



MANAGER

Arcage

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CHUCKLES AND GIGGLES

VOLUME TWO

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Chapter

22

Surprisingly enough, Pleasantville recovered pretty quickly from the flood. A few months passed, then school was back in and Belle was looking forward to it.

“Tuesdays and Thursdays at uni, three days chilling with you guys!” Belle walked to school with the rest of the group (minus Daniel, who was working at the local timber mill).

“I’m glad you’re excited.” TJ deadpanned. He hated school with a passion, and was looking forward to being able to leave and join the police force with his father.

“We’re in the same roll call class too!” Sunny took Belle’s arm. Belle gave her a friendly bump with her hip. The two were almost like sisters nowadays, with Sunny staying over most nights.

“I know! Charlie is with us too.” Belle looked up at her best friend. He put his arm around her and squeezed her tightly.

It turned out that the three of them had several classes together. They all shared Maths and English, Belle and Charlie had Business Principals together, and Belle and Sunny had Music. Charlie and Sunny shared the rest of their classes, which were Wood Working, Metal Working and Technical Drawing.

“I can’t wait for my first day at uni tomorrow. A few of the guys in Legal Studies were giving me heaps over it.” Belle said over lunch.

“It must be so exciting. You’re going to be a uni student!” Petunia smiled.

“It’s gonna be a huge responsibility though.” TJ pointed out.

“Belle can handle it, no problem. She’s awesome.” Charlie grinned. Belle beamed. There was no higher praise than what came from Charlie in her eyes.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, and soon Belle was standing at the entrance of the University on a warm Tuesday morning.

Nerves overtook her as she walked in. Her hands were trembling as she tried to figure out which building her lecture was supposed to be in.

“Hey there. You look a little lost.” She heard a voice behind her.

She turned around to see a man smiling down on her. Belle silently cursed her short stature and smiled back.

“Yeah, I’m a little lost. I’m supposed to be in Introduction to Criminal Law in about fifteen minutes.” She blushed slightly.

He laughed.

“I know where that is, I took it last year. Come with me, you’re not too far off where you need to be.” He led her to a tall building that Belle had passed about four times and took her inside.

He was very handsome, with wild green eyes and jet-black hair. Belle couldn't help but stare a little.

“And here you are.” He showed her a lecture theatre where people were already sitting inside.

“Thanks!” Belle grinned with relief.

“No problem. You look a little young to be a uni student though.” He smiled back.

“I'm doing it part-time while I'm still in year twelve.” Belle explained.

“Well then, you'll probably see a lot of me around then! My name is Webster.” He held out his right hand.

“I'm Belle.” Belle shook it.

“I've gotta go, but if you want to go to the Rec at lunchtime you can sit with my girlfriend and I.” Webster offered.

“That sounds great, thank you!” Belle felt a lot better. She sat down and pulled out the new Tablet her father had bought her just for her uni work. She turned it on and attached the keyboard that her uncle had bought to go with it. She also flicked open her notepad and pulled out her new pens. A few other students had their textbooks open, so Belle got hers out too. She'd read a few of them already, she had been so excited.

The lecture was interesting too. Belle jotted down as much as she could without getting lost. She thought of her father and what he did. It felt good that she was getting the tools she needed to really make a difference.

Afterwards, she headed to the Rec hall to get something to eat. Her next lecture wasn't until after lunch, and she was grateful to have a bit of a break.

She saw Webster sitting with the most beautiful Asian woman Belle had ever laid eyes on, with chestnut hair and blue eyes. He noticed her and waved for her to sit with them.

“Hi Belle. This is Maddy, my lovely lady.” He grinned at the woman cheekily. She smiled back and shook hands with Belle.

“Don't listen to a word this man says, he's more trouble than he's worth.” Maddy chuckled, poking her boyfriend's ribs. “So you're our new part-timer huh?”

“Yeah. I want to go into criminal law eventually.” Belle sat down, stomach rumbling. She was thrilled with the choice of food here, and had neatly stacked her place with roast meat and veggies.

“Excellent! Do you have family in law or something?” Webster asked. “My grand-father was a prosecutor in Brisvegas.”

“My Dad's a prosecutor too – Peter Masters.” Belle said with a huge swelling of pride. Maddy and Webster looked at each other.

“YOU are Peters daughter?!” Maddy gasped. “Wow!”

Belle blushed slightly.

“Why did you leave Brisvegas?” She asked Webster.

He looked uncomfortable. Maddy sighed.

“Tate.” She replied.

“Tate?” Belle asked.

“I'm not originally from Brisvegas. I moved there to live with my grand-father about ten years ago. It was alright for the first few years, until I met Tate. She started following me around. It was pretty cool, like having a little sister.” Webster pushed his meat around the plate. “But when I told her I was coming here to study law she got really upset.”

“Oh...” Belle felt awkward.

“It's okay. I do love Tate, just not the way she wants me to.” Webster put his arm around Maddy.

“Tate sounds like a bit of a pain.” Belle ventured.

“She's not really. If it wasn't for her encouragement I wouldn't have even got into law. I would have just gotten the first job I could.” Webster said. “She just...it's complicated.”

Belle understood. Tate wanted to be with Webster, but Webster simply wasn't interested.

“Then I got here last year and met Maddy.” Websters grin returned. “I'll probably stay here for the rest of my life now.”

“Trust me, there'll be no shortage of work.” Belle said bitterly, thinking of her hated enemies.

“Not with Chuckles and Giggles keeping things in order. Not to mention the Knights of the Last Order. We're big fans of theirs.” Maddy said.

“Really? So am I.” Belle smiled, secretly wondering how her new friends would react if they knew who she was!

Speaking of which, her watch suddenly started flashing orange. Sir Lionheart was in trouble!

“I'm sorry, I have to go, something came up.” Belle quickly excused herself. She looked at her real watch. She had an hour to go until her next class. Plenty of time to sort out any of her regular foes.

She stuffed her uni gear in her locker then hid in an old shed and changed. Pretty soon, Giggles was out and about!

—

Giggles crept up to the Council building, where Demon was now holding hostages. Johannas was with him, laughing at how scared the Councillors were.

“Psst!” She heard someone hiss behind her.

“Chuckles! I thought you were in school!” Giggles whispered.

“It's lunchtime, so I thought I'd come and help. The others are stuck unfortunately.” Chuckles replied.

“How is school anyway?”

“Pretty good.”

Giggles turned around. She saw Daniel standing next to a load of wood that was being used for an extension on the building. He'd been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“C'mon, what are we waiting for?! Why are we sitting here whispering if we can just go and get him?” Chuckles was ready to go.

“Because we don't know if he has any more of his minions around. We don't want innocent people getting - **FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS GOOD AND JUST IN THIS WORLD! CHUCKLES!!**” Giggles roared in anger as Chuckles ran out with the Lions Claw Blade ready to strike.

“Chuckles and Giggles. I thought you two would be at school or something.” Demon frowned. “Johannas! We're leaving!”

“You're joking, right? You're just going to up and leave?” Giggles looked at Demon, dumbfounded.

“Yup.” Replied Demon.

“You didn't bring any back up?”

“Nup.”

“You're just going to run away without a fight?”

“Yup.”

Giggles could feel the familiar twinge of her eye twitching. The smoke bomb went off, and Demon was gone.

“I love being right.” Chuckles came over and leaned on Giggles. “How Improbable was that?”

Funnily enough the teachers believed him when he explained that his black eye had been the result of an unfortunate slip in the toilets.

—

The rest of the lectures were not quite as entertaining as the first one, but Belle still enjoyed them. She packed up her things and headed out towards the school, where she'd walk home with the others.

She got to the front gate of the school and was about to wait for her friends, when she saw that they'd already walked off.

“HEY! Hey you snobs! Wait for me!” She ran to catch up with them.

“Hey Belle! How was uni?” Sammy asked excitedly.

“Really fun. I made some new friends already.” Belle replied. She looked over at Sunny and Charlie, who were laughing.

“What's the joke?” She asked.

“They won't tell us.” TJ frowned.

“You had to be in Metal Works to get it.” Charlie snorted. Belle rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, how's Dan going? I hear you two saved his bacon.” Petunia asked.

Charlie was about to answer, but a warning glance from Belle silenced him. “It was fun.” He said sheepishly.

Chapter

23

Belle got out of uni one day a few months later feeling flat. The work was a lot harder than she was used to, and the extra work was cutting into her social life. Plus the University had just lost funding for her tutor, so life was even harder.

In fact, a lot of funding had been lost recently, especially for the Legal studies. First they'd upped the price of the course, then they fired a few staff, and then the price of textbooks went up. Webster was getting pretty annoyed, and Maddy thought it was a conspiracy.

Belle sighed to herself, wondering at her misfortune and the misfortune of the University. At all the work she had to do. At how unfair life seemed at that moment. But still, at least she could still walk home with her friends, right?

“Where's Charlie and Sunny?” Belle asked as she approached the group.

“They're staying back to work on a project together for Wood Work.” TJ replied.

“Cool.” Belle said. Inside she felt cold and upset. Charlie had been spending a lot more time with Sunny recently. Even when Belle was in school she felt like a third wheel.

Charlie had been her best friend for as long as she could remember. To be honest, she wouldn't have been surprised if they ended up together – in fact, she was hoping for it, and had been since she was ten. Now Sunny was on the scene, and Belle didn't like it.

'She was always jealous of me.' Thought Belle. 'So she's finally decided she's stealing my best friend.'

“Anyway, we're heading off to Dan's place for his parents anniversary. We'll catch up with you later Belle!” Sammy patted her back as the group headed off towards Dans place.

Belle's shoulders were slumped as she walked back home. Didn't ANYONE want to hang out with her?

—

“This.” Said Master Revolver. “Was a brilliant idea.”

“I can't believe we didn't think of this before.” Mobster Marion agreed.

The third figure at the table was a boyish-looking young lady with jet-black short hair and green eyes that could turn wild in a heart-beat. They hadn't been wild in a long time though, they'd been dark and downcast for a good year.

“I did tell you it was a good idea. The less students they graduate out of the Legal program, the less prosecutors there'll be to send you to gaol.” She said smugly.

“Yes, plus with the Council tipping less money into education, they have more to devote to projects more in line with our interests.” Master Revolver sipped the dark red wine.

“You get what you want, and I get what I want.” The young lady said, eating another spoonful of soup.

“You still haven't told us what you want.” Mobster Marion eyed her warily. “Why are you helping us?”

“What does it matter?” The young lady looked up. “You should just be grateful I've joined your cause.”

“You're one of the richest self-made business owners in the country. Why would you want to lower yourself to the level of us petty criminals?” Master Revolver asked.

“You certainly rose to prominence quickly. It must have been a lot of hard work.” Mobster Marion mentioned.

“I had a good example when it came to hard work.” The young lady sipped her drink. “I knew the only way I could meet my goals was to work harder than I ever had.”

“We certainly have much respect for you. You should be proud of your achievements.” Master Revolver toasted her.

“They're nothing but a stepping stone to what I really want.” The young lady frowned.

“I like her. So much lust for power. You will go far indeed.” Mobster Marion grinned.

The lady merely smiled back, and continued eating the delicious soup that was on offer. It wasn't power she was after of course, although it would help in her in the long run.

No. What Tate wanted was her beloved Webster back.

And she would stop at NOTHING until he was hers, even if it meant destroying his dreams.

Even if it meant destroying Pleasantville.

—

Belle was sitting in the tree petting Meow, bored out of her skull. Her father had forbid her from studying, saying she was starting to look pale, and told her to go out and play with Charlie.

One problem – he was still at the school with *Sunny*.

It annoyed her no end. Sunny had been downright cruel to them for YEARS. Belle could still remember the time Sunny had taken her favourite school bag and set it alight – thankfully Charlie had stepped in and saved the contents from harm at least. Then there was the time she and Daryl shoved Charlie down the stairs of the English block – thankfully Belle had caught him before he fell too far and broke any bones.

Now *Sunny* and Charlie were all buddy-buddy. Belle was going to fix that. This weekend she was going to take Charlie on a picnic – just them. She'd gotten her licence a while back and was going to drive him to the Silver Coast for the weekend. They would do all the things they used to, go for walks, watch movies, sing loudly and obnoxiously to the car radio...

Belle sighed, thinking of how much fun they were going to have, when she heard voices.

It was Charlie and Sunny!

“And then my Dad smacked the living daylight out of the two thugs like it was nothing!” Charlie chuckled, recounting the story of Peter and Johannas.

“Wow, poor Belle.” Sunny replied.

“Yeah. He won't ever hurt her again though.” Charlie promised. Belle's heart gave a little leap.

“She's really lucky to have a best friend like you.” Sunny looked at him wistfully.

“Don't fall for it Charlie!” Belle muttered to herself. Slimy, no good Jones!

“I'm not ALL that great.” Charlie laughed bashfully.

“I think you are.” Sunny continued.

“You're pretty awesome yourself. Everything you've been through...” Charlie trailed off. He looked at Sunny. She was beautiful. Even the little scar under her eye added to her allure.

“I have you and Belle to thank for getting me out of that.” Sunny smiled shyly. Charlie wasn't the most handsome boy, but he was still charming, polite and kind. Sunny couldn't help but want to be close to him.

“Friends look out for each other.” Charlie put an arm around her.

“It means a lot to me that you consider me a friend. Especially after everything I did...” Sunny looked down.

“Water under the bridge. You were a different person.” Charlie lifted her chin up.

“Not really. I still get jealous of you and Belle sometimes.” Sunny admitted.

“Knew it.” Belle muttered.

“There's nothing to be jealous of. You're one of us now.” Charlie told her.

Sunny smiled up at him again. Charlie couldn't help it. Neither could she. They kissed.

Belle nearly fell out of the tree. Her blood ran cold and her heart stopped. She couldn't breathe. Tears began to burn at the backs of her eyes and she felt like she was dying. Charlie had KISSED Sunny Jones!

The pair pulled apart. “Umm...” Sunny smiled shyly again.

“I'll see you at school tomorrow?” Charlie asked.

“Sure. See ya!” Sunny gave him another peck on the cheek and bounded off, the happiest girl in Pleasantville. Finally, she felt like she had someone, someone who was hers and hers alone. It wrapped around her like an invisible cloak, not even her cold family could hurt her that night!

Charlie couldn't believe it either. It was as if all his Christmases had come at once. He bounded inside, kissed his sisters, hugged his mother, thumped his father on the back and bolted upstairs.

He had to tell Belle!

He scrambled out of his bedroom window into the tree, nearly falling head-first into the ground below in his haste.

“BELLE! Belle! Something AMAZING just happened! Belle? Belle, are you home?” Charlie knocked on the closed window, the blind drawn down. Odd. “Belle!”

Inside the bedroom however, Belle was sobbing, completely and miserably heartbroken.

In her heart, she felt that she had lost her Charlie forever.

To Sunny Jones, who had once made her life unbearable.

Chapter

24

Charlie was worried. Belle was avoiding him as much as she could, and he didn't know why. It stung, she'd never treated him like this before and it put a nasty damper on his new relationship with Sunny.

"Maybe she's just busy, you know she's had a lot of work to do for uni." Sunny stroked his hair as they sat down for lunch one day, a week or so after the first kiss. Belle had scooted off to the Library almost the moment Double English had been dismissed.

"It can't be, she'd ask for my help if that was it." Charlie groaned.

"I think criminal law is a *little* bit out of your reach Charlie." Sunny chuckled, tickling him.

"Hey, I'm plenty smart enough to handle it thank you!" Charlie laughed, tickling her back.

Belle caught a brief glance of them out of the window as she put a book back on the shelf, and it cut her like a knife. Then the mere fact that she felt like she was cut started to stab at her. Charlie was HAPPY. How on earth could she call herself his best friend if she couldn't be happy for him?

The constant struggle of her emotions followed her to uni the next day, where Maddy noticed she was a bit quieter than usual.

"What's up chickie?" Maddy asked, popping a piece of chicken in her mouth.

"There's a reason cutlery was invented." Webster frowned at her.

"Bite me." Maddy sassed back. Webster smirked.

"I'm in love with someone who's already got a girlfriend." Belle sighed.

Webster suddenly looked mock-serious.

"Belle. You know I'm far too old for you, and I'm too in love with Maddy." He took one of Belle's hands in his, making both girls laugh.

"Webster, sweetie, I'm sorry, but it's certainly not an old man like you I'm interested in." Belle replied with the same mocking seriousness. Webster feigned heart-break while Maddy roared with laughter.

"Forget him Belle, seriously. You deserve someone who will love you so completely that he won't even see another woman even if he's about to walk into her." Webster continued.

"Thanks." Belle smiled.

"You're still young, and I bet your friend is too. There's still plenty of time for him to grow up and smell the roses. It's not like he's married or anything right?" Maddy nudged her. Webster rolled his eyes.

"Horrible." He kissed Maddy.

“Seriously?! GROSS!” Belle pretended to spew up while the couple made out.

While this was happening, someone was watching them from a distance.

Tate missed her boy. She wanted to see him – badly. So she'd snuck onto the campus and stalked her prey for the day.

But she hadn't expected this. Not for him to have someone else. To be in LOVE with someone else.

Pain spread out from her chest. Jealousy. Grief.

Anger.

She was going to make sure he had to come back to Brisvegas. To her.

She had built a small business empire trying to lure him back. She had made so much money over the past year that neither of them would have to work again if they so desired. She thought of all the things she'd tried to make him love her – growing out her hair, working out, encouraging him no matter what, paying for him to take the entrance exams to the University in Brisvegas...

Belle felt someone watching them and turned around, but couldn't see anyone. She tried to shrug it off, but the feeling lingered.

Tate could feel the tears stinging her eyes, but she fought them back. He was hugging her, kissing her, looking at her with such love that Tate wanted to vomit.

A sense of helplessness came over her. She HATED Pleasantville! It was a dinky little town compared to the majesty of Brisvegas! Brisvegas had decent public transport for a start, and crime was almost non-existent there. There were spacious parks and a beautiful river and the shops were open 24/7. Why did Webster want to live HERE of all places?!

She turned away and headed back to the hotel where she was staying. She grabbed her phone and called Master Revolver.

“Miss Tate! Lovely to hear from you. What can I do to help you today?” Master Revolver answered the phone, sounding so sickly-sweet that Tate was disgusted. She knew he was just buttering her up and would turn on her in an instant if it would benefit him.

“I want the University gone. Wiped out. Off the map. Completely destroyed.” Tate said bluntly.

“Oh now you are talking my language!” Master Revolver laughed. “How shall I do it? Explosives? Arson?”

“Whatever way you see fit. Make sure it's in the middle of the day where people will KNOW what happened.” Tate commanded. “I want them all to be afraid.”

“You DO realise that runs the risk of provoking those pests Chuckles and Giggles?” Master Revolver pointed out.

Tate grinned. She knew that if she took out the heroes of Pleasantville, it wouldn't be long before the rest of the city fell. Then Webster would come back to Brisvegas, because there would be nothing left here for him.

“Perfect.”

—

“Maybe she's busy with her new uni friends?” Petunia suggested.

“Belle wouldn't ditch us like that though.” TJ replied.

“Charlie's distraught. She's his best friend and now she isn't talking to him at all.” Sunny sighed.

“She could be jealous.” Daniel piped up.

“Jealous?” Sammy asked.

The Knights of the Last Order were sitting at the tip that Saturday morning. They were supposed to be sparring, but instead were talking.

“I think Belle might have had feelings for Charlie. They've been inseparable since the day they met.” Daniel explained. “Now Charlie is with Sunny, who, if you all remember correctly, coveted everything that Belle had and made her life a living hell.”

Sunny looked down. She hadn't meant to hurt Belle. It was just that she had so much in common with Charlie, and got along with him so well.

“Don't feel too bad Sunny. Belle will get over it.” Sammy said brightly, while Tammy took her hand. Sunny tried to smile but it faltered.

“Belle is almost like a sister to me now. I can't believe I didn't think of her before I acted. Oh lord, we were even TALKING about Belle before I kissed him! How insensitive am I?!” Sunny buried her face in her hands.

“Sunny, it will be okay. Belle loves Charlie. She'll want him to be happy, even if it's with you. She just needs some time.” Petunia tried to cheer her up.

Sunny still looked downcast.

“Let's spar.” Sammy jumped up. “I'll pretend I'm Master Revolver and you guys can try and take me out.”

“Master Revolver huh?” Daniel looked at him, amused.

“Duh, I'm Master Revolver, I like guns although I don't know how to use one.” Sammy put on an exaggerated voice and crossed his eyes. Even Sunny had to howl with laughter at that one.

“I'll be Mobster Marion.” Petunia got into it. “Oh, I'm so beautiful, I'll just stand here and look at my reflection all day long.”

“Oh Marion, your beauty is so magnificent! But it's nothing compared to this shiny object I stole!” Sammy continued.

The group roared with laughter. Suddenly Sunny perked up.

“Hey Charlie!” She bounded over to her boyfriend who had just walked over. He smiled as she hugged him, and gave her a kiss on the nose.

“I heard laughing, what are you guys up to?” He asked as he walked back to the group with Sunny on his arm.

