Personal assistant Belle French develops a crush on her boss and this is an issue when they fly out on a business trip together.
After graduation, Belle French had found the job market economy was not exactly suited for a Bachelor of Art. She had had to fight even to be interviewed for internships that paid nothing, gave her nothing but a line of text in her resume. Belle unfortunately didn't have the option to work as a full-time slave, no matter how good the work experience would have looked on paper, because she still needed to eat, and required a roof over her head.

Belle had then started to worked as Mr Gold's personal assistant. She'd gotten the job by chance, because Mr Gold had had some dealings with her father in the past. The weird thing had been, had it been anyone else, Moe would have practically been signing the work contract in her name and forging her signature. He'd always thought Belle's ideas about writing and travel had been a bit wishy-washy, and would have preferred that she had some more realistic goals in life. But then he'd only reluctantly told her over the phone that Mr Gold was looking for a PA and maybe she should look into it, if she needed a job so bad.

Their first meeting had given Belle perhaps some insight into why Moe French hadn't thought Mr Gold was the best employer of the month. Belle had quickly learned that Gold had fired her last two secretaries in swift succession for being stupid and lazy. Mr Gold was a taciturn, short-tempered, cynical middle-aged man who expected his assistant to be at his beck and call around the clock, seven days a week. Mr Gold didn't take days off from work, and he got by on four to five hours of sleep every night, so he didn't see any reason why other people couldn't do the same.

When Belle had gotten the job, she'd imagined she would suffer in silence while trying to achieve perfection in all she did. She balanced his cheque accounts, answered his calls, arranged his meetings, fetched him coffee, wrote his emails to his dictation, and ran errands all across the city for him. She'd imagined the work would be tedious and wouldn't challenge her at all, but after the first week she had realized that no two weeks were the same working for him.

Mr Gold was the manager of a production service with a number of high-paying high-profile clients. Need thirty swans for a fashion shoot? Contact Gold. Fantasy baroque sitting room required props for a television shoot? Contact Gold. Needed an entire park covered under tarpaulin? Gold was the go-to person.

And he was stupendously particular about perfection. Mr Gold seemed to hate all the people that worked for him, all his clients, any and every occasion where he had to repeat himself. Above all, he hated computer graphics. Belle knew he was a self-made man, who'd climbed from some small obscure corner of a BBC prop department in Britain and across the sea to the east coast to bring to life the crazies fantasies of anyone who had money enough to pay him.

And for all the things he hated, Belle could tell, just from looking at paying attention, that Mr Gold loved creating things. It was a pity he had very few occasions or reasons to get hands-on himself. Belle had on a number of occasions walked into Mr Gold's office and seen him fiddle with his antique clocks and vintage automatons, and all the curios he kept cluttering his personal space, all his attention entirely fixated on the lovely items. Belle thought they were amazing things, but she felt as if though they had a sad sense of being slightly out of this world, out of reach, much like their owner.

Belle had thought she'd try find a job in her own field while she worked as an assistant as her day job, but two years into a seven-days-a-week life with Mr Gold, Belle hadn't gotten any closer to seeking those writing opportunities in journalism or advertising or publishing. She hadn't even written short stories, not as much as a haiku, while Mr Gold had occupied most of her time.
After the first year, Belle had realized she liked being a personal assistant. That had sent her into a short period of self-reflection and doubts about her career – was she really doing what she wanted with her life? If she stayed too long here, how difficult would it be to change the course of her career back to writing?

After the second year, Belle had come to re-evaluate her situation: She had worked with the vice president of the company for a two-month period while Mr Gold had been in Britain because of his son's wedding, and working solely with Regina White had been the most excruciating experience Belle had ever had in her life.

When at the end of summer Mr Gold had returned from the old homeland, Belle had been happy. Far too happy. She had been at the office on a rainy Saturday afternoon, alone as far as she knew. She'd had earphones on, listening to music as she typed a document proposal out of a draft she'd sketched while listening to Regina discussing a project with a client. She'd known Mr Gold would be back Monday, and would most likely have a hundred things for her to do, and so Belle had decided to clear her desk as clean as possibly by then.

Suddenly she'd felt a curious tingle in the back of her head, as if she was being watched. She'd spun around in her chair and seen Mr Gold standing in the doorway, looking thoughtful. Very nice too, Belle thought, he must have bought new clothes in Britain, because she'd never seen the suit and the purple shirt he was wearing. They looked good on him, Belle had thought. She'd felt relieved seeing him.

Out of the blue, lightning and thunder struck the city just outside the building. Belle, startled, had pounced, and her tangled earphone cord had toppled over the paper coffee cup on the desk. Belle had never in her life, by accident or intention, poured liquids over a keyboard, and she was mortified when the coffee spilled all over the keys, and electric sparks danced somewhere underneath them.

“Oh fuck, oh! I'm so sorry! I've never- I'm so sorry Mr Gold! I didn't mean to swear-” Belle pulled the earphones off her head.

“It's alright, it's just a keyboard,” Mr Gold replied. Belle felt her spine tingling, because she was certain that her accident would have normally warranted angry cursing and shouting. Mr Gold hated people who were slow, stupid or clumsy. Mr Gold hated people.

“I'll run to IT and get a new keyboard,” Belle said, her voice shaking as she waited for the inevitable comedown.

Mr Gold looked uncomfortable. “I startled you. Maybe I should go get the keyboard for you.” Lightning flashed outside.

Belle smiled and shook her head. “No, it was just the thunder.”

The thunder rolled.

“Go get your keyboard then. Don't work too hard, you'll need to be prepared for Monday.”

With that, Mr Gold and his cane had walked out of Belle's little office room, leaving her standing there flustered, with a ruined keyboard.

Belle lived in a ridiculously small studio apartment that was split halfway across with Ikea shelves to form two relatively private spaces. On one side was Belle's narrow bed, and on the other side was Ruby Lucas's bed. They had a deal that if one or the other should bring in a special bed-guest, the
other would be informed suitable amount of hours earlier. Belle was in the know that Ruby had had many special guests during the past years they had been living together, while Belle had never had to call Ruby and book their shared living space for the purpose of expected sexual exploits.

The apartment was so small and the lack of privacy such that Belle couldn't even touch herself in the dark of the night if she knew Ruby was on the other side of the Ikea shelves, asleep or not. As pathetic as it was, Belle had taken to a weekly wank in the ladies' bathroom at work, very late in the evening on Fridays, when she was the only woman present at the workplace and there was no chance of someone walking into the bathroom in the middle and disrupting her.

Since the incident with the coffee cup, Belle had started to have dreams of Mr Gold. They spilled onto her daydreams at the office. Sometimes there were more occasions than just late Friday evening for a little fingering. Sometimes Mr Gold arrived at work looking particularly attractive. Sometimes Belle caught the scent of his hair when they were leaning over some paper together. During the two months after Mr Gold's return from Britain, Belle's skittish and well-organized urges escalated to almost pavlovian desires. By the time of her birthday in autumn, Belle was in the ladies' bathroom stall every evening, seven days a week, her skirt hiked up and her hand between her legs, leaning on the wall and imagining how utterly wonderful it would be to have Mr Gold pounding into her, or his clever deft fingers inside her, or his lashing tongue making circles around her clit.

These sweet interludes came to a tragic ending the day after Belle's birthday. Ruby had taken Belle out for a drink or two, which has escalated to ten. They had returned to the apartment at three in the morning. Never mind that Belle was expected to be at work in the morning. The moment she fell asleep wearing make-up and the skankiest dress she owned, Belle's fantasies of Mr Gold had surfaced. In her dreams he'd not just performed her sexual services, but made love to her, slow and sensual and beautiful. Her trashing orgasm had woken her up, and she had reached for her phone in a state of bliss mixed with alcohol, written something, sent the text, and then fallen back into her pillow into what she following day remembered only as a pitch black coma.

Belle woke up next morning an hour after her phone alarm had first tried to shake her awake. The first thing she remembered was the text she'd sent. Her hand flew to her phone. There was a reply. Her hands shaking, Belle opened it. It was from her boss, Mr Gold.

*Your message was inappropriate, but I recall you said it was your birthday yesterday, and you've sent it at 4:30. Maybe these are alleviating circumstances. It's better we don't bring up this subject, especially at the work place. Bring me a latte on your way over.*

Well, it was better than being fired, Belle thought. Then a headache set in.
An Assistant's Accident

Chapter Summary

Sharp knives are sharp.

On week days, Belle arrived at the office at 6:45 every morning to be present fifteen minutes before Mr Gold arrived. She came in one morning in the summer, wearing a loose-fitting beige linen dress that was the most comfortable piece she owned, for the temperatures were climbing, and to make it worse, the air had stood still in the city for the past few days. She had no air conditioning at home, and was relieved to come to work, knowing that soon she'd have to put on a cardigan for how cool it would get. When she'd read her email in the car that morning, the first message had come from LinkedIn, celebrating her three years working for Mr Gold.

The night before, she hadn't slept much in her sticky hot sheets. She had already given up trying to get to bed early, because it only got cool enough in the apartment at two in the morning to get any sleep, so she had stayed up late writing. She had been writing a lot again, since the beginning of the year, when she had made a New Year's resolution to pursue her dreams and forget about Mr Gold and assisting him. She needed a way out, and the only way she could think of escaping her current predicament was that she write again.

Ruby hadn't been around much recently in their flat, so Belle had had it all to herself for long periods of undisturbed writing. Ruby was dating a doctor she'd met at work, tending a hotel lobby bar. Belle missed seeing her, since Ruby was the only person she knew in town outside her workplace. The hours she kept made socializing a little difficult, and Belle wasn't perhaps the best person at socializing in the first place. She felt very out of place at clubs. If she went to a bar she'd do so with a book in hand and that was kind of counteractive to the pursuit of meeting people.

And the amount of people Belle met on a regular day of work was already plenty, rushing either through the office or across town. Belle was always a ray of sunshine, whether it was with her co-workers, with clients or with subcontractors. She was like a padding of humanity between her boss and the world. In all honesty, she wasn't sure if she had the energy to go out and deal with more people in her spare time.

Belle was contemplating her very dead social life – and especially the long-since buried sexual aspect of it – when she clicked on an arrow key to wake up her computer as she passed through her walk-through office that separated Mr Gold from the rest of the company. She picked up the take-away latte she'd just bought down-stairs, extra hot, and delivered it to Mr Gold's desk. It would be just about the right temperature in about the next – Belle glanced at the wall clock – 12 minutes.

She'd grabbed Mr Gold's mail at the front desk on her way in, UPS deliveries the sort, and spent four minutes with a letter opener, slashing open the envelopes and packages as she did every morning. The letter opener was a 300-year-old Malaysian kris knife with a wavy blade, and dark etched ornaments on each side of the blade and all around the hilt. Belle thought the item was rather morbid, but when someone had borrowed and lost her less-impressive office supply knife a year earlier, Mr Gold had handed this knife to her and told her to keep it (and not let an intern pinch it.)

Through the glass wall she saw Regina's personal assistant come in, a very good looking young man, Graham. Belle had always sensed he resented his work, under the superficial cover he put up for
Regina, but Graham was likely in the same position Belle was: get what work what you can. He probably could have gotten work as an underwear model though, for how he looked. But there were thousands of equally good looking men in the city, not to mention the world.

When Graham noticed Belle, he smiled and lifted a hand in greeting. Belle replied with a wave of her daggered hand, and made the effort to smile back despite how fuzzy and groggy and tired she felt. When she returned to her task, Belle noticed she should have paid more attention to what she'd been doing. The razor-sharp kris blade had left a long slashing cut across her hand, and now blood was gushing all over a manilla envelope containing a Condé Nast contract.

Belle let the envelope drop on her desk and ran into the bathroom, the trickling blood leaving a trail behind her. A rivulet of blood ran down her arm and towards her elbow, where it clung to the sleeve of her summer dress. She was still so tired she didn't even have the energy to get upset, and when she swore, it was more out of a need to lull. She was practically singing “fuck fuck oh fuck” as she was wrapping paper towels around her hand in front of the bathroom mirror. She glanced up and saw she looked almost deathly pale, with huge dark shadows underneath her eyes.

Stitches. She would need stitches.

The company at least provided her with great health insurance. So many people there worked under somewhat peculiar circumstances, apart from the straight-up office workers. Although she hadn't ever needed to go to a hospital in all her three years there, Belle realized, and wondered how her insurance would cover this. She didn't have the time to sit in a waiting room all day.

The paper towels around her hand had already turned red. She threw them into the waste basket and took fresh ones. Belle left the bathroom, feeling somewhat dizzy in the head, and sauntered far slower back to her desk, hoping again against all hope that she wouldn't run into Mr Gold. It would have been much nicer to walk over to Graham and tell him to pass on the news that Belle had dropped out to get her hand stitched. Even if Belle had done her best in the past nine months to not think so much of Mr Gold, it still hurt her when she knew he thought poorly of her, and that was another ache she didn't want to experience on top of her current condition. Belle walked past a clock that said it was 7:01. Too late, Mr Gold would be in, sipping his coffee and wondering why his mail was still sitting on Belle's desk. Belle picked up speed and hurried towards her doom, so at least it might be over soon.

When Belle arrived, Mr Gold was standing in front of Belle's desk, looking at the blood-stained envelope and the tell-tale marks all over the floors. He had the kris blade in his hand and seemed thoughtful.

“I was wondering if you'd killed yourself,” Mr Gold said dryly, “but that wouldn't have accounted for the disappearance of your body.”

“Sorry about this,” Belle murmured. She couldn't bear to look at him in the face, so she kept her eyes on her handbag, which she was headed for anyhow, to find her cellphone and call a taxi.

“My car's still downstairs. If you need stitches, that is,” Mr Gold said.

Belle didn't want to impose on him. She didn't want any favour from him in fact. She shook her head, although she wasn't sure if she hadn't just made her entire body shiver. “No thank you, you might need your car, I'll just call a taxi, it's fine.” She could feel herself swaying on her high heels, as her hand went around and around the bottom of her bag, looking for the damned phone underneath her iPad, a paperback, some papers. Then she felt as though the room itself was moving, when she unexpectedly saw the ceiling of the office, and heard her bag hit the floor.
“Miss French!” Belle heard Mr Gold's voice, and felt an arm grab her awkwardly by the waist. Then, very slowly, she slumped down, to the sound of Mr Gold's cane clattering somewhere on the cold hard floor. Belle realized very well now that she'd fainted, almost passed out, but against all expectations her head hadn't hit the floor. When she was aware enough of her surroundings to realize she was half-lying on top of Mr Gold, she would have blushed if it hadn't required more blood near her brain. Mr Gold was shouting for Graham, while feeling curiously light-headed, Belle wished Graham wouldn't hear him at all, so Mr Gold would cradle her head in his lap for a little while longer.

“How terribly clumsy of me, Mr Gold,” Belle managed to stutter.

“Miss French, you have left a trail of blood all over this floor,” he replied, and she could hear his concern, and Belle thought it was the most wonderful thing.

“Miss French, why are you smiling?” Mr Gold asked her.

“I'm just so glad... that I didn't hit my head on the floor,” Belle said, feeling a little out of breath.

“I'm glad of that too. Your head is invaluable to me,” she heard Mr Gold reply. Belle's closed her eyes, because this was far too close to a good dream. “Don't close your eyes Miss French, try stay awake,” Mr Gold said. Worry, worry worry. “Graham!”

“Yes Mr –” Graham's voice came from the direction of the doorway, “Oh, what's happened to Belle!”

Belle felt a hand smooth her hair, and another take her injured left palm, lift it higher, squeezing the paper towels. “I'll be alright, I just need a nap,” Belle said, grinning, hoping deliriously that she might have the nap in Mr Gold's arms.

“Graham, get new towels for Miss French's hand, call my driver Mr Dove and get him up here. He'll carry Miss French to my car and drive her to the hospital,” Mr Gold sounded agitated. Belle heard Graham's footsteps, leaving.

“Miss French, you look very pale. Are you injured anywhere else, besides your hand?” Mr Gold asked her.

“No, no... I'm just tired because I haven't slept,” Belle yawned, “very well this week. No AC.” Her head slumped, and Mr Gold's hand and arm made her a comfortable pillow. And he smelled so nice too.

“Keep talking. Tell me something.”

“About what?” Belle mumbled.

“Anything, tell me about your life,” he said, still sounding agitated.

“I don't have a life. I just come to work and then I go home,” Belle muttered, “if I have a life it's all here with you,” she said with a sigh.

“I'm sure that's not true,” Mr Gold said. He was quiet for a moment. “Or, perhaps with the hours I've kept you...”

Belle wanted to say something about the ways she wanted him to take her, but the stinging memory of the text message on the morning after her birthday worked like an electric shock jolting her, and she stilled inside and outside. She didn't say anything. She just lay there, listening to Mr Gold
breathing, feeling his hand squeeze hers. He called her by her name, Miss French, then Belle, but she didn't want to answer him.

Then Graham returned with paper towels. Pain started to radiate from the palm when the men removed the blood-soaked rags from Belle's hand this time. Additional footsteps approached, and within seconds Belle was being carried off by Mr Dove.

"Don't worry Belle, I'll get you to an emergency room," Dove told her reassuringly when they stepped in an elevator.

"Thanks, Dove. You're a real swell guy," Belle said, and cracked her eyes open a little. "I'm sorry but I think I feel like crying now."

"You go ahead and cry then," the big man told her.

"Thanks," Belle said. She felt like there was a door inside her that opened then, and the tears burst out. She closed her eyes again and cried in silence all the way to the bottom parking floor, and across the walk to the car.
The stitches across Belle's hand had dissolved on their own many weeks before Mr Gold beckoned her to his office and asked her to close the door behind her. Belle, in her comfortable linen dress and a cotton cardigan that kept her warm in the blissfully cool office in late summer, entered with her iPad in hand, ready to take notes.

Mr Gold was leaning over sketches of a layout for some project or other they'd taken up. He was always very meticulous about overseeing plans for all their projects. He had more eye to detail than anyone else in Belle's acquaintance. She knew it was a part of his relentless perfectionism, which was perhaps the reason why his business had the reputation of being the best of the best. It was why he hated slow, lazy and tardy people, and why everyone who worked for him was more or less afraid of him. Apart from Belle.

"We're going to London for two weeks next month. I'm selling my shares of the company there," Gold said, without looking up. "Thirteen to twenty-seventh. You'll fly with me there, and you'll fly back home alone. Book the hotel and flights," Belle felt bewildered as she typed down the notes, "and you'll be assigned as associate producer when you'll get back. Regina will probably take over until the dust settles, and the new owner of my shares will bring in their man, woman. Or not. You'll find out, I'm sure." Mr Gold looked up at Belle then and smiled, which was very uncharacteristic of him. "I hope you can keep this a secret.” His eyes practically glinted!

"Mmhm. Why is it a secret?” Belle asked.

He shrugged. “Because. If anyone asks where we're going, tell them we're attending... come up with some excuse. Look for some film or fashion event in London going on at the time, I'm sure you'll manage.”

Belle nodded and looked down at her notes, feeling grave and very... not exactly unhappy. Disappointed, perhaps. Or lost? She already knew that she had no desire at all to remain at Regina's mercies after Mr Gold had left.

“Alright, sir. Will you be... staying in London?” Belle asked, looking up again.

Mr Gold's attention had already been drawn back to the work at hand. “Most likely.”

Belle was already leaving the room when he looked up at called her name. “After you're done with the bookings, you could take the rest of the day off. Let's say I sent you on an errand to your flat.”

Belle nodded. “If you say so, but why sir?”

Mr Gold glanced up at her only briefly. “You're looking a little pale. I wouldn't want to have a repeat performance of your fainting spell,” he said, his voice quieter.

Belle laughed. “Thank you, sir. Call me if you need anything, I can still work from home.”
Mr Gold shook his head. “You just go and enjoy yourself. You've probably deserved it.”

Even though at first Belle was grinning from the sheer joy of getting an afternoon off, and compliments from her boss, by the time she got home she was feeling nervous and miserable. She knew she wanted out of her job. She couldn't imagine herself working with Regina, who was the most narcissistic and unreasonable person Belle could think of. She'd wanted out of the job for the past three years anyway, but now it seemed as though her only excuse for staying was moving across the Atlantic, and that brought with itself a whole different kind of pain. At least, Belle consoled herself, at least when Mr Gold was so far away, she might get a grip and get over her stupid infatuation of him.

As soon as Belle came home, she launched herself at her laptop and started going through open positions in every area she'd had to reject three years prior. Glad that she'd spent the past half year refreshing her writing talent, she was just turning some samples of her work into PDFs when Ruby appeared from her side of the apartment. To Belle's understanding, she usually slept until sometime past noon, then spent the afternoon doing who knows what, before going off to work.


“I got the half-day off,” Belle explained, looking up from the screen in her lap. “My boss sent me home, apparently I didn't look well.” She wanted to tell Ruby immediately about the situation at work, but then Belle remembered that she'd promised Mr Gold to keep a secret. “So I'm working from home,” Belle said.

“Great. That's great. Can I sit down here?” Ruby said, and yawned. Belle recalled she hadn't heard Ruby come home last night. Perhaps she hadn't been home yet by the time Belle had left for work? But these little things probably were the reason why they were so good at sharing the apartment.

“Of course, make yourself comfortable,” Belle said, pointing to the space on the bed next to her, even as she closed her job search windows on the browser, and opened her work email instead. There, at the top, were the confirmation of business class flights to London, and for two hotel rooms in a five-star in London.

“I'm so glad to see you. I thought I'd have to wait until Saturday to tell you,” Ruby said, and then she hesitated. Belle put her hand on the cover of her laptop and closed it slowly.

“Tell me what?”

Ruby looked aside for a bit, and then back at Belle again. Then she grinned. “Victor and I are moving in together in October,” Ruby said.

Belle felt broken in two, but she decided to go with the better half of it. “I'm so glad, oh Ruby! How long have you guys been going out? Six months? Seven?”

“It's actually nine, if we count all the sex before we actually started dating,” Ruby said with a wolfish grin.

Belle laughed. She had no idea how that worked, what Ruby had described, but Belle laughed, just to be happy for Ruby. She had someone, and Ruby deserved to be happy with someone.

“Look, I know, the apartment... you'll need to find someone to share with I guess. I'll help you, I'll try to find someone you don't have to worry about, ok?” Ruby put her hand over Belle's.

“Ok, I'll go take a shower, but I'll be right back. You can tell me about your crrraaazy work and if you've kidnapped any koala bears recently or put cardboard castles on fire this week.” Ruby patted Belle's hand and pulled herself up. She was so tell, it always seemed to Bell that there was a lot of Ruby to be pulled up.

When Ruby walked off and vanished behind the corner, and when the door to the bathroom clicked close, Belle felt like she had been holding her breath through the entire conversation, and now she could breathe again. Her instincts were telling her to panic – come October, she might homeless, jobless, or living with a stranger, or maybe working under Regina.

The last time Belle had been on an international flight had been when she'd flown from Australia to the States. She'd been nine. Her father Moe had had to come stay for an indefinite period of time with his sister for her terminal illness, which had then taken her eventually, after a long period of suffering. Moe had inherited her flower shop, the management of which he'd already taken up while Belle's aunt was alive.

But Moe was in Maine, and now Belle was in London. She thought of her father as she climbed into a taxi at Heathrow right after Mr Gold. “Enjoy yourself,” Moe had told her before she'd taken off to the airport. Belle gave the driver the name and address of the hotel, and tried to relax herself in the back seat next to Mr Gold, who was preoccupied with his phone. He was texting someone. Belle supposed it was his son, he lived in London.

Belle looked out the window at the darkening, overcast sky over the evening London in September. She'd briefly seen the city from the window of the airplane – Mr Gold had been amused when Belle had plastered her face at the window during landing – but it was far less impressive from the point of view of slow traffic and the fairly mundane looking grey houses they drove past slowly. Night was setting in, and it was dark by the time the taxi reached the hotel. Belle overlooked the luggages brought in and then went to deal with the reception while Mr Gold waited. His phone rang, and he started talking – his American accent vanished and was replaced by the Scottish one Belle had heard only once before, when he'd been on the phone with his son once the year before, at the eve of the wedding. The sound of it made her ears and cheeks red. Very attractive, she thought, and stammered her name and reservation details.

Once she'd secured the details of their stay and the keys to their rooms, Belle went to Mr Gold to tell him the number of his room and to tell him she was going up. He acknowledged her with a nod while still talking on the phone while walking a small circle in the corner of the lobby. While he was busy in his own world, Belle saw all the luggage brought up. She'd booked herself the smallest room she could near Mr Gold's suite, where she unceremoniously dumped her things, before continuing on to the suite. After tipping the service, Belle did a cursory tour of the rooms, more out of curiosity than anything else. This was probably the closest thing to luxury she'd ever been to, and most likely the last time too. Belle wandered around the rooms, sighing at both the loveliness of the place, as well as at her own poor prospects.

When Belle returned from inspecting the bedroom, she encountered Mr Gold who had found his way up despite his on-going phone call. He was standing by the window and looking down at the on-going traffic below. Belle stood awkwardly in the room, waiting for the call to end, while she tried to think of dull and unsexy things, definitely not anything close to the sudden idea of herself lying on her back in the bed in the room she'd just stepped out of, writhing and moaning while Mr Gold whispered her things in that voice of his, and as soon as that idea had formed in Belle's head, she decided to walk out of the suite. It was late, although it was really just afternoon to her internal clock, but perhaps saying it was late might get her off from spending another minute in Gold's
company now.

“Good night sir,” Belle wished him, gave him a big toothy smile to reveal her own discomfort, and sashayed out of the room as quickly as she could. In the corridor, she soon realized she hadn't given him her own room number, but she thought it wouldn't matter.

The schedule of their outing in London was a bit of a mystery to her. To start with, she had no idea why they were staying two weeks. She'd had assumed the signing of the contract would hardly take less than a few minutes, if all the details had already been agreed on. She didn't even have any clue as to when the signing would take place, since Gold hadn't told her anything.

But she'd be up and awake at 6:30, and present in Mr Gold's suite at 7:00, like any normal day.

Belle sighed again as she entered her own modest single room. There was a bed, a bathroom with a tub, and that was all she needed. She kicked her shoes off and went to the bathroom to turn on the taps for the tub. She soon realized she did not care much for British plumbing, as she sat at the edge of the tub and waited for the water to flow, estimating the temperature she was getting from the dual taps.

She was just about to slip out of her dress when her phone rang. It was her boss.

“Yes?” Belle asked, a little bewildered, expecting to hear Scottish brogue again.

But there he went speaking American again. “Would you please get us a table for dinner,” she heard Mr Gold, “and tell me which room you were in?”

“435, and I can get you a table in the hotel restaurant of course, sir,” Belle promised.

“You're not eating?” He asked, sounding dubious.

“No I think I'd rather call it an early night, sir,” Belle replied, “I'm a little tired from the journey over,” she said, lying through her teeth. She didn't want to have a late-night dinner in a fancy hotel with Mr Gold, not right now anyhow. She was afraid that even one glass of wine might send her into revealing him something about her opinions of him, and then he'd take that revelation and crush it. Anyhow, he was going to be out of her life in two more weeks.

“Nevermind dinner then. Get sleep. See you tomorrow.” He cut the call.

Belle sighed again. She tossed the phone on her bed and reached her hand around to her back to unzip the dress, fleetingly thinking it was the kind of dress better suited to be undone by lovers. But she had none, she thought, as she pulled it over her head and tossed it on the bed after the phone. Next time she'd buy a a dress, it would come with a side-zipper, she thought.
It rained when Belle woke up at 6:15. Rain in London in autumn, what a surprise. She'd packed for the weather appropriately though, and the hotel was warm. They weren't going to have the continental breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Belle had made the room service delivered both their breakfasts to Mr Gold's room at seven, and then would discuss their two weeks' agenda over coffee and tea and bread rolls and other... things.

At 6:55 Belle slipped in Mr Gold's suite with the spare keycard the hotel had provided her with. She went about the anteroom and made a cursory job of tidying up little things, like fluffing the pillows on the sofa and closing the newspaper Mr Gold had left wide open, spread on the coffee table. There was no sign of Mr Gold yet. A gentle knock on the door announced the room service at 7:01 and Belle frowned at first, thinking they were late, and then she shook her head. 7:01 was timely enough, and she wouldn't punish the service or their tips for it.

As soon as the table was laid and the people from the room service tipped, Mr Gold made his appearance. “Do you have your laptop with you?” He asked first thing.

Flustered, Belle realized she ought to have brought it with her. She'd only had her iPad with its organizer. No, she'd been too worried about the breakfast service being there in time and bringing the right breakfast in. Belle made her excuses and was already almost out of the door.

“What's wrong with that?” Mr Gold asked her.

“That's my iPad, my laptop is in my room.”

“But can you book a hotel with that?” Mr Gold asked. He was in a constant love-hate relationship with his smartphone and kept away from tablets.

Belle blinked. “I could, but I think I'd prefer my laptop for that. You never know how bad the user interface is for a touchscreen device,” she replied, and left. As she hurried through the corridors she was agitated. Had she booked the wrong hotel in London? What was wrong with this one, apart from the exorbitant price of their rooms per night?

Mr Gold was reading the morning newspaper when she returned, hidden behind the paper. Belle had to be a bit creative with the table space to make room for her laptop at the edge. Remembering the coffee and keyboard accident, she made sure that there were no liquids near, in case of accidents.

“Tell me, if you could do anything in Southern England, right now, what would you do?” Mr Gold asked her, lowering down his newspaper. Belle saw he was drinking tea instead of coffee, and she wondered at that.

“You're drinking tea,” she replied, confused.

He glanced down at his tea. It had come from a pot, properly stewed and everything. Belle didn't know why she was now actually very confused about this, since she had just last night passed on her
employer's particular requests about this. Mr Gold set down the tea cup with a clink and closed the newspaper, and folded it in half.

“I thought I'd try drink less coffee. Postpone my inevitable cardiac arrest,” Mr Gold said acidly, but Belle laughed, recognizing it for his sour brand of humour. She opened the lid of her laptop.

“Sir, what's this outing about? Are we taking the buyers on a tour of the countryside?” Belle started googling up attractions in South of England, already wondering how she'd narrow down the search for the fancier sights and sounds.

“It's for you,” Mr Gold said.

“Sir?” Belle stopped typing and looked over the edge of her screen.

“In two weeks, you'll be working for Regina. In three years you've had two holidays, two weeks in total around Christmas, which I understand you've spent all in Maine. I thought you'd need a break before you go back to work.” He gave her a wolfish smile. “And since I won't be signing the paper before next week, I can sanction any kind of expense report before you fly back.”

Belle felt her jaw drop. She couldn't make any sound at first.

“You could say thank you now,” Mr Gold said.

“Thank you,” Belle managed. “Sir,” she added as an afterthought.

Two weeks of company paid vacation. Granted, it was in September in the ever rainy Britain. Belle glanced at the windows of the suite, where raindrops clung to the glass, obscuring the view so that she could only make out hues of gray beyond.

“Can I ask you, sir, what is this for?” Belle knew she should have felt elated. Instead she felt a twinge of worry.

Mr Gold held his tongue for a moment. “Just take it as thanks. You were wonderful to work with.”

Of their three years together, Belle could now remember only the times when she'd poured a cup of coffee over a keyboard, when she'd sent a drunk sex message to him at four thirty in the morning, and the morning when she'd slashed her hand with a letter opener.

But there were a lot of good moments too. She had always tried not to think of the good moments too much, because they made her feel warm and soft and tender about Mr Gold, and she couldn't afford that.

“You too, sir,” Belle replied, at length. “Are you going to retire entirely now?”

Mr Gold shrugged. “I don't know. I just felt it was time to get rid of the business. Can't compete against CGI these days. Not that I don't doubt for a second that Regina's going to extend there the moment she hears I'm gone. And as an added bonus I'll get rid of Cora.” Cora, Regina's mother, was one of the stockholders of the company – she had a significant share due to funding the business in its infancy.

Belle smiled. “You always liked to have your hands on real things. I like that about you.” Hearing herself, Belle looked down at the screen and typed nonsense in the google search bar fklaskjdlla. “So, what are you going to do in London?” Belle asked. “Do you need me to arrange you anything?”

“No. I imagine I'll be with my son and his wife. Apparently I'm to be a grandfather soon,” he said
Belle had never thought of going to Britain for a holiday, so she had no idea what she was looking for. She wasn't sure if she wanted to stay in London, for despite how she lived and worked in the city back home, she was really more of a countryside person. She liked trees and nature. But there wasn't much in the way of trees in Britain, right? They'd chopped most of that away.

But there were old castles and houses with gardens, Belle thought. She started googling up the attractions and made a list of viable scenery. She soon realized she should go to Oxford. Blenheim Palace wasn't far from there either. She had no idea if she wanted to rent a car and try driving on the wrong side of the road. Two weeks, make the best of it, she thought.

“Coffee's getting cold,” Mr Gold reminded her. Belle wanted to snark at him that he'd been the one to tell her to bring her laptop to the breakfast table, but he was still his boss for two weeks, even if he was sending her off to an adventure of her own, so she thought better of it. She closed the lid of the laptop and started breakfast, planning in her mind how she would go about this.

Once the breakfast was annihilated, Belle returned to her plans.

“What did you decide then?” Mr Gold asked her, once he was finished with his paper.

“I thought I'd stay in this little bed and breakfast place in Oxford and then drive around from there,” Belle started.

Mr Gold seemed extremely disapproving. He got up from his seat, circled the table and looked over Belle's shoulder at the cute little cottage she'd thought of staying at. Out of habit, Belle was in the mind of trying to keep every expense at minimum, lest Mr Gold give her sharp remarks when he read the expenses report.

“Good grief, don't you listen to a word I say,” he muttered, and leaned his cane against the table, then leaned both his arms over Belle's shoulders – she almost let out a squeak – and swatted her hands away from her keyboard.

“Think a little bigger, dear,” Mr Gold said. Belle closed her eyes for a second and when she reopened them, he'd found her a rather palatial five-star manor house hotel from near Oxford. It looked like the kind of place Downton Abbey could have opted for locations.

“Oh Mr Gold, I couldn't,” Belle said, “or... could I?”

Mr Gold removed himself from her presence, and she let a tiny little sigh.

“You'll come up with some beautiful story on the expense report and I'll sign it,” Mr Gold said as he returned to his seat, “after all, you do have good imagination,” he said, amused.

“I'll just see if they have any room then,” Belle said, subdued. She clicked through the photographs of the rooms, and they were lovely indeed. She picked up her phone and made the call.

The manor couldn't squeeze her in immediately, so Belle had stayed in London another extra day,
mostly in solitude, shopping clothes. Mr Gold was who knew where, probably with his son in the meantime. He'd even given her a bonus as another departing gift, and even if the clothes stores in London were far more expensive than the ones Belle was used to shopping in, there was something very elegant and classy about the Laura Ashley dresses she'd found. And she didn't want to look like an American personal assistant during her little trip to the countryside, so she went and wasted a portion of her bonus straight away.

Then it was another morning and time for her to get to leave the hotel and go to the train station. The plan was she stay in Oxford until the time of her return flight to New York, for which she'd return to Heathrow straight away.

Belle had packed her luggage again, and was worried how she'd handle all of it alone when she'd arrive by train to Oxford in late afternoon. Before she went down to reception to turn in her keys, she went to say goodbye to Mr Gold, whom she'd never see again, happily and unhappily enough. She knocked before letting herself in with her own key.

