Summary

He’d grown used to fear, but it was Belle that he wanted to protect. Or, the one where Spinner!Rumple lives in M. Night Shayamalan’s ‘The Village’.

Notes

Warning: contains heavy spoilers for 'The Village'.
Will follow the plot of the story in the movie.
Chapter 1

The first time he came upon a skinned fox cub, he stared at it for long minutes, fixed on the spot with horror. Flies were already swarming the bloodied carcass, the sound of their angry buzzing filling the air, causing his stomach to revolt, the bile rising in his throat.

Leaning heavily on his cane, he crouched down and inspected the poor creature. Surprisingly enough, its small head was mainly untouched, save for some specs of blood marring its fur. Its mouth was wide open though, showing tiny, sharp teeth and the eyes, although black and lifeless still expressed terror.
The small animal had met a vile, violent end and his heart ached for the futility of it.

Then it occurred to him that the blood might attract the creatures and that thought snapped him out of his stupor. Scrambling to his feet, he limbed towards the small shed behind his house where he kept his tools and retrieved a small gardening scoop and an old cloth.

Walking to the edge of his garden, he quickly dug a small, deep hole and then returned to the remains of the cub. Carefully folding it into the cloth, he carried it over to the makeshift grave and disposed of it, covering the hole with enough earth to ensure the blood and color were gone permanently.

Still, he couldn’t shake off the terror that had taken root in him upon seeing the dead animal. The relative safety of their village was surrounded by evil and now that evil had come near his house and was buried in his garden.

He had to fight the urge to dig the carcass back up and take it to the edge of the forest to dispose of it there, to have it as far removed from him as possible. Merely burying the evil, covering it with a few layers of earth wouldn’t make it disappear.

He followed the rules meticulously. There wasn’t a thread or spot of the bad color to be found inside his house or on the grounds surrounding it. He was in the habit of inspecting his garden two times a day to make sure nature itself didn’t infiltrate the bad color on his holdings and at the first set of dusk he lighted the lantern at his gate to keep the darkness at bay.

And yet, it never felt like it was enough.

Returning into the house, he washed his hands for a long time until the shaking stopped. Only then he donned his dark brown coat, gripped his cane tightly and made his way into the village towards his workshop.

The buzzing of frantic, frightened whispers greeted him as he arrived at the center of the town. Apparently more dead animals were found lying scattered across town, one even lying as near as the porch of the school building.

He turned the sign on the door from closed to open, aware he was opening up later than usual, but also knowing that amongst the commotion of the dead animals found, not a soul would pay attention to that. He crossed the shop and entered the workroom at the back, hoping his customers would remain away on this day.

He needed to spin.

Opening a new bag of sheep’s wool, he sat down behind the wheel to prepare. Soon the wheel was spinning and the rhythmic tapping of his left foot on the pedal finally easing his heartbeat.
The elders called a meeting at the hall at the end of the afternoon to appease the worries that had been drumming through the village all day. The place was packed and he could see the trepidation and fear on every single one of the faces in attendance. In the way children huddled close to their parents, husbands grasped their spouses’ hands and held tightly, their backs and shoulders ramrod straight, mothers wrapping their arms around their children like birds tucking their chicks underneath their wings.

Alice Hunt was in charge of the meeting and he watched, from his slightly secluded spot at the side of the hall as she explained how all the signs indicated that there was some kind of predator on the loose, most likely one that was suffering from madness.

He kept his eyes down, shaking his head imperceptibly. It was utter madness and a foolish deceit on the part of the elders. No coyote or wolf would ever maul a prey in the way the fox cubs had been battered.

Alice Hunt continued to caution the villagers to be vigilant for the next fortnight or so and he had to give her credit for the way she was turning the town’s panic into a protective stance by urging them to watch over the children, the adorable little girl on her hip proving to be quite the incentive.

In front of his eyes, the assembled crowd relaxed ever so slightly, eyes filling with determination. Only then, after exchanging a brief glance with the council, she said something that really sparked his interest.

“As for the other notion, we do not believe our boundaries have been breeched. Those We Don’t Speak Off are much… larger creatures than coyotes. We would know if they had been here.”

He exhaled slowly, his mind slowly progressing the words. There was no doubt in his mind that whatever it was that had killed those cubs, it had not been coyotes. That left the other notion a very plausible possibility. The elders would know if the boundaries surrounding the village were breeched, or if the truce was violated. But not for the first time he wondered how they could be so certain, what kind of power was vested in them that made them able to discern between what was seen and what was.

And then the familiar feeling of resignation washed over him. There was no point in debating the issue, even with himself. Whether it were coyotes or the creatures that resided in the woods that were responsible for the killings, either way he was useless to do anything about it. He was lame and unimpressive and all alone. Except for his own life, which was insignificant to begin with, he had no one to worry for, no one to protect. He would do well to follow the elder’s reasoning. A coyote, even a mad one could be dealt with, would be dealt with expertly by one of the strong, well-abled young man of the village.

The truce had not been breeched for many years. It would not break now.

When the meeting was adjourned, people poured out of the building, wavering off across the village and he lagged behind to watch as he often did.

He watched as Alice Hunt exchanged a few words with Edward Walker, the man’s posture rigid and stiff for the entire duration of their conversation and the way the woman’s shoulders had dropped ever so slightly by the time their talk had come to an end.

He watched as Walker’s wife, Tabitha walked up to the pair and spoke a few words to him, completely oblivious to what was happening in front of her and he watched the flicker of burning guilt flicker inside her husband’s eyes as he looked at her. Eventually they said their goodbyes and took off and the brief, intense look of longing on Alice Hunt’s face was seen by no-one but him.

Love wasn’t supposed to be this complicated or cruel.
Soft laughter caught his attention, making him instantly forget about what he'd just witnessed. A young woman, dressed in a blue frock with white, lace trimmings, slipped her arm through that of a slim, red-haired girl that was walking slowly with a cane stretched out in front of her.

“Belle!” the red-haired girl cried happily, pulling her cane back and leaning into the smaller woman. They started walking together in his direction, chattering and laughing and he watched as a sudden ray of sunlight spilled over them, making it impossible for him to move. When they were only a few feet away from him, Belle suddenly looked up, a polite smile gracing her lips as she greeted him with warm eyes.

“Good evening, Mr. Gold.”

“Good day, Miss French… Miss Walker,” he relied stiffly, griping the handle of his cane, the one thing grounding him as he was all but drowning in the blue of her eyes.

The two women continued walking and he watched her leave, gazing at the chestnut curls, held together in a loose braid that danced on her back with every step she took.

Love wasn’t meant to be this cruel or complicated. But more often than not, it very much was.
Chapter 2

After the fifth skinned fox cub was found a Ceremony of Meat was held in a desperate attempt to placate the creatures. From his seat at one of the long tables, he watched how the four assigned men carried a stretcher with the offering, a lamb's cadaver. Not a single sound was heard as two of them continued forward, towards the edge of the forest, towards the yellow safety banners that blew gently in the wind while the other two stood guard.

Their faces, bodies and arms covered by the ochre cloths, the two men swayed the stretcher between them, one, two, three times before swinging the meat onto the Appointed Trunk. It landed there with a dull thud and the four men waited respectfully for the prescribed period. The creatures would not appear, they never had in all those years, but they were lurking among the trees just mere feet away from the trunk and the safety borders around the village and the reality of that was visible in the tightness of their expressions and the tension of their bodies.

Finally the four started to retreat, slowly and cautiously, their gazes still fixed upon the trunk. The creatures would come and claim their offering when night fell. They’d grab the carcass, drag it to their dens and devour it, the meat momentarily stilling their thirst for blood and persuading them to let the village be for the time being, to respect the truce until the next time they became tempted and another animal sacrifice was needed to appease them.

Once the four carriers had shed their protective gear and assumed their places a tremble of relief swept through the assembled townsfolk and the tense silence broke as Noah Percy chortled maniacally in a high-pitched manner almost flapping out of his seat with exuberant anxiety until firm hands pushed him back and hushed voices admonished him to be quiet.

Edward Walker rose from his seat at the center of the first table, his hands clasped and his head bowed. His solemn voice carried over the field as he spoke the blessing: “We are thankful for the time we have been given…”

It was almost pitch dark outside and fifteen minutes to curfew and he was strolling across the path leading up to his house, trying to pay no mind to the howling and roaring coming from the woods.

The creatures had found and accepted the sacrifice.

Despite the increased tension of the past fortnight and the stronger safety percussions, he had not yet been able to bring himself to giving up his habit of walking through the village at dusk. He liked the cool night’s air, the safety of the shadows and the quiet of the impending night. He enjoyed watching the stars and taking in the vastness of the universe, taking comfort in the realization that there was more under the sky than their small town, more than the confinement of Covington Woods.

He liked to stroll and sort out his thoughts at this time of day, knowing that if he didn’t the darkness of his tormented mind would invade his sleep and shape his worst fears into nightmares. As of late his thoughts and worries wore down his heart and he needed the reprieve of his solitary walks more than ever.

The Ceremony of Meat was carried out once a year and for as long as Gold could remember, the cycle had never been broken by issuing an additional offering. But for some reason the creatures had begun to feel threatened of late. To think that anyone living in the village had been foolish
enough to breach the barrier and go into the woods was unthinkable. The fear of the creatures was too great, too deeply ingrained into the consciousness of the people to make that probable.

No one was that foolish, or that brave. He himself had been a coward most of his life, had spend it cowering in fear long before he’d even come here. He couldn’t stomach the thought of voluntarily crossing the boarder and facing the horror that dwelled there. He couldn’t imagine anyone would. He was barely able to stand the threat, barely able to breathe freely, knowing that these monsters existed nearby.

Soft footsteps coming up behind him startled him out of his reverie and unconsciously the grip on the handle of his cane tightened as if he was carrying a weapon instead of a walking aid.

“Good evening, Mr. Gold,” a lilting voice spoke up beside him and the split second of relief he’d experienced when he realized he had just encountered an other human being gave way to a completely different kind of terror.

“Good evening, Miss French.”

She wasn’t supposed to be walking out so late, all by herself and unprotected. She was too good, too pure and the creatures would seize the opportunity to pound on her, to tear her away and into the forest with them.

She fell into step with him effortlessly and this surprised him a great deal. Usually he walked too slowly for other people’s liking, his gait too uneven for them to bear with. But she walked next to him, perfectly easy and graceful, easily matching his strides.

“What brings you out at this late hour?” he inquired, eyeing the basket she was carrying.

“I’ve brought August Nicholson a meal,” she told him, her face sobering. “His spirits have been low since the passing of his son.”

He bowed his head, the familiar knot of grief coiling tightly inside him, almost making it impossible to breathe.

“You’re showing him a great kindness,” he managed to murmur eventually, his eyes straying back to her face, looking wistful in the pale light of the moon.

“I do hope so,” she replied quietly. “But what comfort can you offer a man who has lost his child?”

“There is none,” he agreed, the effort of keeping down his own grief down taking all of his energy. “But you’re caring for him and in the end that will make a difference.”

The brilliant smile that lightened her face was enough to dispel some of the darkness of the night and he was captivated by it, elevating some of the fear and loneliness that bore his heart down. Unconsciously, she even moved a few inches closer towards him, their shoulders almost brushing as they continued to walk and for a few precious moments his thoughts quieted and he allowed himself to just enjoy the moment.

Winter was fast approaching and he needed to start dyeing as soon as the Shearing Festival had passed. Belle deserved a vast array of blue colored wool, enough for her shawls, cardigans and blankets, everything she needed to keep warm when the harsh cold came. He still had a small supply of wool, he could start dyeing and spinning for her the very next day.
“Do the recent events trouble you?” she asked quietly, shocking him out of his musings.

“They have been on my mind constantly…” he confessed, trailing off momentarily, trying to formulate the jumble of thoughts inside his head into words.

“The dead animals disturb me, but I cannot help but wonder… if the truce truly has been breached, Those We Don’t Speak Of must have been provoked. And I cannot imagine that anyone is reckless enough to do that.”

She nodded thoughtfully as they rounded a corner and he realized they had completely bypassed his own house and that they were still walking. And rightly so, he would see that she got home safely.

“The finding of the dead animals is horrible,” she then agreed with a small shudder. “Those poor cubs. But how can Those We Don’t Speak Of have entered the village on so many occasions without being discovered? The Watch Tower is constantly occupied and from what the elders tell us they are big creatures. They cannot have been overlooked.”

The same reasoning had been plaguing his mind for days now and yet his mind rebelled at the notion, the implication of the theory too horrible to comprehend.

“But if it’s not the creatures, then who is responsible for the death of these animals?” The question slipped from him almost involuntarily, but despite him dreading the answer, he was also burning for it, his overwrought, anxious brain latching on the first person who shared his confusion.

She stopped in the middle of the path, her head bowed, her hands nervously toying with the handle of her basket.

“I know it’s horrible to think anyone inside this village can be responsible for such a heinous act… but I find myself… not fully believing it has been done by the creatures either…”

She looked up at him apologetically, biting her lip in a way that made his blood rush in his veins and make him forget all about creatures and impending dread.

“Both options are unbearable to contemplate,” he said softly.

“You’ve lived here since the very beginning, haven’t you?” she asked him, her blue eyes gazing up at him imploringly. It all seemed like a lifetime ago, but he found himself nodding at her question.

“And have you ever actually seen the creatures… I mean to say, behold them with your own eyes?”

Small, white teeth were once again mercilessly worrying the plump lip and he had to make a conscious effort to get his voice to work. Searching his memory, he thought about her question.

“The drills are just routine exercises,” he started slowly. “There was one instant, about a year after we had settled here that Those We Don’t Speak Of came into our village…”

He remembered well the panic of that night, the all consuming terror and the chilling realization that he had voluntarily trapped himself in a place that was even more terrifying than the one he’d sought to escape.

“But did you see them?” Her face was almost translucent in the white light of the moon, her eyes large and shining.

He gave a slight shake of his head.

“I did not. I hid in the shelter underneath my house, like the elders had instructed us to do and stayed there long after they had gone…”

His face twisted at the memory of his own cowardice.
“After that the Ceremony of Meat was installed and the elders told us about the safe color. They have not entered our village ever since.”

She nodded pensively, her soft eyes never leaving his face. “I think that the fear itself is more terrifying than anything else.”

Her words both soothed and unsettled him.
“There’s nothing worse than being afraid,” he agreed, his voice barely audible. She was so close he only had to reach out a little or he’d be touching her. A small tug of his hands and she’d be in his arms. He clenched his hands around the handle of his cane and breathed deeply through his nose. 
*The fear itself is more terrifying than anything else.*

“I do not want to be afraid.” Her voice was small and frank at the same time and some primal, fierce urge to protect her roared up inside him, leaving him bewildered.

“No harm will come to you,” he promised her, his voice hoarse, scarcely daring to believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. “I’ll see to that…”

She smiled at that, her face lightening up, erasing every and all trace of worry and his heart seized at the sight. “I know you will.”

Her trust in him was astounding and wholly and completely unjustified. But he need not prove that to her straight away. “Let me start by getting you home safe.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warning: if you haven't watched the original movie, you WILL be spoiled for it after this chapter.
Also, character death. A pretty obvious one, but still... and a little more graphic than I normally write them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The days after little Daniel Nicholson’s funeral were surprisingly bright and sunny. Patches of shining blue shone through the heavy clouds and the occasional rays of sunlight created chasing shadows over the green fields surrounding the village, coloring the grass in a wide array of greens.

As far as Gold was concerned it was too shiny, too bright a day. Young Daniel’s illness and his quickly deteriorating condition had weighted heavily on the spirit of the community. The once lively and vivacious boy had slowly faded into becoming only a pale shadow of himself. Now that he had passed away and his small body had been entrusted back to the earth, the village seemed to breathe again.
It wasn’t callous or unfeeling, but now that the dread of what was about to happen, in fact had happened, the tension that had worn everybody down evaporated. Life went on and there were crops to harvest, lambs to be born, roofs to mend and children to be taught.

Perhaps it was as it should be, but he felt he couldn’t move on so quickly, adjust so effortlessly. The passing of Daniel Nicholson had torn open every single one of his old, barely stitched back together wounds. Ever since the night of the young boy’s passing, sleep had been elusive and he had spend the dark, lonely nights lying on his bed, his eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling, seeing nothing but the images his mind provided for him.

A young boy with unruly, dark curls and brown eyes climbing out of the school bus and running towards him, his Sesame Street backpack bouncing on his back. His jubilant cry of “Papa!” as he ran and ran towards him, his arms outstretched as if he wanted to fly.

It wasn’t often that he was able to wait for his son as he came out of school. Business was tight and the shop required long hours. But every time he did manage to take some time off to walk Bae home from school, the ritual was always the same. His boy’s face lightening up in joy as he discovered his papa standing at the bus stop. The way he almost dived out of the bus into his father’s waiting arms. The slow-paced, leisured walk home as his son chattered on endlessly about his friends, his teachers and the bugs and lizards he had managed to catch.

Until that fateful day.

He had planned to close the shop early and pick up Bae. But a last-minute phone call had delayed him and as he had limped towards the bus stop, he could already see the big, yellow bus approaching. He’d been across the street, still making his way over as Bae had jumped out of the bus and started walking, his eyes growing wide as he’d spotted him. “Papa!”
Until his dying day, the sound of his son’s voice, happy and excited, would stay with him. As
would the sight of him running towards him. He was so young, so innocent, barely seven years old, just starting 1st Grade.

He had run across the street without looking and while a part of him wanted to cry out a warning, a much bigger part of him reveled in the sight of his son, so happy and eager to greet him, that he couldn’t help but cry out himself: “Bae! Come here, my boy!”

The car had come out of nowhere, suddenly rounding the corner, swaying dangerously across the road at a terrifying speed. And suddenly the blissful sight in front of his eyes turned into one of slow-motioned terror. Bae was already on the street. He was running, running as fast as he could towards him, but his legs were so short, his body so small, he simply couldn’t run fast enough and the car was closing in more and more.

He’d screamed, a helpless, terrified, heart-broken scream, because in that moment he knew what was about to happen. He’d known, even if he hadn’t want to believe it. Hadn’t been able to believe it, even weeks afterwards. He’d known, as soon as the car had slammed into his son’s small, fragile body with a gut-wrenching crash that there would be no chance he would survive an impact like that.

He’d known, as soon as he’d reached him, dropping to the ground and cradling the broken, shattered form of his boy close that he was already gone.

