A Wonderful Carol

by PhoenixTalon

Summary

One Christmas Eve, Belle Bailey learns just how much her life has affected others and R. Gold is taught the true meaning of Christmas. Rumbelle fic, mashup of It's A Wonderful Life and A Christmas Carol.
Chapter 1

Prologue

“Busy night tonight. We’ll have to send someone down.”

“Gracious me, what a difficult case…the measures must be extreme for Mr. Gold, I think.”

“Yes, it’s his crucial night, but let’s not forget Belle Bailey.”

“Is she sick?”

“Worse, she’s discouraged. At exactly 10:45 PM tonight, earth time, that girl will be thinking seriously of throwing away God’s greatest gift. I believe it’s Nova’s turn.”

“Nova? She hasn’t got her wings yet!”

“No, but she has the faith of a child and even more enthusiasm. I think Nova could help her far better than any of us.”

“Very well…but what shall we do with Mr. Gold?”

“Don’t you worry about him, I’ve something special planned in mind. In fact, if Nova does a good job, we might be certain of a joint happy ending for Mr. Gold and Belle.”

“You can’t mean—”

“Never mind that, we’ve work to do. Go and fetch Nova. It’s time to begin.”

There were three things Rutherford Gold hated absolutely—Regina Mills, the Bailey Building and Loan, and Christmas.

It was obvious why he hated Regina Mills. She had been a constant source of opposition since he came to Storybrooke. She was the mayor, as well as the head of most of the boards in the community, and she ruled the little town like a queen. She didn’t like that the properties and capital were something outside her realm—they were Gold’s. They never actively fought, but a cold war remained between the two nonetheless. The various sections of town either belonged to Regina or to him, there was no midway.

Well, aside from the Bailey Building and Loan.

The Bailey Building and Loan, founded by Moe and Clara Bailey, was an irritating place. The little upstart company helped residents of Storybrooke buy their own houses—out of Gold’s control and out of Regina’s jurisdiction. For years, Regina had tried to find legal loopholes to ban the building and Gold had tried his hardest to bankrupt it. Nevertheless, it remained.

He came close. Once. When Clara Bailey died several years ago, it seemed that Moe Bailey lost all common sense and heart for the place. It nearly went under, until Belle took over.

Gold had not counted on Belle Bailey. The bright, charming daughter of Moe and Clara had more talent and cleverness than most of Storybrooke combined. She had been destined for greatness, offered a full ride at Stanford University, and there was no doubt that she would make her mark
But she didn’t. She turned down the scholarship and chose to take over the Building and Loan.

Gold had not expected a nineteen-year-old girl to manage such a responsibility, but she did, and did it finer than her father or her mother before her. She seemed to have a knack for catching on to whatever scheme he had up his sleeve and countering it with equal savvy. Although he hated the Building and Loan with a fiery passion, he had a good deal of respect for Belle Bailey. He almost wished she worked for him.

But he could handle Regina, and while the Building and Loan was irritating, he respected Belle—there was no getting around Christmas.

It never changed. The lights would go up, the trees would be sold, carols would be sung, and Granny’s diner would offer their special Christmas menu. The elementary school would host their pageant, Mary Margaret would try and convince Leroy to dress up as Santa Claus, and cheer and hope would fill the town of Storybrooke.

Gold hated it.

On Christmas Eve, he stormed through the town, spreading as much tension and gloom as he could. He refused to close on Christmas Eve, although Storybrooke pitied the careless shopper who thought they could buy some last minute Christmas gifts at his pawnshop. He scowled and glared at any passerby, suitably frightening Mary Margaret out of her wits. He threatened to evict several nuns that dared to carol on his corner of the street and as they scurried off, he was almost feeling a little better.

Almost.

It was a bitterly cold day, the sky a dirty gray that threatened snow. Gold had just made it to his pawnshop, where he planned on retreating until the snow let up, when his cane slipped on a patch of ice and he lost his balance.

He landed badly. He scraped his hands on the rough pavement and his bad leg felt like it was on fire. He swore fluidly, trying to stand, but slipped again. On his third try, he felt an arm hoist him up. He turned to find himself facing Belle Bailey.

She’d always been a pretty little thing, with chestnut curls and wide blue eyes. She was shorter than him and her voice had a pleasant lilt to it, low and melodic. She looked quite pretty in her teal winter coat and white gloves, bundled up in a camel-colored scarf.

“Are you all right?” Belle asked. “I saw you trip. The ice is really nasty today.”

Gold’s mouth went a little dry at her concern and he wasn’t entirely sure why. “I’m fine,” He grumbled. “Someone needs to salt these bloody sidewalks.”

“I think Leroy’s doing it, he ought to be down here in a little bit,” Belle replied. She smiled at him pleasantly.

There was a pause between them as Gold tried to think of something to say. Fear and disgust were easy emotions to deal with in other people, but the problem was, Belle was the only person in Storybrooke who did not feel that way towards him.

Come to think of it, Belle Bailey was the only person that went out of her way to smile at him on the streets. She was never afraid to enter his shop and although her finely sharpened business sense kept her from entering any deals with him, it didn’t stop her from buying things at the
pawnshop. Gold didn’t like to admit it, but although their collective interactions were brief, he remembered each one in detail.

“Well,” Belle shuffled her feet a little. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Gold. I hope you have a nice one.”

Gold snorted. “Merry Christmas, hm. And what’s so merry about it?”

She grinned. “Somehow, it doesn’t surprise me that you wouldn’t like Christmas, Mr. Gold. That’s a shame. I think a good snowball fight would knock the stick out of your ass in no time.”

He blinked at her and had no idea how to respond to this, earning a delighted giggle from Belle.

“What do you have to be so merry about?” Gold asked finally, recovering his wits. “You’re poor enough.”

“What reason do you have to be crabby?” Belle shot back. “You’re rich enough.”


Belle laughed, a lovely musical sound. “I love the snow, but I hate driving in it. But come on, Mr. Gold. Surely you can admit there’s something nice about spending Christmas with your loved ones.”

Gold was about to retort it wasn’t so nice when you had no one loved ones, but decided against it, not wanting her to think he was fishing for pity.

“Touche.” He grunted instead.

“I think there’s even something romantic about it,” Belle remarked. “I’d love to curl up by a fireside and watch ridiculously sentimental Christmas specials with someone.” She gave him another bright smile, rendering Gold incapable of speech for a minute. Her little proclamation had the undertones of flirtation, but Gold quickly convinced himself he was imagining things.


“Nothing,” She replied smiling at her father. “Just wishing Mr. Gold a merry Christmas.”

“Hmph,” Moe grunted, casting another nervous and peevish look at Gold. “I’m sure it’ll be merry enough.”

Gold felt a stab of annoyance. “I’m sure,” He retorted. “I’m sure yours will be very merry as well, assuming you pay me the rent you owe. And I hear you have company—didn’t Mayor Mills send over the bank examiner?”

“How do you know that?” Moe demanded. “You sneaking, warped, frustrated old—”

“That’s enough,” Belle said firmly. “C’mon, dad. We’ve a lot to do today and we don’t want to dawdle. Merry Christmas, Mr. Gold.” She gave him another smile before ushering her father down the street. Gold watched until her little form disappeared.

Humbug.

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“Dad, it’s Christmas,” Belle scolded. “Couldn’t you offer Mr. Gold a little Christian charity?”

“Ha!” Moe snorted violently, shaking the snow from his boots as they entered the Building and
Loans. “I’d give him far more than he’d give us. I don’t want you talking to him, Belle. He’s a greedy old miser and would like nothing more for this Building and Loan to go under.”

“Maybe so,” Belle allowed, turning the electric kettle on. “But I think he’s lonely. I think it’s a pity for anyone to be alone on Christmas.”

“You’re too kind, Belle,” Moe grumbled. “Gold is nothing short of a monster and a plague on Storybrooke. Thinks his money gives him power. Thinks he’s better than everyone.” He slammed the books on one of the tables, scattering pens everywhere.

Belle patiently gathered up the pens. “Maybe so, but that doesn’t stop a person from getting lonely.”

“Well, who could even stand to be with him?” Moe wanted to know.

Belle sighed in resignation, deciding to drop the subject. “Have you gotten the books ready, Dad? The bank examiner should be here in a little while.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Moe said distractedly. “I’m not a child, Belle, I’ve run this business far longer than you.”

With Mom’s help, Belle thought silently. “All right then, looks like everything’s in order,” She said promptly. “Water should boil in a few minutes for your tea. I’m going out to meet Ruby now, we’re exchanging Christmas gifts. I’ll be back in a few hours or so.”

