Of Courtrooms and Cream Cakes

by WorryinglyInnocent

Summary

Remix of Carrot Cake. Belle is a young solicitor beginning a junior partnership at Guildhall Law, where she meets the rather grumpy legal secretary, Mr Gold.

[Fic has been abandoned]
Chapter 1

In which Belle begins her new job.

Belle probably shouldn’t have been quite so excited about starting a new job, but as she stood outside Guildhall Law, she was having trouble stopping herself bouncing up and down. She was becoming a junior partner in a well-reputed firm, and she couldn’t wait to get started.

The cathedral clock struck nine and Belle opened the door.

"Ah, Miss French! Excellent to see you." Mr Fox, the senior partner who had interviewed her for the position, was waiting in the reception area. "Good to see you got here in one piece. This is Kathryn, our receptionist."

"Pleased to meet you." Kathryn shook Belle’s hand over the top of the reception desk.

"And I’ll show you to your office. You’ll be sharing with our other junior but it's quite roomy. Follow me." Belle dutifully followed Mr Fox up the stairs, taking a detour to say hello to Alice and Ashley, the secretaries housed on the middle floor of the old building before arriving in her own office at the top. A young man was already sitting at one of the desks and he stood to greet them.

"Miss French, this is Jefferson Milliner. Jefferson, this is Belle French. She’s come to keep you company now that Marina’s moved down a floor."

"Welcome." Jefferson shook her hand enthusiastically. "I’ve been getting lonely up here all on my own. Good exercise though, having to go up and down stairs every time I want to talk to someone."

They stayed talking for a few moments before they were interrupted by a knock from the door.

"Mr Fox."

Belle turned on hearing the voice behind her to find a man standing in the open doorway to the little office. Small and slim, with slightly greying hair and an impeccably cut suit, leaning heavily on a cane.

"Yes?" Fox asked, clearly not expecting this man’s appearance in the office. The newcomer gestured over his shoulder in the direction of the stairs and reception.

"Your nine fifteen’s here."

"Ah, yes, right, erm, didn’t I tell you to rearrange that?"

The man in the doorway made no reply to this assertion and merely raised an eyebrow, the expression clearly stating ‘if you had told me to rearrange it, I would have done so’.

"Ok, maybe not. Erm, right. Well, Miss French, I shall leave you in Mr Milliner’s capable hands. Oh, yes. Miss French, Mr Gold; Mr Gold, Miss French."

Mr Fox left the room and rushed down the stairs towards his waiting client, leaving Mr Gold standing in the doorway. Jefferson gave a snort of laughter and Mr Gold rolled his eyes.
"He'd lose his head if it wasn’t attached," the older man muttered, before coming over to Belle. "Welcome to the madhouse," he said gruffly, extending a hand. "Make yourself at home."

"Thank you…" Belle began, unsure whether the statement was meant to reassure her or make her slightly fearful. "I think."

"Gold's the senior secretary," Jefferson said. "He works for Fox and Regina downstairs and keeps Alice and Ashley in order."

"It’s Fox and Her Majesty who need keeping in order," Gold said darkly. "Miss Boyd and Miss Kingsleigh are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Well, it was a pleasure to meet you Miss French. If you need anything let me know. Or let Alice know and she’ll let me know. Everything comes back to me eventually."

He made to follow Fox down the stairs and Belle blinked at the abrupt introduction.

"Well, he seems… friendly."

Jefferson laughed.

"You'll get used to him," he said. "He's a grumpy bugger but so would you be if you had to listen to Regina ranting all the time. He’s all right once you get to know him, and I’m pretty certain he’s a complete softie once you get under the Armani suit. Metaphorically, of course," he added hastily. "I don’t think he’d take too kindly to being unceremoniously undressed in the middle of the office."

Had the words referred to anyone other than the blunt senior secretary, Belle would have had to giggle, but something about him lingered in the room, foreboding and forbidding, and she suppressed the urge.

Her first morning passed in something of a blur, setting up her desk and files and receiving a brief history lesson of the firm from Jefferson. She was just wondering when it would be an appropriate time to go for lunch when the phone on Jefferson’s desk gave a shrill ring.

He picked it up.

"Hi Ashley."

"Lunchtime" said the voice on the other end of the phone.

"You rang me just for that?"

"Jeff, I’m eight months pregnant. You think I’m walking up any more flights of stairs than I have to?"

Jefferson conceded the point.

There was a crackling sound as the phone was handed over.

"Bring Belle," Alice’s disembodied voice said. "And remind Gold that eating is pretty essential to the continuation of life."

“You remind him, if you’re that worried,” Jefferson said.

“The last time I tried I got a paperweight thrown at my head,” Alice said sourly. Jefferson raised his eyes heavenwards.
“He wasn’t aiming at you, Alice, you just happened to open the door at the wrong time.”

Alice replied with an emphatic sniff and Jefferson rolled his eyes before giving a weary ‘fine’ and cutting off the call.

Belle raised an eyebrow as he grabbed his jacket. “Does Gold often forget to eat?”

"It’s not a question of forgetting, it’s a question of never getting chance because Regina and Fox constantly want him for something or another. Come on,” he said. "We’re only going over the road. It’s a brilliant place and the carrot cake is to die for."

Belle locked her filing cabinets and followed Jefferson down the stairs, finding him with his head poked round one of the doors on the ground floor. Belle peered over his shoulder. Gold was on the other side of the door, phone cradled under his ear and typing voraciously.

"Lunch, Gold?" Jefferson asked.

Gold shook his head and hit the mute button on the phone, letting whoever it was on the other end of the line continue squawking in his ear.

"Contender for most annoying client of the year on line one," he said. "Fox has managed to conveniently vanish. I’ll be here a while."

Jefferson nodded his understanding and closed the office door, and Belle followed him out of the building. Ashley and Alice were waiting outside and the foursome entered the cafe across the way.

"Jeff!" The waitress behind the counter exclaimed when he entered. "We haven’t seen you for ages! Your usual?"

"Yes please, Emma." He turned to Belle, his face slightly apologetic. "We, erm, we come here quite a lot."

"They’re our best customers," Emma said. "You must be Belle. Welcome to the precinct. You’ll be fine as long as you remember that Fox is the most scatterbrained man on the planet, you ignore Regina, and you keep Gold well-stocked with tea and carrot cake."

With lunch ordered and on its way, they sat down at a table in one corner.