He was already on his way to the door when she stepped in.

“"I just came to say thank you, and good bye,” Belle said, and smiled. “Thank you for the very exciting three years. I don't think I'll ever forget how you made me steal a koala bear,” she grinned.

“Borrowed temporarily without informing the owner,” Mr Gold corrected her, and smiled back at her. Then his eyes swept up and down her. “You look very nice," he said.


“Is your taxi already downstairs?” Mr Gold asked her.

“No, I'll call one after I've checked out,” Belle replied. “And I suppose you'll be alright without me.” Belle swallowed. “You'll have the hotel staff waiting on you.”

Mr Gold glanced down for a moment.

“Actually, there was something I wanted to tell you, before you go. If you've a moment?” Mr Gold said, and Belle nodded.

“I... I was always a little...” Mr Gold paused. “Remember that text you sent me?”

Belle nodded. She stared down at the floor, because there was no way she could ever forget that either.

“It wasn't missent to a wrong number...?” Mr Gold asked, and Belle gnawed at her lower lip as she looked up and shook her head.

“Well, by the description you provided, I thought not,” Mr Gold said.

Belle took a deep breath. “Why are you telling me this, sir?”

Mr Gold didn't say anything. He seemed every bit as uncomfortable as Belle, in fact. “I... I like you, miss French. And I always thought it was a pity that you worked for me.”

Belle frowned. “Why? I'm sorry, I don't understand,” she said, feeling as if her breath was leaving her body.
“I mean, I would have loved to... how did you put it... fuck you like an animal over my desk some night after everyone else had gone home?”

Belle laughed, but it sounded a little crazy. Just like this situation was.

“I didn't want your career to suffer, miss French,” he said. “It's not good for a young lady, if anyone thought you were sleeping with your employer.”

Belle bit her lips for a while and looked at anywhere and everywhere except him. “Thanks,” she muttered eventually.

“And you are really the most brightest, smartest woman I know of, and I want you to go as far as you can and do everything you want to do in life,” Mr Gold said, and Belle had to lean back against the door now and close her eyes and grit her teeth together to stop the tears from coming.

“Thanks,” she managed, along with a deep breath.

“I'm sorry if this is troubling for you,” he said with a whisper. “I just wanted you to know, before you leave.”

Belle nodded. She took another deep breath. “Well, I guess this is it, then?” She smiled, even if her heart hurt, and opened her eyes. “I hope you all the best here in London. I shouldn't expect I'll stay too long with Regina, actually, I'm losing my apartment in three weeks. I've applied jobs pretty much everywhere in fact. I'm trying to get a writing position somewhere along the west coast.” She babbled all she could about something out of this topic. “It looks like it's a great time for... changing pretty much everything about my life.”

He didn't say anything. Belle couldn't imagine them hugging, or shaking hands. She tried to look at him, really look at him, because she wouldn't see him again, but she didn't know if she really wanted to remember this moment. It would leave her hanging on to the memory of him, and she couldn't get on in life with that.

“Good bye, Mr Gold,” Belle said, and reached for the door handle.

“Good bye, Miss French,” he replied, and she slipped out of the room.
An Assistant's Holiday

Chapter Summary

Letting loose in an Oxford library

The weather in Oxford was temperamental, altering between heavy pouring rain and bright sunshine, back and forth, within the same day. It had taken less than two hours from London Victoria to Oxford, and there Belle had felt no remorse taking a taxi to the hotel, instead of leasing a car for the week and half she was staying there. She sat in the back of the car in silence, her arms locked protectively around her, as she watched the weather unravel from rain back to sun again.

Oxford seemed lovely enough. Old houses, red and gold leaves in the trees. Belle wasn't paying too rapt attention to her surroundings, lovely as they were. She had her own internal screams to keep in check while the car drive seemed to last forever and over. Of course, they were driving far away from the centre, the hotel was fairly far off. Of course the drive would take forever, and it'd be who knew how long before she'd be in a safe, locked room where she could vent her rage and frustration in peace.

She hated, hated hated that she'd let Mr Gold choose her hotel for her. It was impractical and too far away from the sights, and she'd be completely at the mercy of expensive taxi rides – which Mr Gold paid anyway, in some way, although it was actually the company under Regina's regime on October that paid her expenses but that was technical details. It was simply the principle of being wasteful and spending more than was necessary that irked her.

Half an hour later, the weather was turning miserable again. A dark cloud rolled over the village the taxi drove to, a place that had one of those very English-English sort of names, Weston-on-the-Green. It would have amused Belle more if she hadn't been quite so angry at the time. The taxi turned from the main street down a tree-lined alley at the end of which was the manor house, which rather more like a castle than a manor, built of stone by the looks of it.

When the taxi stopped at the front door, a rather archaic dressed valet stepped out of the house, holding a black umbrella, and stood outside the car in the pouring rain while Belle paid the driver. As she looked up out of the car, ready to step out, she was suddenly feeling extremely under-dressed for this hotel. She had maybe one nice dress, the one she was wearing, which she'd bought in London. She should have gone for the bed and breakfast she thought with a sigh, as she climbed out of the taxi and let the valet escort her inside, while the driver and another man sorted her luggage and brought it in after her.

There was a complimentary glass of sherry in her room. Belle drank it, and knew two things: that she had a great dislike for sherry; and that she needed more alcohol in her body by the end of the day.

Despite the morning having started with a thundering headache, Belle had torn herself out of bed by sheer force of will and returned to Oxford for another day of rain and sunshine. She had the taxi leave her near the Bodleian Library. When she'd spent the previous night searching for museums and attractions, her heart had skipped a beat when she'd realized she was in the vicinity of some of the oldest libraries in the world.
And Belle loved libraries.

The tour guide Belle was stuck with took her through the hallowed halls of the Divinity College and the reading rooms that day, and Belle followed the woman around in rapt fascination, taking occasional photos with her phone, and mostly in disbelief that such a place existed. She felt like she was having a religious experience, like what other people might feel in a cathedral. It was strange, she realized, the last time she'd been in a library had been when she was in college. She hadn't had the time to go to them since she'd started working, and all the books she'd acquired since then she'd bought as electronic ones.

Although she'd never been to this grand library, not even a library in the States as grand as this was, Belle still felt a little like she'd come home, as she meandered behind the tour guide and let her eyes rest on the books. Oh so many books.

Her phone was in her hand, the sounds turned off. It started vibrating, and Belle looked down at the caller name. It was Mr Gold. Belle wrapped a scarf around the vibrating phone and put it in her bag. Her mood soured, Belle still followed the tour guide and listened to all she said, but the unearthly beauty of the library was ruined for her for the rest of the tour.

Outside, it was raining again. Belle walked around the streets with an umbrella in hand, completely puzzled by where she was going. All the streets looked exactly the same. All buildings on both sides of the streets roughly the same height, all of the same architecture with their pale ochre walls. The streets would have felt a little more hospitable perhaps, if it wasn't for how all the people were hidden under umbrellas and hurrying past her to get away from the rain as it was getting worse. Wind was picking up too.

She couldn't make eye-contact with anyone to ask for a place to eat, so she strode along, looking. By all accounts, pub food in Britain was a Thing to experience. And once she got herself seated and still somewhere, she would eventually gave dig her phone out of her bag and take the call she'd missed, but that was just one of life's inescapable unpleasantries she was far too familiar dealing with.

She felt the damn thing vibrate again, and fished it out of her bag. She might as well, she needed her scarf, for the wind was getting chilly.

"Yes?" Belle replied curtly. "Mr Gold you do realize you're ruining my holiday is this going to take long."

She heard a cough at the other end of the line.

"I'm standing in the rain, lost in Oxford, if there's anything that requires your company's immediate attention, can you please state it so I can get on with looking for a place to eat?"

"Belle, are you angry with me?" Mr Gold asked.

She felt a twinge of unreasonable rage at being called by her first name. She would have far preferred to have been Miss French, if anything.

"Bzz, rrr, oh dear sir, I think we're breaking up, zzz. Damn satellites." Belle cut the call short and dropped the phone in her bag again. When she looked up at her surroundings again, she thought she spied something that looked like a pub. Clinging to her umbrella, she headed forward. Excellent Food the sign promised, and she hoped the place was as good as their word.

The afternoon lunch at the King's Arms had been cheered up by seven Australian rugby playing
students who'd caught Belle's accent and had invited her to eat with them. They'd been very sad to hear Belle was only passing through town. They'd invited her to join their team too, which had been the first thing that day to make Belle laugh again. After a couple hours of chatter, the rain finally passed again, and Belle left the cheerful students behind.

Oxford was beautiful in autumn, rain or sun, and as she found her way from King's Arms to Queen Street, she could feel her spirits lift up again. She wished she'd been there with a lady friend though, preferably with Ruby, or at least someone from work she was an amicable acquaintance with – like Abigail who managed contracts and the legal work. Belle kept wanting to turn and talk to someone about every little thing she saw, but there was no one. But then again, she'd just been flirted at by a rugby club, so maybe things weren't so bad as she felt they were.

It started to set in gradually, that she was free to be and go as she pleased, and the only schedule she had was that she needed to be back in Heathrow Friday next week. It was Monday now, so there was still plenty of time to look around. With the extensive list of museums and castles and gardens she'd found a list of, it was unlikely she'd get bored, but the morning and day in the library had worn her sensibilities for old buildings somewhat. Then when she passed by a Marks and Spencer's it was as though an invisible hand took her by the arm and guided her in to look at dresses.

A no-nonsense, pragmatic voice in her head reminded her that it would be better if she didn't spend too much money of her own, she had college debts to settle, and she couldn't put clothing on the company expense report. That would have caused a scandal, with or without the manager's approval. Someone in accounting would see the credit card bill eventually. She had briefly considered lifting a couple hundred pounds in cash from an ATM with the card, that was likely to have caused less of a stir, but Belle felt equally morally challenged about that. It would have probably counted as fraud.

But maybe one or two dresses wouldn't hurt, Belle thought, as she meandered through the racks in the store. Maybe something suitable for a work interview. She'd filled a hundred applications in the past month, but of course there hadn't even been a “sorry but no” reply from any of them. But how was it, dress for the job you want, not for the job you have?

And what job was it that she wanted? She wondered gloomily as she picked up a dress from the rack. A black thing that wasn't too sexy. Probably good interview material, and she'd get away with dining at the manor hotel restaurant without being thrown out. The job you need is the job that pays off your tuition, she told herself. But what about the job you want? There was another black dress, this one with a flared hem and short sleeves. She rather liked flared hems. They were nice to twirl in, and Belle couldn't say no to any chance of twirling, or acting like she wasn't part of the big adulthood play.

She tried them both on in the fitting room, and was at odds which one she liked better. Not that she particularly liked either one in fact that much, she would have preferred some color, or patterns, but she was imagining expectations of further employers and – good grief! – of a restaurant's dress code!

Another tour of the floor produced her with, amongst other things, another dark dress, but this one at least had a pattern of flowers on it. The trouble with shopping that time of the year was that spring was definitely out of season, and so everything was in sombre tones of grey, black and brown. The most adventurous thing on display was purple, and Belle didn't care much for it.

As she was pulling on an electric blue shift dress, Belle heard her phone vibrate briefly. The thing was still muted, at the bottom of her bag. She tried to resist taking the phone out, but the fitting room as as good a place as any to sit down and check her messages.

She'd missed two calls, and there was an unread text message from Mr Gold. Belle gnawed her lip as she opened it. He wanted to know if she'd arrived in Oxford safely and if the hotel was alright and if
she needed anything.

*I'm fine thank you,* she texted a reply and then got on with the blue dress. She didn't want it, she realized the moment she saw herself in the mirror, and she was peeling it off when her phone started vibrating with an incoming call.

“Yes!” She replied, trying to keep her voice subdued, but her whisper came out as an angry hiss. There was subtle noise coming from fitting rooms around her.

“Is this a bad time?” She heard Mr Gold's voice.

“Yes. It's very inconvenient, now could you please state me if there's a problem of some sort I need to attend professionally? Or is there some angle to my holiday here that I wasn't aware of before I took the train to Oxford?” The electric blue dress pooled around her feet and she stepped out of it, turning her back to the mirror as she did. While she waited for a reply, she lifted the dress up from the floor and returned it to its hanger.

When there was no reply, Belle pursued through the door of righteous anger that had just opened for her. “If there's nothing you require of me in my professional capacity, then I ask you please let me have my vacation in peace.”

“I was just concerned for you,” he replied.

“Well I don't need your concern. It was a really, really awful thing of you to crash all that on me just before I left, and I'd probably get along much better with my vacation, and my career, and my life, if I didn't have you stringing me along with your platitudes on my well-being. Sir.” Belle was so angry she was shaking now. She wanted to cut the call short, but her hand was like a claw around the phone, squeezing it close to her face.

“Can you please stop calling me sir.”

“Whatever, Mr Gold,” Belle said, with daggers in her voice.

“Yes, I suppose I deserve that.”

“You suppose right, Mr Gold.” Belle sat down slowly on the bench on one side of the sitting room where she'd casually thrown most of her clothes.

“I'm... sorry,” said Mr Gold. Maybe Belle would have thought a week ago that Mr Gold saying he was sorry was something amazing, since he was never sorry for anything, but now it just sounded tiresome and meaningless. “I, I wanted to talk to you about your living arrangements too, I have an apartment I haven't sold yet, and you could rent it until you find a better situation. I was going to sell it at some point soon, but I'm not in a hurry.”

Belle swallowed, mulling over her reply. “Well, that is very generous of you, Mr Gold,” she started, “but I don't think I'll be staying in the city for very long. Like I told, you need a change of pace.”

“And you'll be changing your course. I'll of course write you a recommendation. I already did, in fact, I emailed the draft to you before I called you.”

“I can't wait to read it when I get back to the hotel,” Belle replied without any enthusiasm. “Look, I'm in a fitting room at Marks and Spencer and I need to get my clothes on before I get any colder,” she closed her eyes, cursing herself for letting him in with these details, “was this all?”

There was a pause again at the end of the line. Belle waited, exasperated.
“Since you're changing careers and, I thought. Would you, perhaps, let me see you again, before you fly out? Let me take you to dinner tomorrow?”

Belle could feel her whole body tingling. “In... what way?” She asked quietly. With the blood rushing in her ears, she couldn't hear the background noises from the surrounding stalls, but she had the nervous feeling like everyone at Marks and Spencer's were eavesdropping on this conversation.

“The very unprofessional way,” Mr Gold replied, and Belle couldn't decipher whether he sounded flippant or nervous.

“Oh,” Belle stood up again, and leaned against the stall as she stared at herself in the mirror again. There could be nothing but tears at the end of this. She was flying away next week. This had the potential of turning everything even worse than it had been. On the other hand, she might have a wonderful time with Mr Gold, she thought. But she was terrified of just that, that if it was wonderful, and then it ended, and she had only a lack of home and occupation to return to in the States, how would she ever manage?

“I'm sorry, it was a terrible idea,” Mr Gold said, after the prolonged silence.

“No, no. I'll see you, Mr Gold,” Belle heard the words come out almost on their own volition. That was because she really wanted to say those words, and damn the consequences.

“Could you please call me James from now on?” Mr Gold asked her.

Belle laughed nervously. “Alright, James. I'll see you tomorrow. I need to get out of this stall now. Bye.”

“Until tomorrow then,” Mr Gold said, and the call ended. Belle threw the phone into her bag and then stared at her underwear.

It was time to change floors to the lingerie department.
Out of habit, Belle was an early riser. She'd only needed two days to adjust herself to the Greenwich time zone, and so she was awake by seven. Because she was on a holiday after all, she gave herself plenty of time to wash up and get dressed for the time. She was already feeling agitated about meeting Mr Gold for dinner. He hadn't called since yesterday afternoon, and Belle wondered if he was waiting for a call from her, or if he was going to call her soon and make plans.

Then it was time to head out and face the day, beginning with the breakfast buffet laid out in the hotel restaurant. Belle had many misgivings about the hotel – perhaps the place was trying to give tourists the Downton Abbey experience with all the pomp and circumstance, but the receptionist was never happy when she teasingly called him Carson; and the topiary garden she found genuinely disturbing with its militantly cut trees and bushes like straight jackets for plants – but she was at least glad that the breakfast buffet was amazing.

She was crossing the grand foyer on her way to the restaurant, mouth already watering at the memory of the croissants of the previous morning, when she noticed there was someone sitting in the foyer in a dark suit, reading a newspaper held up just so that she couldn't see his face. But there was a gold-tipped cane leaning against the chair that Belle would have recognized under any circumstances, and seeing it actually shocked her so she almost tripped over her own feet, but she managed to catch herself in time and merely inelegantly half-stumbled her next step before she took a 90 degree turn next and loomed over Mr Gold's newspaper like one of the purple-black rain clouds that had passed over Oxfordshire the day before.

He glanced up. Only Mr Gold's eyes moved, the rest of him stayed completely still and petrified.

“Mr Gold, you do realize you are about twelve hours early,” Belle said blankly. She was afraid this was some sort of a fucked up mind game. Not that Mr Gold had ever been a particular bastard when it came to her, but during her time working for him, Belle had seen him at his absolute worst sometimes when it came to his workers, his clients, and with the board members of his own company.

Mr Gold made a show of slowly folding the paper he'd been reading before he replied. “I was passing nearby and I thought I'd come ask you in person what would you like to do tonight,” he said, and glanced back up at her.

Belle was fairly sure that Mr Gold had just happened to pass by the neighbourhood at least a two hour drive away from London, where she was fairly sure he'd been the day before. Although, how could she know? But if he had been in London that morning, he'd probably started driving up here at five in the morning. That sounded unlikely, early rise though he was.

“I hope you've not waited here too long,” Belle said, still somewhat humorless.

“Not at all.”
“You might have called me.”

“I thought it best let you sleep.”

“Right.” Belle stared him down for a while longer. “Well, since you're here, why don't you join me for breakfast.” She glanced over her shoulder at the reception area, where a man was slightly unsubtly following their conversation with a side-glance. “I'm sure you can sort it with the See you there.” She gave him a bright smile and he just stared up at her in slight confusion she had to assume came from the fact that she was behaving as she was Belle French on a holiday, and not Miss French the personal assistant softening the world between Mr Gold and Other People.

The morning was outrageously sunny and warm for a day in late September. Great glass doors dividing the restaurant from the terrace that overlooked the morbid topiary garden were open. Her hands full of breakfast things, Belle headed out to the terrace and picked up vacant table there. She was spreading raspberry jam over a halved croissant when Mr Gold found her and sat down beside her, carrying only tea.

“So you like croissants,” he said dryly, observing the three of them that dominated Belle's breakfast tray.

“I like tasty croissants. Usually they taste like cardboard,” Belle said, and smiled, because these ones did not. She leaned close to the table and took a bite of her croissant which crumbled at the edges of her mouth, tiny flakes falling down over the plate. “Don't worry, I'll still fit into my dress by dinner time,” she said once her mouth was empty. “So what brought you two hours away from London at seven in the morning?” Belle asked, and put her croissant down in favour of a coffee.

He sighed and dug sunglasses from his breast pocket. The sun was hanging still low in the morning, and there was nothing giving them shade from it staring straight at them, and Belle had chosen the only seat where she could keep her back to the sunlight. “My daughter-in-law grew a little tired of seeing me,” after one weekend, Belle marvelled, “and since you fly back to States soon, I thought I'd make the best of the time you've here.”

Belle shrugged. When his eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses it was harder to read him. “You might have called. I might have made plans for today.” She took another bite of the flaking croissant.

“How was your son?” Belle asked. The truth was she didn't really care that much, but she wanted to make meaningless conversation to ease her own annoyance.

“Fine.”

There was not much of small talk there, Belle realized and listened to the awkward silence between them, and the chattering of the other guests of the hotel in the background as she finished the first of her croissants.

“How was your son?” Belle asked. The truth was she didn't really care that much, but she wanted to make meaningless conversation to ease her own annoyance.

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“Is the hotel to your liking?” He asked.

Belle shrugged. “I like the breakfast. I'm afraid it might be a little too fancy for me. There's a dresscode for dinner here, and the maids who clean the rooms have these uniforms with lace trimmings. I suppose the whole thing markets to some kind of a Downton Abbey authenticity seeking crowd? But the receptionist I called Carson, because he looks like him a bit, he didn't appreciate my sense of humor. There's a bit of an oh-look-at-the-stupid-Australian-hick thing going on here, I wonder how they can charge the queen's ransom for the rooms here while all the staff have brooms so far up their—"
Just then someone from the hotel's service appeared by the table, carrying a breakfast tray, which they set on the table for Mr Gold. He tipped the young man and he scurried off after giving his muted thanks.

“You were saying,” Mr Gold said.

“There's pancakes!” Belle said.

“Just one.”

“I need some.” Belle got off her seat. When she returned, she noticed one of her croissants had mysteriously vanished. In all fairness, she probably wouldn't have had room for both third croissant and the pancakes.

“So what else do you watch?” Mr Gold asked her as soon as she'd reseated herself.

“I like Parks and Recreation. There's an evil librarian in it. I don't like Game of Thrones, although everyone at work are watching it. The breakroom was all about dragon girl fashion all spring.”

“The hand-crafted things are the best part of the show. I met the embroiderer who works with their costumes last year. Impressive skill.”

It suddenly really hit Belle. She was on a date, a breakfast date with her boss, and they were talking about teevee shows like it was the most normal thing in the world, except it wasn't. There was something highly surreal about it all in fact. Her spine tingled a bit and she lost her murmured reply in her coffee cup.

“But you'd rather change hotels?” He asked.

Belle had given it thought twice already. But even though she was on her holiday here, she was still technically spending the company's money, and Mr Gold had chosen this place out of all the others in the area because of his own reasons. It wasn't really her place to downgrade the experience. “No, I just meant that... I feel like I can't relax here when I leave my room. But maybe I'll get used to it. And it is lovely here. I just need to adjust, I mean I have lived with Ikea shelves and curtains for walls for the past seven years. But the holiday is really nice, thank you. And I guess this is the best way of denting your travel expense budget just two weeks before the board hears of your resignation?”

“Indeed.” He sipped his tea, she drank her coffee, and silence reigned once more.

“So what show do you like?” Belle asked him.

“I don't really watch anything if it's not related to work. Or didn't. Hm.”

“I prefer reading anyhow. It's more engaging for the brain.” Belle dug into her pancakes, which she'd smeared with jam and syrup. She was aware of him watching her eat, and it made her feel a bit uncomfortable. The sexy Belle French move probably would have been to eat dainty little bites from the edge of the pancake, and then excuse herself with everything barely touched. Actual Belle French whose favourite part of the hotel was the breakfast buffet wanted to have seconds, because the croissants were full of flavour – probably because they were full of butter – and the bread rolls were fresh hot from the oven. Everything was a far cry from the very plain budget things she ate at home.

“Have you let you starve during the past three years?” Mr Gold asked, and Belle swore she could hear a little discomfort.
“I’ve been trying to pay back as much of my college loans as possible. And rent is not cheap in the city.”

Belle was aware of a big generation and income gulf between them now, and it made her feel small and naïve and flustered. She looked down at her lap and gnawed her lip as she thought of the degree of huge mistake she was up to, with Mr Gold.

“Do you like Jane Austen’s works?” He asked next, and Belle found the question very out of the blue. She had loved Jane Austen’s books as a teenager, but when she’d realized at twenty, that Mr Darcy was a fable as much as Santa Claus, and that Jane Austen’s romances were a way of consoling women without lives of their own that they might build meaning for their existence by romanticizing their marriages, then Belle had set Jane Austen aside. She had to give it to Jane Austen though, that she had lived herself as a writer, unmarried, and had related things of a world she’d belonged to in her own time.

“I used to adore Jane Austen,” Belle said, “I prefer less romantic fiction at the moment. Swedish detective novels are good.”

“Unhappily, we're not in Sweden. Jane Austen's house is not too far away from here, do you want to go there?”

This was another bewildering suggestion. Belle wanted to pinch herself to make sure it wasn’t all a part of a crazy dream. She wasn’t still in an airplane crossing the Atlantic. She wasn’t still in the hotel bed.

She hadn’t really planned anything for the week yet, apart from the notion of maybe possibly visiting Blenheim Palace, which was apparently a Thing to Do if one was touring this area. A big house with a big garden. But she was tired of big manors already after spending two nights in one, and the idea of Jane Austen's house sounded tempting. Very tempting.

“Do you want to go there?” Belle asked warily.

“I thought you'd like it,” he replied evasively.

“I would. I would like it a lot.” Belle was already thinking about other British writers whose house she might want to invade. Bronte sisters popped into her mind, and gave herself a mental note to check the place on the internet once she had the time.

“Then let's drive to Hampshire after you're done with your breakfast.”

“What, now?” Belle gave him an incredulous look.

“Unless you'd prefer not to.”

Belle smiled. “I don't see why not. Will you drive? I don't know if I can manage the wrong side traffic.” It had been a while too, since the last time she'd had a car. It was expensive to keep one in the city.

“Of course. I'll try not to crash us,” he said dryly.

Twenty minutes later Belle was climbing to the front passenger side of a leased car, still reeling over how the lack of plans for the day had changed. But, reflecting on her mournful solitude in Oxford the day before, perhaps today would be better. It would be certainly more bizarre than expected, but also it might be better. Unless Mr Gold would irritate her enough again and they’d end up having an argument in person instead of on the phone, and he'd leave her in some dark wilderness of
Hampshire countryside on her own.

In all honesty, Belle had expected to have spent the day in bookshops in Oxford, maybe visiting one of the many museums in town, or reading a little before getting ready for her big date, which she had estimated would have taken about two hours before she'd either been headed towards as of yet unknown bed, led or leading the nearby sitting person with sunglasses at the moment driving the car out of Weston and heading south, and it wasn't even nine in the morning.
“So what crime did you commit to get deported from London?” Belle asked Mr Gold. There had been enough quiet in the car apart from the few moments she’d taken it upon herself to talk the small, mostly commenting on the beauty of the English countryside, apparently to herself.

“As a matter of fact, my daughter-in-law is a police constable in the Metropolitan Police, but she didn't charge me with anything,” Mr Gold replied.

“Oh. That's an interesting occupation. And what does your son do?”

“Works in a bank. Not a teller. Banking adviser. Hates it, wants to make a fortune so his wife doesn’t have to be hunting for illegal gun trades by Somali gangs in Woolwich. Especially while she's pregnant.”

“What, she's on the field even now? And how far along is she?” Belle was immediately concerned. Partially fascinated too, for this police constable that Mr Gold had for a daughter-in-law must have been something else to drive Mr Gold out of London.

“Oh, I don't know. Four months, I presume.”

“And she didn't like you meddling?”

“No, Bae's the one trying to get her a desk job. I left London for... other reasons. That reminds me, Belle if I could trouble you in your professional capacity for a minute,” while keeping one hand to the wheel, Mr Gold dug his phone from his chest pocket and handed it to her, “can you work this so that all calls from Regina and Cora go automatically to voice mail? And Graham's too.”

Belle took the phone with a sigh – she didn't like how this whole thing veered from her professional to unprofessional, even in tiny nuances. It threw her off, and made her uncertain whether or not this was date or a business trip or a vacation or a what the fuck.

“Just this once, but I would like to remind you I’m on my well-deserved holiday,” she said, masking her chagrin with a little cheerfulness. Belle gave the phone her attention for a few minutes before she was done. When she looked up, there was a particularly beautiful little village on the passenger side of the A34, which caught her attention amidst all the plain level green fields. Absently, and perhaps affected by the fact that she’d had only one cup of coffee instead of three that morning, she put the phone in her own purse instead of giving it back to Mr Gold.

“There was an article a few months back about Rudyard Kipling's short story about soldiers of the first world war, who were given Austen novels to read to recover from shell shock,” Mr Gold said.

“Yes, I saw that too. I looked up the story too, but I couldn't read it. The language was really interesting, but it's not really casual reading in the subway on your way to work. So, do you like Kipling?”

“Not really my cup of tea.”

“Then name your favourite author,” Belle challenged him.

The reply didn't come instantly. The GPS guide supplied by the car leaser spoke in both their stead, advising them to keep to the A34. The highway was splitting into two just ahead of them.
“Kurt Vonnegut,” Mr Gold replied at length, “but I don't read much anymore. Perhaps I should take that up again. Read something new. Maybe by an author that's still alive.”

Belle nodded in agreement. “I think it's hard to tell about all the new books, which one is going to be worth your time. At least with old classics you sort of know you have something that's stood the test of time. Some time at least. I don't know, maybe it's the world that's so odd, sort of splintered in post-post-modernism, it makes all contemporary fiction in my opinion at least feel wrong, somehow. If there's not a lot of Hollywood theatrics, then there's some kind of technical deconstruction on meta-level of language and culture in itself that doesn't really reveal anything about life.”

“A passionate speech. And you think that's what fiction is for, revealing life?” Mr Gold asked her.

Ironically, Belle recalled, she had picked up that idea from a film, not a book. A film about Jane Austen. “Yes,” Belle said. “Fiction should reveal truths about our actions in life.”

“And are these subjective or objective truths?” Mr Gold asked, and Belle could tell he was amused.

Belle ignored the question. “I bet no one writes good books anymore because all the good writers want to write for Hollywood. Easier and probably has more money in it.”

“Didn't E.L. James just come as the most well-earning writer in the year 2012?” Mr Gold asked. Belle remembered, it had been in a business newspaper at the office a week ago.

“And have you read Fifty Shades of Grey?” Belle asked teasingly.

“I just told you I don't read much these days, except for newspapers. You on the other hand spend all your lunch breaks at your desk with a book in your hand, but I don't think it'd be the kind of book you'd bring to work.”

“I haven't read it, if that's what you're insinuating,” Belle said, rolling her eyes. Although, now she wondered if she might.

“Are those Swedish crime stories any good?” He asked.

“They mostly make me want to live in a socialist utopia that even at its worst is still... really good. I don't speak any Swedish though. And I don't know anyone in Sweden, so it might remain a dream.”

“I knew no one in the States when I moved there,” Mr Gold said. “I think I was about your age when I did. So never say never.”

Belle thought a bit, about how Mr Gold had moved to the States and had left his only child in Britain. In the three years Belle had worked for Mr Gold, she was aware of them having met only once prior to last weekend, although the first meeting did take almost two months. There were never any personal calls from Britain in the middle of the day, and Mr Gold had almost never mentioned his son, not before the wedding, when Belle had been surprised to find out there was such a person.

“I think moving from Melbourne to Maine was enough of an uprooting experience for me, personally,” Belle said.

“And how did that happen to come by?”

Belle stayed quiet for a while, trying to think and choose what to say. “My mother was a doctor of anthropology at Melbourne university. She was actually American but she moved to Australia to be near her work in Polynesia. She contracted malaria, and she died of it. Then my mother's sister got in a bad way, she was paralysed waist-down you see, and my father thought moving to my aunt's
would be a good thing. Let us start fresh. So we moved to Maine.” And Belle recalled the horror of having her mother first die slowly, and then living with a stranger, who then also died slowly. Between nine and ten, there had been nothing but withdrawn curtains, gloom and deep shadows in her life.

“I'm sorry,” Mr Gold said, “about your mother.”

“Don't worry. It's been almost twenty years. I think she wanted to study Polynesia just to get out of Maine.”

“But not far off from Sweden, I'm sure you'd do well there.”

Belle shook her head. She turned her head and stared out for a while, her mood soured by this sudden heart-to-heart. Maybe she'd told too much, maybe he didn't want to or didn't need to hear about her traumas or childhood. It was far too much for the purpose of this outing, even if they had known each other for three years.

“You know, my father was a shell-shocked World War veteran. His whole life, the parts I can remember of it at least, was misery,” Mr Gold said, and instantly Belle felt as if she knew that there were not many people in the world he'd ever talked about this to.

“What happened to him?” Belle asked, keeping her voice small and quiet.

“Shot by a policeman in the dark. It was an accident, or so they told me. It was a long time ago.”

“So, was it that Rudyard Kipling article that made you interested in Jane Austen?” Belle asked. She felt the morbid subjects needed to be put behind for now.

“I admit nothing.”

When they reached Chawton, they were ten minutes too early before the museum opened. Belle was already excited at the sight of the garden, which they could see from over the fence surrounding the place. Belle decided to waste the minutes waiting in the pub across the road, because coffee. Then, once the house opened, despite her slight cynical misgivings of the morning, Belle began a descent back into a happier, optimistic mental set she'd had before the humdrum life of work and the stressful years she'd spent in college.

Everything was so damn romantic. The garden with its flowers, with the old yew tree which must have been alive there when Jane Austen herself had walked under its younger branches. The pink roses growing along the lattices surrounding the kitchen door. The beautiful old furnitures, even the wallpapers inside the house made Belle feel lost in a beautiful fantasy of a make-belief world where everything was beautiful, people good and a happy ending waiting around the bend for every heroine who but persevered and did well, or at least meant well.

After a good and thorough tour of the upstairs and downstairs, Belle returned to her favourite place in the house. She was staring intently at a small round table and a chair, when she became aware of Mr Gold standing near her. “Why are you staring holes into the table?”

“I just find it very uplifting to think that some of the most well-known pieces of English literature have been written on a very tiny table, by a very tiny woman.”

“Well, isn't that all you need? A pen and a paper.”

“I think the publishers like it better now if you give them a word doc though,” Belle said with a grin that came from the heart.
She was floating a little, in her head, by the end of the visit. She was feeling more carefree than she had in years. Even Mr Gold remarked that she seemed happier than usual, and Belle laughed, because she was, and if she was any judge of reading body language, perhaps so was Mr Gold too.

“James,” Belle said, trying his first name, which felt odd. They had just sat inside the car and there was the topic of lunch to be discussed, and of their afternoon activities.

“Belle,” he replied expectantly.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” Out of a sudden whim, Belle leaned across the car and placed a kiss on Mr Gold's cheek. It was only a peck, that was all.

He froze in place for two seconds too long, and seemed a little confused, perhaps.

“Don't worry, I'm not intending on luring you into a profitable marriage for myself,” Belle said slyly, inspired by Jane Austen's heroines.

“I'm afraid I don't have ten thousand pounds a year, dear,” he said with his dry humour.

“Oh my God, you know that,” Belle said, and laughed out of joy again. “You can't know know that. Not unless you've seen the tv show.”

“No I haven't seen the tv show,” Mr Gold grumbled as he put the key in the ignition and turned on the GPS locator.

“Then you've read the book?” Belle asked.

“And where are we going now? Back to Oxford?” He asked in turn, completely avoiding the subject.

“Yes, but I want to stop at a supermarket on our way back,” Belle replied.

He made a face. “Why?”

“I've never been to an English supermarket. I want to see what's inside them,” Belle said matter-of-factly.

“They are supermarkets,” Mr Gold replied slowly. He wasn't perhaps so quick on the intake on Belle's fascination on the subject.

“Yes but almost all the places I've been to have been some sort of tourist attractions. I want to see where normal English people go every day. And I thought we could buy picnic lunch there, and then go to a park in Oxford and eat there. And if it rains, then we can infuriate the hotel by eating picnic in my room.” Belle grinned.

“As my lady commands,” he said, although he didn't seem entirely too pleased with this plan.

The GPS knew where all the supermarkets were kept in Oxfordshire, and so an hour or so later, Belle was traipsing the isles of a Sainsbury's, making a careful, analytic and intricately detailed tour of the place, picking up things after much consideration and putting them in the trolley pushed by her much-suffering boss who didn't seem like a fan of supermarkets. But he put up a brave enough face about trailing after her.

