A collection of Captain Swan movie AUs. I use the term rom-com loosely. Most will come from the heyday of the rom-com: the 90s. I will take prompts.

Chapter One: The Storybook (Captain Swan AU of The Notebook)
Nominated in the OUAT Fandom Awards
Chapter Two: Clueless
Chapters Three & Four: Ever After
Chapter Five: One Fine Day
Chapters Six & Seven: 13 Going on 30
Chapters Eight - Eleven: Far and Away
Chapter Twelve: The Jones Identity (CS AU of The Bourne Identity)
Chapter Thirteen-Sixteen: Where the Heart Is
Notes

* I blame this fic entirely on cardio cinema at the gym.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Allie Calhoun smiled as she saw Killian Jones walking towards her down the hallway of the nursing home. He had a thick leather-bound book tucked under his arm like he always did as he approached room 301. He came every day to read to Emma Swan Jones, even though Allie was the only nurse who thought it did any good.

“He’s lost his mind as much as she has,” the other nurses would say, “believing he’s Captain Hook and his wife is the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. Believing that silly book of fairy tales is real.”

But Allie knew better. She was Emma Swan Jones’ regular nurse, and she was there to see it every time she remembered. She didn’t remember every day, or even most days, but because there were days that she remembered, Killian Jones kept coming to read to her. Even though he started every day with his wife looking at him as if he were a stranger.

And yet hope was what Allie saw in his eyes as he nodded to her, like every other day, and asked, “Are you ready, lass?”

Allie grinned, returned the nod, and opened the door to room 301. Killian Jones had paid extra so his wife could have this room – a suite all to herself with a window seat in front of a beautiful set of bay windows. “She needs to have a view of the sea,” he had insisted, “it will calm her.” And though most of the staff had rolled their eyes, he had been right. Emma sat there now, gazing sadly out at the water, a lost look on her face. Her hair was still long, though now silvery gray, and her lithe figure was now gaunt, her skin papery thin and wrinkled. Yet Allie watched as the face of Killian Jones transformed. He beamed at his wife with sparkling eyes, as if nothing in the world were more beautiful. His own skin was leathery and wrinkled from many hours in the sun, his once dark hair now a dull, mottled gray. His steps were hesitant now, his gait stiff, his muscles softened and weak. Yet he still flirted with the nurses, winking and using his still plentiful charms to weasel them out of an extra helping at meal times or trying (in vain) to get out of taking his heart medication. His eyes were still the same sparkling blue of his youth, and his face though softened and lined, was still a handsome one. “I still look devastatingly handsome,” he would joke, “especially at 380.”

Emma turned her head slowly as Allie entered the room, Killian following closely at her heels. Emma frowned at the two of them, a startled look crossing her face.

“It’s okay, ma’am,” Allie was quick to reassure her, “this is just Mr. Jones. He’d like to read to you today, if that’s all right.”

Emma Swan Jones had such advanced Alzheimer’s disease, that she didn’t even remember her own name. Whenever Allie slipped up and used it, she got agitated that she didn’t know who she was. So both Allie and Killian avoided using it. Emma rose from her seat and came cautiously forward, examining Killian with suspicion.

“Do I like him?” she asked, fixing her gaze on Allie.

Allie tried not to allow herself to smile, but her lips twitched anyway as she exchanged a glance with Mr. Jones. “Yes, I think you like him okay.”

Emma shrugged, “Well, I suppose I have nothing better to do.”
Killian let out a breath. Some days Emma refused to see him at first, or even at all. Maybe today would be one of the good days. He gave Emma a cautious nod of his head and gestured gallantly at the tea table in the corner of the suite.

“Would this suit you, m’lady?”

Emma snorted, “Who are you, freakin’ Prince Charming?” Killian and Allie exchanged another amused glance at that. “I’ve already had my breakfast. I was enjoying the view, so if you want to read, you’ll have to sit over there,” she continued, gesturing towards a comfortable chair catty-corner to the window seat.

“As you wish,” Killian replied softly, watching Emma’s face closely. But she barely glanced his direction at the familiar phrase. Allie’s heart went out to him, though she knew it was much too early in the day for Emma to remember anything. He seated himself in the chair, cleared his throat, and began, “The Pirate and the Princess. Chapter One. Once Upon a Time, there lived a lost boy and a lost girl, separated by realms and time . . . “

Allie was in and out to check on her patient in room 301, lingering when she could to listen the story she had heard bit by bit a hundred times. The other nurses called her a daydreamer who wasted too much time coddling the fantasy of two senile patients.

Emma sat for most of the beginning of the tale gazing out at the water, as if she were only half listening. But when Allie came in to give Emma her supplements, she turned her head in Killian’s direction with interest.

“Wait, did you say he bandaged her hand with his teeth?”

Killian removed his reading glasses to regard his wife with an amused grin and an arched eyebrow, “Yes, that’s how the story goes.”

“Hmph,” Emma snorted, turning once more to gaze out the window, “completely unnecessary. This pirate thinks he’s God’s gift to women, doesn’t he?”

Killian chuckled at that. Emma turned back to look at him intently.

“They’re going to fall in love, aren’t they?”

Killian nodded his head slowly, his gaze never leaving his wife’s. “Yes,” he said softly.

Allie let a long moment pass as the pair of them gazed into one another’s eyes, but then Emma’s green ones glossed over, and she looked back out to sea. “Um, ma’am,” Allie said to her gently, “It’s time for your walk.”

“Oh,” Emma said almost sadly, rising with the aid of Allie’s hand to her elbow. She studied Killian’s face for a long moment then said, “Could perhaps . . . he take me on my walk?” A blush stained Emma’s face as she leaned over and whispered to Allie, “He is awfully good-looking, isn’t he?”

Allie chuckled, “Yes, I think he is, and I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

Allie could tell Killian Jones was attempting to hold back his enthusiasm as he rose eagerly from his chair, “I would be honored m’lady. Perhaps Ms. Allie could bring the book down to the bench by the water, and we could continue reading there?”

Both women nodded their consent as Killian offered Emma his arm. Allie’s heart swelled
within her as she watched the elderly man guide his elderly wife out of the room. She picked up the leather volume where Mr. Jones had left it and clutched it to her chest. Oh to be loved like that . . .

Later, when Allie brought a blanket and two hot chocolates for the Joneses, Killian was reading about Neverland, with the pounding of the surf as background noise. “As you wish the pirate managed to stutter as he touched his lips in awe. Suddenly, he knew with startling clarity that he was in love with Emma Swan.”

“A one-time thing?” Emma interrupted.

“I beg your pardon?” Killian inquired, peering up at her over the rim of his reading glasses.

“She called the kiss a one-time thing. I don’t believe that for one second, do you?”

Killian bit his lip to suppress a smile, “Well, I don’t know. She’s a princess, and the savior, after all. He’s nothing but a pirate.”

“How can you say that?” Emma argued vehemently, “If he is, he’s a pretty lousy villain if you ask me. Saving women’s hearts and going around rescuing little boys.”

Killian pressed a hand to his lips, “Well, I suppose we’ll have to see.”

When Allie returned to escort the pair back to room 301 for lunch, Killian was just ending the scene at the town line.

“You know,” Emma remarked as she walked back across the grounds, “when she said Good, what she really meant was that she was falling for him.”

“Oh, you mean after he told her not a day would go by when he wouldn’t think of her?” Killian asked as if the story wasn’t intimately familiar to him.

“Of course,” Emma scoffed.

Killian laid his good hand on Emma’s which rested in the crook of his left arm. Allie, walking behind them, wanted to cheer when Emma didn’t pull away. “Well,” he said, “perhaps they’ll get their happy ending after all.”

Over lunch, Killian read about the pirate finding the princess in New York, about how she was hesitant to drink the memory potion, and the flying monkey that tried to kill the princess. Emma gasped at that revelation, then said with a shake of her head, “I knew something wasn’t right about that Walsh guy.”

The pair lingered over lunch as Killian continued the tale. He was just finishing the part where the princess became angry with the pirate because he didn’t tell her about the wicked witch’s curse when Allie had to come in and interrupt them. She bent to whisper in Killian’s ear that he had visitors – he and Emma’s children and grandchildren. They wanted to see both of them, but Allie would leave that up to Killian.

“I have visitors,” Killian explained to Emma as he put away his glasses and closed the book.

“Oh,” Emma said, her face falling, “the story was just getting good.”
He reached across the table and grasped his wife’s hand, “I’ll be back to finish it, I promise.” But he quickly saw that his reassurances were doing little to quell her rising panic. Some days the Alzheimer’s had his wife reverting back to the tough as nails bail bondswoman who trusted no one. Other days, she reverted all the way back to being a little lost girl again. Today seemed to be one of those days.

“Would you like to meet my friends?” he asked tentatively. When her face lit up, he gave a tiny nod to Allie that he had judged correctly.

“That would be nice,” Emma answered simply, trying to mask her obvious excitement.

Killian took her arm again, and they all headed downstairs, but it quickly became clear that Emma was still wrapped up in the story.

“He was only trying to protect her and Henry.”

“Who?”

“Hook. He thought if he said anything, Zelena would kill them.”

“Oh,” Killian said with a nod.

“Although,” Emma said after a brief pause, “what he should have done was tell that witch to go to hell.”

Killian laughed a pure, free, happy laugh. It was so like his Emma that it felt as if the sun were out after a long, dark storm.

Allie hung back, just in case Emma needed her, as the couple approached the small crowd seated on Adirondack chairs in the facility’s courtyard. Killian could tell their grown children were surprised to see their mother, and he prayed they would follow his lead. He patted Emma’s hand as he met each child’s gaze.

“I’d like you to meet my children and grandchildren,” he informed Emma, “or some of them, anyway.”

“Oh!” she replied, smiling brightly, “All of these are yours? How wonderful.”

“Yes,” Killian answered, swallowing the sudden lump in his throat. He avoided eye contact with his children, knowing he would see hurt there. Their own mother didn’t know them! “This is my oldest daughter, Haley, my younger daughter, Clara, and this is my son Charlie. And these two little ones are Clara’s twins, Mary and Margaret.” Emma shook hands with each young adult in turn, smiling with detached politeness. But the Jones children played along, despite how much it hurt them to do so. “And this,” Killian continued, “is my oldest, Henry.”

Henry was having the most difficult time holding it together. He stayed slightly removed from his siblings, his shoulders rigid. He shuffled forward reluctantly as Emma extended her hand. Henry took his mother’s frail hand in his, his eyes immediately welling up with unshed tears.

“My my,” Emma said as she shook Henry’s hand, “you don’t seem old enough to have such a grown son!”

“Dad’s a lot older than he looks,” joked Charlie to break the tension.

They all insisted that Emma join them, and Killian helped lower her into a cushioned rocker
that would be more comfortable for her. As soon as she was seated, little Mary scrambled into her grandmother’s lap. Clara scolded her, but Emma, though shocked at first, held the little girl tight.

“No, it’s okay,” Emma told them, “she’s a precious little thing.”

An awkward silence descended on the group, everyone nervous that they might say the wrong thing. Mary turned in her grandmother’s lap to pat her cheek, and something about the gesture caused Emma to get uncomfortable. Killian could see the beginning of panic settling on his wife’s features, and he hurried to retrieve Mary. Emma’s hands fluttered nervously at her throat.

“I . .. I’m getting awfully tired.”

Allie was there in a moment, and she helped a relieved Emma out of her seat and began walking her back to her room. As soon as their mother was out of ear shot, all of the Jones children leaned towards their father in concern.

“Daddy,” Haley began, “you can’t keep living like this.”

“Like what? I’m right where I belong.”

“What do you mean, dad?” Charlie argued, “You are in excellent health. There’s nothing for you here.”

“Nothing!?” Killian exclaimed, “That’s my true love in there,” he argued, pointing back up the hill where Emma had gone.

Clara leaned forward, resting a hand gently on her father’s knee, “She didn’t even know us, Daddy. Her mind is gone.”

Killian shook his head firmly, “No, it’s not. I read our story to her every day. And some days, she remembers.”

The Jones children all looked to Henry for help. He cleared his throat and stepped forward, “Come home with me, Dad. Back to Storybrooke. Grace and I have plenty of room now that the kids have all moved out.”

Killian shook his head sadly, “You too, Henry? I thought you of all people –“

Henry cut him off. “This isn’t a memory curse. This is medical. Alzheimer’s. There’s no cure.”

“Your mother and I have faced every obstacle the same way – together. I won’t leave her now. Besides, what is there for me in Storybrooke? Everyone is gone: your grandparents, Regina, Belle, Smee. I’m the last of the fairy tale characters, Henry. Frankly, I’m eager to join my kin. Your mother is the only reason I still have breath.”

His jaw clenched as he took in the wrecked expressions of his children. He knew his words hurt, but they were true. He and Emma had made solemn vows to love each other for all eternity. He intended to never break that vow.

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Emma’s face lit up when Killian entered her room after her nap. She had settled once again in the window seat, and she gestured for Killian to take up his spot in the chair nearby. Allie was in and out as Killian read for hours. “Hook begged the princess not to do it, but she simply pulled him
close, pressing his hand to her breast. *I love you* she breathed, then before he could respond, she pushed him backwards. He watched in agony as the black tendrils swirled around his beloved, their eyes locked on one another. Until the darkness blocked her from view. Then the black cloud disappeared, and in the empty space, a dagger clattered to the pavement. *Emma Swan* was etched upon the blade.”

“I’m not going to like this part of the story, am I?”

Killian startled at the sound of his wife’s voice, she had been quietly listening for so long. He gave her a sad smile. “No,” he told her honestly, “I don’t particularly like this part myself.”

She sighed so deeply, he glanced with concern at Allie.

“What do you want me to stop reading?”

“Actually, ma’am,” Allie interrupted gently, “it’s time for your dinner.”

“Okay,” Emma said softly, her gaze drifting to the carpet. Then she looked up at Killian, “Will you stay for supper too? And keep reading?”

“Aye,” he answered simply with a nod. Emma’s face seemed to startle at his answer, and for one second, he thought maybe she was remembering the day she found out he had traded his ship for her. But it passed almost as quickly.

Through dinner Killian read about Emma’s time as the Dark One and her desperate choice in the middlemist field as he lay dying. He hated to read the part about their fights as Dark Ones, but he plowed ahead, forcing his voice to remain steady. Dinner came and went, and time seemed to stand still. Allie hovered in the doorway because this was when Emma’s behavior could sometimes become erratic.

“Hook gave Emma a half smile and a nod, assuring her that it would all be okay,” Killian read, voice thick with emotion, “so with tears streaming down her face, Emma ran him through with Excalibur. As she pulled the sword free, the darkness fled, and the sword turned to ash and blew away on the wind. Hook crumpled forward, and Emma fell with him, sobbing over his body as his life ebbed away.”

Killian stopped his reading at the sound of a sob from Emma’s throat. He looked up to see her with tears streaming down her face. “It can’t,” she sobbed brokenly, “It can’t end like that.”

Killian quickly reached out for her hand and grasped it, “It doesn’t,” he assured her, rubbing his thumb in circles across the back of her hand, “I promise you, Emma, this isn’t how the story ends.”

It was Allie’s gasp from the doorway that alerted Killian to his mistake. He had used Emma’s name. His blood froze in his veins as he watched Emma’s face. She first looked confused, then she looked long at their joined hands, then she looked up at him. Her expression had cleared, and for the first time in many days, Killian saw love reflected back in her eyes. Still, he waited, holding his breath.

“It’s us,” Emma breathed. “The story – it’s us!”

A sob escaped Killian’s throat, “Oh, Emma, my love!”

“Killian!” Emma gasped out, rising from her chair so fast, it clattered to the floor.
Killian was there in a heartbeat, catching her in his arms. She kept saying his name over and over, touching his face, kissing him with the same passion they had always shared. From the doorway, Allie wept too, covering her face with her hands.

“How long have I been cursed?” Emma asked once they finally pulled away from each other.

Killian tucked a strand of her silver hair gently behind her ear, “This isn’t a curse, Swan. You have something called Alzheimer’s disease.”

He drew her closer as full comprehension dawned on her features. She wept into his chest as he ran his fingers through her hair. She pulled back to look up into his face.

“How long do we have?”

“I don’t know, love,” he answered honestly, kissing her gently on the forehead. “Sometimes you remember for a few hours. But often, it’s only a few minutes.”

She gave him that determined smile he knew so well, and with a crooked grin, told him, “Well, pirate, let’s make the most of it.”

Killian waggled his eyebrows at her suggestively, “If you’re referring to more enjoyable activities on your back, I’m afraid that isn’t the wisest idea.”

She rolled her eyes and slapped him in the chest, once again the wife he knew and loved so well, “I don’t mean that, Captain Innuendo.” She drew closer, wrapping her arms around his waist, “Would you like to dance, Mr. Jones?”

“I would love to, Mrs. Jones,” he smiled back, taking her hand in his and placing his prosthetic at the curve of her waist.

“Because you know,” Emma told him, “there’s only one rule: pick a partner who knows what he’s doing.”

The Joneses had completely forgotten that Allie even existed; they never did on nights like this. And this – seeing this play out before her eyes on those nights – was the very reason Allie was the only nurse who believed.

As Killian led Emma around the room in an intricate waltz, she began to sing:

> Tomorrow is uncertain

> Who knows what it will bring?

Killian spun her and began to sing as well:

> But one thing is for sure, love

> With you I have everything

Then the two sang in perfect harmony:

> A happily ever after

> Is the way these stories go
Emma sang back, gazing adoringly into his eyes:

_Used to think that’s what I wanted_

_But now I finally know_

_There’s no storm we can’t outrun._

The years seemed to melt away as Killian sang to his true love:

_We will always find the sun._

Allie watched, mesmerized as the two played out a fairy tale musical number before her very eyes.

_Leave the past and all its scars_

_A happy beginning now is ours_

Killian clasped Emma close to him, swaying and humming to the music in their heads. But the moment ended far too soon. He felt Emma stiffen in his arms, then she stumbled backwards, shaking her head and mumbling.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, Emma, honey –“

But before he could reach for her, comfort her, she became hysterical.

“Get away from me!” she screamed. “Help! Help!”

Allie attempted to quiet Emma’s screams, but soon two more nurses and an orderly rushed in to assist. Emma screamed louder as the orderly held her pinned in his arms so another nurse could administer a sedative. Killian rushed forward, hating to see his wife filled with such terror, but one of the other nurses shoved his book roughly into his arms and sent him stumbling into the hall.

“You and your stupid book just make things worse,” she shouted at him.

Killian sagged in agony against the wall, pounding his fist against the wood in frustration. Tears coursed down his weathered face as the image of his wife’s face in that last moment tortured him. She looked at him like he was something hideous and terrifying. Maybe the other nurses were right; maybe it was cruel to try and help her remember. He stumbled down the hallway, the leather book tucked once again under his left arm.

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Killian was awakened later that night by footfalls near the bed. He grumbled in frustration. Couldn’t the night nurses leave him bloody well alone? But then he was startled as the bed dipped down slightly and an arm snaked around his waist.

“Emma?” Killian asked tentatively as he rolled over to come face to face with his wife. This had never happened in the entire two years they had been living at the nursing home. He was completely unsure how to proceed.

“Yes,” Emma whispered with a smile as she cupped his cheek, “it’s me.”
He knew he should tell her to leave, but her face and voice seemed so like the Emma he knew, he simply pulled her closer to him. It had been too long since he held her as he slept. Too many months spent in a restless sleep because his true love was so close – just down the hall – yet so far away. They lay there, just holding one another close, for the longest time. Then Emma whispered into the darkness.

“Killian, do you think our love is strong enough to take us both home, together?”

He pulled back enough to look her in the face. The moonlight reflected in her eyes, which shone with such deep conviction. He smiled back at her as he thumbed the dimple in her chin.

“I think our love can do anything we want it to.”

Emma gave a single nod and snuggled closer to Killian, holding him tight. “Then let’s go home.”

“As you wish.”

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Emma’s eyes fluttered open, and she found herself in an eerily familiar place: in Charon’s boat, sailing to the shores of the Underworld. But this time, she wasn’t afraid. Her true love was there, right next to her, holding her hand. When the boat reached shore, Killian got out first, then reached to help Emma onto shore as well. They turned and found a familiar face to greet them.

“Arthur!” Killian said with a smile, slapping the other man on the back in greeting.

“It’s about time you two showed up,” Arthur quipped, "everyone is eager to see you again."

“Everyone?” Emma asked, confused.

“Why, your family, of course.” Arthur answered with a wink, and he turned and gestured towards a walkway leading into blindingly bright and beautiful land.

Emma smiled at her husband and grasped his hook tightly. He smiled at her in return. Then they walked forward into the light. Together.

One minute they were walking across the stone pathway, and the next they were in a field of middlemist roses. Emma looked at Killian and gasped. The sound made Killian look in her direction, and he was startled as well. They were both young again. As a matter of fact, they looked exactly as they had in Camelot; Emma in a white lace dress and a crown of white roses, Killian in the fancy brocaded leather duster and red vest. Across the field, a white horse seemed to be waiting for them.

Killian flexed his now muscular arms, and Emma laughed at his antics. Her laughter turned to giggles as he scooped her up in his arms. Emma looked around as he carried her to the waiting horse. Everything here seemed brighter than she remembered, more . . . real. She suddenly realized why. This wasn’t Camelot at all. It was heaven.

Killian set her on the horse first and then mounted behind her. With a “hiya!” he set the horse off at an exhilarating gallop towards a castle that glittered on a distant hill.

“Where are we going?” Emma shouted into his ear.

“Just like Arthur said. We’re going home. Home to our family.”
Allie’s heart was heavy as she entered Killian Jones’ empty room at the nursing home. When she learned that Killian and Emma had both passed away in their sleep, together, her emotions had been mixed. She knew it was what they wanted, but still . . . she would miss them and the incredible love they shared.

Killian had left strict instructions that only Allie was allowed to clean out his things. So Allie set the cardboard box down on the empty bed with a sigh and got to work.

Allie was almost finished, kneeling on the floor in front of the bottom drawer of the room’s wardrobe. She pulled the familiar storybook out, but her finger caught on something as she did so. Curious, she rested the book on the floor and looked more carefully inside the drawer. The bottom seemed to tilt a bit. She pushed on it experimentally, and it gave a little. She pried at the edges, and eventually she was able to open a hidden panel at the bottom of the drawer. Allie shook her head with a smile.

“Pirate!” she muttered, laughing.

There were two thin leather chests inside. One was square, and the other was long and rectangular. Inside the first was a cutlass, just like pirates wielded in the movies. Allie set it inside and opened the square one next. Inside, nestled in a red satin lining, was a shiny, steel hook. Allie gasped as she slowly took it out. She held it up to the light, turning it this way and that, her mouth hanging open in shock. She had believed the story, but to actually see the hook of Captain –

“Those are my grandfather’s things!”

Allie let out a yelp at the sound of the voice in the doorway and dropped the hook. It clattered loudly to the floor. She scrambled to her feet, and her breathe caught in her throat at the sight of the young man standing in the door. He was so handsome, he took her breath away. His straight blonde hair, felt rebelliously in his eyes, which were a bright blue. His chest was broad, and just standing there angry with his hands on his hips, his biceps rippled with strong muscles. He strode forward and snatched the hook up off the floor, waving it angrily.

“Who gave you the right to go through my grandfather’s stuff?”

Allie folded her arms indignantly across her chest, “Your grandfather, actually. He left clear instructions that only I could oversee cleaning out his things.”

“Well, he left instructions with the family that his grandson Noah Jones had to come and . . .” The young man, Noah, apparently, trailed off and started to laugh. He shook his head and looked up at the ceiling, “Really, grandpa?” Then he looked Allie in the eye and extended his hand, “You must be the nurse Allie he was always going on about.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Allie answered, as she took his hand. It sounded cheesy, but a spark seemed to pass between them. Suddenly, she put the same thing together that Noah apparently had. “Oh my god! What did he tell you about me?”

Noah grinned, not seeming to mind his late grandfather’s matchmaking schemes at all, “He told me you have the heart of a true believer.”

Allie regarded him with an arched brow, “Mhm. And you, Noah Jones, are you a pirate or a prince charming?”
He shrugged, “They say I look a lot like my great-grandfather. But I say I have a bit of rogue in me.”

Allie smiled in return, “Or would you prefer dashing rapscallion?”

He leaned forward, so close Allie could feel his breath against her cheek, “Go out to dinner with me and find out.”

All those days of hearing the love story of Killian and Emma Jones, Allie had wondered if true love like that could be real. With Noah, she found out it was. Just like fairy tales. And when the lights flickered the first time they made love, she learned that magic was still real, too.

And just like Emma Swan and Captain Hook, they had many happy beginnings . . .
Clueless

Chapter Notes

* My self-imposed rule with this fic is that I'm not allowed to re-watch the movies these are based on. That way, I can give it it's own unique Captain Swan spin and avoid the temptation to do the story scene by scene. Unfortunately, I'm a teen of the nineties which means I know Clueless by heart. Literally. So this one follows pretty closely to the plot of the movie. The characters necessitated changes, however, so it isn't like I just plugged Once characters in and re-hashed the movie. It just means this is an insanely long chapter :) I hope you like the changes I made, however, especially the ending. I loved writing the ending!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Emma Swan knew exactly what people assumed about her, driving around Beverly Hills in her bubble-gum pink jeep clothed in fashions by the latest designers, her wavy blonde hair blowing behind her. A life-size Barbie doll, that’s what they saw. Little did they know the lost girl hidden beneath her Calvin Klein’s.

She hadn’t come to live in Beverly Hills until she was ten. She hadn’t known what to think of either LaLa Land or her new adoptive mother, Ingrid. She went from barely eating and wearing thread bare clothes to living in a mansion with a kitchen larger than most of the houses she had lived in. She had been wary at first about why a successful, insanely wealthy Hollywood attorney would adopt a foster kid like her. This wasn’t Annie, and there was no such thing as a Daddy Warbucks. But there was an Ingrid Swan, a lost girl deep inside just like Emma who had lost her sisters at a young age (some kind of accident involving a frozen pond which Ingrid didn’t like to talk about). Because she was rich and powerful in LA, no one questioned why she specifically wanted to adopt either a six year old red head or a ten year old blonde. They just delivered, chalking it up to the eccentricity of a billionaire. (And yes, Emma would readily admit, Ingrid was eccentric). But Emma finally realized that Ingrid truly accepted her and loved her. And that was enough.

It wasn’t enough, however, for her classmates at Beverly Hills elementary. And thus Emma Swan re-invented herself into a perfect, plastic Beverly Hills socialite. (Yes, they’re plastic even in the fifth grade.) People loved the plastic Emma, and she was happy. She guessed.

Her amazing transformation made her obsessed with make-overs. Any time a new kid arrived at their school, everyone knew the “Swan” would take the newest “ugly duckling” under her wing. Some, like Zelena, were less than appreciative. Others, like David, became permanent friends. When David moved from Texas, someone had to rescue him from all that plaid. It may have worked on a sheep ranch, but not in Beverly Hills. The makeover had also indirectly led Emma’s best friend to find “true love.” Emma felt so proud of herself for fixing up Mary Margaret and David, that matchmaking became somewhat of an obsession as well. But that figures later in the story . . .

For now, just know as you watch that Barbie pink jeep drive up the circular drive of Mary Margaret Blanchard’s house; as you watch the seemingly charmed Emma Swan smiling and laughing with her best friend, eyes behind designer sunglasses; know that underneath, there’s more than meets the eye. That figures into our story from the start . . .
Emma stood at the front of her debate class, rolling her eyes as she listened to Zelena speak condescendingly about immigrants. She didn’t regret a single one of her makeovers. Except for Zelena. She should have left her the way she was with frizzy hair, ill-fitting baby doll dresses, and a constant whine in her voice. It was better than the condescending way she ruled over her underlings and whipped into submission every boy she dated. And the obsession with hats – that hadn’t been part of the makeover.

“Thank you, Ms. Green,” their debate teacher, Mr. Gold said as Zelena finished up, “Your rebuttal, Ms. Swan?”

Emma sighed deeply, “Okay, in my opinion Zelena sounds like an absolute wicked witch. Her snobby opinion is exactly why people think Beverly Hills is full of shallow people. It’s like . . . “ Emma bit her bottom lip. She was passionate about a lot of things, but she always struggled to find the right words. Killian would know what to say. As irritating as her ex-stepbrother might be, no one could deny that he had a way with words. His constant barbs about her use of “small” words had led her to purchase a book entitled A Word a Day: Increasing Your Vocabulary the Easy Way. “It’s like when my mom turned fifty. I put RSVP on the invitation, but like all these people showed up who didn’t RSVP. Let me tell you, I was freakin’ out. But my ex-stepbrother, he told me to calm down. He ran to the store and bought all this extra food for the catering people. Then he helped me round up all these extra chairs, and in the end, it was cool. So, if our government can just re-arrange a few things, surely we can welcome all these refugees and stuff.” Emma had another inspiration. She lifted her finger in the air, realizing too late it was where she had stuck her gum. Mr. Gold hated when people spoke with gum in their mouths; he would dock you a whole letter grade. Emma ignored her mistake, and plowed on with conviction, “And need I remind you, it does not say RSVP on the statue of liberty!”

Emma grinned as her classmates whooped and cheered. Granted, it probably had more to do with her popularity than her speech, but whatever. She returned her gum to her mouth with a flourish and glared at Zelena.

Mr. Gold sighed, “Any further rebuttals, Ms. Green?”

“I don’t think so,” Zelena scoffed with a flip of her hair, “We’re supposed to be talking about immigration, and she’s going on about some little party.”

Mr. Gold rubbed his temple wearily, “Fine. Be seated, ladies. I need to pass out the report cards, anyway.”

He gathered the stack and began making his way down the aisles. Emma’s heart sank to the pit of her stomach as she saw her grades. She was used to struggling because of how many times she had changed schools in the foster care system, but her current report card was the worst she had had in a long time. She glared at Mr. Gold. A “D” in debate? Okay, so maybe words weren’t her forte. But a “D”? Seriously?

As soon as the bell rang, Emma whipped out her phone.

“Well I’m dead,” she said as soon as Mary Margaret answered.

“Me too,” her best friend sighed as they joined up in the hallway. They both put their phones away and exchanged report cards.

“Mary Margaret, really?” Emma scoffed, waving the report card in the brunette’s face.
“What?” Mary Margaret protested, “I only got one A – in home ec! And look,” she continued, pointing at the paper in Emma’s hand, “a B- in debate. What is with Mr. Gold? I give quite inspirational speeches, if I do say so myself.”

Emma shook her head as she took back her own report card littered with nothing but Cs and Ds and one B- in gym. Mary Margaret had no idea what kind of charmed life she lived. She could talk as if her parents would kill her over her report card, but the truth was that Ava and Leopold Blanchard were two of the kindest people Emma had ever met. They showered adoration on their daughter while still teaching her to be as compassionate and selfless as they were.

“It’s okay,” Emma shrugged as she shoved her report card into her backpack, “I’ll just get higher grades the Swan way.”

Emma groaned when she pulled her jeep into the driveway to see Killian’s black pick-up parked out front. She saw her mother in her office the second she walked through the door, and stomped her way inside.

“Seriously, mom?” she fumed, pointing an irritated finger at the truck that sat just outside the office window.

“You mean Killian?” Ingrid asked distractedly as she slid a few files into her filing cabinet.

“Yes! What’s he doing here? Again?”

“I invited him for dinner.”

Emma rolled her eyes, “You were barely married to his father!”

Ingrid patted Emma’s cheek and laughed, “You divorce husbands, Emma, not children.”

“But he’s so . . . so . . . “ Emma continued, following her mother into the dining room.

“Eloquent as always, are we Swan?” quipped Killian, who was already seated and digging into his salad. He was always eating.

“See!” Emma declared to her mother, gesturing at Killian.

Ingrid narrowed her eyes. “I want a nice, family dinner. So SIT!”

Emma huffed and crossed her arms, but plopped down into her chair anyway. She picked up a piece of asparagus and scowled across at Killian as she nibbled at it. He had the audacity to wink at her. He was so full of himself!

“You look bigger, Killian. Have you been working out?” Ingrid asked. She seemed to think Killian hung the moon, for some reason. Probably because he wanted to be a lawyer, like her, and followed Ingrid around as if she were his mentor or something. “Doesn’t Killian look bigger, Emma?”

“His head does,” Emma sassed, her voice dripping with false sweetness.

Killian arched his eyebrows, “Real mature there, Swan.”

Ingrid seemed determined to have normal dinner conversation, despite their prickly behavior, so she turned to Emma and asked, “Report cards came out today, sweetie. How was yours?”
Emma shook her head. “Mine’s not ready yet.”

Ingrid narrowed her eyes, “What do you mean?”

Emma put on her best pout, “Some teachers were trying to low-ball me, mom! So I just see these current grades as a jumping off point before I begin negotiations.”

Ingrid gave her a suspicious look, “Well, okay, but I expect to see that report card in a week or two.” Her cell phone, which rested on the table beside her, vibrated. “Sorry, kids, but I gotta take this.”

Ingrid’s voice trailed off as she headed for her office, and Killian leaned over the table towards Emma. “You are so spoiled, Emma. What makes you think you can get teachers to change your grades?”

Emma smirked at him as she dipped her finger in the hollandaise sauce, “Only because I’ve done it every other semester.” She licked her finger with attitude as Killian shook his head.

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It only took Emma two days to convince the majority of her teachers to change her grades. Manipulation had often been a life or death skill as a foster kid, and Emma Swan still knew how to work it to her advantage. She got her literature teacher, Ms. French, to bump her C+ to a solid B when she brought in a volume of Shakespeare’s sonnets and quoted part of sonnet 116. She told her math teacher, Ms. Mills, that one of her best friends had blabbed a secret all over school, and she was so distraught she had bombed her mid-term. Ms. Mills patted her hand sympathetically and changed her C-to a B-. For her science teacher, Mrs. Agrabah, she pulled out the big guns. She really hated to do it, but her foster kid background made a good sob story when needed. She had the woman in tears. As well as a solid B+.

The only teacher she couldn’t sway was Mr. Gold. He continued to assert that she came in unprepared with speeches that were ill researched and poorly delivered. She even sunk to offering to do extra credit, but he refused. Now she sat in the food court at the mall, picking at her plate of onion rings.

“Come on Emma,” Mary Margaret tried to cheer her up, “since when do onion rings sit uneaten on your plate? You deserve to celebrate! You have all Bs now –“

“And one D,” Emma mumbled, ripping an onion ring in half with her teeth, “A big, fat D!”

“He gave me a B-,” Mary Margaret sighed, “which brings down my entire GPA. He’s a horrible, miserable, lonely little man who wants to make everyone else miserable, too.”

“That’s it!” Emma cried out, sitting up straighter.

“What!”

Emma grabbed Mary Margaret by the arms and shook her. “I’m an expert matchmaker, wouldn’t you say?”

Mary Margaret grinned, “Yes, I can never thank you enough for setting me up with David.”

“Then all I have to do is find Mr. Gold a happy ending – a woman who will make him sublimely happy!”

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“Shakespeare’s 18th sonnet,” Mary Margaret sighed.

Emma laughed, “Which is why you have an A+ in lit. I didn’t know that until I was sweating for extra credit.”

Mary Margaret jumped and shoved Emma in the arm, “Quick! She’s coming!”

Emma capped her pen and shoved both the note and the red rose she’d swiped from her mother’s garden into Ms. French’s faculty mailbox. The girls scurried out the side door and watched through the window as Ms. French came in to get her mail. The look of surprise on her face when she found the rose made Emma forget that she was doing this for a higher grade in debate; she looked so happy! Then Ms. French’s features practically glowed as she read the love note. Emma and Mary Margaret squealed with glee.

“Okay,” Emma said, taking a deep breath to calm down, “phase two. Ms. French eats her lunch on the bench by the library every day. All we have to do is get Mr. Gold to sit with her.”

Mary Margaret narrowed her eyes. “How are we supposed to do that?”

Emma brandished her mother’s coffee thermos, “Just follow my lead.”

The girls raced out the door and saw Mr. Gold heading for his car to eat lunch off campus. “Mr. Gold! Mr. Gold!” they cried as they jogged towards him. A look of surprise filled his face, which was understandable. He wasn’t particularly well liked by the students, and most avoided him.

“Yes ladies?”

“Thank goodness,” Emma said brightly. She may not be good with words, but acting she could do. It was another skill that came in handy whenever she had run away from a foster home. “My mom accidentally took my thermos of hot cocoa this morning while I got her Italian roast.” Emma uncapped the thermos and waved it under Mr. Gold’s nose. Her skills of observation had not only uncovered Ms. French’s lunch habits, but also Mr. Gold’s weakness for expensive coffee. “Want it?”

Mr. Gold leaned towards the thermos like a rabbit sniffing out a carrot. “You don’t?”

“No way!” Emma protested, “I think coffee tastes gross. I’m a hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon kind of girl.”

“Okay, then,” Mr. Gold said eagerly, grasping the thermos.

“You should share it,” Mary Margaret piped up, and Emma tried not to groan. Her friend’s acting was, quite frankly, horrible. “With Ms. French.”

“Belle?” Mr. Gold squeaked, his gaze shifting to where Ms. French sat, reading a book as she nibbled on a sandwich. Emma noted the look in his eyes when he saw the literature teacher, and her heart soared. So he had noticed Ms. French before! Not that Emma blamed him. The teacher was quite pretty, so pretty that many of the boys had crushes on her. She just hoped Ms. French didn’t think Mr. Gold was too old for her.

“Yes,” Emma encouraged, “just the other day in class she mentioned you.”

“She did?”
“Mhm,” Emma nodded, tapping her lower lip as if trying to remember something, “What did she say? Oh yes! She said Mr. Gold is the only man in this school who knows how to be a gentleman.”

“Did she now?”

Mr. Gold’s face was beaming in a way Emma had never seen. She and Mary Margaret held their breath as he walked over to the bench. When Ms. French looked up and saw him, her smile put Emma at ease. Then the woman slid over as Mr. Gold poured some Italian roast into the thermos cap for her. Emma and Mary Margaret slipped behind a tree, losing track of their lunch break as they watched the pair talk and laugh.

“Aw, they’re so cute,” Mary Margaret sighed.

“Do you see their body language?” Emma asked. “Legs crossed, pointed towards each other? That’s a subconscious sex invite.”

Mary Margaret wrinkled her nose. “Ew! Okay, don’t want to think about that!” Then she grabbed Emma’s arm and shook her, “Look, Emma! He’s getting her number!”

Sure enough, Mr. Gold had taken a tiny notepad and pen from the inside pocket of his coat and was jotting something down. Ms. French, surprisingly, looked ecstatic. Emma looked at Mary Margaret smugly.

“And you doubted my matchmaking skills!”

Mary Margaret laughed and shook her head, “Not your skills, just your theory that those two were secretly pining for each other. Who knew Ms. French saw a prince under that beastly little man?”

As the next two weeks went on, Mr. Gold and Ms. French became not only increasingly giddy with happiness but also slightly dreamy and scatter brained, as people in love were wont to do. They would both lose their train of thought in class, suddenly deciding to let the kids have a free period. Ms. French gave less and less homework as the days went by, and everyone’s grades in both classes soared. Emma had been popular before. Now she was a campus legend.

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“Emma, honey, can you get in here?”

Emma entered her mother’s home office. “Yes, mom? I brought you some cocoa.”

“Oh, thank you sweetheart,” Ingrid replied, blowing on the hot liquid as she took a seat on her leather sofa and gestured for Emma to join her. She took a sip, smiled, then set the mug down on the coffee table and picked up a piece of paper resting there. “So this is your report card.”

Emma took a sip of her cocoa and nodded.

Ingrid arched an elegant brow. “Did you do extra credit work?”

“No.”

“Re-take your mid-terms?”

“Uh-uh,” Emma said, shaking her head.

“So you convinced your teachers to change your grades?” Emma smiled with a tilt of her chin, “Yes, based entirely on my art of persuasion. Are you proud?”
Ingrid laughed and gave Emma a hug. “Honey, I couldn’t be prouder if they were based on real grades!” Only a lawyer would react that way, and Emma was once again thankful for the woman who adopted her. Ingrid pulled back, her expression now stern as she picked up another piece of paper. “This however . . . Care to explain this, Emma?”

Emma bit her lower lip, “Um . . . it’s a ticket.”

“A ticket? Emma, you shouldn’t even be driving! You may be 16, but you still only have a learner’s permit!” Emma opened her mouth to protest, but Ingrid cut her off, “And Mary Margaret doesn’t count. Two permits do not equal a license. From now on, you can only drive that jeep with a licensed driver in the car.”

Emma headed out to the pool where Killian sat on a lounge chair strumming his guitar. She rolled her eyes as she got close enough.

“Wa, wa, wa,” she taunted with a wrinkle of her nose, “do you only know how to play angst-ridden cry-baby music?”

Killian squinted from the sun as he looked up at her. “Wonderful seeing you, too, Swan. And it’s called alternative music. It’s what college students listen to. You know, as opposed to pop music that kills brain cells?”

Emma sighed. She hadn’t meant to pick a fight with him. She needed a favor, after all. She forced a smile and sat down on the end of the lounge chair, facing him. Her bare legs underneath her short skirt rubbed against the leg of his jeans as she sat, and Killian glanced down. Suddenly wondering if her skirt was too short, she shifted to yank it down a little. She cleared her throat and gave him her sweetest look, resting her hand on his knee.

“Have I told you yet that the facial hair looks good on you?”

Killian narrowed his eyes as if he saw right through her, “Last week you called them chin pubes.”

Emma shrugged, still smiling, “Well, I was wrong. They make you look older, wiser.”

Killian sighed and set his guitar down in its case. “Spit it out, Emma. What do you want?”

“Well, mom says I can take the jeep out, but only with a licensed driver. Can you take me for a lesson? Please?” Her pouting usually didn’t work on him, but she tried anyway. She also squeezed his knee beneath her hand.

Killian’s jaw clenched, and then he muttered, “What are the chances of you shutting up until you get what you want?”

Emma grinned broadly, “Slim to none.” She grabbed his hand and yanked him up as she stood, “Come on!”

“You know Emma, back when my Dad and I lived in England, we drove on the left side of the road. But here in America, I’m pretty sure you drive on the right.”

“I’m trying!” Emma snapped. Killian seemed to bring up England every chance he got and seemed to think all things British were far superior to anything in the US. It didn’t help that all of Emma’s friends thought his accent was hot. She scowled at him now, “You try driving in clogs!”
Emma eased back to the right side of the road, ignoring Killian as he eyed her up and down.

“Why do you dress like that anyway?”

“Like what?”

“Like you stepped out of a fashion magazine,” Killian seemed to be scrutinizing her, and she squirmed. At times it felt like he was reading her like an open book. “You just don’t seem like the type.”

“Oh? And what type am I, mister fashion police?” “I don’t know,” he looked at her intently again, and she pretended to concentrate on the road. “Casual? Vintage?” Emma had to admit, casual and vintage sounded appealing, but she would never give him the satisfaction of admitting it. “There’s nothing wrong with keeping up with what’s popular.”

“Oh,” Killian argued with a bob of his head, “you could be your own person.”

Emma snorted, “And that’s what you do? Dressing all in black?”

“First of all, black is a good color on me. Second, I wear other colors.”

Emma rolled her eyes, “Yeah, let’s see, navy blue, dark purple, dark red. Every shade of . . . oh yeah, dark! I mean who are trying to be, John Wayne?”

Killian laughed out loud, “John Wayne?”

“You know, the man in black? The country singer.”

Killian doubled over, laughing even more. “I think you mean Johnny Cash.”

“Whatever.”

Killian finally stopped laughing and turned sideways to get a better look at her. “All I’m saying, Emma, is that you don’t have to be what’s popular. You should just be you.”

Emma gripped the steering wheel harder, narrowing her eyes as if she were having to concentrate on her driving.

“You don’t even know who that is, do you?” Killian asked softly.

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“Mary Margaret, do you think I don’t know who I really am?”

Emma and her best friend were standing in line during gym class waiting for their turn to swing a tennis racquet. As Emma had pointed out on multiple occasions, standing around wasn’t exactly aerobically affective. Coach Humbert, of course, had eventually told her to stop exercising her mouth or she’d get detention. And Mr. Gold said she was a poor public speaker!

Mary Margaret rolled her eyes, “Is Killian giving you grief again?”

“Is the earth still revolving on its axis?”

“Why do you always let him get to you?”

Emma shrugged, “He is older. Maybe he’s right.”
Mary Margaret chuckled, “Emma, he’s eighteen, not 300. And it’s a phase. All college freshman go through it. We learned about it in AP psychology.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, is he overly idealistic?”

“Yeah.”

“Does he think he’s unique while everyone else is following the crowd?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Self-righteous? Opinionated? Stubborn?”

Emma nodded the affirmative to all three. Mary Margaret gave a firm nod.

“See? I told you. A phase.”

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” Coach Humbert called out. Everyone turned to face their teacher. Standing next to him was a tall, lanky red head. Her hair was braided in twin braids and she wore a t-shirt over blue jean shorts. The t-shirt was sparkly and decorated with rainbows and unicorns. On her feet were a pair of converse tennis shoes. She shuffled nervously as she regarded everyone, clutching her books to her chest. “I’d like everyone to meet our new student, Anna Arendelle.”

“Oh, Mary Margaret, my mission is clear.” Emma breathed, her heart going out to Anna. “That girl is so adorably clueless. We have to adopt her.”

Mary Margaret smiled at the red head, “She seems sweet.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed, shaking her head, “but the student body will eat her alive dressed like that. I mean look at her, she’s dressed like a five year old.”

“I think her shirt is cute.”

Emma laughed, “Of course you do, but you’d never actually wear it.”

The bell rang, dismissing the girls to the locker rooms. Emma motioned for Anna to come over. The girl’s jaw dropped as she touched her hand to her chest and mouthed, “Me?” Emma and Mary Margaret nodded vehemently.

“Come have lunch with us,” Emma told her, linking her arm through Anna’s.

Zelena and her underlings stopped nearby and snickered. “Their stock will plummet,” Zelena said, disdain dripping from her voice.

Mary Margaret slipped her arm through Anna’s as well and whispered to the girl loud enough for Zelena to hear. “Don’t pay any attention to her. She’s just envious that we didn’t ask her to sit with us.”

Later, after Emma and Mary Margaret changed out of their gym clothes, they walked Anna to the cafeteria, showing her around as they went. Mary Margaret pointed with pride at a group of cute boys hanging out on the picnic benches.
“Over there are all the cutest, most popular boys in school. And that one, in the varsity letter jacket is my boyfriend, David.”

David saw Mary Margaret and jogged over.

“Wow,” Anna breathed, “he’s really cute.”

“Yeah,” Mary Margaret said, beaming, “he really is.”

“I really am what?” David asked when he reached them.

Mary Margaret tilted her head up for a kiss as she wrapped her arms around David’s waist. “Cute. You really are cute.”

“I try,” he said as he obliged his girlfriend with a kiss, and Emma rolled her eyes at their cheesiness.

“Which one’s your boyfriend, Emma?” Anna asked innocently.

“Ugh! Are you kidding?”

“Emma has a strict personal code,” Mary Margaret explained. “She refuses to date high school boys.”

“Why not?” Anna asked with a curious raise of her eyebrows.

Emma shrugged. She wasn’t about to explain that in the foster care system she had seen enough teen pregnancies to fill up ten after school specials. “It’s a personal choice that every girl has to make for herself. High school boys are just self-centered and immature.”

“Except for your old friend David,” the tall blonde joked, throwing his famous quarterback arm across Emma’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Emma teased as she returned David’s side hug, “you’re a prince among frogs. But alas, you’re taken.”

“Wow,” Anna exclaimed, “you guys talk like grown-ups!”

“Well,” Mary Margaret explained, “J.M. Barrie High is a really good school.”

Anna was looking a little overwhelmed, so Emma quickly changed the subject. “Did you bring your own lunch, Anna?”

“No, I have to buy mine.”

“I’ll take her into the cafeteria,” David offered.

“Great!” Emma said, grabbing Mary Margaret by the hand, “We’ll save us all seats in the courtyard.”

Anna followed David into the cafeteria line, picking up a plastic tray and settling her books on the side of it. She was sliding her tray along the conveyor, bypassing the soggy pre-packaged sandwiches, when the boy behind her leaned across her.

“David! Hey, man! It’s been awhile!”

David reached across Anna and clasped the other boy’s hand, “Kristoff! Good to see you!”
“We miss you at Dungeons and Dragons,” Kristoff continued.

“Yeah,” David chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, “Mary Margaret wasn’t a fan, and well . . . I’m busy with football.”

“Right . . . right . . . wow!” Kristoff grabbed the notebook off Anna’s tray, and she tried to grab it back, her face turning red. “Is this a twi’lek?” he pointed to a drawing on the front of her notebook. “It’s really good.”

“Thanks,” Anna said shyly, “I do lots of fan art. I do Tolkien too.” She flipped through her notebook to show him some drawings of elves and dragons. Kristoff gushed over those, too.

“Seriously? These are really good. Have you ever been to Comic Con?”

Anna shook her head, her braids bobbing excitedly, “No, but I’ve been to Dragon Con.”

“Do you cosplay?”

“Absolutely! You should have seen my Princess Leia costume last year. Not New Hope or Return of the Jedi, but the one from the Empire Strikes Back. Not the white jumpsuit, but the dress from Cloud City.”

“Awesome! You should show me sometime. I’ve been Han Solo a couple of times,” he stumbled over that last word and ducked his head as he blushed.

Anna bit her bottom lip as she smiled up at him, “Really? Small world, huh?”

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“What took you two so long?” Emma asked as David and Anna sat down.

Anna shrugged, and Emma narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the blush that stained the girl’s cheeks. She took a sip of her milk before speaking. “I was talking to a really nice guy.”

Emma and Mary Margaret exchanged glances. “Who?”

Anna glanced around as she answered, “An old friend of David’s. What was his name, David?” She sat up eagerly as Kristoff exited the cafeteria doors. “That guy!” Anna waved excitedly, but when Kristoff tried to wave back, he almost dropped his lunch tray.

Emma watched Anna’s clearly smitten face as she watched Kristoff join his friends. Her mouth formed into a thin line as she set her Diet Coke down with force. “Anna,” she said patiently, “do you see those kids sitting on that grassy knoll over there?”

“With Kristoff? Yeah.”

Emma sighed and leaned forward on her elbows. “They spend all their time playing role-playing games and going to comic book conventions. They know weird movie trivia and do bizarre things like learn elvish and Klingon.”

Anna slumped into her seat a bit, “What’s wrong with all of that?”

“It’s just that no respectable girl dates them. You don’t want to start off on the wrong foot do you?”

“No . . .”
“Kristoff’s not a bad guy,” David tried to cut in.

“David,” Mary Margaret snapped, “now’s not the time.”

“I know!” Emma squealed, “Let’s do a makeover!”

“A . . . makeover?” Anna asked tentatively, pulling nervously on one of her braids.

“Please?” Emma begged, using her best pout.

“Emma lives for makeovers,” Mary Margaret explained, “it gives her a feeling of control in a world full of chaos.”

Emma rolled her eyes as AP psychology reared its ugly head again. She cut her eyes back to Anna, who let out a sigh that ruffled her bangs. “Sure,” she said with a shrug, “why not?”

The first order of business when they got back to Emma’s house was to cut and dye Anna’s hair. Anna was hesitant about Emma’s idea to put blonde streaks in her red hair, but Emma assured her it would give her a unique look that would help her stand out from other red heads. Then they cut Anna’s hair into soft layers and taught her how to curl it.

“No braids?” she had asked sadly, to which Emma and Mary Margaret vehemently shook their heads.

The next order of business was wardrobe, and luckily Emma had more clothes in her closet than she knew what to do with. Not only that, it just so happened that she and Anna were the same size. Anna seemed hesitant at first about the short skirts and lower cut tops, but when they showed her the finished product in the mirror, the red head bounced up and down with joy at how good she looked. Emma couldn’t help but smile. Not only had the makeover been a success, but she had truly come to like the girl. Anna had an innocence that was genuine, and a joy and exuberance about life that was contagious. Emma also quickly learned that the girl had no filter; Anna said whatever popped into her head. Emma found it refreshing.

Now Emma was in the family room, helping guide Anna through a workout DVD. Anna’s scrawny arms and legs were clearly not used to exercise, and she whined the entire time.

“Emma,” she moaned, “I’m tired. And my buns? They feel nothing like steel!”

Emma chuckled. Yep, absolutely no filter. “Well, not at first they won’t, but they will. As long as you don’t do the exercises sporadically.”

“How do I know if I’m doing them sporadically?”

“That’s another thing, Anna, we need to work on your vocabulary,” Emma pulled Anna over to the couch and picked up a book from the coffee table. “See, I use this book. It gives me a new word every day. Today’s word is sporadically. It means every once in a while. Try using it in a sentence today, okay?”

“Hey, brainiac,” a voice called from the doorway.

Emma lifted her head to see Killian standing there. Heat flooded her face. He had clearly seen the word a day book, judging by the smirk on his face. She never wanted him to find out about that! She scowled at his smug expression and groaned.
“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?” he asked with an arched eyebrow.

“Killian, Anna. Anna, Killian,” Emma deadpanned, giving Killian a glare that could curdle milk.

“Nice to meet you!” Anna said enthusiastically, bouncing off the couch to shake his hand. She then turned back to Emma “Um, where’s the little girl’s room?”

Emma told her where to go, and as soon as Anna was out of ear shot, Killian’s lecture began.

“Emma, what the bloody hell are you doing?”

Emma’s mouth fell open, “What’s your problem? I’m helping a new girl at school.”

“Dressing her up like your own personal Barbie doll, you mean.”

Emma glared at him, crossing her arms indignantly over her chest, “I’m saving her from teenage hell. Do you realize that the wounds of adolescence can take years to heal?”

Killian grasped his hair with both hands in frustration, “Emma, popularity doesn’t fix everything! You’re squashing that girl’s individuality and making her just as clueless and shallow as you!”

“Shallow? Clueless?” Emma balled her hands into fists. “You are so full of it, Killian Jones!”

“Hey, Killian!” Mary Margaret called, sticking her head out the kitchen door. “Can you come in here for a sec? And Emma, could you run upstairs and grab that curling iron you said Anna could borrow?”

“Fine!” they both spat, turning on their heels to walk away from each other.

The minute Killian stepped in the kitchen, Mary Margaret drew her arm back and smacked him as hard as she could in the chest. “Ow!” he yelped, “What the bloody hell was that for?”

“You! Being a self-absorbed idiot!”

“Me?” Killian protested.

“Yes, you! Could you lay off Emma, please? You know why she’s obsessed with makeovers, right?”

“Because crimes of fashion make her break out in hives?”

Mary Margaret rolled her eyes. “NO! She had to make over herself, Killian. In order to survive. Every time she sees a new kid that the socially elite can potentially tear to shreds, she sees a little of herself. That ten year old foster kid who’s idea of high fashion was the discount rack at Target.”

“I suppose she wasn’t that girl anymore by the time my dad and I showed up,” Killian mused, cocking his head as he regarded Emma in a new light. When Ingrid had married his dad, he was mostly just angry. Angry that his father had married again and had moved him to a new town again. He had been fifteen and full of too much angst to pay any attention to his thirteen year old stepsister. She had seemed flighty and silly; giggling with friends over the latest boy bands. It had never occurred to him to look beyond to see the lost girl underneath. Then six months later, his father broke his leg on a ski trip, fell in “love” with his nurse, and that was that. Another marriage ended for Brennan Jones and another move for Killian. Thank God for Ingrid who saw the lost boy in an angry kid. His continued visits to the Swan household had been his saving grace, and somewhere along the
way, Emma had become the spunky friend he adored verbally sparing with. He honestly wasn’t trying to hurt her.

“Jones!”

Killian jumped, shaking his head to awaken him from his reverie. “Uh, yeah?”

“Are you listening to me?” Mary Margaret asked.

He sighed and lowered his head, feeling ashamed. “Yes, I hear you. I’ll try to be a little more compassionate.”

“Good,” Mary Margaret said firmly, “because what you think matters to her.”

“It does?” Killian’s eyebrows shot up. For some reason, the idea that Emma cared what he thought of her made a thrill course through him.

“Yeah,” Mary Margaret told him seriously, “more than she even knows.”

The next day at school, everyone was whispering about the pretty new girl hanging out with Emma Swan and Mary Margaret Blanchard. The admiration in the eyes of all the boys was obvious, too. Another successful makeover for The Swan!

The three girls were walking to lunch when Kristoff practically jumped in their path, offering them a flyer.

“Ooh,” Anna breathed, “a party!”

“Yeah,” Kristoff nodded, “I hope you’ll come.”

“Sure,” Anna replied, her eyes sparkling, “I wouldn’t miss it.”

The chemistry between the two wasn’t lost on Emma, so she whisked Anna away as quickly as she could. She took the flyer from her hand and waded it up, throwing it in the nearest trash can.

“But . . . “ Anna protested, her face falling.

“It was a party in the valley anyway,” Mary Margaret explained. “The police always break them up in less than an hour, and it takes that long to drive there anyway.”

“Besides, Anna, don’t sell yourself short,” Emma continued, “Why settle for Kristoff? You’re the mysterious new girl, which means you can have any guy you want.” Emma bit her lower lip as she thought, “Let’s see, who’s single . . . oh! Hans!”

“That’s right!” Mary Margaret agreed, “He just broke up with Tiana!”

“Hans?” Anna asked, “You mean that really good looking guy who sits behind me in lit class?” Emma and Mary Margaret nodded enthusiastically. “I doubt he even knows I’m alive.”

“That’s not true!” Emma protested, “He said you gave him a tooth ache.”

“I what?”
“It means he thinks your sweet.”

Anna blushed and smiled shyly, “Wow . . .”

“Did he really say that?” Mary Margaret whispered.

“No,” Emma whispered back. She could tell Mary Margaret wasn’t pleased, but what could it hurt? Mr. Gold never wrote a love note to Ms. French, either, and look how well that turned out!

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“Look at the map again, Mary Margaret, there should be numbers along the top.”

“There aren’t numbers, David, there are letters. And don’t talk to me like I’m stupid!”

In the back seat of David’s convertible, Anna exchanged an awkward glance with Emma, who shook her head. David and Mary Margaret were usually nauseatingly sweet, but the last couple of days David had been snappy. The four of them were on their way to the party in the valley. Mary Margaret had found out that Hans would be there, so this was the perfect opportunity for Anna to get his attention. Unfortunately, they were lost. And David wasn’t handling it well. He snatched the map from Mary Margaret, but lost his grip on it. It went sailing over his head and fluttered away into the LA sky. David banged his palm against the steering wheel, which resulted in a fresh round of arguing between him and Mary Margaret. Emma sighed and rubbed her forehead wearily.

Somehow, miraculously, they made it to the party. Mary Margaret and David seemed intent on continuing their fight on the front lawn, so Emma and Anna ditched them. The party was already in full swing as they headed inside. Music was thumping and everyone was dancing. Emma spied Hans in the corner and maneuvered Anna to a spot where Hans could easily see her.

“Hans is over there,” Emma whispered.

Anna turned to her with a look that was like a deer in the headlights. “What do I do?”

Emma smiled and took Anna’s hand. “Just dance. You’re in his line of sight. Let him come to you.”

The two girls danced, first one song, then another. Anna forgot her nerves and laughed with Emma. She wasn’t the sexiest dancer in the world, but her enthusiasm was contagious as her curls bounced and her laughter floated through the air. Emma let herself forget her friends fighting on the front lawn, let herself forget trying to protect Anna from the angst of high school, let herself forget even who she was supposed to be for all these people. For a little while it was just her and Anna, two friends having a great time. When the second song ended, she and Anna laughed together, breathless, and she caught Hans’ eye across the room. Emma was giddy with excitement at the look on his face; he had noticed Anna! And how could he not? She was adorable and so full of life.

A hip hop song started and Hans and a group of about five other people were sitting on top of the back of a couch swinging their bodies back and forth to the music. One girl, Mulan, swung her foot too high in the air, and her shoe came flying off. Before Emma knew what had happened, it hit Anna in the head with a thud and her friend crumpled to the floor. Emma screamed and fell to her knees beside her friend. Kristoff was suddenly there too, his face a mask of worry. Emma groaned inwardly. How was this guy always popping up? She lifted her face and caught Hans looking there way.

“Hans!” she cried out. “I need you!”

Hans rushed to them immediately. Kristoff made a move towards Anna, but Emma pushed him
aside. Kristoff wrung his hands as Hans scooped Anna up and deposited her on the couch.

“Just give her air, Kristoff,” Emma insisted, “she’ll be fine.”

Emma was worried about Anna, but as Hans hovered over her friend, Emma also felt a thrill go through her. What could be more romantic than Hans coming to Anna’s rescue? Emma sighed with relief as Anna’s eyes fluttered open.

“She might have a concussion!” Emma called out. “Ask her something, Hans!”

“Um . . . right,” he muttered, “what’s four times four?”

“Stuff she knows!”

Kristoff ran up behind Emma, stumbling and spilling loose pieces of ice that he was carrying in his hands, “I – I got her some ice.”

“Seriously, Kristoff?” Emma groaned, “At least wrap it in a towel.”

“A towel! Right!” and he ran off again.

When Kristoff returned, he tried to hover over Anna, but Emma took the ice-filled towel from him and gently pushed him away.

“Is she okay? I just want to be sure she’s okay . . . “

“Yes, Kristoff, she’s fine. Why don’t you run off and go find her jacket in case she gets cold?”

Kristoff’s face brightened at the suggestion, and he ran off. Emma sighed with relief that she had finally gotten rid of him, and turned back to her friend. Hans had taken the towel and was holding it to Anna’s head. The two were gazing into each other’s eyes just as Emma had hoped they would. Hans put his hand beneath her elbow and eased her to a sitting position.

“Hey, can you hear the song that’s playing?” he asked her.

Anna nodded her head tentatively and then sang along, “Rollin’ with the homies.”

Hans chuckled and nodded. “That’s right. Wanna dance?”

Anna’s smile was bright as she nodded yes, and Hans lead her out into the room to dance. Emma backed away from the pair of them, feeling as if her work was done. She wandered out the back door, gazing up at the stars and taking a deep breath. Anna wouldn’t be the butt of any jokes. She would never feel the sting of rejection. Emma had spared her that.

The phone in Emma’s purse rang, “Mom? High!”

“Emma! Where the hell are you? It sounds like you’re at an orgy.”

A drunken guy stumbled into Emma, almost toppling her into the pool. Someone else whooped and did a cannonball into the water. Emma imagined it sounded insane to her mother’s ears.

“I thought you said you were going to a coffee shop with your friends,” her mother continued suspiciously.

“I did – I was – I am! They seated us outside by the street. You know how that is on a Friday night.”
“Okay,” her mother replied smugly as if she wasn’t buying it, “then I want you home in twenty minutes.”

Emma laughed, “Well, it may take a little longer than that, mom.”

“Everywhere in LA takes twenty minutes.”

“But –“ before Emma could reply, her mother hung up. She had to get home fast, or she would be so dead. Maybe if she got home soon enough, she could come up with a good cover story for why she was late. Though that was unlikely. Ingrid seemed to have a sixth sense about these things. Sometimes Emma swore she had a magic mirror hidden somewhere that could watch her at all times.

Emma went back inside and started weaving her way through the crowd which had grown larger since she’d stepped outside. She spotted Anna across the room slow dancing with Hans and decided to wait until the last possible moment to pull her away. Mary Margaret and David were nowhere to be seen. Emma headed for the front door, thinking maybe they were still out on the front lawn. As she neared the stairs, she heard David’s voice coming from the second floor. Emma followed the sound upstairs.

“Mary Margaret!” David yelled in frustration, banging on a bedroom door. “Come on, open the door!”

“Um, David . . .” Emma spoke hesitantly as she approached him. He waved her off distractedly, not even turning around.

“Mary Margaret, please let me in!” “No! You think I’m a spoiled princess who only cares about popularity.”

David groaned in frustration, “That’s not what I said. Just let me in, and we’ll talk.”

“Go away, David!”

“No,” David snapped back, turning around and leaning his back against the door. He crossed his arms over his chest stubbornly. “I’m not leaving. I’ll sit out here all night if I have to.”

Emma sighed when Mary Margaret started yelling through the door again. She turned and headed back downstairs; obviously she wasn’t getting home the way she’d arrived. She hated to do it, but she was forced to approach Anna and tap Hans on the shoulder. He turned and smiled widely when he saw Emma.

“Wanna cut in?”

“Uh, no, I need Anna, actually. My mom says I have to get home right away, and Anna and I came together –“

“I’ll give you a ride home,” Hans interrupted quickly.

Emma shook her head, “I wouldn’t feel right leaving without Anna.”

Hans glanced back at the red head, “I’ll take you both, no problem.”

Emma sighed with relief, “Thank you Hans. That would be great.”

Emma apologized profusely to Anna for having to leave early, but her new friend didn’t seem to mind. They tracked down Kristoff who was sulking in the corner holding Anna’s jacket. Emma
actually felt a little sorry for the guy. Especially when he gave Anna a look like a lost puppy when Hans helped her into the jacket. Emma pushed aside the feeling by reminding herself how well her matchmaking had gone. Hans had danced with Anna twice, helped her into her jacket, and was giving them a ride home. Anna’s social standing at school was now a guarantee.

The three of them headed out to Hans’ car and saw Mulan struggling to help her friends Ruby and Merida into the back seat of her SUV. Mulan was clearly the designated driver for her two friends who were obviously completely smashed.

“Don’t you dare puke back there! I just got this thing for my birthday!” Mulan shouted as she shut the back door. She turned and saw the three of them coming across the lawn. “Anna! I am so sorry I hit you with my shoe. Are you okay?”

Anna just laughed it off, to Mulan’s obvious relief.

“So, Anna,” Hans asked as he unlocked his Lexus, “where do you live?”

“On Elm.”

“You live on Elm?” Mulan asked, “So do I! Why don’t I just give you a lift?”

“Sure!” Anna said with a shrug. “If you don’t mind making one more stop.”

“You mean my friends? Oh, they’re crashing at my place anyway.”

During this entire exchange, Emma was giving herself a facial workout trying to shut Anna up without actually talking. Didn’t she know that getting a ride home with Hans would be the perfect ending to the night? Emma was even planning on having Hans drop her off first so he and Anna could be alone. But Emma’s eyebrow raises and pointed glares were lost on the red head, so before she knew it, Anna was driving off with Mulan, and Emma was in the front passenger seat of Hans’ car.

As Hans drove, he kept smiling strangely at Emma and singing the songs on the radio to her. Emma smiled back awkwardly. She longed to take off her stilettos and stick her sore feet up on the dashboard. She would do that if David or Killian were driving, but this wasn’t David or Killian. She suddenly realized how little she actually knew Hans. He was an acquaintance, not an actual friend. All she really knew about him was that he was popular and his dad was a record producer. He was always bragging about the concert tickets his father could get. That all added up to mean that Emma had no idea how to break the awkward silence in the car (Hans singing didn’t count). She finally decided that if Anna wasn’t here, the least she could do was talk her up.

“Anna is great, isn’t she?” Emma asked Hans. A rhetorical question, really, it was obvious the two of them had hit it off.

But to Emma’s surprise, Hans just shrugged and said, “I guess.”

Emma frowned, “I mean, she’s so full of life, she just lights up the room, and her red hair is just beautiful. Don’t you think?”

Hans gave her a pointed look, “I prefer blondes.”

Emma narrowed her eyes. Ignoring his comment, she plowed on, “Everyone knows how hard your break up with Tiana was, Hans. I really want to see you move on, you know?”

Suddenly, Hans pulled the car over. Emma sat up straighter and looked around in confusion, “Why
are you stopping?”

Hans gave her a feral grin as he removed his seatbelt and leaned towards her. “I knew it.”

Then, to Emma’s shock, he grabbed her and kissed her. Emma shoved him away immediately.
“Ugh! You knew what?”

“That you’re into me,” he replied huskily, coming towards her again.

Emma lifted her hand to ward him off, “Seriously? Are you insane?”

“Come on, Emma, you’ve been flirting with me all year!”

“Yeah, right! I’ve been trying to set you up with Anna!”

“Anna?” Hans asked incredulously, his face a mask of absolute disgust, “Why would I ever go out with her? Do you know who my father is?”

Emma rolled her eyes, “You are a snob and a half. I change my mind, Anna’s too good for you.”

Hans didn’t seem the least bit happy with that sentiment, “Anna and I—” he paused giving an exaggerated shudder as if the very idea disgusted him. Emma rolled her eyes again, “we don’t make sense. You and I, Emma, we make sense.”

Hans lunged across the front seat, grabbing Emma and kissing her again. He had her pinned against the passenger door with his tongue shoved into her mouth. Emma started to panic slightly as she struggled against him. When he made no move to release her, she shoved her elbow as hard as she could into his ribs. Hans yowled with pain and fell back into the driver’s seat. Emma honestly didn’t think Hans was the type to commit date rape, but she wasn’t about to stick around to test the theory. She opened the door and tumbled out. Hans started driving the car slowly towards her, and Emma ran, though she wasn’t very fast in her heels.

“Come on, baby, get back in the car,” Hans yelled out the window.

Emma stopped and whirled towards the car, livid, “I am no one’s baby!” she shouted, slamming her tiny purse against the top of Hans’ ridiculous luxury car. Hans shouted obscenities back at her, then peeled away.

Emma was breathing hard, adrenaline coursing through her as she watched Hans’ headlights fade away. But the adrenaline quickly faded, and cold dread took over. She had no idea where she was, and from the looks of it, she was in a very bad neighborhood. With trembling hands, she pulled her cell phone out of her purse, praying that either David or Mary Margaret would answer. But before she could even dial, she heard a loud click right by her ear and felt cold metal against the back of her head.

“Give me the purse and the phone. Or I blow your damn head off,” a voice behind her growled.

Moves from the self-defense classes she and her mother had taken flipped through Emma’s mind. But the class had also emphasized that if a person had a weapon, and all they wanted was your money, give it to them. Better to be mugged than dead. The class had also taught them to throw the items the criminal wanted as far away from you as possible and then run, so Emma tossed her purse and cell as hard as she could across the empty parking lot and took off, running right out of her stilettos.

Emma braced herself as she ran for a shot to ring out, but it never came. Regardless, she kept
running, wanting to put as much distance between herself and the thug as possible. Finally, when her lungs were burning and her sides were cramping, she stopped. She bent over, clutching her side and panting heavily, as she took in her surroundings once again. She was in the parking lot of a crowded convenience store. It was well lit, but the crowd hanging out front looked less than savory. The leers they were giving her were not making her feel very safe. Thankfully, there was a pay phone just a few feet away. Emma made her way to it, her heart dropping to her stomach. There were only two phone numbers she knew by heart. She couldn’t call her mother without being in a world of trouble, so there was only one other person she could call. And she really didn’t want to call him. She also had no money, so she had to call collect. She worried for a minute that he would be so angry, he wouldn’t accept the call, but he did. When she heard his voice saying her name (and did he actually sound worried?), relief flooded her.

“Killian!” she breathed, “Thank God! I have had the worst night. I was at a party, and mom called and wanted me home, but David and Mary Margaret were in this big fight, so I got this other boy from school to give me a ride. But he pulled over, and he, and he . . .”

Emma felt tears rise up, and she struggled to tamp them down.

“He did what?” Killian asked, voice low as if he was ready to beat the crap out of someone, “What did he do? Did he hurt you?”

Killian sounded so genuinely worried about her, that it released the tears, but she managed to choke out, “No, no, nothing like that. But he made a move on me, and he wouldn’t stop, so I got out of the car,” she paused as a sob escaped her, but she quickly swallowed it and continued, “but he left me. Just left me there! And there was a guy with a gun —“

“A gun!” Killian cried out, “My God, Emma. Where the hell are you? I’m coming for you. Right now.”

Emma glanced around, biting her lower lip, “Somewhere in the valley . . .”

Killian swore under his breath, and then she heard some muffled sounds, including a voice that sounded female. Killian got her to read the number on the front of the convenience store and the nearest street sign.

“Stay there, Emma. Don’t move. I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

Emma replaced the phone’s receiver after Killian hung up, her whole body shaking. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, suddenly wishing she had worn a jacket. When she got ready for the party, she thought a jacket detracted from the outfit. It seemed foolish now.

It felt like forever, but Killian finally pulled up. He jumped out of the truck almost before he put it in park and ran towards her, pulling her into a hug. Emma sank into him gladly; she’d never been so happy to see someone in her life.

He stroked her hair for a few minutes, and then asked, “Are you sure you’re okay? Do I need to take you to the police station to report that kid from your school? And the guy with the gun who mugged you, we should really —“

Emma stepped out of his embrace and shook her head vehemently, “No, please, Killian, I just want to go home now.”

He nodded his assent. Then he saw that she was shivering. “Bloody hell, Emma, where are your shoes?”
“I had to run.”

He shrugged out of his black leather jacket and draped it around her. “You’re freezing,” he said, pulling her close again and rubbing her arms.

Over Killian’s shoulder, Emma noticed for the first time that someone was sitting in the passenger seat of his truck. She couldn’t see very well from the glow of the truck’s headlights, but she could tell the person was female.

“What’s that?”

Killian glanced back, “Oh, that’s Milah. I was . . . on a date.”

Everything clicked together fairly quickly in Emma’s mind. He was on a date, but she had reached him at his apartment. There had been rustling in the background on the phone, and Killian’s voice had sounded muffled. Like he was getting dressed? And it was late. And Killian was currently blushing and scratching behind his ear, Oh . . . The thought of what she interrupted made Emma feel simultaneously sick to her stomach and incredibly embarrassed. Killian guided her to his truck and helped her into the back of the extended cab. He stuck his head in the window to address both Emma and his date.

“While we’re here, I need to fill up,” he explained, and then Emma was alone with the woman in the front seat.

“Hi, I’m Emma,” she said, leaning forward to offer Milah her hand to shake. But Milah glanced at her hand as if it might bite, so Emma withdrew it and snuggled back into Killian’s jacket. Milah eyed her wearing it with narrowed eyes.

“I’m Milah,” she finally said.

Emma nodded, “Killian told me.” Milah faced forward again, and Emma gnawed on her lower lip. “So, um, how did you two meet?”

Milah turned then and gave her a condescending smile, “I’m a grad student assistant in one of his classes.”

“Oh,” Emma said in a small voice. She studied Milah’s profile as she turned back around. Only now did she notice that the woman was a bit older than Killian, how much older she couldn’t tell. The woman was beautiful with wavy dark hair and flashing grey eyes. She exuded strength, intensity, and a worldliness that made Emma feel like a little girl.

Milah smiled smugly at Emma’s reflection in the rearview mirror, “Killian is very mature; an old soul. Girl’s his age just don’t understand him.”

Emma squirmed a bit, not quite knowing what to say. After a long, awkward pause, she finally said, “Well, I’m sorry I interrupted your date.”

Milah turned and looked at Emma with a half-smile, “Of course Killian would rush to the rescue of his little sister.”

Emma’s mouth fell open, and she felt an intense need to correct Milah, but before she could say anything, Killian climbed back into the truck. He looked back at her immediately, concern still in his eyes, and asked again if she was okay.

Emma chuckled, drawing Killian’s jacket closer around her, “I’ve told you a hundred times,
I’m fine.”

“I know how badly you want to get home, but I have to drop Milah off first.”

Emma nodded, confused as to why tears are gathering at the corner of her eyes. Killian misinterpreted it. “Hey,” he said, leaning back to grasp her knee, “I’ll cover for you, okay? Ingrid won’t be mad when she sees you with me.”

His words smarted for some reason, and all Emma could think about was how Milah called her his “little sister.” Although why it should bother her so much, she couldn’t say. As they drove, Milah and Killian started getting into a debate about the class where they met. Emma didn’t understand half of what they were talking about, but she had been reading people long enough in her life to know that Milah liked to pretend she was smarter than she actually was. Her strength and intensity weren’t an act, but her academic persona was. Emma began to think she was older than the typical grad student and guessed there was a tragic back story there.

Killian shrugged at an argument Milah was making, “I don’t know. I think there’s merit to learning forms straight off.”

“Kil, please!” Milah argued back, “He’s restraining your mind at its most fecund point before it’s had a chance to sail freely through the ocean of ideas. It’s just like Hamlet said, To thine own self be true.”

Emma wasn’t sure why she did it. Maybe it was to prove to Killian that she wasn’t clueless, like he accused her of being. Maybe it was to pull back the mask of intellect she knew Milah wore. Whatever the reason, Emma chose to put her two cents in.

“Actually, Hamlet didn’t say that.”

Milah rolled her eyes and chuckled. When she spoke, she looked at Killian as if Emma wasn’t worth her time, “I think I remember Hamlet accurately.”

Emma gave a sharp, sarcastic laugh. She was so over this woman’s attitude towards her. She seemed to hate Emma for no apparent reason. “Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn’t say that. That Polonius guy did.”

Killian’s subsequent laughter was joyful, and Emma was thrilled to see him beaming with pride at her reflection in the rearview mirror. It was Killian, after all, who had convinced her to watch that movie. Mel Gibson, of course, being the argument that won her over. She had expected to be confused, but the story had actually drawn her in. They had ended up watching it again a few nights later.

Emma met Killian’s gaze in the rearview mirror. She smiled, and he winked at her.

Milah’s mouth dropped open, then she closed it in a thin line and glared at Killian. “So that’s how it is then?”

Killian tore his eyes away from Emma to look at Milah in confusion, “What?”

They were pulling up to Milah’s apartment now, and the woman was out of the truck as soon as it stopped. She slammed the passenger door shut with force that impressed Emma. It was a heavy door, and the cab was a bit far from the ground.

“Milah, wait!” Killian cried as he hurriedly unbuckled his seat belt.
Emma leaned closer to the window, unable to resist watching as Killian chased after the woman. He didn’t catch up to her until she reached her door, and then he grabbed her by the elbow and turned her to him. They argued, Milah yelling and gesturing towards the truck. He glanced in that direction, catching Emma’s gaze, then looked back at Milah as he shook his head. Finally, as if his words are inadequate, he grabbed Milah’s face and kissed her.

Emma quickly looked away, her heart constricting. She didn’t know why it bothered her. She thought of Hans’ grabby hands from earlier, and groaned as she rubbed her temple. She suddenly knew that she wanted what Mary Margaret and David had, what it seemed like Killian had with Milah. But how was she supposed to ever have that when she was apparently a horrible judge of people? Like being so wrong about Hans, and even Milah. She didn’t seem like Killian’s type, yet he was out their kissing her passionately. Maybe Killian was right. Maybe she really was clueless.

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Emma dreaded the arrival of Monday, and it wasn’t just the typical end of the weekend blues. On Monday she would have to tell Anna how wrong she had been about Hans. When David and Mary Margaret picked her up for school, she was worrying so much about what she would say to Anna, she almost didn’t notice at first . . .

“David! What the hell are you wearing?”

David turned to her with a grin, “Plaid. I’m wearing plaid. And I like it.”

His gaze then turned to Mary Margaret who smiled so wide her dimples showed. “I agree,” she said. “He looks very handsome.”

David lifted Mary Margaret’s hand and kissed it. His face fell a bit as he saw Emma’s confused expression. “Look, Emma, I appreciate what you did back when I first moved here. You helped teach me the ropes of living in LA, and for that I’ll be forever grateful. But I’m tired of pushing aside who I really am, the things I really like. So from now on, I’m just going to be me.”

Emma’s eyes darted from one of her best friends to the other. “Is this what your fight was about the other night?”

“Yeah,” Mary Margaret said, her voice trembling, “David was afraid he would lose me. But he was wrong. I love him for who he is, not for his social standing.”

David chuckled, “Although I didn’t communicate what I meant all that well at first.”

Mary Margaret laughed, too, “No, but we got it all worked out.”