“All right then,” Moe waved her off, heading into his office.

Belle sighed with relief, stepping out into the cold day. Another Christmas in Storybrooke, like all the others she’d experienced in the twenty-seven years of her life. It only took Belle a few minutes to get to Granny’s and to her delight, it began to snow even harder. Her heart felt a little lighter. She took a seat by the window and Ruby joined her.

“Everything okay?” Ruby asked with a smile, setting down two mugs of hot chocolate.

“Sure is,” Belle said, attempting cheer. “I think it’s going to be a great Christmas. Tell Granny I think her decorations are beautiful.”

“I will,” Ruby replied cautiously. “You sure you’re all right? You seem a little down.”

“Oh, it’s a little of everything, I suppose,” Belle sighed, taking a sip. “I always miss my mother this time of year. She made Christmas so special. And when I think of her, I can’t help but wonder if she’d be disappointed in how my life turned out.”

Ruby snorted. “I find that very hard to believe. Besides, you didn’t go to Stanford so you could help your dad here. Surely she’d be pleased about that.”

“Maybe,” Belle acknowledged, ripping a napkin into little pieces. It was a habit of hers when she was thinking or nervous. “But she was always so excited for me to take on the world, you know? She knew how much I wanted to go to college—I mean, maybe she was even living through me a little bit, since she didn’t get to go. I just can’t help but feel like I’m wasting my life.”

Ruby snorted. “I find that very hard to believe. Besides, you didn’t go to Stanford so you could help your dad here. Surely she’d be pleased about that.”

“Just because your life isn’t what you planned, doesn’t mean it’s a waste,” Ruby said firmly. “I don’t think you know how much good you’ve done, Belle.”

“I suppose so,” Belle sighed again, finishing her hot chocolate. “I’m sorry I can’t stay for very long, I need to get back to the Building and Loan. The bank examiner’s coming, and I want to
make sure everything’s in order.”

“All right then,” Ruby smiled as Belle handed her a gift with teacup wrapping paper. “Let me guess—a book?”

“A really good book,” Belle said weakly. Belle always gave books for Christmas, not because she wasn’t considerate of others’ wants, but simply because she thought they made the best presents.

Ruby’s present was a lovely mug and a package of iced tea—Belle’s favorite brand. The two girls hugged and Belle left the diner with a sigh.

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“You can’t do this to us, Gold!”

Gold’s upper lip curled. “Me? I’m doing nothing. The terms of the loan were very specific. I’m within my rights to evict.” He stared at the young man coolly from across the counter.

“This isn’t right!” Sean shouted, his fists tightening. “You can’t just cast us out like that! It’s Christmas Eve, you can’t do this to us!”

“I don’t care what day it is, and I certainly can and will,” Gold replied smoothly. “I suggest you make some arrangements—”

“Ashley’s pregnant!” Sean yelled. “She could have the baby any day now! My dad’s kicked me out, her stepmother won’t take us, we have no other arrangements! You have to give us an extension!”

“I don’t grant extensions,” Gold informed him. “As you well know. As for your fiancée, I express my sympathies, but when Miss Boyd decided against giving up the child for adoption, causing myself and others a major inconvenience, it was with the understanding that you would support and care for her. Your failure to do that is not my concern.”

“You son of a bitch!” Sean exploded into an impressive display of profanity.

“Enough,” Gold said slightly bored. “Please see yourself to the door, I’d hate to call Dove.”

For a brief instant, it looked as though Sean would hit Gold, but instead he stormed outside, slamming the door behind him. Gold’s bell clanged to the floor. Rolling his eyes, Gold limped over and retrieved it.

Another reason to find this holiday completely ridiculous. People would spend the rent and mortgage money on frivolities like presents and decorations and turkey dinners, and then blame him, for acting like a rational landlord.

“I do hope he hasn’t broken my little bell,” Gold said to himself mildly, inspecting it as it lay in the palm of his hand. As he spoke the words, his mind flashed on Belle Bailey’s sad little smile. Despite her cheer, he sensed she’d been a little downcast and wondered why.

Not that it mattered. Belle Bailey’s life was no concern of his. Taking a deep breath, he hung the bell up and retreated to his counter, where he prepared to lock up.

At that moment, he had the strangest feeling that he was being watched. His head jerked up and he quickly scanned the room and windows, but all was quiet. The people of Storybrooke had retreated indoors for their Christmas festivities; none were lurking outside or inside his shop. Still feeling uneasy, he put on his black coat and gloves and double-checked his alarm system.
All seemed well. Gold cleared his throat and grumbled something suspiciously like ‘humbug’ and exited the shop, walking down the snowy path towards his house. His mind was on nothing but dinner, yet he still couldn’t escape the feeling of being watched, as if there were eyes in every hedge bush. It was disconcerting to say the least.

He went through his usual routine once at home, going over his accounts, taking a light dinner, and finishing the newspaper. After dinner, he was just making himself a cup of tea when an icy wind flew through the room.

“What—?” Gold snarled, limping about his living room to find the open window. But no windows were open.

He had just convinced himself that he was imagining things when a loud, terrible clanking broke the silence. It was almost as though someone were dragging chains all around him.

“Who’s there?” Gold shouted. “Show yourself!”

Like a dying flame, the very air flickered, and a mass of shadows appeared mold together. The shadows gained definition and detail, and to Gold’s shock, a familiar face greeted him. The spirit was also bedecked in a myriad of ghostly and transparent chains, enveloping its body, causing a dreadful racket. But Gold couldn’t pay attention to these.

“Zoso,” He sucked in his breath, clutching the handle of his cane.

It was from Jacob Zoso that Gold had received his riches. Everything Gold had—the power, mass ownership over most of Storybrooke’s homes, even his pawnshop—had once belonged to Zoso. That was, until Gold had arrived and taken everything from him.

He’d died recently—Gold had seen the obituary a few days ago—but aside from that, the older man had barely crossed Gold’s thoughts.

“You’re not real,” Gold informed him. “You’re—this isn’t real.”

The phantom smiled, a grotesquely awful expression that made Gold shiver. “Why do you doubt your senses?”

“Because you’re dead!” Gold shouted. “And there’s no such thing as ghosts!”

Zoso cackled horribly, a wheezing, dreadful noise, clanging his chains in emphasis.

“All right,” Gold snapped irritably. “You’ve made your point—although I’m still banking on you being a hallucination—what do you want? And why are you chained?”

“I wear the chain I forged in life,” Zoso returned. “You wear such a chain yourself, Rutherford Gold. I have done many a terrible thing, but when you took my place in this town, your wicked heart consumed even more darkness.”

“I did no more than you did!” Gold snarled.

Zoso ignored him. “You will be haunted by Three.”

“Three ghosts?!” Gold demanded.

“I didn’t say that,” Zoso retorted. “But you will be haunted by Three. Expect the first when the bell tolls midnight!”
When Belle returned to the Building and Loan, she was greeted with the sight of her father flinging papers everywhere and looking mad with panic.

She stared at him, slowly dropping her purse on a chair. “Dad,” She said cautiously. “What—what’s wrong with you?”

He turned to her, his face ashen and gray. “There’s a deficit,” He choked out. “We’re missing $25,000.”
I’ve never posted a trigger warning before, but there are references to thoughts of suicide (drawing back on my own personal experiences) and allusions to domestic abuse. So trigger warning.

Belle stared at her father in disbelief. “What do you mean, there’s a deficit?” She said in a tremulous voice.

“I mean, we’re missing $25,000 dollars!” Moe snapped. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair agitatedly. “I’ve looked everywhere—it’s not there!”

Belle took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. “Dad,” She said firmly. “I went over the books just last Sunday and everything completely balanced and organized. How could there be $25,000 dollars missing?”

“I was supposed to drop off our latest deposit at the bank this morning,” Moe said agitatedly. “But I forgot. When I remembered after you left an hour ago, I searched for the money, and I can’t find it anywhere!”

Belle’s heart began to pound horribly. “When you were out today, did you go anywhere, did you stop for anything? Buy anything?”

“No!” Moe exclaimed. “Not even a stick of gum!”

Desperately, Belle began to search the building, lifting through every file and piece of paper. She walked her father through their day together, combing his memories for any innocuous details. The trouble was, he couldn’t seem to get the details straight. He blathered on about possibly running into Regina Mills then backtracked, saying he couldn’t remember if it happened this morning or the day before.

“You checked the house?” Belle asked urgently.