His marriage to Milah, already rocky long before the accident occurred never stood a chance of surviving the devastating loss of their son. Nevertheless, the fall out was horrendous. His guilt over the accident - if only he’d come earlier, if only he’d cautioned Bae, if only he hadn’t called out to him, if only… - only fueled her resentment of him, which in return only added to his self-deprecation. In the end the very air around them had become toxic and twisted.

The inebriated driver had been arrested and his trial was impending. But his attorney offered a long list of mitigating circumstances. He was a father of three young children, he had recently been through a difficult time, he had an otherwise clear record… Eventually the DA office had agreed on a settlement, ensuring the man would only serve a minimal period of time in jail. Milah had opposed vehemently against this and had urged him to appeal. But by then getting out of bed every morning took more strength than he possessed and he couldn’t muster the energy to fight it.

No amount of revenge could ease the heartache that was piercing him every minute of every day. Ruining the other man’s life would do nothing to rebuild his own. His son, his Bae was gone and nothing, nothing would ever make it right.

Milah had been livid, had called him a coward and every other name in the book. And had eventually left him.

By the time he’d come to the counseling center, he was convinced that there was nothing left to salvage of his life. His son was dead, his wife was gone and he simply couldn’t bear living in this world any longer, not with so much pain and so much grief.

Nevertheless, he attended the meetings dutifully, first because it supplied some much craved structure and purpose in his life and then because he became aware of the plan that was forming within the tight-knit group of grief-stricken survivors.

As he tentatively began to express an interest, something of a path, a way out of the hell he was living in began to emerge. A world with no violence, no money and no alcohol might be a world where he’d be able to find a semblance of peace.
As the owner of an antique and curiosa shop, he had easy access to the furniture and appliances needed to furnish the refugee they were building.

And he knew how to spin yarn. Growing up in Scotland, he had been taught by his aunts and he had always, somewhat stubbornly, kept to practicing his craft, redundant as it even appeared. But suddenly he found himself to be a valuable asset to a forming community.

By the time he truly joined, the foundations were already in place. A council of elders was appointed and installed and with little heartache he settled his affairs in the city. He had little to no family and few friends to say goodbye to. He sold his shop, transferred the money to the partnership and locked a few of most treasured possessions into a wooden chest.

It was all he would bring to his new life. Photos of his son and his aunts in Scotland. A dinky toy car that’d belonged to Bae. Newspaper cuttings of the accident. A photo of Bae’s grave. A few trinkets, some books… the things he couldn’t forget, but tried to carry in a chest instead of his heart.

Crossing the fence between Covington Woods and the world as he’d known it seemed like the most obvious step in the world. Of course he knew of the rumors. Knew of the evil that was supposed to lurk in the forest. But with everything that had happened to him in the past six months, an unnamed, faceless thread held little terror for him.

And for the first few years or so he had been… content. The slow pace of life, the solitude, making his livelihood out of spinning yarn, it wasn’t enough to make him happy, but it was enough to dull his misery.

But somewhere along the lines, fear had begin to creep into his conscious. The howling coming from the woods had at first only been a vague sound in the background to him, but as time went on, it started to fill him with a sense of trepidation that he wasn’t able to shake off during the day. The fear he felt was mirrored on every face he encountered in the village and that more than anything else made it real. The more he subjected himself to the regulations and safety measures, the more he felt his control slipping and slowly but surely, the village became a prison he couldn’t escape from, his fears the bars that kept him caged.

And left him a coward still.

Chapter End Notes

So in my head-canon, only the council of elders (which is only a small group of about eight people) know the full truth about the creatures. Many, many more people (like Gold) joined them, but they only know what the elders chose to tell them.
Chapter 4

About a fortnight after Daniel Nicholson’s death the village was buzzing with rumors. Apparently Lucius Hunt had made an appeal to the council, asking permission to cross Covington Woods and go to the towns to fetch medicine. His request was gently, but firmly denied. However, a few days later he renewed his request, stating that he had found Noah Percy carrying berries of the forbidden color. Berries that he’d supposedly found somewhere past Resting Rock and past the barrier, into the woods were the creatures dwelled.

Somehow, because it was the way things like this always went, the news of his request spread through the town like wildfire. It was all people could talk about. It was talked about among the pews during the weekly meeting at the hall, it was discussed at length in the greenhouses and it even filtered into his shop, where he warily had to listen to two elderly ladies voicing their indignation as they tangled up the wool.

Only too soon two camps appeared, those who supported Lucius Hunt in his quest and those who opposed violently against it. Apparently Maurice French was one of them, even going as far as forbidding all discussion of the topic inside the greenhouse he supervised.

Gold himself did not know what to make of it. His initial feeling was that Lucius Hunt was a foolish, headstrong boy for wanting to put himself in danger in such a way. The past twenty years had blurred his memories of the city he’d lived in prior to coming here and had been tainted by the constant description the elders gave to the younger generations: the towns was were the wicked people lived. Where the wicked things happened and harm and death were a more certain fate than the horror that lived in the woods.

Lucius Hunt was a fool for wanting to go there. It was reckless and stupid and no good could come of it.

And yet, he admired the boy’s bravery and his persistency. The thought that Daniel Nicholsions’ life could have been spared if only one of them had been brave enough to make the journey when he fell ill tormented him. The temptation of money and alcohol could be removed. Over the years any trace of violence had slowly been taken away from their lives. Even the yearly slaughtering of the animals for meat consumption was done hidden in a shed that wasn’t used for any other purpose.

But sickness and ailment could not be prevented. Daniel Nicholson had wasted away to an illness that in the old world was known as cancer. Ivy Walker would never see again. Adeline Clark would have to suffer through a long winter, her joints aching with rheumatism. Noah Percy’s affliction would only grow worse.

So he envied Lucius Hunt for the bravery he’d never had.

One of his evenings strolls took him past the stump near the woods. He knew of the game the boys of the village played there often. Stand on the stump with your back to the woods and your arms outstretched. Stand there for as long as you dared. Or until the creatures came for you. The stump was well within the safety of the boarders, yet the game was frowned upon by the elders. It did not do to tempt fate, to entice the creatures.
That evening he heard hushed whispered coming from the fallen trunk a few feet away from the stump, the figures of Christop Crane and Jamison huddled behind it while a young boy by the name of August Booth stood on the stump, his shaking arms outstretched, his entire body quivering in fear.

“Do not let the fear overtake you,” Christop urged him from his relative safe position. “Steel yourself for just a few more minutes. No one has hold out as long on their first attempt as you have.”

Another howl coming from the woods left the ten year old August Booth shaking with terror, perspiration dripping down from his face.

A surge of anger, white and blinding, overtook and he stomped towards the boys, clutching his cane tightly. First he addressed August Booth, his voice a low and menacing growl. “Get yourself back here this instant!”

The two boys behind the trunk bolted in surprise, scrambling to their feet while August Booth dived off the stump, dashing towards them. Jamison let out a terrified squeak before turning around and bolting into the direction of the village. He was already gone before Gold could even attempt to grab him. Making sure the other two culprits couldn’t escape, he hooked the handle of his cane around Christop Crane’s elbow and yanked him back as he too tried to run and grabbed August Booth by the scruff of his collar as soon as he’d reached them.

“Sir, you are wrinkling my shirt,” Christop Crane protested indignantly. “I demand you release me at once!”

“You have precious little to demand, boy,” Gold replied, sneering the last word. “You may wear a suit and pretend you’re a man, but you’re nothing but an irresponsible, mindless dimwit. You endanger the life of a boy not even out of his childhood years for some meaningless fun!

Foolish…” He shook he cane, jostling the boy back and forth like a rag doll, “…stupid…” another twist of his cane had the boy yelping in pain as the handle dug into his arm, “….coward!” With a final shove, he pushed Christop Crane away harshly so that he fell unto the ground. With his eyes wide with fear and shock, the boy struggled up and ran away blindly.

Then he turned to August Booth, who he was still holding tightly and the boy whimpered when he looked at him. “Never do that again, do you hear me?” he snarled, bringing his face only inches away from that of the boy.

“Y-yes Mr. Gold…” the boy stammered, still shaking.

Not easing his grip on him in the slightest, Gold started to walk, dragging the boy with him. “I shall you return you to your father,” he said, his voice tight. “And be thankful it has ended this way.”

Of course there were repercussions to his outburst. For one, Christop Crane wore his arm in a sling for two weeks straight, complaining about his injuries until even the gentle physician Viktor Bing lost patience with him. On the other hand, Marco Booth came to his shop the very next day to thank him for his interference and assure him that August was grounded until after the Harvest Feast.

Edward Walker paid him a visit as well, gently emphasizing that although he understood and
shared his aversion towards the game any display of physical violence was not permitted.

He sat quietly through the lecture, nodded contritely in all the right place and vowed to keep to himself for a while.

It mattered not. The creatures would not breach the boundary because of a child’s game. The boys would not come to harm.

*They* were safe.

One evening he encountered Ivy Walker, walking by herself along the path, her cane stretched out in front of her. Quickening his step as much as he could he attempted to catch up with her. Ivy was Belle’s friend. She should not be walking alone either.

He finally reached her and just as he opened his mouth to make his presence known, she smiled at him. “Good evening, Mr. Gold.”

He blinked in surprise, but said nothing, falling into step besides her. “Good evening, Miss Walker.”

“You will be relieved to hear that Christop Crane has regained the full use of his arm again,” she informed him, a hint of teasing in her voice.

“It fills my heart with relief,” he replied dryly and she chuckled lightly.

“I think you did more good than harm in the end,” she told him. “My sister Kitty felt very sorry for him. He quite enjoyed that.”

Ah. That explained a few things.

“Congratulations on your sister’s betrothal, Miss Walker,” he answered, adding after a second, “Your heart must be relieved as well now that your sister has recovered from her earlier heartbreak so swiftly.”

Ivy Walker blushed deeply, but lifted her face steadily to meet his own. “I am relieved,” she said. “Very much so.”

She continued to look up at him, a small smile starting around the corners of her lips. “You are wondering how I knew it was you…”

“You heard the sound of my cane,” guessed smoothly.

“No…” her smile was turning positively mischievous now. “Some people give off a bit of color. It is barely noticeable and all I can ever see in the dark. It is only a few people… but you are one of them. I recognized your color.”

“I… “ he stammered, completely taken aback by this information. “It is not gold, is it?” he quipped eventually.

Ivy’s laughter filled the quiet night. “It is not,” she assured him. “But I will not yet tell you what your color is, Mr. Gold.”

“Not yet?” he asked surprised. “But I would like to know.”
“It is too early for that,” her smile was now sympathetic. “But you will know, when the time is right.”
The evening started out as one like every other. It was an hour to curfew and many people were still out and about. Out of nowhere, the bell in the watchtower started to toll and for a long, stretched second the entire town stood still, frozen in terror.

Then all hell broke loose. Children cried, women shrieked and everything and everyone started to dash and run in every direction, colliding into each other in their hurry to find the nearest shelter. Men barked orders and rushed around, closing shutters and urging everybody in. The elderly were all but picked up and carried into the homes.

When the bell sounded, Gold had been inside his house, clearing away the few dishes of his solitary dinner and for a full minute he had stood frozen, clutching the tea towel in his hands, not certain if he should give in to the terror he was feeling or feel relieved that now at least it had finally came.

Then his senses returned and he dropped the towel, hastening towards the small living room were there was a loose cupboard, right in front of the fireplace that led to the shelter underneath his house. But before he had even lifted the board he froze again, a terrible realization washing over him.

Belle would be outside. She always brought August Nicholson his dinner around this time. She was outside, alone and unprotected and the horror that lived in the woods was now freely roaming the village. He could not let her come to harm, he could not allow the creatures to take her and maul her like she was some kind of sacrificial lamb. She could not be hurt.

Stumbling and staggering he made his way to the front door and threw it open, the ice-cold night air and the shrieks coming from the town hitting him immediately. He was shaking from head to toe as he stepped outside, leaving the safety and protection of his house behind. Every cell in his body, every impulse inside him screamed at him to turn around, to go back and huddle up in the shelter and hide until everything had passed.

Only the terrible, sickening imagines that his mind provided for him - Belle being hauled into the woods by the creatures, her perfect skin ripped apart by vicious claws, her soft, beautiful body devoured by hellions - made him go on. There was no courage in him, not a single hint of bravery, only the nauseating, stomach-wrenching fear of what would happen if the creatures got to her before he managed to reach her made him put his one foot in front of the other and carry on.

The town’s center had dissolved into chaos, with people running and screaming about and for a moment he stood still, trying to think, forcing his brain to function. If Belle had gone to see August Nicholson, she would be on her way back to her father’s house by now. In order to so, she’d have to pass the school building and the town hall...

Coming to a decision, he started to limp in that direction as fast as he could, ignoring the throbbing
pain in his ankle, adding his voice to the screams and cries around him, calling her name.

When he neared the town hall, it became quieter around him and he realized with increasing dread
that nobody lived here or hid here. If she was here now, she’d be all alone.

“Belle!” He cried out again, looking around him frantically. “Belle!”

“Mr. Gold?” Her voice sounded wrangled and out of breath, but he felt relief flooding him at the
sound of it.

“Belle!” He called again. “Where are you?”

She came running from behind the school building and as soon as he caught sight of her he ran
towards her, almost colliding into her when he reached her, wrapping his arms around her to
prevent them from falling to the ground.

“Mr. Gold…” Her voice shook as she clung onto him and he held her tighter, for a second feeling
only relief that he’d found her.

Then he glanced over her shoulder and in the corner of his eye he saw a flash of the forbidden
color. His body went rigid and Belle pulled back slightly, her eyes wide with fear, her breath
shaky.

“They’re here…” He breathed hoarsely. “Come with me…”

He grasped her hand and started tugging her towards the town hall. They couldn’t go inside and to
the shelter, but there was a small alcove behind the building, perhaps they could go there to hide.
With the creatures swarming the grounds, he didn’t dare to go much further.

They went around the building and hid in the shadows of a shrub, standing almost in the pitch
dark. The screaming had died out and the village was eerily quiet now, save from the sound of
creaking and pounding.

Belle burrowed herself in his arms once again, and he slid his arms around her gratefully, needing
to hold on to her as much as she needed to be held by him probably. She was shaking against him,
her face hidden against his chest, her hands grasping the lapels of his jacket tightly.

He kept his eyes wide open, vigilant for any trace of danger, his arms clasped securely around her
back, one of his hands holding his cane in a tight grip.

The sound of heavy footsteps came closer and he felt Belle tense in his arms, his own breath
leaving his body in terrified anticipation.

Snarling, grunting sounds came from around the building and he raised the cane in his hand, ready
to strike if need be.

There was more shuffling and a low, stretched out, gnarling noise and then one of the creatures
appeared in his view, Clutching Belle tighter against him on instinct, he watched paralyzed in
fear as the creature took a few steps closer and stretched out a claw-like paw with long, curved
pointed nails, almost as if they belonged to a gigantic bird.

In the pale light of the moon he could see that the creature was dressed in a long cloak of a deep
red color and finally he understood why it was called the bad color. Much like a porcupine, the
creature’s back was covered in thick, pointed, arm-length stings, shining dangerously in the sparse
light of the night.

The creature snarled again, but did not come closer and as Belle whimpered against his throat, he
raised his cane up higher, ready to strike, ready to distract the creature long enough for Belle to be
able to run.
His movement appeared to startle the creature somewhat and it took a step back. In doing so, the red hood that had covered most of his face fell back slightly and Gold found himself gazing in the face of what appeared to be a very large boar. Its snout and mouth undeniable belonged to a boar, but were stiff and motionless and the eyes, that were still partly hidden by the hood looked directly at him appeared almost human.

For a long moment the creature stared at Gold and Gold stared right back and in doing so, he felt how most of his fear left his body and was replaced by a feeling akin to curiosity. The creature was large, but not as large as he’d feared and it was far less agile and fast as he’d always believed it to be.

The claws did look fearsome indeed, but upon closer inspection, Gold realized the creature would have a hard time actually being able to grab something with talons like that.

The creature grunted again, but then took another step back. And another.

Until it turned around and retreated, leaving Gold behind with his heart pounding in his chest. It was gone. The creature had left without so much as a fight.

Belle was safe for now.

“It is gone,” he whispered against her temple. “We can go to my shop now and hide in the shelter. You have nothing to fear there.”

She nodded wordlessly and stepped back slightly, but still kept one of her arms securely around his waist. Wrapping his one arm around her shoulders and leaning heavily on his cane with his other hand, they made their way back to the road.

It didn’t take more than a minute to reach his shop and with shaking hands he unlocked the door, thankful that he had already closed the shutters as he had closed up his shop that afternoon. Quickly he ushered her inside to the back of the shop where there was a trapdoor in the floor that led to the underground shelter. Pulling it open, he let Belle ascend the steep ladder first before following her, closing the door securely above him.

The shelter was dark and narrow. Even though neither of them were very tall, they couldn’t stand upright inside it and knowing that he would never be able to sit on the floor with his bad leg, he’d put a chair in there when he’d opened his shop all these years ago. Sinking down on it, he pulled Belle down with him with his hands on her hips until she was sitting in his lap and was all but plastered against him, her arms around his neck, her face buried against the juncture where his neck met his shoulder.

With shaking hands he caressed her back and her hair, not daring to make another noise, not even to soothe her as outside the sound of footsteps stomping about continued and something bashed long and hard on the door of his shop.

The boarder had been breached and creatures were roaming the village.

The creatures were not all how he had imagined them to be and the lack of terror they installed in him was terrifying in itself.

Belle was in his arms, wrapped around him as much as he had wrapped himself around her and the warmth of her body penetrated his clothes, making his body almost burn with longing. His nose was in her hair and as he inhaled the sweet, flowery soap his treacherous heart wished they would never have to leave the shelter again.
When the sun rose the next day it became clear that although the creatures hadn’t physically harmed anyone, they had certainly left their mark. Blood red lines were smeared diagonally at various doors around the village. For a brief, panicked moment people assumed that it was indeed blood, but a closer inspection revealed that it was merely red paint. Still, having the bad color so visibly present among them did nothing to calm the fright of the townsfolk.

His shop had been amongst the buildings that had been stained with the mark and at least now he knew what the banging on the door had been when he and Belle had hidden in the shelter underneath his shop. Donned in an ochre cloak for protection it took him most of the morning to scrub the stain away. As the red water dribbled down the door and created puddles of the forbidden color on the doorstep his mind kept drifting back to what he had seen the night before.

