The Do Over

by LittleSwanLover

Summary

What if you were given a complete do over in life? A de-aged Emma Swan gets exactly that when she awaken to find herself dependent on the Queen. There's a new curse (or is it?) and an angry little savior. Emma's baggage and the Queen's need for control collide. Will Emma fight for her old life or dare explore her new one? AU before season 4, Regina/Little Emma

Notes

This story is dedicated to all the people out there with a hurt kid inside of them who dreamed of something different than what they were given in life. This one is for you.

The spell is not what it seems. As the saying goes...It takes two to tango. Emma is unaware of something she used to know... Also, Regina is not evil in this at all, quite the opposite.
*Hook never happened btw, in this A/U anyway.

**The Lonely Geek created a video music rendition of the series. It’s adorable and I’m so honored something like this was created based on my story. Link below:

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=5PeqqGgeuGs
Disclaimer- I own nothing, but my own ideas. Also, I do not write Regina as fluffy as in some other stories with little Emma. There will be swoon worthy fluff moments, but also some tough ones. Both characters have major issues to work through, though this fic focuses more on Emma's. This will be a multi-chapter and long piece of work. I appreciate ideas and constructive feedback.

**Warning** There will be spanking done to an adult in a child's body in later chapters.**
The Do Over

The last thing she remembered was visiting with Regina in her study; a room devoid of warmth except for a roaring fire in the oversized hearth. She shared a glass of celebratory cider with the woman who hadn’t aged a day in the ten years she had known her. Emma toasted Henry’s marriage to Paige, the Mad Hatter’s daughter, with the Queen who had be responsible for bringing them all together with an apple, a curse, and her need for her own happy ending. What Emma didn't understand yet was that the grinning brunette across from her was a very patient woman, a woman who had spent years planning the moment to come. The moment Emma would become her own happy ending.

Stretching like a lazy cat under the thick quilts, Emma twisted onto her stomach and buried her head under a pillow before bringing her thumb to her mouth. It took her a full minute to reject the digit and jerk upright onto her knees. She rubbed her heavy green eyes and squinted at the rude sunlight coming in through purple drapes.

"W-What?" She immediately slapped her hand over her mouth. Her voice sounded pinched and foreign.

Everything around her seemed oversized. She looked at her hands; her own, but not her own. A sickness pulls at her core as she scrambled off the high bed and over to the door. Emma frantically tried the knob. The door opened, but there was an invisible magical barrier in place. It wasn’t a strong one so she held her hands up to the door, reaching deep inside for her magic, but felt nothing. Not even static.

Beginning to panic, Emma took quick shallow breaths and surveyed the room around her. The walls were pale lavender with crown molding at the ceiling. There was a full sized bed centered against the far wall with a purple padded bench at the foot of the bed. Along the opposite wall was a white desk with a full book case next to it. A rocking chair sat next to the window with a big carved trunk near it. All the furniture was white. It was then she saw herself in the full length mirror in the corner of the room and screamed.

Regina awoke with a start, her heart pounding in wonder as she listened to the stillness of the house. Then she heard it. A child’s scream.

A smile bloomed across her face. Her spell worked.

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She flung her goose down duvet back and found her silk robe at the foot of the bed. The Queen took a moment to run a brush through her short hair, the glossy strands falling perfectly into place before padding down the hall to the open door. She jumped when something on the other banged against the magical barrier. The woman chuckled to herself not expecting a tantrum so early in the morning coming from her new charge. No matter, Emma would learn soon enough.

She undid the protection field from the doorway, a precaution she’d added to the spell to ensure Emma would be safe upon waking up. She slowly eased through the doorway. She was met with a green eyed, red faced, blonde hurricane that threw a book at her head. Regina dodged the missile and raised a single dark brow at the irate child across the room.
"What did you do to me?!" Emma yelled, gesturing wildly to her small form.

"I see someone woke up cranky this morning. Tell me Emma, do you think I find your tantrum acceptable, dear?" Regina stepped into the room, picked up the book and placed it on the child's desk. She surprised herself at how easily she shifted to mother mode and smiled after the fact.

Emma glared at her, huffing in response. Tears flowed freely down her red cheeks. The girl rubbed her eyes on her PJ sleeve, looking every bit the disgruntled child Regina had turned her in to.

"W-why? Why did you do this?" Emma stuttered, wishing she didn't sound so small.

Regina clenched her jaw for a moment, understanding the girl's anger before crossing the room to stand near Emma. She leaned down to be eye level with her new six year old. If this child version of Emma was anything like the adult she would be more amendable after food. Regina desperately wanted a cup of caffeine before explaining herself to the little savior. "I think that is best answered over breakfast." She looked deeply into wet green pools silently communicating that any display of the prior tantrum would be dealt with swiftly.

Emma looked away, huffing again.

Regina stood, extending a warm hand. "Come."

Emma narrowed her eyes and crossed her shaking arms in response. "Not until y-you tell m-me why."

Regina's brown eyes softened at the obvious anxiety, but she kept her firmness. "Uncross those arms and take my hand. I will answer your questions once we start our day. It is past time you had something in your stomach."

Emma startled at the tone coming from the adult towering over her. As tiny as she was, she didn't have the strength to challenge the Queen physically or magically. She needed to know more about what was going on before trying to make a plan of escape. Her stomach growled, giving her away. With a sigh she took the offered hand.

The girl missed the small smile on her keeper's face as she was led through the door way. With a subtle flick of Regina's wrist and the door to the room closed behind them. Emma felt the familiar tingle of magic in the air and felt her insides knot again at the fact that Regina had her powers.

They entered the kitchen. This was one of Regina's favorite rooms in the house. Many memories of cooking for Henry and baking treats together came flooding her mind upon entry. She hoped new memories with Emma would come to pass here. Once the child became accepting of their new life together that is.

Regina let go of the small hand and easily lifted Emma up onto a kitchen stool by the counter. She turned on the Keurig and busied herself making eggs and toast for Emma. Soon mocha espresso filled a black striped mug Emma eyed with envy as she watched Regina take a sip. Reading the girl's thoughts, the Queen shook her head, setting her mug by the stove. She poured a small cup of apple juice and put it before the child.

"No coffee for you, little one. Your taste buds wouldn't like it right now, anyway. Have this instead."

Emma scrunched up her nose at the juice once Regina turned her back to tend to the eggs. The silence between them was thick with Emma fuming and the shooting daggers coming from angry green slits at Regina's back. The woman turned to set a full plate of food in front of the girl, returning the blonde's look with a raised brow.
"Would you like ketchup on your eggs?" She tried a safe question to cut the tension, remembering Henry loved to smother everything at this age with the red condiment.

"NO!"

The Queen sighed, handing the girl a fork. "You mean 'no, thank you'. That is the polite way to answer, dear."

Emma took a bite of the eggs, surprised at how good and fluffy they were before dropping her fork to the plate. "No, thank you? That's all you can—correcting my speech? Seriously! Why, Regina? What did you do to everyone? And, what happened to my magic?"

The woman bristled at her first name coming from the girl's lips. They'd have to talk about that before going in public; one of many hard conversations for later. Taking a breath, she began the speech she had been planning.

"When you first came to town all those years ago in that death trap you call a vehicle I knew my life would never be the same. We spent years attacking each other and fighting over Henry. You broke my curse, what was supposed to be my happy ending and took my son—."

"Our son. He's our son." Emma couldn't help cutting the Queen off on something she felt their adult selves had both worked hard to come to an agreement on.

"Do you want answers or not, Emma?"

"Fine. Continue your Majesty."

"The spell's memories of our new life pushed me to reference Henry as my son. I wasn't over sighting your contributions to the amazing young man he has become. I took great care in crafting this life to preserve that."

Either Emma's internal lie detector was way off or the brunette was actually being genuine in her compliment. She took another forkful of eggs, nodding her understanding.

"As I was saying, in those early years you were here I felt that I missed out on being a mother to Henry. The first 6 years of his life were the happiest of mine." She took a breath and a sip of her coffee before continuing. "That ended when he found out he was adopted and started looking for you."

Emma squirmed, and felt the heat of anger flush her pale skin. She had thought after all this time that the feud between them had ended. She took a bite toast just to have something to do with her mouth. She wouldn't snap, not yet. The first step to freedom was information and right now Regina had all of it.

"Later, as we got to know each other, you shared with me about your childhood or lack thereof and I realized we could both have what we want, our very own happy ending. You owe me a portion of Henry's childhood and I owe you happy memories in yours. This way we both win."

Emma's mouth dropped. She hadn't been expecting that, not that she knew what she was expecting, but it wasn't that. And, it wasn't the bare bones of Regina's honesty either.

Thoughtful chocolate eyes watched Emma process her words, knowing that she just threw the savior for a loop. Anger crept back into the girl's features smothering any shock that had been there. The woman sighed, setting down her empty mug, readying herself for a fight.
"So you turned me into a 6 year old so we could play happy family? A twisted version of a do over? What about my life, my parents, our son? W-what—" Emma's shoulders shook with rage and then, with something else entirely.

Regina recognized the need in the child eyes that housed the adult savior and went around the island. She attempted to hug the flustered girl, but scrawny arms pushed her away.

"Tell me. I need to know right now." She demanded clarity.

Regina lightly rested her hands on shaking shoulders, rubbing her thumbs in a calming fashion along Emma's collar bone.

"Take a slow breath for me first…. That's it. One more." The woman coached before continuing. "The spell took care of all those pieces. Everyone in town regained their cursed memories, plus many happy new ones. You will find them different, but recognizable. Your magic is still inside of you, but muted for time time being."

Emma bit her lip, fighting tears as she glared up. "And H-Henry?"

Regina swallowed, knowing this would be the most difficult part for Emma to accept. She'd went to considerable lengths to create positive memories for Henry and not to erase the influence adult Emma had on him. It was complicated and not something she felt little Emma could wrap her head around at the moment, so she kept it simple. "He has good memories of his birth mother, though they are hazy for him. In this life he thinks you are his little sister."

I promise Regina is not a b*tch in this. There will be flashbacks woven throughout that explain the moment leading up to the when Emma awoke little. They are written in italics as a sort of count down.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer- I own nothing, but my own ideas. Also, I do not write Regina as sweet and fluffy as in some other stories with little Emma. There will be swoon worthy fluff moments, but also some tough ones. Both characters have major issues to work through, though this fic focuses more on Emma's. This will be a multi-chapter and long piece of work. I appreciate ideas and constructive feedback. *Warning*There will be spanking done to an adult in a child's body in later chapters.*

Last time I will mention disclaimer. By now you all know what you've gotten in to. :-) Also, I am not a Snow/Charming fan.

Previously...

Regina swallowed, knowing this would be the most difficult part for Emma to accept. She'd went to considerable lengths to create positive memories for Henry and not to erase the influence adult Emma had on him. It was complicated and not something she felt little Emma could wrap her head around at the moment, so she kept it simple. "He has good memories of his birth mother, though they are hazy for him. In this life he thinks you are his little sister."

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Emma swiped at the juice sending it crashing to the floor and jumped off her stool. Regina caught her under the arms and lifted her back up to sit. "I know this is hard for you, dear, but throwing your cup will not get you the attention you want from me."

"Let me go! You ruined my life! LET GO!" Emma yelled and began to beat her small fists wildly against the marble counter. Regina easily grasped the girl's small wrists in her hand while lifting Emma's chin with the other. "I will not allow you to be self destructive. Stop this behavior right now."

The girl continued trying to thrash her arms and kick her legs out. "NO! LET GO!"

"Emma, calm—"

The savior jerked her chin away. "Fuck you!"

Before Emma could process what was happening she found herself lifted from the stool and marched across the room. She was placed to face a bare corner and shivered at the firm, but calm tone in her ear.

"You are new to my home Emma, so I hope for your sake that you are a quick learner. I do not accept vile language, and certainly not when it is directed at me. You will stand in the corner for six minutes and think about your words. Do you understand me?"

Emma scowled, wanting to spit at the woman behind her.
"I expect a verbal answer from you, please."

The girl's stomach lurched at Regina's deepened tenor, but the adult in her wasn't easily overpowered.

"YES, your Majesty!"

The barb caused Regina to square her jaw, knowing she needed to be patient. She decided to let the girl's sass go and give her a chance to calm down. Leaving the child alone, the Queen moved to clean up the breakfast dishes. Six minutes passed quickly. She called Emma over and was met with slightly calmer green eyes. Regina handed a damp cloth to the girl and directed her to clean up the mess she had made with the juice. To her surprise Emma wiped up the spill without protest before handing the dirty cloth and plastic cup back to her keeper. Regina tossed both in the sink and knelt down to be eye level with her charge.

Emma looked away from the Queen's steady gaze and nervously started twisting her PJ top. Regina gently took the small hands and unfolded the little fingers. She rubbed her thumbs against the soft pale skin in a reassuring manner.

"Do you understand why I put you in time out?"

"I'm not six, Regina!" Emma shouted, trying to pull her hands away unsuccessfully. She failed to notice how the Queen's touch was calming the fire within her.

"To the world and more importantly, to me, you are. This is your—our second chance. Over time this will get easier." The spell she weaved would make sure of that, slowly shifting Emma's mind and emotions to that of a child. She leaned in to hug her 'daughter'.

"I don't want this." Emma whispered as she fell into her keeper, letting herself be freely held for the first time in years. Part of her yearned for those arms never to let her go and another part screamed at her to run. Her pint size self won out as tears sprung from tired eyes. The emotions of the morning had exhausted her small frame and she rested her head on the woman's shoulder in momentary defeat.

"You may not want this, but we both need this." Regina thought as she stood with Emma in her arms and made her way back upstairs to the lavender room. Easing herself into the rocker, she rocked Emma until the tears ceased and the girl's body went limp with sleep. Smiling, the Queen crossed the room and untangled little arms from her neck as she set her charge on the bed.

"Don't wanna' go to sleep..." Green eyes fluttered open for a moment, taking in her surroundings briefly only to close again.

Regina tucked her in and pressed a kiss to the girl's forehead, enjoying the small moment of familial peace.

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Emma awoke much calmer the second time that day and sat up sleepily taking in the room—her room. As a foster child she had never had her own room, always having to share space and things in group homes. Despite her anger at Regina, the woman had taken care to give her a room fit for a princess. She slid off the bed and wondered over to the closet. She opened it to a few hanging dresses, skirts, and sweaters. She pouted at her current options, making a mental note to get Regina to take her shopping. If she was stuck being fun size she better damn well have her skinny jeans, tanks, and boots.
She hopped up to reach for a green sweater that buttoned up the back on a high hanger and a matching plaid skirt. She found a pair of black tights in her dresser. Little fingers made the buttons and zipper of her outfit of choice difficult. Frustrated, she plopped down on the floor and glanced at a clock on the nightstand shaped like a swan. She squinted at it, waiting for her little brain to catch up. 'One o'clock, it was one already?' Her stomach growled begging for lunch.

"Someone's hungry."

Opening the door, Regina poked her head into the room. She was dressed in grey slacks, heels, and a black boat-neck sweater, her make-up flawless and hair curled.

Emma looked up at the immaculate woman and narrowed her eyes.

"Looks like you need some help. Stand up, dear." Regina directed and reached down for Emma's hand, expecting compliance.

Emma eyed it with hesitation. By accepting, she'd be silently affirming her dependency, yet again. Her adult mind was screaming in protest. She sat for a full minute, not moving.

Regina shook her head and bent down to pull the girl upwards, taking the decision away. With a scowl, Emma let the Queen button up her sweater. Regina grabbed the tights from the floor and knelt to help the girl step into them. She then retrieved a pair of black flat soled ankle boots from the closet and handed them to Emma, wanting to affirm something for herself.

The boots were snatched hastily, but girl easily became frustrated when her fingers couldn't do what her mind knew her adult self could; tie her boots. After a minute, Regina silently took over having seen enough of the missing fine motor skills to answer her own question. She made quick work of the now tangled laces.

"How would you like to walk to Granny's and have lunch?" The woman hoped the idea of getting out of the house would make the girl smile and possibly begin to get used to the new Storybrooke.

Emma's head jerked up at that and she had the faintest hint of a smile ready at her lips at the mention of her favorite diner. A deep frown quickly took root as she thought that offer through.

"No one remembers?" She had to ask, her frustration over the cursed personas of her friends returning.

"No, they don't. They all think you are my daughter, that I adopted you as a baby when Henry was 16."

Regina waited for Emma's mind to catch up to what she was saying before continuing. "It is Saturday, so the diner will not be as crowded. This will give you a chance to get used to things. Before we go, there are some rules I want to go over with you."

The girl's eyes snapped up at the mention of rules and she crinkled her nose in such a way that made Regina want to laugh. The woman bit her cheek to keep her serious expression, knowing that things would become unnecessarily difficult for them if Emma didn't cooperate.

"I know this is new and overwhelming for you, that you are angry with me. That being said, in this life my role is your parent. You may not call me by my first name outside of this house when we are with other people. Ah, ah—" Regina held up her hand to stop Emma's protest. "I will be very patient with you in regards to that. When we are around other people you can call me ma'am or mom or nothing at all. I expect you to be respectful. It is also of the utmost importance that you listen to me. You no longer have your adult senses or body and it is my job to keep you safe. Do you understand,
Emma stared at her, knowing she would be stuck inside the mansion until she agreed. Deciding to go with 'nothing at all' she responded with one word and put as much bite behind it as she could.

"Yes."

Nodding, Regina led Emma into the bathroom across the hall and had the girl wash up before taking a brush to clear the tangles away from the long blonde curls. Emma was surprised at the woman's gentleness, remembering back to her actual childhood where foster parents would leave her own or nearly pull her hair out as they tried to tame it. Regina quickly pulled back a small section of hair away from Emma's face and secured it with a green bow. The girl rolled her eyes, going along with the routine in hopes of learning more about her surroundings once at the diner. She'd have to fake her compliance for now. Only then could she begin to form a plan.

She tolerated Regina leading her about by the hand downstairs. She was bundled in a miniature version of Regina's own black pea coat, except hers was red before heading out the door. On their walk, Emma scanned the town for anyone she knew. She spotted Archie walking Pongo across the street and waved frantically at him, hoping he would walk over to them. The Doctor nodded his smiling head their way, but kept walking in the opposite direction.

Emma sighed and mumbled something about dumb cricket ears as Regina talked about the new town and what changes to expect. Ignoring the Queen she instead focused on the leaves crunching under her boots.

The woman tugged her in the direction of the diner and stopped short of the door. "Remember what we talked about, Emma." Regina reminded as she opened the door. It chimed announcing them.

The girl's eyes took in the 50's style decor she knew like the back of her hand, noticing everyone stared at them for a split second before going back to their conversations. She saw Ruby at the far end off the counter wave at them and Emma pulled away from Regina's hand to dart over to friend.

"Ruby! It's me Emma!"

The once werewolf feigned surprise and slouched down on the counter to be eye level with the small girl. She extended a hand in greeting, "Well, hi there 'It's me Emma'. I'm Ruby."

Big eyes blinked rapidly at the former wolf in shock, "Don't you recognize me Ruby? It's Emma, your best friend. We had drinks at the Rabbit Hole last weekend! Don't you remember?" She thrust herself halfway across the counter and grabbed the redhead's face in earnest.

By this time Regina had caught up to Emma and drew the girl back off the counter by the shoulders. "That's enough, Emma. Ms. Lucas needs to get back to work."

"Oh, I get it." Ruby winked at Regina and stood to her full height. "This is one of your make believe games you told me about. You have a great imagination. Who are you pretending to be this week, little swan?"

"Ms. Lucas, do not encourage my—"

"Ruby! You need to listen—"

"Order up!" Granny's shrill voice drowned out them all and Ruby winced. She excused herself to the kitchen.
Emma deflated and turned to see an annoyed Regina staring down at her. Emma swallowed hard watching the vein on the Queen's forehead pulse. The woman silently pointed to an empty booth towards the back of the restaurant and the girl shuffled over and plopped herself down. Regina gracefully slid in the same side keeping Emma pinned between herself and the wall. Emma scooted over as far as she could.

"You can't do that, Emma."

"Do what?"

"You can't pull away and dart off when I have your hand."

The little savior scowled when Ruby returned with a regular menu for the Mayor and a kid's color mat for her. Regina ordered drinks for them as Emma blinked rapidly at the mat in front of her, watching as letters swam on paper.

"Um…Reg—" A quick eye stopped her. "I mean M-m…" Emma couldn't stop her mouth from trying to spit out the undeserved title. She was having a difficult time understanding why the kid in her wanted to naturally refer to Regina as such. She licked her lips and tried again. "I can't see all the words. The letters are there and some I know, but…" She turned wide eyes to her keeper in askance.

"It's alright, dear. This is just a side effect of the spell. Your mind and body are adjusting." The Queen didn't want to go into more detail right now and cause the girl panic.

Before Emma could respond Ruby returned. Regina ordered a kale cranberry salad for herself and a grilled cheese with a side of broccoli for Emma, who frowned at the vegetable choice. With nothing else to do, but wait for their food—and refusing conversation with the woman next to her, Emma picked up a crayon and tackled the maze on the coloring mat.

Regina watched her 'daughter' and smiled softly at how sweet she looked in her outfit and bow. They had a rough start, but little bits of the 'child' in Emma were starting to take over. When the food arrived Emma attacked it with gusto, earning a scolding look from the Mayor when she tried to ask a question with food stuffed in her cheeks like a chip monk.

"Emma, don't be rude. Chew, swallow, and then speak." One thing Regina Mills would not tolerate was rude table manners.

"Sowwory." Emma mumbled and took a sip of her milk to clear her throat. "I said, can I get ice-cream?" If she was stuck as a kid she might as well get a treat out of it.

"You mean 'may I have ice-cream please' and no, I do not think so. You haven't even touched your broccoli." Regina refused the request, believing such treats must be earned.

She continued eating her salad as Emma whined about wanting dessert, listening as she was given a detailed education on the nutritional value of dairy. "I said no, Emma. I don't plan on allowing you much sugar and only as a treat when I tell you it is alright." She stated more firmly, but the girl's frown got to her. Remembering their rough morning, she relented a bit.

"Perhaps you may after dinner."

Emma beamed, momentarily forgetting her troubles as she took a bite of broccoli. The buttery taste surprised her and she willingly ate a few more pieces before stopping, not realizing how much her endless stomach had shrunk.

Regina quickly finished her meal and paid. She took Emma's hand again and led her out the door.
She watched as the girl shuffled along, scuffing her new boots in the process. The Mayor pursed her lips, quieting a scolding comment on her tongue remembering that Emma wasn't Henry who had been raised to know better about walking properly when she felt a sharp jerk on her arm. Her mind slammed into the present when she heard one word from Emma's lips.

"Mom!"

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Snow and Emma encounter coming up...
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

A/N - Thank you for reading and reviewing! I hope you enjoy this part. There will be occasional flashbacks to before the spell was cast. One of them is in this chapter. :-)

Previously...

Regina quickly finished her meal and paid. She took Emma's hand and led her out the door. She watched as the girl shuffled along, scuffing her new boots in the process. The Mayor pursed her lips, quieting a scolding comment on her tongue remembering that Emma wasn't Henry who had been raised to know better about walking properly when she felt a sharp jerk on her arm. Her mind slammed into the present when she heard one word from Emma's lips.

"Mom!"

Regina's heart pounded as Emma pulled out of her grasp and dashed towards the dark pixie haired woman across the street—right into oncoming traffic. Mary-Margret froze, watching in shock as Emma ran all the while not knowing the term of endearment had been meant for her.

"Emma stop!"

That royal command fell on deaf ears as the girl dodged a honking car and somehow made it to the other sidewalk in one piece. Emma had exactly 2.5 seconds of freedom before Regina scooped her up. The Mayor let out a ragged breath as she knelt down to feel the girl over for signs of hurt. Assured Emma wasn't harmed she cocked her wrist back and swatted Emma's bottom once over the thick coat with her open hand. The newly turned 6 year old winced at the sound.

"Is she okay, Madame Mayor?" Mary-Margret asked, alarmed that the little girl had nearly been ran over.

Ignoring the teacher for the moment, Regina lit into Emma. "That's the second time today you have pulled away from me. What were you thinking running into the street like that, young lady? You could have been killed!" She gripped Emma's shoulders for emphasis before hugging her again.

"I-I'm sorry…" Green eyes grew teary, not understanding her emotional reaction to the scolding or the swat she had received. 'What the actual fuck just happened?' her adult side thought. 'I have a right to run—don't I? Regina is keeping me against my will—isn't she? Mary-Margret is my real mother—but…?' The two sides battling for dominance was both confusing and exhausting at the same time.

Standing to her full height, the Mayor towered over them both in her Gianvito Rossi heels. She adjusted her Prada purse keeping a tight grip on Emma's hand as she finally addressed the school teacher. "Yes, Ms. Blanchard. She is fine. Come along Emma." She walked quickly back across the street after looking both ways.

They walked in silence for a minute before Regina stopped short squeezing the girl's hand while looking straight ahead. "You scared me back there. Please don't ever do something like that again."
In the short time they had been together she already loved this little version of Emma and the idea of
her being hurt twisted the brunette's heart in the worst way.

"You hit me." The accusing tone made Regina flinch and she knew she had to clear up this misunderstanding right away. Taking Emma to a nearby bench she sat with the little savior standing at her knees looking anywhere, but Regina's gaze.

"Look at me, dear."

Two fingers lifted a quivering chin, her stern expression softening as she rubbed her thumb gently along Emma's cheek. "I did not hit you. I would never hit you. I gave you a swat with my hand to your bottom, over your coat I might add, for running into the street. You frightened me by running. We had a talk before leaving the house about respect and being safe. Were you being safe when you pulled away from me?"

"Well no, but Mary-Margret was—"

"No buts, Emma. What you did was dangerous. If you run from me again or put your safety at risk like that I will take you across my knee and spank you. This is not a game. This," she waved her hand about them, "is our life now. You are a child..." my child... "And you would do well to remember that. Is that clear?" The Queen fought to keep her tone in check, still feeling her heartbeat ringing in her ears from the scare as she realized how harsh she'd sounded.

Emma's jaw dropped, not believing what she was hearing. Her child brain told her to shut up and nod, while the adult in her seethed. The little girl in her recognized that Regina was being protective of her. Growing up the first time she had never had anyone in her back corner to love, look after, or hold her accountable. The adult in her shook her head at the childish thought, curls flying in the breeze as her anger returned.

Regina watched the battle behind Emma's eyes, knowing she needed to continue going slow with her authority over her new charge, but at the same time needing to lay down the law early on to prevent trouble. Children thrived when boundaries and expectations were clear. She gave the girl another minute before asking Emma again. "Is that clear? I need to hear that you understand, dear."

"Yes." The word hissed begrudgingly through clenched teeth and Emma pulled her chin away.

"Alright then, we've had enough excitement for one day. Let's go home."

The rest of the walk was silent and once at the mansion, Emma shed her coat and boots by the door before running upstairs. Regina called after the girl not to run and to hang up her things before hearing a door slam. Sighing, she hung it up, not wanting a fight and headed into her study, deciding to give her little one some space while she tackled some paper work.

She was neck deep in budget reports with her reading glasses perched on the end of her nose when she heard the floorboards creak outside of her office. Knowing it could only be one person, she called out, not lifting her eyes from the excel sheet.

"Emma, come in here please."

Emma stuck her head around the corner pouting at being heard. She had planned on going to the kitchen to get a snack before trying to go sleep. Her little body simply couldn't keep up with her adult mind. She had spent the time in her room sulking over Regina's words and wondering how she was going to change herself back. Eventually her grumbling stomach caught her attention and she ventured downstairs.

"I'm hungry." Emma offered and slunk her way over to the Mayor. She peered curiously over the
rim of the wood. "What are you doing?"

Regina rolled away from her desk slightly and lifted Emma up to sit on her lap. Too tired to protest, Emma leaned into the warm body. Brown eyes caught the time on the mantle and saw that she had been working steadily for a few hours. She had forgotten how much time little children needed and berated herself for not checking on the girl sooner. "I've been working on this quarter's budget report, but I'm done for the day." Regina rested her chin atop Emma's blonde head, enjoying the simplicity of the moment. "How does spaghetti and salad for dinner sound, dear?"

Emma murmured noncommittally and she turned to look up at the quiet Queen. "Ice-cream after?"

The cheeky request was meant with a raised brow. "Hop down and you can help by setting the table."

Emma yawned and slid off the warm lap. She followed Regina into the kitchen. A half hour later they both sat down to dinner. Emma got halfway through her meal before she started nodding off at the table. Regina realized it was nearing eight o'clock and knew the girl must be fatigued from the emotional day despite the nap earlier. She quickly cleared the table, leaving the dishes to soak while she returned to get Emma ready for bed. She lifted the sleepy child into her arms and made her way upstairs to the bathroom across from Emma's new room.

Regina set the girl down on a purple bath mat and turned on the faucet. The sound of running water stirred Emma enough to feel the Mayor unbuttoning her sweater before she realized she was being undressed.

"Wait!" She stood in her undershirt and skirt with her hands white knuckled over the Queen's. "I don't want you to see!"

A slight smile played at the Queen's mouth. "You have nothing I haven't seen before. Besides, I'm not leaving you in the tub alone until you have better control over your new body. It's not safe."

Emma couldn't argue with that logic. She dropped her hands. "I don't want a bath. I want to go to sleep now, Gina." She stomped her small foot and yawned.

Regina smiled at the nickname and made quick work of stripping the clothes off the reluctant girl and depositing her into the warm water. She was careful not to wet the girl's long hair in the shallow bath, not wanting to fight the shampoo battle tonight. Emma let herself be washed, rinsed, and lifted from the tub into a large duck hooded towel. She was dried and placed into warm yellow footed PJs before being tucked into her princess bed.

"Good night little swan." She bent to kiss Emma's cheek, having taken an immediate liking to the nickname Ruby had used in the diner.

Regina flipped a switch on the swan clock that produced a soft white glow, providing enough light should the girl wake up in the night needing to see. She sat for a long moment watching the woman child sleep grateful they had made it through their first day. She knew things wouldn't be easy for a while yet, but held hope in her not so dark heart that the small moments like this would make the tough ones worth it.

As she went through her own nightly routine a few hours later she reflected on their day together. She remembered back to an evening five years ago during a time when a tentative friendship between herself and Miss Swan had begun.

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Flashback - 5 years ago…

"I'd fight you every step of the way, Regina." Emma smirked and swirled the melted ice in the crystal tumbler.

The husky chuckle drew the blonde's attention upwards to the brunette who regally lounged on the chaise by the fire. They were enjoying a night cap in the darkened study of the mansion after a long afternoon of playing in the snow with Henry. All of Storybrooke was covered in it after the Snow Queen's disappearance.

"I'd expect nothing less from the savior, dear. Seriously though, you should consider it, for Henry's sake, if not your own." Regina sipped her cider watching the blonde process her offer.

Emma sighed, taking a gulp of her own drink. "I'll think it about. The kid is starting to get sick of Kraft dinners when he stays with me anyway." She frowned remembering the cardboard taste from her own childhood and suddenly decided she would take the Queen up on the cooking lessons.

"You are thinking about it again."

"About what?"

"Your past." Regina crossed her legs, leaning forward to set her tumbler on a coaster when the savior across from her scowled. "Your left eye twitches and the corners of your mouth become pinched."

"So what if I am? Thinking about it, I mean. What's it matter to you?" Emma bristled at how easily she'd be read.

Not allowing the diversion Regina tried again. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nope." The 'p' sound popped against damp lips and green eyes stared into the flames of the fire. After several minutes of being stuck in her head, Emma got up to refill her glass from the side bar. The cider was strong and was beginning to make her teeth numb. Numb was good.

She paced the length of the room, coming to stop at the mantle that housed several framed pictures of Regina and Henry. She noticed one in particular of Regina holding a much younger Henry from behind and the boy's easy grin.

"No one ever did that for me."

Regina listened closely, barely catching the hitch in Emma's voice. She dared a question, "Did what?"

"Held me." It was such a simple thing, a mother holding her child and yet Emma had wanted nothing more than to know what that felt like. She replaced the picture and turned back to Regina, shoving her hands in her pockets and rocking back on her heels. "I'm grateful you did that for Henry."

Regina reached out, taking Emma's hand from the safety of the denim pocket. She didn't comment on the savior's revelation, filing it away for later.

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What do you think? :-}
Previously...Flashback

"No one ever did that for me."

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The morning of the second day of her new childhood dawned too soon for Emma. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, staring at little fingers and trying to process the fact she was still a kid that yesterday hadn't been a dream. The anger at the injustice of her situation returned with a new force.

Time for action.

She had to show Regina that the spell may have physically reverted her to a child's body, but that she was all adult Emma inside. Maybe then, she could convince Regina to change her back.

Satisfied with her plan she jumped out of bed and shimmied out of the flannel footed PJs she had been put in and pulled on a white tank top from her dresser, more of an undershirt, but it would do and the only pair of jeans in her closet. She hated the pink rhinestones on the front pockets, but they were better than a dress. She ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing it as best as she could. Feeling more like herself, she tried the bedroom door and smiled when she found it unlocked. Bare feet padded down the hall and she peeked into the master suite, sighing in relief that the Queen was sound asleep.

Emma made her way downstairs and dragged a stool over to the kitchen counter. After climbing up she found the small coffee pods she saw Regina use yesterday. She had never used one of these fancy machines before. Using her teeth, she peeled back plastic top, trying to remember if that is what the Mayor had done. She dropped the open pod, spilling grounds all over the floor and counter. Two pods later and Emma figured out that the top stays on and popped one into the machine. She pressed a hand on the big button, recognizing the 'B' for what she knew to be 'brew'. Smiling at the tinkling sound filling the mug she hopped down and opened the fridge.

She pulled out several random items in search for breakfast, setting them all on the counter. This took several trips for her little arms. She failed to notice that one of the juices had tipped over, making a large puddle on the once pristine counter top. Wrinkling her nose at the soy creamer options and vegetables overflowing the cool space she slammed it shut, deciding to opt for what she had been denied yesterday, ice-cream!

Emma found her prize, a pint of Rocky Road, in the freezer drawer. She'd had to remove a large chicken and several neatly labeled pouches of lasagna to get to it, leaving the items on the floor. A mess was made scooping the slippery cream into a bowl, one she had nearly broken getting down
from a high shelf. She had taken several dishes out, looking for just the one.

Over the course of a half hour Emma had managed to get a bowl of ice-cream, a partial cup of coffee (half had spilled on the floor between the Keurig and the breakfast counter) while completely obliterating the kitchen.

The girl found the newspaper in the inside mail slot of the front door and settled in front of her. Flipping to the only part of the paper she could 'read', the comics, Emma sighed in contentment. She was about to take an obnoxiously large bite of ice-cream when she saw Regina in her peripheral vision. The Queen was a shade of white Emma didn't know existed before the color pulsed back to the natural olive tone. The brunette abruptly halted in the kitchen doorway.

Emma almost dropped her spoon at the heated look taking over her keeper's features. Almost.

Shoving the cold sweetness into her mouth, she swallowed quickly before offering up her signature snarky grin.

"Emma Swan Mills! What do you think you are doing?"

Prickly words deflated Emma's ego enough that she winced. Apparently, Swan was now her middle name. Deciding to play it cool, Emma sassily cocked her head to the side.

"Good morning to you too, your Majesty."

Emma reached with both hands for her mug and took a big gulp before spitting the hot, and unexpectedly foul, fluid from her mouth in a full on hose spray across the counter. She dropped the mug, spilling again and began to fan her mouth rapidly.

Regina sprung into action. She caught the coffee making its' way over the lip of the counter towards Emma's lap with a dish towel and filled a cup with cool water, handing it to Emma who drank it down quickly before letting the water sit in her mouth. The Mayor took the empty cup and spun Emma's chair around to face her.

"Open your mouth." She demanded no nonsense.

Emma obeyed, blinking back tears. Regina thoroughly inspected the little mouth for signs of a scald and felt her heart slow noting only some redness. The girl would be fine in an hour or so. Grabbing a damp dish cloth she gently cleaned the chocolate from Emma's mouth and hands. The methodical motion gave her mind a chance to process the situation and her destroyed kitchen. Apparently, the lecture she had given yesterday afternoon hadn't made a dent in big Emma's stubborn nature.

"What were you thinking?"

Emma twisted her face up in surprise at Regina's tone. Searching those brown eyes for anger, she only found concern. Deciding to stick with her original plan her adult self took over. "That I wanted a cup of coffee, something sweet and to read—" She stopped at that word, her face turning pink, "or at least look at the newspaper like any other person on a god damned Sunday morning."

The mayor tsked at the choice of words, her brow raised in warning.

Emma rolled her eyes. "I just wanted my normal morning. My body may be six, but my mind isn't!" The last few words came out as a whine and Emma scowled at how bratty she sounded. She looked anywhere but the calculating brown eyes and finally saw the state of the kitchen. 'Did I do that?
Damn, no wonder she looks pissed.' Her plan was not going well.

Regina nodded in understanding watching the girl survey the room, but knew that to maintain any control over their life she couldn't let the actions of the morning go unaddressed.

"Do you remember what we talked about yesterday? About how you do not have your adult body or common sense here, about how it is my job to keep you safe and how your job is to listen?" Regina kept her tone level as she stood up over the girl and crossed her arms.

Emma nodded the kid in her was quickly retreating under Regina's firmness.

"Answer me, Emma."

"Yeeessss." It was quiet, but an acknowledgement.

"I told you no coffee yesterday morning. You took it upon yourself to disobey me and make yourself some today. I also told you no sugar without my permission and you decided to have ice-cream for breakfast."

"I only got one stinking bite. That doesn't count, Gina." Emma started to protest, but was shushed when Regina put a finger to her lips and cupped her chin lifting her eyes up.

"Furthermore, the kitchen is in quite a state of disarray from your actions." Her hand waved over the room. "More importantly you used a heating element unsupervised and nearly scalded your mouth. You are fortunate we are not sitting in the emergency room right now for your insubordination." Regina explained and noticed Emma's scrunched brow at her last word. "It means disobedience."

"I know what it fucking means!" Emma shouted at being told off like a little kid and looked down at the once white tank top that was stained with chocolate. She barely registered her body being lifted off the stool. Regina had a hold of her upper arm and, once again, she was marched towards a bare corner. She turned around to step out from where she was forcibly put and bit her lip at seeing the sparks in the Queen's gaze.

"You were warned about foul language Emma. That is an unacceptable. You will stand here in timeout for 6 minutes for how you just spoke to me and then we will continue our conversation in my study. I suggest you use this time to change your attitude and adjust your tone."

The woman gently turned the stunned girl back around and went to magically clean up the mess in the kitchen and have her own much needed cup of coffee. The timer on the stove drew Regina out of her thoughts too soon. Knowing her next move would be tough for Emma to process she took a moment to think through what she was about to do. She tightened her grey silk robe before calling Emma from the corner. The girl huffed at her name and approached Regina with her arms crossed defiantly.

"Do you need another round in the corner or are you ready to drop the attitude?"

Emma chewed her inner cheek and uncrossed her arms. She learned she did not like the corner and the forced think time it brought. "No. I'm ready."

Regina extended a hand. "Come."

