Steady hands (just take the wheel)

by Philyra

Summary

World-famous mystery novelist Killian Jones has just killed off his main character and is looking for a muse. Enter Detective Emma Swan.

Or, when OUAT meets Castle.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The first time Emma Swan properly meets Killian Jones she has to fight to keep from blushing and stammering because this is the man she’s waited hours in line for just so she can get his signature on the cover of *Storm Rising*. His books line the shelves in her cramped little apartment, dog-eared and the pages warped from too much time spent reading in the bath. The words on those pages have entertained her during the good times and been her saving grace during the bad.

But she can’t be sentimental right now and if there’s anything Emma’s good at, it’s tamping down on her feelings and focusing on the job at hand with an objective eye. “Killian Jones? Detective Emma Swan, NYPD. I’d like to ask you a few questions regarding a series of murders that may be connected with your novels.”

Twenty-four hours later, she’s absolutely torn between disillusionment at having her image of him shattered because Killian Jones is a cocky, womanizing, overgrown man-child. On the other hand, he’s intelligent, cognizant of law enforcement procedure, and incredibly perceptive.

Uncomfortably so.

“There’s always a story, Detective Swan,” he tells her earnestly over piles and piles of fan letters. His accent, lilting and Irish, flows over vowels and consonants in the most appealing way. “Take yours, for example.”

“Mine?” Emma scoffs, reaching for her coffee and frowning to discover that it had gone cold, though maybe that was a good thing. This was bottom of the pot stuff and could absolutely qualify for toxic waste at this stage.

“Yes, yours. You’re smart and beautiful and have amazing instincts. You could have been anything – a lawyer, a businesswoman, a politician – and risen to the very top, because that’s the kind of person you are. And yet here you are.” He tilts his head to the side, eyes a shade of blue that’s absolutely unreal, sharp and focused as he considers her. “Something happened to you, something life-changing. Something that got you onto the straight and narrow.”

Emma slowly and deliberately sets down the letter she’s holding. “What makes you think I wasn’t always on the straight and narrow?”

Some of the excitement fades from his eyes as he mirrors her stance and leans slightly over the table. “It’s something in your eyes, Detective. You’ve seen too much, and most of it before you ever joined the force. Tell me, love…who was it that left you?”

The question hits hard and true. She has to fight to keep from snarling at him and instead settles for the kind of glare that has her suspects peeing in their pants in the interrogation room. She feels some satisfaction in making him flinch. “You don’t know me.”

“No,” and there’s something regretful in his tone – for what? Pushing her? She doesn’t want to know. “But you’re something of an open book, Detective. And trust me when I say that there is definitely a story here.”

She looks down at the letter she just put down. “I think I just found it.”

In hindsight, Emma knows that the case fell into place a little too neatly. Part of it is because she
wanted to shut Jones and his ridiculous need for a story down (he was so annoying and when she said stay in the car she damn well meant for him to stay in the car). For once she just wants life to be easy, but she’s never chosen the easy life and damned if she’s going to start now.

Okay, so he was right and there was a story there (brother kills sister over inheritance, frames one of her patients and kills two others just to throw police off the scent). And he had been the one to initially apprehend the murderer.

Still, she was so glad that it was over.

“I don’t mean to upset you, Detective Swan, but we make quite the team,” Jones remarks as he steps up behind her.

Emma shoots a glance at him over her shoulder before turning around, a smile playing around the corner of her lips in spite of herself. Her favorite author might have fallen off his pedestal a bit, but hey, she could still say that she’d worked with the Killian Jones. “Yes, well, it’s over now. Case closed.”

Jones steps into her space, eyes sparkling with mischief. “It doesn’t have to be over, you know. Have dinner with me. We could…debrief each other.”

Gods, is he really that cheesy? She laughs a little bit and doesn’t miss the way he brightens at the sound. “I’m not going to be one of your conquests, Jones.”

He does this thing where he almost sways in place, closing the space between them just a little more. “It wouldn’t have to be that way, love. I could be one of yours.”

“Please.” Feeling playful (after all, she was never going to see him again, right?), she reaches up to whisper in his ear. “You couldn’t handle it.”

With that, she turns on her heel and walks away. She misses the way that his expression shifts from dazed to admiring to positively gleeful.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Captain Dulais Tracy stands, smiling wryly as Emma steps in. “Good work on the Killian Jones case, Detective. You have a fan.”

“Sir?”

The captain looks far too amused for her own good. “It seems you’ve got his muse alive and kicking now. He’s looking to write a new hero…or rather, heroine. A beautiful, street-wise detective.”

A feeling of foreboding sweeps over her. “Sir, no. Jones is a flippant little twit who-”

Captain Tracy holds up a hand. “Be that as it may, I’m afraid it’s out of my hands, Detective. This is a personal request from the mayor.”

“So, Detective Swan,” a familiar, detestable voice pipes up from the doorway. “When do we begin?”

“I still need to think of a name for your alter ego.” Jones reclines back in the seat beside her desk.
I’m not here to help you brainstorm,” she snaps.

“It’s too bad I couldn’t use your real name,” he continues. “Detective Emma Swan. My god, it’s like you’re a character in a book already. A fairy tale.”

Emma rolls her eyes so hard she nearly sprains them. She has no room in her life for fairy tales. Maybe she dreamed of princes and princess and happily-ever-after once – but not anymore. “I’m not a character in a fairy tale, Jones. I’m a real person.”

“Real, yes. Ordinary, no.” He has his chin propped up in his hand and Emma tries not to shift under the weight of that focused gaze. He’s been working with her for about two weeks now and he’s tried her patience more than anyone else, but there are times like this, when he dissects her like she’s one of his mysteries, that she’s most unnerved.

Emma reaches for her coffee and makes her usual face at the taste, not noticing the way that his gaze flitters from her to the mug. “Honestly, Jones,” she begins as she puts it away. She can do without the caffeine fix for now. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Other people to creep on?”

“I like it here,” he says cheerfully.

“Ugh.” She gets back to her paperwork. David and Leroy are out canvassing the latest victim’s neighborhood and there’s no way that she’s subjecting her colleagues to Jones without her, not yet. Leroy’s leash is even shorter than hers, and while David’s always been the most easygoing of the three of them, she knows that he’s got his eye on Jones.

Speaking of – “Snow!” he cries, sitting bolt upright.

“Excuse me?”

He flashes her a sheepish grin, his hand coming up to rub the back of his neck. “Nothing.”

“ Weirdo.”

The next morning, he hands her a coffee cup from the place around the corner from the precinct that she treats herself to when she can’t stand the coffee inside anymore. It’s done exactly the way she likes, hot and strong, with just a dash of milk and two spoons of sugar. Emma’s not sure she wants to know how he’s figured it out, but it’s a cold morning and a nice gesture.

So she thanks him and hides a smile at how pleased he is over that small thing.

Gwen Snow. He’s named the character Gwen Snow.

Emma’s not sure whether she should laugh or cry. It’s…it’s just kind of tacky and yeah, so was Derrick Storm but Derrick Storm wasn’t based on her, now was he?

“Detective Snow? What, is she chasing down criminals north of the Wall?” Leroy asks, unimpressed.

“It’s great!” Jones protests, deflating slightly at the three pairs of eyes staring him down. “Detective Gwen Snow – it just rolls off the tongue. The first novel will be titled Snow Falls.”

“Seriously, is she Ned Stark’s bastard?”

“George Martin does not have a monopoly on the surname Snow!” Jones says, affronted. Emma
catches David’s eye and the two of them have to fight to keep from bursting into laughter. They make a great team, the three of them. Leroy’s the best at busting balls, David’s got the kind of golden earnestness that has people falling all over themselves to confess, and Emma—

Well, Emma’s the heavy-hitter.

She decides to take pity on Jones, who looks like he’s opened a pile of Christmas presents only to discover they’re all filled with coal. “It’s fine, Jones. Knowing you, she could have ended up with a stripper name.”

“Exactly – wait, what?”

“Nice weather theme you’ve got going on with your characters,” she continues casually. Please god let it just be the one because the thought of him hanging around to write more than one book makes her want to …well, best not say.

Jones looks like he’s about to comment but decides against it. Wise man. “Well, now that you mention titles, there’s going to be a publicity party announcing the title and the new character at the Library Bar. You’re all invited, of course, and I would be most obliged if the lovely Detective Swan here came as my date.”

Emma wonders if she heard him right. “Excuse me?”

Those eyes of his really need to stop doing that twinkling thing. “Well, it would make sense, wouldn’t it?” he asks innocently. “You are, after all, the real-life Gwen Snow.” He winks. “Wear something short.”

“Hey buddy,” Leroy growls. “We know how to make you disappear, if you catch my drift.”

“It’s okay Leroy,” Emma says, turning over the possibilities. She hates being the center of attention, but she has no doubt that the mayor, the commissioner, and Captain Tracy will be on her to make good publicity for the NYPD. “Jones is just being Jones. What time are you picking me up?”

He looks absolutely thrown. Emma hides a smirk because really, she’s just getting started. He wants short? He’ll get it.

The expression on Jones’ face when she opens her apartment door wearing her favorite little red dress and not so favorite sky-high black heels is more than worth a night of false smiles and schmoozing.

(Jones, of course, recovers quickly and drops innuendos the entire night but she has sharp elbows and knows how to use them.)

Emma knows that Killian has been married before. His wife is lovingly mentioned in the dedications of the first, second, third, and fourth Derrick Storm books. Now that she’s been working for him for a while, she notices the tattoo on his wrist that he never talks about. She knows that Milah Jones died – an aneurysm? – and that the fifth, sixth, and seventh Derrick Storm novels were the darkest of the series.

But this? “You have a son?”

Something dark and sad crosses his face ever so briefly as he tracks the thirteen-year-old across the
room where he’s getting the grand tour from David and Leroy. “Adopted, technically. It’s a long
story.” He rubs the back of his neck. “You don’t mind, do you? It’s just for a little while, and then
he’ll probably go back to the penthouse to do his homework.”

It’s the unexpected bashfulness that does Emma in, just a little bit. “No, of course not. He’s…
delightful.”

Liam Jones, Jr. is as different from Jones as night is from day. Sure, he’s got the same insatiable
curiosity and the same blue eyes, but his hair is a much lighter brown and determinedly curly. He’s
quiet and serious and sensitive. Despite the differences, though, it’s clear that the two Jones men
absolutely adore one another.

Case in point: “All right kid, Gran’s waiting for you at home. Have you done your homework?”

“Already done.”

“Oh good.” Jones grins, affection clear on his face as he gazes down at his son. “Why don’t you
finish mine?”

Liam considers it. “That depends. How much are you going to pay me?”

Jones roars with laughter. “I’ve taught you well, lad. Let me grab my coat and I’ll walk you to the
metro stop.”

Liam waits until he’s well away before he turns to Emma. She braces herself because this kid is
Jones’ and wow that’s really difficult to process. “Dad really likes working with you, Detective
Swan,” he says solemnly.

“He’s certainly…interesting to work with,” Emma says diplomatically, a smile threatening at the
corners of her mouth.

He shoots her a look that is all too knowing and somewhat out of place on a kid that young. “I know
how he is, Detective. But he’s the best. Please take care of him for me when you’re working.”

She understands the gravity of the request and the fear behind it. The love Liam has for Jones makes
feelings old and forgotten flutter inside her, tightening her chest. “Don’t worry, kid. He’s in good
hands.”

Gran, as it turns out, is Isabel Lucas, the owner of Granny’s Diner. Granny’s, as it’s affectionately
called, is a New York City institution and a place where New York’s finest have been known to end
up after a long shift because the coffee’s good and hot and always free for them. She’s also Jones’
next-door neighbor and his go-to babysitter – either Granny, or her granddaughter Ruby, who is
poised to take over Granny’s.

Liam tells her all of this as he perches beside her on a stool while Jones bustles around the kitchen.
He drops by the precinct every once in a while if he knows that Jones is there and they’re not too
busy. And somehow, he wheedled Emma into coming over for dinner.

“So Granny just adopted you?” Emma asks.

“More or less,” Jones says, tossing a wink over his shoulder as he stirs béchamel sauce on the stove.
“Liam was but a lad when we moved in and I was something of a helpless bachelor-“
“You’re still a helpless bachelor,” someone sniffs behind Emma, and she almost falls off her stool.

“Gran!” Liam exclaims, jumping off his stool.

Jones looks wounded. “I’m hardly helpless, Gran!” he protests. “See, I’m cooking!” He’s only just put the lasagna noodles into the pot of boiling water and is back to attending the béchamel.

“Burning is more like it,” the older woman scoffs as she releases Liam from her embrace and eyes Emma. “Detective Swan, you seem like the sensible type so I know you’ll keep him in line. Though heaven knows why you decided to work with him in the first place. The man’s impossible.” Granny’s behind the counter with Jones before Emma can even reply, nudging him aside as she peers into the pot of sauce bubbling away on the stove.

Liam grins at Emma as he climbs back into his stool. “Granny doesn’t cook for us all that often, you know. Dad’s a really good cook,” he confides. “He says he likes it because it clears his head. And his lasagna’s the best.”

Emma can’t help but smile back at him. She’s not good with kids (and really, really doesn’t dwell on the reasons why) – David’s the one who’s usually saddled with them during cases. Liam’s different though. Maybe it’s because he’s older, or something of an old soul, but he’s easy to talk to and inquisitive in a way that isn’t invasive or irritating. “I’ll believe it when I try it, kid. So, how does Granny know about me?”

“Easy. Dad talks about you all the time.” Emma blinks because what does that even mean when he turns back across the counter. “Speaking of – Dad, if I was putting a body in the freezer, it would be because I was trying to hide it.”

The words arrow straight into her brain and all the alarm bells go off. “Whoa, whoa. Jones, you cannot discuss open cases!” It’s bad enough that he’s a civilian consultant, but talking about cases with his teenage son? She’s going to kill him.

Jones darts behind Granny, who just snorts and stands aside. He raises his hands. “I think best aloud, Swan! And I’m never specific!” He quickly diverts his attention to Liam, pointedly ignoring the death glare that she’s throwing his way. “Trying to hide it – until you stop paying for the storage space.”

Liam hums under his breath, his brow furrowing. “Did I stop, or did something stop me?”

Jones’ eyes widen at that insight, and even Emma takes notice. Finally, he laughs. “It’s family moments like these I will never forget.”

Granny slaps the back of his head with a dishrag. “With a good therapist, hopefully Liam will. Now come on and assemble this lasagna!” She motion towards Emma and Liam. “And you two – less murder and more chopping, help me with the salad.”

“So.” Mary Margaret hands Emma a mug and curls up on the couch beside her. She’s kicked David out for the night, citing the need for a much-needed ‘Girl’s Night.’ “Tell me more about Killian Jones.”

Emma takes a moment to appreciatively sniff the hot chocolate, lightly scented with cinnamon. The M.E. (and David’s fiancée) is perhaps her first true female friend, and the only other person she knows who enjoys the hot beverage this particular way. “I’m sure David’s told you plenty.”
“Sure,” she agrees. “But I want to know what you think.”

“He’s annoying, self-centered, egotistical…what else do you want to know?”

Mary Margaret just grins at her from over the top of her mug.

“What?”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “He’s not a bad man, though.” And Emma knows that. She has, after all, met Liam and the kid’s turned out all right. “And he could be…fun. You could use a little more fun in your life.”

“Not in the form of an overgrown third-grader,” she mutters.

“All I’m saying is that you should be a little bit more open-minded. He could be good for you, even if it’s just in the professional sense. How many cases have you closed since he started shadowing you?”

“A few,” she admits reluctantly. “Don’t say a thing,” she warns. Mary Margaret is an idealist. She wants everyone to have what she has with David – especially Emma. She knows that she means well, but it can be exasperating. Especially after one too many blind dates.

The petite brunette raises a single hand in surrender. “Zipping it now. Anyway, want to hear about the latest Perlmutter disaster?”

“Oh god, lay it on me!”

“So, we have this new intern…”

She’s going to stab him through the eye.

“So, you and I are married.”

Emma crosses her arms and gives him the death glare. “We are not married.” She can almost – just barely – tolerate the crazy theories, because, well, so far they’ve provided an alternative viewpoint that gives them an edge in solving crimes. She would never admit it, but Jones has good instincts. Like their last case – she wasn’t sure what prompted her to let him into the interrogation room with her, but it was his line of questioning, his way of sympathizing with the suspect that drew out the confession. So yes, his way with words comes in handy.

But she draws the line at roleplaying.

“Relax, love, it’s just pretend.”

“Don’t call me love. And I don’t want to pretend.”

"Well, if that's what you-"

"Don't finish that sentence."

The landlord looks between the two of them with interest. “Are you two like this all the time?”

“Yes,” they say at the same time. Emma’s scowl deepens and Jones beams, rocking back on his
Emma wears her mementos on her body – as tributes and as reminders. She doesn’t talk about them to anyone (not even David and Mary Margaret know the full story behind any one of them), so it’s a surprise that she winds up telling Jones. Not everything, but just enough.

“I was found abandoned on the side of the road. They couldn’t even bring me to a hospital or a church or a shelter. My first foster family kept me until I was three, but then they had a kid of their own so I was put back in the system. From then on it was just one house to the next until I finally got out.” She’s deathly calm and it’s like she’s reciting a report, but that’s the only way she can tell it and keep it together. That is, until- “Swan was the first foster family’s name. They wouldn’t keep me, but I kept their name.”

The emotion is still bitter on her tongue and harsh in the corners of her eyes, not that she ever lets any tears fall.

“The swan’s a reminder of what you lost,” Jones murmurs, staring at the silver swan around her neck. There’s no pity or sympathy in his eyes, only a deep sort of understanding that’s oddly comforting.

_In more ways than one_, Emma thinks remembering when the pendant had been a part of a keychain, and warm brown eyes as it was handed to her-

But that’s a wound that cuts too deep, so she shoves it down, down, down, to that locked away place inside of her, the part of her that is still seventeen and bright and hopeful.

“And the shoelace?”

That hurt is still fresh in her mind. “Graham was my first partner,” she says, running a thumb over the brown suede tied around her wrist. “I was fresh out of the Academy and stupidly overconfident.”

“I find that hard to imagine.”

She shrugs and tucks her hair behind her ear. “Well, I was. Graham…calmed me down.”

“How did he die?”

“We were investigating a bodega robbery. The kid who did it hid in the broom closet in the back and when Graham opened the door…” Emma lets out a watery laugh, remembering her screams of _10-00, requesting backup, repeat, 10-00_. “He told me…before…that I’d saved him. What kind of idiot says that when he’s bleeding out in front of you?” She knew that he’d had some sort of past, something that he’d eventually let go of during the brief months that they’d been partners, but he’d never told her the specifics.

“One who meant it, I imagine,” he says softly.

_One for the one I lost…and one for the one I saved._ Perhaps she could look at it that way.

Silence follows them as they ride the elevator down and cross the lobby. She pauses at the front doors and turns to him, wondering why she trusted him enough to tell him these things.

“Until tomorrow, Swan.”
She shakes her head. “You can’t just say ‘night?’”

“I’m a writer. ‘Night’ is boring. ‘Until tomorrow’ is more…hopeful.”

His honesty and utter lack of pretense knocks her off balance, so Emma falls back on what she knows: distance. “Yeah. Well, I’m a cop. Night.” And she pushes through the doors, leaving him behind.

Jones is sitting with David and Leroy in front of the board while Emma pins up the crime scene photographs.

“Why do you writers always call suspects ‘perps?’” David’s asking.

Jones raises an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what you call them?”

“We’ve got a whole lot of names for them. Pipehead, pisshead, orc, creep-“

“-crook, knucklehead, chucklehead,” Leroy chimes in.

“-chud, turd-“

“-destro, scall-“

“-slicko, slick-“

“-mope-“

Jones’ notepad appears out of thin air and he’s scrambling to keep up as they throw slang his way. “Hang on there mates, slow down a tick!” he exclaims.

“Suspects,” Emma says. Her head’s starting to throb. “We call them suspects.”

Captain Tracy walks by. “I’m old school,” she comments. “I like ‘dirtbag.’”

“Classic!” Jones cries. Emma resists the urge to slam her head against the board.

The case is truly starting to get to her. It all snowballs when the suspect alibis out and there’s nothing they can do about it. She knows that she’s got to get out of there or people (most likely Jones) are going to get it (and for once it wouldn’t even be his fault).

So she goes to blow off some steam in the shooting range. She needs the sharp juxtaposition of loud and quiet, the cool weight of metal in her hand, and above all, the semblance of control.

But of course Jones can’t leave well enough alone. He all but bounces in and her irritation keeps notching upwards until she’s just itching to use him for target practice (of course, it’s not until later that she realizes he did it all on purpose, making her focus on him rather than the situation at hand).

Then he implies she’s not doing it right – or something – and she’s handing the gun off to him. “All
right Jones, you show me how it’s done.”

He sends that stupid grin of his in her direction. “I love a challenge.”

She gestures at the target, wondering how long it will be before he puts a hole in the ceiling. “All yours.”

Jones’ stance is ridiculous, standing profile with the gun in one hand, his right shoulder up and eyes squinting. “It’s not a duel, Scaramouche.” She’s reaching out to turn him before she remembers that she really doesn’t touch people, but oh well. If he’s going to shoot then he might as well do it right. “Square off the target. Feet shoulder distance apart and gauntlet your right fist in your left palm.”

She gets a whiff of him as she arranges his stance to her liking, and it’s something like wood, salt, and warm leather, rich and cozy and comforting. They’ve never been this close before and she’s suddenly aware of how here, his larger-than-life persona is toned down. And when he’s like that… well, he’s an entirely different animal.

Oh god. She’s not actually attracted to him, is she?

Evidently Jones is just as distracted, because he squeezes the trigger and fires into the wall. “Oops. Shot too soon.”

The moment is light and funny and just what she needed so Emma can’t help but respond. “Yeah, well, you know we could always just cuddle, Jones.”

Jones angles his head towards her and is clearly taken by the sight of her amusement. “Oh, funny, Swan, and a smile! Good!” He winks and tries another shot, missing the target by a mile. At least it’s not the ceiling.

“Well, that’s…better.”

He shifts a little bit and regards the target. “I actually came down to ask you if I could take some of those stolen property photos.”

“Photos of the evidence? Why?”

He shrugs. “Maybe I could talk it over with Liam. Something might spark, you know?” He squares his stance and fires again, shooting the target, but right in the groin. He winces. “That hurt.”

She’s going to let him take them anyway, seeing as they’re at a dead end, but maybe he’ll do better with some incentive. “Tell you what. You put any of the next three in the ten ring and I will give you the files.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Jones straightens and before Emma can say something he fires three shots straight in the ten ring. Emma’s jaw drops and she turns to him, eyes narrowing.

He beams, unapologetic. “You’re a very good teacher.”

The book dedication to Snow Falls is this:
To the extraordinary ES and all my friends at the 12th Precinct.

Her gaze lingers on the word “extraordinary” for far too long and it stirs something in her stomach. No one’s ever called her that before and as she looks up into his eyes, she knows that he means it with every cell in his body.

“Henry!” Jones exclaims. Emma looks up to find a boy around ten years old standing beside her desk. He has dark brown hair and is wearing a wool coat and a striped scarf. He’s staring at her with eyes that are unnervingly familiar. “What brings you here, lad?”

“Hi Killian,” the boy says, then focuses his attention back on Emma. “Are you Detective Emma Swan?” he asks.

“That’s me,” she says warily, wondering how Jones knows him. A friend of Liam’s perhaps? “What can I do for you?”

“My name is Henry Mills.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m your son.”
"My name is Henry Mills." He takes a deep breath. "I'm your son."

The world as she knows it comes crashing down on her head. For a moment, Emma can hardly see straight and her breath is stuck in her lungs and there's a roaring in her ears...

The sound of Jones choking on his coffee is enough to bring her back to the present. "I don’t have a kid," she utters harshly, feeling the lie in every bone of her body. No, no, this can’t be happening right now...

But the kid won’t give up (and some crazy corner of her brain wonders where he gets it from, exactly?). "Did you give a kid up for adoption ten years ago?" he persists, brown eyes beseeching. "That was me."

Emma feels light-headed, because she can see shadows of herself in his chin and the tilt of his mouth. The age is right, the look is right, but this, this cannot be right. She gave him up for a reason.

"Henry, are you sure?" Jones asks incredulously. "Swan? You had a son?"

There’s a brief commotion on one end of the bullpen and in walks Mayor Regina Mills, her expensive heels clicking on the floor. "Henry Daniel Mills!" she says in a voice that’s too soft to be a shout, yet too loud to be at normal speaking volume. "What on earth are you doing?"

Henry spins around, a guilty expression creeping over his face. "Sorry, Mom, but I wanted to see her!"

Her son is also the son of the mayor of New York City. Oh god.

"I'm sorry about this, Detective Swan," Mayor Mills says later. She’s standing by the interrogation table, her arms crossed tight over her chest. The blinds are closed, shutting them away from curious eyes and she just knows that Captain Tracy is guarding the observation room so that there aren’t any curious ears, either. Henry is in the bullpen with Jones, David, and Leroy, allowing his "moms" some space. "Henry has always known that he was adopted and I promised him that for his tenth birthday we could get your information. From there we would see if you wanted to set up some form of communication. I never imagined that he would do this, though."

The mayor presses her fingers to the bridge of her nose and sighs. Emma has to admit that she’s a little awed. Regina Mills is a formidable woman and the city’s first female mayor. She’s tough but fair and her hard stance against crime and corruption has been good for the city. She was married young and widowed not long after, and has a reputation as a loving single mother.

"Right." The words feel like sand in her mouth but she gets them out anyway. "I admit that I’m surprised you allowed him to do this. I know I have a record."

"It was a consideration," Regina agrees and Emma winces. "But your service for the city speaks for itself, Detective Swan." She smiles wryly. "I love Henry. I would do anything for him – including share him, which is something I’m not particularly good at. But I won’t allow him to force himself on you if that’s not what you want."
Emma exhales shakily. There’s been a lot to process over the last few minutes. “I—I’m really sorry. This is so sudden and—”

“Of course,” Regina says quickly, looking faintly horrified. “I apologize, Detective Swan. This must be overwhelming. I don’t know if you even wanted to see him—”

“Henry seems like a great kid,” Emma starts, then stops. Great, now she’s made the mayor uncomfortable. She casts about for something, anything to say and wishes briefly that she had Jones’ gift for words. “I just wanted him to have his best chance and it seems like he has it with you.”

The other woman seems genuinely touched by that. “He’s the best thing in my life,” she admits, her eyes softening and her wariness fading away.

Emma checks her watch. “Listen, I’m off in five minutes.” She pauses. “Why don’t you, Henry, and I get some hot chocolate or coffee or something? There’s a nice place around the corner…?”

Evidently it’s the right thing to say, because Regina relaxes further. “I think Henry would really like that.”

Emma’s not sure why she’s doing this, but something in her gut tells her that it’s the right thing to do. She certainly cannot help the unexpected warmth that spreads throughout her body at Henry’s genuine excitement when she and Regina step out of the room and tell him they’re all going out together.

Henry’s obviously a smart, happy kid with a mother that loves him. It shows that for once, she’s done something right.

Maybe she can do this right, too.

Henry takes to coming by the precinct about once a week after that. Sometimes, because he goes to the same school as Liam (turns out Emma was right about that), the two boys turn up together. David’s always delighted to see them and so is Leroy, even if he hides it better. When the two boys are there and Emma happens to be free, Jones inevitably wheedles them into getting hot beverages at the corner shop.

It’s a startling coincidence, but Henry likes cinnamon on his hot cocoa too. His imagination is right on par with Killian’s and their increasingly outlandish theories regarding the case of the moment are enough to make Emma’s head throb.

Henry’s passionate about fairytales and has a particular talent for breaking them down and reimagining them. He’s convinced, for example, that there was more to the Evil Queen in Snow White (“Being the fairest is the worst motivation ever. What if Snow White actually did something to her?”) and that Snow White herself is not the weak and shivering damsel Emma’s always imagined her to be. Not that she’d ever tell Mary Margaret, seeing as Snow White’s her favorite Disney princess.

“He has quite the imagination, your boy,” Jones remarks as Henry and Liam go back to the counter to order another round of hot chocolates.

“Yeah, well I can’t take credit for that. He definitely didn’t get it from me.”

“Did he get it from his father?”
Emma stiffens and wonders why she didn’t see that coming. Probably because she pushes all thoughts of him out of her head and expects everyone else to do the same. It’s irrational and she’s made a career out of being rational, but she’s allowed – no, she deserves this. Henry hasn’t asked about his birth father yet and she dreads the day he will. “That’s none of your business.”

His fingers stop their dance on the table. “You’re right, Swan. I’m sorry. I’ll not ask again. Not until you’re willing to tell me.”

Which will probably be the other side of never. Emma still has no idea how he’s wormed himself into her life but there are limits. Still, she doesn’t even need her superpower to know that he’s telling her the truth and he really won’t push.

However, he’s given her the perfect opening to a question that she’s been pondering for quite some time now. “What about Liam?”

She’s never realized how open he is with her until he suddenly isn’t. A wall comes down behind those ocean-blue eyes, cutting her off from a part of him that she didn’t even know that she wanted to see. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

“Tit for tat, Jones,” she presses when he doesn’t deign to reply. “Maybe someday we’ll both be willing to talk about it. Until then…” she trails off, unsure of where to go from there.

“Until then.” Jones’ gaze shifts back to her then, as unreadable as a pane of glass. Emma wonders how much she really knows about Killian Jones, truly, beyond what he’s shown her. The thought is both intriguing and unsettling because she’s known him for a year now and if she’s only been seeing the surface…well, then she’s a little ashamed of herself. She’s a detective, isn’t she? Seeing past the surface is her job.

“Four hot chocolates with cinnamon,” Liam announces as he and Henry come back to the table. The tense atmosphere dissipates like the morning fog in the sun. He shrugs at Jones. “I thought we could see what all the fuss was about, but tea’s still better.”

“We’ll convert them in no time,” Henry confides to Emma, his face twisting comically at the mention of tea. She fights back her thoughts and lifts the mug to her lips, indulging the little bit of comfort it brings.

“I don’t get it. Who would steal a dead body?” David muses. The four of them are assembled in front of the board. Call Emma old-fashioned, but she likes it. She’s always been a visual learner and this way, all the facts are arrayed in front of them, just begging for them to draw the connections. Ever since Jones has joined the team, his stories have made it easier to make those connections. Even when they’re utterly and completely absurd. Like now.

“Plenty of people.” Jones sidles in front of the board to face the three detectives and ticks off the possibilities on his fingers. “Organ harvesters, medical students in need of cadavers, Satanists.” He pauses, says in a stage whisper, “Mad scientists looking to create their own monster. I swear that a mate of mine in London was like that. He had the Frankenstein air to him.”

“Or,” Emma interrupts, rolling her eyes. “The guys who killed him might have left some evidence behind.”

Jones looks pained, as though her lack of imagination is something to truly mourn. “Swan, that’s so...
boring. Help a man out here – what if he was a spy that swallowed a microchip? Then he’s murdered by other spies before the CIA can get a hold of him?”

“No. Just…no.” Those kinds of theories never lead them anywhere, but Emma tolerates them because it’s fun yanking on Jones’ chain.

“So Swan, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

Emma rifles with the stack of papers in front of her and tries not to resent him too badly. A real partner would help her with the paperwork, but Jones is a civilian consultant and there are all kinds of rules and regulations that prevent him from actually being helpful. She knows that it’s petty of her, but there’s a stress headache brewing behind her eyes and there’s no time to be charitable. “No.”

“You really haven’t read Snow Falls yet?”

She freezes slightly at his wounded tone. She’s been trying to avoid this moment. Ever since they started working together she’s downplayed how much a fan of his work she truly is because the man really does not need an ego boost.

But she honestly doesn’t think she can lie to him about this. She’s already read her advance copy twice. The book is brilliant. It’s everything she’s come to expect from a Killian Jones novel. The plot is clever and twisting and despite her abilities the ending was a complete shocker. Jones has a way of crafting stories that just reach out and grab the reader by the throat. She’s laughed, she’s cried, and yes, she’s fanned herself a few times because the man can write a love scene (but she’s not going to dwell on that, oh no).

It’s the way that he wrote Gwen Snow, though, that just…baffles Emma. Gwen Snow is sexy, tough, and brilliant – that was only to be expected. Jones’ main characters follow a specific type. Gwen Snow is more than that, though: she’s also deliciously complex, fiercely independent, and sure of what’s right and wrong. Emma sees determination and passion and the faintest hint of vulnerability in her and it’s easy to see why the character Jameson Rook is instantly hooked.

Is that what Jones sees when he looks at her? She knows that he thinks she’s extraordinary (she’s flipped back to the dedication page, drinking in that specific combination of letters over and over again, e-x-t-r-a-o-r-d-i-n-a-r-y), but it’s one thing to read the word and another to have the character come to life on the page and know that she’s somehow at the root of it. It’s almost too much to believe.

Emma has never seen herself that way. She’s the orphan, the lost girl, the one always left behind. She’s the thief, the scrappy fighter, the overconfident rookie. It’s only now that as the detective she’s found a calling and a purpose. Somewhere where she can finally be useful and make a difference. She’s never seen it as more than that.

But Gwen Snow is like…Wonder Woman. And Emma can’t reconcile the line between those two women and the lost girl. She tells herself that it’s embellishment and spectacular characterization but somehow she can’t make herself believe it.

She blinks and realizes that Jones has been raving this entire time. “…you kept going on about getting a copy of that book. Do you have any idea how many hoops I had to jump through just so that your copy didn’t come with an armed escort? The least you could do is…” he trails off and those blue eyes narrow at her. “Oh, I see what you’re doing.”
“I’m not doing anything,” she says quickly, turning back to the paperwork.

