been tempered. The evening had proved her dramatically wrong, something shining in his eyes that she was sure had not been there on previous evenings.

Graham battled his way over to their corner.

"I've only just managed to get away from Ruby's Uncle Stanley," he said. "I've half a mind to join Henry under the table."

"You'd probably be better off trying to find Emma," Gold said. "It's nearly midnight and you don't want someone else grabbing her at crunch time." He increased his grip on Belle's waist, the movement imperceptible to the eye, but Belle could feel it. "Why do you think I've kept you so close all evening?"

Belle wriggled free from his arms so that she could stand and pull him up with her.

"We need some champagne," she said in answer to his unspoken question of 'why have we given up our chair?'. "Or at least, we need to try and find it before it's all drunk and we don't get any to toast the New Year in with."

Out of the corner of her eye, Belle saw Graham waving madly over the top of Ruby's Uncle Stanley's head towards Emma, who was absorbed in conversation with August and paying her fiancé absolutely no attention whatsoever. Someone was yelling from the living room, where the TV was on blasting out the live coverage of the New Year celebrations in London, that there was less than a minute of the old year left. Jefferson had managed to persuade Henry and Grace out of hiding, and there seemed to be far more people in the room than there had any business to be.

Gold caught Belle's wrist as she tried to get out of the dining room.

"It's not worth it," he murmured. "Let's just stay here."

He held her close against the crush, pressing her flush against him, and Belle slipped her arms round his middle under his jacket.

Ten… Nine… Eight…

Gold's mouth was looking incredibly inviting, but Belle was determined not to give into temptation until the year had ended.

Seven… Six… Five…
She decided her New Year's resolution was to spend as much time as possible in the arms of the man currently holding her.

Four… Three… Two…

And maybe buy some more underwear.

One.

Belle got as far as 'Happy Ne…' before Gold had captured her mouth in a kiss that went above and beyond the call of duty as far as the 'kiss the person nearest to you at midnight' rule was concerned. He finally released her and Belle rested her chin in the crook of his collar bone. Best to start early on the resolutions. Under the exclamations of Happy New Year, calls for champagne, fireworks and wildly inappropriate music, she made out a low Scottish voice rumbling next to her ear.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind..."

Belle closed her eyes and nuzzled into Gold's neck, feeling him singing more than she could hear him.

"…we'll raise a cup of kindness yet for the sake of auld lang syne..."

"That was lovely," she whispered when he'd finished.

"I can sing it in Gaelic if you want," he said. "According to Aunt Elvira, the words mean the same thing, but it could be something completely different."

He was about to pull her into another kiss when his phone rang. He rolled his eyes but dutifully answered.

"Hello Aunt Elvira. Happy New Year. Yes, Bliadhna Mhath Ùr if you must." He raised his eyes to heaven and put the phone next to Belle's ear. A shrill Glaswegian voice that sounded as if its owner had had far too much gin was practically shouting down the phone over the noise on the other end. Aunt Elvira had obviously gone out on the town without her errant nephew for companionship and had managed to find a pretty good party on her own.

"… and my only relative is gallivanting off down South, leaving me with but my gin for company..."

"Just say Happy New Year," Gold mouthed to Belle.

"Erm, Happy New Year, Aunt Elvira," she said.

Aunt Elvira gave a squawk of alarm and Gold took the phone back. He listened for a few minutes, went decidedly pink and hung up with a gruff 'Happy New Year, I'll call you later'.

Belle gave a small, scheming smile.

"What on earth could she have said to make you blush?" she asked Gold, who shook his head.

"You know, I'm beginning to like your Aunt Elvira. I'd quite like to meet her."

"I was starting to fear that," Gold muttered. He looked her straight in the eye. "If you really want to know, she told me to..."

"Happy New Year!" Ruby bounded up to them with Archie and Pongo in hot pursuit. However they'd managed to get in from the garden was beyond Belle, and she cursed her friend's sense of
timing as she was summarily hugged very tightly. "Sorry, were you two in the middle of
something?"

Belle rolled her eyes as Ruby released her and moved onto Gold, throwing her arms around him
before he could protest and then skipping away before he could do anything to retaliate. Belle gave
him a sideways glance but Gold just shrugged. New Year's could make fools of them all, it
seemed.

X

The majority of the guests had gone by four in the morning, leaving Belle, Ruby, Archie, Gold and
a small diehard core of celebrators tidying the house whilst an utterly exhausted (and not a little
tipsy) Granny snoozed in an armchair in the living room. By the time the kitchen was in a vague
semblance of order and Ruby's next door neighbours had put the carpets back down – having taken
them up earlier in the day in case of accidents – it was close on seven, and Belle was dead on her
feet. At least they'd left it late enough in the morning that there were plenty of taxis available.

Belle rested her head on Gold's shoulder and gave an enormous yawn. The first day of the year was
going to be spent asleep, as long as she had anything to do with it.

Gold, on the other hand, seemed to have other ideas, the merry little glint in his eyes still
undimmed after being awake for almost twenty-four hours, and when their taxi stopped in the
middle of the town instead of at his doorstep, Belle knew that something was definitely going on.

"Where are we going?" she moaned. "It's nearly half-past seven in the morning, Gold, for crying
out loud, I want to sleep, it'll be light soon!"

"Exactly," Gold said. "Hogmanay isn't over till sunrise on the first." They rounded the corner
behind the library and he led them up towards the castle gardens and the bench on which they'd
had their second date. "You've got to see the sun up on New Year's Day," he added. They could
hear the occasional drunken reveller in the gardens still making their way home from one of the
many parties that had been happening in various places all over the town.

"Just in time." Gold gave a satisfied sigh and sat down on their bench, pulling Belle down beside
him.

"You ridiculous man," she said.

"You won't be saying that in five minutes," Gold replied. "Trust me."

X

The first of January dawned clear and bright, if a bit frosty, and looking out over the town, Belle
had to concede Gold's point. It was a beautiful sight to behold. He kissed her cheek, and Belle
snuggled into his side. Someone wise had once said that true love wasn't looking into each other's
eyes, it was looking at the same thing together, and right now, Belle knew that they were looking
forward to a bright new year.

"Happy New Year, Miss French," Gold whispered.

"Happy New Year, Mr Gold."
The black BMW screeched to a stop and Gold told the driver who'd cut him up exactly what he thought of him, in no uncertain terms. Sadly, the other driver did not hear this, and, on second thoughts, it was probably best that Gold's outburst of rather colourful language was kept safely within the car. Still grumbling about inept motorists under his breath, Gold parked, and was about to get out of the car when something caught his eye in the passenger foot-well.

It was a reporter's notebook, nothing unusual about it apart from the fact that Gold knew it definitely did not belong to him. He frowned. It had obviously been wedged under the seat and had flown forward when he'd braked sharply. It must have belonged to either Belle or Sid, who were the only people to spend any length of time in the BMW on a regular basis and who had the opportunity to lose things in it.

Gold leaned over and picked up the notebook. Belle did have a tendency to drop things, and whenever Gold was giving Sid a lift anywhere, the latter man was usually drunk and therefore more than likely to leave notebooks lying around. He opened it to try and glean some idea of ownership and immediately recognised Belle's clear, rounded hand. Satisfied, Gold was about to close the book again when he saw his name, and naturally this drew his attention. Reading a little further, Gold discovered the true meaning of the phrase 'curiosity killed the cat' and slammed the book shut.

It was official. Belle's imagination, which he had always known to be overactive, was also incredibly... vivid.

Gold stared down at the notebook in his hands and, deciding that he was on the slippery slope anyway, risked a second glance inside, just in case he'd been seeing things the first time round. For a second time, he came to the conclusion that this really was not the sort of material he should be reading when he had a meeting with a client to discuss an enduring power of attorney in fifteen minutes. And, for the second time, Gold came to the conclusion that one thing was certain. The look on Belle's face when she found out about this morning's turn of events was going to be absolutely priceless.

X

"Good morning, Mr Gold," Kathryn said brightly as she handed him his post. "Mr Gold?"

"What? Oh, sorry, Kathryn, I was miles away."

"So I see," Kathryn observed. "Well, Jefferson's phoned in sick and Sid's dragged Dawn into court with him so it'll be pretty quiet up there. Don't get lonely."

Gold merely raised an eyebrow and continued on up the stairs towards his office. Thankfully, his client arrived on time and he was able to put thoughts of Belle's literary fantasies aside for the time
As the day wore on, however, he couldn't help occasionally glancing over at his desk drawer where he'd stowed the notebook for safekeeping. Finally, he could resist it no longer. Feeling a strange desire to find out what else she'd written about him, Gold took out the notebook and flipped it open, beginning to read a passage. He raised his eyebrows. Where did Belle get all this from? Well, he reflected, he had seen her bookshelves and their contents, so he shouldn't really be too surprised. All he knew was, she wasn't basing it off real life, because they'd certainly never done that.

Oh dear, he was never going to be able to look at his desk in the same way again. Why had she had to set this little erotic masterpiece in his office?

Well, she probably didn't intend for you to ever see it, the little voice in the back of his mind that sounded suspiciously like Archie Hopper pointed out.

That Belle had written it before she'd properly met him, or at least before they'd first made love, was fairly self-evident. A small part of him wondered if he ought to be worried about this, but he had to admit, he'd had similar thoughts about Belle before they'd introduced themselves to each other. He just hadn't turned his into prose. He was more amused than anything. Well, almost anything.

Oh, for crying out loud. He shut the notebook back in his desk crossly. He was never going to get anything done at this rate. His desk phone chirruped into life, startling him out of slightly less than innocent daydreams. He picked it up.

"Mr Clark's here to see you," said Kathryn.

"What? Oh, yes, I remember. Send him up,"

"Mr Gold?" Kathryn began, "are you quite all right? You seem… distracted."

"I'm fine, thank you, Kathryn. Just a lot on my mind at the moment."

"Right…” Kathryn didn't sound all that convinced. "Mr Clark's on his way up."

Gold hung up and sighed before giving himself a shake and getting up to greet Mr Clark. The man's hay fever was obviously playing up again; Gold could hear him sneezing before he'd even left his office.

He took one last longing look at his desk before pushing all thoughts of non-work related activities to the back of his mind. It was going to take an awful lot of will-power to get to the end of the day…

X

As far as Belle was concerned, it was a perfectly ordinary Monday evening as she ran the short distance over the way between the café and the law offices after her shift finished. She'd had an uneventful day at work, as usual, and Gold would meet her at the door and take her home, as usual, and they'd have a fairly normal Monday evening, as usual.

Her first inkling that all was not as it should be was when, instead of appearing at the door with coat on and car keys in hand, Gold let her into the offices and motioned for her to follow him.

"I'm a bit behind," he said by way of explanation as he made his way back up the stairs, Belle a
couple of paces behind. "Just a couple of things to finish off, then we'll go home."

Well, this wasn't completely unheard of, but unusual enough for Belle to raise an eyebrow. She dutifully followed Gold into his office and sat down in the chair opposite his desk, which seemed to be remarkably empty considering he was in the middle of doing something.

It was then that she saw it.

Sitting there on her lover's desk, so innocently and inconspicuously.

Her notebook.

Her notebook filled with her deepest, darkest fantasies.

Her notebook, that she hadn't even realised she had lost.

Her immediate thought was denial, that it couldn't possibly be hers, after all, there were many reporter's notebooks in the world. Her hand went to the front of her satchel, but alas, she could feel its absence. The notebook on the desk was definitely hers.

Belle groaned and buried her head in her hands, feeling her cheeks flush bright red. Oh dear lord above. He'd read it. All her perverted little fantasies from before she'd ever met him, lurid tales of debauchery and desks.

"There is a reason I'm so behind on my paperwork," Gold said drily, and Belle could see him out of the corner of her eye, smirking as he settled himself back in his chair and watched her squirm with an expression of polite amusement. "I found some rather intriguing reading material in my car this morning."

"I'm so sorry," Belle murmured behind her hands. She was fairly certain that she had never been so embarrassed in her whole adult life. It was one thing to fantasise about someone, another to write those fantasies down in fiction form, and yet another to have the subject read them.

"Oh, don't apologise, it's been far more interesting than Wills and divorce petitions. Slightly distracting though."

Belle risked a glance through her fingers. Gold was still sitting there, idly flipping through the pages of her notebook. She moved her hands away from her face fully and studied him, mapping his reaction closely.

He was evidently finding the whole thing hilarious, which Belle was not finding it in the slightest, but she could see something else in his dark eyes, the unmistakeable glint that meant his thoughts were not at all pure and he was having, to put it euphemistically, naughty ideas.

"Yes, slightly distracting," Gold repeated. "There could have been some very difficult-to-explain situations on more than one occasion, today." He closed the book and handed it back to her. "You, my love, have a lot to answer for."

Belle, feeling a little emboldened by the fact he didn't seem to be running a mile in disgust at the fact she could dream up such things, finally trusted herself to speak.

"You can't say you've never thought about it," she blurted out. "You, me, your desk..."
"No, you're right. I have thought about it. And thanks to you I've been thinking about it all day and I'm utterly wound up," Belle had to smile at his bluntness. "So since I'll never be able to look at my desk in the same way again anyway…"

Gold raised an eyebrow and Belle raised both of hers in return. Her mouth went dry. Surely he wasn't seriously suggesting that they made good on her notebook? Her eyes flickered to the office door.

"We are alone up here, aren't we?" she managed. "Everyone else has gone home?"

"Solitary as oysters," Gold assured her. There was a moment's pause, and the wickedness in his eyes returned. "So, what do you think, Miss French?"

Belle grinned and leaned across the desk.

"I think I need a lawyer," she purred, "and I think I need him now."
Ruby Lucas could say, with her hand on her heart, that her bed was twelve years old and had never had a man in it. The reason for this was, of course, the fact that she lived with her grandmother, and if there was one thing that made the beautiful and brash Ruby baulk, it was the thought of entertaining male guests in her bedroom whilst her grandmother was asleep at the other end of the landing.

On this particular Monday evening, however, Ruby was not thinking about her grandmother, possibly because said grandmother had gone to the women's institute meeting and then on to bingo, and was going to be out for the majority of the evening. So when Archie had turned up on her doorstep with a bottle of wine, offering to continue her chess lessons (he'd started teaching her the previous day during one of her breaks at the café), Ruby had accepted eagerly. Especially since Archie was rather amenable to the idea of 'the kind of chess where you lose more than pieces'.

Ruby was, unfortunately, not a natural when it came to chess, which explained why she could be found wearing only her bra and knickers whilst Archie was still comparatively fully clothed. They were sitting on the floor of Ruby's bedroom, because Granny had just taken in a mass order of new baking equipment for the café, so the kitchen was full of cake and the living room was full of the utensils used to make it. Despite the fact that they were less than two feet away from her bed and were gradually getting undressed, Ruby was very focused on the game, determined that she would not allow this new concept to best her. She would conquer chess as she conquered everything else in this life: with the force of a rampaging bull. The trouble was, Ruby's philosophy of life had always been to act first and ask questions later. Planning ahead was not a strong point for her, and it was this measure of forethought, or rather lack of it, that had lost her most of her pieces, and her clothes with them.

Archie made his next move, and Ruby spotted her chance, pouncing on her remaining knight and sending it galloping across the board to where Archie's bishop had so carelessly stepped into its path.

"You don't want to do that," Archie said as she took his piece, his voice amused.

"Yes, I do," Ruby countered. "Now, hand over your shirt."

Archie shrugged and did as bid, but Ruby got the distinct impression that he was going to start laughing at her any minute. She scowled. "Are you cheating?"

The psychiatrist shook his head, but then, Ruby wouldn't know if he was or wasn't.

Her eyes narrowed. "Your move."

Archie took her remaining knight without batting an eyelid.

"Checkmate," he said. "You lose the game and, I believe, the rest of your clothes."
Ruby spent several seconds staring at the board, wondering how on earth that had just happened. She'd thought her fortunes were changing, dammit! She looked up and met Archie's eye, grinning wickedly.

"If you want them, you'll have to come and get them,"
The chessboard was somewhat forgotten after that.

X

There was still a good half-hour before Granny would be home, and as Ruby lay in bed in Archie's arms, she couldn't help but feel a certain sense of occasion, that her bed had finally been broken in, so to speak.

"What are you thinking about?" Archie asked presently. "You look like you're miles away."

There were disadvantages to sleeping with a psychiatrist, thought Ruby, twisting the velvet throw between her fingers. They always wanted in when you were lost in thought.

"Nothing really. I was just thinking that you're the first man in this bed."

"Really? Sorry, I didn't mean to sound so surprised, I wasn't implying anything, I swear."

Ruby laughed and pressed her fingers over his lips to silence him.

"It's all right, I know what you mean." She raised one eyebrow suggestively. "It has had other women in it though…"

"It has?" Archie's voice sounded slightly strained, and Ruby had to giggle.

"Yes. Belle a couple of times, Granny on occasion… We don't have a spare bed so people have to bunk up when they stay over."

"Cosy."

"Yes. But it's always been the way, and I don't mind because I benefit in the long run; the business gets left to me. Granny and Grandpa downsized after their kids moved out so they could save up for the catering business and then the café, and that's always been where all the money's gone instead of on a big house. And it went on me when I came to live with them. Grandpa spoilt me rotten. I think that's always the way though, trying to make up for the fact that a six year old doesn't have parents anymore." She rolled onto her stomach and looked at Archie. "You're probably going to tell me that's a recognised psychological condition."

"Well, now you mention it… It's ok, I won't bore you with the details." He paused. "Have you ever thought about moving out?" he asked. "I know it's just been you and Granny for a while now."

Ruby nodded, shook her head, and nodded again.

"I don't know. I'd like to spread my wings, of course I would. It's always a bit weird telling people that I live with my grandmother, and there's nothing I want more than to see the world and do something with my life. But at the same time, she raised me and she's looked after me all this time; now she's slowing down and I don't want to leave her just when she starts needing my help rather than the other way round."

"So you'd rather stay here?"
"Well, not exactly. It's not like I spend all my time here. Half my nights are spent at your house, after all. I just…” Ruby's brow furrowed and she rested her chin on Archie's chest so that she could hold his gaze. "Archie, are you asking me to move in with you?"

"I'm, well, I'm, erm…” He sighed. "I'm trying to work out whether or not it would be a good idea to ask you to move in with me before I actually ask. Because if it's not going to be a good idea then I won't do it."

"Asking is generally a good idea," Ruby said with a smile. "It's normally the response that's problematic."

"Well, that's what I was afraid of. So, if I were to ask, would it be a good idea?"

Ruby sighed and kissed Archie's chest.

"I don't know," she said earnestly. "I would like to move in with you, very much, but I can't give you an answer right now. Can I sleep on it?"

Archie chuckled.

"Of course."

There was a long silence for a while before Ruby spoke again.

"Can I sleep on you?"

X

Ruby was woken next morning by a soft knock on her bedroom door.

"Morning, Ruby," said Granny's voice.

It was only then that Ruby remembered she was lying on top of Archie, who was fumbling on the bedside table for his glasses. She scrambled off him and pulled the blankets up over his head.

"Morning, Granny," she called brightly.

"I wouldn't have disturbed you but it's half-past eight, and Doctor Hopper's appointments usually begin at nine, and if he wants a bacon sandwich before he leaves, then I'm frying now."

"Erm, ok."

Ruby buried her face in the pillow as Archie emerged from under the blankets.

"How did she know I was here?" he hissed.

Just then, the door opened, and Archie drew the covers up to his nose with a yelp. Granny peeped round the doorframe, grinning.

"Your car was parked outside my house when I came in from bingo last night, Doctor, so naturally, I assumed you wouldn't be far away," she said before disappearing downstairs.

Ruby and Archie exchanged looks, and Ruby groaned.

"When can I move in?"
Chapter Summary

Belle and Gold go on a trip to meet his family. Inspired by Anonymous Nerd Girl, who prompted 'shortbread cookies and a trip to Scotland' and Trekkie, who said 'OMG they HAVE to meet Aunt Elvira', both from FF.net.

[If you've got a particular scene you want to see, don't be shy!]

"Gold. Gold! Wake up!"

Gold opened one eye and looked sideways at Belle, mumbling something along the lines of 'are we there yet?'

"No. We're at the border and it's your turn to drive."

"Five more minutes." He yawned and shifted in the passenger seat of the little green Ford Fiesta; how on earth he could be comfortable enough to sleep was beyond Belle. She reached over the gear stick and shook his shoulder. Gold batted her hand away.

"All right, all right, I'm awake."

He opened both eyes and looked out of the windscreen at the lay-by they were parked in and the large sign saying 'Welcome to Scotland' that loomed in front of them. Belle sighed as she got out of the driver's side and walked round the front of the car. It was her own fault that she was in this position really. She should have learned by now never to try and bluff Gold, because he'd nearly always call her on it. She patted the bonnet of the Fiesta. It had done well to get them this far. When she'd bought it – a triumphant moment having been saving for it ever since she moved down to Devon – Gold had suggested that she ought to take it on a long run to break it in and get used to it, and he'd offered to come with her.

When Belle had, completely in jest, suggested that they drove to Glasgow to visit his Aunt Elvira, she hadn't expected him to take her up on the idea.

It was a nine hour drive, livened up by the rule that whoever wasn't driving was in charge of the radio. This in itself wasn't overly entertaining; it was more the fact that the radio only seemed to pick up about three stations, so they had a choice of cricket commentary, operas that sounded slightly underwater, or Radio Berkshire – a particularly interesting one since they were currently nearly four hundred miles away from Berkshire. For the most part, the trip had been a good one, but now that they were an awful lot nearer to their destination than they were to home and couldn't turn back, Belle was feeling somewhat apprehensive about the forthcoming meeting.

Gold looked up from adjusting the driver's seat as Belle let out a long sigh.

"Something up, love?"

She turned to him.

"What if she doesn't like me?"
"Who, Aunt Elvira?"

"Who else?"

Gold laughed. "Don't be silly. She's been dying to meet you."

"But what if that's only so that she can rip me to shreds with a single glare?" Belle said. "I've seen you in action in court now. I've seen the way you stare down the opposition. It could make hell freeze over sometimes. What if that look runs in the family?"

"Believe me, it comes down my mother's side, you're nothing to worry about." He gave her a sympathetic look before turning the key in the ignition and pulling out onto the road again. "You're only having second thoughts now that we're actually in Scotland," he said.

"I know, I know."

"Well, we'll be there soon," Gold said cheerfully. "So you don't have long to stew about it."

Belle turned Radio Berkshire up to full volume to distract herself.

X

Elvira Gold had lived in the same area of Glasgow for each of her eighty-three years. She had never married and had no children of her own. She had survived her younger brother and his wife, leaving her with but one living relation – the nephew who was standing on the doorstep of her bungalow with his increasingly nervous girlfriend, listening to the usual cacophony of chaos that preceded Elvira opening the front door.

"Down, Maisie! Down! I said get down!"

This was followed by a volley of high-pitched barking as Maisie, Elvira's toy poodle who served as companion, guard dog and liability in one, attempted to answer the door before her owner. Eventually, she managed to get the dog away from the door and open it.

She was a pretty typical eighty-three year old, if looks were anything to go by, even if she was holding a wooden spoon in one hand and the scruff of a poodle's neck in the other, but it still wasn't enough to mollify Belle yet.

"Ah, the prodigal nephew returns, I see. You know the drill. You can't come in unless you've brought me something to convince me to let you stay."

Gold held out the bottle of gin they'd brought with them and Elvira grinned wickedly.

"Perfect." She reached up on her tiptoes to kiss Gold's cheek. "Welcome back to Scotland, young man. And you must be Belle." She shook Belle's hand and then kissed her as well. "Very pleased to meet you. I thought he was exaggerating when he kept going on about how bonny you were, but he was right."

Belle blushed.

"Come in, come in, out of the cold." Elvira stepped backwards taking Maisie with her, the dog being pulled up short when she tried to jump up and greet the visitors. "Don't mind Maisie, she's just daft. If she had half a brain she'd be dangerous. Oi, Maisie!" she called as the poodle wrestled free of her grip and jumped up at Gold to say hello to her long absent human cousin. "No paw-prints on the Armani!" She shut the door. "Well, I'll show you where you'll be sleeping, and I'm
warning you now – the bed squeaks and I'm a light sleeper."

Belle's eyes shifted from Gold, who was staring rather pointedly at the ceiling, to Elvira, who was still doing a pretty passable impression of the Cheshire Cat.

She couldn't quite decide whether she liked Aunt Elvira or was absolutely terrified of her. The next couple of days were going to be extremely interesting.

X

Belle liked to think that everything had been going pretty well until lunchtime the next day. The previous evening had passed pleasantly enough – although perhaps not quite so much for Gold, whose childhood and university indiscretions were the source of most of Elvira's conversation topics. They had very assiduously avoided making the bed squeak, apart from on one occasion in the early hours of the morning when Belle was woken by a canine nose investigating her feet, Maisie having managed to open the bedroom door and come in for a sniff around. Still half asleep and not expecting such an intrusion, Belle had given a muted squeal, whereupon Gold had woken up with a start. Having taken a few moments to assess the situation and groaned something along the lines of 'Jesus Christ, that bloody dog', he got out of bed and dragged the poodle out of the room by the collar, warning her in no uncertain terms that if she tried for a ménage à trois again, she'd be feeling his cane.

("And don't give me that look either," Gold had said when Maisie had given a pathetic whine and looked up at him with a butter-wouldn't-melt expression. "You're the devil in dog form. Now I know why Goethe made Mephistopheles into a poodle for his first entrance.")

Aunt Elvira, it turned out, had lied about being a light sleeper, because she had heard none of this early morning exchange when it was explained to her over breakfast.

So yes, things were on a pretty even keel as far as Belle could tell, until Elvira came through from the kitchen where she was making lunch and told Gold that she had run out of wine.

"Right…" Gold replied. "And what precisely do you expect me to do about it?"

Elvira rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips.

"I expect you to go to the off-licence and get some more!"

"Can't I plead being an invalid?" Gold moaned, waving his cane at her.

"No," Elvira said plainly. "I'm cooking and Belle's a guest, so it's your job."

"If Belle's a guest, what on earth am I?"

"You're my nephew."

Gold sighed – apparently he'd long since learned that arguing with his aunt was a fruitless pursuit – and got up. Belle offered to come with him, but Elvira called her back.

"Actually, Belle, I thought you and I could have a bit of a girly chat."

Gold raised an eyebrow. "So you don't actually need me to go to the off-licence, you just want me out of the way so that you can terrorise my girlfriend."

Elvira placed her hand on her heart with a mock-offended expression.
"Would I do such a thing?"

"Yes," Gold replied gruffly. He turned to Belle. "The shop's only at the end of the road, I'll be fifteen minutes at the most."

"I'll be fine," Belle said brightly, despite the fact she was suddenly not looking forward to being left alone with Aunt Elvira.

"Just set Maisie on her if she scares you too much."

Belle looked down at Maisie, who was chasing her tail round in increasingly small circles. The thought didn't fill her with much confidence.

Elvira sat down in Gold's vacated seat on the sofa beside Belle.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," the older woman began. "You're thinking 'oh dear lord, she's about to threaten me with an egg whisk if I break his heart'. And you're quite right. I am. He's the happiest I've seen him since he lost Bae, and if you hurt him I will come after you and kill you with a spoon." She paused and her fierce expression gradually melted into a smile. "So that's the scary bit over."

"Right…" Belle looked at Elvira, who in spite of her age and frailty did seem perfectly capable of murdering her with a spoon. "Erm… I'm not quite sure what I should say to that. Fair enough, I suppose."

Elvira patted her arm.

"He's my only blood relation, and I'm his. We live at opposite ends of the British Isles and see each other twice a year if we're lucky. I'm a bit protective." She grinned. "But I don't think you'll break his heart, far from it. You two work well together, I can tell. There's something there that wasn't there before, not with any other woman." She paused. "It's a shame you couldn't meet his mother. She would have loved you; you'd have got on very well together. She was nowhere near as scary as I am. Nowhere near the usual Mother-In-Law from Hell."

"I don't know much about her really," Belle admitted. "He doesn't talk about his family much. Apart from you."

"Whatever outrageous tales he's told you about me, I can assure you that they are all completely and utterly true. And aye, well, he has his reasons. There's nothing traumatic, don't worry about that. But he and his dad were never close and that only worsened when the wayward son decided to move about as far away from Scotland as possible. His ma was lovely, though, and it's a shame he didn't take more after her in temperament. I know you're not supposed to like your in-laws, but Miriam didn't have an unkind bone in her body. And like I said, she would have loved you. You remind me a bit of her, actually."

Belle gave a small sigh, not really hearing Elvira's next words as she made her excuses and returned to the kitchen. Gold had told her before that his mother would have loved her, and she'd never really taken him seriously. But now Elvira had also said it...

She did not know much about Gold's family, but having now met its only surviving branch, Belle was beginning to believe that maybe she could become a proper part of it.

X

"She's even lovelier than you had me believe."
Elvira's eyes flickered from her shortbread mix towards Belle, who was playing with Maisie in the conservatory whilst her owner baked in the kitchen, Gold hovering in the doorway between the two. Having ascertained on his return from the off-licence that morning that Belle had not been completely traumatised by her chat with Elvira, he had determined to keep a watchful eye on his aunt for the rest of their stay. He glanced over his shoulder at Belle before turning back to his aunt, who was looking at him in an almost accusatory manner, her arms crossed over her chest in a classic no-nonsense pose.

"She's a keeper. I've already warned her that I'll have her heart with a teaspoon if she hurts you, and now I'll warn you that I'll have your balls with my cuticle scissors if you break her heart." Elvira raised an eyebrow with a wicked little smile. "So when are you going to make an honest woman of her, then?"

"Aunt Elvira, please…"

"You are not getting any younger, sir." She tapped his shoulder with her measuring spoon. "If you don't snap her up soon, someone else will. She's bright, she's beautiful, and she makes you stupidly happy. What more do you need?"

"Nothing, I just… I'm just waiting for the right moment."

Elvira grinned.

"So you are planning on popping the question, then?"

"When the time comes. Baby steps, Aunt Elvira. We aren't even living together yet."

"Aye, and if you don't get a move on I'll come down there with a removal van myself." She paused and gave him a look that could almost be described as sympathetic if it wasn't quite so excited at the prospect of a forthcoming wedding and the opportunity to buy a new hat. "Well, when you do feel that the time is right, you know where I keep the Gold family stone."

"I can't propose to Belle with the family stone!" Gold hissed.

"Why not?"

"Because I proposed to Liz with it! You can't propose to two different women with the same ring, even if it is a family heirloom."

Elvira smiled, and this time it was truly sympathetic.

"Your ma thought you might say that."

Gold watched as Elvira reached down the back of the saucepan cupboard to where she kept all her little valuables and pulled out a small velvet pouch.

"You know Miriam left me her jewellery when she died."

Gold nodded. It was the only thing that she hadn't left to him, and he hadn't contested it. After his father's death, his mother and Elvira had become as close as blood sisters.

"Well, before she died, she took me on one side and told me something. I know he'll find the one, even if he doesn't believe me' she said – she was talking about you. 'I know he'll find the one, and I know she'll be the one because she'll wear my ring. Keep it safe for her, Vi.'" Elvira slipped her hand into the little bag and pulled out a ring familiar to Gold that had once adorned his mother's
hands. "I'd never met anyone with fingers as slim as your ma's till I met Belle. I couldn't believe it when I shook hands with her, it was like holding Miriam's hands again. I even nicked one of her own rings this morning to measure against it."

Gold raised an eyebrow. "And they wonder where I get my magpie tendencies from."

Elvira ignored him.

"Exactly the same size," she continued. "Just as your ma predicted. She always had a touch of magic about her, Miriam Gold." She took Gold's hand and pressed the ring into it. "So when the time's right, you can give her your ma's ring, with her blessing and mine."

Gold looked back at Belle over his shoulder, following the movement of her hands as she patted Maisie and got her to jump for treats, imagining the ring he now held set against her beautiful fingers. He curled his own fingers over it in his palm.

One day, when the time was right, Belle would wear his mother's ring.
Chapter Summary

The morning after Belle and Gold's first night together, prompted by Julie Winchester and anon reviewer Diane on FF.net.

Probably the most risqué of all the shots so far - just a prior warning.

The first thing that crossed Belle's mind when she woke was how lovely and warm she was, especially since it was the middle of December and she didn't have any clothes on. The second thing that crossed Belle's mind, once she remembered where she was, why she was there and why she didn't have any clothes on, was that Gold made an excellent man-shaped hot water bottle and if she could have him in her bed every night, she'd never need to wear pyjamas again.

She had forgotten just how warm a second person made a double bed.

Belle rolled over onto her back to try and regain some of the feeling in her arm where she'd ended up lying on it, and Gold shifted in his sleep at the loss of contact. She glanced over at the shimmering gold silk in an unattractive puddle on the floor where it had been hastily discarded, and remembered the previous evening: the ball, the mulled wine making everything a little bit fuzzy round the edges, being an impromptu witness to Graham's proposal, and what had come after…

She felt Gold move beside her and twisted to see him blinking sleep out of his eyes.

"Good morning."

He smiled languidly. "Morning." He leaned across to kiss her briefly, but when Belle tried to deepen it and push him back down onto the pillows, he pulled away.

"Not now, give me a moment."

"Problem?" Belle asked, her brow furrowing minutely.

"Only if you don't let me out of bed to go to the bathroom," Gold replied pointedly. "All last night's whiskey's catching up with me."

"Ah. Right."

She released him and let him get up, turning back onto her stomach to get comfortable again and returning to her thoughts of the previous evening. She had been nervous during the cab ride home, she'd admit that freely, and she knew Gold had been as well. It was no secret that it had been a long time since either of them had shared a bed. Theirs had been a slow-building romance with its fair share of hiccups, and perhaps, deep down, they had been subconsciously putting off this moment, afraid that when it came to down to it, something would happen. When it finally came down to the bedroom, it was easier for Belle to remember that she'd lived this moment vicariously through prose so many times but didn't know how she would measure up in real life. It was easier for Gold to remember that beneath his suits he had eleven visible scars from the accident and the following surgery. Yes, they had both been nervous, but once they'd made it inside and kissed in the hallway,
impatience and lust had swept the fear out of them. Because when it came down to it, they trusted each other and were comfortable enough with each other to say if something wasn't right, and that was really all that mattered.

And when the moment had come, Belle couldn't remember why she had been worried.

Gold returned to the bed and welcomed her readily this time, and Belle decided that starting the day with kissing was an excellent idea. When they finally broke away by mutual consent, she rested her chin on her hands, elbows planted firmly on the mattress, her eyes narrowing in pleasure involuntarily as Gold's fingertips stroked up and down her spine.

"Ruby was right," she said.

Gold's fingers stilled on her skin.

"Ruby was right about what?" he asked, and Belle could swear that there was the smallest hint of fear in his voice.

"You remember the first time you asked me out, that Sunday in the café? You came into the tail end of a conversation between Granny and Ruby concerning the difference between barristers and solicitors."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, prior to that, Ruby had surmised something about lawyers."

"Which is?"

"Barristers may have briefs, but solicitors wear boxers."

"Indeed." Gold raised an eyebrow. "I'm not wearing either at this particular moment in time."

She was about to make some hopelessly clichéd comment about taking advantage of the fact but was interrupted by a loud rumble from her stomach. She hadn't eaten all that much the previous evening, and the sunlight peering through the crack in the curtains told her that it was late on in the morning.

All the same, she was still mortified. She groaned and hid her face in Gold's chest, only to find the man practically vibrating with silent laughter.

"Shut up," she mumbled against him. "It's not funny."

"You're right. It's not funny. It's hilarious."

Belle moaned. "Gold!"

"Oh come on, I've already proved this morning that basic bodily functions have to take priority sometimes." He gave her shoulders an encouraging squeeze, the action seeming to reassure her that all was well. "What do you want for breakfast?"

Belle raised her eyes to meet his and gave a small smile.

"Depends," she teased. "Are you on the menu?"

Gold shook his head.
"That, my dearest Belle, is called cannibalism, and the last time I checked, it was illegal. And as we have established, I am a lawyer and I know these things."

"Ah, but when was the last time you checked?" Belle asked. "Things may have changed since then."

She bit down on his collarbone, not hard enough to leave a mark.

"True enough. Would you prefer me fried or boiled, madam?"

Belle pretended to give the matter serious thought.

"Lightly poached," she said eventually. "And topped with hollandaise sauce."

Luckily – or unluckily – her stomach growled again before she could get too caught up in extremely unwholesome ideas about hollandaise sauce and its various uses.

Gold bit back a laugh. "I think I have some almond croissants in the freezer. We'll have to make do with those."

Belle sat up and drew her knees up to her chest under the covers, watching Gold leave the room in his dressing gown and wondering what to put on. Donning her dress again seemed a bit overkill for a Sunday morning.

Catching something white out of the corner of her eye, Belle found her conundrum solved.

X

She knew she'd had the right idea when she saw Gold's reaction to her sidling into the kitchen wearing just his shirt and her French knickers. He stayed staring at her from over the top of the freezer door for a good two minutes.

"Have you found the croissants?" she asked lightly. "I'm starving."

"I, erm…"

Apparently coherent speech was beyond him. He ducked back down into the freezer and began rummaging in the drawers. Belle leaned over the top of the door and Gold looked up at her.

"Well?" she pressed. "Aren't you getting cold in there? Won't your knee be going stiff?"

She probably shouldn't be teasing him, because at this rate she'd never get any breakfast.

He held up the croissants and pulled himself off the floor, grimacing slightly.

"You're right about the knee," he muttered. "You're going to be the death of me, did you know that?"

Belle pouted. "Surely death by sex is a good thing? Four popes have died whilst having sex."

"What on earth were popes doing having sex in the first place?" Gold asked incredulously as he shut the freezer door and limped across the kitchen to put the oven on.

"I've no idea." Belle moved over to the table and sat down, crossing her legs demurely and fiddling with the shirt cuffs.
Croissants warming nicely, Gold came back across the kitchen and pressed a kiss to her forehead. The scene was so domestic, it was as if they'd had this Sunday morning routine their entire lives.

"Are you all right?" Belle asked in earnest. She was remembering the little gasp of pain that Gold had given the previous night when he'd ended up with all his weight on his bad knee at one point. He nodded.

"I'm fine," he said. "A little out of practice maybe. One forgets the trivial, unimportant things like knees in the heat of the moment."

Belle gave a cheeky little smile.

"Out of practice, you say?" she purred. "Would you be requiring some assistance to... get back into practice?"

Gold's eyes were dark and lusty as he nodded his agreement.

"Oh, most definitely," he growled. His accent had been getting progressively thicker for the last few minutes. "They do say that practice makes perfect."

He slipped a hand down the front of the shirt and Belle caught his wrist.

"Food first, fun later," she scolded.

"So there will be fun later?"

Belle looked from the oven to Gold to the kitchen door and back again.

"Well, I'd hate to keep us from important practising time." She licked her lips. "What are your thoughts towards breakfast in bed?"
Gold groaned as his stomach gave yet another tremendous lurch and he gripped the sink with white knuckles. There couldn't be much more of his lunch left to come back, but the cold wave of nausea refused to leave him. He rested his clammy forehead against the mirror over the sink with a whimper, vaguely aware of someone knocking on the gents' bathroom door.

It had been an ordinary day until he'd got the phone call. As soon as the word 'hospital' had crossed Kathryn's lips, he'd felt his innards begin to churn, and once he'd talked to the nurse, his worst fears had just about come true.

She's all right, he told himself firmly. They're just keeping her in for observation.

"Gold, if you don't say something right now, I'm going to do something drastic." Gold realised that Jefferson had been talking to him through the door and received no reply but the sound of violent regurgitation. He heard the lock scrape open, forced with the flat of a scissor blade – Jefferson was nothing if not prepared.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gold saw the younger man enter the cramped bathroom and put a glass of water down between the taps, all without a word.

"Mr Gold?"

The new voice was nervous and tentative, and it belonged to Dawn.

"It's all right, Dawn," Jefferson said. "I've got this one. Trust me," he continued as he pushed the door to. "It's a man thing."

Gold sighed and closed his eyes, fighting back the urge to retch again. It wasn't at all surprising that Jefferson should be the one mothering him. Of all the people who currently worked out of Guildhall, only three had any sort of experience of being parents – and two of them were in this very bathroom.

"What's up?" the younger man asked quietly. "I'm assuming this has to do with the phone call you just received. I was in reception when Kathryn put it through."

Gold nodded.

"Belle's in the hospital," he croaked. "She's had an accident."

Jefferson let out a long breath and took Gold's shoulder in a firm but friendly and slightly awkward
grip. Neither was the most tactile of men, so the gesture was a mark of how dire the circumstances were.

"Do you want a lift over there?" he asked, adding, "that wasn't a question," in a warning tone. "You're shaking. If you try to drive you'll have a wreck yourself."

Gold nodded his acquiescence; it would probably be infinitely safer if someone else was behind the wheel. He straightened and looked in the mirror – Jesus, he looked old today. The hospital staff would probably think he was Belle's father, rather than her boyfriend, dubiously as the title could be applied to someone fast approaching fifty.

He shuddered again at the thought of Belle in the hospital and the circumstances that had brought her there.

_She'll be fine_, he repeated. _They're just keeping her in for observation._

The mantra wasn't working – it never would, the fear was too strong. He'd lost Bae to the roads already, and since then he'd been terrified of losing someone else to them. He couldn't lose Belle as well.

"Drink," Jefferson said, tapping the glass. "Or you'll rot your teeth."

Gold obeyed mutely. On any other occasion, he would have laughed and made some kind of comment about Jefferson becoming the office mother hen. He'd done it before often enough. But right now, humour was beyond him. The only thing permeating his awareness was that Belle had had a car accident. Gold was not a religious man, but in that moment he winged up a prayer.

_Dear God, don't let me lose her._

X

"So what exactly happened?" Jefferson asked a few minutes later once they were in his car heading towards the hospital. "How badly is she hurt?"

"Just cuts and bruises." Gold sighed, staring out of the windscreen. "Apparently she hit her head quite hard though, so they're keeping her in, in case she's got delayed concussion."

Jefferson nodded, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. He didn't judge Gold's reaction to the news as disproportionate, and Gold was grateful for his quiet companionship. He and his younger colleague had more in common than perhaps met the eye, although the kinship the two men shared was a sad one in many ways. Both had brought up children alone, and both had lost loved ones in sudden tragedies – Jefferson's wife had died of meningitis when their daughter was just two, and he had put his legal training on hold for five years to take care of Grace. Each had recognised a fellow soul in the other, and whilst they mostly kept themselves to themselves, it was reassuring to know that there was someone else nearby who understood more than other colleagues perhaps would. They continued to drive in silence for a while before Jefferson spoke again.

"Did they tell you what happened?" he asked.

Gold shook his head.

"Only that she'd had a car accident. I'm hoping Belle can tell me when I get there," he said. He didn't need to elaborate, they both knew what he was inferring by the remark. If Belle could tell him it meant she was conscious and compos mentis, and she was all right. Gold knew that the ice in the pit of his stomach wouldn't dissipate until he had seen Belle and spoken to her himself, no
matter how many reassurances he might receive from anyone else. Thankfully, Jefferson understood this, and didn't try any more words of well-meant but ultimately useless comfort.

The journey to the hospital seemed to take an age, although it couldn't have been any longer than usual. Gold stared up at the foreboding building with its front façade of red brick and the sprawling glass and concrete extension behind the original Victorian part before hurrying into the accident and emergency entrance. The last time he'd been here had been a routine orthopaedic appointment only a week ago, and it wasn't looking any more welcoming now than it had done then. He hated hospitals, had done for years, and going into one never got any easier.

Especially not now, when Belle was the patient rather than himself.

Jefferson took a seat in the emergency department waiting room and calmly began reading the free pamphlets whilst Gold went up to the reception desk.

"I'm looking for Belle French," he said. "She was brought in after a car accident; I got a phone call…"

The nurse looked at her notes.

"Ah, you must be Mr Gold. I was the one who called you. I'll take you through to her now if you'd like to follow me. We're just waiting for the paperwork to be signed before we take Miss French upstairs to the ward. There's nothing wrong, per se, but delayed concussion can occur so often with head injuries and it's better to be safe than sorry."

The nurse drew back the curtain around one cubicle at the far end of the emergency ward, and Gold's prayers were answered. Belle was sitting cross-legged on the bed, most definitely alive and conscious, if a little battered. She was holding an icepack against the side of her head, and there were four steri-strips over a small cut on her hairline – it had evidently bled heavily onto her collar, which was looking like something from a horror film. But shirt collars were unimportant to Gold in the grander scheme of things at that moment in time.

"Belle…" he breathed.

She looked up at him, put down the icepack and held out her arms without a word.

"I'm all right, darling," she whispered as he practically crushed her against him, mindful of her head. "I'm all right. Thumping headache, but I'm all right."

Gold could only hold her, vaguely aware of the nurse leaving them in private. Belle stroked his back, petting him almost.

"I can't even begin to imagine how worried you've been. I would have phoned you myself but I was a bit busy being poked and prodded and x-rayed so they wouldn't let me."

"Idiots," Gold growled. Finally he released her so that he could look into her face. "I'm quite prepared to sue the entire lot of them for you if you want," he offered, although the threat didn't sound anywhere near as convincing as it normally could have done.

Belle rolled her eyes.

"They're only doing their jobs, Gold," she said. "Being poked and prodded and x-rayed is all part of being in hospital. If you really want to make yourself useful, you can go home and get me some pyjamas, since they're determined to keep me in." She looked up at him. "Oh, come here."
Belle patted the bed beside her and Gold sank down onto it gratefully. She put her arms around him again, and Gold couldn't quite believe it – she was the bruised and battered one who'd just had a traumatic experience, and yet she was the one offering comfort.

"What happened?" he asked presently.

"There was oil on the road," Belle said. "I skidded and ended up on the verge. The car should be fine, it's just a bit dented."

"I'm not worried about the car." It was Gold's turn to roll his eyes. "Honestly."

"I know. But I'm all right."

Gold nodded, finally trusting himself to believe it. Belle was all right, and even if she did have delayed concussion, she was in the best place.

"So who do I have to thank for getting you here in one piece and stopping you from dismembering the nurses?" Belle asked. It was a mark of how well she knew him that she recognised he wouldn't have been able to drive himself.

"I haven't threatened to dismember anyone," Gold protested.

"Yet," Belle added.

"Well, you never know." He paused. "It was Jefferson."

"I thought it might be." Belle rested her chin on his shoulder. "Buy him a bottle of wine from me on the way home."

Gold smiled weakly.

"I love you," he said after a few moments silence.

Belle squeezed him tighter and he reached round to put an arm around her. "I love you too."

There were unspoken words hiding behind the simple phrase. *I love you and I could have lost you*, Gold thought, but he pushed it aside for the moment. There was no point in dwelling on what terrible things might have been. Belle was here, holding him close, and she loved him, but more importantly, she was going to be all right. That was all that mattered, and for that, Gold was primordially grateful.
Teacake

Chapter Summary

Love is blossoming in Granny's café again...

Chapter Notes

I'm introducing a new pairing! And oh dear, it's got a sort-of OC in it... I am a big Alice in Wonderland fan, and I really like Hatter/Alice, so naturally, my little brain had to get whirring as to how I could transfer that to OUAT and the adorable Jefferson. So, without further ado, meet my OUAT/Cake'verse Alice...

Tara Castle, mentioned here in passing, is the 'Storybrooke-ified' name I give to Rapunzel – Tara comes from the Irish for 'high place'.

"Are you going to drink that tea or just let it steep till it's ruined because you're distracted by your lover's underwear?" 

Gold transferred his gaze from Belle to Ruby and gave the latter a withering glare. Ruby merely smiled sweetly in return and suppressed a laugh as Belle reached round and pulled her trouser waistband an inch higher to cover the top of her knickers.

"Stop gawping," she said without turning her attention from the coffee machine. "Nothing to see here."

It was a Tuesday, and Ruby was enjoying the banter that she never usually got to see. She had swapped shifts with Emma – Henry's school was closed due to a rather unfortunate sewage leak – and was party to the Tuesday morning routine that had formed in the first few weeks after Belle and Gold became an established couple. Gold worked late on Monday evenings; Belle would go over to the law office after her shift at Granny's ended, they'd spend the night together, and Gold would give Belle a lift to work the next morning, staying in the café until he had to go to his own work at nine.

Ruby was witnessing it for the first time, and her comments aside, she couldn't help but smile at the simple domesticity of the scene. Gold had hooked his cane over the top of the cake display and was leaning on the counter with his tea, watching Belle as she went about her usual early Tuesday morning tasks. Ruby pushed a spare takeaway cup along the counter towards Gold and he dropped the teabag into it.

"So," she began brightly. "What colour do you think Emma will dress us in to be her bridesmaids?"

"Yellow polka dots," muttered Gold. "On a lime green background."

"Don't be silly," came Belle's voice from under the coffee machine – it had been playing up for a couple of days now and she was determined to fix it without having to call Granny for back-up.
She emerged and put her hands on her hips. "You're just sour because you were caught ogling."

"I wasn't ogling," Gold refuted. "I was merely… appreciating the view."

Ruby raised her eyebrows.

"So that's what the kids are calling it these days." She turned to Belle. "Is it always like this on a Tuesday morning?"

"Pretty much."

Ruby sighed wistfully. "I miss out on so much when I have a lie in. Never mind, I'll just have to make up for lost time now."

Before she could do so, however, the café door opened, and a blast of cold air heralded the arrival of another customer. Ruby looked up as a young blonde woman in a light blue coat was practically blown into the café on a gust of wind from the precinct entrance.

"Hello," she said breathlessly, trying to smooth her hair back into place and look professional. "Can you help me? I'm looking for Guildhall Law; I'm starting temp there today and I don't want to be late. This place is like a rabbit warren."

Ruby laughed as Gold pointed at the door she'd just entered through.

"Just over the way," he said.

"Oh thank God, I thought I was going to be late." She came towards the counter.

"So, who are you temping for?" Ruby asked. "We like to keep an eye on our regular customers… I mean our valued neighbours."

"It's just a secretarial role," the woman said. "Another girl from my agency did maternity cover there last year, but she refused to go back again – something about being terrified of Mr Gold – so I was drafted in as cover at the last minute. Could I have a cup of tea please?"

"English Breakfast?" Belle asked. The woman nodded and opened her mouth to speak again before closing it and leaning in over the counter.

"Do you, erm, do you know much about them?" she asked Ruby, her eyes flickering over to the solicitors' offices.

Ruby bit back a grin.

"Quite a bit." She glanced over the new arrival's shoulder at Gold and winked. "We have… inside sources."

"So, what are they like?" the blonde asked as Belle brought her tea over. "I'm Alice, by the way."

"Ruby. They're… Well, we've heard some interesting stories over the years."

"I heard some horror stories from Tara," Alice said conspiratorially.

"Well, they're probably all true." Ruby's voice was remarkably cheerful at the prospect. "And yes, before you ask, Mr Glass and Ms Mills are in a relationship. Some of the time."

"It's hardly a relationship," Gold mused. "More like friends with benefits. Actually, better make
that enemies with benefits."

"To be honest, I'm more worried about Mr Gold," Alice murmured. "Tara said he throws things."

"Oh, he does," said Gold airily, hiding his smile in his cup. "He's a right terror."

"So I've heard." Alice gave another worried glance across at her new workplace. "Oh dear, I'm not looking forward to this."

"You'll be fine," said Ruby. "Now Ashley's back from maternity she takes care of all Mr Gold's tantrums. But if you're working for Ms Mills, well, Her Majesty's a different kettle of fish entirely."

"Oh no… Does she throw things too?"

"Only at Mr Glass," Gold said drily. "Might help if you're handy with a Hoover though. She has a predilection for using expensive, highly fragile objects as missiles."

"Stop it, both you." Belle came over to the counter. "You're scaring the poor girl. I'm Belle, and I'm sure you'll get on fine, Alice. They aren't all as black as they're painted."

Alice did not seem at all mollified by this, and the door opened at that moment to admit another customer.

"It's cold enough to freeze the you-know-whats off a brass monkey out there!" Jefferson rushed into the café and closed the door again quickly, holding his hat on with one hand.

"Morning, Jefferson," Gold called from the counter.

"Good morning, Mr Milliner," Ruby said. "We don't often see you in here unless you've had a shock and need a camomile tea."

"I have a shock, it's bloody freezing outside. Morning, Gold, see you pre-empted my idea of getting stoked up on tea before the day begins."

"Oh no…" Alice looked at Gold with an expression just short of 'mute terror'. "Gold… As in…"

Gold nodded and Alice buried her head in her hands.

"Did I miss something?" Jefferson asked, adding his teabag to the growing collection on the counter. Gold ignored the question and went straight into introductions.

"Jefferson, this is Alice, she's your new temp secretary. Alice, this is Jefferson Milliner; you'll be working for him."

Alice removed her face from her hands and looked up at Jefferson, who removed his hat with an absurdly chivalrous flourish and held out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Alice," he said.

Alice shook his hand, and as their eyes met, she smiled for the first time since she entered the café.

Ruby had never been witness to what Granny called a 'time stands still and everything goes wibbly' moment before, but she was fairly sure that she had just seen one. Jefferson returned Alice's smile and they stayed looking at each other for a fraction of a second too long. Alice broke the gaze with a nervous giggle, only then realising that she was still holding Jefferson's hand. They broke away suddenly, each taking half a step backwards, unable to meet the other's eyes.
"Yes, well, I, erm, the tea will be getting cold, and we really don't want to be late…” Jefferson began. Gold stepped into the breach.

"Why don't you take Miss…"

"Kingsleigh," Alice provided.

"Why don't you take Miss Kingsleigh over to the office and get her settled in," Gold suggested.

"Yes, an excellent idea." Jefferson gestured to the door. "Shall we, Alice?"

"Certainly. I'm so sorry, I'm new round here and I got lost…”

As they left the café to brave the cold again, Gold twisted round to plant both elbows on the counter.

"Well, if you wanted proof that love at first sight exists, that was it," he said.

"He'll have asked her out by the end of the week," Ruby agreed.

"Ah, but is dallying with one's secretary really wise?" Belle asked. "He might angst about that for a while. I say it'll be a month of tiptoeing round each other at least."

Ruby looked at Gold.

"Well, you know him the best. What do you think?"

"Hmm." Gold seemed to be giving the matter serious consideration. "Jefferson is generally an impulsive soul…” here Ruby grinned "…except," he added, and her face fell, "when Grace is in any way involved, in which case he is always generally cautious. I'll put in a bet for two weeks and a day."

"You're on." Ruby paused. "What does the winner get?"

"Tea," Gold said, draining his cup and unhooking his cane. "Now, I think I've given them enough time alone, and I too will be late if I don't get going." He leaned over the counter to kiss Belle. "See you later, love."

"Don't you dare scare Alice into leaving after less than a day!" Belle called after him as he left the café.

"There's true love at stake! Would I dream of such a thing?"

"Hmm."

The café door closed again and Ruby gave a squeal of delight. "Oh, I love it when we see people get together in our café. First you, now Jefferson."

"Don't forget that you and Archie also met under this roof," Belle added.

Ruby nodded. "Now all we need to do is find some rich widower for Granny and we'd be sorted." She paused. "Do you think she'd like Marco?"

Belle rolled her eyes and Ruby laughed, looking out of the window at the gale beyond. The wind of change was blowing, and love was blossoming in the precinct again.
Chapter Summary

Valentine's Day, for WhiteOrangeFlower who prompted 'Chocolate Mocha cupcakes for Valentine's Day' and Wingless Demeter on FF.net, who wanted to see a Rumbelle and Red Cricket first Valentine's Day. There's not much Red Cricket in it, I'm afraid, but I hope you enjoy nonetheless.

"Huh. Valentine's Day."

Thursday the fourteenth of February, and Emma was sitting in the now-closed café at the only table that they hadn't put the chairs on top of yet, staring despondently down at a single Valentine's cupcake that was left over from the day's sales. Belle brought over two cups of coffee and a knife and unceremoniously cut the little cake in half.

"I mean, I know it's not his fault, but seeing all the happy couples coming in and being ridiculously romantic, and Ruby not being here, it rubs it in a bit."