The girl reluctantly took it and was led into the home office. The door was closed behind her and Regina let go as she moved to the cream colored love seat to spread the red throw along the length before sitting down. She beckoned Emma by patting the seat next to her. Not understanding why Regina had moved their conversation to the privacy of the study she rolled her eyes and climbed up
"We left off talking about your lack of concern for your safety. I am not happy with your choices this morning, Emma. I will not sit by and watch you get hurt because you choose not to listen. Like it or not, you are stuck with me."

Green eyes shot bullets for the truth in that last statement. Emma knew there was no way she could pilot this world alone. She was dependent on Regina and that was something she truly hated. That feeling of dependency took her to a bad place deep inside.

Reading Emma's mind, the Queen reached out a hand to smooth a loose curl off the girl's face. "It's alright."

At the affection, the child jerked backwards. "Don't do that. Don't pretend with me."

Sighing, the smooth olive hand dropped, "I'm not pretending Emma. What I feel for you, what I want to share with you is very real to me. I want nothing more than for us to have our happy ending. Meantime we need to learn to navigate our new relationship together." She grasped the small hands before speaking again, "And sometimes that means you need to learn that I mean what I say."

"What's that supposed to mean, Gina?" Emma tried pulling away, but was held fast.

"Yesterday, you ran away from me and almost got hit by a car. I thought the discussion we had and the swat I gave you was sufficient warning of what would happen if you deliberately put yourself in harm's way again."

Emma's princess curls flew as she shook her head, beginning to understand what her keeper was referring to. "No! You can't do that to me, Gina, you're not my M-m…" Emma stuttered over the title again as she had the day before. Regina lifted her off the couch in a smooth motion and she found herself standing at the Mayor's right knee.

"For all intents and purposes in this life I am your parent Emma and this is one of the ways I will correct you when you do something you know better than to do."

"Noooooo!" Tears sprang to Emma's eyes as she realized how powerless she was to stop what was about to happen. She felt herself lifted and draped over the silk lap.

"Since this is your first time in this position, Emma, I will allow you to keep your jeans on. You may cry all you want to, but do not reach back. Do you understand?" Regina calmly explained her rules, wanting to be sure there was no harshness in her tone.

"Y-yes."

The quiver in that small answer did not go unnoticed and Regina ran a calming hand down the length of Emma's back. The gentleness of the motion soothed Emma enough that she relaxed a fraction.

"Do you understand why I am going to spank you, dear?"

Emma groaned, the adult in her felt thoroughly humiliated.

"Cause I wasn't safe."

Regina accepted the vague response for now and decided to keep Emma's first spanking symbolic, knowing that the vulnerable position alone was pushing to the girl to her limit. She rested her hand
on the small jean covered bottom before her, letting Emma get used to the weight of it before bringing her palm up half way and down with a light spank to the right cheek.

"Ow!" Emma mumbled more from surprise than hurt. She kicked up her leg at the second spank and grabbed the blanket they were on with her fists at the third. This was really happening. She was over Regina's lap getting a spanking like a naughty little kid. Emma buried her red face when the fourth spank landed and her shoulders started to shake. Tears she didn't understand began freely after the sixth swat.

Regina paused then, taking in the child's breathing and the rigidity of her shoulders. She heard sniffling and decided to press on with her predetermined dozen. She felt the shift she was waiting for at eight spanks when the little body wilted over her lap. She paused again since she had the girl's full attention.

"Look at me Emma."

The order was met with a high pitched whine and was heeded when she felt a firm tap on her hip. The Queen waited until she had wet green eyes on hers. "Who do you need to listen to?"

"Y-you."

"And why is that?"

"So I-I don't get hurt."

"Good girl."

Satisfied for now, she finished up with four crisp and well placed spanks to the girls's sit spots. She stopped, resting her hand on the chastised bottom over her lap and used her free one to soothe the now crying woman child.

Fingers ran through tangled curls and Emma unconsciously leaned into the affection, the little part of her seeking reassurance. She didn't understand why she was crying. Her bottom barely stung and her pride was more wounded than anything. She let go of her confusion, grateful to feel Regina righting her. Emma's hands immediately went to her bottom to rub.

The queen took in the girl in front of her, the messy blonde curls, quivering dimpled chin, and red rimmed untrusting eyes. In that moment, she finally saw the tender heart of the hard ass sheriff that was Emma Swan and the little one inside who begged to be noticed, loved, and protected. Instinct took over and she pulled the girl up on her lap in a hug.

Emma gasped. Never in her actual childhood had she ever been held like this after being punished. She was used to being slapped, tossed aside, and told to get over it. She didn't feel punished just then.

She felt…

She felt a lot; confusion, anger, accountability, and…affection?

Head spinning at that last thought, Emma pulled away and went to wipe her nose on her arm. She stopped when she felt a tissue being pressed to her nose.

"That is what tissues are for, dear. Blow."
Embarrassed at her childish inclination, she blew and had her nose and face cleaned free of tears. She allowed herself to get lost in the security of their embrace.

The corner of Regina's lips turned up as she rested her chin against blonde curls. She recalled one particular evening in her study years ago when she and Emma had been indulging in her famous cider.

Flashback 5 years ago

Sunday night caps were quickly becoming routine for the two women since their first one a month ago. Emma would show up at the mansion around ten PM. Sometimes bringing a bottle of scotch, but always preferring the Queen's cider. They often settled into easy conversation and sometimes just companionable silence. Emma easily swallowed tumbler after tumbler, never noticing that the Queen only ever had one drink.

"We had a CPS call at the station today, a false one, thank the gods." Emma began tapping the crystal with her nail. "Apparently, someone reported seeing Ashley hit her daughter at the grocery store. Can you imagine Ashley abusing Alexandra? The accusation made my head spin."

"What did you do?" There was tension in the Queen's tone could slice bread.

"Relax. I followed protocol and went over to Ash's house to investigate the complaint, like we are supposed to." The blonde waited for the brunette to settle before continuing. "I told her there had been a call and that I needed to talk to Alex outside. She was upset and rightly so, but let me. I asked Alex about what happened at the store and she told me she had a fit when her mother wouldn't buy her a candy bar and that her mom had spanked her. I then talked to Ashley, confirmed that story and dismissed the CPS call."

"And how did that make you feel?" Regina inquired, wondering Emma's views on such a controversial topic.

"Fine, I guess. I mean it's not like Ashley really hurt her. Kids need boundaries. I probably wouldn't have tried half the shit I did as a kid if someone had cared enough to put me in line like that." Emma finally stopped her nervous tapping and shrugged, suddenly wondering something. "Did you ever? With Henry I mean."

Regina debated answering, but decided that she and Emma were seemingly on enough common ground with their views. She nodded briefly, refusing to elaborate.

Emma smiled softly. "He turned out good, you know. Henry has such a big heart, a strong sense of right and wrong." She dipped her chin when she saw a shimmer cross brown eyes. "Besides, if he was anything like the firecracker I was, the kid needed to know where the line was."

The Queen wondered if Emma had really meant Henry or herself.

The warm little body in Regina's arms brought her thoughts back into the present moment. "You took my correction very well. No more hot coffee or ice cream mornings, alright?"

Emma looked up at the praise and reluctantly mumbled her understanding. Several quiet minutes of cuddling passed before her tummy growled and she felt Regina's husky chuckle from her place against the woman's breast.
"Someone's hungry. Let's get you fed and dressed for the day little swan."

Emma jerked at the nickname, remembering Ruby calling her that yesterday. She wasn't sure how she felt about the term of endearment coming from Regina's lips, though she heated up at being referred to as 'little' anything. Taken in hand to the kitchen, she watched as a bowl of cinnamon oatmeal and OJ was prepared for her. This was her second day with a hot and healthy meal for breakfast. The kid in her loved the certainty of three full meals a day, but her adult self wasn't too happy with the healthy part. But damn could Regina cook. The oatmeal was smooth, creamy, and just sweet enough to appease Emma's pallet. When she scraped the last bit from the bowl she looked up for the first time in ten minutes to see Regina smiling over the rim of a coffee mug.

"Go ahead and put your dishes next to the sink. I want you to start clearing your place after you eat."

Emma did as she was asked and rocked back on her heels, waiting for her next instruction.

"Do you think you can manage to get yourself cleaned up and dressed on your own this morning?"

Emma nodded and then remembered to reply. "Yes."

"We have some errands to run today and it is wet outside. There are rain boots in your closet. Be sure to wear those and something warm. I'll check on you in a little bit."

Dismissed, Emma bolted for the stairs only to have her arm caught. "No running in the house, Emma."

The girl bit her lip, eyeing Regina.

The Mayor saw the girl's worried face and softened her tone. "The floors are all tile and wood down here. You could fall and hurt yourself." She explained further when the girl's brow remained furrowed. "I'm not mad and you are not in trouble. Just walk."

Emma relaxed and walked upstairs to her room. It took her fifteen minutes to brush her teeth and to dress in a red sweater with black leggings, and the ladybug rain boots. Regina appeared at her bedroom door fully ready to go wearing a tailored navy pant suit, heels, and hints of gold jewelry.

Emma stopped bouncing on her foot to tug her boot on when she noticed an amused smile on the Queen's red mouth.

"Sit on the bench and I'll help you."

She plopped down on the purple bench and stuck her foot up with pout on her face at her inability to dress herself.

Being small sucked.

Regina easily popped the red rubber shoe on Emma's foot and gently began to work the long curling locks into a high ponytail. She secured it with a black hair tie and ribbon from Emma's dresser.

Little Emma stood and got a look at herself in the full length mirror. She had to admit she was a cute kid. She noticed Regina had come to stand behind and felt olive toned hands come to rest on her shoulders. They watched each other in the mirror, each wondering the other's thoughts. Emma broke the silence first.

"Where are we going?" She asked, wriggling out from under the Queen.
"I am taking you shopping. You need some more clothes." She watched Emma's button nose wrinkle. "And, I thought we could take a walk down by the duck pond. We won't get many more opportunities before the snow hits."

Emma kept the joy of out of her next question, not realizing it was the child in her that asked. "Can I feed them? Please?" She added as an afterthought and missed the beaming smile on the Mayor's face at that word.

"Yes, little swan, you may."

Hope you liked this. :-(
Chapter 5

Previously...

"I am taking you shopping. You need some more clothes." She watched Emma's button nose wrinkle. "And, I thought we could take a walk down by the duck pond. We won't get many more opportunities before the snow hits."

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"Yes, little swan, you may."

Emma rolled her eyes as the car came to a stop at the third store of the day. She waited impatiently for Regina to let her out of the horrid contraption she was strapped into.

She'd balked at seeing what was in the back of the black Benz when they had left the house and nearly threw a tantrum when she was told that the only way to get to the ducks she so wanted to see was to ride in a car seat. Like a little kid. She had stomped her boots and adamantly declared her ability to ride up front, when Regina reminded her that it was against the law for anyone under 13 to ride in the front seat. Emma refused to move from the porch after that. Regina had easily lifted the stubborn girl and carried her to the back door of the Benz.

"Are you going to sit in your car seat like a good girl or do you need me to help you with that?"

Emma had no doubt that Regina's 'help' wouldn't be pleasant. After a minute of deliberation she'd responded with, "I can do it myself." She'd hated how easily she had given in.

Shaking her head at the memory, she allowed Regina to take her hand and lead her into a local shoe boutique known as The Cobbler. This was their last stop before the park and Emma couldn't wait to get it over with. The Mayor allowed her to look around the small store and to find some play shoes she liked. Emma roamed an aisle halfheartedly and found a pair of dark purple high top Converse that caught her little eye. Turning the shoe over, she winced at the $60.00 ticket price for designer kid's footwear. Come to think of it, she hadn't noticed the price of the things Regina had bought for her, but judging by the amount of clothing it was more than Emma had ever spent for herself as an adult—even. As a foster kid she'd never had new clothes, always hand me downs, the leftovers… except that one time. Heaviness filled her.

For the first time in two days she started to appreciate the lengths Regina was going to give her nice memories… 'Well, other than the timeouts and the spanking.' Emma shivered, remembering the maternal feeling of the hand on her bottom and the realization just then of what it had made her feel. Safe.

"Did you find a pair you like?"

The husky voice caught her attention. She fingered the shoe before putting it back on the shelf. "It's too much."

Regina tilted her head in confusion, "What is too much?"
"The shoes, the clothes, all of it! It's too much M—" She caught herself and slammed her mouth shut, refusing to use the title pushing to spill from her kid lips. Hot tears sprung to green eyes as she had a mini meltdown. Emotions were too big for her little mind just then and she lacked the favored coping options of how her adult self would deal—running and drinking.

Regina quickly knelt, pulling Emma into a hug and waited patiently for the little swan to calm down. The spell was beginning to work its' magic to loosen the trappings of the adult mind. She knew there would be many more moments of struggle like this ahead.

"It's alright Emma. I've got you." Regina whispered, comforting the girl in her arms. When she felt Emma's breathing even out she moved to sit on a small bench used for trying on shoes, adjusting the girl to sit on her lap. The silent Queen removed the red boots from Emma's feet with one tug and reached for the purple Converse on the shelf. The girl watched as the expensive footwear was tied in two perfect bows.

"Try not to over think things. Let me worry about what is and is not too much. That's my job sweet one, not yours." Regina explained softly as she eased Emma to the floor with a kiss to the top of her head.

The girl's lips hinted upward to a smile that did not quite reach her eyes as she took in her new shoes.

"How do they feel? Is there enough room in the toe?"

"Huh?"

Regina fought the urge to roll her eyes at the improper use of phrasing coming from her charge's pink mouth as she bent to feel the top of each shoe with her thumb. "Pardon. That is the correct response when you need someone to repeat themselves."

Emma blinked. "Sorry." She tried keeping the sass out of her voice. "What did you say?"

"That's alright, dear. I asked you how they feel."

The girl rocked on her toes and walked in small circles. "They feel good." She responded, not really knowing what she was feeling for.

Regina watched her confusion with a grin. "Would you like to wear them to the park?"

Emma's eyes darkened and she bent to untie her shoes. Regina caught frantic little hands with her questioning eyes.

"They will get dirty." Emma deadpanned, a dark memory flashing before her eyes.

Regina turned serious at the child's tone, knowing a demon from the past had surfaced. "They are play shoes and meant to get dirty, Emma. That is expected. You will not get in trouble for that with me."

"Oh."

She watched as Regina retied the loose bows and grabbed an additional pair of red Converse in the same size before they went to the register to pay. Careful green eyes studied the Queen as the total was tallied. Cash for the purchase was exchanged and a bag for the ladybug boots found its way into Emma's hands.

As she was hustled into the car seat for the 6th time that day, Emma watched as Regina made sure
she was securely fastened.

"Thanks, Gina."

Their eyes met over what was not said.

"You are welcome my dear."

As the trunk of the Mercedes clicked shut, Emma reached up with grabby hands to the bread just out of reach.

"Be careful next to the water."

"Gina."

"If you get too close you'll fall in."

Emma rolled her eyes. "I know, Gina."

"Keep your coat on, the wind is—"

"Gina!" She jumped for the bread and caught the bag. She made a run for the shoreline of the pond, shouting over her shoulder, "I know and I'll be careful!"

Shaking her head, Regina smiled at the girl's excitement. She found a nearby bench and watched as Emma played bread Frisbee with the few ducks who decided to brave the Maine winter afternoon. When the bread ran out a 30 minutes later Emma came back to the bench, just now noticing the small cooler next to her keeper.

"Is that…"

"Lunch? Yes, it is. Come sit and we will have a picnic."

Emma genuinely smiled at the promise of food. Hands obediently rubbed in the hand sanitizer Regina gave her before being allowed to unwrap her food. The afternoon was turning out to be one of the best she'd had in a long time. As she bit into a turkey sandwich she sighed with contentment. She'd forgotten how carefree being a kid could be. She didn't have to worry about money, work, or anything. As thoughts turned to the week ahead of them, Emma felt her mouth grow dry.

"What am I supposed to do while you are at work?"

"I thought tomorrow you could come to the office with me and then in the afternoon we can go by the school so you can see your classroom. According to the spell's created memories, I've home schooled you in the past. That will ensure you have time to adjust without anything being awkward." The Mayor used her no nonsense politician voice as she explained her plans.

"Why school? I've been there, done that, and bought the T-shirt." She giggled at her own clever answer, taking another bite of her sandwich.

Filing away her first thought of because I said so, Regina explained. "You will need to relearn a few fine motor skills like writing reading. Also, certain physical milestones you didn't master by this age from your first childhood, like tying your own shoes or riding a bike."

Emma dropped her lunch in her lap and kicked her shoe against the bench. "That royally sucks a—"

"Language, Emma." Regina cut in.
"What!? Suck isn't a bad word. Or should I say pardon?" Her words dripped with sass.

"That wasn't the word I was referencing and you know it, young lady."

"So you can read my mind now? That's a power my favorite storybook didn't mention." Emma baited the Queen, knowing any talk about Henry's book caused the vein on the brunette's head to pop.

The mocking tone coming from a six year old mouth was not amusing to Regina in the least. Refusing to argue, she took the last bite of her fruit salad before beginning to pack up their picnic. As she wrapped the other half of Emma's discarded sandwich to put in the cooler, the girl waited for a reprimand. The Mayor stood, extending her hand expectantly.

"No." The woman child stated stubbornly and crossed her arms and legs in classic Emma Swan standoff.

"So, we're back to this so soon," Regina thought, not wanting to take the choice to comply from the girl again. She believed children needed choices to feel in control.

"You can take my hand or I will carry you to the car. It is your choice, Emma."

The girl made a show of tapping her chin as if in deep thought. "I choose… NO!"

Her keeper replied with a single magical word. "One."

The girl's ponytail hit her face as she swung her head around. "One what?"

"One of five dear, and trust me, you do not want me to reach five before you have told me your decision."

The Queen's sure words were met with scowl.

"Two."

"Giiinnnnaaa!"

"Three."

"Stop counting!"

The brunette raised a brow. "Four."

"Okay! Okay!" Emma quickly stood and took the offered hand.

"Good choice." Regina smiled at her victory and led the little swan to the waiting Benz.

By the time they got home, Emma had pushed the thought of school from her brain, wanting nothing more than to curl up on the couch and watch TV. She yawned as she slid off her shoes by the front door and had to be helped with the buttons on her coat when her fingers wouldn't move fast enough. Finally free of her warm clothing Emma darted into the living room as Regina sorted out her own things by the door. The woman shook her head at the sound of the TV and the cursing that followed.

"What was that?" Regina came to stand in the entry way of the living room, crossing her arms over her smart blazer at Emma's mumbling.

"Nothing…" She covered. "The TV is broken. It wants some kind of code."
Regina took the remote and pressed the power button. "The television is not broken, simply coded to block inappropriate shows from little eyes and ears."

The pained look on Emma's face was priceless.

"In no way is the cage fighting inappropriate, Gina. It's a sport! There are rules and everything!"

"Never the less, it's time for a nap. You can watch an approved television show or a short movie before dinner."

The woman child blinked hard at that. "You are really embracing the whole maternal thing aren't you? What do you get out of this, anyway?"

Regina took a deep breath and went to stand next to Emma. "I explained what I get out of this the first day to you. None of that has changed. Now come. I want you to lay down for the next hour to rest. We've had a busy afternoon and I can tell you are tired."

"Am not." A hot pouty breath blew the stray curls off her forehead.

"You can just rest your eyes then."

Emma allowed herself to be lifted off the couch and carried upstairs to her room. Regina settled the girl under the covers and by the time she shut the drapes the child was passed out. The Mayor took a moment to tuck in her charge before beginning to quietly sort the new purchases into the dresser and closet. By the time Emma awoke all her new things had been put away. The swan clock had a 4 on the far left, so Emma knew it was evening. She eased out of bed, feeling better since her nap, though she'd never admit it.

She found Regina in the living room sitting on the couch.

"What are you reading?"

The Queen smiled softly at the inquiry. "Hemingway." She placed a silk marker between the thick pages and set the book on the coffee table.

"Willingly?" Emma remembered back to her high school lit days and the horrible English teacher from her freshman year.

"I enjoy his inverted themes of dark and light along with the depth of his characters. He has his own particular sort of genius. How did you sleep?"

Emma shrugged and shifted under the attention. Regina always had intensity about her, especially when she focused her conversation on someone. Little Emma didn't know what to make of it, yet.

Regina noted her discomfort and shifted her gaze to the safety of the TV. "Would you like to watch a movie before dinner?"

"What kind of movie?"

"Take a look in the basket below the television and pick one." The woman's husky chuckle followed as Emma dove under the TV stand. In the group homes she had been in, she never got to pick what was watched. She'd never tell Regina, but there were plenty of kid films she was dying to see, but never had the excuse as an adult to watch. She found a whole collection of Pixar films and several vintage ones that caught her interest. She decided on Lilo and Stitch because her adult self was secretly in love the ugly duckling scene.
She held up the DVD in question, half expecting Regina to say no. The woman simply smiled and showed her how to load it into the Blue-Ray Player. The biggest surprise of the day was the fact that Regina, the Evil Queen herself, kicked off her heels to curl up on the couch to watch with her. Emma could never remember another adult readily spending time doing something she'd wanted to do. The girl glanced at the woman during a particularly funny part and noticed how unguarded Regina looked. Emma returned her focus to the screen. By the time the credits rolled around the girl had unknowingly snuggled up into her keeper's side. Emma picked at a loose thread on the edge of a sofa pillow as she thought about the movie while the woman absentmindedly stroked blonde curls.

The six chimes of the grandfather clock drew their minds to the present. Regina missed the warmth of the little body that pulled away from her.

"I should start dinner."

"Can I help?" Wide eyes pleaded to be included.

The Queen's smile returned. "I would like that very much."

Together, they made quick work making a teriyaki chicken and veggie stir-fry that had Emma skeptical until she tasted it. Regina watched, amused as her cooking was devoured for a third time that day. The girl even remembered to clear her place without being asked. Emma then wondered into the living room as Regina began to do the dishes, which she insisted on hand washing, believing that they somehow got cleaner than with modern machinery.

As she worked, the Queen realized how much simpler the end of the day was with Emma than the mornings. It was as if a reset happened overnight that had Emma full of defiance and questions as soon as she awoke. After drying her hands, she set an alarm on her phone to ensure she would awaken before her little swan. Monday would be the perfect day to start getting Emma into a solid routine.

A giggle from the other room directed her thoughts to the clock on the stove. It was nearing 7:30 and time to begin getting Emma ready for bed. She headed into the living room and scooped up the laughing child into her arms, using her free hand to turn off the cartoons.

"Heeyyy! I was watching that."

"You have had enough television for today. You need a bath then it is bedtime."

The child flopped dramatically over her carrier's shoulder on the way upstairs and continued to whine. "I don't want to go to sleep now and I don't need a bedtime. I'm not really six!" She stomped her foot as soon as she was set down in the bathroom.

Ignoring the whining, Regina turned on the tap, checking the temperature of the water filling the clawfoot tub before turning her attention to the frustrated savior. "Arms up."

Emma rolled her eyes, but complied when she saw what she now recognized as the warning brow. She was quickly stripped and put in the warm bath. The girl quietly played with a toy duck she found on the ledge as Regina crossed the room and returned with a red bottle.

"What's that?"

"Tear free shampoo. It will make your hair smell like strawberries."

"I don't—"
"I know you don't want to, but you need to have your hair washed tonight. I'll be gentle and we'll be done before you know it."

Emma was having none of it. She tried to climb out of the tub and the woman had to sit on the edge to keep the child in the water.

"Sit down Emma. I don't want you to slip."

"But it will hurt!"

‘Not as much as the sore behind you've about earned yourself will,’ the woman thought as she gently sat the girl back in the water. She knew there was an unsaid reason Emma was being defiant and she'd bet money it had to do with the flashback the girl had at the shoe store earlier. "I won't let it hurt."

Emma bit her lip and considered her keeper's words.

"Really?"

"Really."

Regina carefully washed Emma's curls. She even gave the girl a washcloth, making sure it was fully covering the small face when she brought the spray nozzle down for rinsing. Soon, the tub was being drained and Emma found herself wrapped snuggly in her duck towel with the hood over her wet hair. She was dried and dressed in a yellow nightgown before Regina seated her on the bed to plait the damp locks. The Queen quickly tied off the braid and pulled down the comforter for Emma to slip in.

Emma watched as her keeper went across the room to the dresser and extracted something from the bottom drawer before grabbing a book off the shelf. She went bug eyed at what the Queen offered up to her grabby little hands.

"It's here? My—"

"Yes dear. I made sure of that."

The purple ribbon was smooth under her fingers as Emma brought the cream crochet blanket to her nose and took the biggest breath she could. Lavender flooded her nose and she sighed with pleasure. "It smells the same." Emma commented snuggling her baby blanket as she felt a weight sink down next to her.

"I would like to talk with you a bit about what happened at the shoe store. I noticed you became upset over something when I asked you about wearing your new shoes to the park." Regina felt Emma tense beside her.

"Do I have to?" She whispered.

The Queen thought for a moment, not wanting to push, but also knowing something of importance was hiding there. "No you don't. That is your choice, but sometimes talking about it helps. Giving a memory words can desensitize you to the triggers that cause it."

Wheels turned in the girl's head before she closed her eyes. "I was five. It was wet outside and…" She sunk down under the covers. "I got in trouble for messing up my shoes. They were new. I never had new ones before."
The Queen listened as Emma told her about being locked in a closet after a scalding bath and not being allowed to eat the next day. Rage simmered within the brunette’s core. She had done some unspeakable things as the Evil Queen and she had paid dearly for her choices in her prior life, but she’d never hurt a child. Even the then insufferable Snow White didn’t have a target on her back until she had turned eighteen. She breathed slowly to calm down, taking in Emma's thin frame and troubled eyes. 'What kind of person could deny this little girl love?’ Even she had loved the child Snow had been in her own way.

Regina took Emma's hands, rubbing gentle circles as she considered her words knowing now what she needed to say. "Look at me." She waited until green eyes found hers before continuing. "I will never deny you meals or lock you away by yourself—"

"But what about that first morning?" Little brows furrowed, she hadn't really been locked in a room with the door that opened, but she wondered about it.

"A temporary precaution of the spell, a protection field meant to keep you safe until I could get to you. Not for any other reason. I'm sorry if that scared you. That was never my intention." She knew now that had not been her best idea. The spell required one to sleep to move from one life and wake to another and she'd honestly thought that Emma would have a heart attack if she'd woken up in the same room as the Queen.

Emma didn't comment on the apology, but felt a fragmented piece inside of her budge.

"You may do things I do not approve of, that get you in trouble and I expect you to because you are learning. I will correct your behavior when that is the case. Though, my corrections will always come from my desire to help you grow as a person and more importantly, from my affection for you." She cupped the little face with both hands and kissed the girl's forehead. "I will never abuse you, Emma. I promise you that."

"I..." Words failed her. That same buried piece she couldn't explain loosened, shifted, and settled in place. She frowned, but leaned into the Queen's side just now noticing the book. Adult Emma recognized the cover, but her little mind couldn't form the words for the title. "What's that?"

Sensing Emma was on overload she withdrew her hands and returned them to the book in her lap. "Henry used to love this series when he was your age and I thought you might enjoy it, as well."

Emma pouted and turned away. "It's not like I can read it."

Regina wrapped her arm around the little swan, pulling her close. "I'd like to read it to you, if you are not too tired to start a story tonight?"

Emma eyed the book, not wanting to appear too interested, but not wanting to be forced to go to sleep right away either. "I guess... If you insist."

Gentle hands opened the well worn cover. As the words of C.S. Lewis left the page, Emma was memorized by the story of a magical wardrobe and a faun by the name of Mr. Tumnus. The husk of the Queen's tenor dulled her senses and before the first chapter was finished Emma dropped off.

"The world breaks everyone and afterward
many are strong in the broken places. But
those it will not break it kills. It kills the good
and the very gentle and the very brave

impartially. If you are none of these things

you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be

no special hurry.' – Ernest Hemingway

........................................
Thank you!

Please let me know your thoughts. :-)
Chapter Notes

A/N - Wow! You stuck with me this far! :-) 

People have asked about Emma's two sides. Just to clarify, she is very much an adult trapped in a kid body, especially early on in the story. At time passes, her little personality will become stronger as the spell works it's magic. Right now little Emma pops out sporadically and is working hard to get big Emma to acknowledge she exists because she is tired of being ignored.

Previously...

*Emma eyed the book, not wanting to appear too interested, but not wanting to be forced to go to sleep right away either. "I guess… If you insist."*

*Gentle hands opened the well worn cover. As the words of C.S. Lewis left the page, Emma was memorized by the story of a magical wardrobe and a faun by the name of Mr. Tumnus. The husk of the Queen's tenor dulled her senses and before the first chapter was finished Emma dropped off.*

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Regina massaged a dollop of rich hand cream into her skin and checked her makeup in the mirror by the front door as she waited for Emma to finish the second timeout of the morning. The Queen had awoken a half hour earlier than her usual six thirty to ensure she'd have time to help Emma adjust to her new routine.

The first timeout occurred when Emma decided to go to the butcher block when Regina's back was turned to the stove and get a large bread knife to cut her own sesame seed bagel. The Queen caught the little hand just before the knife slipped. The current one was due to a shoe bomb thrown against the wall when Emma tried to tie it herself after Regina had told her to wait for help. It barely missed the woman and caused a black mark to appear on the otherwise pristine wall.

Regina's phone timer buzzed. She waved a delicate wrist and the wall was mark free. The Mayor turned from the mirror to eye a fidgeting Emma. "Please pick up your shoe and bring it to me, dear." The woman sat on the small bench by the front door and held out her hand in wait.

Emma sulked from her place and brought the offending black boot to the Queen who quickly took the little foot to her knee after securing the boot on it. The girl had to grip the arm of the bench to balance.

"I realize a thing like tying your shoes is difficult right now; however this is the second time you have thrown something at me. A third will not be tolerated. Now, watch closely." She took a lace in each hand and pinched them in the middle forming two loops. She then crossed them before tucking one under the other and pulling tight. Emma studied the pattern in rapt attention as it was demonstrated one more time.

"Your turn."
It took Emma two trys to make the loops with her clumsy fingers and three more to tuck them as she had seen done, but at the end of 5 minutes she tied her own shoe. The girl beamed, bouncing all over the foyer.

"I did it!"

"You sure did." Regina smiled genuinely. "I'm proud of you. With a little patience, you were successful. Go ahead and finish your other foot. We need to get going."

Emma's cheeks flushed at the compliment and her little heart swelled at the word proud. She'd never been told that as a kid before and even coming from the Queen, whom she knew by this point cared for her, meant something.

"Are you alright?"

"Mmmhhmm. Just thinking." Emma dropped her head and it only took two minutes to do up her second shoe. She was so fixated on the compliment that she didn't protest at having to ride in the back seat to town hall. The little bit of control she'd gained from that simple act had put her on cloud nine.

They arrived precisely at 8:30. Regina led the way into the white ominous building and into her private office. Her secretary, the former Cinderella herself, greeted them ready with a notepad and pen in hand. The Queen spouted off a list of to do items as long as Emma was tall.

"Be sure to tell the night custodial crew to re-wax the plaza floor. I should be able to see my reflection gleaming in it by tomorrow morning. I need the new floor plans for gymnasium sent to the construction department and my car tires need a bit of air since the cold snap. Remind the florist to replace the current lilies with carnations for December and cancel my 2:30. I'm leaving early to take Emma by the school. That's all for now." Regina buzzed passed Ashley, her heels clicking sharply into her main office. Emma followed behind after watching the blonde scribble frantically.

As the Queen settled the files from her oversized purse on her desk, she caught Emma's calculated expression and raised her brows in question.

"You realize you just put Ashley through a 'Devil Wears Prada' moment, right?"

At the reference to the character of Miranda Priestly, Regina nodded knowingly. "And, unlike that character, I pay competitive wages, require reasonable working hours, and provide a comprehensive benefits package in return for efficiency. She's very good at what she does, the best actually and I wouldn't be as nearly as productive as I am without her expertise."

Emma's jaw dropped at that and she glanced through the window of the door watching as Ashley happily tapped away on her computer, not considering that this version of Cinderella was actually content working for the Mayor.

"Now come away from there. I want to go over something with you."

Emma shuffled over to the couch where Regina sat with a thin book in her lap and a pencil. She pulled herself up next to the Queen and furrowed her brow at the cover.

"This is a 1st grade comprehension book with practice sheets for reading, writing, and math. I've tabbed a few with post-it notes I'd like you to try." The Mayor pushed on despite the glazed look that passed over her charge's eyes. "This will give me a better gauge of what your skills are so that when I meet with your teacher this afternoon I will be able to share your progress with her."
"Can't you just wave your hand and make it so I have all those skills again?"

Emma tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice, but Regina knew enough of her facial tics by now to pick up on it. A reassuring hand found its way to a bouncing knee.

"There are some things we must learn the long way in order for them to stick. This is one of those things. Besides, magic always carries a price." Her voice dipped with the last phrase.

Suspicion passed through the little mind, "Did you even pay a price for the spell that did this to me?"

Regina's expression went completely serious. She made sure to turn her body fully to Emma and hold the inquiring gaze as she answered. "Yes Emma. I paid in full."

The Queen sighed as she shifted through the last of Emma's papers. She was pleasantly surprised at the accuracy shown in math. The basic printing of letters and lack of punctuation was typical for a six year old, but needed practice to become fluid script. She'd listened to Emma struggle though a simple ½ page story. Independently, she was able to answer about 2 of the 5 questions about the passage correctly. When read a passage she got all the comprehension questions right. Emma was definitely going to need support with reading, much like Henry had at the same age.

'Like savior, like son.' That thought made Regina smile fondly.

The morning had sped by between supporting the child with the comprehension sheets and her own pile of folders to get through. They had taken a break at noon for a light lunch Ashley had picked up from Granny's and then it was right back to work. The girl had conked out on the sofa after lunch and slept until it was time to leave for the school.

Regina packed up her belongings, deciding to leave the stack of reports needing her signature on the desk for the morning, wanting to spend the time with Emma instead. She gently ran a finger against a pale cheek. "It is time to wake up now, dear."

"Hhhmmmmm?" Green eyes cracked open and blinked sleepily.

"Sit up, please. We are leaving." Regina helped the girl to her feet and quickly bundled her up in the new red pea coat after smoothing down the green velvet dress underneath. A comb she kept in her purse parted through the mussed blonde hair, smoothing it into shining waves.

"Where are we going, Gina?"

"Over to your new school. I want to meet with your teacher and introduce you before you start next week." The Mayor headed toward the office door with Emma trailing behind. She gave directions to Ashley to forward any emergency calls to her cell as they passed.

That woke Emma right up. "Wait. I actually have to go? Like for real for real?"

Regina nodded. "We discussed this yesterday and again this morning. There are skills that you need to learn and school will help with some of those."

Emma ran ahead of the Mayor and blocked the plaza exit with her arms outstretched. "I have my GED already! I'm not going to sit in a stupid classroom with snot nosed brats writing the ABCs and 123s all day!" She stomped her foot for emphasis.

"This topic is not up for discussion right now." Regina sympathized, but refused to debate publically
with her 6 year old charge. "Going to school is also not your decision, it is the law. You will have
the rest of the week to get used to the idea and we will discuss your concerns later at home. Now,
come along." She moved forward taking one of the girl's hands.

Emma deflated as she was led to the Mercedes and buckled in. Regina turned on the radio to her
favorite Jazz station and the woman child balked. "Not this again! Gina I want a turn. Can we at least
listen to music I like?"

"Tell you what; we can take turns every other time on the condition that there is no more whining
about the car seat. Deal?" She didn't bother mentioning the songs had to have appropriate lyrics,
knowing the stations filtered all their songs.

Green eyes squinted, mulling over the idea before she stuck out her hand. "Deal, but I get to pick
first."

The brunette reached over the divide and shook the little hand. "You have a deal. What station
would you like to listen to?"

Emma grinned wickedly. "Heavy metal."

Brown eyes narrowed in the mirror, cringing at the thought. "You actually like that?"

"You said I could pick." She crossed her arms smugly. 'Ha! If you're making me go to school I'm
making you listen to shit I know you hate.'

True to her word, Regina put on the promised station and tried to focus on the road instead of the
screeching coming from her classic speakers. Despite winning the radio battle, Emma pouted on the
ten minute drive to Storybrooke Elementary. The Queen pulled into the parking lot immediately
killing the radio and turned around to view the sulking form.

"Do you have any questions before we go in?"

Nothing.

"Emma?"

A grunt.

"Do we need to stop home first before we speak with your teacher? I am perfectly happy to
reschedule for later today if you need an opportunity to reflect."

"Not my home." Emma mumbled.

Regina raised her brow and turned back around to start up the car again.

"Nnnnooooo. Let's just get this over with." Emma whined, realizing the Queen was serious. She
unbuckled herself and tried to open the side door, forgetting about the child locks. She kicked the
passenger seat in frustration.

Regina reached a hand over the divide, tapping the little leg in warning and caught Emma's chin.
"Mind your tone and my good interior leather. I expect you to be polite when we go inside." She
received a slight nod in return. Satisfied for the moment she exited the car and escorted Emma into
the brick building, stopping in the front office to check them in.

Big eyes took in the familiar interior of the office and Emma wondered for the first time who her
teacher was. She let herself be led down a brightly lit hallway decorated with student artwork and tried to memorize the route to the classroom. They stopped at room 110 and she pulled back, suddenly anxious. A firm hand between shoulders coaxed her feet first into the room.

"Good afternoon Madam Mayor." A petite, cat eyed brunette reached to shake Regina's hand. "This must be Emma." The woman leaned down to get a better look at the little blonde now tucked up almost shyly against her keeper. "I'm Ms. Gold."

Belle Gold.

'Wait. What about the cursed memories? I thought she'd have been locked back up in the psych ward with the new spell.' Emma paused in deep thought, awkwardly staring up at her new teacher. "You and Mr. Gold are together? Like married?"

"Emma." Regina sternly corrected.

"It's quite alright." Belle easily redirected Emma's attention. "This is my prep period, meaning the other students are in art. Why don't you explore the classroom a bit while I talk to your—"

"Okay!" Emma squeaked and fled across the room to keep from hearing Belle refer to Regina as her mom. She pretended to busy herself searching the bookshelf full of colorful bins.

"I apologize for Emma. She is not keen on the whole school idea just yet. This will be quite a shift for us." The Mayor pulled out a file from her purse and handed it to Ms. Gold. "I've brought the assessment sheets you asked for."

While the adults talked, Emma found a bin of wooden blocks in different shapes and began stacking them on the rainbow rug. She became engrossed in making a mini version of Storybrooke complete with a clock tower when she heard Regina calling.

"Emma, start cleaning up please. It is time to go home."

The savior stared, as if in a fog. She looked at the block town and down at her hand clutching the triangle she'd intended to use as a roof and sighed. Everything was put away quickly and she wandered back over to the adults who were smiling down at her.

"I'll see you next Monday, Emma. You'll make friends in no time and we will have a lot of fun learning together." Ms. Gold assured.

Regina took Emma's hand and prompted gently. "Say thank you."