“Mocking Revolver and Marion.” Daniel chuckled.

“We think we might have figured out why Belle is MIA.” TJ said as Charlie sat next to him.

“Oh? She completely ignored me this morning and rushed off to her stupid open day at the uni.” Charlie looked upset.

“She's jealous of you and Sunny.” TJ said.

“You what now?” Charlie looked confused.

“Seriously Charlie, you're thicker than you look. Did it never occur to you that Belle might have liked you more than a friend?” Petunia shook her head at him.

“Ah...no?” Charlie looked sheepish. “Whoops.”

“You moron.” Sunny poked him.

“She'll get over it though.” Charlie said brightly. “She's bouncy like that. Once she gets used to it then she'll be okay.”

“I hope so.” Sunny looked downcast again. Charlie hugged her.

“I know so. She's pretty awesome like that.” Charlie bragged. As much as he loved Sunny, he was still very proud of his Belle.

“Do you think we should go see her at the uni? Make her feel a little less excluded?” Daniel suggested. “She probably feels left out.”

Tammy jumped up immediately. Sammy grinned too.

“Let's go!” He ran off.

The others followed, all laughing.

—

It was a good thing they decided to head to the University, because Giggles was in trouble.

Belle had just finished watching a presentation done by the art department, and was walking back to the Legal facility with Webster and Maddy when the Death Valley Mobsters struck.

“Oh NO!” Belle ran into the toilet block with her friends at her heels.

The Death Valley Mobsters had gotten a hold of some bulldozers, and were chasing the attendees around. The Science building was quickly destroyed, and several others were badly damaged.

“Why are you hiding in here when they're destroying the buildings?!” Webster cried as a loud bang sounded outside.

“Can you keep a secret?” Belle got into a cubicle and quickly pulled her Giggles gear out of her bag. She got into her gear as quickly as she could.

“Of course we can keep a secret Belle, we're your friends! What's up?” Maddy asked.

Belle holstered her guns and grabbed the Backpack and her helmet. She then opened the cubicle door.

“Just call me Giggles.” She said, pulling on her helmet and running out to fight off the bad guys.

Webster and Maddy ran

“We'd better find a better hiding spot!” Webster dragged Maddy away.

“We've been friends with Giggles this whole time?” Maddy was impressed.

Giggles ran up to one of the dozers and jumped up to the cockpit.

“Hi there. Where's Revolver?” She asked of the Mobster that was driving it.

“None of your business! He's left Miss Tate in charge of this one!” The Mobster replied.

“Miss Tate?!” Giggles stepped back. “Who on earth is Miss Tate?!”

“Some rich chick from Brisvegas.” The goon replied. “Now rack off!”

Tate? Brisvegas? Rich?

Giggles didn't want to believe it. She kicked the windshield of the dozer in, knocking out the Mobster. She then turned off the dozer and took the key out of the ignition.

“Only about twenty more of those to go...” She muttered. She saw another dozer heading for her, and quickly flew upwards to dodge the collision.

Webster was running hand-in-hand with Maddy, looking for an exit. He finally got to the front entrance, when he stopped dead in his tracks in shock.

Chapter

25

Tate. She was here.

“TATER! What are you doing?! Get outta here!” Webster cried, running to her.

“Webby!” Tate couldn't help but brighten up at the sight of her beloved Webster. For a moment, her eyes mirrored his for colour and wildness and they could have been siblings for all anyone else knew.

But then the darkness returned and the sick smile came with it.

“When are you coming home Webby?” She asked coolly.

“Pleasantville is my home now Tater. I'm not going back.” Webster replied.

“Pleasantville won't exist very shortly.” Tate frowned.

Realisation dawned on Webster's face. Tate was behind the destruction of the University. Tate. The girl who had followed him around like a little lost puppy, pumping him up when he felt down, annoying him at every opportunity. Who always smiled and wanted to help the world.

“Why are you doing this?!” Maddy cried.

Tate glared at her.

“Tater, please, I'm not going back. If you're really that upset, why don't you come to Pleasantville too? You can live with Maddy and I.” Webster tried.

That was too much. Tate stormed off.

“Tate! C'mon Tater, don't be like this – ARGH!” Webster tried to run after her, but was cut off by a bulldozer.

“We have to get out of here Webster!” Maddy cried.

The exit now blocked, Webster pulled Maddy towards a broken fence. That was blocked off by another dozer.

They were trapped.

“Darn it Tate!” Webster tried to look for another exit. Suddenly he felt himself being pulled up alongside Maddy.

“Webster! Is that your Tate?” Giggles asked as she lifted them to safety.

“Yes. It is.” Webster sighed.

“Oh dear.” Giggles dropped them outside of the fence.

“You're going back?!” Webster cried as Giggles prepared to take off again.

“I have to try and stop them.” Giggles replied.

“Where's Chuckles?”

“I don't need him.”

“Let me go and talk to Tate. She'll listen to me. She always did.” Webster begged.

“It's too dangerous.” Giggles replied.

“Please Giggles. She's not a bad person, she just needs help.” Webster began to tear up. Giggles sighed.

“Fine, but keep out of my way.” She warned.

They both went back to the war zone. Webster ran off to find Tate, and Giggles resumed taking down the bulldozers.

“YIKES!” Giggles slammed her body to the ground as a large crane swung at her. “Where did THAT come from?!”

She rolled out of the way of a few bullets, trying to scramble to her feet. The crane swung at her again, clipping her leg as she got to her feet.

“Darn it!” She cried, trying to get away from the constant barrage.

The crane was coming again for a third shot. Giggles was doomed. There was no way it was going to miss this time!

She closed her eyes and prepared for the worst. A loud clang made her open her eyes.

“CHUCKLES!” She cried. The Arm Scythes had been strong enough to deflect the crane.

“The others are here too. What were you THINKING taking this all on yourself?!” Chuckles scolded her.

“Whatever.” Giggles scowled.

The Knights were busy disabling the bulldozers as Giggles had been doing, only with a little more difficulty owing to the fact they can't fly.

Giggles watched Sunny expertly jump from one bulldozer to the other, kick the driver out of the cockpit and steal the keys. No wonder Charlie liked *her* better.

She got up and flew around trying to find Webster. She found him trying to talk to Tate.

“Tater, call this off! You're going to get someone killed!” He begged.

“Come home to Brisvegas.” Tate replied.

“Tate, this is ridiculous.” Webster got angry. “I don't love you. I can't love you – not someone who will throw temper tantrums just because she can't get her own way! You've always been a brat, and enough's enough!”

Tate glared at him.

“I gave you everything I could. I would have followed you anywhere. You were my hero.”

“I never asked for any of this.” Webster replied.

Giggles flew down and stood in front of Tate.

“I know how you feel Tate. The man I love doesn't want me either.” Giggles sighed. “Please call this off, it's not going to change anything.”

“Definitely not.” Webster glowered behind her. “Not ever again. You let me down, and I have nothing left for you.”

Tate looked at Webster. Her heart shattered. He would never love her. He couldn't love her.

She picked up her phone and pushed a few buttons. Soon, the bulldozers had left, leaving a ruin where there had once been a proud University.

Giggles hugged Tate tightly. “I'm sorry Tate. I know it hurts, but you're going to be okay. You and Webster will be brother and sister, the way you were meant to be, and you'll both be happy.”

Tate stared blankly into space. Her eyes were dead. Her body slumped.

“I know I'll be okay.” She said hoarsely, before pushing Giggles off and walking away.

“Webster! Are you okay?” Maddy ran over and hugged Webster. Webster kept his eyes trained on Tate, who disappeared into the dust.

He began to cry. He DID love Tate, just not the way she wanted him to. Now she hated him.

His heart was broken too.

—

Belle walked with Webster and Maddy to Tate's hotel room the next day, hoping to talk to her and cheer her up a little. The plan was to talk her into going home to Brisvegas and getting some counselling.

“Poor Tate.” Webster knocked on the door. “I didn't mean for any of this to happen.”

“I know. It's not your fault.” Belle replied. She thought of Charlie and Sunny and cringed.

She still hadn't spoken to Charlie. In fact, he was the LAST person on earth she wanted to talk to. She just wanted to hide away and not see anyone ever again.

“TATER! It's me!” Webster banged on the door. “Open up!”

“BELLE! Get out here now! Talk to me! I'm not going until you come out here! BELLE!”
Charlie banged on the door of Belles room the previous night.

No way had she been getting out of that room and talking to Charlie.

“TATER! Come on! Let me in!” Webster kept banging on the door.

“What if she's not in?” Belle pointed out.

“She's in.” Webster assured her. He grabbed the door handle and was surprised to find it unlocked.

“TATER! I'm coming in!” Webster called out, opening the door. The room was huge and very nicely kept, decorated in blues and whites. It had a tidy little kitchenette and a massive bathroom with a huge tub. The curtains were drawn, but the room looked out onto Lake Pleasant. There was a large four-post bed against the wall.

“TATE!” Websters scream would haunt Belle forever. Hanging from the top of the four-post bed was a limp Tate.

She was dead.

Webster pulled her down and laid her on the bed. “No...no Tater no...why?! I loved you Tate. Please don't leave me. I'm so sorry. Please don't be dead Tate. I love you!” He sobbed into her chest, holding her hand tightly in his own. “Please don't leave me.”

Maddy had her hands over her mouth in shock. Tears began to fall from her eyes too.

Belle felt cold. Cold and sick. Webster was devastated. Tate had supported him, encouraged him, helped him, and now because of him she had taken her own life.

“You were my baby sister and I was supposed to look out for you. I'm so sorry Tater. I'm so, so sorry.” He sobbed.

—

Webster cried through the whole funeral, Maddy holding his hand. He couldn't speak when it came time for the eulogy, and could barely hold up the coffin as he helped carry it out of the church.

Belle could feel Charlies eyes on her throughout the whole ceremony. It made her uncomfortable. He should have been doting on Sunny, not thinking about what he would have done if it had been Belles funeral they were attending. If Belle had died fighting away the bulldozers, that she had so stupidly taken on by herself. All she'd had to do was push in the button on her watch, and they would have all been there and fought as a team.

Charlie kept a firm eye on Belle. He was angry with her for nearly getting herself killed, angry with her for not talking to him and angry at her for being jealous.

It hurt him that he'd hurt her. It hurt him that she now hated him. Their friendship had now changed, and he didn't think he liked it.

After the ceremony, Sunny went to speak to Belle, who was sitting near the creek.

"Hey Belle." She sat down next to her.

"You don't need to say anything." Belle replied. Sunny sighed sadly.

"It's fine Sunny, really. I'm okay." Belle quickly added.

"Please talk to Charlie. He misses you like crazy." Sunny said.

"Why would he miss me when he has you?" Belle sighed.

"You're his best friend!" Sunny protested.

"I know." Belle looked at Sunny. "I'll get there. I promise."

"I'm sorry Belle. If I had known-," Sunny started.

"It's okay Sunny. He wants to be with you." Belle interrupted.

Sunny couldn't think of anything to say. She got up to walk away.

"Sunny?"

She turned back to look at Belle, who was standing up.

"I'm glad you're happy, if anyone deserves it, it's you." Belle hugged her tightly. "And thank you for making Charlie happy."

Sunny gripped Belle tightly. "Thank you." She whispered.

"Besides, you're pretty much my sister. Which would make Charlie my brother." Belle joked.

"Yeah." Sunny smiled.

"Well, it's nice to see you two cooperating." Charlie walked over and put his arms around both of them.

"I'm sorry for being a brat." Belle looked down.

"It's okay." Charlie hugged her closer. Belle pulled away.

"You ARE allowed to hug him y'know." Sunny joked.

“I'm going to go and see what Dad is doing.” Belle excused herself. Charlie sighed.

“C'mon, let's go find the others and cheer her up.” Sunny suggested, taking his hand.

“Yeah, okay then.” Charlie went with Sunny, sending one last wistful look after Belle.

Chapter

26

Belle was elbow-deep in legal history. Even though she was only a part-time uni student, she still had assignments that needed to be done.

Due to the destruction of the University, Belle had to do all of her courses now online. While it meant she could do school full-time again, it was still a disappointment. Belle had loved being a uni student.

She could hear Woof yelping outside as Meow chased him. She figured one day she'd teach that cat to leave the poor dog alone. It was embarrassing really.

“Hey Belle! We're heading off to the movies, you wanna come with us?” Charlie poked his head in the window.

“I can't. I have an assignment due.” Belle replied.

“The Legal History one that you have a month to finish?” Charlie looked at her quizzically.

Belle sighed.

“Who else is going?” She asked, preparing to close her books.

Charlie hesitated. Belle immediately turned back to her books.

“If it's just you and Sunny then I'm not going.” She said flatly.

“It's not!” Charlie protested. “Actually, it's just me.”

“DEFINITELY not going.” Belle picked up her pen.

“We used to go to the movies together all the time Belle! Why not now?” Charlie begged.

“You have a girlfriend for that sort of thing.” Belle fired.

“Sunny doesn't have a problem with it!” Charlie snapped back. “You're the only one acting like this.”

“I don't feel comfortable with it, why is that such an issue?!” Belle turned around.

“Because we used to be inseparable. Don't you remember?” Charlie begged.

“Yeah, I remember. But you have someone else now.” Belle turned back to her books. “Go to the movies with Sunny. If everyone else is going then I'll come.”

“Belle-,”

“Go away Charlie, I'm busy.” Belle brushed him off. Charlie sighed. He climbed back across the shaky tree to his own bedroom and slammed the window shut.

Belle sighed too. On one hand, heading out to the movies with Charlie and everything being like it used to be sounded great...but things weren't the way they used to be. Plus, if she got

this assignment done early enough, she could apply for an extra credit assignment, making getting into the University her father had studied at in Brisvegas a whole lot easier.

It had been a few months since Tate died. Webster and Maddy had headed back to Brisvegas to continue studying – Maddy was now pregnant too, which Webster was thrilled about. It seemed the impending baby took the edge off his pain of losing Tate.

Soon after, Bill came up with some snacks for Belle.

“Thanks Uncle Bill.” Belle dug into the yummy cream puffs.

“No problem.” Bill sat down on the bed. “You know, your father and Thomas had a HUGE fight just before we left for Brisvegas.”

“Really?” Belle perked up.

“Yeah. Your Dad was pretty jealous that Thomas had gotten School Captaincy, especially as your Dad was top of the class.” Bill remembered. “They needled each other all year, before finally they had a huge dust-up in the school yard. It didn't help that Thomas was a right royal prat about the whole thing.”

“He was?” Belle asked, curious.

“Your Dad thought he'd try and help out, try and pretend he wasn't jealous. Thomas let the power get to his head a bit and passed on a few of Petes ideas as his own. They were both in the wrong.” Bill laughed. “They made up a few years later when you were born though – Thomas flew down to Brisvegas almost the moment he heard you were in hospital, bringing a lot of Charlies old baby clothes and stuff. The night they found out that you were going to be okay, they went out drinking and made up.”

Belle smiled.

“The fact is, you can't just throw 500 years away over petty jealousy. Sooner or later you two will make it up.” Bill looked out of the window. Sure enough, Thomas and Peter were sitting down drinking a beer together.

“Yup. The moment they found out the secret of the Clause, they were inseparable again.” Bill laughed.

“The secret of the Clause?” Belle asked.

“Anyway, how's your studying going?” Bill quickly changed the subject.

“Okay...” Belle figured she wasn't going to get any more out of Bill.

“You're just like your father.” Bill chuckled. He ruffled her hair and let her continue her work. “He'll be late home too by the way – he's got a meeting to go to.”

“He's had a few of those.” Belle commented as Bill left.

—

“Kidnapping and extortion,” Mobster Marion said as she sat in her expensive limo with Master Revolver a few nights later. “Are two of my families staples. It's how we've kept a firm hold of the City Council for so long.”

“I still don't see how brute force wouldn't be at least as effective.” Master Revolver argued. “The Death Valley Gang was easily as powerful as the Mob, and we didn't resort to such wastes of time.”

“You were only able to keep your foothold because of our hard work!” Mobster Marion fired back.

“Then how come you were never able to get rid of us?” Master Revolver smirked.

Mobster Marion's eye twitched.

“Look, the point is, we're here to scare the Mayor into acting on our orders. Usually we don't need to resort to this, but due to the emergence of certain brats we don't have a choice.” She snapped.

Master Revolver didn't reply, but wore a satisfied smirk that rankled Mobster Marion.

“Stop here.” She barked at the driver. She limo stopped and she quickly got out. Master Revolver lazily joined her.

She went over to a nearby limo and punched out the driver. Her driver quickly stole the mans clothes as Mobster Marion pulled off the licence plate and swapped it with her own.

“Seriously?” Master Revolver looked amused.

“The Mayor has started taking security measures – not very good ones, but they're there none the less. We're just making sure we don't get caught.” Mobster Marion explained.

“Isn't this how you lost the Lions Claw Blade though?” Master Revolver asked.

“Don't remind me.” Mobster Marion growled. “At least I didn't lose the Lucky Seven Gun while trying to kidnap a bunch of kids!”

Master Revolver growled back. That foolish mess had been his idea, trying to mimic the Mobsters of Misneach, thinking that by expanding their operations they could become the dominant crime syndicate in Pleasantville. It had lost him his father and the family gun.

Never again.

Meanwhile, up above, Lady Courage, Chuckles and Giggles were sitting on the roof of a nearby building.

“The others are hanging around the Mayors house in case we stuff up.” Lady Courage explained. “Hopefully that won't be the case though.”

“This'll be easy. Let's just go in, kick some backside and get outta here. Mum's making meatloaf tonight.” Chuckles grinned.

“Whatever you say.” Giggles deadpanned. Chuckles was rankled, usually she'd rip his plans to shreds.

'I still have the Improbability Clause though. She can't take that off me.' He thought foolishly.

Chuckles bolted out first, followed closely by Lady Courage. Giggles flew overhead.

“And look who we have here.” Master Revolver pointed to Mobster Marion. “Now who'd have thunk it?”

“Luckily for you, I did.” Mobster Marion clicked her fingers.

“Argh!” Chuckles quickly stopped. Fifteen Mobsters had jumped out of the limo, and stood facing the heroes.

“Uh-oh.” Lady Courage looked at the group. “Well?”

Chuckles was frozen. He hadn't thought of what to do if they'd brought back up. He'd just assumed the Improbability Clause would mean it was only the three of them, proving that he had no clue on how the Clause really worked.

“Get them.” Mobster Marion smirked.

“Oh NO!” Giggles fired the Lucky Seven Gun at the feet of a few of the thugs, but it didn't deter them. She could only keep them at bay.

She panicked. Chuckles ALWAYS knew what he was doing, but now he looked like a fish out of water. She hadn't realised how much she relied on his confidence for her to know what to do. She thought of trying to take out the tyres of the limo, but the moment she aimed at them Master Revolver shot at her, making aiming impossible.

“Nice try little brat, but I learnt from the whole truck incident.” Master Revolver smirked.

Lady Courage and Chuckles were in big trouble. Lady Courage was already being contained by five of the Mobsters, while Chuckles was badly bruised and in danger of succumbing to them too.

Giggles swooped down and fired at the Mobsters who had a hold of Lady Courage. They jumped away giving Giggles enough time to grab her friend and deliver her to safety on top of a nearby roof.

“I'm going back for Chuckles, you let the others know what's happened.” Giggles commanded.

“Giggles! Wait! It's not safe!” Lady Courage tried to stop her, but Giggles was gone.

Chuckles was barely holding his own against the horde. Mobster Marion clicked her fingers again and the siege subsided. She slowly walked towards Chuckles, the clicking of her heels contrasting with the silence of the night.

“Now. This is where your life ends, and you stopping annoying the living daylights out of me.” Mobster Marion raised her sword. She brought it down hard, but one of the Arm Scythes stopped her.

She kept pushing, forcing the Arm Scythe back into Chuckles arm. He dropped the Lions Claw Blade in pain, just as Giggles swooped in firing the Lucky Seven Gun. She grabbed Chuckles and made her escape.

“No!” Chuckles cried, trying to reach for his sword. Too late, it was gone.

The last thing Chuckles and Giggles saw was Mobster Marion holding the Lions Claw Blade up to the sky.

“The Improbability Clause...it didn't work?” Chuckles looked dumbfounded as Giggles flew him off into the night.

Chapter

27

Charlie sat in the tree, looking up through the dying branches at the sky. He was probably too old to be climbing trees. He WAS nearly nineteen after all. Yet the tree had always been a comfort to him, especially when he'd sat here with Belle so many times, talking.

But now she wasn't here. She was hunched over her desk studying her heart out. Another thing he'd lost. First his grand-father, then his best friend, and now the Lions Claw Blade.

Sunny had been nothing but sympathetic. She'd held him for a long time that night at the tip, as he complained about his loss. Belle hadn't said a word, choosing to stare at the sky. It was okay for HER. She still had the Lucky Seven Gun. She still had everything.

That's where he was wrong. Belle missed Charlie badly, but her wounded pride and broken heart kept him at arms length. Her only solace was her studying – at least she was good at that.