“Yes—I did—every room, even your mother’s old sewing room…” Belle ignored the shot of pain at mention of her mother.

“You counted the money last night, didn’t you? And brought it here this morning?” Belle pressed.

“I think—maybe—”

“Maybe? We can’t have any ‘maybes’, Dad, we’ve got to find that money!” Belle struggled against raising her voice.

Tears began to leak out of her father’s eyes. “It’s no good, Belle. It’s no good. It’s gone. We’re going to lose the building.”

“Dad!” Belle shouted. “It’s worse than that! This means bankruptcy and scandal! Do you think Regina Mills will let this opportunity to get us out of the way pass her by? This means jail, Dad!
She’ll lock us up and throw away the key!”

Moe Bailey just looked at his daughter, tears falling more quickly.

“One of us is going to jail,” Belle felt as though she were swallowing knives. “I guess it’s going to be me.” She snatched her coat and scarf and ran outside into the snowy night.

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Belle wasn’t entirely certain where she was going. All she could do was walk with no particular destination. Not that there was anywhere to go in Storybrooke on Christmas Eve. Granny’s had closed an hour ago as had the library and the pub. Even Mr. Gold’s pawnshop windows were darkened—and this depressed Belle most of all. She’d had an inkling that seeing his face might lift her spirits.

Jail. Belle shivered as an icy wind blew past her. The idea of being locked up made her stomach turn. When she was eight years old, she’d been exploring the mines with Ruby when one of the tunnels collapsed. For a good six hours, she’d been stuck there, alone in the dark, while the sheriff department carefully dug her out. She still had nightmares about the walls closing in on her, taking away the oxygen, and abandoning her to blackness. Logically, she knew a female state penitentiary would be nothing like an old mine shaft, but still, her chest constricted horribly at the idea of being locked there interminably.

“Oh, mom,” She whispered, taking a turn into the woods. “What do I do, mom?”

There was no way she could suddenly magic $25,000 dollars. She had no collateral to offer Mr. Gold should she come to him, and Regina would refuse her pointblank, probably with a fair amount of glee.

She thought harder about collateral. Maybe she could ask for Mr. Gold’s help. He didn’t outright hate her like he did everyone else. Well, at the very least, he snarled at her less. Of course, she knew it was a mistake to ever make a deal with Gold, but she was willing to pay any price to save the Building and Loan. But once again, she had no collateral to offer him. Her father’s van wasn’t worth $25,000 dollars and nothing they owned even came close to that amount of money. He would laugh in her face.

What was she going to do?

Dazedly, she snapped to attention, and realized she was standing at the toll bridge, overlooking the river. It had begun to snow even harder and the snow falling on the churning waters below had an almost hypnotic effect.

$25,000 dollars. There was simply no way to get the money. Her work at the Building and Loan had been all for naught. She really was a failure in her life. She couldn’t go to college for her mother and now she couldn’t even save her family’s business.

Belle took a deep breath, still staring at the turbulent waters. The feeling of failure and worthlessness seemed to envelop her entire form and she could not see any way out.

“Invisible,” She whispered. “I’m invisible to everyone. My life…my life doesn’t matter.” She put her hands against the rail of the bridge.

The woods remained silent.

“I’m suffocating,” Belle swallowed hard. “In a life I didn’t want. And now I can’t even fix that.” Tears leaked out of the corner of her eyes.
At that moment, she had the oddest feeling of comfort. It was as if someone warm and comforting put their arms around her and held her closely. The warmth of it swam through her veins like a tonic, and for an instant, it felt as though her problems had melted away.

But then the feeling was gone and she was alone in the dark, cold woods. The suddenness of reality crushed her and she choked back a sob, leaning against the bridge for support.

I ought to jump in, she thought to herself. It would be better for everyone if I jumped in. My life insurance money would save Dad. Ruby would be sad for a while, but she’d move on. My Dad… he’d be sad too, but he wouldn’t have the constant reminder of his wife walking around, wounding his heart. I know how he looks at me. Because I look like her. I hurt him just by existing.

The deep waters continued to churn invitingly. Taking a deep breath, she placed both hands on the railing, leaning in.

But before she could do or decide anything, she saw a flash of pink hurtle into the cold waters below.

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Gold was not having a great night.

He considered trooping down to the Storybrooke Hospital to have his head examined, but it was snowing harder now. Inspiration struck, and he went to his phone to call Dr. Whale and threaten him to make a house call—but the phone lines were down. Apparently the Christmas snow had turned into a bloody snowstorm. Absolutely perfect.

Trying to get the mental image of his ghostly predecessor out of his head, he went to his bedroom, determinedly swallowing his nightcap. He couldn’t think of sleeping, not yet, so he took another drink of Johnnie Walker, trying to blur his head into unconsciousness. Eventually, he slumped onto his bed, burying his face into the pillow, and shutting the bed curtains.

The alcohol began to fuzz his brain nicely. He was just drifting off into unconsciousness, when he was sharply awoken by clock tower’s tolling bells. The clock had struck one.

Gold grunted and turned over, trying to fall back asleep, but before he could even get comfortable, a burst of light exploded into the room.

Swallowing hard, he flung open the bed curtains, refusing to be cowed by whatever hallucination that decided to plague him. But before he could think of anything he fell against his bed in shock.

His son stood before him.

Ten years ago, his only child, Baden, had been killed in a car wreck. His first wife had left when Baden was only four. For ten years, it had been just him and Baden, a challenge and a struggle yet a joy and a mercy. But when his son died, he’d lost all hope.

Last night, he’d seen the ghost of Jacob Zoso. Could it only follow that he would see his son next?

“Bae…” Gold whispered raggedly. “Son…is it really and truly you…”

Baden smiled but sadly shook his head. “No, Gold.”
“Then—why do you look like him?” Gold choked out desperately.

“I am the Spirit of Christmases Past,” Baden replied. “You see me how you see your past Christmases, therefore, I wear the face of your son.”

Gold could barely answer. His throat constricted tightly and tears were threatening to leak out of his eyes. Finally, he took a trembling breath, and gasped out, “What do you want?”

“I’m here to help you, Rutherford Gold. I am here for your salvation. In fact—I am here on your son’s bidding.”

“Baden,” At this, the tears that had threatened fell freely down his cheeks. “Baden sent you. Am I—am I dying? Am I going to see him?”

The spirit gently shook his head. “It is not yet your time. But your son awaits you and sends his love.”

“Why couldn’t he come?” Gold pleaded. “I’ll do anything to see him again. Please…can’t I see him? Just for a minute?”

“We have rules, Rutherford Gold. The ghosts that visit Earth are shackled, doomed to a life of penance and horror. Your son has new life now, in a far better place than here. Rejoice and take heart, for he is now in True Joy.”

Despite the spirit’s assurance, it did not comfort Gold. His thoughts were dark and bitter and he could not escape the consuming yearning to see his son again.

The spirit gently took his arm. “Now rise and come with me.”

Gold swallowed his dry mouth. Unable to look at the spirit’s face, he said in a thin voice, “Where are we going?”

“You will see.” The spirit presented a small hand, so like Baden’s, before him. Wiping his wet cheeks, Gold took the hand. The spirit began to walk forward and they passed through the wall of his bedroom into a deep, violet mist. Storybrooke had vanished; instead they seemed to be in an urban area, surrounded by alleyways and cars. It was a clear, cold winter day with not a trace of snow. Gold recognized it at once.

“Glasgow,” He said stunned. “We’re in Glasgow. I was born here. I grew up here.”

“So you were,” The spirit observed and Gold tried not to look at him. It was too hard, the image that he was walking around his childhood city with his son. He couldn’t focus on it, he’d go mad.

“Do you recognize this flat?” The spirit asked. “And this day?”

Gold licked his lips. “This was my parents’ flat,” He replied stiffly.

“A Christmas from long ago,” The spirit agreed. “Let us enter.” The spirit took Gold’s hand again, leading his unwilling form into the building, to a shabby downstairs flat with a broken number on the door.

The spirit gestured for them to walk and once again, they passed through the door as if it was nothing but air. Gold froze when he saw an intimidating man staring directly at him.

“Father,” He said bitterly.
His father did not answer but reached past Gold to get a tattered coat. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was red—Gold recognized this face. His father had just finished with one of his rages.

“He doesn’t see me,” Gold noted.

“These are but shadows,” The spirit told him. “They can neither see nor hear you.”