"Thank you, Ms. Gold." The girl bit her lip at the ease of her answer. It was getting harder to fight the child like desire in her to comply.

"Have a nice evening you two."

After the final paperwork was completed for the registration, they made their way to the Benz. The ride back to Mifflin Street was filled with smooth jazz and constant sighs from the backseat. Upon entry to the house, Emma put away her coat and boots the way Regina had taught her and went into the living room. She fell face first dramatically on the couch and covered her head with a tasseled pillow, cringing as the inevitable heels approached.

The Queen easily pulled the pillow away as she sat down next to Emma's head. She moved long curls away from the little face that turned to look up sideways at her. "Would you like to talk about what had you so upset about school earlier? I believe I know why, though I'd prefer to hear your take
Emma shook her head. "It doesn't matter anyway. You're gonna make me go no matter what." A sniffle escaped as she took a deep breath to calm down.

Regina nodded, not denying the truth in that statement. "Still, I'd like to help you process what you are feeling because your feelings do matter."

"Oh my God! You know nothing about my feelings. Get off my case, Gina!" The girl turned away to hide, then back again when she felt familiar warning tap on her hip.

Brown eyes caught a simmering green pair. "Tone, Emma." Softening, she continued. "I know, through no fault of your own, you were never in one place long enough in your first childhood to make adequate progress in your studies. You were also so focused on just surviving that you didn't have the energy to devote yourself to learning. This caused a lot of gaps in your early education that made more advanced concepts difficult." Regina shifted, taking Emma gently into her lap as little eyes began to leak. "As a result, school is now a reminder of how difficult your first childhood was and also, how very unfair." She didn't have to ask if she was right. The shaking girl she now held on her lap attested that truth.

Emma cried, pain a bitter potion choking her as she began to mourn the injustice of her early existence. The teeth it had on her heart felt like her chest had been ripped open; pulsing black pus was beginning to push forth.

'Fuck! Why does this hurt so damn much? It's done. I've dealt with it already…haven't I?' She shook her head, knowing that stuffing her feelings in a mental box or drowning them with booze all these years hadn't been dealing with her past in the least; not when her past knew how to swim.

It made feeling anything at all worse.

Cries she couldn't control turned into sobs and she fisted the cool silk of Regina's blouse, fighting for stability in her sudden vertigo.

"Good girl. Let it out." Regina praised, as she rubbed the little back knowing this was a first for Emma; fully embracing her own pain.

The girl was soothed as sobs finally eased into hiccups. Rubbing her eyes, she leaned back from the strong shoulder her cheek had found a momentary home on.

"Gina?"

"Yes dear?" Little ears missed the crack in the Queen's voice and the shine in brown eyes.

"H-how did you know?"

"I see you Emma." A soft hand cupped the child's chin. "And I understand what it is like to fight just to take your next breath. Your heart has been torn to pieces by circumstances that were not your fault and I simply want to help you put them back together. I can't promise that all those pieces will mend, but I can promise you won't have to do it alone."

Emma sucked her lower lip, taking in the weight of those words. Somehow over the years they had gotten to a place where Regina could see the ache behind the mask she wore every day. She didn't know how she felt about that and filed it away for later pondering.

A few minutes later, she let Regina lead her into the downstairs bathroom and wash her face with a
warm cloth. Willing little feet followed the woman into the kitchen and she watched hungrily as the makings for lasagna were pulled out. Regina handed her a bundle of silverware and Emma quietly set the table before being excused to the living room with permission to watch TV.

"Can I watch another movie?"

"That's 'may I' and yes, though only from the basket I showed you yesterday. If you need help with the Blu-ray player, let me know." She smiled as the delighted girl scurried out. When dinner was in the oven, she strolled into the living room to see which movie Emma picked.

The child bounced through all the songs from Frozen, giving a watery smile and a shrug as Regina chuckled at her pleasure. An hour later the oven timer dinged. The DVD was paused when they went into the dining room. Emma actually chatted about the plot and other inconsequential things as they ate. After clearing her place, the Queen asked if she would like dessert.

"Really?" Green eyes danced at the prospect of something sweet.

"Yes, you may have some ice cream, if you wish. You were a good girl for me today and that deserves a treat."

Little Emma cocked her head in confusion. "But w-what about this morning and at the school with Ms. Gold and—"

Regina cupped Emma's chin. "You tried today. With your boots, at my office and the school, and more importantly when we got home. You let your walls down and started to process some of the pain inside you. That is what I am most proud of you for my dear." She kissed the child's forehead and went to the freezer to make the promised sweet.

Emma flushed at the praise and took her time enjoying the ice cream, which tasted exceptionally delicious. The rest of the evening before bedtime was spent finishing the movie, having her first ever bubble bath, and curling up with Regina in the rocker to listen to The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

"The faun is mean, tricking Lucy like that." Big Emma commented on how Mr. Tumnus alerted the witch's spies to Lucy's whereabouts and had lured her to sleep with his flute.

"I'm sure he had his reasons for doing what he did." Regina closed the book and placed a ribbon between the pages, ignoring Emma's implied parallel. "We will find out more tomorrow. Time for bed."

"But it's only…" Little eyes squinted at her swan clock when Regina lifted her to the floor. "Eight… I think. And, I'm not tired yet."

"Eight o'clock is your bedtime during the week. We will see about extending it to eight thirty on the weekends once you get settled into school." Regina knew by now that Emma faired best with a solid nine hours of rest, plus a nap during the day. She turned down the cream comforter, waiting for Emma to cross the room and get in.

"Come on Giiinnnnnnaaa. I want to stay up!"

The Mayor simply pointed to the bed.

"Please?" Emma tried using a word she knew Regina favored.

Nothing.
"Pllllleeeaaassssseeee?"

The shrill whine scratched a royal nerve. "Enough. Into bed now."

Little shoulders drooped at that unrelenting tone. Emma sulked and climbed into the princess bed, yawning as she was tucked in with her baby blanket and kissed good night. Grumpy green eyes watched as the swan nightlight was turned on and the Queen left, leaving the door cracked.

Emma threw off her covers with a huff, the adult in her refusing to be put to bed like the kid she was for the third night in a row. She tiptoed across the room to the rocker where the book had been left. She couldn't read it, but there were plenty of pictures in it she wanted to look at. The main light of the room flashing on stopped her from picking up the worn hardcover.

"What are you doing up?" The Queen raised a brow in question.

"I-I just wanted a glass water." The age old excuse used by every kid in the history of existence slipped from her lips.

"There's a cup of water on your nightstand. Get back into bed please." Regina handed her the cup and put it back when Emma was through. She then darkened room for a second time.

The girl wasn't giving up that easily and waited a full ten minutes before escaping the bed again. She actually got the book in hand before the light came on, dropping it when she saw the brunette's tight face.

"Again Emma?"

"I…need the bathroom."

Regina stepped into the room, arms crossed. "Then why did you have the book?"

"Reading material?"

"Emma—"

"I gotta' go!" Small feet faked a pee dance and dashed down the hall when the Queen stepped aside.

The six year old woman took her time pretending to flush the commode and wash her hands. She found her keeper in exactly the same spot and sheepishly got back into bed. Regina said nothing as she turned off the light a third time.

Emma waited a few minutes before trying to get the book again and made it all of two feet before the light snapped on. 'Damn! Is she really that good or did she install sensors in the floor?'

Their eyes locked.

"Hi… I just…"

The Queen crossed the room, picking up the book and setting it atop the bookcase out of reach. She then took the girl in hand and popped the little bottom twice with a cupped palm.

"Owie Gina!" Emma yelped at the slight warmth buzzing on her skin. The swats hadn't really hurt, but they certainly got her attention.

She was put directly back to bed and chewed her lip when the Queen sat on the edge gazing down at her. "It is past your bedtime Emma. We have a busy day tomorrow and you need your rest. I don't
want you to get out of bed unless you actually need the bathroom or you have a bad dream. Is that clear?" She wanted it to be known that Emma could come to her for comfort in the night if needed.

"Yes."

They were back to the biting one word answers, then. Regina knew their journey would include moments with a step forward and two steps back, especially in the beginning. Overall, they had made progress that day. She hoped the reminder would stick with Emma come morning.

"Sweet dreams." She kissed the pale cheek and stood to leave.

"Gina?"

Turning in the doorway, she arched a brow.

"Night."

"Good night dear." Regina smiled softly at the sentiment and eased out of the room.

A check on the little swan fifteen minutes later showed that a thumb had found its' way into Emma's mouth. Pulling her phone from her slacks, the Queen captured the sweet moment and decided to get the girl's picture professionally taken sometime in the near future. The spell had provided a few familial photos around the house, but nothing Regina actually experienced. She wanted to provide all those wonderful firsts for Emma, knowing from past conversations with the adult version what they would mean to the hurt little girl who was finally beginning to heal.

'You're sick of feeling numb
You're not the only one
I'll take you by the hand
And I'll show you a world that you can understand.'

-Pain by Three Days Grace

I appreciate you reading!
A/N - People have asked about Emma's relationship with her parents. Some of the reasons why she is the way she is towards them is revealed in a flashback. Others have asked what price Regina paid for the spell she cast. That answer is coming up within a few chapters.

SQ in some form (not what you are thinking, (I guarantee it) will take place in an entirely separate sequel AFTER this fic, but they have a long road to go. That relationship is NOT the focus of this story. This fic is about Emma learning to heal and exploring what it is like to be loved as a kid.

I like to explore complicated relationships through writing and theirs is just asking to be dug into with a spoon.

Hint :: that must mean there is a way to break the spell...

That's all I'm saying!

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Despite their progress on Tuesday Emma awoke in a sullen mood the following morning. Her adult mind firmly locked the kid one away, determined to get some time on her own so she could figure out a way to break the spell. It was the fourth day of the spell and already she was feeling off, less in control and vulnerable. A few different ideas floated in mind, but before she could play any of the scenarios out she heard a tapping on the door. Regina breezed into the room all business for the day ahead in a pinstriped pencil skirt, thick black stockings and a cream blouse tucked in under a matching striped vest.

The bright winter sunlight caused Emma to hide back under the covers as the drapes were opened. The Queen had given instructions to dress in what was laid out and come down to breakfast. Emma fumbled out of bed and managed to dress in red wool leggings with a royal purple long sleeved tunic with matching red peter-pan collar. The clothing fit perfectly and was well made. Emma secretly adored the outfit, finding it both comfortable and cute. She wandered downstairs, finding her little
feet moving faster when she smelled bacon cooking.

It ended up being turkey bacon, but still delicious. She watched as Regina's slim fingers cut up several freshly washed strawberries and placed a few on Emma's plate. Her keeper dished a plate of mostly fruit and sat next to her at the breakfast bar with the paper in hand, having already given over the comics section.

As they ate in companionable silence, the girl realized that Regina always made sure she had food first and it was prepared so it could easily consumed with her little hands and mouth. A small thing like the comics caused Emma's heart to beam at being included. It meant that Regina cared enough about her to take notice of some of the small things that brought her comfort, like the yellow coffee mug she was drinking juice out of.

Emma shook her head, letting her sullen mood return so she could focus on her mission; Operation Get the Hell Out of Dodge. She sighed, sipping the OJ Regina had cut with water, insisting it had too much sugar.

Operation Phase One; Gain Sympathy.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon she carefully followed directions enough to stay out of trouble, but was purposefully withdrawn the entire time. Regina tried her best to engage the girl; even to the point of allowing a cookie as a snack around three o'clock just to get a smile. The bribe had worked for half a minute as Emma chewed happily on the cinnamon oatmeal confection while she watched Regina answering e-mails. They were at the Mayor's office again and the girl was actually beginning to wish she was starting school sooner, just to get a change of scenery. The four walls of birch tree wallpaper were beginning to feel claustrophobic as boredom took over. She sighed after swallowing the last bite and went over to tug on Regina's sleeve.

Phase Two; Distract the Pray.

The Mayor smoothed her blouse where Emma had pulled. "Emma do not tug at people's clothing when you want attention. Use your words instead." She gently admonished and took a napkin from the desk drawer.

"Gina," Emma began, careful to keep the whine from her voice as she was wiped free of crumbs. "Can—I mean—may I go out to the bench and color under the tree out front, please?"

A firm no pressed at the inside of Regina's lips, but she stopped to process the request and why it was being made. Big green hopeful eyes batted long lashes and she found her stern resolve loosening. 'Those eyes will be the death of me and most likely, the cause of several grey hairs in the future.' The fidgeting child looked like she could use a break. A few minutes outside and away might just be the start to earning the trust she wanted from Emma.

"You may, as long as you stay near the tree where I'll be able to see you from the window. Put your coat on." She kept the apprehension out of her voice at the idea of Emma being out of her sight. The experience of the car and running feet that first day still sat fresh in her mind.

Emma quickly slipped on her coat before gathering the coloring book and crayons Regina had given her that morning, and made her way outside. Settling on the bench, she waved at the Mayor through the glass. She sat obediently for what she guessed was fifteen minutes, catching brown eyes checking frequently. Finally, the Mayor seemed absorbed enough in paperwork to turn away from the window.

Phase Three; Run Like Hell.
The red crayon dropped as she made a mad dash for the sidewalk that led to town. Purple Converse slammed the pavement as she ran the familiar path. She first thought when she had awoken that morning to try and go to Mary-Margret's loft once she got away, but decided against it, not knowing if that was still the teacher's home. She also realized she did not like the way the pixie hair woman ignored her in favor of speaking to Regina on the street that first day. Her mind wondered what had become of David and even Neal. Between the shock of her current state and her little being self absorbed, as most children are, she didn't even think to inquire. Based on what she'd observed about the spelled town folk so far, she bet they were still with MM.

Emma shook her head to clear it and found herself on the edge of the park, cheeks flushed as she racked her brain for phase four of the plan when she suddenly realized there wasn't one. She sunk dejectedly on a nearby bench, the same one they'd had their picnic at by the duck pond, staring at her shoes. The same shoes Regina had bought and taught her how to tie. The laces on Converse were thicker than the boots and she'd needed another lesson on shoe tying before leaving the house this morning.

Her adult mind shifted to the past and recalled how no grownups in her first childhood had given a fig about her happiness. 'All because I got sent to Maine in a tree.' Tiny cheeks flamed with anger at that idea. A bitterness she didn't miss took over as she thought back to the quarrel she'd had with David and Snow years ago, the same argument that had started the divide in their relationship.

………………………………………………

Flashback – 4 years ago…

Emma stood in the kitchen of the Charming loft at the fridge looking for a beer among juice boxes and lunch-ables. She shoved Neal's stuff to the side and grinned when her hand found the last one. Popping the tab she took a long pull and closed the fridge with a hip bump and leaned over the counter holding her head in hand, wincing at the sound of a key in the lock.

'Damn, their home early.' She thought and tried to smile in spite of her throbbing head. It had been a long stressful week saving the town from yet another fairy tale disaster. She was hoping to be in bed before her parents had gotten home from their weekly date night.

"Hi Emma!" MM's cheery voice ran through the loft. "Was Neal good for you?"

"As always. He's been asleep since 8:00." Emma kept her beer behind her back as she eased towards the stairs. "I was just heading up myself, good night."

MM blocked her path. "Oh, but it's early. Stay up with us and talk for a bit. I feel like I never get to see you anymore."

David chimed in with an easy smile. "Emma humor your mother and come sit."

Sighing and gearing up for the fight to come Emma shuffled into the living room, not bothering to hide the drink anymore. Two pairs of judging eyes followed the path of the beer from hand to mouth.

"Really Emma? You were supposed to watch Neal tonight not get drunk and we asked you not to drink when you are caring for him." Snow shook her head, brows furrowed.

"Don't start. I just opened it and he's asleep." She held up a hand as she settled on the arm of the sofa, cringing as MM and David hovered closer. "One beer will not even put me over the legal limit. The hospital is two blocks away, 911 on speed dial, and oh yeah; I'm a freaking adult over 21."

David rolled his eyes, ready to mediate, but MM cut him off.
"You need slow down on your drinking; especially when we ask you to on a night like this. Maybe you should get some help, talk to Archie."

Emma threw her head back in exasperation. "It's one beer and a Saturday night."

"That's not what I mean Emma. You're different, you're changing and I don't like it." Snow's princess tone took over. "If we were back in the Enchanted Forest you wouldn't be acting this way or treating me with such disrespect."

Green eyes blinked and burned with un-shed tears. After the week she'd had that took the cake. "You know what... I'm not a little kid." She stood and got right up in MM's space. "You can't tell me what to do and I really hate it when you pull the royalty card. This is America, not fairy tale land."

David tried to step between the two fuming women. "Not this again. We explained it to you Emma. We had no choice—"

"No! You had a choice."

"Our choice was to save you."

Emma shook her head. "You chose to save yourselves. What about me? No one ever tried to save me! We knew each other all of 5 fucking minutes before you stuck me in a god damn tree and FedExed me to Maine."

A delicate hand flew, landing with a crack against a pale cheek. Emma staggered back, cupping her stinging face with both hands.

"Oh Gods Emma, I'm sorry! I didn't mean—" MM reached out as the shock-wave of her impulse registered.

The blonde jerked back out of reach, stumbling towards the door. "Don't! Don't you touch me."

Shaking hands grabbed her jacket and keys before disappearing into the night.

A mother duck and ducklings caused ripples across the green water. Feelings of loneliness crept into the girl's gut, but shook it off when she heard a group of joggers coming up the path. Moving quickly, she found a break in the sculpted bushes to hide in and crouched down in the dirt as the runners went past.

Frowning she threw a handful of pebbles away from her in frustration. This had been the extent of her plan; get away and think. Not her brightest idea. She had always been good at running, but not what came after. Her brain felt scrambled and a cool sweat broke out on her skin as she processed what she had just done.

'Gina is going to BBQ me with a fireball for sure… She is probably worried, too.' Blonde curls flew as she shook the guilty thought away. She spent the next hour drawing in the dirt with a stick as she tried to think of a way out the current mess. The child mind was pulling thoughts in another direction entirely, wondering if Regina missed her.

The growling of her stomach startled her. Twilight seeped into town and long shadows began to form across the park. Usually they'd be home—at the mansion—starting to make dinner by now. She groaned, not liking the slip.
Emma's mind began to play tricks on her as darkness crept in on the horizon. Shivering against the chilly air, the child bolted when she heard the wind whistling behind her with the beginnings of a storm coming in from the seaside. Stopping to catch her breath in front of the diner, she spotted a friendly figure in the glowing window.

The door chime caught the redhead's attention and she nearly dropped the mug of coffee she was holding when she realized who it was. "Emma? Where's your Mom?"

Emma winced at that reference and suddenly felt the kid side fully take over. She shrugged her shoulders, growing teary eyed and looked about the empty space. Granny told Ruby to take care of her, before the old woman quickly disappeared into the back room.

Ruby gestured to the high stools by the counter. Emma climbed up, spinning side to side. The fear from being alone for the last few hours was finally wearing on her tiny nerves.

"Hot chocolate?"

Emma nodded, her stomach agreeing noisily.

The she wolf laughed, "And maybe a grilled cheese sandwich?"

Another bob.

Two minutes later Emma was inhaling the meal Granny had prepared as Ruby watched. "Do you want to talk about why you're on your own, little swan?"

"I…I needed to think." She'd decided just to be honest with what she was feeling, going against adding the whole truth of her circumstances. There was no way the wolf would believe her without proof.

"It must be tough being the Mayor's kid." Ruby drew from her spell created memories.

Emma swallowed. "She's making me go to school next week." Using that excuse to gain a semi-normal moment with her friend. "Everything is different now and I don't…I miss how things used to be."

"Change can be uncomfortable. Have you tried talking to your Mom about it?"

"She's not my Mom." Emma stuffed the last of the sandwich in her mouth and nearly choked when she realized she didn't just mean Regina by that comment.

"Is this about the adoption again?" The waitress remembered that was a sensitive topic, though knew that Regina had never once hidden the fact Emma or Henry was adopted from anyone. "If there is one thing I know about the Mayor is that she would go to the moon and back for you. She chose you. That is so incredibly special and unconditional love at its' finest."

Emma stared into the nearly empty hot chocolate, missing the chime of the diner door and the significance of the wolf's words.

"But she's all uptight about stupid stuff and there are timeouts and rules and I have to bed at eight and, and…" There were those things, but there were also hugs, walks, bedtime stories, bubble baths, and movies, too. Emma shook the kid thoughts off and huffed. "She has a stick stuck up her—"

"Don't you dare finish that statement. My being uptight and such, as you so eloquently put it, is the least of your concerns at the moment little miss swan."
'Shit! Shit! Shit!'

Emma hiked her shoulders to her ears as she heard the quick click of heels on the checkered floor. Eugenia appeared from the back room and Emma put two and two together. Granny had rat her out.

The stool she was on spun around to face the glowering Queen. They stared at each other for a moment and Emma shrunk at the obvious tear tracks on olive skin.

'So she did miss me, after all.' Emma thought as she was pulled into a fierce hug. She felt shoulders shaking under her skinny arms that had somehow found their way around the brunette's neck.

"She's alright, Regina." Granny addressed informally. "I've already notified Sheriff Nolan that she was safe after we spoke last. Little one came in cold and frightened, but otherwise unhurt. Take her home. Looks like you both could use some time with each other."

Big ears perked up at the mention of the Sheriff. 'So Gina made David the Sheriff and called him to find me…Why would she…?' Little Emma pushed into the forefront, whispering against the wool of the Mayor's coat.

"I'm Ssorrry."

Regina took a deep breath and then other before loosening her grip. She helped Emma off the bar stool and kept a death grip on the little hand as she thanked the Lucas women for their help.

Granny's knowing eyes wrinkled with a smile. "It's no trouble and the food is on the house." She held up a hand when the brunette tried to hand over money for the meal.

Pulling Emma along behind her, Regina made a regal exit towards the Mercedes.

The drive was silent.

The girl fidgeted in the car seat, avoiding the Mayor's dark eyes in the rear view mirror and thinking about her inevitable destruction back at the mansion. She tried to focus on pulling out the leaves that had found their way in her hair from the park bushes. The Benz engine turned off much too soon for Emma's liking and she was taken from the car by hand. Regina let go only when they were safely inside the house with the door locked. The girl shed her muddy shoes and dusty coat, starting to hang it up.

"Leave it by the door. I need to have your coat dry cleaned before you can wear it again." Regina instructed, finally taking in the state of disarray that the little girl was in. Feeling the beginning of a headache at the base of her skull she walked towards the stairs. "You need a bath. Come."

"Gina?"

Pausing, a delicate brow rose.

Emma licked her lips, guilt starting to take over. "I'm in trouble, huh?"

"Yes, quite a bit I'm afraid." The Queen answered frankly, being sure to keep her tone neutral. "We will discuss it after you get cleaned up."

A half hour later, Emma sat on Regina's large sleigh bed in a clean purple nightgown having her hair brushed and braided into two twin plaits. Her stomach knotted when the ends were tied off knowing that it was time to face the music. She felt a tap against her hip, knowing the brunette wanted her to turn around. Their eyes met.
Regina studied her charge. "Are you hungry or did you have enough to eat at the diner?"

"N-no, I'm good." She hated the stutter that gave nerves away.

"What happened today?"

A shrug.

"Emma?"

"I just needed some space. It's not a big deal, Gina."

"Not a big—" Regina scoffed, losing what patience she had left. "Not a big deal? Emma! I drove around for over two hours looking for you, worried sick that you were hurt or lost or…" She failed to finish and stood from the bed, placing hands on hips to look down at the squirming bundle and decided to call the girl's bluff. "You were allowed space when I trusted you to go outside on your own this afternoon. That has nothing to do with the real reason you ran away, now does it?"

"I don't…" Hot tears ran down pink cheeks. "I don't know."

At the whisper Regina went back to sit on the bed, taking little hands. "You do know and that is what you need to come to terms with."

"You're uptight." Emma began and felt her hands squeezed gently.

The Queen sighed. "You are in enough trouble without calling me names, dear."

"Noooo, I'm trying to tell you."

Regina frowned thoughtfully at the sincerity in Emma's words before nodding. "Continue."

"You're that, but also nice to me. I hate that I want you to be. That I like it when you do stuff with me, like the movies or braiding my hair." Big Emma struggled to explain the duality of her feelings. "I just kind of freaked and wanted time to think of a way to change things back to normal, but little me got scared and it got dark and…" She shrugged again, knowing Regina knew how the rest of the story went.

"I understand you wanting space. In fact, that's exactly why I gave it to you today. I knew you needed some time on your own think."

"You did?"

The Queen nodded, deciding not to tell Emma how transparent she really was. "I trusted you to stay under the tree. My heart stopped when I saw that you were gone because I thought someone had taken you, which was a very real possibility Emma. This world may have been created with a spell, but you are not protected from all its' harms."

"I didn't think about that." The end of a blonde braid found a way into her mouth. She chewed it restlessly.

The brunette pulled the plait away and lifted a pointed chin with two fingers. "No, you did not think. You ran without thinking about the consequences of your actions or the feelings of others who care about you. A good deal of your old life was spent running and I will not allow that behavior to continue this time around, young lady." She let the little face go when she realized there was something else. "A few days ago you told me not to pretend with you on my affections. I have been
genuine in all of my interactions with you Emma for several years now and I promise I will continue to be real with you. That deal goes two ways."

Emma blushed knowing she'd royally played the Queen. "I didn't mean to…"

"Yes, Emma you did mean to manipulate me this afternoon, being sweet and affectionate with the purpose of getting me distracted to get something you wanted. You may not think I have a heart, but I do and your manipulation of it is unacceptable."

"I'm sorry, Gina." She felt bad when her actions were put so plainly.

"I appreciate your apology dear, but that doesn't excuse your behavior. You broke a lot of rules today, rules that are in place to keep you safe. We have discussed your safety numerous times this week and I am tired of repeating my expectations only for you not to heed them." She raised her brow for emphasis.

Emma wiggled backwards. "I think I want to go to bed now."

"You will be after we are done here." Regina confirmed, already deciding to put Emma to bed early. She took a little hand and led the girl to an empty corner. "First, I want you to spend some time thinking about the effects your choices have on others then you will be getting a spanking for your actions today."

The savior drew back at that news, digging her socks into the carpet. "Nooo Gina! I'm sorry!"

Regina easily carried the pouting girl across the room and put the little wrinkled nose to face the wall. "Six minutes Emma." She waited for the fidgeting to cease before going back to sit on the bed to further think her decision through. She hated the idea of disciplining the child, but knew the ramifications from the adult in Emma of not following through.

The little blonde turned around at her name a few minutes later, but shrunk into the wall when she saw her keeper perched on the edge of the bed.

"Gina, pleaseee."

"Come here Emma." She kept her tone reassuring, but left little room for being disobeyed.

Little socked feet took a single step forward, stalling for time. "I'll listen from now and I won't run again." Pleading did nothing, but earn her a single word.

"One."

"Don't count!"

"Two."

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Emma shuffled over and began sniffling when she was lifted up across a perfectly ironed pencil skirt.

"I don't want a spanking. I'm not a little kid! Not really." Emma felt an arm across her lower back, keeping her still.

"That is not your decision to make. Now tell me why I have you across my lap for a second time in 48 hours."

Emma kicked up her feet in protest missing the brunette's face by mere inches. She froze when she
felt a hand rest on her bottom. Sighing she dropped her feet mumbling a response.

The Queen's hand left the small behind and returned with a warning.

"Okay! I wasn't safe."

"And?" Another rebuke followed.

"Ow! I didn't think about y-your feelings and someone could have t-taken me." She dropped her head onto the comforter in defeat, knowing she'd pushed the Queen too far.

Regina pulled the girl's nightgown up out of the way and let her hand do the talking on Emma's panties for the next six spanks. There was nothing harsh or unfeeling about the way she disciplined. Quite the opposite; she felt too much. She knew big Emma was unconsciously counting on her to define the boundaries of their life together and to hold her accountable when those lines were crossed.

Another pause and Emma started to reach back to stop the last layer of protection from leaving and had her small hand caught. It was held gently out of the way.

"Emma." The first syllable was stressed in warning.

Yellow panties rested at her knees and she began to cry into the duvet as she felt the Queen's right knee lift, exposing the underside of her cheeks. A free hand found her keeper's bare calf and squeezed as the last four crisp spanks turned her bottom a bright pink.

"No more running." Regina rubbed her hand briskly against the warm skin, calming the burn before fixing the clothing and lifting Emma up into her arms. The girl fell heavily against her and one grabby hand fistèd the fabric of her blouse as the other forced a thumb into a little mouth.

"That's my good girl."

Little Emma relaxed at those words and hid her face against the Queen's chest. She was held for a few minutes as the tears slowed and then began to panic when the arms around her loosened. "Don't let go yet."

"I won't. I was actually going to take you into your room so we can rock and read before bed. Would you like that, dear?"

Green eyes clouded with confusion and then narrowed, becoming lost.

Regina felt her heart pinch, knowing Emma's mind had shifted to a dark place. "Look at me please."

She waited for the girl to obey. "Things like hugs, stories, or braiding your hair will never be denied to you as a punishment or for any other reason. I don't work that way."

Emma studied her keeper, seeking any hint of untruth and found none.

"Okay."

There was just enough in that single word to cause the stitches of trust to begin mending the gap in the Queen's darkened heart.

........................................

Next chapter reveals the price Regina paid, a bit of Henry time, and insight into Emma's dual nature. Please review and let me know if you want any specific little Emma moments. :-)

Chapter 8

Previously...

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By the time Regina read a full chapter and tucked her charge into bed it was after seven o'clock. She had stayed with Emma until the girl had fallen asleep and then went about the house tidying up as rain began to pelt against the windows. The smell of left over lasagna filled the kitchen as she poured a generous glass of her favorite Cabernet. She enjoyed her meal, though found herself missing Emma's chatter.

After doing the dishes, she topped off her wine and headed upstairs, peeking in on the little swan before making her way to the en suite of her bedroom. She took her time filling the elegant claw foot tub with bath salts and oils, hissing as she eased herself down into the hot water. The intensity of the heat caused gooseflesh to bloom across tanned skin. The worries of the day disappeared an hour later down the drain when the water fully cooled.

Regina toweled off and made quick work of drying her short hair. The liquid feel of black silk pajamas kissed her skin causing a shiver as she slipped between the sheets. Reading glasses fell before chocolate eyes that began to skim the pages of a rather thick file she’d extracted from the night stand.

She flipped to the end of the medical section wanting to know more about Emma's early childhood vaccinations or if there were any allergies to medication she should know about. Over the next half hour lightning flashed as the wind picked up, slamming the branches of the large Maple in the front yard against the house. After a particular nasty peal of thunder, Regina heard a thump down the hall. She looked up from the papers. The sky roared and Emma came barreling into the room and dove under the duvet, curling her willingly body next to the Queen. It was obvious at that gesture that she was dealing with fully little Emma.

If the child hadn't been so terrified, Regina would have been amused when she peeked under the covers to see that Emma had hands over her ears with her butt up in the air. The brunette cleared the file to the side and joined her in the makeshift hide out.

"Hi there." Her fingers cleared blonde curls away so she could see Emma's puckered face.

"Too noisy."

"The storm is making quite the racket out there, isn't it? Do you want to keep me company until it
stops?"

A tentative nod.

Regina grinned, running her thumb against a pale cheek. "Come and sit up a bit so we can get comfortable."

Emma crawled out and snuggled up next to her keeper as the Queen flicked her wrist summoning the crocheted blanket and wrapped it around the little swan who began stroking the ribbon, as she often did, when afraid. Questioning adult eyes met brown when the girl noticed a file on the nightstand.

"Is that…mine?" She recognized the many colorful tabs in a rainbow pattern down the side, confused at why it would be here.

"Yes, one of the few files that appeared in my lockbox from the spell." Regina put back on her glasses, trying to gauge how adult Emma felt about that.

"Why?"

"As your parent, I need to know your history and have access to information pertaining to your health."

Emma detected no falsehood there, slowing coming to terms that what was left of her privacy was no longer her own. A slightly sick look twisted her features as she dared ask, "Is there other stuff in there, like from before?"

"Do you mean your foster care records and such? Not at all…. In this life you were never in state custody. Enough questions. Try closing your eyes. I'll be right here." Regina decided to end the conversation, knowing the other half was a whole other can of worms she was not ready to open, yet.

Little Emma curled up under the safety of that promise.

"Night Gina."

"Good night, my dear."

Regina returned to the file as Emma slept and the storm lessened to a misting rain. She made a note on her Google calendar that the girl was due for a round of vaccinations in a week. That was sure to be a thrilling experience for both of them. It was near midnight when she finally turned off the lamp and let her mind wander back to her conversation with Emma about the records and first time she'd seen that same sick look on the blonde's face.

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Flash back – 4 years ago…

"I can't believe her! How dare… It... She... UGH!" Emma threw her red leather jacket on the chaise and stormed about the small room.

The Queen picked up the discarded leather with two fingers, and much distaste, and hung it on a hook by the door of the study. "If you must throw something on my white chaise, might it at least be something cleaner that the dead animal you insist on calling a jacket?"

Emma dropped a bag her shoulders to the floor and sunk into the couch with her head in her hands.
Regina softened at the dejectedness of the woman, "I was only trying to lighten the mood. I didn't mean it."

The blonde plunked backwards and blew the hair off her face. "It's not that. It's Snow."

"What did the 'flake do now?" Already feeling agitated at the thought of Snow hurting Emma again after the slap a month prior.

"Regina." Emma's lips turned up briefly at the nickname before becoming pinched. "She had my file again, my foster care records. She was reading them, crying and—God I just can't deal with that look she gets, you know? The 'I'm sorry, BUT I had no choice' look."

Regina nodded. "I know the look. She often had that expression as a child whenever her father caught her doing something forbidden to her, which wasn't much. She always found a way to justify her actions."

Emma could still feel the burn on her cheek from the slap Snow had given her as she pulled a worn brown file from the bag between her boots and ran long fingers over the tab protruding from it. She opened the cover and unpinned one of the many pictures paper clipped to the first page, a familiar green sickness taking over. The bottle of Johnny Walker found its' way from the bottom of her bag to her mouth. After the burning in her throat eased she passed the picture to Regina. She watched the brown eyes take in the image.

"You are..." Regina searched for the right description for the little eyes staring up from the picture, "haunting in this."

Emma nodded, taking a sip of scotch. "We went through a lot of shit."

The Queen tilted her head and took a seat next to Emma, her eyes never leaving the image of the little girl. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" Another sip.

"Refer to the child in you in third person?"

"Cause she is. A third person, I mean, at least to me."

"Explain."

"There's me right now the almighty Savior, the Princess who was born in the Enchanted Forest and there's her, Emma Swan." A large gulp of liquor followed that statement, dripping down a pointed chin. "The kid that showed up on the side of a highway and one nobody wanted, not that I blame them. I was a pain in the ass." She thumped the fat file on her lap.

Regina took the bottle from the blonde's hand and set it on the curio table next to her. "The only 'pain in the ass' will be in your own if you end up making my upholstery smell like a cheap brothel."

The blonde wiped at her chin awkwardly and shrugged.

"May I have this?"

"Why? It's a dumb picture."

Regina's eyes darkened briefly at the self depreciation. "It reminds me a little of Henry at that age, the striped shirt and the same scowl when he knew his picture was being taken."
Emma remembered the horrible outfit the day of the picture. The shirt belonged to a foster brother and the pants were from a church rummage sale. She nodded, surprised at the ease with which she trusted Regina with it. "Just don't show anyone. I don't want Henry asking about it."

"You have my word. I'll keep...it safe." When what she really meant was 'you'.

The rest of the week was a blur. Emma ceased the disappearing acts, hardly having a minute to herself the last three days. Regina had kept them both busy. Between trips to town hall, school shopping, walks to the duck pond, and making their way through the movie basket in the evenings Emma was grateful for the reprieve the weekend brought.

Saturday had always been her favorite day of the week. No commitments and complete freedom from work and life. She'd been allowed to stay up a bit later last night for managing to go the whole day without a timeout. The little side of her smiled at that accomplishment, remembering the brunette's genuine praise. She turned over in bed, enjoying the fuzzy warmth of her blanket when she saw it.

"GINA!"

The far away scream jolted Regina out of a deep sleep. She lay still wondering what had woken her when she heard Emma yelling. Ripping the covers away she dashed down the hall and nearly bruised her shoulder on the door jamb of the lavender room.

"Emma what—"

"Look Gina!" Little Emma was bouncing at the window, slapping her hand on the glass pane. "It's snowing!"

Letting the scolding remark about fingers and clean glass go, Regina joined her. She smiled when she was allowed to rest her hands on little shoulders. The front yard was covered in fluff and with white rain still coming down.

"It's pretty. I feel like I'm seeing it for the first time, but I know that's not the case... It's kinda' weird." Big Emma looked up. "How is that possible?"

The Queen continued looking out the window. "It's complicated, but it has to do with your adult mind learning to blend with the little one in you. Like déjà vu in reverse."

"Can we play in it?"

Her un-caffeinated brain took a full minute to understand which side of Emma was asking. "Yes, we most certainly can. Breakfast first. What would you like to eat?"

"I can pick?"

"Of course."

"Waffles with whip cream?"

"That's easy enough."

While Regina prepared their meal Emma stared dreamily out the back window. She reluctantly went
to sit at the counter when called, but happily piled cut fruit and a mountain of whipped cream, not the canned kind, on her waffle. Her taste buds were in heaven. A buzzing sound from Regina's cell signaled a text that was soon followed by a ringing that brought Emma out of her food coma.

Seeing who it was, Regina paused in thought before swiping the screen, declining the call with an automated text message to the caller.

"Who's that?"

"Paige. She and Henry are on their way to London from Amsterdam." She explained casually and winced at the sound of a clanging fork against her expensive dishware.

"What the he—heck, Gina!? I wanna talk to them!" Emma squawked, reaching for the phone across the counter.

"Emma."

"I said heck not…the other one. I wanna talk." She slumped back in her chair pouting, suddenly realizing she’d been so focused on herself this week that she hadn't asked about Henry since that first day. She didn’t know what to make of that.

Sensing the inner struggle, Regina rounded the counter and sat down next to the teary girl. "I didn't mean to deny you an opportunity to talk to them, to Henry. They are at the airport and any phone call right now would have been brief. I texted them to call us this evening. You may talk as long as you wish then."

"Promise?" A little question behind big eyes.

"I promise."

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A squeal of delight rang out across the backyard as the girl threw herself into a pile of snow that had been shoveled from the porch. She fanned her arms and legs wildly and palmed a handful of snow before standing up to get the Queen's attention.

"Look a snow angel!" A toothy smirk crossed her face.

The Queen leaned the shovel against the side of the house and went to see. "More like a snow swan." Grinning she adjusted the girl's pompom hat down over pink ears.

Emma squirmed away and tossed the hidden snowball, giggling insanely when it landed at the brunette's coat collar. She nearly fell down in laughter as Regina danced trying to get the ice dripping down her back out of her coat.

Regina huffed and narrowed her eyes in mock sternness. "You know that this means…war!" The Queen threw her own snowball at the little girl, missing as Emma turned to run.