She sat back from her assignment. It was some of her best work, and she was proud of what she was able to do. She just wished she hadn't had to have lost so much to get it.

A tapping at the window brought her back to reality. Charlie was outside, looking like a little lost puppy. Belle smiled in spite of herself, that face always got to her.

“Hey goof-ball, what's up?” She opened the window.

“Nothing much. How's the assignment nerd-face?” Charlie replied, happy that they could at least still banter like they used to.

“Almost done. If I get it handed in on Friday then I can go for an extra-credit assignment, which will all but get me to Brisvegas.” Belle bragged.

“Aren't you overworking yourself?” Charlie asked.

“Nope.” Belle replied.

“You look pale.” Charlie pointed out.

Belle sighed.

“I really want to get to the University Dad went to. Then I can come back and help him make a difference here. People here simply don't care enough to try and change things.”

“We do!” Charlie said indignantly.

“Yeah, eight kids with a bit of optimism.” Belle said bitterly. “I reckon that's how Tate convinced the DVM to help her – keep the people under-educated so they won't fight back. I don't see Revolver or Marion thinking of something like that do you?”

“Not really.” Charlie sighed.

A loud creaking interrupted their chat.

“What's that noise?” Belle asked. Suddenly the tree lurched forward. Charlie got away just in time, the old tree finally snapping and falling.

“What happened?!” Thomas ran into Charlie's room. He looked out of the window and saw his son hanging out of the opposite window, Belle holding him tightly. The tree lay between the two houses, having taken down the power lines as well.

“Well, that could have ended badly.” Peter walked over from the car, having just gotten home from another meeting. “Being old to begin with, the flood probably rotted the wood away.”

“It HAS ended badly!” Bill cried from inside. “The cricket was on TV and now we have no power!”

Peter's wail of pain could be heard throughout the city.

—

Even though she had finally gotten her assignment done, Belle was having trouble sleeping (it probably didn't help that it was a pretty warm night and the power hadn't been restored to the air conditioning). Eventually she got tired of not sleeping and pulled on her Giggles attire.

Flying was a relief. Feeling the wind surrounding her, the Backpack lifting her up, the clouds around her, it made her forget for a while how her life was slowly going downhill.

She looked down. Master Revolver was standing atop a tall building. Giggles hovered in the air for a second, wondering what it was with people and tall buildings in Pleasantville. He wasn't really hurting anyone at that time, so she decided she'd leave him alone and head home.

The sound of a gunshot in her direction changed her mind however.

“Can't a girl go for a midnight flight without some moron firing his gun at her?!” Giggles fumed, hitting the face of her watch. After the scolding she'd received from her father over the whole Tate incident, she wasn't going to risk fighting anyone alone ever again!

“And waste the opportunity to finally get my gun back? Are you kidding me?” Master Revolver grinned. The bullet had just grazed Giggles' helmet, leaving it with a “scar” very similar to the one that her father had earned across his cheek from the fight with Johannes so many years ago.

“Fine, you're on!” Giggles flew at him, dodging a few more shots that came her way. She shot at his feet with the Lucky Seven Gun, which forced him to retreat.

“Shooting my feet won't do much little girl, I'm on to your trick! You're too scared to kill me!” Master Revolver fired again, this time nicking her hand. “Marion has been impossible the last few days after getting back the Lions Claw Blade, it's about time I shut her up by getting the Lucky Seven Gun back!”

“Like hell you will.” Giggles glared at him. She swooped down at him, with a nasty punch into his guts. He tried to regain composure but she swooped again, kicking him over.

“That'll learn you to – OH NO!” Giggles cried as the Backpack gave out again and she fell down next to him, knocking all of the wind out of her lungs. “I am going to KILL Dad.” She muttered.

“That'll learn me what hmmm?” Master Revolver stood up and pointed his pistol at Giggles. “Give me the Lucky Seven Gun and I'll consider letting you live.”

Giggles froze. Where was everyone?!

“I'm not going to ask again, you either hand over the Lucky Seven Gun or you die.” Master Revolver growled. “You're defenceless and alone.”

Giggles gulped, and slowly extended the hand holding the Lucky Seven Gun out towards him. He grabbed it as fast as he could, before she could pull any of her tricks.

“It's mine again! It's mine! My family gun!” He cried in glee. He turned to Giggles and smiled.

“I don't know how you got a hold of this.” He said softly. “But now I'm going to make sure it never happens again. Good bye Giggles.”

Giggles heart stopped. She was going to die at the hands of this mad man. Her life was over.

“Hold it Revolver.” Said a voice that Giggles thought she'd never hear again.

Master Revolver slowly looked around. The tip of one of the Arm Scythes was pointed directly at him. A small buzzing alerted Giggles that the Backpack had enough charge to fly a small distance. She used the distraction to get herself back up in the air and get the Desert Eagle in her hands.

“We gotta get out of here Chuckles!” She called down to her best friend.

“Right. See you at home Giggles.” Chuckles quickly backed off and ran from Master Revolver. Giggles flew backwards, keeping the Desert Eagle trained on Master Revolver until she was sure she was safe. Then she quickly landed and ran away to the tip.

Now she'd lost the Lucky Seven Gun, and she now knew exactly how poor Charlie felt.

Chapter

28

“We lost the Lions Claw Blade.”

“Yup.”

“Then we lost the tree.”

“Yup.”

“And now the Lucky Seven Gun.”

“Yup, yup and yup.”

“Can this get any worse?”

“Yup.”

“You're optimistic, aren't you?” Charlie scowled at Belle, who was sitting on the old tree stump.

“I think given the rubbish we've been through this past year, we deserve a bit of pessimism. LIFE SUCKS.” Belle replied.

“Most of it we kinda brought on ourselves.” Charlie tried to reason.

“I don't see how your grand-fathers death was our fault, I don't see how we could have stopped the flood, I don't see how we could have stopped Johannas from murdering my aunt and I don't see how the University was in any way our fault.” Belle pouted.

“Technically it WAS our fault that Grandpa died – if it wasn't for us, there wouldn't have been a Demon in the first place.” Charlie tried.

“Oh come off it.” Belle got up and walked away. She already felt like a coward for giving up the Lucky Seven Gun so easily, she didn't need Charlies guilt-trip on top of that.

Charlie watched her retreating back. Ever since she'd started University things had been different. She started studying more and talking strangely, about apathy and group-think and protesting and making their voices heard. Weren't they already doing that? Weren't they already fighting? Why blame the citizens of Pleasantville for what was going on, why not blame the real bad guys?

“Hey Charlie.”

Charlie jumped a little as Sunny and Tammy walked over.

“Hey guys. Where's Petunia?” He smiled and gave both of them a hug.

“She's signing up for some program that will help her fast-track into a nursing career.” Sunny replied, while Tammy grinned. “And tomorrow Tammy is going to start trying remedial speech again.”

“You're going to try to talk again?” Charlie asked. Tammy made a funny squeaking sound with her throat, trying to make a sound. “Well, things are changing around here.” He said with a hint of bitterness.

“Things always were going to change Charlie. Look at Belle and I. THAT certainly changed.” Sunny pointed out. “We used to hate each other so much.”

“I just wish we didn't have to grow up. That we didn't have to change and move away from each other.” Charlie looked towards Belle's window.

“Sometimes we need to move away from each other to become closer.” Sunny said.

Charlie still looked doubtful.

—

“Belle, no more. Go out and play with your friends PLEASE!” Joe begged his only grandchild. “Your studying is going to be the end of you.”

“I'm fine Pa, really.” Belle tried to read her textbook, but the lines were starting to blur a little.

“Your eyes are glazing over, you need to put down that book and do something else. Watch some cricket with your Dad or go to Brisvegas and watch the Leos play or even go and beat up the Death Valley Mobsters for all I care, just get your nose out of those books!” Joe pulled the textbook away.

“I can't really go beat up the Mobsters without my gun can I?” Belle snatched the book back.

“What's wrong with the Desert Eagle?!” Joe looked affronted.

“It's not the Lucky Seven Gun Dad, you know that. It wouldn't be right would it Beauty?” Peter walked in with a stack of paperwork and a large box.

“Don't tell me you're going to kill yourself with work as well!” Joe fumed.

“I don't see that it's any of your business old man!” Peter snapped.

“Watch how you speak to me sonny, or I'll deck you where you stand!”

“Like to see you try without breaking your hips!”

Belle rolled her eyes. She looked out of the window and saw Charlie, Sunny and Tammy beckoning. She turned back to her book and was about to start studying again when Peter removed the book from her this time.

“I have a present for you.” He said.

“Oh?” Belle piped up.

“You can only have it if you let your friends in.” Peter nodded to the window.

Belle sighed, and opened the front door.

“Hi guys.” She deadpanned.

“Geezus, don't sound so happy!” Sunny laughed, giving her friend a hug. Belle hugged her back.

“Anyway, do you want to see what I made you?” Peter smirked.

“Oooh, is Belle getting a present?” Charlie and Tammy rushed to the box to try and catch a glimpse of the present. Peter merely pulled the box away from them with a maddening smile.

“We have to go to the tip first. Coming Dad?” Peter grabbed the keys to the ageing Elantra.

“I'll pass, thank you.” Joe turned to the kitchen and prepared himself a coffee.

“Eh. Come on you lot.” Peter led them out to the car.

—

The ruby-coloured one-piece suit was skin-tight with two powered boots attached for flying. There were pink pads on the fingertips and palms of the attached gloves, and the top lifted up to cover Belle's face, with two little nodes that sat on her temples and connected with a band over her head which could unclasp from the left side to make it easier to get it on/off. The back locked up with a plastic zip, making the whole thing feel very uncomfortable. Two small pink power boxes sat on the shoulders, and around the middle was what looked like a pink belt.

“Dad, seriously? You want me to fight crime in THIS?!” Belle groaned.

“You look like a video game character!” Peter defended. “You have your usual flight capability, plus you have the ability to form these carbon weapons using your mind.”

“Wha-?” Everyone looked dumbfounded at Peter.

“Just say this old dart board here is a bad guy. Form a dagger and throw it at him.” Peter instructed.

Belle looked at her right hand. Slowly the pink pads glowed, oozing a ruby-coloured substance which hardened to look like a ruby weapon.

“Wow.” Belle threw the Ruby Shard at the dart board. It hit easily, lingering for about ten seconds before disintegrating and disappearing.

“The best thing is, this stuff will leave your opponents limbs numb, incapacitating them for a few minutes without killing them.” Peter grinned.

“How did you find that out?” Sunny asked.

“Plus you can fly now without the issues that the Backpack has!” Peter ignored Sunnys question. “Just jump up and away you go!”

“Whoa-OAAA!!!!!!” Belle cried. As soon as she'd gotten airborne, her top half had fallen and she was nearly hanging upside-down. She struggled to get back up.

Charlie roared with laughter, Sunny and Tammy tried to hide their giggles and Peter groaned.

“You're too used to the lift coming from your back, leaving your legs free.” He sighed. “Still, this is an improvement, at least it's harder to shoot both your feet.”

“Thanks Dad.” Belle groaned. She eventually righted herself and landed heavily.

“Anyway, I have another meeting to get to, and I'm almost late! You guys can get yourselves home right?” Peter asked.

“Sure.” Was the general reply. Peter quickly sped off. Belle frowned.

“I wonder why Daddy has so many more meetings recently.” She floated up wobbily and watched her father leave.

“Probably getting hammered at work after the whole flood thing and the University getting destroyed.” Sunny pointed out. “I know my Dad is copping it.”

“But this many meetings? And on weekends too?” Belle hovered in the direction her father had taken.

“You should surprise him, Ruby Giggles!” Charlie piped up.

“Ruby Giggles?” Was the reply from above.

“Well, you're not exactly regular Giggles anymore are you?” Charlie pointed out.

Ruby Giggles slumped slightly, but it was enough to make her lose her balance again.

“Whoaaaaaaaaa!”

—

“I'm glad you could get here. I had this place booked for weeks!” Peter smiled at Lara as they both enjoyed their pasta dinner.

“It was close, but I managed to get away in time.” Lara Vargas replied, smiling into his eyes. She had beautiful long chestnut brown hair and deep hazel eyes. She was a little on the bigger side, but had a huge smile that was kind and warm. “I would have left tennis anyway, I love spending time with you.”

“Managed to win a few games?”

“All of them sweetheart.”

“Oh, you're good.”

The pair laughed. Peter was on cloud nine. Not since Belles mother had broken his heart had he thought he would be able to love again. Now he was sitting in a restaurant with the woman of his dreams.

“What about Oscar? Isn't it your weekend with him?” Peter asked about Laras toddler son.

“No, Irwin is taking him on a camping trip.” Lara replied. “He might not have been a decent husband but I will admit he's a damned good father.”

“And that's all that counts.” Peter smiled.

“How about Belle? How's she doing?” Lara asked. She was always curious about the Masters clan, she loved the idea of the family code and the Improbability Clause.

“Still over-studying. She's a good kid and wants to save Pleasantville but she doesn't realise that if she over-does things she's just going to make herself sick.” Peter sighed.

“Reminds me a bit of her father.” Lara grinned cheekily.

“Hey, I was never that bad!” Peter argued.

“Are you kidding me? I remember in school while we were all out at the sports carnival you were holed up studying. Your brother had to drag you away for your events!” Lara laughed at the memory as Peter turned pink.

“I was such a little snot then. But you were a complete cow so it all evens out.” He laughed as she poked her tongue out at him.

Outside meanwhile, Ruby Giggles was sitting on a rooftop across the street and could see her father and Lara sitting in the restaurant.

Her father had a girlfriend?!

Chapter

29

“Are you serious? I didn't realise Pete knew what women were!” Bill looked mock-shocked at the news. “And LARA? They hated each others guts in school!”

“Quiet you.” Joe frowned at his youngest son. “We should be happy for Peter, he's been alone for so long now.”

“Why didn't he tell us?” Belle asked, sitting at the table. The moment she'd figured out what was going on with her father, she'd flown back to the tip, gotten changed and then bolted home.

“Could be that things aren't quite serious yet.” Bill shrugged. He turned to the pot of spaghetti sauce he was making. “Don't sweat it kiddo, he'll tell us when he's good and ready.”

“Yes Uncle Bill.” Belle sighed. She was about to reach for her textbook when a warning look from her grand-father stopped her.

“I'm going to go and play with Meow. At least SHE doesn't judge me!” Belle huffed off. Joe chuckled and leaned back in his armchair.

He absentmindedly rubbed his face. A scar across his eye, from that stupid go-cart race. A scar on his cheek, from the war. A scar on his lips, hidden by his beard, from a fight with Tim after the war. He thought over his life, all the twists and turns. He thought of when Peter first came home with Belle, begging to be allowed to move back in. He thought of the awful court case against her maternal grand-parents after the news of her mothers death reached them. He thought of her now.

She had her heart in the right place at least, he thought. At least she was trying. Unlike him. Even in the war he'd been a coward, hiding behind the Code, trying not to get involved in anything. It wasn't his business, he'd tried to rationalise with himself, he was only there to look out for the two men he called brothers. He'd been just as bad when he'd gotten home, pretending that the crime problem in Pleasantville didn't effect him or his family.

It was a lie, it HAD affected them. Peter, Bill and Jessie had all grown up scared. None of them had been allowed to spend time with friends after school, none of them had been allowed on sleepovers or to have friends over. It had killed Jessie, scarred Bill and steeled Peter.

'You're a coward.' Joe thought to himself. He closed his eyes and leaned back into the chair. 'But I'm cool with that.'

—

Belle stomped upstairs and into her room. She opened the window and was about to jump out when she remembered the tree no longer existed. There was just a rotten stump where it used to be.

She rested her head on the window sill and sighed. Charlie was out on a date with Sunny, so playing with him was out. Meow was fast asleep on her bed, so that plan was a bust too.

She thought back to a time when the tree was still standing. She and Charlie had used it as a refuge against the Jones siblings. She wondered what Daryl was up to, she hadn't seen him since he left school.

Suddenly her watch began to flash blue. Charlie and Sunny were in trouble!

—

“Put the money down and get out of it.” Chuckles glowered at Mobster Marion. “And while you're at it I'll have my sword back.”

“Naw, is the little loser feeling a bit lost without having someone else's weapon to hide behind?” Mobster Marion sneered back.

The Death Valley Mobsters had struck again, this time at the biggest bank in the city. Master Revolver was directing Mobsters who had looted huge amounts of money and valuables towards the big trucks that were parked outside.

“We're almost done here.” Master Revolver grinned. He swung the Lucky Seven Gun around his finger, looking very pleased with himself.

Sir Lionheart, Sir Hyper and Sir Dark were trying to impede the loading of the trucks, but it wasn't working very well. Sir Hyper had nearly had his head removed twice already and Sir Dark was sporting a new cut on his arm.

“You'll need to see Lady Luck about that, get out of here, we'll handle this.” Sir Lionheart threw another rock at the head of a Mobster, missing.

“You guys can't do this alone.” Sir Dark protested.

“Give this up you two!” Lady Courage cried from behind Chuckles.

“Aww, does Chuck-Up have a new girlfriend? Where's that floaty little friend of yours?” Master Revolver laughed. A flash of red hit him in the arm. He screamed in pain as his arm was rendered immobile.

“I'm up here doofus.”

Chuckles and Lady Courage spun around. Ruby Giggles was floating behind them, looking pleased with herself. Master Revolver ripped the Ruby Shard out of his arm and flung it to the ground where it shattered and disappeared. His arm still stung with numbness and he glared at Ruby Giggles.

“You. What the hell have you done to me?!” He roared angrily.

“Only what you deserve.” Ruby Giggles replied. In her hand five more Ruby Shards appeared, and she flung them with deadly accuracy at the other Mobsters, making all of them drop in pain as arms and legs were struck.

She prepared to have another go at Master Revolver, but the Ruby Shard was blocked by Mobster Marion and the Lions Claw Blade.

“Let's get out of here.” Mobster Marion called off the attack.

“I don't think so. You're staying here until the police come to arrest you.” Ruby Giggles glared. She flew at Mobster Marion with the tips of her fingers alight with the Ruby Power and swiped at her foe. Marion jumped back but was too slow to avoid a nasty cut on her cheek. Immediately the side of her face started to sag.

“You little weasel!” Master Revolver ran to Mobster Marions aid. Ruby Giggles grinned beneath the mask.

Chuckles looked up at his best friend. Now would have been the perfect time for her to swoop in and steal back the Lions Claw Blade and the Lucky Seven Gun, but she wasn't moving.

“Uh, Giggles? Wanna go and get our weapons back?” Chuckles asked.

“You can go get the Lions Claw back if you want, I don't need the Lucky Seven anymore.” Ruby Giggles smirked. Chuckles shrugged and ran back to get his beloved sword back.

“HEY!” He jumped back as Mobster Marion swung at him. “A little help here Giggles?”

“The police are here now, we'd better check out. See you losers later!” Ruby Giggles flew off, leaving Chuckles fuming.

—

“Why didn't you help me get my sword back?!” Charlie yelled.

“Will you chill out? It's not like you need it. I've just proved that I can beat the lot of them without your help.” Belle brushed him off.

They were sitting at the tip waiting for Thomas to come and pick them up. Charlie was still furious over the lack of support coming from Belle.

“That's not the point! You know how much that sword means to me!” Charlie cried. “I thought we had each others backs!”

“We DO. Didn't I just save your bacon?” Belle rolled her eyes.

“Charlie, it's okay, we can always get it back later.” Sunny tried to comfort her boyfriend. He shoved her off.

“You're supposed to be my best friend.” Charlie said coldly.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Belle frowned.

The honking of a horn broke up the argument. The eight friends filed dejectedly into the two cars driven by Thomas and Petunias father.

Things were changing.

Chapter

30

Chuckles sighed. Alongside him, the Knights of the Last Order were standing around looking bored. Meanwhile, Ruby Giggles was singlehandedly making life hell for the Death Valley Mobsters.

It had been a week since Ruby Giggles triumphant debut, and she was only getting stronger. She'd learnt how to form Ruby Shields which were strong enough to keep even the Lucky Seven Gun at bay, and her aim with the Ruby Shards was deadly.

Chuckles sighed and examined one of the Arm Scythes. Lady Courage checked her watch. Sir Lionheart and Sir Dark were playing on their Game Pads, and Sir Hyper was sending text messages to Lady Luck and Lady Silent, who were back at the tip preparing for any injuries.

“She finished yet?” Sir Lionheart looked at his watch.

Chuckles looked over. “Yeah, the DVM have run away.” He got himself up off the wall.

Ruby Giggles grinned to herself. She felt strong, powerful, relevant. She didn't need anyone!

She swooped down to join the others. “How good was that?” She bragged.

“Saves us a job.” Lady Courage scowled, which made Ruby Giggles feel even better. Antagonising her rival was always good fun.

“I'll catch you guys at the tip!” Ruby Giggles soared off.

“Wait! Giggles!” Chuckles ran after her, but she was gone. “What happened to being a team? She always used to fly me back to the tip.” He pouted.