Gold barely heard the spirit, so transfixed on the living room. A pitiful Christmas tree, probably made out of aluminum, adorned the living room where a small boy was playing. Gold inhaled sharply, seeing familiar haunted eyes and crooked nose. The boy was staring at the Christmas tree, knees tucked under him. One of his eyes was rimmed with a purplish bruise.

“You know this child,” The spirit stated.

Gold stared at the boy. “Yes,” He said slowly. “I do know him.”

A thin wisp of a woman came out of the kitchen. She was wringing her hands together nervously, but once she saw that the man had exited the flat, she relaxed slightly. Gold’s eyes narrowed, seeing that her face too was decorated with dark bruises and even a large cut across her forehead.

She crossed over to where the child sat, running her fingers through his hair gently. “I know you’re disappointed,” She said in a quiet, shaky little voice. “But Rum…Father Christmas will be here. He just couldn’t make it for Christmas.”

“Father Christmas doesn’t exist,” The boy said flatly. “He isn’t real.”

The woman looked startled. “He does!” She insisted. “I promise he does. He just—he’s got a lot of houses to visit in one night, and it might take him a week or two before he reaches our flat. We just have to be patient.”

The little boy looked up at her, eyes cool and lifeless. “All right, mum.” He said tonelessly.

“Good boy,” His mother pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Now—come into the kitchen, we’ll put some ice on that bruise and eat some Christmas cookies. Your father won’t be home for a while now.” She led the child into the kitchen.

“You know this woman as well?” The spirit asked Gold.

Gold cleared his throat. “My mother,” He said bitterly. “A weak and foolish woman.”

“Who very much loved you,” The spirit observed.

“Not enough to leave my drunkard of a father,” Gold snapped. The spirit bowed his head and Gold felt a pang of remorse. The spirit still wore Baden’s face and it looked as if he’d hurt his son.

“Let us move on,” The spirit suggested. It took Gold’s hand once more and led the two through the wall, passing through the vale of purple mist. When the mist cleared, they were in a different apartment.

This flat was much larger and more decadent than the former. They had somehow managed to appear on the top level, giving Gold a view of the city. Once again, there was no snow, just a cold, wet, drizzle that slopped against the windows.

Gold turned and sucked in his breath. He saw himself, sitting at a table with a cup of tea.
This version of himself was much younger, much less world-weary. There were no streaks of silver in his hair nor were the lines in his face as prominent. Still, Gold couldn’t help but notice the cloud of gloom above his younger self, almost tangible.

The memory came back like a flash. “This isn’t—”

“Papa?”

The spirit and Gold turned. Baden, holding a blanket and a stuffed sheep, wandered into the living room. Gold let out a little moan at the sight of his boy, so young and sweet.

His past self attempted a smile. “Hey son,” He cleared his throat. “Merry Christmas, Bae. You’ve been a good boy this year, look at all the presents you got from Father Christmas in the living room.”

“I saw,” Baden beamed and Gold wanted nothing more than to gather his beautiful baby in his arms once more. But the shadow of his son did not see him, heading straight for his past self’s lap. Gold watched his past shadow with biting envy as the memory nuzzled his child.

“Papa, where’s mama?” Baden asked seriously.

There was a long pause before his past self answered. “Mama had to go away,” He said finally.

Baden contemplated this, sticking a thumb in his mouth. “Is mama coming back soon?” He questioned solemnly. “I have a present for her still.”

His past self held Baden tightly, quietly shaking his head. “No, son. She’s not coming back soon. It might…it might be a very long time before mama comes back.”

Gold whirled around towards the spirit. “ENOUGH!” He thundered. “Why do you insist on torturing me this way?!”

“I told you,” The spirit said calmly. “These are but shadows that have come and gone. Do not blame me.”

“I will blame you,” Gold growled enraged. “There is no reason for it, no reason to drag me through this hell again. Will you now show me my son’s death? How his broken bleeding body looked in the hospital? How he choked on his words right before he drew his last breath? Is my torment your joy?!” Every impulse wanted to attack the spirit, rip it to shreds, but the spirit still wore his son’s face. He collapsed against the wall, trying not to sob.

Gently, the spirit took his hand. “Come,” It said quietly. “We shall go to a different memory.”

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When the mists cleared again, they were back in Storybrooke. Gold couldn’t help but draw a sigh of relief at their return to the present. He looked about, trying to regain his bearings.

The spirit saw this sigh and smiled. “We are not yet back,” It remarked. “This is the Christmas after Clara Bailey died.”

“Clara Bailey?” Gold asked startled. “Belle’s mother?”

“Yes,” The spirit said unfazed. “Look, there’s her daughter.”

Gold whipped his head around a little too suddenly to be completely casual. Sure enough, a
nineteen-year-old Belle had stepped out of the building and loan, carefully testing the sidewalk to see if it was slick. She was holding several wrapped boxes in her arms and she walked briskly, if not cheerfully.

They followed her, watching as she gave a box to Granny and Ruby and another to Leroy and another to Graham Humbert. Soon, Belle was in front of the pawnshop.

“I remember this,” Gold said blandly.

Belle considered the pawnshop for a moment. She then took a deep breath and marched towards the door, opening it decisively. Without waiting for the spirit, Gold followed.

He watched her walk towards the counter, watched his past self glance up, annoyed. Belle smiled at him.

“Merry Christmas, Mr. Gold.” She said pleasantly. “Mary Margaret and I made Christmas cookies for Storybrooke, so here’s yours.” She held out a small package, wrapped in red and green wrapping paper.

The memory looked at her frowning, refusing to take it. “I have no need of that,” He said coldly.

Had it been Mary Margaret, she would’ve apologized, and meekly scuttled out the door. But Belle was made of sterner stuff.

“Christmas cookies aren’t about need,” She retorted. “Take the cookies, Mr. Gold. I think you’ll like them.”

“I told you, I have no need of them,” He snapped. “If you’re not going to buy anything, I suggest you leave.”

Belle eyed him hard. “Have it your way,” She said loftily and much to his past self’s annoyance, she promptly placed the package on his counter and trotted out the door.

Gold watched himself glare at her for a few minutes. His past self snatched the package and went to the trash can, ready to pitch it. He paused in the action before gently setting it down and tearing open the paper. Hesitantly, he picked up a cookie and took a bite. It had been the first Christmas present he’d received in over fifteen years.

“And every year hence,” The spirit remarked. “She brought you something.”

Gold’s mouth was dry. “Not this year,” He rasped. “She didn’t. She didn’t bring me anything this year.”

“Alas, the present is not of my jurisdiction,” Baden’s face began to warp slightly, like a photograph underwater. “But it is time to say my goodbye to you, Rutherford Gold.”

He watched the spirit with mixed emotions. Baden’s face was so close…it was like a dagger in his heart. “Must you go?” Gold felt like he was swallowing knives.

“I will never truly be gone,” The spirit answered. “I live in your memories, as does your son.”

The spirit shimmered and disappeared. The mist wrapped around Gold, transporting him back into his bedroom. Shutting his eyes, he began to sob.
“Help! Oh, help! Help me please!”

Belle didn’t even think. Without missing a beat, she dove into the churning waters below, grabbing hold of the woman and towing her to shore. The water was freezing; it felt like a thousand needles were pricking at her skin and she half wondered if this was what it felt like for the survivors of the Titanic. Nevertheless, she kept her head and held on, pulling the stranger out of the water.

She didn’t waste a minute once they were safely on dry land, propelling the woman to the sheriff’s station. Emma Swan was working late on Christmas Eve, and was happy to provide fresh clothes and steaming cups of coffee for them both. Belle was not a coffee drinker but she couldn’t resist the hot drink and its ability to warm her bones.

“All right,” Emma said sardonically, taking a sip of her own coffee. “What in the world possessed you to take a swim in fifteen degree weather?”

The woman smiled brightly. She wore a pair of flannel pajamas that probably belonged to Emma and seemed oddly cheerful about the whole situation. Her brown hair went every which way and she had the distinct air of dottiness in her attitude and manner.

“Oh, I wasn’t taking a swim,” She informed Emma, ripping open twenty packets of sugar and dumping them into her coffee. “I jumped in to save Belle!”

Belle choked on her coffee. “You what? To save me?”

“Well, I did, didn’t I?” The woman continued. “You didn’t go through with it, did you?”

Belle blinked. “Go through with what?”

“Suicide.”

This time Emma choked on her coffee and Belle flushed. The woman beamed at the both of them, rocking back and forth on her toes.

Emma was the first to snap out of it. “Where exactly do you come from?” She wanted to know, pulling out some paperwork.