"Can't catch me Gina!" Emma hid behind a tree at the end of the yard and stuck her tongue out in jest. She lost her smirk when a snowball landed squarely on the front of her blue coat. Emma dropped to her knees beginning to make the biggest snowball she could, failing to notice the Queen had snuck on her.

Regina grabbed her from behind causing Emma to squeal and erupt in giggles as she was spun around and around. "Got you!" They both fell lazily back into the snow, watching as their quick
breath puffed upwards into the winter sky.

Emma felt exhilarated and realized how long it had been since she’d allowed herself to be so silly. When she gave into her little side everything was easy. 'Too easy.' She thought. 'But god it feels good!' Glancing at the cherry cheeked Queen, she finally saw a bit of what her future could be like if she gave in, let herself go and just be.

Regina felt large emerald eyes studying her. After a minute she turned to meet them. "We have been out here for some time. What do you say we go in to warm up and have a snack?" Receiving a nod in return, she stood to brush the snow from her coat and Emma's.

After shedding their wet outer clothing on a large rubber mat kept by the sliding door, Regina went to the fruit basket and pulled two honey crisp apples from the bowl. Her nimble fingers quickly skinned and cut them into slices. She gave Emma a few with a dollop of peanut butter and plated the rest for herself.

Sighing at her only option, but too hungry to protest, Emma began eating quietly while watching her keeper clean the counters. She flinched when she felt a sharp pinch in her cheek. She spit out the partially chewed apple into a white napkin, swooning a bit at the speckles of blood there.

"Giiinnaa…"

The troubled plea instantly brought brown eyes to Emma's in concern. "What's wrong?"

"I-I think I'm falling apart…" She indicated the little white tooth sticking out of the apple slice.

"Oh, my dear girl." Regina felt her heart start again. "It's alright. You lost a tooth. That is perfectly normal at this age.

Emma stared at the offending enamel. Shrugging she slid off the stool and went over to the cabinet under the sink.

Regina watched curiously and sprang forward, catching the little white pearl in her hand before it fell in the trash. "Emma, no."

"It's just a tooth, Gina."

"No, dear it is not just a tooth." Taking a paper towel she carefully wrapped it.

Realization dawned on the pale face. "I am not putting that rotten thing under my pillow for some make believe glitter moth to steal."

"That is your choice entirely."

"Huh?" Emma wasn't expecting that.

Regina slipped the folded paper towel into a zip-lock bag and took a sharpie from the junk drawer. "You don't have to, but I have a feeling that would make a little someone very sad." She explained as she labeled the bag with Emma's name and the date.

'Well, shit.' When put that way, Emma felt her little self tugging, but ignored it. "What are you doing?"

"I have started a keepsake scrapbook. This is technically your first tooth. Here, put this against your gum."
A gel pack from the freezer was handed to her and Emma sighed in relief as the numbness crept in, soothing the ache in her lower jaw. She felt the tugging again, stronger this time. 'NO! Stop whining!' Self scolding briefly stopped the pulling sensation. It was getting harder to shift between her dual halves fluidly. Needing a distraction, she voiced her next thought.

"Why do people do that?"

"Scrapbook? I think it depends on the person. I imagine most are trying to preserve memories or experiences."

Emma dropped the gel pack in the sink. "Is that what you're doing? Preserving memories?"

Regina startled at the bluntness of the question. Almost shyly, she nodded, "I want you to have something special, a keepsake of experiences that belong to you, not a file filled with words from people who don't matter."

That eloquence was perhaps the most authentic thing anyone had ever said to her. Emma bit her lip, not being able to find her voice. Instead, she leaned in and wound her arms around Regina's legs. She felt warm hands caress her hair in return.

Ssssooooo… Is it time yet?

Emma bounced on the balls of her feet as she fumbled with the zipper of her footy purple PJs. She was wired tired after her bath waiting for Henry to call. Their plane had landed an hour ago and the text said he'd call when they were at the hotel.

"Almost, have some patience. Do you have any questions about we discussed?" The brunette took over, pulling the zipper up before spinning the girl around to brush out the long blonde curls.

Emma rolled her eyes, recalling the lengthy conversation over dinner about what Henry remembered and the details of their relationship in this life as siblings. She learned about how her brother Henry had positive, but foggy memories of his birth mother and that he had no recollection of the reality of magic or fairy tales. He was, as Regina put it, a version of himself that could have been had magic not existed in the first place to cause all the havoc it did in their previous life. Little Emma had a few vague memories of when her brother had visited home from college, playing games together, and from being the flower girl in his wedding that had been a month ago. Big Emma had tried to wrap her head around the complexity of the spell that did this to them, beginning to wonder how long it had taken the Queen to craft.

"No, I get it, but I don't—" A ringing cut her off.

Regina set the brush on Emma's dresser and accepted the call. "Henry, dear. How are you?"

"I wanna talk!" Jumping, she tried to grab the phone.

"Yes, she's right here chomping at the bit to speak with you, hold on." Regina raised a brow and waited for the girl to still before handing over her cell.

Emma held the I-phone tentatively to her ear and whispered 'hello', the reality of the situation making her gun shy.

Regina sat on the bed watching as little Emma spoke to Henry for the first time. The girl told him about having to start school next week, the ducks, the snowball fight, and even her tooth. Their
conversation was fluid in such a way that she visibly relaxed, grateful for the care she'd put into the
details of the spell that allowed for the two of them to connect in this unique way. Twenty minutes
passed before she noticed Emma becoming brief in her responses to Henry's questions.

"I miss you….I will….Love you, too… Night." Emma handed the phone back to Regina and went
immediately to the bed for her baby blanket.

"She's fine… it's past her bedtime here and we have had a very busy day." The Queen answered
Henry's questions, enjoying the sound of his voice. "Give my love to Paige. Maybe the next call we
can FaceTime…Be safe and call again soon." She eyed Emma's form cuddled in the rocker with her
blanket over head as she wrapped up her conversation with Henry. When she hung up, she pocketed
the phone and went to kneel down in front of the rocker.

"Go away, Gina." A yearning hid behind the scowl in her tone as a corner of the blanket was lifted
to reveal concerned brown eyes.

"Did you like talking with Henry?"
A sharp nod.

"Then what is the matter?"

"I liked it."

Tilting her head, she pulled the blanket off and down to Emma's shoulders. "You are upset because
little Emma enjoyed her conversation with Henry?"

"And big me. Both I guess." She scratched her head, more tears nesting in her eyes; she was tired of
their price. "I just don't get why. I mean none of this is real, is it? This life, this version of Henry or
you or me… I shouldn't feel good about any of this, but I do. I HATE that I do."

Regina lifted Emma up and traded places on the rocker. "It is very real, as real as the air we are
breathing. Keep in mind that there are many types of realities and planes of existence. This life is
simply one of them." She chewed on a thought for a moment, deciding it was time to give big Emma
some insight. "Do you remember when you asked me about the price I paid for the spell that brought
us here?"

"Yeah, you said you paid in full." Emma looked up curiously. "What'd you mean by that, anyway?"

"I paid a steep price. Part of which involves my magic." Regina began, planning to only reveal that
much. "I still have my powers, but they are limited to everyday effects like moving objects,
summoning small things, or cleaning. I can no longer teleport, form fireballs or other such acts that
require large amounts of energy. The spell required an immense amount of magic that I am not
equipped to regenerate. I paid to give you a chance to experience what childhood should feel like."

Emma was floored. The Queen had given up most of her power, for this life and for her... 'but why?'
Big Emma knew that Regina felt incredibly vulnerable whenever she'd been without magic in the
past and to know that her keeper had willingly put herself in such a state begged questions.

"What else? You said part..."

Regina swallowed hard, closing her eyes, envisioning another life and the promise of a love she'd
never thought possible and always just out of reach. There were important issues blocking that path
from being followed and helping little Emma navigate them meant more to her than her own
happiness.
Now that they were here and she was beginning to see the effects on Emma, it had been well worth it. She knew love meant sacrifice, not weakness as she had been raised to believe and she'd do anything to continue to see the growth Emma was making. She also knew the spell seemed selfish to big Emma, but to her it was entirely different; a way of mending the past and giving the blonde a chance at the childhood that had been denied her.

"Gina?"

The little question pulled her back into the present. "I am sorry. I'm not ready to share that. I will tell you at some point, just not right now.

Big Emma was puzzled until something clicked. "At what point? Does that mean the spell can break?"

Regina wasn't expecting Emma to make that jump, nor was she ready for the implications of that revelation just yet, but she pushed forward. "All spells can be undone." Honest, yet vague.

'If the spell is one version of our lives playing out in one reality, what is going on in the other version? Can we go back our original life? Do I even want to? Damn my head hurts.' Emma rubbed her face. "So that means this can all end? The spell, this life?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Regina rested her chin atop Emma's head and hugged her close. "You are not ready for that detail yet, I think."

'So close!' Emma sulked, feeling that the rug had been pulled out from under her. "Why not? You said you'd be honest with me, Gina."

"I am. Remember I have different role in this life as your parent, not as your friend and sometimes I may not give you all the information at once. This is one of those times because it is too soon for you, big you, to know. You will just have to trust me with that or not, as the case may be."

"Do you even want us to be able to go back to our old life?"

"If and only if the time is right." Until the little swan was ready she would be content in this role and give it her all, for Emma's sake. "You are the savior, dear. It is your fate to my break my spells."

Emma scrunched up her face, running new facts through her mind. Their old life was somewhere out there on pause waiting for them and there was a way to get back to it. She was also fated to break the Queen's spell again. Regina even seemed to expect her to... at some point.

'And what else could Gina have possibly given up?' It didn't make sense. 'At least not yet.'

Brain hurting and exhausted from the day, little Emma took over and relaxed against the woman who held her, completely content in those arms. The rhythm of the rocker dulled senses and fatigue carried her to sleep.

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Thoughts?

Next chapter first day of school...
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A/N-so here's a short flashback chapter before the first day of school in the next one. I promise you Regina did not kidnap Emma. Stick with me. Some insight into that is given here. The closer we get to the day the spell was cast the more sense everything will make. I am having a blast writing this and enjoying this journey with you...

The plot thickens… :-)

Previously...

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Flashback – 4 years ago...

A thumping sound outside the mansion door caused Regina to tense. It was after midnight on a Saturday and she was getting ready to close down the house after a late movie and dinner on her own. Henry was camping with a friend and she knew Emma had an evening at the Charmings lined up. The thumping moved to the bottom of the door and turned to scratching, then stopped all together. Readying the spark of a fireball in her hand, she flicked a wrist towards the door, forcing it open with magic.

A flash of red and blonde tumbled to the floor inside. The figure scowled and used a dirty boot to kick the door shut.

Regina winced at the rattling of her dual pane windows and the shoe mark on her white door. She extinguished the fireball in favor of placing her hands on her hips at the disgruntled heap of savior at her feet. "Miss Swan, civilized people knock and call ahead before showing up in the middle of the night."

"Can't. My phone is dead." Emma jumped to her feet and brushed off her jeans.

"So charge it. Now if you'll excuse me—"
"Like rreeaalllly dead. I smashed it against a wall." She pushed past the flabbergasted brunette and into the study where the cider was kept, pouring a large dose and downing it.

"By all means help yourself."

Emma blushed and turned back to the bar. She handed a partially full crystal glass to the Queen before refilling her own and settling onto the sofa.

"Thank you. Now to what do I own the pleasure of your company at this hour?"

"I went off on Mary-Margret again and David told me to take a walk." She shrugged, eyes misting and took another healthy swallow. "I needed some air and here I am."

"I thought you had dinner plans with them?"

"I did at 8:00. Then I sort of blew up and left shortly after."

Brown eyes narrowed and sat on the sofa next to the blonde. "So you have been walking around in the dark alone in the middle of the night in near freezing conditions for the last three hours?" She just noticed how cold Emma looked and eyed the hearth summoning a fire and a blanket.

"Thanks." The savior blew into her hands and wrapped up tightly in the red quilt, enjoying the clean scent of warm cotton that seemed to belong to anything the Mayor owned. "I wasn't walking the whole time. I stopped off at the Rabbit Hole and then found myself here."

Regina sipped her cider, letting the sweet and sour tastes mingle before responding. "What happened?"

"What always happens!" Emma spat sharply, slapping her free hand against her thigh. "Shit, that hurts!"

"Stop that." Regina took both their glasses and set them aside. "Take a deep breath and try again."

Emma missed her drink, but took a shaky breath. "She says she wants this incredibly close relationship with me, but never opens up. She expects me to spill what I'm feeling at the drop of a hat and won't stop until I do and when I do, it's always 'poor Emma'. I don't need her pity. She didn't raise me and I don't even think...I am NOT princess material. We don't have that type of relationship. Like it or not that ship has sailed and I will never get that."

The Queen listened carefully and waited until she was sure Emma's rant was done before responding. "No you don't need her pity, but you don't need your own either and I most certainly will not give you mine."

"Huh?"

Regina pointed to the glasses and again to Emma's now stinging thigh. "You are doing a good job of giving yourself a pity party by submitting to self harming habits."

Emma closed her eyes and dropped her head backwards. "I don't need a lecture on my habits, Regina."

"Nor am I giving you one. I am just making an observation as your friend. If you don't want to engage with your mother, then use your words and tell her so. That is your right as an adult."

"It's not that easy. She is, but she isn't—UGH! It's weird." Emma chewed her cheek in thought,
suddenly feeling vulnerable. After a minute she reached for her glass and took a sip before turning to look at Regina with a small smirk. "Can't you make her get off my case? You have such a compelling way of getting her attention."

Lightning filled the Mayor's eyes. "I do not appreciate your insinuation Miss Swan. I am not that woman anymore."

"Shit! Sorry my bad. I didn't mean to imply that you were. My mouth gets stupid when I'm upset." Emma took one olive hand and squeeze. "I'm sorry Regina. I only meant that you're good at getting her to see things from a different perspective."

"That's not my place Emma."

"What if I want it to be?" Her desire escaped before she knew it entered her mind.

Brown eyes furrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

Emma blinked, the strength in her voice returning. "Nothing... Never mind."

"That was not nothing. You can tell me."

Green eyes brewed, studying the brunette for a long moment before sighing in defeat. "No one ever cared what I wanted, back in the Enchanted Forest, or even here as I grew up. I never had anyone in my back pocket to look out for me. Even the wooden puppet left me for something better."

"You have a lot of people here, now, who practically worship the ground you walk on." Regina reached out a hand to the savior's knee to return comfort.

"But that's just it. I never asked them to. I never asked to be the savior, or a princess, or a foster kid." She ran a hand through her thick curls and dropped it loudly. "Sometimes I wish I could start over, you know? Before the system beat me to shit... I'd take that chance in a heartbeat."

The Queen's mind spiraled at that revelation."Would you?"

"I like to think I would, but it's impossible. I mean I wouldn't trade having Henry in my life for anything, but it's just nice to imagine something different, even if it can never be real."

They stared at each other for a full minute before Emma finally turned away. "I should go."

"No, you are not leaving this house right now. You have no car and I am in for the night." Regina indicated her nearly empty glass of cider taking full control of the situation as Emma seemed to need her to. "I'll make up the guest room for you."

Emma smiled gratefully. "Thanks Regina."

"Don't thank me yet Miss Swan." The brunette insisted as she stood, making her way to the door of the study.

"What do you mean?"

A cloud of purple smoke evaporated at Emma's feet leaving a soapy bucket of hot water and scrub brush. "Uh, thanks but...I already had a shower today."

"That is not for you to wash yourself with dear, but to clean the footprint off my front door. Don't even think of coming upstairs until that mark is gone and your boots are in the caddy where they belong." She instructed regally and left to ready the guestroom.
Emma stared at the bucket, flicking her own wrist. White sparks fizzled. "Hey! What the—"

"No magic Emma. A little focused physical activity is just what you need right now." Regina's voice echoed within the Sheriff's mind.

Sighing, Emma made her way to the front parlor with the bucket. It took her ten minutes to get every spec of dirt she left off the door. The bucket disappeared in the same puff of smoke it arrived in. Shedding her boots, she made her way up to the guest room across the door from Regina's master suite. She wasted no time shimmying out of her skinny jeans and jacket, leaving both in a pile on the floor before slipping beneath the warm sheets. The second her head hit the pillow she was out.

A few minutes later Regina eased into the guest room. Out of habit she picked up and folded the discarded clothing neatly before placing the pile on the dresser, much as she did for Henry. She watched Emma sleep, eyes in wonder over the woman curled up like a question mark.

'What if Emma's wish is possible?' The Queen pondered that thought. 'Perhaps I'll make a trip to the vault and see if there is such a spell.' Knowing investigating the idea wouldn't be a one trip research project, but an undertaking of immense proportions and that even if she found a way, it would not be her choice to make; it would be entirely Emma's.

Her fingers found the light switch. "Good night Miss Swan."

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:-) Please review and thank you! Promise next chapter first day of school.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/N – Here is Emma's first day of school and there are a few more chapters until the spell is revealed for what it really is. I'm super excited to share it with you! Oh, and for those of you that asked for a sick Emma comfort and Regina cuddle scene, I've worked it in, but it is several chapters off.

Enjoy!

Previously...

A few minutes later Regina eased into the guest room. Out of habit she picked up and folded the discarded clothing neatly before placing the pile on the dresser, much as she did for Henry. She watched Emma sleep, eyes in wonder over the woman curled up like a question mark.

'What if Emma's wish is possible?' The Queen pondered that thought. 'Perhaps I'll make a trip to the vault and see if there is such a spell.' Knowing investigating the idea wouldn't be a one trip research project, but an undertaking of immense proportions and that even if she found a way, it would not be her choice to make; it would be entirely Emma's.

Her fingers found the light switch. "Good night Miss Swan."

The school uniform was the worst.

"There is no way I'm wearing that thing!" Emma spoke from under the bed skirt and scooted under further when Regina's heels approached her face.

"Emma, come out from there. We do not have time for games this morning." The Queen patiently tried coaxing the child out, not beyond offering a bribe when coffee waited for her downstairs. "I made scrambled eggs with cheese just how you like it. As soon as you are dressed we can go have some."

"Not gonna happen Gina." Big eyes widened as the heels walked away.

'Did that actually work?"

"HEEEYYYY!" Emma screeched as she felt her ankle grabbed and pulled from behind out from under the bed. She huffed rolling over onto her back to gaze up at amused brown eyes.

"You were saying dear?"

The blonde tried to kick off the hand from her ankle and received a raised brow in warning. "I don't want to wear it! I'll look like the poster child for a quack private school."

Regina pinched the bridge of her nose, desperately in need of caffeine. "I will compromise with you on the shoes. You may wear whatever shoes you want and pick your hairstyle. How does that
sound?"

Emma chewed her lip and eyed the purple bench. The navy pleated skirt, black wool tights, collared long sleeve blouse and crested navy sweater had been laid out for her upon waking along with the horrible mary-jane doll shoes to match.

Little eyes looked up at the Queen. "Fishtail crown?"

"Yes sweet one. Which shoes?"

"Red Converse." Big Emma answered and stood, knowing her little side would choose the ladybug boots if she wasn't quick enough.

Regina quickly wove the complicated braid, wrapping it around Emma's head before instructing her charge to get dressed. Ten minutes later Emma sat at the kitchen counter sulking over her food.

'I can't believe Monday's still suck.' Emma thought as she pushed the cheesy scrambled eggs around on her plate. Butterflies flew in her stomach making her nauseous and she pushed her half eaten plate away, knowing she'd had just enough to avoid Regina commenting on it.

She tugged on the cuffs of her sleeves nervously as Regina finished her coffee. The Queen eyed the partially eaten plate as she stood to retrieve an odd shaped bundle she'd hidden in the pantry that morning before Emma came down for breakfast. She set the box in front of the sulking blonde.

"What's that?"

"Open it and find out."

Little hands tore at the red wrapping to reveal a white swan figurine. "Woah!" It was hand painted and obviously expensive. Emma turned it fully around to get a better look at it and noticed a neat slot of the back of the swan. "It's a bank… Why do I need this?"

"It is never too soon to start saving and you will need something to keep your allowance in."

"I get money?" Her eyes widened at that idea. "Sweet!"

Regina smiled at how a simple idea brought such joy. "You will have to earn it of course, doing chores like keeping your room clean, clearing your place, setting the table, etcetera. Six dollars a week will add up fast. You can start earning your allowance today, but this is for your tooth." She handed a folded five to the girl who eagerly stuffed it in the swan. "Now use both hands to walk upstairs and put it in your room. We need to get going."

After breakfast had been cleared away Emma was hurried into her (now clean) red pea-coat and given a sunny yellow leather backpack with her new school supplies neatly labeled with her name and classroom number. She was secretly in love with the creamy leather, enjoying the way it felt under her fingers.

"Go stand by the front door and let me get a few pictures before we go." Opening the camera app, Regina quickly turned on the portrait filter.

"I don't want to, I look stupid Gina!" She hid behind the coat rack to avoid the lens.

"Emma, do not refer to yourself as stupid. You look sweet. Please do as I ask."

With a dramatic sigh, Emma sulked to the door and stood awkwardly. She smiled lamely, showing
the gap in her bottom teeth. When the phone was put away she made a dash towards the Mercedes.

The drive was quick and Regina was grateful not to have to resort to the Jaws-of-Life to get Emma out of the car. A raised brow had the same effect when the child had pushed down the car door locks after she'd unlocked them. She insisted on walking Emma into school after that.

They hovered outside of the classroom, each suddenly becoming anxious at the stretch of time that would separate them. Regina knelt down to be eye level with Emma. "Your lunch is in your backpack and an extra sweater in case you get cold. I will meet you right on the front steps of the school at 3:30 sharp. Listen to your teacher and the adults on campus. They are in charge—"

"Not me…I know." Emma confirmed and allowed herself to be hugged good bye. She watched as the Mayor's heels disappeared down the corridor before turning towards her classroom. "Alright Swan, you got this."

'How bad could it be?'

The start of the day was both confusing and uncomfortable. She liked that her desk was off to the side and in the back row, but she hated the constant attention of little curious eyes staring at her; the new kid. She stared back at them, sticking out her tongue at a few in hopes they would stop gawking.

Ms. Gold had greeted her warmly and quickly went over the morning agenda so Emma would know what to expect. The petite brunette then went to the front of the room to address the class. "We have a new student today and to help her learn our names I will be taking attendance aloud this morning. When I can your name, raise your hand and say 'present'. Rodney Axel…Kayla Cattle…” And on it went.

When Emma's name was called she smirked and shot her hand up. "I'm President!" The class erupted in giggles and the girl received a tolerant look from the teacher. She shrugged, maybe being the class clown wasn't such a good idea, but it was all her big side knew to use to as a way to cope with school.

As she waited for Ms. Gold to finish taking roll, she noticed markings on the whiteboard and recognized the first half of the word December followed by the number 5. 'It's December already? That means winter break is….10 days away or 12?' Her mind struggled with the mental calculation. Math hour was first and was soon distracted as she discovered she quite liked learning about different strategies to add and subtract besides the standard algorithms.

Reading was next and she struggled through the story assigned in the reader. The words blurred on the page and familiar tears soon clouded her eyes. Her teacher saw the anxious expression and Emma was embarrassed to be pulled to the back table with two other students to work directly with Ms. Gold on sight words, blending, and lines of practice. By the end of the hour she was surprised that she could read a few new words without help and was reassured that it would get easier the more she practiced. Printing was next and by the time lunch rolled around at 12:30 her hand was cramping.

A few children asked her to sit with them and she agreed just so she wouldn't be alone. There was a boy with reddish blonde hair and the bluest eyes Emma had ever seen across from her at the table. He introduced himself as Gabe Cobbler. She recognized that he was the shoemaker's son and his family owned the store they'd visited last week. He chatted at her about his family as she opened her red lunch bag. Emma hungrily un-wrapped the cheese sandwich that was cut neatly into triangles, grapes and milk, grinning when she spotted a single cinnamon cookie with a smiley face drawn on the bag in red sharpie. She soon found herself responding to Gabe's questions about her favorite
things and enjoying the simplicity of his company.

Recess was a tease. Her little legs itched to run and play with the other children, but the adult in Emma forced herself to sit on a bench and watch. Gabe asked her to play, but she shrugged him off. It was nearing the end of their playtime when she heard the sound of footsteps coming near.

"Hi Emma, how is your day at school going?"

She whipped her head around at the familiar voice. "Mary— I mean Ms. Blanchard. Hi… Good, I guess."

"Are you ok from last week? I was worried when you nearly got hit by that car." The woman sat down on the far end of the bench.

"Um…I got in trouble, but I'm fine." Emma swung her legs, cheeks turning pink as she stared at the patches of winter grass peeking through the left over snow.

"How so?"

The conversation was becoming too familiar and made her stomach bubble. "I don't wanna talk about—"

"The Mayor expects a lot from you, huh?"

Emma shrugged, conflicted on that notion. Regina was both strict and affectionate.

The pixie haired woman cast her gaze back to the field of playing kids, opting for neutral topic of conversation. "See that boy with the red stocking cap? That's my son Neal. He's eight and in 3rd grade."

Emma followed the pointing finger and saw that Neal was indeed swinging from the monkey bars. 'How did I not see him?' Her jaw dropped… 'Did that mean…' She swallowed. "Are you and Dav— I mean Sheriff Nolan married?"

Mary-Margret cocked her head, "We are. Have been for as long as I can remember; high school sweethearts." She chuckled. "Not that you know what that is."

Emma bristled. "I know what that is. I'm not stupid."

Concern filled MM's eyes, "Oh, no Emma… I didn't mean it like that."

Big Emma dropped her shoulders, but felt further conflicted as she watched Neal play. She thought back to her conversation with the Queen about there being different types of reality and wondered if this version of Mary-Margret was maybe getting her own second chance at a happy ending by proxy. 'And if she is, what does that mean for me?'

"Are you happy?" Green eyes darkened with the loaded question.

"What a funny question." MM squinted her eyes at Emma, trying to understand what the little girl was getting at.

"Are you?" She pressed, beginning to grow hot with agitation.

"I—"

The bell signaled the end of recess.
"It's time to go inside. I hope you enjoy your day Emma."

"Wait!"

"The bell rang. You need to go line up with your class." The teacher stood, glad for the reprieve from such intense little eyes.

Red faced, Emma stood up on the bench, angry at being dismissed yet again. She never got a straight answer when she asked MM about her feelings on something. "Just answer the damn question."

"Emma—"

"No! You don't get to push me off. Just tell me!" She stomped her foot.

"Yes, I'm happy Emma, but why does it—"

"What's going on here?" A new voice jutted in. "Ms. Blanchard your class is waiting for you."

Emma blinked up at the former sleeping beauty, known here as Ms. Rose, Principal of Storybrooke Elementary. "It's none of your beeswax!" Little hands slapped over a big mouth.

Auburn brows shot skyward. "We will see how much of this, is in fact my beeswax, Emma Mills." Turning to Ms. Blanchard, she nodded towards the building. "Go to your class, but I expect a referral on my desk in the next fifteen minutes."

'Damn it!'

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Emma sat on the bench outside of the Principal's office biting her nails. She was furious at MM. 'Why couldn't she just tell me? Why does everything with her have to be so—' A sharp clicking caught her attention and she shrank when a pair of red heels came to a halt nearby. She suddenly was extremely interested in her shoe laces and then she felt her chin being lifted, forced to meet a pair of questioning brown eyes.

"Hi?" She squeaked, trying to cut the tension.

Before Regina could comment, Principal Rose stepped into the hall. "Good afternoon Madam Mayor, if you'll both just step in we can meet and get Emma right back to class."

Emma let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. 'At least I'm not being suspended. Maybe Gina won't kill me after all.' She followed the adults into a spacious office and sat next to Regina in a padded chair across the great oak desk.

"Thank you for coming so soon I realize how busy you must be." The principal smiled at the Mayor and shuffled a few papers on her desk.

"Of course, I am always available when it comes to Emma. What is this specifically about?"

"At recess today I encountered Emma speaking rather rudely to a teacher who was trying to get her to line up. She was refusing to listen, so I stepped in and was told to mind my own beeswax."

The Queen tightened her jaw and peered down at the girl through thick lashes. "Is this true?"

"Kinda."
"Emma."

"Maybe."

"Emma Swan M—"

"Yeah." She flinched at the deepened tenor.

"You mean 'yes'. Why were you being rude? Did the teacher upset you in some way?"

"Yeah… I mean yes, but—"

"Who is the teacher that made the referral?" Regina turned sharply to Ms. Rose.

"Ms. Blanchard."

Regina looked upwards counting to three before responding. "Of course it was."

Principal Rose softened, knowing that the two women had a strained relationship in the past. That was not a secret, but a fact the whole town knew. "Madam Mayor, I understand school is new for Emma and that she needs time to adjust to other adults having authority over her. This is why we called you to meet and we are not giving her a consequence this time. We just want you to be aware. I also will not have any child at this school thinking it is alright to use crude language with a teacher."

Regina raised a brow, not aware of that fact and turned to look down at Emma. "What did you say precisely?"

"I-I said… just answer the damn question."

A 'tsk' followed; grateful it wasn't the 'F' bomb, at least. "I gave you one instruction today before I left. Do you remember what I said?"

"To listen to the adults."

"And did you?"

"Noooo."

"No what?" She pushed, needing some form of acknowledgement to her authority. They'd discussed cursing many times and she was determined to rid Emma of the foul habit.

Emma blushed and whispered. "No Ma'am."

"We will be discussing this further." The Mayor turned back to the Principal and stood to shake hands.

Mary-Margret chose that moment to step into the office unannounced. "Ms. Rose I have your… Oh! I'm t-terribly sorry." She stammered, realizing she'd stepped in on a private meeting.

Not missing a beat Regina turned swiftly to regard her former enemy. "Are you Ms. Blanchard? I'd appreciate it if you would give Emma some time to settle into school and allow her to choose when she engages in non-academic conversation with you. I'm assuming that is what caused this whole disruption, is it not?"

"I—I didn't mean to upset her."
"Whatever your intentions you have, indeed, upset her." She turned back to the Principal, a brow raised. "I believe my request is reasonable and I expect it to be heeded going forward." Regina waited until both women nodded before turning back to a stunned Emma.

'What the fuck just happened? Did Gina just defend me?'

"Come along. I will walk you back to class, dear." Regina took Emma's hand and squeezed in a reassuring manner, before leading the way out of the office.

Outside of the classroom, Regina once again knelt to be eye level with her charge. "I want you to go back to class and have a good rest of your day. I'll be back in a few hours to get you."

Emma nodded, peeking at the Queen from under hooded eyes.

"Look up at me, please." She waited for little eyes to brave their way upwards. "I want you to know that Ms. Gold called me when you went to lunch and told me what a wonderful morning you had. She said you didn't give up on a task that was challenging for you and hearing that made me so proud." Emma's little smile made her heart float.

"I actually didn't mean to get in trouble." Big green eyes pleaded.

The Mayor stood and tucked a loose curl behind a little ear. "I know. We will speak about it more, later."

Do I have to actually do this?" Emma thumbed her pencil against the workbook on the coffee table of the Mayor's office.

Regina looked up from her laptop, eyeing the girl over the rim of dark glasses. "It is called homework for a reason, dear."

"I don't get it." She dropped the writing tool, taking a bite of the carrot sticks and ranch Regina had given as a snack. She chewed on the left, careful to avoid the new tooth poking through her gum line.

Pushing back from her desk, the brunette joined the hunched form on the couch. "Let's take a look." She skimmed the directions and noted where in the noun sort worksheet Emma had gone wrong. "Remember nouns refer to people, things, and places. Look at the list here. Is Maine a place?"

"Yeah... Yes."

"Then it needs to go in the last column."

Emma erased and made the same correction to the last few words on the sheet, sighing happily at having completed the blasted thing. She lost her smile when Regina looked over her homework calendar for the week.

"It says here you also have some flash cards for sight words we need to practice. Get those out from your backpack."

Groaning, she did as she was told and handed her keeper a pile of white cards, each with a printed word on them. She chewed her lip. "I know them already. This is pointless."

Calling the bluff Regina held up a card. "Then we will be finished in no time. What is the first
The Queen tapped the card. "Word."

"M-aake."

Another card.

"Th…th-aaa-t. That."

A nod and a new card flashed.

"Aaa-ww…"

"Try again."

"Aaawwaa…This is stupid!" She pulled the card out of Regina's hand and ripped it in two.

Frowning, the Queen stood and went to her desk, returning with a fat marker and a few note cards. She wrote a word and handed the marker to Emma with a new blank card. "Copy it."

Huffing, Emma did and her slanted handwriting was held up. "Repeat after me, Aaa-w-ay."

"A-w-ay…away?"

"Good girl. Next word."

They went on like that for ten minutes, making their way through the cards three times until she had the fluidity of the words. Adult Emma was surprised at the patience she'd been granted despite her poor attitude. The Queen never once scolded nor showed pity at missed attempts; she simply expected effort. Regina signed the calendar and put it with the cards back in the yellow bag.

"Can I play now?" She pointed to a basket of puzzles, coloring books, and building blocks in the corner of the office that she learned last week was hers.

Regina chuckled at the earnestness in that voice. "Not yet. We need to discuss your behavior at school first. Tell me what happened."

One shoulder popped up and down. "You know already."

"I only know what others told me. I want to hear about your experience."

'So she was defending me, after all.' Emma's eyes found the ceiling. "The same that always happens when I ask a question, Mary-Margret avoids me."

Two fingers found a little chin, drawing it down eye level. "Explain."

Adult Emma launched into the details of recess and how she'd reacted to being shut down—again—when she tried to ask MM about her feelings. "She always turns it back on me or doesn't answer and it pisses me off and makes me angry." An eyebrow rose. "Good catch."

"I didn't mean to get in trouble or be rude to Ms. Rose." Emma whined, purposefully leaving out
"Being rude is one thing, though I understand that old emotions were activated by Ms. Blanchard. You are not in trouble with me for that." She assured, letting go of the pointed chin. "I am, however, displeased by your word choice with two different adults to whom you owe respect because of their roles at the school."

"But she—"

Regina held up a hand. "Words have power Emma. Your choice of which ones to use in a situation, can take away from that power if they are crass. People get hung up on them and can miss the purpose of what it is that you are trying to express. Does that make sense?"

"I guess... I mean yes."

"We have discussed cursing a few times now. I will not tolerate you using coarse language, especially at another person. That ends today." She watched Emma begin to squirm, but pressed on. "I will be patient if you catch yourself like you did just now, as I understand habits are hard to break. However, from this moment forward intentional use will earn you a swift correction."

Emma's face blanched. Stammering, "W-What if there are other p-people around?"

"Then they will see that I do not abide your use of foul language. Do we understand each other?"

She fought not to roll her eyes, her little side realizing the seriousness of the situation. "Yeesss."

"I also want to be sure you understand the boundaries I set in place at the Principal's office in regards to Ms. Blanchard. They are meant to protect you, not keep you from engaging with her." Regina wanted to be very clear on that point; she was not stopping Emma from having a relationship with Snow. "As a teacher she does have authority over you and while on campus you need to listen to any adult who asks you to do something. However, it is your choice to engage with her if the conversation turns into something personal, like it did today."

"She wouldn't leave me alone about the car thing last week and I didn't want to talk about how I got in trouble with you." Small cheeks turned pink at the memory.

The Mayor sighed, annoyed at Ms. Blanchard's lack of tact. "I understand how frustrating that was for you. If there is a next time, kindly tell her you do not wish to discuss it and walk way. You can always ask your teacher to call me if your wishes are not being respected. Ms. Gold knows to let you and she won't question it."

Emma relaxed knowing there was now a system in place to help her with MM, suddenly grateful for Regina's forethought.

"One more thing; that choice to connect goes two ways. Sometimes people do not want to answer personal questions and when they choose not to, you need to be respectful of that."

"But she—"

"Is a person, too."

Purple shoes toed the white tile. "It's hard with her."

Red lips pursed. "Don't I know it."
Their eyes met and they both smiled faintly.

"Alright, you own me six minutes for your word choice at school. Then we will consider the matter closed."

Sighing, small feet obeyed and found themselves touching the corner where the toy basket was kept.

Regina returned to her desk to finish the e-mail draft, curser flashing as she watched the little blonde fidget. 'She looks adorable even when she is sulking, especially in that uniform.' Tapping her pen to refocus, she hoped for Emma's sake that Mary-Margret heeded her directive in the Principal's office. In the emotional state the savior was in, she lacked the impulse and vernacular control that the adult in her was used to. It would be a learning curve, a tough one, if big Emma didn't learn to control her temper. Regardless, the Queen would hold Emma accountable, as they had promised each other they would years ago.

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Next chapter another flashback and a fun trip to the Doctor for vaccinations...
Chapter 11

Previously...

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Flash back – 3 years ago...

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make it so perfect?" Emma sat in awe with her head on her hands in the living room of the mansion watching the needle poke in and out of the fabric. The efficiency of the movement was fascinating.

Regina pursed her lips, not looking up from her quick hand. "Years of forced practice, dear."

"Forced?"

"You forget, I had Cora as a mother and anything less than perfection was not tolerated." The Queen tied off the thread with a single hand and cut the ends. She checked her work, knowing Henry would be pleased with the gesture she'd taken to embroider a fountain pen and replica of the storybook onto a bookmark for his use while away at school in Boston.

Emma winced at that revelation and settled back on the couch next to the now silent Queen. "Will you tell me about it?"

"She was a cruel taskmistress and we never saw eye to eye." She twisted the left over thread around her fingers in thought, recalling her mother's last words fondly and then something much darker. "I used to be terrified of becoming her and yet I did for some time."

"Not anymore." Emma reached a hand over to rest on the brunette's knee as so often had been done for her. "You chose differently and despite her, you gave Henry an amazing childhood. He tells me stories about when he was little and I've seen the pictures of those memories, you can't fake that kind of happiness." She squeezed gently. "Trust me. I know."

"Mothering seems to be the one thing I excel at, at least some of the time."

Emma shook her head, squeezing again. "Don't do that."
"Do what?"

"Doubt yourself. You don't let me do that and I'm not going to let you, either. Let's make a deal right now to always call each other on it no matter what."

Regina digested those words and the underlying significance of what wasn't said. Her eyes found green, for the first time noticing that they could be three distinct shades; a rich emerald when the blonde was angry and the color of a spring meadow when she wasn't and something else entirely at this moment. "You really think I was a good mother to Henry?"

White teeth flashed a knowing grin. "The kid is living proof. He's a well adjusted, intelligent, polite and passionate human being. And as much as I'd like to take credit for all that with my 'Charming' genes, I know he got those things from you."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" Emma smirked at the banter and leaned back, letting go of the Queen's knee with some reluctance of her own.

"Discredit your own contributions to the man is becoming." Regina set the thread aside and reached out her hand. "You have a deal Miss Swan."

They shook on it, not letting go just yet for the weight of that promise.

Emma snapped the fingers of her free hand and delightfully handed the Queen a glass of conjured cider before picking up her own. "Cheers to always calling each other on our bullshit!"

Crystal clinked softly.

"I will drink to that." Regina agreed, and silently hoped they would soon toast much more when she shared what she had finally found with Emma in an ancient book of spells.