Graham and Emma had planned to go away for Valentine's Day, their first romantic break on their own since becoming a couple and then engaged in a comparatively short space of time, but Graham hadn't been able to get the time off work. Naturally, Emma had been quite put out when it was revealed that Archie was taking Ruby to Paris to celebrate the occasion.

"Drink your mocha," Belle said, "and eat your half of the cupcake. Coffee and chocolate can always make everything seem better."

Emma took a bite of her cake with a wan smile.

"So what's your excuse?" she asked. "How come you're here with me drowning your sorrows in mocha and cupcakes and not celebrating your first Valentine's with your significant other?"

Belle sipped her coffee. "Same as you. Work got in the way. He's in Plymouth for a case. It's a particularly tricky one, an adoption, and unfortunately 'it's Valentine's Day and I want to spend it in bed with my girlfriend' wasn't a valid excuse for missing all the important meetings." She picked at one of the red sugar hearts on top of the chocolate frosting and smiled. "He's promised to make it up to me, and if there's one thing that can be said of my Gold, he always honours his agreements."

Emma raised an eyebrow.

"So we won't be seeing you in tomorrow morning then," she asked drily. "I'll have to send Granny to pull you out of bed by your feet?"

Belle shook her head in despair.

"I shouldn't have said anything, you're as bad as Ruby," she muttered, before adding, "at least you seem to be feeling better now."

Emma nodded and finished her last mouthful of cupcake. "Have you heard anything from Ruby? If I know her, she'll be giving us regular updates."
"Surprisingly no," Belle said. "Perhaps she's being tactful considering your situation. Then again, perhaps she's aware of the fact that Archie's very shy and blushing really doesn't go with his hair, so she's keeping quiet for modesty's sake. I've had one text, this morning." She got out her phone and showed the message to Emma.

_Went to the Moulin Rouge last night. OMG, I had to cover Archie's eyes…_

"I'm sure we'll be getting an in depth report when she comes back on Saturday," Emma said.

"As long as we can fend off questions about our own lovelives," Belle added. "What did you do for Valentine's Day? Well, all four of us were working, Ruby."

Emma laughed. "At least we know they didn't forget completely," she said, indicating the large bouquet of white roses that Mary Margaret had delivered to Belle that morning. ("It's been mad," the little dark-haired florist had said. "I swear that next year I'm taking Valentine's Day off and making David do all the work.")

"I suppose that sometimes life has to take priority," Belle said. "It's just annoying that it's decided today is the day to do it."

It was, they had realised, the first Valentine's Day that all three friends were one half of a relationship, and before more quotidian things had come in the way, they'd been looking forward to comparing notes. Before, Belle's coupled up Valentine's Days had consisted of the usual flowers, card, moderately nice restaurant, and her single ones had been spent celebrating her independence at the pub.

Presently Emma looked at her watch.

"It's coming up to seven," she said. "I'd better go, I need to pick up Henry. He went to a friend's house after school but they might be wondering where I am now."

She made to go into the back room to collect her things, but before she could get there, the two waitresses were interrupted by a little knock on the glass door. Emma turned and her hands flew to her mouth; Belle glanced over her shoulder and smiled on seeing Graham standing outside the café, holding up a pink cardboard box and looking a little sheepish but extremely pleased with himself.

Emma rushed over to unlock the door and let him into the café.

"Nearest I could get to Paris," he said, presenting her with the box. Belle could see that it had come from the boutique French patisserie at the other end of the high street.

"Oh Graham…" Emma bore the box over to the counter and opened it carefully. "Millefeuille, selta, kirschtorte… Graham, you must have a slice of every cake in the shop in here!"

"Not every cake," Graham protested. "I know which ones you don't like."

Emma replied by kissing him.

"I love you," she said.

"I know," Graham replied, a hint of pride in his voice. He pulled her in for another kiss, one that Emma accepted readily before breaking off suddenly.

"I need to pick up Henry, I'm already late."
"No you don't," Graham said. "He's staying with Jamie tonight."

"But he hasn't got his pyjamas!" Emma protested.

Graham gave her a knowing look. "There's a lot I can do in two hours, Emma, even if I can't multitask quite as well as you do."

Emma sighed happily. "You really have thought of everything." She turned back to Belle, who nodded.

"Don't worry, I'll finish up here," she said in response to Emma's unspoken question. "You go on, your cakes'll be getting past their best and Graham has to go to work at three in the morning."

"Thanks, Belle. Graham, we'll never eat all this cake."

"Speak for yourself. I'm starving."

They said their goodbyes and left the café together, and Belle was alone with her thoughts as she did the last bits of tidying before locking up and taking her roses in the direction of home. She had no idea what time Gold would be back from his meetings. Maybe he'd be waiting for her when she got back to the flat. He didn't have a key, but Mrs Ginger could let him in. Perhaps he'd be waiting for her, with champagne on ice and her bed turned down and scattered with rose petals. Actually, on second thoughts, scrap the rose petals. Belle had never seen the point. All they did was get in the way and stick to hot, damp skin. But champagne on ice sounded good. And Gold in his shirtsleeves and no tie, off-duty and relaxed. Or, conversely, the tie but nothing else; Belle had never had a problem with that particular vision.

What she found, however, on turning the corner from the bus stop and feeling her heart flip on seeing Gold's car parked in the street outside her house, was none of these things. Namely because Gold was still outside the flat, engaged in an exchange with Mrs Ginger, who was hanging out of her bedroom window on the first floor.

"No," the landlady was saying. "No, absolutely not. Not after what happened last time. Belle's not in, come back tomorrow." Belle smiled, she was referring to the debacle with Gary back in November.

"Mrs Ginger, it's me." Gold's voice was betraying all the signs of an exasperation that could fast turn explosive. "We've met. Belle has formally introduced us. You know who I am, so will you please do me a favour and let me in, because I am freezing out here and the food's going cold."

"You brought food?" Belle came past him on the path and slipped her key into the front door. "You can definitely come in then." She opened the door and ushered him inside.

"Your landlady is something else," Gold muttered as he went into the kitchen and dumped the carrier bag he had with him onto the table. "I know that a Chinese takeaway on Valentine's Day is hardly the most impressive or romantic of gestures, but all the restaurants will be booked up and I'm too hungry to cook."

Belle kissed his cheek, pausing in her previous occupation of getting out the plates and cutlery.

"I'll make it up to you at the weekend, I promise," he said.

"Don't be silly," Belle said. "You're here, that's all that matters in the end. I don't need anything fancy as long as I've got you." She paused. "On the upside, all the restaurants will be empty and cheaper at the weekend. Everywhere hikes their prices up for the fourteenth."
Gold laughed. "I've corrupted you. I swear you weren't this cynical when we first met."

He reached into the carrier bag to produce a bottle of champagne. "At least I remembered that."

"Ah yes, the perfect accompaniment to prawn wontons and egg-fried rice," Belle teased.

Gold merely raised an eyebrow. "According to my esteemed Aunt Elvira, champagne goes with everything. Including, worryingly enough, gin."

"Had I not met your aunt, I wouldn't believe you," Belle said. She served out the food and brought it through to the living room, Gold following with the champagne and glasses. When everything was nicely laid out on the coffee table – she still hadn't bought a table-cloth – Belle sat back and admired her handiwork.

"Perfect," she said. "There's only one thing spoiling the picture." She reached across and undid Gold's tie, tossing it in the general direction of the door. She chinked her glass against his. "Happy Valentine's Day."

"Happy Valentine's Day," Gold echoed, pulling her in so that he could kiss her properly.

Belle rested her forehead against his after she broke away. Who needed a Parisian hotel room when you had an Ikea sofa and someone who could kiss you like that? She was incredibly fortunate to be in love with this man and have him love her back.

At length she pulled out of his arms and they began to eat.

"Successful day?" Belle asked.

"Yes, at last. After however many months of wrangling, not aided by their previous solicitor dropping dead from a heart attack in the middle of the case – God rest Mr Fothergill – Mr and Mrs Mason are now officially the parents of little Gail. Everything's been signed and sealed and she's moving in on Saturday."

"That's good news."

Gold nodded, a slightly faraway look in his eyes. Belle smiled. This was the reason, one of the reasons, why Gold had ended up specialising in family law. However much he said it was because he could make millions from messy divorce settlements, Belle knew that he was a softie at heart, and he did it for the children more than anything. Even the hardest and most ruthless of men had a weakness somewhere. She wondered… Perhaps it was because his own family had come apart that he wanted to see others put back together, the individual pieces becoming a whole. Belle smiled at the notion; it made sense in the grander scheme of things. She was no longer an insular person anymore, she was part of something wondrous and inexplicable and celebrated on this very day – love.

The meal over, Gold pulled Belle in close to his side.

"I have something for you," he said. "You don't have to take it yet if you don't want to, but it's for you nonetheless."

He reached over and took his wallet out of his coat pocket, and from this he took a key.

"It's my house key," he continued. "Belle, I love you, and I want to come home to you every night. And if you don't want to live in my house, then maybe we can find somewhere new, together."
Belle smiled, her heart racing.

"I love your house," she said. "I love you." They'd talked about living together a couple of times, and Ruby was constantly asking her when she was going to move out of her little flat and into the big pink house on the hill once and for all, but she hadn't been expecting this. "I love you, and I love your house, and there's nothing I'd want more than to make it our home."

So what if they'd only had Chinese takeaway on the sofa? It was by far and away the best Valentine's Day of Belle's life so far.
Gold couldn't deny it; the addition of Belle was what had made his house truly a home. The rooms seemed lighter and warmer now that there was evidence that she occupied them as well, her books and trinkets in amongst his own, her family pictures interspersed with his. Over the past weeks it had cemented their togetherness, their status as a couple. Knowing that he wasn't coming back to an empty house after a particularly trying day gave him the will to continue. Gold never drank on the job, but it was on days like this that he understood why Sid and Fox did.

He'd been in court all day, the majority of it in the same hearing, a particularly volatile custody argument. He'd been standing for the best part of the afternoon, and as a result, his leg was killing him. It was with a dry smile that he gingerly got out of the car and limped painfully up the steps towards the front door. Even if he'd wanted whiskey, he couldn't have it, Doctor's orders on increasing the strength of his prescription the previous week.

Yes, it was the thought of Belle that kept him going, but as he entered the house, there was no sign of her.

"Belle?" he called softly, looking into the rooms on the ground floor. He put the kettle on, half-expecting to find a note propped up against it telling him she was at Ruby's, but there was nothing.

"Belle?" he called again, louder this time. He leaned back against the worktop to ease his leg. There were some times in life when only the old-fashioned methods of 'strong tea and a hot bath' would work to soothe his complaining joints. He grimaced; it was definitely getting worse. He fancied he could almost feel the titanium pins in his bones like little shards of ice.

"Hello darling."

She was upstairs, and Gold took his tea and ventured back into the hall.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in the bath."

"Dammit. Gold sighed and began up the stairs, knowing that if he stretched out on the sofa as he was more than a little tempted to do, he'd never get off it again.

"Gold?" Belle's voice came through the bathroom door as he passed it. "Something wrong?"

He sighed again. *Yes, you're in my bath,* but it wasn't his, it was theirs now, and she had every right to it if she wanted it. *Yes, I'm in agony,* but that sounded a bit dramatic and he didn't want to worry her. He closed his hand over the doorknob—it wasn't locked— and considered going in, but decided against it. He felt incredibly old at that moment in time, and the image of the middle-aged lecher leering at the beautiful young maiden in her bathtub was a strong and unwelcome one.

"No, no," he replied eventually. "Just a difficult day."
He moved away into the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, closing his eyes with a small groan akin to a balloon with a slow puncture. Cohabitation was all about compromise, Gold knew that; he was no stranger to it. All the same, ten years alone was a long time to have to get used to things, to routine, to being able to have a bath whenever he wanted.

He reached out and rummaged blindly in his bedside drawer for something topical to ease the dull ache that was beginning at the base of his spine as a result of carrying his weight unevenly, overcompensating for his leg. Normally he took care to try and keep his carriage as upright as possible for this very reason, but today he'd given up and was paying the price.

Never mind that the application of such medication required the removal of clothing, which in turn required verticality, something that Gold wasn't sure he could manage now that he was nicely horizontal.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Warm fingers pressed the cold tube into his hand and Gold opened his eyes to see Belle hovering over him, wrapped in a towel. The few tendrils of hair that had escaped her loose bun were curling in the steam from the bathroom, and there were traces of bubble bath on her damp skin.

"When I said I was in the bath, I meant it more as an invitation than a statement," Belle admitted before giving a sly grin. "Come on in, the water's lovely."

"Belle," Gold began weakly, because he was fairly sure that she had never looked quite as lovely as she did then. "Belle, my leg's giving me seven shades of hell."

"All the more reason for you to get in a hot bath then." She grabbed his hands and pulled him into a sitting position. "Come on, it'll be going cold. You can bring your tea if you want."

"What I mean is," Gold continued as she practically dragged him off the bed (he'd learned he was pretty powerless when Belle was in one of these determined mindsets), "is that I'm really not in the mood for…"

Belle pressed her fingers against his lips.

"It's just a bath," she said. "No promises or expectations. Just a nice, hot bath, and I'll see if I can't work some of the knots out of your shoulders."

She slipped one arm round his waist so that he could lean on her rather than his cane, and they made their way back through to the bathroom; Belle had dotted tea-lights around in room in a way that made it seem cosy rather than seductive. Somehow they managed to get his clothes off without either of them falling over, and before Gold knew it, Belle was back in the bath, encouraging him to lie between her knees and relax.

He could only obey, and he had to admit as he leaned back against Belle's chest and felt the heat of the water permeate through to his tired bones, it was blissful relief.

Belle curled her arms round his neck and rested her chin on the top of his head.

"Bad day in court?" she asked. Gold nodded and explained the case succinctly. "Whose side are you on?"

"Legally, I'm working for the mother." Gold let out a long breath and closed his eyes. "Personally, I'm not sure either of them are fit to be parents in my opinion."
He felt Belle's sigh rather than heard it.

"Well, whatever happens, it'll be for the best. I'm sure you'll all make the right decision in the end between you."

"I hope so." Gold gave a wan smile and twisted to look at Belle. "You're lovely," he said. "Beautiful inside and out."

Belle bent to kiss him.

"Thank you, kind sir," she said. "So are you." She grinned. "Do you want to hear about my rather interesting day to take your mind off yours?"

Gold's brow furrowed, then he groaned.

"I forgot," he said. "Sorry. Go on. How was it?"

Belle, Ruby and Emma had had their first dress fittings for the wedding that afternoon, and the two bridesmaids had finally got to see Emma's gown.

"I feel like a pin cushion," Belle admitted, "but it was good. We had a good laugh."

"And are you, as I suspected, wearing lime green with yellow polka dots?"

She smacked his shoulder.

"Of course not. We're in burgundy, I already told you that."

Gold shrugged. "Emma might have changed her mind at the last minute. Perhaps looking like a tennis court is in this season." This earned him another bat round the shoulder. "Oi! I know massage involves pummelling, but I really don't think it's meant quite like that."

"Of course, darling." Belle kissed the top of his head before pressing the heels of her hands into his shoulder blades, beginning to rub away the tension there. Gold gave a satisfied sigh and let his head loll forward, closing his eyes. "So what's it like then? The main event?"

"You mean Emma's dress?"

"Aye."

Belle's hands stilled momentarily, and there was a playful note in her voice when she spoke. "I think I ought to leave you to find out for yourself," she said. "The wedding's not that far away now."

"I'm not the groom," Gold protested. "It can't do me any harm." He glanced behind him to see Belle raising an eyebrow.

"I think you're far too interested in the girly aspects of this wedding, Mr Gold," she teased. "It's lovely," she added. "Quite simple, but that suits Emma, I think. I've only ever seen her in a dress once, and that was at the ball." She paused and her fingers continued their soothing trail over his shoulders. "She wouldn't be comfortable in a lot of flounce. It wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be Emma."

Gold wondered. As the past few weeks had gone on and Emma's forthcoming wedding seemed to pervade into Belle's life more and more, so he was ever more frequently reminded of the ring secreted away in what Belle affectionately called his 'man drawer'. ("You've got a pill drawer, a
sock drawer and a man drawer," she had said of his bedside cabinet on one occasion. "Medication, socks and random bits of useless junk that you keep just in case it comes in handy. Everything a man needs. Screwdrivers with heads you'll never use, dead batteries, keys for things you don't even own any more...") It was about the only place that he could virtually guarantee that she wouldn't find it by accident.

He was still looking for the right moment, and Aunt Elvira's helpfully dropping hints every so often really wasn't helping. That he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Belle was a no-brainer; he'd known that having only been with her for a few weeks, and right now he would be most content to spend the rest of his life right here in the bath with her wonderful hands on his back. But, as with every time he found himself thinking about it, now was not the right time. The first rule of proposing, Gold thought dryly – don't ask when your intended is drunk, hungover, tired, asleep or PMT – could just as easily be applied to the one doing the proposing. He'd take Belle off to Gretna Green right there and then if he thought that would be appropriate, but she deserved better than that. Her first engagement and marriage had been a rush job with no thought in it. Timing had to be perfect.

"Feeling better?" Belle asked presently, cutting through his thoughts. He nodded and relaxed back against her. The time was coming. It wasn't here yet, but Gold knew when it would come. Their nine-month anniversary was coming up, and the particular occasion would be perfect.

There was just one thing left to do, really, before he could begin to plan his moment; a necessary task, however unpleasant the prospect was. Gold was old-fashioned for the most part, and liked to think of himself as a gentleman.

As such, he was going to have to ask Moe for Belle's hand…
Chapter Summary

Belle is unwell and Gold takes care of her, prompted by DuskTillDawn95 on FF.net.

Chapter Notes

Well, wouldn't you just know it? I sit down to write a chapter about Belle getting ill and lo and behold, I end up going home from work with a fever and spending the majority of the next sixteen hours asleep. Maybe I should write a chapter about her winning the lottery…

Belle knew she was coming down with something when she woke up at four in the morning feeling as if she was both roasting alive and freezing at the same time. She peeled herself away from Gold – the man was honest to goodness a human hot water bottle – and curled up on her own side of the bed, feeling her throat slowly turning into sandpaper. Oh, brilliant…

She squeezed her eyes tight shut and buried her face in the pillow. Belle hated being ill – well, it was no-one's favourite pastime – but now she had a second person to make her feel even more miserable. In Belle's experience, men did not handle sick women very well. Gary had stayed away from her like she had the plague every time she so much as sneezed, which had not helped matters, and her dad went to the opposite extreme, not leaving her alone at all.

Belle also hated the fact that she seemed to lose all perception of time when she was ill. She was certain that she had been lying awake the entire night, and suddenly, the alarm was going off and there was a Scottish accent muttering curses at it, like every morning. Gold leaned over and kissed her ear.

"Time to get up, love," he said. Belle shook her head with a little noise that she hoped signified 'no'. Gold just chuckled. "Ok, ten more minutes."

It didn't help that she was on the early shift at the café and had to be there to open up for eight o'clock. Belle curled up in on herself further and groaned. She was not going to work today. No way, no how.

Two seconds later, Gold returned. Annoying man, he'd said ten minutes.

"Belle, love."

He kissed her cheek, and Belle had to concede that since he now smelled of shampoo and his chin was smooth rather than whiskery, he'd been away for longer than two seconds and it was just sleep and her sense of time playing up again.

"Belle?" Gold's voice was concerned and Belle pulled the covers up to her nose. "Belle, you're not well."
"Well done, Sherlock," she croaked. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

She felt the weight on the bed shift.

"Shut up and let me kiss you."

Belle shook her head and opened one eye.

"I'm not in the right shape," she grumbled. "Do you want the dreaded lurgy too?"

Gold just raised an eyebrow.

"I meant your forehead, to check for fever. But I'd quite happily kiss you even when you are snotty and feverish."

"Charmer." She conceded and turned onto her back to let Gold press his lips against her forehead. He nodded.

"You're burning up. So," he continued as she curled up on her side again, "do you want looking after or leaving be?"

"Ugh," was Belle's reply. Having had experience of both, she didn't want either. "Happy medium?" she suggested feebly.

Gold squeezed her shoulder.

"I'll use my initiative. I've got to go into work, I've got meetings, but I'll try and get you sorted before abandon you for divorces and Wills."

He collected his cane from where it was hooked over the foot of the bed and left the room. This time, though, he seemed to take an age and then some to return.

"Right," he said, depositing the tray he was carrying on her bedside table. "Lemon and ginger tea with honey, water and toast if you want it." He moved away and Belle heard him rooting through his medication. Most people kept their pills in the bathroom or the kitchen, but when Gold had made the executive decision to keep his painkillers within a reachable-from-the-bed distance, he'd also decided 'what the hell' and moved the entirety of the medicine cabinet in there. It had been both a blessing and a curse; Belle couldn't count the number of times she'd gone into that particular drawer in search of condoms and come up with three boxes of pills of varying description before reaching her goal.

"Paracetamol," he concluded, placing the packet on the tray next to the other items. He brushed a damp curl out of her face and gave her a soft smile in the dim light peeking through the curtains. "Anything else I can get you before I go?"

"Ring Ruby and tell her I'm not coming in."

Gold nodded and kissed her flushed cheek.

"Get well soon, Belle."

She closed her eyes, hearing him pottering about, and contented herself to sleep off and on for the rest of the day, only venturing out of bed to the bathroom and the kettle.

Gold rang at lunchtime.
"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Not really," Belle replied, and went to get herself some more water before pulling the covers back up to her stuffed nose.

When Belle next woke, she found herself curled up next to a large hot water bottle. On further investigation, it turned out to be Gold's leg. She raised her head up slightly to find him sitting on the bed beside her, reading his paperwork.

She thumped his hip weakly.

"No working in the bedroom," she croaked. "Bed room for sleeping and sex only. That's your rule."

"I'm not really working." He shuffled the papers into a vague semblance of a neat stack and stroked Belle's hair. "Feeling better?"

"A bit." Belle snuggled up against him. "What time is it? How long have you been back?"

"It's just gone four, and I've been back about ten minutes." He nodded over to her bedside table. "I made you some more tea."

"Lemon and ginger?"

"With honey. Or I could put whiskey in if you'd prefer." He paused. "I do. Best way to cope with the ‘flu is to spend the duration of the illness drunk."

Belle laughed and wriggled around until she was in the vaguest semblance of a sitting position, and sipped her tea.

"You're a good little caretaker," she said.

Gold's returning smile was somewhat sad.

"No I'm not. I'm on autopilot. Slipped back into parent-mode. It was really quite worrying how easy it was. I've gone down the lines of 'treat you like a twelve-year-old and hope for the best.' He put the papers down on the covers between them. "I used to take care of Bae when he was ill. Liz is a midwife; she worked odd shifts and couldn't exactly come home in the middle of a birth, so it was easier for me to work from home and look after Bae. And obviously, when it was just him and me… I used to work on his bed like this."

Belle leaned her head against his upper arm; she was too slouched to reach his shoulder.

"It must be odd, looking after me."

"You're a much better patient," Gold said with a chuckle. "You're quieter and you don't get quite as bored."

Belle decided it was time to change the subject.

"So what's all this then if it isn't really work?" she asked, indicating the papers.

Gold showed her the top of the stack. It was a CV belonging to a Mr Philip Desmond.

"Fox has asked me to take a trainee," he said, with a slight grimace. "We need someone to take on the simple cases with Dawn; we've needed someone for a long time. We'll be understaffed as it is when Fox retires in a couple of months and Regina takes his place as senior partner. Sid's already
got Dawn, Her Majesty can't be trusted with trainees, and neither Jefferson nor Jones has been qualified long enough to take one, so the honour unfortunately falls to me."

Belle raised an eyebrow at him.

"So Regina can't be trusted with trainees, but you can? Gold, everyone knows the horror stories that get passed around between the temp secretaries when Ashley goes on leave. Tara Castle refused to come back, she was that scared of you. I pity the poor unfortunate soul who gets you as their mentor."

Gold looked affronted, but only mildly.

"The other trainees I've taken on during my career all turned out fine. Slightly shellshocked, but physically unharmed."

Belle remembered the tale he had told Dawn of one of his trainees losing a decree absolute. She tried to laugh, but it came out as a rather pathetic sounding cough.

"I'd hate to see what Regina did to her trainees if that's the state yours end up in," she grumbled, snuggling back down under the covers and closing her eyes. This was a good happy medium, she decided. It was nice to have company in her misery without feeling herself completely stifled by worry. She wondered if it was just a parent thing. Gold was in self-confessed parent-mode, but Belle wasn't his child, she was his lover, and she doubted he'd have joked about adding a shot of his Glenmorangie to the tea if the honey didn't work with Bae. Her dad, well, she couldn't really blame him for his reaction. Her mother had died when she was still young – just twenty-seven years old, younger than Belle was now – and naturally he was petrified of losing his daughter in the same way. She guessed that Jefferson would be the same with Grace, having lost her mother so young.

So she dozed off her cold, feeling Gold's arm around her and occasionally hearing him rustle his papers. Presently he squeezed her shoulders.

"I'm going downstairs. Give me a shout if you need anything."

Belle nodded without opening her eyes. She continued to sleep on and off through the evening, eventually waking up suddenly and completely to find the room pitch black and a warm, pyjama-clad body asleep beside her. Damn her sense of timing, or rather the lack thereof. She wasn't going to get back to sleep in a hurry; her body had decided it was going to stick to the old adage of 'a cold has to get worse before it can get better' and she was feeling rougher than she'd been all day, and wide awake on top of it.

"If you toss and turn any more you'll end up on the floor," grumbled a low voice from the duvet-covered shape that hadn't moved in the last half-hour, despite the number of times she'd accidently whacked him whilst trying to get comfortable. "Mainly because I'll have kicked you out of bed for being annoying."

"I'm ill," Belle croaked. "I can't help it."

Gold rolled over to face her and opened his eyes blearily.

"At least fevered insomnia was one thing I never had to worry about with Bae, what with sleeping in a different room. Except on the few occasions he managed to kick the wall so hard it made my headboard vibrate." He reached out and touched her flushed cheek. "Come on, I know what'll help."
He got out of bed and limped over to the window, pulling the curtains back and pushing the sash up before gesturing for her to join him.

"Don't tell me you'll catch cold, because you've already caught one," he said. "And don't tell me I'll catch cold, because I'm more likely to do that staying in a nice, warm, unventilated room full of your germs," he added matter-of-factly. Belle got out of bed and joined him at the window. The cold air felt lovely on her hot face.

"What are we going to do with you?" Gold murmured. Belle gave a weak smile.

"Love me?" she suggested.

"That's easy enough."

Belle didn't know how long they stayed like that at the window, leaning on the sill, but presently she felt Gold shiver and move away.

"I've got court in the morning; I'm going back to bed." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, even though she hadn't washed her hair for a couple of days and her locks were still damp with sweat. "I love you. Even when you're snotty and feverish and elbowing me in the back."

Belle smiled, remaining at the window for a few minutes until she felt fatigue begin to settle in her limbs. One of Granny's pearls of wisdom had always been that if a man couldn't love you when you were sick, he wasn't worth keeping.

Gold had definitely proved his worth today.

I think it's definitely a parent thing, not being one myself. Gold knows it's only a cold, it's not going to kill her; I don't think that in this AU he'd over-react to Belle being ill quite as much as he might in the canon. ;)

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Wedding Cake - First Tier - Part One

Chapter Summary

Emma's wedding as requested by Hermitess [AO3], and MyraValhallah [FF.net], who wanted a Gremma chapter.

Chapter Notes

Part One of Two.

Ruby's 'stand well clear' speech comes courtesy of my brother (a legend in his own lifetime), who very nearly said this during our cousin's wedding…

Quick reminder – this is set in England, with British wedding traditions.

"Oh Henry, I can't do it."

"Don't be silly, of course you can."

"But!"

"No buts. Do you love Graham?"

"Well, of course I do."

"And I know he loves you. So what's the problem?"

Belle laughed, and Emma couldn't exactly blame her. The three women were sitting in Emma's bedroom, putting the finishing touches to the bride's hair. Henry was sitting on the bed ready in his suit, looking far suaver than any ten-year-old had any business to look, being the calm voice of reason to his increasingly nervous mother.

"It's just all those people," Emma said. "Maybe I should have taken Graham's dad up on his offer to give us the petrol money to go to Gretna Green and throw in a free fridge-freezer."

Ruby rolled her eyes and gave Emma's coiffeur a final spritz of hairspray.

"Don't be ridiculous," Henry said. "Once you get in the church you won't notice all the people, it'll just be you and Graham and the vicar."

"Where do you get all this philosophy from?" Emma asked her son. "You're only ten!"

Henry shrugged. "It's the same advice you gave me when I had stage fright in the school nativity play when I was six."

"Come on, Emma," Belle said. "If Henry says you can do it, then you can do it. We'll be right
behind you. Literally."

"So don't think of turning tail and running," Ruby warned. She affected the nasal tones of a train station announcer. "Ladies and gentlemen, please stand well clear of the edges of the pews as the approaching bride is not scheduled to stop at this altar."

Belle smacked her friend's shoulder. "Ruby, you are not helping."

Presently, there was a knock at the front door and Henry jumped up to get it.

"You aren't supposed to see Mum till the wedding!" Emma heard him exclaim.

"I know," came Graham's voice. "I just wanted to see if she's ok."

"She's getting her running shoes on for a quick getaway!" Ruby called down the stairs.

"Ruby!" yelled Belle, Emma and Henry in unison.

"Sorry!"

There was a timid knock on the bedroom door.

"It's all right," said Graham through the wood. "I'm not coming in. I just wanted to check how you're doing."

Emma got up from her dressing table and went over to the door, her fingers hovering over the handle, in two minds about opening it or not. She'd never held much with all this superstition nonsense, but at the same time, she was nervous enough already without tempting fate.

"I'm fine," she said. "Better now you're here."

"Well, I'll have to go in a minute." There was a pause. "It's still not too late to back out and hitch to Gretna Green if you want."

"I don't think Granny would appreciate her catering going to waste," Emma said. There had been some more cynical souls who had wondered if the wedding was actually going to take place. Whilst no-one had any doubts that Emma and Graham truly loved each other, they all knew that Emma was nervous about being the centre of attention at her wedding. She had come through so much of her life on her own that she wasn't used to having a big fuss made of her.

"Well, I've got something for you," Graham said. The door opened a fraction and his hand appeared round it, holding a slim box. "To complete your set."

"Something blue?" Emma asked. She had everything else. Something new – her dress. Something old – the necklace she'd worn every day for as long as she could remember. Something borrowed – her veil, a square of vintage muslin loaned by Graham's mother.

"Well, I know how you like to do things properly," Graham said. Emma flipped the box open and burst out laughing on seeing what was inside.

"Did you actually buy this?" she asked.

"Yes!" Graham sounded slightly hurt at the accusation. "I may have bought it online using my cousin's credit card, but I did buy it."

"What is it?" Ruby asked.
Emma held up the contents of the box – a blue lace garter.

"Thank you," she called through the door.

"My pleasure. Since I'm the one who'll be flinging it later, I thought I may as well go for it."

Emma laughed and came back to sit at the dressing table, hitching her dress up to her knees so that she could slip the garter on. "Well, as long as you aim it at Archie."

"Hey!" Ruby said. "I don't want my Archie being pelted with other women's undergarments, thank you!"

There was a pause after the laughter had died down.

"I'll see you at the altar then," said Graham's voice through the door.

"I'll see you then." Emma was gripped again by a sudden fear. She was used to running. She was good at running away from scary situations, and she couldn't think of anything more scary than walking into that church and having everyone's eyes on her. It wasn't that she didn't want to marry Graham, and it wasn't even that she didn't want to do it in front of all their friends and family – she was quite happy to let the entire world know that Graham loved her and she loved him. It was just… This was an unknown. Emma had only been to one wedding in her life before, and she felt it slightly overwhelming that her second ever experience of a marriage ceremony was her own. Put bluntly, she was terrified that something was going to go wrong.

"I love you," she added, feeling that it was very important to say it just in case something did go wrong.

"I love you too. See you soon."

Graham's footsteps became ever quieter as he went down the stairs again.

"I'll wait downstairs, Mum," Henry said. "So you and Belle and Ruby can do… girly stuff."

Emma managed a weak laugh at that statement as Ruby clipped in her veil.

"There," her friend said. "You're ready, and you look beautiful, Emma Swan. And remember; Henry's right. Once you get in there, you won't be nervous anymore."

The three friends sat in silence for a while, just enjoying each other's company. It was, after all, a momentous day for them all.

Presently they heard the purr of an engine winding down outside the house, and a scabble of feet as Henry rushed up the stairs.

"The car's here!" he exclaimed, careering into Emma's bedroom. "It's amazing!"

Emma peered out of the window and smiled. As much as she would have been happy to drive to the wedding in her little yellow Volkswagen, Henry, of all people, had put his foot down. If she wasn't going to have a horse-drawn carriage, which was his first suggestion, then she at least needed a nice car with ribbons on. "You only get one wedding," he'd said. "You might as well go the whole hog. And no-one can drive in a wedding dress."

When Emma had weakly said that she and Graham were stretching their wages as it was, her son – ever scheming, ever practical and ever determined for his mother to have the happy ending he
knew she deserved – had blithely suggested that she ask Gold: "because he's a lawyer and must
know people with nice cars who owe him favours," being the reasoning.

Still marvelling at Henry's capacity for engineering things, Emma had nonetheless asked, and sure
enough, Gold had called in a favour and produced a former client who was willing to act as
chauffeur for the day. Emma was fairly certain that, given just the car and the cake, without any of
the rest of the day that went between the two, Henry would have called the wedding a complete
success.

It was a bit of a squeeze, but soon bride, bridesmaids and Henry were seated in the back of the car,
and they reached the church far too soon for Emma's liking.

Oh, pull yourself together, she told herself crossly as she got out. There's nothing to be scared of.
You're only getting married, for heaven's sake…

One of Graham's cousins, acting as an usher, poked his head round the church door.

"Ready?" he asked.

Emma glanced over her shoulder at Belle and Ruby, the former giving her an encouraging nod and
the latter a thumbs up.

She nodded to the usher, who opened the doors fully to let her in.

Emma took a deep breath and stepped into the church as the music began to play. She was holding
Henry's hand so tightly her knuckles were as white as her gown.

"Mum!" Henry hissed under his breath. "You're cutting off the blood supply in my fingers!"

"Sorry," Emma whispered back, and tried to loosen her grip slightly. Truth be told, having Henry
by her side was an absolute blessing. Whilst it might have looked odd to the observer for the bride
to be given away by her young son, Emma knew that Henry was probably the only thing keeping
her from running up the aisle, grabbing Graham and running full pelt for the Scottish border.
Maybe Gold knew someone in Gretna Green whom he could forewarn of their arrival.

But suddenly, she was there, at the front of the church, and Ruby was holding out a hand for her
bouquet with an impish smile, and Henry had gone to sit beside Archie, and there was Graham,
grinning as if all his Christmases had come at once.

And in that moment, nothing else mattered. Just as Henry had promised. It was just Emma,
Graham and the vicar. When Graham took her hands and gave them a reassuring squeeze, Emma
no longer felt the weight of everyone's eyes on her, no longer worried about forgetting what she
was supposed to say, and she began to relax for the first time that day. She wondered if she should
have let Graham come in when he'd delivered her garter; maybe his presence would have calmed
her down before.

"We are gathered here today to witness the joining together in holy matrimony of Emma and
Graham," the vicar began. "If anyone knows of any just cause or impediment why these two should
not be wed today, please speak now or forever hold your peace."

A small part of Emma was still worried that someone was going to object, but there was silence,
and the vicar smiled and moved on. Emma let out a long breath that she wasn't even sure why she'd
been holding. Graham squeezed her fingers again.

"It's all going fine," he whispered, once the first part of the ceremony was over and they could sit
down during the readings. Although they were marrying in a church, the same church that most of Graham's family had married in, neither had made any secret of the fact that they weren't strictly religious, and they had opted to keep their readings from more popular texts. True to form, Astrid managed to trip up on her way to the lectern, and only the vicar's lightning reflexes managed to stop her careening into the altar. The ensuing ripple of mirth that ran round the room (thankfully Astrid saw the funny side of it too) was enough to set Emma's mind at ease once more. Everything was going well. There was no need to worry. There was no need to run.

Astrid finished reading her passage from 'Three Men in a Boat' and it was time for the most important part of the wedding. Emma and Graham stood once again. Emma took a deep breath. She wasn't going to forget her vows. Nothing was going to go wrong.

"Emma, please repeat after me: I, Emma, take you, Graham, to be my lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, according to God's holy law, this is my solemn vow."

Emma repeated the vow, and it was only after Graham had slid the wedding ring onto her finger that she realised that her active part in the wedding was over. She'd said all that she needed to say. There was no more reason for stage-fright. She'd done it. They'd done it. They were married.

"Graham and Emma are now beginning their married life together; we hope that they may have loving assistance from their family, the constant support of friends, and a long life with good health and everlasting love. In so much as Graham and Emma have consented to live forever together in wedlock, and have witnessed the same before this company, declared by the exchanging of vows and rings, I pronounce that they are husband and wife."

Graham didn't have to be told that he could now kiss the bride, and Emma wasn't sure if she heard a cheer erupt in the church, or if it was just her imagination. She didn't care.

Graham Wolff and Emma Swan were husband and wife, and Emma had never been happier.
The evening was definitely drawing to a close. The newly-weds had been safely waved off on their honeymoon and people were beginning to drift away from the hotel in dribs and drabs, only the die-hard core of drinkers remaining in the bar and getting increasingly rowdy. Belle stayed standing in the driveway waving long after the taillights of the taxi had disappeared onto the main road. The function room had been becoming unbearably warm and stuffy, and Belle was glad of the breeze preventing what could have been the beginnings of a headache. One of Graham's many cousins – the man had a seemingly interminable supply of them, a true wolf pack – had caught Emma's bouquet, and, as promised, Graham had flung the garter at Archie, much to Ruby's consternation. Granny had surpassed herself with the cake, which although not a three-tiered meringue-iced masterpiece, was never the less intricately decorated with tiny handmade sugar decorations in all sorts of shapes that reflected Emma and Graham's lives, and topped not with the traditional bride and groom, but with a white swan and wolf.

All in all, it had been a wonderful day, and Belle's heart was swollen with joy. She was also, although she'd never admit it, feeling a pang of yearning for her own wedding. She had never had the chance for a proper wedding; Emma and Graham's modest celebration was a far cry from the lavish ceremonies that she'd dreamed of when she was younger, but it was still a celebration, an event to be remembered, not a simple legal binding performed for necessity rather than any real desire.

Gold put an arm around Belle's shoulders to pull her into his side.

"Shall we go for a wander?" he asked. "Make sure we're well away when the drunken karaoke starts."

Belle nodded her assent and slipped her arm through his, letting him lead them through the gardens away from the drive. She sighed happily and leaned into Gold's side. "It was a lovely day. I'm glad everything went according to plan. I'm not quite sure inviting the vicar back to partake of the reception was quite the right idea though. I think the best man's speech may have shocked him a bit."

"Well, they weren't to know," said Gold. "Actually, Graham should probably have known. Ah well, I'm sure he's heard worse in his time." Belle looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, ok, maybe not. We should probably be grateful that Archie was on hand to cover Henry's ears in some places."
Graham's cousin's speech had been... interesting, would probably be the best way of describing it. It had certainly left poor Graham doing a passable impression of a tomato. Whilst said cousin's wife had done an admirable job of censoring it, there had still been more than enough innuendo to raise a few eyebrows, most of the jokes coming from the fact Graham was a policeman and had been known to fell dangerous criminals with his truncheon. Mind you, Ruby had done much the same for Emma in her own speech. In the absence of a father-of-the-bride to give the traditional speech to embarrass the newly-wed wife just as the best man ribbed the groom, Ruby had been elected to do the honours instead. Belle giggled again at the memory and nearly toppled over on her spindly heels. Gold caught her.

"You want to be careful, my darling, as people will begin to think you've had too much champagne."

"Well, we're celebrating," Belle said, her voice as placid as if she was stating the weather. "It's a wedding, after all."

"We could be celebrating something else, as well," Gold said softly. Belle looked up at him.

"What?"

"Oh, not yet, not yet. I'll tell you later." There was the faintest smirk playing on his lips, and Belle got the distinct impression that he was planning something. She looked around at their surroundings, still headed further and further away from the hotel.

"Do you actually have a destination in mind?" she asked playfully. "If I didn't know you were a gentleman, Mr Gold, I'd be rather inclined to think you were intending to ravish me behind the rose bushes."

With impeccable timing, there was a very human sounding squeal and giggle from the nearest clump of greenery, and the two wanderers picked up their pace a little to move past. Belle wasn't sure, but she thought that the voice had belonged to Astrid.

"Much as that sounds like an excellent idea, Miss French, I think such a course of action may be frowned upon by the proprietors of the establishment. We'll leave the ravishing till we're at home, eh? But I'm sure we could do it behind the rose bushes there if you wanted."

"Your rosebushes leave a little to be desired, though," Belle pointed out. "They need nurturing. We wouldn't get much coverage."

"Hmm... Put your posy in a vase on the mantelpiece and use artistic license?" Gold suggested.

Belle looked down at the posy of dark red roses in her free hand that she'd been carrying for most of the day. "It'll do."

They were nearing the end of the path now, and Belle was beginning to wonder quite what Gold was planning.

"Seriously, Gold, where are we going?" she asked.

"Right there." He nodded towards the end of the path. Belle squinted through the dim evening light to see a little wishing well tucked in amongst the trees. She looked at him and narrowed her eyes.

"What are you planning?" she asked. Her heart skipped a little, not wanting to give voice to the thought in case her hope was unfounded and she was disappointed.
"I have no idea," Gold confessed. Belle could tell he was nervous behind the easy demeanour he'd fallen into over the last few minutes. "I just saw this place earlier on, and thought, 'why not, it's as good a place as any…' Oh dear, I haven't thought this through."

Belle tried to squash her grin, but it didn't work.

"Come on," she said and slipped her arm out of his so that she could take his hand in hers and pull him towards the well. She tripped up the little flight of steps to peer into the well, slightly disappointed to find it covered in mesh for health and safety reasons. Probably to keep the drunkards from the many weddings that the hotel hosted from falling in, she supposed, but still. She turned back to Gold, who'd stayed at the bottom of the steps, watching her with an expression that was, simply put, pure love.

"So," Belle began, before the silence could become all-encompassing. "We're here now."

Gold took Belle's left hand in his and kissed her knuckles.

"I've been waiting for the right moment for months," he said. "And even now, I'm not sure if it's the right moment, what with it still technically being someone else's wedding. But it's also our nine-month anniversary, and we're in a place that looks like something out of a fairytale, and, well, there's no time like the present." He looked up at her from the bottom of the steps, slightly sheepish. "This is about as near to down on one knee as you're going to get from me."

Belle felt her breath catch as Gold leaned his cane carefully against the well to have both hands free, feeling in his inside jacket pocket to pull out a little velvet bag not at all unlike the ones she kept her jewellery in. He reached inside and produced something small, silver and sparkling.

"Belle, you're the most wonderful person I've met, I love you more than I can ever express, and if you agree to be my wife, you'll make me the happiest man alive." He took a deep breath. "Belle French, will you marry me?"

She'd suspected that this might have been what he'd been building up to, but she hadn't dared to hope. She rushed down the steps and threw her arms around Gold, pulling him into a long, languorous kiss.

"So, that's a yes, then?" Gold asked faintly as she finally let him up for air.

"Yes. Oh, yes!"

Belle released her grip on his shoulders to bring her left hand up between them so that Gold could slip the ring onto her finger.

"Perfect fit," she said, peering closely at the ring. It was in the shape of a pair of hands holding a heart-shaped diamond, and Belle was sure she'd seen it somewhere before.

"It was ma's," Gold said quietly, kissing her fingertips. "She had tiny wee hands, like yours. She wanted you to have it. You can pick out another if you don't like it."

"It's beautiful," Belle breathed, and since words seemed to her to be completely overrated at that moment in time, she settled for kissing Gold again instead.

She was in love. She was engaged. She was going to marry this wonderful man and spend the rest of her life with him.

Belle's heart, already so full of love and joy from the celebratory day, decided that skipping was
Belle's ring is a variation on an Irish claddagh, if you wanted to google it and see what it looks like.

I know these two chapters are slightly uneven in length, but I wanted to keep them separate. In my cake'verse timeline, I have always had Gold proposing after Emma's wedding, but I didn't want the proposal to detract from the wedding itself, so I split the chapter in two. I hope you enjoyed nonetheless.
Gold sees Belle through her divorce. Quite a few people were interested to see this one.

It was rare for Belle not to come over on a Monday evening after she'd finished work. Even after they'd started living together, the Monday-night-Tuesday-morning ritual had remained in place. Yes, it was rare enough that it made Gold wonder if everything was all right as he locked up Guildhall and walked the few steps over the way to collect Belle from the café. He peered through the glass to see her polishing the top of the cake display vigorously, her mind obviously elsewhere.

Having spent a few minutes watching her abstraction, Gold decided to knock on the door to get her attention.

The noise made her jump and she dropped the cloth with a little squeal before recovering herself and coming round to let him in.

"If you polish that glass any more, you'll wear a hole in it," he said.

"I know, I know. I…" She paused, defeated. "I was miles away," she said eventually.

And not in a good way, Gold added mentally. Something was worrying her.

He took her hand in his free one and led her over to the bench seating at the back of the café, hidden from view behind a forest of upturned chairs.

"What's up?" he asked once they were sat down together.

Belle sighed and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I…" she began. "I'm divorced. Officially. Absolute came through today." She reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out a heavy, expensive looking cream envelope, taking out the letter inside to hand it to him. Gold had seen hundreds of such letters in his time; his own signature could be found at the bottom of many. He didn't say anything, simply looking at the pretty jargon that was practically meaningless, and waiting for Belle to speak again.

"It's silly really," she said at length as he handed the letter back to her. "I just don't know what to feel. So I've been keeping busy, trying not to feel anything. I'm just numb. Part of me feels like I ought to be happy because that part of my life is over and I can truly draw a line under it and move on. But the rest of me feels like this isn't an occasion that should be celebrated. This is a reminder that something went wrong, something wasn't right. All these people who throw parties when they get divorced…. It seems a bit perverse to me unless you absolutely loathed your spouse. Which I didn't. So I feel sad, because even though I've moved on – I moved on a long time ago – it was still a huge part of my life and it's a shame that it didn't work out. But then I feel guilty about feeling sad about it because I'm so happy with you and I shouldn't be thinking about Gary, and I'm just incredibly confused."

She sighed, and Gold pulled her in closer.
"You feel whatever you want to feel," he said. "There's no right and wrong. There's no handbook for it; there never is. Nothing's changed, in the grander scheme of things. You haven't changed your name. Tomorrow you'll wake up and you'll still be the same person that you were this morning."

"It feels like it should be momentous, life-changing. You know, like I'm walking around with a great big flashing sign above my head saying 'something big has happened'. But it doesn't. Everything's still the same. I had a perfectly ordinary day at work. Nothing's different to yesterday except the fact I'm not legally married anymore."

Gold nodded. "I know what you mean. Nothing's different, but you feel like it ought to be."

Belle paused.

"How did you feel? After yours was finalised?"

"Relief, mainly." Gold sighed. It was so long ago that he'd put it to the back of his mind; it wasn't something that he thought of often. He remembered that it had been a Thursday, when he'd received a letter so much like Belle's, over fifteen years ago now. He'd been in the middle of a complicated case and it hadn't really registered on any kind of deeper level until about a week later. "I was just glad it was all over. Mine wasn't acrimonious, but it had taken a long time and I was glad there was nothing else to do, no more forms to sign or things to negotiate. I mean, it was different for me; there was a house to sell and assets to split and Bae to think about. But yes, mainly I was relieved that the process was over."

Belle fidgeted a little, nestling in closer to his side.

"So what happens now?" she asked.

"Now you just carry on living your life," Gold replied. "You mentioned baking chocolate chip cookies this evening."

Belle laughed, and Gold considered that a suitable small triumph in the grander scheme of things. He could try to help her make sense of her confused emotions, but ultimately only Belle could dictate what she was and wasn't going to feel. But he could be there if she wanted to talk, and if she didn't, and if he could make her smile, then that was a bonus.

"Will you be wanting to sample the mixture?" she asked playfully.

"Don't I always?" Gold growled in response.

"I don't know." Belle sighed. "I'm not sure I'm in the right frame of mind to make cookies tonight."

"Not even the famous giant cookie?"

"That was an accident!" Belle protested. "I didn't know how much the mixture would spread," she added. "That they all ended up sticking together to make one large cookie is in no way my fault at all."

"Imagine what would have happened if you'd actually been intending to make a large, baking-tray shaped cookie," Gold mused. "I dread to think of the possible consequences."

There was a long, companionable silence, broken only by the rustling of paper as Belle turned the letter over and over in her fingers. Finally she seemed to take action, stuffing the paper back into the envelope and putting this in turn back in her apron.
"Right," she said firmly. "That's that. It's done. Over. So let's go home to make chocolate chip cookies and carry on life as normal."

Belle pulled him off the bench seating before going over to get her jacket and switch off the lights. "Where've you parked?"

"Behind the library. Bit of a trek, but it's a mild enough night."

"Why there?" Belle asked, ushering him out of the café door so that she could lock up.

"Fox was entertaining some clients," Gold said drily. "They took all our usual parking spaces. Regina was most put out. Her rage was absolutely beautiful to behold. She didn't say anything, of course; ultimately he's her boss and she'll take the senior partner position when he retires. But her face was a picture. I'm surprised Marina didn't try to capture it on film actually. Oh yes. Fox's retirement can't come a moment too soon for Her Majesty."

Belle slipped her hand round his arm and curled her fingers into the fabric of his jacket.

"How was your day other than Regina nearly exploding in silent rage then?" she asked. Gold gave her a run-down of everything that had happened that day; not much interesting if he was being honest, but he could tell that she wanted her mind taken off their previous conversation with the banalities of everyday life. It was almost as if she wanted to reassure herself that everything really was still the same as it had been the previous day.

Suddenly she stopped dead, pulling him back.

"What is it?"

Belle didn't answer, instead reading a notice in the library window.

"Gold?" she breathed. "Do you believe in fate?"

Gold read the notice. The library was recruiting for a new trainee librarian. He raised an eyebrow at Belle.

"I mean," she continued, "I've been feeling like today should be a turning point all day, and maybe it is. Maybe, as one door closes..." She pressed her hand against her apron pocket where her decree absolute resided.

"...another one opens," Gold finished for her.

"What do you think?" Belle asked.

"Go for it," Gold said simply. "You've got nothing to lose."

Belle smiled up at him, the first genuine smile that he had seen from her all evening. It was a turning point in her life, there could be no doubt of that, and it was an emotional rollercoaster. Everything had changed and everything was still the same, and it was a confusing journey that her feelings were going on. But this was something new, something positive that she could focus on as she let go of her past once and for all. The divorce signalled the absolute end of something. Now, this could be the beginning of something new.
Chapter Summary

Gold asks Moe for Belle's hand in marriage. Again, a lot of people wanted to see this one!

Chapter Notes

ONCE IS BACK ON TV IN THE UK! PRAISE BE!

Ahem. Enjoy the celebratory cupcake whilst I wallow in the Once goodness. Oh Once, I missed you...

Gold sat in the driver's seat of the black BMW, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and wishing he could open the bottle of Glenmorangie in the glove box for a little Dutch courage. He was parked outside a respectable-looking semi-detached house some hundred miles away from his own home, and he was waiting for the right moment. He'd been waiting for the right moment for a good twenty minutes now, and no doubt the neighbours were starting to wonder what in God's name he was doing.

He was seriously considering giving up and going back to Devon. After all, he and Belle were both consenting adults. It wasn't as if they couldn't get married without Moe's permission; it wasn't as if he needed to ask for the keys to her chastity belt.

No, Gold told himself crossly. He was going to do this properly.

Asking a man for his daughter's hand in marriage never got any easier, no matter how much experience one had. He'd never admit it, but he'd nearly fainted before facing up to his first father-in-law-to-be. It had taken him several attempts to speak to Liz's father, the first few failing because he had got blind drunk beforehand and said would-be fiancée had had to take him home to sleep it off before he could embarrass himself. By the time he had actually got through the meeting in one piece, Liz had been left in no doubt of what he had been trying to achieve. At least this time, downing the whiskey was absolutely not an option, but there were still at least twenty different ways in which he could make a fool of himself. Gold tried to rationalise. On the one hand, he was twenty-six years older and wiser now than he had been then. He had a respectable career, rather than being just out of training, earning a fraction of his current salary and living above a dry-cleaners. On the other hand…

He was still rehearsing what he was going to say once he actually left the car when a knock on the passenger window startled him. Gold tuned to see Moe French peering through the passenger window with a look that was partly confused, partly amused, and partly reserving judgement.

On the other hand, Moe was about a foot taller than he was, and infinitely broader, and he was holding a pair of secateurs that were rather sharp looking. Gold opened the window.
"Good morning, Mr French," he said, as brightly as he could manage, which, he admitted, wasn't that much.

"Where's Belle?" Moe asked. He peered into the car, looking at the boot rather suspiciously as if he expected to hear his daughter's muffled screams for help.

"She's on a library training course all week," Gold said.

"Did she send you with a message?" Moe asked drily.

"She, erm, doesn't know I'm here," Gold admitted. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell her."

Moe raised an eyebrow. "Right… Gold, you've been parked outside my house talking to yourself for nearly half an hour. D'you want to come in?"

Not really, Gold thought to himself. He was nice and safe and not likely to be castrated with a pair of secateurs if he was in his car. He could very easily stick it in reverse and run away at the first sign of violence on Moe's part. On the other hand, he was never going to get anywhere if he simply fled the scene in panic like he was tempted to do, and the idea of having to make the entire journey again was not a particularly favourable one.

So he let go of the steering wheel, took his foot off the clutch and, however reluctantly, got out of the car, bringing the whiskey with him. He followed Moe into the house that had been Belle's childhood home, and took the offered seat at the kitchen table.

"Now, in my experience," Moe began, "men normally only visit their girlfriends' fathers without their knowledge for one of two reasons. Since Belle's already had her birthday and Christmas is still over six months away, I doubt it's the 'please help me plan a surprise for her' option. So I'm assuming it's the other option. Then again, you and Belle could never be accused of being normal. So tell me, are you here for the reason I think you're here for?"

Gold took a deep breath to try and avoid his words coming out as one long, incomprehensible jumble and being made to repeat himself.

"I would like your permission to marry your daughter, Mr French."

"I thought that's why you were here." Moe put a cup of tea down in front of Gold and exchanged the whiskey for the sugar bowl. He unsealed the cap and took a sniff of the spirit. "Good stuff, this. Excellent choice for a bribe." He added a dash to his own mug and sat down opposite Gold.

Gold, who never normally took sugar in tea, added three spoonfuls for want of something to do with his nervous fingers. He held the older man's gaze, willing him to say something. Anything. At this point he'd take a flat out refusal over the heavy silence that was gradually enveloping the room. The silence was the worst part. Gold knew human nature; he'd said as much to Moe on the first occasion that they met, by accident. He knew that silence in circumstances such as these was not necessarily a good thing.

"Well, my answer really depends," Moe said levelly.

"On what?" Gold managed, rather glad when the words didn't come out as the squeak they could have done.

"On whether or not your intentions are honourable." Moe calmly sipped his tea. "You know Belle's been married before. And you know the circumstances that led to her very short engagement."
Gold nodded, unsure where this was going.

"Gary married Belle because he felt – well, his family felt – that in the circumstances it was the honourable thing to do," Moe continued. "And it was. It was the honourable thing to do. But not necessarily the best thing. We all found that out with hindsight. So, Gold, my question to you is, are your intentions honourable, or good? Because I've learned my lesson, and I won't allow Belle to be coerced into wedlock if she doesn't think it's a good idea, no matter how honourable the intent is. It ruined her life once, and it won't happen again."

Gold finally found his voice, which had been hiding in the back of his throat somewhere during Moe's grave speech.

