The Love Hack

by mariacomet

Summary

When a hacker threatens to expose compromising information on her son, the carefully constructed world of small-town mayor Regina Mills starts to crumble. Growing up in the foster care system has taught ex-hacker and ex-felon Emma Swan that she's better off alone. From they start, they challenge one another, soon finding that to follow their hearts, they have to face their fears.

Notes

Summary:
Regina and Henry Mills are in the middle of a nightmare, threatened by a hacker with compromising information. Emma Swan is an ex-hacker and ex-felon who just might be the unconventional hero they need.

Author’s Notes:
FYI: I am @mariacomet on Twitter should you want to say "hi".

1. This is an AU with no magic. As such I had to reimagine the histories of Regina and Emma. There are details I have changed to accommodate their new backstories but I also put forth a lot of effort to keep true to key details. For example: Regina’s home office is black and taupe. Yes, I know it is black and white on the show. But firstly, that’s her official mayor’s office and secondly, my version of Henry was able to convince her that not everything needed to be so foreboding and colorless all the time. He couldn’t talk her out of the black though because….she’s Regina.
2. I haven’t posted a fanfic story in years, so this is my attempt to refind a bit of myself. I know that as fans of the characters, we all have things we’d prefer to see and not to see. However, if I hamper myself with that, I won’t feel free to take you on the kind of journey I want to. I’m hoping it’s a journey with moments of magic along the way. My promise to you is that if you agree to go with me, I’ll get you to the other side safely. Our girls will be together and happy. I also promise to do my best to warn you when rough waters are coming up.

3. This is going to be a slow burn. There will be sex...later.

The one where Regina finds out

"In the whole of time, 107 billion people have existed. As a comparison, the earth is 4.5 billion years old. The universe itself has existed for 14 billion years. 107 billion people – each one unique and never to be repeated. The observable universe has more than 100 billion galaxies, so there is some truth in imagining each one of us as a galaxy unto ourselves. We are born understanding this: how big we are. We know that we are each a unique tapestry of personality, talent and possibility, created as if by magic. We understand that, in all of time and space, in the infinity of the world, from now until forever, every individual is a singular and colossal creation. Never to be repeated.

The voices come, so many from every direction. From those we love, from strangers, from all the messages in the maze of media that assails us. All of them saying the same thing: you are wrong, you are ugly, you are small. We hunch down under the weight of it, our backs aching, bent over low as we try to stay standing. Until someone reminds us that those voices are lies.” -- S White
Part 1 - The one where Regina finds out

Henry did not steal.

Regina tossed aside the book she’d been trying to read. She had told herself it would be good to get her mind off of things, putting things aside might yield clarity - if only she could make herself care
what Paul Kalanithi thought. She turned to the abandoned laptop sitting on the pillow next to her. She kept pulling it in her lap and checking for new emails, only to rediscover no new mail and highly organized folders testifying that she or her assistant Belle dealt with all town business before five p.m. It used to be so common for the populace of Storybrooke, Maine to contact her after hours with requests and complaints that she levied a twenty-five dollar fine on anyone calling for non-emergencies after six p.m. Her email, however, she considered twenty-four by seven and people knew it. Yet, the one time that it would offer her a desperately needed distraction, no one wanted the mayor.

Henry didn’t steal. It rolled in Regina’s mind again and again, a pounding drum heralding so many dark possibilities. Henry did NOT steal.

But he had.

He had, and when Regina questioned him about it three days ago - trying to stay calm, sure that there was a reasonable explanation - her thirteen-year-old son had just stared at the ground. He’d shrugged again and again when she’d asked what he needed the five hundred dollars for.

There had to be a good reason. A noble reason. She just had to make him tell her.

She looked at the clock. It was an hour until Henry was supposed to bring her his homework. She distracted herself from waiting by making a list of things she needed to do tomorrow.

Monday was always ‘deep cleaning’ day but tomorrow no nook or cranny would be safe from her. She’d pull out the oven from where it rested hiding heavens knew what. She’d do the same to the fridge that undoubtedly also conspired against her. What else in her home dared defy her, she wondered. She should give her home office the same no-holds-barred inspection. Move the desk. Push back the bookshelves. Her fingers practically twitched with the desire to start now.

The clock hands barely moved, mocking her.

She kept at the page, the pen never straying from the neat, precise lines she always used to write. Habits could be a lifeline, discipline a handrail.

Eventually, a soft knock came at her door. Henry was a ½ hour early. “Come in, Henry,” she called, expecting him to open the door and offer his homework without looking at her, just as he did last night and the one before. Since the initial confrontation three days ago, they barely exchanged more than a handful of words. Their typical ritual of her checking his homework became a twirling of tension and hopelessness. Something they did because they didn’t know what else to do.

Regina was the adult and his mother and she knew that she should find some way to forge forward. Yet for one of the few times in her life, she felt uncertain of what to do. Confront him again? Apologize? Ground him until he gave her answers? Hug him and hug him and tell him it was alright and that she would always love him?

Another knock came. “Mom?” He called, his voice unsteady and shaking. “M-mom?” A sob choked the word.

She was up instantly, heart pounding as she launched herself towards the door. “Henry - what…”

“Something happened,” he whispered, eyes filled with tears.

Regina waited. During the first conversation about the money, she pushed him, and it had been a mistake. She couldn’t do that again. “Sweetheart, what is it?”
Defeat burdened his eyes, his usually bright, optimistic eyes. “Mom, I know you’re mad about the money.”

Henry volunteered to pay her back more than once during that first failure of a discussion. Regina grew up with money which made her trivialize it, especially since a trust fund left to her by her father ensured they would never have to worry about it. Missing money could never make her blindly frantic, but his refusal to tell her why did. Something barged into her house without her knowing, pushing her son to do things he would never do. She didn’t know what it was or how it had gotten in. She didn’t know if it still remained.

She lowered herself so that they were eye level. “Henry, you are one of the most honest people I know. I know you must have felt you had to do what you did. I know I didn’t handle it very well. But I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

He hesitated and she forced herself to be still, so very still.

“Someone took pictures of me.” Her fingernails dug into her palm, the result of an impatient person trying her best to wait. “I don’t know how. I didn’t take them, I swear I didn’t. But he has them and he said that if I didn’t do what he wanted, he’d send them to everyone. He knows all my friends and their emails. He knows everyone on my Facebook account. He changed the status yesterday – to show me that he…” A tear ran down his cheek.

Half his body all but fell against hers. His face pressed into the shoulder of her satin shirt, clinging to her in a way he hadn’t for years. Her arms came around him automatically, half-robot. Henry's words gave shape to the invader of their quiet lives and Regina, shocked by the size of it, could only stare. Reacting to it no better than a deer would to the oncoming headlights of a car.

Henry hugged her harder, as if she could save him from anything and everything. Such a lofty place to put her and she prayed she was worthy. Regina fought to keep her growing horror from showing on her face as she cupped his cheeks and drew back, wiping at his tears.

“Henry, can you start from the beginning? I need to understand and then we can make a plan, okay?”

“Two weeks ago I got an email. From someone called Peter Pan. There was a picture of me in my room. I was….” He looked down, away from her. Her thirteen-year-old son, just starting to understand so many things, starting to be aware of so many things. “I wasn’t…wearing anything.” His face reddened with complete humiliation. “I swear I’ve never taken a picture like that. I didn’t do it, mom.”

“I believe you.” She promised.

“He…he has more pictures. And video…” Henry’s voice was smaller now. “Of…private stuff.” His eyes begged her to understand so he wouldn’t have to say it.

When she’d arrived in the town of Storybrooke eight years ago, she hid and tried to heal. Soon after, she found Henry and he found her. They gave one another peace. She guarded it vigilantly. She protected them both from her name, from her past, from who she used to be. They placed their trust in this little town, refugees from the bigger world seeking sanctuary. The bigger world now proclaimed its abuse of her son proudly, taunting her.

She gave her son’s shoulders a small shake. It scared him, but she couldn’t stop herself. “What else did it say, sweetheart?”
“If I didn’t send him $500.00, he’d send everything to everyone I knew. Post it on Facebook and the internet. Everyone would see. And he said nothing dies on the internet. Like if I apply to college they could see.”

Henry didn’t steal. That thought came back to her. Oh god, she’d failed him. She should have handled everything differently.

On the first night three days ago, when he shrugged once too often in response to her questions, it unleashed something in her. A monster buried and marked with a headstone. There were tricks she knew to make people do things. Ways to apply motivation and fear. Her mother had taught her a dozen ways, and she’d learned another dozen on her own.

She used sharp, insightful words. “You will not stand there and say nothing. I don’t care how lonely you feel or how much you struggle to fit in. Do we need to take you back to to visit your counselor? Is that what you need?” and “This is how cowards handle things, Henry.” Every word was deliberately cruel, sickening her even as she said them.

In her mind’s eye, she remembered how his jaw quivered. Like a witch casting an evil spell, she transformed his guilty expression into a haunted one. He turned and ran from her.

He ran. From her.

“But I sent him the money.” Henry’s voice yanked her from the swamp of guilt she festered in. “And he just sent another email. He wants me to send him more pictures. Lots. But...high definition. And with different poses.”

The moment the roller coaster stopped at the tallest point on the track, hovered, then fell forward with a rush of gravity felt like this. On the descent, she didn’t feel in control of her body and air pummeled against her stomach like fists. Yet the art of being a parent was to project knowing, project certainty of what to do. She tried. “Henry – I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.” She took in a deep breath, knowing how hard her next request was going to be for him. “I need you to show me exactly what he sent you.”

He immediately started to shake his head in denial. “I don’t want you to see.”

She didn’t want to see. It didn’t matter. She tried to be who he needed now.

She remembered how she used to transform herself in the past into that other Regina, back before Henry. He needed her to be calm and sure, loving too, so she shut everything she was feeling into a small box and focused on her goal. She straightened, shoulders back. Body language was the first way to fool others into seeing what you wanted them to.

“I know.” Her voice was soft, all of her love in those two words. She may not be the perfect mother but she tried to sound like it. She would be who he needed. “But you know that it’s the only way I can help, don’t you? And...sweetheart, we’re going to need to go the police.” He shook his head again. Holding back everything but being what he needed grew easier the longer she did it.

She took his hands and led him to sit on the edge of her bed, stroking his hair back from his face and trying to be as open as she knew how to be. “There are times you have to do things, even though they are the last things you want to – because there are people in this world who will hurt you if you don’t. It was brave of you to tell me, baby. And I wish I could tell you that after tonight you won’t need to be that brave anymore, but you’re going to need to be for a little while longer.” She pressed a soft kiss to his temple. He was thinking about what she said. His fingers, still holding hers, eased, though he didn’t let go.
“Mom?” He asked in a small voice. “What if he never stops?”

She wouldn’t let her own fear in again. “I promise you that we will make him stop.”

“Do you think it’s because of my Youtube videos? Is that why me?” For the last eight months, Henry posted weekly videos about movies and comic books on his very own YouTube channel. He could be very shy with other kids; it was an outlet.

She didn’t know if his channel drew the monster out, but she couldn’t let him carry that. “This is a sick, sick person, Henry. Sick people do things for a thousand different reasons.” She paused then said insistently. “*You* are not to blame for this.”

“Do you believe me about the pictures and the videos? That I didn’t take them?”

She cupped his face again. “I will always believe you. I will always believe *in* you.” She kissed his forehead. “I am so sorry, sweetheart. I am so, so sorry.” Tears filled his eyes again and he pressed his face into her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him and whispered that it would be okay over and over.

She wasn’t the perfect mother he deserved but she could pretend.

Her belief in her son was shared by the sheriff of Storybrooke, though that may have been a product of her being both the mayor and a Mills. But belief didn’t mean they had the resources to help. No, she’d have to find another way.

She knew the F.B.I was probably the best option. Her family had friends in the F.B.I hierarchy, not to mention senators, judges and others. But it would mean that Henry’s existence, something she had been able to hide from her family for eight years, might be revealed. It could mean her mother coming back into her life – and into Henry’s life. No – no, one did not take poison to cure poison, she told herself.

The second option meant tapping into police resources that were vaster than her little town’s.

She prepared herself to move mountains for Henry. Portland was the nearest large city. She had several emergency contingencies in place there. At least that’s what she told herself when she donated large sums of money to the police association every year. She wondered if it wasn’t the last desperate attempt of an addict to get a small fix of influence and power. Regardless, it came in useful now. She called Police Commissioner Gold’s office in Portland and asked for a meeting.

“Ms. Mills,” The detective greeted her and guided her to a small meeting room. One side of the room was entirely made of glass panes. Six chairs of varying stages of decay surrounded the table. A whiteboard, stained with years of old writing that now couldn’t entirely be cleaned, hung at the front of the room.

The detective was older, and the first thing she noticed was that he looked far too old to be working. Years were etched in line after line around his mouth. His small, perfectly round face was too small, his ears poked out too far. He motioned for her and Henry to sit down and smiled too pleasantly, in Regina’s opinion. “Commissioner Gold asked me to take your statement. You’re from Storybrooke? I hope your drive was okay.”

Regina held her tongue a long moment. She linked her fingers neatly before setting them on the
The suit she wore now was black, with red piping that matched the designer red silk shirt she wore under it. Her medium dark hair was styled meticulously away from her face, but purposefully looked as if it took no effort at all. Her makeup was light, save covering a few small blemishes on her face. She used blue eyeliner to bring out her eyes. She chose gold jewelry, a subtle reminder of wealth as well as being fashionable. She wore the costume and armor appropriate for what she wanted to project. Today, she intended to intimidate.

“The drive was fine. Perhaps we should begin.” She turned to her son. “Henry?” He held the gray folder with all the e-mail printouts. He knew what she wanted but his face burned as he laid the folder down and pushed it weakly toward the detective. He’d wanted to hold it, he’d told her in the car. She felt maybe it would give him a feeling of control and allowed it. Now though, he looked ashamed. She curled an arm around him.

“That’s what we have,” Regina continued and waited while the man reviewed it.

He scanned the contents. “You know, this is probably just one of your friends at school.”

“But I sent money to an account,” Henry protested. “And he has pictures.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You’d be amazed what kids can do these days.”

Regina wondered why the hell he was laughing. “You’re saying it’s someone at Henry’s school?” She questioned.

His congenial expression didn’t change. “Kids are cruel and with the technology nowadays, they do cruel things,” he reasoned. “It’s most likely a prank. I wouldn’t worry.” If the detective could have reached, he undoubtedly would have ruffled Henry’s hair good-naturedly when speaking those words.

Regina reached out and took hold of the folder, easing it from the detective’s fingers.

“Henry, could you get me some water, please?” Regina asked.

Her son knew that tone and knew better than to argue. He stood, looking once between them before leaving them alone.

The detective’s response to the e-mail gave her the final permission she needed to allow her darker alter-ego, the one she had tried so hard to bury, free. She fixed the detective with a steady stare and felt a smile that was dripping with ice grace her lips. The worst part, always the worst part, was how satisfying it felt to be this part of herself. How powerful.

“I have no idea what the standards usually are for police work in this city,” she began flippantly. “My understanding has always been that police are here to actually investigate crime. Clearly in your case, your pay is solely based on commission every time you offer placating and condescending statements?” He gaped at her like a dying fish. She rose enough to lean over the table, her hands gripping the table as her sharp gaze cut at him. “You’re going to get on your phone and tell the Commissioner I’d like to see him now. Tell him that I am tired of dealing with lazy police officers
who either don’t know how or don’t care enough to actually do their jobs, and that he needs to come down here and talk to me or I will stop donating. I’ll also convince a dozen of my closest friends to do the same.” The last part was a lie. She didn’t have any friends. She donated fifty-thousand a year; it was enough to get some attention when she needed it.

She eased back into her seat, crossing one leg over the other and regaining a prim, in-control pose.

“Ma’am,” he sputtered. “I-I- I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Oh, but you did.” She gave him one of his own pleasant smiles. “I suggest you hurry, detective. For every minute you waste my time from here on, I will subtract a thousand dollars from my yearly donation.” She pulled her iphone from her suit jacket and began to review emails.

“I’ll call Commissioner Gold.”

She didn’t even look up. “That would be best.”

Police Commissioner Gold arrived to speak to her twenty minutes later. He sat in the chair across from Regina and Henry, listened patiently, then called in several members of the computer forensics task force. After they had assessed the evidence, they left and he asked Henry to wait in the hall a moment.

Henry didn’t like it, but Regina nodded to him. He unhappily trudged from the room, closing the door behind him.

Commissioner Gold rose and moved around the table, his leather briefcase in hand. He sat next to Regina, setting the briefcase down in the empty chair on the other side of him. He tapped his fingertips together three times, flickering his eyes from her face to the wall near her several times.

“My men are working a high profile corporate cybercrime that just happened. I know it’s not what you want to hear but I can’t spare them for a few days. It was a ten million-dollar theft of goods.”

Regina jammed two fingers against the gray folder still on the table, making a muted thumping sound. “This maniac gave my son five days to send him pictures.”

He stared at the folder. “I have three resources in computer crime. Three.” He sounded apologetic. “And each of them is usually juggling multiple cases at once, plus they have a pile waiting when they’re done with those.” He cleared his throat. “Our police department has appreciated your generosity and support...”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me that I drove all this way for nothing?” Her voice was silky and cool. “I really hope that’s not what you are saying to me, Commissioner.”

He tried again. “You do have a case that would merit the attention of the F.B.I.”

“My son and I like our privacy. The F.B.I.,” She snarled, sounding out each letter, “likes to crow about their success in the press. I question their ability to show discretion.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “There are IT security consultants who might be able to...”

“She shall I throw a dart to pick one to entrust my son’s wellbeing to? Is that what you are suggesting or do you have a name?” She opened the folder, sorting through and reviewing the emails one by one.

“Ms. Mills, you should know that after you started donating, I did some research on you. It’s rare that individuals are so charitable.” She didn’t stop what she was doing, but she listened very carefully.
She stacked the papers, tapping them lightly on the table. “Can I assume that some of this resistance to traditional investigation has to do with your family? Perhaps avoiding the press?”

She leaned back, one arm moving to dangle over the back of her chair. She didn’t answer. She waited.

“If so, I do have a thought. I have the name of someone. She’s not a security consultant. It would be an out-of-the-box solution and borders on being inappropriate but, it is an option.”

“Go on.”

“She’s an ex-hacker who got out of prison a few months ago. Her parole officer and I were just discussing her. You have to understand that her skills are exceptional or I wouldn’t suggest her. Her activities cost millions of dollars, but the F.B.I gave her a commuted sentence because she explained to them how she did it. We thought we might even ask her to help with the theft the team is already investigating. But we decided that the risk was too…”

“And why should I should trust this person?”

He had the audacity to seem amused, and she realized that a shark lived in this man. “You have no leverage to keep the F.B.I or a security consultant quiet. But an ex-felon? With a Police Commissioner watching her closely?” He straightened his tie, one corner of his mouth lifting. “Campaigns to run for governor are expensive. I hope I can count on your support.”

Her alter-ego loved negotiations and he surprised her with his skill. Her eyes glittered. “Of course.” No, she chastised herself for enjoying his offer. Henry, Henry, Henry, she chanted to herself. She turned from him, took the folder and rose smoothly. “Is this ex-hacker close?”

“She’s local, but I don’t know exactly where she…”

She moved to the conference door and opened it. “I’m sure you can find out. Shall we go see if she’s available?”
“Your company’s customer service is horrible.” The man railed into the phone. Emma turned down its volume on her headset and sketched a computer monitor with gnashed teeth and big, bulging, unhappy eyes while she listened to the customer bemoan the performance of his computer. He couldn’t get to his email and there were pictures of his grandchildren at stake.

She could sympathize with the dilemma of an innocent grandfather battling the tyranny of computer overlords. Her heartstrings were easily tuggable and, of course, she fell into crusader mode. Some people had panic attacks, she had ‘knight in shining armor’ attacks. It led her down perilous trails, one of which she was only now beginning to get her life back from.

“Mr Abigail, your computer continuously freezing on you probably means…”

Mr Abigail angrily objected to the idea that his computer would freeze, as he always kept the house a
perfect 73 degrees. Emma, flabbergasted, felt the urge to bang her head on her cubicle desk several times in rapid and hard succession.

Okay, so, she just had to imagine this was HER grandfather. Not that she knew who that was. Or who her true father and mother were. But if she did know, she’d want the person on the other end of the phone to be patient, right? She’d only worked at Gek-Help a week, but she liked that it offered a chance to help people. Some were rude, yes, but they needed help nonetheless.

“Mr. Abigail, freezing,” she added add ice cubes around the unhappy computer she’d been drawing. “Is just a term to explain that your computer suddenly stopped what it was doing. Sorry about that. A lot of computers just need some diagnostics and clean up. Like…an oil change for your car, only with software. I have this file I can send you that should help. We’ll run it together, then I’ll delete it from your computer and hopefully you’ll be all set.”

It was a bad idea to run the software, her survival instinct argued with her crusader instinct.

But it will help, said the knight in armor.

But it’ s unapproved, the survivor fought back.

In the brief time Emma had been with Gek-Help, she’d taken it upon herself to develop an executable file that did diagnostics. She was going to tell management about it soon…soonish. But the company she worked for, ‘877-Gek-Help’, wasn’t the most progressive when it came to things like this. They preferred that their technicians follow a verbal script of suggestions.

They also recorded and monitored phone calls. But, the crusader inside her countered, this was only the second time she had offered the .exe file. She just wanted to see it in action a few times before offering it up as a real tool. It didn’t help that she believed they’d shoot it down when she did bring it forward. Her little projects kept her sane and, she hoped, they would keep her out of trouble. Her parole office did suggest she find an outlet for the creativity that computers brought out of her.

Making her decision, she brought up a remote access tool and Mr. Abigail gave her permission to remote into his PC. She uploaded her script to his computer and had him double-click it on his end. It began to bring up basic data about his machine: when it had last been rebooted, last had a defrag run, how many errors it was seeing in the logs, how old the drives were, what the average CPU, memory and disk usage was, and so on. In five minutes, not only had it run basic diagnostics, it had also begun running actions on the PC that should help with the issues it found.

“Okay, that’s it.” Emma said cheerfully as the script brought up the message, ‘Computer Awesomeness achieved! Nice job!’ “So let’s have you access your email and see if we can’t get those pictures.”

A few minutes later, the now jubilant grandfather had his photos and was thanking her profusely. Emma grinned and added an arm making a muscle to the CPU unit of her unhappy computer sketch. “Not a problem Mr. Abigail. Thanks for calling Gek Help.”

She put her phone into ‘do not receive calls’ mode for a moment and reached in her desk for another notebook. In this one, she noted how long it took her little program to run and a couple of thoughts about what else she could add. With a small smile, she glanced back to her drawing and shaded in some of the ice to make it more clear that it was, in fact, ice. She was about to go into ‘receive calls’ mode again when an instant message popped up on her screen from her supervisor.

*Hi Emma, could you come to my office for a few minutes?*
Everything but the words blinking at her on the screen fell away as dread crept up Emma’s spine with tiny clawed caterpillar legs. It was possible that this was nothing. Possible, but…

There was always a kind of denial one lived in when on borrowed time. Time was a constant. It was so easy to forget about it, to take it for granted. Emma tried not to be blind or too deeply in denial. She’d figured she had three weeks before her background check came back. It had only been 7 days. She’d hoped she could make a big enough mark and maybe, maybe that would forestall the inevitable. The other possibility was simply that Mr. Green was monitoring her call and wanted to ask her about the tool.

She needed this job. A two hundred dollar gap existed between rent due and money in her bank account. She’d been living on ramen noodles and cheap frozen pizza. Her made wheezing noises every time she tried to start it. She’d been desperate to somehow earn her way, to try and turn the corner into a new life.

Okay, she told herself, it could be coincidence. She looked down at herself. She was wearing the required Gek Help polo shirt and khaki pants. It wasn’t tucked in so that was not quite up to par with the dress code. Maybe that was it?

She typed out a response, ‘Sure, Mr. Green. BRT’

Standing, she tucked her shirt in and tried to still her galloping heart. Her hands had gone cold. She talked to herself as she moved.

“This is going to be fine,” She muttered under her breath. “They don’t know yet. This isn’t a big deal. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

The reassurances to herself stopped when she came within view of Mr. Green’s glass door. In the room with him she could see a man and woman, both in suits. Okay that was ominous, But, it still didn’t mean something was wrong, right? It could be anything. Maybe they wanted - her agile mind blanked and stalled.

She pushed open the glass door as Mr. Green motioned her inside.

“Emma, please sit down.” Green said.

“This is Mrs. Hansen and Mr. Perrillo from HR.” That line gave away why she was here, and if that hadn’t, the empathetic look the lady offered would have. Mr. Perillo handed Emma a piece of paper with a portion highlighted in yellow.

“Miss Swan,” Her tone perfected the shade of an HR professional about to give someone bad news. “as you know, your employment with the company is considered temporary - a grace period, if you will - until your background check comes back. It is assumed when you start that the background check will come back clear.”

“And I lied on my application.” Emma said quietly, beating the others in the room to the punch.

Mrs. Hansen fell silent, as if she had been thrown off for just a moment on her planned speech. “Your background check came back listing that you are a convicted felon.” Green and Perrillo nodded in stereo, as if they had planned it.

Emma’s eyes drifted around the room. They’d already decided. She knew it. Could feel it. It was something that felt so ultimately familiar – people deciding she wasn’t worth it.

“I’m good at this job. My stats are good. I’m always a half hour early. And I’ve been working on this
diagnostic tool that could save the techs time…” She looked to Green, hoping he might at least agree with some of what she said. He said nothing, his expression blank.

“Would you have hired me if I had listed it?” Emma said, a note of frustration in her voice. “Would I have even had a chance? You have no idea how many places I applied before I tried here. Grocery stores, other tech companies, convenience stores, even a few jobs as a waitress. None of them - .”

They trio remained unmoved. “Miss Swan,” Mr Green interrupted. “Company policy about lying on your application is very clear.”

“I was hoping that maybe if you got a chance to know me. Maybe you’d be able to look past something I did that was a mistake. A mistake I served eighteen months for. Isn’t there some way I could - ”

“Miss Swan, it is not an option for you to remain with this company.”

Emma knew better, she knew so much better than to ask. Throughout her life, people giving her a chance had been rare.

A college professor had told Emma there was power in quantifying things. That lesson, out of all the lessons she had at her year-long stay in college stayed with her. One way she could have currently quantified her life was with the number thirty-eight, the number of job applications she filled out in the last three months before landing this job. She might also use the number two which represented the number of people in her life who actually gave a fuck about her.

She could have, but one night in a bar she decided on a far more accurate means to quantify the trajectory of her life. Two variables defined life. Variable A represented ‘How good a life are you providing for yourself’ on a 1-100 scale. Variable B represented ‘how much good are you doing around you’. In both cases 100 was where she thought she should be if she was doing everything right i.e., living up to her potential. She rated herself on her perception of both variable A and variable B, then averaged things out. She acknowledged that as the whole formula was based on her perception, it was flawed so, when she was feeling generous she gave herself a +/- 5 to her score.

She called the formula the ‘Pertential scale’, named after the words ‘perception’ and ‘potential’. It required her to make up a word, of course, but anything in the name of science. To quantify it further, she came up with the Hermit line. The Hermit line was if her ‘Pertential’ score ever got below 10%. If she ever got there, she figured, she might well pack it in and go and live in a cave like a hermit.

\[ \text{Pertential} = \frac{\text{Variable A} + \text{Variable B}}{2} \]

Emma judged herself to be a 35 on Variable A and 15 on Variable B, which meant an unimpressive score of 25%. Some movement was normal on the scale, and she thought that most people saw themselves in the high seventies. Something bad would happen to them, adjusting them down a few percentage points only to go back up or higher as they moved ahead with their lives. Hers, though, seemed stuck at 25%.

The thing she tried not to think about was that being that low on the scale sucked. Being that low…hurt. It always hurt. It made her feel like a child in a crowd of adults - each of them just so much bigger than she was. They all saw something in front of them, something bright and happy, that she couldn’t. She wasn’t tall enough.

The three people in the room with her, serving as her judge and jury, waited for further reaction or argument. Emma shook her head, trying to come up with another logical argument. Another line of
defense that would somehow, because of the mathematical correctness of the line of thought, save this job for her and penetrate the bureaucracy she was now attacked with.

“I’m sorry, Emma.” Green rounded his desk, extending his hand to her. She took it numbly, still trying to think of a way out of this.

“Security will escort you back to your desk to pick up your belongings. They’ll walk you to the door and collect your badge from you.” Mrs. Hansen was saying. “We’ll send you your paycheck. Best of luck to you, Miss Swan.”

Emma reddened with humiliation. A large security guard waited outside the office, holding a box. She hadn’t met very many people in her week with the company, but everyone would see her being paraded back to her desk and out of the building.

“No.” Emma stated. Her fight or flight response had kicked in. “I’m walking out now. Not to my desk, just out. If you want security to escort me, they better keep up.”

With that, she strode as fast as she could down the hallway and toward the front door. She paused when she reached the exit and took off her badge, tossing it in the otherwise empty box. She started to leave then sighed and turned back to the guard. “On my desk, there’s this bakery bag. Would you do me a solid and grab it for me? Please?” she asked, her voice feeling rough and dry. Her eyes beseeched him. He nodded at her, allowing her to avoid the full embarrassment of this moment. It was a small mercy but one she was grateful for.

Her drawings were abandoned. She should have known not to get too comfortable. She tried to reclaim a small modicum of dignity by taking a huge handful of candy from the reception’s desk and shoving it in her pocket.

She walked unsteadily to her small yellow, rusty Volkswagon bug. Like most of the employees, she parked in the second parking lot from the corporate office. It was a decent hike, but for once she didn’t feel it. It was 95 degrees and the heat didn’t seem to touch her, so lost was she in what had happened, in the shock of it, in the self-mockery for feeling shock in the first place. She should have known. She should have been better prepared.

She unlocked the car and got in, resting her brow against the steering wheel despite the heat and the burn against her skin. She slowly put the key into the ignition and turned. The car made a choking, half-hearted clicking and whirring sounds it always did. This time, though, nothing came after it. The engine did not jump to life. She tried again. Clicking and whirring and then silence.

She turned the key once more. The car still did not start.

Fuck. She slapped her hand on the dashboard hard. “Fuck. Come on.” But the car wasn’t listening to her. Each subsequent attempt yielded the same result. It was on the eighth or ninth attempt that she realized she was crying.

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Emma placed the cupcake from Murray’s Bakery on the center of her kitchen countertop and stared at it. On her phone was a message from David and Mary Margaret. She knew she should check it. She also knew what she would find. Her former foster parents always called on her birthday, they always sang. They said they loved her. She managed it by never picking up during certain times of
She met David when she was fifteen. He taught at a computer class at the local YMCA and Emma used it to avoid going home. She never expected he’d become a constant in her life. She met his wife Mary Margret not long after. She liked them. They were open, listened well and rated as cool in her teenage mind, mostly because they knew how to hack things. She didn’t trust anyone, not really, but they earned more trust than anyone ever had. Six months later, they completed training and paperwork to become foster parents. She knew they did it for her.

Not long after they’d taken her in, they asked about adopting her. She’d said no. She never called them ‘mom’ and ‘dad.’ After she turned eighteen she left their home and started to travel, earning money by doing less than legal things. They chased her with phone calls, texts and Skype. They wore her down until she surrendered to their desire to have a place in her life. Secretly, Emma loved how stubborn they were about it. At the end of every communication came those three little words.

She never said it back.

Besides, if she answered the phone today, they’d ask her how the job was going and she couldn’t bear to tell them she’d failed. Again.

Emma took off her ‘work-shirt’ - a long sleeved blue shirt she’d found at a thrift store for five bucks. The heater in her apartment had two settings - frozen tundra and surface of the sun. She’d already begun to sweat and she’d been here three minutes. She complained to the landlord three times but he didn’t even look up from his newspaper the last time she told him. She found a sleeveless shirt where she’d abandoned it on her desk chair.

She turned back to the bakery bag. She should blow out a candle and eat the cupcake, right? It was traditional. She hadn’t thought to get a candle, so she substituted a very old match from a very old matchbook. The whole thing felt like her life – especially lately – a shadow of something life-like.

She took a deep breath to blow out the matchstick, and then a knock came at the door, effectively startling the hell out of her. She knocked her knee against the countertop causing pain to ring over and over in the spot she’d bashed into the laminate counter. The cupcake flopped to one side, match and all.

“Shit, shit shit.” Emma muttered, grasping her knee. She huffed at the matchstick, blowing it out before it burned the counter or set something on fire. A knocked over birthday cupcake seemed about right. Her score on the Pertential Scale fell from 25 to 20.

“Emma Swan?” Knocking came at her door again. “It’s the police.”
Chapter Notes

Hi again all! Welcome to another edition of The Love Hack, where I promise not to mention a certain president or post spoilers for Game of Thrones. Hopefully you all are enjoying the reimagining of everyone’s backgrounds so far. Remember: kudos, follows, and comments are writer fuel so feel free to show me some love if you have a moment.

I am posting the first three chapters in one week because I think everyone really wants to get to the point where our ladies meet. After this week, my plan is to update weekly, probably on Thursdays.

Chapter 3 – The one with the quickest job interview ever

Regina stood with Commissioner Gold and two uniformed officers in one of the roughest parts of the whole city. It was why Gold had insisted that two officers accompany them. Henry remained at the police station being looked after by a female officer who was a member of the K-9 Unit. Regina made sure he was suitably distracted by the officer and the dog.

She felt drained but knew better than to drop the costume of her control and strength. She straightened the color on her blouse and dashed her nails through the back of her hair to refresh the styling. She painted iciness over her features, mixed with highlights of impatience.

She stood in front of an avocado green apartment door that desperately needed fresh paint. Two letters were scratched into the wood F U, with the rest of the word chiseled away revealing bare wood.

The second-floor apartment door opened the length of the chain on the door and the occupant within peeked out.

“Emma Swan?” One of the officers asked. He pointed to the badge fastened to his shirt. “My name is Officer Hamilton. This is Commissioner Gold.” The one eye that could be seen in the doorway widened and blinked at that, Regina observed. “This is Regina Mills. She’s the mayor of a town a few hours away. They’d like to talk to you. You can call in my badge number if it makes you feel safer.” Emma was already opening up the door and the officer broke off. “Or not.”

Emma Swan wore a sleeveless shirt despite the twenty-degree temperature outside; her biceps were muscled and she leaned a baseball bat on one shoulder. She stepped back and motioned for them to come in.

“Fairly careless with your safety aren’t you?” Regina noted but frowned as a sweltering wave of heat overcame her. That, at least, explained the shirt.

“Is this some sort of women’s self-defense inspection?” Emma asked, a tiny wry expression peeking
out from the corner of one side of her mouth.

More quick-witted than expected, Regina thought as she examined Emma again. That would be useful.

“Your jacket costs more than everything in my apartment.” Emma said. “I figure I don’t have much to lose.” Emma retorted.

Regina guessed Emma was in her early thirties, though the genetic lottery gifted Emma with high cheekbones and youthful, unblemished skin. Even in this dire situation, Regina acknowledged Emma’s beauty. Not that it mattered. The cockiness in Emma’s stance, feet spread apart as she, an ex-felon, faced down a mayor and a police commissioner provided Regina another insight.

“I think I agree with your assessment.” Emma’s snorted at the insult, taken aback. Regina turned from her, taking a visual sweep of the room.

The studio apartment had a futon, a desk that was off balance and had to be prevented from leaning with two stacked books, and an old leather office chair with a deep gash down the back. A box labelled “Clothes” idled in one corner of the room. Nothing decorated the walls. The ceiling had a dozen discolored spots of varying sizes from heaven knew what. The muddy-brown carpet was covered in threadbare spots where the fabric gave way to patches of grey. A flicker of a burning flame, perhaps candlelight, came from the kitchenette. Regina wondered, for a moment, if the apartment had power. It did. A dim overhead lamp and the computer monitor glowed more than provided actual light, leaving the room shadowed. There were no Christmas decorations. A box of Frosted Flakes cereal leaned against the frame of the futon acting as a sentry.

“Look,” Emma said, lowering the bat and letting it swing back and forth. “This has been a bad day and it’s my birthday and I have big plans. So, if you’re here because you think I did something, could we just get to it?”

“You’re not under suspicion or arrest. This isn’t that kind of visit,” Gold said. “You two gentleman can wait outside,” he told the police officers. They nodded and left.

Gold gave Emma a smile that did its best to look congenial, and dragged her torn desk chair over toward the futon before sitting in it. “First, let me offer you heartfelt birthday good wishes.” Regina thought the man had the sincerity of a snake and it showed. Emma, by the way she was looking at him, seemed to be of the same opinion.

“Thanks,” Emma muttered and leaned the baseball bat in the corner by the door.

“Ms. Swan,” he continued. “We’ve come because we have a situation where we think we can make use of your talents. Your parole officer called your job before we came here. He was sorry to hear you had been let go.” Emma’s mouth set in a hard line, her expression not changing from wary and expecting the worst as she waited. Gold waved a hand toward Regina. “As mentioned, Ms. Mills is the mayor of Storybrooke, a small town a few hours south of us. She is considering hiring you to help with a personal situation. If you do a good job for her, I may be able to convince the mayor of Portland that, despite your record, you would be a good resource as a contractor for our Computer Forensics division.”

“It’s eight o’clock at night and you two just show up at my house? Weird way to offer a job, isn’t it?”

“Mayor Mills is under a tight timeline,” Gold offered as an explanation.
“Why don’t you sit down and we’ll talk about what you need?” Emma asked, focusing on Regina.

Regina did not sit down. Not yet. She didn’t like to waste time on ideas that likely wouldn’t work and didn’t make a habit of spending extended periods of time with criminals.

“The Commissioner told me that your crime involved beating firewalls and security systems put in place by several high priced IT Security firms,” Regina said. “My understanding is that your skillset a year ago surpassed even some of the best and brightest in the FBI’s cyber division. That they actually consulted with you after you were arrested?” Regina tilted her head and watched Emma bob her head from one side to the other as she tried to shape a reply. Regina didn’t let her. Not yet. Regina smiled superiorly. “Then again, you did get caught, so perhaps it was a limited skillset after all.”

The false mirth, a trick from the old days, was meant to either make someone feel small and out of their depth or to penetrate a weak spot. A nip, not a bite, similar to what a hyena might do when circling and assessing its prey. In this case, she used it to see how Emma would react. A dozen moths took flight in Regina’s stomach, causing an ache as their wings moved frantically. She swallowed and the heat of the room grew as her stomach tightened even further. She’d forgotten that particular smile. Enough, she insisted to herself, whatever I have to do, I will do.

“I turned myself in,” Emma replied casually, ignoring Regina’s barb. She shrugged as if she was not sure why the contradiction was important. “Potato, potahto, I guess.” Emma fell silent again, waiting, instead of reacting.

The non-reaction gave Regina pause. “Very well,” she murmured, partly to herself. She pressed a hand to her stomach as she steeled herself to say what she had to. “I’ll get to the point. My thirteen year old son Henry is being harassed by someone via e-mail. Someone who has somehow acquired very personal information about him.” Regina straightened, counteracting her admission of vulnerability by trying to make herself seem as calm and cold as possible. Her voice betrayed nothing other than restrained anger. “I came to the police for help and they suggested I call the FBI. I am a very private person, and potentially drawing that kind of attention to me and my family is unthinkable. Hiring an IT security consultant as opposed to an ex-criminal would have been a much more logical step in my eyes, but the commissioner convinced me that an unconventional path might have merit. I believe this is probably a waste of everyone’s time.”

Emma sat up a little but otherwise seemed non-plussed. “Wow,” she said good-naturedly, “that was direct. And kinda bitchy.”

Regina felt a trickle of amusement. In another situation, she would have enjoyed Emma’s bluntness in the face of her own no holds barred assessment. “Is there some reason I should be anything else?” Regina rounded the futon to sit on the other side of Gold. “The person who is harassing my son has given him five days to send pictures.” Here Regina faltered. It was hard to maintain the distant, controlled facade when thinking of her son’s face when he had told her. And it was impossible not to think of his face. “High resolution close-ups of…” Her fingers strangled her jaw as tears threatened. The pain pushed back the emotions and forced them back into their box. She closed her eyes as tightly as she could until she felt nothing. Weakness could only prevent her from helping Henry. Her hand dropped to her side before she raised her chin and went on. “Or he will release the videos and pictures he already has to friends, family – everyone.”

“Fucking asshole,” Emma growled, voice rising. Her defensive stance was completely gone now, replaced with an anger on behalf of Regina and Henry.

Emma’s indignation confused Regina. She blinked before answering, “Indeed. The police think it’s a classmate. I’m not so sure.”
“Do you think you might know who – “

“I have no idea, Miss Swan. If I did, I would have stopped it and I can promise you I would not be here,” Regina answered harshly. She expelled a long breath, trying to gather her patience. “He has a Youtube channel. I am not sure if that is a factor or not.” She handed Emma the gray folder, and hated it a little more every time she had to hand it to anyone. “This is what was sent to us.”

Emma opened the envelope and frowned. “He calls himself ‘Peter Pan’?”

“So it would seem,” Regina answered.

“Yeah, cause that’s not creepy,” Emma muttered. “I’ll need to see the original emails so I can try to find the IP. Print-outs tend to...the angle. Does your son have a camera on his laptop?”

Regina was surprised by the question. “Yes.”

“Does he keep the laptop on his desk? Maybe in his room?” Emma handed the folder back. Regina nodded, looking at the picture. She hadn’t noticed any of what was so obvious to Emma. Why hadn’t she noticed? Why had no one but this ex-criminal seen it? “I think your son’s computer has a RAT.”

“A rat?”

“Sorry. Remote Access Tool? RAT.” Regina must have still looked confused because Emma went on. “You can hack an iphone or PC but really what you want is data. And the holy grail is to have a door to access and control that data whenever you want. So, basically, that’s what a RAT allows.” That made Regina wince. “I can tell you what’s possible from a computer standpoint but the easiest thing to say is that hacking into almost anything is possible.”

“I thought that was just in sci-fi movies,” Gold remarked wryly.

“If there’s technology around your son, it can be hacked and used. Anything from a cell phone to a car. To... something like - that’s a nice watch. Is that one of the designer ones with a Fitbit included?”

Regina regarded Emma curiously, but with distrust. “It is.”

Emma moved to her laptop on her desk. “Then I’ll show you what I mean.”

“Ms. Mills,” Gold began. “Are you sure you want to let her...”

“It’s okay,” Regina crossed her arms over her chest. “Go ahead, Miss Swan. Dazzle me.”

“Fitbits have bluetooth connections open, so, if I use the same kind of connection,” she didn’t entirely complete the thought, instead diving into the world of the screen before her. She typed for a few minutes, then looked up at the Regina. “Okay, can you sync the device, please?”

Regina wasn’t sure about it, but she’d given the go ahead so she did as asked. Emma typed for a few more moments, then gave another ‘hmmm.’ “You jog every morning at 6 a.m. Oh, this is cool, it even knows where.”

“Wait you can...”

“Storybrooke Park?” Emma interrupted. “About five miles a day over the last six months. Except today it was three. Oh, you take Sundays off. I mean, WAY off. You’re practically catatonic
comparatively in terms of movement. I can tell how long it took you, what your heart rate was, and it looks like you leave it on at night so, um, you get an average of six hours of sleep a night. Across thirty days. Only two last night.” Emma spun in her chair and almost went all the way around, her expression smug. “Pretty dazzling, right?”

Regina and Gold gaped at her incredulously, giving her a look that suggested Emma had made the last right turn into insanity.

“Sorry,” Emma said and turned back toward the keyboard, typing rapidly. “Give me a minute and let me get rid of it.” The fluid movements of Emma’s fingers on the keyboard reminded Regina of someone playing the piano. “Okay, when you sync again it’ll be gone. Go ahead.”

With a frown, Regina did it once, then again, just to be sure. “And that’s it? It’s gone now?” she asked, glaring at her Fitbit with narrowed eyes, as if it had betrayed her.

“Yeah, and I’ll show you how to keep your bluetooth connection closed till you need it if you want. You look kinda freaked out. Sorry again.” Emma let out a soft sigh, the small frustrated sound of the frequently misunderstood. “I thought it might help to show you what I meant about stealing data.”

She offered apologetically. “If your watch had a RAT then I’d be able to know where you are at all times. I’d have access to - well, anything the FitBit tracks, really. If it had a microphone, I could hear all your conversations. If it had a video camera, I could watch you. And so on. That’s what RATs do. They let you have access to anything the device can do. It’s an open door.” She pushed her laptop away. “Anyway, I’m happy to help.”

Regina wasn’t sure what she was more angry at - the watch or the hacker. “Given your demonstration and your past, why should I trust you in my home?”

Emma’s reply was quick and fierce. “Look around this place. If I was a bad guy, do you think I’d be living like this?” She carried that refusal to be cowed into her next words. “Since prison, getting a job has been all but impossible. I have exactly three plates, a cup and a frying pan in my kitchen. The most expensive thing I own is my laptop and my big birthday plan involves sitting in this apartment, eating a cupcake and watching Star Wars. It’s not much, actually it kind of sucks, but I’m working my ass off trying to earn something better. That’s all I want to do.”

Regina was stricken by how Emma was just so, so honest. If any of that had been true in Regina’s life, she certainly could never have admitted it to a stranger. Nor would she have sounded almost proud about it, as Emma had. She wondered if Emma was truly the ‘what you see is what you get’ type that she appeared. Many of the people in Storybrooke were like that - decent and forthright. It was one of the reasons why she’d stayed there, made it her home.

Commissioner Gold interjected, “She did turn herself in as she said, Miss Mills. She did not directly profit from her last crime. She stole from men accused of defrauding people and gave their money to charities.”

Regina scoffed, still playing her role. Later she would try to process Emma’s crime. What on earth had the woman gained from such a thing? “She stole from the rich to give to the poor? How quaint.”

Gold shrugged and offered one last comment. “Her parole officer thinks she is sincere in wanting to turn her life around.”

Regina nodded slowly and trusted her gut. “Very well. We’ll try it.”

“Okay, if I can somehow get a look at Henry’s laptop?”
Regina pivoted back to Emma at the request. “Do you not want to ask how much I’ll be paying you?”

Emma’s face twisted in confusion. “You’re going to pay me?”

Regina blinked at her and breathed in, then out, then in again - an attempt to manage her control against the stupid question. “This is a job offer, Miss Swan.” Then she said to Gold. “I’ll give it a few days to see if her skills are as good as you think they are.” She stood and addressed Emma again as Gold stood with her. “My assistant found that senior computer consultants make 150 to 200 an hour. I trust that is acceptable?”

“… what?”

Regina sighed. “I don’t have time to haggle with you. Three hundred. Three hundred and you start first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Wait, what?”

“It’s a several hour drive back to Storybrooke, Miss Swan. The most expedient thing would be for you to follow me, then we can get you checked into the bed and breakfast. Do you need a few moments to pack a bag?”

“What?”

“Are you having an aneurysm, Miss Swan? Or is there some other reason you only seem capable of saying one word?”

“My brain short-circuited somewhere between three hundred dollars an hour and we’re leaving right now.”

“Are you refusing my offer?”

“No! No, just…” Emma exclaimed. “Trying to process the fastest job interview ever. Of course I’m going to help you and your son. Of course. I just need a second. Also, my car is in the shop.”

“We can have a rental car arranged for you, Ms. Swan,” Gold put in, sounding polite. “It’s no trouble.”

“I’d need to check with my parole officer about – “

“Already taken care of,” Gold interrupted calmly.

“Miss Swan, allow me to simplify. I am offering you a job. If you accept, we leave now. You will work 8 – 10 hours a day and will be on call whenever I need you. To ensure this, I will both pay for a rental car and arrange for you to stay at the bed and breakfast in town,” Regina went on. “Your pay is three hundred an hour and you must tell me yes or no - right now.”
The one with the blonde plague

Happy Thursday everyone! Welcome to another episode of the Love Hack. Today in our story, there are awkwardness, hyper-organization, apple tossing, and a flashback. This is your captain speaking; the seat belt sign has been turned off, feel free to roam about the cabin.

"JustaWanderingReader" was asking me about the pertential scale. I can tell you all that it is fundamentally flawed which will be explored more later. And that, folks, is called ‘baiting’. Yanno, so you keep reading.

I want to tell you all how much I appreciate all the support you have shown the story so far. Thank you for encouraging my passion for writing. It means a lot.

“I set up a workspace for you,” Regina announced as she pushed open the door to her home, her heels a rapid percussion of sound as she kept moving. Emma paused a moment to take in the house. It seemed old, Victorian maybe? Not quite a mansion though she had no better name for it. Something a rich person would buy as a starter home before moving into their palace. Emma didn’t do mansions or quiet, small towns; she never had. The floor stretched in large slabs of white and beige marble, with black squares breaking up the larger pieces. She shrank into herself, all of her instincts telling her she didn’t belong anywhere this nice. Regina’s steps were still clip-clopping rapidly, deeper into the house. Emma adjusted her faithful, battered backpack over one shoulder and lengthened her stride to catch up.

When Regina said that she’d set up a workstation for Emma in her office, Emma assumed that she’d cleared a little space - a corner or counter space. Instead, when she followed Regina into her home office she found a battle station for Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker. The large oak desk saluted her from its place in front of a tall set of windows. The lions carved in the unusual stone legs of the desk watched her dispassionately. Two black leather chairs before it waited for guests. A similarly colored high-back chair loomed behind the desk.

“I think you will find all the relevant information there.” Regina gestured toward a long rectangular fold-out table that did not belong in an auspicious room like this one. Kind of like she didn’t. The table held clearly labelled groupings of electronics and folders. The index card in front of one pile of electronics read “Henry’s Devices”, then listed his laptop, ipad and cellphone. The next arrangement, “Regina’s Devices”, consisted of Regina’s laptop, ipad and cell phone; and the third was labelled “Our Router”. It was unplugged, an electric cord wrapped around it. Three folders of green, gray, and red respectively, purported to be “Henry’s Email, Facebook and Youtube information”, “Hacker’s emails”, and “Henry’s friends and contacts”. The last index card read “Tools” and had an open plastic case containing a whole array of screwdrivers.

“This will be your desk,” Regina said, motioning to a small metal desk across from the fold-out table. The desk, about the width and length of an old clunky computer monitor, sat ready for service on rollers. The mesh chair that went with it, also on rollers, looked comfortable in that modern, “everything is designed to reduce any and all strain on the body” way. An old-school landline cordless phone had been placed on the desk, next to a desk lamp and a pencil holder with various
pens, pencils, and highlighters.

“Ookay,” Emma breathed, a little out of sorts. This level of organization would have made a military commander proud. She could imagine Regina Mills in a military uniform, complete with monocle, saying “Welcome to Ft. Mills, Miss Svan”.

Regina’s phone rang on the table but, for now, the Mayor ignored it.

“I’ll work in the kitchen,” Regina explained, gesturing to one of the rooms beyond the foyer. “Please make your….” The home phone rang and Regina broke off to march to her desk and answer it. “Hello, Belle,” she greeted. She held up a finger to Emma, asking her to wait a moment. “No, I appreciate you taking the initiative to reschedule it.” She glanced to Emma. “Yes, she’s here now. Perhaps you could bring us lunch later?”

As Emma waited, the furniture in the room seemed to grow in size, filling up more space and crowding her. Everything except the fold-out table screamed “get out!” In horror movies, the hero never listened when houses did stuff like that. She decided to leave the room to its “uninviting-ness” for a while and wandered into the rooms nearby. The living room maintained that museum “stay behind the velvet ropes and don’t touch” quality. Even the Christmas decorations and the Christmas tree were in tidy, coordinating colors of white, gold and blue. In Regina Mills’ home, furniture and decor projected the “we’re watching you” attitude of security guards back in her shoplifting days. The beige carpet in the living room didn’t look like anyone had ever actually walked on it. The room’s taupe color, broken up by a darker taupe and black curtains, did nothing to warm the relentless, foreboding formality of the room.

She found the dining room to be a little less intimidating. The formal table probably cost a fortune, but at least the room was open. She ran her hand over the table, examining the deep oak. She thought it could be one of those “distressed” pieces she’d seen in a magazine. Dents all over it made darker wood show through and provided texture. Her practical side objected to a perfectly good piece of furniture being made to look older and worn down on purpose. Yet, it gave the room warmth, its imperfections making it approachable.

She took a seat in one of the taupe leather chairs around it and surveyed the landscape. Much better than the stuffy, closed off office, she thought. She realized it wasn’t just the office that was hyper-organized and pristine. Emma set her laptop bag on a chair.

“You know, I’m much better in open spaces,” Emma explained with an apologetic smile when Regina found her. “Do you mind if I work in here?”

Regina straightened a chair Emma hadn’t even touched before responding, “Wouldn’t it be easier if everything was in one place?” Regina’s voice was usually strong. The entire time they’d spoken in Emma’s apartment, the mayor projected confidence. Now, her voice had a thin waver. “I assumed you’d want to look at all of our various computers which is why I had my assistant…I thought it would give you a head start.”

“It does,” Emma rushed to agree, really hoping she hadn’t already offended her new employer. “And you’re right, I do want to look at everything. I’ll probably start by using a scan I created. Just, I think I’ll be better here.”

Regina gestured toward the office. “Shall I move things here then?”

As a kid, when meeting a new foster family, Emma had been forced to answer questions. Just answer politely, her social worker said, but Emma often found it a struggle to find the right words to questions like “do you like dolls?” The answer was no, but did that make it polite? She took a wild
guess at the right thing to say now. “No, no, I'll just grab stuff when I need it.”

Regina turned away from Emma, hands sliding in her pockets. “Nothing you need from me then.”

Emma adjusted her glasses and began pulling out the necessities from her bag. This included her old battered laptop, her coding notepad, pens and pencils. Of course, she also needed sugar so out came a pack of Twizzlers, two 6-packs of Mountain Dew, and three Snickers bars.

Rounding back to Emma, Regina narrowed her eyes at the assortment that now spread over two place settings at the table.

“Am I taking up too much room?”

“It’s fine.” Regina cleared her throat. “Do you need space in the refrigerator?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“What else should I know, before you start, Miss Swan?”

“Everything needs to stay offline,” Emma told her. “No internet traffic leaving the house.”

“Very well, but I have a request. I’d appreciate it if you could arrange for Henry’s email to be forwarded to my work email instead. There’s no need for him to know any more than he does.”

“Miss Mills, the hacker-guy could try and infect your work computer, too. It would be better if we didn’t-”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take.” Regina spoke over Emma; a general reminding a private which one of them had the last word. She linked her hands before her, face composed, her perfect posture conveying control as much as her words. Sometimes people felt like they were far away, even when they were in the same room. Regina came across as a gray castle on an island, guarded by multiple walls. And possibly a dragon. “If he tries to communicate again with my son, I want to know. Immediately.”

Emma shook her head and decided to pick her battles. “Right - okay. Just get me your work email and I’ll…”

“All of our information is in the office,” Regina interrupted again. “I think moving everything from the office would be wise. I'll do that as you get settled in.” Emma decided to give a small, agreeable smile rather than arguing. “One more thing, Henry will be home around three. I don’t want him to know you saw the pictures he was sent. He was devastated enough that the police and I had to see them.”

Emma paused her arranging of her things on the table, which mostly involved just setting them somewhere in the vicinity of her laptop. “I get it. How’s he holding up with everything?”

The mayor seemed surprised by the question. She paused, softening. “He’s been incredibly brave. He’s trusting me. Us.” She straightened another chair, running her hand down the leather back as if smoothing out a wrinkle. “I mentioned a YouTube channel. He talks about superheroes in movies and on television. He’s always liked superheroes; I don’t know why.”

So far, Regina had maintained a relentless “I am in command” countenance. The mention of Henry broke it into pieces and warmth cascaded over her face, mesmerizing Emma.

“He’s very shy at school, so when he started the channel, I thought maybe it would be a good
outlet. It has been. It helped him grow a little more confidence. He has a thousand subscribers. I am
told that is rather good.” A proud little smile came out of hiding briefly before fading. “Could the
channel have led to this? A stalker of some kind; or maybe it drew someone?”

“It’s most likely a crime of opportunity than all that much interest in the victim. It’s like a mugging.
Why one person over another? Usually because someone dropped their guard for a second.”

“You don’t think this is one of his friends from school then? This Peter Pan asked for money when
this first started. He gave instructions to Henry on how to convert money into something called
Bitcoins.”

“It’s currency,” Emma explained. “People use it because it’s not traceable. I don’t know, Miss Mills.
I think another kid would have stuck with asking for more money and not wanted more, um, data.
And the bitcoin thing has a certain sophistication. It doesn’t seem like a kid thing, but we’ll see.”

There was a pile of apples corralled in a bowl at the center of the table, and now that she noticed
them, they distracted Emma. Emma lifted one of the apples, investigating if it was real or fake. It
looked perfect - deep red and large. Her mouth watered. She hadn’t had unprocessed produce in
longer than she cared to think about. Prison didn’t have anything that looked this fresh, and
afterwards, she avoided luxuries like fruits and vegetables. That thought felt like a mirror into her life
choices.

“I considered it might be someone out to embarrass my family. Or me. Or even someone who
wanted revenge. Using Henry to get to me. However there are much, much easier ways.”

The silence after that felt heavy. What WAS the polite thing to say now, Emma wondered. She
wanted to do something with her hands and she still hadn’t put the apple down. Tossing it into the air
and catching it happened without her thinking about it.

“So, yeah, I’m just gonna start with a scan. This thing,” she picked up a USB with her free hand.
“Used to be a combination of RAT tools, and then when I got out of prison I reverse engineered it.”
She gave a sheepish smile. “Reformed hacking tool is reformed. So anyway, it looks for RATs.”
Emma was pretty sure she was repeating herself again but it was better than sitting there in the
silence. She set the USB drive down then tossed the apple once more. Regina’s eyes followed its
path, then she bent and picked up dust or dirt or something from the floor so microscopic Emma
couldn’t see it.

“RAT. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to that term.”

There were other terms in the hacker world that Regina would like less, and they likely applied here.
Emma decided to divert the conversation.

always sounds weird to say. Spear-Phishing.” Toss. Catch. “Spoofing.” Regina’s eyes hammered
nails into the apple in her hand and Emma, surprised to be holding it, put it back.

Regina reached over and plucked it from the bowl. “It’s bruised now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. What do you need to get started?”

“Why don’t we start with your stuff?” Regina nodded and moved back to the office to gather her
electronics. When she returned to the dining room, Emma took them from her, setting them down
around her laptop.
Her gaze fixed on her screen as she plugged Regina’s phone into it and pressed the USB stick into another free port. “I had one company express some interest in buying this scanner, but they sort of wondered if I might try to infect their users and attempt global domination. Anyway, it will tell us if anything looks strange. You know, we should consider getting you a VPN. It would give you a lot more security.”

“I considered buying all new devices for Henry and myself. But, the pictures would still be out there, and I wondered if that would make it impossible to track whomever is doing this. Miss Swan.” Regina waited till Emma tore her eyes from her screen. “You understand that that is part of what I am paying you to do? To find whomever did this.”

“I’ll find him,” Emma promised and meant it. “But, what - exactly - are you going to do when I find him?”

“Do you really care?”

It was hard to meet that piercing stare, so Emma turned back, watching her scan run. She shrugged a little. “Well, despite my past, I do try and have some kind of moral code.”

Regina leaned her wrist on the back of one of the dining chairs. “The truth is,” she began softly. “I don’t know yet. It’s been two days. I haven’t had time to think. First things first. We stop this man from hurting my son. After that, you and I will discuss the matter in more detail.” Her hand pulled into a fist and her jawline set. “Is there anything else you need, Miss Swan?”

“Do you have a screwdriver? Phillips head? I’m going to remove all the cameras from your and Henry’s laptops just in case.”

“In the office. I’ll get you one.”

“Do you mind if I play music?” Emma asked.

Regina made a helpless gesture. “If it helps you, of course you can. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Emma hoped her backdoor search would yield something right away. First, it would be good to provide Henry some piece of mind but also, Regina Mills was unsettling. She sighed and told herself to worry more about the teenaged boy who was getting abused. Henry was an innocent, and someone was taking his lack of knowledge and using it to torture him. She looked up from her scanning long enough to note a small half table with a vase and a picture of mother and son. She walked over to it and took it in her hand, then brought it back to the dining table. Because, this – the smiling boy who looked just a little embarrassed at the way his mother was hugging him, but also like he kind of loved it – THIS was the only thing she should be thinking about.

She heard Regina’s returning footsteps and could almost hear the frown she was surely giving at the new placement of the picture. “Miss Swan…,” she began.

“Motivation,” Emma explained. “Henry, right?” She motioned to the picture.

Regina gave a slow nod and carefully laid a screwdriver on the table.

“Is it okay that I moved it?” Emma asked.

“It’s fine.”

Emma brought up Itunes and the Proclaimers began to sing about walking 500 miles.
Emma Swan kept spreading out, Regina observed a few hours later, like a blonde plague descending upon her orderly home. Emma kept some things in the office despite Regina moving them for easier accessibility. In addition, Emma’s other odds and ends were slowly taking up the entire dining room table. The woman didn’t seem to require any organization at all. For example, she scanned Regina’s phone, then Henry’s iPad. What logical sense did that make? Shouldn’t there be some sort of order? Still, a large part of her didn’t care if Emma left all her things scattered around the whole of Storybrooke - as long as she stopped Peter Pan.

A small voice inside bemoaned the mess. She began cleaning out the cabinets in the kitchen to pacify it. It needed something - she needed something useful to do.

She’d made a list of to do’s after Emma arrived. The list took up a full page but it didn’t satisfy Regina. She called Belle, instructing her to stop by with printouts from the office computer. The list grew to a page and a half. Frustrated, she abandoned it for later and aimed the weapon of her focus at the kitchen. She started with the oven, scrubbing inside at spots so small they may have been imagined. She strove for perfection - gleaming, shining perfection. She then dismantled the contents of her cabinets. She put out a box for items to donate to charity. She had too much, she decided. Far too many things to keep track of. She would simplify.

She kept moving, kept going till she filled the first box, then got another.

She stopped when Belle brought lunch. Sandwiches and soup. The young woman was a dear, and Regina would make sure to acknowledge that in Belle’s Christmas bonus. Regina could have gone to the office for a few hours. She’d be able to use the internet there. But she couldn’t bear leaving when Emma could have news at any moment.

Emma’s question about the hacker’s punishment circled in her mind - a shark on the prowl for some juicy idea that would sate it. Her father had left her a large trust fund when he died. It gave her options. She could imagine letting her darker alter ego free to deal with this man who was hurting her son. She’d relish every moment.

But afterwards, could she put the old her back in her prison? If not, where did that leave her? Where did it leave Henry?

“We’re both alone.” At five years old, he’d held her hand at his father’s funeral and said those words.

Henry melted her from the first time they’d met. He’d taken what she’d come to think of as her chair in Granny’s diner. She didn’t point it out but stayed alert, ready to take it when they left.

Regina ordered fish. Henry turned to her and asked why she would eat such a thing, his face scrunching up with disapproval. His father didn’t immediately stop the boy, so after several questions Regina corrected his prying behaviour.

“But if I don’t pry, how will I ever learn anything?” He asked, astutely.

Smiling had become a rarity in her life, but Henry made her smile without effort. Later, his father apologized for his son’s nosiness and explained they’d only be in town for a few days. She wished now she’d asked the father more questions. A car accident on an icy road took the man’s life when
he and Henry were leaving Storybrooke.

Local and state agencies looked for any other relatives Henry might have, sending notices to police stations throughout the U.S. No one had stepped forward to claim him. He stayed with her while they tried to sort out what to do with him. More accurately, she used her money and influence to ensure that he was placed in her care.

“Am I staying here?” Henry asked several months later when she came to tuck him in.

“I don’t know. Do you want to?” Henry had looked at her with sad eyes and shrugged. He did that a lot after his father died. She knelt by the bed so she was at his eye-level. “I’m not sure I’d be a good guardian for you.” Guardian, she said, not mother. “Some people are warm and friendly. I’m not. I’m used to being alone. And I - I don’t think I know how to love very well.”

He had squinted at her, quiet for a long time. “Maybe I can teach you,” The sweetness of his absolute sincerity, unafraid and total almost made her laugh. What else could she do when faced with a little boy who, after losing everything, made that kind of promise to her. Her, the woman whom the newspapers had once called “the Evil Queen”. What else could you do but laugh? Or cry. Regina did both.

“Maybe you can,” she whispered back, tears trying to steal her vision from her, stubbornness a barrier against their falling.

“We’re both alone.” They were the same words he’d said to her at his father’s funeral.

“Maybe we don’t have to be,” she told him. He lurched for her, hugging her hard, curling close. It had been four months since his father’s funeral. Four months since he’d willingly reached for her or anyone. He chose her. She knew she didn’t deserve it, but he did.

Regina sat back at the kitchen table, withdrawing from the memory. In a million moments since then, just by loving her, he’d woven inside her the idea of who she might be. She liked that person, if only she could find her. That was her measure, the person she wanted to be in Henry’s eyes on one side of the scale, who she was now on the other. Henry loved her without blinking. He loved her without waiting. He loved her without limitations. In return she loved him in with an imperfect heart, but she loved him with all of it.

It took time to earn the title “mom” from him. To stop being Regina and become “mom”. Such a small word, so entirely essential to her now.

She checked the clock and saw it was time to pick him up. She bid goodbye to Emma and drove to the middle school.

Henry usually bounded into the car chattering away. Over a week ago, that changed. Regina should have asked more questions. She’d let him down by asking only a few, then accepting his uncharacteristic reticence as part of him becoming a teenager. Today, he sank into the passenger seat and tugged the door shut. He didn’t say anything.

“Emma started running scans on our computers,” Regina told him. Some statements weren’t what they appeared to be. This one pleaded with him to talk to her.

He nodded his head but didn’t say a word.
Happy Thursday once again, everyone! Welcome to another installment of the 'The Love Hack'. Hope this week finds you well and that you don't have the same cold I do at the moment. I want to thank you all for your continued support. All of the reviews and Kudos mean more than you can imagine.

This week we begin a period of mild turbulence but there's also an all you can drink virtual margarita bar. And free virtual hats too.

Day 2 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker

The first day went by slowly. Regina left to run an errand before picking up her son from school. Emma decided it was time to call in the big guns to make sure she was headed in the right direction. The big guns, as it turned out, were more than happy to help.

“Of course we can help,” her former foster mother said, her face shining with excitement on the computer screen.

“Is that Emma?” Her former foster father asked off screen. Emma added him to the Skype call a moment later.

Between Mary Margaret and David, Mary Margaret was the stronger hacker. They had adopted the handles of “Snow White” and “Charming” back in college, soon after they had gotten together. They’d kept those names ever since. It was either sweet or kinda sickening, depending on Emma’s mood. David had been in IT security for most of his career. Snow had been on the not-so-legal side of things for a while. She had long ago confided to Emma that sometimes – very rarely – she would still veer slightly into less than legal territory. But only for the “greater good.”

Like extra coupons.

Emma needed their help. She knew that Snow - at least initially - would want to talk about personal things. Mostly Emma didn’t mind. It was just that Snow could be like a dog with a bone. She didn’t need to talk about her birthday gifts; she needed to ask for their help. And preferably before Henry and Regina got home.

“Wait - you didn’t mention your birthday present.”

Of course Emma hadn’t. It made her feel guilty that she dodged their calls around holidays and made excuse after excuse not to go see them. She didn’t do “close”, not in the way they wanted. Her lack of consistency kept their expectations of low, or so she hoped.

“You got it, didn’t you? Did you like it?”
“You got me the Lost Girl boxset. What’s not to like? But - this is the third lesbian related gift over the last few birthdays. All of them love stories sooo…what are you trying to tell me?”

Mary Margaret protested any hidden motive, while David insisted that the gifts were all her idea. “I wanted to get you an external hard drive,” he said. David was generous-hearted and allowed Emma her freedom. Mary Margaret was down-to-earth and thoughtful, but she pushed. It made Emma shy away from her.

Besides, she’d met David first. He’d been a volunteer at the computer center at the high school where she finished ninth grade. They’d bonded over their love of transforming the nothingness of bits and bytes into games and programs. David delighted in the small success Emma had when she used her skills. He encouraged her and even bought her a book. He had faith in her. Snow hadn’t come into the picture until Emma was fifteen, when she and David became her foster parents. Emma was sure they were either fixated on “saving” her, which she didn’t need, or that they would realize it was a mistake and back out. They hadn’t. Their motives confused Emma to this day.

Snow broke into her thoughts. “Emma, we just want you to feel supported. Your sexual identity is still fairly new.”

Emma made a face. “Can we not talk about my sexual identity right now, please?”

“Okay then, when are you coming to visit us?” Mary Margaret asked. Snow and Emma shared a brief stare down. The words poked at things they never talked about. David and Mary Margaret never challenged Emma on her absences, on her retreats and withdraws from them. When weeks went by without a word from Emma and Emma suddenly showed up again, they never questioned her.

“You can’t just throw yourself into whatever job you are working on, Emma.” Mary Margaret said, more gently. “That can’t be your life.”

“I didn’t call you to talk about me.”

“No, and David and I will help you whatever we can, you know that. But, I’m your -” So many words for their relationship, but not one that totally worked, Emma thought. “Friend.“

“So as my friend, you should listen to my request to not lecture me about my life right now.”

“I’m lecturing you about your lack of a life. Who else will lecture you, if I don’t?”

Emma wished she had a comeback to that last part. She didn’t.

“Okay!” David said, breaking in. “Why don’t we focus in on what Emma needs?” Emma felt the same gratitude she always did when he took things at face value and tried to give her whatever she had asked for. Things were uncomplicated with him; there was no baggage, just him accepting and trying to support her as best he could. He never pushed.

She explained the situation and sent the emails Henry had received to both of them. Regina likely wouldn’t have liked it if she knew.

“I’m looking at the file you sent.” David said, after a few minutes, a deep frown on his face and a flash of anger in his eyes. “This is...Emma, I still have friends in the F.B.I. Are you sure you shouldn’t have help on this one?”

“David, I have friends in the F.B.I. It’s a no go. Not yet. Miss Mills is a very private person. We find the guy, then we’ll see.”
Snow spoke up for the first time since she’d opened the emails. “You said Regina Mills?” she asked hesitantly. “And the town you’re in is Storybrooke?”

“Yeah.”

David cut off that topic for now. “I’m sending you an update to your scanner from one I put together. It will net you about 200 other Trojans.”

“Cool,” Emma mused. “Uber Scanner!”

“When did you say this started?” Snow asked.

“Couple months ago.”

“I’m on Ratzforum.com now.” Snow murmured, distracted as she began different directed searches of the site.

“Better you than me,” Charming said to his wife with a sigh. “That whole site makes my stomach turn.”

Emma had never been to the site but she’d heard of it. It was where amateur computer hackers traded their secrets. A lot of it was private so it couldn’t be searched unless you were a member. She guessed that Snow likely was; she liked to keep up-to-date on things in the hacking world.

“I’ll keep poking around while you run the scan with David’s additions. We’ll keep at this and help with the research,” Snow said, blue eyes spilling over with empathy. David was the one who offered steady acceptance but Snow, she seemed to understand Emma in a way Emma didn’t understand herself. Emma needed a win. Badly. It looked like Snow knew it.

She always got the feeling that Mary Margaret understood her hacktivism better than David did. Yet when she had been arrested and they flew down to see her, her foster mother was furious in a way Emma had never seen her. Mary Margaret ranted about how Emma was throwing away her future, how this could mean years of her life down the drain, and how foolish she had been. David, who usually would have tried to pacify her, let her go on. They both hugged her as they left. To Emma it seemed like they were saying goodbye.

She was certain, when they left the visiting lounge that day, that she’d never see them again. Surely, they would walk away from their daughter now that a potential felony she admitted to was hanging over her head. Surely, she’d finally let them down enough for them to abandon her. Instead, they’d been there every step of the way. Snow had never again expressed her anger over Emma’s crime. They didn’t desert her, and Emma, while not understanding it, would never forget it.

At the same time, a part of her hadn’t let go of the fear that one day she’d find something - some random thing - that would make them leave her.

“Yeah, we’ll keep at it.” Charming echoed. “Why don’t we all touch base tonight?”

“This is my job, I don’t mean to take you away from what you guys are doing. I just thought you might have some tips. I just don’t want to miss anything.”

“Do you mind our help?” David asked, checking in that they weren’t overstepping.

“I’ll take any help i can get.” She answered.

“Good. 7 o’clock tonight work?” he asked and they all agreed it did.
Emma heard the garage door open and a few moments later, two car doors were opening then slamming shut. “Okay, call you in few hours. The kid and Miss Mills are home,” Emma told them, and waved right before she ended the call.

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Henry Mills was loud. This was likely because he was a thirteen year old boy, but it amused Emma all the same. Henry scampered into the house with squeaking sneakers. He set his backpack down with an echoing thud. He took off his jacket and strode into the dining room, sounding a bit like a baby elephant on skates.

Much more sedately, Regina followed behind him and corrected him on where his jacket belonged. Henry looked at his mother in absolute exasperation, but he took hold of the offending article of clothing and put it in the coat closet.

“Miss Swan, this is my son Henry. He wanted to meet you.”

Emma held out her hand to Henry. “Hey, Henry,” she greeted as he took her hand. But he didn’t hold it for very long and he didn’t meet her gaze.

“Miss Swan,” he muttered. Wowzers, he had the expression of someone who had just been introduced to an evil stepmother.

“Um, maybe just Emma?” she asked, looking to Regina to clear the request. She couldn’t tell if Regina agreed or not so she looked back to the boy.

“Did Mom show you the emails?”

Emma paused a moment, trying to find a good answer. Regina had asked her not to let Henry know what Emma had seen. “She told me about them.”

“Mom said you’re a hacker.”

“I used to be.”

“But you went to prison ’cause of what you did.”

“Henry,” Regina said softly, a reminder that this was a highly inappropriate question.

“You stole money,” Henry said, and it was an accusation.

“Henry, we talked about this,” Regina tried again.

Emma suddenly saw the correlation. One bad hacker was trying to extort money from him, and she was another hacker who had stolen money. In Henry’s eyes, it must have seemed like almost the same thing. Was it? She didn’t want to think so but her world view was still reforming after being blown apart.

“I hacked into the accounts of some very rich people who I thought had cheated some very poor people and I kind of forced them to give to lots of money to charity.”

His intelligent eyes narrowed. “So, it wasn’t stealing?”
“It was. I was wrong doing what I did. I did it because I was frustrated and angry. And I wanted to stop people that I thought were too strong to be stopped in the usual ways.”

“You mean like going to the police,” he observed. “Yeah, they didn’t help me and my mom much either.”

“The law moves slow,” Emma agreed. “But what I did? It didn’t really solve anything. The people I was trying to stop, they just had a bad month, and then? They were fine. I cost them some money but I’m sure they’ve made it back by now.” Her shoulders shrugged. “So my way wasn’t any better and it didn’t help. And I spent 18 months in jail.”

He tilted his head and watched her again, and that look reminded Emma of his mother. It was like he was trying to see into her soul. “You know what he said he’d do? D-do you think – do you think he means it?”

Regina approached her son and set her hand on his shoulder. “Henry, nothing is going to happen,” she said gently.

“He might,” Emma countered at the same time, causing Regina to gape at her. But Emma believed in telling the truth and studiously avoided looking at Henry’s mother. “But your mom and I? We got this.” She looked to Regina. “Right?”

Regina’s fingers drifted through her son’s hair and she smiled quietly down at him. “Absolutely.” She turned that same smile on Emma briefly. A moment of approval, possibly a doorway into friendlier, less awkward relations between the two of them. It was over in a blink but maybe, just maybe. The Pertential scale went up a percentage point as warmth coiled inside Emma.

Henry nodded and seemed a little more hopeful now. He inspected Emma’s laptop. “Are you online? Mom said we can’t be online. How come you are?”

“My computer is mega-protected.” She patted her laptop fondly. “VPNs, Advanced Intrusion Detection, several firewalls. I’ll set you up the same way before I leave.”

He nodded, having satisfied his curiosity. He started to move toward the stairs, then paused. “So, when this is over, would you be a guest on my YouTube channel?” He didn’t smile but but there was a spark there that hadn’t been there the moment before. “I mean, if I decide to keep doing it.”

“Sure thing, kid.”

Regina didn’t actually smile at her but there was a softening of her gaze. Emm felt like she had won something. Regina used her arm around Henry’s shoulder to steer him up the stairs, talking quietly with him as she did.

A few minutes later, Regina came back down. “I’m sorry if he was too forward. He’s usually much more polite.”

“Nah, if anyone’s entitled to be suspicious of strangers, it’s him.”

“Henry’s always been very trusting. When I met him and his father, he introduced himself to me immediately without prompting. And then, he was full of questions. He’s usually like that with adults. With kids his own age though, it’s hard for him.”

“Is it just you and Henry?”

“It is. His father died eight years ago. We weren’t involved. I was told his father was a musician, and
they travelled a lot. Henry keeps a map in his room tracking all the places he’s been. At any rate, it’s just us.” Regina didn’t say more and Emma didn’t ask. Politeness might be a mystery sometimes but other times, it slapped even her. “Is there anything you need? Anything I can do?”

There wasn’t. Regina excused herself to begin making dinner.

David and Mary Margaret called her on Skype a few hours later. They hadn’t found much, but Emma could tell there was something they wanted to tell her.

“Soooo Emma,” David began conversationally, but he sucked at subtlety. “We did find out some things on your new boss.”

Emma looked at the screen, eyes narrowing. “What do you mean you ‘found out’?”


“Which you probably should have thought to do too, in this day and age,” David pointed out, prodding Emma for agreement. Snow’s microphone was suddenly muted and David turned his head to yell. “Mary Margaret, I’m just trying to say that she shouldn’t show up alone at some strange woman’s house without exercising caution. Just like no one should show up at a stranger’s house who posts an ad on Craig’s list that says ‘Cosplay ballgown, must pick up at my home’ without proper caution.”

Over David’s mic, Emma heard Snow yell out. “That was one time. And it was a beautiful gown.”

“You two are in the same house,” Emma observed wryly. “Can you not just get up and walk ten feet?”

Snow’s mic unmuted. “Sorry about that.” She straightened in her chair. “Regina Mills has something of an unsavory past.” Emma glanced toward the kitchen where she had last seen (or more accurately, heard) her employer and her son. They’d been having dinner and Regina asked if she would like a plate. Emma took it as another positive sign, much like their brief moment a few hours ago.

“You mean like, say, two of the three people in this conversation?” Emma questioned ironically, lowering her voice and turning down the volume a little on her computer.

Snow was undaunted. “When you told me her name, I thought I recognized it, so I did some digging. I also checked what’s been going on in Storybrooke the last few years. It took a while for me to find a current picture of her but when I did…”

“Have you heard of the Mills family?” David asked.

Emma just blinked at the screen. “Um, no?”

“The Mills family.” Snow repeated, like she believed Emma would suddenly remember. “You know all those hotels with one word names like ‘Calm - a Mills Luxury Resort Hotel’ or ‘Queen - a Mills Luxury Resort Hotel’.”

“I think they have one that’s called Magic, too,” David added.
“Oh yeah, that one’s in Florida, I think,” Snow said. “Family size jacuzzi in every suite and a butler assigned to every floor.”

Emma ran her fingers through her already messy hair. “So she’s rich?”

“Emma, her family has billions.”

“I fail to see why that’s bad.”

“Doesn’t it make you wonder why she lives in a small town like Storybrooke?” David asked. Emma hadn’t and he read it on her face. He grumbled about “safety” under his breath. “Her family had a foundation to fight cancer. Regina was the president of the foundation for a couple years, until it was discovered that a lot of the funds never went where they were supposed to. She resigned and went off the grid.”

Emma’s brows knot together. “She stole from people with cancer?”

“She embezzled millions. Or she was ‘accused’,” Snow made air quotes with her fingers. “The money completely disappeared.”

“How much?” Emma asked.

David glanced to his computer screen then said, “a few million.”

Snow took up the story. “She stepped down as head of the organization. No charges ever filed. She could be innocent.” Mary Margaret was sincere about leaving a little room for that possibility. She hated wealth and power and had said more than once that she should have been born in the 60’s and not the 70’s.

“Yeah, right,” David was big into law and order.

“David,” Snow rebuked. She sometimes reminded him that he sounded like his father when he talked that way. David did not get along with his father. “Emma was also accused of stealing millions, remember?”

“But Emma did it. She was guilty.” David argued then looked at the screen, wincing. “Sorry, Emma. Anyway, Emma didn’t do it for personal gain.”

“I’m just saying that we don’t have all the facts.” Snow reasoned.

“Okay so,” Emma steered them back to the topic. “She - might have stolen millions - and then winds up mayor of a small town?”

“She was supposed to be gearing herself up for politics before her fall from grace.” Mary Margaret continued. “She had a reputation, Emma. I read a story about a guy spending weeks, including weekends, coming up with a marketing campaign for her charity. Regina listened to his pitch for two minutes then the told him to take all the papers and posters he’d created and lean it up against a fire hydrant for dogs to pee on because that was all it was good for. She berated people in job interviews if they didn’t answer her fast enough. And, they say she pretty much only used part-time employees at the foundation and when she used to run one of her family’s hotels. That way, she didn’t have to pay benefits.”

“Her employees called her the ‘Ice Queen’,” David added. “We found a few old Reddit threads dedicated to stories about her from former employees. None of them are good.”
Emma stopped. “Wait, wait - I’m here for Henry.”


Emma did feel more cautious now. Less trusting. But, she called herself out for being a hypocrite. “I’m here to do a job,” she reasoned. “Hopefully it won’t take long and then I’ll never see her again.”

“You’d be out of here even sooner if you actually did your job instead of gossiping.” A voice hissed from behind her. Emma shut her eyes briefly, and then turned to face the seething visage of her employer. Regina moved toward her swiftly and slammed the laptop shut. She glared at Emma, and if looks could kill, Emma would be chopped up into tiny, itty bitty pieces. “Henry,” she said a little more quietly and with great restraint. “Could you go upstairs and do your homework please?”

Emma had been so focused on the demon of fury in designer shoes she hadn’t seen Henry hovering behind her in the doorway of the kitchen.

He looked at his mom and then Emma, and Emma could swear he shot her a sympathetic look. “Mom? I know you’re angry but there’s 3 more days, right? That’s how long we have.”

“Henry, I need you to let me handle this.”

“Mom,” he insisted again. “We only have three days. You told me she was really good.”

Regina bent slightly before him and cupped his chin. Her face softened and her eyes shone. She looked at her son like he could save the world just by standing in it. “Henry. Nothing is going to happen. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you.” He sounded more like someone who wanted to believe, wanted to hold on to believing in things that were impossible, like Santa Claus and wishes on shooting stars. Regina bore the weight of it in a way no one ever had for Emma, and she kissed his forehead before urging him upstairs again.

Once she heard his door close, Emma jumped to her own defense. “Look, I don’t know what you heard but - ”

“Henry wanted to check on your progress before going upstairs to do his homework.”

“I’m scanning.”

“Interesting. That’s exactly what you were doing this morning.”

“Well, it does take time to run,” she broke off her explanation. “You’re going to fire me aren’t you?”

Regina’s dark eyes attacked Emma with contempt. “Oh Miss Swan, you have no idea how much I would love to have the luxury of firing you.”

Just like that - whatever thaw had begun between them became a wall of ice.
Greetings all! Happy Thursday again. So, today we continue with the tension. So again, turbulence warning. Don’t worry we’ll get through it...soonish. This is your captain speaking, free drinks at the virtual bar for all those who need it. The bright spot I can offer is that often conflict leads to understanding. So, yanno, keep that in mind.

Thanks again for the love in Kudos or comments form. Please keep that coming as you can so I know you're out there and what you think. Also, special welcome to those that live in places that are particularly harsh to the GLBT community. I hope this story gives you a little bit of light and that you know darkness never lasts.

Of course, Regina thought, she came upon Emma while Emma’s friends, or whoever they were, told “evil Regina” stories. And of course Henry heard. For eight years no one had mentioned her past. She purposefully intimidated most of the people in town by acting aloof and above them. It served as protection like she knew it would, like it always had. The citizens of Storybrooke were too afraid or too polite to mention her background, or they were ignorant of it. It allowed her to compartmentalize her life into “before Henry” and “after Henry”. Everything that happened before him she threw in a pit, buried it in gravel, and cemented over it. As years went by, she could hear it deep inside her but pretended she couldn’t.

But now she couldn’t pretend. Now, her son had gotten a look inside that tomb. She couldn’t stop it, this drilling into her truths. The hurricane of the outside world battering against the life she had tried to build spared nothing from its fury. She just wanted it to stop. To leave her and her son alone. It took her a beat to recover from the speed of the wind, caught up in it and tossed about by it.

Enough, Regina told herself, forcing herself to stop tumbling about. The poise ground into her all her life served her well. Her hands folded before her and her body became a straight, rigid line. Although Henry tried to pacify her she ordered him upstairs. Emma began her excuses but she had no patience for them.

“You’re going to fire me, aren’t you?”

Regina’s dark eyes attacked Emma with contempt. “Oh Miss Swan, you have no idea how much I would love to have the luxury of firing you. I think there’s been some confusion. Perhaps I was too ambiguous when I offered you this job?” The false smile punctuating the question turned into a sneer. “You are here to help my son. You are not here to research me, Miss Swan. Nor are you here
to gossip. I am happy to use smaller words if that is too complicated a concept for you.”

“No, no, I got it. I’m really so ——”

“The story you heard is true.” Regina tried to sound almost pleasant. “Everything your friends said about me is entirely accurate. If you had worked at for me years ago, I would have held a staff meeting just to make an example of you. ‘This is Emma’,,” she waved her hand towards the hacker, “‘a shining example of a lack of professionalism.’ I would have made you apologize. To me. To them. I would have made you beg for your job. And then, of course, I would have fired you.” Every word brimmed with satisfaction. The old her peddled the addictive memory of power to her. Back then, her little demonstrations had felt good. Justified. The best way to keep control.

She’d told Henry the type of person she’d been, but she hadn’t given him specifics. He would want to know if the fire hydrant story was true. She didn’t know what to say. She could confess, but it would be like getting away with a ticket for jaywalking when she’d just robbed a bank. That story didn’t even crack the top hundred worst things she’d ever done to her employees or those around her.

“You should wonder, Miss Swan, if I can go that far to do what is best for business, imagine what I would do to protect my son. If our privacy is violated any more than it already has been or if you don’t do exactly what you came here to do, imagine what I could do to someone with your history. I read an article once that said that deep down, on some level, people grow to enjoy the structure in prison, the routine. I have always wondered if that were true.”

Emma burst out of her seat and into Regina’s personal space. “Lady, what the fuck do you think I’m going to do? I’m here to help you. To help Henry. That’s all I want.”

Regina hadn’t expected indignation from Emma. She hated being surprised. She stared her down, refusing to be cowed and seething that Emma would challenge her. “Back away, Miss Swan.”


“Are you quite finished?”

“Sorry. Just, God, you don’t have to come out with guns blazing, okay? I’m on your side.”
With a dismissive snort, Regina walked past her into the living room before facing her again. “Yesterday, I had options. I could have gone to the F.B.I., or legitimate security consultants. Instead, I turned to you.” The words were clipped, tightly controlled. “As there is not a line of ex-hackers outside my door, I’m stuck with you, Miss Swan, whether I chose well or not.”

“Hey. You did choose well.”

Regina pinched the bridge of her nose as the haughtiness in her bearing threatened to come apart, leaving behind the weary mother. No, she urged herself. Be stronger. She couldn’t keep herself and her hands still as she usually did. She paced towards the fireplace and waited until she had firmly screwed her authoritarian guise back into place. “That remains to be seen. I have lost an entire day. I have three left. If you don’t have results for me by tomorrow, I will reevaluate.”

Emma intercepted Regina so that she had to look at her, shocking her again even though she was careful not to get too close this time. “I’m good at this. I’m really, really good at this,” Emma said softly. Emma couldn’t play poker to save her life. Everything showed in her eyes - the plea for Regina’s faith and the apology that she’d caused her to doubt.

“My friends both work in cyber security. I didn’t call them to gossip. I called because I knew they could help. But you’re right, I should have shut them up.”

Emma’s phone, still on the dining room table rang, the Disney theme of ‘When you wish upon a star’ flowing between their locked eyes.

“Sorry. That’s them, probably worried. They can wait.” Emma leaned against the mantle of the fireplace and gave a hapless shrug of her shoulders, the song continuing in the background. “You weren’t wrong to pick me.”

Regina advanced so that they stood no more than a foot apart. “Then show me.”

Regina abandoned the conversation, certain she had made her point, and went up the stairs. She paused before Henry’s door, knowing she had to talk to him about what he heard. She shuddered, feeling the person she used to be clinging to her as she tried to shove her back into the pit. Right now, slipping into the old Regina required no effort, and it gave her super powers. She could conquer. She could avenge. She could make the world bend according to her will and damn the consequences. She thought about Henry, using him to chase the past away. But without it, she felt so weak. So tired.
The Disney music abruptly halted but she didn’t hear Emma’s voice. She leaned her head on Henry’s door. Her composure was like a plastic bag meant to manage whatever it carried. It held her reputation in this town. The conversation with Gold, all the times she had pushed Emma, her determination to carry on with her duties as mayor so no one would know anything was wrong, and the calm she portrayed to Henry - all of it loaded the bag down. Composure had never failed the old version of her. Since coming to Storybrooke though, it had never carried half this much. It stretched out now, bulging dangerously.

She straightened, cupping her hands together and willing the bag to carry more as her nails dug into her knuckles. After another moment, she knocked on Henry’s door.

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A few hours later, Emma decided that one of her top grievances against her foster parents involved dinner. Regina, before she’d overheard Emma’s Skype call, had promised to bring her a plate of spinach and mushroom stuffed chicken. It smelled amazing and it had been a long, long time since Emma had eaten a home-cooked meal. Emma, now consigned to the icy north of Regina’s trust, never did get dinner. She bitterly chewed a candy bar.

The clearing of a throat caught her attention. She looked toward the stairs to see that Henry had crept about halfway down.

“Are you still in trouble?” He mouthed to Emma, mindful of his mother within earshot.

“Pretty much,” Emma mouthed back.

He pointed to the various junk food leavings on the table. "Maybe clean that up," he suggested silently.

Emma flashed him the “Ok” sign.

“Homework, Henry.” Regina’s voice ambushed them from inside her bedroom, behind a closed door.

Henry looked up back up the stairs and gave a frustrated groan. “I don’t know how she always hears me. I can’t sneak cookies either,” he said then scampered back up the stairs.
By the time Regina came down to check on Emma’s progress before bed, Emma had cleaned up. She’d even neatly stacked the various devices she was using. And she’d made decaf coffee. She presented her best winning smile, hoping that it might, by its sheer friendliness and confidence, prove that she wasn’t a complete fuck-up. Deep down, Emma knew it was asking way, way too much of a simple smile.

“I made coffee if you…” she began.

Regina was unmoved by Emma’s repentant behavior. “Do you have anything new to tell me?”

“No, not yet.” Emma started to give Regina more information on what she was doing, trying to warm things up between them just a little. “I’m trying to…”

“I see.” Regina’s stare chilled Emma.

Emma’s words during the confrontation earlier had been a show of bravado, utterly and completely. Her Pertential scale still hovered at 30. She wanted to believe that she could do this. She told herself she could. Yet both the hope and the pep talk were empty bottles she wished would fill with something real.

Emma was almost relieved when Regina said emotionlessly, “Please inform me if you do happen to make progress,” and moved up the stairs without bothering to tell Emma goodnight.

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Day 3 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker

All through the next day and into the early evening, Regina left Emma to her own devices, save to check in periodically. The same conversation happened each time:

“Do you have any new information?” Regina would ask, one eyebrow raised.

“Not yet.” Emma would answer, the two words she didn’t want to say dragged from her tongue.

Regina’s eyes broadcast ice. “I see.”
Emma hadn’t slept the night before, re-writing her scanning code from scratch and programming in more and more variations. It now took twice as long to run. But it still came back with the same result - nothing. She even took an extreme option. She re-installed Henry’s camera, connected his p.c. to the internet, and used a program to monitor for intruders. Nothing there either. The computer faced the wall even now, waiting.

Henry came to sit with her before going to do his homework. He stared at the laptop now and then, as if it had become an alien that might attack him at any moment.

“Can we talk with it on?” He asked, worried.

“I didn’t put the mic back in.”

“And he can’t do anything else?”

“No way. The minute he tries, I’ll see it and stop him. Okay?” He nodded, frowning, not entirely believing her. That seemed to be a theme with the Mills family that last day or so. Emma didn’t blame them.

Henry stayed a little bit longer, and reminded her, “Remember, Mom doesn’t like messes. Don’t get in more trouble.” He motioned to the various debris on the table. Good kid, Emma thought and grinned after him as he trudged up the stairs.

After he left, she broke down and returned David and Mary Margaret’s phone calls. They had each called twice. She had let each call go to voicemail, and though guilt battered her immediately, it took the entire day to wear her down.

“I know you were just worried,” Emma told them as they appeared on her screen. It was seven o’clock at night. Emma was on her seventh Mountain Dew and took a long sip.

“Are you sure you don’t want us to apologize to Regina?” David asked.

Emma shook her head more than was probably necessary. “That sounds like a really bad idea.”
“We’re so sorry, Emma,” Snow said.

“So – are we forgiven for almost getting you fired?” David asked, at the same moment.

“You owe me pizza. Good pizza. And ice cream.”

Snow paused, frowning. “Emma, when did you last sleep or eat? That’s – that’s an absurd amount of Mountain Dew cans.”

“Not absurd.” Emma looked at the debris of cans near her and the three candy bar wrappers. Okay, maybe it was a little like a homage to caffeinated beverages that came in green cans. She checked the clock for the first time in she wasn’t even sure how long. “Um…it’s been...” She didn’t know. Hours. Hours, for sure. She rubbed at her eyes, realizing that they were tired of staring at screens. “I’ll get dinner after we talk,” she soothed.

“You promise?” Mary Margaret pressed.

Emma made a show of crossing her heart and hung up soon after. The intrusion alert she’d set up for Henry’s computer went off but it was a false alarm. She decided to recode the alerts and that turned her words to Mary Margaret about getting food into a lie. She forgot.

Regina stopped in for her last check-in before she went to bed. “Do you have any new information?”

“Not yet.”

They stared at one another and the wall of ice between them doubled in thickness. “The hacker’s deadline is two days away. You are aware of that?”

Not including today, Emma countered in her head. It didn’t seem worth mentioning. “I get it. I know things are getting down to the wire.”

“I have a phone appointment with a security consultant in the morning.”
Her throat constricted, the noose of Regina’s mistrust and the looming deadline tightening around her neck. She swallowed and it hurt. “I have security consultants working with me.” It may have sounded like a challenge; instead the words were a flailing attempt to give Regina a reason not to give up on her.

“Nonetheless, at this point a contingency plan is needed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Emma checked the clock, and though it read midnight she texted David: “Am I in over my head?”

It took a few minutes for him to text her back: “Emma, you’re doing everything you can. You’ll figure this out. Do you need to talk?”

He always knew what to say. Always, since the day they’d met. “No, I’m okay,” she typed into her phone. “We’ll talk tomorrow.” She ended the conversation with the one thing she didn’t say to them enough. “Thank you David.”
Happy Thursday Everyone! Once again, you all amaze me with your response to this story. Thank you for the comments, KUDOs, etc. It makes the muse happy and when the muse is happy....er....it's happy.

I thought it was worth mentioning that this story has three sections (or arcs) and we're over halfway through the first one. And just to do that baiting thing I do sometimes. Chapter 9 is titled, "Part 9 - The one where Regina gets revenge – kind of".

This is your captain speaking and it's clear skies for us today. Turbulence seems to be clearing up. For now.

*Day 4 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker*

Early the next morning Emma heard Regina call for Henry to wake up for school and then heard them both moving around above her. She had again been up all night. After breakfast, which Regina hadn’t offered to Emma, the phone rang. Regina greeted her assistant then asked her to hold on a moment so she could make sure Henry had all the essentials - books, lunch, goodbye kiss. Emma gave Henry a hangdog look, letting him know that his advice hadn’t worked. He gave her a “hang in there” face and waved to her as he left for school.

“No, don’t. I’ll come in.” Regina finished her phone conversation and left no more than five minutes later without checking in with Emma. Both the lack of communication and the fact that Regina left Emma alone in her home raised a red flag. Regina didn’t seem the trusting sort. Still, it could be that she was going to call the security consultants she had an appointment with and didn’t want Emma to hear for some reason.

When Regina came home two hours later, something was different. Something more than the frozen tundra that had been born between them yesterday.

“I made coffee. Again,” Emma said.

Regina ignored her coffee peacemaking attempt. Again. “I’ll be in the kitchen,” she said and ducked into the garage on her way, arming herself with a mop and a bucket.
A bit later Emma heard the sound of something being dragged coming from the kitchen. She paused, fingers hovering over her keyboard, then decided to check it out. In the kitchen, Regina strained to move the refrigerator. She’d already managed to move it about a foot. Without a word, Emma tried to pitch in and help, but the moment Emma touched the fridge Regina stopped. She pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and slumped into it.

“He wrote again,” Regina whispered.

Emma didn’t shock easily, not after all she’d been through. The last time she’d felt this shaken was when the judge gavelled her prison sentence. She sat down at the table, dazed, and wondered how Peter Pan could be such a complete and utter bastard.

“I’m glad that you routed Henry’s mail to my work email, Miss Swan.” Regina’s voice rose a little. A glance toward Emma before her eyes were directed away, back to staring at nothing. “This morning my assistant called. She’s been checking my mail for me since I can’t connect here. She told me Peter Pan had written. He originally gave us five days to reply to him. This is the third day. He sent an email saying that he missed seeing Henry online. He offered us three more days on the deadline but this time, he included another photo of Henry to prove he was serious.”

“Three days from when?”

“The original deadline.”

“So we have five days, not counting today.” Emma calculated. “Do you have the e-mail?”

“No. The photo was explicit. I debated whether you needed to see it or the email, given that you have several emails already.”