Emma watched the two of them lean over and kiss one another with their usual sweetness. A smile filled her face and a lightness fluttered in her chest. “David, I can’t say that I’ll ever be a fan of the flannel shirts, but I am a fan of you. If you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“Thanks, Emma,” David told her, “I hope you’re also okay with me bowing out of whatever our crew has planned for next weekend.”

“Oh?” “Kristoff says they have a spot for me in their next Dungeons and Dragons night. So my friends and I will be doing that.”

Emma caught Mary Margaret’s eye, and the brunette nodded that she was okay with it. “Hans and Phillip and all the other guys are going to join you for Dungeons & Dragons?”
“No,” David said, shaking his head, “but my friends August and Jefferson are.”

Emma nodded in understanding, “Your real friends, then.”

David’s face softened as he regarded her, “If all my real friends were going, you’d be there, Emma.”

Emma gave David a wobbly smile, as emotions welled up in her, “Thanks, David. Are girls allowed at this role playing stuff?”

“Absolutely,” David said with a grin.

“Then I’m there!”

“Me too,” Mary Margaret said firmly.

David chuckled, “Okay, girls, I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic to give it a try. But let me have a guys night first, okay? I think Kristoff, August, and Jefferson would faint if girls as hot as you showed up suddenly at their game.”

They all laughed at that mental image as David pulled out of Emma’s driveway. Suddenly, Emma had an idea of how she could make things up to Anna . . .

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Emma waited until after gym class to explain what happened with Hans. For a few moments, Anna sat there in her sports bra, clutching her t-shirt to her chest and staring off into space. Emma and Mary Margaret exchanged glances over the top of Anna’s head.

“He’s a complete jerk, Anna,” Emma said quickly, “I never should have pushed you towards him.”

“He doesn’t deserve you,” Mary Margaret added, running her hand over Anna’s hair in a motherly gesture.

Suddenly, to their surprise, Anna burst out laughing. And kept laughing. Emma looked at Mary Margaret in alarm. Had Anna completely lost it?

“I don’t care,” Anna finally gasped between laughs. “I sat here, waiting to care, and I just . . . don’t! If I really liked him, I would care, you know?” Then she laughed some more.

Emma laughed too, mostly with relief and wrapped her arm around Anna, pulling her close in a side hug. A buzzing sound kept coming from her gym bag.

“Emma,” Mary Margaret huffed in frustration, “get your phone already, it’s driving me crazy!”

“Yeah,” Emma said, fishing it out of her bag, “it rang during gym class. I have no idea who would be calling me . . .”

Emma saw that she had a message and listened to it. As she did, a smile slowly filled up her face. She hung up and beamed at her two friends.

“Well, ladies, are you ready for an amazing weekend? Because Killian got us invited to a college party!”

They all squealed and Anna threw her arms around Emma’s neck.

Evidently, there would be no grieving period over Hans.
The party Killian had gotten them invited to wasn’t some beer bash at a rundown frat house, but a legit party with a full bar and a live band. So legit, in fact, that the girls had to have their hands stamped to show that they were underage and couldn’t drink. Someone asked Emma to dance almost immediately, and Mary Margaret wasn’t far behind. Dance after dance, Emma was kept busy as one college guy after another swept her out onto the floor. Mary Margaret, who was also still out on the dance floor, caught her eye and waved happily.

But Emma’s happiness was deflated when she saw Anna standing forlornly against the wall. No one was asking her to dance. The band started in on another song, and still Anna stood alone. Then Emma saw him – Killian – approaching Anna with a smile. He offered her his hand gallantly, and Anna giggled. Emma gently slapped the shoulder of Victor, the guy she was dancing with.

“Look!” she told him, “Killian asked Anna to dance. He never dances!”

Victor raised his eyebrows as he took in Killian’s awkward, jerky movement, “I can see why.”

“No, you don’t understand. He saw her standing all alone and came to her rescue! It’s so sweet.”

Victor shrugged as he pulled Emma farther out on the dance floor. Emma turned and caught Killian’s eye. She waved at him, and he gave an embarrassed wave back. Now Emma could fully enjoy herself knowing Anna was no longer alone.

Emma sank with a sigh into a folding chair along the wall, resisting the urge to remove her heels. She loved dancing, but she’d lost count of how many songs in a row she had danced to already. She needed a breather. She suppressed a groan when someone walked up and stood in front of her.

“May I have this dance?”

Only one person would ask in such an old-fashioned away. Only one person had that exact accent. Emma looked up, and sure enough, Killian was standing there, a nervous smile on his face. He was holding his hand out towards her. Emma quirked an eyebrow at him.

“I thought you didn’t dance.”

He shrugged, “It’s a slow song. Anyone can sway.”

She didn’t know why, but she was nervous about accepting. She quickly told herself that was silly, and took Killian’s hand. He led her out on the dance floor, keeping his eyes locked on hers. Then he pulled her close, resting one hand on her waist and holding her hand with the other. Emma cleared her throat nervously as she rested her free hand on his shoulder. Emma’s eyes darted around as a blush crept up her neck. Why was she so nervous? This was just Killian.

“Why didn’t you come with a date?” he asked her.

Emma narrowed her eyes, “You mean you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“About my personal code. I don’t date high school guys.”

Killian nodded and searched her face intently. She glanced away from his gaze. “And why is that?”
Emma shrugged, “They’re immature.”

Killian was quiet for a moment before he spoke, “That’s not it.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Oh, it’s not?”

“No, it isn’t,” he narrowed his eyes as he searched hers, then they widened as his eyebrows arched. “You’re afraid. Afraid of ending up like other girls you knew when you were a foster kid.”

Emma swallowed her gasp and shook her head, “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Read me like that.”

Killian shrugged, “I don’t know. You’re just an open book for some reason.”

They were quiet for a few moments. Killian let go of her hand to snake both arms around her waist instead. Emma slid her free hand up to rest on his other shoulder. She cleared her throat nervously “What about you? Where’s Milah?”

Killian chuckled nervously and ducked his head. If his hand had been free, Emma was sure he would have scratched behind his ear. “We – uh – I’m not seeing her anymore.” He met Emma’s eyes and seemed to be debating with himself. “I found out she was married.”

Emma’s eyebrows shot up at that, “Really? Wow, Killian, I’m sorry.”

He gave Emma a small smile, “It’s okay, actually. I don’t think it was healthy. She sort of treated me like a boy, not a man. You know?”

“How old was she?”

“28.”

“Killian!”

“I know!” he shook his head. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I was flattered, I guess.”

They fell silent again. Killian pulled her just a hair closer, and Emma wrapped her arms just a bit tighter around his neck.

“You haven’t lacked for partners tonight,” Killian finally pointed out.

Emma tipped her head to the side and smirked at him, “True. I didn’t say I wouldn’t date. Just not high school boys. Think you might set me up?”

“Hell no,” Killian snapped, more forcefully than Emma would have expected. He shook his head slightly, “I mean, sorry, no. I don’t want to have to kill anyone.”

“Why would you have to do that?” Emma chuckled.

“If someone broke your heart.”

His words were so sincere, it took Emma’s breath away. But then she remembered Milah’s words – he just thought of her as his little sister. Of course he would protect her. Like a brother. That wasn’t a bad thing. Was it?
Without thinking about it, Emma had started to fiddle with the hair at the nape of Killian’s neck. It was so soft, and his eyes . . .

“Emma.”

She jumped at the sound of Mary Margaret’s voice, and she shook her head. What was she doing? This was Killian! She let go of Killian and took a step back, clearing her throat nervously.

“Yeah?”

Mary Margaret glanced between the two of them, a smile teasing her lips. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, but Anna and I are pretty beat.”

Killian glanced at his watch, “Bloody hell, it’s 1 am! I better get you girls home before Ingrid kills me! I’ll go pull the car around.”

He squeezed Emma’s arm and left. When she turned to look at her best friend, Mary Margaret had a knowing smile on her face.

“What?” Emma asked defensively.

“Nothing.” Mary Margaret said. She threaded her arm with Emma’s and pulled her gently off the dance floor. “Absolutely nothing.”

*********************************************************

The day after the college party, Emma was exhausted. As much as she enjoyed parties and going out with her friends, sometimes staying home and vegging out was all she really wanted deep down. And as much she hated to admit it, Killian’s presence made it even more fun. So she didn’t feel the least bit disappointed to find herself in her pajamas at nine o’clock on a Saturday night watching Ren and Stimpy cartoons with Killian, a bowl of chips on the couch between them. With him, she didn’t feel self-conscious by the fact that she was wearing no make-up. She didn’t even give it a second thought when she started going through her nightly beauty regimen right in front of him. She flipped her hair over, brushing it from underneath. When she flipped it back, she caught Killian staring at her.

“What?”

She thought he seemed flustered, but then quickly told herself that was ridiculous. He confirmed it when he rolled his eyes at her, “How many hours a day do you spend grooming yourself anyway?”

Emma rolled her eyes right back. “Not all of us can be as naturally adorable as you,” she teased, poking him in the side to elicit giggles.

Killian jerked back, but not before Emma spied the dimples that he so rarely allowed to show. He wriggled his eyebrows at her, “I prefer the description devilishly handsome.”

Emma cocked her head at him, propping her chin in her hand, “You have dimples when you smile big enough.”

He shrugged, popping a few chips in his mouth, “So?”

Emma grinned mischievously, “So, you should smile more often.”
Killian just shook his head.

Emma got up on her knees, “Come on Killian, show me the dimples.”

“Uh-uh. Five year olds have dimples.”

“And so does Killian Jones,” Emma replied, pouncing on him and tickling him. Sure enough, his laughter brought out the dimples in full force.

Emma gave him a breather, which was a mistake. His eyes flashed as he grinned at her, “Oh, it’s on now!”

Emma yelped and attempted to dart away from him, sending the bowl of chips scattering to the floor. He grabbed her around the waist, tickling her until her sides hurt with laughter. Emma kicked and screamed in protest, but he kept right on going.

“Mercy!” Emma squealed, and he finally let go. Only then did Emma realize their position. Killian had pulled her down with him onto the couch, and now she was wedged between him and the back of the sofa, one of her legs flung over his. Her chest was pressed against his, and their faces were inches apart. The only sound as they looked long into each other’s eyes was their labored breaths from all the tickling.

“What’s going on here?”

They leapt apart at the sound of Ingrid’s voice. Emma’s face immediately burned, and she knew it must be a deep shade of red.

“We were just messing around,” Killian muttered as he bent to scoop up the chips and shove them back into the bowl.

“Okay,” Ingrid said as if she thought there was more to it, “and here I thought you two couldn’t stand each other.”

An awkward silence descended between the two of them as Ingrid walked out. Killian reached over and grabbed a box of crackers from the coffee table. Emma shifted and tried to watch television like she normally would. What had just happened?

“What are we watching anyway?” Killian muttered as he munched on the crackers, “Some cartoon?”

For some reason, his tone hurt her feelings where normally she would just sass him back. She pulled her knees up under her, “This isn’t just a cartoon, it’s Ren and Stimpy. They’re way existential.”

Killian looked at her with a crooked smile, “Do you have any idea what you’re talking about?”

Emma smiled back, then replied honestly, “No. Do I sound like I do?”

Killian shook his head and laughed, and Emma somehow knew things were back to normal. The phone rang, and she answered it. “Brennan, hi!” Killian immediately started making slashing motions with his hands. Emma raised her eyebrows at him, and he started mouthing the word no. “No, Brennan, sorry, he’s not here. Try checking the dorms. Okay. Bye.”

Killian let out a huge sigh of relief. “What was that all about?” Emma asked as she gathered
her hair into a messy bun. She pulled the elastic band off her wrist and secured it.

Killian rolled his eyes, “Wife number four. That’s what. Oh wait – it’s wife number five.”

Emma frowned in sympathy as she watched Killian’s jaw clench. She reached over for her hair clips and began securing the loose hair around her face. She said nothing, simply waiting for Killian to continue.

“She idea of family bonding is to criticize everything about me. Which is why I’m staying in the dorms over spring break.”

“Killian, that’s ridiculous,” Emma protested, “why do that when you can just stay here?”

He shook his head, “You don’t want some brother-type hanging around.”

“Killian, you’re not my brother.” She hadn’t meant it to sound anything more than matter-of-fact, but the look Killian gave her made her remember his arms wrapped around her waist, how close his lips had been to hers – what was wrong with her? This was Killian! She cleared her throat and snatched the box of crackers out of his hand, “Although you better not eat all the snacks.”

Killian grinned so wide, that there they were, the dimples again. Augh! Since when did she care so much about his damn dimples? He nodded, “Okay, I’ll stay here then.”

Emma smiled back and reached for her moisturizer. But suddenly, she didn’t want to smear cream on her face with Killian there. Then she inwardly berated herself and picked the jar up anyway. It’s only Killian. It’s only Killian. That was the mantra running through her head as she rubbed the cream onto her face.

******************************************************

The next day was an important one for Emma. She finally had enough practice hours behind the wheel and was taking her driver’s test. Emma had been counting the days off on her calendar for a month, eager for the freedom her license would allow. But here she was, taking the test and she was completely distracted.

What exactly had happened between her and Killian this past weekend? First the slow dance, and then the tickling on the couch. She couldn’t get him off her mind, which had never happened before. She mentally catalogued each and every time he had held her in his arms, from the time he had come to her rescue after the party in the valley to just the other night after he tickled her. Ugh! Why couldn’t she stop thinking about it?

“Pull over please,” the instructor said, pointing to a spot by the curb.

Emma was awful at parallel parking, but the space thankfully had an empty one behind it. She pulled into the space and turned off her jeep. “Well,” she asked with a grin, “how did I do?”

“Let’s see,” the instructor bit out with a glare, consulting his clipboard, “you kept drifting into the other lane, you ran a stop a sign, and you never once used your blinker. I say you failed.”

Emma’s heart plummeted, “What? I couldn’t have failed. I mean, surely, I can take it again, right? Or someone else maybe can look over your notes? I mean, this can’t be it.”

The instructor shook his head forcefully, “Oh, but it is. You can re-take the test in 30 days. Now, get out of the car before you kill someone.”

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*******************************************************************************
Emma was so depressed, nothing her mother said on the drive home could cheer her up. For some reason, she wanted to talk to Killian, so she headed straight to the patio where she heard his voice. When she got there, she was surprised to find Anna there too. Killian was apparently teaching her how to play hacky sack, a college cliché she always loved to tease him about.

“Hey!” they both said when they saw her.

“How’d your test go?” Killian asked.

“I failed.” Emma whispered, and suddenly she was pissed. Pissed at Anna for being here when all she wanted was to talk to Killian alone. But mostly pissed at Killian because she wanted him at all. She didn’t need a big brother. She could take care of herself. “And spare me the lecture, Killian, on how driving is a huge responsibility and I shouldn’t have taken it so lightly. Okay?”

Killian’s eyes widened, and he exchanged a look with Anna. “Well, I’ve got some studying to do, so . . .”

He quickly made himself scarce, and Anna bounced towards Emma with her usual enthusiasm. “Emma, I am so glad you’re here! I’m freaking out, and I need your help.”

Emma eased herself down onto a pool chair and massaged her temple. “Um, okay. What’s wrong?”

Anna giggled, “Nothing’s wrong, I just really really like someone, and I have to talk to somebody about it before I burst!”

Emma smiled back at Anna. If this was about Kristoff, and she hoped it was, she was now totally on board with it. “Who is it?”

Anna blushed furiously before whispering, “Killian.”

Emma suddenly felt as if she were in a room being sucked of its air. “Killian?”

“Yeah, I mean, he’s so hot, and he plays the guitar, and he’s a college guy.”

Emma shook her head, thinking maybe she was dreaming all of this. “Okay, well, do you . . . I mean, has he given you any indication he feels the same way?”

“Actually, yeah. We danced at the college party, remember? And he talks to me every time I come over here. Oh, and he’s always finding excuses to touch me or tickle me. I mean, he’s not the type of guy to lead a girl on, is he?”

Emma felt tears pool in her eyes, and she took a shaky breathe to mask how each of Anna’s words felt like daggers to her heart.

“Emma?” Anna asked with alarm, “Are you feeling okay? You look pale all of a sudden.”

Emma shook her head, “Yeah, I’m fine. My mom got me a huge hot chocolate to cheer me up, and now I feel like ralphing.”

“Okay, well, can you help me?”

“Help you what?”

“Get Killian.”

Maybe Emma really was going to puke, “Anna are you sure Killian’s really your type? I mean, he’s
kind of a brainiac. I mean, he even knows Greek and stuff.”

Anna narrowed her eyes at Emma, “What? You think I’m not smart enough for him?”

“I didn’t say that,” Emma quickly clarified, “it’s just . . . I’m not sure you two mesh well together.”

Anna’s eyes widened and her face looked incredibly hurt, “Be honest, Emma! You don’t think I’m good enough for your brother!”

“He’s not my brother!” Emma shouted. She was really tired of people saying that.

Anna leapt up, her hands clenched into fists at her side, “Why are you yelling at me? You know what, Emma? Just forget it! I’m outie!”

*I’m outie*?! Emma watched Anna walk away, her hips swaying in her short, pleated black leather skirt, her red blonde-streaked curls bouncing against her shoulders. Where was that sweet girl she had first met? Emma suddenly felt as if she had created a monster.

Emma had to get away to clear her head, and since she had just flunked her driver’s test, she had to walk. She walked and walked, thoughts tumbling through her head. Why was she so upset? She didn’t begrudge Anna a boyfriend, and she certainly didn’t think Anna was too dumb for Killian. But Killian needed someone he could banter with. He needed someone who knew how to cheer him up when he brooded too much. He needed someone who appreciated his biting sense of humor and his old-fashioned mannerisms. Emma stopped suddenly in her tracks as sudden clarity struck.

“Oh my God!” she said out loud to herself. “I’m in love with Killian!”

She was crazy, stupid in love with Killian!

But what did that matter? He thought she was a clueless kid sister who didn’t even know who she really was. She could love him until the day she died, and probably would, but it was doubtful he would ever love her back. Emma stopped her walking, feeling completely dejected.

Then she looked up and saw it. The funky, vintage boutique across the street. The outfit in the window caught her eye, and she jogged over for a closer look. The outfit in the window was a white lace shirt over tight black pants. She liked it even more up close. She walked inside and found a store filled with clothes that were nothing like the fashions she usually wore. Emma tried on the outfit that had drawn her into the store and decided immediately that she had to buy it. She then decided on some dark wash skinny jeans, a couple of thin sweaters, a black blouse with vintage embroidery, and a filmy, flowy dress with a pattern of tiny flowers. Then she picked out two pairs of boots, one black and one brown. When she piled all of it on the counter, Killian’s words suddenly came back to her: *casual and vintage*. She chuckled to herself.

“Will that be all?” the salesgirl asked.

Emma was about to say yes when she saw it. It drew her, and when she pulled the red leather jacket off the hanger and slipped it on, it felt like it had been made just for her.

She smiled as she flipped her hair over the collar. “No, I’ll also be buying this.”

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Emma rubbed her hands nervously down the front of her dark wash jeans as she approached Kristoff’s front door, then she adjusted the collar of her red leather jacket before ringing the doorbell. She wasn’t sure what her friends would think of her make over.
It was Anna who opened the door. The two girls just stood staring at each other for a few moments, mouths agape. Anna’s hair was in braids again, and she wore a t-shirt with Princess Leia across the front and said “I’d just as soon kiss a wookie.”

The silence was broken when they both started laughing. Then they spoke simultaneously.

“I like your shirt.”

“I like your jacket.”

Anna shook her head, “Emma, I am so sorry.”

“No, I’m the one who should be apologizing! I should have been more understanding about your feelings for Killian.”

Anna smiled a knowing smile, then reached out and pulled Emma through the door. She put her arm around her friend and whispered in her ear, “It’s okay, Emma. I know.”

“Know what?” Emma asked with an arch of her eyebrows.

“That you’re in love with Killian but can’t admit to yourself.”

Emma’s jaw dropped.

“Mary Margaret explained it to me.”

Emma ducked her head, blushing furiously, “I actually have admitted it to myself. Finally. But you’re okay with it?”

“Remember how I couldn’t make myself care when I found out Hans didn’t really like me?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Anna said with a shrug, “let’s just say, one of these days, there will be a guy who makes me care.”

Emma sighed with relief and gave Anna a quick hug. Then she let the red head guide her into the kitchen where a large group, including Mary Margaret and David, were gathered around a table with cards in their hands. Everyone smiled and welcomed her warmly. Kristoff even pulled out the chair for her.

“Okay,” Emma said nervously, “you’re gonna have to explain all this to me.”

“Don’t worry, Emma,” Mary Margaret said, “they decided to ease us into this with a simpler game.”

“I picked it up at the comic book store,” Kristoff explained, dealing Emma in. “It’s a Lord of the Rings game. The goal is to get the ring of power and destroy it on the top of mount doom.”

Emma was already lost.

But as the afternoon progressed, Emma found herself having fun, even though she kept losing every hand. Kristoff was on one side of her, and Anna on the other, but both kept leaning over her to flirt with each other. When Emma returned from the bathroom to find Kristoff in her seat, whispering in Anna’s ear as she giggled, a smile lit up Emma’s face.

It looked like Anna’s feelings for Killian were total history.
A week later, Ingrid took a huge case, pro bono. A single father of twins was in danger of losing custody because of a long, lost aunt. It turned out the man, Michael Tillman, wasn’t the twins’ biological father. He had married their mother when they were infants, and then she had passed away of cancer when they were three. Now that said twins were twelve years old, this aunt had suddenly shown up claiming he was an unfit father. Ingrid suspected her concerns had more to do with the trust fund the twins’ would inherit when they turned 18.

The case made Emma livid, and she wanted to help in any way she could. No way was some greedy woman going to tear two children from the only home they had ever known! Which was why Emma sat at their dining room table with a stack of files and a highlighter in her hand. Killian, who often interned in her mother’s firm, sat next to her working as well.

Across from them was one of Ingrid’s associates, a man she and Killian had secretly dubbed “the weasel.” He whined like a weasel and had a tight, pinched face like one. His actual name was Mr. Wesel. Ingrid was at the courthouse with her client.

Killian was trying to concentrate on his work, but Emma’s presence was something that was hard to ignore. His feelings for her had changed, he could admit that now. The first inkling had been the panic that gripped him when she had called him for help. When he had seen her standing in that parking lot, barefoot and freezing, he had an overwhelming desire to pummel anyone who would ever dare to hurt her. He had honestly forgotten all about Milah the second Emma had collapsed with relief into his arms. It had been so obvious how he felt, that even Milah had seen it.

But it wasn’t until he danced with her at the campus party that his feelings had become obvious to himself. He had danced with her after spending several agonizing hours watching every other man in the room pursue her. And he had felt like punching every single one of them. Then he had danced with her and felt himself drowning in the sea foam green of her eyes, his arms pulling her closer without a conscious thought. And basically ever since he had been living in agony.

He smiled as he looked at her now. She had given herself a makeover, though he hadn’t commented on it. But he loved it. He loved the confidence she now exuded, the way she finally seemed comfortable in her own skin. Emma glanced his way, and he felt himself blush at being caught staring.

“What?”

“Your red leather jacket.”

“Yeah?”

“I like the red leather jacket.”

Emma’s smile was bright as she looked back down at the file she was reading. He couldn’t bear to look away from her and how she was gnawing on that plump lower lip of hers. The lips he so desperately longed to kiss. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, which gave him the most delectable view of her elegant, swanlike neck and the soft skin of her pink-tinged cheeks. He even loved the way she wrinkled her freckle-dusted nose when she was concentrating on something. He reached over and used his pencil to flick her ponytail off her shoulder. She rewarded him with another grin.

“You’re wearing your hair up a lot more lately,” he commented.
“Yeah,” she replied with a shrug, “I like wearing it up.”

“I like it, too,” he said softly.

Emma cracked her neck and arched her back, “It’s getting a little hot in here.”

She shrugged out of her jacket, and Killian’s heart thudded in his chest at the swell of her breasts beneath her tight, cream colored sweater. He tried to tell himself it was wrong to think of her this way when Ingrid had been so kind to him, but he was too mesmerized to look away. Especially when Emma shook her hair free of its ponytail, tilting her head back and closing her eyes as she ran her fingers through the long, golden locks. Killian turned bright red when his elbow slid from the edge of the table, sending his fist flying out from under his chin.

“Wait – where are the files on the aunt’s level of contact?”

Emma and Killian both looked up at Mr. Wesel with dazed and distracted expressions.

“The contact evidence? Where is it?”

Emma looked at the three stacks in front of her, “I was checking the phone conversation transcripts. Was it in there?”

Mr. Wesel’s jaw dropped, “Yes, it was in there!”

Flustered, Emma continued, “I organized it into three piles by date. Is that wrong?”

“Yes, it’s wrong! I’ll have to re-do all of that! Who cares about the phone conversations, you moron!”

“Hey!” Killian snapped. “Don’t talk to her like that!” “She’s an idiot who’s only here to play footsie with you,” Mr. Wesel countered. Then he sneered at Emma, “Go back to the mall, sweetheart. We both know you’re just a ditz with a credit card.”

Killian shouted back, but Emma was so humiliated, she fled the room in tears. Killian called out after her, then turned back to Mr. Wesel, irate with anger, “What the hell is your problem! She’s been working her butt off, we all have, to win this case!”

The older man stood, hurriedly gathered his things, and headed for the door. Killian ran after him and grabbed him by the arm, “Where are you going? We’ve got a ton of work to do!”

“Don’t act all high and mighty, Jones! Everyone knows the only reason you’re here is to get into that girl’s pants. Well, you can flirt on your own time. I’m calling in sick.”

With that, the weasel slammed the door in Killian’s face and was gone. He turned around with a sigh to see Emma sitting at the top of the stairs.

“Did I really ruin mom’s case?” she asked him tearfully.

Killian smiled up at her, “No,” he assured her as he climbed the stairs, “that guy is an idiot.”

Killian eased down onto the step next to her, wondering how much else he should say. Emma hugged herself, tears still staining her cheeks. He hated to see her this way.

“You shouldn’t be here, Emma. You should go do something fun with your friends.”
Emma turned hurt eyes his way, “So you agree with him, then. I’m just a ditz with a credit card. Selfish and shallow.”

“No, Emma,” he protested, hating himself as memories of all his little jabs at her floated through his mind.

She shook her head, “No wonder you only see me as a little sister.”

Killian took her gently by the elbow and turned her towards him, “You are not my little sister, Emma.” Emma’s eyes widened for a brief moment, but then she lowered her gaze, “You want to change the world, Killian. Become a lawyer and fight for injustice. What do I do? Nothing that matters.”

“Oh, Emma,” he said gently, toying with a strand of her hair, “I have never seen anyone with a heart like yours. You befriend people that others would ignore. You have loved Mary Margaret and David and Anna –”

“I give them makeovers, you mean. Tell them to date complete jerks.”

“Only because you want to spare them the pain you’ve felt your whole life. I’ve never known anyone who wants so badly to see people get their happy endings.”

Emma gazed up at him with a trembling smile, “Really?”

“Yes,” he breathed, cupping her cheek, “it’s what I love most about you.”

“Y-you love me?”

Killian felt the blood rush to his head and felt his heart thunder in his chest. He hadn’t meant to say that. He searched Emma’s face and saw the tiny smile and the hope shining in her green eyes. Could he be so lucky? Did she really feel the same? He swallowed hard. His thumb moved to brush against her lips.

“Yes,” he replied, voice barely above a whisper, “somewhere along the way, I’m not even sure when, I fell in love with you, Emma.”

Her smile widened, “And I fell in love with you.”

He let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding, a smile filling his face. He leaned forward, tilting Emma’s face up to his. Her eyes fluttered closed as he touched his lips to hers. The kiss was tentative at first, but when Emma pulled back briefly to smile sweetly at him, he grinned even wider and kissed her more deeply. Her mouth parted on a sigh, and he pulled her closer. He slipped his tongue into her mouth, and the kiss became even more passionate. Neither of them noticed the front door open and close.

“What’s going on here?”

They leapt apart at the sound of Ingrid’s voice. They laughed nervously to see her standing at the bottom of the steps, her hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

“Hi mom!” Emma told her with an embarrassed little wave.

Ingrid shook her head, “I don’t know why I’m shocked. I saw this coming.”

Killian and Emma both laughed, blushing, as she walked towards the kitchen. Killian was
just about to lean forward to kiss Emma again, when Ingrid’s heels clicked again across the foyer.

“Oh, and Killian, from now on you’ll be staying in the pool house.”

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If this were a teen flick, it would end there. Our young lovers kissing on the stairs, roll credits. And everyone would assume that they had passionate sex for a while and then grew up, their relationship just a memory of young love. But that’s not this story . . .

Five years later, Emma opened the door to her college dorm room to find . . . no one standing on the other side. She looked around in confusion until she spied the old bouquet on the floor at her feet. She had caught it five years ago at the wedding of her teachers, Mr. Gold and Ms. French. Mainly it was because Killian, David, and Kristoff had a bet going over whose girl could catch it. But it was partly the tiny bit of a romantic in her that maybe, just maybe, Killian was her soul mate. It was a little embarrassing how hard she fought to catch it; elbowing bridesmaids and wrestling Zelena to the ground. But then she had it in her hands, pumping it in her fist in victory. Killian had laughed, his smile wide as he scooped her up and kissed her like they were in some old movie. And she thought guys were supposed to freak out when their girlfriends wanted the bouquet that badly. (Of course, the $200 he had just won also sweetened the deal.)

Emma had actually kept it, and here it was at her feet, petals so brown they would turn to dust if she touched them. The white lace was slightly yellowed, the rose pink ribbons faded where the sun had hit them. Emma turned it carefully in her hand to see a note attached. In dramatic, flowing script that she would recognize anywhere, she read: “Did you mean it?”

Emma looked in both directions down the dormitory hallway, calling out, “Killian?” Then she noticed the trail of rose petals to her left, leading to the stairwell. With an excited smile, and a skip to her step, she eagerly followed the trail down the steps, out through the lobby and into the courtyard outside. There, standing in front of the wishing fountain, was Killian. Her heart suddenly fluttered with a thousand butterflies, and her mouth went dry. Her whole body trembled with excitement and slight disbelief that this was really happening. They had talked about it, in vague terms, but was he really going to . . .

When Emma reached, him he fell to one knee before her. Yes, he was really going to ask her. His smile wobbled nervously as he searched her face, and Emma felt tears welling up in her eyes already. He glanced at the bouquet in her hands.

“So, did you mean it?” he finally asked.

Emma played coy, “Mean what?”

His mouth twitched a little as he smiled, “That bouquet in your hands. When you caught it, did you really mean it? Because if you did, I think it’s high time I get you a new one.” Emma rolled her eyes, “I wanna hear you say it, Jones. I want the ring and – “ Killian pulled a blue Tiffany box out of his pocket. “Oh. . .,” she trailed off.

“Emma Swan, will you marry me?”

Emma bounced up and down, squealing “yes!” so loudly, a crowd started to gather. She threw her arms around his neck as he stood, pressing her lips to his, not caring when dried out petals rained down to the sidewalk.

She was getting a new one anyway.
* I'm still taking prompts, so please leave them in the comments!
* Speaking of prompts, I got some good ones already, so I decided to veer off my list of ideas and use one of them for the next chapter. Someone asked for Ever After, and the idea of writing Prince Killian was too much fun to pass up. I've read Prince Killian fics, but never written one. My muse is already brimming with ideas, and this one will be VERY different from the movie, I can tell you that already.
* For those of you who follow my other stories, I'd like to give you an idea of what you can expect. I've decided to prioritize finishing my works in progress, so I'm going to focus on each one and finish it before moving on to the next. Here's the order I'll be tackling them: 1. God Bless the Broken Road and its accompanying series Musings of Pastor's Kid Killian Jones 2. Normal Interruptus and the final story for the series Journeying the Realms 3. Descended from Delilah. After that, I will start on a new MC which will be a canon divergence for season 7.
* Thank you so much to everyone who are following my stories!
Ever After: Part One

Chapter Notes

* I'm dividing this one up into two parts for two reasons: One, to say I've had an insane week is an understatement. There were days I had planned to write and then life got in the way. So in order to post today, I had to admit defeat and split the story up. Second, this one sort of got away from me, in a good way. I created this whole alternate version of the Enchanted Forest and it was so much fun, I got carried away.

* Please remember this is an AU of the Enchanted Forest, so many things diverge from canon. I know, for example, that Snow's ring belonged to Charming's mother Ruth, not her own mother Ava. But in this story, I switched it. That's just one example, though, so don't go correcting me! I have my reasons :)  
* Every dress Emma wears in this story is one she has worn on the show, so have fun with that :) One of them JMO didn't wear, but Emma the character did as a teen.  
* Emma and Killian are younger in this story, just like in the movie Ever After. Emma is 18 and Killian is 22. Just so you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just before dawn in the kingdom of Avelor, only two souls are awake. One is up at such a dreary hour to escape a castle unseen, the other wakes from a fitful sleep on a stone hearth. One is clothed in the finest fabrics of the realms, the other finds herself covered in ashes from trying to keep warm. One is galloping through the forests and over the farm lands, the other wearily trudges through her stepmother’s meager farm to begin her morning chores. Those chores will take her to gather apples in the orchard.

This is where the destinies of these two souls will collide, to become forever intertwined. Though neither of them realize it yet.

What’s that phrase they use in fairy tales? Oh yes, *Once upon a time* . . .

Emma Swan doesn’t mind the quiet of her father’s apple orchard. She knows, of course, that in the eyes of the law, it is her stepmother’s apple orchard, but since the woman takes no pride in the land nor any concern in the deterioration of its estate, Emma thinks few would fault her for the way she thinks of it in her mind. Though she may not be happy on the Swan Manor, she takes pleasure in working the land. She relishes, for example, the quiet of the early morning amongst these apple trees, the sun’s rays dappling the earth through the fluttering leaves. When she’s gathering apples in her apron, or collecting eggs from the hens, or tending the bee hives, she isn’t doing chores heaped on her by her stepmother. No. She’s working her father’s land and keeping his estate going in the hopes that, one day, it might be hers.

The peace of her apple gathering is shattered by the sounds of half a dozen horses galloping along the country road. Emma watches them thunder past, her brow furrowing in curiosity. They are obviously royal guards, but what their business could be out here in the country, she cannot fathom. Her thoughts are drawn away from the royal guards by muffled grunts of frustration and the whinnying of a horse to her left. She turns to see a lone rider struggling with a feisty golden brown
stallion. If Emma’s anger hadn’t welled up so fast and hot, she would have chuckled at the thief’s poor choice in horses. Maximus is a stubborn horse that few on Swan Manor can ride.

“Oh no you don’t!” Emma mutters to herself as she races down the hill towards the horse and its rider. She keeps hold of her apron full of apples until she gets close enough to aim. Then she drops her load and sends one apple sailing directly for the forehead of the horse thief.

The projectile hits its mark, and the thief tumbles sideways from the saddle. Maximus whinnies and sidesteps, and the person now groaning on the ground has no idea how blessed he is that the stallion doesn’t purposefully trample him underfoot. The figure stumbles to his feet, but Emma isn’t relenting. Not yet. She grabs apple after apple from the ground and lobs them one after the other at the horse thief.

The figure’s head is still covered by a cloak, but Emma discovers the thief is indeed male by his voice as he begins to protest the assault. “I didn’t mean – ow! – to startle – ugh! – you.”

“Startle me? You’re stealing my family’s best stallion!”

“My own horse – ow! – broke a shoe!”

“Oh, and we’re supposed to do what? Just let you steal ours?”

The man finally stands upright, flinging his shawl and hood back as he attempts to stop the onslaught of apples. Emma eventually would have recognized the dark, handsome face with sparkling blue eyes from the royal processions she has seen on occasion, but in this moment it is the royal crest on his shawl that sends her immediately to her knees, her face to the ground. She’s not the cowering type, but she knows the law and her station.

“My apologies your highness,” she stammers as she stares at the ground, “I did not see you.”

Killian reaches up to tentatively explore the lump forming on his temple, “Your aim would suggest otherwise.”

He looks down at the woman, who is currently trembling at his feet. These types of displays are relished by some royalty, but not him. Being put on a pedestal is something he was born to and never earned. Nor did he ever ask for it. He would rather people speak to him forthrightly and look him boldly in the eye, but when the law states that he and his family can pretty much take whatever they wish from their subjects (like the horse of the peasant who is at this very moment groveling on the ground), few are willing to do so.

“And for that,” the woman continues, “I know the penalty is death.”

Killian frowns at the woman. He can’t see her face, but her voice doesn’t waver in the least. He has a feeling she would face the gallows with defiance in her eyes. And while what she says is technically true, he doesn’t feel a death sentence is the least bit warranted in this situation. She obviously didn’t know who he was when she began throwing red delicious projectiles at his head.

“Then speak of this to no one, and we shall call it even.”

He mounts the horse again. He’s wasted too much time as it is.

“If you refrain from using your heels, Maximus will respond much better. The horse I mean.”
Killian mumbles a thank you, slightly embarrassed that he needs riding advice from a peasant girl. He pulls a leather pouch from his inside pocket and empties the gold coins inside onto the ground before the girl.

“For your silence,” he tells her and then gallops off.

Emma’s heart is pounding as hard as Maximus’ retreating hooves, but as she lifts her head to take in the sight of the gold coins scattered across the ground, a smile fills her face.

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Killian has almost reached Avelor’s borders when something whizzes past his head. He turns to see an ax embedded in the tree just behind him. Judging by the crudeness of the weapon, it’s rough-hewn handle in particular, not to mention its sheer size, Killian knows what he has stumbled upon.

“An ogre attack,” he grumbles with a roll of his eyes.

Sure enough, as he crests the next hill, he sees a royal procession under attack. Arrows from royal guards whizz through the air as they attempt to hold the ogres off. Killian’s heart sinks as he recognizes the crest on the carriages, and he almost digs his heels into Maximus’ flanks to reach the battle faster. Instead, he takes the peasant girl’s advice and refrains, shouting a loud hiyah instead.

Killian draws his sword and slashes his way through the thick of the battle calling, “Uncle! Uncle!” as he does so.

“Killian!” a voice responds, and soon the prince sees a portly, middle-aged man rushing towards him. “Belle! They took Belle!”

Killian doesn’t even pause to speak to his uncle any further as a familiar scream fills the air. Killian turns his horse, scanning the tree line, then pushes the animal into a gallop when he spots his cousin’s brunette head flung over the shoulder of an ogre. She’s putting up a fight, as he would expect her to, but the blows from her petite form are ineffectual against such a giant creature. When Killian gets close enough, he launches himself from his horse and onto the back of the ogre. The force of Killian’s weight combined with the speed from the galloping horse, send the ogre toppling to the forest floor, and Belle goes rolling out of the monster’s grip and scrambles to her feet.

The terrain works both for Killian and against him. He has collided with the beast at the top of a steep hill, which has sent them both tumbling. The positive is that the ogre can’t regain his footing nor can he get a hold on Killian. The negative is that Killian is unable to gain an advantage. Killian scrambles for purchase with his feet or a root for his hands to grab hold of. The land, however, takes another steep drop sending Killian pitching forward in a somersault. Then he’s sliding forward straight for a drop off into the river below. The ogre, being heavier, goes over first with a deep-throated scream. Killian twists so he’s falling on his stomach, and his hands grasp again for something—anything—to stop him from going over. He finds it just in time, and is soon dangling by a thick vine over the water that has just swallowed up the ogre.

“Killian!” a voice calls out above him, and he looks up to see Belle’s worried face. She’s clinging to the same vine, which is longer than he had realized.

He reaches up with first one hand, then another, and Belle helps him. They crawl up the vine until they are on level ground again, both of them collapsing onto their backs, chests heaving from the exertion. Once they’ve both caught their breath, Belle rolls over to look at him.

“Why in the world are you all the way out here?”
Killian makes no move to sit up, his breaths still ragged, “I was running away.”

Belle just shakes her head as she struggles to a standing position, brushing the dirt and leaves from her blue skirt. She then offers Killian a hand and helps him up.

“What stopped you?”

He shakes his head back at his cousin and gives her a lopsided grin, “I lack conviction, I suppose. Something else seemed slightly more important.”

He flings his arm across her shoulder and leads her back to the caravan she had been snatched from. Thankfully, her royal guards have routed the ogres, and even Maximus is safe and sound. Unfortunately, Avelor’s royal guards have finally caught up with him.

“Killian,” the head of the guard, and the prince’s best friend, admonishes him, “did you really have to get me out of bed to chase you around the kingdom?”

Belle laughs merrily and pokes Killian in the ribs, “What is my cousin suffering from now?”

“An arranged marriage, among other things.”

“Ha ha, Graham, very funny,” Killian retorts as he mounts Maximus.

He watches his uncle, King Maurice, embrace Belle in relief.

“I heard about Aunt Colette,” Killian tells them softly, “I thought we would see you in a week at her funeral.”

Belle exchanges a pained glance with her father, “Corona has fallen to the ogre’s, Killian. That’s why we’re here.”

“What!” Killian exclaims.

“Which explains why such a large force of them were here at our borders,” Graham speaks up somberly. “Let’s get back to the castle where it’s safer.”

The rest of the members of the royal guard are eying Killian with barely concealed irritation. And now that he knows the seriousness facing the realm, he can’t say that he blames them. His little stunt running away seems extremely immature in the greater scheme of things.

And admitting that sends a chill through his veins.

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“Are you going to tell me who the witch is they’re forcing you to marry?” Belle asks as she watches Killian pace the royal library, the book she’s holding forgotten in her hand. “She must be hideous if you ran away like that.”

Killian stops and gives her a withering glare. “I’d rather not discuss it. Besides, the fall of Corona is much more serious news. I thought you had sought help?”

Corona isn’t the first kingdom to fall to the ogres, Killian knows, but it is the first to fall with full military might and a strong royal family behind it. The last kingdom to succumb to the ogres was Mishaven, and that was only because of the sudden and mysterious disappearance of the entire royal family. Corona’s fall only gives Killian’s father further reason to push for this impending marriage.
Belle sighs now and looks pensively out of the window where she sits reading, “That help required a deal my father refused to accept.”

“And what was that?”

“An arranged marriage – to the Dark One.”

Killian gasps and rushes to sit next to his cousin, “Belle, thank God Uncle Maurice refused!”

“I should be thankful?” Belle asks sadly. “It would have been terrifying, yes, but I could have saved my people.”

Killian shakes his head vehemently, “No, Belle, I can’t imagine your fate at the hands of that demon. And if you came to be with child, what then? The Dark One would have had a claim to the throne, and then God help us all!”

Belle narrows her eyes, “I hadn’t thought of that,” she glances then at the doors of the library, “What do you suppose our fathers are discussing?”

Killian shrugs and resumes his pacing.

“Who is she Killian?”

“Who?”

“You’re betrothed.”

“She’s not my betrothed – yet,” he sighs deeply and runs a hand through his hair, “Princess Jasmine of Agrabah. Her people are fierce fighters, apparently. Father believes their army combined with our navy will guarantee that our borders are protected from the ogres.”

“Rumor has it she’s very beautiful.”

“And what does that matter if she’s a stranger to me on our wedding night?”

Belle seems to only be half-listening to Killian as she eyes again the door leading to the King of Avelor’s study. “Killian!” she gasps, “You don’t think our fathers could be discussing an arranged marriage between – us? Do you?”

Killian’s eyes widen, “Surely not! We’re blood relatives!”

Belle shrugs, her face pale, “Other kingdoms do it.”

Killian turns pale as well, his stomach turning over at the thought. Not that his cousin is disgusting to look at, but she’s his cousin. They grew up together. He thinks of her like a sister. The thought of having to force himself on a near stranger to consummate a royal marriage is enough to give him chills, but to have to do that to his own cousin . . . His mind just won’t go there, and he shakes his head firmly, “No, Belle, don’t worry about such a thing. My father wouldn’t risk breaking faith with Agrabah. I may not be betrothed to Princess Jasmine yet, but I’m close enough. It would be political suicide to back out now.”

Belle lets out a shaky breath, “You’re right. Corona is the only kingdom that would benefit from such an arrangement, anyway. A kingdom that no longer exists.”

Her voice breaks on her final words, and Killian goes to her quickly, “We’ll win Corona
back somehow from the ogres, Belle, you’ll see.”

Belle bites her lower lip as tears fill her eyes, “The only way that will happen is if all the kingdoms unite, and right now they are more divided than ever. There are even whispers that the Black Fairy has broken free of her entrapment. These are dark times, Killian. We all need to do what we must. Even marry to align the kingdoms.”

Killian draws back from his cousin, his heart sinking. “But what about love?”

Belle leans her head against the window pane, and when she speaks, her voice holds a deep sadness, “What of it?”

Emma searches through the racks of dresses in her friend August’s studio, finally settling on one of pale blue. Red is more her color, but attracting too much attention is the last thing she needs or wants. She carries the voluminous dress towards the changing screen.

“This is suicide, Emma,” August argues even as he thrusts a skirt of crinoline into Emma’s arms.

Emma ducks behind the screen, tossing the dress up to hang over the top as she shimmies out of her own dull brown dress.

“Do you know the penalty for a peasant who dresses above her station?” August continues. “Five whole days in the stocks, and that’s just for the dress. You’re planning on impersonating a courtier. When you’ve never been to court!”

“Then I won’t be recognized,” Emma argues.

She pokes her head out from behind the dressing screen to find August’s back to her, crushing flowers with a pestle to make paints. He has been blessed to receive an apprenticeship with the royal portrait maker, which has rescued him from a toiling, meaningless existence as a servant on the Swan estate. He has been Emma’s best friend since they were both five and his family came to work as servants for her stepmother.

“Hand me the hose on that chair over there,” Emma asks him, and August turns and tosses them to her. “This is the only way I can think of to save your father, August. 20 gold coins won’t buy him back, but the command of a courtier might.”

“Or it might land you in the dungeon,” August sighs. “Look, Emma, I appreciate the gesture, but I’m not sure it’s worth the risk.”

“And what are we to do?” Emma asks, her voice muffled as the dress slips over her head, “Let your father be shipped off to the mines to pay for Cora’s debt? Where is she anyway?”

August makes his way over to the window and looks down into the marketplace, “Looking at brooches for your stepsisters.”

Emma snorts, “Unbelievable! She ignores the manor, sells your father to pay her debt, then still pretends she has money to burn!” Emma steps from behind the screen, tugging at the fabric nervously, “Now, don’t laugh.”

August turns to look at her, and he smiles appreciatively at the sight. It warms Emma’s heart until his eyes dip to her chest. Childhood friends they may be, but August is still a red-blooded male,
and women at court show off much more of their assets than peasant girls. Emma flushes and attempts to cover the wide expanse of skin from her neck to her cleavage, her eyes darting downward.


August steps forward and takes her chin in his hand, lifting her face towards him gently. “You are playing the part of a courtier. You look down to no one.”

Emma’s smile wobbles, “I’m just a peasant in a nice dress.”

August tips his head and regards her, “Well, you could have fooled me. You seem like a natural. Now, come on, let’s do something about your hair.”

August tugs on her hand and pulls her towards the salon where he prepares nobility for their fancy portraits. Emma grins and tries to pretend this is all a game. Instead of a gamble with a man’s life on the line.

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Emma tilts her head with purpose, mimicking the way her stepmother and stepsisters carry themselves. As if no one should dare defy her. She walks out into the cobbled street that leads out of the palace grounds, her eyes fixed on the carriage rumbling towards the gate. When it’s near enough, she steps forward with confidence she doesn’t completely feel, grasping the lead horse by the reins.

“I demand to speak with you about one of your prisoners,” Emma tells the driver, surprised herself at how commanding she sounds.

“I gotta get these blokes down to the docks, miss,” the driver argues, “they bein’ shipped off to pay they debt. I ain’t missin’ the boat.”

“I wish to buy back my servant Marco,” Emma continues, undeterred. She lifts the pouch in her hand containing the coins Prince Killian had tossed to her this morning, “I have twenty gold pieces to pay off his debt.”

The driver chuckles, “You couldn’t pay off a dog’s debt for twenty gold pieces, now move!”

Emma’s blood boils. She knows what it is to be treated as nothing more than property, as if your worth were no more than the stock in the barn. Or less. “How dare you! Every single person you have locked up in there is a human being! They don’t deserve to be shipped off to the mines just because they are poor. I’m freeing one of them, and you will take these coins and set him free! Now!”

The man’s face turns a bright shade of red. He is broad and thick, and just one of his meaty hands could send Emma flying into the stone wall behind her. But surely he wouldn’t strike a courtier. Or who he thinks is a courtier, anyway. Emma swears inwardly. So many things could go wrong. Fast.

“Get outta me way!” the driver screams as he leans towards her face.

“Is that any way to speak to a lady?” another cultured voice rings out.

The driver turns instantly pale as he pulls away from Emma. Emma’s heart begins to pound violently in her chest as she slowly turns around, keeping her eyes trained on the cobblestone street. August
had said a true courtier looks down to no one. But this is the prince. Who has also seen her before, but as a peasant throwing apples. She bobs in a tight curtsy, but knows August is right, she must lift her eyes to face the prince if the ruse has any hope of working. She’s no longer grimy with dirt under her finger nails and soot staining her cheeks. She’s wearing a glittering blue dress instead of brown rags. And her golden hair is twisted into an elegant bun at the nap of her neck instead of blowing crazy and free in a mass of curls. Still, she prays like never before as her gaze meets that of the prince that he doesn’t recognize her.

But Prince Killian at the moment isn’t even looking her way, instead gazing angrily at the carriage driver. It gives her a moment to take him in, something she hadn’t had time for this morning. He has that dark skin tone that all of the royal family of Avelor possess, as well as thick, dark hair that curls just a bit at the nape of his neck. His eyes are his most well-known attribute; even peasant maidens around the village well gush about how sparkling blue they are. Emma sees now that those stories have not been exaggerated. The prince is clearly angry, his arms crossed over his chest, his jaw clenching. That jaw is a strong, masculine one covered in attractive dark scruff.

“I – I’m sorry, your highness, but I’m just trying to do me job here. I gotta take these criminals to the docks.”

The words are out of Emma’s mouth before she can register what’s happening, “They aren’t criminals!”

Prince Killian’s gaze shifts to her in surprise. Maybe females of noble blood don’t go around shouting their opinions? “I beg your pardon?” Emma clears her throat, but plunges ahead. How many times has she wished she could speak her mind to the royal family, tell them the many things wrong with their kingdom and how their people suffer? “It makes no sense, your highness, to punish people for their poverty. Society is organized in such a way that one born poor is never given opportunities to better himself. So in a way, you first create criminals and then punish them.”

Killian raises his eyebrows, “Interesting words coming from a noble woman. And what business did you have with this particular group of prisoners? Or are you seeking to start a riot of civil disobedience?”

Emma isn’t sure, but she thinks his lips quirk up in a smirk at that last statement. And are his eyes sparkling? He probably just sees her as amusing. Emma lifts the pouch of coins. “I have 20 gold pieces here to pay off the debt for one of my own servants. Would you deny me the right to do so?”

The silence seems to stretch for too many long moments as the prince regards her. “Fine,” he finally says, then turns to the driver, “release him.”

“But your highness –“

“I said release him!”

Emma curtsies quickly, her heart hammering with relief. Then she rushes quickly to show the driver which one is Marco. Emma is overcome with emotion when he embraces her; how thin he has become! He pulls back and regards her with tear-filled eyes.

“I thought I was seeing a princess,” he whispers.

Emma just nods quickly. She’s supposed to be acting like a noble woman with her lowly servant. “Meet me at the bridge,” she whispers to Marco before stepping away from him. Loudly, she proclaims regally, “Prepare the horses! We must leave at once.”
Emma turns quickly to make her way out of the palace grounds in a different direction from Marco, but she almost bumps straight into the prince.

“I’ve never seen such spirit in a courtier before. I’m impressed.”

Emma curtsies quickly again, averting her gaze. As close as he is now, he might recognize her. “Thank you, your highness, but I must be on my way,” she says curtly, dodging around him.

He doesn’t grab for her, but hurries to walk alongside her, “Well, don’t rush off. Most courtiers seem to enjoy my company.”

Emma turns indignantly to regard his cocky grin and arched eyebrows. She knows it is unwise, but she can’t help rolling her eyes. “Please, just because you’re used to women falling in a dead faint at your feet doesn’t mean you deserve the attention.”

Killian blinks quickly, but his grin widens. What she says is true, and that fact intrigues him. He’s used to the noble women, and even peasant women, for that matter, fawning all over him. He knows full well he’s handsome, but he also knows most women have plenty of other reasons besides his looks to seek his attentions. News of his impending nuptials have caused much weeping and wringing of hands amongst the women of Avalor, who now see the possibility of a crown slipping through their fingers. He’s always wished to know how women would behave around him if he were simply Killian.

He steps in front of this intriguing blonde courtier with flashing green eyes and a quick-witted tongue. “You think me arrogant!” he declares, almost happily.

“Well, yes,” she replies with a regal tilt of her head, “I mean, you gave one man his freedom, but did you even glance at the others?”

Her words arrest him, and he looks over her shoulder at the carriage now rattling through the palace gates. She has a point. How often does he think of the plight of the common people in his kingdom? Belle carries a compassion for the people of Corona that puts him to shame, and he knows it full well. But whereas Belle always knew that ruling the kingdom fell to her, it was not always so for Killian. And ever since his entire life tilted on its axle, all he has done is rail against his fate. He’s never stopped to consider that the fate of all Avalor was bound up in his.

He glances back to see the blonde walking away from him, and he trots to catch back up to her. She makes no move to slow down, forcing him to step in front of her again.

“A name,” he asks, and he knows he sounds desperate.

Emma looks up at him in a panic. He wants her name? She swallows hard. Courtiers play coy, don’t they? So she steps around him with a shake of her head, “I must be going.”

He simply jogs beside her, “Please, I must know your name.”

How can she refuse? He’s the Crown Prince of Avalor for God’s sake! Of course, she can’t give him her real one, it might get back to Cora. Emma racks her brain, stalling, “I’m afraid the only name I have to give you is . . . Countess Ava Blanca.”

Prince Killian grins at her, a smile so wide she sees he has dimples. It’s silly, she’s never tittered on about the handsome prince like other girls, but her heart does a little flip at that smile. She can’t help smiling back.

“Killian!” a voice calls across the courtyard.
Emma’s heart leaps in her throat to see the Queen herself striding towards them. Emma knows it’s rude, but she darts away the second the prince turns towards his mother.

“Yes mother?”

“Yes, your father want’s a word with you, Killian.”

“Yes,” he responds sarcastically, “he usually does.”

He turns to find Countess Ava Blanca suddenly gone. He searches the crowded courtyard for her head of golden hair, but she has completely disappeared.

Countess Ava Blanca. He has to see her again. Never has a woman so intrigued him.

The sound of the surf breaking against the beach and the salty breeze brushing Emma’s cheeks is a welcome reprieve from all the hours of hard work she endures at Swan Manor. She makes her way carefully across the rocks, clambering onto a large one that she always enjoys perching on to read. She situates herself on the boulder, gathering her skirts beneath her bare feet and hugging her knees to her chest. She pulls her father’s book out from where she had tucked it under her arm and opens it to one of her favorite stories.

Emma only has three belongings from her parents. The book is one of them. On the inside cover is an inscription from her father: “My dearest Emma, even the possibility of a happy ending is a powerful thing. I look forward to reading these fairy tales to you over the years and instilling your heart with hope. Love, Daddy.”

Emma has read the book so many times, the cream colored leather cover is yellowed and cracked and the binding is bent. The pages are stained with soot at the edges from reading by the fire and the faded pink ribbon marker is badly frayed, but never has a book been so loved.

Hope has been in short supply in Emma’s life, but the book in her hands has brought her comfort in the darkest days. And really, she has so much to be thankful for. A roof over her head and food in her belly, which is more than many in her kingdom have. And though her stepmother and stepsisters don’t treat her in the least as family, she has August and his family. His mother, Beverly, and his sister Ruby are the manor’s housekeepers. And now, of course, they have his father Marco back as groundskeeper. Those four have loved Emma dearly as family and have protected her as best they can from Cora’s wrath and her older stepsister Zelena’s bullying. Her other stepsister, Regina, tries at times to be kind to Emma, but she is too afraid of crossing her mother and sister to do anything but toe the line. Still, at times, Regina is almost a friend. She at least warns Emma when Cora’s wrath is about to rain down on her.

But today Emma has a blissful day of freedom. Her stepfamily is off to watch a tennis match at the palace, which she of course is not allowed to attend. Cora was a baroness before marrying Emma’s father, and thus of noble blood. Unlike the blood of a simple merchant which runs through Emma’s veins. A fact Cora and Zelena are constantly reminding her of. Not that it matters. Emma has no interest in the tennis match which is only a veiled meat market for Prince Killian to choose a bride.

Emma’s stepmother has thought of nothing but scheming for her daughter to snatch up the eligible prince ever since the king announced that his son would choose a bride at the ball on Midsummer’s Eve. Emma personally thinks it’s foolishness. Such lavish celebrations are wasteful and silly when the ogres are still such a threat, not to mention that people in Avelor are starving.
Prince Killian, in Emma’s opinion, should do the honorable thing and marry Princess Jasmine as planned. Agrabah’s army can help defeat the ogres, and then Avalor can concentrate on the severe poverty gripping its people. Not that the prince cares about that. He had seemed cocky and self-absorbed when she met him. What does he care about starving peasants?

Emma had actually joked that he and Zelena deserved one another. Ruby had immediately told her to bite her tongue. The only throne she wanted that snob sitting on was the one she had to clean every day.

Emma realizes she has read the same paragraph three times and sighs. She leans back, reaching her toes down to dip into a tide pool amidst the rocks. A wave comes up, spraying the end of her dress, and she draws her legs back up. She’s wearing a pale pink dress that is a hand me down from Zelena. She doesn’t know why, but Ruby had insisted she wear something pretty for her day off. Emma had complied, although she can’t fathom why it matters. She isn’t going to see anyone. And if she does, they will probably know the empire-waisted gown with the simple, crinoline-free skirt is old. That fashion had gone out of style shortly before Zelena had tossed it into the rag bag.

Emma starts suddenly at a rustling in the trees behind her, and she turns quickly to scan the tree line. Emma’s eyes widen as she sees a bright box-shaped object caught in some branches. Then she hears voices and footsteps coming through the forest. Before she can take off or hide, the crown prince himself and a female companion come bursting through the trees, laughing. The brunette points and gives a delighted shout when she sees the object and doesn’t hesitate before clambering up the lower branches. She’s dressed appropriately for the task in leather breeches, her curly hair pulled back in a low, side ponytail. Prince Killian grabs her around the waist to hoist her higher, and her fingertips brush the tips of the cloth-covered box. She loses her balance, and the prince catches her, both of them laughing. The box is jostled free enough that it catches the wind and blows straight for Emma. It is then that the pair notice her, and the girl shouts for Emma to grab the string. For the first time, Emma sees the string dangling from the contraption, and she realizes suddenly that it’s an odd kite of some sort. Emma tucks her father’s book into the ribbon tied at her waist and dashes off, grabbing towards the string. Each time, it slips from her grasp. It isn’t until she’s waded ankle deep in the surf that she catches hold of it. When she turns, Prince Killian and his companion are racing across the sand towards her.

Great! Emma thinks to herself. Seeing the prince again was not part of the plan. She had pretended to be a courtier and given a false name. If she’s found out, the penalty could be severe. Not to mention the last thing she wants is to be anywhere near the prince’s courtship of this pretty, petite brunette. Emma shakes her head, surprised that she cares about that last point.

“Oh thank you,” the girl gushes as she reaches Emma, taking the kite’s string in her own hand.

“Ava!” Prince Killian exclaims, his face lighting up as if he’s thrilled to see her. “I mean, Countess Blanca, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Prince Killian takes her hand, leans over it, and brushes a kiss to her knuckles. Emma is suddenly glad that she let Ruby talk her into the pink dress. In her everyday clothes, he would have recognized her immediately as a fraud.

“So this is Countess Ava,” the brunette says, giving the prince a knowing look. He blushes slightly, which is rather becoming on him, actually, and scratches nervously behind his ear.

“Um, yes, Countess, may I introduce my cousin Belle.”

Emma raises her eyebrows at that, trying to conceal her relief that she’s his cousin. Then again, don’t some kingdoms betroth their children to relatives? “Princess Belle of Corona? I’m honored, your
highness,” Emma says with a small curtsy.

Belle waves her off, “Oh, don’t bother with all of that. Besides, I can’t really be princess of a kingdom that no longer exists, can I?”

Emma is impressed at the joy the young woman exudes, although she can detect sadness in her voice. She has lost much, yet still has a spark within her. Belle threads her arm through Emma’s and draws her up the beach, insisting she stay and fly the kite with her and the prince. Belle’s kindness is so genuine, Emma can’t help but agree.

“This is the oddest kite I’ve ever seen,” Emma remarks as Belle hands her the string. “I didn’t even know what it was at first.”

The prince chuckles, “My cousin is forever discovering oddities in her beloved books. And then she has to test them out for herself. She’s somewhat of a tinkerer.”

Belle rolls her eyes and punches Killian playfully, “First, you read as much as I do. Second, princesses must occupy their minds with more than just balls and deflecting suitors.”

Emma smiles, liking Belle already, and it’s clear from her and Killian’s interactions that the two of them are too much like brother and sister to ever wed. Emma doesn’t know why that relieves her, but it does.

Emma watches the kite, which Belle informs her is called a box kite, swoop and soar higher and higher into the air. She then glances at the prince out of the corner of her eye. “I thought you were playing tennis today.”

Prince Killian groans, “I was. Or I tried.”

Belle laughs so hard she almost doubles over, “What he means is that his female admirers wouldn’t allow him to enjoy the game. I seriously thought all those women would eat you alive, cousin, when you fell into the stands.”

The prince’s face turns bright crimson as his jaw clenches. “They were all trying to give me their handkerchiefs for good luck. As if I were about to joust or something.”

Belle was holding her sides as she continued to laugh, “You should have seen it Ava, he pulled about a dozen handkerchiefs from his shirt front. Of course, it serves him right. I’ve told him a thousand times to button his damn shirt.”

“It’s buttoned!”

Belle rolls her eyes, “Halfway.”

Emma exchanges a glance with Belle and shares in her laughter. Although she has to admit, she herself has admired the prince’s chest hair.

“But I knew the game was over,” Killian continues, “when that crazy red head was suddenly standing there with the ball in her hand.”

“That was weird,” Belle comments.

“The female spectators are supposed to stay behind the screen –“

“Yes, because heaven forbid we should get too close to manly sweat,” Belle interrupts with a roll of
her eyes. Yes, Emma definitely likes her.

The prince must be used to Belle interrupting him because he ignores her and keeps going, “but there she was, like she just *poofed* herself there or something. You don’t think she could have dark magic, do you? Be a witch or something?”

Belle chuckled and shook her head, “No, Killian, Zelena Mills isn’t wicked. Just desperate. For a crown.”

Emma coughs suddenly at the sound of her stepsister’s name. When the royals glance her way, she clears her throat loudly to cover up her reaction. It suddenly occurs to her that if the prince is no longer at the match, then –

“Can you believe Zelena and her mother Cora wrangled tea with my mother?” Killian complains, picking up a stone and examining it. “Do they really think bonding with the Queen will make me chose Zelena as a bride?” He tosses the stone into the waves with a heavy sigh, “All this scheming for a crown has me weary. I just needed to get away.”

Emma lets out a breath of relief. At least her stepmother and stepsisters are still occupied. Something about the prince’s tone makes her want to stay a bit longer. Maybe he wasn’t as selfish and arrogant as he had first seemed.

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Killian has honestly lost track of time talking to Countess Ava. When his father had decided that perhaps Killian didn’t *have* to marry Princess Jasmine, his first thoughts had admittedly gone to the feisty blonde who stared down a royal carriage. Yet try as he might, he hadn’t been able to track her down again. No one seemed to know a Countess Ava Blanca, and he hadn’t seen her at any of the social gatherings his mother had thrown to help him find a bride. And then today, by chance, here she was. She had been a vision dashing into the surf to retrieve Belle’s kite, her long blonde waves tumbling down her back. When she had turned to face them, the light reflecting off the water had caught her sea foam green eyes, causing them to sparkle in the most fetching way. In her gossamer pink gown, she looked like a naiad rising from the sea.

They sit now on the shore, digging their toes into the sand. He tries not to stare, but can’t help noting the way the wind blows tendrils of hair around her pink-tinged cheeks or how adorable the freckles are that sprinkle her nose. Belle has, probably intentionally, wandered farther down the beach to fly her kite. Ava draws her knees up under her and turns to look at him.

“I have to confess, Prince Killian, that maybe I was wrong about you.”

“Oh really? I’m not cocky and selfish after all?”

Her nose crinkles adorably as she rolls her eyes. Then she says in a completely serious voice, “Cocky, yes. Selfish, no. And not arrogant.”

“I’m cocky but not arrogant? However do I manage that?”

Ava laughs, “I don’t know. You have this boyish charm about you, and you are far too aware of your good looks –”

“Oh, so you admit I’m good looking.”

She ignores him and keeps going, “– so that’s the cocky part. But an arrogant person lacks compassion, and I don’t believe that of you. Compassion you have plenty of. Unfortunately, you
have no idea where to spend it.”

“Ah,” Killian says with a nod, “like ignoring the other prisoners in that carriage.”

“Precisely. And throwing this extravagant ball while ogres are threatening our borders.”

Killian winces, frowning at the countess. “You honestly think I don’t know the seriousness of the ogre situation?”

Emma’s eyes widen and her face goes pale. She feels like kicking herself. Now who is the self-absorbed one? “Oh my God, your highness, I’m sorry. Everyone knows about your brother. How callous of me!”

Killian’s jaw clenches as he stabs the sand with a bit of driftwood. “I was twelve,” he begins softly, “when our royal procession was attacked on the road. We were traveling home from Arrendele.”

Emma lifts her hand, but hesitates from touching the prince. They have been talking like old friends, but he is still royalty. Yet she longs to give him comfort. “You don’t have to tell the story,” she whispers.

He shakes his head. “No, I want to. Liam died in my arms. He was only sixteen.”

Emma rests her chin on her knees as she watches his profile. It’s clear that the pain is still fresh. And suddenly, a realization strikes her. “You didn’t just lose your brother that day. You also lost your freedom. Freedom to choose your own future.”

He turns to her and nods, “Aye. In one day, at only twelve years old, I became heir to the throne of Avalor. In one moment, my dreams of one day joining the royal navy and sailing the realms died along with my brother.”

Emma sighs deeply as she lets that sink in. She thought he was a reckless, shallow womanizer who didn’t take his responsibilities seriously, but now she sees there are deeper reasons for him to fight against a heavy destiny that was suddenly thrust upon him at a young age.

“Liam knew from the time he was just a small lad that he would one day have the throne,” Killian continues, “and he was made for it. He was the most noble and selfless person I’ve ever known, with impeccable character. He set the bar so high, how can I ever reach it?”

Emma isn’t sure what to say, so she remains silent, watching the surf wash in and out upon the sand. Killian turns to her suddenly with a smile, wishing to change the direction of the conversation.

“So what of your book?” “Oh,” Emma says with tender reverence in her voice as she picks the slender volume up from where she has rested it upon the sand, “it’s all I have of my father. So I’ve read it literally hundreds of times.”

Killian takes it from her and flips through the pages, then he stops and reads the inscription. “Hope is a powerful thing,” he muses, “but false hope can also be very cruel.”

He hands the book back to her, and she frowns. “Is this still about the arranged marriage?”

Killian shakes his head, “I don’t know, Ava. Belle tells me it’s my duty to marry Princess Jasmine, but my heart has always wanted to marry for love. And here I am looking at what amounts to a business transaction. Maybe there’s no such thing as soul mates or true love.”

Emma ducks her head, twisting the emerald ring on her finger as she muses. Prince Killian eyes her
“I wonder the same thing. Apparently my parents found true love, but then my mother died,” she takes a deep breath, knowing she can’t say too much or she could reveal her true identity, “Then my father entered a marriage of convenience. I think just so I would have a mother.”

“How old were you?”

“I don’t know,” Emma says with a shrug, “I was very young. All I have to go on is what my stepmother has told me. She says I was three when they wed, and in less than a week, he had a heart attack and died.”

“You’re lucky you had a stepmother, and that your father was of noble blood.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Emma replies, shifting uncomfortably in the sand. Suddenly, she starts. Did she just hear what she thinks she did? She strains to hear over the surf, and sure enough, faintly, she hears Regina’s voice far off past the tree line.

“Emma! Emma!”

She stands abruptly, and the prince follows her. “I – I suddenly remembered something I have to do,” she tells him hastily. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

Without waiting for a reply, Emma turns and dashes towards the trees.

“When will I see you again?” Killian calls after the countess’ retreating form. But she simply turns and gives him a quick wave before ducking into the forest. Killian shakes his head as Belle comes dashing up to join him.

“Why does she keep doing that?” Killian asks.

Instead of answering the question, Belle just teases him, “So that’s why you asked if I believe in love at first sight.”

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Ruby Lucas elbows her mother in the ribs as she watches Emma stir the breakfast porridge. Two things are out of character: one, Emma is humming as she stirs, and two, she’s staring dreamily into space. Beverly Lucas grins back at her daughter with a nod.

“So,” Ruby says with false casualness, throwing a wink at her mother, “did you hear that Cora and her daughters will be away all day again?”

“Mhm,” Emma mumbles, clearly only half listening.

“Yes, I think Zelena is going horseback riding with Prince Killian while Cora plans their wedding with the queen.”

“What?” Emma yelps, dropping the spoon into the porridge. She curses at herself, as she dips her fingers into the hot porridge to retrieve the spoon. Then she hisses as she blows on her burned fingers.

Ruby and Beverly, however, are doubled over with laughter. Emma narrows her eyes at them.

“I was just teasing you, Emma,” Ruby laughs. “They’re just going to the garden party at the palace like every other eligible maiden in the kingdom.” Ruby rolls her eyes at the last statement.
“Why should I care what they do,” Emma mutters as she fills three bowls with porridge.

“Because you like him,” Ruby retorts, “admit it.”

Emma shakes her head at her friend in frustration, “Look, you two. Don’t get any romantic ideas in your heads. Keeping the manor going is all that matters. That’s my ticket to freedom, not some prince.” Even if he is charming, and funny, and absolutely gorgeous Emma adds in her head. Then she scolds herself for her foolishness.

“Emma, sweetie,” Beverly says as she comes to put an arm around the young woman she loves as much as her own daughter, “you gave him the name that’s on your mother’s ring. Maybe that’s a sign.”

Emma looks down at the emerald ring on her finger. It’s another one of the three things she has from her parents. This one, however, is special. It suddenly appeared on Emma’s finger when she was six years old and was clearly enchanted. For one, it arrived in conjunction with a dream. In it, a woman with long, dark hair, creamy white skin, and eyes the same shade as Emma’s appeared before her, smiling the kindest smile Emma had ever seen. The woman reached out towards her, holding the emerald ring. Then she had said, “Emma sweetie, I’m your mother! I give you this ring so you will know I am always looking out for you. My mother gave it to me, and now I give it to you.” Then Emma had awoken with a start to find the ring on her finger. She had expected Cora to take it away from her, but surprisingly her stepmother didn’t even seem to notice the ring. That was the other enchantment it had. Only those who loved Emma could see the ring. Inside the ring there was an inscription: “To Ava – True Love follows this ring.” Ava, Emma assumed, was her grandmother.

Emma shakes her head, “Beverly, it was just the first name that popped in my head. Probably because I’ve looked at that inscription so many times.”

“But Emma,” Ruby continues to argue, “don’t you see? You can test the prince. If he can see the ring, then that means he loves you.”

Emma just snorts as she picks up the breakfast tray. “As if I’ll ever see him again anyway. It’s best if I don’t get my hopes up, so can we just drop it?”

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“Emma! Emma!”

The group gathered in the kitchen of Swan Manor jump at the dramatic entrance of Ruby. August has come in from town to visit with his family and sits with a canvas and paints. Beverly knits in the far corner, Emma sits reading by the fire, and Marco is working by the light of the window on a wood carving of a horse to give to a little boy in the village who is sick. Once again, they are relishing the quiet. The recent swirl of social events leading up to the ball are keeping Cora and her daughters busy, and the help at Swan Manor couldn’t be happier about it.

“Royal – procession” Ruby gasps, “coming up the lane.”

August drops his paintbrush with a clatter. “Uh-oh. I didn’t think he’d really show up today. He’s supposed to be hosting a garden party.”

Emma narrows her eyes at her best friend, “What do you mean, August?” she bites out.

“Th-the prince,” August stutters, “he’s been asking anyone and everyone at the palace about Countess Ave Blanca. He really likes you, Emma, so I thought I’d help you out.”

“I told him you were staying with your cousin. The Baronness Cora Mills-Swan,” he throws Emma a sheepish grin, “and I may have implied you would be here today. Alone.”

Emma gasps, her book clattering to the floor, “August, you didn’t! You mean the prince is on his way to my house at this very minute?”

August grins at Emma, “Then I suggest you run and change.”

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Emma tries to hide the fact that she’s out of breath when she pulls the door open for Prince Killian and his entourage which includes three royal guards on horseback and two carriages. In the hallway behind Emma, Ruby and Beverly sit breathless on the steps, fanning themselves. Getting her into one of Zelena’s old gowns in less than five minutes had been a massive undertaking. Emma prays that the hasty French twist they had thrown her hair up into holds.

The prince’s eyes widen and he gapes for a moment at her, then shakes his head, “You look – stunning, Countess.”

Emma shocks herself when she smirks and says, “I know,” then she herself is gaping as she hastily adds, “red is a good color on me.”

Prince Killian chuckles his agreement, then furrows his brow in confusion. “You open your own door?”

Emma’s mouth falls open as she realizes her mistake. A real Countess would have a servant to open the door and receive visitors. She thinks quickly and laces her voice with what she hopes is confidence as she answers, “Why not? I’m perfectly capable of opening a door, am I not?”

He shakes his head at her as a smile graces his lips, “You are unlike any courtier I have ever known, Ava. I like it.”

“Why aren’t you at the garden party?”

He arches his brows flirtatiously, “I could ask you the same question.”

Emma can flirt with her eyes too, and she does as she replies, “I just find scheming, desperate women tiresome.”

“As do I. Besides, when I heard that the only woman I cared to see was here on this estate all alone, the party no longer held any joy for me.”

Emma can’t help the blush that stains her cheeks at his words. The prince gestures behind him to the carriages.

“My friends in Arrendele have the finest library in the realm. Filled with many more fairy tales than your father’s book contains, I am sure. I thought you might like to see it?”

Emma’s heart beats faster at his grand gesture, but she fights to maintain a flirtatious coyness when she speaks, “Your highness, you have discovered my weakness, but I have yet to learn yours.”

The prince leans closer to whisper in her ear, “I should think it was fairly obvious.”

He catches her eye before he steps away, a sincerity in his face that takes her breath away. She’s
relieved when a throat being cleared behind them breaks the connection between them. Emma looks behind the prince’s shoulder to see Belle standing there.

“I was wondering if your friend August were around,” Belle says, and Emma has never heard her sound so nervous before, “he . . . said he might be. I thought he might join us? The royal family of Arendelle has the finest art collection in the realm as well. I thought August might like to see it.”

Prince Killian leans forward to whisper in Emma’s ear again, and she would gladly let him whisper to her all day long so she can feel the warmth of his breath against her neck. “My cousin is smitten with your friend, I believe. And to think she told me once she didn’t believe in love at first sight.”

Emma shares a giggle with him, then clears her throat. “I believe August and I both will gladly accept your invitation, your highness.”

She follows her words with a quick, tight curtsy. When she rises, the prince takes her hand as if to stop the formal motion.

“Today,” he tells her with deep sincerity, “I am simply Killian.”

“Killian,” Emma repeats, her voice breathy and light.

He smiles that heart stopping smile again and leans over her hand, giving it a lingering kiss. As he stands, his thumb swipes across her knuckles, sliding over her mother’s ring. He looks down at it, and Emma’s heart freezes in her chest.

“What a beautiful ring,” he remarks, “it matches your eyes.”

Chapter End Notes

* I normally respond to every comment people leave on my stories, but for this one I've decided not to. It's because of the prompts. Some of them I like, while some I think, "never cared for that movie," or "never heard of that movie." And I don't know what to say sometimes. In short, I'm not good at being diplomatic, so to spare everyone's feelings, I'm choosing not to respond to comments. That doesn't mean I don't want your prompts though. You never know what might inspire the muse, so keep them coming! I never would have though of Ever After if it weren't for a prompt.

* Speaking of prompts, I had several requests to do Sweet Home Alabama. That was actually on my list of ideas as well. However, PhiraLovesLoki has a Sweet Home Alabama AU multi-chapter already in progress, and I honestly can't improve upon the genius of that fic. It's called Coming Home to You. Trust me, you'll love it! I've already subscribed to it myself.

* I may post part two today if I finish it. If not, it will be posted next Thursday per usual.
Ever After: Part Two

Chapter Notes

* Thank you to Hartnhand for giving me the prompt to do an Ever After AU. It's been fun!
* This is where the story diverges the most from the Drew Barrymore movie and the Cinderella mythology as a whole. Like the shoe? Sorry, but it's role is pretty much . . . non-existent. Just thought I should get that out of the way right off the bat :)
* I forgot to mention before the last chapter: I have a six year old daughter, and like most six year old girls right now she is obsessed with Alena of Avalor on the Disney Channel. So when I had to come up with the name of Killian's kingdom, that's where my mommy brain immediately went. So no, I'm not 12 :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Conversation in the royal carriage flows just as easily as it always has between Emma and the prince – *Killian, just Killian she reminds herself* – even though her heart is pounding and her hands are clammy. He saw it! He can see the ring! And Emma’s brain is tumbling with so many thoughts. She has to admit to herself that she has fallen for the Prince of Avalor, and he, apparently, has fallen in love as well. The problem is, he thinks she’s someone else. He’s in love with Countess Ava Blanca, not Emma Swan, and she has no idea how to get out of this mess she’s made.

Killian sighs in exasperation as the head of the royal guard once again trots as close as possible to their carriage, “Graham,” he grumbles, leaning towards the window, “you don’t have to follow so closely.”

Graham shakes his head grimly, glancing towards the prince, “On the contrary, I do. Decorum would have dictated that the women take one carriage and the men the other. Since you and decorum have never been in the same realm together, I’m forced to be your chaperone as well as your guard.”

Emma giggles behind her hand as Killian rolls his eyes, “And what of my cousin? Who’s guarding *her* virtue?”

Graham glances away from the road for a moment to look Killian full in the face, “Leroy, of course,” he deadpans, “though I trust her propriety more than yours.”

Killian narrows his eyes, “I’m *always* a gentleman.”

He looks at Emma and winks, “Don’t mind Graham,” he tells her, “he and I have been friends since we were lads. Long before he joined the royal guard and shoved a stick permanently up his arse.”

Emma shakes her head as Graham sputters loudly. She had somehow always assumed nobility were boring and lacked humor, maybe because her stepmother is that way, but Prince Killian is far from it. Not only is he witty, but he is surrounded by genuine friends like Graham and Belle, whom he freely converses with. Formality isn’t in the least part of his personality. She can see why his royal duties chafe at him, considering his vivacious personality.
The carriage suddenly comes to a halt, and Emma pokes her head out the window, craning her neck to look up, up at the amazing sight before her. Her eyes widen as she takes in the giant wall of ice currently baring their way. She has heard rumors of Arendelle; that it’s Queen is an ice witch and that its people are sequestered away from the rest of the realm in what amounts to an icy prison. Killian, however, had assured her on the way that all of it is exaggerated rumor. The ice wall is protection from ogres – mainly. Emma senses there is something he isn’t telling her, but she hasn’t pressed. Killian considers the queen and her sister close friends, and Emma trusts him.