“Does food just appear out of nowhere into your home?” Belle asked him when she was looking at shortbread packages.
“I have one of those Star Trek materializers that can make anything you tell them to,” he said flatly.

“A Janeite and a Trekkie,” Belle replied, winking. “Which series did you like best?”

“I have no idea. I am not a Trekkie, but I do know pop culture trivia when I am pushed to the edge.”

“And supermarkets are you being pushed to the edge?” Belle asked.

“I have this memory of trying to find a granola bar in a supermarket, and I had to do four circuits, because it was in no logical place, since it wasn't a nut, a fruit or a biscuit. There were no personnel in the entire place. I decided never to go to back. Life is too short to be wasted lost in a supermarket.”

“Ok, I'll get some granola bars next. I think I saw them in one of the previous isles. Hang on.” Belle departed Mr Gold for a moment in her search. When she found the bars, a phone started ringing in her handbag. It most definitely wasn't her phone either. She recognized the ringtone as Mr Gold's. For a moment she considered running back to Mr Gold in order to hand him his phone back, but then he might miss the call.

And it wasn't like she hadn't taken his calls a million times before.

The phone number she saw was from States. If it was Cora or Regina, it was probably even better that Belle take this call. The phone also identified the number, but only with the mysterious name of Babicky.

“Mr Gold's phone, her personal assistant Belle French speaking,” Belle said. “What is this regarding?”

“Is Mr Gold not available?” The voice was that of an older woman's.

“Yes, but he's not by his phone just now, do you want me to get him for you?” Belle asked.

“You must manage his schedule so that is fine. I'm doctor Babicky, just calling to cancel his appointment for the day after tomorrow. I've sprained my ankle and I need to take the rest of the week off, even though our appointment was phone only. I'll call back Friday and we'll get a new appointment. That's all.”

“Thank you, I'll tell him,” Belle replied.

“Bye-bye.”

“Bye-bye,” Belle replied. She picked up a granola bar and put the phone back in her bag. She was walking back the isle and to where she'd left Mr Gold waiting, but she felt uneasy about the phone call. She took out her own phone and fiddled with the settings, turning on Internet services before opening the tiny web browser and googling up Doctor Babicky within the city.

Valerie Babicky, Psychologist, PhD was the first thing that came up. Belle turned off the internet settings on her phone and returned with the granola bars. She'd have to give him his phone back, and she'd have to tell about the call. And she was dead sure he mostly likely didn't want her to know anything about this at all, or else this appointment would have been arranged by herself in the first place.
They were in luck, it wasn't raining. On her first day of touring Oxford, Belle had spotted as well as sought plenty of parks she thought she’d like to have a closer look at, and she already knew from where to choose. She'd already planned on visiting the canals, since there was a network of public footpaths along the sides of them. Her original idea had included a long circular walk, but she thought better not Mr Gold and his cane into the rural wilderness, especially since he'd already driven her up and down the countryside and suffered a very long and thorough tour through Sainsbury's.

Belle had created a picnic spread on a bench by the canal. There were swans swimming there, obviously tame ones that had picked the bench area as good stake-out place for begging food from humans. There was also a very clear sign forbidding all feeding of birds. The plaque was in fact so full of information, Belle had to walk over to it and read all of it, in the process finding out amongst other things, about gang-raping mallard drakes. This made Belle's skin crawl as she read it twice over to make sure she wasn't misunderstanding something.

“So the swans are protected by the Queen of England, right?” Belle asked as she returned to the bench, after reading the dreaded feeding prohibition plaque.

“That is correct.”

“Are we allowed to defend ourselves if those two attack us?” Belle asked next, pointing at the pair of hopeful mute swans paddling back and forth near them at the canal.

“You can take my cane. I'm already regarded suspiciously by the metropolitan police, without needing a swan assault to further drag me into infamy,” Mr Gold said, and Belle laughed for his dark and quick sense of humour.

Belle realized as she sat down, that she'd effectively separated herself from him by laying out the picnic between them. It would have been pleasant to sit in the crisp autumn afternoon much closer to each other. Then again, she didn't know if she would have had the courage to do that, just sit next to Mr Gold, thigh against thigh, and cuddle under his arm. Was he a cuddling type, out of office hours? Belle couldn't imagine that being so. But she still smiled, because it had been the most extraordinary day so far, and there was little else to complain about, except the chill of the bench – and the picnic had happened as per her own request.

“You seem pleased. I don't think you've smiled like that since your first year at work,” Mr Gold remarked.

“Two days of paid holiday can make miracles,” Belle replied, her smile deepening. She took her sandwich and started unwrapping it. “I'm surprised you even think about what my facial expressions were three years ago,” she added.

“People tend to be optimistic and wide-eyed when they start a new job. You more so than anyone else I can remember, and it lasted a long time.”
“Mm.” Belle bit into her sandwich. “Then I got used to it. Were you ever wide-eyed with wonder?”

“Possibly for all of fifteen seconds in my first place of occupation.”

“Which would have been... probably here in the UK?” Belle asked between bites.

Mr Gold nodded.

“And it was...” Belle helped him along.

“... very uninteresting,” Mr Gold finished.

“No, I'm sure I would find it interesting. I find you interesting. I'd like to know more about you, if possible,” Belle replied, reaching for a napkin from the pile between them to hold the sandwich better with.

“Is that entirely necessary? You'll fly off next week in any case,” Mr Gold said.

Touché, Belle thought. She decided not to answer that question immediately. She had no answer, so she ate her sandwich as she thought it though.

“You have taken me on what has been the most amazing casual sex date ever, and we're still hours away from dinner,” Belle said, eventually.

“It was only dinner I offered, what makes you think I'll be so easy?” Mr Gold asked with a smirk, and Belle laughed again, louder and heartier.

“I bought a new black dress,” Belle said when she got her breath back. “I hope it'll persuade you.” She gave a coy sideways glance at Mr Gold, and felt her heart run away pounding to a rhythm of its own for a moment. She regretted again that she hadn't sat down next to Mr Gold, for with the warm glance he'd given back to her, if not for the short distance, it would have been the most opportune moment for kissing. It would have been perfect, under the slowly falling autumn leaves and the clear blue sky, and swans swimming about.

Feeling her cheeks were a bit too hot, Belle looked abruptly above at the yellowing tree canopy, and at the reddening ivy that had tangled and wound itself tightly around the trunk of the tree which their bench was sat against of.

The swans leaned their necks over the side of the canal, eyes eagerly scaling the grassy bank for any food they might have thrown or dropped at the ground, but Belle had kept vigilant with every crumb of food and with the packaging waste. They ate in the most simultaneously comfortable while uncomfortable silence, Belle making sure every bit of scrap ended up in the small plastic bag she'd intended for disposing all the waste into.

“I hope you won't feel like I've ruined your day off,” Mr Gold said, breaking the quiet, once they were done eating.

“Oh, no, not at all. It has really been a wonderful day,” Belle assured him. “What do you want to do before dinner?”

“Depends, do you have any preference? About the dinner, to start with?”

Belle shrugged. She didn't have any idea. When she'd had to choose, the nicest dinner she'd ever been to out of office hours had been the one she'd attended with her father after graduation, in an Italian family restaurant in Boston. “I guess the hotel restaurant is fine. The food is nice there.”
She didn't want to say out loud and it only takes five minutes to get from the table to my bed, but she thought it. Possibly loudly, she was afraid. Mr Gold had a point in that she'd fly off next week, and then they'd never see each other again. Belle told herself to keep the small talk casual and harmless. *Play it cool,* she reminded herself. It would be awful if this led to any worse emotional entanglements than the past year or so already had. She'd just go into this playing the personal assistant on a holiday, quick fun and casual sex, followed by amicable departure as... As people who had had quick fun and casual sex.

If Belle had smoked, she would have now dived for a cigarette from her bag with nervous, shaking hands, but she didn't, so she settled for diving for her mobile phone instead and checking if she'd had any calls, messages or email, in a desperate effort to momentarily calm herself down. She found Mr Gold's phone first though, and handed it to him.

“Sorry, I put your phone in my bag by accident,” she said.

“That's alright. It didn't ring?”

Belle chewed on her lip. “Some doctor called you. I answered it because you were on the other side of Sainsbury's right then, and they wanted me to tell you your phone call tomorrow was cancelled. Right, oh I'm sorry I meant to tell you that in the car, but it slipped my mind,“ Belle said.

Mr Gold glanced at his phone. The devilish smile had vanished from his lips and he seemed displeased as he tucked the phone back in his pocket. Belle knew there was nothing better to do about that than let him be. She found her own phone then and looked over the cover. No personal messages. Emails from the office had arrived, but none of them requiring her immediate reply.

“You never said what you want to do before dinner?” Mr Gold asked her.

“Maybe take a nap. It's been fairly exciting today so far,” Belle said. “I know I said I wanted to visit Oxford for bookshops, but I don't think it would be very interesting for you. And I have no idea how bad parking is there with the car and all. I can go alone tomorrow.” Belle pushed herself up from the bench. She wondered how tomorrow morning would play out. Would she wake up alone in her hotel bed? Or in Mr Gold's bed? Would there be cuddling? Or prompt removal of company after the act itself? In any case, she believed that whatever happened during the night, she'd probably prefer to spend the day after alone, mulling it over.

But she was getting ahead of herself, Belle thought. Maybe Mr Gold had been serious when he'd teased her, maybe he only just wanted to spend time with her because his daughter-in-law had sent him away from London.

Belle chewed on her lower lip as she thought these things over on their way back to the car, and then some more the whole drive back to the hotel. The chill of the autumn afternoon had gotten under her skin by then, and she was looking forward to taking a hot shower once she got to her room, not just to warm herself up, but to also help let go of the mounting tension within.

But she wasn't allowed easily into her room for a breather. At the hotel reception, Mr Gold found out that all the rooms were taken.

A quick private conference was needed. Belle, carrying a Sainsbury's plastic bag full of, amongst other things, wine, and now shivering from the cold, didn't feel very conference-y when Mr Gold pulled her aside to the little lounge area to where the reception occasionally abandoned people when they were feeling incapable of servicing them.

“Would you find it a terrible inconvenience if-” Mr Gold began.
Belle's eyes went wide open, automatically filling the rest of the sentence with them, already, immediately, minutes from now, in the same room, in the space where not long ago naps and showers had been imagined.

“- we looked for another hotel?” Mr Gold ended.

Belle frowned. “I don't know, if this countryside manor is fully booked, how likely will it be we'll find two vacant rooms nearby?” She had done her share of hotel bookings in the past three years for him. Also, she was cold, in need of a nap, and really wanting to get into the luxurious bathroom that was mere metres away.

“I'll just upgrade the room for two,” Belle replied. “Won't that be more... convenient, in any case?” She wasn't sure if it was terribly smart to put them both in the same room in the same hotel, revealing on the same receipt someone at work might glance at eventually. But she could just say there was a mistake, if anyone asked. She seemed to have made a split-second decision about it, in any case, and she didn't want to wallow over it, in case there was any indecisiveness, so Belle reached for her wallet and marched on to the reception to deal with this ordeal.

“Your key,” Belle said to Mr Gold once she returned to him. “I'll go on up ahead. I asked them to get someone here to carry your things from the car.” She was mumbling and finding it hard to look straight at him, and it was a sort of a revelation as well as a marginally nerve-easing thing when she understood he was not perfectly at ease himself.

“I'll... see you soon,” he replied mutedly.

“Yes,” Belle replied and took her things from the seats of the lounge where she'd left them. She went on ahead to her room, wondering if her ears were red or if she was only imagining it.
An Assistant's Dinner Date

Chapter Summary

As was initially suggested, they have dinner

When she got in her room, the first thing Belle did was sort the chaos that had only been partially amended by room service while she'd been out. The way she’d unpacked and left things lying about carelessly through the suite was fun and relaxing for a Belle staying in the room alone. She didn't want the place to appear like she'd gone out of her way to make it messy by leaving dresses and bags and things haphazardly on every surface. She'd just been unwinding! This was not what she'd intended when she'd hastily left the hotel that morning.

The black dress she'd bought from Marks and Spencer was laid on the bed, and she hid that in the dark-green bag it had come in. It was not the most beautiful, glamorous or sophisticated of little black dresses, but it was one that had been within her budget. And could in a pinch be turned into more formal clothing with the right accessories, or so she had rationalised the purchase to herself the day before.

Belle piled all her things on the chair by the tiny desk where her laptop and iPad rested, before almost making a run for the bathroom in order to be in the shower before the arrival of Mr Gold so she wouldn't have to do any awkward pantomime dance across the room while he was in there. She sat on the edge of the bathtub for a while, listening to the effects her panicky excitement on her circulation as much as she waited for the door outside to open. It took a moment, but then there it was, the clicking of the lock, the brief interchange between the service and Mr Gold. Then, another click, the room service was gone. Belle and Mr Gold were alone in the suite.

Belle listened, but there was nothing. She also started to wonder how and when she'd become so skittish and tense as she was. With a couple of deep, controlled breaths, she forced herself to calm down. Then, slowly as her forced breath was, she started to remove her clothes.

As she stepped out of her shoes and pulled her dress over her head, Belle wondered if it wouldn't be faster and better if she just wrapped herself in a towel, stepped out of the bathroom and just straightforwardly sat in Mr Gold's lap and kissed him. That would have done miracles for making herself feel less discomfort for the strange and mostly unspoken wishes and expectations they had somewhere between each other in regards to the coming night. Then they could go have dinner and enjoy a far less loaded atmosphere. But she remembered how Mr Gold had frozen just from having his cheek kissed, and Belle wasn't sure if she should take the initiative, perhaps he would find it off-putting. She had no idea what sort of a person he was on an intimate level, but Belle knew Mr Gold was particular about details and how he liked things, so she assumed he wanted to be in the lead, so to speak. Maybe it gave him a sense of satisfaction.

She did enjoy their tentative flirting. It was a little odd sort of a thing, the way they spoke to each other, and she liked it. Outright flirtation, the sort she thought of what people like Ruby were good at, came to neither one of them naturally, and what they had instead, with Belle's perhaps too straightforward remarks and Mr Gold's sharp and cynical witticism... well, she'd already known for three years that she liked talking with Mr Gold. Today she'd learned she liked it a lot more outside the professional sphere.
Belle was down to only her bra and panties when there was a knock on the door. Belle thought she felt a small animal get stuck in her throat and squeak, for she couldn't recognize herself acting the way she was, but there you had it. She was a small squeaky rodent.

“Belle? I'm stepping out for a moment so you can shower in peace,” she heard his voice, muted behind the door.

So no grand and sultry entrance in a towel then, Belle thought, and looked down at herself. Her skin was on goosebumps and she wasn't sure if it was thanks to still feeling chill, or because Mr Gold was talking to her from the other side of the door.

“Alright,” Belle replied with a wavering voice, “I won't be long.”

Once she was standing in the hot water, she wished she would stay there longer. The hot water felt soothing and seemed to wash away the worst of her nervous insecurity. Well, she told herself, they were sharing the room at least for the night, so the chance that Mr Gold would be warming her up soon was looking pretty promising. That thought, the idea of sleeping near him, was soothing and comforting. She was fairly certain she would manage that part very well, for she liked sleeping.

Belle washed her hair quickly, and dried herself as thoroughly as she could manage, as fast she could manage. She dealt with her hair with a brush and a dryer, which took longer time than the shower had. After that was all done, she was so tired she decided a nap was in order, and so she put an alarm on and tucked herself into bed, wearing just fresh underwear and a flannel pyjama top. There were curtains on two sides of the four-poster bed too. It was very fancy, she'd never slept in a four-poster bed before. She pulled the curtain on her side of the bed to give herself an illusion of privacy, in case Mr Gold entered.

Just a quick, light nap, she told herself.

The alarm woke her up. Belle was surprised how deeply she'd slept, and yawned as she reached for the clamouring phone. She wanted to keep on sleeping, but it wouldn't do to stay in bed. She had a dinner to go to. Belle kept her eyes closed and listened to the room beyond the curtain, wondering if Mr Gold was in there with her, and if so, how would she get out of bed and into her black dress elegantly. Dinner dates were supposed to end in a room like this, with the black dress removed, and the whole situation felt a bit backwards, but also amusing.

There was someone in the room. Belle could hear smallest sounds. Fabric against another fabric. Soft steps headed for the bathroom, the bathroom light turned on. Belle sat up, and pulled a part of the curtain away, to peer out.

The bathroom door was open, and she saw Mr Gold there, standing in front of the mirror, putting on his tie. Of things that had happened while Belle had been asleep, she couldn't be certain, but he looked like he'd shaved. He'd also changed his shirt to a burgundy one. He glanced at her. “Did you sleep well?” He asked.

“Like a log,” Belle answered, and hid a yawn. “Can you please close the door? I'd like to change into something acceptable for the dress code.”

“Of course,” replied Mr Gold, leaving Belle now on this side of the closed door.

Belle found that rather than being awkward, it was amusing to be getting ready for the same date within the same room. Once she got dressed, she realized she wouldn't be making any stunning
entrance effects with absolutely no make-up on. That was fine too, Mr Gold had seen her without so much as lip-gloss on plenty of times.

They amount of small-talk was now very little compared to the earlier day, for each one of them seemed intent on getting ready for dinner. Rather than having awkward silent staring, they just were very focused on things like the tying of shoelaces for Mr Gold, and the light application of lipstick for Belle. She thought it felt nice now, this shared anticipation. The terror of ohmygodwhatamidoing from the moment when she'd walked over to the reception desk and added Mr Gold to her own room had now changed into a kind of a sparkly, happy feeling on the bottom of her stomach, like she was tipsy of champagne.

And when they were both ready, and left the room, Mr Gold offered her his arm, and escorted her to the restaurant. Belle smiled the whole way there, and felt her spine tingle when he momentarily touched the small of her back just before he pulled her a chair in the restaurant at their table and helped her to get seated.

The hotel restaurant was all dim mood lighting, large cream-coloured tablecloths, tall candles resting in silver candlesticks, old oak wall panelling surrounding the entire room and an ancient black chandelier hanging from the high ceiling above with two tiers of candles shedding live firelight to the ornately detailed ceiling, even as there was still red dusk outside beyond the windows. All that, and the red autumn leaves mixed with flowers in the showy bouquets laid on flowers tables here and there spelled romance and intimacy all around.

Belle felt a moment of dread when the waiter gave her the menu. There was no knowing what sort of English cuisine horrors were lurking hiding there, and for a moment she wished she was in a less impressive place. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw the kitchen had vegetarian options on the menu that didn't sound half-bad – that always made her hopeful. Besides, there was no reason to assume the a la carte menu would disappoint her, when the breakfast buffet certainly didn't. Really, the worst case scenario she had to consider would be that she'd get carried away and eat too much and feel sick halfway back to the room.

“Why are you sighing?” Mr Gold asked her.

“I... I started from the dessert section,” Belle said. It made sense though, they had done everything backwards today. She made a few quick decisions and then when the waiter returned, asked for a glass of whatever wine they'd recommend to go with the stewed vegetables and goat cheese crumble.

“Do you eat out a lot?” Belle asked Mr Gold once the waiter was gone.

“No really. I prefer to cook for myself.”

Belle grinned. “Even though you don't like food shopping.”

“You can do everything on-line now. I get... got grocery deliveries twice a week. Very convenient.”

Belle thought it might be a bit extreme to hermit oneself so that you didn't even go to shops.

“I never have the time or energy to cook when I'm home. I've managed to get on by with the lunch cafeteria at work.”

“And the free dinners you've had when you've stayed late,” Mr Gold pointed out. There was nothing malicious about the observation, it was just an observation.

“Mm. I don't even remember the last time I cooked anything. Other than pouring milk over cereal. I ate lunch in the cafeteria while I was in college.”
“It’s a shame you won’t be able to visit me. I would have loved to cook you dinner,” Mr Gold said, and Belle felt those champagne sparkles in the pit of her stomach again. She smiled coyly, although Mr Gold's admission was sad as well, a reminder of how brief was any time they would share together now.

“I would have loved that,” Belle replied. She gave the room another good look, to let every detail sink into her memory. She doubted she would soon be dining again in a manor. All the while, she was self-consciously aware of how Mr Gold's eyes stayed on her. More champagne bubbles, she thought.

Words had flowed easier in Jane Austen’s house, and in the car, in the supermarket aisles and when being stared at by a pair of swans, but now Belle felt she couldn't muster any more small talk to keep the evening rolling as pleasantly as the day had. She didn't want to ask Mr Gold any more personal questions he was as unlikely to avoid as to answer, and there was nothing in their surroundings that made her want to make conversation of. For a moment, she'd wondered if she should talk about the possibility of wax falling from the chandeliers onto the diners' plates down below, but she abandoned the thought and decided to stress less over this. And who knew, maybe if she stopped carrying the weight of the talking, maybe Mr Gold would join in more.

Perhaps it was the wine too, but eventually Mr Gold spoke more. It was all mostly about work, which was not surprising, since it was what they shared. About the highs and lows, who Belle had been happy to see sacked, and who she'd missed after their departure. They gossiped about the last office Christmas party, which Belle had sat through mostly working while simultaneously attending the party around herself, and where Mr Gold had been present for all of fifteen minutes before calling it an early night. By the time they'd finished their appetisers, and now into her second glass of wine, Belle was glad to be allowed to share her own personal and very in-depth misgivings she had against Regina.

“So how did you get Mrs Mills to finance your company?” Belle asked, after the main course was brought to the table. The topic seemed natural, after all she'd just drank soup while claiming Cora's daughter was a sociopath.

“By grievous error, of course,” Mr Gold replied, entirely unamused by the topic of Cora Mills. “Regina's turned out tolerable enough, considering her circumstances. All her parents are both veering towards insanity.”

“All her parents?” Belle asked, curious.

“There's Mr Mills, the first. Regina's father, who Cora married when she was pretty much penniless. She divorced him and that made her rather well-off. Well enough to invest, amongst other things. Then she married another rich man, this one was old money from New England. Regina's father married Regina's nanny, and now they all live on the same strip of road in Connecticut.”

Belle tried to keep up with the story. She nodded slowly. “That does sound like it came from a novel.” Belle had seen Cora Mills plenty of times during the past three years. She was sometimes around, seeing her daughter Regina, or making a fuss at the yearly stockholders' meeting. In her imagination, Belle likened Cora to the character of Scarlet O'Hara in Gone with the Wind. From afar, she could be viewed as a shrewd, independent and headstrong powerhouse. From a viewpoint too near, Cora had all the charm of an oncoming train.

Belle was aware that Mr Gold hadn't entirely answered her questions – how had Cora Mills come to acquire such a large part of the company? Why had she invested in him in the first place?

Belle recalled the first time she'd seen Cora. She'd marched through Belle's office and straight into
Mr Gold's room in her black Chanel, her hair sprayed so tight it was more like a helmet than a
hairstyle. Belle had stumbled to attention from behind her desk and ran into the room after Mrs Mills, a
woman of whose identity she had no idea of at that time.

Cora had given her quite the scrutiny then. “What a cute little assistant you have. Did you hire her for
the looks, or can she type too?” She'd asked Mr Gold, as if Belle wasn't even present in the room.
Then Cora had lit her cigarette and laughed, and Mr Gold had sourly told Belle to leave. In her
opinion, they surely seemed to be on some kind of terms a little bit more intimate than just business
partners.

“I seem to have lost you,” Mr Gold said.

“Hm?” Belle asked.

“Lost in thoughts,” Mr Gold elaborated. “I asked if you cared for dessert?”

Belle brightened up. “Oh, right. No, I think no thank you. I'm fine for now.” She didn't want to be
falling asleep from having eaten too much the minute they returned to the room. “Besides, I have all
that chocolate from Sainbury's I need to experiment with, should the need arise later.”

“I must give it to you, you have the most interesting opinions when it comes to tourism that I've ever
seen on anyone,” Mr Gold said, and Belle took the compliment well.

“I guess I get it from my mother. Maybe I should write an anthropologist guide to vacations.”

“Do it. I think independent authoring would suit you,” Mr Gold said.

“I agree. I would spend all my money on budget holidays, and never on any real food,” Belle
replied, and went on to explain her dreams of backpacking through South America.

“I have no idea if there are supermarkets in Argentina. I must go and find out about these things first
hand,” Belle explained as she finished her dinner.

“Instead of looking it up on the Internet, as you usually do?”

Belle nodded. “Google is killing the romance of discovering things in their natural habitat,” she
replied, and this earned her a smile from Mr Gold. The giddiness returned. She had a sudden urge to
reach her foot down underneath the clean and nice cream tablecloths to rub her ankle against Mr
Gold's, but she reigned herself in and fidgeted impatiently instead for a second.

A waiter came to clear their plates away. Belle declined the offer for coffee, knowing it would give
her palpitations and keep her awake all night. She had the intention of being kept awake all night, but
not with coffee, and any palpitations she was about to have tonight she'd prefer exclusively from Mr
James Gold.

Mr Gold assisted her out of her chair, and then brushed the small of her back again as they left the
restaurant. They passed the reception area and headed off to the guest side of the manor, off to the
second-floor rooms in shared, complicit silence. Belle had left the room key inside, and he watched
Mr Gold take out his from his pocket, slip the card in. Like the gentleman he was, he held the door
open for her first.
The waiting room of Doctor Babicky's private practice was decorated in all the hues of a dark, deep forest. Wood and earth tones met dark greens of spruce and pine, with occasional smatterings of lighter green in the midst. There were tiny speakers high near the ceiling in two corners of the room, playing forest ambiance sounds – wind rustling in the leaves of trees, birds occasionally tweeting, a woodpecker chopping a tree, a little rain. Doctor Babicky's waiting room certainly had a theme.

Doctor Babicky had no receptionist of her own, and there were no other patients in the waiting room. He was on his own.

Mr Gold had been told to come early, in order to have time to fill in forms while he waited. They'd been ready and waiting for him on the table, set apart from the selected reading material, which included all of the year's earlier issues of House and Garden, Vogue Knitting and National Geographic. When he'd finished filling all three forms, he'd paced around the room for a moment, thinking of an excuse with which to leave since there was still time, but he was still vividly recalling what it was like to be punched by an officer of the Met in her bridal gown, an event which had indirectly contributed to the fact that he was now standing in this bizarre room that was a reality of its own to itself.

One wall in the room was custom wallpaper with life-size forest printed on it. The other side of the room had wooden panelling, with forest-themed framed pictures hanging in two rows, pencil sketches and watercolours of trees, mushrooms, birds and flowers and the like. There was also a picture of a chicken, which Mr Gold found disturbing, since it was an obvious domesticated chicken, and was the only thing in the room not entirely fitting to the theme. He wondered if it was a test. Or if it was placed there just to irritate people.

“Mr Gold?” He hadn't heard the door to the office open, but it had. At the door stood an elder woman with black hair that sported a single grey streak, reminding Gold a bit of the black-and-white Bride of Frankenstein. Doctor Babicky was a tad too old for the role though, she was in her fifties at least. She was dressed like an elegant, eccentric bohemian hippie, rather than in sombre suits Mr Gold had thought all doctors wore. Babicky's loose-fitting knit cardigan was a serious-enough burgundy, but the thigh-length tunic she wore underneath was printed with simplistic pictures of cats and feathers, and the long and layered necklaces she wore were strung with wooden beads. The frames of her eyeglasses were thick, containing an unflinching and confident stare as Babicky watched Mr Gold cross the room. They shook hands, and Babicky showed him in. She retrieved the filled-in forms from the reception area table and followed Mr Gold.

The office was a slightly muted version of the fairy-tale escapology lounge that had been the sitting room. There was a window here, giving in real daylight, and real plants crowded the tables near the window. He took a seat in the middle of a sofa decked with green pillows and a brown quilt on one end.

“Why the forest?” Mr Gold asked.
“For one, because trees tend to calm people, Mr Gold,” Babicky replied, leafing through the forms. “But then again, in fact, I recently read a study showing that most adults in the United States fear forests, especially in urban areas.” Doctor Babicky looked up at Mr Gold. “What do you think of forests, Mr Gold?” She asked.

“Are you going to waste my money all hour by talking about forests, doctor?” Mr Gold asked in turn.

“It's you who brought up the subject, not I,” Babicky retorted. “Have you ever been to therapy before?”

“No.”

“Have you been diagnosed anywhere else with depression or other psychiatric condition?”

“No.”

Babicky made shorthand notes on a pad.

“And when we talked on the phone, you mentioned you wanted to be treated without medication. Why is that?”

Mr Gold stared at her. “I'm not insane, I don't need them.”

Babicky scrawled more shorthand notes on her pad. “So what brings you here?”

This part felt more difficult than it ought to have. He'd have guessed this would have been her first question, and he'd been expecting it. Mr Gold looked for something in the room to look at besides the doctor's piercing eyes.

The seconds he was paying for ticked away, and the psychologist stared at him, saying nothing. Her face gave up no sense of judgement, no sense of empathy, not even a sense of curiosity. She just sat there, unreadable and silent.

“I was in London last month, for my son's wedding. I... I hadn't seen him in a long time. He used to live with me until he was nine, when his mother got full custody of him.”

“Was she at this wedding too?” Babicky asked.

“Yes,” Mr Gold snapped.

“What happened at the wedding?”

Mr Gold played with his cane, twirling it between his hands.

“Well... she didn't bring just her current husband to the wedding. In fact, all three were there,” he said acidly.

“Do you mean, they were all attending without being invited?” Babicky asked.

Mr Gold grit his teeth together and stared at the carpet for a while. “No, they were invited.”

“Has your son always lived in London?” She asked next.

Mr Gold nodded slowly. “More or less. He did live in Scotland for a few years when he was a baby, but he can't remember that.”
“And how long have you lived in the United States?”

“Twenty years, give or take a few.”

Babicky nodded. “Why did you leave Britain?”

Mr Gold gripped his cane. “You can probably figure that out, doctor.”

Babicky shook her head slowly. “You obviously feel strongly about your son. But you ran away from him. Did his mother prevent you from seeing him entirely? Didn't you get any visitation rights?”

“I'm not here to talk about this!” Mr Gold snapped, trying to contain his rage.

“Alright, what are you here to talk about then?” Babicky asked. She seemed unaffected by Mr Gold's temper.

“My daughter-in-law said I needed to see someone,” he replied, his humour made ill by the topic as well as Babicky's apparent nonchalance.


“Who the bloody hell else.”

“You might have other daughter-in-laws,” Babicky replied, and scribbled on her notepad. “And why did she tell you to see a therapist?”

Mr Gold went silent again. Seconds ticked away, and the wall-like Babicky regarded him from behind her wide-brimmed glasses, not even blinking her wrinkly eyes.

“There was an incident after the wedding,” Mr Gold said eventually, “where my cane hit one of my ex-wife's ex-husbands in the head a few times. Afterwards, Emma, my daughter-in-law, punched me in the face. At that point I was fairly drunk and having an argument with Milah. That's my ex-wife.”

“Your son's mother?” Babicky asked.

“Yes,” Gold replied with almost a growl.

“What happened to the man?”

“He was hospitalized.”

“Was that the first time you've assaulted anyone?” Babicky asked.

Mr Gold took a deep, shivering breath before he replied. “... no.”

“Have you ever been arrested for assaulting anyone?” Babicky asked.

“Once. It wasn't for a long time. They didn't press charges.”

“Why was that?” Babicky asked.

“I threatened them, and paid them off.”

Babicky made quite a lot of scrawls on her pad, but she didn't seem scared, or concerned. Mr Gold couldn't read the notes, and it worried him. The whole situation worried him. What if the doctor
“Why did you have the adrenaline surge in your veins, primordially telling him to fight or run."

Mr Gold jumped up from his seat and started walking about the room.

“Would you like a glass of water? Or perhaps some herbal tea, to calm your nerves,” Babicky asked, voice as still and serene as ever. “I have fresh peppermint leaves from my home garden, let me stew you a pot.” She set her pencil and notepad aside and went about to brew the tea, while Mr Gold went to the window and looked at the miserable and grey concrete city outside.

The therapist popped outside of the room for a moment, into a side kitchenette beyond another door. She put on a kettle. While it boiled, she returned with a plate full of snacks. There were fruit as well as cookies. She set it down on the table near the sofa.

“Our conversations are completely confidential, of course. We can have a little break from this topic, if you like. I do have some questions about one of the forms you filled. You left the Beck's Depression Inventory questionnaire almost empty, why is that?”

Mr Gold scowled at her, returning from the window. “The questions were odd.”

“How come?”

“What does the previously mean? Compared to when? A week ago? Twenty years ago?” Mr Gold asked.

“This questionnaire is meant to be filled numerous times during your treatment. It is a self-evaluation tool. It is not entirely scientific, because of course you see, it is very easy for anyone to lie, doing this. The 'previously' refers to the last time you filled one of these forms, but if you'd please indulge me... fill them in, and imagine that previously was, let's say, three years ago.”

Babicky gave her pencil to Mr Gold along with the half-filled questionnaire form. Mr Gold filled it swiftly and returned it to her. She spent a moment going over each section.

“You've self-analysed yourself to be severely depressed.” Babicky flicked her eyes from the form to Mr Gold. “Do you think you are depressed, Mr Gold?”

“You're the doctor,” he replied, “aren't you supposed to make the diagnose?”

“By your familial arrangements alone, I would say you are depressed. By your problems with violence alone, I would say you need therapy.” Babicky flicked her gaze at the questionnaire. “And you've filled in a couple of more boxes in... other areas.”

She looked at Mr Gold for a moment. When she spoke again, it was the first time she let a little human emotion into her voice. “I can't write you an entire analysis based on a twenty-minute interview, but we really don't need me to know you are depressed. We need you to know you are. If you are here only as a formality, to make good with a demand your daughter-in-law expressed you with, and nothing more, it doesn't matter what I think about you or diagnose you with. There's just one person who can fix you, and that is yourself, and if you want to commit to dealing with your problems, which I think you should, then you may pay me for my professional services in helping you find a way to create healthier relationships with people around you. Including your son.”

Mr Gold returned to the sofa and sat down quietly.

“Would you like to tell me about your daily life here in the city then? Are you married, or seeing
Mr Gold shook his head.

“And how do you get with work?”

“I've managed to set up everything so I don't have to deal with people.” Mr Gold smiled. “Other than my personal assistant.”

Babicky hmm’d. “That was the first time you've smiled the entire time. What is your assistant like?”

Mr Gold schooled his face back into a passive-aggressive scowl again.

“Her name is Belle French and she's twenty years younger than I am.”

“Do you always describe people's ages in respect to your own?” Babicky asked. She took the Back's Depression Inventory questionnaire in her hand and glanced at it.

“... no.”

“Indeed,” Babicky replied dubiously. “And do you have any hobbies?”
It was dark and wet outside. Rain had passed all over Oxfordshire during the evening. If it hadn't been, Belle would have suggested a walk through the extensive topiary garden of the manor, just to postpone this moment a few minutes more.

She wish they were again on the park bench by the canals, or in Jane Austen's sitting room, instead of standing in the heavy silence of a dark hotel room where she was forced to hear the rise and fall of her own breath. She waited for him to make the first move, but since he didn't move away from the door at all - maybe he was waiting for an excuse to bolt? - Belle kicked her shoes off and under furniture before she sat down on the soft edge of the bed.