He’d come to face the creature and he’d live to tell the tale. With Belle’s safety his responsibility and only a cane as a weapon it was a miracle in itself. He was by no means an impressive man. Small of stature, scrawny and with a noticeable limb, a souvenir from a car accident in his younger years, he could not possible have been a threat to creatures who were believed to have extraordinary strength.

Another possibility was that the creature had thought him to be so insignificant that it couldn’t even bother to attack him. In the stark, cold light of day this seemed a rather real possibility. He had done nothing to save or protect Belle, he’d merely been too negligible to notice.

And yet, he couldn’t shake the nagging doubt that something didn’t add up. On first glimpse the creatures appeared to be rather threatening, but now that he had seen one with his own eyes he found them a great deal less fearful than he’d believed them to be. They didn’t install the paralyzing terror inside him that he’d anticipated. Had the creature come after Belle, he would have lashed out with his cane and a small part of him even believed that he could have taken the creature down that way.

But as the red paint stained his hands as he scrubbed at the resistant paint, the bad color firmly absorbing in his skin, the old fear returned. After twenty years the horror of what the creatures could do was ingrained in his mind. He’d even heard rumors of the stories long before he’d come to Covington Woods. The careful instructions of the elders, the look of fear on each and every face in the village, the markings on the houses, the skinned animals… the creatures should not be underestimated.

Later that day there was a meeting at the town hall and he saw his own fear mirrored in the face of each and every person in attendance. The breach of the barriers had shocked the small community deeply and as everybody settled in their seats, anxious eyes turned towards the front row where the elders sat, pleading for answers.

First Edward Walker launched off in a long lecture on how the truce was established between the town and the creatures, concluding with: “By the markings we’ve found this morning on our homes, I feel they were warning us, they act as if… threatened.”
His gentle attempt at shifting the blame became only more pronounced by August Nicholson’s next question: “The creatures have never attacked us without reason. Does anyone here know of a reason why these events may have occurred?”

In the heavy, loaded silence that fell upon his words, Gold’s mind reeled, two things sticking out. ‘...they act as if... threatened.’ If Walker had said ‘provoked’ he could have understood the man’s reasoning, but claiming that the creatures had felt threatened made no sense at all. Why would creatures capable of inflicting unspeakable horror feel threatened by a group of cowering, terrified people, scrupulously keeping to their village to avoid confrontation?

And then there were August Nicolson’s words: ‘The creatures have never attacked us without reason...’

Only, not a single one of them had been attacked during the previous night. Their houses were soiled and everyone was terrified, but every single person in their village had remained unharmed. There were stories of near misses, apparently Lucius Hunt had only just been able to pull Ivy Walker to safety before one of the creatures had entered their home, but still...

He himself had come face to face with one of the creatures and it had withdrawn of its own accord. Apparently the creatures were even more less eager to attack them then anyone in the village was inclined to threaten the creatures.

A movement in the hall pulled him out of his musings. A young woman handed a note to the elders and after some consternations Vivian Percy read it out loud. Lucius Hunt had entered the woods on the day before last and had been seen by the creatures, ensuing their wrath.

Between all the gasps and exclamations of shocked horror, Gold felt his stomach sinking and the blood in his ears pounding.

So the creatures were real. Hunt had witnessed them with his own eyes and the creature’s retaliation was both understandable and justified.

But then the most startling thing of all happened. Edward Walker got to his feet and slowly walked the aisle between the pews, only briefly distracted by a gleefully giggling Noah Percy. The entire assembly, himself included watched with bated breath as he advanced on Lucius Hunt.

He was sitting in his seat, almost hunched over, his head firmly bowed and Gold couldn’t help but feel anything else but pity for the young man. But then Walker spoke, kneeling down in front of him as he went.

“Do not fret. You are fearless in a way that I shall never know.”

The words resounded in his head for a long time. He had been a coward all of his life. It was his lack of bravery that had made him chose a life that would shield him from violence and his fear was the price he paid for that.

Lucius Hunt was without fear. There was no fear in him when he asked permission to travel through the woods and go to the town to retrieve medicine. There had been no fear in him when he’d crossed the forbidden line into the woods.

Much like he had miraculously felt little to no fear when he’d stood eye to eye with the creature on the previous night.

He allowed himself to believe that ever since the night the creatures had swarmed the village Belle
sought him out more, even though he knew perfectly well that the season of winter was fast approaching and she simply needed to visit his shop to buy yarn. The fact that she timed her visits at moments the shop was all but deserted and they had time to talk was purely a coincidence.

She talked about her work in the greenhouses, confiding to him how difficult it often was for her to be so under the scrutinizing eye of her father all the time and how she much rather spend her time outside, preferably with a good book.

He was amused to discover that she had read and re-read every single book the small reading room had to offer and preferred Wuthering Heights above everything else.

As it seemed, Belle apparently had taken rather a liking to knitting lately, because she’d started on various projects at the same time. Still, she seemed rather unable at being able to judge how much yarn she was going to need for each of them, often buying far less material than she actually needed, making it necessary for her to make several trips to his shop.

He didn’t mind at all and enjoyed their brief moments together, eager to get to know her better. There was a genuine happiness about her that was heart-warming. She brightened his days with her visits, her smiles and her gentle teasing and for the first time in many decades she made him feel like a man, instead of a shell.

He had been infatuated with her for a long time, but over the course of the next weeks he felt himself falling deeper for her.

She was beautiful. She was light. She filled his thoughts and more astonishing his dreams. For the first time since he came to Covington’s Woods he started to sleep properly, his dreams filled with her smile, her laughter and her warmth.

As innocent as his dreams were, his fantasies most certainly were not. Ever since the night he’d held her in his arms he couldn’t stop himself from remembering and dreaming. He’d held her in his lap, careful not to bring attention to his growing arousal, even despite the seriousness of the situation they’d found themselves in. But he hadn’t even began to admit to himself that apart from his protective instincts, she also stirred far baser, more carnal urges inside him or his mind started to provide him with the images.

Belle in his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck, but her eyes gazing into his, clouded with longing. He’d touch and stroke every inch of her, his fingers itching to worship her skin.

Belle in his bed, naked and flushed, her eyes tightly closed as she moaned and whimpered at every brush of his lips as he kissed his way down her body.

He tried to squash those primal, basic urges down as the little bell above the door of his shop chimed, signaling her arrival. He refused to let those images taint the moments with her that he had. Belle was good and pure, she bestowed her kindness and her warmth on him, treated him to her smiles and her stories and he cherished them, resolving every day that he’d put a stop to his lustful longings since she deserved so much more than that.

He never quite managed.
A month later Kitty Walker married Christop Crane and the entire village came together for the occasion. After all the anxiety and tension of the past weeks people lunged at the opportunity to have something to celebrate and a wedding was the perfect occasion. The weather was crisp and glorious and the young couple looked the part. She the pretty, blushing bride, he the sharp-dressed, beaming groom.

One of the greenhouses was converted into a party hall, neatly decorated with garlands, flowers and lights. A picnic was held on the meadows surrounding the greenhouses and as the adults sat down to talk and the children ran around laughing and playing games while the orchestra played a cheerful tune, for the first time in weeks there was peace again.

Leaning on his cane, Gold watched a group of young girls play ‘ring around the rosie’, holding a glass of cider in his other hand. Whether or not Kitty Walker marrying Christop Crane was truly cause for celebration he privately begged to differ. Although Kitty Walker was not as steadfast and sensible as her younger sister, Gold still believed she could do better than Christop Crane. The boy was obviously besotted with her, but as he watched him smooth down his shirt for the umpteenth time, puffing out his chest with a smug smile as yet another person came to congratulate the happy couple, he couldn’t help but feeling that he was still very much a boy pretending to be a man.

“Good day Mr. Gold. What a pleasure to see you on such a joyous day,” a soft, melodious voice cut through his musings and he found that he was already smiling before he looked up at her.

“Good day to you, Miss French. It is indeed a most happy occasion.”

“They look very happy together,” Belle mused, watching as the bride and groom entered the greenhouse for a private tete-a-tete with the elders. “Ivy tells me they’re very eager to start a family.”

“Then we should throw rice at them for good measure,” Gold mumbled before he check his words.

Belle gave him a bewildered look. “How would that accomplish anything?”

“You must pardon my words,” he hastened to reply. “I spoke without thinking. It is nothing of significance.

One of the most important rules impressed on them by the elders. Never, under no circumstance tell any of the younger inhabitants of their lives previous to coming to Covington Woods, unless it’s to emphasize how dreadful a place the towns are.

Belle was still watching him intently, a little frown appearing between her eyes. “You speak of the old world, do you not?” she pressed. “Was it custom there to throw rice at a married couple?”

Gold sighed resignedly. The damage was already done and his Belle was a persistent one. There would be no harm in sharing this small bit of information with her.
“It was a superstition,” he explained. “A belief that everybody knew to be untrue, but kept believing anyway for nostalgic purposes. Throwing rice towards a married couple as the exited the church was believed to increase their fertility.”

“I see…” Belle replied thoughtfully before her smile became wide as if he had uncovered one of the mysteries of the universe for her. “It is rather nice in a way.”

“I should not have told you,” he answered regretfully. “We have moved away from the old world and their customs have no place in our lives here.”

She felt silent for a long moment, her teeth worrying her lower lip in a way that made his blood stir.

“You do?” he asked in surprise. Belle had been barely more than a toddler when she and her father had come to Covington’s Woods and he had learned their tragic family history early on. Maurice French had decided to join after his wife Colette had been assaulted and abused by a group of men one evening on her way back from work and had spiraled into a deep depression in the aftermath. Eventually, unable to bear the grief and agony any longer, she had taken her own life by throwing herself from the top of an apartment building.

He wondered how much Belle knew about her mother’s history.

“Most of them are hazy ones,” Belle continued to confide in him. “I remember my mother mostly. But I also remember… playing in a box filled with sand. I had a little bucket of a very bright color… the color of fuchsia’s in bloom…”

Her beautiful smile turned wistful as she sighed softly. “I know they say that the towns are wicked, but all I remember is sunshine… and my little bucket.”

“Not all was bad there,” he replied softly, his heart squeezing painfully. For some reason it felt wrong that a child as young as Belle had been ripped away from a place that had given her so much happiness.

“I also remember… music…” she continued thoughtfully. “It came out of some kind of box and the tunes were very different from our songs… ”

He had to laugh at that, the memories flooding back at him. “It is called a radio,” he told her. “And yes, I remember it well. It was one of the things I missed most after I came here.”

“My mother used to sing along with it,” Belle mused, her eyes acquiring a far away look. “There was one song that was her favorite… I still remember it…”

And before he could even think of a reply, before he could put a stop to the inexplicable wave of homesickness that washed over him all of a sudden, Belle sang softly under her breath:

“Our house, is a very, very, very fine house. Which two cats in the yard, life used to be so hard…”

Her voice faltered and she looked at him bashfully. “I don’t remember the rest of it.”

There was hardly any breath left in his lungs, but he still managed the words:

“Now everything is easy ‘cause of you.”
She gazed up at him, her eyes beaming and a radiant smile playing across her lips. Because of her his world was turned upside down once again, but this time he felt no fear, no trepidation. The world he’d left behind suddenly didn’t seem so frightful anymore and the prospect of leaving this refugee no longer daunting. For her, he could

“Belle…” he started, turning towards her to be able to look at her more fully, unconsciously inching closer towards her. The use of her given name elected a small gasp from her, one that gave him hope and courage to continue. “I feel… that I should tell you…”

“Belle!”

Maurice French’s voice cut through the air, chasing away the quietness and intimacy of their moment together.

“I have looked everywhere for your. The celebration is about to start, won’t you come with me?” Despite his heavy frame, he was approaching them quickly and Maurice French shot him a cold, warning look that took Gold completely by surprise. He looked at Belle and for a moment he thought he saw a flicker of disappointment flash across her face before it was replaced with her usual, sunny smile.

“Of course papa, I’m coming,” she told her father, stepping away from Gold, who felt the sudden distance between them keenly and was only partly soothed by the smile she send his way. “Enjoy your evening, Mr. Gold. It was nice talking to you.”

Then she stepped towards her father who immediately took hold of her elbow in an almost possessive grip. Before they took off, Maurice French looked back one more time, his eyebrows frowned and his face marred with suspicion.

The greenhouse was warm and filled with light and scents and music. People were dancing gaily and he watched them from the sideline, another glass of cider in his hand. He tried not to look, but every few minutes his treacherous eyes strayed towards Belle. She was dancing in a large circle in the middle of the room, clearly swept up in the thrill of the moment. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were sparkling and she looked like a vision in the sky blue linen dress she was wearing with her chestnut curls dancing on her shoulders and pretty white flowers adorning her hair.

He wanted to cross the room and take her hand in his. Pull her close as he guided her through the row of people, wrap his arm around her waist as they joined the circle. Hold her close and not let go, showing everyone that she was his.

It was a hopeless fantasy in every way. Beautiful, young, sweet Belle would never be romantically interested in an old man like him. And even if she were, he would never be able to dance with her, his crippled leg preventing him for being the man he wanted to be for her, the man she deserved.

He became aware of the presence of Edward Walker next to him and he shot him a side-ways glance, frowning at the man’s serious expression. “Congratulations on this joyful day,” he offered.

The other man nodded solemnly, his face unchanging. “Nicolas,” he started eventually, deliberately keeping his voice low as to not be overheard. “It feel that it is my unfortunate duty to warn you.”
The words were so unexpected that he recoiled in surprise. “Warn me… what reason is there to do that?”

“There has been talk. People have noticed that you have been paying a lot of attention to Miss French lately.”

Immediately he felt hot and cold all over, his hand clenching around the handle of his cane. “I… that is… that is preposterous,” he managed to stammer eventually.

“I feel that it is only fair to warn you,” Walker cautioned him. “Maurice French’ feelings on the subject are not in your favor, should you endeavor to pursue her.”

Anger flared up in him and he struggled both to find words to deny these ridiculous accusations and to keep his voice down. “I do not intend to pursue Miss French… that is to say, I am convinced such attempts would not be welcomed by her… were I you I would not pay mind to such idle gossip.”

“My actions stem from observation,” Walker replied stone-faced. “Regardless of Miss French’ feelings on the subject, I caution you to keep your distance. It might not be an easy thing, but every man must exercise self-control. It is a matter of self-preservation.”

“Miss French will not have to fear any unwanted advances on my part,” he replied coolly. “And I refuse to say any more on the matter.”

“Look…” Walker nodded in the direction of the dancing circle, Belle still in their midst, this time accompanied by a tall, muscular-built, dark-haired fellow that had both his hands on her, holding her far too tightly for Gold’s comfort. “Young Gaston Merand is a much more suited match for her and her father is pleased with the notion.”

He was barely holding on to his self-control, or to his sanity for that manner. Gripping his cane even more tightly he managed to grit between his clenched teeth: “As I said, I refuse to say more on this.”

“As you wish,” Walker replied benignantly. “Just take my warning to heart. Enjoy the rest of the evening.”

As the other man walked away, Gold could feel the walls of the room closing in on him, the air becoming so thick it was almost suffocating him. There was too much noise, there were too more people and from the corner of his eye, he could see how Gaston pulled Belle out of the circle, his bulky arms pressing her close against his form as he steered her to another dancing formation.

He had to leave.

He stumbled his way to the exit, almost colliding into Noah Percy when he tried to make it out of the door, the young, disturbed man ranting incoherently about ‘offerings’ and ‘how displeased they were…’

He paid him no mind, simply brushed him aside, stepping into the dark, cold night, breathing in the night’s air with a sign of relief.
Then he started walking towards his house in as brisk a pace as he could managed, while Noah Percy disappeared into the opposite direction of the village.

Chapter End Notes
Of course the song Belle remembers is 'My house' from Crosby, Still, Nash and Young.
When he entered the village the next morning, his eyes stinging with sleep-deprivation as he’d spend the entire night tossing and turning, he was greeted by the grim sight of a dead, skinned lamb lying on the porch of his shop.

He gaped in horror at the bloodied, tattered carcass, bile rising in his throat. There could not have been another invasion. He’d heard the bell if there had been.

Looking around him, he noticed that the village was strangely quiet. Most windows and shutters were still closed and only a handful of people, dressed in ochre cloaks were roaming about a few dozen feet away.

Stepping off his porch he limbed in their direction, noticing as he went that there were more animal carcasses lying scattered around, or messy trials of blood to be found. When he approached one of the barns where the livestock was kept, he felt the color drain his face as he watched how two young men cut an animal down from the rope it was dangling on, attached to the doorpost.

Another lamb.

“What has transpired here?” he asked, his voice hoarse and rough.

“Mr. Gold,” Lucius Hunt acknowledged him with a small nod. “Those We Don’t Speak Off have entered our village again last night, while we were all celebrating the union between Christop Crane and Kitty Walker. Two boys saw one of the creatures as it ran away from the village and they alerted Mr. Walker. We returned from the greenhouse together and… we found a dozen animals like this.”

As he was speaking, Lucius Hunt gently lowered the lamb on the ground and taking a deep breath to steady himself, Gold took a step forward to examine it closely. The head was lying in an odd angle, prompting his conclusion that the animal’s neck had been snapped first before it had been skinned.

“These are our own,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

“Animals have been stolen from the barn last night,” Lucius Hunt agreed. “We are missing a total of fifteen, most of them only just born.”

Gold resisted the temptation to swear loudly. Fifteen lambs murdered meant that the entire lambing season had been wasted.

Because he made his living of the wool they provided, he’d always taken a keen interest to the flock and as the years went by he’d become genuinely interested in shepherding. Now fifteen newborn, innocent lambs had been slaughtered for no other reason than to install fear in an already terrified community and for the first time ever he was filled with an intense hate towards the creatures that caused so much terror and destruction.

“The elders will conduct interviews with everybody separately,” Lucius Hunt informed him. “They want to find out what may have caused this new attack.”

A flicker of guilt crossed his face before he turned his attention to Gold. “You did not come back with us to the village, did you?”

“I had left the celebration much earlier.” Gold replied, “I was feeling unwell, so I returned to my home. I did not see anything when I left.”

Lucius Hunt’s posture relaxed somewhat. “I do believe the elders will be quick to question you.
Them seemed… unsettled by the recent events.”

Their conversation was interrupted when Finton Coin urged him to move on to the next spot were a lamb had been found and Gold watched the two young men stride away, his mind reeling.

He needed to go back to his shop.

He needed to spin.