“Heaven,” The woman replied easily, taking a sip of her too sweetened coffee. “I don’t suppose you have any milk here, do you?”

Emma would no sooner take milk in her coffee than believe this woman was from Heaven. “Uh, no,” She said, her eyes narrowing. “Go on?”

“I had to act quickly. That’s why I jumped in. I knew if I were drowning, you’d try and save me,
and you see, you did! And that’s how I saved you,” The woman finished proudly. She thought for a minute and put another packet of sugar into her coffee.

Belle said nothing, staring at her, bewildered.

“I’m the answer to your prayer, Belle,” The woman continued merrily, neatly tucking her knees underneath her.

“How do you know my name?” Belle asked, startled.

“Oh, I know all about you,” The woman said airily. “I’ve watched you grow up from a little girl to—well, now!”

Belle and Emma looked at each other. Clearing her throat, Belle continued, “I’m sorry—in all the fuss, I didn’t get your name—who are you?”

“Nova Astrid, AS2,” Nova introduced, performing a little bow.

“Astrid?” Belle frowned. She knew everyone in Storybrooke, but the name was unfamiliar. “What is that, AS2?”

“Angel, Second Class,” Nova explained cheerfully.

At this, Emma choked on her coffee again. When she regained oxygen, she wheezed out, “Okay…I’m gonna…step out for a second. Belle, holler if you need anything.”

“Cheerio!” Nova waved Emma off brightly. Emma shook her head in bemusement, retreating into her inner office to make a phone call. Which left Belle to scrutinize Nova.

It wasn’t that Belle didn’t believe in angels. She did. But she always imagined them as silent suggestive forces or random acts of kindness, not ditzy young women who appeared to have a few screws loose. Not that Belle was anyone to judge, she’d had her own battles with her mental health.

“So you’re an angel,” Belle said slowly.

“That’s right!” Nova sang.

“And—why did you save me?”

“It’s what I was sent down for, I’m your guardian angel,” Nova said seriously.

Belle blinked. “I—I see…”

“It’s ridiculous to think of killing yourself for money,” Nova scolded her like a little child. “$25,000, dollars. As if that’s worth a life!”

Belle started. “How did you know that?” She demanded.

“I told you, I’m your guardian angel, I know everything about you!” Nova said earnestly.

Belle blew out of her mouth exasperatedly. “I thought angels had wings,” She said a bit wryly.

“I haven’t won my wings yet,” Nova explained with every ounce of sincerity. “That’s why I’m an Angel Second Class. I’ve got to earn them. You’ll help me, won’t you, Belle?”

“Uh—sure,” Belle humored. “And how would I do that?”
“By letting me help you, of course!” Nova beamed.

Belle couldn’t help but give another wry smile. “Well, you don’t happen to have $25,000 on you?”

“Oh no,” Nova shook her head gravely. “We don’t use money in Heaven.”

“Right,” Belle said, shaking her head. “Well, it comes in rather handy down here.” She closed her eyes, thinking of the life insurance money and how it could help her father.

Without thinking, she murmured, “I’m worth more dead than alive.”

“Oh, Belle,” Nova said sorrowfully. “You mustn’t talk like that! You just don’t know all that you’ve done! If it hadn’t been for you…”

“If it hadn’t been for me, people would be a lot better off,” Belle couldn’t help but snap. Who was this stranger to cast judgments and assumptions about her life? “Everyone, my father, Ruby, certainly Regina…”

“Belle Bailey,” Nova said gravely. “Do you really think killing yourself would make everyone feel happier?”

Belle’s mind flashed on her father’s broken face. “No…” She sighed. “But—it would’ve been better if I’d never been born.”

An icy wind shot through the room, causing both women to shiver. Nova’s eyes widened in apparent interest.

“Oh my,” Nova said, sounding a little impressed. “It looks like you’ve got your wish. You’ve never been born. You no longer exist. Gracious me, what a treat for you! No worries, no responsibilities, no $25,000 hanging over your head!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Belle snapped. “Of course I exist. Now I’m sorry you fell in, but I have to go, I have to figure out how to scare up that money—” She blinked in surprise. Her clothes were suddenly neatly folded on one of the desks, rather than being in the dryer.

“Your clothes are dry now,” Nova commented, looking as though she was rather enjoying the whole thing.

“Well,” Belle said uncertainly. “I don’t remember Emma bringing them out—but if they’re dry, then I need to change and get out of here. Emma can help you find where you need to go, Ms. Astrid. Good luck.”

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Belle stormed out of the sheriff’s office. She was angry, but she wasn’t entirely sure why she was angry. Something about Nova had put her in a dreadfully sour mood. But when she turned the corner onto Main Street, she started in surprise.

It wasn’t that Storybrooke looked different—it felt different. Hours before, there had been nothing but peace and joy in the air. Now there seemed to be a dark shadow over every house and people walked the streets, their faces tight with tension.

She noticed Ruby locking up Granny’s diner as she walked by and waved. Ruby frowned at the wave, acknowledging the gesture with an almost sarcastic wave herself. Belle blinked, pausing,
and did a double take when she saw the diner.

The diner no longer read Granny’s’, instead, it said “Ruby’s” and looked to be more of a bar than a diner. Bemused, Belle strode over to Ruby, who arched an eyebrow.

“Did you guys get a new sign or something?” Belle let out a little laugh as she reexamined the diner.

Ruby’s eyes narrowed. “No…” She said, a little tightly. “Why?”

“I guess—I never noticed it, or something,” Belle replied, a bit bewildered. “But what about Granny? Is she all right with you changing the name?”

Ruby’s eyes widened in shock. She looked almost offended. “For your information,” She snapped icily. “My grandmother’s dead.” She turned her heel and stalked off into the snow.

Now completely confused, Belle chased after her. “Ruby, wait,” She demanded, grabbing her elbow. “What are you talking about? I just saw your grandmother an hour ago.”

Ruby jerked her arm away. “Look,” She snarled. “I don’t know who the hell you are—but my grandmother’s been dead for five years. Now stay away from me, or I’ll call the sheriff!”

When the clock struck two, Gold heard every chime. He had lain awake in bed, staring at the bed curtains, exhausted, but eyes wide open. He was going mad. It was the only explanation. He was going mad and that was all there was to it.

Grimly, he wondered if it were some kind of cosmic punishment. But before he could ponder the answer, a bright light shone through the bed curtains accompanied by a brisk winter wind. He shuddered. The ghost. The next ghost would be here.

He refused to budge. The ghost could bloody well find someone else to haunt.

“Hey.” Gold heard a strangely familiar voice bite out. “HEY.”

For a brief inkling, he considered opening the bed curtains, but decided against it.

He heard a dramatic sigh and in a blaze of light, the bed curtains flew open. Standing beside his bed, was Emma Swan.

What?

“Emma?” Gold choked out, hardly daring to believe it.

Emma exhaled loudly, rolling her eyes. She wore an emerald green jacket and a bright red tank top, along with her usual blue jeans and motorcycle boots. “Well, not exactly,” She corrected flatly. “I’m the Ghost of Christmas Present.”

Gold stared at her stupidly.

“Look,” Emma said sharply. “Emma Swan is the biggest thing to happen to Storybrooke this year—she represents your present. So that’s why I look like her. Deal with it.”

Gold barked out a hoarse laugh. It was all he could really think of doing. “And what do you plan on showing me?” He demanded finally. “It’s not as if I don’t know what’s going on in the present.”
“Actually,” Emma said snippily. “You have literally no idea of what’s going on in the present or what’s been right in front of you all along.”

Gold was baffled. “What are you on about?”

She rolled her eyes once more. “All right. Get up, Mr. Gold. We’re going on a little field trip.”

“Welcome to Storybrooke, Christmas Present!”

Gold surveyed his surroundings. As far as he could tell, all they’d done is go outside.

“This is hardly magic,” He remarked dryly. “You took me outside. Hardly any great lessons to be learned here.”

Emma glared at him. “We’re not just outside, Gold, we’re outside several hours before!” She waved her hands in emphasis.

“Wouldn’t that be the past again?” Gold demanded, folding his arms.

“Hey,” The spirit warned. “I am not above stranding you on top of the clock tower. So shut up and pay attention.”

“And where are we going?” Gold asked sardonically as they walked down the path. People were going about their business and like his trip into the past, they did not seem to notice his or the spirit’s presence.

“First stop is the Bailey home,” Emma paused in front of a grubby little apartment and inhaled deeply. “Smell that?”