"Belle's not pregnant," he blurted out, and immediately regretted it. Not subtle, Gold, not subtle… However blunt, the words did seem to make Moe relax slightly. Gold took a deep breath and continued. He felt that at this moment in time, less was more, and the less he talked, the more likely he was to succeed instead of metaphorically putting his foot in it, so he chose his words carefully.

"I want to marry her because I want to marry her, not because I have to marry her."

Moe frowned and waved the secateurs, which he had not let go of once during their exchange.

"If you hurt her, I will hunt you down with the most painful gardening implements I can find and you'll never look at a T-handled dibber in the same way again," he said.

"Understood," Gold replied weakly. "But you'll have to fight my aunt for castration rights, she's already threatened me once." Moe gave a snort of laughter and with it the tension in the room began to break. "Mr French, I love Belle and want to spend the rest of my life with her. That's pretty much it."

Moe sighed and sipped his laced tea.

"Belle and I have always been close," he said. "I know her inside out, or I like to think I do. She can certainly read me as easily as one of her books. I have to say it, she's more alive with you than she ever was with Gary." He laughed again. "Really, I'm the last person who should judge. I know exactly how you're feeling. I had it worse, I was only six years younger than my prospective father-in-law." He reached across, holding out his hand. "Welcome to the family."

Gold shook it and took a gulp of tea to calm his nerves. He was instantly reminded of why he didn't take sugar and grimaced, looking longingly at the whiskey standing on the table between them. He'd forgotten what Belle had said, way back on their first date – there was the same age gap between them as there had been between her own parents. He mentally kicked himself for worrying that Moe would baulk at the idea of a middle-aged man wanting his beautiful young daughter.

It hadn't been so bad. It could certainly have been an awful lot worse.

Now all he had to do was ask Belle.

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You are welcome to Google a T-handled dibber to see precisely why and how one could be painful…
**Chapter Summary**

An unexpected incident occurs on Belle's last day at the café, for an anonymous reviewer who wanted to see Belle and Gold get locked in the fridge at Granny's, and Hermitess on AO3, who wanted to know what Granny's advice from the Carrot Cake epilogue was. Warning – the higher end of the T spectrum, some sex references and innuendo throughout.

**Chapter Notes**

I do apologise for the lack of cupcakes again. I've just moved for the third time since Christmas and I've not had a mind to write due to stress. And, I've only just got the Internet in my new place, so it's taken a while. But here I am again!

Belle's last day at the café before beginning her new job at the library had gone remarkably well until six o'clock. August had made a little poster that was taped up in the window. Congratulations Belle, it read, and she had seen a flush of pride on seeing it. This is Belle's last day with us here at Granny's before she enters the wide world of library services. Please pop in to join us in wishing her all the best in her career. Signed, Granny, Ruby, Emma and August. She had received several well-wishers who had bought an awful lot of cake, and all in all, she could say that the day had been a success, and whilst she would miss the café and the regulars and the constant banter with Ruby and Emma, Belle knew that she was only moving round the corner, and they would still see each other with alarming regularity.

So Belle's last day at the café had gone remarkably well until six o'clock, when she had found herself unceremoniously locked in the fridge with only the cheese and her lover for company. Gold had come to collect her and had been told by Ruby that she was in the fridge taking stock. Gold had come in to find her, and they had, by some means as yet unknown, been locked in.

Belle, personally, suspected that Ruby had been behind it, and voiced this thought to Gold, even though the other waitress had seemed most repentant when she had asked them through the door if they were all right and had told them not to go anywhere and to hang on until she'd run home to get the spare key from Granny.

"Ruby's been wanting to do this ever since you first turned up," Belle said, her teeth chattering. "I'm not quite sure what she hopes to achieve now, months down the line. She'd always intended to force us to share body heat and in doing so get us to admit our mutual attraction. Since we are now living together and share body heat on a regular basis, I'm not sure what she's going to get out of it now."

Gold wrapped his jacket around her and rubbed her back to try and warm her up.

"Maybe it's because she knows that she's unlikely to ever have the opportunity to lock us in the
fridge again?" he suggested. "Or maybe it really was an accident."

"Hmmm." Belle remained unconvinced. "Oh well. We're stuck in here now. How was your day? Has Philip settled in yet?"

"Oh yes. He seems to have taken quite a shine to Dawn, actually." Gold smiled fondly, no doubt at the memory of his new trainee's first meeting with the other young would-be lawyer who worked out of Guildhall. "They'll be hiding under their desks from me together in no time at all."

"You know, something tells me that it is your influence that causes the people around you to hide under their desks," Belle mused. "First Dawn, now Philip."

Gold's reply was non-committal, and he grimaced as he shifted his weight. Belle frowned; it had been barely perceptible unless one had been looking for it, but she had been looking for it. In the last few weeks of living in close proximity, Belle had learned the little tells that showed Gold was in pain, even if he didn't say anything.

"Is it playing up again?" she asked, nodding towards his knee. Gold nodded.

"The cold in here's not helping," he admitted, "but I've been aching all day."

Belle sighed. There were only so many times that the doctors would increase the strength of his prescription, and it seemed that the situation was only getting worse. She didn't like to think of the day when… Belle shook her head and pushed the idea to the back of her mind. Today was a time for celebrating a new phase of her life about to start, not for foreboding thoughts of things that were yet to come.

"Come on," she said brightly, grabbing his arm and pulling him over to the stepladder that she had been standing on to take stock. "Sit down and I'll see if I can't help you out."

Gold did as bid and Belle knelt down between his knees, earning her a raised eyebrow for her troubles. Belle merely rolled her eyes in response and began to press her fingertips into his kneecap, trying to alleviate the dull ache there. She could feel the scar tissue even through his suit trousers, and she sighed inwardly, a sigh that couldn't help turning into a giggle when Gold gave a heartfelt and rather guttural groan of relief. She wondered what it sounded like to the people on the other side of the cold room door. Gold seemed to catch her train of thought.

"What will Granny say when she unlocks the door and comes in to find you on your knees in front of me like this?" he asked.

"She'll probably just leave us to it and tell me to mind her old advice," Belle said. She increased the pressure of her fingertips on his knee and Gold gave a grunt of appreciation.

"Ah yes, Granny Lucas's old advice. I remember. The night of the ball. You never did tell me what it was."

Belle grinned up at him.

"Thankfully, I've never had to put it into practice," she purred.

"I still want to know," Gold said. "I should like to be… prepared."

Belle pressed a kiss to his knee.

"Granny Lucas's old advice to young ladies embarking upon a relationship in the boudoir," she
began, "is never to put your mouth between a man's legs unless he's prepared to return the favour."

"Right." Gold's eyebrows shot to his hairline for a moment. "Well, I don't think we need worry about that one."

"Oh no, dear. I did say I'd never needed to put it into practice." Belle fell silent, and gradually her fingers stilled. "Better?"

Gold nodded, and glanced over at the door.

"How long do you think it'll take for Ruby to get us out of here?" he asked.

Belle shrugged.

"I don't know. At least we know that we aren't going to die of starvation."

Gold opened his mouth to reply but Belle held up a hand to stop him, cocking her head on one side to listen. She felt a wicked little grin spread over her features unbidden as she heard footsteps and voices from outside the café, and metal fumbling in locks as someone opened the main café door.

"I think Granny and Ruby are here," she said.

"Fantastic," Gold replied. "Let's get out of here and get warm."

But as the footsteps entered the café, Belle quickly realised that whoever had opened the door was not coming to rescue them. Her brow furrowed, but her grin remained in place.

"Someone's trying to break into the till," she whispered to Gold.

"And you're smiling because?"

"Because they aren't going to succeed."

Gold raised an eyebrow.

"Belle, how on earth are you going to stop them when you're locked in a fridge?" he hissed.

"Well, to start with, Ruby's already emptied the till for the evening and the money's in the safe. And secondly…"

Belle assumed as demure an expression as she could muster, and then let out a breathy scream.

"Yes! Yes! Oh, yes, harder, yes, yes, YES!"

Gold just looked at her as if she'd gone utterly mad, before the same expression came over his face, and he joined in her cacophony with the broad brogue she only ever really heard in the bedroom. Although not usually quite so loudly.

She wasn't quite sure how long they carried on their masquerade before she deemed it time to quieten down.

"Have we scared them off yet?" Gold whispered.

Belle listened.

"I think so."
They stayed silent for a few moments, and Belle jumped out of her skin as there came a sharp rap on the door.

"Are you two quite finished?" asked Granny's voice.

Belle burst out laughing.

"Well, to be honest, we never actually got started, Mrs Lucas," Gold called. "Please let us out, I'm freezing and my knee's seized up."

"Have you gone stiff?" Ruby's voice asked, barely masking her giggling.

Gold rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to grace that with a reply, Ruby."

The door scraped open and Belle found herself face to face with Granny, who was looking unimpressed, with Ruby doing an uncanny Cheshire cat impression beside her. Graham was standing outside the café talking to a young man in black who was looking extremely shellshocked.

"Well, at least you caught a petty thief into the bargain," Granny said.

"Oh, the expression on his face was priceless," Ruby said, gesturing towards the would-be burglar. "We came in to find him standing behind the till just gawping in the direction of the fridge. I think you've scarred him for life. It really was beautiful to behold." She paused. "You know, you two have just given me an excellent idea for a new burglar alarm system."

"Although if I find any evidence of you going in flagrante behind the tomatoes," Granny continued, "there will be hell to pay. Not only is it unhygienic, I do not take kindly to having my stock destroyed in moments of passion. Remember, chocolate frosting might seem like a good idea at the time, but believe me, cleaning up afterwards is a nightmare."

Belle and Ruby burst out laughing as Gold shook his head in despair. Thankfully, he had got used to Granny and Ruby, or Belle might have been worried for the effect that such comments would have had on him.

The thief outside, however, merely whimpered on catching this tail end of the conversation. Belle had to smile at his discomfiture. Perhaps being locked in the fridge had its benefits after all.
Brandy Snap

Chapter Summary

Emma meets someone unexpected from her past and learns that the whole 'six degrees of separation' thing might have some truth in it.

Chapter Notes

Ok, this one came into my head fully formed as a direct result of watching S2 Ep6 'Tallahassee'. I hereby blame Neal Cassidy for this chapter. Entirely. I also apologise to the Neal fans...

Never in the history of time, thought Emma, had the act of turning round been so powerful as to completely flip one's world on its head. One minute she was standing by the coffee machine and everything was well. The next she was standing at the counter and she didn't know what to do, say or think. She was only continuing to breathe because she was so used to the habit that it was automatic.

The only good thing to come of the situation was that the person on the other side of the counter looked as shocked as she surely did.

"Emma?"

Emma gave a curt nod.

"Hello, Neal. What can I get for you?" she asked, trying to keep the astonishment out of her voice and sound at least semi-professional.

It didn't work.

"I, erm, cappuccino to take away, please." There was a long pause as Emma rang it up with shaking fingers. "So… how are you?"

"Great, thank you." Emma turned back to the coffee machine, taking her time. It was easier when she didn't have to look at him. Of all the blasts from the past to turn up in Granny's, why had it had to be Neal sodding Cassidy who'd walked into the café? "How are you?"

"I'm good."

"Are you local now?" Emma asked lightly. Please say no, she thought. Please don't say I'm going to start bumping into you on a regular basis. And please, please don't say that you're here because Henry tracked you down online. "That's two-ten," she added as she handed over the cardboard cup.

Neal shook his head as he gave her his money and Emma counted out his change.

"No, I'm just passing through. Like always really."
Emma managed a thin-lipped smile. "Emma, I… I don't know what to say."

He fumbled with the plastic takeaway lid, prising it off and pushing it back on. It was a nervous tic of his; he'd had it when they'd first met. He was always taking lids off and putting them back on. Emma sighed and forced herself to behave like a rational adult when every other instinct in her brain was screaming at her to shout and rant and rave at this man, this man who had left her with barely a word and with a baby to boot.

"There's nothing to say, Neal. It was ten years ago. You've moved on. I've moved on. I'm married, I have a son." *Your son*, she added mentally. "We're different people. It happens."

"I guess," Neal said, eventually taking a sip of his coffee. "Crumbs, Emma, of all the people to bump into. It's been a while."

"Ten years," Emma repeated. "A lot's happened in that time."

A small part of her wanted to ask, wanted to know what in God's name he'd thought he was doing when he had left that morning and never come back. When she'd phoned him to find out where the hell he was, having expected to see him three hours prior, he had explained, in a rather distracted voice, that it was complicated and he couldn't explain it, and he wouldn't be back for a while. After two months of ringing and getting no answer, Emma had given up waiting for another explanatory phone call, accepted he'd found a better deal than a waitress just out of the care system, and vowed to be the best single mother she could be.

And now, here he was. Ten years later, looking exactly the same, and Emma was lost for words. Neal sighed.

"I should have explained," he continued.

*Yes, you should have*, Emma's brain snapped, but she said nothing, just shrugging in a gesture that she hoped conveyed 'well, I got on just fine without you, thank you very much.'

"It was complicated," Neal went on, echoing his words of a decade ago. "Everything happened at once, and I had to go away for a while, and we hadn't really known each other all that long, so I didn't want you to get dragged into it all, it was a messy business."

*You'd known me long enough to get me pregnant and hear me say 'I love you',* Emma's mind supplied helpfully. She pushed it down, focusing on keeping a clear head, just listening to Neal's patter of explanations and excuses. He was not the love of her life – that was Graham, and Emma was wondrously happy with her husband. But Neal was her *first* love, and the father of her child, and as such, she was always reminded of him in their son and could never truly forget him. Not that she would trade Henry for the world.

Emma found herself desperately wishing for another customer to come in, preferably a regular that she could strike up a conversation with and force Neal to move on, and her wish was answered when she heard Gold's voice come through the door, his instantly recognisable brogue bemoaning the miserable state of the weather.

"Afternoon, Emma, I…" His voice faltered as Emma and Neal looked over at him.

Gold looked as if he'd seen a ghost. So did Neal; the younger man startled visibly. There was a moment of intense stillness and silence whilst the two men looked at each other.
"Mr Gold, I…” Neal began, but Gold shook his head.

"Don't, Mr Cassidy," he said softly. "Please don't. Nothing you can say will make this moment any easier, so please, don't say anything."

Neal gave a small nod and turned back to Emma. "Bye, Emma. It was nice to see you again."

"Goodbye, Neal."

Gold waited until the door had closed behind Neal before hooking his cane over the top of the cake display and leaning both hands on the counter heavily.

"Of all the people to bump into," he murmured, and if Emma hadn't been listening for it, she wouldn't have heard the quaver in his voice that matched her own.

"Is everything all right out here?" August asked on coming out of the kitchen to find Emma and Gold in a similar stance on either side of the counter, both looking as if the polished wood was the only thing keeping them upright.

"Emma and I've had a bit of a shock," Gold said. "We need a sit down and a cup of tea."

"I'll get you some chamomile," August said faintly.

"A wee drop of brandy in it wouldn't go amiss," Gold added. "Come on, Emma. Let's sit down before you fall down."

Wordlessly, Emma nodded and came out from behind the counter, letting Gold lead her over to a table out of the way in one corner.

"Old client?" she asked, although the jest wasn't even half-hearted and it was in fairly poor taste considering Gold's reaction to the younger man. He shook his head.

"We met in court, yes, but not in a professional capacity."

Suddenly, Emma realised. "When he said he had to go away for a while…” She felt a trickle of ice run down her spine as the pieces of a puzzle that had eluded her for ten years suddenly began to fall into place, the clue being in that single moment of interaction between Neal and Gold.

"When he said he had to go away for a while," she repeated. "He meant it literally, didn't he? He was in prison. He was the driver who killed your son."

Gold gave a curt nod.

"He was sentenced to two years for causing death by dangerous driving; I've no idea how long he actually served," he said quietly. "Yes, he was responsible for Bae's death."

August brought over the tea at this point, apologising that there wasn't any brandy. He hovered for a moment to check that neither of them was likely to faint then tactfully withdrew to leave them to their obviously private and sensitive conversation.

"Oh God…” Emma rested her head in her hands. "I didn't, I just, I… He's Henry's father," she finished weakly.

"I'm sorry," Gold said. "I shouldn't have…”

"I'm sorry; I brought it up," Emma cut him off. "I hadn't had any contact with him since before
Henry was born, before I even knew I was having Henry." She looked up. "Do you think I should have told him? Neal, I mean. He's got a son, and I never told him. I mean, I never wanted anything from Neal, I've always got on fine without him, but isn't it a parent's right to know their child? You know about this legal kind of thing; do I have to tell him? And Henry's never shown any interest in wanting to know about his father… Crumbs, what do I tell Henry?"

"Emma… Emma!"

Gold's voice broke her out of her chaotic spiral of thought.

"If Henry wants to know, then you just tell him the truth," he said. "It's the most honourable thing to do."

Emma blinked. It was such a deceptively simple answer. If Henry wanted to know, she would tell him, and if he didn't, she wouldn't. As for Neal… Emma sighed. It was unlikely that she was ever going to see him again now. He had always been a drifter, never staying in one place for too long, and he had said that he was just passing through. Perhaps it was fate that had caused them to meet like this today; fate that had pulled her and Gold and Neal together. After all, if August had been working the till, if Gold had sent Ashley in to get his tea, it would never have happened. Just chance.

"Em."

Emma turned to see August gesturing towards the clock. It was time for her to finish her shift and pick up Henry from school. She took off her apron.

"Thanks, Mr Gold."

"Thank you, dear." He drained his tea and made to leave the café as well, giving a small snort of hollow laughter. "It's a small world after all."

Emma was still lost in thought when she pulled up outside Henry's school and her son jumped into the passenger seat.

"Mum?" he asked on seeing her so abstracted. "Are you ok?"

"Yes, sorry, fine, I'm fine. How was your day?"

Henry chattered on happily until they reached home. Graham's car was already in the drive, he must have clocked off his shift early having put in overtime last week, and the thought made Emma smile. She would tell him what had happened later, but for now, she felt she had to clear the air with Henry – even if the boy didn't realise anything was different.

"Henry…"

"Yes, Mum?"

"You know, if you ever want to know about your father, you can ask, right? I will tell you."

Henry nodded.

"I know. I've just never thought it was important. I mean, we've always got on fine just the two of us, and as far as I'm concerned, Graham's my dad now."

Emma was so happy she could have cried, but she fought back the urge and hugged her son instead.
"Oh, Henry, you're remarkable."

Henry grinned.

"I know, I'm awesome. Now let's go inside, I'm starving."

Emma smiled as she watched Henry race up towards the front door, which Graham opened before the boy could careen into it. It had been an emotional afternoon, but as long as she had Henry and Graham, Emma knew she could cope with anything.
Cherry Cake

Chapter Summary

Gold gets a surprise whilst working in London one summer's day.

Chapter Notes

I apologise for my recent lack of cupcakes; my writing zen has been elsewhere, I’m afraid. I swear I am going to get round to writing everyone’s prompts, thank you for sending me them, they are in the pipeline.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this little offering (a mini cupcake, if you will), to soothe the tastebuds for a while.

As always in my AU’s, Cara Mallory is the name I give Maleficent, from Carabosse in the Sleeping Beauty ballet. And to reaffirm, all my AU’s are set in the UK as it’s easier for me to write about my home country.

Gold didn’t like the capital at the best of times, but the capital in mid-summer was even worse, and the capital in mid-summer in the middle of an unanticipated heat-wave was pretty much unbearable. It was not often that he had to come to London for a case, but this was one of those rare occasions. One of his cases had gone to appeal, and as such, he and Philip were ensconced in an increasingly stuffy courtroom in the Royal Courts of Justice, watching the barristers thrash it out between them and trying not to roast alive. Gold had to admit, his new trainee was bearing up remarkably well, all things considered, especially when the first major case he worked on had ended up going cataclysmic through no fault of his own.

The judge adjourned the case for lunch and the occupants of the courtroom began to file out. Philip sank down in his seat with a groan and began to half-heartedly fan himself with his case file. There was a laugh and a rustle of black fabric as Cara twisted in her seat on the bench in front of them. Cara Mallory was Guildhall’s ‘tame barrister’ as she liked to be known. If any of the solicitors’ cases ended up in the highest London courts, it was generally Cara whom they called upon to do the honours of representing their clients where they could not. Gold liked Cara, he found her down to earth and thoroughly capable, and she shared his often morbid sense of humour. Sidney had said that she and Regina had studied law together and been good friends and university at one point, although the relationship was now most definitely soured, and neither woman would reveal exactly what went wrong.

“So far, so good?” Cara ventured.

“Apart from the fact I’m melting,” Philip groaned. “Let’s get out of here and get some fresh air.”

“This is London, Philip,” Gold pointed out as he shuffled his notes and papers into order. “There hasn’t been fresh air here since about 1700.”
“You know what I mean.” Philip slipped off his jacket and loosened his tie. “Gold, how the hell can you be wearing a three piece suit and double-cuff shirt in this weather?”

“Practice?” Gold ventured. Philip narrowed his eyes and turned to Cara.

“And you,” he added, eyeing her horsehair wig and black gown. “Why aren’t you doing an impression of a broiled lobster?”

“Ah, you’ve a lot to learn, young one,” Cara said. “I’m naked under this gown.”

Philip spluttered. “What?”

“Ask Gold.”

“Do you mind, Miss Mallory? I have a fiancée.”

“Just teasing,” Cara said. “It is just practice, Phil. You get used to it. I have a coolpack in my handbag to stick under my wig in case of emergencies though. What? I’ve seen high court judges do it! Speaking of the fiancée, though, Gold, this is a new development. Since when have you had a fiancée, and who’s the poor woman mad enough to agree to marry you?”

“Her name is Belle. We’ve been engaged a month.”

“Ah, young love.” Cara smiled. “I sure she’s thinking of you, getting all hot and bothered in here…”

It was Gold’s turn to splutter slightly.

“Right,” he said gruffly, giving his junior a glare when Philip had the audacity to snigger. “You can snigger, young man, but I’ve seen the way you look at Miss Stephens. Outside, lunch, ‘fresh’ air and we’ll meet back here at half-twelve to discuss the plan for this afternoon.”

Ten minutes later found Gold sitting in a blissfully cold, air-conditioned deli, dreading the moment when he’d have to step outside into the veritable furnace that was Aldwych again. Presently his phone buzzed with the arrival of a message. It was from Jefferson.

How’s court?

Soul-destroying, Gold replied.

A few moments later, Jefferson responded.

That good, huh?

It must be at least 35 degrees in that room.

Ah, was Jefferson’s reply, closely followed by well, it’s your own fault for wearing a full suit in this weather. I came into the office in shorts this morning.

Gold’s brow furrowed.

I thought you were on holiday?

I am. Forgot my sunglasses last night.

Gold rolled his eyes, but before he could respond, Jefferson sent him another message: I’ve got
something that will cheer you up for the afternoon session.

Not another one of your ‘Snow White, Cinderella and Red Riding Hood walk into a bar’ jokes. I’ve already lost the will to live.

You wound me, Mr Gold! No, I’m bringing Grace to London this afternoon to see The Lion King at the Lyceum. Meet me outside the court at the end of session and I’ll bring you a surprise.

Gold raised an eyebrow. He wanted to reply, but it was time to return to the court. He would just have to see what Jefferson brought.

X

Gold stepped out of the court buildings and gave a cursory glance around, finding Jefferson nowhere. Too hot and tired to try searching for the man, he cut his losses and rang him.

“Evening, Gold.”

“All right, I’m outside. Where are you?”

“I’m in a restaurant on Northumberland Avenue with Grace.”

“So you were lying about bringing me a surprise.”

“For an extremely well-paid and intelligent lawyer who did post-grad at Cambridge, you aren’t half dense at times. Your surprise is there. Bottom step, wrapped up with a pink bow.”

Gold looked down and caught a glimpse of a pale pink bow fluttering in the breeze, a pale pink bow tied into a very familiar mass of chestnut curls.

“Belle?” he called in disbelief.

She turned and waved, beaming up at him beatifically.

“Oh ye of little faith,” came Jefferson’s voice in his ear. “I sincerely hope your hotel has air-conditioning.”

The call cut off and Gold made his way down the steps towards Belle.

“Jefferson gave me a lift,” she said by way of greeting, slipping her arms around his middle. “I know you don’t like London, so I thought you’d appreciate a friendly face in the big, scary capital.”

Gold laughed and kissed her. She tasted of sunshine and cherry lip balm.

“Oh for God’s sake, get a room. It’s hot enough already without you two ratcheting up the temperature another couple of degrees”

Gold broke away from Belle and saw Cara grinning at them. She turned to Belle.

“He’s been roasting alive in that courtroom all afternoon,” she whispered conspiratorially. “I’d get him out of all those clothes as soon as possible, if I were you.” She wrinkled her nose. “He could probably use a shower as well.”

She fixed Gold with a ‘butter wouldn’t melt’ expression and turned on her heel. “See you tomorrow, Gold. Enjoy your evening.”
Gold shook his head on despair, but Belle just laughed and captured his lips again.

Hmm. Maybe he could grow to love the capital in a heat-wave after all.
Chapter Summary

Ruby's reaction to Belle's engagement. Several reviewers wanted this one. Again, it's a little shorter, but I hope it sates your appetites nonetheless.

Chapter Notes

Dedicated to a lovely colleague of mine, whose Scottish father really wants her to get married so he's got an excuse to wear his kilt again… She is also the one who told me the 'slightly scandalised receptionist' tale that Ruby relates here. It's a true story!

"Well, hello stranger," Ruby said as Belle stepped up to the counter and ordered a cup of tea to take away. "We haven't seen you in here for a while."

"Ruby, you saw me on Saturday at Emma's wedding and I was here in the café last Monday. That's seven days since I was last in here."

"Well, yes, but... I'm used to seeing you in here every day!" Ruby moaned.

"Despite the fact that I've been working at the library for over two months now," Belle said drily.

"Some things are harder to get used to than others," Ruby countered. She poured some hot water into a cardboard cup and added milk, pressing a takeaway lid on, Belle merely looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm not paying for my tea unless it's actually got tea in it," she said plainly. Ruby prised the lid off and realised her mistake, dropping a teabag into the hot white liquid. Belle reached out to take the cup again, but as she did so, something flashed in the light and Ruby held the cup out of her reach, staring down at Belle's left hand.

"Ruby?" Belle's voice was concerned. "Is something wrong?"

"Is something wrong?" Ruby exploded. "Is something wrong, she asks, blithely coming in here with a rock on her finger the size of I don't know what!" She grabbed Belle's hand and held it up in front of her face, pointing out the ring that had most definitely not been there the last time they had met. "When did this happen?"

"I was going to tell you," Belle said, amused by Ruby's reaction – something Ruby herself didn't find at all amusing. "Given your abstraction with teabags this morning, however, I wasn't sure you'd fully appreciate the news."

"Appreciate it! You're engaged, woman! I want to know everything!"

"Ruby, I've got to go to work."
"Well, you'll just have to tell me everything quickly then, won't you?"

Belle gave her friend a succinct and speedy account of the proposal and promised to go into as much detail as Ruby wanted later, after work.

Ruby waited until Belle had left the café in the direction of the library before dancing a little jig on the spot. August had come in during this expression of joy and stood in the doorway for several seconds just staring at his colleague.

"May I ask why you're dancing like a lunatic?" he asked eventually.

"Erm…" Ruby thought for a moment. Whilst Belle hadn't specifically asked her to keep the details of her newly-affianced status a secret, she wasn't sure her friend wanted everyone told; it was her news to spread after all. "No," she said finally, after much deliberation. "You'll find out soon enough."

Thankfully, August seemed to accept this and didn't press any further. Still, Ruby thought it might be a good idea to calm down.

Working in the café and having worked in catering and hospitality her entire life, Ruby had been a witness to many snapshots of many different romances. She had seen shy first glances, awkward first dates, tentative first kisses. She had seen proposals, she had seen wedding receptions, she had seen the aftermath of hotel rooms on wedding nights. She had seen fallouts, breakups, the beginnings of divorces. She had seen so many relationships in so many various stages, but she felt a certain sort of protectiveness towards Belle and Gold, as she had seen their love unfold from its very beginning, a year ago now, when Gold had first come to work over the way and Belle had dropped a fork after exchanging a smile with him through the window. She had seen them past their rocky beginnings and watched them go from strength to strength, and now, she felt almost as if her patience had been rewarded with their engagement. Romance was part of her every day life and she saw it so often that she thought that she might have become too used to it to care; she was glad to find that this was not so.

She grinned again, unable to help it, and looked down to find that she had absent-mindedly started doodling on the order pad. A cake, naturally, Ruby was good at imagining cakes thanks to Granny's expertise. Square, four tiers, white with yellow roses. Or maybe pink. It depended on what colour Belle wanted her bridesmaids to be.

"Ruby… What are you drawing… Is that a wedding cake?"

Ruby quickly tore the top sheet off the pad and stuck it in the pocket of her apron.

"Nope!" she said, overly brightly. August merely raised an eyebrow in response, completely disbelieving.

"Ruby, I know you're trying to keep the fact that Belle's engaged a secret, but you're really not doing a very good job of it."

Ruby opened her mouth to protest and closed it again before she ended up doing an impression of a gaping fish.

"How did you know?" she asked indignantly.

"Well, someone's getting married, and I think you'd make very sure I knew if it was you. Besides, I saw the ring on her finger this morning."
Ruby's eyes narrowed. "Hmm. All right. Yes. Belle's getting married. But don't tell a soul."

"I won't."

"I'll get Granny to take a crossbow to you."

"I won't tell anyone! I swear!"

August threw up his hands in defence against the non-existent crossbow, and Ruby smiled to herself. That tactic never failed.

The end of the day seemed to take an age to come round, but finally, Belle appeared in the café once more and Ruby could confirm that the events of the morning had been neither dream or hallucination and yes, Belle really was getting married and Ruby's celebratory dancing had not been in vain.

"So..." Ruby began once Belle had finished the full, unabridged tale of the proposal. She was dying to ask a question that had been burning at the back of her mind ever since she had first learned of Belle's engagement that morning. "You're marrying a Scotsman."

"Yes..." Belle's eyes narrowed. "Ruby, where are you going with this?"

Ruby grinned.

"Is he going to wear a kilt to the wedding?"

Belle gave her friend a pointed look.

"Ruby, the question you are actually trying to ask is 'is he going to wear anything underneath the kilt?' isn't it?"

"That was going to be my next question," Ruby admitted. "But it's no use asking that if he's not going to be wearing a kilt in the first place." She paused. "Does he even own a kilt?"

Belle nodded. "It's hanging up in a suit carrier at the back of the wardrobe gathering dust. I've seen it. Never seen him inside it though, before you ask."

"What, the suit carrier?" Ruby grinned.

"No, the kilt."

"Not even in pictures?" Ruby was disappointed.

"Ruby, I think the last time he wore it was his dad's funeral. That's coming up for twenty years ago. It probably doesn't fit anymore, and he had the accident since then..." Belle began.

"You still haven't answered the question," Ruby pointed out.

"And I'm not going to. I don't want you scaring him off just after he's asked me to marry him," Belle said, raising an eyebrow.

"Belle!" Ruby exclaimed in mock-offence. "Honestly, you make me sound like some kind of predator!"

"When it comes to men wearing kilts, you are," Belle said drily. "I remember your tales from when you worked at the Royal Clarence."
"Ah yes…” Ruby remembered one particular incident from her tenure as a waitress at the hotel with fondness. She'd been working a Scottish wedding and all the groomsmen – kilt-clad and wearing them like true Scotsmen – had casually started mooning the receptionist. "She was slightly scandalised, but she was young. She got over it quickly."

"I was going to ask what you were talking about, but I've suddenly decided that I don't want to know."

Ruby looked over at the door to see Gold standing there with raised eyebrows. She tilted her head on one side and gave him the once over, trying to imagine him in a kilt.

It didn't work. Especially when, considering she'd known him for practically a year, she could count the number of times she'd seen Gold in anything less than a full suit on one hand.

Gold took a step back towards the safety of the pavement outside under the weight of her scrutiny, and Belle rolled her eyes before going over and hooking her arm through her fiancé’s, acting as a sort of human shield from Ruby's imagination.

She would have to wait and see, but Ruby didn't mind. Kilts were unimportant in the grander scheme of things, after all, when your best friend had found true love and happiness.
Pumpkin Pie

Chapter Summary

Just in time for Hallowe'en, a vaguely spooky chapter. For an anonymous reviewer on AO3 who requested a Dawn/Philip pairing, and my dear Miran, who wanted a Hallowe'en chapter.

This is semi-based on something that happened to me at work.

Philip liked Hallowe'en. If pushed he would probably say that it was his favourite holiday after Christmas. As a child he had always loved trick or treating, and the thrill of seeing carved pumpkins and shop windows decorated in orange and black had remained with him into adulthood. This particular Hallowe'en was not shaping up to be anything special, but the thought of it being the 31st of October once more had put him in a good mood as he entered the office, said good morning to Kathryn and made his way up to the middle floor where his desk was situated. The large open plan office was empty, but this was not in itself unusual; it was quite early in the morning so Alice and Dawn, with whom he shared the space, might not be in yet, and Ashley, the final member of their quartet, was on holiday.

Six months into his training contract, Philip was definitely beginning to feel like he belonged at Guildhall. He got on well with the senior solicitors and had even managed to pacify Regina on one occasion when she had raged herself into incoherency. Whilst his supervisor, the somewhat infamous Mr Gold, was demanding and a perfectionist in the extreme, he also had a sense of humour so dark and wicked that Philip was certain that the next time he saw the older man, he'd have grown horns and a tail. (Or at the very least, a pointy moustache to twirl.) He expected the best, but he let Philip have a good deal of autonomy in his cases and decision-making, allowing him to learn from his mistakes however frustrated they might have made his supervisor. The fact that Philip's first case had gone completely pear-shaped through no fault of his own had acted to bring them together a little more, and they had bonded over a stifling summer spent in the Royal Courts of Justice with Cara Mallory.

Philip looked around at the empty desks as he hung his coat and scarf on the stand and went to switch his computer on. He liked his colleagues, although he would admit to feeling slightly outnumbered when he realised he would be sharing his office space with three women, the two other men on the floor being shut away in their own rooms at either end. The building was an old one with pretty thick walls, and Philip hadn't been sure if any pleas for help would have been heard by Gold or Jefferson. Thankfully, he had not needed to beg for mercy from Alice, Ashley and Dawn. The two secretaries were so calmly efficient that nothing seemed to faze them, not even Jefferson's numerous idiosyncrasies, and Dawn wouldn't say boo to a sparrow, let alone a goose. He glanced over at the cardboard boxes stacked outside Jefferson's office door. In the wake of Mr Fox's retirement three months prior and Regina's promotion to senior partner, there had been a constant stream of movement up and down the stairs as the partners moved around their offices to reflect their new status within the firm. Philip and Gold, neither of whom had any inclination to move, had watched the intricate ballet of boxes and files being carted around with amusement, the difference being that Philip's inherent chivalry meant he would offer to help should anyone drop something, whilst Gold would simply raise an eyebrow or laugh at them.
Jefferson had still not fully moved into his new office despite coming down from the top floor in the middle of August. Philip was quite certain that they would just get everything nicely settled down in time for Dawn to fully qualify as a junior partner in December and move up to the top office, currently occupied by Jones alone – who, from the sounds of it, was revelling in not having to share his working space with Jefferson any more.

Philip hadn't been quite sure what to make of Dawn at first, but having seen the way she worked, he was quite certain that once she was qualified and her tenure with the firm was permanent, her confidence would increase dramatically. In spite of her timidity, she had a fierce sense of justice that Philip loved. He looked over at her empty desk and frowned; it was unusual for him to get into work before Dawn did, but he didn't think too much on it. Perhaps she had simply overslept. It wouldn't be the first time.

It was only after sitting down at his desk that he realised that there was a problem, and he only realised this when the desk spoke.

"Ouch!"

Perturbed by his desk speaking in a voice that sounded remarkably like Dawn's, Philip cautiously pushed his chair back and peered down to find his fellow trainee sitting under his desk, her knees drawn up to her chin and an expression of utter terror on her face. Philip gave a sigh of good-natured despair. He was becoming accustomed to Dawn's habit of disappearing under her desk whenever she wanted to hide from her supervisor or any of her other superiors. She had never yet, however, hidden under anyone's but her own.

Before he could make any kind of comment about the rather unusual situation that Dawn was in, or ask what was wrong with her own desk for hiding under, one of her skinny arms shot out and pulled him out of his chair and under the desk alongside her with a strength that he would not have thought her capable of possessing.

"What's going…" he began, but before he could get any further in his question, Dawn shushed him with a sharp hiss, pressing a finger over her lips."Ok," he began again in a whisper, "why are we under here? And why aren't we allowed to talk?"

"We're hiding from the ghost," Dawn whispered back. "The office is haunted, I'm telling you. It's old Mr Fothergill. I reckon he's after Gold for rearranging his office and getting rid of his pot plants."

"Right…" Philip narrowed his eyes. "Mr Fothergill died over eighteen months ago, right? And this is the first indication of his supernatural state you've had in all that time?"

Dawn nodded, eyes wide. "Well, he was always a bit slow towards the end. It probably took him a while to rise up as a ghost, and then he decided he'd wait until Hallowe'en and give us all a fright."

Philip accepted Dawn's hypothesis and turned to a far more pressing question.

"So, what's Mr Fothergill's ghost done this morning then?"

Dawn's response was a single word.

"Pie."

"Pie?" Philip repeated.

"Pie. There is a pumpkin pie on my desk and I do not know how it got there. No-one knows how it
got there. I've asked everyone! Killian, Kathryn, Marina, none of them know! I even asked Her Majesty if she'd put it there!"

"And what was her response?"

"Her response was 'why would I want to give you a pie, you ridiculous girl?' But that's beside the point. The point is, there is a pumpkin pie on my desk that was not there before, and no-one put it there, ergo, it must have been Mr Fothergill! Ergo, we are hiding. And naturally, I am hiding under your desk because my desk has the pie on and is not safe."

Philip thought about this for a moment. Dawn's logic was sound, even if the situation was rather far-fetched.

"When do you think it will be safe to come out?" he asked. Dawn shook her head.

"Not yet. We'll have to wait until Gold gets in. He's the one that Mr Fothergill wants. He wants to avenge the aspidistras. We'll be safe then."

There was silence for a long time.

"So…" Philip whispered. "We're going to stay under the desk until Mr Gold arrives?"

"Yes."

"What if he's in court today?"

"Erm…" Dawn paused, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'll just have to stay under here all day."

Philip thought about this.

"Ok."

Dawn looked at him as if he had gone slightly mad.

"Pardon?"

"I said 'ok'. If you want to stay under the desk because of Mr Fothergill's pumpkin pies from beyond the grave, then we'll stay under the desk."

"You'll stay with me?"

"I'm hardly going to leave you to the mercy of Mr Fothergill now, am I?"

Dawn smiled coyly. "You want to be my knight in shining armour against the incorporeal?"

"Well, at the rate we're going, you'll probably need to save me. You know far more about it than I do."

They fell into silence for a while.

"Am I allowed to get up and get some paperwork?" Philip asked. "I don't think Gold would think Mr Fothergill was a good enough excuse for shirking off."

Philip got out from under the desk and fetched some files out of his drawer. He cast a glance over at the pumpkin pie sitting so inconspicuously on Dawn's desk; he hadn't noticed it when he'd first
come in but there was definitely a pie there. He went over to it cautiously and sniffed. It smelled like a pumpkin pie, and it looked like a pumpkin pie, but who knew? Maybe Mr Fothergill, God rest his soul, had put it there.

He got back under the desk with Dawn and handed her a file. "Can you make any sense of that?"

They spent the next ten minutes in a cramped but companionable silence under Philip's desk, reading their paperwork, until Philip felt compelled to make conversation. Perhaps it was the fact that they were so squashed in together, he felt that they ought to at least make polite small talk.

"So… Are you doing anything tonight, for Hallowe'en?"

Dawn shook her head.

"Hiding under my dining table."

"I'm sure Mr Fothergill isn't going to follow you home once he's enacted revenge on Mr Gold for his aspidistras," Philip said.

"No, no, I'm not scared of that." Dawn paused and sighed. Whilst she had held no qualms about diving under the desk at the first thought of miasmic pumpkin pies, she seemed to be embarrassed to admit what she was about to say. "It's trick or treaters. I live on my own, on a street with a lot of kids. And normally I like kids, but when there's a pack of them outside in the dark all dressed up demanding sweets… I don't like it. It's easier to hide and pretend I'm not home."

Philip thought of Dawn, sitting alone under her dining table in the dark, listening to people hammer on her door. He opened his mouth to say something and closed it again. If he asked her out, would he just be doing it out of pity?

No. Dawn had asked him if he wanted to be her knight in shining armour, and he did. Not particularly because she needed saving, but because she was cute, and quirky, and she believed in ghosts – and that was pretty cool in itself.

"Do you want to come out with me?" he asked. "We could watch a completely non-scary film, have something to eat, make prank calls to Gold pretending to be Mr Fothergill demanding the return of his pot plants…"

Dawn giggled. "You'd think we were three, not twenty-three."

Philip shrugged.

"What do you think?"

His fellow trainee smiled shyly.

"Do you mean like a date?"

"Yeah." Philip said. "Like a date."

"Then I'd like that very much."

Philip let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

"Morning all, oh, who brought in the pie… Where is everyone?"

Alice's voice came into the office and tailed off on finding it apparently empty. Philip listened to
her slowly come towards his desk and then saw her face upside down as she peered over it.

"Erm… why?" she asked, not even attempting to formulate more of a question than the single word.

"Mr Fothergill's ghost has been bringing us mysterious and suspect pies," Philip explained. "We're in hiding until Gold gets here."

Alice threw up both hands in a gesture of defeat. "Say no more. I'll leave you to it."

After Alice went to get a cup of tea, Philip felt Dawn's fingers curl around his arm. He turned to see an expression of not a little wonder creeping over her face.

"You're the only one who takes me seriously," she breathed. "You could have said 'Dawn's scared because a pie materialised on her desk this morning and I'm humouring her'. But you said that we were hiding."

"Well, we are."

Philip gave a muted squeak as Dawn threw her arms around him and pecked a little kiss on his cheek.

"Thank you," she said. "And thank you for inviting me out."

"Ahem?"

Dawn let go of Philip as if she had been stung and they both glanced up to see Gold standing behind Philip's desk, looking down at them with a raised eyebrow.

"Cosy, Mr Desmond, Miss Stephens?"

"Erm..."

"Philip was protecting me from Mr Fothergill's pumpkin pie," Dawn said defiantly.

Gold's eyebrow remained raised.

"Mr Fothergill."

"Yes."

"Mr Fothergill, my predecessor who died a year and a half ago."

"Yes."

"And his pie being the one on your desk that Jefferson said he was going to bring in early this morning before he left for court. How fascinating."

Gold turned on his heel, still smirking, and went into his office.

Dawn blushed bright red and mumbled an apology, but Philip found that despite being curled up in an uncomfortable position for half an hour, he didn't mind a bit...
It was an ordinary evening by Belle's standards. She'd had a normal day at work, she'd cooked dinner, and now she and Gold were snuggled on the sofa together watching a film that neither of them were particularly interested in.

Presently the phone started ringing, and Belle made a moue of protest as Gold's arms left her to reach for the cordless on the end table beside him.

"Hello?"

Belle glanced at the clock on the wall; it was eleven at night, who could be ringing so late?

"It's for you." Gold handed her the phone. "It's Brenda."

Belle took the receiver with a growing sense of unease. Brenda had been her dad's trusted assistant ever since he had set up the shop, and she had been a good friend to both Moe and Belle over the years. Gold's arm slipped back around her waist, and Belle laced her fingers through his for comfort and courage.

"Hello Brenda."

"Oh Belle, I'm so sorry, it's your dad." Brenda's voice was rough and choked, as if she was fighting back tears, and Belle felt her blood turn to ice in her veins. "He's in hospital."

Belle dug her fingernails into Gold's palm, unable to speak, envisioning a thousand and one terrible scenarios that could have occurred.

"What happened?" she managed to say, finally finding her voice. Her tongue felt thick and alien in her mouth. Beside her, Gold switched off the TV and cuddled her closer into his side, his brow furrowed in question and concern.

"He's had a stroke. I just came into the shop this evening and found him slumped in his chair... I'm at the hospital with him now, they say he's stable at the moment but he's still in intensive care and the first twenty-four hours are crucial, and I'm so sorry, Belle, I'm so sorry."

Belle screwed up her eyes against the tears that were already welling and falling, trying to keep it together for long enough to finish the conversation and make a rational plan.

"It's ok, Brenda, I'm on my way. Just, please, don't leave him alone."

"Of course duck, I'll stay with him till you get here."

"Is he awake? Is he asking for me?"
"No, love, I'm sorry. He's still unconscious. I'm so sorry."

Belle nodded her understanding, fully aware that Brenda couldn't see her.

"I... I'm coming. I'll see you soon."

Brenda said her goodbyes and Belle hung up, dropping the phone into her lap and staring at it, eyes unseeing.

"Belle? Darling, what's happened? Belle?" Gold's voice seemed very far away, as though he were calling her from another room even though he was right beside "Belle, love, please talk to me."

Belle jumped off the sofa, the realisation suddenly dawning on her that every minute she stayed staring at the phone that had been the bringer of such bad news was a minute that she wasn't using to get to her dad.

"Belle!"

Gold followed her out of the room as she rushed into the hallway, pulling on her coat and rummaging frantically for her car keys.

"Belle."

Gold's hands came to rest on her shoulders, a loving but firm grip, and Belle's hectic activity came to a stop.

"Dad's had a stroke," she said, and giving voice to the words made them horribly real. She felt Gold give her shoulders a squeeze and press a kiss to her cheek.

"I'll drive," he said. Belle turned to him and he brushed away her tears.

"Gold..."

"I'm coming with you."

"You've got court tomorrow."

"Screw court. Now, I can appreciate that you want to set off ten minutes ago, but another five to pack your pyjamas and toothbrush won't make a difference. Come upstairs, help me pack a bag and we'll get going."

Belle sagged against Gold and felt his arms come around her and pull her in close, stroking her hair as she buried her face in his sweater.

"I've got you, darling. I've got you."

He was so warm and solid and stoic, an immovable rock against her wild frenzy of panic, and Belle didn't want to let go, for fear of crumpling in on herself with worry.

"What am I going to do without him?" she asked.

"Don't think about it. Not now. We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Let's just get there and find out what's happened for ourselves." Gold paused. "You might want to put some shoes on."

Belle looked down at her fluffy slipper-clad feet and managed a small smile in spite of everything.
They reached the hospital at just gone one in the morning; the roads had been blessedly quiet. A nurse came to let them in and Brenda was waiting for them at the entrance to the ICU where Moe was being cared for. The older woman was chalk white, and the grey in her mane of frizzy red hair was even more apparent under the stark hospital lighting.

"Oh Belle..." Brenda threw her arms around Belle and the two women stayed in their hug for a long time, each trying to draw strength and comfort from the other. Belle was quite certain that she had never seen Brenda so scared. She'd seen her frustrated, angry, but never scared. Brenda wasn't scared of anything; Belle had made that judgment when she had first met her aged eight, and it still held true twenty years later. She had seen Brenda pick up earwigs with her bare hands, shoo spiders away with a simple flick of the wrist and pet growling rottweilers tied up outside the shop. She bred venus flytraps for heaven's sake. To see Brenda so shaken was unnerving.

"He'll be ok," Brenda said eventually, although she did not sound convinced of her own words. "You know your dad, strong as an ox."

Belle wished she could agree. If he really was, then he wouldn't have had a stroke in the first place; he wouldn't be in intensive care.

The doctor came out at that point and took Belle aside into an office to explain everything that was happening. The words flew over her head for the most part, unintelligible medical speak with the occasional terrifying phrase that she could recognise: 'stroke', 'oxygen', 'brain damage', 'operation', 'coma'.

She understood that her father was very ill, and that was all she needed to know at that point.

"Can I see him, please?" she asked.

"Of course." The doctor stood and opened the office door for her. "Right this way."

Gold stood from where he had been sitting in the waiting area with Brenda, and Belle grabbed his left hand as they passed, squeezing hard and dragging him along with her. She was going to need his strength to get her through the first sight of her dad in a hospital bed.

He looked so small. Moe was a big man, tall and broad, the kind of man who filled a room when he walked in. Belle, petite like her mother, had always looked up to him as a giant. But he wasn't a giant now. He was an ordinary man, sick in hospital, surrounded by monitors and machines flashing and beeping.

"Miss French, we're doing everything we can, but your father's condition is very serious."

Belle nodded. "I understand."

The doctor left them alone, assuring them that they could stay as long as they wanted. Belle stood inside the door for a long time, unable to bring herself to go closer and accept that it was really her father looking so small, so helpless.

Gold squeezed her hand.

"Talk to him. He can hear you."

"I don't know what to say," Belle mumbled.

"Whatever you want. He's your father, he'll understand."
Still clinging to her fiancé for dear life, Belle made her way over to the bed and sat down in the chair beside it.

"I'll give you some privacy." Gold kissed the top of her head. "I'll take Brenda home, unless you want me here."

Belle shook her head.

"I do want you here, but poor Brenda needs to go home. Thank you, for everything."

"It's what I'm here for," Gold said. "I'll be back as soon as I can be, and I'm only on the other end of the phone." He paused. "He's in the best place, darling."

"I know."

"I'll be back."

Gold left the room to take Brenda home and Belle stayed lost for words. She took her dad's hand in both of hers, mindful of the wires, and watched the steady rise and fall of his chest.

"I'm here, Dad. I don't know what to say, but I'm here." She sighed. "I thought I'd be better prepared for this. I mean, when Mum got sick I had you to tell me what was happening, prepare me for it, prepare me to lose her. But I'm not ready to lose you too, Dad. I don't know what I'd do without you. I've got Gold, and I love him to pieces, but you're my dad, and I can't imagine life without you on the other end of the phone. Don't you dare go without saying goodbye. Don't you dare!"

Belle didn't want to think about life without Moe. He had always been there for her, always taken her side without question, always loved her and fought for her no matter what. For her whole life he had always been quietly in the background, waiting to catch her if she fell and set her back on her feet, and she didn't know what she would do without his presence as a safety net - never interfering, but always there if he needed her.

She rested her head on the mattress beside Moe's limp hand, resisting the urge to kick something in frustration. It wasn't fair. Her dad still had so much to get from life; he was only in his sixties, and now, this. The doctor had not hidden the truth from her about the severity of her father's stroke. If he survived, it would be unlikely that he would make a perfect recovery. It would be a long, slow, painful process.

She didn't know how long she sat there before there was a gentle tap on the door and she turned to see that Gold had returned. He entered quietly and closed the door behind him.

"Nothing's changed," Belle told him. "I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Take it as a good sign."

Belle let go of Moe's hand with one of hers to close over Gold's on the top of his cane.

"Please stay with me," she said. "I need to be strong, and I just can't do that alone at the moment."

Gold made no response save to nudge his nose against hers and settle himself in the other chair in the room.

"Brenda's fine," he said eventually. "She said to call if there was any change, no matter how small, no matter what time of day or night."
"Thank you," Belle croaked. They lapsed into silence again to wait, although for what, Belle was still unsure. At some point she must have lapsed into sleep, as she woke with a start, unable to place what had roused her. Everything was still the same as it had been; the monitors were still flashing and beeping rhythmically, there were no nurses running around and Gold was still asleep in the other chair, so she assumed that the status quo remained unchanged.

She looked down and found that Moe was looking back at her, awake. One eye was unfocused but the other one was definitely looking at her.

"Dad?" she ventured. "Dad, it's me, Belle."

The doctor had warned her that he might have some memory loss, and the idea that he didn't recognise her twisted in Belle's heart like a knife.

"It's me, Dad," she repeated. "It's Belle, your daughter. Your Belle."

The faintest flicker of recognition ghosted over half his face and the corner of his mouth twitched up in a hint of a smile.

"I'm here," Belle continued. "You just get well."

Moe's eyes closed again and Belle felt herself begin to panic.

"No, Dad, don't go. Not without saying goodbye. Daddy!"

"Sh sh sh..." Gold's hand was soothing on her back. "Sleep is the best healer, you know that."

Belle leaned into Gold's side, trying to absorb some of his stoicism and failing. This was why she needed him with her through this ordeal of a night, and she was incredibly grateful that he had come with her.

Despite his words, though, Belle couldn't help but feel the certain sense of foreboding that had crept into her when her dad had closed his eyes again.

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Moe passed away at half-past six without regaining consciousness again.

Belle didn't know what to do, what to say, anything. She had cried herself dry and she had sat, mute and numb, letting Gold handle the paperwork.

"Come on, darling," he said, taking her hand. "There's nothing more we can do here. Come on, let's go."

Belle nodded and let him guide her through the corridors towards the car. They were going to stay at Moe's house as Belle would need to be on hand to organise the funeral and sort out Game of Thorns and her father's other affairs. As soon as they got in through the front door and she was faced with so many reminders of her life with her dad, she felt the tears threatening again.

"I... I'm just going to freshen up," she said, aware of the quavering in her voice.

"Of course, love. I'll make you a cup of tea."

Belle went upstairs, suddenly feeling lost in her own childhood home. She couldn't face going into
Moe's room, and the spare room furniture was covered with dust sheets to keep it nice. She ended up in her own room - always kept ready for her in case she ever needed it - and the thought of her dad hoovering in there every now and again caused her to break down again. She collapsed onto her bed as she cried, fisting her fingers in the blankets.

She heard Gold come up the stairs and pause outside her door, obviously unsure if she wanted to be alone in her grief. As her snuffling sobs subsided, she heard his voice.

"Belle, darling."

"Come in," she managed.

She didn't turn as he entered and set her mug of tea on the bedside table, staying staring at the wall.

"He still had so much to do," Belle murmured. "There was still so much he didn't get to do. He didn't get to retire and play golf all day. He didn't get to..." She tailed off. "He really wanted grandkids. He never said anything, never wanted to pressure me, but I knew that there was this little seed of happiness when I told him I was expecting. But when I lost the baby, he wasn't sad for himself and his lost grandchild, he was only sad for me. He only ever wanted me to be happy, wanted what was best for me, and he trusted me to know what was best for myself. He wanted to walk me down the aisle next summer, and now he can't!"

She felt Gold's weight shift until he was lying on the narrow single bed behind her, one arm coming round to hold her close against his chest.

"It hurts," he whispered. "I know it hurts, and it feels like you've got this great, gaping hole in your heart that you'll never be able to fill. It hurts like hell, so you just cry until you feel better. I've got you, love."

Belle interlaced her fingers through Gold's. It did hurt, and she knew that in time the pain would lessen. But for now, the wound was fresh, and she would grieve in peace, safe in the knowledge that although her father was no longer with her, Gold would be there to hold her and help her through.
Several eons ago, ANG asked for a Cupcake with Regina/Sid. Erm, this didn’t go quite according to plan. But it does have both Regina and Sid in it!

Regina is getting on her colleagues’ nerves a little more than usual.

It was a perfectly ordinary Thursday morning at Guildhall Law. The birds were singing, the sun was shining, and Regina was shouting at anyone who happened to pass. Mainly Marina, who was almost always within shouting distance. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

What was out of the ordinary was the aforementioned red-headed secretary storming into Gold's office without so much as a pre-emptory tap on the door, pointing at the floor and screaming.

"I cannot work for that woman a second longer! She is a vicious harpy and I have had enough! I quit! I'm leaving before I stab her with a fish fork!"

"Because obviously, you carry fish forks around with you all the time," Gold muttered without taking his attention from his papers. He let Marina give another howl of frustration and stamp her foot before he put down his pen and looked up at her.

"Excellent. I'm glad you've got all that off your chest. May I ask why you chose me to vent at?"

"Because I wouldn't give Her Majesty and Slimey Sid the satisfaction, Jeff's in court, Dawn's at lunch and I couldn't be arsed to go up another flight of stairs to see Killian."

"Right. So now that you've decided to hand in your notice, are you going to enlighten me concerning the circumstances which led to your sudden resignation?"

"Her!" Marina exploded, jabbing her finger towards the floor again. "She's just so, so, so, well, you know!"