“The Backpack always gave out and she nearly always dropped you.” Sir Dark pointed out.

“THAT'S NOT THE POINT!” Chuckles wailed. “No one understands me.”

“You're starting to sound like Belle.” Lady Courage raised an eyebrow as Chuckles dissolved into hysterics.

—

“Hey Uncle Bill. Hey Pa. Hey...Dad? Who's this?” Belle walked into the house that afternoon. She had just dropped her bag on the table when she noticed Lara sitting there, holding hands with her father.

“Beauty, this is my friend Lara Vargus.” Peter introduced his daughter to his new girlfriend.

“Hi...?” Belle was a bit dumbfounded. She'd known that Lara existed, she'd known that her father was seeing a woman, but now she was actually MEETING her fathers friend?

“Hi Belle. Your father has told me a lot about you. You're going into Law too aren't you?” Lara shook hands with the younger woman.

“Yeah. Criminal Law.” Belle looked quickly at her father, who was grinning.

“Belle is doing her University studies part-time alongside her Year 12 studies.” He said proudly, making Belle blush a little.

“How smart!” Lara smiled pleasantly.

Belle felt rather uncomfortable. In eighteen years Peter had never had girlfriends. Not even female friends. Belle had no idea how she was supposed to behave.

“I’m just trying to make a difference.” Belle shrugged, figuring modesty was the best way to go.

“Lara and I met through work – she does Family Law.” Peter tried to edge the conversation along.

“Yes, he told me about what happened to you, very interesting from a legal perspective.” Lara smiled.

Belle tried not to scowl. Even after all this time, the thought of what she had been through still hurt. Lara quickly realised she’d said something wrong and tried to make amends.

“But that’s in the past, you’ve grown up to be quite a grand young person even without your mother.” Lara put her foot in it again.

“I need to go and study.” Belle stomped upstairs, leaving her father bewildered.

She dumped her bag by her wardrobe and closed her door. She then flopped down on the bed and sighed. She rarely thought of her absent mother, or her maternal grand-parents who had only appeared on the scene after her mother died. She didn’t even know her mother’s name.

And now her father was in love again. Was Lara going to try and be Belle’s mother? Did Belle even NEED a mother? Betty Begly had always been like a mother to her, even after the whole Charles/Sapphire affair.

Belle looked outside. Charlie and the others were sitting outside near the old rotted stump, talking about something. Now she was on the outer with her friends too. Belle began to wish she had never started University. If she’d stayed in school full-time then Charlie would never have had the opportunity to get close to Sunny (who he now had his arm around), she would still be getting all the jokes and having fun still. Instead she was constantly studying and trying to keep her grades up so she could stay in University.

At least she was going to make a difference.

A knock on the door woke her from her thoughts. Joe walked in and sat down on the bed next to her.

“After the war, Tim and I had a huge fight – it’s how I got the scar on my lip. Charles took Tim’s side of course, and I didn’t speak to either of them for two years, even though I lived next door to Tim and our sons were best friends.” Joe sighed. “We only became friends again

when Thomas lost his little brother Jack – Jack and Bill had been inseparable, and Tim was devastated to lose his youngest son.”

“It seems the Masters and the Beglys are always having fights.” Belle pointed out. “Dad and Thomas had one too didn't they?”

“Yep, but only one. Ever since that fight both Pete and Tom have been inseparable again. Ever since the fight I had with Tim we were the greatest of friends again – one could say our friendship was even stronger for the argument.” Joe smiled. “You and your friends will work this out, it might take a little while but everything will be fine.”

Belle tried to smile back, but it was hard when all her friends were sitting there happily without her.

“Why don't you go out to play?” Joe suggested. “Surely you can take a break from the constant study?”

“I have a couple of assignments due for school Pa, and if I fall behind at school I'll lose my University place.” Belle pointed out.

“You're as bad as your father.” Joe shook his head. He kissed his grand-daughters head and got up. “Staring out that window isn't going to help you study or make you feel better.” He pointed out.

He closed the door as he left, leaving Belle to her thoughts.

–

“It's good to be home, isn't it boys?” Tim sighed and stretched out in the sun next to Pleasant Creek. Young Peter was playing with young Thomas, and it looked like Delilah was pregnant again.

“Sure is. No more jungle fighting or hand-to-hand combat.” Joe sipped his beer.

“What are you talking about, you never fought at all!” Charles laughed as he set his fishing rod again.

“I didn't kill anyone you mean. I got in plenty of fights thank you.” Joe frowned.

“What, while you were hiding?” Tim sniped.

“I was gathering intelligence!” Joe tried to defend himself.

“You were hiding in a village trying to avoid getting into a fight!” Tim corrected him. “I don't know why you bothered signing up, you did absolutely nothing.”

“I saved your lives! If I hadn't come along when I did you would have both bled to death in the jungle! If that bullet had hit you instead of my cheek then you would have been done for!” Joe pointed to the nasty cut on his cheek, which was still being held together with stitches. “I only signed up to protect you two.”

“So that no one would realise how much of a coward you are.” Charles stated.

“My orders were to wait in that village!” Joe yelled. “You could have stayed too.”

“We wouldn't abandon our mates like that.” Tim stood up. He was still very wide, and very short. “Charles is right, you ARE a coward Joey, and you use your loyalty to the Masters Code as an excuse.”

“Can you NOT say that in front of my son?!” Joe growled.

“What, you want him to be a coward too?” Tim spat. “I used to look up to you Joe, but you let me down.”

“That is complete and utter rubbish!” Joe roared.

“I don't see you proving it.”

“I don't need to. I don't have to spill blood to prove myself like you do you short moron.” Joe hissed.

CRACK. Tim punched Joe hard in the mouth, splitting his lip open with his wedding ring. Joe glared back at him, but said nothing – the old scar, the healing scar and the new scar all combined to make him look hideous and for a split second Tim regretted striking his best friend.

“We're leaving.” Joe said, seething. Delilah quickly gathered up Peter and the small family left.

—

Joe flicked through his old photo album. He missed Tim and Charles. He wondered when his time would come.

He wondered when he would be forgiven.

Chapter

31

Daniel looked at Tammy. She was out for blood. It was up to him to make sure she didn't-

“OW, OW, OW, OW!” Daniel limped away as Sunny lifted her finger to the sky. “THAT WAS NOT LBW!”

“It would have hit the wicket if your fat knee hadn't been in the way.” Sunny pointed out.

“I think you guys are cheating.” Sammy pouted.

The game of cricket at the tip had taken a turn for the nastier. Charlie was certain that bats were going to start flying shortly.

“What,” Petunia narrowed her eyes. “Did you just accuse us of?”

“You heard him!” TJ fired.

Tammy shot the filthiest glare she could at him.

“Guys, let's just take it easy. It's just a game of cricket.” Charlie tried to calm everyone down.

“If you guys think for a SECOND that we're going to let you get away with SLANDER, you have another thing coming.” Sunny and Petunia stood on either side of Tammy.

“HI GUYS!”

Everyone jumped a mile. Belle ran over, waving wildly.

“What did I miss?” She asked breathlessly as she hugged Sunny, Tammy and Petunia.

“Dodgy umpiring.” Daniel muttered earning him three dirty looks.

“Hi Belle! Nice of you to drag yourself away from your studies and grace us with your presence.” Charlie scowled at her.

“I have to keep my grades up otherwise I'll get kicked out of my course!” Belle protested.

“Why is it so important that you stay in that course for? Aren't we your friends?” Petunia asked.

“I'm doing it so that I can start making changes around here! The Council is so corrupt that any time the DVM mess up they only get a slap-on-the-wrist sentence and no one does anything about it!” Belle explained. “There's no point in us saving everyone if the same threats just keep coming back again and again!”

“That's what my grand-father said, and you disagreed with him.” Charlie said coldly.

“No, your grand-father wanted to kill them outright. That wouldn't have changed anything, because the same threats still would have kept coming. You saw that Demon came along when we managed to put Marion and Revolver away for a little while. The only thing that

will fix the crime problem in Pleasantville is the constant application of tough penalties for those who disobey the law!" Belle moralised.

"Or you just can't tolerate the fact that I have a girlfriend now and you're jealous." Charlie bit.

Belle was furious. On one hand she couldn't exactly deny the accusation. On the other hand, she HAD been studying to some effect, having gotten very high marks in all her courses and almost completely securing her path to the very best scholarship, thus Charlie's words rankled her right to the core.

So she insulted him back.

"If anyone is jealous Begly, it's YOU. You're jealous that my high intelligence and hard work has finally paid off and you're going to be left in the dust. The only reason you've kept up with me all these years is the stupid Improbability Clause, and even that seems to be failing recently."

This infuriated Charlie no end. The Improbability Clause was a sore point with him at the moment, so naturally he fought back too.

"How's being smart working for you, all alone and forgotten?" He snapped.

"Forgotten? YOU'RE the forgotten one, when's the last time Chuckles saved anyone?"

"You think you're SO much better than me because of that stupid suit?!"

"Plus the fact that I'm smarter than you."

The Knights of the Last Order slowly backed away. This was nothing like their little spat over the cricket. This was a real fight between the two best friends.

"Charlie, maybe we'd better head off?" Sunny tried to take her boyfriend's arm, but he brushed her off. He was livid.

"I can't believe you. You've changed." Charlie said coldly.

"You've changed too." Belle shot back icily.

Everyone was thankful when Daniel's phone rang.

"Johannas? Demon's lost control of him? How?" Daniel spoke to the person on the other end of the phone. "Right, we'll be there."

He hung up. "That was my Grandad, Johannas has gone berserk again. This time he's strapped himself up with explosives and is threatening to blow up Pleasant Gardens Shopping Centre."

"I'll handle this." Belle rushed to get changed.

"No, WE will handle this. We're a team, remember?" Sunny tried to pull her up.

“Let her do what she wants, it's the only way people will notice her. Especially with her head constantly in a book.” Charlie snapped. He stormed off angrily

“Charlie no!” Sunny tried to pull him back. “Sorry guys, I'll have to sit this one out too.”

“No problem.” Daniel sighed, watching the pair head off.

“Charlie, we really should head back and help. They're our friends.” Sunny tried to persuade Charlie to turn around.

“What's the point Sunny, we'll just be playing second fiddle to Miss Perfect over there.” Charlie snapped.

“You're just upset because you've had a fight, you'll get over it.” Sunny tried. “If she got hurt because you weren't there you'd never forgive yourself.”

“It'd serve her right.” Charlie muttered.

“Charlie, don't be like that! She's your best friend!” Sunny stood in front of him.

“WAS my best friend. I don't know her anymore.” Charlie tried to step around her. Sunny grabbed him around the waist and held him.

“I don't think she's changed at all. She was always pretty studious even before she started uni.” Sunny kissed him. “Try to understand where she is right now.”

“I've tried but she's not helping!” Charlie protested. Sunny sighed.

“You two can be so stubborn.” She rested her head against Charlie's chest.

Charlie looked back towards the impromptu cricket pitch, where Ruby Giggles had just taken off with the other Knights of the Last Order in hot pursuit. He scowled and continued to walk in the opposite direction.

He wasn't going to concern himself with *her*.

—

“Chuckles and Giggles should be here soon...I hope.” Peter Masters ducked behind a clothes rack with Lara close beside him.

“This one is your brother-in-law?” Lara asked quietly as Johannas stalked around angrily, waving a shorn-off shotgun around.

“Yeah. Bastard killed my sister.” Peter grimaced. He looked towards another clothes rack and saw his father and brother looking pretty ticked off.

“What are YOU doing here?!” Peter mouthed silently.

“Dancing the can-can, what do you THINK we're doing?!” Bill mouthed back angrily.

“No need to be a smart-arse!”

“No need to be a dumb-arse!”

“Do you guys always argue?” Lara whispered, looking amused at the silent exchange.

“It's our thing.” Peter shrugged.

“I’LL KILL YOU ALL! I HATE YOU ALL! TELL ME WHERE JESSIE IS!” Johannas screamed, firing off the shotgun.

“In the ground where you put her.” Joe growled under his breath.

“In the ground where YOU put her!” A loud yell was heard.

“YOU.” Johannas spun around. Ruby Giggles was floating just above the ground.

“Me.” Ruby Giggles replied. “And I'm going to stop you.”

“You can't stop me from finding Jessie.” Johannas grinned his sick grin.

“Jessie? You MURDERED her, remember?” Ruby Giggles groaned, readying a Ruby Shard in her hand.

Johannas looked troubled.

“Murdered. Murdered her. YOU MURDERED HER!” He screamed. He flew at Ruby Giggles, who threw the Ruby Shard at him. It hit his arm, making him drop his detonator.

Joe suddenly bolted out of his hiding place and grabbed the detonator. With his good hand, Johannas fired off the shotgun wildly, making some of the innocent shoppers scream.

“Oh man...!” Ruby Giggles tried to fly at Johannas, but he fired at her and she had to dodge. She looked out of one of the windows and saw Sir Lionheart and Sir Hyper outside.

“We need to get everyone out of here!” She called to them. “Pa has the detonator, I don't think Johannas can hurt anyone at the moment!”

“Right!” Sir Lionheart nodded. Ruby Giggles formed a Ruby Shield and took on Johannas while the Knights of the Last Order cleared the civilians out.

A swift kick from Johannas winded Ruby Giggles, giving him enough time to attack Joe and try to get the detonator back.

“Forget it!” Joe shoved the younger man down easily – although old, Joe was still large and dangerous.

“Dad, c'mon, give the detonator to Ruby Giggles and let's get outta here!” Peter begged.

“GO!” Joe barked in a dangerous tone. Bill and Peter always obeyed that tone. Peter grabbed Lara and the three quickly got out of there.

Joe glared at Johannas. The man who had brutally murdered his only daughter. In a way, he felt some pity for Johannas. He obviously had mental issues that had never been tended to. Another blow against the Pleasantville City Council – there had never been a mental health facility here. If you wanted a psychologist or psychiatrist (or even simple counselling) you had to travel south to Brisvegas.

But that would never make Joe forgive the man for what he had done. He shoved the younger man away again, allowing Ruby Giggles to grab him.

“Now to quiet you down.” Ruby Giggles formed another Ruby Shard and prepared to stab Johannas with it. Crazy and furious, Johannas grabbed her hand and forced it back onto her.

Ruby Giggles hadn't been expecting that. The Ruby Shard pierced the Ruby Suit, causing a the Suit to malfunction. Ruby Giggles screamed in pain as her body was flooded with the Ruby power.

“NO!” Screamed Joe. Johannas grinned, and was about to fire his shotgun on the wounded Ruby Giggles when the gun was struck out of his hands!

“CHUCKLES!” Joe cried.

Chuckles swung one of the Arm Scythes at Johannas, who dodged and kicked him in the shin. While Chuckles was stunned, Johannas turned his attentions back to Joe.

The two men began to struggle over the detonator, Joes age finally catching up with him.

“Get Belle out of here!” Joe roared at Chuckles.

“Sir-,”

“NOW.” Joe bellowed. Chuckles grabbed the now unconscious Ruby Giggles and ran out of the building as fast as he could.

Now it was Joe vs. Johannas. Johannas finally managed to ease the detonator out of Joes hand. Grinning, he grabbed the older man around the waist.

“DAD!” Screamed Peter in agony. There was a loud explosion inside the building, and both Peter and Bill knew they'd never see their father again.

–

White. Bright white. Breathlessness.

The end.

Two sets of footsteps. Coming for him. Coming to get him and take him away.

“I tried my best. Am I forgiven?”

The two sets of footsteps came closer.

“Forgiven? Joey, you have nothing to be forgiven for. If anything, we should be begging your forgiveness.”

“We're sorry Joey. For all the rubbish we put you through.”

A smile.

“You two are idiots.”

“C'mon Joey, they're all waiting for us.”

“Yeah, let's go!”

And the three friends were reunited, and everything was okay.

Chapter

32

Belle lay in bed, still unconscious but stable now that the Ruby Suit had been removed. It had taken a while for Charlie and Peter to get it off, but at least Belle was safe now.

“She'll be sick for a while. I've contacted the school and the University so it should all be okay.” Peter sighed.

“She needed to take a break anyway I guess.” Bill rubbed his brothers back. “She's going to be devastated when she wakes up.”

Peter simply buried his head in his hands. He didn't want to think about it, but then he felt horrible for not wanting to think about it.

His father was dead. Killed saving Belle's life. It should have been him. Belle was his daughter.

“I'd kill Johannes if he weren't already dead. That's two he took from us.” Bill continued, angry.

“He can't hurt anyone ever again.” Peter said quietly. Bill sighed.

“I know.” He looked up at the roof. “Thanks Dad.”

—

Daryl Jones was having a rotten day.

Those idiots at work had torn shreds off him for doing what they considered a “sub-standard job”. Given that if it wasn't for his father they wouldn't even HAVE a job, Daryl thought that was a bit rich.

The really annoying bit was that he no longer had his former victims to take his frustrations out on. Belle, Charlie and Sunny were now backed up by their stupid group of friends, and sheer weight of numbers meant that going after them was pointless.

Daryl flopped down onto his bed and sighed. Looking out of the window, he could see Sunny comforting that dumb boyfriend of hers. He smirked. He thought Sunny was brilliant for stealing Charlie out from under Belle's nose. It was the sort of thing she used to do back when she was cool.

From what Daryl had heard, Belle had gotten very ill at the news of her grand-father's death at the hands of Johannes. Daryl wasn't completely heartless, and did feel bad for the loss of Joe Masters.

He sighed, and continued to watch the young couple.

Charlie felt insanely guilty. He knew he could have saved Joe if he hadn't been so stubborn. He could have helped stop Johannes, and perhaps even saved him.

“Stop beating yourself up Charlie, it wasn't your fault.” Sunny tried to talk him out of it.

“If I had headed out with Belle in the first place then I could have grabbed the detonator. Johannas wouldn't have dared go near me with the Arm Scythes.” Charlie sobbed. “Joe would still be alive.”

“Johannas could have just as easily have seen you and blown himself and everyone else up anyway.” Sunny pointed out.

“The detonator had been knocked out of his hands.” Charlie tried to argue.

“Charlie!” Sunny groaned. She hugged him tightly. “It's not your fault.”

Charlie said nothing, but looked grey, drawn and sad. He slumped a little further down in the old sofa, fresh tears rolling down his cheeks. Sunny kissed him, smothering him with kisses, trying to stop the flow of guilt.

Upstairs, Belle was starting to stir. Peter quickly grabbed her hand while Bill called Charlie.

“Pa?” Belle slowly woke up.

Peter swallowed hard. She'd have to know eventually.

“Hey Beauty.” He stroked her hair as she turned to face him.

“Hey Daddy.” Belle smiled weakly. “Where's Pa?”

Peter's lip began to quiver and the tears welled in his eyes.

“Pa is gone.” He sobbed. The pair clutched each other and cried over their loss.

—

“Belle?”

“Go away.”

“Belle, I'm really sorry about what happened.”

“That's nice.”

“I can understand if you're mad at me-,”

“You accused me of not having your back, and then you left me to die.”

“I came eventually and I got you out of there! Johannas would have killed you if it wasn't for me!”

“If you'd been there from the beginning, Johannas would never have had the chance.”

“You're blaming me for your grand-fathers death?”

“No, I'm pissed off at you for coming in here trying to be all apologetic after your hypocrisy.”

“Belle-,”

“Go away Charlie.”

“Belle!”

“GO.”

Charlie looked shell shocked. His shoulders slumped and he turned and left the room.

—

He had NO idea why his sister decided hanging around the tip was a good idea. The place stank and it was messy.

Daryl Jones was looking for Sunny. His laundry needed doing and his parents were out on a business trip. His coworkers had again been stern with him about his work ethic, and he was getting quite annoyed about it.

“SUNNY!” He yelled. If she wasn't here he was going to hit the roof (figuratively of course). What a mess.

He came across what looked like a cubbyhouse made out of garbage. He'd seen several of these around the place, he guessed they were made by those stupid friends of hers. He had a quick look around it, but found nothing.

He sighed, and was about to move on when something caught his eye. It was bright red and small.

The Ruby Suit.

“Ruby Giggles must've left it here!” Daryl grabbed it. It had been badly stretched by Peter and Charlie when they'd forced it off Belle, but it was still in one piece. Making sure he was alone, Daryl pulled off his own clothes and struggled to get the Ruby Suit on.

It tore a little, but the Ruby Ooze soon moved out over the tears and healed them up so the Suit fit perfectly.

Daryl grinned. The mask hid his face just as well as it hid Belles, and it still functioned beautifully. Daryl soon got a hang of flying and forming the Ruby Weapons.

“This is most excellent.” He laughed. “Those morons at work don't stand a chance against Ruby!”

He flew off in the direction of the offices, ready to take out whomever he found there.

—

“Where's the Ruby Suit? I want to wash it before Belle packs it.” Bill asked Peter and Belle, who were sitting in front of the TV eating popcorn and looking bored.

“Dumped it.” Peter deadpanned.

“Dumped it where?” Bill asked.

“Dump.” Belle deadpanned.

“So you're not taking it to Brisvegas?” Bill asked.