Killian pulls a necklace from the pocket of his vest – a snowflake pendant encrusted with diamonds dangles from the end of it – and hands it to Graham. Emma watches in fascination as Graham’s horse trots closer to the ice wall. He then lifts the charm towards the wall, and the portion blocking the road begins to shudder. A gate of smooth ice magically appears and swings open. As their carriage clatters through, Emma is surprised to find a beautiful country stretched out in the valley before her. It is summer, just as it is in Avelor, and the hills are lush and green and dotted with flowers, mostly yellow crocuses. The palace, which is made of warm and inviting brown stone, is nestled against a sparkling blue fjord. So one false rumor is laid to rest: Arendelle isn’t trapped in eternal winter.

Emma soon finds that rumors of the queen are false as well. Queen Elsa greets them warmly, as do her sister Anna and Anna’s betrothed, Kristoff. Killian converses with them as one does with old friends, as does Belle, and Emma quickly relaxes in their presence.

An hour later, Emma finds herself alone in a corner of the library perusing a book with exquisite illuminated illustrations. August has disappeared with Belle, presumably to look at the art collection. She looks up when Killian enters with the queen; the pair have been holed up in Queen Elsa’s study, and even now their conversation seems formal. However, they both grace Emma with a smile as they approach.

“The Spell of Shattered Sight,” Elsa comments with a raised eyebrow as she sees what Emma is reading, “that one I’m afraid has a very unhappy ending.”

“Yes, but the illustrations are gorgeous,” Emma replies, “you have so many illuminated manuscripts. The value of this library cannot be measured.”

“One of the many things the realm risks losing if the ogres remain unchecked,” Killian says with seriousness, clearly directing the statement at the queen. It is the first time she has heard him sound truly regal.

“I know, Killian,” Elsa replies, “and I will think long and hard about your proposal, truly I will. But for now, I will leave you two to enjoy the books.”

Killian gives the queen a small bow as she departs, then turns to sit beside Emma.

“So this wasn’t just a social visit,” Emma remarks.

“I apologize, Ava, if I misled you. I truly did think of you when planning this trip –“

Emma quickly stops him, placing her hand on his arm, “No, Killian, you misunderstand. You have been born into great privilege, and with that, comes great responsibility. I’m proud of you for doing what you can to unite the kingdoms. We live in dark times; we cannot afford to sit idle.”

Killian remains silent, gazing at her with intensity she can’t read. She quickly pulls her hand away, fearing she has spoken out of turn.
“I am sorry,” she apologizes, “my mouth has run away with me again.”

“On the contrary,” Killian argues, his eyes flickering to her lips, “it is your mouth that has me mesmerized.”

Emma feels suddenly light-headed as Killian leans towards her. Their noses brush, and Emma’s voice hitches in her throat as she gives a soft laugh. But before Killian can brush his lips with hers, a child’s voice echoes through the library.

“Uncle Killy!”

For one moment, Killian’s expression is one of disappointment, but as he rises from his chair, it morphs into one of joy. A little boy with blonde curls and blue eyes launches himself into Killian’s arms. Killian hugs him, then ruffles the boy’s hair as he pulls away.

“Lars, I can’t believe how tall you’ve gotten!” he remarks.

“I’m ten now,” brags the boy, puffing out his chest.

“Yes,” Killian replies with a nod, deep emotion swirling suddenly in his eyes, “I know.”

“Lars,” Queen Elsa’s voice rings through the aisles of books, a good-natured scolding residing in the boy’s name, “let our guests be.”

She puts her arm around the child’s shoulders and presses a kiss to his temple.

“But it’s been ages since Uncle Killy came to visit!” he protests with a frown.

Killian kneels before him, “I tell you what, give my friend and I another hour to tour the library, and then I’ll play with you before we leave.”

“Ice skating in the ball room?” Lars asks, tilting his face up in question towards his mother.

Elsa laughs, “Okay, since we have guests, we’ll do ice skating.”

“Hooray!” Lars cheers, and waves shyly goodbye to Emma as his mother leads him from the room.

“I didn’t know Queen Elsa had a husband,” Emma remarks tentatively as Killian resumes his seat beside her. “Everyone is always whispering and questioning why a woman of her age hasn’t yet wed.”

“I know,” Killian sighs, his adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows hard, “she refuses to. Says she had one true love and will never have another.”

The pieces fall into place, and Emma asks softly, “Liam?”

Killian nods, “Aye. They were only sixteen, so our parents refused to let them wed saying they were too young. They were going to announce their betrothal at seventeen and have the wedding on Elsa’s eighteenth birthday.”

“But Liam died,” Emma says, voice barely above a whisper.

Killian nods, tears shining in his eyes, and Emma covers his hand with hers. “Lars is the other reason for the ice wall. It was scandal enough in Arendelle when Elsa’s pregnancy was discovered. She didn’t want Liam’s name sullied, so she has secluded herself ever since. I come to
visit as often as I can, but it still isn’t enough. Lars is getting too old to be kept hidden away.”

Emma threads her fingers with Killian’s, suddenly understanding what bravery it took to ask Queen Elsa to bring herself and her kingdom out of hiding. Every time she thinks she couldn’t love this man more, he surprises her.

“I’m honored that you shared such a delicate family secret with me,” Emma tells him, “aren’t you afraid I will gossip as most courtiers do?”

“No in the least,” Killian answers without hesitation, “You aren’t most courtiers. I trust you, Ava.”

The sound of the name that isn’t hers, delivered with complete and utter faith, is like a dagger to Emma’s heart.

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The royal guards are on edge as the carriages clatter and bump over the dirt road on their way back to Avalor. She also senses a nervousness in Killian’s expression; a tightness to his smiles. This was the road, after all, where his brother died, and they may have tarried too long in Arendelle. The sun is still bright, but it is moving quickly toward evening. The closer they get to twilight, the more in danger they are from an ogre attack.

There is an air of apprehension surrounding their little group, and Emma and Killian’s conversation is subdued, their voices soft. Emma wishes more than anything that she could throw decorum completely to the wind and cross the carriage to sit next to Killian, but she’s hesitant to be that bold. It doesn’t seem fitting behavior for a countess. And, oh, how she wishes she could stop this whole ruse for good! But she’s in far too deep.

Suddenly, a roar fills the air. It’s a sound that even the smallest child in the realm can recognize: an ogre’s roar. Killian’s eyes widen as they meet Emma’s, his face pale. She grieves for him, knowing he must be taken back to the day he lost his brother. But the moment passes quickly, and Killian is grasping the hilt of his sword.

“Stay here,” he commands her, reaching for the carriage door. But before he can open it, an ogre appears in the small opening, snarling with rancid breath. Emma screams as the ogre’s thick, hairy arm reaches for her through the window. She lifts her leg and kicks at the ogre with all her might. Killian flings the door open, shoving the ogre off the side of the carriage. He then whips around and slams the hilt of his sword into the face of another ogre that is reaching through the opposite window. The ogre falls to the ground, but then the carriage rocks and sends Killian falling against the seat next to Emma. Before he can regain his footing, the carriage tilts sideways, sending Emma tumbling into Killian’s chest.

“We have to get out of here,” Killian shouts, as he attempts to pull her to her feet, but the jostling of the carriage makes that an impossible feat.

Before either of them can get their bearings, the carriage is flipping. Once, twice. Killian holds her close as they tumble about inside, then for a moment they are weightless. Then they are slammed against one side of the carriage. Through the opposite window, Emma sees a terrifying sight.

They are plunging over the side of the mountain road and into the ravine below.

***************************************************************
“Ava! Ava!”

*Why is Cora yelling at me? And why is she calling me by my grandmother’s name?* Emma rolls to her side, still half asleep. *Wait, this isn’t my bed.* Emma pushes up on one hand and looks down to see that she is lying on a broken carriage door. The motion sends a pounding through her head, and she reaches up tentatively to touch the sore spot on her forehead. When she pulls her hand away, blood stains her fingers. Suddenly, it all comes rushing back. Killian. The royal carriage. Arendelle. The ogres. Killian. . . Killian!

She attempts to scramble to her feet, but Killian is there at her side in an instant, “Whoa, whoa,” he tells her, “let’s be sure you’re alright.”

“What about you?” she asks in concern, reaching out with a shaking hand to a cut across his cheek, “that looks deep.”

He shakes his head, his hair falling across his forehead, giving him a roguish look, “Tis but a scratch love.”

He pulls out his handkerchief and dabs at the cut on her forehead. Thankfully, once the blood is washed away, it becomes clear that it’s only minor. Killian’s cut, however, is more severe. It soaks Emma’s handkerchief, but the bleeding eventually stops.

“You’ll have a scar,” Emma warns.

Killian shrugs, “It will only add to my rugged good looks.”

Emma shakes her head and laughs as he helps her to her feet. She tests her limbs, and is amazed to find that she truly is ok. Her arm and hip are bruised, but other than that, she feels perfectly fine.

“We were lucky,” she comments, taking in the battered carriage.

“Aye,” Killian agrees, “though we are still not out of danger. If we don’t find a way out of this ravine, we will face not only ogres but bandits as night falls. Not to mention the dropping temperatures once the sun goes down.”

Emma frowns as she takes in the sun that is already dipping towards the horizon. The road at the top of the ravine from which they fell is quiet, which means there is no one above searching for a way to help them. Emma makes her way to the sheer wall to find that it isn’t, in fact, sheer at all. Rocks jut out here and there, and there are ample roots and vines for climbing. Emma takes a step forward, but trips on the bottom of her voluminous skirts. She curses at the impracticality of female fashions and reaches awkwardly behind her. She mutters at herself in frustration.

“Killian,” she says, pulling him closer by his arm, and then turning her back to him, “undo my stays.”

“Uh – I – what?” he stutters.

Emma turns to him with a crooked, mischievous smile. “Get your mind out of the gutter, prince. Do you think we have time for seduction? I simply can’t climb the ravine in this dress, and I can’t reach my stays.”

“But – but, it isn’t proper for me to –“

“For you to what?” Emma snaps, stomping her foot in frustration, “See me in my
undergarments which are basically a whole other dress under this one? There’d be more of me to see if I were in breeches. Now just undo them, please!"

Emma gathers her hair, which has tumbled out of the French twist, up off her neck and turns back around for Killian. He does as she asks, his hands trembling nervously. For some reason, she finds it endearing.

But that endearment quickly heats to something else as Killian’s hands reach the last few stays. His hands rest for a moment at her hips, and he steps closer until his chest is almost flush with her back. He bends his head towards her neck. Her dress, now loose, slides down exposing her collarbone. Killian’s breath ghosts against her bare skin, and a heat pools in her belly. She turns her head slightly to meet his eyes. They are so close, only inches separate their lips.

“I thought you were always a gentleman,” she says hoarsely, her eyes flickering to his lips.

“Perhaps being a gentleman is overrated,” he answers, voice gravelly and low.

Emma takes a deep, shuddering breath, and forces herself to step away from him. “Turn around,” she mutters.

Killian does as she asks, reluctantly, he must admit. He fidgets, forcing his eyes to stare at the trees straight ahead. He hears the slight rustling of her dress, and he can’t help imagining it falling from her hips to lie in a heap on the forest floor. His mind also can’t help imagining what the rest of her would look like laid completely bare, or what her skin would feel like beneath his fingertips and his lips. He runs his fingers agitatedly through his hair and groans. This woman will be the death of him!

“You can turn around now.”

Killian turns to find Ava already scrambling up the side of the ravine, using rocks as footholds and clinging to roots with her hands. She has pulled her shift up through her legs and tucked it into her corset so her legs, covered in pantaloons, are free to climb. He would laugh at the sight if she didn’t look so bloody amazing with her strength and resourcefulness. She turns and looks down at him with a scowl, blowing a strand of blonde hair out of her face.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No, just bit. You’re bloody brilliant, Countess.”

“Well turn around; you make me nervous watching me like that. When I get to the top, I’ll look for a vine or something to help you up.”

Killian feels as if he should be doing more to help, but Ava’s words broker no argument. So he turns around, only to find himself staring down the tip of an arrow.

“Hello, Prince of Avalor,” the man behind the bow quips, “looks as if you’ve lost your way. May I introduce myself? I’m Robin Hood, and I am prince of this forest.”

Killian backs away from the arrow, his hand hovering near the hilt of his sword. He ducks, spins, and pulls out his sword in one fluid motion. Robin Hood lets the arrow fly, but it sails over Killian’s head. The arc of Killian’s sword comes down where Robin holds his bow aloft, but the bandit anticipates him, and spins out of the way. He then flings his bow onto his back and pulls out a sword of his own. The two men eye one another, their swords at the ready.

“Stay aloft, m’lady,” Killian calls up to Ava, “there are games afoot!”
Emma, of course, isn’t the type to abandon Killian to his fate, especially when several other thieves emerge from the forest and begin to surround him. Emma gives up on her climb and begins to descend. She gasps when she sees one burly thief with long, curly hair pick up her red dress with the tip of his sword.

“My wife thanks you for the gown, m’lady,” the thief teases as he grins up at her.

Emma’s eyes narrow in anger, and she shouts back at him, “You **will** give me back my dress!” Emma jumps down the last of the way, and lunges for the brute who is attempting to steal her gown. But before she can reach him, arms grab her around the waist. She kicks and elbows, but the man holding her only laughs.

“Stop!” Killian shouts, “Your fight is with me!” He then drops his sword to the ground and lifts his hands in surrender. Three of the bandits descend upon him and shove him to his knees.

Robin Hood sticks the toe of his boot beneath Killian’s sword and flips it towards him, catching it easily in his hand. He then turns Killian’s own sword on him, and Emma cries out in alarm. The prince of thieves lifts Killian’s chin with the tip of the sword.

“We ran into some royal guards and a carriage with a pretty brunette earlier. They seemed rather upset about a missing prince.”

Despite the sword at his throat, Killian feels relief flood through him. His friends are ok.

“I’m sure they would be incredibly appreciative if we returned him, right boys?” Robin Hood asks his men, to which they all cheer. “Appreciative and generous, right?”

“So you want a ransom,” Killian spits out, “fine. But let the lady go.”

Robin nods at the men who hold Emma. As soon as they loosen their hold on her, she jerks from their grasp. She looks defiantly at all of the men, “I demand you provide me a horse so I can safely return to Avalor. And since you’ve stolen my dress, I demand a cloak as well.”

Robin raises his eyebrows in surprise and he and his men all chuckle, “Oh, really? You **demand** these things?”

“Robin Hood lives by a code, does he not?” Emma asks with an imperial tilt to her chin. “Or are the legends of you and your merry men nothing but exaggerated hero worship?”

Robin gives her an incredulous look that is mixed with something akin to awe. Killian knows he is looking at her with awe. His beautiful, avenging, warrior angel.

“I tell you what, miss,” Robin tells her sarcastically, “I will let you have anything that you can carry.”

She seems to mull over that for a moment, her eyes flickering to Killian. He gives her a half smile to let her know he’s ok. She can leave him behind with a clear conscience.

“So do I have your word on that?” she finally asks Robin.

Robin puts his hand to his heart, “On my word as Robin Hood, defender of the poor, whatever you can carry.”

Killian watches as Ava marches resolutely over to him. What the bloody hell is she doing? She grabs him by the arm and yanks him to stand, then she ducks under his arm. Before he even
realizes what is happening, she has stood with him slung across her shoulders like a sack of flour. He’s shocked and amazed at her strength, though he can feel her trembling and knows she can’t make it too far before she stumbles under his weight.

Emma’s arms and legs tremble, and her shoulders and back scream from the weight. Killian is slender of build, but muscular, and she knows she can’t carry him far. But perhaps far enough to let these thieves know she’s serious. Their laughter rings around her, Robin Hood’s the loudest and deepest of all.

“Stop!” he cries out, doubled over with laughter, “Put him down! We- we’ll get you a horse!”

Emma sits gazing into the fire in the campground of the Merry Men. She nurses a bottle of rum and an empty bowl of stew sits on the log next to her. She draws the blue cloak Robin Hood had given her closer around herself to ward off the night’s chill; the wind goes right through her thin shift. She never did get her dress back. Little John – ironic name for the brawny man who had stolen it from her – did indeed have a sweet wife who cleaned Killian’s cut and gave them each a bowl of stew. The look on the woman’s face when Emma told her to keep the dress was worth every shiver against the night air.

Killian stands talking with Robin Hood on the other side of the fire. Both men wear serious expressions, but the conversation ends with Robin Hood smiling and slapping Killian on the back. When Killian heads over to join her, he’s smiling.

“What was that all about?”

“I offered immunity for Robin and all of his men in exchange for help fighting the ogres. I also asked if he would come and speak to Graham tomorrow about the tactics he and his men use. They manage after all to protect their little band here sufficiently. I’m sure there’s much they can teach us.”

“I’m impressed,” Emma says. “That’s a really good idea.”

But Killian doesn’t seem pleased, clenching his jaw instead. “I also offered to find lodging for the women and children in the village near the palace. Robin hasn’t taken a wife, but many of his men have. He realizes this is no way to raise a family.”

“So why are you brooding enough to almost break your jaw?”

Killian glances at her, surprised, and Emma raises her eyebrows at him. He sighs and shakes his head.

“Robin told me the work he’s been doing. Stealing from the rich to give to the poor. You were right, Ava. There is too much poverty in Avalor. The people can’t feed their families. How did I not know?”

Emma massages his shoulder as she speaks, “Your parents haven’t paid attention to those outside the palace walls. But Killian, you can be a different kind of ruler. You can change things! I’ve already seen it.”

Killian gives her a soft smile, but there is sadness behind it. “Your passion for justice has awakened something in me, Ava. It’s changed me, made me aware of my duty. But duty also says I should marry Princess Jasmine.”
Emma pulls her hand away from him as her heart sinks to the pit of her stomach. She wants to withdraw completely, but she can’t tear her eyes away from his. The firelight makes the blue of his eyes sparkle in a way that draws her closer. Like a moth to the flame. He reaches up to caress her cheek, and she can’t resist leaning into it.

“But how,” Killian continues, his voice breaking, “how can I fulfill such a duty when I’ve already fallen so completely in love with you?”

Some invisible force seems to pull them towards one another, and as Killian’s lips meet hers, her first thought is fear. Fear that he will be disappointed in the kiss because, truth be told, she’s never done this before. But then he slants his mouth over hers, his fingers threading through her hair, and she can’t think at all, only feel. She cups the back of his head, fingers toying with the curls at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer. The push and pull of their kisses become hungrier and more insistent, and their tongues dance and tangle. The sound of hoots and cheers penetrate the haze of desire, and she and Killian pull apart to find that their kiss has been a source of entertainment for all the merry men. Robin himself, directly across the fire, points both fingers at Killian.

“Now that’s a kiss!” he shouts at them, and Emma ducks her head, face flaming.

She glances up at Killian, who is blushing too, but when his eyes meet hers, they both laugh. Emma glances around the campfire at the continued cheers and catcalls, a mischievous grin filling her face. She rolls her eyes and then grabs a bewildered Killian by the shirt collar and hauls him in for more.

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Emma startles from a deep sleep when a broom, of all things, jabs her in the shoulder. She jerks up, only to fall back down amongst her pillows with a groan, clutching her pounding head.

“Are you ill?” demands her stepmother, jabbing her again with the broom.

“No,” Emma croaks out, but then she sees stars and the room feels like it’s spinning, “I mean, yes.” How much rum did she and Killian have last night? Or was that this morning? Probably a little of both. It had been dawn when she had snuck up the attic steps of the manor.

“Where have you been?” Cora asks with a note of suspicion to her voice.

The rum may have faded, but Emma is still drunk off Killian’s kisses, so she has the audacity to talk back to Cora for the first time in her life. “Just tell me where you think I was so I can go back to sleep.”

“You impertinent brat!” Cora yells, and Emma shoves her pillow over her head with a groan. “What about our breakfast?”

Emilia pulls the pillow from her face and regards her stepmother and stepsisters with new eyes. She does not deserve to be treated like a servant. “You have two hands. Make it yourself.”

“You little leech! How dare you!” Zelena screeches as Cora orders Regina to go boil water. Her younger stepsister mutters under her breath, but obeys.

Emma cares nothing about any of it. She simply rolls over and goes back to sleep where she can dream of Killian and his kisses.

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A few hours later, someone else is attempting to awaken Emma. But this time, they have gentle hands and a softer voice.

“Emma, Emma,” Ruby hisses.

Emma mumbles a complaint, but sits up anyway. Thankfully, the room is no longer spinning and her headache is just a dull pressure.

“You better get downstairs,” Ruby tells her.

Something about her friend’s eyes tells Emma this is serious, so she races down the back stairwell. She hears her stepmother and stepsisters in the spare bedroom and heads in that direction. She stops in the doorway, her heart dropping when she sees her mother’s chest open at the foot of the bed. Cora is holding her mother’s wedding dress up against Zelena, and both of them are talking and laughing. Regina is holding the glass slippers that match the dress, admiring their silver detailing. Emma feels the room spin, but this time it isn’t from the after-effects of the rum.

“What are you doing?” Emma asks, her voice still laced with shock.

The three women at least have the decency to look guilty as they look up at Emma, but for Cora and Zelena, it is short-lived.

“I’m about to try on my dress for the ball,” Zelena tells her smugly.

Emma marches into the room, her hands balled into fists, and walks right up to get into Zelena’s face. “Like hell you are. I will be wearing my mother’s wedding dress to the ball.”

Cora laughs melodically as if Emma is a silly child, “Please, Emma, you know full well a merchant’s daughter is not invited to balls.”

“But I am invited,” Emma says boldly, tipping her chin up, “Prince Killian asked me himself.” Okay, so technically Killian asked Countess Ava to the ball, but that’s neither here nor there. He did ask her. And he also agreed to meet her privately just beforehand, at the stroke of nine, and there Emma plans on telling him everything. Why she pretended to be a courtier, why she was stupid enough to give him a false name, and above all, the truth of who she is. She prays his love runs deep enough to forgive her.

Cora narrows her eyes at Emma, and she sees something dangerous flash in them. “Do you really expect me to believe that Prince Killian personally invited you to the ball?”

Emma swallows hard. Something in Cora’s voice sends off warning bells, but she pushes it aside. Killian’s love has filled her with a heady pride, and she can’t help throwing the truth in her stepsister’s face. “I have been spending time with the prince – a lot of time – and yes, he asked me.”

Cora laughs melodically as if Emma is a silly child, “Please, Emma, you know full well a merchant’s daughter is not invited to balls.”

“Fine, fine,” Emma says, her hands still balled into fists. “Let’s see what happens when you open the door.”

Emma snatches the shoes out of Regina’s hands. “These are my mother’s things.”

“Yes,” Zelena taunts, her voice dripping with wicked glee, “and she’s dead.”

Emma marches forward, and without a second thought, pulls her fist back and punches
Zelena right in the face. Zelena falls backwards, somer-saulting over the bed. She scrambles up and screams as Emma continues coming straight at her.

“I’ll yank that nappy red hair right out of your head!” Emma screams.

Zelena dodges this way and that, then makes a break for the door, screaming her head off the whole time. Emma chases after her, down the stairs, and through the corridor to the dining room. They play cat and mouse around the dining room table until Zelena dashes into the kitchen. She heads straight for the fireplace and yanks Emma’s book off the stool by the hearth.

“I’ll burn it, so help me God!” Zelena screeches as she thrusts the book towards the fire.

“No!” Emma cries out.

Regina runs in and gasps, hands to her mouth. Cora comes in calmly, slowly, inching towards the fire place with a cruel smile on her lips.

“That’s right, Emma,” she taunts, “your mother’s shoes or your father’s book. Though neither will save you from a sound lashing.”

Emma hesitates; the thought of her mother’s dress on Zelena makes her stomach turn, but her heart constricts at the sight of her father’s book so near the flames. Hesitatingly, she slowly reaches her hands out to give the shoes over to Zelena. But as soon as the red head grabs them, she slams the book of fairy tales into the flames with dramatic relish.

“No!” Emma screams, lunging towards the fire. Regina and Ruby both grab her and pull her back before she can burn herself. She sags against both of them, sobbing, as the last words her father ever wrote to her turn to ash.

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Regina sits by Emma’s bed, soaking strips of cloth in a salve of herbs that Beverly has made. Regina lifts one of them, wrings the excess liquid from the cloth, and gently applies it to one of the many lacerations on Emma’s back. Emma winces and sucks in her breath.

“Sorry,” Regina tells her softly, but after the initial sting, whatever herbs the salve contains begin to take affect, and Emma sighs at the numbing relief. Regina continues with the next cloth, speaking as she works, “You really brought this on yourself, you know. First with breakfast and then with that awful display downstairs.”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” Emma says softly, a tear slipping down her face. Yes I do, she inwardly corrects herself, It’s love, and it’s both agony and ecstasy.

“Although,” Regina continues conspiratorially, “I’ll never forget the way Zelena’s feet went up over her head like that.”

Emma turns her head to see Regina smirking, her eyes sparkling with mirth. They both laugh at the memory, and it warms Emma’s heart.

Regina sighs as she continues with her ministrations, “She should not have said that about your mother.”

Emma pauses for a beat before whispering, “Thank you.”

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Two days later, it is the day before the ball, and Emma still winces every time she bends over. Most of the cuts from the whipping Cora gave her have scabbed over, but some were quite deep and still haven’t healed. She still finds spots of blood on her shift when she undresses at night.

Emma leans over the trough and empties the bucket in her hands for the pigs. She then turns and trudges back towards the manor, worries tumbling through her head. Some are silly worries of a love-sick girl like how the cuts on her back will affect her ability to dance with the prince or how in the world she will find a dress appropriate for a ball. However, her greatest worry of all isn’t silly in the least. How will the prince react when she tells him the truth?

Emma draws water from the well and carries it into the kitchen for Beverly to use for dinner preparations. Then she makes her way to the back stairwell to take a much-needed afternoon rest before she has to set the table for dinner. Half way up, her stepmother and stepsisters bar her way.

“Where is the dress, Emma?” Cora demands, voice cold as ice.

“What are you talking about?” Emma asks wearily.

“Your mother’s dress!” Zelena shouts, “It was in my room this morning, and now it’s gone.”

Emma shakes her head, “I know nothing of it, I swear. Though I can’t deny I’m thrilled to hear it’s missing.”

“Excuse me?” Cora hisses, eyes narrowed.

“I would rather die a thousand deaths than see my mother’s dress on that selfish pig!” Emma shouts, shoving her finger in Zelena’s direction.

Cora calmly lifts her hand and then slaps Emma soundly across the face. The force of it sends Emma’s face whipping sideways, and Emma bites her lip to keep from crying.

“Would you like another whipping, child?” her stepmother threatens.

Emma looks up at Cora through her hair that has fallen across her face. Cora’s eyes are more shrewd and cold than she’s ever seen them. She reaches out and grasps Emma by the elbow, digging her sharp fingernails into the flesh. She then spins Emma around and drags her down the hall. When they reach Cora’s bedchamber, she shoves Emma roughly inside. Cora still seems outwardly calm, however, and not the least bit out of breath or visibly angry. She smooths her skirts and eyes Emma with a calculating stare.

“Haven’t you wondered why I haven’t gone to the prince with the truth about your identity?”

“Who says he doesn’t know?” Emma counters with a tilt of her chin.

Cora laughs softly at that, studying her fingernails casually, “Oh please, my dear girl, don’t patronize me. I know all about the prince’s search for Countess Ava Blanca.” Cora marches quickly towards Emma and grasps Emma’s face tightly in her hand, her fingertips leaving marks in Emma’s cheeks. “How do you know that name: Ava? And why ‘Blanca’? It means ‘white’. Why did you choose that name?” Cora loses her cool for a moment and shakes Emma violently, “Why did you choose that name!”

“I don’t know!” Emma shouts back, tears pricking at her eyes. Cora’s face takes on a wild look for a moment, but then she shoves Emma roughly away.
“I didn’t go to the prince,” Cora continues, as if her moment of frenzy had never happened, “because I am not in the least bit concerned. You are a common servant girl who feeds pigs, Emma Swan, nothing more. Many royal men have a fling before settling down. That is all you are to Prince Killian.” She eyes Emma up and down with a look of disgust, “If he hasn’t taken your virtue yet, he will. Because that’s all your good for. And then he’ll forget all about you and marry someone like Zelena.”

Emma swallows hard, trying not to allow the sliver of fear Cora is attempting to plant worm its way into her heart. Killian has been true to his word; he has been nothing but a gentleman. But is that only because he thinks she’s a countess?

Cora grasps Emma again and shoves her out into the hallway. The woman stands in her doorway, eying her stepdaughter with such hatred, it sends chills down Emma’s spine. When she speaks, her words carry a heavy foreboding, “If I were you, Emma dear, I would stay away from the ball tomorrow night. You are messing with forces far beyond what you can comprehend.”

Emma jumps when the door slams in her face.

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The next day, Emma is such a bundle of nervous energy that she can barely carry out her chores. She drops buckets, fumbles with the latches on the gate, and breaks a saucer at teatime. She’s meeting Killian at nine o’clock in the royal library, just as she’d planned. No matter what Cora said yesterday. Though what she can possibly wear, she has no clue. She’s basically praying for a miracle.

Emma shuts the door of Maximus’ stall, and turns to leave the barn. Before she can, a hand reaches out and grabs her, and another is clamped over her mouth.

“Sh,” Regina whispers, “its just me.”

“What the hell?”


“So you can wear it tonight, what do you think? Ruby helped me. She went in to town to see August. The dress is with him, at his studio.”

Emma can’t help her eyes filling up with tears. “Really? You did this for me?” Regina nods and shrugs, “I’m tired of my mother and Zelena and their games. I don’t know why they treat you so badly; it isn’t right. I should have tried to help you more all these years. I guess this is the least I can do.”

“Oh, Regina, thank you!” Emma squeals, throwing her arms around her stepsister.

“Shh,” Regina admonishes again, “not so loud. And you have to leave now.”

Emma looks down at her filthy fingernails, then touches her matted, dirty hair. “Now? But look at me, I can’t go like this!”

Regina shakes her head, “Everything you need will be provided. Now go before my mother locks you up or something.”

Emma grins widely and takes off on Maximus. Perhaps her luck is beginning to change.
Emma sighs deliciously as she eases her body inch by inch into the soapy water. She leans back against the copper tub with a smile on her face. Never in all her days can she remember taking a bath with such warm water. Usually she’s shivering in a tiny iron basin beside the kitchen fire.

“Real soap!” Emma exclaims. She’s behind the dressing screen in the royal portrait-makers studio.

“That’s courtesy of Belle,” August calls back from the other side, “She had everything prepared for your arrival.”

Emma’s heart is full at the love so many have lavished on her today: Regina, Ruby, August, and now Belle.

“Don’t dawdle in there all afternoon,” August scolds good-naturedly, “you can’t be late meeting the prince.”

Emma lifts the soap with shaking hands and begins to scrub the grime away. Her heart still hammers violently in her chest every time she thinks about what she has to do. She’s played the whole thing out in her mind dozens of times; each with a different outcome. Emma dunks her head under, scrubbing at the roots of her hair as she forces her mind to stop torturing her. She’ll know his reaction soon enough.

When she comes up out of the water after rinsing her hair, she hears a door open and close. Then she hears August and Belle call out each other’s names. This is followed by sounds that Emma thinks must be kisses. Her suspicions are confirmed when she hears August and Belle giggle breathlessly.

“Shh, Emma’s right over there behind the screen,” August says, his voice muffled as if Belle won’t stop kissing him.

Belle giggles again, “I know, I’m sorry. I just missed you.”

“You saw me this morning.”

Emma rolls her eyes at the lovers as she steps from the tub and dries off. The sounds of kisses continue as Emma slips her mother’s dress over her head. She wrings her hair out one more time over the tub, then clears her throat loudly as she steps out into the room. Belle is in August’s embrace, but they aren’t kissing, and Belle doesn’t seem the least bit embarrassed. August on the other hand, quickly releases Belle, blushing furiously.

“Emma,” Belle exclaims, dashing to her. The sound of her real name coming from the princess’s lips, almost moves Emma to tears. “This dress is exquisite on you!”

“How can you be so kind to me?” Emma asks, ducking her head. “I lied to you and to Killian. I’m no countess, Belle, just a simple peasant girl.”

“Hey,” Belle tells her, squeezing her hands, “it’s just a name. Just a title. It has nothing to do with the person you are. Killian loves you; it’s obvious to everyone. That won’t change. He’ll understand.”

Emma bites her lip, “Do you really think so?”

“I do,” Belle says firmly with a nod of her head, “now, let’s get your hair and makeup done,
shall we?”

Belle goes to the door and ushers in four ladies in waiting. They move Emma to the salon and make quick work of her hair, drying it and curling it, and then pulling the sides up and twisting it into a braided crown. Then they weave swan’s feathers in and out of the braids. Emma is relieved. It isn’t over the top, but completely suits her personality. They keep the makeup minimal, too, except for the lipstick, which is bright red. Emma smiles at her reflection as she dons the long, white gloves that match the dress. She spins from the mirror and dashes out into the room to get her friends’ reaction.

But August and Belle aren’t paying the least bit of attention to her. They are too busy lost in one another’s embrace. Their kisses do not abate as Emma clears her throat and waves to try and get their attention. Finally, she sighs and gives up.

“See you at the ball, then,” she chuckles, “if you ever make it there, that is . . .”

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Prince Killian leans against the far wall of the royal library, tapping his fingers agitatedly against the stone. He looks pensively out the window, not actually seeing anything. He had tried to read until the stroke of nine, but it was no use. Mostly, he’s trying not to pace the room in his fretting.

It has been three whole days since he’s seen Ava, but it feels like three years. He longs to be with her every second of every hour of every day. He knows now he could never marry Princess Jasmine; it would be unfair to them both. He will never stop loving Ava, even if he weds another. That can be disastrous for a kingdom; just ask Queen Guinevere of Camelot.

But what of Ava? How does she feel about him? She had returned his kisses with vigor, and the way she looked at him made him feel stronger than ten men. Yet she hadn’t declared her love as he had. Then she asks to meet him here privately before the ball. Why? He’s gone over dozens of possible scenarios in his mind, some as mundane as longing to share private kisses to something as heart shattering as already being married to someone else.

The door opens, and Killian raises his eyes to see Ava enter the room. The second he sees her, his breath leaves his body. She is a vision in a white gown, the skirt covered in delicate white feathers. More white feathers adorn her golden hair, a perfect symbol of who she is; everything pure and good and light. He crosses the room in only a few strides and gathers her in his arms. He hadn’t meant to greet her with a kiss, especially one so passionate, but he can’t help himself.

“Ava,” he breathes when they part.

She shakes her head, tears already filling her eyes, and his heart trips in his chest. Is it that bad?

“Killian, there’s something I must tell you before another moment passes.”

He searches her face, and sees fear there. He laughs, “Whatever it is, my answer is yes,” then he bends to kiss her again.

Emma lifts her hand and places it firmly against his chest to stop the kiss. Why does he have to be so wonderful? And so handsome? She takes a shaky breath. “I think it’s best to just rip it off like a bandage . . . my name isn’t Ava, it’s Emma. Emma Swan. And I’m not a countess.”

Emma’s heart sinks as he takes a step back from her, confusion in his eyes, so she simply goes on, “That day we met – wait, no, that wasn’t the day we met – anyway, that day with the
carriage of prisoners, I was –“

“The apple?” Killian stops her with the question. “That was you?”

“Yes,” Emma says, her voice wavering. She takes Killian’s hand in hers that has fallen limp at his side, “You were my angel of mercy that day, giving me those coins. Marco is August’s father, and we were desperate to save him from the mines, so –“

“So you pretended to be of noble blood to use the coins to buy him back,” Killian finishes for her, sinking to a chair by the fire.

“Yes,” Emma explains, falling to her knees by his side and clasping both his hands in hers, “and I never meant to try and deceive you, but you begged me for my name. I – I was scared, so I made one up . . .”

Emma trails off at the ashen look on his face. She sinks into a heap on the floor, relinquishing his hands, “I should have told you that day on the beach, but I didn’t know you and Belle yet. I was scared you would throw me in the stocks or worse for impersonating a courtier. And then . . . I didn’t plan on falling in love with you.”

She whispers the final words, unable to look him in the eye. It’s quiet for long moments, long enough to give her all the answers she needs. She rises wearily from the floor. Without looking at him, she says her good-bye.

“I understand if you don’t trust me. But know this, your highness, I truly do love you.”

Emma forces herself to take one step then another for the door on wobbly legs, but before she can reach it, Killian is there, grasping her by the elbow. He whirls her around to face him, and she is shocked to see a smile on his face.

“Emma Swan, is it?”

She swallows hard and nods as he searches her face, and she thrills with hope at the sparkle she sees in his eyes.

“It suits you.”

Then he is kissing her, and Emma can’t believe how wonderfully blessed she is to have this man’s love. A single tear slips down her cheek as she pulls him closer.

But suddenly, Killian gasps and stiffens in her arms. She pulls back in alarm and screams when he crumples to the ground. She collapses beside him, shaking him by the shoulder.

“Killian! Killian!”

“Don’t worry,” says a figure shrouded in shadows in the far corner of the room, “he isn’t dead. Just under my spell.”

The figure’s words send icy fingers of dread throughout Emma’s veins. The person – a woman – steps from the shadows. She is wearing a black dress fringed with black feathers. Atop her head is a black headdress glittering with blood red jewels. She is beautiful in a terrifying way, her angular cheek bones seeming almost chiseled from alabaster. Her smile is deceptively kind as she almost floats towards Emma.

“Who are you?” Emma chokes out, tears slipping down her face.
“I told you, Emma, that you were messing with forces you couldn’t comprehend.”

Emma turns towards the second voice to find her stepmother standing over her. Cora’s smile is malevolent and her eyes are sparked with vicious glee.

“I don’t understand. What forces?”

“Think Emma,” the black clad figure taunts, “you know who I am.”

“The Black Fairy,” Emma whispers the words, but she knows beyond a doubt they are true. “What do you want with me?”

“Mostly,” Cora says coldly, “we just want you out of the way.”

Emma clutches the front of Killian’s brocaded dress coat in her fists, “The prince loves me. He doesn’t care that I’m a commoner. He will find me.”

The Black Fairy shakes her head at Emma, clucking her tongue against her teeth, “You poor, naïve girl.”

Then the fairy makes a dramatic motion with her hands and is suddenly enveloped in black smoke. When it clears, Emma is staring back into her own face. The Black Fairy looks so much like Emma in her mother’s dress, it’s like looking in a mirror. She’s so shocked, it doesn’t register at first what the fairy plans to do until Cora is pulling her away from Killian.

“No! No!” she screams, kicking as hard as she can. “What will you do to him?”

Emma’s stomach turns as the fairy leans over Killian’s form and runs her fingers across his cheek. “Oh, don’t worry dear, I’m just going to break his heart.”

Before Emma can fight her way free of Cora’s grasp, the fairy waves her hand at them, and Emma and her stepmother disappear in a puff of smoke.

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Killian starts suddenly, his head resting on the stone wall by the library window. Had he dozed off? How was that possible when he was so anxious waiting for Countess Ava? He glances at the grandfather clock in the corner and is surprised to see it read a quarter past nine. His heart sinks. Ava didn’t show.

His parents duck their heads in the room, admonishing him to hurry and make his way to the ballroom. They must make their royal welcome so the feasting can begin. Killian follows them, trying to remain calm. He had planned to ask Ava to marry him in private, and then announce her as his betrothed at the close of the ball. But now? Perhaps he can get a moment alone with her during the festivities. He doesn’t have to make the formal announcement until the end of the ball, at the stroke of midnight.

Once he and his parents welcome everyone to the ball, Killian begins scanning the hall for Ava, but he doesn’t see her anywhere. He also looks for August or Belle; surely they will know not only where she is, but why she didn’t meet him. His cousin and her lover, however, are nowhere to be seen. He spots Robin Hood, but he’s busy whispering in the ear of a pretty brunette. The girl, if he remembers correctly, is Zelena’s younger sister.

“Looking for someone?” a voice behind him teases.
Killian rolls his eyes as Graham pushes a tankard of ale into his hands. They both take a drink, and then Graham shoves him playfully in the arm.

“Don’t worry, Killian, I’ve never heard of a countess skipping a ball,” Graham chuckles as he takes another swallow of ale, then his mouth quirks up in a smile. He gestures over Killian’s shoulder, “What did I tell you?”

Killian turns towards the staircase leading into the ballroom, and his heart leaps into his throat. The vision of Ava descending the stairs is like something out of a dream. Her white dress gives her an angelic look, and she seems to almost float down the stairs. She is enchanting in every way. So much so that she has attracted the attention of every single person in the room. But Killian could care less about the audience as he rushes towards her.

“Ava,” he breathes as he bends to kiss her hand, “why didn’t you meet me as we planned?”

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes, smiling in a way that thoroughly beguiles him, “I just couldn’t get away sooner.”

“Tis no matter,” he says shaking his head, and pulling her towards an alcove on the far side of the room, “we can talk now.”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Baroness Cora descends on them both, grabbing Ava by the hair. Killian shouts at the woman’s shocking behavior, but the baroness ignores him, dragging Ava into the center of the ballroom to stand before the king and queen. Everything falls to an eerie silence, and every eye in the room is on the tableau unfolding before the royal family.

“Your majesties,” the baroness shouts, pointing an accusing finger at Ava, “I must expose this imposter for who she really is.”

Killian shakes his head in confusion, “You are on dangerous ground, Baroness!”

“This girl,” Cora spits out, “has been a servant in my household since she was a child. She deceived you, Prince Killian, in order to seduce you and gain herself a crown.”

The blood drains from Killian’s face as he turns shocked eyes towards Ava, “No. That can’t be true. Tell them, Ava.”

Gone suddenly is the bright sweetness of Ava’s smile, the sparkle of innocence in her jade eyes, the resourceful wit of her stance. Instead, she tilts her head and regards him with a cold stare. Her shoulders are squared and haughty in a way he has never seen. When she speaks, her words are clipped and calculating. “My name is Emma Swan. You didn’t seem to care what my name was when you took me to your bed, prince.”

A gasp echoes throughout the room, and the blood drains from Killian’s face. This can’t actually be happening. Surely, he will awaken soon from this nightmare.

“Killian!” his father shouts, “Please tell me you didn’t!”

“She’s lying!” Killian protests, “As God as my witness, I was nothing but a gentleman to this maiden!”

Ava – Emma – narrows her eyes at him and arches a cruel brow, “You mean like your brother before you? Is taking a woman’s virtue permissible if she’s heir to the throne of Arendelle? Is that it?”
Another gasp echoes throughout the room, and Killian’s jaw clenches, his heart shattering in agony. “You,” he spits out, “are no different from all the others.”

“I demand that the prince marry me since he has taken my maidenhead!” Emma shouts, not caring in the least for the heartbreak on his face.

Killian drops his head for a moment, wishing to hide his agony from all these on-lookers. He steadies his breath, then raises his head, “Royal guards,” he shouts, “arrest this woman for impersonating a courtier!”

The guards come forward to do the prince’s bidding, Graham giving him a long, sympathetic look. Emma just smiles cruelly at him as they drag her away. How could he have been such a fool?

“Son –“ his father says tentatively, but Killian shoves off the comforting hand his father rests on his shoulder. He then turns and flees the ballroom. There will be no reveling for him tonight.

In the corridor, he almost collides with his cousin, who is laughing merrily on August’s arm. But her smile falls away when she sees Killian’s agonized expression.

“What’s happened, cousin? Where’s Emma?”

Killian’s eyes flash fire at his cousin’s words, “Emma! You knew?”

Belle shakes her head at him, “I just found out yesterday. But, Killian . . . you love her. Why would you care if she isn’t a countess?”

“Then she has bewitched you, too,” Killian replies with a shake of his head, “perhaps she has dark magic. I don’t know. But she deceived us all.”

Killian turns and runs down the corridor, ignoring August’s cries for him to wait. A broken heart is bad enough, but to have it happen in front of the entire kingdom? That is more than anyone should have to bear. Even a prince.

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Emma shoves the hair pin she clutches in her hand back into the waistband of her pantaloons as the sound of footsteps descend the basement stairs. She also scrambles away from the dungeon door, the lock of which she’s been attempting to pick. All of her years at Swan Manor, and she never once knew there was a basement, much less a dungeon. Then again, there is apparently much she never knew. Like her stepmother’s true nature.

Cora, with that same regal air she has always possessed, descends the slick stone stairs, a ring of keys jangling in her hand. She unlocks the door to Emma’s cell and steps inside. Emma pulls her knees up to her chest and turns away from her stepmother’s gaze.

“I just thought you might like to know,” Cora says with a casual air, “that Prince Killian announced his betrothal yesterday. To Princess Jasmine.” She shakes her head and gives Emma a look of mock sympathy, “Men are so fickle. The wedding is just a fortnight away, too.”

Emma choke back the tears, commanding herself to stop reminding herself of Killian’s kisses and tender words. She refuses to give her stepmother the pleasure. Instead, she tilts her head and regards the woman for a moment before speaking. “Okay, so you won. I’m not marrying the prince. So let me go!”
“Well, we can’t have you around distracting the prince and his Arabian beauty, now can we? Aside from that, I have all this pesky debt I need to take care of. So. . . I’ve made a deal.”

“With who?”

The question is barely out of Emma’s mouth before a manic laugh comes from the corner of the dungeon.

“Why with me of course!”

Emma starts to see the impish man with reptilian green skin materialize suddenly in the opposite corner of her cell. “The Dark One?”

“Yes!” Rumpelstiltskin squeals with delight. “I’ve been in need of a . . . companion.” He draws closer to trace a claw like nail across her cheek. Emma pulls away and tries to conceal the shudder that rolls through her.

“You in exchange for canceling my debt,” Cora explains casually, as if she’s trading one of the cows in the barn, “though I do believe I’m getting the better end of the deal.”

Rumplestiltskin yanks her closer with super-human strength that surprises her. “The kingdom of Corona refused a similar deal, and I still need an heir.”

“Hell no!” Emma snaps, “No way am I marrying you!”

“Who said anything about marriage?” the Dark One asks with a maniacal tilt of his head, “A man has needs is all.”

Then he’s laughing that creepy laugh again, and Emma is struggling with all her might as she screams, but it’s useless. In a puff of smoke, the Dark One takes her away.

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Weddings can be many things, but somber is not normally one of them. Yet somber is the best word to describe the air in the Royal Chapel of Avalor as Princess Jasmine of Agrabah walks stately down the aisle to wed Prince Killian.

Killian tries to stop fidgeting, tries to squash this feeling of dread that threatens to consume him. Rumors were true, after all, Princess Jasmine is beautiful. But this wedding holds no joy at all for him, and part of Killian aches at what that means for Jasmine. She deserves more than he can give.

They were given two weeks to get to know one another, which is more than most royals get. They have played tennis, gone on horseback rides, taken long walks. They could be friends for sure, but there is a sadness in them both, and he thinks he can guess what it is. It’s only a suspicion, but he guesses that he’s not the only one whose heart is elsewhere.

He takes Jasmine’s hand to help her up onto the dais to face the priest. Even through her lace gloves, her hand feels clammy in his. She averts her eyes as she faces him, and they both turn towards the priest.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today –“

“I object,” Princess Jasmine blurts out.
Killian’s jaw drops as he glances at her, understanding passing between them. “I’m afraid I must also object.” He hears his father groaning in protest behind him, but he doesn’t care.

“Um, I haven’t gotten to that part yet,” whispers the priest.

Jasmine shakes her head as she turns to face him, lifting her veil up off her face. “Prince Killian, you are just as handsome and charming as rumors said you were, so don’t take this personally. But my heart already belongs to another,” she looks over her shoulder and Killian follows her gaze to a young man in the audience with long dark hair and brown eyes. Though a roguish grin fills his face, there is also sadness and grief there.

Jasmine looks from her lover back to Killian. He smiles down at her and grasps her shoulders, “Princess,” he tells her, “I know exactly how you feel.”

He then presses a chaste kiss to her forehead and whispers in her ear. Jasmine grins widely, flinging the wedding veil off her head and onto the floor. Then she races across the room and flings herself into the arms of her lover.

“Alladin!” she cries as she peppers his face with kisses.

Killian just grins watching them, then unpins his wedding cloak, tosses it to the floor, and strides out of the palace chapel. His father chases after him, stopping him in the corridor.

“Son, you don’t honestly plan on marrying a girl who currently resides in our dungeon?”

Killian shakes his head, “I know it sounds crazy, but I just can’t shake the feeling that something isn’t right.”

“The prince isn’t crazy, your majesty,” calls a voice behind them. They turn to see a crowd of people; among them, Graham and Robin Hood. It is Graham who has spoken, and he strides closer, “I brought these visitors to you as soon as I could. I almost thought I would have to crash the wedding.”

A couple, a man with sandy blonde hair and a woman with long, dark hair, stride towards the king with the bearing of royalty. Yet they are also clearly panicked. The woman speaks first.

“Forgive me and my husband for barging in like this, but it is urgent. Was there a young woman at the ball you threw a few weeks ago wearing a dress with white feathers?”

“Yes,” Killian gasps, remembering the vision Emma made in that dress, “yes, there was.”

The dark haired woman turns to him, clasping both his hands, “What is her name? What does she look like?”

“Emma,” Killian answers, and wonders as tears brim in the woman’s eyes, “and she’s beautiful. Golden hair, jade green eyes, a dimple in her chin, and the most becoming freckles dusting her nose.”

The couple collapse against each other as Killian describes Emma’s surpassing beauty, tears spilling over both their eyes. They seem to have an unspoken conversation, and then the woman turns to Killian again, searching his face intently.

“Did she wear any jewelry?”

Killian thinks to himself, suddenly surprised that he hadn’t noticed. “You know, the night of the ball
she wasn’t wearing it, which was odd. She always wore an emerald ring. She was always fiddling with it.”

“IT’s her, Charming,” the woman gasps, clutching her husband’s arms, “it’s our Emma!”

“Well, yes and no,” another voice corrects, and Regina, Zelena’s sister, steps forward. She glances over at Robin Hood, who nods at her in encouragement. “The Emma you described has lived in my home as my stepsister for the past fifteen years.”

“That’s right,” the man interrupts, “she was kidnapped when she was only three.”

“But,” Regina continues, “the woman at the ball, the woman in your dungeon right now? That’s not Emma.”

Killian shakes his head, hesitant to allow the hope rising in him to take hold, “What do you mean?”

“The real Emma has been in the dungeon of Swan Manor since the night of the ball. Until two weeks ago.”

“What happened two weeks ago?” the man asks with a trembling voice.

“She was sold.”

“Sold!” Killian shouts in horror, as does the sandy-haired man. His wife lets out a sob.

“Yes,” Regina says sadly, “to the Dark One.”

The entire group chases after Killian as he heads straight for the armory. Wordlessly, he straps a sword to his waist and begins perusing the daggers. He chooses two of those as well, slipping one into his belt and the other into his boot.

“Killian,” Graham says to him, with both hands raised in supplication, “let’s slow down for just a minute. You’re talking about storming the Dark One’s castle. No one has ever done that and lived.”

“Slow down?” Killian snaps at his best friend as he slings a bow across his back. “The woman I love is being held captive by the Dark One, and you want me to slow down?”

The sandy haired man claps a hand to his shoulder, “I agree with your friend. We have to be strategic in this.”

“We want Emma home just as much as you do,” the dark haired woman adds, reaching around Killian to retrieve a bow of her own.

She straps it onto her back and gives him a firm nod. It is so like Emma that it makes him finally pause. He looks at the couple closely, and suddenly everything falls into place. “You’re Snow White and Prince Charming, the missing rulers of Misthaven.” He pauses as the couple nods in the affirmative. “And you had a daughter . . . Emma!”

“Yes,” Snow White says, her lip trembling, “and I think it’s best you sit and hear our tale before we run off on this mission.”

Killian shakes his head, clenching his jaw, “Why should I listen to you? Where have you been for the past 15 years?”
“Cursed,” Charming explains, “separated from one another and cursed with no memory of one another.”


Snow comes closer to him, searching his eyes in an uncanny way. They are the same jade green as Emma’s, and it makes him want to look away, so ashamed is he of failing the woman he loves. Snow takes his face in her hands, “Answer one question for me first. When did you first see Emma’s ring?”

Killian furrows his brow and thinks, he remembers it there when he kissed her hand at Swan Manor, remembers her twirling it on her finger that day at the beach, he remembers it glittering up at him from the ground when—his eyes fly open. “The apple!” he gasps, and then he remembers that she did come to meet him in the library. She told him the truth, told him she loved him, and then—he shakes his head. After that it’s a blank, but magic must have erased it from his mind until this moment.

“Killian?” Snow asks patiently.

He looks Snow in the eye and blinks, “The very first day we met,” he tells her. How had he not remembered until now? Such an expensive emerald on a peasant girl’s hand...

But all Snow does is smile, and it fills up her entire face. “That ring is enchanted, Killian. It was enchanted to lead Emma to her true love. Only her true love would be able to see it on first sight.” She stretches up on her tiptoes and places a soft kiss to Killian’s brow. “It’s you,” she says softly.

“I—“ Killian’s voice is choked, “I know. That’s why we can’t delay. The Dark One sought to marry my cousin, so I can only guess he wants Emma to—to—“ but he can’t bring himself to say it.

Snow shakes her head, “He couldn’t do that even if he wanted to. The ring has a strong enchantment; it will protect her. Even from the Dark One.”

“Emma is a special girl,” Charming adds, “The day she was born, all three of the great fairies—Blue, Tinker Bell, and Tiger Lily—were at her birth. They prophesied that she would possess strong light magic. Strong enough to defeat the darkness for good and free the realms. We tried to keep her safe, but... we failed.”

Snow puts a comforting hand to her husband’s shoulder, “First, when Emma was three years old, she was kidnapped. We thought it was the Black Fairy, but the other fairies could find no trace of magic. Then, just days later, Charming and I were parted. I awoke in the forest with no memory of him or who I really was. Tiger Lily managed to find me two years later and restore my memories. She told me then that Emma’s true love would be key to her destroying the darkness. That’s when the fairies helped me enchant that ring and send it to her.”

“It took Snow eight more years to find me, then another year to get my memories back,” Charming continues. “Ever since then, we have been searching for our daughter. Just about two months ago, the enchantment on the ring grew stronger, and it led us here.”

“That’s when Emma and I met,” Killian whispers.

Snow pulls a gnarled piece of wood from the satchel at her waist and hands it to Killian. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but this is the wand that will open a portal where we can forever banish both the Black Fairy and the Dark One. Only Emma can wield it.”

Killian turns it over in his hands, “I don’t understand. I’ve never seen Emma use magic.”
Charming shakes his head, “She has no idea she has it. She has no idea who she really is – Princess of Misthaven. The Dark One and the Black Fairy, do know who she is. That is the true danger that Emma faces.”

The guard they had sent to the dungeon to apprehend the “fake Emma,” comes rushing in at that moment. “It was the Black Fairy!” he gasps. “She was the imposter! But before we could do anything, she disappeared!”

Regina gasps, “My mother has been helping the Black Fairy?”

Killian clutches the wooden wand tightly in his fists, “Regina, you must return home and speak of this to know one.”

Regina nods and turns to run out.

“Wait!” Killian stops her with a mischievous smile on his face. “Actually, tell them you spoke to me after the wedding. Tell them I said I couldn’t believe I almost married a foreigner when I could have had . . . your sister.”

Regina smirks back at him, then gives a small curtsy, “It shall be done, your highness.”

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Emma sticks her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she concentrates, ear bent toward the padlock on the dungeon door, waiting for a click. Fourteen long days living in the Dark One’s castle. The first half of it, the disgusting imp tried to make good on his promise – using Emma to fulfill his “manly needs.” She hadn’t made it easy for him, of course, but once he had her cornered, and reached out to caress her, Emma closed her eyes and thought of Killian instead. His smiles, his eyes, the way he looked at her as if she were the most precious treasure in all the realms. As she thought of these things, a warmth spread from her emerald ring all the way through her body, and then Rumplestiltskin was screaming in agony about his burned hands. From then on, whenever he came to her chambers, she simply thought of Killian, and Rumpelstiltskin couldn’t touch her without being burned.

Of course, the Dark One only put up with it for the first week. After that, he moved Emma out of the bedchamber and into the dungeon. A fact which actually thrilled Emma. She had been close to figuring out the tumblers on the lock in Cora’s basement. It was only a matter of time before she had these figured out, too. And she still had the hairpin hidden in her pantaloons. It was one of the hairpins that had kept her crown of braids in place the night of the ball. She tries not to think about that fact too deeply.

There’s a click and Emma exults inwardly as she slides the padlock quietly from the door. She eases open the heavy metal door and slips up the stairs. When she reaches the first hallway, she rounds a corner and bumps into –

“Killian!” she gasps, probably louder than she should. “What are you doing here?”

He shocks her by gathering her in his embrace, “Oh, Emma,” he breathes, then he chuckles, “I’m here to rescue you, though you don’t seem to need it.”

Emma choke back a sob, “Say that again.”

Killian’s brow furrows in confusion, “You don’t need to be rescued?”

Emma shakes her head, “No. The part where you said my name.”
He gives her that smile that she has clung to in her mind these past two weeks, and says again on a soft breathe, “Emma.”

Killian steps forward, cupping her face, but before his lips can touch hers, she pulls back abruptly. “Wait! What about your princess?”

He takes a tendril of her hair and lets it slip between his fingers, “You’re my princess, Emma. I didn’t marry Jasmine.”

She throws her arms around his neck with joy, but then laughs merrily, “Please, Killian, you and your romantic sentiments. I’m no countess, much less a princess.”

“Oh, but you are, Emma,” he tells her in all sincerity, then he gestures with a nod to a couple standing behind him.

The dark haired woman and the sandy haired man step forward, weeping, and envelop Emma in their embrace. The woman says her name over and over, and the man cups the back of her head as if she’s a child. For one moment, she stiffens, but then she’s suddenly assaulted by memories. She’s lying in her crib, staring up at a mobile of glass unicorns. Then two faces – the faces of the couple embracing her – are hovering over her, smiling. She remembers the woman’s kisses when she scraped her knee, the man’s hugs when she found a bird with a broken wing. She remembers bedtime stories, and music, and laughter.

“Mother? Father?”

The couple laugh through their tears and hold Emma tighter. She clings to them, so happy she fears this may be some wonderful dream. Their joy is interrupted by a gleeful, wicked laugh.

Rumplestiltskin claps his hands together, “Oh, I just love a good reunion. Touching, isn’t it Fiona?”

The Black Fairy steps around the corner, and Killian and her father both draw their swords.

“Yes, Rumple. Warms the heart. It’s a shame we have to break it up.”

“Yes,” the Dark One hisses as he gesticulates with his hands, “they maybe should have waited until they escaped the castle.”

Snow White turns Emma to face her. She looks into her daughter’s eyes with such hope and belief, it causes a warmth Emma has never felt before curl along the edges of her spine. “Sweetheart, I know this is a lot to take in. But you were meant to defeat them.” She pulls the wand from her satchel and sets it reverently into Emma’s palm. “This wand will open a portal that will banish them both forever, but only you can make it work.”

Emma begins to tremble all over. “What? No! I can’t. I don’t have magic! I don’t know how to make a wand work!”

“Yes, you do,” Killian tells her firmly. He doesn’t lower his sword, but steps closer to her, locking his blue eyes on her green ones. “You are my bloody brilliant, amazing, incandescently good Swan. You want justice and truth and everything pure in this world. You can do this!”

The warmth she felt when her mother spoke with such belief begins to tingle now throughout her limbs.

“He’s right, Emma,” her father says, “fairies were there when you were born to give a
prophesy. About you. I believe in you, Emma, we all do. We always have.”

The warmth now spreads to her fingertips, and she can feel something indescribable sparking to life, but the wand still remains lifeless in her palm. The Black Fairy cackles. Snow White cocks an arrow in her bow.

“Foolish girl,” the evil fairy taunts, “using magic takes training and time. I have studied the black arts for centuries. Do you really think you can defeat me?”

Emma narrows her eyes at the woman and lifts the wand, “I can sure as hell try!” She flicks her arm and points the wand at the villains, wishing with all her might as she does so that they will be banished forever.

Nothing happens.

The villains laugh uproariously. “You know,” the Black Fairy sneers, “all I asked of that silly woman was to hide you away, Emma. I took her from being a whore with two illegitimate daughters and made her a baroness. And all she had to do was one simple thing – keep you from finding true love. And she failed.”

The Black Fairy smiles in a way that sends chills down Emma’s spine. “Some things a fairy just has to do herself,” with those words, she flicks her hand towards Killian, and he goes flying through the air. He lands at Fiona’s feet with a sickening thud. The fairy smiles down at his unconscious form, then lifts her arms over him, “Now, to kill the lover boy myself.”

“NO!!!” Emma screams, and before she even realizes what is happening, a burst of white magic has pulsed from her fingertips. It hits the Black Fairy square in the chest and sends her flying into the wall behind her. Trembling, Emma looks down at her hands which are now glowing and crackling with energy.

Before Emma can rush to check on Killian, the Black Fairy sends her own burst of magic back at Emma. Her father tries to deflect it with his sword, but instead, it pushes him into Emma, and they both go flying backwards. The wand goes skidding across the floor. Rumplestiltskin is laughing with glee as he bats away arrow after arrow from Snow’s bow. Emma rolls over on her stomach and crawls towards where the wand has landed. Suddenly, she’s sliding by the force of magic along the corridor, straight towards the Black Fairy.

“You will watch me kill him!” Fiona shrieks, sending a burst of magic towards Killian that sends his body into convulsions.

Emma rolls onto her back, and smirks at the fairy. “I don’t think so,” she tells her, then points the wand straight at her.

The Black Fairy’s eyes widen in shock. “No!” she screams as magic pours from the wand and into her chest. A portal opens behind her, sucking her in.

The force of the magic has Emma’s whole body shaking. She can only manage to crawl over to where Killian lies crumpled on the floor. She takes him by the shoulder and rolls him over. Relief floods through her when he coughs and moans. She cries and laughs in relief as she peppers his face with kisses. But their joy is short-lived when they hear a loud snap.

“Oh!” Rumplestiltskin giggles with an exaggerated hand to his mouth. The wand is broken in half under his foot. “Know how they say all curses can be broken? Well, so can all wands.” He then claps with glee at his own joke.
The Dark One then stomps over to Emma, pulling her up by her hair.

“Leave her alone!” Killian screams. He moves to stand up, but the Dark One flings an arm in his direction, and magic freezes him in place.

“No!” Emma’s parents scream, and Rumplestiltskin freezes them as well.

“Do you know what it’s like?” the Dark One sneers, “To have every delicate female shudder at the sight of you? To have every woman you ever meet wrinkle their nose in disgust the minute they see your hideousness? And yet, this pretty little prince has women begging to be his bride.”

Rumplestiltskin takes Emma face in his clawed hands and shoves her towards Killian. “You love her, don’t you?” he taunts. “Well I shall make you suffer as I have suffered. Her enchantment won’t let me take her to my bed, but it can’t stop me from taking her heart. And you, young prince, will be forced to watch as I crush it to powder.”

The Dark One turns suddenly and plunges his hand into Emma’s chest. Every fiber in Killian’s being is screaming in agony, though he is unable to move to make the sound.

Rumplestiltskin sneers at Emma, “Poor, poor girl. Don’t you know? Love is weakness.”

Then he pulls his hand, and Emma braces herself to feel her heart leave her body. But all she feels is a tug. The Dark One jerks his hand again in frustration, but he can’t remove Emma’s heart.

A single tear slips down Emma’s cheek as she smiles in wonder. “No,” she tells the Dark One, “love is strength.”

She pulls all of the warmth she has felt inward and then out, and a pulse of bright, white magic bursts from Emma’s heart. It shoves the Dark One backward, his hand no longer in Emma’s chest. The wand flies back into her hand, whole once more, and Emma points it at Rumplestiltskin in triumph. A portal opens behind him, and with one last scream, he is sucked in as well. The magic gathers back towards Emma and sinks back beneath her skin. She sags to her knees, breathless.

The spell now broken, her family surrounds her with hugs and kisses of joy.

Family. She likes the sound of that.

*************************************************************************

Emma stands just outside the throne room door, waiting for her cue. She trembles all over, hands smoothing the front of her new gown. It’s cream colored, and the skirt is dotted with a pattern of blue forget-me-nots the color of Killian’s eyes.

She still blushes when she thinks of her husband. After all, they have only been wed for a few days. Every time he catches her eye across the room and gives her that crooked smile, her mind can’t help replaying the things that have happened in the privacy of their bedchamber. She thinks, for example, of the first time he discovered the scars on her back from all of Cora’s lashings. She had been so ashamed, but he had sat down behind her, pushed her long blonde hair over one shoulder, and proceeded to tenderly kiss every scar on her bare back. When he had made love to her after that, tears were in his eyes. As he held her close, he vowed that the woman who did this to her would pay.

Thus, here she is now. She knows she shouldn’t relish the impeding downfall of her
stepmother, but she’s having a very difficult time being merciful in this particular situation. The woman isn’t even her stepmother, but a cruel woman who kidnapped an innocent three year old and kept her from her family for 15 years.

Emma hears her stepmother and stepsisters announced before the court. Regina, of course, is in on the whole charade. Emma leans her ear against the crack in the door to hear better.

“Baroness Cora Mills-Swan,” Killian’s father asks in his booming voice, “did you or did you not lie to the entire royal family?”

She hears her stepmother grovel and sputter excuses, though she can’t make out the words.

“And did you not kidnap your supposed stepdaughter Emma while you yourself pretended to be a baroness?”

Emma can’t help giggling when she hears Zelena shrieking, clearly turning on her own mother to save her own skin.

“Perhaps,” calls out the queen, “there is someone here who can speak for you?”

Emma counts to twenty before squaring her shoulders and stepping through the throne room doors. The entire court turns to her and bows. Cora and Zelena look around in obvious confusion before following suit to bow themselves.

“Oh, Zelena,” Killian smirks from the dais next to his parents, “I don’t think you’ve met . . . my wife.”

The look Zelena makes is absolutely priceless, and Emma has to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Emma makes her way down the aisle in the center of the room to stand before her stepmother.

“I will speak for this woman, your majesty,” Emma tells the queen.

Cora falls into a deeper curtsy at Emma’s feet, “I beg mercy, your highness. Let me live.”

Emma thinks of dozens of things she could say to this woman, but in the end, she decides she just isn’t worth the breath it would require. Instead, she ignores Cora completely to gaze up at her mother-in-law, “Your majesties, this woman’s crimes were against my parents, Queen Snow White and Prince Charming of Misthaven. I think it is only fair that she be sent there for trial.”

Emma once again looks to Zelena for her reaction. Once again: priceless.

It only takes a month after that to set the entire realm to rights again. Without the dark magic of the Black Fairy and the Dark One, and with all the kingdoms united as one, the ogres are easily defeated. Once the roads are safe for travel, commerce between the kingdoms is possible once again. Both Misthaven and Corona have been reestablished and Arendelle is no longer hidden away behind a wall of ice. The poverty that has held the people captive will take time to ebbate, but people everywhere are filled with hope for a brighter future.

And in the midst of a newfound peace, wedding after wedding is being thrown across the land. First Princess Jasmine to her true love Alladin, then Princess Anna of Arendelle to her beloved Kristoff, and even Emma’s own stepsister Regina to the former bandit Robin Hood. But the next wedding for Emma is bittersweet, for it will take her childhood friend away to another kingdom.
Killian keeps assuring her that the journey to Corona is but a short carriage ride away, but she will still miss him.

August stands now in the royal library before a small crowd. His own parents and his sister Ruby, now employed at the castle, stand eagerly to one side. Robin stands near the window, his arms around his new bride Regina. Graham is also present, chatting low with Snow White and Prince Charming. Belle stands near her fiancée, eyes shining with pride.

“This is really his best piece, Emma,” she gushes, “wait until you see it. I told him he must continue to paint when we settle in at the palace in Corona. I know he will have royal duties, but such a talent shouldn’t be wasted.”

“Stop running your mouth, then, and let him unveil the damn thing,” Robin quips. Regina turns in his arms to smack his chest.

“You don’t talk like that to a princess!” she admonishes, but the royals in the room only laugh.

“Okay, okay,” Belle laughs, brushing a kiss across August’s cheek, “show them, sweetheart.”

August removes the piece of silk from the canvas with a flourish to reveal the painting of Princess Emma. In it, she is on the edge of the sea, her blonde hair blowing in the wind, her pink gown billowing around her ankles as the surf washes over her bare feet. Emma agrees it is breathtaking, and everyone gasps and claps in approval.

Except for Prince Killian.

“I’m sorry, August, but it looks nothing like her.”

A smile is teasing his lips, but Emma can read him well enough to know that he is one hundred percent serious.

“Killian!” she admonishes.

He turns to her and gathers her in his arms, “I’m sorry, love, but no painting could ever capture your beauty.”

Emma can’t help but blush and smile as he bends to kiss her. “But Killian,” she argues as he pulls away, “You’re a prince, you’re supposed to be charming.”

Killian rests his forehead on hers, “And we, princess, are supposed to live happily ever after.”

“Really?” she giggles, “Says who?”

“Says every fairy tale ending ever written.”

“Then that’s where your wrong,” Emma argues, wrapping her arm around her prince’s neck, “this isn’t what this is. It’s a happy beginning.”

And, ladies and gentleman, so it was . . .
* I also took this opportunity to do a "fix-it" of Ever After. I'm going to date myself here, but I saw Ever After in the theater when it came out. (Of course, I already dated myself by admitted I'm a 90s teen, so . . .) Anyway, I'll never forget how the audience cheered when Danielle punched her stepsister. So know how much I adore this movie. However, in the scene when Danielle goes to meet Henry in the ruins, I really wanted him to discover that she had been whipped and get angry/overprotective. I was bummed that it didn't happen that way and honestly pissed that he didn't notice she was in OBVIOUS PHYSICAL PAIN. Plus, I thought he was a douchebag at the ball, sorry. So, anyway, fixed it! :)

* And see what I did there? Throwing a little Tangled in there? ;)
* So, we've done a canon compliant future fic, a high school au, and an enchanted forest au. I think it's time for a single parent modern au. (You all know how much I love those!) So next will be a CS version of the George Clooney and Michelle Pfeiffer movie One Fine Day. So see you next Thursday!
One Fine Day

Chapter Notes

* I said at the beginning of this series that I blame it on cardio cinema at the gym. This chapter specifically happened because of the gym. I was on my stationary bike, and this movie was on the screen. George Clooney's character is trying to convince Michelle Pfeiffer's character that he has a Peter Pan complex, to which she responds, "You have a Captain Hook complex." I nearly fell off my stationary bike, and you know where my CS shipper brain went then . . .

* Any fic based on a 90s movie will be set in the 90s. Thus, in this story they "flip" open their phones and show the kids a video cassette.

* I almost didn't think I would get this to ya'll today. I just got back from a vacation to California and had some serious jet lag. So if some parts are not up to par, I blame it on the jet lag!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

7:30 am

There are some seemingly contradictory things that one enjoys when combined: sweet and salty gives us chocolate covered pretzels and salted caramel; sweet and sour results in delightful things like starburst and skittles. However, the two diametrically opposed females standing unannounced on the other side of the door of Killian Jones’ New York City apartment are not a combination that he finds either enjoyable or delightful. One holds his heart in the palm of her hand, and the other. Well, she used to as well. But that time is long past, and their present represents nothing but heartbreak.

Ignoring them, however, is not an option. So Killian pulls his eye from the peephole and gives himself a moment, resting his forehead against the old wood. Then he takes a deep breath and opens the door for his ex-wife and his six year old daughter.

“Daddy!” Maggie squeals, and Killian immediately falls to one knee to envelope his little girl in a hug. His throat constricts at how tightly she squeezes his neck. “I missed you!”

“Aye,” Killian chokes out over the lump in his throat, “and I you.” “Why don’t I get to stay with you lots and lots?” Maggie asks with a frown as she pulls away.

Killian tilts his head up to the taller brunette who, as usual fills up the narrow hallway with her presence. “That’s a good question,” he says pointedly.

Milah rolls her eyes and huffs loudly as she brushes past him into the apartment. His eyebrows raise as he sees that she’s pulling Maggie’s Little Mermaid suitcase behind her. Maggie’s matching book bag is looped over the handle, and her lovey, Mr. Bunny, pokes out of the top.

“Listen,” Milah snaps, all business, and apparently already irritated with Killian. Not that it ever takes her much effort. Being annoyed with him seems to be her constant state since the divorce. Or before, if he’s honest with himself. “The nanny came down with the flu, and you know we’ve got no family in the city. Our flight leaves in less than an hour.”
As if on cue, the sound of a car horn honking floats through Killian’s open window. “Oh, what exotic locale is Mr. Record Producer whisking you off to now?”

Milah sighs and rubs her forehead, “Don’t be a tool, Killian. Our honeymoon. And don’t act as if you forgot.”

“So you’re desperate, that’s what you’re saying,” Killian replies, unable to keep the satisfied grin off his face.

Milah grits her teeth in a very unflattering way. Funny how her every expression, once upon a time, was sexy to him, “Yes, okay?”

Killian nods, “Mhm . . .”

“Daddy!” Maggie calls from the other room, where she’s dangling from the scaffolding the contractor and his crew left behind. “Is this gonna be my room?”

Killian grins, “Yes, princess.”

“Get off that, Maggie!” Milah screeches, and Maggie flinches.

“See,” Killian remarks, lifting a finger in the air, “that’s what I find so confusing. You and Mr. Big Shot’s lawyers keep calling me unfit and this apartment . . . let’s see . . . how did they put it? Oh yes! Not adequately conducive to raising a child properly. So here I’ve been, spending almost every dime getting this place fixed up while simultaneously struggling to pay my lawyer, to prove I can care for my own daughter. And here you are, begging me –”

“Killian!” Milah shouts as the car horn blares again. “Look, I’ve got to go over all of Maggie’s information, and the flight –” she rubs her forehead again, “so what do you want?”

“Two week honeymoon, right?”

Killian’s heart soars as Milah nods. Two weeks? It’s the most time he’s been offered with Maggie in two years. But he forces a crease into his brow. Let Milah think it’s an inconvenience.

“And when you get back, we talk about shared custody?”

Milah glowers and bites her lower lip as she thinks a moment. The horn outside blares once again, and she jumps, clearly agitated. “Fine!”

“Shared custody,” Killian emphasizes, “not just visitation rights. Shared custody.”

Milah crosses her arms, glancing away from him, “Yes, yes, okay!”

Milah blows a kiss to Maggie and shoves a list into Killian’s hand. She hurriedly tries to go over everything on the list, but Killian waves her off. He used to do this alone, after all.

How hard can it be?

9:00 am

The minute Emma Swan’s feet hit the ground after exiting the cab, she dashes as fast as she can to the front door of her son Henry’s school. Which isn’t that fast considering she’s in heels. And dragging her six year old son along with her. While carrying a fish bowl. Yes, a fish bowl. This past weekend, of all weekends, had been Henry’s turn to care for the class pet. She just hopes little Nemo
doesn’t slosh out of his bowl as she runs. She doesn’t care a rat’s ass for the goldfish, but she’ll be damned if she lets her son be the kid who killed the class pet.

“Come on, Henry, hurry,” she pants.

Emma is in great shape, but today has already been . . . a day. Not to mention she got a grand total of two hours sleep last night. Henry had a nightmare – supposedly – and a thrashing six year old had not been conducive to restful slumber.

“No!” Emma cries as she reaches the front door where a notice has been posted. “No, no, no, no!”

“Sorry we missed you. The entire school has already left for the field trip.”

Emma’s back stiffens at the sound of the masculine voice reading the notice over her shoulder. His British accent sounds pompous to her ears, as if he’s rubbing it in that her day already sucks. She rolls her eyes as she turns around to face him. He’s wearing a grin that’s just too cocky as if he knows how handsome he is. And he is. Handsome. Unfairly so. Little does he know Emma Swan is immune to men with his brand of charm.

As if the universe is conspiring against her, it begins to rain. Emma shifts the fish bowl to her other arm to retrieve the umbrella from her enormous mom purse.

“You must be Milah’s ex-husband,” Emma bites out as she opens the umbrella.

Mr. Sexy raises his handsome eyebrows in surprise, “How’d you know that?”

Emma presses her lips into a thin line as she regards him cooly, “Well, that’s Milah’s daughter,” she begins, gesturing to the little girl whose hand he is holding, “and this is a totally ex-husband thing to do.”

The man drops the charm as he narrows his eyes at her. “And that’s a totally ex-wife thing to say. You’re kid’s late, too.”

Emma startles for a moment. How did he know she wasn’t married? But then she quickly shakes it off. He probably checked her ring finger a moment ago when he thought he could flirt with her. “Yeah, I’m late because of you!”

His face clears of its anger, and a blush rises to his stubbled cheeks instead. “Oh my God,” he mutters sheepishly as he fumbles to remove a wrinkled list from his jeans pocket. He chuckles as he peruses it, ducking his head and scratching behind his ear. Emma suddenly thinks how the rain is doing wonderful things to his thick dark hair, but quickly admonishes herself. “You must be Emma Swan. Says right here, Drop Maggie off with Emma Swan at 8:00. She even gave me your address. Look, I am so sorry. We’re kind of having a day here.”

A dimple forms in one cheek as he smiles at her, but Emma steels herself against its affect. “Whatever.”

She sees a taxi, and runs as best she can, waving it down. It pulls up to the curb, and she awkwardly pulls Henry along, struggling to juggle the fishbowl and the umbrella. An arm reaches out to deal with the umbrella, and Emma stubbornly wrenches it away as she slides into the cab. She lets out a groan when Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome slides in too with his daughter.

“Seriously?”

“Look, it’s my fault our kids missed their field trip, so let me make it up to you,” he apologizes, then
he turns to the cab driver. “Take her where she needs to go, then me, and I’ll pay both fares.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so,” Emma argues.

“Look lady,” the taxi driver snaps, “either tell me where to go, or get outta my cab.”

Emma bites her lower lip and glances down at her watch. She’s already late for work. “Fine, 860 Broadway, please.”

“Pendragon Design,” Killian says with a smile, “I’m impressed. You’re an architect?”

“Yes,” Emma says curtly, smoothing her hair from where the rain had frizzed it out. Trying to get her to open up won’t work. He’s Milah’s ex, and she probably divorced him for good reason.

“Name’s Killian, by the way,” he says, flashing her that mega-watt smile again, “Killian Jones.”

He offers her his hand, and she feels no way out of taking it. Instead of shaking hands like a normal person, he brings her hand up to his lips and brushes a kiss across her knuckles. She yanks her hand away and rolls her eyes. Arrogant playboy! He taps her on the shoulder, and gestures out the window.

“You may have heard of me,” he says with an arched eyebrow. She turns to see a bus in traffic next to them, emblazoned with an ad for the New York Times. Killian’s handsome face smiles at all of New York and the ad announces, Killian Jones Uncovers the Truth – For You!

Emma flips her hair haughtily, then lies and says, “Don’t read the Times, actually.”

She doesn’t even look at him to see if her barb hit its mark, instead pulling out her cell phone and flipping it open. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees him do the same.

“Mom!” Henry complains, shoving Maggie away from him. “She’s touching me!”

“He’s taking up all the room!” Maggie argues.

Emma sighs, as she dials her sister’s number with one hand and fishes through her purse with another. “Here,” she says, handing the children a couple of plastic dinosaurs, “play with these.”

The children cheer, their argument immediately forgotten as they make their dinosaurs attack each other. On the other side of the children, Killian has his cell phone to his ear.

“Hey there, sexy,” he says to whomever is on the other line, voice low and gravelly, “I was just calling to ask – what color panties are you wearing today?”