Gold leaned back in his chair slightly. It was rare for Marina to lose her cool; not often did the cliché of fiery redheads apply to her. She was frequently cynical and sarcastic, and she made no secret of the fact that she would prefer working for any of the solicitors over Regina (with the exception perhaps of Killian, who had a tendency to address her ample chest rather than her face). But to see her truly riled, truly frustrated, was uncommon enough that Gold wondered precisely what had passed between the two women.

"All right," he said levelly, indicating for Marina to take the chair opposite his desk. The senior secretary declined in favour of pacing up and down the room, occasionally paused to smack one of Gold's filing cabinets with great force.

"Miss Tempest, I understand that you're angry, but could you please desist from abusing my office? And if you continue to distract me from my actual paying work, I might have to start charging you. I believe you're aware of my hourly rate."

Marina stopped hitting the grey metal and muttered an apology to the cabinet, but soon resumed
her pacing. Beneath them, Regina had started yelling again, this time at Sid, who had no doubt come to find out what the previous catastrophe had been caused by. Presently, Alice put her head around the door, looking incredibly frazzled. Gold could blame her; she was doing two people's work at once since Ashley was still on holiday.

"Look," she began, "I don't know what Her Majesty thinks she's playing at, but you've got old Mr Middleton coming in to finalise his Will at half past two, and if we're not careful she'll give him a heart attack. You know how messy it can be if people die suddenly and intestate in their solicitor's reception."

Gold sighed and left his office, making his way down to the bottom floor of the building and the source of the cacophony that could no doubt now be heard in every room.

Cara Mallory was standing outside the door that lead to Regina and Marina's offices, her arms folded and an amused expression on her face. She checked her watch.

"My train leaves in half an hour," she said. "So far, my three hour meeting with Sid's lasted a grand total of twenty-seven minutes when you take out all the interruptions." She jerked her head towards the door. "I'm glad you lot usually come to see me in chambers. Is it always like this?"

Gold nodded.

"Pretty much." He listened to the argument for a few seconds. "I wouldn't worry, my dear," he added, turning back to Cara. "Regina probably just has a serious case of the green-eyed monster because Sid's currently spending more time with you than with her."

Cara rolled her eyes.

"She's a brilliant lawyer," she said. "I'll give her that, however grudgingly. The news that Regina Mills is suing them in small claims court sends most people running for the hills without fail. Why in God's name is she so incredibly insecure that she feels the need to crush everyone in her path to make her feel better? I studied with her and I don't understand."

Gold sighed. "If we only knew, Miss Mallory."

He knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an invitation, knowing that neither of the current occupants would have heard him.

"What?" Regina roared as she saw him come in.

"I've nothing against you letting out your anger, Regina, in fact, it is always encouraged to talk about your feelings rather than keeping them bottled up. But keep it down," Gold said. "I've got a client with a nervous disposition in ten minutes."

Regina gave an exclamation of anger and frustration and threw the papers that she had been gesticulating with in the vague direction of her desk, sending them scattering to the four winds.

"And where the hell is Marina?" she added.

"She's punching my filing cabinets," Gold said conversationally. "She handed in her notice."

"What?" Regina roared. "No, don't you do it, you'll get it wrong," she snapped at Sidney, who had begun to pick up the papers. She strode to the door of her office and wrenched it open, yelling up the stairs. "Marina! Get down here! I need you!"
"You do realise that cleaning up after your tantrums isn't actually part of Marina’s job description, however much she might go above and beyond the call of duty for you as it is."

"Shut up and get out!" Regina screamed. "I don't need you telling me... I don't want you to..." She tailed off. "I am a perfectly capable and rational -" here Gold snorted "-human being!"

"Regina, love..." Sidney began.

"Don't you 'Regina, love' me!"

Gold decided that there was no use in beating about the bush any longer.

"Ms Mills, you are a pain in the arse to work with at the best of times but today our eardrums are suffering under your rage a little more than is usually tolerable and Marina, who has the infinitesimal patience of a saint, has handed in her resignation. Do you see where I am coming from, or am I going to have to tape your mouth shut for an hour? Has anything particular happened to incur your wrath today or did you just get out of the wrong side of Sid's bed?"

Fighting snark with snark appeared to have worked, and Regina stood still and silent for a moment, her mouth gaping like a fish.

"Excellent, peace in our time," Gold said. He left them to meet Mr Middleton just as he stepped into reception. Marina had thankfully left his office without too many visible dents in it; and Gold surmised that she was hiding out in Jefferson’s room until she had cooled down.

The next hour passed with blessed quiet from the offices on the floor below, but Gold's peace of mind was to be shortlived when he opened his office door to see Mr Middleton out and found Regina standing on the other side of it, her mouth pressed together in a thin line.

"We need to talk," she said through gritted teeth.

Gold raised one eyebrow.

"Really? I've said all I have to say."

Regina sighed and rested her forehead on Gold’s doorframe.

“It’s my mother,” she ground out. “She’s coming to stay.”

“And this has caused the world to implode dramatically and take your already short temper into the negative figures.” Gold mused politely.


“It’s hardly the end of the world.”

Regina snorted. “You’ve never met my mother.”

“I have actually.”

Regina looked up at him sharply.


Regina continued to regard him warily. “Who won?”
“I did, of course.”

“How on earth did you manage that?” Regina asked.

“Your unswerving faith in my ability to do my job is most flattering,” Gold said drily.

“Gold, I know my mother. She’s a heartless witch when she’s suing someone. In fact, she’s a heartless witch most of the time.”

“Precisely. You just have to know how to handle her correctly.”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Does accidentally pushing her into a cheval mirror count as handling her correctly?”

“That depends. Who came off worse from that particular altercation?”

“The mirror,” Regina grumbled, “and it cost a fortune to get it repaired. My mother is remarkably resilient.”

“In that case, destroying bedroom furniture is probably not the best way to go about surviving a visit from mummy dearest.”

Regina sighed.

“She’s just so… Nothing’s good enough. She wants me to be better than she was but I’m taking too long about it. Do you ever have this problem?”

“Given that both my parents are dead, not currently, no.”

Regina huffed and fixed him with a pointed look.

“Did you ever have this problem?”

“My father was a shipbuilder and my mother was a housewife. I was doing better than them when I took my Highers.”

“Ugh. Christ, I never thought I’d be jealous of you.”

“There’s no need to sound quite so revolted at the prospect,” Gold said. Regina ignored him and sat down on Ashley’s vacant desk with a heartfelt sigh.

“Did Marina really hand in her notice?”

“I don’t think she meant it,” Gold said, settling himself in the desk chair. “She’d just had enough of you being unreasonable.”

“I am not unreasonable!”

Gold didn’t reply, and fell to pondering how much of Regina’s personality could be attributed to her mother. As Cara had said, there was an insecurity behind that prickly exterior, a constant craving need for love, approval and respect, all three of which she demanded in such a myriad of different ways that the ultimate end result was that of a neurotic control freak on a power trip. Was it her mother’s influence that had shaped her like that? How much was Regina herself?

“Did you ever want to be anything else?” he asked presently. Regina turned her head towards him sharply.
“Pardon?”

“Did you always want to be a lawyer?” Gold rephrased his question. “Was it always your passion or did you ever want to be anything else?”

“I knew I was going to do this job for as long as I can remember,” Regina said coolly.

“That wasn’t what I asked. You’re sidestepping the question. I didn’t ask if you knew. I asked if you wanted. That you were destined to follow in Mummy Dearest’s footsteps was never in any doubt. She is, as you said yourself, a remarkably resilient woman.”

Regina was silent for a long time.

“Showjumping,” she said eventually. “I wanted to be a professional showjumper. Mother stopped my riding lessons when I was sixteen. I needed to focus on my education.”

“Do you regret it?” Gold asked.

“What? Of course not.” Regina snorted. “What do you care anyway? Why are we even having this conversation?”

“You started it, Ms Mills. I believe you were the one who came to me, and given that this is such a rare occurrence I assumed you wanted to get something off your chest and your usual confidant wouldn’t do. I am turning into quite the agony aunt today. I should start a column in the Express and Echo.”

Regina just gave him a withering look and left the room, but the conversation – disguised as a battle of wits as it had been – seemed to have done her good. It was clear to Gold that his colleague’s feelings towards and concerning her mother were incredibly confused, but maybe she was starting to see a clear path. He got up from Ashley’s desk and was about to go back into his own office when another voice arrested his attention.

“So what’s up with Her Majesty?”

Marina was peering out of the doorway of Jefferson’s room. Gold had been correct in his assumption that she’d been hiding out in there.

“PMT,” Gold said cheerfully. “Pre-Mother Tension. I think she’ll be all right now but please, do feel free to come up here and take apart some filing cabinets should it all get too much. Just as long as they’re not mine.”

Marina rolled her eyes and followed her employer down the stairs, leaving Gold to his work and a hopefully quieter afternoon…

Note: “PMT – Pre-Mother Tension” is a line from Berlin Berlin, a German sitcom.
Chapter Summary

Several people have asked for the ‘do you want kids’ talk in various different guises – so here it is, in a slightly unexpected format. I hope you enjoy nonetheless.

Belle was incredibly puzzled as she rang Archie's doorbell. She'd received a call from him at lunch time, saying that he was concerned about Ruby, and would Belle please come over and talk to her? Worried and intrigued in equal measure, Belle had gone over to the psychiatrist's after she'd finished at the library, armed with doughnuts, Ruby's favourite comfort food.

Her first thought was that Ruby and Archie had had a fight. She dismissed the idea almost immediately; Ruby had told Belle every time she and Archie had fought (all two and a half occasions); even when it was the middle of the night, Belle was always the first to know.

Granny answered the door.

"Thank God you're here," she said. "I don't know what's up with her. She won't talk to me, or Archie, she's just sitting up in the bedroom refusing to come out."

The poor woman was incredibly upset. Despite the vast age gap between them, she and Ruby had always been very close – after all, Granny had raised Ruby from the age of six – and it obviously hurt her that her granddaughter wouldn't confide in her.

Archie was hovering in the hallway behind Granny, looking nervous.

"If it was something I did or said," he began, "tell her I'm really sorry, even though I don't know what it was."

Belle smiled and patted his arm on her way past. "I'm sure you haven't done anything, Archie," she said. "I'd know about it if you had, believe me."

She went upstairs and knocked gently on the bedroom door.

"Rubes, it's Belle. Can I come in?"

There was no reply.

"I brought doughnuts," Belle wheedled. "Please, Ruby?"

There was a long silence, and then a very small-sounding 'yes'.

Belle tentatively opened the door and inserted herself into the room. The curtains were drawn despite it still being light outside, and Ruby was sitting in the centre of the bed. She was curled up with her chin on her knees, hugging her plush wolf and staring at the door. She'd been crying, that much was self-evident.

"Oh Ruby…" Belle kicked off her shoes and got onto the bed next to her friend. "What's up, babe?"
Ruby just gave a choked little sob, burying her face in the wolf and pointing a shaking finger at her bedside table. Belle leaned over and saw it, the thing that had made her usually bright and loquacious friend so emotional.

It was a pregnancy test.

A positive pregnancy test. There in blue and white; Ruby was having a baby.

Belle said nothing. She knew all too well the fear that unplanned pregnancy brought, and she knew from experience that no words could help assuage it. Nothing she could say would make Ruby feel any better, so she just wrapped her arms around her friend and waited for her to speak. She wondered at their sudden reversal. All the time that they had known each other, it had always been Ruby who had been the strong one; Ruby who had been the one to comfort and protect her friend, Ruby who always knew what to say and how to say it and how to make Belle feel better no matter how bad the circumstances. Now it was up to Belle to return the great gift of friendship that Ruby had given her, to be the strong one and help her best friend through her time of need. She kissed the top of Ruby's head and gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze.

"It's silly, really," Ruby said eventually, her voice muffled by the wolf until she finally turned her face up towards Belle and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. "Just the other day, Archie and I were talking about kids. We've been thinking of getting a bigger place, you see, perhaps out into the countryside a bit more, more room for Pongo to run around in. We were talking about having a big country church wedding, four kids, the whole white picket fence charade. And we both wanted it." She sighed. "I just didn't expect it to be so soon." She snorted. "I even know when it happened; it was Emma's wedding. Emma got married, you got engaged, I got pregnant."

Belle sighed and held out the bag of doughnuts. "Ruby, you've got to tell Archie."

Ruby took a doughnut and turned it over in her fingers, picking at it rather than eating it until it broke and spilt jam all over her, and she was forced to lick it away before she made the sheets sticky and strawberry-scented.

"It's just so sudden," she said, ignoring Belle's previous words. "My life's never going to be the same. Ever. For about an hour I just sat here thinking about everything that I needed to do, everything I needed to buy... I started thinking about folic acid, and that's something I've never thought about in my life before. And then I realised that this is it, this is real, this isn't just me and Archie giggling over the really embarrassing names we'd give our kids. So then I spent another hour forgetting everything I'd just been thinking about and just thinking 'Oh my God, I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby, another person, and he or she will be part of my life forever'. And then I started getting worried because I thought 'what if I forget I have a baby and leave it in Tesco carpark? What if I get bored of it? A kid is for life, not just for Christmas...'. And I'd like to be ready, I'd like to think I'm grown up enough. I'm nearly twenty-eight, after all. But right now I just feel like a scared little girl again."

Belle took the mangled doughnut from Ruby's hands and put it back in the bag before leaning in and giving her once more weeping friend another hug. She had been through exactly the same thought pattern herself when she'd first found out she was pregnant.

"It's scary," she agreed. "It's an absolutely terrifying prospect. But you've got Archie, and Granny, and me and Emma. We'll all help you out. We're all here for you, no matter what happens." There was a long pause whilst Ruby blew her nose and dried her eyes again. "I did mean what I said about you needing to tell Archie though."

Ruby shook her head.
"I don't want to."

"I know you don't." She hadn't wanted to tell Gary either. "It's frightening, and actually saying the words 'we're having a baby' makes it all the more real. But you've got to."

Ruby looked at her with a pleading expression in her eyes.

"Will you stay? Please? Just for moral support, you know."

Belle nodded. As incredibly unlikely as she thought a volatile reaction from the timid psychiatrist would be, she wasn't going to ignore her friend's request to be loaned strength when she needed it most.

"Of course."

"This isn't what we planned," Ruby said.

"But at least it was planned eventually," Belle said. "It's just happening a little sooner than expected. The steps of the grand master plan are being taken out of order, but you'll get to the end in time."

Ruby nodded.

"Will you get Archie please?"

Belle nodded and left the room. Archie was sitting on the bottom step with his head in his hands, and Granny was trying to coax him into accepting a mug of tea.

"Archie," she called down to him. He jumped up like a shot and ran up the stairs towards her, stumbling over his own feet in the process. He entered the bedroom and Belle slipped in behind him, closing the door.

Ruby got off the bed and took the few steps over to Archie, taking both his hands in hers.

"Archie, I have something very important to say," she said, before taking a brief glance over his shoulder at Belle and then refixing her eyes on her boyfriend. She took a deep breath, then seemed to deflate a little. "I think maybe you ought to sit down."

"Ok…"

Archie let himself be led over to the bed and sat down beside Ruby, who took another deep breath.

"I'm pregnant."

As Belle would later attest, Archie's face ran the full gamut of expressions from 'shocked' through to 'amazed' via 'terrified' and back again, and for a moment Belle was very glad that he was sitting down lest he faint, before the widest grin imaginable spread over his face and he said one word.

"Wow."

"Wow?" Ruby echoed.

"Wow," Archie affirmed. "Ruby, I'm going to be a dad. You're going to be a mum. We're going to have a baby. It's as simple as that, and it's the most amazing thing in the world. So yes. Wow."

Ruby looked for a moment as if she was going to say something, but she appeared to think better of
it, and settled instead for throwing her arms around Archie in a bone-crushing hug.

"You know, we'll have to stop procrastinating about house-hunting now," Archie pointed out, stroking Ruby's hair. He kissed her cheek. "Oh Ruby, I love you."

They stayed in their embrace for a long time, and Belle was about to make her excuses and leave them in privacy when Ruby spoke again.

"Of course, now we've got to do the really scary part," she muttered. "We've got to tell Granny."

Belle laughed. "You're on your own for that one."

She said her goodbyes to the newly-expectant couple and left the room, confident that her presence was no longer required, but assuring Ruby that she need only pick up the phone and Belle would come running to her aid. Granny was still hovering at the bottom of the stairs as Belle came down.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

Belle smiled.

"Everything's going to be perfect," she replied. "Just wait and see."

X

Belle knew she was going to have to stop thinking and start talking when she realised she had read the same page of *Sense and Sensibility* three times without noticing. She and Gold were sitting on the floor in the living room, or rather, Gold was sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa and Belle was lying on the floor using her fiancé's lap as a pillow. She sighed and put the book down, splayed over her stomach.

"Gold…"

"Hm?"

She turned her head slightly to look at him, watching as he closed his own book and put it on the sofa to give her his full attention.

"I was thinking…"

She broke off, completely unsure of where to begin. Ever since Ruby's revelation that afternoon, she had been thinking about children, and it made no sense to her. She had never been particularly maternal; she had never felt broody when around Ashley and Alexandra or Henry, and she wasn't feeling broody now. A small part of her always thought about how her first pregnancy had ended, and that was enough to chase her thoughts away from children who had her nose and chestnut curls and Gold's eyes of bittersweet chocolate…

It was more that she had come to a realisation, a sudden knowledge that unlike Archie and Ruby, she and Gold had never, ever discussed starting a family.

Given both of their backgrounds, Belle couldn't say that she was entirely surprised that this was the one topic that they had both steered clear of for so long. Although they both knew the pain of losing a child, they knew it from different circumstances, and neither could hope to fully understand the other's feelings as they had never been in exactly the same position. Every time it had crossed her mind to bring up the subject, Belle had chased the thought away with the proviso that Gold would be fifty next year; he probably didn't want to be getting into new family dynamics
with her twenty-five years after starting his first family. The last thing she wanted him to think was that she was trying to substitute his dead son.

But what if he was working on the same principle; never mentioning the subject because of her experiences? Some women, Belle knew, had a tragic natural disposition to multiple miscarriages, and whilst she had never been told that this could happen to her, she still could not help but feel a certain fear of becoming pregnant again lest she lose another spark of life. Maybe he didn't want to feel that he was pushing her towards having a baby if he didn't know whether she felt completely comfortable with the idea of another pregnancy.

She sighed again, letting out a long breath as she tried to formulate her thoughts into some kind of coherent speech, Gold's dark eyes watching her calmly. They could be thinking all these things, but they'd never know unless they actually talked about them.

"I was thinking," she repeated, more firmly and sure of herself. "For all that we talk, we've never really discussed the future, you know... having a family."

Gold was silent for a moment, the little frown line appearing between his brows as he thought. "No, I don't suppose we have."

"I mean, we're getting married next year, and it's not an unreasonable thing for an engaged couple to talk about," Belle continued. "Have you ever thought about it?"

Gold nodded, curling his fingers into her hair.

"I have thought about it, yes. Belle, sweetheart..." he began. "You've been acting a little bit off ever since you came in..." He placed his other hand on her book over her abdomen. "Are you..."

Belle shook her head and put her hand over his. "No, I'm not pregnant." She studied his face carefully for a reaction; she had felt the incredible urge to add 'sorry' to the statement, but there was nothing in his expression to show that he was saddened or disappointed by her last words. He wore a mask of neutrality, waiting for her to speak again. He had, quite rightly, assumed there was more to be said.

"Ruby is," she said eventually. "And although it's completely unexpected, she said that she and Archie had talked about having children, they'd talked about a future family. It made me realise that it's something we've never spoken about. And I wondered if we've both been thinking about it but just never brought it up because we're each worried about what the other will think in relation to the past."

Gold gave a slight nod. "I understand."

"So this is me being brave and bringing it up. Children." Belle let out a long breath and silence reigned supreme for a few moments until she began to feel uncomfortable with the stillness and began to speak again. "If we imagine, for the moment, that we hadn't had the experiences we've had... Would you want to have children? Damn, that's a stupid thing to say, of course we can't just forget everything that's happened in the past, that would defeat the entire..."

"Belle."

Gold gently placed his index finger over her lips and she quietened.

"Belle, I would love to have a child with you, in the future. Whether or not we've been through what we've been through wouldn't change that. I have no doubt that you would be an amazing mother. But it's not the be all and end all. If it happens, then it will be wonderful, but if it doesn't,
then it doesn't matter. We have many years ahead of us and anything could happen. You are more than enough to make my life complete, and your wellbeing is what's most important, and that should come into consideration first." He gave a wan smile. "That's one of the reasons why I never mentioned the subject. It's your body. It should be your decision."

Belle took his hand and moved it away from her face, playing with his fingers.

"So what's the other reason?"

"Pardon?"

"You said one of the reasons. What's the other?"

The corner of Gold's mouth twitched. "I'm forty-nine, Belle. I'm a bit past my peak. You're still in the prime of your life and, it must be said, your fertility. I didn't want to disappoint you." Belle sighed and squeezed his fingers. "That's it, in a nutshell," he continued. "What about you? To ask you your own question."

Belle nodded.

"In a perfect world, I wouldn't hesitate to say yes, I'd love to have kids with you some day. And even now, in our beautifully imperfect world, I would love to have kids with you some day. But this is the world we're in, we have been through the lives we've had, and I have to be honest and say that I'm scared. Not just of the possibility of losing another baby… I suppose the other real reason I never broached the subject was Bae. I never wanted you to think I'd forgotten him, or was trying to replace him."

"Belle, no-one will ever be able to replace Bae. He was unique and irreplaceable. But that doesn't mean I don't have enough room in my heart to love another child."

Belle released her grip on his hand and raised herself up on her elbows so that she could kiss him. They had only scaled the tip of the iceberg, of course. There was more to be said, much more, but at least their thoughts were out in the open; there was no fear of bringing up the subject any more. Their feelings had been aired and now they could be put aside calmly, ready for the next time that the discussion arose. Neither would be scared of the topic now that misappreciations had been put to rights. Perhaps it wasn't a discussion for right now, perhaps it was one that they would wait until they were married before they revisited, but they were on the same page now. If children happened in the years to come, then it would be a good thing that they would welcome – if with a little trepidation – but if they didn't, then it wouldn't be a bad thing. After all, Gold's words were true. The entire future lay ahead of them, and anything could happen.
Stollen

Chapter Summary

The Guildhall office Christmas party.

Chapter Notes

In keeping with the festive season, a Christmassy cake. 'Including the alcove where the cooker is' – included as homage to my dear friend Miran… Stop grinning, young lady…

Killian/Hook fans… This cupcake is not particularly kind to him. You've been warned…

It had been a long Friday and Gold could safely say that he was looking forward to going to bed with Belle and not letting her get out of it until at least one o'clock in the afternoon. On Sunday. He knew there was an open bottle of wine in the fridge, and he had got it out, poured the remainder into a glass and was about to take a, as he thought, well-deserved sip, when Belle's voice stopped him.

"What are you doing?"

At first thinking that she was merely irritated with him for not asking her if she wanted any wine, Gold did not respond, and he only realised something was slightly amiss when she crossed the kitchen and put her hand over the top of the glass. In doing so, he was forced to take a good look at her, to find that instead of her jeans and fluffy cardigan, as he would expect to find her wearing at that point in time on a Friday evening, Belle was dressed in a scarlet cocktail dress and stilettos that left her almost taller than he was.

It was then that he remembered the occasion. It was the Office Christmas Party, an event so momentous that it was most definitely worthy of capitalisation. The only date on which the entire office ever met in one place that was not their workplace. Like Christmas itself, it happened infrequently enough that everyone had enough time to blot the last one from memory before they embarked upon the next festive extravaganza, during which they would be conveniently reminded of the last one and vow never to go again – just as they had done the previous year.

Gold had not yet experienced a Christmas party with Guildhall, having accidentally-on-purpose forgotten about the last one during his first year of tenure there, and he was perfectly happy to forgo the occasion once more in a repeat of the activities that kept him from the previous. He frowned when Belle took the wine glass away from him and put it down on the kitchen table.

"Do we have to go?" he asked.

"Yes," Belle said plainly. "I think it'll do you good to socialise with your colleagues outside of your office."
"I do socialise with my colleagues outside of the office!" Gold protested. "We had Jefferson and Alice over for dinner the other day!"

"Jefferson doesn't count."

"We went to Marina's engagement party!"

"For a grand total of fifteen minutes."

"I politely ignore Dawn when I run into her in the supermarket lest she jump into a freezer cabinet to get away from me!"

Belle folded her arms and gave him a pointed look, one that told him quiet clearly that he wasn't getting off that easily.

"You came to my work Christmas party at the library," she said. "I don't see why we can't go to yours. Especially since we've already said we're going and we've paid."

"That was different." Gold huffed. "Yours was at the library, there was free cake, and the strongest drink there was mulled cider. Besides, all your colleagues are perfectly decent and tolerable people. I don't like my own."

"Darling, I know how charmingly misanthropy suits you. In fact it suits you almost as well as your suit does." Belle plucked a stray hair off the shoulder of the suit. "But it is really not in keeping with the festive spirit. I already said, when the idea was first mooted, that I wanted to meet all your colleagues properly."

Gold racked his brains trying to think of the occasion on which he and Belle had first discussed the party, but he kept coming up with precisely nothing, and he admitted defeat.

"When was that?"

"Beginning of November. We were having breakfast in bed if I recall correctly."

Well, at least that explained why he was drawing a blank. Breakfast in bed usually meant that his mind was rather more occupied with the there and then rather than the hypothetical events of the future.

"Do we have to?" he repeated, only slightly ashamed of the unapologetic whine in his voice. "I already know what will happen. Everyone will be plastered, Jones will attempt to fondle a waitress, Dawn will beat a hasty retreat under the nearest table – not necessarily our own – and Jefferson will end the evening despairing that his adult colleagues are able to cause more trouble than his eleven-year-old daughter."

Belle was not budging She leaned in close.

"Gold, I'll make you a deal. We go to your Christmas party. You do not get horrifically drunk and you behave in a civilised manner towards your colleagues. And afterwards, we come back here, and we can have sex on any and every available surface in the house."

Gold looked at her, considering this proposition.

"Including the alcove where the cooker is?"

"Provided you switch it off at the mains beforehand, yes, including the alcove where the cooker
It was tempting. Too tempting.

"All right, all right. You win. We'll go." He reached round her for the glass. "Now give me the damn wine."

"Gold..." Belle raised one eyebrow at him and he matched the expression.

"I'll call a cab. Believe me, there's no way in hell I'm driving. I'm going to need more than lime and soda to get through this..."

X

When they arrived at the restaurant, before they had even made it four steps towards the bar or the long table at the back that had been set aside for them, they were met by Alice, who was wearing what had become her default expression of 'exasperated'; completely at odds with her tinsel hair ties.

"Thank God you're here," she said, coming over to them from the bar with a vodka and tonic in one hand and a glass of red wine in the other. "Sidney's on his fourth mojito and Dawn's already looking like she wants to dive under the table of the couple next door."

"So which is yours?" Belle asked Alice, eyeing the two glasses and their wildly varied contents.

"What? Oh no, these are both for me." She raised the vodka tumbler in a toast. "Happy Christmas. I'm glad you didn't miss dinner. You've got five minutes to get yourself a drink before they bring it out."

Gold buried his face in one palm.

"Whiskey," he mumbled to the leather glove. "I need scotch and I need it now."

"Darling, we've only just got here," Belle said, leading him over to the bar. "At least wait until after the first course. Besides, you know you have much nicer, more expensive whiskey at home. Think of it as the light at the end of the tunnel."

Having procured two large glasses of wine, Belle led Gold over to their table. Arriving late as they were, they had no choice of seats and squeezed on one end next to Sean and Ashley, the former looking ever so slightly scared and the latter looking worryingly calm, as if she had seen this all before. Gold snorted; knowing his colleagues she probably had. He looked back along the table, trying to gauge just how drunk everyone already was. It was a sorry state of affairs when the only way to survive dinner with the entire complement of one's colleagues was to turn up to the encounter completely rat-arsed. Why did they even have this ridiculous tradition? With a sigh, he realised that Fox and Fothergill had probably instigated it and no-one had had the heart nor the motivated to change.

A little further down the table, Regina and Sidney were ostensibly engaged in some in depth discussion about a case they were working on, but from the way Sidney kept playing with – and subsequently dropping – his cutlery, Gold suspected that a rather high-stakes game of footsie was going on under the table, a game that Regina was winning hands down. Beside them, Marina and her fiancé Eric were explaining their planned loft conversion to Kathryn and Jim, complete with remarkably detailed technical drawings on the back of the napkins. And at the other end of the table, Killian was knocking back...
"Ashley, what in the name of all that is holy is Jones drinking?" Gold asked.

"Eggnog," Ashley replied conversationally. "We got a complimentary eggnog when we arrived but none of us like it apart from Dawn, Marina and Killian so he's commandeered about twelve servings."

"I like eggnog!" Belle protested.

"Ah yes, but you weren't here to claim it," Ashley said knowingly.

Killian raised his glass towards Gold in a toast – God only knew to what – and took a swig. Gold hoped it that the man was only swaying in his imagination. It was no secret that Guildhall social outings were rare occasions, doubtless owing to the fact that they had been banned from several local establishments thanks to Christmas holiday hijinks. Gold was infinitely glad that all these infamous incidents had occurred before he had joined.

Luckily, at that juncture, the first course arrived, and Gold distracted himself from whatever was going on at the other end of the table by engaging in Ashley, Sean and Belle's discussion, which was predominantly on the topics of either Alexandra, Ruby's impending new arrival, or their other mutual friends in the precinct – apparently David was getting Mary Margaret a puppy for Christmas but was having some trouble working out where to keep it until the big day. All the while though, he couldn't help but wonder about the state of his colleagues. Dawn and Philip he could trust to be sensible, even if they were scared off before their main course arrived. Jefferson, long since established as the office mother hen, would at least stay sober long enough to make sure that he had poured everyone into a taxi. Jones, on the other hand…

Jones was Irish, and Gold was Scottish, and despite their personal and professional opinions of each other, each respected the other man as one who could hold his hard liquor and do his country's whiskey proud. Needless to say, Gold found it both unexpected and incredibly hilarious that the one drink to floor his usually extremely tolerant colleague was the humble and innocuous eggnog. Gold glanced back down to the younger man's end to the table. He was definitely swaying now, there was no trick of the light or slip of the imagination about it. Gold would not be at all surprised if Killian ended up snoring into his dessert.

At least he couldn't fault the food. The restaurant, Darlings, had only recently opened, and that was probably why they hadn't had any trouble booking. It was about the only place in the town where their reputation did not precede them. As the evening wore on, he was just beginning to think that maybe this was one office party he might just be able to survive and not live to rue. Good food, not bad wine, and Belle's hand on his knee under the table – although whether that was to reassure him or prevent him from running away was debatable. But then he saw it: the moment it happened and the entire evening went to hell in a fast car, just as he had known it would. He had been waiting patiently for the moment for the past five minutes, watching as Killian's eyes tracked their waitress (Wendy, according to her name badge) slightly hazily round the table, and he could almost play out word for word what would happen when she got to him.

"What did you order for dessert, sir?" she asked.

"Can't remember, darling. Can I have you instead?"

In the middle of the table, Jefferson groaned and covered his face with both hands.

"Get your paws off my sister!"

Dawn gave a squeal and shot out of her seat as the waiter at the next table made a swing at Killian,
who reciprocated, passing by Dawn's ear rather too closely. Philip grabbed her and together they backed off from the table.

"My dear," Gold murmured, leaning into Belle's side, "I think this would be an excellent time to absent ourselves from the party."

Belle looked at him and nodded her agreement.

"Don't say 'I told you so'," she muttered.

Gold gave a gasp of mock offence. "I wouldn't dream of it!"

"I can't say I blame you," Ashley said, continuing to eat her dessert, quite happily ignoring the fracas at the other end of the table. Jefferson was now standing between the two men trying to act as a mediator – Gold had half a mind to tell him it wasn't worth it, both looked particularly murderous even if Killian seemed about to plant his face into the floor at any moment and Marina, ever the patient problem-solver, was smoothing things over with Wendy and the restaurant manager, who had rushed out when the shouting had begun. "Well, enjoy your weekend. See you Monday. Don't worry, we already told Her Majesty that if anyone ended up in jail tonight she'd be bailing them out." She paused. "It's a good job everyone already paid…"

Gold shook his head in despair and let Belle slip her arm through his before walking her out of the restaurant. Outside, Philip and Dawn were talking in muted tones. Gold couldn't make out what they were saying, but from the way Philip was cupping Dawn's face and stroking her cheeks, he guessed that his trainee was trying to calm down his girlfriend. Dawn, naturally nervous around her colleagues as it was, had also forgone the party last year and had only attended this one at Philip's request. This was not a good first experience of an office party for the poor girl, and Gold felt a swell of sympathy for her, as did Belle, who left him to go over and offer her words of reassurance.

Gold decided not to overcrowd her and instead made himself useful ordering a taxi for them all. He knew that Dawn lived on the way to their own house, and it made sense to save the couple one worry for the night.

At least they now had a very good excuse not to go to the next Guildhall social gathering…

X

When they finally got home, Gold made a beeline for the drinks cabinet and poured two tumblers of the scotch he'd denied himself all evening, handing one to Belle. He sipped the warm whiskey and loosened his tie, finally allowing his shoulders to relax and untense after the trials and tribulations. Belle chinked her own tumbler to his before setting it down on the mantelpiece and, after some measured consideration, turning the picture of his grandmother round so that it faced the wall. Gold raised an eyebrow.

"She's already died once, you're not likely to give her a heart attack from impropriety."

Belle responded with a non-comittal 'hmm' and hitched her dress up to mid thigh in order to begin casually rolling her hold ups down her legs.

Gold froze with the whiskey halfway to his lips as Belle toed off her shoes, finally divested herself of the stockings and sidled over, slipping one long nylon round his neck and pulling him in for a kiss.

"I believe we agreed on any and every surface in the house…" she purred.

Gold narrowed his eyes.
"Kitchen. Now."
Eleven O' Clock Chocolate Cake

Chapter Summary

Grief, comfort, catharsis and midnight feasts.

Chapter Notes

I apologise for a) the long wait and b) the rather sombre tone of this cupcake but after tackling Belle’s grief in Chocolate Heartache Cake, I wanted to reverse the situation. I had to deal with a family crisis (thankfully now recovered) over the Christmas period and writing this was good for catharsis. I promise the next one will be lighter!

Belle was walking through a jungle. It was warm and dark, and the air was heavy with strange, exotic noises. Something was digging into her shoulder, and she turned a little to find that she had a little parrot with a brightly coloured plumage perched there.

"Bae," the parrot squawked. "Bae." It dug its claws in again and Belle’s brow furrowed because it didn’t feel like claws. It felt like the point of her fiancé’s nose. The bird spread its wings and the tips touched her neck. They were cold and clammy, and felt more like human skin than feathers.

"Bae!" the parrot called again, louder, and then it vanished, taking to the sky, still cawing. Belle turned around, unnerved and determined to retrace her steps. The jungle seemed darker now without the parrot’s colourful wings. She peered up to the treetops to see if she could see it, but it was gone. She began to hurry now, eager to catch up to the bird, but still looking at the sky and not her feet, she tripped and fell, and jerked awake suddenly from her rather odd dream.

She blinked and turned over to find herself alone in bed, the only evidence that she had at one point had company being Gold’s pyjama shirt discarded in the tangle of sheets, soaked with sweat. His cane was missing from the foot of the bed, so wherever he had gone, it was further than simply limping into the bathroom.

Belle ran a hand through her hair and wondered whether to go after him or let him be. His dreaming about Bae was not entirely incomprehensible, in fact, Belle had been expecting it. It was – or had been – the eleventh anniversary of Bae’s death and they had made the journey to visit his grave together. It had been a sombre trip; the grief from her father’s passing was still too fresh in Belle’s heart, but in some ways it had given her hope, of moving on and coping with her loss as Gold had done, without forgetting.

She got out of bed and padded across to the wardrobe to put on her dressing gown and retrieve Gold’s. The middle of a November night was not the most sensible time to be wandering around the house semi-naked. She ran him to ground in the kitchen in the end, staring out of the half-closed blinds at the garden beyond. Belle’s attempts to cultivate a fresh herb garden that summer had not proved very fruitful so she had transplanted her efforts to the kitchen windowsill, where they seemed to be thriving a lot better. Belle draped Gold’s dressing gown over his shoulders and put her arms around him, resting her head against his back between his shoulder blades and
breathing in his scent: soap, jasmine fabric conditioner and something indefinable but undeniably
him. The calm stillness reigned and Belle was in no hurry to break the silence.

Eventually Gold’s hands closed over her own, clasped around his middle as they were.

“Sorry I woke you.”

“I was having a very odd dream about a parrot,” Belle replied, her voice slightly muffled by the
fabric of his dressing gown. “It doesn’t matter.”

Gold made a noise that Belle couldn’t tell if it was one of laughter or despair. “It matters to me.”

“We all have nightmares sometimes,” Belle said. “We’re only human.”

She felt him shift in her arms and released her hold on him so that he could turn to face her.

“This is what it’s all about,” Belle said. “For better or worse, that’s how it goes. I’m always here,
no matter what time of the night.”

“And I love you for it.” He kissed her forehead. “Nightcap?”

Belle could tell that he didn’t want to come back to bed, and she couldn’t say she blamed him.
They’d both taken the next day off work, perhaps anticipating the need for emotional, if not
physical, recovery from their excursion. She nodded her assent and stepped away to fetch the
brandy glasses. Gold shivered and slipped his arms into the sleeves of his dressing gown.

Belle watched him move around the darkened kitchen and thought about putting the lights on, but
decided against it. There was a bright full moon and the silvery light illuminated the room just
enough through the blind slats. She held out the glasses for Gold to fill and sat down at the kitchen
table, cupping the goblet in both hands to warm the liquor. It had been a crisp, cold day, and the
night was equally chill. Belle was glad of her fluffy slippers against the tiled floor. Gold reached
across and closed one hand over her wrist.

“Thank you,” he said. “I know it can’t have been easy for you, with your dad…”

“I wanted to come today,” Belle affirmed. “I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t want to, if I didn’t
think it would be a good idea. It isn’t easy, you’re right. I do miss Dad and it is still raw. But we’ve
got each other and we’ll see it through.”

Gold was quiet for a long time, staring down into the depths of his glass.

“I miss him,” he said eventually. “Not all the time. Just sometimes it hits me and I wonder what it
would be like if he was here. And then I dream and it… shakes me.”

They fell into silence once more. Belle could tell that there was something still left unsaid, some
uneasiness still remaining that her partner had yet to voice.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, the question forthright but her tone gentle. Gold leaned
back in his chair and closed his eyes, and for a moment Belle thought that he was going to say no.

“Normally I just relive the crash,” he said presently. “But sometimes the memory’s warped,
twisted. This was one of those.” He put the brandy goblet down on the table and traced around the
rim. “Bae died in the impact, I know that. But tonight… he wasn’t. He was hurting and begging
me to make it stop. And I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything. Then I woke up.”
Belle reached across and squeezed his hand. “It was just a dream. Just a nightmare.”

Gold didn’t reply, but he returned her grip, and they remained like that for a while, before Belle concluded that it was time to change the mood and try to pull her fiancé out of the spiralling train of thought she knew he was embarking upon, a whirlpool of what-ifs and buts and unrealised terrifying scenarios. Melancholy herself, she wasn’t sure if her words would come out right, so she decided on action instead. She went over to the fridge and took out the remains of the chocolate gateau that they had begun the evening before, bringing it over to the table and getting out two forks.

“Well, if we’re staying up, we may as well have a midnight feast, and everyone knows that there’s no better comfort food than chocolate cake.”

Gold gave her a wan smile.

“You remind me of Ma,” he said. “When I was staying with her after the accident, when I couldn’t – or wouldn’t – sleep, she’d stay up with me, baking. All the best chocolate cakes are baked at night, she used to say.”

Belle smiled and popped a forkful of cake into her mouth, savouring it before she responded. It wasn’t often that Gold spoke about his mother, and she was eager to hear more, if she could persuade him to talk, but she didn’t want to push him in his emotional state.

“What was she like? I mean, I’ve seen pictures, but I’ve never known her.”

“She was tiny,” Gold replied. “You can tell that from the pictures, I know. But she had a big heart to make up for her small stature. A lot like you. Take the opposite of all my bad points, multiply the intensity and you’ve got my mother. Kind. Sociable. Non-judgmental. When I turned up on her doorstep after the funeral and said I couldn’t go back to work yet, she just gave me a hug and a cup of tea. And after the accident itself, I don’t remember much as I was unconscious or out of it on morphine most of the time, but I vaguely remember telling the paramedics I wanted my ma and thinking I was hallucinating when she and Elvira arrived in the hospital next day.” He paused and reached out to swipe a morsel of chocolate ganache from the corner of her mouth. “She’d have loved you.”

“You and Elvira keep saying that. I thought it was a prerogative for all mothers to terrify their potential daughters-in-law.”

Gold snorted. “Not my ma. She wouldn’t say boo to a goose. What about yours?”

Belle sighed.

“To be honest… I don’t know. I was only seven when she died; it was over twenty years ago. I haven’t forgotten her, of course not, but there aren’t as many fixed memories as there were… More just impressions and odd pictures.”

“There’s no need to be ashamed of that,” Gold said, gently turning her face back toward him when she looked away guiltily.

“I know. Doesn’t stop me, though.”

“Join the club.”

Belle inched her chair closer to Gold’s, the cake forgotten for the moment, and nestled into his side. His arm came round her automatically and he looked down at her.
“Maybe we ought to move to living room. This might be easier on a sofa.”

Belle shook her head. “No, I like it like this. It feels more… clandestine. Sneaking around in the middle of the night. The moonlight on the fridge looks all mysterious.”

Gold laughed, the first proper mirth she’d heard from him since they woke, since the previous evening in fact.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You were the one who wanted me to marry you,” Belle pointed out.

“True,” he conceded, before adding, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They stayed in a companionable silence, drawing comfort and strength from each other and knowing they could talk if they wanted, until the moonlight was beginning to make way to the beginnings of a grey dawn. Belle couldn’t stifle her yawn. Gold squeezed her shoulders.

“Maybe it’s time to go back to bed.” He paused. “Light chases nightmares away.”

He got up and stretched the cricks out of his back, and Belle followed him up the stairs. The night was over; they had survived, and they could face the day together, stronger.
Fruit Cake

Chapter Summary

Wedding planning with Granny...

Chapter Notes

Many and much thanks to my brother for his help with this chapter. A little shorter, but short and sweet I hope.

“Belle?”

“Yes, darling?”

“May I ask a stupid question?”

“Of course, darling.”

“Why are we standing outside Granny’s in the middle of the night?”

Belle looked at Gold, who was eyeing their surroundings with a vague sense of unease, despite the fact that he spent the majority of his working life in the immediate vicinity.

“It isn’t the middle of the night,” she pointed out. “It’s still comparatively early evening.”

“But why are we standing outside Granny’s in the middle of the comparatively early evening, then?”

Gold countered. “Everywhere is closed. Even Granny’s is closed.”

Belle patted his shoulder with an easy smile.

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

It was at this juncture that Granny joined them, jangling keys and shuffling paperwork. She unlocked the café and switched the lights on, beckoning for Belle and Gold to follow her inside and take a seat.

“Right,” she said, once her guests were settled, placing the sheaf of papers onto the table in front of them and giving them a grin of Cheshire cat proportions before uttering a single word. “Cake.”

“Cake?” Gold repeated warily. He sounded completely confused, but since he’d just spent a day in court, Belle would forgive him his befuddlement.

“Cake,” she affirmed to him. “Our wedding cake, to be precise.”

“Ah.” Understanding began to dawn on Gold’s face, but a furrow remained between his brows. “Is there a reason why we’re here and not at your house, Mrs Lucas?”
“You haven’t been in my kitchen recently, have you, Mr Gold,” Granny said, a twinkle in her eye. “Practically every surface is covered in various wool or plush items for the imminent new arrival. Oh, I can’t help it. He or she’s my first great-grandchild!”

Belle smiled. Ruby’s mid-pregnancy scan was coming up in a couple of weeks; she and Archie had been agonising over whether to find out the baby’s gender or not for the past… well, ever since her first scan, really, when Ruby had been convinced that her baby had been a boy only to be told by the apologetic sonographer that what she thought was the necessary male appendage was in fact the umbilical cord.

Seeing that they were finally all on the same page, Granny began, bringing Belle’s attention back to the task at hand from her flights of fancy on impending godchildren.

“Well, there’s so much to decide! Round or square or hexagon or whatever other shape you fancy, fruit cake or Madeira or chocolate – I’d advise against sponge, doesn’t stay fresh long enough. How many tiers, decorated with fruit or flowers or swans or another animal of your choice? Traditional bride and groom centrepiece? Comical bride and groom centrepiece? Risqué bride and groom centrepiece? Actually, better not, Henry and Grace will be there. What about cupcakes? Cupcakes are a very fashionable choice for wedding cakes these days. Or a croquembouche? Everyone loves profiteroles. I reckon on about four per person; three if you want the cream laced with brandy – everyone’s already going to be off their heads. Or you could throw the cake concept completely out of the window; I made a giant chocolate chip cookie ‘wedding cake’ once…”

Belle, amused by Granny’s monologue, cast a glance at Gold, whose expression had gone from ‘comprehending’ to ‘extremely scared’ during the course of the older woman’s speech.

“Erm… Fruit cake?” he suggested weakly.

“Excellent choice,” Granny said. “Give me a minute.”

Granny vanished into the kitchen and came back with plates, cake forks, and several Tupperware containers. “I’ve got light fruit cake, rich fruit cake, fruit cake with extra cherries, fruit cake with extra nuts – don’t you dare say a word, either of you – and fruit cake with pineapple.”

“All the best cakes have a not-so-secret ingredient.”

Granny was absolutely in her element; Belle knew that she enjoyed baking and used every excuse she could to create the most fantastical cakes imaginable, but she was fairly sure that she had never seen her former employer quite so happy and animated as she continued to chatter on about the various wedding cakes that she had made and seen in her long and illustrious career in catering and hospitality.

The only trouble was, Belle didn’t really like fruit cake all that much. She knew that it was the traditional cake of choice for weddings, and with good reason – it kept fresh for a long time, it was incredibly dense and sturdy for tiering, and it took icing and marzipan well. She would eat it, that wasn’t a problem, but for her wedding, Belle had wanted something special, something that she would enjoy and remember.

Granny was watching her as she sampled the various different kinds of fruit cake.

“I know, you’re not much of a fruit cake girl,” she said to Belle. “Chocolate’s your thing. I’ve done sachertorte wedding cakes before, and Ruby’s already put in an order for a cinnamon red velvet
cake if she ever gets married.”

Belle shook her head. “We’re having a chocolatey dessert; it would be overkill to have a chocolatey cake as well.”

“Madeira then,” Granny suggested. “It’s excellent for sculpting with. You can practically carve it.”

Gold wrinkled his nose. “Not Madeira, please. My mother used to make it. Badly. I don’t think I’ve ever got over the experience.”

“It is a bit boring for a wedding cake,” Granny conceded. They remained silent for a moment before a grin spread over the older woman’s face.

“I’ve had an idea,” she said. “Give me a minute. I’ve got the perfect cake. One I can guarantee you’ll both love.”

Granny disappeared back into the kitchen, leaving Gold and Belle looking at each other as they listened to her jovial humming. She reappeared a minute or so later bearing a plate, upon which stood a large round cake covered in white icing – but fluffy frosting rather than hard royal icing.

“Here we are,” she said, slicing a knife into the cake and cutting three generous pieces. “You can’t tell me that you both don’t like that.”

Belle looked down at the cake that Granny had handed her and burst out laughing.

“Granny, you can’t have a carrot cake as a wedding cake! It’s too soft, the tiers would sink!”

“Miss French, have I ever let you down before? Has my carrot cake ever let you down before, for that matter? You two owe your very marriage to this carrot cake, the least you can do is honour its vital role in the founding of your relationship by giving it a place at your wedding reception.”

“And eating it, a fine homage,” Gold said drily.

“Carrot cakes are made to be eaten, Mr Gold,” Granny said, a knowing, motherly tone in her voice. “That is their sole purpose in life. They live for nothing else, except matchmaking. And now that my carrot cakes have brought you two together, they want nothing more than to be eaten by you both. They care for nothing else.”

Gold rubbed his left temple with the hand not holding his cake fork. “Did I overdose on my painkillers at lunchtime? I think I’m high. Are we really discussing the motivations of carrot cake?”

“Of course,” Granny said. “I regularly discuss the motivations, thoughts and feelings of my various baked creations; it’s an entire branch of philosophy all to itself. Look at fruitarians. But whether the carrot cake wants to be eaten or not is beside the point. The point is: would you like a carrot wedding cake?”

Belle looked at Gold – who had either given up entirely or had accepted that he was tripping the light fantastic on his medication – happily munching on his slice of cake. She didn’t think that he would have any problem with a carrot cake wedding cake, but her initial fears of Granny’s masterpiece collapsing halfway through the reception were still not assuaged.

“Is it possible?” she asked. “Tell me honestly.”

Granny raised one eyebrow. “Belle, my dear, would I have offered to make you a carrot wedding
cake if such a thing was impossible?”

“But it’s so soft…” Belle said. “I know you can get firmer recipes, but then it wouldn’t be your carrot cake.”

“It’s not the cake that’s important, it’s the way that you build it,” Granny explained. “I’ve made chocolate wedding cakes before now, and they are far softer than a good carrot cake.”

“Well…” Belle licked frosting off her fork. It was a good idea. It was a cake they both liked, that couldn’t be denied, and Granny’s words were true. Carrot cake was more than just a dessert to them. It had indeed been the thing that had brought them together. Whilst she had no doubt that they would have found a way to meet without the intervention of the cake, it just so happened that it was the cake that had been the catalyst to their entire relationship. Having it as their wedding cake would make it so much more meaningful; not simply a white cake that they were having in order to bow to tradition. Their marriage was hardly traditional in any other aspects of the word, so it made no sense to go for a boring royal-iced and marzipaned fruit cake just for the sake of being normal. Being normal was overrated.

She turned to her fiancé.

“Gold?”

“Sorry, what? I think I zoned out at fruitarians.”

“Would you like a carrot cake wedding cake?”

Gold contemplated his cake fork before addressing Granny.

“Mrs Lucas, I could quite happily survive on your carrot cake alone. Having a three tiered one for my wedding is no chore at all.”

“Excellent!” Granny was beaming. “That’s the easy part over.”

“Oh God,” Gold murmured. “I swear there was none of this at my first wedding; I just turned up and the cake was there. There’s more to decide?”

“Well, of course,” Granny said. If Belle didn’t know better, she’d say that Granny was trying to frazzle Gold’s nerves on purpose. “The cake itself is just the canvas. Now you’ve got to decide how to decorate it...”
Ruby was in two minds about her feelings towards being woken up at half past seven on a Thursday, traditionally her day off and therefore the day she had a lie-in. There were some mitigating factors to being woken up on this particular Thursday, however. Firstly, she was not feeling as sick as a dog, which was how she had been waking up feeling for the past week, and as she was not confined to her bed feeling terrible, it made sense to get out of it and do something constructive. Secondly, the person doing the waking up was Archie, and his expression of enthusiastic excitement was enough to completely kill any reproaches that Ruby might have given him for waking her.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said.

Ruby looked up at him and narrowed her eyes.

"Is it an ice-cream maker?" She had been hankering after white chocolate marshmallow ice-cream for a few days now, but she and Archie had not been able to source any at any of the local shops and she was getting to the desperate stage of thinking that it might be quicker and easier to just make her own.

Archie's face fell. "No. It's not an ice-cream maker. But hopefully it will be just as good as an ice-cream maker."

Ruby gave him an inquisitive look, glancing all around the room to try and see if there were any clues as to what her mysterious gift might be if it was not an ice-cream maker. "What is it? Where is it?"

"It's not in the flat," Archie said. "It won't fit in the flat. We're going to have to go on a little trip to see it. Sadly, this does mean that you're going to have to get out of bed."

Curiosity as to what could possibly not fit in the flat won out over reluctance to leave the cosy blankets, and Ruby pushed the covers off. Ten weeks into her pregnancy, there was still nothing to see in terms of a visible baby bump, but she had already gone up a bra size and a half. Not that she had heard Archie complaining about this. She was pulled from her musings by the arrival of Pongo in the bedroom, jumping up and licking her face as she got out of bed. It then transpired that he too was coming on the trip to see the surprise, and he was incredibly excited at the prospect. Pongo had been extremely affectionate to her of late, and Ruby assumed that it must be the influx of pregnancy hormones giving her a different smell. She had been slightly concerned that the
Dalmatian had somehow mistaken her for a fellow canine in heat, but so far he had simply been as attentive as his owner; wanting to be with her but not constantly under her feet. She wondered what would happen later on when she actually started to show, whether Archie would be as calm as he was at the moment or whether he would panic. She had not expected him to take the news so well, but perhaps because she had been so worried and distraught at the time, he had risen to the occasion admirably. Of course, there had been a couple of times during the past few weeks when Ruby had roused in the middle of the night to find Archie wide awake, scribbling in his notebook by the dim reading light, making lists of things that they needed to get ready for the baby. A cot and a Moses basket were sensible items; a two-foot tall plush stegosaurus that he had seen in the toyshop window slightly less so. Tellingly, it was the stegosaurus that was sitting in their wardrobe, waiting to be given to its new owner whenever he or she arrived. But still, a stegosaurus was better than nothing, and at least their preparations for becoming parents had begun. Archie was thrilled to be a prospective dad. His relationship with his own parents had not been the most smooth, and he was determined not to repeat their mistakes with his own child. Ruby could tell that he was nervous at times, but then so was she, and they would muddle through it all together.

By the time she was ready to go, Pongo was at the stage of chasing dust motes around the hallway, and when Archie finally let him into the car, his tail was wagging so hard that Ruby thought it might be in danger of falling off. Archie steadfastly refused to tell her anything about the surprise until they had left the town centre and were driving into the countryside, when finally, Ruby's constant questioning of 'what is it, what is it' bore fruit.

"It's a house. Not an actual house. Well, an actual house. A house viewing. The appointment's at nine o'clock."

Ruby looked at her partner. 'Gobsmacked' did not adequately describe her feelings.

"You found us a house," she said. "You found us a house and you arranged a viewing and you didn't tell me? Why?"

Archie just chuckled.

"You'll see."

Ten minutes later, Ruby did see.

The house was beautiful; a bit on the small side compared to the other properties they had been looking at on the outskirts of the town, but still bigger than their current flat. An old farmhouse with ivy and other creepers climbing up the stonework, and nailed back wooden shutters. The only thing that could have made it any better was a thatched roof, but that might have been more trouble than it was worth if the insurance ended up costing more than the house itself.

"It only came on the market last night," Archie said, once they had parked next to the estate agent's car in the driveway. "I wanted to get in there quick."

Ruby grabbed him by the shirt lapels and kissed him fiercely.

"I want this house," she said. "I haven't even seen inside and I want this house."

The house's size - comparatively small for a two-bed family home - and out-of-the-way location were off set by its huge garden and beautiful period detailing. Ruby had always wanted to live in a house with character, and Granny had always decried this as an impossible dream. Right now, Ruby was fairly certain that she was looking at a fantasy made real.
After showing them around, the estate agent left them alone to think things over, and Pongo promptly settled himself in a patch of sunlight in the living room, thumping his tail against the carpet.

“Well, Pongo's certainly made himself at home,” Ruby said. “Please can we live here Archie? It's so much nicer than the other places we've seen, and Pongo could bury an entire full-size stegosaurus in the garden with room to spare.”

“I'm glad you liked your surprise,” Archie said. Pongo barked his assent and bounded over to them. Archie scratched behind his spotty ears. “And Pongo's asking when we can move in. I think he's already searching for dinosaurs. There's only one problem.”

Ruby bit her lip.

“What's that?”

“How am I going to convince you to come home and not start moving in right now?”

Ruby laughed. Oh yes, this had definitely been worth getting out of bed for.
Vanilla Cupcake

Chapter Summary

Ruby takes Belle shopping for something very important.