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The routine of the next few days helped Emma ease into life at school. She began to look forward to small parts of her day; namely math, art, and lunch. A sweet was always included in her red lunch bag, a Hershey Kiss or a small cinnamon cookie Emma learned that Regina made simply because she adored the spice. She still struggled during reading hour and her homework, but took comfort in the fact that the Mayor always made time to help no matter how demanding things at Town Hall got.

Today was Thursday and Emma was glad school was nearly over. She had managed to make a friend in blue eyed Gabe and actually enjoyed playing with him at recess on the jungle gym that afternoon. The little in her could barely contain her excitement. She'd never had many friends in her first childhood, always moving from place to place too quickly before she could put down roots.

"Emma, don't forget to ask if you can come!" Gabe threw out as he made a beeline for the cubicles right before the clock struck three thirty.

The bell signaled her release and she bolted from her own chair over to get her belongings. Shoving arms into her coat, she ran out through the front door with her bag strap slung over one shoulder and collided right into Mary-Margret by the steps.

"Ow!" Her butt slammed into the concrete.

Mary-Margret quickly bent to offer a hand. "Are you okay Emma?"
Emma shrugged off the help when she noticed Neal standing next to MM and slowly stood up. The adult in her never admitted the jealousy she’d felt when MM and David had announced they were having another baby. She'd been genuinely happy for them at the time, but at her own expense. The little part of her felt no envy now, but big Emma still battled with it on occasion and right now the green eyed-monster was blazing.

"I'm fine. Sorry."

"That's okay." Mary-Margret took Neal's hand and nodded to the now approaching Mayor.

"Emma, are you alright?" Regina met Snow's eyes before turning to Emma.

"Yeah, I just fell." She sighed as the Mayor looked her over. "Can we go now? Please?" Almost forgoing the 'please' just to show her full irritation.

Regina nodded knowingly, taking Emma's hand and offered a small smile to Neal who waved. "Ms. Blanchard." She acknowledged politely.

By the time they were in the Benz and driving Emma's mood lightened considerably as she told Regina all about her new friend. "He's the Cobbler's son; you know the store we went to? His dad owns it and he has his own game room with a popcorn machine and everything. His birthday is next month and he invited me. Can I go? I wonder what I should get him—" And on she went without a breath until she realized they were driving the opposite direction of both Town Hall and the mansion.

"I'd like to meet his father first, but I don't see why not." Smiling at the ease with which the little girl shared about her day. She was glad Emma had made a friend and planned on helping her nurture that relationship.

"Where are we going?" Emma jumped subjects like a frog on a lily pad.

"Do you remember when you asked me about the file I was looking at last week?" Answering with a question of her own gave her mind a chance to catch up to Emma. She caught a nod in the rear view mirror. "Well, your records show that you are due for your MMR and Varicella immunizations.

"My what?"

"Your vaccines."

Nothing.

Sighing, the queen tried again. "Shots?"

"NO SHOTS!"

That screech caused Regina to break sharply. "Emma!"

But Emma was gone, her little mouth stuck in a scream the nearly tore Regina's heart in two when she realized it was filled with terror. She quickly pulled over and exited the Benz to slide into the back seat next to the panicking savior.

"Emma, it's okay." She struggled to be heard over the now crying child. She switched tactics to one she'd used with Henry whenever he'd been beyond words. She hummed, keeping the tune deep in her throat.

The girl cried for a few minutes before she felt the soothing vibrations. Tears slowed when she
realized the car had stopped and her hand was in Regina's, being held to the woman's chest as she hummed a slow melodic tune. She hiccupped and rubbed her eyes with her other hand.

Regina paused, grateful to have reached Emma. "There you go little swan. Take a deep breath for me."

The Queen let go and reached over the divide for the pack of wet wipes she kept in her purse. After cleaning Emma up she conjured a bottle of water and handed it over to greedy hands.

"S-sorry." Emma sniffed after taking a long drink, hoping she wasn't in trouble for her tantrum.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, sweet one. I should be apologizing to you. I had no idea you felt this strongly about going to the doctor. I would have better prepared you, like I did with school." She purposefully avoided the trigger word that had started the melt down.

"S'okay. I don't like needles and doctors always hurt."

Regina nodded, wanting to validate Emma's feelings. "It seems that way sometimes. Though, I think your pediatrician will do everything in her power to make sure you are comfortable."

That got Emma's attention. "Who is it?"

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The office of Dr. Prince was bustling with activity when Regina walked in with Emma at her heels. Walls were painted a sunny yellow and there were pastel blue chairs lining one wall. A mosaic spiraled on the floor to like forest paths and the ceiling was painted to look like a summer sky at dawn.

"Woah!" Never had she ever been to a doctor's office like this. 'Even that disgusting sterile smell is missing.' The room smelled like fresh lemons.

Regina smiled down at Emma pulling the girl along to the counter to check in.

"Can I go look at the fish?"

The Mayor turned from the insurance papers to where Emma pointed. A large salt water tank filled the corner of the waiting room. It reached from ground to ceiling in a column that allowed one to see from all sides. The base of the tank fanned out to connect to the mosaic making it look like a part of a river on the floor. "Look with your eyes and not your hands."

The little girl took that as a yes and scampered over to the tank. She was memorized by the tropical fish and colorful coral. Heels came to a stop on the other side of the tank a few minutes later and Emma could see the Mayor's wavy form. She stuck out her tongue playfully and giggled when Regina did the same.

"Emma Swan Mills?"

"That's us." The Mayor rounded the tank towards the open office door. Little feet trailed reluctantly after her.

"Hi Emma. I'm Nurse Bell. Will you hop up on the scale for me please?" An elfish blonde woman pointed to the scale. Emma recognized her as Tinker Bell, but didn't say anything. It was taking all her self control not to bolt.
"Um, okay." As her weight and height were recorded she missed the frown on Regina's face at the meter.

"Are those numbers within range?"

"They are a bit on the low end, but nothing to be concerned about Madam Mayor. Let's get you both settled into room 4. Doctor Prince will be with you shortly."

They followed Nurse Bell into a small exam room. The forest theme continued in there and Emma was memorized by the realistic paintings of animals adorning the walls. Regina settled into a chair by the door after helping Emma out of her coat. They were not kept waiting long.

A crisp knock followed by a cheery 'Hello!' caused Emma to swing around. She watched as Kathryn and the Mayor shook hands before a pair of bright blue eyes found hers. "It is good to see you again, Emma. Do you like the new fish tank?"

Little Emma grinned back at that question and shyly nodded. "I want one like that."

"Lots of the kids agree with you on that one." Kathryn nodded for Regina to lift Emma up onto the exam table. "Let's check out that strong heartbeat of yours, but I need to make sure my stethoscope works first. Will you help me with that?"

Emma nodded again as she was lifted up onto the padded bench by sure hands. She was curious about this adaptation of Kathryn and immediately decided she liked this cheery version better than the depressed one she used to know. The Doctor made a show of fixing the ear pieces over Emma's and made funny faces when the girl listened to her heartbeat.

The rest of her vitals were taken in such a playful manner that Emma forgot she was at the Doctor at all. After her temperature was taken, Kathryn eyed Regina silently communicating that it was nearing time for the vaccines.

Regina went to the table sitting next to Emma and pulled the girl into her lap, turning her away from the door as Nurse Bell brought a tray in. She fished a lollipop out of her pocket and handed it to Emma to unwrap.

"Really?" Emma tore into the cellophane and popped the grape sucker in her mouth, not even feeling the cool swab of an alcohol pad on her upper arm where her sleeve had been rolled up. The sweet taste was lost on her when she felt a sharp pinch that made her eyes water. "OW!" She spit out the sucker and it dropped to the floor.

The Queen held her firmly and kept Emma from looking back at her arm. Tears followed as the next shot was prepared and another cool wipe crossed pale skin. The girl jerked her arm away, pushing hard into the adult holding her. "No shot!"

"Almost finished Emma. Last one." The brunette tried to soothe, but the girl shook her head.

Doctor Kathryn tried to distract Emma enough to get that little arm back. "Tell your Mom about your favorite fish Emma. Which one did you like the best?"

"Stupid fish!" Little Emma was out in all her bratty glory. "I wanna go home NOW!"

Regina felt a mix of elation at Emma referring to their house as home and grief at the girl's begging. Without thinking she tried the first thing that came to mind. "Look at me sweet one. How would you like to have a fish of your very own?"
"W-what? For r-reals?" Emma dropped her crossed arms.

"For real. We can go right after dinner at Granny's to pick one out."

"Owie…" A poke stole her attention briefly, but the idea of pet she had never had before was just enough to keep her from feeling the pinch that followed. "P-promise?"

"I promise. You can pick out any one you like." The weight of her words finally registered and she sighed. She'd never allowed Henry a pet merely because she hated the idea of an animal in her immaculate home. She loved horses and even a few bird species, but internally blanched at the idea of a pet fish which belonged, in her opinion, on a dinner plate.

'Too late now.'

"What kind of band-aid do you want Emma?" Dr. Prince asked, smirking at the Mayor knowing exactly what the woman was thinking. She knew she'd be getting an ear full later via text.

Emma studied her options and settled on a Wonder Woman one. Her thumb found her mouth briefly before Regina gently took it out. Embarrassed, big Emma slipped down from the brunette's lap.

"Say thank you Emma."

"Oh… thanks Dr. Prince." Though why she was thanking someone who poked her with a medieval torture device she couldn't understand. She was helped back into her coat and led from the office.

The ride to the diner was quick with the car filling of soft jazz music from Regina's favorite station. Emma suddenly felt sleepy from the shots, but perked up when the car stopped. Once inside her mini me took over and with a nod from the Queen, ran up to Ruby showing off her Wonder Woman band-aid.

"Wow! What did you do to get that, little swan?" Ruby bent over the counter to get a better look.

"It's cool huh? Yucky vacc-een." Little Emma stuck out her tongue in disgust and rolled back down her sleeve.

"She means vaccine." Regina gently corrected and handed Emma a few quarters. "Go over to the juke box and pick a song." She grinned as Emma grabbed the coins and ran to the back of the restaurant. "Ms. Lucas a word if you please?"

The girl pressed her face up against the scratched glass and studied the album pictures on the choice bar for a few minutes. Big Emma smirked, suddenly feeling mischievous. She inserted the coins and carefully pressed A-6. As the old timey vocals filled the diner, Emma waited. She giggled when two delicate brows rose across the room.

Regina finished up with Ruby and sauntered over. "Really Emma… Nina Simone?"

'I put a spell on you because you're mine!

You know I love you

I love you

I love you

I love you anyhow
And I don't care if you don't want me
I'm yours right now'

Little Emma burst with laughter missing the warmth in her keeper's eyes at the lyrics. Regina shook her head smiling as she led the girl to an empty booth ordering a chicken salad and grilled chicken strips and carrots for Emma.

"I wanna grilled cheeeessssse." The whine escaped before she could catch it, earning her a warning look.

"You have had two already this week. If you are not careful you'll turn into one." Regina unwrapped the silverware bundles, setting them in place properly as she thought about the Doctor visit. "A diet rich in variety is exactly what you need."

"But my arm hurts and I was good!"

"Yes you were which, is why we are going to the pet store after our meal."

At the mention of the promised pet, the girl forgot about her arm in favor of asking questions about different types of fish. When their food arrived, Regina cut the grilled chicken strips and carrots into bite sized pieces and slid the plate over to Emma who began eating without issue. They were quiet until near the end of their meal.

"So this Saturday I have my monthly council meeting." Regina took a bite of her salad, chewing as she waited for Emma's eyes.

"Are we going to the office then? After can we go see if the ducks are still here?"

Regina shook her head gently. "I can't have you with me in that meeting, sweet one. You can come with and play in the office for a few hours while Ashley sits with you or you can stay home with a sitter."

Emma dropped her fork, immediately rejecting both ideas. 'It's not fair I want Gina!' Her little whined and her big self pushed back, feeling just as jumbled. 'That would be the perfect opportunity to get away, but then what?'

'I don't want to get in trouble.' Little thoughts slammed into big ones.

'Shit up!'

'NO!'

'FINE I won't run… Like it worked out so well the last time anyway. Get a hold of yourself Swan!' Emma swallowed as her dual sides put down their arms. "But Saturday is our… is the weekend. I want to do something fun!"

"I asked Ms. Lucas if she would be willing to sit with you at home and she agreed. Those are your two choices." She watched Emma process as she ate the rest of her salad.

Emma's jaw dropped at the idea of her former best friend babysitting her. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. 'We could hang out, watch movies and talk… Maybe I can gather some intel…' Yes, that could work.

"I want Ruby."
"Are you sure? There will be some rules involved, but I think you two would have fun."

Emma nodded and smiled, showing the gap in her teeth as she took her last bite of chicken.

"Ms. Lucas it is then." Regina dabbed her mouth with a napkin, waving Ruby over. "The check please and we will see you on Saturday morning at ten sharp."

'\n
'This is the worst idea I have ever had.' Regina grimaced at the slimy creatures swimming in the wall of tanks at the pet store Enchanted Tails trying to imagine one of them actually in her home. 'Our home.' She self corrected and visibly relaxed at that thought.

"Gina?"

A small whisper caught her attention. She raised a warning brow at her nickname. "Emma we have discussed this."

"Sorry." Frowning at the reprimand, she pointed to the little fish filled cups on a shelf. "What's a b-bat-a?"

"Betta." Regina corrected and read the card under the shelf aloud. "Betta are Siamese fighting fish that come in a rainbow of colors and prefer warm tropical climates."

Emma lifted her arms up, silently asking to be picked up for the first time. The Queen obliged, lifting the girl to her hip with practiced ease. A little hand pointed to a rust and teal colored fish who actively swam in the confines of the cup. "That one. He's it."

Regina looked from the fish to Emma. "How do you know it's a him?"

"Just do."

"Then he's yours, sweet one. Let's take him home." She kissed a pale cheek.

"Wait! He needs a tank and food and gravel and plants and toys and—"

"Giiinnnnnaaa! Jasper needs his dinner!" She yelled down the hall and stood on her tiptoes to peer in the brightly lit small two gallon tank that bubbled on the bookshelf in her room next to her swan bank. She'd picked out yellow glass beads for the bottom of the tank, leafy green plastic plants, and an igloo for her fish's new home.

"Please don't yell through the house Emma. Come and get me directly." Regina dropped her annoyance at the sight before her. The girl looked enthralled with her new pet and so sweet in her white nightgown, slippers, and braids. The Queen approached the tank and got the fish food shaker from the top of the bookcase. She intended to keep it out of reach until the girl showed she could consistently feed the swimming sushi the appropriate amount of food. The last thing she needed was a sick fish. She placed two pellets into an open palm.

Emma carefully dropped the fish food through the tiny flap on the top of the tank and watched as an upturned mouth inhaled both orbs. "Jasper likes it! He wants more."

"He may not have more until tomorrow night. Those are the instructions on the bottle." She explained and replaced the pellet jar up high, just noticing the name Emma gave her new friend.
"Why Jasper?"

"He looks like the pretty rock. You know a Jasper."

Regina did know, remembering a ring she used to own with the rust colored stone.

"Time for bed. You can leave on his tank light if you like so he can watch over you while you sleep."

"Can't I just—"

"No, you may not. You've had your story and Jasper needs to get his own rest."

Emma trailed the Queen to the bed and climbed in when the covers were drawn down. "Fish sleep? Does that mean they dream too?"

Regina sniffed sharply at the idea as she tucked the blankets around Emma. "I imagine they do."

"Gina?"

"Hhmmm?"

"Thank you for my fish. I've never had a pet before."

"He is your responsibility. You'll need to feed him each day and change his water every few weeks." Though she knew she would be doing that last part until Emma was older.

"I will. He's my 'sponibility." Little Emma agreed with a yawn. "G'night."

"Sweet dreams sweet one." Regina stood and after turning on the swan light she crossed the room. As fingers turned off the main light and she eased out of the room her mind wandered back to the night few years ago when the conversation of this journey they were on began.

............................

:-) Thanks for reading! Please comment or leave Kudos if you liked it.
A/N - Here you go. The promised chapter about the spell. This chapter is dedicated to all of the people out there with a hurting kid inside of them who dreamed of something different than what they were given in life.

Previously...

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Flashback – 3 years ago

"Sooooooo, why are we here again?" Emma shivered, hating the creepiness of the cemetery where the Queen's crypt was, nearly tripping over a rock in her distraction.

"Patience Miss Swan." She keyed them into the main floor mausoleum and together they pushed the coffin of Henry Sr. aside. A flick of a delicate wrist lit the torches and candles, casting shadows on the stone steps.

The blonde followed heels into the basement. The usually tidy space was over flowing with books and parchments spread out on every available surface. "What's all this?"

"I have been doing a great deal of research the last year or so." Regina ran her hand along the leather cover of a thick ancient tome. "Do you recall last winter where you showed up in the middle of the night on my porch and I practically fire-balled you for scaring me to death?"

Emma popped her shoulders up to her ears. "There were a few nights like that, but yeah, I think so."

"The evening when you told me you would give just about anything for a second chance at your childhood?"

Emma's face turned red. She stuck her hands in her pockets and rolled her feet. "I do."

"I've found a way for you to explore that desire. A do over if you will, but with the caveat that once you experience what you need to you will return to this life right from the moment you left it."

"How is that… What do you mean experience what I need to?" Her brain was spinning and heart
Regina opened the tome and read directly from marked page. "Trice Life Enchantment is a way for a person to re-experience a portion of their life under a different set of circumstances designated by the caster. The spelled individual will leave their current life on pause and return the next moment after their needs have been met. Two must travel to the new reality, with the caster as the warder for the one in need of a second chance."

Green eyes blinked. "For real? We could actually do that?" She began pacing the crypt.

"We could, but I'm not sure—"

"What's a warder?"

Regina re-read the script before answering. "Like someone who watches over."

"Does it really pause a life, like a video game?"

"That seems to be the case... And when the need has been met for the person the spell is cast for the individuals can return and pick up where they left off, albeit changed internally from the experience."

Emma sank on to a carved wooden bench across from the Queen, letting her thoughts run. "If we did this, I can't know that it was my choice. There would be no point going through all of it."

Brown brows furrowed. "Why ever not?"

"Because I want it too much and everything I've ever wanted I've royally screwed up." Tears burned behind emeralds. "Every family I was with gave me back. I liked school for a little while, but I was always moved, I didn't really graduate. Then there was being homeless, Neal, stealing, jail, giving Henry up, my parents... I fucked up everything I touched. And I'll fuck this up too, if I want it as much as I do." She didn't realize she was crying until warm arms encircled her.

Regina simply held on. "I know it feels that way and I am willing to help you mend your past, if this is really what you want. I just don't think I'd be able to lie to you in that new life. We don't do that to each other."

"It wouldn't really be lying, just delaying information. It's the only way I'll even consider doing this Regina." Emma knew she was pushing hard, asking for too much, but with this desire an actual possibility she wanted it, price be damned.

The Queen swallowed. She did not expect Emma to add this condition to her idea and she tried again to dissuade the blonde. "You'd be a child again with your adult self awareness and you would know that a spell had been cast. Without the memories of sharing that desire with me or of this conversation, you would be incredibly irate towards me, actually that's an understatement."

"I know... But anger has always pushed me into action. Look at what it did when you pissed me off so much that I put down roots in StoryBrooke. It would be the fuel I needed to heal. After all the stuff we've been through, you're the only one with balls enough to go toe to toe with me. Please Regina. I need this." Emma completely relaxed in the Queen's arms, giving herself over completely to her convictions.

"Then we will make the journey, with your condition in place. Though, I have a condition of my own." Regina lifted Emma's chin so their eyes met. "The spell will take a great deal of time to craft and it needs to be done with Henry's happiness in mind in addition to your own. I will not have him
left to the wayside and I want his life as untouched as possible, even if we are just gone a moment in this one and it is not really him in that new life. He and Paige are engaged and in school. I’d like to wait until they both graduate, are married and settled. That way, when we return we can deal with whatever you need to after the spell without impacting Henry."

Emma pulled her chin away and nodded, readily agreeing. "Of course. That makes sense, after the wedding." She tried to hide her disappointment at having to wait three years. A lot could happen in three years. Another thought surfaced. "What happens to everyone else while we are gone?"

"They won’t know anything is different. Our journey will last but a moment here; the blink of an eye."

"And in the other life, how will they be?"

Regina thought for a moment before responding. "It won’t really be them, but a version that could have existed under different circumstances and that will depend on how I craft their memories."

"I don’t want anyone miserable or hurt, even if they are not really themselves."

"They won’t be unhappy, I’ll make sure if it."

The blonde sighed. "Even Snow?"

"Even the ‘flake. I promise not to split up your parents or take Neal from them. I’m not that person anymore. You’ll all be together as a family."

"There’s something else…" Emma swallowed and whispered, "I don’t want them raising little me. I’d be trapped in a pink nightmare of tiaras, tutus, and Barbies. It’s not what I want. Our relationship is too raw right now and I don’t think little me would go for it." She looked up at the Queen, her voice gaining strength. "And sharing them with Neal wouldn’t be the point of doing this and I don’t want them not to have him. He’s like their second chance."

"Are you asking me—"

"Yeah I am. If you think you could… care for me that way, there."

Regina didn’t answer right away. She was not sure what her role would be when she proposed the idea other than to craft the spell and make sure Emma was safe. She figured the blonde would want her parents.

Emma shrank under the silence, fearing she had finally asked for too much. "I think both the little girl and the adult in me need to learn how to trust again. This is the perfect chance for both sides to do that together. I’d still know about the tree and original curse and with Neal thrown in… I just can’t be with them that way."

An olive hand found and took a pale one. "I’m not saying no. I am just…what if I can’t get you to where you need to be?"

"You are the most stubborn and determined person I know. You’ll get us there." Emma placed her other hand on top of both of theirs. "When the time is right, you can give back my memories of this conversation and others I’m sure we’ll have. It will have all been worth it. I can’t fuck up what I don’t know I really want and by the time both sides of me trust you it will be time to come home."

A delicate brow rose, "It is that simple then?"
Green eyes met brown. "With us, it never is Regina."

"If we are to do this the way you described, then there is much to discuss, but not here." Regina stood, keeping hold of the savior's hand to help the blonde stand up.

"Come."

A/N - After writing this I went back and re-read the first few parts of my story. I had something different planned when I first started writing and now that we are here I am curious to explore this avenue with them. I have another 30,000 words written so far, but they need editing and posts will come once or twice a week from here on out. Please let me know if you want anything specific or have questions.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A/N - I just got back from my trip this week. Here's a chapter. The fish scenario actually happened to my current pet fish friend Jasper, without the magic part, but yeah...No fish were harmed in the writing or inspiration of this chapter, though. He's just dandy.

Previously... From flashback

"You are the most stubborn and determined person I know. You'll get us there." Emma placed her other hand on top of both of theirs. "When the time is right, you can give back my memories of this conversation and others I'm sure we'll have. It will have all been worth it. I can't fuck up what I don't know I really want and by the time both sides of me trust you it will be time to come home."

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"Come."

On Saturday morning little Emma awoke with the sun, but without her big side in sight. She grinned, rolling out of bed and ran over to her new friend, switching off the tank light. Jasper seemed to smile at her from between the green curtains of his hiding place. She'd missed him yesterday while at school and wanted him near her. She twisted her face up in deep thought to figure out how to make that happen.

Her bright idea had her rushing into the bathroom. She stepped up on the stool by the sink and washed out her clear rinsing cup before running back to her room. Careful fingers removed the lid of the tank and dipped the cup into the water. Jasper swam right inside, as if ready for a field trip. With both hands hugging the fish to her chest Emma went downstairs and into the kitchen. She set him on the counter by the sink and happily went to the front door to get the paper from the mail slot with the comics she liked so much.

Her mouth formed a shocked 'O' when she returned and saw the cup without a fish. She dropped the paper and rushed to the counter, jumping to look in the sink. Tears burned behind her eyes when she saw her dear fish flopping in the bottom on the top of garbage disposal.

Apparently this fish was a gymnast.

A little hand froze over the sink, remembering the warning she'd received earlier that week when she'd reached into the disposal for her dropped spoon. Regina had explained she could get cut on the blades.

Running upstairs she threw her little body onto the high sleigh bed and slammed into the sleeping
Queen. "Wake up, wake up, WAKE UP!"

Regina bolted upright, frantically grabbing for the little girl bouncing on her legs. "Emma what's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"He…It… I… HELP!" Emma minced her words pulling hard at the Queen's arm.

Regina followed running feet quickly downstairs. A shaking finger pointed to the sink as the owner began to bawl. She saw the water glass that belonged upstairs and put two and two together. "Oh Emma, you didn't."

Rushing to the sink, she saw the fish with gills rising slowly in the bowels of the disposal. She concentrated and magically eased the gasping fish upwards and into the cup of water. A wave of her conjured a lid with holes to ensure the fish stayed put before she pulled a hysterical Emma into her arms.

"Ssshhhhhh. He's alright, Emma. Look."

Emma sniffled, snot running down her face as she gazed red wet eyes on her friend. "$-he is?"

"Yes, sweet one he is." Regina realized that she was dealing with a completely little savior at that moment. The difference was striking. Little Emma clung to her for dear life, resting fully against her naturally.

"I-I'm s-sorry Jasper. I didn't m-mean for you to get hurted."

"Hurt." The correction came softly as she rubbed the small back. Sitting down on a stool, she took a breath, letting her heart return to a normal pattern. "Why did you put Jasper in a cup?"

"He wanted to hang out with me."

"I bet he did, but what did we talk about when Jasper came to live with us a few days ago?" Smoothing the blonde curls she kissed Emma's head.

"That he n-needed to stay in his h-house and to wait for you if his tank got dirty." Emma sniffled, rubbing a balled fist across her eyes.

"Yes, and did you follow those instructions this morning?" The Queen asked, referring directly the acrobatic fish.

Emma shook her head and allowed Regina to wipe her face and nose with a napkin.

"No and what happened when you chose not to listen?"

Wet green eyes looked up. "He jumped ship."

If Emma hadn't looked completely crestfallen Regina would have chuckled at that. Instead she nodded. "We are lucky he is not hurt. No more taking him out of his house. Understand?"

"Yes." The girl nodded, readily agreeing as her tears turned to snuffles.

Regina eyed the sink in thought, "Did you reach in to try and get him?"

Thoughtful little eyes looked down at hands then back at Jasper.

"Little miss swan?"
"Nooo I almost did, but 'membered what you said."

"Good girl. You did the right thing coming to get me." Relieved some of her rules were beginning to stick.

"Am I in trouble with you?"

"No, sweet one I think you learned a lesson the hard way today and I don't imagine you will make that same choice again. Am I right?"

Emma nodded and snuggled up into the Queen's arms.

Regina felt the shift as the little body stiffened. She swallowed. "Emma?"

"I'm here Gina."

"Were you ever entirely absent?" She questioned, wondering the reason for the sudden switch.

"No… Just passive. I wanted to see what she would do if I just let her be. I-I couldn't stop her from… I froze." Emma pulled back and looked at the fish.

"It's not your fault. She knew better and learned the hard way. Sometimes that needs to happen."

"Thanks for not getting mad at her… At me. I—she tried to do the right thing."

"Yes and it saved her friend's life."

Emma lips turned up. "Yeah she did." He stomach grumbled in agreement.

Regina lifted the girl off her lap, glancing at the clock. If she started now, she'd have enough time to make a full breakfast before she had to get ready for her meeting. "Will turkey bacon with toast and fruit salad be alright?"

"Yes please."

"Let's take Jasper back upstairs first."

Emma followed the Queen up to her room and sighed happily as Jasper was put back. He swam right into the igloo and poked his head out. Regina waved a hand over the tank, magically anchoring it to the shelf and sealed the lid closed. It wouldn't budge without her touch.

The girl approached the shelf and little eyes peered up at her fine finned friend. "You're safe now, Jasper. Welcome home."

Can we have popcorn later?" Emma sung her legs against the side of the sleigh bed and Regina finished getting ready.

"You mean may we, and yes. I already set up the air popper for Ruby." She fastened a gold hoop and fluffed her hair, eyeing Emma in the mirror of her vanity. "Do you have any questions about the rules?"

"Nope." Emma's lips smacked over the 'p'. "I know not to try and get her to remember and to listen to what she tells me to do." She rolled her eyes. 'Not that she'd believe me anyway.'
"There is egg salad and cut apples for your lunch in the fridge. I should be home just when you are getting up from your nap."

The door bell rang and Emma made a beeline for the stairs. "Walk Emma." Regina shook her head, following downstairs and watched in amusement as Emma jumped to try and undo the high bolt lock. "Whenever someone is at the door you need to wait for me to open it or tell you it is alright to do so." She waited for acknowledgement before unlatching the door and welcoming Ruby inside.

"Ruby!" Little arms wrapped around the waitress' legs in greeting.

"Hey there, are you ready for a fun day? I brought a movie for us to watch." Ruby handed a DVD to Emma who looked curiously at the cover. She then offered a smile to Regina. "It's The Princess Bride. She'll love it!"

"I'm sure she will. I've set up the air popper. She may have that as a snack and her lunch is in the fridge. I made extra for you, as well. No matter what she tries to tell you she is allowed zero sugar and her nap time is at one o'clock sharp. I refuse to come home to her bouncing off the walls on a sugar high and cranky." Regina slipped on her coat and tied the waist sash, taking her purse in hand.

"You got it Madam Mayor."

"Emma? I'm leaving. Be a good girl for Ms. Lucas today." She bent to hug and kiss the little one goodbye.

The girl stilled long enough to return the hug. "I will!"

"And Ruby?"

The she wolf stilled in the act of shedding her coat at the sound of her first name leaving those burgundy lips. "Yes, Madam Mayor?"

"Please call me Regina."

Ruby's wolfish grin blossomed. "Regina, I'll take good care of her."

They waved goodbye and Emma watched through the side window as the Benz rolled away. The little in her felt some apprehension at being left behind while big Emma was gung-ho about getting alone time with her best friend.

"What do you want to do first little swan?" Ruby set her things on the table by the door, trying to distract the obviously anxious kid.

"Candy Land!" Little Emma answered and made a dash for the game closet down the hall. She discovered it when Regina was cleaning last week and they'd ended up spending a whole evening playing different board games.

Big Emma loved the competition and creamed the wolf in round after round before becoming bored with the juvenile game. She thought back to Thursday at the diner and remembered that now was the perfect time to do some digging for answers to how to change herself back. Regina mentioned she had a lock-box and the bounty hunter in Emma bet it was somewhere in the Queen's bedroom or study. She wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for, but knew she'd feel better with more information about her situation or maybe even some more insight to why Regina did this to her.

'Maybe she has a diary or something?' She had to get Ruby to leave her alone for a little while, first. 'I got it!'
"Wanna play hide and seek?" Emma jumped up and ran out of the living room calling over her shoulder. "You're it! Count to 300!"

"300?"

"Yeah, that's the rule!" It wasn't, but Ruby didn't know that. Emma hid behind the corner waiting until she heard the waitress start to count before grinning. 'That was too easy.' She hurried upstairs deciding to check the master suite first. Her slim body eased through the cracked door, suddenly feeling weird at being in the Queen's personal space without permission. Shaking off the misplaced guilt she shimmed under the bed looking for anything that resembled a safe or lock-box. She found several shoe boxes filled with summer sandals, but not what she was looking for. Under the dresser and inside the drawers came next. Her little hands dug through the top drawer and held up a black lacy thong. Little eyes looked at it briefly before big eyes bugged. She slammed the drawer shut, trying to bleach the image from her mind.

Knowing she didn't have much time left before Ruby came searching for her she tried the walk in closet. Designer suits, blouses, skirts and slacks hung on one wall and the other housed the Queen's famous footwear collection in neatly stacked rows. She spotted what she was looking for on the top shelf above the shoes. Using the wooden grid that housed the foot wear she scaled the wall and pushed the lock-box off the shelf, accidentally knocking a box of scarves with it. Both landed with a loud thump on the taupe colored carpet.

She shimmied down and tried to pry the lid off before realizing it had a numbered keypad. 'What would Regina use as a code? Maybe Henry's birthday... nope, not it... Damn it! I'm running out of time. Maybe it's...' 

"Emma? Come out come out wherever you are."

Ruby's faint call jarred her out of her thoughts. Sighing she tried the last combination she could think of; Regina's birth date. The keypad flashed at her and she scowled before shoving the box away from her in disgust. She heard the bedroom door creak and quickly threw herself behind the row of hanging suits.

"Emma? If you're in here I don't think your mom would—There you are! Got 'cha!" Ruby tickled a little foot that was poking out and grinned at the muffled squeal.

"No tickling! No fair Ruby!" Emma parted the sea of clothing and panted, out of breath.

"What happened in here?" Ruby knelt down indicating the pile of scarves and the upside down lock-box on the floor. "I don't think your mom would leave her closet like this." Knowing Regina was a stickler for order and neatness.

Emma sobered at that question. "Uhhhh... I was just playing and I wanted... 'Shit! What to say, what to say... 'She bit her lip. "Toooo play dress up. I like her scarves and stuff sorta' fell... Please don't tell that I climbed up." She whispered that last part, a tingling beginning to rush across her skin at the thought of Regina's face if she were to find out.

Ruby cocked her head, not sure if she bought that excuse, but shrugged it off. "Let's get this cleaned up then. Put the scarves back in the box and I'll put this up." They made quick work of righting the closet and Emma felt the knot in her tummy loosen at Ruby's next words.

"Let's go down and watch our movie. I think I've had enough games for one day." She took Emma's hand and led her downstairs. They made popcorn and laughed though the first half of 'The Princess Bride.' Ruby paused at the sword fighting scene and served up their lunch, insisting they eat in the
dining room despite Emma's begging to eat on the couch.

The movie ended right before the girl was scheduled to go down for her nap. The wolf left Emma to watch the credits as she cleaned up their dishes. When she returned she found the little body passed out on the couch. Smiling at the sight she easily carried Emma upstairs and put her to bed in the lavender room. As promised near 2:00 the Benz pulled into the drive way and Ruby turned off the TV before going to the door to greet the Mayor.

"Hey! How was your meeting?"

"It was productive, as always, but too long. Was she well behaved for you?"

"A complete doll. She kicked my tail at Candy Land and those green eyes of hers are SO hard to say no to."

Regina smirked at that. "Yes she can be quite persuasive. I take it she is still sleeping?"

"Out like a light right at one o'clock. Oh, you should know that we played hide and seek. Emma kind of made a small mess in your closet. I helped her clean it up, but she was so cute hiding behind your suits I couldn't be mad at her." She kept her promise about not mentioning the climbing, but felt uncomfortable hiding the fact that she'd been in the Mayor's private space.

The Queen jarred at the thought of the wolf or anyone snooping through her things, but relaxed realizing it had been innocent. "Thank you for telling me." She slipped four twenties into Ruby's palm as she showed the young woman out. Apparently she'd have to have a chat with little Emma about playing dress up with her expensive things and perhaps buy the girl a set of dress-up clothes.

As she locked up, she heard little feet speed walking downstairs. Just as she turned Emma threw her arms around Regina's legs.

"You're home!"

Regina ran her fingers through tussled curls, smoothing the bed head away. "Hello there. I heard you were a good girl for Ruby today."

Emma grinned up, showing the gap in her teeth. "I was! Does that mean I get ice-cream after dinner?"

"We shall see. How do you feel about a walk to the park in a little bit? I need check my messages and get out of these clothes first, though."

Tiny feet bounced affirmatively. "I'm gonna go tell Jasper."

Regina followed and once on the upstairs landing they went their separate ways. As she entered her room, the Queen shrugged off her red blazer and tossed it in the hamper along with her black dress. She felt off immediately upon entering her closet, sensing a disturbance in her space. Uncomfortable at the warning scratching at the back of her mind, she found a pair of tan casual slacks and a blue button down V-neck fitted sweater. She reached up for a matching silk scarf and a red flash caught her eye.

"What…? No…" Realization punched her stomach.

Pulling down the lock-box she felt a wet burning starting behind her eyes and she swallowed hard as she leaned into the shoe tower. That light only flashed when a wrong code had been attempted. She had a theory of which version of Emma had been in her closet, but knew that she needed more
information before jumping to conclusions. Deliberate versus curious fingers would determine how she dealt with this.

Setting the box on her bed, she took time to brush her hair and scroll through text messages, returning one to Henry confirming they could all FaceTime that night. It came to her then that Emma must have scaled the shoe wall to get to the box and the scarves. Sighing, she now understood what Ruby had meant by the girl being 'hard to say no to' when they'd been talking in the foyer. She really hoped her theory was wrong.

After searching the upstairs the Queen descended to the ground floor, finally finding Emma in the living room working on a maze in a coloring book. Bright eyes found brown as the girl leapt to her feet.

"Time to go?"

"Not just yet. I need to speak with you first."

"Oh…" Big Emma shifted from foot to foot, deciding to play dumb. "About what?"

"I think you already know about what. Come with me please." She turned towards her study, preferring the formal setting for the talk at hand. Emma slowly followed and stopped in the doorway when the Queen sat on the favored chaise lounge.

"Am I in trouble?"

"That depends. Should you be?"

Emma licked her lips, finally approaching when beckoned with a finger. She stopped just out of reach. "I don't—"

"I know you were in my closet. Ruby mentioned she caught you playing in there. Something about dress up and hide and seek." She watched, sure the red face was big Emma's anger at being told on. "She did not tell me about your rock climbing adventure. I figured that out for myself when I noticed the light on my lock-box flashing."

"She—"

Regina held up her hand for silence wanting all the cards on the table to give Emma a chance to explain. "It only ever does that when the code has been entered incorrectly. What I want to know is if little Emma was playing and got curious about the locked box or if big Emma was hunting for something deliberately." She decided to cut directly to the chase, not believing in baiting the child just to catch her in a lie.

"I…I didn't mean too." A wave of heat flooded the girl's body and she took a step back.

Regina kept her face passive and tone encouraging. "So little Emma was playing in my closet and big Emma was nowhere to be found, like this morning with Jasper?" She wanted to be absolutely clear on what she was asking.

"Yeah…"

"Yes that it was little Emma just being curious and playful?" She highly doubted that, but wanted to give the girl the benefit of her doubts.

"Yes." Little thoughts slammed against big ones in protest of that untrue word.
"Are you sure?"

"Yes! I told you already." Emma turned away and crossed her arms suddenly defensive.

The Queen stood, running a hand through her hair, suddenly feeling terrible that she'd doubted Emma, especially after the morning they'd had. "Alright. Go and get your boots and coat on."

A blonde braid whipped around. "That's it?"

"That is all, yes. Unless you need to tell me something?" Regina lightened her tone. Their relationship was at such a delicate stage that she wanted to trust the girl's answer even when her gut said the opposite.

Emma stared at the brunette for a long moment before walking off to get ready. She was unusually quiet on their walk and avoided the Queen's attempts at conversation. Once they made it to the park the girl looked for the ducks and seeing none asked to play on the jungle gym. Regina allowed that and found a bench to sit on. After an hour Regina called her over, deciding they had been exposed to the cold air long enough.

Little Emma ran happily to hug the Queen's legs, but her joy disappeared as big Emma's heavy emotions took over. The brunette puzzled over the change and squeezed a little hand reassuringly, wondering if Emma was coming down with something. She took off her glove and placed her wrist to a cool cheek and forehead, feeling for a fever.