He leans forward, jabbing an accusing finger in her direction. “Oh yes, you are Swan.” Stunningly enough, he gets her wrong. “You’re trying to push my buttons, but you’re in for a disappointment.”

“Am I?” Emma glances back at him, fighting her relief and yes, her disappointment, though not for the reason he thinks. For someone who claims she’s an open book, he’s not exactly doing a great job of it right now.

But perhaps that’s for the best. She’s almost afraid of his answer, because then what would she do?

“Well, Swan.”

She smirks. “Cause it seems to be working just fine.”

“Swan,” he whines but is interrupted by David walking in, waving his phone.

“We’ve got a case!”

“I can’t believe how naïve she’s being about this,” Emma complains as she and Jones exit the brownstone belonging to the victim’s fiancée. “Despite the overwhelming evidence that her fiancé was a conman she still believes he loved her.” The words leave a bad taste in her mouth, the same way much of the case does. She really doesn’t like their victim – in fact, she’s quite happy to believe he deserves what he got. But his killer is out there and it’s her job to catch him. Or her.

Jones matches her stride for stride on the sidewalk. “People see what they want to see,” he reasons. “It’s what con artists prey on.”

“It’s psychopathy, really. To be so cold that you can look someone in the eye, tell them you love them, then rob them blind without remorse…”

Emma becomes conscious of the fact that Jones has stopped and is regarding her far too closely. “That’s quite the response there, Swan,” he says carefully and damn it, what did she give away? “Care to share with the class?”

Thankfully, her phone rings and she’s saved from having to respond.

Later that night, Captain Tracy comes by to monitor their progress on the case. “What do you have?” she inquires as Emma and the boys sit down with boxes of pizza and their victim’s files.

“We’re still not sure which con killed Steven Fletcher, but he was definitely a criminal overachiever,” Emma says wryly.

David laughs as he shuffles through some papers. “Hey, you know those Nigerian e-mail scams?”

“Don’t tell me he pulled one of those,” Leroy mumbles around a mouthful of pepperoni.

“Nah, someone tried to pull one on him, so Fletcher conned the guy out of ten grand.” He shakes his head, impressed despite himself.

Leroy whistles. “Our man was good.”

“Damn good,” Jones agrees, sharing a grin with Captain Tracy.

Sometimes Emma can’t believe her partners. “Don’t be so impressed,” she snaps, opening her box of
supreme. “The guy was a criminal.”

“Come now, Swan.” Jones leans forward, warming to his topic. “There’s something about a well-played con that makes you want to tip your hat to the man.”

“I do love a good con movie,” Captain Tracy confesses. “House of Games, Catch Me If You Can—”

“Ocean’s Eleven,” Leroy chimes in.

David reaches over and snags a slice of Emma’s pizza. “Dirty Rotten Scoundrels. Come on Emma, you have to have a favorite.”

“I hate con movies,” she says flatly. Cries of dismay rise from the three men sitting with her and Captain Tracy just smiles patiently, waiting for her to explain. Emma sighs. “Because the only people that get conned in a con movie are the people watching it. You can’t invest in the movie because nothing’s real, all right?” Again, something of the bitter truth seeps through her words because Jones throws her another one of those looks.

“That’s what makes it fun,” is his soft remark.

Emma gestures at the files piled in front of them. “Well it wasn’t fun to Fletcher’s victims, now was it?”

That shuts them all up real quick.

This case. This ridiculous case. It should have been open and shut. Find the conman’s most convincing victim, bam. But then there’s the whole spy thing and the whole the-conman-might-be-alive business and oh god her brain is going to explode. She might as well grab one of Mary Margaret’s Stryker saws to relieve the pressure, and yes, she’s well aware of how morbid that is.

“Mary Margaret, what are you trying to say?”

The M.E. looks apologetic. “Honestly, Emma, I can’t verify anything.” She glances down at the body on the slab. “This man may or may not be the con artist you know as Steven Fletcher.”

“I hate this case!” Emma hisses.

Jones is almost jumping for joy at her side. “I know! It’s great, innit?”

Sometimes, he just gets so very Irish.

But then, finally, everything starts falling into place.

Emma stares at the engagement scrapbooks. Everything about them, from the white glossy paper to the Photoshop, looks startlingly familiar. “These look exactly like the brochures Fletcher made for his fake polar expedition,” she murmurs, and it’s like she’s finally seen the light. “You said Sue made them, Mrs. Finnegan?”

“Yes,” the victim’s almost mother-in-law confirms, looking at them over Emma’s shoulder.

Jones is rifling through them too, and he’s caught her train of thought. “How long has Sue been working for Elise?”
“I don’t know, a year maybe?”

Emma faces Jones, absolutely certain. “Sue is Fletcher’s partner.”

Jones straightens. “It’s the undercover lover scam.” He turns slightly to Mrs. Finnegan, eyes alight as he explains. “Sue is the scout. It’s her job to learn everything there is to know about Elise so that Steven is ready. Because of Sue’s information—“

“Steven has the playbook of all of Elise’s hopes and dreams,” Emma continues, walking as she talks it out. “And voila, it’s love at first sight!”

“But something doesn’t make sense.” Jones is right behind her, his brow furrowed in thought. “Why would they fake Fletcher’s death in such a public manner? They had to have known that the police would get involved and expose the con to dangerous scrutiny.”

“Unless Fletcher really is dead and Mr. Finnegan was right. Fletcher was really in love with Elise—“

“And was going to give up his conman ways—“

“—Meaning that Sue was going to lose everything either way.”

“So Sue eliminates Fletcher, shooting him in the face to avoid positive ID.”

“Yes!”

“But what about the voicemail?” A lost voice cuts in. Mrs. Finnegan looks hopelessly confused. Emma looks back at Jones, notices they’re standing far too close, and backs up.

Jones rubs his chin. “Sue must have faked it somehow.”

“But why?”

“The con is still on!” Emma and Jones say together.

Liam says he’s too old to Trick-Or-Treat for Halloween and Henry claims the same, but it doesn’t stop the two boys from begging to play together at the loft. Luckily, Regina’s busy with an event so she allows Emma to bring Henry over for a sleepover. The two boys immediately start a video game, gleefully shooting zombies and consuming enough candy to ensure a sugar high, if not a sore belly, in the morning.

For her part, Emma curls up on the couch (Jones has excellent taste in furniture, she has to admit) and declines to comment on their shooting technique. She winces as they whoop over a lucky headshot on Liam’s part. “Liam, where’s your father?”

“Putting the final touches on his costume,” the teenager says absently. “He always dresses up for Halloween.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

It’s almost as if he was waiting for just the right time to appear and if she knows Jones, he was. The door to his bedroom flies open and Emma side-eyes him so hard that he stops dead in his tracks, his grand proclamation dying on his lips.
“What? Don’t you like it?”

“You’re Captain Hook?” She takes in the leather pants, billowy black shirt, black leather vest, and shiny hook prosthetic. And guyliner. Can’t forget that. “Where’s the perm and waxed mustache?”

Jones actually pouts (and it’s not adorable Emma, it really isn’t). “I’m sexy Captain Hook, love. Perms and waxed mustaches would take away from the look. Besides, Barrie described Hook as-”

“Whoa, you look great, Killian! You’re exactly how I pictured him!” Henry exclaims, peeling his eyes away from the video game for a few precious seconds.

“Thank you lad.” Jones bows, his arms extended out to the side. “At least someone appreciates my efforts.” He scowls at Emma and grabs the candy bowl as the doorbell rings. His entire demeanor changes when he faces the trick-or-treaters. “Oh-ho, look at these scallywags! Now don’t take too much candy or I’ll make you walk the plank!” He starts doling out the candy, asking each child about his or her outfit and answering their excited questions – in character, of course.

On the television, both Liam and Henry’s characters die in a shower of blood and guts, much to their delight. Henry runs off to the bathroom while Liam tips his head back to smile at Emma. “Dad’s worn a lot of costumes over the years, but the Captain Hook one is his favorite. Mum-“ A shadow passes over his face. “Mum always joked that he was a dashing pirate, sweeping the maiden off for adventures in different lands.”

It’s the first time Liam’s ever mentioned Milah Jones to her. “You miss her, don’t you?” she murmurs. She can’t help it – she reaches out and runs her fingers through his curls.

“All the time,” he admits. “Dad doesn’t like talking about her. It makes him too sad.”

Emma glances over at the framed photograph sitting next to her. “I kind of understand.”

“Okay!” Henry exclaims as he dashes back in, nearly wiping out on the hardwood floors. “Round two!”

Liam gives Emma a grateful, embarrassed smile and starts the whole thing over again just as Jones plops down beside her. “Come now, Swan, you have to admit that I’m quite dashing.” He offers her the bowl with a cheeky grin.

Emma selects a mini peanut butter cup and shrugs. “The guyliner’s not too bad, even if you did rip off Jack Sparrow.”

“That’s Captain Jack Sparrow to you, wench.” Jones sulks.

Later that night, she watches as he cajoles both boys into brushing their teeth and into the blanket fort the two insisted on constructing. From the giggles that drift down the stairs, Emma knows they’re not asleep yet but hey, that’s what sleepovers are for. Regina won’t be picking Henry up until noon next day – she cites a desperate need to sleep in. Emma knows the feeling.

“What?” Jones asks, catching her eye as he jogs down the loft stairs.

“Nothing.” She hands him the DVD (Nosferatu), then relents. “It’s just I’m so used to seeing you act like a twelve-year-old all the time. It’s refreshing to see you as the father.”

Jones starts up the DVD and tosses a wink at her over his shoulder. “It makes you want me, right Swan?”
Emma groans. “…and there goes the twelve-year-old again.”

He does make for a pretty sexy Captain Hook though. Not that she’ll ever admit it.

“Are you two together?” A witness asks the two of them.

“Absolutely not,” Emma exclaims.

“Not yet,” Jones sighs at the same time.

Speculation flies wildly around the precinct when they take on the Conway wedding case. Everyone saw how Jones and the bride reacted to each other – but neither one of them is talking.

“Aren’t you guys supposed to be running background checks?” Emma asks David and Leroy.

“We are,” David protests.

“On the bride.” Leroy flips open the cover to *A Rose For Everafter*. Emma recognizes it, of course – it’s the second novel Jones published, before he even started the Derrick Storm series. “The dedication says, ‘For the one who makes the stars shine’ – think it’s her?” The two men turn and stare at her expectantly.

“Seriously,” Emma mutters after a long pause. “When I’m not here, do you guys braid each other’s hair and debate over the cutest member of One Direction?”

“Nope.” David’s expression is absolutely deadpan. “But it’s definitely Harry.”

“No, it’s Zayn,” Leroy exclaims.

She’s not even safe from Mary Margaret. The moment she finishes with all the pertinent details, she raises an eyebrow. “So, David tells me that Killian has a history with the bride.”

Oh hell. “So it would seem,” Emma says reluctantly, knowing that she’s not going to escape easily. For some strange reason, she’s become Jones’ biggest cheerleader and has not been subtle in her attempts to get Emma to do…something.

“Ancient, modern, or sexual?”

“Who knows?”

Mary Margaret disposes of her gloves and moves around the slab to Emma’s side. “Are you okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She ignores the skeptical glance that’s thrown her way. “Just keep me posted on the lab results, all right?”

“Come on, Emma. You can’t tell me that you’re not the least bit curious. You work side by side with the man every day. He wrote a sex scene between the two of you-“

“Between the *characters*, Mary Margaret!”
“-that had me reaching for ice water it was so hot. And now this beautiful, mysterious woman shows up.”

She really, really can’t take much more of this. “You’ve been inhaling too many autopsy fluids.” She pivots on her heel and marches out the doors.

“Just because you can’t see what’s going on doesn’t mean everyone else can’t see what’s going on!” she shouts after her.

“I can’t hear you!”

But the truth, as it turns out, is nothing that anyone could have predicted.

“Siobhan is Liam’s biological mother?”

Jones rubs the back of his neck and strides towards the edge of the roof. New York spreads itself below them, its concrete towers and streets bright and busy and humming with life. After a short while Emma joins him, leaning against the railing and looking out over the city to at least give him some semblance of privacy. She knows what it’s like to reveal secrets.

“You know by now that Liam’s not my biological son, either.”

“You told me that the day I met him. But he’s still related to you by blood, the physical similarities between the two of you are too strong.” They have the same smile, the same eyes.

She sees him nod out of the corner of her eye. “Liam Jones, Jr. for Liam Jones, Sr. My brother’s son.”

The confession, though expected, still takes her by surprise. Jones had a brother. Jones had a wife. Jones has a son, who’s really his nephew. What else doesn’t she know about him?

“Liam was a police officer back in Dublin. You’ll find this hilarious, Swan, but I was actually in the Academy at the time, with one novel in press already.”

Now that is something she just cannot picture, though she tries. Killian Jones, young and earnest…in a cadet’s uniform. “What…what happened to him?”

“He died,” Jones says shortly, his burr thickening with the onset of emotion. “No one would admit it, but Liam’s partner and some of the others he ran with were corrupt.” His knuckles whiten on the railing and the expression on his face is fierce and haunted. “There was no one more honorable than Liam, you have my word on that. They were bad and he was good, and he paid the price for it. After that, I couldn’t stay. I-“ His breath hitches and he shudders.

“You couldn’t become part of a corrupt system that killed your brother.” Now that she can see, because there’s nothing wrong with Jones’ sense of justice. And though he doesn’t say it, she just knows that Liam’s death killed something in him, too.

He grunts. “Aye. Siobhan showed up a few months after with a babe yet in swaddling cloth. She and Liam and gone their separate ways shortly before he died. She told me she hadn’t the heart to get rid of the child but she couldn’t love him, either.”

“But you could,” Emma breathes. “A Rose For Everafter – the dedication is for Liam.” She always wondered why Liam had no explicit dedication, but then again, she knew how protective Jones was
of his son. She could piece the rest of it together – Jones took Liam and Milah and moved to London, where they’d started over. That’s when he started on the Derrick Storm novels. Then after Milah’s death, they came to New York for another fresh start.

“I fell head over heels in love with him,” Jones admits, chuckling softly. “It was like having my brother back. It still is. Liam’s exactly like his father.”

“He’s like both of his fathers, and that’s not a bad thing at all,” Emma says softly. But something still doesn’t make sense. Jones had been tense the moment he laid eyes on Siobhan, and if it wasn’t because of a shared romantic history… “Did you think Siobhan was going to try and take him back?”

“It occurred to me, but she put all thoughts like that to rest.” He frowned. “She didn’t even want to meet him. She just wanted her wedding and her new life.”

“Her loss, then.” Something in him just loosens at her words and it’s like the specters that haunted him all week have simply vanished.

“That it is. Thank you, Swan. I’ve carried this around with me for far too long.”

Emma shrugs and tries desperately to keep her voice nonchalant. “That’s what partners are for, right?” She finally feels like she’s gotten the true measure of Killian Jones and she can’t help it – she likes what she sees.

It’s the first time she’s ever acknowledged their strange relationship. Jones’ eyes sparkle in the darkness and it’s more than just the reflection of city lights. “Aye, Swan. Partners.”

He brings her hot chocolate with cinnamon the next morning, and every morning thereafter.

Chapter End Notes

And now, I present teasing! Emma (because S1 was skeptical! Beckett, S2 was teasing! Beckett, S3 was flirty! Beckett, S4 was love-eyeballs! Beckett, and so on and so forth). I thought about writing a chapter per season, but I’d forgotten that Season One was so short. I project about two chapters per season, though it depends on how snippet-ish I decide I’m going to be. I thought it would be nice to have more of an entire episode’s plot here, and since Fool Me Once was what came up when I was writing it...well...

It’s so much fun blending my two favorite shows. I never realized just how many parallels there were between CS and Caskett until I started going through the previous seasons!

Also, thanks to Insiya for beta reading. :D
Snow Falls has been at the top of the bestseller charts for weeks. If anyone had any doubts about Gwen Snow filling Derrick Storm’s shoes, they’re gone (“Gwen Snow does not fall into Derrick Storm’s shadow. She eclipses it and stands firmly on her own, in charge and in control,” is an excerpt from the Times’ review). Jones is riding the high, full of inspiration and claiming to be halfway through the first draft of book number two.

Emma’s own life doesn’t change that much. She takes colleagues’ good-natured comments in stride and shuts down the other kind because she has no patience for them. Being someone’s muse (she still cringes at the word) doesn’t make her less of a detective or indeed, a person. She’s rarely recognized and any excessive disturbance to her work due to the books is not tolerated.

It’s still pretty darn cool though, and if she traces her finger along the spine of Snow Falls and has a bit of a giggle to herself every once in a while, well, there’s no one to give her away.

“Can you tell me anything about my dad?” Henry asks over ice cream cones one lovely spring day in Central Park.

Emma’s hoped to avoid this question. Even after all this time, his father’s name dredges up a volatile combination of betrayal, rage, and hurt. She contemplates lying to him – after all, what’s wrong with giving him the dream of a kind and perfect father who would have wanted both of them? A fireman, maybe, who ate pie and flirted with her while she waited tables and died tragically on the job?

However, the fact remains that it would be a lie. She won’t add to the list of things she owes him and she certainly cannot stand the idea of him idolizing a man who doesn’t deserve it.

“Yes?” He’s staring at her expectantly.

She gives herself a mental shake. “I’m… I’m sorry Henry. It’s just a difficult subject.”

The look he gives her is long and contemplative. “That bad, huh?” he says finally.

“Well… yes,” she admits, briefly attacking her ice cream before it melts all over her fingers. “Let’s sit, okay?”

They settle on a park bench and Emma gathers her thoughts. “Henry, I don’t think I can tell you the whole story – at least not right now,” she confesses, holding his gaze with hers. She desperately wants him to understand that she’s not deliberately trying to keep this from him. “It’s a part of my past that’s difficult to face, to say the least. Let’s just say that things didn’t end well between the two of us.”

Henry’s silent for a long time after that. He looks away and Emma fights the urge to bend down and peer at his face, to get an idea of the thoughts that are surging through his brain right now. Is it selfish of her to want to remain blameless in this instance? He has enough to condemn her for already. “Did he hurt you?” His voice is small, uncertain.

“What?”
“Did he hurt you?” he repeats, and when he turns back to her he’s brimming with ferocity and overprotectiveness. It’s touching because it’s so rare for someone to go to bat for her.

“Oh Henry.” She shakes her head. “Not physically, no.”

“Scars don’t have to be physical,” he informs her.

For once, she’s oddly grateful for those long ago circumstances because this boy? He’s a treasure. “That’s true. You’re a wise one, Henry.”

He shrugs, bashful, and finishes his cone. “I’m sorry, Emma. I won’t ask again. And you don’t have to tell me unless you want to.”

“Someday,” she promises, relieved that he understands and that she doesn’t have to say any more. “And in the meantime, I think there’s a zoo calling our names.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?”

Emma ducks under the tape, nodding absently at uniform who points her in the right direction. “What’s the situation?” she asks David and Leroy as they fall into step with her.

“Where’s Jones?” David asks in reply. “Because this one’s going to be right up his alley.”

“Henry slept over last night. He needs to arrange for someone to watch them.”

Both men thaw visibly at the mention of the two boys. It’s sweet, how much they adore them. Especially Leroy, who pretends to be so gruff and aloof but keeps candy in his desk to sneak to them when they drop by the precinct. “How are they?” David inquires.

She shakes her head and smiles, remembering the spate of enthusiastic text messages she received from Henry. “Apparently they built a pretty epic blanket fort in the middle of the loft. I’m sure Jones regrets introducing them to Community.” And because they still have a job to do, she snaps back to professional mode. “So, why’s the scene Jones’ cup of tea?”

Leroy grunts. “Trust us, Swan, you have to see it to believe it. Construction workers called it in when they got to the site an hour ago.”

The trio rounds the corner and are caught by a flurry of uniforms adding rigging to-

Emma blinks. “Is that a wall?”

“Yep. A precast concrete wall, if you want to be exact. Probably from right here.” Leroy jerks his head towards the unfinished walls of the site around them. “Looks like whoever killed our vic just tipped one of these over.”

David rolls his eyes. “It probably took a little more finesse than that. Especially once you have a look at the guy.” He motions for Emma to follow him. “Over here.”

Mary Margaret is crouched on one side of the wall, her eyes intent on the work in front of her. “I don’t think I need to tell you cause of death,” she comments as the three detectives close in on her.

That was probably true, but Emma was never one to skip over the details and she certainly isn’t going to start now. “Why don’t you tell me anyway?” She adopts the same stance, her movements smooth despite the height of her heeled boots because hey, she’s had plenty of practice.
“Massive internal bleeding from the slab pressing down on him.” She tilts her head and frowns. “You’re seeing what I’m seeing, right?”

“Yeah. It definitely wasn’t just dropped on him,” Emma confirms. She sees the creases on the victim’s clothing (a really nice suit, from what she can see of it), the abrasions on his hands from where he struggled with the slab, and most of all his expression, frozen in a rictus of terror and pain.

Running footsteps echo behind them and Jones skids to a halt behind them. “I apologize, I came as quickly as I - dear God,” he utters, taking it all in. He’s at Emma’s side in an instant, absenty handing her coffee. She accepts it without question and misses the smug smile Mary Margaret tosses at a scowling David. “It’s like when you trod on a slug in the garden, isn’t it?”

“Seriously? A little sensitivity, Jones,” she scolds as Leroy smacks him upside the head.

“I’m plenty sensitive, love, as the back of my head can attest.” Jones rubs the spot in question. “So, who’s our man?”

“No ID yet, we’re waiting on the wall to come up so that we can check his pockets for a wallet, anything,” Leroy answers.

“What are we waiting for, then?” Emma stands up. “Can we get this thing up now?”

As they move back to let the uniforms raise the wall, Jones leans over to Emma. “I saw his hands and his face.”

“They’re hard to miss.”

“Peine forte et dure.” She turns a quizzical expression on him and he switches on scholar mode. “French for ‘hard and forceful punishment.’ It was a type of torture reserved for those who made no plea. Heavy weight after heavy weight was placed on the accused’s chest until they confessed or died. One of the men in your Salem Witch Trials was killed that way.”

She inclines her head, interested despite herself. “You seem to know a lot about it.”

“Love, I’m a mystery writer. Torture is always a good plot device to have on hand, wouldn’t you say?” He tracks the movement of the wall with interest. “Someone wanted his information so badly that they tormented him over it.”

She nods decisively. “We’ll find them.”

“I have no doubt about it, Swan.”

“I have a wallet!” Mary Margaret calls out, motioning to David.

“Well, the first step to finding that information is to find out who the vic is.” Emma inclines her head towards the scene. “Shall we?”

“We shall.”

“Our vic’s name is Jeremy Cahn, 28, junior investment banker at Goldman Sachs.” Emma slaps the photo on the board and steps back. The man in the photograph is handsome and confident, a far cry from the body they saw only minutes ago. “He received his MBA with honors at Stanford and was employed by the firm immediately after.”

“I can see where this is going,” Jones predicts. “Wall Street. He’s a young stallion, desperate to make
a name for himself and pull in the big money. So he starts playing fast and loose. Insider trading.
Straw purchases.” He warms to his subject and immediately starts pacing back and forth, his hands
flying in the air as he theorizes. Emma settles back to watch him work, her expression tolerant. “But
Jeremy gets in too deep. Clients get hurt. The SEC starts noticing, and even worse, the higher-ups
do. He pisses off the wrong person and as payback they literally press him until he confesses to his
crimes.” He turns back to them expectantly.

Leroy looks skeptical. David’s nodding slightly. Emma turns to the board before anyone can see her
smile. “The theory’s not half bad, Jones. But we need more than that.” She sees him beam out of the
corner of her eye, looking far too pleased with himself. “Leroy, where are we on any security cam
footage from the construction site?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing internal. Cameras were on every entrance but that’s it. I’m having the
foreman bring them in anyway so that we can see if anyone went in.”

“Do that. Afterwards, I want you and David to go to his apartment and start looking into his life. I
want interviews with neighbors and friends, phone records, and financials. We need to know
everything that he was into. Jones, you’re with me.”

The two men nod and walk off, bickering over whose turn it is to drive.

“Where are we going, Swan?” Jones asks as he throws his coat back on.

“Goldman Sachs Tower. We’re going to see if your little theory holds up.”

“This is disappointing.” Jones comments in an undertone as he and Emma wait to meet with
Jeremy’s boss. “Where’s the debauchery? The lines of cocaine across desks, exotic animals padding
around ages, models parading around in skimpy bikinis—“

“Do you really think bankers do that?” Emma asks incredulously. Where the hell does he get these
things? She’s seen Wall Street too, but it’s a movie.

He shrugs. “Don’t you?” But then he winks and she just knows he’s pulling her leg. She flicks his
ear and ignores his indignant yelp.

“Detective Swan, Mr. Jones? Mr. Gold will see you now.”

“The COO of Goldman Sachs’ name is Gold,” Jones chuckles as he follows Emma. “That is the best
kind of coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” is the whisper-soft comment behind them. Jones jumps behind
Emma, who tenses because she didn’t hear a thing, even on the highly polished wooden floors. “I
apologize, I startled you. Please.” He opens the door to his office himself and ushers them inside.

Jones recovers quickly and immediately walks over to the floor-to-ceiling windows to admire the
view over Lower Manhattan. “You don’t believe in coincidences, Mr. Gold? Do you believe in fate,
then?”

The man known as Kieran Gold does not fit Emma’s image of a banker. He’s short and slight, with
mousy brown hair that is certainly longer than fashion (and indeed the business world) dictates,
brushing the collar of his tailored suit jacket. And even though the suit itself is almost certainly
bespoke, it hangs on his frame in a way that doesn’t inspire much intimidation.

That is, until Emma gets a good look at his eyes. They’re flat and brown, like chips of glass. His
gaze is sharp and calculating, accustomed to weighing and measuring and deciding in an instant. He’s a shark in human clothes and suddenly the case has taken a very interesting turn. “You could say that, although I am also firmly of the belief that one is the master of one’s own fate. Please, have a seat.” He waits until Emma and Killian sit down before he seats himself behind a dark, heavy carved oak desk that looks like it would be more at home in a chateau than a top-floor executive’s office.

“Mr. Gold, I’m Detective Emma Swan, and this is my colleague Killian Jones. We’d like to ask you a few questions about one of your employees.”

Amusement flickers faintly in those eyes and Emma realizes that he knows exactly who they are. “Of course, anything for New York’s finest. And Mr. Jones, of course. I’m a fan of your work.” Jones simply inclines his head rather than resort to his usual gracious excitement, which speaks volumes about the sudden shift in tone.

“Are you acquainted with Jeremy Cahn?”

He nods. “Ah, Jeremy. Yes, I approved his application myself. He’s one of our most promising hires in recent years. His floor manager informed me that he did not report to work this morning. Is he all right?”

“Unfortunately not. He was murdered some time last night.”

His eyebrow ticks upwards ever so slightly. “Oh dear. That’s terrible news.”

“Did you know Mr. Cahn well?”

“I’m afraid not. As I said before, I only approved his application.” Gold leans forward, palms up in a gesture that Emma thinks is meant to be open and supportive, but it just makes alarm bells go off in her head. “But we will help in every way we can. I assume you would like to see records of Mr. Cahn’s clients?”

Emma’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. Open and supportive, indeed. “Yes. We’d also like to speak to his co-workers.”

“Of course. All I ask for is discretion in regards to our clients.”

She favors him with a smile every bit as bland as his, with a slight edge of teeth. “This is an ongoing murder investigation, Mr. Gold. We’ll be as discreet as we have to be.”

He inclines his head in seeming acquiescence, but Emma feels as though he’s mocking her. “Of course. My secretary will provide you with the relevant files and lead you to the right people. Do let me know if you require anything further.”

Jones says nothing until they step into the elevator. “Well, that was unsettling.”

“You got that too?”

“Do you know what he reminds me of, Swan?” He turns towards her, for once utterly serious and intent. She turns to face him because let’s face it; she wants to know what he thinks. “He’s a spider. He sits in the middle of webs of his own making and snares his victims, innocent or otherwise.”

It’s a rather apt description. “He knows something about Cahn’s murder,” she says grimly as they reach the correct floor. “I want to know what it is.”
“He’s dangerous, Swan,” Jones cautions.

This time, the smile that curves over her lips is entirely real. “When has that ever stopped me, Jones?”

He grins back and it’s a relief to see some of his levity leaking back in. “Point taken.”

They’re in the car driving back to the precinct when Jones’ phone buzzes. “Huh,” he says aloud. “Regina’s had to take care of something and won’t be able to pick Henry up for another few hours. Do we need to be back at the precinct right away?”

Emma glances at her watch. “I suppose we can take lunch. Why?”

“That’s perfect. Why don’t we swing by the penthouse and have lunch with the boys, and I can make sure that someone’s watching them until Regina’s finished.”

She immediately brightens at the thought of seeing Henry. “That sounds great.”

The first thing she’s greeted to when they get to the penthouse is Henry’s sleep-tousled head emerging from the entrance of a truly impressive blanket fort. It looks like every single pillow, cushion, and bed set has been raided for the endeavor. “Emma!” he exclaims when he sees her, scrambling up for a hug.

“Hey there kid,” she says affectionately. She’s never been one for hugs (never really one for being touched, period), but Henry’s are like a balm to her cracked heart. “That’s a great fort you have there.”

“Yeah, Liam and I definitely gave Abed and Troy a run for their money.”

Liam’s next to crawl out, blinking sleep from his wide blue eyes. He also grants Emma a hug before he shuffles to the kitchen, where Jones is already prepping lunch. “Hey Dad.”

“Ah, he finally wakes,” Jones observes, ruffling his curls. “It’s about time you started taking after me, usually you’re up at some ungodly hour.”

“That,” Liam informs him, “is because I have Very Important Things to Do.” He takes out a small cutting board and knife and begins halving oranges for orange juice.

“And I don’t?”

He shrugs and throws a dry smile at Emma. “Come on Dad, you clack away at a keyboard the entire day. At least you’re catching actual murderers now.” It’s all tongue in cheek though, since everyone knows that Liam is Jones’ biggest fan.

“Ungrateful heathen,” Jones declares over Henry’s giggles. “Now, I assume that the lads want breakfast? Not a full Irish, sadly, Liam cemented his heathen status by rejecting the heavenly concoctions that are white and black pudding – “ He pitches his voice over Liam’s exaggerated gagging noises. “But we compromise with a full English. What do you say, Swan, breakfast for lunch?”

“What’s a full English?” she asks curiously.

“You’re in for a treat. Liam, when you’re done with the oranges halve some tomatoes for me, will you?” He reaches into a cupboard and retrieves a can, sliding it across the counter to Henry. “And
toss Henry the can opener while you’re at it.”

Henry inspects the can curiously. “You eat baked beans for breakfast?”

“Aye, it’s not a full English without them!” Henry makes a face and he laughs. “It’s all right if you don’t like it, lad. I can always leave them off your plate.”

“I’ll eat his,” Liam pipes up.

Henry pulls a stubborn face that, to Emma’s horror, looks exactly like hers. “No, I’ll try it,” he insists, handing Jones the open can of beans. “Can I do anything else?”

“When the time is right, you can start making toast. You can also set the table, if you like.” Henry immediately makes a beeline for the open shelves on the side of the island.

Emma in the meantime drifts over to where Jones is stationed. The domestic side of Killian Jones is endlessly fascinating. Almost every burner has something going on – the beans are now in a small saucepan heating up, back bacon and some kind of sausage are happily crisping away on a skillet, a pile of mushrooms is frying up on another skillet, and one more is waiting for the eggs that Jones is cracking into a small bowl. “Makes it easier to fry up eggs, rather than cracking an egg at a time,” he says when he notices her hovering. “There’s an art to the English breakfast, love. It has a lot of components and they all need to be ready at the same time. Lucky for you, I mastered this at a young age.”

“Lucky me,” she echoes and returns to her stool. She thanks Liam when he places a glass of orange juice beside her. She feels uncharacteristically content watching the entire scene. It’s a welcome change from the sense of unease that sprang up inside of her at Goldman Sachs.

“Henry, the toast! And Liam, get the plates ready for me, that’s a lad.”

In no time at all, she’s facing a plate of beans, toast, a fried egg, two sausages, a slice of back bacon, a pile of fried mushrooms, and half a tomato, also fried. “It’ll give you energy, Swan!” Jones says cheerfully, sitting down. “So, what do you think?”

“It’s not bad,” she admits. Jones is definitely talented in the kitchen. “I still say that eggs, pancakes, hash browns, and proper bacon are better, though,” she adds mischievously.

Both Joneses look piqued. “This is proper bacon!” they chorus.

“No it’s not! It’s not crispy!” Henry retorts.

Any escalation is forestalled when a tall, gorgeous woman sweeps into the kitchen clad in a short silk robe, her hair twisted up in a towel. “I thought I smelled an English breakfast!” she exclaims delightedly, planting a loud, smacking kiss on Jones’ cheek before grabbing an extra plate that Emma failed to notice. “‘Ah, my little hellions are awake!” She favors the boys with a wide, movie star type smile. Liam rolls his eyes good-naturedly while Henry stares and turns slightly pink.

Emma realizes three things. One: her stomach is burning with something perilously close to jealousy and no, she’s not going to examine or even acknowledge that any further. Two: the woman now sitting next to Liam looks oddly familiar. Three-

Liam leans over and sniffs the woman. “Did you use my shower gel again, Aunt Ruby?”
Ah yes. She came out of the upstairs bathroom, not Jones’ bathroom (not that it matters what bathroom she uses, not at all).

“What can I say, Liam, you have good taste in bath products. And stop calling me Aunt Ruby, I’m not that old!”

The expression on the teenager’s face is comically resigned. “You have your own bathroom, Aunt Ruby.”