"Speaking of Gold, how is he today?" Alice asked. "I notice there are no dents in your head. Do you think I ought to take a bribe when I go and ask him for a week off to go to my sister’s wedding?"

Jefferson gave a slow nod over the top of his coffee cup.

"Definitely. Make it a big one."

Alice sighed, then cocked her head on one side, fluttering her eyelashes at Jefferson.

"No," he said before she’d opened her mouth. "I’m not asking Gold for leave for you."

"But Jeff…"

"No buts. I am quite fond of being alive and I’d like to stay that way for as long as possible."

Belle said nothing, watching the interplay between Alice and Jefferson. If she wasn’t entirely
mistaken, she’d say that there was something more than a simple friendship between colleagues there.

"He used to be a CPS barrister, you know." Jefferson said, after the conversation had turned to the varied inventive methods that Gold would employ to make Alice’s life a misery. "He knows all the loopholes and then some."

"Why would you give up being a barrister to become a legal secretary?" Ashley asked incredulously. "Moreover, why would you give up being a barrister to work for Regina?"

"He didn’t really have a choice when it came to Regina," Jefferson pointed out. "He’s been with the firm since Fox and Fothergill first set it up ten years ago when it was just the two of them. Regina only came along later."

"Still," Ashley said, going back to her sandwich with a shrug. "It’s a bit of a dramatic career change."

Belle looked up as the cafe door opened and Mr Gold came in and limped up to the counter to order. She watched him for a moment, the way he moved and leaned, the way he hooked his cane over the cake display case to have both hands free. Presently his eyes met Belle’s and he gave her a brief nod of acknowledgement as he accepted his takeaway cup and turned to leave again.

The man was a mystery, and she was most definitely intrigued by him.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Belle and Jefferson discuss Gold's first name.

It was official. Belle had spent so long looking at numbers that her brain had turned to mush. She had never really had much of a head for numbers. She got on far better with the written word.

She put down her sheet of figures, leaned back in her chair and looked over at Jefferson, who was staring at his computer screen intently but did not appear to be doing anything else.

"Jeff, can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly. I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to answer, but ask away."

"What’s Gold’s first name?"

Jefferson looked up at her and blinked before replying, without the slightest hint of irony, “Mister.”

Belle rolled her eyes.

"I’m being serious," she said. "I never call Fox by his first name but I know it’s Colin, and I never met Mr Fothergill, but I know he had the rather impressive appellation of Horatio."

Jefferson shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “He was introduced on my first day as Mr Gold, and we all just call him by his surname.”

"You cannot tell me that you have worked here for three years and you don’t know one of your colleagues’ names." Belle folded her arms and fixed Jefferson with a look that she hoped was challenging rather than just tired.

"Are we talking about Gold, by any chance?" Alice tapped on the open door and poked her head round the frame before inserting herself fully, a large sheaf of papers balanced precariously in her arms. "Jeff, they faxed over all the documents for that criminal damage case." She dumped the pile of documents on his desk with a resounding thump. "I think you’ve bitten off more than you can chew with that one."

"Never," said Jefferson. "A challenge is all in a day’s work!" Alice raised an eyebrow, and Jefferson ignored her. "Do you know Gold’s first name?"

"Jefferson, I’ve worked here for less time than you have. What makes you think I’ve got any more of an idea than you?"

"Well, you have more contact with him. He’s your boss. Ish."

Alice laughed. “It begins with R, and I only know that from attempting to decipher his signature on the stationery order forms.”

"Hmmm," Jefferson said, at the same time as Alice groaned ‘oh no, what have I unleashed?’ but it
was too late, Jefferson was already staring into the middle distance with a rather absent expression on his face, an expression that Belle had quickly learned meant that his imagination was on some wild flight of fancy or another.

"Well," Jefferson began. ("Here we go," Alice muttered.) "It’s obviously a very embarrassing name, or else he wouldn’t have such a problem with people knowing what it is. Romeo? Roderick? Raffaello?"

"Jeff," Alice interjected, her voice carrying an ominous tone. Belle followed her gaze over to the doorway, where Gold was standing, wearing a wryly amused smile. Jefferson continued, blissfully oblivious.

"Rudolf?" he suggested. "Randall? Randy Gold… No, that sounds too much like a porn star…"

"Jeff!" Alice exclaimed.

Jefferson tailed off and looked up, and his face turned a fetching shade of beetroot.

"I can assure you, Jefferson, that I do not share my name with any x-rated film stars," Gold said. Jefferson’s response could only be described as a squeak, which Gold declined to comment on.

“Alice, can I borrow you please?”

Alice nodded, trying to hide a smile, and left the room. As soon as both she and Gold were out of sight, Jefferson gave a mournful groan and began to rhythmically bang his head against his desk.

"Me and my mouth," Belle heard him mutter.

She honestly tried not to laugh at her office-mate’s misfortune, but it was really rather difficult…
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Belle stays late, and Mr Gold provides caffeinated beverages and an unintentional insight into his personal life.

Belle was rather alarmed when a takeaway coffee cup floated into view in front of her screen, mainly because she had not heard any indication of someone entering the office behind her to bring her said takeaway coffee cup.

“Drink,” said a familiar Scottish accent. “I don’t want to have to scrape you off your desk when I arrive tomorrow morning.”

“I’m not sleepy,” Belle protested, but she took a grateful sip of the coffee nonetheless.

“You sound like a six-year-old,” Gold remarked. “But Daddy why do I have to go to bed, I’m not tired!” He came round her chair and leaned on her desk. “What’s kept you here so late anyway?”

Belle indicated her computer screen and the printouts that were spread all over her keyboard. “The Anderson case. The first hearing’s tomorrow and I just want to make sure I’ve got everything right.”

Gold nodded and they fell into silence as Belle drank her coffee. It was perfect – just frothy and creamy enough with an extra shot of espresso to wake her up and the hint of syrupy sweetness coming through. She closed her eyes and gave an appreciative hum, which cut off midway when Gold gave a soft laugh.

She opened one eye.

“How do you know my favourite coffee anyway?” she asked.

“I’m a secretary,” Gold said with a shrug. “It’s my prerogative to know my employers’ coffee preferences. Coffee is seventy-five per cent of the job, you know.”

Belle gave him a look; she knew that Gold did far more than make coffee runs.

“Besides,” she added, despite not having spoken her thoughts aloud. “You’re Fox and Regina’s secretary. Alice is mine.”