He replayed the conversation with Edward Walker over and over again in his mind. People were talking about them and they had noticed. What exactly they had noticed mystified him. Belle had come to his shop a few times and they had been seen in conversation on occasion. It should hardly be enough to get the tongues wagging. Then again, in a small community like theirs people always found something to talk about. To his knowledge, no-one knew that on the night of the first invasion he and Belle had hidden in the shelter underneath his shop. As her father had been out that night, he and everyone else assumed that she’d been home by herself and hid herself there. Belle had never contradicted these assumptions and the hours spend in his shelter with her burrowed in his arms was a secret only known to them.

Yet, somehow Maurice French had seen enough to form a suspicion. And even Edward Walker had confirmed that his warning had been triggered by his own observations.

Beautiful Belle, unassuming and artless was above every reproach, most likely it had been his actions, his hungry staring that had betrayed him.

And now there was only one solution for it to avoid his utter embarrassment and Belle’s ruined reputation: he should, as Walker had suggested, keep away from her, distance himself from her until the rumors had faded. It was quite simple really, but his heart contorted painfully at the very thought. She was the single bright light that shone in the darkness of his existence, the flicker of warmth that cut trough the ice that had accumulated around his heart. He asked for so little. He only needed to see her, watch her go on about her day and hear her laughter. A little conversation every now and then, have her soft, beaming eyes looking at him and bask in the sight of her smile. She was young and beautiful and completely unattainable. She was forever out of his reach and he didn’t need Maurice French’ disapproving looks, or Edward Walker’s warning to be aware of that. He’d never approach her, he’d never made her feel uncomfortable. He just needed to be allowed his feelings for her.

His resolution to stay away from her lasted all but a day. As Lucius Hunt had predicted he was one of the first that was questioned by the elders, but he had next to nothing to tell them. He’d left the wedding early, went home and strayed to bed where he’d been too caught up in his own misery that Judgement Day could have arrived without him noticing.

She didn’t come to the shop that day and when he passed her in the street later that afternoon he kept his head firmly turned to the other side, feigning interest in his surroundings, his heart pounding in his chest until he’d turned the corner. This was sheer torture. Turning away from her like this when all he craved was just a glimpse of
His resolve remained strong until the next day. He’d made it into his shop without crossing her path and he intended to lock himself into his backroom for most of the day. Halfway through the morning he became aware of the sound of cries and yelling outside and he limped to the front of the shop to see what the commotion was about.

Just as he’d entered, the door of his shop was flung open and a flustered looking Finton Coin stumbled in.

“Mr. Gold, are you well?” he panted. “I am, thank you,” he answered, bewildered. Outside the screaming became louder and his stomach dropped with dread in anticipation of the horror that had befallen them this time.

“Is there anyone else hurt in here?” Finton Coin asked anxiously.

“There isn’t,” he bit back, nerves seeping into his voice. “Would you please be so kind as to tell me what is going on?”

“Noah Percy was found with blood on his hands not half an hour ago,” Finton Coin told him, his face etched with horror. “He has suffered no injuries himself, so the blood is unlikely to be his own. But he will not speak as to what has befallen him.”

For a few seconds Gold stood rooted to the spot, his inside chilling with fear. Then the cold terror snapped him into action and within moments he was outside the door, almost knocking Finton Coin over in his haste.

There was only one thought remaining in his mind: he needed to find Belle. He needed to ensure that she was all right. He had to find her.

He went straight for her father’s greenhouse, but discovered that she’d gone out for an errand earlier that morning and hadn’t been seen since. His stomach twisting into knots, he pushed his body to move faster, towards the Town Hall. She wasn’t there either and just as the panic was about to seize him, another notion occurred to his mind and his feet immediately carried him around the schoolhouse where the entrance to the small reading room was located. He stepped inside the dimly-lit room, only to find it empty as well and his heart sank.

Trying to think of another place where she might be, he was startled when the door was thrown open and Belle ran inside, her eyes wide and frantic, curling strands coming undone from her bun. She froze upon seeing him, her mouth slightly agape as they stared at each other, scarcely daring to believe their eyes.

“Thank God you’re unhurt…” he managed eventually, his voice nothing more than a hoarse whisper and the next moment she was in his arms, her arms wrapping themselves around his neck as she pressed herself closely against him.

“Belle… Belle…” he breathed in her hair and letting go of his cane, his hands fluttered over her body before settling on the small of her back.

Eventually he pulled back a little bit, needing to see her eyes and her face, needing to reassure himself that she was real. His face was only inches away from hers and his eyes swept hungrily over her face.

Up close her eyes were even bluer than he’d ever imagined them to be and he found that he was rapidly losing himself in their depths. The skin of her face was smooth and slightly flushed and his fingertips itched with the desire to touch her.
Then his eyes strayed to her mouth and his entire world ceased to exist, his whole being focussed on the cherry red plumpness of her lips. Breathing became almost too much an effort when her front teeth dug firmly into her lower lip, leaving a small crease behind. A low, hungry growl ended the silence in the room and he realized belatedly that the sound had been of his own making.

Then his mouth crashed to hers, his lips closing around her mistreated lower lip and he sucked gently. For a moment she didn’t react at all and then she became soft and pliant in his arms, her fingers burying himself into his hair as she pressed herself closer. He growled her name, the sound turning unrecognizable as he refused to let go of her mouth, his tongue coming out instead to soothe the spot were she had bit her lip.

She whimpered into his mouth, clinging tighter against him and whatever little there was left of his control snapped as her lips parted hesitantly underneath his. Deepening the kiss, his tongue sought out all the places in her mouth that made her writhe against him and sigh against his lips until she tentatively began to respond, his heart almost stopping as he felt her stroke her tongue against his.

She was safe and unharmed and he was surrounded by her warmth and her scent and nothing could ever be more right.

The kiss felt like it both lasted for an eternity and only a second, but when he heard voices approaching the reading room, he had enough common sense left to pull away from her and put a respectable distance between them just before the door was thrown open once more and revealed August Nicholson.

“Belle, you need to come with me straight away,” His face was white as a sheet and his voice grave. “They have found Lucius Hunt… he has been stabbed multiple times… He…”

August Nicholson took a deep, shuddering breath that ended in a sob. “He may very well lose his life…”

“Oh god…” Next to him Belle went pale and purely on instinct he reached out and placed his hand on her waist to steady her, his own mind spinning at the news. Quiet, brave Lucius Hunt… why in the world would anyone wish him any harm? Then the dots connected. “It was Noah Percy who hurt him?” It wasn’t so much a question as a statement.

August Nicholson nodded painfully. “We suppose so. But he needs to be questioned before we can be certain…”

“Lucius and Ivy were going to be married,” Belle said quietly, tears forming in her eyes. “They finally agreed upon it on the night after Kitty’s wedding.” She looked up at August Nicholson. “Does Ivy know?”

“She does,” the older men replied. “And that is why I have come to fetch you. She is very distressed and Mr. Walker requires your help to calm her… Kitty is with her now, but…”

He understood. Kitty and Ivy were as close as sisters could be, but Kitty was also likely to be as distressed and emotional as Ivy was. Ivy now needed the calm strength and company of Belle.

“I'll come with you at once,” Belle answered, picking up her shawl from a nearby chair. She turned to look at him, her eyes a storm of emotions. There was so much to be said, so much he needed to tell her, but now was not the time. Their kiss had shifted everything between them, but his heart clenched painfully with the fear that with once she walked out of this room, their moment would be gone.
She gave him a tiny smile, the softness of it soothing him somewhat as she followed August Nicholson outside.

The events of this morning had changed everything.
Chapter 9

The rest of the day passed in a fog of disbelief and fear. Lucius Hunt’s injured body was brought to the clinic where Victor Bing attempted to stabilize his condition as best as he could. But by the end of the afternoon Adeline Clark told the assembled townsfolk the bleak news: the young man’s condition was very serious indeed and he could pass any moment.

Gold spent the rest of the day spinning and then returned home, where he spend the evening pottering nervously around in his house, too anxious to eat or to settle himself to any task, futilely trying to get a grip on the whirl of emotions that were swirling through his brain, the memory of the heated kiss he’d shared with Belle making his heart pound and his hands shake even hours later.

In spite of all of his fantasies, he had never expected to be so carried away by the sheer intensity of the moment. Far from being sated from having finally kissed her after months of longing for her, he knew craved her even more.

The kiss had far exceeded his wildest expectations, but now that it had happened, he couldn’t even begin to determine where it left them. There hadn’t been time to talk afterwards, or even for him gauge her reaction. Had she been merely seized by the moment? Was she regretting it now? He hadn’t seen her for the rest of the day since she had been with Ivy and he fretted how he was going to find an opportunity to talk to her alone.

A soft rap on the window startled him and he hurried towards the door, trying to ignore the surge of hope that flared up inside him. It was a little over an hour to curfew, but it was already dark outside and surely she wouldn’t…

But when he opened the door, it was very much Belle standing on the threshold, her cheeks flushed and panting slightly as if she’d been running.

Quickly he stepped aside to let her in and closed the door behind her, suddenly finding himself to be standing almost chest to chest with her in the narrow, dimly lit corridor.

“How is Ivy faring?” he asked hoarsely, desperately attempting not to notice how close and warm her body was, how much he wanted to reach out and pull her back into his arms.

“Here spirit is very down,” Belle answered, her voice sounding quiet and endlessly tired. “After she stopped crying she simply… broke… and if Lucius would pass away I don’t think she’ll ever mend again…”

Her words ended in a dry sob and more on impulse than anything else he reached out and placed his hand on her upper arm in an attempt to comfort her.

“It is not fair…” she wept quietly. “They just found each other… they love each other so very much. It isn’t right…”

“I know,” he whispered, daring to rub his hand up and down over her arm. “I know it is not.”

She moved closer towards him, pressing herself into his arms.

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“Hold me, please?”

For a moment she looked up at him, her eyes sparkling with tears in the low light, her lips trembling and nothing could have stopped him from opening his arms and wrapping her up in his embrace, his heart swelling as she tucked her head underneath his chin and she nestled herself against his chest, her hands coming up to rest on his shoulders. He held her close, murmuring a stream of soft, soothing nonsense into her hair as he rubbed her back and held her close, absorbing
her sobs and her tears. It didn’t matter what she felt or didn’t feel for him. She was here now, allowing him to comfort her, to hold her and that alone was more than enough already.

Eventually though she had cried herself out and straightened up a little and for a horrible, sinking moment he feared she was going to move away from.
But she only pulled back slightly, so she could look at him properly, sliding her hands up and linking them behind his neck, giving him a watery smile.

His heart melted at the sight of her tear-streaked face, smiling bravely in the face of such horror. He reached out a shaking hand and tentatively brushed the tears away from her cheeks, reveling in the softness of her skin. Under his fingertips she blushed slightly, causing his breath to catch in his throat.
Her smile widened at his actions, her hands moving into his hair and caressing the strands between her fingers and he bit back a groan, feeling as if she’d set his blood aflame.

“Belle…” he whispered hoarsely, not really knowing if he was begging her to stop or begging her to continue.

She was watching him intently, her head slightly tilted to the side until she seemed to reach a decision. Leaning in slowly, she brought her face closer to his until their noses were almost touching, but then she tilted her head further to the side and he stood motionless, barely daring to draw breath as her lips came only inches away from his own and her eyelids fluttered closed. She brushed her lips over his so softly and so delicately that if he hadn’t kept his eyes open, he would barely have noticed. But this first touch seemed to embolden her and she pressed her lips a little firmer against his, her hands tightening on the back of his head.

He wanted to remain completely still, wanted to give her the opportunity to set the pace, to have full control of how much was going to happen. But when she drew his bottom lip between her own and sucked gently he couldn’t hold back any longer. With a low groan he pulled her flush against him, his hands running up and down over her back, feeling the warmth of her skin through the thin, linen dress she was wearing before settling on her waist.

She moaned in surprise and he used the opportunity to tease the entrance to her mouth with his tongue, feeling her lips parting to welcome him in. This kiss was so different from the frantic, passionate one they had shared in the reading room and he took his time to explore her mouth, to discover every spot that made her sigh and arch against him and exploiting it to the fullest.

Her soft moans made his head spin and crave more and soon his hands resumed caressing her hips and sides, slowly inching up higher until his thumbs were brushing over her ribcage. She was soft and warm and so responsive in his arms and he couldn’t get enough. Wrapping one arm around her waist again, he pulled her close, his other hand traveling up even higher until she gasped into his mouth and he realized with a start that he was caressing the side of her breast with his fingertips.

Appalled by his own forwardness, he dropped his hand back to her hip and pulled away, breaking their kiss. With his stomach churning with worry he checked her face for signs of uncomfortableness or revulsion, but the sight that met his eyes instead took his breath away. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide and dilated and her lips red and swollen from his kisses.
She had never looked more lovely, more beautiful to him than in that moment, but he still didn’t dare to believe that she really wanted this, that she really welcomed his kisses and his hands touching her body.

But then her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips, her voice breathless and heady with desire: “Nicolas… please…”
The use of his given name, the name that hardly anybody ever used these days brought down the last remaining wall of his self-control. Barely able to breathe and with his heart pounding in his ears, he looked down between them and watched how his hand slowly slid up from her hip over her side. Hesitating for a moment, he summoned his courage and gently cupped her breast through the material of her dress, marveling at how perfectly she fitted in the palm of his hand. She was watching the movement of his hand with dazed eyes, her face flaming with heat, breathing haltingly through half open lips. He rubbed his thumb experimentally over the soft curve, feeling how she began to tremble against him as her nipple hardened under his touch.

“Oh my Belle…” he groaned helplessly, trying to focus as desire began to cloud his mind. “Tell me to stop… tell me you don’t want this…”

Blue eyes bored into his, clear and unafraid and one of her hands moved from his hair to the front of her dress, steadily and unwavering.

He watched transfixed as she slipped the first button of her dress through the hole and then the next and the next, revealing inch by inch the porcelain white skin of her throat. “I want you,” she told him softly, unblinkingly.

His hands settled on her waist again and he steered her gently towards the flight of stairs at the end of the corridor. They moved up haltingly, as he was unable to resist from stopping every few steps to undo a few more buttons and kiss and stroke every inch of revealed skin.

“Won’t your father object…?” he asked worriedly as they finally reached the foot end of his bed.

“He believes I am still with Ivy… he will not expect me for another hour…”

She shrugged out of the sleeves, her dress sliding into a heap on the floor. He almost didn’t dare to trust his eyes as she laid down on his bed, dressed only in her chemise, her soft skin begging to be touched and kissed, her scent beckoning him to taste her. He was only a man and he had been alone for far too long. He had loved and desired her for too long to be able to hold himself back now and so he gave in. Covering her body with his own, he devoted himself to worshipping her.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lucius Hunt was stabbed on a Wednesday. On Friday morning Ivy Walker was gone from the village and later that same morning Noah Percy escaped the room he’d been confined in through a broken window.

Soon whispers of the reason of Ivy Walker’s disappearance began to roam. None of the elders deigned to confirm the rumors, but Bessie Morton had overheard their heated argument as an impromptu council meeting had been orchestrated shortly after the severity of Lucius Hunt’s condition had become clear.

As it would seem, Ivy Walker had requested and been granted permission by her father to cross Covington’s Woods and go to the towns to obtain medicine that would heal Lucius’s Hunts affliction. She had crossed the boarder on Thursday night, accompanied by Christop Crane and Finton Coin, the three of them dressed in safe color and carrying protective stones to keep the creatures at bay.

But early Friday morning both young men had returned, unharmed but terrified by their experience.

It was Ivy’s quest and she, and she alone was to cross the woods and enter the towns.

Many of the townsfolk never expected to see the girl alive again. Blind, unprotected and unaware she stood no chance against the horror that dwelled in the woods. A horror that would certainly prey on a defenseless girl and tear her to pieces. Perhaps, all in all, it would be kindness. Her tombstone could be placed next to that of Lucius Hunt and they would always be together in some way.

The only person who truly seemed to believe that Ivy would succeed in her endeavor appeared to be her father, who had defended his choice fiercely against the other elders. Bessie Morton claimed to have heard him raving against Adeline Clark, who had voiced her objections most strongly, claiming that in the end it was innocence that they wanted to protect.

Sadly, it seemed that innocence was the very thing that was being jeopardized by the events that took place in the following days. Noah Percy’s disappearance came as a shock to everyone, including the elders and that more than anything fueled the terror that took hold of the village once again.

Something dark and dangerous was on the loose and instead of being able to keep it out by boarders and rituals, it appeared to have emerged from amongst them.

The village became dosed in dread, parents forbidding their children to go outdoors, even going as far as to keep them home from school, until Mr. Walker sternly put a stop to that. Upon anxious demand, the Watch Tower was now manned by two guards at all times and there was talk of increasing the number of rehearsal drills to once a week.

Surprisingly enough no search party was organized to look for Noah Percy, the elders insisting that they would take care of that among themselves.

And against all odds, Lucius Hunt kept fighting for his life, stubbornly and insistingly clinging to it, even as the infection scourged his body.
Ivy Walker returned to the Village, alive and well on Saturday morning, carrying a small linen back with two peculiar looking bottles, labeled with strange markings. She was covered in blood, mud, twigs, dirt, gravel and countless other, unmentionable things and once her mother had cleaned her up it became apparent that she was also rather badly scratched and bruised, with all of her fingernails torn and a nasty cut across her collarbone. But the most devastating things was the sight of her usual so empty eyes filled with terror.

Of course it was only a matter of hours before the story of what had befallen her began to spread. After Christop Crane and Finton Coin had returned she had continued her journey through the woods. For the most part her journey had been swift and uneventful, until she had fallen into a pit. When she had managed to climb out of that and continue her journey, she had encountered a lone creature that has been roaming the woods.

Hurrying back to the pit, she had stood on the edge, waiting for the creature to catch up with her and grab her, only stepping aside at the very last second so that the creature dived head first into the pit with considerably speed, the fall presumingly breaking its neck.

After that obtaining the precious medicine had been relatively easy and Ivy had quickly been able to start the journey back, almost running the entire time in her haste to make it back to the village before Lucius Hunt would succumb to his injuries.

Many praised her bravery and most of the men grudgingly admitted that she had probably been more fearless than any of them would have been in the same situation. And yet it was clear that the experience had shaken her deeply. She kept a vigil watch at Lucius’ bed, waiting impatiently for any sign of improvement of his condition. And after her initial telling of the story, she refused to relate anything else.

The medicine she had brought back from the towns were of a very strong and healing kind and within days Lucius Hunt began to heal, albeit slowly, leaving the townsfolk perplexed. It appeared that Ivy Walker had single-handedly cheated the creatures in the woods and saved the life of the man she loved.