"I'm not sick Gina." Emma pulled back sharply and ran ahead to the path that led out of the park. The Queen caught up and took back the small hand.

They walked home in thick silence.

The rest of the afternoon, Emma avoided the Queen, favoring spending time in her room with Jasper. By this time Regina knew something was seriously wrong. She decided to deep clean the kitchen while going over the morning and afternoon in her mind, thinking back to how defensive Emma had been in the study. As she finished mopping she knew that Emma had lied to her. She just didn't want to believe it.

Washing her hands, she decided to try talking to Emma again. She dried them quickly and put away the rest of the cleaning supplies in the cupboard of the laundry room, closing the door harder than she meant to. Eyeing the clock, she decided to wait another ten minutes and have some tea to fully calm down before calling Emma downstairs. Regina was halfway through the herbal brew when the girl made an appearance.

Emma went right to the fridge, ignoring her keeper and tried to get the juice down from the high shelf. A smooth hand caught the carton before it slipped.

"Careful, I just mopped the floor." Regina filled the glass with ¼ juice and ¾ water and handed it to the girl. "Both hands."

Emma took the offered cup and sipped, feeling the silence condense around them. She startled at the sound of a china mug touching marble.

"When you have finished your juice, I'd like you to join me in the study please." The brunette rose gracefully from her spot, without waiting for a reply, expecting the child to eventually follow.
Emma frowned knowing the gig was up. She took as long as she thought reasonable to finish her drink, even standing in a step stool to rinse the cup and put it in the dishwasher. Rubbing her sweaty hands on her leggings, she shuffled into the home office and found the Queen pacing the room.

"Shut the door behind you."

Biting her lip, the girl obeyed and fidgeted as she watched the regal woman sigh and sink onto the sofa.

"Come here to me. We need to talk."

"About what?" Emma tried without thinking, just to hear something over her pounding heart.

"You lied to me Emma, this afternoon about the lock-box."

"No I didn't."

There was just enough sass in that voice to set brunette on edge. Regina snapped her fingers pointing to the spot right in front of her, manner no nonsense.

The girl took her time obeying, never meeting the brown eyes studying her.

"You did lie to me and you are doing so again right now. Look at me Emma." She waited before shaking her head and lifting the little chin.

"Don't Gina."

"Emma—"

"No! You lie to me all the time, what's the big deal if I do it once?"

Holding steadfast, Regina didn't allow the deflection. "The big deal Emma is that you lied to me and then lied about lying. I admit there was a time in our early relationship where I was not honest with you or anyone else. I can promise you that ever since I redeemed myself I have not lied to you. Can you look me in the eye and say the same?"

Emma's face paled and she tried to jerk her chin away.

Regina waited, brows raised.

"No."

Nodding, the Queen allowed Emma to look away as she continued. "I may not give you all the information about something at one time because that is my right in this life as your parent, but I will always be truthful with you and I expect the truth from you every single time, young lady. We do not lie to each other and we are not going to start now."

Emma felt tears land on her socks. Her stomach flipped and she tried stupidly one more time to dig herself out. "It wasn't my fault. It was hers."

"Stop lying to me Emma."

"No, it was her… Really." Panic had her grasping at straws. She didn't want to believe she'd lied to the one person she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, despite everything that had happened between them, had her back.
Regina sat back watching Emma's tears, deciding to take back full control over the situation and lifted the dimpled chin again. "These walls you have up… it is time they start coming down. We will get to this truth and many others going forward." Still holding green eyes, she thought, 'No matter how painful.'

Emma wiggled and tried again to pull her face away, but stilled when she felt a warning tap to her hip.

"Yes Ma'am or No Ma'am. Those are the only two responses I care to hear from you right now. Do you understand me?"

Emma gulped, "Yes Ma'am."

"Today you went into my closet with the intent of trying to find something that doesn't belong to you. Am I correct that you thought you'd find some answers about your current state in my lock-box?"

"Yes."

Regina stared.

"Yes Ma'am."

"Good girl. Am I also correct that you actually had no idea what it was that you were looking for and that your little self had nothing to do with it?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"So you did lie to me a few different times today?"

A whisper. "Yes Ma'am."

Finally they were getting somewhere. The Queen shifted, pulling Emma to stand between her knees and placing her hands on small shoulders. "Thank you for telling me the truth."

"Are you mad?" Emma sniffed, focusing her eyes on a crease in the tan slacks.

"I am displeased with your choices. Mostly, I wanted to understand why you lied to me and I think I do now." Regina waved her hand, summoning the lockbox. It appeared on her lap between them. She turned the box so that it faced Emma. "011523."

Emma looked up quizzically.

"That is the code for the box and before you even ask; it is not the code for the parental controls on the television."

'But that's…' Emma pressed the sequence on the keypad and the boxed beeped, flashing green. "All our days of birth."

"Yes, with Henry in the middle and us as the bookends."

"Why?"

Regina tucked a stray curl behind a little ear. "We are a family and Henry brought us together. Open it and see if the answers you are looking for are inside."
The sudden display of trust had Emma guiltily lifting the lid and she was surprised to find the box nearly empty. Her medical file and what she assumed to be her and Henry's adoption papers were resting on the bottom with passports and other business looking paperwork. Daniel's ring was in a velvet pouch, Cora's locket and a small painting of Henry Sr. lay on top. Her hand shook when she picked up the single wallet sized photo tucked in a corner and found her own eyes staring back at her.

"You kept it?" The adult in Emma retreated under the weight of her feelings.

"I did." Regina felt a single tear escape her eye and saw the shift take place from adult to child, knowing now was the right time for another revelation; this time to little Emma. "I promised a dear friend I care for very much that I'd keep it safe. In doing so I have come to love that little girl."

Little hands froze and then dropped the picture back in the box as the emotions of her big half rolled through her mind, crashing their halves together. She began to shake so hard she couldn't breathe.

'Did she…she loves… me?'

The rightness of those words tugged at all the tangled pieces inside and the little girl didn't understand why her adult side fought so hard not to let them shift in place where they belonged. She decided to help and kept big Emma at bay long enough for little eyes to take in brown and with the beginnings of trust she reached up grabby hands.

Regina waved the box away and lifted Emma up into her arms, desperately needing to connect their hearts. After a time, the little body stilled and leaned heavily against her. A minute later it tensed signaling the adult half was once again present.

"How much trouble am I in?" Emma whispered, trying to take everything in she just been forced to passively witness.

"A bit my dear. I do not like that you went through my things without permission or that you lied about which side of you was the responsible party."

Emma was quiet taking the weight of her actions in. She knew they had more to talk about in regards to the picture and felt conflicted over the brunette's disclosure, not understanding how the little side of her was lovable or her mini-me's reaction, and she didn't know how to approach either. Setting her focus on the present moment, she asked, "What happens now?"

Regina deliberated briefly, and confirmed her original plan knowing she was dealing with Emma's adult actions. "You are going to spend some time in the corner thinking about what we just discussed." More softly she added, "Then I am taking you across my knee for lying and you are grounded to my side the rest of the weekend for going through my things." Feeling Emma squirm in her arms at the reality of a spanking, she kissed the top of the blonde head. She knew both sides of Emma would need her close in the day to come once her words thoroughly soaked in about why she'd kept the photograph. "Up you go. Let's get this done so I can hold you again."

Emma eased off the warm lap and shuffled over to a far empty corner. She looked over her shoulder.

"Six minutes?"

"Six minutes."

A little wobble. "You'll stay here with me?"

"Right here sweet one."
When Emma turned around fully Regina lost her perfect posture and dropped her head in her hands as another tear fell. She was exhausted, but felt lighter than she had in a long time. She'd finally told little Emma she loved her and the child hadn't shut her out. They were on the right track and finally were starting to make some real progress as to why they were here in this life in the first place. Her eyes quickly found the clock, not wanting to keep the girl in time out a second longer than promised.

Minutes passed too slowly for both of them.

Wiping her eyes, Regina focused on the task at hand when the clock struck the appointed time. She called once and the woman child came willingly. Without ceremony she lifted Emma over her lap and immediately pulled down the purple leggings.

The girl whimpered, but said nothing as she felt a cool hand rest on her backside and an arm around her waist.

"We do not lie to each other. Do you understand me?" Regina repeated the exact phrase from earlier, wanting that message to be absorbed in the next minute.

A small nod.

"Emma, I need to hear your voice."

"Yeeesss."

"Yes what?" The brunette pressed, the need acknowledgement surfacing again.

"Y-yes Ma'am."

Little feet kicked up at the sharp sting and Emma cried out at the second one that quickly followed. Regina wasn't going easy on her this time and she found herself starting to weep after three swats.

The Queen finished a full dozen without pause. Emma was breathing heavily and crying under her hand. She kept the girl in place to process as the cries eased to sniffling.

Emma winced when she was lifted up and her bottom made contact with the other side of the lap. "Ow G-gina!" She fist a sweater and burrowed into her keeper.

They sat together for a long time without moving, each deep in their own thoughts. Emma shifted trying to get comfortable, but her bottom stung too much. This spanking had been different, somehow more meaningful as if there were something at stake she didn't know about. Emma puzzled over that idea as she was consoled lovingly in those arms, but genuinely felt better now knowing they were on good terms again.

Little Emma poked her head upwards and whispered. "I'm hungry."

Regina rested her lips briefly atop a blonde braid, finally surfacing for air from the pool of feelings. "Yes, I'm sure you are. Let's look at what we can find for dinner." She lifted Emma down, pulling up the leggings and took a moment to gaze into big wet green eyes. "I meant what I said about your grounding. You are not to leave the room we are in without my permission until you wake up Monday morning."

Pale skin flushed. "What about the bathroom?"

"You will need to ask to leave the room. Don't worry I will let you, but you are not to leave my sight otherwise. A bit of required dependency will help reinforce our dynamic, which I think you are in
dire need of remembering."

"Remember what about it?" Emma asked without tone.

Regina chose not to answer with words. She simply took the small hand and led the way to the kitchen.

…………………………:

Now that you know that Emma actually wanted this whole thing, but doesn't remember she does, I'm curious your thoughts.

Next up- possible flashback... FaceTime with Henry, talk of Christmas plans and more school fun.
A/N - Brief update before the work week starts. Had to put down my family cat of 20 years today and needed to dive into the comfort of these characters for a little bit.

Enjoy.

Previously...

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Flashback… 3 years ago.

Emma tapped her pen against the blank notebook page and sighed in frustration. Her eyes wandered over to the Queen who sat behind the desk of the study, reading glasses on and eyes focused in a thick text. Since their conversation in the crypt two months ago, they had been meeting weekly specifically to discuss plans for the spell that couldn't happen soon enough for Emma. She found her mind lost in the idea of it every day and it was getting harder and harder not to be impatient about it. She let a breathy whine escape her lips as she thumbed her pen harder, finally catching Regina's eye.

"Something wrong dear?"

"Oh, you know… Just this whole homework thing you've given me." Emma tossed the pen and notebook on the table and leaned backwards on the sofa, pulling a pillow over her face with a groan. When she didn't get the response she was hoping for she sat up and on impulse tossed the fancy cushion at the Queen.

Regina lightening quick, caught it with a single hand and removed reading glasses with the other. "Miss Swan, kindly refrain from pitching my pillows like a farm hand does hay bales and focus. We each have work to do in order to make the most of this experience."

"I just don't get why I have to write in this silly notebook. I can just tell you stuff, like always." The blonde pouted, earning her a raised brow in return.

"I explained it to you, but I will refresh your memory once more." Regina rose from her desk and rounded it to sit on the sofa next to the pouting blonde. "Writing will allow you to more freely admit certain things on paper than verbally face to face with me. Making these lists will help me to help you in our new life. I need to know what your triggers are, your fears, worries, hopes, wants, and
needs so that I can be better equipped to serve in the role you asked me to take on."

"You're all serious all the time though and I miss just us talking about regular stuff and having fun."

Regina softened at the plea in that voice. "We will make time, I promise. That is important to me, too. However, there is much to prepare for this spell and I cannot start crafting it until I have this information."

"It doesn't have to be prefect Regina." Emma missed the flash of fire in brown eyes, failing also to keep her tone in check.

"Emma, this is not a game. This is—"

"You don't have to be so intense about it."

Regina stiffened, her eyes finally caught green. "Please do not interrupt me again."

Emma stilled at that firm tone, wisely yielding. "Sorry."

"This is your childhood we are talking about. We get one opportunity to get this right. I am a planner and I do not do anything halfway. It is all in on both our accounts, or we do nothing. What is your choice?"

"All in." No hesitation and to show her sincerity Emma picked up the notebook and with pen in hand started writing.

Regina eyed the blonde for a moment and returned to her desk. The worked independently for about an hour before Emma stopped to shake out her hand. She settled her gaze back on the Queen. Their eyes met. "I think I need a break, my hand feels like it will fall off. What are you reading?"

"A few different things. I am going to need some insight into helping you through your trauma and tools to make sure we do it effectively." She thumbed a thick stack of psychology and self help books. "Miss Swan, I believe you have a list to finish for me. One more page and we can take a break for dinner."

Emma smirked, loving how focused and nurturing Regina sounded. "You're really something you know that?"

Regina chose not to answer and returned to reading instead.

"Can we have Pizza?" A hesitant pen scratched paper.

"I don't know, can we dear?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "MAY WE have pizza?"

"We may. Finish your list first."

"Pepperoni?"

"Half pepperoni and half vegetable."

Another eye roll and more scribbling."No olives this time, or anything green, or mushrooms, or—"

"Or no pizza at all. I can make us a salad instead?" A page turns.

"Good girl."

Coming from any other person Emma would have found that affection demeaning, but from the lips of the Queen it felt right.

Next time- FaceTime with Henry, Christmas plans, and more school shenanigans.
Chapter 15

Previously... from flashback.

"Pepperoni?"

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'How do the kids these days manage all these apps and buttons?' As tech savvy as she was, Regina still struggled with social media in any form, not understanding this generation's need to self catalog every waking moment of their lives.

"It's this one, Gina." Emma's little thumb pressed the green camera button on the I-Phone app and looked up with a snarky grin as she settled back into her keeper's lap with a yawn. It was nearing eight thirty and she was tired, but excited to FaceTime with Henry.

The small screen blurred and a young man's hazel eyes and big grin came into focus. "Hi Mom! Hey Ems! It's so great to see you two. How are you? Tell me everything that's been going on!" Henry hit the ground running with a barrage of questions.

Little Emma took over after Regina's polite greeting and told him all about starting school, playing games with Ruby, and even the trip to the Doctor's office. "And I got a fish! His name is Jasper and he likes to do circus tricks and take long swims and—"

"Woah, wait up..." Henry cut in, raising a brow much like his mother's. "You got her a fish? And, I wasn't allowed a snake at her age?" He feigned hurt, clutching his chest in dramatically.

Regina fought the urge to roll her eyes. "It was more like the fish hooked us, but yes." Smiling at the shocked, but humorous expression coming from the screen. "And to be fair, you wanted a Boa Constrictor. That is very different than a Betta fish."

Emma giggled at the exchange and winced suddenly as she wiggled to get comfortable.
"Something wrong Em?"

'Damn he misses nothing.'

Regina affectionately fluffed the freshly washed blonde hair. "She learned a tough lesson today on the importance of telling me the truth."

Little cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but she relaxed when Henry seemed un-phased and began to tell them about his honeymoon trip and the most recent stop at London. They chatted for almost a half hour and as much as Emma fought to stay awake, she starting nodding off.

"Henry, we can chat more this coming week. Please give Paige a hug from us. I need to get Emma to bed." Regina eyed the time and blew her son a kiss.

"Will do. Oh, before you go. Are you guys still coming for Christmas?"

Emma’s eyes fluttered open at Henry's excitement. "Coming where?"

"Henry Daniel… I haven't told her yet. I wanted it to be a surprise." Regina half scolded, unable to keep the grin out of her voice.

"Where? Tell me!" Emma bounced in earnest.

"You and Mom are coming to Boston for Christmas, Ems. We'll have a blast and you can see our new place! The view of the city is incredible."

Big eyes stared up at Regina. "Really?! Boston for Christmas, like for real?"

"Nice one Henry. Now I will never get her to sleep."

He smiled good naturedly and shrugged. "Think of it as payback for not letting me have that snake. Just kidding, at least Ems can look forward to it now."

They said their good nights and Regina closed down the app and lifted Emma to her hip in one smooth motion. "Alright little swan, it is way past your bed time."

Emma rested her head against the Queen's shoulder as she was carried upstairs, already losing the brief burst of energy from the news. "Are we really going?"

"We are. After next week winter break starts and Town Hall closes for two weeks. We will be leaving the day before Christmas Eve." Regina nudged open the door to master suite and magically flicked on the light with a nod.

"Will you read to me?" Emma sleepily rubbed her eyes, adjusting to the light as she was set on the bed.

"A few pages, yes." The Queen relented and tucked the girl between the Egyptian cotton sheets. Summoning their book, she sat and Emma rested a head in her lap. The ease of that gesture brought a soft smile to her lips as she opened the book. "Chapter 9, In the Witch's House…"

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Emma groaned and flopped backwards on the sleigh bed. "Gggiinnnnnaa?"

The Queen emerged from her ensuite in a robe, running a comb through her locks. "I'm nearly finished Emma. Have some patience please." She went into the closet and cracked the door to
change in privacy.

Emma rolled to the edge of the bed, head dropping off the side, eyeing the floor with want and huffing in annoyance.

"And don't even think about getting off the bed."

"I'm not! Geezz..." The savior rolled her eyes as far back into their sockets as she could. 'Being Gina grounded sucks.' She'd coined the term last night after her story when she realized her actions cost the privilege of sleeping in her own room and any amount of privacy she'd won since the day the spell was enacted. Her little half adored the time and attention from an adult that loved her, but big Emma was overwhelmed for exactly the same reasons.

A few minutes later, Regina came out dressed in fitted black slacks and a purple tunic sweater. She joined Emma on the bed as she fastened her favorite leather knee length heeled boots.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Like a bazillion years ago." Emma flipped over, doing a half somersault off the bed when she received a permissible nod and went right up to the doorway without crossing it. She'd tested the boundaries of her grounding earlier this morning and did not want a reminder of where the line was.

It was a blue chilly Sunday afternoon and Emma wanted to get out in it, but found herself tied to the house and to her keeper. She'd begged to go somewhere, anywhere distracting to get out of her head. The Queen agreed noting she could use a few things from the store to flesh out some more complex meals she planned on making in the coming week.

Traffic was light and soon Emma found herself being led into the only grocery store in town. It was packed.

"Would you like to sit in the cart or hang onto the side rail?"

"Rail."

Nodding Regina settled her purse on the top part of the cart and led them to the produce section.
"Stay close and keep your hand on the cart."

Nimble fingers took their time selecting the best offerings of tomatoes, lettuce, peppers, and avocados. For the most part Emma hung onto the side and followed from section to section of the store. She became distracted when they passed the candy isle and let go of the rail in favor of stopping to browse the chocolate choices on the end of an aisle. Less than a minute later she jerked forward when she felt hands under her arms, lifting her up.

"Hey!" Little legs were directed into the slots of the cart seat. "Noooo, I wanna walk!"

"What did I tell you when we got here?" Regina resettled her purse next to the squirming girl.

"To stay close, but I didn't mean to let go."

"I know and sitting up here will take care of that. Here, you can hold the list and help me. What does number seven say?"

Blonde brows furrowed. "M-may-o…Mayo?"

They made their way to the condiment aisle and the Queen held up two different jars. "Which one
has the word 'light' on it?"

Emma thought for a moment and pointed to the one on the left, receiving an affirmative nod in return. By time she got to number 10 on the list she realized what was happening.

"You can't make me read on a Sunday. That's sacrilegious. School's not 'til tomorrow." Arms crossing, she refused to participate further.

"I suppose not, but then I won't know what kind of butter to get for the cookies I had planned on making for your lunches next week. I prefer the salted kind." She held up two boxes that looked the same.

Backed into a corner by her stomach, Emma flicked her finger to the right after studying her choices. The reading game ceased after that and she busied herself watching the shoppers mingle around them. Near the checkout she spotted a stand of cheap supermarket toys and something yellow caught her eye.

"Wait! I wanna look." She twisted around when they sped past.

Regina followed the pointing finger to the display when she realized what had the child so worked up. She reached for the small matchbox toy Volkswagen Bug and handed it to Emma.

"I want this." Big eyes studied the details of the toy from all sides and looked up pleadingly.

"Manners, Emma." The correction came automatically, but was gentle.

"Please. I want to get it myself with my own money." It didn't matter that it wasn't really her money, but the act of doing this herself was suddenly of the utmost importance.

The Queen was thoughtful for a moment before nodding her consent, taking the toy in hand to look for a price. "This is $4.90. How much will you have left to put in your swan bank when we get home if your allowance is $6.00?"

Emma thought back to her math lesson on Friday when they had learned counting backwards by tens. She started at 600 and held up a finger for each ten she took away, even using one of the brunette's digits to get to the answer. "110… I mean one dollar and ten cents. Right?"

"Right you are and that is an excellent strategy."

White teeth flashed in return as Emma hugged the yellow beetle to her chest.

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The end of the school week before winter break couldn't roll around quick enough for Emma. It was only Tuesday and the day was dragging. It had snowed again last night, but not enough for a snow day, as the girl had been hoping for. Little thoughts of pretending to be sick just so she could stay home with Regina crossed her mind, but left just as quickly knowing that lying wasn't an option on the table.

Overall she was moody and off, but unsure of why. Part of her missed the closeness the weekend brought with it, but big Emma was grateful her grounding was over. They had still yet to have a deeper conversation about the picture in the lock-box, but Emma was in no rush to open up to the pain that came with looking into the little matching eyes that Regina had described once as 'haunting'. 
"Emma?"

A concerned voice pushed her out of her head. "What?"

Ms. Gold gently touched the child's shoulder and crouched down by the desk. "It's time to go to art. The rest of the kids have left already. Are you alright?"

Emma focused on the empty room. "Oh sorry. I'm fine."

"You sure? Do you want to call your mom?"

She shrugged off the hand, not wanting to appear too eager at the suggestion and shook her head no before leaving the classroom.

The art room was bustling with noise and she quickly found her assigned seat. The teacher put a tub with her project in front of her and went to explain the next steps of the craft to the whole group. They had been working on making mosaic tile picture with little bits of rounded pottery and glue. Emma was the only one who was still on the first step; deciding what to make. She glanced around at her table mates and noted Gabe smiling at her and she easily returned it with one of her own. He was making a snowman mosaic.

"What about you make one like mine? Then we could be twins!" The boy beamed at his own cleverness and Emma tried not to roll her eyes at him.

"Nah, I just need more time to think about it."

"How about you make your house or a picture of your family?"

The question had been innocent, but caused Emma to tear up. 'Gina said we were a family…What does that even mean?' Suddenly her little self pushed an answer to the front of their shared mind; a clear and defined image as if it had always been there just waiting.

'That's how you see it?'

A little thought questioned back. 'Don't you?'

'I…'

Gabe scrunched up his face unaware of the inner dialogue happening, placing a hand over his friend's. "You ok?"

Emma sniffed hard and wiped her eyes, "Yeah… I think I know what to make." She offered him a watery smile and let her little take over. She didn't fight the image or the fingers that glued and sorted the colored chips. At the end of the hour the mosaic was finished. Trembling hands lifted the cardboard backing, turning it over. Grabbing a fat marker from the supply bin she wrote her first name on it in slanted print, letting out a deep breath she didn't know she'd been holding at the completion.

"Alright class. I will grade your projects today and you can take them home tomorrow. Please pass them to the front."

Panic filled her at the idea of letting go of what she just realized represented a burning desire in her heart. She raised her hand.

"Yes Emma?"
"I want to take mine home now."

The teacher smiled thoughtfully. "I need to grade it first, and then you can."

"So grade it now. I'm not letting you take it." Big Emma was annoyed when several little heads spun her way, watching the stand-off between them.

"Emma—"

"I said no!" Little nostrils flared.

Ms. Gold chose that moment to poke her head into the art room and called her class to line up. She was surprised when no one moved and just noticed the tension between her blonde pupil and the teacher. "What's going on?"

Emma's chest heaved as both sides of her fought for dominance of self and control of her temper as those blue eyes bore into her. "He's trying to take it and I am not going to let him. It's mine!" Mini me won out.

The art teacher explained the situation to Ms. Gold, who nodded, knowing there was something deeper going on. The Mayor had told her Emma was working through some things when she'd been registered at school, but did not elaborate. "Emma, sometimes you can't always have your way. This is one of those times."

A little shoe stomped, hugging the mosaic to her chest. "It's not like that." And it wasn't. It was so much more.

Ms. Gold turned to her colleague. "Will you keep my class for a bit? Emma and I are going to make a phone call. I'll be back to get them after."

The girl paled at that idea, but refused to let go of the art to take the offered hand. She shuffled along after the teacher, knowing better than to further disobey at this point. "You don't need to call her. I didn't say anything bad and I don't want to be in trouble again!"

Ms. Gold looked down at the pouting child. "I think we need to. You've been upset most of the day and I promised your mom I'd keep in touch with her if you were struggling." They reached the classroom and went over to the phone. Belle dialed the familiar number.

Emma fidgeted as her actions were relayed over the line, keeping a death grip on her project and wondering why she was so adamant about the gesture. After a minute, the phone was thrust her way and the girl swallowed hard as she stared at the receiver like it was a snake. She reluctantly brought it up to her ear.

"Hi?"

"Hi yourself." Regina's rich voice came through. "Ms. Gold says you are refusing to let the art teacher collect your work for a grade. She also told me about yelling at your teacher and stomping your foot. Is any of that untrue?"

"No."

"Do you need me to come down there and help you listen to your teachers? I thought we discussed this last week quite thoroughly."

"Noooo! Please...It's not like that!" Tears were begging to fall and she hoped her tone said enough
about what she was feeling because words were not her friend right now.

A pause. "What is it, sweet one? You can tell me."

At the affection Emma lost her composure and began to cry, shaking her head and dropping the phone. She darted for the reading nook in the back of the room and hid under the pile of pillows on the rug.

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An impatient knock came before the clicking of heels into the classroom. Emma burrowed deeper, being careful not to crush her project as she heard muffled voices across the way. Soon those heels made their way over and she felt a tapping on her exposed foot.

"Emma, come out from there please."

"No."

A cool rush of air flooded her senses as the pillow covering her face was lifted to reveal brown eyes.

"Telling me no is not an option you want to take right now." Regina kept her tone neutral, concern fully taking over. She knew all of Emma's defiant looks and the little face in front of her was not one of them. Her gaze shifted to what was in the girl's hand. "May I see?"

"Not here." Tears fell and she gave into her desire. "I wanna go with you."

The weight of those words pulsed through the Queen and she pulled away the pillows to help the girl stand up. She'd never give into a tantrum, but knew this wasn't one. Something was wrong and she would not deny this child comfort. "Go get your things."

The girl flew across the room and gently put her project into her backpack while Regina spoke with Ms. Gold to get the homework assignment for the night. After signing the child out in the front office, they made their way to the waiting Benz and back towards Town Hall.

Emma disheartened when she realized they were not headed back to the mansion right away. She kicked the passenger seat, earning her a raised brow in the mirror. "Sorry… I thought we were going to the house." She gave by way of explanation.

Regina softened at that, returning her eyes to the road. She pulled into her reserved parking space. "I have a bit more work that needs to get done today. Then we will go home and you can tell me what happened. First, I think a nap is in order." As much as she wanted to be done with the day, there were documents needing her signature, especially since Town Hall would be closed for a few weeks.

"No nap Gina." Even through the whine she fought a yawn.

A firm hand led the girl over to the sofa in the black and white office. Regina knelt to remove the child's shoes and coat. "I want you to rest. You do not have to sleep, but you will lie quietly while I finish up. Alright?"

"Yes, but… will you sit with me first?"

"Of course, come here." She sat and patted her lap.

Emma curled up resting her head on the offered spot and relaxed when she felt familiar fingers running through her hair. As much as she fought, fatigue won and she slipped off.
The Mayor sat stroking blonde curls for a few more minutes before easing out from underneath Emma. She summoned a blanket and tucked it around her charge, finally returning to the pile of tasks on her desk.

In a little over an hour Emma woke to the clicking of nails on the computer. She blinked groggily, suddenly remembering where she was and why. Sitting up, she stretched and looked over at the Mayor who paused long enough to smile over.

"Hello there, sleepy head. Now that you are up, I'd like you to get started on your homework." She indicated the coffee table where she'd placed Emma's homework folder she'd pulled from her purse earlier. "That way we can spend some time together this evening doing something fun after we talk. Perhaps a game or a movie. How does that sound?"

"Mnhmm." Emma hummed and sighed at the task before her, but started without a fuss. She finished with spelling and math worksheet quickly. She was allowed to play with the basket of toys once Regina checked over her work and they went through the flash cards together. A little while later the clock chimed four times and she knew that was the signal to leave.

The Mayor shut down the office, bundling herself and Emma up for the ride home. It was already getting dark outside as the heavy eye of winter settled in for a nap over the seaside town.

Once at the house Emma dashed upstairs to the lavender room to put her things away. She pulled the mosaic out, relieved it made it home in one piece. Studying the intersecting tiles, she knew the adult in her would have begrudgingly included more people, but she struggled to understand why her little side didn't. She tried to get back to the feelings that came from making it. They rushed in, right with her little side, taking hold of her mind and heart.

"Emma?" A brief knock followed the question.

"Yeah?" Little eyes glanced up.

Regina took a moment to study the child unsure of which side of Emma was fully present. "Are you ready to tell me what happened at school today?"

A tear threatened and Emma sucked in her lower lip. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, you are not." The Queen went to the purple bench and sat to be nearer. "I'm not thrilled with the fit you had with your teacher, but I know something must be bothering you for you to act out that way. I also want to understand why you felt so strongly about taking your project home today."

"It's mine. I made it and she finally let me be so I could."

Regina nodded, now understanding little Emma was present and was referring to her counterpart. "That must feel amazing for you, sweet one. I know your big side is trying to understand all of this and sometimes she needs a little help. We're you helping today?"

"Yeah and she kinda listened, but then not and I wanted to show you before she did something to it." Little Emma gestured to the craft in her hand, shuffling over and climbing on the bench to sit next to her keeper. She hugged it once more and finally turned it over.

Regina gasped at the detail and the blend of the colors. It was wonderfully made for such little hands and she pondered over the raw talent that was obviously there. She made a note to further explore that as she took in the image as a whole. "It's beautiful."

There were four figures in a row, each with a distinct hair and eye color. Regina spotted herself on
the far left next to a light blonde figure. Then man with brown hair and a woman with darker blonde hair. They were all holding hands. A red boader surrounded them in the shape of a heart.

"That's you and me and Henry and Paige and even Jasper." She pointed to a rust colored blob in what looked like a blue bowl next to the blonde figure's feet.

"I think I understand why you were so upset at having this taken from you. Though how you went about expressing that was not appropriate. Next time I expect you to listen when your teacher asks to grade your work. He would have given it back tomorrow for you to take home." She was gentle in her explanation, but wanted to be clear the fit from earlier was not to be repeated. "You owe him and Ms. Gold an apology. We'll take care of that when I drop you off in the morning. I will go with you, but you will tell them yourself."

"I will and I'm sorry." She leaned into the Queen, a free hand quietly played with the brunette's gold necklace.

"I know you are dear heart. May I put this on the fridge so we can look at it every day?" She wanted to frame it eventually, but knew what it would mean to the little one to have it on display.

An eager nod agreed before green eyes darkened and a little hand twisted the necklace. "Gina?"

"Yes, Emma."

"I need to know."

Regina stilled the small fingers at her neck and lifted the child to her lap, unsure of what Emma meant. "Know what?"

"The picture. You said you kept it because..." A dry mouth couldn't finish and big Emma squirmed. "No one ever loved her from before. Why you?"

The Queen froze and lifted the little chin with a single finger. "Why do I love the little girl in you?" When the briefest of nods followed, she wrapped the child up tight in her arms. "You are easy to love and you always were, never think otherwise. Anyone who failed to from your first childhood was a complete idiot."

"I think she... little me might love..." Emma whispered that last few words, never finishing.

Regina smiled briefly for what went unsaid. "For now, her feelings are raw and new. She gets all the time she needs." Realizing there was something else, she continued. "She needs to be allowed her feelings, whatever they are she is not wrong for having them and big you needs to try to be understanding of that. I think if you took some time to listen to the little girl inside, you would learn a few things that might help you understand your reactions to certain feelings. Will you try for her, like you did today?"

Emma did not agree nor disagree. She simply allowed herself to be held in those warm arms.

Next time - Shopping and more Snow encounters, Emma learns Regina makes mistakes too, and a flashback.
Chapter 16

A/N - Enjoy! I'll try to post another chapter later this weekend.

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Previously...

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“Why are we here? I have a ton of clothes already.” Big eyes rolled as she watched Regina thumb a rack of expensive dresses in the high end boutique downtown. Despite her annoyance, her little fingers rubbed the rich fabric of a deep blue velvet dress.

“I told you Emma, I want to get you a Christmas dress to wear when we are in Boston. Henry wants to take us out to a nice dinner.” She took the blue dress the child was fingering and added to a growing pile over her arm. It was late Thursday afternoon before winter break and she’d just gotten Emma from school. The stores would be packed this time tomorrow and she refused to be stuck in the madness of the Christmas shopping frenzy. There was a lot to do and prepare for before their trip and the stress of it was beginning to cause a dull ache at the base of her skull.

“Don’t wanna wear a dress. I’ll look dumb!”

Regina ‘tsked’ and steered the child by the shoulder to the back of the store. “Do not talk about yourself that way. Come try these on.”

They spent the next twenty minutes in the dressing room and Emma was grateful when the last dress was pulled over her head. The dark blue contrasted beautifully with pale skin and the brunette was instantly in love with the velvet number. It was a classic A-frame cut with a scoop neckline and a wide silk sash that tied in the back. She buttoned Emma up and tied the sash in an elaborate bow before turning the child to face the mirror.

“What do you think?”

Emma’s lips parted. Her eyes were bright and cheeks a healthy pink framed by shining curls, and she knew then that she looked nothing like the haunted kid in the old picture. She looked like a little doll, a well cared for and cherished child.

Unsure eyes found brown in the mirror. “I look… nice.”

“You look beautiful. Do you like the dress enough to wear it? Is it too tight or uncomfortable in any way?” The Queen knew she’d pay to have it altered if needed.
“No, it’s good.”

Sure fingers untied the sash and helped the girl step out. As Emma got dressed, Regina re-hung the garment, already planning the matching accessories to get. The girl followed back into the store and watched as white tights and matching blue shoes were selected along with a blue velvet headband. Big eyes bugged at the total of the items, but didn’t comment. She knew the Queen had never hurt for money, but having it so freely spent on her was still new territory.

“I’d like to make one more stop if you are amendable to the idea.” Regina secured the garment bag in the back seat and helped Emma into the car. The headache was starting to get worse and she wanted nothing more than a hot bath and a glass of wine, but she knew there wouldn’t be time tomorrow for the errand. She checked her purse for Excedrin and found she’d forgotten to refill her pill container. A little voice pulled her from the search.

“Where?”

“Rapunzel’s Hair Salon. When I was washing your hair last night I noticed several split ends and you could use a trim to keep it healthy. I won’t force you today, but it does need to be done sometime soon.”

Big Emma appreciated being asked about such a personal effect and nodded her consent. Before the spell she had planned on getting a haircut anyway. The drove a few blocks and parked. The salon was nearly empty and they were seen right away by none other than the golden beauty Rapunzel herself.

“Afternoon Madam Mayor. How may I help you?”

“Emma needs a trim, an inch at most off the ends.” She looked down at the girl to confirm. “Unless you’d like something else?”

“No thanks, that’s good.”

Regina smiled at the use of manners and helped Emma up into the chair. Rapunzel wet the curls with water and combed them through. Wet, Emma’s hair reached her waist. The girl watched in the mirror as the promised inch was cut and little hands flew up.

“Wait! I want it shorter.” She pointed to her shoulders having done a lot of thinking in the car on the way over about what the Queen had said about listening more to her little side.

“That’s a big difference Emma. Are you sure?” The Queen was surprised by the request, wondering where it was coming from.

“I don’t want princess hair no more.” A little nose wrinkled.

“You mean anymore.” Sighing Regina rounded the chair and cupped the small chin. “And why is that, dear?”

“I’m not a princess. I never was, not really and I don’t want to pretend to be anymore.” Big eyes looked up in certainty and shifted back to little ones. “I just want to be me.”

A smile tugged at burgundy lips as she pressed them to a pale cheek. “Then you shall be.” She placed a finger between Emma’s shoulder blades. “How about here? That way we can still put up your hair or braid it.”

“That’s good.” She nodded, eager to lose some of the weight of her past.
The Mayor nodded in turn to Rapunzel who went to work. A half hour later Emma was beaming into the handheld mirror at her new do and playfully shook her head from side to side, enjoying the freedom the movement brought. She was allowed to choose a sticker pack from the treasure chest as a prize and happily hopped off the chair.

“You look adorable. Do you like it?”

“Love it! I can’t wait to show Jasper and Henry and Paige and Gabe and—” She went through a whole list as Regina paid and they made their way to the car. Her happiness was short lived as she spotted Snow and Neal coming up the side walk hand in hand.

Regina squeezed the small hand reassuringly and despite the throbbing pain in her temples she greeted the pair as they stopped in front of the salon. “Hello Ms. Blanchard. Are you getting a haircut too, Neal?”

The boy grinned and nodded. He went ahead of his mother into the salon. Mary-Margret smiled in return, grateful for the Mayor’s civility as she looked down at the girl. “Wow, Emma your hair looks great! That’s quite a change.”

Emma stared with a pinched look on her face, unsure of why she was shutting down and again felt her hand squeezed gently.

“Say thank you.” Regina prompted out of habit. Regardless of the tension between the two she would not allow the girl to be rude to anyone.

Big Emma bit her lip suddenly annoyed at being forced to interact. “But…” She stalled remembering what the Queen had said about it being her choice if she wanted to interact on a personal level.

“Emma, say thank you for the compliment.” Brown eyes flashed in warning, suddenly irritated at pinching pain behind her eyes.

“Thanks.” The word was cold and biting, entirely not what was expected of her and she knew it.

“Please excuse her, Ms. Blanchard. She missed her nap after school today and seems a bit tired. Come along Emma.”

Regina led the girl to the car and once they were inside, she turned around fully in the front seat to scold. “When someone compliments you, a polite response is expected regardless of how you feel about the person, especially if they are an adult. I will not accept rude behavior from you, young lady. Are we clear?” Emma’s actions struck a nerve, of which was already throbbing into the beginnings of a migraine and she found herself sounding harsher then she meant to be.

Emma blinked, tears forming. “But you said—”

The Queen held up a hand for silence. “Are we clear Emma?”

“Crystal your Majesty!” She spat the barb that hadn’t been used in a long time and crossed her arms to hide her face in them.