Gold laughed. “As Alice’s immediate superior, I know everything she knows.”

“That sounds really quite creepy, you know.”

“I apologise. I didn’t mean it to.”

Belle leaned back in her chair and looked at Gold through a critical eye. There was a lot more to him than first glance might show. For all he was grumpy and sarcastic, he had a seemingly infinite patience; in the few months that she had been at the firm, Belle had never heard him raise his voice with either the clients or the solicitors themselves, and yet he still had such respect from everyone in the building – even Regina, however grudgingly she gave it. And here he was,
bringing her coffee whilst she worked late.

Presently he moved off her desk and made his way towards the door.

“I have to leave now, I need to pick Bae up. I just wanted to remind you to lock up and set the alarm before you leave.”

Belle’s brow furrowed, slightly taken aback.

“Bae?”

“My son,” Gold said.

“You have a son?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Belle wondered if he would be offended at how surprised she sounded.

“Yes.” The corner of Gold’s mouth twitched upwards in a little smirk. “Did you not know?”

“Gold, I don’t even know your first name.”

“Ah, well, that’s a secret I guard with my life.” He paused. “Yes, I have a son. My Bae. He’s fourteen and waiting to be picked up from football practice.”

Belle didn’t know why her immediate reaction was to drop her gaze to Gold’s left hand and search for a wedding ring.

There wasn’t one.

“Good night, Belle.”

“Good night,” she managed to reply, still reeling from the revelation, and she stared after him long after he had left the room.

Belle didn’t know why she was so surprised really. After all, she had not been working at Guildhall that long, and Gold was a naturally reticent person. She would readily concede that there was an awful lot about him that she didn’t know.

But a son?

She simply hadn’t pegged him as a parent. Always so sharply dressed, always so… cool. So distant. In her experience, parents were warm, vivacious people, like Jefferson. She had not been at all surprised to learn that Jefferson had a ten-year-old daughter.

Idly, Belle wondered what else about Mr Gold she didn’t know.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which Belle comes to the conclusion that Mr Gold is actually rather attractive.

It was such a small thing, really, but it was enough to make Belle blush and hide behind her paperwork, attempting to look extremely busy and important but only succeeding in dropping her pencil into her cup of coffee with a disproportionately loud plop. She didn’t dare look up from behind the papers for a good five minutes, and even then, she just peered over the top of them to check that Gold had left the counter.

Luckily, Gold had left the counter.

Less luckily, Ruby was sitting at the table across from her, a disarmingly innocent smile on her face.

Belle put the papers down and focused her attention on them, fishing her pencil out of her cup and drying it on a napkin as if stirring one’s hazelnut latte with stationery implements was an everyday occurrence. She glanced up again but sadly Ruby was still there.

“Don’t give me that look,” Belle muttered.

“I was not aware that I was giving you any look,” Ruby said, but when Belle glanced back up at her friend, the other woman was wearing a grin of positively Cheshire Cat proportions.

Ruby had become a firm friend within just a few weeks of Belle beginning her tenure at Guildhall and starting to frequent Granny’s on a regular basis. She was on good terms with all the lawyers and secretaries who worked over the way from the café, even Gold to some extent, and she had accepted Belle as a newcomer easily.

Belle sighed and put down her pencil.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Ruby replied levelly. “I’m just sitting here waiting for you to plead guilty.”

“I have nothing to plead guilty to, Ruby. What am I charged with, at any rate?”

“Admit it, Belle. You have a little bit of a crush.”

“Ruby, I do not have a little bit of a crush on Gold.”

Ruby folded her arms, and although Belle had not thought it possible, her grin widened. “I never said you had a little bit of a crush on Gold.”

“Ruby, you just said…”

“I said you had a little bit of a crush. I never mentioned Gold.”

Belle groaned and rested her forehead against the table.
It was absolutely not her fault. It was Gold’s fault. Belle had been sitting at her favourite corner table with her papers and pencil and coffee, when Gold had come in and ordered his usual tea to take away.

It was not Belle’s fault that she had looked up from her papers at exactly the same moment as Gold had loosened his tie and undone his collar button, blowing a stray strand of hair out of his face with a frustrated huff. It was not Belle’s fault that this had made her stomach do a rather funny little somersault which had in turn caused her pencil to somersault into her coffee.

She had not really thought of Gold in any way other than a colleague, one with a superior status within the firm by dint of experience alone, and one who, whilst patient and professional, somehow exuded an aura of unrufflable and untouchable. Always dressed in his three-piece suit, double-cuff shirt and tie, he never seemed to be affected by the summer weather, and Belle had almost half-convinced herself that he was in fact a robot who did not feel temperature.

Until today. When he had proved himself just as incapable of living with heat as the rest of them.

And he had proved himself rather attractive in doing so.

“All right, all right,” she grumbled, addressing the table rather than her friend. “I admit it.”

“I knew it,” Ruby said, her voice matter-of-fact.

Belle did not deign to reply.
In which Belle meets Bae.

It was not often that Belle walked into the office, having spent all morning in court, to find a teenage boy leaning on the reception desk chatting animatedly to Kathryn. Had she not spent all morning in court, Belle would probably not have been quite so perplexed by his presence and would probably have put two and two together rather sooner, but as things were, she simply stood in reception looking rather stumped.

She was fairly certain that he was not a client. He looked slightly too young to be requiring the services of a solicitor, but then again, if there was one thing that Belle had learned in her line of work it was that nothing could be taken for granted.

“Everything ok, Belle?” Kathryn asked, looking up from her computer screen and furrowing her brow on seeing Belle so confused.

Belle blinked. “Erm, yes, everything’s fine.” She could not exactly ask ‘who’s this?’ so she left it lie and pretended that the newcomer wasn’t there. “Is there any post for me?”

Kathryn shook her head. “Well, there was an advert for stair-lifts, but I didn’t really think you’d be interested in that. How was court?”

“Fine thanks…” Belle tailed off on seeing that the boy was now wearing a very wide grin.

“So you’re the mysterious Belle,” he said.

Belle blinked again. “Can I help you?”

“Not really,” the boy said cheerfully. “I’ve heard all about you though. I’m Bae, by the way,” he added before nodding over his shoulder towards Gold’s office door. “That one’s son.”