Aunt Ruby. Suddenly it twigs. This is Ruby Lucas, Granny Lucas’ granddaughter and the Jones’ next-door neighbor. And the reason why she’s so familiar is-

“Detective Swan! It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Because she helps run Granny’s and has poured Emma many a cup of free coffee. Emma beats her churning feelings into submission and manages a genuine smile. “Ruby. Yes, it has been a while.”

“I can’t believe that you’re still working with this guy.” She punches Jones in the shoulder and he merely rolls his eyes and keeps tucking in. “Please tell me you’ve locked him in a cell or handcuffed him or something. He’s so damn annoying.”

“Now, that’s not fair-“ Jones begins.

Emma smiles into her orange juice. “I’ve certainly been tempted to.”

“Excellent. Take pictures when you do.”

She ignores his splutters. “Of course. It’ll make for excellent blackmail.”

“Swan!”

“So, what did you guys get from Goldman Sachs?” David asks when they finally return to the precinct.

Jones answers before Emma can. “The man was a good worker and well-liked at work – hard to believe, considering the profession, eh?” He slouches comfortably in his chair (and it really has become his chair) and tips his head back to look at Emma. “The COO was a piece of work though. The man’s an…imp.”

“Imp?” Leroy crosses his arms skeptically.

“Let’s just say I have a feeling that he’s someone we need to keep an eye on.” Emma holds up a flash drive. “Goldman Sachs was obliging and gave us a copy of his files. What did you guys find at his place?”

“Nothing overly suspicious, but we’re waiting on phone records and financials.”

“Family? Friends?”

David shakes his head. “No family. His mom died in high school, dad in college, no siblings, aunts, uncles, or anything. Neighbor mentioned a possible boyfriend, though.”

Jones nods. “Aye, co-workers said the same thing.”

“Well then, track him down. In the meantime, let’s start looking.”
The only file that stands out is the one belonging to Seamus McNally, a low-level member of the Irish mob. Some of the numbers don’t match up, and Emma sends David and Leroy to investigate.

However, it’s the vic’s boyfriend who gives them their first clear lead. He’s a wreck, eyes red-rimmed and currently going through a box of tissues like nobody’s business. “Jeremy was doing really well at Goldman Sachs,” he sniffs. “Too well, I guess.”

Emma and Jones lean forward at the same time. “What do you mean, Sean?” Emma asks softly.

“Well, they moved him up. Bigger cases, more high-profile clients. I think he even said he was working on some of the big man’s stuff. Amazing, right?” He hiccups. “But I guess it wasn’t. He started getting scared. I don’t know if it’s things he heard or things he read, but…”

“But what?” Jones prompts curiously.

“He wanted out. He started talking about leaving, about getting a job where he didn’t feel quite so dirty.” Sean laughs hollowly. “I used to tease him about it at first – I mean come on, a broker wanting to be less dirty? But Jeremy had integrity. I realized how much of a toll it took on him. Something over there really messed him up.”

“Can you give us any more specifics about what Jeremy was looking into?” He begins to shake his head, but Emma pounces. “What about this ‘big man’?”

“Oh, him.” Sean shudders. “I met him once at one of the work parties there. Short guy, long-ish brown hair. Dead brown eyes-“

Emma glances at Jones. The man he just described is Kieran Gold.

Kieran Gold is a cipher. There’s no record of him anywhere before the late 70s, when he started working in the mailroom at Goldman Sachs. The rest is history, with the man slowly climbing the ranks until he ended up in the corner office. His record is squeaky clean (again, unbearably so), even though Organized Crime has a file on him.

The detective who created the file can only shrug helplessly when Emma inquires about Gold. “I’m sorry, Detective Swan,” Detective Belle French sighs. “It’s there for form’s sake, really. We get hints every now and then that Gold may or may not have dealings with the Russian Mob. Then we hear about involvement with the Irish, the yakuza…you name it. If he really is involved with any one or all of them, with all of his connections...it will be difficult to bring him down, to say the least.”

“It has to be Gold,” Jones exclaims. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Cahn moves swiftly through the ranks at Goldman Sachs – just like Gold. It stands to reason that he’d take an interest and get him working on some of his projects.”

“And during the course of that, Cahn stumbles across one of Gold’s shadier moments, and can’t stomach it,” Emma muses.

“Precisely. He tries to make a break for it, but Gold gets wind of it. He tries to figure out what Cahn knows, then when he realizes he knows too much, he kills him.”

Emma rubs her forehead. “Except that this is all speculation. We need proof. Besides, you saw Gold. Could he really shove a concrete wall onto Cahn? He had to have had help.”

Captain Tracy shakes her head when they present her with what they have so far. “I will support you in anything, Detective Swan, you know that,” she says seriously. “But accusing Kieran Gold? He’s a
major political backer in the city. He’s friends with the commissioner. Give me something concrete, then we can proceed.”

Leroy knocks then pokes his head into the room. “Hey, I think we got something on the security cam footage.”

The footage from one of the entrances shows Seamus McNally leaving the construction site just after Cahn’s estimated TOD. He confesses to Cahn’s murder easily enough once Emma confronts him with his case file from Goldman Sachs and the security camera footage.

“I didn’t like what he was doing,” McNally says with a smirk. “I thought he was stealing from me and…persuaded him until he told me the truth.”

It’s all incredibly convenient and so tidy that Emma wants to scream. But they have a confession, so McNally is taken away and charged with the murder of Jeremy Cahn.

“I don’t like it,” David mutters as they watch uniforms escort him down to holding. “Gold obviously hired him and bribed him to take the fall.”

“He wouldn’t confess to that,” Emma reminds him, frustrated. She tried everything, but it seems like whatever Kieran Gold promised Seamus McNally was more than anything she could.

“Well, we got one party in Cahn’s murder,” Leroy admits grudgingly.

“It’s not enough.” The sheer injustice of it all sets Emma on edge. She can’t bear the thought of Cahn’s real killer remaining free while some patsy goes to jail, no matter how guilty he may be. She gets the feeling that they’ve only scratched the surface when it comes to Kieran Gold. How deeply are his roots embedded in the city? She wonders. What would it take to see if the rumors are true?

Jones comes up beside her, his presence solid and oddly comforting. “Don’t worry, Swan. We’ll get him. Not today, but we’ll get him.”

“Yes. Yes we will.”

She creates her own file on Kieran Gold that very night.

Emma walks over to where David and Leroy are staring down a manhole. “What’s up?” she greets them, privately amused by the way that they mirror one another, legs solidly braced and arms akimbo with heads tilted to the right.

David turns around with a welcoming smile that quickly drops. “No Jones?”

She kind of misses the coffee, herself. And she won’t comment on David’s developing bromance with Jones, even if it is endearing. “He wasn’t answering his phone. I left a message.”

Because Jones has that kind of timing, he arrives on the scene while the ME’s van is pulling away. “Was that the body?” he pants, looking hilariously disappointed.

“It’s too bad, too. It was your kind of case,” David remarks.

“Yes?”

“Yep. The body was found down that manhole half-eaten,” Leroy says with a straight face. Emma starts walking away before Jones can see her expression.
“Eaten?”

“It was covered in some kind of green slime.”

Jones’ brow furrows. “Um, all right…”

David nods. “It was creepy. It’s as if someone or something is down there.”

Jones scowls at them as they burst out laughing. “Very funny, you two.” He wheels around and calls after Emma. “Was there a body down the manhole?”

“You.”

“Thank you.” He gestures after her. “An adult.”

She turns around, still walking. She’s a little ticked off that he never answered his phone and can’t exactly figure out why – he’s not exactly obligated to come every time she calls him. A horrifying thought crosses her mind – is she getting used to him? “You should have seen what else was down there. Two metal canisters with biohazard stickers and yellow powder inside.”

“You opened-” His face is a picture. “All right, will someone please enlighten me with the truth, if you please?”

“We’re checking the nearby trash cans for the murder weapon,” Leroy admits.

“What was the murder weapon?”

“Some kind of death ray,” is the immediate response.

“Turns your insides out.”

“Swan, make them stop!”

Seriously, they’re like a pack of preschoolers sometimes. “Maybe you should consider turning up on time, Jones. Don’t make a habit of it, all right?”

“Ask my why I’m here,” Jones says as he drops into his chair.

Emma doesn’t bother to look up from her paperwork. “You know, I ask myself that question every day.”

“My agent has news about Snow Falls. Care to guess?”

“Guessing would imply caring.”

It looks like Snow Falls is being optioned for a movie. Emma leaves Jones, David, and Leroy to happily speculate about which actors they’d get to play themselves when her phone rings. “Swan.”

“Yes, I’d like to report a murder.”

She reaches for her pen. “Do you have an address?”

There’s something like a soft laugh on the other end. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Emma deliberately puts the pen down and snaps her fingers at David, pointing to her phone. He immediately reaches for another phone to start a trace, while Jones leans forward, straining to catch
anything from the receiver. “Right. Who is this?” Her voice is hard.

“Oh, a fan.”

“Tell me more about this murder.”

David mouths at her. “It’s tracing.”

“Well.” The voice gives her the creeps. “I did it. And that’s all you need to know.” The line goes dead before she can respond.

“Got it. 42nd and Lex.”

Jones straightens. “That’s Grand Central Station.”

“Time to go.”

The victim total goes up to two, the bullets from both vics spell out GWEN WILL, and the FBI is crawling all over the place with their fancy technology.

They’re edging in on her territory and it sets her back up like nothing else. Emma’s had precious little to call her own and this town is hers. This case is hers. That’s clear enough, with the killer’s creepy obsession with Gwen Snow and her by proxy.

Jones certainly isn’t helping with his incessant fanboying over Special Agent Jordan Shaw. Emma gets it, really she does. Agent Shaw’s record is impressive. But does he have to be so obvious?

She’s sitting in the passenger seat of Agent Shaw’s SUV waiting to take down a potential suspect. “Yes, just pulling up now. Yep, got it,” she says, getting off the phone with Agent Avery. “The suspect lives in that brick building. His supervisor says he left work an hour ago, so he should be here by now. When the others get here, we’ll take him.” She catches sight of Jones fiddling with equipment in the backseat. “What is he doing?”

Emma rubs her forehead. “He, um, touches things.”

“Night vision goggles! I think I have the newer model though,” Jones remarks through the bulky black goggles. “You know, maybe in my third book, Gwen Snow will tangle with a cold-hearted FBI profiler. It could be called Agent Snow.” Emma and Agent Shaw swing around to glare at him. “Perhaps not. At the very least, the title needs work,” he mutters to himself, contemplating alternative combinations.

Agent Shaw exhales slowly and faces forward. “So, how long have you two been sleeping together?”

Emma discovers that it is possible to choke on air. “I’m—we’re—we’re not sleeping together. We…he just observes me.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the way he observes you.”

“No, she’s correct,” Jones pipes up. “Aside from my first girlfriend, this is the most sexless relationship I’ve ever been in. Do let me know if you want that to change though, Swan.” Unfortunately, he’s too far away for Emma to smack.

“I’ve been profiling people for a long time.” The FBI agent’s gaze flicks from Emma to Jones’ reflection in the rearview mirror. “I’m hardly ever wrong.”
Emma grits her teeth. “Well, this time you are wrong.”

She concedes for the moment. “So, if you’re not sleeping together, why do you keep him around?”

“I can hear you!” Jones objects.

“He’s actually proven to be surprisingly helpful.”

“Have to take your word on that,” Agent Shaw scoffs. There’s a crackle from the backseat as Jones charges a taser. “Put. The taser. Down.”

Of course, Jones and the taser come in handy when he takes down the suspect. “See? I’m helping.”

“Yeah, I’ll buy you an ice cream later,” Agent Shaw replies, grudgingly impressed.

The web unfolds further. The guy they’ve nabbed is just a lackey who, disturbingly enough, sliced off his pinky finger to give to the actual murderer. Cryptic numbers written on the bandage reveal a threat written from words taken from the pages of Snow Falls: “I will kill someone else before midnight tonight unless you stop me.” Traces from the bandages covering the suspect’s finger are formaldehyde, leading them to a dead end with mortuary workers. That’s when Emma’s phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Gwen. You were supposed to stop me.” The voice on the other end is shaking with rage. “I wanted you to stop me.”

“Tell me where you are.”

“Will you come alone?”

Emma glances at Agent Shaw to confirm. The agent nods. “Yes, just you and me. We can figure this out. I can help you.” Like hell. She’s putting him behind bars and will relish every minute of it. “You just need to trust me.”

“Tell me something.” The sneer is clear in his voice. “How does it feel to know that you have failed?” There’s a soft thud as the receiver is placed down. Gunshots ring out and Emma jolts backwards, her lips pressing into a thin line.

They miss him by a mile and the game has changed. The victim’s body is gone now, not on display where they were killed. Everyone goes home, though Jones turns up at Emma’s with a bottle of wine.

“What happened to your security detail, Swan? I didn’t see anyone outside,” Jones inquires as he pours the wine. Emma’s settled on the couch, poring over the case files.

“I sent them home after I got in.” She catches his disapproving look. “What? The windows are locked, the door is locked. I’m armed.” She’d pulled a gun on him when she answered the door. “So, our guy killed the others where they were found. Why not this girl? Why didn’t he just leave her in the garage where we’d find her?”

“He’s changing it up.”

“Or this victim is special.” Jones comes over with two glasses of wine and offers one to Emma. “No thanks.”
He forces her to take the glass. “Agent Shaw said we need to decompress, Swan. Nothing decompresses like a 2000 Châteauneuf-du-Pape.”

Emma can barely contain the snort. “Well, if Special Agent Shaw said so.” That comes out way cattier than she means it to and of course Jones picks up on it. He cocks his head at her.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She pauses, and then relents. “I just see the way that you listen to her, the way that you look at all of her fancy equipment. My murder board’s not enough for you? Now you need a smart board?”

A grin flashes across his face. “Are you jealous?”

She wants to smack that look off his face. “I’m not jealous. I’m just embarrassed the way that you act like a ten-year-old all impressed by her data matrix. ‘Oh, it collates information so quickly, Agent Shaw. Tell me all about it.’” She manages a good approximation of his accent and is pretty proud of it.

“You’re ridiculous, Swan.” Jones looks more than a little annoyed now, which is good because she’s spoiling for a fight.

“And then to top it off, you’re building theory with her!”

“So?”

“So, you’re supposed to be building theory with me. You’re supposed to be on my team.”

Comprehension flashes in his blue eyes and Emma wished she hadn’t been so transparent. Her face gets hot and she takes a sip of wine to cover it. “I thought we were all on the same team,” is the soft reply.

“We are. It’s just…I think that if you have an insight, you should run it by me first.” She felt like such an outsider watching them trade theories and she hated that feeling.

“Fine, I will.” He motions to her glass. “Drink more wine, Swan.”

Emma knocks it back and ignores his wince. Too bad, she just needs to get away from him and the confusing feelings rising up inside of her. “I’m tired. I need to go to bed.” She jerks her head towards the door, a clear indication that it’s time for him to move out.

“Oh no, Swan. I’m not leaving. I’m here to protect you.”

Unbelievable. Emma crosses her arms. “What, with your vast arsenal of rapier wit?”

“I did leave my sword at home,” he muses. “Seriously. There is a madman gunning for you because of me. I am not going to leave you alone.”

They stare each other down and Emma wonders if this is his way of trying to make up for the Agent Shaw thing. “Okay, fine. I am too tired to argue.” She marches over to her linen closet and hands him a blanket and an extra pillow.

“You’re my partner, Swan, not Agent Shaw,” he says quietly as she walks over to her bedroom. “You’re not going to lose me.”

Emma stops at her door, but doesn’t respond. “Good night, Jones.”
The next moments of the case fly by in a dizzying set of flashes. The victim is found on Emma’s doorstep the following morning. The connection between the three victims is found – Ben Conrad. The bullets spell out the message GWEN WILL BURN. The NYPD and FBI descend on Conrad to stop him before that threat proves true for Emma.

Conrad takes himself out in a blaze of defiance and it looks like they were just in time. Bombs are never pretty. The FBI packs up.

But something’s not right.

Jones sits in the loft later, frowning at the files in an echo of Emma the previous night. Liam shuffles in dressed in his pajamas. “Lad? I thought you went to bed an hour ago.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” He settles beside his father but doesn’t look too closely at the files. “I thought the case was over.”

“It is.” He frowns. “Wrapped up all nice and neat.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“In a book that’s a good thing. In real life, nothing is that tidy.”

Liam sighs. “Are you sure you’re not overthinking this, Dad? It’s out of your hands now-“

The light bulb goes off in his head. “Hands.”

“What?”

“The bruising pattern on the second victim. The killer used his left hand. And see his handwriting? The slope on the four and the loop on the six?”

“The killer was left-handed?” Liam ventures slowly, not understanding.

“But Ben Conrad shot himself with his right hand.” It’s all becoming clear to him, as clear as words on a page. “If he was the real killer, he would have shot himself with his left hand. Ben Conrad was murdered. He’s not our killer. The killer was just playing with us.”

“But the evidence-“

“It was planted to lead us to Ben. He wants us to think it’s over. He wants us to drop our guard. He wants to make a scene.” Jones eyes widen. “Gwen will burn.’ He’s after Swan.” He grabs his cell phone and motions for Liam to follow. “Captain Tracy took the detail off her place. She’ll be alone.”

Emma’s phone rings and rings. He grabs his jacket and shrugs into it. “Go to Gran’s now and make sure you stay there until I come back. Call the precinct. Tell them to get over there and that we were wrong. Swan’s in danger. You got that, Liam?”

Liam nods and tears down the hall. Jones sprints in the opposite direction, praying he’s not too late.

“He’s on the street outside her building when she finally picks up. “What, Jones?”

“It wasn’t Ben Conrad! He’s not the killer! The killer is still alive! Swan, you’re in danger!” He hears it then – beeping in the background. “Emma!”
There’s a horrific bang and the world is nothing but red and heat as Emma’s apartment goes up in flames.

Chapter End Notes

Random tidbit: Liam uses the Dirty line from Lush. And now I'm trying to lay down the groundwork for events that of course culminate in the end of Season 4. I realized that I sort of shot myself in the foot by not giving Emma the exact same storyline as Kate, but ah well. Let's hope I come up with something as compelling!
But fair ain't what you really need

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Emma decides that the whole spiel about one’s life flashing before their eyes is a dirty, dirty lie. All she knows is Jones’ frantic voice in her ear and the ticking of the bomb before instinct takes over.

*Slam.* The bathroom door shuts behind her because it’ll block some of the blast. Better that than nothing.

*Thud.* She sort of falls into the tub but she has no time to think about that because the tub’s cast iron and if anything will protect her from the blast it’s that, right?

The seconds when the bomb detonates are the longest of her life. Its heat is unlike anything she’s ever felt before and she feels the flames roaring only inches above her. It sucks the air from her lungs and everything is *burning* and even though her eyes are squeezed shut all she can see is red, red, red.

Finally, the flames recede and all she can hear is the soft crackle of things in her apartment catching fire and all she can think is that she’s *alive*-

“Emma, are you in there? EMMA!” There’s a smash and a thud and frantic scrabbling in the living room. In the distance, sirens are wailing. “Bloody buggering *hell.* Emma? EMMA?”

Jones. Tears of pain and relief trickle out of the corners of her eyes. He saved her life. If it hadn’t been for his call, she would have been standing in her bathroom, completely oblivious. She opens her mouth to call out but all that comes out is a cough.

“Emma?” Surely he’s heard her. “Emma. Emma!”

Wow. She’s never heard him call her by her first name before, but it’s amazing how many inflections he’s giving those two syllables. She coughs more in an attempt to clear the smoke from her throat.

Finally, his footsteps echo on the bathroom floor. “Emma! Thank god you’re alive and – you’re naked.”

Oh, right. “Jones!” she sputters, glad that she at least has her back to him. “Turn around!”

“You may be injured and your flat’s on fire, Swan. Now might not be the best time for modesty, don’t you think?”

“Just get me a towel, will you?”

“They’re also on fire.”

“Bathrobe?” she croaks, knowing the futility of it all before the word even leaves her mouth. Everything’s on fire. Everything she had in this world is crumbling away into ash and she’s just sitting in her bathtub, naked. Her fingers tighten convulsively on the rim.

“Swan.” His voice is gentle and soothing. “Let me just give you my jacket, all right? Stand up now, love, I promise I won’t look.”

“You better not,” she growls because she doesn’t have control over much right now, but she can at least have this.
“I’m not!” Fabric brushes her shoulders and she shrugs into the blazer as quickly as she can. Jones is taller than her by a few inches, so the tweed blazer falls to mid-thigh, keeping her pretty decently covered. She recognizes it – navy tweed with leather elbow patches. It smells like Jones, comforting and masculine, and that relaxes her more than anything.

“Okay, you can look now.”

She turns just as his eyes flicker open and he scans her from head to toe and back, as though making sure she’s all there. “All right there, Swan?” he asks, gently grabbing her elbows to help her climb out of the tub. Her left ankle gives a little bit when she tests the floor but his right arm is around her instantly, supporting her as she limps forward.

“Are you sure you can walk?”

“I’m a little banged up,” she admits, wincing.

“Are you in any pain?” Anxiety creeps back into his voice and his concern is so new and welcome…she can’t really process it right now.

She glances over at him, then at the front door. “Well, not nearly as much as you,” she jokes, trying to break the tension. “It’s killing you, isn’t it?”

He looks down at her, surprised. “What?”

“Having to wait this long to tell me how you banged down the door.” She needs something – anything – to keep her mind off the fact that someone’s just violated her sanctuary.

“Shall I start from the beginning?”

Things are tense when Shaw arrives, but once the paramedics let her go and the fire department gives the all clear, she’s up there with the team (fully dressed thanks to Mary Margaret). Emma edges past C.S.U., her lips tightening at the number of people roaming the space that was once hers, going through her things…

“The damage isn’t as bad in your bedroom,” David says as he comes out of the room. “But your clothes do smell like smoke and explosives.” He presses her cell phone and a bundle of suede into her hand. Graham’s shoelaces. She was afraid they’d gone up in smoke. She smiles gratefully at him.

“I’ve got the blast seat here,” Shaw announces, poking at one particularly charred spot.

Emma comes over took look. “Well, it had to have been a small device; otherwise I would have seen it.”

“The lab will have the breakdown by morning, but that’s cyclonite,” Shaw says briskly, bagging the evidence. “Same thing we found in Ben Conrad’s apartment. So, what tipped you off?”

“It wasn’t me, it was Jones.”

Jones, who has been hovering behind Emma this whole time, jumps a little bit when Shaw and Avery turn to him, all skepticism. “Our supposed killer, Ben Conrad? He shot himself with his right hand, yet the man that Detective Swan and I saw in the window was holding the gun in his left hand. The shot went off just as soon as he stepped out of view. He couldn’t have had time to switch hands
that fast. No,” he muses, shaking his head. “Our real killer shot Ben Conrad and placed the gun in his hand to make it look like a suicide.”

Agent Shaw crosses her arms, defensive but willing to listen. “We were outside the door. We heard the shot. There’s no other way out of that apartment. So if Ben Conrad didn’t kill himself…”

“Oh, then our killer was in the apartment the whole time,” Emma finishes.

“How the hell did we miss him?”

“Let’s find out,” Jones says grimly.

The cubbyhole in Ben Conrad’s apartment tells them everything. Their man carefully crafted a web of murders around his life, turning the real Ben Conrad into the perfect patsy. It’s brilliant. It’s sick. It’s twisted.

And the killer calls her again and takes another victim, her scream echoing through Emma’s phone.

The trace leads them to the newest vic’s cell phone. They find a slug and there’s no letter etching confirming Emma’s suspicion that the killer is devolving. But now they have some key information: he’s been watching their every move. How else could he have known that she was alive? That means they’ve got him somewhere in their crime scene photos.

She rubs her eyes. “If we don’t catch him soon, he’s going to kill again.”

Shaw sighs. “You can’t take this personally.”

Emma’s hands drop to her lap and she glares at the FBI agent. “The hell I can’t. He just blew up my apartment. I think that’s pretty damn personal.”

“Do you know how they caught Son of Sam?”

Jones raises his hand. “A parking ticket. If I remember correctly, Berkowitz parked too close to a fire hydrant.”

She nods grimly. “All we need is to find our parking ticket and we catch this killer. As smart as he is, he’s got a fatal flaw: hubris. It’s not enough to be smart; he wants us to know it. He wants us to know that he fooled us.” She paces back and forth. “All of his first victims – the personal injury lawyer, the dog walker, the taxidermist – they all lead back to the death of Ben Conrad’s dog. How could our killer have known all the players in someone else’s life?”

Jones shrugs. “He must have known Ben Conrad.”

“That’s where we start,” Shaw states decisively, tapping Conrad’s picture on Emma’s murder board. “We treat Ben Conrad as the first victim in this case.”

It makes sense. Now Emma has a place to start. A place to finally get at this son of a bitch. “And then we find out where he intersected with our killer.”

Jones leaves briefly to shower and reassure Liam that everything is all right. During that space of time, Henry and Regina arrive at the precinct.

“Emma!” Henry cries, barreling straight into her. His arms are tight around her waist and the force is
enough that Emma rocks back.

“Kid, hey!” she gasps. “Whoa, hey, I’m all right. I’m all right.” She cradles his head in one hand, the other making soothing circles on his back. “Are you sure that you should be here?” she asks Regina over his head.

“He wouldn’t stop until he could see for himself that you were safe, Detective.” Regina looks her over. “And I wanted Captain Tracy to debrief me on the situation. It makes sense.”

She swallows a lump in her throat, looking down at Henry then back to Regina. “The killer – he’s after me,” she stammers. There’s suddenly a very real chance that Henry could be in danger because a madman’s fixated on her. “You and Henry-“

Regina puts a hand up to stop her protests. “Detective, I appreciate your concern, I do. But I have some of the best security in the city.” Something in her softens at Emma’s concern for Henry. “However, I will allow Captain Tracy to add a security detail, if that makes you feel better.”

Emma’s breath whooshes out. “It would. Thank you.”

“Mayor Mills? Agent Shaw and I will debrief you now.” Captain Tracy smiles reassuringly at Emma as Regina enters her office.

“How did you survive?” Henry demands the moment the door closes. “Where were you when the bomb went off?”

“I jumped into the bathtub. The door and the tub protected me.”

His eyebrows bunch together quizzically. “Why is this guy going after you?”

Henry’s a smart kid, so she knows that he’d get it. But it’s an open case and she doesn’t want him to worry any more than he has to. “We’re working on a theory, kid. And we’ll get him, that I promise you.”

He tips his head back to meet her eyes, brown eyes solemn. “I know you will,” he whispers. “But can you promise to be careful, too?” She can feel the unspoken current beneath his question, because it’s running through her as well: please don’t leave me, I just found you.

Emma cups his face in her hands and smiles down at him. “I promise.”

Eventually, Henry and Regina leave and Jones comes back. A peek into Ben Conrad’s life leads them to the apartment of one Chris Doherty, dead for six years.

The apartment is shocking and yet not. It’s like something out of every gritty serial killer film, the walls plastered with newspaper cutouts connected by strings. And there are a hell of a lot of pictures of Emma.

“He’s done this before,” Emma murmurs, stepping forward to peer at articles regarding unsolved cases all over the country.

Jones picks up a book with a familiar cover. Snow Falls. “I signed this. ‘To Scott, write what you know.’”

Shaw wheels around to face him. “Scott? Do you remember him?”

“No, but I sign hundreds of books.” He reaches over and picks up something that looks like a book
proof.

“His manifesto?”

“His manuscript,” he corrects, flipping through it.

Emma comes to look over his shoulder. “Frozen Snow?” It was an awful title.

Jones’ grimace says that he’s thinking the same thing. “Snow examined the bullets, each of them perfectly engraved with a letter.” His lilting accent seemed horribly out of place in this setting. “She rearranged them like scrabble tiles until they spelled her name.”

Unbelievable. He was writing it all up like- “A book,” Emma spat. “All of this over a damn book.”

Shaw held up another manuscript. “He was writing about his murders long before Gwen Snow. Night Terrors. Looks like it’s about killing prostitutes in Seattle.”

“I remember that case,” Jones commented, closing the manuscript with a decisive snap. “I was under the impression that they’d caught the perpetrator.”

“Not so much caught as found dead,” Shaw murmured, making the connection. “He hung himself.”

“Another patsy just like Ben Conrad.”

The notion that the killer had been doing this for years just infuriates Emma. “He gets away with murder. Why would he write about it? Why risk it?”

“Writing is probably a symptom of his psychosis, like taking a trophy.” Shaw’s eyes are clear as she goes into profiling mode. “He both memorializes the deed and distances himself from it by turning fact into fiction. Then comes Gwen Snow, who is tailor-made for his psychosis: one part fact, one part fiction, just like him. Who better for him to challenge?”

Emma’s blood runs cold and she turns away.

Jones glances at her and moves slightly in her direction before addressing his next comment to Shaw. “He should have realized that by going after Swan we’d realize Ben Conrad wasn’t the killer. Why would he reveal his hand?”

“It’s part of the thrill,” Emma mutters. “He needed to escalate in order to feel alive.”

“Or he’s a psychotic obsessive-compulsive and has already decided how it has to end.”

The FBI stakes out the apartment, hoping to catch the elusive “Scott.” Emma, Jones, and Shaw make their way over to the van. Jones pulls the manuscript out from his jacket and begins rifling through it. “It’s all here,” he says with surprise. “The engraved bullets, the cat and mouse phone calls, the cipher – only it’s Gwen Snow investigating, and she’s always one step behind him.”

“Until now.” Emma’s eyes are glued to the screens.

“Jones, what part of ‘un-ass’ don’t you understand?” Shaw demands, yanking the sheaf of papers from his hands.

“All of it.”

She glares at him. “For future reference, it means, ‘get the hell out and don’t take anything.’”
Jones whips his ever-present notepad from a jacket pocket. "'Un-ass.' Most interesting." His pencil flies across the paper. "'Un-ass.'"

"Is he always like this?"

Emma nods. "Jones has the attention span of a cocker spaniel."

Shaw makes a soft noise at the back of her throat – almost like a laugh. "And the loyalty. The way he follows you around," she explains as Emma looks at her. "From what I’ve observed, this unorthodox partnership works well for you."

"For now," she says non-committal. She can tell Shaw’s about to say more, but something on the screen catches the older woman’s eye. All hell breaks loose when they realize the spotter on the roof isn’t theirs. Shaw sprints away with the team and misses the guy leaping from rooftop to rooftop. "He’s getting away," Emma realizes, jumping out of the van over Jones’ protests.

Instinct takes her down the road, where sure enough, there’s a stir in the crowd. The killer’s there; she knows it in her bones. "NYPD! On the ground, now!"

But the suspect runs away, knowing full well that Emma won’t shoot with all the civilians moving around. She chases him down into the subway, only to have the car doors slide closed between them. He makes a shooting gesture towards her as the train moves away, slipping through her fingers once more.

The killer has a name: Scott Dunn. But while they’re shutting down all of his assets, Agent Shaw turns to her, her voice too level as she says, "You’re out."

"I’m sorry, what?"

"You were supposed to stay in the van, Detective." Shaw looks at her coolly, arms crossed.

Emma stands up, defensive. "I just broke this case!"

"And I need people backing me that I can trust."

The words stop her in her tracks. "Whoa. Hold on-"

"Sorry, Detective Swan. You’re off the case."

Even Captain Tracy can’t do anything. "She has jurisdiction, Swan. There’s nothing I can do."

"Sir, this is my case," Emma protests, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. Jones lingers near the door, concern etched on every line of his face. "Dunn is coming after me. Like it or not, I’m already on the front line."

Tracy holds her hands out, placating. "You and Jones found him. The hard part is already over. They’ve frozen his financials, alerted T.S.A. His face is all over the news. He’s cornered."

Emma stops pacing and glares at her. "And you’re the one who taught me that when you have an animal cornered, that’s when they’re the most unpredictable!"

The captain’s lips thin into a straight line as she stands up. "Yes, and that’s also when they make mistakes. He does something stupid, and we will take him down. Swan, you’ve been running yourself ragged the last few days. You need to go home and get some sleep."
“Sir, I don’t have a home!” And oh god, it’s like a sucker punch. She’s been working around the clock since the explosion. Better to collapse and sleep in the precinct than admit that she’s got nowhere to go.

“Yes, you do.” Emma spins around and Jones’ gaze pins her to the spot. His eyes are dark and earnest. “It’s a secured building with an extra bedroom, with people that care about you. With a federal detail at the door, it’s the safest place in the city.”

“Thank you Jones, but I couldn’t-“

Jones levers himself up and stands next to her. “You can and you will.”

Captain Tracy looks between the two of them, cutting in when Emma would protest further. “Detective, I took that security off your apartment and that gave Dunn the opportunity to get to you. I won’t make the same mistake again. Consider it an order.”

Emma stares at the amber liquid that Jones pours into the tumbler. “Well who would’ve thought that I would be homeless and case-less in one day?” she jokes bitterly, tapping her glass to his as he settles beside her on the couch. Liam’s only just gone upstairs, reassured that Emma is there and in one piece.

“I know I’m the master of going rogue, but you were right to chase after Dunn, Swan.”

At least Jones believes in her. She takes comfort in that. But she’s also a realist. “And Agent Shaw was right to kick me off the case. I would’ve done the same thing if I were in her spot. I’m too close to it.”

Jones takes a sip of the aged rum, his eyes never leaving her face. “I’m sure that after all of this you’re sorry you let me follow you around.”

It’s a strangely vulnerable admission, coming from him. Emma meets his gaze head-on, wondering at how contrite and guarded he looks. “No,” she says eventually, surprised to find that it’s the honest truth. “Not this. All the other annoying things you do, but not this.” She smiles reluctantly. “I’ve gotten used to you pulling my pigtails, Jones.”

He relaxes and grins at her over the top of his glass.