Emma rolls her eyes. She knew it. He’s just like every other self-absorbed man in this city. Her sister picks up, and the first thing she says to her is, “Elsa, if I am ever attracted to a man ever again, will you please shoot me and put me out of my misery?”

Killian gives her a shit-eating grin and an arched eyebrow. Emma turns her body towards the window to focus on her sister’s conversation.

“Good morning to you, too, Emma. Is this the only purpose for this call?”

“I’m just having the worst day. Thanks to a self-absorbed jerk who thinks the world revolves around him, Henry missed his field trip. This is a big day for my career. Can you please watch him for me?”

“Daddy, I’m hungry,” Maggie whines, and Emma sticks her finger in her ear.
“Emma, I love Henry, you know I do, but I have an audition today.”

Emma feels panic well up inside, “Well, okay, when is that?”

“Four, but –”

“Perfect! My office is on Broadway, you can just drop him off before.”

“Emma, you know how I have to focus before an audition. I have to rest my voice, and meditate –”

“Are you serious?” Emma snaps, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Elsa, you have a maid, a chef, and a personal trainer. How stressed can you be?”

“Well, I’m sorry we’re not all supermom, Emma.”

“DA--DDY!” Maggie cries louder, “I’m hungry!”

Emma continues begging with her sister as she roots around in her purse, “Elsa, that’s not what I’m trying to say. I’m just in a bind here.”

“Maggie, quit whining,” Killian says, “I don’t have any food.”

Emma reaches across the seat and hands the little girl a bakery sack.

“Why don’t you ask mom?” Elsa asks.

“Wow, a muffin!” exults Maggie, “Thank you, Emma!”

Killian flashes her a smile, but Emma turns her face away, “Mom’s at the spa on Mondays, and you know she’s still pissed about what Henry did to her ring.”

“What about Anna?”

“She and Kristoff are off mountain climbing, remember? Please, Elsa!”

“I’m sorry, Emma, but we all have careers. Try the 12th street drop off.”

Emma pulls the phone away and stares at it for a minute. Then she puts the phone back to her ear, “Are you serious? What kind of mother do you think I am?”

“You know, Emma,” her sister snaps, “I’m a little tired of your attitude. So you’ve had it tough, so what? You’re still the only one who’s given mom a grandkid. None of you seem to understand the sacrifices I’ve made to make it on Broadway. Don’t you think I feel my biological clock ticking?”

Emma lets her head drop back on the seat in frustration. She has had this same argument with her sister a hundred times, and she’s not in the mood for it today. “You know what, Elsa, forget it. I’ll figure something out.”

She hangs up and lets the phone drop to her lap. Then she rubs her face wearily with both hands. Henry picks up her cell phone and starts playing with it, pretending to talk to Maggie.

“Hello, my mommy hates your daddy.”

Maggie picks up her father’s phone and flips it open, “Well, so what, my daddy hates your mommy.”

The two children then stick their tongues out at each other, but Emma doesn’t have the energy for a
parental lecture on being nice. She doesn’t feel like being nice herself, so why bother?

“Swan,” Killian comments with a nod of his head, “I didn’t realize you were related to *those* Swans.”

“Why, you assumed I kept my douchebag of an ex-husband’s name?”

Killian sighs and gives her a sincere look for the first time that morning, “Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot—“

“No, I think my foot stepped exactly in the right place,” Emma cuts him off. The taxi has pulled up at the curb of her office building, and Emma wrestles her way out, juggling the fishbowl again. She gestures for Henry to get out, taking her cell phone from him and dropping it into her purse.

“But mommy—“ Henry protests.

“Henry, get out of the cab *now*, we don’t have time for this.”

Reluctantly, Henry obeys, and Emma takes his hand. Before she turns to go inside, she looks down at the fishbowl in her arms and smiles. Then she turns and sets it in Killian’s lap.

“Since you ruined our day, the class fish is now *your* responsibility,” she tells him, then slams the door in his shocked face. She doesn’t even mind letting him pay the cab fare.

Killian watches Emma Swan walk away, a golden-haired goddess full of brilliant fire.

“Maggie,” he tells his daughter as he watches the bloody brilliant woman walk confidently through the glass door of the office building, “one day, when you’re insanely beautiful, brilliant, and intoxicating, you’ll be tempted to squash men beneath your heel just because you can. But don’t, okay?”

Maggie shrugs as she leans into him, “Okay, Daddy.”

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10:00 am

Killian ignores his ringing cell phone as he hurriedly pays the cab driver. It’s probably Regina again anyway. He’s late for work, and apparently his editor is ready to have his head. She’s usually okay with him keeping his schedule flexible, as long as he gets his copy in on time, so something is definitely up.

“Hurry, Maggie,” he scolds, tugging on his little girl’s hand. Her legs go as limp as spaghetti noodles, her feet glued to the pavement.

“I don’t wanna go to your office,” she whines, “it’s so boring.”

“Maggie, please,” he begs, “I don’t have time for this.”

His cell phone is ringing again, and his nerves are completely frayed. He tucks the stupid fishbowl Emma Swan had shoved at him in the crook of one arm as he scoops Maggie up with his other one. His cell phone is tucked between his shoulder and chin.

“Hello?”

“Who’s this?” asks a suspicious sounding female voice.
Killian manages to slip inside the lobby elevator and hits ten with his knee. “Uh, Killian Jones. Who’s this?”

“That delicious young man who works for the Times?” the woman gushes. “You’re dating Emma?”


“This is my daughter’s phone,” the woman clarifies in an icy voice.

“Oh,” Killian groans, "our phones must have gotten mixed up.”

“Well, could you be a dear and let Emma know that I can’t watch Henry today? I’m already in the middle of my facial, and I just can’t get away. But make sure she knows this has nothing to do with Henry getting my ring stuck up his nose.”

Killian sets Maggie down as they step off the elevator, and distractedly tells Emma’s mother, “Uh, okay, sure.”

“And don’t let Emma freeze you out, okay? She seems prickly, but underneath she’s got a lot of love to give.”

Killian gives an awkward chuckle, but before he can clarify his and Emma’s relationship, the woman has already hung up. He blinks in shock as he looks at the phone in his hand. Ingrid Swan, queen of the soap opera, is indeed as regally cool as her reputation says.

“Jones, get the hell in here!”

Killian startles at the sound of Regina’s voice, and he looks up to see her across the bullpen, finely penciled brow arched, perfectly manicured hands on hips, and one sensible heel tapping a staccato rhythm. He swallows nervously as he scoops up Maggie and hurries to her office. As he passes cubicles, several female employees call out to him.

“Morning, Killian.”

“Aw, Killian, is that your daughter?”

“Your daughter is so cute! She looks just like you!”

“Missed you at the cocktail party last night, Killian.”

“Daddy,” Maggie asks innocently, “why are all the ladies looking at you like that?”

“Like what, sweetheart?”

“Like you’re a chocolate ice cream cone. And they talk funny to you, too.”

Killian ignores Maggie’s explanation, depositing her into a chair in Regina’s office. He then plops the fishbowl on Regina’s desk. Regina is sitting in her swivel chair, arms crossed. She raises both eyebrows as she regards the fishbowl.

“I don’t recall asking for another office pet.”

“You have a pet already?” Maggie asks, perking up.

The evil queen face melts from Regina’s expression as she looks at Maggie. For all her snarky comments and ruthless office policies, Regina has a soft spot for children. She leans over the desk
towards Killian’s little girl.

“Yes, sweetie, my cat,” Regina tells her, motioning for Maggie to come around the side of the desk. “Come look.”

“Awww,” Maggie cries as she sinks to the floor next to the open bottom drawer of Regina’s desk, stroking the back of the chubby tabby cat.

“Her name is Apple Turnover,” Regina tells her with a smile, “and I think she likes you.”

Once Maggie is occupied with the cat, Regina strides to her office door and closes it. Uh-oh, this is worse than Killian thought.

“Here I am, attempting to put out your fires and you’re strolling into work late?”

“Regina,” he says, raising both hands in defense, “I can explain. You see, I found out last minute that I had to keep Maggie, and then she missed her field trip, and I got stuck with the class fish—“

“Really?” Regina cuts him off, “Yet you had time when I called to ask me what color panties I was wearing? Let me guess, there was a woman involved. What? Were you trying to make her jealous? Get a rise out of her? Regardless what games you had time to play this morning, the fact is your job and mine are on the line.”

Killian blinks, baffled, “What?”

“The undercover piece you did? On corruption in Mayor Spencer’s office?”

“Yeah,” he nods, “the mob got Spencer elected. I had an anonymous source that gave me paperwork proving the whole thing. Dirty money funding Spencer’s election, even fraud at several of the polls.”

“Yeah, well, your source backed out,” Regina snaps, “and Mayor Spencer is demanding I fire you for libel. If I don’t, the board is going to fire me.”

“Libel? That’s ridiculous! The citizens of New York have a right to know that their Mayor is in bed with the mob.”

“Uh, Daddy,” Maggie interrupts.

“Not now, sweetheart,” Killian dismisses her, massaging his temple.

“The mayor is holding a press conference at 4:30 to deny all allegations. He’s planning on calling you out as a liar and a fraud, Killian.”

“No,” Killian says firmly with a shake of his head, “no way I’m taking the fall for this when all I did was expose the truth.”

He paces back and forth, his hands on his hips as he thinks.

“I have until 4:30?” he asks Regina.

“Are you trying to be the death of me, Jones?” Regina counters.

He walks closer to her, putting both hands on her shoulders. “I’ll go back to my source. I’ll talk him down off his ledge. He probably just got cold feet.” Killian can see the hesitation in Regina’s face. “Just give me a little time.”
“Okay, but if you can’t back up your story, I’ll have no choice,” she looks at him a bit sadly, “I’ll have to fire you, Killian.”

He nods and takes off towards the elevators. If Smee is freaked out enough, he may skip town. Killian has no time to lose. Just as the elevator doors start to shut, a hand stops the door. Killian groans inwardly when he sees Regina’s red-headed sister, Zelena, standing there.

“Hey, Killian,” she says in a breathy voice, “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah . . .” he hedges, “sorry, but I don’t really have time —”

“I’ll make it quick. The girls and I have been talking. We’ve noticed you haven’t been dating, and we’re worried about you.”

She makes an exaggerated pout and bats her green eyes at him. Killian feels like a small animal trapped in a fox’s cage, especially when Zelena bangs her shoulder against the elevator door to keep it from closing again.

“I’ll be blunt,” she continues, a sultry edge to her voice, “I know you’ve been hurt, but I can be gentle. My mom always used to tell me, Love him like a little boy and he’ll grow into a man. I’m what you need, Killian, I know it.” Then she leans further into the elevator. “Think about it,” then she winks and steps back, allowing the elevator doors to finally close.

“Scary,” Killian whispers, a shudder going through him. Does Regina know her sister is certifiably crazy?

Zelena is the least of his problems, however, as he dashes through the lobby and out the front door. He stops just outside the building, suddenly feeling as if he’s forgotten something. He spins, looking down at his black leather jacket and patting the pockets of his jeans. He feels a crumpled list poking out of his pocket, and –

“Maggie!” he shouts, sprinting back inside.

The elevator seems to take forever, but once it reaches the tenth floor, Killian is dashing across the bullpen and barging into Regina’s office.

“Where’s Maggie?” he pants, barely noticing the empty fishbowl Regina holds in her hand.

“She’s not with you?”

Regina is saying something else, but Killian doesn’t hear it as he dashes out of her office. He stops at cubicle after cubicle, asking everyone if they’ve seen a little six year old girl. He finally finds her behind the receptionist’s desk, curled up with Apple Turnover. Tears are streaming down her cheeks.

“Maggie,” he exclaims, sinking to the floor in relief, “sweetheart, I was so worried!”

He pulls his daughter to him, cradling her in his lap. His heart is thudding and his arms are trembling. Did he really just forget his own kid? And she had been trying to tell him something. Was he this out of practice? This used to her not being in his life?

“Daddy,” Maggie sniffls, “don’t be mad.”

“Oh, honey, I’m not mad. I – I forgot you.” The words are like bile in his mouth.

“No, I mean about the fish. Regina’s cat ate the class fish.”
He looks up to see Regina standing there, an apologetic look on her face, holding the now empty fishbowl. And he can’t help it – he laughs out loud. Maggie looks at him with surprise and confusion written across her face. He wipes her wet cheeks and kisses her forehead.

“We’ll replace the fish, lass, so no worries. Ok?”

Maggie manages a smile and nods. Then Killian scoops her up and heads back to the elevators. This time, he isn’t in a hurry. He can’t take on the mayor and the mob until he figures out what to do with his daughter.

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11:00 am

Mommy guilt is a very common feeling in Emma Swan’s life. She tries to tamp it down, but it seems like a constant companion. As a single mom, she always feels she can never give Henry all that he deserves. Not enough of her time, attention, or money, so emotional exhaustion is on par with her physical exhaustion. And time and again, she finds herself compromising; doing things, saying things, that she swore she never would.

Like using the 12th street drop off.

“Look at this!” she enthuses with false cheeriness as she leads Henry into the lower elementary playroom.

“Mommy, please don’t leave me here,” Henry sniffles, “I promise I’ll be good from now on. I won’t mess up anymore ‘peztations.”

And there it is. Mommy guilt.

“Oh, baby,” she says, sinking to her knees, “I know that was an accident.”

“Then why did you get so mad?”

Ouch. More mommy guilt. She has to admit, it wasn’t her finest moment. But she had spent countless hours and painful brainstorming putting together that model for her presentation to Pendragon Design’s newest client. If Arthur lets her run with this one, giving her full creative control of the account, her place in the company will be solidified. She may even get that promotion she’s been gunning for. So when she had tripped over one of Henry’s toy cars and fallen, smashing the model as she landed on top of it, well . . . let’s just say that’s when she said things she swore she would never say.

Emma sighs now, smoothing Henry’s hair out of his face. “I’m sorry I snapped at you, buddy. Mommy’s just having a rough day. But I swear this isn’t a punishment. We just don’t have any other options, okay, kiddo?”

Henry nods, although his face is still incredibly sad. Emma gestures around the room, pointing out the buckets of toys, the coloring section, the reading corner full of books. As her eyes scan the room, she sees a little girl, her back to Emma, sitting in front of a little puppet show.

“Look at the puppet show,” Emma tells Henry brightly.

Then a googly-eyed sock puppet pops out of the square cut out on the puppet show. It reaches out and tweaks the little girl’s nose, causing her to giggle. The hairy, muscular arm is decidedly male. Then a male voice comes from behind the puppet show where the little girl’s daddy
is apparently crouched. He moves his hand to make the puppet point at the little play clock on the top of the puppet show.

“And when the hand gets here, and . . . here, Daddy will be back to pick up his little princess.”

Emma finds herself mesmerized as she watches whoever this man is act so silly just to make his little girl feel better. Involved fathers are so rare these days. The puppet disappears again and comes back with a man’s watch in its “mouth.”

“And just so you know how long it will be before Daddy comes, here’s his watch to wear.”

Emma’s heart melts a little bit more as the little girl slides the huge watch up past her elbow. Then, she turns and just as Emma recognizes the child, a dark head pops up from behind the puppet show. Her face falls in shock looking at the cocky grin of the last man she expected “puppet dad” to be.

“Killian Jones?” Emma blurts out before she can stop herself; her voice a mixture of disbelief and slight embarrassment.

“Why hello there, Swan! Didn’t know you were enjoying the show.”

Killian drapes his arms across the opening of the puppet show and gives Emma a saucy wink. She rolls her eyes as she turns away from Killian to talk to Henry. She hopes Killian doesn’t notice her flaming cheeks. They both give their children multiple assurances that everything will be fine and they will be back before they know it. Then as soon as Henry is out of sight, Emma quickly turns on her heel to walk away from Killian Jones. She was checking him out, as crazy as that sounds, and he caught her at it, too.

“Swan, wait,” he says, taking her gently by the elbow.

“Listen,” Emma snaps as she turns around, her finger pointing accusatorily in Killian’s face. But then she sees that he’s holding up a cell phone, and the words die on her lips. “My cell phone?”

“Uh huh, the kids apparently switched them. Thought you might need it.”

Emma flushes again as she snatches the phone and drops it into her purse. She then pulls his out and hands it to him.

“And your mother says she’s sorry she can’t watch Henry and it has nothing to do with him shoving her ring up his nose,” Killian continues as he takes his phone from her. “Any messages for me?”

“No,” Emma replies, then can’t help snidely adding, “she never called back to tell you the color of her bra.” Let him know she sees right through the cute dad routine. Underneath it all, Killian Jones is still a typical male with only one thing on his mind. She needs to remember that.

Killian’s eyebrows raise, and Emma crosses her arms and flips her hair, suddenly feeling as if she’s an open book. He grins slowly, like a cat about to snatch the canary. He then shoves his hands into his pockets, takes a step right into her personal space, and leans towards her ear.

“That was my editor, just my editor. I was trying to get a rise out of you, Swan.” He leans away, cocking his head, and sticking his tongue out a bit. Then his smile grows wider. “Mission accomplished, I see.”
“Please,” Emma scoffs, “I could care less whose panties you have or have not been acquainted with.”

“But you were checking me out when I was putting my watch on Maggie just now,” he counters.

“I was just shocked it was a grown man and not a child with that puppet,” Emma quips flatly.

“Love your guy like a little boy and he’ll grow into a man.”

“What?”

Killian takes another step closer, “It’s advice my mom used to give.”

Emma snorts, “She gave you advice about loving a man?”

Now it was Killian’s turn to roll his eyes. “No, it was so I could find the right woman someday. You know, that, that . . . complex they say men have. They even wrote a book about it—The Peter Pan complex.”

“Please, you don’t have a Peter Pan complex. If anything, you have a Captain Hook complex.”

“What the bloody hell is that?”

Emma is flustered for a moment. She isn’t even sure why those words had come out of her mouth. You wear insanely tight pants, have a larger-than-life personality, and seem like a guy who can pillage and plunder my heart until nothing is left. Yeah, no. She can’t say any of that. Instead she glares at him and snaps, “I don’t know, but whatever it is, you have it.”

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12:00 pm

When Killian comes charging out of the elevator and into the bullpen, Regina isn’t even in her office. She’s in his cubicle, leaning worriedly over his desk. Not good.

“Please tell me you got your source back,” Regina says wearily. “I’ve been on and off the phone all day trying to stall.”

“You promised me until 4:30!”

Regina straightens, crossing her arms across her chest. “I take that as a no.”

Killian sighs, running a hand agitatedly through his hair. “Smee’s terrified. I think he’s gotten threats. He’s just an accountant with the firm who handled Spencer’s campaign finances. It took some convincing to get him to talk the first time around.”

“Let me guess,” Regina says sardonically, “lots of rum.”

Killian grins, “You know me so well.”

Regina rolls her eyes, “That may be true, Jones, but our history can’t help you this time.” “I know, I know,” Killian mutters as he shuffles through the notes littering his desk, “I’m not asking that of you. There’s got to be someone else who will talk. Help me, Regina, think!”
Regina begins shuffling through papers herself, scanning Killian’s impeccable notes. Despite the situation, she chuckles softly. “You’re the only journalist I know with beautiful handwriting.”

“Ah-ha!” Killian exults, waving a piece of paper in the air, “Spencer’s campaign manager. Robert Gold.”

Regina pushes her hair out of her face, “How does that help us? He’s as dirty as Spencer. No way he’ll talk.”

Killian taps his lips as he thinks, “But he’s got ties to the mob. Surely he’s slipped up somewhere. Pissed off the wrong person who would love to flip on him.”

“Leroy!” Regina calls across the bullpen. “Where’s Robert Gold these days?”

When it comes to knowing which politicians are dabbling in organized crime, or which bills are being pushed by special interest groups, or which government programs are misusing funds, Killian is the one to ask. But when it comes to scandal in the social lives of politicians, it’s Leroy everyone goes to for the dirt.

The stout man grumbles as he brushes crumbs from his lunch off the front of his shirt. “Barbados,” he shouts, “with his newest girlfriend.”

Regina swivels her head towards Killian, a sly grin on her face, “Which leaves —”

“- a very pissed off Mrs. Gold,” Killian finishes for his editor, his own face filling with a delighted smile.

“Hey Sis,” Regina calls as she straightens, and the grin falls from Killian’s face, “do you have any idea where Belle French Gold would be on a Monday afternoon?”

Zelena’s eyes light up when she sees Killian standing next to her sister, so instead of answering the damn question, she saunters over. He understands why Regina is asking for her sister’s help; she’s lead writer for the social section of The Times, and Belle French Gold is featured prominently in that section. Beautiful, young, and a former Miss New York, Belle made a splash in the New York social scene when she married shady billionaire Robert Gold. No one knew what she saw in the man, especially since he was almost twice her age, but that didn’t quell the public’s insatiable appetite for information about the young woman. She had an eye for fashion, especially shoes, and everything she wore quickly became the latest trend in the city.

Unfortunately, Zelena’s mind is clearly not on Belle French Gold when she reaches Killian’s cubicle. “Hello, Killian,” she purrs, running one of her red fingernails down his forearm, “have you thought about what we discussed?”

Thankfully, Regina cuts in, “Zelena,” she says with far more patience than she gives anyone else in the office, “we’re kind of in crisis mode right now. Belle French Gold?”

“Oh right,” Zelena says with a pout, pulling her eyes reluctantly from Killian, “Mondays are her spa day. She never misses getting the full treatment at Elizabeth Arden.”

“How long is she there?” Killian asks, checking his watch.

“Like I said, she gets the full treatment. She’ll be there until four.”

Zelena then starts leaning closer towards Killian, and he has to resist the urge to take a step
“Okay, sis,” Regina commands with a quick wave of her hand, “that will be all. Jones and I have a big story to save.”

Zelena pouts again, but flounces off after giving Killian a flirty wink. He flinches as if he could feel the wink like a slap in the face.

“You know,” Regina smirks, “you could just put us all out of our misery and just bang my sister.”

Killian blanches at the thought, “And unleash a psychopath like in Fatal Attraction? No thank you!”

Regina just laughs and shoves him in the shoulder, “Get to Elizabeth Arden and save our butts already.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Killian jokes as he jogs for the elevator.

He’s just stepped out onto the first floor when his cell phone rings. He flips it out and is shocked at the voice he hears on the other end.

“Killian, thank God!” Emma Swan’s voice greets him. He can’t lie, the sound of her being so relieved and grateful to hear his voice thrills something deep inside of him. Get a grip, Jones, it’s just a phone call!

“You’ve got to go pick up the kids,” she continues with absolutely no elaboration. “They can’t stay there.”

Killian shakes his head, the information dump slightly overwhelming, “I’m sorry, back up. What’s going on with the kids?”

“Henry found a phone in some office, Killian, he and Maggie were hiding from some bullies,” Emma explains in a shaky voice. He’s yet to see her panic, but this sounds pretty close to it.

“Someone’s bothering my Maggie?” he asks, his heart thudding in his chest. If anyone has laid a finger on his baby girl . . .

Emma understands his fear immediately, “No one’s hurt them, just teasing. But Killian, Henry also asked me what LSD was. Some kid was talking about it.”

Killian takes in a sharp breath, but tries to reassure Emma, “Don’t panic, Swan, the kid is probably just repeating something he heard on TV.”

“Or repeating something he heard from his gun-toting, drug-dealing parents,” Emma counters.

Killian has seen far too much as a journalist to discount what Emma says, so he takes a deep breath, and tells her, “Okay, I’m on my way. But what do I do after that? I’ve still got a job I’m trying to save here.”

He can almost imagine Emma biting her lovely lower lip as the phone goes quiet as she thinks, “I’m literally walking into my building as we speak for a meeting that starts in 15 minutes. Can you give me two hours? Then I’ll keep the kids for two hours.” She pauses and takes a breath. “Do we have a deal?”
Killian mulls it over as he glances at his watch. If he keeps the kids until 2:30, he’ll still have plenty of time to get to Elizabeth Arden. “Yes, Swan, I can swing that. It’s a deal.”

He can hear Emma let out a huge sigh, “Oh, Killian, thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me!”

Killian can’t wipe the grin off his face after he hangs up. He would do just about anything to hear her say his name like that again.

Which means he is in serious trouble.

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2:30 pm

“Switch!” Emma calls out with a grin, and she slides her caramel brownie sundae to Henry as he slides his strawberry sundae to Maggie. Maggie slides her peanut butter cup sundae towards Emma. She sighs with contentment as she pulls out a spoonful. Her day is finally improving, so she felt relaxed enough to take the kids out for ice cream. Her presentation had gone better than she ever could have imagined. Pendragon Designs officially won the account, and Arthur told her it was all hers to manage.

She also has to admit that Killian is a tiny part of her good mood. She hadn’t expected him to agree so easily to picking up the kids. Then, just before her presentation, he had called to let her know the kids were safely with him. She had answered to the sound of Henry and Maggie shouting hello, which had filled her face with a huge grin. Then Killian had gotten on the phone to tell her not to worry about anything but her meeting. His final words had taken her completely by surprise.

“You can do this, Swan, I have no doubt. You are amazing; bloody brilliant. Those clients will see it, too.”

Emma had rarely heard such lofty praise, especially from the men in her life. It had caught her so completely off-guard, she had stuttered out an awkward thank you that felt completely inadequate.

“So,” Emma says now, smiling at the two children, “what did you two do with Killian?”

Henry rubs his arm across his face, and Emma hands him a napkin. Then he tells her, “He took us to the park and then the wishing fountain.” He follows his words with a huge, exaggerated wink towards Maggie, which she returns with one of her own.

Emma eyes them suspiciously, “Okaaay, so what did you wish?”

The two children giggle, “We can’t tell you,” says Maggie.

“Because it won’t come true?” Emma asks. For some reason, her question makes the two of them laugh even more.

“Yeah,” Henry says, “but also ‘cause you’d be mad prob’ly.”

Emma furrows her brow, “Why would I be mad?”

Henry shrugs as he takes another huge bite of ice cream, “You’re just not ready yet.”

“Yeah,” Maggie giggles, “not ready.”
Emma can clearly see that the kids aren’t telling, so she just shakes her head and grins. “Switch!” she announces.

The kids are so giddy with laughter, that Maggie hops off her stool and barrels her strawberry sundae towards Emma. It collides with Emma’s cream-colored blouse. Maggie’s hands fly to her mouth.

“I’m so sorry, Emma!”

Emma sighs, dabbing at the giant red stain on her shirt, “It’s okay, honey, it was an accident.”

“What do you mean, Don’t be my usual self?”

Emma tucks her phone against her ear as she unbuttons her blouse in Serendipities public bathroom. She is seriously regretting answering her phone. Today is not the day for a lecture on relationships from her mother. Considering her three failed marriages, Ingrid Swan is the last person on earth who should be giving relationship advice.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Emma,” Ingrid continues, “you sabotage just about every relationship before it even starts. Those walls of yours may keep hurt out, Emma, but it also keeps out love.”

Emma rummages in her purse until she finds a shirt and sniffs it. It’s one of Henry’s, a little musty from being at the bottom of her purse, and covered in dinosaurs, but it will have to do. She’s grateful that she’s small and the shirt is stretchy. After slipping it over her head, she hears her mother’s voice, tinny and far away, coming from her phone that’s balanced on the bathroom sink. Emma snatches it up and puts it to her ear.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, mom,” Emma sighs, “I’m listening. But mom, I tried to explain it to you, I’m not dating the guy! Our phones got mixed up in the cab; that’s all.”

“I know, and it must be a sign! Think about it, Emma, what are the chances? He’s smart, successful, attractive. You said yourself he’s good with his daughter, even with Henry. You don’t get infinite chances, Emma. You need to stop tossing them away.”

Emma steps out of the bathroom, her mother’s words drifting to the background as she sees Henry standing alone against the wall. She pulls the phone away from her mouth.

“Henry, where’s Maggie?”

The boy shrugs, “I dunno.”

“Mom, I gotta go,” she mutters hastily into her phone, ignoring her mother’s protests.

Emma ducks back into the bathroom, calling Maggie’s name, then checks the men’s bathroom too, ignoring the shouts of protest from the lone figure at the urinals. She then grabs Henry’s hand and makes a quick search of the restaurant, but Maggie is nowhere to be seen. She then rushes out into the street, heedless of the rain that has begun to fall in torrents. She dashes up and down the street in both directions, dragging Henry along, still frantically shouting Maggie’s name. Panic begins to set in, and she clambers on top of a parked car to get a better view.
“Maaa-gie!!!” she shouts until she’s hoarse, tears beginning to mingle with the rain.

Forget her damn walls. She’s gone and lost the man’s daughter.

3:00 pm

Killian squeezes the hand of Belle French Gold, hoping she doesn’t find him clingy and desperate. “Thank you, thank you,” he tells her, and hopes she knows that he’s one hundred percent sincere. The woman is accustomed to being used, after all.

The petite brunette smiles and squeezes Killian’s hand in return. “It’s the least I can do, Mr. Jones. I’ve heard the news, and I hate to think a man would lose his job for telling the truth.”

Killian refrains from kissing the hand he’s holding, afraid that might be a bit much. But this is the first time all day he has felt relief. And hope. He slips the disc drive she has given him into the inside pocket of his leather jacket. On the disc is a paper trail leading from Mayor Spencer’s campaign fund all the way back to the mob. Not only that, there are names of polling officers that were paid off to commit voter fraud. After he pockets the disc, he eyes Belle with concern.

“You aren’t afraid of your husband or the men he works for?”

Belle smiles in a way that Killian can only describe as incredibly brave. Only talking to her for half an hour, he’s already seen that there is far more to her than just fashion sense. She puts a hand to her abdomen, which for the first time Killian sees shows the tiniest of bumps.

“As angry as I am with him for all his broken promises, my husband would never hurt me. Especially now that I’m carrying his son.”

“Um – congratulations?”

Belle laughs lightly at Killian’s hesitant expression. “Yes, congratulations. Regardless of what the future may hold, my son is a blessing, believe me.”

Killian can’t help himself then, he lifts her hand and brushes her knuckles with a kiss. She nods in understanding and he turns to leave. The press conference is still looming at 4:30.

“Killian Jones?”

He stops in his tracks at the sound of the delicate voice, then turns to see a tall, slender blonde having her nails done. She smiles gently in understanding at the look of confusion on his face.

“I’m Ingrid Swan,” she explains, “Emma’s mother.”

Killian chuckles nervously, scratching behind his ear. This is awkward. The woman thinks he’s dating her daughter, and while he would like nothing more than for that to be true, it simply isn’t. Killian shuffles forward anyway, not wanting to be rude.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Swan,” he says with a nod of his head, since her hands are occupied.

“Listen,” Ingrid says, leaning towards him, “forgive the alliteration, but Emma has had a long string of losers in her love life. She’s skittish, but don’t give up. Okay?”
Killian feels heat flood his cheeks, but he nods obediently, “No, Ms. Swan, I promise I won’t.” He then finds himself adding, to his own surprise, “Actually, I love a challenge.”

Ingrid grins as if Killian has passed some sort of test, “Fabulous.” Then she winks, “And you’re even more delicious in person. If I were 20 years younger, I’d snatch you up myself.”

Killian doesn’t quite know how to respond to that, so he mumbles an awkward thank you and hurries out. Just as he steps onto the sidewalk in front of Elizabeth Arden, his phone rings. The words he hears after his hello sends his heart plummeting.

“Killian Jones? Do you have a daughter named Maggie?”

Killian finds the address that the shop owner on the phone had given him and runs inside, looking around the tiny shop in a panic. The lady behind the counter smiles gently at him and tilts her head towards the other side of the cash register. Killian runs around it to find Maggie underneath the counter perched atop a pile of pillows, kittens all around her. They are tumbling out of a box marked Kittens: Free to Good Homes. Killian drops to his knees in relief, reaching awkwardly under the counter for Maggie.

“Sweetheart,” he scolds her gently, “why did you wander away from Emma?”

“Cause I wanted to come in here on the way to get ice cream, but Emma said no.”

Killian looks around the small shop to see that it’s a cat-lover’s dream. There are cat toys, scratching posts, and blinged out cat collars. There’s also every kind of cat memorabilia imaginable, from knick-knacks to bumper stickers. To him – and to Emma – it’s tacky. But to his little girl, it’s everything she’s ever wanted.

“You still shouldn’t have wandered off, Maggie. Emma’s probably sick with worry.” Killian glances at his watch. “Come on, lass, we’ve got to go.”

He twists his body around to reach for Maggie, but she pulls away and whines as she clutches an orange tabby closer to her chest. He starts to scold her, but then sees tears rolling down her cheeks. This isn’t Maggie being disobedient or difficult. This is his baby needing him. He suddenly realizes that the past two years have broken her little heart just as much as it’s broken his. A new country, a new city, a new school, and a new stepdad. Her entire life has been turned upside down, and the one person who has always cared for her has been torn away. For all he knows, Maggie thinks he left her. Who knows what Milah has told her?

The minutes leading up to the press conference are still ticking down in his brain, but Killian pushes it aside. He sits up and gestures for Maggie to come to him. She crawls out from under the desk and lets him cradle her in his lap. He brushes her hair back from her forehead and places a kiss there.

“Tell me about the kittens, little princess.”

Maggie has not only named each and every one, but has a story behind every name. Killian listens patiently. At the end she lifts up the orange tabby again, nuzzling it with her nose. The kitten is incredibly kid friendly, lying limp in Maggie’s arms and patiently allowing the child to squeeze and pet her without protest.

“This is Treasure. She’s my favorite because she’s the same color as Ariel’s hair.”
“I see,” Killian smiles, “and Treasure because of Ariel’s collection.”

“Uh huh, but also ‘cause I bet Ariel’s friends with pirates.”

“Oh really, is that so?”

“Mhm,” Maggie continues seriously, brushing her unruly dark hair out of her face, ‘cause mermaids are out in the ocean where the pirates are, and she likes ships.”

“So Treasure, huh?” Killian says, picking up the docile kitten and holding her up to his face. He eyes Maggie, whose face is full of hope, and he smiles at her. “Your mom’s allergic, isn’t she?”

Maggie nods, and Killian sighs. He doesn’t really want to change a litter box every day, but on the other hand, it may give Milah more reason to let Maggie come over. And if Milah’s allergy prevents her from crossing Killian’s threshold, well . . . that’s just icing on the cake.

Killian looks up at the lady behind the counter. “We’ll take the orange kitten.”

“Oh, Daddy!” Maggie squeals, throwing her arms around his neck, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

4:30 pm

Emma pushes her way through the crowd at the press conference, asking if anyone knows Killian Jones or seen a little dark-haired six year old girl. The panic she feels is like a lead weight on her chest. Maggie is gone, and it’s her fault. She tries not to think about the horrible things that could happen to a child in New York City because if she does, she will fully teeter over the edge.

Because let’s face it, she’s already lost it. The cops at the police station looked at her as if she’d already lost her mind. She had been yelling and shaking and dripping rainwater all over the floor. The police had put a jacket over her shoulders, some hideous pink thing with feathery fringe. Confiscated from a hooker, probably. And here she is wearing it to a press conference where she’ll most likely come face to face with Killian. Of course, what she’s wearing won’t matter the second he learns about Maggie.

She had been downright mean to him all day. Had accused him of being a womanizer and a lousy father. Yet he had rearranged his schedule to take care of the kids and had been great with Henry. He had even encouraged her before her presentation. And what did she go and do? Lose his daughter.

“Excuse me,” Emma says for what feels like the hundredth time, “have you seen Killian Jones?”

A tall red head with curves in all the right places turns to look at Emma with thinly veiled disgust. “What would he want with you?”

“You know him?” Emma asks with a shaky breath. She runs her hand self-consciously over her damp hair which is drying into messy, frizzy curls. She also figures she has raccoon eyes from the rain and all of her crying.

“Intimately,” the red head answers with a smirk.

Before Emma can answer or even fully contemplate her emotional reaction to the woman’s
Mayor Spencer is stepping up to the dais on the other side of the room. Emma turns towards the bank of microphones, and scans the group behind them, but she doesn’t see Killian anywhere. Through the haze of her panic, little of the press conference penetrates her brain, until the Mayor scoffs and laughs.

“Killian Jones is a fraud and a liar. All he cares about is getting attention. As opposed to pesky little things like integrity in journalism.”

A chuckle ripples through the crowd at the mayor’s words, and indignation suddenly seizes Emma. Without fully thinking it through, she shoots her arm up into the air.

“Mommy,” Henry says in a panic, pulling on her skirt, “what are you doing?”

“I really have no idea, kiddo,” she whispers back. The mayor probably won’t call on her anyway –

“You, in the pink coat.”

Or, maybe he will.

The mayor gives an irritated sigh as Emma points questioningly to herself. “Yes, you. With the wet hair and raccoon eyes. Are the teen magazines covering politics now?”

Another laugh ripples around the room, and Emma tosses her head back, stuffing down her rising embarrassment. “I know Killian Jones,” Emma says, forcing confidence into her voice, “and he has a passion for the truth. I also have it on good authority that he’ll be here soon with proof that you are just as crooked as he said you were.”

“You know him, huh? Know his passion for the truth, huh?”

The mayor’s insinuations aren’t lost on the audience, who laugh on cue. Emma feels a traitorous blush rise to her cheeks. Mayor Spencer narrows his eyes, and Emma can tell from his feral expression that everything Killian has written about him is true.

“I don’t know what your relationship with Mr. Jones is, Miss, but it’s obvious you know nothing about journalism.”

“But I do!” an accented voice calls from the back of the room.

Everyone turns to see Killian striding through the crowd. Relief floods through Emma as she sees that he’s carrying Maggie in his arms. He stops right next to Emma, and the heat she feels from his presence sets her heart thumping. There’s no denying it now, it only took less than a day for her to fall for this guy. But now he’ll never speak to her again. The fact that he refuses to look at her right now confirms it.

Killian pulls a disc from the inside pocket of his leather jacket and holds it up for everyone to see. “On this disc, Mayor, is proof that your campaign was financed via organized crime. Some of it from behind bars. It also proves voter fraud.”

“Please!” argues the mayor, but Emma can detect the panic in his eyes. “How do we even know that information is legitimate?”

“Because it comes from the desk of your campaign manager, Robert Gold. His wife is the one who gave me this disc, and as we speak, she is giving a nice tour of her husband’s office to the New York City police department.”
On cue, a detective climbs the dais, showing his badge. In front of everyone, they read the mayor his rights and slap handcuffs on his wrists. Emma can't help turning to Killian with a huge smile on her face, pride for him surging through her. He finally turns to her then, and the smile on his face falls. He carefully lowers Maggie to the ground, then sets his hands on Emma’s shoulders and worriedly searches her face.

“Are you okay, Swan?”

Emma shakes her head, knowing she doesn’t deserve his concern. She instead pulls away and drops to her knees before Maggie, gathering the little girl in her arms. She’s trembling from relief, and she suddenly feels exhaustion as the adrenaline of the past hour fades away. She holds Maggie tighter and is surprised when the little girl hugs her back.

“I’m sorry, Emma,” she says, “for wandering away.”

Emma shakes her head as she pulls back, rubbing at new tears, “Oh sweetie, I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Emma glances up at Killian to see him staring at them both with a sort of slack-jawed expression that she can’t read. She glances at the orange striped creature clinging to his left shoulder.

“Is that a kitten?”

He gives her a heart-stopping smile she doesn’t deserve. “Long story.”

“Killian!” the red head from earlier gushes as she grabs Killian by the elbow and turns him around. She beams up at him, grasping both his biceps with perfectly manicured, red fingernails. “You did it! Let me take you and your daughter out for dinner to celebrate.”

Emma rises from her place on the floor with Maggie but keeps a firm grip on the child’s hand. She won’t let her wander away again.

“Is that your daddy’s girlfriend?” Emma whispers to Maggie.

Maggie wrinkles her nose, “No, but she wants to be.”

Killian steps out of the woman’s reach and turns to look at Emma, who is suddenly keenly aware of the hideous jacket still draped around her and the dinosaur t-shirt underneath. Not to mention her frizzed out hair and the makeup melting off her face. The red head, who is eying Emma with contempt, has on a black business skirt and jacket, both of which hug her body to accentuate her curves. The blouse beneath her jacket is unbuttoned enough to show ample cleavage, just shy of being inappropriate. Her red hair falls in perfect waves, and her eyes are a dazzling shade of bright green. Emma knows her own jade eyes are clearer and less arresting. If Killian decides to take off with this woman, she won’t blame him. Especially since he’s obviously known her for more than a measly day.

She’s also never lost his kid. So there’s that, too.

“Sorry, Zelena,” Killian says, taking another step away from his co-worker, “but I can’t.”

Zelena narrows her eyes menacingly, and Emma thinks for a moment that she won’t take no for an answer. But the moment passes, and she tosses her hair over her shoulder. “That’s okay, Killian,” she says, reaching out to grasp his bicep one more time, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She eyes Emma purposefully when she says tomorrow, and Emma almost laughs. Once
she’s out of earshot, Killian visibly deflates.

“That woman is terrifying, and I don’t mean in a good way.”

He turns to Emma then with a lopsided smile, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He looks at each of the children with a sparkle in his eyes. “Who’s hungry for pizza?”

The children cheer, and Emma’s mouth drops open. “How can you not hate me?” she asks.

Killian’s grin softens as he regards her for a moment. “Maggie has a tendency to wander off. I lost her myself this morning.” Killian then reaches out to brush a rebelliously tangled curl off Emma’s cheek. “Besides, I can tell how worried you were. I’ve never even seen her mother that emotional.”

He drops his hand and swallows as if he’s said too much. Emma can relate to the feeling, so she smiles brightly as she turns towards the children, “Pizza sounds awesome, right kids?”

5:00 pm

Emma snorts with laughter, then clamps her hand over her mouth as she blushes. Killian feels his own grin practically cracking his face; he’s never heard a laugh so free and adorable. He swallows hard as his eyes drink in her face; the dimple in her chin begging to be thumbed, the dusting of freckles across her perfect nose that crinkles adorably when she laughs, and the perfect apples of her cheeks. She has pulled her hair into a messy bun, complaining that the rain had completely ruined it. Killian, however, can’t see how it’s ruined at all. The soft golden waves from this morning have curled into perfect tendrils framing her face. The wildness of it now has his pulse racing and his fingers itching to bury themselves in it. She takes another bite of pizza, then swipes her bottom lip with her tongue to catch a stray drip of sauce. Now his heart is thudding in his ears. Realizing he’s staring at her lips, he quickly speaks to cover it up.

“So what you’re saying is you have the stereotypical middle child syndrome.”

Emma sighs and shrugs, “Guilty. But it’s kind of hard not to when your older sister becomes a Broadway star at 18, and your younger sister has her own Disney Channel sitcom at 14. I’m a disappointment to my mother however you slice it.”

“Your mother seemed rather proud of you when I spoke with her.” He almost kicks himself. She’s going to think he’s a stalker!

“When did you talk to my mother?”

Good, she’s laughing about it. “Well, first when our phones got switched, and then I ran into her at Elizabeth Arden. I’m afraid she thinks we’re seeing one another. I tried to explain –“

Emma quickly raises her hand to stop him. A tiny spot of pink colors both her cheeks, which only makes her look prettier, “I tried too, believe me. I think she’s already jumped to planning the wedding.”

They are both laughing now, and Killian is relieved that the situation hasn’t become awkward. Emma regards him for a long moment, and he somehow knows what she wants to ask. She glances over at Maggie, who’s playing an arcade game with Henry in the corner of the pizzeria. Then she drops her gaze and begins tracing the pattern on the table cloth.
“Ask me anything,” Killian tells her softly.

Emma looks up at him, surprised. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Read my mind?”

Killian shrugs; he doesn’t understand it fully himself. “I don’t know love, you’re just an open book.”

Emma leans forward and rests her chin in her hand, “You said something about Maggie’s mother earlier that didn’t make sense. I don’t know Milah that well, Killian. Maggie’s just in Henry’s class at school, so you can be honest with me.”

Killian sighs deeply, rubbing his hands along his thighs, “I never want to be one of those men who go around bashing their ex.”

“Women do it, too,” Emma replies with a shrug, “and sometimes it’s warranted.”

“Yes, but the way I see it, two make a marriage. So doesn’t it take two to end one?”

Emma leans back, crossing her arms over her chest, “I say every situation is different. Maybe that’s true; maybe not. Like I said, it depends.”

“Milah was . . .” Killian trails off, looking vacantly over Emma’s shoulder, as if looking back in time, “adventurous, larger than life. I was so young, and Milah was so exciting and vibrant. She wanted to travel, see the world. I was working for The Daily Telegraph in London at the time as their foreign correspondent.”

“So your lifestyle appealed to her,” Emma supplies.

Killian nods, “Aye, it did. The thing is . . .” Killian pauses here, unsure how Emma will take the truth about his relationship with Milah. Finally, he takes a deep breath and plunges ahead, “Milah was married. I knew it was wrong, but I justified it because Milah seemed so unhappy. She said she felt trapped. Eventually, she left her husband and we were wed.”

“Hey,” Emma says gently, reaching out to take his hand, “we all make mistakes.”

Killian is relieved to hear her says so, and smiles at her as he threads his fingers with hers. Then he continues, “We were so happy for a while. Milah traveled with me and seemed so in love. Then she got pregnant with Maggie. And that’s when I started making mistakes.” Killian shakes his head, “I should have known better, really. I asked for a transfer at The Telegraph, to the politics department. That way I could travel less and be home more for Milah and the baby. I should have discussed it with her, but I didn’t. When I told her, she was so angry.”

“Is that why she left?” Emma asks softly.

“In a way, Maggie came, and we both tried, but I quickly came to realize something. Milah had been in love with my way of life, not with me. It was only a matter of time before someone more exiting came along.”

“The record producer that she’s on the honeymoon with?”

Killian shakes his head, “No, there was someone else first. Milah is a singer, as you
probably know. Before Maggie came, she toured as a backup singer, then after the baby came, she worked in the recording studios. A friendship she had with a guitar player turned into something more and . . . long story short, she left.”

“Let me guess,” Emma asks with a tiny edge to her voice, “he was always on the road.”

“Aye,” Killian says with a nod, “how the tables turned. But it wasn’t so much how she hurt me, but how she hurt Maggie. The little lass was only one, but she cried every night asking for her mum. At first, anyway.”

“Wait,” Emma asks suddenly, sitting up straighter in her chair, “she just left? Even her daughter?”

Killian nods, looking over fondly at his little girl, “Being a single dad wasn’t always easy, but I wrapped my life completely around that little girl. For four years, we were happy, truly we were.”

Killian was quiet for a while as he struggled with his emotions. Emma squeezed his hand lightly, “What happened then?”

“Mr. Record Producer,” Killian said wryly. “Apparently touring with a band can get old, but a record producer with billions? He can give you the world. And for some reason, Milah suddenly wanted Maggie. I didn’t think I had to worry. I figured four years of raising her would count for something right? But it didn’t, not with the expensive lawyers stacked against me. And you know how they say courts always favor the mother? Well, it’s true. Found that out the hard way.”

Killian quickly clears his throat, the memories from that time so fresh he fears tears will fall remembering them. Maggie’s cries as she was literally pulled from his arms still haunt him. Killian rubs his eyes for a moment.

“Killian,” Emma whispers, “I’m so sorry.” He looks up at her with a wobbly smile, and she searches his face, “That’s why you moved to New York, isn’t it? You followed them here.”

Killian shrugs, “I can’t let an ocean separate me and my little lass, now can I?” He gives Emma’s hand one last squeeze and then relinquishes it. “But enough about me. What about you, Swan? Have you ever been in love?”

He almost kicks himself for asking it that way. She obviously has a child, how crass of him to ask such a thing? But something about Emma Swan makes him say crazy, inappropriate things.

Emma laughs wryly, and shakes her head, “I thought I was. Once. But I was young and dumb as they say.”

“Henry’s dad?”

“Yeah,” Emma picks up a straw wrapper and starts twirling it around her finger, “there’s not much to that story, really. Know earlier when you mentioned the Peter Pan complex?”

“Aye?”

Emma shrugs, tossing the wrapper, “Well, I knew you didn’t have it because I know it pretty damn well.” Emma turns to watch Henry chase Maggie around the arcade area. “Henry’s dad told me he wasn’t cut out to be a father. Probably the most honest thing he ever said to me. He’s got the attention span of an eight year old. Can’t keep a job, always chasing one pipe dream after another. Right now it’s motorcycling across Canada.”
“Seriously?”

Emma nods. “Yep. Obviously, there’s never been a child support check. Not one.”

“Does Henry know him?”

Emma leans back and hugs herself. “Unfortunately, yes. Neal pops in and out when he pleases, making and breaking promises left and right. I try to prepare Henry for the disappointment that his dad always brings around, but he’s too young to understand.”

“I get that,” Killian says with a nod.

“Hey,” Emma says quickly, leaning forward to grasp his hand again, “Maggie understands enough to know how much you love her. Anyone can see that.”

Killian’s eyes meet Emma’s and the belief he sees there takes his breath away. Have they really only known one another a day? A day that started off so horribly, too. But now? He thinks this just might be the finest day of his life.

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8:30 pm

Emma jumps as the doorbell rings, so much so that she yelps and spills the coffee she just made down the front of her shirt. Who the hell is ringing her doorbell at this time of night? How did they even get in the building? Emma shakes her shirt trying to dry it as she goes to look through the peep hole. She gasps as she pulls away. She spins around, frantic. She’s a mess and the apartment is worse. Oh well, it is what it is. She fluffs her hair a bit and pulls the door open.

“Killian,” she says, embarrassed at how breathy her voice sounds, “what are you doing here?”

Killian is holding Maggie on his left hip, his right arm behind his back. He pulls his hand out to reveal a goldfish in a bag. “The class fish!” he announces with that amazing smile of his, “We can’t let Henry take the fall for Nemo’s demise, now can we?”

Killian’s tongue shoots out of the corner of his mouth, and Emma feels a heat pool in her belly as he swipes it across his lower lip. How can a man look so sexy holding a kid on his hip and a goldfish in his other hand? Emma remembers what her mother told her about not wasting her chances, so she throws the door open wide.

“Come on in,” she says.

Henry comes running out of his room and collides with Maggie as kids do, the two of them rolling like tumbleweed across the living room. And to think they started the day sticking their tongues out at each other!

Emma eyes Killian and knows she doesn’t want the kids underfoot for this visit. The look he gives her is a heated one, and she thinks back to when he told her she was an open book.

“Kids,” she announces, her eyes never leaving Killian’s, “why don’t you two watch a video? I’ll let you watch it in my room.”

The kids cheer and follow Emma into her bedroom. They jump up on the bed and bounce around.
“Can we watch *The Wizard of Oz*?” Henry asks.

Emma thinks about what a long movie that is and how tonight is a school night. But then Killian looks at her with those insanely blue eyes, and her knees suddenly go weak. “Sure!” she says, voice thick. “But only until they first get to the Emerald City, okay?”

When Emma comes out into the kitchen, the room seems charged with an electric current. She takes the gold fish from Killian and pulls out a bowl to put it in. They eye each other nervously then laugh awkwardly.

“Uh,” Killian says, scratching behind his ear, “your apartment is . . . . just as messy as I imagined.”

Emma rolls her eyes, but there’s no true heat behind it. “Let me guess,” she quips, “yours is all spit and polish.”

“Well,” he retorts, running his finger along her dusty fireplace mantel, “I was in the navy.”

Emma raises her eyebrows in shock, “Really?”

“Aye,” he says, rocking back on his heels, “briefly. Then I was wounded and lost my brother, and well . . . that was that.”

Emma regards him for a moment, then lowers her eyes to the ground. “I’m so sorry for misjudging you, Killian. I was so horrible to you today.”

Killian ducks his head and gives her a playful grin as he saunters close to her. He leans towards her, scratching again at that damn spot behind his ear. “Perhaps you could make it up to me?” he asks flirtatiously, tapping suggestively at his lips.

Emma grins in a way she knows must look goofy on her face. She wants to kiss him; God, does she want to, but no way is she making this easy on him. “Please,” she scoffs with a roll of her eyes, “you couldn’t handle it.”

Killian resumes that cocky air he had when they first met this morning. “Perhaps you’re the one who couldn’t handle it,” he taunts, popping the “t.”

And suddenly, the sexual tension that’s been there from the first moment she saw him is too much for her to bear. Emma reaches out and grabs him by the front of his shirt and hauls him in for a kiss. She can tell he’s surprised at first by the stiffness of his body, but he catches up quickly. Before she knows it, their lips are hungry, their tongues tangled. Emma snakes one hand up Killian’s neck to thread her fingers through his hair, pressing him closer. Killian’s fingers are buried in her hair, his other hand splayed on her back. When they finally pull apart, their lips are swollen and their cheeks are flushed.

“That was –“ Killian begins.

“Mommy!”

Emma literally jumps a foot in the air at the sound of Henry’s voice.

“Mommy,” he continues, seemingly oblivious to what he just interrupted, “Maggie doesn’t like the witch in the tornado and neither do I.”

Emma follows Henry into her room on wobbly legs and fast forwards the video tape as fast
as she possibly can. When she returns to the kitchen, she and Killian smile shyly at one another as if
they hadn’t just been sucking each other’s faces off. He approaches her somewhat tentatively,
reaching out to brush tendrils of hair off her face.

“Where were we?” he says softly, smiling, and bending to touch his lips to hers.

He barely brushes her lips chastely when Emma pulls quickly away. Hurt flashes in his
eyes, but she quickly reassures him. “Wait, just – can I freshen up first? So I feel more like woman
and less like a mommy?”

He bites his lower lip and nods. “Sure, Swan.”

She brushes a kiss to his cheek and whispers in his ear, “Just sit over there and wait eagerly
for my return.”

“Oh, I’ll be eager, Swan, I assure you.”

He winks at her as she backs away, and she turns around just before she collides with the
doorway. *Pull yourself together, Emma!* She admonishes herself as she shuts herself in the
bathroom. She winces at the huge coffee stain that covers the front of her white t-shirt and quickly
 tosses it aside.

Emma doesn’t mean to spend so long primping, she really doesn’t. She’s not a high-
maintenance woman in the slightest. But first she pulls off her pajama pants to see that she needs to
shave. Not that she’s letting things *go that far*, especially with the kids in the next room, but Emma
will still know she has hairy legs, and she just doesn’t think she can get in the proper mood knowing
that. Then she decides she just needs a bit of mouse to tame her hair, and that leads to the hair
straightener. Then she decides it’s *too* straight and goes for a slick ponytail instead.

But despite all of that, she still didn’t think she’d been in the bathroom THAT long. But
there Killian Jones is, asleep on her couch when she returns. She sits next to him and pokes at his
jaw with her knuckles, but all he does is groan in his sleep. Emma laughs a little, and then drinks in
the sight of him. He really is the most handsome man she’s ever seen, but in sleep he looks even
more appealing, his dark lashes fluttering against his cheeks, his broad chest rising and falling with
each breath. His arm is flung across the back of the couch, so Emma snuggles close to him, resting
her head on his chest. He shifts to a more comfortable position, and as he does, he gathers Emma in
his arms. Emma sighs in his embrace, feeling more safe and content than she has in a long time.

An hour later, Henry pokes Maggie.

“What do you think they’re doing out there?”

Maggie shrugs. They’ve almost finished the movie now.

They both run out into the quiet living room, and Henry giggles as he leans over the back of
the couch.

“Look!” he calls to Maggie, motioning her over.

Maggie looks over the back of the couch, too. There are their parents, holding each other
close, fast asleep.

“Our wish is coming true!” she tells Henry excitedly. “My daddy likes your mommy!”

“And my mommy likes your daddy! We’ll be brother and sister in no time!”
6:30 am

Killian Jones awakens to drool on his shoulder and soft laughter above him. His eyes flutter open to see Emma’s beautiful jade green eyes and her halo of golden hair. He shifts to get a crick out of his neck, careful of the tiny warm bundle in his arms.

“You always do this,” Emma admonishes him.

“Well,” Killian replies as he sits up and shifts his six week old baby girl to his other shoulder, “babies sleep better on Daddy’s shoulder. It’s a rule.”

Emma gives him a soft kiss as he rises from the couch, “That may be true, but I’m trying to teach her to sleep in the crib, Killian. Coffee?”

“Sounds wonderful, love.”

Killian makes his way to the windows of their new apartment which look out over the city. He takes the coffee Emma brings him in his free hand and takes a sip. Emma wraps her arms around his waist and leans into him.

“Are Maggie and Henry up yet?”

“No,” Emma mumbles against the front of his chest as the sun rises over the city.

“Well, Mrs. Jones,” he says, brushing a kiss to first the baby’s temple, and then Emma’s, “it looks like it’s going to be one fine day.”

Chapter End Notes

* I just can't seem to help adding a dash of domestic CS to the end of these things, can I. Killian with a baby is also my kryptonite:)
* I'm not sure yet what the next story will be. I have a list of ideas, I just haven't decided on one yet. You'll just have to be surprised!
13 Going on 30 Part One

Chapter Notes

* I had a difficult time deciding what to do next. I had a list of ideas, but the muse just wasn't feeling it, so I read over all of your prompts for inspiration. I'm so glad I did. HooksSwan asked for a 13 Going on 30 AU, and since we hadn't done a childhood friends trope yet, I immediately got inspired. So thank you, HooksSwan! I hope you enjoy this.

* As you can see, this one had to be split up again. Ya'll give me a prompt, and my muse goes crazy! This one got long because I put more into Killian and Emma's backstory as kids than the movie does with Jenna and Matty. I love writing Little!Killian and Little!Emma too darn much!

* To help with your visual picture, 13 year old Emma looks (of course) like Abby Ross when she first appeared in season 3. Likewise, young Neal looks like Dylan Schmid in season 2. 13 year old Killian looks like Oliver Bell at this very moment, but with darker hair (the kid is 13 in real life already, can you believe it?). Our OTP as five year olds of course look like little McKenna Grace and Oliver Bell back when he was on Salem. Imagining this in my head was just the cutest thing! :)

* I followed the Once timeline for this fic, not the one in the movie. So they are thirteen in the 90s, not the 80s.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1988

The smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies wafted through the Nolan home as Mary Margaret slid a spatula under the cookies and scooped them into some Tupperware. She wasn’t surprised at all when the hand of her five year old daughter reached up to snatch one. Mary Margaret smiled as she heard the child giggle from her hiding place behind the kitchen island.

“You know I can see you, right?” Mary Margaret teased as she scooped her daughter up and tickled her.

Wide-eyed, Emma crammed the cookie into her mouth, leaving smears of chocolate on her checks. Despite two years of hugs, kisses, and a warm belly, Emma still at times thought things would be taken from her. Or feared her parents would get too angry, change their minds, and send her back. Mary Margaret had never met the Swans, the family who cared for Emma until she was three, but what kind of people sent a kid back as if she were a puppy who peed too much on the carpet? Sometimes Mary Margaret wept in her husband David’s arms, unsure if their little girl would ever believe that this was her home forever; that nothing could ever make them give her away. David would kiss her brow and remind her that all they had to do was one thing: keep on loving her. One day, it would stick and Emma would no longer doubt it.

Mary Margaret plopped Emma down on the kitchen stool and took two more cookies from the baking sheet. She handed one to Emma and nibbled on the other herself. “They’re best warm, aren’t they?” she asked her daughter, smiling.
Emma smiled back and ate her second cookie more slowly. When she swallowed, she asked her mother, “Why are you baking cookies? Just cuz?”

“Well,” Mary Margaret replied, filling the Tupperware with the remainder of the cookies, “I’m all for baking cookies just cuz, but in this particular case, they are to take next door.”

“To Regina?”

“Yes,” Mary Margaret said slowly, eying Emma carefully, “and for the two little boys who live with her now; her nephews.”

Emma’s face lit up, “Two little boys? You mean I’ll have kids to play with?”

“That’s right. Liam is a bit older than you, he’s ten, but Killian is exactly your age.”

“Yay!” Emma cheered with a delighted clap, “Can we go meet them now?”

She jumped off her stool and raced for the door. Mary Margaret intercepted her, crouching down so they were eye to eye. She brushed Emma’s hair out of her face. “We will honey, but I want you to be patient with Killian and his brother. They may not feel like playing. As a matter of fact, they may be a little sad.”

Emma frowned, “Why?”

Mary Margaret took a deep breath, hesitating over how to explain. She didn’t want to give Emma anything else to be afraid of, but on the other hand, she wanted to be truthful. “Well . . . remember how you felt when you first came to us when you were three?” Emma nodded, her eyes wide. “Well, Liam and Killian are getting used to Regina’s home just like you had to get used to ours.”

Emma chewed on her lower lip and lowered her eyes to stare at the carpet. “Their mommy and daddy didn’t want them either?”

Oh boy. Mary Margaret plopped down on the floor right where she was and gathered Emma in her lap. “Actually, Emma, their mommy got very sick.”

Emma looked up at her mother with eyes far too jaded for a five year old, “She died, right?”

Mary Margaret pulled Emma closer, pressing her chin to the top of her golden head, “Sadly, yes.”

“What about their daddy?” Emma asked, fiddling with Mary Margaret’s emerald ring.

“He . . . once again Mary Margaret hesitated before plunging ahead, “thought their Aunt Regina could give them a better home.”

Emma’s head bobbed beneath Mary Margaret’s chin, and she was quiet for a long time. Finally, she hopped up from her mother’s lap and tugged on Mary Margaret’s hand.

“Then they really need those cookies,” she said with childish exuberance, “let’s go!”

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The voices of her mother and Regina drifted towards Emma’s ears as she crept up the steps. Her neighbor’s house didn’t sound at all like little boys lived here; it was much too quiet. The older one, Liam, was too engrossed in a video game in the living room to pay her any mind. So Emma
decided to go off and find this Killian by herself.

“I just don’t know what to do,” Regina said to Emma’s mother from the kitchen. “I’ve always loved those boys like my own, and you know how I’ve always longed to be a mother. So please understand that I’m in this for the long haul. Not for one moment have I second-guessed taking them in . . . “

“But you don’t know how to reach them,” Emma’s mother supplied.

“Exactly.” Regina said the word with a measure of relief that someone understood. “Killian refuses to speak. Or eat. Liam seems to know what his little brother is thinking. He speaks for him. When he’s not lost in those video games, that is . . .”

The voices of the adults faded as Emma reached the top of the stairs. She crept cautiously down the quiet hallway, wondering which door belonged to the little boy she hoped would be her friend. She paused in front of one door, which was cracked open. On the other side, she heard soft crying. Emma pushed it gently, and as the door swung slowly open, she saw a small figure on the bed. Skinny shoulders trembled as the small, dark haired boy let out a shaky sob. Emma tiptoed closer to the bed.

“Go away!” the child snapped, throat thick with tears.

“Are you Killian?” Emma whispered.

The boy’s back stiffened in surprise, and he rolled over hesitantly. Bright blue eyes, wet with tears gazed into Emma’s green ones. “Who -who are you?” He rubbed at his wet cheeks, and Emma saw with delight that his face was smattered with freckles just like the ones sprinkled across the bridge of her nose.

“I’m Emma,” she replied softly.

Killian eased up against the head board, drawing his knees up to his chest. Tucked under his chin was a stuffed bear. He just sat there, regarding Emma with a furrow resting between his brows.

“I live next door,” Emma explained, hopping up on the bed, “I thought we could be friends.”

“I don’t want any friends,” Killian muttered, pressing the bear to his face, “I just want my family back.”

“You still have your brother,” Emma pointed out, “that’s more than I had when I got here.”

Killian pulled the bear away and raised his eyebrows at her. “What do you mean?”

Emma shrugged, scrambling up the bed to sit next to Killian. “This is my third mommy and daddy. My first ones and second ones didn’t want me. I hope these ones do.”

“My daddy didn’t want me,” Killian whispered, rubbing at his bear’s ear. Emma noticed the fur there was worn away.

“I like your bear.”

For the first time, Killian smiled. He set the bear on his knees so the furry creature was
looking at them both. “This is Mr. Smee. Liam says it’s silly to have a bear. He say’s only babies
do.”

“Nuh-uh,” Emma disagreed, shaking her head, “I have a duck.”

“What’s his name?”

“Duck!” Emma answered, and for some reason that gave them both a fit of giggles. Once
they finally stopped laughing, Emma propped her chin in her hands, and asked, “Wanna play?”

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Regina stood at the foot of the stairs, her hand to her heart, tears threatening to spill over.
Squeals, happy shouts, and laughter drifted down the stairs. All the sounds of childhood. Sounds that
Regina hadn’t heard once since the boys arrived a week ago. Mary Margaret reached out to grasp
Regina’s hand in understanding.

“Thank you,” Regina whispered, squeezing her friend’s hand in return, “thank you for
bringing her over.”

Mary Margaret’s own eyes brimmed with tears as she answered, “It’s only the first of many
memories those two will make growing up together. I can feel it.”

And Mary Margaret was right. From that day forward, Killian and Emma were practically
inseparable. They ran in and out of each other’s houses without even knocking. They walked to
school together every morning and afternoon. They sometimes even climbed the trees outside each
other’s bedroom windows at night when they just didn’t want to be alone. Their parents got used to
finding them cuddled up together in the morning.

As the years passed and puberty loomed, the adults braced themselves for the inevitable
change in the friendship. But 11 and 12 passed without any angst. And then came Emma’s 13th
birthday . . .

1996

The air around Emma Nolan buzzed with the nervous energy that always abounds in a
school when there are only two weeks left until summer vacation. Despite tests and final papers
looming, everyone felt excited anticipation that was only fueled by end of the year field days, class
parties, and yearbook signings. So Emma should have been on cloud nine. Especially since today
was her birthday and tonight would be her first boy/girl birthday party.

However, today was also the day that school pictures for the yearbook came out. Which
meant Emma was approaching the dreaded folding table emblazoned with the banner for Hot-Touch
Photography with a pounding in her chest. To say twelve had been a rough year was an
understatement. First Emma had to shoot up three inches, mostly in her arms and legs, making her
look like an awkward rag doll. She towered over most of the boys, but slouching to compensate
made her look like a hunched troll. On top of that, she had no curves to speak of. She still wore a
training bra, for heaven’s sake! Her freckles were more prominent than ever, refusing to hide no
matter how much makeup she smeared on her face. Although she usually gave up wearing any. The
art of make-up was still an elusive skill she had yet to master. Her blonde hair alternated between
stringy and frizzy, and a checkup had revealed that she needed reading glasses, so thick black frames
were perched atop her freckled nose during class. If she tried not to wear them, her teachers asked
her to put them on in front of everyone. And if all of that weren’t enough, her parents had to go and
pay for braces.
Emma closed her eyes for a moment after the Hot-Touch employee handed her the blue and white envelope containing her pictures. She still remembered class picture day vividly: How her hair wouldn’t cooperate, how a zit had popped out on her chin, and how she had been in the middle of correcting the photographer when he snapped the photo. The guy kept calling her “Ella” instead of “Emma.”

Emma took a breath and opened her eyes. The face looking back at her through the little plastic window on the envelope made her want to scream and cry at the same time. Her face was captured in a grimace which put her braces on prominent display and scrunched up her freckled nose. This was going to be in the yearbook? Seriously?

“Say cheese!”

The familiar voice was accompanied by a skinny arm being flung around Emma’s shoulder. On autopilot, Emma grinned into the camera Killian held in front of both their faces, leaning close so that her blonde hair was pressed against his dark hair. Killian always had a camera around his neck. This particular one was a really expensive Nikon that Regina had gotten him for his 13th birthday.

“If only I had smiled like that for my yearbook picture,” Emma muttered, stuffing the hideous photos into her backpack.

“If those photographs didn’t capture your beauty, the fault is with the photographer.”

Killian said this with his usual dramatic flair, which made Emma smile despite herself. Even though she had told him a thousand times not to call her “Swan” anymore. It was because of the stuffed duck she used to sleep with and the last name she had confided in him had once belonged to her. She had loved the nickname for years until –

“Ducky and Noodle!” a condescending voice called out over Emma’s shoulder, “Cute together as always, aren’t they girls?”

Emma suppressed a groan as she turned to face the infamous “Six Chicks.” It was a clique of girls in their class at school. They were mean and teased everyone mercilessly, and yet every girl wanted to be one of them. Emma included. Even though Fifi, the group’s queen bee, changed her best friend’s lovely nickname “Swan” into “Ducky.” Aka the ugly duckling. Kilian said it was so unoriginal, she shouldn’t let it bother her. But it did. She wished she could brush off teasing the way Killian did. People in their class started laughing about how scrawny Killian was back when he was eleven. They laughed that his arms and legs looked like spaghetti noodles. Fifi started calling him just “Noodle,” and it stuck. Nevertheless, it never seemed to phase Killian at all. “As long as you don’t call me Noodle, Swan, all is right with the world,” he had told her with a confident smile.

Fifi stood before them now, hand on her cocked hip, her perfect dark hair cut just like Rachel’s on the TV show Friends. The girls behind her were gathered close like a celebrity with her entourage. She smiled at Emma and Killian as if she were complimenting them, not insulting them.

“Did you get your class pictures, Emma?” Fifi asked.

Emma’s face drained of its color, and she held her book bag close against her chest, suddenly fearful that Fifi would snatch them out to display them to the world. “Uh, not yet,” she lied.

Fifi flipped her hair off her shoulder, “Mine weren’t that great.”

Her entourage immediately disagreed.
“No way, Fifi!”

“Whatsoever!”

“Yours are totally amazing, Fifi!” “You look gorgeous!”

“Yeah, like a model!”

Fifi sighed and then whipped the photos out for Emma to see. Sure enough, there, captured for the yearbook, were Fifi’s perfect smile, perfect skin, and perfect hair.

“Wow,” Emma breathed enviously, “you’re so photogenic!”

Fifi shrugged as if bored with the constant praise. She stepped closer to Emma and leaned to whisper in her ear conspiratorially. “The Six Chicks and I would so love to come to your little party tonight. Even Neal Cassidy told me he wanted to come.”

Emma’s heart stuttered and blood rushed to her ears. She prayed she wasn’t blushing. “Neal Cassidy?”

“U-huh,” Fifi continued with an almost wicked smile, “unfortunately, Mrs. French assigned that stupid project on one of the presidents. We’re all gonna have to work on that tonight, and Neal said he wouldn’t go if we didn’t. So, sorry, kay?”

Emma’s mind reeled. She was really afraid that no one but Killian would be coming to her party tonight, but now not only the Six Chicks but Neal Cassidy wanted to come! Neal was older, in the 8th grade, and the cutest boy in school. Every girl wanted to go out with him. Emma included.

Okay. In all honesty, Emma didn’t just want to “go out” with Neal Cassidy. She had a deep, mad crush. As in head over heels, borderline obsessive crush. She may or may not have scribbled his name all over her notebook inside hearts. She may or may not have written “Emma Cassidy” a thousand times to see how it would look.

In short, she was pathetic.

So Emma’s mind raced thinking of a way to get the most popular kids in school to her party. She and Killian had already finished their project, so . . .

“You know, I could maybe, help you with your project? So you can come to the party.”

“Would you really?” Fifi squealed, giving Emma a side hug.

“Sure.”

“Great! On President Kennedy, okay? He’s the cutest.”

“Sure,” Emma shrugged, “no problem.”

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“Are you going to tell me why you’re brooding?”

Killian scuffed the sidewalk with the toe of his sneakers as they walked home from school.

“I’m not brooding.”
Emma looked down at her best friend. Yes, down. Emma didn’t tower over Killian the way she did most of the other boys in the seventh grade, but she was still slightly taller than him. In all honestly, Killian hadn’t grown all that much since he was ten. He was cute in a little boy sort of way, with his freckles and his dark hair constantly falling in his face. His voice still squeaked, too. In some ways, he had it worse than she did at school, getting tripped in the hallways, shoved into lockers, and in gym class . . . well, whatever happened in gym class he wouldn’t say, but Emma could tell it was bad.

Emma shoved him in the shoulder, “You’re clenching your jaw. You always clench your jaw when you’re thinking too hard.”

Killian shook some more Razzles into his hand, and then offered Emma some. She popped them into her mouth. Part candy, part gum, they were Emma and Killian’s favorite treat. Killian chewed for a little while before speaking.

“Why do you care so much about them?”

Emma didn’t have to ask what he meant. “Care about them? I want to be them!”

“First of all, there can’t be a seventh Six Chick. That’s why they’re the Six Chicks? And more importantly, why would you want to be like them? They’re completely unoriginal!”

“I don’t care about being original, Killian, I want to fit in!”

Killian gave her a long look that Emma couldn’t read. He’d been doing that the last year or so. Ever since she was five, she could pretty much read Killian’s mind and he hers. But lately there was this new look . . .

“Just don’t lose yourself, okay, Swan?” he said softly, taking her hand and squeezing it.

“I’ve already been a lost girl, remember lost boy?”

Killian grinned; it was an old game they used to play when they were little. They would pretend to fly away to Neverland. “Well,” he told her, “see you tonight at the party. I’m coming early, remember?”

Emma gave a dramatic wave, “Au Revoir!”

Killian waved back just as dramatically, “Arrivederci!”

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“Aaaand here’s the birthday girl!”

Emma screamed as her father burst into her bedroom with a video camera held aloft. The tissue paper she had been using to stuff her bra went flying through the air as she dove for her bed, pulling the covers up over her head.

“Go away!” her muffled voice shouted.

Emma peeked out from under the sheets to see her dad lowering the camera with a hurt look on his face. Her mother was mouthing something at him while shooing him out the door with her hand. Once the door closed behind him, Mary Margaret pulled back the covers and smoothed Emma’s hair.
“Honey, what is this?” she gently scolded as she pulled wadded up tissue from the front of Emma’s dress.

“Look at me, Mom!” Emma exclaimed, gesturing down the length of her stick thin body. “This is a disaster!”

Mary Margaret took in the empire-waisted, short, black dress covered in a design of tiny roses. She re-adjusted the scooped neckline which was no longer packed with tissue paper. “Whatever do you mean? This dress is adorable!”

“I don’t want to be adorable!” Emma wailed, rolling her eyes. She pulled her favorite fashion magazine, Poise, from her nightstand and opened its glossy pages for her mother. “I want to look like this,” she explained, pointing to a picture of an elegant business woman applying makeup at a vanity inside a closet full of designer clothes. Emma admired the woman’s shapely legs extending from the tight skirt she wore and the ample breasts that filled out her button-down blouse.

“Oh, honey,” her mother laughed, playing with the ends of Emma’s freshly curled hair, “those aren’t real women in that magazine; they’re models.”

Emma read the headline out loud, “Thirty, Flirty, and Fabulous. I want to be thirty; it sounds so glamorous!”

Mary Margaret shook her head, suppressing a laugh, “Oh, you will be, before you know it. But how about you enjoy thirteen for now?”

Emma’s mother kissed her on the forehead and gave her a pointed look before leaving the room. As soon as the door clicked shut, Emma was back at her mirror, stuffing wads of tissue paper down the front of her dress.

Enjoy thirteen? That was easy for her mother to say. She wasn’t the one living it.

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“And announcing the first gift bestowed upon the lovely Swan Princess!”

Emma whirled from her place at the stereo where she was attempting to organize CDs to play during the party. She shook her head and grinned at her best friend, who always loved dramatic entrances. He descended the Nolan’s basement stairs slowly and awkwardly because of the gift he balanced in his arms.

“Killian, you are such a dork!”

“And you love me for it,” he argued, the grin never leaving his face.

Emma gasped as he set his present down with a flourish on the coffee table. He had warned her beforehand that his gift was impossible to wrap, and she now saw why. She sank to the floor in front of the blue dollhouse, shaking her head in awe.

“You made this for me?” she breathed, reaching out to touch first one tiny detail then another.

“Mm hm,” Killian replied, leaning over her shoulder, “Instead of a Barbie dream house, this is an Emma dream house.”

Killian had used photographs on cardboard to make little models of her in various places
throughout the house. There was her face, in a bathtub of cotton ball “bubbles” reading an issue of *Poise*. There she was lounging on her bed in her room, tiny replicas of her favorite CDs stacked next to a tiny stereo. Emma chuckled when she saw who was sitting next to her on the tiny living room couch.

“Is that –“

“Yeah,” Killian grumbled as if it pained him tremendously, “I had to put pretty boy in there since his picture is plastered all over your room.” Killian knelt down next to her, “But I’m there too, see? Warning him that I’ll beat the crap out of him if he doesn’t keep his hands to himself.”

Emma laughed aloud when she saw the tiny cardboard Killian pointing a stern finger at Leonardo DiCaprio. She jabbed Killian in the ribs with her elbow, “I’m sure you could take him if you needed to.”

“Damn straight,” Killian agreed. “Oh, I almost forgot!”

Killian reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a little packet decorated with pink, purple, and yellow swirls. In psychedelic style print, it said “Wishing Dust.” Killian tore open the package and started sprinkling the sparkly dust over the dream house.

“Make a wish,” he told her.

Emma closed her eyes, but before she could even formulate a thought, the doorbell rang. Emma’s eyes flew open wide, and she jumped up with nervous energy.

“They’re here!” she cried, darting from the stereo to the refreshments.

She suddenly saw Killian’s gift with new eyes. The Six Chicks would think she was a baby! And heaven forbid Neal Cassidy saw a tiny version of her crushing on Leo DiCaprio like a ten year old. She hurriedly picked up the dollhouse and raced with it to the closet.

Seeing the hurt expression on Killian’s face, she hurriedly explained, “We’ll just put this up so there’s room for dancing.” She shoved it on the highest shelf, then closed the closet door and dashed for the stairs.

Emma knew her expression was far too eager when she opened the door for Fifi and the other girls, but she couldn’t help the huge grin on her face. The Six Chicks were really here, *at her* party! She directed them downstairs and then her heart practically stopped as a black jeep pulled up to the curb. Neal Cassidy stepped out of the passenger side, and Emma sighed as she leaned against the door. It felt as if she were watching him in slow motion. He shook his head to get his thick, dark brown hair out of his eyes. It was one of his best features. Emma had many fantasies about running her hands through it. She loved the way he wore it a little long, the ends curling slightly. He laughed at something one of his friends said, and Emma gazed into his deep brown eyes as he walked across her front lawn.

“This where the party is?” he asked when he reached her front door.

“Yeah,” Emma said, then shook herself slightly when she heard how breathy her voice sounded.

Neal chuckled and gave his friends a look as if he knew Emma was yet another girl crushing on him. Emma blushed slightly as four more 8th grade boys filed past, heading to the basement. Once they were halfway down the stairs and out of sight, Emma did a little happy dance. Her party was turning out better than she had dreamed.
Unfortunately, when Emma got down stairs, Killian was manning the stereo, which he had hijacked with his own CDs. He was currently playing air guitar and the other kids were staring at him. Fifi caught the eye of one of the boys, Peter, who laughed and rolled his eyes.

“What kind of music is this?” Fifi asked Emma, her voice dripping with disdain.

“Oh, it’s Killian’s,” Emma explained nervously, “The Cure?”

Fifi made a look that clearly said she had never heard of the band and didn’t care. She sauntered up to Killian and changed out the CD, completely ignoring his protests.

“ Majority rules, Noodle,” she said haughtily with a flip of her hair, “Sorry.”

Everyone laughed even as Killian wrinkled his nose at the new choice of music. “Hootie and the Blowfish?” he looked at Emma beseechingly, “Seriously, Swan?”

Emma ignored her best friend as everyone continued to laugh at him. It was clear how everyone felt about Killian, and Emma knew full well how junior high social standing worked. Dweeb by association and all of that. Killian lowered his eyes to the carpet, his straight black hair hiding his bright blue eyes. He shuffled for a minute, then looked up at Emma, sweeping his hair back with his fingers.

“I’m gonna go next door and get my guitar, Emma,” he told her.

It felt as if the room were getting smaller, pressing in on Emma. All of the most popular kids in school were here, and she felt the pressure of their approval so strongly, she could barely breathe. A part had to be played, and Emma knew if she ever wanted to fit in, she had to play it. So she took a deep breath, and tossed her hair just like a Six Chick. She spoke with a bored tone, laced with just an edge of cruelty.