“Miss Mills,” Emma protested. “I can’t help you if…”

“Do you think any of this is easy for me, Miss Swan?” Regina sounded stretched to her limits. If anyone was in her line of fire when she snapped, God help them. “Letting a stranger see and know things that are deeply personal to me and my family. Having to sit here while you go through devices that contain sensitive information about our everyday lives. Having you here at all, especially when you feel the need to drudge up my past where my son can hear.”
“That was an accident.”

“So you said.”

“I do need to see the email,” Emma returned quietly. “None of the other emails have given us anything to go on but, I do need it.”

“He said something else.”

A dark harbinger entered the room, making Emma’s skin feel icy. She waited, but she knew what terrible news looked like before it was spoken. People paused as they drummed up the courage. They spoke slowly and carefully as if the right words would spare the listener some of what they carried.

“In exchange for the extra time, he decided he wants...he wants....” Regina pressed her hand over her mouth, face pinching till it grew red. “He wants high-resolution video not pictures. Or my son can join him in Skype....” Glistening brown eyes sought out Emma’s. “Where the hacker will get to give him commands on what he wants him to do for five minutes. That’s the new price. The new bargain,” Regina spat out. “This monster wants to hurt my son more than he already has.”

Emma felt a rush of adrenaline, her body telling her that surely there was some action she could take, some great feat that could vanquish this man. The stakes had been raised and they had been high to begin with. Fuck. She couldn’t stay sitting. She couldn’t.

“You know what sucks? This guy is a script kitty. I’m positive he is. Some asshole amateur who borrowed code from someone much more talented than he’ll ever be.” She slapped her hand down on the table, making Regina jump. “And I can’t fucking find how he did what he did. I keep adjusting my script. I’ve read a bunch of articles on the net with suggestions from experts.”

“I suppose then that we should be grateful for the extra time.” She rose, tilted her chin up a little and became very still. “You won’t tell Henry what I told you.”

“Course not.”

“I’ll call Belle and have her send the email to you. I’ll be upstairs until I have to pick up Henry.”
Emma had the bizarre instinct to touch her hand even though Regina had been sending out untouchable vibes from the moment they met. “Wait.” Like the day before, she found herself chasing Regina. “Will you please just give me a chance? Because you haven’t really, not since I got here.”

“I think hiring you would qualify as a ‘chance’.”

“You treat me like I’m a termite colony you can’t get rid of.”

“I treat you like an employee.”

“Which means you constantly act like you have an invisible clipboard and are marking down demerits. It’s a sucky position to be in. You don’t even call me by my first name, which starts with an ‘E’, in case you forgot. We need to start being a team and I need you to trust me a little. Just, a little. Can you do that?”

“I’m not very good at trusting.”

“Join the club. But, we can try.” She extended her hand out to Regina. “Team Henry, right?”

Regina took the offering. “Team Henry.”

A text from Snow buzzed later that night. Wait, was that right? Night? Emma glanced outside and then at the clock on her laptop. It had been early evening when she’d gone out for supplies and now it was hovering just before midnight.

“U free? Nd 2 tlk,” Snow asked. She had taken to using “text speak” about a year ago. David barely understood it and complained when people used it. His wife told him to get with the times and stop being a dinosaur. Emma didn’t use the shorthand either because she didn’t text enough people to have to shorten things.
Emma opened a Skype call and pulled Snow in. David popped up in the call a moment later. The trio didn’t even say hello half the time, their familiarity with one another creating a shorthand. Emma shared the news that the hacker offered them a few more days without going into what he wanted in exchange. She wondered if protecting small, private details of Regina’s life was the same thing as protecting Regina. She hoped so.

“We found out something.” Snow’s expression on the screen was that of someone holding back a dam, waiting for permission to open the floodgates. “You know the forum I have been reading? Three months ago, they started talking about how effective it was to make a video and hide a RAT in the video.”

“They embedded it in a video?” It hadn’t occurred to Emma and she hated herself for not thinking of it.

“They even gave suggestions on what RATs to buy and links where to buy them.” Snow explained. The video seems legit, but it has a stealth RAT baked in.”

“Stealth software. Which is why my tool didn’t find it.” Emma pushed away from the table and stood, like she might storm out of the house to go wreak havoc on someone or something. “This absolutely sucks.”

She said too loudly, berating herself.

“It used to be big-time hacker stuff - the guys from Russia and China used to use it.” David said and, like the others, a frown etched into his features.

Emma heard noises on the staircase but they didn’t really register.

“Well, apparently now it’s available for twenty-five dollars,” Snow added unhappily.

“With the three of us, I’m sure it won’t take that much longer.” David used the soothing version of his voice. Something he sometimes did with her and Snow. “If the big-time hackers are selling it, it means they consider it older code. Those guys don’t give away the tricks of their trade. Not ever. So, they must feel like this software is old hat.”

Emma had seen a movie once where the hero steps into quicksand, which prompted her to google it and figure out how it really worked. She discovered that in quicksand, the more you struggle to get out the more you sink. Doing nothing is the best way to survive, and floating on your back, buoyed above the water and sand, could save your life. She needed money. Even to just lie there and float,
she needed a job. Once she had that she could drift again. Escaping didn’t matter to her as much as peace did.

Until now. Henry and Regina were depending on her so she thrashed and thrashed and just sank deeper. If she screwed this up, as she had so many other things, they’d drown with her. Fuck, she’d misread everything. They didn’t just need someone with technical talent. A lot of people had that. No, they needed someone with skills and tenacity. When the hell had she ever been tenacious? She fled commitment and she avoided conflict. She did only what she had to do so she would be left alone.

Emma pressed her face into her arm and groaned, “I fucked this up. I am fucking this up.”

“Emma, you’re not.” David argued in the most gentle of ways.

Snow started to say something too and Emma couldn’t take it. “Stop. I don’t need you to make me feel better. We have nothing on this guy. *I* have nothing. This fucking guy….and a bunch of Russian or Chinese hacker assholes who created then sold this code. Because, of everything, *this* is the technology needs to be shared.” Emma’s lips clenched as she felt a monsoon of a rant coming on. Her agitation increased until she had to release some of her energy, so she paced around the dining room. “Hey, why not give any idiot out there that has twenty five bucks software that’ll let him spy on me through my vidcam, listen with my microphone – control my PC. Why not? That seems a perfectly wonderful idea because anonymous people on the internet have proven they can be trusted with that kind of power.” She slapped her hand against the open arch to the dining room. “I mean what the hell is the matter with people?”

“An excellent question, Miss Swan,” Regina said, and Emma looked up to see her leaning on one side of the entrance to her dining room. “I heard raised voices. Or, your raised voice.”

Emma glanced around her at the horde of empty cans and junk food leavings. “I’m gonna clean this…”

“Might I ask what a stealth RAT is exactly?”

Apparently Regina had listened to them for a while before speaking. Emma deferred to David, gesturing to him, and Regina moved closer to the computer. “There are two ways stealth usually works. First, you can have a RAT that has a stealth mode or encryption. Second, you can have a RAT written in a language that’s atypical. Like Visual Basic. Also, hi? I’m David Nolan and this is my wife Mary Margaret. We’re with Nolan Securities.”
“I’m Regina Mills, or,” she paused for effect. “The Ice Queen, if you prefer. That is what they used to call me, isn’t it?”

David’s eyes bulged. A fish on the hook, begging the fisherman to throw him back into the safety of the water. “We’re sorry about that.”

“Very sorry,” Snow agreed, mirroring his expression.

Regina turned to Emma. “If this RAT is hiding, how do we find it?”

“I’ve tried all the usual stuff and looked in all the usual places. It could have been downloaded and bound to a legit program. If things were different, I’d suggested a complete reinstall of the operating system.” Everyone glanced at one another, wondering who would say what they all already knew. “I know it’s not an option. I know we need to find him. We’ll keep at it.” She turned back to her foster parents. “Guys, I’m gonna go.”

“Emma – did you actually eat yesterday?” Snow asked. Emma’s guilty face answered the question. “Emma, you promised.”

“Right.” Snow was using her “mom” voice. And often that worked, just not when she was faced with a Regina Mills standing right there. “I’ll talk to you all later, okay?”

“We love you.” Mary Margaret said.

Emma hung up the call without further pleasantries.

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Regina made no pretense of getting into her pajamas. She’d come upstairs earlier to give Henry a sense of routine. Even if she could sleep it seemed wrong, like she was letting him down. What did you do when absolutely nothing felt right? Voices downstairs, loud enough in moments to disturb Henry, gave her a good excuse to get up. She checked her reflection in a long, full length mirror, straightened her shirt, then leaned forward to check her makeup. She frowned, seeing the red in her eyes. Lack of sleep understandably took its toll. It wouldn’t do. It didn’t matter that only Emma would be her audience.
She found eyedrops in the medicine cabinet and put them in both eyes. She dabbed a fingertip in foundation makeup, working on the circles under her eyes, trying to make them disappear. Her pale features were enhanced with blush.

Satisfied, she went to the dining room. Icicles formed inside her with every discouraging word the trio exchanged. Her chin trembled and she had to brace herself on the wall. She told herself what she always did - be stronger. She pulled herself together, a rag doll propped up by a stand. By the time she spoke, she projected herself as a fortress, impenetrable and unbreechable.

After Emma hung up the call, she turned to Regina. “I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to wake you.”

In the new spirit of cooperation, Regina admitted, “You didn’t. Sleep is rare these days.”

Emma nodded very slowly, as if she were operated by batteries and they were wearing down.

“Is it good or bad that we know it’s one of those stealth RATs?” No answer came. “Miss Swan?” Regina prompted.

Emma jerked, brought back to life. “Sorry. I’m not sure. I just...my brain is fried.”

“You’ve been working more or less non-stop for two days. And you’re keeping a diet that would be the envy of any five-year-old.” Emma looked at her screen with that far-off, dazed expression.

Regina laid her fingertips against Emma’s shoulder blade. She tried for a smile. “Miss Swan, come with me. Your friends are quite possibly morons, but they are right about you needing to eat.” She didn’t want to offend Emma, but right now kindness cracked her open. She needed the sharpness to not let too much out. Emma searched her face but didn’t say anything as she followed Regina to the kitchen.

Regina decided a sandwich would be the simplest thing. In short order she placed a plate and a glass of orange juice before Emma.

“Thanks.”
Regina sat across from her, much as she had earlier that morning. “I wish I could help more.”

Emma pressed two fingers to one temple, rubbing there. “I feel like I need a new bucket of ideas to reach into.”

“Henry is what they call a ‘slave’, isn’t he?” She tried to keep her voice steady. “I asked Belle to look up information on RATs. She printed something for me. It said that when someone’s computer was infected, the victim was called a slave. His information could be traded. Sold.”

After she’d read it earlier, she’d had to bite down on her fist because it filled her too suddenly with anger and dread and loathing and misery. She felt sure all of those feelings would spill out over everything; the pain of her teeth on her skin settled her again.

“No. He wants something he thinks he’s going to get. He’s not going to give his access to Henry away.” The first bite Emma took of her sandwich had been careful and polite. The next one made no pretense and Emma had to chew several moments before speaking again. “You were a corporate something or other right? Someone high up the corporate ladder? When you noticed things were wrong but you couldn’t tell why, what did you do?”

Before their agreement, Regina would have treated the words with suspicion. Now, she gave Emma a little rope. “You mean...with accounting, for example?”

“Yeah, like that. I just – I need to look at it from another angle.”

“You go through the books. The goal would be to find the transaction or transactions that are problematic.”

“But how?”

“You start from when the books were last balanced - the last result you trust, so you can narrow down the time frame.”

Emma took another large mouthful of sandwich and a swallow of juice, then tossed her eyeglasses onto the table. She stood up and paced, her sneakers making squeaking noises on the floor. “Okay, so, you narrow down the transactions to find the ones that are problematic.” She took a rest from her pacing to gulp more from her glass. “I think...to do that I have to make some assumptions. Okay,
assumptions.”

Regina saw new ideas spark in Emma’s eyes.

“My sketchpad…” Emma charged toward the living room, returning with a notebook in her hand. She sat down, pushing the food and drink away. She scribbled furiously, pushing an errant strand of hair from her cheek in irritation as she wrote.

Emma stopped to show Regina a drawing of a Tolkien-esque mini-troll driving a car. “To Peter Pan, Henry is like a new toy. Most people can’t wait to play with new toys, right?” In her mind, she imagined a middle-aged man going through a midlife crisis, so - troll and car.

“This started a couple of weeks ago, and maybe Peter spent a few weeks watching Henry before he reached out.” On the sketchpad, Emma drew a very sad face on the car. “So let’s say - as a guess - that it’s been about two months since he started watching Henry.”

Two months. The statement shoved Regina’s head underwater. She couldn’t breathe. Her chest heaved with effort, but she couldn’t find any air. “Would you excuse me a moment?”

She didn’t wait for a reply and strode into the downstairs powder room, closing the door quietly behind her. Two months. Henry had been violated for two months and she hadn’t even known. She tried to be as silent as she could, covering her face with one of the soft towels that hung next to the sink. A keening sound left her as her shoulders shook violently, but no tears came. She leaned her brow against the cool wood of the door and clutched the towel to her. She couldn’t have known. This kind of attack would never have occurred to her. She didn’t have an immediate way to channel the pain into something productive or into any action at all. Her baby had been attacked and she couldn’t have stopped it. She couldn’t even stop it now. Henry’s natural enthusiasm and optimism about everything lay shattered under this attack and she had no way to mend it. The great Regina Mills relegated to being a spectator.

Trembling, she told herself that she could not afford the luxury of self-loathing. Not now. She rehung the towel, pulling at the edges until it was perfectly centered, and splashed water on her face. When she returned to the kitchen, Emma stood by the doorway, watching her with concern. “Miss Mills? Look, talking out loud helps me think but maybe I should…”

Regina’s mouth tightened. “No, We’re a team, correct? Go on. You were saying that you believe Peter Pan started watching Henry two months ago.” Regina congratulated herself for saying it unemotionally.
Emma started to draw a female knight pointing her sword at the troll. “Right, two months. That would put it near the time frame where Mary Margaret and David said there was a lot of talk about this stealth rat on forums they looked at. My guess would be that Henry must have gotten a link or downloaded something four to twelve weeks ago. It’s just an educated guess but I don’t think it’s crazy.”

“And how does all of this help?” Regina asked, her tone cool.

“It’s like you said, when you're looking for a bad transaction, you narrow down the timeframe. I hadn’t thought to make assumptions to do that.”

“Assumptions aren’t facts.”

“Because I don’t have any facts to go on,” Emma countered. “Maybe this is close enough. If I can figure out when Henry got the RAT, I can probably find it. If I can do that, I might be able to find Peter Pan.”

“And what would be the equivalent of transactions in the computer world?” Regina asked.

Emma stared into space a moment as if the query gave her pause. “Um...that’s actually a really good question. So, in this case, it’d be downloads. There’d be two types, right? Websites Henry visited that may have secretly downloaded something to his computer, or things he directly downloaded. Like, attachments. Wait….” This time as Emma strode into the other room, Regina followed.

Emma sat down in front of Henry’s laptop and went to his internet history. “And like any good teenager, Henry clears his internet history regularly.”

“Is that a problem?”

Emma made a pffft sound. “Please. Nothing ever dies on computers. I’ll recover it.” She wriggled her fingers over the laptop keys as if performing a magic trick. “Sites that are purposefully malicious - ones that are put up and registered for the purpose of infecting people - have a short shelf life. Either the hacker's afraid of getting caught and only leaves it up a couple of weeks, or someone reports it and it’s taken down. So I could run a script that tries to reach any website Henry has in his history. If the site is unreachable, it becomes suspect and then I can dig into when it expired, and see if there are files on Henry’s computer with matching dates. If that fails, we do something similar for any email
he’s gotten that has an attachment.”

Emma picked up her pencil and tapped the sketchpad before adding a terrified expression to the mini-troll’s face. Emma looked back to her screen and Regina felt like she was about to lose Emma to a binary world.

“If it won’t disturb you, do you mind if I stay?” Regina asked. “I can’t sleep anyway.”

“Sure,” she said softly, letting her eyes flick back to Regina. “Miss Mills? Just so you know, that helped.”

Regina’s composure cracked a moment and she rubbed at her eyes so Emma didn’t see. To a heart weary of not being able to help, it felt like spring.
Happy Thursday everyone. This is your captain speaking. A few clouds on the horizon today but mostly clear skies as we fly towards our destination. The virtual bar remains open and today at noon, the M_Comet dancers will be performing the traditional 'slow-burn' dance.

I continue to be amazed at the response to this story. My wife and I both have gotten into the habit of checking a few times a day (or more) for reaction and we both squeal a little when we see comments and kudos and so on. Thank you, thank you and thank you some more.

In about three chapters, we wrap with the first of three arches to this story. They have threads running between them, and often consequences from one arch leads to another. I know, I'm being all mysterious and 'you have to read more to see what happens'. It's what I do.

Day 5 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker

The fucking code wouldn’t stop giving Emma errors. She’d missed some small, stupid thing like a slash or a period and it kept breaking. The whole day she felt like a gerbil on a wheel. Fix the code, run the code, error. Fix the code, run the code, error. For hours it went like that, until she finally sent it to David and Mary Margaret who found her mistakes in about a half hour.

“Emma,” David said. “You’re exhausted. Have you tried to get some sleep?”

He should have known better than to ask. He and Mary Margaret knew Emma hadn’t been good at sleeping since she was very little. For many years, night was a time of anxiety for her, wondering what tomorrow would or wouldn’t bring. Tomorrow was an enemy, if yesterday was anything to go by. It wasn’t unusual for her to go a few nights without sleep, and in some ways it was a relief when she could finally just collapse into blissful nothingness - the dark, dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

“Maybe when the new code is working and starts its scan,” she told him. She knew she wouldn’t be able to, but he and Snow were already casting worried looks at her. No need to make it worse.

The entire day, time had been marked by failures in her code, the sounds of Henry going about his
day, and visits from Regina. She heard Regina tell Henry it was time to wake up. He came down and talked to Emma before he left for school. Regina brought him home and he made a healthy snack for himself and Emma - baby carrots and ranch dressing. Regina set plates of food next to her for each meal and asked about her progress. Later, the kid went to bed, and she heard Regina’s bedroom door shut. An hour later it opened again and Regina came down.

Emma glanced over her shoulder. “Hey. My program is running. Well, technically it’s three programs.”

“Three?”

“Yeah, being thorough. Based on our brainstorming. I need to sort of check one thing, then another, then correlate. Each program takes up a lot of resources so I need to run them separately.”

The two scans would run and then she’d run the third program to cross reference. The worst case scenario would be a message back that said “no results found”. Emma didn’t want to think about that.


Regina gave a small smile - well, almost. Her lips twitched, so Emma took it as a win.

Regina cleared a space for herself, gathering Emma’s things into a pile. She withdrew briefly to get a book before returning. A real hardcover book too, Emma noticed. She couldn’t see the whole title - The Zookeeper’s...something. The book sleeve had a picture of a gate. Regina skipped one chair, leaving it empty between them, and removed a blue bookmark about ten pages in before beginning to read. Neither of them acknowledged any of this as being out of the ordinary.

Emma started the first program with a sigh. After it began, all she could do was wait. The equivalent of standing there with a lotto ticket, waiting for the balls with the numbers to be chosen. Nothing to do, really, but hope the right numbers came up. She kept the scan minimized while it ran so she wouldn’t go crazy waiting for it to finish. Instead it would display a message that the scan was done and send a report to her email. She’d have to start the next program manually after the first finished. She knew there was a chance that these two scans, like the others before, would yield nothing.

A chance that she’d fail. A chance that Regina had been wrong to choose her after all. It was
possible she wasn’t good enough. She was running out of time, and these two scans were at the bottom of her bucket of ideas. David kept telling her that she was doing all the right things. Mary Margaret told her it was a matter of time. She both loathed and needed such reassurances. She didn’t believe them but she wanted to.

_God, what would she do if she failed Regina?_

She took to sketching or surfing Ratzforum.com. She watched Henry’s videos and surveyed the comments, hoping that maybe one would stand out to her for some reason. On one he pretended to be Batman, complete with mask and loud _Bang and Pow_ sounds flashing on the screen.

Regina raised her head from the book and looked at Emma quizzically. Emma had her headphones on, but they hadn’t entirely muffled the noise for this one video.

“Is that one of Henry’s videos?” Regina asked. “I have been doing that too.” She moved to the seat next to Emma’s and adjusted it so she could see the screen. “Watching his videos. Last night he and I watched a few together.” Her eyes lingered on the image of her son. “I make sure to watch them before he posts them. I haven’t seen these early ones in a while. He’s a lot more mature now. More confident.”

“He really seems to like it.”

“He does.” Regina kept her eyes on her son’s animated face. “He wanted me to read him a bedtime story tonight. Well, he phrased it as: ‘you can read to me if you want.’ He hasn’t asked me to read to him since he was six. I keep going by his school and asking how he is doing. He’s been keeping to himself more than usual, doing poorly at tests and homework. Just for a week but it’s unusual for him. And,’’ she let out a slow sigh. “Right now I don’t have it in me to care enough to reprimand him.”

“You know, one time in high school we had to write a paper on how airplanes work and I made a paper airplane instead. And turned it in.”

Regina looked at her in that way that judged Emma to be insane, but this time she smiled a little, too.

“Hey, I colored it and drew doors on it and stuff. It was solid design.”
“I’m sure.” Regina’s laugh was just a breath. Yet she squeezed Emma's shoulder as she withdrew back to her former chair. It felt like thank you.

Day 6 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker

Henry came down a few hours later, bounding down the stairs. Emma hurriedly shh’d him and tilted her head towards Regina, sleeping with her head pillowed in her arms.

“You okay? Why are you up?” she asked quietly.

“It’s morning.”

Emma glanced out the window. “Shi...shoot.”

“Is Mom okay?”

“Long few days.”

“I know but….is she okay?” His voice was intense and small. It drew Emma’s full attention to him. “Her eyes were red when she picked me up from school yesterday. You don’t know her, but she never cries.”

“Everyone cries.”

Henry shook his head insistently. “When she needs to do something, no matter how hard it is, she just finds a way. The last time I saw her cry was the first time I called her my mom.”

Emma could only imagine how Snow would sob if Emma ever called her "Mom". To be fair, David would too if she called either of them "Mom" or "Dad". She wondered what might have happened if they'd found her when she was five.
“What did you call her before that?”

“Just Regina. But I decided that’s what she was - my mom - and it didn’t take away from my dad or my bio-mom to say it. One morning she made me breakfast like always, and I said ‘thanks, Mom’. She cried then. I might have cried a little too.” Emma loved that he admitted that, even if he ducked his head with chagrin. “But I haven’t seen her cry since then.”

“Just because you don’t see it doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.”

“She’s been more angry lately, too.”

“I think she’s just trying to do the best she can. There’s not really a map for all this.”

“Emma?” When he spoke again, his voice trembled. "You know how I asked you about my channel and an interview? Should I...not do my Youtube channel anymore? If it caused all this? If I did?"

Emma understood the reason for the question. When she'd gotten out of prison, she had wondered the same thing. Were there some things you loved that only led to pain? She felt that moment now, choking her, but she forced herself to answer. "No, kid. Look, I get it; I do. You were burned by something you thought was safe." She thought of Neal, his boyish, endearing smile. “I know what that’s like. I know how it can scare you.” She paused for a moment. “You know what my absolute worst day was?"

"When you went to prison?"

"No, but that did suck. It was - I’m a little like you. An orphan. I grew up in foster care but I got close to being adopted a few times.” Pain struck her sharper than she was prepared for. She had to draw in a breath before going on. “One time I was about your age.”

“But you weren’t adopted?”

“No. No, I was angry. Restless. My record showed problems at foster homes, which meant that a lot of people didn’t bother to even look at me. This couple was college educated, she was a lawyer and they had a house with a pool. I couldn’t let them in. I didn’t let them hug me. I didn’t tell them things.
I acted like every gift they gave me was no big deal. I just needed time. Time to trust them, time to believe it could be real. But they brought me back after only two weeks. A week after that I had to give this presentation at school - a science project about the environment. You could invite your family to come and watch you. And that day everyone - everyone - had someone there. And as each kid finished, their parents and family clapped and cheered. But when I finished my presentation - there was just...silence." She met Henry's eyes. "And I realized that no one would ever be there to cheer and clap for me. That night was the first time I ran away.”

*From everything*, she added silently. She shook her head, thinking of David and Mary Margaret. Loving them and not sure she’d ever be able to tell them. "I flunked out of college and then, I wandered around for a long time. I was still running.”

She’d been sure that David and Mary Margaret would kick her out when she turned eighteen. But her birthday came and went, uncelebrated by her insistence, though presents were non-negotiable items for birthdays no matter how much Emma protested. David quietly made sure local college pamphlets showed up in her room. She had gone because it seemed important to both her foster parents, but that wasn’t reason enough to sustain her grades, so she found herself sneaking out very early one morning. She didn’t want to be around when they found out she failed out. Mary Margaret caught her and asked for one thing: that Emma let them know where she was every month or so. Emma promised and meant it. She didn’t think she’d ever see them again, but she sent them a postcard now and then. One night she drunk dialed them from a hotel room. She couldn’t even remember the conversation, but she felt the sharp ache of missing them. Needing them. After that, she stayed in contact in more tangible ways.

She brushed her thoughts away. “Running started to feel normal. You know what I mean?”

“Even now?”

“Yeah, kid. Even now,” she told him honestly.

Henry was watching her quietly, with understanding. “Emma? I’m sorry no one adopted you.”

“I’m sorry Peter Pan infected your computer,” she replied, just as sincerely.

There was a beat before Henry, in a much more chipper tone, asked, “Do you want hot chocolate? I like mine with cinnamon. Have you ever had it like that?”
The non sequitur made her laugh. Henry apparently was done with intense, life-lesson discussions for the moment. “Sure haven’t.”

He looked a little more excited. “You have to try it. I’ll make us some.”

“Wait, don’t you have school?”

“Nope. It’s Saturday.”

Emma frowned at herself. When the hell had the weekend gotten here?

Henry skittered away to the kitchen, deep conversation forgotten for now. He returned a bit later with two large, steaming mugs which he carried very carefully, setting one down in front of Emma. He gazed at his mom quietly. He leaned in and kissed her hair, then he went to the coffee table in the living room and opened it, pulling out a quilt and returning to wrap it around her.

It turned out that hot chocolate with cinnamon was really good.

Regina stirred not long after that. Henry, next to Emma, tried to hide the giant bowl of cereal he was eating.

Regina rubbed at a line on her face she’d gotten from sleeping on one corner of her book. “Do you want breakfast?” she asked Emma. Then, she turned to her son. “Henry, you are not eating that entire bowl of cereal.”

Henry pouted but didn’t seem surprised.

“Can I have coffee?” Emma asked and Regina nodded. “Actually, do you mind if I make eggs?”

Regina turned to her in disbelief. “Can you?”

“I’m really good at eggs. All kinds. A...friend taught me. Weekend breakfasts used to be a big thing when I was a teenager. I am the undisputed egg master. Which, now that I’ve said it out loud isn’t
half as cool a title as it sounded in my head.”

“I see. I was merely surprised, because if you can cook then your diet of pure sugar and caffeine is a conscious choice.” A quiver took refuge in Regina’s voice that may have been a laugh. Emma couldn’t be sure. “You are welcome to my kitchen, Miss Swan.”

“You know I can make eggs for all of us.” Emma pointed out, nodding to the kid. Henry looked mournfully at his cereal but didn’t complain when Regina agreed and told Henry to go empty his bowl into the sink.

The silence after he left the room weighed on Emma. She felt she owed it to Regina to let her know about the earlier conversation with Henry. However, though Henry hadn’t made her promise not to tell, she sorta felt like he’d told her things in confidence. She debated herself a little more, watching as Regina picked up the comforter Henry had wrapped around her earlier.

“Henry’s kinda worried about you,” Emma said finally.

Regina stopped, blanket in her hands folded in half. “How do you...did he say something?”

“He’s scared. He’s not sure what he can trust and he’s picked up that you’re angrier than normal.”

“I’m not,” Regina said, then amended the words. “Not at him.” She finished putting the comforter away. “I’ll talk to him.”

“I told him about when I was a kid. I grew up in foster care, only I didn’t ever get adopted, but it’s close enough to his story that I thought he’d listen. He’s afraid his videos caused all this. He shouldn’t stop them though, if he loves them. That’s what I told him. I hope I didn’t overstep?”

Regina’s face softened, shields lowered. “No, I’m glad he confided in you. I had no idea about your background but, I imagine it was a relief for him to be able to talk to someone who understands.”

Emma shrugged, a feigned act of indifference toward the revelation of her past. They heard the clutter of the dishwasher opening and closing, then Henry returning. “So,” Emma said, changing the topic with a twinkle in her eyes, “how do you like your eggs?”
A fragile sense of normalcy came over the house. Regina showed Emma where pans and other things were. She set out a whisk and a bowl. Emma stopped Regina from ‘helping’, gesturing to herself and pointing out her title of “Egg Master”. Henry grinned at them as he thumbed through a comic book and waited. They focused on breakfast as if nothing else existed. They barricaded themselves in that moment, needing the sanity, desperate for something to feel simple. For an hour or so, the kitchen became the entire world.

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That night Emma allowed herself to sit on the couch, laptop in her lap, and doze as the second scan ran. Regina acknowledged that she too, needed to try to get a little sleep. She went upstairs, and after an hour, she hadn’t rejoined Emma. Emma felt relieved. She had started to worry about Regina. She didn’t mind her own insomnia, she was used to it, but Regina needed her rest. The sleep she found was fragile, broken over and over. Deep rest didn’t come. Fear held it away from her. She kept imagining a moment in the future when the hacker released the pictures. Henry’s face ashen, terrorized. Regina baring her teeth as she clutched her son and cast blame toward Emma. Everything in her stomach turned to acid, it clawed its way up her throat and her stomach twisted. She jerked awake five or six times over a few hours. She rubbed her stomach, trying to calm it. Her mouth was rough and dry, her lips sticking together. She didn’t care. The words “no results found” kept flashing in her head. That worst possible result.

“No results found.” That message had flashed her entire life. Why should she expect anything different now?

She checked the scan. Almost done.

She stepped outside, hoping the fresh air would settle her down. It didn’t. She’d always been a fuck up. What the hell had made her accept this job? What had made her think that she, Emma Swan, could help anyone? She looked down at her hands. She wondered if they were skilled enough. Good enough.

The scan completed without much fanfare except a brief beep. Emma jerked around, shutting the door and sprinting for the computer. She took in a deep breath, then launched the application to match the results from the first two scans.

“5 results found.” She read it again to make sure. 5 results.

Five websites that had been around three months ago and now weren’t. Hope expanded inside her quickly as she began to look up whatever she could on each of them. Six weeks ago one of them had
left cookie files on Henry’s computer. Emma checked the date on the cookies, then did a search for that same date to see if anything had been installed.

Sonofabitch. It was an honest-to-God lead. Sonofabitch.
Happy Thursday everyone. Welcome back to another installment of the Love Hack, a story that asks the question, 'How much longer till the Carmilla movie comes out?' This is your captain speaking and we are about four chapters away from the ending of the first arch of the story. I very much look forward to your comments because I had such a good time writing the end of this chapter.

As usual, thank you for all the comments. kudos, etc. It's such an honor to write for you and I appreciate all of the feedback.

Day 7 of Operation: Get the Scumbag Hacker

Emma didn’t want to get her hopes up over nothing. She called her parents at 3:00 a.m. and they groggily came into a Skype call with her - pajamas, mussed hair and all. “Just...just tell me if I’m crazy. Does that look like an IP address to you?”

“Why would a RAT collect the hacker’s IP?” Snow wondered aloud, rubbing at her eyes as she appeared on screen leaning over David’s shoulder.

“Okay so...the RAT is embedded in a music video Henry goes to a website to view,” Emma told them as she paced back and forth in front of her laptop. “The RAT is called StealthLoki and when they click the link to download the video -” Snow disappeared from over David’s shoulder but joined the call at her own laptop a moment later. “It downloads, then when Henry clicks on the video to play it, it installs malicious software on his computer.”

David nodded his head. “But it also actually gives him the video, and since that plays like a normal video, Henry or anyone that downloaded the file doesn’t suspect anything is wrong.”

“All of this is typical but I looked into how this RAT installs. On the first sign on, it creates an initial configuration file for the hacker accessing it a.k.a. Peter Pan. After the initial connection, it’s supposed to delete the configuration file. It’s supposed to but...that’s an IP address, right?”

Emma hung over insanity, grasping the ledge of a cliff she’d fallen over. Every second he took, she felt as if another finger pried loose. She had checked the IP address. She couldn’t be wrong about that, but the terror that she might have missed something small and obvious pushed her till she
dangled, split in two between complete confidence and absolute uncertainty. She heard the clicking of Snow’s fingers on the keyboard in the background but kept her eyes on David, awaiting his conclusion.

Finally, David shook his head, trying to believe what he saw. “Have you done a lookup on the IP address? It looks legit...did you see the user name hidden in the code here? And is that a password?” He motioned to the screen with both hands and gaped. “It gives his username and password?”

Snow started to laugh, not a full belly laugh but an extended soft laugh that made her eyes shine. David frowned at her image on his screen. Emma’s emotions were a shook-up champagne bottle about to pop. The combination of weariness and the need to get a win twisted tighter and tighter inside her. She had to stop herself from snapping at Snow.

“What is it?” David asked his wife.

The smile did not leave her face. “LokiStealth is an updated version of a RAT that used to be called Thor’s Hammer. The developers of Thor’s Hammer put in a way for them to track anyone who ever used the tool - on the hacker side and the victim side. I mean, why give away their toys completely? Why not find a way to collect data on the people who buy their tool?”

David, catching on, grinned. “So you think that when they updated it to Lokistealth, they never removed that part of the code. No honor among thieves, I guess.”

“My guess, Emma,” Mary Margaret said cheerfully. “Is that the configuration file collects information on the person using it, and it’s either sent to the original developer of the RAT immediately or it’s something the developer can pull easily at will from any infected computer. You just can’t trust anyone these days.”

Emma’s mind moved in slow motion. She didn’t want to misunderstand. Another shoe might drop at any moment. A win could turn into a defeat so easily. “So when Peter Pan hacked Henry and stole information….”

“A small portion of his information was collected by the developer of the RAT.”

“Let me see something.” David muttered and refocused on his computer screen. “Emma,” he called out a few minutes later. “The IP address traces to a latitude, longitude, postal code address, cable provider...it looks legit.”
Emma breathed out, some of her inner tension easing. Emma didn’t mean to cry. Hated to cry. Her eyes grew blurry with tears and she tried to stop it. “I got him?” she whispered as the tears fell down her face. “I did it?”

If David and Mary Margaret were really there, they would have hugged her and she may have, for one of the first times in her life, sobbed while someone held her. It was all going to be okay. She hadn’t failed. Her breathing was ragged as she fought for control. She hadn’t failed.

She sank into her chair, the relief flooding her in ways that stretched her out, made her feel distorted and like she might break. Winning shouldn’t feel like it might break her more than losing did, should it? She just didn’t have all that much experience with it. Didn’t know what to do with it. “Am I panicking? I think I’m panicking. Shouldn’t I be, I don’t know, happy?”

“It’s very emotional, Emma,” Snow soothed.

“The day Mary Margaret and I got married? Best day of my life. But I was a wreck.”

“He was a total wreck.” Snow agreed.

“I stood up at the front with a Justice of the Peace, sweating like I was in 100 degree heat even though it was the beginning of October. I heard the bride’s marching music, and I felt lightheaded. I saw her and one of my knees actually wobbled. It wasn’t till she got up there with me, took my hand and said, ‘I love you with all of my heart, David Nolan, but you’re looking at me like you’re going to pass out. It’s kind of giving me a complex’, that I relaxed.” Mary Margaret came in the room David sat in and leaned down to kiss him. He pulled his wife into his lap and turned back to the screen. “People are complicated. Give yourself a break.”

Since she met them, she had rolled her eyes at their various romantic displays hundreds of times. Deep down, she’d felt warmed by each and every one of them. They offered one another something total and pure, then they extended that shelter to include her.

“We love you with all of our heart, Emma Swan, but you look like you’re about to pass out. It’s giving us a complex,” Snow added, a twinkle in her eyes.

Emma laughed, starting to feel okay. More than okay. She’d called Snow and Charming because for so long they’d been her northern star. If they said it, she could believe. With Snow’s gentle humor, Emma’s confidence doubled and doubled again. Holy shit. Elation stomped all over doubt, sending it
scurrying away. Her spirit zoomed around the room, flying in loopy loops.

“Virtual high-five,” Emma said exuberantly and held up her palm to the screen.

“Virtual high-five,” they agreed and did the same.

Emma leaned back in her chair. Solid ground returned to her, but she still couldn’t think clearly enough to give herself a Pertential Score. “So what do we do now?”

“F.B.I.” David said, the answer obvious in his mind. “They’ll subpoena the Internet Service Provider, and if this is Peter Pan’s home address then you have him. If not, you’d have a general location but….it would take a lot more research. Still, it’s a very good lead.”

“I need to talk to Miss Mills. I haven’t told her yet. I needed to have you look at it first. I...thank you. Both of you. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“We love you Emma,” Mary Margaret told her.

Emma just nodded, not answering those words as usual. After she had disconnected the call, she just sat.

“Computer awesomeness achieved,” she said quietly to herself and gave a laugh that might have really been a sob. She still soared through the room and up into the sky and she wanted to savor it for just a little longer. It was so, so rare. She breathed in and fresh air filled her lungs. What she’d done, this one thing, transformed her into someone better. Much better. It wouldn’t last. But still.

It was the middle of the night, and it took her a few more moments to gather herself enough to go upstairs and knock on Regina’s door. She didn’t answer, so Emma, without thinking about it, opened the door and moved to Regina’s bedside, gently shaking her.

“Regina?” Emma didn’t think she’d used anything but ‘Miss Mills’ up until now.

Regina snapped to alertness, eyes opening fully and sitting up. “Miss Swan?”
“Hey,” Emma greeted. “I have some news.”

Regina leaned over to turn on the light and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Talking with David and Mary Margaret had settled Emma, but seeing Regina made her feel like a victor. She explained as best she could, trying to be careful of being too technical.

Towards the end, Regina closed her eyes and whispered, “Just give me a moment.” Her chin wobbled and her shoulders scrunched up near her neck and she just looked so fucking vulnerable. It hurt to see Regina like that. Emma sat down next to her and debated what to do.

She turned toward her and quietly called, “Hey.” Tentatively, she reached out and laid her hand over Regina’s. Regina turned her palm so that their hands curled against one another. Regina’s fingers were warm and soft. Emma’s own felt dried out and cool. Emma tended to shy away from physical contact of any kind, but she squeezed Regina’s hand and didn’t second guess it. The touch completed something, like someone finishing her sentence. She should want to pull away. When her ex-boyfriend Neal held her hand, she could only stand a few moments before drawing back. It felt dangerous usually, uncomfortable, like wearing an itchy sweater on a hot day. Right now though, it made sense in a way very little in her life ever did. She didn’t want to let go. Not yet.

“Does this mean that Henry’s safe?” Regina breathed out the question, not opening her eyes. “You said we needed to do more but...is he safe?”

Emma swayed a little closer, almost touching their brows together but not quite. “Almost. We need to decide what to do next. And it may not be Peter Pan’s home address. But almost.”

Regina held on a little tighter. When she opened her eyes her expression resembled someone who thought she’d been deserted in the desert, a sand storm bearing down on her, and then suddenly saw a rescue plane.

“We did this, you know,” Emma said. “Your idea....”

“Don’t,” Regina stopped her. “It’s not true. You did this. You did.” Their eyes met, Emma in the middle of trying to protest that she’d done this alone. “Thank you, Emma.” The words on the tip of Emma’s tongue surrendered and fell back. Gratitude could feel like a heavy weight slung over your shoulders, she observed, if you weren’t used to it.
“So you do know my first name,” Emma teased, trying to shed Regina’s appreciation. It felt uncomfortable to wear.

Regina didn’t respond, didn’t lighten. “This is almost over?” she asked as if she needed to hear it once more to believe it.

“Almost.” Emma paused, not wanting to bring up next steps just yet, but knowing she should. “We’re going to have to make some decisions.”

A slow nod. “I know.” The bed shifted as Regina withdrew, pulling her hand away. “We should tell Henry.” She abruptly strode out of the room to wake up her son.

Emma looked down at her empty hand, still feeling Regina’s touch.

Something about sitting on Regina’s bed started to feel weird when Henry appeared in the doorway. Emma sprang up and moved to the chair in front of the vanity instead. Henry didn’t look like he cared where she had been sitting. Regina sat next to him and explained what she could then looked to Emma.

“We know a lot more than we did about Peter Pan,” Emma said. “I know how he infected your computer. I know a general location where he is. It’s not quite over, okay? But, we’re halfway there.”

“But it’s not over?” He looked between the two women, unsure how he should react.

Regina wrapped him in her arms. “We’re close, Henry,” she told him. “We’re going to stop him.” Henry gave in to the hug completely, holding on hard. When he let go, he went to Emma and hugged her in the same way. Winning felt good, but this, the gratitude of a boy who’d had faith in her? Flying became zooming through the universe. Elation became a superpower.

“Is the F.B.I going to arrest him, Mom?” Henry asked, untangling himself from Emma.

“Why don’t you go back to bed and Miss Swan and I will talk about the next steps?” Regina said, and laid her hand on his cheek.
Henry frowned, looking between the two women. The look on his face didn’t bode well and Emma felt something in her begin to sink back to earth. “But, why can’t I stay?”

“Because this is an adult conversation,” Regina reasoned.

“I can tell the F.B.I what happened,” he protested. “I can help.”

Emma turned away from mother and son. Henry's request, no, his plea dug into her. He needed this. So many times in her youth what she felt she needed remained out of reach. She carried the ache of it even now. Well, the whole winning thing had been nice while it lasted.

“Henry, please. I need you to go back to bed now, okay? Emma and I will tell you more when we have a plan.”

Henry’s face twisted into a scowl. “This isn’t fair. He did this to me, not you. He took pictures of me.”

“I know he did and I know how scared you’ve been.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t know anything.” Teenagers could say ‘I hate you’ with their eyes so, so clearly.

Emma saw Regina falter for just a second, a slump of her shoulders before her chin jutted up. “Bed, Henry. Now.” Henry stormed out and it didn’t take long for the sound of his slamming door to reverberate through the house.

Emma winced. “So, did I mention we almost found the hacker? Yay,” she joked dryly.

“Yes, that did turn quickly,” Regina agreed. She paced to her bureau and arranged the photos and baubles there, her mouth pressed in a hard line. “He’s going to think I’m a coward,” she whispered.

Emma didn’t want to witness the tension between Regina and her son. She already knew so much about them that she shouldn’t, that she wished she could un-see or un-know. She preferred to keep people at a comfortable distance. “I think the kid has good instincts about the F.B.I.,” she said, using
the case to push them back to the arena of “business talk.”

Regina turned away from the bureau, shifting gears as Emma intended. “Miss Swan, I believe we have discussed the need for discretion. The F.B.I. will care much more about my family’s name than helping my son. I’d prefer to keep them out of it.”

Emma stood and crossed her arms over her chest. “And I’d prefer to know Peter Pan’s in a tiny little cell with a large man named Bruiser.”

Regina rolled her eyes at her. “It’s not that simple.”

“It’s not that complicated,” Emma argued, and Regina gave her a death glare, motioned toward Henry’s room and made a hissing ‘shhh’ sound. Emma huffed, but unbent enough to sit back down. “Okay, so what do you want to do?”

“With the information you have, what can you do?”

Emma tightened her jaw. “Nothing that will stop him permanently, and he needs to stopped.”

“He does. I will consider turning over his information to the F.B.I - anonymously - after I am sure Henry’s information is safe.”

“Anonymously? Like - ‘Dear F.B.I., I’d like you to know about this hacker called Peter Pan and all the wackiness in Never Neverland.’ They’ll think it’s a joke.” The answer seemed clear even with Regina’s stubbornness about privacy.

Regina must have heard something in Emma’s tone because her own became cooler. “Then I may have to settle for putting Henry first and, with any luck, stopping Peter Pan temporarily.”

“How does putting Henry first mean not going to the F.B.I?”

“There are influences from my past I would rather not subject him to.” Then more softly. “I know it’s hard to understand, given what Peter Pan has done. But I have to make a choice - do I want vengeance or do I want my son to have the best life possible? If we come forward Henry's life will
“I’m a stranger who you just trusted.”

“You were a calculated risk,” Regina shot back sharply. “If worse came to worst, I am sure I could have found plenty of leverage on you, couldn’t I, Miss Swan?”

Emma wasn’t sure why that stung but it did. After all, this was a job and Regina had never claimed that she trusted Emma. Only that she needed her.

Emma gritted her teeth. “We have a responsibility to stop this guy.” She struggled to keep her voice down, her hands curling hard on the arms of her chair.

“Not at the risk of my son.” Regina spoke just as passionately, the tension between them ratcheting higher. She took a moment, drawing in a deep breath and smoothing her two piece pajama set as if it was a suit. When she spoke again, the tightness of anger was absent from her voice. “You said you discovered how Peter Pan infected my son’s computer? How, exactly, did he do it?”

“I can explain that after we - ” Emma started to protest, wanting to stick to the topic at hand.

“Miss Swan, please answer my question.”

Emma sighed. “Henry visited a website about six weeks ago, probably looked a lot like a streaming video service. He downloaded a video - it was part of one of the Avengers movies. Deleted scenes. In the video, there was a RAT. Henry would have never known that anything was wrong.”

“RATs can be embedded in videos,” Regina repeated, looking deep in thought. “And what can
RATs do again?”

“Lots of things. Control the infected computer. Steal data. Listen in, if there’s a microphone. Execute other code to run on the computer to change passwords or whatever. Once you’re in, everything on the computer, anything it can do is yours to control. You just have to code what you want it to do.”

“You are an excellent hacker. If you had a RAT, you’d be able to code quite a bit, I would imagine. Could you use the same RAT Peter Pan did and change the code to do different things?”

“You’re making me kinda nervous.”

Regina was lost in her thoughts a moment before she gave a slow smile. “I don’t know if we can stop him, but maybe we can slow him down. I think it’s time I had a chat with Peter Pan, don’t you?”

Eight hours later, an unknown man looked at his email with delight, noting that he’d received a large attachment from Henry Mills. He downloaded it and leaned back to watch.

But when he double clicked it, it wasn’t Henry who was on his screen, but a woman with dark hair and angry dark eyes.

“I don’t know who you are but I thought I should introduce myself. My name is Regina Mills – I’m Henry’s mother. I wanted to…. “ She looked down a moment. “Appeal to you as a mother. And I wanted to better introduce you to my son.

“Henry is someone with a good heart. I know everyone says that, but in all of my life I have never met anyone as fundamentally good as my son. He believes that most people mean well. That most of the world just needs the occasional reminder to do the right thing. When he was five, there was a drive for underprivileged children at his school for Christmas. One morning, he came downstairs for school hauling this huge garbage bag – it was about half of his toys that he’d gathered and wanted to donate. That’s who Henry is. That’s the boy you’ve threatened to violate in front of his friends and expose to pedophiles. You already took the sense of safety that every child should have in his home. Now, nothing and nowhere feels safe. Every day has become about fear. Every moment his heart is filled with the worry of what you might do. And he feels – utterly helpless. I don’t know if you have ever felt that kind of helplessness. When your life is that deeply controlled by someone else and you
can’t stop it. When it’s like being in a nightmare you can’t wake from. So, I am appealing to you as Henry’s mother to think about the boy you are hurting. To consider the damage you might do to him.” Regina Mills dropped her head and drew a deep breath.

“But, you won’t will you?” She looked back up at the screen. “If you were capable of that kind of compassion, you wouldn’t have tried to blackmail a thirteen-year-old boy.

“I’ve learned a lot this week about things like remote access tools and slaves. That’s what you call the ones you have tricked into downloading your software onto their computer, right? A slave? And I’ve learned how you get slaves. How you can embed a RAT into just about anything, like….like a video. A video that...” she checked her watch, and a smile rose on her face that was a twisted combination of serenity and malice. “In let’s say about five minutes should start to stealthily delete everything on your hard drive, and also let us track exactly who and where you are.

“Are you still paying attention? I would if I were you. When you started this with my son, maybe you didn’t know who he was. After all, Mills is a common name. What were the odds that Henry was connected to one of the richest, most powerful families in the world? I am going to use that influence to find you and then I am going to slowly turn up the hell in your life. And you’ll know how it feels to be helpless. Your job, your friends, your family, your car, your home – I am going to make it my life’s mission to take everything and anything that means something to you. And I’m going to start with this computer. By now, the fan in your computer has been dead for about two minutes due to the worm in the RAT you downloaded. Have you tried to use the power button to turn this off? That probably won’t work, and if so, it’s because your computer has slowly been melting.”
Happy Thursday everyone. Welcome back aboard. As always, I am deeply appreciative of all of your support. Writing has been my passion for a very long time. One day I hope to be published but what is more important to me is that people read my work. I’m not sure if all writers need that, but I do. Interacting with you is fun and I am enjoying the bantering with those of you who comment regularly. But also, it feels like taking large steps toward something I have always wanted, Thank you and...keep letting me know you’re out there.

BTW, just a note that next week will be a double-post. The sixteenth is my birthday so I will be posting both Tuesday and Thursday.

**two hours before Peter Pan received the video, justice was served (and a computer melted)**

Emma pressed the red square on Regina’s phone to stop recording the video. “Well that was….just horrendously terrifying.”

“It was supposed to be,” Regina countered. “It’s a good bluff.”

The menacing confidence so on display in the video slipped. Regina dropped her gaze, standing statue-like. “The truth is I can’t do anything. Not with... “ The momentary bow of her head made her dark hair fall over one of her eyes and she swept it back into place. “At any rate, maybe it’s enough to keep him on the straight and narrow for a while.”

“I still think we should...” Emma didn’t finish. Regina wasn’t going to change her mind and at least they had done something. “I’m going to use my handy RAT scanner on everything else in the house, just to be sure.”

“That can wait.”

“It can?”

Emma swayed a little on her feet. Not enough to be noticeable. Probably. She was running on fumes. Actually, her fumes were running on fumes. Emma’s habit in new places was to push herself till she passed out. She worked with, instead of against, her insomnia in those situations. It made things easier. After a few days without sleep, her body would seem to simultaneously float and not feel attached at all. She would close her eyes and there’d be nothing until she woke. She shook her head as it became too light. A bad sign. Probably.

“How close are you to being able to send the video with the RAT to Peter Pan?”
“Well I re-engineered LokiStealth; now it’s EmmaStealth. I just have to render the video and embed the RAT. That’ll take a while. I guess I could set it up to send automatically when it’s done.”

“Then why don’t you do that and get some rest? Henry and I are capable of staying offline a bit longer, and you need to sleep. You haven’t slept for more than a few hours at a time since you got here. And by my count you’ve been awake for the last thirty-five hours. Even with the amount I am paying you, I didn’t expect that level of investment when I hired you.”

“This was never about the money. I mean, I really need it, don’t get me wrong but…” Emma pointed at the picture that still sat by her laptop. “That –that should be protected.”

Regina was watching her, searching her face and eyes for...something. Whatever it was, she turned to the stairs and motioned toward them. “When you’re ready, go upstairs. Take a shower in the guest bath then lie down in the guest bedroom.”

“You don’t have to do that. The B&B isn’t far.”

“I am aware of the distance to the bed and breakfast in my town, Miss Swan. Please. Stay.”

Please, Regina had said. It tugged at Emma, made her want to give in. Damn it.

“You have to start calling me Emma. No more of the ‘Miss Swan’ thing,” Emma said, while telling herself that she couldn’t be a total pushover for a beautiful mayor and please. “And I get to call you Regina.” She gave her best mock-serious look. “And you must tell me yes or no….right now.”

The callback to when Regina offered her a job caused them both to smile at one another.

“Very well. Emma?”

“Yes, Regina?”

“Go upstairs and go to sleep. Now.”

Emma felt emboldened enough to give Regina a wink before turning toward the stairs and heading up.

She debated calling David and Mary Margaret to give them an update. She hesitated, knowing that when she told them about the re-engineered RAT, David would be beside himself. He didn’t do confrontation, he didn’t press, but he believed in the law. He would think Emma’s actions were wrong, and he’d try to calmly steer her in another direction.

He’d probably say something like: “Emma, I understand you’re in a difficult situation given how Regina feels, but this is serious. This is destroying evidence. I just don’t want you to regret anything.”

Imaginary David was right.

Yet Emma kept coming back to one thing: Henry was Regina’s kid. Regina should have the final say.

She couldn’t think anymore, or feel her legs for that matter. She’d deal with her foster parents later. When she got to the guest room, she fell face first onto the bed and didn’t move again for hours.
A quiet knock sounded at the guest room door. “Emma? Mom said to come get you for dinner.”

“Wha-?” Barely awake, Emma tried to process where she was. She might have asked Henry if he really meant that she was supposed to come down for dinner, but she could hear his sneaker-clad feet already moving back down the stairs. She slowly got out of the bed, and then she noticed a sticky note on the bureau mirror. It read “fresh shirt”, with an arrow pointing down to a sweatshirt.

Emma grinned. Regina apparently had a thing for labelling stuff.

The sweatshirt was a tad big, but then Emma tended to like baggy clothes. Plus it said “Yale”. She’d never worn anything that made her look Ivy League before. She descended the stairs about fifteen minutes after Henry called for her.

Her things had been moved from the dining room into the living room. The dining table now had a proper tablecloth, with china plates, crystal water glasses, two wine glasses, and cloth napkins. The smells from the kitchen drifted through the house and were like heaven – something tomato-y or spicy? Whatever it was, it made Emma’s stomach perk up. At the same time, the formality of her former work space unlocked a jittery sensation that prickled across her skin. She didn’t do...this. Formal. Family. It would only be a couple hours, she soothed herself. Still, she went to the nearby living room and found her rental car keys in one of the front pockets of her backpack; holding them in her hand helped.

“Emma!” Henry called out and bounded up to her. “Mom said you deleted what he had?” His eyes were seeking confirmation. He needed reassurance. Emma shoved the keys in her front pants pocket. Not as good as in her hand, but the weight of them comforted her.

“His computer is toast. I put this thing in his computer that was like Batman letting off a whole bunch of explosions in it.”

“That’s kinda like Ironman.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah, hang on…..” He pulled his phone from his pocket. The Henry who stormed out of his mother’s room last night seemed gone. Instead, he chattered away, showing her movie clips on Youtube.

“Henry, I asked you to bring the salad bowls and the salad to the table, please.” Regina ducked her head into the living room. “That is, if I am not interrupting the important business you have with Miss – Emma.”

“Well, you kinda are,” Henry responded. Emma wondered if mutant, grumpy Henry had returned, but then a broad grin filled his features. “Joke! Getting salad.” He bolted off to do so.

Regina looked after him with a wry, loving expression. “I told him a little of our plan while you were sleeping. It helped. You’re his hero now, did you know?”

“Nah, Batman’s his hero,” Emma countered, feeling like she was under a white hot light and needed to sink back into the shade.

Regina let her. “True. Maybe if you get a Batmobile.” For once, Regina wore a smile that invited Emma to share in the joke. “We’re having chicken cacciatore.”
The last time Emma had eaten a semi-decent meal was Thanksgiving dinner at the group home after prison. “I’m used to ramen noodles.”

“I will see if I can exceed that incredibly high bar.”

“Do you, um,” Emma jerked her thumb in the direction of the table. “Should I do anything?”

“Everything’s just about done. I wanted to let you sleep as long as possible. Do you want wine? I tend to drink red. I have a Pinot Noir and a Merlot.”

Emma drank beer. Maybe an occasional hard lemonade. She suggested Regina pick and decided to Google those wines later.

Regina Mills could cook the hell out of food. Emma stopped herself from taking a third helping, pretty sure that such a thing would cross the line into bad manners. That didn’t mean her eyes didn’t greedily stray to the platter of leftovers. She knew exactly how many pieces of chicken were left - three. A mountain of angel hair pasta tried to seduce her from a bowl just beyond her water glass.

Okay, she thought, maybe I need to eat more often than I have been.

While they ate, Regina peppered the kid with questions about school. She refused to let Henry ask Emma any questions about prison or hacking, both of which seemed endlessly fascinating to him. But overall there was an ease about mother and son and how they teased one another. Both of them wearing matching expressions of profound relief and trying so very hard to move back towards being normal with one another.

It spared Emma from having to contribute more than an occasional nod to the conversation. It helped ease her discomfort with this whole “family meal” thing.

Still, she’d started to check her watch, wondering how soon she could leave and not look like a jerk. She pressed the toe then the heel of her shoe to the floor over and over in a silent attempt to control her rising anxiety.

Snow and Charming had learned ways around her tendency to avoid anything that even hinted at domesticity. In short, they found ways to trick her into it. They made breakfast “family time” because it could be informal, and they usually ate in their pajamas. The first Saturday in their house Charming woke Emma at nine a.m., grinning, his hair still messy from sleep.

“Breakfast,” he said with a wide grin, as if that one word encompassed all that was good in the world. She wanted to ignore him but that smile on her foster father’s face could melt glaciers. Snow sang while she scrambled eggs, which Emma formally protested.

“No,” she groaned. “No singing.”

Snow threw a bagged loaf of bread at her. “Make toast.”

Mary Margaret toned it down, but did not entirely give up the singing. Emma made toast.

Emma denied them so many things, trying to hold them away from her. But, they made inroads despite her. They found ways. It scared her that she liked when they did.

Another ten minutes passed, and Emma saw light at the end of the tunnel as Regina asked Henry to start clearing the table. Emma volunteered to help with the dishes because, again, trying to be polite.
Regina told her to stay where she was and explained, “Dessert,” while she set down smaller plates and forks. And then it happened. Henry emerged from the kitchen carrying a small cake with about ten lit candles on it. He beamed at Emma.

“I wasn’t sure how old you are but ten seemed a good aesthetic for the size of that cake,” Regina said softly. “Happy belated birthday, Emma. I- I used to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ for Henry but he has recently insisted that…”

“It’s lame.” Henry seemed certain that he’d come across one of life’s truths.

Emma pressed her fingers against her pocket, feeling the hard edges of the keys. *Fuck.* The rules she’d set down with David and Mary Margaret long ago circled in her head. No birthdays, no family holidays or celebrations, no Christmas mornings, no family vacations - she’d given them an entire list. She didn’t want to experience the pretense of “family events”. Despite their talent for working around her rules, they’d never found ways around some of them.

“Emma, is everything okay?” Regina asked.

Emma realized that her face might have the expression of someone seeing a day-old pile of liver rather than a white frosted birthday cake.

“I appreciate all this, but,” *Fuck,* she never did well “on the spot”. Emma had risen from the table before she invented an excuse, and now she just looked awkward. “There’s some things I need to check on. Really sorry about that. Maybe you can save me a piece or two? I’ll come by tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Did something…”

“It’s fine,” Emma said before Regina could finish. “Really. Just need to do some computer stuff.” Emma didn’t allow herself to look at Henry. She rushed to grab her backpack from the living room and fled through the front door.

“Emma?”

A brick path led from the front door all the way to the sidewalk; Emma had already made it halfway before hearing her name. Regina stood in the doorway, still in only her button-up blouse.

“Regina, it’s freezing out here.”

“A fact that we could both easily deal with if you come back inside,” Regina calmly pointed out. She closed the front door until just a sliver of light slanted onto the concrete porch. “Did we – did I do something wrong? I just….after what you did for Henry and me, it seemed such a small gesture…

“You don’t owe me anything.”

Regina regarded Emma in exasperation. “Of course I owe you, of course I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“After what you did -”

“Look, you didn’t deserve what happened. You and Henry being okay is enough. We’re even.”

“But, I just wanted to do something to show you -” The hitching of her voice made Emma turn fully to face her. Regina wiped angrily at her eyes.
The realization that the tough-as-nails mayor of Storybrooke was crying made her freeze in surprise and also forced her heart into a vise that then began to tighten.

“You,” Regina railed, gesturing to her. “You are so impossible.”

Emma tried to understand what was happening. Regina shouldn’t be crying, she reasoned with herself. She also didn’t know what she had done to be called impossible.

“Do you know how much I have loathed every moment of the last week? Beyond the pain my son was suffering, which I could do nothing about, this has been a cavalcade of things I am unable to do. I know nothing about hacking. Heaven knows, you had no use for my organizational skills. I couldn’t help Henry. I just kept saying it would be alright, but I had no idea if it would be.” The tears came more freely and still Regina tried to keep her face free of them.

“Regina,” Emma tried, taking a couple of careful steps in Regina’s direction.

“I don’t understand half of what you say. You keep moving things around in my dining room and eating my apples. And you wouldn’t stay in the office where I had a workspace set up for you. And I – I got that email, and I wondered if I had made a mistake hiring you. I wondered if, by avoiding the FBI in order to protect my son –” a sob made her shoulders shake even as she tried to fight through it. “I had doomed him. And I wondered how quickly I could sell the house if the worst happened, because maybe in Europe where fewer people know us – maybe it wouldn’t follow him there. And my mind has just been going and going.”

Emma was close enough to touch Regina but wasn’t entirely sure how. It wasn’t as if she’d been comforted a lot throughout her life. “Okay, stop,” she said quietly.

“I apologize, this is inappropriate.”

“What, crying?”

Regina tried to step back inside, but Emma moved till she partially blocked her path.

“Regina, stop. Just for a second, okay?” Emma couldn’t just stand there anymore. She settled on rubbing a hand lightly up and down Regina’s back. She kept up the gentle motion until the other woman calmed.

“I told you about me. How I was raised. There was this foster family - the Mavens. I was living with them when I turned eight, and they made this big birthday dinner for me. But then I found out it was because they knew Child Services was coming. It pissed me off - ‘cause, y’know, anger issues. I wound up throwing the cake at the foster brother who told me the truth. The Mavens didn’t keep me very long after that. Even when I was with Neal, I never….” She shrugged. “I’m not used to the same things that most people are. It was nice, what you did. Really. I just...can’t.”

Regina raised her head and their eyes met. Emma didn’t know what made her say all that. She didn’t know why she thought it would help.

Saying “can’t” about a birthday celebration might be a lie, or it might not. “Won’t” might be closer to the truth. Emma didn’t dig too deeply, just as she didn’t with David and Mary Margaret. The boundary protected her, kept her from hoping. It was logical - good code. Smart design.

She avoided Regina’s questioning, empathetic eyes, instead fixating on the nearest distraction. Panes of glass on either side of the front door were frosted over; she could have scratched her name in the ice. She remembered doing that on car windows as a kid. Emma hadn’t noticed it till now, but a wreath hung surrounding the lion’s head knocker. Of course, it matched the white, gold and blue of
the Christmas decorations inside.

Regina cleared her throat. "Neal is your…"

"My ex-something."

"I have one of those. An ex-husband in my case."

Emma cast about for something else to say, silence spreading between them gracelessly, restlessly. A wind blew and Regina rubbed her bare hands together, then did the same to her wrists and forearms.

"You should go inside. Will you tell Henry I’m sorry about everything?" Emma smiled, trying to coax an answering one from Regina. "But, maybe make me sound cool?"

"If I tell him you left to attend to something important, his imagination will come up with something appropriately elaborate and clandestine. Perhaps we could meet at the diner tomorrow morning? We can discuss what, if anything, is left to do. It’s almost 8 now. If we meet at 8:30 a.m., you’ll have twelve hours to sleep. Is that alright?"

Emma paused before answering. "Um, about that cake." Her last piece of birthday cake had been at a party for a co-worker at Gek-Help. Before that, she’d probably been a kid.

Regina seemed wary. "Yes?"

"I’m weird about celebrations, but I do like cake."

Slowly, Regina’s features brightened and she laughed. Emma didn’t realize how much she’d needed a sign Regina was really okay until that moment. "I suppose I can accommodate that. Stay here a moment."

Regina disappeared inside the house. Emma heard Henry’s muffled voice say something and a gentle reply from Regina. Henry spoke again, though Emma couldn’t make it out, and a few moments later, he appeared in the doorway handed her a plastic container.

"Mom said I could bring this to you. She put in two pieces," Henry explained, giving her a disposable fork. "She told me to tell you goodnight. She won’t tell me why you have to go. Are you going to go help the F.B.I.? Is there a special division you work with?"

"That’s top secret, Henry," Emma told him seriously. He didn’t entirely look like he believed her, but he also didn’t seem completely sure either way.

At the bed and breakfast, Emma surprised herself by eating only one piece of cake, leaving the other for the next day. Some things were good enough to savor.

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The next morning Regina dressed in a blouse and pants – her usual mayor attire. When she came downstairs, Henry was padding around in an old shirt and pajama bottoms.

"You know, Mom, Emma’s really nice. I like her."

"That’s a rather pointed way to say that."
He looked gleeful that she’d noticed. “Yep.”

She snorted. “I believe I have told you that my having more ‘fun’ is my concern, not my well-meaning-but-nonetheless-busy-body son’s. Also, Emma lives several hours away.”

“But she could still be your friend,” Henry countered.

It was a relief to be playful with one another again. Even when the topic wasn’t entirely comfortable for Regina. Henry was right about Emma. She was nice. More and more, Regina got the feeling that Emma might be someone truly kind. She hadn’t met many kind people in her life.

She dropped a kiss on the top of Henry’s head. “Go get dressed for school, please.”

“Mom? It really is okay, right?”

“Yes, sweetheart, it really is.”

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When Regina entered the diner, several people greeted her politely, though none of them did more than that. She considered their standoffishness to be a reaction to her own. With the brief exception of Graham, the town sheriff, she invited none of them in her life. She preferred them to be a little intimidated by her. They knew her but didn’t know much about her. They liked her but were wary of her. They approached her only when they needed something for the town or when polite convention demanded it. She wanted it that way.

Regina paused over the mat by the door to brushed the snow from her jacket, and then hung it on one of the coat hooks provided for customers.

Emma was drinking coffee in a booth by the window. “Hey,” she greeted distractedly as Regina joined her. Emma slid a second cup of coffee across the table. “Didn’t know if you drink coffee, but I thought it might warm you up,” she muttered. She was staring at the table and her voice seemed...off.

“I do, thank you.” Regina regarded her with a quiet frown; Emma was too pale.

She looked up at Regina with large, stricken eyes. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Regina slid off her leather gloves and wrapped her hands around the warmth of the mug, waiting.

“Regina, I don’t want you to get upset but – what I did to that guy’s hard drive. Before my RAT destroyed everything, it copied his data to my computer. It was a precaution in case you wanted to go to the F.B.I. after all, or we needed more information for some reason.”

“I understand. It was very sensible of you,” Regina said gently, wondering if perhaps the fear of Regina’s anger was in part responsible for how lost Emma looked.

“So, in the data, I found a folder marked ‘Slaves’. I found Henry’s folder. But Regina, there are other folders, too.”

The words sliced deeply into her, making her bleed so profusely she wondered if she’d ever stop. “How –” she had to clear her throat to properly ask the question. “How many? How many other folders?”
“Almost fifty.”

Regina tightened her hold on the mug of coffee, afraid she would drop it if she didn’t.
The one with the F-ing Hotel

Chapter Notes

Yes, I am going to continue to thank you all for being awesome. This is only right as awesome should always be recognized. I think Gandhi said that. On average about 450 - 500 folks are reading each new story part that is posted (here and on FF) which amazes me and makes me feel like dancing. No, I will not video that. It is not pretty.

Please keep the love coming and know that I my wife and I are like: 'did you see what ____ wrote?' about every comment you make. We're totally OCD. Also, I'm competitive about Kudos.

Anyyyyywhoooo..... These next two chapters represent the end of Arc 1 (Chapter 11) and the beginning of Arc 2 (Chapter 12). At the end of Arc 2, we'll see a couple of things come into play.

In the worst of situations, being smart and determined had always saved Regina. Her mind navigated through the most treacherous of terrains, pushed her through forests, deserts, and mountains. It often left her heart behind, but she didn’t know what to do with most of her feelings anyway. They were extra luggage on the journey. The packed bag of winter clothes you brought along just in case the temperature suddenly dropped, not believing it really would.

“Let me call my friend,” Emma urged her. “Look, I know you’re worried about, well...something, but you know this is a game changer, right? We can’t sit on this.”

Sometimes it did get cold, so cold she couldn’t think. The sight of her father’s body lying still and white at the front of the church froze her. Years later, after her mother’s renunciation, she sat in a hotel room and stared into space, unable to summon up one single action to take away the sharpness of the descending winter. Her heart never did her any good in those situations. It forced her to stop, stunned, stuck in hostile conditions until she managed to shove it out of the way again.

“Regina?” Emma prompted again, this time sounding frustrated.

A better person would have only one answer to Emma’s suggestion. Fifty folders on Peter Pan’s hard drive meant fifty children and fifty families. A vision of the press laying siege to her sleepy little town stole into her mind. Or worse, her mother arriving at her front door with all of her various agendas in tow, like suitcases.

“I know that my hesitation seems unreasonable in light of what you found. Could I - would you mind if I explained more about my background?”

Emma’s agitation softened and she nodded.

“I came to Storybrooke to hide from my past. As you know, ten years ago I was involved in a scandal.”
Acknowledgment of her own complacency and the many ways she’d been a fool was buried so deeply inside her, she would surely have to tear herself apart to say it. She began to dig it free anyway.

“Before that, life was going very much to plan. I was on a career path carefully mapped out by both me and my mother. She had aspirations of me going into politics, and I quite liked that idea too. I managed one of our family’s hotels, then ran events at the Washington D.C. location. I decided I needed more experience managing something on my own. With Mother’s support, I started a national cancer foundation. We dispensed 76% of all donations to cancer patients. 8% was overhead. We did do some good.”

“So, that leaves sixteen percent, right? What happened to it?”

Spikes covered the answer to that question and it tore at Regina as she forced it free. She knew she deserved it - the painful embarrassment of something she couldn’t defend and didn’t deserve forgiveness for. “My mother used the charity to skim money for various investments. I didn’t know at first. When I found out, my mother convinced me that it was just how things were done. That we still were helping people.” She slumped forward, though her tone, through sheer will didn’t change. “So...I did it too.”

She heard her mother’s voice in her head, “I didn’t raise you to be naive. As long as people genuinely benefit from the charity, what’s the harm in using it to our advantage? Unless this is too much responsibility for you? You’ve come this far, dear. Are you going to lose your courage now? I have plans for you, Regina, but if you can’t even handle this...” It would have been so much easier to fight her mother if Regina hadn’t wanted everything that dangled in front of her.

Regina waited for Emma’s inevitable abandonment. Every friend she’d ever had, every person she knew disassociated themselves from her in those days. At first promising their support, only to avoid and ignore her after. She became an outcast. She didn’t blame them. What she did could only acquire such a response from anyone with decency. Her friend Mal eventually became the exception, but Mal’s reasons for doing anything could be hard to discern.

Regina sat up, back perfectly straight. She erased any and all emotions from her features, making her face blank. She hated how easily she could hide behind this mask. She could have made a killing as an actress.

Emma banged the back of her head against the cushion of the booth. “You fucking stole from people with cancer.”

Regina stared at her folded hands on the tabletop. Her greedy ambition stalked the future like prey but she’d also wanted to make a difference. She had kept a long list of things she wanted to accomplish, ways she could do good.

“Yes, I did,” Regina answered bluntly, knowing nothing else would suffice. “There was a former employee whom I had treated...the way I often treated people. He went to the Washington Post with a lot of stories but no proof. The newspapers started to dig. In public, my mother did interviews saying she knew nothing about the inner workings of the charity. In private, she promised me she could do more to help me if she didn’t seem linked to everything.”

Bitterness rose from inside her, and she pressed her teeth against her tongue to force it back down. “Our financial records were subpoenaed but we kept more than one set of books. Still, the media grew frenzied. They mobbed me everywhere I went, enjoying every moment of the Evil Queen’s downfall. Finally, my mother suggested I go to Europe for a while. I argued that it would make me look guilty, and my mother told me that was entirely the point. Everything had become too public,
people wanted someone to blame. Someone had to take the fall, she said.”

That moment itself was one of so many manipulations. Regina should have been more surprised. It hurt, so very much, that she wasn’t.

Emma sputtered, “And that someone was you? Her own fucking daughter?”

“My mother told me that publicly I would be blamed for everything, but she could arrange it so I’d never be charged.” Regina snorted, raising a meaningful eyebrow to paint the picture of her mother’s machinations. “Unless, of course, I refused to go to Europe and therefore didn’t want her help. In which case, she just couldn’t be sure I’d stay out of prison.” She spoke as her mother did then, imitating the false concern. “My mother uses people. Everything she does, every time she gives anything. There’s a price.”

Regina looked out the window, taking in the town where she’d unexpectedly found a safe haven for herself and Henry and a second chance. “I went into hiding here to get away from her and from what I had done. And that was before Henry. I never want her to hurt him the way she hurt me. And I don’t know if, even after all this time, the revelation of where I am would draw the attention of the press. You need to understand that if we go to the F.B.I., it might lead to my mother or the press finding us. If I decide to carry out my threat to Peter Pan, I would need to use my contacts, and again, it could lead to us being found.”

Emma took that in. “We’ll figure it out, okay?”

“We will?”

Emma nodded. “Yeah.”

Regina didn’t say “Why?” out loud, but it must have shown on her face.

After a moment Emma said, “When I was younger, I was a scamming, bottom-feeding, stone cold, credit-card-number thief. But I don’t think I’m that person anymore. The person that stole from the charity? She seems like a mega-bitch, an evil Whitewalker zombie with a heart of ice. But I don’t think she’s you. We ex-jerks have to stick together.”

Since the conversation began, Regina had been tearing away pieces of herself and laying them out before Emma. Now, all the scattered bits became one, patched together with the pieces of tape that one smile gave her. The patchwork of those memories were put away, still feverish and infected. But, she felt for the first time in a long time that they might one day heal. Regina wanted to surge toward Emma, to be closer to her, to somehow communicate the gratitude she felt. She just didn’t know how.

“This is way too intense of a discussion to have without pancakes. Let’s order and we can look at your choices, okay,” Emma said. Without waiting for an answer, she motioned Granny over and ordered something called a superstack, which included six pancakes, plus eggs and sausage. Regina ordered egg whites on toast.

As they waited, Emma slid one of her notebooks forward, so they could both see it. She started to turn to a clean page when Regina lay two fingers on the open one, stopping her.

“Is that me?” Regina asked.

Emma clapped her palm down over it, slid another finger against the corner of the pages and flipped them over.
“Why am I holding a sword?”

“Nope, nope. Wasn’t you. Wasn’t a sword.”

Regina raised a brow. “I’m fairly certain that’s what I saw.”

“Hey look, here’s a clean page with nothing on it.”

Regina let it go. Curiosity and amusement needed to give way so she could focus on next steps.

“Okay, so,” Emma began. “Option one - You get your revenge in horrific ways. But there’s a big chance that your mother finds out. Option two - You don’t do anything more than you already have. You and Henry are safe, Peter Pan is slowed down but isn’t stopped. Option three - You leave an anonymous tip. You’re safe from your mother but the Peter Pan problem might not get addressed at all.” Emma was scribbling each option as she spoke it. “Option four - Go to the F.B.I yourself and that probably means your mother finds out right? Or….Option five, we go to my F.B.I friend unofficially. Peter Pan is dealt with. Even though there’s a risk your mother finds out, I think it’s a small risk.”

Regina saw the point Emma was making, of course, she did. Out of all available options, contacting Emma’s friend offered the best potential outcomes. She had come to Storybrooke to hide away from the world. Her son, though, had sought it out. He always would - her idealistic boy who believed in heroes and villains, good and evil.

“Henry would say that heroes always do the right thing, even if they are scared.” She raised her eyes to Emma’s. “My son mistakenly believes I am heroic.”

“Look, you aren’t the only one who doesn’t want to go to the F.B.I. I’m an ex-con, Regina. I’m completely paranoid that everyone in law enforcement is just waiting for me to screw up so they can take me back to prison. I trust people about as much as you do. But I think when the right thing to do is this clear, you have to do it no matter what it does or doesn’t cost you.”

Regina couldn’t help feeling the better angels of her nature rise up inside her. She was still frightened of her mother and what she could do, but the right thing to do was staring her in the face and couldn’t be ignored.

She could have cursed Emma for it.

She could have hugged Emma for it.

Emma’s straightforward words felt painful but also like a beacon. Once, she had thought she could add positive things to the world. Change it for the better. That’s why she had let her mother talk her into running the charity. That fearless hope had been placed in a box marked “unrealistic” where so many unfulfilled wishes of her youth were stored. If nothing else, Regina was good at keeping things tidy, making sure everything was in its proper place. What would it be like, she wondered, to have that trust in herself again - that she could be and do good?


He’s a good guy,” Emma reassured her for about the sixth time as they walked through the parking lot toward the front door of the Chili’s.
“You do realize that repetition suggests a lack of confidence, don’t you?”

“You do realize you let an ex-con into your house.” Emma teased back. “I wouldn’t introduce you if I didn’t think he was okay.”

Regina did know that, or she was starting to.

Once again, she wore a power suit. She wanted to project strength and confidence. Earlier Emma had made a phone call, and it turned out that Special Agent August Booth could meet them that evening, halfway between Storybrooke and Portland. It meant driving in some dodgy conditions, as the snowfall was expected to pick up. Regina preemptively made a reservation at a hotel near the restaurant, and arranged for Henry to “hang out” with a friend. (“I’m thirteen, Mom, I don’t have sleepovers.”) Regina couldn’t remember the last time she’d left Storybrooke once, much less twice, in a week.

Regina followed Emma into the Chili’s and looked around for someone wearing the type of clothing she assumed a federal agent would wear. However, the person who stood and waved to Emma was not wearing a suit. Instead, he wore a wrinkled white button-down shirt, worn black boots, and shorts. In December. In a snowstorm. In Maine.

“Hey Emma!” he called out. He stood when they were about a foot away, catching Emma by the elbow and kissing her cheek. Regina noticed he’d been eating from a basket of chili fries the size of a bucket and almost missed it when he extended his hand to her.

“Miss Mills? I’m Special Agent August Booth.”

Regina shook his hand. Proximity did nothing to make her feel this man had any notion of professionalism. His hair, though short, was ragged. His beard had uneven tufts of hair and stubble, as if he couldn’t be bothered to shave properly. When he sat down again, he took up his entire side of the booth, stretched out so that his back pressed against the window and his boots dangled over the opposite side of the seat.

“You look like hell,” Emma noted, amused.

“Been re-celebrating my single life the last few nights,” August noted.

“Re-celebrating?” Emma asked.

He held up all five fingers of his right hand. “Had a girlfriend for about six months, but I screwed it up. The screw-up’s name was Sugar, by the way. Which might tell you all you need to know.”

Emma glanced at Regina, seeming to realize that August wasn’t giving the best first impression. “Hey, August’s kinda different than a lot of agents, but when I was working with him, it helped make me feel more comfortable. He’s very good at what he does.”

August grinned. “Thank you. If only the higher ups in the Bureau would figure that out. But, the good part of being underutilized is that I can meet old friends with very little notice.”

“By the way,” he directed his next words to Emma and pointed at her. “Call me every now and again, will you?” He popped a fry into his mouth and chewed while he looked back to Regina. “Anywho, Emma said that she has some evidence about a guy harassing kids online, but I have to keep it on the down low?”

Emma pulled a USB from her jacket pocket, and August looked at it a moment before pulling a tablet from the seat beside him and inserting the USB into the proper port.
“There’s this folder called ‘Slaves’,” Emma directed him. “We have his information - address, real
name. User names on different forums. “

August didn’t search for it right away. “From what you told me, you also committed a crime.
Again.” Regina opened her mouth to come to Emma’s defense, but August only wagged a finger
playfully. “Bad hacker.” Then more seriously, “Sounds like you gave us a pretty good start.”

“Can you keep Regina’s name out of it?”

He squinted at Regina. “Are you really that Regina Mills?”

“Are you really an F.B.I agent?”

Emma glanced from August to Regina and back, wondering if she needed to referee, but August
merely held up both his hands in a pacifying gesture.

“Just clarifying. Let’s see what we got.” August propped up the tablet and tapped through the folders
on the drive. After a few more moments, he gave a low whistle. “Jesus.” He kept tapping, then
glanced up. "You look at these?"

Regina was profoundly thankful that she could not see his screen.

“No,” Emma answered for them.

August nodded. “He has a type. A certain age bracket. None of his victims look over sixteen or so.”
He scratched his beard as he tapped a few more times, frowning deeply before making three more
aggressive taps and setting the tablet aside.

“You’re lucky,” he said to Regina. “There was another situation like this one a year back. A wanna-
be hacker infected a fourteen-year-old girl’s computer with a RAT. She didn’t do what the guy said
and he released all these naked photos of her.” He focused on his computer again, distracted. “We
were called in after she committed suicide. Her parents found her. We got the guy, but we couldn’t
save her.”

Emma stood up, furious. “August, what the hell,” she snarled.

August’s head jerked up, his face slackened in realization. “I’m…”

The words took hold without Regina wanting them to. Regina saw her sweet son’s smiling face. She
imagined pushing open the door to Henry’s room and finding him….finding him. Losing him. Oh
God, oh God, oh God. She tried to hold Henry’s smiling face in her mind. She’d hugged him that
morning before he went to school, just like always.

A few years ago he’d had the flu - a bad cough and a fever of 104. She’d given him every cold
medicine she could think of and fed him soup and other liquids till he complained that he was tired of
having to pee. She dragged the armchair from her room to his so she could keep watch over him as
he slept. Calling his doctor led to placating reassurance that Henry would be fine in a few days.
Regina waited a day and a half before insisting that the doctor see him. Of course Henry got better
just as the doctor predicted. Still, it changed her. She carried a bag of worries, sometimes more full,
sometimes lighter, but never empty from that day. Mostly, she filled it with silly things and she knew
it. Concern about test scores and what they meant. Hyper-analyzing Henry’s shyness. Endlessly
wondering if he wore enough layers in winter. What Agent Booth spoke of, though, it crushed
every worry she’d ever had into dust under its weight. It change the word ‘worry’ from something
almost benign to something malignant.
Emma leaned over the table and punched August in the arm. Hard.

“Ow!” he complained. “That’s assault, you know.”

“Regina will bail me out. August, please just...” She sank back into her seat beside Regina, worried eyes on her. “Hey,” Emma called softly to her. “Can I show you something? Do you have a quarter and a dollar bill?”

Regina frowned. “I don’t think…”

“August?” Emma asked. He produced the money after a moment of searching. “Watch,” she instructed Regina. She folded the dollar bill into a V and set the quarter into the center of the V so that it was suspended. “I can balance this quarter on its side on this dollar,” she explained.

Regina blinked, not sure she understood the point or how it connected to their previous conversation.

Emma slowly pulled the edges of the dollar bill until the dollar began to straighten. The coin wobbled for just a moment, but then was steady and stayed balanced flat on the edge of the dollar bill.

“Ta-da!” Emma grinned triumphantly.

Regina continued to be confused. “I’m sorry, I think I might be missing the point.”

Emma winked and pocketed August’s money. “Distracted you, didn’t it?”

Regina couldn’t help but laugh, despite her myriad fears and doubts. “I suppose so.”

Emma was unexpectedly gallant in the most interesting of ways. So far, it occurred to Regina, she had been by her side every step of the way. Absolutely steadfast and dependable. More than she ever could have expected when they’d met. A blessing she didn’t truly deserve.

“Learned it in prison. There’s a surprising amount of down time.”

She shook her head fondly. “So I gather.”

“Regina, David has known August for years. He is a good guy. Really.” It sounded like an apology. Regina knew vaguely who David and Mary Margaret were just based on snatches of conversation. Emma treated their opinions as if they were infallible. There was a bond there.

“August,” Emma prodded. “I told you what she’s been through. Can you reassure her that you’re not a complete asshole, please?”

August pushed his fries and his beer to one side and moved to sit properly instead of half-lounging “I am sorry about that, Miss Mills. Agents have this thing where they engage in a lot of shop-talk. I’ve been in the bureau fifteen years, so sometimes I forget how to talk to actual human beings. I am truly glad that Emma was able to help you and your son, and I will keep this entire conversation confidential. I’ll just claim I have an anonymous informant which is the truth. You can trust me and, honestly, I could use a case like this.”

“Just keep both of our names out of it,” Emma insisted.

“I will. I promise. Miss Mills, can you tell me your son’s story from the beginning? It would help me begin to understand this guy’s M.O.”

Regina told the story. For the first time, August seemed competent, asking solid questions and
listening intently. He even asked her to pause several times so he could take down some notes. And then it was Emma’s turn. He wanted to understand how she’d found the guy. August’s expression lit up, impressed, as Emma explained the stealth scanner she’d developed. He asked for a copy, which Emma apparently had anticipated.


“You’re the bomb.” August asked Emma a few questions. Again, they were astute. Perhaps this had been a good idea. Perhaps.

“Wait – you fried the hard drive?” August said, echoing Emma, his eyes wide with disbelief. “Why would you do that?”

“You have the information right there, August,” Emma said, confused. “You have everything I have.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. When he spoke, he strained to keep his voice level. “But what I don’t have is material obtained with a search warrant at his house, Emma, that directly proves he did it.”

The significance of this seemed to dawn on Emma slowly, and she let out a heavy sigh. Regina, however, still wasn’t sure she was following.

August saw her confusion and tried to reel in his emotions. “To get a search warrant, we need probable cause that a crime has been committed. The best case scenario is that from the search warrant we find direct evidence of what he did in his possession. If you killed his hard drive, a lot of our evidence might be gone.”

“But, I have traces and we have e-mails. We have his IP address.”

“Obtained by you – an ex-felon,” August countered. “I’m not saying you have nothing. I’m just saying….it’s like you went to the murderer’s house, found the murder weapon with his fingerprints on it, and then threw it away.”

*My fault,* Regina thought, *entirely my fault.* She had insisted that they do things her way. She hadn’t known what they would find. She had only been thinking of Henry. Yet that didn’t change the fact that Emma had tried to tell her, and as she often did, Regina decided she knew what was best.

“I asked her to,” Regina said slowly. “I wanted to make sure he didn’t have the files and pictures of my son anymore.”

“Would it make any difference at all if I was willing to come forward and explain what I did, and how?” Emma asked.

“No, because weird shit happens, and with your luck it would backfire and they’d make me arrest you.”

“But if there’s a chance it could help,” Emma persisted.

“Emma -” Regina began to protest, but August cut in.

“I’m going to run it by the guys upstairs, okay? And my boss will give me that annoyed look he always does. The F.B.I., likes their cases nice and clean and tied up in a little bow. What you gave me is a mess. Evidence has to stand up to the scrutiny of the courts. Peter Pan having a computer at his house with all these files would have given us a solid case. But this? Unverifiable suspect from
information obtained illegally?"

“Could you reach out to the other victims?” Regina suggested, having a feeling she knew the answer, but she had to ask.

“We will do that. We’ll contact everyone who has a file. But that will take time too. A lot of these hackers sell their slaves’ information. The Bureau will want to try to nail him for distribution of child pornography if we can. Look, I’m trying to tell you this won’t be a fast process. Even if we still had direct proof, like his home computer, it would take months. The Bureau focuses on being thorough, dotting every ‘i’ and crossing every ‘t’. The evidence we lost will probably set us back.”

Emma burrowed back into the corner of her booth with a surly expression but said nothing.

August called over the waitress and asked for his check. When she left, he said, “Hey, I can promise we will investigate and I will go over what you collected on this guy with the powers-that-be. I just want to set expectations.”

Regina had heard people attempt to placate her a million times. She knew what it sounded like.

August gazed at them from across the table for a moment, and seemed to realize there was nothing he could say that would help. He looked like he wished he could. An awkward silence stretched between them as the server came back with the bill and he quickly handed her cash, telling her to keep the change. “I really should go.” August sighed and rose from his seat, throwing on a leather jacket.

Regina didn’t understand how that was going to protect him when he had shorts on – but it wasn’t her job to keep him from catching pneumonia.

He stood and looked across the table. “Emma, just so you know, I have occasionally poked around for Neal.”

She sighed, still looking unhappy. “August, you don’t have to do that.”

“David and I both want a piece of that guy.”

“He’s not worth it. He never was.”

August looked like he wanted to argue but instead leaned in to touch Emma’s hand. “You take care of yourself, okay? Miss Mills, I’ll be in touch.” He headed off toward the exit.

Emma didn’t move, her jaw clenched. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she said, slapping her palm on the table.

“Either way, it’s done,” Regina said flatly, her mind whirling with dark possibilities. One thought surfaced. “You turned yourself in, correct? How long would you have been put in prison if you hadn’t helped the F.B.I?”

Emma looked decidedly uncomfortable. “I was looking at twenty years.”

“And yet you were willing to do it again today.” Regina couldn’t look at her for a moment. “You – you haven’t said ‘I told you so’ yet. About the way we handled this. The way I told you to handle this.”

“You didn’t know.”

“Nor did I want to know, I suspect.” Regina wasn’t about to give herself a respite from the guilt she
richly deserved.

“You were terrified for your son, Regina,” Emma countered.

“Yes,” she agreed. And then more quietly. “And for me.”

“We’re here though. You trusted someone you don’t know with something that could hurt you and your son because you’re trying to do the right thing.”

“And yet I didn’t.”

“And I stole millions of dollars from sixteen really rich white guys.”

“And you turned yourself in.”

“Because they were trying to pin it on these college kids. These idiot kids decided to ‘hint’ on Twitter that they were the ones who ripped off the investment company. They had some scripting skills so the cops believed them. Neal and I were holed up in a hotel and we saw their arrest on TV.”

“And that’s why you turned yourself in?” Regina asked, a wave of understanding rising then settling inside her.

“The whole thing was about justice for sixteen men who defrauded their investors and got away with it. All the money we took – ALL of it – was supposed to be funneled into different charities. Neal kept saying it wasn’t our problem, but if I had let those kids take the rap, I would have been as bad as the men we stole from.” Emma met Regina’s eyes. “My point is, you can think you’re doing a good thing and just be wrong, or go about it wrong. It happens. You were between a rock and a hard place.”

Realization made Regina sit up straighter. “Neal didn’t turn himself in, did he?”

Emma gave a mirthless laugh. “Shocking, right? He took a million dollars and disappeared. I got three years, but it was eventually commuted to eighteen months. Better than it could have been.” Her forced-casual tone said clearly that the subject was closed, so Regina didn’t push.

They lingered a little longer, picking at food, till they both looked at one another and silently agreed it was time to go. Outside, the snow was really coming down, and they huddled under the roof of the restaurant as they watched it.

Regina pulled out her iPhone and checked the weather. It was only going to get worse tonight, so it seemed. “The weather gave a high chance of heavy snow. I took the liberty of making reservations at a Holiday Inn near the turnpike.”

“There’s a 24-hour diner a few blocks from here, why don’t you head to the hotel and I’ll hang out there. You can pick me up in the morning.”

Regina looked dubiously at the falling snow. “I would feel better if I knew we were both safe and sound.” Emma looked as if she was about to argue and Regina tried to guess her objection. “I’m happy to pay for your room. You did come out here to help with Henry’s case. Besides, I suspect the last thing you need is another night without sleep,” She noted dryly.

“I’ll get Mountain Dew and a boatload of coffee, I’ll be fine.”

“I’m not going to abandon you in some diner.”
“You don’t need to worry about me,” Emma insisted, gesturing to herself. “Big girl. Survived prison.”

“Very well, then we’ll go to the diner.”

“Regina, I’m not going to make you stay up all night with me.”

Regina shifted and slid her hands in her pockets. She wasn’t about to back down. “Then we have a problem, Emma, because I’m not going to leave you alone. Let me know what you decide. Do try and make a choice before we both turn into popsicles.”

Regina leaned forward and plucked a snowflake from Emma’s jacket. She brushed a few more from her own jacket.

“Fine,” Emma exclaimed in frustration. “Let’s go to the fucking hotel.”

“Fucking hotel it is.”
Happy Thursday everyone! This is your captain speaking telling you that today’s flight is blue skies and clear flying. This was one of my favorite chapters of the story to write so far. That being said Noname_Kat, much to my chagrin, guessed what was going to happen in this chapter like...a month ago. Kudos to her. See, I give YOU all kudos too. It’s that kind of relationship.

I want to remind everyone that this is a sloooooow burn. Note the unnecessary presence of multiple O’s. Wait, some of your minds went to a naughty place just then didn’t you? What I mean to say is that there won’t be sex in this chapter. Or for a bit. I fear the following virtual and completely imaginary conversation.

ReadersofLoveHack: You called last chapter 'the One with the F-Ing Hotel'.
Me: But I tagged this as slow burn.
ReadersofLoveHack: But they are IN a Hotel.
Me: But....slow burn.
ReadersofLoveHack: False advertising!
Me: But....
ReadersofLoveHack: We’re suing you for unresolved sexual tension infringement.

Anyway, please don't be too mad at me.

They were able to get adjoining rooms. Regina sat on the bed tiredly, skimming through her mental list for anything that unequivocally had to be done before she could let herself rest. She checked her watch to make sure it was still before eleven. It was – with ten minutes to spare – so she called her son. If it had been later she would have just sent him a text, to avoid disturbing the family of Henry’s friend. As it was, she felt grateful to hear his voice and the lightness in it.

“Is Emma with you?” Henry wanted to know. When she assured him that Emma was, he wanted to talk to her. Regina quietly knocked on Emma’s door to find her wide awake and at the computer. She took the cell phone when Regina explained it was Henry. They chatted amiably for a few minutes and Regina tried not to listen in, though she was extremely curious what her son had to say to someone he barely knew. She did believe in offering some degree of privacy.

Emma wandered back into Regina’s room, offering her the phone. “Henry tells me you wanted to invite me to a Winter Festival? And then he can interview me for his Youtube channel the next morning?”
Regina had told Henry no such thing. This was clearly his opening salvo against what he perceived to be the lack of fun in her life. She snatched back the phone, making a mental list of all the possible ways to punish him. “Henry Daniel Mills...”

“Love you Mom, gotta go – bye!”

She could feel Emma’s smirk while she stared impotently at her phone, a fresh dial tone bleating from it.

“So what’s this Winter Festival thing?” Emma asked.

Regina noted that Emma’s innocent tone was undone by the twinkle in her eyes at Regina’s discomfort. She could have handled inviting Emma if, well, if it had even occurred to her.

She cleared her throat, fumbling to navigate the unexpected situation. “Just a lot of insipid people overdrinking and overeating and someone is always arrested for relieving themselves in public – every year.”

“Is that how you market it on posters too?”

Regina realized that it wasn’t her best sales pitch, but including Emma in her town’s yearly festival felt like an invasion of something private. It wasn’t. At all. Yet it felt like it. Like boundaries were about to be crossed when she hadn’t had a chance to assess possible fallout.

“I’m sorry. It’s actually quite lovely. It’s a special event for our town. Although, as Mayor, it’s quite stressful for me. I usually wind up playing referee for petty squabbles and solving a thousand different logistical problems. This year the two men who are working on the ice sculpture are in a heated disagreement over whether the sculptures should be backlit with white or colored lights.” She closed her eyes, knowing that she still wasn’t making much of a case.

The question was: did she want Emma to go or not? It would be a risk. Emma would see personal things about her. This time not due to an emergency, but because she invited Emma into her world. Into the safe haven that she had carved for her and her son. Perhaps she was overthinking. She loved the town and the people in it. Was it so hard for her to let anyone actually see that? Could she not let her walls down even that far?
When one isn’t used to risking, when one is too used to doing what is safe, even small risks seem colossal. She did trust Emma, to a degree. More than most. That hadn’t happened in a long time and, perhaps, for that reason alone, it should be cultivated

Regina took in a deep breath and tried – for once – to reach out. “It’s something people always get very excited for. Lights strung up all over the main street. A giant Christmas tree. Hot chocolate. A few carnival rides and games and a snowman contest. A baking contest, too. And I have to make a speech.” Regina had once played hostess to heads of state and Washington movers and shakers, but now she couldn’t hold Emma’s eyes. She fidgeted, straightening the bedspread. “I know you don’t celebrate some things, so I don’t know if this is something you would want to do. If it is not an imposition, I would like you to consider coming.”

“Well, it’s not usually my kind of thing, but there will be baked goods. So – how bad could it be, right?”

Regina appreciated the ease with which Emma accepted, ignoring the awkward invitation. “The baked goods are quite good. I make something every year, though I do not enter the contest. If I win, I would not want people to assume it is because of my position.”

“You sure you’d win? I hear Granny makes a mean pie,” Emma teased.

Lesser people would have backed away from the unblinking and unmistakeable haughtiness Regina leveled at Emma. “There is professional and there is perfection, dear. Granny,” Regina stressed it to emphasis it was just a title (as far as anyone knew). “Is one, and I am the other.”

Emma wasn’t intimidated, full mirth spilling from her eyes. Secretly, Regina liked it.

“Perfection is a pretty ballsy claim.”

“Are you challenging me?”

“Pretty much.”

“Then I suppose you’ll need to come to the festival and be prepared to admit my superiority.”
"I guess so."

Regina enjoyed her victory. She enjoyed everything about the last few minutes. Her dark eyes were glowing with amusement. She felt lighthearted and she couldn’t remember the last time she had felt that way. "Speaking of the festival, it should have been this week but we pushed it back. Rather, my assistant did." She felt like it was an admission of failure. She had been so frantic about Henry that almost everything else had fallen away. "I should check on preparations."

"I’m going to entertain myself with this VR game I found," Emma said easily, and reached into her backpack, pulling free a headset and sliding it over her eyes and face. "Let me know if my zombie killing gets too loud."

Regina went to the desk and composed several e-mails. One regarding the Storybrooke budget for the upcoming year and asking for her assistant to assess some of the expenses. Not that there would be that many. Not anymore. Regina had led many improvement efforts in her time as mayor. After her election, she had made a five page list of steps to revive the faded, worn-down town. She’d completed all the items on that list two years ago. Her assistant Belle, a bright spot left over from the former mayor, could answer most inquiries on her own. When Regina let her.

Over time, Regina made the inner workings of city hall into an efficient series of cogs and springs, operating with precision. Perhaps made too well, as it barely needed her on some days.

She finished her work for the evening and ducked her head through the open doorway to Emma’s room. "Emma?"