And no-one dared to voice the dread they were experiencing for the ramifications of her actions.

For Gold, the fortnight after Ivy Walker’s journey to the towns passed in dream-like blur. He had learned of the events that had taken place like everyone else and was likewise worried, but the most part of his thoughts and actions now revolved around Belle.

They were not together every day. It was simply not possible under the watchful eye of her father and the heavy scrutiny of the rest of the town. Yet, the thrill of their secret meetings ensured his mind wasn’t able to focus on much else than when he was to see her and hold her in his arms again.

Belle in particular proved to be downright crafty in finding ways for them to be together. She always found an excuse for completing an errand that would have her out and about in the hours before dusk, ensuring she ran into him while he was taking his customary evening walk. On these occasions they couldn’t do more than walk beside each other and talk, barely allowing themselves the tiniest hint of a touch for the fear of being discovered, but he cherished the moments all the same, happy to just spend time with her.
He initiated another meeting in the reading room where they shared a few lovely kisses, but being afraid the entire time that someone was going to walk in on them turned that into a rather nerve-wrecking affair.

He liked it better when she found an excuse to come to his shop and he could switch the sign on the door to ‘closed’ and lead her to the backroom under the pretense of showing her the yarn he was currently working on.

There they could kiss and embrace at leisure and although he never quite worked up the courage to initiate anything more than passionate kisses and a few coy touches as they were in a place that he still considered to be relatively public.

Nevertheless, her unexpected visits were the highlight of his day and her craved her warmth and her laughter as much as he yearned for her touch.

On a few occasions she managed to come to his house in the evening and stay for a few hours, time he treasured beyond anything else in his life. Belle was breathtaking in every way. She was inexperienced and self-conscious at first and on their first night together he had discovered soon enough that she had never been with a man before. It had almost made him stop, feeling that she was giving him too great a gift, allowing him to take something so precious from her.

Ensuring she was comfortable and satisfied and that her first time was as enjoyable and free of pain and distress as he could possibly make it, was nerve fraying.

Yet at the same time there was something indescribable gratifying in being her first. The first to kiss her. The first to lavish his eyes on her beauty of her body, all creamy white skin and soft curves. The first to touch her and show her all the wonderful sensations her body was capable of. The first to taste every inch of her and making her writhe with delight. The first to coax surprised and breathy moans from her throat as he learned what she liked. The first to bring her to her peak and watch her face as her pleasure overtook her.

Because at the same time she was also insatiably curious and just as intent on discovering him and learning what made him cry out and render him helpless to her.

He had never felt happier or more fulfilled than during the stolen hours she spend in his bed and in his arms. In these hours it felt to him as if the world around them ceased to exist.

Nothing mattered but her smiles, her happiness and her pleasure.

When she dozed off afterwards he held her tightly in his arms, not daring to release his hold on her in the slightest, instead continuing to caress her hair or the soft skin of her shoulders and back to ensure himself that she was really there. That it was all real.

He never slept, their time together being too precious, too beautiful to him to waste even a second of it sleeping.

They had silently agreed not breathe a word of their relationship to anyone. Maurice French would throw a fit and would do anything in his power to keep them apart and with all the terrible happenings of the past weeks, it simply wasn’t prudent to cause more drama.

He tried to be sensible about it, but the secrecy of their relationship did nothing to alleviate the fear that lived in the pit of his stomach.

Someone as young and vibrant as Belle would never tie herself permanently to an old cripple like himself. She enjoyed their time together, but inevitably the time would come when he would have to let her go.

Her father would never approve and nor would the elders and Belle deserved so much better than to be subjected to their scorn because of him.
She deserved the world and everything else that he would never be able to give her.

He was living on borrowed time and every moment together could be their last. And so he held her in the low light of an oil lamp as she slept, memorizing every single detail about her, from the way her hair curled at the nape of her neck to the way her eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks in her slumber.

It was never enough and more than he would ever thought he had.

Chapter End Notes

It's probably already fairly obvious, but from this point on the story no longer follows the events of the movie, but expands on what could have happened afterwards.
One morning, a fortnight after Ivy Walker’s journey to the towns, the body of Noah Percy was brought back to village in a closed coffin.

It was divulged later that morning that the elders had negotiated the release of his body with the creatures in the woods so that his grief-stricken parents would have a place to put their son to rest.

The wake that was held to remember Noah Percy and the funeral the next day marked a changing point. The fear and terror that had gripped the townsfolk in a suffocating grasp for the past months imploded with dramatic consequences.

The extra safety measures, already installed in the previous weeks were extended. Many people took up wearing the safety color at all time, boarder security was increased and a lively trade of lucky charms, protective amulets and other precautions arose.

The council of elders did point out on occasion that all these extra totems didn’t actually offer any real protection, but their general attitude of ‘it doesn’t hurt either way’, ensured an even higher demand of them.

People grew more suspicious and jumpy around each other. The occasional flowers or fruits that bore the bad color and appeared within the boarders of the village were now not only buried, but burned first before their ashes were covered with sand.

The stump near the woods became forbidden territory and several people took it upon themselves to guard the area around it to dissuade the boys from playing any games there.

The building tension escalated about a week later for the first time. Dean Leroy, one of the carpenters hurt his hand badly while mending a fence, acquiring a deep cut. Frightened townsfolk, terrified that the bad color of the blood would attract a hoard of creatures from the woods decided in their panicked state of minds that Leroy was to be cast out into the woods, outside of the boarders, so that the creatures would maul only him and not swarm the village again in retaliation.

Four strong men had already grabbed him and were dragging a howling, cursing, pleading Leroy towards the boarder when August Nicholson timely interfered. The soft-spoken, introvert man uncharacteristically displayed such an anger over this impulsive display of kangaroo court that the chastised townsfolk quickly released Leroy and allowed him to visit Dr. Bing’s clinic for treatment.

A town meeting was held after that and Edward Walker seriously impressed on the people how important it was to follow the rules set by the council and not participate in any arbitrary measures.

At the same time he acknowledged the village’s increased fear and eagerness for ways to ensure their safety and announced that the Ceremony of Meat was to held every week from this point on.

As the weeks wore on the Elder’s double stance became even more obvious.

Bessie Morton was one of the laundresses in charge of cleaning the large ochre banners that marked the boarders to Covington Woods. Once a month, the banners and flags were changed and laundered, so that their vivid, yellow color always stood out brightly.

To clean away the mud and grass stains that had soiled the fabric, Bessie Morton used a
handmade laundering detergent, made out of peroxide and lemons. During the monthly laundering a few weeks after Noah Percy’s funeral, she used a slightly too strong detergent, causing the deep color or the flags and banners to become shaded.

The uproar this created among the village had never been seen before. A crowd of agitated and fearful people had gathered at the town hall, demanding that action was taken against the young woman who carelessly and irresponsibly had exposed the village to even more danger by ruining one of its safety persuasions.

Fearing for her safety and in an attempt to appease the angry pack of townsfolk, the Elders decided to place Bessie Morton under house-arrest for the time being and locked her away into the same room that had confined Noah Percy before he’d run away into the woods.

The village had no experience with a court system. In the twenty years since the village had been founded, there never had been a need for it. Minor conflicts were dealt with by the council and the utter peacefulness and renouncing of violence that characterized every person who’d decided to join ensured nothing more was ever needed.

Until now. People demanded to be protected agains the horror that dwelled in the woods, with bad grace if necessary.

The case of Bessie Morton became more difficult to solve satisfactory as the days past on and so the woman remained in custody, becoming the village’s first true prisoner.

Gold resented the increased safety percussions because it made it even harder for Belle and him to spend time together. She still managed to come to his shop rather frequently, but being together for a longer period of time in his house proved to become more and more challenging.

It did nothing to alleviate his fear that one day Belle was going to grow tired of their arrangement and decided to end things between them. Belle deserved a real suitor. A handsome, respectable young man that was able to lavish her with attentions and take her on walks and picnics under the approving, watchful eye of the village’s matrons. She deserved a true courtship, a formal engagement and to experience all the happiness and excitement young women usually experienced when they entered a betrothal.

Instead, because of him she got a hurried fumbling in the back of his shop, or a few stolen hours in his bed. And no matter how much he treasured their time together, no matter how much he saw her as the single most precious thing that had even befallen him, he was well aware of how it would appear to everyone else.

The lecherous old man ruining a lovely young woman.

If he were a better man, a less selfish one, he would be the one to end it and to set her free. But no matter how much his guilty conscious plagued him during the hours she wasn’t with him, once he had her in his arms again, all he could think of was how wonderful she was and how perfect. How she made him happy, happier than he’d ever held possible after losing Bae.

And if she looked at him with bright, beaming eyes, shining with something soft and tender, he could almost make himself believe that she loved him as he loved her.

At times like that he had to stop himself from telling her of his feelings because it would serve no purpose whatsoever. It would in all likelihood only scare her away.

And so he mouthed his I love you’s without making a sound against her lips as he kissed her,
against her skin as he loved her and against her hair as he held her afterwards.

There was precious little he could offer her and yet he wanted to give her something. She deserved to receive attentions and be showered with tokens of his affection, but for weeks he came up blank as to what to offer her.

Until he thought of something.

Hiding his present in the back of his shop, he hoped she would soon find an opportunity to come and see him. He had to wait an agonizing two days before she appeared in the shop with sparkling eyes and a warm smile around her lips. Since his lunch hour was about to start, he switched the sign on the door of his shop to ‘closed’ and all but dragged her into the backroom, relieved to finally be alone with her.

Away from prying eyes, she wrapped her arms around his neck, her hands disappearing into his hair as he claimed her lips with his own, desperate to feel her. All too soon they had to break apart, but he shivered when he felt her press her soft lips against his neck, just below his ear, her hands tightening on the back of his head.

“I’ve missed you, Nicholas…”

“I missed you too, sweetheart,” he whispered into her hair, pulling her close. She stayed in his arms for a while, her head resting against his shoulder, tucked underneath his chin and he reveled in this peaceful moment of simply holding her, trying to imprint the memory into his brain.

“I have something for you,” he told her eventually, doubt settling in as he spoke the words. “At least… if you’d like to have it…”

She pulled back, surprised, delighted eyes meeting his. “Really? What is it?”

Her happy anticipation both reassured him and made him even more afraid of disappointing her. “Well, I assume that by now you have read the entire content of the reading room… three times,” he started and she grinned wryly at his assessment.

“When I came to Covington Woods all those years ago I wasn’t permitted to bring along a great many things. Only things that would fit a wooden chest…”

“The black boxes that are to be found in every house?” Belle asked, her eyes widening in understanding.

Gold nodded. “Aside from some pictures of my family and some of Bae’s toys I also packed my favorite books…” he paused, trying to gauge her reaction, his insides unclenching when he noticed her breath catching in her throat.

“These books are obviously about our old world, but if you’re interested in reading them…”

A moment later the air was knocked out of his lungs as Belle flung herself back into his arms, hugging him so tightly he feared he might crack a rib.

“I’d love to read them…”

Pulling back slightly, he was surprised to see the tears trickling down her face, their paths halted by her brilliant smile.

“Everybody is forever scolding me because I read too much…” she said, her words breaking on a sob. “They all say I can spend my time doing far more industrious things… I can’t believe you did this…”
Cupping her face between his hands, he brushed her tears away with his thumbs, his heart searing at her obvious happiness. “I’ve brought a few with me to the shop and I have some more at the house as well… they’re all for you, Belle.”

Tugging his head down, she kissed him soundly and he could feel her radiant smile against her lips.

“What kind of books are they?”

“Well… he pulled the books from underneath some wool where he’d hidden them and showed them to her.

“The Shining, by Stephen King,” Belle read out loud, reverently taking the book from him. “It looks so different from the books in the reading room. This one has a picture…” Her fingers trailed over the drawing of a man, a woman and a child on the cover and she looked up at him with curious eyes. “Were all books like this in the old world?”

“Most of them, yes,” he replied. “This is called a paperback edition, it was usually cheaper. I actually bought this about a month before I came here…”

The two other books he had brought were paperbacks as well, and despite the fact that Belle appeared deeply intrigued by the book about a colony of rabbits, she decided to start on ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ first.

A rap on the door alerted them to the fact that his lunch hour had passed and Belle hastily put the books into her basket.

“I’ll be very careful with them,” she promised him. “I know I’m not allowed to read them, but…” biting her lip to stop herself from smiling happily she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him quickly once more.

“Thank you. You have no idea how much this means to me…”

And up until now he really hadn’t. He had never given it much thought how stifling her life must be. How a smart, curious woman like her would suffocate in a world of duty, responsibilities and conventions.

In many ways, they were all prisoners in Covington Woods.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's not an *entire* library, but I still think it counts!
Chapter 12

A few days later Gold came across Ivy Walker, just as he stepped out of Victor Bing’s clinic. The young woman was sitting on a bench on the porch, sitting as still as a statue, with her head bowed and her hands folded tightly into her lap.

“Good day, Miss Walker,” he greeted, intentionally keeping his voice soft.

Nevertheless, she jumped in fright, her head shooting upwards to reveal a drawn, pale face, the skin underneath her eyes grey with exhaustion.

“Forgive me… Mrs Hunt, I should say. I did not mean to frighten you.”

Shortly after Lucius Hunt had regained consciousness, he and Ivy had married in a very small ceremony, performed by her father and with only both of their mothers in attendance.

Now that she was married, Ivy Hunt wore her hair up in a bun, customary for married women in their village and stiffer, more concealing clothing.

“My apologies, Mr. Gold,” she murmured, her voice blank. “I did not hear you.” She scrambled to her feet, holding out her cane in front of her and he held the door open for her, a thought niggling at the back of his mind.

She was already almost inside when he remembered.

“She was already almost inside when he remembered.

“Mrs Hunt… you once told me that you could recognize me by my color.”

She froze, her face contorting painfully for a moment before she looked down.

“I used to see them, Mr. Gold. “But not anymore. Now there’s only darkness.”

His insides chilled at her words and looking at her haggard face his stomach churned at the realization that something was very deeply wrong with this once so vivacious girl.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Hunt,” he told her quietly.

A ghost of a smile passed fleetingly over her face. “Thank you, Mr. Gold. I should go in now… I’ve come to retrieve medicine for Lucius…”

He nodded, belatedly realizing she couldn’t see and started to turn away. Ivy’s voice however brought him up short.

“Blue.”

“Excuse me?” he rasped, haltering his movements.

“Your color was blue… when I could still see it.”

She disappeared inside and left him standing on the porch, his breath coming fast.

That night Belle managed to come to his house and after they’d made love, they lay wrapped up in each other’s arms in his bed, enjoying the moments that still lasted them.

In the soft light of the oil lamp on his nightstand, surrounded by the white of the sheets, her skin
still flushed and warm in the afterglow and her chestnut curls fanned out over his shoulder and chest she was the more beautiful than he’d ever seen her.
Unable to stop himself from touching her for even a second, he ran his hands lightly over every inch of her, memorizing each soft curve and feeling the way her skin heat up wherever he touched her.
“My beautiful Belle,” he whispered, pressing kisses to her brow, his fingers seeking out all the spots that made her moan softly and stretch against him like sleepy cat.

He was addicted to her. To her taste and kisses, to her scent and her warmth and to the way she blissfully arched into each and every touch of his hands.

“I saw Ivy today,” he told her, his voice thoughtful.

A shadow crossed over her face and she sighed deeply at his words. “And how was she?”

Tapping his fingers across her spine he paused, trying to formulate his thoughts. “She seemed distressed to me…”

“Something is wrong,” Belle answered softly, snuggling closer into his side. “She has not been the same since she has returned from the towns.”

Hearing Belle confirming his own suspicions only increased his worry and he pulled her little closer against him.

“At first I thought she was afraid for Lucius’ life,” Belle continued. “But now that he’s improving and out of danger it seems that she is growing more afraid with each passing day. She’s taken to wearing a protective charm around her wrists and she never takes it off. She insists that Lucius’ wounds remain bandaged at all times so that the forbidden color doesn’t attract the creatures. I believe she fears they’ll come after her again.”

“She never used to be so afraid,” he observed.

Against his shoulder, Belle shook her head. “Something bad happened to her when she was in the woods. Something that made her so very afraid that it is now sucking all her happiness away.”

Leaning up, her sad eyes met his. “You once told me that there’s nothing worse than being afraid.”

“There isn’t,” he conceded, “I believe fear can destroy a person.”

It had almost destroyed him, the paralyzing fear of what violence and heartache could do to him. It was why he and every other person in this village over the age of forty had fled the old world in a desperate attempt to find a place to be safe from it all.

And yet, as hard as they’d run, sorrow had caught up with them.

Then tender, warm fingers were carding through his hair and he looked up into the blue depths of her eyes and the softness of her smile.
“I’m not afraid when I’m with you,” she told him, her hand coming to rest on his cheek.

His heart overflowed with love for her and he tangled his hand in her hair to pull her head down for a kiss.

They kissed for what felt like a lifetime, mouths fused together, bodies intertwined, safely tucked away underneath the comforting weight of the blankets and he could have stayed into that warm
cocoon with her for the rest of his life, doing nothing else than kissing her, but eventually she untangled herself from him with a deep sigh.

“I need to go back,” she told him, her voice heavy with regret. “I told my father I was spending time with Ivy and he will grow suspicious if I return late.”

Letting her get out of the bed and watching her dress was almost physically painful for him and he distracted himself by putting on some clothes himself so that he could walk her to the door and prolong their time together for as long as he could.

Far too soon they were already descending the stairs and he helped her into her blue coat, carefully arranging her scarf around her so she wouldn’t be cold.

She giggled as his fussing, the happy sound lightening the moment somewhat and she stood on her tiptoes to give him a final kiss.

“I’ll try to come and see you again soon,” she promised against his lips before pulling away.

His hands hung emptily in the air as she stepped away from him and reached out to open the door and he was suddenly seized with a wave of desperation. There was no telling when he’d see her again, when they’d find an opportunity to be together again and every time she left him, it became harder to let her go.

The door was already open, but he lunged forward and pulled her back into his arms, almost crushing her body to his as he held her tightly and captured her lips, plundering her mouth with an almost frantic intensity.

Belle melted against him, her arms wrapping themselves around his neck as she responded to his kiss with equal passion.

Stumbling through the narrow hallway he backed her up against the wall, pressing himself even closer against her, grateful to have something to lean against, because his own legs barely supported him any longer.

He reached out one arm to close the door again, suddenly determined to keep her with him, all consequences be damned.