They sit in comfortable silence. “What about you?” Emma asks eventually. “Are you sorry that you ever wrote Snow Falls?”

He’s shaking his head before she’s even halfway finished asking. “The way I see it now, Swan, if it wasn’t for Gwen Snow, this cretin would’ve just gone on killing because he wouldn’t have met anyone smart enough to stop him.” Emma grins. “I’m speaking, of course, about Special Agent Shaw.”

She contemplates throwing the glass at his head, but holds it out instead. “One more round.”

Emma wakes up early the next morning and tackles that gorgeous kitchen. She’s not a fantastic cook by any means, but she gets by. She can, however, make a pretty mean stack of buttermilk pancakes. She figures it’s the least she can do for Jones and maybe Liam will like it too.

The front door to the loft opens and Ruby strides in, flashing a perplexed look over her shoulder. “Hey Killian, what’s with the-“ Her eyebrows shoot up her forehead as Emma freezes behind the counter.
“Ruby.”

“Detective Swan.” Her face lights up with unholy glee and Emma realizes exactly how it must look. Hair messy, still in pajamas, cooking breakfast – yeah, it looks pretty bad.

“I’m here on orders from the FBI,” she blurts out.

Ruby waggles her eyebrows and sits at the counter. “No need to explain to me, Detective Swan. I am hardly the one to judge.”

“No, it’s just my apartment is-“

“Ashes?” Ruby finishes sympathetically. “I know. Liam was with us when the entire thing went down. I’m glad that you’re all right.”

Emma relaxes and manages a hesitant smile. “Thanks.”

“Well, that explains the pat-down by the hunky guy with the ear bud!”

Jones’ door swings open and the man himself walks to the kitchen. He is still in his pajamas as well, and is sporting an impressive case of bed hair, with black chunks sticking every which way. “I can smell coffee and pancakes!” he announces happily.

Emma slides a mug to him and to Ruby. She even has a mug of proper tea for Liam when he comes sliding into the kitchen, the tie on his school uniform flopping open and untied around his collar. “Wow, breakfast! Thanks Emma!”

Ruby nudges Jones in the side. “She cooks.”

Jones winks at Emma and she rolls her eyes. “Aye, that she does.”

“Seriously Emma, this peach reduction is amazing,” Ruby continues. “Any chance I can get the recipe off you for Granny’s? It’s perfect for summer.”

Now it’s Emma’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Really?” she says doubtfully.

“They’re really good, Emma!” Liam pipes up, shoveling another forkful into his mouth. She glances at Jones and he raises his coffee mug in a salute. He’s smiling and that’s no new thing because Jones smiles all the time, but this is softer and more affectionate around the edges. It makes her stomach flip uncomfortably. “Um, okay-“ Her cell phone rings and she flashes an apologetic look at Ruby. “Swan.” Her expression hardens. “Got it. We’ll be right there.” She hangs up and begins gathering up her dishes. “That was Agent Avery. Agent Shaw never made it home last night.”

The situation is grim. They find Agent Shaw’s vehicle once the GPS tracker is turned on, fitting into Dunn’s sense of theatricality. That’s all confirmed when he calls her phone once more and challenges Emma to a showdown (calling her “Gwen” the entire time) whilst holding Agent Shaw’s life in the balance.

The e-mail he sends them providing proof of life leads them to a series of abandoned warehouses in the Bronx. Agent Avery isn’t taking the chance that Dunn will kill Agent Shaw before the scheduled confrontation and everyone agrees that taking him out when he least expects it is a better idea.

Everyone, that is, except Jones. “This is wrong,” he murmurs when Avery confirms that there are
“What’s wrong?” Emma swings around to face him. All of Jones’ observations have been spot on during this case. If there’s any time to really listen to him, it’s now.

“It’s too easy, Swan,” he replies, his fingertip gliding over the heat signatures on the screen.

Avery does not look happy. “What do you mean, ‘too easy?’”

Jones heaves a sigh, his brow furrowing. “I mean the sneak peek out the window, waiting to record the message just as the train went past? He led us here. Need I remind you how perfect everything was with Conrad? This is no coincidence.”

“Yeah, I got the trap memo, too. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to sit on my ass and do nothing. That’s my partner up there.”

Avery’s comm unit crackles. “Alpha team standing by,”

“She’ll be dead the moment you breach that door,” Jones cautions as Avery moves to exit the van.

“That’s why we’re not going to breach. Hostage exchange goes down at midnight. He has to move her before then. We go in quietly and wait-“

“-and then as soon as Dunn comes out?” Emma asks.

“I’ll put him down like the rabid dog he is.” The door closes firmly behind him.

Jones keeps staring at the screen as the team moves in. “I don’t know how he’s doing it, Swan, but he’s not up there.”

“What are you basing that on?” she asks curiously.

“I don’t know how I know,” he says, frustrated. “I just…” He turns to her, half pleading and half conviction. He’s begging her to believe him and trust his instincts.

And she does. “You just what? Jones, you and I have known each other long enough for me to know that sometimes your silly theories are right. You haven’t let me down during this case. But if you really believe he’s not up there, you need to tell me why before I compromise that team.”

He rubs his forehead, scenes flashing through his head. “It’s just not how I would write it. Dunn wants to be a writer, correct? He wants the drama and the story, and this is not a satisfactory ending at all, Swan.”

She settles down beside him. “What happens in your version?”

“He lets us think we found him in order to lure us here. He has something planned. If it were me, I would wait until they were all inside…and then I’d blow the building. We’d see a bomb in the building, waiting for the FBI.”

It all makes hideous sense. “Where is he watching from?” It’s Dunn; he has to be watching from somewhere.

“I don’t know. He wants to show that he’s smarter than us, so he’ll be close and out of the way.”

“Jones.” She spins his chair around, her hands firm on the arms. “If it were you, where would you be?”
“Not where they are, that’s for certain. I’d be here.” He points to the opposite building.

Emma bites her lip. Multiple lives hang in the balance. If Jones is wrong…

He’s not wrong. She knows it in her gut, and she always follows that. “Come on.” She leads him out of the van and into the other building. As they climb the stairs, she produces a 9mm and hands it to him. “Here.”

He looks confused. “Do you want me to hold it whilst you tie your shoe?”

She shakes her head and pulls out her second piece. He’s a decent shot, he’s proven that to her before. “I want you to take it just in case.”

Jones swallows. His eyes shine in the darkness with something she cannot quite identify, but there’s no time to think about that right now. They move up slowly and quietly, until they hear it:

“I’m almost sad to see it come to an end, Agent Shaw. You know, I’d expected more from you.”

Emma peers into the room. Agent Shaw is tied to a chair, duct tape across her mouth. Emma catches her eye and nods slightly before slipping back into the shadows.

She touches Jones’ sleeve. “He’s there. I’m going to draw him away. You need to free Agent Shaw and get help. You’re my only backup.” He nods, uncharacteristically solemn and focused. She takes a moment to look at him, just look at him, and wonder how he’s become so important, before she steps into the light. “I thought it was me you were after.”

Dunn spins around. His smile is beatific. “Gwen, you came.”

Emma raises her gun. She can see his face clearly and she just hates him. “Put your hands up Dunn, or I will take you down.”

Dunn raises a detonator remote. “I have a better idea, Gwen. Why don’t you put your gun down or I’ll detonate the nineteen pounds of cyclonite I have in the building across the street, turning Agent Avery and his team into mist.” Agent Shaw flinches at that and Emma holds steady, her gun still pointed his way. “If you shoot me, Gwen, it might cause my body to tense up and push the button. Do you really want to take that chance?”

“They’re not in the building anymore. I only sent them in there to throw you off.”

He frowns. “You’re lying.”

He’s smart. He won’t fall for it that easily but she has to try everything. “Why would they be in there if I knew that you were in here?” she reasons. “Face it, Dunn. I beat you. Gwen Snow won.”

His face contorts. “No. No! No!” He throws the detonator to the floor and Emma reacts, moving forward as he goes for the gun on a box in front of Agent Shaw. The FBI agent moves as well, kicking the gun to the floor. He changes tactics, using the agent as a shield before quickly running off. As Emma chases after him, Jones emerges and goes for Shaw.

“Where are my people?” she snaps as he gets her hands free.

“Ehm…across the street, sitting on nineteen pounds of cyclonite.”

“She was bluffing?”

Jones grins and it’s all pride. “She was profiling.”
“Go help her,” Shaw orders. “He could outflank her. Go, go!” she says when he hesitates. “I’ve got this!”

Emma stalks through the stacked boxes, her footsteps all but inaudible on the concrete floor. “Dunn, give it up. Nobody has to die.”

There is a slight thudding sound then all of a sudden he’s on top of her. She moves quickly, shoving him towards the wall as they grappled for her gun, but he somehow manages to wrestle it from her and throw her to the floor. Emma hits her shoulder hard, knocking the wind out of her.

“That’s how all my stories end,” Dunn intones, pointing the gun at her. “With someone else dead.”

All Emma can hear is “No!” There’s a shot and the gun is spinning out of Gunn’s hand. He scrambles for it once more but suddenly Agent Shaw is there, her foot on his hand and a gun to his head. “I believe this is your collar, Detective Swan.”

Emma gets to her feet, nodding to the agent as she drags Dunn up to cuff him. “This isn’t over, Snow,” he snarls.

Emma’s not too gentle as she prods him forward. She’s so damn tired of him. “It’s not Snow, it’s Swan. You have the right to remain silent, so shut the hell up.” She passes him off to Shaw. “Thank you.”

The agent smiles her first genuine smile. “Ditto.”

As Shaw leads him away, Emma turns to Jones, who is still staring at the spot where he shot Dunn. “That was a hell of a shot, Jones. You been practicing?”

He glances at her. “I was aiming at his head.”

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Emma walks into the precinct the next morning to see Agent Shaw waiting by her desk. “Agent Shaw,” she says with a smile. “I want you to know that I learned a lot from you on this one.” She might have resented the other woman at first, but she’s come to respect her professionalism, her cool head, and her instincts.

Shaw returns the smile. “You did most of the heavy lifting,” she admits. “Honestly, the thing that impresses me most is that you came in with Jones at the end.”

“Some people would call that foolish.”

Shaw purses her lips. “You made a tough decision on your feet and used the resources at hand. I’d say that’s heroic and somewhat poetic.” At Emma’s confused look, she elaborates. “In the end, Dunn faced Gwen Snow. She is, after all, part you and part Jones.” She pauses. “He cares about you, Emma. You may not see it, you may not be ready to, but he does.”

Emma looks down. “Yeah, well, the situation with Jones is complicated.”

“Ah.”

Jones enters with two cups of coffee, as usual. “Ladies.”

Shaw glances at her watch. “Detective Swan, it’s been a pleasure.”
"We'll see you around."

Shaw actually spares a warm glance for Jones. “Jones, thank you for your help. You are a valuable asset to Detective Swan’s team.”

“Well, it would be wonderful if you would call her and remind her of that from time to time.” As Shaw makes her exit, Jones settles into his chair. He reaches into his pocket and places a small box on her desk.

Emma eyes it with wariness and interest. “Wow. What’s this?”

“Open it.”

Beneath the cardboard lid are the swan necklace and the circle necklace, shiny and new. “My necklaces,” she says with surprise. No one had found them during the search.

“I found them in the wreckage and thought you’d like them cleaned up. Here, allow me.” He circles around her desk before she can protest, brushing her hair aside and fastening them around her neck. His fingertips just graze the sensitive skin there and Emma has to fight from shuddering. Complicated indeed.

“Thank you, Jones.” She touches them instinctively, the cool metal warming quickly beneath her touch.

“Anytime, Swan.” He sips his coffee, his eyes never leaving her face.

Things…shift after the Dunn case. He stands closer to her now, edging past her carefully erected space bubble as they stand in front of the murder board or talk to a witness on the street. She doesn’t pause to think that maybe it isn’t that he’s worked up the courage to stand closer – maybe it’s just that she allows it. It’s practically a given now that he comes into the interrogation rooms with her, because he has this way of judging the situation. He knows when to hold back and let her do her thing (“You’ve got this, Swan) or when they can play off one another until the answers fall into their laps.

It’s a million little things, really, tiny steps that lead to a place that’s utterly foreign for her. She’s never had anyone like him in her life, someone so infuriating and brilliant and supportive and so unshakably convinced that she’s, well, extraordinary.

She still can’t believe that he put that in the book dedication.

Emma watches him joke around with David and Leroy sometimes. He laughs loudly and freely with them, even if the joke is at his own expense. The blueness of his eyes deepens and they crinkle around the corners with mirth in a way that’s only slightly mesmerizing. Every smile and every laugh thaws her in a way that frightens her beyond belief.

Which is why she does the incredibly stupid thing and says yes when the cute guy who owns the furniture store asks her out.

Jones asks her to come out with him and Liam to their place in the Hamptons over Memorial Day weekend. “It’s been a tradition of ours since we moved here,” he says. “Bonfires, roasting marshmallows, telling ghost stories, sleeping late.”
“Sounds nice,” she murmurs, picturing it in her head. She likes the image of a younger Liam running in circles around a bonfire while Jones sits back and laughs. “Kind of magical, actually.”

“You really ought to come, Swan. It’s right on the ocean with a secluded pool.” He winks at her, draws his tongue across his bottom lip in a movement that is entirely unconscious and just really, really hot. “You could lie out and work on your tan.”

She snorts. “Wow, Jones, you’re working really hard to see me in a swimsuit.”

Something just flares in his eyes and her breath just kind of catches in her throat. “If you’re not comfortable in a swimsuit, you can just skinny dip. I won’t complain.”

He keeps dropping hints as they work the case, showing her pictures on his phone, telling her that she can bring Henry. And it’s tempting, so tempting, but she still can’t reconcile these stupid feelings inside of her when it comes to Jones.

Then there’s Walsh. He’s sweet and understanding and cute and he put a rush order on furniture so that she actually had some when she moved into her new place.

And there’s the fact that she agreed to go somewhere with him for Memorial Day and she didn’t know how to tell Jones until it just…comes out.

“I thought you were working this weekend.” The way he looks at her then is careful and guarded. She hates it but she knows that she put it there and why the hell is everything so complicated?

She sighs. “I’m sorry, Jones. I should’ve just told you. I didn’t want things to be awkward between us, now that Walsh and I are…” Her hands flail on top of her desk because she really can’t say it. Saying it makes it real and right now? She kind of wishes it wasn’t. Especially when she hears the next words out of his mouth.

“I understand, Swan.” And damn him, he does. She can see it. But she can also see that he’s hurt and she definitely didn’t want that. “You want your private life to be private and…that makes what I was going to say a little easier.” He tells her about how he’s hit a snag on book two (still untitled), how his publisher has been breathing down his neck, and how it’s time for a break.

“A break?” Emma echoes, startled.

“Of course. God knows you must be tired of me following you around all the time and I confess that I really must get some work done.” The forced cheerfulness in his voice is grating and completely at odds with the sadness that settles over him like a cloak. “I may just stay in the Hamptons over the summer and get away from the city for a while.”

“The summer?”

He nods. “I thought this would be our last case.”

*Our last case.*

Emma’s still processing that nugget of information hours later when David comes by her desk. “So, Jones’ last case.” He says it like he’s treading on glass, his blue eyes scanning her face with a look that’s far too kind and understanding.

Emma makes a non-committal noise. She does not want to talk about it. She’s already had to shut Mary Margaret down (and she felt bad about that, really, but she needs space right now) and she really doesn’t want to chew David’s head off either.
“Leroy and I were thinking of throwing him a little going away party.”

That’s a surprise. “It’s not like he’s leaving forever, you know.” She hopes.

And David sees right through her. “Are you sure about that?” His voice is gentle but firm. “Why do you think he’s been following you around all this time? Research?” He shakes his head in disbelief. “He’s done enough research to write fifty books, Emma. And maybe I don’t know the reason, but I’m pretty sure it doesn’t include watching you be with another guy.”

That’s probably about as much of an endorsement as David’s capable of making, and it absolutely floors her.

On the other side of the city, Jones’ own motivations are being called into question.

“A murder in the middle of a spy game where nobody knows what’s going on?” Stephen Cannell chuckles and sips from his tumbler. “I like that.”

“The Ukrainians are a nice twist,” Michael Connelly admits.

Jones deals. “So, we’ve explained the money, the gadgets, and the briefcase. The only thing we can’t explain is why he was killed.” His eyes sweep over the other players. Sometimes, when bouncing ideas off Liam isn’t enough, he goes to these men, his peers, because they think the way that he does – creatively, fluidly, between the lines.

Case in point: “Maybe that’s because you’re looking in the wrong place.”

"All right, Patterson, where would you look?"

James Patterson is the cornerstone of this little group. Everyone shuts up when he talks. “If I was writing this,” he says contemplatively. “The murder would have nothing to do with the spy game except that it gave the killer an opportunity to act.”

“He knew that the trappings of the game would cover his tracks,” Connelly finishes, following his line of thought.

“Which is pretty much what’s happened,” Cannell says in a way that’s pretty final, placing his bet on the table. “Look, Killian, as much trouble as we go to with these novels, there’s only three reasons to commit a murder.” He ticks them off on his fingers. “Love, money, and to cover up a crime.”

Connelly’s nodding. “Cannell’s right, I’d spend more time looking at your victim and less time looking at the game.”

Patterson gives Killian a sideways look. “Personally, I’d spend more time writing and less time hanging out with your cop friend. I mean, really, Irish. Just one book a year?”

Chuckles go all around the table. “Kind of thin, Killian,” Cannell agrees. Connelly just shrugs when Jones looks over to see what he thinks.

“She seems more like a distraction than a muse.”

Jones bites his lip and looks down. They’re right about the book, that’s for certain. He doesn’t think they’re right about Swan because while she’s definitely more, she’s not a distraction. But the whole Walsh situation took him by surprise and he does need to finish this book. Perhaps it’s time to order
his thoughts and lick his wounds. “No, you’re right,” he says eventually. “I think I’ve gotten everything I can get out of that relationship anyway.”

In the end, Emma has to watch him walk away with his publisher at his side, chatting away about how fun the Hamptons are going to be and how’s she’s going to stay on top of him while he finishes his book.

Bile rises up at the back of her throat and something stings at the back of her eyes. The words are stuck inside of her (“I know I’m not the easiest person to get to know, and I don’t always let on what’s on my mind”) but she can’t do anything about that now because it’s her own goddamn fault and she’s still going away with Walsh.

So all she says is, “See you in the fall” and hopes that it’s the truth.

Chapter End Notes

The overall tone of the CS dynamic in the last two weeks parallels the end of Season Two of Castle beautifully. Beckett is only really beginning to accept Castle's presence in her life, and she's starting to consider the idea of them...only to have him walk away. Ugh, the feels!

I'm turning Walsh into a combination of Demming and Josh. I don't have the patience to make Emma date other guys, really, but it shapes great confrontations during Season Three and Four. Also, Tink is definitely Jones' publisher.
“Killian Jones, you’re under arrest for murder.”

This is not exactly how Emma’s envisioned seeing him again.

There’s something inherently wrong about sitting across from Jones in interrogation. He was her partner (was a nasty corner of her mind whispers). The seat beside her was for him, even if it had remained empty over the summer, or temporarily filled by either David or Leroy.

Three months. Three months of no contact. Emma wasn’t even aware that he was back in town or that he finished the second book, titled *Snow Blind*.

It hurts. Emma’s amazed that she can admit that to herself, but it does. Or maybe it’s just galling, the way that he manages to affect her even when he’s not around. She’s spent the last few months hating herself for her dependence on him (because Emma Swan does not depend on anyone, thank you very much) and just missing him. Not just for cases, though she’s noticing a distinct lack of creative thinking around the precinct. She misses the light, musical lilt of his voice drifting above the sharper New York accents, his jokes, and the way he brings her coffee…

She also misses Liam. Henry mentions him every once in a while, but it’s not the same.

Nothing’s been the same since she’s begun to question just what Killian Jones means to her and promptly ran in the opposite direction and into another man’s arms. She tells herself that he walked away too (with another woman on his arm), but that doesn’t mean that she can’t be upset about it.

But she has a duty and she’ll do it. Even if Jones is sitting in the wrong place, and assessing her with a look that’s a little too flippant. It reminds her of their first meeting. He’s too happy to be sitting there. “Something is different,” he remarks idly, the light bouncing off his silver rings. The claddagh ring on his right ring finger has changed position, with the heart pointing inward. “Did you remodel?”

“You’ve been informed of your rights, Mr. Jones,” Emma responds stiffly.

Jones slouches back and the only word she can think of is *indolent*. “Really? You’re not going to ask me how my summer was?”

She ignores the urge to banter back with him. It’s more difficult than she expects because even if it feels like that first interrogation, it’s not. “You are aware that you’re under arrest for murder.”

Something wicked sparks in those stupid, stupid eyes. “And I thought you were being rough with the cuffs just for fun. Just so you know, Swan, my safe word is ‘apples.’”

This is familiar ground, at least. Emma folds her hands on top of the table as he continues, “You look good.”

“You look good, too.”
Jones mirrors her movement, a lazy smirk playing around the corners of his lips. “Yeah?”

Really, he’s so gullible sometimes. She cannot believe that he fell for that. “For murder.”

He cocks his head to the side and doesn’t respond for a long moment. Perhaps he’s beginning to get an inkling of the gravity of the situation. “Why are you angry with me, Swan?”

Emma has to resist the urge to huff. Is he really going to play it this way? “Maybe because you were found standing over a dead body with a gun in your hand.”

“Swan, I told you, she was dead when I arrived.”

“Then why didn’t you call?” Emma snaps, and instantly wishes she could take it back because there’s more than just professional curiosity there.

Jones realizes it too. She can almost see that writer’s mind connecting the dots, picking up on the fact that she’s angry about more than just the case. “I was going to call you, Swan. But you showed up before I could.”

“Really. Then why did we find you in our victim’s apartment?”

“She called me.”

“Oh, so you and Ms. Santori were in a relationship.”

“I wouldn’t call it a relationship. I purchased a few sculptures from her.”

“Were you sleeping with her?”

One of his eyebrows shoots up. “That’s an odd question, Swan. How is that relevant?”

“Motive,” she retorts.

Jones shakes his head. “I wasn’t sleeping with her.”

“Are you sure?” she presses, and wonders why she’s being so persistent. “Beautiful woman-“

Now he just looks aggravated. “I’m in a relationship.”

“With whom?”

“I like your new hairstyle,” he deflects, sprawling back in his seat. Emma absolutely does not pay attention to the way that his shirt stretches over his chest. Not at all. “You should wear your hair down more often.”

“Jones.”

“You know with whom.”

Emma grits her teeth. “How should I know? I haven’t seen you in months. You could have been in dozens of relationships since then.”

And now he’s smirking at her again. “You sound jealous.”

“Jealous?” she scoffs. “Of you dating your publisher? Tell me, does she make you do everything on a deadline?” She’s being so damn petty and she knows it, but that just makes her angrier.
“So how about you?” Jones skips over her barb as though he never heard it. “Are you still with that furniture maker of yours? What was his name again? Walsh?”

No, she really can’t point fingers, not when she’s with someone too. Emma straightens in her seat, furious at her lack of professionalism. She’s better than this and she’s not going to let his kindergarten antics throw her off. All of the anger and recrimination bleed from her voice, leaving nothing but cool interest. “The victim called you. What was it about?”

The atmosphere shifts now, and banter time (even if it was distinctly unfriendly) is over. Jones shoots a startled glance her way before adopting the same tone. “She said she was in trouble and she couldn’t go to the police.”

“So why did she call you?”

“Because Maya knew I had a relationship with you – with the NYPD.” He waves his hand in the air and shrugs. “She thought I could help. When I came over the door was open, the place was trashed, Maya was dead on the bed, and the gun was on the floor.”

Now she’s just aggravated in a professional sense. “So, you being the expert veteran of dozens of crime scenes decided to pick up the murder weapon to what? Ensure that we had your prints?” This is not the Killian Jones that she knows.

Something angry and a little dark flashes in Jones’ eyes. “Perhaps you missed the part where I said she was shot dead. When I heard the noises coming from the next room I thought whoever killed her was back.” His hands open on the table, palms up. “So I picked up the gun to defend myself. It seemed like a very good idea at the time. That’s when you, David, and Leroy came bursting through the door.”

It all sounds well and good. Her gut tells her that he’s telling the truth and her heart is telling her that Killian Jones is not capable of murder, but the situation still stands. “Why should I believe you, considering that you pretty much make up stories for a living?”

His chin tilts up, the corners of his lips turn down, and she realizes that she’s hurt him. Too bad, he’s hurt her too. “Because you know me, Swan.”

She does, and maybe that’s the problem. Something must have shifted on her face because he opens his mouth-

There’s a knock on the glass, shattering the moment. Emma pops out and then back in within minutes. “You’re free to go.”

Jones looks taken aback at her brusqueness. “What, that’s it?”

“Bullets don’t match your gun. You’re off the hook.”

He follows her out of the room, his step distinctively lighter. “So, what’s our next move?”

“There isn’t one, at least not for you. You’re going home.” She doesn’t have time to deal with him, not now. His mere presence rubs her raw and she needs the space to reorient herself.

“Wait a minute, Swan. You have two victims, one of whom is an acquaintance of mine, and you’re sending me home?”

Emma sits at her desk and begins to go through a file, retreating back to what works: distance. “You’re a witness, Jones. I can’t have you involved.”
“I’m already involved-“

“Jones!” she snaps, reaching the end of her tether. She stands up, hands firmly planted on her desk as she stares him down. “Go back to the Hamptons, your publisher, and your book parties, all right? I have work to do.”

“What did I do?” he wonders.

Jones returns to the loft to find Ruby’s head bent close to Liam’s. They both turn to greet him, but something about his state of mind must show on his face because their smiles instantly drop. “What’s wrong, Killian?” Ruby asks, concerned.

“I stopped by the precinct.”

Liam lights up. “I thought you weren’t going back until after the book tour.” He’s been asking about Henry off and on, and Emma. He’s felt their absence as much as his father has.

“Yes, well, fate intervened,” he sighs. “Someone I know was murdered today.” He contemplates the implications of pouring himself a shot or two of rum right now.

“Who?” Liam asks, eyes widening. “It’s not-“

“Maya. The woman who made the sculpture for me.”

“Any leads?” Liam’s missed the cases as much as he has. Out in the Hamptons, ideas for *Snow Blind* came so easily that there wasn’t too much brainstorming to do.

“No, not yet.”

Ruby’s still staring at him, annoyingly perceptive. “So, how is everyone? Did Emma have a nice summer?”

Jones shoots her a look. “Yes, Ruby, everyone’s fine.”

“No, not yet.”

Ruby’s still staring at him, annoyingly perceptive. “So, how is everyone? Did Emma have a nice summer?”

Jones shoots her a look. “Yes, Ruby, everyone’s fine.”

“Now, why don’t I believe you?” she drawls. “Come on, let’s talk it over. I’m in crisis prevention mode. Liam says that the girl from the summer program still hasn’t called her.”

Liam props his chin in his hand, soulfully depressed in the way that only teenagers can be. “Despite the fact that she said we’d talk when she returned from Mexico, which she already did.”

“Well, if you knew she was back, why didn’t you just call her?”

Liam shakes his head. He chopped his hair off in the Hamptons because of the heat, and the curls are only just starting to grow back in. “She’s the one that went away. I think if she still cared she would have called.”

“Perhaps she was going to but she didn’t know how you felt about her. Maybe she was worried that something had changed whilst she was away.”

Ruby slaps him upside the head, picking up on the fact that Jones might be talking about something else entirely. “Killian Jones, that is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Do you know nothing about relationships?”
He glares at her. “As though you’re a shining example.” It’s a low blow and he winces at Liam’s disappointed expression. He waves a hand at Ruby and she rolls her eyes, all forgiven. He focuses his attention back on his son. “How big a deal is this anyway?”

Liam thinks it over and deflates. “I don’t even know if I want to see her anymore.”

“You’re not even giving her a chance!”

“Why are you siding with her? Shouldn’t you be siding with me?”

“I am!” Jones pauses and wonders why he’s so worked up over this situation. “I just…perhaps she’ll do something that will make it right. Perhaps she’ll surprise you.”

Liam shrugs and begins taking the empty dishes to the dishwasher. “Or maybe she missed her chance.”

Jones tries not to think about those words, or the way that Ruby’s looking at him sympathetically.

Even between the three of them, Emma, Leroy, and David can’t make heads or tails of the connections (or lack thereof) regarding their two victims. And though she knows her friends resent Jones’ absence, she also knows that they miss his insights and want him back.

She escapes the precinct and makes her way over to the morgue before she realizes that it’s probably a bad idea to go to Mary Margaret. She’s not afraid to voice her opinions when it comes to the way that Emma’s living her life – especially when it comes to Killian Jones. Luckily, Emma’s used to ignoring her and Mary Margaret is used to ignoring Emma’s avoidance. It works for them.

“I hear you made an interesting arrest today,” the brunette says without preamble. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Noppe.” Emma pops the p at the end of the word.

Mary Margaret just shakes her head. “All right. But if you keep holding that stuff in, you’re going to get an ulcer. Then you’ll wish you talked.”

“Anything unusual?”

“Besides the gunshots?” She shows Emma the victims’ tattoos, the rose and the mermaid, similar in style, as well as the mysterious number written on Chloe Whitman’s hand.

David calls and there’s a lead – the same man called both victims within hours of their respective deaths and he’s got an address.

When they enter the suspect’s apartment, Emma swears that they’ve entered the twilight zone because there’s a dead body on the couch and Jones is standing over him. Emma, Leroy, and David gapes, dumbfounded.

He laughs nervously, realizing just how much trouble he’s in. “Er, hello.” He takes a swift step back and almost falls over the coffee table as Emma comes forward with handcuffs. “Swan, I can explain!”

“Turn around,” Emma seethes. This is the second time he’s screwed up a crime scene and she’s fast reaching the end of her rope.
“Swan, would you please listen?”

“Why?” Emma snaps, but stops her advance. “You don’t listen to me.”

“I was doing some investigating on my own,” he explains quickly, eyeing David and Leroy, who’ve put down their guns but are glaring his way. “That’s not a crime, is it?”

This can’t be happening. “No, but criminal trespassing is. And so is murder.”

“I was just trying to help!” he interjects stubbornly, still holding his hands up.

“I don’t need your help!” She takes one look at his mouth, set in one mutinous line, and relents a tiny bit. “Look, Jones, I’m sorry about your friend, I really am. But that doesn’t meant that you can just show up out of the blue and act like nothing’s happened.” She takes a breath and lets the hard truth come out in the air for his sake and for hers. “The truth is, if you’d wanted to come back you would’ve already, but you didn’t.” She ignores David and Leroy as they slip away to check the rest of the crime scene. “Let’s face it, the only reason you’re here is because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Jones is already shaking his head. “Swan, have you ever stopped and considered that perhaps I was waiting to hear from you? Do you know what these bodies are? A sign.”

“A sign,” Emma repeats flatly, processing his previous statement and summarily dismissing it. What are they, teenagers?

“Yes, Swan. A sign from the universe telling us we need to solve this case together.”

She can feel the headache brewing. “You’re not going to go away no matter what I do, are you?”

But perhaps that’s the problem. Killian Jones has a place in her life now, one she didn’t even know was there until he was gone. And she still can’t decide what that means.

There’s time enough to make that decision. Jones pulls his weight once he’s officially on the case and it’s almost like no time has gone by at all. They just know how to work with each other by now. Theories are thrown around and connections are made. And when push comes to shove, she trusts him with her spare sidearm again and is rewarded for that trust when they take down both murder suspects simultaneously.

Okay, maybe she does need him. It’s nice to have a partner again.

Just when she thought Jones couldn’t get any crazier, they get the case with the murdered psychic.

It’s not so much the case, but the way he reacts to her skepticism.

“Let me guess, Swan, you don’t believe in fate. Soul mates?”

Definitely not. “No.”

His shoulders slump infinitesimally and she pointedly take no notice. “Hmm. Unicorns, fairies, double rainbows? Didn’t you ever think your dolls used to awaken at night and play with your toys?”

“Sorry.” She’s not sorry, even if she is curious. “Why is it so important to you that I believe all this stuff about fates and psychics, anyway?”
Jones steps into her path, forcing her to stop walking or crash into him. “Because if you don’t believe in even the possibility of magic, you’ll never find it.”

Henry always tells her the same thing. Emma sidesteps him neatly and tries not to consider why her son and her partner think she needs magic in her life.

She’s not blind, she really isn’t. She knows that Henry likes Walsh well enough, but he adores Jones.

“You’re investigating Kieran Gold.”

Emma glances up from her paperwork, startled. “Detective French. I’m sorry, I don’t-“

The other woman shoots her a piercing glance that is surprisingly effective, for someone so tiny. “Don’t patronize me, Detective Swan. I’m the one who gave you all of the information on Gold in the first place. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice if you started poking around?”

She discards the idea of lying almost as quickly as it comes up. “Kieran Gold got away with murder on my watch, Detective French. That doesn’t happen very often, and not when someone’s so obviously-“

“Guilty?” Belle supplies knowingly as she slides into Jones’ chair. “Trust me, Detective Swan, I understand. That’s why I think we should work together.”

Really? The last thing Emma needs is another partner. And yet…Detective French is in Organized Crime. Between the two of them that’s a lot of resources. And she clearly has a vendetta of her own against the businessman. “It’s off the books,” she begins.

Belle rolls her eyes and Emma’s definitely not used to seeing that expression reflected back at her. Her estimation of her instantly goes up several notches. “Of course it is. Do you know how many times my superiors have warned me off his case?”

Definitely a vendetta. But she can work with that. “Okay,” Emma says slowly. “I’m in.”

“Good. When are you off your shift?”

She glances at the clock. “Now, actually. I know a pub with great food and no chance of being overheard.”