Belle looked up at him. “I know it's not your desk, but I'm pretty sure it's also much more comfortable,” she smiled and glanced at the prettily made bed. “Sit down, please?”

He obliged her silently, and sat close to her, just close enough for their knees and parts of their thighs to touch. Belle regarded that tentative connection of her naked knee and his trouser leg. She put her hand over his, and he tensed again, like he had in the car where she had kissed his cheek.

“Forgive me, I don't usually do this with my assistants. Or in hotel rooms,” he said, his voice husky. In the dimness of the room it seemed appropriate to whisper, Belle thought.

“I know what you mean,” Belle nodded, and added a breathy, silent laugh. “It's been a while, I've forgotten how you do... these things.” She spoke softly, and moved her gaze from their knees and hands to his eyes. She couldn't presume to be very good at reading him, since Mr Gold had usually expressed mostly only irritation, dark humour and occasionally, such skills in concentration that he was oblivious to everything else that happened in his presence. Now, when he gazed at Belle with such a naked, such an intimate expression that it made him look almost a stranger, Belle wondered for a second what he might be seeing. The corners of her lips twitched as she tried to remember how to smile, to appear more appealing, that he might kiss her, and also because smiling always made her shoulders relax, and she could feel them tense up.

Belle had planned to let him kiss her, but despite her smiles, she thought her heart might leap out of her chest if this terrible stand-still prolonged itself further. Slowly, she turned herself waist above, and leaned forwards, hoping he wouldn't try to evade her. Belle's gently laid palm on top of the back of his hand tightened a little as she sought for support. She closed her eyes and placed a small, tiny kiss on her Mr Gold's lower lip. It was such an innocent little kiss, Belle felt almost silly, because she was still the only one kissing. She was opening her eyes when he kissed her upper lip, just as softly, and then Belle felt anything but innocent. Her skin tingled. She kissed him back again, now with just the smallest bit of added pressure.

The moment was so unhurried and romantic, instead of quick and dirty like she'd always thought.
And it didn't matter what she'd imagined, anyway, because this, the reality, was so much better than any her of dreams, sleeping or waking ones. And this was still just kissing. Soft, unhurried, delicate kissing.

She broke the kiss eventually, when the leaning, reaching, half-turned position she was sitting in made her feel a little too uncomfortable to continue, but even so, she withdrew gently, her eyes fluttering half-open as she heard the tiny keening sigh he gave as she withdrew.

Belle lifted her hand on top of his, to remove her earrings. They were long, dangling things, and she thought they might soon be in the way. She stood up and went to place the earrings on a table, along with the simple pendant she'd worn around her neck all evening. She could feel Gold's eyes on her as she moved about in the dimly lit room, soon returning to him.

“Don't you want to take something off?” Belle asked him tenderly, standing in front of him and nudging his dark grey, herringbone-patterned suit jacket. He seemed to be well on his way to that inner world of deep concentration where he lost track of time, but her voice snapped him out of it.

Wordlessly he complied, and Belle watched him move with rapt fascination. She felt a bit heady over how she was the one leading this slow dance. Recalling a moment from earlier in the day, of how she'd woken up earlier in the day to watch him put on the tie, Belle reached for it with both hands, loosened it gently, and pulled it away, just as Gold removed his arms from the sleeves of his jacket.

Belle discarded both of the pieces, and then returned to the bed, to lie down, not to sit. She took his hand and pulled him down with herself. Her other hand went to to the back of his neck and pulled his head closer to hers. She parted her lips in anticipation, and closed her eyes. Gold kissed her neck, not her lips, but it didn't matter to Belle, she liked where he was going. Her hands relaxed a little, and she let out small and appreciative moans as his mouth travelled across her skin. Belle began to move her hands across his back and his neck. She could feel how tense he was, but she could hardly blame him, because the same nervous tautness plagued her as well.

“I want to kiss,” Belle whispered, and he obliged her in a heartbeat. The resulting kiss was a half-open-mouthed version of their earlier first kiss, soft and wet. Belle pulled Gold's body closer to her own with one arm, while the other one crept back up to his hair, and down his neck again, massaging the tension away.

Belle thought she could have kissed him all day. At least half of her daydreams of him had included mostly kissing, but she couldn't have recalled any of them to save her life now. She was beginning to be perfectly comfortable on the bed, between the soft mattress and the warm Mr Gold, tension was seeping out of her with every sweet nip of his lips on hers. She felt heady with the kissing, and a warm heaviness had began to build between her legs.

Eventually, the kissing stopped, and was replaced by very sweet tip-of-the-nose touching, before Gold leaned up. “Are you alright?” He asked. Belle couldn't understand where that slightly unwanted hint of insecurity was coming from.

Belle beamed up at him. “Oh, but I'm absolutely marvellous,” she replied with a contented sigh, and kept drawing small circles with her thumb about his neck for a moment longer. Then she slid her hands from behind his neck to balance herself, and turned a bit, shifting her weight, while he made room for her to move.

Belle lifted her arm a bit. “Would you like to undo the zipper?”

He nodded. Belle watched his face while his hand reached up to her side, and she heard and felt the zipper slide down. Belle felt a bit silly now that she hadn't made this easier by getting rid of the dress
while she was still out of bed, but que sera sera. She felt she wasn’t very good at this choreography, and it made her feel nervous again. Belle sat up and pulled the dress up over her head like it was a bandage she was tearing off, immediately horribly self-conscious of herself now in this state of fewer clothes she was in.

Belle hadn’t gone just for a lacy bra and matching panties at Marks and Spencer’s. She’d gone for a black garter belt as well, which kept up the thin thigh-length socks. And she could have sworn she’d heard a noise coming out of Mr Gold’s throat. She wasn’t sure if it had been laughter, and she was blushing somewhat fiercely.

“Do you... like it?” she stammered.

He managed to nod.

Belle wanted to already be vanishing underneath some bed covers, but that would not be managed yet, not while he was wearing still an excess of clothing. She edged her hand on Gold’s shirt-buttons and started undoing them slowly, since it was apparent he wasn’t about to do anything with them. Belle kissed him, and finished undoing his shirt. He breathed heavily as the kiss broke.

“Belle,” Gold said, the sound of her name wavering as he spoke it.

She smiled as she ran her palms down his chest and kissed him again, while her hands slid south to his belt buckle.

“Belle, look...” Gold’s hand came to grab her wrists and held her roaming palms still for a moment. “I need to tell you something.”

Belle felt as if all colour vanished from her face then. He sounded so serious.

“Yes?” She asked.

“I can’t do this.”

Belle gasped for air, and gulped, and gasped for air again. “I’m sorry, did I do something wrong?” She asked, after three gasps, tears already forming in her eyes.

“Oh. Goddamn. It’s not you, sweetheart, trust me,” Gold replied, and he seemed upset now by Belle’s crying, and he released her wrists as he struggled to “It’s... more of a technical performance issue.”

Belle stared at him in complete state of confusion. He glanced down. She followed his gaze.

There was something vital missing from this evening of seduction.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't throw things at me
Belle wasn't even sure what emotion she was going through, and wondered if she might not be having a nightmare, and she just stared at him in complete incomprehension, because she was so completely lost at sea for what to say or do. He said her name out loud, and cupped her face with both his hands. Gold kissed her softly, just like when they'd started, and she closed her eyes and felt herself return to the present out of wherever.

“You look - are so amazing, I think you'll give me a heart-attack,” Gold said to her, his voice low, as he departed from the kiss, but he stayed so close his forehead leaned against hers.

Belle started to feel chilly. She was, after all, wearing only her underwear, and emotionally she felt like she'd just been doused with cold water.

“I'm sorry,” they both said at the same time. Belle laughed a bit, at the end of hers.

“I shouldn't have come here,” Gold muttered.

Belle shook her head and wrapped her hands to hold his shoulders just as she thought he might draw himself away.

“No, don't say that. I want you here.” She pecked a kiss on his lower lip, and pulled back just enough to speak without having to mumble against his mouth. “Sorry,” she said.

“Why are you apologizing?” Gold asked, his voice so small, Belle wondered that he had it in him to be so small.

“This... It's been a really long, strange today,” Belle replied, and sighed. She relaxed a little against him, he was still strung tight. “I... I'm sorry if I've been... I mean, if I've made you feel uncomfortable in some way.”

He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. She felt less cold, as she hid her face in his neck, in his hair. “You haven't,” he told her gently.

She was still and enjoyed the fact that he was warm, and keeping her warm too. Despite him being almost a nervous wreck, and herself probably not really that far off from being one herself, Belle still thought it was wonderful. She could feel the skin of his chest against her own where the lacy black bra wasn't in between them, and she could smell his hair and his neck without having to feel guilty and secretive about it.

She stayed glued to him, waiting for him to speak, maybe tell her something, but there was just the quiet, and the dimness of the room. She started to stroke his arms and then his back with his palms, soothingly, with long and slow caresses that she hoped were interpreted as caring and grounding touches, rather than sensuous ones.

“I need a smoke,” Gold said quietly, but didn't move, not before she did, and slowly disentangled
herself from him.

“You stopped smoking a year ago,” Belle said, frowning.

“They'll have some in the bar,” Gold said, and started buttoning his shirt back up. Belle felt a twinge in her heart when he did that, as she climbed out of the bed.

“I'll just brush my teeth then,” she replied. “And, if you want to talk...” she said, turning at the threshold before flicking the lights on.

“Yes,” he replied simply, and didn't even look at her in the eyes.

Belle sighed and closed the door behind herself. She started to wash her make-up off, and heard him leave. As she applied cleanser to her face a bit more vigorously than maybe necessary, she wondered if he really went out for a smoke, or if he was leaving into the dead of night. Maybe this was why he was seeing that psychologist, Belle thought. She also wondered if he needed to be alone, or if it would have been better to go after him. In fact, now that she thought about it, it irritated her immensely, that he hadn't wanted to talk to her.

After a brief moment in the bathroom spent scrubbing and thinking, Belle came to the conclusion that even though Gold didn't want to talk with her, she still wanted to talk to him. Emptying a bottle of white wine was the second on top of her to do list, but she decided not to mix the two just yet. She put on a looser-fitting day-gown and a shawl, pulled her hair back in a pony tail, and followed Gold down to the bar.

He wasn't there, but the bartender directed her towards the garden terrace where there was a smoking area. Belle was glad she'd had the presence of mind to bring the shawl, because it was cold out. At least it wasn't raining. There were a couple of other people out smoking in the dead of the night, but Belle couldn't see Gold anywhere amongst them. She was about to give up her search and go see if the car was still out on the parking lot when she heard the sound of cracking pottery from amongst the hedges of the topiary garden.

Other people outside had heard it too, but chose to ignore it, chatting the evening away with their beer and wine glasses in hand. Belle pursued the crashing sounds into the rows of tall hedges. When these sounds stopped, she chased the tiny orange gleam of the end of a cigarette being inhaled in the night.

Where there had been a circle of potted plants in the midst of the garden, there was now debris of clay and plants and black earth. The lights from the hotel bar terrace illuminated the garden slightly, and Belle stood staring at the hundreds of tiny pieces of broken clay pots scattered all about. She looked up, and stared at Gold, leaning on his cane with one hand while inhaling smoke from the cigarette with the other.

Belle approached him slowly, and she saw when he noticed her arrival, it was in the hitch of his breath, and in the prolonged exhalation of smoke. She looked down at the ground again.

“I'll be gone in the morning,” he said gruffly.

Belle frowned. “I think they'll settle for cash or credit, if you let me handle this mess, and they won't need to expel you,” she said, and looked up. “So I guess you're a little frustrated?”

Gold inhaled smoke. “That's a nicely put understatement.” He threw the cigarette on the gravelled ground and extinguished with his heel. “It's not just this.”

“Something related to what happened in London?” Belle inquired. She had to admit, she was curious
what had warranted that expulsion, had Gold destroyed something there too?

“Yes, but I'd rather not bore you with that.”

Belle walked closer towards him, slowly, and heard the broken pottery crank underneath her shoes.

“I don't think this is ideal, I mean, you going on a nightly mission to destroy a garden, but I was really looking forward to going to Blenheim with you tomorrow,” Belle said softly. She imagined she was speaking to an angry, scared animal and trying to calm it down. “Of course, they will probably arrest you there if you do this in their garden, so I'd rather you resort to a punching bag or maybe a vigorous walk while you're with me,” she went on talking gently, and once she reached his side, she put her hand his, the one that rested on his cane, and smoothed his cheek with the other.

“So what are you suggesting?” He asked.

“I suggest that... we open a bottle of wine, finish it between each other, you can talk or be quiet all night, and I'll listen to you if you talk. If you don't talk, I'll give you a neck massage, because you're far too tense. Either way, eventually you'll return to bed with me, and I think we should make out like teenagers until we fall asleep.”

He seemed half-decided about it, and she thought he was about to protest, so she rose up to her toes as she wound her hand to the back of his neck, and kissed him. Whatever he was about to say, Belle would never know, since he gave up trying to say it and kissed her back.

“Thank you for offering to deal with this,” Gold said when the kiss broke, and he glanced around them at the pottery shards on the ground.

“You can give me a foot massage tomorrow to make up for it. And drive me all around England,” Belle replied, all smiles and good humour, as she took hold of both of his hands and tugged him to follow her back inside.

“Do you always wear garters?” Gold asked suddenly, as she led him through the topiary garden.

Belle laughed. “No, I got that especially for tonight. I was shopping yesterday, when you called.”

“I was just thinking I can't believe you've worn that under your dresses for three years,” he said, and Belle laughed more.

“You can imagine, if you like.” She wrapped her arm around his elbow and leaned closer to him. It was like a proper romantic moonlight garden walk, almost, except for the fine details of what else had happened haunting in the background.

“Belle,” he said, as they walked between tall hedges that might have been from a labyrinth if they weren't so strict and straight and completely predictable.

“Yes, James,” she replied.

“I'm sorry for ruining your holiday.”

“You haven't,” she said, and squeezed his arms. “I...” she halted them both. “It's not an ideal timing for either one of us. I can hardly have any hard feelings you if you don't want to tell me what's going on, because I'll fly off next week anyhow. But I'd really like to be here for you, while I am here,” she said, pleading, and hoping she might give him some courage to let her in.

He kissed her temple. “You're far too kind.”
They gazed at each others' eyes for a moment, and Belle felt her heart stop for a beat. “Let's get you inside, you're getting cold.” Mr Gold said, urging her onwards.

Belle sent him up in the room alone while she went to the night-time receptionist to explain as kindly as she could how about twelve or so potted rosemary and thyme had exploded in the garden during the course of the evening, and how she might discuss the compensation of them in depth in the morning. The receptionist took in the details of their short conversation and Belle wished them good night very amiably.

The second return to the room that night was a little less loaded an affair. Belle stepped in and found Gold looking for his phone charger from his suitcase. She found it amusingly ordinary, and grinned as she danced past him to the corner of the room, to the comfy chair where she'd piled all her shopping bags, where the chocolates, biscuits and wine were all hidden. She didn't care for throwing up as well as having a headache in the morning, so she settled for just one bottle of white wine and put it on the desk next to her laptop, and went to the bathroom to look for – bingo – plastic cups to drink the wine from.

“Tut tut. Plastic cups for toothbrushes in Downton Abbey, I don't think the dowager countess would approve,” Belle declared as she returned from the bathroom and poured the wine in the cups.

He replied with something about the immaterial value return of glass or porcelain, and dishwashers and room service, but his mind wasn't really into it, not while he was looking for something else. Belle took a peek over his shoulder because she was interested in what he packed in his suitcase. Three years ago she would have guessed human bones.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“I want to know what's in here,” she said, and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You can use mine.”

“But I won't be able to use yours forever, what if I need mine soon. What if I left mine in the hotel room in London,” said Gold, his physical appearances not betraying a dislike to being held so familiarly.

“Then you'll call them tomorrow and ask them if their cleaners found it after you left,” she said calmly, “and you can buy them as well, I bet there are a ton of shops in Oxford... Oh right, they'd have British socket pairing then.” Belle let go of him and went to dig her adorable Hello Kitty pyjamas from underneath her pillow. She'd considered buying a sexy nightgown at Marks and Spencer's but she'd gotten a hold of herself when she'd calculated the prices in dollars. With Hello Kitty in hand, she slipped into the bathroom and changed into the something a little more comfortable.

Upon her return, she was afraid he'd comment on her outfit, but he didn’t. They didn't drink the entire bottle of wine either, just one cup each, while Belle gave him a brief neck massage, her sitting on the edge of the bed and he on the floor, squeezed between her legs. They were silent for the most part of it.

“The thing is, I'm morbidly depressed,” Gold said, declared even.

“A lot of people are these days,” Belle replied. She'd sort of guessed that much. “But you're working on it?”

“I guess I am.”
“Did you read Jane Austen for your depression?” Belle asked, half-teasing.

That got a sound that might have been an amused snort out of him. “My therapist encourages me to try new things. But she didn’t tell me to read Austen, I got the idea from that article.” He sounded a little more relaxed, and a bit drowsy.

“I think it’s brave of you to try new things,” Belle said. “I try to remind myself too, to try new things.” It's why I think it's time I tried some new line of work, she added to herself. She felt her fingers start to tire from the massage, and so she just let them slip them down, and go still. She half-stifled a yawn, at which point he escaped from between her legs, and Belle marvelled half-consciously how elegantly he moved, even with a bad ankle.

“Why don’t you get in bed. You're tired.”

Belle leaned back slow until she lay down against the mattress. “I am in bed, technically,” she replied. “And I'm afraid if my head touches the pillow I'll fall asleep without my designated kissing.” She yawned, and didn't catch herself in time to stop it.

“I can kiss you awake in the morning, if you want,” he replied from the bathroom.

Belle shook her head and started pulling back the bed cover, to find the bedsheets and blankets underneath. “It’s not the same.” The door between them closed. Resigned to her fate, she slipped between the crisp sheets and made herself a comfortable space there.

She looked at the ceiling and the railings of the poster bed, and how the single light coming from the table lamp on the desk across the room illuminated the room, and where it threw shadows. Belle kept herself awake from second to second, waiting for Gold to return, and when he did, he first of course turned off the lamp.

Belle listened to him cross the room with his gait, the one he had when he moved without his cane, and then she felt as much as heard him join her in bed. She turned on her side and reached for him. She was fairly surprised when she found her palm slipping across satin. She cuddled a little closer.

“I see you're still awake,” Gold muttered.

“Mnhmhm,” Belle agreed, and grinned as she reached closer to him to kiss him, but he reached her first, and gave her a brief kiss, just a half-moist touch on the lips.

“More, please,” Belle muttered.

“So I take it you like kissing,” he observed with his dry humour, while Belle wrapped her arm around him and pulled him closer into a slower, longer, wetter kiss. When it ended, Belle sighed.

“Why did you stop?” She asked, not wanting to open her eyes, because she was feeling very sleepy now.

“You're pushing me off the edge of the bed, darling,” he replied, and even if she was, Belle was glad that she heard a smile in his voice.

“I'll try and keep just one half of the bed,” Belle replied as she retreated a little bit. She smiled and reclined her head against the pillow, and felt wonderful again, all tingly and warm, when she felt his hand at her waist. She even made a noise, a pleased humm.

“Good night, miss French,” Gold said.
“Good night, Mr. Gold,” Belle managed to mutter, and then she was too tired to say or do anything except fall asleep.
An alarm woke up Belle in the morning, and she threw her hand on the chirping phone to silence it. She'd set it up so she wouldn't miss the breakfast buffet and the fabulous pancakes. On the other hand, the breakfast table wasn't quite as comfortable as the hotel bed. She re-set the alarm to go off again thirty minutes later and returned the phone by the bed, and she did all this while lying on her side, facing the rest of the room. Belle was fairly sure that his soon-ex-boss was still with her, she'd glanced at him when she'd woken up to the alarm, but he was so quiet. She wasn't sure if she should turn around and greet him with a good morning. She wasn't even sure if he was breathing.

"Why the alarm?" Gold asked. Belle thought it odd, he sounded sleepy. Earlier in her life she couldn't have fathomed of a tired sounding Mr Gold, such a thing being so entirely out of character.

Belle turned about slowly and rolled a little closer to him. "Pancakes," she replied, smiling, and slipped her hand over his shoulder to his neck to nudge his face closer to hers, and she almost had her good morning kiss.

"This is a kiss, not a pancake," Gold told her, and she nodded, before giving him a tiny, light kiss.

"The alarm will go off again in - ah - thirty minutes," Belle replied, stifling a yawn at the end, and gave him another kiss, "I can have my pancake and eat it too." She kissed him for the third time, and finally he responded, even if it was just slow and lazy. Slow and lazy was perfect for a hotel morning of an impromptu holiday anyhow.

Belle let go of the back of his head and slid her hand down to his waist as she hugged herself a little closer to him, and she felt a little joy when his arm came around her and stroke her side as they kissed, soft, shallow, lingering and slow kisses. Once she started to feel too excited though, she pulled back, and snuggled him, ducking her head under his chin, and took a deep breath.

"I like kisses," she muttered, reaffirming something she thought she had said during the night.

Gold had gone still entirely, and tense.

"Was yesterday nice?" Belle asked. "Did you enjoy yourself, despite the supermarket?"

"It was an excellent Tuesday, thank you," he replied.

"What would you like to do today?" Belle felt him relax a little, after a moment, and his hand gently ghosted across her skin, over her arm. Belle found the sensation delightful.

"It is your holiday," Gold replied, "and Blenheim is fine."

Belle was happy with the answer. She would have preferred a single "you" as a reply, but another
day as a tourist wouldn't be terrible either. And Gold did make for nice company, even outside his new role as her chauffeur.

She felt his fingers trail up from near her elbow, up to her shoulder, and from there to her chin to gently urge her to tilt her face up again. Belle thought she shouldn't have, but she gave into the temptation anyhow. She could wash her face with cold water once she slipped in the bathroom. There was a limit to the hours of kissing she had left with this man and it would be a shame to waste any, she thought, commending herself for this reasoning, as she kissed him, and kissed him. It was all just lips and slowly roaming hands, and having to try stifle the aching urge inside her for more seemed to make the kisses even sweeter.

"You know," he whispered against her lips, kissed her, and rolled her on her back. Belle barely stifled a whimper, but at that moment she had already been partaking in an exercise of self-control, "I could give you a hand, if you like," he murmured in her ear. Belle didn't whimper, but she sighed with joy instead. She closed her eyes and imagined for a second what he'd just offered her, imagined it in fine detail. Too fine, in fact. She dropped her hands off of him and sighed again, this time only briefly in self-created disappointment.

"Thank you for the offer. I just... I don't know. It doesn't really feel right to me," Belle said and opened her eyes. "Under the circumstances." She felt a little silly, saying it out loud, but so it was. She thought sex should be sharing. Give and take. Not just taking. And she wasn't sure she was ready to be so open and vulnerable all on her own while he was not.

He kissed her briefly, it was just a peck on her lips, and retreated. "As you wish," he said. Belle wondered if he was upset, but it was impossible to determine his mood from his voice just then. "Then I'll leave you to wait for your breakfast alarm to ring," he said and left the bed to go to the bathroom. Belle's eyes followed him around the room in the soft half-light of morning. She couldn't help but stare at him, imagine his proposal again, imagine him without any of his clothes on.

The door clicked and Belle closed her eyes as her hand flew swiftly down the front of her pyjama trousers, finding herself slick there. She began to rub herself furiously with her index finger, and hoped he would stay in the bathroom at least five minutes, but she wondered if she'd be even able to do this. Belle had no intention of allowing herself to get caught, so she listened to every sound Gold made.

When she heard the shower turn on she could relax. She sighed as she had when Gold had murmured in her ear, and she imagined it was his hand and his finger. She kept quiet and listened to the shower, imagining it was just the English rain.

Chapter End Notes

Same goes on in that shower.
Since people are so curious about erections, I realized we need another trip to Baba Yaga's fabulous practice.

Gold had been staring at Babicky for a minute through, since his arrival. He moved the focus of his eyes past the old stone-faced psychologist, at the window. It was late in the evening, the sun had gone down. He could see Christmas lights across the street, adorning several windows of the building on the opposite side of the road. He frowned and directed his gaze elsewhere.

“I don't want to talk about my son tonight,” Gold informed the Eastern-European hen. Her vocabulary and grammar were good but there was still that tell-tale intonation in Babicky’s voice, revealing her origins.

He should have cancelled this appointment, but he hadn't been in this mood before late last night, when a drawn-out phone call had kept him awake, and then the thought of the phone call had kept him awake even later.

“Dad, why don't you get Skype, it'd be a million times easier and cheaper too,” had been the only part of the talk that hadn't aggravated him overtly, and that had only aggravated him modestly. He'd made a mental note to delegate that to the clever Miss French, but he’d forgotten to do so during the day, having spent the business hours locked up in his study and only permitting Miss French inside, and only for the purpose of bringing him coffee.

He was hankering for a smoke. Even if he hadn't quit smoking, and still carried some, it would be a problem with the good doctor here if he'd tried to light one up. He tapped the armrests with his fingers as his eye roamed over Babicky's assortments of forest-related art hanging on the walls.

“That's fine. Christmas is the most stressful time of the year.” Babicky went to her desk, reached into her drawer and pulled out a form. She put it on a clipboard and grabbed a pencil from the desk, and handed it to Gold. “We can do a little progress evaluation again.”

Gold had filled in the same form twice before now, and ticked the boxes without wasting his time over-thinking his replies, and returned the form to the crone. She was wrapped inside a loose-fitting wool dress and a shawl wrapped around her. Her fine and wispy hair looked soft like down, and the delicacy of her appearance was in a strange contrast with the rock-hard demeanour with which she conducted her sessions. It was not unkind rock-ness, it was simply that she didn't let Gold under her skin in any way. While she and her personality were in plain sight, with her peculiar and eccentric wood-bead jewellery and earth-tone clothes mixing comfort with functionality, that was as deep as one could get with the crone – what you saw was what you got.

Babicky only glanced at the paper. She was very good at taking in a lot of information at a fraction of a second glance, or at least she appeared so. “Until now we’ve been skirting the issue of your personal life, your intimate personal life that is, because your relationship with your son and ex-wife have dominated our sessions, One might even think your hanging on to the past is preventing you from having a future, but perhaps you would like to talk about these boxes you've ticked yourself? About your lack of interest in forming relationships?”
Gold almost squirmed in his seat. He was only thinking of how damned to-the-point and straightforward Babicky could be.

“I know you prefer above all that we be efficient with our appointments,” Babicky said. “If you want to be efficient, in my expert opinion I think we should discuss your son, or your sex life. If you wish to choose a different topic, then you can also choose to do so. Of course.”

Gold gritted his teeth together. Sometimes had the suspicious feeling that his therapist was taunting him or toying with him. It was hard to say for real. Then again, maybe she'd be easier on him if he didn't hassle her so much about the cost of every minute of her time, and

Babicky went through her notes. “You briefly mentioned the last time you filled one of these forms, when I asked for elaboration, that you've had problems in this area, and then you said, no, you don't want to talk about it, and spent the rest of the session listing ways in which you felt you were being personally victimized by your ex-wife. Do you think you have a problem with women?”

Gold grabbed the armrests of the chair he was in, and contemplated leaving early.

“So, if I start with something easier. When was the last time you had sex? And doesn't have to be coitus, everything counts. Dry-humping, anal, blow jobs, hand jobs,” the old bat counted the list with her fingers. “Or would you prefer I speak less directly?” Her eyes narrowed. “I could come up with some beautiful euphemisms, if you like?”

Gold was certain that she was laughing inside at him, but there was no hint of amusement. She just was, like an ancient rock, everything plain and out in the open.

“There's no need to,” he replied acidly, “your language is fine.”

“Maybe you'd feel easier talking to a male colleague of mine?” Babicky asked, her tone almost motherly.

“God no,” he replied swiftly.

He was tempted to go on a tempestuous rant about how Milah had personally made him feel victimized by showing up in London for the Christmas time completely out of the blue, which had made him entirely cancel his own plans to visit.

“Everything about our lives is interconnected. Things that get you down in one sphere of your life will reflect in other parts of it as well. But also, improvement in one sphere can help you deal with your other problems, do you understand?” Babicky said.

“Yes, yes,” Gold replied, irritated that she had to ask that. “And in answer to your question, it was three years ago. Almost exactly three years ago.”

Babicky nodded and sat silently. She didn’t ask anything. Gold presumed she waited him to fill in with more details, or to change the subject, like he'd done the time he'd almost talked about the matter on his own volition, almost.

He slipped briefly into the memory. “She was nice. I saw her about four months, and then we broke it off. I broke it off.” Gold looked into the furthest corner of the room he could. “I couldn't trust her.”

“What did she do?”

Gold shrugged. “She was more attracted to my money than to me.”
“Did she treat you badly?”

Gold covered his eyes with his hand and sighed. “No, she was very... very obliging.”

“How did your money come to play a part?”

“It didn’t really, but she didn’t earn that much in that job of hers, two jobs in fact, and with a kid to take care of too, it was something she struggled with, sometimes.”

“Did she ask you for money?”

Gold shook his head. “No, never.”

“Expensive gifts?”

Gold shook his head. “Dinner was always on me.”

“Three-star Michelin restaurants?” Babicky asked, and Gold started to feel irritated.

“No, we most often had takeaway chinese, or I cooked for her,” he replied. “She didn't like eating out.”

Babicky nodded, and scribbled on her notepad. She didn't say anything, but Gold heard a lot of things in his own head, his thoughts reminding him of how Vera had never wanted to be a burden on him, and how she'd yelled at him for being completely irrational and crazy.

Well, that he was. The fact that he was sitting in Babicky's office was only one small piece of the evidence gathered around him.

Gold stopped facepalming and looked at the ceiling. He hadn't stared at the ceiling this session yet. He could feel the seconds of this expensive appointment ticking away. He could afford them, but he was always thinking back to a time when he should have ransomed someone to be able to sit here. It was unnerving how Babicky was so quiet he couldn't even hear her breathe.

“It's like there's a wall around me,” Gold managed to say. “And sometimes, when I've been with someone, it's like the walls get higher, and I feel like I'm suffocating.”

“Is it anxiety?” Babicky asked.

“Anxiety... yes. I suppose it is.”

“And you feel anxious when people come close to you?”

“Yes.”

Babicky scribbled down her notes.

“I'm not sure I... function right anymore,” Gold said, and felt it was like he had his teeth pulled out.

“What do you mean?” Babicky asked.

“In my last three... relationships... I've had occasional problems. With uhm.” Good grief did the old crone have to stare at him with her eyes wide like that? She resembled an owl sometimes, especially with how the rims of her spectacles were so round. She blinked, and it was the owl blinking, a hunter seeking mice. “With the erection,” Gold added, and felt like that was a molar just plucked out of his proverbial mouth. He thought he would have preferred to have had this talk drunk. Babicky's office
only had water and herbal tea to offer him.

“It might be less severe than you think. In this world, everything’s filled to the brim with sex, sex everywhere. Amazing orgasms and beautiful bodies all over advertising, films, television, music. It's perfectly alright, if you're not always able to come to attention when your drill sergeant calls you by your name – ah I love that euphemism – but it's normal and fine. You're hardly sixteen.”

Gold shook his head, frowning. “More than half attempts fail.”

Babicky looked worried for a second. “That is not normal.” She scribbled notes. “Have you seen anyone about it? A medical doctor?”

Gold stared at distant corners again, and almost groaned. “I did, and they did tests and I can't have viagra, they said, because it’s a psychological issue, they said.”

“And how long ago was this?”

He shrugged. “Five or six years ago”, he muttered.

“Better late than never,” Babicky said and scrawled notes. “So everything works when you're alone?”

“Yes,” Gold said, clawing at the furniture again, trying to make himself stay still, even though he had a very dear wish that the floor would open up and swallow him.

“And how often do you masturbate?” Babicky asked.

Gold narrowed his eyes. “I fail to see the relevance of that question.”

“Like I said earlier, everything is related to everything. You have a lot of built-up aggression and anxiety that's accumulated across many years, and very few means of releasing your stress. If the way how you deal with your inability to connect with other people on an intimate level is reflecting how you shut yourself up in other ways, we could start find a comfortable way for you to start unraveling this ball of anxiety inside your mind.”

“Are you proposing you try get me an erection?” Gold asked, and it would have sounded maybe flirtatious but there was too much venom in his voice for misunderstandings.

Babicky laughed, and Gold actually felt a little bewildered by it. She hadn't done so much as genuinely smile before. “Mr Gold, what an interesting suggestion, but I am not a sex therapist. Also, it's unethical for me to liaisons with my clients,” the old lady said, and winked with her owly eye.
Belle could barely keep her hands off Gold during Wednesday. She took every excuse and some more to keep close to him. Partially it was in order to voicelessly relate to him that she was still very much partial to him, even though the level of their physical intimacy was modest, and the rest of the reason was because she enjoyed wrapping her arm around his and giving him brief kisses, just as much as she enjoyed talking with him, and talk they did, about Churchill, and the Queen, of what Britain had been like twenty years before when Gold had lived there, and of the future.

One thing about their conversation that surprised Belle in the most positive way during the day was his displeasure with financial politics in Britain as well as the states, as they were in the car, driving back from their day-trip at the palace. “If I was twenty-something in this day and age, it would take a lot more than just hard work to run the company I've run. It's ridiculous nowadays.”

“Are you going to talk to Keynesian economics to me next?” Belle asked, grinning. “Because I like a man who can speak socio-economic theory, especially when combined with great kissing.”

Gold glanced at her, obviously bemused. “I thought your degree was from media.”

“I read everything,” Belle replied. “Although... I do admit, that subject can be a bit of a drag to study as an outsider from finance and politics.”

“But you started anyway?”

Belle nodded. “I was writing some pieces during the year, and I wanted to write something really... really current. And broken economics are the talk of the day, aren't they? You read every day about people with more than one job, with no health insurance, one catastrophe away from having their life smashed. I wanted to write something about that, but I ended up with nothing.”

“Are you... do you have anything to rely onto, when you quit?” Gold asked.

Belle shrugged. “I think I'll manage. I always have.” She forced herself to smile, even though her self-esteem about the matter wasn't quite as steely as she wanted it to be. “I think I'll be alright, especially with that stellar letter of recommendation. Which I think I'll edit a bit, to make even more amazing.”

That earned her a genuine laugh from him, although a short one. Belle felt like her insides glowed. She'd made him laugh! Her weak smile grew stronger.

“Of course, you'll deserve every praise,” he said.

“I do?”
“You are eloquent, intelligent, and handle the situation without fail in a tight spot,” Gold said, “Belle, you are a treasure.”

Belle frowned. She wanted to say that she should have asked him for a raise then, but she kept her mouth shut, and directed her attention outside, at the monotony of the roadside view. The quiet lull in the conversation didn't feel too bad, not especially with so much traffic on the road.

“What made you change your mind?” Belle asked suddenly.

“Hm?”

“About me. Why did you call me, after you sent me packing from London?”

She watched him rap his fingers against the wheel before he replied.

“You know how it is.” Gold sighed. “You don't really know how much you miss someone, before they're gone.”

“But you knew what was going to happen...?” Belle tried to ask about the issue of the night before as delicately as possible.

“Chance of,” Gold said as curtly as possible, and suddenly it seemed as if though driving was very important and required all his attention. The following silence was not as cosy as the previous ones had been.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm really, really glad you did, I just don't... understand all of this. I'm flying home next week, and you're staying here, and you...”