Emma held a controller in front of her like a gun, and she turned from one side to the other. The headset she wore reminded Regina of a View Master, a toy she’d had as a child, that showed 3-D pictures frame by frame. Apparently someone decided that strapping the device to your head made for a better product. Emma kept muttering to herself, a vicious "Die, zombie" or a disbelieving "Are you kidding me, I hit that guy".

"Emma?" she called again. "I’m going to turn in."

She noticed Emma’s notebook open with a few sketches in plain sight. She wanted to see if Emma had indeed drawn a cartoon of her as a knight, so she crept closer than strictly necessary.
It was definitely her, and now she was leveling a sword at a troll. Invading someone’s privacy went against her rather well-developed sense of decorum, so she cleared her throat - loudly - to get Emma’s attention.

Emma started and raised her headset onto her forehead. It made her look a bit like a welder from the future. A moment later, a creepy voice from the game said, “You have died for the 11th time.”

“I’m sorry to have caused your untimely death,” Regina told her wryly. “I wanted to let you know I am going to bed and to discuss tomorrow. I recognize that you are close to home. If you wish, I can get you a car and ship anything you might have left at the bed and breakfast to you.”

Emma motioned to her backpack. “Almost everything is in there. There’s another backpack with clothes in the trunk of the rental car. That’s pretty much it. But, ah, the kid would never forgive me if I didn’t say goodbye, so if it’s all the same to you, we’ll just head back to Storybrooke.”

Regina gave her an honest smile. Anyone thinking of Henry’s happiness was always going to garner her good opinion.

“Is 8 a.m. suitable?”

Emma groaned. “It’s early.”

“And you object to early?”

“As a concept, yes. But for tomorrow, no.”

“Excellent. Goodnight, Emma.”

Emma’s lips turned downward into a small pout, a series of wrinkles marring her brow. “You’re going?”

“Well, my bed is in my room. It seemed wise.”
“Actually, you can help me with something,” Emma said. The next Regina knew Emma scrambled onto her bed – standing in the middle of it. “You know what I have never done? Jumped on a mattress. My mattresses have never been what you’d call cushy. I mean, the one at your house is, but jumping on that one would have been such a bad idea.”

“Indubitably.”

“But this one?” Emma let herself fall from the standing position she was in and bounce on her rear. “Oh my God, that was awesome. Did you ever do this as a kid?”

Regina didn’t like where this was heading. “I was far too sensible.”

“That settles it, you have to.”

“I assure you that I do not.”

“Regina Mills, take off that suit jacket and those designer shoes and jump on this bed with me.”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

Emma grinned. “To unwind after a long day.”

“I can have a glass of wine after we get back home.”

“For little Regina Mills who was too sensible to jump on her bed.”

“Big Regina Mills is also too sensible. It’s unseemly.”

“There’s no one here to seem in front of.”

“Seemly or not, it is a matter of it being undignified.”
“Really?” Emma asked dryly. “I mean, this is a Holiday Inn.” It must have been evident that Regina wouldn’t move from her position because Emma’s mouth twisted unhappily.

“I don’t sleep all that well in new places,” she blurted. “The first night in new foster homes always felt dangerous to me. Nothing ever happened, but I heard stories. One time, one of the other kids came in my room to see if I was asleep. When he realized I was awake, he dashed out. I mean...sleep is sometimes rough for me anyway. My head gets going and…” She drifted off but Regina thought she understood. “It’s just worse in new places.” Emma tapped the side of her head. “It’s why I wanted to go to the diner after we left Chili’s.”

Regina considered her. “You slept well at my house.”

“I passed out. It’s what I do. I’ve gotten good at finding ways to distract myself from not being able to sleep. Usually by doing something that’s pretty childish and stupid. Like...mattress jumping.”

“Emma,” Regina sighed, feeling herself give in. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. Pride maybe? So – will you do this stupid thing with me?” Emma extended her hand to Regina. “Please?”

In the end, that was what ultimately moved Regina. It was ridiculous. Moronic. Definitely unseemly. But something in her couldn’t refuse an extended hand from Emma Swan. So she took the hand, briefly sitting on the bed to pull off her heels.

“Remove that virtual gear you have on. I can’t take you seriously like that. I will do it…once,” she said to Emma.

Emma moved off the bed and waved Regina toward it. “Let’s see what you got, Madame Mayor.”

Regina hopped the tiniest hop known to humankind. “Happy?”

Emma just looked at her. Regina rolled her eyes but did, indeed, give a slightly more animated hop. Only slightly. It made Emma shake her head and climb back on the bed. “Look, I’ll show you.”
She actually found herself feeling tense and anxious about jumping on a questionable bed in a hotel in the middle of nowhere.

“You said you had never done this.”

Emma waved that off. “I’m a natural.”

“At mattress jumping?” Regina asked in disbelief. “I don’t believe that’s actually a skillset.”

Emma ignored her, bent her knees and jumped so high that she almost hit the ceiling, and almost caused Regina to lose her balance. She cajoled Regina into trying again, and then she challenged Regina to jump higher than she did. The thing was that Emma also cheered her on. Emma encouraged and celebrated every jump. Regina found herself breathless after a few minutes, and she and Emma collapsed onto the bed.

“I’m thinking we should try to get some sleep before you get us kicked out,” Regina told her anyway, huffing over being forced to do something so childish.

As Regina stood and adjusted her suit, Emma waved from the bed she was now lying on, looking terribly pleased with herself.

“Hey, Regina?”

Regina turned to face her.

When she and Graham had an affair several years ago, she couldn’t wait to leave him after her passion was spent. She didn’t seek out the social company of anyone. She was used to being alone. With other people, it was hard to know what to say and equally hard to trust. In her other life, she had moved through a room like a queen, confident in the light stories and small talk she had perfected. She had wanted to project an image of both friendly and untouchable all at once. She had mastered it. Now, all she seemed to know how to do well was be secluded - save Henry.

Here and now, though, she felt no trepidation. She didn’t feel the push to retreat or distance herself.
“Emma?”

“Will you do one more thing? Tell me something good. A memory. A good one.”

Regina thought a moment. “My father liked working with wood. He had a workshop in the garage. He kept a mini fridge there, and it always had root beer because he knew it was my favorite.”

“You told me about your mom. Is your dad -”

“He’s gone.” Regina shook her head, not wanting Emma to give the usual condolences. “He loved that workshop. I think if it weren’t for the family business, he would have been a carpenter. But Daddy was so accommodating. He tended to do what others thought he should.” She fought to keep away the rawness that also accompanied memories of her father. “He made little things. Boxes, wine racks, cutting boards.”

She didn’t tell Emma about the wooden sign her father made her when she started middle school. It hung over her bed until he died then she put it away. “When I tell you I love you, I don’t say it out of habit. I say it to remind you that you’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” it read. She kept it in a box in the attic now. So many years since he died, yet she still couldn’t bear to look at it.

But Emma asked her for a good memory.

“I’d forgotten, but he always hummed as he made things. Elvis,” she confessed with a breath of a laugh. It felt good to think about her dad and laugh. “Always something from Elvis. He taught me this ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ dance Elvis used to do.”

Emma’s expression lit up. “You can do a ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ dance?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Well, it's one for the money,” Emma sang off key in her best attempt at an Elvis impersonation.
“Emma,” Regina admonished.

“Two for the show, three to get ready.”

“Emma.” It was more the pretense of agitation than anything else. Emma just waggled her brows and kept going.

“Now go, cat, go - Come on Regina - but don’t you step on my blue suede shoes. You can do anything but lay off on my blue --”

Regina reached for a pillow and proceeded to throw it at her. Emma grinned, catching it, and stacked it on top of the other one under her head.

“Are you feeling better?”

Emma knocked on the side of her head. “Pretty quiet up here at the moment.”

Regina really couldn’t resist with such an opening. “Like normal, then?”

Emma’s eyes were so alive when she laughed; there was so much unrestrained brightness.

“Goodnight, Emma,” Regina said quietly.

Regina left the door between their rooms open just a crack. Enough to monitor Emma’s sleep or lack thereof. Emma deserved to rest. If that meant Regina had to do something else inane to distract her, she happily would. A little while later, she climbed into bed wearing her pajamas. They were black flannel and left very little skin exposed - practical and warm. Given the uncertainty of the weather, she knew she might need them and came prepared.

She sat up to grab her laptop and peered through the doorway to check on Emma. Emma clearly didn’t have the same qualms about decency in front of strangers. She lay on her back in v-cut panties and a bra straining to hold her breasts. Emma’s arms and abdomen were sculpted with muscles. Regina jerked her eyes away before they wandered further down. A few minutes later, she turned off the light in her bedroom, just in case she was tempted to look again.
Regina didn’t think of herself as a prude about sex. She simply viewed some things - such as gawking at an employee - as inappropriate.

She had once heard someone say, in reference to an attractive woman, “I’d drink her bathwater.” At the time she’d wrinkled her nose in distaste. She hadn’t any inkling of what the man had meant. She was - in this moment - getting some idea. Emma’s beauty didn’t shock her on a fundamental level. Anyone looking at Emma would call her beautiful. Regina didn’t expect, however, to find her attractive. A minor thing, she told herself and dove into the comfortable task of answering e-mails.

“Sweet dreams, boss.” Emma’s voice broke the darkness. Instinctively, Regina looked back into the other room, but the light from her laptop wasn’t enough to let her see. She closed the computer, leaning it against the side of the bed.

“Emma?” she began tentatively. “Do you remember when you said that I picked the right person to help me. I told you I wasn’t sure I had.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I just…. you were right. I am glad I picked you.”

She heard Emma’s sharp intake of breath, but she rolled over quickly, pretending she hadn’t.

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It was ironic that Regina couldn’t sleep right away. The meeting with August rang alarm bells inside her. She’d failed - her son, herself, and others. Fifty others and their families. She had been shortsighted and selfish, which reminded her of the person she was trying so hard not to be. The old Regina had been so focused on her own interests that she was practically blind to the needs of others. She never felt guilt when other people were forgotten, hurt or even trampled in the wake of her drive to get what she wanted.

She was self-aware enough to know that, at some point in her teen years, she had become utterly self-centered. She told herself it was necessary. Cora carved into her that no one else was going to be on her side except perhaps Cora herself, but Mommy couldn’t always be there. Regina had to make opportunities for herself. She had to be able to take what she wanted.
The cancer foundation could have been a turning point. She had wanted it to be. She’d believed that perhaps she could do good using her tenacity, her business sense, her confidence. All of those things that were ugly, that she used to manipulate others or get what she wanted -- she started to think they could serve a greater purpose than her mother’s will. She went to her mother with the idea for a foundation dedicated to cancer research and support and her mother had surprised her by agreeing.

She should have known. She really should have.

Regina distracted herself with the thought that she needed to make sure she gave Emma a check in the morning. And of course she needed to. It wasn’t likely she would forget that. Yet it nagged and nagged at her until she found her checkbook and did some math. Approximately forty-five hours? She added five more, telling herself she liked even numbers – $15,000. A knot that she didn’t know had formed inside her eased a little at seeing the number. She thought of Emma in that pathetic, bare apartment. She thought of the way that Emma had seemed surprised she was going to be paid when they first met. Emma, whose car was still in the parking lot of her former employer. Regina chastised herself for not asking more about that. Why had Emma been fired? Regina Mills, the CEO inside her, mocked her, insisting that she shouldn’t care. Emma had done a job and would be paid, and paid well, to do that job. Whatever Emma’s woes were, $15,000 was a more-than-adequate nest egg.

Emma would be fine. She wasn’t really responsible for Emma. Even if they might become friends.

But…she was responsible for the fact that a hacker was out there, allowed to continue his debauchery. That, was entirely her fault.

In the end, it was that thought that finished the job started by worrying about Emma and robbed her of all of her sleep.

But once, once, she had believed she could do good.

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They arrived in Storybrooke close to ten a.m. Emma sketched a dinosaur driving a car as Regina made coffee and momentarily withdrew to her office. A large part of Emma wanted to be on the road towards her house, headed back to “normal”. Regina returned a few moments later, heels clicking against the floor as she held out two checks.

“Your payment, Emma,” she murmured, smiling quietly, looking pleased.
Emma jerked in her chair as if having a seizure. “This is seventeen thousand dollars.” She waved the check in the air, as if Regina would be shocked by the amount.

“Are you under the impression that I am not aware of how much I wrote the check for?”

“I didn’t earn this much.”

“I assure you that I tracked your hours thoroughly. The second check is a bonus.” Regina stepped closer and dipped her head to catch Emma’s eyes before saying softly, “You earned every penny.”

Emma stacked the two checks then flicked them with her thumb, “I’m just not sure I feel good about taking any money for what I did. Especially given how things went with August.”

She and Regina hadn’t talked more about yesterday. Emma tried her best to make a barricade in her mind against August’s grim forecast of what might happen now. Eventually it would push through and she’d feel like a failure again. She continued to dread the phone call to David and Mary Margaret she knew was overdue. They’d already left her a message to check on things. Telling her foster parents anything always made it more real. They’d be sympathetic, of course. They’d also both be disappointed in her but try to hide it - the hiding would make it worse.

“What happened with the F.B.I was my fault,” Regina responded, sitting and crossing one leg over the other. Emma opened her mouth to protest again. “Emma, please.”

Shit, Emma grumbled to herself, Regina saying please shouldn’t work that well. “I guess the pay makes it official, huh? My work is done.”

“Well, I - I did want to discuss something else with you.” Regina paused, placed one arm over the other and leaned forward slightly. “I’ve decided to invest in a business. I want to help others the way you helped me. In this day and age, there have to be a lot of people who face similar harassment.”

Emma’s pulse spurred to life and she felt a familiar feeling of dread curl in her stomach. When she took the job, she hadn’t planned on caring about Regina and her son. Why would she? She’d hoped to sweep in, give her ego the food of being a hero for a bit, then dash off.
Creating space between herself and everyone else - with the exception of David and Mary Margaret, who were stubborn - came easily. Nothing bound her, not obligations or love or hope. She wandered freely. Life sucked, but she was used to that. Money could allow high living or not, but it couldn’t be counted on to stick around; such a temporary, fickle thing. People were so much worse. They made promises, said beautiful things, then decided you weren’t worth sticking around for. Emma kept moving, not allowing anyone to give her false words or abandon her.

“And you think that could be a business - helping people?”

“That part of the business would be either nonprofit or operate on a sliding scale. Which means it would have to have another way to keep the doors open. I thought cyber security. Richer clients who want their homes and businesses to be safe. I even thought of what I think is a compelling name - Cybersavior.” Regina watched Emma so closely, so intently; Emma knew she wanted a reaction.

If this headed where Emma thought it might, she needed to find a way out of it. She tried for levity.

“Cybersavior sounds like an A.I. One of those, humans-are-beneath-me-and-must-worship-me kinds.”

“Do you think it would work?”

“I don’t really know the security business, or business at all. David and Mary Margaret have a cyber security business - Nolan Securities - they’d be able to give you a better picture. I can get you their numbers.” She reached for her phone and shared their contact information.

“I - had hoped you might want to work for me. With me. I think we make a good team.”

And there it was. Her mind carried a rolodex of excuses to get her out of just such a situation. She mentally gave it a turn and picked the first one that came to her. “I appreciate it, Regina. I really do, but I’m trying to get my life back on track. I need to focus on that.” Emma picked up steam, the locomotive of her lie gaining momentum. “Any startup - it’s going to be a lot of work. I just don’t think I can do it right now. I’m sorry.” Emma mentally weighed the words, wondering if their level of credibility tipped more toward “obvious b.s.” or “sounds plausible”.

Regina offered a tight-lipped, professional smile. “I’ll admit that I’m disappointed. But, I understand. You’re right, new businesses aren’t easy.”
Emma expected a push-back to her refusal. Waited for it. She even had another argument prepped. They’d basically be in competition with Mary Margaret and David, she could say, and she couldn’t do that.

“What will you do for employment?” Regina asked.

“I thought I might contact the commissioner and see how serious he was about the consulting thing.”

“I think you’ll find he is quite serious. I’ll check in with him to make sure.”

Emma used to feel she watched Regina from a distance, all of the mayor’s fury and rigid control creating wall after wall. Emma didn’t mind being treated like a straight-up employee. She told herself it would be easier to unplug and go back to her “real life”. One overheard conversation fucked everything up. It changed their dynamic to something more hostile, then flipped it again when they made peace.

Now, she didn’t see Regina from afar. She stood up close, enough to see Regina’s big brown eyes and the way they could sparkle. She knew what Regina’s real smile looked like, and how she carried pain, trying to deny it victory. She saw how Regina loved her son, as though she had been born for it. Emma didn’t particularly like knowing any of that; it made her uncomfortable, a pebble in her shoe she couldn’t get rid of. The whole Winter Festival invitation came back to her. Going would be a very bad idea. She’d blow it off. Just not show and text some excuse.

“How did you sleep last night,” Regina asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“Not bad.” She’d actually slept much better than usual. She refused to admit it. Regina’s story about her father had given Emma’s mind something to chew on. The adjoining room door staying open soothed her in the same way a nightlight comforted kids who were afraid of the dark. It just...helped.

Emma grinned. “Would have slept even better if you had done the dance.”

Regina placed her chin on her hand, amused. “You will never see that dance.”

_Nope, probably not_, Emma thought. She’d wait for the kid to get home, say goodbye, then go back to her life. This, with Regina and Henry, would become a memory. She’d move on to whatever was next.
“I was going to say that you can take a nap, if you wanted.” Regina said.

It meant spending less time with Regina. As a start toward pulling back from the Mills family, that would do.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”
Henry woke her up, pounding on her door. She hadn’t actually intended to sleep; her laptop sitting open on her chest testified to that.

“Mom said you were waiting for me to get home,” he called. “I’m home.”

Emma got up, bending her neck this way and that, trying to ease out the knot from sleeping in a weird position. Half-awake, she opened the door to find Henry hovering there.

“How’d the meeting with the F.B.I go?” he asked in one rush of breath.

His dangerous question stomped into her slow-moving mind, making her head hurt just a little. Asking that kind of thing before allowing a five minute wake-up period should be against the rules. She tried to focus on him, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

Henry wore the type of neat button-up shirt he tended to wear to school. His backpack still slung over his shoulder probably meant that he’d come to wake her directly after getting home.

“Didn’t your mom tell you?” Emma hedged, not sure what he knew.

“She said they were going to review everything and be in touch.”

It didn’t sound like Regina had shared any of the grittier details. He might not even know about the other victims. She tried to keep what she said just as sparse. “Well, yeah. They’re going to get back to us.”

“I just thought you might know more because you’re good at this stuff. They took it seriously, right?”
“Yeah, course they did.”

His face darkened a little. “I wish I could’ve been there.”

Emma didn’t know what to say to that. She took her best shot at being encouraging. “Well, you never know, they might want to talk to you later. For now, they just wanted to see the evidence we have.”

She ducked back into the room, still sluggish, but remembering that her plan involved leaving as soon as possible. Playing fugitive from commitment came more naturally then answering the questions of teenaged boys. She threw everything together in sixty seconds, tossing on her jacket and shoving the laptop into her bag.

“I still think I could have helped,” he said as he waited for her.

Emma could do no more than offer a sympathetic twist of her lips, placing a hand on his shoulder and guiding him to the stairs. “I should get on the road, kid. Let’s find your mom, okay?”

Downstairs, they checked the kitchen, then found Regina in the office. She sat making aggressive slashes with a red marker on something that looked official.

“Mom, Emma has to go.” Emma side-eyed the kid. He had this habit of announcing things like he was providing news - the Henry News Network.

Regina rose from behind her intimidating desk and straightened her suit. “Are you sure you don’t want to stay for din…” She didn’t complete the suggestion, giving a shake of her head. “Habitual manners. I forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Henry asked.

*That I don’t do that kind of thing unless I’m forced at gunpoint, ambushed or tricked,* Emma thought. Regina knowing that about her proved Emma’s point about the Mills family being trouble. It soothed Emma to adjust her backpack against her shoulder, the comforting weight a reminder she’d be free soon. She’d skip the Winter Festival and wouldn’t see mother and son for a long time. Maybe she’d call them in three or four months just to check on them. If Gold made good on the job offer, she planned to work for him for about six months, then decide what to do next. Being on parole made it impossible to wander the way she once did, but maybe she could do some version of it.

“I just have to do some stuff,” she told the kid, shrugging off her thoughts. Henry tilted his head, weighing the words way too much. She thought it best to cut his imagination off at the pass. “Just bills. Things like that.”

She reached down and ruffled his hair. Her hand paused a moment before drawing back. “You be good, okay, kid?”

Henry smirked, reaching up to dishevel her in return. “You be good, too, Emma.” As she started to turn from him, his hand wrapped around her arm, drawing her back. “Emma, the Winter Festival - you promise?”

*Shit.* Henry looked up at her with such hope.

She should lay the groundwork to not show up. Or maybe give a nod and get out of there. “Um…”

“You’re coming, right?” he asked anxiously. Regina stepped up behind him, brow furrowed, her hands moving to both his shoulders. Henry’s face started to fall. Something bright in him started to
fade, his certainty in her starting to become doubt. It hurt to watch, slices of a scalpel during surgery without the mercy of anesthesia.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I can’t, she thought, I can’t. Yet, letting this kid down, could she do that? She hated dilemmas like this, choices where she would lose either way.

Alright so...alright. Maybe she could do this one last thing for him. She’d go, stay a few hours, then pull back hard. Maybe let herself text Henry a few times after, but nothing else. Not for a long time. Not until she felt untethered from them, free.

“Yeah, course I am, kid. I was just thinking I have to rearrange a couple of things,” she told him.

“And we’re going to make a video, right?” He kept staring up into her face, the fog of mistrust fading but not gone.

Shit. She forgot about that. Okay so it meant spending a little more time with them, but not that much longer.

She bent down to his level and held up her pinky. “I promise I’m coming. Pinky swear.” He rolled his eyes at her, but a pinpoint of light in his eyes slowly grew into a twinkle. There - he believed her totally again and linked his finger with hers. She hugged him. She couldn’t stop herself.

“I’ll walk you out,” Regina said. She moved past Emma to open the front door.

“Making sure I’m really leaving?” Emma asked, teasing.

“Well, it does mean my dining room will be neat again. I do value a clean house.”

The two watched one another for a moment.

“You’re okay to drive? You’re rested enough?”

Stop caring about me! Emma wanted to shout, but did the sane thing and nodded instead.

“I guess I’ll see you in a few weeks, then,” Regina said. “Unless, Emma, if you can’t make it -”

Fuck. Regina’s mistrusting expression sank into her just as sharply as Henry’s had.

“Hey, you owe me baked goods. I take that very seriously.”

Again, they fell into the kind of uncomfortable silence that happened when people weren’t sure what else to say. Regina shifted and curled her arms around herself to fight the chill.

Emma glanced toward her rental car then back. “I feel like I should shake your hand or something. But that doesn’t quite fit.”

“No, not quite,” Regina agreed. “I think, some people hug in this type of situation.”

“I’m not traditionally a hugger.”

“Do other people usually negotiate this?”
“We’ve negotiated almost everything since we met. Why would this be different?”

“Perhaps, but do we always have to barter outdoors in the cold? A hug seems appropriate.” Regina said decisively. “Though I’m also not much of a hugger.”

“Okay so…hug, right?” Emma slowly stepped forward, curling her arms around Regina tentatively.

Regina did the same back. Sort of. And she applied a “pat, pat” motion to Emma’s back while remaining mostly stiff.

“You’re terrible at this.”

“Oh, shut up,” Regina grumbled but relaxed.

Emma really should have kept her mouth shut. Without the awkward tension, Regina’s body melded into hers. She felt Regina everywhere, softness and curves, the faint clean scent of makeup, a subtle hint of perfume she couldn’t place but was probably expensive as hell. Her head and heart began a steady rapping beat, the reverberating sound of a snare drum moving down her body, stopping between her hips. The tempo made Emma’s entire body feel hot.

Emma stepped back, hopefully projecting nonchalance. It took effort, and she didn’t really get a read on Regina before she said, “Goodnight, Regina.”

“Goodnight, Emma.”

Only when she got in the car and saw Regina go back inside did she pause to assess what just happened.

*Dammit, when had she become attracted to Regina Mills?*

********************************************************************************

“There’s that winter festival you’re going to tomorrow, right?” David asked her.

Emma frowned. “How did you know about that?”

Since her prison term had ended, she usually hung out with David and Mary Margaret on Skype once a week. Unless Emma had shifted to radio silence for a few weeks, which she did from time time, just to show she could if she wanted.

They had been playing online Monopoly. Emma didn’t know why they bothered - David always won by a longshot. Snow didn’t like putting up hotels because she felt it came too close to the evils of corporate America, and Emma had horrible luck with the dice.

“Regina told us.”

Emma hesitated, not sure if she’d heard right. “Regina?”

David’s head tilted at a slight angle, uncertain. “You gave her our number, right? Mary Margaret and I have been talking about her Cybersavior idea. We were just both surprised you’d agree to…”

“Talking?” Emma asked. “As in multiple times?”

“Actually,” Mary Margaret said, watching the screen as if she was afraid the image of Emma would
suddenly become a tiger and jump at them. “We've been considering partnering with her.”

The word “partnering” landed in Emma's mind with a thud. Reason told her that just because her foster parents and Regina might be going into business together didn't mean that anything in her world would change. It didn't have to affect her at all. Only, on television, Emma had seen wild things be corralled. A rancher moving forward, lasso in hand, tricking a wild mustang to retreat - one step back, then another. Until he could shut the corral gate, trapping it. She fidgeted with a pencil, wanting very much to draw a picture of a horse. Perhaps a horse with a human head. Maybe her face?

This development could make her getaway much messier, a tickle of fear in her throat warned. Her perfectly designed program to be free of the Millses, first infected by Henry’s puppy dog eyes, now warned of the possibility of a Regina virus.

“Well, Mary Margaret has been considering it more than I have,” David said. “Going into business with someone is a big decision.”

Snow still watched Emma carefully, curiously. “But we have asked her for an initial business proposal and we've sent her some financial paperwork. We discussed how she could use her business experience to help us promote Nolan Securities. And we’d offer her our technical expertise.”

David crossed his arms over his chest, a small defiance. “We also agreed that if we were actually going to go forward with this, we’ll need to have a face-to-face meeting at some point.”

Mary Margaret eyed him on her screen; Emma could tell there had been quite a few disagreements about this. “David's concerned about Regina's past.”

“Mary Margaret isn’t concerned enough,” he shot back. “I just...I don't know if I can get around the fact that she stole from cancer patients.”

“Regina's a good person,” Emma said quietly. In a harem of confusing feelings, each tempting, faceless woman demanded her attention, crowding her. Apart from them stood the one thing she was sure of. She didn’t want anything or anyone taking this away from Regina. “I think she wants to do this, partly, to try to set right the things she did before.”

“Regina mentioned that she’d asked you to be part of the business,” Snow said, trying to make it a tidy statement instead of the messy question it was. “I told her that we've been trying to get you involved in Nolan Securities for a long time.”

So this is how it's gonna go, Emma thought, these guys are gonna gang up on me?

Snow pushed. Snow always pushed.

“Emma,” she said softly. “It just seems like the perfect opportunity for you. You have so much talent, and you’ll be helping people.”

“Wait,” David interrupted. “Now we're considering getting Emma involved in this?”

“Regina told us that she'd asked her.”

“And I was relieved to hear that Emma said no.”

Snow rose, abandoning her chair, but a moment later Emma heard her loud voice over David’s microphone. “You are being narrow-minded and cynical. You’d actually be happy with Emma
refusing this kind of an opportunity? If Regina has changed and she’s sincere, this could be the start of something incredible. Don’t ruin this for her!”

David tried for a congenial smile as he glanced back at Emma. “Excuse us a minute.” He, too, disappeared from the screen, and for several minutes Emma sat by herself. They used to do this when she was a kid, too. They never wanted to disagree in front of her, preferring to present a united front.

Emma popped a burrito in the microwave. Regina would be horrified, she thought, amused. She grumbled at herself for letting the mayor race through her head at all. When the microwave chimed, Emma tossed it on a paper plate, almost burning her fingers in the process.

She went back to her desk, set her food down to cool, and waited one more minute before she called, “Guys, do you need me here while you decide what I should do with my life, or…”

A moment later they both returned to their seats, David looking appropriately cowed. “We’re sorry Emma,” he said. “Where you work or don’t work is entirely your decision and we’re just all talking at this point. I could probably try to be a little more open-minded.”

Emma tried to predict what Mary Margaret would do at that point. Would she offer a similar compromise or not?

“Yes, you should.” Mary Margaret said to him.

Moments like that Emma knew she loved them. Her amusement pushed forward, not because of what Mary Margaret said, but because it seemed so her. The laugh Emma held back tangled with the pride of knowing someone as well as you know yourself. Because, whether you trusted yourself or not, they trusted you. Some people had tried to force a connection upon her. David and Mary Margaret left it for her as a gift that she could open or not.

“If we decide to go forward, we’ll probably meet with Regina after the holidays,” David said.

Good, Emma thought. It would give her a few weeks to set some things in motion. She needed a job - Gold or whoever. With the money Regina paid her, maybe she’d even get a cabin somewhere over the New Year. All legit things she could tell Regina and Henry to explain why she wouldn’t be available for a while. Sometimes excuses took a little preparation.

“So anyway,” Snow said brightly, “The winter festival is tomorrow and you’re going to go.”

“Yeah, I promised Henry I’d go.”

“You promised Regina's son?” Snow’s voice suggested this was an interesting development.

David seemed oblivious. “Just text us when you get there tomorrow, okay? Just ‘I am alive’ or something.” It was David’s stern voice – which wasn’t so stern at all, really. Emma worried someone was going to take advantage of him some day.

The request was reasonable enough, and they were the exception to her rules - mostly. Them and no one else. Plus, it was nice that they – that anyone – gave a damn if she was safe.

“I will,” she promised.

“Hey Emma?” Snow began. “Are you sure you don’t want us to fly you up here for the holidays?”

Snow asked this every single major holiday and birthday. Emma made an excuse about 95% of the time. Once, she had agreed to fly down the day after Christmas just because her foster mom seemed
particularly upset. Perhaps that was why David and Mary Margaret were surprised that Emma had accepted Regina’s invitation to the festival. It wasn’t usually her thing, she could admit that, but it wasn’t like she was a total recluse. Her attendance didn’t have to mean anything.

“Yeah, I think I told you about the commissioner offering me a job? I have a meeting with him.” She hoped it wasn’t entirely a lie. She’d left Gold a message. Maybe he’d want to meet with her. Maybe he’d even put her to work right away. It would be a pretty good way to spend Christmas and it would be all part of that gift-wrapped box of excuses she needed.

David’s expression slackened in reaction to Emma’s refusal, but only a little. Mary Margaret, though, her fist closed around a clump of her hair, pulling as she closed her eyes briefly. Emma supposed it was a victory that her foster mother didn’t batter her evasions as she once would have. Emma wondered if a day would come when they would quit asking. She’d left their house at the age of eighteen and it had always been the same. Since prison, Emma had done much better at staying in touch. She figured she owed them that much. Bending a few of her personal rules didn’t mean breaking all of them.

David and Mary Margaret had confused her for a long, long time. They loved her like she was family; she believed that. It was as close to unconditional as someone like her was ever likely to find. She just didn't believe in love being infinite, or family being a constant. Nothing and no one could be trusted entirely. Everyone had limits, and they were difficult, if not impossible, to predict. Her faith that they did love her didn’t mean she trusted their love not to spoil - even though they had been in her life for years - but she also couldn’t bring herself to entirely turn away from it.

“Well, we’re sending you some things,” Mary Margaret cut in. Affection brightened her grumpy expression.

They always sent her gifts. It was nice that someone did.

“I got you all something too.” Online gift cards, like always. The best Christmas gifts ever.

“So did you get Regina and Henry anything?” Snow asked. Emma frowned at the fact that, well, no she hadn’t. She hadn’t intended to.

“I mean, they’re not even really…They’re former employers. They just invited me to this thing to be polite.”

“And,” Mary Margaret countered. “It might be polite for you to bring them a little something. Especially if you are seeing them face-to-face.”

Mary Margaret had a good point. Shit. Sometimes she hated it when the Nolans had good points.

“Okay. Noted.”

It would be online gift cards in a dollar amount that confirmed the oh-so-casual nature of their relationship. Just a token.

“Emma, maybe consider something a little more personal than gift cards?” Mary Margaret suggested, reading her mind. “Given everything you just went through with them. It just might be a nice gesture.”

David and Mary Margaret often made her think about things she didn't want to. Regina tried to offer her a birthday celebration. When Emma refused, she broke down, explaining how hard it was to let Emma in every aspect of their lives. Emma held Regina's hand in the depths of night as they both reveled in the fact that they were close to catching Peter Pan. Regina hugged her after admitting she
wasn't much of a hugger.

_Shit._

Emma promised herself - again - that the Winter Festival would be her farewell to Regina and Henry Mills.

Still, maybe Snow was right. Maybe Emma did owe them better Christmas presents.

_Shit._
The one with the Winter Festival

Chapter Notes

Happy Thursday everyone! Welcome back aboard for another flight. A few warnings. The weather will slowly start to get rough and build for the next four or five chapters. Cling on to one another or the emergency Regina Mills life-size plushies as you need to. Secondly, after posting 15 (next week) I’m going on vacation for a couple of weeks so I won’t be posting on June 15th and June 22nd. I’ll be back again on June 29th though.

Sometime in the next few chapters I fully expect you to be angry, agitated, frustrated, and fuming at one or both of our two girls. Should this feeling continue for more than several minutes emergency screens will lower from the ceiling above your head and distract you by playing 'Sassy Regina' clips.

Final thought: I have now promised two people (you know who you are) to make them woot at some point during the story. Between you and me, I feel both confident and really nervous about it. Send good thoughts and some love if you can.

Emma got out of the Volkswagon and felt a blast of cold air hit her. She grappled for her coat in the passenger seat and tossed it on as quickly as humanly possible. The GPS on her phone told her that if she walked north for twelve blocks she would arrive at the town square.

Earlier, on the phone, Regina had questioned why Emma wanted to meet them in the middle of town, rather than two minutes away at Regina’s house. She also informed Emma that most of the on-street parking was blocked off during the Winter Festival. Emma didn’t give a direct answer. It’s not like she could admit she had a plan.

**Step 1:** Keep her word to Henry. Go to the Winter Festival and help with the video.

**Step 2:** Stay only as long as she absolutely had to.

**Step 3:** Say goodbye to the Millses for a long while.

**Step 4:** Get her normal, detached life back.

Step 1 and 2 involved making sure she told Regina and Henry that she needed to run errands early in the morning. Likewise, the parking selection gave her a guaranteed escape route and the freedom to get to it without obstacles. She didn’t want to break her promise, but she did intend to follow it to the letter and no further.

Her Pertential scale weighed the entire situation and gave Emma points for doing something she wouldn’t normally do, and for following through on making Henry happy. It took points away for blatant cowardice, but it all kind of evened out.
Emma jangled her keys in her jacket pocket as she headed toward the town square. Henry had emailed her the night before, excitedly relaying about a dozen facts. She’d skimmed through it to pick up the highlights, and then Googled the Storybrooke Winter Festival just to get a feel for the layout. Any good getaway needed maps of some kind, after all.

The Storybrooke population of five thousand swelled by another thousand or so during this event, most of them stuffed into five blocks of space. Regina, Emma discovered, had downplayed it as a small festival. It may not have been huge but it certainly wasn’t small, and it had more things to do than anyone could complete before the sun set and everything closed down. There was a mobile zip line, a log rolling contest, a toboggan track that started way up in the woods, two ponds for ice skating, ten carnival games, two ice sculpture gardens, a snowman contest, and Santa Claus reading stories and taking wishes in the town library. The nearby stores all gave away one thing or another. The hardware store offered free hot chocolate. The bakery, naturally, hosted the baking contest, and had plenty of samples and ballots. Of course, if you wanted more than a sample, you had to pay. There were lobster rolls, corn chowder, and hot cider at the diner. The pawn shop had a huge array of beer from microbreweries, or flavored sodas if you weren’t old enough or didn’t want to imbibe. In the center of it all was an outdoor theater (currently occupied by carolers singing), a mini ferris wheel and a large, unlit Christmas tree.

A tall ladder was placed next to the tree, and it took Emma a moment to realize why until she noticed the tree had no topper.

Emma shot off a text: @MadameMayor, @BatMankid I’m here by the Christmas tree. Where are you?

She spotted Henry a few moments later, his phone held out in front of him. He still hadn’t seen her. He stood near the tree, frowning at it.

Emma moved up behind him and nudged him. “Hey kid.” Henry grinned when he saw her and gave her a two-second hug, a huge sign of affection from a thirteen-year-old boy. He wore a dark winter coat, gloves, and a red scarf, and carried a hand-held video camera in his other hand.

“Hey, Emma. You’re here.”

“A promise is a promise.”

Her Pertential score went up. Really, she sighed at herself, just by him looking so happy?

He motioned to the Christmas tree with the camera. “I was just taping the tree. Every year – always white and gold. Never any other colors. White tree, white lights, gold ornaments. And it’s just like the one at home.”

“It’s pretty,” Emma said, trying to be positive.

He looked as if she had personally betrayed him with that statement. “It’s boring. Every year I tell Mom she should change it, but she never does. I’m thinking of putting a survey about it on my channel.”

Emma took a look around to see if she could spot the mayor in question. “Where is your mom?”

“Doing mayor things. She thinks they’re gonna run out of hot chocolate, because every year she tells everyone they should budget for 15% more tourists than the year before. The hardware store didn’t, so Mom threatened to let the library do hot chocolate next year.” Henry gave Emma a somber look. “Hot chocolate is very serious during the Winter Festival.”
“I’m sure.”

“Okay, the intro,” Henry said, and raised the camera toward Emma. “You can just wave for now,” he instructed. “Hi everyone, this is Henry, and I’m live at the Winter Festival. This is my friend Emma, who may or may not secretly work for the F.B.I. She’s really good with computers and….”

Emma heard a familiar, agitated voice coming towards her and pivoted toward it.

“Emma,” Henry complained, since now her back was towards him.

“Sorry.” She tugged on his elbow, gesturing to where his mom was striding toward them, three people scurrying behind and to either side of her.

“We’ve already discussed this,” Regina was saying in a strained voice. “The top of the tree is a star, it’s always a star.”

“We just wanted you to have options,” “I like the angel.” Two of the men spoke over each other. The woman added, “I like the lobster. It’s Maine. It says who we are.”

Regina held up her gloved hands. “Star. Same as every year. Next topic.”

Emma remembered her being beautiful, but now, seeing her again, after an absence and without high stakes hanging over her head, she realized that Regina Mills was the embodiment of the naughty thoughts that plague you at night, leaving you shaking and wanting. She didn’t want to stare. Yet every piece of data she could collect with her eyes barrelled through her body, in so many directions and with such speed that she couldn’t process it all and froze. She had to curl her nails into her palms to reboot.

“Hey,” Emma called out to her.

Regina looked in her direction and a small smile teased her mouth. “Hi,” she greeted. “I wasn’t sure you were going to make it.”

And again, the stupid Pertential score rose. Apparently because she made Regina smile.

Emma shrugged, trying to think of a witty reply, when she noticed the three people with Regina were staring at her with open curiosity.

Regina noticed at the same time and started the introductions. “Emma, this is Archie, Sidney and Kathryn. They’re the Winter Festival planning committee. Everyone this is my…friend..Emma.” Regina gave Emma a searching look before deciding to use the “f” word. “Could you all give me a few moments?”

She moved toward Emma, taking her by the arm and wrapping her other arm around her son’s shoulders – ferrying them away. “I need to pass a law that makes it legal to put people in jail during this festival if they continuously show incompetence.”

“Yeah, that seems fair,” Emma taunted playfully.

“I’m glad you made it. I’m sorry – there’s still so much to do.”

“I’ll show her around,” Henry volunteered. “Emma, I asked mom earlier, and she said that if you wanted to have dinner with us after the festival you could. She even said we could get pizza, since that’s not so formal and you don’t like formal.”
“Ah…” *Shit, shit, shit,* thought Emma.

“Just something to think about,” Regine told her with an apologetic expression. “I have to go. I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

Henry and Emma made a game plan of what they wanted to do, and he occasionally paused to film things as they wandered. Hanging out with him reminded her of being around David - conversation came easily and covered only light topics, and they didn’t feel the need to fill every silence.

“Emma,” Henry said softly when they were in a line for the mobile zipline. “If you drove here and you’re driving back, isn’t that a long day?”

“Well, yeah, but I really wanted to come.”

He continued to look at her thoughtfully. “I wish you could stay over. You could get some sleep and have breakfast with us, and then go home.” He kept his bright eyes on her, to see if maybe she might change her mind.

She couldn’t. Of course, she couldn’t. It went against the plan. Yet for just a moment, she considered it. It would be nice to chat more with the kid, and maybe have pizza. Her Pertential score felt higher than usual, just from being around him. She could see it in her head, chatting with Regina after he went to bed, each of them holding a glass of wine.

Everything about it tempted her.

The words that rose on her tongue to answer Henry weren’t a firm “no,” but rather a “let me think about it.” It made her rub at her temples. She had David and Mary Margaret. Could it be possible to broaden that very small circle to include Regina and Henry? She didn’t have to be obligated to them, right? She looked for a middle ground between the relationship with her foster parents and the almost nothing relationships she allowed with others.

“I’m sorry Henry, I really can’t,” she said finally.

He fell silent, but started telling her about last year’s rides a few minutes later. After the zipline, Henry took Emma by the library to meet Regina’s assistant. Belle wore a Mrs. Claus costume and kept pushing unruly red hair under her white wig. She greeted Emma warmly after Henry introduced her, but could only linger a moment as she was responsible for the line of children waiting to sit on Santa’s knee. Belle paused mid-conversation to answer a child’s question about if Santa was really an elf. The Santa in question, played by a little person, glowered at the boy. He relaxed after Belle said, ‘Santa can look any way he wants to. It’s one of his tricks. That’s why some pictures of him are so different.’

Occasionally, Regina joined Henry and Emma somewhere, only to dash off a few minutes later to check on, or deal with, or make sure of...something. She gave tight smiles, and stood ramrod straight each time she appeared. She looked tired and resigned more than cheerful.

*Did the woman not know how to have fun, ever?* Emma wondered. Not that she cared, because it was none of her business. And she’d be doing the whole pulling away thing after today. Still, she could check on her, right?

@MadameMayor Marco?

@EmmaSwan Emma, Did you text the right person?

@MadameMayor Marco, like the game? You’re supposed to say Polo. Where are you?
Emma Swan: Polo. I’m sorry Emma, I meant to get away before now.


Emma Swan: Granny’s diner. Polo. I’m not sure this game works effectively over text.

Emma shooed Henry off to hang out with kids his own age for a bit. He looked like he would rather swallow nails, and Emma wondered about that too. But then he saw the Sheriff’s son, and apparently that was more appealing.

She got two hot chocolates from the stand at the hardware store, and went in search of Mayor Mills. She found her at Granny’s with the planning committee. Regina sat at a booth, fingers folded before her, staring intently at the pile of about 200 small slips of paper on the table in front of her. Kathryn, Archie and Sidney stood several feet away, locked in a heated discussion. Sidney gestured towards Kathryn emphatically as she glared at him, opening her mouth to answer whatever he’d said before Emma arrived.

“Marco?” Emma called as she approached, mostly to alert Regina to her presence.

Regina looked surprised to see her. “Hey – I’m sorry, I just have to deal with this, and then….”

“No.” Emma handed Regina one of the hot chocolates. The three members of the planning committee jerked their heads in Emma’s direction, like startled deer freezing at the sound of a snapping branch. “Hey,” Emma greeted them with a wriggle of her fingers. All of them returned the greeting and broke out of their tight circle. Clearly, she had disturbed the dynamic of the group.

Emma ignored them. “Regina, did you notice there’s a festival out there? You know, festive. You haven’t relaxed for ten minutes the entire time I’ve been here. So here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to pick one thing - one activity - and you’re going to do that activity for at least fifteen minutes.”

Archie cleared his throat but kept his eyes on Sidney, who then looked at Kathryn. All three of them glanced toward Regina.

“Emma,” Regina said. “I have to help with this, and then I have to attend the tree lighting in a half hour. This is important.”

Emma picked up a pile of paper and looked at it. Then she rifled through another. She saw the problem. The marks made on the papers were barely marks, and some might be smudges. “It’s that big a deal?” she asked.

“The race for best pie is extremely tight this year,” Sidney confided, sighing and adjusting his fedora so it sat back on his head. “We’re trying to decide what to do with these. It’s become a little heated.”

“They all like this?” Emma asked.

Archie spoke up. “Yes, that’s the problem. They aren’t clear but we didn’t want to just throw them out. I was thinking we might want to ask people to revote.” Regina actively winced at that suggestion, along with Kathryn and Sidney.

Emma looked back to the pile. “How long have you all been looking at these?”

“Forty-five minutes,” Kathryn answered. “Usually Regina would have decided for us thirty minutes ago.”
Regina stared hard at Kathryn, betrayed. “I can’t decide everything. Delegation is an important part of management.”

“And you,” Emma said with a chuckle. “Do a lot of delegation?”

As if they were watching a particularly intense tennis match, Archie, Kathryn, and Sidney simultaneously turned their heads to look at Regina.

“I do...some.” Regina answered, waving the question away.

Emma set her hands on her hips. “Okay, show of hands for all those who’re sick of looking at these things?” Everyone except Regina raised their hand.

“Emma,” Regina said with a frown, anticipating the possible introduction of chaos to otherwise orderly proceedings.

“I’m a neutral party. I have no pie loyalties whatsoever. Here’s what I say.” Emma gathered all the disputed votes into one semi-neat pile and walked toward the trash. “These ballots were filled out improperly, so they shouldn’t count. Voting is a privilege. You don’t do it properly and you don’t get a say. Any objections?” No one said anything. “Counting to five – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.” She let the papers drop into the trash bin. “We good?” She didn’t really wait for anyone to answer before she gestured to Regina. “Let’s go, Madame Mayor.” Glaring, Regina scooted out of the booth and paused to put on her coat.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t just revote?” Archie moved to stand forlornly in front of the trash, looking into it.

“No,” Sidney and Kathryn said at once.

“Thanks for the help, Emma,” Kathryn called cheerfully.

Sidney went to a coat rack and took a long red scarf from it, wrapping it around his neck. “Can we move on to the after-voting celebration, please?” he asked. “It’s our turn to sample the winners.”

“I’ll see all of you at the tree lighting,” Regina said in farewell. As she and Emma left the diner, she asked in a low voice, “Was that really necessary?”

Emma turned to her. “Tell me that’s not what you wanted to do from the first second they brought ‘em to you?”

An impish and undeniably attractive smile touched the corner of Regina’s mouth. “I’ve been trying to be more approachable than I used to be,” she admitted. “I put up with more than I used to.”

“No one should have to put up with the Great Pie Ballot Scandal of 2017. Now come on, pick an activity.”

“Can we just sit for a while?”

“Not truly an activity,” Emma countered, and motioned around them. “Look around, Regina, you did a great job with this. You should enjoy some of it.”

“Very well,” Regina muttered, as if she were the most put upon woman in the entire town. “Perhaps one of the carnival games?”

Emma shook her head. “An activity is not a five-minute thing. It’s at least fifteen.”
“I believe you’re stretching the meaning of that word, Miss Swan.”

“Miss Swan again? Really?”

A smirk. “I believe I should be given a reprieve from our agreement when you are being ludicrous.”

Not even in school had anyone ever called Emma “Miss Swan.” It gave rise to amusement, as well as something deeply rooted and provocative. A movie started running in her head, starring herself as the juvenile delinquent and Regina as the high-school principal. The longer she indulged that image, the more it did things to her pulse rate she tried to ignore. “Anyway – activity – something somewhat active for at least twenty minutes.”

“You said fifteen.”

“Yeah, I rethought it. And you can’t deal with anyone’s random problems while you do it. And, any other rules I make up.”

“And why are you the judge of this?”

Emma stopped walking and turned to her fully. “Name the last thing fun thing you did, without Henry, that wasn’t reading and only had the goal of fun.”

“I…”

Emma waited for Regina to actually add more words to that, but she seemed unable to; Emma felt, for one of the few times with Regina, a little superior.

“Does cooking count?”

It really didn’t, and they both knew it.

“There is one thing I do every year,” Regina offered slowly, almost timidly. “But it’s by the docks and it will take 30 minutes - which is longer than I have right now. And I usually do it when the festival is closing down.” She lifted her eyes to Emma’s. “You could come with me this year, if you wish, and if it counts as an activity, according to your judgement.”

It felt like trouble. It was Emma’s idea and it still felt like trouble. She forced herself to relax. It was 30 minutes, Emma reassured herself, what could possibly happen? This was still goodbye, still an exit. Nothing about her plans would change.

“I will issue a ruling at that time,” Emma answered with a grin, then she touched the side of her hot chocolate to the side of Regina’s. “I meant to ask you, is Henry better with everything? I mean, he seems okay. And you two seem fine. Right?”

Regina faced her, a wisp of breath escaping her, curling like smoke in the chilly air.

“It’s okay to wait, Regina. We don’t know anything definitive yet. I’m hoping for the same thing you are.”

“I will tell him once we know for sure,” Regina replied, determined.

Emma wanted to take her hand, like that night in the bedroom when Regina had asked her repeatedly
if it was really over. Although, maybe offering that kind of comfort was a lie at this point.

She decided to offer a distraction instead. “Henry keeps introducing me as your friend, and then people ask me all these questions about you.” She shrugged. “We created an elaborate backstory for you. You’ll be pleased to know that you served with distinction in the CIA Black Ops program.”

“You didn’t,” Regina murmured, but her dark eyes were smiling.

Her change in topic worked. Her Pertential score rose, much as it did with Henry. Being around them made her feel more...more everything. Although, the scale didn’t just act to quantify, it also protected her. People who made her score rise could, if they deserted her, make it fall below normal.

“I told them that we hadn’t known one another very long.”

They found a bench that was a street beyond the noise and crowd of the festival. Regina sat down with a deep sigh and, for the first time all day, she relaxed.

“I suppose I can be distant.”

Emma had noticed. The townspeople extended polite hellos and goodbyes, but they all gave her a wide berth unless they needed something. They didn’t dislike Regina, but they reacted to her staunch professionalism by giving her the space she seemed to want.

“They’re not really insipid,” Regina told her, frowning. “I shouldn’t have said that. They’re good people who perhaps care a little too much. Every year they put in weeks of work ahead of this festival. And there’s not one person in town who doesn’t do something. Every house and building is decorated. One year the pawn shop didn’t put up lights and a mob forcibly decorated the building. They have convictions. They take care of and protect one another because they’re neighbors. Here, that word means something.”

“I’ve never lived in a place like that.”

“I hadn’t either.”

“You really do love it here.”

“I do. I even like being mayor. I’ve never been sure who knows who I am and who doesn’t. I imagine someone must. But they consider it none of their business. I’m one of them now. That’s all that matters. A few people asked me about you too, by the way.” Emma’s brows rose. ”Nothing terribly intrusive. Sadly, I didn’t have an elaborate backstory prepared. It’s just that with a few notable exceptions, they’re not used to seeing me with anyone.”

“A few notable exceptions?” Emma repeated.

For the first time since they met, Regina’s cheeks colored. “Well, there was a discreet and brief affair with the sheriff. And, there was one old friend who managed to track me down. She comes to visit every few years, just for an evening or two. Again, discreetly. It’s possible the townspeople wonder about my preferences.”

Preferences, the word echoed in her mind like a distant bell. “I thought you were married to some guy.” It was one of the stupider things Emma had ever said. Having Neal in her life hadn’t stopped her from making other realizations later on.

Regina fixed her with a stare that was the equivalent of an eye roll. Emma couldn’t be sure if Regina was offended by the disdainful “some guy,” or the suggestion that being married to a man at some
“I did not marry ‘some guy’,” Regina said haughtily. “Robin went to Princeton and his father is a senator. His family has millions. I have always been extremely self-aware. I knew from a young age that while I find either sex appealing, I have strong leanings. My mother didn’t approve. She believed it would get in the way of my aspirations, so I just adjusted my behavior to be more conservative. At the time, I agreed with her. I…” She shook her head, her expression becoming shadowed. “Robin was a good man but he made the mistake of being a good fit for our plans. After I came here, I allowed myself to approach dating open-mindedly. At least on the occasions when the opportunity arose.”

With every small revelation Regina gave, Emma wanted to know more. She needed to start staving that instinct off.

“Well, I really only discovered that I was - open minded,” she used Regina’s term on purpose. “About sex in prison.”

“So you…in prison. Like in the movies?” Regina shook her head, as if she had started to conjure an image of something and now was trying to make it dissolve. “Sorry, that’s really none of my business.” There was a tint of red on her cheeks, and she shifted on the bench, seemingly no longer comfortable.

Emma watched her, and wondered if the great Regina Mills had a hard time talking about sex.

She decided to needle Regina just a little to test her theory. “I told you I had a lot of downtime in prison, and I looked for ways to distract myself. Turns out, there were several.” Emma waggled her brows. “Some more enjoyable than others. We did have to get pretty creative about locations.”

As intended, Regina looked a little more flushed, and she was staring at her, blinking rapidly. Emma decided to be chivalrous, for now, and change the subject. But it was kind of adorable to watch the tightly controlled mayor get so easily scattered to the winds.

“Hey, wanna see my souvenir?” Emma began pushing her right sleeve up to her elbow. Regina rubbed her face with one hand and set her cup down to rub her hands together, looking down at them for a moment before turning toward the exposed tattoo.

The first part of it was simple, a traditional medieval shield that would have displayed a family crest, if Emma had one. The shield had stayed blank while she was in prison. Then after, she’d done a favor for a tattoo artist and set up wi-fi in his shop so waiting clients could have access to it. She’d created her own family seal - an abstract phoenix made of swirls and lines, its red wings extending just beyond the edges of the shield. She wasn’t sure why she’d wanted the wings to break free of the other tattoo. It just felt right.

She had shown Mary Margaret on Skype. Just her. She wasn’t sure how David would feel about it, and she didn’t want to see his disapproving face. Mary Margaret thought it was beautiful, but then she had her hacker name tattooed in script over her heart.

“A friend in prison gave me the shield, and then when I got out I had someone add the phoenix,” Emma explained quietly. “Subtle as an anvil, right? Ex-con. Phoenix.”

Regina reached out and let one finger skim over it. Emma had no idea why but it felt intimate. It
surprised her. Such a small touch shouldn’t make her heart ache. It shouldn’t make her skin overly sensitive. That was definitely trouble, Emma thought. She occasionally indulged in one night stands. They didn’t have the same aching curiosity to them. She wondered what more - more contact, more closeness, more talking - would be like.

Pulling back from Regina and Henry should be simple. The execution of her plan couldn’t be easier - just four steps. Only, the more time she spent with Regina and Henry, the more exhaustingly complicated it felt.

Regina’s hand dropped quickly, while a shutter slammed over her features. She was suddenly standing and checking her watch. “Well, it’s getting close to the tree lighting speech, and I need to make a few edits to it. We should head back,” she announced abruptly.

“Wait, you wrote the speech but you aren’t giving the speech?”

Regina dragged her teeth over her lower lip. “There are a lot of tourists. It could attract attention.”

She took a step back towards the main street, turning to Emma expectantly.

They still had fifteen minutes before the Christmas tree was scheduled to be lit, but Emma figured that going was all for the best. She straightened her sleeve, finished off her cocoa, then took Regina’s empty cup. They fell into step beside one another and strolled wordlessly until they reached the center of the town square. Regina headed to the stage next to the tree to speak with Archie. He handed Regina a small stack of index cards, and she had him turn around so she could use his back to make some notes. She drew back, reviewing the cards oh-so-seriously, before handing them back and patting Archie on the arm. Regina paused, reached up to straighten his bow-tie, then frowned and adjusted it again before drawing away.

Emma disposed of the hot chocolate cups and got two hot ciders. When Regina reached her, she handed one to her.

Archie stepped up to the microphone, making an an announcement that they’d be lighting the tree soon. He repeated it a few minutes later, as people moved, unhurried, forming a crowd in front of him.

“On behalf of the Winter Festival Planning Committee, if you are a visitor here, we’d like to say welcome to Storybrooke. We started this winter festival just over four years ago, and every year it’s gotten a little bigger. I want to thank the people of Storybrooke for all the hard work they put into this event.” Some hoots and clapping greeted those words and Archie smiled.

“I also want to thank those of you who made the journey to our town. Whether you travelled two minutes, two hours, or more, we’re very glad you’re here.” Applause grew again from a few spattering claps to a sincere but quiet acknowledgement from the crowd. It wasn’t a large moment; it came softly and faded away much in the same way.

“This time of year can bring with it many gifts. Not the least of which are our families.”

Regina wrapped an arm around Henry and kissed his head. He wriggled as if to get away from the dastardliness of motherly affection, but Emma couldn’t help but notice his smile and that he didn’t struggle for more than half a second.

Archie continued reading Regina’s words, “Or friends – old and new - who stumble into our lives, subtle as an anvil, and somehow make it better.”

Emma looked towards Regina and their eyes connected. A smile flirted against Regina’s lips for a
second, before she turned back to watch Archie. Emma’s heart felt like it was expanding, and inside her it floated giddy and careless.

She couldn’t help but consider a possible middle ground again. Maybe she could have something with Regina and Henry. Something different. New. It couldn’t be the same closeness as she had with David and Mary Margaret. She couldn’t risk that. She wanted there to be another answer. Some way she could keep Regina and Henry in her life without risking the Hermit line in her scale if everything fell apart.

“My Christmas wish for you is to enjoy the small, quiet moments with all of those people, to feel grateful for every blessing you have, and to give others a reason to feel grateful too.” Archie was saying on the stage. “Happy Holidays.”

Archie raised a remote and pointed it at the tree, all white with gold ornaments, to turn on the hundreds of white Christmas lights.

Emma let herself smile a little, because Regina finally looked like she might be enjoying herself, and on her, happy was luminous.

“See.” Henry leaned up to whisper to her. “It’s boring.”

Emma nudged him in the stomach with her elbow.
The one with the lie

Chapter Notes

Firstly and most importantly, I want to send a lot of love to readers in the U.K. Seeing your resolve has been incredible.

And now back to my usual rambling. Welcome aboard Chapter 15 of 'The Love Hack'. As a reminder, I'm on vacation for a couple weeks after this post and will be back on June 29th.

Also, wanted to take a moment to thank everyone (again) for your continued support. Posting writing online can feel like calling into a void hoping people are out there to hear you. It feels like a gamble. When you hear people calling back, when others let you know they are out there and listening - when I see kudos and comments - it's a pretty amazing feeling. Plus, I get to know you all and sometimes even get to play with you. I'm a big kid deep down.

By the way, should you wish to poke at me or say hi, you can find me on twitter here: https://twitter.com/mariacomet.
On a related note, have you all seen Lana’s twitter account and some of the pictures? Gang, she is trying to melt people’s brains.

Annnnywho: Insert another cryptic words here about the next few chapters being rough. See you all in a couple weeks.

Regina hadn’t realized until today that there was something about Emma Swan. Something alluring and charming. It was possible she’d caught glimpses before, she was certain she had. Yet she’d been dealing with Peter Pan and the fallout from that. She’d been so worried about her son. There had been a kind of blindness to everything else. Only now, she could definitely see.

Regina found herself curious, so very curious about Emma’s life and what she was thinking. The feeling had been just a seed when she’d invited her to the festival and now, it was growing. Faster than she was prepared for it to grow. Then there was the moment when Emma talked about how she distracted herself in prison. Regina had an image of an arrogantly grinning Emma Swan, pushing a woman against prison bars and having her way with her. She couldn’t see the face of Emma’s lover, and she quickly cast it from her mind into oblivion. She knew, though, that there was a better than 50% chance that she’d just had a daydream of Emma pushing her against the bars of a cell.

When Regina saw Emma’s tattoo and found herself touching Emma’s skin, she heard her own desires mocking her.

The walk back to the town square allowed Regina time to shove her feelings into a room and slam the door shut.

Thank heavens.

At the moment, Henry was trying to goad Emma into riding on the toboggan with him again.
“Henry,” Regina interrupted. “We do not make nuisances of ourselves.”

“You can tell she’s irritated because she’s doing the ‘we’ thing,” Henry said teasingly to Emma.

“You should go see if anyone needs help cleaning up,” Regina told him. “Why don’t you go to Granny’s? Stay inside, please, it’s getting cold.”

Henry accepted his fate good-naturedly. “Okay, Mom. Are you going to be at the steamboat?”

“Yes and I invited Emma too.”

“Emma’s going?” He seemed surprised but excited to hear that bit of news. He wanted, so badly, for her to have friends. Henry was at that age where hugs from his mother were less important than looking cool and independent. These days, he tended to offer affection more in private than in public. Which is why it surprised her when Henry hugged her, giving her an encouraging look. They both knew how hard it was for her to not keep people at arm’s length. He believed in her though. He always had. She kissed the top of his head, closing her eyes and squeezing him gently against her.

He let go and started in the direction of the diner. “See you later, Mom, Emma.” he called back to them.

“Steamboat, huh?” Emma asked.

Regina just smiled and motioned toward the docks. “Shall we?” She took a look back at Henry. He was standing there looking at them thoughtfully. He gave her a thumbs up, and she held back a laugh.

“Don’t you want him to come, too?”

Regina checked on him again, and this time he was scurrying off in the direction of the diner. “He did this once with me, and at the end he just asked ‘was that it’?” She laughed as she remembered it because Henry had been six and his question had been one of earnest confusion. “He came along one more time, clearly out of a sense of duty, so after that I let him off the hook. His enthusiasm, which is endless for other things, is definitely lacking for this. But for me, it’s peaceful and…” She shook her head, not having a better word and wishing she did. Maybe Emma would see it and feel the same way she did. Maybe not. Either way, it would be nice to have company, even if it was just this once.

“Half hour, right?” Emma asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Just checking.”

They walked for about ten minutes until they reached the wooden dock where the steamboat was anchored.

The ship had two levels. Most of the first level was enclosed with large windows, so groups of fifty or so could be protected from the cold and wind. Cushioned benches provided seating inside and in the small open area at the front of the boat. The upper level was completely open to the elements, with the exception of the pilot’s cabin. A railing extended from the point of the bow down the sides of the upper level so people could stand and look without obstruction. Despite the cold, the front of the upper level was Regina’s favorite spot. It offered her the best view of her town as the steamboat trundled its way along the coast.
“Hello there, Madam Mayor,” the captain called out as he moved down the steel bridge to meet them.

Regina handed him an envelope. “Merry Christmas, Captain. Emma, this is Marco. He’s our resident carpenter and all-around handyman. I’m not sure where this town would be without him. I’ve needed his help on hundreds of projects and he’s never let me down.”

“Mayor Regina gives me too much credit. Without her list, I would not have as much work. Work is good.” He winked at both of them. “She had a very long list when she became mayor. But, we finished it.”

“We did.” Regina agreed.

Marco tipped his captain’s hat to her and motioned for them to come aboard, offering his hand to help them up. “Welcome to The Pinocchio,” he said cheerfully, his Italian accent blending cheerfully into his words.

“They shut the steamboat down for the winter, but Captain Marco offers rides during the festival. He always waits to give me the last ride before he closes up, and I always give him a tip to thank him.”

“Least I can do for the one who is responsible for saving her.” His eyes crinkled with humor. “I bet she didn’t tell you about that.”

Emma turned to Regina. “Why no, she hasn’t.”

Regina avoided looking at her while Marco gestured toward the stairs, looking pleased with himself. They had the whole boat to themselves and Regina was eager to get to her usual spot. It was getting very cold but it didn’t matter; she placed her hands on the railing and gazed contently at her little town. The engine chugged rhythmically as Marco backed the ship away from the dock. A moment later Christmas music started from the speakers.

“So... you saved this thing?”

Regina sighed, clearly Emma wasn’t going to let that slip by without an explanation. “I just helped acquire the funds. The ship was built in 1911. It was an important reminder of the history of the town. I organized a fundraiser and took donations to sell things on Ebay. We made enough to keep her running for a few more years.”

“How long have you been mayor?”

“Since Henry turned eight. Five years.”

“Weren’t you worried that might put you back on your mom’s radar.”

Regina leaned back against the railing. “The previous mayor was a complacent windbag who did as little as possible. The town was crumbling down around him and he did nothing. The playground at the town park was falling apart. No one paid too much attention, till one day a little girl was using the monkey bars and half of the structure collapsed. The town had a forum to discuss it and the mayor said there was no money in the budget to fix them, but he would see what he could do next year. I stood up and pointed out ten cutbacks that could be made in other areas to free up the funds. He told me it was much more complicated than that. I assured him it wasn’t. He said that the council had already agreed with him, and maybe one day, if I ever became mayor, I could convince them to do things differently. I started running against him the next day. It was February, a full ten months before the next election. People thought I was crazy at first. But I was determined and...well, here I
Emma settled against the railing next to her. “How badly did you beat him?”

Regina tried to appear modest, she really did, but she was very proud of that first campaign. “Eighty percent of the vote.”

Emma did look impressed and that probably added just a little fuel to Regina’s momentary fire of ego.

“Oh, okay, high-five,” Emma said and held up her hand. Regina clapped her hand to Emma’s, feeling charmed. Again.

“How did you get interested in computers?”

“I wanted to avoid going to whatever foster home they put me in that week and I saw a sign for a computer club at the community center. I didn’t think it would be my thing. The first three days, I sat there for half the time and then found somewhere to disappear to for the rest of it. The fourth day, David sat down with me and started showing me some stuff.”

“How old were you?”

Emma thought back. “Fifteen.”

“I had no idea you had known them that long.”

Emma’s brows drew together hard and she shifted against the railing. “Yeah, they were my foster parents for a few years. They took me in.”

Regina wondered why they hadn’t adopted Emma and why Emma had introduced them as her friends. She had a feeling if she asked more about them, Emma might withdraw.

“Anyway,” Emma went on. “It turned out that something about computers made sense to me. Now, hacking – hacking I got into because it turns out you can make decent cash at it. A lot involving identity theft and credit card fraud. You can also tweak your high school transcripts to make you look like your grade point average is just good enough to get into college.”

“You didn’t.”

“In my defense, I only went college for a year. It didn’t feel like me.”

“Didn’t feel like me” didn’t sound like a good reason to drop out. But then, Emma had given several explanations lately that didn’t seem to tell the whole story.

“Mary Margaret told me that she and David have offered you a job at Nolan Securities many times. That didn’t feel like you either?” Emma looked stricken by the question but Regina wasn’t done. She felt herself growing irritated. “After you were let out of prison, I’m surprised that the F.B.I didn’t offer you a job? You worked with them for two years before serving your sentence, didn’t you?”

“They did. I didn’t take it. I felt weird not having any control of the cases I worked on. Besides, ex-cons and the feds don’t mix. Not for long.”

“I see.”

Emma folded her arms across her chest. “And what do you see?”
“That it didn’t feel like you either, apparently,” came the dry answer.

Emma’s posture became defensive, hands on her hips. “So?”

“Why won’t you work for Cybersavior?.

Emma raised her brows. “Seriously? I told you already.”

“No, I don’t think you have. You said you were worried about the amount of work involved in a new business, yet even when much easier opportunities have been presented, you refused them.”

Shock ran across Emma’s features, her expression hardening in a way Regina hadn’t seen before.”My past and my decisions are none of your business.”

Yet Regina was no flower and didn't wilt at the first sign of rain. "I disagree. You saying no to me makes it my business."

Emma laughed, the sound bitter. She pressed back against the railing as far she could. "Like hell it does. I know you're probably used to getting what you want, but you're going to have to accept a 'no' this time."

"I will, happily. As soon as you're actually honest with me about why you're saying no."

"Oh, you want honesty? Let's talk about you. Are you interested in helping people or is this about Henry?"

"And what about him?"

"If August was right about how long the F.B.I. is going to take, it's bound to hurt Henry. So, maybe if you have this little business of yours it'll help. That's what you're thinking, right?"

Regina didn't flinch. She'd always known herself very well. Too well not to acknowledge that Emma wasn't entirely wrong. It was an overly simplistic way to put it, but that didn't make it a lie.

"I will always want to help my son. I will always try to make him proud of me. I do feel like I failed him. And I also want to help people. I want to stop hiding in this town, I want to do something good." Regina advanced on Emma, just two steps but close enough so they could both see each other's faces clearly. "Your turn," she said firmly.

Emma didn't answer, choosing instead to bang the heel of her boot against the bars. She targeted Regina with a sullen stare.

"We're stuck on this boat together for the next half hour. So I'll ask again - why won't you work at Cybersavior?"

"Dammit, Regina."

"I'm waiting, Emma."

Emma looked over the side of the railing and glanced toward the captain, as if she were mapping out an escape route. "I don't owe you any explanations."

Regina moved forward again. Just a foot or so between them now.

"It wouldn't work out, okay?"
Regina made her voice calm, smooth as the bow of the ship gliding through the water. "Why, Emma?"

"Fuck," Emma growled and started pulling off her jacket and boots.

The flurry of motion startled Regina, making her take a step back. Was Emma undressing?

"What the hell are you doing?" For a moment she could see men in white coats strapping Emma into a straitjacket, taking her somewhere she'd be free of the stress of being interrogated by Regina.

"I'm gonna jump off this boat and swim for shore so I don't have to keep having this conversation."

"Let me understand – you'd rather freeze to death than give me an answer?"

"I'm thinking about it."

Regina realized that she was losing the argument. She’d never win if she relied on demanding or applying pressure. Her defenses lowered and she consciously softened.

“Okay, honesty. Real honesty. Since I came here, I have tried to keep everything in my life - and Henry's - controlled. Tried not to be the person I was. At first I thought being Henry's mother would be enough. Then, I thought if I was mayor and helped the town, that would make me feel settled. I made a long list of all the things I wanted to accomplish, and for as long as I was improving Storybrooke, I felt a sense of purpose."

She approached Emma and lifted up her jacket from the bench, putting it around her shoulders again. “I finished that list two and half years ago, and since then I’ve felt...bored. Restless. This idea for Cybersavior - I haven’t had an opportunity like this in a long time. The last time, I thought the ends justified the means, and I let myself be convinced that it was okay to use what was meant to be a gift to others. This is a second chance. I need this."

As Regina’s tactic changed, Emma’s stance relaxed though her gaze didn’t soften, eyes strained with wariness and frustration. “So this is about you making up for the past.”

Lowering her walls, especially to this extent, should have been nearly impossible. They were so skillfully built. Necessity and experience measured each brick, laid them down one by one. Despite all the ways she had tried to change herself, deep down she still only saw two types of people: lions and sheep. Except Henry. Maybe Emma, too. The walls came down, no defenses guarded the faith or the hope burning in Regina’s eyes. Her arms hung limply at her sides.

“The past. Now. The future. All of it.”

Emma’s anger flattened, the spike of her temper evening out as she searched Regina’s face again and again. She put up her hands in front of her. “I can’t work with you.”

“Why, Emma?” Regina asked, soft but insistent.

Emma tore back from her and glared before blurtling out. “Because my life is one big, never ending reminder that the best thing is for me to keep moving. When I don’t, when I stop, life vividly reminds me what I am and am not meant for. There’s this scale I have to measure things. Where I am on it is really low. And I can’t go lower. I can’t.” Emma expelled a loud breath of winter air. “Before you tell me that’s fucked up - I know. I’m never gonna be one of those people surrounded by friends and family. I’m not gonna be someone that has this stable, 9-to-5 life. I’m okay with that. My life is fine the way it is.”
“Is it?” Regina challenged, still gentle. “Or is it just familiar? You know how afraid I was to go to the F.B.I. You convinced me that sometimes it was better to do the right thing, even if it went against everything I felt was best for me.” She paused and found another way to - perhaps - bolster her argument. “What if your involvement in the business was temporary? Would you be willing to help get us started?”

“You’re the most stubborn, pain-in-the-ass woman I have ever met,” Emma grumbled.

“I am aware.” The words made Emma’s lips shift into a small, reluctant smile; Regina allowed herself the luxury of matching it.

Emma shook her head over and over. “Why me? There are plenty of people out there that do what I do.”

“I’m not sure anyone is good, except perhaps my son. I’m not. However, I see good in the person who kept our picture nearby to motivate herself when she was working. The person I think would have helped me whether I paid her or not. The person who did a stupid trick at Chili’s to distract me. The person who called a friend in the F.B.I even though you’re an ex-con and it’s the last call you wanted to make. You turned herself in to save some college kids. And, you inexplicably stole money to give it away like some demented Robin Hood.” She lifted her shoulders helplessly. She was asking Emma for much more than her skills. She needed Emma to be her partner in this, her lighthouse; she wasn’t sure she could find her own way. “I trust your heart, Emma. That’s why.”

Emma stomped the length of the bow before tossing up her hands. “What the fuck am I supposed to say to that?” Then more loudly toward the night sky, “Fuck!” She grumbled while her socked feet trudged back and forth along the deck once more.

Emma sank the fingers of one hand in her hair, looking agitated and wild. Regina wondered if she might jump in the water after all. “Look, I’ll think about it, okay? And I’ll - I’ll come with David and Mary Margaret when they meet with you.” Emma paced to the pilot cabin and back before turning to Regina again. “And, you have to call it Cybersheriff. Cybersavior is a stupid name. And….”

Regina was smart enough not to argue the point and simply listened as Emma listed further conditions.

“I’m only agreeing to listen more, when the time comes, and think about it. That’s it.”

“Thank you.”

Emma seemed to accept that. “So is the interrogation over? I can’t feel my toes anymore and I’m really hoping I’m not gonna have to jump after all.”

Regina bent down, picked up her boots and handed them to her. “You finally answered my question, so, yes,” Regina answered, not giving ground.

Emma turned her head partially away, her lips twisting into a reluctant little smile. After another moment, she moved to put on her shoes and push her arms into place in her jacket. It was hard to tell what she was thinking. Regina hoped that, despite the tension, they could enjoy one another’s company as they had throughout the day.

Regina moved back to the railing. “You know, the best part is coming up,” she said, her eyes on the horizon. “Come here.”

When Emma didn’t join her after a few moments, she turned back to check on her. Emma was watching her with narrowed, uncertain eyes, similar to those of someone on a strict diet being offered
a large piece of chocolate cake.

She crooked her finger for Emma to come stand by her. “Come here. Come see my town at sunset.”

Emma snorted at the command, but she swaggered to Regina and leaned next to her. Emma didn’t say anything, stuffing her hands in her jacket pockets.

They stood, shoulders almost touching. About ten minutes later they reached Regina’s favorite part of the ride. A vantage point where the whole town was visible as twilight was descending. They could see Storybrooke with all the lights and the ice sculpture gardens, with the large white and gold Christmas tree in the distance.

It was a brilliant, miraculous thing, her town. The tranquility it offered, it had offered for generations. It stayed mostly the same as history buzzed around it. It had lost some of its glory under the hands of the previous mayor, but it hadn’t taken much to bring it back. It was aching to be a good home for the people who lived there; it just needed the right person to make sure it was tended to as it deserved to be. This town, being mayor, was one of the few things she’d really done right.

Without lightening her serious demeanor, Emma nudged Regina in a quiet expression of appreciation at the view. Regina nodded in acknowledgement, not breaking the spell.

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The boat docked soon afterward. Things became strained again as they walked back towards Main Street in silence to meet Henry.

*What the fuck happened?* Emma demanded of herself. She cursed at herself over and over. In her head, she invented combinations of swearwords that would have inspired the most ambitious of sailors. She’d gone there with a plan. The Winter Festival was supposed to be a goodbye, or at least a strong farewell for now. How the hell had Regina gotten her to agree to come to Storybrooke to discuss Cybersheriff? Her footfalls became more aggressive than absolutely necessary, and Regina turned to her, raising a brow. Emma ignored her.

Fear stretched out in the center of her, lounging. Her temples became touched with sweat, and her stomach tightened. Regina did this, her and that stupid speech. Now, Emma felt obligated. Middle ground would never be a possibility, not ever, because somehow Regina hit buttons inside her that made her do things she usually never would.

Henry did too.

She couldn’t put them in a box and take them out occasionally so they could be in her life. They would trash the box and refuse to stay there. The conversation on the steamboat proved that.

*What. The. Fuck. Happened.* Her plan had four steps. Four. She’d made it to two, completing screwing up the most important ones.

**Step 3: Say goodbye to the Millses for a long while.**

**Step 4: Get her normal, detached life back.**

"Emma, would you mind if I used information about your past - your prison sentence - to market Cybersheriff?"
Emma, deep in thought, didn't really register what Regina said. "I guess so. I'm not really ashamed of my time in prison. I'm ashamed of what I did. But I try to be honest about who I am. Maybe send me what you're thinking about when you get it written up or something."

Emma’s mind ground away at her dilemma. It occurred to her that she could still follow through on gaining space. Coming to Storybrooke to discuss Cybersheriff would be a pause. Afterwards, she wouldn’t talk to Regina again, not for a long time.

“Hey Regina? I should probably get going.”

Regina looked confused, glancing at her watch. “Are you and Henry done with the video already?”

Emma gave a snow mound near the shovelled sidewalk a little kick. “I’m just getting concerned about the time. Hopefully he has enough for what he needs.”

She’d already delayed doing what she had to do long enough. Waiting any longer to lay down boundaries would make it harder for everyone.

“Emma, I know I pushed you…” Regina began, and it sounded apologetic.

“It’s okay,” Emma said quickly.

Regina’s eyes searched hers. “Is it?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Regina didn’t ask anything more, and Emma could only feel relief. She needed to go, everything would be better after she left.

They found Henry, and Emma explained to him that she had to go. He reacted, flustered and surprised, gaping at her. “But we still have to film the outro. You know, like the epilogue. Can’t you stay for a few more hours?”

“I’m really sorry, Henry,” Emma said.

“But…”

“Henry,” Regina scolded mildly. “If Emma needs to go, we need to respect that. Maybe we’ll invite her over after the holidays,” she suggested, examining Emma’s expression closely for dissent. Emma did her best not to give away that no way in hell would she be coming over. Regina must not have detected anything wrong because her eyes warmed with a smile as she stepped in front of Emma and her son. “Your present is at our house, Emma. Could you come by for a moment? Just to pick it up?”

Panic alarms went off. Would this woman stop with the curveballs? Okay, she told herself, she could handle a few more minutes with the Millses. “Yeah, I’ll get my car.”

_Get the car, gas it up and be ready to go_, she ordered herself firmly. The sooner the better. She pulled into the local mini-mart and filled up the tank.

Emma had gone with gift cards after all, having no idea what the hell to get either Regina or Henry. She didn’t expect a better gift to present itself in a gaudy display inside the store when she stopped for gas. It caught her eye, and the thought of Regina’s reaction made her grin. She saw the idiocy of her actions even as she was paying for it - if she wanted to have firm boundaries, buying a second Christmas gift for the person she was trying to pull away from wasn’t logical.
Emma allowed it. The present was a kind of goodbye. A mile marker between this almost-friendship they’d had and the return to something much less personal.

When she finally got to Regina’s, it was a good half hour later, and she had two envelopes with her original gifts and an unwrapped box in a plastic bag.

By the time she arrived, Henry was over his disappointment, grinning ear to ear. The half-eaten chocolate chip cookie in his hand probably didn’t hurt. He took another bite of it and announced, “I’m going to call the video of us the Winter Festival Spectacular-Spectacular.”

Regina questioned if the title really needed two spectaculars. Henry and Emma insisted it did.

“Marketing, Mom,” Henry told her, as though it was obvious.

“I’d watch a video with two spectaculars in it,” Emma added helpfully.

“Come on, let’s give Emma her present so she can be on her way.”

He immediately went to the tree and began pushing a large box toward Emma. She moved to intercept, and tried to lift it. It was much heavier than she expected and she gave a grunt of effort as she balanced it then set it back down. On the floor it just reached her hips. The width was a little bigger than one of the front seats in her car. She was going to have to strap it down in the passenger seat and hope it didn’t crush her into the driver's seat.

“What is that thing?”

“You’ll have to see on Christmas day.”

“Oh, these are gift cards.” Emma pushed the envelopes at her.

“Thank--”

“This is for the tree.” Emma cut Regina off by thrusting the plastic bag at her, blurring, “It’s a tree topper.” Through clear packaging, the plastic 8-pointed star seemed silver and blue. However, the box proudly proclaimed that the topper “magically glowed in eight alternating and enchanting colors”. Also, the included music of ten Christmas favorites would coordinate perfectly with the lights.

Henry’s eyes grew wide with delight while his mother stared. Regina did not hide her uncertainty that even the existence of such a tree topper was a good idea.

Emma gave Henry a one-armed hug. “Happy Holidays, kid. Send me a link to the video when it’s done, okay?” He promised that he would.

“I’ll walk you out,” Regina insisted.

Emma hefted up her present as Regina opened up the door for her. “Be honest, did you get me a huge boulder for Christmas?”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Regina asked dryly. She opened Emma’s passenger side door and helped wedge the box into the bucket seat. Emma used the seatbelt to keep it in place and carefully closed the rusting yellow door.

“You’ll drive safely?” Regina asked.

“Yeah,” Emma patted the roof of her car. “I should…”
They stopped there on that precipice of saying goodbye, then Regina stepped forward, tentatively wrapping her arms around Emma.

Slowly Emma returned the embrace. “You still suck at this,” she murmured in Regina’s ear, and they both quietly, awkwardly laughed. Further words were stolen by the press of Regina’s body against hers, the feel of Regina’s lithe arms coming around her, folding her in, and her own body’s desire to be held. Tickles travelled up and down her skin where they touched, uncomfortable heat swelling in her body that she tried to fight. Closeness that she wanted no part of trying to chain them together in messy, complicated ways.

Again she felt the desire to find a way to hold on. Her head knew better, but her heart, starved for friendship and family, battered her with hope. *I can’t,* she mourned. She gathered her stubborn survival instincts, they always protected her, they would now too.

Emma stepped back, out of the embrace. “So, see ya.”

“Emma? You’re sure we’re okay?”

*I’m sorry, Regina,* she thought.

“Yes, all good.” Emma backed away, practically tripping in her rush to get into her car.
Hi everyone, I missed you all!

A few things of note. First, I am working on a little something for you all just as a thank you. Not a gift as much as a trinket. I'll have it ready in a few weeks. Second, a small evil voice in my head wanted me to leave you this chapter as my last chapter before the break. "No," said my Wonder Woman inspired conscience, "you are evil Ares and I will vanquish you." Um, I may be a little obsessed with that movie. Thirdly, I wouldn't put you or the characters through the Bog of Angst for no reason. We will get through it together.

In the meantime, have a drink at the virtual bar, snuggle with OUAT virtual plushies or avail yourself of the Wonder Woman costumes under your virtual seat. This is your captain speaking and I'm bacccccccccdkkkk.

For many years, Regina obsessively dove into anything and everything she did. If it was worth doing, it was worth doing perfectly. This was true for any role she had ever held, and her need to be the best also fueled the bright aspirations of what she could accomplish as mayor. A few years ago, she had reached the end of a long list of goals for the town, and the fires that drove her began to wane. Her creativity and vision floundered, gasping like a dying fish on shore. She tried to reinvigorate them by reading articles and talking to other mayors; she even tried tricks like meditation. Nothing worked. She approached each day with her usual work ethic, but without the sense of building toward something, which made her perfectionist nature jeer that she was mediocre.

Cybersheriff restored the sleeping giant of her inspiration. By the week after the Winter Festival, she had drafted a business plan. Three days before Christmas, she finished the first draft of a marketing plan. That same day she sat Henry down to explain her new business and what she wanted to accomplish.

She had expected Henry to be his usual enthusiastic self, but it wasn’t until she mentioned that Emma might be helping that his eyes lit up. In his mind, Emma and the legitimacy of Cybersheriff were tightly coiled together. Regina tried not to feel wounded by that. She also reminded him—and herself—that all Emma had promised to do was listen.

“But Emma will want to help,” Henry said firmly.

Regina hesitated, reluctant to either diminish his hero, or set him up for disappointment. “I am sure she will if she can. Let’s just take things one step at a time.”
“And we have to see if Agent Booth needs us, too.”

Henry believed Booth was going to contact them after the holidays with good news about Peter Pan. Regina didn’t tell Henry about Booth’s concerns or her role in tampering with the evidence. She wanted to believe that Booth’s superiors would decide to use what Emma gave them. He had been offering his opinion of what might happen, that was all, she reassured herself. He might be wrong. Once Booth called to let them know one way or another, she’d tell Henry everything.

“Do you think it’s a good idea?” She watched his face, aware that her yearning for his approval probably wasn’t healthy.

A crease formed between his eyes. “You don’t usually ask me what I think about stuff like that. Like...work stuff.”

“Maybe I should. More often than not, you’re my inspiration. In this case, I especially want you to feel proud of what I am trying to do.”

He snorted, lifted himself from the dining room chair and moved to kiss her forward. “You’re my mom. And it’s a really good idea.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Can I go play a game?” he asked, and that was that.

After he’d jogged up the stairs, she called Emma, who didn’t pick up, and left a message: “Emma, would you be interested in getting pizza with me and Henry? Is that suitably informal? It’s three days before Christmas, so it can’t count as an official holiday meal. Call me when you have a moment.”

As driven as she was, Regina tried very hard to only work on Cybersheriff during personal time. She wanted an obvious separation between the business and her mayoral duties. She needed to have the moral high ground, to prove to herself this would be different from the past. Belle offered to help her and she refused—gently. She didn’t want to give the impression of conflict or negligence of duties.
It became a test of her control. As much as she loved her town, her own efficiency and organization left a very small to-do list. Those items were often heavily bureaucratic, budget related, or tedious. For example, Sheriff Graham’s weekly police report consisted of the same items as it had for the last two years: speeding at night, and underage drinking in the park after hours. Her mind kept wandering to her new non-profit business. It seemed so colorful compared to the drabness of her daily responsibilities.

It wouldn’t do. She owed Storybrooke as much of her heart and energy as she gave to Cybersheriff. She needed a new town project, something different. Something to not just restore the town, but make it grow. She set aside time in her daily schedule to research possibilities. Regina would keep her mind properly affixed until 5:01 p.m.

Still, even the possibility of Cybersheriff lifted her spirits higher than they had been in a long time. Speaking with David and Mary Margaret and seeing their interest added fuel to the fire as it began to feel tangible.

“It think what you’re doing is wonderful,” Mary Margaret told her with a smile, while her husband just watched the exchange between them on Skype closely. Even with his reservations, Regina counted it as progress.

And then there was Emma.

Emma might decide not to work with her, but they were friends. Emma was the first friend she had allowed herself to have in a long time. She looked forward to continuing that journey.

No matter how deeply she descended into her planning, Emma hovered at the fringes of her mind. It gave her a reason to smile, even when she wound up accidentally overwriting a draft of the marketing plan she’d spent hours on.

On Christmas Day, Regina called Emma, hoping to chat for at least a few minutes. It had only been two weeks since the Winter Festival, but she found herself craving the way Emma made things easier, not quite so serious. She wanted to tell Emma about a dozen things—Henry, the town, her thoughts on Cybersheriff, her heroic restraint in not “accidentally” breaking the noisy, colorful tree topper. She wondered if Emma liked her present.

Again, Emma didn’t answer or return her call. This time, the lack of a response gave her pause. But she told herself, as she had before, that people were often busy and distracted during the holidays. In an effort to make it easier on Emma, she texted as well.
Still nothing. Okay, that felt odd.

Not the end of the world. Just...odd.

The Nolans sent her the financials she had requested, and she used them to double-check herself on both the business and marketing plan.

Just after Christmas, Regina thought to ask Henry if he had heard from Emma, and he showed her a picture he’d received. She smiled and laughed with him over the ridiculousness of the picture. Afterwards, she went into the kitchen and let the avalanche of doubts and questions come rumbling down.

She silenced those inner voices, choosing to trust that there was an explanation.

It was good that Emma was texting Henry, she told herself.

She had begun to worry about him but wasn’t sure how much she should. Most days, he still joked with her and rambled about anything that tickled his endless curiosity and sense of excitement. Yet sometimes they ate dinner in total silence, Regina trying to make conversation and Henry giving one-word answers. He didn’t look her in the eyes when he asked about Emma, or when she tried to tell him more about Cybersheriff. Even when she inquired about his Youtube channel he just shrugged and said only that he was “working on some things”. Henry was a teenager now though, so perhaps some of the changes were normal.

The relentlessly busy pace of Christmas changed into a similarly frantic gallop for New Year’s. As mayor, she had responsibilities, and one of them was to throw a New Year’s Eve party and invite half the town. At midnight, she thought about texting Emma, but then was swept up in a wave of well wishes and even the occasional hug from her guests. She made a mental note to try to contact Emma the next day.

On New Year’s Day, she waited until what she thought was an appropriate hour—just after one—then went to her bedroom, shutting the door. Regina wasn’t sure why she thought she might need privacy. Her confidence swooped down then up - only to fall again. Her stomach tightened in response.

She dialed Emma’s number and lifted the phone to her ear. “Hi Emma, Happy New Year.” She tried
to sound cheerful. Casual. She pulled her pillow into her arms. “Hope everything is going well, and you’re out doing something fun. Or maybe something with that strange helmet you use to play computer games. Please call me when you get a second.”

She hung up and spend a good twenty minutes berating herself for using the word “please.”

Despite her suspicions of what was happening, she decided to send a text as well—just to make sure that Emma could answer easily.

@EmmaSwan  Marco. Happy New Year Emma.

She had learned a long time ago—people will use you, get what they want, then discard you. She observed this reality over and over, in both her own life and the lives of others. Eventually, in her mind, the use of relationships as currency seemed like a societal norm. Acceptance should have given her peace. However, in this case, the truth did not set her free. Instead it made her spirit scream at the world to be better, to be more like it should be. She ignored the protesting cries inside her because hearing them was too hard. They never disappeared but, after enough time, they were reduced to whispers. When she was busy enough, as she most often was, she couldn’t hear them at all. Henry made her put an asterisk next to her old adage, marking him as an exception. Her own devotion to the town, primarily selfless did the same. She hungered to add another asterisk because of Emma.

While she waited, hoping Emma would get back to her quickly, Regina remembered her first “adult” party. At the time, “adult” meant alcohol. Usually a sophomore wouldn’t have made the cut for such a gathering. Her invitation was because, as a Mills, she had a certain standing. She was fifteen and nervous, especially since most of people at the party would be seniors and unknown to her. She’d never had alcohol except for a sip or two of her mother’s wine on special occasions. She didn’t like doing things that seemed so foreign to her experience.

Sadie talked her into it, promising she would be at Regina’s side all night. Sadie wasn’t exactly a friend, but they’d known one another since they were eight. For Regina that mattered, and so she felt a certain amount of loyalty to her and, fair being fair, figured it probably ran both ways.

The night of the party, she didn’t know what to wear, and despite being confident for a teenager, her frayed nerves drove her to try on half the closet. It took her an hour to finally choose a bold red shirt with a triangular silver bead design and sleeves that exposed her shoulders and part of her upper arms. She also wore a black jean skirt that ended at just above her knees and heels.

When Sadie showed up, thirty minutes late and with some boy in tow, Regina knew it wasn’t a good
Regina sat in the back seat of Sadie’s car, while the boy who hadn’t been introduced drove and Sadie spent the ride giggling at things he said. Ten minutes after they arrived at the house, Sadie said she needed to go talk to someone but would be right back. Every room was filled with raucous music, the upper echelon of her high school and even a few college freshman chugging beer as if being drunk gave them superpowers. The party wasn’t large, maybe about fifty people. Quantity of people wasn’t the focus, quality was.

For a while, Regina waited for Sadie to come back. After a couple of jocks paid her far too much attention, she excused herself to the bathroom, hiding there, humiliation making the back of her neck cold and clammy. When she flung the door open, she painted a nonchalant smile into place and went on a mission to find Sadie. She searched every room as quickly as she could. Only when she decided to look outside and realized that Sadie’s car was gone did she understand that she had been deserted.

Bereft of options, she called her mother to come get her. The ride home was another level of mortification as Cora Mills, a knowing look shining in her eyes, innocently asked what had happened. Regina lied, making up a story about her friend needing to go home. She knew her mother didn’t believe her.

“I hope tonight serves as a lesson to you, Regina,” her mother said as they walked into the house. “Really, the only question is what are you going to do about it?”

Weeks later, when she discovered that Sadie had only met the boy a few days before the party, the betrayal was pinned into place all the more firmly. Regina took action. She attracted a clique of five other girls, including Sadie. She threw lavish, exclusive parties at her home. She flirted with football players, teasing them so they thought she was attainable. She walked down the halls of her high school, the clique orbiting around her, as a new force to be reckoned with. She lifted Sadie up, waited till she was vulnerable, and dropped her, cutting her from the in-crowd so she could crash down to earth.

Soon after, Cora Mills noticed that the fifth member of Regina’s circle had permanently changed and gave Regina a quiet little nod. Approval from her mother surprised her.

Her need for self-reliance was born because “friends” had always swayed to her and away without warning. She had a new toy, they’d come. Someone else had a better one, they’d go. She threw a birthday party with a DJ, they’d come. She wore a shirt they didn’t think was fashionable, they’d go. Her absolute emotional autonomy reached adolescence during that moment with Sadie, but became an adult due to many more such abandonments.

Regina pushed her memories away. After what she and Emma had shared, Emma couldn’t be leaving her behind so easily. An hour went by. Emma didn’t answer. Again.
The familiarity of that hurt, the repetition of it, like a scratched record stalled on a verse she’d heard all her life, made her tremble. She couldn’t let go of the stupid pillow. She fell asleep holding it, torn between growing rage at Emma and an aching heart.

As the holidays ended, she tried to put everything Emma Swan–related behind her. Henry went back to school, and she went back to work. She needed to email various documents to the Nolans, including the marketing plan. They had already told her that right after the holidays they’d be busy playing catch up, so February would be a better for them to meet in Storybrooke. Still, she wanted to make sure they had plenty of time to look over the documents. Yet when she thought about them, Emma also entered her mind. Regina found herself dragging her feet, not ready to send the email.

She reviewed the weekly police report, completed by the deputy sheriff. Graham had gone to visit family for the New Year and still wasn’t back. The deputy had noted instances of teens drinking in the park and issues with the speed limit. She stared at it, truly considering crumpling it up, before placing it in the appropriate file cabinet drawer and folder.

“Regina?” Belle’s Irish accent chirped as her assistant ducked her head into the doorway of her office. “A Mr. Henry Mills is here to see you. He seems rather insistent.”

Regina frowned. She appreciated Belle’s humor but the clock showed twelve. Henry should definitely be in school. “Please show him in.”

“Hi Mom,” Henry said casually and flopped into one of the antique chairs before her large cherry wood desk.

“Henry, you should be in school. Is there some reason why you’re here?” She chose to ignore the abuse of her furniture. She’d given up on that battle after she’d reminded Henry for the hundredth time.,

Henry was on a mission and wasn’t interested in such details. “When Emma comes to town for your meeting, can she stay with us? I texted her and she said she was going to stay at the Bed and Breakfast. She told me she wasn’t even sure when the meeting was. I thought maybe if you asked her she could stay with us.”
She gritted her teeth, his words digging claws into raw parts of her. *So he had gotten a text,* her inner snide noted. If Emma had actually talked to her, she would know the meeting was the second week of February. “Henry, I don’t believe that request warranted you leaving school. I am not happy with you.” She stood and rounded her desk. “Let’s go. I’m driving you back.”

“But you didn’t answer my question.”

“Which I won’t, until you ask it at an appropriate time.”

“Mooooom.” Henry groaned, flinging up his hands. “We haven’t seen Emma in forever.”

“Let’s go.” She told him firmly. He stood and she placed her arm around him to guide him through the door. “It’s been three weeks, Henry. We can talk about this after school.”

Belle raised her head. “That one escaped, did he? I was wondering.”

“Can you put funding for a teenager school entrapment system on my agenda for this afternoon?” Regina queried. Belle looked at the mayor uncertainly. Regina contained the desire to roll her eyes. “That was a joke.”

Her secretary, surprised by the teasing, rallied. “I’ll put it after your plan to outlaw snow, shall I?”

“Wait, do we need to tell Belle?” Both Belle and Regina waited for more information from Henry. “Well, you’re having a business meeting. Belle helps you with business. They need rooms at the bed and breakfast and maybe you all will need food. But maybe Emma won’t need a room.”

A sneaky attempt, Regina gave him credit.

“This is personal business, Henry, not town business.”

“Regina, if I can help,” Belle offered.
Belle’s friendly nature made her one of the most well-liked people in town. Belle knew everyone. Regina found her hardworking, intelligent, able to predict what Regina might ask - and yes, likable. Regina depended on her, yet they weren’t close. Even Graham, when they’d enjoyed a more carnal relationship years ago, didn’t get past her defenses. He ended it for the reason Regina started it; it was just a convenience. Her letting him into her bedroom didn’t give him access to anything personal about her.

“We discussed this. The town pays your salary. Using you for personal business would be unethical.” She quietly added, “I do appreciate it, Belle.”

Regina propelled Henry towards the door with just a little more impatience. “Cutting school is unacceptable, Henry.”

“I didn’t cut class, just lunch.”

The sidewalk outside was wet and she pulled him to one side to avoid a puddle made by melting snow. “You know better.”

“But you won’t talk about it.” He shook free of her and stood in her path, frustrated. “You two were getting to be friends. I thought she’d come by for Christmas. Or before winter break ended. Emma says it’s not a good idea. She never wants to Skype either. She just texts and it’s always short,” he said with a frown.

Regina opened the door of her ebony Jaguar, slid into the leather seat then opened Henry’s door. Regina started the car but she didn’t shift it into gear, her mind still working on an answer for her son. She didn’t want to dethrone his newest hero or hurt him. “I’m fairly sure she got a job with the police department, Henry. She’s probably just busy.” She recalled her promise to Emma to make sure Gold kept his word. She should follow up with him, but her injured spirit didn’t feel particularly motivated.

“But have you talked to her? Have you tried?”