Gold inhaled. At first all he could smell was the cold snow but soon he caught a whiff of peppermint and vanilla. It was coming from an open window—a ground level apartment.

“Baking,” Gold confirmed, looking at Emma. “So?”

“Belle Bailey’s baking,” Emma retorted. “Shall we go inside?”

Gold refused to dignify this with a response although in all honesty, he was rather curious to see inside the Bailey home. The spirit took his hand and they passed through the wall as if it was air.

The Bailey apartment was small and cramped, giving Gold uneasy memories of his childhood home. But there was a distinct atmosphere of love and warmth in the air. Despite everything, it was clean and well-kept, with cheap Christmas lights adorning the hall. A pitiful aluminum Christmas tree stood proudly on a corner table, decorated with homemade ornaments. Gold swallowed and followed the scent of baking into the kitchen.

Belle Bailey was icing Christmas cookies. Without realizing it, Gold’s breath hitched a little. She looked extraordinarily lovely at the moment, her chestnut curls caught in a messy braid, wearing a checkered apron over her oversized sweater and leggings. She was humming to herself, something that sounded a little like ‘Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas’ and she carefully placed to M&Ms on a snowman shaped cookie.

“Those are the cookies she makes every year,” Gold said quietly, more to himself than to the spirit.
“Yup,” The spirit agreed.

Gold said nothing. Every year but this year, Belle had dutifully dropped off a tin of Christmas cookies. And every year, she stopped at his shop for a little longer, just to talk to him and ask him how his year was. He hadn’t realized till this year how much he savored every meeting.

But this year she had not. He had assumed she had realized what a monster he was, and did not want to force further interactions. He could hardly blame her for that.

He was about to ask the spirit to leave, when Moe Bailey entered the kitchen.

“These smell great, Belle,” He said, reaching for a cookie.

She swatted his hand. “Hands off, Dad,” Her eyes sparkled. “I’m giving these out, remember? Those cookies are for Mr. Gold.”

Moe rolled his eyes. “I don’t see why you always give him cookies every year,” He grumbled. “He hardly deserves it.”

Belle’s lips formed a secretive smile. “It’s not about who deserves it,” She said, a little softly. “It’s just about—giving it.” She smiled again, a little dreamily.

“Cookies?” Moe snorted.

Belle snapped out of her reverie. “Right,” She said practically. “And they’re for Mr. Gold. As soon as we’re done today, I’ll give them out, probably after I exchange presents with Ruby.” She snapped the lid on one of the tins and tied it with a ribbon.

Moe grunted in acquiescence. Gold glanced at Emma, who was watching intently.

“Then why didn’t she give it to me?” He asked. “I saw her once today—other than that, she never came by.”

“She had her reasons,” Emma said, suddenly looking a little sad.

Gold swallowed. “What…reasons?”

Emma offered her hand and Gold took it. Purple mist enveloped them and when it cleared, they were at the toll bridge in the middle of the forest. It was snowing, a little after sunset.

“What are we doing here?” Gold asked confused. Emma pointed behind him.

Turning around, he saw Belle Bailey, leaning against the bridge, staring at the churning waters. Hours before, she’d had light and warmth in her eyes, but now…she seemed different. Her cheeks were much paler and her eyes were blank and dead-looking.

“What is she doing here?” Gold asked again. The bleak, hopeless expression on Belle’s face made him feel uneasy.

“She’s thinking,” Emma said slowly. “Of ending her life.”

Gold stilled. “What?”

“She’s thinking of jumping into the water and ending her life,” The spirit repeated. “Because her father misplaced $25,000 and she can’t think of way to come up with the money by the time the bank examiner arrives.”
He stared at the spirit horrified.

“Belle has been lost for a while now,” The spirit continued. “She does not see the value in her life.”

Gold grabbed Emma’s shoulders in a frenzy. “Why didn’t she come to me?!” He demanded. “I would’ve—you can’t let her do this! We’ve got to stop her!”

Belle murmured something softly. Panicked, Gold ran to her, not caring that she couldn’t see him.

“My life…my life doesn’t matter,” She whispered.

“It matters to me!” Gold shouted at her desperately. Belle stared blankly through him.

“I’m suffocating,” She swallowed. “In a life I didn’t want. And now I can’t even fix that.” Tears began to streak down her face. Gold gazed at her helplessly, her tears shattering him.

Before he knew quite what was happening, he put his arms around her. He expected his arms to go right through her body, but to his surprise, she felt warm and solid. The ghost of Christmas present said nothing, watching intently.

He had never dared to imagine what it would be like embrace Belle Bailey. But now that he had experienced it, he never wanted to stop. Weren’t these supposed to be shadows, unable to hear or feel him? Then why could he catch her scent, something close to roses and vanilla? Why did she feel so warm?

Belle stiffened. It didn’t seem possible, but it was almost as if...as if she could feel him holding her. Her shoulders relaxed and the tension drained out of her expression. It was impossible, but she leaned into his warmth and sighed. He stared at her in astonishment, feeling as though something inside his chest was melting.

Someone touched his shoulder. Emma had a soft smile upon her face. “Time to go,” She said firmly, touching his palm. Before he could protest, they vanished, leaving Belle alone on the bridge.
Chapter 4

“Take me back!” Gold demanded.

“I can’t do that,” Emma replied. But it wasn’t Emma—in fact, the spirit wasn’t looking very well. Her blonde hair seemed to be turning gray, lines appearing across her face.

“You have to!” Gold shouted. “She’ll hurt herself! She’ll kill herself!”

“What has that to do with you?” Emma asked, raising a silver brow. “Without Belle Bailey, the Building and Loan will fall. The one obstacle keeping you from possessing Storybrooke will be gone. Wouldn’t it be more of a convenience to let her jump?”

Gold grabbed the spirit by its collar. “Don’t you say that,” He hissed, eyes wild. “Don’t you dare say that! It has everything to do with me! I—I need her.”

Emma smiled, despite his tight grip on her collar. “The final spirit is coming,” She said simply, and Gold realized he was holding an old woman. “My time is up. Good luck, Mr. Gold.” The purple fog returned once more and he was alone.

XXXX

Belle was going insane, that was all there was to it. Granny, dead? Ruby, her best friend, not know who she was? She passed other friends on the streets—Mary Margaret, Emma, Magnolia, Anastasia—but their glances slid over her. She was unrecognizable. She’d become truly invisible.

“This is impossible,” She muttered, running towards the Building and Loan. She stopped dead in front of the building—or what was supposed to be the building.

The sign remained, but it was old, faded. The windows were boarded up and the door was padlocked. Belle traced the snow around the window—no one had entered this building in years.

“This is impossible!” She cried out. Turning away, she ran down the sidewalk, heading directly for her apartment. Her heart was pounding wildly—this couldn’t be true, this wasn’t happening. At the door of her apartment, she fumbled in her pockets for her keys—and came up short.

With mounting horror, she realized that she was missing everything. Her license, her money, her keys—it was as if her very identity was stolen from her.

“No!” Belle cried, banging the doors of the apartment. “Dad! Please! Open the door! Dad!”

The door opened and her father’s familiar face stared back at her, filled with confusion. Belle took in his red-rimmed eyes, how he wore only a tattered gray robe, the pungent smell of whiskey and fast food that permeated the apartment. Behind him, she could see trash everywhere—he was living squalor.

“What do you want?” Moe demanded.

“Dad,” Belle said desperately. “I—I thought for sure you’d recognize me.”

Moe stared at her, mouth hanging open. “Dad?”

“It’s me, Belle!” Belle’s face crumpled at his blank expression. “Belle Bailey! Your daughter!”
Moe’s face hardened in anger. “I don’t have a daughter,” He sneered. “You’re nuts. Get off my porch!” He slammed the door in her face.

Belle took a step back, staggering. Everything was blurring together and she was having trouble catching her breath. This couldn’t he happening. This couldn’t—

“Do you understand now, Belle?”

She whipped around to see Nova, staring at her earnestly.

“What did you do?” Belle demanded, grabbing her coat collar. “What did you do to my friends and family?”

“Belle,” Nova replied, unfazed at the grip on her coat. “I granted your wish. You wished you had never been born. And now you see how Storybrooke would be without you. Your father is a drunken slob, unemployed, addicted to beer and television. Ruby and Granny lost the diner to Regina, and the stress of it killed—”

“That’s a lie!” Belle shouted. “I helped them save their diner! The bank wouldn’t give them a loan, but we did, and they were able to pay it off and own the diner fully!”

“You weren’t there,” Nova said quietly. “Because you didn’t exist.”