“Nope.” Deadpan.

Bill sighed, and continued to do the washing. Then a thought struck him.

“You dumped it? At the dump?” He asked the other two.

“Yup.”

“Where at the dump?”

“Just dumped it.”

“Where anyone could get it?”

“Doubtful.”

Suddenly the TV changed to a news bulletin.

“NEWS JUST IN! Someone has stolen Giggles Ruby Suit and is now holding up the Pleasantville Investment Centre!”

“You ever get the feeling things happen way to conveniently sometimes?” Peter turned to Belle.

“It's not my problem anymore. I'm moving to Brisvegas soon.” Was the sullen reply.

“Beauty-,”

“I lost the Suit, I lost the Lucky Seven Gun, and my friends hate me. I'm not fighting anymore.” Belle got up and tried to storm up the stairs, but she was still too weak. Bill grabbed her to stop her from collapsing.

“I just want to go away.” She whispered as her uncle hugged her.

“I know. In two weeks you'll be outta here.” He kissed her forehead.

—

“I hope you didn't get hurt by that Ruby creature.” Mrs. Jones scooped another healthy serving of pasta bake onto Daryl's plate three weeks later.

“Nah, I was fine. I hid.” Daryl tucked into the delicious meal.

“Sunny, you look a little sick. Maybe you should head off to bed after dinner?” Mrs. Jones then turned to her daughter.

“I'm fine.” Sunny mumbled. Thankfully her mother hadn't noticed the bruises all over her body from where Ruby had belted her black and blue, much like the other Knights of the Last Order. Neither Chuckles nor Giggles had shown up.

Belle she could understand, still being weakened from the whole Suit incident, but she was furious with Charlie. The pair had broken up very angrily afterwards, which left Sunny feeling completely miserable.

Who was Ruby? Where did they come from? How did they find the Ruby Suit, which had been pretty well hidden?

Sunny didn't like the situation at all.

And she knew it would get a whole lot worse before it would get better.

Chapter

33

The big city of New Metropolis never failed to impress Charlie. After Belle had left for Brisvegas without saying good bye, Charlie had decided to head overseas. Awesomica had always been the one place he wanted to visit, so after his messy break up with Sunny, he packed his bags and left.

New Metropolis was wonderful. Very little to no crime, beautiful clean streets, no crumbling dam to worry about. Public transport ran like clockwork, schools were all well-funded, there were several Universities to pick from and did I mention the lack of crime? The capital of Awesomica was definitely a standard to live up to.

He walked along one of the many long, bright, happy streets, looking in all of the windows at all of the beautiful displays. He was about to head back to his apartment, when he bumped into someone.

“Oh! Sorry mate, didn't see you there!” Charlie readied himself to get punched out as one would in Pleasantville, but all he heard was a chuckle.

“That's all right friend. You're foreign?” The stranger asked. He was dark, tall and grinning. Charlie grinned back.

“I'm from Pleasantville, Ostraya. Name's Charlie.” He offered his hand in greeting.

“Damien.” The stranger shook his hand. “Welcome to Awesomica.”

“Thanks.” Charlie felt great. The people here were awesome!

“Let me show you around.” Damien motioned for Charlie to follow him. Damien showed him a far bit of the city, all of the best places to grab a coffee or a meal or see a show or some sports. Charlie's mind was blown.

“Thanks for the tour!” Charlie smiled at his new friend.

“No problem. You're free to hang out with my friends and I any time.” Damien replied.

Charlie watched as his new friend walked away. He was about to head back to his apartment, when something he saw changed his mind on Pleasantville forever.

A young lady had been walking past, minding her own business. She was clearly wealthy and proud of it, with expensive looking clothes and jewellery. From her shoulder swung a beautiful red velvet handbag.

Charlie squirmed uncomfortably when he saw her – anyone who dressed like that in Pleasantville was just begging for an attack, and it seemed no different here. A young thug grabbed the woman while another went for her handbag.

She screamed loudly as the two men ran off. A loud wailing sounded throughout the street as a police car appeared and took off after the crooks. Charlie blinked. How on earth did the police respond THAT quickly?

Within the hour the handbag had been returned and the thugs apprehended. Within the week, Charlie read in the paper that the crooks had been placed in gaol for a year, where they would be making bricks to be used in construction. It was a shock to Charlie's system – the law enforcement here actually WORKED!

Over the next three years, Charlie saw more and more that made him realise that Belle might have been right.

“Charlie! We need you to help us with a new campaign!” Damien's boyfriend Jake barged in the door one day.

“Campaign?” Charlie looked confused.

“They're going to knock down the old Cat Manor to build apartments!” Jake cried in anguish. “We have to stop them!”

“If the Council says that the building is going, what can we do?” Charlie resumed his breakfast.

“If we stage a peaceful protest they'll have to back down!” Jake pointed out.

“You'll just get arrested.” Charlie pointed out.

“No we won't! If we keep within the letter of the law, then they can't do a thing!” Jake grinned. “Haven't you ever protested before?!”

“Uhhh...” Charlie hesitated. In Pleasantville, protesting was unheard of. No one dared upset the status-quo, everyone was too afraid of the criminal element.

“Come on!” Jake dragged him out of the house.

“My cornflakes!”

—

Charlie was quite surprised. It was nothing like what he thought a protest would be like. The very large group were standing on a large patch of grass just outside the Council office, singing old songs about history and the Awesomica way of life.

“And the Council will listen to this?” Charlie was stunned.

“Of course! They know that we won't vote for them if they upset us.” Damien pointed out. “There's a fair whack of the voter base here today.”

“Voting?” Charlie was intrigued. Voting meant nothing in Pleasantville, everyone knew the Mayor was just a figurehead who bowed to the will of the Death Valley Mobsters.

“What planet did you come from?” Jake laughed.

Charlie went bright red. Not from his ignorance – but from how shamefully he treated Belle. This had been what she'd been talking about. The people of Pleasantville standing up and saying “No more!”

And they could do it too. The civilians and the police easily outnumbered the hundred or so Mobsters. However, as proven by the peoples wilful ignorance when it came to the flood, the people of Pleasantville had no intention of rousing themselves.

While the people around him started singing of their founding fathers, he thought back to his last few months in Ostraya.

–

“Where WERE you?!” Sunny cried. “Ruby completely kicked our backsides out there! We needed you!”

“Forget it. I'm not doing the whole Chuckles thing any more. Not without Giggles.” Charlie lay down on his bed, looking across to the bedroom that held his ex-best friend.

“Why not? What's wrong with you?!” Sunny sighed. “Belle can't be Giggles any more, she's leaving for Brisvegas remember? Plus she's still sick from being flooded with Ruby power.”

She sat down next to him. “Talk to me Charlie.”

“I just can't. She won't do anything with me any more. I keep trying to include her but she just won't have it.” Charlie sighed.

“She just needs some space Charlie. You know she's been working hard. Plus this has been a bit of a shock to her, and now on top of losing her aunt she's lost her grand-father.” Sunny pointed out. “You needed a lot of space when your grand-father died.”

“She's been pushing me away ever since we got together! She's nothing but a jealous brat!” Charlie snapped, slamming his window closed.

“You've been pushing this all on her since we got together! You were so insistent that we all got along that you didn't give her time!” Sunny hugged him.

“I just wanted things to be the way they were. Her and me.” Charlie looked sadly at Sunny, who frowned.

“They couldn't be Charlie. It's you and me now, not you and her.” She smoothed his hair. “You'll always be best friends, but you can't be joined at the hip any more.”

“I didn't realise dating YOU meant choosing.” Charlie scowled at her, pulling away.

“It was always going to be that way!” Sunny cried. “Do you REALLY think that we could carry on together with HER always hanging off you like the leech she is?!”

“Don't you DARE call Belle a leech!” Charlie got up. “You're still jealous aren't you?”

“Jealous? I’ll ALWAYS be jealous. Every night I walk into that house and everyone is cold and awkward around me. They don’t know how to treat me well after years of ignoring my existence, while Belle walks home into hugs and toys and pampering!” Sunny shot back. “And then I finally get you, but nooooo, she’s still got her little claws stuck into the one person I thought I could have to myself.”

“You sound like you’re only with me to get back at her!” Charlie spat. Sunny was shocked.

“That’s not true!” She defended herself. But a shadow of guilt haunted her face, and Charlie knew that while it wasn’t the whole reason, it was part of it.

“It isn’t, huh?” He stared coldly at her.

Sunny couldn’t bear the cold. She felt it all the time, and to have it directed at her from Charlie was too much.

“It WASN’T.” She corrected him, just as coldly. “It’s over Charlie, go back to your stupid unwanted bastard.”

She ran out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

—

Thinking over it more, Sunny had been right. Belle had needed more time. She also really DID have a need to study.

A few months after the rally, the Mayor was voted out in favour of someone who would protect historical land. Charlie was beginning to understand what Belle had been trying to tell him – that when people took responsibility for their community and held their chosen leaders to account, the community benefited. It wasn’t the task of eight kids to stop the Death Valley Mobsters and their hold on Pleasantville – it was up to the people to hold the Council to account, and then the Council needed to stand up and fix the problem.

Belle was studying so she could make a difference. So she could set an example to others. So she could even get into the Council and change it from inside, to continue the work her father was starting.

She had talent, brains and had a brilliant work ethic. Not like him, who simply relied on sheer dumb luck.

“Oi! Wake up Chuckles!” Damien laughed

“Wha-?” Charlie jumped a mile. Did Damien just call him Chuckles?!

“Your name is Charlie, which is shortened to Chuck, and your eyes were glazed over. It was a joke.” Damien reassured him.

They were sitting on the balcony of Charlies apartment, sipping beer and looking out over the beautiful coast.

“Aren't you glad the right guy won the election?” Damien grinned.

“Yeah, it's pretty different from Pleasantville.” Charlie admitted. “You only get to run for Mayors Office if you're under the control of the Death Valley Mob there, otherwise you don't get a look-in.”

Damien looked disgusted.

“If any of our elected representatives were corrupt there'd be HELL to pay! People would be marching down the streets demanding a resignation! How do you LIVE like that?!” He asked, taking another mouthful of beer. “Doesn't anyone stand up for themselves?”

“We did. My friends and I.” Charlie said. “Chuckles and Giggles, with the Knights of the Last Order. We were the local vigilantes.”

Damien's eyes grew wide. “That's why you were startled when I...you FOUGHT the bad guys?!” He yelped.

“Keep it down, I don't want it going around.” Charlie chuckled. “Yeah, I did. Managed to get my hands on the Lions Claw Blade for a short while too before I lost it.”

“Why aren't you fighting any more?” Damien asked as Charlie took another swig of beer.

“Belle and I had a fight. I broke up with my girlfriend too, who was a Knight. Plus I lost my magic. The family magic, the Improbability Clause.” Charlie explained.

“Magic?” Damien looked quizzically at Charlie.

“Yeah, it was pretty much sheer dumb luck. Made even better when Belle was around – her family and my family have been friends for centuries.” Charlie said. “My Dad and her father are brilliant at using the Clause – apparently there's some secret about it that they know that we don't.”

“Secret? How did it work anyway?” Damien asked.

“I'd come up with a brilliant plan, Belle would pooh-pooh it and then everything would work.” Charlie explained.

Damien thought for a second. “When you say she pooh-pooh'd it, what do you mean by that?”

“She basically would tell me...every...thing...that...” Charlie stopped.

Belle would tell him everything that could have gone wrong with the plan. THAT was why the Improbability Clause worked. Because when Belle told him off, she was really going over the finer points of his plan that he missed. His quick brain would then take her information in and, with a bit of dumb luck, formulate something that worked every time.

“I am such a moron.” Charlie sighed. Damien looked at him quizzically.

“Ah...okay.” Damien sat back. “You said you got a hold of the Lions Claw Blade?”

“Yup. Belle had the Lucky Seven Gun for a bit there too, a modified Colt .45 with an extra chamber and an interesting pattern on the handle..” Charlie smiled with the memory. It had been a few years now since those days.

“I wonder...I have a gun, and Jake has a whip. It's an average Colt .45 though, but the handle has a weird design.” He got up and pulled his gun from his holster. Charlie jumped up.

“That's the EXACT same design as on the Lucky Seven Gun!” He pointed to it. “Jakes whip, does it have a small chain with a talisman at the end of it?”

“Yeah, it does. It's called the Stingrays Tail Whip, and this is the Palatable Six Gun.” Damien said. “We got them at a sale, the guy was insistent that they be sold together.”

“I wonder if there are other weapons like this?” Charlie wondered.

“I bet there is.” Damien smiled.

Charlie sat back down.

“I was horrible to Belle.” He sighed. He told Damien what had happened between himself, Belle and Sunny.

“You should go back and apologise. You've been here for years, surely it's time you went home?” Damien looked at his friend.

“I know.” Charlie sighed, finishing off his beer. “Another drink?”

“Of course!”

Chapter

34

“I am SO proud of you!” Peter hugged Belle tightly.

“Pa would have been proud.” Bill ruffled her hair.

Belle looked up to the sky with tears in her eyes. After four years of hard study, she'd finally gotten her Law degree.

“You'll be coming home with us?” Bill asked as they walked away from the ceremony together.

“I'm thinking I might stay in Brisvegas. Webster and Maddy are happy for me to stay as long as I need to.” Belle replied, not looking at her uncle.

“You should come back to Pleasantville.” Bill insisted. “Charlie came back a few months ago, he misses you.”

“That's nice.” Belle stiffened. She didn't want to think about him. Not after what had happened.

Peter smiled secretively.

“Beauty should only come home when she's ready.” He said with an air of superiority.

“Stop talking like you know some great secret and we don't.” Bill said dryly.

“Jealous, brat?”

“Get over yourself pipsqueak.”

“I love you two.” Belle grabbed them both in a big hug.

“We love you too.” Peter looked at Bill, and the pair grinned at each other.

—

“Webster! Tate needs a bath!” Maddy called upstairs to her husband as the little toddler sat with an empty bowl of cake mix, trying to lick the last morsels out and instead getting them all over herself.

“You are SO adorable!” Belle picked the gurgling little girl up as Webster made his way downstairs.

“Come one Mess-Monster, time you got cleaned up!” Webster took his daughter who squealed with delight as her father lifted her up and took her to the bath.

“You guys are so awesome. I hope I have a family like yours one day.” Belle sat at the table and peeled potatoes while Maddy worked around the kitchen.

“Webster's so wonderful.” Maddy gushed. “And when Tate was born, it just completed us.”

Belle continued peeling vegetables. "Are you guys planning on having any more?"

"Nah. One will do us, and she wasn't really planned." Maddy replied. "We're actually thinking of heading back to Pleasantville."

"Oh..." Belle said after a pause.

"We want to help your Dad. Plus you need to go back and try to make up with Charlie." Maddy continued.

Belle squirmed uncomfortably. Fortunately there was a loud banging and a splash from upstairs followed by laughter.

"You two!" Maddy ran upstairs, leaving Belle alone with her thoughts.

—

Belle was getting ready for bed that night. It had been a week since her graduation, and she was enjoying her little holiday.

She brushed her teeth and pulled on her nightclothes. It was a warm, beautiful night that nothing except the nagging thoughts of Charlie and Pleasantville could ruin.

Belle groaned, and threw herself onto the bed. She couldn't escape the fact that he was back in the country or that she had no reason to stay in Brisvegas. Wasn't the whole point of her education to save Pleasantville anyway? How could she do that if she avoided the city?

The problem was Charlie. He wouldn't be the same boy she left behind. He'd been overseas for nearly four years. He was older, more experienced. Would he hook back up with Sunny again? Would they be able to repair their friendship? Or were the wounds too deep?

Tossing and turning wasn't getting her anywhere, so Belle got up, grabbed a dressing gown and headed out to the back deck, where she found Webster gazing out over the city.

"Can't sleep?" He asked as Belle sat on the chair on the other side of the deck.

"Nope. Still thinking about Charlie and Pleasantville." Belle sighed. "You?"

"Thinking of Tate." Webster shuffled in his seat. "It's been years but I miss her so much."

"She tried to kill us and completely destroyed a University." Belle narrowed her eyes at him.

"You don't understand Belle. Tater was a good person, I swear." Webster protested as Belle snorted. "She WAS! Did you see her Will? That business empire that she created is now funding cancer research and supporting our Defence force."

"Wow." Belle deadpanned.

"You didn't know her." Webster continued. "She meant the world to me. We met at school when we had to do a science project together. It was our last year and neither of us had any

idea what we were going to do. We started hanging out, I found out that her birthday was the day after mine. She was always telling me that I was special, that I would do something great in life.” Tears were beginning to form in his eyes, but he blinked them back. “I lost my twin sister when we were four, and since that day I'd felt like part of me was missing. Tater filled that void, she was my sister in every sense of the word. Everyone told me to stay away from Tater because she was crazy, but no one told me of the big heart she had.”

“Yeah, a big heart doesn't negate the fact that she was completely psycho.” Belle shook her head.

“She was getting help. I helped her get to a psychologist. She was getting better. Then I moved and everything went wrong.” Webster looked away.

“I knew she was in love with me, but I could never love her that way. That's why I left Brisvegas. I couldn't bear to break her heart so I ran.”

“Doesn't change what she did.” Belle rolled her eyes. “Let her go Webster, she was psycho who needed to be put in an institution and left to rot.”

“She WASN'T Belle! When she got help she was fine! Haven't you seen the business empire she put together, all the people she helped out, all the good that she's done? If I hadn't run away things might have been different...”

“You can't blame yourself.” Belle said.

“You're blaming yourself for what happened with Charlie. You're thinking right now what could have happened if you hadn't left for Brisvegas.” Webster pointed out. “You're going over and over again in your head why you couldn't have just sucked it up and accepted his relationship with Sunny instead of hiding in your studies.”

“I had to study!” Belle retorted.

“You say that, but you don't believe it.” Webster smiled. “You need to go home Belle, if you don't you'll lose Charlie. Not saying he'll off himself like Tater did, but you'll still lose him.”

Belle sat silently. She COULD have taken the relationship better. She could have tried instead of making excuses.

Maybe she did need to go home.

“I might have loved her, you know, if she'd stayed in Brisvegas and continued her business.” Webster said quietly. “I love Maddy, and I'll stay with her forever, but if Tater were still around...”

“She'd make a great aunt to baby Tate.” Belle tried to smile. Webster smiled back.

“Do you think she knows?” Webster looked up at the stars. “Do you think she's watching over us?”

“I wouldn't be surprised if she was.” Belle grinned.

—

“So you're going home?” Maddy asked with a smile over breakfast the next morning.

“Yeah, it's about time I got back to Pleasantville. I can't hide forever.” Belle shovelled down her bacon and eggs (as good as Maddy is, she couldn't quite compare to Bill).

“We'll probably be a few months behind you. Both of us are looking for work, and Betty Begly has offered to babysit Tate for us.” Webster tried to scoop food into his daughters mouth, and was rewarded with it all over his face and shirt. “Thanks brat.”

“I'm heading out this afternoon, I should be at Dads place before dinnertime.” Belle said. “I've packed most of my things already.”

“We'll drive you to the Bus Interchange if you like.” Webster offered.

“Thanks.” Belle smiled.

She headed upstairs to finish packing. All she needed to do was get the last few clothes in her suitcase and try to stuff the last of her books into another suitcase.

Afterwards, she carefully started packing her last few photos, laptop and other trinkets into her bag. She was putting photos into a box when she saw an old newspaper clipping.

Belle smiled. If you really looked hard (or at least Belle thought) you could almost see the outline of the Lucky Seven Gun in her shorts as she walked out of that doomed Assembly Hall on the fateful day that changed everything.

The pair of them together, with the friends they wouldn't meet until years later, that had been their first mission. Their first win. Belles smile faded however, when in the background of the picture she noticed Sunny, glaring at Belle and Charlie, face full of jealousy.

Hopefully she could fix things up with Sunny too. She couldn't help the pang of hurt and regret mixed with jealousy she felt when she thought of Charlie and Sunny together again, but she vowed to be more mature about it. If Charlie wanted to go to the movies with her every day, then she'd do it.

She finished packing and had one last look at the room that had been hers for the last four years. It was a little bit sad to say good-bye, but it was time to move on.

Belle Masters was going home.

Chapter

35

The first thing she noticed was the tree. Another year or so and it'd be back to its former glory, ready for the next generation to play in. The second thing she noticed was Sunny out the front of her house with a two-year-old, a broken arm and a man Belle had never met before. So it looked like she wasn't back with Charlie after all.

“Things have changed a little bit Beauty.” Peter helped Belle get her trunk out of the car as a young man of six ran out to hug her.

“Hey Ozzie!” Belle lifted up her younger step-brother. “You're getting big now mate, you're almost as tall as me!”

“I missed you Belle!” Oscar hugged her tightly. Hand-in-hand, the siblings headed inside where Lara was feeding baby Madeleine Masters. Peter set down the bags and kissed his wife.

“Who's the guy with Sunny? Is that her baby?” Belle asked, setting down her bag and sitting down. Oscar scrambled into her lap.