Chapter Notes

Because for all these shorts are called 'cupcakes', we haven't had 'cupcake' as a chapter, and this scenario sort of cheekily demanded it.

**On the risqué side, as the chapter is devoted almost solely to the discussion of underwear and forthcoming bedroom shenanigans.**

(I would also like to state for the record that I have no idea what size bra Emilie de Ravin and Meghan Ory take. I am going from height and body shape and comparing them to women whose bra sizes I do know.)

"Belle!" Ruby's voice was on the verge of becoming absolutely despairing and she buried her head in her hands with a groan. "I can't believe I'm hearing this. I'm almost ashamed to call you my best friend."

Belle merely raised an eyebrow at her friend.

"Anyone would think I'd admitted to drowning puppies in my spare time," she remarked drily. "I simply said that, given that I have been sleeping with my future husband for over a year, I don't see why I need to go out and by a lot of white lace lingerie for my wedding night."

Ruby gave another mournful moan and did not move her hands as she replied. "Belle, this is going to be the most important set of underwear you will ever buy. Ever."

"Is it? If I was a virgin bride I could understand it, but I'm not." She thought back to their recent rendezvous on the kitchen table; she had not got very far in her attempts to make dinner and they had ended up eating ordered-in Chinese on the sofa, still only half-dressed. "Definitely not."

Ruby finally took her head out of her hands and surveyed her friend. The two women were sitting in Granny's, after Ruby had turned up on Belle's doorstep at nine o'clock on that bright Saturday morning and cheerfully announced to Gold that she was taking his fiancée shopping and he was absolutely categorically not allowed to come with them. If he had been alarmed by this, he had not shown it, and he had simply wished Belle a good time before going back to the paper. Belle, who was used to going on shopping trips with Ruby where menfolk were banished, had not thought anything of their unexpected trip at the time, believing that she was simply being dragged on another excursion to buy baby clothes. Since finding out that she was, as she had always suspected, expecting a boy, Ruby had gone slightly mad in the buying of blue hats and rompersuits, and Astrid's old knitting circle – who still used the cafe as their meeting place – had gone overboard. Belle surmised that there were several cold sheep wandering the hills of Devon and cursing the
imminent Lucas-Hopper baby who would soon be wearing all their wool.

As it was, Ruby had not mentioned buying baby things once. Her mind was set on a far bigger goal. Today's trip, she had announced, once they were safely sitting at their table in Granny's with hot chocolate to get them stoked up before the shopping began, was to get Belle's wedding night lingerie.

"Belle." Ruby reached across the table and took one of Belle's hands in both of hers. "I am not quite sure that you grasp the magnitude of what is happening to you. You are getting married. You are getting married to your lawyer-with-a-limp from over the way, as Emma so quaintly described him when this tentative flirtation began, and you are doing this not from a sense of duty but simply because you love him to pieces, and he loves you. This is a momentous occasion. A celebration. You're wearing a white wedding dress, are you not?"

"Yes," Belle conceded. "But that's different."

"How? Traditionally a bride's wedding dress was always white as a symbol of her virginity, just like her wedding nightie was. You have other white underwear sets; I've been there when you've bought them. And when you've bought the replacements because the first set was literally ripped from your petite little frame by a man who definitely appreciated it."

"And a bride having a white nightie had nothing to do with the fact they used to show the bloodied thing off as proof that the marriage had been consummated," Belle said drily. She sighed, tracing patterns in the cream on her hot chocolate with the tip of her spoon. "I don't know, Ruby. I'm wearing a white dress because I want to wear a white dress. I found a wedding dress I liked and it happened to look nice in white, and I never got the chance to wear a proper white wedding dress on my first time round. But whilst I like my white lingerie…"

"As does Gold," Ruby interjected. Belle glared at her and Ruby shrugged, popping a spoonful of cream into her mouth. "Just saying."

"… whilst I like my white lingerie, it's not my favourite. It's not that I don't want special lingerie, Ruby, it's more a question that I don't see why it has to be white. If it's going to be special, then it should be special. And to me, white isn't that special."

Ruby nodded her understanding, and stayed lost in thought for a long while, sucking on her chocolate spoon, before a wide grin spread over her face.

"Oh, we're going to have so much fun."

Belle gave her friend a worried look. "Ruby, whenever you say that I get rather scared."

"It will be brilliant. I promise. Drink up! We've got so many shops and so few hours!"

Belle sighed, wondering just what she had let herself in for.

X

"Belle! What size bra do you take again?"

Belle cringed as Ruby's voice carried across the boutique. Certainly, she and Ruby were the only people in the shop aside from the cashier, but that didn't mean that she wanted to shout out her measurements. She came over to where Ruby was pawing through a rack of ivory coloured satin basques and pulled out her own size.
Ruby paused and turned to look at her, eyebrows knitting together.

"Are you sure?"

"Ruby, I'm fairly sure I know my own bra size."

"At least eighty per cent of women wear the wrong size," Ruby pointed out. "Belle… Before I got pregnant and my chest ballooned, I took a C-cup, and your puppies were bigger than mine."

Belle looked at the basque that Ruby was holding and traced her finger over the underwiring. "But I'm so little," she said. "I'm short, and I've always been fairly in proportion."

Ruby put an arm around her friend.

"Come on. You need to be measured. There's a brilliant little place just round the corner; I've had three fittings in the last eight months there."

Belle let Ruby steer her out of the shop, still wondering what she had let herself in for.

X

By the time she let herself into the house in the evening – the shopping trip had turned into an impromptu dinner date – Belle was fairly certain that she and Ruby had been into every single shop that sold underwear in the town and tried on pretty much everything that could be classed as lingerie. At least their trip had definitely borne fruit. Belle peeped into the bag that held her prize purchase, and after popping her head round the living room door to say a quick hello to Gold, rushed upstairs to hide the underwear in question, ready to be laundered in secret and shown off on its grand unveiling. It gave her a little thrill of excitement to know that this particular lingerie set would not be worn until she was a Mrs.

She emptied her bags of the rest of her purchases and spread the lace, silk and cotton over the bed. She would admit, she might have gone a little bit overboard, but wearing the wrong size bra never felt like the wrong size until you'd worn the right size, and having found out that she was indeed wearing the wrong size, Belle wanted to start wearing the right size as soon as possible.

She started to sort out the new things, pulling off tags and labels, and she wondered if Gold would appreciate a fashion show. He wasn't exactly in the middle of anything she might distract him from – when she'd looked in on him he'd been playing Minesweeper with a large glass of wine for company.

Scratch that, she knew that Gold would appreciate a fashion show, but perhaps it would be best to reveal her new purchases to him a piece at a time. One could have too much of a good thing.

Belle ran her fingers over a peacock blue lace bra, and an idea came into her mind. She felt a little guilty for abandoning Gold for rather longer than planned, and she knew exactly how to make it up to him. She quickly undressed and changed her underwear before redonning the dress and beginning to make the descent back downstairs.

"Did you enjoy your day?" Gold called from the living room.

"Oh yes," Belle replied. "It was most enlightening and useful. I had a boob job."

There was the sound of spluttering and Belle rushed down the rest of the stairs in case her casual remark had left her fiancé choking to death. Luckily, he was no worse for wear, but the same could not be said of his laptop, which was now sprayed with droplets of peach-coloured liquid.
"Pardon?" Gold said, his voice sounding rather strangled.

"I am returning to the house two cup sizes bigger than I left it," Belle said.

Gold just blinked at her. "Why?" he finally managed. "How?"

"I had a proper fitting," Belle explained, coming over and taking the glass of rosé wine from his hand before he could upend it and cause any further damage to his electronics or, indeed, himself. "You've spat wine on your laptop, by the way."

"Screw my laptop," Gold growled, without giving the item in question a second glance.

"I'd rather screw you," Belle replied conversationally. "Anyway, it turns out I've been wearing the wrong size bra and my breasts are in fact two cup sizes bigger than I thought they were."

Gold's eyes travelled from her chest, where they had been transfixed, up to her eyes, and back down again.

"They look just the right size to me."

Belle bent down and kissed him. "Correct answer," she said, and she took a sip of his wine. When he didn't protest, she knew that she had officially floored him. She grinned, wondering just how far she could tease him before he decided that it would be a good idea to relocate to the bedroom Right Now This Minute.

"Of course, you know what this means," she purred. "I'll have to go out and buy an awful lot more underwear now."

Gold gave a mute nod.

"Would you like to see what I got today?"

"Does my Aunt Elvira drink gin?" Gold replied weakly.

Belle smiled and arched one eyebrow. "I'll take that as a yes."

She slowly unzipped her dress and pushed it off her shoulders, watching Gold's eyes widen as he saw what she was wearing beneath it.

"I loved this bra so much, but they didn't have any matching knickers in my size, so I had to do without..."

Gold's response was to pull her down onto his lap and begin to smother her skin with kisses, wine-spotted computer completely forgotten. Belle rephrased her earlier bet with herself.

They were not going to get as far as the bedroom.

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Note: If anyone has any strong thoughts on what Ruby and Archie should (or should not) call their baby, speak now or forever hold your peace... ;)


Birthday Cake

Chapter Summary

It's Gold's fiftieth birthday, but the celebrations don't pan out quite as expected.

In which Archie panics (not without due reason), Ruby curses Cajun chicken, Belle meets a dinosaur and Gold gives a Dalmatian a pep talk...

Chapter Notes

Miran requested a declaration of love in the chapter notes in honour of her managing to get me out of my block for this chapter. So: Love you, Miran!

"Happy birthday."

Gold gave a non-committal grunt and pulled the covers up further in the (admittedly foolish) hope that he could somehow turn the bed into a time machine and that when he actually opened his eyes, he would still be forty-nine. He had never normally had a problem with birthdays; they were things that happened to come round once a year and brought with them cake and whiskey, but this was the first time that he had actively not wanted it to be his birthday. This year he was acutely aware that he had now seen rather a lot of the blessed days.

He felt Belle's hair tickle his ear and knew that she was leaning over him.

"I know you're not asleep," she said conversationally, and Gold felt a delicate finger trace up his spine. "You can't hide from the day under the duvet, you know."

Gold's response to this remark was to pull the sheets up over his head completely.

"I can try," he muttered. "Now, it's Sunday, it's my birthday, and I'm officially old, so I'm having a lie-in."

"You are not old," Belle scolded. "You're mature, like a good wine."

Gold pulled the covers down a fraction and rolled over onto his back so that he could look at Belle, who was propped up on one elbow grinning down at him.

"Or a ripe cheese," he grumbled.

"No, no, no," Belle said, punctuating her words with kisses. "You're whiskey. A perfectly-aged Glenmorangie. And you've had a lie-in."

Gold glanced at the alarm clock; it was almost ten already.

"Ruby and Archie are coming over to take us out for lunch, since you refused point blank to have any other celebration. And as tempting as it is to stay here in this lovely warm bed with my lovely
handsome fiancé, I feel that Ruby would not appreciate her child being scandalised before he is even born when we answer the door in varying states of undress. I don't want to be a corrupting influence on my godson too early on."

Gold laughed and pulled her down for another kiss. Ruby's due date was fast approaching, and Belle was having trouble downplaying her excitement at becoming a sort-of aunt.

"What time are they coming?" he asked.

"No, we do not have time for a quickie," Belle said. Gold raised an eyebrow.

"Consider it a birthday present?" he suggested. "One that you would also enjoy?"

Belle smiled. "Ok. Maybe a quick quickie…"

X

Lunch had been a pleasant affair, even if they had been slightly late to the table, but Ruby had been restless. Gold couldn't blame her. As far along as she was, her baby would be very low in her abdomen and making her perpetually uncomfortable no matter what position she was in. He wondered what the baby would weigh at birth; from the outside Ruby's bump looked very big, but Gold wasn't sure if this was simply a matter of perception because she was so naturally tall and slim. When they had returned to the pink house after lunch she had managed half an hour before needing to get up and move about, and Gold gave it a few minutes – until Archie and Belle were immersed in discussion about the new periodicals wing that was being built at the library – before excusing himself to find her. He was remembering a cold November night almost twenty-five years ago, when his heavily-pregnant ex-wife had been unable to sleep and wandered round the house for two hours. Bae had been born that night, and Gold had the creeping suspicion that Ruby was beginning to go into labour.

He ran her to ground in the dining room, leaning on the windowsill with her forehead pressed against the pane.

"Are you all right, Ruby?" he asked. "Do you want to lie down?"

She shook her head.

"No, I'm ok. Well. I've got heartburn. Should not have had that Cajun chicken. Bloody cravings. I just ache all over. And I'm tired." She rubbed her belly. "This one's nocturnal at the moment. It wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't in training to become the next Fred Astaire as well."

She turned and looked at Gold. "I just can't wait to meet him, for him to come out and say hi. On the other hand, I think about actually giving birth and…" She tailed off. "What was it like for you? When Bae was born, I mean."

"A damn sight easier than it was for Liz." Gold laughed. "If you're asking 'will Archie faint?' then I think it's highly unlikely. He'll keep going on adrenaline alone. He's just as eager to meet his son as you are."

Ruby smiled. "It's weird; when I was younger I never thought of myself as a mother. Even after I got pregnant I still couldn't imagine actually having a baby. I've read all the books and been to all the classes and I'm still worried that I'm going to do it wrong."

"Ruby, you will be fine."
She sighed and nodded.

"I suppose. I just get thinking too much sometimes. You know…"

There was a long pause and Gold's brow furrowed.

"Ruby?"

"Oh God."

Ruby looked up, her face bleach white and terrified.

"What's the matter?" Gold asked, but his question was answered in the next moment by the steady drip of liquid onto the floor.

"My water just broke." Ruby squeezed her eyes tight shut. "Forget what I said before, I'm not ready at all. It was the Cajun chicken, I swear, they say spicy food can induce labour. Oh God, and on your birthday too. And on your carpet..." She opened her eyes, glanced down and whimpered. "And on your shoes..."

Gold took Ruby's hand.

"Ruby, I couldn't care less about my birthday, my carpet, or my shoes. The latter two can be cleaned and the formermost I have seen enough of already. Babies come when they want to and nothing can change that."

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze before going over to the dining room door.

"Archie!" he called. The psychiatrist came out of the living room and Gold beckoned him over. As soon as he saw Ruby, standing in a puddle of fluid, wringing her hands, his face took on a similarly terrified aspect.

"I think we need to call the hospital," Ruby said weakly.

Archie nodded mutely and Gold stepped out of the room to allow the couple to talk in peace.

Belle came out of the kitchen with some tea-towels and cleaned the fluid off Gold's shoes without a word.

"I had a hunch of what might have happened when you called Archie through. I thought that Ruby might have been slightly more vocal had her contractions started." She glanced towards the dining room door, left slightly ajar. "Do you think they'll be ok?"

"I'm sure they'll be fine."

They waited in the hall for a few more minutes before Archie came out, looking worried, apologetic, but a little bit exhilarated at the same time.

"We've rung the hospital, and because this is Ruby's first baby they think that she ought to go in straight away. The thing is, obviously we don't have anything with us, all the stuff for the baby's back home and it'll take us about forty-five minutes out of our way to go back home and then go back to the hospital as opposed to going straight there, and Ruby's really worried and wants to get there as soon as possible..."

"Archie." The younger man tailed off at Gold's firm tone, his panicked eyes pleading. "Take Ruby to the hospital. We'll bring your bags."
"Thank you." Archie gave a weak laugh. "Interesting way to spend your birthday."

Gold shrugged. "A godson is fairly unique birthday present. I'm not complaining."

X

Pongo bounded up to them as soon as Belle opened Archie and Ruby's front door, and Gold crouched down to scratch his ears.

"Jefferson's right," Belle observed. "You really are squidgy in the middle."

"There's nothing wrong with liking dogs," Gold protested, before returning his attention to the Dalmatian. "You've got to be good, hear me? When your humans come back, they'll have another very small human with them, and they probably won't pay you quite as much attention for a bit. But don't worry, they haven't forgotten you. So don't go getting jealous of the small one. He's going to be very loud, and very smelly, but you'll get used to it. He's also going to be very helpless as well as very small, and you're going to have to be his personal guard dog." He continued to scratch behind Pongo's ears, leaning back slightly when the dog tried to lick his face and wobbling a bit on his precarious balance. Belle grabbed his shoulder to steady him and Pongo got his lick in. Gold raised one eyebrow at the dog.

"Pongo, I thought we had established that Mr Gold is not a person for licking," Belle said, taking him by the collar and pulling him back a bit to allow Gold to get to his feet. "He'll scratch your ears as much as you like, but please don't lick him."

Pongo gave a little whine and looked up at Gold with doleful eyes. Gold wiped his face with his handkerchief. Belle tried to suppress a smile and failed, miserably.

"Ok," she began, "I'll do things for Ruby and Archie; as much as she loves you I don't think she'll want you going through her underwear drawer. You get things for the baby as you've had more experience with, to use your own words, very small humans."

Gold followed Belle up the stairs towards the bedrooms of Ruby and Archie's little cottage. The nursery had been decorated in various tones of blue and green, and a border of rather plump-looking fish was swimming around the top of the room near the ceiling. He looked around, opening drawers and cupboards and taking out blankets and baby clothes before stopping to admire the mobile that hung above the crib. It was made of wood, beautifully carved and painted, and he remembered Belle telling him about a carpenter who had been one of their most frequent customers at the café. Apparently Ruby had been trying to set him up with Granny for a long time now; perhaps the mobile had been a gift to either thank her for her efforts or try and prevent any more. The drops were in the shape of various fishes and animals, including a spotted Dalmatian with an uncanny resemblance to Pongo.

"Gold, come and have a look at this! Oh, it's the sweetest thing I've ever seen!"

On hearing Belle call through from the master bedroom, Gold ventured through with his pile of things and was rather alarmed to find himself face to face with an enormous purple and orange stegosaurus, Belle's grinning face behind it. Gold raised an eyebrow.

"Oh come on," Belle said. "Even you've got to think that he's utterly adorable. He's even smiling, look! Smiley Steggy!"

She touched him on the nose with the furry toy in a little stegosaurus kiss, and her grin became even more devilish, as she knew that she was the only person over the age of four and a half who
would be able to get away with such an action and not suffer any repercussions. She placed the
stegosaurus in the bottom of the wardrobe where she had evidently found it and put Gold's items
into the overnight bag that was open on the bed.

"I think we've got everything," Belle said. "Spare clothes, towels, pillows, toiletries, baby
things…" She leaned over and grabbed Ruby's plush wolf and popped him on top of the other
things in the bag. "You never know," she said. "If Ruby ends up breaking one of Archie's hands
she'll need something else comforting to squeeze through the contractions, won't she?"

Gold couldn't fault her logic.

X

It had been four hours since they arrived home from the hospital having dropped off Ruby and
Archie's things, and Belle had spent the majority of that time pacing up and down the living room.

"Belle, darling, you're going to wear a hole in the floor at this rate," Gold said. He looked up from
his book and patted the sofa beside him. Belle gave up her pacing and flopped down beside him.
He put his arm around her and pulled her in close to press a kiss into her hair. "Ruby is going to be
fine, and Archie will call as soon as there's any news."

With impeccable timing, the phone rang and Belle jumped off the sofa and raced into the hallway
to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Belle, it's Archie."

"How's it going? Has the little one arrived yet?"

"No… There've been some complications. Ruby's in surgery. " Archie sounded like he was on the
verge of tears and Belle's blood ran cold in her veins. "I know it's a big ask and I know it's Gold's
birthday, but could you come over to the hospital again please? I don't think I can cope on my own
and I didn't know who else to call; I can't get through to Granny."

"Archie, it's never too much to ask, we're on our way."

Gold came out into the hallway as Belle shoved the cordless back into its dock.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," Belle said. "From what I can make out they've taken Ruby for an emergency
caesarean. Archie's distraught. We're going to the hospital. Now."

Gold needed no further prompting, simply nodding and grabbing his car keys from the dresser. The
drive to the hospital was a tense, silent one. Belle spent the entire journey envisaging a thousand
and one nightmare scenarios that could be playing out in the hospital in parallel.

The psychiatrist was waiting in the carpark when they arrived, and Belle ran over to him. The poor
man was white as a sheet and shivering uncontrollably despite the warm April evening.

"Archie, what's happened?" Belle asked, throwing her arms around him and stroking his back to try
and help him calm down.

"I… it's… Can we go inside? I just came out for some air, I want to be there if there's any news."
"Of course, come on."

Gold had joined them by this point and they made their way back inside to the maternity unit waiting room. Archie went over to the nearest midwife and spoke with her in low tones for a moment. Belle made out the response 'I'm sorry, she's still in surgery' and her insides twisted nervously.

Archie came back over to them and collapsed into a chair with his head in his hands, Belle and Gold on either side.

"It was going ok," Archie said. "Ruby was in a lot of pain though, despite the medication, and it was really stressing her out, and that made her panic even more because she thought she might be hurting the baby, and so it turned into a vicious cycle. Then the baby's heart rate started dropping and the midwives started getting worried as Ruby was still nowhere near ready to push, she was only five centimetres dilated. They were just deciding whether to take her for a c-section when Ruby said she felt really wet down below, like her waters had broken all over again. She thought she must have wet herself but when they moved the blankets off her… I've never seen so much blood." Archie shook his head. "They rushed her straight into surgery for an emergency c-section; they were worried, they thought that the placenta was coming away too early and that the baby's blood might be mixing with Ruby's... She needed general anaesthetic; I wasn't allowed in with her."

Archie began to cry and Belle anchored her arm around his shoulders.

"I couldn't stay here. I just ran outside to throw up and call you, and I felt so awful because Ruby was in there all on her own, hurting, and they're cutting her open and I don't know if she's going to be ok. I can't lose her, Belle. I can't lose either of them." He drew in a shaky breath. "Ruby's got a rare blood type, she's AB-neg, what if she needs a transfusion and they don't have enough for her?"

Belle cast a glance at Gold over Archie's bowed head. She didn't know what to say to console the terrified man; she was feeling the same nauseating horror herself. Her fiancé gave her a worried look that did nothing to reassure her, and it was clear that this was beyond the scope of his experience as well.

It felt like they had been sitting there for hours when the nurse came in.

"Archie Hopper?"

Archie's head shot up, and it was to Belle's infinite relief that she saw the nurse was smiling as she came over to them.

"Are they ok?" Archie asked frantically, before the nurse could speak.

"Yes. Both mother and baby are going to be just fine. Ruby's out of surgery and we're waiting for her to sleep off the anaesthetic. She's lost an awful lot of blood and needed a transfusion; she'll be very weak for a while so we'll need to keep her in for observation for a few days, but there's nothing that indicates that she won't make a full recovery."

Archie gave a sigh of relief. "And the baby?"

The nurse grinned.

"We were worried about his heart rate and we'll be keeping him under observation as well just in case, but you have a perfectly healthy little boy who's ready to meet his daddy."

"Oh thank you, thank you." Archie threw his arms around the nurse, who took it all in her stride.
and patted his shoulder.

"This way."

Archie looked back over his shoulder at Belle and Gold.

"Go on," Gold said. "Go and hold your son. We won't leave without saying goodbye."

As soon as Archie had left the waiting room, Belle burst into tears of relief, and she felt Gold slide into Archie's vacated seat and gather her up in his arms.

"It's all going to be ok," he soothed. "Ruby and the baby are going to be fine, and you're going to be a godmother."

"I forgot to bring the elephant," Belle sniffed, fumbling for a tissue to dry her eyes on. The little blue elephant had been sitting on her dressing table for two weeks now, but in all the panic that had accompanied their departure to the hospital, it hadn't crossed her mind.

"I'm sure the new arrival can survive without his elephant for a couple of days. He's got a giant stegosaurus waiting for him at home. Come on, I think we need a cup of tea after that." Gold paused. "And someone should probably tell Granny that she's now a Great-Granny…"

X

Ruby looked very small and very pale. The stark white of the hospital gown and the sheets wasn't helping, and neither were the tubes snaking in and out of the crook of her elbow and her wrist. But there, wrapped up in soft fleecy blankets in the little plastic crib beside the bed, was a perfect little bundle with a shock of bright red hair. He was the most precious thing that Archie had ever seen.

There were no words to describe how he felt. Archie had never been particularly good with fancy words anyway. With his patients he simply spoke the truth from the heart, and they appreciated his honesty and integrity.

"You can hold him," the nurse said.

"I'm scared he'll break if I pick him up," Archie admitted. The nurse shook her head with a smile, picking up his son and handing him to him.

"He won't break," she said. "He's a fighter, your little boy, just like his mum. He's very strong."

"He's so small," Archie breathed.

"He's eight pounds ten ounces, so he's actually on the big side," the nurse said. "He'll soon grow." She paused. "Just give us a shout if you need anything."

Archie nodded, not really hearing the words. He sat down in the chair beside the bed, still clutching his son against him, almost afraid to move lest he disturb the little bundle. He wanted to take Ruby's limp hand, but he didn't want to shift his hold on his baby. Ruby would understand when she woke. He was there, as he had promised when they'd taken her for surgery. He would be there when she woke up.

It was another half an hour before she opened her eyes. She blinked a few times before she focussed on Archie and smiled blearily.

"Hello love," she croaked.
"Hello." He carefully stood up and came closer so that she could see the baby in his arms.

"I feel like I've been run over by a bus," Ruby said, "but seeing him, I don't care. He's worth every minute of it."

"You still look beautiful, bus or no bus." Archie said. Ruby snorted.

"You charmer." She reached up and tugged at the blankets a little so that she could see more of her baby's head, and she laughed weakly.

"He takes after his daddy," she said.

"Yes, but he's got his mum's spirit."

There was a brief knock at the door before the nurse popped her head round. "I thought I heard voices. Welcome back, Ruby. I should also tell you that your grandma's in the waiting room, but she said she would wait until you said you were ready before she came in." The nurse came into the room fully and checked Ruby's stats, drips and lines. "Now, I'll bet you want to hold your little boy."

"Am I allowed?" Ruby asked. "What with…" She indicated her abdomen, where the incision had been made.

"Of course you are. We just have to be careful with your wound and your IV's, is all."

The nurse helped Archie place their baby onto Ruby's chest so that she could cuddle him close without putting pressure on her stomach or elbows.

There was silence in the room as Ruby held her baby for the first time, tears streaming down her cheeks but the widest smile possible lighting up her face.

"You, my little cub, are perfect," she breathed. "Hello gorgeous. I'm your mummy. It's very nice to meet you. And this is your daddy," she added, reaching out for Archie, who caught her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "You've already met your daddy. He's the bravest, most brilliant man in the world. I love him very much and we both love you more than anything. You're going to have a fantastic life. We'll make sure of it."

X

"Happy birthday."

Belle toasted her now-empty mug of tea against Gold's and snuggled into his side. The sofas were a new addition to the hospital canteen and she was very glad of them. "Not the most orthodox way to celebrate your fiftieth, but what can you do?"

"I'm perfectly happy with this turn of events," Gold said. "Not Ruby needing an emergency caesarean and blood transfusion, of course, but since Archie and Ruby's son chose today to come into the world, it means that all future celebrations you might be planning for me are henceforth called off. I can't steal my godson's thunder on his birthday now, can I?"

Belle batted his arm playfully. "I'm just glad everything's going to be ok." She yawned. "Do you think we ought to be heading back now? I don't want to leave Archie till Ruby's woken, but we might be able to get an update if he's feeling more reassured that she's going to be ok."

Gold nodded and they left the canteen. As they were walking back across the carpark towards the
maternity suite, Belle's phone buzzed with the arrival of a text message. It was from Archie:

**Ruby's awake and we'd like you to meet your godson.**

Belle smiled, at least they knew now that Ruby was conscious and compos mentis. When they arrived back in the maternity ward, the first thing they saw was Granny, waving at them from out of a doorway. Belle rushed forward, dragging Gold along with her.

Ruby was awake, if looking incredibly exhausted and absolutely elated at the same time. Archie was perched on the bed beside her, stroking his son's pink cheek. Ruby waved them over with one hand for a closer look.

"Thank you both," she whispered. "For everything you've done today." There was a pause and she beamed up at them. "Belle, Gold, this is Connor Richard Hopper. Connor, this is your godma and godpa, Belle and Gold."

She took the baby's tiny hand in hers and kissed it before moving it in the smallest approximation of a wave in Belle's direction.

"We all love you, little one," Ruby said. "We are your family, and whatever happens, you will always be loved."

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**Note:** Two people suggested Connor, meaning 'lover of hounds/wolves' as a name for Ruby and Archie's baby. I added Richard, meaning 'brave, hardy', which I thought was appropriate given his slightly dramatic birth!
Belle returns home from her hen night a little bit worse for wear.

It was a Friday evening, and Gold had found himself in the unusual circumstance of being home alone. Emma had taken Belle out on a makeshift hen night with their other female friends consisting of dinner and drinks at the Slug and Lettuce, and Gold had been quite content to let her have a girly night out whilst he monopolised the sofa and spent however many hours watching CSI box sets in her absence.

Having fallen into a slightly-too-much-whiskey-induced slumber, Gold was woken by the sound of a car pulling up outside the house and doors slamming. He peered at the clock on the DVD player and found that it was one in the morning. This was obviously Belle coming back from her night out. He heard giggling and stumbling steps, and frowned. This was obviously Belle coming back from her night out a little worse for wear. Gold knew that Belle was a lightweight, and he knew that she was an extremely giggly drunk, but he was fairly sure she’d never actually fallen over on his watch before. He got up off the sofa and made his way to the front door. He was just about to open it when the faint sound of quiet, although definitely warbling, singing came up the driveway.

“Have some Madeira m’dear, you really have nothing to fear.”

The voice then tailed off for a while and hummed, evidently having forgotten the words. Gold recognised the reedy tones as Belle’s and opened the door, leaning in the frame to observe the unexpected tableau that was unfolding in his front garden. Belle was being gently steered up the path by Emma on one side and Marina on the other, Alice following a couple of paces behind obviously trying not to laugh. Ruby was absent entirely, but this was not at all unexpected; with a three month old baby at home, she had only been intending to stay for an hour or so before going back to relieve an undoubtedly fraught Archie from his babysitting duties.

“She sipped it, she drank it, she drained it she did, he slyly refilled it again. And he said as he secretly carved one more notch on the butt of his gold-handled cane…”

At this particular line of the song, Belle looked her husband-to-be up and down from head to toe and back again, taking in the cane in his right hand, and burst out in a fresh fit of giggles, bent double in the middle of the path, before wobbling up towards him. Gold merely raised an eyebrow.

“Evening, Mr Gold,” Marina said as they reached the front door. “Special delivery!”

Gold looked over her shoulder to see Eric watching them from the driver’s seat of the car, killing himself laughing.

Belle threw her arms around Gold’s neck. Not only was she giggly when drunk, she was also rather touchy-feely, moreso than usual.

“Are you going to proposition me?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes at him. “With your cane?”

“Not in the front doorway when I’ve got an audience, love. Maybe later.”
“It was the cocktails,” Emma said apologetically. “Belle and cocktails are a lethal combination and they were on special at the Slug and Lettuce. They were doing her favourite pina coladas, which they never normally do, so I think you went a little bit overboard, didn’t you, lovely?”

Belle nodded with a self-deprecating little smile. “I think I’m a little bit tipsy.”

“You’re telling me,” said Gold. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

“Are you coming too?” Belle asked, leaning up to kiss him and missing his mouth by an inch or so. Apparently she was also rather lascivious when drunk.

“Yes, I’m coming too.”

Gold was fairly certain that he had never witnessed this side to her before. The night was still too young yet for him to have decided whether he wanted to see Belle under the influence of pina coladas again or not.

“Excellent.” Belle stepped inside the front door, still not letting go of him.

“Thank you for bringing her back in one piece,” Gold said to Marina, who gave an airy wave, and respectfully declined to comment on his little squeak as Belle’s hands began wandering and he received an unexpected goosing.

“It was nothing. Eric was on his way back from Grimsby and saw her singing in the taxi rank so he thought he might as well give us a lift. Ruby left after dinner and Dawn decided to skedaddle at the first mention of pina coladas. Probably for the best. Ashley, Mary Margaret and Astrid send their regards; they waited for a taxi.” Marina raised one eyebrow. “Good luck.”

Gold looked down at Belle’s flushed grin. He was probably going to need it.

After seeing the other women safely back into Eric’s car, Gold shut the door and leaned on it, putting both arms around Belle.

“Now, my dear, I hate to say it, but I can’t carry you up to bed.”

Belle nodded good-naturedly.

“Can you remember where the bedroom is?” Gold continued. Belle gave him a look and batted his arm affectionately.

“Of course I do,” she said, planting a clumsy kiss on his chin.

“Are you sure? Since you seem to be having some difficulties finding my mouth, I was wondering.”

“If you shut up and stopped moving it around, I wouldn’t have so much trouble, would I?”

Gold had to concede her point, and dutifully closed his mouth. Belle held his face firmly in both hands and gave him a very determined and deliberate kiss on the lips. She snuggled in closer against him and he let her hands begin to roam again. When she had succeeded in getting her fingers under the waistband of both trousers and underwear, he decided that it was probably time for them to move.

“Darling, I know that the front door is one of the few places in the house that we haven’t christened, but since you can barely stand up straight, I don’t think that this is the most appropriate
occasion for acrobatics. Come on. Bed.”

With her skyscraping stilettos off, Belle was not quite as wobbly as she had been whilst coming up the garden path, and she skipped up the stairs in an almost perfect straight line, the slingbacks dangling from her fingers as she hummed the first few bars of *Have Some Madeira* under her breath. Gold rolled his eyes and followed her up to the bedroom at a slower pace. When he reached her, she was pirouetting haphazardly in the centre of the room.

“I never did ballet when I was little,” she explained, as she staggered to a stop and Gold threw out an arm to catch her balance.

“Well, it’s never too late to try new things,” Gold said, “but half past one in the morning might not be the best time to practise. Especially considering the pina coladas.”

Belle flopped down onto the end of the bed.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Thank you.”

Belle drew her legs up and sat cross-legged on duvet, watching Gold intently as he moved around between the bedroom and the bathroom, undressing and brushing his teeth. He’d almost got into bed when she put a hand up to his chest to stop him, and she traced a fingertip up the long white scar over his knee.

“Belle…” Whilst Gold had never had a problem being naked with his scars on show in front of Belle, her brow was furrowed, and the intensity in her eyes was everso slightly unnerving. She made no reply save to bend forward and press her lips to the sharp line.

“There. All better.”

Gold laughed and got into bed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m drunk,” Belle pointed out, before scrambling off the bed and going into the bathroom herself. Gold settled down under the covers, listening to her continued humming as he took his evening pills. Belle returned to the bed just as he finished screwing the caps back on the bottles.

“I just think it’s sad,” she said, the last word turning into a yawn. “That you’re always in pain. I wish I could kiss it all better.”

Gold smiled and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

“Go to sleep, my beauty.”

Belle opened her mouth to say something else, but whatever it was, it was lost in the yawn that escaped her.

“Yes,” she said eventually, snuggling down beside Gold. “Sleep is probably good.”

X

The next morning, Gold was woken by an emphatic groan from somewhere in the region of his right ear. He opened one eye and looked sideways at Belle, who was squinting against the summer sunshine forcing its way through the closed curtains. She pressed a hand against her forehead and groaned again.
Gold extricated himself from the tangle of limbs that they had fallen into during the night, and got her a glass of alka seltzer without a word. Belle looked at him blearily as he held it out to her and manoeuvred herself into a vague semblance of a sitting position before downing half of the effervescing liquid in one go.

“Better?” he asked mildly. Belle just glared at him.

“You know, your ‘incredibly smug’ look would be a lot more effective if you had some clothes on,” she grumbled. “All right, all right, so I had one too many pina coladas.”

Gold got back into bed beside her. “How much of last night do you remember?”

“I remember a lot of pina coladas. And dancing with Marina in the taxi rank. And I remember some things that I am sincerely hoping were a dream. Most of them happened after I got home, actually.” She paused. “Was I singing outside?”

“Yes.”

“Was I singing *Have Some Madeira*?”

“Yes.”

“Did I grope you on the doorstep?”

“Yes.”

Belle gave a muted groan and felt around behind her for a pillow, which she subsequently pressed over her face. “Never again,” came her muffled voice through the feathers. “I am swearing off pina coladas for life.”

Unseen by Belle, Gold just smiled, remembering not the tipsy escapades but the tenderness with which she had kissed his broken knee. In three weeks to the day, this beautiful, if a little hungover, woman would be his wife, and drunk or not, she was perfect.
Gold was woken by a tapping at the bedroom door.

"Mr Gold?"

It was Grace's voice. Gold's brow furrowed. What was Grace doing in his house? He opened his eyes and rolled over onto his stomach to look at the door as the tapping came again, only to find himself face to face with a large wardrobe. He blinked, but no, the wardrobe was still there. It took a couple of moments for Gold to remember that he wasn't in his own house, he was in Jefferson's spare room, and therefore Grace being outside the door wasn't all that surprising.

"Mr Gold, Dad said to tell you that there's a cup of tea outside the door, and that I shouldn't go away until I'd got some kind of coherent response from you."

Gold smiled.

"You might be here a while, Grace."

He heard her laugh and run off down the stairs. Faintly, he could make out the sound of Jefferson humming out of tune in the kitchen. It sounded like 'I'm getting married in the morning,' and Gold had to wonder at the irony.

He got out of bed and padded across to the door on the other side of the room, opening it to find not merely a cup of tea but an entire tray full of the various accoutrements that the proper appreciation of a cup of tea required - milk, lemon, honey, sugar. Gold would never let it be said that Jefferson did not know how to make tea. He poured himself a cup and leaned in the bedroom doorway with it, listening to the rest of the house coming to life and wondering what Belle was doing; whether she was awake yet with her own morning tea, whether Ruby and Emma had arrived at their house yet to help her get ready. It was still slightly unreal; the feeling, the anticipation. Even after just over a year of engagement, Gold couldn't quite believe that today he would be marrying Belle and they would be starting on a new stage of their life as husband and wife.

Along the landing another door opened and Alice came out of it wearing her dressing gown, rollers in her hair. She waved at Gold, yawned and made her way downstairs, muttering something along the lines of 'whoever thought that Saturday mornings started earlier than ten o'clock needs shooting'. Gold returned to the bedroom and stared at the suit carrier hanging on the back of the door.

One year, nine months and two weeks ago, he and Belle had been on their first date, and it felt like only yesterday. But then again, at other times it was sometimes hard to remember a time when there hadn't been Belle in his life - normally those were the moments when she was leaning over the breakfast table for the marmalade and giving him a clear view down her gaping nightdress. He'd said it to himself before he'd met her, really met her, that if he was going to have any kind of relationship with her, then it had to be love, true love. He was too old to be happy with anything.
less. Belle had been the first to make him think that perhaps lasting happiness with another partner would not be such an impossible thing to achieve. So he had taken a leap of faith, and here they were, about to cement their love and show it off to the world.

Their marriage was slightly unconventional of course, in that they had both been married before under very different circumstances and neither wanted to fully repeat the experience in the same way. Belle's first wedding had been a simple legal binding, over within twenty minutes flat; she hadn't even worn a white dress. Gold's had been traditional in every sense of the word, organised by his then-fiancée's parents with his only important tasks being to accept Liz's decisions and turn up on the day. (His father had later added the stipulation that he'd be disowned if he was the only Scotsman at the wedding not wearing a kilt.)

It would be very different today. The only other person who was coming to this wedding who had been to his first was Aunt Elvira, who was overjoyed about finally having the opportunity to wear the new hat that she had bought three days after finding out that her only nephew was engaged. The circle of friends that he and Belle now moved in were very different to those of ten, twenty years ago. Their entire lives were different, and it made sense that they would do things differently.

Downstairs, the humming had stopped and it appeared that an argument had started. Unwilling to begin the day with his best man in a bad mood, Gold took his tea down to the kitchen to see what the fuss was about. Alice was standing by the stove with her arms folded, Jefferson had his head stuck in the fridge and Grace was calmly watching the scene from the table, eating a piece of toast.

Gold sat down beside her and took another slice from the rack, spreading it with a liberal helping of marmalade, and tried to ascertain the nature of the discussion.

“But Alice!” Jefferson was whining from the fridge.

“No buts! This is a wedding! As sexy as your sexy stubble is, Jefferson, it is not appropriate for being a best man! You are having a proper shave this morning!”

“Gold?” Jefferson closed the fridge door and gave his friend a pleading look.

“Jeff, I wet shave every day; you’ll get no sympathy from me.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

Gold turned to Grace. “Is it always like this?”

“Pretty much.” Grace seemed remarkably blasé about the entire situation, so Gold resolved to follow her lead and just enjoy the show. He found his thoughts once more wending towards Belle. He hoped that Emma would make sure she had a good breakfast. He had felt a little guilty, leaving her in their pink house all alone the night before their wedding, knowing that he would be in good company with Jefferson and his family, but she had insisted that this was one tradition that she didn’t want to break with.

Gold couldn’t really complain too much, for it made the anticipation of seeing her walking up the aisle towards him all the sweeter.

X

Across town, Belle was, like Gold had been, reliving their first date, because she had found herself in the same position of sitting on the end of her bed whilst Ruby rifled through her underwear drawer.
“And you still keep your passport in with your knickers?” Ruby exclaimed? “I’d have thought that Gold of all people would have somewhere organised to keep things like that.”

Belle raised an eyebrow. “Ruby, have you actually taken a good look around this house? Have you seen the amount of junk?”

Ruby turned and gave Belle a knowing look.

“It’s very nicely organised junk, though,” she said. “Everything has a home. And I would have thought that passports would have had a home somewhere other than your underwear drawer.”

Belle just gave a snort of laughter. “Scrabble around in that drawer enough and you’ll find Gold’s as well.”

Ruby gave an exasperated sigh and flung Belle’s lucky knickers at her. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand you.”

“You don’t have to understand me,” Belle said, pulling on the knickers under her bathrobe. “Just love me. Now, I think your son may be wanting attention,” she added, as the wailing of a young infant began on the floor below. Archie was ensconced in the living room with Connor, allowing Belle to have her best friends to herself for a few hours before the wedding. “Go on. Emma and I can finish up here and dress me on our own, I think.”

“We’ll give you a shout if the dress needs more than two pairs of hands,” Emma added.

Ruby gave her a grateful smile and rushed downstairs, and Emma continued to work on Belle’s hair. Ruby had been in charge of it but her excitement had resulted in some rather exuberant hand-waving, and Belle had begun to fear for the safety of her ears in the proximity of the curling tongs.

“You’re a lot calmer than I was,” Emma observed, beginning to thread pearl pins into Belle’s updo. “I can’t believe how non-plussed you are.”

“I’m not non-plussed. I’m just not nervous.” Belle grinned at her friend in the mirror. “I’m excited.”

It was the honest truth. Of course, there were a few lingering worries at the back of her mind, the odd niggle of ‘what if such and such goes wrong’, but when it came to the actual act of marrying her fiancé, there were no doubts at all. She had been waiting for this day for a long time, and she was going to enjoy every minute of it.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang, and Belle heard Archie answer it.

“Only me!” Jefferson yelled up the stairs. “I’ve brought you a bridesmaid, where would you like me to put her? In the cupboard under the stairs out of the way? She brought a book, if you provide a torch she’ll be quite happy.”

“Dad!” Grace exclaimed.

“Come on up, Grace,” Belle called.

“Jeff, stop making trouble and stick to the day job of seeing that Gold doesn’t scarper for Glasgow at the last minute,” Emma added.

Jefferson said his farewells and left the house again. A moment later, there was a tap on the bedroom door and Grace poked her head round it.

“Awake,” Grace replied after some thought, sitting down on the bed and visibly trying very hard not to touch her hair. She had naturally thick and heavy tresses; it seemed that Alice had used an entire can of hairspray to try and get the curls to stay. “And alive. He was singing in the shower so he can’t have drowned himself.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure your father didn’t spike his breakfast tea with vodka?”

Grace nodded. “I’m sure. Not that I wouldn’t put it past Dad, but I was watching him like a hawk. I think he’s working on the principle that anything he does will come back to haunt him if he and Alice get married.”

Belle wouldn’t put it past Gold. He had a memory like an elephant when it suited him.

At length, after Ruby had come in and out several times to offer a second opinion, they deemed Belle’s hair and make-up perfect, and it was time for her dress. Emma came over and helped her get into it, holding the neckline open so that it wouldn’t muss her hair, and Ruby held the skirt so that it wouldn’t crease.

“You’re going to be stunning,” Emma said earnestly, zipping the dress up the back and fiddling with the layers of tulle around the neckline. “Gold won’t know what hit him.”

Belle looked at herself in the mirror. Emma had been there when she’d found the dress, and she’d known as soon as she put it on that it was ‘the one’ so to speak. Her friend had just sat in the corner of the bridal boutique nodding dumbly and giving two thumbs up. An a-line skirt with a fitted halter-neck bodice in pure white tulle. It had taken Emma several minutes to actually come up with any words, but Belle had understood what she was driving at. It was simple, but feminine, and the shape was evocative of the vintage style that Belle was so fond of.

She had decided against a veil, in the end. She didn’t want anything in front of her eyes whilst she was walking up the aisle lest she trip up and plant herself face first in the floor, and she couldn’t find anything in the boutiques that seemed to fit properly. Everything had been too long, too short, too wide or too flounced, and since Belle hadn’t had any kind of clear idea of what she wanted from a veil in the first place, she decided to cut her losses after a conversation with Granny.

“You’ve got beautiful hair,” the older woman had said when Belle had confided her veil woes. “Why do you want to cover it up on your wedding of all days?”

It was such a simple solution, and it had saved her a lot of stress and a sore head from veil combs digging into her scalp.

There was another knock at the door downstairs and Archie was once more pressed into service as butler. A few moments later, his head appeared around the door.

“The car’s here, and Connor and I are off,” he said. “You look wonderful, Belle. Truly. I’ll see you at the hall.”

He closed the door behind him and Ruby turned to Belle.

“Ready?”

Belle smiled.

“What do you think?”
When Reed Hall, a beautiful old building tucked away at the bottom of the university campus, had presented itself as a possible venue for their wedding, Belle and Gold had known that they had hit the jackpot. The hall had a small ceremony room that was the perfect size for their number of guests and a well-appointed dining room for the reception, and it was set in charming gardens that were ideal for photographs and mingling as long as the weather held. It was in this garden that Gold and Jefferson were enjoying the sunshine whilst waiting for the first guests to arrive.

Belle had not wanted the wedding to be in a registry office. Although it was a nice enough building and Gold had seen more than enough couples posing for pictures on the steps when he had gone to collect Belle from the library around the corner, he understood her reluctance. Her first wedding had been at a registry, and whilst it had not been entirely emotionless, it had not been the romantic experience that she wanted from a wedding. Gold was similarly reluctant for a church wedding having been through one himself, and after Bae he’d stopped believing in God anyway. Besides, theirs was a small, intimate wedding: neither of them had any extended family beyond Aunt Elvira and they moved in the same small circle of friends. A large church would seem comical; they needed a small, cosy venue.

Jefferson checked his watch.

“Last chance for Dutch before the guests arrive,” he said. Gold raised his eyebrows at the suggestion. “What? I spent the morning of my wedding to Sophie firmly attached to my best man’s hip flask.”

“You spent the morning of your first date with Alice searching my office for gin,” Gold added. “It would have been funny had I not been trying to put together a custody case for the same afternoon.”

“Ah yes.” Jefferson smiled fondly at the memory. “I stole some from Sid in the end.”

Gold shook his head in despair, but before anything more could be said on the subject of Dutch courage or the fact that Jefferson found the prospect of romantic encounters utterly terrifying, one of the venue admin staff came over to tell them that the room was ready, and they decamped inside the cool building to await the guests.

There wasn’t much call for ushers; there weren’t enough people coming to warrant it and as most of the guests knew both Belle and Gold equally, it made sense to let everyone sit where they wanted for the ceremony instead of splitting up between bride and groom. Gold watched people begin to arrive in dribs and drabs; when he saw Archie and Connor slip in at the back, he knew that Belle would soon be on her way and the waiting would be over…

“Errant Nephew!”

Aunt Elvira had arrived. Gold had picked her up from the train station the previous day and driven her to her bed and breakfast. She had turned down his offer to stay at the house, saying that it would feel odd staying in his home when he wasn’t there, and that she didn’t want to be a third wheel to Belle’s preparations in the morning. She trotted down the aisle towards them with a speed that belied her advancing years, and came to a halt in front of Jefferson, giving him the complete onceover from head to toe and back again.

“Hello there. Who’s this handsome young fellow?”

“Aunt Elvira, this is Jefferson. Jefferson, my Aunt Elvira.”
“Errant Nephew, you must introduce me to your friends more often,” Elvira scolded. “Especially if they’re all as good-looking as this one.”

Gold resisted the urge to bury his face in his hands. He should have known that Elvira would start flirting with someone at some point during the day, but he’d expected her to have had a few more glasses of gin, and he had not expected her victim to be his best man. Luckily, Jefferson took it all in his stride.

“You’re very kind, Miss Gold, but I’m afraid I am spoken for.”

Aunt Elvira tutted. “It’s a crying shame. All the best men are taken. She’s a very lucky lady. Or he’s a very lucky man. Whatever floats your lilo.” She turned her attention to Gold. “Now, my nephew, I am most disappointed in you…”

There was a polite cough from behind Gold’s left shoulder and he turned to see one of the hall staff smiling at him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have to let you know that the bride has arrived.”

Aunt Elvira’s eyes lit up.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s get this show on the road!”

The word quickly spread around the guests and they filed into their seats. Gold took his place at the front. Jefferson gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and he turned to watch his beautiful bride enter the room.

Belle was radiant as the sun. There was no other way to describe her, and even those words didn’t do her full justice as she glided towards him, the smile on her face one of Cheshire Cat proportions. He had to grip his cane handle hard; suddenly it felt like the only thing keeping him upright.

The most beautiful woman in the world was coming up the aisle towards him, and in a few minutes, she was going to be his wife.

X

The room was only small and the aisle was not very long, but Belle tried to make the walk, with Gold’s awestruck eyes on her the entire way, last as long as she could. When she reached the front, she gave her bouquet to Emma and Gold took one of her hands.

“You look beautiful,” he murmured.

Belle smiled. “You’re not looking too bad yourself.”

Gold’s reply was to kiss her knuckles, and Belle gave him a look at would have been far more effective had she been able to stop herself grinning from ear to ear.

“The kissing’s supposed to come after the wedding,” she scolded.

Gold shrugged. There was a moment of quiet between them, Gold running his thumb over her fingers. Belle looked to his other hand; his hold on his cane was white-knuckled although she didn’t see what he had to be nervous about.

“Shall we get married now?” she suggested.

Gold nodded. “I think that’s an excellent idea.”
The ceremony was short but heartfelt, and then, Belle was married.

She couldn’t quite believe it.

Signing the register, she looked down at the band of white gold around her finger. Although she had been determined not to think about it, she couldn’t help but remember the last time that she had been in this position, a cold February morning, wearing her thick but not particularly attractive winter coat and fighting back morning sickness. She’d thrown up three times before the ceremony then, and she couldn’t tell to this day whether it had been nerves, pregnancy or her poor body screaming at her not to go through with it.

Today though… She was broken from her train of thought by Gold’s lips against her cheek as he took the pen from her to sign his own name… Today, nothing had gone wrong and the only butterflies in her stomach now were ones of excitement. Today, everything was right. She had been looking forward to this day for over a year now, and whilst a lot had happened in those twelve months, her anticipation had never dimmed. And now, she was married, and she couldn’t quite believe that it had finally happened.

She closed her hand over the top of Gold’s on his cane and squeezed, to reassure herself that he was still there and it wasn’t just a dream.

With the register signed, the only thing left to do was walk back down the aisle. She had walked up it alone, but she would be walking down it with the man she loved, the man who was now her husband.

Although she was pretty sure that most people knew each other, Belle made certain to move between the groups of guests in the garden, making introductions as they drank their Pimms and chatted, waiting to be fed.

“Belle! Pet, you look stunning!” Brenda rushed over to them, the flowers on her hat bouncing as she moved, and she threw the arm not holding her drink around the bride. “And the mysterious Mr Gold, looking sharp as ever. Oh Belle, your dad would be so proud of you.”

Belle had determined that she wasn’t going to cry today. It was a day for celebration, not mourning, but she had felt her father’s absence as she had walked down the aisle, and she couldn’t help the tears that welled up. She tried to blink them away, but Brenda, who was observant for all her scattiness, saw and fished a tissue out of her handbag.

“There now, pet. It’s a good job I brought extra stock. I always cry at weddings.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Belle said. “I’ll ruin my make-up.” Beside her, Gold gave a little huff of laughter and put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close to his side.

“Well there is that about it, but I won’t discourage you.” Brenda smiled before giving a sniff and reaching for the tissues herself. “It’s good luck for a bride to cry on her wedding day.”

Belle gave her older friend an incredulous look.

“It is.” Aunt Elvira had joined them, nodding enthusiastically. “She cries away all her tears on her wedding day and she’ll be happy for the rest of her marriage.”

Belle laughed and dried her eyes as Aunt Elvira rounded on her nephew.
“Errant Nephew, I am most disappointed in you.” She prodded Gold’s shoulder, but the merry twinkle in her eyes showed that whatever she was about to say was not meant to be taken seriously. “Where is your kilt, boy?”

Gold raised his eyes to heaven with an expression that plainly read ‘God, I don’t know what I did to deserve my aunt, but please save me from her now’.

“Yes…” Ruby came over, cradling a dozing Connor against her shoulder. “I was wondering the same thing.”

“For the love of…” Gold threw his free hand up in despair, but before the women could gang up on him even more, Elvira was completely captivated by her nephew’s godson and she and Ruby were caught up on an in-depth discussion of babies. Gold saw this as an excellent opportunity to steer Belle away from his aunt before she could embarrass him any further, and they moved over to greet Astrid and Leroy. The couple were contemplating the rose bushes behind the dining room, and Belle couldn’t help but remember the last wedding that they had all been to together. Whilst no-one had actually said anything, the fact that a very rumpled-looking Astrid had popped up from behind a rose bush as a very newly-engaged Belle and Gold were heading back to the hotel had spoken volumes, and also resulted in Astrid and Leroy being the first people to know of the engagement.

Gold cleared his throat.

“I do hope you’re not thinking of getting up to any shenanigans,” he said. “We’ve already claimed this bush.” Astrid started and jerked her glass, sending half her Pimms flying. Luckily it avoided Belle’s dress and Leroy managed to jump out of the way in time to stop any landing on him.

“Good grief, Gold,” he grumbled. “I’ve only got the one suit and tie. At least try and let me get out of buying a new one.”

Gold opened his mouth to say something, but then the waitresses were calling them into the dining room. The reception was served.

X

It was only once the dessert plates had been cleared and the bar staff were topping up champagne flutes for the toasts that Belle began to feel nervous about what she was about to do.

Gold squeezed her hand under the table.

“You’ll be great,” he said. “I promise. Just take a deep breath and speak from the heart.”

Belle stood up and cleared her throat, looking around at the guests – at her friends – watching her expectantly.

“Before I start, I would like to thank you all for coming and being with us today, especially those of you who have made long journeys from other parts of the country, you know who you are. I know it’s unusual for the bride to give a speech, but everyone here knows that this wedding is hardly conventional. Everyone here also knows that my dad died last year. Because I know how much he was looking forward to walking me down the aisle and making a toe-curlingly embarrassing speech, it felt wrong to have anyone else in his place, to have someone else by my side. And then I realised that since Dad died, I have had someone else by my side, and I’ve always had him. The amazing man who is now my husband. At weddings you toast the bride, the bridesmaids, the happy couple. Today I’d like to toast the groom. Please raise your glasses to my
wonderful Gold.”

The guests echoed her toast and Belle continued. Having had a bit of a cry earlier with Brenda, it made it easier to get through the rest of her words.

“Even though Dad’s not here today, I know that he’s up there watching over us – probably waiting in the bar telling me to get on with it so that we can get onto the party. So I won’t keep you much longer. I’ll just take this opportunity to say thank you to Dad for all he did for me, and to tell him to get himself another whiskey whilst he waits. Please raise your glasses to absent friends.”

“To absent friends.”