Regina closed her eyes, berating herself for coming across so firm. It felt like someone was tap-dancing on her temples. Right now she needed to get them home so she could take something for her head. She eased into traffic as sniffling came from the back seat. The second the front door was unlocked Emma flew inside and upstairs into her room.

The slamming door caused the brunette to wince, but she let the angry child go for the moment,
thinking big Emma might need some space. Making her way into the kitchen, she went right to the medicine cabinet using the magnet key she kept hidden on the fridge so little hands wouldn’t get into things they shouldn’t. She found the Excedrin and took two capsules with a full glass of water and forced herself to begin working on dinner. By the time she had a salad made and the mix for stuffed peppers ready to be put in the oven the medication was beginning to work. She kicked off her heels by the front door and headed upstairs in search of what she hoped would be a calmer savior.

Knocking thrice on the closed door she waited before opening it. Her heart nearly broke when she saw Emma curled up in the rocker covered with her baby blanket and thumb in mouth. Tear tracks stained the little cheeks and green eyes glared back.

Sure feet crossed the room and knelt in front of the rocker. Regina gently removed the thumb and ran cool hand through tangled hair.

“Leave me alone!”

“I will not and I should not have to begin with.” Feeling guilty at the obvious upset that action caused. She thought she had been doing the right thing, but mistook Emma’s hurt for anger. “I am sorry for coming across as harsh as I did in the car. I did not mean to be so firm with you.” A part of her wanted to throw in that she had a headache and was stressed, but the child before her wouldn’t understand that, nor was it an excuse for her behavior. She took little hands in hers.

The girl sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve before Regina could conjure a tissue fast enough. “I didn’t want to talk to her and you said before it was my choice.”

The Queen closed her eyes, realizing her other mistake. “You are right, I did say that and I’m sorry I took that choice from you. I shouldn’t have. I was focused on you being impolite and other things. I missed that you were uncomfortable.”

Big Emma shrugged, not used to being apologized to. “S’okay.”

“No Emma, it isn’t. I will be much more aware going forward. I’m sorry for hurting your feelings and I can only show you by doing differently.” Regina sought understanding in the eyes she held. “I’m human. I’m going to make mistakes sometimes, but that doesn’t mean I’m any less accountable for them to you. We are a team.”

Emma felt her heart skip a beat over that idea, quickly taken with the notion. “I like the dress and my hair.” She offered an olive branch.

Regina smiled, grateful for the extension as she held a tissue up to a little nose. “Blow.” She magicked away the tissue and conjured a bath at the ready in the next room. With ease she lifted the child to her hip. Emma dropped the blanket and allowed herself to be carried into the bathroom where a warm bath with bubbles awaited.

As she played with the bath toys she enjoyed the silent company as Regina tidied the bathroom. She thought about how she acted outside of the salon and knew there was more to her behavior than simply not wanting to talk to Snow. “I’m sorry I was rude. I know you expect me not to be and I coulda’ been nicer.”

The Queen paused wiping up the sink and smiled down at the girl who was now busy patting bubbles on her face. “I do expect you to be polite, but I understand why you didn’t want to be.” The look Emma gave, complete with the white bubble beard was priceless and she found the phone in her hand snapping a picture at the sheer cuteness of the moment.
Little hands snapped up over big eyes. “Gina! Destroy that right now!”

“Careful little swan, I may just keep it for blackmail when you’re older.” She teased and then sobered at the thought. “Alright, time to get out before you prune. Dinner should be ready soon.” Reaching for the spray nozzle she helped Emma stand and rinsed the suds away.

After dinner and a story, Emma was put to bed and fell right to sleep. Regina cleaned the kitchen and went up her room to enjoy her own bath with the glass of wine she’d been looking forward too. The hot soak took away the last of her headache and she decided she had a bit of time before she needed to be asleep to dig into the scrapbook she’d been making for Emma.

Pulling a heavy purple silk bound book from the top of her armoire, she paged through it so far and smiled at the book of memories starting to come together. She added a lock of Emma’s hair to new parchment and took a few minutes to jot down the date and a description of the moment in an elegant hand. Closing the book, she pulled out the sewing basket from under the night stand and the cross stitch pattern she’d been working on to add to the cover. Sure hands worked for an hour, finally finishing a single lavender bud and leaf. Her work was exquisite and she wanted to add a personal touch she knew Emma would appreciate.

Removing her glasses, she put everything away and slipped between the cool sheets. As she settled into the darkness thoughts of the past swam across her mind, taking her back on the river of time to another gift she’d given the blonde.

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Flash back – 2 years ago…

Regina settled back in her desk chair of town hall, silently going over her notes for the next council meeting when her office door burst open. She startled, nearly spilling her coffee mug mid sip.

“I just thought of something Regina!” Emma slammed the door behind her and sealed the room with a sound barrier spell.

“Miss Swan, you can’t just burst in here unannounced—”

“Sorry, but it’s important.” She slid into a chair opposite the Queen and propped her boots up on the desk.

“If you value the ability to sit, you will remove your feet from my furniture.”

Emma blushed and obediently dropped her boots to the floor and brushed the desk for dirt with her hand. “Opps… Force of habit.”

“One we will work on breaking in the next life. Now, what is so important that couldn’t wait until our meeting tonight?”

“Magic always comes with a price, right?”

Regina removed her reading glasses. “Yes.”

“So what’s the price of doing this spell?” The blonde asked in a nervous tone.

The Mayor blinked. “It’s complicated and not something I care to discuss with you right this second.” She wasn’t being dismissive she was just surprised at the sudden interest.
Emma bit her lip, not satisfied with that answer, but knowing that if she pushed too hard the Queen wouldn’t budge. “Can you at least tell me if it is dangerous or harmful to anyone?”

“I can assure you the price is neither dangerous nor harmful. It is something very personal and one that I am willing to pay. Consider it my gift to you for casting the dark curse and causing you the hurt you experienced in the first place. I’d appreciate your respect to my privacy on the specifics of that right now.”

Emma winced. “You’ve more than made up for that Regina. Henry and you have bounced back and you guys are closer than ever. Even my parents are ok and with all the times we’ve saved this town from some kind of magical disaster, I’d say the score is even.”

Regina crossed her arms and sighed. “Maybe to everyone else, but my score is not settled with you.”

“You took in Henry when I couldn’t care for him, or even myself.” She said the first thing that came to mind, hating the dejected look on the brunette’s face.

“I still owe the little girl in you a happy ending and that is something real I can explain to you when you’ll be ready to rip my head off the first morning you awaken in our new life. And it’s the truth. I told you I won’t lie to you, here nor there, Emma.” She crossed her legs, feeling defensive.

“People lie to kids all the time. It’s kinda a thing, look at Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy.” Emma rubbed her knuckles together, not understanding the Queen’s hang up.

“I lied to Henry and look at how well that turned out for me. It nearly cost me our son and I refuse to repeat that mistake with you, especially if you won’t have your memories of these conversations.” After everything that lies had cost she valued honesty above a lot of things and she did not like how Emma seemed to be ok muddying the truth.

Embarrassed, Emma’s shoulders popped up to her ears. “Right… What about just staggering the truth over time, like we talked about before? I can’t know I wanted this, not right away.”

Regina nodded, remembering the night in the crypt last year. “Under the pretense of assuming the role of your parent, yes because it would be my job to keep you safe, all parts of you, emotionally and physically.” She grinned. “And, as you so movingly put it I’m ‘the only one with balls enough to go toe to toe with you.’ And you will be one angry little savior.”

The blonde burst out laughing, doubling over.

Olive skin turned pink. “What in the world is so humorous?”

“You! You said balls! The Queen said BALLS!” By now she was rolling.

Regina looked up at the ceiling, scoffing. “You are such a child.”

Emma smirked, tossing her hair back. “I’m gonna be all yours, too!”

A/N - If you have any little Emma requests, please let me know. If it works I’ll add it in.

Next time - Pictures, grades, winter break starts & sick Emma.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

A/N - Here is one more chapter before the work week. I will try to get the usual Wednesday and Friday posts out. Busiest work week of the year for me so we will see. Meantime enjoy. Those of you that asked for a sick Emma scene, here you go. Also, the scene for the cover art for this fic (visible on Fan-Fiction.net is here as well. Hope you like it! Bit of a fluff chapter. We are two chapters away from a Boston Christmas with Henry. :-)

Previously...from flashback...

The blonde burst out laughing, doubling over.

Olive skin turned pink. "What in the world is so humorous?"

"You! You said balls! The Queen said BALLS!" By now she was rolling.

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Friday was a half day at school due to the impending break and Emma loved every second of it. There were games and songs with a small party after lunch before they were to go home. Everyone in class had been asked to bring something and Emma begged Regina to make the cinnamon cookies she loved so much. The children swarmed her when she brought out the container and for a few minutes Emma was the center of attention, in a good way. She found she quite enjoyed the feeling and wondered why she hadn't tried harder with the other children aside from Gabe. Promising to work on that after winter break, Emma bit into the still warm cinnamon.

As they were packing up to go home Ms. Gold handed each student a vanilla envelope with their parent's name on it, explaining that it was their report card for the quarter. The teacher knelt down to give Emma hers. "I know you've only been with us for a little bit, so this is more of a progress report than a report card. It just gives your mom an update on how you are doing so far, okay?"

Emma nervously took the sealed envelope and stuffed it in her backpack with a few bags of sight words she was supposed to practice over the two weeks. She'd thought about opening the envelope right there to quench her curiosity, but knew the Queen wouldn't like that, especially since it wasn't addressed to her.

The bell caused an explosion of running feet out the front door of the school; Emma among them immediately looked for her keeper. Regina waved across the way and bent to receive a hug from the happy child.

"Freedom! No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers with—"

"Emma." She tapped the girl's nose gently and grinned at the easy smile that was returned. "It looks
like you had a wonderful day." Pulling a wet wipe from her purse, she wiped the chocolate from the little mouth.

"We had a party and everyone ate the cinnamon cookies! I had a cupcake that Gabe's dad made and a cookie. Ms. Gold said we could only have two things, not everything. I could have had one of everything and still had room for cinnamon cookies." Emma squirmed out of reach of the wipe and got into the back seat. She noticed the garment bag and a shoe box on the seat and turned questioning eyes to the Mayor. "Are you returning these?"

Regina froze after clicking Emma's seat belt into place in confusion. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"They're here and not in my closet." Emma dropped her head, biting her lip. "And grades came out today and I thought maybe you knew I did bad or something."

"Look at me please." The Mayor waited patiently before continuing. "There is a reason they are here, but not for the one you are thinking. I would never buy you something and then return it as a punishment. Has that happened to you before?"

A shaky nod, complete with a chin wobble.

"I've told you before, I don't work that way. As for grades, as long as you try your best with each assignment, you don't need to worry about consequences. Things like not trying, cheating, or not doing your homework would be things I'd be upset about. Does that make sense?"

Emma let out a breath and nodded. She felt warm lips kiss her cheek and she pointed to the bag in question.

"Ah, yes. We have an appointment scheduled to have your picture taken. I thought you might like to have something to give Henry and Paige for Christmas."

"Like in a studio? With lights and stuff?" Big Emma had secretly always wanted to do that and her little side started bouncing in the seat at the idea. "I've never done that before, just school pictures."

The Queen settled into the front seat. "This is quite different, more formal and the experience of having your portrait done is fun." She tuned the radio station to one she knew Emma liked, minus the heavy metal, and they were quickly on route.

The only portrait studio in town was called Magical Moments and Emma wondered who owned it. When a short man with a buzz cut in a suit and the biggest smile greeted them, the girl giggled; of course it would be Happy the dwarf, or former dwarf.

"The main gallery room is all ready Madam Mayor." Mr. Glee reached for the garment bag over the brunette's shoulder. "Here allow me to take those, follow me."

Emma trailed along after them taking in all the props, settings, and backdrops that were neatly on display wanting to ask what backdrop had been chosen for her. A minute later she found herself alone with the Queen in a dressing room and squirmed, as little children often did, when helped into fancy clothing. The blue dress, tights and shoes fit perfectly and Regina took a minute to comb Emma's shortened hair back, twirling the curls to help them spiral and braided a small lock in the front to further frame the little face.

"Take a quick look and then we need to get back out there."

For a second time Emma looked at herself in the mirror and even from yesterday she looked
different. The haircut had made her appear younger somehow.

"Are you ready to go?" Regina bundled the discarded uniform, neatly folding each piece on the bench provided.

Emma shifted from foot to foot, nodding nervously. This was really going to happen. She was getting her picture taken professionally just like the ones she'd envied of Henry on the mantle of the study all those years ago. The strangest feeling of déjà vu took over as Regina led her into the main room of the gallery. Upbeat music was playing in the background and Emma found her little feet beginning to tap in time.

Two backdrops with props were set up, one was an underwater kingdom with swimming fish and flickering colored lights to imitate moving water and little Emma adored the magic of it. The other was much more personal.

"Both? You picked both for me?"

Regina thumbed the little hand. "One for each of you, yes."

The second backdrop was of a warm hearth next to a large window with falling snow. There was a white chaise, similar to the one at the mansion near the fire, but not blocking it.

"Which would you like to do first dear heart?"

Little Emma grinned and ran over to the ocean scene. She easily climbed up onto a stool that was covered with shimmering gold fabric. She sat patiently as Mr. Glee adjusted the lights to best feature Emma's skin tone and clothing. The camera clicked away and Emma laughed at the funny faces the former dwarf made. She posed in a few different positions before it was time to move sets.

Regina noted the shift as Emma climbed down from the sea scene and walked over to the chaise. Mr. Glee posed her more formally with the child sitting at an angle, ankles crossed and hands folded in her lap. A few shots were taken before Emma shook her head, waving Regina over.

The brunette quickly crossed the room and knelt by the chaise. "Emma?"

"It feels wrong. I… I want you here instead."

Brown eyes wondered at that. "We are here for your portrait dear, not mine."

"No. I mean I want one of us, here together." Big eyes invited the Queen.

Regina cupped the dimpled chin, suddenly realizing where this was coming from and knowing that there had to be some trust beginning to form with that request coming from adult Emma. "Like Henry?" She stroked a pale cheek with her thumb.

"Like Henry and you."

Standing to her full height, the Queen smoothed her skirt and black blazer, pulling the cuffs with gold buttons down. She lifted Emma up as she sat, placing the child facing front on her lap while gently fixing the hem of the velvet dress. She rested her chin atop Emma's curls and looked over toward the camera with red lips in the barest hint of a smile. Her heart was too full for anything bigger; fearing if she tried there would be tears.

Mr. Glee took a single shot and paused to look at it for a long moment before beginning to shut down the camera. Regina looked at him quizzically, lifting Emma up and telling her to go into the
dressing room to change. She strode over.

"Just one?"

"Just one." He turned on the preview feature of the camera. "Look and you'll see why."

And she did. The moment captured was truly magical.

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"We have to wait a whole week? That sucks!" She kicked at the counter from her perch on the stool in the kitchen at the idea that the portraits wouldn't be ready sooner, reaching her finger over to dip in the bowl of white sauce Regina was making.

"Emma, stop that." The Queen took a teaspoon from the drawer and dipped the tip in the bowl. "Use a spoon. Good work takes time to produce. We will pick them up before our trip to Boston."

"Well, it does suck." Emma mumbled around the spoon in her mouth, eyes growing large at the creamy taste of alfredo sauce. "That's good! What are we having?"

"Chicken Alfredo and brussel sprouts."

She made a face. "Do I have to—"

"Yes, you do. At least try a few before condemning the dish. If you genuinely don't like it, I won't force you." Regina was determined to broaden Emma's pallet. Since their visit to the Doctor's office she diversified her cooking a great deal and started to limit how many grilled cheese or even cold cheese sandwiches Emma ate, still concerned about Emma's low height and weight. She increased healthy snacks to twice a day and with three rounded meals, the girl was starting to fill out and not appear as scrawny.

"But they're green, Gina. Green like mold and swamp water and that stuff between—"

"Set the table please." The Queen handed over a silverware bundle and napkins, nodding her head towards the dining room.

"Fine." She scooted out the door, avoiding a playful dish towel flick and completed her chore. She wandered back into the kitchen just as the chicken was being pulled out of the oven with the tray of lemon buttered brussel sprouts. Everything smelled amazing.

"Wash your hands and go sit down."

Emma hopped up on the stool by the sink and quickly cleaned up while the food was plated. Regina cut the chicken and sprouts before drizzling sauce over everything. The girl settled in place at the table on Regina's right and felt her mouth water as dinner was set in front of her.

They talked easily about the upcoming trip to Boston as Emma ate most of the chicken. She didn't touch the sprouts, but moved them around on her plate hoping to make it look like she did.

"Just try it, dear. They will not bite." She took a forkful of brussels to prove her point, swirling it in the sauce before bringing it to her mouth.

Emma was skeptical, but mimicked the same action, though with a much smaller portion. She hesitated, but finally tried the dreaded greens. She chewed thoughtfully and was surprised she didn't hate it. The sauce made all the difference and she politely asked for more of the cream sauce to dip
The Queen smiled, consenting to the request and glad her strategy of the sauce was effective. Henry had been much the same way at this age, but had always given trying new things a go with much more ease than the little blonde.

After dinner was cleared away, Emma asked to watch TV, but was told to get her backpack so they could practice the dreaded flash cards.

The girl groaned. "But it's Friday and I wanna chillax Gina."

A sculpted brow rose at that word. "Chillax? Really Emma."

"It's a word, sorta."

"You mean 'sort of'. Now do as I ask please."

"I don't—"

"I know you don't, but it will take ten minutes and then we can watch a show." The brunette filled the sink with hot soapy water. Part of her wanted to relent, but knew that daily practice was the key to helping Emma succeed with reading. That thought reminded her of something else. "Bring down your progress report as well. I want to have a look at it."

Emma sulked upstairs and returned with a bag of words and the envelope with Regina's name on it still sealed. As her keeper did the dishes, she read the cards through three times, only getting hung up on four words out of twenty, but finished the last set without errors.

"Well done, sweet one." Regina dried her hands on a dishcloth after draining the sink. She went to open the envelope, noting how the girl tensed when she did so. Summoning her reading glasses, she skimmed the single sheet.

Big Emma waited with baited breath, hoping that what was on the paper was decent. She had plenty of experience of getting poor marks and being on the receiving end of criticism in the past. Little Emma was simply curious, not having the knowledge of knowing any differently in this life.

"What's it say? How bad is it?"

The Queen came around the counter and set the page down. She pointed with a manicured finger and read through each subject. "In math and art you received an A. In everything else a B, including reading." Offering a winning smile, she ran her hand through the back of the girl's curls. "You are doing very well and I'm so proud of you."

"But what about my mosaic? I never turned that in."

"I took a picture and e-mailed it to your Art teacher, who was quite impressed with it." The Queen kissed the top of blonde curls. "To celebrate we can go to the store and you can pick out a prize tomorrow."

"I never got an 'A' before...in anything." She whispered, tearing up at the thought. Little hands took the paper and scooted off the stool. Big Emma allowed her little side to take over and passively went through the motions of hanging up the paper on the fridge with a magnet.

"That is the perfect spot for it, sweet one. I think big you appreciates the gesture." Regina watched as the shift occurred again and big green eyes found hers.
"I do. I really do."

The next morning Regina awoke to something nudging her foot. She cracked one eye open, catching the god-awful early hour on the clock and closed it right back up.

"G-ina?"

Both eyes popped open at the scratchy voice and the finger now poking her cheek, catching sight of a pale pinched face. Concern flooded her senses and she sat up quickly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't feel good." Emma clutched her stomach, actually turning green.

The Queen threw off the duvet, scooped Emma up in one arm and made a beeline for the bathroom. She barely made it to the toilet before last night's dinner made an unwelcome appearance, keeping one arm around the child as a support and the other holding back a blonde braid. Emma heaved until nothing more came out of her little body which was now damp with sweat and trembling. Regina moved over to the sink and wet a washcloth to wipe the girl's face. She filled a Dixie cup with water and Emma rinsed into the sink as tears began to fall.

"I-I'm s-sorry. I didn't m-mean toooo."

"Come here." The Queen lifted the child to her hip and taking her back into the main bedroom to the bed where she sat with Emma in her lap. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Sometimes we get sick and that can't be helped."

"But I-I puked." Sniffling and struggling for breath, Emma hung on to Regina for dear life, the adult in her fighting a full blown trigger from the past.

Regina felt her own stomach start to turn. "I saw that. It's alright, that happens when you don't feel well."

"N-no I puked on m-my bed." More hot tears streamed. "I'm sorrrrrry!"

"Then I'll clean it up. You are not in any kind of trouble." Regina's brow wrinkled, realizing that at some point in Emma's life being sick had been traumatizing for her. The very idea made her heart clench. She hugged the crying girl and pressed her lips to a forehead, feeling for a fever. Shaking her head at the heat and waving her wrist, a skin thermometer appeared in a swirl of purple smoke. She gently ran the device across Emma's brow. It beeped, flashing 101.

"You are running a fever." Noting the shift taking over her charge, she conjured a clean pair of purple cotton PJs with a duck print, little Emma's favorites. "Let's get you changed and back into bed."

Green eyes scrunched and tired little legs kicked out. "Nnnnooo! We're supposta go to the toy store for my prize today." She felt herself eased off the warm lap to the floor and stomped her foot. Another wave of nausea took over as she staggered forward and was caught between the brunette's knees.

"You are not going anywhere today, sweet one." Sure fingers unzipped the fleece footed pajamas. "We will go to the store for your prize when you are feeling better, I promise. Step out."

"No fair, stupid stomach, stupid puke..." Little Emma hung on to the Queen's arms as she shed the sweaty garment and was wiped down with a cool cloth before being redressed. The cotton felt much
better against her skin. She watched as a bottle appeared in her keeper's hand, realizing what it was and slapped both hands over her mouth, head shaking. "Uhhhhhuuuuh."

An efficient hand poured a measured dose of children's Tylenol into a little plastic cup. "This will help bring your fever down. Take this please."

Another shake.

"It is cherry flavored. You like cherries." Frowning when that explanation did nothing, she sighed. "If you take this without a further fuss, I will make you a grilled cheese when you wake up."

Emma dropped her hands, even nauseous; the promise of her favorite food got her attention. "You'll cut it with the star cutter?"

Regina smiled tiredly and nodded. One day last week she had used a cookie cutter on Emma's turkey sandwich and the child had been enamored with the idea since.

"Open."

The second the child's mouth gaped, she poured the medicine in, making her own face when Emma gagged and turned accusing big eyes her way.

"Cherry flavored my a—"

"Don't start. Into bed with you." Her tone was firm, not wanting to have to address any use of coarse language when the girl was already feeling miserable.

Emma huffed and yawned as she was tucked into the very spot her keeper had slept. She let go of the need to be present, stepping back in exhaustion.

"Stay with me?" Watery eyes begged for comfort.

"Of course." The Queen rounded the other side of the bed and lay down, pulling the warm body close. "I'm right here, sweet one. Try and go back to sleep." She rubbed Emma's back gently as the girl dozed off. A glance at the clock showed it was barely four in the morning and she was wide awake.

Careful not to disturb the sleeping form she eased out of bed and went down the hall to the lavender room, taking her time stripping the bed. Once it was remade with fresh linens she took everything to the laundry room and started a wash. After which, she brewed a cup of coffee and took it back upstairs. She resettled on the bed and watched the child sleep as she sipped the drink. She wondered at the tears from earlier and decided to ask big Emma about it when the savior decided to return, having a feeling that the little side would be present most of the day to come.

Over the next few hours the Mayor worked diligently on a list of things to do before their trip to Boston next Thursday as well as some left over paperwork from town hall. Pausing to set aside her papers when Emma stirred around seven thirty, blurry eyed and pucker faced.

"Good morning sweet one, how are you feeling?" Little hands reached for the Queen who pulled the girl over to cuddle in her arms.

"Do you want some warm tea with honey?" Regina knew she had to get plenty of liquids into the child and hoped the promise of something sweet would help. Receiving a small nod, she conjured Emma's yellow mug with the promised drink and helped the girl hold it. "A little more. We can't have you getting dehydrated."
Emma finished the tea and snuggled down against her keeper. "Read please?"

Regina summoned their book and began to recite. She read two chapters before the girl drifted off again. Setting the book aside, she removed her glasses and leaned back against the headboard closing her own eyes. Together dreams claimed them.

"Emma your grilled cheese is ready. Please come and sit at the table." Regina called into the living room where the girl sat piled under blankets watching cartoons.

"I don't wanna. Hurts." Little Emma whined, refusing to move.

Seeing the pink cheeks and glassy eyes, the Queen relented bringing the plate and a cup of grape Pedialyte into the living room. She joined Emma on the couch and helped her sit up. "Liquid first, a few sips at least. Good girl."

"I want Stitch movie."

Regina settled the plate on Emma's lap with plenty of napkins. "Manners dear."

"Please Stitch movie and watch with me?" Little hands picked up the star shaped sandwich and began to nibble a point.

"Of course, sweet one." She quickly found the requested DVD and popped it into the player before rejoining Emma on the couch.

Over the next hour Emma ate half her sandwich and continued to sip the Pedialyte. Eventually she pushed the plate away and reached for her keeper with grabby hands. She sat on the Queen's lap facing the television, leaning back against the strong form in complete ease. After the movie it was time for temperature check and more Tylenol. Emma fussied briefly, but was too tired to fight about the awful taste. She grew teary eyed after swallowing and turned around completely in Regina's arms to rest against her heart to heart.

As exhausted as the brunette was, she simply held onto the child seeking comfort. A flick of her wrist turned off the movie credits to the news channel and she watched while Emma slept. After an hour in the same position her lap had gone numb along with her arms, but she daren't move least she wake the sick child who stirred a bit later.

Big Emma cracked her eyes open, confused at first until she felt the Queen shift under her. Jerking back, she came face to face with concerned brown eyes finally remembering she had been sick and sought her keeper out.

"W-what time is it Gina?"

"A little after two thirty. You have been sleeping most of the day."

Teeth chewed a lower lip. "I freaked out, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that." Regina ran a hand up and down the small back. "You were upset at being sick, of which you had no control over."

"I didn't mean to do that."

"I know. Do you want to talk about why it bothered you so much? I'd like to understand so I can
better help you if there is a next time."

Emma's forehead crinkled and she looked down at her hands, which were fisting the fabric of the grey silk robe. She tried to relax, loosening her grip. "The second family I was with had a lot of kids. I was the youngest and I was sick a lot." Bile formed at the back of her throat, but she pushed it down. "I threw up on my bed one night and I told the lady, I can't remember her name. Anyway, she yelled at me and…” She shrugged, tears forming. "She slapped me and made me sleep in the messed up bed all night."

"Oh, Emma." Regina wiped the falling tears away and kissed a pale temple. "You are safe with me. I would never do that to you."

"I know you wouldn't. I…I think that's why I can't forgive MM for hitting me like she did. I want to 'cause I hate that we had that fight. I just…” She was crying now and fell forward willingly into the Queen's arms. She was congested, hot, and miserable, but her heart felt a bit lighter when the tears finally stopped.

Regina summoned a wet cloth and wiped the little red face. "I think there have been enough tears for one day. How about a Popsicle and another movie?" She needed to get more fluids in the little body and a Pedialyte Popsicle for a feverish child was just the way to do it.

"Lilo and Stitch 2… please? You said it was out on Netflix I think."

"Yes dear heart, let me up so I can get a few things and set it up for you."

"Hold me?"

Regina stilled, looking at green eyes for who was asking and was surprised to see big Emma's vulnerable stare, chin wobbling. She stood in answer, lifting the girl to her hip and went into the kitchen to the freezer giving Emma a choice between flavors and grabbing a Greek yogurt for herself. Once back in the living room she settled on the couch and went to Netflix for the movie, having flagged it the week before knowing the girl would want to see it. Together they watched the animated adventure in each other's arms.

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Next time - Toy store, Storybrooke Light Festival, Santa, and a very special book.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

A/N - This chapter features a block quote from my favorite book. One that got me through a lot of tough stuff as a kid. Do you know it? :-) 

Previously...

"Hold me?"

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Emma's fever broke Sunday afternoon and by Monday morning she was feeling like her old self. Regina was thankful it was just a seemingly 48 hour bug. Her body was still sore from holding Emma as much as she did, but she wouldn't trade the closeness of those little arms for anything. She mused over the savior's request to be held as she put the finishing touches on her make-up, nearly applying lipstick to her teeth when a little body slammed into her legs from behind.

"Is it time to go yet?" Little Emma squeezed, and stood up on her tiptoes to peer over the counter at the makeup. She reached a hand out for a shiny lip gloss tube that rolled to the edge and her hand was caught gently.

"Not yet. I am nearly finished. Did you pick up your room, like I asked?" The Queen moved the lip gloss out of reach and tapped Emma's nose playfully. "I'm sure Jasper would appreciate a clean room to share with you."

"I think… Lemme check again." She dashed off to confirm that her bedroom, was indeed cleaned up, knowing they wouldn't leave until it was. Little eyes scanned her room and found she missed a few clothes in the corner that belonged in the hamper. By the time Regina came to check Emma was busy tugging on her ladybug boots.

"Your room looks good. Thank you for picking up. Have you thought about what kind of toy you would like for your good grades?" The Queen offered her hand and smiled when it was accepted.

Little Emma had been present most of the morning in high anticipation of the promised reward for doing well in school. The adult side was present, but was more of a passenger observing. Emma rattled off a list of possible items as they bundled up and headed out to the car. It was a short drive into town and the girl pointed to all the lights being put up and posters of what looked to be a festival of some kind. She asked and was told it was the annual light festival that happened in the evenings the week leading up to Christmas with music, vendor booths, a hot chocolate stand and games for children.
"Can we go? Please!" She bounced in her car seat as much as the seat belt would allow.

"That is may we and yes. Do you want to go this evening or tom—"

"Tonight, tonight, tonight!"

Regina smiled at the happy girl in the rear view mirror, relieved that the sudden illness seemed to be gone for good as they pulled into the parking lot. Emma chatted happily about the festival up until they walked into the toy store.

"Wow…” The child's jaw dropped, eyes finding the Queen's. "I can pick anything?"

"One item, yes."

Emma tugged the brunette up and down each aisle taking in all her choices. About halfway through the store the girl spotted a stuffed animal display and darted right over to the Disney options. Fingers reached for blue fur and grinned, holding up her choice.

"Look! Stitch is here! He was waiting for me." She hugged the furry alien likeness to her chest.

"It looks like you found a new friend to take home." Regina realized then that out of all the toys Emma had, she did not have a stuffed animal. "Emma, have Stitch help you pick out your prize."

The adult in Emma perked up, suspicious at that idea, questioning the extra treat. She'd had too many experiences of adults tricking her in her first childhood not to do so. "But you said one thing?"

"I think he is more of a friend than a thing, don't you?"

Green eyes studied the toy in her arms as the adult became passive once again. "Yeah! Come on Stitchy."

"Stitchy?"

"Yeah, he's Stitch's little brother." Emma explained very matter of fact and continued chatting to her new friend as she roamed the rest of the isle. Her feet rooted to the floor in front of the action figures and she pointed up to an item on the top shelf.

"This one?" Regina pointed to a Wonder Woman figurine.

"Yeah! Stitchy says that's his friend." Feet bounced and danced in a circle.

The brunette handed Emma the item and they made their way to the register. "Why did you choose Wonder Woman?"

Little feet stilled and big eyes looked up. "No one can hurt her and no one expects her to be anything that she's not. And Barbie's suck."

Full red lips perked up at the last few words, silently agreeing. She tucked blonde curls behind an ear and rubbed her thumb against a cheek affectionately. "No one here expects you to be anything other than yourself."

Emma didn't comment on that, but felt another tangled piece inside her heart shift into its rightful place as they walked to the front hand in hand.

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"I wanna go now Gina! I'm not hungry!" Big Emma pushed her dinner plate away, having only eaten a few bites in her excitement.

"I find that hard to believe dear. You are always hungry. Please sit down properly and eat your dinner. You love turkey and gravy."

Emma rolled her eyes, adjusted her legs so she was sitting on her bottom and picked up her fork, stabbing a piece of meat viciously. She loved the light festival as an adult, always going with Henry and Regina each year and now that she was a kid she found herself looking forward to experiencing the magic of it from a different perspective. Chewing quickly, she ate one more bite and pushed her plate away again, nearly knocking her milk over in the process.

Regina eyed the mostly full plate and the attitude rolling off the girl in waves. She sighed, knowing Emma would be hungry again very soon. She planned on allowing the girl one sweet treat at the festival, but refused to have a child with a sugar high on her hands, especially without having eaten a regular meal beforehand.

"Three more bites and then you may clear your place."

"But I'm—"

"Not finished yet. I know you are excited for the festival and we will go right after dinner is finished."

"No. I'm done. Let's go NOW." Arms crossed and pouting, Emma challenged the Queen.

"Emma."

"I SAID no!"

Regina stood, carrying her own plate and flatware into the kitchen. She returned a moment later and leaned down to the fuming woman child. "I do not like when you shout at me. I understand you are upset at not getting your way, but being rude to me is not an option. Do you want to try your answer again?"

"NO!"

"Last chance Emma. We don't shout at each other. I am more than prepared to give you my undivided attention before you finish your dinner and we go to the festival."

Emma stilled at that, wondering why she was testing boundaries again, knowing deep down she wasn't going to win. She was stubborn, but Regina was that and intensely determined. She was half expecting to have the promise of the festival taken away, but remembered earlier conversations they had about consequences and knew that her keeper did not work that way.

"Three bites?"

"Three bites. Is that your choice?"

"Yes, but... it's cold now."

"I'll reheat it for you." The Queen compromised accepting the child's plate and stopped in the doorway at her name.

"Gina… I'm sorry for shouting."
"Thank you, Emma. I'll be right back." She returned a minute later and watched as the girl ate exactly three mouthfuls and drank all her milk. "Clear your place and go put your shoes on please."

Twenty minutes later they were getting out of the Benz near where the light display started. It was only 6:30, but dark enough that the twinkling colors of red and green washed the street with a magical glow. Lights wrapped around every pole, branch, street sign and available surface. Little Emma hugged her new friend, insisting Stitchy come along while she held Regina's hand with the other.

As they walked along in front of a row of shops, each having a small booth to promote their business, the town's people greeted the Mayor with friendly words and nods. Emma noticed for the first time, no one seemed put off or in fear of the former Queen. They treated her keeper as they did anyone else and she wondered if that was an intentional piece of the spell. Her adult mind shifted backwards, allowing her little side to be dominant.

"Look at the lights! They look like stars, but way closer!"

"They are beautiful. What would you like to do first?"

"Face painting!" She pointed to a booth in front of the art studio, dragging Regina right up front to look at the sample book of choices. Browsing until she found exactly what she wanted, a Wonder Woman logo, and hopped up onto the stool in front of one of the painter's. After ten minutes she beamed into a hand held mirror admiring her new addition and looked up at the Queen with mischievous eyes.

"I want you to get one too! Pleeeaaassee?"

A brow rose at the whine, noting the naughty sparkle in those green pools. "You do, do you? And what, pray tell, do you want me to get?"

Big Emma slapped her finger, quick as lightening to the Christmas page of the sample book. "This one!"

"Absolutely not."

"Awww, come on it's perfect!" Lashes batted in mock pleading before Emma burst into a fit of giggles and tapped the picture of a snowflake with her finger. "Tis' the season!"

"When the Underworld freezes over. Pick another one."

Little eyes scanned the book and settled on an apple. "This one!"

Regina consented to have an apple painted on her cheek and scooped Emma up into her arms to capture a picture with her phone to send off to Henry of their painted cheeks side to side. After sending the text, she thanked the booth artist and took up Emma's hand again.

"What next?"

"Stitchy wants to go see the elves."

"He does? Well then we shall go do just that." Regina led them through the crowd to the front of Magical Moments Photography Shop that had a small North Pole scene set up in front of the store where children were lined up to get their picture with Santa and the elves. Emma grinned at two of the former dwarfs dressed up in green pointed hats and shoes with bells on the toe. Mr. Glee waved hello at them and came over to speak to the Mayor.
Regina shook his hand. "I can't believe you actually got Leroy to volunteer for the job as head elf this year."

"He was reluctant, but I tossed in a few gift cards to the Rabbit Hole as incentive. I think he secretly likes the attention from the kids." Mr. Glee smiled. "Your photos are almost ready by the way. I know you mentioned a trip out of town when we last spoke so I pushed the order up. You can pick them up tomorrow."

Emma tugged impatiently at her keeper's hand. "I wanna go see—"

Regina gently quieted Emma by placing her hand on a small shoulder and finished her conversation as the blonde pouted at her side. As soon as she was done, she turned attention to the child. "What do you want to see dear?"

Big eyes narrowed, shaking her head. "It's dumb. Never mind."

"Your thoughts and feeling are not dumb. Try again."

The girl sighed and turned longing eyes on the line of children waiting to tell a fat old man what they wanted for Christmas. "I've never done that." She toed a crack on the sidewalk. "I know he's not real, but…"

"The idea of Santa being real is not the point is it? I think the experience is what you are after, yes?" Regina eyed the child knowingly and received a tiny nod. "Then you shall have it. Let's go get in line."

"Stitchy too?"

"Stitchy too."

They waited for about fifteen minutes and the whole time little Emma chatted excitedly about seeing the portraits and their upcoming trip to Boston. When her turn came, Leroy the head elf himself escorted her to the red throne next to a winter wonderland back drop. Emma couldn't place the man behind the beard as she was helped up to perch on the edge of his knee.

"Ho, Ho, Ho! How are you today, Emma?"

"You know my name?" Big Emma was a bit disturbed at that, but her little side was captivated.

"Santa knows everyone's name. Now, tell me what you would like for Christmas?"

"I…" The adult in Emma stalled, not thinking that far ahead. "As long as it's not a Barbie or a tiara, I'll be just peachy." Her little side silently agreed and didn't add to the list, having already gotten two toys that same day.

Blue eyes sparkled and a laugh rolled up from the great belly. "I think I can manage that. Anything else?"

"I want…" Teeth chewed on an inner cheek. 'What the hell…Might as well get the full experience including the disappointment when it doesn't happen.' She shrugged and spit out the line she had practiced in her first childhood whenever she had imagined a moment like this happening.

"I want a Christmas like you read about in a book or see on TV. With the tree, presents, traditions, and…" She stopped from saying the last words and shaking her head at her last desire, instead hopping off his lap. "Thanks for listening dude, but there is hot chocolate calling my name." Sticking
out her hand, knowing Regina would insist she thank the man.

Santa was flabbergasted with the precocious child, but quickly shook the tiny hand and waved the Mayor over. "Emma is enchanting Madam Mayor and apparently she is in need of a hot chocolate." He winked at the child as Leroy handed Regina a Polaroid.

As they stepped away from the throne, little Emma bounced at Regina's feet. "Lemme see please!" She was shown the photo she didn't even realize had been taken. Mr. Glee had captured the awed delight when Emma had heard her name from Santa's mouth.

"It looks real."

Regina put the picture in her purse for safe keeping, trying to keep up with the rapid shifts between the girl's dual halves. She took Emma's hand, starting over towards the refreshment booth in front of Granny's. After she ordered the warm treat, not hot, complete with whipped cream and cinnamon she asked, "What do you mean by 'it looks real'?"