“Fantastic.” There’s something fierce and determined in her eyes, and Emma wonders if she’s perhaps underestimated Belle French. She knows a good cop when she sees one, and Belle? She’s a good cop, through and through. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah.” Emma picks up her jacket and shrugs into it. “And maybe you can also tell me how you got into Organized Crime.”

“Buy me a pint and I will.”

August Booth blows back into her life and Emma’s reeling. The years have been good to him – the rough stubble that shades his jaw does nothing to take away from the brightness of his eyes. And if he seems a little darker, a little rougher, well perhaps that’s the price of bounty hunting.
Emma doesn’t really care because it hasn’t changed the way he smiles at her. Or the way he just fits into the investigation. It’s pure luck that he’s collecting a bounty on their suspect in the murder of a bail bondsman. August has always been a good cop and she’s not ashamed to say that she’s learned almost everything she knows from him. The only one who’s taught her more is Captain Tracy.

She knows that Jones is curious about their relationship, but can’t bring herself to mind when he stays behind and prods August for stories about Emma Swan, rookie cop.

“So, she’s got the cat in one hand, the gun in the other, and I’m trying to get the hell out of the way so she can shoot the guy with the spear gun,” August says with great relish. Jones, David, and Leroy are hanging on to every word.

“Except Booth has such a giant head that every time I go to pull the trigger, all I could think about is how much paperwork I’d have to do if I accidently shoot him,” Emma interrupts, shaking her head when August just winks.

“That’s fair,” he concedes. “But you know what she does? She offers to show the guy her boobs if he drops the spear gun.”

David’s eyes are round. “Did he?”

“Did you?” Jones leers at Emma. Leroy smacks him.

“No, because he had the same slack-jawed look you have.”

August nods. “That allowed me to take the guy down. I’ll tell you what I realized in that moment – with Swan, you have to be ready for anything.”

The suspect, Random Pierce, is innocent so Emma hands him off to August.

“He tells a terrific story,” Jones muses as they walk away.

Emma snickers under her breath. “Got a little bromance there, Jones?”

“What, no. What?”

She walks off with a smirk. “It’s all right, you know. Booth is pretty hard to resist.”

Jones watches her go and turns to David. “Booth was her partner after Graham, correct?”

David nods. “Yep.”

“Why didn’t they stay partners?”

“She moved up and he moved out. He did his twenty and then put in his papers. I think he realized that he wasn’t going to do any better than her.”

Jones has to agree. He’s beginning to realize that no one’s better than Emma Swan. It doesn’t bode well for his current relationship.

David and Leroy lose their next suspect in the case, who just so happens to be a septuagenarian ex-con whose fingerprints were found in the victim’s office. Emma recounts how Jones put adult diapers, prune juice, false teeth, glasses, and walking canes on their desks to August over a pint.
“So it’s actually a treasure map, huh?” August muses, speculating over the ambiguous drawing that’s the main piece of evidence.

“Jones has been trying to figure it out all day,” she confirms, a fond smile curling around her lips. She sighs, takes a sip of beer. “I should’ve been on to Stuckey earlier, though.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“You were,” she counters.

August tilts his head to look at her and shakes his head. “You were easy to impress.”

Emma snorts because he’s completely off base there. “No, I wasn’t. I was drowning after losing Graham and you were dry land. All they ever taught us in the academy was how to do paperwork. You taught me how to be a cop.”

“You were easy to teach,” he says, nudging her with his shoulder. “Keeping you out of trouble though? Not so much.”

“Trouble, me?” she gasps with faux innocence.

Now he’s giving her the stink eye. “What about that biker chick from Yonkers?”

“I got her to snitch on her crew, didn’t I?”

“By offering me up as bait!”

She’s almost forgotten about that. She hasn’t laughed this hard in a long time. “Oh, you should have seen your face when she told the judge, ‘He completes me.’”

“That’s so mean.”

Emma thinks that no one, not even Jones, possesses the vocabulary necessary to articulate the depth of her rage and disappointment when it turns out that August himself is now a suspect in their investigation. He never turned Random over and that little scribble? It’s a map to a massive stash of stolen jewelry, one that their victim had been trying to recover.

“Turn yourself in, Booth,” she snarls over the phone. She can’t believe he has the nerve to call her now.

“I can’t do that, Emma. I’m too close to the money to walk away right now. Listen, I just need you to know that I didn’t mean for it to end up like this.”

“Did you kill Carver for the map?” She has to keep it together. She can’t crumble here, not with Jones, David, and Leroy looking on.

August makes a sound of disgust. “Oh come on, Emma. You know me better than that.”

“I don’t think I do.” And that is the absolute truth. “The man I knew wouldn’t betray me like this.”

“I have to go.”

“I was in love with you.” She catches Jones’ stunned expression out of the corner of her eye. He’s
never seen her this raw.

There’s a sound of something – regret, maybe – on the other side of the line. “Aw, Emma, don’t.”

She takes a deep breath and presses on because she has to. “You were the only one who understood the state I was in after Graham, the only one who didn’t tell me that I would get over it.”

“I was just trying to do right by you, Ems.”

“I dream about you. Every time I relive his shooting, it’s me on the ground dying. And then you, you come up to me and tell me to stand up because there’s still work to be done. You’re the one who gave that to me, August.”

“No, Ems.” He sounds so sad now. “That’s all you.”

“I’m going to catch Carver’s killer, August,” she says over him. “And then I’m going to recover that jewelry. And when I arrest you, you’re going to realize that what you destroyed today was worth a hell of a lot more than money.” She slams the phone down and turns her eyes on Leroy, who flinches back from the destroyed expression her face. “Did I keep him on long enough?”

“Oh…” he stutters.

“Yes, we got an address,” David confirms, his eyes scanning her face worriedly.

“All right. Let’s go.” She stands up, slips into her jacket.

“What?” Jones exclaims, startled. “All of that was just an act to get a trace?”

She stares him down, dares him to say more. “Of course.”

But he sees through her, he always does. So she just walks past him to arrest her former partner and tries to keep the tears at bay.

The thing about Jones is that he’s a little too brilliant at reading between the lines. Emma knows it’s going to get him in trouble someday, but she didn’t think it would be this day. She didn’t think he’d actually go after a serial killer like 3XK.

It’s one thing for Emma to take risks. She’s a cop. It’s her job, it’s what she’s trained to do, it’s what she’s prepared to do. It’s different for Jones. For all that he’s her partner, he’s still a civilian. He still has a sense of wonder about things, despite the circumstances behind his brother’s death and the death of his wife. Emma feels a sense of responsibility to keep him that way, and she can’t do that if she’s not covering his back.

She and Leroy burst into the motel room expecting the worst. Emma can’t help the sense of dread and panic that clogs her chest. He has to be alive because she can’t tell Liam and Ruby otherwise, she can’t… “Jones!” she calls frantically.

“It’s clear, Swan. He’s gone and I’m fine,” Jones reassures her from where he’s tied to a chair. “David needs an ambulance.”

“No, I don’t,” David argues, wincing. He has a massive lump on his head from where 3XK clocked him. “I really don’t. Mary Margaret’s going to kill me if I go to the hospital.”
“What the hell happened here?” Leroy demands.

“Jerry’s the real Triple Killer,” Jones says grimly, naming their supposed ‘informant’ on 3XK. “He set Gates up to be a copycat.”

Emma nods as she finishes untying him. She suppresses the urge to check him over and make sure he’s really all right. “I know. I did the math when you and David didn’t come back from talking to him.”

“How did you know to come here?”

“Granny called.” She remembers the sheer panic in the older woman’s voice. “She said that you told her you loved her and she figured something must be terribly wrong.”

“I figured she might. Granny’s a sharp one.”

Later, Emma finds him staring into the water of the motel pool. She thinks it’s only fair that she bring him coffee now. He’s had a rough few days. 3XK really got to him. “You look like you can use this.”

He accepts the coffee, his expression still. “Thanks.”

“Why did he let you live?”

“To punish me,” he says on an exhale and suddenly he looks so tired and defeated. “To make me pay for ruining his plan. Now he’s going to kill again because I couldn’t stop him. I feel so…”

Emma reaches over and puts her hand on his knee. It’s the first time she’s initiated a touch. “I know the feeling.”

“I know you do.”

He takes her hand. She lets him.

Chapter End Notes

I know I had August as the detective in Organized Crime, but it made so much more sense to put Belle in that position. I wanted August to take Mike Royce's position because how could I write OUAT/Castle without To Live and Die in L.A.? Answer: I couldn't. So I needed to introduce August/Royce the way they did in Under the Gun. You guys have no idea how excited I am to write Captain Swan framed through Season Three because AUGH.

Have I mentioned how wonderful poptate is? She's betaing even though she's doing BAR prep. Gotta love that woman.
Emma Swan is familiar with difficult cases. It isn’t that she doesn’t appreciate the open and shut cases, because she does. It’s better when suspects make her life easier. She doesn’t admit this to herself often, but she derives a savage sort of pleasure from the challenging ones. The puzzles and the uncertainty only make her more determined to see them through to the very end because Emma hates loose ends.

It’s like a mystery novel, in a way.

And that’s an interesting thought in and of itself. She never really considered these things until she met Killian Jones. By working with him, she’s come to appreciate aspects of her job that she never had before. His pure joy and excitement at seeing each case through from start to finish has leaked into her bit by bit.

She’s even debated bringing him in on the Kieran Gold investigation. It’s not that Detective French isn’t a satisfactory partner – on the contrary. Belle is the most dedicated and organized researcher that Emma’s ever met. She wonders why the tiny brunette isn’t a librarian or an English professor, but remembers that she has her own reasons for being a detective. Belle might be a colleague, and a very good one at that, but she’s not a friend, at least not in the same way as David or Leroy.

Not yet, at least. But the two women have been very careful to keep some professional distance due to the circumstances of their little side project.

Kieran Gold is a very dangerous man. It’s clear through the lack of history and the sheer number of cases that Belle has been able to attribute, but not pin to him. This is where Belle excels, digging into files and recognizing patterns and origins between them. From there, Emma’s identified other major players within Gold’s web that might not have been obvious from Belle’s initial investigations. He plays both sides of the fence, from members of the city’s crime families to some of the state’s most influential politicians.

Regina, thank heavens, isn’t one of them. But some members of her circle are, and Emma wonders just how much information the mayor might have on their little spider.

And they need more information. Kieran Gold is dangerous, yes, but also confusing. “I don’t understand him,” Emma complains. She and Belle are at her apartment, staring contemplatively at her personal murder board. “If it were purely about money, we could eliminate about half of these associates. If it was about gaining political power, we could cut even more of them.”

Belle makes a noise of agreement. “He has as many criminal allies as he does within the police force. Even if you try to find patterns amongst the criminals, nothing adds up. He doesn’t focus exclusively on anything, not drugs or gambling—“

“And that doesn’t even take into account white collar crime. He has his hands in everything, but why?” Emma shakes her head. Everyone has something that drives them. She knows that Gold is no different but nothing is clear right now. “He’s…chaotic.”

“Actually, I don’t think he is.” Belle walks over to the board, tracing the red tape that Emma’s used to connect people and events, annotated with Post-Its. “He’s Neutral Evil. He’s concerned about
himself and no one else. He’s only working with these people because they’re helping him fulfill a goal. It doesn’t matter if they’re criminals or not. If they can help him, he’ll use them. But at the same time, he won’t hesitate to betray or use them, so maybe he’s a little bit of a Chaotic Evil.”

It’s an interesting theory, but Emma feels like Belle’s reference has just sailed over her head. “I feel like I’m missing something here.”

A slight flush appears high on Belle’s cheeks as she turns back around. “Oh, sorry. Character alignments from Dungeons and Dragons.”

“Ah.” Somehow, this doesn’t surprise her. “I’ll have to look those up. Also, there’s an author who I should probably introduce to you.”

“Killian Jones, right? I heard that he’s been working with you.” She pauses and frowns at one of the cases on the board. “I like his novels. P.D. James is my favorite mystery writer, but he does have a way with words and plotlines.” Her gaze sharpens as she glances back over her shoulder at Emma. “Are you thinking of bringing him in?”

“I’m not sure,” Emma admits. “He does have an uncanny way at seeing things that I’ve missed. You said that he’s only concerned about himself, but what does that really mean? What’s his ultimate goal?”

Belle sets her mug down with a decisive clack. “I don’t know. And that is what frustrates me. I understand him to an extent, but beyond that?” She shrugs. “And if I don’t understand him, I can’t figure out what he wants, and if I can’t figure out what he wants—”

“Then you can’t take him down,” Emma finishes. “I get it, French.”

“Maybe we should bring your partner in,” she says wearily. “But you need to be sure.”

Emma thinks about Jones and how he’d been disgusted with the outcome of their case against Gold. She knows that he would be able to help, but they’re not desperate yet. “Not now,” she says eventually. “Maybe later, if we’re really stuck. We just…we need to keep looking. We’ll find something.”

The elevator doors slide open and Henry bolts out like his pants are on fire. “Whoa, hey there kid, slow down!” Emma calls as she trots after him. “I’m pretty sure Liam isn’t going anywhere.”

Henry’s expression is 100% aggravated teenager and Emma finds it hilarious. “Liam has the new Assassin’s Creed game,” he informs her testily as he rings the doorbell. “Mom won’t let me play mine until winter break.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Emma drawls, nodding wisely. “You’re just using our time to play this game with Liam.”

He turns to her then with an adorably guilty expression. “I…no, that’s not it! I want to play the game but I want to hang out with you too.” He bites his lip and it’s clear that he’s battling with himself as he offers, “I don’t have to play.”

Emma’s heart actually bursts a little bit because he’s wonderful. She and Regina may not always see eye-to-eye, but she’s raised a caring, considerate boy with the biggest heart she’s ever seen. “I’m just kidding, kid.” She slings an arm around his shoulder and hugs him against her side, resting her cheek
briefly on his head. “Just eat breakfast with us, and then you can play all you like.”

“Really? You’re the best, Emma.”

The loft door opens and Jones grins at them. “Right on time!” he exclaims, shaking hands with Henry and moving to take their coats. “I was only going to do a full English again, but Ruby’s test-driving a potential new item for Granny’s.”

“Hi Emma, hi Henry!” Ruby calls from the kitchen, stirring something on the stove. “I could use another hand, Henry, if you’re up to it.”

“New recipe?” Emma inquires as Henry skitters around the island, eager to help. She nudges Gran’s shoulder with her own in greeting and waves at Liam.

Gran sniffs. “Something that’s likely to kill most of our customers, I think.”

Ruby rolls her eyes fondly as she coaches Henry through mixing what looks like a combination of cream, eggs, and vanilla. “But it won’t matter if they love it!”

“What are we eating?” Emma accepts the mug of coffee that Jones passes her, taking a large, appreciate sniff before diving in. On Ruby’s other side, Liam looks like he’s making Nutella sandwiches.

“Nutella-stuffed brioche French toast with berry compote,” Jones answers.

Emma’s eyes cross in pleasure at the mere thought of it. “That sounds like the best kind of heart attack.”

“It just sounds like a heart attack,” Gran grumbles, sipping her own coffee. “But I suppose it has flair.”

“Of course it has flair!” Ruby declares smugly. “It’s mine.” In no time at all, the French toast is cut into triangles and artfully stacked and finished off with berry compote and a dusting of powdered sugar.

The boys (Jones included) begin shoveling in the food like their lives depend on it. They voice their approval through various grunts and mumbles. Emma takes one bite and closes her eyes. “Wow, Ruby. All that’s missing is a choir of angels.”

Ruby beams. One by one, all eyes shift to Gran, who is chewing contemplatively, her expression blank. “The compote needs more acidity to counter the richness. Once you tweak it, we’ll train the cooks and start tests next week.” She cracks a smile. “Well done, my girl. It’s a good recipe.”

Ruby bounces in her seat, the boys cheer – and Emma’s phone rings. “I am so sorry,” she mumbles, fumbling the device. “Swan.”

When she hangs up, Jones has already finished his portion of French toast. “Have we a case then, Swan?”

“We do.” She sends Henry an apologetic look and he shrugs.

“Put some bad guys away.”

“I have them, not to worry,” Gran briskly, moving to put Jones’ plate in the sink. “Sundays are Ruby’s days at the diner.”
“Thanks, Gran, I’ll let Regina know.” Emma shovels the rest of the French toast in her mouth before moving around to hug both of the boys. “Behave, you two. Don’t give Gran any trouble.”

“She’ll probably slaughter us on Assassin’s Creed,” Liam says cheerfully.

Ruby snorts and Gran gives her a pointed look. “Damn straight.”

“Ladies, I am not a stripper,” Jones declares, holding out his arms to ward off the sleepily excited and hungover women who were the last to see their latest victim alive. A shit-eating grin spreads across his face. “Though I can understand how you would make that mistake.”

That pretty much sets the tone for the rest of the case, which involves Emma and Jones going to a strip club to interview their victim’s boss.

“I can’t believe you got dressed up for this,” Jones comments, adjusting the collar of his shirt. Emma’s rarely out of her work-wear, and while he adores the leather jackets and loosely tailored blazers, it’s always a shock to see her in something different. Like the short, skintight blue dress that he wouldn’t mind peeling off with his teeth. Down, boy. “Remind me why David and Leroy couldn’t come?”

Emma snorts and fluffs up her hair. “We all agreed, as Volunteer Assistant Homicide Detective you could really sink your teeth into this avenue of investigation. And they called ‘not it.’”

He scratches his ear with one be-ringed finger. “You know, Swan, I’ve been dreaming of the day when you’d say, ‘let’s go to the strip club and get this dirt bag.’ I just never imagined it would feel like this.”

She pats his chest before they enter. “Let me know if you need any singles.”

“Strangest pet you ever had?”

She doesn’t even skip a beat. “You.”

Things go from strange to weird when the Gwen Snow movie is officially confirmed with a director and script. They cast Allison Cameron as Gwen Snow and Emma’s not quite sure what she makes of it. Sure, there’s some resemblance but Cameron is a brunette. And maybe she’s being a bit of a snob, but the actress has only done TV, though she really did enjoy the one with the cranky doctor, and Henry’s favorite show is the fairy tale one.

(“Can I please come by the precinct and get her autograph, Emma? Are you excited? She’s playing you!”)

It actually pleased Emma when Cameron’s people contacted her about shadowing. She’s used to it at this point, and she thinks Jones’ reaction will be hilarious. So she has more than an extra swing in her step when she heads to the precinct.

Jones and David have their heads together over a familiar-looking jewelry box. Emma’s had the
sneaking suspicion that he would be popping the question soon, and it’s nice to see her instincts are spot on as usual. It’s a good thing that she knows how to keep her mouth shut around Mary Margaret.

“Mary Margaret is a lucky woman,” Jones is commenting as she comes up behind them. “So, how are you planning to propose? Hot-air balloon? Skywriting? A helicopter ride?”

David stares from Jones to the ring, looking taken aback. “I was thinking of just asking her.” There’s a hint of panic in his voice, as though he hadn’t even considered the other options.

“No, no, you can’t just ask!” Jones protests, dismayed. “It’s a proposal, mate! It has to be big! It has to make a statement!” His gestures get wilder and wilder with each sentence, and Emma muffles her laughter as some of the other detectives dodge his windmilling arms.

She decides to take pity on David, who looks more and more hunted with each passing second. “Actually, most women prefer something more intimate.” Besides, Mary Margaret doesn’t like heights and would find skywriting incredibly cheesy.

Jones spins around to look at her, eyebrows halfway up to his hairline. “Are you joking, Swan? He’s supposed to be boring and ask, ‘Will you marry me’?”

He holds out the ring box out to her as he utters the question and everything goes still. There’s no rising sense of panic, no fear, just peace. Because somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows she’s going to hear that question again from this man, in an entirely different context.

And she’s probably going to say yes.

But all of that is far away right now, and Emma’s miles away from accepting that fact. She can enjoy the moment exactly how it is, cocking her head to the side as dawning realization washes over Jones’ face. He swallows and the box shakes in his hand.

David glances at the two of them before easing between them and retrieving the ring. He’ll have to tell Mary Margaret about this…once he’s figured out how to propose.

“I find helicopter rides to be massively intimate, Swan,” Jones says nonchalantly, thus ending the moment.

“Yeah, sure, if you want to share the most romantic moment of your life with Reggie the chopper pilot.

Allison Cameron is rather method in her acting approach and it’s cute at first when they trade quips about standing tall over the other men in the precinct or discuss some of Emma’s specific mannerisms during interrogation. Cameron’s distinctly unimpressed by Jones’ charm, and he keeps cranking it up with hilarious results. But then she starts dressing like Emma. Then she bleaches her hair. Then she starts taking over the case.

At least when Jones is with her, he’s not trying to become her.

When Jones comes in with coffee, Cameron scoops up Emma’s with a bright “Thanks, Jones!” before turning back to write on the murder board. Emma’s jaw actually drops.

Jones looks between the women, absolutely flummoxed. “Tha-that’s, I was…you’re welcome?” He
hands Emma his coffee instead with an apologetic shrug. “So, where are we?”

“David and Leroy are looking into the dead matchmaker’s assistants,” Cameron answers, sipping Emma’s coffee and staring at Emma’s board.

He glances at Emma, whose expression is fast approaching thunderous. “What about her ex? Did his neighbor confirm his romantic evening?”

“His—”

Cameron cuts her off, still staring at the board. “He did. So did a couple of the other neighbors, who complained about the noise. It looks like he alibis out.” She’s even modulated the tone of her voice so that she sounds like Emma.

Emma grits her teeth. “What she said.” She swivels her head around and glares at Jones. “Can we talk for a second?” When they’re finally alone in the break room, she rounds on him. “She took my coffee, Jones!”

She’s comically distraught, and Jones finds it utterly endearing. He makes sure to keep the smile from his face though, lest she kill him. “It’s just coffee, Swan.”

“What’s next? My soul? My hot chocolate? Everything I do, she does. Even when I’m thinking I can feel her in my head.” She rubs her temples.

“Come on Swan, she’s just dedicated to her craft!”

So dedicated, in fact, that Cameron corners Jones in the elevator at the end of the day, planting a big, wet one on him as Emma stares, horrified, from the other end of the bullpen.

The next day, Emma’s frowning and drinking hot chocolate at her desk because it’s just that kind of morning. She can’t stop thinking about Jones and the physical manifestation of Gwen Snow. It’s all very, very surreal and her head is mucked up because it’s like he’s kissing her but he’s not. She really shouldn’t be dwelling on that because she’s still with Walsh. Walsh, who she’s pushed more and more on the backburner as she and Belle continue their investigation into Kieran Gold.

Emma’s so preoccupied with her thoughts that she doesn’t notice Cameron as she slides into Jones’ usual seat.

“May I ask you a question, Detective?” the actress asks. She’s wearing a leather jacket that is eerily similar in cut and style to one that’s hanging in her closet right now. Thank god it’s not red, or Emma would be tempted to go down to the shooting range.

“Sure.”

“Is Jones gay?”

Emma promptly sprays hot chocolate all over her desk. She swears and immediately begins wiping up the mess with tissues. “I’m sorry, what?” Of all the questions… “No. No.”

She frowns and leans forward, dropping her voice. “Then you two are an item but you’re sworn to secrecy, right?”

“No, we are not an item,” Emma promises, dabbing at some paperwork. She’s going to have to get
copies off David later. She stops when she realizes that Cameron is still scrutinizing her, like if she stares long enough all the answers will fly out of her mouth. “Why?”

“Last night I invited him back to my place and he refused.” Cameron shakes her head, bewildered.

Emma’s equally baffled. She drops the damp tissues into the trash, realizes with relief that there’s still some hot chocolate in the cup, and takes a big sip. “He did?” He broke up with his publisher a month ago, saying that they worked much better as friends. If he rejected Cameron’s pass, it’s not because of his current relationship status.

“I don’t get it!” Cameron slumps back in the chair, and she appears genuinely put-out at the rejection. It would be funny if it weren’t about Jones. “He’s into you but you’re determined not to give in to the feelings you clearly have for him.” Emma stutters, but Cameron ignores it and plows on. “So he fantasizes about you through his writing. It’s literally verbal masturbation.”

Okay, that’s really not something she needs to hear, especially when people like Mary Margaret and Ruby imply it all the time. “He…what exactly does this have to do with me?”

The actress gestures at her outfit. “I am not wearing this for my health, Detective. You’re Gwen Snow. He’s Quinn McCrae. I need to sleep with him in the name of character research. Can you talk to him?”

“And say what?”

“I don’t know. Give him permission or something.”

Right. Emma’s had her fair share of bizarre conversations, but this really ranks up there. “Ooookay. I’m just going to go. Over there.” Once again, she finds herself hiding in the break room. She peers through the blinds, watching as Cameron stands in front of the murder board and tries out her “Emma Swan” poses.

“Everything all right, Swan?” Jones inquires from behind her.

“Do I really do that?”

His breath is warm in her ear as he laughs. His unexpected proximity causes goosebumps to rise on her skin. “Yes, and it’s endearing.”

She blows her bangs out of her eyes. “If it’s so endearing, why didn’t you sleep with me?” She’s met with stunned silence and rolls her eyes before turning to face him. Sure enough, his eyes are wide and for once there’s no lewd comeback in sight. “I meant her me, not me me.”

“What, her?” Jones asks incredulously once he regains his faculties. “A fictional character I wrote, based on you, and played by Allison Cameron, who has currently turned herself into your doppelganger? Swan, that is far too meta.”

Meta?

Jones leans even closer, his eyes drifting down to her lips. “Besides,” he murmurs, his voice dropping, deepening. Emma finds herself drifting into his space as well, drawn in despite herself. “Why would I want the fake when the real thing is before me?”

Oh boy. There’s really no response for that. Emma looks at him, really looks, and her lips part on a breath because really, he should not be allowed to look at her that way, as though she’s hung the moon, like she’s something out of fantasy and it’s all he can do to keep her in the here and now.
Jones just does things like that. He’ll slip her compliments after a case. Remarkable. Amazing. Bloody brilliant. And Emma knows that he means it, that he’d never lie to her. Because if there’s something he doesn’t shy away from, it’s telling her how he feels about her. Even when it’s something as innocuous as how she got the criminal of the day to confess.

She doesn’t know what to do about it, to be honest. So she just shakes her head, smiles, and carries on as though those little words mean nothing.

In fact, they mean everything.

The pull of his gravity is so seductive and compelling. It would be so easy to just give in and close the rest of the distance between them. He wants her to as well, she can see it in his eyes, from the way the blue darkens to near black, the clenching of his jaw, the frantic thrum of his pulse…

But then he’s moving away, his hands clenching at his sides. The effort costs him. He coughs and glances through the blinds. “Anyway. Let us return to our starlet and solve this case. Shall we?”

Sometimes Emma wonders what will happen when their merry little dance comes to an end. The thought is like the reddest, juiciest apple on the branch, but she knows how that story goes.

The case is right up Jones’ alley – a missing container of priceless whiskey, a resentful bartender, and a legendary pub. Emma turns to him, a flirty smile playing around her lips. “So Jones… can I buy you a drink?”

He plays along. “Why Detective Swan, I thought you’d never ask.”

She pauses to watch him when they stop in front of the exterior of The Jolly Roger. He traces the lettering reverently, smiling softly to himself and it’s clear that he has a lot of memories tied up in the place. “How well do you know this bar, Jones?”

“Oh, I haven’t been here in years. But all the great writers wrote here, and I couldn’t help but follow tradition when Liam and I first arrived. I drafted a great deal of Unholy Storm in one of those booths.”

Emma smiles. She can just picture him in a corner booth, hair standing up in tufts as he types frantically on his laptop. “That explains why you’re so excited.”

“There’s plenty of history here, Swan. First as a blacksmith, then as a bordello. It only became a bar during Prohibition as a speakeasy and it was one of the best.” He shoves his hands in his pockets, rocks back on his heels, and scans the façade with a delighted eye. “It’s as though you can feel the vibration of every notorious episode of glamor and debauchery in its walls.”

“Easy, Jones, it’s just a bar.”

The statement is clearly an affront to his sensibilities. “No, no. TJ McChucklenuts is just a bar. The Jolly Roger is the last of a dying breed. A proud institution standing up to a ruthless generation. It’s a classic.” He drifts off as he turns around to face her. Emma’s touching up her makeup and shaking her hair out of her ponytail. “What are you doing, Swan?”

She shrugs. “Well, I’m not going to get much out of our suspect looking like a cop.”

“Undercover,” he muses. “I like it. You might want to pop one more button just in case.” His leer is
horrifically exaggerated as he looks pointedly at her shirt.

Oh, he wants to play? Emma deliberately pops the next button at his suggestion until the black lace of her bra is peeking through the top. The look she sends him is pure heat before she turns and walks down the stairs to the entrance.

Behind her, Jones stares, slack-jawed and uncomfortable. “That woman is going to be the death of me,” he mumbles, before taking a deep breath and following her.

It’s no surprise that Jones buys The Jolly Roger when it comes up for sale at the end of the case.

She’s pacing in front of Granny’s, wondering if she’s made the right call. Belle couldn’t make it because she was visiting her father and…well, she had a feeling and Emma doesn’t question her gut.

Not when it came to cases, anyway.

She’s almost certain that things are about to become more dangerous and that’s been a major factor in keeping him away from the Gold case. She thinks of Liam, and Ruby, and Gran and wonders if she can really justify his presence if it paints that kind of target on his back. And what about those he loves?

The everyday stuff is one thing, and yes, she’s well aware that with the number of cases they’ve solved, he’s already earned some enemies, especially with 3XK on the loose. This is something that he doesn’t have to be involved in…but she’s involving him anyway.

“Swan!” Jones jogged up to her in his usual outfit of collared shirt, waistcoat, and jeans. He scans her from head to toe and reaches out to touch her elbow. “Everything all right?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. His brow is furrowed but he says nothing and that’s all it takes, really. They have an implacable kind of trust between them now. It was shaken over the summer, but they’ve begun to build it back, brick by brick. “This is what you need to know for now: I’ve been investigating Kieran Gold off to the side with Detective French from Organized Crime. One of Gold’s old coworkers is inside. Want to find out what he knows?”

“One of these days, Swan, I’m going to get the full story at the beginning, rather than somewhere in the middle.” But Jones smiles slightly as he says it, and reaches for the door. “Shall we?”

Gran waves at them from behind the counter, but Emma drags Jones to the corner booth before she can strike up a conversation. “That’s him. Connor O’Brien.”

The informer is a gaunt man more than a decade Emma’s senior, and she actually recognizes him. He was one of the top brokers at Goldman Sachs, but not one that they’d interviewed during the Cahn case. At the sight of Jones, O’Brien jerks slightly in his seat. “Lady, what part of ‘no cops’ didn’t you understand?”

“He’s not a cop.” Emma slides in across from him, folding her hands on the table.

He scowls. “Well, who the hell is he?”

Emma glances at Jones and tells the truth. “He’s someone I trust.” She focuses back on O’Brien, but not before she catches the brief, blinding smile that spreads across Jones’ face. “Tell me what I don’t know about Kieran Gold.”
O’Brien flinches at the name as though she’s called him Voldemort. He exhales shakily, gripping his mug of coffee with both hands. Granny brings over fresh mugs for Emma and Jones, but O’Brien doesn’t speak until she’s well away. “Everyone drinks their coffee out of cardboard cups these days, you ever notice that? Or those plastic travel mugs. They don’t warm your hands the way mugs do.” He stares down at his coffee as though it holds all the universe’s answers. “The things you notice, right? I just got the news from the doctor. Prostate cancer. Probably have a year or two.”

That explains why he contacted her. Conscience. “Sorry to hear about that.”

“Every year they play ‘A Christmas Carol.’ When I was a kid, Jacob Marley scared the hell out of me with that chain of his.”

“I wear the chain I forged in life,”’ Jones quotes.

“I made it link by link,”’ O’Brien finishes, nodding grimly. “I hid a lot of sins and now I have to carry them. But Gold…that weighs a ton.”

Emma leans forward. “Why?”

“Because of everything he’s done. And everything I helped him do.”

“And what has he done?”

O’Brien exhales. “You need some context here. This started twenty-eight years ago. I was young and stupid and got into some things, but it wasn’t until ’94-“

The window cracks, O’Brien’s mug shatters, and red blooms across his chest in a familiar pattern. She reacts instantly, shoving Jones out of the booth and to the floor. “Everybody on the ground now!” She pitches her voice over the screaming. “Back away from the windows, away from the windows!”

“Swan!” Jones grabs at her, face ashen. “You’re hit!”

Emma glances down at sees the spatter across her shirt. “I’m fine, it’s not my blood.” He turns and scrambles for O’Brien as she pulls out her radio. “One Lincoln Forty, I have shots fired on Fourth and Main. I need back-up and an ambulance.” She looks back over at Jones, who is trying to staunch the flow of blood from O’Brien’s chest wound. He shakes his head, eyes wide and haunted.

“Dispatch to One Lincoln Forty repeat. Dispatch to One Lincoln Forty, are you there?”

Emma puts a hand to her forehead and responds, voice heavy with disappointment and frustration. “One Lincoln Forty, please be advised. This is now a homicide.”

Captain Tracy reads Emma the riot act for the consequences of her off-the-books investigation, but gives her permission to pursue it. “I know you,” she says softly, still and solid in the way that Emma has always known her. “You’re going to pick up those scissors and run around the house with them. Walk, don’t run. Go where the evidence leads, not the other way round. Understood?”

“Understood, sir.”

Jones refuses to go home, even though he’s clearly shaken. This is on a different level. He writes about death but he’s never seen it so close and so violent. But he pushes through it, apologizing
profusely to Gran, who is looking at him and Emma with sharp, knowing eyes and pursed lips. Emma apologizes as well, but there’s a murder to solve on top of the already deepening mystery surrounding Kieran Gold.