“Whatever, Killian. I don’t need a play by play.”

Killian’s face fell and the sparkle that normally lit up his eyes dimmed. For a split second, she hated herself. But then everyone laughed at her wittiness, and she was buoyed along by all the approval. Surely Killian understood what a person had to do to fit in. She intentionally looked away as he headed dejectedly for the stairs.

“Okay. What’s the game?”

After Killian left, Fifi sidled up to Emma, “We were all wanting to play a little game. And since you’re the birthday girl, we thought you should go first.”

Emma glanced around to see everyone smiling at her. “Okay. What’s the game?”

Fifi turned Emma around, unwound a scarf from around her wrist, and then placed it over Emma’s eyes. As she tied it, Fifi explained, “The game is called Seven Minutes in Heaven. You go in the closet, and then a lucky guy comes in and gets to do whatever he wants with you for seven whole minutes.”

Emma swallowed hard and tried to stop herself from shaking. She had never even kissed a boy, but she didn’t want anyone to know how inexperienced she was.

“And guess who wants to go first?” Fifi whispered in her ear. “Neal Cassidy.”

“No way!” Emma exclaimed, her voice squeaking involuntarily.

“Way,” Fifi confirmed as she guided Emma into the closet. She turned Emma to face the
door, and suddenly Emma was standing there alone, feeling exposed. “By the way Emma, where’s that project you promised us?”

“On the coffee table,” Emma told her.

“Thanks,” Fifi replied, voice dripping with sweetness, “Oh, and just to warn you, Neal likes to go straight for second base.”

There was a small tittering of laughter as the closet door shut, cutting off the tiny bit of light penetrating the scarf Emma wore over her eyes. Emma shuddered, feeling suddenly cold, and hugged her chest protectively. Second base? The tissues! Emma hastily tossed them out as quickly as she could, then took in a shaky breath. She sank down to the floor, hugging herself for warmth. She told herself there was nothing to be nervous about. Where was Neal, anyway? Had he changed his mind? Emma concentrated on the sounds coming from the other side of the door and thought she heard Fifi telling someone – Neal, she hoped – that Emma was waiting in the closet.

The closet door swung open, and light once again filtered through the scarf across Emma’s face. But light was all she could make out. Whoever it was didn’t move, but just stood there. She could hear him breathing.

“I was worried you wouldn’t come,” Emma said in a soft, nervous voice. The person still didn’t move towards her, so she reached her hands out. “Where are you?”

Palms pressed against hers, fingers lacing together. Their hands fit together in a way that felt so right. Emma’s heart pounded against her rib cage as the person drew closer. Breath caressed her face.

“Oh, Neal,” she said softly.

“Neal! It’s Killian!”

Emma started at the voice she knew as well as her own, withdrawing her hands immediately and yanking the scarf from her face. “Killian? What are you doing?” She looked behind him to see the basement empty. She shoved him aside and raced out into the room, sure she must be mistaken. But she wasn’t. Everyone had left.

“Where are they?” she asked, almost hysterical now. She rounded on Killian, “What did you do?”

Killian’s eyes went wide. “Nothing! I swear! I came back and they were leaving. Then Fifi said you were waiting for me in the closet –”

Emma squeezed her eyes shut, covering her ears with her hands to drown out his words. “No!” she cried out, shoving past him and closing herself back up in the closet. Killian pounded on the door, begging her to come out, assuring her it would all be okay. But it wouldn’t. She would never fit in now; all the days of junior high and high school stretched out before her in a long timeline of adolescent angst.

“Emma, please,” Killian continued to plead from the other side of the door.

“Go away!” she shouted. She put the scarf back over her eyes, anything to block out the social disaster of her life.

“Let me play this song,” Killian continued, “it’s for your birthday.”
To drown out Killian’s stupid song, Emma started pounding her head against the shelves behind her. She felt dust sprinkling down from above, falling into her hair and choking her nose, but she didn’t care. She thought about the confident woman in *Poise* magazine. Thirty, flirty, and thriving . . .

Then Emma felt like she was falling.

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Emma groaned and stretched, feeling suddenly strange in her own skin. It seemed much brighter suddenly, even though her eyes were still covered. She was also disconcerted, unsure which way was up. She reached out, feeling something silky beneath her arms, then turned. Suddenly she was falling off the edge of something, but groaned when she quickly hit the ground. Emma pulled up to her knees and groped along the ground. Her head collided with the door, and she reached up to turn the knob. She stood and removed the blindfold.

What Emma saw made her scream and stumble backwards. She collided with the back of a couch and went tumbling over it. She groaned again after her body collided with the floor. She pulled herself up onto the couch, terrified to look again into the mirror. She poked her head up slowly, thinking maybe someone else was in the room with her, but the reflection in the mirror made the same movements that she did. Emma stood slowly, gaping at what seemed to be her own reflection. But the woman staring back at her in the mirror was much older than 13. More than that, she was gorgeous. With a shaking hand, Emma tentatively touched the tousled, wavy golden hair that tumbled down her back. She blinked at the thick lashes framing gorgeous green eyes set in a face with a flawless complexion. The red satin nightie she wore hugged all the right curves; actual curves. On Emma’s body! Emma reached up to confirm that the breasts she saw in the mirror were actually hers. They were.

Emma looked down at herself to confirm that the womanly figure in the mirror was indeed her own. She swayed on her feet, clutching her head with one hand. She sank to the couch, then put her head between her knees as she struggled to breathe. It was only then she realized her surroundings. She was no longer in her parents’ basement but in some fashionable high rise apartment. Bills sat on the glass coffee table, and Emma sorted through them.


Emma saw a phone sitting next to the mail. She dialed with trembling fingers and lifted it to her ear. “Mom!” she cried out at the sound of her mother’s voice, but Mary Margaret didn’t respond.

“David and I are on a cruise to the Bahamas, so leave a message . . . “

“You went on a cruise without me?” Emma cried after the beep, but then tossed the phone aside.

Another sound across the apartment made Emma’s blood suddenly go cold. The sound of a shower cutting off and a man’s voice whistling. Emma glanced around the room frantically for a weapon, but the best she could do was a large umbrella. She inched towards the hallway slowly. A man with light brown hair came around the corner, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. Emma screamed.

The man grinned at her, “*This* is making you scream? Just wait till you see the main attraction.”
He then whipped the towel off and threw it aside. Emma screamed again, accidentally opening the umbrella. The man took a step towards her, and she thrust the open umbrella into his hands.

“Stay away from me, you pervert!” she screeched, sprinting for the front door.

A purse, coat, and heels were flung on a cabinet by the door. She grabbed all three and raced out. Heart pounding, she hurriedly got on the elevator at the end of the hall and pushed the button for the ground floor. Once the door opened, she ran across the lobby and didn’t stop until she was outside on the sidewalk. She spun around in confusion and awe. She lived in New York City. She was an adult who lived in New York City. But just moments ago she was 13. What had happened?

“Emma, come on! Hurry up!”

Emma turned to see a woman standing beside a fancy car with a cell phone to her ear. She was tall and attractive, with long, straight black hair. She was dressed like the woman Emma remembered from her Poise magazine, in business attire with just the right amount of sexiness. She was attempting to talk to someone on her phone and to Emma at the same time.

“Emma! Car! Now!”

Emma shook her head, clutching her purse to her chest. “I’m not supposed to get in a car with a stranger.”

The brunette rolled her eyes and stomped her foot, “Are you hungover? I’m Fiona, your best friend? Emma come on, just get in the car. Please! We’re going to be late for work!”

Emma was still unsure what to do until the naked guy from her apartment leaned out a window and shouted down to her, calling her his “baby.” Emma jumped in the car just to get away from him. Once the door was shut, and they were moving, Emma sagged in relief against the seat. She reached down and slipped the black heels she had grabbed onto her feet. The other woman finished her call and dropped her cell phone into her purse. She gave Emma a once over that didn’t seem at all friendly.

“Emma, lingerie dresses are so 90s,” she began with a tone of disgust. Then her face morphed into one of concern, “Unless they’re vintage. Are they vintage now?”

Emma shook her head, still feeling like she was living in a dream world. “So you’re Fiona? And you’re my best friend?”

Fiona’s dark brown eyes widened, and her perfectly penciled brows arched. Emma had first thought, if this were her best friend, she could explain about waking up from her 13th birthday to . . . this. But something about Fiona’s expression warned her not to go into that.

“I just . . .” Emma paused, massaging her forehead, “I don’t . . . I’m so confused. There was this naked guy in my apartment this morning. I have no idea who he is.”

Fiona chuckled, “Just as I thought. Someone had a little too much fun last night, huh?”

Emma leaned closer and whispered, “I saw his thingy.”

“Oh no!” Fiona deadpanned with mock seriousness, “Not his thingy!”

The car came to a stop, and Emma’s mouth dropped open to find herself standing in front of the offices for Poise magazine.
“I work here?” Emma asked in awe.

Fiona rolled her eyes and looped her arm through Emma’s, tugging her through the office building’s revolving doors.

“Yes, you’re a magazine editor, so pull yourself together!”

Emma had a difficult time keeping up with Fiona as they raced through the lobby and then through the office space full of cubicles. She had never worn high heels before – well, her thirteen year old self never had, and walking was a challenge, much less running. Fiona dragged her into a conference room where about ten other people were already seated.

“Nice for you to finally join us,” a straight-laced woman quipped from the front of the room. Her dress looked fashionable and expensive, but her brown hair was pulled back in a tight bun.

“Sorry, Ms. Blue,” Fiona apologized as she yanked Emma into a seat next to her.

Emma glanced around the table to see that everyone had pens out, ready to take notes on the yellow legal pads set in front of them. Emma grabbed a pen, uncapped it, and wrote her name across the top of her paper, just like she always did in class at school. Fiona glanced at her and gave her a strange look. Emma wasn’t sure what she had done wrong. She jumped slightly when a woman leaned over her shoulder and placed a paper to-go cup in front of her.

“Your hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon just the way you like it, Ms. Nolan,” the woman told her, nervousness trembling in her voice. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“You mean like a favor?” Emma asked excitedly, an idea forming.

Ms. Blue cleared her throat at the front of the room, and Emma’s assistant scurried away from Emma’s side. Emma hurriedly scribbled a note on her legal pad and tore it off. Her assistant was just about to head out the door, so Emma quickly crumpled the note into a ball and tossed it across the room. It bounced off her assistant’s head. Emma’s chair spun to the side, depositing her with a thump to the floor. How many times today would she fall on her butt? Emma scrambled back onto her chair, face flaming.

“Emma’s a little hungover today,” Fiona whispered to their co-workers, pantomiming someone knocking back a bottle of liquor.

Emma’s face flamed, but everyone nodded in understanding. She ducked her head, and scribbled her name once again across the top of a fresh sheet of paper. For the next hour, she tried to focus on the meeting, but she was completely lost. In more ways than one. So she really hoped her assistant came through with that favor.

Because what this lost girl desperately needed right now was her lost boy.

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After the meeting which Emma could make neither head nor tail of, she retreated to a private office with her name written beside the door. She tossed her purse onto the desk that apparently belonged to her and sank with relief into the chair. At least here she was alone and didn’t have to pretend. She sat there, her head swimming, until a knock sounded on her office door.

“It’s me,” her assistant’s soft voice called out, “Astrid.”
Emma raced to the door and opened it a crack.

“You know that guy you wanted me to find? Well, I found him.”

Emma squealed and yanked Astrid inside her office and shut the door.

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Emma shuffled nervously outside the apartment door Astrid had sent her to. She knocked, but when a stretch of time went by, she impatiently knocked again.

“Coming!” a deep voice sounded from the other sound of the door. “I'm getting my wallet!”

A moment after that, the door swung open. Emma’s mouth fell agape and her eyes widened at the man who stood before her.

“You're not my Chinese food,” he said with a voice like warm honey.

“Killian?”

She shook her head slightly, taking him in head to toe. His hair had darkened to an even deeper shade of black, and while it was still a little messy, it was thicker. His eyes were still that familiar shade of sparkling blue, the trait that let her know it was really him. Whether he still had freckles she wasn’t sure, because dark scruff covered his very masculine jaw. Masculine was the best word to describe the person who stood before her. No longer was Killian a cute little boy. No longer could anyone call him Noodle, either. He was still of slender build, but his t-shirt stretched over hard muscle. Emma blinked in shock. Her best friend had grown up to be insanely hot. Who would have guessed it way back when?

All of these thoughts flew through Emma’s mind in the space of a heartbeat. Killian eyed her in obvious surprise as well.

“Emma?”

“Oh, Killy!” she cried out, throwing herself into his arms.

It felt so strange to be able to press her face into his shoulder when earlier today – yesterday? 17 years ago? – she had to look down in order to look in his eyes. His arms came up around her hesitantly, his hands patting her back awkwardly. Yet she could still feel the hard strength of his muscles. And never in her life had he smelled so good.

“I need your help,” she whispered into his shoulder.

Killian pulled her gently into his apartment, shutting the door behind him. She saw camera equipment everywhere as he ushered her in. Emma was so glad he was still pursuing photography. It looked like they both had the jobs they had always dreamed of.

“You're still taking pictures,” she said to him with a smile. “Is this your job?”

He glanced around at the photographs on the walls that she was gesturing to. “Well,” he chuckled, “those are more like my hobby. For my job I take more mundane pictures. Bottles of aspirin, bowls of cereal. But hey, it pays the bills.” Killian shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “What do you need my help for, Swan?”

This was Killian. Her best friend since she was five years old. So she just jumped right in.
“Yesterday was my thirteenth birthday, Killian. And today, I wake up, and I’m this.” She spun around to show him what she meant. “I can’t remember my life! I need you to help me remember, Killian.”

He shuffled his feet, ducked his head, and scratched behind his ear. She knew all those signs well. He was nervous. Why was he nervous?

“Emma,” he finally said gently, “we’re not friends anymore.”

“What do you mean? Killy, you- you’re my best friend.”

He grimaced apologetically and shook his head, “No, Emma. Not anymore. Not for a long time.”

Emma suddenly felt as if the room was spinning. She started fanning herself. “Is it – hot in here?” she gasped, stumbling backwards onto an armchair. Killian was at her side in an instant, worry lining his brow.

“Can I get you something? Some water . . . or . . .”

“Yes, water,” Emma nodded, then she felt tears pricking her eyes. Killian straightened but still regarded her, waiting. She was embarrassed to ask, and he probably didn’t even have it anymore . . .

“Do you still have Mr. Smee?” she finally asked in a quiet voice.

He just smiled.

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Mr. Smee’s ear was still a comforting thing to rub, whether it had been seventeen years or not. Emma rubbed the bear’s ear where it sat in her lap as she sipped the glass of water Killian had brought her. He had spread several yearbooks out on his coffee table in front of her. Emma leaned forward in shock, almost dropping her glass.

“I was a Six Chick?” she gasped, looking at the picture of herself, posed confidently in front of the other six girls.

“Yes,” Killian said with a sigh, leaning back in his chair, “you became their leader.”

Emma turned a page to see a picture of her grinning widely with her arm around a pretty brunette. “Fifi,” she mused, “I wonder whatever happened to her.”

“You two are still friends, last your parents told me,’ Killian remarked, “you work together, I think.”

“Fiona!” Emma gasped. “She’s Fiona now!” Emma glanced up at Killian, who didn’t look the least bit comfortable. He was kneading the arms of his chair with a white-knuckled grip. “You see my parents?”

Killian smiled, “Every time I visit home.” His face fell and he grew serious. “I see them more than you do, Swan. They miss you.”

“I don’t go to Storybrooke?” Emma asked, furrowing her brow. Killian shook his head, and she frowned further. “Not even at Christmas?”

“Last Christmas, your parents said you were in . . . St. Bart’s I believe. You sent a nice fruit basket, though.”
Emma sighed, the thought not sitting right with her. She pushed aside the 8th grade yearbook to look at the high school ones.

“High school,” Killian muttered as he headed to the kitchen to get his own glass of water, “the worst four years of my life.”

Emma wasn’t sure what to say to that. How could high school have been worse for him than seventh grade? Was he still getting shoved into lockers and getting his head pushed in toilets? But those thoughts fled Emma’s brain as she saw the glittering full-page picture before her.

“I went to prom with Neal Cassidy?”

“Yep,” Killian answered, an edge of bitterness to his voice. “You two dated on and off until we graduated.”

“I was prom queen?”

“Yep,” Killian said again, flatly. “Forget water. Where’s the rum?”

Emma wondered briefly why he sounded so upset by the whole thing, but then the cell phone in her purse rang. She almost squealed when the person on the other end spoke, but she quickly remembered she was supposed to be an adult.

“Yes,” she said, poised and calm, “I will be ready for my limo at that time. Thank you.”

Once she hung up, Emma squealed and flung herself across Killian’s couch. He came into the room with a tumbler of rum in his hand and looked down at her, giving her his first genuine smile since she got to his apartment.

“I’m going to a party in a limo!” she crowed. “On a school night!”

“Well,” Killian said flatly, “looks like you’re back to your old self.”

Emma scrambled off Killian’s couch and gathered her purse. “Yeah. The limo’s coming at 7 so I better get home and get ready.”

Killian nodded, ducking his head and taking another sip of rum. When he looked up at her, he seemed a little sad, “Well, it was good to see you again.”

Emma nodded, suddenly shy for some reason. She slid her purse over her shoulder and turned towards the door. Killian followed her.

“You sure you can get back to your apartment okay?”

Emma nodded, swallowing hard. “Yeah, I’m sure. Thank you,” she said softly. She had the strangest feeling he was saying goodbye for good. But why? Maybe they had lost touch, but surely now they could be friends again.

Emma turned and headed down the hallway. At the head of the stairs, she turned back to see Killian still standing in his doorway, watching her go. She waved her hand in an exaggerated goodbye, “Au revoir!” she called.

Killian nodded and raised a hand in farewell. He started to close his door, but Emma called out after him.
“Killy!” she scolded with a smile. “Now you say – “

He smiled and shook his head. Then he lifted his hand in his own exaggerated wave.
“Arrivederci.”

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Emma tried to suppress a yawn as the bartender placed another daiquiri in front of her. Being an adult was exhausting. At first she had found it thrilling to stay up on school nights as late as she wanted, but falling into bed after midnight lost its appeal when the alarm went off so early each morning. She had also been up late many nights reading *Magazine Editing for Dummies* so she wouldn’t feel completely lost at her job.

“A daiquiri again, Emma?” Fiona asked with a roll of her eyes. “What are you, 21?”

“What? They’re delicious!” Emma protested, taking a big slurp.

The two women stayed in the bar for only a couple of hours. Emma had to admit that the thrill of partying every night was losing its luster. She just wanted to sleep for a really, really long time. She also longed to talk to her best friend – really talk. And she didn’t mean Fiona. Everything about her friendship with Fiona seemed fake, honestly. She felt like she couldn’t be herself without Fiona’s judgmental, biting sarcasm stabbing like a knife. Emma leaned her head back and took a deep breath of the cool night air as they walked out onto the sidewalk.

“Emma, seriously?” Fiona snapped. “Things were just heating up in there with those two guys. The brunette really seemed into you.”

“You mean the old guy with the streaks of gray?” Emma shuddered. “Oh, gross!”

Fiona rolled her eyes as she pulled a cigarette from her purse. “What’s gotten into you lately, anyway?”

Emma didn’t answer, suddenly incredibly tired of Fiona and her attitude. She turned to hail a taxi and saw a familiar figure just feet away standing in front of a funky housewares shop. Her face lit up.

“Killian!”

He turned towards her as she walked closer, his face a complicated mixture of surprise, pleasure, and guilt. He swiped his tongue across his lower lip and his eyes lit up, but then his hand hovered behind his ear. “Emma . . . hey!”

“I tried to call you like a million times.” She had left a few messages, too, and it hurt that she hadn’t heard back from him. Was he that angry about losing the past seventeen years? It was hard to wrap her brain around because, to her, they were best friends a week ago.

Before Killian could answer, Fiona sauntered up, blowing cigarette smoke in his face. “Noodle! Look at you! You filled out!” From anyone else, it would sound like a pleasant surprise. A compliment even. But from Fiona’s lips, it was clearly an insult. “Guess jocks can’t fit you in lockers anymore, huh?”

Killian narrowed his eyes at Fiona and gave her a sarcastic smirk, “Lovely as always, Fifi.”

A petite blonde came out of the store behind Killian. She put her arms around him and brushed a kiss across his lips. “There you are,” she told him, “I found the cutest set of glassware for our registry; you’ve got to come see.”
Emma’s reaction to the blonde and her kiss was immediate, like a hard knot suddenly forming in her chest. Killian smiled down at the woman as she beamed up at him. She was adorable, her blonde hair framing her face in tight curls, her pixie like face blushing with pleasure under Killian’s gaze, and a sparkle in her green eyes.

“Who’s this,” Emma managed to choke out.

Killian chuckled nervously, his hand finally landing behind that ear. “Oh, this is Tink . . . my . . . fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” Emma exclaimed in surprise. That one word suddenly had more effect on her equilibrium than the two daiquiris she had just had.

“It’s Tina Green, actually,” the woman corrected, extending her hand to Emma. After shaking, she tickled Killian in the ribs, “He’s the only one who calls me Tink. We met at a Halloween party. I was dressed as Tinkerbell, he was Captain Hook. We were meant to be, I guess.”

Emma couldn’t tear her eyes away from the woman’s adoring gaze. How could Killian be engaged? She also couldn’t explain the anger that suddenly rose in her when she looked at the other woman. “Killian and I used to play Neverland all the time,” she couldn’t resist saying.

“Yes!” Tink enthused, looking at Emma without a hint of displeasure. “Killian told me about his blast from the past. It was so good you two could catch up!”

Killian’s gaze towards her was hooded, and Emma hated how uncomfortable he looked. Things were so much simpler when they were kids.

“Especially since he’ll be leaving all of this behind soon,” Tink continued.

Emma blinked quickly and shook her head, “What?”

“See, I’m a weather girl for ABC 7 in Chicago,” Tink explained, tightening her embrace around Killian’s waist and resting her head on his shoulder, “so after the wedding, my Killy will be a permanent resident of the windy city.”

Killy? Emma took a deep breath as her two daiquiris from earlier threatened to come back up. “You’re moving to Chicago?” Emma asked, voice hoarse.

Killian chuckled nervously, hemming and hawing (that spot behind his ear had to be rubbed raw by now), but before he could respond to Emma’s question, a voice across the street called Emma’s name. She spun towards the sound and started, grasping Fiona by the elbow and pulling her close.

“That’s the naked guy!” Emma hissed in her ear.

Fiona rolled her eyes, “Well that makes sense. You’re dating him.”

“He’s my boyfriend?” Emma asked in surprise. “And he sleeps over?”

Fiona shrugged, taking another drag on her cigarette. “You never like to put labels on things, but yeah.”

Emma watched the guy scribble something on pieces of paper for a couple of girls who had stopped him from crossing the street. Then he posed for a picture.

“Why are those girls asking my boyfriend for an autograph?”
Fiona laughed sarcastically. “Well, he may not be the best hockey player on the New York Rangers, but he’s the New York Ranger with the hottest ass.”

He finished with the fans and then jogged across the street, flinging his arm possessively around Emma and brushing a kiss to her cheek. He stuck his hand out towards Killian and Tink.

“Hi, I’m –“

“Hans Southern,” Killian supplied, taking his hand, “I follow hockey.”

Hans grinned cockily as he returned the hand shake. “Want an autograph? I’ll sign just about anything. Except butts. I won’t do butts. Signed some breasts, though,” he chuckled, shaking Emma’s shoulder as if she should find such a thing hilarious. Emma suppressed an eye roll. She was dating this moron?

Killian blanched, and Emma could read him like a book. Fiona hadn’t been exaggerating. Her “boyfriend” probably only got autograph requests from desperate females. Killian had always loved hockey, but he clearly had no interest in Hans’ autograph.

“I’m actually tired,” Tink jumped in, squeezing Killian’s bicep with her tiny hands. Emma’s stare was practically burning a hole in that location, and she quickly shook her head.

“Uh yeah,” Killian quickly agreed. He exchanged pleasantries and handshakes with all of them, even Fiona, and then turned with Tink on his arm. As they walked, he grasped her hand, their fingers threading together. The sight released a sigh from deep in Emma’s throat.

“He sure has a type doesn’t he?” Fiona joked after the couple had walked far enough away.

“What do you mean?”

“You seriously can’t see it?” Fiona laughed, dropping her cigarette to the asphalt and crushing it under her heel. “He had a crush on you forever and now he’s marrying her. Blonde hair? Green eyes? Freckles?”

“Killian had a crush on me? When?”

“Oh God, Emma, you are not that naïve.”

“Well, too late for him,” Hans mumbled, nuzzling against Emma’s cheek. He reached down to nip at her ear, and Emma pushed him away. He just laughed, not seeming to notice her revulsion as he hailed a cab.

Emma let Hans guide her into the cab, paying little attention as he gave the driver her address. She propped her chin in her hand and gazed out the window, ignoring Hans as he ran a finger down her arm. *He had a crush on you forever. . .*

When the cab pulled up to Emma’s apartment, Hans paid and then slid over to exit with her. She stopped him with a firm hand to the chest.

“Hell no, buddy,” she told him with a roll of her eyes, “you’re going home.”

“Come on, Emma!” he exclaimed with a pathetic pout “You always help me wind down after a game!” He gave her what Emma guessed was supposed to be a sexy smirk. “Don’t I owe you a strip dance?”
Emma wrinkled her nose and shuddered, “Ew! No! I never want to see that again!”

She slammed the taxi door on Hans shocked face and turned to go upstairs to her apartment. As soon as she was inside, she collapsed onto her bed, not even bothering to change or wash off her makeup. Despite her exhaustion, she wasn’t sure she could sleep. The idea that Killian was engaged had her in an absolute panic. And Fiona said he used to have a crush on her? She buried her face in her pillow and groaned. But despite the turmoil inside her heart, exhaustion won out, and Emma fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

* In part two, Emma will start to discover that her 30 year old self isn't the nicest person and she and Killian will become closer. (Duh, that's what happens in the movie, I know!) I also added some things to the ending, however, (which is already written) and you will see a little of Emma and Killian's life between 13 and the ending. I was always curious about that in the movie, you know?
* Even though I am not responding to your comments, please know how much I appreciate them. Ya'll are the best!
“Good morning, Astrid!” Emma called cheerily to her assistant as she breezed into work the next morning. A good night’s sleep had made a world of difference. That, in addition to the caramel mocha in her hand, was helping her forget about Killian being engaged. Mostly.

“Good morning Ms. Nolan.”

Emma stopped at Astrid’s desk and cocked her head to the side. “Why do you do that Astrid?”

“Do what?”

“Say good morning as if you’re surprised I said it first.”

Astrid’s eyes grew wide and her face went pale. “I-I’m sorry, Ms. Nolan. I didn’t mean to offend you. Please don’t fire me!”

Emma giggled, “Fire you? Why ever would I do that?”

“It’s what you did to your last three assistants. The one before me lasted only three weeks. She forgot the cinnamon on your hot chocolate.”

Emma frowned, “How could I be so mean?”

Astrid bit her lip, looking visibly frightened. “Do I have to answer that?” she whispered.

Emma shook her head. “No, Astrid, I just . . . I’m sorry, okay?”

Astrid finally gave her a tiny, hesitant smile as Emma stepped into her office. She set her messenger bag down on a filing cabinet in the corner and sank into her desk chair. She pulled out several folders that contained fashion photo spreads for the next issue and started going over them, struggling to remember what she had read in *Magazine Editing for Dummies*. She had just made a note on the first page when Astrid buzzed in.

“Hans Southern is on line one asking when you’d like him to make dinner reservations for tonight?”

Emma wrinkled her nose. How had the jerk not taken the hint? “Ugh. How about half past never? Ask him how that sounds.”

Astrid let out a tiny laugh, then quickly cleared her throat, “Yes, ma’am.”

Emma finished going through the fashion photo spreads, then picked up another folder containing an article outlining the top five lipsticks for the season. She furrowed her brow as she looked over them. What real women actually wore colors like this? Orange? How many women could pull *that* off? Emma pivoted to face her computer to pull up the internet. Fashion had changed since she was 13.
Maybe orange lipstick was a thing? But she couldn’t recall anyone wearing it at the bar or in the office or even on the sidewalks of New York.

Astrid buzzed in again, “Um, Ms. Nolan? Arthur Pendragon is here to see you.”

“Oh, okay,” Emma replied, slightly confused. Why would she need to see some accountant’s husband? “Send him in.”

Emma rose from her desk as a man with dark hair and a beard entered the room as Astrid held the door for him. Astrid’s expression was one of disgust as Arthur explained he had brought his wife lunch and thought he would pop in to say hi.

“That’s nice of you to bring Gwen lunch,” Emma started to say as the door swung shut.

Suddenly, before she knew what was happening, Arthur had grabbed her. He leaned forward to kiss her, but Emma turned her head at the last moment, receiving a sloppy wet one on her cheek. Emma shoved him away with all her might.

“Ugh!” Emma wiped the spit off her cheek in disgust. “What are you doing?” she hissed. “You’re married!”

Arthur just gave her a predatory look as he stalked towards her again. He laughed, “That didn’t stop us from rattling a few filing cabinets last week.”

When he grabbed her this time, Emma panicked and drew her knee up. Hard. Arthur crumpled to the floor, calling her every foul name he could think of. With shaky hands, Emma grabbed her bag and stumbled out her office door. Astrid had risen from the chair at her desk and for the first time was beaming at Emma with a genuine grin. Emma self-consciously patted her hair and cleared her throat.

“I’ll be going out, Astrid. Hold my calls.”

On shaky limbs, Emma headed towards the elevators, but stopped short when she heard her name from inside Fiona’s office. Emma leaned towards the partially open door to hear better.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into her lately, do you?” asked an unseen co-worker.

“I have no idea,” replied Fiona, voice dripping with disdain, “but this wide-eyed innocent routine is getting old. If Emma thinks that sickly sweet demeanor is going to win her the re-design bid with Blue, she is sorely mistaken.”

“You have much better business sense, Fiona,” the other woman continued. It reminded Emma of the way the Six Chicks used to gush over their leader in the seventh grade.

“Just wait. Emma is going down.”

The two women laughed, and Emma took a few shaky steps backwards, her eyes suddenly blurring with tears. She knew her friendship with Fiona was shallow, but to hear confirmation that the woman wasn’t a true friend still hurt. Emma tried not to stumble on her heels as she headed for the back stairs.

There was only one person she wanted to talk to right now, and she hoped he wouldn’t turn
Emma couldn’t help sneaking peeks at Killian’s profile as they walked. He was so handsome, it was difficult not to stare. And when he turned her way and gave her that amazing smile, her heart felt like it might beat right out of her chest. How had she let their friendship go?

He poked her with his elbow and gave her a teasing grin, “You’re awfully quiet.”

Emma took a deep breath and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Before meeting Killian at the park near his apartment, she had run home to change. She felt more like herself in jeans and a t-shirt. Even if these jeans were dark wash, designer skinny jeans instead of the loose fitting stonewash of her youth.

“What happened between us, Killian? Why did we stop being friends?”

Killian shrugged as his lip quirked up on one side in a half-smile. “Does it really matter? It was so long ago.”

Emma stopped walking and rested her hand on Killian’s elbow. “It matters to me. Please, Killian. Tell me.”

Killian gave a silent nod and started walking again, his blue eyes hooded. “I suppose I can trace it all back to your thirteenth birthday. I went next door to get my guitar, and when I came back everyone was leaving. Fifi told me you were in the closet waiting for me.”

“Seven minutes in heaven!” Emma exclaimed. “That’s the last thing I remember.”

Killian nodded, and something about the look on his face made her long to reach for his hand. But she refrained.

“You blamed me for ruining your party and locked yourself in the closet. I tried playing the song I wrote for you on my guitar –“

“You wrote me a song?” Emma breathed out.

Killian chuckled awkwardly and scratched behind his ear. “Yeah. Not that you really listened. You finally came out of the closet, threw the doll house I had spent weeks making at my head, and . . . you never spoke to me again.”

Emma stopped, the horror of how cruel she had been rooting her to the sidewalk. Killian’s eyes darted everywhere, refusing to land on her face. Killian had been such a faithful friend, encouraging her to be herself, loving her even when she was unlovable. And she had gone and treated him that way? The words that finally came out of her mouth made no sense and were completely inadequate. “Never? Never ever?”

Killian shook his head sadly, but quickly covered his hurt with a playful smile. “But we all do stupid things when we’re young right?”

Emma just gaped at him. “Killian, I am so sorry.”

Killian waved a hand in the air as if brushing it all aside. “It’s in the past, Emma.”
Emma shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. “Stop being so nice to me, Killian, I
don’t deserve it. Do you know who I am now? Right now?”

Killian’s eyes finally met hers, and the intensity in his deep blue gaze had her looking away
in shame.

“I don’t have a relationship anymore with my parents,” Emma finally began, eyes glued to
the pavement, “I don’t have any real friends. I’m super mean to all my assistants, firing them over
stupid things. I did something really bad with this married guy.” Emma took a deep breath after
cataloguing all her sins, finally raising her head. But she still couldn’t look Killian in the eye.

“I’m not a nice person,” she finally admitted in a small voice. Her eyes finally darted to
Killian’s and what she saw there took her breath away. He was looking at her with tenderness, just
as he had when he gave her the Emma dream house for her birthday. Emma closed her eyes tightly
against the compassion.

“I don’t deserve your friendship, Killian. Maybe I never did.”

She turned from him then, unable to handle the kindness that he still extended in his gaze.
He shouted after her to wait, calling her name, but she just kept running.

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Bus service still didn’t extend all the way to Storybrooke, so when Emma reached
Granville, she took a cab to her childhood home. Her parents must have still been on their cruise
because no one came to the door when she rang the bell, so she walked around to the back porch.
She checked under the flower pot to find the spare key still in the same place. She smiled to herself,
relieved to know that some things never changed. But her home – her parent’s home – had. She
looked around to find small changes that nevertheless made a huge difference: a coat of paint instead
of wallpaper, white cabinets instead of oak, a double –hinged front door. Emma walked up the stairs
which were now hard wood instead of carpet and headed for her room. Opening the door, she found
exercise equipment. For some reason, she found it depressing.

Her feet took her against her will next to the basement. The change here was drastic. It was
now a finely decorated media room instead of a grubby basement for teens to hang out in. Yet the
closet door was still exactly the same, made of that hideous faux wood. Emma opened it slowly, her
heart in her throat. She stepped inside, turning a circle. She tenderly rested her hand on the marks on
the inside of the door chronicling her and Killian’s heights as they grew. Until they were ten and
insisted they were too old for Mary Margaret’s fussing. Emma lifted her gaze up to the top shelf
behind her, and her heart sunk. The doll house was gone. Emma shut the door behind her and sank
to the floor in the small, dark room, hugging her knees to her chest. If this was where everything
went wrong, maybe she could wish herself back to that moment.

“I wish I were thirteen again. I wish I were thirteen again. I wish . . . “

With each muttering, Emma rocked back and forth, harder and harder until her back was
banging against the shelves behind her. Tears began to stream down her face. It was no use. There
was no going back.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Emma startled as a sleeping bag fell against her
shoulder. There, standing in the doorway, were her parents. They must have heard the banging
Emma was making because her father held a baseball bat in one hand while the other shielded his
wife. Emma drank in the sight of them. Their hair had turned gray, wrinkles creased their faces, and
her father’s muscles had softened, but they were still a familiar and beautiful sight.
“Daddy!” Emma cried, launching herself into David’s arms.

“Emma!” both her parents breathed. Her father cupped the back of her head, just as he had when she was little. Her mother came and wrapped her arms around Emma’s shoulders, holding her close. She thought she felt tears splash against the top of her head. She had obviously stayed away far too much if this was their reaction.

Just further evidence of the horrible person Emma had grown up to be.

The next morning, Emma descended the back stairs to find her father puttering around the kitchen with a towel draped over his shoulder. The table was filled with a platter of pancakes, a bowl filled with a mountain of scrambled eggs, and another bowled heaped with an assortment of fruit. Her father turned from the stove with another platter piled high with strips of bacon. When he saw Emma, he smiled.

“I wanted to cook breakfast for my girl,” he told her.

“Thanks dad,” Emma chuckled, “but I’m a magazine editor, not a Romanian power lifter.”

“Well,” David shrugged as Emma took her seat, “a man is allowed to spoil his daughter if he wants to.”

He brushed a kiss to the top of her head and took a seat next to his wife. Emma lifted her fork and grinned before digging in. Her 30 year old self had nothing but power bars in the cabinet for breakfast. She missed this kind of food.

The family ate in silence, though her parents frequently cast her concerned looks. Her appetite sated, Emma wiped her mouth with a napkin, then squirmed in her seat before asking, “Have you ever made a decision you regret? Like if you could go back and change something in your life, would you?”

Her parents exchanged a glance over the tops of their coffee mugs. They had always done that. Emma swore they could read each other’s minds. Mary Margaret set down her mug and reached out to take Emma’s hand.

“Everyone makes mistakes, Emma. We all have regrets. And of course we wish we could go back and fix things, but we can’t.”

“There’s no point beating ourselves up about the past,” her father continued.

Emma bit her lip to hold back the tears, “Then what do you do? How do you handle the guilt?” she lowered her gaze to her plate. “And the consequences.”

Her father smiled gently at her, “You change course. Choose to be a better person going forward.”

“But what if it’s too late?” Emma asked, thinking of Killian’s fiancé.

“Well, I refuse to believe that,” her mother argued, “there’s always hope. Anyone can change if they choose to.”

Emma fiddled with her fork, gathering her courage. Finally, she looked up at her parents with repentance. “I’m sorry I’ve missed Christmas.”
With a squeeze of her hand and a smile, her parents forgave her with no strings attached.

When Killian approached her, Emma rose from the bench were she was waiting for him in Central Park. He gave her a nod and that killer smile as he said hello. Emma felt herself blushing as she said hello in return. Ugh! If she ever made it back to the past, would her insides still turn over like this every time he smiled?

Killian gestured over her shoulder at the lighting and camera equipment set up by a fountain, “You have a photo shoot today?”

“No,” Emma said, tilting her chin up and grinning at him, “you do. At least I hope.” She rooted around in her shoulder bag and pulled out a check. “I’m hiring you – or, I should say Poise is hiring you.”

Killian lifted his hands and shook his head, “You don’t need to do me any favors, Swan.”

“You’d be the one doing me a favor. I’ve seen your work, Killian. Not your advertising stuff, your real work at the gallery. It’s amazing!”

Killian eyed the check she had placed in his palm and his brows lifted in surprise. Unsure if that was good surprise or bad, she shook her hand at the cheek and hurriedly assured him, “That’s just the first check. There will be more later.”

Killian swiped his tongue across his lower lip as he thought, gazing over Emma’s shoulder. She tried not to stare at his lips. He shook his head, “I don’t know, Emma. I’ve seen your magazine. My photos aren’t really your style.”

Emma grinned widely. “Exactly. Poise has been struggling, so we’re doing a full re-design. I think the magazine’s problem is that it doesn’t reflect real women. When I look at a magazine, I want to see people I know. My mom, my co-worker, my best friend’s sometimes snarky aunt.”

That got a chuckle out of Killian, and Emma beamed. “Real women,” she continued, “don’t wear orange lipstick or lounge in boudoirs. Will you help me?”

Killian eyed the check, then her, and gave her a crooked smile. “Ah, so you need my help... again. I do love rescuing a damsel in distress.”

Emma rolled her eyes and smacked him in the chest. “Please. No one rescues me but me.”

Emma was distracted again as she watched Killian lean over the mock-ups for the re-design pitch. She couldn’t keep her eyes off the way his biceps bulged against his black t-shirt. The last few days with him had been like old times in so many ways. They laughed and joked together just as they always had. Killian still called her out on her bullshit just like he always did, and vice versa. But things were different, too. She worried she may have been seeing things that weren’t there simply because she wanted it so badly, but Killian had shown signs – a series of little things – that maybe he saw her as more than a friend. One day, they were doing a photo shoot at a flower cart and Killian gallantly, with the dramatic flair he had always had, presented her with a bouquet of pink and white roses. Followed by a wink. On another occasion, they had shared an ice cream cone after the shoot, and Killian had reached out to brush a drip from her chin with his thumb. Then last night, they had been shooting a dance scene on a rooftop covered with tiny white lights. One of the male models wasn’t conveying the emotion Killian wanted, so he had snatched Emma to demonstrate. He had
dipped her, and then before she knew what was happening, he had scooped her up off her feet and spun her around. Emma’s face had been flushed, but she thought she had detected a slightly pink tinge in Killian’s cheeks as well. And if she weren’t mistaken, his hands remained at her waist a beat too long.

Killian was running his thumb across his lower lip now as he concentrated, and Emma found herself staring at that exact location. He turned, catching her, and Emma quickly pulled her gaze to the spread in front of her. As she looked at the photograph of the young man dipping his prom date, her mind went back to Killian holding her in that exact same position the night before. She reached out and ran her fingertips across the photograph. She glanced Killian’s way and saw his eyes fixated on her. He glanced away just as she had moments ago. Maybe she wasn’t the only one who couldn’t stop staring. At least she could hope.

“Well,” Killian said, straightening, “these look good. I think we can call it a night, don’t you?”

Emma’s heart sank as she realized how much she disagreed – no, she didn’t want to call it a night. The photo shoot was over, so after this, there would be no reason to see Killian all day, every day. And she hated the thought. She stared down at the photos spread before her, not really seeing them, and then looked up at Killian with a grin.

“Know what I want right now?”

“I can’t believe they still sell these,” Killian chuckled as they walked along the sidewalk. He shook some more Razzles into his palm, then gave Emma some. She watched his profile as he gazed out at the Hudson River, the wind ruffling his hair. He turned to look at her, and for once she held his gaze. Her face still flushed immediately, but she hoped he would assume it was just from the wind.

“What are you thinking?” she breathed out, then felt like kicking herself. What a lame thing to ask!

But Killian just smiled at her. “I’m thinking this is the last place I expected to be right now. Here. With You. Eating Razzles.”

Emma smiled then schooled her expression into a serious one. “Yes. Not many people know it’s both a candy AND a gum.”

They both laughed, then continued walking in companionable silence. Emma turned to Killian. “What color is my tongue?” she asked, opening her mouth wide.

Killian shook his head, “You’re just determined to act like a kid, aren’t you?” Emma arched a brow at him and pointed at her tongue. He sighed, “It’s red.”

“Red red? Or Razzle red?”

Killian laughed, “Razzle red.”

“Okay, let me see yours.”

Killian shook his head, “Uh, no.”

Emma grasped him by the elbow and shook him a little, “Come on, Killy! I showed you
He rolled his eyes, but then stuck out his tongue for her. Emma grinned broadly and nodded in satisfaction. “Razzle red.”

Killian glanced down, and Emma suddenly realized she was still grasping his elbow. His skin beneath her fingertips felt deliciously warm, and before she could second guess what she was doing, she slid her hand down and grasped his hand. He threaded his fingers with hers, and her heart soared. She stared at their interlocked fingers for a moment, and her mind went back to her 13th birthday. She had thought it was Neal, but it was Killian’s hands that had fit so perfectly with her own. She finally looked up at Killian, but he was looking ahead and not at here. He then tilted his head in that direction.

“Want to?”

Emma finally tore her gaze from his face to follow his line of sight. There on the sand by the river was an old, metal swing set. Before she could reply, Killian was tugging her hand and pulling her down the hill. A giggle escaped her lips as she hopped out of her flats to run barefoot across the sand. Killian didn’t release her hand until he had seated her gallantly in a swing, brushing a kiss across her knuckles before letting go. Emma resisted the urge to press that hand against her own lips, grasping the metal chain of the swing instead. Killian settled in his own swing and pushed off. Emma followed suit, pumping her legs. Her belly swooped as she swung higher, the weightlessness dizzying her in ways swinging never had before. Her equilibrium as a thirty year old felt completely different.

“Bet I can still go farther than you on the take off,” Killian teased.

“Please,” Emma scoffed, “I always went farther than you did, Jones.” Because she had always been taller than him. That wasn’t the case anymore.

“Well, let’s make a wager,” Killian challenged her, “winner buys the other lunch tomorrow.”

Emma beamed. And get to see him again tomorrow? Either way, she would win. “Deal!”

Killian counted them down, and then they both jumped from their swings. Emma’s legs collided with the earth in a way they never had before, sending shockwaves through her entire body. Killian groaned loudly as he hit the ground next to her. Emma’s painful moan as she rolled onto her back was bit off by a sudden laugh at how pitiful she was. Killian pushed up on all fours and shifted closer to her as he sat up.

“Who won?” Emma managed to chuckle.

“I have no idea,” Killian moaned. “I’m too old for this.”

“Hey! Don’t say that!” Emma protested. “If you’re old, then so am I!”

Emma started to roll over to get back on her feet, but stilled when she saw that Killian was hovering over her. His left hip was pressed against hers, and his arm was on her other side, braced in the sand. Emma took her hands and did something she had longed to do: grasped his bicep, feeling the hard muscle underneath. He had grown up to be so strong. She ran her hands down the length of his arm.

“You have so much hair on your arms,” she mused, thinking back to the little boy he had
Killian chuckled hoarsely, “I’ve never had a woman tell me *that* before.”

Emma ran her hand back up his arm, across his shoulder blade, and down the front of his v-neck shirt. “You have so much chest hair, too,” she said, though she wasn’t really thinking clearly with Killian’s face hovering so close to hers.

“Now that, I have heard before,” Killian attempted to joke, but his words sort of fizzled out as Emma’s gaze met his. She wasn’t sure if it was the street light nearby, or Killian’s emotions shining through his eyes. All she knew was that the blue was suddenly deeper, with a brighter sparkle. But then he leaned down towards her, and they fluttered closed.

When his lips met hers, they were softer than she would have expected, yet the scruff was rough against her skin. The combination made her feel as if she were melting into the sand. Her thoughts were flitting around like hummingbirds. One moment she felt fear that he would be able to tell this was the first time she had ever done this, and then the next she felt bliss so overwhelming it felt like flying. She reached her fingers up tentatively to trace his jaw, and Killian deepened the kiss. In some ways, she felt she was watching it all happen from above, that the real Emma was floating away on a cloud.

When Killian finally pulled away, there was a different look in his eyes, a look that seemed so sad and conflicted, it broke Emma’s heart. He sat up and turned away from her completely, running a shaking hand through his hair. Emma sat up too and shifted closer. She wrapped her arm around his waist and pressed her cheek to his back.

“Was it not a good kiss?” Emma whispered, fearful that she had done everything wrong. Like the 13 year old she was inside who had never been kissed.

Killian was silent for a long stretch of time. So long, it made Emma’s head ache with worry. “No,” he finally choked out, “it was perfect. That’s the problem.”

The walk back to Emma’s apartment was incredibly awkward. Neither of them spoke, and Killian was clenching his jaw so hard, she feared he might chip a tooth. She longed to reach out and take his hand again, but he had them shoved in his pockets. When they finally reached her door, Emma turned to him, but before she could say a word, Killian began to speak.

“Do you know when I first wanted to kiss you?”

Emma’s jaw dropped. Of all the things she had expected him to say, that wasn’t it.

“It was at my 13th birthday party,” he continued. “I had a piñata, remember?”

Emma was actually able to laugh at the memory. “Yes. You were always complaining about having a winter birthday. Regina was bound and determined that you were going to have a piñata, even though there was three feet of snow. All the candy was wet and ruined the second it hit the ground.”

“But do you remember when it was your turn to swing?”

Of course she did. To her, it was less than a year ago.

“I’ve never seen someone get so disoriented. You came right at me with that stick, and I
yelled as you almost clubbed me in the head.”

Emma arched an eyebrow. “Yelled? Killian, you screamed like a little girl!”

Killian, who had been dead serious telling the tale up to this point, finally managed a chuckle. “Okay, I screamed. You dropped the stick, terrified you had hurt me. You grabbed me and started touching me all over to be sure I was still in one piece.”

Emma shook her head, “I don’t know why I didn’t take the damn blindfold off.”

“No, I took it off for you,” Killian tilted his head at her as he walked closer. “Just has your hands came up to my cheeks, I pulled the blindfold down. We were so close . . .” he trailed off. They were close now, Killian’s lips a breath away from hers. “And that, Emma, was the first time I wanted to kiss you.”

Emma was breathing hard, the desire to feel his lips on hers again overwhelming her senses. But Killian didn’t kiss her. Instead, he kept talking.

“It took me forever to get over you. To move on. I kept holding out hope . . .” Killian closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, they were filled with a tortured look. “But I finally did move on, and then . . . you knocked on my door.”

“Maybe it was fate,” Emma whispered, squeezing the door knob behind her until her fingers ached.

“The fates are cruel,” Killian countered, and then he kissed her, slow and tender this time.

The kiss was brief and almost chaste, if not for the way Emma’s hands fisted in Killian’s shirt and the way his tangled in her hair. On a sigh, he pulled away, and Emma couldn’t help feeling as if it was a kiss good-bye.

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Emma hit send on the text message she had just written to Killian, then dropped the phone back into her purse. She straightened and took deep, cleansing breaths, pacing as she mentally rehearsed her presentation.

The re-design Killian had helped her put together had excited Blue. Now they just had to present their idea to the board of directors, but Blue was confident that they would like it as much as she did. If only things with Killian were going so well. The lunch he had mentioned never happened. Emma had shown up at his apartment to find Tink there, wearing nothing but one of Killian’s shirts. The sight had sent her reeling as well as Tink giddily informing her that Killian was out picking up his tux for the wedding. How could he have kissed her like that and still plan on marrying someone else? That had been a week ago. Since then, Killian had ignored all of her calls and texts.

Emma turned with a smile as her boss entered the room, but that smile fell at the stunned look on Blue’s face. “The presentation is cancelled, Emma.”

Emma shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“It was Fiona. She took all your ideas to Sparkle. Killian’s pictures are already all over the city in the magazine’s outdoor ads.”

“But they can’t do that!” Emma exclaimed. “Those are Killian’s pictures.”
“She got Killian to sign this,” Blue sighed and handed Emma a piece of paper with Killian’s signature at the bottom. “It’s a release giving us permission to sell his pictures.”

Emma took the paper with shaking hands. Killian’s signature swam in her vision for a moment, then her head snapped up and she narrowed her eyes, fire flashing in their emerald depths. She marched straight for Fiona’s office. Her slight surprise at finding the woman packing up her office didn’t deter her from her rage.

“What did you say to Killian?” she thundered. “How did you get him to sign this?”

Fiona didn’t even stop what she was doing, but simply rolled her eyes as she set a potted plant into a cardboard box. “Which one do you want to be, Emma? The pot or the kettle? Because if it’s okay with you, I’d like to be the pot. Or the kettle. It doesn’t really matter. They’re both black.”

As she emphasized the last word, Fiona grabbed a stack of letters and slapped them onto the desk in front of Emma. Emma’s brow furrowed as she shuffled through them, all addressed to her from the chief editor at Sparkle magazine, the rival magazine of Poise.

“I – I don’t understand,” Emma stuttered.

“Please you can wipe that Bambi I just watched my mom get shot and strapped to the back of a van look off your face. I know it’s all an act. You get a head editor position at Sparkle if you help them reach a million copies? It’s a wonderful, evil plan. Just wish I’d thought of it. Of course, now I’ve sold them all your designs with Killian’s pictures, so I get to be head editor leaving you here with the magazine you’ve single-handedly driven into the ground.”

Fiona finished her evil monologue with a smirk and hoisted her box full of belongings, turning towards the door. Emma stepped in her way.

“What did you say to him?”

“He came to take you to lunch last week. Isn’t he engaged?”

Emma narrowed her eyes menacingly. “Answer the damn question.”

“Gee – I can’t remember, let’s see . . . I think I said you had decided to go in a different direction,” Fiona gave Emma an icy glare. “I may have said something else, but I just can’t remember.”

Then Fiona shoved Emma aside and stalked her way to the elevators.

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Emma sighed in frustration as she raised her fist to bang loudly one more time on Killian’s apartment door.

“I you’re looking for the couple in 2C, you’re out of luck.”

Emma jumped and turned toward the voice to her right. A rotund gentlemen stood unlocking his door. “What do you mean?” Emma asked him.

“Their wedding is today. In his hometown,” the man explained. “The little blonde wouldn’t shut up about it.”

“Today!” Emma exclaimed.

She didn’t wait to hear the man’s answer, racing towards stairwell instead. She had to stop that
Emma tapped her fingers impatiently on the leather seat of the taxi, craning her head out the window as they inched past Granny’s diner. Since when was there bumper to bumper traffic in tiny Storybrooke?

“Um, can you maybe go down a side street or something?” Emma asked the driver.

The man shook his head, “Nah, sorry, just gotta sit tight. There’s a wedding today and the whole town is turning out for it. Don’t understand why. Killian Jones was always a loser when we were kids.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at the driver, partially in anger at his snobby attitude, and partly to try and place him. If he grew up here, Emma ought to know him. He lifted his brown eyes to examine her reflection in the rearview mirror, and recognition suddenly dawned on his face.

“Emma Nolan!” he exclaimed.

Emma shook her head, her brow furrowing in confusion. So apparently she should know him. But she didn’t.

“It’s me!” the man said, patting his chest. “Neal Cassidy!”

Emma’s jaw dropped as she gave him a closer look. He looked nothing like he had in junior high. He didn’t even look like his pictures in Killian’s high school year book. The dark brown hair had lightened to a dull tawny. His face was more lined and sagging than it should have been at thirty-one, and his entire physique lacked tone and muscle. But the biggest shock was his clothes. They were baggy and ill-fitting, giving off the overall impression that he just rolled out of bed.

“Ooh!” Neal cried out, cranking up the cab’s radio. “Wonderwall” by Oasis came through the speakers. “Do you remember? The first time we fogged up the windows in my car was to this song!”

Emma realized her mouth was still hanging open. She searched her brain for something – anything – to say. Finally, she stuttered, “You drive a cab.”

“Yes,” he answered, with a wave of his hand, “for now. I’ve done this and that. Never like to settle on any one thing. Worst job was at Wal-Mart though. That layaway at Christmas?” he rolled his eyes. “I walked right out. Kept the blue vest, though. Served ‘em right.”

“That’s . . . that’s . . .”

“Hey!” Neal exclaimed, eyes bright, “Are you single? ‘Cuz if you are, I’d totally like your number. If you’re anything like you were in high school, we’ll have this cab rockin.”

Neal made a vulgar thrust with his hips, laughed, and winked. Emma felt bile rising in her throat as she groped for the door handle.

“I don’t think so, pal,” she muttered and lunged out of the taxi.

“Hey!” Neal yelled after her. “So you don’t want to go out, that’s cool, but ya gotta pay me!”

Emma threw a wad of twenties at his face and sprinted down Oak Street. It would get her to Killian’s house in less than five minutes if she ran fast enough.
But what she really needed was to run backwards. Backwards far enough to undue every stupid mistake she had ever made.

The first people Emma saw when she dashed across the street and into Killian’s front yard were her own parents. She swore under her breath as she ducked behind a catering van. She should have known they would be there. They probably knew Tink better than they knew their own daughter. She was sure Regina, Liam, and Killian still did Thanksgiving with the Nolans just like when they were kids. She could just see Tink sitting at her father’s left, right next to Killian. The spot she had always taken.

Emma waited until her parents headed for the backyard, where white chairs were lined up on either side of a blue satin runner. The wedding venue took up both the Mills and Nolan backyards. The same place, ironically, where Killian had his 13th birthday party (when they weren’t shivering in the house, that is). The very place where Killian first wanted to kiss Emma.

She pushed away those melancholy thoughts as she inched forward, hunched low. She scanned the side of the Mills house. There Killian was, standing in his bedroom window. If she squinted, she could imagine him as a kid, grinning down at her as she scaled the huge oak beside his house. But when her mind’s eye cleared, he was still there, a thirty year old man in a black tux. Which wouldn’t be so bad if he were her groom and not Tink’s.

Emma slipped through the front door and almost gasped aloud at the sight of Regina in the formal sitting room to her left. Her back was to Emma, and she was straightening Liam’s bow tie. Emma grabbed a flower arrangement and held it in front of her face before Killian’s brother could see her. She slipped up the stairs as quickly as she could, setting the flowers down on a small table in the hallway. She straightened up, smoothing out invisible wrinkles in the front of her jeans as she approached Killian’s bedroom door. She could still remember so clearly the first time she had opened that door to find Killian crying on the other side.

This time, Killian stood with his back to her, but turned abruptly at the sound of the door opening. His eyes widened in surprise to see Emma standing there, and she quickly shut the door behind her, leaning against it to gather her emotional strength.

“Emma!” he exclaimed in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Emma swallowed hard when tears began to well up. She had to just bluntly say it, or she might never choke it out. “I’m here because you shouldn’t be getting married . . . unless it’s to me.”

Killian just stood there silently for the longest time, then let out a long sigh as he dropped his head. Emma took several quick steps forward. “Because I love you, Killian, so much. And I . . . what are you thinking?”

Killian finally looked at her with a pained expression. Once again, Emma plowed on before he could speak.

“And if you’re hurt by what Fiona said . . . whatever it was, that’s not me. Not anymore, I—“

Killian raised a hand and shook his head. “I haven’t believed a word that woman has said since the third grade, Emma.”

She let out a shaky sigh of relief, “Good.”
The silence stretched on and on, even more awkward than the one on the night of their kiss. Emma opened her mouth several times to say something else, but no words came. Finally, Killian looked at her sadly. Even before he spoke, she knew he was about to break her heart.

“I made a vow to Tink, Emma. Her family’s down there. My family is down there.” He put a hand to his chest, his fingers splayed across his heart. “That means something. Maybe it doesn’t to you anymore, but it does to me.”

“But we’re soul mates,” Emma whispered, “even my mom has always said so. Remember?”

Killian’s eyes shuttered from her. “And then we grew up.”

A sob choked Emma, and she shuddered as she stopped it from escaping. She nodded, feeling so vulnerable, exposed, and heartbroken, that her limbs suddenly felt heavy and her head pounded with shame. Tears began to slip down her cheeks unbidden. Killian took a step forward, and Emma thought at first he would embrace her. She half feared that he would and half longed for it. Instead, he turned towards the closet and pulled something down from the top shelf.

It was the Emma dream house.

The tears came in torrents now. “Oh Killy,” Emma wept, “can I keep it?”

“Oh, Killy,” he told her softly, his own voice choked, “I made it for you.”

Emma took it and then finally lifted her eyes to meet his. The blue of them were bright with unshed tears. She suddenly realized that it wasn’t what she wanted for him. Not on a day that was supposed to be joyful. That was how much she loved him.

“I just want you to be happy, Killian,” she told him. “Please promise me you’ll be so, so happy.”

Killian simply nodded and took a step back. Emma ducked her head as she turned, fumbling awkwardly with the door as she balanced the doll house in her arms.

“Emma,” he stopped her. She turned and looked at him hesitantly. She feared she would see anger in his eyes, but instead it was that familiar tenderness. “I’ve always loved you. From the moment you first stepped through that door when we were five years old.”

Emma couldn’t hold back the sobs now as she pulled the door closed behind her and hurried down the stairs. Luckily, all the activity was now in the back yard. Emma’s legs were wobbling beneath her as she stepped out onto the front porch, and she sank quickly to the front step, afraid she might fall. The first few strands of Canon in D drifted from the backyard, and her sobs grew louder as she hugged her knees to her chest.

After a few moments of succumbing to her tears, Emma rubbed her cheeks dry and turned the doll house towards her. Fresh tears flowed even as she smiled fondly at all the little details of the doll house. She brushed a layer of dirt off the slanted roof, then closed her eyes as the wedding march announcing the entrance of the bride played in the back yard. Emma didn’t see the sparkles of wishing dust floating on the wind along with the dust.

All she knew was that her parents had been wrong. Sometimes, changing course wasn’t enough. Sometimes, what you needed was to go back and choose a different path to begin with. She had skipped seventeen years of her life, why couldn’t she go back? Maybe because it didn’t work that way.

If I could go back, Emma thought to herself, I would love the people who matter. The people who
Suddenly, the porch seemed to shift beneath Emma and fall away. She felt almost as if she were shrinking in on herself and melting away all at the same time. She felt the light behind her eyelids quickly dim until she was in utter darkness. Instead of the wedding march, pop music floated to her ears, but muted. She reached her hand up and felt something bound across her eyes. She yanked it down and blinked. She looked around to find herself back in the dark interior of the basement closet. Emma touched her face, her chest, and stretched her lanky limbs out in front of her. Then she smiled. She was 13 again!

“Emma is waiting for you in the closet.”

Emma’s grin widened at the sound of Fiona’s 13 year old self as her heart pounded in her chest. She knew now that it was Killian, not Neal heading for the closet door. And she couldn’t wait to see him! The second he swung the door open, Emma leapt to her feet. She drank in the sight of him in a heartbeat, all skinny arms and legs with messy hair and freckles. How had she never seen what a cutie pie he was?

“Killian!” she cried out, then threw herself at him. She forgot for a moment that he was no longer the muscled, broad shouldered man he had been, and the force sent them both tumbling to the floor. Killian looked up at her in surprise, but that surprise morphed to shock when she pressed her lips to his. His lips softened beneath hers, but it was still a kiss between two thirteen year olds. All awkward and innocent. In short, it was beautiful and perfect.

“Wow,” Killian gasped when she pulled away, “where’d you learn to do that?”

“You!” Emma laughed, giving him another peck, “I learned it from you!”

Killian gave her a look of utter confusion, but Emma just scrambled off him and pulled him to his feet. “Come on, I gotta tell you what happened. It was crazy!”

Emma laced their fingers and yanked him towards the stairs, halfway up, they collided with Fiona. The dark-haired girl yanked the scarf from Emma’s neck.

“I came to get this back.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at Fiona, the memory of their argument at Poise still fresh in her mind. She looked at the project Fiona held in her hand, and suddenly felt sick to her stomach at how low she had stooped to win popularity. She grabbed the papers from Fiona’s hands and ripped them in half. “I don’t want to be the pot or the kettle! You can be evil all by yourself.” Then she flung the shredded pieces of paper in Fiona’s face as the girl gaped like a cod fish.

Emma dragged Killian up the rest of the stairs, and he stopped her with a hand to both shoulders when they reached the top. “You’re amazing, Emma,” he grinned at her, face beaming with pride. “Bloody brilliant!”

Then he kissed her.

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Emma declared the party a bust and asked instead for her parents to take them, as well as Regina and Liam, out for pizza. The adults suspected that the children’s relationship had changed when they saw them holding hands in the back seat. It was confirmed when Liam caught them kissing in the photo booth in the arcade.
The ramifications of children meeting their soul mates at 5 and declaring their feelings at 13 had not been fully realized by the adults until they met them head on. At 14, a rule had to be made that Emma and Killian could no longer watch movies alone in the Nolan’s basement. (The rule being made after Mary Margaret and Regina stopped David from murdering Killian.) At 15, the pair were grounded after being caught skipping class so they could make out behind the bleachers. (A grounding that was largely unsuccessful since Emma and Killian were by then experts at sneaking out of the house.) At 16, well, let’s just say that at 16 the adults discovered that finding the pair in each other’s beds was no longer cute. (And Killian once again had to be rescued from a murderous David).

At 17, a Nolan-Mills-Jones family meeting had to be called after Killian slipped a ring on Emma’s finger. The adults put their collective foot down that no, they were not getting married right after graduation. (Threats of murder from David notwithstanding.) Emma very uncharacteristically burst into tears proclaiming that she had lost Killian once, she wouldn’t let it happen again. Her tale of traveling into a future without Killian in her life was made all the more disturbing by Killian’s unwavering belief that everything Emma said was true. The pair, however, finally agreed to wait until they had earned their college degrees. And the Nolan’s succeeded in keeping them from moving in together by threatening to stop paying Emma’s tuition. (David said it was his threat to murder Killian that did the trick, of course.) There was nothing they could do, however, to prevent Emma and Killian from finishing their degrees in three years instead of four. So when wedding vendors asked why the rush to get married at 21, every one rolled their eyes and laughed.

The wedding was straight out of Emma’s dreams and attended by everyone in Storybrooke. Even though they had, of course, hired a photographer, it didn’t keep Killian from hiding a disposal camera in the pocket of his tux. When the officiant declared, “you may now kiss the bride,” Killian dipped Emma in an epic kiss, holding his camera aloft simultaneously to capture the moment.

It was that photograph, not a professional shot, that sat on the mantel in their blue Victorian with a wraparound porch. Right next to a picture of them at 13, on Emma’s fateful birthday that would forever change their lives. Those two photographs were the first things Emma unpacked. Then she collapsed on the couch, cuddling up with Killian, sharing a box of Razzles.

“Welcome home, Mr. Jones,” Emma grinned popping a Razzle into his mouth.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Jones,” Killian replied, returning the favor.

Then he gathered her in a kiss, both their mouths Razzle-red.

Chapter End Notes

* I hope you didn’t think I was too harsh on Neal. I mean, I did crank up the loser quotient since he’s supposed to be Chris Grandy from the movie, but I can’t apologize for the physical description. My sister and I have had so many conversations about how we like Baelfire the kid but hate Neal the man. It's almost like they aren't even the same person. And physically, I'm sorry, but Once wasn't doing Neal any favors. And it's not just what Swanfire fans complain about: "Colin is a pretty boy, and Michael Raymond James is untraditionally handsome, Emma and CSers are so shallow, blah, blah, blah." But if you look at the way the men were presented to the audience, it's like they were purposefully stacking the deck in Killian's favor. Putting Neal in unflattering, ill-fitting clothes while giving Killian those half-unbuttoned shirts. Even Neal's dialogue (uh,
yeah, Ems, whatever) was in direct contrast to Killian's eloquence. It's like they didn't WANT us to like Neal. And in story telling, there's always a reason for purposely wanting the audience to dislike someone. Until Neal died, of course, then he suddenly became a saint. But seriously, I've seen pictures of Michael Raymond James in real life. They could have helped a guy out. But they didn't. Just saying.

* For my next story I'm going to do a historical period piece. I'm actually a little nervous about it because the movie isn't hugely popular, but it's one of my personal favorites. The next story will be Far and Away, based on the movie with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman about Irish immigrants in Boston in the 19th century. Outside of the Irish/Boston connection, so much of this movie screams CS. There is a class division trope, a "let's pretend to be brother and sister so we can get a room together" trope, and a "we act like we hate each other because we can't admit we're in love" trope. The ending is also perfect for Killian Jones (if you've seen it, you know what I mean). So see you next Thursday, I hope!
The full moon glinted off the ironworks above Killian Jones as he crept on silent feet onto Swan Manor. He pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes at the twin Swans wrought in steel arching towards one another. *Pretentious.* How many fields of potatoes had been harvested through toil, sweat, and broken backs to pay for such an entrance? Which of Killian’s kin buried in the family plot had been lain to rest as this ironwork was lifted to the skies? David Swan, current patriarch of the Swan family, didn’t know of Killian’s losses and likely wouldn’t care if he did. But Killian was about to change that. David Swan *would* know and he *would* care. And then Killian would put a bullet through his heart. It would only be fitting. Killian Jones knew the feeling of a shattered heart. Let David Swan know it too.

Killian stole into the stables on the edge of the estate and found an empty stall. He would rest until dawn, though he was fairly certain sleep would elude him. Since Liam’s death, sleep had been hard to come by. He had grieved in the past, having lost every person he ever loved, but losing Liam was different somehow. For one, it now meant he was utterly and completely alone in the world. His mother and baby sister had died in childbirth when he was only seven, and the loss sent his father first to the bottle and then to an early grave only a year after that. Killian’s own bonny lass, Milah, had barely lost the blush of a new bride before she succumbed to the fever, then was quickly followed by Liam’s wife, Elsa, and their unborn child. The brothers leaned on one another in their shared grief, and time had dulled the pain. But now even Liam was gone, and so senselessly, too. Run down by an aristocrat in his fancy carriage. The man hadn’t even had the decency to stop, so by the time a friend discovered Liam in a ditch by the road, he not only had lost far too much blood, but was shivering from hypothermia. All he had time to do was gasp out a final piece of advice for his little brother, take one last shuddering breath, and then he was gone.

*You’re more than this tiny scrap of earth, little brother. We used to dream of seeing the world. Do it, Killian. For me.*

Killian was now pricked with guilt that he ever promised such a thing. For once he enacted his revenge, the only other land he would see besides Ireland was hell itself.

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The rolling green hills of her homeland rushed past Emma Swan’s vision as she gave her mare free rein. Emma leaned over the horse’s neck as she galloped faster and faster, relishing the feel of the cool morning air. But as freeing as the full gallop may have been, it wasn’t enough for Emma. She wanted so much more, and the only place she would ever find it was far and away from the shores of Ireland.

Emma slowed Buttercup to a canter and then a trot as she crested the final hill towards her parent’s manor. Once Buttercup was walking in sight of the stables, she saw her mother watching with crossed arms and a humorous smile.

“You know why I’m here,” Mary Margaret half-teased as she watched Emma dismount.

Emma groaned as she gathered Buttercup’s reins. “Let me guess. Grandmother Eva saw me riding astride.”

“A lady of good breeding should ride sidesaddle, Emma.”

A very unladylike snort bubbled out of Emma at that. “And you have always ridden sidesaddle, mother? Because if I’m not mistaken, that’s not how father tells the story of how you two met.”

Mary Margaret sighed, unable to dispute her daughter’s claim. “Perhaps I rode astride as a lass, but Emma, by the time I was your age –”

“I know, I know,” Emma cut her off, “by my age, you were already wed.” Before her mother could continue that train of thought, Emma called out to the stable boy. “Colin, if you could take Buttercup and give her a good rub down? Thank you.”

Emma then turned her back on her mother, yanking her hands out of her riding gloves. Her mother seemed to take the hint and turned to go, giving Emma a gentle reminder that breakfast would soon be served. Emma stalked into the stable, hands on her hips, and gaze lifted to the ceiling. She then plopped down on a bale of hay. Glancing around to be sure no one was around, she hiked her riding skirt, underskirt, and petticoat up around her thighs. She lifted the fabric and fanned at her legs, which were sticky with sweat from her ride. Grandmother Eva would faint dead away if she could see her now. Apparently, a lady of propriety was never unclothed, even to bathe. Emma had never had the guts to ask, but she wondered if ladies of propriety even got to enjoy relations with their husbands. Or was that also performed with petticoat intact?

Emma leaned her head against the rough wood behind her and unbuttoned the topmost buttons of her riding jacket. She stopped fanning her legs and instead gathered her hair up on top of her head and fanned her neck with her free hand. What she wouldn’t give to simply wear trousers like a man!

Suddenly, a pigeon cooed and flapped its way out of the stall across from where Emma sat. She quickly shoved her skirts back down and stood, her heart pounding. Had someone been peeping in on her? She narrowed her eyes as she scanned the stalls, but neither saw nor heard anything suspicious. Just to be sure, she grabbed a horse shoe and tossed it over the stall the pigeon had just vacated.

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Killian Jones’s heart was about to beat right out of his chest, and it wasn’t just because of the horseshoe that hit the toe of his boot. Bloody hell, no man could lay eyes on such an exquisite creature and not physically react! He knew it was wrong to watch her when she clearly believed she
was alone, but he simply couldn’t help himself. It wasn’t just the shapeliness of her form – and good God, he hadn’t seen that much of a woman’s figure since Milah passed! – or her golden tresses, or the perfect beauty of her face. There was a spirit in her, like an unbroken colt, and it awakened things in him he had thought long dead.

He knew, of course, that she had to be Emma Swan, the only child of David Swan. None of the tenant farmers had ever laid eyes on her, for rumor had it she was kept on a short leash by her family. Not that such a thing was odd for a woman of means in 1892. Especially for a woman who would inherit her family’s estate. Suitors would go to any length to marry into that kind of wealth, and David Swan guarded his beloved daughter from cads who may seek to take advantage of her. Or so people said. People also said she was given every luxury and doted on excessively by both of her parents. Beautiful she may be, but Killian would be wise to remember that she was also spoiled and pampered. Narcissistic and selfish, too, most likely.

Killian’s heartbeat slowed, and he let out an even breath as Miss Swan turned to go. He waited several more moments, and when he was finally sure that the lass had left, he darted out of the stall. He had to seek out his revenge before the manor began to swarm with activity. But just as he made for the stable door, Emma Swan leapt in front of him, wielding a pitchfork. Killian’s eyes went wide at her sudden appearance, and for one long moment they simply stared at one another. Miss Swan’s eyes grew wide, and her face went flushed. Killian swallowed hard as his traitorous heart pounded once more in reaction to the glittering green of her eyes and the fetching freckles across the bridge of her nose. He internally cursed his own foolishness and went to dodge around the woman, but she anticipated him and blocked his way.

Killian couldn’t help a cocky smirk from lifting the corner of his mouth as he narrowed his eyes at Emma. Her own eyebrows lifted a hair in surprise. He was going to take a gamble that she didn’t have the guts to actually use that pitchfork. He lunged forward.

He had gambled poorly.

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He hadn’t thought she would use the pitchfork, and honestly, Emma hadn’t been sure, either. But when he lunged at her, fear took over, and she reacted. And now the tines of the pitchfork were imbedded deep into his upper thigh. She lifted her eyes to the man’s face and watched it crumble in shock and – betrayal? With shaking hands, Emma yanked the weapon free, and the young man screamed as he fell to his knees. Emma stumbled backwards towards the stable doors, the sight of blood on the pitchfork making her slightly dizzy. She dropped the disgusting thing and ran towards the house, picking up her skirts in both hands to aid her haste.

“Daddy!” Emma screamed as she raced across the grounds. “Daddy!”

David and Mary Margaret came running from the terrace where breakfast was being served. Emma yanked on her father’s shirt when he reached her, gesturing towards the stables.

“There was a man,” she gasped, then bent over to catch her breath. She was in better shape than this, she knew she was, but the shock of everything had stolen her breath away.

David’s face narrowed as he took in his daughter’s trembling state. She was a tough lass, and her reaction had alarm bells going off. “Did he touch you?” he gasped out.

“Emma!” Mary Margaret cried out, “Your buttons are undone!”

Emma shook her head, suddenly realizing the terrible conclusion her parents were jumping
to. “No, no, it wasn’t like that. I think he was hiding out—”

But before Emma could explain any further, her mother screamed. Emma turned to see the young man walking painfully across the grass, blood spreading quickly down his left pant leg. Emma screamed as well when he lifted the pistol in his right hand.

“David Swan, it’s time for you to pay!”

Emma’s father pushed her and her mother away from him and braced himself for the bullet’s impact. It never came. Instead, the interloper lay prone on the ground, his face, chest, and arms stained with gunpowder.

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“I don’t understand,” Emma argued with a shake of her head, “why are we tending his wounds? He tried to kill father!”

“Because,” Emma’s mother explained patiently, “we are not barbarians. Even a criminal deserves basic human care.”

Mary Margaret approached the bed where the unconscious man lay. Leroy and Graham, the groundskeepers, had stripped the man already of his filthy clothes and covered him with a sheet. Her mother sank to her knees beside him and brushed the dark hair off his forehead in a motherly gesture.

“He’s so young,” she mused, “about your age I would say.” Mary Margaret clucked her tongue as she stood and reached for the pot of herbal salve cook had whipped up. “What in life pressed you to such desperate measures, dear lad?”

Emma’s mother always put her to shame, always able to see the good in everyone and extending compassion, even to the wicked who didn’t seem to deserve it. Emma, on the other hand, had a bad habit of expecting the worst in people. Her father claimed it was his fault. David Swan worried for his daughter’s future, wanting to find her a suitable match. Not just someone who would run the estate well, but one who would love his daughter truly and completely. But starting when Emma was only thirteen, unscrupulous rogues had seemed to slink out of every nook and cranny eager to wed the only daughter and heir of David Swan. Emma was a Daddy’s girl through and through; she trusted his judgment implicitly and followed his lead when determining a person’s inner character. So if he had made her a bit jaded, so be it. Not many men in 1892 allowed their daughters freedom to choose who they wed, especially not wealthy ones.

Mary Margaret took hold of the sheet, then paused as she glanced at Emma. “Turn your virginal eyes away, sweetheart.”

Emma rolled her eyes, but did as her mother requested. “How am I supposed to help if I have to keep my back turned?”

“You can help me bathe his arms and face once I dress the wound. The lad is filthy with gunpowder, poor thing.”

Suddenly, a door slammed downstairs and angry shouts could be heard echoing through the foyer. Mary Margaret gasped, her hand fluttering to her chest. “For heaven sakes,” she muttered, “what now? I’m going to run downstairs to be sure everything’s okay. Don’t turn around Emma!”

“Yes, mother,” Emma grumbled. One minute her parents were treating her like a child, and the next they were pestering her about finding a husband. The walls of Swan Manor had never felt so suffocating. Emma chewed on her lower lip as both temptation and rebellion welled within her.
What could be so wrong with a tiny peek? Her mother would never know. She was a grown woman of twenty-two, after all.

Emma turned towards the bed and then immediately clapped her hand over her mouth as a laugh escaped her throat. Her mother had covered the man’s... unmentionables with the pot that once held the salve. Either she was trying to protect the man’s dignity, or she well knew her daughter’s rebellious nature. Most likely it was the latter, for how dignifying could a kitchen pot be?

Still, it was the most Emma had ever seen of a man, and the sight made her throat go dry. He was a fine specimen, with chiseled muscle on his narrow frame. His chest, which rose and fell with each breath, was thick with dark hair that narrowed to a v as it lowered to... the pot. Emma tiptoed closer to get a better look at his face. When their eyes had met in the barn, Emma had been shocked at her immediate attraction. He was handsome, that much she remembered, but the details of his features eluded her memory. What she saw now was more dark hair; thick upon his head and smattered in scruff across his face. The hair on his head looked in need of a trim, falling across his forehead and curling slightly at the nape of his neck. She wished she had the courage to reach out and touch it as her mother had, for it looked soft as satin. It was black as pitch, yet the scruff upon his face held a hint of ginger. It was obvious he had led a hard life, with his strong, calloused hands and the scars. There were multiple of those. One ran the length of his left arm from shoulder blade to elbow. Another was small and puckered, right above his heart. The final scar ran across his right cheek, but somehow it only made him more handsome, adding to the raw masculinity he exuded, even in sleep. This man was much different than the aristocrats she was used to, that was clearly evident. Yet her mother was right, looking at his face now, she saw he was very young. If he was older than she, it wasn’t by much.

Emma bit her lip as her eyes raked across his broad chest and down. What mystery of the male anatomy was being hidden from her beneath that kitchen bowl? Curiosity finally won out over propriety, and after a quick glance at the door, Emma lifted it cautiously. But before she could really get a good look, the man started up and grabbed Emma by the shoulders. Emma glanced from his manhood, now on clear display as the bowl slid to the mattress, and then into his face. She had noticed in the barn how startlingly blue his eyes were, and right now they had a wild glint to them as he searched her face. Emma shook her head quickly, as shame washed over her cheeks.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” she stuttered, “y—you’re dreaming.”

But it didn’t seem that the man was fully aware for his next words clearly weren’t for her. “Liam,” he rasped, “I failed you, brother.” Then his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed onto his pillow, once again unconscious.

Emma heard the click-clack of her mother’s heels heading down the hallway and hastily grabbed the kitchen pot to once again cover the man with it. She barely had time to straighten before her mother hurried back into the room.

“Emma!” her mother exclaimed. “You were supposed to keep your back turned! Has he stirred?”

“No.”

Emma herself was impressed at how steady her voice sounded. Because her insides were flipping and spinning faster than a child’s top.