“Emma had a whole life before she met us. Distance can make it hard to keep in touch with people.” Her fingers tried to curl around his as she continued gently. “I’m not saying she doesn’t care about you.” She couldn’t bring herself to use the word “us” instead of “you”. “But, you may not be able to have the exact relationship you had while she was here.”
He snatched his hand back. “But that’s stupid! That’s giving up. If someone’s really important to you, then why should you give up on them?”

She should strangle Emma Swan for putting her in this position. “That’s not what I said.”

“She saved me,” he insisted. “She helped us. It’s like you forgot.”

“Henry,” she said firmly, a tactic to end the line of questioning she didn’t have answers for. “Seatbelt and school.” He snatched the silver end of the seat belt, pulling hard on the slack and fastening it as hard as he could. “We’ll talk about your punishment for cutting school later.”

“Fine,” he muttered.

She just sighed. Once again, he seemed to cast her in the role of villain. When she stopped in front of the school, he ran out of the car, his backpack flopping behind him.

Back at the office, she picked up the phone to call Emma and fume at her. Unsurprisingly, it went to voicemail, and she slammed her cell phone back on her desk without bothering to leave a message. Emma owed her, owed THEM an explanation. One way or another, Regina decided, she was going to get it. Most adults might have calmly backed off when they sensed someone blowing them off. After seeing her son’s reaction, Regina felt no such obligation.

Henry’s words about giving up returned to her. They cooled the steam of her anger.

She did owe Emma, that was true. She remembered Emma holding her hand and reassuring her that the worst was over with Peter Pan.

Dammit.

One more try, she decided. It wouldn’t be like before, when she tried to invite a friendly connection. Instead, she emailed the marketing proposal she had put off sending, then clung tightly to her professional demeanor, simply asking Emma to review it. The reason for contact was legitimate, but it also was another opportunity for Emma to reach out.

If she wished to.
She owed Emma one more thing, because of what Emma did for Henry. She called Gold. When Emma had left the Winter Festival early, she had said that she had a meeting with Gold the next morning. Regina wanted to make sure he made good on his promise to offer her a job.

He told her there had been no meeting because one hadn’t been scheduled. He assured her he’d reach out to Emma as soon as possible.

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In mid-January August Booth called and told her that he had bad news. Her hope that she might be able to tell her son what she had done, but balance it with good news, was dashed. She wanted to call Emma, but didn’t. This left a very small pool of people she could talk to.

David Nolan’s expression was kind when she told him and his wife over Skype. “Look, if it helps,” David said. “Sometimes even when you do everything right, the brass just wants more.”

Mary Margaret stepped behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders, offering an empathetic and worried look. “But Henry doesn’t know yet? Are you thinking of telling him?”

Regina nodded. “I have to. I can’t lie to him.” She looked beyond her desk toward the open door to the foyer. “I - I should just get it over with. I have been stalling because I hoped the news would be different. It was foolhardy. I have to tell him.” She tried to gather her courage with those last words. She realized that, in part, the reason she’d called was to say the words out loud to someone else. As if the verbalizing of them held a power, would give her no other option than to do the right thing, no matter how much it scared her.

“I know you don’t know us very well,” Mary Margaret said, “but if you need to talk afterwards, we’re here.”

“Thank you,” Regina replied, knowing she would do no such thing. They were still strangers. One did not make themselves too vulnerable to strangers. The call ended just a moment after that, with Regina wishing them a good night.

Slowly, she rose and buttoned her blazer. Her legs were leaden as she went upstairs and knocked on Henry’s door.
He didn’t say anything at first after she told him. He sat by her on his bed, an abandoned comic book in one hand.

In a rush of sudden motion, he flung his comic book at his wall. “You’re a coward,” he said, eyes watering. “You’re nothing but a coward.” He went to his window, looking out, back to her. “Can I be alone now, please?”

She tried, how she tried not to take it to heart. He was a teenager. He was hurting. The problem wasn’t what he said, it was that deep down she agreed with it. “Henry,” she said, trying to be brave, to focus on being his mother and guiding him through this as best she could. “We should talk about this. I know you’re upset.”

“You don’t know,” he snapped. She’d never heard his warm voice sound so bitter. “I’d like to be alone, please.”

Henry’s comic books were precious to him, usually he handled them like someone else might hold a newborn. Regina picked it up, carefully smoothing it out and setting it on his bed. She hesitated, wondering if she should approach him. Maybe time and space were good, she reasoned, not sure what to do.

She left him, going back to her office. She tried to bury her mind in work—the new ideas she had for the town or Cybersheriff—but her chest refused to fill with air, overcome with a crushing sensation.

You’re a coward, his condemnation pummeled her. She buried her head in her hands to try and drown it out. She couldn’t.

She’d let him down.

The truth of that thought let her breathe again. She breathed it in, unfiltered self-honesty, that loosened her tight chest. Her eyes burned with tears, but they didn’t fall. She didn’t want them to.

Not long after that, she heard the front door open and the sound of her son charging out of the house. “Henry,” she called, pursuing him. He didn’t listen. He didn’t stop. She gave it ten minutes before she called Graham. It didn’t take long for Graham to find him at the docks.

When she got there, she parked across the street, keeping him safe without intruding.
Eventually he noticed her. He slowly made his way to the car and got in the passenger side. The car was running, heat on, but Regina didn’t move.

“I’m sorry,” she said. His hand crept out, and for just a moment, his fingers touched her knuckles on the steering wheel.

“We should go home, Mom,” he said softly.

“I...were you talking to someone? I thought I saw you on the phone.”

“Emma.” He faced straight ahead. “She said I was being kind of a jerk.” A slight expression of mirth touched one corner of his mouth. “I mean, not in those words. But...basically.”

She wasn’t sure what to think of Emma’s “help,” so she didn’t give it any weight at all. “No, that’s not true. I made a bad decision. I was wrong.”

“Are you still going to do Cybersheriff?”

“Of course.”

“Even if Emma doesn’t help?”

Regina nodded again, words stolen from her because suddenly her son sounded so wise.

“Because she might not. I asked her to call me in a few days but she—I don’t think she will.” He gave a slow exhale, still not looking at his mother. “Can I have hot chocolate at home?”

“Absolutely,” she said quietly, putting the car in drive.

She let him set the pace for the rest of the evening. He didn’t talk very much and what he did say was about a school project he needed to work on.
Through the rest of January and into February, his moody silences became more frequent. When she tried to bring up what had happened, he said nothing or tried to change the subject. She suggested he might want to talk to someone professionally, if not to her, and he glared at her.

She checked in with the Nolans about the meeting and they mentioned that they also hadn’t talked with Emma, but did get a text. Regina erected a wall between her memories of Emma and the rest of her mind. She suspected she wouldn’t hear from her again.

She tried to cauterize her pain with professional detachment. Because of Mary Margaret’s repeated interest, she allowed herself to be cautiously optimistic about Cybersheriff. She also began working on a proposal for Storybrooke to become eighty percent green within three years.

In early February she presented the idea to the town council, and the next week it went to an open town forum. Town forums were a gamble. Half the time, the people of Storybrooke chose to stay home. The other half, well, it could be anything. Tonight, the discussion started off with questions about the impact of the “green plan” on the budget for things like new computers for the library. Regina tried her best, at every open forum, to just listen. She had to vigorously restrain her decisive, organizational side. It wore her out. As the meeting rolled to a halfway point, most of the comments seemed cautiously in favor of the green initiative. Another reason to be encouraged beyond Cybersheriff, she told herself.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she pulled it free, checking to see if Henry was calling.

Her heart jolted to life in her chest.

Emma.

Only a call from her mother would have surprised her more. She could feel the pulsing in her fingertips as she gripped the phone. All of her detachment collapsed, replaced with the desire to scream at the other woman. She could use every vulnerability Emma had ever shared and inflict wound after wound. The thought soothed her, and offered retaliation for her torn pride.

She slammed down the phone, trying to push her emotions away until she escaped the meeting and could cradle them in private. The loud thud of her phone hitting the table gained her the attention of everyone in the room.
“Sorry. Please go on.”

She refused to let the call interrupt her attention to her town. A quiet trill of worry vibrated in her head, refusing to leave her be. It made her wonder if something had happened to Emma. Regina pushed that aside, too.

As usual, and because of her management, the meeting ended exactly at nine o’clock. She calmly said her farewells, then retreated to her office.

After shutting her door, she settled in her chair and let out a slow breath. She fought to be still and calm. Both were her best armour against the wound threatening to open, and she refused to let Emma know about the marks of pain inside her. Her pride demanded the deception. She didn’t even bother listening to the message Emma left; whatever Emma had to say could be said to her directly. Regina touched Emma’s name in her phone’s address book and placed the call on speaker.

Emma picked up after half a ring. “Regina, who the hell do you think you are?”

It felt like cold water stinging her face. “Excuse me?”

“What the fuck is this marketing proposal? I told you I would come and listen to your idea, but I never agreed to work with you for three or four months. You sent this to David and Mary Margaret so they’d know that starting up Cybersheriff will take twice as long without my help.” Regina heard the rustle of paper. “Three months with my help and six without. That’s what you said. So now, if I say no I look like the world’s biggest asshole.”

Regina felt her chin tremble and a pressure in her throat. She tightened her jaw to try and control it.

“After all, what kind of person would refuse to help a non-profit get started,” Emma railed. “Your idea won’t even work. When you asked if you could use my story, I didn’t think you wanted me to give speeches to a bunch of one-percenters who use hundred dollars bills as kitty litter for their purebred, diamond-collared cats. I’m a hacker, Regina. I don’t know how to talk to those people. So, thank you, thank you for pushing me into a business I never wanted any part of. You can’t do this. You can’t just expect things from me. I told you I didn’t want any part of your business. I know I agreed to go meet with you in Storybrooke, but couldn’t you see I was just…” The rapid venting of Emma’s words paused.

“How?” Regina asked softly. She already knew. She knew exactly where Emma’s words would
go. It just felt braver to hear it out loud. She preferred an honest, no-holds-barred strike against her. Words unsaid could soften the heart over time.

“Trying to let you down easy.” Emma didn’t say anything for a long moment, but when she spoke again, she sounded calmer. “Look, I’ll - I’ll give you the three months okay? It’s not like I don’t want your business to get going. Just, after that I’m done, and you have to back off. No more 'Emma, will you do this’ or ‘Emma will you do that'. No more expectations.”

Regina drew in a shaky breath, rubbing at the column of her neck, trying to loosen her tense vocal chords. “Is that what you wanted to tell me? Are you finished?”

“Yeah…”

“Then it’s my turn.”
Happy Thursday everyone. This is your captain speaking.

Turbulence continues in this chapter which is Emma-centric. I am stocking virtual cream-pies behind the virtual bar and if you wish to throw one at her, please feel free to do so. I ask that you not throw one at me because it makes it hard to see my keyboard when writing. Also, I am disguise and hiding. Seriously, I sympathize and appreciate how some of you are feeling about Emma right now. This chapter will provide you more insight but is definitely not meant to excuse anything Emma has done or will do. That being said, you can expect me to slowly turn up the heat on our favorite hacker over the next few chapters.

Thank you so much for all of your support. This little ship of a story is so so much better because of all of you. You're pretty much what keeps this thing in the air, so I appreciate all the kudos and comments.

When Emma got home, she opened Regina’s Christmas gift, which turned out to be a new office chair—a practical gift, and probably an expensive one. The need to thank Regina formed red, raw bumps in her conscience, hives she couldn’t scratch away. She left the chair in its box, unassembled, hoping to keep thoughts of Regina from the forefront of her mind.

Regina called a few days later to check in, and invited Emma to meet her and Henry for pizza before Christmas. Emma let it go to voicemail. After listening to the message, she stared at the phone, a small voice inside her asking if accepting could be harmless. But, no, she stuck to her plan this time.

As a means of defense, she drove downtown and took a walk in the city, leaving her cell phone at home. The attempt at distraction didn’t help. Even as she fell into a brisk walk and tried not to think of anything, she felt like she was claustrophobic and stuck in an elevator. Shame and the desire to talk to Regina dug their forks into her. She refused to let either emotion make a meal of her. When she went home, she bought and downloaded a new game; she played all night and all of the next day.

For days, the feeling of being cut into was a constant. If she called Regina, it would go away, she knew it. Yet she didn’t understand why it was so hard, why it impacted her this much. David and Mary Margaret were family, and when she avoided them her calloused heart shrugged off their attempts to reach out to her.

The second call and then a text came on Christmas day. A simple “Happy Holidays” and a request for Emma to call when she got a chance. Regina sounded cheerful and unworried. Again, it cost the price of another new game to distract herself. She received another call on New Year’s Day. Regina’s voice was different in this message, more hesitant and confused. Her phone chimed with a text not long after.
@EmmaSwan  Marco. Happy New Year Emma.

She debated with herself again. For hours. Wishing someone a Happy New Year wasn’t a big deal, right? she wondered. Part of her compared it to saying “bless you” when someone sneezed. Yet again, she resisted. This time she threw herself into offering the code for her uberscanner to a few manufacturers of free anti-virus software. A couple of guys from one place wanted to talk to her on New Year’s Day. The conversation kept her occupied and engaged, but it felt too familiar. It was the kind of thing she had done after prison, a means of killing time until she found work. Before lying her way into that job at Gek- Help, she dove into coder forums and offered advice and suggestions on scripts in the effort to prevent herself from feeling both hopeless and bored out of her mind.

Police Commissioner Gold called a few days later to set up an actual meeting with her. When they did meet, he offered her a chance to consult on a series of ATM thefts. The case notes she’d receive would be edited, given her history, but she should do the best she could.

“You’re not going to fire me for being an ex-con, are you?” she joked with him during the face-to-face meeting after he’d told her about the case. He just looked at her.

“So obviously working with him was going to be a blast.

“I am offering you a trial period, Emma.” He’d said that already. Twice. “Tomorrow we’ll give you a work area. I expect you to keep all evidence here, and you will not be allowed to have your own computer while in the building. Your cellphone will be held by the desk sergeant.”

“I totally understand. I’m really glad you called me,” Emma said, still trying to be friendly. “My parole officer wants to meet this week to talk about possible jobs, and the last time that happened his big lead was Chick-fil-A. You know, the fast food place?”

“That seems like it could be quite the opportunity for someone getting out of prison,” Gold answered, sounding surprisingly sincere. “It’s fortunate that the state offers that level of support.”

“Right,” Emma said slowly.

“However, we may be able make better use of your skills. You’ll be required to go through a staffing agency, just to keep things above board. They can tell you more, but I believe the salary starts at eight hundred dollars a week.”

It was, Emma knew, a low ball offer—probably about 30 to 40% below the salary of the official cyber-investigators in the department. She was in no position to negotiate.

“Please share the good news of your opportunity with Miss Mills when you speak to her.” He gave a smarmy little smile that made both his eyes squint and curled one side of his mouth, while the other stayed flat. “I’m sure she’ll be pleased. She called me yesterday. She was under the impression we were due to meet before the holidays.”

Regina had called her yesterday too. As usual, Emma let it go to voicemail. This time though, she hadn’t listened to it immediately. It sat in her new message queue even now.

“Right, I’ll be sure to tell her,” she told him.

Emma fought hard to ignore the slithering sensation in her stomach. Regina promised that Gold would give her a chance. She’d checked up on him to ensure it, which meant that she knew Emma lied. Maybe it was for the best. Another layer of thick concrete wall between them to make sure the boundaries stayed in place. Still, she wished Regina didn’t know.
It didn’t matter—it was done.

Emma shook her thoughts away. “When should I start?”

“Well again, you’ll need to go through the agency, but I suspect they’ll want you to start bright and early if you can see them today.” He gave a small shrug, his teeth flashing as he motioned to her with a flourish of his fingers. “I hope you won’t disappoint me, Emma.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Do remember to give my best to Miss Mills.”

She thought back to the message on her phone: from Regina, a message ten seconds long, left on January 4th. Ten seconds. God only knew what Regina had said. Emma couldn’t bring herself to find out. Not this time.

“Right.” She stood and shook his hand, wondering how stupid it was for an ex-con like her to be working this closely with the police. Surely, they’d always be silently judging her. Still, she wanted to give it a try.

Her mind pivoted wildly between nerves about the new job and the new fork of self-contempt now pressing its tines into her.

The meeting in Storybrooke was approaching, which meant a possible confrontation. She’d probably know when that meeting was if she hadn’t also been avoiding her foster parents. Regina, David and Mary Margaret were like this Jenga tower, and contacting one of them would pull out a wooden block, sending this whole attempt at getting back to normal tumbling down.

As if he could tell she was thinking about his mother, a text from Henry made her phone vibrate.

@EmmaSwan Do you know when you David and MM are coming?

@Batmankid Not yet.

@EmmaSwan Are you staying at the B&B? I think Mom was going to ask you to stay with us.

Doubtful, Emma thought. She knew the kid wanted to spend time with her, and she wasn’t sure what she’d do about that when she went to Storybrooke. But that, too, was part of the test.

Henry was the only one who wasn’t included in her complete radio silence. He had sent photos to her phone. Like: Can you believe the size of this frog? He’s the science teacher’s pet. With a picture of said frog included. Emma had to admit, it was a big frog. She answered him mostly in emojis; sometimes she sent him a picture, too.

Such as: This is me with a moose head. Don’t ask.

It was a little lame as communication went, but it was uncomplicated and easy. She wanted to ask him how Regina was doing. She didn’t.

The few times that Henry broached the idea of Emma visiting, she used the excuse of being busy with work. As much as she didn’t like disappointing him, it was necessary, and signified progress toward keeping the promises she’d made to herself.

@Batmankid Think David and MM already have reservations. Need to go. Work.

She sent him a picture of a running Kermit the Frog to soften the blow of her dismissal. He didn’t
text her anything else until later that night when he sent a picture of himself with a chocolate milk mustache.

The staffing company got her paperwork done quickly and started her the next morning at 7:30 a.m. Over the next three weeks, life developed a decent flow. During the day she focused on her work and reviewed whatever printed and deeply redacted papers they gave her. At night, she took on various mini-projects. She found a forum for people who needed help with coding and spent hours on it answering questions.

It wasn’t that different from life before prison, except her coding wasn’t criminal in nature and she couldn’t travel the way she wanted to. Work required things of her but not her heart. She didn’t have to feel much of anything. She didn’t have to depend on anyone. The deeper she pushed herself into the webs of solitude, the more she became cocooned in a silken warmth that didn’t change. If that wasn’t joy—at least it wasn’t pain.

In mid-January Henry started a text conversation by sending her a picture of himself in a Batman mask, creeping up on a distracted Regina. It gave her a pang, but only a blip of one compared to what she might have felt weeks ago. A good sign, in Emma’s opinion.

@BatMankid I forgot to ask. How did the Winter Spectacular Spectacular vid go? I need a link.

No answer came to that, which was weird enough to make her keep the phone close to her for awhile. She listened to Mary Margaret’s message left earlier that day of “Just checking in. Let us know what’s going on with you when you can. We love you,” before deleting it. She still hadn’t called them, though on the first of the year she did at least text that she was “alive and busy”. She didn’t want them to worry.

As she looked at her voicemail queue, the blue dot by Regina’s last message taunted her with its neglected state. She almost always screened her calls, letting her iPhone play secretary, but usually she checked messages immediately. Her crusader side insisted on making sure no one needed her help. With this one message, the survivor part of her took control, telling her the message contained the anger she’d earned from Regina. It warned her that listening might cause her to question herself or even to cave in to the temptation of Regina.

She had a feeling this one message would be the last she’d hear from Regina, at least until she attended the meeting in Storybrooke. The thought of the meeting continued to make her nervous. She didn’t know how Regina would deal with Emma’s silence. She’d seen “ice queen” Regina. More than that, she feared Regina would, in some way, break through all the boundaries she’d carefully been setting up.

In mid-January, August called her. She figured he had news, so she picked up. “I tried. It went about as I thought,” he said in a flat, drained voice. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not what you and Miss Mills hoped for.”

She sighed into her phone. “Are they going to use anything we found?”

“Some of the basics, yes, but they want to start the investigation from scratch, given the uncertainty about the quality of evidence.”

“The uncertainty about the source in other words.”

“Just—they want everything above board, and get evidence that will hold up to lots of scrutiny. They want things airtight. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll be leading the investigation.” It almost did, because at least she trusted August to follow through. “Given the politics lately, I was kind of
worried they would give it to someone else. I told them that the killing of the hard drive was an accident. But they feel—"

“How long do you think it might take?” Emma cut him off. She didn’t want to talk about what she’d done to Peter Pan’s hard drive.

“Depends on our guy, if he has access to a computer and is misbehaving. It could be months. It could be longer.”

August had never lied to her. It was part of what she liked about him. Even when the truth was hard and ugly.

“That sucks,” she muttered under her breath.

“I’m sorry.” They shared an uncomfortable silence. “Did you want me to call Miss Mills or…”

“Yeah.” Emma needed to maintain her distance. They hung up soon after that, with August promising to give updates when he could. “Just focus on letting Regina know,” she told him. “I’m not sure how much more I can help.”

She felt a pinprick of sensation, like a shot—sharp, but over quickly. She should call Regina now, right? She wanted to hear Regina’s voice. She wondered what she could offer, if she could make Regina laugh or relax or let her know it would be okay. Distance or not, boundaries or not, she wanted to somehow offer Regina comfort. She’d just have to be careful to keep it short.

While she decided, she found the courage to listen to that voicemail that was now almost two weeks old.

“Emma, could you look at the marketing proposal I emailed you?” Regina sounded very formal. Emma thought she would hang up right after that, but she didn’t. There was just breathing, and this hanging silence. Finally she said, “Thank you,” and hung up. The hesitation before those last two words chopped at Emma, a chef’s knife wielded far too well.

She hadn’t looked at the email because it felt as threatening as the voicemail had. Listening to the voicemail was emotionally tangling enough for one day. Emma firmly told herself that she had to remain strong. No use sending mixed messages, to herself or anyone else. She’d gotten through the most difficult stage of resisting the urge to contact them. She wouldn’t backtrack now. She went to her computer and spent an hour looking for a new game she could dive deep, deep into.

Emma’s cell phone rang a few hours later. She knew the number, but it surprised her. She debated not answering, of using the moment as another successful test of her resolve. But then she noticed the 10:00 p.m. in the corner of her computer screen, and reminded herself that he’d never tried to just call her before.

“Kid? Everything okay?”

“Emma?” It was Henry’s voice, distorted by background noise. Wind? “Mom said she made you break Peter Pan’s computer, and now it’ll take a long time to find him.”

That made Emma sit up straighter in her desk chair. They were a direct people, these Mills’. More background noise but this time in the distance. A car horn? “Henry, where are you?”

“The wharf.”

She stood up, as if there was something she could do. It was probably 30 degrees outside. It’s a three
hour drive, she reminded herself. “That doesn’t make me happy to hear, kid.”

“She’s a coward, Emma! She’s a coward and this is her fault.” Henry’s words tumbled over one another, furious and uncontrollable. “She’s afraid of my grandmother and she never talks about her. But she’s just always been scared. And I don’t understand how she can be so scared.”

Emma sucked in a breath. “And you told her all that?”

“I wanted to go to the F.B.I. just like you did. She should have listened to us. She’s a coward, and I told her so.”

Emma could imagine Regina’s expression at that moment, the lost longing and the absolute, desolate fear. She clutched her phone more tightly.

“I made her cry.” His breathing became choppy hitches of sound. Emma listened to him swallow several times, trying to find enough air and composure to say more. “She doesn’t cry, but...I made her.”

Emma wasn’t equipped for this, for advising anyone about family matters, especially a boy like Henry on how to deal with his mother.

“Has your mom ever done anything nice for you?”

(Of course, she’s my mom.”

“Now ask me that same question.”

Henry was silent, then his voice turned sullen. “I know what you’ll say. You’re going to say you didn’t have a mom.”

“You’re damn right I will. She isn’t perfect. So what? No one is. Do you know how common it is for people to promise you things—especially people who are supposed to look out for you—and not follow through? At least she’s trying her best.”

The words rang through her, a broken bell with a sound too dull. They made her unexpectedly emotional as she considered Regina and Henry, and herself when she was his age.

“Maybe,” he muttered, clearly not believing it.

“Kid, does your mom know where you are?”

“Kind of.”

“Does that mean no?”

Henry didn’t answer right away. Emma gave him time. “Well, she’s sitting in her car across the street,” he said. “I think Sheriff Graham saw me and called her. I don’t think she knows I know she’s here. She’s trying to, sort of hide, like, sitting low in her car seat.”

Emma let free a relieved laugh, and Henry made a sound like he might be smiling.

“She loves you,” Emma said.

“Yeah.” The word was soft and full of belief.

“I told you about one of my worst days, do you want to hear about one of my good ones?”
“Okay…”

“I ran away from one of my foster homes one night. Kind of like you did tonight.”

“I did not. I just got some air.”

“Yeah well, for me ‘getting air’ wasn’t unusual at all. It was kind of a habit. But this time my social worker called my friend David to ask him if he knew where I was. David didn’t but he decided to drive around looking for me. He found me at the bus station and he took me for ice cream. He told me we could keep eating ice cream till I was ready to go back.” Emma grinned at the memory. “I ate four scoops of mint chocolate chip, my favorite, and got kinda sick. I almost threw up in his car.” Henry made a grossed out noise, and Emma quickly moved on. “The next day David and his wife asked permission to take me to an amusement park a little ways outside Boston. We went a couple of weeks later and it was a really good day. But what matters is that he came looking for me. And that’s something I have never forgotten because no one had ever done that before. I’m not good at a lot of things, but I’m grateful. You need to remember that people like that in your life are rare.” She gripped the phone a little tighter, as if it could somehow convey her point more strongly. “You know what I mean?”

“I think so. Just, since everything happened—since you went back home—I’m...Mom makes me angry a lot more than she used to. She should have let me have a say. She should have included me in things.”

“Okay, I get that.”

“You do?” he asked, surprised.

“Getting Peter Pan behind bars feels like a finish line. One you needed. It sucks when adults make big choices for you without giving you a say.” Emma imagined Regina sitting in the cold, staring out at Henry with needy eyes. “But, has Batman ever made a mistake? Something you thought was really stupid?”

“Yeah. Like I know he shouldn’t kill, but couldn’t he bury Joker underground in concrete? He keeps getting out of Arkham. But Batman just keeps taking him back there.”

“But you’re still a fan, right? So maybe it’s like that? Maybe your mom sometimes has a blindspot when it comes to protecting you.”

She could hear nothing but his breathing for a few moments. Emma wondered if he was thinking about what she’d said. It was also possible he was playing an app on his Iphone. She didn’t want to get her hopes up too high that she’d actually gotten through to him.

“Emma? What if he’s already doing it to someone else? What if they can’t get help like the way you helped us? What if he hurts them by showing pictures like he was going to show of me? What if I was lucky and other kids aren’t?”

The truth was brutal sometimes. Henry wasn’t wrong, but Emma couldn’t let him carry that. Not at thirteen. Not when he was already feeling so lost. “I guess, you appreciate what you have? You know? Maybe you do what you can to help your mom with the business she’s starting. Did she tell you about that?”

“Yeah.” It didn’t sound like it resolved anything in his eyes.

“So, I’ll be visiting with David and Mary Margaret to talk more about how we can help.” She instinctively deflected his expectations. “I have a job so I’m not sure how much I can help, but..”
“Mom said,” he told her, flatly. “You’re all just discussing things.”

“Hey, how’s the Winter Festival Spectacular Spectacular? Did you ever post it?”

He sighed. “I think I procrastinated too long on it. Probably wouldn’t even make sense to upload now.” He paused. “I liked this story about you as a kid better than the other one you told me,” he said, a little more upbeat.

She snorted, leaning against the side of her fridge door, kicking the bottom of the fridge lightly. “You’re going to be okay,” she reassured him.

“Mom update. She just got out of the car. She’s just kind of standing there watching me, but she still doesn’t know I know she’s there. Turns out she’s not so good at sneaking.”

“She’ll never live up to that covert background we gave her.”

“Yeah, that’s kinda too bad. Emma? It’s really cold out. I don’t want her to...I should go.”

He felt betrayed by his mother, Emma thought, but he couldn’t stand the thought of her standing in the cold for too long. Tears tried to form but she rubbed at her eyes to deny them. They diverted to her throat, lodging there, hurting her. They killed her, this mother and son.

“Do you think maybe you could call me in a few days?”

Henry’s words put a mirror in front of her face. It was hard to like what she saw right now. Emma closed her eyes. She couldn’t. She’d worked and fought so hard to keep away from them. “I’ll try. But work is crazy.”

“Okay,” he said, his voice sad and soft. “Night, Emma.”

David and Mary Margaret didn’t give up on trying to reach her the way Regina did, but she was used to pushing them away. It was probably the most damning thing about her.

On the second of February, David called her once and then again a few hours later. On the third call, she finally picked up. David never badgered her that way; something had to be wrong. He sounded agitated when he picked up and asked if they could Skype. She wondered if he would finally lose his temper with her. Finally call her on the carpet and lay down ultimatums.

While she was in prison they wrote her letter after letter. She answered once a month, briefly, to reassure them she was “okay”. Yet, in the last several weeks of her sentence, even though she didn’t really think they’d come, she found herself focusing all of her hope on seeing them. She wanted a hug from David, a kiss on the forehead from Mary Margaret, the smiles on their faces across the breakfast table. She missed taking walks with David and the way they passionately discussed new technology and what it meant for the future. She wondered if Mary Margaret would still stop by her room after Emma went to bed on the pretense of “checking in”. Emma knew, from the first night Mary Margaret did it, that it was the closest to tucking her in that Mary Margaret thought she could get away with.

She doubted she would get any of it. As usual, they surprised her.

The moment she walked out of the gate, they both greeted her with a hug and a kiss. They’d thought
ahead and rented a house in Portland. She stayed with them, they insisted on it. That evening, they all had dinner together—hamburgers and fries.

The next morning they made breakfast, her foster mother in charge of pancakes and Emma in charge of bacon and toast. David made a ridiculous amount of eggs and Mary Margaret proudly presented “real maple syrup from Vermont.”

David walked with her and they discussed the future of 3-D printing, David talking animatedly with his hands. For that entire week, Mary Margaret visited her every night at around eleven, just to see how Emma was doing.

It was too much.

Most kids dreamed of being astronauts or firefighters. Her own abandoned wish was a family. It cost her too much, and she stopped being able to afford it. After they went back home, she avoided them for ten days. They each left her one message apiece. When she finally reached out to them again, they didn’t mention the lapse in time. They never did.

David’s image appearing on her screen ripped her mind from the past. He looked grim, his eyes holding none of their usual good humor, his lips pressed in a line.

"Emma, did you know that you’re a big part of Regina's marketing strategy for Cybersheriff? Did you actually agree to be part of this?"

She downplayed things, not entirely sure yet what he was talking about. "I agreed to go with you all and listen to her proposal."

David turned partially from the screen, shaking his head a few times. He glanced back at Mary Margaret, who sat behind him on the bed reading a book. It was upside down, Emma noted. "Emma, we’re supposed to meet with her in a week."

“Oh.”

“But you haven’t looked at the business or marketing proposal,” he pressed. “She sent it weeks ago.”

“Not yet. Work’s kept me pretty busy.” Off their surprised look, she continued. “I’m working with the Portland Police Department. Consulting on computer crimes.”

Her foster parents exchanged yet another look, then David said, “Well that...that sounds like a great opportunity.”

She knew it had to hurt them, being kept in the dark about her life. It couldn’t be helped.

Mary Margaret set the book down on her nightstand. “Sounds like it’s good we were finally able to get ahold of you.” The occasional passive-aggressive barb was the only mention they ever made of her absences. “Since you’re coming to Storybrooke too, maybe we can all drive up together? Maybe even go to dinner the night before,” she suggested.

Emma saw it for what it was. Penance. They didn’t confront her over disappearing on them, but they made sure to find ways to spend as much time with her as they could when there was opportunity. She could deal with that. “I can do dinner.”

“I have to be honest, I’m looking forward to seeing Storybrooke,” David said. “I haven’t been to a small town since I was a kid. The town I grew up in only had about sixteen hundred people and—”
“And the main street was three blocks and two stoplights,” Emma finished, chuckling, having heard this a few times before.

She grinned at Mary Margaret and they said together, “And the town post office was originally established in 1932.” Mary Margaret took her husband’s mug, sipping from it.

David mock-glared at both of them. “Let’s get back to why I called. The proposal.”

Just a few days ago, when Emma had tried to open the email, her fingers froze on the mouse. Her temple throbbed, and she imagined all of the anger Regina probably felt, every bit of it justified.

“I was concerned because I know how you feel about—um—making sure your life has a certain balance. Emma, why don’t you take a look and give us a call back?” David leaned back in his chair, drinking again. “We can just go slow with this. We’ll meet with her, go through the paperwork, and then all three of us can talk things out.” David’s teeth flashed in a grin. “I admit though, if it does work out—I’m not saying it will—but if it does, it would be fun to work together again.” He seemed to be nervous, the flow of his words uneven. He tried so hard, even now, not to make her feel forced into anything.

Emma ended the call with them a few minutes later and opened her web browser. The email from Regina only contained three words.

*Emma - Please review.*

All of her anticipation of a wordy smackdown drained, leaving an unpleasant emptiness. The place her fear so recently vacated hurt a little, like a sharp hunger pang. She ignored it and downloaded the attachment. She began to read. There were two proposals in the document, each written efficiently and summed up in a page. Both ended with a visual timeline. She clenched her teeth and printed them out, staring at the two pages hard. Inside, she shook, a vibrating tuner struck. Her palms became icy.

*Fuck Regina Mills*, Emma thought over and over. *Fuck her.*

She grabbed her phone like her apartment was on fire and it was the only water source, finding Regina in her contacts. She was so unsteady it took three tries to punch the right icon with her finger to dial her phone number.

Voicemail.

Damn it. Voicemail.

It was 8 o’clock on a weeknight. Where the hell was she?

“Regina,” she gritted. “This is Emma. I need you to call me as soon as you get this.” She started to pace, furious, and as she waited she found herself considering a drive to Storybrooke.

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When Regina called back, Emma ranted at her, not able to help herself. The cosmic joke of it, after all she’d done to be free, was that these pages from Regina threatened to take her back to square one. She couldn’t let it happen. She’d been afraid of the test of seeing Regina, even with the distance she had forged. The possibility of continued contact, looming over their next meeting, was a sword of Damocles. It gave that part of her that still missed Regina, even now, too much hope.

She needed to make Regina back the fuck up. It was only after she spoke that she realized her words
were cruel. She tried to walk them back a little by offering her help with Cybersheriff anyway, but it sounded lame even to her ears.

“Then it’s my turn.” Regina’s voice grew icy and far, far too calm. “I can’t believe I ever thought you were the answer to….anything.” Her voice deepened, the next dark words curling around her tongue as if she was savoring them. A stranger may have thought Regina sounded amused, but her next words were delivered too precisely for that emotion to be true. “I can’t believe I let you near my son. And most of all, I can’t believe I told myself you were different. You’re like everyone else. You take what you need, then move on. Except, in this case what you needed was to feel like a hero, so you could overcome, even for a little while, the mess you’ve made of your life. In the end, you run. That’s who you are.”

Emma found the description too accurate, and any words she might have used to defend herself shattered on her tongue. David and Mary Margaret loved her, but, she realized at that moment, they’d never told her the truth. They treated her with kid gloves, a cracked thing they were afraid would break once and for all.

“I tried to tell you, Regina,” she said weakly, as if that in any way redeemed her. It didn’t. She knew better. She unlocked and opened her front door, the winter air bolstering her. She didn’t even have a jacket on, and the sensation of her skin prickling against the cold gave her a respite from the phone call for a moment.

“Oh no, you had your say,” Regina snarled. “Now, I have the floor. The only reason it was so important to me to try to get you involved in Cybersheriff was because I thought you were my friend. I trusted you and I wanted you to have a chance to see yourself the way I….” She broke off. “You think I manipulated you because I sent the proposals to the Nolans?” A dark little chuckle filled the line. “No, I simple acted on the delusion that I could trust that you meant what you said. I misjudged you, Emma, and I promise you that you won’t have to worry about any expectations from me, or my son, ever again.”

Emma stepped back into her apartment, closing the door and leaning back against it. She tried to find a way to salvage….something. “Look, I’m not going to let this thing with you and me hurt Henry.”

“Yes, I’m sure the occasional texts you send him are a lot of work. If it was practical to stop you from coming to Storybrooke, I would, but if you don’t come, your foster parents will undoubtedly have a lot of questions. I don’t think either of us want that. Therefore, after today, we will act professionally toward one another. Civil. And you will not spend time with my son unless I am there. Not that I expect that to be a problem. After all, it hasn’t been so far.”

Part of Emma wanted to argue that maybe they could find middle ground between strangers and friends. That things didn’t have to be one extreme or the other. Except, Emma had known this might happen. Her choices caused this. She couldn’t disavow that, she wasn’t quite that dishonest with herself.

“Don’t make me out to be the bad guy here. You put me in a bad spot. The other day Henry called me and I tried to help. I told you on the boat who I am. But I haven’t let him down.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Emma.” Her voice now jeered at her. “But perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I was only hearing what I wished to. I won’t be so naive again in the future.”

“Look, I’m still willing to help you, okay? For a little while.” The offer didn’t make Emma feel noble or good in any way. It was just a way to assuage her own guilt. “I don’t think your seminar idea will work. I think I’m the wrong person for it, but I’m willing to do what I can for three months. I can make that deal as long as after that...”
“You’ve made yourself quite clear. Let me be equally as clear. I would sooner choose your friend August as an employee than you, but I’ve always been quite practical when it comes to how I conduct business. So, you may work two seconds or the three months.” Her voice simmered with cold. “I will use your services for whatever short period you offer them. No sense looking a gift horse in the mouth. As for the presentation, you don’t need to be polished. You need to be authentic, assuming you can handle that. That being said, you’re free to chose not to do them. I told you—no more expectations. Was there anything else you wished to discuss with me?”

Emma looked at the still-packed and unassembled office chair. “No...I’ll see you in a week.”

Regina said nothing else, and the call ended with a firm click.
Happy Thursday everyone, this is your captain speaking. So, you might be wondering if we’re finally done flying over Angst Town and continuing on our way to Swanqueen Land. Um. Well, you see….

***deploying distraction techniques***

-Did I mention I am almost done with the trinket I am making for you all?
-Also, have I mentioned that I’m on twitter? Mariacomet, that’s me.
-David and Mary Margaret are in this chapter. And meetings! We doesn’t love a good meeting?
-Have you seen Wynonna Earp lately?

***Puts on a Hillary Clinton mask, secure that it is an impenetrable disguise***

In all seriousness, keep hanging on with me, we’ll get through this. Thank you for all of your continued generosity with your feedback. Your support makes me truly feel I am part of a community.

On a last note, there’s this writing contest I am thinking of entering. It’s for Fan Fiction. I am super intimidated about it. There’s a LOT of great Fanfic writers out there. And no, I am not saying that so you tell me how awesome I am (though feel free). It’s just bouncing in my head and I wanted to share. I may also need to ask your help at some point. If I don’t chicken out.

David insisted on renting a car for the drive to Storybrooke, casting doubt that Emma’s Bug could comfortably carry all three of them, plus their luggage. Emma took the second shift of driving, managing to maintain convenient amnesia about Regina until an hour outside Storybrooke. At that point, she started fidgeting with the radio dial, and developed a painful tension between her shoulder blades. Surely, after everything that happened, ice queen Regina would show up today in her full, icy-caped glory. When Emma began to play with the temperature gauges, David and Mary Margaret gave each other those long looks that meant they were confused, but also trying to give her privacy.

With the exception of David and Mary Margaret, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d had to face someone after one of her disappearing acts. Before prison, moving frequently gave her camouflage after she made vague “sure, I’ll call you when I get settled” promises to friendly acquaintances. She knew full well that she paid a price by not letting anyone get close to her. Of course she missed things—parties, birthdays and holidays, celebrating big moments in life, not that she had many of those. She also dodged the kind of pain that would put pressure on the many fractures inside her. The problem was that she had too many cracks, perhaps because of faulty
design, and she’d already weathered too much for her poor construction. She barely functioned, and even that could fail if she let it, if her Pertential score fell so low she could never recover.

*Pay a little now, or a pay a lot later* was the guidance she gave herself.

As they pulled onto Main St., David pushed forward excitedly from the back seat, an elbow resting on either side of the two front seats, eyes darting around trying to take in everything. “See, the main street where I grew up wasn’t much bigger than this. We should try that diner when we get a chance. Probably close to home cooking there. Been a long time since I had a home cooked—”

”Hey!” Mary Margaret exclaimed. “I cook for you.”

”When you leave the take-out containers in the kitchen garbage, it makes them easy to find.”

Emma pulled into a side street near the main drag. Usually David and Mary Margaret's banter would have been soothing. But today, her eyes were trained on what she could see of the Roman columns and pale yellow siding of the town hall. She found a parking space and slotted her car between the lines.

Then she decided it was over too far to the left. And parked again.

Over the next four minutes, Emma completed the most thorough parking job she had ever done in the entirety of her life, not stopping until she was exactly in the center of the space. Likewise, her movements dragged in slow motion as she undid her seatbelt and gathered her backpack from the trunk. Snow started to say something a few times, but David did that communicating without talking thing, and she let it be. The trio walked toward Granny’s Bed and Breakfast. They were supposed to settle in and then meet up with Regina after lunch, so they had a few hours.

Her foster parents—well, David—was puppy-like with excitement to look around Main Street. He couldn’t get the keys to his room fast enough. Emma declined the invitation to explore, truding toward her room and laying on her bed. She accepted that there would be fallout from what happened between her and Regina. She expected Regina to assail her with cutting barbs the entire day. Maybe she would be subtle about it, given the presence of David and Mary Margaret, but either way, it was just part of the price. Nothing was free. Not even freedom, and especially not self-preservation.

In what felt like about fifteen minutes, Snow and Charming were knocking on her door to tell her it
was time to go. Emma dawdled, starting out several feet behind them and increasing the distance to a
good fifteen feet by the time they reached city hall. When they arrived, Belle greeted them and led
them to a conference room, knocking on the door to announce their presence.

As Emma entered the room, she braced herself, not sure if Regina would be playing the role of lady
or tiger.

Apparently neither.

Regina ignored her, stepping toward David and Mary Margaret and shaking both their hands in turn.
She greeted them with warmth, but it was practiced warmth. Despite her friendly, welcoming words,
her eyes were cool and assessing. Emma watched her uncertainly. She set her feet apart, needing to
feel solid and balanced—prepared—when Regina moved around the Nolans and came to stand in
front of her. Regina’s smile didn’t change a bit as she told Emma it was good to see her. There was
no sign of connection in her gaze; it was as if they'd never met before. The emptiness between them
struck her stomach hard. Regina invited them to sit down, and it took Emma a moment to recover
enough to do so.

Regina wore a cobalt blue suit, with white piping around the edges of the collar of her jacket. Under
it was a silken white button up with pearl buttons that matched her earrings. Regina’s beauty felt too
bright. Emma moved toward the back of the room, choosing to take a chair as far away from Regina
as she could.

*Pay a little now, or pay a lot later,* she reminded herself.

The conference room contained an oval table surrounded by eight chairs, with historical photos of
Storybrooke dotting the walls. The only other furniture, a five foot credenza with three cabinets,
offered a coffee maker, a coffee caddy and a watercooler. Emma was glad that they weren’t in close
quarters; she didn’t even want to think about what that would be like. Mary Margaret pinned Emma
with a long, thoughtful gaze then focused on Regina as she began her presentation.

“Unless anyone has any objections,” Regina said pleasantly, still on her feet, a large flipchart to one
side of her. “I would like to go over the proposal at a high level, then we can drill down into any
details you wish to discuss further.”

“Well, the most controversial part of this seems to be the marketing plan,” David noted. “Maybe we
should discuss that before we go too much further.”
“Oh good, a light topic,” Emma said. The joke weighed too much for the humor she intended, instead tilting toward sarcasm. Regina didn’t look her way, using one hand to smooth out the side of her skirt as she calmly gave David her attention.

“You say here that the Nolan Securities website needs to be significantly revised?” David tapped the document in front of him. “Emma and I put a lot of work into that site. I mean, did you play the game on the home page? It’s a really good game.”

“I did not,” Regina replied. “Henry played the game. I will say he enjoyed it.” Her next words sounded playful but had a mild edge. “I will not say that it’s effective marketing.”

“But we get a lot of positive feedback from that game,” David said with a frown.

“I am not saying it lacks creativity,” Regina told him, meeting his eyes. “However, we need to assess if it gets you sales. Beyond that, you have no branding on it, and the game involves shooting spaceships—”

“Aliens,” he corrected, still looking confused.

“Aliens,” she repeated. “Which has nothing to do with your business.” Regina took a deep breath, the professional mask softening slightly, her dark eyes sympathetic. “I know some of this may be hard to hear. You are trying to attract wealthy clients, and for that, they must take you seriously. The landing page is prime real estate. We need to use it to show that Nolan Securities is reputable, and capture the attention of any would-be customers. The game, as it is, is more of a distraction than an asset.”

David looked like a man who had just been fired from his own company.

“What about if we changed the game? Made it more, um, attractive or whatever,” Emma asked. She was tempted to look at Regina, but the lack of recognition in Regina’s eyes slammed into her chest every time she did. She spared herself and looked between her foster parents.

“I would still suggest that we leave it off the main page. However, we could use social media to advertise it and see what the response is.” Regina gave a nod, again pulling at one side of her skirt to adjust it then moving to sit. “We do need to make sure that it is clearly branded.”
Emma turned fully toward David. “We could come up with something more cybery-security, right?”

He pursed his lips, confusion becoming interest. “Maybe it can shoot incoming viruses.”

“Maybe you’re the police trying to figure out how a hacker committed a crime,” Emma said. Focusing on it allowed her to breathe unencumbered air. She forgot about Regina for just a moment. “It could be like a puzzle game. We’d let the player collect pieces.”

“Yeah.” David pulled a pen from a holder in the center of the table. “Let me get that down.”

“Um, maybe we could talk about that later,” Mary Margaret said, gently bringing them back to task.

David redirected his attention to Regina, his expression apologetic. He mouthed we’ll talk to Emma who couldn’t help but snort in amusement. She glanced toward Regina, wondering if maybe just a small tick of mirth had cracked her professional exterior.

Nope.

That fucking island she used to imagine Regina on was back. Only this time, the island was a dot on the horizon, farther away than it had ever been. When she called after seeing the marketing plan, she’d felt desperate to rail at Regina. To chase her off once and for all. She hadn’t meant to say quite as much as she did. She had loosened the faucet too fast, tightened it again too slowly. She had only needed enough water to cover the bridges, but she’d washed them entirely.

“Regarding marketing, I took the liberty,” Regina continued, and set a few pieces of paper backed by cardboard on the table. “To have some possible new logos drawn up for you.”

Emma had to admit that they were all sharp. She especially liked the one with a blue padlock that had lines extending from the keyhole to the words “Nolan Securities”.

“I’m a little confused,” David said after a moment. “I know that we’ll be making Nolan Securities more profitable to fund the new arm of the company, but...do we really need all these changes?”
Regina’s tone was matter-of-fact. “You sent me your books, which was greatly appreciated. As it stands, you are in the green approximately one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars a year. To fund a philanthropic arm, we will need to double what you are bringing in.”

David’s mouth hung open and he started to form words several times before getting out, “Double?”

“At least. The success of Cybersheriff is directly tied to that of Nolan Securities. If we set this up properly, get you the right exposure to the right people, I believe we could triple your current income in a year. It means rebranding, cold contacts and direct marketing. This is also predicated on the creation of two new positions for Cybersheriff after Emma’s departure. Assuming she still wishes to move forward.” Regina fixed that neutral gaze on Emma, awaiting disagreement.

Emma looked up from the papers and narrowed her eyes. She shook her head to herself, wishing she could, for three seconds, see anything but professional Regina. They eyed each other—two knights staring one another down, as their horses brought them closer and closer to a moment of impact.

“Yeah, oddly, my mind hasn’t changed in the four days since we talked about this.” The gruff, snapping words spilled from her unintentionally.

The room suddenly became stifling and uncomfortable. David tapped the side of her knee, trying to get her attention, a question in his eyes. Mary Margaret frowned, worry and a hint of scolding at Emma’s rudeness marking her small features.

Regina stiffened and she lifted her chin, eyes narrowing, then like a match getting blown out, she recovered. “Well, there is no obligation. Let me know if, at any point, you wish to reconsider.”

“Maybe it would be a good idea,” David had been lounging back in his chair but now he sat forward. “To discuss what exactly it is that you want Emma to do.” A flag of suspicion raised and flew high over his head, not that it had ever been fully lowered. David mistrusted Regina, but more importantly, Emma’s behavior today had been odd enough to pull the lever on his protective mode.

Mary Margaret softened her husband’s words by adding, “We’ve read through your proposal, but maybe we could just review the highlights?”

“How is tripling our income even possible?” David asked, still sounding a little bearish.
“If you would look at the draft of the marketing timeline?” Regina waited for them to have the document in hand. Emma didn’t move but Regina ignored it. “Emma’s story, and the press around her original arrest, has significant value to the business. She will present three seminars. One in New York, one in Chicago, and the final one in L.A. I will use my old rolodex to help you find businessmen and women who are one-percenters. We will invite them and attempt to scare them into using your services. Emma’s story should be the perfect instrument for that.” She pushed back her chair to stand.

This seemed to be in David’s wheelhouse, because he said, “Like *Scared Straight*. And you’re okay with this, Emma?”

Shit, she sighed to herself. David’s radar was still pinging and it could screw everything up, which, despite everything, Emma didn’t want for Regina.

“Regina’s idea is good. I’m fine with doing what I can to help you all get started.” Out of the corner of her eye, she tracked Regina’s movements. Regina moved towards the credenza, scooted past the back of Emma’s chair, then poured a glass of water from the watercooler. Emma could feel Regina behind her and she suspected if she rotated her chair, they might touch. Instead she rolled her chair further away, placing it off center, her fingers wrapping around the edge of the table.

“As long as everyone knows I can’t help more than a few months. And...” Emma paused, waiting—insisting—that Regina meet her eyes. “I’m just not sure I can pull it off. I’ve never done any public speaking. I’m pretty sure I’ll get nervous and start dropping F-bombs.” She needed Regina to know she wanted to help. Her words were just an honest concern.

Regina drew the fabric at her hip into a pinch and adjusted her skirt before smoothing it into place. “I need to make arrangements for the first seminar,” she said, her eyes on David and Mary Margaret. “That will give us a month to decide.”

“But if Emma’s not certain she wants to, maybe we should go with the other marketing strategy you came up with,” Mary Margaret reasoned.

“Whoa. I never said I didn’t want to. I just get the feeling I might be terrible at it. Like, nightmarishly terrible.” David started to say something but Emma rushed on. “But I get what her vision is.”

“I can help with the presentation,” Regina said, still holding her glass and walking primly back to the
front of the room before sitting at the head of the table. “I have a great deal of experience presenting
to CEOs, entrepreneurs, the type of people we need as clients in order to grow Nolan Securities. If
Emma can speak, even briefly, it will jumpstart everything we need. I am willing to finance every
aspect of these seminars myself. I am also willing to hire a marketing agency, which I will oversee, if
you wish.”

David gave a thoughtful hum and began looking at the contract Regina had offered each of them at
the beginning of the meeting. “This says we need to hire a business accountant—which you’ll pay
for for a year—and that we give you the title of Director of Marketing for Cybersheriff, which will
be part-time?”

“I am investing in CyberSheriff. You’ll notice that, beyond the seminars, I am offering to cover the
first six months of operations including equipment. I would like to stay involved on a day-to-day
basis.”

“But the business accountant will completely be our choice?” David asked, quietly but directly. “It
takes time to build trust, and I don’t want to pretend we’re not aware of your past.”

Regina’s cheeks flushed. She rearranged her fingers in her lap. “I-I would expect nothing less than to
have to earn your trust. I admit your scepticism, as embarrassing as it is, is deserved. Cybersheriff can
help a lot of people.” David nodded at that. ”I hope that in time you’ll see my passion to make it
succeed, without agenda or desire for personal gain. We can add whatever safeguards you think are
appropriate, but I hope you’ll consider giving me a chance.”

“Some people like to judge others, and by doing that they get to play the good guy and make
someone else the bad guy. They think that’s the same thing as being good.” Mary Margaret said
kindly. “But ‘good’ people focus more on understanding than judging. They know one of the best
things this world offers is the possibility of grace. No matter what we’ve done.”

David watched his wife with glowing eyes, as if he’d always loved her and also fallen in love with
her again in that moment. Emma wished she’d been the one to give Regina those words, or even had
the right to.

“Look,” David said, and Emma knew that he was about to try and smooth the tension in the room.
“When Mary Margaret and I decided to go into business for ourselves, I didn’t want to feel like I was
working a nine-to-five job anymore. All this stuff with contracts, titles, and a business model is
something I have to adjust to again. I get that it makes sense and it’s organized.” His grin rose. “I was
just beginning to wonder if you’d want us to put the word General in your title somewhere.”
“Not General,” Mary Margaret tossed out. “Maybe Commander.”

That coaxed a laugh from Regina. Her real one, low, a little husky, rising to the surface in a small series of sounds. For just a second, the Regina who had no walls stood in the room. Only Emma hadn’t caused it, her parents had.

David gestured to the table. “I think I just need to go over the paperwork again on my own. And all of us probably need to get used to one another.”

Regina’s shoulders relaxed and she gave a quiet nod. “I realize I am thorough. My style is to plan for every likely possibility. You can trust that I only want to support your company, not micromanage it.”

The next few hours went by smoothly. With the marketing topic out of the way, Regina started her abandoned flip chart presentation, which mainly focused on things like vision statements, goals and words like “cross-function.”

Just after four, Regina said, “We seem to have reached a natural stopping point. I was hoping you might come to my house this evening for dinner. If you’re up to it?”

Emma didn’t reach into her bucket of blasé excuses quickly enough. She could see it, all of them sitting at Regina’s dining room table, exchanging pleasant small talk over a home-cooked meal. Yet her presence would be an attempt to complete a puzzle by using a random piece from another puzzle. It wouldn’t— couldn’t— fit.

David’s smile grew into place once more, toothy and enthusiastic. Informal was a better speed for him than hyper-organized. “Can we bring anything?”

“No, please, this is my treat.”

Snow’s eyes were trying to peel away her layers, so she could see how Emma was reacting to the invitation. Emma tried to ask her for help with a look, but Snow didn’t know what Emma wanted her to do, tilting her head and raising her brows high in question. Shit, Emma thought, and felt a pinpoint of pain start at her temple as anxiety clawed its way up her body.
“Would you mind giving us a brief tour of Storybrooke tomorrow?” David asked. “We’ve been in Boston for years now, but I grew up in a town just like this. And, since you are getting dinner, breakfast is on us.”

Regina agreed to play tour guide, and they decided to meet up at Regina’s house at 7:00 p.m. for dinner.

The Nolans and Emma headed out the front doors of city hall, but after a few feet, Emma found herself looking back over her shoulder. She told David and Mary Margaret to go on ahead as she strode back towards the building. Belle, looking curious as to who would be coming through the doors at this hour, met Emma inside, pointing her to an open door with “Mayor” stenciled in big black letters.

Emma rapped on the doorframe and ducked inside. “Hey.”

Regina slowly put down the pen she had been holding and regarded her quietly, without dropping her professional demeanor. “Was there something you needed?”

Emma wanted to come up with something ludicrous that would give Regina no choice but to laugh. Then maybe, just for a second, she would see the Regina who wasn’t acting like a virtual stranger. Nothing funny came to mind. “So, that meeting could have gone worse, right?” Regina watched her dispassionately, perhaps still awaiting the answer to her question. Emma tried again. “How’s Henry doing? Is he happy we’re here talking about Cybersheriff?”

“Reasonably so.”

“How’s his Youtube channel?”

“I’m sure when you have a moment, you can visit it.”

“Sorry if David was a little hard on you at first. He’s usually really easy-going.”

“It’s fine.”
Emma gave a tired sigh. “Come on Regina. What the hell.”

“I’m sorry?”

Emma moved to stand directly before Regina’s desk, leaning on her knuckles and bending so she could meet Regina’s eyes. “You’re not just being ‘civil’. You’re being RoboRegina 2017.”

Regina remained unfazed. “We’re business associates. This is how I conduct business.”

Emma fought the urge to shake her, pushing off Regina’s desk in a fast, frustrated movement. “We have to work together for three months. Can you at least talk to me in more than five-word sentences?”

“Very well. Henry hasn’t posted a video on his channel since before everything happened. Having lost that outlet for his shyness, he’s been reading more. He is happy we are meeting, but right now Cybersheriff seems too vague to actually believe in. The meeting today went well, though I am still clearly capable of being surprised by people’s innate distrust of my motives. Not that I entirely blame anyone.” She waited a moment for Emma to process everything she had just said. “Anything else?”

Emma set her hands on her hips and sighed. Now, alone with “Civil Land Regina,” she couldn’t say what she’d hoped for when she decided to come back for a private conversation. “I...about dinner. You know I have a thing about—I’m not good at things like that.”

“So you aren’t coming?”

Fuck, that was brutal. Regina had taken out a bow and quiver and was using her for target practice at this point. “I just didn’t want you to think it’s because things are awkward with us. I just have this thing.”

Regina’s professional veneer dropped away, and her smile became a half-sneer, nose lifting and wrinkling as if she smelled something bad. “Oh, I didn’t have any expectations of you, Emma. Thank you for letting me know. I’ll send leftovers with your parents. Have a good evening,” Regina told her in a clear dismissal.

Not knowing what else to say, Emma left without a word. Inside, her Pertential score trembled but
didn’t move. She could be grateful for that anyway; the price she was paying was having the intended outcome. Yet she wanted to hit something, or get in her car, tires peeling out as she sped from town. She remembered, without meaning to, the Regina who jumped on a mattress in a hotel room. It stopped her movement. A fire started in her chest, spreading its pain slowly, melting and consuming. Before Christmas, Regina had offered her an informal dinner because that Regina seemed to know her, and was willing to work with her idiosyncrasies. Emma had blown her off.

So, fine. Her plan had, in the end, gone perfectly, even if she pushed Regina away harder than she’d expected to. Her payment to keep her life the same was to do her time in Cybersheriff. After that, she could keep moving...and keep moving.

And moving.

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Regina took off her apron, now that dinner preparation was in its final stages. Henry had voluntarily set the table the moment she started making it. It helped that the main dish this evening was a pizza pasta casserole, which Henry had been a big fan of for years. Over time, she added vegetables to make it healthier than regular pizza, but he had never commented on that. She always slightly burned the corners of the dish, because that was his favorite part. One of the things she loved most in the world was that she knew little things about him that no one else did.

When she told him that Emma wouldn’t be coming because “she had an unexpected case” she was working on, he looked thoughtful.

The message about dinner matched others she had been giving him. “Henry,” she told him days ago. “Just remember that Emma might not be able to see you that much while she is here. We’ll be in meetings a lot of the time.”

She hadn’t told him that she had insisted Emma stay away. Or that she had decided letting him spend time alone with Emma, allowing them to further bond, wouldn’t be permissible. If they saw one another, Regina would be with them to ensure their time together was limited. She had no intention of letting her son be set up for the same fall she had taken.

Attempt to protect him or not, she braced herself for his anger or petulance. His moodiness still came in flash floods on a regular basis. Yet he hadn’t reacted at all. Even now, post-“Emma has a case” announcement, his expression contained only understanding.
“Emma and I haven’t been texting very much for awhile now,” he admitted slowly.

She quickly turned in his direction. “You didn’t tell me.” She kept her eyes on him, but apparently that was all he was going to say on that topic.

“It’ll be cool to meet the Nolans.”

“You do remember that you aren’t supposed to know what I told you about them.” Regina had accidentally let it slip at some point during the holidays that they had been Emma’s foster parents. Henry was surprised, and she mentally blamed it on Emma for being so secretive, before giving him strict instructions never to mention it.

“If I say anything you’ll make me go to summer school till I turn eighteen.”

“Exactly.”

“Did you like them?”

“We’re all still getting used to one another but….yes. Overall, I did.”

She had made a plan for today. The most hideous person she had ever been forced to do business with was a political lobbyist who laughed far too loudly, had breath that reminded her of sewage, and had eyes that continuously wandered over her body. She had needed his help. It got to the point that, to keep her temper around him, she would pinch a spot on her hip whenever she felt she was losing control.

She remembered the trick in preparation for seeing Emma again. She knew she could be detached with Emma, but she had to be careful because the Nolans would also be present. Her best solution was to act as though they were merely business acquaintances.

Regina had discovered a volume control for her professionalism when she was just out of college. After gaining a degree, her business-norm became the highest setting, blocking out most personal interaction and emotion. She found, in time, that it was more effective to keep the dial between six
and eight as opposed to ten. Charm could be both hook and bait, and business most certainly could be fishing. She learned to find, not only what drove people, but why it drove them, then she engaged in a subtle form of seduction until she gained whatever she wanted. Usually money, though not always.

She recognized how mercenary it was, but she didn’t consider that a bad thing. She told herself it was necessary. Until the avarice of reporters and her mother’s desertion forced her to rethink everything. As mayor, she tried to keep her setting at exactly 4.5. She wanted to be authentic and approachable enough, without inviting deeper connection. It gave all of her conversations a consistency she valued.

She felt rather pleased with her conduct today. It had exhausted her, but she kept her composure. With the Nolans, seeing that her formality wasn't working, she dropped some of her defenses. They responded in kind. It was a good sign. Nothing was certain yet, but Emma was right about it going better than it could have.

"Did you and Emma have a chance to talk," Henry asked, interrupting her thoughts. He tried to sound casual, but she could tell he was intent on mining for information.

They had, and Regina had pinched her hip through the entire conversation. She cradled her head after Emma left, then dove into work for the next ten minutes, denying the tears in her eyes.

“We did. That went fine too. You know, Henry, I wish—” She broke off before completing the thought that she had wanted, for once, to follow his advice about seeking out friendship. She had tried. Telling him wasn’t practical; it wasn’t his job to soothe her. “I wish Emma didn’t live so far away.”

Henry rose, pulled toward her by the hurt he sensed in her, his arms squeezing her around the waist. “Me too,” he said. When she looked down at him, his eyes were large and round with sadness. She didn’t want that. She lifted his chin in her fingertips and gave him a soft smile, and her son, brave and beautiful, smiled back because he knew she needed him too.

A while later, Regina took the casserole from the oven, then went upstairs to change and touch up her makeup. She had just finished when she heard the doorbell. She checked the clock—they were fifteen minutes early. She barely had a chance to leave her bathroom when she heard the loud pounding of her son charging down the stairs.

“I got it!”
Regina looked heavenwards without real annoyance and followed him down at a much calmer pace.

Henry had flung the door open and Mary Margaret stood there, the kind of brown paper bag that usually contained alcohol in her hand.

“Hey, you must be Henry,” she greeted him.

“You’re Snow White.”

Mary Margaret tilted her head and gave him a side-eyed look. “Someone’s been telling stories.” She looked up the stairs toward Regina, and held up the paper bag. “Hi Regina. Sorry, couldn’t resist at least bringing wine. Emma is...”

Mary Margaret had the apologetic look of someone about to offer an excuse. “I know, I already told Henry she had to work.” Regina said quickly, trying to align for Henry the different reasons to explain where Emma was.

Mary Margaret was smart enough to nod, and for that Regina felt terribly grateful.

Mary Margaret wore a white flowing top, with an abstract flower etched in gold thread at the center. On her left arm she wore about eight bracelets with completely different designs. Turquoise and silver earrings that made no attempt to match any of her other jewelry dangled from her ears. Her light-weight pants had patches of different types of fabric all sewn together. The lack of rhyme or reason to the outfit made something inside Regina twitch. She recalled Mary Margaret wearing a tie-dyed shirt in one of their Skype conversations; perhaps the small screen masked the incongruity of Mary Margaret’s clothes.

David, in a polo shirt and jeans, stood just behind her and offered Henry a handshake.

He proved to be excellent at making dinner conversation flow easily, now that his distrust seemed to be slowly fading. He asked about the town, then told them how he ended up in cyber-security and how he and Mary Margaret had met in college.

“Love at first sight,” he said.
“He wore ties to classes. Ties. I hated him.”

Henry didn’t join in the way he usually might have, but he showed interest, listening closely, his features reacting. At a lull in the conversation, he asked, ”Did Emma spend the holidays with you?”

The question barged into the room, halting the light conversation. All three adults at the table took a moment to recover.

Mary Margaret rallied first. “Emma’s always been funny about the holidays. And—and she has a new job.” She looked like she might want to say more but David laid his hand over hers, clearing his throat a little.

“Always?” Henry pressed.

“Do you know anything about her childhood?” David asked gently. Henry nodded. “The holidays are a very hard time for her.”

“But you’re her family.”

Again, Mary Margaret started to say something but David gave her a wide-eyed beseeching look. “Sometimes that means trying to understand and being patient. And she’s an adult. She has her life to lead. You know, my parents and I don’t get along very well. I call, but I don’t visit them over the holidays either.”

Henry looked at his mother with soft eyes, and Regina wanted to reach out to him, but her sense of propriety told her it would be better to steer back to less intense waters.

But he touched her wrist to get her attention, features earnest and stubborn. “No matter what happens, I’ll always come home.” Her boy, looking toward the horizon, trying to see the man he might become.

To hell with propriety, she thought as she rose and kissed the top of his head. She cupped his face briefly afterwards, wanting to remember the fiery, loving way he was looking at her.
When she retook her seat, David eased things by saying, “You know one day he’s going to bring a girl home.”

Regina gathered herself, then quipped back, “You can still be denied dessert.”

David declared that “harsh” with a laugh, and they fell into much easier topics. Later, the Nolans and Henry helped her clear the table and give the dishes a fair start. Henry and Mary Margaret bonded over some video game or other on his computer. Mary Margaret teased her husband for his “ineptitude” at games, and David haughtily answered that “there were those who excelled at creating games and those who just played them.” Henry watched their banter like they were an all-you-can-eat cookie sale.

After they left and she finished getting her kitchen back into the only condition she deemed acceptable, she went upstairs to check on Henry, expecting to find him in bed and reading. Instead, he was still in his clothes, sitting on the edge of his bed, head bowed, his phone abandoned on the bed beside him.

Her first thought was to blame Emma for doing any number of things to upset him. “Henry? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I was thinking about Emma. I was going to text her, but,” he raised his head, darker, confusing thoughts smoothing into reluctance. “I think I need to talk to her, Mom. Face to face.” His voice sounded resigned but firm. He watched her carefully, and she wondered if, even with the determined straightening of his back, he was still asking permission.

The thought of Emma hurting him further made her want to cradle him preemptively, but sometimes all mothers could do was wait and hope. She had a feeling this was one of those times. She gave him a little nod.
Hey all, this is your captain speaking. A few updates below.

Re: The trinket I made you all. Yep, I made you all a small present as a “thank you” for all of your support and generally cause you rock. Link below or you can look at my twitter feed and it’s there too. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTbmCAedxwY

Re: The flight through Angstville. This chapter, IMHO, is probably the most angsty. That being said, it’s a slow road Emma is travelling but pretty soon her journey starts to change in the next chapter.

Re: The contest. Again, I appreciate the support and yes, I will be entering it. Deadline is Aug 15th so I have a bit before I have to get anything in.

At a little after nine p.m., a knock came at Emma’s door. On her laptop screen, she was in the midst of a crucial decision for an anime character in one of those visual novel games that promised every choice could impact the entire story. She closed out of the program, feeling guilty, knowing it was either David or Mary Margaret at the door. She bet on her foster mother, but as she opened the door, David presented her with two plastic containers, explaining he’d brought her leftovers from dinner.

She put the containers near her laptop and sat down. “How did it go?” She hoped the spirit of cooperation they’d ended the meeting on continued.

“Really good. She’s a really good cook. And she made chocolate cake.” David sounded like he approved of the evening for that reason alone. He cocked his head, continuing to stand. “Hey, do you feel like going for a walk?”

“It’s freezing out there,” she said, bemused.

“Come on,” he said, picking up her scarf from the desk and drizzling it around her neck. “Just for a few minutes. Humor me.”
She rolled her eyes in a minor show of protest, but she didn’t really mind. She slid into her coat, checked her pockets for gloves and put those on too. They had a brief verbal scuffle about “the importance of locking doors these days, even in small towns” which David won, so they were delayed as she went back inside to get the key and secure the door. “Protective David” was the most stubborn side of him, but luckily he didn’t show up that often.

Outside they fell into an effortless rhythm, walking side by side. Storybrooke effectively shut down by 7:00 p.m., weekends or not. Sure, the sign for Granny’s diner blinked cheerfully, but Emma could see just a few people inside, despite it being a prime hour on a Friday night. On the street, only their footfalls broke the silence, the sounds quickly swallowed up by the colossal quiet.

It wasn’t until they were about five buildings away from the bed and breakfast that David stopped and turned to her, breathing out white air as he spoke. “Sooooo, you got a little lucky. Snow feels like you need someone to give you a good talking to before you blow your friendship with Regina. I talked her into letting me check on you.”

A sharp guilt assailed her. “Anything I do now would be too little, too late. Trust me.”

She knew he wanted answers, but took advantage of the fact that he wouldn’t ask for them.

Mary Margaret would have kept at her. David didn’t; he never did. She hated it when Mary Margaret locked her jaws around a topic, refusing to let go. Except sometimes it was nice too—easier. The few times Emma had discussed something she struggled with, it was Mary Margaret’s persistence that dragged it out of her.

He rubbed his fingertips against his furrowed brow. “If this is just because you need distance sometimes—like when you need it from us—maybe you can explain it to them.”

She knew he didn’t mean to, but the way he put it sounded awful, as if she had purposefully spoiled something sacred. Like a child who jeers to another that there is no Santa Claus, shattering the magic.

“Like when you didn’t let us—” She knew the end of that sentence—she didn’t let them adopt her—but David didn’t say it. “Or when we call during the holidays and you always let it go to voicemail. We understand. We know it’s just something you need to do.”

She had never wanted to believe she was hurting people, but she could hear the faint wounded
quality in his voice underneath his relentless understanding. She’d wanted to think that David and Mary Margaret wrote off her need for space and freedom from obligations to “Emma being Emma.” She had refused to consider that it might hurt them each and every time. David did not say more, but the cost they paid for things to always be on her terms slapped her face. Shame formed hot pinpricks of red all over her face.

She clutched his sleeve, anxious to make it better somehow. “Do you know how many times I was almost adopted?”

“It’s not something you’ve ever told me about.”

She didn’t stop walking. It felt important not to. “Six. Well, to be fair I don’t remember the first two because I was a baby. My mom was a drug addict, and I used to have these shaking fits. It scared people off, I guess. The first one I really remember, I was five. That time, I think they tossed me back because I was blonde.”

David snorted, thinking it was a joke, but Emma shook her head. “No, really. They started with me but they wound up picking another little girl. I heard about it. They had dark hair and so did the little girl they chose. So, at my foster parents’ house, I took the scissors from the kitchen and snuck into the bathroom. I gave myself this Justin Bieber-style haircut. I was five years old. When my foster family saw what I did, they freaked out and called the county. I was sent back the next day.”

It brought his movements up short. “Emma,” he whispered, as if saying her name in that fatherly way could chase away her demons. “It doesn’t always have to be that way.”

Now, the stillness of Storybrooke felt wrong to her, like the stifling quiet could be blamed for the painful heaviness in her chest. “Six times, David. The last one…” She didn’t want to dig that last moment of hope out of her heart, so she leapfrogged past it. “I decided to make sure I didn’t have to go through that ever again, and I acted out. My file became thick with ‘incidents’. But then later, even Neal…”

“Neal was a jerk.” David’s voice grumbled defensively on her behalf. “I never liked him.” He only admitted it after she’d been sent to prison, but he’d said it many times since then. “You can’t just give up on people.”

“Maybe I’m tired of having the one constant in my life be them giving up on me. I’m no fucking prize, David. Sometimes I wonder if the only reason you and Snow are still around is because you’re too stubborn to admit it.”
David’s face slackened with surprise. His large hands took hold of her shoulders and he bent his head, forcing her to meet his sad eyes. “I have a brother who barely talks to me, a father who thinks I’m a failure. My mom’s been gone a long time. When I met Snow, she made me feel like I didn’t have to be alone. She showed me what the world could be, what I could be. But you, you made me believe in family again. You gave me back a piece of myself that I’d let go of. You don’t know. There are so many reasons that meeting you...I wish you could see how lovableView you are.”

She curled her fists at her sides, a surge of anger making her want to scream at him, demand that he defend his words against the trajectory of her life. She drew back, stuffing her hands in her coat pockets, stalking ahead on the sidewalk.

“That’s bullshit, David. It’s the kind of thing they put in Hallmark cards. That’s what I’m talking about. You believe the world is a certain way. Both of you, for as long as I’ve known you, you’ve always had this faith. That most people are decent, or that love and family can be like the movies.”

He strode after her, catching her easily and moving in front of her so that she had to stop. “Hey, Emma.”

She wanted a fight now. Her voice rose. “My truth is that the world is ugly and you just have to survive it.” She wanted him to challenge her and she wanted to shove back, but David had never been that for her. “You can’t count on anyone else. Not really.”

“Even us?” he asked. Emma just stared at him, unable to tell him that she knew one day he and Mary Margaret would be like everyone and everything else. Her silence made his face twist and he rocked back on his heels. “Even us.”

He didn’t judge her, he just absorbed it all. He watched her, aching but not angry. Why the fuck, a part of her cried, couldn’t he hurt her back? “I know how fucked up that is. I know it isn’t fair.”

“No, it isn’t, but that’s okay.”

“Is it? Why do you stick around? After everything. After prison. I was just supposed to part of your job, another kid who liked computers in an after school program.”

He stepped closer to her, the tenderness on his face a quiet, consistent song. One he’d been playing for her for a long time. “Because sometimes you have to know what to hold on to. No matter how
hard it is. Some things—some people—are worth it. I know that’s steering into Hallmark territory again, but,” he shrugged his shoulders. “You’re our kid, Emma. Always. Paperwork or not.”

She didn’t believe him. She couldn’t. God, she wanted to. The desire for battle dried out of her, evaporating into the air, leaving her feeling cold and sad. “I’m sorry. About the way I am.”

His arms came around her, and she leaned into the shelter he offered. “Will you stop that? We love you. We love you. Someday, you’ll just have to deal with it.”

She couldn’t say “I love you back.” She never could. She wanted to. She wanted to apologize a thousand times—for all the times she had hurt him and Mary Margaret. She wanted to thank him over and over. Instead, she laid her cheek on his chest, against the steady beat of his huge heart, and wished for it to somehow just know.

After a few moment, he drew away and offered her his arm. “Come on, you were right—it IS freezing out here. Let’s head back.”

*How could he do that*, she wondered. *How could he take so little and act like it was more than enough?* Emma just stared at him till he made a greater show of extending his bent arm.

“Come on.”

She capitulated, placing her hand on his bicep.

“Hallmark territory?” he asked her, quirking an eyebrow.

Emma laughed and it was a relief to be able to.

He leaned down and kissed her temple as they kept walking. “Will you do me a favor and say goodnight to Snow? When I told her we should stay out of this thing with you and Regina, I became pretty unpopular.”

“It’s not really a ‘thing’.” Emma mumbled.
She followed him to his room, letting him go in first. He spoke to Mary Margaret quietly, and whatever he said caused her to groan loudly, before turning to Emma with a bright, strained smile. Emma weathered a tight hug from her before being offered bottled water. When that was refused, Snow suggested a snack and pulled out a green fabric grocery bag with an array of choices from chips to energy bars. She took a granola bar, humoring Snow’s mothering instincts.

“So, there’s nothing you need to talk about?” Snow asked. The room was toasty, though not uncomfortably so, yet Snow crisscrossed her arms tightly across her chest as if to block out the cold. She knew this version of Snow—tightly corked, bubbling violently with questions and advice she was trying not to unleash. David must have spent quite some time imploring her not to push Emma right now.

“Nope. I’m good.”

“Really,” she asked, cocking her head. “You’re sure?” It reminded Emma of those game show hosts who tried to psych out contestants by asking them repeatedly if what they said was their final answer or not. “Do you want another snack? And are you sure you don’t want water?”

Emma gestured back towards the door. “I’m going to go to bed.”

Emma probably wasn’t supposed to see it, but as she left, she saw Snow swat David’s chest with her hand.

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Emma joined everyone for breakfast. She didn’t say much, but it felt like keeping a promise somehow. She’d agreed to work with Regina, and minus formal family dinners, she intended to try her best. For three months, anyway. She hoped joking around with Henry would help her weather things, but he offered her none of his usual good-humored enthusiasm or warmth. He didn’t even hug her, and he chose to sit beside his mother, opposite David. He seemed his usual self with everyone else, but when he turned her way all signs of animation faded into something distrusting. She tried engaging him with talk about superheroes, but his answers were stilted. So the kid was pissed at her, too. The one part of her relationship with the Mills family she thought she might have a chance at maintaining—light-hearted exchanges with Henry—and that was in danger, too.
After breakfast, just as they were about to start their tour of the town, Henry turned to her unexpectedly. “Can we talk for a few minutes?” he asked. He watched her grimly, like she was a stranger knocking at his door and he was trying to work out if she was about to deliver a gift or a curse.

Automatically, she turned to Regina, seeking permission.

Regina drew nearer so that her next words were heard by Emma alone. “This was his idea.” She glared into Emma’s face, a leashed dragon in her eyes. “You have ten minutes before I come looking for you.” She stepped toward Mary Margaret and David. “Why don’t we start the tour? I’m sure Emma and Henry will catch up.” With that, Regina led the Nolans down the street.

The door to the diner had one of those hinges that wouldn’t let the door be slammed, instead taking a good forty-five seconds to bring the door to a slow, quiet closure. It provided an appropriately awkward background as Emma and Henry stared at the slushy sidewalk in silence.

“How’s your Youtube channel going,” Emma asked, trying to start things off. Regina had already told her part of the answer. She just wanted to hear things in his own words.

Over his expression hung a heavy, dark cloud. “I haven’t worked on it much. I’ve been busy with school.”

Emma blinked as Henry used the “too busy” excuse. Turned out that it sounded less than convincing.

“Can we go to the playground? It’s close.” He said and started in the direction of the park across the town square without waiting for her. He kept walking until he reached the merry-go-round at the edge of the park. He stepped onto it and leaned back against the bars. Emma dusted one triangle of the platform free of light snowfall with her hand. She sat down, giving a push with her feet that was just strong enough to make it slowly rotate. The cold of the metal surface pushed past the barrier of her clothes like they didn’t exist. She ignored it.

The rubber soles of Henry’s boot made a squeaking noise on the wet metal as he shifted a few times. The skin between his eyes was pinched. He continued to look down, as if some great answer could be found on the ground if he looked hard enough.

“You didn’t come to dinner last night. They told me you had a case. But...that wasn’t true, was it?”
He sounded sad, a little like that night on the phone, except this time he held back, preparing himself for what he might hear.

That tone became a fist around her heart, clenching. Emma was reminded of how she’d learned to keep her heart in check when her social worker came to give her news—a foster home sending her back, a family deciding not to move forward with adoption, the Nolans having to jump through another legal hurdle before they could offer her some kind of home.

Maybe if she and David hadn’t talked just the night before, she could have played turtle and pulled her head back into her shell like she usually did, coming up with some excuse and then hiding away. “No, that was bullshit.”

He lifted his head, cocking it a little, as if not sure he’d heard her right, as if he’d expected her to lie.

“I have this thing, kid, whenever there’s something that seems too much like a family event, I guess I freak out.”

“When Mom made you the birthday cake. Then too?” She nodded, but he gave no sign that he’d seen it, still thinking. “You didn’t tell me the Nolans were your foster parents.”

“They took me in when I was a teenager. I was a couple years older than you are.”

“They didn’t adopt you?”

“They wanted to, but I—I told them no.”

He finally looked at her, innocent eyes pummelling her with a need to understand. “Why?”

His directness was one of the reasons she liked him, but right now it attacked her like a virus. She felt fatigued, too drained to move. Her throat felt like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper. A place at her temple throbbed painfully.

“Look, you know how this town probably feels like all you know? How it feels like nothing could surprise you here? How it makes you feel safe? I guess my safe place has always been being alone.”
His mouth tightened in disappointment. “But, you don’t even go see them over the holidays.”

“It’s just how I am. And it’s not that they aren’t great. Just like me not seeing you and your mom more doesn’t mean you’re not great. Because you are. It—I’m not a very brave person, Henry. Not about some things.”

“You told me that the people that look out for you, the ones who follow through are rare, so you have to keep holding onto them.” David’s words about knowing who to hold on to came back to her. “I thought you were like that. If you know it’s important, why can’t you be like that,” he cried out, his childish sense of fairness offended.

The pain at her brow spread down the base of her neck. She had no answers that would span the gap between what Henry wanted to believe about her and what he was starting to realize was true. “Because sometimes people can’t be who they want to be.” The answer had a tinge of desperation, needing him to let her regroup.

Henry grew quiet again, still. It was almost exactly like Regina, Emma realized, when she was trying to hold too many things in. The boyish indignation faded into something softer. “When my dad died, I didn’t know what was going to happen. I don’t remember everything but I know I used to hate going to sleep. Mom used to sit with me and read to me for as long as I wanted. I’m sorry you’re so scared. I’m sorry someone like my mom wasn’t there when you were little. Or like the Nolans.” He sounded so grown up, calm, his strong heart extending grace to her in the best way he knew how.

She pulled herself up, clenching a crossbar, legs feeling like they might not be able to carry her as the conversation continued to leech her strength. She thought vaguely about touching his arm or his shoulder, or at least standing closer to him. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to offer him comfort, or she wanted a tiny piece of absolution for herself.

He retreated from her, giving his head a small, sad shake. He was far too young to be wearing regret like that. “You hurt my mom.”

“I know.”

“No,” he corrected patiently, eyes gentle on hers. “With Mom, she’s careful. She doesn’t trust people. But, she has me. And she tried to let you in. I told her you would be a good friend. I told her to try, and she did. But you, you don’t let anyone in. Not even the Nolans.” The judge at her sentencing spoke to her like this, with candor but surprisingly without cruelty.
He hopped off the platform, glancing back toward the town hall. He pushed out a long breath, his
next words reticent. “Emma? I don’t think we should text one another anymore.”

Pay a little now, or….Except this didn’t feel like paying a little. She could lie to herself and call his
decision her inevitable destiny. But he didn’t want to make this choice. He wanted her to be his hero
or his playmate or maybe even an addition to his family. She couldn’t give him that and he couldn’t
accept scraps. Like his mother, refusing to be half in and half out.

Her escapes usually didn’t feel like they truly cost her anything. Paying to stay disconnected came
easy, the equivalent of taking a handful of change from a jar that held the excess from other
purchases. This time, the bill meant tearing through her wallet and hoping to God she had enough.

“It’s okay. I understand,” Emma said, voice unsteady. During a boxing match, if one boxer kept
getting hit, he could be knocked down and if he just lay there, the fight would be over. But in real
life, sometimes you just bore the beating until somehow, some way, there was a reprieve. Her
shoulders slumped, hands sliding in her pockets as if to make herself a smaller target.

People did this thing when trying to be brave where they smiled, or made themselves sound like they
were having a good day when just the opposite was true, and Emma did it now without thinking. “I
should get you back. You know, before your mom kills me.”

She walked with Henry in the general direction the others had gone. His movements were much
faster than her beaten, trodding steps but eventually, they caught up to the tour. Henry went up to his
mother and they exchanged a few quiet words. Regina glanced back toward Emma, then wrapped an
arm around her son’s shoulders. Henry was quiet for a bit, walking at the head of the group beside
his mother.

David, sensing something was wrong, started asking him about his favorite places in town. This led
to the slow evolution, much to Regina’s chagrin, of Henry becoming the tour guide. He took great
pride explaining things he knew and especially talking about things his mother had helped with. It
turned out that the list of improvements that had happened under Regina’s watch was extensive. The
local parks and the steamboat and a few dozen other projects were all her idea.

Emma thought of Neal and the moment in prison when she’d truly understood that he’d betrayed her.
After time ground down the shock, her heart began scrubbing and bleaching the places he’d
inhabited. As if he was just a mess she needed to clean up. After a week, she felt like she was tidy
enough, and put him behind her. He was surprisingly easy to bar from her mind. Neal made her
Pertential score go down five points at first, but then, it rose again. Not all the way but enough so that
she recovered about half of what she’d lost. She wondered what kind of person so easily disinfected
themselves of someone they claimed to love.

By the time they reached city hall again, David and Henry were leading everyone, chatting happily. Regina and Margaret had fallen into step behind them, occasionally interjecting, and Emma was at the rear, not having much to say at all.

“Well,” Regina said, clapping her gloved hands together as Emma fully rejoined them. “Why don’t we get started for the day? I am sure that business talk would bore my son to death. And it is Saturday, which I am told is usually a day off.” She brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes and he lightly batted at her. “So, I suppose he can go home.”

“Thank goodness,” he said, but sported a large grin at David and Mary Margaret. “Hey, what’s for dinner? Can we do tacos? Can David and…um, everyone come?” He glanced toward Emma uncertainly, and Emma knew that originally he hadn’t thought to invite her.

The fucking price kept climbing.

“We could make it do-it-yourself,” Henry said. “Casual.”

It was possible he’d suggested the last part because of her, but too much had changed in a short amount of time and she couldn’t be sure. Not anymore.

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Regina checked on Henry when he and Emma returned. His somber mood told her something serious had happened. However, surrounded by people they hardly knew—and Emma—wasn’t a good time to question him. She settled for staying close by, until David drew him out by asking about Storybrooke. David tossed her a wink over Henry’s shoulder and she gave him a grateful nod. Sometimes sons wouldn’t let mothers soothe them, and in those instances, it was nice when someone else was around to try.

Regina was startled when Henry almost omitted Emma from the dinner invitation. She began to make up a reason why Emma might be otherwise engaged, allowing Emma and her son a graceful exit. But Emma said, “I do have some work to do, but I’ll come by for a bit.” Regina, lips parted, found herself watching Emma, as surprised by the offer as she was by the very quiet way that Emma spoke.
She allowed Henry to flee the torture of a business meeting, making a mental note to corner him at home after dinner to try and get answers. They all took the same seats they had taken the day before. Regina then suggested that they go forward with making plans for Nolan Securities’ first presentation, in Los Angeles.

“Four weeks should be enough time to arrange everything,” Regina assured them, and recommended they leave the details—the hotel, the time, the conference room, invitees and possible invitees—to her.

“There should be light refreshments starting at 10:30.” Regina went on. “Mary Margaret, you will sign everyone in and get their email addresses as they arrive. At 11:00, David will introduce the company and give a presentation on ways to protect against cyber crime. If we provide education we can call it a free seminar, as opposed to a sales presentation. After David’s portion is done, Emma will give a twenty minute speech. David will then wrap things up.” David Nolan’s eyes were dancing, as were his wife’s. She had gotten to know them a little over the last day and a half, and she gave a playful roll of her eyes. “Yes, you can put Commander before my name in the contract.”

“I mean,” David said, releasing a burst of laughter he’d been holding in. “It’s like a battle plan.”

Regina gathered stray papers from the table and into a pile, brow creased. “Too much?”

“Nope, it’s good,” he answered cheerfully. Regina’s worries faded. Neither David or Mary Margaret hid what they thought. She liked that about them. Given her past dog-eat-dog experience in the business world, it was a welcome change of pace.

Today, David Nolan wore a business jacket, a button-up shirt, a belt, and blue jeans. Emma had on the same type of outfit, minus the jacket, and about ten minutes after she had arrived, she rolled up her sleeves to mid-elbow. It showed off her tattoo, and Regina’s eyes lingered there a moment. Her mind summoned that tingle of awareness she had felt at the Winter Festival, sitting on the bench beside Emma. Irrationally, Regina felt a wave of irritation that required her to silently count to ten before it evaporated.

Mary Margaret suggested they make business cards with the new logo. Today’s ensemble—a purple shirt with a tribal design and a black, loose pants—didn’t make Regina twitch. As long as she willed herself to forget that the pants had black leather fringes from the knee down. She really needed to draft something to them about proper attire for the seminar.

“Do we have a backup plan just in case Emma decides she’d not up to it,” Mary Margaret questioned.
Emma, her chin resting on her fist, stared into space as she had for the entirety of the meeting so far.

“In that case, David would present Emma’s story as a case study. Less effective, but that doesn’t mean it will be futile. We’ll have to see.”

David shook his head, impressed. “Looks like you have everything figured out.”

“Maybe we can think of a way to make the business cards we hand out something they might actually keep.” Mary Margaret sounded a little excited by the prospect. “Like maybe a coaster or a ruler or a USB drive. We can get one of those QR codes so they can scan it and boom! Business information populated into their phone.”

Regina wrote it down, appreciating the innovation in the idea.

“I’ll get started on it.” Mary Margaret grinned wide. “They’ll be forced to take our marketing material.”

David rubbed his wife’s back. “Snow, have you shifted into ‘damn the man’ mode? Cause I think we’re going for a slightly less hostile note.”

“Regarding marketing, Emma?” Regina calling her name pulled Emma from her stupor. “The marketing company I have hired may want to make a five to ten minute video of you and your story. They imagine it will serve as marketing on the website and Youtube.”

Emma lifted her head a moment, only to let it fall back to her hand after she spoke. “That’s fine.”

This was a completely deflated version of Emma, one that Regina had never seen. A pang of sympathy rose before she could stop it. She wondered again what she and Henry had spoken about, and if that was to blame for her current condition.

“Worse comes to worst, we could use the video at the seminars, too,” David said.
“Yes, we could.” Regina agreed, distracted. She used her reason to deflect her unwarranted concern for Emma Swan. After three months, Emma would be gone, and she doubted they would see one another again.

“There’s one more thing I think we should cover.” She tried to make it sound like just another bullet among many. In reality, she clutched at her professional demeanor, hoping how cowed and foolish she felt didn’t show. “Just for clarity. While I will plan every detail of these seminars, I won’t be able to attend them with you.”

“You won’t?” David asked, hands coming to rest on his hips as his brows raised into his hairline.

She managed a weak smile. “As my potential business partners, it’s important you know my limitations. My mother is a powerful woman and she and I aren’t exactly on good terms.” Regina’s conscience poked at her violently for the drastic oversimplification. She dug her teeth in her lower lip until the pang eased. “Many of the possible seminar attendees I am supplying you with are people I once knew. It’s highly likely they know my mother. It’s also possible, given my past, they could let the media know where I am. I can’t have them skulking around this town or my son.”

Mary Margaret smothered her surprised expression before speaking. “You really think that the press will hound you after all this time?”

“It’s something I don’t really want to test. I’m hoping for your understanding.”

Emma leaned back, rubbing at her mouth. For the first time, she saw hints on the Emma who told her she would have helped Henry for free. “This whole thing - Cybersheriff - is about protecting people. Especially kids. Doesn’t make any sense to me to put Regina and Henry in a bad position as we try and get it going.”

Regina clenched her teeth as hard as she could. It wasn’t fair for Emma to say things like that. Not when sometimes Regina still missed her.

Mary Margaret squeezed Emma’s hand, proud. David gave Emma a high five.

The rest of the meeting went by quickly and Regina let herself believe Cybersheriff might actually become a reality.
Later that evening, the Nolans and Emma arrived at the appointed time. Regina set out what amounted to a buffet line, and even used paper plates. Emma stayed for about an hour before making her excuses and leaving. The Nolans stayed another hour or so, before they too called it a night.

After doing her usual re-assembling of her clean kitchen, she ducked her head into Henry’s room. He was in his pajamas, curled up with his laptop.

“Hey Mom.”

“Henry, what did you and Emma talk about?”

He hesitated, closing his laptop and twisting one corner of his mouth uncertainly. “Do I have to tell you?”

Her first instinct was to insist but given the rises and falls of their relationship over the last few months, she paused to consider her phrasing.

“It’s just that I made a decision about Emma, and if I tell you, I won’t feel like it’s really my decision anymore. Could I wait a couple of weeks?”

It seemed fair. She didn’t like it, but it was a reasonable compromise. Looking at his face, worried and a little stubborn, her gut told her that maybe he needed this. She murmured, “Alright,” and his face beamed at her in gratitude.

The next day, Sunday, was another success. David was going to have a lawyer friend take one more look at the contracts before he and Mary Margaret signed, but he acted like it was just a formality. By Monday morning, most everything was wrapped up.

David offered to get everyone donuts so they could have a quick breakfast before they had to get on the road. His and Mary Margaret’s flight home was later that night, and they wanted to leave with plenty of time. David’s eyes glowed when he entered the conference room, a box in one hand and a drink carrier in the other. Regina briefly wondered why he didn’t let Emma and Mary Margaret, who came in just behind him, carry more. “I am telling you, I love this town. Hot chocolate with cinnamon and coffee,” he announced to Regina and Henry, setting the styrofoam holder down on the table. And then, with a flourish, he opened the box. “Donuts. Fresh, homemade giant donuts. Bigger than both my hands put together.” He demonstrated by holding up his fists. Regina began to suspect that the reason he’d carried everything was because he’d refused to let go of the sugary treasures. “36
types of donuts in the bakery every morning.”

“He seriously considered getting one of each.” Mary Margaret chuckled.

Regina made small talk with them, including suggesting donuts David might wish to try if he returned. There was a S’mores one that was one of Regina’s guilt pleasures. Henry, on his way to school, quickly hugged everyone goodbye—even Emma, though Regina suspected he was being polite.

Soon enough it was time for them to get on the road.

Regina tried for a handshake with Mary Margaret, but Mary Margaret and David both insisted they were huggers. Regina bore it with good humor, though it didn’t feel entirely natural to her.

When Regina turned to Emma, they both slid their hands deep in their pockets. They watched one another, unmoving. “Drive safely, Emma.”

Emma rocked heel to toe a few times. “I’ll see you around, Regina.”

The distance between them had teeth, but neither tried to change it, and after another moment, Emma got into the passenger seat of the car. Regina stood on the curb and watched as they drove away.

Just to make sure you didn't miss it, gentle reader. The trinket I made you all as a “thank you” is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L.TbmCAedxwY
Hi all -
I'll be honest. Everything I have tried to type in this little box has felt a little trite. Or off. Incomplete. Yesterday Trump attacked part of our family. He used his power to marginalize people who already have to fight for basic respect every single day of their lives.

If you're discouraged or sad, know that all of these attacks on the rights on LGBTQ community are a result of small men trying to hold on to what they perceive to be power as it slips away. This kind of thing has happened before: (http://civilrights.findlaw.com/civil-rights-overview/civil-rights-law-and-history.html). It's not new. It's just our chapter. The pen is in our hands. And know that you aren't alone.

If you're angry, channel it into something positive: donate, write, Tweet, march, make a phone call, display a bumper sticker, encourage, etc. The size of what you do doesn't matter as much as doing something.

With love, this is your captain speaking.

Part 20 – The one with the burning building

Emma removed her suit jacket with jerky-violent movements, and threw it over the back of her newly-assembled desk chair. She didn’t sit as much as slouch forward in her chair, head bowed slightly so that her hair threatened to hide her face. She automatically sought Regina’s face on her computer screen, knowing her performance was dismal, hungry for someone to tell her the truth about how bad it really was. Regina, eyes cool, had her head turned slightly away from the camera. Her stony neutrality was polished, marbled with hints of thoughtfulness that gave nothing away.

Emma sighed. “I’m sorry.” She meant it as a quiet admission to all of them, but Regina most of all. “I don’t know why I can’t get this.”

The Nolans had only taken three days to send Regina the signed contract that officially created Cybersheriff. A week later, trying to be a good team player, Emma sent Regina the written version of her speech. Regina emailed back, obliterating Emma’s first draft with comments and suggested changes. Emma made the edits and sent them back; Regina responded with a “thank you” message to Emma’s inbox. That was the only interaction they’d had until today. Regina had called a meeting with everyone for the sole purpose of rehearsing David’s and Emma’s presentations.

Emma’s third attempt hadn’t gone much better than her first, and she wondered how that was
possible. She had forgotten most of the intro. She’d stuttered in the middle, discarding a few sentences here and there that she couldn’t get out no matter how hard she tried. Her volume surged and fell randomly, and the more Emma tried to control it, the more extreme the variances became. She had no idea what to do with her hands; they flopped around or were clenched at her sides. She forgot a good section of the end of the speech, too.

“Emma,” David said. “It’s just practice. This is only the second time—”

“Third time,” Regina corrected.

“—third time you’ve done it. This is the reason we’re practicing. To iron out the wrinkles. No one expects perfection right now.” David’s attempt to soothe her frustration waved a red cape in front of it, making it snort, paw at the earth, and get ready to charge.

“Come on, I was horrible,” Emma insisted. “I was the Titanic of presenters.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” Mary Margaret insisted. “You’re new at this. There’s a learning curve.”

Emma turned back to Regina, needing honesty.

Regina crossed her arms over her chest in a relaxed, superior way as she leaned back in her chair. “Your delivery continues to be wooden. At times you are bellowing instead of speaking. You’re forgetting important transitions and fumbling far too many words. The main problem, however, is that you aren’t at ease with anything you’re saying. Given that it’s your life story, I’m not sure why.”

None of the feedback was new, except the last part. No one wanted to be sliced open so precisely and thoroughly, parts of them categorized and put under glass for scrutiny. Yet at least what Regina said was real, and in that way tangible, and something Emma could trust.

“It wasn’t any better?” Emma asked, not expecting a positive response. Maybe she just wanted Regina to help her believe she could pull this off somehow.

A soft regretful press of Regina’s lips matched the sympathy broadcasting from her eyes. “I wish I could say it was. Overall, because of your lack of confidence, you seem...unprepared, which causes Cybersheriff to look unprofessional.”
The faint hope she’d held onto that she’d be able to cobble together a passable speech dangled farther out of reach. It made Emma itch to kick something. Maybe the stupid suit jacket.

It had been Regina’s idea to wear the suit jacket during practices. “To get into character,” she said. Regina was also adamant that Emma wear a pantsuit. From the beginning, she hated the heaviness of the jacket. She kept rolling up the sleeves but that didn’t feel quite right either. She experimented with buttoning versus unbuttoning a dozen times.

She didn’t complain. About anything.