“That's her boyfriend Patrick and their daughter Melody.” Peter replied.

“What happened to her arm?” Belle asked. Peter looked uncomfortable.

“Ruby Daryl.” He replied.

“Ruby Daryl? What the -?” Belle looked confused.

“Maybe it's best if you ask Sunny. She's currently trying to break down the door.” Lara pointed to the front door. Out of the window, Belle could see Sunny waving and knocking furiously.

“SUNNY!” Belle ripped open the door. The two friends hugged each other tightly. “You're a Mum now?”

“Yup. Myself and Patrick have a little girl now.” Sunny grinned.

“So, you finally found yourself someone of your own?” Belle smiled.

“Sure did! Patrick, get in here and say hi to Belle!” Sunny called to her beloved Patrick. “Bring Melody too!”

“How on earth did your parents react to you having a baby?!” Belle asked as the group sat down at the Masters table.

Sunny looked downcast. “Things got pretty bad once Chuckles and Giggles left. Demon is now the Mayor – it turns out he was my own father!”

“Demon is your father?!” Belle yelped.

“Yeah. Dad got really pissed off after you and Charlie came into my place that time to stop Daryl from picking on me. So he decided to become Demon and do whatever he could to get

rid of you. Now he's Mayor...and he's become far too power-mad. Especially once he found out that it was Daryl who found your Ruby Suit. Daryl is now Dad's private enforcer, which is how I got my arm broken.” Sunny sighed. “He was also pretty ticked off when I got pregnant, but Mum talked him into signing the old house over to me when they moved into their new mansion.”

“Wow. What about the DVM?” Belle asked.

“They're unstoppable. Last time we managed to get Revolver arrested he only got community service.” Peter said bitterly. “Three whole weeks of it, and he hasn't done one second.”

“Wow. This place really has gone to the dogs.” Belle looked down.

“Plus Jones has had a huge crackdown on vigilantism. Thankfully he has no idea Sunny's with the Knights or we'd be in huge trouble.” Patrick added.

“How did you two meet anyway?” Belle asked.

Sunny smiled.

“I was doing some online courses and ended up at the Library a fair bit. Patrick was also studying and well, here we are.” Sunny rested her head on Patrick, who kissed her nose. “Have you been to see Charlie yet? He misses you.”

“So I've heard.” Belle sighed.

“Just go over there and say hi Belle-Belle, it's not that hard.” Sunny poked her friend in the arm, hard.

“Easy for you to say.” Belle rubbed her arm with a quick dirty look at Sunny, who poked her tongue out.

—

“Hi Betty, hi Thomas!” Belle hugged Charlies parents as she walked into the familiar lounge room.

“Well I don't believe it! Is this the same little girl who once helped me make biscuits?” Betty squeezed Belle tightly.

“Little is correct.” Thomas laughed as Belle scowled at him. She was STILL impossibly tiny for her age.

“Don't be mean!” Betty chided. Belle smiled at the pair of them.

“How have you guys been?” She made herself comfortable on the couch.

“Getting by. It helps that Charlie came home and took over the family business.” Thomas sat on one of the chairs opposite her.

Belle felt a twinge of guilt. She remembered how she'd planned with Charlie to do a business degree together.

“He learnt a lot about metal working while he was in Awesomica. They do things differently over there, and Charlie brought back a lot of new ideas.” Thomas continued.

“It's so good to have the two of you home again.” Betty smiled.

“Speaking of, where is Charlie?” Belle asked, figuring it was better to get this over and done with.

“He's at work at the-,” Betty started, when the front door opened and a loud, clear, familiar voice called out.

“MUM! DAD! I'm home!”

Belle jumped a little. Charlie barrelled into the lounge room and stopped dead in his tracks.

He wasn't too much taller, but enough so that he towered over Belle. His shoulders had filled out even more and he had the beginnings of a beard. He was now a complete tank, and Belle, who was still shorter than most thirteen year olds, felt pathetically tiny.

“Hi.” Charlie mumbled, completely unsure of where to look. Belle looked almost exactly as she had four years ago, perhaps looking a little bit more like her father. He noted that she was still incredibly short, he'd have to pick on her later...if they were still friends.

“Hi.” Belle tried to smile back.

Silence.

“I'm going to get dinner ready, Pete and Lara will be over soon.” Betty suddenly got up.

“I need to prune the roses.” Thomas also exited.

More silence. The atmosphere was heavy enough to sink a ship, and it couldn't get any more awkward if they tried.

“So...how was Brisvegas?” Charlie asked.

“Good. How was Awesomica?” Belle asked.

“Good.”

Crickets.

“How's the business?”

“Good. How was University?”

“Good.”

Another long, awkward pause.

—

Belle lay on her bed, looking out of her window at the leaves gently swaying outside. Dinner hadn't been that bad, but she still hadn't been able to really talk to Charlie. Every time either one of them tried (and everyone was giving them every opportunity to have a private heart-to-heart!) it just ended in awkward silence.

Her old bed felt great. The familiarity of her old room felt safe and inviting. She didn't know how she'd managed to stay away for so long, Charlie or no Charlie. The only thing that made her uncomfortable was the helmet.

Belle had shoved the thing into her wardrobe and closed the door, but she could still sense it. It was like Giggles was staring at her, trying to get to her.

"I'm not Giggles any more. I need to be a lawyer now, the fight on the streets isn't my problem, I'm fighting higher up." She tried to tell herself.

Meanwhile, Charlie had slipped out and was training himself with the Arm Scythes at the tip. He wasn't ready to go back out and rejoin the Knights of the Last Order with their fight against the corrupt system, but the urge to put his blades back on and swing away was overwhelming.

"Looks like you're having fun."

Charlie spun around. Sunny stood behind him, nursing her sore arm.

"What are you doing here?" Charlie asked.

"Watching you. How long have you been coming down here?" She sat down, looking up at him.

"Ever since I got back." He admitted.

Sunny sighed.

"I've been trying to think of what to say to you, after everything that happened. I missed you awfully after you left." She said.

"There's no need to say anything. We were both young and stupid." Charlie sat down next to her. "I missed you too, and to be honest I'm a little jealous of Patrick."

Sunny smiled. "I figured you would be. You will always be my first love though, so you have that."

Charlie smiled too.

"It's a shame you can't say that I'm your first love." Sunny hinted cheekily.

“You are!” Charlie was confused.

“Oh please. Belle has always been and always will be your one and only.” Sunny laughed.

“Belle and I were best friends. Nothing more.” Charlie defended himself.

“Of course. My apologies, I must have misread the situation.” Sunny apologised, not sounding the least bit sincere.

“You did. Now, I'm training if you don't mind.” Charlie got up. Sunny got up too. She touched his face and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. There was a hint of sadness and regret in the action, and both of them felt it. However, the smile on Sunnys face when she left was genuine, and Charlie knew she was happy with Patrick and Melody.

Chapter

36

“DARN IT Ruby!” Sir Lionheart groaned as he dodged another Ruby Blast. Since discovering the Ruby Suit, Daryl had managed to improve the skill set to include minor explosive Ruby Blasts and Ruby Whips, which could be used to grab victims while numbing them.

“Are you lot DONE yet?” Ruby turned to face Mobster Marion and three of her goons, who were busy destroying an old city memorial. Peter had warned the Knights of the Last Order that the memorial would be a target, as Mayor Jones wanted land for a shopping complex.

“We're taking our time to do things properly!” Mobster Marion snapped as another statue fell.

“It's DESTRUCTION, how “properly” can you do it?!” Ruby cried, throwing another Ruby Blast at Sir Hyper, who had gotten close enough to try and strike. Sir Hyper screamed as the Ruby Power charged up to his shoulder, numbing his entire arm.

“Sir Hyper!” Sir Lionheart tried to get to his fallen comrade, but it was too late. With a sickening pop, Ruby easily twisted around Sir Hyper's elbow.

“Not another one!” Sir Lionheart groaned. That meant Sir Hyper, Sir Dark AND Lady Courage were out of commission!

“You're next Chickenheart!” Ruby grinned beneath the mask. Sir Lionheart quickly grabbed Sir Hyper and the pair bolted from the memorial, unable to save it.

“Damn, damn, DAMN!” Sir Lionheart groaned. He did his best to drag Sir Hyper away from the area as quickly as he could – when Sir Dark had his ankle broken, Master Revolver and twenty of the Death Valley Mobsters had chased them around the city. Lady Luck was still fuming over the fact that her beloved had been injured.

“I'm sorry Sammy.” Sir Lionheart climbed down one of the broken storm drains which led to the tip. Sir Hyper was following slowly, hissing with the pain in his elbow.

“I'll live.” Sir Hyper replied. Now nineteen, the small boy had become an imposing man. He was still pretty hyperactive and fun though, especially with children. He was going through University himself now, hoping to become a teacher. His theory was that while Belle could try and change minds that were already set, he could help mould the minds that were still flexible.

“If only we had Chuckles and Giggles again.” He sighed as the pair emerged from a large pipe that emptied near the tip. Sir Lionheart shook his head.

“I know Charlie's still keen, but I don't see Belle getting involved again.” The older man sighed. “Let's get your arm fixed. Petunia's gonna kill us.”

“I think the jerk just dislocated my elbow.” Sir Hyper looked at his arm. With a little wiggle and a “pop”, the arm looked normal again, if not a little swollen.

“Oh thank goodness for that.” Daniel pulled off his helmet. “A bit of ice on that and you'll be good in a week. We're running out of combatants.”

“Surely TJ should be fine soon.” Sam got back into his civilian attire.

“I'd still like for him to rest for another week or so until he's 100% fit. He could get killed otherwise.” Daniel replied.

“SAM! DAN!” A raspy female voice called out. Lady Silent (or Not-So-Silent-Any-More as Sir Dark calls her) ran towards them, jumping up and hugging her brother tightly. “You guys were on the news, I saw your arm, what happened Sam?”

“It was dislocated, but I popped it back in. Chill out Tammy, I'm fine.” Sam patted her head, wincing at the pain that was still in his arm.

“It looks like it's sore.” Tammy pointed out.

“Are you going to be annoying all the way home?” Sam frowned at her as the trio headed towards Sams car.

“I'm your big sister.”

“By fifteen minutes!”

“Still your big sister.”

Daniel couldn't help but sit in the back seat chuckling all the way home.

—

Belle walked out of the court room, fuming. It seemed that the Death Valley Mobsters weren't the only crooks in town, and she was beginning to regret all the times she saved the Pleasantville First Bank as Giggles. The way they treated people and they were allowed to get away with it?!

“Does this city THRIVE on corruption or something?!” She wondered out aloud.

“It's an alternate way to do business one might say.”

Belle's head shot up to see Mr. Jones smiling triumphantly at her.

“You're just like your father.” He chuckled. “Neither you, nor him, nor the Knights of the Last Order can change this city. It's the place where so called “trustworthy” businesses come to make a dirty profit. That's what keeps us going.”

“Leave me alone.” Belle growled at the Mayor, stalking off.

“You're fighting a losing battle, why not join the winning team?” Mr. Jones called after her. Belle ignored him and quickened her pace. What a SLIMEBALL!

She got into the slowly dying old Elantra and headed home. One day she'd have to buy herself a new car.

“Now I understand why you got so mad Dad.” She said later, sitting at the table at home nursing a hot chocolate. “It's infuriating, the way that people get away with murder in this city.”

“You're fighting a long ingrained state of mind Beauty.” Peter replied, standing at the sink and peeling potatoes. “This was SO much easier when Bill lived here.” He grumbled.

“It wasn't a total waste of a day though.” Belle mentioned.

“Oh?” Peter looked up at her.

“You see, I stopped at the petrol station to get more fuel and-,”

Belle was cut off by Lara returning home with Madeleine and Oscar. Oscar burst into the house waving around a red ribbon.

“I won the race! I won the race!” He cried, running laps between Peter and Belle. “We had the sports carnival today and I won the race!”

“Well done!” Peter lifted his step-son up in a big bear hug.

“Have you finished those potatoes yet?” Lara narrowed her eyes at Peter, who started peeling as if his life depended on it (which it did).

“Hey little man!” Belle high-fived Oscar before pulling him into her lap.

“I ran really, really, REALLY fast Belle! Zoom!” Oscar started giving a detailed description of how he completely obliterated his competition (to be honest, he only JUST barely won, but we won't take his victory away from him).

“Did you see the Pleasantville Memorial got flattened?” Lara said quietly to Peter.

Peter grimaced. Joe Masters had a plaque there due to his actions against Johannas.

“I can't take much more of this.” He threw down the last potato and the peeler, frustrated.

Belle looked at her father, and then back at Oscar, who was still jumping around with excitement. She tried not to think of the future the poor boy faced.

—

Crickets chirped loudly at the tip that night, where again Charlie was having a late-night training session. Although tonight wasn't so much training as it was stargazing. And not so much stargazing as it was being lost in his own thoughts.

He'd seen the news that day. He'd seen Sir Hyper get injured. He knew Sunny still had a cast on her arm and that TJ had just gotten out of his moon-boot. Daniel was the only combatant of the Knights of the Last Order left who could still fight.

The bad guys were winning.

He sat up. It wasn't fair. He had to do something! But without Belle and the Improbability Clause he was little more than cannon fodder.

You managed to do okay before Giggles came on the scene. Remember how you won the Lions Claw Blade?

He shook the thought off. That had been with the help of Sir Lionheart and Sir Dark.

You should go and get your sword back. It's not like you need Giggles to help you.

He sighed. He didn't even know where Mobster Marion was. Probably antagonising some innocent civilian.

He got up and stretched. Probably should go for a walk, lying down with the Arm Scythes on usually ended in stiffness. He pulled on his masks and headed back towards the city on the back of the midnight bus.

He savoured the bus ride every night, because that's when he was Chuckles again, even if he wasn't fighting crime. He jumped off the bus near the Pleasantville Central Park and headed into the scented garden. It was peaceful here, the lingering smell of the flowers hanging in the air.

WAS peaceful.

“I can't believe the NERVE of that man! Yelling at me as if I were one of the grunts!” Chuckles heard the distinguishable voice of Mobster Marion ranting. “I don't care what he lost, he has no right to speak to his fiancé like that!”

“Had a domestic with Revolver did you?” Chuckles jumped out from behind a bush.

“Humph. What do you care?” Mobster Marion growled.

“Hey, we've all had relationship problems before. Maybe it will help to talk about it?” Chuckles threw up his hands in defence. “You're not breaking any laws right now so I'm not going to beat you up.”

“I can change that!” Mobster Marion grinned, pulling out the Lions Claw Blade and slicing down one of the bushes.

“HEY! Not cool!” Chuckles cried.

“I'll just take my frustrations out on you shall I?” Mobster Marion laughed, swinging the Lions Claw Blade at Chuckles, who jumped back.

“I was only trying to help!” Chuckles yelped indignantly. “No wonder Revolver yells at you, you're a COW!”

“And proud of it brat!” Mobster Marion moved to advance again, when a gunshot rang out and a bullet landed just in front of her.

“The HECK?!” Chuckles spun around, looking for the source of the bullet. Nothing but silence and empty darkness surrounded him.

“Ooooh, you're going to get it -ARGH!” Mobster Marion moved to attack again, but was stopped by another bullet. In her fright, the Lions Claw Blade fell to the ground.

Chuckles saw his chance. He swung at Mobster Marion with one of the Arm Scythes, forcing her back. She kicked at her sword, sending it towards one of the bushes.

It would be a foot race to see who would get there first, and Chuckles had a sharp advantage. He swung at Mobster Marion again, forcing her backwards before taking off towards the fallen Blade himself.

“Get back here!” Unfortunately Mobster Marion still had speed on her side. She went to make a grab at Chuckles when the third bullet nicked her finger. She screamed in pain and fright as Chuckles rolled into the bushes and took back his sword.

He bolted as fast as he could back to the tip, making sure that Mobster Marion nor none of her henchmen were following him.

“I GOT MY SWORD BACK!”

Chapter 37

“That smug look on your face is really making me want to hit you.” Belle deadpanned as she sat under the tree next to Charlie, who was happily chowing down on barley sugar.

“Did I mention I got my sword back?” He grinned, popping another piece of barley sugar into his mouth.

“Only fifty times.” Belle groaned.

“Reckon you'll get the Lucky Seven back?”

“Charlie, I-,”

“BELLE! We're going out to see your Uncle Bill, can you take care of your brother and sister?” Peter called out from the front door.

“Sure Dad! I'll catch up with you later Chuckles.” Belle got up and headed back inside.

She was kind of glad to be away from Charlie. Sitting there with him had been like old times...only she wasn't the old Belle any more.

“Hey Belle-Belle, can I have some ice cream?” Oscar asked innocently as Belle sat down. Madeleine squealed.

“I ceem! I ceem!” She yelled.

“What did Mum and Dad say?” Belle asked.

Oscar looked downcast. “Not until after tea.” He mumbled.

“Are Mum and Dad here?”

“No...” Oscar started to grin.

Soon, the three were tucking into the container of ice cream.

“Belle, aren't Mum and Dad going to notice the ice cream is gone?” Oscar asked innocently as they finished it off.

Belle froze. The group quickly scrambled to the corner store to get a new container!

“Good thinking Ozzie.” Belle held the little boys hand as they walked down the street.

“My other Daddy says that I'm one smart cookie.” Oscar grinned.

“If you're a cookie does that mean I get to eat you up?” Belle chased him down the street and back up to the house. The pair quickly got inside and put the ice cream back in the freezer before putting Madeleine back in her chair and settling down to watch the television. It wasn't long before the three were singing along with the childrens shows.

“Keep filling up the bag and you'll increase your chances of survival by 30%.” Master Revolver grinned at the scared bank teller who was stuffing valuables as quickly as he could into the brown bag Master Revolver had handed him. “I'm in a foul, foul mood today thanks to-,”

“LEAVE THEM ALONE REVOLVER!” Sir Lionheart stood at the entrance of the bank with Chuckles, who was swinging the Lions Claw Blade around in his fingers.

“Just two of you today?” Master Revolver smirked. “What happened to the others? Wuss out?”

“None of your business.” Chuckles gripped the Lions Claw Blade in his hand. He looked at Master Revolver and noticed something. “Leave the Lucky Seven at home did you?”

Furious, Master Revolver grabbed his handgun and rushed at the pair, firing madly. The two heroes separated and hid, while Master Revolver stalked the room. He had his finger on the trigger of the gun, and Chuckles was beginning to worry. He really hadn't thought this through at all, he'd have to get up close if he wanted to attack, whereas Master Revolver could just shoot from any distance.

“What kind of numbskull takes a sword to a gunfight?” Chuckles groaned. He glanced out from behind the pillar he was behind. Master Revolver was still stalking the room, but it looked like the tellers and other innocents had managed to escape. He then looked across at Sir Lionheart.

“Escape?” Sir Lionheart mouthed.

Chuckles nodded furiously. They waited until Master Revolver was at the other end of the room and tried to make a break for it, but another gunshot rang out and they were forced to take cover again.

“Damn him!” Sir Lionheart hissed.

“Oh I am SO going to enjoy ending your lives.” Master Revolver stalked towards the pillar where the two heroes were hiding. “GAH!”

A small, sharp piece of metal embedded itself in Master Revolver's arm. A tall, lean figure dressed in a grey body suit with blades running along his arms and spine jumped down from the ceiling.

“Who IS that?!” Chuckles asked. The suit went up over the figure's face and head, with goggles masking their eyes.

“ARGH! You!” Master Revolver ripped the blade out of his arm and threw it to the ground at the figure's feet. The figure picked it up, shook the blood off and reattached it to the rest of the blades.

The sound of sirens started. Master Revolver scowled and stomped out of the building with his ill-gotten gains, while the three heroes bolted back towards the tip.

“Who ARE you?!” Chuckles turned to their new friend the moment they were well-hidden amongst the rubbish.

“Promise not to tell Maddy?” The figure asked.

“WEBSTER!” Chuckles cried. The figure unzipped the suit and pulled it away from his face to reveal Webster, who grinned.

“I thought you guys were still in Brisvegas?” Daniel asked, pulling off his Sir Lionheart armour.

“Maddy got a job here in Family Law, so we're in the process of moving. I saw you guys were down to one, so I thought I, Sir Hedgehog, could help.” Webster pointed to the small dark grey hedgehog figure on his chest.

“Maddy is going to eat you alive.” Charlie pointed out.

“Not really, I do night feeds with Tate.” Webster shrugged.

“Because that will totally save you.” Daniel rolled his eyes.

Charlie wrapped the Lions Claw Blade up in a clean length of cloth when he had a thought.

“Say Webster, you don't know how to use a gun do you?” He asked.

“Never touched one in my life. Why?” Webster replied, trying to peel off his suit.

Charlie told them about how he got the Lions Claw Blade back. Daniel frowned.

“There's someone else out there maybe?” He pondered. “Or maybe they're just screwing with us?”

“Who knows.” Charlie put the sword away.

—

“So how loud did Maddy yell?” Belle asked as she sat with Charlie in the strong new branches of the tree.

“I doubt he'll be able to have any more children.” Charlie laughed.