Back at the precinct, David’s assigned the job of tracking down their shooter, while Leroy brings everything they know about Connor O’Brien. “O’Brien was a bachelor, no next of kin. Super said he didn’t have visitors. But I do have a former acquaintance of his at Goldman Sachs. Morris “Mo” French, stockbroker, jailed in ’99 for money laundering. Still serving a fifteen-year sentence at Rikers.”

The blood freezes in her veins at that name. “French?”

Leroy looks up from the file in his hands. “Yeah. That mean something to you?”

“Potentially. Get me anything connecting French, our victim, and Kieran Gold.”

Leroy drops the folder to his desk. “Gold? As in that bastard from a year ago?”

”Yup.” Emma grabs her jacket. “Come on, Jones. We’re going to Rikers.”

Emma’s suspicions are confirmed when she finds Belle sitting at a table with Mo French. “I’m sorry that we have to break this up,” she announces with absolutely no remorse. “NYPD. Mr. French, I have a few questions for you regarding Connor O’Brien.”

Belle swings around, her eyes widening as she catches sight of both Emma and Jones. “Detective-“ she begins.

“Thank you, Detective French, but your assistance isn’t needed, unless you have something to say regarding the connection between Kieran Gold, our victim, and your father.” Emma’s surprised to find that her hands are shaking slightly and she realizes that she’s both furious and let down. She cannot believe that Belle has kept something this big a secret.

“Connor is dead?” Mo French cries. “Is it-no, you said victim. Someone murdered him, right?” He buries his head in his hands. “I’m next.”

“O’Brien? That’s who you were seeing this morning?” Belle asks Emma.

“Why was he killed, Mr. French?” Emma demands, ignoring Belle. “He contacted me, saying that he had something he wanted to get off his chest. Something involving Kieran Gold and events that started twenty-eight years ago but didn’t escalate until 1994. Care to enlighten me?” She doesn’t miss the way that Belle snaps to and focuses all her attention on her father. Clearly this is something he’s never told her, and Emma can’t help but get some satisfaction out of that.

“No,” the former stockbroker says firmly. “It got Connor killed, and I’d like to stay alive.” He glares at Belle, whose normally smooth and implacable façade has faded away, leaving her stricken and pale. “When are you going to stop poking, girl? I told you that it would only lead to trouble, and now you’ve got these people in on it too!” He signals to the prison guard. “I’m ready to go back now.”

Emma waits until they’re all in the parking lot before she rounds on the other detective. “You know, you’ve given me a lot of connections, Detective French, but you’ve left out the most important. Why didn’t you tell me that your father worked with Gold?”
“Because I wanted to keep him out of it,” Belle retorts, tears of frustration rising to her eyes. “Gold’s the one who put him away in the first place, I know it. That’s why I became a detective, to obtain justice.”

“But you knew how dangerous Gold was, so you kept any mention of your father hidden away so that he would stay safe,” Jones remarks, drawing his own conclusions.

Belle nods sharply and crosses her arms tightly over her torso. She shifts her stance, braced and prepared for anything. “Except now he isn’t, and neither are you, especially if someone killed Connor O’Brien. Did he say anything else?”

“Why should I tell you anything?” Emma snaps. She’s not quite shouting, but she’s nearly there, and her hands are clenched hard at her side. “You haven’t been honest, Detective.”

“I was protecting my family, Detective,” Belle snarls right back. “Surely you can appreciate that.”

Of course she can. She doesn’t want Jones or his family, or Henry and Regina, or David and Leroy involved but now, one way or another, they all are. Now the only way they can ensure everyone’s safety is to take Gold down. And she needs Belle. “I know. But we need to be 100% honest from here on out, Detective. And Jones is our new partner.”

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Jones takes advantage of a lull in the case to go home and shower. Liam’s waiting for him on the couch and barrels into him the moment he returns. “Dad!”

Jones lets out a grunt. “Easy, lad. You’ve gained at least a stone since the last time you threw yourself at me,” he jokes lamely, brushing the curls away from his face.

“What if it were you? It could have been you, you know that, right?” His voice gets higher and more frantic with each word, and his eyes are bright with tears.

“I’m fine, Liam. It wasn’t me.” He tilts his head to the side and chucks Liam’s chin with his fingers in an attempt to coax a smile.

“This isn’t one of your books, Dad. You don’t know the ending. You were lucky yesterday.” He buries his face in Jones’ shoulder. “You’re pretty amazing, but even you can’t dodge a bullet. I can’t lose you too.”

Any mention of Milah is, as always, resoundingly painful. Jones sighs and hugs him close. “What do you suggest then, lad? That I quit?” Liam is right about one thing – even with his Kevlar vest, he’s not bulletproof. He certainly wasn’t wearing it when they went to meet O’Brien.

The teenager snuffles a little bit. “Dad, you wrote plenty of books before you met Emma, and you didn’t need to spend every day at a police station or some spy headquarters in order to finish them.”

“It’s not about the books anymore.” The words ring bright and true as he says them, admitting his feelings out loud for the very first time.

Everything moves quickly and yet, not quickly enough after that. Emma and Belle bring Jones up to speed on what they have on Kieran Gold. Together, they start going through the files that Leroy brings from Goldman Sachs, trying to figure out what O’Brien, French, and Gold were up to and what was so significant in 1985 and 1994. Meanwhile, David and Leroy keep chasing leads on O’Brien’s shooter.
Emma glances up from her desk to see Jones nodding off in his seat, two folders open on his lap. “Jones, there’s something I need you to do.”

He’s fully awake and focused on her in an instant. “Name it.”

"Go home."

“Certainly not.” He wags a finger at her. “‘Fear does not exist in this dojo.’”

She has no idea what he’s referencing. Mortal Kombat? “Look, I signed up for this when I put that badge on. So did Belle, Leroy, and David. You didn’t. It’s not your fight.” He’d told her about Liam’s reaction to the shooting, and to be honest, Henry’s hadn’t been any better (“Mom tried to hide it from me. The guy was sitting across from you when he was shot! You need to be careful, Emma!”). She can’t help the guilt she feels for dragging him into this but…it feels a hell of a lot more right, now that he’s working beside her. Still, she’ll do whatever she can to make things as safe and comfortable as possible.

“That’s a bloody load of crock and you know it, Swan. I don’t hang around you just to annoy you.” He places the folders back on her desk. “I don’t ride up to murder scenes in the middle of the night to satisfy some morbid curiosity. If that’s all this was then I would have quit long ago.”

Emma puts her pen down. “Then why do you keep coming back, Killian?”

His gaze shoots to hers and they stare, unblinking, for what feels like an eternity. This is the first time she’s called him by his name. Finally, he breaks the stalemate. “Look, I may not have a badge, but I’ll tell you this. Like it or not, I’m your plucky sidekick.” He grins cheekily at that.

“The plucky sidekick always gets killed,” she counters.

The lines that appear at the corners of his eyes when he smiles are incredibly endearing. “Partner, then.”

Something warm flutters in her chest. They’ve been tossing this word around for a while now, but it’s never felt more real or more right until now. “Okay.”

The moment shatters when they find out that David and Leroy have been kidnapped, and possibly by the person who killed Connor O’Brien. She doesn’t want to think about what they might find, can’t even bring herself to face Mary Margaret. It takes a few agonizing hours, but eventually they track their location to an abandoned warehouse in the Docklands.

It’s only with sheer luck that Emma spots the lookout outside the warehouse. She backs up against the adjacent building, swearing under her breath. “That guy is going to spot a SWAT team from a block away and warn anyone who’s inside. We call in the cavalry and both David and Leroy are dead.” She turns her head to look at Jones. “I’m open to dumb ideas.”

Jones pokes his head around the corner and immediately returns to Emma’s side. “Good, because I have one.” He grabs her arm, threads it through his. “Follow my lead.” He pulls them both out onto the street, laughing loudly and rather drunkenly. Emma stiffens at first but he pulls her against him just as the watchdog turns to look at them. She instantly relaxes and lets out a giggle of her own.

“He’s not buying it, Jones,” Emma warns as the guy turns fully towards them, his face set in suspicious lines. She starts angling herself towards Jones to reach for her piece, cursing because she knows a gunshot will tip off the others. Then Leroy and David are as good as dead.

But then Jones’ fingers land on the back of her neck, warm in contrast to the cool metal of his rings.
He stares at her for a split second before he moves in, and it’s with a shock that his lips meet hers.

Emma’s mind empties and she yanks herself away, eyes darting over his shoulder to the guard and back to Jones, who’s looking at her with hunger and hesitation warring in his eyes.

She throws herself at him, marveling at how he catches her and responds so enthusiastically to her kiss, one hand sliding into her hair. She’s still darting little looks to the side, but then she catches his lower lip between her teeth and he growls. The sound rips through her and Emma allows herself to get lost in that kiss, haphazardly throwing an arm across his shoulders while the other one cups the back of his head. She savors the rough scrape of his tongue over hers and the harsh shuddering of his breath and she moves again, swinging him around and tugging him close-

-Then using that momentum to clock the guard with the butt of her Glock as he turns away from them, chuckling. Emma stares at the man sprawled at her feet, breath coming out in heavy pants and willing her nerves to stop tingling, damn it. She absolutely will not acknowledge this, not at all-

“That was amazing,” Jones breathes. She wheels around and stares at him incredulously. He actually has a hand to his lips. “The way you knocked him out, I mean.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

The rescue afterwards is almost anti-climactic, except where Jones takes out the guy aiming for Emma and gets slide bite. Both Leroy and David are in one piece, and every member of the hit squad that took out O’Brien is carted away for questioning.

Once the adrenaline high leaves her, Emma’s left feeling drained and horrified. There’s no doubt that Gold was backing the team that grabbed David and Leroy, and a search of the place reveals that they’ve been watching Emma’s every move, too. They’ve officially hit the point of no return and Emma’s now faced with the absolute reality that she’s put her friends in danger.

“Swan?” Jones steps into the locker room.

She tips her head back against the lockers and closes her eyes. “What, Jones?” Guilt and exhaustion seep through the terse response.

“David, Leroy, and I are meeting Mary Margaret for food. My treat. Are you joining us?”

“…No, I should stay here. Finish the paperwork.”

He settles across from her and she refuses to look at him. His next question is soft. “Do you really think that David and Leroy’s kidnapping is your fault? All they had was mild hypothermia and a case of wounded pride.”

Her silence says everything.

“Neither of them blame you for it.”

“They should!” The confession bursts out of her like a geyser as she finally looks at him. “I pushed. I couldn’t leave well enough alone when we wrapped up the Cahn case. I’m the one who decided to keep looking into Gold and now-“

“Yes, you pushed for it. It’s not because it’s your job, but because you care. Most people come up
against a wall and they give up. Not you.” He leans forward, his arms resting on his knees. “You
don’t let go. You don’t back down. That’s what makes you extraordinary.”

Emma shakes her head. “I don’t feel extraordinary. I feel like a failure. And I’m scared,” she
whispers. “He went after David and Leroy. Who’s next? Henry?” Oh gods, Henry. She can’t bear to
even think of it. “It didn’t matter before. I was alone. Now I have weaknesses.” She can’t go into
battle – for that’s surely what this is, shots have been fired – at anything less than perfect strength.

Jones reaches for her hand then. The look in those impossibly blue eyes simultaneously calms her
and frightens her beyond measure. It’s sympathetic and fierce and supportive and understanding and
it’s everything she needs. “Oh Swan,” he sighs. “Caring for someone is not weakness. It makes you
stronger. It gives you something to fight for.”

Fight. It’s a term she’s intimately familiar with. She’s learned to fight for herself – she’s done that her
entire life. She’s fought for her victims. So far, that’s worked pretty well.

But fighting for dear ones? That’s a new concept but…perhaps it’s one she can work with.
“Fighting,” she whispers, looking down to where his hand covers hers. “That just might work.”

“See? Extraordinary.”

It’s the simple admiration and belief in his words that finally breaks through to her. “You’re fond of
using that word when it comes to me,” she says wryly, trying not to blush.

He chuckles and knows that for now, he’s succeeded. “Is it getting old? I have other words I can use.
Amazing, marvelous, incredible, phenomenal, remarkable-“

“I find that silence is preferable.” She stands and looks down at him. “So, you said something about
food?”

His eyes warm and then he’s up and bouncing beside her. “Absolutely. Food.”

Chapter End Notes

I’d love if you guys let me know what you think of the Gold case! I think I’ve finally
figured out where I want it to go and how to make it fit into the Castle universe.

I’m so sorry for the long wait. My thesis is...a monster.

Lawgeeks is a saint, as usual.
Regina’s already sitting in one of the cozy corner booths of The Jolly Roger when Emma arrives. The mayor appears cool, calm, and collected as always, with her impeccably tailored suits and designer heels. She sips calmly from a glass of red wine while two of her security staff lounge unobtrusively across the room.

Emma nods at the bartender (“MacCutcheon’s, Smee, the usual, thanks.”) and slides into the opposite seat. “Madame Mayor.”

Regina sighs. “We share the same son, Emma. I think we can dispense of formalities when we’re not in an official capacity, don’t you think?”

Smee brings her whisky over and Emma accepts it with a grateful smile. It’s been a long day and she has the sneaking suspicion that she’s going to need it. One-on-one meetings with Regina are few and far between, and not just because they are very busy women.

Personally, Emma thinks they are far too similar to ever get along comfortably. They’ve both worked their asses off to make their way through male-dominated professions and that engenders a certain kind of attitude. They’re both incredibly blunt and unafraid to push for what they want, as well as unapologetically driven.

It’s a good thing that they are both single-minded over the wellbeing of Henry and the city of New York. Emma would hate to have her as an enemy. And even if they can’t be friends (and she’s not ruling out that possibility), they at least have the other’s respect.

“It’s difficult, but I can try,” Emma concedes, and savors the taste of smoky, smooth whisky. “Is everything all right with Henry?”

“This isn’t about Henry. This is about you, Detective French, and your preoccupation with Kieran Gold.” Regina’s expression gives nothing away as she stares at Emma over the table.

Emma’s spine automatically uncurls from its comfortable slouch. Had she been wrong about being on the same side? She hasn’t found any obvious connections between Regina and Gold and assumes they’re unconnected, but she’s been wrong before.

For Henry’s sake, she prays that she’s not wrong. Regina might not be his mother by birth, but she is his mother and he adores her. “I wouldn’t call it a preoccupation.”

“Oh?” Regina drawls, drawing the tip of one perfectly manicured finger around the rim of her wineglass. “What would you call it, then?”

It feels like she’s being the one interrogated and it’s not a feeling that she enjoys. “I call it a quest for justice.” She raises an eyebrow because two can play this game. And though the practical side of her insists that she should maintain some sense of self-preservation, she cannot stand the idea of being blocked in this way. It reeks of corruption. “Are you going to stand in the way of that?”

“A quest for justice?” Regina mocks, rolling her eyes. “Really, Emma, you’re being far too romantic about this. The same goes for Detective French. It opens you to vulnerabilities.”
“What kind of vulnerabilities?”

“The kind that can get the two of you demoted to traffic. Or worse, expelled from the force entirely.”

Emma’s grip tightens on her glass and she forces herself to take a slow, calming sip. “Is that a threat?”

“No, it’s a warning to tread carefully. Honestly, the two of you have all the elegance of a herd of rhinoceri. You need to be subtle if you’re going to go after Kieran Gold.”

“What?”

“For god’s sake, you’re not an idiot,” Regina snaps, cross now. “You’re lucky that the police commissioner defers to me over Gold, that his wife’s job is contingent on my good will, and that his daughter is friends with Henry.”

Emma scowls in response, her mind rapidly connecting the dots. “How long have you two been battling for control of the city?”

“Long enough.” When you did politics in New York City, you learned to find your place to stand. Regina had found hers – opposite Kieran Gold. He hadn’t thought much about the widowed single mother who’d worked her way up from the city clerk’s office, but he’d learned very quickly.

“So you could help us then.”

Regina shakes her head, though not without some regret. “No. Kieran Gold and I have an understanding. We have balance.” She can’t make a move against him without serious consequences. Not unless things change drastically.

She wonders if Emma Swan is going to be the one to make that change.

“Your hands are tied,” Emma guesses correctly. Regina spreads her hands and looks down at the table, grinning wryly. “Well, I guess it’s back to work.”

“I guess so. But remember, Detective Swan. Discretion.”

“I’ll try.”

Paradigm shifts never happen quietly, after all.

“This was a great idea,” Emma comments as she watches Henry and Liam expertly navigate the crowds on their skates, followed by a laughing David and Mary Margaret. She normally avoids Rockefeller Center like the plague, but even she is not immune to the allure of Christmas lights, the prospect of bundling up in layers, and playing the tourist in the ice rink. “You’re kind of terrible at this, though.”

Jones huffs out a laugh. “May I remind you, love, that I am from a part of the world where it rarely gets cold enough to do this? My only experiences lie in shuffling along at overcrowded rinks at the Christmas faires.”

“Oh, you mean kind of like you’re doing now?” she teases, coming around in front of him and skating backwards. “Bend your knees. Pick up your feet.”
“That’s what I’m doing!”

She bites down on her bottom lip to hold back the laugh. She’s seen a number of Killian Jones’ tantrums, but this one just might take the cake. He’s actually pouting as he shuffles along, his arms held out stiffly from his sides. It’s kind of adorable. “Jones, Jones, this is just painful. Come on, take my hands.”

He glances from her hands to her face with trepidation. “Swan, really, it’s fine, I’m perfectly happy doing this—” He lets out a tiny shriek as she grabs his hands and begins towing him forward. “Swan, we’re going to fall—”

“Only if you keep pulling back on me like that!” she admonishes, continuing to pull at a steady pace. “Match my rhythm. Come on, Jones, don’t you trust me?”

“Swan, I trust you with my life, but not when ice and sharpened steel blades are involved.”

“Shouldn’t you trust me even more under those circumstances?” His ready admission – no hesitation, no playfulness, just a simple statement of fact – makes her determined, even if it is just over ice skating.

And he’s already improving, just by virtue of the fact that he’s paying attention to her. He probably doesn’t even realize it, but he’s mirroring her movements, leaning when she leans and pushing off when she does. Emma decides not to mention it, because knowing Jones he’d probably startle and bring them both down in a tangle of arms and legs on the ice. And no one needs that. She wants the hot chocolate he promised her, not a trip to the emergency room.

“Dad! You’re doing great!” Liam chirps as he comes up on the left. “You’ll be an expert yet!”

“Such pretty lies, my boy, but thank you.” His brow is furrowed in concentration as he tries to look down at his feet and Emma tuts.

“None of that, please. And you’re doing fine, Jones. You don’t have to be brilliant at everything the first time around.” It’s not obvious, but Jones has quite the competitive streak. She still remembers when he taught David how to play rummy. He’d sulked for days after David beat him at five straight games. And the less said about the time he invited her to his famous writers’ poker night, the better.

He peeks up at her and the grin nearly blinds her. “What?”

“Swan, you just said ‘brilliant.’ I’m rubbing off on you.”

She contemplates letting go of his hands. It would teach him if he went flying into the boards. “Well, I do suppose you grow on people. Like mold.”

Liam and Henry guffaw. “Hey, are we going to get hot chocolate soon?” Henry wonders. His cheeks are adorably pink and he’s sporting a giant knit cap with great panache. “I’m getting kind of thirsty.”

“Sure lad,” Jones promises, relieved at the prospect of leaving. “Perhaps another turn around the rink?”

It starts snowing halfway around, and that’s when Emma sees it. David has stopped Mary Margaret in an empty patch of ice near the middle. They make such a picture as he kneels, steady despite the skates and the falling snow. Mary Margaret’s smile is a mile wide, no hint of surprise in sight. “Oh,” Emma breathes, and points.
The four of them glide to a stop by the rail to watch the spectacle. “Well,” Jones says with a sappy grin, “I suppose this suits them better than a helicopter ride.”

“You told David to propose to Mary Margaret on a helicopter?” Liam shakes his head, and the happiness is contagious as Mary Margaret nods, letting out a bright “Yes!” that they can hear even from where they’re standing. David is on his feet in an instant, wrapping his arms around her as some of the passers-by applaud.

Emma can feel their brightness, shining like a beacon across the ice rink. David and Mary Margaret are a partnership through and through, and they’ve held steadfast over the years despite tough cases on both of their parts. All she can think is finally. “Come on,” she says to the boys (and yes, that includes Jones). “Let’s congratulate them. And then we can see about some hot chocolate.”

And if Jones slips his hand through hers, claiming that he needs something to keep him steady (“Have you seen those children, Swan? They’re speed demons, I fear for my life.”), well, she’ll let it slide this time.

Besides, ice rinks are made for holding hands.

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Belle wakes up instantly knowing that something is wrong. She isn’t a light sleeper in the slightest – she’s usually out the moment her head hits the pillow, and she has one of those alarm clocks that rings and rolls away because otherwise she’d never get out of bed.

She’s not sure why she’s awake, not until she sits up, holding her blankets to her chest. Then she wishes that she were still asleep, for this is surely a nightmare.

“Ah, Sleeping Beauty awakens.” Kieran Gold is standing by her window, facing out over the city. From this angle, all Belle can see is his profile silhouetted by moonlight and streetlights, posture loose, with his hands clasped behind his back. “Ah, ah, I wouldn’t do that,” he cautions as she dives for the piece hidden beneath her pillow.

“You’re breaking and entering, and in a law enforcement official’s home, no less,” she growls, fingers closing around cool metal. This is it, she thinks, leveling her pistol. If they can hold him, even for a small amount of time, maybe they can get a court order and get into his files-

“It’s amusing that you think you have any power in this situation, dearie,” he drawls. “See, even though I am alone, I’m not without…influence.” Gold turns from the window and raises a cell phone. Belle feels cold, some of her bravado dying in the face of this strange turn of events. She can feel his gaze on her even though she can’t see his face, and fear pricks sharp in her chest. “All I need to do is dial one number and your father will suffer the consequences.”

No, is the first thought that races through her head. But that’s not right because she knows how this man operates. She knows exactly what he’s capable of doing. And he’s most certainly capable of signing her father’s death warrant with a single phone call. “What do you want?” she croaks, acquiescing but knowing better than to lower her weapon.

“My dear Detective French, there are many things I want.” The endearment makes her skin crawl. “I admit it has been very amusing to watch you and Detective Swan dog my steps, first individually and then collectively. It is the most fun I’ve had in quite some time. But now…now the fun must stop.”

They must have been getting close, Bell realizes. They were onto something – maybe a key witness, or one thread that would have cracked the whole thing. She thinks back furiously, wondering what it
might have been…

*His background.* Emma had been delving into immigration records and cross-referencing them with connections to Irish mob activity. It was a tenuous link, but they figured it was worth checking out.

“Are you going to kill me?”

She’s proud that her voice is strong, steady. She knows the way Gold works like she knows the policeman’s code of conduct. She knows that he can make her disappear as easily as he closes a big account at Goldman Sachs. She knows that no one would ever be able to tie it to him.

Just like she knows that Emma will figure out. Emma will suspect, and she’ll add Belle to her murder board and use it to push forward and bury him. She knows that, at the very least, and can at least take some comfort in that.

His laughter is unpleasant, darkly amused and condescending as hell. “Kill you? Now that would be too quick and I would derive absolutely no satisfaction from that. No, Detective French, you’re going to derail your own investigations.” He outlines the plan for her then, all the ways that she’s going to plant false trails and fake leads, guiding Emma around in a merry chase. And if Belle thinks she felt sick before, well, that’s nothing compared to how she feels now. It’s a betrayal on every level. It goes against everything Belle believes in, everything she’s worked her life fighting for.

In that moment, she hates Kieran Gold more than she’s hated anyone or anything. It boils inside her, red-hot and scorching her lungs. Her finger tightens fractionally on the trigger and it would be so easy, wouldn’t it?

“I know what you’re thinking, Detective French, and I wouldn’t do it if I were you. You don’t want to experience the safety nets I have put into place if you kill me tonight.” She can hear the satisfaction in his voice. “Starting with, but certainly not ending, with the murder of your father.”

*Dad.* The reminder is like a bucket of ice water and Belle lowers her piece, ignoring the way her hand shakes. Her father is the reason why she went after Gold in the first place. Why she went into the academy rather than get a Ph.D., become a lit professor. She can let so many things slide, push the envelope as much as possible, but she won’t compromise on this.

Defeat tastes like ashes in her mouth. “You’re a monster,” she informs him lowly.

“You’re working for the monster now,” Gold responds, satisfied with her defeat. He walks for the door. “Expect instructions soon. And it goes without saying that you tell no one, Detective French. Especially Detective Swan. You won’t enjoy the results if you do.”

Belle waits until her front door closes before she loses it, gulping back sobs as tears burn tracks down her cheeks. For the first time in her life, she feels like a complete failure.

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Emma’s a cop; she’s seen plenty of terrible things throughout the years. Still, she thought nothing was worse than the sight of Graham, bleeding out in her arms on the floor of that godforsaken convenience store. It’s a sight that has haunted her dreams in the intervening years. But this? This she knows is going to be worse.

She ducks under the tape and past Captain Tracy. She can’t bring herself to take her pity so she keeps moving, the lights blurring her vision. Sounds are muted except for the dull roar inside her own head.
Except for one thing. “Emma.” Jones’ voice is so gentle but rather than calming her all she wants to do is punch him. “You don’t have to go and see him if you don’t want to.”

She keeps walking because if she stops, she’s going to collapse. “Jones, if it were me lying there would you just walk away?” She glances at him out of the corner of her eye. His expression is stricken, and she feels guilty for saying the words but they needed to be said. The silence that follows tells her everything she needs to know.

Mary Margaret stands up from where she’s been leaning over August’s body. In her eyes is the same terrible sadness reflected on everyone else. “I’m so sorry, Emma,” she murmurs, pressing against her side. Emma allows herself to lean back on her for a moment, frozen on the tableau before her. August is on his back beside a dumpster, blue eyes staring sightlessly up, a bullet hole through his forehead.

She was right. This is much, much worse than Graham. She swallows and feels Jones come up on her other side, also pressing his shoulder to hers. It’s enough to steady her and she takes a breath. “What happened?”

“He was shot in the leg. From the blood trail, I’d say the bullet broke the bone. I found this in his pocket.” Mary Margaret hands Emma a piece of paper. “He just flew in from Los Angeles.”

“What was he doing in LA?” Jones asks, curious.

“He moved there after what happened here,” Emma remarks absently, looking over August’s flight itinerary. “He was probably trying to start over.”

“When was the last time you spoke to him?”

Emma can’t allow herself to feel regret, not right now. Still, the words are hoarse when they escape her throat. “When I arrested him.” She lifts an inquiring brow at Mary Margaret, who nods and pulls Jones back to allow Emma some semblance of privacy. She kneels beside August, reaching out with trembling fingers to touch the side of his face. Her breath hitches and for a moment, tears burn in her eyes as she wonders why the things she loves crumble away into dust.

Jones is right, though. She doesn’t want to remember August this way. Emma shuts her eyes and dredges up memories of the two of them drinking pints after work. Of the way that his eyes would crinkle when he laughed at her. Of the way that he made her feel safe. That’s the August she loved, and that’s the August she’ll carry inside of her. “Goodbye, August,” she whispers, levering herself back up and walking back to Mary Margaret.

The other woman holds out another piece of paper. “August had something else in his pocket. It’s for you.”

“Is it about the case?” Jones asks as she skims it.

“No.” David and Leroy call them over. They’ve found the murder weapon.

Emma spares one more look back towards August. I’ll find your killer, she promises him silently. And I’m going to put him away.

The trail leads out to LA and a suspect. Captain Tracy forbids her from going. Emma realizes that it’s for all the right reasons – even though it’s her case, there’s no reason to expect that the LAPD will cooperate. There’s also the tiny thing of being emotionally compromised because she’s too close to
But that closeness is the very reason why she needs to go. Emma slumps down in the uncomfortable seat in coach, running over the words August wrote to her.

_Dear Emma, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve written and re-written this letter. Someday I might actually send it. There’s no excuse for what I did, especially what I did to you. I’m on a righteous path now, and I hope one day that path earns me your forgiveness._

It’s good to have a case and a clear goal in mind. Robert Gold’s case has been one dead end after another. Emma knows that she needs to be patient because they’re not going to build a case on him overnight, but for a while it seemed like she and Belle were close to a breakthrough. Belle has been different in the last few weeks, more withdrawn and less enthusiastic. The lack of progress must be getting to her, too.

“Excuse me, Detective Swan?”

Emma blinks up at the flight attendant. “Yes?”

“You’ve been upgraded to first class.”

Jones is in first class, of course, handing her a flute of champagne. Emma buckles herself into the adjacent seat, and everything feels a little surreal. She’s never been in first class before and all she wants to do is wallow, but first… “Jones, what are you doing?”

“Well, the studio has been after me to fly down and do a set visit for the Gwen Snow movie. Imagine my surprise when I saw your name on the standby list.” He tells the lie so cheerfully that all Emma can do is stare.

“Jones, you can’t do this.” She’s flying out without Captain Tracy’s consent – hell, Captain Tracy thinks she’s taking a much-deserved vacation.

“I thought you were on vacation,” Jones says innocently, following her train of thought.

She narrows her eyes at him and sets the champagne flute aside. “Jones. It’s not the same in LA. I don’t have any authority out there. Any backup. There are consequences-“

He looks wounded. “I’m your backup, Swan. Besides-“ he does that stupid eyebrow thing. “Going rogue is my specialty.”

“Yeah, but subtlety isn’t.” She really needs to resign herself to the fact that Killian Jones is now like her conjoined twin. “I’m not going to get rid of you, am I?” The look he gives her simply says DUH. “Look, if we do this together you have to promise me that we’re going to fly under the radar.”

It stands to reason that Jones’ idea of ‘under the radar’ is a red convertible and the two of them sharing the opulent suite the movie studio gave him.

Scratch that. ‘Under the radar’ is finding out that August helped out _Gene Simmons_ and was living in his guesthouse. Emma feels a little vindicated, knowing that August was telling her the truth in his note and that he was turning things around. It goes a long way in reassuring her that the man she loved and admired hadn’t completely fled. It doesn’t make his loss hurt any less, but it’s something.

_Gene Simmons_ (Gene Simmons!) gives them the name of the woman August had been helping – an aspiring actress named Violet Young. In the meantime, they run by the _Snow Falls_ set and Emma’s relieved to find out that Allison Cameron isn’t present. And if she thought meeting the actress was
weird, it’s even weirder to see the men cast to play David and Leroy. The resemblance is uncanny.

Emma knows that breaking into Violet Young’s house it completely illegal – she’s a cop, for crying out loud. But Mary Margaret has just called them with the information that they can’t get anything off of ballistics because the bullets dissolved and it’s imperative to get as much information as possible.

“She’s not here,” Emma notes after clearing the house.

“No, she’s not. She’s in New York.” He flashes her a handwritten note with flight information on it. Emma snatches it from his hand. “This was August’s flight,” she realizes. “All right, so they flew together. He knew they were in trouble and tried to protect her by taking her to New York.”

Jones shakes his head, eyes trailing over the house as though begging for clues. “Protect her from what?”

In a folder on the dining table are surveillance photos. Emma waves them at him. “Maybe from these? Why does she need surveillance photos?”

“Perhaps August was doing PI work for her. The building this man’s coming out of looks familiar.”

She purses her lips. Violet has articles on everything from corgis to wine tastings clipped out of newspapers, a voice recorder with a cryptic phrase, and nothing adds up, not even if she were researching a role. None of it seems to have anything to do with August.

What happens next is just embarrassing. They’re detained by the LAPD, which results in Emma’s current predicament.

“Breaking into people’s houses? Is this really your idea of a vacation, Emma?” Captain Tracy is on the other end of LAPD Detective Seeger’s phone and she is pissed.

“Sir, I can explain. I was-”

“No. No explanations. I want you on the next plane back to New York.”

Jones raises a hand even though there’s no possible way she can see him. “We haven’t eaten at Pink’s yet! Is morning all right?”

“Is this a joke to you, Jones?” He winces because listening to Captain Tracy’s tone is like being dipped into a frozen pond. “When Emma is working mall security following her around isn’t going to have the same allure. Come. Home. Now.”

Detective Seeger leaves them with a warning, but Emma’s already dialing Leroy. She can’t leave LA now, not when there are still so many unanswered questions. She’ll answer to Captain Tracy and take her punishment later. “Leroy, I need you to find someone. We think August came to New York with a Violet Young.”

“I’ll look her up,” he promises. “David has something.”

David comes onto the line. “Hey Emma.” His voice is warm over the phone. “How’s LA?”

“The usual. Sun, beaches, and a dressing-down from the captain,” she says wryly, smiling a little bit when he laughs. “What’ve you got?”

“A photo of our killer. I’m sending it to you now.”
Beside Emma, Jones makes a noise of triumph, holding his phone in the air. “I told you that building looked familiar, Swan.” He explains to her that he saw it in a movie and it’s the headquarters for an R&D facility – one with a CEO whose hobbies include corgis and wine tastings.

It turns out that CEO has been manufacturing dissolving bullets – bullets that have since disappeared.

Back at the hotel, Jones does what he does best. “If I were writing it, it would go like this: a gullible young actress is desperate to make a name for herself and meets our mastermind at a club. He needs a pretty girl to help him get a voice code. He tells Violet he’s a producer and promises to make her famous, if she helps him play a practical joke on a friend.”

“She doesn’t realize she’s participating in a crime until afterwards,” Emma says, picking up the thread. She’s getting better at this. “She can’t call the cops, so she contacts August.”

“Then our killer finds out.”

“She’s a gullible young actress desperate to make a name for herself and meets our mastermind at a club. He needs a pretty girl to help him get a voice code. He tells Violet he’s a producer and promises to make her famous, if she helps him play a practical joke on a friend.”