Instead, she thought of Henry’s gentle dismissal and Regina saying she trusted Emma’s heart. She’d tried to explain to both of them how she lived her life. It didn’t stop them from asking for more from her. And they were right to. They deserved so much more than the sum of what Emma could give.

Maybe Emma could at least come through for Cybersheriff. She wanted to believe that when she left in a few months, she could leave that sliver of gold behind for them. A bright thing to remember.

“Fuck,” Emma groaned. “I don’t seem confident because I’m not confident.”

“Then that’s what we need to fix,” Regina replied as if there was a simple solution.


“I’m not sure drunken idiot is the right image either.”

There was a softer lilt in Regina’s voice, a break in the chill, and it called to Emma. It was the closest Regina had come to teasing her since they had crossed the county line into Civil Land. Emma felt a moment of hope, then she watched as the door Regina had briefly opened slammed shut again.

Regina’s arms fell to rest on her desk, her fingers mingling together. “Do you have any thoughts on what might help you at this point? Clearly my suggestions about the breathing exercises or connecting with the audience rather than trying to be perfect haven’t.”
“Wait,” David said. “Emma has been nervous about doing this since we brought it up. Emma, are you feeling any better about doing this? Because if not, we need to look at what we’re doing.”

It offered her the possibility of absolution.

She didn’t want it and made her refusal to take it clear. “No. I’ll get there. How many people have confirmed they’re going to the seminar so far?”

Emma knew the answer. Regina’s tailored marketing to her old friends and colleagues through mailings and emails netted them about forty “yes, I will attend” responses so far. The goal was sixty attendees, with what Regina called a stretch goal of eighty.

“Forty-two as of this morning,” Mary Margaret said.

Emma felt pinpricks of sensation all over her face, tingling like she’d been slapped several times. “Let’s go through it again.”

They did.

She did no better.

It was agony. All of the things she disliked most about herself (and there were many) collided into this one twenty-minute presentation. Her hand pressed to her stomach; it felt too empty, like there was only acid there. She tasted it on her tongue. Why couldn’t she handle this kind of thing the way other people could? Why did it feel like, if it didn’t involve a computer, she was incompetent? What was her Pertential score now? High twenties? Lower? God, she was going to go out there and the mocking eyes of the audience would burn her to cinders.

“I think you’re tired, Emma,” Mary Margaret said, not offering placating positivity this time. “You’ve been at it close to two hours.”

David nodded several times. “Taking a break is a good idea. Keep in mind, we can still rework things if we need to. No one is going to make you do this.” He didn’t look at Regina when he said that, but he may as well have.
Regina bristled, rapping her well-manicured, wine-red fingernails on her desk. “I have said from the beginning that this is Emma’s choice.”

“Yes,” he agreed, voice rising slightly. “And then you keep pushing her.”

“By being honest? By using my years of experience in the business world to try to help her succeed? The point to all of this is to grow Nolan Securities. To that end, if Emma can’t get to where she needs to be, she will do more harm than good.”

_Says the woman who won’t even be at the speech,_ Emma thought, then strangled the momentary bitterness. Regina had her reasons—good reasons. It was just hard not to feel unsettled because Regina wouldn’t be there. She was the only one of them who actually had any idea what she was doing.

“You don’t have to be so negative,” David challenged.

“She’s trying to help,” Mary Margaret said softly. “And she did get Emma permission to leave the state.”

Strictly speaking, Emma’s parole prevented her from leaving Maine. Emma had no idea what Regina said to Gold, but he assured Emma she had special dispensation for the seminars.

“If Emma feels more time and practice is what she needs,” Regina said, “then we will keep trying. But, I don’t think it’s fair to her to pull punches.”

“Regina’s right,” Emma said, rubbing her hands on her jeans. “And this isn’t about me. It’s about Cybersheriff.” She took off her glasses, letting them dangle from her fingers. “I’ll practice more. We can go over it again in a few days.”

Regina rolled her shoulders, rubbing the bridge of her nose with her fingertips. “I’ll send a calendar invite. David, would you like to go over your section again?”

Emma gave him an encouraging look. He sighed but agreed, sliding on his own suit jacket. He gave an engaging smile and began. It made Emma feel worse. He was so fucking personable. He’d been good at this from the get-go. Regina gave him a few minor corrections. The difference between her critique of Emma and the one of David was like the difference between a monsoon and a few errant
raindrops on a sunny day.

Emma couldn’t wait to end the call. When it was mercifully over, she knocked on her forehead with her fist, wishing she could beat herself into becoming who she needed to be.

Regina suggested to David and Mary Margaret that they should meet again later that day, but without Emma. They had implied that she was to blame for Emma’s state of mind, and her business survival instincts told her that “checking in” was a good idea. It didn’t immediately surprise her when Mary Margaret appeared on her screen alone. After all, David was likely to be close by.

“I thought maybe just you and I could chat,” Mary Margaret said, serene and pleasant, as if the two of them were sharing tea and she was about to offer Regina a cookie.

“David doesn’t mind?”

Mary Margaret gave a quiet little hum, lips pursing in amusement. “Oh, he did. But, we’ve been trying things his way for a while now. I think it’s time to use another approach. David thinks I can be pushy.” She shrugged and a twinkle glimmered in her eyes. “He’s not wrong. We disagree on whether we should keep encouraging Emma to do the speech. He thinks it’s too much to ask of her. I disagree. But, I wanted to talk with you about it a little more.”

“Does David intend to refuse to let Emma present?” It was within his power as CEO of Nolan Securities. She just couldn’t imagine the affable man going to such an extreme. He could be protective, certainly, but that kind of decision required precise cruelty. She had never seen that in him.

“No, no, no,” Mary Margaret answered quickly. “That’s not David’s style. Especially not with Emma. He’s always been extremely careful not to pressure her. He wants her to feel completely at home with us.”

“You’ll forgive me for wondering if Emma is completely at home anywhere.”

The words slipped past her strictly controlled impersonal perimeter. That Emma could still annoy her was an affront in and of itself. She shook her head, a reprimand directed inward. “I’m sorry,” Regina
Mary Margaret didn’t look offended. “But it wasn’t wrong. Emma is the type of person who would race into a burning building to save people. But...she won’t call or come home on a regular basis. I know that better than anyone.”

Regina tried to imagine an older Henry behaving that way, how it would be a constant stinging in her heart. “Can I ask how long you’ve known her?”

“Fifteen years. She’s always been standoffish. That’s just Emma. But,” Mary Margaret drew in a deep breath. “I had a breast-cancer scare a while back. Back before Emma was arrested. When she found out she got on the next plane. I got lucky; all of the tests came back benign. But she stayed by my side through everything. Every doctor’s appointment and every procedure. She kept trying to make me laugh.” Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Like—she got us to have this Star Wars marathon and actually wear costumes. She was Han Solo, by the way. I was Yoda. Green makeup and all. David wore this white goatee; he was Obi-Wan Kenobi. And that’s Emma, too.”

She smiled in the same way Regina did when thinking of the gifts Henry gave her just to tell her he loved her. Those small presents—his surprise of fiery orange milkweeds, borrowed from the neighbor’s yard, put in a vase and set in the kitchen. He wouldn’t say anything, just wait for her to notice, then grin when she did. She saved almost all of them, pressing them flat in a scrapbook. She had thirty; she had counted them all. More than once.

Regina’s throat clenched painfully as she swallowed. “For my purposes, I am happy to work with Emma until she leaves in three months. Or for whatever length of time she wishes to be involved. And if she cannot or does not wish to give the speech, we have contingency plans.”

“I don’t think she’s going to walk away from giving this speech. I’m not sure what happened, but I think she feels she needs to do this.” Snow tilted her head, measuring Regina.

Regina smoothed a tendril of her hair that she knew was perfect. But still. This kind of honesty required preparation. “Are you implying she thinks of the speech as a burning building? She has been on the cusp of refusing to be any part of the seminars from the moment I suggested it.”

“I haven’t heard her say anything like that since we left Storybrooke, have you? Since she officially agreed to work for Cybersherriff?”
Now that Snow mentioned it, Emma had done everything asked of her. On time and without hesitation. Honoring her commitment fully and expressing nothing but devotion to Cybersheriff. She wet her lips. “Not since then, no.”

Snow sat forward, folding one arm over the other in front of her laptop. “I think Emma needs to stretch her comfort zone. But I don’t want to see her fail either. I’m worried she will.”

Regina wondered where this was going. “And is there something else you think we can do to help her?”

“I think there might be something else you can do.”

“Such as?”

“She respects you, Regina. We’re her...we’re family, and we can and will offer our support. But I think if she knows you’re there, it will make a big difference. I wonder if there’s any way you’d reconsider coming to Los Angeles with us? Some way we can lessen the risk? I think she might need you there.”

“I assure you that she does not respect—” Regina’s mouth filled with so many denials that it felt like they were dripping to the floor from lack of room. She opened her mouth and plucked the first one she could from the crowd. “I wish I could come. I really do.”

“You’ve been in Storybrooke about eight years? And you’ve been able to escape everything there? Your mother and the past?”

Escaping the past was impossible. The next best thing was bricking it up, hopefully to never be heard from again. But that wasn’t the same as escaping. It was still there, and sometimes it knocked on the wall. “Within reason. And more to the point, it hasn’t touched Henry.”

“And what does Henry think of your decision not to go to the seminars?” Mary Margaret had the look of someone who knew the card she’d just played was powerful—a royal flush at a poker table. Hippie or not, Mary Margaret could be formidable when she chose to be.

Regina hadn’t told Henry. Of course she hadn’t; she knew what he’d think.
“Just—it might be something to consider. I don’t know how you convinced Emma to be part of Cybersheriff, but I see her trying harder than I’ve seen her try in a long time. I think that’s significant, and I can’t help but notice that she looks to you first when she wants an opinion about her speech.”

All of her earlier denials froze and shattered under the magic of Mary Margaret’s candor. She cleared her throat. “Perhaps I can simply be more encouraging.”

“That might help, too. But I wonder, especially with someone like Emma, if actions don’t matter more than words.”

Rushing into a burning building wasn’t one of Regina’s fortes. *Is that what this seminar had become?*

Silence stretched between them for too long to be comfortable, and they finally said their goodbyes.

The conversation was not easy to put behind her. She thought about it as she prepared for bed. It danced at the edges of her thoughts when she woke. She had never been heroic. She was practical. She was a good planner. She took only calculated risks, and even those had been few and far between since coming to Storybrooke.

She didn’t do that. That wasn’t who she was.

One selfish thought popped up, waiting for her to use a mallet to strike it down: Mal lived in Los Angeles. Mal, who she hadn’t seen for a few years. Mal was a woman of refined tastes, experienced enough to appreciate the value of a few sultry nights in bed without asking for anything more. Regina’s body felt a charge, like extra batteries hooked in and making her buzz as she considered it. She wished it hadn’t crossed her mind at all, it wasn’t worthy of being part of this decision. She whacked it away. The rest of her thoughts weren’t so easy to hit; they rose and fell too quickly. Mary Margaret was suggesting that she throw caution to the wind. She wasn’t that type of person. The entire point of the last eight years was to keep herself and her son safe. But Henry...always that desire to be better for her son. And Emma—complicated, impossible, infuriating topic that she was. Emma needed her help. Maybe. If Mary Margaret was right. She told herself that she could care less what Emma Swan needed, but it didn’t entirely ring true.

What would Henry think if he knew, the thought clanged in her head and stole sleep from her. The night he had called her a coward rang just as loud. He was growing up, and perhaps with everything that had happened so many weeks ago, one of her greatest missteps was not acknowledging that.
Leaving him out of every decision, trying to protect him too much.

The next morning she found herself standing before her full length mirror, Henry seated on the bed behind her. She took longer than necessary to put in her earrings and coif her hair before telling him why she had asked him to come in and talk.

“You know that I did something very bad…” she began, looking at him in the mirror.

He raised his eyebrows in a frank assessment. “Mom, I googled you a long time ago.”

Of course he did.

She struggled to maintain eye contact. She could only imagine all the things he could have found. She hadn’t been brave enough to google herself in years. “You did? You didn’t tell me.”

“A lot of what people said was pretty mean,” he told her, the words offered hesitantly, his cheeks taking on a little color. She supposed there was no good way to tell someone you loved that other people had a low opinion of them. “I stayed away from like...Reddit and places like that.” Regina had no idea what that meant. “But, even on the news websites, people said a lot.”

She turned toward him, feeling like she stood on splintering ice and she had to step carefully. “I guess maybe that’s appropriate given what I wanted to talk about with you.”

She sat down beside him, and felt his gaze become worried the longer it took for her to say more. “The presentations we’re giving about Cybersheriff will be attended by many people I used to know….before. We’re using my old contacts as a starting point. Many of them also know my mother.” She hadn’t told him very much about Cora; it was hard to explain. She had always settled on saying Cora wasn’t a good person. “So, if I go, someone might recognize me—”

“You’re not gonna go?” he asked, alarmed.

“Henry, listen. If I go and someone recognizes me, there could be consequences. The press could come here and disrupt our lives. They could follow us everywhere. Even to school. Even home.” He struggled to get his head around that, eyes narrowing as he considered it. Her hand lifted to rest on his back. “And then there’s my mother.”
His still boyish chin dimpled as he frowned. “I found this article, it was pretty old. It said no one had seen you in a year. Your mom said,” he paused as he thought back. “You were behaving like a criminal, even if you’d been cleared of everything. She wanted you to consider your reputation. And the Mills family name, too.”

Regina hadn’t seen that exact quote, but it didn’t surprise her. “My mother has always been protective of our family legacy. You know I was investigated for the charity I ran? She wanted me to handle things a certain way, and grew very upset with me when I didn’t do what she asked.”

“What did she ask you to do?”

“She didn’t ask, Henry. Not really. She commanded.”

Regina reached out to take his hand, feeling a crawling shame that she needed strength from him when she was the adult. “You know how I used to warn you about bad influences? My mother had an agenda for my life. She wanted me to become governor, then a senator. Then...who knows. I didn’t like myself before I came to Storybrooke. A part of that was because I was trying to be who my mother wanted me to be. It’s why I’ve hidden from her. She is very good at getting people to do what she wants. Sometimes by hardly doing anything at all.”

He shook his head. “But, what would she want you to do?”

She wasn’t being clear, and she didn’t know how to be without exposing him to the darkness of her mother’s scheming, of the way someone motivated by power thought. “I don’t know exactly. She would probably want me to follow that plan she had for me again. Maybe she’d start making a plan for you.”

Cora believed that everyone in the world was either a wolf or prey. The Mills, she told Regina over and over, must always be predators. She would want to transform Henry into one.

“But you wouldn’t let her.”

His faith piled onto her, too much and too fast. She shifted, trying to bear its weight. Trying to sound calm and rational, and not like the terrified little girl part of her still was regarding her mother. “That doesn’t mean it would be easy to stop her from trying.”
He nodded slowly, as if understanding, but his brow was creased so she couldn’t be sure. “You’re still really scared of her, aren’t you? Even though it’s been a really long time since you’ve seen her?”

“I am,” she answered honestly. “She’s my mother. No matter what she’s done, it’s hard not to want to please her. That scares me. Her stubbornness scares me. Her ambitions scare me. So between her and the press, there is a lot at stake if people see me. If they use that to find us.”

She drew in a deep breath, keeping together the frayed ropes of herself by pure will. “Now, the decision is still mine, and it will be final when I make it. But, I know that before—” she rarely mentioned Peter Pan by name. Neither did Henry. “—I didn’t always discuss things with you. So, I thought this time I could try to do that.”

He blinked at her as if she had become something he didn’t understand. Something miraculous. “You want to know what I think?”

“Unless you would rather I just decide. I can do that.” The entire point of this conversation was to acknowledge that he was growing up. That didn’t mean her motherly heart wanted him to. “But if you’d like to tell me, after you take some time to think, then yes. Again, with the understanding that I’m—”

“I know. You’re in charge.”

“For now, we need to get you to school.”

His lips pursed as he stared at the image of them in the mirror, then he smiled at her reflection. After giving her hand a squeeze, he stood and slung his backpack over one shoulder.

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For the next practice session, Regina asked to meet with Emma alone. And once again, Emma struggled. At times, she was fine. She was engaging and spoke without mumbling, looking at her notes, or enunciating the way a robot might. Then, just as she hit her stride, she would stumble. It happened at a different point in the speech every time. Sometimes ten minutes in. Sometimes five.

Near the end of Emma’s third run-through, Regina held up a hand, stopping her. A weary Emma eased into her desk chair, watching her screen with the trepidation of someone expecting bad news.
“I know,” Emma blurted out. “I know I don’t have it yet. Just give me another few days.”

“You said that a few days ago.”

Emma pounded her fist on the arm of her chair. Once. Then again. “Look, I know you want to bench me. I know you’re afraid I’ll get up there and make you and Cybersheriff look like an idiot, but I don’t want to throw in the towel yet, okay?”

Regina tried to say her next words as softly as she could. “What is it, Emma? You know the speech. That’s not the problem.”

“I don’t know. I really want to do this. I mean—I don’t, but I want Cybersheriff to…” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “I think you could do great things with it.” She sat, elbows on her knees, hair close to becoming a curtain that hid her face. She lifted her head. “Can I tell you something? Something personal?”

Regina gave a slow nod, uncertain. The question itself was a vulnerability, and she couldn’t treat it like it was nothing.

“I used to go to some swanky places back when I was hacking. Not all the time, but sometimes. I’d use stolen credit card numbers and go to expensive hotels and restaurants. But I didn’t do it a lot, not as much as I could have.”

Regina felt the desire to find out more and quelled it. She had to maintain her professional boundaries.

“When I went to those places, I always felt like there were people who could tell I didn’t belong. And if I talked to anyone too long or did the wrong thing, everybody would see it. And if I didn’t care what they thought, it wouldn’t matter as much, but there was always this small part of me that did. That wanted them to look at me with respect. I haven’t gotten a lot of that in my life.” Emma closed her eyes. “And now I am going to be in front of a whole bunch of these people. A whole room judging me, and I’m pretty sure they’ll all think I’m a joke.”

Emma steepled her hands in front of her face, her thumbs pressing hard into her chin. “I’ll get over it. I’ll get it together.” She let her hands fall and met Regina’s eyes earnestly, asking for Regina to believe her.
Regina had to say something. She knew it. Emma had the look of someone surrounded by flames, trapped by the hundreds of orange and red hands reaching for her, incessantly rising from a misshapen body of fire.

Henry had told her she should go to the seminars. Even after thinking. He had said it was the right thing to do. Regina hadn’t promised him anything, though they had talked about it for a long time. He even had ideas for how she could disguise herself.

“I do know what it’s like to fear people’s judgements,” Regina said. “Did you know that what I wore to my high school prom was actually printed in three magazines? Two of the magazines printed glowing reviews and the third tore my ensemble apart. Called me frumpy and awkward.”

Emma looked like she wasn’t certain what to do with the quiet revelation, like someone gave her a gift she was sure would be snatched away if she tried to open it. “So that last one was called ‘Lying Assholes Review’, right?” Regina never smiled at Emma these days, but she did now. “How—how did you deal with it?”

Regina looked down at her desk. “Well, my mother got the reporter fired for one thing. Later on there were too many stories, too many reporters and far too many people. I treated it like a war I could win by gaining enough influence and refusing to show weakness. I told myself that one day all of the people who hated me would be forced to admire what I achieved. And then, I could give, build, help. I could be more magnanimous. I could leave behind all the expectations of…” She thought of her mother. “Everyone.”

When she was very little, her mother was always so busy. So absent. Except when Cora judged Regina needed her firm hand: selecting what she wore to school or parties, maintaining her perfect grade point average, choosing her extracurricular activities. Her friends and the boys—later, the men—she chose to date were carefully assessed by her mother. So many judgements, and most often Regina was found guilty of being insufficient, incapable, or foolish.

She fought the urge to keep her gaze averted. She was giving too much. Breaking her own rules of engagement. When she finally looked up, the support and understanding from Emma was so fierce, it defied distance and reached through the screen. They both instinctively understood things about one another. She wondered if that would always be true.

“They were going to judge me no matter what I did. I wonder, if I had just been the person I am now, how that would have gone. At least then they would have judged me for me. But, it’s hard to escape the voices in your head that tell you you’re not enough.”
“Yeah, it is,” Emma said, almost to herself. Her next words tiptoed even softer. “What am I going to do?”

Regina wondered about the nature of burning buildings, and how sometimes the sparks that caused them came from long ago. How in the end, all acts of courage came down to running forward headlong.

“For the presentation, do you think you can just…repeat after me.”

“Repeat after you?” Emma blinked a few times. “I don’t get how that’s supposed to help me when I’m on the stage at the seminar.”

“There’s a plan I have been considering.” She clenched her fists, trying to be brave enough to say her next words. “But I would have to come to Los Angeles, so I have been unsure about it.”

“But you—”

Regina cut off whatever Emma was going to say, whether it was a question or an objection. “If you’re willing to hear me out, I think I have a plan that might work.”
Chapter Notes

Hi all! Happy Thursday. This is your captain speaking.

Once again, your may feel turbulence during your flight. In particular we are flying over an area named "Mal". We will not be flying over it for more than two chapters. Also, there won't be an in depth tour of Mal-Land. It's just a place we need to fly over. Flight attendants will be moving about the cabin offering Mal voodoo dolls and pins. Do as you must.

I'll share too that the next chapter is called: The one with Snow unchained.

I remain incredibly grateful for all of your support. Please keep the kudos and comments coming. They give me super writing fuel. Like Popeye and spinach. Only, yanno, with less of a sailory vibe and more of a writer with a laptop vibe.

BTW, if you feel like it, come say hello on Twitter: https://twitter.com/mariacomet

Part 21 – The one with the speech

Regina picked the place: the Ritz Carlton near the Los Angeles airport. The proximity to the airport gave it a feel of business, and the Ritz Carlton name was one that people associated with elegance. David and Mary Margaret flew in three days early as Regina had instructed. She sent them to tailors, barber shops, spas, and fitness clubs that she knew catered to a certain class of clientele. She offered pointers on how to engage with the “suits”, as Mary Margaret kept calling them. She gave them a mission to convince twenty people to go to the seminar. With the Nolans canvassing, and the responses they had already received to email and direct mail marketing, they expected sixty to eighty people to attend the seminar.

“Mission complete,” David announced when Regina arrived on Thursday, and the trio sat together in her room. “Thirty people.” He raised his hand for a high-five. Regina rolled her eyes upward, as if greatly put out, but a smile peeked out. She clapped her hand against his.

Her mother would have found it childish, and the Regina groomed from a young age to take on the mantle of Mill Enterprises would have agreed. As if either of them knew anything about the wonder of childhood. Regina’s father tried to give her glimpses into that world, but her mother always discovered them and dragged her back to that lumbering monster she called reality. Cora lectured seven-year-old Regina about becoming more concerned with making the right friends than her silly dolls. When Regina was ten, Cora reprimanded her for reading foolish novels about heroes, and gave her a business book geared toward children. At the start of every school year, Cora reminded her that she was expected to be in gifted classes and to excel in all of them. In many ways, the first time she experienced childhood was through Henry’s eyes.
She saw flickers of it when she was with Emma, too.

_Damn it._ Thoughts of Emma still refused to stay corralled.

David called her name and, startled, she drew back from her thoughts. “Yes, David?”

“I just wanted to thank you for coming.” His sincerity warmed her. “I know we haven’t always seen eye-to-eye through this process, but you being here despite everything means a lot. For all of us.” He half-rose from his chair to give her a quick, one-armed hug. The Nolans were huggers. It wasn’t her comfort zone with anyone except Henry, but she was getting used to it.

In one of her only ventures from her hotel room, she agreed to meet with them for breakfast the next morning. As part of her concession, she wore dark sunglasses as camouflage. She felt a bit foolish, but it was Henry’s idea, and she had to admit there was merit to it.

They planned out the day: more canvassing for the Nolans, and a reminder email to everyone who had agreed to attend. While they waited for the check, which the Nolans insisted on picking up, David received a call from Emma, saying she was boarding her flight and everything was on track.

“Disneyland tomorrow after the thing,” David told Emma cheerfully. Regina was able to glimpse a much younger version of Emma on the screen of his phone as the call came in. “Hey, half a day at Disney is still better than a full day almost anywhere else. It’ll be our reward.” He paused then turned his head toward Regina. “Regina, I didn’t think to ask. Did you want to go?”

She didn’t want to explain too much, so she kept her answer vague. “I’m sorry, but I already have plans.”

David and Mary Margaret cast confused looks in her direction but, to her relief, took it in stride.

While David talked about the rides he and Emma wanted to go on, Mary Margaret leaned closer to her and asked, “Hey, do you want to see Emma as a teenager?”

Propriety demanded that Regina say “yes” to that kind of question no matter who asked. A cursory glance at even the most intrusively presented photographs of someone’s children was not truly
She didn’t just flick her eyes to Mary Margaret’s screen. She found herself taking the phone. She studied the lean string-bean of a girl, blonde hair much longer than she wore it now, cascading down her back. She swiped the image to the next one, noticing Emma wore a leather jacket in both pictures. And in the next, the one she secretly liked the best. David sat on a throne with a paper crown on his head, while Mary Margaret struck a similar pose, and Emma knelt between them with a wooden sword in her hand. In the leather jacket. In the next picture at the same location, Emma played the part of a mighty steed, hunched over as Mary Margaret rode on her back. As she and Emma laughed, Mary Margaret clutched Emma’s shoulders with one arm as she waved the faux weapon.

It seemed so much like the Emma she wanted to be her friend. It cracked her polished exterior. Human beings under duress instinctively either fought or fled. Regina made her excuses to head up to her room. Later, she checked in with Mal, verifying their plans for the weekend.

Regina, Emma, and the Nolans had agreed to meet at 8:00 p.m. that evening for one last rehearsal. Emma was splitting her time between CyberSheriff and her cases for Commissioner Gold, so she wouldn’t arrive from Portland until the last possible moment. The start time for their final walk-through gave Emma plenty of time to relax after her flight.

It also gave her time to meet up with Mal. At home, she had debated what to wear, weighing either a black cocktail dress or the same business suit she planned to wear all day. She valued her privacy too much to purposefully reveal her weekend plans to the Nolans and Emma, so she decided the dress would have to wait.

As per her plans, she and Mal met for a drink at around five p.m.

“I hope you weren’t thinking about leaving soon?” A playful feminine voice spilled into her ear as Regina sat at the bar. The woman addressing her had her hair back and was dressed in an all black skirt suit. The shell under the jacket of the suit was dangerously low. It didn’t quite cross the line of unseemly for a businesswoman, but it did play with the line aggressively. The skirt did the same, revealing long legs and a hint of thigh, tempting without actually showing too much. Regina registered the temperature of her warming skin; the condensation on her glass, which felt colder than before; her toes rolling as they felt dipped in icy water. She curled and uncurled them.

“This is usually when I try to gauge if you’re interested in women with a reference to The Advocate, or my ex-wife, or something,” The woman said. “But this time,” she motioned the bartender over with a wave of her hand and ordered white wine before continuing. “I’m just going to hope I’m right and that you’ll let me keep you company.”
“I suppose I can let you do that,” Regina said, and then Mal grinned and they stepped toward one another, sharing an embrace. Regina would have ended it quickly but Mal didn’t cooperate, holding on for a length of time that flirted with being improper for a public place. It had been over a year since their last encounter. She had known Mal for many years—an old college flame who happened to live in L.A. Who drifted in and out of her life, shared some fun, and was content leaving things casual.

Mal gave Regina a slow, burning once-over. In Storybrooke, Regina might go days without anyone meeting her eyes beside Henry, much less this vivid and joyful inspection of her. In her old life she had played the part of the hunter, but never prey. Feeling wanted was delicious; it pulsed through her, warm and heady. It also made her nerves jitter like a rung bell.

Mal eased into a chair beside Regina. “It’s really good to see you, Regina. So, what’s the plan now that you have me in your web?”

Regina mined through her memory for information on how to flirt. “I’m busy until early afternoon tomorrow. After that, I have until late afternoon on Saturday.” She tried for an alluring smile. It didn’t quite reach her eyes because she was thinking about it too much.

Regina sank the stirrer deeper into her almost-empty glass and stirred compulsively. The ice made tinkling sounds against the side of the glass. She managed to stop, but still toyed with the straw.

Mal gave a full smile, confident and lazy. “We could head to my place.”

“Just so you know, I’m trying to keep a low profile.”

Mal revealed her canines and gave a rich laugh. “Aren’t you always?”

Regina continued to feel inept and finished her drink. “We can stay here, too. I checked and they offer in-room couple’s massages. I didn’t want to assume.”

Mal leaned in to whisper in her ear. “That’s funny, I have been assuming a lot. And I think we should explore that in more detail at my condo.”
It had been such a long time. Regina’s body and nerves felt like a pendulum swinging from extreme to extreme: pleasure and anxiety. It only increased when Mal touched her knee as they continued their conversation. “I can work with that.”

They talked for about an hour, then Regina gave her a key to her room, while she sought out the meeting room Cybersheriff would be using tomorrow. She was, of course, ten minutes early. The others were two minutes late. Regina feigned working on her iPhone, an illusion meant to convey the relaxed state of someone who hadn’t checked the clock at least three times.

“Hey Regina,” Emma’s easily recognizable voice reached her. Emma was hauling her backpack over one shoulder. Her hair was in a loose ponytail and glasses were perched on her nose. She wore a wrinkled Star Wars t-shirt and equally unkempt shorts. She expected that, by now, seeing Emma would feel like the spikes of an iron maiden against her back. Necessary pain to endure until she was set free in three months. Instead, it was the first delicious gasp of air after holding her breath underwater for as long as she could.

She hated it.

She smiled cordially, though her eyes were wary. “Emma.” The greeting was a slight movement of her mouth. Being around Emma felt like an attempted invasion.

David and Mary Margaret entered on Emma’s heels; Mary Margaret was wearing a brown floppy hat with a fake blue and white flower attached to the wide brim. Regina refused to look at it. Snow had agreed to wear an outfit in a sensible navy blue tomorrow.

Together, they walked through everything, including the entire presentation. Emma was still visibly nervous, but got through it. Regina’s lips twisted as she gave David and Mary Margaret a questioning look.

“Emma, how are you feeling,” David asked.

“I still suck, huh?”

“You do not.” He insisted and moved to stand beside her. “Right, Regina?” he prompted.

“It is better,” she said honestly. Emma was no longer getting tongue tied, though a section that had
not been a problem previously was stilted and half-mumbled this time. If there was a pattern to which point in the speech Emma lost her bearings, it would be easier to remedy, but there wasn’t. “Which reminds me, we should test out our plan this evening before I go.”

“Regina told us about her plan, and we think it’s a great idea,” David said, watching Emma carefully. “Do you think it will help?”

“We should test it out,” Regina interrupted, trying to spare Emma from having to reassure him. If they tested it and it still didn’t help, Regina would be at a loss. This, helping Emma and Cybersheriff, was why she had come. Why she had taken a risk. She refused to entertain the idea that it wouldn’t help, that she had come for nothing. “I’ll head to the other room.”

Before she could, however, a quiet, tapping came at the double doors of the room.

Mal ducked her head in. “Hi. I was just looking for—” She spotted Regina and entered the room fully. “Regina, I was just going to get a nightcap at the bar. You didn’t answer your phone.”

Regina’s phone mocked her from the back of the room where she had left it. Her time with Mal was meant to be uncomplicated. When they spoke on the phone about the weekend, Regina provided only basic logistics of why she would be in town. She did not want or intend for the world she escaped to with Mal to intersect the world of her new business. Even at dinner earlier, she told Mal what conference room she would be working in that evening, but nothing else. Regina also suggested Mal get a deep tissue massage at the spa and charge it to her room. It was a calculated invitation meant to ensure the twain of her life did not meet. It seemed important, though she didn’t closely examine her motives. She was naturally reserved. Perhaps that was why.

Perhaps not.

Regina wondered if there was a way to salvage the separation she had tried to cultivate. “Thank you, Mal, it will probably be another hour,” she said hurriedly.

“Who’s your friend?” Mary Margaret asked, and Regina winced.

She supposed she would have to introduce Mal, now that the issue had been pressed. “This is Mal. An old friend of mine. Mal, this is David, Mary Margaret and Emma. They’re my partners in the business venture I told you about.”
“Pleased to meet all of you. Sorry to interrupt. Regina, I just wanted you to know where you could find me. I’ll just hang out there till you’re done.” She gave Regina a wink and waved to everyone before disappearing from view and closing the door behind her.

Regina straightened her suit jacket. Having a friend was nothing to be ashamed of, she told herself firmly, even as the others in the room stared at her with varying degrees of interest. She kept her professionalism fixed and glanced to each of the expectant faces. If they wanted more of a scoop on Mal than what she had said, they were going to be very disappointed.

“The test,” she reminded them. “Emma, please be ready to go,” she said as she marched towards the second, much smaller conference room.

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Emma put her suit jacket on last. She knew that the hotel air conditioning had not failed. When she asked the others about the uncomfortable temperature in the room, they were surprised. In fact, Mary Margaret said she was a bit cool. Emma wondered why Team Nolan Securities couldn’t feel the stifling, hot-as-a-swamp-in-July heat.

“Did you sleep alright?” Regina asked, as if that might be an explanation.

No, of course, Emma hadn’t. The odds of her getting a good night’s rest were long on most nights, but on this one? She worked out, she took Nyquil, she coded, and in desperation, she drank three beers from her mini-fridge. They charged her $15.00 a beer.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better once you start talking,” David said. Emma gave a tight nod and watched the clock at the back of the room, the ticking sounding to her like the sharpening of an executioner's blade.

They tested various equipment.

Regina retreated to a small office down the hall so she could watch the live stream.

Emma paced.
As people began to file into the room, Emma decided to self-medicate by going to the bar and getting a quick shot of tequilla. She came back in, sat in the front row and didn’t look behind her, even when the noise of people milling grew loud. Her fingers constricted around the sides of her chair, one leg compulsively bouncing in place.

The sweltering heat continued to try and strangle her. Her mind boiled, coherent thoughts bubbling only to burst.

*Fuck, Fuck, Fuck.*

The eyes and faces of the mob behind her, those she hadn’t even seen yet, assaulted her like rotting vegetables. They sneered and whispered to one another how she didn’t belong. And never had. And never would.

David introduced her, a verbal defibrillator that jolted her into overdrive. Sweat gathered on her temples and under her shirt. She fought to believe in herself, while inner voices screamed about her inevitable failure. She couldn’t shut them up. Fifty-six men and four women sat in banquet chairs, under which a maroon carpet with gold swirls spread itself across the entire room. David smiled at her from the podium. Regina had advised her not to use the podium because it created distance. Her fingertips shook unless she concentrated on keeping her hands still. Emma really wanted to clutch on to something, to block herself.

The suits waited. The faces in the crowd blurred, her scattered mind unable to hold focus.

“Hello, my name is Emma Swan.” She had memorized the speech, and she knew more came after that. She just didn’t know what.

*What the hell was the next line?*

Someone gave a nervous cough.
She turned to David. He likely offered her an encouraging look. She couldn’t concentrate enough to make out his features. Her tongue thickened in her mouth. She knew it would be like this. An audience watching every second of this mistake. Her chest was rising and falling, yet she didn’t feel like she was breathing. Submerged in a taunting ocean, she tried to breathe, but swallowed liters of saltwater.

“Emma, I’m here.” A low voice murmured into her ear from a plastic ear-piece. “I want you to tug on your left ear if you hear me.”

Emma moved in slow-motion, the action crystallizing in her mind first.

Lift hand up. Check.

Grasp ear. Check.

Tug.

The earpiece was Regina’s plan. She couldn’t be in the room with them, not with all the power-players that might be there. She refused to wear a wig or something equally banal. During the seminar, Regina had informed them, was when there would be the greatest risk of her being recognized. If she had to wear sunglasses or the like during the rest of her stay in Los Angeles, she was fine with that, but the presentation required something else.

Regina was sitting in a small office about three doors down. She and Emma each had an earpiece, so in theory, they could talk to one another, except of course for the fact that Emma was giving a speech. Regina had also arranged for a video monitor so she could see Emma.

“Now,” Regina’s voice was even and determined, pushing her will towards Emma. “I need you to take a deep breath.” Emma didn’t know if she could. Her chest rose and fell. “Again. Slow.” Emma adjusted her collar, an excuse to loosen the damp fabric from her neck as she obeyed.

Regina prompted her. “My name is Emma Swan, and a few years ago I stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from people just like you.” Emma parroted the words. She drew in another long pull of air and released it without being told.

“I didn’t use a gun. I didn’t go into a bank or a house…” Regina continued reciting the words.
“All I needed was a laptop and one person in a multi-million dollar corporation to let down their guard.” Emma said as the next line came to her.

“Good.” Regina’s voice rested on Emma’s shoulders, made deep circles against her skin, loosening her muscles.

Regina being there with her, even indirectly, scared away the loud, conflicting voices in her head.

*She just had to do what they’d practiced. It would be okay.*

Emma’s hands steadied as a projector came on, the screen to her right displaying images of news articles about her theft and arrest. She spoke without help until three slides later. They’d switched the order of two slides the night before to add clarity. She’d forgotten and what was now on the screen didn’t fit with where she thought she was in the speech.

*Fuck.*

Her mind became a giant blank page.

Fear wasn’t so easily overcome. It waited in the shadows for its chance. It tried to push her back into the cage she’d stood in at the beginning. She grappled to stay free but her eyes fell on the audience—the intimidating-as-hell audience. She remembered a few sentences, but they were wrong, they were supposed to be at the end. The voices telling her she should have run away started again. Her heartbeat pumped harder, warning her to prepare for disaster.

“Listen to me.” Again that stroking touch of sound jerked Emma out of the anxiety-induced fog. “Right now every single person in that room is terrified of you. Soon, you’ll give a demonstration that will scare them even more. What you need to do is get to the demonstration. Ten more minutes.”

*Right, ten minutes.*

For the next few minutes, Emma clung to the lifeline of Regina’s voice as she told the rest of her story. By minute five, her nerves fully let her go once again and the prison of fear retreated. All of her practice clicked into place and the speech flowed.

Emma’s part of the presentation was far from perfect but the audience didn’t snicker. They weren’t amused. They didn’t check their phones and watches, wondering when the screw-up at the front would stop talking. Instead, the mood grew somber and silent. No coughing, no clearing of throats, just soundlessness so immovable it felt solid.

Fumbling start or not, the audience was fucking riveted. *Son of a bitch*, Emma thought, *Regina had been right*.

Emma didn’t realize how long it had been since Regina’s last comment, until she heard, “Just one more minute.” She had crossed the finish line after miles of running and barely realized it.

She finished up and it was time for the demo. She was gluttonous for the relief that filled her. She didn’t feel herself move as she took her place in front of the computer at the podium.

Mary Margaret asked for a volunteer.

For the demonstration, Mary Margaret sent an email to someone in the crowd and asked them to click on the link inside it. A surge of confidence made Emma smile for the first time all morning. This—this was her world. As the url downloaded an executable file to the volunteer’s cell phone, Emma directed the audience to watch the display screen. Within minutes, she projected her exploration of the hacked phone, going through the contact list and received texts. An uneasy murmur ran through the crowd. Emma took care not to open any of the contacts, but the point was that she could. She pointed out how easy it would be to install software that allowed someone to hear and record phone calls. Worse, since the device had a microphone, she could listen in at any time—phone call or not.

After the demo, a flurry of questions began. David fielded most of them, but even though it wasn’t planned, she took a few as well. The amount of interest from the group, the way they stood, faces drawn in worry as they asked about their various concerns, reaffirmed Regina’s plan. In their eyes, Emma had transformed into the Bogeyman. She lived in the digital world she had lectured on. Here, they were amateurs, and Emma wore the jersey of a professional all-star. She didn’t have to be afraid of them.
She took a break after one question to glance at David, then Mary Margaret. They both looked proud and pleased. David pretended to scratch his chin, but gave her a thumbs up against the side of his jaw.

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Emma kept herself collected until the room cleared. She’d discarded the jacket the moment her speech was done, and when the door closed behind the final potential customer, she swirled it over her head in triumph. Her attempt at a business face gave way to exultation as David strode toward her, lifting and spinning her around as he hugged her.

Excitement was bright on his features. “I am so proud of you. You did great.”

“It was rough,” Emma admitted. “I mean it was really rough.”

“But, you did do great. And…” Mary Margaret paused on purpose, giving her next words an air of suspense. “Twenty potential clients who want to talk to us about our services.” David initiated a group hug. Afterwards, Mary Margaret seized Emma’s jacket and gave it a twirl, cowboy style. “Damn the man!”

“Damn the man,” Emma agreed, hugging both of them again.

The double doors to the room opened and Regina joined them. Emma grinned at her, expecting her to share in the exuberance, or at least in the relief that things were over for now.

“We should celebrate,” David exclaimed. “Regina, didn’t she do great?”

Emma surged toward her, greeting her as a rescuer. She wanted to throw her arms around Regina and hug the hell out of her. Regina had kept her from drowning, and her gratitude was an unyielding flood. “Holy crap, Regina you saved my…”

The calm, shuttered way Regina regarded her and slid her hands in her pockets, stopped her momentum. “You did well, Emma. Next time, pick a woman from the audience for the demonstration.”
Wait—what? an inner voice asked.

“Twenty leads,” David sounded triumphant.

“A very good start,” Regina’s tone was pacifying.

Mary Margaret didn’t look quite as happy anymore, watching the interplay between her daughter and their new business partner. “Emma shined during the demo, don’t you think, Regina?” Snow prompted.

A tight smile barely touched Regina’s mouth. “She did,” she replied as if it was a fact, but not one she wished to linger on.

“Maybe next time we’ll start with that. Emma had the audience eating from her hand,” Snow pushed. Regina didn’t respond.

“Hey Regina—thank you.” Emma said. “I don’t know what I would have done if...thank you for everything.” A nod in answer. That was it. Not a word. Not a smile. But, Emma thought helplessly, this was a win. Surely that deserved a thaw, however brief? She didn’t expect much but...something? Anything? They’d done this together.

David cast a grin around him. “One guy in the front row went totally white during the demo.”

“A lot of people took our business cards too,” Snow noted, still watching Regina carefully. “Regina, don’t you think Emma—” Emma squeezed Snow’s arm, stopping her from trying again to elicit a reaction from Regina.

“The business cards look amazing,” Emma told Snow, spreading a little pride in her direction. The business cards were totally black until exposed to body heat, then they would show the Nolan Securities logo and contact information.

Regina softened long enough to rest a hand on Charming’s, then Snow’s arm. “I think we can consider this a success. I’ll start work on the seminar for New York.”
She didn’t touch Emma.

She seemed to feel Emma’s lost stare because she turned towards her. “You did well, Emma.” Emma wanted to step closer to her, but Regina was already moving away. Her next words addressed all of them. “I have plans, but if you come by the bar in an hour or so? I would love to buy all of you a drink to celebrate. If you have time.”

“I think Disneyland will wait that long,” David agreed for all of them.

Regina was leaving? She was just...leaving?

Because she had plans. Plans with a “friend”.

Snow wrapped an arm around her as Regina made her exit. Emma barely felt it.

She and Regina were....this. Just this.
Happy Thursday everyone! This is your captain speaking. On your flight today - slightly cloudy skies with a chance of a light drizzle. We're within a few chapters of the end of arc 2 of Love Hack. After that, there will be one more arc to go. You all might remember the contest I mentioned many weeks back. I am entering that on August 13th and I am using chapter 2 of this story to do it. Keep any body parts you have that you're not actively using crossed for me.

Coming up in the next few chapters we have a lot of Emma/Henry and Emma/Regina. And no Mal. Promise.

BTW, if you want to throw things at me for Mal or for the angst, you can find me on Twitter - https://twitter.com/mariacomet

Part 22 – The one with Snow unchained

Emma arrived at the bar first, eyeing its colorful, hot pink and burnt orange decor. High above hung large rectangular light fixtures of varying length. Most of the lighting was soft and unobtrusive, except near the bar, where bright white light rose from the translucent floor. She found a grouping of chairs at the edge of the room that had plain old tan armchairs. She settled in, waiting, grateful she wasn’t surrounded by magenta.

When Regina and Mal joined her, she only saw Regina at first. Her lips painted a deep red, a contrast to the black silk shell. Emma stood, a reflex. Until Regina turned to Mal, offering an inviting, generous smile. They took seats next to one another. At one point, Regina turned enough for Emma to see that the back of her shirt dipped down into a ‘V’ criss cross pattern. It hinted at the curve of her upper shoulders, the delicate indentation of her spine as it rippled on its perfect canvas.

Regina leaned back in her chair, looking so content. Emma remembered the steamboat. Regina had had a similar look then. But not since. At least not around her.

It was only then Emma processed that both of them had small rolling suitcases. Each with a coat draped over it.

“Are you heading home today?” she asked.
“Um...tomorrow,” Regina said slowly, glancing at Mal.

“Regina and I are going to catch up a little,” Mal added. “We haven’t seen each other in a long time.”

“I was surprised you were available this weekend.”

Mal laughed. “I’m surprised you managed to drag yourself away from that town of yours.”

It took two minutes for Emma to come up with an excuse so she wouldn’t have to be alone with them. She mumbled something about the air conditioning in her room and fled to the front desk.

She calculated it would take David and Mary Margaret another five minutes to come down. After that, it would be ten minutes before people wondered where she was. She waited as long as she could, then steeled herself. She didn’t want to keep watching this thing with Regina and Mal. She just didn’t see any way out of it.

She was right about Mary Margaret and David being there. They were in “Disney mode,” wearing jeans and old Mickey Mouse t-shirts. Around David’s neck hung a pair of sunglasses on a black cord. Mary Margaret had a lightweight jacket over the arm of her chair. Emma greeted them but didn’t sit down again right away. It felt better to be on her feet.

Regina insisted on buying them a bottle of champagne. She toasted David and Emma on a “job well done.” David raised his glass to Regina in return, saying something about teamwork that Emma couldn’t quite focus on. Regina spoke about the next seminar for a few minutes; Emma didn’t catch any of that either.

Small talk began, mostly David and Mary Margaret asking Mal questions about herself. Emma focused on sipping her champagne, fighting to avert her eyes from Regina and Mal. The first sip was sweet. The longer she sat there, the more muted it became. Plus, she couldn’t stop what her peripheral vision insisted on letting her see.

Every time Regina’s “friend” touched her, Emma’s entire chest felt a sharp shock. Mal’s hand made slow, small circles on Regina’s back, touching that smooth skin the color of a light amber honey. Emma clenched her teeth hard enough to crack them.
Before she’d screwed everything up, Regina would have probably noticed how little Emma said. Maybe Emma could have convinced her to come to Disneyland. And even if Mal intruded on that, maybe Emma could have stolen a few moments alone with Regina.

Maybe playful grins. Or banter. Or even a roll of Regina’s eyes at her idiocy. Something. Some part of Regina she had a right to reach out to and hold.

Maybe she could have convinced Regina to let Henry come. She suspected there would be no Mal if that happened. Henry could have added to the list of rides she and David already had. It would have been a thing. Their thing.

“You two look amazing. Headed somewhere special?” Mary Margaret asked.

“There’s a wonderful Italian restaurant near my condo.”

Emma’s eyes fell on their suitcases, that painful zapping hit her nerves again.

Regina and Mal left after having one drink.

As they started away from the bar, Mal settled an arm behind Regina’s shoulders. The din in the room buried everything but the nearest sounds, but Emma swore she could hear Regina’s heels tapping against the marble floor.

Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap, Tap.

The little girl inside her tugged at her, urging her to do something. Watching Regina walk away shouldn’t feel this way. This had never, ever been the plan.

“Hey, Regina,” Emma called out to her and took a step after her. Regina turned back, both Mal and Regina leveling curious looks at her. “Just...thank you. For your help.”

Regina paused as if searching for the right response, then simply nodded. The couple continued on their way, and Emma watched as they disappeared through the double-doors of the entrance.
Emma frowned as she pictured the beautiful gatecrasher showing up at the next seminar. What if Mal became a fixture in Regina’s life? The sting of that thought was vicious, and it refused to let up.

In desperation, she turned to David and Mary Margaret, the performance of a smile stretching across her face. “So—Disneyland?”

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David embodied delight for the next few hours, and Emma was reluctantly pulled from darker thoughts. He reminded her of the rides they’d agreed to go on. He bought all three of them Mickey Mouse ears.

Between them, her foster parents took about two thousand pictures: a shot of Mary Margaret in the teacups, David pretending to high-five a statue of Walt Disney, and Mary Margaret beaming next to Snow White (after stalking her across half the park). Which turned out to be nothing compared to the photo with Darth Vader. The Dark Lord of the Sith raised his lightsaber above all three of them as they knelt, doing their best impression of cowering in fear.

Emma’s first thought after that picture was that she should send it to Henry and Regina.

And then she remembered she couldn’t; it wouldn’t be welcome or wanted. Another reality hit her. Other than the two people with her, there was no one she could send pictures to. She felt the fear and the realization of someone falling from a great height—that there was nothing to stop the descent. Nothing to grab onto. Emma didn’t have anyone who would want to listen to the stories from today. When she got back to her hotel room, her cell phone would sit ignored and unused. She didn’t even have to check in with someone, letting them know she was back at the hotel.

Having no one in her life meant having no ties, and days like today would drift away like balloons. No one would help her hold onto the strings of them.

Mary Margaret and David beckoned her to take a picture of them in front of the iconic Disney castle. They shared a kiss because...of course, they did.

They got a stranger to hold Emma’s camera so that the next picture could include all three of them. The last thing Emma wanted to do was hold still and smile.

She did anyway.
Later, they trudged into the hotel in that post-amusement park stupor. Theme parks always inflicted a certain amount of trauma, and if life was fair, Emma should have passed out. She lay down, expecting to be out in minutes, but peace eluded her.

She tried distracting herself with games. She couldn’t stay focused on them.

She took a walk but, if anything, it made her feel more wired.

She even tried the hotel’s exercise room, jogging on the treadmill for a good hour.

After that, she took a shower and tried knocking on sleep’s door again. Nothing, it seemed, would open that door for her tonight.

The next morning she was still wide awake when her cell phone vibrated at eight a.m. It was Mary Margaret sending her pictures from the day before, including her favorite one with Lord Vader.

She found herself typing five words in response: *Can I come to your room?*

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Snow opened the door, wrapped in a terry-cloth robe with the hotel monogram. David sat on the bed behind her in a similar robe, laptop propped on his legs. Nearby was a tray with a bowl of cut fruit and two silver domes covering plates. They were all leaving today, but not till the early afternoon. They were still relaxing and making the most of it, it seemed.

“We’re you guys busy?”

“Well, I have killed Mary Margaret three times in Overwatch.” David waggled his brows. “It’s practically torrid.”

“I’m letting him win,” Mary Margaret whispered, her amusement dimming as she appraised the evolution of Emma’s shifting stances. Emma braced one hand against the wall. She pushed off and pivoted as if she might go. She inched closer. She backed up.
“I...” The words felt thick on her tongue, sticky, difficult to free. “I need...some advice. Is that okay?”

Snow didn’t react with the absolute shock Emma expected. Emma never asked for advice. Instead, Snow pushed the door open all the way and reached for her wrist. “Oh, Emma, of course.”

“Could it be just you and me?” Emma asked, allowing herself to be pulled just inside but no further.

“We can sit on the balcony. It has an amazing view.” Snow went to her husband and kissed his cheek. They exchanged a few words, then he turned his loving, encouraging smile towards Emma. It poked at parts of her that didn’t feel she deserved that kind of goodness.

The space outside was generous, large enough for a table and six chairs, all orange wicker with matching cushions, resting on wrought iron legs. Everything in this place tried to convey a light, happy aesthetic, as if just by being in Los Angeles, most problems would melt away. A section to one side of the terrace had nothing at all: just a railing and the stretched-out city below. This high up, and because of the still early hour, the city offered them silence punctuated by the occasional honking of car horns.

The air was chilly, but Mary Margaret had thought to pull a couple of extra blankets from the closet. She bundled one around Emma without asking, then sat down in one of the chairs at the table, settling her blanket over her lap.

Emma still didn’t know how to begin, and doubt began to chip away at whatever courage led her here, demoralizing her. She wasn’t sure she had a right to ask for help. She wondered if it would let things in that were too big. The lions of rejection and loss prowled inside her, never sleeping. She’d learned to live with their pacing, with the occasional attack that left her bleeding but didn’t knock her down. Only today, their attempts to maul her were relentless, and now her legs trembled under her, close to giving in to exhaustion. She was so tired of them, these things inside that tore at her. She sat down, hunched over, both hands strangling the arms of the chair.

Mary Margaret reached out to her, fingers wrapping around hers. “Emma?”

Emma’s jaw trembled, and the threat of tears pounded against her eyes until she had to set them free.
“Emma?” A more frightened question this time.

Emma lifted her head and Snow, eyes frantic and fierce with love, leaned in to brush her tears away.

“Hey,” Snow tried again. “Tell me.”

There was only one word Emma could think to say. To begin. She needed to. God, how she needed to say it. It broke free of her clutching heart because she just couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Mom,” Emma whispered. A beginning, she hoped.

Mary Margaret froze, shocked. She opened her mouth to speak but faltered until she shook her head at herself. She crumpled out of the chair, falling one knee, arms coming around her daughter. “It’s okay.”

Emma let herself sink into the embrace, her arms rising and holding on to Snow. She allowed tears to fall. They didn’t rip her as she thought they would. They surrendered, dripping onto Snow’s shoulder one at a time. Snow hugged her harder.

“This is stupid,” Emma said, shoving back, fingers curling into fists. Snow faded back into her chair, waiting. “It’s—it’s about Regina. And sort of not about her, too. I just—I’m not happy. I don’t even think I know what that looks like. And it’s been true a long time, but...I’m tired. I’m really fucking tired of not being happy.”

“So...where does Regina come in?”

“I don’t know.” She groaned in frustration, unable to label the sides waging a battle inside her.

“Emma, breathe. Take your time. I’m not going anywhere.”

She licked her dry lips and let her hands relax. She tried again. “Regina and I were almost friends. And Henry was almost a friend, too. And that felt good. But now I have the distance I usually want, and I’m so miserable I can’t see straight. I don’t know why. I don’t know what to do about it.”
Mary Margaret scraped her chair on the concrete as she moved it closer to Emma. “Usually want,” she echoed. “That sounds like maybe what you want has changed.”

Emma couldn’t stand being in her own head, she sought the salvation of distraction, moving to stand against the railing of the balcony. “You always push.”

Emma heard Snow’s quiet laugh on the breeze. “And why do you think that is?”

“Because I make you.” Emma looked at Snow over her shoulder. “If you didn’t...I’m not sure we’d all still be in touch. You didn’t let me run. You kept us together.” Relief rained down on Mary Margaret’s face, and Emma could tell she’d needed to hear those words for a long time. “I’m sorry.”

“God, Emma, I don’t want an apology.” Snow strode towards her, taking her shoulders and carefully turning her so that they stood face to face. “I want you to have more. Someone has to want more for you. And if that has to be me, and it pisses you off sometimes, then that’s fine.” Snow paused, almost bracing herself as she waited to see if Emma would say something.

Snow was passionate by nature. Full of endless fire when she believed in something. It occurred to Emma that in the play of her life, she’d cast Snow as “the pest”, “the nag”. The occasional tension between them was because of Snow’s willingness to carry that burden.

It was only when Emma shook her head and kept quiet that Snow went on. “You know, I remember my college graduation and my wedding, but those moments, big moments, they’re always a blur. But small moments, like the first time David took my hand, or the first morning you came into the kitchen after you came to live with us. I remember every single detail. You aren’t letting yourself have any of that.”

“I’m not good at any of those things.”

“How do you know?”

Words came together in an ill-crafted patchwork of halting, incomplete thoughts. “Because hoping for people in my life, people to care, it—over and over again. No one chose me. After a while, it didn’t matter why. It was just true.”
Like breathing or the sun rising, Emma thought. In a strange way, predictable and constant.

“Not with us,” Mary Margaret countered.

She tossed up her hands, retreating back one step to escape Snow’s gentle touch. “You think being around you and David feels normal to me? It doesn’t. It never has. And when it was Neal, it was the same. When he left, that felt like returning to my real life.” Emma leaned her head back, focusing on an airplane breaking through the drifting clouds above them. “But this—this doesn’t feel normal anymore either, and I don’t know what the fuck that means.”

“You lost hope.” Mary Margaret breathed, eyes aching. “Something made you want to hope again. Someone.”

Emma gave Snow the side-eye, a moment of levity. “It’s not like that. It’s not always some big love thing.”

Snow raised a brow. “Isn’t it? Sometimes people come along and they force you to make choices. At least if you want to keep them in your life. They make you see everything. They make you see yourself in a way you never have. It’s a blessing, Emma.”

Emma didn’t have much denial left, scraped away like old paint to reveal bare wood. She trusted her weight to the railing behind her, feeling weary. “Well right now, it feels like shit.”

Snow ducked her head to hide a smile. She gestured back toward the chairs with her head. “Why don’t we sit?” She patted Emma’s arm and drifted back to a chair, stretching out and reclaiming her deserted blanket. Emma hesitated but didn’t have the energy to do much more than comply.

“About six months after we met, David and I got into this fight. We were about to graduate from college, and he was seriously considering taking a job with Lockheed Martin. I called him a sellout and said he was betraying himself...and other ‘people-power down-with-corporate-evil’ things. You know how I get.”

It made Emma smile, easing the tension. “Yeah, I do.”

“It was one of the worst fights we ever had. He wound up storming away from me.” She stopped, her face glazing over with memories before she spoke again. “I had all these high-and-mighty values.
I never imagined being with someone like him, this preppy, rich, Dudley-do-right who believed in a system I fought against. So, I told myself the argument was a good thing. Dating him had been a mistake. I mean he was a resident advisor of his dorm, for God’s sake. It would never have worked out. I was headed to law school so I could defend people’s rights. I didn’t need him.”

Emma could imagine Snow being stubborn even back then. Snow, so clear-eyed about herself and the world. Believing in a way Emma didn’t understand.

“But, from the beginning, David always refused to stay in the box I wanted to put him in. This straight-laced guy started a program to offer free tutoring to students. He constantly helped people. Helping them move into their dorm rooms, listening to their problems, inviting them to sit with us if he thought they were lonely. He became an R.A. because he wanted to do some good. I wanted to fight these big fights, but he made me see the small ones.”

She shifted, pulling the blanket up, falling silent as thoughts kept riding the streams of her mind. She reached out to adjust Emma’s blanket, too. “And, that day we fought, it felt like my heart had walked out with him. I knew I had to make a decision. At that point, I was so sure I knew the path I was on and where it would lead. Trying to be with him despite our differences, that was a new path. I knew nothing about it. And if I chose it, all I could do was hope we wouldn’t let one another get lost.”

The misery inside Emma grew heavier. She wanted to be younger, so she could toss the blanket over her head and pretend nothing else existed. That’s a coward’s way, she reprimanded herself. She had come to Mary Margaret for unbridled truth.

She shook her head. “It’s different with Regina. We’re not—we weren’t even friends. I did the disappearing thing with her. I screwed up. So now, she acts like she barely knows me.”

A small nod. “Excuse me, while I appreciate the irony of you complaining about someone being distant. So, she won’t play by your rules and accept whatever you’re willing to give? Also, ironic, by the way.” The ribbing included a wink. Emma propped her boots up on an empty chair, smirking. Snow had a point and she wouldn’t argue.

Emma cocked her head. “David didn’t work for Lockheed Martin after college. He worked for Ameri-something.”

“That was part of the compromise we made. After almost a week, I couldn’t take it anymore, and I came close to running to his dorm, only to find him almost running to mine.”
Emma snorted. “You two really are sickening.” She reached out and took Mary Margaret’s hand.

“I know,” Snow exclaimed in delight. She squeezed Emma’s hand. “You can’t have them in your life if you stay on the path you’re on.”

“So, I have to change, or I have to lose them? But, even if I wanted to, Regina isn’t going to forgive me. Henry probably won’t either.”

“They might not,” Snow agreed.

“That’s not very encouraging.”

“The choice you have to make is hard. Loving someone as a friend or a lover or family—none of it makes sense, really. It’s instinctive to protect yourself from pain. But to love someone you have to do the most ludicrous, illogical thing: give them the power to devastate you.”

Loving someone forced you to stand in a room full of swords, sharp edges pressing into you from every direction. She’d known that for most of her life.

Emma breathed out, banging the back of her head once against the top of her chair. “Fuck, this is terrifying.”

“Which part? Changing and letting them into your life? Trying and risking that they won’t forgive you? Or letting yourself want more than you have now?”

Emma didn’t hide or dodge the question. “All of it. I don’t know how. I don’t know how to do any of it. I’m like that kid at school who eats paste while everyone else is doing multiplication.”

“Well, maybe first you decide to put down the paste. Then maybe you start with one times one. Two times two if you’re feeling really brave.”

A binary choice. Complicated calculations reduced into one simple yes or no. “Can I sit here for a while?”
“Can I sit with you?”

“Yeah. I was kinda hoping you would,” Emma said, and kept hold of her hand.

They sat amicably for about an hour, until Mary Margaret glanced at her watch, reminding them both that they had to leave soon.

“Hey,” David greeted them with a grin as they finally came inside. “I was about to come out after you.” Then to Snow. “Did you tell her?”

“Tell me?”

Mary Margaret was giving him a hard stare, but for once, he didn’t see it. “Mary Margaret and I have been talking about moving to Storybrooke,” he announced, sliding an arm around Snow and sounding proud of the mere possibility.

A revelation like that coming out of the blue didn’t seem fair. “You mean Regina’s Storybrooke?”

“We’d be closer to you, and it would be easier to confer with Regina.” Snow used a voice intended to soften the surprise. “David sort of fell in love with it. Are you completely freaked out?”

She was for a second. Emma breathed in and out, waiting for the shock to turn into abject terror. It didn’t. Something else happened. Something brave.

“We were waiting to talk to you about it,” David said. “We didn’t want to ambush you with it.”

Emma went to them and kissed first David’s cheek, then Mary Margaret’s. “I appreciate that. I know I’ve been...a pain in the ass sometimes. If you want to live in Storybrooke, or wherever, I want it for you. What if—what if I helped you find a place?”

“Well, we were thinking of coming down for a week to look for something,” he said. “You’re welcome to come. We need to tell Regina too, just to give her a heads up.”
“I could help. I could go a couple of days early and scout some things out. Gold gave me a mountain of paperwork he wants me to go through, and I don’t think he cares where I do it. I can check with him. If he’s cool with it, we can look for a new place for you, like, as a family thing.”

She could sense a million questions forming in David’s head. Mary Margaret looked like someone who’d won an Academy Award but was doing that pleased but humble face.

“You’re right, David, we should warn Regina we’ll all be in town for a bit.”

Emma grinned at her and nodded. “I guess you should.”
The one with the drip, drip, drip of reconciliation

Chapter Notes

Happy Thursday everyone, this is your Captain speaking. I want to start out by thanking my wife. You all have no idea how much she adds to this story in every way. She brainstorms with me, she helps me edit (well, usually she helps me edit a few times), she encourages me, she's patient with my impatience. You know, I could fly higher than an eagle but she's the wind beneath my....wait...that's a song. Anyway, I just want to thank her.

In this chapter: boxing metaphors, suspicious strangers, flowers - and more! We're coming into bluer skies and the famous Hillary Clinton look-alike band will be providing entertainment.

Can you all believe we are 23 chapters into this thing? Cause like...we're 23 chapters into this thing. Thank you for sticking with me this far.

As always, everyone, I truly, deeply, really appreciate all the encouragement, kudos and comments. BTW, if you want to offer life wisdom or ask me for bad advice you can find me on Twitter - https://twitter.com/mariacomet

Ten minutes into the meeting, David made his announcement. Regina’s eyes jumped to Emma’s face on her screen to see if she was surprised. She wasn’t.

“So, we’re moving to Storybrooke. If you’re okay with it,” David continued. “And if we find a place, maybe we can move back the third seminar? Just till Mary Margaret and I get moved in? It’ll take us a few weeks to pack up our lives in Boston and get settled.”

The request was reasonable.

The news was surprising.

Regina was still adjusting.

It was the Thursday after the Los Angeles seminar. With the Chicago presentation coming up in four weeks, they had all agreed to weekly meetings to touch base on the progress of both Cybersheriff and Nolan Securities. Regina tried to sell the idea of bi-weekly meetings, but David promised he’d send out a report in place of a second meeting. He wasn’t willing to be “quite that corporate.”
“I don’t want you to feel like we’re invading,” he went on. “You have a great town, Regina.”

It was a nice thing for him to say. The Nolans were good people, and Henry adored them. Regina didn’t feel quite that level of fondness, not yet, but she did enjoy their company. They would probably want to come over for dinner every now and then. She loved cooking for Henry, but it would nice to have more people at the table occasionally.

“It would allow us to work together on Cybersheriff more easily too,” David pointed out, rightly.

The only real negative was her habitual caution about letting people past the gates into her life. And, she might have to see Emma after the three-month contract was over. She didn’t deem that a serious issue. From all accounts, Emma visited David and Mary Margaret as often as groundhogs looked for their shadows. She could handle that.

“I think it’s wonderful news.” Regina meant it. She just needed the idea to defrost a little more. “We have ten houses for sale, I think. We don’t have a large real estate market here, and I tend to keep an eye on the available properties.” This was due to her own paranoia. She wanted to keep a close eye on anyone moving into her town.

“Only ten? We were hoping for something with four bedrooms and two baths,”

“Also, something with character that isn’t boring,” Mary Margaret added.

The corner of Regina’s mouth lifted. She did like these two. “I’d suggest looking through all the listings. You never know what might work. Something might surprise you. I’ll send them over after we hang up so you can take a look.”

“Oh, just so you know,” Mary Margaret said. “Emma volunteered to help. She’s going to Storybrooke in about a week and a half to start looking at what’s available. We’re making this sort of a family project.”

Regina’s knuckles went white around the arm of her chair. She reminded herself that she need not be afraid or intimidated by the mere presence of Emma Swan. “I’m a little surprised.” Such a thing wasn’t wise to say. It required explanation, and she didn’t wish to stroll too deeply into family business or malign Emma. She built a cover for her words by adding, “I know you’ve been working on several things for Commissioner Gold, Emma.”
Emma shrugged. “I found something that gave the Portland P.D. grounds for a search warrant. Since then, Gold has loosened up.”

“By the way,” David said. “Can you change our plane tickets so we fly to Chicago from Portland instead of from Boston? That way we can come to Storybrooke and spend four or five days looking at houses, before we have to leave for the seminar.”

The Nolans were once again flying in a few days before the presentation. Of the three seminar locations, Regina knew Chicago the least. She didn’t have as many contacts or tips. As a result, it would be harder for the Nolans to canvass the city and try to get the word out.

Still, Regina wasn’t concerned. Her business strategy for Nolan Securities was working well so far. David had managed to convert three meetings into contracts for network security. One agreement alone was worth seven thousand dollars. David explained it excitedly, using phrases like “intrusion prevention,” “user roles,” and “data encryption.” She knew he had another four meetings this week.

“I’m sure changing the flights won’t be a problem,” Regina said.

She steered the conversation back toward other features the Nolans were looking for in a home. She made sure to give him the contact information for Storybrooke’s one realtor before she hung up. It was generous calling the town’s agent that, since her day job was freelance graphic design. She did have a license, at least.

“Is there anything else we need to discuss?” Regina asked when conversation ebbed.

“Um,” Emma cleared her throat. “So I was reading this article. It said white suits inspire trust. Should I maybe get one?”

Emma’s question was surreal, like in a dream when illogical things wove together in a way that could be understood but not reasoned. Emma had worn a suit in Los Angeles, but wouldn’t have thought to if Regina hadn’t suggested it. Regina asked if Emma if she could send pictures on possible choices before deciding. She gave her opinion on the outfit and shoes that matched it. Emma capitulated, showing no strong feelings one way or the other about any of it. She simply looked relieved when the wardrobe choices were done. Regina set appointments for a haircut and styling too. That wouldn’t have occurred to Emma either without Regina.
“Emma,” Regina said, "white is a very unforgiving fabric. You should probably stick to what you already have."

“Ah, right. Also, well, um, I checked the Los Angeles papers a few times. About you, I mean. To see if...” The uneasy tinge in Emma’s voice conjured an image of her pacing, though Emma sat there, hunched over. “Well, y’know, if they maybe mentioned you? So far, so good.”

“I—well, yes.” Apparently, stammering was catching. “I’ve checked too. I am pleased that everything has been quiet.”

Every morning and evening, she obsessively checked the Los Angeles newspapers online. She needed to reassure herself that no one had seen her. She found nothing.

It didn’t give her peace. Not when she couldn’t stop herself from expecting the lazy river of her life to swell into rapids. The continued drifting waters did not ease her. They only made her feel like there was something under the surface that she couldn’t see.

She knew that Marco took the steamship out every few days during the off season, to check for issues and keep the engine in working order. She asked if she could go along. It helped. It was the one thing that did.

On the monitor, Emma was shifting to one side, as if trying to look around Regina. “Those are nice flowers.”

“Thank you.” They were a typical gesture from Mal. These post-visit messages usually kindled lethargic, sensual memories.

Seeing Mal in Los Angeles had been different than it usually was. Getting into Mal’s car in Los Angeles after the presentation, heading toward the beach, should have been the perfect escape. Yet, something had distracted her that she couldn’t identify. It reminded her of straining to hear a sound again that she’d heard in the distance. The time with Mal had felt good, but it hadn’t felt right.

A few minutes after ending the Skype call, she sent over the entire inventory of homes for sale in Storybrooke. She was right, there were only ten.

After that, she was free to return to her mayoral duties and try to forget that Emma would be coming
to town.

A week later, Emma called to suggest they all go to dinner on the night before the presentation. She even volunteered to make reservations.

Regina drummed her nails on her desk, gathering her patience before answering. “Emma, I appreciate your sudden mysterious diligence, but won’t you be in town soon? Perhaps we can discuss anything else you need when you arrive?”

Regina hung up and met with Graham, trying to engineer an invitation from his son for Henry to come over and play video games. Henry politely refused then dove back into his books. Her festering worries about Henry were barbed wire rubbing just enough to cut, tearing deeper over time. Archie kept offering her advice like, “Keep trying to be encouraging.” It felt like nothing.

Two weeks later, her phone buzzed bright and early. The text from Emma read: *Just a reminder that I’ll be coming into town tomorrow. Should be in by early afternoon.*

Damn her.

During every Thursday meeting Emma was engaged, offering suggestions and asking questions. She drafted a website for Cybersheriff without being prompted. She offered to go to Gold so he could help them keep an eye out for a pro bono case Cybersheriff could officially cut its teeth on. She also double-checked that he remembered the special permission he’d granted for her to go to Chicago, despite being on parole.

Now, this attempt to keep Regina updated on her plans.

Emma was driving her crazy. It was frustrating. Since Los Angeles, dealing with Emma was very frustrating.

During the seminar, she and Emma had climbed a mountain together. She stood with an earpiece in her ear, trying to loan Emma all of the strength she could. She held the rope tight when Emma slipped, refusing to let her fall. They were a good team. Emma made the summit and Regina was proud of her.

The trip down the hallway back to the large meeting room was a short one. She had smoothed down
her suit before she entered, smothering everything except cool professionalism. She had kept her heart blind and business-focused as she entered. Emma had greeted her in celebration, a triumphant grin on display. She was incandescent with light, and every shadow was kept at bay. Her sudden flush of confidence was beautiful and magnetic.

She realized she had missed Emma’s smile.

It wasn’t fair.

She fled the post-presentation debrief as soon as possible. She did better at the bar, repeating to herself over and over she was only staying for a single celebratory glass of champagne.

Now, the absolute last thing she wanted was to have Emma around any given corner. Especially not this bizarre thoughtful version. At the hotel in Los Angeles, she had been able to control her exposure. But after Emma arrived in Storybrooke tomorrow, there was no telling where she might turn up.

In HER town. Her home.

Damn her.

To make herself feel better, Regina drafted an email to the sheriff, instructing him to drag Emma Swan out of town on sight. She smirked as she re-read it, then deleted and replaced the text with a request for his budget. She would handle this, she reassured herself, with her usual strength.

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Emma figured it was better not to surprise Regina. When she arrived in town, she parked near the Town Hall and made her presence known. Regina did the usual pleasant but impersonal thing, but that was okay. Emma had a new plan.

Step 1: Be better. Try. Or as Mary Margaret put it—put down the paste.

Step 2: Do something real to show Regina and Henry she was trying.

Step 3: Apologize.
She had googled how to truly show someone that you’re sorry. There were a series of steps to an apology:

- Be specific about what you are apologizing for.
- Tell the person you are apologizing to why they are important to you.
- Suggest something you can do to make it up to them, or ask them how to make it up to them.

She was willing to do all of that, but she did think she was lame for having to google it in the first place.

Step 4: Keep trying, no matter what.

She met with the realtor and toured a bunch of houses. She suspected Mary Margaret would probably go with the one that had the old brick fireplace and clawfoot tub. It was a five bedroom at the moment, though two of the rooms were closet-sized. David had initiated the move to Storybrooke, so Emma figured that Mary Margaret would probably have the final say on the house.

She had already called them a half dozen times since Los Angeles. She had included them in her step 1. Mary Margaret noticed but didn’t say anything. David was oblivious for now, but he’d catch on eventually.

The first night in Storybrooke, she sat in a booth in Granny’s doing Gold’s paperwork till late. The next day involved more house tours and more paperwork that night.

The second evening, Regina and Henry came into the diner. She gave them a small wave. Regina nodded to her but guided Henry to a booth on the other side of the room.

Emma let it bounce off of her. She owed Regina a lot of things: understanding was one of them. Still, it was hard to sit there with them so close. Step 2 began to rotate in her mind. “Do something real to show Regina and Henry she was trying.” She had an idea of what to do, but she wasn’t sure when or how.

She kept trying to read through one of the thick binders of transcripts. After re-reading the same line for the sixtieth time, she gave up. She rose and pressed the two black binders under her arm, then tossed some money on the table to pay her bill.

The door to the diner opened, and Archie and Marco called out a few “hellos” as they entered. Granny came from the back and conscripted them to taste a new chili recipe. They greeted Regina and Henry but didn’t approach the pair. She had noticed that before: Regina was left alone unless someone needed something. Emma attributed that to Regina’s standoffish vibe.
Marco spotted Emma, and a large smile spread across his weathered face. “Well, Miss Swan, you are back.”

Beside him, Archie swished his head from Emma’s table to the Mayor’s and back, brows raised high. “Hello Emma, good to see you again. Are you in town for a while...”

“Hey Marco. Archie. I’m helping some frie—” She rubbed her chin, uncomfortable calling the Nolans that now. “Sorry. Helping my parents find a home here. The Nolans. I think you met them?”

“Oh, are they moving here?” he asked. All eyes in the diner were now on Emma.

“Yeah, they’ll be in town in a couple of days. They live in Boston so, um, since I live in Portland, I’m just looking some houses over before they get here.”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll love it here,” Archie said, friendly and smiling. He gave one more curious look between Emma and Regina.

Marco came a few feet closer to where she stood. “You know, I stir the Pinocchio’s engines by taking a little ride every few days. The mayor has been going with me. You could come along if you’ll be in town in a couple of days. Your parents, too.”

“That would be nice, Marco. Thanks, I’ll tell them.” She had no intention of saying anything to them. Time on that boat was special to Regina. She didn’t want to intrude.

Marco and Archie left her and sat down at the counter.

Emma hovered near the table she’d deserted, glancing at Regina and Henry again. To Step 2 or not to Step 2. That was the question. But approaching Regina when Henry was with her, was that a good thing? A bad thing? She didn’t want to come across as manipulative. However, this whole thing was about Henry, too. The debate in her head seemed endless, and she wasn’t a patient person. She jammed one hand in her back pocket, and approached them as she might a long, dark hallway in a first person shooter game.

“Henry, Regina.” They’d been talking and now they stopped. Regina latched onto her with an
expectant expression. Henry watched with curiosity. “Regina, I wanted to ask you something. Could I sit down a second?”

“We’re having—” Regina began to refuse, but then seemed to think better of it. “Of course.” Henry slid over, making room for her. She didn’t bother to set the binders down. She was probably better off if she didn’t stay long.

“I’ve been thinking. How—how big a deal would it be to let my contract with Cybersheriff go past the three months?”

Regina lifted her eyes to Emma, raising a brow. “You mean the three months you insisted on?”

She deserved that. “The three-month thing was stupid. I was stupid. Maybe we can start the pro bono stuff sooner than we thought. I don’t want to leave before I know everything is okay. If a blank end date makes you nervous, I get that. You could put in that I have to give you 60 days notice or something.”

Regina’s features darkened with suspicion. She leaned forward, folding her fingers before her. “And what does ‘okay’ look like to you, Emma?”

Emma felt like Regina had just turned a mag flashlight on her. The pulse in her throat jumped. “Um, I figured at least until we have a few cases under our belt. Or maybe till Nolan Securities hires on a couple more people.”

Regina’s eyes narrowed. Emma scrambled to her feet, trying to stay true to her hit-and-run approach. “So would you be okay with taking out the end date?”

“And that’s what you really want me to do?” It was the kind of question a prosecutor asked the defendant on a witness stand when they expected pressing the issue would result in a different answer.

“Absolutely.”

Regina was still hard-eyed, but polite. “I’ll consider your proposed revision.”
Emma gave them a thumbs up and mumbled a goodbye, rushing toward the door. She exploded free of the diner into the cold air. She rounded the corner and banged her forehead into the side of the building because—really? A thumbs up? What the fuck was wrong with her? She let her fingertips dig into the brick, her head spinning. She’d actually gone through it.

The pillars holding up her old world began to teeter and crack. If it fell, it could crush her. She could be left with less than before.

Or not. The ruins of her world could reveal a new one, huge by comparison. One where the dreams in her head found shape as she refused to let them be wasted anymore.

The next morning, exactly a week before Chicago, her parents arrived in town. The first day they looked at the house Emma suspected they would pick. As Emma had predicted, Mary Margaret gushed over the antique brick fireplace that stretched all the way up to the ceiling.

While they toured the house together, David happily pointed out all the improvements he thought he could make. As they peered into the two cramped bedrooms, he said, “I think we can take this wall out. Make it one room.”

Emma found herself saying, “Maybe this one could be mine when I come to visit?”

David and Mary Margaret froze where they were, as if moving would break something fragile.

“Well, it’s why we wanted a house with four bedrooms,” David told her quietly. “We don’t want you to feel any pressure. But we want you to have a space. Just, for whenever you want it.”

“That - that sounds good. Thanks.” It was the perfect moment to call him “dad” for the first time. That word lodged itself in her throat, sticking painfully but refusing to come out. She was still working on it. And so many other things. She went further into the tiny room, studying a nook in one corner. One of the pine floorboards made a faint wheezing noise as she stepped on it.

“I can fix that,” David said, making another mental note.
Emma set her hands on her hips. “If you get me a tool belt, I’ll help.” He grinned at her.

They decided to continue looking over the next few days, but to keep that one in mind.

That first night Regina invited David, Mary Margaret and Emma to dinner. A formal dinner at her house.

Emma wasn’t up for that yet. Mary Margaret told her it was okay to build up to some stuff. She looked online for a nearby flower store and picked out a bouquet that came with a glass pitcher. It was pretty, and pitchers were useful. She wasn’t sure it was the right kind of gift, or if sending anything was a good idea. She just knew that her chest felt tight until she did it.

The next day, Saturday, Henry peered at her through the window of the diner, just after noon. She waved at him. His expression didn’t change, but he came inside. A bustle of customers were scattered among the tables and booths, providing a steady, unblunted din of white noise. Granny didn’t believe in trimmings like background music, so nothing blocked out the occasional swell of a loud conversation.

Henry didn’t bother hanging his navy fleece jacket or the matching insulated vest on the coat rack. He pushed into the booth opposite her, his head tilted at a downward angle so that Emma could clearly see the solemnity in his eyes. “What are you doing?” He sounded like a father asking about someone’s intentions towards his daughter.

Emma motioned to the open binder before her. “Paperwork. Does your mom know you’re here?”

“I told her I was going to the park.” He gestured out the window. “It’s right over there.”

“Okay, so, innocence by association?”

He ignored the joke and launched into a list instead. “Staying with Cybersheriff. Coming to town to help David and Mary Margaret find a house. Sending flowers last night. Mom knows you’re up to something. So do I.” Emma pressed back against the booth as far as she could. She hadn’t anticipated someone directing questions at her before her plan had run its course.

“It’s not like that.”
“Then what is it like?”

She warded him off by raising her hands. “Okay, okay.” She paused, torn.

This was the bitch about trying to ask forgiveness from someone when she had no right to. If her actions were only about reconciliation, then their real purpose was manipulation. She’d be acting only to get a reaction she wanted. That would be selfish. On the other hand, how could she ever earn forgiveness without somehow showing what she was trying to do and be? She couldn’t stop herself from hoping for a second chance, couldn’t pretend that wasn’t there in her heart. Regina and Henry had inspired this flame she carried, this race she ran. Yet, it was also true that it wasn’t only about them.

She scratched the back of her neck, ruminating on how to explain. “I’m trying to change. Not just for you and your mom, but you’re part of it. I thought my life had to be this one thing. I was too scared to try and have more. I want to be someone that maybe you and your mom could like again one day. But, it has to be real. I want to be that person, not just pretend to be. So, that’s what trying to do.”

His eyes were so clear. He never hid anything he felt. “You haven’t even apologized.”

“People say things all the time. Why would either of you believe me?”

“So, you’re trying to show us you’re sorry?”

“Look, kid, I have no idea what I’m doing. Like, I keep trying to show your mom I’m taking Cybersheriff seriously? I think I’m just pissing her off. I just...” She gestured toward him, then her hand fell back to the table helplessly. “I’m so tired of being scared. I want to be brave, or at least braver.” She leaned in so she could look in his eyes. “I know I let you down, Henry. I’m sorry.”

His face tightened. “I know what it’s like to be scared.” His eyes fell to the table, head bowing. “I know it’s hard.”

She had no right to comfort him. It made her hesitate.

Whatever she was to him now, she couldn’t just sit there when he was showing her a part of him that was in pieces. In a surge of motion, Emma reached his side of the booth, nudging him till he moved. She slid in next to him.
“Listen, only a complete idiot wouldn’t be scared with everything you’ve been through.” She moved her arm over the back of the booth. She wanted to sling it around him. Maybe one day she’d be able to again. “Here’s what I’m slowly figuring out. Being scared? It makes sense. That’s not where things go wrong. But, you have to stop once in a while and ask what is worth facing the fear. If you don’t, that’s when it gets all screwed up. That’s when you lose important stuff.”

He didn’t reply, just reached across the table and picked up the paper cover from her straw. He twisted it round and round, then made a knot in it. “I only have my mom. She only has me. I thought you could be someone else for us.” He tossed down the now-mangled paper. “I know you saved me, but I’m not ready to forgive you yet.”

She cupped the back of his head. Not a pat, a touch. A connection. Just for a second. “I get it. Really. But, you should know, I’m not going anywhere. After Mary Margaret and David move in, I’m going to be around.”

She wanted to believe the conflicting emotions making him furrow his brow were a mix of hope and doubt. That some part of him held a door cracked open for her. “You have to apologize to Mom too.”

“I was thinking that after some time, if your mom sees I’m trying to change, maybe she’ll be more open to an apology?”

“But that’s you trying to protect yourself,” he challenged her. “Apologies aren’t supposed to be easy. They’re supposed to be a little scary.”

She nudged his side. “Yeah, I told you I was bad at this.” She rose and stepped back to her own side of the booth. “I just didn’t want to like, force it on her. I don’t know what she needs.”

Henry considered that and started to say something, but the door to the diner opened, distracting him. His brow furrowed a moment later. The man who had entered took a moment to take in everyone in the room. His face was square, except for the small jut of his jaw. A reddish mustache buried his upper lip. He wore a three piece suit without a tie and a long pea-green overcoat. When Granny came out to meet him, he said, “Hi, can I get some coffee?”

Henry kept his eyes on the man, tilting his head as he rested his chin on the back of the booth. He pursed his lips as if he noticed something, but decided to move on. He turned back to Emma. “It’s been weeks and weeks. She needs to know you’re sorry,” he said as if it was the most obvious and
She had a plan.

Then again, sometimes you had to say to hell with plans. This kid, this phenomenal kid, probably knew more about generosity than she ever would. She wanted to give to them. She couldn’t ask for a better tutor.

His mood melted into cautious optimism. “Mom said we’re having dinner here tonight. Can you come?”

It was news to her, but she nodded. “Yeah, I’ll be here.”

Henry grinned. Just a little.

“There’s no harm in waiting. Remember, if she’s not in a good frame of mind, you can retreat and try to apologize another day,” David said.

“But if you start, keep yourself open. No matter what she says, don’t get angry or defensive. You hurt her, so she might have the instinct to hurt back.”

They had made an offer on the house Emma figured they would, and were a little nervous as they awaited an answer. Emma didn’t tell them, but she had already bought them an old horseshoe on ebay. She heard it was lucky. She wasn’t sure if that was true or not, but it was the thought that counted. She wanted to make sure they knew that she was supportive of the move.
“Meet her eyes,” added David. “Eye contact is important.”

“Don’t be too discouraged if she’s not ready yet.”

“Guys,” Emma called, stopping the waterfall of advice. “If I don’t go I’m going to lose my nerve.”

“Call us later,” Snow said.

“Yeah,” David agreed, “call us later.”

“Um, guys? Thanks. Really.” The words “I love you” still stuck in her throat. She would keep working on that. She did her best to tell them with her eyes, hoping they could see her heart there.
Happy Thursday, everyone. This is your captain speaking.

Some of you seemed concerned about the man in the green coat. Folks, can't someone just wear a green coat? I mean....you all are a suspicious bunch. I blame Hulu. As a second note, quite a few requested a JealousRegina! scene. I'm not sure if the room we have left in the story will allow for that, but it is a very good idea. Also, I love you guys. So, you never know what I might do with it.

I am going to tell you for the millionth *checks how many chapters I have posted* er...at least the 20th time how much I appreciate all the feedback. It keeps the engines on this plane going more than you probably know. Especially when a scene gives me trouble. I'm looking at you chapter 22. So, again, thank you.

Btw, good fic ideas or green coated man questions can be tossed at me here or on Twitter - https://twitter.com/mariacomet

The mystery of Emma’s recent behavior had required some thought. Regina had formulated a hypothesis on the reason for it. Emma felt guilty and was trying to make herself feel better by being nice. It would end eventually. The only question was what to do about it in the meantime.

Regina decided that subtle confrontation would compel Emma to end the penitent performance. She had just the tool for a reality check. When Emma rang her doorbell late Sunday morning, she realized with a delicious glee that the moment had come.

Standing in her doorway, Emma rubbed her palms on her jeans and produced a wobbly smile. “Hey, can we talk for a second?”

Regina stepped back to let Emma in. “We can go into the office.” She waited for Emma to come inside before closing the door and leading the way.

She draped herself in the chair behind her mammoth desk, elbows resting on the armrests. “It’s good that you came by. I wanted to talk to you about your contract.” She gestured for Emma to sit. Emma did, then steadily tapped her fingertips on her knees. “I can make the adjustment you requested.” It was challenging not to let a superior sparkle show in her eyes; she forced a smile away from her lips. “However,” she paused to further enjoy the moment. “I would require a one hundred and twenty-day notice.”
The drumbeat against Emma’s leg stopped, one of her hands frozen in mid-air. “Four months.”

“It may seem excessive,” Regina said casually, “but I cannot afford random upheaval when the business is just getting off the ground.” She waited, with a trickle of eager anticipation, for Emma to stammer and get wide-eyed. She refused to participate in Emma’s quest for self-(absolution.

None of the cowardice Regina expected surfaced. Instead, Emma’s tentative posture grew into a determined one. She hunched over, coiling her hands around the edges of her chair like she was about to propel herself and the chair forward. “Four months,” she said.

“You’re agreeing?” Regina asked.

“Yeah. If that’s what you need me to do, then….okay.”

Regina shook her head at Emma and her nostrils flared. She jerked open a drawer, taking out a copy of the contract. She flapped through the pages in agitation till she reached the appropriate one. “You will notice the suggested amendment on that page. On the second to the last page, you will see your contract end date has been changed.” She slid the paper towards Emma. Emma plucked a pen from a square pencil holder. “If you would initial the hundred and twenty day requirement then do the same with the contract date, please?”

Emma did as requested and closed the document. “Thanks for the changes. I actually wanted to talk to you about something else too.” She put the pen back and offered the contract to Regina.

Regina took it and waited for whatever else was coming. Probably something thoughtful, she thought with disdain.

“I just wanted to say...” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I wanted to apologize for hurting you and lying to you. I uh, apologized to Henry too. Just so you know.” She cleared her throat as if something was blocking her words. “I was a jerk to you. I was a jerk to him.”

Regina held up a hand. Emma wasn’t done. Her lips were pursed on a word, but Regina didn’t want the apology, just as she didn’t want Emma in town. “Emma, your apology is unnecessary. It was quite some time ago.”

“Unnecessary?”
Regina didn’t bang her fist on her desk, her lessons in composure demanding her restraint. “As in, there’s no need to discuss it further.” She needed Emma to go. “Was that everything?”

“I...okay. So you—um, okay.” Emma rose, moving around her chair towards the door, then paused. “Thanks.” Regina folded her fingers on her desk, sitting up straighter, doing everything she could to will Emma out.

Emma pushed down on the door handle but didn’t complete the motion of opening the door. She stopped, lost in her thoughts, halfway between going and staying. She turned back to Regina and drifted toward her desk, not meeting her eyes until she spoke. “I need two more minutes. I...miss you, Regina. Which is kinda weird because we were only friends for a little while.” She stepped closer. “On the boat that day, I was trying to warn you off because you and Henry make me feel like my parents make me feel. Connected.”

Regina could no longer stay seated, anger clawing from her gut to her throat. She rounded her desk to confront Emma. “Your parents? Since when are they your parents? And while I’m at it, since when do you stay anywhere. Wasn’t that one of your points of contention? How I used my skills to ‘manipulate’ you into working for Cybersheriff? You think you’re the only person in this world who has reason to be afraid of people? Do you think you are in any way special in that regard? Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” She came closer still, voice quieting in an illusion of softness. “Making you feel better, Emma, isn’t a responsibility I wish to take on.”

Emma’s arms fell to her sides, limp. A moment later, she shoved her hands in her pockets, her stance shrunk, taking up less room.

Regina loathed the sight. If Emma wouldn’t leave then she wanted the angry Emma from the night they’d fought so long ago. “Nothing to say?” It was cruel, even more so because she actually smiled. She moved her hands behind her back, a militaristic, at-attention pose.

Emma’s jaw clenched at the taunt. “I never thought I was special.” A mountain of history under those words filled the room between them. Regina had hit a bullseye she wasn’t even aware was there. “And I don’t want anything from you.” Emma motioned to her. “We had this cool thing. This cool...something. I wasted it. I don’t want to be like that anymore. I just wanted you to know that I felt that way and that I’m sorry. That’s it.”

Emma’s stubbornness plucked at Regina’s fraying control. She survived by corralling the chaotic feelings inside her until they were tamed. Letting free only what she wished to, when she wished to. Whenever there was too much to hold back, something was bound to escape. Regina balled her fist as hard as she could and pressed it to her brow as she felt pain break free. “I don’t care. I don’t care
about your sudden revelations. I trusted you with my son. I. Trusted. You.”

Emma’s eyes shone with tears. “I know.”

Regina hated seeing those tears. She smoothed out the contract with extreme deliberation. She rearranged a few knick-knacks on her desk, the photo of her son straightened so that it would perfectly face her when she sat, three folders on green initiatives stacked with military precision, her coffee mug rotated so that the handle faced out. “I will always appreciate what you did for Henry and me, but I think it’s better we put the past behind us.” She gave a tight smile, without the intent to wound. “We have a business to consider.”

She told Emma to go away over and over in her head.

“Right. Thanks for listening.” Emma didn’t wait for Regina to say more, she left. Regina heard her boots on the tile floor of the foyer. The front door opened and clicked shut.

She scrubbed at her face with trembling fingertips. After everything, maybe she should be more ready to forgive. Remembered pain reverberated inside her. She had thought Emma was different. A bright place, touched by sunlight in a gray sky.

Emma had always been dangerous. Likeable. Attractive in so many ways. She wasn’t an explorer, but Emma made her want to travel fresh paths.

No. She needed to put that behind her once and for all.

Her static world was what was best, with all of the controls in place to keep out too many deviations.

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Emma lay on her bed at the bed and breakfast, not moving. She pressed her head back into her pillow as hard as she could to still her mind. The whole time in Regina’s office, she’d felt like she was on the Titanic and she knew the ship was going down.

She needed to call her parents.
She just wanted to feel a little bigger first. Right now, a thousand moments from her childhood raced in her head. It made her want to get in her car and run. Drive anywhere else. She didn’t know the little girl inside her had held hopes about today. She would have tried to warn her that the point wasn’t about what Regina did.

She wasn’t sure the kid inside her would have listened to all that reasoning. Kids dreamed. That’s just what they did. She stopped herself from calling David and Mary Margaret for a few more minutes. She didn’t deserve the comfort they would offer. She’d made choices and this was the predictable outcome.

It was her due.

When she came back to Storybrooke, her plan had four steps.

Step 1: Be better. Try. Or as Mary Margaret put it—put down the paste.

Step 2: Do something real to show Regina and Henry she was trying.

Step 3: Apologize.

Step 4: Keep trying, no matter what.

No matter what, she repeated as she forced herself to sit up.

She should focus on doing the right thing, and do whatever she could to be honest with two people she’d wronged. She debated if that should be an official step or not, but decided to just lump it under Step 4.

She’d just tell her parents she didn’t want to talk about it. They wouldn’t like it, but she thought it was the most honorable thing to do. She grabbed a half full bottle of water from her nightstand and gulped down a mouthful to ease her parched throat.

Her phone buzzed and she glanced at it, expecting it to be Mary Margaret.
It was a text from Henry. *Heard you downstairs and now mom wants to ‘help’ me clean my room. You apologized and it didn’t go well, huh?*

*It’s okay, we’re not fighting* she texted back. She went through a series of adding and deleting words.

*Yeah, I apologized. No matter what, remember that I did this. I screwed things up. Just me. Your mom not trusting me, especially around you, makes sense.*

A long pause before he answered. *Maybe you were right about waiting.*

*It’s a choice. She has every right to say no.*

*Are you leaving?*

She punched in four letters with more certainty than she’d felt in a long time. *Nope*

A brief one-word reply came from him. *okay*

She stared at her phone, wondering if there would be more. When there wasn’t, she typed, *Just an FYI— been watching your videos. You might want to read your comments, if you haven’t in a bit.*

She held the question of whether all this was worth it up in her head and knew there was only one answer. Fear was tricky and subtle, it burrowed into solid structures by finding cracks. It quickly became an infestation. Yet its bite felt toothless right now, all gums and pressure.

She believed in this. In Regina and Henry. David and Mary Margaret. In being there for them, being better for them. It was probably co-dependent or some other unhealthy psychological term.

Emma figured that the reason she started to push beyond her fears didn’t matter as much as the starting did. She could work on a lot of motivations later if she refused to give up on brighter things. The people she was doing this for—they made up the entire sky of her world.
She kept her eyes on that.

Emma texted David and told him she was back and she wanted to take a walk. He knocked on her door about three minutes later.

“Do we have to talk about it?” Emma asked.

He shook his head. “We can talk about anything or nothing.”

She took hold of his hand and met his eyes. “Thanks, Dad.”

His larger hand jerked under hers. He turned his head then his body away. He massaged his eyelids with his forefinger and thumb. “Dust in here,” he said, his voice thick. He kept himself facing away from her, his eyes covered. “I’m trying not to make a big deal about this,” David said, muffled, “because I know you’ll hate it if I do.”

She laughed. It felt good. She tugged at his arm and hugged him when he turned back to her. He’d never hesitated to show her he loved her and didn’t now, his arms tightening around her till her ribs hurt.

She didn’t care. “I don’t know how often I can say it. It’s still hard. But that’s what you are.”

His hand cradled her head and he kissed her temple. He kept sniffling and swiping at his eyes.

“So…” She withdrew. “Maybe let’s talk about the house?”

He nodded. “We should definitely talk about the house.”

It proved to be a decent distraction. She came back to their room later and let Mary Margaret fuss over her. At one point, David whispered in his wife’s ear. Mary Margaret’s eyes shone with light. She enveloped Emma in another vice-like hug, but didn’t say anything.

“You really don’t want to talk about what happened with Regina?” She asked when she finally drew
Emma shrugged. “I—it didn’t go well. She’s really pissed at me.”

“Maybe that’s not a bad sign,” Snow said. “You know that story I told you? I was livid with David.”

David frowned. “Wait, what story?”

“How you almost sold your soul to big business and ruined our relationship. How you came to my dorm and begged my forgiveness once you realized how foolish you were being.”

He rolled his eyes at her and crossed his arms over her chest. “I don’t remember it like that.”

“Well, I mean, you’re getting old.” Snow tapped the side of her head. “The memory goes.”

David tackled both of them to the bed, then released Emma to steal a kiss from his wife. He settled in beside Snow, leaning on one elbow. “Snow is right though. When someone can get you that mad, it’s because they care about you. Even if they don’t want to. Don’t give up just yet.”

“And you wonder why I compare you guys to Hallmark.” Emma hopped from the bed. “I’m going to go.”

“Where are you headed?”

“The diner so I can work. That’s what I did last night and the night before that and the night before that. So, that’s what I’m doing tonight.”

“You want some company?” Mary Margaret asked.

“Guys, I’m an adult.” She tweaked David’s nose, then her mother’s and left the room.
A few hours later, Henry texted again. *You left comments on all of them. All forty you watched them all?*

She had made specific comments on each video, so he’d know she wasn’t bs-ing him, that she hadn’t taken the easy way out. She just wanted to do something for him.

*Yeah. Emma answered. Gave them all a thumbs up too.*

*Which was your favorite?*

Twenty minutes later, they were still texting.

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That evening they all had “breakfast for dinner” at the diner. Henry sat next to her and though he didn’t say all that much directly to her, she considered it a good sign. She was jubilant enough to offer to pay for everyone’s dinner. It made Regina scowl at her.