Belle sat back down and Gold took her hand under the table again.

“I told you you’d be great,” he whispered, before standing himself. Belle had not heard Gold’s speech. Jefferson had assured her that it was perfectly fine and would not offend anyone, and now that she had her own nerve-wracking part out of the way, she was quite looking forward to hearing him.

“I talk for a living,” he began. “I make statements and speeches almost every day. But when I sat down to write this one, I had no idea what to say.”

“You’re losing your silver tongue, Mr Gold,” Cara called from her table. Gold rolled his eyes.

“One does not normally expect hecklers during a wedding speech, unless Cara is amongst the guests. There are children present, Miss Mallory. Let us descend into innuendo another time. As I was saying, I had no idea what to say. I could tell you how beautiful Belle is, but that would be a ridiculous waste of time because you can all see how beautiful she is, and you can all see that nothing I could say would do her proper justice.”

“I could wax lyrical about how Belle and I met, and how many slices of carrot cake I had to buy before I plucked up the courage to ask her out, but that’s a story for another time and place. The most important thing is that, carrot cake aside, Belle and I did meet, and I knew from the moment I saw her that she was perfect. I’m too old and cynical to believe in love at first sight. At least, I always thought I was. Belle has managed to change quite a few of my pre-conceived notions since I’ve known her. I can quite honestly say, from the bottom of my heart, that Belle is the best thing to happen to me for a very, very long time, and I’d like to raise a toast to that. To Belle, my bright, bold, beautiful wife. Thank you for being you, and for loving me.”

“To Belle,” the guests echoed.

“There are many other people to thank for their crucial role today. My Aunt Elvira, for example, thank you for leaving Maisie the poodle at home. Mrs Lucas, thank you for the confectionery masterpiece that is our wedding cake. My best man Jefferson, who had to put up with me all morning and should be commended for that alone, but who also made sure I had breakfast and got here on time. We’ve always known him as the office mother hen, and today I’ve been grateful for his clucking. Should you ever find yourself in my position, Mr Milliner, I will happily return the favour. Last but not least, the bridesmaids – Emma, Ruby and Grace, especially Ruby, who has been juggling bouquets, lipstick, hairpins and a four month old all day. Please raise your glasses to the best man and the bridesmaids – they deserve it for all their hard work helping me and my wife in the run-up to this momentous day.”

Belle leaned into Gold’s side as he sat down.
“Thank you,” she whispered. “That was sweet.”

“Don’t mention it,” Gold replied with a grin. “I mean it. I’ll be getting a reputation.”

Jefferson stood.

“Thank you Gold, I’m touched. There was I, thinking you were a cold-hearted, ungrateful sod.” He cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentlemen, as you all know, we are gathered here today to witness… No, we’ve already had that bit… Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen, friends, family, gatecrashers whom we let stay for the party anyway, as Gold’s best man it is my duty and my privilege to embarrass him to the point where his face is the same colour as the raspberry coulis…”

Gold rested his head in one hand with a muted groan and Belle patted his arm, unable to hide her smile. She had vetted Jefferson’s speech personally and taken out all the bits that she thought completely inappropriate, but Gold didn’t know that. Best to let him stew for a little while.

“For those of you who don’t know, although the majority of you do, Gold and I work in the same law practice. I have not known him as long as some best men have known their grooms. I have no stories to tell you of his childhood indiscretions, such as the time he was nearly kicked out of playgroup for biting, or the things he would do at university when paid in whiskey. I hereby extend my thanks to Gold’s wonderful Aunt Elvira for the enthusiasm with which she offered up these tibits with which to embarrass her nephew. No, I can’t tell you about any of those things, but she can, and she’ll be more than willing share them. Gold and I first met when he came to fill in the rather large shoes left by the senior partner Mr Fothergill, god rest his departed soul. Little did I know he had already begun his wooing of the beautiful Miss French who waitressed over the way by smiling at her through the window and causing her to drop forks. Yes, people, Don Juan was nothing before he cut a deal with Gold…”

Jefferson paused and pulled out some cards.

“Now, everyone in the practice found out very quickly that Mr Gold is Scottish, and Mr Gold likes his Scotch. I took the liberty of looking up some vocabulary commonly used to describe whiskey, and it gave me food for thought, as I was worried that Gold might have imbibed so much of the stuff that he is actually turning into it. Listen to these: ‘dignified’, ‘firm’, ‘dry’, ‘subtle’, ‘rich’, ‘dark’. There are more that I think Belle is probably more justified in using than myself: ‘hot’, ‘salty’, ‘mouth-coating’. And there is, of course, my personal favourite and the most apt: ‘nutty’.”

Jefferson waited for the laughter to dissipate and continued.

“I also have here some genuine, bonafide statements that our colleagues have used when describing Mr Gold, none of which can be attributed to whiskey. His secretary Ashley says he’s a ‘terror’. Our receptionist, Kathryn, says ‘Gold only has two moods – bad and suing someone’. Regina Mills, who likes to think she’s Gold’s boss – you just keep dreaming that, Regina – calls him… several things that are unrepeatable in polite society. Tara Castle, Ashley’s maternity cover temp who was with us for a grand total of… how many days, Gold?”

“Twenty-four,” Gold mumbled.

“Twenty-four days.” Jefferson continued. “was so traumatised by the experience of working for him that she couldn’t even give a statement. My own first impression of him was a Very Scary Man With A Cane, and I maintained this impression until I saw him on his first divorce case. The parents spent the entire time arguing to the extent that he left them in his office and spent the rest of the appointment sitting in reception with their son discussing Pokémon. For three quarters of an hour. And I happen to know that Gold has never played Pokémon in his life and barely knows how
to switch on his computer. I have seen him hit his laptop with one of Belle’s shoes before. But he will still be able to have a forty-five minute in-depth discussion on pokémon with a seven year old because despite the Hugo Boss suit, and the cane, and the smile that sometimes makes you think he’s just killed someone, Gold is completely gooey and squidgy in the middle, and Belle, darling, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing out Gold’s inner softie more often. Just don’t do it too much. If he starts humming in his office then you might have gone too far and we’ll have to find him a horrible client asap to sharpen him up again.

“But this is why Belle is such a good match for our Very Scary Man With A Cane, and why I offer the two of them my sincerest congratulations. Belle brings out the very best in Gold, and the most wonderful thing is that he lets her. Gold, I shall be serious now. You are a difficult man to get to know. There are many layers of Boss and Armani, and indeed Glenmorangie, before we uncover the squishy middle, and there are not many to whom you open up. It is therefore a great honour to me to be numbered amongst your friends and a great honour to be asked to stand beside you on this most important day. Over the past couple of years that I have known you, you and Belle have been very good friends to me and I only hope I can return the great gift you have given me as you continue on your married life together. People, please be upstanding and raise your glasses to toast the bride and groom.”

The toast echoed round the room.

“Quick,” Jefferson said. “Toss the bouquet now whilst you’ve got their attention.”

Belle laughed, but nonetheless got up from the table, bouquet in hand, and the ladies followed her out into the garden.

“You know,” Emma called back to the men who had remained, “you might want to join us, just in case. You’ll want to know what you’re letting yourselves in for. Especially you, Jefferson. Now might be a good time to remember that your daughter’s on the basketball team.”

Jefferson choked on his champagne and scrambled round the tables and out into the garden past Emma.

“Grace Milliner, if you catch that bouquet...!”

Belle laughed and brought her bouquet up to her face, breathing in the delicate scent of the roses and lavender and taking a few final moments to admire the flowers in their full glory before they were unceremoniously thrown.

She tossed the bouquet and turned to see the results. A triumphant-looking Ashley stood in the centre of the group of women, Alexandra in one arm and the bouquet in the other hand. Over by the doors, Sean was looking rather worried…

Ruby was exhausted. Going to a wedding four months after having a baby was a tiring feat in itself. Being a bridesmaid four months after having a baby was something else entirely. True, Emma had taken on the majority of the bridesmaid duties, with Ruby’s only stipulation being to turn up, wear the dress and walk up the aisle after Belle, after which she could concentrate on Connor and ignore the rest of the wedding if needs be, but she was still exhausted.

Ignoring the wedding was certainly what she was doing at that point in time, secreted away in a quiet corner behind the speakers so that she could feed Connor in peace as the venue staff cleared away the tables to create a dance floor in the dining room. Belle had been so good about the whole
thing, finding her an empire-line dress with a tie halter that was comfortable and practical for breast-feeding as well as looking pretty.

She leaned back in her chair and watched the other guests mingling in the garden, Belle moving between the groups of guests, Gold following her at a slightly slower pace but with his eyes always on her, a look of adoration on his face. *Look at my wife,* he seemed to be saying. *Isn’t she beautiful and wonderful and aren’t I the luckiest man alive to have her?*

And Belle… Belle looked so happy. Ruby was quite certain that she had never seen her friend look so happy. Belle had been so calm about the entire wedding – no last minute nerves or cold feet, no crises of confidence, no last minute stresses about whether the preparations were all going to plan or not. She had thoroughly enjoyed her wedding day and the build up to it. Ruby hoped that when she married Archie (because she was going to marry Archie at some point in the far future, whether he realised this or not), she was just as unflappable. It was unlikely, admittedly, but it wasn’t an impossible dream.

“Hello.”

Ruby tore her glance away from the window to see Ashley making slow progress towards her, Alexandra tottering along in front of her mother. The little girl was holding a white rose from Belle’s bouquet in one hand; she had been most put out when her mother had given the bride back her bouquet, so Belle had carefully extracted a few roses for Alexandra to keep. She presented the bloom clumsily to Ruby.

“Flow, Nana Roo,” she gabbled, which Ruby translated from toddler to English as ‘flower, Aunty Ruby’.

“Thank you, Lexy.” She tucked the rose behind her ear and readjusted Connor’s position on her lap. Ashley responded to her unspoken request to retie her halterneck for her, and the two women looked out at the wedding guests again. Somehow, Belle and Gold had managed to take leave of the small party and were partly concealed from view behind a rose bush, or at least, they would have been had Ruby and Ashley not been on the other side of the window watching them. Whilst they weren’t doing anything remotely resembling debauchery – in fact they weren’t even kissing – they still jumped apart guiltily when Ashley tapped calmly on the glass and waved. Muffled through the window, Ruby heard Gold grumble something about not being able to get a moment’s peace at his own wedding and Belle laugh and pull him back to the guests.

“I did tell her that he would be excellent husband material,” Ashley said proudly. “I stand by my judgement.”

Ruby stood by it too.

X

“Mr Gold, you promised.” Belle had not wanted to resort to pouting when their marriage was less than six hours old, but it seemed the most effective method of persuasion at that particular point in time. “You promised me a first dance. We had a deal. One dance, and I would let you sit down for the entire rest of the evening.”

Gold sighed, although she could tell that his reluctance was at least half-feigned.

“All right.” He glanced around for a suitable place to put his cane for safekeeping and Henry helpfully held out a hand. “You’re holding me up though.”
Belle kissed him and gave him both her hands, pulling him onto the floor as the music began. They didn’t dance often; Gold’s knee made it nearly impossible to move to anything faster than a soulful ballad, but a soulful ballad was what they had, and she was grateful for it. She rested her head on Gold’s shoulder as they swayed along to Bette Midler’s bluesy vocals, and the irony of the situation made her smile. This was the first song they had ever danced to, and in a beautiful coincidence, their first dance had also been on the first night they’d slept together. Once more, the night was only just beginning, and it was theirs for the taking.

Jefferson, Alice, Emma and Graham soon joined them, and by the end of the song several other couples were dancing as well. Over Gold’s shoulder, Belle watched Archie dancing with Connor whilst Ruby looked on from her seat, her no-doubt aching feet propped on another chair.

The music stopped but neither of them made any move. They stayed standing in the middle of the dance floor, even as a livelier tune began and other people started to dance around them. Belle nuzzled into Gold’s neck, breathing in his aftershave, feeling his hands on her lower back – warm and steady and giving no indication that he was uncomfortable even though she knew that standing unsupported for a long time gave his knee grief. For as long as Gold was content to stay holding her, Belle didn’t want to let go.

She didn’t want to let go for a long time.

X

The bridal suite at the Royal was beautiful, and Belle spent several minutes just looking around it in wonder. Her attention kept being drawn back to the four-poster bed that was very obviously intended as the centrepiece of the room. No-one looking in could deny that this suite had definitely been designed with its intended purpose in mind. Jefferson had already arranged for their bags to be brought over to the hotel and they were stowed neatly in one corner, Gold’s suit carrier hanging on the wardrobe door.

There was an ice-bucket with a bottle of champagne in it in the centre of the room, and Belle was about to suggest they cracked it open when Gold gave a heartfelt sigh of ‘tea!’ and made a beeline for the kettle, as if he’d never been happier to see an electrical appliance in his life.

Belle laughed. “There’s free champagne and you want tea?”

“Belle, I have drunk more than enough champagne already today, but I haven’t had a cup of tea since half-past nine this morning and I’m going to start getting withdrawal soon.” He wandered over to the ice bucket whilst he waited for the kettle to boil and picked up the card that was clipped to the handle.

“Who’s it from?” Belle asked. “The hotel?” She pulled off her shoes and got onto the bed, testing out the mattress. It was heavenly and she could quite happily have slept on it for twenty years, but sleeping was not very high on her list of priorities at that moment in time.

Gold rolled his eyes as he read the card.

“Jeff?” Belle asked. He shook his head.

“To my dear Errant Nephew and my beautiful new niece,” he read, “please enjoy the champagne. In moderation. This is going to be a night that you will want to remember. All my love and the very best wishes for your future together, Aunt Elvira.”

Belle laughed. “Your Aunt Elvira is a legend.”
“Don’t I know it,” Gold muttered. The kettle boiled and he went back to it to make his tea. “Would you like some?”

Belle was about to respond in the negative and pop the champagne for herself when her nose caught the aromatic bergamot scent of Earl Grey and she decided that maybe tea wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

“Actually…”

Gold was already bringing two cups over to the bed. He handed them to her and divested himself of shoes and socks before getting onto the bed beside her and taking a long gulp, giving a heartfelt grunt of satisfaction.

Belle laughed and sipped her own tea. “We’re already giving the neighbours a show and we aren’t even undressed yet.”

“At least we actually waited until most of the guests had gone home before taking leave of them,” Gold pointed out. “Unlike certain literary couples. Marius was so eager to get the wedding night started he dragged Cosette off halfway through the reception, if I remember correctly.”

“We might have scandalised people somewhat if you’d ravished me in the middle of dinner,” Belle said. Gold raised one eyebrow.

“Who, precisely? Everyone in the room knows us and Aunt Elvira would have been cheering me on.”

“Cara’s plus one might have been a bit surprised.”

“He’s with Cara. Nothing should surprise that man.”

Belle thought about this for a moment and conceded the point. She chinked her teacup to Gold’s in a toast.

“To us, on the first night of the rest of our lives.”

“And to many more nights to come, I hope.”

Belle took another sip of tea and then burst out laughing; Gold had to take her cup from her lest she upend it over her white dress.

“I can’t quite believe that we’re sitting on the largest bed I’ve ever seen, drinking tea and discussing Hugo. On our wedding night.”

“What’s wrong with drinking tea and discussing Hugo on our wedding night?” Gold asked, before draining his cup and setting it on the bedside table beside hers.

“Nothing.” Belle took his hand and laced her fingers through his, bringing his palm up to kiss it. “Most couples tear each other’s clothes off as soon as they get in the door. And sometimes before.” She kissed him again. “I like it this way. The anticipation’s still there…” her eyes trailed down to Gold’s crotch and his hips shifted under her gaze “but there’s less pressure to perform and have it all over and done within five minutes.”

“Oh, I plan on spending a lot longer than five minutes with you tonight, Mrs Gold.” Gold growled. His voice was husky with unchecked desire and Belle grinned as he pulled her in closer for another kiss, letting him take the lead and tip her onto her back.
“I’m glad to hear it, Mr French,” she replied.

“I thought we agreed,” Gold said, peppering her lips with little kisses, “that you were going to take my name.”

“I know, I know,” Belle replied. “But my brain doesn’t want to think about complicated thinkie thoughts like changing my name right now.”

Gold pressed a trail of light, nipping kisses down her jaw and neck. “What does your brain want to think about?”

“My brain doesn’t want to think about anything. My brain wants to shag my husband senseless.”

Said husband gave her a narrow, cat-eyed smile. “I like your brain.”

Belle grinned.

“Just let me put something more appropriate on.” Gold raised his eyebrows and moved off her. Belle slipped off the bed and turned her back.

“Unzip me?” she asked demurely.

Gold acquiesced eagerly, dragging the zip down and kissing his way down her spine. Belle felt him unhook her bra as he went past and she grabbed her chest to stop the underwear falling down inside her dress. She gave him a look over her shoulder.

“I believe I said ‘unzip’, not ‘undo.’”

Gold shrugged and Belle rolled her eyes, hooking her bra out of her dress and tossing it at him. Gathering up the carefully tissue-wrapped package from the top of her overnight bag and a coathanger from the wardrobe, she slipped into the bathroom and began her preparations.

She’d been waiting to wear this lingerie for far too long, and she was damn well going to enjoy it whilst it was on, because knowing Gold, it wouldn’t be on for very long. Belle slipped out of her wedding dress and hung it on the back of the door, and opened up her package. It was a babydoll nightdress in sheer, golden-champagne coloured silk with embroidered lace cups and fastened with long, curling ribbons, and matching lace knickers. As soon as she’d seen the set, she’d known it was the one, and Ruby had agreed with her, for all their arguing about white wedding night lingerie.

Beyond the bathroom door, Belle could hear Gold pottering about in the bedroom – teacups chinking, bags being unzipped, his uneven step over the floorboards – and she figured that she could take her time. They weren’t in any hurry, after all. Their plane didn’t leave until three o’clock the next day. Plenty of time to enjoy what the night had in store. She washed off her makeup and combed all the pins out of her hair; as tempting as it was to leave it up and have it adding to the seductive effect, she knew how uncomfortable it would be if she ended up falling asleep with it still pinned, and she knew that once she was in bed, she wasn’t going to want to get out of it again in a hurry.

Finally ready, she donned the lingerie and took a long look at herself in the full-length cheval. Yes. Yes, this was definitely a good purchase. She gave an involuntary shiver of anticipation and made to leave the room.

Belle paused with her hand on the door handle, listening to the sounds coming from the bedroom. Her brow furrowed as she heard Gold swearing under his breath.
“Is everything all right out there?” she called.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Just give me a minute… bloody thing…”

Belle’s brow furrowed as he swore in Gaelic before returning to English again.

“All right, let me look at you.”

Belle smiled; his accent was so thick as to be nearly unintelligible. This was shaping up to be an excellent wedding night.

She opened the door, intending to pose in as sultry manner as possible in the bathroom doorway, but all thoughts of playing the coquette flew from her head when she saw her husband, and she stayed transfixed with one hand on the door handle, taking in the sight of him.

He was wearing his kilt. And nothing else.

“Take a good look, darling, because once this comes off, I’m not likely to ever put it on again.”

Belle grinned as she sidled towards him, movement finally returning to her limbs.

“One night only?” she asked, slipping her arms around his neck and feeling his hands splay over her back, stroking up and down the golden silk.

“Well, I thought that since you’d wed a Scotsman, you might as well bed one.”

“Ah, but are you a true Scotsman?”

Gold merely quirked an eyebrow and pressed his lips to hers.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured against her mouth.

“So are you,” Belle said. “But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“Maybe there are some things,” Gold began, punctuating his words with kisses along her jaw and up to her ear, “that you have to find out for yourself…”

Belle all but tackled him onto the bed. Married life was going to be fantastic.

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All of the words used to describe whiskey (and Gold) are genuine and can be found here: http://www.whiskypapa.com/25-ways-to-describe-whisky

Belle and Gold’s first (and indeed only) dance is to Bette Midler’s ‘The Rose’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxSTzSEiZ2c
“Can I open my eyes yet?”

“Have I said you can open your eyes?”

“I know where we are, Gold."

“I have no doubt of that, my darling. It’s the principle of the thing. I want your first view of it to be magnificent.”

Belle smiled and held onto Gold’s arm a little tighter. When he had blindfolded her as they left the hotel that morning, the final morning of their honeymoon before they flew home the next day, she had known immediately what he was doing, where he was taking her. Their walk had been slow – the lame leading the blind, as Gold had jokingly put it, but without visual distractions, Belle had had time to reflect on their holiday and ruminate on their ultimate destination.

The first day of their honeymoon had not been at all productive. They’d spent the majority of it in one hotel room or another, living off room service and each other with a short interlude whilst they got to their airport, got their plane and got to the other hotel. The second day, Belle had been determined to do some sightseeing, so they had gone out and taken in the city.

Dublin was a beautiful place, and the weather had truly held out for them. They had wanted a city break; Gold was not one for hot climates and long-haul flights, and Belle knew that she would go out of her mind just lying on a beach for a week. She liked having places to explore, lost secrets to discover, museums, libraries, hidden gems. Dublin seemed like the perfect place. When Jones had found out they were headed to his native land, he had given them a long list of tourist attractions that they might want to visit. On closer inspection, it had turned out to be a list of various different breweries and distilleries, with a note saying that he would be most disappointed should they return having omitted a visit to the Guinness storehouse.

Jones was going to be disappointed. Neither Belle nor Gold could stand Guinness. They had, however, visited the Old Jameson distillery, and Gold had conceded that for all he loved his Scotch, the Irish whiskey was ‘not bad’, which was about as high a praise as he would give.

(It hadn’t stopped him buying a couple of bottles to take home with them, though.)
They had been to the Titanic museum, seen the grand staircase and argued about the factual inaccuracies of the film. They had gone for long walks through the old streets and stopped on benches for ice cream when Gold’s knee had decided it had had enough of walking. They had been to the museums and the galleries and the theatre, and they had made love on every available surface in their hotel room.

There was one place they had not yet been, and Belle knew, as her footsteps echoed in a large room, that this was where she was.

Belle had always wanted to visit Trinity College library for as long as she could remember. She’d told Gold that on their first date, but it wasn’t something that they often dwelt on. She’d mentioned it in passing when Dublin had been mooted as a honeymoon location. When they had arrived in the city, Belle knew that she would not be leaving without having set foot in that library, and now that it was the last day and she was blindfolded and she could smell the distinctive scent of dusty old books in the air, she knew exactly where she was.

“Ok. Open your eyes.”

She felt Gold’s arm slip out of her hold and a moment later, her blindfold was removed.

The famous Long Room of the library was even more beautiful than the pictures had made her believe it, and for several minutes Belle could do nothing other than stand in the centre of the vaulted room, gazing around her surroundings in wonder.

“I’ve never seen so many books in all my life,” she breathed.

“You like it?”

Gold’s arms came around her waist and his chin rested on her shoulder. Belle leaned back against him.

“Oh yes, I love it. It’s so beautiful.”

Gold pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. “I’m glad.”

“I could live here,” Belle whispered. “I could spend a year here and I don’t think I’d get through all the books.”

Gold chuckled.

“I think you underestimate your ability to devour literature, my dear,” he said.

Belle twisted in his arms to kiss him properly.

“Thank you. It was a lovely surprise.”

“Despite the fact you knew exactly where you were going?”

“Because of it.” It was true. Knowing where she was headed had not dampened her enthusiasm; if anything it had added to it. Being able to open her eyes onto the magnificent interior as if she had been magically transported there had made the experience all the more breathtaking.

Gold let her go and Belle moved away to the nearest shelf, wanting so badly to ghost her fingertips over the spines of the books there, to take one out and immediately lose herself in the tales that it told, but she was unable to. Even if the shelves had not been cordoned off to protect the oldest
works, she didn’t know how she would be able to choose a tome.  

Besides, she knew that if she started reading something, there would be no stopping her, and there was so much more to discover. She wandered along down the length of the room, basking in the beauty of the library as the summer sun streamed in through the windows, casting the shelves in their best light and catching the dust particles hanging in the air; adding to the sense of stepping into a bygone era.  

Libraries were functional places, as a librarian Belle knew that better than most. They were valuable stores of knowledge that might otherwise be lost. In the age of technology, with so much information available at the click of a mouse or the push of a button, Belle found it all the more worthwhile remembering that there were some treasures that the internet could never hope to match. She had handled manuscripts and books from ages past at the library where she worked, and the feeling of reverence that she had felt would never leave her. She felt it again now, as she made her way through Trinity College library. These texts were more than just books, they were part of history, part of the way her life had been shaped.  

But functional as they were, that did not mean that libraries could not and should not be places of art as well. Magnificent works need magnificent surroundings. That was what she had said to Gold all those months ago, when she had first told him of her dream. What better way to honour the volumes that had given humanity so much than with a beautiful safe resting place?  

Presently, Belle looked around for Gold. He was standing in front of one of the busts that flanked the bookshelves, his head on one side.  

She went over to him.  

“He looks familiar,” Gold said to her, nodding to the bust.  

“He’s Plato,” Belle pointed out.  

Gold looked at her and raised one eyebrow.  

“Be he Plato or not, he still looks familiar.” He tilted his head slightly in the other direction. “I know who it is. He reminds me of my grandfather.”  

Belle rolled her eyes and slipped her arm back through his. “Come on,” she said. “I want to see the Book of Kells before we leave.”  

The Book of Kells, a lavishly decorated manuscript dating back to the ninth century, had been on display in the Old Library for almost two hundred years, and it was to be the oldest text that Belle had ever seen. Despite its age, it was still in good condition, and Belle gazed at the displayed pages in awe. Yes, this was what libraries were about. They were more than simply a place to house old and dusty books until they were no longer required. They safeguarded history, culture, the fabric of life itself. Things like the Book of Kells could never be superseded by technology. Images might be available on computer screens, but nothing would compare to the real thing, to being so close to a chapter of the past.  

Belle was reluctant to leave the library, having spent the entire morning there, but she did so with a smile on her face. She had achieved a lifelong dream, and far from feeling a sense of disappointment that it was over, she felt happy. The library had more than lived up to her expectations, her fantasies, and now instead of flimsy dreams, she had solid, tangible memories.  

She squeezed Gold’s arm a little tighter. The fact that he had been at her side made those memories
all the sweeter.
Fairy Cake

Chapter Summary

Belle learns to knit with Tina and plans for the future.

Chapter Notes

Credit must go to my brother for being the first to suggest a cupcake entitled ‘Fairy Cake’ featuring the nuns-who-are-not-nuns-in-this-AU. So, here it is! Introducing Tinkerbell, very imaginatively renamed Tina Bell…

Fairy Cake

There were two things in Miss Tina Bell’s life that she held in higher esteem than anything else. The first was books. Tina had worked at the library for the entirety of her adult life and she had never held any desire to do anything else for a living. She had never found anyone else with quite the same passion for books as she had until Belle French (now Belle Gold, Tina loved a good storybook romance) had joined the library. The two women had immediately hit it off over a discussion of Anna Karenina. Although their opinions of the classic text were about as polarised as possible, Tina and Belle had become close friends, and on Tuesdays, when the library closed early, they could often be found in Granny’s, discussing literature and waiting for Mr Gold. (Or Mr French, as Tina called him privately, because there was no doubting who wore the trousers in the marriage. When she’d learned that he was Scottish, her theory was further confirmed although she had yet to see any pictorial evidence of his owning a kilt. She’d been most disappointed when he’d been married in a three piece suit.)

The time spent in Granny’s gave Tina the perfect opportunity to indulge in her second passion – knitting.

She had first joined the Nutty Knitters’ Stitching Circle three years ago, and she had not looked back. The group, originally led by an uptight young woman named Fae Blue, met in Granny’s once a month to drink tea, knit, chat, and swap patterns and tips. They had gone through a rocky patch about a year after Tina had joined when Astrid, the bubbly, absent-minded glue that had held the group together, had left, but they had pulled through. Tina missed Astrid sometimes, missed the way that she would drop every other stitch and the fact that she would knit everything (including sweaters for her husband) in varying shades of pink. Whilst Leroy had always claimed to love the garments Astrid made for him, Tina had never actually seen him wear any of them, and she couldn’t say she blamed him.

Relations within the group had become much easier after Fae had left – or rather, after Fae had walked out in a huff. When Ruby Lucas had revealed to the group that she was expecting, the idea had been mooted to knit some baby clothes for her new arrival. Tina always reckoned that it was a
knee-jerk reaction in women who knitted. Whenever a pregnancy was announced, their thoughts immediately turned to baby clothes and knitted toys. (Tina’s certainly did. Although she had yet to emulate Connor’s giant stegosaurus in woollen form, she was determined to do it eventually.) Fae, whom Tina was convinced was an undercover nun, had taken umbrage at this fact, since the Lucas-Hopper baby was being born out of wedlock, and she didn’t want to encourage young people to live in sin. When half the group had looked at her with ‘you’ve got to be kidding me’ expressions and the other half had simply burst out laughing, Fae had gathered her needles and yarns and stalked out of the café, and the Nutty Knitters had not seen her since. Needless to say, Connor Hopper now owned more knitted items than any six month old boy could ever need, including Tina’s own pride and joy, a miniature woollen Pongo.

Even after Connor’s birth, Tina had continued to make him things, and she was finishing sewing up another item on the day that Belle asked if Tina would teach her to knit.

Tina agreed with gusto.

She always had several projects on the go lest she get bored, and she dived into her knitting bag and took out an extremely large ball of bright yellow wool on chunky needles.

"You can start on the scarf," she said, handing the ball over to Belle. "Everyone I've ever taught to knit in the past couple of years has started on the beginner's scarf."

Belle looked down at the winding scarf, covered in haphazard bits of pattern with no rhyme or reason to it, with the occasional patched hole or place where something had obviously gone very wrong, and Tina saw her raised eyebrow. "It's very simple really. Needle in, yarn round needle, needle out to make a knot, slip old stitch."

Belle took the needles from Tina and tried it herself, making slow progress along the row. Tina watched her work for a little while until she got into some semblance of a rhythm, then returned her attention to her own needlework. She had just finished a pair of little socks for Connor and she was putting the final touches to them, making sure there were no loose threads or loops that might catch his tiny toes.

"What are you making?" Ruby asked, bringing over a pot of hot water to top up their tea. Six months after Connor’s birth she had just started working again, the odd afternoon here and there when the café was short staffed and Granny was on hand to babysit. Tina held up her socks.

"For Connor. Stripy socks like his dad wears."

Ruby smiled.

"I hate to say this Tina, especially when I can see the love and care that's gone into those little socks, but I don't think they're going to fit Connor. He's growing every day. I think he grows every time I take my eyes off him."

Tina looked down at the little stripy socks and the pattern that she had knitted them from.

"Ah," she said, on realising that she had been using the measurements for a newborn, rather than a six-month-old infant. "Ah well, never mind. I'm sure there'll be another baby coming along sooner or later."

Belle picked up one of the socks and cradled it in her palm.

"It's so dinky, it's perfect. I could never make something so fiddly." She paused. "Can I keep them?"
Both Ruby and Tina turned to Belle.

"Belle, is there something you should be telling us? Like, are you going to be needing those in nine months?" Tina asked.

Belle laughed and shook her head.

"No, I'm not pregnant. They just look so sweet. And well, you never know. Never say never."

Tina took out her smallest sock needles and striped yarn and began to cast on for a slightly larger sock, one that would hopefully fit Connor when it was finished. She wouldn't say anything to her friend, but she was secretly hoping that Belle would be announcing the arrival of tiny feet to wear those socks soon. After all, they'd been married two months now and were, if Belle's blushes when asked about the lovebite on her neck that her collar did not quite cover were anything to go by, still very much enjoying being newly-weds. As much as she loved knitting for Ruby's ever-growing son, it would be nice to make tiny hats and blankets for newborns again. Perhaps she was getting broody herself. Pairing up and settling down had never really been high on Tina's list of priorities; she was perfectly happy by herself with only her knitted creations and her nutty friends for companionship.

It was at that point that Gold arrived with one of his colleagues from the law offices, and Belle waved him over to show off her knitting progress on the beginner’s scarf. He caught sight of the miniature socks sitting on the top of her handbag and raised one eyebrow.

“Have you been making clothes for dolls?” he asked.

“No, no, Tina made those. The extent of my knitting experience is this one row I’ve just done. They were for Connor but they won’t fit. So I’ve kept them.”

Gold raised both eyebrows.

“Well, you never know." Belle said. "They might come in handy in the future. We can use them as little egg cosies if nothing else.”

“You want to be careful, Gold.”

Tina looked up from her socks to see the other lawyer leaning on the cake display, smirking.

“When women start hoarding very small items of clothing, it’s always a bad sign,” he continued.

Gold closed his eyes and pressed one palm to his forehead. “Jones, don’t say another word.”

“Well, I’m just saying. You’re not getting any younger, mate, and if someone’s pining for the pitter patter…”

“Jones, shut up,” Belle said conversationally. “Anyone would think you were the one pining.”

Jones dutifully mimed drawing a zip across his lips and locking it. As he did, his eyes caught Tina’s and he winked at her. Tina smiled back.

Maybe companionship other than her yarns and crochet hooks wasn’t all that bad a prospect.
Brownie

Chapter Summary

Jefferson is about to go on a rather daunting date with Alice – and her family.

Chapter Notes

Someone wanted to see the results of the bet made back in chapter ten regarding how long it would take Jefferson to ask Alice on a date. Someone else wanted to see Jefferson and Alice’s first date. This is about as close as I could get. A Jefferson/Alice chapter.

I take Alice’s surname (Kingsleigh) and her sister’s name (Margaret, here shortened to Meg) from the Tim Burton Alice in Wonderland film.

Gold was having a perfectly normal lunch time – well, in as much as having a picnic in one’s office with one’s wife can be classed as perfectly normal – when the door burst open and Jefferson rushed in.

“Do you mind?” Gold asked. “God only knows what we might have been up to in here!”

“The walls are thick, but they aren’t that thick,” Jefferson said. “I’d have heard you, and so would everyone else in the building. That’s beside the point. The point is, I am in desperate need of your help.”

“And you couldn’t knock because…”

“Because this is practically a matter of life and death!” Jefferson exclaimed. “My life and possible death to be precise!”

Belle sat bolt upright from where she had been lounging in the chair opposite Gold’s. “What’s happened? Are you all right? What do you need us to do?”

“Alice wants me to meet her family. I need you to come on a triple date with me and Alice and her...
“Jefferson, I am quite certain that I have no more desire to meet Alice’s sister and mother, charming people as I’m sure they are, than you do,” Gold said. “Moreover, I am even more certain that they have much more desire to meet you, a possible future in-law, than they do to meet Belle and me, being as we are mere friends and acquaintances.”

Jefferson sagged slightly in the doorway, his whole manner akin to a balloon with a slow puncture.

“Jefferson, are you honestly telling me that you have been in a relationship with Alice for a year now and you have never met her family?” Belle asked.

Jefferson nodded sadly, then came into the office fully, sitting down on the edge of the desk. “She won’t move in till I’ve met her mother.”

Gold folded his arms.

“Jefferson, I appreciate your plight, but there are some things that man must do alone. Meeting the possible future in-laws is one of them.”

Jefferson sighed and looked at Gold with wide, doleful eyes.

“I suppose begging and pleading aren’t going to help me?”

Gold shook his head and Jefferson narrowed his eyes.

“You know, I think you’re enjoying this,” he muttered.

Belle reached across and patted Jefferson’s arm in a gesture of comfort.

“Jefferson, you will be fine. Honestly. Alice has been with you for a year now, she’s not likely to change her mind based on one meeting with her family. It’s just lunch. Not much can go wrong.”
The look Jefferson gave Belle was one that quite clearly showed that he felt exactly the opposite way…

X

Jefferson could categorically say that he was not at all looking forward to the next couple of hours. He was sitting at a large round table in Granny's, fiddling with cutlery and trying very hard not to let how incredibly nervous he was show in his face.

Emma came over and sat down at one of the empty chairs.

"Jefferson, everything about your demeanour is screaming 'I would like to be anywhere other than here'," she said. "Please calm down. Meeting the parents is not pleasant, but it is not a life-threatening experience either. You are in a safe environment. You are not going to be murdered by Alice's mother. No-one is going to stab you with a cake fork."

Jefferson gave Emma a pleading look.

"It's me against three of them," he whined. "What if they decide that I'm not good enough for Alice and just sit there with disapproving looks on their faces for the entire time? If there's one look I can't deal with, it's the disapproving one."

Emma patted Jefferson's hand. Despite the cafe being the social point at which most of the circle of friends' lives converged, Emma and Jefferson actually knew each other from another source. Grace and Henry had been in the same class at school for a long time and the parents had met at an open evening.

"Jefferson, it's going to be fine," Emma said. "I promise. You and Alice have been together for a year now. I think if her family had any strong objections to you they would have made them felt by now, and Alice is still with you. So either no strong objections were made, or if they were made, Alice has ignored them. And if they were made, then do you really think that you would be sitting here now waiting to meet her mother?"

Jefferson had to concede the point. He just wished that he and Alice could continue being a family with Grace without having to go through the motions of meeting the family.

It had taken a long time for Jefferson to pluck up the courage to ask Alice on a date. He was all too aware of the bets that had been placed in the cafe and amongst his colleagues at Guildhall as to how long it would be before one of them made the first move. Belle had been closest with her estimate of three months - it had taken four and a half and Grace had been the one to prompt the shift from colleagues with an awkward and undeniable attraction to actually dating. Grace, sick of seeing her father 'moping about making puppy dog eyes' had asked Alice out on Jefferson's behalf. He could still remember his absolute mortification when he realised, and his joy when Alice had said yes. (And, of course, Grace's smug 'I told you so' smile.)

The cafe door opened and Alice came in, followed by her family. Emma gave Jefferson a final pat on the arm for good luck and left the table to return to the counter.

Although he had not met them in the flesh before, Jefferson had seen pictures of Alice's mother, sister and brother-in-law, and he knew what to expect, and he stood to meet them, feeling for all the world like a man on his way to the scaffold.
Once hands were shaken and introductions made, Jefferson sat back down. It was crunch time.

X

It was going about as well as Jefferson could expect, that is to say, it was not going well at all.

Alice's sister, Meg, was lovely. Her husband was an arrogant twerp, but Jefferson had been warned about this by Alice, who could barely tolerate the man herself.

Alice's mother, Mrs Kingsleigh, was downright terrifying. She kept looking at Jefferson through narrowed eyes, as if she was working out the most entertaining way of slowly killing him. Jefferson looked towards the cafe doors, not for the first time during the encounter. He kept hoping that Belle and Gold would walk in unexpectedly, despite Gold telling him in no uncertain terms that they were not going to save him by coming on a triple date.

Maybe Belle would take pity on him and come to his rescue.

Jefferson suppressed a whimper of fear, trying to tune out Alice's brother-in-law's voice. He had recognised very early on in the proceedings that the older man was trying to bate him, and he was concentrating all his attention on not rising to it. It didn't help that Meg and Alice were over at the cake display, arguing about triple chocolate brownies whilst they tried to work out what to order, and Meg was not there to keep her husband in check like she had been doing for the past half an hour.

Presently, Mrs Kingsleigh spoke.

"Oh, be quiet John, you'd try the patience of a saint."

Abashed, John stopped talking. Sadly this meant that Mrs Kingsleigh's attention was fully focused on Jefferson. Her next words, however, where not at all what he was expecting.

"How's Grace, Jefferson?"

Jefferson blinked.

"I, erm, she, erm, she's very well, thank you."

Jefferson didn't know why it came as a shock to him to learn that Alice's mother knew about Grace. After all, it wasn't as if Alice never spoke to her family about her life and the fact she was an almost-stepmother to a twelve-year-old.

"Where is she today?"

"She's at basketball practice," Jefferson said, still slightly shell-shocked.

"That's a shame, I was very much looking forward to meeting her. Alice has always told me what a sweet girl she is." For the first time since she entered the cafe, Mrs Kingsleigh smiled. "By all accounts, you have done an excellent job raising her. Oh, do excuse my squinting at you all the time, I've lost my glasses. Meg always says I look murderous without them and even though you look fuzzy I can tell you're slightly scared."

John gave a snort of laughter that was hastily turned into a cough when Mrs Kingsleigh's eyes turned on him.

Jefferson was not quite sure what to say to that. The part of him that was still vaguely compos
mentis was helpfully telling him that he really ought to say something but the majority of him was too relieved to speak. Mrs Kingsleigh saved him the trouble of trying to string a coherent sentence together and continued.

"Alice is very fond of Grace, and I am sure I would not mind another ready-made grandchild." She smiled. "Welcome to the family, Jefferson."

X

"Gold, I really think we ought to just go and see how they're getting on," Belle said, tugging on the sleeve of Gold's coat and trying to steer him in the direction of Granny's. "Jefferson is quite clearly terrified of Alice's relations and he's going to need moral support."

"Belle, darling, Jefferson is perfectly capable of taking care of himself. If he can handle Sid and Jones on a bender, he can handle Alice's mother."

Belle raised one eyebrow. "Are you quite sure about that? Gold, he's your best friend, you really ought to be more concerned for his welfare."

Gold sighed. "All right, we'll go and see if Jefferson looks to be on the verge of fainting, and if he is, then we'll think up a battle plan for intervening."

He let himself be dragged towards the cafe, and Belle peered in through the glass, looking for their friend.

"Is he alright?" Gold asked. Belle pulled away and nodded with a smile.

"I think he's going to be fine."

Gold looked in through the cafe window. Jefferson was sitting at a table in the centre, smiling. Alice was looking happy too, and they were holding hands on the table. The two women who must have been Alice's mother and older sister were laughing, and there did not seem to be any animosity in the air.

At that moment, Jefferson looked over and saw Gold and Belle outside the cafe, and he nodded his acknowledgement.

"Yes, he'll be just fine."
Tarte Tatin (En Flambé)

Chapter Summary

There is a small incident in Guildhall involving Jones and fire...

Chapter Notes

In which I shamelessly use Killian as a comedy vehicle. Again. Be warned, this chapter is not too kind to him. Dedicated to my lovely Miran and inspired by the following quote from Iron Man 3:
“YOU should have pressed the panic button!”
“Well, I panicked, but then I handled it.”

Tarte Tatin (En Flambé)

Killian would always maintain that it was not his fault. It was the microwave's fault. He would admit that he had not perhaps handled the situation quite as well as he could have done, but he had panicked, and no-one ever thought straight when they were panicking.

Dawn had been baking, which was always a good thing. This particular week she had brought in a rather lovely caramelised apple tart, which Killian had very much been looking forward to eating the last piece of.

The office that he and Dawn shared on the top floor was a sort of dumping ground for everything that did not fit into the main offices below, including the microwave, since the building did not boast a separate kitchen. The microwave was a rather old and battered thing, but Killian was very glad of it, especially given his ability to forget about his cups of tea on a regular basis and only remember once they had gone stone cold. On this particular day, Killian was alone in the office with the last piece of apple tart, and he decided that warming it up would be a good idea. Since it was the last piece, he did not see the point in transferring it to a smaller plate.

It was categorically not Killian's fault that he had not realised the plate upon which the innocent apple tart was sitting was decorated with metallic paint.

By the time he had realised, the microwave was emitting a rather worrying sound and was filling up with smoke. The apple tart had burst into flames and was burning away quite happily.

Killian did the first thing that any sensible young man with a good head on his shoulders would do in his situation.

He panicked.

He managed to stop himself from screaming and alerting the attention of everyone else in the building, but only just, and after taking a fortifying swig of tea, he calmed down.
Killian understood that the first thing to do was stop the microwave from frying itself any further, and to this end he yanked the plug out of the socket. So far, so good, there were no longer any alarming crackling sounds coming from inside.

The next thing to do was to do something about the fire. As things stood, the fire was currently confined within the microwave, and it would make sense to try and keep it that way lest it consume the entire building with flames. The problem was, Killian was not quite sure how to put the fire out with it still being within the microwave, and the worry that the appliance itself would catch alight was becoming ever stronger.

He briefly considered throwing it out of the window, but quickly dismissed this as probably doing more harm than good. Since he was a lawyer, he knew being sued for damages having accidentally knocked out a passer-by with a burning microwave would not be a good idea.

He was going to have to get the burning tart out of the microwave. Killian looked around for something to use as an oven mitt. Oven mitts were not things that one normally expected to use in a solicitor’s office, so naturally there were none available, and he didn’t want to leave the miniature conflagration unattended to run downstairs to the toilets to grab a handful of paper towel. His jacket sleeves would have to suffice.

Killian opened the microwave door and waved away the flood of smoke. Immediately, the shrill and piercing scream of the smoke alarm started, and Killian began to panic afresh, the sound of the alarm renewing his sense of urgency. He quickly pulled the tart - now reduced to a blackened cinder flickering with a weak flame - out of the appliance, but his jacket sleeves proved not to be as heatproof as he had hoped and he gave a yelp of pain, dropping the tart onto his desk before he rushed over to open the window to try and get the smoke to dissipate. It registered somewhere in the back of his frazzled mind that he probably ought to let his colleagues know that the building was not in imminent danger of burning down and the fire brigade did not need to be called, but he was slightly too concerned with the immediate present. Somewhere else in the back of his mind, he was very glad that Dawn was not in the office today or it would have taken them about a month to get her out from under her desk.

Below him, Killian could hear movement in the other offices, and he wondered how many of his colleagues were now wondering whether there was actually a fire and whether they ought to evacuate their clients. He heard a door open, then another, and then a voice from the stairwell that he had been dreading, a familiar Scotch growl.

“Jones, if you’re burned your damn toast again…”

Killian looked at the smoking tart; it was beginning to char the papers beneath it.

“No,” he called back. “I haven’t burned my toast. No need to panic. Everything’s under control.”

Killian could forgive Gold the misappreciation. His office also played host to the toaster and Killian did not have the best track record when it came to making toast. It would not be the first time that he had set the smoke alarm off in a morning whilst trying to make a late breakfast before his first appointment.

“Then for the love of the almighty will you turn that blasted racket off!” Gold yelled up the stairs.

Killian frantically looked around for the mop handle that was kept in the office for the sole purpose of switching off the smoke alarm. Kathryn had installed it after Killian’s third toast misadventure in one week. The tart had luckily stopped burning and was now simply smoking,
along with a stack of Killian’s paperwork that was turning a lovely shade of charcoal. Something had to be done, and quickly, but before he could concentrate on a battle plan he first needed to get rid of the infernal noise, because he had got to the stage of thinking that his eardrums were bleeding.

“Killian…”

It was Kathryn’s voice, in the doorway. Killian turned to look at her and found himself blasted by a highly powerful jet of water. Once he was no longer being assaulted by a veritable cyclone, Killian was able to see that Kathryn was standing in the doorway with a fire extinguisher, Gold behind her. Killian was also able to see that the flambéd tarte tatin was no longer smoking and his papers were soaked through.

Killian himself was not all that dryer.

“Better safe than sorry,” Kathryn said with a shrug, putting the fire extinguisher down.

Killian got the distinct impression that she had done it for no reason other than her own enjoyment, but he kept his mouth shut. At least she had solved the smoke problem. Gold came into the office, clambered a little awkwardly onto Killian’s desk and hit the smoke alarm with his cane, bringing blessed silence to the room.

The receptionist and the two lawyers looked at each other for a minute, Killian categorically not wanting to tell them precisely what had happened and Kathryn and Gold visibly debating whether or not they wanted to ask.

They were saved the trouble by Dawn’s voice coming up the stairs, chattering happily on her phone to Philip. She entered the office, took in the tableau, and blinked.

“Would it be too much to ask why Killian is soaked to the skin, why Gold is standing on the desk and why Kathryn has a fire extinguisher?” she said faintly?

Kathryn and Gold both looked to Killian to provide the explanation. He’d been afraid that they’d do that.

“Well,” he began, wishing that he could just teleport back home and get some dry trousers. “I didn’t burn my toast…”
**Millionaire's Shortbread**

Chapter Summary

An old school-friend of Belle’s comes back into her life and Gold categorically denies having a case of the green-eyed monster…

Chapter Notes

A couple of people have wanted to see Gold get jealous.
I hereby introduce Lumière and Cogsworth, aka Louis and Clarence. Please note that this idea was conceived before Lumière made an appearance on the show. This is a non-canon Lumière!

Gold would not say that he was a jealous man. If anyone had asked him, he would have said that he was a very trusting man when it came to relationships and therefore he felt absolutely no fear when he saw Belle talking to other men. Normally, this was true. Throughout the entire length of their relationship, Gold had not once had a case of the green-eyed monster. He was Belle's and she was his, and now that they were married that fact was only cemented.

He was therefore extremely perplexed with his current state of mind; that of wanting to beat a certain young man to a bloody pulp with his cane. This was very unlike him. Yes, he would admit to bouts of temper and it would not be the first time that he had thrown something at his office door in a rage, but actually going so far as homicidal thoughts was rare, even more so when the person towards whom the murderous thoughts were directed had not done anything to personally anger Gold himself.

No, this young man's only crime was, apparently, existing.

That, and talking to Belle. Leaning in really rather too close, and laughing and joking with her, and wrapping her up in a hug and kissing her cheek.

The sensible part of his brain which he had luckily retained despite the emerald now colouring his vision, told him that he shouldn't be stupid. This young man and Belle obviously knew each other, hence their closeness and the tactility of their exchange. There was no way in the world that Belle would let someone she did not know come into her personal space like that. The slightly less sensible part of his brain told him that this was even more reason for him to worry. Perhaps he was an ex-boyfriend from before she moved south. Perhaps he was here with entirely the wrong intentions up his sleeve.

*Gold,* the sensible part of his brain said, in an exasperated voice that sounded rather a lot like Jefferson's, *for the love of all that is holy will you please calm down. Gold?*

"Gold?"

It took Gold a few moments to recognise that the voice that sounded like Jefferson's was indeed his
colleague's, and he turned to find the younger man standing next to him, a tired but still somewhat amused look on his face.

"I am perfectly calm," Gold said. He realised too late that he had spoken through gritted teeth and therefore was not doing all that much to add any conviction to his statement. Jefferson raised an eyebrow.

"Your knuckles are white and you're grinding your teeth," he said. "Come on, cup of tea. There's no use in standing out here like a lemon spying on your wife."

Gold tried to protest, but Jefferson was stronger and practically levered him into Granny's and into a chair. A few moments later, he appeared with two cups of tea. Gold sighed and took a sip. It had been a perfectly ordinary morning until about four minutes ago, when Gold had left the office with the intention of meeting Belle for lunch. As he had left the office, he had seen Belle chatting animatedly on the pavement to this young, handsome stranger, and for some completely inexplicable reason, every possessive tendency in his body chose that time to make itself known.

"Gold, you trust Belle with your life," Jeff said. "Now please stop worrying."

"Worrying about what?" Belle had come into the café behind them. "Hello Jefferson, what brings you here?"

"Your idiotic husband," Jefferson muttered. "He's gone and got stupid ideas into his head. Maybe you can quell his fears now that you're here. I'd rather he didn't have a midlife crisis and buy a Ferrari, he'll never get it in the car park."

Belle raised her eyebrows and took the seat that Jefferson vacated.

"Gold, is everything all right?" she asked.

Gold nodded. "I'm fine, Jeff's over-reacting."

Belle did not seem at all convinced by this statement, but after opening her mouth to say something, she let it slide. Gold wondered if he should bring up the topic of the mystery man, or whether he should let it lie. Maybe if he said something it would give Belle the impression that he was checking up on her and didn't trust her. And he did trust her. He just didn't trust her acquaintance.

"Ok then, if there's nothing to tell on your side, I'll tell you my news," she said. "You'll never guess who I just met."

Gold could guess, but he decided that it would be an incredibly bad idea to voice his thoughts at that moment in time.

"Go on," he said, before taking another swig of tea to occupy his mouth lest he say something he regretted later.

"Louis."

Gold blinked. "Who?"

"Louis Candélabre," Belle said. "You remember, we fell over a programme on the food network and I said 'hey, I went to school with him'? It was a programme about European cakes and he was doing demonstrations of patisserie."
"Erm..." Gold did not remember at all, but most of the cookery programmes that Belle watched did seem to blur together in his mind a little. "Yes?" he said hesitantly. Belle gave him a look.

"You don't remember at all, but that's neither here nor there. I just met him outside the café. He's opening a new restaurant here, just round the corner. He's invited us to the opening night."

"Us?" Gold said.

"Yes, us, you and me..." Belle quirked one eyebrow. "Is there a problem with that?"

"No, no, I just thought..." Gold tailed off. He really didn't want to tell Belle what he just thought.

Belle smirked in response to his floundering. "I know what's happened," she said. "It's written all over your incredibly sheepish face, you silly man. You saw me and Louis talking outside and you got jealous."

"I did not!" Gold protested - admittedly feebly. "I just thought..."

"I know what you just thought."

Belle's reaction to his almost-admission of guilt was not the one that he was expecting. He had been expecting some kind of negative reaction, an accusation that he didn't trust her.

What he got was a howl of laughter that continued for longer than strictly healthy.

"Oh dear me, Gold, of all the men to be jealous of..."

Gold could feel himself colouring. "I don't see what's so funny," he muttered. "You're young and beautiful and he's your age and handsome."

"Gold, please. Who am I married to?"

"Me."

"Who do I adore to pieces?"

"Me."

"Who do I think is the most handsome man in the world no matter what age he is?"

"Alan Rickman."

"No, you, but if you're not available then I wouldn't say no to Mr Rickman." She gave a good-humoured sigh and patted his hand. "Gold, come along to the restaurant with me on Saturday night. You'll see then."

Gold's brow furrowed. He was not altogether sure that he liked this idea. "I'll see what?"

An enigmatic smile spread over Belle's face.

"You'll see," she repeated.

X

When Saturday evening rolled around, Gold was not sure whether or not he was looking forward to the events that were about to transpire. Belle had been worryingly reticent on the subject of Louis,
and Gold's research on the man had not turned up anything of import. After leaving school he'd trained in various French restaurants before opening his own chain of patisseries and now recently branching out to open his first full restaurant. To all intents and purposes he had made himself a very pretty penny.

Belle was wearing her dark blue dress, the backless one that she never wore a bra under. And sometimes didn't wear knickers under either. Normally, Gold loved that dress. Today, he was not feeling quite so enamoured by it. Belle seemed to sense his unease and draped a wrap round her shoulders, covering her bare back.

"Come on," she said. "We're going to be late. Louis is expecting us."

The restaurant was beautiful, Gold would certainly say that much. It had been finished to perfection and was scrupulously clean, and although small, the tables were not too crowded together and there was still a sense of privacy.

The food was faultless. Gold was no gourmet but he did appreciate good food. He could already tell that this was one place he was going to veto as a possible location for the next Guildhall office Christmas party. He did not particularly fancy a scene being caused in here by his drunken colleagues.

They were just finishing their desserts – Gold’s a crème brulée, Belle's a chocolate and caramel entremet - when they were interrupted by the arrival of the chef at their table.

"Belle! Darling, I'm so glad you could make it."

"Louis!" Belle tilted her head to accept his kiss on her cheek.

"And this must be the famous Mr Gold." Louis shook Gold's hand and sighed. "Oh Belle, how do you do it?"

"How do I do what?" Belle asked, but Gold could see the gleam in her eyes that meant she knew the answer already.

"How do you get all the best-looking men, of course," Louis said. "It was always the same, even at school. At least you married this one so the rest are free for the rest of us."

"Louis, don't make trouble, I know that you and Clarence are very happy together."

Louis laughed. "Indeed we are. It's almost sickening how happy we are really. I hope everything has been to your satisfaction?"

"It's all been gorgeous, like always," Belle replied. "I trust that everything's under control in the kitchen."

"Of course," Louis replied airily. "My sous-chef is running around on fire and two of the waiters are collapsed in a heap giggling after sneaking too much of the cooking brandy; all in a day's work. In any case, it was very nice to meet you, Mr Gold, and lovely to see you again, Belle. I'll leave you to enjoy your desserts."

As Louis left them, Belle leaned in over the puddings to whisper in Gold's ear.

"Now do you see why you didn't need to be worried?" she purred, letting the wrap around her shoulders drop.
Gold just nodded, not paying any mind to the attention Belle's bared back was now receiving.

It was not often that anything rendered him completely speechless, but there was a first time for everything...
Devil's Food Cake

Chapter Summary

After an argument over a particularly intimate issue, Belle turns to Emma for consolation and advice.