She can feel his gaze on her, completely serious for once. “Would you like to know what I thought when I first met you, Swan?” he asks eventually. She cocks her head and makes a curious noise at the back of her throat. Jones scratches the back of his neck and he almost looks embarrassed – but earnest. “That you were a mystery I was never going to solve. Even now, after spending all this time with you I’m absolutely amazed by the depth of your strength, your heart…” Emma’s heart speeds up at the confession. “And how utterly fit you are.”

Classic Jones. He certainly knows how to make and then break a moment. But Emma appreciates that now more than ever. She’s glad he came out with her. “You’re not so bad yourself, Jones.”

Their eyes meet and it’s just another one of those electric moments. Emma can’t help but flash back to that kiss and the hard press of his lips against hers. Some of what she’s feeling must show on her face because Jones’ eyes darken to a deep, stormy blue and he moves incrementally closer.

It’s enough to have Emma rocketing off the couch. “I should go,” she mutters, running her hands through her hair. “It’s late. Good night.”

“Emma-“ he protests.

She pauses at her door, her hand on the knob. “Good night, Jones.” Once inside, Emma presses her back to the door and exhales. She’d almost leaned into him too, almost kissed him again. There’s no denying that she wants it. She wants it so badly that her body almost vibrates with it. What would happen if she opened the door and went back into the living room? The possibilities are both dizzying and terrifying.

But when Emma finally summons the courage to open her door it’s to the sight of Jones’ door closing. It feels oddly symbolic and she stares for one long moment before she retreats inside her room once more. It’s all for the best, she tells herself, oddly disappointed. After all, she still has Walsh.

Luckily there’s better news the next day. David and Leroy find Violet Young and the killer’s...
accomplice in New York City. That gives Emma and Jones a name – Russell Ganz – and the meeting place where Ganz intends to sell the stolen bullets – Santa Monica Pier. It’s enough to go to the LAPD.

It’s easy enough to catch the buyer, but Ganz makes a run for it. Emma growls and launches herself after him, vaulting over the pier and into the sand. Beneath the pier, she pulls her pistol and down he goes with a shot to the leg. She smiles grimly as she approaches, weapon still raised, hands rock steady. “I’m Detective Emma Swan, NYPD. You shot my friend and you left him in an alley like a piece of garbage.” There’s only a slight tremor in her voice because the way August died is always going to hurt. “Now look at you.”

Ganz rolls over on his back to stare back at her. “He said something about hell raining down on me. I never imagined hell would look like you.”

Emma’s so tempted to pull the trigger, to kill Ganz in cold blood the way he did August. Her smile widens and Ganz flinches, holding his hands up higher.

“Emma!” Jones calls from behind her, voice high and frantic, followed by the pounding footsteps of the LAPD.

“Russell Ganz, you are under arrest for the murder of August Booth.” She lowers the gun and feels everything, all the tension and grief, leaking out of her. She caught August’s killer. She can breathe easy now.

Jones reaches out, touches the back of her hand tentatively as Seeger hauls Ganz away. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

On the plane, Jones is snoring away as Emma rereads August’s letter.

*Listen to me now, Ems. You and Jones have something real and you’re fighting it the way you always do. You can’t keep putting the job above yourself. Love’s a beautiful thing. It’s one of the reasons why we do what we do. Don’t look back on your life and have regrets, Ems. Take a leap. Live.*

Emma puts the letter down and looks over at Jones. She takes all of him in, from the scruffy beard to the ever-smiling mouth, soft now in sleep. He mumbles a little bit and scoots closer to her, dropping his head down to her shoulder. It’s kind of nice, actually.

Maybe August is right. Maybe it’s time to take a risk. Maybe it’s time to start living.

“I’ve got something!”

Belle stares at the folder Emma drops onto her desk. “What?”

Emma grins at her, and it’s all teeth. “Look, I know everything has kind of sucked recently with the Gold case. Every new lead we’ve had has been…bunk. I’ve taken the time to look through some of your older stuff, cross-referencing it with pay stubs from old Irish mob cases, and there’s something big.” She slides a pay stub across the counter.

Belle picks it up and scans it. It’s from a mob-run pub in the Bronx, addressed to one B. Gold,

“Don’t you see? Gold must have come over here with a relative. Considering the year and the job? I’d say it’s a son. Kieran Gold had a son. I don’t know if he’s still alive, but it’s something to look into. How’s that for some detective work, huh?”

She’s not sure how to smile through the churning in her gut, but she manages. “That’s great, Emma. We definitely need to look into it.”

Emma frowns at her. “I thought you’d be more excited about this, Belle. Is everything all right?”

It’s not all right! Belle wants to shout. Gold is blackmailing me and he’s sure to take this away from us, too! But all she says is, “Not really. I might have the stomach flu.”

“Oh, in that case I might just go.” Emma takes a step back with an apologetic grin. “I’m seeing Henry later and don’t want to pass anything on to him. You should go home and get some rest. We can tackle this soon, all right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Belle waits until she leaves before she reaches for her phone, hands trembling.

Gold answers on the first ring. “Hello, Detective French,” he says pleasantly. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you today. Do you have anything for me?”

“Yes.” And she outlines what Emma’s told her, dreading what his instructions will be.

His silence is long, and enraged. “Well, that won’t do at all.” His voice has gone quiet, flat, and deadly. “Here is what you are going to do, Detective French. Listen to me very carefully.”

Belle knocks on Emma’s door a few days later. “Come in!” Emma calls. She’s standing in front of her murder board, Chinese food in hand. “Hey Belle, come on over, close the door behind you. Are you feeling better?”

“Something like that.”

Emma puts her food down, though she keeps her chopsticks in her hand, humming to herself as she uses them as a pointer. “So I’m thinking this potential son of Gold’s is a big sticking point. Maybe something happened to him, because I’ve found a few more mentions of him before that pay slip I showed you, but nothing after, and that’s when we get a pretty big upswing in Gold’s criminal activities—” She turns to Belle. Her chopsticks clatter to the floor.

Belle’s holding a pistol fitted with a silencer, and it’s pointed straight between Emma’s eyes. “Emma, I’m so sorry,” she whispers, tears shining bright in her eyes. “But Gold has my father and I can’t—”

“Belle, put the gun down.” Emma’s hands come up and she starts moving forward, mind racing. If she gets close enough, maybe she can disarm her. “Are you telling me that Gold’s been blackmailing you? We can fix this—“

“No, we can’t, not this way!” She steps back out of Emma’s reach, her entire body shaking. “I’m sorry,” she repeats and the emotion is heartbreakingly sincere. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Emma’s eyes widen and for the first time, she truly feels fear, frozen and cold. “Belle—”

Belle’s hand wavers and then she shoots.

Emma lurches back, pain blossoming hot in her chest in counter to the fear. She tries making it to the
phone, but stumbles and falls to the ground. Her hands are slippery with blood – her blood.

Then she hears it. “Swan, I know you’re excited about this new lead in the Gold case, but you really shouldn’t leave your door open – Swan? Swan! Emma!”

There are pounding footsteps and suddenly Jones is at her side, hands hovering over her before he fumbles for his phone. “Hello, 911, help, please, my friend has been shot. Emma, Emma love, please stay with me!” His voice is frantic, the blood draining from his face as he puts his phone on speaker, yanking off his sweater and pressing it to her wound.

She can feel herself going into shock. She opens her mouth, trying to tell him that it was Belle, Belle’s the one who shot her, but the words won’t come.

“Emma, shhh, don’t speak love. Just…don’t leave me, Emma, please. Stay with me, love.”

She’s trying. She’s trying so hard and gods, the pain is fading and Emma knows that’s bad. She’s so scared because she doesn’t want to leave and she can feel tears leaving wet trails down her face.

“Emma.” One of his hands cups her face. “I love you. I love you, Emma.”

Oh. She tries to smile, tries to do something to reassure him, anything. But she’s so tired now, her body feels so heavy, and it’s so much effort to keep her eyes open, to breathe…

Emma’s eyes slip closed.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t kill me! You know this happens at the end of season three! That being said, I’m trying not to rely on the Castle storyline as I have in previous chapters, barring major events. But even those have tweaks.

Lawgeeks is, as usual, the best beta. Especially because she found the time to edit this despite having the flu. Love you, dear!
Emma knows two things when she wakes up.

One. Belle shot her.

Two. Killian loves her.

Both are overwhelming in different ways and both pose difficult questions and even more difficult realizations. However, her head is too fuzzy from the pain meds and her chest *burns*. Her arms are heavy at her sides but she pushes through it, reaching up to press her fingers between her breasts. Below the thin hospital gown, she can feel the bandaging. Her breath hitches and-

*Pain. So much pain, blossoming outwards like the blood pouring from the wound-*

Emma slams her eyes shut and forces herself to take deep, slow breaths.

"Emma?" Cool fingers wrap around hers, chasing the panic and the nightmares away because she would know that voice and that touch anywhere. "You're awake."

"Seems that way," she croaks, peeling her eyes open and managing a smile when Mary Margaret holds a cup of water to her lips. The ice water is soothing, though she'd kill for tea laden down with honey. "You look awful." She despises herself for putting that expression on her best friend's face, equal parts pinched worry and heartbreaking relief.

Mary Margaret manages a wobbly smile. "My best friend has been shot. What's your excuse?"

"Whatever, I'm sure I look like a million bucks." They lapse into silence for a moment, hands clasped tight, before Emma dredges up the courage to ask. "How bad was it?"

Mary Margaret presses her lips together until they turn white, shaking her head ever so slightly. "They had to revive you twice," she tells her, eyes darting away as though she's pushing the memory aside. "Once at the scene and once when you were on the operating table. You're lucky Killian got there when he did or-

"Yeah." Emma's seen enough of those wounds in her lifetime to know she's lucky. Still, it doesn't negate the fact she was shot in the first place. "I need to speak to Captain Tracy."

"She can wait a little longer," Mary Margaret says firmly, going into overprotective mama bear mode. "You need to see Henry first."

Oh god. "Is-is he here?"

"He refuses to leave until he sees that you're awake." Mary Margaret squeezes her hand one more time before she stands up. "I'll get the nurse, and then we'll see about the rest of your visitors."

The nurse checks her over before allowing her a small handful of visitors, two at a time. Henry and Regina are the first, Henry pauses in the doorway and his face crumples the moment he catches sight of her on the bed. And yeah, she knows she looks terrible but it's one thing for her to know and another thing for Henry to see. "Hey kid," she manages, holding out a hand.
He unfreezes and throws himself across the room, seizing her hand like a lifeline and slumping down into the seat Mary Margaret vacated. "First your apartment was bombed and now someone shot you?" he mumbles, burying his face in her shoulder, tears wetting her hospital gown.

"Oh Henry," Emma stutters, completely taken aback at his tears. She awkwardly reaches over with her other hand to pat his head. "You know I'd do anything to spare you from this, right? I don't like it either, trust me. I can't promise it will ever settle down but I...I'll do my best." She nods at Regina as the mayor comes up behind Henry, settling a hand on his back. There's something heavy in Regina's expression, a question she refuses to voice while Henry's in the room.

Emma nods once. Regina looks unsurprised, but she probably knew the answer long before she stepped into the room and only needed confirmation. "Henry and I are happy you're all right, Detective. No doubt you still have some recovery time ahead of you."

"No doubt," Emma echoes wryly.

"We have a place," Henry blurts out, raising his head. "You should go there. It's on Martha's Vineyard and it's really peaceful. I could...school's almost out, so I could even be there with you-"

"If that's what she wants," Regina corrects him carefully. She meets Emma's startled gaze head-on and shrugs. "It's a genuine offer. It would be good for you to get out of the city, and you and Henry can take care of one another if that's what you'd like. My private security detail would be there as well, so you needn't worry about your safety."

Emma automatically opens her mouth to refuse and then promptly shuts it. It's not a terrible idea. She needs to be realistic – there's no way Captain Tracy is going to allow her back anytime soon, not without extensive counseling and some amount of leave.

And for the first time in her life, Emma doesn't want to go back to work. She frightened and off-balance in a way she hasn't been since she was a rookie. Since Graham. The ache in her chest is a stark reminder of how she needs to re-evaluate not just one, but two of her relationships. Three, if she counts Walsh, but he's so low on the scale and Emma knows exactly what she needs to do in regards to him.

She doesn't want to admit it, but running away looks like a pretty good option right now. "I...thank you," she says, looking at Henry and Regina in turn. "I might actually take you up on that."

Regina nods as though she expected nothing less than complete agreement. "Call me when you want to set things up."

Henry flashes Emma a brilliant smile, buoyed by the prospect of spending time with her. "It'll be just what you need, Emma, I promise. I'll take care of you." The sweetness and honesty in that statement slides in deep, past all her armor but she'd be lying if he hasn't already broken past all her defenses.

After Regina and Henry leave, Emma has to brace herself because Jones and Killian are next. Liam's frightened, pinched expression is just as heartbreaking as Henry's, though he refrains from crying on her shoulder and settles for holding her hand. Emma thinks she's held more hands in the past twenty minutes than she probably has her entire life. "Please don't-" he chokes a little bit, and slumps back against his father for a moment before trying again. "We can't lose you, either."

Oh god, Milah. Liam has already faced so many unimaginable losses. Emma knows how that is and how terrifying it is to come so close to losing someone again. So she tugs him a little closer and tangles her fingers with his. "I'm still here," she assures him. "I'm not going anywhere."
He still doesn't look convinced. "If Dad hadn't-"

"But he did," Emma interrupts, keeping her gaze focused on Liam. She knows Jones' eyes have been trained on her from the moment they entered the room, but she can't think about that right now. "No time for what ifs. Now is all that matters."

Liam bites his lip and then nods. Emma works up the courage to look at Jones then and he looks absolutely drawn, like the only thing keeping him together is the fact that he needs to be strong for Liam. It looks like someone (possibly David) wrestled him home and made him take a shower, so she's grateful he hasn't been hanging around this entire time waiting for her to wake up.

"Sorry I couldn't bring coffee, Swan. The nurses wouldn't allow me to smuggle anything in." The smile he offers her is a little rueful, but his eyes are searching for something she can't admit to right now – and not just because Liam is in the room.

"Damn," Emma says with feeling. Coffee sounds like heaven right about now.

His smile is a bit more genuine after that. "Next time, I promise."

The nurse interrupts and lets them know if Emma wants to see more people she had best see them now before visiting hours are over. Liam and Jones peel themselves away reluctantly, promising to return the following day. David and Leroy are next, and they at least have some answers for her: between Jones' testimony that they were supposed to meet with Belle and the security cam footage of her entering Emma's building only minutes before Jones arrived, they figured out she was the shooter. Unfortunately, Belle is now in the wind.

"We have an APB out on her car and her face is plastered over every single news network," Leroy says grimly. He looks wan and disbelieving, like he can't believe they're looking for one of their own. The entire situation has shown them that Gold's reach extends much farther than they could have ever imagined.

Emma wonders, somewhat bitterly, if Belle is even now seeking shelter with Gold. If anyone can hide her, it's him.

"We'll find her," David promises, but even he sounds unsure.

Walsh is the last visitor and Emma hates herself for what she's about to do to him. He's probably been a wreck ever since he received news of her shooting and he doesn't deserve to have her do this to him now. Truth be told, her heart hasn't been in their relationship for a long time and she can't even say if it was there to start with. And now, knowing everything she knows, there's no possible way she can keep leading him on. She should have ended things long ago, once she returned from LA.

The door opens and she takes a deep breath.

Emma is released from the hospital a few days later and is packing her bags for Martha's Vineyard when Jones comes to see her. "Captain Tracy won't let me back. She won't even let me look at the case," Emma mutters, busying herself with selecting shoes even though she knows she's probably going to spend her days in pajamas. She crosses back to her wardrobe to throw in two more sets and doesn't even care that one
pair is definitely Christmas-themed. "Regina offered, so…I'm going to go. I think I just need some time and space."

"From the case or from everyone?"

Jones is trying for nonchalant, but Emma can hear the undercurrent of hurt there. "Perhaps a little bit of both," she admits. Belle's betrayal has thrown everything into flux and she just needs a little bit of peace.

"Is Walsh going to be there?"

Emma glares at him now. Jealousy definitely doesn't become him. "Walsh and I broke up." She's still looking in his direction so she catches his reaction right away, the widening of his eyes before he resumes his slouch against the doorway. "He was nice," she continues before he can say anything. "But it wasn't enough."

"Enough?" Jones echoes.

Emma just shakes her head. Their situation is so complicated, even if Walsh is no longer in the picture. "I'm pretty messed up, Jones. You know that more than most. Losing so many people…has made me build this wall inside to stop from being hurt like that again." She pauses and can't believe she's even voicing this now. But she owes him that, doesn't she? Ever since he came into her life Jones has been there for her, without question. "And I know it's holding me back and that I can never…" she swallows. "Be with anyone until it comes down."

She looks down at her hands, wondering what he'll say now that she's all but put it out there that she cannot be with him. Not just yet. The thought of him reacting badly makes her tense and wary.

Fabric rustles and-and Jones kneels before her, covering her hands with his much larger ones. His rings are cold against her skin but his hands – his hands are so warm and steady. "Emma, I confessed something to you when you were shot. I don't know if you remember, but you must know. I love you."

_"I love you._ The words are even more terrifying in the light of day, settling heavily on her chest, right below the scar she still cannot bear to look at. "I can't." Emma chokes.

"I understand," Jones murmurs softly, soothingly, rubbing his thumbs along her knuckles. "I heard what you said, Emma. I know that wall is there and I will wait however long it takes for it to come down. You must know that you're worth waiting for."

Her eyes blink open and she looks at him, a little bit in awe, a little bit in disbelief. "You will?" she asks quietly. "You'll wait?"

"Aye." He lifts one of her hands, presses his lips to her pulse reverently, like she's spun from gold. "I never thought I could let go of Milah, let alone that I could ever find someone else." Jones lets out a small laugh, eyes sparkling as they meet hers. "And there you were, the answer to all my creative quandaries. My Gwen Snow."

"That's all I am to you, your bestselling character?" she jokes dryly.

Jones shakes his finger at her, the tension in his shoulders dissipating because she hasn't run screaming from the room yet. "Ah-ah, you know better, Swan. Gwen Snow might be the reason why I began to work with you, but she's not the reason why I stayed." She squeezes his fingers back in a silent question and he turns his face to sigh into her palm before looking back at her once more. "I bring you coffee just so I can see you smile. And because you are the most remarkable,
maddening, challenging, frustrating person I've ever met. And because I love you."

It's still frightening to hear those words and to know love is the feeling behind the way he's been looking at her all this time, but it's a good kind of frightening. Emma might not be certain of much, but she's beginning to be certain of him. And she thinks he might actually stay, when so many others have left her behind.

"And Emma...when I win your heart, it will be because you want me. Because you chose me. So I will put my heart in your hands and trust you will return."

Emma leans down and presses her forehead to his. Jones exhales, his breath shuddering at the gesture. "Thank you," she whispers.

That wall won't be inside forever. She believes that. And now she has something to work towards.

Emma turns into a hermit the first week of her stay at Martha's Vineyard. She doesn't exactly mean to but...she just doesn't leave the house. The silence and isolation is a bit more than she expected and Regina's place is just so large. There's no doubt it's beautiful, but it feels just a little cold to be there by herself, so it's no wonder she begins wandering around like a ghost. The entire experience makes her twitchy and she's constantly thinking about how Gold and his goons could be waiting just around the corner to finish her off. It's only the occasional glimpse of Regina's housekeeper (who brings groceries, thank goodness) and security detail that manages to ease her mind.

Still, her nightmares are filled with replays of her shooting. In her dreams, the muzzle of the gun fills her vision until all she sees is a dark, endless tunnel with nothing but death at the end. In her dreams, the crack of a gunshot echoes over and over again, even though the gun she was shot with was fitted with a silencer. She relives the moment the bullet pierces her chest, experiences the sharp, piercing pain over and over again. In her dreams, her vision goes as crimson red as the blood that stains her shirt.

And each time, it's not Belle's sorrowful and stricken gaze she sees but the cold, flat stare of Kieran Gold.

The vision never fails to launch her awake, drenched in cold sweat and gasping, digging the heel of her hand into her chest. She could swear her scar is burning, even though she knows, logically, that it's impossible.

So Emma doesn't sleep. She takes to venturing out of the house and makes her way along the beach. Somehow, it's easier at night than during the light of day. The crash of the waves on the sand is almost soothing and there's no one awake to disturb her. She walks and walks and walks, and eventually, as the first rays of the sun peek over the horizon, Emma returns to the house and either collapses on her bed or goes on with her day.

Henry shows up during the second week. He takes one look at the bags under her eyes, the pajamas that clearly have not been changed for at least a day, and her greasy hair and declares, "Okay, this is bad."

Emma really should feel guilty about this. She's not exactly setting a good example for Henry, but right now she's just happy to see him. "Is it, kid?"

He folds his arms and yep, he's definitely not impressed. "Have you been calling your psychiatrist?"
Good lord. "Who's the adult here?" she grumbles. Yes, she knows she has mandatory sessions to go through before she's allowed back at work, but she figured she would go and see Dr. Hopper once she was back in New York.

"You are, obviously. But even I can tell you're not okay." Henry settles beside her on the couch, brow furrowed. "Maybe you don't need to call your psychiatrist, but...what about Mary Margaret? Or Killian?"

Emma shakes her head. She's made sure to text, if not call everyone back in New York because she knows better than to go incommunicado for an entire week. It would result with everyone descending on her and she really doesn't want that. Things will be bad enough once she returns to the city and everyone can physically hover over her. "I don't know if I'm ready to talk to anyone just yet, kid."

"Then maybe you just need a distraction," he muses and perks up. "Luckily, you have me. Come on, let's go into town!" He leans over and sniffs her. "First things first though. You need to take a shower."

It's times like these when Emma just knows Henry's her kid. He can be just as big of a pain in the ass. "Yeah, yeah, all right."

Henry bullies her into going into town, into buying groceries, picking up donuts at the local bakery, swimming, and all manners of things that vacationers do on Martha's Vineyard. His presence is like a beacon of light and while it doesn't completely chase the shadows away, she no longer wakes every night gasping and wandering the beach. She sleeps through the night more often than not, if only because he makes her do so much during the day that there's really nothing more to do than sleep.

The third Gwen Snow novel hits the markets while she's on the island. The dedication reads: To all the remarkable, maddening, challenging, frustrating people who inspire us to do great things.

"He keeps dedicating his novels to you," Henry muses as he flips through Snowmelt. "Remember Snow Blind? 'To the real Gwen Snow, with gratitude.' This seems more personal."

Emma glances over to where Regina, up for the long weekend, is preparing apple pie in the kitchen. "You don't let him read Jones' books, do you?"

"I'm almost fourteen," Henry protests. "Of course I can read them!"

"He only just started reading them this year, thank you Emma," Regina responds dryly. There had been an awkward hour where Emma and Regina addressed each other by their titles before Regina exasperatedly declared she was not going to be called "Madame Mayor" while she was on vacation, thank you very much. "He reads them with discretion."

"Meaning I have to skip the pages she's paper-clipped together," he grumbles. "You make me take sex ed, I don't know what the big deal is."

Emma blanches and is so, so grateful she doesn't have to deal with this aspect of parenting. "Well, it would be really weird-" she cuts herself off and decides not to finish that sentence because that way lies madness. And meta. "Anyway, I'm aware of the dedications. I guess it kind of makes sense."

"Because he loves you?" he comments slyly.

"What?" he demands, completely unrepentant. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Just because it's true doesn't mean Emma's ready to acknowledge it," Regina responds with a mostly apologetic look towards Emma, who just shrugs. Henry's never been subtle about preferring Jones to Walsh.

"We're working it out," is all she says on the topic.

The words in the dedication still linger with her when she turns in for the night, though not perhaps in the way Jones intended. Great things. Emma's been feeling twitchy as of late. So far there's still no lead on Belle and they're nowhere nearer to pinning anything on Gold.

It's not only Gold's case. It's now been close to two months since her shooting, two months of inactivity and it's beginning to wear on her. She feels twitchy and unfulfilled and aches for the feel of pavement beneath her feet layered with the noise and bustle of her city. She misses her whiteboard and the thrill of tracking down leads, misses David and Leroy's constant bickering, and Mary Margaret's smile and support.

It's not so difficult to admit she misses Killian too, and not just the way they work together. She misses those morning coffee deliveries and the random mealtimes spent at his place with Liam, Granny, and Ruby. She's grown accustomed to the way he seems to knows exactly what she's thinking almost before she does.

She needs that now. Emma doesn't think it's a coincidence Gold tried to take her out of the game the moment the case turned onto a new path. It just tells her she was heading in the right direction.

Emma smiles grimly. If Gold thought a bullet in her chest was going to stop her, he's dead wrong. She's made of stronger stuff than that.

It's time to get back to work.

When she returns to New York, the first thing she does is check in with Captain Tracy and set up appointments with Dr. Hopper.

Then she goes and stands in line for a few hours. She fires off a few text messages to Mary Margaret, David, and Henry, but mostly she reminisces. It's been a very long time since she's been in this particular situation.

Emma shifted nervously from foot to foot as the line grew shorter and shorter. She was grateful she'd chosen to wear her beat shoes, otherwise her feet would be killing her by now. It seemed like she'd been in line for hours, but it wasn't so bad when the people around her were just as enthusiastic about being here as she was. They'd just spent the last hour gleefully dissecting the first novel of the new Derrick Storm series and speculating if the rest of the books would be as good and if Derrick Storm was really all that (Emma loved him, of course).

At first she'd worried no one was going to trade shifts with her at work so that she could come, but some of the guys had pulled through at the last minute. August had teased her mercilessly about being a bookworm. He was such a hypocrite because he was almost certainly spending his day off at the New York Public Library, hyperventilating over rare books.

Speaking of hyperventilating – not that Emma was doing any such thing, she was a proud member of the NYPD, thank you very much – she was only a few people away from coming face-to-face with
Emma craned her neck around and – oh. He was so very handsome, even more so than his book jackets suggested. Dark, slightly wavy hair, beautifully chiseled features, and those eyes – well. She did have a bit of a crush, but it was mostly literary and the man was married anyway.

"And who am I making this out to?" Killian Jones asked, automatically extending a hand for her book. His smile was a little worn around the edges, which was not surprising because the signing had been ongoing since noon. It still didn't lessen its impact.

Her mind went blank at the sound of his voice, so very similar to Graham's but of a slightly different color and cadence. "Emma." It came out a little strangled. "Just Emma."

He paused momentarily, taking in the ratty cover and dog-eared, coffee-splashed pages of Flowers For Your Grave. "What a surprise, to see something so well-loved," he murmured as his pen moved across the title page. "Why this one and not Deadly Storm?"

Emma didn't think he had the time to listen to her blurt about how she'd finally peeled herself from her apartment days after Graham's funeral, listless and grief-stricken, to try and get some real food in her belly. How she'd spotted the display of Killian Jones books in the window her local bookstore and impulsively grabbed one of the books despite herself. How his words completely captured her and she ended up reading the book three times in rapid succession, and then there was no recourse but to go out and purchase every single book of his that was currently in print (or rather, was available to borrow at the library because she was still on a rookie cop's salary). How she still turns back to Flowers For Your Grave when she's feeling weary and frustrated. The words are familiar and soothing, the storyline like an old friend.

No, he probably didn't have time to hear all that. So all she said was, "It's gotten me through some pretty tough times. It...means a lot to me."

Killian Jones' smile softened into something a bit more genuine at that, and when he lifted his eyes to her it was as though he looked into the very heart of her. "I can appreciate that, and I'm humbled one of my books has been so helpful to you." He turned to his agent and she handed over a copy of Deadly Storm.

Emma's eyes grew round. "Oh, you don't have to-"

"It's the least I could do for one of my biggest fans," he responded easily. "Emma, is it?"

"Yes," she breathed as he handed both of them back and clutched them to her chest. She couldn't quite believe what had just happened. "Thank you very much, Mr. Jones."

"A pleasure, my dear."

She waited until she was at the coffee shop around the corner to read what he'd written. In Flowers For Your Grave was: To Emma, with much love. Killian Jones.

The message in Deadly Storm read: Dear Emma, I'm honoured that my books have weathered many a journey with you. May the winds blow steady and the seas stay calm for the rest of your life's journey. Best, Killian Jones.

It is a little embarrassing to remember how starstruck she'd been at the time, but Emma knows better than anyone how much Jones' books helped her through what was arguably one of the lowest periods of her life. She still never lets on how much she loves his books because the man has quite a big enough ego, thank you.
But she often wonders if some part of him remembered that book signing from many years ago. Probably not, or he would have mentioned it. After all, he's probably signed thousands of books in the intervening years.

"And who am I making this out to?"

Emma has to bite back a laugh. It's almost exactly the same scenario. "Emma. Emma Swan."

Jones' head pops up so fast she's afraid he'll give himself whiplash. "Swan." It's like the breath has been punched from his lungs, his gaze dragging over her like they hadn't just spoken over the phone the day before. Granted, she hadn't told him she was already on her way back to the city. "You're back."

She grins, ignoring the excited chatter that breaks out around them. "Ready to get back to work?"

He comes to find her at a nearby park once the signing is over. Emma is sitting on the swings and motions for him to join her. She can't help but smile when she sees that he's carrying two cups of coffee. When she accepts hers and takes a sip, her drink is not coffee, but hot chocolate with cinnamon.

Jones shrugs at her inquisitive look as he settles into the adjacent swing. "I figured this was a cause for celebration, no? Bit cheeky of you to keep your return a secret though, Swan."

"Maybe I just wanted to make a dramatic entrance," she responds, savoring the taste of her favorite drink. It's still far too warm for hot chocolate, but she can never turn it down regardless of the time of year. "Thanks for signing my book."

He snorts a laugh. "It's my pleasure."

"It's uh…quite the dedication. Henry had a field day with it."

Jones actually flushes at that, awkwardly scratching at the back of his neck. "Ah. Did he now? That's a rather thorny path, isn't it?"

Emma briefly considers letting him stew but decides it would be too cruel. Henry wouldn't approve. "Nah. In this, he's probably your number one cheerleader. Well, he might be tied with Mary Margaret," she concedes thoughtfully. Mary Margaret certainly had much to say about the dedication as well. Her first few texts had only contained a series of emojis and key-smashes.

He beams. "Is that so? They might have to fight Liam for the title."

She nearly spills her hot chocolate all over Snowmelt. "Wait, really?"

His expression is so many things at once – affectionate, rueful, and a little melancholy. "Don't you know, Swan?" he murmurs. "Liam loves you too."

Now that Jones has pointed it out, it's difficult to forget just how frantic Liam had been at the hospital and how diligent he'd been at keeping up with Emma once she'd flown out to Henry and Regina's place. She feels a little guilty for not letting him know that she's returned but maybe she can go and see him soon. "Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Jones is looking at her carefully now. "What happens now, Swan?"
Boy, is that a loaded question. She takes the easy road for now. "I have to speak to a psychiatrist before they let me back into the precinct. But I… I still have some ideas on how to proceed with the Gold case in the meantime. We should be looking into his son."

"Gold has a son?" Jones' eyebrows have hit his hairline.

"He does. And I think he plays a key role in all of this." She glances over at him uncertainly, worrying at her bottom lip. "Are you on board?"

Jones scuffs the wood chips with his foot for a moment. His entire posture screams contemplation. Eventually he looks up at her and knocks his swing sideways so he can gently bump against her. "What are partners for?"

She sags a little bit with relief. "Thanks, Jones."

"We'll work it out together, Swan." Those blue, blue eyes light up with promise and the world seems just a little brighter. "And we'll work on taking down that wall."

"Yes. Yes, we will."

The door swings open and Belle jerks upright, the hallway light forcing hazy spots into her vision after stewing in the dark for so long.

"Detective French." That sibilant voice evokes a visceral reaction in her, one that makes her want to hurl and recoil, all at the same time. "You have led my men on quite the merry chase and for that I congratulate you. But you had to know you couldn't evade me forever."

No, she really couldn't. Belle had even considered handing herself over to the authorities, but she knows how many pies Gold has his fingers in. Running just seemed like her best chance of staying out of his slimy grip for as long as possible. "Are you going to kill me now, Gold?" she says wearily.

Belle has felt so ill with her betrayal, and even the news that Emma somehow miraculously survived couldn't keep her spirits up for very long. She even briefly entertained the notion that Emma would find her first, but realistically knew Captain Tracy would keep her out of the game for as long as possible.

Gold chuckles. "Killing is too easy, Detective French – well, easy for anyone except for you, apparently. No, I'm going to keep you right where you are until I find some other way for you to be useful. I advise you make yourself comfortable, because you're going to be here for a very long time."

Belle waits until the door closes behind him before she slumps back onto the bed. Crying is no use, she thinks listlessly. Crying means there's hope, and she has none left.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all didn't think I was going to kill Emma, right?

Yep, so we're kind of mashing up Season Four because...this is a major canon
divergence. A very astute reviewer pointed out that Killian wouldn't keep silent even if Emma said she didn't remember what he said, and I wholeheartedly agree. Hence the change so...stick with me? Also, creating mystery novel titles based around the word "snow" is more difficult than it seems. Should I name one "Snow White"? Or is that weird?

Lawgeeks is, as ever, the best beta. I keep dumping stories on her so unexpectedly.
And I'm standing down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thunk.

Emma and Killian jerk away from their respective laptops, only to be faced with two matching sets of disapproving glares. "Honestly," Granny tuts, peering at them over the rim of her glasses and making Emma feel unexpectedly guilty. "If the two of you are going to spend the whole night doing research, you might as well do it correctly."

"You didn't even twitch when Granny was making the sandwiches," Liam marvels, and nudges the plates forward. "And they smelt so good. Hurry up and eat before she gets mad."