The next morning Emma was still in her booth. She was becoming a familiar sight, and the occasional towns person greeted her. Outside the window, Regina stalked by and into the diner. She didn’t notice Emma until she had a to-go coffee cup in hand. Her lips parted and jaw slackened. She left without a word.

Ten minutes later, the mayor reappeared without the coffee, paperwork in hand. “You’re still here,” she greeted Emma. “Not just at the diner, though that’s true, too. But here.”

“Oh, well, I have that sleep thing, so I just decided to work. And, as I mentioned last night when you first noticed I haven’t left yet, my flight to Chicago isn’t till Thursday.”

Regina shifted, pulling at the gloves she wore, securing them to the very tips of her fingers. “We’re flying out of Portland and you live there. You could leave anytime. David and Mary Margaret are leaving tomorrow morning, maybe you should go with them.”
“But they have a rental car,” Emma reasoned. “I have my car.” Her neck muscles screwed tight near her shoulders. “Just so you know, I promised my parents I’d help them move in and fix up their new house. So, I might be in town again soon. I just...don’t want you to be surprised.”

“I appreciate the advance notice, but it’s unnecessary. You being here is fine and working together will be fine. We’re adults.”

“So, this—” Emma motioned between them “—isn’t a little awkward?”

“Is there some reason it should be?”

“Well, I mean, you did just do everything you could to convince me to leave town. I can, if you—”

Regina cut her off. “I was simply being practical.”

Emma wondered if just agreeing and changing the subject was the best idea. “Right.” She gestured to the paperwork in Regina’s hand. “What’s that?”

“Your copy of the Cybersheriff contract.”

Emma took it by the corner and pulled it free from Regina’s pinching grasp. “Thanks.”

Regina straightened her white blouse where it was tucked in. Emma wondered if, no matter how pressed her clothes were, Regina alway felt imaginary wrinkles. “Have a good morning, Emma.”

“You too, Regina.”

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Two hours later, Emma was still sitting at her booth when she saw the man in the green coat again. He approached some townspeople sitting a couple of tables away from her. “Hi,” he said. “I’m doing a story on up-and-coming, small-town mayors. Have you lived here long? I wanted to get your
opinions on Regina Mills.”

Emma knew she had no right to play the part of Regina’s protector. She told that bit of logic to fuck off and strode for the guy. She refused to just sit there and let whoever he was have free run of Regina’s town. She tapped his shoulder. “Hey. You have questions about Regina?”

His mustached mouth lifted in a friendly expression. “Yes, I’m doing a story on…”

“I heard. Have you gotten Regina’s permission?”

He gave a little “you’re worrying for nothing” chuckle. “Well, I’m just asking some general questions. I don’t really need her permission.”

Just to annoy him, Emma mimicked his laugh. “Does she at least know you’re here?”

“You’re right, I should check in with her office.” He extended his hand to her. “Pleased to meet you, Miss…?”

She shook his hand. One quick up and down before her hands went to her hips. “Emma Swan.”

“Nice to meet you, Emma,” he said, and again he smiled in that pleasant way, then moved toward the door. Emma knew a liar when she saw one. Something about this guy was off. It wasn’t until he crossed to the other side of the street that Emma realized he’d never told her his name.

She shot off a text to Regina. The guy looked like he’d been going toward Town Hall, but better safe than sorry. Regina didn’t answer after twenty minutes, and Emma, still feeling uneasy, gathered her things and went to make sure Regina got her message.

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Regina was on a conference call with a “green” consultant for an hour and asked Belle to hold her calls. Sometime in the middle of the call, she pulled up her e-mail and clicked on a new message from Agent August Booth. His update was that the “investigation was ongoing and he couldn’t say
more.”

She refocused on her call, shaking her head in annoyance. Half of the things the man on the phone was saying she had already researched in depth, though he had clarified a few things.

Belle knocked and entered without being asked, which was highly unusual. She walked toward Regina with lips pressed in a grim expression and set down a message.

A man in town was asking questions and claimed to be a reporter.

Regina hung up on her call with only the barest of explanations.

“I got another message directly after the first one,” Belle said, placing that one on Regina’s desk too.

If demons existed in the real world, they’d surrounded her, cackling at how hard it was for her to breathe. Her and her prim wardrobe, her lists, and her barrier of professionalism, they could all be torn through as if they were paper.

“Regina, let me call the sheriff,” Belle suggested. Regina didn’t answer and charged out of her office and toward the street. She felt as if she was stepping in thick tar, unable to move fast enough. Belle followed her as far as the door. “They said he was near the diner, then the general store.”

Her lungs forgot how to do their job, giving her far too much or far too little air. The exertion made her chest tighten.

It was the worst time for Emma to jog up to her. “Hey, did some guy stop by to ask you about…”

“Guy? A reporter?” Regina demanded, lower back burning as if she was asking it to carry too much.

“Yeah.”

“Where?”
“It was a while ago.”

“Where!”

“The diner.”

Regina clenched her emotions to her, trying to hold them in check. “How long?”

“Thirty minutes?”

Emma followed her as she stormed down the street, asking anyone she saw about him. The people she encountered became wide-eyed and frightened, surprised by the frantic way she approached them.

He had evaporated. She went back to her office and checked in with Graham. He and his deputy were driving around town but had yet to find the man. She clenched her teeth to the point she thought they might shatter.

“Henry,” she said, color and reason disappearing from the world around her. “I need to get to my son.” Emma’s hand caught her arm carefully. “I need to—”

“Let me drive you.” She pointed to her car just down the street. “I’m right there.” Regina followed her because she couldn’t think of what else to do. Emma opened the passenger door for her then moved to the driver’s side. “I’ll need you to tell me where to—”

“Oh god, I might make it worse.” A trembling hand covered her eyes, and her voice pitched higher than usual. “If they’re looking for me. I might lead them to him.”

Emma thought a moment then pulled her cellphone from her pocket. “Okay, so one step at a time, right? We need to get Henry. You call the school and David and Mary Margaret will get him. I’ll call them after you hang up.”
Emma breaking things into steps made her feel like she was breathing again. The panic began to lose
ground. “I’ll tell the school to ask for i.d. Just to be sure. Let them know. We need to meet up.” That
was the next step, she told herself. “We can’t go to my house. There’s an old nuclear bomb shelter
on the edge of town.”

“A nuclear shelter?”

She knew she probably sounded insane. She didn’t care. “We’ve had some eccentric townspeople.”
Her ability to command even in the heat of battle rose. “No one from outside this town would know
about it. It’s safe,” she insisted, daring Emma to argue with the only semblance of a game plan she
had.

Confusion and worry formed ripples on Emma’s forehead, but she pressed her phone into Regina’s
hand. “Call the school, okay? Then we’ll call my parents.”

Those two things done, Regina gave Emma directions to the shelter. On the drive, she stared out the
window, hoping maybe the reporter would magically appear and she could confront him.

Hope emptied from the day and it leaked from tomorrow too. “I fought so hard to build this life for
us. I was so careful. Someone must have seen me in Los Angeles. I don’t have a plan. I got
complacent and I don’t have a plan.”

Emma glanced at her and moved her hand within touching distance of Regina. “Regina, we don’t
know what this is.”

“She should…” She snatched Emma’s phone from where it rested on the dashboard. She pulled up a
travel site and tried to think of a place to run. A place she didn’t think anyone would find them.
Europe was where she had fled before. They didn’t care much who she was. Henry had only been
out of the country once. Maybe it would be good. Just for a few weeks to start, a vacation. She didn’t
buy the tickets yet. Cash and prepaid credit cards, she should get those first. “I should tell Belle. I
should cancel my meetings for tomorrow.”

They were driving down the single road through the woods that led in and out of town. “Wait,
just...take a second.”

“Pull over here,” Regina ordered, recognizing the two bent trees marking the path to the shelter.
“Regina.”

“We can’t stay out in the open. We need to go. If you want to help me, then check on my son.” Regina couldn’t move fast enough, stumbling over branches and roots in her path, trying to navigate the woods in pumps.

Emma caught up with her. “Hang on. Let me have my phone. I’ll text my parents and see.” Regina didn’t even realize she still had it and handed it to her. “Wait, are those flights to Norway?”

The question ignited Regina’s anger. “That is none of your business,” she snarled.

Emma drew closer. This close, Emma’s concerned eyes became speckled green glass with hints of copper. They offered her much more they than took. It reminded her of Los Angeles. Only this time, Emma was the one trying to make sure she didn’t fall. “I’m only saying—take a few minutes. When everyone gets here, let’s talk it through. Just for five minutes.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand how brave you are and how you look right now. And I understand that you can’t make a good decision if you’re reacting to stuff instead of thinking it through.”

It wasn’t unreasonable advice.

She nodded.

As they continued into the woods Emma’s hand was a light pressure between her shoulder blades.
Happy Thursday everyone!
This is your captain speaking. We have detoured to Downer's Grove, Illinois. They have really good donuts here and you may eat your fill of the virtual donuts in the virtual cafeteria. What, you've never seen a virtual plan with a virtual cafeteria before? It's a new feature of the SQ2017's.

As always, thank you all for all of the feedback.

FYI: Green-coated man is now going to be called GCM by me because I can be lazy about this type of thing. And because I think it sounds cool.

BTW: If you ever want to say hi, debate life, confuse me with references to sports or tell me random secrets, I'm @mariacomet on Twitter.

Chapter 25 - The one with the vigil

The concrete shelter was shaped like a giant barrel, the walls and ceiling were rounded. The main room was about fifty feet long, a little longer than the average school bus. The much smaller second room was separated by a lip that had to be stepped over. The steel door at the front had once hung off its hinges, allowing any person or creature to enter. Rumor had it that it had been a popular make-out spot for years. It was one of Regina’s first refurbishment projects as mayor. She chose new paint and other hardware, such as the replacement for the drooping steel door. It was grim, this place, but right now she felt safe.

Henry hovered near David and Mary Margaret, watching her, perhaps believing that his mother bringing him here was a sign she was losing her mind. Emma stood between Regina and David.

She was certain none of them understood why she felt the urgency to leave town. The stranger hadn’t asked anything alarming. His questions were about what she was working on in town, how long she had been mayor, and what the townspeople thought of her. On the surface, the inquiries were benign, and so was the man in the green coat.

David weighed the situation out loud, “So, the possibilities are: the guy was legit, or…” He wasn’t able to get that out without both Regina and Emma objecting.

“Legitimate reporters don’t disappear,” Regina insisted.
“The guy gave me skeevy vibes,” Emma said.

“Okay, sooooo...other options. Press. Someone connected to Regina’s mother. Someone who maybe intends to blackmail Regina, or is generally up to no good.” David didn’t have a whiteboard, but Regina suspected that if he could have, he’d have taken marker in hand and made a list. “Anything else?”

It was a tidy assembly of possibilities. The thought of each one gave her the sensation of an ant colony marching under her skin. A thousand tiny imaginary legs scurried up from her feet, following a path towards her shoulders.

“Why can’t we just stay here for a couple of days?” Henry asked.

“You mean the shelter?” Henry’s head swiveled from his mother to the other adults to see if he could find an ally. He didn’t, the others still wrestling with the situation. “Sweetheart,” Regina said, “this will probably be more than two or three days. If we’re right, the people we’re talking about won’t give up that quickly or that easily.”

Henry’s shoulders dropped, but his eyes fixed to Regina’s. He was too brave not to demand honesty, even when he was afraid. “How long will we be gone?”

Regina knew she wouldn’t be able to give him an answer that satisfied him. “Henry, we need to leave as soon as we can, and then we have to see what happens in the next few days. I told you about my mother, who she is. The press...during what happened with the charity, they surrounded me everywhere I went. Dozens of them. They waited for me outside airports, they followed me in cabs. They ambushed me in the lobby of hotels. If they couldn’t get to me, they tried to get a story from anyone they could. It could be very bad for us and the town if we stay.”

Regina thought she sounded breathless. Or perhaps she just felt that way. She rubbed her temple and found beads of sweat.

“But Mom, this is our home.”

The feeling of home, it was one of the many things she hadn’t had growing up. She wanted him to have so much more than she did.
She cupped his cheek. “I love Storybrooke as much you do, but I need you to be safe. I won’t risk putting you what I went through.”

He pressed one more time. “We are coming back?”

She tried to sound calm. “The important thing is for us to try and get ahead of anything that might happen. Right now, I need you to trust me. Please?” He wasn’t entirely convinced, but the nod he gave promised that he would try. It was the best she could hope for.

“Now, everyone else?” Her fingertips tingled with cold, but she could feel the sweat on the back of her neck. Neither should be happening. She had turned on the climate control when she had arrived. “Please continue with your plans to go to Chicago. I’ll be in touch in a few days.”

The shift of David’s stance was frustrated inaction. It was like he just wanted to find the right person to punch in Regina’s defense. “Wait a minute, you think we’re just going to go forward like nothing’s happened? We’re a team. We’ll cancel the seminar, and wherever you and Henry go, we can all…”

Regina slid her hands behind her back and raised her chin. “We are not canceling. The presentation is essential to stay on target for our business goals.”

“Business goals,” he repeated, horrified.

“Okay, hang on a second.” Emma stepped in front of David, jamming her fingers in her back pockets. “Regina, you told us you didn’t have any contacts in Chicago, and you never directly worked there. David and Mary Margaret were due to fly out tomorrow anyway. Why don’t we all just go today? We’ll be more careful than we planned. Stay outside the city limits instead of at that fancy hotel you booked us in. Pay for everything with cash. That way, you and Henry get some breathing room, and we could have a shot at doing the seminar if we want.”

David’s features brightened. “That’s a great idea. If we stay maybe an hour outside Chicago, we could still do all the prep work.”

Since they had arrived at the shelter, Regina had been forming a picture of what the next few weeks might look like. Nowhere in that image was the presence of the Nolans or Emma Swan. She couldn’t have even conceived they might offer. It was a wild variable in an already chaotic situation, and she
didn’t know how to process it. “No, there is no reason for you to put yourselves out.”

“Look at it this way,” Emma tried again. “We can also start looking for any tracks you might have left online.”

Snow sounded reluctant to cut in but did anyway. “I did find one picture of Mayor Regina Mills when I searched. When Emma first started working for you.”

“See? We should double-check everything,” Emma said.

“I assume you will do that with computers, and you can do it from anywhere? Thank you for the offer, but as I said, it’s unnecessary. Henry and I will be leaving for an impromptu vacation for two weeks at a minimum. I doubt he would happy with Chicago, given all the choices.”

“I’m okay with Chicago,” Henry said.

She didn’t have the presence of mind to give Henry a proper scolding look. She needed to do something. To go. To plan. She needed...

She tried to keep composed, folding her fingers against her stomach. “I’m going to call Belle and ask her to check the house, and get some things if it seems safe. She can also drop off my car.” Her heart wouldn’t slow down, pounding so fast she couldn’t separate one beat from another. “If one of you could give her a ride back to town after?”

Emma frowned. “Come on Regina, we should all stick together.”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

“We can make sure you don’t have to handle this alone,” Emma countered.

Regina’s overworked mind insisted on shutting down the conversation. “Can I talk with you a moment?” She grabbed hold of Emma’s jacket and tugged her toward the back without waiting for an answer.
She waited until they were as far away from the others as they could be before verbally attacking. “I do not need whatever misguided attempt at heroism your brain has manufactured.” Her pitch was odd, higher than usual. She couldn’t keep it even. “I did not ask for your help and I certainly do not require saving. What I need is to take my son and go.”

Emma expelled a sigh. Her expression beseeching, almost intimate. “What if we can actually help?”

“Emma, please. I can’t argue about this anymore.”

Emma tossed a glance back over her shoulder at her parents, then extended a hand, to splay her fingers on the wall near Regina’s head. She turned so her back was to the rest of the room, and Regina realized that Emma was shielding their conversation.

“I’m not trying to argue. I—” She dipped her head closer to Regina’s. “Fuck. You deserve to have people there for you, okay? That’s why I’m being a pain in the ass.”

It hurt to hear that. She wasn’t sure it was true.

“I don’t care who—me or them or all of us,” Emma said. “Or whoever. I mean, fuck, call Mal if you need to. Just...you don’t have to be alone.”

Regina seized hold of the lapel of Emma’s jacket, her fingers twisting there. A quiet scream at being in this position that only Emma could “hear.” She allowed herself that moment, locking eyes with this woman who had almost been her friend. “You all think I’m overreacting don’t you? You must think I’m crazy.”

A tiny, teasing smile crossed Emma’s lips. “Well, I mean...Norway?” Then quickly, she shook her head. “I don’t think you’re crazy.”

Emma’s presence and her soft words gentled the storm inside Regina. Her heart dropped from a gallop into a slower thudding. Relieved but not normal.

“Hey,” David called, head bent over his iPhone. “There’s a Crowne Plaza about an hour outside Chicago.”
“They are aware they barely know me, right?”

Emma laughed. “You’re totally screwed, they’ve adopted you. Also,” she made a show of her eyes wandering around the shelter, “you know this place is kinda creepy, right?” Regina smiled despite herself. Her fingers loosened, then let go of Emma’s jacket. “Look, this is totally your call. What do you want to do?”

The knock on her door was light, and if Regina had been asleep, it may not have woken her up. Henry, sprawled on the couch, didn’t stir at all. The Crowne Plaza an hour outside Chicago had plenty of rooms and even several suites available. They’d gotten in very late—near 2am. Henry fell asleep in the living room area about twenty minutes after they checked in.

Regina opened the door and found a tentative-looking Emma with two coffees in her hands. “Hey, I didn’t know if you’d be awake but….” Emma offered her a paper cup. “It’s decaf.”

“I won’t be sleeping tonight. I could have used the caffeine. This is a vigil on my life, not much to do but sit and wait. And probably wait more after that.”

“No news?”

“Not yet.”

Emma gestured back outside. “I can go back out and get regular coffee. Or I can let you have some of my stash of Mountain Dew.”

“I had forgotten about that. No, there’s a tray in the bedroom with a coffee maker and some kind of coffee. I just haven’t looked at it yet.” It was one of the only things Regina hadn’t explored.

“I have other assorted junk food, too, which I would be willing to share,” Emma said. “Sugar and caffeine are essentials.” A smile curled at the corner of Emma’s mouth. “I am really good at not sleeping.” Regina had not been able to feel anything but anxiety since early that morning. She couldn’t relax enough to laugh. Emma tried to get a read on her. “I just wanted to sorta check on
“Henry fell asleep playing something on his phone. I feel just on the edge of doing something stupid and desperate.”

“Am I bugging you? I can go.”

She could use the distraction. Any distraction. “No, it’s okay. Please, come in.”

They retreated to the only other room, the bedroom, so they wouldn’t wake Henry. There were two double beds separated by a large nightstand. On her side was a tumbler with a finger of bourbon and an empty airplane-sized liquor bottle. Her laptop was open on her bed, but it was decoration at this point. Even on the plane, it sat in front of her, something to stare at while her mind wandered. Regina waved Emma towards the desk chair.

She heard Emma swivel back and forth. It had been so quiet with Henry asleep. She kept making mental lists of what she could do—watch t.v., soak in the tub, check her e-mail, buy a banal in-room movie. Each time she settled on one thing and started it, her attention would flick to something else, like it was a remote she was using to channel surf.

The one constant, even now, was the cell phone clutched in her hand. She kept glancing at it, and it kept staring back at her with nothing new to say.

“Regina, can I ask you something? When you ran before, how long did you run for?”

“Close to two years.”

Regina thought Emma might be surprised by that but she wasn’t. “David and Mary Margaret have never had to run. Not like we have. Mary Margaret got into a little bit of trouble when she was a kid. She was a hacker, but mostly she just explored. Nothing serious. Unlike me.” She studied the stationary on the desk with the hotel’s logo. “I stayed in a lot of hotels, some of them were just a step up from a roach motel. Sometimes I’d score big and treat myself. I don’t think I ever stayed at a Crowne Plaza though.”

Regina sat on the edge of her bed, but no position gave her any comfort. Instead, she felt awkward and strange, as if she’d never done it before. Standing gave her the same sensation.
“After all of the scandal with my charity, I stayed at the equivalent of bed and breakfasts. First, in Florence, there was a villa in the hills where I stayed inside like a hermit for weeks. It turned out that there were dozens of small towns in the countryside that didn’t know or care who I was in America. The same was true for Switzerland and Germany. Greece. Spain.”

Talking opened a pressure valve, and the frantic need to do something—anything—diminished.

“That actually sounds kinda nice.” Emma frowned. “Why the hell didn’t I ever think to leave the country? I just kept wandering around the U.S. Always big cities so I could steal credit cards more easily.”

“I think it would have been lovely under different circumstances. I was too busy keeping to myself and trying to figure out how everything went wrong. How I went wrong. How I became the type of person who twisted the generosity of others for my own gain.” Her mouth and her eyes screwed tighter and tighter. She crushed something imaginary in her hand as if there was some part of her past she could reach out and destroy.

Emma leaned closer to her, propping her elbows on her knees. “I don’t know why I started stealing instead of getting some tech job. I could have made a good living. In some weird way, stealing made me feel like I was finally winning. People use fucked-up logic to justify all kinds of things.”

“But it was my charity. Up to that point, nothing had ever truly been mine. I built it. I hired everyone. I did fundraising and I came up with the vision. I started with good intentions.” Her next words were a whisper. In a litany of secrets, this was the hardest admission. “It was the best of me. And I just let her taint it—” She knew it sounded like she was abdicating responsibility. “All that time wandering, and all the years since then, and I still don’t know why I did what I did.”

Emma started to say something, but Regina became a flurry of movement. She couldn’t talk about that time in her life anymore. She stalked to the window, arms folded against her chest. It was only the third floor and the view was the front parking lot of the hotel. “I really hate waiting.”

Emma gave a sigh, surrendering to the change in topic, letting Regina set the pace. She motioned to the t.v. with a nod. “We could watch something. Might take your mind off things for a bit.”

“I think my mind has been distracted for far too long already.” The answer created a knot of confusion between Emma’s brows. Both of Regina’s hands were gripping the phone now, her eyes dropped to its screen, but it maintained its silence. Her stomach rolled. ”I should have been better
prepared for all of this. If I could think straight for more than a minute at a time, I would correct that now and come up with an emergency plan. Even if I don’t wind up using it, planning for the worst is always wise.”

It sounded like a platitude, useless and empty.

“Do you know that some states have official dog breeds?” Emma asked.

Regina didn’t follow and looked back over her shoulder, brows raised in amazement. “What?”

“I always wanted a dog, so that’s how I decided where to go. I mean, at first. There aren’t that many states with them. Then I found a list of best ice creams by city and state, and I just went wherever it seemed like there was good ice cream.” Emma rested her chin in her hand. “After that, I winged it. I just needed to stay ahead of the cops, so where I ended up didn’t matter as much as moving did.”

“I’m not you,” Regina said, terse and defensive. “I don’t believe in winging it. You didn’t have a son to worry about.”

Emma’s expression didn’t change. Regina wondered how Emma was able to let so many things roll off of her. “I’m just saying that there isn’t really a perfect way to go on the lam. By the way, don’t mention the dog thing to my parents, okay? I know how that will go.”

Regina’s phone vibrated, and she almost dropped it as she checked for messages. It was just a sales text. She shut her eyes so tightly that there was only darkness. Her energy drained from her. She needed to sit down. She moved like she was sleepwalking, sinking onto the corner of the bed. Her fingers clenched in the back of her hair.

She felt the bed dip next to her. “Hey,” Emma said.

She didn’t realize till then that her eyes were closed again. She should be stronger than this. She shouldn’t be unraveling. “I hate that I don’t know what to be afraid of. Reporters? My mother? Someone trying to blackmail me? I hate that I don’t know if I’m being rational. I’m good at being logical. And right now I’m doubting even that.” She slapped her hand against the mattress. “I hate that all I can do tonight is sit here and wait for Belle or the sheriff to text me if anything happens.” She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “And I hate that you’re the person I’m talking to.”
The stinging words made Emma flinch. “I can...David or Mary Mar—“

Regina snorted at herself in disgust. “Is it any wonder that people used to call me the Evil Queen? I’m sorry. The last time I felt this way was right after my mother gave me the ultimatum. I had never run from anything before that. Never hid from anything or anyone. I couldn’t fight them, the press or my mother.” Regina bowed her head. “They beat me. They left me broken. Now, it’s not just me. Henry, he doesn’t understand. I’m afraid he never will. At the end of this, no matter what happens, maybe he’ll just see me as a coward again. Maybe that’s what I am. Take away my name and my money—maybe that’s just me. Weak and afraid.”

Emma dropped from the bed and knelt in front of Regina. Her fingertips grazed Regina’s chin, lifting it up. “You know, you don’t sound like you know Regina Mills all that well. I should introduce you to, um, you.“

Regina laughed because that seemed to be one of Emma’s gifts—making her laugh no matter what.

“Hey, Regina? You’re the same person who adopted that kid in there and who rebuilt that town. And who’s trying like hell to start a business that’ll help people. Don’t let all this bullshit make you doubt who you are. ”

Emma started to get up and the darkness threatened to surround Regina again. She needed it to stay away. She hungered for light, just for a little while. She ached to not feel alone.

She found herself reaching...and reaching...and holding.

And clutching.

Emma answered by staying where she was and wrapping Regina in her arms.

Regina didn’t cry, but her eyes were dry and sore as if she had been for hours. She rested her head against Emma’s. “Why do you always show up when I desperately need someone?”

She felt Emma’s half grin against her cheek. “Just to annoy you,” she whispered. Her arms pulled Regina closer and Regina welcomed it. She wasn’t sure she understood the meaning of the word sanctuary, but this was close.
Emma didn’t release her and she made no attempt to go. The comfort deepened, then started to change into something else.

Regina wanted absolution from everything she had ever been before Storybrooke. She wanted to pretend she was someone else, someone brave. Emma’s body pressing to hers became pure decadent heat after marching through a frozen wilderness. Her fingers slid down to Emma’s forearm, where the fabric of her jacket hid her tattoo.

She drew away before she did something truly stupid. “You don’t have to sit here with me.”

Emma sank back onto her haunches. She rubbed at her neck, fingers working at the muscles as if her life depended on loosening the muscles there. “Well, not like I had big plans.” Emma rose, turning her back to Regina as she swung in the direction of the desk. Her hand kept kneading her neck. She took one long sip of coffee, then another. She now rubbed at her throat and face. She gave a quiet airy whistle. She finished her coffee then turned back to Regina, head tilted, “You ever play Battleship?”

The question came from nowhere. “What?”

“Battleship. You know, like—you sank my battleship?”

Regina’s expression remained confused. “Why do you ask?”

“***************

“So we just keep clicking on these lettered and numbered squares? That’s the whole point?”

Laughter spilled from Emma. It soothed Regina’s frazzled nerves. Her phone rested on the bed next to her as she continued to wait for news. She sat in bed, legs stretched out, her laptop on her thighs and a pillow behind her. Emma matched her position on the opposite bed.

“The point is to sink each other’s ships,” Emma said and selected a spot on her screen. A male voice said the missile was launching, then came the sound of splashing water. A miss.
Regina guessed where one of Emma’s ships might be. The sound of a missile landing in water signaled her failure. She made a face. “This doesn’t require any actual skill.”

They exchanged a series of misses. Finally, the sound effect changed, and the missile launch notification was followed by an explosion.

“Oh—oh, I hit you.” Regina proceeded to correctly guess the location of Emma’s ship until finally, she sank it. The “battleship sunk” notification made her grin.

“Oh, now you like this game.”

“Well, I will admit I do like the missile sounds.”

“Tell you what? If you win, you can pick the next game.”

They were tied when Regina found her last ship. A series of chipper computer beeps heralded Regina’s victory.

“Okay, fair is fair,” Emma conceded. “What do you want to play now?”

“Chess.”

Emma’s lips came very close to forming a pout. “Really?”

Regina lifted her shoulders innocently. “You have an issue with chess?”

“Like you’re not going to wipe the floor with me.”

“It’s not my fault that Chutes and Ladders are more your speed.”
Regina won three games before Emma rebelled and demanded a different game.

Emma remained with her the entire night. Dawn came with its fingers of color in the sky, and they became too weary for electronic board games. Emma changed the TV channel to one of the free premium ones. A movie provided background noise and they both gave in to light dozing.

Henry woke them up a few hours later, covered his surprise quickly, and asked what was for breakfast.

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Nothing happened in Storybrooke.

Over the new few days, the man in the green coat did not appear again. A horde of reporters did not descend on a town too small to cope with it. Her mother did not make a sudden entrance into the epicenter of her world, arriving with tentacles of manipulation to ensnare her.

Emma volunteered to entertain Henry a few times, and he seemed happy to escape the hotel. Regina allowed it as long as they were only gone for a few hours. The Nolans headed into the city early each morning, returning every evening for dinner. Their energy never seemed to run out, and they often lingered in her suite to chat.

So did Emma, though she didn’t stay up with Regina again.

When they weren’t working on the seminar in some way, the Nolans (which very much included Emma at this point) were protective and concerned. David recommended using a new e-mail address no one knew. Emma and Mary Margaret began scrubbing her limited internet presence from the web. Emma also installed scripts on her computer to prevent cookies from being collected by any website she visited.

“Just an amped-up version of what I already installed,” Emma explained. “Been working on it over the last few days.”

Regina worked on a contingency plan whenever she could. She withdrew as much money as possible each day from ATMs. She purchased a pre-paid cell phone just in case. She picked out a city in Norway and one in Italy, and memorized the regular daily flights to each. She started writing
notes for Belle about anything her able assistant might not know. Belle would be a good shepherd for the town if it came to it.

By the day of the presentation, everything was still quiet. The Nolans called her afterward, reporting that Emma only faltered at the start and they had signed up twenty potential clients for follow up conversations.

Regina insisted that they all take their scheduled flights home. She had put them out enough.

“Henry and I are going to rent a car and go to a place called Branson in Missouri for another week. Just to be sure,” she told them. She had let Henry pick. His decision was based on it having a theme park and caves. “It also has a steamboat museum.”

“And Henry wants to go to a Steamboat museum?” Emma asked Regina, as they all met in the lobby the morning she and the Nolans were due to fly out.

“It’s called compromise. I promised him if he actually died from boredom, I’d call 911. I thought I could get some pictures for Marco. It might inspire some ideas for the Pinnochio.”

She paused and curled her fingers around Emma’s. “I’m going to say this to your parents, too, but I wanted to thank you. Especially you. When you came to me to apologize, I wasn’t very kind—

Emma stopped her. “Hey, you know what? Let’s talk about it when you get back, okay?”

Regina squeezed Emma’s hand and then let go.
The one with all-out war

Chapter Notes

UPDATE: Thanks you all for the well wishes and prayers regarding Irma. All is well with house, cats, wife, in-laws and my laptop. Funny story - I survived a hurricane and a trip to Atlanta and back. A week after that, I slipped in the shower, banged my head and had to get stitches. Do you know that they give you really good pain meds for that? They do.

So, I'll be back a couple weeks from today (Sept 30th) and will see you all Oct 12th. That should be (weather-willing) the last break till we end this story. Lots of happy Emma and Regina in the next couple chapters. After that, well, you'll have to see.

Love to all of you! This is your captain speaking.

Chapter 26 - The one with all-out war

Mary Margaret stepped up to the line they formed, inspecting them. She marched down the row, meeting every eye, then nodding in solemn approval. “Soldiers, I know you’re afraid. I know you’re wondering if you can face the enemy today. If you have the skill, the courage, and the strength. Will you falter on the battlefield, or will you provide an accounting of yourself to be remembered through the ages?” She touched Emma’s shoulder, squeezing it and imparting encouragement.

This was going to take a while. Emma leaned her water gun against her shoulder as her mother moved on. She and David communicated silently about when they should step in. David held up an index finger, telling her to wait. Regina pinched the bridge of her nose, and Emma assumed she was wondering how they’d talked her into this.

“But, you are the brave-hearted. You are the iron-willed. I promise you, you will conduct yourselves with honor. When you meet the enemy, you will know what is right and you will not hesitate. You will not, for example, go into David’s and my bedroom because that is out of bounds. Instead you will keep to the agreed areas in the yard or the house.” She held up a fist, pointing with her thumb to Henry. “You will reload your weapons only at the allocated sinks.” She gestured to David. “You will not continue to fire beyond the fifteen-minute time limit.” Finally, she motioned to Regina. “And should you hear the cry of ‘Time is up’, you will not use that moment to ambush someone else. No matter how tempting it is.”

Mary Margaret faced them, feet apart, hands behind her back. “But beyond that, this will be your moment. Yours in glory. Yours in courage. All things are ready if your minds are ready. You know your places.” She reached for her two pistols on the hood of the moving truck, taking one in each hand. “You have one minute to retreat to your hiding place. God be with you all.”
“Does she think she’s Patton?” Regina whispered to Emma.

“I think that was a mix of Patton and William Wallace,” David said back, careful to keep his voice low.

It was six weeks after the presentation in Chicago.

Nothing had happened with the reporter-who-may-not-have-really-been-a-reporter guy. Storybrooke remained the nice, quiet town it always was. During the week Regina was in Branson, they held daily check-in meetings on Skype. After that, videoconferences became weekly again, and life went on. David and Mary Margaret packed. Emma continued to work on whatever Gold had assigned her. Regina worked on her green initiative and occasionally mentioned creating an emergency plan she and Henry could use if it was ever needed. She also arranged for Emma to be interviewed in Portland about her background so they could put the video on social media.

Regina didn’t raise anything personal with Emma, and Emma didn’t want to push so she left things alone. The only exception was the issue of Henry messaging her. He’d started to every few days, and she wanted to make sure Regina was okay with it. Regina answered that it was “fine”. The whole conversation took place over text, but still, Emma took it as a victory.

Yesterday she’d driven into Storybrooke so she could be there when her parents and the rented moving truck reached the house. It was the first time she’d been back since Chicago.

David had raised the idea for today’s battle two weeks ago. An empty house that needed some work, he said, would be ideal for a war with guns that shot foam darts. Mary Margaret countered with a proposal for a water battle.

“I think we need Henry’s opinion,” David said, and Regina called for him to come to her office.

Henry, a delighted grin in place, agreed with using water guns.

“While you children are having your fun, I’ll review Nolan Securities’ books and make sure we are on track,” Regina said.
The rest of the group looked at one another, scandalized. Emma was the only one brave enough to speak. “So, you’re too scared to get your hands dirty? Um, metaphorically speaking.”

Both of Regina’s brows raised. “Are you challenging me?”

Henry turned to his mother solemnly. “Mom, I think we have to do it. Mills family honor.”

Her lips slid up into a playful half-smile that made Emma’s heart beat faster. Regina’s professional mask slipped as she placed her brow to Henry’s and touched his chin. “Well, then, how can I say no?”

Everyone agreed to purchase their weapons ahead of time and be ready when David and Mary Margaret arrived in the moving truck. Now, the moment of war was at hand. They all had their strategies and preferences for today.

Henry had the only water gun with a backpack, a special dispensation Regina fought for because he was the only one under twenty-one. David’s gun was motorized, a tiny engine assisting the power of the lime-green uzi. He wore a belt with extra clips of water across his chest. Emma went with the closest thing to a water shotgun she could find. It had a nozzle the size of a dime. An extra pistol was tucked into her belt. Regina had let Henry pick for her. The barrel of her gun was long and four muzzles would deal extra damage.

David checked in with everyone, reminding them of one more thing before they officially started. “Okay now, everyone hide and then when I yell ‘go’, we start the fight, okay?”

Emma chose a spot outside the door leading to the back yard, crouched down, and waited. She heard David yell “go,” thinking it was odd that it sounded like it came from somewhere above her. She stayed low and advanced into the house, then down a hallway. She passed one of the three buckets of water balloons. With a smirk, still crouched, she plucked three from inside of it and hid them behind the nearby bathroom door. Her own secret stash of grenades.

She scanned the hallway up ahead, which led to two bedrooms. It was quiet, too quiet. Weapon at the ready, she advanced into the first room. She made sure to check her flank before sneaking to the closet and sliding it open.

Nothing.
She steadied herself and headed to the other room. She stuck her head around the corner of the doorway and lukewarm water blasted her in the face. She retreated, but from behind her came more gunfire, soaking her shirt. Mother and son had ambushed her. This violated the “every person for his- or herself” rule, but Emma was so busy trying to escape that she didn’t have time to think about crying foul. It was not the last time Regina and Henry would lie in wait for her and attack as a unit.

She seemed to be the only one singled out for a coordinated attack, because at another point, Henry spotted Emma, called for his mother and, again, they advanced on her. The same thing happened six other times, sometimes with Regina instigating it. Emma never did get to use her hidden grenades.

By the end of the battle, Emma was the only one soaked from head to toe, dripping on the driveway. Her hair went from straight to zig-zagging into loose curls. Usually that only happened when she took a shower.

“Mills family honor,” Regina told Emma in a flippant tone. She did at least hand her a towel.

They all pitched in to first clean up the water, then started moving in boxes. Her favorite part of the day was after all the hard work, when, exhausted, they sat around in the living room eating pizza. They were all sweaty and disheveled and they were together. A team.

The word “family” was still scary.

She still couldn’t see herself sitting down with her “team” for a formal dinner either.

Her Pertential score prodded at her for an excuse to change—it wondered if her continued imperfections meant her overall number should be lowered. For the second time in the last few months, she put the scale away in the back of her emotional closet. She couldn’t fight her demons with it constantly popping up in her head like an overactive puppy.

She’d come back to it as soon as she could.

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David and Mary Margaret put down an air mattress for her that night, but predictably, she couldn’t sleep. She went down to the kitchen and made herself coffee. An idea popped into her mind; the kind that stalked her through the night and wouldn’t be shaken off. The next evening, again a sleepless night, it continued to poke at her. At midday she surrendered to it, letting herself be prodded into buying a few simple supplies.
That afternoon, she sat down at the metal table and chairs her parents were using until the flooring was replaced. Emma pulled another Post-It note from her stack, paused, then wrote down a sentence in black ink as neatly as she could. She placed it face down, sticky side up, starting a fifth row. Half of the table was covered in a bizarre yellow papered mosaic.

Mary Margaret descended the stairs and, of course, the table drew her attention. “What’s all this?”

“All what,” David asked, coming in behind his wife and using a dishrag to wipe at his face. Without waiting, he flipped one of the pieces of paper over. “Number five - You are the most honest person I have ever met.” He plucked one more and looked at it. “Number six - You are a chess demon.” Confusion made him stare at the table, then turn to Emma for an explanation. “I think I agree with Snow’s question.”

“Is this a Regina thing?” Snow asked. Emma wasn’t a blusher, she really wasn’t. She felt heat on her cheeks all the same. “Let us know if you need help,” Snow said and squeezed her shoulder.

David came closer, studying the table again. Quiet realization surged into his eyes, making them twinkle. “Oh,” he said, drawing the word out.

“This isn’t—don’t make this into a thing,” Emma pleaded, “I’m just trying to...she’s got a lot on her shoulders.”

“Well, I like her. We like her. Just for future reference.” He kissed the top of her head. “We’re on our own tonight. Don’t want the Millses to get sick of us. Hamburgers okay?” He wandered into the kitchen without saying anything else. Later, both her parents gave her a few suggestions when she started running out of ideas at number one hundred and forty-two.

When she was finished, she finally relaxed enough to fall asleep.

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Three mornings after the Nolans moved in, Belle greeted Regina and let her know there was a message from Emma waiting in her office. Regina expected it to be a phone message or a file or something ordinary. Instead, the large window behind her desk was covered with canary yellow Post-It notes. There were so many that the sunlight could only get through in the cracks between the squares, making the room darker than usual.
Above them, a piece of loose-leaf paper read, “Just in case you ever doubt who you are again.”

She peeled one of the yellow papers off and read it.

Number #1 - You care more than you ever let on.

Number #2 - I have never seen anything like the way you smiled at your town in the steamboat.

Number #3 - Your smile when you talk about Henry is the only thing that tops it.

Number #4 - You see potential in things no one else would see potential in.

Number #5 - You are scary as hell when you want to be.

Number #6 - You know the blue-suede-shoes dance even if you won’t let me see it.

Number #7 - You came up with the idea for Cybersheriff because you didn’t want anyone to go through what you did.

Number #8 - You stuck with the idea of Cybersheriff even though I was a bonehead.

Number #9 - You are an amazing planner.

Number #10 - You don’t let things stop you (even when people act like boneheads).

On and on it went, each one a testament to what Emma thought of Regina.

The last one was numbered two-hundred.
She stared at it all for a long time, not sure how to feel about something she could barely believe was real. Her son was one of the few people who did nice things for her without deeper motivations other than “because”. Her father had loved her in that same way, giving to her without thinking or asking for anything in return. Occasionally Belle or one of the townspeople were thoughtful. Usually when she was ill, which didn’t happen often, thank goodness. Or near the holidays. Or on her birthday.

Henry and her father were family. The town appreciated her work as mayor and acted cordially. This was the act of someone who had no obligation.

She didn’t bother taking her coat off, instead she told Belle she would be out for awhile and headed to her car. For once, Emma wasn’t at the diner, but she knew the other place Emma would be. She found her, as expected, at the Nolans’.

Emma wore an old plaid shirt, hair back as she helped paint the living room.

“Can I talk to you,” Regina said, barely stopping to say hello to David, who was in the room with Emma, or Mary Margaret, who was taking a hammer to the backdrop in the kitchen.

“Sure, my room is—” She gestured up the stairs. Regina nodded and waved her forward.

There wasn’t much to Emma’s room, just an air mattress with beige sheets and a couple of pillows. The only sources of light were a desk lamp on the floor near the bed, and the long rectangular window that looked out onto the yard. In front of it, the sill stretched in a wide window bench big enough for two. It was bare now, but Snow would probably make it homey with a cushion and pillows in time. For the moment, it was a good enough place to sit as they began their conversation.

“I don’t understand you,” Regina said, sitting primly.

Emma followed her across the room but remained standing. “I get that a lot.”

“I have done nothing to encourage you. I assumed we both silently agreed to leave well enough alone and then…” She dug her hand in her pocket and produced the gathered pile of Post-it notes.

“Oh. Well, you know what they say about people who assume?” Emma scratched her forehead and
shifted her weight from one foot to the other, hands lifting to rest on her hips. “Sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

Too many explanations crowded Regina’s mind; the silence in the room grew heavy as she sorted through them. “I know we said we would talk. I have thought about reaching out to you almost daily. I was putting together an emergency plan for me and Henry, and then I told myself I should wait till we were face to face again…”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I’m not usually so—I don’t know...uncertain.” Regina focused on the doorway, wanting to give herself the comfort of knowing she could leave if she wished. “You have no idea how bad I am at letting people in. And I never give second chances. Which is probably why my son rightfully observes that I need a life.”

Emma sat down next to her, also staring at the open door. “I don’t blame you for hesitating, you know. I’m trying now, but I didn’t for a long time. You don’t know if you can forgive me, because it’s not something you usually do. I’m not sure that I’m a good investment.” Regina shook her head, trying to stop Emma. Emma continued, unaware, “You know how they say you have to walk before you can run? I’m not even walking, I’m crawling.”

Regina’s reservoir of patience was shrinking, and Emma kept pouring words into it. “Emma…”

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I am going to fuck up again and—”

Regina thrust out her hands, palms up. “Okay, stop,” she snapped, needing the relief of silence. She hated her anger, how it burst in without invitation, how it took over.

A matching agitation made Emma raise her voice. “Hey, I’m just being honest.”

“If we’re both uncertain and afraid and that’s all we are...there’s nothing left to say. No way forward.” She waited until her temper receded. “For future reference, telling someone how horrible you are at something is not a good selling point.”

Emma pushed her shoulders back as far as they could go, her head tilting back against the wall at the same time. “So, what do we do now?”
As an answer, Regina held up the Post-It notes. “You are this impossible presence in my life, Emma Swan. I can’t rely on the Emma who lied to me, the one who hurt my son. But this one—” she lifted the papers up a little more “—the person who has this kind of heart? I want to believe in her. You. I just need…” Her voice was barely louder than a breath, a lower register than usual. “Tell me what happened. What made you change?”

Emma’s fingers flexed and unflexed around the lip of the bench. “Playing the part of a knight in shining armor isn’t the same as actually being brave. If I just keep avoiding the things that scare me the most, the hard things that stick with me all the time, that’s not heroic. I’ve been a coward for way too long. I knew I was. Deep down, I knew. I was just so used to it.” She rocked her toes back and forth, a slow to-and-fro motion. “I’m tired of it.” Frustration at the strength of her fears made her voice rough. “I don’t want to feel like a knight only in moments. I want to feel that brave every day.” She stopped swaying and raised her eyes to Regina’s. “You and Henry make me feel like maybe I have a shot at it. You stop me from being okay with being a coward. I don’t know how much I’ve changed. Right now it feels like a daily fight, but I think I’m winning more than I’m losing.”

Every word was the strike of a sledgehammer against her walls, and inside she trembled from the blows. Regina clutched harder at the papers in her hand, then looked down to see the writing on the first. You care more than you let on, it read. It was certainly true about Emma. She had put hours of effort into trying not to care about her, but she had never actually managed it.

Some people were naturally positive; she wasn’t. Some saw good without straining, but not her. Her self-reliance and pain soured many of her observations and aspirations. She had tried to catch hope all of her life, but it was too fast, flitting in the air in front of her, just out of reach. Sometimes she barely closed her hand around it, she could feel its wings, but it always got away, darting off once more. When Emma was with her, it fluttered to her palm and rested there.

Regina tried to not scare it away. “I’d like to try and be better than I have been. I’d like us to try together.”

Emma kicked her boot against the bench a few times. “So, I may be slow on the uptake, but does that mean you want to be friends again? I’m pretty sure that’s what you said. Is that what you meant? I just want to be sure. If this was second grade, I could just send you a note and ask you to check ‘yes’ or ‘no’.”

“Well then, hold out your hands.” Emma did so, openly curious about where this was headed. “Now, let’s pretend your right hand is ‘yes’ and your left is ‘no’.”

Their eyes met, Emma’s widening and her chin tightening. There were no shields now, no hiding, no
walls. Regina used her fingertip to trace a check onto Emma’s right palm. “Does that help?” Emma’s fingers curled around hers, holding on.

Her awareness of Emma heightened. A smudge of dirt marred Emma’s cheek. A toolbelt with only a screwdriver and a hammer hung low on her waist. Her plain white t-shirt under flannel had an ink stain. Black ink like the Post-It notes she mused. Where their hands still touched, pulses of heat spread over her skin.

She squeezed Emma’s hand and with closed eyes, she let her head rest on Emma’s shoulder. Neither of them moved for a long time.

Eventually she straightened and smoothed out her skirt. “Would you...would you like to meet for breakfast tomorrow? I have a very early meeting but perhaps after at Granny’s? Maybe 9:30?”

A smile inched across Emma’s lips, stretching out till it couldn’t go any broader. “Deal.”

The meeting lasted about half as long as she thought it would. That gave her a little time before meeting up with Emma. She consulted her list of to do’s. Now that the Nolans were moved in, they could go forward with planning the next seminar. Before anything, she wanted to check in with Gold. He and Regina had originally discussed special permission for Emma to leave the state for the three seminars over a three-month timeframe. Since they were moving outside that timeline, due to the Nolans’ move, she decided it was prudent to check in.

It turned out to be a wise decision.

Gold answered his cell phone pleasantly, making small talk. His refusal of her request, however, was immediate. “I have some bad news. I am afraid I can no longer accommodate you, Ms. Mills. I am going to officially announce that I am running for Governor soon. I can’t take the risk of my name being attached to a convicted felon wandering freely around the country.”

Regina sat up straighter. This was supposed to be an easy call. “I’m confused. We agreed that you would provide special dispensation for Emma to do three presentations, did we not? In exchange, you were going to use us in your marketing and sell yourself as a progressive. Wouldn’t that be more relevant now than it was before?”
“I thought it would take me a couple of years to gather the right support. I thought by then, surely Emma Swan would no longer be in your employ.”

Regina began to pace. She had never said any such thing to him. He could have deduced it from the original request, or perhaps because of Emma’s background. His words caused shock to spread down her spine, like she’d misstepped, the weight of her entire body crashing down on one foot.

“Things have changed,” he said. “I recently gained significant financial backing from several new donors. It’s allowed me resources that I didn’t have before. Keeping my little deal with you could quickly become a scandal. I can’t afford that.”

Regina gritted her teeth, but managed to keep her voice steady and confident. “We both know that Emma isn’t a risk.”

He tsk’d into the phone, and Regina’s jaw flexed at the way his voice hinted at her foolishness. “You haven’t forgotten she’s a criminal, have you? She was a criminal long before she was caught.”

“She’s changed.”

“Yes, well, a lot of criminals say that, don’t they?”

She didn’t know if he was baiting her. She stopped pacing so she could focus on listening, on gathering clues in how he said what he said and in what he might not be saying.

“It’s very likely I am going to run for governor. I want to stay on good terms with you, and I am still willing to support your organization. I just don’t think it’s wise for you to be so dependent on Miss Swan. I’ll tell you what, I shouldn’t do this, but I can offer you the services of one of my cybercrime team members for New York. They can talk about the many crimes they have investigated and provide some of the same type of perspective Miss Swan did.”

“Emma’s story is unique, and she’s an important part of our team.”

He sighed, and that same superiority lounged in his voice. “I get that you feel you owe Miss Swan a debt, but it it seems to me you have done your best to repay her. It may be time to let that debt go. At any rate, Miss Mills, I’m sorry I can’t accommodate your request. Please let me know if you’d like to take me up on my offer. I think you’ll find that one of my men would be—”
Regina ended the call, slamming her cell phone down on her desk. She sank into her desk chair and shoved her frustration away. It wasn’t the first time in her life that someone had taken another deal over the one she offered, or tried to change the deal halfway through. In the old days, she would have used her wealth to broker information on Gold, find buttons to push or weaknesses to exploit.

She loved both sides of winning—getting what she wanted and beating others.

She did her best to ignore those old, dark impulses. She needed to make sure Nolan Securities still succeeded.

She needed a new plan.

*********************************************

She called a meeting. It meant cancelling breakfast with Emma. Something else to hold against Gold.

Regina told them about her phone call, and was patient while David vented at the injustice of judging Emma without truly knowing her and Mary Margaret insisted that “the man” could never be trusted not to profile people. Emma crossed her arms over her chest and didn’t say anything at all. Regina touched her arm as she brushed past her and moved to the flipchart at the front of the room.

“I do have an alternative proposal. Well, a two-fold proposal.” She flipped the page to reveal one word: Portland.

“Portland?” Emma asked.

Regina nodded. “The terms of your parole don’t allow you to leave the state without permission. I think you’ll find that Portland is in the state of Maine.”

“But—I mean, compared to New York.”

“Oh it’s definitely not New York. However, it is the biggest city in this state. It will have to do. As
for New York, I do have an idea. I have found a company that teams with people who want to make extra cash, and helps them offer their cars as advertising space. We pay for the signs, decide on the number and type of cars. I budgeted 6 luxury cars in Manhattan for one month, it’s 4600 dollars. It’s reasonable, and it could be something we could do in other cities, if need be.”

“No, this is silly.” Emma scowled at Regina. “You should all just go to New York. We’ve talked about how you could do the presentations without me there. You should just do that.”

“I am afraid that that is impossible, Emma,” Regina said.

“Why?”

“Because we’re a team.” The Nolans grinned, as a unit, both of them showering Regina with silent looks of praise. “Isn’t that what you all said about Chicago?”

“Come on, that’s nothing like this.”

“Obstacles in business are not unusual. The trick is to adapt quickly and creatively to whatever is thrown at you. My monetary goals for Nolan Security and the timeline have not changed. I believe in this approach, Emma. And I believe we need you. Please trust me.”

Emma grumbled, turned, banged her head on the wall, then sighed. “Fuck. You saying please to me isn’t fair. Just saying.”

Regina tried her best to hide a smirk. “I’ll make a note of it.”

The next day they did have breakfast. The conversation was light, and primarily about business or what might be fun to do in Portland. The Nolans and Henry liked when everyone was together as a group, but they did manage to squeeze in an additional lunch over the next few days. Again, they stayed with easy topics, but at one point Emma bet Regina she could balance a spoon on her nose for sixty seconds (she could) and it felt...slowly...like it had before.

Emma could only stay a week. She had told her parole officer where she was going, why and for how long. She thought it best to stick to her plans, given how much of a jerk Gold was being. On the morning Emma left to go back home, Regina offered to walk her to her car. The walk to the yellow bug was made in small steps, prolonging the moment before Emma’s department by mutual, silent
agreement. They didn’t speak, both of them walking with their hands in their pockets.

“Thanks for walking me. Um, I could text you when I get home. If you want. Just as a check-in.”

“Thank you, I’d feel better if you did.”

“Right. We have a business meeting next week.”

“Yes, but I think we can feel free to touch base sooner if we wish.”

“Right. Good. Okay…” Emma pulled a hand from her pocket long enough to wave. “Talk to you soon.”

She thought about stopping Emma and re-instating their goodbye hugs. Emma paused with her hand on her door handle and stared at Regina; it made Regina wonder if she was thinking the same thing.

Regina stepped back from the curb. Not just yet.

She and Emma shared a smile.

But maybe soon.
Happy Thursday everyone,

And lo, your faithful captain did survive a trip to Georgia to escape a hurricane and falling in the shower and being attacked by a gang of vicious platypuses (platypusi - what is the plural of that word). I have missed you all. Thank you so very much for all the well wishes for my family. You all are fantastic. Right now, a lot of people need a lot of love and prayers so if you can, send some towards PR or Mexico or Houston or VI or anywhere that needs it really.

The flight today....oh, you'll see...BTW, I have another SQ thingy that I'll be posting later today. It's a stand alone called "Trust" and involves a blindfold. It's um, plot adjacent. I'll toss the link up on Twitter when it's up (I'm mariacomet there too)

This, finally once again, is your captain speaking.

Three changes happened in the weeks between Regina forgiving Emma and Portland. The first was David receiving a phone call from a Fortune 500 company interested in using Nolan Securities.

“I’m not sure how they found out about us,” David told them. He was unable to stay in his seat, so Emma kept losing sight of him as he paced back and forth on her screen. “They’ve had some security issues and their current provider isn’t moving fast enough so…I mean they said that we’d be a backup. Checking servers and conducting weekly tests, that kind of thing. We’re talking about a global company though. Global.” He swirled one finger in the air. “Offices around the world.”

“But is it global?” Emma asked. Her eyes jumped to Regina on her screen, checking to see if she had earned the tightening of Regina’s lips which meant she was holding back a smile. She had.

“It is excellent news, and you’re correct about the scale,” Regina said. “I checked into them after they called you. They have over three hundred branches throughout the world and generate over seven billion dollars in assets. Their main source of revenue is managing investments and providing investment advice.” She glanced at everyone’s expressions before she continued. “I also checked into their employment practices and their charitable contributions, Mary Margaret, since I knew you might have concerns. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Regina could be thoughtful that way, and Mary Margaret winked at her.
David paused, setting his hands on his hips and shaking his head in disbelief. “There’s no way that Emma, Mary Margaret and I could handle this on our own. Especially not with all the other new accounts.”

“They want to start by seeing how we do with one location, that will give us some time,” Regina said. “But I am aware that all of you have been stretched thin.”

He set his hands on the back of his office chair. He stood up straight, which cut his head off from the camera’s vision. “I’ve never had to hire people. I don’t know how to figure out how many people we need or anything.”

“We thought maybe you could help, Regina. We’re pretty far out of our depth,” Mary Margaret said.

Regina sat in her home office, sitting up straight and listening. She nodded, ready. “Let’s start by considering a couple of temp-to-perm positions. We’ll use a company to find candidates and put them on smaller, established accounts. We’ll see who works out. In the meantime, we can review how to estimate man-hours.”

David winced and flopped back into his chair. “That...sounds really boring.”

“Perhaps we could create or find a computer program to help us?” Regina suggested.

Emma didn’t know how the hell Regina came up with plans like that in the blink of an eye. Experience probably, but it felt miraculous to someone who pretty much Googled or YouTubed how to do even simple things like “how to iron” on a regular basis.

Mary Margaret’s fingers clicked over her keyboard. “I’m finding a few programs but almost all of them are bundled with a payroll system.” Mary Margaret’s eyes widened. “Oh my god, I just said the word ‘payroll’. Have we gone corporate? Is that what just happened?”

David rubbed at his head, sharing her realization.

“Are we going to have to do stuff like coming up with dress codes,” Mary Margaret asked, nose wrinkled as if raw sewage had spilled into the room.
“There’s a list of things that you will need to consider,” Regina said.

Success was scaring the hell out of all of them.

During their meetings, Regina very rarely wavered from her confident and controlled tone. She didn’t now, thank God. “But I have navigated quite a few them. One thing you might wish to do is to begin capturing knowledge about not just what, but how you do things for your current clients.”

David took a deep breath, nodding and balancing himself. “Maybe we can just take a few minutes and start a list. If only to keep Mary Margaret and me from admitting our little company is growing up.”

David started a list. It took Mary Margaret a couple of minutes to say anything then she too, dove in.

As her parents brainstormed, Emma saw an orange dot appear on her screen indicating a message directly to her. Since you live in Portland, do you want a hotel room for the presentation? Regina asked.

Maybe the night directly before, Emma answered.

What about sleeping? It would be a new place.

I doubt I’m going to sleep anyway with the presentation the next morning. My insomnia doesn’t always need the excuse of a new place.

This was the second change: the renewal of their friendship. They talked about every other day, sometimes in conversational sprints of fifteen to twenty minutes. There were also video and phone calls that ambled, lazy and lost in the sun of one another’s company, not caring about the destination or if they reached it.

Often they discussed small, unimportant details that they gave more attention to then they should. David asked Emma what color they should paint “her” bedroom, and she dragged Regina into Skype to talk about the labyrinth of blue paint shades. Emma could care less about what her walls looked
like, but it gave a legitimate reason to engage in a winding, two-hour conversation. Regina called her to get her opinion on where to start with her green initiative. Emma acknowledged her absolute lack of knowledge about the topic and wound up agreeing with whatever Regina said, adding nothing useful.

But there were a few times she made Regina laugh, the light banter submerging her problems and worries in giddy fog, leaving them in a place where the only thing they could see clearly was one another. Half the time when she and Regina spoke, she wound up laying down on her couch, eyes closed and grinning.

*Should I get a reservation then?* Regina asked, continuing their private messages.

*Unless they’ll let me pitch a tent in the lobby. Or... I could build a pillow fort.* She glanced back at Skype because she knew Regina’s mouth would tilt in a small amused smile. It did.

*I’ll ask them,* Regina typed back.

*Actually, I’ve never built a pillow fort. David and Mary Margaret built one for me once. They found out I’d never had one. It covered the whole living room, and it had Christmas lights inside. They refused to take it down for a week.*

*I never have either. It’s not the kind of thing my mother ever encouraged.*

*I feel like she encouraged you to focus on things like tax code.*

*Not quite that bad. Close. But not quite.*

Emma realized she’d lost time and place and jerked her attention back to her parents. They seemed to have the start of a plan, though what it was exactly she wasn’t sure.

There were no more messages as Regina, ever-devoted to good time management, kept on track, steering them back to the last topic on their agenda.

After the meeting ended, one question appeared on Emma’s screen that made her heart swell with sadness.
Do you think I’m pushing your parents? Nolan Securities belongs to them—I know they agreed to this, but I’m not sure they really understood.

Emma frowned at the question. She kind of wished they were talking about the “green, recycle-y stuff” again, because at least then not knowing what to say didn’t have an emotional cost.

Fuck. She tapped two fingers hard against her forehead. Talk, she ordered herself. *Maybe it’s not that you’re pushing. Maybe it’s like coding. You have a list of stuff you want the program to do and you start with the first thing. You get that working, then you add to it. But there are these natural sort of checkpoints? So maybe we’re just at one of those, where we have to see if the formula is doing what we want it to do?* She typed it all as fast as she could, almost feverishly wanting to help, hoping that by the end what she was saying would make sense.


For the rest of the day she felt like she had taken down Goliath single-handedly.

She was used to happiness being a thing she searched for, not something she carried. All of her life she’d felt so clumsy. She didn’t want to drop this new thing, didn’t want it to shatter into a thousand pieces. Maybe one day she wouldn’t feel like a klutz quite so often. When Regina said things like that to her, she believed it was possible.

Later, she called her parents to check on them. They did seem freaked out.

David promised her that he and Mary Margaret would be okay. “It’s just all new. I’m really sorry we made Regina worry. She likes wine, maybe Snow and I will surprise her with a bottle later and we can talk.”

Emma liked the thought of the three of them (and perhaps Henry, because he would definitely want to be around) sitting around together.

This was the third change in her life—how often she spoke with her parents, and how their family unit, complete with Regina and Henry, had cemented itself. It wasn’t always easy. Sometimes, for no reason, the words “Mom” and “Dad” lodged in her throat, scratching there with sharp edges. There were moments she wanted to withdraw from all of them and give herself the safety of space. Mary Margaret suggested she could try that daily, but only for an hour or two. She was going to give that a
try.

Adopted, Emma thought with a laugh. The Nolans really had adopted all of them.

The Portland presentation was two weeks later. Her parents arrived on Wednesday to do their usual canvassing, and Regina and Henry came in the next day.

During Emma and Regina’s many phone conversations and Skype sessions, Henry sometimes sat in. A week ago Regina confided her worry about his sullenness. They both agreed that him coming to Portland to see the presentation was a good idea, and maybe they would manage to do something fun together. It wasn’t clear if “together” was just Emma, Regina, and Henry or if it also included David and Mary Margaret. Henry volunteered to coordinate an activity, and decided it should be just the three of them. Doing something involving Segways. Henry wondered if they could stay with Emma. “No,” Regina and Emma both said at once.

Emma had never gotten around to moving from her shoe-box-like, likely-to-be-murdered-in, barely-worthy-of-the-name apartment. Her Cybersheriff salary had kicked in so she certainly made enough money to upgrade. Every time she considered it, she pushed it to the side. Like...she was waiting for a better motive than just to live somewhere safer and nicer. As if that wasn’t reason enough.

She waited until six p.m. to check into the hotel, giving Regina and Henry time to relax before they all met for dinner. Regina had gotten them adjoining rooms, so Henry was playing games on her bed when she walked it. She tossed down her backpack and greeted him, which made Regina appear in the doorway between their rooms. Emma started towards her, but paused just within hugging distance. Henry bounced from the bed and wedged between them, hugging Emma with one arm.

Regina’s brown eyes shone into hers for a moment, and then she drifted back. “I promised I’d call your parents when you got—”

“I texted them from the lobby.”

Regina responded with a playful, arched eyebrow. “How responsible.”

The teasing lilt in Regina’s voice mixing with fondness was like downing three shots. Tingles traveled from the top of her head down to her neck. She felt a jolt in her knees, like a doctor testing
her reflexes. It was the weirdest place to feel her attraction to Regina because—really? Her knees? She cleared her throat to get herself back on track.

“We should head down if you all are ready,” Emma said.

“I picked a restaurant that used to be a church,” Henry told her excitedly, following her to the door.

“I told him it sounded heavenly,” Regina said, straightfaced.

Another knock to her knees at Regina’s twinkling eyes and the appealing curve of her lips.

*Dammit.*

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At midnight three tentative knocks came at the door linking their rooms. Emma was deeply engaged in a debate on one of her favorite forums over the government using malware against foreign entities (she thought it was allowable with a few limitations). When she opened the adjoining door, Regina stood there in blue pajamas, a terry cloth robe tossed over them.

It was untied. Regina’s sleepwear wasn’t particularly revealing, but that little detail made Emma’s mouth go dry.

“I wondered if…” Regina didn’t seem the confident businesswoman or mayor now, voice quiet, face softer and younger than usual, words offered tentatively. “You said that sometimes when something distracts you, it can help you sleep.”

“Are you going to the do the blue suede shoes dance?”

Based on Regina’s expression, that was not going to be a possibility. She held up her iPhone, pulling it from the pocket of her robe. “I...had an idea. It’s a bit unorthodox.”

“We’re going to play minesweeper?”
“Emma,” Regina’s chiding voice made Emma grasp that this offer was hard for her. She didn’t usually do things like this. “Henry used to have horrible nightmares after his father died. It helped if I read to him before he slept. This isn’t exactly the same, but you need your rest. I thought perhaps it couldn’t hurt to try?”

Kindness was something she never expected, it was so rare a visitor to her life. It knocked on other people’s doors, but not more than a few times on hers. She didn’t know exactly what to do with it now that it was here. She realized that she and Regina were still standing in the doorway between their rooms, and she took a giant step back to let Regina in properly. “You’re going to read me a bedtime story?”

Regina retreated, reaching for the door handle behind her. “Maybe this was a foolish idea.”

“Wait, I’m—I’m sorry. I mean...thank you.” She hated how often what she said failed to express what she felt. “I mean...I’d like to try. If you still want to.”

“Very well.”

“So, what now?”

“Well, traditionally you get into your Star Wars pajamas and get under the covers. After that, I’ll read for half an hour, and we can see.”

Emma scoffed. “I sleep in an old t-shirt and underwear, thank you very much.”

“And what is on said t-shirt?”

Emma’s cheeks colored just a bit. “Dr. Who.”

“Yes, that is quite different.”

Emma gave up, which was probably the right course of action, and ducked into the bathroom to change. When she returned a moment later, Regina was sitting cross-legged on the left side of the
bed. She didn’t look up as Emma quickly made her way to the other side, slipped off her jeans, and got under the covers. Emma fluffed her pillow, frowned, then added a second pillow under her head.

“Ready?”

“Thanks again. Really.”

Regina smiled at her, a smile that felt like Regina was holding her hand even though they weren’t touching. “Chapter one. The boy who lived….”

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Emma didn’t sleep deeply. She woke every half hour or so with her hands clenched. But she did sleep. When Regina stopped reading, she muttered, tossing and turning in agitation.

So Regina didn’t stop reading. She did allow herself to prop pillows behind her back and lean against the headboard. Later, she removed her robe and lay down near Emma but, studiously did not touch her. As the morning came upon them, Regina was exhausted but also surprisingly content.

The latter was disturbingly normal around Emma these days.

She didn’t know what to do with that, how to assess it or categorize it or manage it. There were days when she wanted to be brave enough to explore how much more she truly felt—beyond friendship, beyond anything she understood. Those days were just so much less frequent than the other days, when she warned herself to be careful or risk losing what she had.

She felt stuck, stepping into mud so deep and thick it captured one foot, then the other.

Emma was trying to be so brave, but Regina could only feel that courage could be misleading. Danger should be avoided. That was only logical.

“Hey,” Emma’s voice was hoarse from sleep.
“Good morning,” Regina said, enjoying Emma’s tousled hair and the way she was just awake enough to give Regina a little smile, but not much else.

Emma blinked, her eyes adjusting to the spill of light in the room. “What time is it?”

“Early. You can sleep a little more if you want. I should start my day.”

Emma pushed up onto her elbows and squinted at the window and the sun. “You stayed here all night? Did you sleep?”

A white lie popped from her mouth without permission. It felt easier than the truth somehow. “A little.”

“I think I remember you talking about Hagrid.” Emma stared at her as if trying to puzzle something out. “But then, I think I woke up around...it was like 3 a.m. and you were still reading.” Emma’s mouth pressed into a line as she kept thinking. “And the same thing happened later on, too.”

“It seemed to relax you.” Regina felt boxed-in by the acknowledgment, claustrophobic because it could reveal how much of herself she could give to those she cared for. “It was nothing.” She swung her legs over the side of the bed, her back to Emma as she fled. “I really should get going.”

“Wait a second.” Emma scampered over the bed, drawing up alongside her. She lay a hand on her shoulder to try and keep her there. “You read to me all night?”

“I just wanted to help,” Regina said. She tried for a smile. “Turns out that Harry Potter is a cure-all for insomnia.” She expected Emma to pick up on the banter. Instead, Emma watched her, eye burning into her own and refusing to let go. “It was no...”

“Don’t do that,” Emma whispered. She looked at the floor, clasping her fingers together in front of her as if she was praying. “For me, it’s a big deal. It’s a big deal when I can count on one hand the number of people who have ever gone out of their way for me.” She turned, brow wrinkled and lips parted and soft. “You are a big deal to me, Regina.” Her hand reached out, hesitantly, a ghost wisping against Regina’s cheek.

Regina knew passion could be leaned into, at least the way she did it. With Mal, she inched forward into the heat as far as she could without losing herself, knowing their time together only meant so
much and she would have to go back to her real life. She couldn’t do that with Emma. Her beautiful, rough-around-the-edges Emma.

A line of sunlight crossed Emma’s shoulder from the window, but otherwise the room was cool and dark. Emma’s bare leg pressed against hers, since she only wore her T-shirt and panties. Her fingers skimmed the line of Regina’s cheek, touched the edges of her hair, cupping her face.

“You and Henry are the biggest deals in my life, okay?”

The words made Regina bloom, unfold—her body, her heart, her needs. She couldn’t stop herself from encouraging Emma’s touch, her hand rising over Emma’s on her face.

Falling into this moment felt like finding. It made the air tingle and her body roar unabashedly. The ache rising over every inch of her—toes to the top of her head—was the pure, unadulterated electricity of wanting. She wanted more of it. The now, right now, grabbed hold of her, almost cruel in its relentlessness, not letting her think.

More.

The pads of her fingertips and her nails painting down Emma’s forearm, then up to her bicep. Her head drew closer to Emma’s, as she was pulled into her orbit. Her pulse jumped in her neck and she could feel it pounding there and in her ears.

More.

Regina closed her eyes, her cheek skimming Emma’s as she whispered, “You’re a big deal to me, too.” Her lips brushed a kiss to the bridge of Emma’s nose, then dotted another on Emma’s cheek. “And you’re impossibly tempting.”

The admission surprised both of them. She felt Emma start, and then reason tore into the moment just enough to make her falter. She was toying with important boundaries, and no matter how much she wanted to forget them, to ignore her many rules, it would belittle what they shared if she did. Regina tried to navigate the moment and found herself going round in circles.

She forced herself to stand up, shaking her head to clear it. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...This isn’t something we can pursue lightly. We just became friends again. We’re starting a business. Your parents live in my town...and then there’s Henry.” Her fingers trembled. Her heart was still beating
so hard it pulsed everything inside her. She paced between the bed and escape to her room. “I’ve never had what we have with anyone. I never thought I would. I barely know what to do with it as is.” She smoothed her fingers back and forth over her forehead. “I have plans for everything, but this is...there are so many complications. I have a literal escape plan just in case my mother or the press show up. Money in a suitcase, debit cards, plane schedules. That’s who I am.”

She glanced back over her shoulder. Emma still sat on the side of the bed, lips parted, wearing a small shell-shocked expression. Her gaze unwillingly dropped to Emma’s shapely legs and she spun back around. “Maybe—could you please put some pants on?”

She heard Emma moving behind her, and then the rustle of fabric as Emma responded to her request. Relief and disappointment dripped through her in equal measure.

“I need you in my life, Emma. Or I’m starting to. And I need to be careful. I know how brave you’ve been. I just—I’m not there.”

Emma came a round to stand in front of her. She searched Regina’s eyes and reached for her hands. “We’ll figure it out. We don’t have to...there are no expectations, okay?”

“There aren’t?”

Emma’s eyes were soft, a quiet, dignified plea. “Just—I need you in this with me. Whatever this is, whatever happens. I need us to figure it out together. Can you give me that?”

“I can do that,” Regina said and squeezed Emma’s hands.

************************

The presentation went well enough. Emma forgot an entire section in the middle but it wasn’t noticeable. It still took about fifteen minutes for her to actually relax into her speech, but she did relax. After the speech, the entire family went to lunch and then the Storybrooke contingent headed back.

Later that night, Emma sent her an email with an attachment that said, _Hey Regina, take a look, this is us in Portland._ It had a picture of all of them in the lobby of the hotel.
When she saved it—as her desktop—a black box popped up on her screen that read *Expecto Patronum!* Then a pause and more typing, *This is a message from Emma. Don’t be freaked out.*

The text disappeared and a cursor blinked on her screen. After a beat, more words came, *What if we went out to dinner. Just us. Not on a date. Just on a thing. No pressure. Also, no business talk allowed.* Again the writing disappeared and the screen went blank.

_Type “Y” for Yes or “N” for No, and your answer will be texted to me. If you say yes, I’ll call you so we can make plans. Or if you say no, we shall never speak of this again. Either way, I’ll probably breathe for the first time since making this program._

Regina smiled so wide, it hurt. She really should say no. It was the wise thing to do. Her mind was in motion on too many things and she didn’t know what, beyond friendship, she could offer Emma.

She should absolutely say no.

She typed one letter.

_Y._
Chapter Summary

Happy Thursday everyone. Today's flight will be a lovely waltz through the sky invoking butterflies, nervous moments and a "thing" that is TOTALLY not a date. As usual, thank you all for the response and the comments and the kudos. I don't think I wouldn't have gotten half this far without your support. We are about 5 chapters away from the end, can you all believe it? Still, a lot more story to tell. Recline your seats back and enjoy. This is your Captain speaking.

As always if you want to say "hi", you can find me on Twitter under "mariacomet".

Btw, if you haven't already, you might want to check out "Trust" which is another SQ story I just tossed up. It's MUCH shorter and MUCH more unsafe for work. I can shill my own stuff, right? That's totally allowed? I did anyway! Muhahahahaha.

Regina heard Emma call out a hello to Belle, and she studiously adopted a “working hard” pose that would convey that this visit and their plans for that night did not throw her.

At all.

Earlier, when Emma texted she was on the way, Regina sought out a mirror without thinking and began to primp. She then berated herself for the sudden attack of a schoolgirl crush. It didn’t stop her from wondering if she should have worn a grey suit and not a black one. A lighter color might make her seem more approachable.

She hadn’t gotten a thing done after that.

A knock came at her door and Emma peeked in, engaging grin at the ready. Regina waved her in and realized that, for whatever reason, Emma had abandoned the casual-jeans-and-t-shirt look. She wore a crisp button-up dark blue shirt, top two buttons left open. A charcoal vest was tossed over it coordinated with slacks of the same color. Emma’s hair was in a loose ponytail and she was wearing drop earrings capped at the end with a small rhinestone.

It was quite a fetching ensemble, she thought as her head began to feel feverish. Her fingers splayed flat on her desk, fingertips itching to do something. Her toes curled in the same desire to move.
This was just Emma, she reminded herself.

“Am I interrupting,” Emma asked.

“You—you’re dressed.”

They had decided to do “the thing” the weekend directly after Portland. The plan was that Emma would drive in today, Friday, to help look at resumes sent over from the temp agency. After that, in the evening would be the “thing.”

“Well, driving naked seemed like a bad idea. This is my more ‘professional’ look but…” She kicked up a leg. “Still have sneakers.” She came a little closer. “Do you like it?”

Regina couldn’t cobble two words together to answer Emma’s question. She tried to kick-start her mind, but it sputtered and refused to function. She wanted to say how beautiful Emma was, but if she said that, it would surely make things awkward. Yet, the reality of that truth swept everything else.

She cleared her throat. “It’s very nice, but it’s your wardrobe. What I like is irrelevant.”

“I kinda like it. I have to get used to it. I am not doing heels. I don’t care how successful we get. I will break something.” She tilted her head. “But you don’t like it?”

Between the “the thing” tonight and that question, it felt like someone had kicked over a basket of butterflies in her stomach. “I…” Her eyes flooded with an appreciative glow, she could feel it and couldn’t stop it. “I like it very much.”

“Very much?”

She forced her eyes back down to her paperwork. “Yes.” Regina pinched her side to try and regain her senses. “Your parents have a bunch of resumes for you to offer your opinion on. Henry told me that we can have ‘time to ourselves’ tonight as long as you give him ‘Emma time’ tomorrow. On that topic, your parents want to have a family dinner tomorrow night. They probably let you know that the moment you arrived in town.”
“They probably would have. Except I came here first.”

The butterflies got out again. “You did?”

“Yup.” Emma dipped her hands in the pockets of her vest which hung to her hips. “Ah, I don’t ever want you to feel pushed by me but—can I tell you I missed you?”

She realized the awkward position she had put Emma in. Her own uncertainty caused Emma doubt where the boundaries were. “You can always say that to me. I missed you, too.”

Emma flicked her index finger toward Regina then back to herself. “So, this—this is weird, right? I don’t know if you’re nervous. I’m a little nervous.”

Emma’s admission was a relief. The line of her shoulders relaxed. Emma’s casual honesty had always been disarming, but more importantly, right now it felt familiar. It was a little like finding an English television station in a foreign country where she didn’t speak the language.

“I am too,” Regina said. “I think we’re both just trying to understand the expectations.”

“But the entire point is not to have them. That’s why it’s a ‘thing’ and not a date. We’re just going to go and hang out with each other.”

Regina nodded, trying to chisel that into her head. Maybe that would keep the former cocoon-dwellers at bay. That, and a sensible plan. “About tonight, we settled on the restaurant, but we didn’t talk about how we are getting there.”

Emma’s mouth hung open in an O. “Um, well, it wouldn’t make sense to take separate cars, but uh, I guess picking you up would seem too ‘date-y’.”

Regina was the planner between them. “What if we meet here, outside, at 7.”

“Sure,” Emma said. “So, I guess I’ll see you then.”
“See you then.”

As soon as Emma left, Regina sank her head in her hands. “Hanging out,” she muttered. “Just hanging out. Right.”

A little later, she received a text from Emma, “Hey Regina. Marco.”

She didn’t remember the inside joke from the Winter Festival right away, but when she did, it gave her yet another reminder that Emma hadn’t changed just because they were exploring untrodden paths.

Polo, she texted back.

*******************************************************************************

Regina was trying to kill her.

Though, really, in a court of law a judge probably wouldn’t believe that wearing a skirt was a murder weapon.

It entirely was.

Regina’s skirt, slit on the side, offering hints of luscious skin applied the gas to her libido and revved her engines. She was stuck at the starting line raring to go. The way Regina ate, how she occasionally fusses with the edges of her hair, her smiles—playful, touched, amused—none of them did anything but put pressure on the accelerator.

She ignored it, like she had on the drive here and when they’d walked into the restaurant and as they ordered appetizers.

“How did you meet Neal,” Regina asked, after their entrees were ordered. Before that moment, they had discussed things they were working on that didn’t directly involve Cybersheriff. Tonight, by mutual agreement, talking about Cybersheriff was off limits.
“We were both trying to hack the same ATM.”

“Romantic,” Regina said, and took a dainty bite of one of the mini egg rolls they had ordered as an appetizer. Emma knew nothing about Vietnam cuisine, but Yelp rated this restaurant highly, so maybe egg rolls weren’t just Chinese? She would google it later.

“What about you and your husband?”

“My mother picked him out of several eligible men as someone who would best assist in my ambitions. I then systematically befriended him and his girlfriend so I could break them up.”

“Romantic.”

Regina’s mouth twisted. “I made him miserable, but he was malleable. After a few years, I felt guilty enough to let him go. He was a good man. He wanted to go to counselling and really try to work at our marriage.” She sighed, fingertips massaging her temple for a moment. “He didn’t realize it was, and always had been a sham.”

“So, we really suck at this. Like—on every level.”

It made Regina give a small burst of a laugh.

Good.

There was this uncertainty bouncing up and down between them that kept yelling “look at me!” They were both doing their best to ignore it. Emma recognized that for someone like Regina, who thrived on rules, this place they were in must feel like the Wild West. Lawless, uncharted, and probably dusty.

Emma, on the other hand, didn’t want to push, and it was hard to know when she was. She wished Regina came with a traffic signal—red, yellow, green. Anything but green meant stop, but she didn’t know when the light would change, so she kept reading into what Regina said and did.
Maybe if she could keep it light, keep making Regina laugh, it would be okay.

“We do suck at it,” Regina agreed. “My first crush was on a teacher my freshman year of high school. She taught history and wore perfume that smelled like gardenias. She had an awful time controlling her class but she was passionate. I…used to buy her books and leave them on her desk when I was sure no one was around. ‘Wuthering Heights,’ ‘A Room with a View,’ ‘Agnes Grey’. Of course, I acted completely apathetic in her class around my friends.”

“Did she ever figure out it was you?”

“Never.” She paused before she said the next part. “My friends weren’t kind to her. I didn’t join in, but I didn’t stop them either.”

Emma pursed her lips and strummed at the edge of her napkin. “Do you think you would now?”

“Now.” A dry chuckle escaped her. “Now, I would read every single one of them the riot act until they were in tears.” She leaned back, shoulders straightening. “Good people deserve better. I wanted to do that then, too, but…I knew I could lose my influence, and I couldn’t allow that.”

“No better than me sizing up marks to steal credit cards from, probably,” Emma said easily. “Actually, I probably would have wound up working at a store your friends shopped in. Best way to do it was to work retail a few days and attach software to the credit card scanner.”

Regina’s brows shot up. “Sometimes you terrify me.”

“Hey, reformed hacker is reformed, remember?”

Regina reached across and touched her hand. “I am very much aware of that.” Emma’s eyes fell to their hands. Regina didn’t keep her hand there long, withdrawing it to take a long sip of water.

Fuck, Emma thought. Things would be fine, and then it would suddenly be awkward, like one of them had tripped. She released a puff of air and forged ahead with the conversation.

“My first crush was a girl who rode a Harley, had a nose ring, and wore a leather jacket. But I
thought I was just lusting after the Harley.”

Regina chuckled and the evening righted itself again. “Can I ask you about prison?” Emma shrugged, honestly not minding. “Were you scared?”

“Mostly, I was bored and frustrated. Three of us in a cell—but it was minimum security, so no bars. Everything was gray. I mean everything. They wouldn’t let me use a computer because of what I had done. There was other stuff to do—pool, ping pong, weights—but they kept shutting down the library because inmates snuck in there to smoke weed. It was kind of like a really, really low-budget summer camp you couldn’t escape from and without nature. I felt like I was crawling out of my skin. I started gambling with my inmate allowance because I was bored. I taught a computer basics class because I was bored. I worked out because I was bored.”

“You experimented with your sexuality because you were bored?”

Emma’s cheeks colored. “That wasn’t how it started. It started because I met someone who reminded me of my first crush, and she let her interest be known loud and clear. But after that, yeah, kinda.”

Regina paid close attention to the silverware, rearranging her fork and knife so they were parallel. “And was your relief from boredom extensive in that way?”

Emma translated that into what she thought Regina was actually asking. The corners of her eyes crinkled. “Are you asking if I was a slut?”

Regina’s eyes widened into big, round circles. “I was asking no such thing.”

Emma let her off the hook and answered while enjoying her still shocked expression. “I was with my first prison girlfriend—I use that term loosely—for a couple months. After her, I occasionally had a thing. I mean, there’s a certain amount of planning involved for the whole thing so you don’t get caught. Spontaneity was hard to come by.”

“My first girlfriend was a cliche. It was in college—as if that stereotype needed me to give it more credence. I arranged for us to be roommates, so we could hide it more easily. It would have been a disaster if it had gotten out.”

“You didn’t ‘arrange it’ by killing someone, did you?”
“Please, I only maimed them.”

Emma rested her chin in her hand. “Sometimes you terrify me.”

Regina’s eyes sparkled. “Reformed Ice Queen is reformed. No, I just asked both of our roommates if they would mind switching. Nothing diabolical.”

“So, what happened to Miss Cliche?”

Regina’s head dropped a fraction, her tone thoughtful. “She got tired of hiding, and I had no intention of making it public. I had a plan for my life mapped out. I wasn’t about to deviate from it for anyone.” She shook her head as if trying to dismiss the memory. “It’s just as well, she was majoring in theater arts. It never would have worked.”

The joke drifted away, Regina’s brow furrowing. “When my husband and I divorced, it made the papers in New York. My lawyer’s secretary gave a ‘tell all’ interview, sharing everything and anything she’d overheard. It didn’t make me look very good.” She tested the prongs of her fork with her fingertip. “They never did.”

Emma couldn’t fight Regina’s past for her. She didn’t have the means to go back in time and stand by the side of the woman going through those days. She wished she did. The thing that always struck Emma about Regina was how alone she sounded when she spoke about her past. Emma had been poor and an orphan, so her own solitude made sense. Regina, though, she had a family. She had a golden ticket.

Still, they had spent most of their lives in the same way—alone.

“My mother was very disappointed that I couldn’t make it work,” Regina said. “She is a big believer in doing whatever is necessary to get what you want. There was something in the way she treated my father that I could never put my finger on when I was little. In public, she said all the right things to him and was affectionate with him. In private though, she was constantly correcting him.”

“And you, too?”
Regina nodded. “And me, too. She would do it with a small smile or a pat, like she was trying to help. But it was all the time. And all that ‘affection’—she used it. She used it like a tool to make us think or do what she wanted.”

“And your dad doesn’t seem to have been like that. From what little you’ve told me.”

“No. He was—” She withdrew further into herself, stopped fussing with the silverware, and placed her hands in her lap. “I think the way I love Henry is because of what he taught me. I think that’s the part of me that’s from my father.” She met Emma’s eyes and held them, not holding back the mourning of her father or the pride in that part of herself. “I guess this isn’t the most fun topic of conversation.”

“We can talk about this MMORPG I just started playing.”

Regina cocked her head. “I have no idea what you just said.”

“Regina, if you want to talk about your dad or Henry or paperclips—”

“Paperclips?”

—or whatever, I’m good. Look, we both know each other and we know we like each other. That’s the hard part, right? So, we can just be ourselves. Whatever that means. Okay?”

Regina answered her with an unrestrained smile that slowly curved up her lips until it was fully freed. “Okay,” Regina said.

Once again, Emma’s body quickened. She ignored it.

Well, she tried.

The conversation flowed and, right about the time dinner came, Emma relaxed. Their banter built and fell away when they talked about deeper things. After dinner, they drove back to Regina’s house, and Regina asked if Emma wanted to go for a walk.
“So, I’m thinking this went pretty well,” Emma said, darting a glance at her to try and gauge whether she agreed.

They walked beside one another slowly, drifting into the quiet Storybrooke night. “I’d like to do this again, but Emma, I still don’t know…”

Emma turned toward her to stop her. “I’m not asking you for anything, remember?”

“You deserve…”

“So do you.” Emma’s voice was strained, believing it with all of her heart.

Regina stepped closer and tugged on Emma’s vest, their eyes meeting. “Could we…” she left it hanging there for a long moment. “Could we try this?” Regina reached out and linked her fingers with Emma’s.

The smile inside Emma was gargantuan, it battled to take over her eyes and mouth. It stomped over her intentions of being cool and casual. “Yeah.” She squeezed Regina’s hand to give her another source of affirmation.

They kept walking, hand in hand.

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Emma wrote the Pertential Scale on the whiteboard. “So, here it is,” she said to Regina. “And so, like, right now I’m at 40. Which is great for me.”

“40.” Regina stared at it, frowning then sitting forward. “That is the stupidest thing I have ever seen.”

It was a week after their “thing” and technically this long lunch in the conference room at city hall was another “thing”. Emma brought Chinese food. They bantered for a bit and even held hands. Taken in by this new level of closeness, Emma decided to explain her philosophy of quantifying her
Emma wondered if she had explained it right. “No, see, it’s two parameters to make it a more complete value.”

Regina, expression not changing, rapped her fingernails on the top of the table. “And yet you rate yourself as a 40?”

“My point was that it’s a good thing. Like, yay, it went up. Because of,” she gestured between them, “y’know, of everything.”

“40,” Regina said again, standing and crossing towards Emma. “If I may?” Regina pulled the marker from Emma’s fingertips. “You have two variables, yes? ‘A’ which is ‘how good a life you are providing for yourself’ and ‘B’ which is ‘how much good you are doing for the people around you’.”

Regina wrote down a very neat and precise A, followed by a B, and then began to draw money symbols around both. “When I had access to my mother’s coffers I could help thousands of people if I wanted to. Am I really any better than someone who helps a dozen, but does it by offering blood, sweat, and tears? Variable A has the same weakness. Living up to your potential may involve contacts, education, any number of things that some people have in abundance and some don’t. So, you’ve created a scale that anyone can game simply by being wealthy.”

Emma studied the scale she had drawn, gaping, as Regina, in minutes, dismantled what took her years to create. “Rich people are a statistical anomaly. You always toss out the outliers if you want accuracy, right?”

Regina didn’t fight that, instead she wrote “Henry.”

“Emma, would you say that Henry would be high on either of those two variables? He is still trying to understand what his potential is, and while he does what he can to help others, I think he has a while to go before he’s Mother Theresa. Are you saying that his worth is low?”

“Of course not. I mean, that’s another outlier, really. I wouldn’t apply this to a kid.”

“I see. And at what age, then, is suitable to apply it?” Regina sounded calm and reasonable, but she
was flicking the marker up and down.

“Well—“

“If I have bad days when I don’t ‘live up to my potential’ or ‘don’t do much good’, my son still considers my worth to be high. My town considers it to be high. And I hope, so do you. Am I wrong?”

Emma gave a nervous smile. The question was dangerous. “It’s supposed to measure where you are compared to where you could be. Your perception of your potential. It doesn’t try to determine ‘worth’.”

“All grading systems have an impact on morale and confidence. Where is the parameter that gives you credit just for being you? Where is the line that says you are more than these two variables? Because that scale should start at a 100%. Emma, the trick is to hang on to that with all your might, and not let anyone or anything make you feel it’s not 100%.” She tossed the marker onto the table and folded her arms over her stomach. “You have an entire scale that reduces you, and you’ve had it for years.”

The instinct to apologize rose in Emma, except she didn’t entirely understand what she would be apologizing for. “If I just erase this, can you forget I mentioned it?” she asked, and inched toward the eraser.

Regina fixed her with a glare. “Don’t joke about this. Is this scale what caused you to punish people who swindle others? Is this part of why you feel the need to charge in and save the day?”

“I can we back up a step, please?” Emma scratched the back of her neck and claimed a chair a few feet away. She settled in and took a moment to regroup. “Look, I just wanted something to help me make sense of things. I needed something.”

Regina came to sit beside her and took her hand. “My mother made me believe that I could either be perfect or worthless, that was all there was in her eyes. There are so many people who will tear you down, Emma. Because you have something they want, or they aren’t thinking, or because they can. Don’t help them do it.” She lifted from her chair long enough to gently kiss Emma’s temple. “You have to start each day at 100, because I can’t stand…” Her fingers brushed the hair from Emma’s face. “I can’t stand the thought of you not seeing yourself that way.”
Emma felt her vision blur with tears, and all she could do was hold tighter to Regina’s hand. “I’ll try.”

“I don’t always do a good job of it either, but you help. You very much help, Emma.”

“Can I ask you something? Do you still have that escape plan box?”

“Yes.”

Regina had showed her the box once. It was hidden in the floor safe in her home office, just under her desk chair. Inside she had petty cash, passports, and stacks of pre-paid credit cards, as well as a list of hotels, flight numbers, and flight times. Regina had told her that she double-checked the details every other week—like a ritual.

“That box scares me. I feel like it’s this ticking time bomb, you know? And I’m wondering if it makes you feel like less than you are.” Regina’s expression was confused, so Emma went on. “It’s a reminder of what scares you the most, and it’s there with you every day. It helps you feel safe and in control. Like the scale for me. But maybe it also messes with you. Makes you doubt yourself.”

Her eyes dropped as she considered Emma’s words. “It’s possible. I don’t think I’m ready to get rid of that box, Emma. I don’t know if I’ll ever be, but...maybe I can at least move it out of my office. Put it in a safety deposit box. Maybe that’s progress.”

“I’ll work at updating my scale.” Emma leaned forward till her head was on Regina’s shoulder. Regina lay her cheek against Emma’s hair, fingers combing through the ends.

“So—we start at 100,” Emma said.

“Start at 100,” Regina echoed, and it felt like a vow.
The one with an absolute lack of focus

Chapter Notes

Happy Thursday everybody,

The flight takes you into Flirtingville and has clear skies though the last leg of the flight will be turning into Angstown. That being said, I am going to give you all an extra post next week so I will be posting on Monday and Thursday. Monday and Thursday posts! Cats and dogs living together! Anarchy!

I continue to be amazed and appreciative of all the feedback, Kudos, etc. You all have really given me a community here and it's fantastic to be so supported.

With tons of love, this is your captain speaking.

The third “thing” happened two weeks later, when Emma came back into town for a long weekend.

This time the Nolans volunteered to entertain Henry so they could have time alone, and Regina cooked. They agreed that they would start the evening looking over resumes, however, so it was a “working thing” instead of just a “thing”.

During dinner, she found herself watching Emma’s profile and the intensity of Emma’s gaze as she skimmed resumes. “Most of these are college kids.” Emma fumbled her fork, dropping pasta in her lap. She tossed the pasta into her mouth and smoothed out her pants. “Like, this one has no work experience at all. Shouldn’t we be asking for that?”

Regina got up to look, bending to peer at Emma’s screen. “Your parents gave a thumb’s up to all of these. You think they’re a soft touch?”

Emma didn’t answer, but Regina could feel her eyes stroking up her neck to her face, caressing her skin. Her ego crowed, unused to that kind of attention. She glanced toward her. “You’re not focusing, Emma.”

Emma swallowed and wet her lips. “Sorry.”

Regina repeated her question.
“Yeah, pretty much.”

Regina couldn’t help herself, she leaned across Emma to point at her screen. “Can you open that one, please?” Once more, Emma’s silence was conspicuous. “Focus, Emma.”

“You’re standing way too close to me for that.”

They turned toward one another and she basked in the totality of Emma’s attention, and the depth of the longing etched on her face. “Decorum, Miss Swan.”

“Don’t you call me Emma these days?”

Regina drunk with how it felt to be wanted by Emma, pressed her fingers on the back of Emma’s neck and lowered her head to whisper in Emma’s ear. “Decorum, Emma.”

Emma groaned and slumped down in her chair. “God, Regina, are you kidding me?”

Regina jerked back, repentant. “I’m sorry, I was just — I — I’m not trying to -”

Emma straightened, chasing Regina’s hands with her own, trying to quell her skittishness. “Whoa. It’s okay, just...use your powers for good instead of evil.” It forced a smile from Regina. Emma always found a way to ground her. “It’s just flirting, Regina. We just don’t usually ‘go there’. So...kinda threw me.”

Regina was still confused about what they should or should not pursue with one another. Still, she’d developed a plan on how to proceed. First, she would speak with Henry. After that, she would try to take initiative more often. She may be unsure, but she should be honest and show Emma they were in this together. She vowed to find a moment to do so during dinner. Those two steps were all she had; she was still working on a third one.

Earlier that day, she’d completed the first step.
Henry set his hands on his hips. “You’re kicking me out?”

“Yes,” Regina answered succinctly. “However, tomorrow all three of us will have breakfast. And after that, you and Emma can get into as much sensible trouble as you can manage without destroying anything or hurting yourselves.”

Henry snorted and his eyes twinkled. “Mom, I don’t think ‘sensible trouble’ is a thing.”

She eyed him. “It is in this house.” She paused. “Henry — what if we saw more of Emma? And what if I, specifically, saw more of her?”

He didn’t look surprised. “Just as friends?”

The question stilled her heart in her chest and made her wonder if time had stopped. Her answer was careful. “What if it was more?”

He tilted his head. “Are you asking for my blessing? Because I think Emma’s supposed to do that.”

He didn’t seem thrown by any of this, which flustered her. “I’m asking — need to know you’re okay. I will always need to know that, Henry.”

His face softened. “She makes you smile more often. I like that. I like her being around. She fits in. She makes things...better.”

“She does, doesn’t she?”

Now, right now, seemed a good time to try to take that second step — be more direct and honest with Emma about her feelings.

She took in a deep breath. “Can I tell you that I like flirting with you? I liked just now.”

“Really?”
The question rang with vulnerability. It was hard, this place they were in. “Really.”

“So, what if we decided flirting was okay sometimes? Not all the time, because you’ll kill me. But occasionally.”

“Are you sure?”

“I like knowing that we’re not just buddies.” Another quiet revelation from Emma, another reminder of how many times Emma’s hopes had resulted in ash.

“Emma?” Regina squeezed her shoulder. “We’re not just buddies.”

“Good. Now, could you please stay on task, Regina? We’re looking at resumes, you really need to focus.”

Regina threw her napkin at her.

********************************************************************

That night, Regina found it impossible to stop thinking of Emma. Even after declaring war on the fridge, removing all the food, wiping it down, and even running the shelves through the dishwasher. It made her tired, it just didn’t take her mind off Emma’s reaction to her earlier. While she showered, she thought of Emma’s smile...and her mouth.

She sat cross-legged on her bed and threw herself into answering emails from council members. Every correspondence seemed duller than usual. She wondered if Emma was sleeping. She imagined her sitting at her desk, her eyes consumed by whatever was on the screen. Emma’s fingers were long and white; they flew across the keys when she typed.

When they held hands, she noticed the way her skin was a shade darker than Emma’s, and that Emma’s index finger had a little scar she hadn’t asked about yet.
She wondered how to make Emma’s eyes shine. Over and over, she replayed the moment at the hotel in Portland when they’d almost kissed. She wanted to see that ache in Emma’s eyes again.

With a sigh of frustration, she closed the laptop and placed it on her nightstand. This was ridiculous. *Dammit, just call her.*

Emma answered on the second ring.

“Did I wake you?” Regina asked, more out of politeness than because she was concerned.

“Nope, I was daydreaming.”

“About?”

Regina could almost hear Emma’s grin. “My new coffee mug. For like an hour and a half. It’s a mug that strives for perfection and will allow no stain. It is unlike any coffee mug I have ever known. A little sassy but able to hold warm cocoa.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “You’re very strange.”

“I’m just very invested in my coffee mugs.”

Regina’s voice deepened and she imagined whispering in Emma’s ear like she had earlier. “Well, I was thinking about you.”

“Do tell.”

Regina fought back a wave of shyness. “I had a question. What would your ideal date look like?”

She heard Emma shift the phone. “I am not good at questions like this. I haven’t had many dates. One time Neal got us a pizza and lit a few candles. My first prison girlfriend and I danced in a cell
“Once.”

“That reminds me, are you still in touch with her?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” Regina heard a soft chuckle then a squeak on Emma’s end, like a chair reclining or moving. “Do you like roses?”