“Ah well. Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission huh?” Belle grinned.

“BELLE! WHAT'S THIS I HEAR ABOUT A WHOLE TUB OF ICE CREAM BEFORE DINNER?!” The voice of Peter Masters roared throughout the street.

“How's that working for you?” Charlie roared with laughter, earning him a nice shove out of the tree.

“OWCH!”

Chapter

38

“It's been a busy fortnight.” Peter lounged back in his chair.

“A long, busy fortnight.” Thomas agreed. “At least Belle is talking to Charlie again.”

“I'm just glad he survived being shoved out of the tree.” Peter sipped his beer.

The pair were sitting on the bank of Pleasant Creek, two fishing poles dangling lifelessly in the water. The bait was probably long gone by now, but neither man had any inclination to check the end of his line.

“They're figuring it out. Soon it'll be as if they never left.” Thomas smiled, taking a swig of his beer. “Hopefully appreciating each other-,”

“And us.” Peter added.

“-more.” Thomas finished as they toasted their sentence.

The sun's heat began to wane as it floated softly down into its western bed.

“Where ARE the kidlets today anyway?” Thomas stretched out.

“Lara has taken Madeleine and Ozzie to see her parents, Belle is hanging out with Charlie and they're meeting up with the Knights later tonight to go to the movies. Did you hear about Webster joining them?” Peter gave his fishing rod a token nudge.

“Maddy had a fit. Betty had to help calm her down.” Thomas laughed. “Betty can't wait for the twins to come home from camp, she misses them.”

“It's hard being a parent sometimes.” Peter sighed.

“I hear you.”

—

“This is where we made our first stand so many years ago. Can you believe it?” Sir Dark was still walking with a slight limp, but he was much better now. The Knights of the Last Order had been training at the tip, until they heard council workers coming in to inspect the place. So they'd run off and found themselves at the abandoned private school where Masked Revolver had met his fate.

“With this still taking up valuable land I don't understand why Demon wanted the memorial destroyed.” Lady Courage walked through the ruined classrooms.

“Because the memorial was in a great location.” Sir Hyper said bitterly, his arm still bandaged. “Did you hear that Marion only got three weeks community service for destroying it?!”

“He's not even pretending to be on the right side of the law any more!” Sir Hedgehog cried angrily. “And the people of this city just let him get away with it!”

“This place is a crime haven. There are so many businesses that come here to do their dirty work and places for them to do it that it's not funny any more. Belle told me.” Lady Silent croaked.

“Unbelievable. So the DVM aren't the only threat in town.” Sir Lionheart groaned.

They heard laughter outside, and not of the fun and joyous variety.

“That sounds like Ruby.” Lady Luck listened.

“It IS Ruby.” Lady Courage glowered. She HATED her brother with a passion!

“I desperately want to see who he's tormenting, but last time we tried to attack him as a group it ended poorly.” Sir Lionheart groaned. “I hate this situation. Why Belle couldn't have disposed of the Ruby Suit properly-,”

“Don't you DARE blame Belle for this!” Lady Luck fumed. “For all they knew the Suit was busted after what it did to her!”

“And just leaving it in the tip was a good idea?!” Sir Lionheart growled.

“I hear Knights!” The voice of Ruby floated through the school.

The Knights froze. Sir Hedgehog reached out and pushed the face of his grey watch in and prayed that Chuckles and Giggles would see it.

—

“Cheeky little brats!” Belle cried as her siblings laughed with glee. The front of her shirt was soaked with water from the bathtub where Oscar and Madeleine were having their bath.

Belle grinned as she splashed the two back.

“That floor had better be dry when I get in there!” Lara yelled from downstairs.

“Uhhh...” Belle and Ozzie looked around. A thin layer of water covered the entire surface of the tiled floor.

“Figures.” Lara appeared at the door. She laughed at Belle's shirt. “They use you to try and mop up the floor did they?”

Belle grinned.

“You go and get changed, I'll handle these two.” Lara grabbed Madeleine and hauled her out of the bath. Belle headed back to her bedroom and was about to get changed when she noticed a grey light coming from her desk.

“Sir Hedgehog is in trouble.” She looked at the red watch. The arrow was pointing in the direction of the old abandoned school.

She sighed and looked out of her window. Charlie was waving madly at her.

“I was driving past and I saw it. Ruby Daryl has got them!” He squeaked.

“I shouldn't have left the Ruby Suit at the tip. This is all my fault.” Belle sighed.

“You guys didn't know that the thing still worked! We were just grateful to get it off you and away from here!” Charlie swallowed hard. “We were terrified you weren't going to survive and that everything Joe had done had been in vain.”

Belle looked back at the watch. Part of her wanted to turn away, say that she couldn't do that sort of thing any more, that her fight was higher up.

But she knew that if she didn't have the support from down the bottom, that she'd never get up the ladder. The people of Pleasantville needed the courage to want to change, and the only way that was going to happen was if their heroes, Chuckles, Giggles and the Knights of the Last Order stayed true to their cause.

Plus smacking the pants off Daryl sounded like fun.

“Let's get going then.” Giggles grabbed the watch and the rest of her gear and followed Chuckles to the old school.

—

Lady Luck ducked her head as another Ruby Blast shattered the wall above her. She tightened the bandage around Lady Courage's bleeding arm.

“I can't do any more.” She looked sadly at her friend, who was badly bruised and battered.

“It's okay Lady Luck. You've done your best.” Lady Courage staggered to her feet as Sir Hyper went flying past them.

“He got my arm again! I can't feel it!” The young man cried. Lady Luck ran to try and help her friend, but copped a Ruby Shard to the leg, immobilising her.

“You lot are making this too easy.” Ruby sneered. He floated above the wounded Knights of the Last Order, all of them looking sad and sorry for themselves.

Sir Lionheart couldn't move his legs due to the Ruby Shards, Sir Dark's ankle was flaring up again, Lady Luck was immobilised, Lady Courage's arm was broken again, Sir Hedgehog had been knocked out along with Sir Hyper and Lady Silent was nursing some bruised ribs.

“What do you guys honestly think you're doing?” Ruby laughed. “You honestly thought you stood a chance against 200 years of history? You can't change this city, no one can change this city. If people don't like it, they're welcome to leave.”

“If they can.” Spat Sir Dark.

“Not our fault if people dig themselves into holes they can't get out of.” Ruby shrugged.
“Anyway, you lot are pitiful. I bet you reckon you're all heroes too.”

“We tried.” Sir Lionheart gasped for air.

“Maybe we might make a memorial for you. Something to remind people never to challenge the status-quo again.” Ruby lifted up his hand and the Ruby Power began to gather in his hand. The conscious Knights reached out for each other, prepared to make a last stand against the might of the Ruby Blast.

“Be brave Knights.” Sir Lionheart glared into the eyes of Ruby Daryl.

“Let this be a lesson to all of Pleasantville.” Ruby hissed as he lifted his arm to throw the Ruby Blast.

A gunshot sounded and Ruby screamed. The Ruby Blast oozed out of his hand and sank to the ground harmlessly, where it disappeared leaving a small hollow in the ground. The mounted block on his shoulder had ruptured where the bullet had hit it.

“Sorry we're late guys.” Chuckles stepped out from the shadows, grinning. “You're screwed now Ruby.”

“Says who?! Who shot me?!” Ruby screamed in fury.

“That would have been me.”

Behind and above Ruby floated none other than the original Giggles.

And in her hand was the Lucky Seven Gun.

Chapter

39

The scene was set. Well, almost.

Ruby and Giggles were locked in a stare-down, Giggles pointing the Lucky Seven Gun at the other shoulder of Ruby, who was now having difficulty staying upright. You see, the shoulder boxes on the Ruby Suit are a special conductor fuse in which the information gathered from the band on the users temples was translated into Ruby Power and then formed into Ruby Weapons. Because the box was knocked out, not only was Ruby unable to form Ruby Weapons with his right hand, but the booster under his right foot was out too, meaning the only thing keeping him afloat was his left leg.

It would have been the most amazing setting for the beginning of an epic battle, had Giggles Backpack not stayed true to form. It cut out again, leaving Giggles on her backside.

“Class.” Chuckles raised his eyebrow as Giggles got up and dusted herself off.

“I try.” Giggles replied before straightening up and pointing the Lucky Seven Gun at Ruby again. “Give up Ruby. You can't beat me.”

“Like heck I will!” Ruby growled, forming a Ruby Shard in his left hand and throwing it at Giggles.

The Ruby Shard merely shattered ineffectively against Giggles chest. Ruby was stunned. So was Giggles.

“What in the -?” Giggles felt her chest. Nothing. Not even a scratch.

“Well...that certainly helps us.” Sir Lionheart smirked at Ruby. “Get him Giggles!”

“No problem.” Giggles aimed the Lucky Seven at Ruby again, who flew off as fast as he could. Giggles reached around and gave her Backpack a quick shake before taking off after him.

She had missed flying. Soaring towards the clouds, the memory of her grand-father lifting her up and pulling her up towards the sky overcame her.

“I'll get him Pa. I won't ever give up again.” She vowed, firing a warning shot at Ruby, who growled and rolled out of the way.

Giggles shot up past him, and quickly brought her ascent to a halt. She dived after him as he flew haphazardly between buildings, the loss of flight power from his right leg hindering him. Giggles fired another shot, but this time Ruby used a Ruby Shield to block the attack.

“Darn!” Giggles groaned.

The pair were ducking and diving through the streets, scaring a fair few citizens along the way, until Giggles Backpack gave a jolt.

“Uh...oh...” She tried to steady herself, but the Backpack had other ideas. She quickly grabbed the nearest ledge and hauled herself up onto a balcony.

“Stupid thing!” Giggles groaned as she slowly made her way back down to the ground.

“GIGGLES!” She heard footsteps behind her. Chuckles was running towards her, that annoying look in his eyes that told her that she wasn't going to like what she heard. “I bet he's headed for the Council Building! If we head there now we can cut him off!”

“Chuckles, he's probably going to get there well before we do seeing as we're on foot, not to mention the CHUCKLES GET BACK HERE!” Giggles cried as Chuckles grabbed the back of a bus that was flying past. Using the last of the Backpacks power, she shot after the bus and jumped on beside him.

“You DOLT.” She scowled, holding on to the bus with one hand while flicking the Backpack into charge mode with the other.

The bus rolled on for a good twenty minutes. Finally, Chuckles let out a yell.

“There he is! C'mon Giggles!” He grabbed his best friend and jumped off the bus.

“YIKES!” Giggles screamed as she was yanked off the speeding vehicle. “And just what do you suppose we do to stop him? He's still got Ruby Shields that make the Lucky Seven useless.”

“Get me up there and let me try!” Chuckles grinned. Giggles facepalmed, but she grabbed him and lifted him up so they were right in front of Ruby.

“How in the-?” Ruby stopped. Chuckles leapt from Giggles to Ruby, sending Giggles spiralling in the process.

“Get off me!” Ruby growled, trying to force Chuckles off. Chuckles tried to hit the remaining shoulder box with one of the Arm Scythes, but was repelled by another Ruby Shield.

The pair struggled in mid-air, sometimes plummeting dangerously but never managing to hit anything thankfully.

Giggles righted herself, annoyed. “Of all the stupid...CHUCKLES!”

She flew towards the struggling pair, Chuckles still trying to knock out the shoulder box while Ruby was trying to throw Chuckles to his doom.

Without thinking, Giggles brought her hand down on the shoulder box protected by the Ruby Shield. It shattered, leaving it free for a hit from the Lions Claw Blade which Chuckles was now waving around.

The box gave one last shot of light before it gave out, destroyed.

And, as anyone with any common sense would have predicted, both men began to fall.

“Probably should have thought of that.” Giggles shrugged, before grabbing both men and tossing Ruby onto the roof of a nearby building.

“Well, that was harder than it needed to be.” Giggles sighed as they flew back to the tip, heading over the abandoned school to make sure the Knights were okay.

“Hee hee, I've got the Improbability Clause back on my side!” Chuckles couldn't help but cheer with glee.

“Oh drop it will you? Uh...ARGH!!” Giggles cried as the Backpack cut out again and the pair landed on a pile of dead grass clippings.

—

“He's gone! Yay for Chuckles and Giggles!” Sam and Tammy danced for joy as the group sat around the Masters living room.

“That's one less worry on our minds! Good work guys!” Daniel thumped Belle and Charlie on their backs, making them wince.

“Wish we'd thought about going for the shoulders, it never occurred to us to ask your Dad.” TJ grinned sheepishly, his arms around Petunia.

“So some good came of you getting zapped with the Ruby Suit after all!” Peter rubbed a towel over his daughters dripping hair. “I'd say being flooded with Ruby Power has made you immune to it!”

“How cool is that?!” Petunia laughed.

“I have to ask though, when did you get the Lucky Seven back?” Sunny held Melody as Patrick rubbed her shoulders.

“I've been trying to tell everyone how I did it for the past week!” Belle looked annoyed. “I kept getting interrupted!”

“Well, no one is going to interrupt you now Beauty. Spill!” Peter grinned.

“Well, it was after I had that lovely chat with Sunnys Dad...”

—

Belle drove back towards the suburbs, fuming. How could he believe those things?! How could he believe it was RIGHT?! It angered her to the point where she was half tempted to whip out the helmet that was sitting on the back seat and kick his backside from here to Chitney!

She stopped at a set of lights and sighed. No use letting him get to her. No use getting riled up. Belle would win this war eventually, let him win a battle or two first.

Her eyes floated down to the fuel gauge, which was nearing empty. She sighed again and turned off to head towards the petrol station.

She quickly glanced in the rear view mirror again and tensed up. That helmet was still there where she'd stuck it because having it in her wardrobe was becoming unnerving. It was like having Giggles in the back seat saying "We could finish him, let's go already!"

No. Those days were over. The fight was now to be fought higher up. That was where she was needed. At the next set of red lights she grabbed a blanket from under the passenger-side seat and threw it over the helmet. No more.

She pulled into the service station and noticed Master Revolver and a few of his men fuelling up their truck. She sighed. What a rubbish day!

Master Revolver didn't seem to notice her however. He was too preoccupied with getting his bladder emptied while the cronies filled up the truck.

Belle parked the Elantra as far away she could from the Death Valley Mobsters, putting the truck between her and them. She was a little scared, the petrol station was in one of the quieter areas of town, plus a large bush hid it from the road and if the Mobsters decided they liked the sight of her, she was finished.

She swiped her debit card on the bowser and began to fill up, not wanting to have to go past the truck and into the station. She kept her eye on the truck as she filled up the Elantra.

One of the idiots had left the door open and a gun sitting on the front seat. Hadn't they heard of gun safety?! Belle shook the nozzle from the bowser off before putting it back, her car filled. Seriously, the knobs were all hanging out on the other side of the truck, leaving the cab completely exposed!

She looked again as she put the nozzle back in the bowser. The gun looked like it was a rather large Colt. 45. Huh.

Belle was about to get back into the car when she slapped herself. A large Colt .45?! THAT WAS NONE OTHER THAN **HER** LUCKY SEVEN GUN! She had to get it back!

She quickly glanced around. The only sounds were the disgusting ones coming from Master Revolver in the toilets.

She quickly grabbed the helmet in the back of the car. She then drove the Elantra out of the station and parked it a little way away behind another building. She headed back to the petrol station, where Master Revolver was finishing up in the toilet.

Sucking in her breath and putting her helmet on, she quickly scooted across the to the truck, grabbed her gun, shot a few rounds at Master Revolver as he emerged from the toilets, bolted back to the car, pulled off the helmet and drove off as quickly as she could, laughing.

—

"You're kidding, right?" Charlie's jaw dropped.

"Nope." Belle grinned.

“Was firing at Revolver REALLY necessary?” Lara frowned.

“Yup.” Belle grinned.

“So YOU'RE the one who fired the shots that helped Charlie get the Lions Claw back!” Thomas said.

“Yup again.” Belle smirked.

Charlie could feel his eye beginning to twitch.

Chapter

40

Belle was seething. An innocent young man was now going to go to gaol for crimes committed by Ruby, thanks to Mr. Jones. Plus due to her having a little outburst in the court room, she was now suspended for a month.

“I heard what happened.” Peter walked with her out of the courthouse. “Don't worry about it too much, I've had more suspensions than I can count. It just means you get stuck filing for a month, no big deal.”

“But how can I protect people if I'm suspended?!” Belle kicked a nearby rock, sending it flying to a pond and scaring the ducks.

“You'll have to leave it to Giggles to do.” Peter hugged his daughter.

“It's not fair. I wish -,” Belle started, when she saw the look her father was giving her.

“If wishes were leaves, the trees would fall down.” Peter reminded her gently. “Anyway, it's the Leos versus the Far Coast Canaries tonight, won't that be fun?”

“We're more than likely going to get flogged Dad.” Belle deadpanned as they got into the car.

“Spoilsport.” Peter laughed as they drove home.

Alas, she was right. The Leos lost 10.14. 74 to 12.3.75. Bad kicking is bad football!

—

“Hey Belle – are you serious?!” Charlie poked his head into Belle's window to find her studying again. “What could you POSSIBLY have to study for NOW?!”

“I'm RESEARCHING doofus. Did you know the last public demonstration in Pleasantville was ninety-three years ago?” Belle informed her best friend as he leaned on the window sill.

“And?” Charlie prompted her.

“There were only fifty people who demonstrated their frustration with the Council at that time. They were wiped out by the March Hill Crusaders.” Belle sipped her tea.

“Who?”

“The March Hill Crusaders used to be the ruling power in Pleasantville before the Mobsters of Misneach overthrew them fifty years ago. It's a very interesting read actually, it seems that Marion and Revolver aren't the first time the DVG and the Mob have worked together.” Belle continued to read. “The Mob had huge opposition from the Silent Lake Gang, who spent thirteen years struggling for survival against the DVG before eventually the DVG won out. So really the two-player system has only been around for forty-seven years.” She looked at Charlie, who was drooling slightly. “Did ANY of that register?!”

“I know that you were talking, does that count?” Charlie asked.

Overall I think the Leos got off pretty lightly comparatively.

—

“If I have to hear ONE more lecture on the political history of Pleasantville then I am going to flip.” Charlie sat down in the kitchen at Bills restaurant.

“Hear hear.” Sam groaned, dipping his chips into the aioli.

“I think she's trying to get a protest going.” Sunny told them, trying to feed Melody while keeping herself clean (and failing at both).

“I don't know why, the last protest in Pleasantville didn't end so well for the protesters according to her.” Daniel tried to steal some of Sams aioli for his calamari and was swiftly rebuffed.

“I think that she thinks we can get better numbers this time. Plus there's the fact that the town vigilantes are on her side.” Tammy successfully stole some of the aioli for her chips.

“If she does then the Knights of the Last Order are 100% behind her. By the way, where IS she?” TJ also helped himself to Sams aioli. Sam scowled and gave up.

“I think she nicked off to Brisvegas for the day.” Charlie checked his watch. “She should be back...”

Suddenly there was a loud tapping on the kitchen window. Outside, Giggles was floating above the ground, waving at them.

“...Now?” Charlie looked surprised. The group headed outside where they were each presented with a large pile of flyers.

“You went to Brisvegas dressed as Giggles?” Petunia looked incredulously at Giggles, who nodded.

“I couldn't get these printed here, you don't know who's on the side of the DVM. Plus if Belle came back with these, my family would be in trouble. It was best that I just took the back of the bus there and back and got the printing done away from Pleasantville. By the way I wouldn't be seen with those without a uniform on.” Giggles pointed out, making everyone recoil.

“Pleasantville for the Innocent?” Sunny picked up one of the flyers from her pile. “People Power Protects our Pleasantville?”

“Work Hard for a Pleasant Pleasantville?” TJ raised an eyebrow at Giggles, who shrugged.

“Hey, I had to come up with these all by myself, YOU guys weren't helping!” She defended herself.

“I love this picture of Sir Hyper. Makes me look tough!” Sam grinned at another one of the posters.

“You made me look like a wuss!” Daniel cried as a picture of Sir Lionheart holding a puppy appeared on a poster.

“I'm TRYING to make us look good and drum up support. Now, disguises on and let's get handing these out!” Giggles flew off with her pile of flyers, eager to start work against the corruption of Pleasantville.

“Was my niece just out here?” Bill walked out with a tea-towel over his shoulder.

“Look at what she's been up to!” Sunny waved a flyer in Bills face.

He sighed.

“I admire her tenacity, but one rally isn't going to save Pleasantville.” He warned.

“We have to do something.” Petunia piped up.

“I agree! Let's go guys!” Daniel raced to grab his pack which held his Sir Lionheart armour.

The revolution had begun!

—

“I don't want any more junk mail!”

“You're breaking the law yourselves! Turn yourselves in and I'll think about it!”

“Go away, I have things to do!”

“Well, this is working out fine.” Lady Courage frowned, most of her fliers still in her hands.
“No one wants a bar of us!”

“We have to keep trying, it IS for our city after all.” Sir Dark pointed out.