“It does sound a little unhinged,” Gold admitted, staring at the road ahead. “I just thought, it would be a shame to not... try, before you go.” He heaved such a heavy sigh.

She gnawed her lips in silence, not knowing what to say.

“I don't trust many people, Belle, but I trust you.” Gold glanced at her very briefly and returned his attention to the traffic. “You're eloquent and intelligent and... many other good attributes.”

Belle nodded. “Do you think it would be possible for me to investigate your good attributes some more tonight?” She queried.

“Drive straight to the hotel?”

“Dinner first. In Oxford. Let's drive around in circles looking for parking space and then find something a bit less wholesome than hotel restaurant food, I'm in the mood for something a little less fancy,” Belle suggested, and she was already getting her phone out of her bag in order to look for a suitable place.

“She is eloquent, intelligent, and eats at the fish and chips shop,” Gold said.

“Ah, brilliant idea,” Belle agreed. She leaned sideways and pecked a kiss on his cheek. “Thanks.”

“I liked fish and chips,” Belle muttered as she stumbled into the hotel room. “But I think I'll wait until my next visit before I have more of them.” She was tired and with good reason – they had a five-hour walking tour of a palace and its gardens behind them, and some rather greasy food to top it off with. Belle threw her coat and bag around the room to most suitable looking places and threw herself
sluggishly on top of the bed. Room service had made the bed very nicely, and all the pillows were fluffed up and arranged neatly, until she scattered them about and took one to hug it.

“Should I draw a bath for you?”

In contrast, Gold looked completely impervious to the hardships of the tour and the food. Belle squinted at him and wondered what made him so damn tough.

“Mmhm. Yes please,” Belle replied, the pillows muting her reply. She had her eyes closed, but she heard him move about the rooms, heard the water flowing into the tub in the bathroom, and the rustle of fabric. She also felt how the edge of the bed dipped when he sat at the end of the bed, by her feet, and she felt his touch on her ankles as he caressed them briefly before he removed her shoes.

“Mm. They're sore,” Belle said.

“I thought so.”

He put one of her feet in his lap and rubbed the sole with his thumbs. Belle was so surprised she made a little squeal and glanced over her shoulder.

“Oh, don't stop,” she said, when Gold seemed prepared to drop the idea. “I was just surprised. That's all.”

Belle reclined back into the pillows face first and concentrated on how good the foot massage felt. “That's amazing,” she muttered. “Seriously. I won't ever leave if you keep doing that.”

Gold's only reply was an amused sort of snort.

Belle moaned with pleasure and hugged the pillow. Her entire body felt tingly and good. She came up with a half-formed thought about nerve-endings in the soles of feet affecting the entire body, and she abandoned that trail when another roll of Gold’s thumb elicited another moan out of her.

Belle had had men be attentive towards her, especially during the time of her studies. The small kindnesses and superficial compliments seemed to have always often, almost inevitably led to the giving parties becoming rather expectant that she reciprocate to these attentions with sex, accompanied with either whiny clinging, or worse, passive-aggressive hostility. All that had led her to feeling extremely suspicious of any favours. She pondered this as she surfed the wave of indescribable pleasure that came from the rubbing of her sore feet that had been in shoes far impractical for such a long walk as she'd had today.

Belle also thought about what Gold had said, that he trusted her. She supposed she trusted him back too. There he was, driving her around, drawing him baths and rubbing her feet, and there was very little for him to gain from it, just some very extreme cuddling perhaps at best. Belle had met plenty of guys who appeared nice but weren't perhaps so nice when getting to know them better. And she couldn't be sure when was the last time anyone had been this nice to her, and this was a man who wasn't exactly known for his cordial manners or gentleness of spirit.

She found herself wishing she could do something for him.

“Thank you, it's wonderful. I think I'll go soak myself in the bath tub now,” Belle muttered and rolled off the bed as much as she stood up, knowing she was about as elegant probably as a drunken elephant. The best thank you she could come up was a brief kiss, and then she sauntered into the bathroom, feeling his eyes on her all the way and up until there was a door between them.

There was barely enough water in the tub to cover her ankles, but she discarded her clothes quickly
and sat in the bathtub, where she hugged her knees close. She felt far more tired than she'd planned to, but she assumed she wouldn't fall asleep in the bath.

“If I'm not out in fifteen minutes, you need to check on me if I've drowned!” Belle raised her voice to reach through the door.

There was a muted yes beyond.

Once there was enough water, she closed the English water taps, and leaned back. She heard him talk, on the phone she presumed, and heard how his accent got thicker on the phone. Belle smiled, even though she knew she ought to be making some kind of precautionary plan for how rotten she would feel about a week forward, when she'd be alone at Heathrow, waiting to board a plane to return to a land where she had no idea how she'd manage, if she was to quit her job.

But the land was far far away, and she was right now here, in this fairy tale, and she knew enough of disappointment and hardships, that fairy tales were meant to be enjoyed, while they lasted. So for that Wednesday night she reckoned, everything was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Mm-mm. Fish and chips and foot massages, that is what fantasies are made of. Well, mine anyway.

She actually hated the place. She lived in Paris for a reason: She loved the city of Love and Fashion. The labyrinth village districts, the boulangeries and patisseries, the Seine and the Notre Dame. But London was not inconveniently far away for when she had the sudden urge to visit. Two and a half hours by train, and although she deplored having to sit idly, it was not so bad when it was for the sake of going somewhere.

Paris had been beautiful, sunny, crisp with the arrival of autumn. London was gloomy, foggy, rainy when she arrived, and she made faces up at the sky as she left St Pancras station and caught a taxi just outside. She smoked one cigarette at St Pancras, and another as soon as she reached her destination. She stood outside on the street under a red umbrella and sucked almost violently on her lipstick-marked fag, tapping her foot, and wanting to get done with the smoke as soon as she could, so she might get in and leave the drizzle.

She went to the door and rang the bell. Self-consciously, she rearranged her hair, although perhaps that was a bit silly. She'd seen a light inside, but hoped it wasn't just left on by accident, surely someone was in, this late? Or maybe they'd gone to eat out. Or maybe they were gone to theatre, or to catch a film. Even though it was a week night. They might have.

She rang the bell again, impatiently, and was glad when she heard something inside. Doors opening, footsteps.

"Coming!" A man called out.

The door opened and there was the man, fast approaching thirty, with a stubble on his chin and dark rims under his eyes.

"Mum?" He asked.

She grinned nervously. "Surprise?"

Her son shook his head, as if to wake himself up. Then he seemed to remember himself, and the fact that it was raining.

"Let me get that for you," he said, stifling a yawn as he reached for her luggage and pulled it inside. She followed him, and he led her inside.

"Who was that?" The American wife called out to him from inside. She still wasn't sure just what to make of the américaine. On the other hand, she was greatly enthusiastic about anyone who punched her ex-husband in the face, but after the wedding, Emma had called her out on pushing dear old
Jimmy's buttons and causing trouble. And she rather didn't care for being told off by her daughter-in-law, even insensibly drunk one at four in the morning.

"It's just my dear mama," Bae said, "she's come to surprise us," he continued.

Emma and her stomach appeared from the kitchen. She was wearing a worn old beige hoodie and some saggy slacks. Milah gave her a once-over with her eyes.

"I brought you some maternity fashion from Paris," she announced, and seated herself in the lounge.

"I'll just, uh, go put the kettle on," Bae said and vanished into the kitchen. Emma sat down slowly, not right next to Milah herself, but not on the farthest seat either. With her reading glasses on, no make-up, and lacklustre hair pulled back in a ponytail, she looked like she could have been forty, not twenty-four. And the frown, that didn't revitalize her either.

"I also brought some cosmetics," Milah continued, and smiled.

"I appreciate the notion, but I rarely have time to powder my nose when I chase pickpockets and car thieves," Emma replied. Milah shrugged. "I have some great concealer for bruises and cuts."

"Did you get here just to bring me concealer?" Emma asked her pointedly.

Milah straightened herself in a dignified manner. "Not entirely no. I just..."

"His father's just flown to London, and you appear here for some reason the day after?" Emma asked directly.

Milah made a face. "And why should I not have come? We'll have our first and only grandchild in a few months."

Emma rolled her eyes, but said nothing. Then Bae returned, carrying three mugs of tea on a tray.

"Here we go mum," he almost sighed as he set down the tray and then settled on a chair.

Milah glanced about the room. It was so... so bare, and so undecorated. And small. With London expenses, they wouldn't be able to afford anything more spacious, of course. She thought of her own perfectly lovely house in Paris. And of the people there.

"I think Killian is cheating on me," she announced suddenly, dramatically.

Emma rolled her eyes and drank her tea.

"Mum, you said the same about Ronald, and he never was, and then about Patrick," Bae explained patiently.

"But I was right about Patrick!" Milah replied indignantly.

"Only because you practically encouraged him to!" Bae retorted.

"Well, he should have known I don't always mean what I say," Milah declared and left her tea untouched. She sprang off the sofa and went to her luggage and started tearing presents out.

"I thought I'd stay a few days, if it's not too inconvenient, I thought I could take Emma shopping, for clothes, and help you around the kitchen," she made a veritable pile of cosmetics, neatly packed
clothes and even Parisian bakery goods on the coffee table.

"Well," Emma said, blinking. She paused. "Let me just go and put the sheets in the guest bed." She stood up slowly.

"Honey, are you sure you'd-" Bae started.

"Stay here and talk with your mother. Please." Emma gave Milah a forced smiled and left the room, her tea half-drunk. She made slow progress up the narrow stairs and her heavy steps could be heard well down into the lounge.

"You're in London to piss off dad," Bae said.

Milah crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I most certainly am not." She hesitated, and frowned. "Just a little bit. Oh darling, my baby boy, don't you see, he's going to be a millionaire next week and then live here in London with you, and he'll spoil you and Emma's baby and I don't want him to. *I* want to spoil your baby." Milah squirmed.

"And there is absolutely no way for us to exist in a world where we could all spoil my child, mutually?" Bae asked.

Milah rolled her eyes at him. "Can't we just deny that he, or she, is one quarter Scottish and be done with that?"

Bae smiled weakly and shook his head. "Want something with tea?"

Milah glanced at the mug in front of her.

"Got any biscuits?"

"I'll get you biscuits, mum, and then... I am going to have to call dad, ok? Because I guess he won't want to come here for dinner tomorrow."

Milah watched Bae retreat into the kitchen. "Well, you tell him he's a right coward if he can't be in the same house with me!" She called after.

Tea. English tea. She stared at it.

She would have liked a half a glass of red wine, but tea it was. Milah grabbed the mug, and it was at least warm, still, unlike the house. She cradled the mug and leaned back. She missed Killian. The trouble with having a boyfriend so much younger than she was though, was the worry. She felt old. Almost fifty. Maybe she shouldn't smoke so much, it made her skin grey. But old habits died hard.

Chapter End Notes

Milah was suddenly possessed by the spirit of Edina Monsoon.

Her ex-boyfriend-or-husband Patrick's full name is Patrick Maitland.
Interlude: From London to New York

Chapter Summary

Emma's internal reflections on the state of the world in relationship to the sprog spawn inside her.

Before she’d gone to bed, Emma had returned halfway to downstairs and wished her good nights to Milah and Bae. She didn’t go to bed straight away, not yet. She sat with the light on the nightstand, thinking for a while, before she grabbed the very worn old paperback copy of Sherlock Holmes and A Study in Scarlet.

Just one more week to go before her maternity leave started. The way Bae breathed down her neck about how she’d stuck around on the streets longer than necessary was aggravating her, but then again, an enormous amount of things were aggravating her: The events of the book, the attitude of her superiors with a couple of ladies who’d helped her with her inquiries about the missing crate of guns she’d searched all summer. Having to go to bed with a bucket next to her just in case she needed to vomit during the night.

The book was depressing her, but the Sherlock Holmes stories, just like the television show, gave her some sense of what London was all about. She felt a constant outsider to all of it, by the way she spoke and acted. How out of place she felt, even after six years. Maybe it was her decided strange-ness and position as perpetual outsider though, that helped her deal with the other Outsiders of the society too. Maybe? The approachable and confident American lady, a little more laid back than many of the strict and formal PCs of the Met.

She couldn’t believe she was homesick for States again. There was nothing but bad memories there – a string of foster care and a complete lack of future. London had started out as amazing, but now it was too foreign, too complicated. The job took all her energy, and she didn’t get much out of it in return. She chased shadows that vanished into the night, and sometimes she wondered if there was much point to anything she was doing. What sort of government would privatize the police force? Emma suspected in a few years she would be only guarding rich people’s privilege, in a world on its way to hell.

She’d just opened the possibility of moving to the States, maybe in a few years, when the doorbell had rung twice, and that had been the end of that conversation. States wasn’t necessarily better though, if anything it might be even worse. Emma kept thinking around and around in circles, counting the different ways in which Europe and the US were complete shit holes.

Maybe a winner’s move would be to give up the illusion of existing in a democratic world. Just give up, move to some totalitarian authoritative state, and work without question through the rest of your life. No lies about smallest persons being able to make a difference, just plain hard truths, that the rich and the powerful would always put their boots on top of the small and helpless. She thought of thug gangs, of mutilated and traumatised political refugees she knew were in the country without permission. Emma put the book away from her hands and cuddled her growing stomach instead, feeling very sombre, if not quite despairing.

Emma heard voices coming up the staircase eventually. She heard Milah go into the bathroom, and Bae put her luggage in the guest room, before he entered their bedroom.
“Circus is in town,” Bae said, flopped on the bed and reached to give her a kiss on the cheek.

“One crazy father and one neurotic mother. Almost makes me glad I don’t have parents,” Emma replied and returned him a kiss on the tip of his nose.

“How’s the sprog?” Bae asked her and put a hand over hers, twining his fingers between hers.

“I guess we’re okay. Is your dad still coming to visit tomorrow?”

Bae made a face. “Wasn’t too thrilled, but we’ll see.”

Emma ughed. “How about I just go to work tomorrow, and come home alone, and have a nice bath, while you take your parents out for dinner.”

Bae looked at her. “What if I ask mum to leave?”

Emma shrugged. “I don’t mind her in the house, but I just don’t want to be anywhere near those two when they get going, you get me? I don’t want to have to pull my badge while I’m out having dinner.” Emma made herself a little more comfortable, shifting down to lie on the bed instead of sitting.

“Fairy nuff. Though they’re in London to see the sprog spawn, not me,” Bae said, grinning, and stared at the rising lump.

“Can we talk about States again? Later?” Emma asked.

“As soon as the American-French invasion is over? But they’re maybe not going to ever leave, they’ll stay in London fighting over who is the better grandparent until there’s pistols, or swords maybe…”

“Great, so we let them stay in London while we smuggle ourselves to New York!”

Bae shrugged. “Maybe somewhere warmer?”

Emma nodded. “Good point. Florida?”

He grinned playfully. “Now all we need is for your government to give you permission to bring your sprog spawn and husband to Floridian soil, soil which I think is known for being swamp, or frequently swept over by hurricanes.”

Emma nodded twice. “This is a good plan. I like this plan.”

Bae kissed her forehead. “Also ask them to get me a job. Maybe the NSA could employ me to stalk at iPhone owners’ photographs, just in case terrorist take obviously condemning selfies.” He dragged himself off the bed and headed off again into the bathroom. Emma swore inside her head as she realized she had to go pee again, even if she just already had. Goddamn. Pregnancy.
Chapter Summary

Flashback to a few years earlier.

Cora—warning, but she's not featured, except as a glossed-over looming shadow.

There was a mutter, a shifting mattress beside him. Soon the clicking of heels on hardwood floors, and eventually the click of the front door. He didn't want to register any of it, just close his eyes and pretend he was asleep. He had no interest in exchanging meaningless pleasantries with her, especially not right after this was the sixth or seventh last time ever they'd agreed to do this.

He could already guess that later on that day, Cora would appear at the office, all appearances that she was visiting Regina, just like the last six or seven times, and then she'd drop by his office just to eyefuck him with a self-satisfied little smirk on her face which he always wanted to slap off.

After the front door closed eventually, he reached for his cigarettes and lit one. It was almost but not quite light out. Smoking wasn't what he usually did in his bed, but neither was Cora.

He glanced at the ashtray, stuck there was the remainder of Cora's long and slender menthol with the cherry-red lipstick stains. Eventually Gold stubbed his half-smoked cigarette and thought for the ninth time in recent memory that perhaps he should smoke less, but the thought was left in bed, while he took himself to shower, to wardrobe, and then downstairs where Dove was waiting for him.

"Text my assistant, I want my morning coffee at our customer's venue, and I'll be out for the rest of the day," Gold said and got in the car. He had yet again changed his phone into the latest best thing, and the new one had an unbearable touchscreen. He made himself a mental note to tell Miss French to get him a new phone, but that thought was left in front of the apartment building for the rest of the day. He was going to have to come up with a way to not make the day out of the office a complete waste of time. His mind was busy drawing mental lines between antique dealer locations and choices where to eat out until he got to the location.

Gold was so set to his routines, when he first got out of the car he wanted to ask Dove where the hell had he brought them, but he instead he irritatedly commented on the abject lack of Miss French, and went on to inspect the work.

There were two dozen people hurrying about, busy working. Some of them recognized him by the sudden frozen expressions on their faces, and they suddenly started pacing a lot faster. The sun had barely gotten up but the temperature was rising and another unbearably hot day of July was about to start. When Miss French handed Gold his coffee half an hour later, he failed to snark at her that the coffee wasn't hot, since it didn't need to be.

Miss French kept following him around morning while he walked about inspecting the place, occasionally stopping to talk with someone. It was getting hot, and air conditioning was limited on the site. People carried water bottles everywhere, Miss French had three in her bag, just in case. Gold was about to declare the tour over and direct himself and his assistant back to the car when they overheard drama unfold with the telltale signs of yelling and something being smashed.
“Not only! Is the air conditioning here worst ever! You people expect? Me to drink? This?!” The high-pitched screeching was accentuated by a water bottle being thrown at a set assistant who ducked. The set assistant then noticed Mr Gold, recognized him, and stayed ducked like a rabbit in headlights. Gold motioned him over, and the poor girl gradually complied.

“Well?” Gold asked curtly, glancing towards the problem. The problem was a highly paid reality television star, who'd slammed the door shut to her caravan.

The young girl stammered. “S-S-He wanted P-Pellegrino. It was on her list.”

“And?”

“Th-th-there's a problem, we couldn't... actually... get any today. We ran out of them and... They're... sold out. We got her something else.”

Mr Gold was very displeased. “Are you claiming someone personally saw to every store in the entire city to make sure there is no Pellegrino at all available here.”

Gold listened to the underpaid or unpaid set assistant's mousy voice slowly dying – she couldn't know anything, it was someone else's responsibility to get what was on the lists, but he was in a right mood and watching the girl slowly shrink was at least a little entertaining.

Then he noticed from the corner of his eye Miss French, glancing around, and going through a whole basket full of emptied out bottles. From there, Miss French produced an empty green Pellegrino bottle with its cap still intact. She returned and asked the assistant, who by then was every so grateful for her interference, to go get some carbonated mineral water.

Gold didn’t say anything, he just stared, bemused, while Miss French took the three smaller bottles of water from the assistant and started pouring them one by one into the big bottle. The third bottle Miss French opened in her excitement, however, exploded with pressure and half of its contents flew all over the top of her pale beige linen dress.

“Oh, shit!” Miss French swore, her decolletage and face drenched, make-up running from her eyes. Gold felt the smile on his face freeze as his gaze wandered down from Miss French's runny mascara and neck to the pale dress clinging to her breasts, leaving very little to the imagination. He gripped his cane harder and looked away, while the set assistant ran off to find Miss French a towel, and then the assistant excused herself to run to the ladies' room for a minute.

The moment of truth was when the assistant then went back to the prima donna to present her with the freshly opened bottle of water, conveniently already uncorked and a glass of it poured over ice. Out of sight, but within hearing distance, Gold could hear the reply. “Well finally!” There was no more to it, and as such, the ruse seemed to have succeeded.

Ten minutes later they were at the car. Miss French sat on one side in the back, pressing the towel to her chest. She'd washed her face quickly, and her cheeks were slightly flushed, as she stared out through the window, obviously worried and mortified.

“Quick and clever,” Gold commented, trying to sound nonchalant, although he was anything but. For the past year he'd mostly ignored the face and personality of his assistant. At their first meeting he’d deemed her a bookish romantic, with intellect just slightly above the average. He’d slowly begun to admit that she was very perceptive and had particular attention to detail. Maybe if he had her do more than just fetch coffee and parrot memos to him, she'd have more opportunities to use that wit of hers.
Gold suddenly felt as if she was looking at Miss French with too much admiration. “If she'd noticed the difference, I'd have thrown you to the wolves, of course,” he added.

“It was just water,” Miss French said haughtily.

“And the company's reputation,” he replied.

“Where to?” Dove asked.

Miss French gave him the address of the restaurant she'd reserved for lunch, while Gold looked out, suddenly and out of the blue very distracted by the memory of Miss French's wet dress clinging to her chest.
Friday had been sanctified for a day trip to museums in Oxford. Belle had chosen two museums, and with lunch in between, and coffee in town afterwards before retreating to "Downton Abbey", the day totalled in eight well-budgeted hours of sophisticated cultural tourism.

They were walking in the corridors towards their room when a cellphone rang. It was not Belle's, but it was Mr Gold's, who fished it out and gave it a contempting glare. Belle managed a glance at the screen, because he wasn't answering it, he was just looking at the caller ID-less, US region phone number like it was carrying a viral disease.

Belle managed the door open while the phone kept ringing. She was curious as to who it might be. There were probably not a lot of people who'd be calling Mr Gold during daytime on Friday, from States.

"Could you please answer this?" Gold asked her, and Belle nodded. "Sure."

She took the phone and answered as she continued to move about the hotel room. "Hello, this is Mr Gold's personal assistant on his phone, he is not available right now. Who might I be speaking to?"

Belle was expecting to hear from someone at work, perhaps Abigail, or Graham, or maybe Mr Dove?

"Hello, this is Victoria Murray," a very high-pitched, bright, young voice piped on the phone. "When do you think Mr Gold would be available?" Belle frowned.

"I'm... not sure, may I please ask what is this regarding?" Belle asked.

"I'm just calling about tonight, if he's... free?" The young voice waivered uncertainly. Belle found it baffling, she wasn't sure if she was speaking with a 9-year-old girl, or a 90-year-old senior with a funny voice.

"No, I'm afraid Mr Gold is in England at the moment."

Belle glanced at Gold who was looking every bit as puzzled as Belle was sure she was.

"Your name was Victoria Murray?" Belle said, repeating her name. Gold seemed surprised, but not in a displeased way, and extended his hand towards Belle, to take the phone back. "Oh, wait, let me get this phone to Mr Gold now, he just stepped in."

"Victoria. Does your mother know you're calling me? Whose phone are you calling from?" There was a pause. "I see. Happy birthday, young lady." He paused and listened. "No, I'm afraid I'm in England. I'm five hours ahead of you, in fact it's already evening here. Can you please hand over the phone to Vera for a moment, thank you."

Mr Gold trailed off with phone and all, outside, into the corridor, and Belle stood, wordless, in the room. Some little girl had just called him. Maybe... maybe he had a daughter?

Belle took off her coat. She paced back and forth, unable to sit and relax, until he returned.

"I'm sorry, but can I ask, what was that about?" Belle asked almost immediately when he returned. She wasn't sure if it was entirely fair of her to practically jump on him, in the greater scheme of things they'd be separated in less than a week now, and whoever he took calls from, well, that was fine, but she was just feeling a bit... thrown off.
Belle watched Gold, he seemed to be calculating whether or not to reply to her, and a long, uncomfortable silence started then. And went on.

Belle decided not to spend more time listening to it, and kicked her shoes off under the bed, and went to the bathroom, annoyed that he was treating her all of a sudden like the personal assistant. Answer the phone, take the inconvenient phone call, don't expect replies to your questions.

She locked the door behind herself and started pouring herself a bath. It would be nice to go to the hotel restaurant not all sweaty from the day's outing. And it had been a rather long day, she admitted to herself, and she was tired, and a little miserable over the arrangement she had with Mr Gold. She was in no doubt she'd be mentally spanking herself a week from now, telling herself what an idiot she was for getting romantically involved with her still-boss who was going to stay in Britain while she returned to the States.

Best not to ruin the week before that with digging up more heart-ache though, Belle thought wistfully, as she removed her clothes and stepped in the bathtub to let the hot water wash away the tightness in her muscles and the unnerving feeling that was slowly taking over her.

It didn't work entirely, she was still feeling a bit restless and worried when they went down for dinner, and the fact that their usually light-toned and witty chit-chat was sorely absent at the table up until when the main courses arrived.

Mr Gold was eventually the one to open conversation.

"Victoria is ah... my friend's daughter, I've very rarely and occasionally had her visit me while her mother's worked late weekend nights and hasn't managed to get anyone else to watch her," the long-awaited explanation came.

"Oh." Belle nodded. It didn't sound like the state secret she'd expected it to be. "Have I ever met Mrs Murray?"

Gold shook his head. "No. I used to see Miss Murray about four years ago. Rather frequently."

Belle nodded slowly. "Until you stopped seeing her."

Gold toyed with his wine glass.

Belle concentrated on eating for a while, feeling uncomfortable for how uncomfortable she was feeling.

"So," she tried to smile, and be less intensely invested in this business, even as she spoke about it, "do you see Victoria often?"

Gold shook his head slightly. "I've had her over in a pinch, twice."

"What sort of work does her mother do?" Belle wondered, what sort of a woman was the kind that Mr Gold could, and would, properly ask out, wine and dine, and babysit for?

Gold's eyes were more concentrated on his food than Belle. "Vera manages a vintage shop. She likes antiquities. Like myself," Gold added with a hint of irony.

Belle's eyes narrowed. Vintage shops probably weren't open late on Friday nights.

"And most weekends, she has her other job, related to... the performing arts." Gold continued.
"Oh. That must be nice. She sounds very busy. And very artistic."

"She is that. Vera sews and paints and draws the days and nights away."

Belle pursed her lips. She was so very curious to know what had happened to them, but it wasn't very graceful of her, to badger him to sate her nosyness.

"Did you see a lot of her?" Belle asked.

"About half a year," Gold replied, still avoiding looking straight at Belle.

Belle nibbled at her lower lip, and then concentrated on eating again, imagining what sort of six months had this Vera Murray had with Mr Gold. Not terribly bad, if she still called him on occasion, even if it was to get a babysitter? She was then thinking of less delicate things, wondering if Miss Vera Murray had ever had the pleasure of getting Mr Gold hard. Belle wondered. Six months was a rather long time just for kissing and cuddling. Or maybe it had been long, too long, maybe that's why.

"You don't seem very... happy," Gold observed.

Belle let go of the cutlery and leaned back in the chair. She took a deep breath before sipping the wine.

"I just think too much sometimes," Belle replied, and gave him a quickly passing smile.

He didn't reply, but the rest of the meal was quiet and awkward, and it was not at all too soon when it was over. Gold headed out for a smoke, and Belle headed back into the room to sit at the desk by the laptop, to write emails to her dad and Ruby from which she cleverly excluded small details of her holiday, like who she was sharing the hotel room with.

Once she'd done that, Belle googled erectile dysfunctions and concentrated on reading. She didn't mean to get so intensely involved in what she was reading that she'd lose all sense of time and place, but that happened to her easily enough whenever she'd opened a book anywhere ever, and so she only absently and passively acknowledged Gold returning to the room, until he glanced over her shoulder.

"I have enough of that with doctor Babicky," Gold commented sourly, and went into the bathroom. Belle stared at the screen for a while, not really seeing any of the text written on it, and closed the lid.

Belle wasn't feeling very amorous, but neither did she want to feign sleep, so she tried the television, and got out chocolates she'd bought from Sainsbury's, a box of Cadbury's Roses. She threw herself on the bed and started channel surfing until her boss returned.

"Rose?" Belle offered him, and he accepted one wordlessly. They lay on the bed a spell of uncomfortable silence which was heavy with everything they probably should have spoken about. Belle stared at the Friday night television offerings almost thirty seconds per channel before moving on. There were a lot of channels.

"Are you going to choose one, or go through them all?" Gold asked her.

"I don't know what kind of teevvee they have in Britain, I need to inspect all of it," Belle replied calmly. "Unless there's something specific you want?"

He hesitated in his reply, but after two false starts, it came out. "I'd like it if you'd turn off the box and tell me why did you become so unhappy when Victoria called me?"
"I'm not unhappy," Belle said, pursing her lips and looking away.

"Belle French, the phrase open book describes you better than anyone else I've met, and that includes, literally, open books," Gold said.

Belle frowned and glanced at Gold.

"I may be a bit jealous. That's all," Belle said quietly.

Gold was silent while Belle took a deep breath.

"Do you want me to leave?" He asked. He had suggested that so many times, it was ridiculous.

No, I want you to get rid of your clothes, and get rid of my clothes, and fuck me, Belle thought.

She managed to summon a smile. "No, I'd just like to. You know. Get closer to you."

Gold leaned a bit closer. "Is this close enough?" He asked, a playful smile on his face.

Belle felt her face go a bit red. "No, I was thinking, maybe we should take all our clothes off, and you could do that thing you were offering to me the other night?"

Gold looked more serious again. "I thought you didn't want that."

Belle reached for his tie and started to pull it loose. "I changed my mind."

She hadn't felt sure about this until now, when a rush of blood suddenly made her feel bolder when she saw the priceless look on Mr Gold's face. Belle stripped off his tie and started to unbutton his shirt, while wondering if he was more alarmed than happy about her plans for the rest of the evening.
"This is the last time we'll meet then," Dr Babicky said. Her hair was up in a huge do, earrings with brass leaf shapes dangled from her ears, and she wore a dark-green, loose dress with a row of wood buttons running up the middle. "What should we talk about for the next hour?"

Gold felt apprehensive. He'd been thinking about Belle all day, because she had been so excited with her first trip to England, she'd been smiling and talking to people around the office about it. Belle had the most spectacular glow about her. He found he liked looking at her, full of joy like that, even though he'd also found it distracting, but he hadn't hidden in his office and closed the door that day to keep the sunlight of her smiles out.

"What's on your mind?" Babicky asked.

"A young woman."

"Do you find she special?"

Gold sighed. "Of course. For years now."

"And you're moving to Britain. Do you think you'll miss her?"

Gold didn't reply to that. He felt certain he would miss Belle very much, but not as much as he was missing his son.

"I regret that nothing ever happened, but I think it's for the best. For her especially."

Babicky leaned forward in her chair a little.

"Have you noticed that it is a recurring theme in your life, that you've shut yourself off from people, deciding it's for the best? You left Europe because of that, your son, your past two relationships? And now this woman? Is she the reason why you're going back to Britain?"

Gold felt all his muscles tense, as if he was threatened by a wild animal. The first time that had happened when Babicky had asked him something that made him react like that, he'd shouted at her. And what had happened then, well... He'd learned not to do that anymore.

He forced his fingers not to claw the armrests, and leaned back in the chair. "It might be a small part," Gold admitted.

Babicky nodded and leaned back in her own chair. "There aren't that many opportunities in life. We all live with limited time. Maybe in Britain, you should consider trying to allow people come close to you." The doctor seemed very sad and a little older even than normal. "Chances at happiness are like Christmas. You wait for them to come around, and once when they finally appear, they're over in the blink of an eye."

He kissed her first. Belle's mouth tasted of Cadbury's Roses, like his, and it made Gold think of Christmas, because he'd received a box of them in the mail from his son every year since he'd moved to the States to follow his career. It brought back to him Doctor Babicky's words about happiness, and blinks of eye, and it was too true, that this week with Belle was too short. Then again, his rest of his life with Belle would probably be too short.
He reached for the television remote and closed the noisy box while Belle climbed on top of him. Her hands unbuttoned his shirt while his ran up and down her body, tracing the shapes of her hips and thighs, then up again to her waist, her back, and around to her stomach, slowly moving up towards her breasts, but Belle was restless and shifted herself down to have his hands over her where she wanted them, and the kiss broke.

Belle slipped her hands underneath his open shirt, and Gold found pleasure in her warm touches. He pulled her back up into a kiss, but she resisted, instead ducking her head down to lay kisses on his neck and his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and let one hand wander down her back, and the other in the mass of her hair, while Belle finished with the last of his buttons.

She leaned up to sit, straddling his lap, and smiled at him. "Is it alright if we both take our clothes off? I don't want to feel... too exposed, if you understand what I mean?"

Gold smiled back at her. "Of course. This is for you so, anything you want."

"You first?" Belle asked, suddenly timid, going from a determined aggressor to a shy girl in the blink of an eye. Gold was suddenly very self conscious of their age difference, but he mentally waved off the worst of his own self-doubt in favour of pleasing Belle. He removed his shirt, and after Belle removed herself from on top of him and back to her own side, the rest of his clothes.

Belle stared at him for a bit, and he was about to ask if she'd changed her mind, but then she pulled off the dayspread off the bed and asked him to get under the covers. Then he watched, mesmerized, as Belle unzipped her own dress, standing by the bed.

Instead of hastily leaving everything on the floor like he'd done, Belle went to drape her dress on the back of a chair. There was nothing sensual about the way how she struggled out of her tights, but it was all her, and Gold wouldn't have preferred the sexy garterbelt and socks for a world to the amusing display at hand. He hid his amusement diplomatically.

Wearing nothing but knickers and a bra, Belle went about the room to turn off the lights and draw the curtains. A moment later, in near darkness, when Belle stumbled back to bed and into Gold's arms under the covers, she was naked, her skin somewhat cold and she was trembling a little. He held her and soothed her with simple, soft kisses, until she felt warm and steady again.

He was about to ask her what would she like him to do to her, when Belle spoke first.

"Have you ever... fantasized about me?" She whispered. In the darkness, whispering seemed appropriate.

Gold smiled, thinking of the many times he had. "Why do you ask?"

"I think it's only fair if I know, since I sent you that text about my ideas," Belle said, and Gold thought he could hear her blushing. "Tell me yours?"

He found himself holding his breath, hesitating with his reply, while his hand, which had been busy caressing the beautiful and impeccable Miss French's skin, slowed down to stop at her waist. He picked apart his memories, trying to find one that he hoped Belle would not find reproachable.

"Your first summer in the job," Mr Gold said, struggling to find his voice at first, "you opened that bottle of mineral water that exploded on your dress, remember?"

"Mhm," Belle replied.

"It was the first time I really saw you. I mean, not just the wet dress," said Mr Gold, and his hand
travelled upwards from her waist, slowly making a snaking path across her lowest ribs, just under her breasts. “I thought how clever you are. Not just a pretty face.” He smiled. “And I admit I stole a glance at you in the car.” His hands ghosted up to her breasts, which had been soaked wet that day, the nipples puckered up. They were not so now, as he started, but it didn't take more than a roll of his palm, a squeeze of his fingers, before Belle's body responded. It sounded like she was holding her breath. “So you see I'm less gentlemanly than you think,” he said with a smirk.

Holding still, Belle smothered a laugh. Mr Gold wanted to take more of her breath away. He grabbed her breast with a bit more force as he leaned towards her, found her lips in the darkness, and kissed her, kept kissing her, pushing her on her back. His hand remained enticing her breast, alternating between slow rolls and occasionally pinching her nipple, and he delighted in it when he felt Belle press her chest closer to his hand. He abandoned the exploration of her mouth to pull himself down to kiss her remaining breast yet free of his attentions. The vocalisation he got out of her made him feel heady.