“Only got them once,” Emma said. “But they die, right? That’s kinda sad — like, hey you’re hot and I like you. Here are some things that are going to wither and die.”

“Unique perspective.”

“Do you like roses?”

Regina lay back, Emma’s voice lulling her mind and body toward rest. The duality of wanting Emma and the desire to simply hold her blended together seamlessly inside her, born of the same need to be close. “Everyone gives roses and, therefore, I felt the need to like something else. Blue hydrangeas are my favorite, but I haven’t received them in a long time. I do see your point, however. I like Ghirardelli chocolates. But I guess, in terms of romance, those things are just accessories.”

“Hey, are you wearing those blue pajamas you wore at the hotel in Portland?”

Regina’s brow pinched together. “Emma Swan, did you just ask me what I’m wearing?”

“I’m just trying to picture you.”

Regina let her eyes drift close, amazed at how talking to Emma this way could make her feel like she was floating. “Are you wearing a Star Wars t-shirt?”

“Did you just ask me what I’m wearing, Regina Mills?”
“I asked about your choice of geekwear.”

“It’s Big Bang Theory tonight.”

Picturing Emma lounging in that shirt — and probably little else — unleashed an ache which Regina knew the light conversation shouldn’t. “We should probably switch topics. Though it occurs to me that my more intimate moments have been somewhat pedestrian.”

“Sorry, could you put that into English?”

“I haven’t tried a lot of things. Like phone sex for example.”

Emma exhaled loudly and when she answered her voice was muffled. “God, Regina.”

“I’m not offering. I’m just telling.”

“You’re provoking.”

“I am doing no such thing. However, we’re allowed to flirt, correct?” Emma muttered her agreement. “Then let me assure you, Emma, I haven’t begun to provoke.”

“Okay, I’ve been good, but two can play this game.” Inside Regina a bright light of interest flared. “Close your eyes for a second.”

She didn’t admit to Emma that they were already closed. “Very well.”

“Pretend you’re in your living room. You liked what I was wearing the other night, right?”

“Yes.”
“Then imagine me in that. You’re standing near the fireplace and I come up behind you. My body presses against your back. My hands slide over your hips. Do you feel that?”

Regina’s voice trembled. “I — Yes.”

“You’re wearing one of those skirts you torture me with.” Regina had no idea Emma felt that way, but lights kept firing inside her, glowing brighter, drowning out anything she might say. “I press my mouth near your ear and tell you how fucking beautiful you are. In every way. And I’m not good with words and that word — people use it too much and too easily. But, I think, I could show you.”

Regina bit her lower lip. In her mind, Emma’s panting breath teased against her neck. She shivered and pressed her head back against the pillow, wanting more of the sensation. She was transported downstairs with Emma and her living room became a place of infinite possibilities. The couch, the coffee table, even the wall — visions danced in her head of what they might do.

“I want to show you till you believe what I see.” Emma said in a low, dangerous voice. It coiled between Regina’s legs, that tone.

“Emma,” she whispered, wanting Emma to hear the reverence in her voice.

“Is your heart pounding?”

“Yes.”

“Mine too. We should...I don’t want to get carried away.”

*Her Emma, always trying to protect her*, Regina thought. As close to a knight — her knight — as she would ever know.

“You okay?”

Her body hadn’t accepted the loss of the illusion of Emma’s body against hers. Regina wrapped her arms around her midsection, pressing her head into the pillow, and tried to catch her breath. Her feelings for Emma kept growing, and now the physical aspect of their relationship was building
momentum at an even more alarming rate. If they weren’t careful, they would wind up in bed before they were ready.

“Has anyone ever died from flirting?,” Regina asked.

“I’ll google it later.”

“Emma? It hasn’t been like this for me before.”

“Not even with Mal?”

“Never.” They were both quiet a moment after that. “You’re leaving tomorrow to go back to Portland?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll miss you,” she said, and didn’t hide the aching she felt.

“I’ll miss you too, Regina.”

The phone conversation made Regina wonder about a lot of things. She wanted Emma. Regina was a pragmatist and saw no point in denying such a vivid reality. Sex between them would not — could not be just sex. Not like with Mal. Mal had always been a visitor in her life. Their time together was purposefully temporary and had a specific intent. Emma never left her; Regina conjured her presence even when she wasn’t really there, because she was essential.

Regina couldn’t let them do something they weren’t prepared for. She just wasn’t sure how long she could stop herself. Usually, she’d bet on her self-control a thousand times out of a thousand. With Emma, she could see herself being lost to passion.

She needed to figure out what to do.
She found herself inviting Mary Margaret over for coffee under the guise of getting to know one another better. She made shortbread cookies, took out her more expensive premium brand coffee, and arranged a tray with cups and saucers.

When Mary Margaret arrived, she discreetly asked about her parents and her childhood before finally getting to one of the questions she really wanted to ask.

“Mary Margaret, can I ask you — how long were you and David seeing one another before you chose to make it formal?”

Mary Margaret paused, her coffee cup midway to her mouth. A quilted gray beanie perched atop her head, and she wore a t-shirt and jeans. Quite the contrast to the starched business suit Regina was wearing. “Is this about you and Emma?”

Regina didn’t think she’d been quite that transparent, but apparently she’d miscalculated. “I am not going to go to Emma’s ‘mommy’ for advice. That being said, I — I don’t have many people I can talk to. I thought perhaps I could ask your general perspective on relationships.”

A smirk inched up Mary Margaret’s mouth corners. “Oh, I’m in favor of them.” Once again, Regina felt thrown. Her confusion, for some reason, seemed to be endlessly amusing to Emma’s mother. “Sorry, it’s just that this is very much like a conversation Emma and I had a week ago. All vague and mysterious.”

“I’m sorry if I’m putting you in awkward position. That was not my intention.”

Mary Margaret exuded a practical optimism, especially toward those she thought of as being in her ‘circle.’ Warmth and honesty rained from her eyes as she stopped teasing Regina and became thoughtful. “For the record, David and I care about both of you. If all you had ever done was help us with our business, we would care about you. But you have also made our daughter open her heart in a way neither of us thought was possible. We want both of you to be happy.”

Regina faltered, sitting back and realizing that even her own mother had never wished happiness for her. Success, power, and other similar things were what Cora wanted for her. “You both took care of Emma long before I came along.” She couldn’t quite meet Mary Margaret’s eyes. She meant the words too much and it made her feel defenseless. “I am so very grateful to you for that.”
Tears formed in Mary Margaret’s eyes. They both pretended to ignore it when she discretely wiped at them. She set her cup down in its saucer. “You asked me when David and I became official. In his mind, after the first time we talked. In mine, it took a while. Not that I went quite to the lengths of calling what are obviously dates, ‘things’. I mean, come on, Regina.”

“They’re — we’re just…” Regina tried to find more words, an apt rebuttal. She didn’t have one. “I don’t want to rush.”

“I’m not sure there’s a danger of that.”

Regina’s jaw set, feeling defensive. She was, after all, the one setting the pace. “I came to Storybrooke to hide. For years, I was so careful about everything I did. Worried that the slightest misstep would mean my past would catch up with me. Paranoid about any new person who came to town. But as time passed, I felt safe. I stopped actively jumping at shadows a few years ago. Or I thought I had. And then, that reporter came to town.” She bent her head, elbows on her knees. “My fears still control so much of my life. How can I ask anyone to be part of my life under those conditions?

“What are you most afraid of? Of all your fears, which one is really stopping you?”

She thought for a long time and Mary Margaret let her. Her reflection, reflected in the mirror in her mind, was stark. The other her, the one she had been — the one she believed was the truth — lived there. “That, in the end, I did the worst things, not because of my mother’s manipulations, but because there is something in me that is inherently weak and selfish. That Henry...or Emma...will pay the price of discovering that.”

The prevailing feeling Regina had most of her life was hunger, starvation to be seen. Her last name did not herald her, instead it covered her, draping over her like a shroud. That it made her special in the eyes of so many reduced her to furniture. People disregarded her because they assumed her only real attribute was the good fortune of her family. For most of her life others saw her victories — every moment of brilliance, each time she persevered — as almost accidental. They were all reduced to symptoms of her lineage.

Her triumphs in Storybrooke didn’t have the same taint. She believed herself to be a good mother and an innovative mayor. Emma fed her parts of life she had never tasted before. Sweet things, nourishing bites shared during each moment in one another’s company. Storybrooke and Henry presented her with a feast, but she hadn’t fully enjoyed it. Not till Emma.

“And I worry,” she said slowly. “That that part of me is also what is causing me to hang on to
anything more than friendship with Emma, when I know I should let her go.”

Mary Margaret simply nodded, like Emma in the way she offered no condemnation. “Everyone has voices in their heads that tell them to walk away from what they want the most. Women, I think, especially, fear asking the universe for more than we have right now. Like we don’t have the right, or it’s impolite. Or if we do we’ll be punished. The only way to shut that voice up is to go ahead and ask and keep asking.”

“You think I have given into some traditional female stereotype?”

“I think someone like you, Regina, believes in what you can see. With Emma coming and going back and forth to Portland, how can you really know how she fits in day to day? Maybe you need to see that.”

“I don’t think we’re ready for a U-haul.”

Mary Margaret waved that way. “So, what are you ready for?”

Regina parted her lips to answer, but it turned out to be a very good question and it not so easily answered.

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Emma listened to Regina’s plan, and with every word, her heartbeat increased till it slammed against her ribs. The old anxiety clamped its jaws around her and began taking bites of her. The urge rose in her to hang up, to fake a call, to do anything to get her away from this conversation.

“So, we’d cohabitate for one month. You would stay in the guest bedroom. Of course, if you agree, we’ll need Henry’s buy-in.” This was the third time Regina had stated her plan, and Emma still couldn’t bring herself to give a coherent response, which was probably why Regina kept re-explaining.

“Okay,” Emma said finally, but it was more acknowledgment than an answer. “Can we not do this on Skype, please?”
“Do you want to call me back,” Regina offered gently.

She nodded, hanging up. She started to pace, trying to control her breathing, to will away the sensation of her entire body being constricted, seized tighter and tighter.

She forced herself to dial Regina’s number.

*Once when she was five, she had to go to the clinic at school, and there was a new nurse. She asked, “Do you want me to call your mother, honey?” Emma didn’t know what to say.*

Regina picked up.

*In fifth grade, Emma joined the volleyball team. For just one game. Her foster parents didn’t bother to come. Other families invited her out afterwards; she refused. Lying on her bed later, she imagined what it would be like to have family in the stands. She quit the team the next day.*

“Emma?” Regina called to her.

*In middle school, her test scores in math led her to be considered for an AP program in school. One of the teachers expressed the worry that Emma lacked the parental support needed to excel. Emma, her pride wounded, set fire to a math book in the school parking lot. That ended the talk of a special program and got her suspended. No one was surprised.*

“...I still have moments before I come into town where I have to, kind of, talk myself into it, reassure myself it will be okay. It’s been better, easier lately, though so...so...I don’t know.”

Regina only sounded concerned. “I need you to take a deep breath for me, sweetheart.”

Emma shook her head, denying herself Regina’s tenderness. “What if I do this and you hate the day to day with me? I could be over-the-moon happy and you could decide...” The rest of the words refused to be dislodged from her throat.

*Every fucking January after Christmas break — all the stories of presents and dinners and vacations. She got one gift — part of a program for foster kids. It was usually a doll or something,*
“I know I’m — this — this is old baggage. I thought I’d gotten past this. I-I didn’t ask for anything from life for a long time because it all fell to shit when I did. Every time when I was a kid. Every time.”

Regina’s answered quickly; a plea. “Emma, we don't have to do this. I wanted to make sure I didn’t keep you waiting, but, we can forget this for now. This is in no way an ultimatum. I just thought it might be a good step forward. If you aren’t ready, that’s okay.”

Emma’s hand mangled her hair and she fought to find enough reason to remember how far she’d come. Henry and Regina inspired her to fight. She just couldn’t find any sign of that strength in herself right now. “This — This — asking this is you trying to be brave, right? For me? For us?”

“I thought perhaps I was. I-I wanted to try to be.”

Regina sounded so lost, and Emma hated that she’d made her sound that way. “I — can I please have a couple of days to think?”

“Emma? Please, don't disappear on me.”

Given all that they had gone through, that worry was more than justified. “I won’t. I promise. I-I just need a little time.”

“Just, please keep in mind we could wait. We could leave things as they are. Or...we could try and talk through it, whatever you're feeling.”

Regina had been trying to be brave and now she was scared. Emma’s fingers clutched at the phone so tightly it hurt. “Don't give up on me, okay?

There wasn’t a hesitation in Regina’s reply. “Never.”

The call ended with Emma promising again that it would just be a couple days. She set down her phone and sank into her chair, a hollowness in her gut. After that subsided, she found herself getting angry at Regina. What more did Regina want from her, after all she’d already given and done? She’d changed. She’d given, she’d taken things at the pace Regina wanted to.
Because Regina didn’t give her a choice to be half-in and half-out.

Even though right now, Regina was. They could stay as they were, Regina had said.

It felt wrong that Regina had offered that.

_A few months before she met David — going to third base with some guy she barely knew. Afterwards, hating herself. Wishing and wishing and wishing for someone who cared enough to hold her while she cried._

Emma snatched her jacket from her desk chair and headed for the door, wanting to move, to go — to move and move. Her phone chimed in her pocket, and she took it out to find one word from Regina:

_Marco._

She stopped, staring at her phone. Her fears still loomed over her, but maybe it meant something that they didn’t stop her from typing back four letters.

_Polo._
Tourist season, as much as Storybrooke ever had one, began in May. By July, it wasn’t unusual for Marco to take tourists out on Pinocchio a few times a day.

Conscious of his workload, Regina didn’t ask him for private rides on the steamboat during high season. Sometimes he offered and she agreed, but she never approached first. The two days she waited for Emma proved to be an exception.

He didn’t ask any questions when she requested it, he only doffed his cap, smiled and said, “of course, Mayor Mills.”

She joined him on the boat just past sunset, after the last tourist run of the day.

On the deck, she studied the lights of her town, letting it fill her with the same surge of hope it always did. For years, pitch black had stretched down Storybrooke’s main street at night. Three street lamps created tents of light that provided no more than occasional breaks in the darkness. It was one of the first things she addressed after she was elected mayor.

The townspeople, maybe just waiting for direction and encouragement, started to help within days. A few merchants added fluorescent lights advertising their businesses; Granny’s and the pawn shop were the first. Others started to keep their front windows lit when they closed up for the day. Archie held a fundraiser to backlight the face of the old clock tower. These days, the center of town and the surrounding streets had a street lamp every few feet, thirty new lampposts in all.

Henry and Storybrooke — the best parts of her.
Sometimes Regina wondered if she had become a senator, could she have done more. Most of the time, this — her town, her son — were enough. Especially if she added in the amazing woman who anchored her in the now, showing her how many gifts were all around her.

She hadn’t told Henry about her offer to Emma. She wanted to protect his image of Emma, and she didn’t want him to get his hopes up, just in case.

Emma hadn’t completely backed away from her. She texted yesterday and today: Marco and still here and miss you. Regina answered in kind, keeping it short and simple: Polo, remember — together and take care of yourself, please.

Still, she really should have asked for specifics. Did Emma mean she needed two days and then she would call on the third day, or she would reach out on the second day?

As Pinocchio pulled away from the dock, she debated calling Emma. Just to say hello. That wouldn’t be pushing, would it? The debate continued even now, twenty minutes later, Regina holding her phone the entire time. Her shoulders hunched as she sat on the edge of a cushioned bench at the front of the boat.

She dragged her eyes back to Storybrooke and forced herself to sit back, telling herself it would be okay.

After Pinocchio finished its lap along the coast of Storybrooke and back, Marco descended from the pilot’s cabin to find her still sitting there, staring into space. “Maybe,” he said, “another trip around tonight?”

She accepted his offer gratefully, and he left her alone again.

She didn’t return her phone to her pocket, her inner argument raging on.

It buzzed and she almost dropped it. Emma.

“Hello,” she said, trying not to sound breathless.
“Hey. So, um, I guess I freaked out a little.”

A mix of relief and trepidation battled for supremacy inside Regina. She couldn’t bring herself to imagine specific possibilities, good or bad, yet she was very aware of them. “I’m the last one who should judge people for overreacting based on their fears. I’ve been using the time to clear my head too. I’ve been taking rides on the Pinocchio for the last couple of nights.”

“I know. Henry.” One word explained it. “He wanted to know if I had made you mad again.”

Regina shook her head at her wonderfully over-involved son. She thought she heard a noise in the background of Emma’s phone. She frowned as she tried to place it, then disregarded it. It didn’t matter. “Can you — will you tell me what you have decided?”

“Um, look toward the dock.”

Regina quickly strode for the back of the ship, her eyes trying to sort through the darkness. Emma, only a dot in the distance, raised her hand and waved.

“Hey,” she said.

“You’re here?”

“You said a month, right? I have enough stuff to last me a bit. I might need to do laundry, but you have a washer and dryer, right?” Emma sounded worried, as if she was scared she had done something wrong. “That’s a stupid question. You’re Regina Mills, you probably have two.”

Regina didn’t hear any of what Emma actually said, deaf as her heart struggled to understand what to do with a fulfilled wish. “You’re here.” Joy spread through her and her lips stretched into a slow, wide smile.

“Is that okay? I went to your house first and...are you, at all close to docking because I have all this stuff I want to say to you.”

“Marco, can you please turn the boat around? I — I need to go home.” The words burned an etching inside her. She wanted to remember saying them, and the hope, much brighter than downtown
Storybrooke, when she did.

Regina fixed her eyes on Emma in the far-off distance. The steamboat’s sluggish movements came to a stop and the engine cut out. The motors started again and the ship began to pivot back toward port, unrushed, half-drifting.

“You know,” Emma said, sounding a little hoarse. “I can imagine diving into the water and swimming to the boat, like in the movies. But you look like you’re still kind of a ways away.”

Silence bulged between them, heavy with so things both of them wanted to say. Marco’s tours didn’t take very long; if Emma had arrived just a half hour later, or if she’d declined the second trip, they’d be together now.

“Will you please tell me you’re sure about this?”

On the dock, Emma walked in a tight circle. “I’m sure about you and Henry. I’m just...wanting nothing doesn’t set you up to be devastated. I’m still terrified. I’ll feel a lot better as soon as I see you. I mean, up close.” Emma paused before speaking again. “I really need you to hold my hand right now.”

She breathed in and out, finding oxygen after days of deprivation. “Me too.”

“How far out are you?”

Judging by where they were and how long the trip usually took, Regina estimated they were fifteen minutes out, which was fourteen minutes and fifty-nine seconds far too long.

The ship glided through the water lazily. She pressed as close to the railing as she could, as if that would speed up her arrival at Emma’s side. In the distance, Emma felt like a fixed point, a destination. “Marco, can we go any faster?”

“I’ll see what I can do, Mayor Mills,” he answered.

She lowered her voice, not wanting to hurt Marco’s feelings. “We spent tens of thousands repairing
“Shit,” Emma gave a wry chuckle that ended in a groan, like she would have beat her head against a wall if one was immediately available. “This isn’t what I expected. For one thing, I was kinda hoping for a hug.”

“That can be arranged. Soon.” She heard the engine chug a little harder but the sound didn’t seem to have a perceptible result. “Soonish.”

Emma wandered away from the main dock onto one of the side ones. Neither of them spoke as her energy channelled itself into movement. Over the phone, Regina heard her heavy steps and the rippling of water plucking at the wooden walkway.

“Emma?” The lights on the dock allowed her to see that Emma wore a long-sleeved shirt, but distance obscured the color. Regina curled her hand around the metal railing in front of her, needing to hold on to something tangible. “Maybe...I didn’t explain it all that well when I asked you to come. Maybe it will be easier to say it like this. Now.”

“The way I reacted is on me, not you.”

“Please let me finish.”

Emma stopped her constant movement, facing her direction again. Now Regina could make out that her hair was up, her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows in the heat. But she couldn’t see Emma’s face yet no matter how much she strained to.

“I want you here every single day. I want family dinners, no matter how informal I need to make them so you don’t panic. I want to see you with Henry, the way you make him remember to be a child. I need to make you smile and to take your hand and to flirt with you relentlessly.” She glanced down at her hands, mingling them, imagining one was paler with longer fingers used to making magic with a keyboard. “I don’t want it to feel like a vacation when you’re here. I had that with Mal. It’s not what I want with you. I want...so much with you.

Emma released a slow breath. “I swear to God — there’s like ten speed boats here. I’m about to steal one.”
Both of Regina’s hands cradled her phone. “Getting arrested for theft would probably make for an awkward start to our living arrangement.”

Regina imagined trying to explain Emma’s crime at the next council meeting. Storybrooke would probably be more than accepting. In a small town, secrets didn’t stay secrets for long. More than once sly questions had come from the townspeople who had noticed how much time she was spending with Emma, or had seen them holding hands. “How is Emma, Regina?” they would ask, or “Will Emma be visiting again soon?”

Regina cleared her throat. “I — I want us to go on a date. A real date that we actually call a date.”

Emma stepped onto one of the posts near her, standing taller. There were no sounds besides the occasional whistle of wind. No life except for Regina herself and the woman waiting for her. “Are you asking me out?” A chuckle echoed into the phone. “After asking me to live with you for a month?”

“Is that a no?”

She heard the grin in Emma’s voice. “That’s about a million checkmarks in the yes box.”

Emma’s answer made her brave. “There’s one thing neither of us has prepared ourselves for. What if — what if this works out? What if we’re totally, irrevocably happy. What if Henry is. What if we find joy — all three of us?”

Emma dropped her head, and Regina saw her become stone-still. “I’m here,” She said after her silence grew large and her breathing ragged. “God, Regina. The things you do to my heart without even trying.”

Regina’s eyes shimmered with tears. She remembered the times she and Emma pressed their foreheads together, and said things that could only be said when they were that close. “The same you do to mine.”

There were no more words after that. Regina closed her eyes and listened to them breathing together. It felt like lying next to Emma. She wanted to reach out and graze her skin — her arms, her waist, her face, anywhere.
She woke from that image when the pistoning sound of the engine stopped. The steamboat, after an eternity, crept the final length toward the dock.

Marco disembarked to tie off the boat on one of the wood pilings. Regina moved to the gangplank where passengers exited the tour, more than ready to reach land, and Emma. She didn’t know what kind of knot Marco was tying, but she felt on the edge of doing something drastic — threatening his life — if he didn’t hurry.

Emma’s eyes narrowed, probably having similar thoughts, as Marco continued to take his time.

She shook her head several times in frustration, hands on her hips. She kicked at the dock, and it would have made Regina smile if, internally, she wasn’t reacting in exactly the same way.

“Fuck,” Emma muttered. She jolted into movement, launching herself into a running jump. She landed awkwardly on the deck. They reached out, steadying one another, Regina clutching just above Emma’s elbow and Emma grabbing a spot below her own.

Marco said nothing, and just tied off the boat to a second post before he walked away.

Emma was the spontaneous one between them, and she bent, hugging Regina close.

Decorum poked Regina, trying to remind her of the need for rules and control. It felt too far away, that voice, like it wasn’t part of her at all. She buried herself in Emma’s arms.

The boat, gently swaying, was the entire world.

Regina traced her palms down Emma’s shoulders. She turned her head, pressing her face into the crook of Emma’s neck, her senses greedy. Her cheek tingled at the graze of skin on skin.

Regina clenched her jaw and closed her eyes more tightly, trying to stop the shivers that threatened to overtake her. Her lips accidentally brushed Emma’s shoulder. She did it again, branding Emma through her shirt.

A wildness built inside Regina, her heart bucking in rebellion. She didn’t know how to give it its
“Emma?” Regina whispered into the shell of Emma’s ear. Emma bent her head ever so slightly.

Emma kept teaching her how to be brave, one imperfect student learning from another. Some lessons attained perfection simply by being taught, it didn’t matter who learned. Emma inspired her heart.

“Emma,” Regina said again, certain now. She tore down every gate and wall that kept her life manageable and sensible. Everything that separated them. Everything that chained her.

She surged up on tiptoes, drew Emma’s head down, and found her mouth. The kiss didn’t graze, it bruised and demanded. Both of Emma’s hands fisted in her hair, lips parting and fusing with Regina’s. It felt like they’d both been searching so hard and so long for something they now discovered was simple.

Emma tasted of tangy citrus and Regina thought it might be Mountain Dew. She wondered, an airy thought, how Emma would taste after a strong, dry wine. She pulled at Emma’s shoulders, commanding her to bend over her, to surround her.

They didn’t hold one another, they clung.

There was a moment, brief, when the heel of Regina’s hand pressed over Emma’s heart. Like a word she needed to whisper before the roaring pulsing in her neck made her arch forward again.

In their fury, their teeth skimed one another. They nipped at each other, half-wild and not wanting to stop. The heat of Emma’s thighs shifted against hers. She became absurdly aware of the rough texture of Emma’s pants against her. Jeans, perhaps?

Regina trembled, pressing harder into Emma’s curves, as if she didn’t mold herself as closely as she could to Emma she would melt away.

A groan tore from Emma, almost like she was on the edge of a sob.

_Surrender, surrender, surrender_ , her heart throbbed to her. Regina did, almost making them stumble
in her hunger to do so and in her desire to, somehow, gain even more contact.

Emma drew back, both of them panting. She touched Regina’s face as she asked without a word if Regina was okay.

Regina smiled, blushing, flustered at how far she’d allowed her passions to sweep her away. And of course she was okay. Emma shrugged because she couldn’t help but check and grinned back. Their foreheads touched as they both tried to tame themselves again.

“Can I say ‘welcome home’?” Regina asked.

“Yeah.”

Regina tilted her face up towards Emma’s, fingers curling in the lapel of her vest. “Welcome home,” she said.

Their mouths met again. Slower, exploring. One kiss, then two and then more. They grew bolder, yet remained unrushed in their freedom, Emma dotting kisses that sparked down Regina’s throat. Regina’s teeth catching Emma’s earlobe, teasing with a bite.

They ignored the real world until both of their rational sides refused to be ignored any longer. Still, Emma hugged her again, drawing out the moment just a little more. Regina, her responsibilities beginning to tick in her head, pulled Emma’s arm around her shoulders as they started away from the docks, not willing to be parted from her.

Together, they headed home.

Regina called a family meeting at eight o’clock that evening. First, she went upstairs and talked with Henry while Emma waited in the living room.

Henry reassured her that he agreed with her plan, but first he needed to talk to Emma alone.
Regina reminded him to be the generous person he usually was. “Be a little gentle with her, Henry. This is a big step for Emma.”

Their conversation only lasted about five minutes, but Emma winked at her when she left his room. “He wanted me to give my word on a couple things. It’s all good,” Emma said.

“Henry, could you join us in the living room, please?”

The three of them gathered as she reviewed her plan. She started with a few new household rules: Henry was no longer allowed in the guest bedroom unless Emma invited him. They were not allowed to keep one another awake at night; bedtimes, she insisted, would be strictly enforced.

After that, she proposed a schedule. “Monday and Fridays will be family nights. All three of us will have time together to do...something fun. Casual. Emma, you and I will discuss what types of activities you’ll be comfortable with.” She paused, wondering if she should actually write this down for them.

“Tuesdays and Saturday evenings will be date nights for me and Emma. Henry, if we do something here and you’re home, I expect you to respect our privacy. If we go out, we will make arrangements with the Nolans, who have graciously offered to…” she avoided the word babysit “…entertain you. Any questions?”

“Mom, what about Sundays? How am I supposed to know what to do if it's not covered?”

Regina opened her mouth to give an indignant answer, but Emma interrupted. “Is there a bartering system? Like, can I trade Henry for a Friday? Also, if I want to spend all of Saturday with you, does that mean I have to trade in Tuesday nights? What’s the exchange rate?”

Henry nodded and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “We should probably also schedule spontaneous fun time for Wednesday.”

“This is mutiny.” Regina folded her arms over her chest but the adoration burned bright in her eyes. “Are you both quite done?”

Emma and Henry high-fived.
This was her family.

For the second time tonight, she was totally and completely happy.

Regina helped Emma settle in, correcting her approach of shoving as many items as she could into one drawer, then moving on to the next. She imposed martial law on Emma’s clothing, assigning places for specific types and hanging the rest in the closet. She marched her toiletries into the bathroom and sorted them into appropriate locations.

Emma leaned in the doorway, amused. She waited till Regina’s need to organize was sated then tugged her close. She kissed her, just a brush of contact. Regina swayed into her, drawn in by Emma’s gravitational pull. She tried to keep in mind that Henry was nearby. She wasn’t sure any of them were ready for him to walk in on them. Still, she couldn’t resist stealing another kiss.

“About our date. Tomorrow?” she asked.

“I don’t think I have a choice. It’s Saturday, and your schedule must be maintained. I’d hate to be accused of being a mutineer. Y’know, again.”

“So how long did Regina say you were supposed to keep me out of the house,” Emma asked David as he placed his forefinger and thumb on one block of the Jenga tower and tried to ease it free. The tower swayed to and fro and David scowled at it, but managed to complete his turn.

David consulted his watch. “Ten more minutes.” He nodded at the stack of wood pieces. “Your turn.”

Regina had drafted him into keeping her away from Casa Mills as she prepared for their date that evening. Mary Margaret was with Regina, “helping” — whatever that meant.
The game wasn’t boring, but she wanted to go. Her knee kept having bouncing fits, as eagerness about tonight spun inside her. She cautioned herself, the usual lecture for her expectations to be low. Just, parts of her, childlike and hopeful, shouted down that warning.

On her turn, Emma, distracted and unsteady, knocked down the tower.

David patted her hand, perhaps knowing her well enough to sense the happy jangle of her nerves. “Tonight will go great. You know that right?”

“I think so. I — I feel good about it. About us. Me and Regina.” She heard the note in her voice that asked him to tell her it was okay to hope. Like a kid seeking approval. “Between moments of being terrified.”

He rose and hugged her. A bear hug, per his usual. “There are always a million things that could go wrong, but you know, you only need a couple of things to go really right. If you feel hope, that’s a big thing that’s going right.

Ten thousand minutes later (actually only five), David drove her back to Regina’s. Mary Margaret met her at the door, placed her hand over Emma’s eyes, and ushered her inside.

“Ready, Regina?” Snow asked.

“One more moment.” A quiet thud came from the living room, then a rustling of fabric. “Okay, Mary Margaret.”

The hand over her eyes withdrew and Snow stepped back, joining David at the front door.

Henry stood next to his mother, a large grin stretching over his face. Regina focused entirely on Emma, suspended as she waited for her reaction. She wore jeans and — holy shit — a Star Wars t-shirt. Next to them, a few feet off the living room floor, waves of blankets rose up to a point then cascaded back down.

Regina, apparently with some help, had built her a pillow fort.
“Look inside, Emma,” Henry said and dove in. An air mattress and a generous supply of pillows cushioned the floor. The entire roof was strung with white mini-lights. One wall primarily consisted of a flat screen television.

“Henry, why don’t you head out with the Nolans,” Regina said, and bent to join Emma inside. “Youtube was not as forthcoming as I would have liked. At least not if you want to make a fort that has the ceiling at a decent height.” Nervously, Regina fired bullet points of information. “I — I called your mother out of desperation. Also, I promised Henry we would keep it up for a few days, and all three of us would have a game night. I am fairly sure he is talking about something on his Playstation. For tonight, I’m making spaghetti. I thought you could choose a movie, and we could watch it. I — I know it’s not fancy or elegant, but I thought you would like this more.”

Emma couldn’t stop taking it all in. “This is the coolest thing I have ever seen.”

“Wait, just wait a moment.” Regina’s footfalls moved rapid and light into the kitchen then back. She knelt on the mattress and handed Emma a rectangular box about the size of a pizza container, only made of shiny blue cardboard with a gold bow on top. Emma opened it and found a leather book with a small rectangular opening cut out on the front. It confused her till she flipped it open and found pages of six-pocket plastic sleeves, each one four by six inches.

"A photo album," Emma said quietly, tracing it with her fingers.

“I know Snow probably has several of these for you already, but I thought maybe we could start our own.”

In this moment, Emma couldn’t remember her fears or why she had them. There was only Regina, their blanket fort, and the possibility of their future. “I’d like that.”
Happy Thursday everybody,
Thank you all for the responses to the kiss. I am very aware of how long you have been waiting/reading for that and I hope I did it justify for you. Your comments keep me going so thank you. For the flight today, we will be unexpectedly passing through a volcano. Fans and ice will be distributed accordingly.

This is your captain speaking.

Chapter 31 - The one with everything

Henry caused their first real argument.

The sun was going down, and he asked Emma if he could ride his bike into town. Regina was working and Emma didn’t realize he had just lobbed a grenade her way. She didn’t think before she answered with an all-too-casual, “Sure, why not.” She didn’t even consider it giving permission. She just kind of agreed with him.

“You do not have the right to parent my son,” Regina snapped at the height of the argument about it. Emma insisted she hadn’t really done anything wrong. They went to bed angry, and Henry, knowing he had set them up for the conflict, tried to avoid them the next day.

In the morning, she and Regina sat on Regina’s bed and discussed it more calmly. “You are an adult in this house, and whether either of us like it or not, that means you are an authority figure,” Regina said. They discussed Regina’s rules for Henry and came up with guidelines for handling similar situations in the future. Regina also asked Emma to come up with a punishment for Henry.

That afternoon, when Henry got home from school, Emma ushered him into the kitchen. She made them both hot chocolate, even though the summer heat tried to cook anyone who went outside. It’s kind of our thing. Regina leaned against the doorframe, watching. She had promised Emma she would leave this to her, but wanted to be present.

“So,” Emma began, having to bolster herself to meet his eyes. “Your mom wants me to punish you.”
He swivelled his head between his mother and Emma. “I'm old enough to ride my bike after dark.”

Regina straightened as if she might intervene, but then she relaxed.

Emma drummed on the kitchen table, narrowing her eyes at him. "You knew I didn't know that rule. You took advantage of that. You used me. Your mom's right — I've been thinking of you as a friend. A close friend who would never b.s. me. But I have to be more than that.” She straightened, jutted her chin and tried to look firm. “So, no screens, computer or phone for two days.”

He gaped at her, glared at his mother, then turned his sullen, dark expression back to her. "But I need my phone, what if there's an emergency?"

"This is a small town and your mom is the mayor. If you really need to, I am sure someone will let you borrow their phone."

“But —“

Emma raised her voice. “Kid, this isn’t a debate."

Fuck, this is hard.

She wondered how Regina did it every day. She didn’t know if she was up for it.

She softened, her patience frayed by the newness of this position more than his protests. She knew teenagers lived to find things to rebel against. Even good kids like Henry. “Look, you’re important to me. You know that. I'm scared of pissing you off because I don't know where that will go. I don’t know what you will or won’t get over. But, I will do right by you and by your mom, no matter what.”

Henry’s lips pressed in a stubborn line, not ready to forgive her for disciplining him. “I have homework,” he said. “Can I use my computer for that?”

Emma felt like a wrung-out towel, now hanging limp and lifeless. “Just bring it to your mom when you’re done.”
Henry charged away from her and up the stairs. Emma set her elbows on the table and stared at the tabletop. She didn’t hear Regina move, but soon hands covered her shoulders. Regina’s cheek rested against her head. “That was brave,” she said.

“You think?”

The first part of the answer came as a quiet kiss to the top her head. “I do.”

“He kind of hates me right now,” Emma said, worry invading her voice.

“No, he just believes that a two-day punishment is the same thing as forever. And, that we are conspiring to make his life as miserable as possible.” Regina pressed another kiss to her temple and Emma leaned into her.

It turned out that the lifespan of his hate lasted until the next morning, when he bounded down the stairs and asked Emma to take him to the library. He had an idea of building a tree fort to make his videos in and “now I have to research it the old-fashioned way.” She didn’t mention that she was pretty sure he hadn’t made a video for seven months now. After checking in with Regina, she gave him a ride. Later, he showed her three photocopies he’d made and asked if she would build it with him.

Their relationship shifted a little as she became an adult in Henry’s eyes, but it was okay. It really was.

A week later, Regina and Emma’s second fight occurred after Regina proclaimed her annoyance with Emma’s things lying around: wet towels, clothes, dishes, and so on. Emma fought back, her defense mechanism coming into play again, that Regina was a “neat freak” and “had to control every little thing”.

They compromised, with Regina surrendering the guest room and declaring it an “Emma Zone.” The rest of the house, including the guest bathroom, however, was a “Regina Zone” and would be kept orderly.

Also, Regina pointed out that it would be helpful if Emma didn’t respond to legitimate points by immediately making excuses or attacking. Emma agreed to try, and once again, everything was okay.
The best part of their new arrangement was the cuddling. Well, also the kissing.

The soft way their mouths caressed one another when they said goodnight; a ritual from the first night on. Or when Regina surprised her with a kiss on the cheek, or chin, or hand. Or when she couldn’t help but steal a light peck.

The other kisses, too.

During long, extended lunches when Regina would move around her desk, straddle Emma, and claim her mouth. In the kitchen, while Henry did homework upstairs, Emma coming up behind her, hauling her against the strength of her body. Teasing Regina’s neck with tiny bites until she couldn’t stand it anymore and turned to pull Emma into a hard kiss. On the couch, tangling together intimately, Emma trying not to allow brushes of pressure to become hungry grinding.

She had surges of panic, but they came less and less. They eventually gave way to her doing stupid things like humming love songs and bringing home little gifts like donuts or even flowers.

“Here, I picked this thing that will inevitably die for you,” Emma said one day, placing a round blue flower with a pink center behind Regina’s ear. She felt the vibration of Regina’s laugh right before her kiss.

Initially, Emma hadn’t understood the merit of this month-long experiment. She knew it meant embracing the little girl inside her who still dreamed of a having a family, and she wouldn’t have a safety net if it all went south. But the day-to-day made her confidence grow, in herself, in Regina, in all of it.

#Regina’s phone rang while she was in the middle of listening to Mary Margaret explain why she had chosen the hacker nickname “Snow White.” The Nolans were a fixture in her life, and she in theirs. Dinners — always casual — came together without a lot of discussion.

“Hi Miss Mills, it’s Special Agent Booth. I’ve got some exciting news for you. Do you have a few minutes?”
She went very still. Her body language made Emma look up. “Has there been progress? Are you arresting him?”

“Well, that’s what I called to tell you.”

“My son is here and so are the Nolans. I think you know them. And Emma is here, too. Can they listen?”

August paused. “Oh, everyone’s there? I wasn’t sure you and Emma were still...okay. Yeah, they can hear.”

Regina asked him to wait a moment and gathered the others into the living room. She put the phone on speaker, setting it on the coffee table.

Henry went to his mom, sitting on the couch beside her. She wrapped an arm around him as Emma took the spot on his other side. Mary Margaret and David stayed standing, facing them.

Regina clenched her teeth together, always afraid of the other shoe dropping unexpectedly.

“Please continue,” she said.

“I know this took longer then we all hoped, but we were able to follow Peter Pan’s movements on the net. Long story short — we arrested him. And,” August’s voice rose in triumph, “We arrested fifteen other hackers just like him across four states. It’s become a really big deal.”

“Fifteen?” Regina repeated.

“Holy shit,” Emma said and grinned. David bowed his head for a second, his own smile stretched ear to ear. Mary Margaret wrapped her arms around him. Emma, reached over Henry for Regina’s hand. “Holy shit,” she said again.

Regina breathed long and deep. Finally. She closed her eyes. Finally.
“Is it really over,” Henry asked. His voice sounded so small, but it crashed into the room. “Will I have to testify? Will people see the pictures?” Regina’s elation fell. She should have thought of that. She should have asked about it before now. In her selfish desire to put this behind them, she’d failed her son.

August, who she still didn't entirely trust, earned her gratitude by saying, "In a case like this, none of the victims are named. We usually use letters, like victim A or B. That kind of thing. We'll need to show a few pieces of evidence but all the faces will be blurred. The law doesn't always protect kids the way it should, but this time, in this kind of case, it won't become about the victim. Honestly, it will probably be plea-bargained out."

"Is it one charge or multiple?," David asked.

August laughed, sounding overjoyed by his own news. "Oh God, multiple. For all of them. Your guy is looking at 25 years all told. Even with the plea bargain, he'll still probably get 10 to 15."

Regina folder her arms tightly across her stomach. "Which means he'll be out in eight or less."

"Yeah, but, even then, it's not like it'll be over,” August said. “He'll have to register as a sex offender. He’ll have to stay a certain distance from any parks or schools. I knew one guy that took three years to find a home because of all the places he wasn’t allowed to live. The judge might even sentence him to wear a GPS."

"He deserves to be put away for the rest of his life," Regina said.

“It isn’t fair.” Henry stood, so still, his posture tightly controlled, his jaw locked.

It occurred to her how much he was like her sometimes. Maybe his recent sullenness was also an echo of her. Maybe that’s all it ever had been. She didn’t want that for him.

"Hey, hey, hey," David said. "This is a win. It's not a perfect win, but we shouldn’t act like it's a loss."

Regina nodded, still watching Henry’s somber features, her heart twisting hard inside her. "No, we shouldn’t."
"So, uh," August cut back in. She had almost forgotten he was on the phone. "I wanted to ask you if you’d like to watch the press conference with us. They’re going to make an announcement in a couple of days. I just thought maybe, given everything, you’d like to be here in the Portland office when they do.”

Regina hadn't been cautious enough about Henry's feelings before. She made sure she was now. "Henry, do you want to go?"

“For clarity,” August said, “kids aren’t allowed in the briefing room. I was going to suggest one of the agents could watch Henry if you wanted to be in the actual room, Miss Mills.”

“Do you guys still broadcast those things internally,” David asked. “Closed circuit?”

“We do.”

“If Henry wants to go, you can toss Mary Margaret, Henry and me in a conference room so we can watch,” said David. “Emma and Regina can attend the briefing live.”

“All of you are coming?” August asked. “You too, David?”

David turned the question towards Regina. “What do you think? Do you want us there?”

“All of you played a role in helping us. If Henry wants to go, I think all of us should.” She moved to her son’s side, playing her fingers through his hair. “Don’t you think?”

“I want to go,” he said, but he didn’t seem happy or relieved, only pensive. “I want everyone to.”

“Well then,” Regina tried to get him to smile by offering him one first. “I guess we’re all making a trip.”

A moment of silence hung over the phone line, “Okay.” The word hung there. The next words August spoke each had a pause between them, like he was thinking very hard about them. “I guess
I’ll set things up. I should get going.”

“We should get lunch while we’re in town, August,” David suggested. “Catch up.”

He hesitated again. “I’m not sure what my schedule will look like with all the excitement, but yeah, we can try to do that. Anyway, the conference will be at 5:00 p.m. I’ll email you more specifics, Miss Mills. Also, you’ll all need to meet me in front of the building so we can get you set up with badges. David can show you where.”

“Thanks August,” Emma said. The second the call she watched the others carefully, especially Henry and Regina. “So...what now?”

Mary Margaret massaged her knuckles lightly, thinking. She nodded to herself, then gave a small smile. "Now, we celebrate," she said. "That’s what people do when they get good news. We get champagne. We get streamers or whatever and we celebrate."

"Are there ‘yay, we got the scumbag hacker’ decorations?," Emma asked.

Mary Margaret waved that away. "Okay, so maybe just the champagne."

"Steaks," David added and rubbed his hands together. "I'll go get the grill and we'll have steaks."

Regina set her hands on her hips. “I’ll make broccoli.” The enthusiasm about the food dimmed a little. “Vegetables are good for you. However, if you are going to the store and get me gingerbread, I will also make a pudding cake."

Apparently that redeemed her in their eyes. Except for Henry, the mood brightened again.

Gentle fingers rubbed her lower back and she jerked her eyes up to find Emma watching, offering encouragement as always. "Are you good?"

"Of course, I —" She still reflexively denied her pain. Even to Emma. This time. she stopped herself. "I don't know. I think I should try to be. For Henry."

Emma nodded.
Not too much later, Emma plucked a pillow from the couch, fluffed it, then hit Henry over the head. Torn from staring into space, he blinked at her. “This. Is. Good. News,” she said, pummelling him after each word. Henry, Regina’s son in this way too, fought back, grabbing another pillow to launch a counter-attack. David sided with him and used the couch cushion as his weapon of choice to batter Emma.

Emma glanced toward Regina with a “see, it’s okay” expression, and her inattention led to her being smacked in the nose. For the first time since the phone call, Henry laughed, her son’s mood starting to point in the direction of joy.

Because of Emma.

Emma, and what she gave them.

As the war ended, Regina’s dark eyes stayed on her, the softness of Emma’s mouth, the slope of her neck, the strong line of her shoulders, the swell of her breasts. She moved towards her, not with conscious will, but by gravity, by the need to be near her.

Her hands closed around Emma’s and Emma’s warm expression welcomed her. Regina opened herself like a book, bold type in her eyes.

Emma’s fingers went slack, surprised. An uncertain smile lifted one side of her mouth, not sure if she should believe what she saw without confirmation.

Regina pressed a kiss to her cheek and whispered, “Come to my room tonight?”

After Regina’s request, Emma waited for the certainty that had been building inside her to shrink back.

It didn’t.

She expected her fear of commitment, of what this might mean, of what might be expected of her to
make her panic.

She didn’t.

The first night, when she moved in, Henry made her promise she’d do her best to keep being brave. More and more, she wanted to look out for both of them. In every way she could. She just couldn’t immediately cast off the feeling she would wake up one day and this would all be gone.

Except she found no trace of that old shaking inside her right now.

August’s news made her angry, but she couldn’t help but think David was right about this not being a loss. She remembered David telling her once that sometimes, even if a win wasn’t perfect, you just had to take the win. Right now, they were all together, and fifteen complete assholes were being plucked off the streets.

She took the win.

After the phone call, she’d watched her family — her parents, who were determined that this would be a happy day no matter what came in the future; Regina, trying to put aside all her worry and cynicism for the sake of her son; Henry, straining to open to this moment and the people around him who loved him.

*And then Regina*... (which probably would be the title of her life story or on her tombstone or something) Regina who took her hands and asked her to come to her.

Over the top of their champagne glasses Emma and Regina shared secret smiles. They helped set the table, along with Henry, and exchanged small, lingering touches. They caught one another’s eyes between bites of steak, then looked down shyly.

After David and Mary Margaret left, Regina told her, with false lightness, “I’m going to check on Henry then take a shower, and after...” The way Regina hung the words, Emma knew that “after” was her cue.

So “after” came, and Emma rapped on Regina’s door with her knuckles.
Regina opened her door, and Emma cursed quietly when she saw the black satin kimono robe Regina wore. It ran just past her upper thighs, the rest of her legs bare. Regina’s damp hair fell straight, except at the ends in the back where it curled. Fascinated, Emma wound it between her fingers and pressed her face against it. Regina’s familiar scent was stronger and sharper than usual. She liked it.

Regina walked past Emma with purpose, smooth fabric swishing back and forth against her legs as she shut the door with a click. She walked back until her body brushed Emma’s.

Emma cupped her face.

She knew that, up to this point in her life, the word "goodbye" had always hovered over sex. The point was to reach satisfaction, then move on. This wouldn’t be a goodbye. Emma wouldn’t let it. Not this time.

She coaxed Regina into opening for her, craving the deep heat of Regina’s mouth around her tongue. She pulled the knot free on Regina’s robe and pushed it back, though not entirely off, to reveal smooth shoulders.

Their mouths fused over and over. A power line sent electricity from her head to her heart, then lower.

Regina took her hands and backed up towards the bed. Emma followed her, spreading over her when she lay on her back. Everywhere their bodies touched synapses jolted with pleasure. But she knew it could be even better, if she…

Closer...

There.

Her thigh pressed to Regina’s center. They both panted, and their hands grabbed for one another, tempted to rush, to make a mad dash before this disappeared. Emma reminded herself they didn’t need to.

Regina relaxed first and nuzzled her cheek. She guided Emma’s hand to her breast. Her eyes were glowing as she made her offering, pure light and faith, like she had momentarily connected to
something ethereal. It made Emma remember they were building this thing, this lasting thing. Together.

Regina peppered her mouth with encouraging, adoring kisses, and Emma’s heart ached.

She was in love. She couldn’t deny it anymore.

“I want everything with you,” Regina said against her lips.

“Everything,” Emma answered.

“Touch me, Emma.”

Emma took her time. She discovered that Regina’s body twitched if she sucked at the very tip of her nipple in light contractions instead of sucking deeply. Especially if she gave a light bite at the same time.

Regina, usually so controlled and composed, trembled when Emma journeyed down her stomach. The knowledge that she had the power to do that to Regina just... fuck.

She learned that Regina wanted to see her eyes as much as possible. She lifted up on her elbows as Emma’s tongue pressed against her clit. Regina’s body ripened for her, opened and gave her the taste of sweetness. Emma pulled the nub into her mouth, and nursed on it in slow beats of time.

“Everything,” she said, still holding Regina’s eyes.

“Everything.” Regina reached down, her thumb smoothing against Emma’s wet lips, which parted and sucked at it.

Soon Emma’s fingers pressed deep. She paused, wanting to remember the deep pulsing in Regina’s body and how close they were, how Regina clenched to keep her there. She started to use her mouth again but Regina pulled on her shoulders.
“Emma, here...on top of me. Please.”

That last word made her close her eyes. She had to steady herself before she obeyed.

Regina’s arms came around her, hugging her hard as Emma entered her over and over. Her heels pressed into the bed, her hips working with Emma’s patient movements.

“A little...at an angle?”

Emma thrust in just that way. Regina gasped and bit her lower lip. They had to be quiet. Emma kissed her as Regina fed her another sound of pleasure.

Then Emma moved faster. Harder.

Another of Regina’s moans was muffled against their thrusting tongues.

Harder.

Regina’s fingers bunched the skin of her back as she held on.

Harder.

Regina freed her mouth to feverishly rain kisses anywhere she could. Emma couldn’t resist paying attention to her breasts in the way that drove her crazy, rapid presses of her mouth.

Regina twitched and twitched again.

“Emma,” she moaned, sounding overcome and lost.

Emma kissed her cheek, wanting to be there, wanting to always be there. “Everything, everything, everything,” She whispered into Regina’s ear. Regina lunged her hips up to meet the word each time
until — finally — she gave it.

Emma wrapped Regina in her arms and chuckled, maybe just a little smug but mostly — mostly — feeling weightless. As if she had been absolved of every sin, freed from every failure, and she’d wiggled free of every inner demon.

Just for now.

“Marco,” she said, grinning.

She felt Regina laugh too, her fingers stroking the back of her neck. “Polo.”
Happy Thursday Everyone,
The flight today should be smooth with no turbulence at all. Until the end.

I need to take a moment to send those of you in the AO3 community a special thank you. I received 19+ comments after posting the last chapter (not to mention the kudos). This warmth and generosity from you is a gift and a revelation. I write to be a muse to you in some small way, hoping something in my stories might stick and be of service. In answer, you have become my muses and shown me a swelling of support that can be all too rare.

I am a romantic, sentimental and long-winded about both. I ask your indulgence as I quote a speech from the movie V that I have always loved,

"Every inch of me shall perish. Every inch, but one. An Inch, it is small and it is fragile, but it is the only thing the world worth having. We must never lose it or give it away. We must never let them take it from us. I hope that whoever you are, you escape this place. I hope that the world turns and that things get better. But what I hope most of all is that you understand what I mean when I tell you that even though I do not know you, and even though I may never meet you, laugh with you, cry with you, or kiss you. I love you. With all my heart, I love you."

I love you guys.
Thank you.

This is your captain speaking.

UPDATE 11/15 - Hey all - Sorry about this but might be a couple days before I can post LH. I was already behind because I've been pulled into a series of job interviews this week (which is good) but I think I have food poisoning now too.

Honestly, they had to stop smiling. Henry had started to look at them with overt suspicion.

That morning, Regina had insisted they come down to the kitchen a good fifteen minutes apart. Henry came downstairs, dressed for school, and she kissed his cheek immediately instead of waiting for the usual kiss ritual when she dropped him off at school.

“How do you feel about an omelet?” she asked.

“Okay.”
“Just okay? What would you prefer?”

Henry looked at her like he thought it was a trick. “Um, waffles?”

“Why not both?” The corners of her mouth lifted. In her defense, it wasn’t quite a smile. “Can you grab the waffles from the freezer, please?”

His brows shot up. “Both?” With an incredulous look, he left his chair. He paused, as if expecting his mother to tell him she was kidding, before doing as she asked.

Emma entered the kitchen just as the waffles popped from the toaster. She kissed Regina lightly, and Henry made an “ew” sound, but there was no heat to it. Emma just winked at him and stole one of the waffles.

And then — what on earth? — Emma ate it by grabbing a plate, pouring a circle of syrup on it and dipping it. No knife. No fork.

She waggled her brows impishly at Regina and approached, offering a bite.

Regina berated herself for finding it adorable. “We will talk about your table manners later.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Henry trying to imitate Emma — of course he did. “And we will talk about your manners now,” she said and pointed her spatula at him.

Emma sat down next to him and ruffled his hair with too much enthusiasm. He eyed her, too. Regina joined them and meaningfully set silverware near Emma’s plate. Their eyes held and she tried her best to hold back the rising happiness inside her. It just...kept pouring out, no matter how much she tried to stop it.

“You guys are weird,” Henry said, and she bit back a giggle.

A giggle?
“I think, after I drop off Henry, I might come home and get some things done around the house.” She tried to both sound casual and not look at Emma.

Emma paused, her fork hovering near her mouth. Her lips quirked up, and she hummed a little as she kept eating breakfast. Henry decided against further comment.

Regina returned home in no more than twenty minutes.

Emma came out of the guest bedroom when she heard the front door. Regina’s heels beat fast on the stairs, climbing up until they were close.

“Welcome home,” Emma murmured, the sweet words teasing Regina’s mouth. “Missed you.”

“Me too.”

“Should we…”

“Shh,” Regina said, dragging a finger over Emma’s lips. Emma’s mouth stretched into a smile before she nipped at the touch. Emma’s arm circled her in a light embrace, hinting at the contact they both wanted, their bodies brushing instead of pressing. Giddy bubbles filled Regina’s head, fizzing like soda. She took up the game, nibbling at the corners of Emma’s mouth. She skimmed, let her tongue flicker, her teeth graze. That effervescent tingle ran down her body.

The vibration of Emma’s groan teased her chest and abdomen. She again denied Emma a proper kiss, but brushed, caressed, flirted with her mouth.

They rested their brows against one another, and those ridiculous smiles rose again. Regina tugged on the edges of Emma’s hair.

“Fuck, I’m happy,” Emma said.
Regina stopped playing, as sweet as it was. She needed to taste Emma’s joy. In the depths of the kiss, she rediscovered the way her heart took control from her head, spreading its dominion wider, all through her chest, pumping its authority through her veins.

She grabbed the bottom of Emma’s shirt and pulled it up and off in one motion. She used her body to ease Emma into the wall.

Emma’s eyes twinkled with interest. Grinning again, Regina gave her a light kiss, asking for control. Emma negotiated terms by unbuttoning Regina’s shirt and stroking her nipple through her bra. Regina countered the proposal, moving her hand to Emma’s jeans, unbuttoning and unzipping. She set her terms, rolling Emma’s clit in her fingers.

She ached, primal, to take in Emma’s scent as she touched her.

Emma muttered her name.

No, that wouldn’t do. Regina didn’t ask for what she wanted with words, she just kept plucking at that place between Emma’s thighs, it swelled for her. When it throbbed, she filled Emma, thrusting deep.

“Regina,” Emma hissed, the cords in her neck standing out as she arched her head back.

Still not loud enough.

She sank to her knees, dragging Emma’s pants and panties away. She waited till Emma looked down at her through glazed eyes. As their gazes meet, her tongue made contact.

“Fuck, baby.”

*Baby*, Regina let it echo in her mind. She wanted to hear it again. Here. Later, in whispers as they held one another. Tomorrow, when they woke in each other’s arms. She pressed her face closer, sucked harder, wanting Emma to blare, for her pleasure to ring through the house.

Emma’s long fingers pleaded for more against the back of her head. She tasted Emma, her Emma,
with a noble soul despite everything that tried to knock it down. Her Emma, who made her world lighter and made her stronger. She buried her tongue deep, moaning. Her Emma.


Her hands slid between the wall and Emma’s ass, lifting her closer. Emma cried out her name, a shout.

And yes, god, that was perfect.

She kept feeding, demanding more, until Emma’s loud cries became hoarse.

They couldn’t find it in themselves to part from one another long enough to move to the bedroom. Instead, their mouths met wildly, Emma still shuddering. They sank to the floor together.

She didn’t go in till noon, and even then, Emma called her a few hours later. They barely talked. They breathed, just staying on the phone together.

And smiled.

Reality descended that evening as they planned the trip to Portland the next day. They would have lunch together, then take two cars to the FBI office. David wondered if he should invest in a minivan, so they could all take trips together in the future. Mary Margaret assured Emma and Regina he was probably kidding.

Once her mother was out of earshot, Emma said, “He’s not. At all.”

That night, Emma hesitated at Regina’s doorway, not wanting to assume. It could have become a point of miscommunication. She started to wonder if Emma’s reticence was because she wanted freedom. Her doubts weren’t as strong as they once were, however.
She kissed Emma, arms around her neck, and said, “If you want to be with me tonight or any other night, I want you there. Just in case you were wondering.”

She drifted back. Emma surged forward, arms around her within just a few steps. “Maybe we could try me sleeping in here for the next week? In the interest of, y’know, exploring our living arrangement?”

Regina nodded, turning to face her. She pressed her mouth to Emma’s reverently.

Relaxation eluded them, the press of the next day disquieting. They held one another through the night, dozing here and there.

Regina curled into Emma as tightly as she could. “I have this future I’m choosing, and this person I’m choosing it with. I haven’t felt this way in a long time, this optimistic and ready. Except, it feels like part of my life is still held hostage. I want Peter Pan to go away. To leave our lives.” She sighed, frustrated.

Emma didn’t try to comfort her with words. Her mouth offered tender brushes, her hands stroked, her body pressed closer, giving her warmth.

August had told Regina Peter Pan’s name, though she hadn’t used it yet, as if thinking of him as a human being was too good for him. She’d hear it tomorrow, however, on a list of the ones the FBI would be prosecuting. She wondered if that moment would make her, finally, feel free.

Henry decided to dress up to go to the FBI office, though Regina would have asked him to anyways. She checked on him. He put on a tie and a dress shirt and appeared almost ready to go.

After that, however, he dragged his feet. The time came for them to go, and he asked for five minutes, which stretched into ten. He insisted he needed comic books for the car ride, which he hadn’t chosen yet. Regina prodded him several more times before approaching him, arms crossed over her stomach.

“Henry, what’s going on?”
He shrugged.

“Are you nervous about today? Do you not want to go?”

Another lift of his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

She sat down beside him, asking, her voice quiet, “What is it?”

It took another moment before he lifted haunted dark eyes to hers. “I know this is a win. Just, it doesn’t feel like that. Not yet. I hoped it would.”

Peter Pan, still in their house, living in her son’s mind. She didn’t know how to exorcise him.

She tried to offer him understanding, the only way she could think to help him. “You know, even after all this time, I still feel like my mother won. Like I can never really beat her.” His worry for her broadcast in his eyes. God, how she loved his heart. “I guess we all get afraid there are things in our life that feel too big, too powerful. But Henry, you’re not alone. And you’re stronger than you think.”

He reached for his abandoned tie and slung it around his neck. He sighed. “Emma says sometimes you have to ask yourself what’s worth fighting for. I just don’t know how to fight.”

“Well, sometimes Emma can be a little smart. Don’t tell her I said so.” She drew in a deep breath. “I want to believe that we’ll do a lot of good with Cybersheriff, that we’ll eventually help more people than Pan hurt. Maybe even more people than I hurt back when I was...different. I hope Emma will keep convincing us to do ridiculous things, and you and I will slowly help her feel what it’s like to have a home.”

_I hope one day you’ll make a video again_, she thought but didn’t say it.

“I’m not an optimistic person but lately, that’s what think about, when I start to doubt myself,” Regina said.
“Me too. Maybe that’s good, that we hope all that. Maybe that’s how people win. Maybe it just takes time.”

She adjusted his tie under his collar, “Maybe.” She tugged on it, a little bit of play into the seriousness.

He took over, standing and moving to his mirror, tying it into place.

She came up to him and straightened the knot at his neck. “Ready?”

He nodded. “Mom? I love you.” As he became more and more of a teenager, his hugs were one-armed, brief and weak. But not this time, now his arms held her tightly.

“I love you, too,” she whispered back.

####################################################

Emma’s hand was clammy in hers as they walked into the FBI office. Regina wished she could focus even a little of her pounding heart on comforting Emma, but she needed to focus on her son and what was happening every second. Finding the FBI office, following David to a desk to register, then waiting for August.

Today, Agent Booth looked neat and pressed. A black suit, grey and white tie. No sign of a beard or scruff, hair neatly combed. David and Mary Margaret hugged him, both of them teasing him for his unusually neat appearance.

“David,” Mary Margaret said, shaking her head. “I think he sold out.”

He winced a little and loosened his tie. “Hey, life isn’t easy for rebels in the FBI.”

Regina remembered David had known August a long time. He’d helped Emma. She still couldn’t quite overcome her caution around him. She said goodbye to Henry as he and the Nolans went upstairs. She doubted her decision to leave his side. No, she trusted the Nolans. August said the press
conference would last a half hour, tops. It wasn’t that long.

The chairs in the room went on for ten rows, with a large space in the back already filling with cameras and video equipment. At the front of the room, a podium and another space, just to the side of it sectioned off for more photographers.

All of her breath squeezed out of her as she looked at the throng of reporters. August offered her a chair near the front, but she refused. Somewhere in the middle would be fine. Not too close to any of them. She pushed away the memory of being chased when news of the scandal got out, these dogs on her heels everywhere she went. Questions barraging her from a dozen unfamiliar voices. They barked and barked. The parking lot of her hotel became a camping ground. She hired bodyguards, primarily to clear a path for her as they used their pack to hunt her. She ran a hand over her face and smoothed her hair. She tried to maintain her control as the room began to fill.

“Maybe we should go upstairs,” Emma said. “I can call August.”

“He’ll be up at the front, I’m sure he has better things to do.” She tried to sound composed; it came out cold. “Sorry. I don’t like the press.”

“I might have heard something like that.”

August had told her Peter Pan’s real name: Malcolm Marshall.

She wanted to hear it today from whoever was announcing the arrests. She would focus on that. “I know it can’t be easy for you to be here,” she said to Emma.

“I mean, it’s not high on my list.”

“Thank you for coming.” She shook her head, it wasn’t enough. “Thank you for — for — everything.” Their word. New but filled with hope and need. She telegraphed a kiss with her eyes, not quite comfortable with providing an actual one in this environment.

“You’re welcome,” Emma answered, a private smile reflected back. “For everything.”
The talking in the room dimmed as a door on the right opened and a group of men and two women filed towards the podium.

Regina didn’t know the man who took center stage, his hands resting next to his prepared remarks. His jowls were pronounced and his head was bald. He wore not just a suit, but a three-piece gray suit with a red tie. He smiled, exuding confidence and command.

“How is everyone this morning,” he said, but it was perfunctory. “Let’s get started. Today, we are announcing the indictment and arrest of fifteen individuals who are charged with multiple counts of, among others things: possession, distribution and receipt of child pornography, unauthorized access of a protected computer, conspiring to commit computer fraud and abuse, and other crimes. Before I go into more detail, I’d like to introduce the people behind me, then I’ll make a brief statement and take questions.”

Regina couldn’t focus on all the names, someone from the justice department, several attorneys general, Special Agent August Booth, who led the task force, and so on. There was only one name she wanted to hear.

As her mind wandered, she thought she saw a familiar figure sitting at the front of the room. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to verify if she was right. She tugged on Emma’s hand. “Emma,” she said, “is that Gold?”

Bump — hearing a sound in the middle of the night that doesn’t fit, invading safety. Waiting for it to come again, praying it wouldn’t. A single sound is innocent.

Emma frowned. “Shit, looks like him.”

He turned his head, speaking to a man beside him, and they got a good look at him.

“It is him.” Her muscles tensed, coiled and waiting to take action. To confront him or run and find Henry? She didn’t know. Her eyes grilled into the back of his head. “Why is he here?”

Rising from bed to investigate. Discovering a door ajar and…it was locked, wasn’t it? Or could it still be nothing? No, there’s the noise. Something’s wrong.

“I don’t…” Emma used their tangled fingers to draw her closer. “Hey, hey, we don’t know why the
“Hell he’s here.”

Regina’s teeth clenched so tight the base of her neck ached.

The man at the front stopped saying names and went back to his statement. “Today we are increasingly vulnerable to those with the skills to penetrate the machines and devices we have come to rely on for everyday life and business. Nothing is more frightening to any of us, than the idea that the weakest among us, our children, might be at a particular risk from those who wish to harm them, take advantage of them, or exploit them.” His voice rose just a bit with each sentence.

This was someone who knew he had the spotlight on him for a limited time and wanted to take advantage of it. She would have been disgusted if she weren’t waiting for Pan’s name and distracted by Gold.

She tried to process what Gold’s presence could mean and listen to the conference at the same time. The threads of her thoughts criss-crossed, getting tangled and knotted.

*Closing the door, locking it and listening. Wondering if it’s just imagination building a monster out of nothing.*

She let go of Emma’s hand, needing the grip of one of her hands against the other, the feel of her fingernails digging into her palm.

“We at the FBI, while disheartened that these crimes happen, are very proud of the work we have done to stop those who are looking to hurt our children. In our indictment, we state that the following individuals compromised over a thousand computers, primarily belonging to minors between the ages of ten and seventeen.”

Her stomach rolled.

“These individuals accessed these computers by using a remote access tool named StealthLoki, with the intent to capture and distribute data including pictures, video and audio. The defendants include...”

Regina held her breath till her lungs burned until the fifth name, his name.
The speech picked up again after the names, more about the FBI and their dedication. She did feel grateful, just...she couldn’t access it right now, it was too far away. “In closing, I want to give special thanks to several organizations, Police Commissioner Rupert Gold...”

Another bump. It still could be nothing. An odd itching sensation broke out down her back, travelling down her spine. The snake had scored himself a mention somehow, Regina thought, and gained himself new donors according to their last conversation.

“Also, the not-for-profit arm of Nolan Securities, CyberSheriff, which provided initial data that was critical to our investigation...”

Bump. Her body twitched.

“Did you...tell anyone about Cybersheriff?” she asked Emma, her breath coming fast, the words airy.

Emma frowned, but she was more surprised than concerned. “Maybe we mentioned it to August?”

The reporters began to call out questions. She forced herself to scrutinize what was supposed to be a moment of closure, her mind ringing with alarms.

“We didn’t think of Cybersheriff until after our first meeting with him,” Regina said. “His conversations with me have been brief updates. We didn’t mention it on the phone the other day.”

“Gold knows. He had to sign those special dispensations for me to do the presentations.”

“Till he stopped.”

“Maybe he’s trying to get back in your good graces. Do you want to talk to him?” Emma asked.

Fight or flight, so much easier before she became a mother.
“Henry’s my priority right now.”

They waited for August to finish shaking hands so he could escort them to the conference room. As they went up in the elevator, Emma turned to him. “Hey August, what was up with the CyberSheriff mention at the end?”

He moved his hands behind his back, looking between them before he answered. “Cool, huh? I figured free press, right?”

Emma raised a brow. “So it was your idea?”

It could be her imagination, but Regina didn’t see his stretched smile in his eyes. “Well — no, not — it came up somewhere. I thought it would be a good thing.” His fingers ran through his hair then he pressed the already lit number again. “These elevators run on coal, I swear to God.”

“Commissioner Gold was mentioned in the speech,” Regina said, her mouth dry.

“Yeah, my boss likes to have an in with people. Gold wants to be governor or senator or something.”

It made sense. Logic soothed her, puzzle pieces fitting into place meant order; there was nothing unpredictable. Regina licked her lips. “Emma is what ties Gold to this. Wasn’t Emma’s name supposed to be kept out of this? Weren’t all of our names?”

The mirth playing against his lips didn’t match the agitation in his tone. “An investigation like this — it can get big quickly. Things can take on a life of their own. No names have been mentioned in anything official.”

_Bump._ Her heart jolted and every beat told her something wasn’t right.

The elevator door opened and August held it for them, then took the lead. “Everyone else is just over here.”

Henry and the Nolans were in a conference room that fit about sixteen people. A large TV was at the front of the room.
“August,” David said, standing, “what was going on with mentioning our company?”

August’s shoulders gave an exaggerated shrug. “I know, I know. I just went through this with those two. I’m not sure how it happened. I’ll look into it, okay? I’m — I’m really sorry, man.” August gestured behind him with his thumb. “So, my boss — the guy at the podium today — wanted to come up and give you a proper thank you.”

_Bump._ Surprises threatened her now. She pinched her hip, reminding herself to remain calm and in control.

“Really?” Henry asked, lighting up. “Cool.”

“I — we should get going.” Regina said.

“Just take a couple minutes,” August said. “Promise. I’ll be right back.” He didn’t wait before leaving the room.

“He’s being weird,” Mary Margaret said, frowning after him. “Don’t you think, David?”

David stared at the now-closed door, thinking it over. “It’s a big day for him.”

“Is it a bad thing if the press knows about CyberSheriff?” Henry asked, trying to perform a deep study of every expression in the room, not understanding the tension.

Regina didn’t want to discuss the company right now. She shelved her other feelings to inspect him. “Are you okay?”

“They said the bad guys got to a thousand computers. That’s a lot,” Henry said, sounding a little impressed.

Emma came to stand between her parents. “We saw Gold downstairs.”
David blinked a few times. “Commissioner Gold? I mean, we have a big client now, right? A global one. Maybe that kind of thing makes people want to toss your name in.”

“You mean Gold or the FBI?” Mary Margaret asked.

“I have no idea.”

Mary Margaret tried for humor. “Well, at least no one showed up wearing a green coat.” Emma winced at her, and Regina chose to ignore the words.

The door to the room opened, August standing in the doorway as if he was going to say something. Without speaking, he stepped to one side.

*She thought she saw a shadow, something waiting, a fear taking shape. Bump.*

“Hello, dear,” said her mother.
The one with things left behind

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday everyone,

I am so sorry to have kept you waiting but as I mentioned on Twitter, a Cuban sandwich tried to kill me. Incidentally, now may be a good reminder that should you want to know more about where an update is, or subject yourself to my questionable sense of humor, following me on twitter is a good idea!

Just saying.

Today's flight is an never-ending series of bumps, jostles and pockets of turbulence. Keep your seat-belts on but enjoy the in-flight movie "Lots of Random Lesbian Kissing Scenes." It's a new movie from Disney and Pixar.

Um, do try and keep threats of violence to your pilot to a minimum. Nerf balls are available to throw at me, however.

Edited to add: Holy cow! It's Thanksgiving in the states this week so update will be on Friday not Thursday. This week, Friday is the new Thursday. Just this week.

This is your captain speaking.

The one with things left behind

The room grew smaller, the walls closing in. Regina felt weightless, as if she were in water, floating, only hearing sounds as echoes.

Her mother stood, a study in humility, fingers clasped before her chest as if she were praying. Her hair, straight, hung loosely just past her shoulders. The suit she wore was simple white and black with a delicate string of pearls at her neck. Her features were somber, not a trace of arrogance or superiority.

A disguise.

Regina shrunk back. “Mother,” the word tore from her. All of the awful things she had done, and here stood the architect of so many of them. In one way or another. The monster who wielded the ability to turn her into a monster, too. She knew her fists were clenched, nails biting into skin, yet it didn’t register.
“Regina,” Cora said, as if relieved, like a loving mother reuniting with her daughter. “I am sorry for the subterfuge. I just needed to see you, and I knew you wouldn’t talk to me willingly.

Accusations rose inside her that demanded to know what her mother had to do with Peter Pan. Farfetched possibilities formed then drifted off. She couldn’t hold on to them. She knew her chest rose and fell, heaving, but she couldn’t feel air entering her lungs.

Cora’s lips thinned as if saddened. “You’re thinking I had something to do with Peter Pan hurting Henry?”

The question, too observant, pricked over her skin, but that sensation too was lost in a haze.

Cora’s body language didn’t change, but a deep hurt touched her face before she cast it aside. “Given everything, I can understand why you might think that. Though I’d like to believe, that even in my most ambitious moments there were some lines I wouldn’t cross. The assistant director of the FBI called me several months ago. He wanted to offer me an update, off the record, on a case involving my grandson. Before that moment, I didn’t know where you were or about Henry.”

She should speak, or run. She thought she had run fast enough and far enough. She should have known.

As a girl, Regina knew what mothers should be like. They should want to hug their daughters, want to spend time with them, without it being “a best-foot-forward social occasion.” Mothers didn’t stir fears, they soothed them. Family didn’t join the crowd staring, pointing and mocking. They stood with you. That was how it was supposed to be.

Cora demanded she be strong, and the best of her peers. One of them, yes, a carefully-fashioned clone to win their favor. But, an exceptional version without flaw. “You don’t want the other girls to think you’re…” So many different adjectives might follow that: strange, foolish, boring, or common. Her mother was the author of taunts that still lived in her head.

Emma spun toward August, fiery eyes threatening to attacking him. “August, how would the assistant director find out about Regina? I mean, you gave your word, right August?” She came up behind Regina, hands on her shoulders. Henry, a beat later, crossed the room to stand in front of his mother, shielding her. Regina barely processed it.
“August,” David said, his expression harder as he demanded answers.

August lifted up his hands, trying to keep any accusations away. “Okay, look, a few months ago they were going to pull me as lead of the case. Put someone with more ‘experience’ in charge.” He laid a hand against his chest. “More experience than me? Because I think outside the box and don’t dress or talk like a bureau poster boy most of the time? You know how it is, man. Political bullshit.” Nervous, forced laughers tumbled from him. “I name-dropped a little to my boss.”

David’s head shook in disgust. “I told them they could trust you.”

“Look, I got my boss to promise that the names of Ms. Mills and her son would be kept out of any documentation.” August motioned to Cora. “I didn’t know what he was going to do with it. Next thing I know, people in Washington are looking over our shoulder.”

Mary Margaret’s eyes narrowed on Cora. “There was a man who came to Storybrooke, a reporter.”

“A private detective,” Cora corrected. She took a half-step toward Regina, partially extending her hand. Regina stared at it and tried to escape it, only to be prevented by the solid press of Emma’s body behind her.

*Say something, do something, say something,* some part of her pleaded. *Fight or run. Do something.* She glanced toward the door, wondering if she could pull Henry toward it and escape fast enough.

Cora kept her eyes on her daughter. “After the assistant director called me, I hired an agency to check on you. I was so relieved, Regina, to know you’ve been happy these last few years. Becoming mayor of Storybrooke, adopting Henry, even starting this not-for-profit.”

Mary Margaret crossed her arms over her chest. “You spied on us.”

“I have been looking for you, Regina.” Cora said, her eyes round and soft with sadness. “I never stopped. You’re my daughter, Regina. I love you,”

David stepped directly between Cora and his family.

“Please,” Cora said to him, “this is a family matter.”
“Yes, it is.” Snow stood off to the side, expression stubborn. “Which is why we’re not going anywhere unless Regina wants us to.”

Cora took in all of Regina’s defenders. “I’m not your enemy. Not any of you. I’ve been helping you for quite some time.” She met Regina’s eyes. “I just didn’t think you’d accept it from me directly. Mr. Nolan’s company has caught the attention of some large corporations, hasn’t it? I made a suggestion or two. When I heard about this case and — and Henry.” She gave her grandson a quiet smile. Henry wriggled back, closer to his mother.

In the face of another rejection, Cora took a moment. When she spoke again her voice was especially gentle. Regina hated it, but she couldn’t shake free of her internal fog. “I made sure the Peter Pan investigation stayed a priority. The assistant director of the FBI himself talked to Agent Booth’s superiors. He gave me biweekly updates. He was the one who proposed broadening the operation. I suggested they mention Cybersheriff at the press conference. I know it can be hard to get publicity, to become known. I asked Rupert Gold if he could discourage your association with a felon, and if he could help you find less controversial technical help.”

“Wait,” Emma said, “you tried to break us up?”

Cora regarded her matter-of-factly. “I didn’t know until later that you two were...close. You can’t blame me for being concerned about my daughter’s association with a felon? In my shoes, what would you think?”

Mary Margaret placed an arm around Emma. “You’re probably asking the wrong people that question.”

“Regina, I want you to know how proud I am of your accomplishments.”

It slammed into Regina, stealing all her breath. “What did you say?”

“I’m proud of you, Regina.”

Regina pinched her side. Hard. “Stop,” Regina said, much quieter than she intended to, pressing a shaking hand to her brow. “Tell me what you want.”
“Sweetheart, I am telling you.”

Cora always seemed to know when her report cards were coming or important tests occurred. Her mother would summon her to pronounce judgement, but the verdict was always the same. Cora demanded more, endlessly more. As she grew, Regina learned to smile and act as if it didn’t bother her. Cora took that as a challenge and pushed button after button. Every conversation became a chess game and Regina always lost, but she survived.

She also began to believe everyone was her enemy. No one on her side. Not ever.

Regina denied it, and the numbness surrounding her ebbed as she violently shook her head. “You’ve never said that.” She didn’t feel steady, as if a dozen reactions — crying, laughing, screaming — might occur in the next instant. She tried to keep them all at bay. “Not once. Not ever. You threw me away. You abandoned me.”

“Never, sweetheart,” she insisted.

“Please. What do you want? Just tell me what you want.”

Emma, probably surprised by her pleading tone, whispered her name.

“I just want to talk. Regina, I know you have many reasons to doubt me. I thought pushing you was the same as loving you. In my arrogance, I always thought I knew best.” Her voice caressed, like her hands were cupping Regina’s face. “I promise you, I am not trying to hurt you.”

Henry tore from his mother to face down his grandmother, and three adults simultaneously reached for him. Regina couldn’t make her arms move. “No. This isn't fair. You shouldn't have lied. The way you're doing this isn't fair.”

Cora nodded her head at his words. “Perhaps you’re right, Henry.” She withdrew to the doorway. “Maybe it would be better if I gave you some time to think. Agent Booth, perhaps you could walk me to the elevator.” She glanced at him and he gave a little nod. “There’s a restaurant here in Portland called Five Fifty-Five. I’ll be there for the next few hours. I am begging you, Regina, please, just come and talk with me.” Cora turned to Henry, regarding him a long moment. “It was very nice to meet you, Henry.” She turned to August. “Agent Booth,” Cora said.

He motioned for her to leave the room. Together, they made their way out.
David made sure the door was pulled closed tight behind them. He massaged the back of his neck, agitated and confused. “Regina, I’m so sorry. I don’t exactly know the situation between you and your mother, but I know it’s...strained. I’ve known August for years, I never thought—“

“I was the one who said we should go to him,” Emma said. “I brought him into this.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Regina said, reaching out to touch the top of a chair. She couldn’t feel her heart beating in her chest. She wondered if this half-awareness, half sleep was what sleepwalking was like.

“Mom,” Henry said, tugging at her hand to get her attention.

She nodded to him slowly, as if he’d asked a question. She felt an odd tickling sensation at the back of her head. “I need to call Belle.”

“Regina.” Now Emma came around her and touched her cheek.

Regina shrugged the touch away, choosing to take out her cellphone instead. Her mind slowly started to chart a way forward. “I need the box. It has our passports. There’s a late flight out of Boston.” She knew the words were coming from her but she barely heard them; it felt like someone else said them.

The others went very still, staring at her with wide-eyes.

“Hopefully Belle can meet us. She has the extra key to the safety deposit box,” Regina glanced at her watch. Nearly six o’clock. That fact fell into the disconnected void inside her. “I’ll call her when we get downstairs.” She didn’t want to think about what her mother might do, what she might already be doing now that she refused her.

“Wait,” Henry said and pulled at her again. “We’re leaving? Why are we leaving? Things are different now.”

“So, after the guy in the green coat showed up, you were worried about the press, right?” David asked. “Can you — I’m not sure I get what we’re afraid your mother might do.”
A laugh bubbled in the back of her throat that had no place there. She clenched her teeth to quell it. “There’s no limit.”

She hated her mother with every cell of her being. She just didn’t want to. Even after all this time, the little girl inside her still hoped. That was the most dangerous thing of all.

“But like, maybe an example?” he asked.

As she tried to answer David’s question her voice didn’t modulate as it should. She sounded robotic. “People with money and influence have a range of weapons. Maybe she asks Gold to put pressure on Emma. Her parole officer starts watching her more carefully, and she gets pulled in every time someone hacks so much as an electric toothbrush anywhere in Maine. Mother calls Nolan Securities’ new global customer, and other business that have contracts with you, and she suggests that they may want to find another security company, if they ever want to do business with her or any of the companies she’s affiliated with. And Storybrooke, maybe she goes ahead and encourages the press to come, and they do, in droves. She plants the idea in some of the townspeople’s minds that they’d be better off without me as mayor. She makes sure Storybrooke gets all the lush details of my past life and who I was. “

“And Henry...”

“What about me,” he asked, his brow furrowed in worry. Some of it was for her, some for himself.

The question brought her back to herself. Her heart was pumping hard, refusing to let her be quite so mechanical about her son. “There are ways to go after us, too.”

“But we could fight her,” Henry looked at every adult in the room.

She couldn’t find the strength to answer him. Emma moved an arm around him. “Maybe let’s give your mom some time to think, okay, kid?”

David offered suggestions, his own mind travelling in a path similar to Henry’s. “Maybe we could be proactive. We could at least back out of the contract with that company she has ties to. I mean, it would be harder to do it once we actually go through with hiring people and get used to their money, right?” he asked. “We should back away now.”
Mary Margaret gave a thoughtful nod. “Gold signed documents allowing Emma to do tours. He wants to be governor, and he’ll probably run on law and order. It could be that a lot of conservatives would back away from him if they knew he gave Emma, an ex-felon, free run of the country. No offense, Emma.”

Regina withdraw back into what she needed to do. “If Agent Booth isn’t back in another moment, perhaps we could ask another agent to help us.”

“Regina,” Snow prompted her. “Let us be here for you. Just tell us what you need.”

“What I need, sadly, is to do things you can’t help with.”

“Regina,” Emma said, “I mean, we should at least talk things through…”

“Stop,” she snapped. Anger would have strengthened her. This came from a raw, terrified edge inside her. “All of you. Stop. I don’t need help. I don’t need your opinions or your optimism. You don’t understand, and right now, I have neither the time nor the inclination to make you. Now please, if you want to help me, then stop with your questions.” She couldn’t feel her throbbing heart again. She wished she could. “Just let me think.”

Snow opened her mouth to raise another argument, but David lay a hand on her back. They communicated silently before David leaned back into a wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

The room fell into an awkward silence. Henry stood near his mother but didn’t touch her. Emma leaned back against the tabletop. Mary Margaret and David sat down, holding hands and staring into space.

When August came back for them and used his badge to open the elevators, Regina heard David—loving, affable David—tell him, “I don’t know what the hell I ever saw in you. Never come near me or my family again.”

August flinched but didn’t try to answer.
Downstairs, Emma paced while Regina excused herself to make a series of phone calls.

A voice in the back of Emma’s head had started. She fought to drown it out. Life had warned her time and time again that she wasn’t meant to have what many people did. She had defied it for Regina and Henry. She beat it back.

*Right?*

The group waiting for Regina stood in the parking lot as quietly as they had upstairs. David gave each of them a hug or a kiss on the crown of their heads. After that, he leaned back against his car, his jaw flexing. Mary Margaret gave small sighs and shakes of her head every few moments.

Henry joined her. “Emma, please, can’t you talk to her?” She stopped moving and squeezed his shoulder. A question inside her started to tear at her heart. She wasn’t sure she could manage that fear and his, but she’d try.

Regina returned to them. “Belle is on her way. It’s a three-hour drive, so Henry and I will need a place to wait where I can also make some arrangements.”

Emma nodded. “Okay, I know a pizza place. Bit of a dive, but it’s quiet. Serves beer.” Regina didn’t answer so they all took that as a yes.

“We’ll follow you,” David said. Emma wondered if Regina would protest, but she didn’t seem to hear David at all.

Regina went around the car and dropped her keys twice as she tried to unlock the door. Emma went to her and laid a hand on hers. “Why don’t I drive, okay? Just to the restaurant?”

Regina gave her the keys then went to the passenger door without a word. Henry climbed in the back and he met Emma’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Regina spent the ride fixated on her phone. She would occasionally say something, but Emma wasn’t sure if it was really to them or to herself.

She said, “I found a midnight flight to Boston. Lots of flights from there,” and “I found first class tickets.”
Emma parked carefully and cut the engine. Regina jerked, surprised that the car stopped.

“Henry, will you go tell my parents to get a table and head in with them? They can order whatever pizza-wise, if they want.” He waited till she turned toward him and gave her a secret thumbs up before he obeyed.

God, he expected her to somehow fix this. *Fuck, fuck, fuck. Okay, one thing at a time.* Emma stared straight ahead and gathered her courage.

“Emma, I should continue making plans.”

No fucking emotion in her voice. No one home, like she’d already left. “I—I just have one question. Just, real quick. Um, you mentioned getting plane tickets, right? So...did you mean two plane tickets or three?”

Regina’s silence told her the answer, and it battered her as it stretched on.

“You...You’re just going to leave.”

Small things jumped out at her, like how under everything she didn’t feel as surprised as she should. The leather of the car seats was warm, and her hands weren’t the right temperature. They were freezing, as if she’d plunged them deep into snow. She wondered how they could be that cold.

She tried to remember that morning. Regina’s arms around her as she woke. She knew they had shared sweet words. She remembered the curve of Regina’s mouth. She couldn’t remember what she said to cause it. She fought harder, but it drifted away.

She recalled standing on the dock, waiting for Marco to dock the *Pinocchio*. She spoke then too, but what she had said felt like mist she couldn’t hold. Her mind travelled back to when she ran after the Winter Festival. She had been so sure, at the time, it was the right to do.

The car remained quiet. Emma saw the first few stars in the sky outside.
After another few moments, Regina reached for her, slowly, fingers grazing hers on the steering wheel.

“It’s been just Henry and me for so long. I didn’t—” Regina’s hand lifted and dragged through her hair. “Do you even have a passport? Your probation...I don’t know if you can leave or if other countries would allow you to enter. You might never be able to come back to the United States. You might—God, I don’t even know.” She undid her seat-belt, holding the buckle, pulling on the slack. “I can’t think. I can’t think about this now.”

Bitter irony made Emma smile. “Five minutes. That’s how long your mother was in that room.”

“Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?” Emma asked, voice rising. “You’re acting like she’s a monster, some kind of fucking Kraken that will destroy us.”

She wished Regina would yell back, but instead she whispered, “Because she is.”

“Bullshit,” Emma slapped the steering wheel. “Even if she was a Kraken, people fight monsters. Maybe you start by trying. Aren’t there enough reasons for you to try? Henry. Your town.” She couldn’t bring herself to say two words: “us” and “me”. They piled up inside her like traffic. She bit them back again and again. Her vision blurred and, distractedly, she wiped at her eyes.

Regina’s head bowed. “I’ve never won, don’t you see that? My whole life and I have never beaten her.”

“Five fucking minutes.” A question, a sharp sword, leapt to Emma’s tongue. She tried to hold it back, but her heartbeats raged and she wanted to wound. “Is this ‘everything,’ Regina? Cause maybe I’m stupid, but I thought we promised each other a lot more than this.”

“Emma. Don’t. When I get settled, when Henry and I are settled, then I’ll...”

Tears filled Emma’s eyes, and she slapped the steering wheel again. “You’ll get back to me? Like I’m, what, an afterthought?” She felt years of pain scrape down her throat. She pressed her forefinger and thumb to the back of her eyelids. “Just, can you please leave me alone for a bit?”
“Emma, I — “

“Please. Just go, okay? Just leave.”

She heard the car door open. A long pause, the sound of other cars coming and going, then the noise muted as the door closed.

Regina joined the Nolans at the table and saw Henry’s face darken when she explained that Emma wanted a few moments alone.

“Did you tell her she couldn’t come with us?” he asked. His eyes continued to accuse her.

“She doesn’t have a passport, sweetheart.” Not a lie and not the truth.

David stood. “Maybe I should just check on her.”

“I’ll go,” Henry said, not giving anyone else a chance to move before he did. “I’ll be right back.”

It was an odd relief to have him gone. Something she never would have believed she’d feel. She couldn’t soothe him now, didn’t have the presence of mind to manufacture any semblance of comforting words. It might be the last straw on the camel’s back; if she tried, it could crack her apart. She felt the fractures already.

She began double-checking flights, formulating a final version of what they would need to do. Plane tickets from Portland to Boston. She already scoped out apartments on Air BnB. The bedrooms were spacious but Henry would find the size of the bathrooms a learning curve. The location, downtown, would also be a new experience. Henry had never lived in a city. Later, she would try and move them to a smaller town. Quiet.

“I’m kicking myself for not bringing my laptop,” Mary Margaret said “ I need the car keys, David.
“I’m going to go buy one. Maybe two.”

He dug in his pocket for his keys. “What are you thinking?”

Snow’s burning gaze met his. “I think it’s time to do some phishing.”

He pulled his hand back quickly. “Now is not a good time to do something radical.”

She sat forward, arms folded before her on the table. “We send a blanket email to people who work in Cora’s company. Maybe even Cora herself. We see what data we can get access to.”

His brows lifted in degrees until he straightened, finally fully understanding what she meant. “No.”

“David —”

“What you’re talking about is exactly why Emma went to jail.”

“People like Cora Mills rely on the idea that everyone else is powerless against them. We are *not* powerless. Emma is *not* powerless. Regina is *not* powerless.”

Regina heard the conversation through filters, her mind not truly processing it. The growing fury in Mary Margaret’s voice captured her attention.

David set the keys down by his silverware, his jaw tightening. “And if you get caught?”

“That a chance I’m willing to take.”

“And I’m not.”

They sat at a large round table, with rustic pallet chairs. Henry had occupied a chair between the Nolans, and the gap between them, innocent at first, now started to feel oppressive. They were
tearing themselves apart over how to fight for her.

“What is the legal answer then? Who do we complain to, David? Who do we go to when the FBI and the Police Commissioner of Portland and God knows who else could be trying to screw us?”

“Don’t you remember how it felt? Because I do. When Emma called and told us she’d been arrested and why.”

“Of course I do.” Mary Margaret’s words were loud enough so that other tables turned in her direction. Regina doubted she would have cared even if she’d noticed.

“Then you should know,” he said, just as loudly. “They took our daughter from us and there was nothing I could do.” His voice lowered and he punched two fingertips against his brow. “It felt like I was going crazy, like a bad dream. I don’t care about losing money or getting harassed. But I can’t do that again. We need you. You have to know that. You have to.”

Mary Margaret softened. She leaned over the empty chair, her arms coming around him. “I can't just admit we're beaten,” she whispered, but Regina heard. “We can’t give up.”

David didn’t answer her. He unconsciously flicked his gaze to Regina but averted his eyes quickly.

They pulled apart as the waiter returned with a family-sized salad. Regina checked the weather and any other small detail she could think of. There was nothing left to do, but still she tried. She had to keep busy, she had to. A chair scraping near her pulled her attention up. Henry, a surly expression in place, sitting down.

“What’s Emma,” Mary Margaret asked.

“She’s being stupid. All of you are being stupid. Mom’s barely talking, and you two are being too nice, and Emma said I should be nice too, no matter how stupid running away is. And Mom, you told me that we’re stronger than we think we are. You said that, but now it’s like you don’t believe it. Then Emma said she had to go and told me to come back inside. And that’s stupid too.”

“Go,” Regina whispered.
Henry glared at her. “I didn’t get it. She said something about finding a Kraken.”

Pieces of the frozen place she’d been trapped in broke away from her. Her heart contracted painfully.

Regina closed her eyes.
The one with the begging

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday everyone,

Today's flight is bumpy but not have as rollercoaster like as 34. And there are even bits of smooth sailing too. About three more chapters to go, gang.

This is your captain speaking.

As always, feel free to say "hi" on twitter.

The one with begging

The brass accents, like the industrial piping that ran the length of the restaurant, gave Emma pause. As did the waitstaff who wore tuxedos, including the woman.

On the drive over, Emma had rehearsed what she might say, then again as she walked from the parking garage. Yet the talking points varied greatly, fueled by the uneven burning inside her.

She walked into a full waiting area, staffed by a maitre d' in an elegant red dress. The customers milling around with wine in their hands wore custom suits and tailored dresses about a half-step down from evening wear.

Fuck, this was not her type of place. Not somewhere she would ever belong. She asked for Cora’s table, and a waiter guided her upstairs to the back. The moment she saw Cora, she lost half of what she wanted to say. Her hands grew clammy but she clenched her jaw.

“Mrs Mills, your guest has arrived,” the waiter said and pulled out a chair for her. Emma didn’t sit. Confused, he left his hand on the back of her chair for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“I think we’re fine here,” Cora said smoothly. “Why don’t you give us a few minutes?” She gestured to the chair across from her. All the remaining words melted from Emma’s tongue and mind. It reminded her of her first Cybersheriff presentation. Except this time Regina wasn’t in her ear prompting her with what she should say. A bucket of cold water was tossed over the fury inside her, a shock running down her body. “You can sit if you wish.” Cora gave her a once-over in a cool assessment. “Is my daughter with you?” Emma shook her head, desperately trying to kickstart the
engines there. “I see, and will she be coming?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did she send you with a message?”

“No.”

Cora’s brow pinched as she frowned, then it smoothed away. “Then, to what do I owe the honor, dear?” The small smile on Cora’s lips shoved at Emma.

“You can’t take my family from me.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can’t have them.” An itch tickled between her shoulder blades. She cleared her throat.

“Perhaps you should sit down; there’s no reason we can’t be civilized.” Cora said, projecting a grandness, mixed with shades of compassion. It left Emma feeling uncertain, not sure what to believe about her, which was probably the point.

Emma knew that in any other situation Cora would confuse her as “the help,” a runner or dishwasher here at Chez-whatever this place was. Her white button-up was untucked, wisps of hair messy and wild against her face. She’d abandoned her vest in Regina’s Mercedes. She wished she had it.

Heat creeped up her neck, spreading the itchy feeling. “I just came here to tell you that I won’t let you hurt them.”

Cora sipped her wine before answering. “My understanding is that you’ve had quite the tragic life, so I can appreciate your desire to protect what you have.” Cora used the soft voice of someone who didn’t need to be loud to move the world, and who absolutely had moved it. “I, myself, was far too arrogant. I assumed I could never lose my family. It makes me curious, however. If my daughter feels as you do, it seems odd she isn’t here with you.”
Those words cracked open her head and stirred her already buzzing insecurities. “You’re not listening to me.”

“I assure you that I am, dear.”

“Regina is...” The words clogged in her throat.

_She’s going to leave you_, her heart said. Emma shuddered and tried to keep fighting

“...one of the strongest people I....”

_Except not for you._

Emma’s hands rolled into fists. A sob coiled inside her and _fuck no, not now_. “She — she wants to do good things, okay? For her son, for her town, for people who face things like what Henry went through. She’s happy.”

Emma heaved in a breath to get control — God — her eyes were welling up. Because yes, Regina was abandoning her.

“...we’re happy. You can’t just show up on a whim and steal that. She deserves a chance for once. Just leave her alone.”

Cora watched her dispassionately, waiting.

Fuck, this was such a mistake. Is this what Regina felt? This overwhelming understanding that she was losing a race, not even placing or showing, lagging so far behind it was comical.

“Emma,” A soft murmur near her ear, and her heart reached for that voice. Fingers on her face and dark eyes meeting hers, cradling whatever torn part of her was on display now. “Look at me.”
Emma did, she couldn’t help it. She needed to. “So, I’m here to fight for your honor.”

Regina gave a small, gentle smile. She brushed a kiss against Emma’s mouth, warming it and offering comfort. “I see that.”

“Regina, I’m so glad you’re here.” Cora said, rising. “I was just inviting Emma to sit.”

Regina didn’t acknowledge her. Not yet. “I don’t want to lose my nerve so I’m going to quickly say a couple of things and then I need you to go.”

“What, wait — “

Regina adjusted Emma’s shirt collar, her touch lingering. “The first is how sorry I am. I’m really out of practice when it comes to fighting real battles and back when I did, it was never about more than my ambitions. I know I need to learn to do it because I’m worth it and ‘Start at 100’ and all of that. But until I’m there, my reason to try is that you deserve someone who will battle Krakens for you, and so does the life we have together.”

She held up a yellow Post-It note she’d been clutching in her hand. “I remembered that I have this in my wallet. I’ve carried it for a while.” She held it up, a yellow Post-It note. *Number #10 — You don’t let things stop you (even when people act like boneheads).* “I need it today. You have no idea how much.”

It mattered that she kept that with her, Emma just wasn’t sure how much it could soothe the sinking feeling in her chest. Regina pressed her mouth to Emma’s, hard and quick, bolstering herself. “Can you promise me that you’ll be right outside? And that we’ll talk later? After. Please?”

Dammit, she never could refuse a “please” from Regina. Even when she wanted to. She also couldn’t just leave her here without support. “I promise, but Regina, are you sure?”

Regina squeezed Emma’s hand and nodded. She stepped back and spoke, clear and calm, “Emma, could you give us a few moments?” Regina took in a deep breath before turning to Cora. “Hello, Mother.”

*******************************************************************************
On the car ride to the restaurant, what had punctured the shock more than anything was hope. It didn’t make sense to Regina at first — the way her heart could shift from an ashen gray place to one that held a hint of light.

Emma Swan went to fight for her. Her mother would likely have her as a snack before dinner. Emma wasn’t used to the games Cora would play.

Still. She carried a banner into battle for Regina.

It wasn’t just her. The Nolans. Henry. What finally penetrated her retreat was the absolute love they felt for her. Especially Emma.

Cora was talented at devouring someone one bite at a time; she used to tear her to shreds with words that feinted, parried, then stabbed.

Regina couldn’t let Emma face that alone. She remembered the Post-It note. After Emma gave her that gift of a wall of Post-It notes so she’d “always remember who she was”, she had put one in her wallet. She’d wanted to carry that moment with her.

Her heart beat so fast, it hurt, her chest feeling bruised by it. It didn’t matter. Regina forced herself to make a plan during the car ride. If she was going to do this, she couldn’t go in there unarmed.