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“I can’t believe that ruffian is right above our heads.”
Grandmother Eva fanned herself, leaning back in the dining room chair as if she might swoon. Emma refrained from rolling her eyes, choosing instead to concentrate on her dinner. A servant leaned over her shoulder to refill her glass of water, and her mother’s silver chinked against gilt-edged china plates. Her parents sat at opposite ends of the large table, casting meaningful glances at one another over the flickering candlelight. Grandmother Eva sat across from Emma, and next to her—much to Emma’s dismay—was Walsh Oaken. The man seemed to think they were already engaged, joining their family for dinner for the last eight weeks now. Though she had turned him down three times already, he told her she would come around and learn to love him. He was already practically running her father’s estate as the foreman of all his land holdings. He also saw to the finances, collecting rent and crops from the tenant farmers. If he thought all of that would force David Swan to twist his daughter’s arm, he was in for a rude awakening.

Emma’s father pursed his lips now in displeasure. “That ruffian’s name is Killian Jones, and he has been through much hardship. We would do well to show him mercy.”

“You spoke with the miscreant?” Grandma Eva gasped.

“Mercy!” Walsh thundered, drowning out the elderly woman’s protest and pounding his fist on the table. “He accosts my woman in the barn, and you want to show him mercy?”

How many times would Emma have to refrain from rolling her eyes during this meal? “Walsh, he didn’t accost me. I’ve explained that to you a dozen times. And how many times do I have to ask you not to refer to me as your anything?”

Walsh thought that raging and blustering in the name of “protecting” Emma would endear him to her, and he couldn’t seem to get it through his thick skull that it had the opposite effect. It had been he shouting and raising hell in the foyer earlier today, wanting to get his hands on the cad who had “compromised Emma’s honor.” Emma felt a giggle threaten to escape as she thought of it now and lifted her napkin to her lips to conceal it. What would Walsh say if he knew about her “peeking” upstairs earlier?

“Our Emma had things well in hand, I assure you,” David laughed, giving his daughter a wink. Then he turned his gaze on Walsh, and it hardened. “Mr. Jones says that you served him eviction papers two days ago.”

Walsh nodded as he took a sip of wine. If Emma wasn’t mistaken, he looked a bit nervous. “I have evicted many tenants who are delinquent on their rent. It’s hard to remember every single one.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” David continued, folding his hands beneath his chin, “you interrupted his brother’s funeral. You slapped the eviction notice right on top of the casket, and then you set fire to the lad’s home before he even had his brother in the ground.”

Emma’s mouth fell open in shock, sudden compassion for the young man upstairs swelling up in her. How could Walsh behave so cruelly? Her mother gasped.

“Walsh, how could you?” Mary Margaret set her wine goblet down with force as she narrowed her eyes at her husband’s foreman.

“Look,” Walsh explained, lifting both hands in a placating gesture, “you don’t know how these tenant farmers are. Don’t let the lad tug at your heartstrings; people of that class are ignorant and corrupt from birth. Without a heavy hand, they won’t know their place.”

Emma clenched the fist that rested in her lap, clutching the lavender taffeta of her evening
dress. Walsh was always spouting such points of view. Emma knew they were commonly held beliefs in 1892, but her parents had raised her to have more compassion than that. David and Mary Margaret Swan were also more progressive in their views. It was one of the things about Walsh that gave both her and her father pause as a potential suitor. However, he had always seemed honorable in the past, and he ran her father’s business dealings efficiently. Had her father been wrong to pass on so much responsibility to the man?

“Walsh is right, David,” Emma’s grandmother spoke up, “you and my daughter see the world through rose-colored glasses. This is no longer the Ireland of your youth. The masses are rebelling; uprisings are happening from Dublin to Drogheda.”

David slapped his hand down on the dining room table. “I will not let go of mercy and compassion out of fear. I am aware that evictions have to happen if people can’t pay their rent. But bullying and fear tactics will not be part of it. Understood?”

Emma held her breath as Walsh and her father stared each other down. Walsh was gripping his fork with a white knuckled grip. Finally, he loosened his hold on it and nodded.

“Yes, of course, sir.”

David shook his head. “It’s no wonder that boy came here to exact revenge. Do you know he’s all alone in the world? His brother was the last family he had.”

“It’s a shame he’ll find himself at the end of a hangman’s noose,” Grandmother Eva clucked sadly.

“No,” David said firmly, “I’m not pressing charges.” An immediate outcry rose from both Walsh and Emma’s grandmother, but David raised a hand to silence them. “The way I see it, more harm was done to the lad when his pistol backfired than to me. We’re dropping it.”

However, neither Walsh nor her grandmother seemed willing to let the matter drop without vehement arguing. David dropped his head to his hand and began messaging his temple. Emma’s mother caught her eye with a pleading expression. Emma knew just the thing to distract both her grandmother and her suitor.

“How don’t we all retire to the parlor?” Emma asked, raising her voice just a pitch to be heard over the arguing. “I can play the piano for all of you.”

A calm descended as everyone readily agreed. Emma’s study of the piano was her only success in being raised as a genteel lady, and thus it brought her grandmother great joy. Walsh enjoyed watching her play for a similar reason. Emma was sure that every time she sat at the instrument, visions of her as his dutiful, society wife danced through Walsh’s mind.

Everyone made their way to the parlor, and Emma sat before the black and white keys of her father’s baby grand. Emma truly did enjoy playing. As a child she had never once minded her grandmother’s lessons, instead reveling in the joyful music she could produce from her fingertips as if by magic.

“Chopin’s Nocturnes, please,” Grandmother Eva requested, sighing happily as she settled into a brocaded chair by the fireplace.

Emma bit back a sigh as she began the plodding, melancholy tune. The piece was so slow, she felt she could take a quick nap and not miss a beat. She half expected her grandmother to start snoring, but she knew better. Many times during her lessons as a child she would switch pieces,
thinking her grandmother had dozed off only to have the woman jerk up and put Emma quickly in her place. Emma knew the piece so well, her hands moved without conscious thought as her eyes flitted around the room. Her mother had collected a basket of cross-stitching projects she was working on and was contentedly working on a sampler intended as a wedding gift. Her father was relaxing with a book, and Walsh was enjoying a cigar as he looked into the fire burning on the hearth. Everyone seemed so content. Could she do this the rest of her life? Day in and day out? Would she be satisfied with daily rides on Buttercup, entertaining guests in the parlor, retiring at the end of the day with a basket of cross-stitching? She knew full well the answer to that question.

Emma glanced about the room and then down at her fingers as they plodded along the keys. A smile of mischief filled her face, and her fingers seamlessly transitioned to a different tune. Her fingers flew across the keys, pounding out the jaunty rhythm.

“Emma!” her grandmother gasped, sitting up suddenly in her chair, “What in the world is that raucous you’re pounding out?”

“It’s new, modern music!” Emma shouted over the pounding of the keys. “It’s from America!”

She wasn’t surprised when her grandmother fanned herself in a half-faint and Walsh narrowed his eyes in concern. Her mother, however, tapped her foot to the beat as she continued her stitching, and her father rose to join her at the piano. Emma grinned up at him, but then her hands banged still on the keys when she looked across the room to see a figure descending the staircase. It was Killian Jones.

The man had to clutch the banister as he made his way down, but he did it far more swiftly than Emma would have expected. Frozen in shock, the family didn’t react to his presence until he had flung himself upon Walsh.

“You were the one I should have shot!” Killian cried.

Emma rose to her feet in awe as the two men grappled on the floor. Her father ran towards the back of the house shouting for Leroy and Graham. Soon, Killian had Walsh prostrate on the floor, his foot on the man’s neck. Killian spat in Walsh’s face.

“You couldn’t wait until my brother was cold in the ground before you razed everything he ever worked for,” he paused and ground his foot deeper as Walsh clawed at his boot. “You’ll pay! I swear it!”

Then Killian’s face suddenly contorted, and his eyes rolled in the back of his head. He swayed and fell to the floor.

Behind him was Emma’s mother with a frying pan clutched in her hands. Emma’s face widened in surprise and her mother’s eyes sparkled as she caught her gaze. Her father, Graham, and Leroy came dashing in, coming to a shocked stop at the sight of Mrs. Swan standing over the assailant with a frying pan in her hand.

“Damsels in distress can’t wait all day,” her mother quipped, tossing the pan aside. Then she reached down to help a gasping Walsh to his feet.

Killian groaned and rolled over, grasping the back of his head. He swayed and fell to the floor.

Behind him was Emma’s mother with a frying pan clutched in her hands. Emma’s face widened in surprise and her mother’s eyes sparkled as she caught her gaze. Her father, Graham, and Leroy came dashing in, coming to a shocked stop at the sight of Mrs. Swan standing over the assailant with a frying pan in her hand.

“Don’t touch him, Emma!” Walsh yelled, wiping Killian’s spit from his cheek with his
handkerchief. Emma just glowered at him.

“Just wait!” Killian shouted, struggling to get up, and then falling backwards to the floor once again. “I’ll have my revenge! Even if I die trying!”

Walsh strode towards him, an arrogant set to his jaw. When he reached the other man, he gave him a swift kick to the ribs. Emma and her mother both cried out for him to stop.

“You have caused enough turmoil to this household, lad,” Walsh bit out, “I will defend my honor and that of my betrothed. We will duel. Tomorrow. At dawn.”

With that threat leveled, Walsh strode from the room and left, slamming the front door behind him.

Killian Jones passed out again, his head falling into Emma’s lap.

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When Killian Jones had set out for Swan Manor to exact his revenge, he had done so with the knowledge that it would most likely result in his demise. And he had been completely at peace with that. After all, he no longer felt he had anything to live for. But the human spirit is a funny thing, bent towards self-preservation. Because now that he knew the specific time, place, and means of said demise, he was suddenly bound and determined to live. Which was why he was up near midnight, exercising his stiff leg. Unfortunately, his lack of experience with a pistol couldn’t be remedied overnight.

Killian heard a rustling outside his open window and turned to see a pristine, dainty hand grasp the sill. This was followed by a head of golden hair, and then the rest of Emma Swan. Her dress caught on a nail, and tugging it free caused her to stumble for a moment. Under normal circumstances, Killian would have gone to lend her aid, but her appearance at his window was so surprising, he found himself rooted to the spot in shock. Even without the element of surprise, she would have righted herself anyway by the time his impeded gait could cross the room.

Emma regarded him coolly, with a regal tilt of her chin. She then crossed to the dresser by the far wall and began to push it aside. Killian shook his head, finally finding his voice.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here?”

“This is my house,” Emma grunted as she continued shoving the dresser, “I can do as I please.”

“Oh really?” Killian smirked. “Then why climb through the window?”

Emma didn’t answer him, but Killian quickly saw the reason for her subterfuge. Emma ran her fingers along the wallpaper behind the dresser, until they caught on a tear in the paper. It was so minor, most would overlook it even if the dresser didn’t conceal it. She pulled it back, and a section of wall came with it, swinging out like a little door. Emma pulled a rolled up piece of newspaper out, then covered her hiding place and shoved the dresser back into place. Daddy’s little girl apparently had secrets. He wondered what plunder she was concealing. Emma straightened, shoving an errant curl of blonde hair off her forehead and regarded him magnanimously.

“I have a proposition for you, boy.”

Killian’s eyes narrowed at being called a boy. It was bad enough when her father and her suitor used it, but for this tiny slip of a girl to call him that? It was insulting. He smirked at her and
sauntered into her personal space, or as much sauntering as he was capable of with his injured leg.

“Believe me, princess,” he snarled, as she backed up against the dresser, her eyes widening slightly, “I’m anything but a boy.”

“But you are below me in both station and means,” she shot back, “so you will treat me with respect.”

Killian didn’t back down. “How old are you, anyway?”

Emma swallowed, and if he wasn’t mistaken, she glanced briefly at his lips. “Twenty-two, for your information. And you?”

Older than he would have guessed. Killian walked away from her, leaning against the back of the desk chair, and hoping she couldn’t see how he needed its support. “24,” he answered, “a man, not a boy.”

“Exactly,” Emma agreed, straightening to her full height, “you are a strong, hard-working man. You show no fear.” She took a step towards him, a flush tinting her cheeks, “You stomp on men’s necks!”

Killian leaned casually against the desk, stroking his chin, “And you need my . . . strength and lack of fear, for . . . what, exactly?”

Emma’s face broke into a beaming grin as she lifted the newspaper clipping. Killian’s eyes darted away, red shame creeping up his neck. Emma’s own eyes faltered as she took in his expression, and her lips turned down in a frown.

“You . . . can’t read, can you?”

Killian kept his eyes trained on the carpet, unwilling to see any pity in hers.

She cleared her throat and read it for him. “Land, it says! In America!” Emma shook the paper in his face, and he lifted his eyes to look at the indecipherable symbols printed there. “They have so much of it, they’re giving it away for free. There’s to be a race for it in Oklahoma on September 16th, 1893.”

Killian squinted incredulously at the paper in her hand, then snatched it and crumpled it into a ball. He shook it, held tight in his fist, in her face. “You naïve, sheltered girl!” He spat. “No one gives land away for free!” With that, he tossed the wad of paper across the room.

Emma ran to retrieve it, unwadding it and smoothing out the wrinkles. “It’s true!” she argued. “And I plan on being there when the race happens. I’ll have land of my own, where I can live as I see fit. Riding astride my horse with no one to tell me it isn’t ladylike.”

Killian’s jaw clenched with anger. “What do you want land for? You own half of Ireland!”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she argued, marching right up to him. “You’re a man, so how could you? How could you possibly understand being limited by your gender, denied basic rights simply for being born a female?”

Killian leaned close, “I know a thing or two, princess, about being deprived of choices. Agency is something the poor are denied too, as you well know.”

Emma’s eyes brightened. “But it’s not like that in America! Everyone is free to be whatever
they dream! That’s what I’m offering you.”

Emma paced the room, and Killian watched her, unsure what her crazy dream had to do with him. He had heard the stories about America; everyone had. Several in the village had left to cross the ocean, seeking fortune. Some sent letters home weaving tall tales of a land where there was a goose in every pot. But others were never heard from again. In Killian’s experience, if something sounded too good to be true, it usually was.

“I’ve already booked passage on an ocean liner bound for America,” Emma explained, “but a woman cannot travel unaccompanied.”

“Pity,” Killian quipped, but Emma ignored him and plowed on.

“You can come as my servant boy!” she exulted, as if the prospect should have thrilled him.

“Servant boy!” Killian proclaimed, lacing his voice with exaggerated glee. “I could . . . pour you your tea.”

Emma nodded.

“Polish your shoes,” he continued, inching closer to her.

Emma smiled, completely missing his sarcasm, “They will need polishing from time to time.”

He got right up in her face, “You can forget it, princess. I’m done being anyone’s slave.”

To his surprise, Emma shoved him in the chest, “Slave? I’d be paying your passage, boy! And quit calling me princess!”

Killian shook his head and turned his back on her, but she wasn’t finished talking. “You do realize I’m trying to save your life?” She sounded so completely sincere, that he looked hesitantly back at her. “Walsh is a dead shot, and I mean that literally.”

Killian grabbed Emma by the elbow and hauled her back to the window. He bowed gallantly, gesturing for her to descend. “Out of your tower, Swan, and back to your sheltered little life. I would rather die than sell myself into anyone’s service.”

Emma yanked her arm away and sat on the windowsill. She swung her legs over the edge, but before she descended, she shot back, “Rather die, hm? Well, that’s in about five hours.”

Emma had only begun to climb down the rose trellis when Killian slammed the window shut. He grinned broadly when the sound made her jump.

The next day dawned cool and wet, with a thick fog rolling in over the emerald green hills. The June day might warm up enough to beat back the misty gray hue of the sky, but for now, a man could scarcely see his hand in front of his face. Not an encouraging situation when facing a dead shot in a duel. Or perhaps, Killian thought, it could handicap Walsh enough that he just might get through this alive.

*I’ve mucked this all up, brother. Besmeared our family name by being a complete git.*

David Swan, to Killian’s surprise, volunteered to be his second. He approached Killian,
bowing to him as if he were a man of station, then opening a fine mahogany case to reveal two pistols.

“To ensure that no one accuses the duel of being fixed, Mr. Oaken asks that you choose a pistol first.”

If Killian wasn’t mistaken, the man seemed saddened by the whole thing. Killian eyed the two firearms, both with ivory encrusted handles. He knew these pistols must be expensive, but neither looked any deadlier than the other. Of course, what did he know about a gentleman’s duel? He sighed, grabbed the pistol closer to him, and nodded grimly at David Swan. Walsh, who Killian could barely see through the fog, called out that he was ready. They were both to turn and march twenty paces, then round and shoot. Killian began walking, feeling as if he were counting down to his own funeral.

One, two, three

“I must say again,” David Swan told him, “how sorry I am for your loss.”

Four, five, six

“I don’t blame you at all for wanting to kill me. I had a brother once, you know.”

Seven, eight, nine

“Walsh was completely out of line interrupting the funeral like that, and I swear nothing of the sort will happen again.”

Ten, eleven, twelve

“It’s also been brought to my attention that your home isn’t the only one that has been burned when rent is delinquent. That is not how I wish to run my estate.”

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen

“In all, I’m glad I had the honor to meet you, my boy.”

Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen

It didn’t escape Killian’s notice that the man didn’t offer to compensate for the house that was burned nor that his final statement sounded like a good-bye. Killian Jones was about to . . .

Nineteen, twenty

Killian spun around, pointing his pistol in front of him and squinting into the fog that seemed to have become thicker. “I can’t see!” he shouted.

Walsh’s words floated mockingly back to him, “I can!”

Just when Killian was ready to meet his maker, a disruption was heard from Walsh’s direction. He thought he heard Walsh shout, and he definitely heard the distinctive sound of horse’s hooves. Suddenly, Emma Swan appeared before him like an angelic visitation, driving a team of horses hitched to a buggy. She was dressed in an opulent traveling gown of bright red with a jaunty hat to match. The color set off her hair and the red of her lips perfectly. Maybe he had already died?

“Get on, boy!”
Killian shook his head, his brain muddled. Walsh shouted for Emma to get out of the way.

Emma reached out towards Killian with one gloved hand. “Do you have a death wish? Jump on!”

He decided not to think, but to just take the salvation that had been offered him. He ran around to the back and scrambled onto the buggy. The last thing he saw was Emma’s mother running towards them, then falling to the ground. Covering her face, the woman wept. Then the fog rolled over the scene, as if it had never been. Killian narrowed his eyes as he craned his neck to look up at Emma on the buckboard.

“Why me?”

Emma smiled down at him. “My father trusted you. That’s enough for me.”

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The sun was suddenly blocked by a vision in red holding a crimson parasol with gold trim. Killian squinted as he looked up at Emma Swan, who scowled down at him.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Killian swallowed, “Eating your chocolate cake. Never had any before.” He ignored her as she sat, choosing instead to gaze out at the water as he took another delectable bite. If only his brother could see him now!

“And where is the tie I gave you to wear?”

Killian gestured outward, “Tossed the bloody thing out to sea. It was choking me.”

Emma eyed him, her gaze raking up and down his torso. “Yes, because heaven forbid you button your shirt completely.”

Killian smirked and winked at her, “Why, princess, like what you see?” Emma sighed and rolled her eyes, “Please. You wish. And I have repeatedly told you, don’t call me princess.”

Killian set the plate of cake down and leaned towards her, resting his elbows on his knees. “Agreed. If you’ll stop calling me boy.”

Emma locked eyes with him, then gave a small nod. “Agreed.”

Killian leaned back in his chair, casting a glance back at the gentleman Emma had been conversing with a moment ago. His clothes spoke of wealth, but Killian’s instincts told him the man was slippery. “Who’s the dandy?”

“Dandy?” Emma asked, with raised eyebrows. “He’s a prominent American businessman, actually. His name is Sydney Glass. He gave me a lot of good tips about the land race in Oklahoma.”

Killian narrowed his eyes in concern. “Listen, Emma, you have to be careful. Your father isn’t here to weed out the rouges. Just because someone has money doesn’t mean you can trust them.”

Emma gave a short laugh, but Killian sensed a tiny hint of insecurity. “I can read people, b-Killian. You have no need to worry about me. When we get to Boston, we’ll be going our separate
ways. I can take care of myself.”

Emma set her jaw with determination, and Killian knew the subject was dropped. He should be relieved to know that she would no longer be his concern once the ship docked, but for some reason, he had an intense desire to be sure she was safe and cared for. It was probably just a debt of gratitude. Nothing more.

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Boston harbor was overwhelming to all of the senses. The odor of the sea, fish, and warm bodies assaulted Emma’s nose as she pressed her handkerchief to her face. People, some of them sweaty and dirty, pressed against Emma’s shoulders and skirts. But most overwhelming was the noise. People shouted in multiple accents and languages. Young boys darted around, shouting advertisements for boarding houses, tenements, and places of employ. Some shouted asking if people were Irish, or Italian, or Dutch. Emma felt as if she were being spun about in a whirlpool.

“Well,” Killian said to her, smiling as if he weren’t an ocean away from home, “I suppose this is where we part ways, aye?”

Emma swallowed hard as tears inexplicably pricked at her eyes. She suddenly felt an irrational desire to grab Killian’s arm and beg him not to leave her. It was probably just homesickness. He was, after all, the only familiar face in this entire new country.

“Yes,” she finally said, forcing a smile, “that it is. Good luck to you, Killian Jones.”

Killian’s eyebrows rose as she extended her hand for him to shake. He quickly recovered from his surprise and took it. But instead of shaking it, he lifted it to his lips. The kiss he placed there, even through her glove, sent a shudder through her. Although it had more to do with the heated gaze in his blue eyes than the feel of his lips. He winked at her, then turned to go. Refusing to watch him walk away, Emma turned quickly. So much change in such a short time was messing with her emotions.

Emma scanned the throngs for Sydney Glass. The only money Emma had left, after paying her and Killian’s passage and for their food on the voyage, was in the form of silver teaspoons she had stolen from the china cabinet back home. Mr. Glass had told her he could direct her to repubatable buyers.

There he was! Emma called his name and waved. Mr. Glass turned. Everything that happened after that was so swift, Emma could scarcely process it. Someone shouted the man’s name. Then shots were fired. Suddenly, Mr. Glass was falling to the ground, blood spreading across the front of his shirt. Emma screamed and dropped her bag as both hands flew to her face. As Mr. Glass hit the cobblestone street, silver teaspoons clattered around him. Killian had been right about the man – he had stolen her grandmother’s spoons.

“Killian! Killian, help me!”

She found herself shouting the name of the only person on this entire continent who knew her. As the name fell from her lips, she knew it was futile. He was most likely too far away in this mass of humanity to be able to hear her. And yet there he was, in an instant.

“Emma! Are you okay? I heard gunshots!”

Everything was a blur. Emma was sobbing about the spoons, but street urchins were already snatching them up. Then Emma saw one of the boys grab her carpet bag. She clutched Killian by the
“My bag!”

Killian overtook the youngster and wrestled her bag away with little effort. Then he grasped Emma by the elbow and pulled her away from the commotion as police whistles pierced the air.

“We have to get away from here,” he hissed, guiding her expertly through the throng. A small boy with red, curly hair dashed past, shouting the question, *Are you Irish?* Killian grabbed the boy by the back of his shirt. “*We’re Irish.*”

A grin filled the boy’s freckled face. “Then ‘ya need to come with me. No one’ll hire ya iffen yer Irish. Not unless ya get me boss to help ya.”

“And who’s that?” Killian asked with narrowed eyes.

“Robert Gold.”
The little boy introduced himself as August and then expertly guided them down the busy streets of Boston. Killian watched Emma’s reactions out of the corner of his eye. She kept her handkerchief pressed to her nose with one hand, while picking up her skirts with the other. She lifted her feet daintily as they hurried along the dirty streets. Not that Killian blamed her. Poor he may be, but city life was a change for him, too. Fresh off the boat, and he already missed the fresh smell of clover and loam. And never had he seen such masses of people, nor did he care for the tall buildings and puffs of black soot that blocked the sun.

However, excitement still thrummed through Killian’s veins, partially because it was all so different. Liam had told him to see the world, and he actually was! No longer was he bound to a tiny potato field that was barely even his.

August stopped in front of a pub. Emma hung back as the boy hurried through the door, her face contorted in disapproval at the crude wooden sign swinging out front. The Cloak & Dagger Pub: Ale, Women, and Fisticuffs. The curly-headed lad turned and waved them in. Killian took Emma by the elbow and eased her through the door, whispering in her ear to let him do the talking. Her eyes, which had widened in fear, narrowed to slits as she looked at him. God, he hoped she kept her blue-blooded mouth shut.

Though it was only three o’clock in the afternoon, roars and shouts filled the pub. The small crowd encircled two men in the center of the floor, both shirtless with fists raised. August pointed to a thin, wizened man with steely gray hair which hung to his shoulders. He leaned on a cane as he counted a thick wad of bills.

“That’s him,” August said, “that’s Mr. Gold.”

Emma took a step forward, her shoulders squared. Killian put his arm out to stop her.

“Stay back.”

“Don’t shield me, Killian,” Emma scoffed, shoving his arm aside, “I’ve seen fights before.”

Emma’s fancy red dress swirled and flashed as she stepped inside the circle. One of the fighters, a young man with brown hair and brown eyes, glanced at the color in his peripheral vision. The momentary distraction wouldn’t have necessarily cost him the match, if it hadn’t been for the light of appreciation in his eyes when he looked at Emma. It caused him to take a second look, allowing the other fighter to clock him across the jaw.

Neal’s head whipped around. Blood, spittle, and one of Neal’s teeth went flying through the air. Emma gasped and recoiled as the bodily fluids splashed across her face. Groans rippled across the room. Clearly most had their money on Neal. The only cheers came from the other fighter, a thick necked, broad shouldered man with shortly cropped hair. Neal spat another mouthful of blood onto the wooden floor.

“Don’t get too cocky, Will,” he called out, “it was just a fluke. I’ll take you out next time. Same as I always do.”

“Who let that peacock in here?”

The room went instantly silent at the words. Robert Gold made his way towards Emma, his cane beating a staccato rhythm on the wooden floor. Killian could clearly see that this man not only had power, but he wielded it dangerously. His physical appearance was misleading; no one crossed this man if they valued their life. Killian stepped in front of Emma, shielding her from the man.

“I apologize, sir,” Killian said hurriedly, his mind working fast, “we just got off the boat, and my . . . sister isn’t used to these kinds of things.” Killian purposefully kept from glancing back at Emma. He stepped closer to Gold and whispered conspiratorially in his ear, “She’s a bit spoiled, actually. Coddled by our Ma and Da, she was.”

Killian heard Emma’s sharp intake of breath, but August, bless him, stepped in before she could open her mouth.

“They’re in need of work, Mr. Gold. I told them no one will hire Irish without your help.”

Robert Gold leaned on his cane and studied the two of them. Killian tried not to squirm under his scrutiny. A smile that was almost sinister flickered across his face for a moment, and a chill went down Killian’s spine.

“Let me go see what I have available,” the man finally said, then hobbled off.

Once the man had walked away, Emma grabbed Killian by the elbow and pulled him to a semi-private corner. “Brother and sister?” she spat. “Why you and I, we – “

“Listen,” Killian cut her off, coming so close they were practically nose to nose, “these people are my kind of people. And my kind of people don’t like your kind of people. So you better let me handle this. From here on out, you are Emma Jones. Got it?”

Emma swallowed hard, wiping at the blood still smeared across her cheek as her wide eyes scanned the room. She seemed to recognize that everyone was looking at her with either thinly veiled hatred or open lust. She nodded quickly, and Killian squeezed her upper arm encouragingly. Why the hell did the woman have to be so bloody stubborn? Maybe then he wouldn’t have to speak to her so harshly. He let out a breath and relinquished her arm just as Gold came walking towards them.

“Let me speak to you, my boy,” Gold said, gesturing for Killian to step away from Emma for a private word. He grasped his cane in both fists as he regarded Killian coolly. “I have a job for you and your sister as well as a place to stay. But if you want good money, you could both work for me here.”

Killian’s brow furrowed. “Here? In the pub?”

Gold’s gaze never wavered. “You may be slight of build, but I recognize muscle . . . and
rage... when I see it. And as for your sister... “Gold nodded in Emma’s direction, and Killian’s face darkened as he saw her backing away from several lecherous patrons.

“What kind of ma—brother do you think I am? We want *respectable* work.” Not even waiting for Gold’s response, he rushed to Emma’s side. The losing fighter, Neal, was lifting his hand to the shoulder of Emma’s dress.

“Step away from me!” she shouted, as she batted his hand away. The man just grinned and took a step closer.

Killian reached out and grabbed him by the collar, “I believe my sister asked you to step away.”

The man whirled on Killian. “You wanting to fight to defend her honor? Because I’m up for it—“

“Neal,” Robert Gold intervened, “these fine people are tired after a long journey. I need to get them to Granny’s right away.”

Neal grumbled something unintelligible and walked away, but not without shoving Killian in the shoulder as he passed. Killian felt his ire rise but quickly tamped it down. Emma placed a trembling hand in the crook of his elbow as Robert Gold led the way to their new home.

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They say experience is the best teacher, and Emma Swan had certainly had an education in the past eight hours. Never before in her life had she witnessed a murder, nor had she ever seen the inside of a pub. And yes, she hadn’t lied when she told Killian she had seen fights before. But only between gentleman. Never one where the men half disrobed. She remembered her mother calling her eyes virginal. She had balked at it then; now she knew it to be true.

And now the virginity of her eyes were about to be compromised even further. The seemingly innocuous sign read simply *Granny’s*; but Emma wasn’t so naïve that the color red didn’t mean something to her. Emma felt bile rise in her throat as something occurred to her: this wasn’t the “job” Mr. Gold had referred to, was it? As if he could read her thoughts, Killian squeezed her hand and gave her a small smile as they ascended the steps leading up to the establishment’s front door. She shouldn’t trust him; she hadn’t even known him that long, but for some strange reason, she was confidently putting her faith in him. To keep her safe. As ridiculous as it seemed.

A slightly pudgy woman with a matronly gray bun and glasses perched on the edge of her nose opened the door. Emma startled and practically shoved her handkerchief into her open mouth to see the woman holding a huge rat by the tail. No one else in their little party seemed surprised nor repulsed to see the woman toss the offensive vermin into the gutter.

“Who’re you bringing to my door, Gold?” the woman asked nonchalantly, as if huge rats were common place. They probably were. Emma took a deep breath as her stomach roiled.

“No,” Killian said vehemently, before anyone else could open their mouths, “my sister will be doing no such thing.”
“Sister, huh?” Granny repeated, narrowing her eyes as she inspected the two of them. Emma held her breath as it suddenly occurred to her that she and Killian looked nothing alike. And they’re clothing clearly suggested they were of completely different stations. But if Granny suspected anything, she kept it to herself. After all, she was running a brothel. How much could propriety possibly matter to her? “Well, come on, then.”

They all followed the woman inside and up a narrow flight of stairs. Yes, Emma was getting an education. Women lounged everywhere, clothed in a way Emma had only ever seen in her own bedroom mirror. Apparently, at Granny’s pantaloons and corsets weren’t strictly undergarments. Emma had always wondered why they made corsets in different colors when they were never meant to be seen. Well, now she knew.

Emma glanced at Killian, who had grasped her elbow a bit tighter and pulled her surreptitiously a bit closer to his side. Bless him, he was attempting to lessen her discomfort by keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead on Granny’s back. The girls all called out to him, a couple even offering him a “sample on the house,” but he simply clenched his jaw and ignored them.

“Here we are,” Granny announced as she pulled out a set of keys and unlocked a door at the end of the hallway.

The door swung open, and Killian quickly stepped inside, setting Emma’s carpet bag down on the floor. Emma followed him in, her ire raising as her gaze swept the room. The one, single room.

“We can’t share a room!” she protested. Killian raised his eyebrows at her in warning, and she knew she sounded imperious at the moment, but she couldn’t help it. A woman had her limits!

“Well, I’ve only got the one!” Granny snapped. “If it ain’t fancy enough for you, miss high and mighty, you can try your luck elsewhere.”

Killian stepped in quickly to smooth things over. “We’ll take the room.”

Granny told them the rent and when it was due. Mr. Gold gave them the address of the meat packing plant where they would be working and what time to report the next morning. Then all too soon they were both gone, and Emma was alone with a man she barely knew. A man she would have to share a room with. In a brothel. Was he expecting something? Emma turned to face the corner, hugging her arms to her chest. She didn’t even want to closely inspect the filthy room, frightened of what she might find.

“What is the matter with you? Do you know how incredibly lucky we are to have a roof over our heads?”

Emma visibly flinched at the harshness of Killian’s words. How could he be so calloused? She took a deep, shuddering breath before answering. “I’ve just never been in a brothel before.”

Killian’s laughter surprised her and brought her defenses down enough so she could turn to face him. “Bloody hell, woman, and you think I have?”

“Y-you haven’t?”

Killian shook his head as he continued to laugh. “I was married at 20 and widowed six months later.” He gestured awkwardly towards the door. “That’s the most I’ve seen of a woman since my Milah, God rest her soul.”

Emma just stood there, shocked into silence. She felt a mixture of surprise that he had been
married so young, curiosity about this Milah, and a strange jealousy that he was more experienced than she in so many ways. Sympathy for his loss, however, was not one of her emotions, and it bothered her. Maybe she was just as self-centered as he was always implying.

He removed the stained blanket from the bed and spread it out on the floor. He removed his hat and coat, then his shoes. He pulled down his suspenders, but otherwise remained fully clothed as he got settled. He tipped his head towards the bed.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted. It’s probably best we go to bed despite the early hour. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Emma came cautiously closer. “You’re giving me the bed?”

Killian cocked an eyebrow flirtatiously at her as he crossed his arms behind his head, “Why? You wanted to share?”

Emma rolled her eyes but couldn’t help the smile that flirted with the corner of her mouth. Somehow, his jokes put her at ease. Well, mostly. She still felt so self-conscious sharing a room with a man, that she didn’t even remove her shoes when laying herself out upon the bed. The sheets smelled of must and body odor, and Emma willed herself to relax and stop thinking about fleas and bed bugs. Because Killian was right, she should be thankful.

But she couldn’t summon any gratefulness, not in the smallest measure. Instead, all she felt was an intense homesickness. She thought of her parents, her grandmother. She thought of her bedroom at home and her horse Buttercup. She thought of the five course dinners every night, and her stomach rumbled with true hunger for the first time in her life. Tears began to form and slip down her cheeks, but Emma kept her weeping as quiet as possible. She didn’t want Killian to hear her crying. He had already made it clear that he thought she was weak, naïve, and spoiled. The last thing she needed was for him to catch her crying like a child.

But clearly he had no idea of her inner turmoil because he started talking. “I’m starting to think you might be right about this Oklahoma place, Emma. You were right about America! I mean, this is the most unbelievable land. You need a place to stay? Well, here you go! You need a job? Sure, here’s one of those, too!” Emma rolled her eyes. A dirty room in a brothel and a job plucking chicken feathers? He certainly had low standards.

Killian kept talking, his voice becoming contemplative. “As Liam lay dying, he told me to see the world. Perhaps he’s smiling down on me, leading the way. Maybe this is my destiny.”

Emma couldn’t take it anymore. Her frayed nerves caused anger to well up in her, and Killian was an easy target for it. She rolled over and hit him repeatedly with her moldy pillow.

“Oi!” Killian shouted, grabbing the pillow out of her hand. “What the bloody hell was that for?”

Emma brushed at the hair in her face as she glowered at him, her cheeks burning. “Maybe this is my destiny,” she mocked him, “You wouldn’t even be here if not for me!”

Killian’s eyes narrowed in anger as he studied her, “And you would be wandering cold in the streets if not for me!” He pounded the pillow and then shoved it under his head.

“Give me back my pillow.”

Killian grinned smugly at her, “Not a chance, love.”

Emma huffed and turned away from him, curling her arms under her head. She lay there wondering
how she could be so grateful for this man one minute and utterly despise him the next.

The heat in the factory was intense as Killian spun the basket of freshly plucked chickens and lowered them into the boiling water. He lifted the next one out and set it on a conveyor belt to his left. Then he lowered the next bucket into the water. It was the same monotonous series of tasks, hour after hour, day after day. Across the factory floor, a line of women plucked the chickens of their feathers before sending them to the boilers. Among them was Emma Swan. Known of course to everyone else as Emma Jones, his sister.

Killian was honestly, and surprisingly, impressed at how well Emma had adjusted. She hadn’t protested nor shed a tear when they sold her fancy dresses and shoes for sturdier, more sensible ones. She hadn’t balked when instructed on how to pluck the chickens, a task he was sure she had never done once in her life. She had even adjusted to sharing a room with him (made a bit easier when they had requested a second set of linens from Granny). In short, she was a much tougher lass than he had given her credit for.

“Do you fellows know who has the prettiest golden hair and the prettiest Irish green eyes of any lass in Boston?” shouted one of the men working the boiler.

Killian glanced up and grinned at Anton, a kind-hearted giant of a man who worked jovially regardless of the situation. The other men nodded, as if they already knew the answer to the question. Hell, who was he kidding? So did Killian.

“Killian’s sister, Emma!” Anton answered. He elbowed Killian as he inclined his head towards the women. Killian turned in that direction. Emma stood out like a swan amongst crows. “Think you could help a man out where your sister is concerned?”

Killian chuckled as he turned back towards Anton, pulling out another basket of chicken. “I give every man here a strong warning. That swan may seem gentle, but she bites when provoked.”

Almost as if Emma could read his thoughts, her loud voice suddenly cut through the din of the factory. Killian turned away from the boiler to see Emma toe to toe with the factory foreman, poking him in the chest with her pointer finger. Next to her, Ashley Herman stood with her head hung and her hands clasped. The poor girl was eight months pregnant, and yet the foreman had no sympathy for her swollen feet and fatigued hands. She was having a harder and harder time keeping up with her quota, and Emma had taken it upon herself to be the girl’s champion. Killian could make out little of the words, but he picked up on the foreman’s threats to dock Emma’s pay if she kept interfering. Killian began waving his arms, signaling for Emma to drop it. Her eyes caught his, and she sighed, then turned back to the assembly line. Unfortunately, the foreman couldn’t let it go.

“That’s what I thought, girlie.”

Killian could see Emma’s eyes flash all the way from the other side of the room. She turned back to the foreman, and the words she shouted could be heard by all.

“Don’t call me girlie, you small minded pig of a man!”

“Ten more cents docked from your pay!” the foreman thundered, noting it on his clip board.

Killian hung his head, massaging his temple. He shook his head and sighed, though he couldn’t help the smile on his face as he turned back to his work.

“See what I mean, lads?” he chuckled to his co-workers. “No red head in all of Ireland could have
more fire than my Emma.”

My Emma? Where had that come from? He pushed the question from his mind. He was simply getting too used to referring to her as his sister. That was all.

The two of them had gotten into a daily routine fairly easily. They were paid daily wages: Killian, $1.50 a day, and Emma just one dollar a day. (Killian had heard her rail many times on the unfairness of it all. She worked just as hard as he did, so why did she make fifty cents less? He had to admit, he agreed with her.) Since he made more, Killian used his extra fifty cents to buy their dinner on the way home. It didn’t buy them much, but it had to do since rent at Granny’s was $4 a week. They each paid half the rent, then saved the rest.

When they got home, they ate their meager meal around an old crate they had found in the alley. Then Emma got out the only two books she had brought from Ireland: the white leather bound Bible her parents had given her on the occasion of her first communion, and a collection of Shakespeare’s sonnets. These Killian was plodding through as Emma taught him to read. She was surprisingly patient at it.

“In . . .thee . . . Oh, Lord . . . do . . . I . . . put . . . my . . . t-r . . . t-r . . .”

“Remember,” Emma reminded him calmly, her arm brushing against his as she looked at the 31st Psalm over his shoulder, “those two letters blend together to make the sound chr.”

“trust,” Killian sounded out slowly, “let . . . me . . . ne-v-v-v . . .”

“never,” Emma supplied.

Killian pushed the Bible away and leaned back against the wall in frustration. “It’s impossible! I’m too old to learn how to read.”

Emma shook her head vehemently, “That’s not true. Ashley told me just the other day that Andrew Johnson, America’s 17th president, didn’t know how to read until he was an adult.”

Emma grinned at Killian as his face lit up. “Really?”

Emma nodded. “Mhm. Apparently, many presidents started out poor. Even Abraham Lincoln, who seems to be a legend here.”

Killian chuckled. “I noticed.”

Emma tilted her chin in that way that reminded him that despite her drab clothing and this dingy room, she came from much loftier things. “I told you a person can be anything they dream of in America. Now, do you want to learn to read? Or do you want to be taken advantage of?”

Killian sighed and pulled the Bible close to him again. “let me never . . . be . . . a-sh-sh-sh . . .”

“That’s a long a,” Emma smiled at him, “keep going.”

“a-sh-a-m-ed. Ashamed! Let me never be ashamed!”

“See!” Emma enthused. “I knew you could do it!” Emma yawned and closed the small Bible. “But it’s late. Let’s get to bed.”
Killian propped his chin in his hand and watched as she stretched both arms over her head. “Who taught him to read?”

An adorable furrow formed upon Emma’s brow. “What?”

“Andrew Johnson, the 17th president.”

“Oh,” Emma mumbled as she gathered up the books and reached up to set them atop the room’s one shelf, “um . . . Ashley said it was his wife.”

Killian grinned as he watched a blush creep up her neck and brighten her cheeks. She cleared her throat and ducked behind the sheet they had strung across the back corner of the room. Killian busied himself by taking down the empty coffee can and counting out the money.

“How’s it coming?”

Killian turned at the sound of her voice, his throat constricting as he watched her drape her dress over the top of the sheet. He had noticed this morning that there was a small hole in the sheet. His mind had been torturing him about that hole all day. If he looked closely, could he see something through it? It was a wicked thought.

“Killian? Are you listening to me?”

He jumped. Emma stuck her head out from behind the sheet. He could see the white lace of her undershirt as it slipped precariously from her shoulder. She had already taken her hair down, and it hung like a golden waterfall. That was all he could see of her, and his pulse was already becoming erratic.

“How is what coming?” he asked, grimacing when his voice came out as a croak.

Emma rolled her eyes. “The money? I heard you rattling that coffee can.”

She ducked back behind the curtain and Killian hurriedly began removing his suspenders. “Oh, uh, it’s going slowly, to be honest. At this rate it will take forever to get to Oklahoma. But I’m not giving up.” He began working the buttons on his shirt. “And you?”

Emma sighed deeply, and he could imagine her weighing the red velvet purse she kept under the mattress. “America may not be everything I imagined it would be. But I’ll make it to Oklahoma. Mark my words.”

Killian grinned as he tossed his shirt aside and stepped out of his pants. “Of that I have no doubt.”

He should turn around. He should. But then Emma’s corset joined her dress, and his mouth went dry. He wondered if she knew the silhouette she created with the candlelight flickering behind that sheet. Of course, she thought he was facing the wall like he was supposed to. If he was a gentleman, he would do that very thing right now. But it was as if the outline of her curves had him under a spell. He was transfixed. She lifted her arms above her head, and through that blessed – fatal? – hole he clearly saw the curve of her breast. It was only a moment, and then her nightgown was falling around her, but that one moment was enough to light every nerve ending in his body on fire. He was only a man, after all. Now he couldn’t get the image of the soft, white swell of flesh from his mind. Couldn’t stop thinking about the way her golden hair brushed against her breast so invitingly.

“Are you facing the wall?”

He startled at that, hurriedly turning to face the wall. He waited on bated breath for her to yell at him,
for surely he’d been caught in the act, but it was eerily quiet. He lifted both arms to clutch his hair in both hands, willing his body to stop reacting to what he had just seen. What he never should have seen. He was a cad, and if her father wasn’t an ocean away, he would offer himself up to the man to be killed in whatever horrible fashion David Swan saw fit. How dare he look upon an angel like her?

Killian dropped his arms and fiddled with the waist of his drawers. Then he cocked his head. She was awfully quiet.

“Come on, Emma,” he groaned, “what the bloody hell is taking you so long?”

“Light!”

It was what she said every night before exiting the curtain, but she sounded a little jumpy tonight. Like he had caught her at something. But what that could be, he had no idea. He shrugged and blew out the candle that sat atop their dining crate as Emma doused the candle near the bed. He heard Emma dash for the bed and pull the covers to her chin. If only she knew how little her modesty mattered now. He hated himself.

Killian lay down on his pallet on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, sleep elusive. Emma’s every sigh and breath was like a bullet to his senses tonight. She was just inches away from him, yet she may as well have been across the ocean in Ireland. Why did he ever think living with her was a good idea? He wanted to protect her virtue. But who would protect her from him?

He punched the pillow beneath his head, his sexual frustration swelling up hotter and hotter. It was as if the more he tried not to think about Emma, the more he thought about her. Damn that blasted hole! He should have pointed it out to Emma the second he noticed it! Now he was lusting after a woman that he was supposed to be protecting like a sister. He pressed both palms to his eyes and groaned.

Suddenly, as if his thoughts weren’t torture enough, sounds came to him through the thin wall behind him. One of Granny’s girls was with a customer, and he could hear every grunt and every squeak of the bed. Several of the girls had offered themselves to him, but he had refrained. For one, he hated the idea of using any woman as a commodity. For another, he had seen the look on Emma’s face. She would never trust him if he became a participant in the brothel’s economy of flesh.

The squeaking increased in speed, and the panting became louder. Killian couldn’t take it anymore; he leapt from his spot on the floor. He pulled on his pants but didn’t even bother with his shirt. He dashed down the stairs, ignoring the purring offers from the ladies of the night who draped themselves in every doorway. He then burst out into the cool night air, breathing deeply as the sharp wind cooled his bare torso. He then broke into a run. He couldn’t get to The Cloak and Dagger fast enough.

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Emma paced the small room, which only took about three steps to accomplish. She bit her nails, but stopped short of wringing her hands. She was not that kind of woman.

She wondered if Killian knew she was awake when he burst out of the room as if the hounds of hell were after him. She was certainly trying to pretend she was asleep, when all the while her heart was beating so loud and fast she was sure he could hear it. What had she been thinking watching him through the hole in the sheet like that? The muscles in his back, first of all, with his hands over his head that way? She had been transfixed. And his backside? His drawers had been hanging so deliciously low on his hips. They were just about to slip over his buttocks when he had to go and hitch them back up. And then she had huffed in frustration. Out loud. Did he know?
Then she had lain there, more aware than ever that he was on the floor next to her. If she just rolled over and reached down, she could rest her hand on his chest. His very muscular chest. And her heart had continued beating faster and faster as she thought about it. She had seen almost all of him that day back in Ireland when her mother was seeing to his wounds. She knew he was a well-built man. So why was she having this reaction now?

Emma chewed on her lower lip as she continued to pace. She had already discounted that he was with one of Granny’s girls. She had heard their offers in the hall and their following pouts of disappointment when he didn’t stop. She had also heard his pounding feet on the stairs and the slamming of Granny’s front door. But where did he go?

Suddenly, the door of their room burst open. Killian stumbled in on the arm of a beautiful brunette. Emma’s ire and concern would have been on her if not for Killian’s state. One eye was swollen shut, his lip was split and bleeding, and ugly bruises were coming out on his torso, showing deep purple beneath his chest hair.

“Oh my God!” Emma cried, rushing forward. She came around to his other side and helped the brunette get him into the room. They deposited him onto the bed, none too gently. Emma reached down and began working off one of his boots. “What the hell happened to him?”

The brunette put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. Emma saw that beneath her red cloak, all she wore was a corset over a frilly undershirt and knickers. “Oh, he’s been fightin’ down at the Cloak and Dagger. Had a stick ‘a dynamite he needed to set off.”

Emma rose to her full height and leveled a glare at the other woman, “Oh, did he now? And who the hell are you?”

“I’m Ruby,” she smirked with lips stained a bright red, “Granny wouldn’t let me work here, so I dance down at the Cloak and Dagger. She’s my real Granny.”

“Oh, so you decided to go get respectable work?”

Emma’s sarcasm was completely lost on Ruby. “Yeah. You’re brother’s quite the fighter. Nice to look at, too. Me and the other girls got sore eyes from staring at his bum all night.”

“Really?” Emma crossed her arms.

“But all we could do was look,” Ruby sighed as she bent over Killian, brushing his sweaty hair back from his forehead. Emma suppressed the urge to slap her hand. Ruby straightened and sighed dramatically, “Your brother is quite the gentleman.”

“He better be,” Emma muttered as Ruby sauntered out the door. She went to the wash stand, wet a cloth, then dashed back to the bed. She kneeled next to Killian and began washing the blood from his lip. “Killian,” she admonished gently, “what were you thinking? You could have gotten yourself killed. I mean, look at you.”

“Emma,” he choked out, “check my boot.”

“Shhh,” she admonished as she went to wet the cloth again, but when she returned, he kept insisting she check his boot. Emma placed the cloth to his swollen eye, then did as he asked. She gasped as she pulled out a thick wad of bills. She looked back at him in shock.

He managed a crooked smile, even with his split lip. “We can get to Oklahoma, Emma.” Then his head lolled to the side, and his eyes fluttered closed.
Emma stood there, the wad of bills still clutched in her hand. But the thing that stood out to Emma wasn’t the money. It was that he used the word “we.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next, Emma and Killian start butting heads more and more over Killian fighting at the pub. Which of course has nothing to do with sexual tension . . . right? They probably won't get to Oklahoma until part four.
Far and Away Part Three

Chapter Notes

* This is a really long chapter, but I wanted to finish all of the Boston stuff so that the fourth chapter could focus on Oklahoma.
* This chapter ended up being entirely from Killian's point of view except for a very short section at the beginning. But I needed to keep it a little ambiguous as far as Emma's feelings at this point :)
* This includes some of my absolute favorite scenes from the movie!
* Greg Scheol is Hades, just to clarify. Giving him the last name "Hades" or "Underworld" seemed too ridiculous, so I looked up synonyms for hell. Scheol is the word for hell in Hebrew, which I know doesn't fit with the Irish thing, but of all the words in every language for hell, it sounded the most like a last name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Emma Swan had ridden her horse across the rolling green hills of Ireland, she dreamed of going somewhere far and away from home. And now she was. So far and away that she could scarcely remember the sheltered girl she had been. Her life was so consumed now with surviving each new day, that she often forgot she had ever lived any other life but this one. She rarely thought of four course meals any more or wardrobes stuffed with dresses or parties where people sipped champagne. She was so immersed in the life of a poor Irish immigrant struggling in the tenements of Boston, that people who lived such lives seemed distant and petty.

Like the woman sweeping from the dress shop with a tiny dog in her arms. She stepped right out onto the sidewalk, heedless of anyone who might be walking past. Emma, Ashley, and Ariel had to come to a sudden and abrupt stop to avoid crashing into her. Even so, the woman tilted her nose up in disgust, as if they had inconvenienced her. She gave a haughty apology that was anything but. The second she swept into her waiting carriage, Emma imitated her with relish.

"Well, excuse me," Emma repeated in a high-pitched nasal voice. Ashley and Ariel doubled over laughing as Emma swayed her hips in exaggeration and held her hand bent at the wrist. And no, Emma Swan never for one moment remembered that she used to live the same life as the woman she was criticizing. "Even her dog was putting on airs." Emma rolled her eyes as her friends continued to laugh.

"Ooh, Emma," Ariel breathed, grasping her by the arm, "there’s your brother."

There was one thing, however, that Emma could never get used to. One part of this new life that she could never fully embrace. Pretending to be Killian Jones’s sister. She had to constantly remind herself that’s what everyone thought she was. Because hearing women praise her “brother’s” handsome face and appealing features always set her on edge.

Emma watched Killian now exciting the milliner’s shop across the street. He turned to admire his reflection in the mirror, and Emma chuckled with a shake of her head.

“He’s gone and bought himself another hat.”

She laughed as she said it, but inside her heart sank. It had been two months since Killian
had come home a broken mess with that wad of cash in his boot. Since then, he seemed more interested in the local fame and the easy cash than he was in getting them to Oklahoma. Three weeks ago, he had quit his job at the plant, explaining to Emma that he made more money after one fight at Gold’s than he did working a month at the plant. And how was he to fight every night if he had to put in a full day’s work the next morning? Emma tried to reason with him. What happened, she asked him, when he came up against a fighter he couldn’t beat? He hadn’t listened. Instead, he got defensive. There was just no reasoning with him.

And now he was spending his money like it would never run out. On new suits, fancy ties (oh, Emma had quipped, so you’re going to start buttoning your shirts now?), and – of course – hats. The hats were almost an obsession. She wondered if maybe he had never been able to afford one back home. If so, he sure was making up for it now.

Killian spotted them and waved, dashing across the street with a smile on his face. Even with the discolored bruising around his right eye, he was handsome, his blue eyes twinkling in the afternoon sun.

“Emma,” he greeted her. He turned his head right and left, swiping his fingers across the brim of his new derby. “Do you like my hat?”

Emma’s answer was immediate and delivered with a laugh, “No, I don’t.”

She then immediately turned to her friends, her back to Killian. For one, if he was going to waste his money on frivolous things, the last thing Emma was going to do was encourage him. Second, she truly, honestly hated him in those stodgy suits and hats. It just wasn’t him. He was supposed to look strong and intimidating in his simple muslin shirts (unbuttoned halfway, of course), and the last thing he needed to do was cover up that glorious head of hair.

And most of all she wasn’t going to lie and pretend to be happy about any of this. Not when she had put so much hope in that tiny, two letter word: we.

Killian frowned at Emma’s back, unable to deny the hurt and anger that rose up in him at her rebuff. He couldn’t exactly pinpoint the reason why it bothered him so much, but all the praise in the world didn’t seem to matter until Emma called him a success.

“Jones!”

Killian turned away from the women and saw Robert Gold sitting in a fancy black carriage. He motioned for him to join him, and Killian quickly complied. He owed the man plenty. Turning him down wasn’t an option. Once inside, Killian saw that another gentleman sat next to Gold. His clothes spoke of more wealth than Killian had ever seen, even more than David Swan back in Ireland. If he wasn’t mistaken, the man’s tie pin was a real diamond stud. Gold sat clasping his cane in both hands, then lifted one to gesture at his companion.

“Killian, I’d like you to meet an associate of mine, Greg Scheol.”

The man reached forward and shook Killian’s hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, my boy. I’ve seen you fight. You’re fast and fiery. Your opponents underestimate you, and you use it to your advantage.”

Killian nodded in reverence, “Thank you, sir.”

“Irish pride is important in times like these,” Mr. Scheol continued. “You’ve pummeled just
about everyone here in Southie, but up in North Boston, those Italians claim no one can beat their
man. The one they call the Stallion.”

“But our Jones here can,” Gold smirked, his eyes narrowing, “and when we put him up
against that Italian git, their Stallion will be running home with his tail between his legs.”

The two gentleman laughed, grinning hungrily at Killian. He didn’t like the glint in their
eyes or the possessive way they spoke of him. Killian’s stomach roiled as a thought struck him as
never before: was he being owned just as he had back in Ireland?

Before Killian could open his mouth, Mr. Scheol leaned closer towards the open window of
the carriage and gave a low whistle. “Would you look at that golden angel?”

Killian followed the man’s gaze, and his heart froze when he saw Emma ascending the
steps into Granny’s.

“Whoo-hoo!” Mr. Scheol crowed. “The brothel! Well, well, well, I guess our angel’s a
vixen in disguise. I’ve never seen any merchandise in Granny’s of such high quality before.”

The rage welled up so fast, that Killian reacted before his mind even had time to process a
thought. He lunged forward and grabbed Scheol by the collar.

“She’s no merchandise,” he growled. “She’s an angel, all right, one you are never to look
upon or even think of, lest I gut you like a fish.”

“What’s this, Gold!” the man shouted as he attempted to shove Killian back. But Killian
merely grabbed him about the throat.

Gold slammed his cane across Killian’s wrists and shoved him back. “Forgive the boy,”
Gold apologized, glaring at his prize fighter, “the lass is his sister.”

“Alright, I'll forgive it this once,” Greg Scheol spat, “as long as he beats the Stallion.”

Killian glared right back at the two men, “I’ll think on it. But mark my words, I belong to no
one. I fight on my terms, and mine alone.”

“Sorry, dearie,” Gold spat, leaning forward on his cane, “but that’s where you’re wrong.
You would be nothing without us. You would be wise to remember who takes care of you . . .”
Gold paused, and then gestured pointedly toward the brothel, “and your precious sister.”

*********************************************************************

Killian entered Granny’s to the sound of lively piano music coming from the parlor
accompanied by hoots and laughter. He walked into the room to find Emma pounding out a jaunty
tune on Granny’s old upright. Emma’s backside swayed and bounced to the music. Granny’s girls
surrounded the piano, cheering her on.

“What the bloody hell has gotten into you, woman?”

Emma turned to him with a wide, genuine grin that filled up her face. It was amazing, but
somehow all the adversity she had faced over the last few months had only made Emma Swan a
more joyous and free person.

“I’m drunk,” she crowed, lifting a shot glass high. Then she knocked back the amber liquid
as the rest of the women cheered. She slammed the shot glass down upon a small table, the lamp atop
it shaking, then swiped the back of her hand across her mouth. Her mother would faint if she could see her now, he was sure of it.

“You can’t possibly be drunk, Emma, I saw you in the street less than five minutes ago!”

“Well I’m on my way then!” Emma cheered, knocking back another shot. She turned her back on Killian once again to pound upon the piano keys.

“I’m sick of you turning your back on me!” he shouted at her, but then turned and stomped up the stairs without waiting for her response.

He heard the piano music abruptly stop as he neared the top of the stairs, and he wasn’t surprised when Emma raced into their room on his heels. He ignored her as he removed first his hat and then his tie. He slipped his arms out of his suit coat, hug it on a peg on the wall, and then slowly turned to face her. She was standing there, glowering at him, her arms crossed. Though why she was so all-fire mad at him, he had no idea.

“You just can’t stand it, can you?” he snapped at her. “Can’t stand the fact that I’ve made something of myself.”

“Made something of yourself?” Emma spat back incredulously. “Getting your brains bashed in every night?”

“It’s far more than that!” he argued. “You’ve seen the money I bring in!”

Emma marched over to retrieve his coffee can from the shelf on the wall. Then she shook it in his face, the meager coins inside rattling. “What money, Killian? You’ve wasted every bit of it.”

“I have not!”

Emma laughed bitterly as she slammed the coffee can back down upon the shelf. “Oh, really? Then what are all of these?” she gestured condescendingly to the row of new hats upon the shelf. “You really needed another hat, Killian? I mean, really?”

Killian didn’t know why the rage was building inside him at her every word, but it was. And for some reason, his mind was latching onto that row of hats. But before he could formulate a response, a voice drifted up from the alley below.

“Yoo-hoo, Killian!”

Emma, who was closer to the window, looked down with utter contempt written across her face. For some reason, it gave Killian a perverse satisfaction to see the displeasure on her face as she looked down at the woman in the alley. So Killian quickly came to her side, grinning down salaciously at the curvaceous brunette below.

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“Why hello there, Ruby!” he called, giving her a small wave. “You look beautiful as always.”

Ruby grinned, leaning forward a bit so the cleavage of her dress was on better display. “I was just on my way down to the church. Would you like to join me for Saturday vespers?”

Killian heard Emma snort behind him. “Some other time, I’m afraid.”

Ruby pouted exaggeratedly, “That’s a shame. Oh well, see you at the Cloak and Dagger then.”
When Killian turned from the window, Emma was putting freshly cleaned sheets on the bed, snapping and yanking them with incredible force. “Vespers,” she muttered, “I hope the priest has set aside enough time for confessions. She’s bound to be in there awhile.”

“Come now, Emma,” he argued, secretly thrilled at her jealousy, “Ruby’s simply a dancer at the Cloak and Dagger.”

Emma tuck in the bottom of the sheet violently. “That’s not dancing, that’s kicking your knickers up. And I’m sure she’d kick her knickers off if you asked her to.”

Killian laughed and sauntered closer to Emma. When she glanced up at him, anger flashing in her eyes, he cocked his eyebrow saucily. Emma’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed.

“Has she?” Emma bit out. When Killian only licked his lips and lowered his lashes, Emma threw the pillowcase she was holding down onto the bed and put her hands on her hips. She took a step closer to him and repeated her question. “Well, has she?”

Her reaction only made Killian laugh harder. He put on an exaggerated show of searching his mind. “You know . . . I’m trying real hard to remember.”

“Then think harder,” Emma seethed through gritted teeth. When all he did was wriggle his eyebrows, Emma did something that shocked them both.

She slapped him across the face. So hard it sent his head whipping to the side. When Killian turned his head slowly back to face her, she showed no remorse whatsoever. Instead, she stood there, shoulders thrown back, hands fisted at her sides, and her chest heaving. Killian’s eyes widened as multiple emotions surged through him, and before Emma knew what was happening, Killian had picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Let me go!” Emma screamed, beating her fists against his back of hard, knotted muscle. She kicked her legs, too, but none of it deterred him. “Killian! Killian!” she screamed.

Their argument had long ago drawn every girl at Granny’s out into the hallway, and now they all watched with amusement as Killian strode across the hall with Emma and into the laundry room. He flung her off his shoulder and into a tub of dirty wash water. Emma gasped in surprise as she hit the water, slipping until she almost went under. She grasped the side of the tub and hauled herself up to a sitting position. She was so shocked by this turn of events, all she could do was stare at Killian.

“Tell me you like my hat!” he shouted at her.

Emma shook her head in confusion. “You’re not wearing a hat!”

“Just say it!” he screamed. “Say you like my hat!”

“You’re not wearing a hat!” She shouted back, looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

Killian sighed wearily as he perched himself on the edge of the tub. Softly, he asked her, gazing intently into her eyes, “Why can’t you say it, Emma? Why can’t you say that you like my hat?”

They sat there in silence for a long while, the only sound the slight lapping of the wash water. “I’m sorry,” Emma finally whispered, holding out a hand for Killian. He grasped it and pulled her up, then helped her out of the tub. But as soon as Emma’s feet hit the ground, she turned and shoved him. He landed in the wash tub with a loud splash and Emma took the opportunity to dash
out of the room and across the hall. Killian managed to maneuver his way out of the tub, only to slip in the large puddles Emma’s soaked dress had left behind. He lumbered to his feet and chased after Emma, but collided with the door to their room as he grasped the knob. He turned it again. Locked.

“Emma!” he screamed, fiddling ineffectually with the door knob. He shook the door and pounded on it with his fist. “Emma! Open this door right now! Emma!”

“Why don’t you shag her and get it over with?”

Killian turned, slack-jawed, to see Granny standing there, smirking. The hall was filled; it seemed every girl in the place had heard their fight. They all tittered at Granny’s words. Killian felt his face grow hot.

“She – she,” he started to stutter, and only then did he remember the parts they were both playing. He swallowed hard. “She’s my sister!”

Granny rolled her eyes. “And I’m Mary the mother God,” she snorted with laughter, and the rest of the girls joined in.

Killian gave the door one last smack with his palm, then stalked angrily out into the streets of Boston.

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Killian walked without any real thought as to where he was going. His main goal was just to put some distance between himself and Emma, to get some air and clear his thoughts. But no matter how he turned things over in his mind, no matter how closely he analyzed his emotions, he still couldn’t fathom why he’d lost his head the way he had. Couldn’t figure out why Emma’s opinion mattered so much to him.

Killian walked so far that he ended up many blocks away from the tenements of Southie. He had found his way into a nicer neighborhood with cleaner sidewalks and fewer bodies pressed together. Across the street was a park, and the green of its lawns beckoned him, reminding him of the emerald hills of home. He shuffled along, hands stuffed in his pockets, not really seeing anything around him. His eyes were trained on nothing but the green grass at his feet.

Until a name floated to his ears, causing him to freeze in his tracks.

“Her name is Emma Swan,” said the cultured voice, speaking slowly and clearly.

The accent was Irish, but blue-blooded. Killian turned cautiously to look over his shoulder. There was Walsh Oaken, waving a photograph in the face of a man with a cart selling roasted chestnuts. Nearby, David Swan stopped every person he saw and handed them a flyer. People barely glanced at them, and the man’s face was a picture of grief. A flyer floated out of the hands of a finely dressed young woman and sailed upon the fall breeze to land at Killian’s feet. He picked it up to find a daguerreotype of Emma, and below it information about her; that she had blonde hair and green eyes and was five feet, five inches tall. It also gave an address for the family who was looking for her: 22 Charles River Square. After reading it, Killian crumpled it up in his fist and tossed it in the nearby trash bin. Keeping his head low, he circled back for the park entrance. Once he was a block away, he began to run.

Regret was like a lead weight in his chest, and suddenly he knew with startling clarity why Emma had been so angry with him lately. “We can get to Oklahoma,” he had said. Then the attention and the money in his pocket had gone to his head, and he had broken that vow. Now Emma’s family was
here looking for her, and her dreams of getting to Oklahoma were in peril. If it was all snatched away from her, it would be his fault. But he could change. He would be a better man for her; stop fighting, get his old job back, sell all of his silly, dandy clothing. They had to get out of Boston, and soon. He just hoped Emma would listen. Hoped she could trust him again.

The sun had already set when Killian reached Granny’s, and he felt the full biting cold of the late November wind through his thin shirt. Everyone in the city had been talking about the unseasonable Indian summer, but that was coming to a swift end. A warm fall was quickly fading to an early winter. He could feel it in his bones, just as he always could back home.

Killian burst in from the cold and ran immediately up the flight of stairs. He was calling Emma’s name as he raced down the hall, and he took it as a good sign to find the door unlocked. But Emma wasn’t there. He frowned. Where in God’s name would she be after sunset? Perhaps she had gone to vespers. Killian dashed back downstairs. August was there, ringing his newsies cap anxiously in his hands.

“Killian,” the boy cried out, grabbing him by the arm, “Gold sent me to fetch you. The Stallion showed up – he aims to fight you tonight!”

Killian shook the lad off and strode over to where Granny was counting out money from her lock box. “Have you seen Emma?” Granny just shrugged, “How should I know? I’m not her mother.”

Killian took a deep, frustrated breath as the older woman brushed past him.

“Killian –“

“August, not now! Granny, please, it’s important! Did you see Emma leave? Notice which direction she went?”

“She’s there, Killian!”

He froze and turned to the boy, a furrow of confusion marring his brow. “What do you mean, she’s there?”

“Emma’s there. At the Cloak & Dagger.”

A crude sign, hastily written, had been put up on the door of The Cloak & Dagger. It announced two things: a bout between the Italian Stallion and Irish fighter Killian Jones. Despite the fact that the fight had been settled upon without Killian’s input, that wasn’t the part of the sign that had Killian’s blood boiling. It was the part below: And Let Your Eyes Feast Upon Our New Dancer: The Irish Angel!

Killian shoved his way through the crowds that were hooting and catcalling louder than usual, pressing up against the stage in a lustful throng. They were so mesmerized by the blonde beauty swaying her hips next to Ruby, that they didn’t even notice their favorite fighter making his way past them. The music was drawing to a close just as Killian reached the foot of the stage, and Emma caught his eye. She at least had the decency to blush. She didn’t, however, have the decency to stop dancing, putting her hands up on her head and shimmying for the music’s crescendo.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” Killian shouted.

The music ended, and coins pelted the stage. The dancing girls dropped down, showing off their
cleavage as they scrambled for the money, stuffing it into their corsets. Emma was just as hungry as the rest, shoving at Ruby to snatch as much as she could.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Emma snapped back.

“Emma, do you have no self-respect?” Killian jumped up on stage, ignoring the angry protests of the other men.

Emma ignored him as she took dollar bills from men crying out, “Angel! Angel!” When she stood, she stuffed the bills into her garter belt. “You get your head bashed in every night,” she protested, “what’s the difference?”

Killian yanked the bottom of his shirt out of his trousers. “There’s a world of difference!” He pulled the shirt over his head and draped it around Emma’s shoulders, then turned her towards the steps leading off the stage. They came face to face with Gold.

“Jones! So glad you changed your mind! There’s a lot of money on this fight.”

Killian had to take deep breaths to keep from pummeling the man. “I agreed to no such thing. And I thought I made it clear that my sister was only to have respectable work. I’m taking her home. Now.”

“Don’t do something you’ll regret, boy,” Gold started, putting a hand to Killian’s chest.

Before Killian could shove the man aside, Greg Scheol was there. “Listen to Gold, my lad. You’ll get half the pot if you win - $200.”

Beside him, Emma gasped, but Killian shook his head. It was the most money he’d ever been offered in his life, but Emma was there, and he couldn’t protect her in the middle of a fight. As he went to guide her off the stage, Emma yanked back on his arm. When he turned to look at her, her green eyes were wide. She pulled him closer.

"Killian, you have to fight.”

He narrowed his eyes. “But I thought you said –“

She clutched at his arms. “But it’s so much money!” She bit her lower lip as she gazed into his eyes for a long moment. When she finally spoke, a bright spot of red stained both her cheeks. “You can get us out of here.”

“Us?” Killian’s voice hitched as he said it.

Emma’s green eyes sparkled, and her smile crinkled her nose as she nodded. “Yes, us.”

Killian reached up and grasped her shoulders, and everything in him wanted to grab her and kiss her, but he knew this was neither the place nor the time. Not to mention the thorny issue of everyone thinking they were brother and sister. (Although, according to Granny, not many actually believed it anyway.) Instead, he pressed his forehead to hers and nodded. Then he stepped away, relinquishing his hold on her. Her watery eyes and wobbly smile spoke volumes. She had always been an open book to him, and right now he could clearly see how much she believed in him.

The crowd, which had become frenzied with anticipation, practically lifted him bodily from the stage. He never broke eye contact with Emma, even when they tied a sash with the Irish colors around his waist. He lifted both fists into the air, still with his eyes locked on Emma’s. Her nervous smile let him know that she understood his meaning: he was doing this for her. For them.
He finally turned to see the Stallion push his way through the crowd of Italian fans on the other side of the pub. He towered over Killian’s five foot eleven inch frame; the man must have been six-two, at least. He was also twice as broad as Killian, his arms and legs like tree trunks. It was sheer strength versus agility, and Killian knew he would have to keep his focus and his wits to come out of this alive.

August drew a line of chalk across from each man and recited the rules both already knew anyway. Not that there were many; pretty much anything went except for that blasted chalk line. Retreating behind it gave a man a reprieve; crossing back over it, all bets were off.

Almost the second Killian stepped over the line, the Stallion swung wide at his temple. Killian side stepped and spun, jabbing an uppercut at the other man’s torso. He cried out, and cheers erupted from the Irish throughout the pub. Less than a minute in, and most likely Killian had already broken one of the Stallion’s ribs. The giant man got in a few more swings, but none of them connected. He was grimacing with each one, and eventually retreated so his ribs could be bound. Killian pumped the air with his fists, and the Irish patrons cheered loudly.

The men entered the ring again, and the Stallion’s blows were much more effective with his ribs bound. Killian had to rely on his speed and agility alone to avoid each one, and the crowd quickly became irritated at the lack of action. That was the thing about these pub brawls, the crowd could sometimes get so antsy that they became just as dangerous as your opponent. Killian had to get a punch in and quick, or the mob would turn on him. He dodged another of the Stallion’s blows, which had the man hunching over. Killian took the opening and punched him right in the gut, then followed it by a quick uppercut to the jaw. The Stallion staggered backwards but remained on his feet. He recovered much more quickly than Killian had anticipated, and swiped Killian across the face. It sent Killian spinning around, but he didn’t go down. Both men retreated behind their lines. The Stallion spit out a couple of teeth, and Killian worked his jaw. Thankfully, he still had a full set of teeth and nothing was broken.

Suddenly, Killian heard a familiar voice crying, “No!” He turned towards the stage. Mr. Gold and Mr. Scheol had special seating up there for the best view of the match. Gold’s son, Neal, had also been given preferential seating. The young man had grasped Emma around the waist and pulled her into his lap. Killian pushed his way through the crowd, ignoring the boos, making his way closer to the stage. As he watched, every sound and image in the room narrowing to the woman he cared about more than his own life, Emma fought her way out of Neal’s grasp. That’s my strong lass! But then Greg Scheol grabbed her by the arm, and Robert Gold yanked Killian’s shirt from her shoulders. Both men then shoved her back into Neal’s lap, who slapped her across the face. “Emma!” Killian shouted, white hot rage filling every fiber of his being.

Emma lifted her tear stained face to meet his eyes. “Killian!”

But he couldn’t reach her. The mob picked him up and lifted him into the air. He reached for Emma, shouting her name, fighting against the crowd, but they pushed him along, farther and farther away from her. They deposited him back on his feet near the ring, and Killian became like a wild beast, swinging and punching at any one who would dare come between him and Emma. But they kept pushing him back towards the ring.

The mob gave one enormous shove, and Killian new a split second before the agonizing pain that his foot had slid over the line. A fist like iron slammed into his lower back, crumpling him to his feet. Then blow after blow rained down upon him. He heard Emma’s screams and sobs, even over the shouts of the crowd. A ferocious blow to his temple sent him down with a thud to the ground, and August began counting. He thought of Emma and Oklahoma, and struggled to all fours. Everything
seemed to move in slow motion as he turned his head to look up at his giant opponent. The fist was raised. It came crashing down on him.

Then everything went black.

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When Killian came to, he was lying in the filthy dirt of the Cloak & Dagger’s back alley. This didn’t come as a complete shock to him; he had seen many losing fighters tossed out the back door when they lost Robert Gold too much money.

And to say that Killian lost Robert Gold a lot of money was an understatement.

Killian rolled over onto his back, crying out in pain as he clutched his ribs. A few were broken, he could feel it. He lifted his hand to his head and winced at the knot above the right side of his temple. He blinked and worked his jaw, cataloguing the injuries. His left eye was almost swollen shut, both cheeks were bruised, and his lip was split open. But miraculously, his jaw wasn’t broken and he hadn’t lost any teeth. He ran his hand over his face tentatively and winced when he reached his right eyebrow. He couldn’t see a thing, but he felt the stickiness of blood between his fingers. He touched the spot tentatively again; there was a gash there, but it didn’t seem too deep. He wouldn’t bleed to death, anyway.

Killian got to his feet as slowly as possible, breathless with the stabbing pain from his ribs. He grasped his side with his right hand, which of course was cracked and bleeding at the knuckles. He shuffled forward, crying out and almost falling to the ground as he put weight on his left foot. He vaguely remembered the brute he fought stomping on it; it felt broken. The hell if he was going to let a few broken bones stop him, though. Who knew what had happened to Emma? Every second he wasted finding her, she was one second closer to God knows what by Gold’s hand.

Killian hobbled to the door of the pub and pounded on it to no avail. It was dark and locked up tight. So Killian turned and made his way toward Granny’s, forcing himself to put weight on his foot despite the pain. At least it distracted him from the biting cold; the temperatures had dropped significantly.

When he reached the brothel, his banging brought Granny to the locked door, but directly behind her was Robert Gold. The elderly woman’s downcast face let Killian know that whatever Gold had in store for him, it wasn’t pleasant.

“Where’s Emma?” he asked, a desperate edge to his voice.

“Killian, I’m here!”

He attempted to push past Granny and Gold, but the man lifted his cane and used it to shove Killian backwards down the steps. Emma screamed and attempted to run to Killian’s side, but Neal and Will from the pub were there, holding her back.

“Emma!” Killian cried, struggling to his feet. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered, struggling against their grip.

“Let her go,” Killian begged, staggering towards the steps. But Gold was suddenly there, blocking his path. The man raised his cane and slammed it against the side of Killian’s head. When he fell to the sidewalk, Killian curled in on himself to protect his broken bones as the man continued to beat him repeatedly with his cane. He could hear Emma from the doorway, crying and begging for Gold to stop. Finally, his rage spent, Gold stopped and turned to climb the steps of the brothel. He grabbed
Emma by the arm and flung her down the steps. Killian rose up on his knees in time to catch her, the momentum sending them both sprawling back down on the pavement. Despite the pain, Killian held her close, relief flooding him that she was okay.

Emma grasped his shirt in her fists and cried against his chest. “I was so afraid I would never see you again. I was so afraid you were dead.”

Robert Gold pointed at the two of them with his cane and shouted at Granny, “If you shelter these two, even for one night, you and every one of your girls will be out on the streets.”

With that, Gold turned and walked away, Neal and Will on his heels. Emma pulled Killian up to a sitting position, touching his face tentatively and worrying over his injuries. But Killian was looking over her shoulder, up at Granny, hoping against hope to see compassion on the woman’s face.

There was none. So despite the fat snowflakes that had just begun to fall from the sky, Granny shut the door with a loud click of finality.

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22 Charles River Square. That address now haunted Killian every waking moment, and even sometimes his dreams. He thought of it that first wretchedly cold day living on the streets when a group of nuns had given them winter coats, scarves, and mittens. As he watched Emma drink the meager cup of soup the nuns gave her, her hands shaking as the steam rose to her lips, he thought of it. Thought of the warmth that probably resided there, the loving family, the full larder in the kitchen. He almost told her then. Almost asked the nuns for directions. But he didn’t.

Because God forgive him, he was weak, and he didn’t want to lose her.

The nuns let them stay for a week, just until Killian’s injuries were healed. But Robert Gold apparently owned God, too. At least in Southie. For the nuns ashamedly told them that the convent belonged to Gold, and if they were caught sheltering them . . .

So they were back on the streets again. They were forced to leave Southie because everyone there had been warned not to help them. Then, as they found themselves in other neighborhoods of Boston, the full truth of what August had warned them of that first day sunk in. No one was hiring Irish. Many times, businesses displayed it boldly with signs in the window proclaiming, “We don’t hire Irish.” Other times, the door slammed in their faces as soon as the boss heard their lilting accent. The cotton mill, the lumber yard, the docks. No one would hire them. And the bitterness of an early winter had grasped Boston in its iron grip. The worst time to be out of work with no place to live. And every time they heard another no, Killian thought of it. 22 Charles River Square.

One day, when the snow turned instead to a freezing rain, they mercifully found a crew who needed help digging ditches for a new sewage line. The pay was miniscule, but all crew members and their families were provided with temporary housing, a blanket, and an evening meal. They took it eagerly, for what else could they do?

Women weren’t allowed to help dig, so for the first time since being kicked out of Granny’s, Killian was parted from Emma. He worked an eight hour day of back-breaking work in the muddy ditch. The rain showed no signs of letting up, so the work was also cold and wet. He returned “home” each evening, which was nothing more than a tent of burlap, to Emma and their dinner: one can of beans. Killian was always so cold and exhausted, he said little. Emma helped him out of his wet clothes, hanging them by the fire to dry, and by the time she had turned back around, he was asleep. It seemed an eternity that they lived this way, but in reality the job only lasted a week.
Survival had been so all consuming, that it wasn’t until the last night that Killian really took a long, hard look at Emma. When he entered the tent, he really saw for the first time her despair. Her downcast eyes were rimmed in dark circles, she shivered from the cold beneath her filthy, threadbare clothing, and her long, golden hair was matted and dirty. When she ladled out his beans, he saw how thin she had become, her wrists almost nothing but skin and bone. She didn’t even attempt to speak to him as they ate, and he suddenly realized that it had been that way since they got to the work camp.

“Emma,” he said softly, his voice cracking from misuse.

She looked up at him, surprise filling her features. She said nothing, simply waited for what he had to say. 22 Charles River Square. He should tell her. He swallowed his spoonful of beans around the lump in his throat.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been much company.”

Her smile was surprisingly bright, her eyes moist. “Don’t be. You’re dead on your feet every day when you come home.”

Silence fell between them again, but the tiny smile still lit Emma’s face. As if his speaking at all had brightened her day. How sad. He looked around the tiny, dark tent with its mud-stained flap of a door. She had called this “home.” He found that incredibly sad, too.