Belle smiled, and suddenly all the puzzle pieces fell into place. It was school half-term, and it wasn’t unreasonable for Bae to come to his father’s workplace at lunchtime, nor was it unreasonable for him to know Kathryn and be able to chat to her quite happily whilst waiting for said father to appear. What struck Belle most was Bae’s words. I’ve heard all about you. There was really only one person that Bae could have heard all about her from, unless he and Kathryn were regular gossip partners. Belle glanced over his shoulder at Gold’s door, then back at Bae’s open, expectant face, and she realised that she hadn’t actually made any kind of reply to him.

“Pleased to meet you, Bae, I’ve heard a lot about you as well.”

This was true in a way. Whilst Gold was a reticent person at best, on the Monday evenings when they both worked late and took it in turns to provide caffeinated beverages, he would sometimes impart snippets of information to her, and Belle would always ask after Bae.

She had not realised that he and Bae had been talking about her, and she felt something jump excitedly in the pit of her stomach. Gold had told Bae about her. The sensible part of her brain
reasoned that of course Gold had told Bae about her. She was a colleague after all, and it made sense that she would crop up in conversation now and then as part of Gold’s working life. But there was something in Bae’s infectious grin (Kathryn was now wearing a similar Cheshire Cat expression and Belle would have been worried had she not been so lost in thought) that made her think that perhaps there was something more to it than that.

“Sorry about that, Bae, phone call I couldn’t get rid of.”

Gold’s voice came into reception, his body following shortly afterward, and he stopped on seeing Belle there. He had obviously not been expecting her presence, and he shifted awkwardly.

“Morning, Miss French,” he said eventually, and if Belle didn’t know better, she’d say she could make out the faint tint of a blush working its way over his cheekbones.

She smiled.

“Good morning, Mr Gold. I hear you’ve been talking about me.”

Gold’s eyes flickered from Belle to Bae and back again. Bae’s grin seemed to widen, if that was at all possible.

“I, erm, I…”

He was at a complete loss for words, and Belle decided that it might be kinder to rescue the situation.

“Well, I’d best be getting on. Nice to meet you, Bae, and have a good afternoon, Mr Gold.”

She moved past father and son to make to go upstairs, pausing about halfway so that she could still hear the conversation that began after she left.

“Bae!” Gold hissed. “What have you been saying?”

“Nothing at all,” Bae said. “I just said that I’d heard a lot about her. Which I have.”

“Bae! You can’t tell her that!”

“Well *someone* has to,” Bae countered. “It’s not like you’re ever going to say anything. Kathryn and I are on the verge of taking things into our own hands…”

“Oh for goodness sake, stop making trouble…”

The pair left the building at that point and Belle could hear no more, but she stayed sitting on the steps for a few minutes afterwards, digesting what she had just overheard. She smiled at the prospect it presented.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Belle and Gold have their first kiss. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

I posted this on tumblr at Christmas and forgot to post it here. *blush* Sorry....

"Are we ready?" Kathryn asked Bae. It was the Christmas holidays and Bae was helping Kathryn to decorate the office in a suitably festive manner. It did not matter that Kathryn and Dad had already decorated the office in the first week of December. Bae was of the considered opinion that the office needed more decoration. Namely, more mistletoe. Which was why Bae could be found, at lunch time on a cold and frosty Friday, perched precariously on a stepladder in reception, hanging a sprig of mistletoe from the light fittings.

"Yep, all set."

"Fantastic. Belle should have left court by now so she’ll be here in about five minutes." Kathryn clapped her hands in excitement. "Honestly, I can’t wait. Do you think this might finally be the push they need after pussyfooting for six months?"

"If it isn’t, I am stealing my father’s phone and asking her out myself on his behalf," Bae muttered, finishing up with the final string.

"I… Bae! What are you doing up there? Get down, you’ll break your neck!"

Dad had come out of his office and Bae obliged his request, clambering down the step ladder and folding it up.

"I’m not sure I should leave you two alone," Dad muttered on seeing the grin that was exchanged between Bae and Kathryn. "I get the distinct feeling that you’re up to something. Why are you hanging mistletoe anyway?"

Kathryn raised one eyebrow and Bae sighed. Honestly, he might have one of the sharpest minds when it came to legal affairs, but Dad was incredibly dense when it came to matters of the heart.

"Dad, if you haven’t worked it out for yourself by now then I’m not sure that you deserve to know."

"Bloody freezing out there!" Belle came into the office, blown on a gust of wind. "Morning all. Hi Bae." She came up to the desk and took the post that Kathryn handed her, sorting through it, completely oblivious to the mistletoe hanging above her.

Bae coughed pointedly. When that didn’t work, he stood surreptitiously on his father’s good foot. This also didn’t work. Kathryn rolled her eyes.
"Belle…" she began. Belle glanced up and Kathryn pointed above her head.

She looked up. So did Dad.

Then they looked at each other.

Bae didn’t think he’d ever seen Dad blush before. Certainly not quite as pink as he was blushing now.

"Well, go on then," Kathryn said. "It’s bad luck not to."

Belle raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

"Well, I don’t know, but it might be, and do you really want to take that risk?"

Dad moved first, running a hand through his hair in agitation and then quickly darting in to peck a kiss to Belle’s cheek, barely making contact before practically running out of the office. Belle, looking a little startled by the suddenness, gave a somewhat sad shrug and made her way up to her own room on the top floor.

Kathryn rolled her eyes.

"That man is impossible!” she exclaimed, burying her head in her hands. Bae could not help but agree. It was definitely time to take matters into his own hands, and he left the office, running down the street after his father.

"You call that a kiss?" he said, catching up to Dad. "That was the most pathetic attempt at a kiss I’ve ever seen! We’re trying to make it easier for you. We make it the easiest it can possibly be, and you still managed to fluff it. How?"

Dad didn’t look at him and just muttered. “I will not be accused of inappropriately accosting lovely young ladies on the pretence of Christmas and mistletoe.”

"it’s hardly inappropriate if she wants it too," Bae said.

"Since I have no way of knowing that, I will leave it alone. You would do well to follow my lead."

"Come on, Dad! It’s Christmas!"

"Even more reason for respectable gentlemen to keep their hands and mouths to themselves."

"If you don’t make a move soon, Kathryn’s going to lock you two in the cleaning cupboard," Bae said.

"She wouldn’t dare."

It was not often that Bae was forcibly reminded that Dad used to be a barrister and had at one time made a very lucrative living from intimidating people in courtrooms, but the glare he received was one such reminder.

It was, however, Christmas and a season of jollity and good will, so he refused to let it cow him.