Emma needed her.

She needed Emma. So very much.

The plan was to get her mother talking and find out as much as she could. How much Cora knew, what she was thinking. Regina would play the part of someone cowed, trying to make her fear work for her.

After they parked, she asked David to wait in the car. Her heels beat against the pavement in a cross between a jog and a brisk walk. Her terse voice commanded the maitre d’ to take her to her mother’s table.
Emma stood there, her wounded knight, railing. Still, in her pain, Emma defended her, fought for her.

A hysteria ebbed too close to the surface of her even now; she did what she could to hold it back while, outwardly, appearing calm. She kissed Emma and told her to go, then turned and sat down before “the Kraken.”

“What is it you really want,” Regina asked her mother without heat, not entirely sure she could stay and do this. An awkward opening move, her verbal chess piece wobbled on the board.

“A second chance. To get to know you again. To get to know my grandson.”

*If you wanted that, you could have picked up a phone,* Regina thought.

“Your ‘new’ family seems to think you need to be protected from me. Do you believe that too?”

Regina didn’t answer. *Say something,* she ordered herself. She tried to catalogue in her head the number of times she’d defied her mother. How had she done it? She’d been young. It happened a few times in her teens, sometimes when she was in college, and when she started the charity.

She had been scared, but bold. She had still needed her mother’s approval. She had believed she would earn it, probably begrudgingly, by doing something so grand it couldn’t be ignored. She’d been full of hope about the brightness of her future and all she could be. What she wouldn’t give to have a taste of that right now.

“I suppose I can’t blame you.” Cora took a long drink of her wine. “You have to know that I would have never let you serve one single day in jail. You had already cultivated the anger of many people. You earned the title of ‘Ice Queen’. I shouldn’t have tried to use that the way I did. I should have left you and others no doubt whose side I was on. I was being clever and thinking like a businesswoman, but not like a mother. I think that was true most of your life.”

The only real success at standing up to her mother Regina had ever had was starting the charity, but Cora made that her victory in the end. She outmaneuvered her, was stronger than her. Or faster. Or smarter. More resourceful, and simply willing to go farther than she ever considered.
Her mother stared at her, waiting, pressing her. The waiter came over and asked her for her drink order, a momentary reprieve. Regina ordered the house white wine. After he left, neither woman spoke.

_I’m failing_, Regina thought. This wasn’t fighting. It wasn’t what she promised Emma.

“Regina,” Cora said, sighing, “will you please at least look at me?” Regina kept the Post-It note in her hand and did. It pleased Cora, her face broke into a relieved smile. The wine came, and Regina gave a polite nod to the waiter. Emma’s note felt smooth under the pad of her thumb.

Regina needed to summon the part of her that believed in the adoring smiles Emma gave her. She had to grasp onto the certainty that if she fell, Emma would be right there. She wouldn’t be alone. Regina had to trust that trying mattered, that the voices in her head that told her all the conclusions were already reached was wrong.

_Fight, Regina_. Her thumb smoothed over the words of the Post-It note, as if the ink could be pulled into her and give her strength. Maybe it could.

“If all you wanted was to know me and my son, why try so hard to make me beholden to you? The Nolans, Peter Pan, the mention of Cybersheriff,” Regina said. A better gambit, more in keeping with her plan.

Cora dropped her eyes briefly, an old tactic Regina remembered, one that let her hide her emotions. “I wanted to, as best as I could, show you how sincere I am.”

Regina made another move. “When I was 17, I came home one day and found my entire closet empty. I had refused to wear a dress you picked out.” A deep, consistent rapping of anger resounded inside her with the memory. “You didn’t say a thing to me, you just showed me how sincere you were.”

“That was a long time ago. When you left, I realized how wrong I had been. It made me take a long look at myself.”

She sounded so honest. She always could when she wanted to.

“Let’s say I tell you that we could — slowly — get to know one another again. Then what?”
“I’d ask you and Henry to come visit me for a few weeks. To come home. It would be just the three of us.”

“And Emma.”

Her mother remained relaxed, that was another thing about her, always so unfazed. The corners of her mouth lifted. “Of course she is invited, if you wish her to be.”

“I’ll always wish her to be.”

“I see.” Cora took the napkin from the table and neatly draped it in her lap as the waiter returned. She asked him what appetizer he would recommend then flashed him an appreciative look. “Let’s start with that, thank you.”

“I’m not staying long,” Regina cautioned.

“It’s just an appetizer,” Cora said, acknowledging that Regina hadn’t made any decisions and things were still fragile. “As for Emma, well, she’s not who I might have chosen, but she clearly cares about you very much. I look forward to getting to know her better.” Cora smiled, toothy and dripping with earnestness. She had always smiled a lot, a way to seem pleasant and well-meaning. “Perhaps the three of us could discuss what’s to be done with Peter Pan, Mr. Malcolm Marshall. Serving a few years in prison isn’t nearly enough of a punishment, don’t you think?”

The invitation to rage against Peter Pan tasted sweet. She did her best to block it out and keep her wits. She needed information. That was the plan. “Your private detective helped you find out about Henry?”

“The assistant director of the FBI first, then, yes, the private detective. You adopted him when he was still quite young, didn’t you? Not a baby, but young enough that you could enjoy watching him grow up.” Regina tensed; her mother knew much more than she thought. “He seems like a fine young man. Brave. He looks like you. Do you know very much about his family?”

The tempo of her internal ticking sped up, jumping with fear. She schooled her features, trying hard not to show her agitation. It dripped into her voice, darkening her words, making them heavier than they should be. “I knew his father a little. He said that it was just he and Henry. We put out ads. Years later I hired a private detective.” The last one was a lie. She had never thought to. Maybe she
should have.

“He’s been a blessing. Emma. The Nolans. It’s something I am still trying to reconcile — how much they care about me. The fact that I’m not alone anymore.”

“You’ve never been alone. “

Regina paused, wetting her lips with wine more than drinking. “The night before I opened my non-profit, I had a little celebration at my penthouse, do you remember? You told me that night that you had looked into my office location and decided to sell it because it wasn’t suitable. We had to delay opening for two weeks.”

“You’re right. I wanted you to excel, and I constantly pushed you and raised the bar. It doesn’t have to be like that. If you let me, I want to make it up to you, to use our family’s influence and wealth to help you, the way I should have all along. Have you considered what we could give Henry? The colleges and universities we can help him get into?“ Cora, perhaps sensing she’d hit a nerve, went on. “I know he enjoys making videos. My secretary showed a few of them to me. You and I have connections in Hollywood. We could find an amazing internship for him.”

Regina kept her expression neutral. “And did your detective tell you about Cybersheriff too? I never mentioned it to Agent Booth.”

“He did. When I learned you were working with an ex-felon, and where she lives, I reached out to the police commissioner to find out more information about her. Commissioner Gold is a very ambitious man. He was extremely forthcoming about her activities and how they were related to you. I gave him a sizable donation. I think if Emma wants to come to New York with you for a time, we’ll find him receptive. I apologize if I inadvertently made things more challenging for you and your new business by asking him to intercede. I was trying to protect you.”

Regina waited as their appetizers arrived and were set down. “I suppose you were right, the mention of Cybersheiff at the press conference is good publicity.”

“That’s another way I could try to make things up to you if you’ll let me. We both did so many things wrong, and I wonder if Cybersheriff might be a chance for us to make amends. With my help, you could open up offices across the United States. From what I have been able to discover about the Nolans, they don’t have the experience needed to run such a venture, but you do. If you talked to them and explained, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind separating Cybersheriff from Nolan Securities to become its own entity, with you at the helm.”
Regina’s eyes narrowed. “And what would your role be?”

Cora laughed, making barely a sound. “I’d like to think I might offer good advice should you need it, but otherwise — nothing. It won’t be directly connected to me or our businesses. Not like before.”

Regina considered her reflection in the spoon. Her mother wasn’t wrong. The wealth and influence of the Mills name could make Cybersheriff grow quickly. David and Mary Margaret had already started to become overwhelmed with the size of things. They likely wouldn’t mind if Regina disconnected Cybersheriff from Nolan securities. They’d agree with Cora’s plan. She was certain of it.

“Speaking of advice, I do have some which you can take or leave. If you do want to make Cybersheriff a nationwide business venture, you’ll probably want to talk to someone from the press. An interview to announce that you’ve returned. It’s always best to be proactive and get ahead of the media whenever possible. Enough to control the story and how it unfolds.”

A seed pushed into Regina’s mind and started to grow, tendrils reaching upward.

“I’m sorry, I’ve made this all about business. It’s my comfort zone, I suppose. Can I ask you about what we talked about earlier — about you and Henry coming to visit?”

“I think an interview is wise. And I’ll talk to the Nolans. I’m not ready for you to spend time with my son yet. However, perhaps we could arrange a few dinners. If those go well…” She let her words drift off, saw the almost-victorious smile in Cora’s eyes.

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Outside, Regina saw David and Emma leaning against a wall outside a Dunkin Donuts, on the opposite side of the busy street. David bent closer to Emma and said something to her. After taking in a deep breath, she moved toward the crosswalk in long strides, deciding to jog across rather than waiting for the light.

“Hey,” Emma said.

“Hey,” There was so much to say, maybe too many things, and they stood there watching one another awkwardly.
“Henry?” Regina asked, though she was sure he was fine.

“Mom is with him at the pizza place. We know Belle’s coming there, and we didn’t know how long you’d be.”

“Oh, she didn’t need to — I texted Belle and told her to wait.” She guessed the next question and answered it. “When your father was driving me here. I should have said.” She ran a shaky hand through her hair, exhaustion making her eyes feel heavy and her movements sluggish. She pushed that aside. She needed to make this — with Emma — better somehow. She spied a bench by the front of the restaurant and nodded to it. “Will you join me for a few minutes? Please?”

For some reason, Emma rolled her eyes. She sighed and followed Regina to the bench. “So was that as bad as you thought it would be? Because from my perspective, she’s scary as hell.”

“She is,” Regina said. “She laid out a lot of temptation before me in there. My mother’s still very persuasive.”

“So she was up to her old tricks? You don’t think she’s sincere at all?”

Regina rubbed at her temple and gave a small, hapless shrug. “I can’t really take the chance of waiting to see if she is. And I really think, after all this time, she only knows one way to do things. Do whatever you have to do to win. She asked me to compromise one thing. I think it was a test. I think she wanted to see if I was still the daughter she raised.”

She pivoted towards Emma. “I was trying to remember what it took for me to fight her. Back when I believed I could. I don’t think I’ve had that kind of faith in myself for long time.” She laid her hand over Emma’s, half-expecting her to pull away. “I panicked. I know my reaction reminded you of your past. I’m both ashamed and sorry for how I reacted. I think some people aren’t naturally brave, that sometimes finding courage is a journey. I’d very much like to go on that journey with you. If you’re still willing.”

“What you did sucked.” Emma pulled away, linking her fingers together. “Still does, to be honest. You have no idea how hard it is for me to be sitting here right now. After the car, I wanted to run. I still do.”

Regina mirrored her pose, looking across the road at David who was doing his best to pretend he
wasn’t paying attention.

She caused this. She made Emma look into the dark mirror of her worse fears. All because she’d become so used to running, and so terrified of losing fights with her mother, that she dismissed everything except that little emergency box and Henry. Hurting Emma this way made her want to punish herself, grab her flawed heart from her chest and pound it into the pavement until it worked like it was supposed to. The way Emma deserved it to.

Regina tried again, certain she was running out of chances to mend things. “I know. I’m very glad you’re here. Does it help at all if I told you that I truly believe I wouldn’t have lasted an entire day before I came to my senses and begged you to come to me?”

Emma’s mouth set in a bitter line. “How do you know?”

Again, knowing Emma might move away, she reached for her hands — both this time. “Because when Henry told me why you left, all I could think about was getting here. Kraken or not. And because everything good in me, in my heart, is yours. And the rest of me is too.”

Emma softened in degrees, doubt becoming hope. A tiny bit of mirth crept into her eyes, and Regina thought perhaps things might be okay. “You said you’d beg me to come to you. Like...begging, begging?” The hint of a smile played at the corner of Emma’s mouth.

Regina’s lips rose, too. “You want me to beg?”

“Well, it would be nice.”

“Shall I get on on my knees?”

“Would you?” Emma teased but as Regina moved she reached to stop her. "Hey, wait, I was just kidding. Don't - ”

Regina knelt. The brief playfulness of the moment before dropped away. She drew in a deep breath and looked directly into Emma’s eyes. “Emma, I am begging you. Please forgive me. Please give me a chance to prove to you that I will fight for you — us. Our family.” Emma’s hands closed around hers. Finally. She leaned her head against Emma’s. She whispered into the shell of Emma’s ear. “I am begging you to never leave me, to hold my hand and to keep my heart safe, and let me try to keep
yours safe, too. Please.”

Emma’s arms came around her. She hugged her so hard it hurt, but that didn’t matter. Regina needed to feel her, to be given that proof she was forgiven. They held one another just short of crushing each other and tried to find the peace and trust they’d had before.

After a time, Emma drew back and caught her eyes, stroking her hair back from her face. “Hey? So um, with regards to your mom, what do we do?”

“She wants me to convince your parents to let me run Cybersheriff as a separate entity. Make it my company and open up several offices.”

“Oh. I mean, honestly, they’d probably…”

Regina shook her head fervently. “I would love for Cybersheriff to go national one day. The right way. With all of us doing it together. The right way or not at all. I have a plan. Well, I have the very beginnings of a plan. It’s not how to fight my mother so much as it is how to take away most of her ammunition. I need a pad of paper and a mechanical pencil. I need us to go home to Storybrooke. I’m going to need to talk to everyone too. You and Henry. Your parents. And...others.”

A twinkle slowly spread in Emma’s eyes. She popped to her feet, pulling Regina up too, then laughed. “Fuck, y’know, I’m almost worried for your mother now.” She dropped a kiss on Regina’s head and they walked across the street to meet David.
Happy Thursday everyone,
Today's flight takes some turns to only skim Angstville and has a little bit of MM giving Regina a hard time. Also, dancing. According to my outline, we're two chapters from the end after this chapter. Though I am VERY tempted to do an epilogue. As always, everyone, thanks for all the feedback and support.

BTW, a quick thank you to DeedNay for inspiring Dabpa.

This is your captain speaking.

They were in the living room. By design, and Regina had absolutely planned seating arrangements for this, Emma pulled up a chair, Regina sat on the couch and Henry leaned back in the armchair. Regina wanted him to perceive them all as equals, so she didn’t let Emma sit next to her. Regina insisted on including Emma in her conversation with Henry, which was kind of intimidating, but also kind of nice.

Emma sat on the edge of her seat, literally, ready to jump up in case Regina needed her to do anything — get a fire extinguisher, practice a karate chop on an intruder, administer CPR — whatever.

Regina gave Henry her notebook and explained the bullet points on it; the whole time the kid’s eyes grew wider and wider. Emma got it, her reaction had been pretty similar. Henry listened till his hands were clenched around the arm rests and the toes of his sneakers were pressed hard into the floor. Finally he exploded, “but all of this changes everything.”

Regina didn’t look surprised by the outburst. “You’re right. For a long time, we’ve had a quiet, predictable life. Everything was certain and safe. This is what it means to fight. Most of the things in our lives become a big question mark.”

His face bunched unhappily, making him look a little prunish. “But if you do all this, doesn’t it mean that your mother wins?”

“I’m doing it for you, and for Emma. And me.” Regina listing herself last pricked Emma, but at least she was actually including herself now. “Our family.”
“But you’re going to hire a private investigator to see if I have any relatives. That means they could come and take me.”

Regina closed her eyes a long moment and swallowed, composing herself. Right now, she wasn’t Regina the mayor or the ex-hot shot CEO. She was just Regina, fragile and open to her son. Emma wanted to put her arms around both of them. “Or it could just mean you have access to a part of yourself you didn’t before. If it looks like things are going another way, then, I have other thoughts. Nuclear options.” She shook her head, as if that wasn’t a path she wanted to travel during this discussion. “I’m doing it so that my mother can’t threaten us with it. And because, on further reflection, it’s…it’s the right thing to do, Henry. It terrifies me, you must know that.”

Her honesty softened Henry. He moved to sit next to her. In starting to be a man, Henry was learning to put others above himself. He had a big heart, but now, even with the possibility of a door opening that could change his entire life, he focused on soothing his mom.

Emma loved him. Them. Henry nodded toward the spot on his mom’s other side of, trying to get Emma’s attention. She hid a smirk and moved as directed. Henry had his own seating plan.

“We know it’s scary,” Emma said. Regina had told her it was important that she was a part of the conversation instead of fading into the background. This was to be a “family” meeting, after all. “That’s why your mom and I have been talking about it as a family decision. All three of us have to be 100% on board, or we shouldn’t do it.”

Henry’s mouth thinned in something close to a smile but not quite. Emma thought it was mostly because she invoked the words “all three of them”.

Trying to sort through it all, he turned back to his mom. “You wanted to run because you knew how hard all of this would be?”

“Yes. And because…” Regina smoothed his hair back from his face. “Why haven’t you made a video since Peter Pan came along?”

He flinched back, defensive. “I didn’t want to.”

Regina kept her words soft. “But why, you used to love your videos so much?”
This time he thought about it before answering. “Maybe, I’m afraid it will happen again.”

“But logically, you know it probably won’t. You know better how to protect yourself now. And Emma’s here, and you know how good she is with computers.” Henry didn’t answer right away. Regina let him off the hook. “My point is that fear isn’t logical. But that doesn’t mean it’s not valid.”

“Like, my big thing was being afraid of sticking around, because I thought people would always toss me to the curb,” Emma said. “Even though I know you and your mom aren’t like that.”

Their “living together trial period” was due to end in a week or so, but neither Regina or Emma had mentioned it. Emma found that if she thought about living with Regina forever, her stomach still twisted and her anxiety rose. If she just took it day by day, it felt like the best kind of normal. She wasn’t about to bring up the topic of leaving.

“So to you, your mother is like Peter Pan to me,” Henry said slowly, thinking about it as he said it. “And like commitment is to Emma.”

Regina cupped his chin. “I think that’s true.”

He chewed on his lower lip, eyes downcast. “Maybe I’m also embarrassed. About the pictures and the videos. That he was able to trick me so he could take them.” He lifted his head again, taking in their reaction to his words. They offered him patience and let him keep sorting through things. “Could — could your mom use what happened with Peter Pan against us, too?”

Emma reached around Regina to lay a hand on Henry’s back. She didn’t know what Regina would say, it hadn’t come up in their hour-long preparation for talking with him, but it was a pretty intense question.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart, but...I’m not entirely sure.”

He didn’t react to that with terror. Instead, his face tensed, as if he was wearing a backpack that someone had shoved a hundred-pound weight into and he was determined to carry.

“Which is why,” Regina said, quiet but insistent. “As Emma said, we really need you to be sure you agree with all of this.”
“But the other option is running?”

Regina nodded. “In this situation, I think so, yes.”

“And Emma would come, too?”

Emma and Regina had already discussed this, and Regina had even given her homework researching entrance requirements for other countries. “It would be a little more complicated for me, kid, but...yeah. One way or another, we’d all go.”

“The last thing on the list doesn’t really have to do with your mom.”

“No,” Regina agreed, “but it’s something I think I need to do.”

“But I don’t have to come?”

“No, Henry, of course not.”

“What you’re doing, your plan, is like if I had published the pictures of myself before Peter Pan could.” He glanced to Emma to gauge if that sounded right to her. It was close enough. He turned back to his mother. “The pictures would be out there, so he wouldn’t be able to use them against me but...it would be really hard.” He sat back, almost reclining, staring into space. “That’s pretty brave, isn’t it?”

Clouds lifted from Regina’s face, relieved that he understood. Of all the things Regina feared, losing Henry’s love and respect was a living wound that could consume her if it came true. Emma knew she couldn’t convince Regina that any anger or resentment Henry ever felt would, in the end, be drowned by the ocean of the connection between them. She was sure of it though.

Emma knocked his shoulder to get his attention. “Fear makes you give stuff up, right? But it keeps you in the same place. Fighting makes you do stuff and you could lose things, too, but if you fight there’s also a chance for more.”
“Like us being a family?”

The open, easy way he said it poured into Emma furiously, warm and healing. She couldn’t talk for a moment. Regina took her hand and answered for her, “Exactly like that.”

“I think you have a good plan, mom.”

She froze, her voice small as she asked, “You do?”

His smile grew in stages, but by the end, the entirety of his faith and love for her shone on his face. “Yep.”

“Put ‘em in,” Emma told them, extending her hand out.

Henry quickly caught on and placed his hand over Emma’s, but then he had to explain to his mother. “It’s a ‘go team’ thing, mom. Put your hand in.” Regina slowly did, giving Emma a fond, “you’re ridiculous” headshake.

Henry stretched up to kiss the top of his mother’s head. Emma laughed and did the same thing, then tackle-hugged both of them onto the couch with her. Henry protested, mostly to save his teenage pride, but gave them both a quick squeeze before disentangling himself and scrambling free.

When Regina excused herself to her office to finalize some of the details of her plan, Henry stopped Emma. “If I tell you an idea I have, does it mean I have to do it?”

“Nope, you can treat me like a recycle bin that you can empty when you want.” They both paused a moment then frowned. “Yeah, forget I said it that way.” She nudged him. “You want to take a walk?”

David did the same thing with her, she realized. For as long as she’d known him, he would invite her to take a walk if he sensed she needed to talk. He wouldn’t push. He’d offer her an ear if she wanted it and the steady grace of his presence. Maybe she learned from them, David and Mary Margaret, a little something about being a parent. Maybe she could offer some of that to Henry.
She loved that idea and let it fly inside her for the rest of the day.

That night, after she told Regina where she was headed, she dropped by her parents’ house. When David opened the door, it felt like kismet. She asked him to go for a walk. She was pretty sure it was the first time she’d ever asked him, instead of the other way around.

When Emma got home, the kitchen light was still on. Regina had taken out the contents of several cabinets and begun wiping them down.

Emma had seen her do this a few times. It was not a good sign. At least this time she was sure about the cause. “You okay?”

Regina nodded, but didn’t face her. “Just trying to keep occupied. Tomorrow will be difficult.”

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don’t think so."

Emma nodded. “Well...” She pulled her iPhone from her pocket and scrolled through her music. Regina’s brow furrowed, and she turned towards her when a love ballad began to play. “Let me help.”

Emma went to the center of the room, bowed, and extended her hand to Regina.

“Emma, I should finish this, and then review —”

“Everything you have been thinking about and doing is huge. This, getting you to take a minute just for you? Is just as important.” She proffered her hand again. “C’mere.”

Regina went to her, stepping close and resting against her.
“You know,” Emma said, arms wrapping around her. “I have a theory about slow dancing.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, my theory is it's really just an excuse to hug someone for a while and not feel awkward.” They swayed ever so slightly, but at this moment, Regina had to admit that Emma might have a point.

Regina turned her head so her cheek lay over Emma’s heart. “Emma? What if, even with all of this — all my planning — she beats me? What if I never win? What if I can’t do this, and I’m just fooling myself. I hear her in here.” She touched her brow. “She’s so loud. She always tells me I’m not good enough. She told me once that I was lacking a certain something, that she knew I could feel it and she felt it, too. And it meant I would have to work that much harder for everything.”

Emma cursed under her breath, trying to figure out how to battle the voices in Regina’s head. She pulled her closer. “Fuck your mother. Seriously. And fuck anyone who doesn’t see how amazing you are. I’ll tell you what, every time you hear one of those voices in your head, you just picture me punching it out, okay?” It made Regina laugh. Emma’s heart lightened, glad that maybe she’d found the right things to say. “Or come find me and I’ll kiss you. Like...as a counterargument.”

“Kiss me now?”

Her voice was a plea, full of vulnerability. Emma’s mouth on hers made a gentle, thorough argument.

Regina’s arms curled around Emma’s neck as she “listened.”

“I’m terrified.” She sighed into Emma’s neck as she drew back.

Emma felt Regina tremble and cling to her. “I’m here, baby. You’re not alone, okay?” It didn’t solve everything, Emma knew that, but she thought maybe it was what Regina needed to hear.

They kept dancing.
Regina supposed that her insistence on double-checking the room a half hour before the meeting was partly responsible for the tutorial Mary Margaret gave them. David, Mary Margaret and Emma were gathered with her in the meeting room in Town Hall. She was going to address the town council and Belle. They were there to provide moral support. She usually wouldn’t have accepted their offer, but this was far from the normal day.

“So here’s the new plan that we all need to agree to should unexpected things arise.” Mary Margaret said and wrote five letters, D, A, B, P, A, on the whiteboard. “We should not panic and make decisions when we are panicking. Instead we should Dabpa. Discuss. Assess. Brainstorm. Plan. Act.” She pointed to each letter as she spoke the associated word.

“We also,” David added and looked at her meaningfully, then he drew a big circle, wrote the word “crime” inside it, and slanted a line through it. “Should not consider committing a crime because we don’t know what else to do.”

Mary Margaret gave her husband the side-eye. “No, that should only be a last resort.”

David huffed at her. “Should we just start saving up for your bail now?”

“Anyway,” Mary Margaret said with a bright smile. “Dabpa. This is what we should all agree to in the future because if not, Mary Margaret —” she drew a stick figure with x’s for eyes, “— will be like this.”

Emma shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Do we actually have to use the word ‘dabpa.’”

“Hey, it took me quite a bit of time to come up with that.” Unseen by her, David mouthed “two hours” to Regina and Emma. “I wanted something that would be easy to remember.”

“Thank you, Mary Margaret,” Regina said dryly. “I appreciate your subtle lecturing of my life choices.”

Mary Margaret did not look cowed. “You are so very welcome.”
With a smirk at her, Regina moved to the front and erased the board before the others arrived. She regretted the loss of distraction the moment she did it.

Regina rubbed her hands together, trying to relieve the clammy feeling there. She made sure each seat had the right number of handouts. The list of bullet points wasn’t in any particular order. Each item pained her, and it had taken all of her strength just to be brave enough to list them.

Every part of the path forward had brambles and thorns. All of it was uphill. Demons would stalk her as she went. They would claw at her and do all they could to get her to go back. She could swear sweat gathered on her brow and back, but when she touched there, she found nothing.

Belle, Archie, Kathryn and Sidney ambled into the room, all smiles and warm greetings. Surprised to see the Nolans and Emma, but happy. Their good-natured banter existed as a polar opposite to what Regina was about to tell them.

“Please sit,” Regina said, and Archie’s brow furrowed at her seriousness, catching a hint something might be amiss. Belle, of course, already knew, and she controlled her expression, giving nothing away.

Kathryn was the first to look down at the top printout in front of her. “Regina,” she said, alarmed. “This is a resignation letter?”

All eyes in the room jumped to her. David, Emma, Mary Margaret and Belle offering encouragement, the others confused and concerned.

Regina had rehearsed what she would say, how she would begin. Her stomach clenched and her throat tightened, an act of rebellion against what she was about to do. “I need to tell you some things about me. They may be things you already know. I have had the feeling that some of you allowed me my privacy, and for that I am grateful. However, it’s no longer a luxury I can afford, and I want you to hear this from me.”

She took her chair at the head of the table, not at all feeling like the mayor and decision-maker. Instead, she became the young woman facing her mother, trying to make a case for the charity she wanted to head, sure things wouldn’t go her way.

She had been taught no one could be trusted. Not even family. Yet she had Emma and Henry and the Nolans. They were teaching her to hope. Now, though, she wouldn’t blame the council for
turning their backs on her. She loved this town and the people here. She could only pray that if they
turned on her, Henry wouldn’t be caught in the cross fire.

She was asking too much of them, she thought as she spoke. As she laid out her own past and what
the risks were in the present.

When she finished, Sidney, Kathryn, and Archie asked for some time to speak privately. It seemed to
confirm her doubts. She crossed her arms over her chest and stood outside waiting. Emma took her
hand, and the Nolans stood shoulder to shoulder with them.

After twenty minutes the council called her back in; Regina was sure that this was the moment they
would emotionally execute her. She straightened her back and tried to hold her head up.

“Regina,” Archie said. “If you need some time to deal with this, well, family issue, we think we
could work out a leave of absence.” He gave a small, kind smile. “Most of us knew a lot of what you
told us. Well, not Sidney.”

“I don’t like the internet. The internet encourages anonymous stupidity,” Sidney said haughtily.

Kathryn cut in, “We’re not sure your resignation is necessary. Your suggestion to do an interview for
the town newspaper, to get ahead of this, is a good idea. We might want to even have a town
meeting. If the press show up without our permission, we freeze them out. The best they’ll get will
be a whole town of people dodging them and saying, ‘no comment’.”

Regina didn’t think they had fully understood. She picked up one of the papers she’d prepared and
double-checked her wording. “The town deserves a mayor who is fully present and who doesn’t
have a past that could cause significant disruptions. For the time being, Belle will serve as the acting
mayor. She can help ensure continuity between my administration and the next. In your packet is the
proposal for a special election, since we didn’t officially have a procedure.”

“Why don’t we just let Belle serve in that role until the next official election, and then we can vote
you back in,” Sidney suggested. Archie bobbed his head in agreement.

Regina pinched the bridge of her nose. Their inability to follow her logic made an already agonizing
process strangle the strength left in her heart.
“Regina,” David said. “Isn’t your resignation a way to prevent your mother from turning the town against you? If the town knows everything and they still want you as mayor...that’s a valid choice, isn’t it?”

“But…”

“Regina,” Archie said, a quiet, certain expression on his face. “We don’t know this ‘Ice Queen’ you told us about. It sounds like she was not a pleasant person, but that is not the woman who has been our mayor for the last eight years. You are our mayor.” He glanced around at the others to see if any of them would disagree. By their smiles, it didn’t seem like they did.

Belle interrupted before Regina could object again, her tone amused. “It’s been a process, Regina. When you first got here, you were inaccessible. Even as mayor, it was and is hard to get to know you. Even for me. But lately, it seems like you’ve been….more approachable. We accepted you before, but we’re happy you’re letting us get to know you now. You’ve done all these things to make this community a strong one. Didn’t it occur to you that in becoming that, we’d decide to protect our own?”

It hadn’t. Regina, skilled at predicting what people would do, hadn’t considered the possibility of this reaction.

After the meeting concluded, with plans for another one the next day, she went to her office and quietly closed the door. She rested her head in her hands and let herself cry.

Arms came around her not long after and she knew it was Emma. She pressed her face into Emma’s shoulder, teardrops dotting her shirt.

“Will you stay with me while I call my mother?,” Regina asked when she quieted.

Emma kissed her. “Anything. Whatever, whenever.”

Regina held her eyes a moment, drinking in the offering. “Everything,” she countered.

Emma smiled, the kind of smile that was an admission of love even if they hadn’t actually said it to one another yet. “That too.”
Regina’s heart beat so fast as she picked up her phone, that it seemed to leave her chest entirely. She tried to keep her breathing normal, but even over the phone, her mother could be an intimidating presence.

“Mother, I’ve been thinking more about the interview you suggested. I worry that — I am certain many questions about the charity will come up, and I know the slightest misstep could mean disaster.”

“What can I do to help?” Cora asked.

“Maybe we could meet beforehand and practice or...I don’t know.” Good, Regina coached herself as she injected frustration into her voice.

“I could do the interview with you. Would that help?”

Regina hadn’t been sure how this would play out. It was important for her mother to come to the interview. Her plan had been that, after the practice, Cora would stand on the sidelines to offer her support.

This, though, this was better. At least strategically.

She grabbed for Emma’s hand and tried to calm the rise of anxiety inside her. “Would that seem strange?”

“A mother supporting her daughter? I think it will create a strong perception about our dedication to one another. Regina? I’m so very glad you’re letting me help you with this.”

Regina wondered how, after all this time and all she had done, her mother could still make her feel deep pangs of guilt. She tried to ignore it. “Maybe afterwards we can discuss when Emma, Henry, you and I can get together?”

“That would be lovely, dear. Thank you, Regina.”
“You’re welcome, Mother.”
Happy Thursday everyone!

Today's flight has not quite arrived at Coraville (next chapter) but has Regina trying to fly the plane, be a stewardess, be the cockpit crew and load/unload your luggage. She also may try and write the story.

*eyes the character suspiciously*

Henry also does some stuff.

Last week I added that I was on Chapter 35 of 38 to the story's main page, instead of chapter 35 of ?. Made me just a touch sad. Still, for now, the flight continues.

This is your captain speaking.

The trouble started when she awoke far earlier than they’d planned.

She dressed more formally than she had in ages: a tailored suit with a silk red shirt. Armor. She chose earrings she hadn’t worn in years. They were expensive, a rose made of sapphires and diamonds with a pearl at the center. Her fingers were awkward and unsteady; she couldn’t get the back on. After the sixth try, she slammed the gold post onto the bathroom counter.

The sound jerked Emma awake. She squinted at Regina and sat up in bed.

“Sorry,” Regina said, voice flat as she began to fiddle with the earring again. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Emma checked the clock and groaned. It was five a.m., early even by Regina’s standards. “Wasn’t the plan to sleep in and give people in town a chance to read the article, gossip and whatever, before we went out there?”

Henry and Emma had insisted they would be at her side that morning, at least until Henry had to go to school. Their plan included going to Granny’s to show a united front.
“I need to find a private investigator to look into Henry’s family.”

Emma frowned. “You’re doing that today? The same day the article in the newsletter is coming out?”

She shrugged, the line of her shoulders rigid. “I see no point in waiting.”

“Right,” Emma said slowly.

Regina could hear the “but,” the disagreement, coming. She couldn’t stand hearing it right now. Not this morning. “We have to move quickly. We don’t know what my mother may or may not do. I also need to call later and schedule the interview I want my mother to attend.” Her pulse rate jumped the moment she said the words. She ignored it.

A voice that had been with her so long it had become instinct told her all weaknesses were weeds that should be pulled from her. When she didn’t know how, she simply had to dig in and work harder. The brave show only strength. The successful mold the world with their will, refusing to let anything stand in their way.

“Just, isn’t today already going to be a big deal without all that?”

She needed Emma to stop.

She spun towards her, fire in her eyes. “It’s all a big deal. The article in the newsletter this morning begins this game of wait and see with the town. Finding a private detective will be the same way. Waiting to see what he finds. Then, trying to find someone who can interview me fairly and also has a big enough television audience.”

Regina had a shortlist of possible shows she would appear on. Her first choice was a cable news show hosted by Rose Holyoke, a new up-and-comer Mal had spoken highly of.

Regina tried to fasten her earring again and fumbled. “There’s prepping for the interview with my mother and the interview itself. Waiting for public reaction. Talking to Gold to make sure he doesn’t come after you. Much less my meeting with P…” She stopped, the rising animosity in her words wasn’t fair. “There is no easy way to do any of it.”
Emma moved to her feet, padding towards her. She’d worn a Wonder Woman t-shirt and panties to sleep that night; she patted her thighs, like she desperately wished she had pockets she could hide her hands in. “You could let us help. We all want to. I want to.”

Regina sighed, her surge of anger disappearing. She should apologize. She didn’t have the energy. She stroked Emma’s cheek, sliding her hand down till it rested against the back of Emma’s neck. “You will. I just want to get things in motion.”

Emma didn’t entirely look pacified, but she kissed Regina’s cheek. “I’ll go get the kid up. We’ll all just go a little earlier than we planned. You still don’t want my parents to meet us for breakfast?”

“The whole plan is to act normal. David and Mary Margaret hovering protectively over us, glaring at everyone who looks at us twice, will give just the opposite message.”

Emma went to go rouse Henry. Regina studied her reflection in the mirror and told herself over and over again that she could do this.

At the diner, the clump of early risers had read the newsletter and leaned in to whisper to one another as she passed. Others drifted into Granny’s over the next hour, grabbed a paper from a newsrack near the front door, then gave her hard stares as they read. She withstood it as long as she could, before she strode to the register to pay the bill. Emma and Henry, surprised, took a moment to catch up to her.

At city hall, she sat down at her desk and tried to both organize her thoughts and push down the growing tangle of her emotions. No, not her desk — the mayor’s desk, she corrected herself — soon to not be hers anymore. Nevermind, she needed to finish the list of information Belle would need to fill in for her. No, not fill in. Take over — at least until the town decided on a more permanent choice.

Though, perhaps she should start with phone calls to television shows. She couldn’t decide.

She needed to focus. Surely, speaking with Belle had priority. She opened up the document she’d started. Her mind blanked. Fine, it didn’t have to be finished yet, it could be a starting point. Perhaps she should change gears to the detective. In any battle, commanders assessed their opponents’ weaknesses. Her mother would know she could use Henry against her. No, it lacked subtlety. The interview, then. Her mind thrashed, a beached fish fighting to swim again.
It was fine. She was fine.

Later, after Emma dropped off Henry at school, she knocked on her door, hovering uncertainly. “I was thinking I could get my laptop and work here. Or...I don’t know if that would help or not, or what you need, or what I can do, or if I’m just kind of in your way.”

Emma’s last sentence wedged itself inside Regina. “Of course I want you here, Emma.” She sounded tired, she wished she could keep it from her voice.

“Okay, so, is there anything I can do to help?”

“Not yet.”

I’m fine.

Emma decided to strangle Regina if she heard those two words again. She barely saw Regina the entire day. Regina made it a priority to train Belle to replace her, so they disappeared into the conference room for hours.

David and Mary Margaret showed up with a homemade lunch for everyone. Mary Margaret made meatloaf, potatoes au gratin and vegetables. The last dish, a mix of broccoli, onions, mushrooms and garlic, Mary Margaret served with some glee, telling Regina she’d inspired her. David and Emma picked at it, much less excited about it.

“We know you have a lot on your plate, can we do anything to help?” David asked Regina.

Regina glanced to Emma uncertainly, as if she feared commentary from her. “I’ll let you know in just a few days. Thank you for the offer.”
Which in Emma’s head meant: *I’m fine.*

The day went on. Archie stopped by to check on Regina and she thanked him, using those two little words with a tight smile.

After six o’clock Emma drove Regina home. Regina disappeared in her office to brainstorm both questions that come up during the televised interview and answers.

“Can I help,” Emma asked.

“No, I have it.” She brushed a distracted kiss to Emma’s mouth.

Again, Emma heard: *I’m fine.*

Emma knew very little about “adulting” or relationships, but she knew that families, and certainly girlfriends, were supposed to support one another. Regina refused to let her. Her parents gave her conflicting advice; David saying the equivalent of “don’t push her” and Mary Margaret saying, “you absolutely have to push her.”

When Regina snapped at Henry for not having his homework done yet, Emma decided to act.

While Regina was in the bathroom getting ready for bed, Emma positioned two paper signs she’d made: one leaning against the headboard and one resting near where she sat at the edge of the bed.

As the bathroom door opened, Emma held up the piece of Poster Board. She’d written one word on it, and for a reason even she couldn’t articulate, she had added purple glitter.

“Sweetheart,” she tapped the sign, “this is an intervention.”

Emma meant it to be kind of funny. Kind of. She figured she would try and make Regina laugh so she could gently segue into a much more honest conversation.

“Intervention?” Regina blinked at her, no sign of a laugh at all, only confusion.
Emma put the sign down and rubbed her hands on her pants. So much for the comedic approach. “I don’t know if you realize that you’ve gone into full on ‘I will do everything by myself,’ Terminator mode. I’m worried that if you keep going on this way, you’re going to make yourself — and possibly everyone who loves you — miserable.”

Regina’s jaw flexed and she took in a deep breath. “We discussed this this morning. In a few days, perhaps.”

“Okay, but why? As a start, I am pretty sure one of us could somehow find the brain cells to find and call P.I.’s. One of us, or at least maybe a couple of us together, could probably handle Gold.” Emma didn’t know until the edge of pain touched her voice, that Regina shutting her out had stung a little. She made no effort to hide it now that she’d discovered it.

Regina heard it, her expression pained as she sank next to Emma. “I— I was just trying to be expedient.”

“By locking everyone out? Have you thought that maybe if you let other people in, they’d have ideas you haven’t thought of that might help? I mean, when it’s just you working a problem, it’s just whatever comes into your mind, right? Instead of a whole bunch of minds.” Emma didn’t know how hard to press her. Regina, who could probably outthink her strategically, with half her brain tied behind her back. “I know you’re good at about a million things. I just also know you tend to retreat and go ‘Iron Woman’ when you feel out of control. I hate to bring up what happened in Portland, but isn’t that what happened then, too?”

Regina lowered her eyes, thinking. “Have you ever felt like nothing good would happen in your life unless you forced it to happen? That, naturally, if left alone, the world and the people around you would never let you have what makes you happy?”

Emma gathered Regina’s hands in hers. “Look who you’re talking to, Miss ‘leave ‘em before they can leave me’, right?” That teased a reluctant raising on Regina’s lips. Emma brought Regina’s knuckles to her lips. “It’s not just that you’re trying to do things on your own. It’s that you’re trying to do a bunch of really hard things on your own, all at once. Like, instead of battling one super villain, you picked a fight with several at the same time.”

Regina’s eyes jumped to Emma’s, conflicted, brow creased. “I just, for once, want to beat her. I have to this time. I have so, so much to lose.” She bent forward and her mouth pressed to Emma’s longingly, drawing strength and sharing a worry that lived deep in her heart.
After the kiss ended, Emma nodded and stayed close. “I know. She gestured to herself. “Just — why can’t you let me, let anyone, help you?”

“Because….”

“Because why?”

“I have to be strong. Smart. I have to figure it out. It has to be me. What does it mean if it’s not me, Emma? What does that make me?”

Emma’s fingers smoothed a lock of Regina’s hair away from her face. “We discussed you telling all those voices in your head that I’m going to kick their ass.” There. Regina gave a real smile. Emma couldn’t resist trying for a laugh again. “I should do the sound effects to give you a more realistic picture. You have to picture me doing kung fu and going ‘hiyah’.” This time, Emma earned the response she’d wanted.

“My inner demons are shaking in fear.”

“Good.” Emma grew serious again and lay her temple against Regina’s. “It makes me crazy not to help you, okay?”

“Okay.” Regina stretched back, taking hold of the lapels of Emma’s vest and pulling her down to settle atop her. “I’ll work harder on letting you in. And others, too.”

“Is it cool that I brought this up? I don’t want to make you feel… I don’t know. You’re one of the most capable people I have ever met.”

Regina pulled Emma in for a quiet kiss. “My learning to rely on others is a work in progress. I have a lot of walls, but I never want you to be outside of them. I never want you to hold back what you feel.” Regina circled the tip of her nose against Emma’s. “Emma?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you … we haven’t said the words yet, but…” Regina turned her head away, assembling
something in her mind. Emma’s body stiffened, her spirit suddenly feeling empty and starving for what Regina might say. She moistened her lips, waiting. “...you must know I’m in love with you?” Regina shook her head at herself. “I’m sorry, that was possibly the worst confession of love in the history of time.”

Emma could barely register, much less rate, the words. “Would you mind saying that one more time, please?”

This time Regina smiled, a little braver. “I’m in love with you, Emma Swan.” It made Emma shudder, how much it filled her, how big it was. More than she’d ever been given or held before. Everything she wanted in one moment.

“I love you, Regina Mills,” she whispered. It surprised her how it easily she could say it, how unafraid she was in this moment. They fell against one another, holding on as tightly as they could.

No part of her wanted to run.

No part of her wanted it to end.

The ripple of that thought inside her changed things. Soft touches and words began to shower her in sparks. Emma’s nerve endings jolted to life, at capacity and overcharging. It almost hurt, almost too much. Regina panted, her legs parting, mouth nipping at Emma’s. Emma rocked her thigh up and down, a firm pressure Regina’s hips rose to meet. Regina grabbed at the back of her shirt, then fist her hands in Emma’s hair.

“Emma, I don’t want this to just be a trial period,” Regina said, burning her neck with open-mouthed kisses and the scraping of her teeth.

Emma nodded, frantic. “I don’t want to go anywhere.” They tumbled over one another, not able to get close enough. She groaned as Regina all but tore off her shirt, disposing of her own quickly after.

“Stay,” Regina whispered and guided Emma atop her again.

Emma’s head swam, she fought to clear it and find words. Her teeth gritted together. “I don’t think I can be slow.”
Regina’s nails grazed down her spine, the heat of her breath teased the shell of Emma’s ear and there, she gave an urgent command. “Show me I’m yours.”

“You are. You belong to me and not those fucking demons in your head.”

“Show me,” Regina said once more.

Their kisses were bruising and hungry, but in the depths of it, they whispered each other’s names and those three little words. They didn’t stop. “I love you,” a hoarse confession as Emma brought Regina to the brink with her mouth. Later, Emma moaned “I love you” as Regina traced the lines of her body until she squirmed and bucked. And again, “I love you,” a cry between them as they ground against one another, undulating wildly.

They said it over and over.

And over.

The next morning, Regina asked all the most important people in her life to meet her at the house. She included Belle in this select group because Belle had been her right hand at city hall for years.

After laying out what she saw as weak spots her mother could potentially target, she did her best to open the floor for ideas. It surprised her how many she hadn’t considered.

Belle suggested a retrospective in the newsletter of Regina’s time as mayor, just to remind anyone who might have forgotten what she had accomplished during her time in office. Mary Margaret offered to write an algorithm that would scour the net to find news of her mother’s activities over the last two years, including any information available in public records. David knew police officers who later became private detectives, so he’d make some calls. He also thought that he and Emma would be a formidable team to talk to Gold.

“If the interviewer will hit you,” Belle said, “is what happened before, and why you should be trusted again. That will be the question you’ll need to answer.”

“You know what this is like?” Henry said toward the end. “We’re like the Mills Avengers.”
David high-fived him, and Emma insisted on a “hands in” moment, all of them shouting, “Mills Avengers, Assemble!”

After everyone left, Emma hugged her. “You okay?”

“I’m not,” Regina said, “but I think I will be.”

The next evening, Henry rapped at her office door right before his bedtime. “Hey Mom, can I talk to you?” he asked. He treaded carefully into the office, his laptop under his arm, as if there could be mines the deeper he went inside.

He seemed so young sometimes, like now, with his hair ruffled and in his well-worn plaid button down that had a tear in the sleeve he refused to let her either throw out or fix.

He barely waited to sit before he went on. “I know that getting help from other people is really hard for you. I wanted to tell you that I’m proud of you.”

She couldn’t remember the last time she had heard those words. Perhaps from her father. She swallowed, trying to loosen the knot in her throat. “Thank you, Henry.” She never expected him to say that to her. She didn’t think she deserved it. Over the last days, the endless thinking and planning had pummelled her till she felt bruised and sore. His simple words were cool and soothing. They revived her.

“There’s something else. I made this thing. It’s for us. But, I thought maybe it could help people, too. Can I show you?”

“Of course.” She couldn’t help but feel worried at his seriousness. No hint of a smile, just a blank expression, a mirror of her frequent attempts to control her feelings. He brought the laptop around to her and pressed the play icon on the media player.

Henry appeared on the screen, sitting at his desk. He had always made his videos in that spot. Often he used a background of some kind, but this time he didn’t.
“Is this new?”

He didn’t answer, keeping his eyes on the video.

“Hi, I’m Henry,” it began. “I guess you probably know that since this is on my channel.” On-screen Henry dropped his eyes, then gathered a breath.

At her desk, Regina sat forward. Henry’s videos were usually full of unrestrained exuberance. He didn’t hold back in the videos. This boy on the screen hesitated, struggling with words. “I know I haven’t posted anything in a long time. There’re some things that happened to me. Things I’ve been embarrassed about. But, I think maybe I should talk about it, even though it’s hard and some of the kids at school might pick on me, or this channel might get mean comments.”

On the screen, he glanced down at a sheet of paper. Regina, shook her head, not understanding. Henry never scripted his videos. They were always spontaneous. “My friend Emma says it’s okay to be afraid. As long as you stop every once in a while and figure out what’s worth being brave for. If I can help someone with this video, I think that’s worth it. If it makes people understand what my family has been through, I think that’s worth it. too. So, hi, I’m Henry Mills, and I’d like to tell you a story about me and a hacker named Peter Pan.”

“Henry,” Regina said, a breath of air. He stopped the video, eyes soft, worried about her reaction. Her fear for him made her want to hug him hard, destroy the video, and hide him away. She didn’t know how to react or what to say. She had no internal compass telling her the right way to address this. “We don’t know if people will appreciate your story, if they will treat it with respect.”

“It’s the internet, Mom. I’ll probably get a mix of stuff. Anything from, ’you’re brave,’ but spelled ‘ur,’ to ‘you’re stupid and I hope you die’.”

“People say that?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged then gave her a searching look. “Are you going to tell me I can’t post it?”

She ran her fingers through her hair, stalling for time. “This video is very brave, but...have you shown it to Emma?”
“Yeah. Yesterday. I still wasn’t sure about it then. I’m still kinda not, but I feel better about it today. Yesterday, during the meeting, I didn’t think there was much I could do to help you. But then I thought maybe there is something. Because you weren’t sure if your mother might use this against us.”

She cupped his face. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“But I want to,” he said, pulling back, not rejecting her as much as asserting his need for her to understand and take him seriously. “You and Emma are afraid of all this stuff, and you’ve been trying to be brave. I want to try, too.” His brows squeezed together, frustration and helplessness gathered over months finally coming to a head inside him. “I’m tired of being scared, Mom.”

She reached for him again, and this time he allowed it. “Henry, you’ve always been brave. You’ve always followed your heart. It took me my whole life to try to do that.” She smoothed his hair back from his face. Tears touched his eyes and she brushed away one that was about to fall. “You are honorable and thoughtful and kind. All of that takes courage. I am so proud that you are my son.” Her own eyes blurred and a drop cascaded down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly.

“I need to help, Mom.”

“All right,” she said with a watery smile. “We should watch this with our family and if they don’t see any red flags, then...I think we should leave it up to you.” She motioned to a chair. “For now, why don’t we watch the rest of it together?”

Later, she went to bed, burying her head into Emma’s shoulder. She spilled tears on her shirt as Emma tried to sort out what might be wrong. “I’m grateful,” Regina said when she could. “I’m just really grateful.”
Happy Thursday everyone,
This, as always, was a struggle with my nerves and the desire to give you a chapter
worthy of you, me and these characters.

This chapter has bumps but no sudden drops. It concludes Regina’s arc and I hope does
it in a way that satisfies.

The plane is beginning procedures to hit the tarmac and I hope I finish strong and give
you a smooth landing.

This is your captain speaking.

“Walter wants you to take one more look, since you requested several changes,” Cora said over the
phone, as she and Regina reviewed the battle plan: a list of do’s and don’ts for the television
interview. Walter Chum was the image consultant Cora had hired; he had drafted the bulleted list.

“I’m still not sure about trying to keep my relationship with Emma a secret.”

Regina had raised the point before. Cora sighed. “Surely, if she loves you, she wants what is best for
you.”

The words slithered inside Regina’s stomach, snake-like, making her feel revulsion. She needed to
appear pliable, yet not arouse suspicion. Her mother had to believe they were completely on the same
page until the interview. Every time she and Cora spoke, conflicted feelings filled her: worry that her
act of submission would become all too real, fear she wouldn’t be able to do what she needed to, or
that somehow her mother would accomplish her real goals despite her.

Two weeks had passed since the Storybrooke Newsletter featured the “tell all” article about Regina.
She and her mother had spoken every other day, Cora weaving her will about the interview, with
Walter occasionally sitting in to help her. In two days, the news anchor and her television crew, as
well as Cora, would arrive in Storybrooke. When her mother suggested they do the interview in New
York at the family home, Regina put her foot down. By design, one of the few points she’d been
insistent about.
Nearby, Emma held a nerf basketball and took aim at the hoop suction-cupped to the back of Regina’s office door. During these calls with her mother, Emma had tried to keep Regina’s spirits up by doing anything from making shadow puppets on the wall to playing Jenga with her. Today, it was basketball.

Regina took her shot, missing wildly. Emma stole a kiss, fetched the ball, and — well, did considerably better. The ball bounced on the backboard and sunk in for a point.

Cora finally finished with her, and they agreed to chat more tomorrow. She sank down heavily on her office’s couch. Her mother, even now, made her feel as if she was shrinking, becoming younger and smaller moment by moment. She leaned into Emma as Emma joined her.

“I hope we’ve done enough,” Regina said. “I guess we’ll know in two days.”

“Hey,” Emma said. “You know your shit.”

After the first planning session with Cora, she had met with the others. “Mother sees this as an opportunity to pull me back into the fold,” she told them. “I need to show her that’s not going to happen. I need to pick my moment, and once I do, that’s when the test really begins. If I show weakness, if I’m not fast enough or strong enough, she might never stop.”

“So, like, if you get in a fight with a bully and get enough hits in, hopefully he backs down?” Emma asked.

Regina nodded, somber. “Something like that.”

Regina wasn’t sure any of them, even Emma, fully understood. Cora’s true intention was to recapture Regina tentacle by tentacle, allowing her a little room to swim but careful to not let her get too far away. Cora would try to isolate her, so Regina had only her to turn to. Regina had gotten free after years of being trapped in her mother’s lair. Now, she was going to swim at the edges of it, hoping to use the interview to show the monster that she could hurt it, that blood would be in the water from both of them, should it come for her.

Regina nuzzled Emma’s neck. “Can we go somewhere tomorrow night? Just Henry and us.”

“Yeah, but Mom and Dad will get pouty unless we have dinner with them tonight.”
Regina laughed quietly, fondly. “We can do that.”

They went for pizza the next night, a few towns over. They lingered over their meal and talked about taking a family vacation somewhere.

“Three words,” said Emma. “Star Trek exhibit.”

Afterwards, they went home and watched movies for hours. They all fell asleep on the couch, Henry at one end, and she and Emma curled together on the other. Regina awoke in the middle of the night to the flickering light of the television.

She wanted to believe she had done all she could to prepare.

Hours of role-playing the interview with Belle and Snow while the others watched and gave feedback. David and Emma making a decent deal with Gold. Belle publishing a special edition of the Newsletter to thank Regina for her many contributions to the town. Many people treated her no differently than before, and a few made their support clear by bringing baked goods to Regina’s house. The ones who had become distant started to thaw after Belle’s piece. Hiring a private investigator, a friend of David’s.

She shifted to watch her son’s sleeping face, half-illuminated. He’d grown so much in the last year. Emma stirred under her. She cupped her face and dropped kisses against her warm cheek. Emma, still asleep, gave a small smile.

“He makes me think the future could be good,” Regina whispered to her. “So do you.” Emma didn’t entirely wake, squeezing her closer. “We start at 100, right? With believing we can do this.”

Regina stroked Emma’s face and said the words that gave her the most hope. “I love you.”

People referred to Rose Holyoke as “everyone’s best friend.” She wasn’t the svelte blonde many news anchors were. Her dark hair rose into a large halo of endless curls that framed her face. She had a few extra pounds on her, her hips roomy and her upper body rounded. It didn’t matter. Her self-deprecating humor and humility charmed her audience. She came across as sincere instead of ambitious. It was that quality that made Regina choose her.
Rose explained they would weave footage from the town and old news footage into the final cut of the interview. She made it clear that, per their contract with Regina and Cora, none of the audio from the interview would be edited. Regina’s idea.

The crew marked off the interview area with tape, the entire space only about five feet. She was surprised by how close she and her mother would be, probably to get both of them in frame when needed. Their seats were surrounded by three lights and three cameras, and cables from the equipment encircled them.

“Are you ready, dear?” her mother asked, as they waited for last-minute checks on the set.

A weak smile that wasn’t a lie. “I hope so.”

“Just keep to what we talked about,” Cora said, offering a light, supportive touch to Regina’s back. “What’s the expression? This isn’t our first rodeo. Not for either of us.”

“Hey Regina, can we borrow you a second?” David interrupted, pulling her away from Cora and into a family huddle. He laid both his hands on her shoulders, bending to catch her eyes. “Don’t let her make you doubt yourself.”

“Don’t let her bring up your marriage,” Belle said.

Mary Margaret nodded feverently. “And remember, if she brings up the Ice Queen thing, put a stop to it as soon as possible.”

She didn’t know if it was good or bad that both her mother’s plan and her own involved dodging mentions of the Ice Queen moniker. It would be too easy for that phrase to stick in people’s minds. For “the Ice Queen is back” to be the main takeaway. Labels had power; reductive or empowering. Very soon, she’d be fighting her mother, she didn’t know if she could overcome Her too.

Emma and Henry pulled her into a hug. They didn’t speak. They just gathered strength from one another.

A set supervisor led Cora and Regina through the ropes of cords to their chairs. The lights were
turned on, glaring and intrusive. One of the crew held up a digital sign with a countdown. She tried to stop the endless rumbling feeling in her stomach, as if small rocks were raining there incessantly. Her mouth went dry. The counter hit 2, then 1, then 0.

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Rose began with an introduction of her guests and explained why they weren’t in the studio. She extended Cora and Regina a warm welcome.

“We have the unique opportunity to explore both a mother’s and daughter’s perspectives today, to ask about a scandal that tarnished their family name, to see how they survived, and what their hopes are for the future,” Rose said.

The brightness of the lights prevented Regina from seeing very much beyond the interview area. She saw forms more than faces. She picked out her family, needing to know they were there.

Rose sat with one leg crossed over the other, relaxed, but engaged. “I know my audience would accuse me of throwing you softballs if we didn’t start with the charity.” Regina heard a whir of movement from one of the cameras. A close-up on Rose, she guessed. “Now, I want to make sure I say that you, Regina, were investigated, but never charged. The police said they could find no evidence of wrongdoing. But we all know that sometimes people make up their own minds. In this case, a lot of people decided you’d gotten away with a crime. They judged you guilty, trial or no trial. What do you want to say to those people?”

Regina had anticipated this would be the first question and practiced her reply. Somehow, under the heat of bright lights, shame flooded her and made her tongue heavy. They’d be watching, all of those people, when this aired. Her muscles seized, jaw flexing involuntarily.

Too long, she was taking too long to answer.

“Would you mind if I started?” Cora asked, a gentle smile raising her lips. She sat straight-backed and composed. The dress she wore, a cinnamon red. Her suit jacket buttoned and her straightened hair softly framing her face. “This isn’t easy for Regina and me to talk about, but we feel that transparency is best.” Cora mixed pain and dignity into her voice. “It was Regina’s first time running a company. The people who worked for her, let’s just say that they were not as organized as we would have liked. Regina trusted them a little too much. When you combine that with a bitter former employee who was going through a divorce and had been fired, it became something none of us anticipated. Regina’s sole desire, our soul desire with the charity was to give back.”
Regina curled her toes into the tips of her shoes, trying to kickstart herself. She took a deep breath. “I simply want to say that it was and is my fault. I was the CEO. There were 150 families we were supporting, who depended on us.” You’re speaking too fast, she cautioned herself. Slow down. “I let them down. My carelessness meant they had one less resource. I will always regret that.”

Cora’s expression reflected support and empathy, the guise of a devoted mother.

Rose’s expression gentled. “Did the public rage and outcry shock both of you?”

Regina felt a pressure between her eyes, above the bridge of her nose. She remembered, a few days after the accusations became known, the protesters with signs outside her apartment. The hatred as they yelled at her. “I was humiliated, at first. And then I understood it. I withdrew from the public eye for a long time afterwards. It allowed me to reflect. Looking back, I suppose I didn’t give the press or the public much of a reason to believe I was innocent.”

Cora’s lips pressed into a thin line as Regina spoke, a sign of displeasure. After, Cora gave the barest hint of a laugh, purposefully lightening her daughter’s words. “I personally think my daughter takes too much on herself. The public loves a good villain and certainly likes to see successful people fall from grace. As I said, Regina trusted some people she shouldn’t have.” Cora reached across for Regina’s hand. “Regina helped many people. She raised millions. She deserves much more credit than she does condemnation.”

Regina purposefully kept holding her mother’s hand. The pain near her eyes spread to the back of her head. So far in this interview, Cora had been building momentum. She needed to stop it. “In the next few weeks,” Regina said. “We will be reaching out to each and every family we served. We are setting up a trust fund, and where help is needed, it will be given.”

Cora eyes widened, then dropped as she recovered. She let go of Regina. After a moment, she nodded, as if judging what Regina said was still acceptable and on-message.

Regina made herself say more. She needed to carefully start going on the offensive. “I know this offer comes very late. There are many things I should have done differently. I think I lost who I was, and it’s been grueling work to find that again. It took a lot of support…” She paused, smoothed out her skirt, and pinched her side, letting the pain center her. By the doorway stood her family, she knew that. “…from my son, my friends and my…special someone, Emma. I don’t know if I can truly right my mistakes, but I want to try.”

Cora shifted in her seat, uncrossing then re-crossing her legs. “I’m glad Regina mentioned Emma. Emma is a wonderful source of support in more ways than one. However, when she first told me about her, I had my doubts. Not the least of which because Regina was married for several years, so,” she gave a helpless gesture with her hands, inviting Rose to laugh with her at her surprise. Rose did.
“And then when I found out she is an ex-felon — well, my daughter has always been headstrong, and she’s had a lot on her shoulders growing up in the spotlight, a lot of expectations.” Out of the corner of her eye, Regina saw David take a few steps forward. She doubted anyone in Storybrooke knew about Emma’s past, which was the point. Cora wanted them to know. She wanted to lay down the foundation of division. She didn’t know Regina saw it for what it was. “In her shoes, I would have probably sought solace in the unexpected from time to time.” Cora met Regina’s eyes and one brow lifted just a little. A warning.

Reflexively, Regina swallowed. Please, Mother, I’ll be good, she remembered crying out on one of the many occasions her mother threatened to take things away: birthday parties, Christmas presents, clubs she belonged to, the private school Regina loved. Cora reminded her over and over how little Regina had that was truly hers. How easily it could be taken away.

“You belong to me and not those fucking demons in your head.” Emma’s voice whispering to her in the dark as they held one another close.

Fire sprang to life inside Regina, crackling and popping with fury. She struggled to keep it from her face.

“Emma’s time in federal prison was for hacking, not a violent crime,” Cora was saying pleasantly. “She’s trying to turn her life around. In fact, Regina and Emma met because of a program Rupert Gold, the police commissioner of Portland, has been encouraging. Those who have made the wrong choices in life can use their skills to assist the community.

She needed to counter the power of her mother’s words — felon, prison, hacker — with something just as strong. “Emma reminds me that it’s okay to be plain Regina. Not Regina Mills of Mills Luxury Hotels, or Regina Mills who was involved in a scandal eight years ago. I have never felt more safe, more respected, more….more loved than when I’m with her. Neither of us was expecting one another. Emma has made everything in my world better. Every single thing.”

Rose leaned back, eyes warm, charmed by the words. “I think we all want someone who will make us feel exactly that way.”

Regina braced herself and turned to face Rose fully. “It was Emma who reminded me that I shouldn’t assume it’s too late to make amends. Which is why I am stepping down as mayor of Storybrooke as of tomorrow. I want to focus my efforts on distribution of the trust fund and on other volunteer work. My father left me an inheritance; I still have about ten million left. After a lot of discussion with my mother, we have agreed that part of the money will go to the fund I mentioned, part will be put in a trust for my son. Approximately $500,000 will be allotted for me, as a cushion, until I figure out what I am going to do next.”
Cora sat up so straight, it seemed she could snap in half. The cords in her neck bulged, the corners of her mouth twitched. Small signs, all of them, cracks in the mask of a confident chameleon.

Rose didn’t notice, focusing on Regina’s last point. “So you’re giving away nine and a half million dollars? And this is part of the effort to try to make amends? What if you can’t? What if people continue to believe that even this is self-serving? For publicity or an act.”

Regina nodded in acknowledgement. “I am taking these actions because I think they are the right things to do. It’s not meant to garner a specific reaction.”

“I would hope people would look at Regina and ask themselves if they have made mistakes, and then judge her for her actions now.” Cora pressed a hand to her throat. She cleared it several times and a racking cough overtook her once, then again. “I...Excuse me,” she said, before being overcome by another fit.

Regina’s eyes narrowed, watching closely.

“Are you okay, Cora?” Rose held up her hand to the camera man. “We can certainly take a break for a few minutes if you need water or anything.”

“Regina, do you mind?” Cora asked, and cleared her throat again.

“Of course not, Mother.”

“Okay, everyone back in ten,” Rose said, and the atmosphere immediately became much more informal.

As Cora and Regina walked away from the interview area, Cora hissed at her. “Well, it seems like you’ve been making some rather ill-advised and rash decisions.” She smiled then, as if all would be back under her control soon. “Excuse me dear, I’d like a moment to talk to Walter alone. I saw a conference room, can we use it?” Cora didn’t wait for an answer, but moved to Walter’s side and spoke to him, low and insistent. They left the room together.

The Nolans, Henry, and Emma swarmed her.
“Holy shit, Regina,” Mary Margaret said, and embraced her.

“Good job, Mom.” Henry hugged her middle.

“Do you want water?” David asked, holding up a thermos. She took it, mostly to humor him, but also because it was ridiculously sweet.

When Cora and Walter came back, he stayed by the door and she walked past Regina without a glance, then stopped to speak to Rose.

Emma’s eyes followed her. “Hey Regina?”

“Yes?”

“Go kick her ass.”

A smile moved over Regina’s mouth.

“Regina,” Rose said, as the cameras moved in. “It says on my sheet that you’re involved in a new business called Cybersheriff, in addition to the other items you mentioned. Was that Emma’s influence?”

Cora folded her hands in her lap, oh-so-serene, waiting.

“It was the influence of a lot of things,” Regina said.

“And you’re going to be the CEO of Cybersheriff? How will you keep it all balanced, and how will you reassure anyone who might want to donate that you won’t repeat the mistakes of the past?”
“Well, I’m running the marketing department as a volunteer.”

Cora’s eyes narrowed; she almost shook her head but stopped mid-way.

“Cybersheriff is the non-profit arm of Nolan Securities. David and Mary Margaret Nolan are the CEOs. I simply volunteer my time and skills; I don’t have a management role. Emma’s official title is Technician Captain.” She held back the fondness threatening to rise in her eyes. Emma had made up that title; she liked the idea of being called Captain. “She speaks about her past and explains the importance of helping those impacted by online harassment and bullying. We were inspired by Rupert Gold. We believe we can recruit others with a troubled background and help them use their skills for the greater good.”

“One thing we should touch on is that we are holding a fundraiser in a few months for Cybersheriff,” Cora’s expression was carefully blank. “My daughter has always been exceptional at organizing such events. It will be good to see her in that element again.”

“I am happy to help however I can,” Regina said quickly. “Whatever the Nolans think is appropriate. I’m sure David, Mary Margaret, and Emma will want to prepare a special presentation. Also, she’s too humble to say it, but my mother has generously agreed to match all the monies raised.”

Cora paused and arched an eyebrow. “I’m just glad you are letting me,” she said smoothly. “I am very proud of Regina. When the press get hold of someone, they can be relentless. After the scandal broke, they hid in trees outside our home. They rented motorcycles and helicopters to follow Regina through traffic. They disrupted her life entirely. That she is willing to put herself out there again, especially given that history — I hope people can see her sincerity.”

A threat, Regina thought. When this interview aired, it would let the cat out of the bag and the press might invade Storybrooke. However, Cora could make calls, stir the pot. Make both happen more quickly and in larger numbers.

Regina had prepared for this. “Regarding the press. My email address can be found on the Cybersheriff website. I am happy to talk to any member of the press who wishes to speak with me. However, if any reporter or photographer shows up unexpectedly, I will stop granting interviews. Please respect the peace and quiet of our town.”

Cora nodded, but Regina could see thoughts brewing in her eyes. When she spoke, her words were much more controlled than usual. “I am glad my daughter is taking that stance. What happened
impacted our family in many ways. Regina and I grew apart. We lost a lot of time. It was only just recently that I truly spent time with my grandson. He’s quite talented.”

Regina didn’t expect this kind of attack and didn’t know where it was going.

“Regina insisted on giving Henry a normal life, not letting him become entitled or materialistic.” Cora said. “Now that he’s a little older, she’s finally letting me spoil him a little. Given his passion for creating content, she’s letting me take him to a film premiere in a few weeks.”

She could imagine her son’s eyes growing wide with surprise and pleasure. There was, no doubt, a premiere Cora could take him to. Would he hate Regina when she insisted he couldn’t go? She didn’t let herself look at him, afraid of what she would find.

“Regina, turning to the future,” Rose said. ”After you have worked to make reparations to people who may still feel betrayed by you, what’s next? Are there aspirations you still have in the business world, maybe even politics, given your eight years as mayor here”.

“We’ve been discussing that.” Cora gave a charming, broad smile. “I have been counselling her to keep her options open. When she was young, I imagined her serving in government. She has always had so many ideas, such a desire to build things and help people. I think she needs to find the place where she can do the most good.”

Rose chuckled. “So, you see Governor or Senator, maybe even President Mills in your daughter’s future?”

“I think she can accomplish anything,” Cora said, each word reminding her daughter of what she could offer.

Regina knew she’d changed, that her old insatiable hungers had transformed into goals that came from her, but did not define her. Right now that realization didn’t make her feel stronger. “I think I have enough on my plate to keep me busy for the next few years. I owe the families I mentioned. I want to give them the focus they deserve. I want to help build Cybersheriff. I’d like to keep my son on the road to college.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cora start to speak, and she rushed on, “And to convince Emma that she should stick around, despite my militant desire to organize and structure everything.”

Her mother dropped her eyes a moment and when she lifted them, the perfect construction of a
worried expression made her brow crinkle. “The public used to call Regina the ‘Ice Queen’,” Cora said. “There are many stories, rumours really, that led to that name. I think I heard once that Regina made it a habit to fire someone at the start of the new year, just to keep her employees nervous about their jobs. There were even grumbles about Ebenezer Scrooge when Regina reportedly refused to allow time off for the holidays.”

It struck Regina as a slap might, hard and brutal. Of course, Regina hadn’t prepared a defense against “Ice Queen.” Everyone had agreed she was off-limits. What her mother talked about had actually happened, based on Cora’s suggestions, and done back in the days when Regina desperately wanted to make her proud.

_I promise I’ll be a good girl._ Part of her believing her mother would love her if only she obeyed well enough and rose to the right level of success.

“It was ridiculous,” Cora said. “And hurtful. Regina believed she had let the family down. Let me down.”

Another light touch of her mother’s hand on hers, opening old wounds. It ached. All those things she’d wanted, all of her failures bound in two words: Ice Queen. Her mother’s eyes began to take on a triumphant shine.

_Start at 100._ Emma’s voice cut through the fray of demons circling in her mind.

She knew Emma stood beside David. She imagined her smile, the one where faith in Regina lit up her whole face.

_Kick her ass._

The lights bore down on her, hot. There were pricks of perspiration on her face, but the makeup kept it at bay. “Some of the stories weren’t true,” Regina said. “But some were. I pitted my leadership team against one another because I thought it would push them. I mocked employees who took time off to care for sick children because I didn’t want to appear soft. I didn’t think I could inspire them other than through fear and manipulation, and I thought asking for help was weakness.”

The admissions made Cora blink rapidly. She laced her fingers together tightly, watching for an opening.
“I have to say that I’m surprised at your honesty,” Rose said.

Regina chuckled. “You know what they say about the truth setting you free.”

Her mother no longer understood her. She’d become someone Cora couldn’t predict, because she had let people love her and she loved them in return. And in that, Regina finally believed she could win.

“I’ve asked my mother to review the benefits available to all Mills Luxury Hotel employees, and she has asked me to put together a proposal. If you don’t mind, Rose, when the new policies become official, we’d like to share them with you. We hope that, by doing this, we can help other leaders avoid the mistakes I made.” She tilted up her chin, her confidence rising. “There is nothing weak about letting others help you, or extending compassion. To lift others up, to make them feel they are part of something, to help them understand that they are special and worthwhile; to believe you have that capacity and not trade it for something easier and more self-serving — that takes strength.”

Rose leaned forward, as if she might offer Regina a light touch of support. She didn’t, though her next words were gentle. “And that, Regina, is a pretty good place to end.”

She and Cora each shook Rose’s hand. “I think you showed a lot of candor, Regina,” Rose said. “I’m not sure it will fix everything, but I think if you stick to what you said, people might come around.”

It was nice of her to say, and Regina thanked her, honestly and warmly.

“A word, dear?” Cora asked, her face serene.

“Of course,” Regina said, and led Cora to the conference room. Emma squeezed her hand as she went by.

“Do you want to tell me,” Cora said once they were inside with the door closed. “What you are trying to accomplish?” Cora remained calm, always that. Yet her eye were hard, her cheeks pulled in tightly. “I would have thought you had learned your lesson about being stubborn and prideful. This interview was an opportunity to start again. Instead you have bound yourself to a criminal, basically admitted your guilt, and reduced yourself to a supporting character. It’s pathe —”
Regina held up a hand and spoke without waiting, her voice just as quiet. “For so long I was afraid of what you would do if you found me. It terrified me.” Cora retreated a step, wounded. “During the interview, I cost you millions. Matching donations to Cybersheriff, updating employee benefits. Everything said publicly and therefore binding.” She took another step forward. “This is my town. That’s my family waiting outside for me. And I’m not the little girl who desperately needs your approval anymore.”

“You act as if I’m your enemy. I just want what’s best for you.” Her mother’s voice held a note of pleading. “I love you, Regina.”

It called to a part of her. She closed her eyes and soothed that wound inside. “I don’t think you know how to love anyone. Maybe you can learn; I don’t know. I did.” She gathered herself, her heart was pounding, adrenaline and instinctive fear. Maybe it would always be there when she was around her mother. It just wouldn’t control her.

“I am going to do what I said I would,” Regina said. “Dinners with me, and if they go well, then I will let you — slowly — get to know your grandson. Whatever happens, it will be on my terms. And if I ever think you are trying to manipulate us, we’ll be done. Please don’t push me. I know how you think, I know your secrets, and I promise you I will do anything to protect my family.”

She leaned in and kissed her mother’s cheek. “I love you, Mother. I just can’t trust you.” She put her hand on the door handle and turned it, opening the door, signalling their discussion was over.

Cora regarded her, then a slow admiration touched her eyes. “I see,” she said quietly, more reflective than Regina had ever seen her. “For what it’s worth, you did surprise me today. I’ll look forward to your call.”

Mary Margaret approached them in quick strides, David and the others on her heels. “Computer glitches happen all the time. They cost companies a lot of money. Just saying.” She was shorter than Cora but drew up as much as she could. “Don’t you fuck with my kids.”

Cora started, the woman who always knew what to say, speechless. She sniffed and called for Walter, turning to leave when he moved toward her.

Mary Margaret pulled Regina into a fierce hug. “We’re so proud of you.” It bemused Regina at first, but then tears gathered in her eyes and she held on weakly. Emma wrapped her arms around both of them.
The one where they live happily ever after

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N At the end, please have a read.

Special Thanks: Beloved wife, you have elevated this story in more ways than I can list and you are the best "inhouse" editor I could have ever hoped for.

Five months later

“So Emma,” Regina’s low voice tingled against the shell of Emma’s ear. “How did you sleep?”

Emma huffed, arm curling around Regina. “That’s smug. You are being smug. Again.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I am merely expressing concern for your well-being.”

Emma attacked, capturing her then tickling her sides while she squirmed. Regina tried to fend her off, but she also giggled. She almost never did that. It was the best sound in the world.

Emma’s insomnia occasionally still intruded, but like everything in her life, it was better. At night with Regina snuggled up behind her, or if Regina read to her, some of the anxiety would melt away. Most of all, when they traded light kisses, or burning ones, she almost forgot it was there at all.

The brief tickle-fight became an excuse for an embrace.

Regina gave a hum of contentment, then sighed. “I have to go to work.”

Emma didn’t move, as if Regina’s words weren’t a convincing reason to get out of bed.

A month ago, just before Thanksgiving, eighty percent of the town wrote in Regina’s name in the election for mayor. The candidates, Belle and Archie, had actively encouraged it. It was the weirdest
election Emma had ever seen. Regina hadn’t been focused on the race, instead diving into contacting and working with families her charity had once supported. Many were bitter, some refused her help at all. The results of the mayoral race were tabulated and the announcement made in the high school gym. Regina had been sitting in the bleachers like everyone else. She stood stunned, when her name was announced. She thanked everyone, calm, gracious — and overwhelmed. After, she whispered that she didn’t understand while she cried soft tears into Emma’s shoulder.

“We have to meet your parents for breakfast,”

Emma, still partially pinning Regina, groaned. “But it’s cold out there.” Emma’s teeth nipped at Regina’s shoulder. “So fucking cold.”

Regina made a sound of pleasure. “That does tend to happen during winter in Maine.” She pushed lightly at Emma’s shoulders. “We’re supposed to discuss Christmas plans with them. You have to work, too.”

Emma was working on Cybersheriff’s tenth case: a divorced woman whose husband kept hacking into her facebook and email. Her knight complex was satisfied because she was helping people, and she was getting paid decent money. Best job she ever had.

Nolan Securities continued to grow. They had hired two employees a few months ago, one who lived in North Carolina and the other in Florida. Officially speaking, Emma was their mentor. She just had them do what David and Mary Margaret said, and then occasionally asked them questions about it; she had no idea if she was doing it right.

Regina prodded her side. “Ms. Swan, you are being extremely irresponsible. I won’t have it under my roof.

Emma heard the smile in her voice. “It’s our roof,” she said. “You gave me a key and everything.”

“Our roof.” Regina’s rich, warm tone made the words sink into Emma’s skin and quicken her bloodstream. She moved light, fire-filled kisses down Regina’s neck. Her hands moved under her pajama top, tracing up her ribcage.

Regina’s breathing hitched. “That...Emma...”
“Be irresponsible with me,” Emma said, and pulled one of Regina’s legs around her hips, not stopping the attentions she gave to Regina’s throat.


The soft tremble in Regina’s voice was like gasoline. She started to unbutton Regina’s pajama top, but as so often happened, Regina became impatient for skin on skin contact. She tore it off, doing the same to Emma’s a moment later. Her nails skimmed over Emma’s tattoo making already hyper-sensitized skin tingle.

Emma ached for more.

To suck on Regina’s tongue, capturing and recapturing it.

To graze her fingers over her nipples, and tease just the tips the way Regina loved.

They whispered all kinds of things to each other in these intimate moments. Some days they were happy and their eyes glowed as they said words of love. Other times the scars in their hearts asked for promises and reassurances. Sometimes their bodies just took, hard and greedy. Their bed held darkness and light, promise and doubt, wonder and need. They moved together till there was only quiet, only love. Only home.

################################

They were very late to breakfast and, like whenever they were running behind, Regina became irritated and snappy. It was fortunate Emma understood and and didn’t take it personally.

David hugged all three of them, as did Mary Margaret. They saw each other daily for one reason or another, but still — always hugs. Regina had almost gotten used to it. Almost. Emma informed her that her hugs now earned an A rating, but not A plus. Not yet.

After breakfast was ordered, Regina unzipped her briefcase and reached inside, withdrawing a notepad. “So, let’s discuss Christmas. How to make it Emma-friendly.”
“Do you think Santa has outsourced his naughty list to her,” Snow asked.

“Any thoughts?” Regina asked, pointedly ignoring her.

Emma and Henry exchanged a look, battling over something. “The kid and I were looking on Amazon last night, we were wondering about maybe a non-tree Christmas tree.” Emma said.

“Something that could stand in for a tree,” Henry said.

“We thought non-traditional would be fun, but we don’t have to...” Her words were more of a question that a statement.

“Right, it’s just an idea,” Henry was quick to add, watching Regina intently.

“We can do that,” Regina said slowly, fighting the urge to fidget. She reminded herself how hard the holidays were for Emma. Anxiety still rose in her; moments when she felt like she needed to escape and she couldn’t help the desire to run. They had a deal. She could go as long as she texted or told Regina she was going and then checked in every hour or so. Regina couldn’t help but worry when Emma did it, but she had never been gone more than a couple of hours.

“And will we still put presents under this non-tree?” Regina asked.

Emma nodded, eagerly. “Yeah, I think that would be okay,” she said.

“I know you don’t want to do a big Christmas dinner, Emma,” Mary Margaret said. “But, David and I have an idea.” She waited for a beat. “A medieval Christmas, complete with garb.”

“Seriously?” Emma said, brightening. “We get to wear garb?”

“Garb,” Regina repeated.

Henry sat forward, face aglow. “Like costumes?”
“Regina, we can still do pajama brunch at your place Christmas morning,” Mary Margaret said. “Then medieval Christmas that night. If that’s okay?”

Regina took notes as other ideas were tossed out. Her lips pressed together tightly, and she kept pushing her hair back from her face in agitation. After about another half-hour, she said, “I should head to the office.”

“Hey, why don’t Henry and I walk you to work?” Emma asked.

“Nope.” David stood, surprising them. “You guys stay here and brainstorm. I would like the honor of escorting the mayor to work today.” He bowed to Regina with a flourish then offered his arm to her.

David didn’t say much, but when he did, he spoke about craving a donut. Which led to him convincing Regina to stop by the donut shop. She knew him well enough to realize he was giving her the opportunity to talk to a mostly-neutral party.

“I’m not as good with informal.”

“You’ve been with Emma for months. I think you’re not giving yourself enough credit.”

“The holidays...we didn’t do a formal Thanksgiving. No party for Emma’s birthday. It’s —“ She shook her head. “Very different. A little disappointing sometimes. It’s not that it always has to be my way. It’s just that there’s so much I want to do for her and Henry. I’m good at large dinners and sensible decorations. I enjoy making a traditional meal, dressing up and taking out the good china and…” She sighed. “I suppose I’m being petty.”

“You’re being you. She’s being her. It’s that sweet spot of together you have to figure out.”

“What I like makes her anxious.”
“And what she likes makes you the same way.” He winked at her. “Sweet spot.”

“I don’t want to be selfish. I know this is hard for her.”

He nudged her. “And it’s hard for you, too. Regina, one thing you aren’t, with her or any of us, is selfish.”

She wondered if he had any idea how few people in her life had ever said anything like that to her.

They fell silent and walked most of the way to city hall in that same companionable way. “Oh hey.” He paused by the doorway, “As a warning, Mary Margaret has begun sending Emma hints. Emails about sales at jewelry stores. Specifically rings.”

“Oh, she sends them to me, too.”

“Do you want me to talk to her?”

A glow filled Regina’s eyes. “Absolutely not.”

He grinned at her. When he gave that smile, that exact delighted smile, it reminded her of Emma. “Tell you what, why don’t I convince Mary Margaret that we should do the medieval thing on New Year’s Eve. We’ll still come over Christmas morning for brunch. But that night you should take the time to do whatever you and Emma decide. Your own traditions.”

Regina paused and smiled at him, then kissed his cheek lightly. “Thank you, David.”

Emma came by for lunch as she often did. Regina assumed at some point the honeymoon phase would end, and they’d spend less time together, but she loved every second of it.

“The casual Christmas thing is buming you out a little, isn’t it?” Regina hadn’t expected to have this conversation quite so soon. They were seated on the same side of the desk and Emma tugged Regina’s desk chair closer to hers. “Regina, I know when something’s bugging you.”
“I guess the holidays for most of my life, and especially after Henry, looked very different for me. I’m willing to make new traditions with you, I do want to do that.”

“But you feel like you’re missing stuff.”

“I don’t know.” She didn’t want to lay a burden on Emma, but she also didn’t want to lie. “A little.”

Emma patted her lap and waggled her eyebrows. “Come here.” Regina, sometimes far too charmed by Emma to be sensible, settled close to her. “So, tell Santa what you want for Christmas this year?”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You love me. Besides, I didn’t even do the big, booming Santa-voice. Ho, ho, ho! Tell Santa what you want for Christmas this year.” Regina rolled her eyes, but it was in play. Emma softened. “Seriously. I want you to be happy, too. Look, I have baggage because the voices in my head like to fuck with me when I’m confronted with the big Hallmark moments that I wanted so much as a kid. When I throw a wrench in the scene, even a little one, it’s like tossing them a curveball. They’re quieter. But if me facing a little noise in here —” she tapped her head, “— makes you happier, I want to do that. You do it for me.”

Regina looped her arms around Emma’s neck and just tried to be honest. “I miss making turkey and stuffing. I miss mashing potatoes and making pie. Henry and I would dress up. We would sit down to a proper meal on a white tablecloth with the good silverware and the good dishes. It was like that our first Christmas dinner together and since then...” She shook her head. “It’s hard not to miss that.”

Emma thought for a moment. “What if we get dressed up, good china, and all that stuff, but we all wear Santa hats or something? Just a little, you know, curveball.”

“And you’d be okay with that?”

“I’d be okay with trying. And if that doesn’t work, trying something else.”

Sometimes the words “I love you” weren’t enough. Sometimes it was “thank you” and “I love you” and “I need you” and “you are the best thing in my life”. There was no way to say all that.
“Marco,” Regina said, voice breaking.

“Polo,” Emma whispered.

Henry and Emma chose an inflatable medieval knight with a Santa hat and an extended sword for the “tree.” On the sword, they somehow managed to hang the Christmas ornament Emma had bought them about a year before.

Every single time Regina walked past, it played a Christmas carol and flashed an array of lights at her.

She removed the battery a week later.

She was madly in love, but she wasn’t a saint.

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On Christmas night, Emma sat at the very top of the stairs. Her heart felt too big, beating unevenly in her chest. Her hands were clammy and she rubbed them on her pants. Downstairs, Regina and Henry had set the table.

The evening before they had all had dinner with Cora. Mary Margaret tried to be polite but made no attempt to hide that she didn’t trust her, watching her very carefully. Cora was a rigid presence. She didn’t really mesh that well with everyone else, but she was Regina’s mom, so Emma treated things as a work in progress.

Regina walked rapidly up the stairs to stand in front of Emma. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Yeah, okay, just give me a minute. You got the Santa hats for everyone, right?”

“Downstairs,” Regina said, reassuring her. She looked conflicted as she sat down beside Emma, smoothing out her red velvet top. She had avoided a dress today, thinking it might be easier for Emma. “Emma, we don’t have to do this.”
“Just...I need to do it slowly. Is that okay?”

Regina nodded and pressed her brow to Emma’s. “You tell the demons in your head that you’re mine, okay?”

Emma squeezed her hand but said nothing as Regina rose and went back down.

She’d helped the kid with his tie about an hour ago. After that, she dove into her computer till Henry told her that he had been instructed to give her a “fifteen minutes till dinner” warning. Emma would be wearing jeans and a sweater, just another way for her to maybe feel a little more normal about this.

Plucking at her shirt, still uncertain about it, she exhaled slowly. She took three breaths like that, while convincing herself that she could at least go downstairs and look into the dining room. No harm or commitment in that, no need for demons in her head to stab at her. Besides, everything smelled really good. Regina had let her mash the potatoes and help with the stuffing, but then she kicked both Henry and her out of the kitchen.

She ducked her head into the room and saw that Regina and Henry were already sitting. Besides the Santa hats, they were also wearing big white beards. They turned, hearing her.

“You….?” Emma said, gesturing to the white fluff on Regina’s face.

Regina laughed helplessly. “Henry’s idea. He thought it might help.”

Henry grinned proudly.

It made it okay. Seeing them both willing to do this ridiculous, wonderful thing made it okay. She leaned down and kissed Regina.

“You two are totally scarring my childhood,” Henry said.
Emma ruffled his hair and sat down in front of her place setting. Regina lost the beard soon after but Henry took it as a personal challenge to keep it on and still try to eat.

They had their first Christmas dinner together.

Later she and Henry went for a walk, as they often did. This time, just down the street and back, given the relentless winter weather.

“You know,” he said, “Mom didn’t even argue about the beard thing. That’s a really big deal.”

“Um, about your mom.” Henry could be too attentive sometimes, with eyes that latched on and didn’t let go. This was one of those times. “She and I have been together for a bit, right? Things are going really well. You think that too, don’t you?”

“Things are good,” he said. “Have you been thinking about marrying her?”

Emma had to stop walking, that question striking her right between the eyes. “I — I don’t know. Okay, yes. More than a few times. But I’m not sure about it.”

“Oh, I kinda thought that’s where you were going with this conversation. Why aren’t you sure?”

Emma shook her head and put her hands on her hips. “This is a weird thing to be talking about with you.”

“Because I’m a kid?”

“Yes, because you’re a kid.”

He shrugged. “Who knows you both better than I do?”

He had a point, and Emma felt out of sorts because he did. “Look, it’s just hard for me to trust myself. That I won’t become a jerk again. But, who wouldn’t want to marry your mom?”
He played with the zipper on his jacket as they walked a little more. “Do you remember when I told you you shouldn’t text me anymore?” It surprised her. His brows were pulled tightly together, deep in thought. “That was really hard for me to say that to you, but I knew I had to. We couldn’t trust you then.” He pulled on her sleeve, stopping her. “You’re different now.” He sounded so grown up; Emma marvelled at it. “Everything is. So, just in case you were wondering, I trust you to take care of her. And me, too.” His breath came as rapid, white streams of air, as if it took a lot out of him to say all that. He paused then gave a mischievous grin. “Besides, I hear New Year’s Eve is a really romantic time to propose.”

Her mind blanked, not with fear, just…

Just…with thoughts. Many, many thoughts.

He gave her quick hug then started striding back home. “Come on, I’ll make us hot chocolate with cinnamon.”

She jogged to catch up then looped an arm around him. “Hey kid,” she said. “I love you, too.”

########################

A few days before the end of the year, Regina visited him.

She shuddered at the cold of the room, the intense blank, whiteness of it. Half the wall was white tile, then pasty paint with poorly repaired holes here and there.

He sat down in front of her and picked up the phone on his side of the glass.

She met his eyes and pulled her own phone from the holder. “Mr. Marshall.”

“Mills, right?” An uncertain smile spread over his face. A half-circle of black and blue discolored the skin around his right eye. “I didn’t know what to make of you asking to visit me. Almost said no.”

“And yet, you didn’t.”
“I figured you’re worried I might still have pictures of your kid. I might.” His eyes were dark, glowing with malice.

“And if I was worried about that, what then?”

“You have influence.” He gestured to his eye. “I need protection. Or money I can use to buy it.”

She rapped her fingers on the table before her. “So, you wish to blackmail me? I pay you, or you could, possibly, hurt my son.”

“Do you see my face? The guys in here are animals.”

“I’ve heard that prison isn’t kind to people like you. But then, neither is the outside world.”

“So, we can help each other.” A smile flashed briefly, straight white teeth. He’d been a manager of some furniture store, Regina had read. “For as long as it takes.”

“Mr. Marshall, the FBI was very thorough about impounding your electronic devices. I doubt you’ll have access to a computer for several years. And when you get out, you’ll have other concerns. You see, I intend to — on a yearly basis — buy a full-page ad in the town newspaper wherever you reside. Your picture will be displayed, as well as the reason you went to prison.”

“That’s harassment. I’ll sue.”

“Yes, and I am sure many judges will find in favor of a man found guilty of distributing child pornography. Judges do love to have things like that on public record. Besides, my mother has an entire fleet of lawyers who can file motion after motion. You won’t see a dime.” She leaned in, closer to the glass. “The point is, that’s the least of what I can do.” She felt a feral superiority rise up in her. “I can get billboards. I can have a website devoted to your deeds and put it everywhere. Cabs. Social media. Skywriting. Your choice is once a year, every year on January 3rd or...once a week. Maybe even daily.”

“You wouldn’t dare try that. I got in once, I can get in again.”
Regina propped her elbows on the table. “And we got to you, too, didn’t we? I’m not giving you a warning, Mr. Marshall, I am making you a blood oath. Once a year, or much, much more often. I suggest you chose wisely.”

She stood, eyes still on his as she slowly hung up her phone. She moved toward the guard and spared him one last look. He hadn’t moved, his eyes bleakly staring at her empty chair.

Outside, Emma leaned against her Mercedes waiting for her. “So, we’re done with that, right?”

“I don’t intend to ever see him again. Just the yearly ad.” Regina’s first plan was the threat of weekly reminders to the people in the town he lived in. Emma reminded her that devoting so much of her life to anger probably wasn’t a good thing.

“You okay?”

“Would you hate it if I said that, while I don’t advocate revenge, that felt extremely good.”

“Wow, that’s oddly hot. Come on, we’ve got a long drive. Let’s go home.”

Of course, the fucking boat broke down because of the cold. The steamboat was Emma’s plan. Her only plan. Marco looked at them, apologetic. He’d been trying to get it going for twenty minutes.

Emma’s insistence that they go on the steamboat ride before their early dinner on New Year’s Eve had not entirely gone over well. Regina, always antsy about punctuality, worried they were trying to cram too much into one day. The boat ride was at 3:00, the reservation was at 4:00, and they had to be dressed and ready to head to David and Mary Margaret’s medieval-themed New Year’s Eve party by 6:30.

Emma had sworn they wouldn’t be late. With every moment Marco tried to get the boat going, the ring in her pocket felt heavier and heavier, and Regina grew more agitated. Emma didn’t know how to salvage things.
“Why don’t we just head to dinner, Emma.” Regina said.

“Well, I….”

“It was already going to be a challenge to get there on time.”.

“But I…” Emma held up a finger. “Can you give me a minute?” She paced to the end of the pier and started typing frantically into her phone. “Boat died,” she typed to Mary Margaret, “plan ruined. What do I do?!@@!!!” A minute went by with no answer, then two. They knew what she was doing today, shouldn’t they be by the phone waiting breathlessly for news? “Where are you????? MOM!” Still nothing, not even that little dotty thing that indicated a message was being typed back. “Okay, I should just ask her, right? It’s still kinda romantic. Maybe? Okay, I’m going to ask her.”

Emma rubbed her brow fiercely and hoped it would spark ideas. It didn’t. “Marco, can we get on the boat anyway?”

“But it doesn’t work,” he pointed out.

“Just —”

“Emma, it’s okay, let’s just go.”

“No. No, I had a plan.”

Regina’s brows drew together, confused.

Emma’s shoulders sagged. She took three giant steps and boarded the book, then offered Regina her hand. “Regina, will you come here, please?” Regina tilted her head, uncertain and a little concerned, but she let Emma help her onto the boat.

Emma’s phone buzzed. Probably her mom, but it was too late. Emma drew in a deep breath and pulled the ring box out of her pocket. She fumbled, trying to get it open. “I was going to wait until
the part of the ride where we could see the town, you know, with all the lights in the background.” She bent a little, planning on moving to her knee. Regina grabbed her arm.

“Wait.” She dug in her pocket and also produced a ring box. “The restaurant tonight.” Emma stared at the ring. It didn’t make sense to her at first, too surreal a moment for her to process quickly. “I was going to…”

Emma took a step closer to her. “I — I was going to.” The boat swayed gently, rising and falling with the waves.

“I know a nice restaurant is not very imaginative. I went there yesterday to walk through things with them. They were going to give us a seat by a window and put up Post-It notes that spelled out ‘Will you marry me’. They were going to bring us Mountain Dew to toast with. I asked your parent’s blessing. I had a speech.”

Emma loved the idea of it, a smile pushed up the corners of her mouth. “I was going to wing it on the speech. What were you going to say?”

Now, Regina smiled. “Mostly just…” She made a helpless gesture. “A lot of telling you how much I love you.”

“I was going to tell you how much you’ve changed my…” Emma shook her head, biting her lower lip, and realizing, “You already know.”

“Then, do you want to…” Regina offered Emma her hand. “My answer is yes.”

Emma slid the ring on Regina’s finger and offered her own hand. “Me too,” she whispered.

Emma wouldn’t be able to remember, years later, if she hugged Regina or Regina hugged her, or if they kissed too. She would remember, though, lifting Regina off her feet and swinging her around, and the sweetness of her laughter. The sounds of cheering, looking up to see David, Mary Margaret, and Henry watching them from the boardwalk above. Mary Margaret, the loudest among them.

“Do the hug again,” Henry called out. “I think my yelling screwed it up. I’m calling it ‘Engagement Excitement Excitement’.”
Mary Margaret jogged down the steps as fast as she could, David behind her and Henry trying to film everything and not trip.

Emma took Regina’s hand, linking their fingers, and the rings, together. Smiling, they started toward their family.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Thursday Everybody,
I can’t say that I didn’t expect to feel emotional writing this because I am the sappiest of sentimental saps. I cry at Hallmark commercials and Youtube videos of dogs reuniting with owners.

First, as buffer against my teariness, let’s talk about what I am doing next.

My next Swanqueen story is called “Garden of Heroes”. It takes place in the Enchanted Forest and has a talking sword. I’ll start posting the first Thursday in February. FYI: This one won’t be as long as LH because is anything as long as LH?

After that, I will be working on an original F/F western called “Unbroken Sky”. There are no outlaws in it and very few guns. It’s mostly about two women helping one another find their voice. I’ll toss rough drafts up on Wattpad as I go and link to it on Twitter.

Finally, I will rewrite LH and try and get it published. Assuming I can, some publishers ask that you take fanfic stories down that your book is based on. So, at some point, I may need to make a decision. Hope not though.

I have thanked you all many times and my heartfelt gratitude to you remains. I have met so many great people (keep in touch or I will stalk you) and received more supportive comments than I ever expected. Everyone can occasionally use the feeling of being cheered on. You all gave me that and then some. Just -thank you and thank you and thank you.

LH is my first attempt at storytelling in years. I started by wanting to connect with anyone in our community who has been made to feel ‘less’ by the many voices out there who delight in bullying, badgering and belittling. I wanted to say, “start at 100 and fight like hell against anyone that tries to make you feel like you are less.” As I wrote, the story also became my attempt to look at my fears and how and why they have sometimes held me back. Especially around my writing.

So, as I land you all safely at Swanqueenland and you disembark, let me thank you again for flying with me and remind you to ‘Start at 100.’ Know that I am out here plotting a course and getting the plane ready for the next journey. I hope you fly with me again.

This, is your captain speaking.
FYI: I am mariacomet on Twitter too.
Hey everyone!

Two amazing people gave me gift of arts and I just really wanted you to see it and share in the feeling of being blown away. The one with Emma at work captures SO many details from chapter 2.

BTW, the next time I update this story will be with two things: 1. News that I am published 2. Another small Love Hack bit to celebrate #1.

This is your captain speaking.

*Thanks to odenysmora and @AffectionateDth for the amazing art. Gang, follow them, tweet them or show them some love. We need to encourage artists in our community.*

https://www.instagram.com/odenysmora/

Art 1:
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!