Emma cleaned up their meager meal while Killian wearily took off his wet, muddy clothes. They no longer bothered with modesty. Once Killian’s wet clothes were hung by the open fire to dry, Emma peeled off her own clothing. Normally, Killian was already asleep at this point, but tonight, with his mind turning over itself, he was still awake. He watched her from where he lay curled on the floor as she quickly stepped out of her dress and layers of skirt. She had discarded her corset long ago, explaining that it had gotten too big for her anyway. Only further evidence of how thin she had become. In only her shift and pantaloons, she slipped under the one blanket they shared.

The rain had finally stopped, but in its place was a biting, howling wind. It shook the rickety tent, causing the cold to seep under and through. Emma shivered, her teeth chattering. She wriggled closer to Killian, pressing her nose to his back. It was frigid through his undershirt.

“H-hold me K-Killian,” she tremored, “I’m . . . so c-cold.”

Killian turned to face her, pulling her close. She sighed deeply as she buried her face against the crook of his neck. He drew the blanket tighter around them, wishing to lend her all the warmth he could. She fell asleep quickly, her hands curled against his chest. As he held her, it came to him again. 22 Charles River Square. If he truly loved her – and he knew now beyond a shadow of a doubt that he did – he would want her to have her best chance at happiness. At that wasn’t with him.

It was at 22 Charles River Square.

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“Killian, where are we going? This is a really, really nice neighborhood.”

Killian turned to see Emma stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, huddled against the cold, with a confused look upon her face. He gave her a sad smile. “Rich people have work. Come on.”

He knew he would have to tell her eventually. Preferably before he knocked on her parents’ door. But not yet. He told himself it was because she might refuse to go, but he knew deep down that wasn’t true. What reason did she have to stay with him? And that, in the end, was the real reason he
was delaying telling her. Because as soon as he told her, he would no longer be able to deny the inevitable.

That he was about to lose her. The same way he had lost everyone else he had ever loved.

He glanced behind him to see Emma sinking onto a wrought iron bench. He hurried to her, glancing around nervously.

“Emma,” he encouraged, “you can’t stop here. This neighborhood . . . they’ll call the police.”

He managed to hoist her up, and she sagged against him. “Please, Killian,” she murmured, “I’m so tired.”

He slung her arm over his shoulder and managed a wry laugh. “All the more reason not to lie down. It’s below freezing; you’ll never wake up.”

The thought had his heart racing with dreaded fear. Please God, he prayed, I know I should have taken her to her family long ago. Please don’t let it be too late. He saw a family up ahead unloading groceries from the back of an open buggy. Seeing it as providence, he hurried to them. He let go of Emma and started helping with the load, despite the fearful look from the woman who ushered her two small children quickly into the house.

“I’m looking for work,” Killian told the man, who snatched angrily at the box Killian had just hoisted from the wagon. Killian hurried on, despite the man’s hostility. “I’m strong and willing to take on any task.”

“I don’t hire Irish,” the man snapped, turning his back.

“Killian,” Emma called, and he turned to see her swaying on her feet. He rushed to her, tears pricking at his eyes.

“Please, sir,” he begged, “my wife is starving.” When the man shook his head, Killian grasped at his arm desperately. “She’s . . . she’s with child. Please, have pity on us!”

“I don’t hire Irish!” the man shouted, wrenching his arm free. “Now get out of here before I call the police!”

Killian stood there, unmoving, until he felt Emma tugging on his arm. “Killian, please,” she begged, “just let it go.”

With a deep sigh, he did as Emma asked, and they moved on, leaning into the wind. He kept his arm around Emma, hoping to shield her from the cold.

“Why did you say I was your wife?” she asked him softly.

Killian shrugged. “It seemed a more sympathetic story.”

He bit his lip lest he add, and sometimes I pretend that it’s true.

**********************************************

Snow had begun to fall again; the kind of snow that made the world go dark and silent. As the thick flakes drifted to the ground, Killian felt as if he were seeing the world through a gray window pane. It only made their situation seem all the more dire.
Emma stopped suddenly, immovable, shaking her head. “I can’t, Killian. I can’t go on.”

Killian looked around desperately, his mind searching for a solution. They weren’t far from 22 Charles River Square, but he realized now that Emma would never make it even that far. She needed food, and she needed to shelter from the cold. He took a long, close look at the house right in front of them. It was blue with white trim, surrounded by a white picket fence. It had a porch that wrapped around the front of the house and a second floor with a turret. In the falling snow, it looked like the cover of a Christmas card.

“Come on,” he said to her, putting his arm around her to help her along. He guided her through the waist-high gate of the picket fence and down the drive way.

“Killian, what are you doing?” she whispered.

“The house is dark. In this cold, there ought to be fires burning. No one is home.”

They walked around to the back of the house, and Killian was relieved to find the kitchen door unlocked. A breaking window would have sounded ten times louder in this still weather. The inside of the house was still cold, but it was a significant improvement over being outside, and at least they were out of the wind. They found plenty of food in the pantry, and they both began eating it hungrily, with shaking hands.

The moonlight falling through the kitchen window illuminated Emma perfectly, causing her golden hair to glow like a halo. His heart sank as he looked over the filthy coat full of holes that hung on her tiny frame. He watched her lift shaking hands to her lips as she shoved pieces of bread frantically into her mouth. This wasn’t the life she deserved. He sighed and reached out to still her hands. Her green eyes were filled with shame when she turned to look at him.

“I need to slow down, I know,” she told him after swallowing.

Killian shook his head sadly. “No, it isn’t that.” He guided her into the dining room, and eased her into a chair at the large, mahogany table. “This is how you deserve to take your dinner, Emma.” He returned to the kitchen and filled a plate with food, then brought it back to her. He set it down before her with a flourish, then turned to retrieve silverware from a china cabinet. He went to lay a linen napkin across her lap when she stopped him with a hand to his wrist.

“No, Killian,” she said softly. “Don’t serve me. Sit with me. Sit with me, and pretend . . .” her voice trailed off as her gazed traveled over the interior of the house. “Let’s pretend this is our house, and you are my husband.”

There was something about the moonlight pouring through the windows of the dark house that lent a vague, shimmery quality to everything. Killian felt he was dreaming as he filled a plate in the kitchen and came to sit beside Emma. He poured them both water from a pitcher he had found, and they drank goblet after goblet of the water, only now realizing how thirsty they were. They forced themselves to eat slowly from their plates, and minute by minute, their trembling ceased as their stomachs were sated.

The drowsiness that often accompanies a meal settled over Killian’s mind, and the sensation of being in a dream world intensified. Emma smiled shyly at him and pulled her chair closer. She had asked him to pretend, and he was more than happy to indulge this fantasy.

“Do you still think about Oklahoma?” she asked him, almost in a whisper.

“Aye,” he answered, voice coming just as soft, as if speaking too loudly would shatter the
fairy tale, “I do.”

“So do I,” she admitted on a feathery sigh. She took a few more bites of bread and cheese before continuing. “The land you dreamed of. . . what was it like?”

“Well, I wanted to farm my own land, so I imagined it spread before me; farmland of rich soil.”

“And what would you grow?” Emma asked, her chin propped in her hand. It reminded him of those conversations around their wooden crate at Granny’s.

He chuckled and scratched behind his ear, though why he should be nervous, he didn’t know. “Anything but potatoes. God, not potatoes.” She smiled at him, and it was brighter than the moonlight. “I imagined growing wheat. I could see it in my mind’s eye, waving in the breeze like the ocean waves. And I wanted a stream nearby, with a stand of trees along its banks.”

“I wanted to raise horses and be free to ride them any way and any time I pleased,” Emma confessed, her eyes glassy as she dreamed. “I pictured acres of green pastures that rolled just a little bit.” She turned to him then, leaning closer. “Rolling hills and a tree-lined stream. They complement each other, don’t you think?”

“Aye,” he agreed, his heart beating faster as she leaned ever closer.

“Pretend,” she whispered, her breath puffing against his cheek, “that you love me.”

“Oh, Emma, I don’t have to pretend that.”

Her lips brushed his, and they were just as soft as he had imagined. He cupped her cheek, then brushed her hair back, letting a silken tendril slip through his fingers. He explored her lips tentatively, unsure if she really meant for this to happen, but then she pulled away and gave him the most tender smile. He captured her mouth with his a second time, and Emma’s lips parted on a sigh. The kiss deepened, but it was still slow and tender. God, the taste of her was intoxicating! She buried her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck, and a warm, languid feeling seeped into his bones.

He put his arm around her waist to pull her closer, but before he could, a door banged open, shattering the fairy tale. The leapt apart, eyes wide with fear and dashed for the kitchen door just as a loud shout reverberated through the house.

“Hey! What’s the meaning of this?”

Killian pushed Emma through the door, telling her to run, he was right behind her. He pulled over a trash bin and a garden rake as he ran around the side of the house to impede their pursuer. He would risk getting caught himself to save Emma.

He rounded the corner of the house and was terrified to see the homeowner on the front porch, lifting a rifle to his shoulder. Because Killian had hung back, Emma was right in the man’s sights.

“No!” Killian shouted, raising his arms and running as fast as he could to put himself between Emma and the gunman. He waved his arms harder in a gesture of surrender as he cried again, “Please, no!”

But the man was heedless to Killian’s cries for mercy, and a shot rang through the air. It was immediately followed by Emma’s scream. Killian’s heart stopped in terror as he saw her convulse with the impact and fall to the ground. He fell to his knees beside her, not feeling the cold snow
seeping through his trousers. He cradled her to him and immediately felt a warm wetness against his hand.

“No, no, no!” he cried out, tears coursing down his cheeks. He gathered her in his arms and stood cradling her against his chest. There was a bright spot of red on the snow where she had lain.

Everything was a hazy blur now as he ran down the street. He was almost there now, just two blocks more. 22 Charles River Square. But what if it was two blocks too late?

“Please!” Killian screamed at the top of his voice. “Somebody help me! I need a doctor!”

The night was too still and silent for his cries to go unheard, yet no one opened their doors. The sprawling mansions had given way to brownstone townhouses the closer he got to the river. He saw lights in many windows, and still he shouted, but no one came to his aid. In one house he saw a maid stare straight at him through a window – then coldly bolt the shutters.

Finally, he was there. 22 Charles River Square. He took the steps two at a time, then banged with his foot against the front door. He yelled as he banged, and finally a prim maid opened the door. Her nose wrinkled as she took them in, and promptly moved to shut the door in Killian’s face. However, he wasn’t going to let that happen. He stopped the door with his foot.

“This is Emma,” he growled, “the Swan’s daughter. I don’t have time for your propriety.”

He pushed past the surprised maid and stepped into the foyer. “David Swan!” he shouted. “David!”

“What is the meaning of this?” a flustered housekeeper cried, but her indignation quickly turned to shock as she saw him standing there holding Emma. Based on her accent and the look of recognition in her eyes, Killian ascertained that she had come with the family from Ireland.

“Please,” Killian said to her hoarsely, weeping now unabashedly, “she’s been shot.”

“Shot!” another voice thundered.

Killian turned, and under any other circumstances, he would have groaned in irritation to see the man standing before him. However, in this moment, all he could feel was relief as Walsh Oaken took Emma from his arms and laid her upon a settee in the parlor. Walsh removed her filthy coat to reveal the blood soaking through the back of her dress.

“Fetch a doctor!” Walsh shouted at the staff who had gathered in the doorway. Two of them dashed off as the housekeeper hastened into the room with boiling water and rags.

“Is she going to be okay?” Killian choked out, wringing his hands with worry.

Walsh looked up at him with a hateful expression upon his face. “She will be now.” He turned back to Emma’s injury. “She’s filthy,” he muttered as he ripped the shoulder of Emma’s dress.

Killian let out a sigh of relief when he saw that it was only a flesh wound. The bullet must have only grazed her shoulder. Now that he knew for sure she would be okay and the adrenaline was slowly fading, he took stock for the first time of his surroundings. The townhouse was smaller than the home they had broken into, but it was decorating just as ornately. A cheery fire burned in the hearth, and a grandfather clock ticked comfortingly in the corner. His clothes – and Emma’s – stood out amidst the opulence of the décor. Stood out for what they were – dirty and of poor quality. It was a visual representation of what her family could offer her versus what Killian could offer her.
In short, he could offer her nothing.

There was a flurry of activity from the back of the house, and a butler came quickly to whisper to Walsh. Despite his quiet voice, Killian clearly heard the butler say that the Swans had just returned home. Walsh followed the man out of the room, and Killian found himself alone with Emma.

He approached the settee hesitantly, and dropped slowly to his knees. He brushed tendrils of hair from Emma’s face; she was unconscious, but pink tinged her cheeks. Killian sighed and leaned closer.

“You’re better off here, Emma. They’ll take good care of you.” He swallowed the lump in his throat, then continued. “I love you, Emma.”

He then brushed a kiss to her forehead and quickly rose lest someone catch him. He backed away from her, his Irish angel, committing her to memory. Then he turned and dashed out of the townhouse and back into the lonely, quiet streets.

Chapter End Notes

* This particular AU in the series will end with the next chapter. Will our OTP find their way back to each other and to their happy ending in Oklahoma? Well, this is Once Upon a Time, so . . .

* It's hard to believe, but summer is actually over in my neck of the woods. School starts on Monday! (I know, crazy, right?) But after-school activities and sports for my kiddos don't start until after labor day, so you will still get weekly updates in this series through August. After that, I want to continue it because I have a butt-load of prompts, but it won't be on a regular schedule. That is, if you all are still interested?
Far and Away Part Four

Chapter Notes

* Whew, ya'll, the universe seemed to be conspiring against me. I almost didn't think I would get this posted today! I hope I did it justice, because honestly, this was a bit of a struggle.

* There's a little bit of Snowing in this one, which I like :)

* I used the terms blacks and Indians in this chapter in order to be historically accurate. No one would have used the term African-American or Native American back then (those would have made no sense to them), and the terms I did use wouldn't have been considered offensive at the time. They actually would have been the proper, "politically correct" terms. I mean no offense whatsoever in using them, and I hope everyone understands the historical context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tiny room at Granny’s was mostly dark with just the gentle glow of candlelight to see by. Killian stood in the far corner of the room, facing the curtain where Emma changed each morning and evening. He could see her intoxicating silhouette by the flickering candlelight, her head tilted back and her fingers combing through her hair. Killian’s heart pounded and his mouth went dry just as it always did.

But then Emma softly called his name, and he blinked in shocked surprise as she stepped from behind the curtain. His eyes drank in the sight of her body; every curve, every soft bit of her skin on full display. Her smile was gentle, yet without a hint of hesitance or shyness. She whispered his name again when she reached him, running her hand along the expanse of his chest, then looping her arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her close, bending his head to press his lips against hers. The feel of her breasts pressed against his bare chest set every nerve ending in his body on fire as he pillaged her mouth with his tongue. She kissed him back just as fervently, her fingers carding through his hair. She tilted her head back as he trailed kisses down her neck and across her collar bone. His mouth found her breasts as he lowered her to the bed, and her fingers clutched his hair in a tight-fisted grip as she moaned his name.

“Jones!” a harsh voice ripped Killian from the pleasures of his dream. He jolted awake, completely disoriented to find himself suddenly in glaring light instead of the soft glow of candles. The heat he felt was no longer a throbbing simmer inside him, but one that baked his skin. Instead of Emma’s soft curves beneath his fingertips, he felt instead rocky soil. At his back, the rough bark of a tree rubbed him instead of the light scratches of Emma’s fingernails.

The foreman shouted his name again, and Killian groaned as he struggled to his feet. He slapped the hat back on his head as he squinted in the prairie sun. He stretched and adjusted his suspenders. Fully awake now from his dozing, he made his way over to the work crew.

Killian didn’t speak to anyone. He simply entered the cavern, lit the dynamite fuse, then jogged carelessly back out. Everyone else ran as fast as they could for cover, but Killian’s pace was nonchalant. He slid behind a boulder just as the explosion happened, and as soot, pebbles, and dust rained down upon him, he stared into the distance, unfeeling and uncaring.
Everyone else on the railroad crew called him crazy; he had even heard some question if he was even right in the head. Killian didn’t care what they said, as long as he got his pay every week and a place to sleep every night. He spoke to no one unless absolutely necessary, so all the crew knew about him was that he was Irish and apparently had a death wish. Whenever anything in the way of the railroad needed blasting, he was their man.

At least being Irish didn’t matter here. There were all kinds laying the rails: black, Indian, Chinese. No one cared about a man’s station as long as he worked hard and followed orders. Killian didn’t mind doing either. Work kept him distracted from his thoughts.

But when sleep claimed him; that was another story. Thoughts of Emma tortured him then. During the day, it was just an irritating, dull ache that he could ignore. At night, memories and fantasies held his heart in an iron grip.

Awakening from the dreams was even worse.

But that night, as Killian slept in the railroad car that trundled across the prairie, he had an altogether different dream. He was back in Ireland, walking across green hills overlooking the sea. A figure stood at the edge of the cliff, and Killian squinted through the thick fog to make out who it could be. His eyes widened in surprise as he drew nearer.

“Liam?” he asked tentatively. His brother turned, his dark blonde curls ruffling in the wind. His smile was bright when he saw Killian. “Little brother!” he exclaimed joyfully.

“That’s younger brother,” Killian corrected automatically, “how are you here?” He tried to step up to Liam’s side and draw him into an embrace, but no matter how many steps he took, Liam remained out of reach.

“You need direction, Killian. I wanted you to see the world –“

“I have, brother!” Killian argued. “I crossed the ocean. I’ve crossed this young country to the opposite coast and am traveling back again. I’ve seen so much!”

“But you’re not living,” Liam explained gently.

Killian blinked, tears pricking his eyes at the thought of disappointing his brother. “What would you have me do?”

“A man who refuses to fight for what he wants deserves what he gets.”

The train car jerked suddenly, jostling everyone inside awake. Killian clutched the edge of the railcar window as he was pulled suddenly from his dream. Yet it hadn’t felt like a dream, almost as if Liam had really come to him. But what had his brother meant?

“What the hell is the hold up?” one of the men cried out. The rest of the workers were none too happy for the sudden stop, either, though the morning sun was rising above the horizon. Killian turned and looked outside to see an almost endless line of wagons silhouetted by the dawn.

“They racin’ for land,” one of the men grumbled.

“Fool’s errand, if you ask me,” laughed another. “One out of a hundred will stake a claim. The rest’ll be goin’ home empty handed.”

Killian blinked, then rubbed his sleep-laden eyes. It couldn’t be! “Where,” he managed to choke out, “where are we?”
“Oklahoma territory.”

Killian started up, a grin slowly spreading across his face. *Thank you, brother!* He grabbed his knapsack and bedroll, then dashed through the train car’s outside door. The rest of the crew shouted after him in confusion as Killian jumped from the back of the train just as its pistons squealed. He turned and waved as the train steamed ahead without him.

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A temporary western town sprung up almost out of thin air when the wagon train arrived at the starting point of the race. Tents housing a mercantile, a livery, a bank, a saloon, even a church were erected in a semi-circle around the cluster of wagons. The wagons themselves made up a temporary community. Women did wash that they hung on temporary clotheslines, men repaired wagon wheels and cleaned their guns as they chatted around the fires, and children ran and played. Killian walked through the makeshift town, life flowing through his veins in a way it hadn’t since Boston. He wondered if Emma had –

Suddenly, Killian stopped in his tracks, his eyes going to his boots. A man nearby was changing his horse’s shoes and had tossed the old one carelessly aside. It now rested against Killian’s toe. He knelt down and picked it up, a fond smile flirting at the corners of his mouth. When he looked up from the horseshoe in his hand, he almost couldn’t believe his eyes. There, right in front of him, was his Emma, all golden and brilliant, even with a laundry basket balanced against her hip. Feeling as if she may disappear like a mirage, Killian approached her slowly and cautiously. He didn’t speak, just stared as he watched her shake out a white shirt and then clip it to the line. She looked more beautiful than he had remembered, even in her modest brown calico with a white apron tied around her waist. Even though her hair was done up, it still seemed a brighter gold than it had in his imagination. The bridge of her nose was also dotted with more freckles than the last time he had seen her. The fresh air and sunshine evidently agreed with her.

When Emma finally noticed him, her green eyes widened in shock and her hand froze on the line. He smiled at her tentatively.

“You’re amazing, Emma Swan. Bloody brilliant. You said you’d get here, and you did. I never doubted it.” *Really, Jones? You’re leading with that?* He scratched behind his ear and ducked his head, laughing nervously.

Emma gave her head a little shake. “Killian . . .I . . .” He could see several conflicting emotions flicker across her face, but for the first time in a long while, he couldn’t read her. Was she happy to see him? Angry? Hurt? Or the worst possibility of all – indifferent? He did note the flush to her cheeks as she averted her eyes. Understandable, considering the last time they were together.

Their awkward standstill was interrupted by a perky voice. “Emma, honey, are you done with the whites? Because I’ve got this whole basket of colors – oh! Killian.”

“Ma’am,” Killian said to Mary Margaret Swan, inclining his head and hastily removing his hat. He was even more frightened of seeing Emma’s parents. What must they think of him? His worries dissolved, however, when Mrs. Swan leaned forward to grasp his hand in both of hers.

“I am so glad to see you again, Mr. Jones,” the woman told him sincerely. “My husband and I can’t thank you enough for all you did for Emma.”

*Like get her shot? Almost letting her starve and freeze to death?* He mumbled a hesitant thank you as Emma eyed him with an embarrassed expression on her face. He wondered how much
she had told her mother about their . . . living arrangements.

Killian was rescued from awkward small talk once again. This time, from two riders on horseback. The first rider swung quickly from the saddle and bounded across the yard to swoop Mary Margaret up in his arms.

“David!” the brunette squealed as her husband whirled her around. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I got shot at, Mary Margaret!” David exulted.

His wife shook her head, “What? Are you alright?”

“More than alright!” the man continued, face shining with life. “We snuck across the starting line, sweetheart. I broke the law!” David grinned ear to ear, even as his wife gaped in disbelief. “I think this wild west agrees with me.”

The man looked up and noticed Killian, but before Emma’s father could speak to him (or punch him), another man strode up and grasped Emma by the shoulders. Walsh Oaken whirled her around to face him.

“Emma, I found it! The land you described; your dream. Rolling green pastures with a tree-lined stream.”

Walsh’s words were like a punch to the gut, and Killian almost physically staggered backwards from their impact. The man looked over Emma’s shoulder and noticed Killian for the first time. His eyes narrowed darkly.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he spat.

“Come now, Walsh,” David said, stepping right up to Killian, “this is a free country, after all. And I for one am glad to finally tell the man thank you.”

Killian couldn’t have been more shocked as David Swan extended his hand for Killian to shake. Whatever Emma had told her parents, it couldn’t possibly have been the truth. But Killian took the offered hand anyway and gave it a firm shake.

“Walsh!” Emma bit out, shaking free from the man’s hold on her. “How could you?” She glanced sideways at Killian, then lowered her gaze. Her next words were mumbled low, but Killian heard them anyway. “I thought you said we would do this together.”

Walsh opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. He glanced over Emma’s shoulders at her parents, then gently steered her several paces away. He said something to Emma that Killian couldn’t hear. He knew it was wrong to stare, but he couldn’t look away. Emma answered in a low voice, but gesticulated wildly with her hands, her cheeks reddening. Walsh stepped closer as if to embrace her, but Emma shoved him away. She stomped angrily inside one of the large tents the Swans had erected close to their wagon, shoving the opening aside with as much force as she could muster. Walsh sighed deeply, shook his head, and walked dejectedly in the opposite direction.

Killian turned his face away from the scene and looked at Mary Margaret Swan. He didn’t really want to ask, but the woman’s green eyes were so sympathetic, that the question slipped from his lips nonetheless. “Are they courting?”

“No,” Mrs. Swan answered, “they’re engaged.”
Emma sat on the wrought iron bed in her tent, staring at nothing, her hairbrush resting in her hand. This bed had been purchased in Boston, taken apart, packed carefully, then shipped by locomotive to Missouri. In a way, it was a wedding gift, meant to reside in her and Walsh’s bedroom after they were married.

“May I come in?”

Emma didn’t even react as her mother slipped inside and sank to the bed behind her. Mary Margaret took the brush from Emma’s limp hand and began to run it gently through her daughter’s hair. Emma closed her eyes as the familiar motion and her mother’s soft humming soothed her.

“You’re quiet tonight.”

A half smile tilted the corner of Emma’s mouth. “You always brush my hair when you want me to open up.”

“Well, you have to admit,” Mary Margaret chuckled, leaning forward to give Emma’s shoulder a squeeze, “it usually works.”

The smile fell from Emma’s face even as she nodded in agreement. This was what they were doing in the brownstone in Boston when Emma had finally, after weeks of brooding silence, told her mother everything that had happened since she left Ireland. Well, almost everything. Enough so that her parents thought Killian Jones was a certifiable hero who hung the moon. Emma sighed. She hated to admit it, but she agreed with that assessment. Right up until he left her, that is.

“Are you thinking about Killian?”

Emma’s back stiffened at her mother’s question. She glanced over her shoulder and quipped, “Shouldn’t you be asking me about Walsh?”

Mary Margaret shrugged, giving her daughter a pointed look, “And aren’t you deflecting?”

Emma tilted her head and toyed with the lace trim at the bottom of her nightgown. “It was . . . awkward seeing him again. A shock, really. Such a shock all I managed to do was sputter his name and blush, for heaven’s sake!”

“I noticed,” her mother teased, and then she fell silent again for a long moment. She gathered up the top layer of Emma’s hair in her hand and began gently working out the tangles. When she spoke again, Emma noticed a hesitancy in her voice. “Emma, all those months you shared a room with Killian . . . did you . . . well, what I mean to say is . . . did the two of you get . . . close?”

“Mother!”

Mary Margaret’s fair skin was tinged red when Emma turned shocked eyes on her. “Don’t get defensive, sweetheart! He’s a handsome man, and you’re lovely, and you’re both young –“

“Stop,” Emma commanded, her hand lifted in the air, “just stop. I’ll put your mind at ease, mother, nothing of the sort ever happened.” Emma bit her bottom lip as memories of the kiss they had shared came to her mind. She also thought of those grueling days in the work camp with little modesty, and Killian’s warmth by her side at night. They had lived like husband and wife in every way but one.

Her mother searched her face for a moment, a soft smile upon her face. Then Mary
Margaret gently took Emma’s face in her hands. “But you still fell in love with him.”

All of Emma’s carefully constructed walls fell in that moment. Her face crumpled, and the tears came hot and fast. Her mother drew her close, and Emma curled in her lap as she continued to weep. Mary Margaret ran her fingers consolingly through her hair. Her mother said nothing until her crying ebbed to soft sniffling.

“Then why did you agree to marry Walsh, Emma?”

It was an excellent question. The only explanation Emma could give was that Walsh’s presence had been a distraction from her heartbreak. Especially when he threw himself so completely into getting all of them to Oklahoma. When Walsh had proposed (for the fourth time), she was honestly still slightly numb from everything she had been through. Her life in that brownstone with her parents felt like nothing more than a hazy dream. So much so, that the ring sitting there on her dessert plate seemed like a token for another Emma. Like she was watching the proposal take place outside of herself, from a distance. Walsh, of course, had taken her silence as a good sign. Before even hearing her answer, he had slipped the ring on her finger, explaining that it was her grandmother’s, and that Eva’s dying wish had been to see them wed. That had made her feel even worse about potentially turning him down - again. It was bad enough that her running away had sent Grandmother Eva to her sick bed to begin with. So with her parents watching with bated breath, Emma had mumbled a “yes.” Even Walsh’s enthusiastic embrace had seemed surreal, if she was honest.

But only one simple statement could truly answer her mother’s question.

“Because he left me, mother.”

Emma was surprised by her mother’s, soft, wry laugh. “Oh honey, he didn’t leave because he doesn’t love you. He left because he does.”

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Killian knocked back the rest of his tumbler of rum, then banged the glass on the bar to ask for another. There were dozens of things he needed to be doing with his time and money. Purchasing a horse, for one. But rum was better. Much better.

“They’ve got it all picked out ya’ know,” Killian told the bartender, his voice slurring. The man nodded sympathetically; those in his profession were used to the liquor loosening men’s tongues. “The land she talked about with me. And now she’s claiming it with that . . . that . . . “

“Bastard?” the barkeep supplied. And Killian laughed.

“Aye! Yes, the right bastard!” Killian stood and stumbled backwards, lifting his tumbler high in a toast. The men around him in the tiny, tented saloon chuckled, and he belatedly realized how loudly he had been talking. Oh well. The more to sympathize with his grief. He lifted his glass in salute to the entire room. “And it was I who laid the track what brought them here!”

Several men lifted their glasses in return, shouting advice. “You’re better off without her!” Women are nothin’ but trouble!”

Killian shook his head, tears swimming in his vision. “No, not my angel. You lads just don’t know. No one can hold a candle to my Emma.” He stumbled to the bar and pounded his fist for more rum. But before he could down any more, a hand closed over his wrist.

“He’s had enough.”
Killian turned blinking eyes to find David Swan seated at the bar to his right. If he wasn’t so drunk, he would be embarrassed that the man had heard him mooning over his daughter. David clapped him on the shoulder and pushed him back down upon the stool. Then Mr. Swan and the bartender exchanged knowing glances. Killian shook his head knowing there would be no more rum for him. He groaned as he leaned his elbows against the bar and rested his face in his hands.

“Are you here to beat the livin’ daylights outta me for sharing quarters with your daughter?”

Well hell, if the man didn’t know before, he sure did now. Killian braced himself for the onslaught. He deserved it.

“No,” David said casually, sipping at his mug of beer, “Emma told us everything.” He laughed as Killian arched a surprised brow. “And I have to say that any man who would go to such lengths to protect a woman is a man of great character. You didn’t have to pretend to be her brother, but you did.”

Killian shook his head, disbelieving. Maybe he was more drunk than he thought. Then he leaned closer to David Swan, quirking an eyebrow. “But that doesn’t mean you aren’t praying fervently that I’ll go home from this race empty handed.”

“On the contrary,” David said, turning to fully face him, “I’m praying you stake a claim even better than the one Oaken has his eye on.” Now Killian’s eyebrows were lifted almost to his hairline. “Are you now? And why is that?”

“Because all I’ve ever wanted for my daughter is what my wife and I have – true love, and she doesn’t love Walsh. You, on the other hand, she cried for when she was delirious with fever. Once she was well, and we had to tell her you had gone, my daughter was withdrawn and silent for days. When she finally spoke to my wife, it was to tell her all about her time with you.” David swept his hand out in gesture towards the rest of the saloon, “Now I hear you professing your love for my daughter to a bar full of men.”

“So?” Killian muttered, his heart ripping in two hearing how his leaving had affected Emma.

“So,” David told him, leveling him with a stern look as he set his mug down with a thud, “do something about it.”

Walsh obviously didn’t notice Emma walking up behind him, even when Killian’s eyes flickered in that direction. Emma was glad. She needed to see the man’s true colors.

He had Killian by the shirt collar, a fact that made Emma want to laugh out loud. She had told her parents about Killian’s success as a boxer. Walsh apparently hadn’t heard that part of the tale. Either that, or he was incredibly foolish. Lucky for him, Killian was choosing the higher ground and refraining from using physical force against the man. Walsh’s words could be clearly heard as Emma neared.

“You stay away from her, boy.”

“He’s not a boy; he’s a man.”

Walsh startled at the sound of Emma’s voice, his back stiffening. He relinquished Killian, then turned to face her with a pasted on smile. “There you are, darling.”
Emma narrowed her eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not stupid, Walsh. How many times have I told you that I don’t find jealously the least bit attractive? And possessiveness even less so.”

Emma turned on her heel without further comment, noting Killian’s proud smirk out of the corner of her eye. Emma began preparing Buttercup for the race, tightening the saddle and running her hands soothingly along her sides and flank. The crowds of race day had the mare fidgety. She smiled as she stroked her beloved horse’s neck, burying her face in her mane. She still couldn’t believe her parents had brought her with them all the way from Ireland.

“Emma, sweetheart,” Walsh’s voice dripped like warm honey, a tone that Emma was sure some women found appealing. To her, it was saccharine. Not to mention insincere. “You’re angry. It isn’t like you to be so.”

Emma snorted. Seriously? She sometimes wondered if he knew her at all. Well, if he wanted to marry her, it was fine time he learned. Emma turned to face him with a wicked smile upon her face. “I was a dancing girl in Boston.”

Confusion marred Walsh’s features at her abrupt change in the conversation. Then it cleared and he laughed, “Right, Emma. Of course you were.”

He turned to go with a shake of his head, which only infuriated Emma more. She grabbed him by the elbow and stepped in front of him. “I’m serious, Walsh. I wore nothing but my corset and knickers, and men threw money at me.”

His eyes widened and then darkened. “And that boy Jones –“

“I said don’t call him boy, and Killian jumped up on that stage, covered me up, and insisted on taking me home. He would have, too, if I hadn’t begged him to fight. I’m the reason he lost. He got distracted, trying to protect me.”

Walsh shook his head, his brow furrowing. “Why are you telling me this?”

“So you’ll know that Killian Jones isn’t the enemy,” Emma paused for a moment, then took a deep breath before adding, “and so you’ll know who you’re marrying.”

Walsh was silent for a heartbeat. Then his gaze softened, and a smile graced his face as he pushed a tendril of hair back under her bonnet. “Oh, Emma, the past no longer matters. All we need concentrate on now is our future. Together.”

It was the right thing to say. The romantic thing, even. But as Walsh pulled Emma close and wrapped his arms around her, disappointment settled in her chest.

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Mary Margaret Swan may have been a woman of society, but she was no shrinking violet. She didn’t carry smelling salts in her satchel or need to be helped to a fainting couch. Yet right now she was fanning herself with her hankie under the prairie sun.

“David, I can’t believe we’re doing this. What if we get caught?”

Her husband had taken to life in the American West with a relish that shocked Mary Margaret. He was also thrilled with the prospect of “getting back to his roots” and starting a sheep farm on their Oklahoma stake. But racing for it hadn’t been enough of a thrill for David, oh no. He had awakened his wife when it was still dark and snuck past the race borders. He was now running
his horse in circles so it would seem sweaty and tired when the crowds crested the ridge.

“We’re not getting caught,” David laughed, as if this were all a delightful game. He dropped the horse’s reins and pulled Mary Margaret to the bottom of a hill. He placed the green claim flag in his wife’s hand. “Now, hide here. When I give the signal, run to the white flag and stake our claim.”

“But,” Mary Margaret protested, waving her hankie around, “why do we need all this? At our age?”

He kissed her soundly, still curling her toes as he had when they were young. “We’re only in our early forties, dear. Let’s pretend we’re starting out all over again.” Mary Margaret beamed up at him, then cupped his cheek and kissed him again. David pulled her close and rested his chin on the top of her head as he waved his arm outward. “Just across that stream will be Emma’s claim. We can be nearby as she and Killian raise our grandchildren.”

“She and Killian?” Mary Margaret chuckled, leaning back to give him a knowing look.

David winked. “Why? Are you team Walsh?”

Just as she gave her husband a playful shove, they both turned at the sound of thundering hooves. Mary Margaret yelped and took her place, crouching down at the bottom of the hill. David ran the horse a bit more.

“My heart is practically in my nose,” she muttered as she eyed the cloud of dust that signaled the coming crowds.

“Now, Mary Margaret!” David cried, and she picked up her skirts with one hand and dashed for the white marker flag. She pulled it up, then shoved the stake of the green flag in the ground with a grunt. As the adrenaline ebbed away, a euphoria took over Mary Margaret, and she beamed as David threw his hat in the air with a whoop. He hugged her close, kissing the top of her head. She wrapped her arms around his waist and truly did feel like his blushing bride of 18 all over again.

*****************************************************************************

The mustang Killian had purchased was an absolute steal for such a fine animal. A fine animal that was completely unbroken. But the steed was fast, incredibly fast. The wind whipped past Killian as the spirited creature weaved in and out of the thick crowds racing for a claim. Stopping would be something else altogether, but he could worry about that later.

Cresting the first hill, he spotted a familiar head of gold hair. He had seen her straw bonnet go flying as soon as the pistol shot sounded to stat the race. It had apparently loosened the pins in her hair as well, for it flew behind her in a golden streak. He thought of her father’s words: So what are you going to do about it? He thought of his brother’s words in his dream: A man who refuses to fight for what he wants deserves what he gets. He thought of the green pastures that roll just a little bit complemented with the tree-lined stream.

With a shout and a yank of the reins, he turned his mustang to follow Walsh and Emma. Killian reached the edge of a ravine, stopping his mustang with just inches to spare. He saw Walsh and Emma carefully navigating a small path that led down to the stream below. Past the stream, the green pastures of Emma’s dreams rolled onward, and atop a tree-lined hill, a white flag fluttered in the breeze, beckoning him. Killian narrowed his eyes. Emma had come to America so she could have her freedom, but she would never have that with Walsh. He had seen enough of the man to know two things: he had no idea of Emma’s fire and spirit, and worse than that, he was a bully who...
expected a dutiful wife to stand silently by his side. If anything, he would stake this claim to save Emma from marrying the brute.

Killian followed the couple, hissing as his skittish mustang slid halfway down the slope. Emma turned just as her mare entered the stream. It was enough of a distraction to get Emma’s horse out of sorts. Something about the rushing water caused the animal to buck slightly. Because she was turned in the saddle, Emma lost her grip and went falling into the stream.

“Get up, Emma! Hurry!” Walsh shouted from the other side of the stream.

Killian stopped his horse and reached a hand down to help Emma up. “Are you alright?”

Her dripping hair and flushed face caused his heart to constrict as she looked up at him. Her lips curled up in a smile that, if he wasn’t mistaken, hinted at mischief. “Go, Killian. Claim your land.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes as he hesitated. “Go!”

Killian returned her grin, dug his heels into his horse’s side and took off across the stream. He glanced behind him to see Emma pull herself up easily into the saddle, then he leaned over his horse and concentrated on overtaking Walsh. His mustang did so easily, and before Walsh knew what was happening, Killian had galloped up the hill. He leapt from the horse’s back, sliding across the ground. He got back to his feet and ran to the white flag, pulling it up and tossing it aside. He raised the green flag in the air as he stared Walsh down.

But then Emma galloped up behind the other man. The sun was making a halo of her golden hair, and her face was shining with pride. Pride in him. He had never seen anything more beautiful. He hesitated, glancing down at the green flag he clutched in his hand. He suddenly realized; he didn’t want this without her.

“Killian!” Emma shouted. “What are you waiting for? Take it!”

Walsh looked between Emma and Killian, and his face suddenly contorted with rage. “If he won’t claim it, I will!”

Emma shouted in alarm as Walsh pulled a pistol from his saddle bag. She lunged towards him, both their horses bucking as she grappled for the gun, crying out, “No!” Killian’s heart panicked as he watched the gun waving about and the hooves pawing the air. Heedless of his own safety, he raced forward and flung himself at Walsh. In the same moment, Emma managed to rip the gun away from her fiancé, falling from her horse and landing on her backside without injury.

Killian wasn’t so lucky. Emma’s horse landed a hairsbreadth from Killian, sending him reeling backwards. Then Walsh’s horse stumbled and lost its footing. The giant beast rolled over, throwing Walsh harmlessly, but slamming Killian into a rock. The animal stumbled back to its feet, but Killian still lay gasping on the ground, blood seeping out from the blow to his head.

“Killian!” Emma screamed, racing across the grass to fall to her knees at his side. She removed her gloves and cupped Killian’s face with her hands. “Shh,” she soothed him, “be still, Killian. I’m here, and you’re going to be fine.”

“So this is your choice, then?” Walsh bit out hatefully. Emma ignored him, barely sparing a glance to the green flag that he tossed heedlessly to the ground. He walked away, mounted his horse, and galloped off.

Emma took a deep breath and let it out, relief flooding her that Walsh was gone. But that relief was short lived as she saw the blood staining the rock behind Killian’s head. She shifted him
away from it, and he cried out in pain. Emma leaned over him, stroking his cheek. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“Look Killian, you did it,” she encouraged him, “You have to be okay. This is your dream.”

He shook his head, wincing at the pain, “No, Emma. It’s your dream. I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for you.”

“It’s our dream,” she corrected him, grasping his shirt collar and shaking him slightly.

“I’ll . . . just be happy,” he gasped, “that’ll you have it.”

“That’s not enough for me!” she cried, sobbing now and burying her face in his chest.

“I love you, Emma Swan,” he choked out, “I loved you from the very start.”

Then he closed his eyes and gave a shuddering breath. He felt his soul leave his body. It was an interesting feeling, hovering above the earth and looking down at his own body, now dead. He was slowly being pulled away from the land of the living, but his heart still broke to see Emma crying over his still form, the sobs shaking her shoulders.

“Don’t leave me, Killian,” she practically screamed, shaking him harder, “please! I don’t want this without you!”

Her next words were mumbled softly against his chest, and he wondered if the ears attached to his physical body still worked. Because that was the only way he should have been able to hear them. He was so far above the earth now.

“I loved being Emma Jones,” she whispered, “I wanted to be Emma Jones for the rest of my life. You weren’t the only one in love from the start. I love you, Killian.”

Her words filled his soul with fire, and more importantly, a will to live. He fought the pull taking him higher, and strained towards his earthly body. Then he was plummeting to the ground, and right before he hit –

Killian lurched forward with a loud gasp, his eyes flying open. Emma started and pulled away from where she lay across his chest. She gasped and lifted shaking hands to touch his face.

“Killian?”

He grinned at her. “Swan?”

Emma pressed her lips to his and kissed him hungrily. Killian reached up to run his thumb across her cheek, just as hungry as his tongue searched her mouth in a desperate push and pull. Emma pulled away, laughter and wonder bubbling out of her.

“But you died!”

Killian smirked at her. “Then you best be believin’ I won’t be dyin’ twice.”

Emma laughed happy tears and peppered his face with kisses, and he began to laugh too. Then their lips found the other’s again, and their mouths slanted and their tongues tangled until they completely forgot where they were. Until the sound of pounding hooves jerked them back to reality.

Emma looked up at the line of riders fast approaching their location. She locked eyes with him and nodded as she picked up the green flag. “Together?” she asked him.
He rolled to his knees and grasped the stake just above Emma’s hand. He nodded.
“Together.”

They raised the flag as one and drove it into the ground, staking their claim. Theirs.

Chapter End Notes

* I originally wanted to do an epilogue set a few years in the future with some domestic stuff, but I just wasn't feeling it. The future David envisioned? Well, it happened, okay? ;)
* Next week I will be on vacation. I will have tons more time to write, but I don't think I'll have internet access. I'll still have your next installment written, but I will have to wait and see when I can post it.
* Remember when I said I use the term "rom-com" loosely? Well, the next story is going to be a bit different. It is truly going to be a one shot because I will be telling it solely from Emma's point of view. It is The Jones Identity. That's right - our pirate will be a different version of Jason Bourne :) I know it's a slightly odd choice, but I hope you'll all give it a try!
The Jones Identity (CS AU of The Bourne Identity)

Chapter Notes

* This is just a true one-shot because I told this solely from Emma's (Marie's) point of view. I mainly did that because political intrigue is just not my thing. My husband loves the Bourne movies, so I've seen them all multiple times... and some things still confuse me, lol!

* This is another one that came to me at the gym. This time, it was the theme song playing at the end. As I listened to the words, I thought of our pirate. That's the lyrics at the beginning. The song is Extreme Ways by Moby

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I had to close down everything
I had to close down my mind
Too many things could cut me
Too much can make me blind
I've seen so much in so many places
So many heartaches
So many faces
So many dirty things
You couldn't even believe

The snow was so thick in the streets of Bern, Switzerland that it made stomping difficult. And Emma Swan wanted to stomp. She swore under her breath as she approached her yellow bug, rooting around in her bag for her keys. The bag she had just dumped out on the counter in front of the passport office. So much for Americans finding assistance at the embassy. Taking off to bum around Europe had sounded so exotic and thrilling five years ago when Neal had suggested it. Now she was homeless with an expired passport. And Neal? Well, that was ancient history. There had been three more dead-end relationships since then amidst Emma’s rootless wanderings through the continent. Now that August had taken off on his motor cycle leaving behind nothing but an eviction notice and her broken heart, Emma was thinking it might be time to cut her losses and head back to the states. If she could find a way to renew her passport, that is. Which apparently was impossible without an address.

Emma’s fingers, stiff and almost thoroughly frozen through her threadbare gloves, lost their hold on her keys. She swore again as she yanked them out of the snow with numb digits. When she stood up again, she startled to find a man approaching her from the alleyway of the embassy. He quickly lifted his hands in a placating gesture and softened his facial features.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” he explained as he approached her cautiously, “but I couldn’t help overhearing you back there. I thought we might be able to help one another.”
“Okay,” Emma said hesitantly as she turned to face him, arms crossed in a protective gesture. She scrutinized the man’s face, which was startlingly handsome. His dark hair was messy, yet looked soft and slick. The scruff that covered his pretty face gave it a more rugged appeal, and his blue eyes glittered brightly in the glare from the snow. But Emma had never been swayed by charm or an attractive face. Whatever proposition he had, it better be a good one.

“See, I need a ride, and it sounds like you need money.”

The grin he gave her was beyond charming; all lopsided and cocky. Emma scowled as an involuntary swoop hit her stomach. Just because the man appealed to her hormones didn’t mean she would automatically trust him, although she was sure that smile had gotten him plenty in his lifetime.

“What makes you think I need money?” Emma hedged.

“People without a current address typically don’t have money, either,” he explained bluntly as he came even closer. “I just need a ride to Paris, that’s all. I’ll pay you twenty thousand now and twenty thousand more when we get to Paris.”

Emma pulled in a breath sharply. “American dollars?” she asked. His accent was British, so she expected him to say pounds, or maybe Euros. But he stepped right up to her and unzipped the duffel at his side, revealing wads of cash wrapped in bank slips.

“American,” he clarified, and she looked long into his intense blue eyes, unwavering. She wasn’t the stupid 19 year old she had been when Neal first brought her here. She’d learned to read people, and she rarely got taken in. This was the type of situation she would normally brush aside with a sarcastic quip and a roll of her eyes. That much cash in a duffel? It screamed suspicious. And what was a British guy doing in the American embassy? His eyes flickered nervously back towards the alley and for the first time Emma’s ears picked up the sound of shouting, sirens, and police whistles. His eyes bore into hers as he silently plead for her assent. She couldn’t lie, part of her insanity was the thought of that much cash, but the other part was the look in his eyes. Somehow, her gut said she could trust him.

“My name’s Emma,” she told him, “Emma Swan.”

His smile was less cocky this time, and more sincere. “Killian Jones.”

She gave him a nod. “Get in.”

******************************************************************************

Emma Swan was many things, but chatty was not one of them. However, there was only so much silence she could endure in the tight spaces of the bug, so she started to talk. And talk. And talk.

“So then Ruby decided to run off to Prague with this doctor she met. Though when he said he was a surgeon, turned out he meant plastic surgeon. Anyway, he ended up being a dick, so I met up with her in Brussels. She had a cousin there who got us jobs at this hostel. That’s where I met August. August the Douchebag. Never thought I was a sucker for a motorcycle and a leather jacket, but there I was. A freakin’ stereotype. He was American, not European, so I don’t even know what the appeal was. I’ll call it temporary insanity . . .” Emma trailed off, biting on her bottom lip. She glanced over at her traveling companion, who was leaning his head against the passenger side window and gazing out at the scenery. He did the whole pensive and brooding routine incredibly well.
“Listen,” she told him firmly, and he finally turned his gaze upon her, “I’m not normally a real talkative person. But you haven’t said two words since we left Bern.”

He gave her a tentative smile in response. “I like your voice. It’s soothing.”

Emma rolled her eyes, despite the blush that crept up her cheeks. “Guys have told me many flattering things, but no one has ever called my voice soothing. Sarcastic. Grating. Biting. But, nope, never soothing.”

He chuckled. “Well, it is to me. I haven’t slept in . . . well, a long time.”

Emma squirmed in her seat, for some reason uncomfortable with his words. Like she was his savior or something crazy like that. She reached for the radio and fiddled with the dial. “How about we listen to the radio? What kind of music do you like?”

He narrowed his eyes in a more troubled manner than the question warranted. “I don’t know.”


“I told you, I don’t know.”

Emma just laughed. “What do mean, you don’t know? Just tell me, come on.”

“I said I don’t know!” he shouted. Then he leaned his head forward, grasping his face in trembling hands.

Emma swallowed hard, her own hand shaking slightly as she switched off the radio. Killian sighed and looked up at her apologetically.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you,” he told her with complete sincerity. “I really don’t know. I don’t know who I am.”

Emma glanced from the road in alarm, her voice skeptical. “You have amnesia?”

“Aye,” he admitted, drawing in a long breath and then releasing it. “Three weeks ago, I was pulled out of the Mediterranean by a group of fisherman with a bullet hole in my left shoulder. While patching me up, the captain found a tiny device imbedded in my shoulder. It contained the code for a safety deposit box in Bern. That’s what I was doing there. That’s where I got all those US bills.”

Emma shook her head vigorously. Not that she didn’t believe him; she did. That was what made it all so frightening. “What kind of man pays someone forty thousand US dollars for a ride to Paris?”

“I wish I knew,” he answered softly.

Emma didn’t answer. Instead, she pulled into the parking lot of a run-down diner. Despite its hole-in-the-wall appearance, the parking lot was packed with cars. Killian nodded at her, his mouth set in a grim but determined line.

“I don’t blame you,” he told her. “I’ll still pay you the twenty thousand.”

Emma gave him her own crooked grin. “What are you talking about, Jones? I just got hungry.”
“So,” Emma said to him, licking whipped cream from her lips after her sip of hot cocoa, “let me get this straight. You have no memory of who you are, but your safety deposit box had all that cash, a gun, and a stack of passports with multiple names. Why Killian Jones, then?”

Killian took a sip of his coffee, then shrugged, “I obviously have a British accent. The UK passport had that name, so that’s what I’m going with.”

“Not much of an alias,” Emma mused. “I mean, the Jones is, but Killian is sort of a unique name.”

Killian arched a brow. “Maybe that’s the point.”

“Then again,” Emma mused, tapping her finger against the table, “the same name was on your French passport, and the American passport. So it could be your real name.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Killian agreed. “And I’m also hoping to piece everything else together in Paris. I was found in the Mediterranean, so of those three countries, France makes the most sense. Hopefully the address on my French passport is my home.”

“And maybe just going home will trigger your memory,” Emma supplied.

“Exactly.” Killian cocked his head at her. “You’re taking this whole crazy thing awfully well.”

Emma lowered her mug and leaned across the table towards Killian. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I have this gift – I like to call it my super power – I can tell when people are lying to me. And you? You aren’t lying.”

Killian gave a shaky sigh and ran his hand across his face. “That may be so, Emma. And I have told you the entire truth. But being around me? I’m not so sure it’s safe.” His eyes darted around the diner, and then he leaned closer to her. “I know the make, model, and year of every car in the parking lot in addition to every single license plate number. I know where every exit is and precisely how long it would take us to reach each one. I know the approximate weight and height of both police officers over there and how to take both of them down in hand to hand combat. I know the taller one is left handed, and I know that the shorter one is slower with his gun.” He took a deep breath and leaned away from her. “That’s not normal, Swan. How do I know all of that, but I still don’t know who I am?”

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Emma walked out of the market and across the parking lot, surprised to find Killian waiting for her, leaning casually against her bug. The smile he gave her was relaxed and bright as she approached, one she had yet to see on his face. When she reached him, he grasped her arms gently and pressed his lips to hers. It was quick, a mere peck, but she was embarrassed to feel heat rising up her neck from the kiss. When he pulled back, his eyes were bright and his smile wide, but his words didn’t match.

“Don’t look, but those same officers from the diner are here.”

Emma obeyed, keeping her eyes trained on Killian’s, and smiling herself. She’d picked up a few tricks of her own living on the streets as a teenager. Killian pressed his forehead to hers, still acting. And he was damn good, too. His touch and his looks were making her knees turn to jelly. If she didn’t know he was acting, she might be swooning in his arms right now. And Emma Swan didn’t swoon.
“It may be nothing, but I thought it best we act like a couple.”

Emma blinked once to convey she understood, then swung her arms around his neck and gave him a peck of her own. Then she stepped back.

“Ready to go, sweetie?”

Killian swallowed hard, and his eyes darkened, but she had to believe it was from adrenaline, not her kiss. He got in as she crossed to the driver’s side. Once the doors were shut, he turned to her.

“I was afraid you had left me.”

She glanced at him as she pulled the car back onto the road. He was telling the truth.

“Chill out, Jones, I needed tampons.”

His face turned bright crimson, and for the first time since they met, she laughed out loud.

***************************************************

Emma maneuvered the bug into a tight space along the Paris street. She and Killian both craned their necks up at the historic apartment complex, both a little in awe at its opulence. This was a rather posh section of Paris. Emma tore her eyes away from the building to look at Killian. She would never admit it, but she was a little sad that their road trip was over. He ducked his head under her gaze and scratched behind his ear. He cleared his throat nervously as he unzipped the duffel and took out a wad of cash.

“Here’s the rest of your payment,” he said, handing it to her. “I can’t thank you enough, really.”

Emma nodded, suddenly shy herself, and stuffed the money into her bag. Killian turned to open the door, then Emma blurted out, “Could I come up?”

He turned to her with wide, surprised eyes, and Emma suddenly wanted to crawl under the back seat. She knew how it must sound. She tucked her hair behind her ears as she quickly clarified, “I mean, to use your restroom. And maybe freshen up a bit?”

He nodded, a tiny smile teasing the corner of his mouth. “Sure.”

***************************************************

The inside of Killian’s apartment was just as opulent as the outside. And huge. But the décor was stark and cold. Emma hummed in approval as she dropped her bag on the floor by the door. Killian walked around slowly, fingering the spines of the books in the living room, running his palm along the surface of a desk.

“Anything look familiar?” she asked.

Killian frowned and shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

Emma grabbed her bag again and left him to use the hall bathroom. She fished her tooth brush out of her bag and ran the water as she scrubbed the fuzzy layers off her teeth. She and Ruby had dubbed it “road mouth.” Then she ran her brush through her long, blonde hair, working out all the tangles. She glanced behind her at the inviting claw-foot, porcelain tub with an attached shower
head. Could she ask Killian if she could take a shower? She shook her head quickly at that thought. She would surely give the wrong impression if she asked that. She settled for grabbing a washcloth off the shelf so she could wash her face and neck. She ran the water, slipping her finger through the flow to find it ice cold. She let it run a few more minutes, then tried again. It was still frigid; it hadn’t warmed up at all.

“Killian,” she called out, “there’s no hot water.”

“Okay,” he replied, more casual than she had ever heard him, “try running the tub too, and I’ll check the kitchen.”

Something was off about his voice, but she did as he asked. She ran the tub and the sink simultaneously, but still the water was cold. Emma stepped out into the hallway.

“It’s still not working.” Emma’s voice died, and she stood rigid to find Killian slipping slowly from the kitchen with a knife gripped in one hand. He slowly put a finger to his lips.

“Aye,” he continued, as casual as ever, “it’s the same in the kitchen.”

Suddenly, the large picture window in the living room was shattering into a million pieces as a large, dark figure burst through it. Emma screamed and fell to her knees, covering her head. The man rolled expertly to his feet, a revolver in his hand. Pointed straight at her.

Killian collided with the man, sending him crashing into the desk on the other side of the room. The revolver went sliding across the hard wood floor, and Emma grabbed it. Normally, she never cowered from a fight, having grown up a fighter herself, but Killian and their assailant were embroiled in hand to hand combat like she had never seen. Their arms and legs flew so fast, it was if each could anticipate the other’s movements. Emma lifted the gun, but there was no way she could shoot Killian’s attacker without possibly hitting Killian, too. The men flung each other aside, only to spring back up again. They used everything at their disposal as weapons: magazines, pens from the desk, the fireplace poker. Killian’s knife had long ago been knocked from his grip. Emma grabbed that, too.

Finally, Killian had the man on his knees. Behind him, Killian wrapped his forearm around him, his bicep bulging as he crushed the man’s larynx. Emma backed herself into the corner, her fists trembling as she held fast to the two weapons. Emma didn’t know what was worse, the man’s panicked expression as his eyes bulged and his hands clawed, or Killian’s cool demeanor as he choked the life out of him. Finally, the man’s eyes closed, and Killian released him as he slumped to the ground. He strode across the room and began grabbing papers and money out of the desk. He tossed them into the fireplace, lit a match, and tossed that in as well.

“Search the man for a phone,” Killian commanded. When Emma just stood there trembling, Killian’s countenance softened and he hastened to her side. Gently, he pried first the knife then the gun from her fingers. He tossed the first aside, then tucked the latter into the waistband of his jeans.

“Search the man,” Killian told her again, “he’ll have a phone on him.”

Emma swallowed hard, then nodded and crossed to the man’s limp body. Killian strode to the cordless phone on his desk and dialed. Emma’s hands trembled as she searched first the man’s jacket pockets, then the pockets of his pants. In French, Killian told the police something, then shot two rounds into the far wall. Emma jerked at the sound, but also at what she saw when she finally located the man’s phone.

“Killian,” she whispered as she stood with the man’s cell phone cradled in her palms, “what
the hell is this?” Her hands trembled as she saw not only Killian’s picture but her own passport photo on the tiny screen.

“Break it,” Killian commanded as he snatched up his duffel and jogged past her towards the kitchen. When she hesitated, he barked the words, “Smash it under your foot, damn it!”

Emma did as he told, her entire body shaking. “He was going to kill me. He almost killed me.”

Killian returned from the kitchen where he’d grabbed some crackers and some bottles of water just in time to catch Emma as she swayed. And Emma Swan did not faint.

“Look, I know you’re freaked out,” he told her calmly, “but we have to get out of here. That phone had a tracker on it. They’ll know where to find us.”

“Who’s they?” Emma asked as Killian put his arms around her and steered her towards the apartment door. In addition to his own duffel, he had Emma’s bag slung over his shoulder. He didn’t answer her question. Emma realized that he might not even know himself.

When they exited the building, Paris police were squealing down the street. Killian steered her away from the commotion, whispering in her ear. “I called the police as a distraction. It’s our cover to get away, but don’t look.”

Emma attempted to step towards her bug, but Killian’s firm arms around her shoulder prevented it. “We have to leave your car,” he whispered.

They continued down the street, and Emma allowed him to guide her until a flyer pinned to an advertisement board caught her eye. She yanked Killian’s arms off her shoulders and snatched it down. It was a wanted poster for Interpol – with her picture next to Killian’s. The words were in French and English, and Emma read them with horror. It called them murderers, terrorists, and claimed they were armed. Emma backed away from Killian as he reached towards her.

“Oh my god,” she muttered, her hand flying to her face, “oh my god.”

Then she turned and ran. Killian caught up to her and grasped her by the shoulders.

“Get away from me!” she screamed, kicking and railing with her fists. She had taken down men twice her size before, but Killian was an altogether different story. Whoever he was, her moves were ineffectual against his obviously professional training. He had her arms pinned in a vice-like grip as he hauled her down a side alley. He pulled her around so his body shielded her from being seen from the street.

“I’m not trying to hurt you Emma,” he whispered in her ear, “on the contrary, I’m trying to save your life.”

“Could have fooled me,” she bit out as she squirmed once again in his grip.

He spun her around to face him. “Listen, I don’t know who I used to work for or what they made me do. But they’re obviously pissed that they lost control of me. I didn’t mean to pull you into this, but the only way for you to survive now is for you to stay with me. Because they will kill you. Do you understand me, Emma?”

Her eyes darted around frantically until Killian softened his grip. He cupped her face gently in his hands. “Look me in the eye, Emma. Use your super power. Have I lied to you?”
Emma’s pulse slowed as she gazed into his eyes. His twin pools of sapphire showed tenderness and intense regret. “No,” she told him softly, “you haven’t.”

He backed away from her tentatively, but he relaxed when her wobbly smile told him she wasn’t going to run. She took a deep breath and hugged her middle.

“So what do we do now?”

Killian ran a hand through his thick dark hair, making it stick up even more than normal. “We need a car and a place to hide; preferably a place far from any cities.”

Emma nodded firmly. “Those are actually two things I can help you with.”

*******************************************************

Killian drove the small, beat up Volvo they had stolen over the crest of a hill, and Emma sat up eagerly at the sight of the farm house in the distance. She reached over, took Killian’s hand, and squeezed it. He responded by lifting their joined hands and brushing a kiss to her knuckles. Ever since that tense moment in the alley, Killian had been doling out large amounts of casual affection. As if to assure her that he wasn’t some monstrous villain.

He had also been extremely impressed when Emma had boldly stolen the Volvo with tools she kept in her bag. His thick eyebrows had shot to his hairline as he whistled under his breath. “You’re a car thief, love?”

Emma had winked at him and shrugged. “How do you think I got the bug?”

His answering grin had been wide and genuine. “You’re bloody brilliant, lass, amazing!”

Killian pulled the car up to the farm house, parking it in front of a locked shed. He gave the property an intense once-over as they both exited the car.

“You’re sure no one’s living here?”

“I’m sure,” Emma told him. “My friends only use this as a summer home. It isn’t even a working farm anymore.”

Killian nodded. “Well, let’s get inside. You never know when someone’s watching.”

Emma watched as he effortlessly picked the lock, then followed him into the farmhouse kitchen. Emma rubbed her arms. “It’s freezing. Let’s start a fire.”

Killian caught her arm before she could make her way to the hearth. “No,” he told her firmly, “someone may see the smoke.”

They tiptoed through the main part of the quiet house, everything feeling to Emma as if it were blurred around the edges. They made their way upstairs to find three bedrooms. One was clearly the master with an on-suite bathroom, one was obviously a children’s room, and the last was a cozy guest bedroom. Killian motioned her into the last. When she stepped inside, he shut the door behind her, discarded her coat, and rubbed her arms.

“Warm yourself under the covers and try to get some sleep. I’ll stand watch at the window.” He told her, pulling out the revolver that was still tucked in his waistband.

Emma pulled the weapon gently from his grip and laid it on the dresser. “Didn’t you tell me you
hadn’t slept in a long time?” she asked him softly. She reached up and traced her fingertips gently across his scruff, relishing the roughness of it beneath her fingertips. Killian’s eyes closed softly as he turned his head into her touch, his lips pressing against her soft palm. She traced her other hand up over the shell of his ear, then gently touched the hair that fell across his forehead. She leaned forward and brushed her nose against his, then pressed their foreheads together, digging her fingers deeper into his soft hair.

“Emma,” he groaned in a half-hearted protest. She knew he was warning her this was a bad idea, but she didn’t care.

“Shhh,” she whispered, then pressed her lips against his. He responded almost immediately, tangling his own hands in her hair and slanting his mouth over hers to deepen the kiss. Emma tilted her head back and moaned as he trailed kisses down her neck, his hand drifting down to ghost across her body. He grasped her firmly about the waist and pulled her closer.

Emma pushed his jacket off his shoulders, then yanked at the hem of his shirt. He pulled away from their kisses to allow her to peel the shirt off him, but as soon as it was cast aside, his lips covered hers once more. She ran her hands now along his torso, tracing every muscle as he yanked at her shirt as well. She shivered as the frigid air hit her bare skin, and Killian responded by wrapping her completely in his arms, the heat from his now frantic kisses setting her ablaze from the inside.

Soon every article of clothing was discarded, and they cocooned themselves beneath the heavy quilt on the bed. There, they created their own heat so intense their bodies were soon slick with sweat. When the ecstasy passed, and they lay there panting in each other’s arms, Killian pillowied his head against Emma’s chest. She ran her fingers through his now damp hair, pressing kisses to the top of his head. She exulted when his breaths evened out and he lay limply curled against her.

He hadn’t slept in a long time he had said, but now he was. In Emma Swan’s arms.

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When Emma woke the next morning, her body was deliciously sore in all the best places. She stretched as she opened her eyes and realized with a start that Killian’s body was no longer pressed against hers. She sat up quickly to find Killian standing there, fully dressed, the revolver raised as he moved towards the door.

“Stay here,” he told her.

Emma just rolled her eyes as she shoved the bed linens aside and quickly dressed. The hell she was staying there while he went off to face who knew what! Emma followed behind him as he silently made his way down the stairs. Suddenly, the kitchen door burst open, and Killian spun towards the sound, revolver at the ready.

“What the hell is this!” shouted a sandy-haired man as he stopped in the doorway, hands raised.

“Killian,” Emma said in as calm a voice as she could muster, “put the gun down. This is my friend David. He and his wife own the house.”

“Emma!” David exclaimed as he recognized her. She ran to him, and he gathered her into a hug. He eyed Killian suspiciously over the top of her head. “What trouble have you gotten yourself into now?”

“Emma!” squealed a voice just behind David. His wife Mary-Margaret pulled Emma into a hug as well, even as she balanced a grocery sack on her hip. A little girl tumbled in after her, wrapping her
tiny arms around Emma’s leg. Emma reached down and scooped up the little girl. She saw Mary Margaret eyeing Killian warily.

“Everyone,” Emma said, turning to smile at Killian, “this is Killian Jones, my . . . my . . .”

“Boyfriend,” Killian supplied, flashing his most charming grin. By now he had shoved the revolver back into his waistband, behind his back. He stepped forward and gave both David and Mary Margaret a handshake.

“What are you two doing here?” David questioned, widening his stance and crossing his arms across his broad chest.

“Oh, David,” Mary Margaret reprimanded, giving his arm a light slap, “drop the over-protective brother routine. You know your little sister is a bit of a gypsy.” Mary Margaret threaded her arm through Emma’s elbow and guided her towards the kitchen. “So,” she whispered in Emma’s ear, “he’s hot. Where’d you meet him?”

“Your Emma’s brother?” Killian asked, his turn to be suspicious. “Emma told me she was a foster kid.”

“Foster brother,” Emma clarified as she helped Mary Margaret unload the groceries, “his mother Ruth took me in when I was 12.”

“She kept running away, though,” David chuckled, time allowing him to see the humor of it.

“But Ruth always took me back,” Emma added fondly.

Suddenly, the kitchen door burst open and a little boy with his mother’s dark hair came bounding into the room. “Mom! Dad!” Leo Nolan gasped, not even noticing his aunt’s presence. “I can’t find Wilby anywhere!”

“Who’s Wilby?” Killian asked, his forehead furrowing.

“Oh, just our dog,” Mary Margaret explained with a wave. Then she turned to her son, “Don’t worry, sweetie, I’m sure he was just excited to be back on all this land for Christmas.”

“Christmas!” Emma groaned. “I can’t believe I forgot! I didn’t think about what day it was –“

“Emma,” Killian cut her off, “get them all down in the basement. Now.”

Emma’s eyes met his, her face going pale at his intensity. She grabbed her niece in her arms, and shoved Mary Margaret towards the basement door. David scowled even as he snatched up Leo.

“Emma, who the hell is this guy?”

“David, please, you have to trust him. Just get in the basement.” Her brother must have seen something in her eyes that convinced him because he turned without further argument towards the basement stairs. As Emma headed down, she looked back to see David clasp Killian by the upper arm.

“Swear to me you’ll keep my family safe.”

“I swear,” Killian answered firmly, “even if it costs my life.”

Emma didn’t like that answer.
Tears were rolling down the cheeks of little Leo and Ava Nolan as their parents hurriedly packed up their SUV. Mary Margaret was being surprisingly brave as she attempted to soothe them with encouraging words. Not that it was all that easy to soothe them after hearing the land above them shake with explosions as they had huddled in the basement. And Wilby . . . poor Wilby . . .

Killian had returned, shaken, to inform her that there had been a sniper. She had never seen him like that, he was normally so calm. But then she saw his eyes as he glanced over her shoulder at the Nolan family. He didn’t want an innocent family, especially children, caught in the crosshairs. It had rattled him severely, and it made her fall even more in love with him.

This wasn’t like her at all. Emma Swan rarely fell in love, and never so quickly. This man didn’t even know who he was! It was probably the craziest relationship Emma had ever found herself in, and she knew crazy. But at the same time, nothing had ever felt so right.

Killian turned to her now, his eyes shadowed, and his lips downcast. He drew her close in a tender embrace, rubbing his hand down her back. He pressed a kiss to first her forehead, then her nose, then her cheek, and then her lips. The kiss was tender and slow, and there was an ache to it. When he pulled back, he ran his thumb across her lower lip.

“You have to go with your brother,” he told her softly.

“No,” Emma protested, grasping at his arms, “we have to stay together. You said so yourself.”

He shook his head. “I was wrong. Being with me isn’t safe. Go with David. I gave him firm instructions that he has to drop you off somewhere, though. You have to stay far away from everything familiar. Cut your hair. Dye it. Use only cash.” He pressed the duffel into her arms. “I’m traveling light, so take it.”

“But,” Emma whispered as she clutched the bag to her chest, “I don’t want to lose you.”

Killian groaned in true anguish as he pressed his forehead to hers, “And I don’t want to lose you.” He traced her cheek with his fingertips, then tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ll find you, Emma. This all stops now; I swear. I’m going after them, I’ll end this, and then I’ll find you.”

Emma’s lips wobbled and her voice broke. “Promise?”

“No,” he told her solemnly, “I vow it.”

She yanked his head down and kissed him, hard and desperate. Then he nodded once, and she backed away. Emma climbed in the back seat with her niece and nephew and watched out the back window as she traveled farther and farther away from Killian Jones.

A year and a half went by before she saw him again. There was more cash in the duffel than she had known; enough to open a little tourist spot along the Greek coast renting wave ridders and pontoon boats. She changed her name to Jennifer, cut her hair as Killian had suggested, and dyed it brown. An old acquaintance of Ruby’s got her a fake passport. David had begged her before dropping her off at the bus station to go back home to Ruth, but Emma was afraid that even that wasn’t safe. And sometimes, in the quiet of night, when memories came to her of the heat she and Killian had created together, the kisses she still felt against her lips, she knew that she also stayed for him. Though she doubted even an ocean could keep him from finding her.
Unless . . . but no. Even a year and a half later, she couldn’t bring herself to even consider that he was dead. Surely she would know if he was. She would be able to sense it somehow. They had shared a connection that was rare. And Emma Swan never believed in soul mates.

Until she met Killian Jones.

It was a bright, sunny day with only wispy clouds in the sky when he returned. Emma put up the closed sigh and wiped down the counter. She pulled the rubber band from her wrist and pulled her hair up into a sloppy bun atop her head. It had grown out again, and the brown dye job was long gone. She hoped she wasn’t getting too comfortable, but there hadn’t been so much of a hint that anyone was after her in a year.

“Swan?”

Emma froze at the voice. She knew that voice. And most here didn’t know her by that name. She turned slowly, fearing that she had imagined it. But there he was. Silhouetted in the doorway by the setting sun, her heart stuttered at the sight of him. His hands were stuffed in his jeans pockets, his face in a bright, joyous smile.

“Killian!” She raced across the room to him, her brain telling her to play it cool. But her heart, apparently, had other ideas. She flung her arms around him and pressed her lips to his. He grasped her tightly, one hand firm at her waist, the other cupping the back of her head. She pulled back and peppered his face with kisses. He laughed at first, a sound she had never heard from him before, then he held her tightly against him.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She was the one who laughed now, capturing his lips again. There was so much to be said, so many things to explain, but neither of them cared in that moment. Emma dragged him upstairs to her apartment, and talking was the least of their concerns as they quickly shed their clothes. It was Emma who finally slept peacefully this time, feeling safe for the first time in a year and a half with his arms holding her tight. She didn’t open the rental shop the next day, and he managed to get his story out in bits and pieces amidst breaks in making love.

It turned out he had grown up much like her, as an orphan. He still didn’t remember his life, just what he had learned in files from both MI-6 and the CIA. “They made me into a weapon, Emma, brainwashed me,” he told her brokenly. “I was the perfect candidate because I had no family to tie me down or miss me.”

He still couldn’t remember the horrible things he had done as an assassin, but he wept as he relayed to Emma some of what he read in the files. Some of his hits had even been American and British citizens, all in the name of “homeland security.” His eyes were tortured as he looked at her for a long time before telling her brokenly, “I understand if you don’t want me, Emma, knowing the truth of who I am and what I’ve done.”

That’s when she told him she loved him for the first time.

Marriage was impossible with the life they had to live, but they vowed themselves to one another all the same. Constantly on the move, always having to hide their true identities, it was a difficult life. But they had each other, and that was all that mattered. Killian would get flashes of memories and write them down, but it was frustrating and discouraging. Every memory was one he would rather forget.

Emma would let him pull her close in an embrace, and she would tell him, “One day you’ll
remember something good.”

And he would always smile at her tenderly, kiss her, and say, “I do remember something good.”

A smile would tease her lips, and her eyes would shine in wonder. Even after they had the same conversation a hundred times, she would ask, “What is it?”

And with a twinkle in his eye, he would answer, “Don’t you know, Emma? It’s you.”

Chapter End Notes

* SPOILERS AHEAD FOR THE BOURNE MOVIES!!! In this version, everything ends happily for our OTP. So Marie gets killed in Bourne Supremacy, but that doesn't happen to Emma. She and Killian hide away on a secluded beach somewhere, making love and sipping rum for the rest of their days ;)
* Up next will be an AU of Where the Heart Is, the movie from the 90s starring Natalie Portman. It will be a true one shot as well because I am making myself tell it solely from Killian's point of view. That will also give it a different spin from the movie. I can't remember if any of you gave it to me as a prompt or not, but it was also in my original list of ideas.
Chapter Notes

* I was NOT planning on this being more than a one-shot, but ya'll, I wouldn't be posting today if I tried to finish it. To say life got in the way is an understatement. This week has beat the crap out of me! Anyway, I wanted you all to have SOMETHING, so I posted this, which is the shortest chapter yet in this series.
* Despite all of that, I have LOVED writing this solely from Killian's point of view. I feel it has given me more creative freedom than any prompt I have tackled in this series so far. I have the rest outlined, and I am really looking forward to finishing this one. I hope ya'll enjoy it!

Granny’s diner in Storybrooke, Maine, was packed as usual for the lunch crowd. Killian Jones, however, took no notice of it. He was looking instead across the street at the figure sitting on a bench in the park. She was eating a box of saltine crackers, occasionally tossing some to the ducks that waddled up from the pond. Beside her on the bench sat a small potted apple tree cutting. It was that apple tree that had sent Emma through the doorway of the Storybrooke Public Library where he was acting librarian. He was afraid he hadn’t made the best of impressions on the young lass, snapping at her in condescending fashion as she asked for books on how to care for her tree. He hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings or imply that she was ignorant; it was simply the surly countenance he had adopted ever since returning home amidst too much gossip.

“She’s pretty, isn’t she?”

The voice over his shoulder jerked Killian out of such a deep reverie, that he spilled coffee all over the table in front of him. He narrowly managed to rescue his pristine copy of *Treasure Island* before the brown puddle spread entirely across the table. Mary Margaret Blanchard rushed for extra napkins, apologizing profusely as she assisted Killian in mopping up the mess.

“Apologies entirely unnecessary, Mary Margaret,” Killian assured her. The petite school teacher was one of those rare people to whom Killian spoke with kindness, largely because she was generally above town gossip, and never one to partake in passing judgment or speculating.

Mary Margaret’s gaze traveled out the window again to the blonde across the street. “I worry about her,” she mused, crossing her arms across her chest and cocking her pixie head.

“Aye,” Killian agreed, “do you know where she’s staying?”

The third grade teacher shook her head, a frown marring her prefect cream complexion. “I don’t, and that’s part of what worries me. I’ve asked around, subtly of course, and no one seems to know.”

“She came into the library wanting help with her apple tree cutting. She worried it was dying.” Killian looked into Mary Margaret’s face as he spoke. He knew full well, as all of Storybrooke did, that the little tree was part of the basket of gifts given to new residents courtesy of the Storybrooke Welcoming Committee. A committee that consisted of one sole member: Mary Margaret Blanchard.
Mary Margaret narrowed her green eyes, and Killian could practically see the wheels turning in her pretty head. “That tree will die if not planted soon,” she muttered, more to herself than to Killian. Then she gave a brief nod, also more to herself, as if coming to an internal conclusion. Then she left the diner and marched resolutely across the street.

Killian watched as one of the kindest women he had ever known approached Storybrooke’s newcomer with a sweet smile upon her face. Thinking of kind women, however, only made him frown at unbidden memories.

His frown deepened as he watched the blonde rise to her feet, awkwardly shouldering a backpack as Mary Margaret scooped up the potted tree. He frowned this time out of concern, for Emma Swan, the lovely vision who had swept unexpectedly into his library, was very heavily pregnant. And clearly alone in the world.

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The rustling of pages should be an ordinary, common place sound in a library, one that a librarian should be able to ignore, or at least catalogue into background noise. But no matter what task he was immersed in, Killian Jones was keenly aware of the rustling of pages from the back corner of the children’s nook, and he had been at this same time of the day for 2 weeks now.

Summers in coastal Maine can typically be described as pleasant. It isn’t that it doesn’t get warm, just that it rarely gets really and truly hot. Its spot high north on the map combined with the breeze constantly coming off the ocean means that the height of summer still only cracks the 80s. But this week, they were experiencing a rare heat wave with temperatures in the 90s.

Emma Swan came into the library on the first day of the heat wave with badly flushed cheeks, blonde hair stuck to her forehead with perspiration, and eyes that seemed a bit glassy. Killian had rushed to her immediately as she seemed to sway slightly on her feet. He got her set up in the children’s nook amidst piles of pillows, gathering several into a heap so she could prop her feet up. With barely two words spoken between them, he had dashed through the door in the back that led to his small kitchen and quickly got her a glass of water. She had quirked an eyebrow at him as he handed her the glass.

“You have me confused, Mr. Jones. Are you a Dr. Jekyll or a Mr. Hyde?” She laughed further at his bemused expression, then explained, “You were pretty rude to me last time, and now you’re falling all over yourself to help me. Feeling guilty, or do pregnant women just make you nervous?”

Killian had ducked his head and groaned, scratching behind his ear. “My apologies, lass, for the last time you were here. We rarely get visitors, you see, and I’m used to . . . well, let’s just say I have my reasons for keeping people at arm’s length.”

“I get that,” she had commiserated as she sipped the glass of water.

And just like that, they developed a routine. During the hottest part of the day, usually right after lunch, Emma Swan would come into the library and stay until about four in the afternoon. By day three, Killian had a stack of books waiting in the children’s nook. It took him a bit of subtle inquiries and observations to ascertain Ms. Swan’s tastes, but by day five he had figured her out. The first thing that he had learned was that she didn’t want to read books on pregnancy. He had learned this fact the first day he left her a stack of reading materials. He heard a loud ugh from deep in Emma’s throat, then saw the library’s copy of What to Expect When You’re Expecting fly across the room.

“Did the book offend you somehow, Swan?” he had quipped with an arch of his brow.
Emma blew a strand of hair out of her face in exasperation. “They write these books as if everyone has some sort of charmed life. Do you see the cover? A very motherly looking woman in a quaint rocking chair. I don’t see any chapters titled I’m a Teen Mom, Now What?”

Killian stood regarding her silently, knowing there was nothing he could say that wouldn’t sound patronizing. Neither was he surprised, however. Mary Margaret had discovered that Emma was but 18 when she helped her plant the apple tree in the back yard of the Storybrooke Animal Shelter. Mary Margaret’s husband David had been more than thrilled to see more shade grow for the dogs, and Emma had bonded with the couple sufficiently so that she was now sharing many dinners at the Nolan’s loft. (A fact that put Killian’s mind at ease.)

Emma crossed her arms, sighed deeply, and turned her head to gaze pensively out of the small window that overlooked the children’s section. “All I ever wanted,” she said wistfully, “was a little house with a front porch and one of those patio tables with an umbrella where I could sip hot cocoa and watch the sun go down.” She titled her head to look up at him and shrugged, “It’s stupid, I know.”

“I don’t think that’s stupid.”

“It is for a girl like me,” Emma explained flatly, picking at a stray thread on one of the pillows.