Belle stared at her, shock filling her veins. She wanted to throw something, wanted to scream—she resisted the impulse, taking a deep gulp of wintry air.

“Nova,” She said an shaky voice. “Where is Mr. Gold?”

Nova shuffled her feet. “Well—I—”

“Nova, where is he?” Belle commanded, grabbing her coat collar once more. “Where?!”

“I’m not supposed to tell!” Noval protested.

“Tell me!”

“He’s just about to close up the pawnshop!” Nova cried and Belle shoved her away, running down the street.

She didn’t know why it was so fatally important that Gold remember her, but the idea that she wasn’t a part of his life, however small, was a torment. She ran across Storybrooke, not pausing for an instant, until she found herself in front of the pawnshop.

As Nova had said, there he was, locking the door behind him. He put his keys in his coat pocket and paused, glancing at her coldly.

“Can I help you,” He growled. It was a statement, not a question.

Belle gazed at him, willing him to remember. “Mr. Gold,” She said softly. “It’s me—it’s Belle.”

He continued to pierce her with that cool gaze. “I don’t know any Belle.”

“Yes, you do,” Belle choked out. “I—I visit you every week. Every chance I can get. I bring you cookies every Christmas. I—”

“You are raving,” Gold told her stonily. “I told you, I don’t know you. The shop’s closed.” He straightened his coat and walked away with her, not even sparing her a second glance.
Belle watched him go. Shaking, her knees gave out and she collapsed into the snow.

“Each life touches another,” She heard Nova’s voice say in the wind. “And yours touched Mr. Gold. He was always a hard, unshakable man, but without you to see it, there is no goodness left in him.”

“I should’ve asked him,” Belle swallowed. “For the money. I should’ve tried to work something out—if only just to—it hurts so much…looking at him and having him not know me…”

Nova watched her.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Tears were running down Belle’s face. “I’m dead, aren’t I? All of this…all of this is some kind of hell for me. I really did jump into the river and now I’m dead…”

“Take heart, Belle,” Nova smiled, touching her cheek. “You know the consequences of a hasty wish and a life without your light. And you know…”

Belle’s head slowly rose. Nova continued to smile at her.

“I know,” Belle finished. “That I love him. I’m in love with Mr. Gold.”

XXXX

Emma was gone and Mr. Gold was alone. All that was left to do was wait for the final spirit, but he was mad with impatience. The spirit needed to get here now. They had to go back. They had to save Belle.

He heard a noise and whipped around. He was surrounded by purple mist.

“Show yourself!” Gold ordered. “I know you’re the spirit of Christmas future. Show yourself now.”

He watched as a figure emerged in the mist. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting—perhaps something akin to the Grim Reaper? But the figure was small, wearing an elaborate blue cloak, her eyes shaded.

“Are you the spirit of Christmases yet to come,” Gold demanded with a growl.

Delicate fingers grasped the edges of the blue cloak and gently tugged it down. Gold’s eyes widened. Belle Bailey, garbed in a deep red, almost medieval dress, stood before him.

“I am,” She responded with a soft smile.

Gold’s mouth was dry. “I don’t—I don’t understand,” He said weakly.

“I wear the face of Belle Bailey,” The spirit said helpfully. Gold’s eyes widened.

“Are you saying—are you saying Belle is my future?” He asked, hardly daring to believe it.

She smiled at him, not answering.

“Is what you show me next,” Gold swallowed. “The shadows of things that will be—or the shadows of things that may be?”

Belle took his palm. “Come,” She said softly. “We have much to see.”
It was not snowing—it was raining. A disgusting, gray, murky rain that froze on the tops of windshields and made the townspeople of Storybrooke slip and slide as they went about their lives.

“Is this the future,” Gold asked in a monotone. “It looks no different.”

“There is a difference,” Belle murmured. “There is someone missing.”

Gold snorted. “Oh, I think I can guess the rest,” He said sarcastically. “Is this the part where I find Regina having an auction over my old things? An empty funeral? Where I look upon in horror at my own gravestone, and no one cares? Where I realize the lives of Storybrooke are bettered by my death?” He laughed harshly. “And you think I don’t know this already. You think I don’t know I’m a monster to this town?”

The spirit said nothing. She gently took Gold’s arm and led him forward, walking through the drizzle. They came upon his pawnshop and Gold frowned, looking at it. The windows were boarded and the door was padlocked.

“So,” Gold said coldly. “I really am dead.”

“Why do you say that?” The spirit asked.

“This is my vocation,” He answered, crossing his arms. “The only thing I did for money that truly pleased me. I would never let it fall into such disarray unless I was dead.”

She just looked at him and her stare made him uncomfortable. Looking away, he grunted, “What else do you want me to see?”

Belle took his elbow again, leading them to the sheriff’s office. They passed through the walls into Emma’s office. Gold frowned when he saw Regina, standing over Emma with a smug grin.

Emma herself did not look well. Her face was drawn and tight as she pinched her brow wearily.

“So, Sheriff,” Regina said coolly. “What do you intend to do now?”

“I intend to do my job,” Emma snapped. “Whether you like it or not.”

Regina simply smirked.

“You may have control of the schools, the abbey, the apartments, but not for long,” Emma growled. “You’re not going to keep us down for long, Madame Mayor. I’d watch your back.”

Gold glanced at the spirit. “I really am dead,” He said tonelessly. “The abbey and apartments were under my control, not Regina’s.”

The spirit said nothing, just looked at him with that sad, solemn gaze. They exited the sheriff’s office and the spirit cleared her throat.

“We have one more stop to make,” She said softly.

“Oh, is this the part where we come upon my gravestone and I cry out in terror?” Gold asked sarcastically.

“Do you desire death so much?” Belle questioned.
“I desire peace,” He snapped at her. “Peace from restless spirits, peace from this accursed town, peace from—”

“Peace from Belle?” The spirit asked. At that, Gold could not find a response.

“Your wish is granted,” The spirit said sadly as the purple mists began to close around them. When the mist dissipated, they were in front of a cemetery.

To Gold’s shock, he saw himself, clad in a dark coat, staring blankly ahead.

Gold whipped around towards the spirit. “What is this?” He demanded. “I thought I was dead! I thought this vision would show me my death!”

Belle did not respond, her eyes still cast upon his future self. Angrily, Gold turned from her, heading towards his shaded figure.

He did not look well. Gold wasn’t a young man to begin with, but he was never more aware of the deep creases in his forehead, the faded silver hair, his eyes tired and weary. His future self looked old, as if he bore all of Storybrooke upon his shoulders. Gold frowned at this visage, wondering why the man looked so despondent—until he caught sight of what held his future shadow’s gaze.

A gravestone. Squinting his eyes, Gold neared it, reading the stone carved etchings. He drew back in horror.

The tombstone read: BELLE BAILEY

He stumbled, falling into the wet grass, sheathed in ice. He looked upon this future self with stark terror, realizing the cause of his weariness, the dead look in his eyes, as if nothing mattered in the world—not his shop, not his power, not his riches—nothing.

Belle was dead.

“This can’t be!” Gold scrambled to get up, pushing past his apathetic form to get to the spirit. “She cannot have died! Take me back there! I can stop here!”

“You can do no such thing,” The spirit said sadly. “If Belle is to survive this night, it is her choice, not yours.”

“What good is it?” Gold’s expression manic, he wanted to tear the spirits limbs off, but she still wore Belle’s face. All he could do was fall onto his knees and beg. “What good is this night, what good is it if all you spirits show up to save my soul if I can’t save her?!”
"Hey! You!"

Belle whipped her head around to see Sheriff Swan barreling towards her. Panicking slightly, Belle turned towards Nova desperately, ready to beg the sprite to put Storybrooke the way it was—but Nova had disappeared.

Emma placed her hands on her hips, eyeing Belle. "I got a call from Moe Bailey, says you were bothering him," Her voice was doubtful as she looked at Belle’s small figure. "You need some help?"

"Emma, please," Belle begged. "I have to find Nova. I have to make her set everything right again!"

"Whoa, calm down miss, we’ll get everything settled here," Emma raised her hands slightly and Belle was nearly frantic.

"I’m not ‘miss’!" She shouted. "I’m Belle Bailey! You know who I am! I see you at Granny’s diner every single day! I go out with Ruby on Friday nights! You and I have coffee on the weekends, we talk about crime novels! I—I—"

Emma edged nearer. "Okay, maybe we should go see a doctor," She said concerned. "Why don’t you come with me, we’ll sort this out with Dr. Whale—"

"I don’t need a doctor! Let me go!" Belle demanded, wrenching her forearm away from Emma.