"Invite her for a drink," he said. "Mulled cider at the Angel round the corner."

"No."
"Why not?"

"Because!"

"You don’t even have an excuse. You’re just a scaredy-cat. Invite. Her. For. A. Drink." Bae repeated.

Dad looked pained. “What if she says no?”

"Then she says no and you can go back to being a grumpy git." He grabbed Dad’s arm and made to drag him in the direction of the office again. "I am taking you back to the office and I am not leaving your side until you ask her out."

"Baden Gold," Dad growled, but he still let himself be dragged. As they got back into reception, Kathryn raised her eyebrows at the rather unusual spectacle."

"Desperate times, desperate souls, desperate measures," Bae said, pulling Dad in the direction of the stairs and up to Belle’s room.

Luckily she was alone. There was no way that Dad would go through with it if Jefferson was there as well.

Belle looked up from her desk, a little alarmed, but she covered it quickly.

"Bae? Mr Gold? How can I help?"

"Dad’s got something to ask you," Bae said. Belle turned her head on one side, her big blue eyes politely questioning.

"I, erm, I…” Dad had gone lobster red again. It was quite a good look on him, but this was getting nowhere fast. Bae sighed. Time to make good on all those threats, consequences be damned.

"Would you like to go for mulled cider with him after work?” Bae asked.

"BADEN!” Dad exploded at the same time as Belle said "I’d love to."

There was a moment of silence in the room.

"Y-You would?” Dad’s voice was barely more than a surprised squeak.

"Very much so."

Bae chose that moment to slip away. Hopefully, by the time Dad got home that night, he would have forgotten that he was mad at Bae and be too loved up to care.

Even if he wasn’t, Bae thought, it was definitely worth it.
Belle felt an unaccountable nervousness as she made her way towards the Angel for her date. Could it really be classed as a date? The optimistic part of her that had been waiting to see if Gold would make the first move for a very long time now said yes, it was a date. The cynical part said that it was not a date, it was simply a drink with a colleague. Her optimistic side summarily beat the cynical part of her into submission. If it was really just a drink, if Gold really had no feelings towards her other than a colleague, he would not have had such a beautiful blush when Bae had asked her out on his behalf, and he would have been able to ask her himself in the first place, rather than exasperating his son so much that the teen took matters into his own hands. Sadly, confirming that this was really a date did nothing to stop the little butterflies in her stomach. Perhaps mulled cider was not a good idea in this instance. She did not want to end up completely sloshed in front of Gold, especially not on her first real interaction with him outside of the office. Had it really taken them six months and the intervention of a fifteen year old to make this first step? Belle shook her head in despair, they were each as hopeless as the other.

Gold was waiting for her at the bar, and after the necessary greetings and pleasantries he slid a glass of mulled cider across to her as she settled herself on the stool next to him. His cane was hooked over the bar rail and the sight made Belle smile.

There was silence for a while as they drank and Belle let the heat from the golden liquid warm her chilly fingers through the glass. It was not an awkward silence but still one that Belle wanted to fill, although she had no idea what with. It was not as if they had never talked to one another about things other than work before, but their conversations always seemed to start with work and wend their way onto other subjects, and today starting with work didn’t seem to be appropriate.

"Someone needs to come up with a crib sheet of conversation topics for a first date," Gold said, voicing Belle’s exact thoughts. She laughed.

"Maybe we can create our own."

Gold looked at her like she was mad for a moment, then he leaned back on the bar, watching her with an amused smile. “All right. Three questions each. The most ridiculous, random thing you can think of.”

Belle’s mind was completely blank.

"Erm… favourite colour?" she asked eventually.

"Purple."

Well, he was wearing a purple shirt and tie, so it was not really a surprise, but Belle still found herself asking ‘why?’

"It’s a powerful colour," Gold said. "It’s always held connotations of wealth and status. It was the colour of kings and emperors. If there was ever a colour to make you feel like you can conquer the
world, it’s purple."

"I never really thought about it like that," Belle mused. "Does that count as two questions or just one?"

"I think that’s all part of the same question. ‘What’s your favourite colour and why?’ My turn: Is a Jaffa cake a biscuit or a cake?"

"Pardon?"

"Is a Jaffa cake a biscuit or a cake? I suppose you weren’t really here long enough before Ashley went on maternity leave to be witness to the constant bickering between her and Alice on the subject. It was the thing I was most often called upon to sort out."

"Erm… I don’t like Jaffa cakes, so I really don’t have an opinion one way or the other. Who won, in the end?"

"Well, I would always agree with Alice that a Jaffa cake is in fact a cake, but Ashley was incredibly determined to prove us wrong."

Belle couldn’t help herself and had to laugh at the image of the three ruthlessly efficient secretaries having a very serious argument about baked goods. Unfortunately, this resulted in a mouthful of cider going down the wrong way and a choking fit. She felt a heavy hand smack down beneath her shoulder blades and she spat cider all over the bar.

"Are you all right?"

Belle nodded, her face aflame, unable to meet Gold’s eyes. That really wasn’t the best way to make a good impression on a first date. Finally she risked a glance at him when she realised that she could still feel the warm weight of his hand on her back. His face was the picture of concern.

"I’m ok," she mumbled.

He seemed to come to himself then and he moved his hand abruptly, flexing his fingers and looking as embarrassed at his being caught. There was silence for a while, the interruption to the conversation having thrown both of them for six slightly.

"How many Harry Potter books have you read?" Belle asked, suddenly feeling the need to rescue the situation, and immediately regretting such an inane question, but it was the first thing that had popped into her head and Gold had said random and ridiculous earlier.

"All of them. I’m a dad," he pointed out. "I’m pretty sure every child goes through a Harry Potter phase at some point in their lives."

"Hey, there’s no need to justify it. I’ve read them all and I don’t have the child excuse." Belle took a careful sip of now-cold cider. "I’ve thought up my last question. "Why don’t you tell anyone your first name?"

Gold gave a little smirk. “I do tell people my first name.”

"No you don’t. You’ve never told me. We’ve known each other six months, we’re on a date, and you have never once told me your first name."

"You’ve never actually asked," Gold said.

Belle blinked. “Really?”
"We’ve talked about the fact you don’t know my first name on a few occasions, but you’ve never actually asked ‘Mr Gold, what’s your first name?’.

Belle couldn’t quite believe it.

"I don’t volunteer it because I don’t like being called by it. Just Gold is fine. But I’m happy to tell if asked."