Killian wanted to tell her that she deserved all of that and more, but her gaze shuddered, and she quickly changed the subject. Killian could clearly see that opening up wasn’t something Emma Swan did often, and if he wanted her friendship, he would have to let things go at her pace.

Now, two weeks in, and Killian had discovered that Emma’s pace made a turtle seem like an Olympic sprinter. Meanwhile, Killian’s own heart had sped ahead like a race car driver. If he didn’t rein in his own feelings, he would end up crashing and burning. His life was far more complicated than Emma could imagine, and if she knew everything, she very likely would run as far as she could in the opposite direction.

Which was why his overly keen awareness of her presence every day in the library was so disconcerting. Her every sigh, every pounding of the pillows (though, in his defense, she pounded those suckers pretty damn hard), every stretch of her joints, was ten times louder than it ought to have been. It also probably meant that the idea he had concocted was far from wise. But he had to figure out where Emma was staying. He was no expert on pregnancy, but a person could clearly see that Emma’s due date was fast approaching. If she was homeless, as he and the Nolans feared she was, Emma and her baby could be in grave danger. He had noticed today that she was walking with more difficulty than the previous day, so he didn’t think he had much time. Plus, the temperatures were steadily decreasing, so her daily visits to the library could very well be coming to an end. It could be his one and only chance to ensure her safety.

So, he took a deep breath, ran a hand through his hair, and rounded the last row of books. He cleared his throat as he approached Emma, who was deeply engrossed in The Giver. She looked up at him and smiled.

“This book is so good,” she told him, waving it in the air, “sad, too, but good.”

He smiled in return. “I thought you might like it, though I can’t believe you never read it in school.”

Emma shrugged. “I bounced around to a lot of different schools.” She reached a hand out for Killian to help her up, but he waved it off.

“I was actually going to ask if you wanted to stay until closing.” He shuffled awkwardly. He got the
feeling Emma was wary of men in particular, and he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. “See, cooking is a pain because I always have so many leftovers. I end up eating the same thing for a week.” He chuckled, then plowed on. “So it would be nice for once to have company at the dinner table.”

Killian knew full well he was choosing his words carefully, intentionally leaving out vital tidbits. Eventually she would hear it all through the grapevine anyway, so why reveal that he was Storybrooke’s resident Rochester this early in the game?

He saw Emma’s hesitation etched clearly on her face, so he added, “I’m making grilled cod with lemon butter. And roasted potatoes.”

Emma literally licked her lips, and Killian thought back to Mary Margaret’s concern that she wasn’t eating well. Another good reason for his offer, since she was eating for two. “That does sound good . . .”

“Please? It would help me out a lot.”

Killian could immediately tell that phrasing it as a favor to him had been the way to go. She grinned and nodded. “Okay, I’ll stay then.”

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Emma leaned back with a satisfied smile, running her hand contently in circles against her protruding abdomen. She then burped daintily and giggled. “Oh my God, I am so sorry. I just scarfed that food down like a pig, didn’t I?”

Killian smiled as he swallowed his own bite of fish, “Don’t apologize; I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Emma returned his smile with a cock of her head and a playful look in her eyes. “So, does this dinner mean I get a little info on the mysterious and brooding Killian Jones?”

Killian suddenly found his half empty plate incredibly fascinating. “There’s not much to tell, really.”

“I’d say there is. You went to Harvard?”

Killian quickly raised his head, heat creeping up his neck. “What else did the gossips say?”

Emma crossed her arms and scowled openly at him. “I’m not trying to interrogate you. And I haven’t been gossiping. Mary Margaret just mentioned something, is all. That you’ve always been extremely smart and it was a shame you didn’t get to finish at Harvard. I asked why you didn’t, and she said it wasn’t her place to say.”

Killian deflated and ran his hand wearily across his face. “I’m sorry, lass. This is exactly why I tend to stay to myself. Life has made me a bit . . . rough around the edges.”

Emma shrugged, and her tone made it clear that all was forgiven, “I’ve been called prickly myself, so believe me, I get it.” She shifted in her seat, kneading at a spot low on her back. “At least tell me where the accent comes from.”

“Fair enough,” he conceded. “I was born in England. My biological father brought me to the states when I was five.”

“Biological?” Emma quickly raised both hands. “Sorry, you don’t have to explain.”
“No, it’s okay. He ditched me and my brother a year later. Liam did the best he could to take care of me; he was only seventeen, but then I lost him too, so . . .”

“You’re an orphan,” Emma whispered, and something in her tone caught Killian in the chest and pulled him in. “Me too.” Her last two words were whispered even softer; so softly that Killian would have thought he imagined them if not for the look in her eyes. The look of someone who has been abandoned.

Emma shifted once again, wincing slightly this time. Killian rushed to his feet as he realized how uncomfortable the straight-backed wooden chair must be for her. “I should have realized you’d be uncomfortable,” he apologized, taking her by the elbow, “why don’t we go sit down on the couch out in the lobby.”

Emma allowed him to help her up. “You literally live in the library? Where do you sleep? Between the encyclopedias and the cookbooks?”

Killian’s face paled at her question, though she was concentrating on her badly swollen feet and not his face. “Um . . . uh, no. The kitchen’s down here, but my . . . living quarters are upstairs.”

“Living quarters,” she chuckled, “you are such a librarian, talking so fancy, or maybe it’s because you’re British . . .” Emma suddenly stiffened, her words trailing off. Killian followed her line of sight to the clock on the wall. Her eyes were wide and almost panicked. “Killian, I . . . I have to go!”

“Okay,” he replied, turning to steer her towards the door that led to the side street where he parked his car, “I’ll drive you.”

“No, no,” she argued, pulling away from his grasp, “I can just walk. It’s not far.”

“Nonsense, Swan, you’re clearly in no condition to be walking.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at him, and he couldn’t help thinking how adorable she looked when she was irritated. “Please, Killian, I’m pregnant, not ill. Women have been giving birth since the beginning of time. In caves, in the backs of covered wagons; I can manage.”

“That’s true, Swan,” he told her gently, taking her hand in his, “but many of them died.” He searched her eyes before continuing, “Including my mother, if you must know. So humor me? Please?”

Emma’s eyes widened slightly at his confession, and her features softened. “Okay, Killian.”

He cheered inwardly as he guided her out to his car. He would finally be able to put his mind at ease when he found out where she was staying. He was so relieved, that he was surprised to hear Emma chuckling as they approached the curb.

“That’s quite the vessel you captain there, pirate.” She winked at him and elbowed him in the ribs. “I’m not the only one who can have a way with words.”

He chuckled and rolled his eyes as he opened the passenger side of his yellow bug for her. Emma had started calling him a pirate after picking up on his reading habits: *Treasure Island*, *Peter Pan*, and *On Stranger Tides*. Once she was buckled, he started the car, then turned and explained.

“This was my sister’s car.”

“Was?”
He ignored that topic as he pulled out onto Main Street. Opening up didn’t come naturally to Killian Jones, either.

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“You can let me out right here.”

Killian eyed Emma, who shifted nervously in the passenger’s seat. “At the curb?”

“Yeah, sure,” she shrugged as she quickly unbuckled the seatbelt, “you see the apartment complex right there.”

It didn’t escape his notice that she never said she actually lived there. He was quite practiced himself at half-truths and misdirection. But she was already out of the car, shouldering her bag, and muttering a quick thanks. Quite swiftly for a young woman nine months pregnant, like she couldn’t get away from him fast enough. Killian waved goodbye and pulled away from the curb, but he kept a suspicious eye trained on the rearview mirror. Sure enough, Emma bypassed the complex entrance and headed down a side street instead. Killian quickly parked the bug and hopped out. Where the bloody hell was she going?

He worried for a moment that he had lost her when he rounded the corner, but then he spied her long blonde hair and her blue backpack. She was walking across the back parking lot of the Storybrooke Walmart. Killian ducked behind a large bush just as Emma turned around to lean casually against the concrete wall. Emma feigned bored distraction as blue-vested workers streamed out of the employee entrance. Emma slipped expertly past them, dashing through the heavy door just before it shut. The employees never noticed a thing.

Oh, she’s good. Killian grinned to himself as he jogged around to the front customer parking lot. The street lights had just come on, bathing the summer night in a neon glow. Killian’s eyes scanned the last minute shoppers trickling through the sliding glass doors, but Emma wasn’t among them. Storybrooke’s Walmart was ancient, one of the few remaining standard size stores. Even though it was the only one for miles, the population of this area of coastal Maine still didn’t warrant a superstore. Killian squinted at the hours posted on the glass just as an employee turned the lock on the automatic doors, giving him a sympathetic shrug as he did so. It was a Thursday night, so the store closed at nine.

Which meant Emma was still inside. The only conclusion Killian could come to was that Emma Swan was living in Walmart. It was almost comical, yet also ingenious. The store had everything a person could need: food, toiletries, clothes, even bedding. It was honestly surprising that every Walmart didn’t have squatters.

Just to be sure, Killian walked around to the back parking lot again and looked around. He tried the employee door, but it was shut tight. Another door on the far side of the building didn’t budge, either. He made his way back around to the front of the store and did a quick walk-through of the parking lot. Then he shoved his hands into his pockets and sighed as he stood there looking up at the blue and gold logo. Mary Margaret wouldn’t like this at all, and for good reason. Emma couldn’t do this forever, and what would she do when the baby came? Killian frowned at the thought. Maybe Mary Margaret could convince Emma to move into the loft with her and David. But for tonight, there was little he could do. At least Emma was safe and warm with a roof over her head.

Killian crossed the parking lot to head back to the street. Just as he passed the store entrance, he heard it: a loud scream. He stopped, his heart beating fast, his ears straining to hear. There it was again, but this time, it was followed by a crash. Killian dashed back to the glass front of the store. Cupping his hands around his face, he peered in. In the faint light from the store’s emergency lights,
he saw Emma at the end of an aisle, leaning against the metal shelving, its contents in a haphazard mess at her feet. She grasped her abdomen and screamed again, then fell to the floor.

Killian shouted her name, kicking at the glass and then trying to pry the sliding doors open with his fingers. He heard Emma scream again, “Help me! Somebody, please!” Her words tore at his heart, and it sent his adrenaline into overdrive. Without fully thinking it through, Killian ran full tilt at the middle plate-glass window. Covering his head and neck with his arms, he crashed right through.

He rolled onto the floor, groaning as shards of glass nicked him in various places. He rolled to his knees quickly, knowing that he didn’t have time to worry about cuts. He scrambled to his feet and ran to where Emma lay on the cold linoleum. She was wearing a large nightshirt that she had apparently pilfered from the clothing section, and her knees were drawn up as she continued to scream. The floor was wet when he came to kneel beside her, which wasn’t a huge surprise, but when he glanced down, panic flooded him. He was no expert on childbirth, but he was pretty sure that was way too much blood. The baby was already crowning, and as Emma’s scream reached its highest pitch, it slipped out fully. Killian caught the baby, a boy, who blessedly was screaming heartily.

Emma, however was silent.

Killian clutched the baby, wet, warm, and slippery to his chest as he fished his cell phone out of his pocket. Trembling all over, Killian inched his way over to Emma, fear gripping his heart when he saw how papery white her face was.

“9-1-1. What is your emergency?”

“I’m at the Storybrooke Walmart. A woman just had a baby. I need an ambulance.”

“Sir, did you say you’re at Walmart?”

“Yes!” Killian shouted. “Are you bloody listening? Send an ambulance now the mother is unconscious, and . . . there’s a lot of blood.”

“Okay, sir, an ambulance is on the way.”

Killian hung up, flinging the phone aside onto the floor. The baby in his arms continued to scream lustily, while Emma lay there, still and pale. He reached out a hand and stroked her sweaty hair from her forehead. He suddenly felt a deep, sharp pain radiating from his left leg, and he looked down to see a large shard of glass imbedded in his thigh. He winced and lay down beside Emma, holding her baby tight.

“Some knight in shining armor I turned out to be,” he muttered to her.

His eyes fluttered closed just as he heard the wailing of sirens.
Where the Heart Is: Part Two

Chapter Notes

* A reader left a comment saying she had a feeling this would be three parts. Well, Lula, you were right! I apologize, ya'll, but life has just been so crazy hectic.
* I accidentally put that Emma was nineteen in the last chapter, but of course in canon she has Henry at 18. I went back and fixed it.
* This one is a condensed slow burn. (A thing I just made up.) I think you'll understand what I mean when you read it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Killian was just switching off the lights in the library when he heard a light tapping on the door. His first instinct was to grumble and snap like the gruff, antisocial town outcast that he was, but the sight of golden hair haloed under the outside lights brightened his mood immediately. He quickly opened the door for Emma with a smile that he knew bordered on a goofy grin. No one had made him smile that way since . . . but he quickly banished those thoughts lest they sour the good mood Emma had evoked.

Despite the joy he felt in seeing her, smiling and well with a healthy baby in her arms, he felt awkward nonetheless. He shuffled his feet, scratched behind his ear, and glanced about the room to anything but her face. This was, after all, the first time they’d seen each other since that night he crashed into Walmart to deliver her baby.

“It’s um, good to see you,” he said to her lamely.

But Emma just smiled rather shyly up at him as she bounced the baby side to side in her arms. It was a dance he had seen many other mothers do, and he assumed it was instinctual. Not that he knew much about babies. Which was why it was rather disconcerting when Emma suddenly thrust the tiny bundle in his arms as she spoke in quick, awkward, and rambling words.

“I just wanted you to meet him, you know, and say thank you.” She fumbled around in the diaper bag flung over her shoulder, finally pulling out her cell phone. Her brow furrowed adorably as she squinted at the screen, then looked up at him sheepishly. “Never had one of these before. Mary Margaret got it for me. I tried to say no, but she insisted that I needed it in case of an emergency —“

“Mary Margaret can be rather persistent,” Killian agreed, trying to sound nonchalant as he shifted his arms uncomfortably. The little lad was sleeping, so it wasn’t as if he were a bother. On the contrary, something stirred deep inside Killian’s soul as he looked at the tiny one in his arms. His mind immediately returned to the feel of the baby’s tiny warm body pressed against his chest just moments after birth, and he knew, suddenly, that the child had captured his heart in a way he couldn’t explain.

But that didn’t mean Killian was entirely comfortable holding the child in his arms. He was probably the one person in all of Storybrooke who knew the least about babies. What if he dropped the poor lad?

“This thing is supposed to have a camera,” Emma continued to mutter, completely oblivious to the danger her child was surely in being held for such a long time in Killian’s arms. “Aha!” she
cried finally, lifting the phone aloft.

She snapped a picture before Killian was even ready. He was sure he must be bent over awkwardly with a look of sheer terror upon his face, but Emma smiled fondly as she looked at the picture. Then she dropped the phone back in her bag and gathered the baby in her arms once again. Killian felt a strange mixture of relief and loss.

“We can’t thank you enough, really,” Emma continued. “The nurses had to tell me what happened. Did you really jump through a plate-glass window?”

“Aye,” Killian croaked as red crept up his neck.

Emma’s eyes raked up and down his frame. “They said a big piece of glass was embedded in your leg. Are you okay?”

“Right as rain,” he told her, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He inclined his head to the child in her arms, “What about him?”

“Oh, they just wanted to keep him a bit longer for observation. You know, since I didn’t really get any prenatal care.” Emma said it casually, but he detected a tiny hint of guilt and shame. He wanted to ease it, but he didn’t know how. She turned then to the baby and cooed, “But you’re just perfect, aren’t you, Henry?”

“Henry,” Killian said softly, “that’s a good, solid name. You don’t hear it much anymore. How did you choose it?”

Emma chuckled and rolled her eyes, “You’ll never believe it, but it was Regina Mills who inspired me.”

Killian raised his eyes in unabashed surprise. “The mayor?”

“Mhm,” Emma confirmed with a nod, “she cornered me at Granny’s, peppering me with questions. She asked me what I was going to name the baby, and I told her either Windy with an i if it was a girl, or Jordyn with a y if it was a boy.”

“And let me guess, she didn’t approve?”

“That’s an understatement. Her exact words were: God, don’t you dare! Do you want the kid to hate you for the rest of his life? Give him a strong, classic name. Then she walked off muttering that you ought to need a license to have a kid.”

Killian shook his head, feeling inexplicably shamed by association. “I apologize, lass. Our mayor is rather . . . opinionated.”

Emma shrugged. “Maybe. But she made a good point. I thought of Harry at first, but that’s kinda trendy with the Harry Potter craze. And then, I don’t know, from there I thought of Henry.” Emma pulled the baby closer to nuzzle his nose with hers. Still gazing into his face, she continued, “And when I looked into his eyes for the first time, I just knew. That was his name. Henry.”

Killian smiled softly as the baby slowly awakened, gazing about the room with wide, wondering brown eyes. Almost as if he heard them discussing him. Killian reached out tentatively to trace his plump, soft cheek. Henry reached up and grasped Killian’s finger in his tiny fist.

“Nice to meet you, Henry.”
“This is so exciting! My first Christmas tree!”

Killian grinned at Emma as he brushed pine needles from his jeans after tossing the douglass fir into the back of David Nolan’s pick-up truck. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks were flushed a fetching shade of pink.

“I can’t thank you enough for helping me tonight.” Emma Swan wasn’t one to gush with excitement or appreciation, this Killian well knew after five months of friendship. So the simple tradition of getting a Christmas tree obviously meant a great deal to her.

“It was no problem,” Killian said as he climbed into the cab of the pick-up, “and I had fun. I’m secretly glad David got swamped at the animal shelter.”

Emma removed her hat and gloves, then rubbed her hands in front of the heater vents. “David felt so bad for cancelling on me, but I also know he’s excited that the Christmas adoption drive had such a good turn out.”

Killian watched her in silence for a moment, hesitant to pry, but wanting so badly to learn more of her beginnings. The thing was, he could tell those beginnings were painful. “You’ve never had a Christmas tree?”

Emma shrugged, as if it were of no consequence. It was something he noticed she often did when relating sad details of her childhood. “No. There was this one time I was living with this woman named Ingrid, and she promised me a Christmas tree. But then she spent all her money on an ice sculpture because . . . well, because she was crazy, I guess. She felt real bad about it, so on Christmas Eve, she took green paint and painted a Christmas tree on one wall of the living room.” Emma turned to him then with a wide smile. “And that was my only Christmas tree . . . until now. Mary Margaret and David are so great to let me do this. Their loft is crammed enough since they took us in.”

Emma paused for a moment, and Killian knew she was thinking about Henry. She got a little half smile and a fond twinkle in her eye whenever her thoughts turned to her son. “I can’t wait for Henry to see this tree!”

Killian chuckled, “Well, don’t expect too much of a reaction. After all, he just turned five months old today.”

It got suddenly quiet in the truck and Killian turned to see Emma gazing at him in wonder. He squirmed nervously under her gaze. “What?”

Emma shook her head, “I just . . . you remembered that he’s five months old today.”

Killian’s face turned serious as he nodded at her, “Aye, Swan. I’ll never forget that day as long as I live.”

Emma ducked her head, suddenly blushing. “Right. Of course you do. You jumped through a plate glass window. Kind of hard to forget that, right?”

Killian quickly took her hand in his, tenderly stroking her knuckles with his thumb. “No, Emma. You misunderstand me. I’ll never forget the day that little lad came into the world. He stole my heart the minute I laid eyes on him.”

Emma’s eyes softened as she lifted her face to meet his gaze. “You’re good with him.” She
gave him a wobbly smile then slowly pulled her hand away.

Killian keenly felt the loss of her warm hand beneath his. He wanted to tell her that she had stolen his heart, too, but her walls were still too high for that.

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“I was gonna ask if you wanted more coffee, but the cup I filled half an hour ago is still sitting here.”

Killian shook himself out of his pensive reverie to find Ruby standing by his booth, her eyebrows lifted and one hand on her hip. She held a coffee pot in her other hand. Killian glanced down into his full mug and grimaced.

“Oh. Sorry, lass. Could I get another? This one’s cold.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, “Of course it’s cold. You’ve been sitting here brooding instead of drinking it.”

Nevertheless, she grabbed the mug and took it behind the counter. When she returned, Killian was once again frowning at the sight outside the window. Emma was leaning against the diner’s patio fence, smiling and laughing with Billy, the town’s mechanic. The lilacs that vined through the white slats were already blooming in the early spring sun, and if Emma had been chatting with anyone else, the scene would be idyllic.

“Here you go,” Ruby said as she returned with the fresh coffee, “and drink it this time, please.”

“Thank you,” Killian muttered, taking a sip as Ruby stared him down. He took a deep breath as he regarded the brunette waitress, then plunged ahead with his question. “You’ve gotten to be good friends with Emma, right?”

“Yeah,” Ruby replied hesitantly.

“So, you’ve warned her about Billy, right?”

Ruby arched one thickly penciled eyebrow and grinned teasingly. “Now, Killian, I thought you were above gossip.”

Killian glowered at her. “Come on, Ruby, everyone knows that fellow’s a cad. You of all people should know. I just thought the least you could do is keep a friend from making the same mistake.”

Ruby smirked and leaned over, resting her arm on the tabletop. “This isn’t about protecting Emma. Is it?”

“What are you talking about? Of course it is!”

Ruby slid into the seat across from him. “You love her.”

Killian blinked rapidly. “I – I just . . . she’s my friend. And I adore Henry. They deserve better.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Please. You love her,” and now Ruby’s words oozed with suggestiveness, and Killian glanced around nervously to see if anyone was overhearing this conversation. “You love her hair, you love her eyes, you love everything about her.”

Killian licked his lips nervously. Was it that obvious? To everyone?
“Of course I care about her. She’s my friend. I care about her well-being. And Henry’s.”

“Uh-huh,” Ruby quipped sarcastically as she rose to her feet, “okay, Jones, you go with that.”

Killian sighed wearily as Ruby sauntered away. He gulped back his coffee and rose to go, tossing his tip on the table. His heart sank when he left the diner to see Emma strolling down the sidewalk with Billy, flipping her blonde hair as she laughed at whatever he was saying. He clenched his jaw and tightened both fists. If Billy hurt her . . .

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A thick dictionary came sliding across the hardwood floor of the Storybrooke public library, and Killian chuckled as he hopped over it. If it hadn’t been proceeded by Emma’s loud, frustrated groan, he would have tripped over the damn thing. He picked it up and smoothed the wrinkled pages as he walked towards the table in the back where Emma was sitting. She was hunched over, scowling, her elbows on the table and her fists resting at her temple.

“You’re lucky we’re friends, Swan,” Killian remarked as he set the dictionary on the table. “I don’t normally allow my patrons to abuse my books. Whatever did the Webster’s dictionary do to you?”

Emma narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m not in the mood for witty banter today, Killian.” She blew a stray hair out of her eyes in frustration. “I keep having to stop what I’m reading to look up words in the dictionary. But then I don’t understand half the words in the definition, so I have to look those words up in the children’s dictionary. It takes me an hour to read one page!”

Emma leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. Picking idly at the corner of a hardback book, she spoke softly, “Maybe Neal was right.”

Killian’s heart pounded hard in his chest as a confusing whirl of emotions gripped his heart. He knew Neal was Henry’s father, but that was it. “What,” Killian asked tentatively, “what was Neal right about, love?”

Emma shrugged, blinking fast and pressing her lips together before they could tremble. It was a look Killian had seen on her face many times, when she wanted to cry but wouldn’t let herself. “How did he put it . . . I wasn’t the brainy type?” Emma chuckled wryly. “I was only sixteen when we met. It was in Nashville. I had run away from my latest foster home and was living on the streets. I stole a car, and Neal was already in it.”

“It was his car?”

Emma shook her head, smiling almost fondly at the memory, “No, he was already stealing it. A piece of junk, lemon of a car – I don’t even remember the model. Just some 80s crap that looked like a toaster. Anyway, he asked me out for drinks, which was when I told him I was only sixteen –“

“Wait,” Killian interrupted, “how old was he?”

Emma blushed. “24 . . . Come on, Killian, don’t do that!”

“Do what?”

“Clench your jaw like that. If that’s what you’re going to do, I’m not telling the rest of the story.”

Killian sighed deeply as he relaxed his jaw and loosened his fist. The age difference
between himself and Emma had always been one of the reasons he kept things strictly platonic, and he was only 22 to her 19. What kind of sick 24 year old bastard pursued a sixteen year old kid? But he wanted Emma to keep opening up, so he forced himself to relax. “Okay, I’m calm,” he told her.

“So we had this kind of Bonnie and Clyde thing. Well, not exactly, I mean we never used guns. I’m just talkin’ petty thefts, minor cons, that sort of thing. Anyway, Neal always said to leave the brains to him. I was just a naïve kid.”

_Just a naïve kid he was screwing_, Killian thought bitterly, but he didn’t say the words. He knew Emma would clam up if he did. Instead, he leaned over and covered Emma’s hand with his, “Well, he was wrong, Emma. You’re bloody brilliant, lass, and an amazing mother. You can do anything you set your mind to. I know it.”

Emma shrugged, looking down at her lap. “But you have to admit I make pretty stupid decisions. Pregnant at eighteen and abandoned at a freakin’ Walmart.”

“How exactly did you end up here in Storybrooke?”

A tear slipped down Emma’s cheek, and he squeezed her hand. “Neal said he got a job in Canada. That we could have a real home; the two of us and the baby. It wasn’t until we got to Maryland that he admitted the truth. There was no job in Canada. He was wanted for stealing some watches, so he was on the run.”

Killian shook his head, “So he what, left you by the side of the road?”

_Don’t clench your jaw, Jones._

The tears came faster now, and Killian scooted his chair closer to put his arm around her. She took a deep, shuddering breath, then continued. “We had stolen another lemon, worse than the first. It had a huge hole in the floorboard. I had taken off my shoes because my feet were so swollen. So when I saw the Storybrooke Walmart, I asked Neal to pull over. I needed shoes, and being eight months pregnant, I also had to pee like you wouldn’t believe.”

Killian laughed at Emma’s blunt way of putting things, and his heart warmed when she chuckled too. Emma was quite for a long moment. She didn’t finish her tale until she had tucked her head in the crook of Killian’s neck. “I came out after paying for my shoes, and Neal was just . . . gone.” Killian turned his face to brush a kiss against her temple. “I should have known. When I first told him about Henry, he wanted me to get an abortion. Said he wasn’t father material.”

Killian squeezed his eyes shut and counted slowly to ten. If he ever saw that son of a bitch, he would throttle him. At his side, Emma spoke again. “Girls like me don’t get the pick of the litter, Killian.”

“How, Emma,” Killian said, voice thick, “if you’re saying this kind of treatment is what you deserve, you can stop that right now. Let me tell you what you deserve –”

Emma cut him off abruptly as she pulled away from his side and jumped to her feet, her eyes darting around the room. “Do you um . . . have a bathroom in here?”

Killian pointed through the kitchen area. He normally didn’t allow library patrons to use his guest bathroom, but Emma wasn’t an ordinary patron. She nodded, grabbed her purse, and dashed in that direction. He paced while she was gone, his heart in physical pain after hearing the story Emma had related to him. How anyone could treat her in such an abysmal way was mind boggling. No wonder her walls were so high.
“Thank you, Lord!”

Killian’s head came up quickly at Emma’s sudden exclamation from the bathroom, stopping his pacing abruptly. Emma came out of the kitchen area with a huge, relieved smile on her face. Killian shuffled his feet nervously as she gathered up the books she had checked out.

“Things went . . . well, I guess?”

Emma nodded, her eyebrows raised ecstatically. “Oh, yeah.”

Killian awkwardly cleared his throat as a pit formed in his stomach. He assumed this had something to do with her three month long relationship with Billy that had abruptly ended a week ago. He had seen them in a heated argument outside the auto shop. Emma had been in tears, but when Killian had approached and asked if she was okay, she had brushed him off.

“I’m done, Killian,” she was saying now, “with guys like Neal and Billy. No more bad boys who wear wife beaters and flirt with the law.”

Killian didn’t really want to hear about Emma’s exploits with other men. But he liked the sound of where this might be going. Not many women were interested in the nerdy, reclusive, Harvard drop-out, librarian type. But maybe Emma could now start to see that a guy like him was what she needed . . .

“I’m done with men, period.”

Killian hoped Emma couldn’t see the disappointment written across his face. *Change the subject, Jones, quick!* He ducked his head and scratched behind his ear. “Not all men, I hope. I mean –”

“Oh, of course,” Emma said, with a quick wave of her hand, “I mean, there’s David, who’s like a father to me. And Henry of course. If he counts.”

She smiled up at him, completely oblivious to the dagger she had just plunged into his heart. “And your . . . librarian?” he asked tentatively. He almost said *best friend*, but evidently he hadn’t even made her list of *men* at all.

Emma laughed, resting her hand against his upper arm. “Oh God, Killian, of course. And you’re more than my *librarian.*” She tilted her head teasingly. “You’re also my number one babysitter.”

He had to laugh at her teasing, and the tension seemed to melt away. “Always glad to be of service, Swan. And I love that boy with all my heart.”

“He adores you, too. When I asked him yesterday what he wanted to do for his first birthday, all he kept saying was *Kiwee, Kiwee*! So as long as you’re there, apparently, the party will be a success.”

Killian couldn’t stop the wide grin that spread across his face. “I would be honored, Swan. Perhaps we could go down to the seaside. He loves the boats and –”

A sudden crash upstairs broke Killian off midsentence. He glanced up as a second crash resounded, and his heart began to pound. He glanced briefly at Emma, whose face was a picture of confusion. Without explanation, he left her side and raced up the stairs. He entered the second bedroom on the left and raced to the woman who lay curled on the floor. She lifted her head, her wavy auburn hair falling in her face.
“Killian,” she said in a wobbly voice, “I need you. I fell.”

Killian put his hands gently under her arms and lifted her. He eased her onto the bed, then bent to pick up the broken dishes from her lunch tray.

“Who’s that?” she whispered, pointing to the doorway.

Killian stood, the broken china still in his hands, to find Emma standing in shocked silence in the doorway. He swallowed hard as he glanced from one woman to the other. It was a miracle, really, that it had taken her a year to find out the truth.

“Emma,” he said slowly, cautiously, “I’d like you to meet my sister. Belle.”

Chapter End Notes

* Yep, Belle is his sister in this! Anyone guess that? I thought it was pretty obvious since he was running the library, but no one commented on it last time. Anyway, next chapter Killian will explain his past to Emma and open up about his sister.
* If all goes as planned, the next chapter will also be the conclusion of this story. It will also be the conclusion of the summer. I'm not closing out this series, but I simply won't be able to continue the weekly updates. It's already become too much, and after labor day, my kids start all their extra curriculars and it will be positively impossible. I will tackle other prompts when the muse strikes, however.
Where the Heart Is: Part Three

Chapter Notes

* Ya'll, I am SO sorry that this still isn't finished. I thought things wouldn't get crazy until after labor day, but I was so wrong. The new school year is just kicking my butt. However, I have labor day off, so I will post part four that day. I already have part of it written, so that won't be a problem. (And it's got THE scene, if you know what I mean. I'm super pleased with how that part turned out and can't wait for ya'll to read it!
* This chapter also has some super cute Captain Cobra, so hopefully that will ease the pain of this not being finished yet :)
* If you ship Rumbelle, you may not like me after this . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’m heading over to the flea market. Wanna come?”

Killian let out a relieved breath at the invitation. This, he had learned, was how Emma Swan extended the proverbial olive branch. He wondered who he had to thank for it: Ruby or Mary Margaret. Probably Mary Margaret.

“Sure, I’m free,” he replied nonchalantly into the phone. He wouldn’t bring it up until she did. This was how Emma worked. But after a solid month of silence, he was sure as hell going to take whatever he could get.

“Good,” she told him, and he could imagine the firm nod of her head. “Wanna walk over together?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’m heading to Granny’s to grab a bite.”

“Perfect. I’ll meet you there.”

He couldn’t help the smile on his face as he locked up and made his way to the diner. Emma had fled – literally – that day when she had “met” Belle, just as Killian had expected her to. But he knew Emma well enough to know that it wasn’t because she was afraid of the eccentric librarian with a crazy sister locked upstairs. No, she had run and then thrown up her walls because he had kept a secret from her. A huge secret. Trust was hard to come by with Emma Swan, and Killian had broken that trust.

Lunch at Granny’s was filled with small talk, mostly about Henry. Killian was relieved to still get an invitation to the lad’s first birthday party (Emma just avoided him, keeping herself conveniently busy), but he had still seen far too little of Henry lately. So Killian eagerly took in every morsel of information Emma provided about her son.

Later, as they strolled through the booths at the flea market, the conversation was still at the surface level. Killian so badly wanted to address the elephant in the room, but he knew how skittish Emma could be and didn’t want to ruin this tentative thing they had going.

“I know you weren’t trying to hide anything from me.”
Emma’s statement came so abruptly and was so completely unrelated to their current conversation, that it almost gave Killian whiplash. He came to a complete stop and turned to face her.

“Maybe my intentions weren’t nefarious, but I still should have told you.”

Emma’s lip quirked up at the side. It was the look she gave him when he was being verbose. “I should have been more understanding. I know what it’s like to have people judging you.”

Killian shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked on his heels a bit. “I can see your perspective too, though. Swan, we knew each other for an entire year, and I never once opened up to you about this huge part of my life.”

Emma shrugged. “Opening up isn’t exactly my strength, either.” She nudged him in the chest with her elbow. “All’s forgiven?”

He grinned and flung an arm around her, pulling her into a tight side hug. They walked along, with his arm still draped across her shoulder. He began the tale without any prodding from her.

“Belle and I were in a group home together. I was eight, she was five. I can’t describe to you the light she carried with her, the deep compassion. I was angry and sullen, having just lost Liam, yet she befriended me.”

“Why was she there? I mean – “

He could hear the slight hesitation in her voice, and if it had been anyone else, he would have taken it as prying. But Emma knew; she got it, so he answered her question. “Her mother finally relinquished custody. It was one of those situations you see so often in the system. A mother with a drug problem. A kid in and out of homes as her mother tries to get clean.”

Emma nodded against his arm. “Saw it a thousand times. Some kids are still in that situation as teens.”

“I know. Belle’s mother finally decided her daughter’s best chance at a happy life wasn’t with her. Belle always spoke of it as a heroic decision.”

“You’re right, that’s a rare kid.”

“Yeah,” Killian agreed, swallowing the lump that suddenly rose in his throat.

“So what happened to her?”

“Well . . . actually, that’s getting ahead of the story. First, Colette and Moe French showed up. They adopted Belle. I was devastated. Of course Belle got adopted. She was adorable and sweet, and most of all only five years old. I was an angry boy of almost nine. No one would want to adopt me.”

Emma leaned into his side and wrapped her arm around his waist. She squeezed in a way that said she completely understood.

“No one but Colette French,” Killian continued fondly. “She saw Belle saying goodbye to me, and her heart went out to me. They came back a few months later and adopted me, too.”

Killian pulled away from Emma, taking a deep breath. He admired a telescope for sale, fiddled with some ships in a bottle. When he was collected again, he continued.
“Growing up in the French home was perfect, Emma. We were so happy. Dad ran the florist shop, and I loved to help him in the greenhouse and making deliveries. But Belle and I absolutely adored the library. Mum was the librarian, and she taught us to love the written word as much as she did.”

“You call them Mom and Dad?”

“Aye, of course.”

“Then why isn’t your last name French?”

A tender smile filled Killian’s face. “I wanted to keep the name Jones to honor my brother. They understood. But believe me, in every way that mattered, they were Mum and Dad.”

Killian took a shaky breath and ran his hand through his hair. This was the tough part of the story. “Dad had a sudden heart attack and passed away when we were in high school. Belle took it really hard. So did Mum. I had a full scholarship to Harvard, but I seriously considered staying. Mum insisted that I go. What she didn’t tell me, or anyone, was that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer.”

“Killian,” Emma whispered, taking his hand and lacing her fingers with his.

“She passed, too, at the end of my freshman year. Once again, I thought about not going back to school, but Granny took Belle in and practically forced me to return to Harvard.”

Emma chuckled. “Sounds like her.”

“Aye,” Killian shook his head, “but I shouldn’t have listened. Belle needed me; I see that now. I had been back at school a few months. I remember it was right before Christmas break. I got a phone call that Belle was missing.”

“Missing?” Emma rubbed his arm with her other hand. “Killian, oh my God, you’ve been through so much.”

“Not as much as Belle,” Killian choked out. He clenched his jaw and both fists as he thought of the man who had taken the joy and compassion that so defined his little sister and crushed it. “They found her a month later across the state line in a motel with a man named Robert Gold. He was forty-five. She was sixteen.”

He risked looking down into Emma’s eyes. They were wide and shimmering with unshed tears. “That’s why you got so angry when I told you about Neal,” she whispered.

Killian ran a shaky hand down his face. “Aye. The man got a life sentence for kidnapping and statutory rape. Turned out the relationship started when Belle was fifteen. Gold was a wealthy man here in Storybrooke. I don’t know why he turned his sights on my sister, but he did. Anyway, Belle was never the same after that. She actually fancied herself in love with the guy. First it was severe depression, then panic attacks where she thought she was dying. Then there was her first suicide attempt . . .”

“That’s why you never went back to Harvard.”

Killian nodded grimly. “I wish I had quit school sooner. Maybe then she would have never gotten involved with Gold. He had to be looking, Emma. You know? He had to be looking for girls like Belle who were gentle and trusting, but hurting. He was the worst kind of predator and he robbed my sister of her light.”
Emma tugged on his hands to turn him towards her. She wrapped both arms around his waist and hugged him tight, pressing her cheek against his chest. “I’m so sorry I got angry.”

Killian ran his fingers through her hair, reveling in the way she fit so perfectly against him. “And I’m sorry I hid it from you. People talk, Emma. About my crazy sister, and how I have her locked up above the library. I didn’t want you to look at me the way they all do.”

Emma tilted her face up to look at him but didn’t let go of her hold on his waist. “I would never do that. Besides, not everyone looks at you that way. Not Granny or Ruby. Not David or Mary Margaret.”

Killian smiled. “Mary Margaret says that no matter how much evil is out there, there’s good, too. She told me we may not know why awful things happen to good people like Belle, but at least Belle has a brother who would die for her. Mary Margaret says I can be my sister’s light.”

Emma stepped back from his embrace. “Mary Margaret is good at hope speeches. Isn’t she?”

Killian nodded, “Aye, that she is.”

They strolled through the market together, their talk now natural and companionable. Emma was looking for an anniversary gift for David and Mary Margaret. She talked about the couple fondly, in awe of how they had loved her and Henry so unconditionally. She finally settled on a pretty, handmade bird house for them to hang in the front yard of their complex. They were just about to head back to Main Street when Emma stopped in her tracks and gasped. She thrust the bird house abruptly into Killian’s arms as she approached the table.

“That’s a Rollei,” the man behind the booth told her as Emma lifted the vintage camera from the table as if was the greatest treasure she’d ever found. “One of the best cameras you’ll ever find. Lens is cracked, but you can replace that easy. I’m only asking thirty bucks for it.”

“Killian,” Emma turned to him then with a hesitance in her eyes as she gnawed at her lower lip, “all the reading I’ve been doing in the library? I’m trying to learn to be a photographer. Is that stupid?”

Killian reached out to brush a lock of hair from Emma’s shoulder. “Emma. Why would that be stupid? I told you. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

Emma grinned at him, then turned to the man at the table. “I’ll take it.

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Killian hesitated as he lifted his fist to knock on the loft’s front door. He could hear crashes on the other side followed by Emma swearing.

“Mommy, you said shit!”

“No I didn’t, Henry.”

“Yes you did. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shiiiiiiit!”

“Henry, stop using that word!”

Killian couldn’t help laughing as he knocked. The door was flung open by an exuberant three year old boy.
“Kiwee!”

He swung the boy up and gave him a hug. “And how are you this evening, Henry?” Killian balanced the boy on his hip as he walked through the front door. The child frowned.

“Mommy is ‘tated.”

Killian narrowed his eyes. Henry spoke pretty clearly for his age, but his was lost on this one. “Mommy is what?”

“Tated.”

“He means irritated,” Emma explained hastily as she flew past Killian in a blur. She opened the door, then paused and turned around. She spread her arms out. “How do I look? Professional?”

“Well,” Killian chuckled, scratching behind his ear, “you would look more professional with your camera.”

Emma’s mouth hung open, and then she wrinkled her adorable nose. “Shit!” she cried as she raced up the loft stairs to the room she shared with Henry.

“Wowds, Mommy!” Henry shouted after her.

Killian chuckled loudly even as Emma glowered at him as she raced back down the stairs. “Okay, I’m going,” she told them as she grabbed her keys. Then she shook her head, muttered, “What kind of mother am I?” under her breath, then raced quickly back to Killian and Henry. She gave first Henry then Killian a peck on the cheek.

“Love you!” she cried with a half wave.

Then the door slammed shut, and Killian jumped three feet in the air. He lifted his hand tentatively to his cheek, Emma’s “love you” ringing in his ear. She wasn’t thinking when she kissed you, idiot. She was just a mom on autopilot. And the “love you” was for Henry, you git!

The boy scrambled from Killian’s arms and raced for the kitchen. “Mommy got pizza!” he crowed, scrambling up on a kitchen chair so he could open the box.

Just before he could grab a slice, Killian grabbed him and swung him up in the air. “We’re not cavemen, lad. Let me get the plates.”

“That’s what Mawee-Ma says, but Mommy and Day-wid don’t do dat way.”

“They don’t do it that way,” Killian corrected. His mum had been a librarian before him, and the bibliophile apple didn’t fall far from the tree. “and I don’t think it’s wise to let a three year old eat without a plate. But I tell you what. If you’ll use a plate I’ll let you eat at the coffee table and watch a movie.”

Henry crinkled his nose just like his mother as he mulled over the offer. “Can I have chocwate miwk?”

“Chocolate milk.”

“That’s what I say. Chocwate miwk.”

Killian chuckled. “No, lad, sorry. I can just see you spilling chocolate all over Mary Margaret’s area rug. You want me to keep babysitting, right?”
Henry grinned widely and nodded. Finally appeased, Henry raced off to choose a movie to watch from the DVD collection while Killian placed pizza slices on paper plates. He grabbed Henry’s sippy cup of water out of the fridge and beer for himself, then settled on the floor in front of the coffee table. Henry pushed play on the DVD player and raced to settle himself in Killian’s lap. This would make eating a little complicated, but Killian didn’t have the heart to make the boy move. Especially when he leaned back contentedly against Killian’s chest. As the musical introduction to Peter Pan began to play, Henry twisted his head to look up at Killian.

“Kiwee? Where does chocwate miwk come from?”

He gave the child a mischievous smile before answering. “From brown cows, of course. And white ones give regular milk.”

“Wow!” Henry breathed in awe.

“Mhm, and if you spin them around really fast, you get milkshakes.” If Emma were here she would yell at him, for sure. He thinks you know everything, Killian, so he believes everything you say. What’s he going to think when he gets older and realizes you were teasing him?

“You are so smart, Kiwee!”

“Of course I am, I live at the library remember?”

Henry leaned forward to grab his pizza and munched contentedly as he watched the cartoon. He became bored with the movie, however, long before the pizza was even gone. He then insisted that they play Toy Story, a game they had invented the last time Killian babysat. It pretty much just consisted of Killian racing back and forth across the loft with Henry in his arms posed like superman as Killian yelled “To infinity and beyond!” This was interspersed with Henry “crashing,” i.e. being flung down on the couch by Killian while they both made explosion noises.

By bedtime, Henry was sufficiently worn out and fell asleep halfway through Where the Wild Things Are. Killian nursed another beer as he scrolled mindlessly through the TV channels, trying not to think about Emma. She was at this wedding as a photographer, and yet Killian still worried about her meeting someone. He groaned, frustrated with himself, and rubbed his eyes with the palms of both hands.

“Kiwee?”

Killian looked up to see Henry standing by the couch in his PJs, his copy of Where the Wild Things Are dangling from his hand. Killian fumbled for the remote, quickly switching off the crime drama he had been watching before he scarred the kid for life.

“Yes, my boy?”

Henry scrambled onto the couch and into Killian’s lap, thrusting the book in his hands. “You didn’t finish it.”

Killian took the book obediently, knowing it was useless to argue with a three year old. He cleared his throat. “The night Max wore his wolf suit and made mischief of one kind and another . . .”

The next thing Killian knew, he heard a faint clicking sound and a light seemed to pop in front of his eyelids. His closed eyelids. He groaned and shifted, sending Where the Wild Things Are sliding off his lap and onto the ground.

“Shhh, I don’t want you to wake him.”
He blinked and looked up to see Emma leaning over the couch with a fond expression on her face. Her camera was held between her hands as if she’d just been taking a picture. Killian twisted his head and saw that Henry was cradled against his chest, fast asleep.

“I’m sorry,” Killian muttered drowsily, “I must have fallen asleep . . . Do you want me to carry him to bed?”

“No,” Emma told him with a wave of her hand, “he can stay there. I’ll put a blanket over him. Trust me, getting him up those stairs wakes him up every time.”

Killian nodded as he slid carefully from the couch. He settled Henry gently against the pillow, and the boy didn’t stir. He brushed the lad’s hair, sweaty from sleep, off his forehead and placed a kiss there. When he straightened, he found Emma watching him with an odd expression on her face. They just stood there looking at each other for a moment, then Emma seemed to shake herself.

“Thank you so much for watching him.”

Killian headed for the door where their whispering would be less likely to awaken Henry. “No need, Swan. I love that kid. You know that.”

“I do,” she said softly. He turned to go, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was almost to the top of the stairs when he heard Emma’s voice again. “Killian, wait!”

He turned and waited as Emma came closer. She searched his face for a long moment, and Killian felt the oddest feeling flutter in his chest. It had been so long since he felt it, he almost didn’t recognize it. It was hope.

“I just wanted to . . .”

Killian felt he was holding his breath as he watched her lick her lips and search for words.

“say thank you.”

The hope stopped fluttering and crashed all the way down to the pit of his stomach. “You said that already.”

“I know,” Emma said with a shaky smile, “but I don’t mean for the babysitting. I mean for believing in me. This wedding I shot tonight. I never would have had the guts to go after my dream if not for you.”

Killian tried to give her a genuine smile, honestly he did, but his heart just wasn’t in it. “It’s what friends do, Swan.” It was all he could muster. He turned from her and headed dejectedly down the stairs. Friends. He feared that was all he would ever be to Emma Swan.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the dialogue in this was adapted from the conversation between Ashley Judd and Natalie Portman on the front porch in the movie. If you’ve seen it, you can also see that Belle's story is my version of what happened to Ashley Judd and her kids in the movie. If I followed all the characters and subplots of the movie, this thing would be its own MC of 30 chapters!
Where the Heart Is: Part Four

Chapter Notes

* Here it is, just in the nick of time!
* My knowledge of photography, hurricanes, and post traumatic stress disorder is limited to Google, so please forgive any errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And now, we are pleased to introduce to you this year’s winner of the Portland Press Herald’s amateur photography contest. Ms. Emma Swan from Storybrooke, Maine!”

Killian admired the way Emma’s cheeks flushed pink as she rose from her chair in the hotel ballroom. Her hands shook slightly as she dropped the linen napkin onto her plate. The room’s thunderous applause was clearly not appreciated by its recipient. Emma bit her lower lip as she headed for the stage. Killian stood to his feet; he couldn’t help it, his heart was bursting with pride. His motion caused a ripple effect, and soon the entire room was standing. Even Henry scrambled up to stand on his chair. Killian scooped him up so he could better see his mother as she took the stage and accepted the brass trophy and shook the hand of the editor of The Portland Press Herald. Emma turned to step behind the podium as the crowd took their seats. She glanced at Killian and Henry as she cleared her throat nervously. He knew the speech had been making her nervous for a week now.

“It doesn’t matter what you say, love,” Killian had assured her on the drive to Portland, “your photography speaks for itself.”

“She had scoffed, with a dismissive wave of her hand, “it’s just a silly little newspaper contest. And I know I won more for the story behind the photograph than the photograph itself. Not to mention my models were particularly adorable.”

Emma’s award-winning photograph had been the one of Killian and Henry asleep on the couch the night he had babysat. What made it more striking was the lighting Emma had used and the sepia tone she had created in the dark room.

“You wound me, Swan,” Killian had quipped, putting a hand to his chest in mock offense, “I prefer to call myself devilishly handsome.”

“I’m adorable!” Henry had piped up from the backseat.

Her two boys had made her laugh then, and Killian wished he could wipe the panicked look from her face now. But all he could do was wink at her in hopes of lightening the moment. He was awarded with a small smile from Emma, which made his heart soar. It was amazing how encouraging her could make him feel ten feet tall.

Emma tucked her hair behind her ears as she looked down at the prepared speech on the index cards before her. “I took this photograph with a Rollei Rolleiflex Standard K2 with Tessar 7.5 centimeter f3.5 lens. I was informed that I was the only entry to use film as opposed to digital, but I enjoy the creativity and patience required in the dark room. I used Kodak Poly-Toner to achieve the sepia tone.”
Emma cleared her throat as she finally lifted her gaze from her notes. “But I’m sure most of you don’t care much about that. You’d probably rather know more about my models. The little boy in the picture is my son, Henry, the love of my life. The man is my best friend, Killian Jones. Killian was babysitting and I came home to find them like this . . .”

Emma paused again as she gestured to the enlarged copy of the photograph that was set up next to the podium. When Emma spoke again, she kept her gaze on the picture, her eyes softening. “If it weren’t for Killian Jones, my son and I may have died. Some of you may remember the story in the news three years ago about the baby born in a Walmart and the heroic man who jumped through a plate glass window to deliver that baby. Well, that was us. I was that mother, Henry was that baby, and Killian was that hero.” Emma’s eyes sought out Killian’s in the crowd. “And that is what makes this photograph truly special.”

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Killian watched Emma pace the hotel room floor, gnawing on her nails as the weather channel played on TV. The anchorman gestured to a map of the coast of Maine. It always amazed Killian how big hurricanes looked on those things. This one looked like it could wipe out the entire state, maybe even the entire east coast, but he knew rationally that it would do no such thing. Hurricanes rarely struck the cool waters of this part of the Atlantic, though squalls weren’t unheard of. Even those could do quite a bit of damage, but now was not the time for lessons on weather patterns. He needed to calm Emma down.

“I’m sure everyone back home will be fine,” he assured her, stopping her pacing with a hand to each shoulder. He rubbed her arms up and down, relieved when she took a deep, soothing breath. “And look on the bright side. The three of us are here in Portland, all cozy and warm.”

Emma nodded her head, though worry still creased her brow. “Thank you for coming with me, Killian. I would have had to leave Henry at home if I came alone.”

“It was my pleasure, Swan.”

She tilted her head, her brow creasing further. “You’re not worried about Belle?”

“Granny is staying with her. And there’s actually a basement below the library if they need it. It’s dark and disgusting, but it’s there.” Granted, he was still worried, and he had already texted Granny half a dozen times, but Emma didn’t need to know that.

Emma sagged against him as he put his arms around her. “I know you paid for your own room, but could you stay? I’ll worry less that way.”

As if he could refuse her. He knew full well that the night would be sweet torture with little actual sleep. The room only had one queen size bed. Of course, Henry, who was already fast asleep in aforementioned bed, would keep any amorous temptations at bay.

Emma went to the bathroom to change and brush her teeth. Killian snapped off the TV and then stepped out of his jeans. He then unbuttoned his dress shirt and draped it across the desk chair along with his jeans. He wished for the first time in his life that he wore undershirts. If he weren’t bare-chested, he might feel slightly less awkward about the bed sharing. Alas, nothing could be done about it now.

Killian pulled the sheets back and slipped into bed beside Henry, shoving the lad gently to make room. Emma came out then, and Killian’s heart thudded violently in his chest at the sight of her. She was dressed for bed simply, in an old t-shirt and pajama shorts, but she was a vision nevertheless
with her freshly washed face and her golden tresses piled in a messy bun on the top of her head. Her shapely legs were on full display in the extremely short shorts, and Killian swallowed around a sudden lump in his throat. Perhaps this would be harder than he had thought.

Emma seemed just as uncomfortable as he was, avoiding his gaze as she slipped into bed on the other side of Henry, rolling over to face away from Killian. “Goodnight,” she whispered as she reached over and flipped off the lamp.

“Goodnight,” he whispered back. He was already staring at the ceiling.

It was going to be a long night.

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Killian was relieved that Henry was asleep in the back seat as they pulled into Storybrooke. He and Emma remained silent as they took in the devastation. A tree had crashed through the front window of Modern Fashions, cars were flipped over, and the neon sign above Granny’s was dangling crazily from its post. Branches and debris were littered everywhere, and the Red Cross had already set up two trucks. People, shuffling in shock like zombies, stood in line to collect bottles of water, flashlights, and blankets. Killian looked down a side street towards the harbor and saw boats that had been flung onto land, looking like broken children’s toys.

Emma let out a strangled cry as Killian maneuvered the bug around the next block to David and Mary Margaret’s loft. He followed her gaze and saw with horror what had caused her cry: the front of the building had been completely ripped away and the loft was exposed to the world like a child’s dollhouse. Killian had barely put the bug in park when Emma opened the door and tumbled out. She raced up the dilapidated stairs before Killian could stop her. He gathered Henry quickly into his arms and chased after Emma. He felt as if he were holding his breath until he reached the top floor.

Walking through the loft’s front door seemed odd when the entire outside wall was ripped away.

But the important thing was the sight that met his eyes on the other side. Emma embracing Mary Margaret, both of them weeping in relief. David cast aside the giant push broom he was using to clear the floor and joined the embrace.

“I’m so glad you’re both okay,” Emma gasped.

Mary Margaret pulled back and cupped Emma’s face in both of hers. “And we were worried about you driving back from Portland. We heard there were lots of tornados spawned from the hurricane.”

Emma smiled, shaking her head which was still grasped firmly in Mary Margaret’s hands. “It was fine. Some heavy rains, but we managed.” She turned to glare at Killian. “And he wouldn’t let me drive.”

David gave him a solemn nod. “Good man.”

Henry stirred then in Killian’s arms. The lad looked around with utter confusion. “Where we at, Kiwee?”

The adults all exchanged sad looks. “Oh, Emma,” Mary Margaret gasped, “I’m so sorry.”

Emma just pulled her friend into another fierce hug. “All that matters is that you’re both ok. Henry and I will manage.”

Killian frowned as he took in the devastation. How much had been lost? All of their clothes? Emma’s camera? What would they do? Where would they live? He wished he could offer the spare
bedroom above the library, but he couldn’t expose a three year old to Belle’s panic attacks and psychotic breaks. Her screams terrified Killian at times, and he was a grown man of 24. No. Killian was powerless to help, and he hated it.

But then he watched Emma walk around the loft, picking up a framed photograph here, a toy of Henry’s there. She brushed away the dirt, smiling and chatting with Mary Margaret as they collected items and separated them into piles. One of items that could be salvaged and another of trash. Henry scrambled down out of Killian’s arms to help, cheering brightly when he found his favorite teddy bear under the broken sofa.

His Emma was amazing; bloody brilliant. She was a tough lass who wouldn’t be defeated, even by a hurricane.

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Killian followed Doctor Archie Hopper down the stairs and through the library. The men paused as the psychiatrist reached for the door knob.

“I appreciate you coming here like this, doctor,” Killian said. “I know it isn’t standard, but she’s terrified of the outside world. I can’t even get her to come downstairs to the library.”

Hopper sighed and nodded as he glanced upward to where Belle was cloistered in her room. “Post-traumatic stress disorder isn’t an easy thing to overcome. And sadly, you can’t force it.”

Killian nodded grimly, then spoke the words he had been terrified to utter before. But he had to know. “She’s getting worse, isn’t she?”

Dr. Hopper sighed, his frown deepening. “I wish I could tell you otherwise, but . . . yes, I’m afraid she is. I upped her dose of Zoloft, and that may help her sleep and reduce the flashbacks, but . . . is she getting better? No. I don’t think she wants to, honestly. I’m so sorry, Killian. You’re doing all you can, believe me, but you’re only human.”

Killian gave a deep sigh and ran his hand wearily over his face. Dr. Hopper handed him a business card.

“Caregivers need support, too,” he explained, “so call me or stop by the office anytime.”

Killian nodded and gave the kind man a tentative smile. “Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

Killian pulled the door open for the doctor, and both were surprised to see Emma Swan sitting on the library’s front stoop. “Ms. Swan,” Archie exclaimed, “I didn’t keep patrons out of the library did I?”

“No,” Emma assured him, craning her neck up to look into his eyes, “but Killian insists that food and drinks be kept away from his precious books.” Emma lifted her to-go cup of Coke from Granny’s. “And I’m finishing my lunch.”

Archie chuckled and looked back at Killian, giving him a knowing arch of the eyebrows. Killian suppressed a groan. Did all of Storybrooke know of his unrequited love for Emma? Sometimes he felt he was walking around town with a button that read, “I’m in love with Emma Swan.” He might as well for how subtle he apparently . . . wasn’t.

Once Dr. Hopper left, Killian settled on the step next to Emma. “I got you lunch, too,” she told him, handing him a bag from Granny’s and a to-go cup of his own, filled with lemonade instead of Coke. He opened the Styrofoam container inside the bag to find a double bacon cheeseburger and curly fries. He grinned at Emma. Maybe his love was unrequited, but his best friend still knew his favorite
They ate in silence for a few moments. When the edge was off Killian’s hunger, he turned to her and watched amusedly as she slurped up the last of her drink. Emma could never be called ladylike, and Killian found it surprisingly endearing.

“What brings you here today, Swan?”

“Well,” Emma sighed, setting her now empty cup on the pavement at her feet, “I’ve done well with portraits, but I really want to start doing more artistic photography. I’d like to go to school, but since that’s an impossible dream, I’ll settle for the library.”

“A self-taught success story,” Killian quipped, “it’s what America is built on, is it not?”

Emma chuckled. “I suppose so.”

“Even the man who built this library long ago,” Killian remarked, tapping on the brick wall to his right. “Andrew Carnegie? The son of poor immigrants. Am I remembering correctly?”

Emma shrugged. “Beats me. I told you school was never my thing.”

Killian helped her gather the trash from lunch and drop it into the receptacle by the curb. They entered the library, but instead of heading for the photography section, Emma turned to him with worried eyes. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do, Killian. I had hoped by now I would be making good enough money on my photography to quit at Walmart, but that’s out of the question now. I’m barely keeping my head above water. Rent at Granny’s is killing me.”

He laid a comforting hand to her shoulder. “Things will turn around, Swan, I’m sure of it.” They seemed like such pitiful words. He wished he could help her, be her hero again. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Another Coke sounds good,” she said, giving him a playful smile. She clearly thought he would refuse, pointing out the no food and drink in the library rule. Little did she know how weak he was where she was concerned. He took in the dark circles around her eyes. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do, Killian. I had hoped by now I would be making good enough money on my photography to quit at Walmart, but that’s out of the question now. I’m barely keeping my head above water. Rent at Granny’s is killing me.”

He bowed gallantly to Emma. “Your caffeine will be delivered shortly, m’lady.”

Emma just rolled her eyes and chuckled, heading off to gather the photography books she needed. She was so engrossed in her studies, that she didn’t hear him leave. He was back from Granny’s in no time, and grinned broadly as he set a to-go cup of Coke with a straw on the library table right in front of Emma. She looked at him with a surprised smile on her face.

“What about the no food or drink rule?”

“For you, Swan? What rule?”

Emma’s smile was well worth the potential risks to the books as she pulled thirstily on the straw. Not to mention he was taking way too much pleasure in watching her enjoy the beverage.

Just then, the bell over the door tinkled. Killian turned and saw a well-dressed gentleman with a briefcase looking around the library foyer. “Can I help you?” Killian called out to him.
“Yes,” the man said, walking towards Killian, “I was told over at the post office that I could find Emma Swan here.”

Killian glanced at Emma, who shrugged. She was clearly as baffled by the man’s sudden appearance as he was. Emma stood to her feet. “I’m Emma Swan.”

“Good!” the man exclaimed, setting his briefcase down on the table and opening it up. Emma remained standing, casually watching him, still slurping on her Coke. “I represent the estate of Ingrid Foster, who recently passed away. I believe you were her foster daughter for a brief time?”

“Yeah,” Emma confirmed, her eyes narrowing. He remembered Emma mentioning Ingrid, and that the woman wasn’t mentally stable.

“Well, she regretted not adopting you. Apparently, she cared a great deal for you. Anyway, she made some sound investments recently, and when she passed, she left it all to you.”

The man handed Emma a pack of papers. She titled her head, clearly not following the legal jargon on the forms. She guided the straw of her Coke to her mouth and took another pull.

“It comes to two hundred thousand.”

Emma choked on her swallow of Coke, spitting it out all over the lawyer and the books scattered across the table. The lawyer chuckled as he wiped at his wet and sticky face with his handkerchief.

“Sorry,” Emma exclaimed, as she pressed a hand to her mouth.

“This is exactly why I don’t allow food or drinks in the library,” Killian muttered. But to be honest, his heart wasn’t in the reprimand.

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Emma found a fixer-upper for a great price, then enlisted the help from all of her friends to do the renovations. When it was all said and done, Emma and Henry had a gorgeous blue Victorian with white trim. It had a wrap-around porch and bay windows on both the first floor and in the master bedroom on the second floor. It was Emma’s dream house, and Killian couldn’t be happier for her. Not only that, her frugal choices meant she had enough money left over to take photography classes at the local community college. She wouldn’t be working at Walmart for much longer.

But for now, she was, and Killian sat on the front porch with Henry waiting for Emma to get home from work. Killian was blowing bubbles with a giant wand while the three year old chased them around, popping them. His giggles resounded throughout the yard, and the sound warmed Killian’s heart. It was hard to believe the lad would be four in two months.

Emma’s little Nissan (another frugal investment from her inheritance) pulled up in front of the house, and Killian stood, his palms suddenly sweaty with nerves. Her fatigue from a long day on her feet was evident as she opened the front gate, but a wide smile filled her face when Henry raced down the walk towards her. She swung him up and showered his face with kisses.

“I thought Ruby was watching him this afternoon,” Emma said to Killian as she climbed the porch stairs.

“Uh,” Killian replied, scratching behind his ear, “she was, but I brought something over, and . . . “

“We have a sup’ize for you, Mommy!” Henry piped up. Killian shook his head. Great. He was stumbling over his words so much, a three year old had to help him out.
Emma’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, you do?” Her smile as she looked at Killian made his heart flip over.

“Yes, it’s a housewarming gift.” He took Henry from her arms, and set the little boy on his feet. Then he stepped behind Emma and covered her eyes with his hands. “This way,” he told her, guiding her around the porch to the back yard. She laughed as she stumbled along, but he never let her lose her footing. He stopped her right in front of her gift, and taking a deep breath, he pulled his hands away.

Emma blinked several times as she took in the sight before her. Her mouth hung open, but she stood there, mute. Killian began to get worried.

“It’s what you told me you wanted one day, right?”

Still not speaking, Emma stepped forward, and placed a hand to the back of one of the chairs. The salesman at the hardware store had assured him it was the highest quality, coated in rust-proof paint. Each chair also had comfortable cushions on the back and seat which the salesman had also said were extremely easy to clean. The umbrella above the table had been extra, but Killian hadn’t minded.

“Yes,” Emma finally spoke, barely above a whisper, “a patio table with an umbrella . . . you remembered.”

When she looked at him, tears brimmed in her eyes. He rushed to pull the chair out for her, and gestured for her to sit. Then he opened the picnic basket on the table and pulled out a thermos and some Styrofoam cups.

“A patio table where you could sit and drink hot chocolate while you watched the sun go down.”

Killian poured a cup of hot chocolate for each of them, then reached back into the picnic basket for the whipped cream and cinnamon. Once he had topped off their beverages, he sat in the chair across from her, and Henry scrambled into the one between them. Killian eyed her with concerned as she tipped her face back.

“Do – do you like it?”

Still looking up, Emma answered, “Yes, Killian I love it. But shhh . . . I’m watching the sun go down.”

And as she did, Killian Jones watched Emma Swan, who was his sun, his moon, his everything.

*************************************************************************

Time is a funny thing. One moment, you’re blissfully sipping hot chocolate with the woman you love more than life itself. And the next, another woman, who has meant the world to you in a different way, lies cold and dead. Just two days after giving Emma her housewarming gift, Killian sat weeping on the cold wood floors of his sister’s room, her body limp in his arms.

Only a few days after that, Killian sat on the side of the bed in the room he had rented at Granny’s. He knew this numb feeling; he’d felt it before. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, could barely breathe. Just existing took so much energy, that he didn’t cry. He just sat there, unmoving, staring down at the red rose in his hand. The thorns on the stem poked his skin, but he barely felt it.
The EMTs said that he had done all he could; that they were amazed he had kept her alive as long as he had. Yet their words still meant nothing. Especially since she died alone. He knew, logically, that he couldn’t possibly have been with Belle every second. But grief is never logical, and he blamed himself. He had tried so hard to keep her safe. He kept all sharp objects locked up in a drawer. He didn’t own a gun. He kept Belle’s medication locked up in the medicine cabinet, and he kept the key on him at all times. The only other medicine he kept in the house was a small bottle of Advil for occasional headaches. He hadn’t even known it was possible to die from an overdose of Advil. But Belle swallowed the entire bottle, and for someone as petite as her, combined with the other medications she was taking, it had been fatal. She must have snuck downstairs during the night while he slept, and by the time he took her breakfast the next morning . . .

Killian expelled a shaky breath, and his hands began to tremble. *I'm an orphan again, an orphan again . . .* There was a faint knock at the door.

“Come in.”

He didn’t even look up, but he knew it was her. Emma’s presence always carried with it a faint smell of cinnamon and something else clean . . . like the smell of her shampoo maybe. She wasn’t the type to buy shampoo with funky names and fruity scents. She probably bought the ninety-nine scent bottle of Suave at Walmart that supposedly smelled like a waterfall. Ah, that was it, she smelled like fresh water, crisp and cool. Funny the way a mind wanders when you’re grieving . . .

Emma lowered herself gingerly to the bed next to him. “You didn’t come to the memorial service.” Her voice held no judgment, not even worry. She was simply stating a fact, the reason she came.

“Red roses were always her favorite,” Killian answered, though he knew his reply didn’t really address her question. “Dad was the only florist in town, and there hasn’t been another since he passed. So I bought this at the supermarket.” He twirled it between his fingers. “Should have known better. Look at it, its wilting. I couldn’t take her a rose that was . . . dying.”

Killian didn’t expect Emma to give him deep, comforting words, that wasn’t her. Instead, she cradled his head close to her, burying her fingers in his hair. He raised his head to look up into her eyes and was surprised at what he saw there: desire, longing. They just gazed at one another for a long moment, a silent question passing from him to her. She gave the tiniest of nods, her lips trembling slightly.

Killian inched closer, ever so slowly, and pressed his lips to hers. She was just as intoxicating as he had imagined. He cupped the back of her head, and she dug her fingers deeper into his hair. They both tilted their heads to deepen the kiss. It was slow but intense. Exploring yet passionate.

Emma lay back on the bed, pulling him with her, another tiny nod encouraging him. Neither spoke as hands explored and clothing was slowly peeled away and cast aside. At each new level of intimacy, Killian hesitated, searching her eyes for consent. But every time, she pulled his lips to hers again or guided his hand to where she longed to be touched.

He took his time, glorying in this intimate discovery of the woman he had desired for so long. He held himself back as he watched her ascend upon wave after wave of pleasure at his ministrations. Finally, he left himself go, the ecstasy of it beyond anything he had ever felt before. Never had being with a woman been like this.

Afterwards, he held her close to his chest as his body shuddered from coming down. He kissed her bare shoulder tenderly, caressing her bare back with his fingertips as he nuzzled his face.
into her soft hair. Finally, the words came.

“I love you, Emma.”

The silence afterwards stretched tight between them, but he was too sated to analyze it. But when morning came, and he reached out to feel cold sheets, the memory of that silence assaulted him. And it was louder than any words could have ever been.

**********************************************

When Emma’s front door swung open to reveal Mary Margaret, Killian almost folded in on himself with intense sadness. The brunette seemed to sense his mood and frowned in sympathy, her forehead crinkling with concern.

“She’s not here, Killian. She came home this morning, asked me to stay longer with Henry, then ran off. Literally.” She sighed deeply and stepped out onto the porch, crossing her arms in the early morning chill of late spring. She tilted her head as she regarded Killian, and he felt she was reading his mind. “Emma was with you last night, wasn’t she?”

Killian felt himself deflate even more as he nodded, ducking his head to intently study the grain of the wood on the front porch. He licked his lips, swallowed his nerves, and then looked into Mary Margaret’s eyes with bold conviction. “I love her. I always have.”

“Oh, honey,” Mary Margaret replied softly, taking one of his hands in both of hers, “I know that. I think Emma even knows that.”

“Then why did she run off before I even woke up?”

Mary Margaret tilted her chin. “You know I don’t gossip, Killian Jones. Let’s just say . . . “ she bit her lip as if weighing her words carefully, “I told Emma that what Neal did to her, and Billy, and her parents when they left her on the side of the road . . . I told her it’s what makes them trash, not her. But I don’t think she heard me. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Killian narrowed his eyes and shook his head. He had never abandoned her, never used her, and he certainly had never seen her as anything less than a precious treasure. “I’m sorry, but no. I don’t.”

Mary Margaret sighed. “Just . . . be patient with her. Okay?”

Killian grinned. “Have I not proved my patience already?” he asked her sardonically. Mary Margaret smiled back in response. He shuffled his feet for a moment, then explained, “The French family plot is in Cambridge. I have to bury Belle there, beside Mum and Dad.”

“Of course,” Mary Margaret told him softly, rubbing his upper arm in a motherly gesture.

“It’s a two hour drive, and the burial is scheduled for nine-thirty this morning, so . . . “

Mary Margaret nodded in understanding. “I’ll tell her you were here to say good-bye.”

He glanced around Mary Margaret’s shoulder. “Is Henry up yet?”

“No. Do you want to tiptoe up to his room?”

Killian sighed and shook his head. “No, I suppose not.”
He turned to walk down the porch steps, unable to shake the feeling that he had missed out on an important goodbye.

***********************************************

Killian was so anxious to see Emma when he returned, that he dialed her number as soon as he parked his bug in the lot at Granny’s. As it rang, his heart thrilled at the prospect of hearing her voice again. He had spent three days in Cambridge, longer than he had planned. Professor Nemo, his old British Literature professor at Harvard, had tried to entice him into staying even longer. He said he could put in a good word for him with the admissions office. He could pick up right where he left off four years ago. But Killian wouldn’t even contemplate the idea. Not when he had Emma and Henry waiting back home.

“Killian!”

Emma’s voice was music to his ears, and she sounded happy to hear from him. “Hey, beautiful! I just pulled into town. Want me to come over? I can’t wait to see you. And Henry.”

“Umm . . . no, actually, I’ll come to Granny’s.”

He frowned, admittedly disappointed. He wanted to see both of them, and – he wouldn’t lie – he was hoping Emma would let him stay the night. Granny’s was downright depressing. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Yeah, I’m sure, I’ll be right there.”

Killian was glad to have the distraction of unpacking while he waited for Emma. He had just finished when her knock came at the door. When he opened it, she seemed a little sad, yet she went eagerly into his arms and held him tight. Maybe the sadness was just from missing him.

“Come in,” he told her eagerly, pulling her into the room. She sat on the bed, and he hesitated. It suddenly occurred to him that the last time they were here . . . Emma squirmed a bit, perching herself on the very edge of the mattress.

He took the chair.

“You were gone longer than I thought you would be,” Emma said as he got settled.

“Aye, I took the opportunity to go by Harvard. I forgot how amazing their libraries are. An old professor of mine also talked me into sticking around an extra day so he could talk to me over dinner.”

“Really? About what?”

He narrowed his eyes at Emma in concern. She seemed pale. “About going back to Harvard, actually.” He saw her eyes widen slightly, and he rushed to explain. “But I told him that was out of the question, that I had family here who needed me.”

Emboldened, he moved to sit beside Emma, taking her hands in his. She turned towards him, but kept her eyes trained on their interlaced fingers. “Jasmine Akdeniz took over as librarian. She and her husband already moved into the apartment. They have a baby on the way you know.”

“Oh, well, that’s great. I mean, I wouldn’t want to go back there anyway.” Emma was his life now, his future. The library was his past. He ran his fingers along Emma’s knuckles. “Besides, I heard they were hiring down at the cannery. I plan on going over there tomorrow for an application.”
Emma’s head snapped up at that. “Killian, you can’t!”

He shook his head in confusion. “I need a job, Emma.”

“But not at the cannery!”

He chuckled and leaned forward to brush a kiss to her forehead. “I’m not saying it’ll be my long-term career, but it will get me a steady paycheck while I figure things out. The most important thing is that we’re together: you, me, and Henry.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Emma told him, her voice trembling.

He shook his head, “All I want is you and Henry, Emma. The cannery will be fine temporarily. You work at Walmart.”

“It’s not the same,” she whispered. “And you never asked me what I wanted.”

Her question was like a slap in the face. “But what about that night –“

“That might have been a mistake.”

That had Killian reeling. He pulled his hands from hers. “A mistake? How can you say that? Emma, I love you!”

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she shook her head. “Killian, please don’t make me –“

But he cut her off. “Answer me, Emma. Do you love me?”

She swallowed hard, titled her chin slightly, and then answered with an even voice. “No, Killian. I don’t love you. Not that way.”

A bullet to his heart couldn’t have hurt worse. He could sever a limb and not feel this torn in half. Emma rose quickly as the tears started to blur his vision. The door shut with finality, and she was gone.

********************************************************************

Killian walked across the grounds of Harvard University, sorting through his mail as he went along. He paused at an envelope with a Storybrooke return address, and ripped into it eagerly. A child’s drawing was folded inside. It showed a blue house with a blonde woman and a brown-haired little boy. The boy was in a super hero costume and clearly was battling some sort of monster. In the sky above the house, a dark haired super hero soared through the clouds. Below was scribbled in childish srawl with a fat, red crayon: Come Home! Love, Henry.

Killian grinned as he admired the picture. A friend of his in his study group, who was an art major, had seen Henry’s drawings. She swore that the boy had natural talent. Killian certainly thought so, but then again, he wasn’t exactly objective. His thumb caressed the blonde haired female cowering behind super-hero Henry. As if his Swan had ever cowered a day in her life. It had been almost a year, and his heart still beat for her. Not a day went by that he hadn’t thought of her.

With a sigh, he slipped the picture back into its envelope. He sorted the mail and paused with surprise to find a second Storybrooke return address. He wrote Henry every week, and at the end of every letter he included a postscript for Emma: P.S. Tell your mother I’ll never stop fighting for us. P.S. Tell your mother I still want to win her heart, and when I do, it won’t be because of any trickery. It will be because she wants me. P.S. Tell your mother that my happy ending isn’t at
Harvard – it’s with her. But in all these long, lonely months, the only response he had ever gotten back was a drawing from Henry.

He ripped open this new letter, and drank in the loopy cursive as if it were water in a desert. It was from Mary Margaret, not Emma, but it still gave him hope. Dear Killian, I have debated writing this letter a thousand times. You know how strongly I feel about not gossiping. But this has gone on long enough. Killian, I don’t know what happened with you and Emma, but she’s been miserable ever since you left. She denies it, but I think her heart is broken. Please consider coming home. Your friend, Mary Margaret.

Killian dropped the rest of his mail, mostly campus notices and junk mail anyway, as he kissed the letter and then shook it like a thank you offering to heaven. But then Henry’s drawing began to blow away on the spring breeze, and Killian raced after it. Every one of those drawings was precious to him, and this one even more so. It held the same message as the letter clenched in his fist: Come Home.

He managed to grasp the drawing, but as he straightened, he suddenly felt like he must be in a dream. For across the quad, staring straight at him like a deer caught in the headlights, was Emma Swan. She turned from him then and started to walk quickly away. Killian tossed aside the messenger bag slung across his shoulder, and ran as fast as he could towards her, jumping over benches in his haste. He called her name, but she didn’t stop until his hand gently grasped her elbow. She turned to him, and he drank in the sight of her jade green eyes, the dimple in her chin, the sprinkle of freckles across her nose.

“Emma,” he panted, winded from his sprint, “are you okay? Is Henry okay?”

“Yes, yes, we’re okay, it’s just –“

“Killian!”

He suppressed a groan at the cloyingly sweet voice suddenly at his elbow. He turned to see the wide-eyed red head from his study group batting her lashes at him. He grasped Emma’s elbow tighter as the unwanted visitor attempted to take his arm.

“A bunch of us are heading over to The Beanery. Wanna come?”

Killian shook his head, coffee the last thing on his mind. “Uh, no not right now.”

“Oh,” the girl pouted as she twirled a lock of hair around her finger, “you can bring your . . . friend along if you want.”

He wanted to smack himself on the forehead as he saw the girl rack her condescending eyes over Emma’s frame. “Fine, fine,” he muttered quickly. Anything to get rid of her, “we’ll think about stopping by a little later.”

The girl paused, but was appeased enough to flounce away. Killian let out a relieved sigh.

“It’s too late, isn’t it?”

Killian looked at Emma in confusion, surprised to see hurt written clearly across her face. “What are you talking about?”

“Us,” she clarified, looking up at him with trembling lips, “it’s too late for us. I lied to you, and now it’s too late.”
Killian furrowed his brow. “Lied? What do you mean you lied?”

Emma shook her head as if frustrated at herself. “That last time I saw you, you asked me if I loved you. I said I didn’t, but it wasn’t true. I lied, Killian. I do love you.”

Joy immeasurable surged through him, but he held it in check. There was a pain in the depths of Emma’s eyes, and he had to figure out what it was. “Why did you lie?”

Emma bit her lower lip, and her eyes darted away from him for a moment. But then she took a deep breath and looked him straight on. “I lied because I thought you deserved something better.”

Her voice broke on the last word, and it tore into Killian’s heart. He searched her eyes intensely. “Something better than you?”

Tears welled in her eyes as she nodded. One slipped down her cheek, and Killian caught it with his thumb as he cupped her face. “Oh, Emma, there is nothing better than you.”

Then he kissed her; slow and deep, pouring every beautiful thing he saw in her and loved about her into the kiss. He pulled away to trail slow, languid kisses along her forehead, her eyebrows, her nose, her cheeks, and chin. Then he opened his eyes and smiled at her, his amazing, brilliant Swan. Her eyes widened in awe as she realized for the first time what he saw when he looked at her. He caressed her cheeks, then played with tendrils of her hair, letting the silky feel of them slip through his fingers. She smiled back at him in wonder, then leaned forward to press her lips again to his.

They wrapped themselves up in each other’s arms, and this time, neither of them were letting go.

Everyone told them it was a crazy place to have a wedding, but then again, their entire relationship had been a little crazy. And in a way, this was where it had all begun.

“By the power invested in me by the state of Maine,” Dr. Hopper called out with a smile, “I now pronounce you husband and wife!”

Killian pulled Emma close in a passionate kiss amidst the cheers of the crowd, then he dipped her for a second kiss as a voice announced over the intercom:

“Walmart shoppers, we are honored to ask you to join us in the bakery for wedding cake.”

“Yay!” five year old Henry cheered. Killian and Emma laughed, and his new father scooped him up and headed down aisle six.

If he wasn’t mistaken, this was the very same aisle where he had met the boy five years ago.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, guys we're done! Like I said, I may add to this as the muse strikes, but for now, this little series is on hiatus. :) Thank you for all the kudos, follows, comments, and prompt ideas! It's been fun, but now I'm going to bed . . .
End Notes

* As I said in the summary, I am open to prompts. I'm not on Tumblr, so leave them here in the comments. I have to tell you though, I have a huge list of ideas already.
* Some will be modern AU's, while some will be canon compliant, like this one.
* I plan on adding a new story every Thursday all summer. Maybe longer. So subscribe, pretty please!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!