Chapter Notes

Someone wanted to see Belle and Gold have a bit of a fight, and someone else wanted to see Belle/Gold going to Emma for help.

“Don’t say it.”

“It…”

“Don’t say it. I know exactly what you’re going to say. Don’t say it.”

“Love, it’s ok, it…”

“Just don’t. Contrary to popular belief it won’t make me feel any better.”

“I think…”

“No!”

“Well I’ve got to say something!”

“No you don’t! You don’t have to say anything! We’re both fucking thinking it!”

Belle folded her arms. “You are too bloody-minded for your own good sometimes. And I am going to say it: I think it’s your medication.”

Gold looked up at her, one eyebrow raised, clearly not believing her. Belle sighed and drew her knees up under the covers. It had begun four weeks ago. Four weeks ago, Gold had been prescribed a new painkiller to try, fresh out of clinical trials and only recently available. Four weeks ago, they had started to see a dip in their sex life, a dip that had left Gold fractious and irritable, cross with himself for not being able to satisfy his young bride in the bedroom. Belle was not one to believe in coincidences at the best of times, but this one was even more blindingly cause-and-effect than normal.

She knew that he categorically did not want her to say ‘don’t worry, it happens to everyone’, but even Gold, who had been on such a cocktail of pills for the last twelve years, had to accept that lowered sexual drive was one of the known side effects of long-term medication.

“Sweetheart, all that I am asking is that you go to the doctor and get him to switch your prescription again,” Belle said. She was both aware and unashamed of the pleading tone in her
“Belle, I can’t go to the doctor because of this,” Gold growled, indicating his lap.

“Go because of your headaches then; I swear you weren’t getting those as often before you started on your new prescription.”

Gold shook his head. “I’m not going to talk about this anymore tonight. Good night, Belle.”

He turned over onto his side, facing away from her, making it obvious that the conversation was closed. Belle sighed and ran a hand through her hair before leaning back against the bedhead to stare at the ceiling. It was no use, she was going to have to call in the cavalry as she was never going to be able to get through to Gold on her own. The only problem was, she had no idea who else she could turn to for help.

Belle snuggled down in bed beside Gold, lying flat on her back to continue to look at the ceiling. This wasn’t something that could be brought up in a casual conversation over tea and cake with the girls. There was a reason why Gold didn’t want to go to the doctor about it. The whole situation was very embarrassing for him. But she couldn’t just leave it. She was his wife, she was supposed to help him with things like this. They were supposed to help each other. It was no use, staring at the ceiling was not bringing her any answers. Perhaps she would get on better in the morning, with a clearer head. She spooned up behind Gold, wrapping her arms around him and kissing his shoulder, and she felt his hand come down and close over hers.

“I’m sorry sweetheart,” he sighed.

Belle didn’t respond, save to lace her fingers through Gold’s and give a squeeze of reassurance. They would get through this. She wasn’t sure how just yet, but they would.

X

Belle didn’t look up from staring sadly into the middle distance as Emma put down a cup of coffee in front of her and sat down in the chair opposite.

“You look like you need to talk,” Emma said, after a few moments of silence hanging in the air between them. “Come on. Tell Auntie Em.”

Belle finally looked up with a sigh and met Emma’s open, concerned gaze. It was no real surprise that of the three friends, Emma was the one to fall into the role of Agony Aunt most often. Whilst she was not all that much older than Belle and Ruby, her years of experience being a mother meant she slipped into the role as easily with her contemporaries as she did with Henry.

“It’s Gold,” Belle began, and Emma gave a knowing nod.

“Did you two have a fight?” she asked.

“Yes. No. Well… Not really. Sort of.”

Emma raised one eyebrow and Belle felt herself giving in.

“It wasn’t a full-on fight, but we did have a disagreement.”

“Thought so. What did he do?”

Belle gave a snort of weak laughter. “I love how you assume it’s his fault.”
“Belle, I know it’s his fault. If it was your fault you’d be at home or over the way trying to fix it.”

Belle traced a little pattern through the foam on the top of her coffee with the spoon. “He’s just so stubborn.”

“Well, as much as I hate to say it, we did sort of already know that,” Emma said. She reached across and took one of Belle’s hands. “What’s he being so stubborn about that you’re staring despondently at your coffee looking for all the world like you’re drowning in it?”

Belle looked down at the coffee cup, not able to meet Emma’s eyes. Whilst she desperately wanted to vent her frustrations to her friend, she was deeply aware of just how intimate those frustrations were.

“Ok, so it’s obviously something sex-related because you’ve turned as red as a tomato.”

Belle looked up, her hands coming up to touch her flushed cheeks. Emma just gave her a smile.

“Belle, we’re both liberal-minded adults,” she said. “It would take a lot to shock me.”

Belle sighed and succinctly relayed her tale, of the new medication, their wavering passion, and Gold’s constant irritability about the entire debacle.

“Oh Belle.” Emma sighed and patted her friend’s hand. “It’ll all work out for the best, I’m sure of it. If necessary we’ll knock him out, shove him in a sack and dump him in the doctor’s office. That would work.”

Belle gave a weak laugh at Emma’s forthright solution. “I suppose that’s one way. I just feel so helpless, because I know that there’s nothing I can do. I can’t force him to do anything but without wanting to sound selfish, this is affecting both of us. I’m worried about him, Emma.”

“Well…” Emma tailed off. “Speak of the devil.”

Belle turned to see Gold had just come into the café. He looked tired and worn down, and his hair was mussed from raking his hands through it. He gave Belle a wan smile as Emma went over to make up his order, and Belle sighed, returning her attention to her coffee. She just hoped that Emma had more of an idea of what to do than she did.

X

Emma had often heard Ashley call Gold a terror, but she had never seen that side of him herself. She put this down to the fact that she rarely saw Gold when he was working, and generally only ever saw him when he had Belle with him, and Belle was almost always guaranteed to be able to keep Gold’s slightly less sociable traits in check.

This morning, however, Emma was seeing a part of him that she had not wanted to. It was less than twenty-four hours since her conversation with Belle, and it was very clear to see that the problem had not magically solved itself overnight. When he came into the café, he was on his phone, talking in a quiet, menacing hiss that brokered no arguments, so cold it almost lowered the temperature of the café. This was the lawyer speaking, the man who could reduce grown men to tears on the witness stand in the magistrates’ court and bleed his opponents dry if he had a mind to. Emma gave an involuntary shiver.

“What?” Gold snapped as he cut off the call with an alarming degree of violence and stowed his phone back in his pocket.
“Nothing,” Emma said, dropping a teabag into a takeaway cup and bringing it over to him. “What’s got your goat this morning?”

“None of your damn business.”

“All right, all right. Have you talked to Belle about it?”

“That’s none of you damn business either.”

That translated to a resounding ‘no’ in Emma’s mind. Gold snatched up the cup, threw the correct change down on the counter and stormed out of the café again, just as Ruby was coming in to start her shift. The younger woman raised her eyebrows and gave Emma a questioning look. Emma shrugged.

“Trouble in paradise?” Ruby asked once she was behind the counter. Emma shrugged again. Belle had told her about their problems in confidence and although the three women were as thick as thieves, there were some things that needed to be kept to oneself.

Whatever was going on, though, Emma was determined to get to the bottom of it. Belle had asked for her help, at the end of her rope, and Emma was not one to turn down help to a friend in need. When the time came for her to take a break, she wasted no time in grabbing her coat and walking the ten steps over the way to enter the law office.

“Is Gold free?” she asked Kathryn.

“I think so, but I’d advise against seeing him if I were you.” Kathryn raised her eyebrows as she clicked a few buttons on her computer to bring up Gold’s appointments. “He’s been like a bear with a sore head all morning. Killian joked that he needed to get his leg over and Gold nearly took his hand off with a letter opener.” She paused. “He’s free, no appointments till three o’clock. Want me to warn him that you’re coming or do you want it to be a surprise?”

Emma grimaced. “I think a surprise would be more effective.”

She made her way up the stairs, waved to Ashley, Alice and Philip and listened at Gold’s door for a moment. He was on the phone again and Emma waited until she heard him finish and then walked calmly into his office and sat down in the chair opposite him without being invited, before he’d had chance to put down the phone.

“Unscheduled appointment,” she said, then shook her head. “You have got to get your act together. You have a beautiful wife who is at the end of her tether and so worried about you, and quite frankly, you’re being an arse. This morning just cements it. What’s the problem, Gold? What is so awful that you can’t tell Belle? Because whatever it is, she needs to know.”

Gold sighed.

“She already knows. She already knows I’m old and crippled and falling to pieces and she’s far too good for me.”

Emma exhaled slowly.

“Gold, please tell Belle what’s going on. Or if you don’t want to tell Belle, tell me. If you don’t want to tell me, then tell Jefferson, or Archie, or anyone, just please talk to someone. What’s changed in four weeks? What’s changed overnight? I swear you weren’t this wound up yesterday, however irritable you might have been. Somehow I think this goes deeper than a dead bedroom. Yes, Belle told me. She’s worried about you. I don’t think I can stress that enough. She’s not
worried about being satisfied in bed, Gold, she’s worried about your health.”

There was silence for a long time. Gold stared out of the window, pointedly not meeting Emma’s gaze.

“Please Gold,” Emma coaxed. “Whatever this is, Belle is my friend and I want to make sure she’s happy, and you are my friend as well and I want to make sure that you’re happy too.”

Gold finally looked at her with sad eyes.

“I took Belle’s advice,” he said eventually. “I went to the doctor this morning and he took me off my… problematic meds. But there’s nothing else he can give me instead. I have arthritis in my knee, Emma, ever since I broke it. If it continues to get worse, which it will, I’ll need a full knee replacement.”

Emma blinked.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“What do you mean ‘is that it’?” Gold snapped. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Gold, how is knee replacement surgery such a terrible thing? If it will make your life easier, then how can it be so bad?”

“I’m old enough, I don’t need to feel any older!”

Emma raised her eyes to heaven and leaned back in her chair, counting to ten. Belle was not lying when she said that Gold was stubborn, and Emma was not lying when she agreed. If there was one thing that could be said for Gold and Belle’s compatibility, it was that they were both tenacious to the point of exasperation if they wanted to be.

“Gold, this operation won’t be because you’re old, it’ll be because you’ve had a broken knee. People younger than you have knee replacements because of breaks and break-related arthritis.”

Gold was silent for a long time, then nodded.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“So stop acting like an arse and apologise to Belle.” Emma paused. “How long will it take the medication to get out of your system?”

Gold counted on his fingers. “Two weeks, give or take. Call it three to be on the safe side.”

“Right. Here’s what you do. You wait three weeks for your meds to get out of your system. You book a nice little hotel on the Cotswolds for you and Belle. You both leave your phones at home and you have a weekend away. And if all you do in that hotel bed is sleep, then that’s fine, and if you never leave the room, then that’s fine too. Just take a weekend to make it up to Belle and indulge yourself. No stressing about anything, no worrying about operations, no pressure. Just enjoy being together. You’ve only been married three months. Graham and I have been married over a year and we’re still milking the honeymoon period for all it’s worth.”

Gold raised one weary eyebrow.

“I’m not quite sure I needed to know that, but thanks for the advice.”

“I mean it.” Emma folded her arms. “You need to apologise to Belle. Big time.”
“I know.” Gold sighed. “Looks like I’ll be taking a trip to see Mary Margaret before I go home tonight.”

Emma grinned. “That’s the spirit.”

Finally, Gold gave a weak smile.

“Thanks, Emma. I’m sorry for earlier.”

She saluted and got up to go back to the café.

“Well, you know. Rescuing my friends’ marriages is all in a day’s work.”

X

Emma looked up as Belle rushed into the café, her cheeks flushed red and her eyes bright.

“I can’t stop, I’m already running late,” she said. “I just wanted to come and say thank you.”

Emma was completely uncomprehending for a moment, then realised that it was three weeks since her conversation with Gold, and if Belle’s appearance was anything to go by, her advice had done the trick.

“My pleasure,” she said with a bow.

Belle grinned. “Oh no, I rather think it was ours.”
Cream Éclair

Chapter Summary

Regina’s mother is coming to stay again, and this time the whole office is seconded into helping keep Regina sane.

Chapter Notes

Someone wanted to see Cora make a physical appearance, so here she is. Also, Hook is once more used as a comedy vehicle. I should probably show a little more remorse, but… nah…

Spot the Princess Bride reference that was put in there only semi-intentionally.

Gold was rather surprised when, in the middle of a phone call with a particularly annoying man in Plymouth, a calendar entry popped up on his computer screen.

URGENT CRISIS MEETING

It was scheduled for five o'clock that evening in Granny's. Regina had organised it, and everyone in the building was expected to attend, even Kathryn. Puzzled and not a little unnerved, Gold ended his call without paying any attention to what the person on the other end was saying, and he stared at the meeting invitation for a long time. Presently there was a knock at the door before it opened, and Jefferson and Alice both poked their heads around the frame.

"Have you seen it?" Jefferson asked.

"If by 'it' you are referring to our urgent crisis meeting that has suddenly materialised out of nowhere, then yes, I am looking at it as we speak." Gold looked up to meet Jefferson and Alice’s eyes and motioned for the two of them to come in. Jeff sat down in the chair opposite Gold's and Alice perched on the desk.

"So, what's this about?" Alice asked.

Gold raised one eyebrow. "Wouldn't you be better off asking Regina that?"

"Of course we would, but do you fancy going down there and asking Her Majesty what the hell's going on?"

Gold had to concede the point.

"Well, I am as in the dark as you are. Perhaps Regina's lost all the office profits in an online casino and she's having to give up the building lease? This time tomorrow we'll all be working out of the carpark."

Alice shuddered at the thought. "Don't joke about it, for all we know she's firing the lot of us."
"That's highly unlikely," Gold began, but he didn't finish the thought. Nothing was certain when it came to Regina. "If that does happen though, do you want to set up our own practice with Dawn? 'Milliner, Gold and Stephens' has a certain ring to it, I feel."

"Gold!" Alice exclaimed. "This is serious!"

"I'm deadly serious, my dear. We'd take you on as our secretary of course."

Alice buried her face in her hands. "I can't believe this is happening. We're all about to be fired and you're making business plans."

"It pays to have a contingency plan," Jefferson said. "Regina can't just fire us all, can she?"

"You're the lawyer, Jefferson, you tell me!"

Gold leaned back in his chair and watched the couple bickering for a few more minutes. He was pretty certain that this meeting was a slight overreaction on Regina's part. Perhaps the landlords had increased the building rent and she was panicking about price increases. Perhaps she and Sydney had decided to elope to Antigua. It could be anything.

At least they were going to be meeting in a place that could provide several restorative cups of tea lest anyone faint at the revelations that would come to light.

X

When Gold, Jefferson, Ashley and Alice entered the café three hours later, Marina was already there, sitting at a large conference style table that had been formed of several tables all pushed together. Luckily there were only a few other customers in Granny's at the time, but the group from Guildhall still managed to attract a rather inordinate amount of attention.

"Evening, Marina." Jefferson tipped his hat to her and sat down at the conference table. Marina gave a distracted wave and continued to type frantically on her phone.

"Hello," she said eventually. "Before you ask I've got no idea what's going on either." She swore loudly at her phone and hit it against the table. "Aha, that's better. Nothing like mindless violence to get technology working again. Honestly, this is a nightmare. We're trying to organise getting Eric's family over from Denmark for the wedding and it's more trouble than it's worth. I've half a mind to just run off to Gretna and get it over with."

"Before you ask," came a voice through the café door, "I haven't got a clue what this is about either."

Sidney came into the café and sat down beside Marina, who chose that moment to let out a howl of 'why do the Danes speak Danish?'

"I'm not going to ask," Sidney said faintly, helping himself to a cup of tea from the large pot that August had put on the table for them.

Dawn and Philip were the next to enter, followed by Kathryn, who had to put the office to bed before she left, and Killian, who'd had to run straight from court and who looked more confused than all of the rest of them put together, as well as rather out of breath. Finally, Regina arrived and took the only remaining chair, at the head of the table.

"Ladies, gentlemen, thank you for coming. As you have probably gathered, we have an impending crisis on our hands."
Whatever it was that each of the gathered lawyers and admin staff thought that the impending crisis was, Gold was fairly certain that none of them had anticipated the next words that came out of Regina’s mouth.

“My mother is coming to stay.”

There was a stunned silence for several minutes.

“Ah,” said Sidney. Gold could quite forgive him his reaction, considering what had happened the last time that Cora Mills had come to visit her daughter. He was fairly certain that Sidney’s eardrums had never been the same again.

There was another silence and Marina looked around incredulously. “You dragged me away from planning an assault of military proportions on British Airways for that?” she asked.

Regina sighed. “I realise that not all of you think that this is quite such a momentous occasion as I do. However, given the fallout from her last visit, as you well remember, Marina, I thought it best to be prepared.” She gave another sigh. “Especially as I have the final day of the Vizzini case on the day she is coming and I would really like her to remain completely and utterly distracted until it is over.”

Now that put a different spin on things, and the gathered staff of Guildhall furnished their senior partner with an appropriate level of attention. Marina even put down her pocket Danish dictionary. This particular case was a high profile poisoning that had been in and out of court for months, with Cara Mallory providing the voice of reason in the Crown Court and Regina steering everything behind the scenes from Guildhall. If there was a day upon which it would be universally agreed by the entirety of the law office that Regina should not be distracted by her mother’s presence, it was that one.

“So… How do we factor in?” Gold asked. “We can appreciate your predicament, but we are as yet unsure quite what you expect us to do about it short of murder.”

“I have access to a shotgun and a shovel and I know how to use both,” Alice said helpfully.

“You have a shotgun?” Jefferson mouthed, obviously rather alarmed by this revelation.

“My previous fallouts with my mother aside, I have no desire to bury her just yet,” Regina said, “but thank you for the offer. I just need her to be distracted during the day.”

“Can’t you just rearrange her visit?” Ashley asked.

Regina fixed Gold’s secretary with a withering look. “If I had been able to do that, do you think I would be hosting a crisis meeting now?”

“So basically,” Jefferson began, “you want us to keep your mother occupied by hook or by crook to stop her coming to court and distracting you from what is possibly the biggest win in the history of our firm.”

“Indeed, Mr Milliner.”

There was another long silence before Killian voiced the thoughts of everyone around the table.

“How the bloody hell do we do that?”

“Hmm,” Gold pondered aloud. “What does Cora Mills enjoy doing other than ripping people to
It was at that statement that all eyes turned to Killian. He took a few moments to realise that everyone was looking at him and he cast a wary gaze around his gathered colleagues from the above the rim of his teacup.

“Why is everyone looking at me like that?” he asked warily.

“Well, Killian,” Marina began. “You’re an attractive man, as much as I’m loath to admit it, and you’ve got a boat down at quayside, have you not?”

Killian blinked. “You want me to distract Regina’s mother for the day.”

Marina nodded enthusiastically.

Killian’s eyes widened. “Gold should do it!” he blurted out. “He knows her!”

“I’ve met her once,” Gold corrected. “In court. Besides, Sid and I are both automatically out as we’re over forty. We need someone she’ll be interested in.”

Killian looked frantically around at the other gathered men.

“I’ve got exams in London that day!” Philip exclaimed, throwing his hands up in self-defence.

“I’ve got…” Jefferson began. “Ashley, Alice, please tell me there’s something unavoidable in my calendar.”

“You’re in court in the morning,” Alice said. “Jones, you’ve got a completely clear calendar that day.”

“I can’t believe you’re using me as jailbait for your mother!” Killian said faintly.

“Killian, we’re not asking you to do anything less than above board, we just want you to keep her as far away from the courtroom as possible. If you can keep her occupied for the day I’ll pay you,” Regina said flatly.

Killian gave the proposal serious consideration for a moment.

“Cash in hand, and I want a down-payment before we leave this café.”

X

It should have been, according to Belle, a perfectly ordinary Tuesday afternoon. She and Tina were sitting in Granny’s with a large pot of tea and several of Tina’s knitting patterns, and there had been no indication at any point previously during the day to show that anything was remotely out of the ordinary.

This happy misappreciation was soon exposed as such when Killian entered the café, in the company of a middle-aged woman whom Belle had never seen before.

She turned to Tina, but her colleague was wearing a similarly intrigued expression, and both ladies came to the mutual and silent conclusion that it was going to be best simply to observe from a distance what happened next. This was easier said than done when Killian caught Tina’s eye from behind his companion and mouthed, with a rather worried expression, ‘help!’
Tina exchanged a look with Belle. "Do you think we should..." she began, but she was saved from continuing the sentence by the older woman going into the bathroom and Killian rushing over to the librarians.

"It's Regina's mother," he said. "She's... a force to be reckoned with," he finished faintly. "Regina's paying me to keep her occupied whilst she's in court but I've half a mind to give her money back and run. She's more trouble than she's worth."

Tina's attempts to suppress her laughter were woefully unsuccessful.

"If she orders an éclair I'm pulling a Dawn and hiding under the table in fear of my manhood," Killian said. "Do you think Regina would notice if I drugged her mother? What is it with ladies over sixty that make them so... so..."

"Lascivious?" Tina suggested.

"Aye, that, whatever that means."

Belle said nothing; she could only think of Gold's Aunt Elvira and she agreed whole-heartedly with Killian.

Outside, the faint chime of the cathedral clock striking five could be heard, and a few moments later, Gold entered the café.

"How've you been getting on?" he asked Killian mildly.

Killian glared at him. "I am not going to grace that with a reply."

"That well, eh?" Gold grinned. "What can I say, Killian? Your somewhat dubious charm and good looks evidently do you credit."

"Well well well, Mr Gold." Cora had returned from the bathroom and was looking at Gold with a somewhat sly smile on her face. "It's been a long time."

"Indeed it has, Mrs Mills. I'm surprised you remember."

"Oh, I never forget an opponent who has bested me in the field of battle," Cora said, her voice airy but her eyes anything but. "There have been so few, and each has left a considerable impression."

Belle’s eyes flickered between Cora and Gold, and she decided that this was one discussion it was definitely best not to be involved with. As much as she wanted to offer her husband moral support, there was something in his stance that made her doubt whether he actually needed it or whether he was perfectly capable of giving as good as he got.

"Well, I pride myself on being part of such a select group," Gold retorted. "You really must introduce me to some of my fellows, I'd dearly love to compare notes."

The tension was palpable. Tina was watching the scene completely rapt, the only thing that was missing from the picture of the fully immersed spectator was some popcorn. Presently she blinked and started typing voraciously on her phone. Belle watched her for a moment, her attention torn between the fraught silence between Cora and Gold, and Tina's odd behaviour. Her friend was reading something, and her eyebrows shot to her hairline before she passed her phone to Belle. The screen showed an article clipped from a newspaper from 1995, describing the court case in which Cora and Gold had met. On reading the details, Belle was not at all surprised that the two of them remembered it so vividly. The story was so farfetched as to be practically unbelievable, including a
tale of broken contractual agreements and, of all things, spinning wheels.

The situation was resolved by the appearance of Regina in the café.

"Thank God," Killian muttered. "I never thought I'd reach the stage of saying that Her Majesty's my saving grace, but occasionally we all have to lower our expectations." He went over to Regina, hand outstretched, and she sighed before handing him the rest of his payment. Killian wasted no time in leaving the café as fast as he was able to without drawing attention to himself. Belle gave Tina a pointed look.

"If you're looking for the right moment to run after him and offer him moral support to get over his traumatic day, this is it," she pointed out.

Tina grinned and left the café in the direction that Killian had taken.

"Mother, I see you've been introducing yourself to my colleagues."

"Regina, dear." Cora's entire aspect changed and she smiled, going over to embrace her daughter, who received the affection slightly stiffly. "How did you get on?"

Regina gave a triumphant smile. "We won."

"That's what I like to hear. Now, about that young man who kept me company today..."

"I think he has a girlfriend, Mother," Regina said, steering Cora out of the café. "Or, at least, I think he will by tonight," she added under her breath.

"Such a shame," Cora could be heard to say before the door swung shut behind them, and Belle finally let out the howl of laughter that she had been suppressing for the last few minutes of the farce that had been unfolding in front of her. Gold shook his head in despair and came to sit in Tina's vacated place beside Belle. August came over to top up the teapot and Gold poured himself a cup.

"She's an... interesting woman," Belle said.

"She's a demon," Gold muttered darkly into his tea. "She's all sweetness and smiles now but I'm telling you, if Regina had lost today it would be an entirely different kettle of fish."

"Well, with any luck we won't have to see her again," Belle said, leaning into his side with her own teacup. "And with any luck, Killian won't either." She burst into giggles again. "I shouldn't laugh, but his face was priceless."

Gold gave a snort. "Well, I suppose Mrs Mills is good for some things."

Belle thought of Tina. "Yes, I do believe she is."
Mince Pie

Chapter Summary

Gold thinks that Belle would make an excellent mother, and is threatened by a six-year-old.

Chapter Notes

Someone requested something along the lines of Gold witnessing Belle’s maternal side during a school trip to the library. I’d already had pretty much the exact same idea! The quotes from the story Belle is reading come from ‘Another Mince Pie’ by H.E. Todd, which was my favourite Christmas story when I was little.

It was the third day of December and the weather was definitely beginning to take a turn for the worse. Gold gritted his teeth against the chill wind as he made his way towards the library to collect Belle. It wasn’t often that he finished work before her, especially on a Tuesday, but for the second year running, Belle and Tina were organising ‘After-School Advent’, where the children could come along and build up the library’s nativity scene day by day, participate in winter-themed activities, and listen to festive stories.

The two young librarians took it in turns to read and tonight was Belle’s night. Tina was leaning on the issue desk watching the crowd of children sitting on the floor and the old bean bags around Belle’s feet as she read aloud from the Christmas storybook in the children’s corner. She gave Gold a wave as he entered before returning her attention to Belle. It was past the library’s normal closing time, and there was no-one else in there. Gold came over and leaned back on the desk next to Tina, as loath to break the spell as she was. The children were rapt and aside from Belle’s soft voice, there wasn’t a sound to be heard in the library.

"Who on earth can be crying on Christmas Day of all days?" he said to himself. At least, he thought he said it to himself, but he can’t have done because a voice answered him. It did, really.

"I'm crying," it said. "And I'm not on earth, I'm on top of the Christmas tree."

Gold loved listening to Belle read aloud. She hadn’t liked doing it at first, suddenly and inexplicably conscious of her accent, but at Gold’s encouragement she had continued and perfected her art. Gold could quite see how she captured the kids’ attention so fully. In her skirt and pixie boots, sitting on one of the small children’s chairs, she wouldn’t have looked at all out of place as a fairy princess in a picture book.

Tina glanced up at the clock on the wall and Gold followed her eyeline; it was nearly five o’clock and the parents would be arriving to collect their children soon. About a minute later the first parents arrived and came into the library, chatting loudly, whereupon one of the children turned round and shushed them with a fierce expression. Abashed, the adults fell silent and Belle continued to read, trying hard to hide her smile.
"Well, it was a very large mince pie, and she was a very small fairy, but Bobby gazed goggle-eyed as she tucked into it. In no time at all the mince pie was eaten right up.

"That was delicious," said the fairy."

As more and more parents came into the library so more and more people fell under Belle’s spell and listened to the end of the story with Gold and Tina.

"Thank you so much for being so clever," replied the fairy, and Bobby felt quite proud of himself.

"Before I go to bed," he asked, "is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes please," said the fairy wistfully.

"What is it?" asked Bobby.

"I should like another mince pie," said the fairy."

Belle closed the book. “That’s the end, folks, and now it’s time to go home. I’ll see you all again tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” the children chorused, but her name was lost in different variations, with some calling her Belle, some calling her Mrs Gold and the overall effect being that of ‘Mrs Belle’. Gold raised one eyebrow at Tina.

“Oh, that’s normal,” she said with a laugh. “Belle’s Mrs Belle and I’m Miss Tina. It gets confusing otherwise, since my last name’s Bell as well. Children are always told that it’s polite to call grown-ups Miss or Mrs or Mr So-and-so, and when we tell them that they can call us by our names, the amalgamation begins.”

Gold continued to watch the children leaving in dribs and drabs, and Belle chatting easily with them. Not for the first time, he pictured Belle with her own child, teaching him or her the wonders of the written word and reading bedtime stories every night. All of a sudden Gold was reminded of the bedtime stories he used to read to Bae, twenty years ago now, and something inside him twisted.

Tina cut through his reminiscences with her goodbye, running off to catch her bus, and Gold was left alone at the issue desk.

Only one little girl was left talking excitedly to Belle and seemingly refusing to go home, and Belle was trying to shepherd her towards her mother and the exit. Gold recognised her as the one who had told the parents to be quiet earlier.

"It's time to go home, Rachel!" Belle was saying. "The library's closing! Tina's already gone home, see. Your mum's here to take you home. My husband's here to take me home."

Rachel looked at Gold, leaning on the issue desk, and she came over to him.

"So you're Mr Belle?" she asked.

"No, Rachel, he's Mr Gold." Rachel's mother followed her over to the desk and began wrestling her daughter into her coat and scarf.

"Oh no, Mr Belle's probably a more accurate description," Belle called from the bookshelves. She gave Gold a dazzling smile over her shoulder, and he stuck his tongue out at her. Rachel giggled,
but then became worryingly sombre and beckoned for Gold to come down to her level so that she could whisper in his ear.

"Rachel! Stop pestering Mr Gold, it's time to go!" Her mother tugged on her hand. "I'm so sorry," she added to Gold. "Come on, Rachel!"

"No, no, it's ok." Gold crouched down, leaning on his cane.

"Mrs Belle loves you a lot," Rachel whispered, her hot breath tickling his ear. "I heard her telling Miss Tina that you were the best thing that had ever happened to her."

She pulled away and gave him a stern look, and Gold knew that he had just been threatened by a six-year-old. Hurt Mrs Belle, her look said, and you will have to deal with me. He blinked.

"Thank you, Rachel," he finally managed to say. "I love Belle a lot too, so I think we're all going to be all right."

Rachel beamed in response and her mother finally succeeded in dragging her away. Gold stayed crouched on the ground for a little while longer, still trying to process what had just happened.

"You look slightly shellshocked," Belle commented, coming over with her coat on and giving him a hand up. "What could she possibly have said?"

"Belle, I've just had a veritable shovel talk," Gold muttered as they left the building and Belle locked up. "From a six-year-old. You certainly endear yourself to your young charges."

Belle laughed.

"I love after-school advent," she said wistfully. "The children are always so enthusiastic, and I love reading to them." She tailed off. "Gold, I've been meaning to talk to you about something. I should have told you sooner but I wanted to make sure I didn't chicken out and so far it hasn't made a difference because we haven't... I'm gabbling, aren't I?"

"Just a little, Mrs Gold."

Belle fell silent before she slipped her arm through his and they walked down through the narrow streets towards the shopping centre car park. It was a long time before she spoke again.

"You remember last year, when Ruby got pregnant and we were talking about having kids ourselves?"

"Yes, I remember."

"You remember that we said that if it happened then great, and if it didn't, then that was fine too?"

"Yes, I remember that as well." Gold wondered precisely where the conversation was going. He had an inkling, but he didn't want to guess.

"Well, a little while ago, I was looking at my birth control prescription, and I thought to myself, 'this is silly, because all other variables aside, we're never going to have a baby if I'm on the Pill'. So... I didn't put my prescription in. And I ran out of pills three days ago. And obviously that's a moot point because we haven't actually made love since I stopped taking it, but I thought I probably ought to tell you, in case you thought it was too soon or something. I've still got the prescription, I can take it to the pharmacy tomorrow..."
Gold stopped and pressed a finger to Belle's lips to silence her nervous stream of chatter.

"Gold," she said against his finger, "please say something."

Words, always his tool of choice, chose that moment to fail him, so he kissed her instead. Belle relaxed into his embrace, slipping her arms around his middle under his coat. Perhaps this time next year, it would be their own child that Belle was reading to.
Black Bun

Chapter Summary

It’s Hogmanay, and Gold and Belle are staying with Aunt Elvira.

Chapter Notes

Black Bun is a Scottish bake traditionally eaten at Hogmanay.
Elvira’s drunken song is ‘The Widow’, which we used to sing a lot at our folk group:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohdJ1DfBF24
It, like this chapter, is a bit racy, but nothing too bad. The higher end of the T spectrum.

To say that the first day of the new year had dawned would be a little bit of an untruth. What had happened in reality was that Belle and Gold had noticed that the sky was no longer black outside, but a dark grey colour indicative of daytime on a misty, drizzly, Glasgow January morning. The notion of Hogmanay lasting until sun-up on the first was slightly defeated when there was no sun to be seen, but Belle didn't mind. She was warm and snug in bed with her husband and even if they had not stayed out till sunrise, they had certainly stayed awake.

"Happy New Year," Gold said presently, the words lost in a yawn. He pulled Belle in closer to his side and pressed his lips to her hair. "Sun's up, I'm going to sleep now."

Belle batted his bare chest playfully. "Aunt Elvira will be back any minute, we have to use all the time we have."

Gold laughed but didn't resist as Belle rolled over on top of him, pillowing her chin on her arms on his chest. He twisted one of her curls round his index finger, regarding her through sleepy, sated eyes.

"I have to admit, I do feel a bit like a teenager again doing this," he said. "I know we're married and therefore the fact that we make love isn't exactly a secret, but it still feels sort of... clandestine. Sneaking off and getting up to no good in relatives’ beds with the fear of getting caught."

"Well, it's not as if we're in Aunt Elvira's bed," Belle pointed out. "We're in her spare room. But I know what you mean. Doing it in other people's houses is a bit strange. And definitely only to be done when they aren't there."

They had tried to stay at the party, they honestly had, but once the new year had chimed in and it had passed two o'clock, Belle had begun to feel the distinctive urge to get her husband alone as soon as possible. From the way that Gold had casually asked if she wanted to 'get out of the crush', she'd known that he was feeling exactly the same way. Since Elvira was still in full swing, quite happily knocking back gin and dancing around with Maisie the poodle under her feet, it made sense to go back to her bungalow where they knew that they would be uninterrupted for a good few hours, until the sun made a vague attempt to rise and the revellers at the party over the road.
Belle turned her head slightly to look at the devastation that they had wreaked on the room. Staying with Aunt Elvira for Christmas and Hogmanay was all very well, but as Belle maintained, there were certain matrimonial activities that could not in good faith be done in someone else's house, in someone else's bed, when they were only a few yards away. Especially, in the case of Aunt Elvira, when a furry little canine voyeur might decide to try and join in the conjugal festivities at any moment. They had seen the opportunity, taken it, and made the most of it. There was absolutely no rhyme or reason to the array of clothing that was strewn around, looking as if a small explosive had gone off in the wardrobe. It wasn't often that she and Gold reached the stage of literally ripping each other's clothes off, but the week of abstinence - and at Christmas, when the increased amount of alcohol lowered inhibitions exponentially - had evidently taken its toll on them worse than they had anticipated. Belle was pretty certain that Gold's shirt had no buttons left on it and her tights were now a torn and laddered mess neatly draped over the vanity mirror.

"Do you think anyone noticed that we left?" Belle asked, wriggling under Gold's touch as his fingertips traced patterns over her back.

"Of course they did," Gold replied sleepily. "Elvira's got eyes like a hawk, even when she's swimming in Gordon's and tonic."

"Do you think anyone realised why we left?"

Gold raised one eyebrow at her.

"Are you sure you don't know the answer to that one already?" he asked pointedly. "We've been married less than six months, and it's Christmas time, and we're staying in a two-bed bungalow with my aunt. We were only ever going to be going home early to get some coitus non-interruptus. They definitely realised why we left."

"Oh dear..." Belle buried her face in Gold's chest. "Is there any hope that Aunt Elvira will have imbibed so much gin that she'll be delivered home snoring in a taxi, and she won't remember?"

Gold shook his head, and when Belle risked a glance at his face, she could tell that he was biting back a laugh. Belle sighed.

"She's never going to let us live it down, is she?"

Gold shook his head again and Belle groaned.

"It's not that bad," he said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "Think about it. Would you rather have stayed over the road with the neighbours and Aunt Elvira and Maisie, or would you rather have come back here for a little... personal time?"

Belle required precisely no thought to answer that one, and leaned up to capture Gold's lips in response. He smiled against her mouth.

"Exactly," he murmured once she finally released him, casting a glance across at the window and the dull light beyond the curtains before running his hands down Belle's sides to land on her waist. "Now, how long do you think we've got before she comes back?"

Belle grinned. "What happened to you going to sleep?"

"I think I might be persuaded to stay up a little longer. Since we still have the house to ourselves, and all..."
They had got as far as another kiss before a faint barking noise started up. A rather familiar barking noise. Gold gave a long sigh and rested his forehead against Belle's.

Accompanying the barking was the sound of a rather reedy elderly female voice singing at the top of her tiny lungs. Aunt Elvira was on her way home and she seemed to be just a little bit worse for wear.

"...so boldly ran the widow and the door she opened wide, and as she did a tall and handsome stranger stepped inside..." she warbled. Gold gave a snort of laughter.

"Sh!" Belle pressed a finger to his lips. "We've got to pretend we're asleep! At least that might preserve us some dignity!"

"...she gave him bread and brandy, and when that he was fed, he said 'my dear now have no fear, it's time to come to bed'..." Aunt Elvira continued, before humming some more of the tune and then, rather unexpectedly, knocking on her own front door.

"Errant Nephew!" she called.

Gold's eyes flickered towards the bedroom door; he was obviously in two minds about letting his aunt into her own house.

"Errant Nephew, I locked my keys in there, please let me in." There was a pause and Gold shook his head.

"Nope," he muttered. "Bed is nice and warm and comfortable. Not getting out of it."

"Errant Nephew, I know you're in there and I know you're not asleep. Now leave your poor wife alone and let me in, you randy devil."

"How did I end up with the reputation as the insatiable one?" Gold asked, affronted. He gave a heartfelt groan and Belle moved to allow him to get up; there was no way that anything was going to get done - be it sleeping or more pleasurable activities - with Aunt Elvira shrieking through the letterbox. Belle watched him move around the room making himself decent, and she pulled the covers up to her chin. The bed was remarkably chilly without Gold's wonderful warmth to use as a living snuggle blanket.

Outside, Aunt Elvira was singing again.

"... At sixty-nine the widow laughed. 'Again, again!' she cried. The devil, he said: 'Well I can see just how your husband died'..."

"All right, all right," Gold yelled to her as he left the bedroom in the direction of the front door. "If I let you in will you stop singing lewd folk songs at the top of your voice?"

A few moments later, a small bundle of barking dog bounded into the spare room and stood at the side of the bed, tail wagging so hard that Belle thought it was in danger of falling off. Maisie looked up at Belle expectantly with big chocolate brown eyes, hoping for treats, and Belle gave a wry smile. She'd seen those eyes before not all that long ago. Her husband had incredibly persuasive dark eyes when he wanted to.

"Maisie!" Aunt Elvira came into the room and dragged Maisie out by the collar. "Leave the lovenest alone, you've no idea what's gone on in here. Happy New Year, pet," she said to Belle, almost as an afterthought. "Sleep well my dear. If he lets you," she added with a wink.
Gold, who had followed his aunt into the room, simply pressed his hands over his rapidly reddening face.

"One of these days, that poodle is going to find herself on a half hour cycle in the tumble dryer," he grumbled once dog and mistress had left the room again. "With her owner following soon after."

"You should probably be more charitable to your relatives," Belle said with a yawn as Gold undressed again and slipped into bed beside her, welcoming her arms around him and not commenting on her cold nose nuzzling into his shoulder blade. "It's Christmas after all."

Gold's response was a resounding 'hmph'.

They fell into a sleepy silence. Belle was just dropping off when she felt Gold bring her hand up to his lips and kiss her knuckles.

"Happy New Year, Mrs Gold."
Gold woke from an uneasy dream to find Belle sitting up in bed next to him, her forehead resting on her knees. Blearily he glanced over at the alarm clock; it was half-past five.

“Belle? Sweetheart, are you all right?”

She shook her head, nodded, then shook her head again.

“What’s up, love?”

Belle didn’t respond, then in a burst of activity she sprang out of bed and ran for the bathroom, one hand over her mouth.

She kicked the door closed behind her and Gold heard the lock click before she vomited. He waited until she’d quietened then got out of bed, tapping the door.

“Sweetheart, can I get you anything?”

From inside the bathroom, he heard Belle crying. She didn’t reply. Gold sighed.

“I’ll get you some ginger tea, it’ll settle your stomach.”

He collected his cane from the bottom of the bed and put on his dressing gown, moving through the darkened house to the kitchen to prepare the tea. He leaned on the cooker as he waited for the kettle to boil, pinching the bridge of his nose and wishing he knew how to handle the situation.

Gold was ninety per cent sure what was wrong. Ever since he’d come in the previous evening, Belle had been wearing what he termed ‘the look’. Liz had worn the look. One of his previous trainees had worn the look for about three months before she plucked up the courage to tell him she was going to need maternity leave. It was the ‘I’m pregnant but I don’t want to tell you’ look. Belle had been unusually withdrawn and snappish all evening, before finally excusing herself to bed early with a headache.

The kettle boiled and he poured water over the lemon tea leaves and chopped ginger, letting it
steep for a few minutes. Yes, he was fairly certain that Belle was pregnant, but he had no idea how to broach the subject with her if she didn’t want to talk to him about it – and her behaviour was making it obvious that she didn’t want to talk to him about it.

He took the tea upstairs and knocked on the bathroom door again. Belle was still crying.

“Sweetheart? Belle, please tell me what’s wrong, I want to help.”

There was no response, just sobbing.

Gold sighed and rested his forehead against the wooden doorframe, closing his eyes for a moment and praying that she would just let him in. “There’s tea outside the door for you, love.” He put the mug down and eased himself onto the floor beside the door, leaning on the wall.

After a while, the door opened a fraction and Belle’s hand appeared round it to collect the tea before vanishing again. The silence stretched on.

“Gold?” Belle’s voice was small through the wood. “Are you still there?”

“Of course, love.”

“Gold, I’m scared.”

“Why, love?”

“Because I think I’m pregnant and five years ago tonight I miscarried.”

Gold leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. Fuck. Belle had never told him the anniversary date of her miscarriage, and he had never asked, reasoning that if she wanted him to know, she would tell him. Well, it certainly explained her odd mood the previous evening. Gold sighed; he had no idea what to say to reassure her, to let her know that everything was going to be ok and she shouldn’t be scared.

“I skipped my period last month,” Belle continued. “But I didn’t think about it because I’ve only been off my pill since the beginning of December and the doctor said I’d be irregular for a while whilst everything got back to normal. But I skipped again this month and I’ve been feeling sick. So I bought a pregnancy test this morning – well, yesterday morning by now – but with it being the five year mark I was too scared to do it and now I just don’t know, and I can’t tell whether I want to know or not, because maybe if I don’t know for sure, and I miscarry again, I can kid myself it’s just my period…”

Belle burst into tears again; Gold wanted nothing more than to gather his wife up in his arms and keep her safe from all the perils of the world, to cuddle her close and tell her that everything was fine. But that was something that even he couldn’t guarantee, and Belle had locked the door again.

“Oh Belle… Sweetheart… Please open the door and let me hold you.”

His entreaties were met with more sobbing, and the door remained firmly closed.

At length, Belle quietened and she spoke again.

“Gold?” She sounded so small, so unsure, and it broke his heart. “Are you still there?”

“I’m not going anywhere until I see you smiling again,” he replied. “Belle… I want you to be happy. I don’t want you to be scared. Focus on the positives. Everything’s going to be fine. You’re
going to carry our baby to term, and we’re going to be a family. Everything’s going to be fine. We’re happy together and we want to have a baby. The circumstances are very different to last time, my love. I know it sounds heartless but worrying will only make it worse.”

“I know.” He heard Belle sigh. “I just wish I knew whether I want to know or not. Maybe if it was any other day, I wouldn’t be so scared.”

There was another long pause.

“Would you want to know?” Belle asked. “If I was pregnant and I miscarried early, feasibly before I might have known I was expecting… Would you want to know?”

“Yes,” Gold replied without hesitation. “That is never a tragedy to be borne alone, Belle. Of course I would want to know.”

They lapsed into silence again.

“There’s a pregnancy test in my bottom drawer,” Belle said eventually.

“You can wait till the morning if you’d feel more at ease,” Gold said. “I know this must be an emotional night for you, suspicions of pregnancy aside.”

“No.” Belle’s voice was firm, and Gold was grateful to hear some of her normal conviction returning to her words. “I need to pee anyway and right now I just want to know, I think. I think not knowing is making me more nervous than knowing would.”

“Ok. If you’re sure.”

Gold got up off the floor with some difficulty; his knee had gone stiff and it took him a while to get over to Belle’s bedside table and search her drawer. She’d hidden the test well, but he finally unearthed it and brought it back to the bathroom. The door was open a little and he poked the box through the gap before going to sit on the end of the bed to ease his aching leg.

He waited for what seemed like an age before the door opened. Belle stood in the frame, clutching the test in one hand and nothing in the other, her fist opening and closing and needing something to hold. Gold held out his hand and Belle rushed forward to take it, clinging on for dear life.

He raised his eyebrows to question, and Belle merely showed him the test.

For a moment, as he stared at the little blue plus sign, Gold was speechless. To have suspicions was one thing, to have them confirmed was something completely different.

“Oh Belle,” he breathed, wrapping his arms around her. Belle needed no further invitation and curled up in his lap, burying her face in his neck. “My beautiful, brave, brilliant, darling Belle. I love you so much, and I am so very, very happy.”

Belle looked up at him and finally, he saw her lovely smile.

“I’m happy too. I’ll be much happier when I’ve seen a doctor. But I’m happy.”

She looked over his shoulder towards the window, where the grey light of dawn could be seen beyond the curtains. At the same time, Gold’s alarm went off and he reached across to silence it with his free hand. He had no intention of going into work today, not until he knew that Belle was definitely all right.
“I survived the night,” Belle said. “I’m still here and so is the baby.”

She paused. “Gold, whatever happens, whatever the doctor says, please don’t tell anyone. Not yet. Just in case. Just until we’ve got past the twelve week mark.”

“Of course, love. Whenever you’re ready. But remember this, Belle, because it is important.” He put two fingers under her chin and gently turned her face up towards him so that he could look into her eyes. “Belle, whatever happens, I love you more than I can express, and nothing will change that.”

There were tears in Belle’s eyes when she kissed him.

“I love you too.”

They stayed in their embrace for a long time as the room gradually got lighter and lighter, and a cold but bright February dawn broke over their next great adventure.
Belle announces her pregnancy.

Ruby was restocking the cake display when Belle came into the café just before opening, and she was glad to see her friend smiling again. Belle had been withdrawn for the last few weeks; she hadn't told Ruby what was wrong and although she had reassured her friend that she and Gold were still going strong, it was good to see that she was back to her normal self.

"Hello stranger," Ruby said. "How are you today?"

"I'm very well, thank you." Belle leaned on the counter. "I have a proposition for you Ruby. What are your thoughts towards becoming a godmother?"

Ruby looked up from the cake display and raised an eyebrow at her friend.

"Well, when I learned that the job doesn't come with wings and special powers I went off it slightly, but I'm still willing. Belle. In my experience, people only ever ask other people to be godmothers on one of two occasions. Firstly when they are pregnant and secondly when they are staging a production of Cinderella. Now, something tells me that it is unlikely to be the latter."

Belle was positively beaming.

"Yes, Ruby. I'm having a baby."

"Oh Belle!" Ruby positively squealed with excitement and shot up, rushing around the counter to hug Belle. She was so excited that she barely noticed her shoulder catch the top shelf of the cake display as she stood, sending an entire black forest gateau, freshly baked and decorated with whipped cream by Granny that very morning, flying to land against the inside of the glass with a soft fwap. "Oh Belle, I'm so happy for you! You know, I had my suspicions, but I didn't like to say."

"Ok..." Emma's voice entered the café. "Why are we giving Belle hugs? And why does the cake display look like a bomb hit it?"

"It wasn't a bomb, it was a black forest gateau," Ruby said airily. "And we're giving Belle hugs because she's got some excellent news."

Belle blushed slightly as Ruby released her and she turned to Emma.

"I'm expecting. Twelve weeks."

Emma grinned and threw her arms around Belle.

"Congratulations. This calls for celebratory tea and cakes. Although, perhaps not the black forest gateau..."
"It's half-past eight in the morning, Emma," Belle protested. "We can't have cake at this time!"

"Belle, you're having a baby, you're allowed cake whenever you want," Ruby said. "If there is one thing that I took advantage of to the maximum whilst I was pregnant with Connor, it was the ability to eat cake at three in the morning if I so desired."

Belle looked down at the cake display and the cream and cherries slowly dripping down it. She was visibly torn between the idea of eating cake at half-past eight in the morning and trying to be good and healthy for the sake of her baby.

“I suppose one piece of Victoria sandwich won’t hurt,” she said wistfully, gazing at the cake in question.

“Excellent,” Ruby said, going behind the counter to cut some slices. “You’ve given us an excuse to have cake now.”

It took a little while for them all to get sitting down with their tea and cake, mainly because Emma and Ruby were technically working and had to keep getting up to serve customers, but at last the post-opening rush quietened and the three friends were comfortably ensconced around a table.

“Do you know if it’s a boy or girl yet?” Ruby asked. She could not quite contain her excitement at her friend’s news but she did manage to stop short of actually bouncing up and down. Despite the slightly shaky start, Ruby had loved being pregnant and now that she had Connor, she couldn’t imagine a world without him. It was hard to believe that he was nearly a year old; it seemed only yesterday that she had first held him. And now, in six months’ time, she’d be holding another newborn: her godchild.

Belle shook her head. “I’ve only had the first scan, Ruby, they don’t tell you till the second. I don’t think we’re going to find out though. We want a surprise.”

Ruby shook her head in despair. “But Belle, how on earth will Tina and Granny know what colour to knit everything in?”

“Ruby, you do realise that there are more colours than just blue and pink, right?” Emma said, rolling her eyes.

Ruby waved away her statement and turned her attention back to Belle.

“So how long have you known?” she asked. “I noticed you’d been acting a bit odd these past few weeks but I didn’t want to say anything.”

“We’ve known for five weeks,” Belle explained. “But I didn’t want to tell anyone until I’d past twelve weeks and everything was still all right. After last time… I didn’t want to jinx it. So I’ve been this little ball of nervous tension for five weeks. Meanwhile Gold’s been trying so hard not to let the cat out of the bag. When I finally told him we could tell people… I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so excited about calling Aunt Elvira.”

“What did Aunt Elvira say?” Emma asked.

“Well, I’m not quite sure what she said at first,” Belle said, sipping her tea. “Whatever it was, it was in Gaelic and it was very loud. Gold was holding the phone at arm’s length. Then she said that she was very happy for us and we needed to invite her to the christening.” Belle blushed again.

“Then she said that she hoped the conception had not taken place whilst we were staying with her over Christmas and New Year’s.”
Ruby cocked her head on one side. “Belle, may I ask why you’re blushing?”

“Well… Counting backwards… The doctor’s pretty certain it was New Year’s Day.”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “Happy Hogmanay indeed.”

Belle’s furious blush refused to die down.

"It's something you're going to have to live with, Belle," Ruby said. "As someone who's been pregnant to someone who is currently pregnant, if there's one thing constantly on the back of your mind, it's that once people know you're expecting, they also automatically know that you've had a good time between the sheets at least once in your life."

"A very good time," Emma mused. "Everyone knows that when you're trying for a baby, nothing ever happens until you just take time to enjoy yourself for the sake of it."

"We weren't exactly trying," Belle murmured, her face buried in her hands. "It just happened."

"I know the feeling," Ruby said cheerily. "There's no need to be so embarrassed. There are thousands of pregnant women in the country."

"And hundreds more women getting pregnant," Emma added drily.

"At half past nine in the morning?" Ruby exclaimed. "What are they doing at half past nine in the morning?"

"I thought we'd just established what they were doing." Belle giggled.

"But at half past nine in the morning?"

The three women fell about laughing, but sadly their mirth was cut short by the arrival of more customers and Emma went to serve them.

"So who else knows?" Ruby asked. "Or are we part of a select group?"

"I've told Brenda," Belle said. "I'm pretty certain her squealing was ultrasonic. And Gold will probably tell Jefferson, Alice and Ashley today. And obviously, once Jefferson knows, the entire office will know. It's not that he can't keep a secret, but... well... he can't keep a secret. And of course, I still need to tell Tina so that she can start knitting. I mean, she's been waiting to get started ever since I came back from my honeymoon. I think she was most disappointed that I couldn't claim the luck of the Irish. Knowing her penchant though, she'll start knitting everything in the wrong size and it won’t fit for four months."

"At least he or she can grow into it," Ruby said. "Always look on the bright side! Granny will want to get knitting as soon as possible as well. And she'll probably start planning a cake for your baby shower. Whether you have one or not." She sighed as Emma returned to the table. "I can't believe Connor's nearly one. It feels like only yesterday that I first held him. I was completely out of it on painkillers but I knew that as soon as I held him, I never wanted to let go."

"You think you've got it bad?" Emma exclaimed. "Henry's twelve! And it still feels like two minutes since I first held him. At least you can still pick your son up and cuddle him. Henry's going to be taller than I am soon, I swear."

"Do you think you'll have any more children with Graham?" Belle asked Emma.
Emma cocked her head on one side, seriously considering the proposition.

"To be perfectly honest, we haven't really discussed it," she said. "I suppose because Henry's so much older, I was a bit worried, but he's always said that he'd love to have kid brothers and sisters. What about you?" she asked Ruby.

"I can't wait to have more kids." Well, that was not entirely true. She could do without the traumatic labour and birth that Connor had come with, and she'd be quite happy if she never had to go through that again, but she and Archie were definitely planning on having more children in the future. For now though, she would content herself with anticipating her godchild's arrival.

"Ruby!" Granny's voice entered the cafe and it was at that point that Ruby realised that the black forest gateau was still a smeared mess on the front of the cake display. "What happened to my cake?"

Granny was staring at the cake display with an expression of utter horror, as if her life's work had just been ruined in front of her.

"It's my fault, Granny," Belle said. "I gave Ruby a bit of a surprise and that in turn resulted in exploding cakes."

Granny turned to the three women and raised one eyebrow. Belle, evidently not wanting to shout her news across the cafe full of people, went over to her erstwhile employer and whispered in her ear, whereupon Granny's expression changed completely and she gave Belle a hug, taking her off to one side and talking to her animatedly. Ruby smiled. She seemed to be off the hook for now. All the same, it was probably going to be a good idea to clean up....
Banana Bread

Chapter Summary

Belle uncovers some rather interesting photographs when clearing out the spare room ready for the baby.

Chapter Notes

Someone prompted something along the lines of one of them finding the other's high school yearbook... And because I have been wanting to get a Full Monty reference into a fic ever since I first starting writing for OUAT. Over two years later, it finally happened.

As soon as Belle found the shoebox, Gold knew that they weren't going to get any tidying done. They had set aside this weekend to tidy and decorate the spare room that was going to be the baby's bedroom and throw out all the old junk that had accumulated there. Whilst the pink house was full of things, it was not what one might call overly cluttered or a hoarder's paradise, except this one room to which everything not in immediate use seemed to have gravitated. Gold continued sorting through the high bookshelf as Belle settled herself on a spinning office chair that had been liberated from his previous workplace and began to nose through the photos that were in the box. It had been a sort of dumping ground for all kinds of snapshots of sentimental value over the years, pictures that had been unearthed in various placed but that had no other home. He hadn't looked in the box for years – since before he moved in – and he was trying in vain to remember some of the incriminating things that might be in there. The majority were pictures from Bae's childhood and his own younger years, and he knew it was only going to be a matter of time before he was called upon to identify someone in a picture. Sure enough, they had gone less than five minutes before Belle spoke again.

"Gold, who's this?"

Gold left the book case and made his way through the maze of boxes on the floor to Belle, who was now sitting cross-legged in the chair with the box of photographs tucked in her lap. He looked over her shoulder at the black and white portrait photo.

"That's my ma. She must be about seventeen in that picture."

"She's beautiful," Belle said. "I don't think I've seen any pictures of her so young."