"Mr Gold, what’s your first name?"

"It’s Raymond," Gold said. "I was named after my grandfather; my family’s always called me Rum."

"I like that name."

Gold raised an eyebrow. "What, Raymond?"

"No, Rum."

There was a long pause.

"You can call me Rum if you like," Gold said.

Belle smiled. "I would like that, Rum."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which Bae muses on Belle and her effect on his father.

Bae, sitting in the living room with the TV on, contemplated whether to do his homework, put the oven on for dinner or watch more TV. He wondered whether Dad would be back for dinner or whether his date had turned into an all-evening event. He was hoping that it was the latter, not just because he could then get away with just sticking a pizza in the oven and not worrying about having to provide salad or vegetables to go with the meal, but also because, well, Dad needed it. He deserved a proper date. Dad hadn’t been on a proper date since he and Mum had broken up. Well, there was always the chance that he had been on dates in that brief period when Bae had been living with his mother just after the break-up, but somehow he doubted it. That had really not been a very good time for Dad and dating would not have been at the top of his agenda.

And Belle sounded like she was absolutely perfect for him. Bright and intelligent and not afraid to stand up for herself, and so very pretty. As soon as Bae had met her, he had given his seal of approval. He just knew that Belle would make his Dad really, truly happy, and Bae was not above giving them a helping hand on their route to happiness – today’s efforts with the mistletoe being a case in point. So yes, he was very much hoping that Dad’s after-work drinks turned into after-work drinks and dinner.

Sadly, it was at that moment that he heard the key turn in the lock.

“Evening, Dad,” he called through to the hallway. “How was the date?”

He did not receive a response, and a moment later, his father walked into the room in what looked to be a daze. Indeed, he was in so much of a daze that not only did he not tell Bae to get his feet off the coffee table, he put his own feet on it when he sat down on the sofa beside him.

“Ok… So it either went incredibly well or absolutely awfully. Will you be going back into the office on Monday or will you be hiding out here because you managed to do something ridiculous and are now embarrassed?”

Dad nodded, and Bae sighed.

“Dad, you cannot answer ‘yes’ to an either-or question.”

“It was great,” Dad said eventually.

Bae looked at him, head on one side.

“You’re in love,” he proclaimed confidently. “You are head over heels in love.”

Dad turned to Bae.

“I am,” he confessed. “Belle is… She’s just… She’s perfect,” he finished.

“So… what happened? What did you talk about? I want all the details. Did you kiss her properly
this time?”

“No, I did not. A gentleman does not kiss a lady on the first date.”

“What about the second date?”

“We have not had a second date.”

“Yet,” Bae added. “Did you make a date for a second date?”

Dad shook his head and Bae slapped a palm against his forehead in despair.

“Dad! You are hopeless! At least you see her five days a week so you can ask at any time. Still, tell me everything that happened. I want to know it all.”

Dad raised an eyebrow. “I sometimes worry about how invested in my love life you are, Bae. Have you and Kathryn started a betting pool?”

“No,” Bae lied glibly. Well, it wasn’t a complete lie. He and Kathryn had indeed started a betting pool between the two of them, but that was not the reason that he wanted to know everything. He genuinely liked seeing Dad so happy. It was not as if there had been anything particularly missing in their lives before Belle had come into them, but she seemed to have added something extra that they didn’t know they needed. She was a bit like a microwave oven – you got on fine without one but as soon as you got one, you wondered how you survived without one. They had got on perfectly well without Belle, but now that she was there, Bae didn’t know how Dad had survived without the little Australian ray of sunshine who resided on the top floor.

He wanted to encourage Dad on this tentative relationship as much as he could.

It was only after Dad had given him an account of the date that Bae realised that he hadn’t put the oven on and dinner was going to be dramatically delayed.

“Screw it,” Dad said. “We’ll order in Chinese.”

Bae smiled. Dad was definitely in love.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Belle gives Rum a birthday gift.

Rum was having a comparatively good birthday, all things considered. For a start, no-one had remembered that it was his birthday, and he was more than happy about this. He did not take kindly to being made a fuss of and reminded that he was getting ever older. Secondly, Regina was out of the office today so his workplace was blissfully quiet, and he might actually be able to get some work done for a change instead of constantly being called upon to run errands for her. Thirdly, he was thinking about Belle, and that always made him happy.

He really ought to ask her out again. Bae was beginning to despair, and Rum absolutely did not want his son to take matters into his own hands again. Whilst everything had worked out for the best the first time that it had happened, he was fairly sure that Belle might become suspicious if every time she was asked out by him, it was through his teenage son.

All he had to do was walk up two flights of stairs into her office and ask her if she would like to go out to dinner with him that evening. He even had a good excuse; he was celebrating his birthday. Actually, no, asking her out tonight was not a good idea. Far too short notice, she probably had other plans and he had no desire to put her in a position of conflict. And mentioning the fact it was his birthday was also a bad idea, in case she felt obliged to come with him because of the occasion, when in reality she held no desire to do so.

It might also spark a conversation on his age, and that was not one that Rum wanted to be having with a woman whom he knew to be young enough to be his daughter.

He came to the conclusion that it would be infinitely safer to leave well alone and wait to ask her out again. He could do it tomorrow. Or perhaps the day after. Or perhaps next week.

It was not that he didn’t like her and it was certainly not that he did not want to go on another date with her, but he wished that they could go straight to the date without any of the awkwardness that came before it. The last woman he’d dated was Bae’s mother, and that was back when he was a cocky law student who thought he could take over the world via the Old Bailey. Now, he knew that it was impossible to take over the world via the Old Bailey and his life’s experiences had most certainly brought his opinion of himself down a peg or two.

*Do the brave thing and bravery will follow.* Belle had said that to him once. It was true. He just wasn’t brave enough to do the brave thing yet.

He’d ask her tomorrow. Tomorrow was a good day to ask.

Resolved in this, Rum picked up his pencil and happily continued his work, wondering if and when he ought to go and treat himself to birthday chocolate cake in Granny’s over the way. Regina wasn’t there to stop him and no-one else would think it odd for him to be taking a longer than usual tea break. God knows he earned it, putting up with Her Majesty screeching in his ear every day.

Presently, there was a knock on his door and Belle’s head appeared around it. Gold dropped his
pencil, always slightly flustered when he saw her without warning, especially if he had been thinking about her just a few moments prior. She seemed to provoke an unusual neurological reaction in him that made his fingers incapable of functioning properly.