"I’m just trying to help you!" Emma said frustrated. "I don’t want to hurt you, but I think you need to come with me!"

"No!" Belle bellowed. She was off like a shot, running towards the Troll Bridge. She could hear Emma in fast pursuit but she ignored her, darting into the woods. Even in this bleak, horrible world, Emma was still new in town, she wouldn’t know the paths like Belle did. As she ran, it began to snow.

"Come back!" She heard Emma yell but Belle pushed on, dodging trees, crunching through the snow. Her tears froze on her face and she wiped her nose, pushing herself harder, desperate to get to the bridge.

When she finally reached it, she collapsed against the side. "Nova! Nova!" Belle screamed. "Get me back! Get me back, I don’t care what happens to me! Get me back to Mr. Gold, to Ruby, to my father! Help me, Nova, please! Please! I want to live again! I want to live again!"

Belle sank to her knees, dissolving into tears. "I want to live again…please, God…let me live again…"

She heard nothing but the roaring of the river and the quiet, falling snow as she prayed and prayed to return home. A few moments passed when she heard Emma call out,

"Belle! Are you okay?"

She jerked at Emma’s voice, nearing her. "Get out of here, Emma,” Belle snarled. "Get out of here, or I swear I’ll punch you!"
“Geez,” Emma said wryly. “What are you yelling at me for? Belle, are you okay? Should I call your dad?”

Belle’s eyes widened. “Emma—Emma, you know me?”

Emma blinked. “Know you?” She laughed. “Of course I do. I’ve been looking all over town, trying to find you. Ruby saw you running away from the Building and Loan, said you looked upset, so—”

“The Building and Loan!” Belle cried out. She dug into her coat and came up triumphantly, holding her keys. “There they are! Emma! What do you know about that! MERRY CHRISTMAS!” She pounced on her friend, giving her a tight hug before darting away.

Emma looked bemused. “Well—merry Christmas!”

****

Gold awoke in darkness, upon a cold bed, his bed curtains fallen to the floor. He blinked blearily in the darkness as his eyes adjusted.

“A dream—” He tried not to cough. “But no…is there still time?” He ran towards his window.

The streetlights were still lit, illuminating the Christmas decorations. He could see the falling snow in the hazy street light—it was still Christmas Eve, of that he was sure. There was still time.

Forgetting everything else, he ran to his bedroom door, clad in slippers, and snatched his dressing gown, putting it over his pajamas. Urgency swam through his veins like a drug as he hobbled down the steps of his home as fast his lame leg would take him, gripping his cane tightly. Not caring about the lightly falling snowflakes, the snow that cramped under his slippered feet, stumbled out of his house.

Gold was sure that he got a lot of stares as he hurried as fast as his crippled leg would take him, ignoring the biting cold. Nothing else mattered, all he knew was that he had to find Belle, had to help her, had to let her know that life was not worth living without her—had to let her know that he loved her…

Gold was not a praying man, but for the first time in fifteen years, he prayed, begging God would lead him to her.

To his shock, his prayer was almost immediately granted.

He saw her, across the street, running, looking wild. He could not read the expression on her face, but remembering her despondency on the bridge, he cried out, “Belle!”

She froze, turning towards him. Her mouth fell open at his state of disarray, but he didn’t care. He ran towards her.

“M-Mr. Gold,” She breathed, taking in his dressing gown, the snow that blanketed his slippers.

“Belle please,” He said desperately, not caring that he looked like a mad man. “Let me help you. Please.”

She stared at him. “Help me?”

“The money,” He continued. “The money the Building and Loan’s missing. I’ll pay it. I’ll pay it right now. You can arrange whatever payment plan you like or—or it can be a donation.
Anything. Please, Belle. Let me help you, I beg you…” Now he truly sounded like a lunatic. She was going to demand how he know about the Building and Loan’s financial struggles, probably going to accuse him of stealing the money, push him away…

But instead, a slow, happy smile spread across her face. “Oh, Mr. Gold,” She said warmly, and before he could quite realize what was happening, she stepped towards him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

****

There was magic on this Christmas Eve. It was the only explanation, but Belle was ready to accept it wholeheartedly. After all, it was the only reason she could think of that Mr. Gold, clad in a midnight blue robe and pajamas, would come running towards her, with frenzied promises of helping her. She had never seen him out of a suit, never seen him so sloppily dressed, his hair every which way, his warm brown eyes soft and pleading. He had to be absolutely freezing, standing there in the snow. It made her fall in love with him all over again.

So she’d sighed out his name and kissed him.

Belle could feel his shock when she pressed her lips to his, but his response was gloriously enthusiastic. Almost immediately, his arms wrapped around her, pressing her as tightly to his body as he could. Her fingers tangled in his messy hair and her tongue breached his lips, boldly exploring his mouth. She heard him groan against her and she broke away, for just a moment.

“You’ll never believe what’s happened to me,” Belle told him, her eyes shining, her hands unable to keep from carding through his hair.

“You’ll never believe what’s happened to me,” He replied to her just as earnestly, and she couldn’t help but giggle.

“Mr. Gold,” She sighed against him. “You know me. You remember me.”

“How could I not?” He asked her softly, holding her fiercely. “I—I—”

“I love you,” She beat him to it and it was as if twenty years of age lifted from his countenance. This time, he cupped her face tenderly, kissing her deeply, plundering her mouth. Her thumbs caressed his cheeks and she realized how cold his skin was.

“You’re freezing.” Belle tried to hold in her giggle as she unwrapped her scarf, looping it around his neck, tying them together.

“I’m not a bit cold,” Gold murmured against her neck and she laughed, unbuttoning her small coat and attempting to wrap him inside it. He couldn’t seem to stop kissing her, his lips running along her eyes, her cheeks, all over her face, as if he couldn’t believe she was real.

“You’ll let me help you?” He asked her, his gaze intense. “Please, Belle?”

She nodded and his exhale of relief made her heart melt. “Let’s—” She cleared her throat, suddenly aware that they were garnering stares. “Let’s talk about this—somewhere. Before you freeze to death!” She giggled again, wishing her coat were bigger. “Let’s go to your house, okay?”

“All right,” Gold replied and they began to walk, arm in arm, back to his castle.

****
For hours, they simply talked.

Belle quickly took control, made hot chocolate, and insisted Gold change out of his wet clothes, although he seemed more inclined to wrap her into his arms and never stop kissing her.

When he was finally in dry clothes, they sat on the couch in his living room, discussing all that had happened. Predictably, Belle refused to accept $25,000 as a Christmas gift, but instead worked out a very fair repayment plan. She called her father and told him that she had struck a deal with Mr. Gold and would be up all night going over the particulars, but that he had nothing more to fear. Gold went into the other room and had a brief conversation with the bank examiner and came out announcing that everything was now under control.

“Good,” Belle sighed with relief. “Now that—now there’s a few more pieces of business to take care of.”

“And what’s that?” He asked, shutting off his phone, looking at her curiously.

She bit her lip. “This afternoon, when I saw you…and I told you that I’d love to curl up by a fireside and watch ridiculously sentimental Christmas specials with someone…”

Gold continued to stare at her, the corners of his mouth slightly lifting.

“Well,” She flushed. “You knew I was thinking of you, right?”

He gazed at her, the smile on his face growing even broader. Finally, he went to her, sitting next to her on the couch, hesitantly placing an arm around her shoulders.

“No,” Gold breathed. “No, I didn’t. I didn’t dare.”

“Well,” Belle purred, nestling her head against him. “Dare.” She picked up the clicker and flicked the television on, finding a channel that played “White Christmas”. Sighing in contentment, she tucked her feet under her, draping over him like a blanket.

“I love this movie,” She murmured against his chest.

“I love you,” He said quietly and she tilted her head up, smiling at the stark honesty and sincerity in his gaze, as if he couldn’t believe that they were spending Christmas Eve together. His fingers tightened around her slightly, so she kissed him sweetly, and Belle wondered if she would ever be able to let him go.

“You’ll spend Christmas with me, won’t you?” Belle asked him hopefully. “And come to Christmas dinner?”

“If you want me,” He said rather shyly and she kissed him again, memorizing the flavor of his lips. He tasted of smoke and peppermint. He responded to her enthusiastically, his fingers tangling in her hair, and his elbow knocked off a few knick knacks on the coffee table.

Belle started slightly when she heard a small bell clang to the floor.

“What is it?” Gold asked her worriedly, stroking her cheek.


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