“So you think about me in that wet dress?” Belle asked, her voice husky with the passion he was building within her.

Mr Gold bit into the nipple he'd laboured with, earning himself a brief shudder from Belle. “Mmhm,” he replied, switching to a softer kiss before leaning up against his elbow on one side. “You in your thin summer dress, all indignant and red in the face,” he summarised, while his hand plucked Belle's other nipple harder, and she gasped so her midriff rocked.

“Where are we?” She asked, her voice now barely a whisper.

Mr Gold left her breasts alone, and let his palm rest in the patch of skin between her breasts for a moment. “In the back seat of the car, usually.” He started moving his hand down slowly, making the spiralling, wandering patterns across her skin, while pushing off the blanket a little further away with his elbow. “Dove's gone, of course,” Mr Gold let his voice drop to a softer whisper. “It's afternoon. We're near the sea, or a forest, away from the city.”

“Do we kiss?” Belle asked.

“Oh yes,” Mr Gold replied, and leaned down to kiss her again.

Belle felt sensuous and willing, she tasted wondrous, and her quivering whispers in the dark should by all rights sent Mr Gold into an equal fit of passion, but instead he still felt like he was dancing on a thin line between his anxieties and his ardent wish to give Belle release. It was not entirely selfless of him, he wanted to hear and see her coming, to fuel his own fever dreams of her, for a time when he'd be alone and able to give into this.

He kissed her deeply, and when she started to moan and writhe again, he kissed her neck, and her shoulders. She took a hold of his head between her palms and guided his face back to her breasts. Mr Gold obliged her and continued giving his attention to her, touching and squeezing, kissing, sucking and nipping.

It was an uneasy, uncomfortable and difficult thing, to not feel, and more importantly, to make Belle feel like he was involved in this entirely, and not as a distant and impartial spectator. Sex with only a half-interested partner was far worse than having no sex at all, and he unfortunately knew that from experience.

But he found, as he spoke, it was as if the story was building a bridge between them. There was a deep and wide chasm between them, and he didn't have the courage to jump across it, but at least he could give her something else. The story was like a thin thread that connected them.
“We're kissing on the back seat. I put my hand on your knee,” Mr Gold muttered against her skin. He had to move down again, away from the reach of kisses, to reach her knees with his wandering hand. His hand dipped lower too, to caress her leg briefly, before coming back up. The tips of his fingers ghosted in the space between her knees, not particularly forceful. “And under your dress.” His touch turned more meaningful as his palm smoothed up from Belle's knee, on her thigh, turning slightly towards her inner thigh, running upwards.

“And what do I do?” Belle asked, sounding amused.

“What do you want to do?” Mr Gold replied, his hand stopping.

He felt Belle's legs move wider apart. He could smell her, how turned on she was then, and for a second, he thought he would get hard, but that wishful fancy eluded him just as soon as he thought of it. Instead of chasing down his own disappointment, Mr Gold directed his attention to Belle. Slowly, teasingly, his hand approached her. He petted her curls first, glad she had them. He found the trend of women shaving themselves partially unsettling.

“Is this really a proper way for a manager and his assistant to spend their afternoon in the company car?” Belle asked, voice almost shaking.

“Not any worse than the assistant demanding her manager fuck her from behind on his desk after work,” Mr Gold replied, reminding Belle of the text she'd sent him. Oh God, that text. He'd thought he wouldn't be able to go to work that day, the morning he'd received it.

Belle groaned in response, sounding embarrassed to be reminded of it.

Mr Gold dipped a finger underneath her curls then. Belle felt wet and hot, and she gave out a wonderful little sound from the back of her throat when he brushed her clit the first time. He abandoned that soon enough though, and explored the shape of her nether lips, listening to Belle's intakes of breath and giddy little moans, and where and how they happened. She tensed entirely when he started to tease and play at the opening of her vagina. Almost casually, he simultaneously leaned down to nip her nearest nipple with his teeth.

“Oh, Mr Gold!” Belle cried out.

“Yes, Miss French?” He asked playfully, and leaned back to kiss the nipple, while his fingers slid up to tease her clitoris again. She didn't have a comeback. “Is this alright?” He asked, softening his voice.

“Yes. Yes,” Belle replied, sounding rather out of breath.“Oh, yes.”

Mr Gold sucked her breast. “Mmhm,” he replied, and then let go of it. It made a wet plopping sound. His fingers abandoner Belle's clitoris again and wandered up and down, spreading the wetness of her everywhere. She made a keening sound when he teased her opening again, and then when he simultaneously brushed her clitoris at the same time, her breathing grew louder, more accentuated. He applied a little more force to his so-far gentle and tender administrations.

“Oh!” Belle cried out, and then she was tensing all over, until she wasn't. He slowly slipped his hand away from her, leaned back, itching to turn on the nearest lamp to see what she looked like right now. “Oh,” Belle repeated, taking a very deep breath.

Mr Gold brought his hand to his lips. His thumb, index and middle fingers and half his hand were drenched in Miss French. He licked her off then, before leaning up to give her a kiss.

Belle responded lazily, but it was alright. She pulled him closer to her, until he was on her like a
blanket, and then she wrapped even her legs around him.

“What happens next in the car?” Belle asked, after they were done with the long, lazy, slow kiss.

Mr Gold gave her a brief kiss. “You open my belt, and straddle my lap.”

Belle giggled, and kissed him again, while her hands played all over his back.

It was a lie though, Mr Gold reflected, briefly. In his dreams, Miss French leaned down and took him in her pretty little mouth and sucked the fuck out of him. But Belle appeared so dainty and innocent and fragile. She didn't need to know every sordid little detail of his old man's fantasies.
A Saturday

Very little light escaped through the cracks of the curtains, but it was clear it was day already outside. It was dim inside the hotel room, with no lamps turned on. Belle stared at the ceiling choking inside the noise she might have made if she wasn't guessing there was a family with a child in the suite next door. She'd seen them in the hallway twice now, they'd come the day before. She couldn't be sure if the rooms were sound proof. They ought to be, she thought, and she lost that thought then. A small whimper escaped her throat when she felt her still-current-employer's tongue (so warm, she hadn't realised a tongue would be so warm) inside her. It felt insanely good. No one had ever told her it could feel so good.

It was a wonderful way to start a Saturday.

A little later, Mr Gold was in the shower, and Belle stayed in bed, in a state of somewhat confused bliss. Her thoughts travelled past her mind in great winding circles from here to there. She had the slight inclination to make a call, right then and there, to her college boyfriend who'd once deigned to try please her with his tongue, which had been a very dissatisfying attempt. She wanted to get back to him just to give him a few pointers. He'd always made her feel insecure about herself, in sly, snide ways. For example, when she wasn't enjoying what he did to her, it was down to some fault of hers, because she was such a prude, and he was always gracious enough to let it slide.

Belle glanced at the clock on the table, and wasn't surprised to see that it was too late to have breakfast in the hotel now. The buffet would close in fifteen minutes. She didn't mind. She'd had plenty enough pancakes and croissants already.

She hadn't written anything to her father, or to Ruby, in a couple of days. She ought to do so. She'd been to some museums. She could write about that. And about the weather. Everyone liked hearing about how it rained in England. With a sigh, Belle closed her eyes. Unbidden, she remembered she had an apartment to move out of, and a job she needed to hunt, even now. She'd have infinitely preferred to stay on this very odd sort of a holiday for forever instead.

She'd sort it out after she got back.

She first heard and then felt Mr Gold return. He sat on the bed next to her and then ran a hand gently down her arm. "Did you go back to sleep?"

"Not yet." She reached out blindly, and grabbed his hand, then his arm, to pull him down closer to her. He was still shirtless as he lay over her, and they kissed, and kissed. And kissed, but very slowly, with lazy, shallow movements of their lips. After that was done, Belle nudged Mr Gold off of her, as she turned to her side, but she didn't let him go far before she cuddled up close to him, unable to contain her superbly satisfied smirk, when she pressed her face against his neck.

"You're very talented with your tongue," Belle muttered, "and I do mean that in every possible way." She felt her cheeks redden a bit, but it didn't matter, even if she hadn't been hiding her face against his skin. Mr Gold smelled of his aftershave.
“I’ve had to learn how to compensate, my dear,” he muttered, and she was glad to hear a smile there somewhere. “So, you enjoyed it?”

“Uh-huh,” Belle said, squeezing her arms around him just a bit tighter to emphasise her non-words. She listened and felt him breathing, and perhaps minutes passed.

“How do you know?” Belle mumbled, eventually, her voice drowsy.

“Do I know what?” Mr Gold asked.

“What happened, that made you so unhappy?” Belle asked, her voice gone very quiet now.

There was a moment of silence, and then he replied.

“Life happened.” Mr Gold said nothing else at first, and Belle had nothing else to say. She stayed quiet. “Too many hard things. Not enough good things.”

Belle squeezed her arms around him again, and then let one hand stray into his hair. “I’m sorry.” She pressed a kiss against his throat. “Is this a good thing?” She asked, while her fingers played with the long strands of his hair.

“I think you know the answer,” Mr Gold said. She felt him press a kiss on her forehead.

“How long do you suppose we’d need to stay like this, to balance all the hard things?” Belle asked, and reached up to kiss his jaw.

“Probably longer than your holiday,” Mr Gold said. He sounded a distracted, his mind far-off.

Belle was almost already saying she could extend her stay in Britain. Find a job there, suddenly. Stay with him.

But she didn't say that. Her hand in his hair stilled gradually, and then she withdrew it.

“What do you want to do today?” Mr Gold asked.

“I don’t know. This seems like a nice change of pace, actually,” Belle said.

“Stay in bed late?”

“And order room service and watch super old reruns of Friends on the telly.” Belle liked the sound of that. She could take a moment to herself to write those emails. “But... what would you like to do?”

She asked.

He didn't reply. Instead Mr Gold got out of bed and retrieved the television remote and the room service menu for Belle, before starting to get dressed.

“What are you going?” Belle asked.

“Out for a smoke, and I’m going to call my son.”

“I thought you'd quit.”

“For the most part, miss French, for the most part,” he said with a wicked smile, and Belle laughed, watching him move surprisingly eloquently for a man with use of only one leg.

At last dressed, he grabbed his cane and was out the door.
Belle got herself out of bed as well, and dressed. It probably wouldn't do to have a cleaning lady walk into the room while she was in a state of complete nudity. Only a few minutes alone in the hotel room made the place feel a bit claustrophobic. Even for a very nice hotel room, it was still a room of minimal necessities, and not very personal in its touches. Belle decided she'd rather get out, if that was a possibility.

“Wales looks pretty,” Belle commented, late in the afternoon. They were in the car again.

“I'd rather be showing you Scotland, to be honest,” Mr Gold replied.

“How long is the drive?”

“Seven hours maybe,” Mr Gold said. “And seven hours back.”

Belle nodded, understanding how impractical it would be to make the distance for a short time. “But the Forest of Dean was nice too. And the road signs here are so very... interesting.”

“Enjoying reading them?”

“Very much,” she replied, “I can't even finish reading any of them before we're already past them. Do you know any Welsh?”

“Now why would I know any Welsh.”

“Isn't there some similarity between Welsh and Scottish? I don't know. Sorry if I'm saying something terribly rude and insensitive about cultures now.”

“Both are Celtic but I don't really know any Scottish Gaelic, not properly to make a sentence. I can recognise a word here and there. But it's been a long time since I lived up there.”

“I really like listening to you speak on the phone with your son,” Belle admitted, smirking a little.

“Oh?”

“Yes your Scottish accent gets so thick and it's very... very nice.”

That elicited a snort of a laugh and a glance from him.

“He's lost his accent. He moved to London, with his mum, when he was six.”

“Is his mother not Scottish then?”

“Her? No, she's from Swindon. That's not far from Oxford.”

“How did you meet her then? If you don't mind me asking?”

“She moved up north just as soon as she got out of school, she wanted to have a bit of an adventure, and she used to think Scotland was exciting and romantic.”

“You got divorced when your son was six, then?”

“No, he wasn't even two years old before Milah buggered off to London,” he replied, all of a sudden so full of vehemence and anger that it startled Belle. “She found herself a new husband, with lots of money, and three years later comes back out of nowhere saying I'm not fit to be a father to my son.
because I work all the daylight away, and live in a draughty hovel in the highlands. But her new
husband had a nice little palace down south, so court ordered him to Milah.”

His voice turning into a snarl now, it sounded like Mr Gold was getting angrier by the second, and
Belle put his hand on his arm.

“Maybe we could talk about something else for a moment,” Belle suggested. “I could tell you how
interesting Storybrooke, Maine, is.”

“Hmm.”

“Not at all interesting really. My mother's from there.”

“Yes, you said so, the other day.”

“And she fled the place. I ended up there, and I'm trying to flee too.”

“Are you also going to get malaria in the tropics?” Mr Gold asked her, and Belle was relieved that
the sudden change of conversation topic had already calmed him down.

She prattled on about nothing important in particular for a while, until the talk inside the car came to
a natural end, and silence reigned. It started to rain, and it was getting dark on the road leading them
back to Oxfordshire. Belle thought it best to let the driver concentrate on the driving until they were
safely parked somewhere.

He'd sounded so furious all of a sudden, telling her about his son, Belle reflected. It must have been
many years ago, if the son in question had already gotten married half a year ago, and was about to
be a father himself. Maybe twenty years ago. But time had never healed that particular wound for Mr
Gold.

Later that night, when they were having dinner in a restaurant, Belle grabbed Mr Gold's hand on an
impulse, while they waited for their food to arrive.

“I think,” she started almost coyly, “I think you must love your son very much.”

Mr Gold seemed wary and thoughtful at first. “I do,” he replied.

“So why did you move to the States?” Belle asked.

He took a deep breath. “A job opportunity. To make money.”

“To get your son back?”

“Something like that.” He disentangled his hands from hers, but caressed her skin lightly, before
withdrawing himself. “The money I get from the sale next week, I'm going to give a large portion of
that to him. Some way or other.”

Belle smiled. “But of course.” She wondered whatever could he be meaning with that. Or rather,
with the strange way he had just spoken, all tense, speaking every word like they were heavy with
meaning. Then it dawned on her that he may have been insinuating, or even just thinking so, that
maybe she was only interested in him for his money. That felt like a nasty bruise in her heart, and her
smile faltered. She glanced around the restaurant, unable to watch Mr Gold in the eye.

“He must be thrilled then,” Belle managed to say.

“They don't know anything yet. The deal's not signed yet.”
“And you don't do anything too hastily,” Belle concluded, staring at the water glass as she brought it to her lips.

“Not many things, no,” he said.

“Do you think I'm after your money, Mr Gold?” Belle asked then, unable to not keep this bottled up a second longer.

He was silent a second too long.

“Because I recall you saying you have high regard for me, and you trust me, so if you think I would be after your money, why would you tell me those things?” Belle asked, trying to contain her voice from rising above a whisper, a frown distorting her face.

Mr Gold was glancing around, but the hotel restaurant was only partially occupied that night, and no one was seated in the nearby tables.

“I just thought, I'm not very appealing without it, now am I?” He said, obviously troubled by the statement, and Belle wished she could have taken back her sudden flare of temper.

It was no use crying over the spilled milk now.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I just didn't understand what you were saying. I'm so sorry.” She tried to compose her face, because she saw the waitress approach them, carrying their plates. Dinner was a quiet affair after that.
“You're way too nice to me,” Belle said softly. She was sitting in bed, leaning against the pillow, with her laptop sitting on her thighs. The television was on with yet another rerun episode of Friends, which seemed to be airing every day, on multiple channels.

“If I were terrible, then I doubt you'd be pleasant company,” Mr Gold replied. He was half-dressed, reading his emails from his cellphone about the details of his upcoming transaction in London, now due to take place on Thursday.

“It's just that I can never repay any of this. The fancy hotel, or the lease car or any of the... other things,” Belle said. She directed her attention again to the email she was drafting to Ruby about when she was planning to move out of the apartment. Attached were pictures from Oxford and Dean Forest, none of which featured Belle's travel companion.

“Don't worry, I won't send you an invoice later on,” he said, the most of his attention directed to business instead of her.

When he absently started pulling his tie off with one hand, other hand still scrolling down an email on his phone, Belle felt her breath caught in her lungs, and her heartbeat quickening.

But he seemed oblivious to her. His brown eyes didn't stay on her as much as they had during the past few days. He replied to her when she addressed him with her thoughts and questions, but it was with the same sort of distance as when they'd been an assistant and her employer.

Maybe he was cross with her. Or perhaps it was because she was going to fly back across the Atlantic soon. They hadn't even brought up the topic of a long-distance relationship. Even if they had, Belle had serious misgivings about the idea, since she was certainly not in the financial position to make the flight back and forth even once a year, and she was already painfully aware of the fact that it was his money that was making all of this – she glanced at the hotel room again – possible. Maybe another woman would have simply enjoyed it and taken it for granted, but to Belle it was no small thing. Especially since the man who'd repeatedly told her that there are no free lunches was the one in the room with her now. Everything came with a price.

Eventually, Belle turned off the almost offensively boring television show and climbed out of bed to get ready for the night. She doubted it was going to be cosy, since Mr Gold had retreated to the strange shell where he kept himself apart from the rest of the humanity. Going to bed was that night almost a chore for Belle, with her feeling like a parasite. The thought rolled about her head, mocking her, and when at last he joined her under the blankets and the dark, Belle cuddled up to him rather fiercely and almost held him down as she lay partially on top of him and sought him with her hands to trace his skin with her palms.

“What are you doing?” He asked, his whole body tense and tight, Belle could feel.

“I'd like to touch you, if that's alright?” Belle asked, her whispering voice managing not to sound.
tremulous with apprehension.

“I thought you were going to attack me.”

“I was afraid you'd not come to bed with me,” Belle admitted. “That you'd go into your car and drive to London.”

He didn't reply immediately. “I am going to do that at some point next week,” he admitted.

“I'd like to get to know you a little better before you go,” Belle whispered, and pressed her face against his neck, strands of his soft hair, and she inhaled it before pressing a kiss on the skin that tasted like the soap he'd used to wash up a few minutes before.

But Mr Gold didn't feel obliged to acquiesce to her idea. She felt her hands on her shoulders, pushing her away, even though it was just slightly.

“And what does this entail exactly?” He asked, sounding what Belle might have guessed was suspicious. Or offended.

She relaxed, became limp and less threatening, as she slid off of him, to his side, while keeping an arm still wound about him.

“I thought you could lay back and I could do whatever you want,” Belle whispered, “anything you want.”

He took her arm off of him and returned it to her side. “And what if I want nothing right now?”

Belle smiled in the dark. “That's fine,” she mumbled, almost swallowing the words. “I just want you to be happy,” she added, with a little more strength.

“As happy as you were this morning?” He asked, and she could hear the sly grin in his voice, and Belle felt a little giddy with the memory of just how she'd felt that morning.

“Of course. If there's anything I could do to repay you, just tell me,” Belle said, and felt a blush rising to her cheeks, just thinking about ways in which she could repay him his extraordinary kindness and talent.

“Belle,” said Mr Gold, his voice dropping from the teasing, impish taunt to a serious tone, “you know, I don't please you entirely selflessly.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

She heard him take a breath before replying. “Well. You know. I think about you a lot. Especially this morning, while I was in the shower, I was thinking about how bruised your lower lip was, just after you came. Were you biting it to stay quiet?”

Belle's throat made an involuntary squeaking sound. She coughed it away. “There are other people in the rooms around ours,” she replied very properly, after recovering her aplomb.

“Belle, you are so very adorable,” Mr Gold whispered, and then Belle felt his palm on her cheek, his thumb brushed her jaw, and then his lips were on hers, and she forgot the whole concept of breathing while he kissed her.

She had to sigh and breathe deeply to catch her breath, this effort distracted by his teeth nipping at her neck very gently.
“How was it this morning? In the shower?” Belle asked. “What did you do?”

Mr Gold sniggered, and then Belle felt his hand slip inside her pyjama trousers.

“I’m sure you are fairly familiar with the basic mechanic,” he whispered, his thumb drawing circles on her skin just below her belly button.

“D-Did it feel good?”

He stilled for a second. Then, first his hand travelled south, his whole palm covered the hair concealing her privates. His teeth continued nipping at her neck.

Inflamed, and worried that she might not be wet enough, Belle hurriedly started to wriggle out of her top. She barely had it pulled off and over her hair before Mr Gold's teeth were on her first nipple, and her hands in his hair, keeping him in place until the nipple became too sore and she needed a change.

The hand inside her pyjama pants slowly moved up and down, doing barely anything, and that itself was torture.

“I enjoy thinking about you very much,” Mr Gold told him, with a hushed, low voice, his American accent almost breaking, “this morning was no exception.”

While Mr Gold's deft and clever fingers parted her lips, while his mouth became busy sucking her raw nipple, Belle faintly thought, that this was what Mr Gold craved, wasn't it? To be in control so much so that he couldn't allow another person to affect him so much as for him to be able to admit it.

And what did it say about her, that she wanted very much to be under Mr Gold's control now, and of how wet he could make her. If she wasn't careful, she might have total abandon of her common sense with this man.

When Mr Gold's thumb pressed inside her and teased her, all these pointed and important thoughts fled Belle, and she let them go, for the idea of complete abandon in his hands was tempting her much more fiercely than before.

He kissed away Belle's moans into his mouth this time, when she came, and then they both licked his hands and fingers clean of her. Afterwards, and not tired, Belle hung limply by his side, clinging to him, and lay haphazard kisses on his face, lips and cheek, and his neck and chest.

“I'd like to be able to help you,” Belle muttered against his chest.

“I'm going to have to take care of it myself, Belle,” he replied, and his voice betrayed how tired he was now. “It's a bewitching idea, to think that another person can help you change your life and make it all better, but that's a bit too idealistic for someone in therapy.”

“Was Vera like that?” Belle asked.

“Most likely.”

“But you're getting help from your therapist,” Belle pointed out. “So you might as well get some help from me too.”

“Touché, miss French. Can we continue this discussion tomorrow? I need a little time to come up with a clever retort,” said Mr Gold.

“Alright, alright. I'll cuddle you though, for a little while, until I fall asleep,” Belle said, and made herself a bit more comfortable, arm around him, head leaning against his shoulder. “I think you need
to be held more. Get used to being touched.”

“Just please don't become another therapist,” Mr Gold replied drowsily.

“Does your therapist hold you like this during your sessions?” Belle asked.

“Good god, miss French,” he whispered, “if you only knew what sort of imagery you're putting in my head.”

“I hope you'll have pleasant dreams with them,” Belle replied, resisting a giggle, and kissed him good night.
A rare thing – a sunny Sunday morning in autumn – woke Belle before the pancake breakfast buffet alarm did. After opening her eyes, she noticed she'd migrated away from Mr Gold's side of the bed and almost off the edge of her own side during the night. The sun was on her side of the bed, creeping in from between hastily drawn curtains. Belle crossed back over the bed and cuddled up close to Mr Gold.

He was possibly awake, with the faint grunt noise he made in his throat when she slipped her arm around him. She took her time to slowly touch him. He was such a tightly-wound, intense person, mentally and physically, and that was true even when he was half asleep, she noticed, as she gently trailed her hands across his tightened muscles.

When she started slipping her hand underneath his top, he grumbled “what are you doing?” and her questing hand paused for a moment

“I'm acclimatising,” Belle replied playfully, softly.

“You're what?”

Since he wasn't putting up resistance this time, Belle dared to smooth her palm across his abdomen and towards his chest slowly. “Acclimatising. Like wildlife photographers do,” she continued, “when they try to get close for a shot. They spend days on a location, letting the animals become familiar enough with them,” Belle drew playful circles on his chest now, around his nipples, “getting intimate,” she whispered, leaning close, and then kissed his neck just below the ear.

“And what sort of prey am I to you?” Mr Gold muttered.

“Hmm,” Belle had to think about it. She halted her explorations and rested her head against his shoulder as she thought. “Well, first of all, you're not prey, you're just trying to be ironic or sarcastic and half-secretly presume to know about my treasure-hunting motives, which I don't have,” she said as decidedly as could a person who'd woken up because a ray of light had cracked through the curtains five minutes earlier. “You shouldn't imply that, not even as a joke,” Belle said as an afterthought.

“It was just my terrible and wry sense of humour, don't read into it too much,” Mr Gold replied, and he didn't sound too sharp either, with his weary words muddled and threatened to be broken by a yawn that he managed to stifle just up until the end of the sentence.

“You could be a black panther. Like Bagheera in the Jungle Book,” said Belle.

“Not the tiger?”

“Shere Khan? I don't think so. He's much too full of himself.”

The alarm started beeping then, and less than an hour later, the washed and dressed Belle and Mr
Gold were enjoying the hotel's ample weekend brunch buffet, she was reading her emails because night-time had been daytime across the sea and she'd had messages from the office as well as from Ruby, and her father. Mr Gold was reading the newspaper and kept with his limited, simple breakfast options while Belle still went for sampling everything there was on the buffet menu.

After she'd read the emails and mentally composed ideas about replies to them, Belle looked at the pancakes on her plate and felt suddenly awfully sad and weary. When Mr Gold asked her what was the matter, she replied by stabbing the pancake on the plate with her fork and lifting a piece of it up for a good stare.

“Pancakes don't taste so well after a whole week of having them every day with breakfast,” Belle said.

He said nothing at first, but smiled at the newspaper. Belle figured it was more polite than just outright laughing at her first-world problems of eating too many treats.

“I'll go find something healthier looking,” she decided, and set the pancake aside. It was shame it would go to waste now, but in truth, she had no appetite for any more of them.

“Graham's asking quite a few things in an email he sent last night,” Belle said as she returned with an adult breakfast choice, “Regina's filled your desk with papers that need signatures and they can hardly wait for you to come back.”

“Hmm-hmm,” Mr Gold replied with a smirk and continued reading his newspaper.

It was almost eleven o'clock and the brunch was about to end when Mr Gold's cellphone rang. As he picked up the call, Belle could see the name “Emma” on the screen.

“Yes?” He answered, not quite irritated, but rather, confused, while at the same time he got up from his seat. “Excuse me, Emma,” he said then, and looked down at Belle. “I'll go talk on the terrace.”

Belle nodded and reached for the perused newspaper from across the table. “I'll just finish this muesli until they throw me out,” she replied.

She couldn't keep her attention on the newspaper for longer than a second though. Who was this Emma then? She could remember the name from some connection, but she was certain it wasn't business-related. Mr Gold wouldn't put someone he dealt with on his cellphone as plainly as just “Emma.” Belle put the newspaper down and kept eating as she watched Mr Gold speaking on his cellphone on the terrace in the bright autumn sunlight. He walked back and forth and didn't seem pleased at all. The kind of a stone-faced expression had taken him over which was what happened when he had to personally interfere when someone from below screwed up at work.

The call seemed to last for forever, most of it was Mr Gold listening, while he paced back and forth. When it was over, he returned inside, more grim than he'd ever been in the years she'd known him, and he seemed to be having difficulties not deciding if he was going to rush past her or not, so she made it easier by getting up and following him back into their room.

“That didn't look like good news,” Belle said.

“No, it wasn't,” he said, and made his way down the carpeted hotel hallways with such swift vigour, it seemed he'd almost no use at all for his cane.

Once inside the hotel room, he started packing.

“Where are we going?” Belle asked.
“You're not going anywhere, I am going to London,” Mr Gold replied decisively.

“What was that call about?” Belle asked, pleading, as she sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to get a hold of the situation.

“It was my daughter-in-law. She’d been out for brunch with my boy and his mother, and some teenager she arrested during the London riots tried to stab her on the street, and hit Bae instead because he threw himself in front of her. He’s in the A&E, they suspect severe damage to his organs.”

Belle could only stare, slack-jawed, at him, listening to him speak with such a level and calm voice. But his urgency, and the tightness about him betrayed he wasn't feeling level or calm at all about any of what was going on.

“Oh... I'm sorry,” Belle managed to utter, at last. “Did they catch the stabber?”

“Yes. Captured and locked up.” Mr Gold had finished packing by then. “Right. I'll be going then.” He said, and took a moment to look at her.

Belle could feel her own heart plummet.

“You're flying back on Wednesday evening?” Mr Gold asked her.

Belle nodded, feeling her mouth gone dry suddenly. “I should be at Heathrow by nine-thirty. The plane departs at eleven and some.”

Mr Gold reached for his wallet and gave her some notes, she wasn't even looking at them because she was staring at his lovely, dark eyes.

“For the hotel, the train and the taxi, darling,” he said. “I have to go now.”

Belle kept nodding. Of course he needed to. She got up for one final hug, which was not anything how she'd imagined they would be parting, when she'd been dreading this moment. There was nothing tragically romantic or sexy or amorous about it. Instead if felt like she were comforting him for a period of time that was impossibly short. Holding him even for the part of a second, she knew he was absolutely devastated, and was doing all he could to keep it together.

Belle followed him out to the parking lot. She'd forgotten to bring a coat, and despite the sun shining so brightly and it being noon, the wind was sharp and cool and blew right through her thin cardigan.

“Please try and drive safely,” Belle said. She had thought she'd have a chance of giving him better parting words than those too, but then she found herself stuck with those, because in the next moment he was driving away, took a turn at the hedge row that surrounded the hotel manor, and then, Mr Gold was out of his sight.

Belle returned to the hotel room and sat there by the window, staring out and not seeing anything, as she wondered how was she supposed to go on with the rest of the Sunday now. Or the rest of her life for that matter.
The traffic on the M40 from Oxford to London was terrible on that Sunday. Maybe the unusually fine weather had given citizens of the metropolitan area a reason to escape to the green countryside, and they had all decided to return at the same hour on of the Sunday afternoon when Mr Gold was in his leased car on his way to the hospital.

Sitting in the traffic came him an opportunity to call Emma again to ask her which hospital was it again. He had asked that already, but at some point that piece of information had fallen straight right out of his mind. Emma's voice mail answered. She was inside a hospital, so no phones, of course. Mr Gold left her a message, and returned to slowly tapping his fingers against the wheel, while the traffic went nowhere.

After a moment of thinking, Mr Gold picked up his phone again, and dialled a number from memory, starting with a +33. He guessed there would be someone at the hospital who wouldn't care how many turn-your-phones-off reminds they gave her. And yes, this other phone rang, and it was not directed to voice mail. It rang six or seven times before the owner picked it up.

"Yes, what do you want?" Milah replied tersely.

Just hearing her voice made him grit his teeth automatically, so he didn't reply immediately, because he had to undo his jaw from the knot of irate tension.

"Just the name and location of the hospital," Mr Gold replied levelly, as much without emotion as he could, partially because this was the worst time to argue, and partially because he knew being left without regard annoyed her.

Emma got back to him later on, calling him while he was already parking underneath the hospital, marvelling the fact that he hadn't run over any pedestrians or into someone's tail lights while the traffic had crawled so slowly.

"He's still in operation, but it's gone well so far, or at least so they told me," said Emma. She let him know where she was waiting. She, in singular, Mr Gold noticed, not plural. He was on his way to the front desk through the busy hospital floor, passing a little kiosk that sold flowers and gifts, paperback books, little teddy bears and chocolate boxes kind, with a card stand full of colourful "Get Well Soon!" cards, when he heard a familiar voice again that made him grit his teeth together and his shoulders tighten.

"What do you mean you don't sell cigarettes!" She told the kiosk tender with heightened volume.

"This is a hospital, ma'am," the man behind the counter replied.

"A hospital full of bloody well stressed out people dying for smokes!" She retorted.

"Look, ma'am, they won't let me sell smokes any more, but I do have these nicotine patches..."

"My son's been gutted like a goddamn catfish and he's lying upstairs, bleeding and dying, do I look like I want your bloody nicotine patch!"

"Yeah well, ma'am, you'll just have to step outside and find your smokes elsewhere."

Mr Gold did a straight L-turn from the general pathway to the gift shop kiosk and smoothly elbowed himself between Milah and the annoyed-yet-intimidated young man tending the shop.
“Nicotine patches,” he announced gravely.

Milah said nothing while she watched him buy the patches.

“I'm going out to find some fags,” she said with a low voice as they left the kiosk.

Mr Gold reached for his chest pocket for the package of L&Ms he'd bought in Oxfordshire and gave them to her. “Here,” he said.

“Should I expect a black eye in return for these,” Milah said with a mixture of outrage and sarcasm. She seemed almost calmed down when they exited the hospital and got out in front for a smoke.

“You still smoke these,” Milah noted the label now, as she got a cigarette out of the package. Outside, in the late afternoon daylight, she looked deflated. She looked like she'd put on a lot of make up in the morning, but hadn't retouched it all day, and sunlight was merciless on her face, which had aged since she'd appeared in Scotland, a pixie-faced curious creature with a fierce temper. For someone who cared a lot about how she appeared to others, it was a little unusual to see her so undone.

Mr Gold said nothing, he caught the cigarettes from her hand while she was lighting hers up, took one, and gave the package back to her. He lit his up with the gold-plated lighter with his initials, which he always carried with him.

“What are the patches for?” Milah asked him.

“I thought I'd quit smoking,” Mr Gold replied.

“That's a laugh,” she muttered, and inhaled her cigarette fiercely. She exhaled a puff of smoke and without delay took a second, less intense drag, leaving lipstick stains on it.

Mr Gold watched an ambulance curve up on the next door nearby, and men step out to rush another patient inside. He wasn't thinking about nothing much, since his options for thinking of things were of a mutilated son, a wonderful woman he'd probably never see again, and of course, trying to have a real conversation with his ex-wife.

“Why do you resent me so much?” He asked all of a sudden. It was absurd that he asked it. In fact, it had felt as if the question had come out of nowhere, spoken by someone else, borrowing his lips.

“Gosh, I do wonder. Where should I start? Maybe giving me a black eye, my boyfriend a broken rib? Or suing Patrick? Or calling me a whore, a thief and a liar? I don't remember. Which one would you pick, darling?” She said vehemently.

Mr Gold shook his head. “I meant before all of that started.”

Milah was quiet for a while, smoking, and thinking. She exhaled through the nose, which made her look rather fearsome, like a dragon. “Are you asking why did we go sour?”

“Yeah,” said he, his question a bare whisper, with cigarette smoke coming out of his mouth.

“I don't know,” Milah said, uncharacteristically despondent for a change. Maybe it was due to their son being in an operation after being stabbed. “You were, you know, so afraid, and cautious all the time. I thought you'd get over it.” She toyed with the cigarette between her hands. “I hated you being such a fucking martyr all the time. You'll never be able to get over your dad being a total sack of shit, or your mom leaving. Woe is you, limp and all” She glanced at him directly in the eye, a gesture she'd avoided so far during this encounter. “I don't know anyone who hangs on to their baggage like
you do. And I guess I thought I didn't want to go down under with you.”

Mr Gold shrugged, and inhaled his cigarette smokes, watching another ambulance go past them. “Fair point,” he admitted.

“I'm not in the mood for any more of nostalgia. You can talk to your compulsory psychiatrist about it.”

Mr Gold rolled his eyes.

Milah smirked. “Yes, Emma told me, she forced you to go see someone after their wedding.” She dropped the butt of her cigarette on the ground, and flattened with her shoe. “Don't worry, I won't mention it again. Fact is, I don't give a shit about what goes on in your miserable life, because I've moved on. Maybe you should too.”