“Hello,” she said brightly. “Are you busy?”

Gold shook his head. “Not at all,” he said hastily, remembering that he had a tongue and it was fairly vital to comprehensible speech.

“Excellent.” Belle inserted herself into the room fully and came over to him. “Happy Birthday, Rum.”

Rum blinked.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“I happened to see it on Kathryn’s computer calendar over her shoulder this morning, along with a note saying ‘do not tell anyone’.” Belle grinned. “I’ve got a little gift for you.”

He looked down at her hands, which were leaning flat on his desk and were empty. Perhaps her skirt had pockets. For a moment he entertained the notion of her having hidden something in the folds of her sweater’s cowl neck.

“What kind of a gift?” he asked. “I hope it didn’t cost much.”

“It didn’t cost me a penny,” Belle assured him. “And it’s a kind of gift that I am certain you will like. Close your eyes.”

Gold did as bid.

“Hold out your hands.”

He obeyed, and waited for something to be put into his palms. Nothing came.

Just then, he felt the soft pressure of Belle’s lips against his, and his eyes shot open for a moment before something in his mind decided, without the aid of conscious thought, to accept that this was an incredibly good birthday present and he relaxed into the kiss, bringing his hands up to cup her face and deepen it.

Belle was blushing a little when she broke away, but still smiling.

“Do I have to wait till my next birthday for another one?” he asked.

Belle grinned. “Well, that depends entirely on you.”

With that, she skipped out of the room – how she managed in her stiletto heels was beyond Rum completely – and left him alone and speechless in his office.

She was challenging him to make the next move, and if he didn’t make it, it would never be made. This was no time for cowardice. This was a make or break moment for his future happiness.

Rum got up, grabbed his cane from the umbrella stand and made his way up the stairs towards Belle’s office.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Belle goes to a football match and makes a new friend, and Rum is bamboozled into cooking.

Things were progressing, in Belle’s opinion, rather well. She and Rum had been on four dates now and Kathryn was beside herself with glee any time they were both in reception at the same time for any kind of reason. They’d done after work drinks twice, lunch once, and dinner once, and all four occasions had been incredibly successful. Which was why one nondescript Friday morning, Belle felt no qualms about knocking on Rum’s door and poking her head around it.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow?” she asked.

Rum nodded and Belle felt her heart sink. She wasn’t quite sure why she was so disappointed. Rum had his own life after all, and he wasn’t going to be free all the time, but she’d been so looking forward to spending some with him in a place that wasn’t work, a restaurant or a bar that this minor derailment in her plans suddenly seemed like a major conundrum.

“Bae’s got a football match in the afternoon,” Rum said. “I’m going to cheer him on.” He paused. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind the extra support if you wanted to come along. I mean, you don’t have to, of course. I imagine that watching a bunch of teenage boys running around a muddy field isn’t exactly your idea of a good time…”

“I’d love to,” Belle said firmly. She liked Bae, he was a very pleasant young man, and if it wasn’t for his intervention then it might have taken another six months of tiptoeing and mixed signals before she and Rum had taken the plunge and admitted their mutual romantic attraction.

Rum smiled, his slightly bashful, schoolboy smile that made his eyes crinkle at the corners and took years off his face.

“It’s at the school,” he said. “Would you like a lift?”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

“I’ll pick you up at three?” There was a pause before Rum spoke again. “I don’t actually know where you live.” He sounded rather sheepish and Belle grinned, writing her address down on his notepad and tearing it off.

“There you go. I’ll see you at three. I’m looking forward to it.”

Rum scrutinised her face, as if he couldn’t quite believe her, but then nodded, seeing her genuine enthusiasm.

“I’ll see you then. Dress warmly, it’s forecast to be absolutely dismal weather.”

X

It was nearly three and Belle had no idea what to wear. She was going to be standing outside for a
long time and it was, as Rum had predicted, horrible weather. Luckily it was not raining, but it was still damp and grey, and slightly foggy.

Dress warmly, Rum had said, and Belle intended to do just that, but she also wanted to look nice. This was a sort of date after all. Sadly she had no idea what was appropriate attire for going to your boyfriend’s son’s football match.

Eventually she settled for layers. Layers were good, especially in the cold. And it wasn’t an especially formal occasion, and it was in a school field, so sturdy boots would be a good idea too.

Thick leggings, thick socks, thick corduroy skirt. Layers of knitwear.

That was good.

Very good, since it was three o’clock and she’d just heard a car pull up outside her flat.

Belle grabbed her handbag and the flask of tea she’d made and careened out of the front door, meeting Rum in the middle of the garden path as he was coming up to ring her doorbell.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

There was an awkward moment of silence, neither of them really knowing what to say.

“I made tea,” Belle blurted out eventually, holding up the flask and the little travel mugs. “I thought we might need it.”

Rum smiled. “I think you might be my favourite person in the world right now.” He gestured down the path towards his car. “Your carriage awaits, milady.”

Belle smiled and got into the car.

“Hey Belle!” Bae said from the back. “I’m glad you could come.”

“I’m looking forward to it, Bae. I’ll warn you that I have no idea about the rules but I will enthusiastically cheer whenever your team has the ball.”

“That’s good enough,” Bae said.

The journey to the school did not take long and there were not that many people there. Belle did not voice her concern, but Bae must have sensed it.

“Dad likes to get here early so he can get a seat,” he said, indicating the few low benches around the playing field. “Otherwise his leg’ll seize up and he won’t be able to drive home.”

They made their way over to the field and sat down whilst Bae ran off to speak to his teammates and get ready for the game. Belle poured the tea and they drank in companionable quiet for a while. Rum’s arm came around her shoulders as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and Belle snuggled closer into his side, because in that moment, it was the most natural thing in the world.

More parents were milling around, and Belle noticed a group of mothers in the other corner of the field, whispering amongst themselves and casting sidelong glances at her and Rum.

“Rum,” she began, suddenly uncomfortable.
“Hmm?”

“I…” Belle began, but then stopped. “It’s ok, it’s nothing.”

She cast a glance at the gaggle of women, and one of them caught her eye, giving a disarmingly pleasant smile that did not reach her eyes.

“Ignore them.” Belle turned to see a young blonde woman sitting on the bench beside them. “They’re the alpha-mums. You know the type, classic pushy parents. They don’t like anything that’s not the norm.”

Belle recognised the lady, she worked part time at Granny’s.