“Plus if we don't Giggles will eat us alive.” Sir Hyper pointed to the sky as Giggles flew overhead, showering them with flyers.

“Stand up for a better Pleasantville!!” She yelled loudly.

“She's starting to get annoying.” Sir Dark admitted as the others groaned.

A tall blonde figure wearing a fur cape and a royal blue dress with a sword hanging from her waist walked over. “Please tell me you guys have nothing to do with this!” Mobster Marion shoved a flyer in their faces.

“Giggles rail-roaded us into it.” Sir Hyper admitted.

Mobster Marion snorted. “Should have told her to quit before she embarrassed herself, there's no way she's going to change anything – especially not with this trash.”

“By the way is that a new dress?” Lady Luck asked.

“Yes it is.” Mobster Marion did a quick twirl. “What do you think?”

“It'd probably look better on the person you stole it off.” Sir Dark snorted.

Mobster Marion scowled at him and stormed off. Giggles floated overhead, watching Mobster Marion like a hawk.

“What was that all about?” She asked the Knights.

“Marion thinks your campaign is a great idea, and she really hopes you can make a difference.” Sir Dark deadpanned. Giggles glared at him.

“You have to admit Giggles, we're fighting a losing battle.” Lady Courage pointed out.

“We can't just give up!” Giggles cried. “I've already tried that and it didn't exactly work!”

“Well, what can we do if no one wants to listen to us?!” Sir Hyper protested. “Face it Giggles, if no one wants to change, then no one can make them!”

“We just have to make them see reason is all.” Giggles tried to calm her friends down.

Just then, Lady Silent, Sir Hedgehog, Sir Lionheart and Chuckles ran over.

“You guys not having any luck either?” Sir Lionheart sighed.

“Nope. I'm ready to go home!” Sir Hyper began to pout.

“But we can't give up now!” Sir Hedgehog cried.

“Not you too.” Sir Dark rolled his eyes.

“All we need is to demonstrate to the people how bad the situation really is. That would really help our cause.” Chuckles mused.

“Yeah, like Marion is REALLY going to commit a crime right in front of us just so we can use it for our political gain.” Giggles groaned.

Wouldn't you know it, at just that moment a young boy with a awesome-looking model helicopter ran past Mobster Marion, who looked greedily at the helicopter. In one swift movement, she grabbed the toy and shoved the poor boy into the path of an oncoming road train!

“Oh NO!” Cried Lady Luck as Giggles flew as fast as she could towards the now crying child. With barely a second to spare she whisked the young boy out of harms way and deposited him on the footpath, unharmed.

Chuckles scowled at Mobster Marion and snatched the helicopter back. “Not yours.” He snapped at her. He then walked over to Giggles and the child and handed the toy back.

“You'll be okay. You head straight home you hear me?” Chuckles warned the child.

“Yessir. Thank you!” The boy looked up gratefully at his rescuers before running away home.

A small crowd of people had seen the event, and were now looking curiously at Giggles.

“This is what is happening to the innocent people of our city. This is NOT what Simon Masters and Louis Begly had in mind when they built the Pleasant Dam!” Giggles flew up into the air, yelling loudly. “They didn't envisage their fellow man beaten to the ground, they didn't see innocent people killed in the name of profit! And we, the people, have allowed this to happen! No more I say!”

A small murmur of agreement went through the crowd like a wave. More people were coming to listen to Giggles!

“ARE WE GOING TO STAND FOR THIS?!” Giggles roared. “ARE WE GOING TO LET THEM DO THIS TO US? NO, I SAY, NO! WE'RE NOT GOING TO SUFFER THIS DRECK ANY MORE!”

People were starting to cheer, and the crowd was getting bigger and bigger.

“PEOPLE OF PLEASANTVILLE ARISE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR INNOCENCE!” Giggles began to lead the masses to the Council building.

“I'm certain she's ripped that from somewhere.” Sir Hedgehog raised an eyebrow.

“Whatever, it's gotten the people behind us! Let's go!” Sir Lionheart cheered, and they all followed the crowd to the Council building.

Chapter

41

The loud roar of the crowd carried all the way to the Council building, where Mr. Jones was waiting.

“It sounds like Giggles has mobilized the entire city. This doesn't look good at all.” Master Revolver looked out of the window.

“It doesn't help that SOMEONE had to commit a crime right in front of everyone and give the little wretch ammo.” Daryl scowled at Mobster Marion, who glared back.

“Blaming isn't going to solve anything.” Mr. Jones walked between the pair towards his desk. He opened the top drawer and pulled out his Demon mask. “I originally donned this mask to get rid of those interfering mongrels, who invaded my home and interfered in my personal affairs with my daughter Sunny. Now could be the time to not only remove the vigilante problem, but destroy any future hope of a resistance.”

He walked back to the window, clutching the mask in both hands as he watched the advancing crowd.

“Pleasantville has thrived on the darkness for two centuries. It has become a prosperous city dealing in dirty little secrets. It is where I was born, it is my home, and I won't see it brought down by some upstarts who think they know better!” He growled.

“Plus there's the fact that crime pays much more than this so called 'honest work' they keep sprouting.”

“So what's the plan?” Master Revolver asked.

“Daryl, has the Ruby Suit been repaired yet?” Mr. Jones looked at his son.

“I'll go and check.” Daryl quickly scooted off. Mr. Jones beckoned to the others to join him.

“Call the rest of the DVM.” He said “It's time to face the music.”

—

The crowd were roaring behind the Knights of the Last Order, who stood with Chuckles beneath Giggles, who was floating proudly, arms folded in triumph.

“Get your buns out here Demon, it's time to face the music!” She cried. “We aren't scared of your mob any more, we out-number you a hundred to one!”

The thunderous roar from the crowd signalled their approval of their leader and the chants for Demon Jones and his crew to show their faces were deafening.

“She's really doing it.” Sir Dark looked around disbelievingly.

“She's really doing it.” Sir Hedgehog echoed, thinking of his wife, daughter and long-lost best friend.

“It's all going to end. Pleasantville is finally going to be free.” Lady Luck whispered.

Lady Courage looked up at Giggles. There were no more pangs of jealousy now, only a fierce pride and loyalty to her friend.

“Thank you.” She said quietly.

Finally, Demon Jones stepped out of the Council building, flanked by Master Revolver, Mobster Marion and Ruby Daryl. On the roof of the building stood the entirety of the Death Valley Mobsters, all armed and ready to attack.

“We still out-number you even with the DVM! The age of darkness is OVER Jones, and the sooner you realise that the better off you'll be!” Giggles yelled.

“Oh? You think sheer numbers will win?” Demon smirked.

“I KNOW they'll win. We've finally had enough.” Giggles pointed out.

“Enough you say? Enough of prosperity and an easy life?” Demon looked down his nose at Giggles. “I thought you were intelligent Giggles.”

“Easy for whom?” Giggles snapped.

“Easy for everyone!” Demon laughed. “Less people get hurt when the status quo is maintained.”

“Unlike you, we're not afraid of a little pricked finger in the name of progress.” Chuckles stood underneath the floating Giggles. “The time for a fair go is now!”

“Very well. Have it your way. We gave you a chance to back down but you foolishly gave it up.” Demon shrugged.

“YOU'RE the fool Demon, and the time of Pleasantvilles freedom is nigh! Who's with...me?” Giggles spun around, ready to whip the crowd into a frenzy.

The only ones behind her were Chuckles and the Knights of the Last Order. Everyone else had vanished.

“They took one look at the guns and remembered who's in charge and why. They know their lives are better served by minding their own business instead of challenging the system that has worked for centuries.” Master Revolver told them as Giggles slowly dropped to the ground. “It's over Knights, your crusade is over, you've lost. Give up now and we'll go easy on you.”

Giggles felt all the blood drain from her face. They'd all run away on her. She'd failed and now because of her rashness, something she'd always held against Chuckles, because of her the Knights of the Last Order, her friends, they were all going to die.

She felt her fingers brush the Lucky Seven Gun. Even if she wasn't opposed to killing, they still wouldn't survive against the hundred or so Mobsters who had their guns aimed at the

heroes. She felt herself sink to the ground next to her best friend, to whom she owed a huge apology if they somehow survived this.

“We're dead. We're completely dead.” She gulped.

“At least we tried, right?” Sir Hedgehog tried to remain positive, but his voice was laced with fear.

“We'll certainly go down in history, but not for the reasons we wanted to.” Lady Courage thought of her daughter. Of how Melody could very well grow up without a mother and without hope.

“We're going to fight our way out of this.” Chuckles growled, pulling out the Lions Claw Blade.

“Charlie are you INSANE?” Giggles hissed so the others couldn't hear. “They're all armed to the teeth and out-number us twenty to one!”

“We'll just distract them. Up you go!” Chuckles grabbed Giggles before she had a chance to protest, throwing her into the air.

She squeaked angrily, the Backpack making her soar high into the air. She sighed and pulled out the Lucky Seven Gun.

“Here's to the Improbability Clause.” She muttered, before firing blindly.

“GET HER!” Demon screamed. The hundred Mobsters began firing. Giggles braced herself for the rain of bullets, but only a few scratched her.

It was then she realised that she was right in front of the large setting sun. They were missing because they couldn't see her.

She looked to the ground. The others had scattered, and Demon was furiously yelling at the Death Valley Mobsters to follow them.

Giggles continued to fly into the sun. The others were still being chased, but now each of them stood a chance at hiding and surviving.

She saw Chuckles get backed into a corner by twenty eager Mobsters, who wanted nothing more than to be the one to hand his head to Demon.

She quickly swooped down and grabbed her best friend. Alas for the faulty Backpack! It got them around the block before flinging them both to the ground.

“Darn it, darn it, darn it!” Giggles scrambled to her feet. She felt Chuckles grab her elbow and help drag her up and both of them ran as they heard footsteps hurrying behind them.

They bolted down the street, ducking behind cars, street signs, open doors, ANYTHING to protect them from the sprays of bullets that often rang out as they desperately tried to get away.

Chuckles could feel his lungs burning, and every footstep and every gunshot sounded louder and closer than the last. Giggles fired a shot back every so often to disperse the crowd, but even those were getting fewer and less effective as she ran out of ammo and the Mobsters grew wise to the fact she would never kill any of them.

There were too many of them. Where ever the pair ran there were more Mobsters, hunting them down, wearing them down. Chuckles was gasping for air and Giggles was close to tears. Every turn seemed to bring them closer to the end. Fear and exhaustion gripped at Chuckles heart, and he didn't know how much more he had.

Suddenly a miracle happened. A small beep issued from the Backpack – it was charged! With one last great effort, Giggles heaved Chuckles up into the sky with her, swerving through the rain of bullets to an abandoned old building. The pair ran inside.

“They went in there!”

“FIND THEM!”

“We have to hide!” Giggles squeaked. The pair ran down the corridor, terrified the squeaking boards would give them away. They could hear the Mobsters coming up the stairs behind them – what would they do?!

Chuckles quickly pulled Giggles into one of the rooms and as quietly as he could closed the door. They heard a loud crash as one of the doors down the corridor was kicked in. Then another. And another. Closer and closer.

“We can't stay in the open like this!” Chuckles hissed.

Giggles looked around. The room was an old bedroom of sorts, the curtains moth-eaten and falling apart, the carpet worn and torn, and the mattress on the bed sagged with mould.

“It's disgusting, but we have no choice.” Giggles lifted up the mattress as much as she could. “Cut a hole in the bottom and we'll hide inside, hopefully they won't think to turn it over.”

Chuckles turned green, but he had no other alternative. Cutting just underneath the seam of the mattress, he made a hole barely enough for them to squeeze in. Giggles as the smaller went in first, barely able to fit between the rusted old springs. Chuckles squeezed in after her with a lot more difficulty.

Chuckles felt for Giggles hand, and squeezed it tightly as the door was kicked open loudly.

They could hear several people tearing the room apart. The sound of footsteps so close to them made their hearts pound so loud they were sure the Mobsters would hear them easily, even if they were still kicking in doors and ripping up furniture all over the place.

Giggles wanted to cry. She was terrified. If they were found there was no way they'd survive.

Suddenly the pair could feel themselves being lifted upwards then falling back down again with a crash as one of the Mobsters upended the bed to check under it. Chuckles didn't know

what hurt more, the landing that was barely cushioned by the rancid old mattress or the heavy bed landing on them.

“Damn, not here either!” They heard the footsteps move away, and another door crash in, much further down the hall this time. Giggles felt herself breathe just a little easier, but not much.

After what seemed like hours, finally silence reigned. It took the pair a while to trust the silence though, and eventually it was Chuckles who whispered.

“I think they're gone.”

“How can you be sure?” Giggles whispered back. “They could have left someone here.

“I doubt it, they're not that smart.” Chuckles tried to joke.

“Okay then, but try to be quiet!” Giggles agreed with a hiss.

The pair slowly extracted themselves from the disgusting old mattress. Sticking their noses out of the room, they found out that Chuckles was right and they were safe.

“Let's get going while the goings good!” Chuckles whispered, even though he knew no one could hear them in the empty building.

“But how? It's too obvious if we fly off and we're easy to catch on foot.” Giggles protested.

Chuckles thought for a second.

“If we leave by foot and try and stick to the shadows until we get to the suburbs we should be okay. It's night time now, and it will be easier to hide.” He said.

Giggles nodded. Misery was starting to creep in alongside the fear and exhaustion, knowing that she'd sold her friends into a deadly trap and could have possibly killed them. Chuckles gripped her into a tight hug, before taking her by the shoulders and bending down until he was at eye-level with her (and given she's so short...).

“We're going to be okay, and so are the others. I think the Mobsters were more focused on getting us, not them.” He tried to reassure her.

She looked out of a nearby window. Darkness had engulfed the city of Pleasantville, which meant that they'd been in this musty old room for several hours. It didn't feel like it though.

“Let's go then.” She sighed. The pair headed back down the rotten old stairs, every creak and groan of the old building making them jump. They decided to sneak out one of the broken windows, both of them scared that the Mobsters were still guarding the front of place. Thankfully they ended up in a deserted back street, which led onto another deserted street. Keeping to the shadows and the back streets, they managed to get out of the city and into the suburbs, where Giggles held her best friend and lifted the pair of them up off the ground and back towards the tip. It was quiet up in the air, and both of them were tense, waiting for the sound of a gunshot to force them back to the ground again.

They were in luck, however, as it seemed to be late and most people were inside either sleeping or getting ready to sleep. Chuckles and Giggles wondered what their parents were doing – were they up worried or were they at the tip waiting?

The stars shone brightly, their white-blue light a stark contrast to the deep, dark blue-black sky. The Moon shone down on them in all her glory, and as they got closer to the tip they started to breathe easier and started to notice these little details. Not many people get to soar through the night air under the stars and the Moon with their best friend, it's a magical experience that more people should get the opportunity to have. Eventually though the pair touched down at the tip, hearts pounding in their mouths – was everyone okay?

The pair hurried through the tip, the last fear of losing their friends providing them enough adrenaline to get through the aching muscles, the breathlessness. Tears began to form in Giggles eyes – if any of them were gone, it was completely her fault.

“I think I heard them over here!” She heard the sound of Daniels voice and a small ray of hope opened in her heart. The pair bolted towards the sound, desperate, scared, exhausted.

They stopped. Everyone was there. Daniel, TJ, Petunia, Sunny, Sammy, Tammy, Webster. Peter, Lara, Bill, Thomas, Betty, Maddy, all the parents of the Noble Knights of the Last Order.

“Thank heavens you're both all right!” Betty rushed to her son and gripped him tightly.

Giggles pulled off her helmet and threw it to the ground. Tears streamed down her face as she ran into her fathers arms with a loud “Daddy!”

It had been a long, painful, horrible day.

Chapter

42

Charlie watched as Belle sat silently on the floor in front of her father as he brushed out her washed and dried hair. She had been in the shower for twenty minutes trying to get the smell and the feeling of the old rotten mattress off her. He didn't blame her, it had been disgusting hiding in there. Reduced to cowering in filth from the Death Valley Mobsters.

Some heroes they were.

“I could have gotten everyone killed.” Belle whispered. “I am such a fool.”

“It's okay Belle, no one is holding it against you. We were all thinking of what life would have been like if we'd succeeded. We were doing so well until everyone ran off!” Charlie banged his fist on table.

“We never stood a chance. The people we rallied up were either cowards or as guilty as those we opposed. How could we ever expect anything to change?” Belle let her head fall into her arms. “It's just like 93 years ago.”

“No, it isn't.” Peter said.

Lara walked over with some hot chocolate for the pair of them. Thomas was sat with his hand on his sons shoulder, and Betty was sitting by the fire with the twins.

“You survived.” Peter continued. “Ninety-three years ago there were no Knights of the Last Order or Chuckles and Giggles. The protesters back then didn't even try to run or defend themselves. They certainly hadn't been spending years previously defending the city.”

“What does it matter, we got completely humiliated out there.” Belle sighed. “OW, Dad! Gentle!”

Peter yanked the comb through his daughters stubborn hair. “That wasn't the battle. That was only the drawing of the battle lines. The REAL decider is if you guys continue on. If you guys give up now, then it will be just like all those years ago. But if you get back up and keep fighting, and show Demon and his Mobsters that you aren't beaten, then THAT will make all the difference.

“After the massacre, no one dared to fight again. Until you guys stepped up. Suddenly there are now nine people fighting for Pleasantville. Not to mention the influence you're having on your siblings and the people around you. Already you've recruited Webster, and you were able to save Sunny. You just have to keep going, slowly but surely you'll turn more and more people to your side until Pleasantville is changed forever.” Peter finished his little sermon by tying Belles clean hair into a ponytail.

“Show Pleasantville you won't be beaten. Show Pleasantville that the good guys won't give up on them.” He kissed his daughters forehead. “And get to bed. You've got a fair few scrapes and bruises to heal up, and given tomorrow is Saturday I don't want to see you out of bed until at least 10, got it?”

For the first time since Belle got back from Brisvegas with those forsaken flyers she smiled. “Yes Daddy. Good night!”

Charlie sighed, the weight in his chest feeling lighter. At least Belle was smiling again.

“C'mon hotshot, it's time you went to bed too.” Thomas helped him up. As he walked home with his family, he felt his father's arm around him.

“You heard what Pete said Charlie, and Pete's the smartest guy I know. These things take time, and it probably won't be in your lifetime that it will get fixed. I just hope you realise that and don't get too discouraged.” Thomas said as they walked in the front door.

“I won't. I'm in for the long haul. G'night everyone.” Charlie limped up the stairs, his two sisters looking up the stairs after him.

—

The next day was bucketing down with rain, which suited our heroes just fine – they didn't want to do anything either!

“Rainy days are always good in moderation.” Petunia yawned, sitting on a sofa in the back of Bills restaurant.

“Yeah, we've been due for a good one.” TJ agreed, his head resting in her lap. Both of them had black eyes from the previous days adventure.

“And now that we have a functional dam, there's no more fear of another drenching.” Sam joked. Even after his heroics that day, he was still very wary around water. He was sporting a plaster under his eye from where a bullet had grazed him.

“Anyway, Dad is SPEWING about yesterday. He called me this morning to see if I'd heard about it. He's arrested three reporters and two television producers over it, but he can't hold them because the government is now looking into things here.” Sunny grinned. “Our little protest got a fair amount of coverage around Ostraya.”

“So we might have made a difference after all.” Belle smiled, nursing a sore shoulder.

“We've certainly made people sit up and take notice. Dad will find a way to paper over the cracks, no question, but I dare say the heat will be on for a long time yet.” Sunny told them.

“Hopefully we can keep that heat on long enough for the next generation of Knights to take up the mantle.” Webster smiled at his daughter, who smiled back.

Tate, Melody and Madeliene were all sitting in the middle of the floor playing with blocks. Even though there was still a long way to go, everyone in the room felt a bit better about the future of the three little girls.

“The best thing is I don't think there'll be much in the way of crime going on for a while. We can finally have a break!” Daniel laughed.

“It'll be nice going into uni without people wondering why I'm all beat-up. I tell them I do roller-derby and it usually keeps them happy.” Tammy told them. After regaining her voice, Tammy decided she wanted to become a speech-therapist.

“Imagine, spending weekends fishing, camping, reading...Belle! Can't you keep your nose out of a book for five seconds?!” Charlie yelled as he saw his best friend was nose-deep in another textbook.

“What?! The massacre of 93 years ago was whitewashed, I wouldn't be surprised if this one got similar treatment.” Belle looked at them.

“Do you EVER stop?” Webster giggled as Sunny shook her head.

“Nerd.” She poked Belle's arm.

“But it's important to know! After the last demonstration is when the Death Valley Gang first appeared – they were originally a faction opposed to the corruption of Pleasantville!” Belle yelled. “They started off as a 'Robin Hood'-style gang specializing in robbery, which is probably how they became corrupt and started working with the Mobsters of Misneach and the Light Reach Clan to get rid of the March Hill Crusaders, the Silent Lake Gang and the Hidden Fear Crew – seriously?! Why does no one ever listen to me?!”

Just about everyone had fallen asleep listening to Belle lecture on about history! Poor Belle.