"Sorry Granny," Emma says sheepishly, ducking her head and reaching for the sandwich. She feels even worse when she realizes it's pastrami – her favorite. Her stomach grows and yeah, she was definitely hungry. She takes a few bites until Granny's glare softens into fond tolerance and she bustles out of the flat, muttering something uncomplimentary about workaholics.

Liam peers over his father's shoulder. "What's so interesting about the case that you – " His brow furrows. "Census records? Why census records?"

Killian gestures to the computer screen and barely manages to avoid getting his sandwich everywhere. "Because of all the things Gold cannot fake, it's census and immigration records. We know he's a US citizen now, but that accent of his gives him away."

"If he came here with anyone, the census and immigration records will tell us their names. Gold went after me when I started poking after his son, so we know it's a step in the right direction," Emma explains.

Liam's skin goes ashen, and his hand tightens on Killian's shoulder. "Gold had Detective French shoot you when you found out he had a son. What is he going to do when he finds out you're digging even deeper? He could come after you again, Emma. He could come after both of you."

Killian opens his mouth but Emma beats him to it, holding one hand out to the teenager. Liam hesitates for a moment, before he comes forward and takes it. "I know I can't promise anything because what we're doing is definitely dangerous," she says softly. The look on his face is exactly the same as the one he had when she was in the hospital, and she hates that she's put it there again. This time, it's even worse because now she's not the only one on the line. "But Gold needs to be brought down. I promise you that your father and I are being as careful as possible."

"Which is why we're going through these records one at a time rather than doing a search." Killian grimaces, his rings making a metallic clang each time he taps the keyboard. "We don't want to send off any alerts in case Gold is monitoring the databases."

"He can do that?"

"Better safe than sorry, right?" Emma asks ruefully, squeezing his hand. "Trust us, okay? And if we follow up on leads you can be sure that we're going to do that carefully as well."

He exhales slowly. "I trust you to watch Dad's back, Emma. Just like I trust him to watch yours. Just…be cautious, okay?"
"Of course."

"Okay. Well, I'm going to bed." Liam gives her a quick hug before turning back to his dad, who's been watching the entire exchange with a fond expression. "Good night."

"Good night, lad." Killian ruffles that head of brown curls and pushes him gently towards the stairs. "Now, let us work!"

Emma watches Liam over shoulder before turning back to Killian. "You've got a good kid there, Jones."

"Why thank you, Swan. You've a pretty good one yourself. They're both strong lads with big, caring hearts."

"I can't exactly take credit for Henry," she says somewhat wistfully. "That's all Regina." The more she's gotten to know Henry, the more she wonders what life would have been like if she hadn't given him up. He wouldn't have even half of what he has now with Regina, but she can't help but think about lazy weekend mornings eating scrambled eggs and drinking hot chocolate with cinnamon, or nights spent whipping each other's butts at video games.

"The lad's more like you than you think, Swan."

She polishes off the last of her sandwich. "Thanks, Jones. That's probably one of the nicest things anyone's ever said about me." She points sternly at their computers. "Now. Back to work."

They get their first break around midnight. "I've got it!" Emma crows triumphantly, hardly able to believe her eyes. She's been staring at the computer screen for so long she thought she'd been seeing things. "Killian, come here."

He nearly upends his chair in his haste to see what she's found. "What, what is it?"

"1978 immigration records," she announces. "I have one Kieran Gold and his wife, Bethany Gold."

"A wife, but no son?"

"No, apparently it was just the two of them, so I'm going to assume he was born after they came to the US."

He frowns. "Well, he certainly doesn't have a wife now, does he? Should we be searching death records?"

"I can do that, if you move on to the 1980 census records." She checks her watch, fighting back a yawn. "Not tonight, though. I think I should be getting back."

"Nonsense Swan, I have a spare room. Just stay here for the night and go to yours in the morning. Both Liam and I would feel much better about it."

She really feels like she should make a token protest – she's not exactly helpless and she can take a cab if she really needs to, but there's definitely a headache brewing behind her eyes from all the research and it would be nice to go to sleep right away rather than in half an hour.

"Ruby will make breakfast," Killian offers and really, how can she say no to that?

"Fine, you convinced me," she laughs, turning her head and oh. He's much closer than she thought he was. Her eyes flick down to his lips and she wonders what would happen if she just leaned
forward and kissed him. She cannot deny how often she's thought about that kiss in the alleyway, let alone his confession-

Killian clears his throat. "My eyes are up here, Swan." He gives her an exaggerated leer. "Though I'm not averse to a goodnight kiss."

"Hmmmm. Keep dreaming," Emma retorts. She can feel the heat rising to her cheeks at being caught.

"Emma darling, you have no idea what I dream about." His voice pitches low and something hot unfurls in her stomach at the sound of her name spoken like that.

"Something perverted, no doubt." She tries for a joking tone but it comes out more breathless than she'd like. Killian chuckles and leans in closer, bracing his hand on the table on her other side.

"I highly doubt you'd think so. Would you care to wager on it?" He's just a whisper away now and oh does she want this, so very badly.

But there's something niggling at the back of her head. It's not the right time, not yet. Gold's case is still too big, too all-encompassing for her take those final steps forward. So she softens her voice in apology. "No bet. Not tonight, at least."

Killian glances down and away. "All right, Swan. Not tonight." But still he leans forward to brush a kiss along her temple, before leaning the rest of the way to gather up their plates and glasses. They move in easy, companionable silence, with Emma packing up their files and powering down their laptops.

"There should be plenty of spare towels and toothbrushes in the bathroom, and the sheets are clean. Do you need something to sleep in?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"Well. Till tomorrow, Swan."

She smiles. "Till tomorrow, Jones."

Emma scowls at the paperwork beside her desk. Honestly, if Killian would just give her a hand with it every once in a while it wouldn't get so out of control, but he always manages to find an excuse (usually writing) not to turn up. Funny, when he's constantly popping up and asking for cases because he has writer's block.

Her phone rings and wouldn't you know it, it's the man himself. Still, she can't help but smile as she picks up. "What, Jones?" she drawls.

"Tell me you need me."

The smile slides right off her face. "What?"

He explains – he's with Gran at the bank getting a new loan for the diner and is bored out of his mind, so she's only paying him half her attention when he starts theorizing that the bank's about to be robbed.

However, the shout of, "Everyone get down on the floor!" grabs her full attention. "Leroy! 1030 on
at Amsterdam Bank and Trust and Lex. Call dispatch."

He leans back in his chair to stare at her, eyebrows raised quizzically. "Since when do we do bank robberies?"

"Jones and Granny are there."

His jaw drops slightly and from the desk behind him, David is already up and putting on his jacket. "On it, Swan."

"Killian, listen to me." When did she get to her feet? Her free hand is pressed flat to the surface of her desk and it's like it's the only thing keeping her upright. "How many are there?"

"Three." He swallows. "Make that four."

A new voice comes over the line and everything inside her turns to ice. "Sorry, Frank can't talk right now."

Her fingers curl into a fist. "I wouldn't worry about him, I'd worry about yourself. I've got squad cars on the way."

There's a brief scuffle on the other end of the line as the robber berates Killian and Emma squeezes her eyes shut and prays she hasn't gotten him killed. "Listen to me," she snaps. "So far nobody has been hurt and nothing has been stolen. If you leave the same way you came in, you can just disappear."

The robber Chokes back a sound of disbelief. "You promise not to come looking for us?"

"I don't look, I hunt," Emma says flatly, allowing the ice to bleed into her voice. "And trust me, you don't want that. So leave now and this will be a tiny little article in the metro station."

"Sorry sweetheart, I'd rather make the front page." The line goes dead. Emma tries calling back, but to no avail.

Emma stares down at the phone in her hand. Her mouth twists. "Let's go," she tells David and Leroy.

At the site, she sends David off to check for any information with his old buddies at the Emergency Services Unit, while Leroy goes to check if any recent robberies match the M.O. here. That leaves her twiddling her thumbs until she's inexplicably called back to the mobile command station where only moments ago she'd been summarily dismissed.

Peterson gives her a fleeting look from over his shoulder. "Tell me, Detective. What were you thinking?"

"I was just trying to help out, sir," Emma starts, confused. She needs something to do otherwise she's going to go crazy thinking about Killian and Granny in there – oh god, what is she going to tell Ruby and Liam?

"What, by charming a bank robber?"

The question has her drawing up in surprise. "What?"

"We established contact but he only wants to talk to you." He looks like he's swallowed something
"You wanted in? Well, you're in."

This is not what she meant by help. "No sir, I don't have any training in hostage negotiations." There had been a few lectures and scenario plays at the academy but that was the extent of it. She's certainly not qualified to get on the phone, not when she feels like wringing the robbers' throats for putting her partner in danger.

"Well, I don't have time to give you a seminar, so think of it as the opposite of your homicide training. Don't yell, don't bully, and never threaten him in any way. Hostage negotiation is about keeping your suspect calm." When Emma doesn't respond, his brows lower. "Detective, are you up for this?"

Emma can't help but run her mind over every possible way that this can go wrong, but there's no turning back. She has to do this for Killian and Granny. She removes her jacket. "Absolutely."

The first attempt doesn't go swimmingly. She tries to build a rapport with the man she spoke with, who calls himself Trapper John. This guy clearly knows what he's doing, because he calls out Peterson's playbook. All she's left with is a threat to follow his lead or he'll kill hostages, starting with Killian. His demands are the usual: immunity, transport out. She can't get any information on what's going on inside.

But then Killian, that wonderful idiot, somehow starts flashing Morse code onto the bank's ceiling where it's caught by the outside cameras. It gives them their first solid lead: a safety deposit box the robbers are fixated on.

David and Leroy are sent to investigate, only to find that one of the box's owners has been dead for years and the other one has been recently killed, most likely for the key to the box. "I don't get it," Leroy mutters, talking to Emma on speakerphone from the victim's apartment. "This is a little old librarian. What could possibly be in her safe deposit box that would be worth all this?"

David shrugs. "Nazi gold, cold fusion, maybe a map to Atlantis."

Leroy punches his shoulder. "Hey, Castle junior. Could you maybe start thinking like a cop, please?"

"I am," David retorts, wounded.

"Are you?"

"It had to be something huge that was worth killing for, right?"

Emma opens her mouth to respond, but then she catches sight of not only Liam and Ruby, but Henry in the crowd. "Dig up everything you can on the victims, all right? I have to go."

Ruby spots Emma right away and doesn't beat around the bush. "They're here, aren't they? I know Killian and Granny were coming here this morning."

"Ruby-"

Then Liam's breaking in, looking perilously close to tears. "And now no one's answering their phones and Dad always takes my calls and you're here-"

"Listen," Emma interrupts, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Everything is going to be fine. But yes, they are inside." She glances over at Henry. "And what are you doing here?"

His lower lip juts out mutinously. "Liam and I were hanging out and I couldn't let them come here..."
alone." His gaze just dares her to send him away.

"No argument here kid," Emma sighs, impressed with Henry's loyalty despite herself. "So long as your mom says it's okay."

"You're-"

"Your other mom." While he calls Regina, she turns back to Ruby and Liam.

"What can we do?" Ruby asks, visibly drawing from some inner well of strength. The tightness around her eyes betrays her worry, but she's clearly trying to keep it together for Liam's sake.

"Nothing. We're doing everything we can."

Liam breaks and his voice sails above that of the crowd, high and distraught. "You don't understand, Emma! I lost Mom, I can't lose Dad too!" His face contorts. "He's all I have."

Emma grabs his arms and hauls him against her as he cries, heedless to the police barrier between them. "Liam listen to me," she murmurs into his hair, trying her best to keep her own voice level. "I promise you, they're going to be okay. They will."

It takes away, but finally his sobs subside into sniffles. "Promise?"

"I promise," she vows.

One of the officers in the command center pokes his head out and shouts towards Emma. "Detective! Incoming call!"

Emma hands Liam over to Ruby and Henry. "I'll be back," she tells them before she jogs away.

Fifteen minutes later she's dressed up as a paramedic to retrieve a hostage who's had an epileptic seizure. This is their only chance to get some intel for the SWAT team, so she has to make it count.

She spots Granny and Killian right away, sees the recognition and relief on their faces, quickly masked. Killian, of course, is right beside the patient. "How's he doing?" she asks, kneeling beside the prone man.

"Not good," Killian says gruffly. "His name is Sal Martino. He has epilepsy. I believe the seizure was brought on by stress."

Emma leans over the patient, conveniently blocking the view of the robbers. "Hey Sal. Hey buddy, how're you doing? Sal, listen to me. I want you to know there are people out there that care about you, so just keep breathing." She reaches to Killian, wrapping her fingers around his wrist. He turns his head toward her, knowing that she's talking to him. "I promise you, I'm going to get you out of here."

She can't look at him. She can't give it away.

Killian's hand shifts in her grip and suddenly they're holding hands. He squeezes her fingers in wordless reassurance and she feels a piece of paper on his palm. A note.

"Hey, don't talk about it, be about it. And you, talker, help get him on that gurney, now!" Trapper John shouts, breaking the spell.

Emma barely remembers leaving and handing off Sal to the real paramedics, but her mind clears quickly enough when she opens the note from Killian and reads what he's written inside: C4.
This time, when she calls the bank, the only thing she can think of is buying time for everyone inside. "Where's my bus?" Trapper John asks.

"The bus is on its way. It'll be there in 20 minutes."

There's a pause, and then: "A hostage will be dead in two."

"No!" Emma shouts. "Nobody needs to die, okay? It's coming, it's just stuck in traffic," she lies desperately.

"We have rules, Emma. I said I wouldn't kill anyone if you got me a bus. I lived up to my end of the dead." His voice is now deathly calm. "I warned you not to jerk me around. Now, I was clear about the consequences. Do I need to prove how serious I am?"

A gunshot goes off over the phone and Emma has to bite her lip to keep from crying out. "What was that?"

"A warning shot, Emma. The next one's for the kill."

There's a commotion in the background and Emma hears Granny's voice clear as day. "Don't you touch him, you son of a bitch!"

Killian. In the same breath, she can hear him shouting. "Hold her back, lads! I've got this!" Granny's shouts only get louder in the face of the danger facing him. Emma always knew Granny was a formidable lady, but it's one thing to know and another thing to witness.

Trapper John speaks into the phone, his voice a thin, reedy snarl. "I'm going to make pretty red stains out of your boyfriend, Emma. I got my gun to his throat and I'm going to paint a Jackson Pollock with his insides."

"You need to calm him down-" Peterson begins, but Emma's not having any of it.

"Listen to me, jackass. I do not control traffic, so give me 20 minutes!"

"You get one."

Her hand comes down on the control panel, making everyone in the room jump. "No, I've got 20, do you hear me? Because if you pull that trigger I will walk through those doors and personally put a bullet through your head." As the words pull themselves from her mouth she knows it's no threat, but a promise.

A slight chuckle comes down the line and all the tightness goes out of her shoulders. "Okay, Emma. You've got 20 more minutes."

Peterson laughs and rubs his forehead. "Well, that's one way to negotiate."

SWAT team gears up and Emma's still talking with David and Leroy, trying to put together the missing pieces of the puzzle. Something's not sitting right with her – why bring C4 to a bank robbery? How does their dead librarian figure into it? While she's puzzling it out, an explosion rocks the block.

No. He can't be dead. He can't.

Emma runs out into the street. The street is obscured by dust and debris, throwing everything into shadow.
When SWAT goes in, she's with them.

"Jones. Jones!" Her flashlight is out, braced beneath her gun. The lobby is completely deserted, no bodies to be seen. "JONES!"

"Swan!"

They're there, all of them, in the safety deposit box room, sitting bound on the floor. The moment Killian sees her, he brightens and waves, his hands tied with plastic zip ties. "They're here!" she yells out to the SWAT team.

She goes to her knees in front of Killian. Relief makes her lightheaded and strips all her walls away. The smile that breaks across her face is full and free because Killian's okay. He's alive. Fear for him, fear for his life pushed her to the very edge and reminds her just how very precious he is to her.

Killian's eyes scan her face and he lights up in return, his gaze softening from sheer joy to something deeper and more permanent. Everything around them fades into the dust, leaving just the two of them in the moment.

"How are you?" Emma asks softly, smoothing out his jacket. There seems to be something more creeping beneath those simple words, some meaning that is just out of reach-

"He's not the only one here, you know," Granny interjects, waving her hands pointedly.

Emma coughs and breaks Killian's gaze. "I'm so sorry, Granny." She gives Killian a rueful smile and he lets his head fall back against the wall, disappointed by the interruption.

He covers his disappointment as they leave the wreckage of the bank, joking, "Even as a hostage I help you fight crime. Swan, I think you've found the perfect partner."

It's Emma, so he expects her to snort and brush it off. Instead, he's floored when she turns to him with a soft, teasing smile playing around the corners of her mouth. "Huh. Maybe I do."

Killian reaches for her hand, wondering if she'll allow the touch-

"DAD!" Liam breaks through the police barriers and runs full tilt at Killian, nearly knocking him off his feet as he slams into him. Ruby and Henry are not far behind him, and Ruby launches herself at her grandmother.

"Here now, what's this?" Killian asks, smoothing Liam's curls back from his face. He's shocked to see the tears running tracks through the dust smudged on his face. "Tears for your old man?"

"The bomb," Liam stutters, hands trailing over his father's face as though to check everything is in one piece. "When it went off, I thought for sure that you were-" He can't bring himself to voice the horrible possibility of what could have been, if the bomb had been meant for the bank and the hostages rather than to cover the robbers' escape.

Killian murmurs to him, soft, lilting words in Irish that make Liam shudder and relax, boneless against him. Emma finds herself winding an arm around Henry's shoulders, tugging him to her in an absent, affectionate gesture.

Ruby lets out a watery laugh, letting go of Granny to reach out and muss Killian's hair. "You really had us worried there punk, you know?"

"Between Swan and I, how could you ever have any doubt that we would make it through?" he asks
in return, winking at Emma and Henry.

"I knew you and Emma could do it." Henry says confidently, nestling even closer to Emma. "You guys are the best team."

"That's what I said!"

Liam finally manages to peel himself away, wiping at his face with the backs of his hands. "I'll never doubt the two of you again." This time, he's launching himself at Emma, and Henry barely has time to squirm away. "Thank you," he whispers into her vest. "You kept your promise."

Emma glances up to find Killian watching the two of them. "Always."

"And what am I, chopped liver?" Granny demands, hands on her hips. "I was in there too, you know."

"Granny, you're just not allowed to be anywhere but the house and the diner," Liam mumbles, coming over for yet another round of hugs.

"Speaking of the diner, why don't we head over there once everyone's finished with checkups and debriefings and whatnot?" Ruby suggests. "I, for one, would be very happy just to have everyone under the same roof and stuffed with food." She glances over at Emma. "Will you be able to get away?"

Emma looks over to the mobile command center. "I think so." She knows from experience that the paramedics will want to check all the hostages over, and everyone will be required to make a statement to ESU. But this time, the paperwork can wait.

Besides, she is craving some hot chocolate with cinnamon.

Mary Margaret’s door flies open before Emma can even raise her hand to knock. “Oof!” she grunts as what seems like twenty pounds of bricks hits her right in the gut. She stagers a little bit and tries not to drop the bricks – which turn out to be bridal magazines – all over the floor. “What the hell, Mary Margaret?”

The woman in question rescues the bottle of wine dangling precariously from Emma’s fingers. “Sorry, I got a little overexcited,” she says as she walks back into the apartment to open the wine.

“No kidding,” Emma says dryly, staggering in after her. Her eyebrows shoot to her hairline when she notices that every single magazine has been tabbed and earmarked to death. “I’m pretty sure you can’t have all of this stuff at your wedding,” she remarks as she flips through the one on top. “Don’t you and David want it to be small, anyway?” David’s father died when he was a kid, and his mother died while he was in the academy. Mary Margaret only has her father, and neither of them have siblings.

“No, but that doesn’t mean I can’t have pretty things that make me feel happy, right?”

“True.” Emma accepts the wineglass and taps it against Mary Margaret’s. “You want it by the lake, don’t you?”

David and Mary Margaret met by the lake in Central Park responding to the same call. Mary Margaret had mistaken David for a mugger rather than a detective, and knocked him out with one
punch to the jaw. He still carries the scar, but acknowledges that it could have been worse: she could have pushed him into the lake.

“Yes, it would be ideal if we could have the ceremony at the lakeside and the reception at the boathouse.” She makes a face. “That would be heinously expensive, though.”

Emma politely refrains from pointing out that Mary Margaret’s father is loaded and dotes on his only child. “Right, so what else have you bookmarked for me in here?” she asks. “Some puffy, ruffled monstrosity bedecked with ribbons, no doubt?” She dodges the pillow Mary Margaret aims at her head.

“Excuse you, I have impeccable taste,” Mary Margaret sniffs. She grins mischievously. “But I do reserve the right to put you in something hideous if you piss me off.”

“Noted.” It’s true that Mary Margaret does have excellent taste in just about everything, so Emma knows she won’t mind whatever dress she ends up picking out. She definitely knows she’ll end up wearing green. “So, are we paging through bridal magazines the whole night or are we watching a movie?”

“Bridesmaids?”

She snorts. “Are you expecting me to take notes? Oh, please tell me you’re going to have a chocolate fountain at either the bridal shower or the actual wedding.”

“I’d rather not. Leroy would end up glued to its side for the entire night.”

True. The man was a chocolate fiend. “But maybe I should hire an Irish stripper dressed as a policeman for your bachelorette party,” she muses.

This time, she gets a pillow right to the face.

Emma waits until everyone in the bullpen is occupied before she nonchalantly slides a folder across her desk towards Killian, who’s playing Angry Birds on his phone. "Jones. Jones."

He squawks when a pencil bounces off his forehead. "What…Swan, I was just finishing that level! You completely threw off my trajectory."

"Too bad," she replies, rolling her eyes. She taps the folder. "Take a look at this."

Killian heaves a dramatic sigh. His petulance immediately disappears once he realizes what he’s looking at. "Bethany Gold’s death certificate?" He automatically lowers his voice, eyes darting around the room to make sure no one's paying attention to them.

"Yeah. I had to pretend I was looking for something else entirely at city records, but I guess I'll have to do that eventually, anyway. But see here, in 1985 Bethany Gold was the victim of a hit and run, probably a drunk driver. They never found the guy."

"1985?" He glances over the folder at her. "Didn't you say that Gold started working with Mo French and his other associates in the late eighties?"

Emma catches the thread of what he's implying. "You think his wife's death has something to do with the upswing in his criminal activities?"
He shrugs. "It could have been a possible motivator. Look, Detective French-" His voice catches, his eyes going stony at the mere mention of Belle. "All of her files on Gold seem to indicate there was nothing remotely criminal about the man until the late eighties, and you and I both know he came here in the late seventies. If he didn't come here intending to follow a life of crime, it stands to reason there was some sort of catalyst."

There are times when Killian's grasp of human nature and the thread of a story truly come in handy. It's true that there is no evidence Kieran Gold was any sort of criminal when he first came to the U.S. The death of his wife seems like a pretty good place to start. "Okay. We'll start looking into that, then. Have you been able to check the 1980 census for signs of his son?"

"There was nothing in the 1980 census, but I did find him in the 1990 census. One Bartholomew Gold, age nine years old."

"That's why you didn't find him in 1980, he was born the year after," Emma breathes. After so much painstaking research, it's nice to be rewarded. "Bartholomew Gold. Finally, a name and a date of birth."

"He wasn't in the 2000 census, so we're looking for some disappearance between 1990 and 2000. Perhaps you should be looking for another death certificate, Swan."

She's already formulating a plan for going back into the records. "You could be right. If Gold's son died and he had something to do with it, it stands to reason why he wouldn't like me poking my nose down that particular line of evidence." Emma's absolutely convinced that Bartholomew Gold holds the key to his father's secrets and she's even more determined to get down to the bottom of this.

"Good work, Jones."

Killian grins. 'I'm beginning to think there are very few mysteries we cannot solve, Swan. What do you say we tackle next, El Dorado? Aliens?'

Emma's phone rings, and it's Leroy. "Let's just stick to murders, shall we?" she says, putting the file away. "Come on, we have another case."

Emma's been taking her department mandated therapy sessions with Dr. Hopper regularly, and while she'd been resistant in the beginning, she's starting to come around. Dr. Hopper has a seemingly endless well of patience and doesn't seem to mind at all when she retreats behind her walls, whether she's talking about her shooting or her relationship with Killian. She's cautiously optimistic about the whole thing and is counting down the days until she can stop.

But then the sniper case happens and everything she's gained is sorely rested. She should have realized it was trouble from the moment she saw the bullet in Sarah Vasquez's chest. The bullet was in the same exact place where she was shot only months before.

She doesn't notice the stress and anxiety taking its toll, not at first. This isn't like the Hamptons, where she was sleepless and wandered the beach at night. This terror takes her completely out of the moment, shivering and jumping at every sound and shadow. In her mind, it's a reminder that someone out there is looking to finish the job that Belle started. Every time she touches her scar she remembers the burn of the shot and Killian's frantic shouts as he tried to staunch the flow of blood from her chest. It gets to the point where she can hardly bear to look at the scar in the mirror.

Logically, Emma knows she's being ridiculous. A sniper shot Sarah Vasquez. She was not shot at
point blank range like Emma was. And yet there's still something about the entire case that sets her off more than any other homicide she's investigated since her own shooting.

She refuses to believe that any of this is affecting her in an adverse way, even if Killian and the others keep giving her concerned looks.

But then she's standing over Henry Wyatt's body, jumping at every single flash of light around her. And in a city like New York, there's a lot of them.

"Do you see something, Swan?" Killian asks, but it sounds so very far away. The city noise presses in around her, blocking everything out as her eyes track every single minute movement out of the corners of her eyes. Someone's there, she knows it, someone's watching, waiting…

"Emma, are you all right?" Mary Margaret presses, breaking through all the white noise in her skull. From the way she's looking at her, she's repeated her name several times.

"Yes, I'm fine," she lies through her teeth. "I'm just trying to figure out why these two victims? Why shoot here?"

David has his back to them, scanning the surroundings. "Well, the victims might be random but the location isn't. A pro recons his target beforehand. If you're going to kill something from a distance it's not a point and shoot activity." His gaze goes distant too, sliding into the past and his tours in Iraq. "You factor in all the conditions, like range to target, minute of arc…and windage." He points to a green flag taped to a street sign. "This flag is a perfect wind gauge."

"That can't be a coincidence," Killian mutters.

A nearby squad car blips and Emma dives for cover. Killian helps her to her feet and she brushes off his quiet enquiry. Her hands are shaking.

She makes time to see Dr. Hopper. There has to be something he can do. She paces in his office, describing her feelings ever since the case fell into her lap. When she finishes talking, she collapses into a chair and waits for him to talk.

"Emma, what you're describing – hyper vigilance – is a classic symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder."

Emma jerks ramrod straight, her nails digging into the padded arms of the chair. "I don't have PTSD, Dr. Hopper," she snaps. She will admit to having PTSD after the shooting, but to have it now, months afterwards?

Dr. Hopper sighs gently. "You were shot by someone you trusted. I think it's fair to say that the current case is going to bring up issues you still haven't dealt with."

"Fine," she snaps, just barely cutting him off. "I'll deal with them. But I just need to figure out how to make this stop so I can focus on the case."

"It's not going to stop, not without time and treatment. The psychological trauma is every bit as real as the physical trauma."

It's really not the answer she wants to hear. Emma slouches back and scowls at the ginger-haired doctor. "People are dying out there, Dr. Hopper. I don't have time to get weepy over a couple of scars." This weakness absolutely galls her, especially because it's not the same thing, not at all. "There has to be a pill or something, right? To take the edge off?"
He shakes his head. "Medication can help, of course, but not right away."

"Well, then what?"

Dr. Hopper removes his glasses and cleans them slowly, methodically. "Have you considered stepping away from this case?"

The thought has never even crossed her mind and she can't believe he's even bringing up. "You don't think I can handle this?" she asks, incensed.

"I'm saying you don't have to." He slides his glasses back on and looks at her calmly. "You're not the only cop in this city, Emma."

"Then I'm fine," Emma decides. She will be. She has to be. "See you later, Dr. Hopper."

The leads slip through her fingers and Emma feels herself spiraling out of control. All the crime scene photos have her flashing back to her own shooting and there's nothing she can do to keep the memories at bay. She's tense and on edge, fragile and shattering around the edges. She can't even appreciate the clues they've found, like the little paper dolls the sniper is leaving as a type of calling card.

When the third victim is shot all of Emma's control breaks. The woman is still alive, and her terrified pleas to stay indoors, away from the shooter are too much for Emma to hear. As the EMTs wheel her away, Emma runs for the nearest private place she can. Off go her jacket, her gun, and her badge, clattering to the floor as she gasps, doing everything she can to keep the breakdown at bay.

But the sobs come ripping through her throat and though she tries to brace her arms against the wall, her strength fails her and she tumbles to the floor, curled into a ball, small and broken.

When they return to the precinct, Emma feels like a mere shell of herself and listlessly follows David when he motions for her to follow him into a storage room. "David, what are we doing back here?" she asks tiredly. All she wants to do is forget the rest of the world exists.

"I want to show you something." He slowly removes a handgun from an evidence box, clear blue eyes watching her every move. He doesn't say anything when she flinches away from the weapon.

"What is that?"

"It's the gun that shot you."

Emma feels her stomach plummet to the ground. Of all the people – she never would have expected this from David. David's always had her back, has always watched out for her. "You are way out of line." Her voice comes out harsh, strangled.

David holds firm. "Just look at it," he coaxes, walking around the table towards her. Emma immediately scrambles in the other direction.

"No! What the hell are you doing?"

"I've been where you are, Emma. I know what you're going through."

Emma inhales sharply, trying desperately to hold it together. She doesn't think she can handle two breakdowns in one day. "David, I'm fine." She flinches again when David corners her and steps
right into her space.

"You're not fine," he says with absolute certainty. "You're just trying to act like you are. This?" He motions to the gun. "Is just a tool. It's a hunk of steel. It has no magical powers and the person that fired it is not some all-powerful god. She was just a woman with a gun. Just like this guy we're chasing. And just like every other bad guy, he's damaged goods."

_Damaged goods._ "So am I," she confesses softly.

David catches her in a hug then, his free hand coming up to cup the back of her head. She leans into the touch and the pillar of strength he represents. "That's right. And that's okay. You think it's a weakness? Make it strength. It's a part of you."

She dissolves into tears but this time, they're healing.

In the end, they catch the sniper. Emma trudges back into the precinct, exhausted but in a good way. She made it through this. It gives her confidence that she can get through even more.

Her footsteps falter when she realizes Killian hasn't gone home, but is sitting in his chair waiting for her. "Hey," she murmurs, sliding into her seat. "What are you doing?"

"Just waiting for my partner," he says casually, glancing off to the side. "Maybe you've seen her. Beautiful woman, thinks she can leap tall buildings in a single bound, carries the weight of the world on her shoulders, yet still manages to laugh at some of my jokes."

Something loosens inside of Emma and she unconsciously mirrors his movements, looking away and then back, a faint smile threatening at the corners of her mouth. "She sounds like a handful."

"Like you wouldn't believe," he groans theatrically. Then something funny happens: a faint blush tinges his cheeks. "She's worth it, though. Even if she does owe me, oh, a hundred coffees." He winks and stands.

"Jones?" Killian stops and turns back to her, questioning. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For...not pushing and giving me the space to get through this." He'd stood behind her the whole time, silent and strong. It means everything.

His eyes crinkle at the corners. "Always."

At her next therapy session, Emma tells Dr. Hopper everything that happened. "So how do you feel now that the sniper is dead?" he asks once she's finished.

Emma scans her hands, as if the lines there somehow hold all the answers. "I thought taking him down would resolve things, but...it's still here."

"Because you haven't fully dealt with what happened to you," Dr. Hopper prompts.

She shakes her head. "No...I felt it before the shooting. I think it's always been there. With Henry's birth, Graham's shooting, August's betrayal and death, now Gold...I let all of these situations define me and drive me. They've made me who I am, but now..."
He raises an eyebrow. "But now?"

"I want to be more than who I am. But I don't know if I know how to do that without compromising the part of myself that's always driving for...for justice." It's the first time she's ever truly articulated these feelings, let alone admitted to them. But she doesn't know how to be anything but what she is.

"Do you really think you're letting yourself down by letting this go?" Dr. Hopper asks gently, smiling. "That drive is a part of you, and you have to make peace with that, just like you're going to have to make peace with the scars from your shooting. But there's nothing limiting you...but you."

"How am I supposed to let go?" she whispers. She's clung to so much over the years...bitterness over Henry's father, grief from Graham, a broken heart from August...

"I can help you," Dr. Hopper promises. "But Emma, I have to ask. Are you ready?"

She thinks, truly thinks, about what he's asking. And the decision is so much easier than she ever could have imagined. "Yes, I think I am."

Chapter End Notes

I AM SO SORRY. But I've finally submitted my thesis! *sets off confetti cannon* And I'm using NaNoWriMo to finish up my WIPs, so expect some more chapters with less delay! I'm determined to finish this so I can move on to another CS multichapter that's been niggling at me for the last few months...

*EDIT* It has been pointed out that I already wrote a proposal scene (mea culpa, it's thesis brain!), so the Emma/Mary Margaret scene has been rewritten.

End Notes

This is part of my Captain Swan Secret Santa gift for Solène (a.k.a. robbkays) over on tumblr. She requested graphics, but seeing as they're not my strong suit I decided to add to her gift. :)

I really like AU's (nah, really). They're so much fun to play with. And yes, there is a LOT drawn from Castle here. But when the source material is so brilliant...

If you're curious about Liam Jones, Jr., more explanations are forthcoming, but one of the things I love most about Castle is the dynamic between Alexis and Castle. I wanted Killian to have something like that here. As for why the kid's Liam Jr. and not Bae...well, that treads perilously close to headache territory.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!