“Emma, is it?”

“Yeah, you must be Belle.”

They shook hands and Belle could feel Rum grinning beside her.

“My Henry’s in the team too,” Emma explained. “So, what do you think, Gold?” she asked over Belle’s shoulder. “Can they break a losing streak?”

“Of course,” Rum said. “I have every faith in them. And Emma’s right, Belle. Ignore the vultures. They’re all of a flutter because the grumpy old curmudgeon who’s turned up to every match alone suddenly has an incredibly beautiful young woman on his arm. They’re just jealous.”

All the same, Belle could not help but feel a little unease.

It soon passed as the game got underway though. Despite their best efforts, Bae’s team could only hold their opponents to a draw, but as Bae said when he came running up to them, dishevelled and covered in mud but grinning from ear to ear, it was better than losing.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Belle,” Emma said as they said their goodbyes. “How I’m going to get you home,” she added to Henry, who was almost completely caked in mud from head to toe, “is beyond me though.”

Belle had to laugh as Emma steered her son away, still despairing of how he had managed to get quite so filthy in such a comparatively short space of time.

"Thanks for coming, Belle," Bae said as they made their way back towards the car. "Do you want to come back to ours for dinner? Dad’s making fajitas."

Rum looked at his son. “I am?”

"You are."

"Apparently I am making fajitas. You’re very welcome to join us," Rum said to Belle before returning his attention to his son. "Bae, do we even have any of the ingredients for fajitas?"

"We should do, I added them to the online shopping basket and I put them away when the shopping arrived."

"What?” Rum shook his head in despair as they walked back towards the car. "Sometimes I think I’m not in control of my own life."

"Of course you aren’t, Dad, that’s what you have me for." Bae patted his shoulder. "So, would you like to come?" he asked Belle.
"That would be very nice, thank you."

X

As soon as they got into the house, Bae excused himself to go and take a shower and bounded up the stairs, leaving Rum and Belle alone in the hallway. Belle remembered that this was the first time that she had ever been inside Rum’s domain and she felt that the occasion demanded a certain level of respect.

She wasn’t quite sure what she had been expecting. What she got was a perfectly ordinary family home, on the large side for two people, but crammed with all kinds of unique keepsakes and oddments, and strangely mismatched furniture.

“I restore antiques,” Rum said, as Belle’s eyes alighted on a pair of dining chairs stacked on top of each other in the hallway next to the staircase. He seemed slightly sheepish, indeed, the tops of his ears had gone a lovely shade of pink. “It’s a hobby… I’ve acquired a lot that I haven’t had time to do anything with yet and they tend to clutter the place up a bit till I get round to them.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having a hobby,” Belle said. “I think it’s interesting. I’ve never met an antique restorer before.”

“Bae despairs sometimes. But he doesn’t generally complain too much unless I have to store something in his room because I’ve run out of space in the rest of the house.”

Belle gave a laugh. “What do you do with it once you’ve restored it?”

“Normally I sell it on. Some bits I keep. Come through to the kitchen, that’s where all the best bits are.”

Belle tugged her boots off and followed Rum through to the kitchen, sliding a little on the laminate flooring in her fluffy socks. The room was beautifully decorated, and whilst the table and chairs and other various pieces of kitchen furniture looked to be from an identical set at first glance, when she looked closer she could see that each piece was unique.

“Did you do all these yourself?” she asked.

“Everything apart from the table,” Rum said. “I bought that as is, and then set about finding chairs and cabinets to match. It’s taken me nearly as long as I’ve been living here to get everything perfect.”

Belle ran her hand over the back of one of the chairs, looking at the delicate carving there. She could just imagine Rum sitting here in the kitchen, his long, gentle fingers deftly bringing these treasures of a bygone age back to their former glory. The thought wandered into her head, completely unbidden, of what it would feel like to have those long and gentle fingers caressing her rather than his antiques, and Belle ducked down behind the table to hide her blush, on the pretence of giving the chairs a more thorough inspection. She could hear Rum moving around the kitchen collecting dinner ingredients, and she looked at the way he walked without his cane, at his heavy, uneven gait.

“How’s your ankle?” she asked.

“Not its best,” Rum admitted, “I should have worn my support, but I forgot. Does this onion look off to you?”

Belle, hoping her furious blush had calmed down, got up and came over to the counter where
Rum was cooking. The onion seemed to all intents and purposes to be fine, but it looked a little too slimy to be palatable. She wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah, I’d drawn the same conclusion.” He tossed it away and cut into a fresh one.

Belle leaned on the counter next to him.

"I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so casual," she said, taking in his attire fully. She’d seen that he’d been wearing jeans earlier, but his coat had covered up the rest of his clothes and she wanted to appreciate his slim frame in a casual shirt and sweater rather than a suit. Not that she did not appreciate him in a suit, but it was nice to see him outside of his usual immaculately put-together facade. It made this whole situation, being part of not only his life but also Bae’s, far more normal, far more comfortable. It was not as if she dated the cool, sharply-dressed legal expert during the week and he then became a different person on the weekends. Well, he might become a different person on that weekends, but she was a part of those as well, he was not trying to keep her firmly in the ‘work’ part of his life. "And I don’t believe you shaved this morning, either."

He smiled, and his hands stilled on the cutting board as Belle reached out to run a finger over his stubbly cheek.

"Don’t let the office know, my reputation as the best-dressed man in the building will be ruined."

There was a pause whilst they just looked at each other, Belle still stroking Rum’s cheek.

"If I kiss you now, what are the chances of Bae walking in?" she asked softly.

"High," Rum said. "But I don’t think he’d interrupt. He’s been determined to get us together for months. I don’t think he’d rock the boat now."

Belle leaned in and pressed her lips against Rum’s, but instead of settling for a chaste peck, she felt his arms come around her back and pull her in closer.

It seemed to be a long time before they broke away, and even when they did, Rum didn’t let her go. Belle went up on tiptoe to rest her chin against his shoulder, enjoying the embrace, and she startled when she saw Bae standing at the stove beside them, stirring the chicken and vegetables in the frying pan.

"Hey, don’t mind me," Bae said, grinning but pointedly not looking in their direction. "Just making sure the dinner doesn’t burn. Don’t worry, I’ve got this. You can go back to whatever it was you were doing."

"Thanks, son."

Belle felt Rum’s laughter vibrating next to her chest and she smiled against his shoulder. Yes, she could get used to being part of this little family.

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