Gold laughed. "She was camera-shy. Hated having her photo taken."

"She takes after your gran," Belle mused, and looked from the photograph to her husband and back again. "And you definitely take after your mum. You've got the same nose. I never noticed before."

She slid the photo back into the box and picked out another one. "Who's this?"
"That's my dad and Aunt Elvira."

Belle peered at the photo closely. "That's Aunt Elvira?"

"She is only five years old in that picture," Gold pointed out. "Naturally she looks a bit different eighty years down the line."

"I know, but I can't imagine your Aunt Elvira any younger than about sixty. I swear that she was born wearing her fluffy cardigan with a bottle of gin in one hand."

"Well, the gin maybe. I'm not so sure about the cardigan." Gold leaned on the wall beside the chair and continued looking over Belle's shoulder at the photographs. "Elvira Gold was the original wildchild, honestly. I think the only thing she didn't do was run away to join the circus. Everything that could be done within a two-mile radius of the street she grew up in, she did."

"And to think, when you first mentioned your eighty-odd-year-old maiden aunt, I thought she was just a sweet little old lady." Belle twisted around to raise an eyebrow at Gold. "She quickly put paid to that idea the first time that I met her on that trip to Glasgow two years ago when she asked me if I wanted a Rampant Rabbit for my birthday because she'd have killed for one when she was my age."

Gold was not quite sure whether to laugh or beat a hasty retreat in the opposite direction. "What did you say?"

"I said I didn't need one. I've got you." She craned her neck to kiss him.

"The next time you two meet, I think I'm going to be in a corner fearing for my life," Gold muttered. He toyed with the idea of leaving Belle with the pictures and going back over to sort out the bookcase, so that they could at least say that they had got something done that day in between getting thoroughly distracted by the annals of time, and eventually he made it back across to the shelves. There was no denying that the room needed to be cleared out, but as long as it was ready in time for their baby's arrival into the world, then they could take their time with the preparations, and they still had a good few months yet. There was the slight problem of the logistics of getting the room decorated to contend with, since both Belle and Gold had each forbidden the other from climbing any ladders. It was looking highly likely that Archie and Ruby would be roped in to paint the ceiling and the bits of the walls they couldn't reach, and the redecoration would turn into quite the epic project, especially if Ruby's artistic imagination was allowed to run away with her.

"I'm keeping that one," he heard Belle say behind him. "I need as many pictures of you in a kilt as possible to prove that you are actually Scottish." There was a pause. "Your mum really was tiny."

There was another pause, broken only by the slip of glossy photograph paper being moved around, and then suddenly Belle burst out laughing.

"Oh my word! Oh, Gold, you look so young in this picture! How old are you?"

Brow furrowed Gold turned back to face her and she spun the chair round so that he could see the photo. He sighed when he recognised it, and sighed again on realising that Liz must have kept it and somehow it had ended up in with his things when they moved, because there was no way on earth that he would have willingly kept it.

"I was twenty," he groaned. "Dear me, of all the pictures to find."

Belle flipped it over and looked at it again. "You look like a stripper," she observed casually. "A really cheap one."
"Well, that was sort of the point."

Belle raised an eyebrow.

"Now I'm intrigued."

Gold sighed again. "It was my final year at university. I was a broke student. And a law student, and we're second only to the medicine students in the amount we'll drink and the things we'll agree to do when we're drunk."

"Now I'm very intrigued."

Gold came over and perched on the arm of the chair beside her.

"My flatmate's girlfriend wanted to take her best friend to the Chippendales for her twenty-first. Alas, she was also a broke law student just like myself and she couldn't afford it. So, she offered to pay one very brave young man in beer and whiskey for a month as a substitute."

"And you accepted her offer?"

"There was a month's worth of alcohol on the line, Belle, of course I accepted her offer. In the long run," Gold mused, "it would probably have been cheaper for her to go to the show."

Belle leaned back in the chair and held up the photograph, and a sly smile crept over her face. It was a smile that Gold had long since recognised as meaning 'I've had a fantastic idea and I think we're both going to enjoy the results'.

"Have you still got the outfit?" she asked.

Gold snorted. "Over thirty years later?"

Belle shrugged.

"Well, I know your magpie-like tendency to hold on to items of sentimental value." She gestured around the room. "We're sitting in evidence of it."

Gold shook his head. "No, it was hired. It had to go back the next day."

"That's a shame."

Belle returned her attention to the box of photos.

"I wonder if there are any taken slightly later on in the proceedings?" she asked.

"No. Definitely and absolutely not. That's the only one in existence and I don't quite know how it slipped through the net. I'm going to burn it."

"You're going to do nothing of the sort." Belle held the picture close to her chest, then went one further and stuffed it down the front of her blouse into her bra. "It really is a crying shame; I'd have paid good money to see that." She grinned. "How far did you go?"

"There was a month's worth of whiskey on the line, Belle, it was practically a matter of life and death."

"That hasn't answered the question." Belle folded her arms, her expression utterly wicked, and Gold laughed.
"Why is it so important? You, my dear, have seen all I have to offer on numerous occasions."

"Yes but there's a difference between taking all your clothes off in front of your wife and doing it in front of a bunch of drunk university finalists. Which is why I'm asking. Did you go all the way?"

Gold matched her grin, which was becoming worryingly lecherous, and he leaned in to whisper in her ear:

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Belle bit her lip, tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair.

"I don't suppose," she said eventually, "that there is any chance of a repeat performance?"

Gold raised one eyebrow. "Would you be willing to pay me in wine and whiskey for a month?"

"Considering that we already have a lot of wine and whiskey in the house, and I'm not going to be drinking any of it for the foreseeable future, I can't see that this is going to be a problem," Belle pointed out.

Gold sighed. He was fifty years old. Nearly fifty-one.

But the audience was comprised only of Belle, and she was wearing that little smirk that made him weak at the already-weak knees.

"Oh, go on then," he muttered. "Since we're not getting anything done in here anyway."

Belle grinned and slipped off the chair, pulling him along in the direction of their bedroom, and Gold smiled. Perhaps this wasn't quite such a bad idea after all.
Belle has a craving and bakes. At three o'clock in the morning.

Belle could not sleep. This was becoming an increasingly regular occurrence and she was not at all surprised by it. She had long since accepted the fact that her unborn child was, in fact, nocturnal. She was also not at all surprised by the fact that she was craving golden syrup, since this was also becoming an increasingly regular occurrence. As well as being nocturnal, her baby apparently had a sweet tooth to rival the best of them.

When she had first become pregnant, Ruby had advised Belle to make the most of being able to eat as much cake as she wanted, whenever she wanted. Belle had not yet taken advantage of this, knowing that despite pregnancy being an excuse for a lot of things, it still would be best to maintain a relatively normal diet throughout.

But the odd binge could not hurt, Belle reasoned. Especially when it was three o'clock in the morning and she knew that baby was not going to let her sleep again until the craving for syrup had been satisfied. Very carefully, she got into a sitting position and got out of bed, not wanting to wake Gold as she padded softly across the room for her dressing gown and inched the bedroom door open.

She tiptoed into the kitchen and put the lights on before rummaging in the back of the cupboard for the tin of golden syrup. Once it was open, she paused. As tempting as it was to simply dig in to the delicious confection with a spoon, the sheer decadence of the action was still a little too much for Belle, and she resisted with a sigh. Baby still wanted syrup, though. She looked over at the oven. Since she was completely awake, she might as well bake. She would have to be quiet so as not to wake Gold, but she could do it. And treacle tart sounded like such a very delicious proposition at that point in time.

Belle crept around the kitchen, gathering the ingredients she needed to make the tart. Normally she would blitz the pastry in the food processor, but that would almost certainly wake Gold. Never mind. There was something therapeutic in the art of cooking. Belle classed herself as an average cook, enthusiastic but not always successful. Gold was the chef of the household, but Belle was the baker. She did not actually bake all that often; having become so used to always having access to exquisitely baked goods whilst working at Granny's she'd got out of the habit and was somewhat out of practice. Still, no time like the present, especially since Granny's wares were unavailable in the small hours of the morning.

She set the pastry to chill and sat down at the kitchen table, one hand on her bump. There was still a lot more growing to be done, but she was already feeling the weight, and whilst she was very awake, she was still tired.

"How are you doing in there?" she whispered down the front of her dressing gown. Her mid-pregnancy scan had shown that everything was still progressing completely normally, but Belle could not help feeling a certain unease in these quiet moments, when it was just her and her baby. Old fears and misgivings came back to bite, and there were times when her confidence caved.
"Just give me a sign," she said. "Anything. Just let me know you can hear me in there."

The only response was her stomach gurgling, and Belle gave a wan smile. "I guess that's my answer. You're hungry, and only treacle tart will do. You're going to have such a sweet tooth when you grow up. Daddy's going to spoil you rotten, little one. You've already got him wrapped around your little finger. But then again, you've got me hook, line and sinker as well. Why else would I be down here baking at three o'clock in the morning?"

There was no response from her tummy, and Belle sighed. Time to roll the pastry and get cooking whilst she waited for a sign.

X

Gold woke suddenly and completely to a rather loud crashing sound from the kitchen. He sat bolt upright and turned to see if Belle had been disturbed by the noise, only to find her side of the bed empty. It then occurred to him that if Belle was not beside him, she had likely been the cause of the noise. Given that it had been a rather loud and alarming crash, he shot out of bed as fast as his stiff leg would take him, grabbed his cane and his dressing gown (it was not a good idea for one to confront possible burglars and other potentially dangerous situations when one had no clothes on), and rushed down the stairs.

"Belle!" he called. "Are you all right?"

Naturally, in his sleep muddled state, he was assuming that the very worst had happened, and several scenarios vied for dominance in his mind, each one as terrifying as the last - from intruders holding his wife at knifepoint to the baby deciding it was time to come fourteen weeks early.

There was no answer, and Gold called out again. "Belle!"

"I'm fine," she replied at last, and Gold entered the kitchen to a sight that was not at all one that he was expecting.

Belle was standing in the middle of the kitchen, what looked to have once been a treacle tart splattered on the floor in front of her, one hand pressed over her belly and an expression of utter wonder on her face.

"She kicked, Gold," Belle murmured. "I've never felt a kick before. My last appointment with the midwife, I said I was worried because I hadn't felt a kick."

At last convinced that all was, in fact, well in the world, Gold came over to Belle and offered her a hand to step over the sticky mess that had at one point been her midnight snack, and he guided her over to the nearest kitchen chair, pulling up one next to her.

"There it is again!" Belle smiled and took Gold's hand, placing it gently on her bump and closing her own over it. "It was right…there."

On cue, Gold felt the fluttering movement under his palm, delicate as a butterfly's wings.

"I don't think that's a kick," he said, "I think that's a wave. He's waving hello."

"She," Belle corrected automatically. They had decided in the end to keep the baby's gender a surprise, but Belle was certain that she was having a girl. "Hello in there, little one," she said softly, undoing her dressing gown and letting it fall open so that she could stroke her tummy, uncaring of being nearly naked in the kitchen in the small hours of the morning. "I love you so much, even if you did make me drop your treacle tart. You gave me a bit of a shock, but I'm very happy that
you're saying hello. You don't know it's night time in there, do you? It's always nice and dark and warm and snug. They say you can recognise voices even before you're born," she continued. "You can recognise me, can't you? I'm Mummy, and the one with the lovely rich Glasgow brogue is Daddy. Say something," she hissed to Gold. "She needs to know who's who!"

Gold laughed and bent to kiss Belle's tummy, just above where a little hand or foot was still making its presence known.

"Hello darling. Very pleased to meet you."

He felt something wet drip onto his head and looked up. Belle was crying.

"Belle? Sweetheart?"

"I'm just so happy," Belle said, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. "I was getting so worried, but now everything's going to be all right."

Gold smiled. Everything was more than all right.
Baumkuchen (German Layer Cake)

Chapter Summary

Henry works on his family tree, and ruminates on an old saying.

Chapter Notes

Baumkuchen translates literally as ‘tree cake’, as when cut the layers resemble growth rings on a tree.

It was all very well asking students to map their family tree for a history project, Henry thought with a sigh, but for some students, this was a lot easier said than done. He was sitting at the kitchen table doing his homework, which consisted, currently, of two names on a blank sheet of paper joined by a vertical line.

Emma Swan

Henry Swan

It took less than five seconds’ thought for him to add Graham’s name next to Emma’s, because after all, Graham was his dad in everything but blood. He could have asked Emma about his real dad, but it did not feel right. He had never had any desire to find out about his real dad and it seemed ridiculous to put him on a family tree just because he was a biological relation. Obviously, once he had Graham on there, he could then add Graham’s mum and dad and aunts and uncles and all his many cousins, which took a while. But even after he had finished, the paper still did not look quite right. Emma’s side of the sheet was still incredibly empty, and in all honesty, they did not have all that much contact with Graham’s extended wolf pack family.

Henry sighed again. This was one of the most difficult pieces of homework he’d been given since starting at the secondary school, and that included algebra.

"You all right kid?" Emma asked. She was sitting on the floor in front of the oven, watching the contents intently. Their oven was in dire need of replacement and would often burn things to a crisp in a fraction of their recommended cooking time, so the only way to ensure that their meals did not end up completely charcoaled was to watch everything like a hawk if it had been in the oven any longer than about seven minutes.

"I’m fine," Henry said. He looked again at the title of the sheet in front of him. My Family. “Mum, what is a family? I don’t mean in terms of relations and stuff. I mean, what makes those people a family?”

Emma cast a quick glance over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow at her son before hastily returning her attention to the fish fingers.

"Family is family," she said. "You can’t really describe it. I suppose it’s all the people who are
there for you and help you out."

"They don’t need to be related to you to do that," Henry said. "I mean, if you and Graham needed help, who would be the first people you would call? It would be Granny or Graham’s dad, and Granny isn’t related to us at all. And then there are people who are related to you who don’t really fit that description of family."

The words were left unsaid, but they both knew to whom Henry was referring - his father, Emma’s biological parents…

"Oh Henry…” Emma got off the floor and came over to sit beside her son, putting her arm around him. "I suppose family is a pretty loose term. You and I have never really had a family in the traditional sense of the word so our definition of it is very different to everyone else’s. Our family is made up of all the bits and pieces that we’ve collected over the years. When you don’t have any biological family, you kind of have to make your own."

"I think that’s the best kind of family," Henry said, doodling on the edge of his paper. "Graham’s stuck with all his cousins whether he wants them or not, but we can choose our friends, and sometimes they’re better than a load of unwanted cousins would be."

Emma gave him a small smile and ruffled his hair, before leaping out of her seat with an exclamation of alarm as smoke began billowing out of the oven.

Henry looked over at the fridge, and there, stuck to the white metal door, was something that answered all his worries in one simple piece of fridge magnet wisdom. Emma had owned the magnet for as long as he could remember, and he had never thought anything of it until now. He grinned and began drawing more lines on his paper. He had an excellent idea.

The next evening found Henry sitting at a different kitchen table - Belle and Gold’s to be precise. Belle was still mass-producing treacle tart to satisfy her cravings, and Henry, who loved treacle tart almost as much as Belle’s unborn baby seemed to do, was more than happy to come over and help her eat it.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" he asked, helping himself to another slice of the pie on the table. Belle shook her head.

"No, we’re keeping our options open. I think we need to see what she looks like first. There’s no use in calling her Cordelia only to see her face and realise she doesn’t look like a Cordelia at all."

Henry, who thought all babies looked the same, declined to comment. "I thought you didn’t know if you were having a boy or a girl."

"We don’t, but I’m sure she’s a girl. Knowing my luck, I’ll be wrong."

"If it’s a boy will you name him after your dad?" Henry asked.

Belle laughed. “No. I think he would turn in his grave to know that we’d cursed our child with a name like Moe.” Belle paused. “I understand wanting to honour and remember your relations by passing on their names, but I really think it works best as a middle name. I think everyone needs to have their own name, their own identity, rather than having to share their name with a relative.”

Henry laughed. “I was named after the doctor who delivered me. What about Gold’s dad? Would he turn in his grave to have a grandson named after him?”

Belle shook her head sadly. “Gold and his dad didn’t get on very well. I don’t think it would be a
“Good idea.” She smiled. “But if she’s a girl then maybe Miriam, after his mum.”

Henry took another large bite of treacle tart, still making mental notes.

X

Belle was a little surprised when Emma came into the library at closing time, about a week after her conversation with Henry. Her friend was wearing a slightly shellshocked but nonetheless incredibly happy expression and seemed to be in a kind of trance.

“You’ve got to come over and see this,” Emma said. “Henry’s got the best mark in the class for his family tree project. It’s incredible.”

Belle, who had not realised that Henry was doing a project on his family tree, just shrugged, and pondered. Something in the back of her mind made her wonder. After all, Henry had been asking her about her family when he’d come over for treacle tart that evening… Could it be that she was part of the family tree? And Henry and Emma would be the first to admit that their family was not exactly the most conventional…

About an hour later found everyone in Granny’s, gathered around the table where Henry was sitting with his family tree. The paper was absolutely covered in names, linked haphazardly by wobbly lines coming out in all directions. At the top of the page was a single sentence that summed up the relationship between all the people around the table perfectly.

*Friends are the family we choose for ourselves.*

Over the course of the week, Henry had talked to them all about their various familial relationships and the people that they considered to be their family. And since Henry considered Belle, Gold, Archie and Ruby to be his family, their extended family became his by default.

Everyone from their little circle of friends was on there, even Pongo. Belle found her name, linked with a single line to Moe and a double line to Gold, who in turn had lines coming off him to link with Miriam and Elvira, who was also linked to Maisie the poodle.

"Look Connor," Ruby crooned to the one-year-old in her arms. "You’re on Henry’s family tree!"

Connor was naturally still far too young to be able to read his name on the page, but he understood that they were talking about him and he beamed beatifically.

"Oh look, Gold…” Belle looked down at the line that sprouted off between her and Gold.

*A new addition to the family who we can’t wait to meet!*

"They’re still part of the family, even if they haven’t been born yet,” Henry said. Belle looked around at the people who were, without a shadow of a doubt, her chosen family just as much as they were Henry’s. With impeccable timing, a firm kick under her hand where it rested on her stomach showed that the baby agreed.
Chapter Summary

One of Gold’s clients is a little bit touchy-feely, and Belle decides to cement her claim on her man.

Chapter Notes

After ‘Millionaire’s Shortbread’, someone wanted to see the situation reversed with Belle getting jealous.

If Emma was surprised when she walked into the café to begin her shift to find Belle perched awkwardly on one of the high stools next to the window, staring out of the glass with an extremely fierce expression, then she did not show it.

"Are you sure you wouldn’t be more comfortable on one of the sofas, Belle?" she asked. "Or even, you know, a normal chair?"

Belle shook her head and continued her steady glare out of the window. It was at that point that Emma realise that she was staring upwards, and that her eyeline was level with the window of Gold’s office in the building opposite. Unperturbed, Emma came up beside her and followed her gaze.

There was nothing to see in the window. There generally never was, Gold’s desk was out of view and only a very small sliver of the room could be seen from this angle. Emma looked at the window, then at Belle, then back to the window, and unseen beside her friend, she raised an eyebrow before turning to Ruby behind the counter.

Ruby spread her hands in a gesture of defeat and confusion, and Emma left Belle to her own devices, blaming her strange behaviour on her pregnancy and hormones doing very odd things. As she put her apron on and came round to join Ruby, her colleague took her to one side and whispered.

"She hasn’t moved in an hour and a half." Ruby sounded rather worried. "Something’s up, but she won’t say what it is. She’s either had a fight with Gold or she’s been abducted by aliens and we’re looking at a very shoddy replica."

Emma wasn’t quite sure that she subscribed to either of Ruby’s theories, or to her assertion that there were only those two possible explanations. Belle was not the type to fume furiously and silently if a blazing row had taken place, and Emma’s belief in UFOs and little visitors from outer space was so low as to be non-existent.

For the next ten minutes, Emma and Ruby continued to watch Belle as she continued to watch Gold’s office window, still glowering and still unmoving.
Presently, she spoke.

"Emma," she began.

"Yes Belle?"

"Does Henry still have his telescope?"

"Yes Belle."

"Can I borrow it please?"

"Belle, why do you need a telescope?"

"Because I can’t see well enough," Belle muttered. She got off the stool with some degree of awkwardness given her now very apparent baby bump, and came over to the counter, where she let out a long sigh and leaned on the cake display glass.

"Belle, why are you spying on Gold?" she asked.

"Because I want to prove to myself that I’m right." Belle wrung her hands. "I hate doubting. I know I’ve got nothing to worry about but there’s still that little niggle that I can’t get rid of, and I hate having that doubt and I want to get rid of it."

Emma hoped her confusion was not apparent in her face, but even after Belle’s garbled speech had come to its conclusion and she had spent a few minutes processing it, she was still no closer to knowing what on earth her friend was talking about.

"Belle, what’s happened?" Ruby asked plainly. "Why are you suspicious of your husband and the father of your unborn child?"

Belle placed one hand on her belly forlornly. “I know I shouldn’t be and I know it’s nothing. But I saw a woman in his office. And that would never normally worry me because well, she’s a client, but there was something about her, the way she acted… She was very tactile.”

Ruby gave a snort of laughter. “Oh Belle, there’s no need to be jealous of a touchy-feely client,” she said. “Certainly not to the stalking extent.”

"I know!" Belle moaned. "I know that, that’s what I just said. I know everything’s all right, I just want to be sure."

"Well, there’s one surefire way to be sure," Emma said, casting a glance over Belle’s shoulder out of the cafe window. "Ugh, too many sures in one sentence.” She nodded in the direction she had just been looking and Belle turned. Gold and his handsy lady client were just leaving the law office. The woman went off in the direction of the precinct exit and Gold came towards the cafe, his demeanour immediately changing. He caught Belle’s eye through the glass and drew a line across his throat.

"Tea," he said to Emma as soon as he came in. "Extra strong and with half a bottle of gin on the side. Good grief, kill me now."

Emma had to laugh. “That bad huh?”

Gold nodded and came over to the counter, slipping his arm round Belle to kiss her.

"Maybe you can reassure your wife that you aren’t going to run off with your ginger femme fatale
then,” Ruby said. Belle wriggled in embarrassment.

"I blame the hormones,” she muttered.

Gold just shook his head in good-natured despair and pulled Belle closer. “No Belle. I am not running off with Zelena Greene. She’s at least three radishes short of a salad. Probably more.”

Ruby snorted. “Seriously?”

Gold nodded, a worried expression on his face. “I have never before been tempted to ‘pull a Dawn’ as it is known in local parlance, but today... I am very glad there was a large desk between us. Still, my dear.” He turned to Belle. “We can’t have you being jealous. If anyone’s going to be jealous around here, it ought to be her.”

Belle sighed and leaned into Gold’s shoulder. “How can I make her jealous though?”

There was an exclamation of triumph from behind the cake display and Emma turned to her colleague. Ruby was wearing an expression that Emma was not quite sure how to describe, something between a Cheshire cat grin of victory and something akin to merciless glee. The overall effect was really quite terrifying.

"I’ve got the perfect plan."

X

Since Gold had a vague idea of Zelena’s schedule from when she was available to consultations, and since he knew that she was new to the area, their plot was deceptively simple. In the end, the plan turned out to be perfectly timed and even more effective than they could have hoped for.

Ruby was in the Guildhall reception area chatting to Kathryn when Zelena came in. She had to do a double take at first as the woman appeared to have more cleavage than was strictly decent prior to the watershed.

“Good afternoon Miss Greene,” Kathryn said brightly. “How can we help you today?”

“I have some documents for Mr Gold.” Zelena fingered the manila envelope she was holding, eyeing Ruby cautiously.

“Hey, don’t mind me, I’m just delivering lunch,” Ruby said, picking up the basket that had been sitting innocently on the reception desk and omitting to mention that she had in fact delivered lunch half an hour previously.

Kathryn clicked a few icons on her computer. “I’m afraid Mr Gold is out at the moment on his lunch break. I can hang onto these for you though.” She held out a hand for the envelope, which Zelena clutched closer to her chest.

“I’d really rather give them to him in person,” she said. “When will he be back?”

“Well...” Kathryn sighed. “I really can’t say. He has no appointments this afternoon, so it’s plausible that he may go and work from home or go to the law library.”

“He said that he needed these urgently,” Zelena pressed.

“He’s probably at the library,” Ruby said. “I’m going there now, if you give me a minute to pick up my next order I’ll show you the way.”
Zelena nodded gratefully and followed Ruby out of the office. On their entrance to the café, Ruby gave Emma a surreptitious thumbs up, and her friend gave a sly grin, disappearing into the kitchen to fetch Ruby’s delivery and to text Tina regarding the next stage of their plan.

“One of the librarians is heavily pregnant,” Ruby explained to Zelena by way of making small talk as Emma filled the basket again. “She’s craving our carrot cake morning, noon and night, and apparently we’re the only place in town who’ll make up her weird sandwich fillings. Are you new in town?”

Ruby kept Zelena chatting happily all the way to the library. It was really quite easy to do so, since all Ruby had to do was nod in all the right places whilst Zelena talked, about moving to the area and her new house, but mainly about Gold. When they entered the library, Ruby gave Tina a puzzled look over Zelena’s shoulder. “Where are they?” she mouthed. The idea had been that Gold would be at the issue desk talking to the very pretty, very pregnant librarian who would be introduced as his wife. However, neither Belle nor Gold were anywhere to be seen. Tina just winked.

"Can I help you, ladies?" she asked politely.

"We’re looking for Gold," Ruby said. "Urgent document delivery. Have you seen him?"

"Oh yes.” Tina’s smile was positively wicked as she took the lunch parcels from Emma’s basket. "You’ll find him in Ancient Japanese History. Aisle seventy-three."

As soon as Ruby heard the words ‘aisle seventy-three’, she knew exactly what was happening and she didn’t know whether she wanted to be witness to what was coming next as Zelena trotted down the rows of stacks to locate Ancient Japanese History. Thanks to Belle and Tina, the legend of aisle seventy-three was well-known to the café staff.

In the end, Tina made the decision for her.

"Follow her!" she hissed. "I want to see her face when she finds him but I can’t leave the desk!"

Ruby hurried down the library after Zelena, who had come to a stop at the end of aisle seventy-three. She had gone completely bleach white and her jaw was heading towards the floor. Ruby came up next to her and peered round the edge of the stack, and she had to grin at the sight that met her.

She had seen Belle and Gold kiss before. That was not so much of a surprise. But generally, when they were in polite company, their public displays of affection were comparatively chaste; Ruby had never yet witnessed what Henry would term a full-on snogging session. Until now. It was really quite romantic to watch, all told. Ruby noted with pride that Belle, who normally wore flattering empire lines since starting to show, had chosen today to really flaunt her bump.

It took the envelope slithering out of Zelena’s grasp and landing with a flat splat on the linoleum to break the couple out of their close clinch.

"Oh, hello," Gold said, genuinely surprised to see Zelena and Ruby at the end of the row. "Erm…Belle, this is Miss Greene. Miss Greene, my wife Belle."

Zelena was completely speechless.

“Belle, Tina’s got your sandwich at the front desk,” Ruby said helpfully to break the silence. “Extra pickles as requested.”
“Thank God, I’m starving,” Belle said, but she made no move to exit the aisle.

Eventually, Zelena came back to herself and picked up the fallen envelope, thrusting it towards Gold, who thanked her and slid the papers into his inside pocket.

“Erm… enjoy your lunch!” Zelena blurted out, before turning on her heel and walking out of the library at a pace that was just a little bit too hurried to be natural. Emma watched her leave then turned back to Belle, who was wearing a very satisfied smile.

“Oh, I intend to,” Belle said.

“Aisle seventy-three,” Ruby smiled. “I might have guessed.”

“Well, now seemed like the perfect opportunity to test it out,” Belle said mildly. “Didn’t it, darling?” She gave Gold another kiss, although not quite as forceful as before.

“Indeed it did.”

Aisle seventy-three of the central lending library, home to Ancient Japanese History, was one of the most secluded spots in the building and was famous as a clandestine rendezvous point, to the extent where ‘going to aisle seventy-three’ was a widely accepted euphemism among the library staff.

“Are you feeling happier now?” Ruby asked as they made their way back to the issue desk to retrieve lunch. Her friend smiled.

“Oh, infinitely happier.”

“Excellent.” Ruby picked up the basket and made to leave. “By the way, Gold, you’ve got lipstick on your collar. Just thought you ought to know.”
Strawberry Shortcake

Chapter Summary

The entire gang go to the beach.

Chapter Notes

Someone wanted to see a beach outing, and someone else wanted to see Gold playing with the enormous plush dinosaur.

Belle was not expecting a phone call at half-past eight on a Sunday morning, and she wondered aloud who it could be as she reached across Gold for her phone.

“Whoever it is, they can bugger off and call back at a reasonable time of day,” Gold grumbled, his words half muffled in the pillow and his eyes still closed.

It was Emma, and immediately Belle’s mind was set on edge. It was rare for Emma to ring so early on a weekend.

“Oh Emma, is everything ok?”

“Yep. Everything’s fine. Do you want to come to the beach?”

Belle blinked. “Pardon?”

“Do you and Gold want to come to the beach? There’s a whole bunch of us going. Me and Graham and Henry, and Ruby and Archie are bringing Connor, and Henry invited Grace, and Grace invited Jeff and Alice, and Granny offered to provide a picnic if she could come too, so it’s turned into a bit of a family outing. Do you want to come?”

Belle looked down at Gold, who had readjusted his position snuggled in the covers and was watching her from his nest of pillows with one narrowed eye.

“Would you like to go to the beach with pretty much our entire circle of friends?” she asked him.

Gold raised his visible eyebrow.

“Why?” he grumbled.

“Because it’s Sunday, it’s perfect beach weather, and it would be nice to spend time with our friends?” Belle suggested.

Gold gave an incomprehensible grunt and brought one hand out of the tangle of sheets to stroke over her swollen belly. “The only place I want to spend today is in this bed, and the only person I want to spend it with is you.”
“I’ll wear my blue and white bikini top,” Belle wheedled. “You can put sun cream on my back. I promise I won’t make you go anywhere near the sea; you can stay and guard the picnic with Granny.”

“All right, all right.” Gold heaved himself into a sitting position and stretched before slipping an arm around Belle and pulling her back against him to nuzzle at her neck. “You had me at bikini.”

“Do you mind?” Belle giggled as she tried to bat him away with the hand not holding the phone. “I’m on the phone.”

“Hey, it’s ok, feel free to make out.” Belle got the distinct impression that Emma was smirking on the other end of the phone. “So, we’ll see you there in a couple of hours?”

“Count us in,” Belle replied, and she paused before adding: “Best get Granny to make extra sandwiches. I have a feeling we might need them.”

X

All things considered, it was going remarkably well. As promised, Gold had not been made to go anywhere near the sea. Well, he’d have a job. Sand was even harder to walk on with his cane than gravel was, and that was saying something, so once he was sitting down on the beach, he wasn’t moving unless absolutely necessary. He was sitting under a large beach umbrella with all the various bags and baggage that the families had brought with them, watching the others. Granny was asleep in a deckchair beside him; Emma, Graham, Henry and Grace appeared to be having a splash war in the sea; Jefferson and Alice were up on the pier arguing about chocolate sauce on ice-cream; Ruby, Archie and Connor were building a sand castle (well, more like a sand pile), with Pongo’s rather dubious help, and Belle…

Belle was paddling in the shallows, and looking like the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, in her blue and white bikini top and long blue skirt (she was very conscious of her thighs and varicose veins, despite the number of times that Gold told her she was still drop dead gorgeous), her hair blowing in the sea breeze.

Gold took a surreptitious picture on his phone for posterity, so that he could always see her looking the way she did at that moment. Presently she turned and waved at him before walking along the beach a little to talk to Ruby, who appeared to be wrestling with Connor. Gold rummaged in the picnic basket for leftovers. Granny had packed enough food to feed a small army, which was really quite advantageous since they were a small army. There was not much left, which might be the reason why Alice and Jefferson had gone to raid the ice-cream van. He lay back and looked up at the parasol above him, munching on a strawberry thoughtfully. It was years since he had been to a beach. They’d come religiously when Bae was younger. His son had loved to swim in the sea and play football on the sand, and Gold had loved it too. Beach holidays had been a staple part of his life and in recent years he had forgotten the simple pleasures of sun, sea and sand. He was looking forward to rediscovering them in years to come with Belle and their child.

“Please Connor, it’s naptime.” Ruby was steering her son towards the shade under the beach umbrellas. She looked a little frantic, and Gold surmised that Connor had no intention of taking a nap and this was what she had been wrestling with him about ten minutes prior.

“Can you watch him for five minutes whilst I find the facilities?” Ruby asked. “I’m bursting, Belle’s already on her way there and Archie’s had to tear off down the beach after Pongo decided to chase someone else’s Frisbee.”

Gold nodded and Ruby ran off gratefully towards the pier.
"Come on Connor, you stay here with your godpa and have a nap in the shade whilst Mummy and Daddy get themselves sorted out. There might be ice cream if you’re good." Connor seemed quite excited at the prospect of ice cream, and Gold patted the towel beside him. Connor took a couple of steps forward and promptly fell over on the uneven beach. "Eh dear..." Gold leaned across and picked him up, setting him on his feet again and brushing off his tiny hands before he could shove a fistful of sand in his mouth. The little boy was obviously rather shocked by his sudden close encounter with the ground, and looked like he was about to burst into tears. "Come here, wee one."

He groped around in the buggy behind him and found the enormous stegosaurus, hiding it behind the picnic basket and making it pop its head up, much to Connor’s mirth. After a while of the game, he handed the dinosaur over and Connor threw his arms round it, toppling sideways to curl up next to Gold with a happy sigh. He reached out towards the picnic basket.

"Joo."

Gold handed him the little sip-cup of juice and continued to watch over his godchild. He loved kids. There were no two ways about it. Any misgivings that he might have held about having a baby with Belle had been completely swept away by Connor. The more time he spent with his godson, the more he could not wait to become a parent again, and watch over his own child.

X

Belle looked down at her husband and smiled. Gold had decided to join Connor in naptime and she nudged him with her foot to wake him now that his charge had been returned to his parents.

"Mmph." Gold manoeuvred himself into a sitting position and squinted up at her against the sunlight. "Have I missed much?"

"Erm, Gold?"

Gold looked down to where Connor had been dozing against his shoulder and the trail of drool and fruit juice over his shirt, and he sighed.

"Well, it's all good practice for later." Without any further ceremony he stripped off his shirt and tossed it vaguely in the direction of Belle's handbag before opening his arms for her. Belle settled herself between his legs and gave an appreciative hum as he began to rub suncream into her shoulder blades. She was just on the verge of nodding off herself when she felt a ping at her back and gave a squawk of alarm on realising that Gold had undone her bikini top. It was still secured tightly round her neck and was in no danger of revealing anything but she gave Gold a glare over her shoulder nonetheless.

"Do you mind? We can't all go topless without traumatising small children here!"

Gold just kissed her in response and continued to massage the cream into her skin, obediently doing her up again when he was done.

Belle leaned back against his chest, watching Ruby and Archie and Connor playing in the water and stroking Pongo's velvety ears when he came over for a sniff round.

"This time next year, that'll be us," she said.

"I can't wait," Gold said, resting his chin on the top of her head.

Belle laughed as she felt a strong kick. "Baby can't either." The kicking did not let up and Belle grimaced. "Baby really can't wait," she muttered through gritted teeth, looking on in grim
fascination as her tummy moved of its own accord. "She's trying to kick her way out and join in the fun already. Ugh."

She turned over awkwardly, having completely given up any hope of being graceful, and hooked her arms round Gold's neck. He gave her that slightly lopsided little smirk and a second later, she felt the heel of his hand pressing into her back, just where she needed it. At that moment, it was the most wonderful feeling in the world and she wasted no time in letting her husband know that.

"Better than sex?" He quirked an eyebrow.

Belle made a face. This last trimester had made her really, ridiculously horny, having been almost completely off sex for the middle few months. Perhaps her body was reminding her that she wouldn't be able to have any for a while once she gave birth and she needed to get as much in as possible whilst she still could. Thankfully, Gold was more than happy to oblige her cravings, probably secretly ecstatic that he had displaced her previous obsession of golden syrup.

"Not sure," she said. "We might have to do a comparison later."

X

Gold could quite happily have fallen asleep again, once the baby had calmed down and Belle was back sitting in his lap, leaning back against him, but all thoughts of getting another nap were crushed by the arrival of Henry and Grace, at a rate of knots, scrabbling through Jefferson's belongings to emerge victorious with some binoculars, which they focussed on a point halfway down the beach. Or at least, Henry tried to, with little success.

"Oh for crying out loud, you're hopeless." Grace grabbed Belle’s handbag, the picnic hamper, and Ruby’s holdall, and began constructing a makeshift fort that she and Henry then crouched behind. The two kids couldn’t have been more conspicuous if they’d tried, but Gold let them have their moment, smiling as they bickered over the binoculars. He rested his chin on Belle’s shoulder, watching the progress of Jefferson and Alice along the beach in a slightly more subtle manner. He would admit, despite not being an overly romantic soul (here he knew Belle would beg to differ), that they did make a sweet couple, holding hands in their matching sand-stained shorts, Alice’s kaftan billowing slightly in the breeze. Presently they stopped by the water’s edge.

"Do you think he’s going to propose?" Belle asked, tilting her head on one side, her hair tickling Gold’s nose as she did.

Henry and Grace looked at each other, their grins reaching Cheshire Cat proportions. Of course they thought Jefferson was going to propose. Grace grabbed the binoculars out of Henry’s hands and crouched behind the bag-fort again, peering over the top and refocussing the binoculars to better see her father and possibly-soon-to-be-stepmother.

The couple stayed standing by the sea for a long time, still holding hands. By this time, Emma and Graham had also come over and were jostling for space behind the bag-fort, along with Pongo who seemed intent on licking Emma’s ankles, and Granny was sitting up in her deckchair, shielding her eyes with her cake decorating magazine as she too craned to see what was going on at the other end of the beach.

"A fiver says he proposes,” Emma said.

“'You’re on,” muttered Graham. He glanced behind him to Gold and Belle. “Actually, on second thoughts, maybe not. You two have precedent for accidentally witnessing proposals.”
“It’s not our fault if people decide to ask other people to marry them when we’re in the vicinity.” Belle shrugged and popped a strawberry in her mouth. “What can I say? Maybe we’re a good luck charm.”

It was at that point that Jefferson went down on one knee.

“Yes!” Emma exclaimed. “Called it!”

Henry and Grace high-fived. Graham handed over a fiver to his wife with a groan.

“Keep it down!” Granny hissed from her deckchair. “You don’t want them to know they’ve got an audience before she’s said yes!”

The attention returned to the couple by the water. Jefferson had since got back up and he and Alice were wrapped in a close embrace.

“I think she said yes,” Grace said conversationally.

“Can we be sure, though?” Emma asked. “There could be another five quid in it if she does.”

“What?” Graham yelped. “I never agreed to that!”

Presently, Jeff and Alice kissed, a kiss that was definitely one shared by a newly-engaged couple. Grace gave a whoop of joy and scrambled to her feet.

“Congratulations!” she yelled to her father. To their credit, Jefferson and Alice did not make any indication of knowing they’d had an audience other than to give the spectators a thumbs up, neither party breaking from their kiss.

“Hmm.”

Ruby, Archie and Connor had returned to the group, and Ruby was regarding Emma with an expression of intrigue. The young blonde looked up from scratching Pongo between the ears and raised one eyebrow on seeing her friend with her head on one side.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Ruby smiled benignly and turned to Archie. “Pongo’s been very attentive to Emma and Belle today, hasn’t he, Archie?”

“Indeed he has,” Archie agreed.

“It’s just like he was to me when I was expecting Connor,” Ruby continued. “Now, as blooming and full of a baby as Belle is, I can understand his interest in her. His fascination with Emma, however, intrigues me.”

Gold saw the moment that Emma’s face paled.

“Oh God, you don’t think…” She glanced down at her stomach. “That’s not possible.”

“Well, technically…” Graham began. “But I won’t go into the details in polite company,” he added quickly after Emma shot him a glare.

“But I’d know!” Emma said. “There are certain… symptoms!”

Ruby shrugged. “Pongo’s got a very sensitive nose. Perfectly plausible he’d know before you
would.”

Emma glanced with horror to Henry, who was beaming.

“If it’s a girl, can we call her Xena?” he asked.

Emma stayed silent for a long time, and when she did speak, the only word to come out of her mouth was ‘cripes’.

Graham rescued the situation, pulling Emma into his arms and planting a soft kiss on her cheek. “Personally, hun, I’ll trust a Clear Blue over a Dalmatian any day. And no, Henry, we are not naming your sister Xena.”

“But why not? All right, how about Natasha?”

“We are not naming your sister after Black Widow!”

“But what’s wrong with being named after a superhero?”

Belle leaned back against Gold’s chest and looked up at him. Her eyes were obscured behind her sunglasses but Gold knew that they would be smiling with amusement.

“Aren’t you glad we decided to come?” she asked.

“Very glad,” Gold replied, before giving her a heartfelt, if upside-down, kiss.
Gold was very glad that he’d cleared his calendar of all court appointments in the week leading up to Belle’s due date, as there was no way he’d be able to concentrate on presenting a case to a panel of magistrates when every one of his brain cells was screaming at him that his child’s birth was increasingly imminent. Philip, newly qualified and loving it, had been more than happy to take on the extra work, perhaps in an effort to prove himself thoroughly indispensable.

Sadly, charging by the hour meant that Gold did have to do some work if he was to stand any chance of being paid. He was halfway through a routine progress meeting with one of his clients for a long-standing and complicated case – a man contesting his father’s will – when he heard a phone ring in the open office outside. He didn’t think anything of it until Ashley poked her head around the door.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr Gold, but I’ve got your wife on the phone. It’s urgent.”

Immediately, Gold knew exactly what was happening, and he scrambled up, almost tripping over his own cane in the process. His client gave him a rather perplexed shrug as he left the room to take the call on Ashley’s phone, but he gave a good-natured shrug when Ashley offered to get him a cup of tea.

Gold picked up the receiver and took the phone off manual hold.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

“Hi.” Belle sounded remarkably chirpy, all things considered, but Gold could still detect a trace of fear in her voice. “I’m in labour. My contractions started a couple of hours ago.”

Even though he had guessed that this was happening, Gold was still speechless for a minute, to the extent where Belle began asking him if he was ok.

“I’m on my way,” he managed, his words a little strangled.

“Don’t you dare break the speed limit!”

“Belle, I…”

“Or run any ambers!”

“I promise,” Gold agreed. He’d keep to it, but all the same, he couldn’t help but wonder. Bae’s birth had been lightning quick in comparison with some of the tales of horror that he had heard over the years, and he had the terrible feeling that the genes for that may have come down his side of the family. None of his relatives were particularly famed for hanging around when there was something important waiting for them.
“Gold, I mean it.” Belle’s voice was stern.

“I promise,” Gold repeated. “Oh Belle, I love you.”

“I love you too,” Belle said, but the last word became a high-pitched keen of pain.

“Belle? Belle? Breathe, sweetheart.” Gold’s grip on his cane tightened as he listened to Belle’s heavy breathing down the phone.

“I’m ok,” she panted eventually. “But… hospital does look attractive.”

“Ok, I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

They said their goodbyes and Gold dropped the receiver back into its cradle in something of a daze.

“Belle’s in labour, isn’t she?”

He looked up to see Ashley standing calmly in his office doorway with one eyebrow raised, handing a cup of tea to Mr Forrest. Gold turned to his client.

“Mr Forrest, I’m afraid we’re going to have to cut short this meeting because my wife is having a baby. Could we reschedule for the same time next week? Please do enjoy your tea and help yourself to biscuits, Miss Boyd will show you out.”

Mr Forrest smiled and nodded.

“Good luck,” he said, as Gold came back into his office and began locking up filing cabinets. “Is it your first?”

Gold politely ignored the question; it would engender too much explanation to say that their child was Belle’s first but his second, so he left it unsaid. After shaking hands and exchanging the necessary pleasantries, he left his client in Ashley’s capable hands (currently occupied with her biscuit tin) and hurried downstairs as fast as he could.

“Good luck!” Kathryn called after him as he tore through reception past her. “Give Belle my best!”

The drive home seemed to take forever, and it was only his promise to Belle that kept him from putting his foot down. The house was quiet when he got inside, and he called out.

“Belle, love? Where are you?”

“Kitchen,” came the muffled reply. Gold limped through to find Belle leaning on the worktop, forehead pillowed on her arms.

“Oh sweetheart.”

He came up next to her, slipping his free hand up under the hem of her camisole and rubbing her back. She was still in the pyjamas that he’d left her in bed in earlier. Belle sighed happily at his touch and turned her head to face him.

“I’m exhausted and I haven’t even started yet,” she whimpered.

“Come here, love.” Gold opened his arms and Belle pushed herself off the work surface, hooking her arms around his neck and resting her head against his chest. He kept one hand on her back, rubbing small circles, and the other stroked her hair.
“Have you rung the hospital?” he asked.

Belle nodded.

“They said you should take me in when you got back.”

“In that case, let’s go.”

Belle raised her head a couple of inches and looked at him pointedly.

“You cannot attend the birth of your baby wearing a suit,” she said. “I forbid it. I will be wearing my pyjamas. You are not wearing your suit.”

Before Gold could make any kind of response, he felt Belle tense in his arms and grasp around for the notebook and pencil on the side where she’d been timing her contractions.

“Let me.” He made a note of the time and continued to rub her back, murmuring soothing nonsense until she relaxed a little.

Belle looked up at him, her eyes weary.

“Three hours in and I’m already thinking ‘stop, I want to get off!’ Don’t tell me, it’s too late to back out now.”

Gold chuckled.

“I wasn’t going to say anything of the sort,” he said. “Come on love, let’s get you to the hospital and meet our little one.”

He pulled out a chair and made to manoeuvre Belle onto it, but she shook her head, instead moving back to the worktop.

“Sitting’s uncomfortable,” she grumbled. “Baby’s so low now it feels like I’m squashing her head.”

Gold curled one arm around Belle’s stomach.

“Be good in there,” he told his child. “Don’t give your ma hell, ok? Do we have an agreement? I really should get it in writing and ratified by one of my colleagues, but you’re still a bit young yet to hold a pen, let alone read a contract.”

Belle gave a weak laugh, and, satisfied that he’d cheered her up somewhat, Gold moved away to change and collect Belle’s hospital bag from the nursery.

They’d decided on yellow in the end, as they didn’t know if they were having a boy or a girl, and in the late morning sunshine, the room lit up. It gave him pause to think that the next time he set foot in this room, it would have an occupant.

Gold picked up a plush bear, a gift from godmother-to-be Ruby, and tucked it into the top of the overnight bag, head poking out. Belle was waiting for him in the hall when he came back down the stairs and she smiled when she saw the little bear.

They left the house as a couple, and they would be returning to it as a family.

X

The drive to the hospital took twenty minutes, and Gold was quite glad that they hadn’t
encountered any more red lights on the way when Belle’s waters broke whilst they were standing at the maternity unit reception desk. It was not that he had been particularly worried for his car seats, it was the blind fear and mortification in his poor wife’s face.

“It looks you got here right on time,” the midwife assigned to Belle said, having taken everything in her stride, lead them away to an empty room and examined her charge. “I shouldn’t imagine it’ll be long now. You’re already six centimetres dilated, nearly seven.”

“No, no, I’m not ready,” Belle said, and for the first time she seemed to sound genuinely scared of what was to come. She grabbed Gold’s hand and squeezed as another contraction began. “I can’t do this, I’m not ready!”

“You can do this,” Gold said, focussing on the dull ache in his knee from sitting in an awkward position rather than the vice-like crushing grip on his hand. “You’ll get through this with no trouble, because you’re my brave, beautiful, clever Belle, you can do anything, and you’re going to be a brilliant mum. Trust me. I’m a lawyer.”

Belle laughed and gradually loosened her grip as the contraction subsided.

“You’re the one who got me in this state,” she pointed out. “I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could spit.”

She turned over with a little difficulty until she was back on her knees, leaning on the headboard. It seemed to be the position that was the most comfortable for her, and it meant that Gold could perch on the edge of the bed and still massage her back if she wanted.

“Considering how organised we are,” he began, “you’d have thought we’d have come to a decision about names by now.”

“Baby’s two days early,” Belle said. “Who knows? Maybe we’d have reached a conclusion tomorrow.”

They still hadn’t decided an hour later, when the midwife told Belle that she was fully dilated and she should push on the next contraction.

Gold came to the conclusion that he had never heard Belle swear quite so violently, and he was fairly certain that she had invented half a dictionary of new curses. It broke his heart to know that Belle was hurting so much, and he was on the verge of suing the midwives if they didn’t her more pain relief Right Now This Minute, until the rational part of his brain reminded him that Belle didn’t want an epidural, and if she wanted any more drugs, she’d ask for them.

Still the rational part of his brain had a hard time maintaining control later, when the midwives began to look worried, and the gynaecologist was called in.

Belle’s labour was stalling and the baby was in danger of becoming distressed. They were prepared to let labour progress naturally for another half an hour but then…

Belle shook her head, not letting them get out the rest of the words. She grabbed Gold’s hand.

“You told me I could do it,” she cried, sobbing into his wrist. “You told me I could do it! But I’m so, so tired!”

“I know, sweetheart, I know. But you’re doing great, you can do this, I know you can.”

He knew what they needed to do to get things moving again. Simple gravity would be their best
help; the weight of the baby’s head pressing against the cervix triggered contractions.

“Come on sweetheart. You need to get up, that’ll make things easier."

“I can’t…”

“Yes you can. Come on, lean on me, I’ve got you.” He bent, bracing himself against the bed so that Belle could put her arms around his neck and he could pull her up onto her knees and take the majority of her weight. She rested her head on his shoulder and Gold could hear her snuffles of pain and utter frustration next to his ear.

He closed his eyes, winging up a prayer to whichever deity happened to be up there at the moment that everything would be all right. He couldn’t move, his balance was precarious enough as it was; he could only hold Belle and hope.

Five minutes later, he breathed a sigh of relief as the midwife spoke again.

“Ok, Belle, Baby’s coming down beautifully now, you obviously just needed a helping hand from gravity. Another push and we should see the head.”

Gold gave an involuntarily yelp as Belle bit down hard on his shoulder and pushed.

“Excellent, Baby’s crowning now. Two more pushes. Come on Belle, your baby’s nearly here. You can do it.”

Belle gave a final howl that seemed to fill the room and echo around it.

There was a moment of silence, and then the screaming of a healthy baby. Belle laughed next to Gold’s neck when she heard the sound.

“Boy or girl?” she asked. Gold peered over Belle’s shoulder at their baby and smiled before pressing a kiss into her messy curls.

“She’s a girl.”

He felt Belle’s smile against his skin. “Told you so.”

X

Charlotte Miriam Gold was the spitting image of her mother. Gold looked down at his two sleeping girls, noting the similarities between them. Charlotte was safely tucked into Belle’s arms, and her blue eyes fluttered open when he touched the downy hair on top of her head.

“Good evening, little pumpkin,” he said. “It’s nice to finally meet you. Now, I need you to promise not to be too hard on Ma and Daddy, ok? You’ve been brilliant for the last nine months, can you keep it up for another eighteen years?”

Charlotte blinked slowly.

“Can we shake on it?” Gold held out his little finger to Charlotte’s tiny palm and her fist closed around it automatically.

“Do you want to hold her?”

Gold looked up to see Belle smiling at him sleepily.
“You haven’t really had as much chance to hold her,” she continued. “She’s your daughter as much as mine.”

Gold picked up Charlotte and tucked her in close. Belle watched them.

“I keep expecting you to start singing Gaelic lullabies,” she said. “Don’t pretend you weren’t practising whilst you and Archie were decorating the nursery.”

“I was doing nothing of the sort.”

Belle raised an eyebrow.”

“Well,” Gold leaned back in his chair to get comfortable with Charlotte. “Maybe a bit.”

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I love it when you speak Gaelic.”

“Well, you can’t understand a word I’m saying. I can’t understand a word I’m saying, for that matter. The only person who understands is over four hundred miles away.”

“It still sounds nice. Please love, sing Auld Lang Syne in Gaelic for your girls.”

Gold glanced over at the door to Belle’s room.

“Not while I’ve got a rapt audience.”

Ruby was peering through the little glass panel in the door and she waved frantically on catching Belle and Gold’s attention. Belle gestured for her to come in and she rushed inside, Archie following at a slightly more sedate pace with Connor balanced on his hip.

“Oh, she’s so cute!” Ruby gushed, cooing over Charlotte in her father’s arms before giving Belle a hug. “How are you?”

“Knackered.” Belle yawned. “But happy. She’s worth every minute of it all.”

“I know, you forget all the pain as soon as you hold them.”

As if on cue, Connor wriggled in Archie’s arms, wanting to be put down. He pointed excitedly at the envelope in Ruby’s hand as she passed it to Belle.

“Cat!” he said proudly.

“No darling, that’s a card, not a cat,” Ruby said. “Cats have four paws and go mew, don’t they?”

“Have you decided on a name?” Archie asked Belle, grabbing the back of Connor’s dungarees before he could run headlong into the bedframe and knock himself out.

“Charlotte Miriam.”

“Well, the Charlotte is obviously after Charlotte Brontë.” Ruby grinned. “We can never forget that Jane Eyre’s your favourite book, can we?”

Belle laughed. “Of course not. And Miriam after Gold’s mum.”

Ruby continued to fuss over her godchild, and Connor toddled over to investigate.

“Cat!” he exclaimed again, but quickly lost interest in the new arrival and started playing with his
plastic triceratops instead (the giant plush stegosaurus had been deemed too large to bring to the hospital), making it fly around the room and climb up Gold’s chair.

“You’ll be being used as a climbing frame before you know it,” Ruby observed. “Congratulations, you two. I’m so happy for you.”

“Yes, congratulations… No Connor, don’t send Topsy up your godpa’s leg, I don’t think he wants a dinosaur on his lap.” Archie scooped up Connor and Topsy just as Charlotte began to cry. The sound startled the little boy and he too began to grizzle.

“Oh dear,” said Ruby. “I think it’s dinner time.” She disentangled her fingers from Charlotte’s before giving Belle a final hug and Gold a peck on the cheek, and she went over to take Connor from Archie so that he too could give his well wishes.

“Best of luck to you both,” he said. “If you need any help, Ruby still has all her parenting books. You’re welcome to borrow them, read them and then throw them against the wall saying that they’re useless.”

“They are useless,” Ruby said, having succeeded in getting Connor to quiet down by bopping him on the nose with the triceratops until he started giggling. “Just trust your instincts. Unless they’re telling you that your baby wants a bacon sandwich, in which case they might be sending you mixed messages.”

Ruby, Archie and Connor said their goodbyes, and left the new parents in peace.

“I think she is hungry,” Belle said, and she pushed the straps of her camisole down off her shoulders before holding out her arms for her daughter. She gave Gold a wry smile as she got comfortable with Charlotte against her chest and offered the baby her breast; Charlotte immediately stopped crying and suckled greedily.

“I know you’re enjoying the view,” Belle said, “but my boobs are strictly off limits at the moment.”

“Look, but don’t touch.”

“Precisely. Oh, come here.” Belle nudged the pillows behind her with her elbow indicating for Gold to join her on the bed, and she leaned back against him. Gold put his arm around her.

“Did I bite you?” Belle asked. “I seem to remember getting a mouthful of your shirt at one point.”

“Yes, yes you did;”

“Sorry.”

“You were giving birth,” Gold said. “You’re excused pretty much anything.”

Belle looked up at him.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you, and I love you, Charlotte, and I’m incredibly tired and incredibly happy right now.”

“I love you both too.”

Gold kissed Belle’s temple, enjoying the way she snuggled against him instinctively, and he stroked Charlotte’s soft cheek. They were a family, and he couldn’t be happier.
And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the last cupcake. I hope you’ve enjoyed reading them as much as I’ve enjoyed baking them. It’s been a blast, but I think that this is a good time to leave Belle and Gold to their own devices as they continue on their journey together with their new arrival.

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