He had just found the doorknob when an outrageous scream jolted him out of his haze and caused him to break their kiss. Reality inserted itself instantly and purely on instinct he pushed Belle behind him, still trying to close the door as a livid Maurice French stormed towards it.

He was a fraction of a second too late and French shoved the door open, his face red with fury and his eyes bulging.

“Get away from my daughter, you pervert!” he bellowed, his fist raising in the air.

“Papa! No!” Before he could stop her, Belle ducked around him and launched herself at her father, grabbing his arm with both her hands, all but hanging on it with her full weight to stop him from striking.

“That monster had his hands all over you,” Maurice French raged. “He’s been sniveling around you for months now!”

Loathing himself for keeping his cane upstairs so that he now had no means to protect Belle against he rage of father, Gold clenched every muscle in his body, ready to lash out the second Maurice attempted to hurt her, either with his hands or with his words.

Instead, Belle squared her shoulders and looked up her father, her face calm but determined.

“Papa, I’m going home with you now and then we’re going to talk about this calmly.

Her resolute manner seemed to calm him down although he still shot a poisonous look in Gold’s
direction.
“You are never coming near my child again!” he growled.

“Papa, we’re going home,” Belle said once again, decisively pushing him towards the door. Over her shoulder she gave him a last look, attempting to smile at him reassuringly, but Gold’s insides churned as he watched Maurice French grab his daughter possessively by her arm and all but dragged her away from him.
Chapter 13

What followed were two of the most agonizing weeks of his life. Before noon the next day the entire village knew of their relationship and the way they’d been caught by Maurice French the evening before. As he had suspected, the townsfolk unanimously condemned his behavior, but to his surprise, it was Belle who got served the burnt of the village’s outrage.

He himself received a lengthy lecture from Edward Walker, the man eventually informing him that Belle had been placed under the supervision of several of the village’s matrons, in order to curb her conduct and teach her more modest morals.

During the other man’s berating of his own actions, he had remained relatively stoical, finding it only somewhat outrageous that a man who was only slightly older than him thought he could scold him like an erring schoolboy. When Edward Walker mentioned Belle however, his temper flared and only the knowledge that he would make things infinitely more difficult for her if he gave in to his rage gave him the strength to keep his temper in check.

Soon after Edward Walker left, the guilt settled in. Because of him, because of his hopeless, foolish infatuation, Belle was now scorned by the entire village and had become practically a prisoner. Knowing how much his precious girl loved her freedom and her independence, he could only imagine how she must loath having her movements constricted in such a way.

If only he had kept his distance from her.
If only he had let her be.

He hardly caught a glimpse of her in the two weeks that followed. He suspected she was kept indoors for most of the time and whenever she ventured outside she was at all times accompanied by her father or one of the village’s busybodies.

He himself noticed a rather significant decline in his clientele, his shop remaining empty for days on end. He tended not to give the matter much reason for concern. For years he’d kept himself to himself and he was used to people evading him. And it was not like they could purchase their wool someplace else. They would come back eventually.

And he couldn’t bring himself to care two jolts about that.

He missed Belle terribly, like a constant ache in his heart that he could get no reprieve from. He had never realized until that moment how much his happiness depended on seeing her every day. Even before, he’d lived for the brief moments they met, either somewhere around the village or when she visited his shop.

Weeks ago, just before Lucius Hunt had been stabbed by Noah Percy, he had attempted to keep his distance from her, but he hadn’t managed to last for more than two days. And now that he knew the taste of her lips and the feel of her body, it was even more impossible to force himself through the days, knowing she was being kept away from him.

Now that the choice was taken away from him, he found himself resenting the ways of the village more and more.

The meetings in the Town Hall were now an almost weekly occurrence and the one that Gold attended almost two weeks after he and Belle were forced apart instilled a feeling of dread in him.
that only further fueled his apprehension. The attendance had been uncharacteristically low, and at first he had dared to entertain the hope that people were starting to resume their normal life and that the worst of the panic was beginning to fade.

But then the meeting started and it became clear that the decreased attendance was rather deliberate: anyone under the age of thirty had not been invited to this meeting. The reason for this soon became clear when Albert Spencer rose to his feet and addressed the assembly. He gave a lengthy speech on how most of the disturbing recent events had been caused by the antics of the young people, even going as far as including Lucius Hunt and Ivy Walker among them. Gold listened to his speech with rapidly growing astonishment, but from the affirmative and consenting nods and grunts that sounded around the hall as Spencer talked on, he realized a great many people were actually in agreement with him.

Several of the elders protested rather vehemently against these accusations, especially when they concerned their own children, but seeds of doubt against an entire segment of their population were already beginning to take root. Suggestions were made about putting forward the curfew for anyone under the age of thirty so that they would not be able to leave their parental home after six o’clock at night. When Edward Walker pointed out that now that Lucius and Ivy were married they could both be considered as respectable members of the community, the idea was suggested that the youngsters should be more firmly coaxed towards marriage from an earlier age on, thus preventing they got tangled up in ‘unseemly affairs.’

At these words a few snide glances were thrown his way and it took all of his self-control to stop himself from lashing out.

Edward Walker continued to explain at great length what kind of measures had been taken to ensure just that, even going as far as mentioning Bessie Morton and Belle French as an example.

Nothing definite was settled that night, but as the town hall emptied Gold understood from the whispered conversations that surrounded him that it would be only a matter of time before a new and more constrictive code of conduct would be enforced.

As he slowly made his way back to his house after meeting, the full implications of what he’d heard that night continued to mule through his head. Ever since Maurice French had caught them he had clung to the hope that their separation was only a temporarily situation. He had truly believed that the only person in the village who had the power to end their relationship was Belle. It didn’t matter what Maurice French, Edward Walker or anyone else thought about them. As long as Belle wanted to be with him, that was the only thing that mattered. The only thing he had truly feared up until now was the possibility that Belle would grow tired of him and choose to end things. Aside from her, nobody had any leverage over them and he didn’t care about anything than what she thought of them.

Now he realized the situation was infinitely more complicated than that.

The events of the past months and the constant threat of terror had caused a situation of almost full panic. And the terrified townsfolk, no longer certain who they could trust anymore or how to protect themselves any longer were willing to give up a great deal, just to create a semblance of safety again. In many ways, it was exactly like it had been twenty years ago. They had risked, and were willing to continue to risk anything and sacrifice everything, just to keep themselves safe from heartache.
Only he wasn’t sure he wanted that anymore.

He wouldn’t give up Belle. He wouldn’t give up loving her or wanting her or believing that it was wrong for them to be together when nothing had ever felt so right. When no one had made him as happy as she did.

When he passed The Old Shed That Was Not To Be Used he noticed something odd. The wooden door to the shed was usually closed off with a heavy, iron lock, something that was highly unusual in their village. As a rule, doors were never locked. There was no reason for it, because no one would dream of coming in and taking what wasn’t theirs.

The fact that anyone could enter another person’s home had never led to problems before. And after he and Belle had embarked on their relationship there had even been serious advantages. During the past couple of weeks he had, on a few occasions come home at the end of a long day to find Belle already in his bed, wearing nothing but her smile and holding out warm, willing arms to him.

The locks around the village, save from dark wood chests that were to be found in every home, could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

However, the Old Shed That Was Not To Be Used was always locked securely.

But not tonight, because to his surprise he could see the brass key sticking out of the keyhole.

As if in trance, he walked towards the door, all other thoughts fleeing from his mind. The key seemed to be calling to him and with a surprisingly steady hand he reached out and pulled the key out of the lock and tucked it safely away into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Only then his heart began to race and his limbs to shake as the severity of what he had stumbled upon began to settle in.

He needed to know what was inside that shed.

He was terrified of what he would find there.

He needed to understand, he needed to know, he needed to put an end to the endless doubt and uncertainty that had been plaguing him ever since the creatures had first swarmed the village.

He was nowhere near ready for that truth.

“There’s nothing worse than being afraid.”

He couldn't live another day, another minute being afraid. Not anymore. No matter how horrendous and despicable the terror was he would encounter in that shed, at least he would no longer have to fear it. And perhaps when he no longer feared it, he could find a way to protect Belle from it.

His hands were shaking so badly he barely managed to grasp the handle. Drawing in a ragged breath, he summoned every ounce of courage he possessed and pulled, his whole body going taunt in trepidation.

Then the coward inside him took over he shut his eyes tightly, freezing as the door opened.
For long moments he heard nothing but the soft wind rustling through the trees and the frantic beating of his own heart and the way his blood was thumping through his veins. He listened intently and the lack of noise coming from the shed settled his nerves somewhat. He could detect no breathing or snarling and bracing himself again he tremulously opened his eyes.

The sight that greeted his eyes turned his insides to ice and made his skin prickle as if he was being stuck with a thousand needles. His breath left his lungs as if it had been punched out of him and he doubled up, clutching his stomach, his cane barely enough to keep him upright.

He looked again, his eyes slowly adjusting to what they were seeing in the pale light of the moon, his mind catching up. Inside the shed, dangling from great iron hooks on the ceiling were heavy costumes, big enough cover a grown man. The face masks were made out of what once had probably been real boars, the skin and fur prepped to prevent them from decomposing. Their snouts were long and their mouths were moulded to be slightly open, revealing large fangs. But the eyes were gone and instead he found himself staring into black holes.

The rest of the body consisted of some kind or armor, mostly made out of fur and leather. The arms ended in great paws with sharp, talon-like, curved nails. And they were all dressed from head to toe in a heavy cloak of deep red.

Instantly his mind swam with memories of holding Belle tightly in his arms as one of the creatures approached him, dressed in one of the suits he was now looking at. He remembered the stiffness of the creature, as if its clothing made it more difficult for it to move about and its almost hesitant appearance. He remembered looking the creature in its eyes and finding human ones staring back at him.

And as he stared at the costumes, swaying gently back and forth in the nights’ breeze like grotesque puppets he understood.

His stomach revolted at the realization and he stumbled backwards and away, his feet leading him to the shrubs behind he shed. There he fell to his knees as his body convulsed in rage and betrayal, hot tears streaming down his face as he slammed the ground with his fists while he retched until there was nothing left in his stomach but bile.

The years spend in terror as he’d listened to the howling in the woods, trying not to imagine what kind of abomination the creatures were indulging in. The countless animals sacrificed to buy their safety. The drills and the long hours spend locked up in a dark shelter, listening to the sound of children crying.

The reassurances of the elders afterwards, the benign smiles and pats on the shoulders and affirmation that no matter what, they had done right by coming here, by choosing this life above the violence of the old world.

And like the fool he’d been, he’d swallowed each and every single one of their lies.
Chapter 14

He thought long and hard about how he was going to confront Edward Walker with his newfound knowledge and what he wanted to reveal and what not. He hid the key to the Old Shed That Was Not To Be Used in the shelter underneath his house and decided not to tell a soul about it being in his procession.

In the end, the talk with Walker initially went smoother than he had anticipated, the solemn man not looking at all surprised when he told them what he had discovered.

“I have had an inkling for some time now that you suspected something,” he told them, arranging some books on a shelf in the one-room schoolhouse were Gold had approached him. “Ever since the night the village was invaded in fact. I knew it from the look on your face.”

Comprehension dawned on him as the full meaning of the words sunk in. “The creature that approached Belle and me… that was you…”

Walker nodded imperceptibly, his back still turned to him. “I thought it best to avoid a direct confrontation. You were so determined in protecting Miss French.”

His almost nonchalant words send another surge of rage through him. “Is there anything at all living in the woods?” he asked, containing that rage with great difficulty.

“Apart from the usual wildlife?” Walker asked, smiling smartly as he turned around. “No, there’s nothing in the woods. There always have been rumors though. I’ve heard them since I was a young boy, the rumors are even documented.”

“But your daughter, Ivy… she encountered one of the creatures when she travelled through the woods to fetch medicine for Lucius Hunt...” He loathed how despite the anger and indignation he felt, his voice still sounded uncertain, how he doubted the truth still, even though he had beheld the evidence with his own eyes. There was just so much that didn’t make sense yet.

“What Ivy encountered was a fabrication of her own imagination,” Walker responded calmly. “There was nothing in the woods that would truly cause her harm.”

An imagination fed by years of lies and deception. The imagination of a blind girl who could not depend on her eyes to see what was real.

“You send one of the elders after her to scare her?” He asked disbelievingly. “You would do that to your own daughter?”

“Oh of course I did no such thing,” Walker seethed, a sudden fury breaking through his undisturbed countenance. “It were unforeseen circumstances, but I am certain he would never have hurt her… in the end it was just a tragic accident.”

He stopped abruptly, his posture turning rigid, confirming Gold’s suspicion that he had said more than he intended to reveal.

“Who wouldn’t hurt her? Who did she encounter in the woods?” Gold repeated slowly, the dots connecting in his head.

“No matter,” Walker replied hastily, his former ease completely destroyed now. “It is of no importance now…”

Then the penny dropped.

“Noah Percy!” Gold gasped, the full horror of what had transpired that terrible night catching up
with him. “Ivy believes she has killed one of the creatures, but it was in fact Noah Percy, wasn’t it?”

“He smashed a window and escaped, taking one of the suits we had hidden with him,” Walker replied, starting to pace erratically, a vein throbbing on his forehead. “We believe now that Noah knew for some time, that it was him that was responsible for the skinned animals that we found. I told Ivy the truth before she left, but then Noah escaped and chased after her into the woods… After encountering what she believed to be one of the creatures she is now convinced again that the creatures are real. Even more so than before.”

“And you let her go on believing this?” Gold interjected incredulously.

“I cannot tell her she has killed her childhood friend, now can I?” Walker snapped back, his face flushing with anger. “Not when it was my fault to begin with… I knew someone was acting out of order, but I believed it was one of the other elders… I never suspected Noah… I never thought him capable of doing something so heinous… And it was Lucius that paid the price… and it would have been Ivy’s price to pay had he died. I had to let her go to the towns…”

“But why keep lying?” Gold asked, quieter now. “Why did you let Ivy continue believing that lie?” “When Ivy told us she had killed one of the creatures, we all realized instantly it had to be Noah… Noah’s death made it possible for us to continue living our lives here. We all decided it was worth it… that Noah’s death would not have been in vain.”

“And by ‘we all’ you mean the council,” Gold concluded bitterly. “You decided for all of us what would be best.”

“Then what would you have us done?” Walked asked, defensively now. “What would you have done had you stood in our shoes?”

“I would have put an end to the fear,” Gold answered immediately. “The village is going half mad with it. If you do not take control of the situation there’s going to be an uproar.”

“And that is why I need your help,” Walker stated unexpectedly. “I want you to join the council. You know the truth now and I want you on our side. People are upset and they want the elders to take a stand. Appointment new, younger elders will accomplish that and it will salvage the fear that it is the youngsters that are responsible for the incidents that have occurred.”

“But I would be obliged to continue the farce?” Gold asked, his mind reeling from Walker’s suggestion.

“I do not believe it is lying,” Walker replied. “At least not viciously so. This is how we keep our loved ones safe and protect them from danger. Isn’t that what you want? It’s your way to protect Belle… to keep her safe.”

“What is your meaning?” Gold demanded, his heart seizing at the mention of her name and the implications this could have for them.

“If you join the council, the elders will support you in your wish to marry Belle French,” Walker told him. “We will coax Maurice French into giving his consent. You’d be man and wife by the end of the month. Provided that you do not tell her of course.”

An image of Belle, clad in a white, lace dress, her curls adorned with flowers and dancing around her shoulders, her smiling face beaming up at him as they exchanged their vows filled his mind and for long moments he could concentrate on nothing else.

This could be his chance to grab everything he had ever wanted.
“Give me time to consider.”

Walker’s proposition was constantly on his mind during the sleep-deprived night and day that followed. Even a day ago he would have vowed that he would do anything, everything, if it would enable him and Belle to be together. Now he was given the opportunity, but it seemed that it would not come without a price.

Becoming an elder would mean he would have to participate in and condone the lies that had disgusted him so upon discovering them.

But the mere thought of being able to be with Belle, to marry her and to claim her as his own for the entire village to see made his blood boil and his heart ache with longing. She would be his as he was hers and nothing would be able to come between them.

Now that he knew that there was nothing in the woods, he would be able to protect her and take away all her fears. Even if he couldn’t tell her the truth, he could soothe away her worries and keep her safe, never having to be afraid that he would fail her.

And even if he felt aversion at the thought of becoming part of the council and their manipulative ways, there was no denying that he could do some good, once he had joined. He could advocate the case of Bessie Morton and ensure that her confinement came to an end. He could oppose to Albert Spencer’s ridiculous plan of installing a tight curfew for anyone under thirty and making marriage mandatory.

He would not be able to tell the truth, but perhaps in time he would manage to convince the rest of the council to assure the townsfolk that they were not in immediate danger from the creatures. Perhaps in time the lie would grow to be less of an untruth and then it wouldn’t be so bad anymore.

At the end of it, it all depended on the question wether or not Belle truly wanted him and he found that the mere thought of outright asking her made his heart clench with nerves. Walker’s proposal had a put a pressure on their relationship that made him feel deeply apprehensive. In the weeks that they’d been together he had never voiced his feelings for her or found the courage to inquire after hers. Instead he had taken every moment she had granted him without questioning it, terrified of scaring her away with unwanted declarations or claims that would make her feel stifled.

Would she agree to a marriage with him? Would she be willing to tie her life to a crippled man twice her age?

They hadn’t spoken in over two weeks. Would she still think favorably of him? Or did she resent him now for the humiliation and scorn she had suffered because of him?

He wanted her with everything that was in him, but he wasn’t ready to ask her yet. Wasn’t ready to deal with her rejection.

By the end of the day he was nowhere nearer to making a decision, despite his constant agonizing over it. Then the matter was taken more or less out of his hands when he passed the barns on his way back from the shop and he found himself suddenly being grabbed and pulled behind a
haystack. For a split second he was about to panic and lash out with his cane, but then he felt a pair of familiar arms wrap around his neck and a warm, beloved body crawling into him.

“Belle…” he whispered disbelievingly, burying his hands in the messy bun of curls and cradling her close. “Belle…”

“Finally!” she breathed against his neck, burrowing even closer into his arms. “I’ve missed you so much, Nicolas…”

He pulled back slightly, cupping her face in the palm of his hand, his eyes sweeping over her face. “I’ve missed you too, sweetheart…”

She looked pale and wary and there were large, grayish circles underneath her eyes, causing his heart to clench painfully. When she placed her hands on his chest he was shocked to find them raw and covered in angry, red blisters. Taking her hands in his he raised them to his lips, gently kissing the torn nails and battered skin of her fingertips. “What did they do to you?”