Mr Gold didn't listen to her. He finished his cigarette and then followed her in silence up to the emergencies, where they found Emma, standing despite her pregnancy, talking to a nurse who was insisting on trying to get her to sit down.

“Ma'am, you really should sit down and try and relax. Stress might harm your baby. Isn't there anyone here with you?” The nurse was asking.

“No I'm not really a family person,” Emma was saying just as her in-laws got within earshot. “A family-having person. I'm fine on my feet, trust me, I walk around all day while I work. Mothers all over the world have probably carried babies while working and walking, I don't need to lie down, I am perfectly calm,” she insisted to the nurse. Then she saw Mr Gold and Milah approaching at the next moment. Her shoulders visibly twitched, and she sat down instantly.

“I suppose I might be feeling a little stressed,” she added to the nurse, who after a brief conversation seemed satisfied that Emma wasn't about to miscarry in the corridor, and so she left.

“She's just come to tell me the surgeon's finished patching him up, they're moving him into recovery, someone's going to come and tell us more soon, and then we can go see him,” Emma managed to say, her eyes veering from one face to another hesitantly.

There was more waiting in order. While Milah took off for another smoke, Mr Gold took out the nicotine patches and stuck the first one on.

“Quitting smoking. That's nice,” Emma said. Mr Gold wondered, and not for the first time, what had made Emma Swan such a serious, determined, unfazed sort of a person.

“Have I ever told you, I like you. I'm glad you're with my son,” he said.

Emma looked a bit surprised. “Thanks.” The way she said it, he couldn't be entirely sure if she really meant it.

The afternoon vanished and evening took place instead. Bae woke up after his surgery, and could barely stay awake for a few minutes before he was given more drugs to help with the pain. He recognised everyone's face, cracked a joke, and fell back to a medically-induced sleep while they all kept watch of him.

Milah stayed at the hospital while Mr Gold drove Emma home. Streetlights and neon signs had replaced sunlight, and everywhere, there was traffic, because it was London.

“I like it how stiff upper lip your Brits are,” Emma said in the car. “I don't think I could have taken it
if someone had gotten all overwhelmed and emotional back there.”

“What were your parents like?” He asked.

“Bae never told you then?” Emma said in return. “It's how I got to Europe. I've been looking for my real parents all my life. The real reason why I got a job in the Met is so I could snoop around in search for them.”

Mr Gold frowned. “I'd always thought, for some reason, that they died in a car crash.”

“No, that was… some, of my foster parents,” Emma said. “They put me a lot from home to home.”

Mr Gold nodded, realising then why he so instinctively liked this Emma Swan. It was a shame they'd never really had an opportunity to talk with each other. Too bad their situation was less than ideal for familial bonding.

“Is it ok if you sleep on the couch?” Emma asked. “Milah's taken the extra bedroom.”

“I thought I'd go back to the hospital,” Mr Gold said.

“Oh. Ok. Can you stay a while though, before you leave? I... I don't feel like I want to be alone right now, with this... small person inside me.”

“Whatever you want,” he said, hoping he was reassuring.

“I think I also want all the Mexican takeaway. And Dandelion and Burdock. All the Dandelion and Burdock.”

“Interesting choice,” now hoping he was soothing, and remembered to be grateful that at least this pregnant person he was looking after wasn't throwing a fit at him.

It was very late in the night by the time Emma had finished going back and forth from the bathroom due to the excessive amounts of soft drinks she'd digested over the past three hours. Mr Gold lay on the sofa, and listened to the street sounds of London, and thought about his son, and of Milah, and of the finally-resting Emma Swan upstairs, until each thought fell asleep one by one. Underneath that all, as if waiting patiently, was the thought of Belle French.

Mr Gold got his phone from the nearby surface where it had been set next to his watch and the package of nicotine patches. It was half past midnight. Too late to politely call anyone. He hated the touch screen and hated the concept of text messaging, which was why he had zero text messages on his phone, and had never sent one. Now he opened the message icon and then looked up the phone number of Miss French from the address book and set it as recipient.

Arduously, he wrote, “My son was operated, he should recover well. I'll try call tomorrow. Good night.”

Mr Gold put the phone away. It took no less than twenty seconds before it made a cheerful chirp in the darkness, and his heart missed a beat as he picked the phone up and read the message.

Good night, sweet dreams. Sent by: Miss French
An Assistant's Opportunity

After a fairly nice weekend, Monday was a mixture of bleak rain, drizzle and fog. Belle had spent the day in Oxford, first in a museum during the day, then at a mall in the afternoon, trying to think of something to bring home to her father, and more importantly, something appropriate in response to the email she'd gotten from Ruby that morning. Now she wasn't only moving in with her boyfriend, but engaged too.

Belle felt happy for her, she really did, but she couldn't shake the feeling in the afternoon when she was nervously wandering about Marks and Spencer's, that she was only looking for a gift to be distracted. To have a reason not to think about anything serious was a blessing.

After hours upon hours of walking about town like an automaton, her head feeling a little heavy for all the worries they carried, Belle hadn't found anything for Ruby or for her father. She hoped she might have better luck at Heathrow airport, with the tax-free alcohols and cosmetics there. She'd have less things to carry, then.

She was in the taxi, going back to the hotel after the long afternoon, watching sheep disappear into the mist in the brown-green-grey landscape, when her phone rang. Belle almost pounced at it, hoping it was news about Mr Gold and his son, but to her disappointment it was an international call from one Graham.

"Hello hello, I hope I'm not calling at a bad time?" He asked.

"Oh, not at all, Graham," Belle replied. "Is it morning there already?"

"Yes, I just got to work. It's another fine Monday morning! Anyhow, the morning fedex brought some documents to Mr Gold from our friends at Spencer and Herman's." Belle nodded and hummed in reply. Those were the company's legal advisors. But they often sent documents, so that was fine.

Graham's pleasant voice continued at the end of the line. "And I know you won't be back in another week at least, but these are stamped urgent, and he won't answer his phone, so I was wondering if you want to ask him if he wants me to open them and read what's inside?"

Belle coughed, glancing towards the front seat, at the driver, and then out at the countryside. She was supposed to be in London at a business event, or so Graham thought. She was supposed to be within an earshot of Mr Gold, but Graham wouldn't know about that. Belle wondered if she should excuse Graham, call Mr Gold and ask him. He was probably at the hospital though, and they didn't allow cellphones, right? And if Belle herself had been at the office, it would have been her responsibility to open that letter anyway, familiarise herself with its contents, and brief Mr Gold about it.

"You could open it, scan them for me, and send them to me by email, and I'll deal with it, if you could do that please?" Belle asked. "Thank you. You're great. How's things in the city then? All as normal? Yes, well, I have been fairly... busy here." They chattered on the phone, and Belle overheard Graham tinker with the copy-scanner-fax-machine in the background, while page after page was being scanned. Belle pretended to tell Graham about how London was at night, even though she'd barely been there for longer than a day and a half. She nodded and smiled at the phone, at Graham's suspicions of how much fun it must be to travel with Mr Gold.

"The hotel is actually very comfortable. And the breakfasts are always excellent," Belle interceded, glad that she could tell plain truths in the middle of the very stretched versions of them.

There was a pause, Belle heard the scanner read something, and then everything was quiet.

“So, it says here, Mr Gold is selling his part of the company? Did you know about that, Belle?”

Belle closed her eyes. At that moment, the taxi stopped right in front of the hotel manor. She swore internally.

“Graham, if it's ok, I need to pay the man in the taxi now, I'll call you soon.”

Five minutes later she burst inside the hotel room and called Graham frantically, while opening her laptop and sitting down at the desk. Graham let the phone ring a few times before he picked it up.

“Hello Belle!” He replied cheerfully.

“Hi Graham,” she said, exhausted. “Look, could you not tell Regina, or anyone?” Belle asked, pleading.

“Well, you know, if she finds out I've held this back from her, she's going to... well, you know. Set me on fire, in the best case scenario,” Graham replied.

“Don't you know how to keep a secret? There should be no reason why she should assume that you'd gone and read a fedex package sent to Mr Gold,” Belle insisted.

“I'm not sure-”

“Please, if you can't do it for Mr Gold, can you do it for me? Please?” Belle pleaded.

“Oh, fine, damsel in distress. Hang on though, what's in it for you?”

Belle sighed. “I uhh... I'll get a promotion?”

There was a short moment of silence.

“Belle French, are you and Mr Gold...?”

“Not at all!” If Graham meant fucking, then by fine-print of technicalities then, no. “I'm not even in the same room with him. Or in the same town. I uhh, due to many and complicated reasons, happen to be in Oxford right now. He's in London. So you'll keep quiet, Graham?”

“Fine. I'll hide the papers in your desk drawers now. Are you two coming back?”

“He's not. I'm coming back, I think I should be there on Thursday afternoon. Going to clear my desk and give my notice, I guess,” said Belle.

“What about that promotion?” Graham asked.

“I was offered one, but I didn't take it. You see, I'm losing my apartment next month, so I'm going to move back to Maine with my dad, while I try get a new job.” Belle rested her forehead against her palm. It felt good to talk to someone actually, even though it was all mostly crap news.

“There. All is hidden. I'll send you the documents anyway.”

“You're a sweetheart,” Belle replied, her voice subdued.
“So I'll see you in a few days. Take care, Belle.”

“Thank you, Graham. Have a nice day.”

She put the phone away and then typed in the password to her email account. There were two new messages, one from Graham, and another from someone called Stephanie Fitzherbert, with the title: Re: Application for Junior Position in...

Belle's jaw fell open. She stared at the truncated header and then pounced for the touchscreen mouse to click open the message. It was a reply to one of the writing position applications she'd sent out.

Dear Miss French, it started. Would you be available for an interview...

She had to close her eyes, then open them again. She read the beginning part three more times, because for some reason her brain was not making any sense of the part of how, when and where she was going to be at an interview a week forward from them.

Despite her hands sweating, her heart pounding and her lungs feeling like they were running low on oxygen, Belle managed to check her bank statement, her calendar, and make sure everything was in agreement to her being at the interview next Tuesday morning, on the other side of the world. She typed in her reply, hoping that Ms Fitzherbert would appreciate her promptness, and then went to wash her face with cold water, because she was feeling far too excited.

Her brain was abuzz with all the prospects of what sort of things they might ask her at the interview. When she went to the hotel bar for a light dinner consisting of a jacket potato and a glass of apple juice, she did so with her phone hooked on to the hotel wifi, and she read tips about job interviews with one hand while holding the fork in the other.

Belle's mind was full with thoughts of preparation, of the flights she'd need to book to get to there (she'd declined the offer to go through the interview online, hoping it would prove how committed she was) once her head stopped spinning. She still wasn't sure whether she should book the flight immediately, or wait until she was back in the States, so she could be sure that she wasn’t accidentally in the wrong country when she'd need to board the plane.

She was still in such a state of debilitating excitement when her phone next rang. To her delight, it was not a difficult business call from work, but Mr Gold instead. Belle answered cautiously, reminding herself that his son was still at the hospital most likely. She didn't want to get too excited and gush about her interview while his affairs were in such a state. She’d tell him later.

“Hi,” Belle replied plainly, “how is he?”

“He's been awake today. They'll keep him a few more days at least,” Mr Gold replied.

“Good. That's good to hear. You must be so relieved.”

“Yes. It's been a very long day.”

“Did Graham try to call you?” Belle asked.

“While my phone was turned off, yes, I noticed. Did you speak with him?”

Belle bit her lower lip sheepishly. “Yes... he's found out about the transaction. He read some documents that Spencer sent by courier to our office today. I asked him to keep quiet though, and I think he will.”
She heard him do the almost-laugh-snort he was so prone to do. “What would I do without you, Miss French,” he replied, and she heard how relieved he sounded. That made her feel a little warm all over.

“I guess you'll find out next week,” Belle replied. “Do you want to tell me about your day?”

“In one word – a nightmare. But a tolerable enough as nightmares come,” he sounded amused. “How was your day?”

Belle moved over from the desk to the bed to talk. “Nothing special. Went to town, tried to look for presents for people back home. Came up with nothing. Saw a museum. Panicked while talking with Graham on the phone. Had dinner.”

There was an awkward pause when she couldn't think of anything to say, and he had nothing to say either, until he broke the silence.

“You don't absolutely have to leave the country just yet, right?”

Belle managed to uhhm a non-committal noise of a reply.

“Would you like to stay a while? I'm asking, because I need to look for a house in London, or nearby at least, and I thought you'd like to help me pick one,” he said.

She sighed once, and then twice.

“I'm sorry, I can't. I have a job interview a week from now. It's for a writing thing.”

Silence.

“Congratulations,” she heard his fake heartfelt sincerity shine through the words. “That's what you wanted. I'm glad it didn't took you very long.”

“It's just an interview, I'm not sure they'll want to hire me,” Belle said, hearing her voice shake.

“You're good on paper, and great in person. They will want to hire you as soon as you walk in,” she heard him say, and knew he was sincere. It occurred to Belle that she loved the way he often made her feel confident about herself, even when she wasn't so sure of herself.

“Thank you. That means a lot to me,” she whispered to her phone, pressing it closer to her cheek, and closing her eyes, listening to the silence.

Belle continued describing the job and where it was, feeling a little less euphoric now, imagining the distance between them. He in Europe, she on the west coast.

“A change of scenery,” he replied.

“I don't know anyone from there. I guess I'll have to sell all my books, or pack them up and drive them all up to Maine so my father can store them, and I can fail to ever get them back from him. I'm glad now, that half of my books are digital, it'll be easier to move. All my clothes fit in one big suit case too, because there was never enough space in Ruby’s apartment. I can just get on board and fly off,” she said, thinking she ought to sound happier.

“An adventure. It once worked for me,” he said, and already he sounded so distant as if they already were on different sides of the world, instead of being separated by two hours and a British motorway.
“An adventure,” Belle said, agreeing. “So, uhm, do you want to call me again tomorrow?”

“If I get the opportunity,” said Mr Gold. “I’m wedged between my daughter-in-law and my ex-wife most of the time.”

Belle smirked at the idea of Mr Gold being wedged between anything, really. “They must be very exciting ladies.”

“That is a very politically correctly phrased estimation,” he said. “Good night, then.”

“Thank you, and good night,” said Belle in return.
An Assistant's Final Task

Belle woke up early on Tuesday morning, instantly remembering that she'd forgotten something, and that something was important.

The night before, she was supposed to have read the paper Graham had scanned for her at the office. They might be important in regards to Thursday morning's paper-signing.

In her Hello Kitty pyjamas, she dragged herself out of bed in a right state, and hurled herself at the chair by the desk. The email attachments seemed to take forever to download, and the PDFs had been scanned upside down, so she had to work a little magic to make everything legible.

She was no expert in legal jargon, but Belle had gone through enough Spencer and Herbert's documents to understand that Mr Gold's signature was needed on the bottom line, if he was to finalise his transaction on Thursday. Belle went on a search of the bed for her phone, because she'd left it there on the covers during the night, and looking for a white phone between white bedsheets was not a speedy job.

Finally though, with the phone in her hand, she glanced at the time, and deeming the hour suitable enough for the day's first phone call, Belle dialled Mr Gold's number and waited for the phone to ring.

\textit{The number you have tried to connect could not be...}

So his phone was off. Right then, Belle could try some other way of reaching him. First of all, of course, she wrote him an email, forwarding him the upside-up version of the papers. Fingers busy with her phone, looking for a British phone and name directory that could give her some idea of how many B. Golds there lived in the London area, Belle walked to the breakfast buffet, and had a very distracted breakfast while making a few local calls, which yielded no results. She also searched for Emma Golds, and she called a couple of them, but they were most decidedly not the Emma Golds she was looking for. Belle suspected Emma had kept her name.

After getting through the names in the phone directory, and having finished her breakfast in a hurry, Belle returned to the hotel room and got back on the laptop. She looked up profiles on LinkedIn and Facebook for B Golds and Bae Golds in London area, and one profile in particular caught her interest.

“My son works at a bank, but he hates it,” Belle whispered out loud, echoing something she thought Mr Gold had said to her at one point or the other.

She went to the website of the bank, looked up the branch where Mr Gold's son worked, and dialled there, excited how close she was now.

“Hello! This is Miss Belle French, personal assistant to Mr James Gold, his son works there? In personal account management? Where are you directing me? Oh alright.”

She waited.

“Hello, this is Miss French, I'm calling about Mr Gold, he was in an accident... yes. I'm a personal assistant working for his father, you see, and I need to get in touch with someone in his family, is there a number you could give me? His personal mobile number? Sounds terrific, thank you.” Belle wrote down the number the stranger at the bank gave him. “Do you by any chance have his wife's number? Ok, I'll hold.”
Belle waited.

“Hello, this is Belle French, I'm calling about Mr Gold, he was in an accident last weekend, and I need to get in touch with his family. I was told you could get me his wife's phone number? Oh, I'm not from an insurance company. No, I work for Mr Gold's father, and I'm trying to get a hold of them. No, please, this is important.”

The woman at the bank declined, stating the bank wouldn't be giving out their employers' personal information to strangers on the phone, and promptly hung up.

Belle swore at the phone.

But she now had at least one real number! Belle wondered if Bae could pick it up. She swiftly dialled in the numbers and took a deep breath, waiting for the call to connect.

_This is voice mail. Leave a message after the signal._

Belle sighed.

Next she tried to find an address with the phone number, but the address was not listed.

Belle called Bae's phone again, and waited through the voice mail message and after the signal.

“Hello, this is uhm, Belle French, and I'm trying to reach Mr Gold, I mean, your father, not yourself. Could you please ask him to call me soon? It is somewhat urgent. Thank you, and bye.”

With nothing to do but wait for a phone call, Belle went back to re-reading the documents. Outside it rained, and inside, hours passed slowly. Belle felt too antsy to leave the premises, so after a half-a-day of staring at Facebook, mainly replying to Ruby's messages about her engagement party and to the instagram photos of her diamond ring, Belle put the PDFs on a memory stick and headed to the hotel foyer.

“Hello, is there a printer and a scanner here in this house which I could use? It's very urgent,” she burst the words in one frustrated sigh at the man she'd titled as Carson already, and he stepped aside and into a back room for a moment with a chilly, apprehensive look on his face.

“Yes, this can be arranged,” Carson replied coolly, upon his return.

They allowed to use a machine in a back office to print the last page of the contract. Belle forged Mr Gold's signature on it, which was not the first time she'd done that. Usually it was done as per his request though, and not due to her taking such an initiative. She scanned the paper with the signature, and saved it as a PDF on her memory stick and then, making sure she'd left nothing on the hotel computer, she tipped Carson generously, and went back up to the room, still waiting for that phone call.

Deciding to waste more time surfing on the Internet, Belle went to look at the Pinterest page Ruby had already created for her wedding. Her being a bartender, Belle wasn't amazed that the first two screenfuls of pictures were of colourful cocktails. In the email in which she'd sent the link, Ruby had explained she was going to pick all the flowers and bridesmaids dresses based on which cocktail she wanted to create the party around.

A late-night cocktail party, in cocktail dresses.

Sure enough, the bridesmaids dress ideas came up next, and Belle cringed looking at them, each dress shorter than the other, with ever descending necklines. She'd have a say, thank God, she
reminded herself.

We’re thinking about getting married in February, a winter wedding, you know, a party to remember! Not one of those cookie-cutter summertime garden parties. I can get a great discount at work for the ballroom, but I don’t know about the flowers, can you get decent flowers for a wedding in February?

Belle would have regarded the chain of emails with much more energy and vigour if for one, their moving in together hadn’t meant that she was to be homeless in a couple of weeks, and second of all, she was not really in the emotional place where she wanted to be excited about someone else’s wedding.

But she should be, Belle berated herself, scrolling down the Pinterest page. She’d be happy, and supportive, and join this group account on which she could add her own ideas and suggestions, and she’d be there for Ruby, because Ruby had been there for her for so many years, consoling her after every bad and short affair, always helping Belle take her mind off of herself when she was in danger of being lost in too many thoughts and books, and forgetting the wider world outside. Ruby looked after her in bars where Belle was always feeling hopelessly the displaced foreigner, Ruby had even saved her from some creep who’d put some date rape drugs in her drink once. There was no reason at all to let the passing dark cloud of the aftermath of Belle’s short affair with her own boss dampen all this good news.

Not that speaking to herself responsibly and logically helped Belle feel any better. She was then, in fact, rather alarmed by the extent of how much not-alright she felt.

It had been a rather busy week and some, she reflected, staring at the empty bed in the room. They hadn’t really talked about what and how and why of the two of them. Belle had avoided the issue because she knew he’d just moved out of the country, or rather, into this one, and she still was having her own life still on pause one ocean away. Maybe there had been a silent, consensual understanding between herself and Mr Gold that the past week had been nothing but chasing the last rays of a sunset before nightfall.

Then he’d gone and, hmm. He’d asked her to stay.

And Belle bit her lip, thinking, wondering, if she hadn’t received that email yesterday, what would she have replied to him last night, when he’d asked her? Would she just have stayed, like that? Until further notice?

But the thing was, now she couldn’t imagine what that conversation would have been like, because she had been invited to an exciting interview full of exciting opportunities, while in Britain, well, she was afraid she might end up as a housewife, living on Mr Gold’s charity, or doing who knew what to pay her bank all the student loans she’d taken. She couldn’t imagine herself living like that at all, being so wholly dependent on someone.

It could be an adventure, she reflected.

Then again, it could be a nightmare.

You can’t build a relationship on a week spent in a cosy five-star hotel room, paid by someone else, Belle thought. They were in so decidedly different places in their lives. She was just about to go into a life of career, he was leaving his. He had a child, and soon, a grandchild! While all her family was her father, in Maine, suffering from blood pressure and overweight. She lived in half a shoebox, he had a nice, large apartment in a lovely area of the city. Or so he’d had, maybe he’d already sold that away.
Belle felt as though crying would have made her feel better, but there wasn't that sort of miserable self-pitying pain inside her. She just had a cold, hard emptiness inside her chest, in the face of the fact that her holiday adventure was about to be over. She'd stay in this room one more night, pick her things, return to London, get to the airport, and fly home, never to see Mr Gold again.

Refusing to feel too despondent about it, Belle signed in to Pinterest with her Facebook account and started making herself familiar with the place.

She had been intimidated by the hundreds of samples of place settings for dinner under the wedding section, when her phone rang at last, and it was Mr Gold.

“Hello, Miss French,” he said, sounding very formal.

“Hello, Mister Gold,” Belle replied, digging out the emails with the contracts, while attaching the memory stick flash drive to the USB gate on her laptop.

“I've just returned to my daughter-in-law’s residence in London and I've read your message regarding the Spencer and Herman papers,” said Mr Gold, and Belle smiled sadly, he sounded like he was speaking to her from his own office in the city, and it was a year ago again, when there'd been nothing but the most superficial of workplace attachments between them.

“I'd need to sign them, but I can't get them printed here,” he said.

“Oh, Mr Gold, I took the liberty of printing them, signing them with your name, and scanning them, I had the hotel people confirm the copy. I just need to send the copy by email to Spencer and Herman's, and it's done.”

“So efficient of you, as always,” he responded. Belle overheard two women talk in the background, arguing over something about fish.


“Yes, he's... well. He spoke to us today.”

And he'll speak a lot more to you, when you stay here, and see him more often than ever before, Belle thought.

“I shouldn't keep you any longer tonight, then. I have to tidy up here, I'm leaving the hotel after breakfast,” Belle said, clicking Send on her email application, which sent the forged signature of Mr Gold to the lawyers. “There, I sent the paper back to Spencer.”

“Thank you, Miss French. You... travel safely.”

“Thank you, sir, I'll try. Will that be all?”

“That'll be all, Miss French.”

And with that dreadful finality, the call ended. Belle threw the phone away, on top of the bed. Perhaps it might be eaten up by the bedsheets again, she didn't care.

She took a moment to write Graham a thank you note, asking him if he'd like anything from the duty-free portion of Heathrow Airport, and with that done, Belle returned to being amazed by place settings for Your Dream Wedding.
Come Wednesday morning, Belle visited the breakfast buffet of the hotel manor the last time. She ate with more regard to nutrition that morning, rather than indulging herself with a tower of pancake. She returned to the hotel room, packed the last few of her things, did a twice-over to see if she’d missed anything. She checked she had her phone charger, twice, peeked under the bed, and at last, closed the room door behind her one last time, before heading down to the foyer, dragging her baggage all piled on top of her suitcase on wheels behind her.

It was a misty day with a promise of drizzle. Belle watched the green-grey-brown autumn landscape roll in mist while a taxi took her to the coach station where a direct connection would take her to Heathrow. She bought a ticket beforehand, and then went to sit in a nearby coffee shop to eat a bagel and wait for the coach to leave. She could have left Oxford later, pan the streets one more time, but she felt so very tired, and not just from carrying around a purse, a laptop bag and a very large suitcase across the street a couple of times.

An hour and a half later, Belle was in a world very different from the cute, green and rural countryside. The grey concrete surrounding Heathrow airport suited her mood well, she found. The coach reached its final destination at Terminal Five. But she had to get to Three. This preoccupied her for over half an hour.

In the right terminal, she packed her laptop bag inside her suitcase, weary of carrying it around. She had to really squash it in to make room, but a few wrinkled dresses was well worth the bother of not having to injure her neck carrying around the laptop. At this point, she really doubted she would have to do any urgent work. Too bad, if this proved wrong.

Feeling a little sore on the inside, and a little scatterbrained, Belle went through the motions, queuing up for security, getting stalled there for not doing everything as precisely as per according to the instructions. Apologetically, she co-operated with the irate security guardess who then proceeded to look for hidden guns and or narcotics under her dress.

After stumbling onwards and into the midst of the duty-free shopping area of Terminal Three, Belle felt an awful tightness in the back of her throat. Ignoring that, she went straight ahead to find something for her father from amidst the shiny, clean shelves of alcohol. Something else for Ruby. And a little something for Graham.

A young man working in the duty-free shop came to talk to her with a very thick accent, and Belle shook her head at him, striving to understand him, and he mentioned how funny it was that someone with an Australian accent couldn't understand 'im, and Belle excused herself curtly, too sour and her mind preoccupied by a strange foggy cloud. A moment later, when she was queuing up for the till, she realised the young man had been asking her if she wanted any assistance or recommendations.

She had a snack in the food court, and then returned to the waiting area to sit amidst a few hundred other people for a few hours, anticipating for the giant boards to pronounce her departure gate. She looked at other people nervously, a slow anxiety building up in the pit of her stomach.

There were some games on her ipad. She took that out of her bag and whittled away the hours with it, cutting ropes, killing zombies and investigating secrets in dark Scandinavian woods.

When the gate number was announced on the board, Belle felt panic, knowing that she didn't want to board the plane and go back. Walking from the waiting lounge towards the gate, she started crying, despite insisting that she should not, because in a sudden storm of obstinate stupidity, her imagination
broke into a free rampage, giving her flashes of her and Mr Gold looking at houses, her and Mr Gold at Ruby's wedding together, her and Mr Gold getting married.

It was stupid and childish. She'd just spent a whole evening watching wedding flowers and ornaments, of course she'd be thinking about weddings the day after!

Belle stomped down the never-ending carpeted corridors towards the departure gate, wiping away the tears with the sleeve of her coat as she made way. The departure gate wasn't open yet, when she arrived, and she crashed onto a seat identical to the one in the big waiting lounge, and stared out through the window at the darkening sky over London.

In a mad fit of emotion, she reached for her phone and tried to call Mr Gold, but his phone was not on. Belle sat there, staring at the phone, asking herself why did she want, more than anything, for him to suddenly appear. Like they always did in films and at the end of that kind of book, like that little boy had done in Love Actually when he'd raced through the airport to talk to the girl before she flew over to America.

Belle even looked over her shoulder, turned away from staring at the window, to stare down the carpeted corridors at the steady stream of airline passengers walking, expecting to see him there, because that would have been perfect. That was what she wanted.

Then she would have turned down that job interview and wouldn't have told Mr Gold about it, Belle reminded herself, and looked back outside, into the night.

“Are you quite alright, miss?” An airline hostess asked her, when half an hour later she was in her seat in the business class.

“Yes, I just, am so sad to be leaving,” Belle replied, braving a smile at the hostess.

She was still expecting her phone to ring, when the hostesses asked everyone to turn on all and any electronic devices for their departure. Belle bit her lip and turned off the phone, reminding herself that Mr Gold knew very well what time her plane was taking off, and he wouldn't be calling her so late now.

She cried throughout the take-off, as the plane shook and trembled with the terrible speed it needed to lift off, and she cried watching London disappear under fog and smoke and clouds. Her ears ringing, she stared at the landscape changing beyond the window, into the strange and unreal world above clouds. There was just enough light of the setting sun, and light from below to give the clouds a faint purple lighting, in contrast to pitch black darkness of the universe and its stars above.

It was so beautiful, Belle stopped crying. She felt small, removed from her troubles, while she looked out.

The seatbelt light turned off with a bleep, while the hostess on the speaker asked all passengers to keep their seatbelts secured whenever they were seated. Dinner would be served soon.

The hostess in charge of the business class, the same one who'd asked her if she were alright, returned to Belle, and asked if she needed a drink.

“A gin and tonic? Please,” Belle replied, croaking. She'd managed to find an unused napkin from one of the coffee shops she'd been to during the day, and was drying her puffy face with it.

“Coming right up, sweetheart,” the lady replied sweetly.

With a long deep sigh, Belle turned her gaze back to the stars.
Unsure which day it was, and when she'd last slept and how long, Belle woke up in her and Ruby's apartment. All of Ruby's stuff had vanished while Belle had been gone, and by all now this included the very very last of it. The Ikea shelves that had once halved the room had also been gone, but coming home, Belle had been a bit too tired and too drunk to care right then. When her alarm woke her up, reminding her to go to the office, she was properly amazed by how spacious the place seemed. And a little forlorn. It had been homey before, now it felt like just a room, waiting to eject Belle out next.

Everything that had seemed mundane and barely worth the effort to notice a couple of weeks before seemed fresh and new. The cars. The sides of the buildings. The paving on the streets. Little things which you so easily took for granted – because that was how things were and how they looked – came into a new perspective after just a few weeks abroad. Belle took her time to marvel at that when she made her way across the city to the office.

By chance, she ran into Mr Dove in the elevator, he was headed up as well, and they the only people in the tiny space then.

“Miss French,” said Mr Dove courteously as she stepped in, and Belle greeted her with muted, yet cordial politeness, as if expecting Dove to read off her face what had happened between her and Mr Gold in Britain. “Just returned from England?”

“Yes, Mister Dove. Uhm. Do you know how things are here?”

Dove smiled at her generously. “Mr Gold hired me to clear his office as of very early this morning. I'm just about finished, getting a few more boxes down into the van and that's it.”

“So, he sold his shares?”

“I take it that he did.”

Dove and Belle got to their floor and went of course to their shared direction – to Mr Gold's office. Dove's understated telling of him clearing Mr Gold's office was not at all what Belle had expected – there was nothing left in the whole room now but two cardboard boxes on the floor. It was amazing, because the room had been such a magpie's lair before. Belle didn't doubt that it had taken almost all day for Dove to have packed and emptied everything properly. In fact, she thought it very efficient of him to have been done with it already by one o'clock.

Shocked, but not having the luxury of getting to live it thoroughly, Belle went to her own desk – taken over by a pile of unread letters and papers – but she ignored those and instead went through the drawers to find where Graham had stashed the papers from Spencer and Herman's. Graham had been as good as his word, and she found them from the bottom drawer, underneath her stash of emergency toothpaste, facial wash and tampons.

Belle was about to head off to find Graham, when Dove carried a box to Belle's desk and set it down on the floor next to it.

“Mr Gold asked me to give these to you.”

Belle glanced down at the floor. They were rectangular box-shapes, wrapped hastily in brown wrapping paper and then some bubble wrap.

“Oh, thank you. Sorry, but do you know where Graham is?” Belle asked. “Is he at his desk?”
“I couldn’t say.” Dove went back into Mr Gold’s old office, picked up the last box, and carried it out and off the premises.

Graham’s present was wrapped inside a plastic bag from Heathrow. Cradling that with both her hands, Belle returned to the maze of the office corridors, worried that she might run into Regina, who would most likely scream at Belle, because she would probably be outraged, and Belle was a perfect target for taking it all out on.

Timidly at first, and then suddenly remembering that she was going to give in her notice anyway, Belle approached partially-bravely the den of evil.

Graham was not at his desk, but inside Regina’s office, standing with his back turned towards the door, listening to Regina and her mother having a heated discussion about the fate of the company. Belle set the plastic-wrapped bottle of scotch on Graham’s desk and toed away quietly.

Because she had no superior to report to about her quitting, she had to go deal with her departure by herself. She visited payrolls, the general desk clerk in charge of stamping in, she visited the IT department about the handling of her email address and the closure of her company phone, and the return of her keycard and its due expiration date.

Then, because she was still namely working there for five more days, Belle returned to her desk, took the antique kris knife from inside her desk drawer, and started opening the letters one by one, until she remembered the box Dove had set on the floor on the other side of the desk.

Curiosity got the better of her, so Belle cleared aside the stack of papers and letters to make enough room for the box, which turned out to be heavy. She picked one of the wrapped rectangles and unwound the paper and the bubble wrap to uncover a beautiful little book, even if a little old. The faded, worn gold-lettering on the spine and cover said Middlemarch by George Eliot, Vol I. The craftsmanship of the lettering and of the ornate details of the spine and covers delighted her, although inside, the pages had torn a little with time, and the book itself was in danger of falling apart and escaping its hard covers.

A sudden, creeping thought came to her. Belle sought the out the title page of the book and read through that, looking for the year of the print. She found roman numerals at the bottom of the page, and had to use Google to refresh her memory on what year was MDCCCLXXI. It was 1871.

Belle almost dropped the book from her hand then.

She was holding a book that was almost a hundred and fifty years old.

Resisting the urge to look up the asking price for the first edition of Middlemarch, Belle quickly re-wrapped the book, estimating that she was now in possession of eight or ten antique novels.

The box was so heavy, she regretted she hadn’t asked Dove to deliver it home. It would be a right pain to get home safely with it, with all the books intact. She’d have to take a taxi, and it would cost.

She returned to her task of sorting through two weeks of paper mail, when she felt a cold chill creep up her spine, hearing the unmistakable sound of the stiletto heels of Cora Mills advancing down the granite corridor.

Resisting the urge to throw herself down behind the desk and pretend she wasn’t there, Belle continued going through the mail bravely, and looked up to greet Cora with a hello and a smile. Belle didn’t even seem to register on Cora’s radar, when she strode right past her and into Mr Gold’s old office. Belle froze into place and regarded Cora. She did a cursory round of the plain, empty
room, until she paused at the window and stared out for a while. Cora wore a dark Chanel suit and, as usual, her hair seemed to have so much spray in it, it would have worked as a battle helmet.

“Life must go on then,” Belle heard Cora mutter.

With a little less thunder, Cora strode out of the office and in the direction of the elevators. Belle felt like she could breathe again, and the rest of the afternoon at her desk diluted into a very dull, ordinary sort of a Thursday.
February 15th 2014

RUBY & VICTOR

~ are getting married! ~

That Saturday, the wedding preparations started on such a positive note with all the bridesmaids having their breasts taped.