“They’ve assigned me all sorts of chores,” Belle replied with a shrug. “They hope that hard and honest work will make me see the error of my ways. I am supposed to be mucking out the barns now…”

It was only then that he noticed she was wearing a rag of an old dress and heavy boots.

White, hot anger surged through him and at the same time his heart was breaking for her. “I’m so sorry, Belle… I’m so sorry…” he rasped, tears slipping into his voice.

“Well, I’m not,” she replied, a stubborn glint appearing in her eyes, her hands sliding back up into his hair. “We don’t have much time… they’ll come to check on me soon… but I wanted to see you…”

He pulled her close again, drinking in her warmth and her scent, his mind reeling. He had to find a way to get her out of this dreadful situation. It was because of him that she was suffering so and he would make it right. And if becoming and elder was what it took, then he would do it gladly. He didn’t care if had to don a suit himself and chase children down the village if it meant she would be safe and comfortable again.

“You don’t deserve any of this, my darling,” he told her, his voice laced with guilt.

“It’s no matter, she answered, pressing her forehead against his. “They do not decide my fate… only I do…”

His breath caught in his throat at her words, the blood suddenly pumping in his ears, his face burning with shame. All of a sudden he felt no better than the manipulative, controlling Walker with his schemes of cajoling her into marrying him and letting her continue to live in fear, making decisions for her because he believed they were best.

Belle deserved the truth.
She deserved to make up her own mind.
Even if it meant she did not choose him.

“Belle…” he started with some difficulty. “There is something you should know… something I need to show you…”

She gave him a surprised look, a bit of sparkle returning to her eyes. “Oh… what is it?”
He shook his head. “Not here… do you know where the Shed Not To Be Used is?”

She gave him a nod, her frown deepening.

“Try to get away tonight and meet me there at midnight. I’ll wait for you until two o’clock… after that I’ll know you haven’t managed to come and we’ll try to find another time. But you need to come there… and you need to be alone.”

“Is everything all right?” She was once again caressing his hair, worry evident in her voice and involuntarily he leaned into the touch he had so yearned for in the past weeks.

“It will be,” he promised with more confidence than he felt.

Her teeth worried her lower lip for a moment and then she was plastered against him again, her lips crashing to his. It took him only a moment to respond, his mouth hungrily closing over hers, his tongue begging for entrance. He was starved for her and he kissed her with a desperate devotion. He felt like he was falling off a cliff and had been falling for a long time, ever since he had come across that first skinned animal. His whole life was spiraling out of control with a dizzying speed and only with her in his arms he didn’t feel so helplessly terrified.

Her hands were fisting the hair at the back of his head now, pulling him impossibly close as she pressed herself against him, until he no longer knew where he ended and Belle began.

When he finally pulled back they were both panting heavily and he watched how her eyes widened in agitation as they heard voices approaching the barn.

“Quickly!” she urged him in a low whisper. “I’ll distract them, you go around the barn… I’ll see you at midnight.”

He limbed out of sight as quickly as he could, his heart pounding.

One way or the other, the bough was about to break.
Chapter 15

When midnight came he was waiting for her at the path leading up to the Shed That Was Not To Be Used, the key to the door safely tucked away into the pocket of his coat. It was freezing outside and his breath created white, translucent clouds in the pale moonlight every time he exhaled.

He was shaking slightly as he paced across the path, partly from the cold and partly from nerves. By asking her to come and meet him he was putting Belle at a terrible risk. If she was discovered sneaking off to meet him there would be hell to pay for her and he shuddered to think what the repercussions could be.

And as the minutes ticked by and his anxiety increased he cursed himself for his selfishness. For as much as he claimed to love her, he continued to put her at risk and expose her to the scorn and censure of the town. If he truly loved her, he would set her free. He would tell her tonight that their entanglement was over and that she should concentrate her attentions on Gaston Merand. But just the thought of her with that insipid oaf caused his stomach to revolt and he clenched his hand around the handle of his cane.

He would tell her the truth. Belle deserved nothing less and then it was up to her to decide what she wanted. If she wanted to marry him, even if he became part of the lie that kept the village into the clutches of fear and terror, or if she wanted to be free of him.

The sound of twigs breaking snapped him out of his conflicting thoughts and he pulled back into the shadows of a tree, training his ears to the sound of footsteps approaching, trying to determine if it was her.

"Nicolas?" a soft voice whispered through the darkness and at the sound of her voice he rushed forward.

"Belle!" She was in his arms instantly, her own arms wrapping themselves tightly around his neck and he pulled her close, cradling her in his arms.

"Hey…" she breathed, pulling her head back slightly so she could look at him, her smile radiant.

"Hey…" he echoed, his heart expanding in his chest at the sight of her beaming eyes and her beautiful smile.

"I have something for you…" he mumbled, groping around inside the pocket of his coat and pulling out a jar of ointment that he pressed into her hands. "Use this to take care of cuts and blisters on your hands," he urged her.

"They must not get infected and you shouldn’t be hurting…"

She gazed at him, her eyes bright and her look tender, smiling softly at him. Tucking the jar away she stood on her tiptoes and clung to his shoulder until her lips were pressed against his, her kiss warm and he responded to her eagerly, his hands settling themselves on her back so he could pull her against him once more.

Once he had revealed everything to her, he didn’t know if she would let him hold her or kiss her in this way again and if this was to be the last time, he wanted to make it count.

"What did you want to tell me?" she asked eventually, resting her forehead against his.

"There… there’s something I have to show you…” he started, his stomach twisting with nerves again. He had thought about how he was going to tell her what he had discovered, had even
rehearsed the words he was going to use, but now that the moment was there, he found that his courage was deserting him.

Reaching into his pocket he clutched the key, but then changed his mind. Seeing the suits without any warning would only frighten her. He needed to prepare her. “Do you remember the night that Those We Don’t Speak Of entered the village?” he asked tentatively. “And that we hid behind the Town Hall?”

“Of course I do!” She replied, her brow creasing in puzzlement. “You protected me against one of the creatures…”

“Did you see that creature?” he implored. “Did you manage to get a look at it?”

“I… only slightly…” She admitted. “I was rather frightened at the time. I remember it wearing the bad color though and… and that it had an usual head… it was unlike anything I have ever seen before, but I looked it up in one of the books of the Reading Room and I found a picture in one of the biology books. It looked a hog’s head… although when I asked Mr. Walker about it, he said there were no such animals living in the Covington’s Woods… he seemed rather cross with me for asking and told me I spend too much time reading books and that I should start devoting my time to more useful things…”

At her words, Gold’s insides twisted painfully, a horrible suspicion filling him.

“When was this?” he asked urgently, his voice low.

“I-uhm… I’m not certain…” Belle replied startled by his tone. “It was a few days before Kitty’s wedding I suppose…”

Swearing under his breath, Gold racked a hand through his hair, more pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

Walker warning him away from Belle at Kitty and Christop’s wedding, claiming he had observed something untowardly going on between them. Walker agreeing to Belle being kept away from the rest of the village and guarded like a prisoner after they’d been discovered together….

It was never because of the relationship between them, he realized now, but because Belle had been close to discovering the truth.

Walker had been trying to silence her all along.

“What’s going on?” Belle asked startled, clutching the lapel of his coat.

Taking a deep breath, he took the plunge. “Belle, the creatures aren’t real. They never were. It weren’t monsters that entered the village that night, but the elders, dressed up like hogs in red cloaks.”

He watched how her eyes grew wide with fear and disbelief. “W-what?” she stammered. “But that can’t be true… The boarders… the offerings… the dead animals…”

“It’s all a ruse, Belle!” he broke across her. “When we came here all those years ago, when we fled the old world… we wanted a place that was secluded and cut off… a place were no-one would find us. In order not to be found out, no one was allowed to leave either and that’s how the story of the creatures was born…”

She recoiled from him, a look of betrayal crossing her face. “You knew all along?”

“No!” he cried. “Only the elders knew… For twenty years I believed that the creatures were real
as well and I was terrified of them… until…”

He showed her the key, indicating the shed behind him with a jerk of his head. “A few days ago, as I walked past the shed, I noticed that the door was open and I looked inside. I found the suits they keep in there… hog masks and claws… and cloaks in the bad color… It was then that I knew… I confronted Edward Walker about it and he confirmed it…”

“But… but…” she panted, hugging herself around her waist as she tried to grasp what she was hearing. “What about Ivy? She saw one of the creatures in the woods… she killed it!”

“It wasn’t a creature…” he told her quietly. “And Ivy didn’t know, because she couldn’t see it. But it was Noah Percy that she killed… he was wearing one of the suits… he must have known for months… it was him that killed the animals…”

“Oh god…” Burying her face in her hands, Belle faltered and he pulled her in arms, rocking her as she cried and trembled.

“Please Belle, you have to believe me… I didn’t know… I swear to you…” he pleaded into her hair.

“I believe you,” she whispered back, clinging against him.

For long moments they held on to each other, until she sniffed and took a deep breath before pulling back. “I want to see it,” she announced, her voice determined.

“Are you sure?” he asked worriedly. “It is not a pleasant sight.”

“I’m sure,” she replied determinedly. “I need to see it with my own eyes, otherwise I’ll never really believe it.”

Grasping her hand tightly in his, they made their way to the shed together. As he unlocked the door, he kept his eyes on face, trying to gauge her reaction, ready to take her in his arms the moment she showed any sign of distress.

But as he opened the door and lit the oil lamp inside she stood motionless, gazing at the repulsive suits, dangling from the hooks with their soulless expression, without her face betraying the slightest trace of emotion.

“Belle?” he asked carefully after long minutes. At the sound of her name she turned around to face him and he was struck by the look of cold fury in her eyes.

Extinguishing the lamp and stepping out of the shed, he made sure he locked it up securely again, before facing her once more.

“What did Walker say when you told him you knew?” she asked, her voice blank.

“He wasn’t very surprised,” he admitted. “He offered me a deal though… He wants me to become an elder, he wants me to secure my help to keep the story alive.

He offered me…” his voice faltered, realizing fully now how reprehensible Walker’s offer truly was. “He said that if I agreed to become an elder, the council would enable us to marry. They would convince your father to give his consent. If… if that is what you want…”

“It is not what I want,” she replied flatly, her voice harsh with determination and his heart sank to the bottom of his feet to shatter there.

He had always known she would eventually come to her senses and leave him. He had anticipated this moment ever since their first kiss in the Reading Room. And yet, he wasn’t prepared for how much it hurt or how he just wanted to curl up and die now that it felt like there wasn’t anything left
worth living for.

Oblivious to his heartbreak, Belle started to pace the path in front of the shed, much like he had done earlier that night, ranting furiously under her breath.

“How dare they? How dare they use you like that? How dare they use me as a pawn against you? As leverage against you to buy your silence?”

Blinking in bewilderment, he tried to make sense of her words. “Belle… no-one is going to force you into anything…” he tried, desperately to ease her distress. “You can just go back to your life as it was before any of this happened… nothing has to change…”

He’d make any kind of deal with Walker that was necessary to ensure her happiness, no matter what the cost was.

“But I don’t want this kind of life, Nicolas!” she practically yelled at him, her voice carrying through the stillness of the night. “I cannot live like this any longer. And I certainly don’t want our children to grow up in fear, like we did. I want to be free to be with you… to love you… and I’m not going to bend to their will anymore!”

He gasped for breath at her words, his heart all but stuttering out of his chest, barely daring to believe his ears.

“Belle…” he finally managed to utter, his voice frayed. “What are you saying?”

“I love you,” she declared clearly. “And I want to get away from here. I want to build a life with you in a place were we can breathe…”

“You love me?” he croaked out incredulously, his head spinning from her words.

“Of course I love you,” she answered, giving him an odd look. “You know I do…” She trailed off, her eyes going wide as a startled comprehension dawnd. “You do know that I love you, don’t you?” she asked intently, rushing back into his arms and gasping his face between her hands.

“I love you so much, my Belle…” he breathed, his voice choking on the words as his body flooded with relief and she rubbed her nose against his, her body sagging against him.

“You didn’t know…” Nicolas… I love you and I want to be with you…”

“Oh sweetheart…” he captured her mouth with his, kissing her reverently, trying to convey all of his love and longing for her this way.

“We can leave this place,” he whispered against her lips, feeling her mouth curve into a smile and suddenly everything was perfectly clear and simple.

“We’ll find our own place to happy.”
“You want to do what?” Walker asked, his face tight with anger.

“You heard me…” He replied with as much calm as he could muster, the fact that they were having this confrontation inside his home giving him confidence. “Belle and I want to leave. We want to find a place where we can live our lives as we see fit.”

“You cannot just do that!” Walker slammed back, his face reddening in fury. “You promised when you came here, that you would leave the old world behind you… like we all have… and never go back. You promised.”

“I promised to leave a world of violence and crime behind me,” he answered. “But instead I’ve spend the past twenty years living in fear. And Belle hasn’t made any sort of promise, she wants to be somewhere where she is happy and can make her own decisions.”

“You do not see what this place has done for you, for everyone here!” Walker replied, coming to stand in front of him. “We came here to protect innocence! To keep our hope that we could live somewhere where goodness and righteousness are still honored!”

“And is it?” Gold asked. “Is this a place were goodness and righteousness prevails now that Noah Percy is dead and buried and Bessie Morton is still locked up?

“Those actions were necessary for the greater good,” Walker replied warily. “I do not like it, but it is inevitable. Noah’s death, as sad as it was, gave us the opportunity to continue to live our lives here as we had before. He made our story plausible and we all believed it was the best course of action. Even his parents agreed.”

“And what about Bessie Morton?” Gold demanded. “How is keeping her locked up serving the greater good?”

“Bessie is well looked after,” Walker answered defiantly. “She isn’t being mistreated or hurt… And eventually, when all of this has settled down, she can rejoin our community.”

“Well looked after?” he repeated incredulously. “By making her believe she has done something horrible? That she is responsible for jeopardizing the safety of the entire village while all she did was causing a laundry accident?”

“People were upset and on edge,” Walker argued. “We needed to take some form of action. This will eventually blow over and people will forget. Then it will be like it has never happened. Bessie Morton is unharmed and will remain so.”

“Like Belle was unharmed?” he spat bitterly. “With her raw, blistered hands and torn nails from all the work you pushed on her? Or with the way she lost weight in the two weeks she was under your care or how exhausted she was by the end of it? You’ve put her through hell!”

It had taken him a lot of persuasion to get Belle to talk about what had happened to her during the weeks they’d been separated. And although he still felt she hadn’t told him everything, he had gotten enough out of her to make his insides twist in revulsion at the council’s actions.

“You tried to make her believe that her behavior was something she should be ashamed off,” by now the fury was rolling of him in waves. “All she ever did was love me and you wanted her to think that her conduct was bad. You’ve tried to scorn her and lecture her and manipulate her into admitting she was wrong.”
“She slept with you while you are not married!” Walker bellowed, slamming his fist down. “That is not the proper way things are done here. She let her... burstings get the better of her and behaved wantonly. These kind of feelings are to be repressed!”

“First of all, what Belle and I did concerns no one but ourselves and Belle did nothing wrong! We both decided we wanted this relationship, but you only blamed her for it,” he snarled back. “And simply because you cannot act upon your feelings for Alice Hunt doesn’t mean the rest of us should condemn ours.”

“Do not speak of Alice Hunt!” Walker roared back and a vein starting throbbing in his forehead.

“I respect you for honoring your wife and your vows,” Gold answered, calmer now. “But Belle and I are both unattached. And all we did was love each other. You had no right to interfere with that. Particularly because you couldn’t care less about the two of us together. You were worried Belle was about to discover the truth and you wanted to silence her.”

“She reads too much,” Walker said grudgingly. “And she was on to something... I believe she would have figured it out in time. Gaston Merand is a good sort of man, dedicated to our way of life here, of her own age... he wanted to marry her and I thought it best to encourage that.”

“And did it at one point occur to you to wonder what Belle wanted?” Gold asked through clenched teeth.

“You are not a leader!” Walker snapped back. “You do not know what it is to weigh the interests of everyone and base your decisions on that. You do not know the responsibility that come with that!”

“You are right,” Gold replied, feeling oddly resigned and happy with this establishment. “I am not a leader. I would have made a terrible elder. I do not care about the greater good. I only care about the people that I love. And I love Belle. And all I care about is to make sure she’s happy and safe.”

“And by dragging her back to the old world you think you’re going to accomplish that?” Walker sneered. “You’re going to expose a young, sheltered woman to the threats and dangers of that world? You know what happened to her mother. Do you think you can protect her from that?”

He staggered at the harsh words, the bile rising in his throat as Walker threw his worst fear at him. “I’ll do anything I can to protect her...” he answered hoarsely. “In the same way that I have protected her from you.”

“You are a coward, by your own admission,” Walker stated coldly. “You’ve spend all the years that you’ve been here cowering in fear. What good will you to her?”

“I am a coward,” he agreed, his voice quiet. “And I will spend every moment of every day fearing for her safety once we’re outside. But I won’t let her stay here to wilt and crumple until all the life has gone out of her and all of her light is dimmed... the way it happened to your daughter.”

“What have you to say about my daughter?” Walked hissed, cold with fury.

“Are you so blind?” Gold asked. “Don’t you see what the last months have done to your child?”

“Ivy is alive and safe and so is Lucius,” Walker spat back. “She is upset by what has occurred, but she will rally her spirits again.”

“Your daughter used to be unafraid of anything,” Gold said sadly. “She used to run with the boys
and know her mind… she used to be able to recognize people by their color. Now she is so scared she wears protective stones and the safe color at all times. She believes in the creatures and the fear is consuming her, so much that she can’t see what’s real anymore. She is more blind now that she ever was before.”

“And what would have happened had I not let her go to the towns?” Walker demanded. “Lucius Hunt would have died and she would have been devastated.

“I do not argue you should have let her go the towns,” Gold replied. “But you should not have let her believe the lies. You had already told her the truth, why go back on it?”

“So she wouldn’t have to know she killed Noah Percy,” Walker said, tears appearing in his eyes. “Because I cannot bear to see the pain in her eyes when she realizes what she had done. She never intended for this to happen and I couldn’t protect her from it. But I can protect her from knowing the truth. My sole purpose is to protect her, to protect the others.”

“But look at the hurt you’ve caused despite your best intentions,” Gold argued. “Ivy, Noah Percy, Lucius, Belle… little Daniel Nicholson… How can you look at yourself and justify what you have done?”

“My father, Ivy’s grandfather was slain in the towns, shot by his companion,” Walker answered, his voice choking. “August Nicholson’s brother was shot at the hospital when he was trying to help a drug addict. Lucius’s father was robbed and assaulted before he was killed, Robert and Vivien’s eldest son was beaten to death for his wallet, Belle’s mother was gang-raped and your own son died at the hands of a drunk driver… I justify what I did because I don’t want any of the youngsters to know that kind of pain, to feel that kind of sorrow.

Yes, they are afraid of Those We Don’t Speak Of, but at the end of it, fear is all they’ll know. And is that not better than heartache?”

“Nothing is worse than being afraid,” Gold replied softly, a sudden smile playing around his lips as he thought back on the first time he had heard those words. His Belle was a wise woman.

“I understand your reasoning, but I do not agree with you. I think you underestimate what fear does to a person. You believe you can control the fear, while it is the fear that controls you. And I do not believe anything gives you the right to terrify people like this, even if you think it’s for their own good.”

A long, heavy silence stretched out between the two men, until Walker sighed resignedly.

“I will not stop you from leaving Covington’s Woods. You must leave in the night, so no one will notice you’ve gone until the next morning. But realize this: once you’ve left, there is no way back. You cannot return, neither of you.”

Belle would never see her father again and as ambiguous as his feelings towards the man were, he knew it would cause her pain.

“I understand,” Gold answered gravely. “Belle and I will prepare ourselves. We’ll leave tonight.”
Like he had confronted Edward Walker alone, Belle decided to tell her father about their decision by herself. She was gone for more than two hours and the entire time she was gone he paced around nervously, dreading the reaction she would get and the consequences it might entail.

When she finally returned to his house, her face was pale and her eyes swollen and red-rimmed. Without saying a word she fell into his arms and he held her tightly, rubbing her back and murmuring sweet nothingness into her hair. His heart was breaking for her. She shouldn’t have to face this choice, between her father and the man she loved. Between her family and her freedom.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not.” She pulled back and looked at him, smiling through her tears. “We’re making the right decision, we both know that. And Papa understood in the end. He hates it that I am leaving, but he isn’t going to object.”

“Truly?” he asked surprised, his hands settling on her waist.

Belle nodded, brushing the remaining tears away from her face. “He is letting me go.”

They didn’t pack a lot of things. A bag with clothing and a bag with some personal belongings, mostly the things he had saved in the wooden chest all those years and her books. Together they had their last dinner in his house. Ever since the night he had told her the truth about the creatures, Belle had stayed with him, both of them no longer bothering to hide their relationship or fearing what the council might do about it.

Some time after that August Nicholson paid them a visit, his eyes filled with regret and support.

“You will be all right,” he told them quietly. “You are together and you love each other. You really don’t need more than that. Although…” He paused and pulled a small scrape of paper from the pocket of his jacket and handed it to Gold.

“There’s an address on it,” he explained. “It’s of a refuge in Pittsburgh. They give shelter to people who have left secluded communities like an Amish fellowship for instance. You cannot tell them about our village of course, but they’ll be able to help you get acquainted again with the world. Go to them and mention my name… they’ll help you get on your feet.”

“Thank you,” Gold replied sincerely, tucking the address carefully away into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

For the past few days he had worried himself almost sick agonizing how he was going to provide for Belle and protect her upon their return. Now at least he had a place to start.

“Would you not like to come with us?” he asked, surprising himself with the question. But somehow it felt like the right thing to do. August Nicholson somehow didn’t seem to belong in the village anymore than he and Belle did.
But the other man shook his head. “I have nothing to go back to. My life is here. And I believe I should stay to make right the wrongs that were done in the past months.

At midnight he closed the door of his house for the very last time and he briefly wondered who would come to occupy it now.

Together, their hands firmly clasped, they made their way to the Watch Tower and in the light of the torches they could see Edward Walker and Maurice French waiting for them.

“You are determined then?” Walker asked them gravely, giving him a fixed stare.

“Yes, we are.” It was Belle that answered him, her voice clear and strong.

Next to Walker, Maurice French let out a shuddering breath and Gold felt Belle’s fingers grasping tightly around his.

“Very well,” Walker continued, reaching into his pocket and producing a brass key. “A half night’s journey will bring you to a gravel road. You must follow that, it will lead you to a gate in the fence. The gate is closed, but this key will open it. Leave the key in the lock, one of the elders will come to retrieve it some time tomorrow. Remember to close the gate carefully behind you. You are to tell no one about this place, or reveal where we live. Do you understand?”

“Yes!” They replied in unison as Gold took the key from him.

Briefly Belle let go of his hand so she could embrace her father. “I love you, Papa. And thank you.”

Over the top of her head, Maurice French looked at Gold, his eyes wet and pleading. “Take care of my girl... make sure she doesn’t come to harm.”

“I swear,” he promised hoarsely. Belle returned to his side and he took her hand firmly in his again.

“Are you ready?” he whispered quietly, so only she would hear him. One last time he had to make absolutely certain that this was truly what she wanted.

She managed to give him a bright smile, belying her fears. “I’ve never been more certain of anything. And you?”

In response he lifted their clasped hands to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

Strapping their bags securely to their backs, the both of them looked back one final time.

Walker was staring right back at them, his posture rigid and his face impassive. Maurice French was crying quietly, but trying to smile, waving at his daughter.

Taking a deep breath of air, they started to walk towards the boarder.

In a way, crossing the boarder was somewhat anticlimactic. Once they had moved past the poles and the banners there simply continued to be more forest for them to cross.
It was a dark, cold night and the moon was only sporadically visible through the heavy cloud cover. The road was uneven and often difficult to navigate and especially Gold had trouble keeping his balance, carefully putting down his cane with each and every step that he took. Still, Belle’s hand in his gave him the strength and courage to continue.

The further they came into the woods, the darker it became and when they heard the stretched-out howl of an animal crying out in the night both of them froze.

“It’s nothing…” Gold managed, breathing heavily. “It’s just the wildlife that lives in the woods…”

“The creatures aren’t real,” Belle echoed. “We know that, we know they are not real.”

Holding on tightly to each other’s hand, they continued to walk, but Gold still felt the blood pumping through his veins. There was nothing in the woods that he had to fear, he knew that very well. But the monsters living inside his head were a completely different matter.

“What do you think we’ll do when we reach the towns?” Belle asked.

“Find the refuge and some form of employment,” he reasoned practically. “We need an income and then we can go from there.”

“We’ll find something,” Belle replied optimistically. “I know my way around plants and greenery and you have a college degree and everything.”

It hardly felt like this was the right time to point out that there would be a twenty year gap on his résumé, so instead he said: “Perhaps I could go back into the antique business. That can’t have changed much, except for the fact that everything is two decades more worth now.”

Her laughter broke the quietness of the wood and instantly provided him with a surge of hope. “I’ll promise you this much,” he vowed to her. “With the first money I earn, I’m buying you a radio. You should be able to listen to Crosby, Still, Nash and Young again.”

As they continued walking, she brushed her head against his shoulder in an affectionate gesture.

“Do you still remember the words of the song?” she asked.

After discovering how much the song meant to her, he had in fact spend nights laying awake, trying to remember as much of it as he could.

“Some of it…” he answered reluctantly.

“Really?” Her face beamed up at him. “Will you sing them to me?”

In the far distance he could hear howling and grunting and the sounds of twigs breaking under feet.

‘It was nothing,’ he told himself sternly. ‘There is nothing in the woods.’

But when he both felt and heard Belle’s breath hitch in her throat he decided that singing might not be the worse course of action and with a shaky voice he began:

“I’ll light the fire,
you place the flowers in the vase
that you bought today.

Staring at the fire,
for hours and hours
while I listen to you
play your love songs
all night long,
for me
Only for me…”

His voice faltered, his throat suddenly choked. “I don’t remember the rest of it.”

“We’re going to be so happy, Nicolas,” she whispered quietly. “You’ll see, everything is going to be all right.”

They continued to walk, keeping the moon on their right shoulder and occasionally stumbling over a root or a branch in front of them. They kept talking, anything to break the terrifying silence that hung like a heavy blanket over the woods. Occasionally they heard snarls and cries coming from the woods and each time it happened they looked at each other, drawing strength from the other, both of them needing the comfort and the reassurance.

It was already getting light in the East when they finally reached the gravel road and Gold sighed in relief, every muscle in his injured leg aching now.

“We’re almost there,” Belle whispered disbelievingly. “We made it.”

Standing on her tiptoes, she reached out and pulled his face down for a kiss. “Look, it’s a new day,” she told him, smiling against his lips.

Walking the gravel road took another hour, but at last they were standing in front of a high, ivy covered fence. They had to grope around for a bit to find the gate and when they finally did, they looked at each other breathlessly.

“This is it,” Belle whispered eventually.

He nodded wordlessly, extracting the key from his pocket. From the other side of the fence he could hear the sounds of cars passing over asphalt roads, leaving him with a sense of familiarity that was oddly comforting.

Together they put the key into the lock and turned.

It only took a small push and then the gate swung wide open.

Chapter End Notes

Only one more chapter to go...
Chapter 18

Maine, 2009

Returning had been both one of the hardest and easiest things of his life. During the twenty years he had lived inside Covington Woods, the world had altered unrecognizably. Suddenly it was filled with noises and lights, computers and portable phones and radios. Cars had become faster, bigger and - to his horror - quieter.

In many ways the world he’d stepped into the morning he and Belle went through the gate was completely different from the one he’d left twenty years ago and all things considered, he was glad for it. It felt like a chance to start over once again.

A kind Park Ranger had given them a lift to Pittsburgh and they had found their way to the refuge August Nicholson had referred them to. There they’d met with Emily Walsh, the lady who ran the organization and only after a couple of days he had figured out that her maiden name was Emily Nicholson. Without giving away any of the particulars, he had managed to convey to her how her brother was doing. And even though the news of the passing of her young nephew, a boy she’d never met, saddened her, from that moment on Emily Walsh had been an invaluable help to them.

It had been Emily who brought him in contact with Pittsburgh Auction House and set him up for a job interview as a curator. Once he was hired and made it through his trial period, he and Belle had been able to rent a small apartment of their own and he considered the privacy of finally being together in their own home the greatest blessing of all.

Building a life for themselves had been a challenge at times, but throughout it all, as long as at the end of each day he could crawl into bed and wrap his arms around his Belle, he felt he could accomplish anything.

His Belle. There had been a brief and formal ceremony at the register’s office and an embarrassing cheap ring, but still, she was his wife now and that alone made him happier than he’d ever thought to feel again.

They were together now and they were free to love each other and show it and the joy of that made any difficulty or obstacle they encountered seem insignificant in comparison.

Belle took to her new life like a flower that flourished in the light of the sun. Whereas he slowly and painstakingly got used to being in the real world again, she acclimated with leaps and bounds. From one day to the next she shed her long, modest skirts and buttoned-up blouses and traded them for colorful, knee-length dresses and skirts and frilly blouses, paired with high heels. She cut her hair off to her shoulders and soon he grew to love the way her curls danced around her shoulders, as free as she was.

She found a job at a flower shop and seized the first opportunity she got to sign up for evening classes, enabling her to get a degree in library science. It was also Belle who embraced modern technology with both arms and couldn’t get enough of electricity, computers, the internet or phones, the possibilities of them filling her with a childlike wonder.

Like he had promised her, with his first earned money he bought her a radio which was now one of her most priced possessions.
It took five years of hard work, saving, scraping and making do, but then they caught their lucky break. Belle, freshly graduated from college applied for the position of librarian at a small town in Maine and was hired. He found a vacated shop in the same town and managed to get a loan to open up his own antique shop again. They found a small house with a garden. They adopted two cats, because he couldn’t begrudge Belle the chance to live out her favorite song and they were happy.

The sound of the doorbell on a quiet afternoon startled her from the book she’d been reading. Making her way to the front door, Belle panted slightly with the effort, everything just that little bit more challenging now that she was six month’s pregnant. When she opened the door, she found a young woman standing on the doorstep, dressed in an ankle-length, beige skirt and a bulky cardigan, her long, ash-blond hair hiding most of her face.

There was something awfully familiar about the woman, but still, Belle couldn’t quite place her.

“Belle French?” the woman asked timidly.

“Actually, it’s Belle Gold now,” she replied, her mind turning furiously, trying to figure out who this woman was. Then the penny dropped.

“Bessie Morton!” She cried out. “Is that you?”

“It is,” the woman confirmed, her posture tensing. “Would you be so kind as to allow me to come inside your home?”

“Of course,” Belle replied, stepping aside to let the woman enter. “Let us sit down in the living room and I will fetch us some tea.”

It was odd, she pondered as she made her way to the kitchen, how she’d instantly reverted to the way of speaking she’d been accustomed to when she’d lived in Covington Woods. When she returned to the living room, Bessie Morton was seated on the couch, her eyes roaming through the room, wide with wonder.

“What has happened to you?” Belle asked gently, handing her a cup of tea and sitting down across from her. “When did you leave?”

“Three months ago…” Bessie replied hesitantly, her posture rigid and tense. “We… a lot of things have changed since you and Mr. Gold disappeared.”

“Did they now?” Belle asked quietly, imploring the other woman to elaborate.

“When we discovered you were gone, the elders told us that you and Mr. Gold had run off together and that you had been attacked by creatures in the woods and that they had killed you both. They brought two closed coffins back… you were buried at the cemetery.”

“Oh my god,” Belle breathed, bile rising up in her throat. “My poor Papa…”

“After that, things got worse,” Bessie continued. “I was released from the house I’d been confined in, but almost everybody shunned me after that. Some said cruel things as I passed them, how I was a danger… an abomination… and then…”

The woman took a shuddering breath, the last bit of color draining from her already gaunt, pale
face and Belle reached out to pat her arm reassuringly.

“Then Mr. Walker died,” Bessie told her. “He suffered from a heart attack and he was gone instantly. Afterwards everybody panicked. The council tried to maintain control, but people were just too frightened… Scared that with Mr. Walker gone, the truce would crumble and the creatures would come to the village to devour us. And then people like Albert Spencer demanded action, said precautions had to be taken… eventually he was made an elder and then everything just turned horrible…”

“What happened?” Belle asked, her heart constricting in terror.

“There were trials,” Bessie continued motionless. “Everyone who could be accused of jeopardizing the safety of the village was tried and convicted. “Me, Lucius and Ivy Hunt, Finton Coin… some others… We were sent to wear markings of the forbidden color on our clothes, so that when the creatures would come into our village, they’d come after us first and give the others a chance to flee.”

“But wouldn’t the bad color simply attract the creatures?” Belle asked bewildered. “By making you wear them, they were putting everyone at danger.”

Not that there had been any danger, she mentally corrected herself. It was just that the story that the elders were telling appeared to be no longer consistent.

“No one dared to ask,” Bessie admitted. “Everything that could be considered criticism of the council would land you in trouble.”

“But what about the other elders?” Belle asked. “Mr. Nicholson, Mrs. Hunt… did they just agree to it?”

“Quite a few agreed with Spencer,” Bessie replied. “Mrs. Clarke and Mr. and Mrs. Percy did straight away and eventually they managed to convince Mr. Bing as well. Mr. Nicholson, Mrs. Hunt and Mrs. Walker were simply denounced. Mr. Nicholson was made to wear the mark of the forbidden color too, but Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Hunt choose to remain silent so that they could help Lucius and Ivy. Because after their conviction, no one wanted to have anything to do with them. With any of us.”

Bessie rubbed her hands over her face, brushing away her tears and Belle gripped her hand tightly.

“How did you get away?”

“Your father helped us,” Bessie answered, her face brightening somewhat. “A few of us decided to escape… Finton Coin, Henry Mills, Moraine Shade… we just wanted to get away. And then your father told us that the two of you hadn’t died, but that you had chosen to leave. He told us about the fence around the woods and how to reach it. We left in the night and travel through the woods… we didn’t encounter any of the creatures and we managed to reach the gravel road safely… then we climbed over the fence.”

She still didn’t know, Belle realized. The woman across from her had no idea that the creatures had never been real. That it was merely a ruse to keep them frightened and in check. But perhaps now wasn’t the best time to mention that.

And her father…. her Papa had helped them, had saved them.

“What happened after you got out?” she asked.

“We roamed around for a few weeks,” Bessie told her. “Eventually we found shelter at the
Salvation Army, but it’s been difficult. The towns are nothing like I’ve imagined them to be and its all so confusing. I’ve been looking for a job, but it's hard to find anything permanent.”

She had been so lucky, Belle thought to herself. She’d had Nicolas. He had known this world and she’d had her own memories, so this world hadn’t come as a complete shock to her.

“I wanted to meet you, once I found out that you were still alive,” Bessie told her. “I wanted to know how you had done it.” She looked wistfully around the cozy living room before settling her eyes on her protruding stomach. “Now I know. You’ve done well.”

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” Belle offered spontaneously. “We could talk some more…”

But Bessie shook her head. “I need to go back. I have a job interview this evening, I can’t be late for that…”

“How about this weekend then?” Belle pressed. “You could invite the others too. Maybe Nicolas and I can help you settle in…”

Hope blossomed on Bessie’s pale, worry-etched face. “You would?” I’d be so thankful… and the other would too, I’m certain…”

Grabbing a pad and a pencil from the coffee table, Belle started to scribble. “Let me give you our phone number.”

After Bessie had left, Belle wandered around the house aimlessly, her head buzzing with everything Bessie Morton had told her. Running her hands over her stomach and feeling the baby happily kick against her fingers, she could have cried with relief. Had she and Nicolas stayed, they would have been sentenced as well. They would never have been allowed to stay together.

Yes, this new world was very different from the sheltered, peaceful one she’s grown up in. It was harsher, more dangerous here and she knew Nicolas feared for her safety every minute of every day, especially since they’d found out she was pregnant, her husband being both over the moon with happiness and terrified by the prospect of anything happening to them.

But at least they were together and they were building a family.

When she heard his footsteps on the path leading up to the porch, she rushed downstairs and threw the door open, already in his arms before he’d even been able to climb up the steps. His cane clattering to the floor, he held her tightly, his lips moving soothingly over her brow, while his hand slid to the swell of her stomach.

“Is everything all right?” he asked quietly, his eyes fraud with worry.

“Yes!” she sighed, her heart filling with happiness as she pulled his head down for a long, lazy kiss.

The sun was shining, it was almost summer and their little garden was in bloom. Their baby was healthy and safe inside her and his arms were around her.

Everything was just perfect.
Well, that concludes the story. I had so much fun writing this. Thanks for all the comments and kudos!

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