“Welcome to the world of instant breast lift, ladies!” Ruby harked at all of them cheerfully. She was sitting in the corner of the room, drinking a mimosa and wearing something that would not have been recognised as a wedding dress in any culture, but it suited her personality perfectly, and for a chilly February wedding day, a faux-fur capelet with sequins was a very good match with the rather streamlined dress she wore underneath, which in all its glory when revealed, did make Ruby reminiscent of Cleopatra.

Ruby smiled and clapped her hands together when one by one her three bridesmaids finished putting on their dresses. There was Ariel, Ruby's co-worker, a twenty-something redhead who was the namesake of a popular children’s cartoon film heroine from the 80s. She was finding the adventure of wearing a completely backless dress on a day in February as thrilling as Ashley was, the blonde girl who was also from Storybrooke, like Belle and Ruby.

Sean is going to love this!” Ashley giggled, while twirling in her dress, which had ample skirt length while no material covering the back. “I should call him and ask him how he's doing with Alexandra, they went out for a walk but they should have come back by now. And you know, it's a big city, Alexandra's never even been out of Storybrooke, do you think they're ok?”

“You need to lighten up, Ash,” Ruby said, and finished her mimosa in one swell swig. “It's not like he's alone with his own kid for the first time in his life.”

Ashley looked worriedly positive, and took another twirl in front of the mirror. “Thanks for asking me, I know bridesmaids are supposed to be, you know, maidens. Or at least single.”

“It's a stupid rule. Besides, getting knocked up at eighteen, you really didn't have that much time to practice your time as maiden,” Ruby said with a laugh, in which Ariel and Ashley both joined.

A little preoccupied, staring at her new getup, Belle joined in only just as the laugh was dying, which made the situation a little awkward.
“What's the matter, honey? You look great, don't worry,” Ruby said assuringly, and Belle wondered, wasn't it the bridesmaids' task to console the worried bride on her wedding day, and not the other way around? Belle wore a dress identical to the other bridesmaids. Short, small, revealing. They all had their hair piled up, with artistically placed loose curls falling down past their necks.

“It's not the dress,” Belle replied. She was well aware she looked a bit lacklustre. She forced herself to smile, so as not to make Ruby too concerned over her. “I've just been so busy the last couple of months, doing this, and the new job.”

“Hey, congratulations!” Ariel piped in, and suddenly gave Belle a hug so suddenly, Belle almost lost her footing. “What are you doing now?”

Belle smiled shyly, nervous to be the centre of attention in the room all of a sudden. “Well, I'm not a PA anymore. Actually this is my second new job, after I quit that assistant job I had for a couple of years, I worked in this writer's room through October.”

There was a knock on the door and then it was opened when Ashley's husband and their six-year-old daughter entered the room, with Ariel's boyfriend Eric just behind.

“Hey! Oh wow, girls, Jesus Christ, Ruby forgot to order the other halves of your dresses, not that I mind!” Sean declared.

“Mommy mommy, I saw a hobo!” Alexandra declared with such excitement, which made her mother's recently achieved lightened cheer crumble.

“There's more old friends from Storybrooke in town than just the wedding party. Gary's here too, he's here for some sports convention. Didn't you used to date Gary?”

Belle cringed inwardly, listening to Sean talk to Ruby.

Ruby laughed, sparkling, like her wine. "No, that was Belle! Hey if you see Gary around or talk to him, invite him over to the wedding reception later."

There had been far fewer people present at the ceremony at the magistrate's office, than there eventually ended up in the hotel ball room, which Belle had spent the entirety of Valentine's Day decorating the night before. She'd even arranged to take a day off from work to be present early, and while it stung a little to feel so lonely on February 14th, she'd simply focused on the tasks at hand, telling herself secretly how glad she would be on Sunday when this would be all over and she could go home, mope, and concentrate on getting her groove back in her new job.

At least her boss was excellent. Her name was Mary Margaret, and she was excellent, and married, and had a little girl, and there was no danger of Belle and her flying off to Europe together for a week of... yeah. So.

At the party, thoughts about work were the ones that mostly occupied her. She was a bit of a wallflower in the corner of the room, and purposefully so, because every time she did a little turn about the room, many of Victor's drunken doctor friends took the opportunity to touch the skin on her back, and that made Belle's skin crawl.

But she was very proud of how well the room looked. She must have caught a thing or two from her time as a personal assistant to the chaser of professional perfection, Belle mused, staring at the flower centrepieces, and at Ruby's grandmother near them, telling naughty jokes to much younger, very
nervous-looking doctors. Belle had overheard that Granny was to drink all the rest of the guests under the table during the course of the night. Good for her! Belle was waiting for a time when it would be not too impolite to slip away and go up to the hotel room she was sharing with Granny.

She hoped to vanish within the next thirty minutes. The air was getting thick with the perfumes and colognes of all the guests, all mixing with each other. People were dancing, and the place was so warm for hours, she'd been forced to take off the cardigan she'd tried to wear as often as possible across the day.

Amidst the sea of roughly a hundred people, and with more trickling in slowly, Belle suddenly saw Ruby approach her from the crowd, dragging with him not her new husband, but an old mutual acquaintance from Storybrooke! How lovely! Belle forced herself to smile with her teeth showing for about the hundredth time that night.

“Belle! Look who I found!” Ruby declared. Belle knew the bride was very tipsy, but only because she'd trained herself to recognise the signals over the course of the years.

“Look indeed,” Belle replied, and looked up at the two-meter tall, wide-chested man Ruby pushed in front of her.

“Didn't you guys use to date in high school?” Ruby asked. “Gary, keep Belle some company, she's been looking so lonely all evening, ok, bye,” and so with elegance just a little lacking that of Elizabeth Taylor, Ruby took off to a merry group of talkative people and exclaimed “Hi! Have you guys seen my husband!”

“Hi Gary,” Belle said quietly, smiling politely.

“Well... hello there,” he replied.

It had been a decade ago, when he'd copped a feel of her in his car and she'd hit him on the head with War and Peace before jumping out and walking home across all of Storybrooke. Belle still felt that automatic guardedness, seeing him.

“So, how are you doing?” She asked him politely.

“Good.” He nodded. “Great, in fact. I have my own business in Boston!” Gary shouted over the noise.

“Oh, that's wonderful, what's the business?”

Gary sipped his drink before answering. “It's a sports equipment store. So what're you on about these days? Still throwing books at guys?”

Belle laughed nervously. “Only at the ones trying to get fresh with me,” she admitted.

“And how's that working out for you?” He asked rather snidely then, looking around, “No date for the wedding?”

Belle bit her lip. “Well, I don't see you here with anyone, either,” she replied calmly.

Gary made a vague gesture with the hand that wasn't holding his drink. “The old lady wasn't interested, she's staying home with the offspring. Can't leave a bunch of kids to watch after the dogs, either. We got five, you know.”

“Kids?” Belle asked.
“No, dogs! And three kids, two boys and a girl.”

Belle nodded slowly. “That sounds like a lot of work, three kids and five dogs. How do you make the time?”

“I don't know how she does it, my time goes with the store,” Gary replied matter-of-factly.

Belle nodded, and then they stared at each other.

“Excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom,” she told him, and skittered away, trying to keep close to the walls and away from any man who smiled too much.

Belle left the area dedicated for the event, because the women's bathroom there had a queue. Outside, through the hotel lobby, there was one she'd discovered had so little use, she often was the sole person to occupy it. She went to the very last stall and enjoyed the opportunity of getting to take a long breath in relative silence. Echoes of the ball room dance music still reached her there, as did the background jazz of the hotel restaurant still open on the other side of the ground floor level.

Someone else entered while she sat there, but Belle didn't pay any attention, not until she was done with her business, opened the stall door, and found herself face to face with Gary again. With a shriek, she banged the door shut in front of him and locked it.

“Hey... Belle, I just wanted to talk, in private... you know,” he said, knocking softly on the door of the stall. At the party, when he'd been yelling over the noise, the slow slur in his voice had been less obvious.

“You look really hot in that dress, you know,” he continued, while Belle pulled down the cover of the toilet bowl to stand on top of it, not wanting to have her ankles within arm's length of the space underneath the door.

“Gary, you're really drunk, and you shouldn't be in the women's bathroom, just go back to the party, alright? Go look for Sean, he's your football buddy, isn't he,” Belle told him, finding it very difficult to climb with her tallest hells on, while he banged on the door of the stall a couple of times, startling her she almost tripped.

She heard him drink more, and throw the can it'd come in across the floor, then dig a new beverage from his pocket, and open that.

“You know, I was madly in love with you back in high school,” he said, “can't you jus' come out, so we can talk?”

“No, Christ, Gary, get out of here!”

“Paula's great, don't get me wrong,” Gary slurred, sipping more something. “She's just not so... you know. She talks about her sisters and dinners... and about the kids, like all the time. I like that in a woman, family values. Solid family... values. Like, real, old-fashioned wife things.”

“Paula's your wife right? Good, think about Paula!” Belle shouted back at him.

“It's just that... I don't really want to fuck her at all anymore,” Gary said with such pathetic despair that made Belle roll her eyes and even feel something neighbouring to sympathy for him, despite her predicament.

“That's a good topic to talk about with a marriage counsellor!”
It sounded and looked like Gary sat down and leaned against the door to the stall while he was drinking. It was quiet for a long while, apart from the on-going sounds of slurping.

“You know, I've never forgotten you along the years – hic! – you know, Belle.”

“That's too bad, I think you really should,” Belle muttered, while taking off her shoes. In a tight spot, she could use a heel as a weapon.

“Like, you were the first girl ever I really wanted to fuck, you know. We could do it right now, if you want to, against the wall, if you like? Ruby says you haven't been dating in years. Have you become a nun? Or are you going lesbian?” The sounds of drinking. “Beeellle, talk to me.” He had another sip. “Damn you look so fucking hot.”

She really had nothing to say to him at all.

Then he started sobbing, and Belle started debating whether or not she could run away from a grossly drunk ex-quarterback. Then again, Gary was leaning against the stall door, there was no way she could escape without asking him to move first, which would make any surprise exist very unlikely.

There was a window up near the top of the wall though. Belle held on to her shoes by clenching the straps of them between her teeth, while she leaned up and climbed towards the window to see if the window would open wide enough to let her out.

Open, it would admit through someone with about a three-inch wide head, she estimated, and came back down while concentrating on not falling and hitting her head on the back of the toilet and breaking her neck and dying from sudden head trauma in the toilet stall of a hotel, alone apart from a hysterically tragicomical manchild weeping at his crappy marriage.

“Gary. You need to get up now. You're a bit of a mess, but it's alright. No one's seen you, and nothing bad has happened,” Belle said steadily, heart beating up in her throat. “It's getting late, you've had plenty to drink, and it's about time you go to your room and lay down.”

“I don't know Belle. I guess I could go... but only if you take me up? You should take care of me. You're really good at taking care of people.” Sip, slurp. “Like a good wife.”

Belle sighed. “Gary, everyone should take care of each other, because it's the right thing to do. Not because it makes anyone a good wife,” she told him.

Some hotel guests entered the bathroom at last. Belle heard two middle-aged women give Gary a piece of her mind and harry him outside.

She sat down on the toilet seat cover and waited, shoes in her hand, while the other guests did their businesses, chatting merrily, not realising there was someone in the last stall. Just after they left, Belle opened the door and tip-toed to the door in the wake of the two saving dames. She got into the hotel foyer, and got a look of a hotel employer discussing with Gary, imploring him to get upstairs and into his room. They were blocking the area in front of the staircase and the lifts though, and Belle didn't want to go there, not wanting to catch Gary's attention again.

The dance music boomed from the direction of the ball room, and the hotel restaurant was busy and full.

But there was the front door too.

Belle ducked behind a big leafy palm to put her shoes back on, before she headed for the front door.
“I'll be right back, I'll just stand in front here, I need a bit of fresh air,” Belle told the doorman emotionlessly, as he was seeing her out.

It was freezing cold out, and it was a hilariously ridiculous thing to do, to stand there in a freezing temperature in a red dress that barely reached mid-thigh, with a generous décolletage between the ribbons that served as a halterneck, and her back entirely exposed to the weather.

Within seconds, she thought her skin was past the point of feeling any pain from the exposure. Her body was ready to walk back in without asking her if she wanted to or not, but the cold air felt fresh and soothing, which made her stay, uncaring of the temperature. Just a few seconds longer, she told herself. She turned around to glance inside, and saw now there were two men discussing with Gary.

Stubbornly staying outside, Belle watched the cars driving past them. It was the very nice side of the city, so the cars were nice as well. Black, sleek, expensive. A couple of them honked passing her.

“Belle?” Someone called her by her name, but she didn't quite register it at first, because her internal logic said it was Mr Gold, and Mr Gold was now living in Europe. She turned her head to see who it was, and saw not one person, but two. There was a man taller than the slight Mr Gold, with a green parka, carrying four red pizza boxes, which in itself was absurd, and this man was staring at her with a very bewildered, alarmed gaze, which transferred from Belle to the slighter, shorter man by his side.

Mr Gold.

“Pops, do you know this... err... her?” The tall man asked.

“This is my – ahm, was, my personal assistant, Miss French,” Mr Gold said.

Feeling like she was moving in a bizarre dream, or wait, maybe this was life after death, perhaps she had taken a fall in that bathroom stall and died, Belle extended her hand limply, because it was the sort of thing you did when you were introduced to someone. The man struggled to hold all the pizza boxes with one hand to free up the other.

“Belle French,” she repeated her name, squeaking it weakly like a mouse.

“Christ, you're cold as ice!” The man declared at her.

Mr Gold took off his coat promptly and wrapped Belle inside it, and she stared at him, until she remembered to thank him.

“What are you doing out here in that dress?” “Why aren't you in England?” They spoke simultaneously, and then neither one spoke again, they just stared at each other. The wool coat started warming Belle up just enough so she could feel she was really cold.

“Hate to break it to you two, but the pizzas aren't going to stay warm, in fact I think they have already gone cold, and my pregnant wife will eat me, instead of the pizza, if I delay much longer,” the man said.

“My son,” Mr Gold stated.

“I'll just go ahead.” Bae gave Belle a wonderful, warm, friendly smile and then continued down the street. She looked after him, and was woken up to the present tense when Mr Gold took her hands in his and rubbed heat into her palms with friction, holding his cane underneath his arm.

“Belle, I thought you'd left this city,” he said, Belle wasn't sure if he sounded surprised or irritated.
“Yes, I did,” she said, “I'm here just for this weekend, for a wedding. The party's just inside, over there.” Belle nodded back at the hotel.

“So... you'll go back to California tomorrow?” He asked, still warming up her hand, staring down at her palms rather than looking up into her eyes.

Belle shook her head. “No, it didn't work out. I'm driving up to Maine tomorrow.”

He stopped dead then, and looked up. “Oh.”

“Why?” She asked.

“I just moved back here. Emma and Bae decided to leave London and come here,” he said with a quiet voice.

Belle nodded slowly. “So, we now live a few hours' drive apart from each other?”

She felt him squeeze her hand in his.

Because of the cold, she was still stiff like she was made of ice, but he wasn't, he was all warm and hot and pleasant when he still held her hands and leaned down to kiss her.

He was still kissing her when a police car stopped just in front of the hotel and three men dragged Gary out of the hotel, with him repeatedly hollering “Don't fucking tell Paula!” with all the might in his lungs combined with a drunken slur.

Mr Gold stopped kissing her when the car pulled off, and he glanced at the empty space where the car had been. “Exciting wedding?”

Belle shrugged, teeth chattering. “Yes. I'm also freezing, I should get back inside.”

“Can we talk? Tonight?” Mr Gold asked, not letting go of her hands.

“Yes. Definitely. In fact, I insist we do. Do you know anywhere around here where could go? Some place quiet?”

Mr Gold glanced down the way where his son had gone. “Well, I live nearby, but Emma and Bae are staying with me, and they are watching the Winter Olympics and eating junk food. If you can suffer that.”

“Sounds perfect,” Belle replied, a genuine laugh rippling from deep inside her. “I'll just go up and grab a coat from my room.”

He didn't let go of her hand, and the doorman opened the door for the both of them. “Sorry, I need to go look for my key from inside the party,” Belle explained to him, and took of the coat he’d lent to her. In the bright lights of the hotel foyer, it seemed Mr Gold only now got a very good look of how revealing Belle's dress was. Face red, she raced off in her killer heels, to go look for the tiny purse she'd hid amidst the decorations, holding the key to her and Granny's room.

She stopped by Ruby, who was a little bit more intoxicated than the last Belle had seen her, eyes-wide explaining to Sean and Ashley that the police had taken Gary away.

“Sorry, Ruby, I need to go now,” Belle interrupted her and gave Ruby a big warm hug. “I met someone I knew from work, and we're going to go somewhere to talk.”

“Wow! You go girl,” Ruby gave Belle another extra hug. “Thanks for everything you did for my
wedding, you're an angel.”

“I hope you had the party you wanted,” Belle said, happy that she could at last be genuinely glad for her friend on her big day.

“I sure did! Cops busting in, it's perfect! Woo-hoo!”

Victor appeared behind Ruby then and gave her a wolfish tooth-peck on the neck which made her squeal, completely stealing Ruby's attention from Belle, but she didn't mind.

Smiling, Belle made her way out of the party and back to the foyer, where Mr Gold was still standing, waiting for her.

The concierge was giving them sidelong glances from his desk when Belle kissed Mr Gold while waiting for the elevator to come down. She was very well aware that at least four people had by then mistaken her for a streetwalker, and the poor man at the desk would probably have ran after them if Belle had asked Mr Gold to come up to her room with her.

“Can you wait a moment, I think that guy is going to call the police again, because I look like moderately expensive hooker and you my sugar daddy,” Belle muttered to him when the elevator doors opened.

He was at a loss between trying to assure her that she didn't look like a hooker, and trying to ask her how she had come by the dress, but halfway between a construct of these two sentences, the elevator door closed and Belle had no idea which idea he ended up finishing first.

In the room, Belle grabbed a few things swiftly, left Granny a note saying she wasn't sure if she'd be back before morning, and warmly clad in outdoor shoes, an extra cardigan, a long winter coat, a hat, scarf, and gloves, with her hand bag over her shoulder, she returned to the foyer, and in the next moment they were out on the night-time street hand in hand.

Buried underneath the late stages of pregnancy, Emma lay on the sofa and stared at the television, which was showing the highlights of Friday's Olympic hockey game, USA vs Russia. She was more concerned with the pizza than what was on the television.

“This is some fancy pizza, I wonder if this area even has any real junk food,” Emma said, prodding at the artichoke and cold-smoked salmon topping.

“ Might have to go across town for it,” responded her husband who settled himself comfortably on the sofa next to Emma, and she leaned closer to him. “This area is just way too classy to be serving the likes of you and I our usual grease burgers and triple-deep-fried codpieces.”

“Thanks for braving the outdoors anyway,” she muttered, showing one of her rare non-sardonic smiles at him. “Where'd you left your father?”

“There was some girl on the street, and they started talking. He said he'd be back later.”

“What, like a streetwalker?”

“No, actually though she looked like one, but some old colleague from work. I guess they had some catching up to do. Mind if I have a beer?”

Emma grimaced when Bae took off and went back into the kitchen. She was so ready to have the
baby out of her and to drink again like a proper irresponsible adult.

“I need to check it up on Google!” Emma hollered at him.

“What!”

“How long I have to wait after the birth until I can get hammered!”

“Okay!”

“Can you bring it over?”

“What?”

“The Internet pad thing!”

“I thought you had it!”

“No it's charging in the kitchen!”

A moment later Bae returned with Emma's Internet Pad Thing, more pizza, and a beer.

“I am going to replace the plugs on all the electric stuff we brought over. We have like, three transformers, and it's not enough for two cellphones, a surfpad, a laptop, your camera, my music thing-ey, and all the rest of the junk,” Bae declared.

“Hey, you want to keep a Playstation permanently hooked to one of those three,” Emma said grudgingly. “And it's freaking out now all the time because it knows it's not in Europe anymore.”

“Yeah, that's why I brought it with, can't trust these North American consoles,” Bae said dead-on seriously.

Emma hugged him again when he sat down. Bae needed his moments to be a full-on nerd, and she wasn't about to berate him for it.

“I love you, nerd,” Emma said wistfully.

“I love you too, bad-ass police constable,” he said with a grin, and leaned close enough to kiss her cheek. “Too bad they wouldn't let you keep the cute uniform.”

“Cute? First time you saw it you said I look like someone's aunt.”

“A cute aunt.”

“Baby’s kicking,” Emma grumbled.

“Probably because it wants pizza and you're not eating it.”

“The pizza looks like an a la carte restaurant threw up on it, but yes. I'll get to snacking.”

While they were eating and watching hockey, Emma heard the front door open. “Your dad’s back,” she said, poking Bae in the belly. She was usually a little alarmed around her father-in-law, because of very good reasons relating to the events at her wedding, but she was way much more so now, because she felt so out of place in the very nice apartment he was letting them stay in. Even though the place had plenty of room for three adults, Emma couldn't help the feeling that she felt the mahogany walls start caving in whenever Mr Gold was around.
“How was your- oh. Hello there, again.”

Emma looked over at what had made Bae so surprised all of a sudden.

There was a woman in a red dress and a grey cardigan smiling nervously at them and coming over to shake hands.

“I'm not sure we did this properly earlier, sorry, Belle French,” she said, her Australian accent another thing that surprised Emma.

“Balfor Gold, but you should just call me Bae, that's fine, and this is my wife Emma Swan, and somewhere in there is our baby. Name currently unknown.”

The woman, Belle, moved closer to Emma to shake hands with her, and Emma gave her a wary nod.

“Sorry if I'm not getting up right now, requires some effort,” Emma told her.

“Oh, that's fine, that's fine,” Belle assured her, and got away from in front of the television.

Then Mr Gold made his appearance. “I need to discuss something with miss French here so if you'll excuse the two of us,” he said.

“It was nice meeting you two, bye,” Belle told them, and off the two went, vanished into the direction of Mr Gold's bedroom in the middle of a Saturday night.

The muted sound of the background hockey game was the only sound in the room for a while.

Emma poked Bae in the belly again, staring suspiciously into the direction where Mr Gold the senior had just vanished with the lady in the red dress. “Get the remote, I think I'm going to want to crank the volume way up louder in a minute.”

“Miss French?” Belle asked.

“Old habits die hard,” Mr Gold replied.

“You have a lovely home,” Belle stated, sitting at the edge of the bed while Mr Gold turned on a bedside lamp before sitting down next to her. For half a second, Belle wondered if they were going to really talk now, or had that been suddenly turned into a euphemism.

“So, are you going to look for more work across country?” Mr Gold asked, deadly serious.

Belle shook her head. “No, I think I'm actually going to keep my job in Maine, for the foreseeable future anyway.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “It's not a very glamorous job at all, the hours are kinda bad, and there's a lot more work than I get paid for, but I'm in charge of everything myself, so it's been really rewarding, these past couple of months.”

“What job is that?”

Belle sighed. “You're looking at a public servant. I'm now a librarian. Not just a librarian, but the librarian, the only one in Storybrooke.”

He shrugged. “You seem disappointed.”

“I sort of just accidentally landed the job. It wasn't like I was gunning for it hard, like the writing
thing. That was really bad by the way, didn't work out at all. I'm glad I went there anyway, because of the experience. I actually tried to call you, after I got back from there, but I only had your number and your email from work, and they'd both expired.”

Mr Gold smiled at her. “Same here. Actually, I got your father's number, since he was listed as your next-of-kin in the personnel files, but I couldn't come up with a convincing enough lie about why I wanted to talk to you.”

Belle put her hand over his, smiling. “I had your son's number too, but I couldn't get the nerve to call him, to ask about you. I wanted to thank you, for the books.”

Then he kissed her again, suddenly, warmly, tenderly, wrapping his arms around her, and she felt like her whole body was glowing with the feelings he inspired in her, and she kissed him back with the same vigour.

She was well aware that they should be talking about the fine details of what was going on between the two of them. She had a hotel room to vacate from in the morning. She hadn't even brought a toothbrush.

“Serious, talking, remember?” Belle uttered, one word at a time, between the delicious kisses.

He pulled back, settling his hands on each side of her waist, fiddling with her cardigan.

“I'll drive to Maine every other weekend, you'll drive here the other weekends, unless you don't have the time, in which case I'll drive up to Maine every weekend. We'll do this for about three to six months until the driving becomes unbearable and then we'll have a talk about if there's any future in this, and if you don't say no there isn't, I'll buy us a house in Maine, and drive back here to see my son and his family whenever he has the time and patience for it.”

Belle nodded slowly. “Okay. You have given some thought to this. Fine. I think that sounds great.”

They kissed some more, until Belle remembered two things, and pulled back. “Should I stay the night? Or should I go back to the hotel? Will they find it... strange, if I stay?” Belle motioned towards the door leading out of the room and to the couple watching hockey somewhere beyond.

Mr Gold made a face that wordlessly related that whatever Emma and Bae thought of the level of decency or indecency going on was entirely immaterial.

“And another thing, do you think you'd like to come back with me tomorrow, to Maine, for the whole week?” Belle asked, suddenly shy, as if she were asking far too much. “I just, I have a hard time believing this is not a dream,” For emphasis, she let her hands wander up Mr Gold's shirt sleeves up to his neck and into his soft, soft hair, touching, to make sure it was real. “I'm just not used to the universe delivering me good karma gifts,” Belle said.

“Then we'll go to Storybrooke tomorrow,” Mr Gold said decisively, and then kissed her, and kept on kissing her.
Thank you for reading
An Ex-Assistant's Previous Boss and His Psychotherapist

Doctor Babicky was wearing another one of her eccentric togas at her psychology practice office in the city. It was late winter, it had been spring for a while already, but then winter had made a comeback. There was a planter of daffodils by the window, and the room smelled of Babicky's hand-made herbal tea.

Mr Gold kept being distracted by Doctor Babicky's necklace during the forty-five minute session. It was made of white wood, but the long elongated and curving shapes reminded him of bones. Sometimes, Babicky would take the necklace in her hand and make the dangling bits rattle, and he'd be distracted, thinking of bones again. He was distracted by all the details, because he was looking into reading meaning from them, out of habit, making a detailed analysis and deductions, which in turn could be used later on, but …

Mr Gold pushed Babicky's wood necklace out of his mind ten minutes before the end of their once-again last session. It was a Thursday afternoon, and tomorrow would be Friday, and he'd drive to Maine. The forecast had promised a warm weekend, which was nice since Miss Belle French's tiny little apartment above her workplace was not the most pristine condition when it came to insulation.

"It's goodbye again," the doctor said, towards the end of the session. The whole hour had been mostly spent with light chit chat, very removed from their usual routine of him venting whatever was having him on the verge of a complete meltdown, and her giving some bizarre metaphors in relation to it. Babicky lost some of her edge since the end of summer in the previous year. Mr Gold recalled she'd been sick in September. "Not only is this our last session, I'm closing shop in May. I'm moving to my cottage out in the woods."

Mr Gold muttered something acceptably polite and acknowledging what she was saying, while not really caring that much. His thoughts were preoccupied with the plans for the weekend.

"There's a Doctor Frogmorton taking over this office, I'll be letting it to her. But there are also a number of therapists I could recommend to you."

Mr Gold twirled the top of his cane in his hand idly. "I think not. Things are... going very well."

"Yes. You've not been upset recently." Doctor Babicky tapped her fingers against her mug of tea and pursed her lips slightly. The nails made a rattle similar to that of the white wood beads of her necklace. She wasn't making any notes that day. "But then again, the wind has been in your favour these past months. When it blows hard in the wrong direction once more, you might be finding the sea difficult to sail."

Mr Gold said nothing.

"But it's the roughest seas that make good sailors," Doctor Babicky said quietly, and coughed. Then she spoke up again, with her normal voice. "I don't mean to frighten you, or wish you ill weather. Just want to remind you, that life will always be hard. There will be ups and downs. Now that everything is reasonably bearable for you, you may think, perhaps, you've arrived at a port, and the long and miserable adventure is over, ah, but we'll all keep on sailing, down and down the river. The scenery changes, and the company, of course."

Mr Gold stared mutely at the old hag, and she broke into a bout of cough. And excused herself.

"Some people think, they need therapy, because their brain is broken, and then all this chit-chatting,
it will magically fix everything, and at the end of these years, the brain will be healed!” Babicky took an old-fashioned cotton handkerchief from inside her enormous pocket on the front of her large togaish dress, and wiped her lips. “But it doesn't go like that, does it? You know what I mean. You need help because you're tired, and lost, not because anything is broken. My patients need help, to cope with things that tire them so that they're too exhausted to even sleep. And the speaking, it helps for a while, it's like putting the weary things out of your head into a box, and then for a little while, for a week, it's fine, but the problems keep on piling.”

“This would be a good time for you, if you feel so, to look up, hmm... meditation, perhaps. Now that it's all less stressful, I'd recommend you find preoccupations and time to practice how to calm yourself. Look out for your good mental health every day, not just on Thursdays at four o'clock.”

Mr Gold set his empty tea cup aside. “I'll keep that in mind.” He glanced at the time. So did she.

“It's one to five,” Babicky said, and smiled. “Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Mr Gold. I hope you'll enjoy your weekend.” She slowly got off her seat.

“Thank you,” Mr Gold said, as he rose up with the help of his cane. Then he extended his hand to hers. It seemed appropriate. They shook hands briefly, and her thin and wrinkly old skin felt surprisingly strong and leathery in his grip. She probably did more with her pastime than just wash dishes.

In all honesty, Mr Gold wasn't certain if he had gotten all his money's worth off of the old bat, but there was something grandmotherly about her that he'd rather liked, even if her psychological discourse sounded a bit too poetic for his liking. He'd never had a grandmother, and the 80-year-old lady wasn't old enough to have been his actual grand-anything.

She went around the table and pulled out his last invoice. “Here you go. If you want that list of recommendations, I could compile you one now. I've no patients after you tonight.”

“No, I think that's not necessary. I'm thinking of... hoping to move out of town soon,” he almost bit his lip, hoping he wouldn't jinx the whole deal by speaking about it out loud. It was just so very typical, if he had any hopes or wishes regarding another person, it would always go horribly wrong. He accepted the invoice and folded it in two before slipping it inside his pocket, and paid the last session in cash.

“That is lovely to hear. Well, I'll catch you later, Mr Gold. Maybe in Maine, since my cottage is there.”

“By the coast?” Mr Gold asked, hoping that it wasn't. He couldn't remember when he'd happened to mention that Belle lived in Maine.

“No... inland. I like the deep, dark forests, you see.” Doctor Babicky grinned. “The seaside is too windy in any case, for my taste. And smells like fish and salt.”

“Enjoy your, ah, retirement,” Mr Gold said, and headed towards the door.

“Indeed. I have a lot of reading to catch up, when I get started,” Babicky said, and took a seat behind her desk. Mr Gold was walking out the door when he gave one last glance at the Doctor, and saw her fishing a copy of Fifty Shades of Grey from the insides of a drawer.

Mr Gold left the building, shaking his head a little. He'd heard dogs could shrug off things they'd heard by shaking their head. Maybe he could forget the idea of the ancient crone reading erotica if he shook his head enough, but it didn't help.
The librarian of Storybrooke only had to cross a road and walk down a block to get to the local pharmacy from her little apartment just above her workplace. She kept the library open from Tuesday to Saturday. Now it was a Saturday, and she was due to open the doors soon, in fifteen minutes since she left the apartment. But she had to get to the pharmacy first.

Mr Clarke’s pharmacy was a mix of a drug store and a general store, due to the quaint size of their town, and so he sold everything else besides ibuprofen in his shop. Like duct tape and rope, comic books and sweets. Quite a lot of miscellaneous things.

Belle practically sneaked into Mr Clarke’s store that morning, hoping to avoid being seen by anyone, since the town was full of busybodies and gossip mongers, always on the prowl for a little scandal. She’d been sensing herself being discussed about since December, when she’d moved back home from the big city and accepted the job as librarian. When she’d returned home with a stranger in February, after Valentine’s Day and Ruby’s wedding, that had just disturbed the waters more.

While she wondered if other librarians in the world elsewhere had to start their days with complete strangers coming to their workplace and asking if she’d chosen an age-appropriate suitor, Belle walked between the shelves, looking at Mr Clarke’s acquired junk, trying to find a proper isle for her current medicinal purposes. She went around and, looked and looked. When she couldn’t find what she was looking for, she thought she should just drive to Bangor after work to the pharmacy there.

“Hello there Miss French, I saw you looking for something, what can I help you with?” Mr Clarke asked right by her shoulder, and Belle was startled back to the present from her reverie.

“Hello there, Mr Clarke, is your cold getting better?” she replied, fighting back the urge to laugh nervously.

As if jinxed, Mr Clarke sneezed suddenly. He lifted his handkerchief to his face quickly enough too. He probably had plenty of practice, poor man, Belle thought.

“It’s been worse,” Mr Clarke replied. “In the winter, it was the cold, but now it’s the first spring pollen, you know. But what can I get you?”

Belle hesitated. She really ought to drive to Bangor for this problem. The trouble was, the drive there and back would take a couple of hours, and that would be a couple of hours away from home, and she really wanted to go straight home after work. A lot.

“I was just looking for, ahem, the… Do you sell any morning after pills, Mr Clarke?” Belle asked.

Mr Clarke’s eyes glossed over at first with confusion. “Morning… after? Do you mean for hangovers?”

“No, Mr Clarke, I mean contraceptives,” Belle replied with such dignity that it surprised herself too.

“Oh,” Mr Clarke replied, his mouth forming an o for a moment. “I keep them behind the counter. If you’ll follow me.”

Belle went back to the front of the store with Mr Clarke, glad that at least there were no other customers there that morning. While Mr Clarke went through boxes upon boxes, and when they failed, he went in the back. Thoughtfully, Belle looked around. She took a package of condoms from
a nearby shelf. She thought about the matter for a second, and then took a second package.

It seemed to take Mr Clarke such a long time to find the pills that it made Belle wonder if anyone else in Storybrooke ever bought them, or even knew about the option. Her time in the city had made her a bit anxious about having to wait, but she knew Mr Clarke wouldn’t take it well if she started tapping her nails against the counter or her heel against the floor, so she suffered the waiting, her thoughts diverted by very pleasant other thoughts relating to how she might spend her evening after closing the library.

The door opened to admit another customer, and Belle glanced at that way, lost in her daydreams, but the effect of the person entering was much like having cold water thrown over her face.

“Good morning, petal!” Her father declared mirthfully. He was always happy to see her without her significant other. “Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“I’ve at least five minutes to go before I need to open, papa. What about you?”

“Needed to pop here for a roll of string,” her father, Moe, replied, and grabbed a big roll of the most basic plastic wrapping string from the end of the nearby shelf, and joined her at the counter. “What are you here for- oh,” he said, face going red. By the expression on his face, Belle guessed it was something between embarrassment and outrage.

Mr Clarke returned with a triumphant smile on his face. “Here, I got your…” his face dropped when he saw Moe towering over his daughter by the counter, looking angry and red-faced. “… umm, hemorrhoid cream?”

Belle sighed deeply. “I’ll take these too,” she said, pointing down.

Moe seemed so upset that he couldn’t speak. He walked right out of the store, with the string and all.

“And a roll of string,” Belle added calmly, and took out her wallet from her purse.

“That’ll be fifty-seven and seventy,” Mr Clarke concluded. “Do you need a bag for these?”

Belle shook her head. She’d slip everything inside her purse. “No thanks, I’m fine,” she muttered.

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