"Real like if I was a real kid talking to Santa about what I really want for Christmas." Emma licked her lips, dark thoughts starting to brew over all the times she wanted something in the past as a kid only to end up royally screwing up every single one of them. Her little side tried to kick those sharp thoughts away.

"Both hands, sweet one."

The Queen put the cup into two eager hands, enjoying the look of brief contentment on the little face as the first sip was taken. Then she watched the storm clouds take over green eyes again and knelt down to be eye level. Small fingers played with a button on the Queen's coat between the beats of two hearts.

"Right now you are a real little girl who wants hot coco." Brown eyes studied the withdrawn child. "I think there is a book we need to read together tonight before bed that will help you understand more about what being real is and isn't."

"What book?"

"Another favorite of Henry's and also one of mine."

After her bath, Emma sat curled up on the Queen's lap with her blanket draped over them in the rocker and her thumb itching to go into her mouth. Sleepy and warm, but fighting the desire to let her little side take over as she was read to from a well worn book. The binding was nearly coming apart and Emma noticed how carefully Regina held it. She focused on the words coming from a husky voice.

"What is REAL?" the Velveteen Rabbit asked the Skin Horse one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you."

The girl puzzled over that as her thumb finally found her mouth.

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people
who don't understand. But once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

Little Emma lost the digit. "Is being real like being loved?" She hugged Stitchy tighter; wondering if that was the word for what was knocking on the door of her heart.

"Yes, it is."

Little anxious eyes sought brown ones and whispered. "Am I real?"

"Very real, baby and you always will be to me." Regina sealed that promise with a kiss to blonde curls.

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-Credit to Margery Williams author of The Velveteen Rabbit.

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Next Time - Big Emma takes a step back and two steps forward, a plane ride to Boston, Henry and Christmas (to span a few chapters 2-3)
Previously...

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Most of Tuesday was spent running errands and doing chores around the house in prep for their trip. Regina refused to leave the mansion in disarray and insisted Emma help when it came to simple chores like picking up her toys in the living room and making her bed. The little inside was pleased to help, but adult Emma wanted only to watch TV to further distract from the conversation from the previous night and of her pending nervousness about the plane ride to Boston. She’d flown a few times as an adult, but had never liked it and always had to take something to calm herself before hand; like a stiff drink or a shit ton of Valium. She also missed being able to eat her feelings in the form of greasy sugary foods whenever she wanted to.

They were on their way home from the photography studio where they picked up the portraits and even a few frames with matting to put together for the married couple’s gift. Emma was pleased with how they turned out, but cranky at not getting her way when she asked for an ice-cream at Granny’s after.

“Pretty please Gina? Just a little tiny sundae?” Emma tried again with hands clasped together under her chin, batting her eyes.

“It is too close to lunchtime. If you like, you may have some after dinner. There is still some Rocky Road left.” Regina’s hands nearly slipped the wheel when she felt a strong kick to the back of her seat. “Emma!” She slowed to a stop at the red light and her eyes found green in the rear view mirror. “Do not kick the seats, especially when I am driving. That is dangerous.”
Emma crossed her arms, looking away.

The Queen let the lack of response go for the moment and turned to focus back on the road, wondering what deeper meaning was behind the kicking. Ever since she had talked to Emma in the study about walls coming down the girl had been running hot and cold. She expected this to happen at some point; Emma’s emotions were like the ocean tides, it took the full strength of the moon to bring them to shore. A minute later she felt the kick again, harder this time and pulled over to the side of the road with the parking brake on before turning around in the front seat.

“Is there something you need to say to me?”

“I want ice-cream. If this is my do over, like YOU said I should be able to have ALL the ice-cream I WANT.”

Regina closed her eyes at the shouted words, taking a breath before responding. “Yes, this is your second chance, but no that does not mean you get your way in everything. That concept has never made anyone very happy for long and that is certainly not how our relationship works. Do not kick the seat again. It could get us in an accident. This is your last warning, Emma.”

“This is your last warning Em-ma.” The girl was a perfect mimic of her keeper.

Both brows rose at the challenge, but the Queen said nothing and rolled the Benz back into traffic. Once in the safety of the drive way she killed the engine and they exited the vehicle. On the front step, Regina turned to look down at the petulant savior who stood with arms crossed and a sour expression. “I want you to put your things away properly and then go up to your room. You are not in trouble, just in need of some time to calm down. I will come up to speak with you shortly.”

Big Emma stomped her foot. “I wanna watch TV. You said I could at the photo shop when we got HOME.”

At the free use of that word, Regina internally smiled. Despite the budding tantrum they were making progress. “And you will later, after you calm down. Now do as I ask please.” Regina turned the key in the deadbolt, letting them into the house.

Emma began to shed her coat and shoes as her keeper did the same. “NO! I’m an adult and I want to watch TV NOW.” Thoroughly steamed over more than just not getting her way, she turned sharply on a little heel and started towards the living room, but was stopped by a hand on her upper arm.
“Let me go GINA!”

Regina kept her grip loose enough not to cause discomfort in any way, but firm enough to stall the small feet. “You need to take a deep breath and calm down. I do not like how you are speaking to me.”

“I can talk how I WANT!” Emma pulled on her arm, socked feet slipping on tile. “Let go! I wanna watch TV!”

“The only two places you are going are either to your room to calm down or into my study with me for a different kind of chat. I would much rather talk to you about your feelings with you sitting on my lap, not over it. Now what will it be?”

Before little Emma could concede on behalf of the idiot adult version, two big words sealed her fate.

“Fuck off!”

Regina blinked. “Not the best choice you could have made.” Without emotion she led the girl across the foyer into the study, shutting the door after them.

In the safety of that room Emma gave in fully to her anger; kicking, thrashing, and screaming for all she was worth. The rage she’d kept locked away so tight and had never allowed to surface before exploded.

Regina immediately put the girl into a safe hold she’d learned for exactly this purpose; coming up from behind, she crossed the savior’s arms in front and holding onto each wrist with firm, but gently pressure. Sitting on the floor, she spoke softly into Emma’s ear, “I am holding you like this because I will not allow you to hurt yourself or me. I will let go when you calm down.”

There was something incredibly satisfying in losing herself completely in those arms, knowing that no harm would come to her. Emma screamed and twisted as she kicked for another few minutes before going limp, out of breath and energy.

The Queen waited until she was sure Emma was done, before releasing her hold on the child’s wrists. She conjured a wet cloth and bottle of water. Wiping at the girl’s sweaty brow and tear tracks as Emma took a long pull.
After a few quiet minutes Emma was picked up and deposited into a bare corner facing the wall, her corner as it was dubbed. By now she knew the routine and didn’t have to be told she owed six minutes of think time. Green eyes stared at the familiar swirling pattern of the wood paneling. Her foot kicked the wall, wincing as toes cracked. She turned to look at her keeper to see the reaction and wasn’t sure why she wanted one.

“Are you alright?” The Queen fought the part of herself that wanted to simply hold the child form looking back at her, but knowing it was adult housed inside who did.

The briefest of nods followed.

“Then turn back around.”

“Giinnnnaaa.”

“No Emma. We both need a few more quiet minutes to think. Turn around please.” Regina held firm and knew these outbursts were just the beginning. For Emma to get deep enough to carve out her pain, the layers of it, was like peeling an onion and would have to come off one at a time.

Emma huffed obeying, more tears budding in her eyes as her little side surfaced. ‘Your mouth always gets us in trouble.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think.’ Her big half apologized.

‘You should listen to me more and then maybe you wouldn’t get so mad all the time.’

‘It’s not that easy mini-me.’

‘Then stop making it hard.’

The adult in her couldn’t argue with the simplicity of that logic. She sighed, finally feeling calmer, but winced when she heard her name called from across the room. Dragging her feet, she went over
to the Queen, unable to read the neutral expression. She was surprised to be lifted up to sit in warm
arms.

“Talk to me Emma. What are you thinking in that head of yours?”

The girl twisted the hem of her sweater trying to deflect. “Nothing… Aren’t I in trouble?”

“Yes, and we will get to your consequence in a few minutes, but I want to know what has you so
upset. You haven’t been yourself for a few days now; shouting at me, refusing directions, and just
now with your word choice.” She purposefully left out the tantrum, not intending to chastise Emma
for something she didn’t have full control over yet. “I know you and these choices you are making
are coming from somewhere. This is not how my sweet girl behaves.” Regina explained.

“Just get it over with. I wanna go to my room.” Arms crossed again and she stilled when she felt two
fingers under her chin, drawing wet eyes upwards.

“This is not something we can just get over with. I do not take punishing you lightly, young lady.
Now use your words and talk to me please.”

Emma deflated at the firm tone, finally letting a wall down. “I’m scared.”

Concern flooded that husky voice. “What of?”

“A few things.” She decided to start with the easiest answer first. “Like flying. I don’t like heights or
small spaces.”

Regina nodded. “I can understand that. I imagine that wasn’t so much an issue for you as an adult
due to having options to numb yourself.”

Emma’s eyes flew to brown. “How’d you know that?”

“We used to spend many an evening sitting right where we are discussing that very thing, though I’m
sure some of those memories are foggy. You were often quite imbibed. As for flying, I’ll be with you
the whole time. We will take Stitchy and Wonder Woman. The flight is only an hour and just as we
will be reaching cruising altitude we will begin descending.”

“What about Jasper? He’ll starve to death by himself.”

Regina smoothed a hand over blonde curls. “I’ve already arranged for Ruby to stop by every evening to feed him and check on the house. She promised to send a picture text of Jasper each night before you go to bed.”

Emma mulled that over, trying to find another reason they couldn’t go. “I don’t have a suitcase.”

“You do on the top shelf of your closet.”

Out of options, she leaned into the Queen in acceptance. “I guess we’re flying then.”

“What else are you afraid of? You said there were a few things.”

“I… I’ve been caught up about what you and mini-me talked about last night and still from before when you first told her you love her.” Emma’s cheeks turned pink at the thought, but forced the words from her mouth, deciding to try and listen to the little girl who was now screaming inside. “I think she loves y-you too and I don’t… know what to make of that.”

Burgundy lips caught between perfect teeth. Regina forced herself to take a slow, deep breath to still her pounding heart. “You don’t have to make anything of it, Emma. They are her feelings and belong to her.”

“But I’m her and she’s me! And I don’t do that very well and when I try I always fu— mess it up. I don’t know how!” Emma pleaded for understanding over something she did not even comprehend. Confused and hating that feeling almost as much as being vulnerable, she turned to bury her head in the brunette’s chest.

Regina felt her own eyes misting at the step forward Emma just took and offered the only solution she could. “Then let me show you how.”

Too tired to fight and knowing they were far from done, adult Emma consented for the moment and
with one more mental step forward, she verbally consented. “Okay.”

The Queen swallowed. Finally, they were starting to get somewhere.

“Gina?”

“Yes my dear?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are.” She resettled into the present moment. “Let’s finish our chat and then you may go and watch some television while I make lunch.”

Emma scrunched her nose and she was stood up next to the Queen’s right knee. “Do we have to?”

“Yes we do and you know better than to even ask me that.” Sure hands worked the button and zipper of the girl’s jeans, tugging the denim down before she helped the woman child across her knee. “Why am I going to spank you?”

“Cause I kicked the seat in the car?”

“No, although repeating that action in the future will end with you in this same position. Right now you are here for a different reason.” She rested her hand on a little bottom.

Emma sighed, once again giving into her fate. “For shouting and cussing at you.”

“What did I promise you would happen if you chose to intentionally curse again after the many discussions we have had, especially when directed at another person?”

“A correction.” She squirmed at that word.
“And where are you now?”

“Over your lap.” Emma closed her eyes when she felt that cool hand leave.

“Yes you are. I will always keep my promises to you Emma.” And with that she brought her hand down with certainty.

Emma kicked out both legs and grabbed onto her keeper calf as the spanking started. She began crying halfway through, wishing she’d kept her big mouth shut and vowing to do better in the future.

She felt the Queen pause and her tummy twist when that right knee lifted. There were more tears left, she found out when the last four swats met her sit spots with buzzing intensity. Warmth flooded her body along with relief that the slate was once again wiped clean. She was puzzled at that reaction, as she was lifted up to stand between Regina’s knees. Clothing was righted and a tissue was pressed to her nose. As she was cleaned up, little arms reached around her keeper’s waist. She was hugged and kissed in return.

“All is forgiven dear heart. Now, what would you like for lunch?”

“Ice-Cream?” Emma jested to break up the thickness in the room.

A brow rose.

“Too soon, huh?”

“Much.” Though, the corners of a mouth hinted up in a grin.

“Grilled cheese?”

“Try again, Emma.”

“Chicken salad?”
“Yes, I think I can manage that. Would you like to help or do you want to watch television?” Asking because she knew how little Emma liked to prep the meat with a mallet before she shredded it.

“I help now.” Mini Emma replied and she did in more ways than the savior understood yet.

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Emma fidgeted in line, her lady bug boots squeaking on the tile and pulled her little matching red leather suitcase behind her. There wasn’t much in it, but her blanket, Stitchy, Wonder Woman and their book, but she’d insisted on carrying some of her own luggage. Most of her things were packed with Regina’s personal effects in designer luggage that had checked. Emma had puzzled over why the brunette had packed along an extra large empty suitcase, but didn’t question it in her nervousness of the fight. Her mind drifted to earlier that morning.

They had gotten up at eight and had driven a ways to Bangor Airport. The Benz had been stored in the private parking garage with round the clock security and they had taken a short shuttle ride to the main terminal. Emma had been mostly quiet, anxiety and nerves taking a lot out of her little body, but she perked up knowing she was close to seeing Henry. She and Regina had talked at length yesterday about leaving Storybrooke and that the brunette would be without her powers. The Queen made sure both sides of Emma knew the importance of listening, being safe and staying close meant out in the world without magic.

“Come along Emma. It is almost our turn.” Regina called to the child who had slowed behind her in the TSA line and waited until Emma was in front of her before beginning the process of loading the conveyor belt with their items. She made quick work of putting her purse and Emma’s carry on up onto the belt before taking off their coats and her heels, something she found to be absurd and was suddenly grateful she was wearing thick stockings under her black slacks.

Emma got to keep on her boots and froze when a man in a security uniform waved her forward to walk through a big archway. To little eyes the door suddenly resembled a mental mouth with teeth and anxious arms reached up for the Queen who eyed the TSA agent in question. Receiving a nod from him, Regina picked Emma up and walked through the open doorway. Once they were through security and had their things they paused outside of a large digital board.

“Help me find the word Boston.” The Queen’s eyes skimmed the board, knowing she could find it with ease, but always took an opportunity to give Emma a chance to practice reading. She waited a full minute after finding the city for a little finger to touch the board. “Quite right, sweet one.”
“Your daughter is precious.” An older woman who had been watching the exchange commented to Regina.

The adult in Emma bristled at being called that, but her keeper spoke before she could open her big mouth.

“Thank you.” Brown eyes dropped from the stranger’s down to her charge, trying to see which side of Emma was present.

“And reading such big words at her age… What is she five?” Commenting on the petite stature of the child, who was now glaring at her with razor blades for eyes.

This time adult Emma beat the Queen to the punch. “I’m thirty eight lady!” She felt her hand squeezed in warning, but she squeezed back harder in displeasure.

The old woman’s jaw dropped before the sparkle of laughter took over. She turned amused eyes back to the brunette. “I imagine she keeps you quite busy?”

“That she does. We have a flight to catch, excuse us please.” Regina noted their flight was on time and tugged Emma along down the terminal and off into a nook that led to the bathrooms. Finding a low traffic spot, she knelt down to be eye level with the fuming child.

“What in the world was that about, young lady?” Irritated at Emma’s deliberateness after the conversation they had had yesterday.

Emma sniffed back angry tears and crossed her arms in a pout. “She was making fun of me.”

Brown eyes softened. “I’m sorry you feel that way, though I don’t think she meant to hurt your feelings. She was complementing you on your reading skills.”

Big green eyes simmered. “She called me precious.”

“Well, you do look especially adorable today dear heart.” The Queen tried to explain as she took in the black and red polka dot sweater and black legging set with matching headband she had dressed
the child in that morning. With the red coat and boots, Emma did resemble a cute little lady bug. She’d honestly thought that Emma would have been more upset at being referred to as her daughter than being call precious.

A foot stomped in frustration. “NO! That’s not it!”

A brow rose in forewarning as some passersby glanced their way. “Then use your big girl words and tell me what has you so agitated.”

Retreating a fraction, but not willing to explain herself, Emma hissed. “I TOLD you already… she was making fun of me.”

Regina pursed her lips, knowing that was not the main reason behind the outburst. “Don’t think for one moment that I won’t find a corner for you to rethink your tone. Is that what you need right now?” One of her hands lifted a dimpled chin.

Embarrassed at that idea and knowing now that the Queen always kept her word, Emma dropped her head and the attitude. “Sorry.”

“That is a start. Keep going.”

“I don’t like that she called me that word. The third lady who I thought was going to actually adopt me did and she gave me back after she got a boyfriend. He didn’t like kids.” One small shoulder popped up and down. “I don’t like to be called that is all.”

“I know it is not easy for you to talk about these feelings, but when you help me understand I am better equipped to support you when you get triggered. Thank you for telling me.” They hugged for a moment before Regina stood and glanced at her watch. “We need to get to the gate.”

“Carry me?”

The Queen smiled down at the eagerness in those little eyes and quickly lowered the handle of Emma’s luggage to hold in one hand as she scooped up the blonde in the other. Heels echoed through the corridor and back into the terminal.
At the gate, Emma was set down and she skimmed the sea of legs, nerves once again on edge. She kept one finger in her keeper’s belt loop as the Queen pulled out their tickets and Stitchy from the little suitcase. The girl hugged her blue friend close, surprised when the first boarding group was called and they walked right onto the plane only to stop at the third row. Their coats were placed in the overhead bin and they took their seats.

“First class? This is awesome!” Emma bounced in the wide leather seat and began to press all the buttons on the arm and poke the screen across from her seat.

Storing her purse and the Emma’s red bag, Regina reached over to buckle the girl in before doing her own belt. “I’m glad you think so.

A steward approached them for drinks and Regina ordered sparkling water and watered down lemonade for Emma who was busy playing a video game on the little TV embedded within the seat back. With the stuffed toy sitting on a little lap and a pointed tongue poking out in concentration Emma looked like any other happy kid.

The Queen took a picture of the perfect moment with her phone and sent it to Henry letting him know they were about to take off.

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“Mom!”

Regina turned in the breezeway at baggage claim in Boston Airport and grinned. “Henry!” Tears came to her eyes as she felt his arms around her. She held him close for a long moment before pulling back and bringing a suddenly shy Emma in between them.

Henry knelt down and opened his arms. “Hi Ems, I missed you.”

The girl fell right into him, misty eyed at finally having those arms around her again. It felt different, being smaller than him, but the same depth of their relationship was still present. “Hi…”

“Who’s your new friend?” Henry tapped the blue fur in the girl’s arms.
“This is Stitchy. We rode in first class and I had lemonade and played video games!”

Henry stood up smirking at his mother in surprise. “You let her have a lemonade?”

“It was mostly water, you know I don’t allow her a ton of sugar. Now be a dear and help with our bags. I can’t wait to see your new flat and get my arms around my daughter in law. Where is she by the way?”

“Working at the tailor shop, but she’s off for a week after today.” Ever the gentleman his mother raised him to be, he easily piled their suitcases onto a trolley cart and led them to the parking garage.

Emma ran ahead and hopped onto the edge of the cart to catch a ride. She squealed in delight when Henry went faster and twirled the cart in a careful circle.

Regina smiled at them both, loving their seamless interaction. She noticed the shift in Emma when they stopped at the car and the back door was opened.

“Really Henry? Not you too.” Emma pointed to the brand new car seat in the back of the blue Honda, seriously thinking she’d be able to avoid the contraption for the duration of their trip.

“Ems, I know you hate it, but mom would kill me if I let you ride without it.” He frowned apologetically as he watched his mother help buckle Emma in.

“I wouldn’t kill you per say, perhaps just ground you for life.” Regina jested, and rounded the car to the passenger seat, eyeing her son.

“Mooomm.” He groaned at the juvenile reference, but smiled at their effortless teasing.

They were quickly on route and just missed the start of rush hour traffic as they crossed over the bridge into the city. Emma grinned at the familiar brick buildings, lights, and sounds. She missed the busyness and spontaneity of living in Boston and thought it was amazing Henry ended up falling in love with the same city she had. After about twenty minutes filled with the sounds of classic rock and the tones of adult conversation little Emma didn’t bother following they turned onto Commonwealth Ave and into an underground parking garage.
With the bags in tow, Henry led them up to the 12th floor of the building and into a small, but immaculate apartment. Emma ran right over to the large window and pressed her face right up against the glass to take in the bird’s eye view of the city, missing the exchange happening behind her.

“I insist Henry.”

“Mom we’re getting on fine. We both have jobs and—”

“Jefferson paid for the wedding and your honeymoon. Let me do this for you both, as a wedding present.”

Henry met his mother’s eyes and sighed. “You already gave us the car and what about you and Emma? I don’t want to take from either of you.”

Emma turned from the window at the sound of her name and come over to stand nearby, now curious at the conversation.

Regina straightened Henry’s collar and rested her hands on his shoulders that were now taller than she was. “We have plenty. I promise not to bring it up again, just consider it a little gift.” She folded the check into his palm. “Please.”

“It’s six months worth of rent Mom, Boston City rent at that… that’s not a little gift.” He felt a tug on his shirt sleeve and looked down into green eyes.

“Say thank you Henry.” Little Emma parroted what the Queen said so often to her and whispered the next part up to him as if it was a great secret. “That’s what you are supposta’ say when you get a present.”

“She is right, you know.” Brown eyes twinkled.

“You both are here less than five minutes and you’re already gaining up on me.” He smiled and bent to tickle the little girl by his feet before swinging Emma up onto his shoulders to sit. “Thank you Mom. I appreciate it more than you know. Come on let me show you the guest room where you’ll be staying.”
Emma dug her fingers into Henry’s brown hair to balance when they began moving down the hallway across from the kitchen and into a bedroom with a queen sized bed, dresser and matching nightstands. The walls were painted a soft blue and the window looked out over a small grassy area between buildings. She was lifted under her arms over Henry’s head and plopped onto the midnight colored comforter. Little legs found her balance and began bouncing on the bed, albeit briefly once she caught Regina’s eye. Henry left and returned with their suitcases as Regina started to remove Emma’s boots and outerwear.

“So what are we gonna do first? Do you have any video games?”

Henry chuckled. “You bet, I even have vintage Mario Cart we can play later, if you want.”

“I wanna play now.” Big eyes found her keeper’s when she noticed a pair of pajamas being pulled out of a Louboutin suitcase. “No nap!”

“Yes you are going to take your nap. We will be up past your usual bedtime tonight for a surprise and I won’t have you cranky.” The Queen quickly stripped the sweater and leggings off, replacing them with a warm nightgown.

“But I don’t want… wait, what surprise?”

Regina tapped a scrunched nose. “If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, little swan.” She kissed Emma’s forehead and pulled the covers down as Henry closed the drapes. “In you go.” Waiting until the girl was snuggled in before giving her Stitchy.

“I’m just gonna rest my eyes... I’m not gonna sleep.” Emma fought a yawn, silently grateful for a chance to re-energize from the emotions of the day, not that she’d ever admit it. She was asleep before the adults left the room.

REDENTIAL:

A/N - Next time - tree decorating, a shopping trip with Henry, and Christmas Eve...angst coming up, but feels too.
Previously...

Regina tapped a scrunched nose. “If I told you it wouldn’t be a surprise, little swan.” She kissed Emma’s forehead and pulled the covers down as Henry closed the drapes. “In you go.” Waiting until the girl was snuggled in before giving her Stitchy.

“I’m just gonna rest my eyes... I’m not gonna sleep.” Emma fought a yawn, silently grateful for a chance to re-energize from the emotions of the day, not that she’d ever admit it. She was asleep before the adults left the room.

“...”

“This is the BEST DAY ever!” Emma giggled as she and Henry spun in circles on the ice skating rink under the twinkling stars and full moon starting to rise overhead. She felt cold, happily dizzy and more alive she’d felt in years. Big bright eyes found Regina and Paige across the rink and she waved as Henry held her other hand.

They’d had dinner at the apartment, a baked basil spaghetti confection that Regina asked Paige for the recipe of, after a video game marathon with Henry upon having woken from a long nap. Emma creamed him in the final race and claimed they were having ice-cream for dessert, the winner’s choice.

Emma panted, out of breath as she and Henry skated over to the sidelines where Regina took the small girl into her arms. “Did you see me? I did good, huh?”

“I saw you the whole time. How about we take a break, you look like you’re freezing and thirsty.” Even as she said those words she pulled down the pompom hat over red ears and handed Emma a thermos of warm decaf tea she’d brought from the apartment.
“Actually, we should be getting back for tree decorating.” Paige reminded as Henry came to wrap his arms around her slim form.

Emma finished a long gulp and furrowed her brow at that, just now remembering the small bare pine tree in the corner of the apartment living room. “Tree decorating? Like together?”

“Yeah Ems. We wanted to wait for you guys to get here. Your mom shipped down a bunch of ornaments and lights so we could do it together as a family.” Paige saw the glassy look taking over big green eyes, and looked to Regina in question.

The brunette capped the thermos and went to pick up the Savior. “Henry, I need your keys. I am going to take Emma and meet you both in the car. Give us a few minutes please?”

“Sure Mom, whatever you need.” He quickly handed them over and mouthed, “She ok?”

Regina smiled softly, not answering as she disappeared into the crowd with a crying child in tow. Once at the car, she settled them both in the back seat with the sniffling girl on her lap. She didn’t say anything as the tears began to slow she was simply there as Emma needed her to be.

“I’ve never decorated a tree before, not as a kid. I’ve always wanted too.” Teeth scratched a lower lip, snuggling into her keeper with hope at the edge of her voice. “Did you remember the star Gina?”

“I did. It is in the box by the tree at the apartment waiting for you.” Red lips found a pink cheek, knowing what that detail would mean to the little blonde.

Three years ago they had their first Christmas together as friends with Henry at the mansion. Emma had bought an obnoxious silver star for Henry as a gift that clashed badly with the Queen’s gold and black designer tree. It had so much glitter on it that Regina still found silver flakes in the carpet every year after the holiday for weeks. She could see Emma’s longing expression in her mind’s eye each of the last few years when Henry put the hideous thing on top of the tree.

A brief knock on the front window brought Regina out of the memory and she shifted Emma to the car seat so she could unlock the doors for Henry and Paige. They drove back to the apartment to the tune of a Winter Wonderland. Emma perked up when they were back inside the warm little apartment and ran over to the lone box under the pine. She tore off the lid and right on top, as promised was the star. Holding it close and dropping glitter all over the wood floor, she went over to the adults who looked at her in question, except for the Queen.
“Lift me up?” Big eyes found the warmth she sought.

“Of course dear heart.” Regina lifted Emma and went to the tree. Together they crowned the naked pine and stepped back to admire the view. “I have something for you.” She set Emma down and went to the bedroom. Returning, she sat on the couch and beckoned the girl to stand before her.

“What’s that?” A finger pointed to the small box in her keeper’s hand.

“Open it and see.”

Emma eyed the Queen, but took the offered box and opened the top. She pulled out a clear glass swan ornament with her name and the date etched on the wing. Biting her lip, green eyes sought brown and whispered. “It’s pretty.”

Regina steadied herself as little arms were thrown around her neck and returned the hug. She whispered back. “In honor of your little half’s first Christmas and ours together as a family.”

A blonde head hid in soft dark chocolate hair. “Thank you.” Emma pulled back and carefully added the swan to tree.

Many hands went to work after that, adding colored lights, ornaments and even a string of popcorn Emma and Henry kept stealing pieces from. It was everything both halves of Emma hoped it would be.

After a light snack and a few rounds of Uno, the girl began nodding off. Regina excused them both and helped Emma get a quick bath before tucking her into bed.

“Did Ruby text yet? Is Jasper okay?”

The Queen scrolled through her messages and nearly snorted at the selfie of Ruby pretending give Jasper rabbit ears, showing Emma the screen with a grin. The giggle from the child was the perfect happy ending to the day.
Little Emma awoke on Christmas Eve full of energy. She slid out of bed, careful not to wake the sleeping Queen and slipped out of the room. Running down the hall into the kitchen, she spotted Henry and Paige already up drinking coffee at the breakfast bar.

“G’morning! I gotta ask you something ‘portant.”

Henry put down his pen and journal, turning his full attention to the little blonde with raised brows. “Oh, and what’s that?”

“I need to buy a present, but my allowance is at home in my swan bank.”

“A present for Mom?”

A tentative nod followed that last word.

Paige rounded the counter and leaned over to hug the little girl good morning. “How about you and I make her breakfast in bed today and later Henry will take you shopping so you can pick something out. I’ll help you wrap whatever it is.”

“Yes! I wanna do that please!” Little feet bounced in glee and trotted over to the fridge.

Henry smiled at his wife and sister, loving their interaction. Part of him wished they lived closer to Storybrooke, but he knew neither of them could fully explore their new careers in such a small town. He continued writing while the two of them prepared a tray of smoked salmon, blueberries and coffee for Regina and cinnamon blueberry pancakes for the rest of them.

Paige waited with the tray in the guest room doorway, while Emma went ahead and poked her keeper awake.

Regina stirred at the familiar feeling, but pretended to be asleep.
“Waaaakkeee uuuuupp!” Emma sang and lifted a closed eye lid. She yelped in surprise as two arms pulled her in close and tickled her ribs. “Aaaaaahhhhhhh! No fair!”

“Good morning my dear. How did you sleep?” The brunette smiled at the little bundle in her arms.

“Good! Looky I made you breakfast.”

“You did?” Regina eyed the tray with a raised brow in Paige’s hands as she sat up fully in bed.

“Don’t worry, she had help.”

Relived at that after Emma’s last attempt in the kitchen several weeks ago, Regina offered them both a smile. “Thank you both so much. This is a lovely way to wake up.”

“And guess what? Henry is taking me shopping—” Little hands clamped over her mouth at nearly spilling the surprise.

“He is? Isn’t that nice.” The brunette sipped the coffee, sighing as the heat cleared the fog from her head.

Paige sat at the foot of the bed and stole a blueberry from the crystal fruit dish watching as Regina tried to offer Emma a bite of salmon. “And while they do that, you and I have a girl’s day at the spa planned. Nails, massages, lunch… the works.”

“That sounds amazing.” The Queen gave up on the fish and tried a blueberry which the child happily accepted. She was genuinely looking forward to some one-to-one time with Paige, having fallen in love with the young woman who had captured her son’s heart. “Did she eat yet?”

“Yes, a whole pile of pancakes and we gave her berry puree not syrup.” A knowing smile met the brunette’s.

When breakfast was over they all scattered to get ready for the day, taking turns in the single bathroom. Emma perched on the edge of the tub after brushing her teeth and chatted about their ice skating adventure as she watched Regina fixing hair in the mirror. The Queen finished up and turned
Emma around so she could pull blonde locks into a high ponytail.

“Two tails please?”

Quick fingers reworked the hair into two even pigtails. “Sweet one I need to speak to big Emma for a minute.” She waited for the shift and sat down tub ledge next to the woman child now looking at her.

“What’s up Gina?”

“I wanted to check in with how you are doing. You’ve been passive since tree decorating last night.”

Emma shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about what you said about letting you show her what it’s like to be loved. This is me trying.”

“You know that you don’t have to be passive to do that.” Wanting to be sure that Emma understood that was not her implied meaning.

Another shrug. “I know... I’m just tired of fighting with her and I have been keeping her on a tight leash since this whole thing started. She wants to play and I’m trying to let her.” Emma leaned into the Queen and felt an arm wrap around her shoulders. “Thank you for the star and the ornament by the way. That made it perfect for us. Big me, especially.”

“You are most welcome.” Regina smiled softly, grateful for the willing affection. “There is something else I wanted to discuss with you both. When you go out with Henry later on, he is in charge.” Feeling Emma tense, she continued. “He is an adult figure to you in this life and I want you to have fun with him, but his word is law in my absence today. Do you understand that?

“I do. I don’t like it, but I get it, Gina.”

“Alright, go and get your boots on.” Brown eyes observed the shift again as little feet scampered off hoping both sides of Emma heeded her words.
“Just one, please Henry! I ate all my breakfast!” Emma begged for a cookie in the coffee shop window display they passed on the street.

“After lunch Ems, hey look, we are almost there.” He pointed to a blue sign across the way to distract the girl from her sweet tooth. It worked on the child’s one track mind and he smiled at the look of joy that filled that little face.

“I can pick the present?”

“Sure, let’s see what they have.” He opened the door to a local jewelry shop that specialized in custom pieces and classic cuts, knowing his mother would appreciate simplicity over flash any day. They scanned the glass cases and Emma pointed to a sign with a row of tiny rainbow stones in front of it.

“What’s that?”

“Those are birth stones.”

Emma eyed the stones and moved from foot to foot as she internally conferred with her mini me. Finally she offered up a big grin. “I know exactly what to get.”

An hour later they exited the shop hand in hand with Henry tucking a small box into his pocket. Emma spotted a food truck and begged Henry for a hotdog. They wolfed down a mess of mustard, relish, and ketchup. She got her promised cookie and nibbled happily as they walked to a local park near the apartment as they talked about anything and everything from comic book heroes to life in the city. It felt like old times and was exactly what Emma needed. She found she liked being playful and carefree with Henry. The less she was in charge or tried to control things, the more freedom she discovered she had.

As they approached the park, Emma pointed to the playground on the far side and ran off happily towards it once Henry gave his ok and directions to stay on the playground equipment. He popped down on a bench to watch and pulled out his phone to text Paige about their day so far. A few minutes later he looked up and saw a little blonde swinging from the monkey bars and went back to his phone. He became so absorbed in his texts that he didn’t look up again for several minutes and when he did Emma was nowhere in sight.
As the blonde followed the sound of ducks down a treed path, she barely heard her name being called in the distance. Ignoring the voice in her focus on the ducks, she reached down a hand to see if one of the ducks would come to her. They scattered, flapping away into the rippling pond. She huddled on the edge of the wooden embankment reaching out and lost her balance. She screamed as the freezing water slapped her skin. The cold engulfed her and another scream escaped as she surfaced, a great white puff. The water felt like a thousand needles poking her all at once. A second later a hand jerked her up by the coat collar onto the grassy bank, all 38 dripping pounds of her.

“Ems! Are you alright!? Henry pulled the girl into his arms making them both soaking wet, hugging her while his heart hammered a hole in his chest.

“I-I saw the d-ducks… S-sorry.” Little teeth chattered as big Emma slammed into the front of her head. It hurt to breathe.

Henry whipped off his coat and replaced Emma’s wet one with his own and lifted her into his arms. “Mom’s going to kill me.” Henry muttered and stood, quickly working his way up the path towards the apartment.

Emma gulped, snuggling into his neck for warmth. “D-do you have to t-tell her?”

“Of course I have to tell her. I’m not going to lie to her Ems… We’ll just have to deal with it, okay?” He tried to sound reassuring, feeling anything but.

Henry dropped the sopping red pea coat outside the apartment door and tugged off Emma’s boots. The front door flew open to a smiling Paige whose face dropped upon seeing their state. “What happened?”

“Henry? Emma?” Regina’s voice called from the depths of the apartment.

“Paige go start a bath for Ems.” Henry moved past his shocked wife and set Emma down on the kitchen tile.

The young woman hurried to the bathroom just missing colliding with Regina who rounded the corner.
“Paige, what is the matter?” Brown eyes took in the worried rush and widened when she spotted a quivering Emma. “What happened? Henry?” Even as she spoke, she knelt in front of the little blonde and began stripping off the drenched sweater and jeans.

“We were at the park and she fell in the pond. It was only for a second. She’s cold, but not hurt.” Guilt scratched at his throat as he took in his mother’s hard eyes.

When Emma was down to her undershirt and panties Regina hauled the shaking girl up to her hip and made a beeline towards the bathroom. Paige wisely left the little room, closing the door behind her. Sure hands finished stripping the child and gently lifted her into the warm bath.

Emma ducked down in the water up to her chin as hot prickles rippled over chilled skin. After a full minute the shakes slowed and she finally met the worried wet eyes of her keeper who was kneeling down by the side of the tub.

“I—”

“Did you swallow any water? Are you hurt?” That husky voice was thick and shook at the edges.

“No and no… J-just cold, I was cold.” Emma dropped her lips below the water line blowing a bubble, breathing slowly through her nose. She felt her pigtails gently taken out and watched as the Queen poured shampoo into a palm.

“Sit up.”

Emma forced her body up, sighing as her hair was washed and conditioned, becoming more and more nervous as Regina said nothing. A crooked finger instructed her to stand up once her hair was rinsed. She was quickly, but thoroughly scrubbed clean.

“Gina?” A murmur breaking against splashing water.

Their eyes met briefly as the lather was rinsed away. Emma bit her lip as she was bundled into a thick towel. A knock on the bathroom door startled them both out of their heads and the door cracked open.
“It’s just me.” Paige left the bundle on the counter. “I brought what looked like her warmest PJs and underwear.”

“Thank you. We will be right out.” Regina finally found her voice again and turned back to finish drying Emma. She helped the girl dress in fleece footed PJs and managed two twin braids in under 3 minutes. As she tied off the last braid, she spun Emma around by the shoulders. “Go into our room and sit on the bed. I will be in to speak with you when I am done with Henry.”

“But Gina—”

“Emma, right now.”

The girl sighed at that firm undertone she knew so well and went down the hall, but listened at the closed door when she heard heels leave the bathroom. Quiet words were exchanged and she strained at what she thought were Paige’s footsteps going into the master bedroom and a door closing. Frustrated at not being able to hear anything, she cracked open the door and eased out into the hall.

“Mom I’m so sor—”

“She is six years old Henry.” Regina started in interrupting his attempt at apologizing.

“I called for her and saw before she fe—” He shut his mouth when he saw the regal hand held up for silence.

Worried that they were fighting over her, Emma darted down the hall and came to a stop behind the recliner near the Queen. She could just make out the pained lines creasing a normally smooth forehead.

“You can’t take your eyes off of her when you are out like that, especially in an open space with water. She could have drowned.” Regina didn’t yell, but she wasn’t fully composed either. Stopping, she ran her hands over her face and took a few moments to focus on her breathing. “I am sorry Henry you are not a child anymore. I should not be—”

“Mom, it’s okay. I messed up. You have a right to be upset.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I
won’t let it happen again.”

Dealing with it was an understatement, Emma realized as she watched both Mills’ tear up as Henry stepped back from the embrace and apologized to Regina. She chewed her lip, knowing that deep down she was the one really at fault.

“It was me.” Her voice cracked between them as she stepped out from her hiding spot.

Regina turned sharply at the little voice she was not expecting to hear, an admonition in her eye as she pointed back to the bedroom. She had wanted a private moment with Henry and hadn’t expected to be eavesdropped on.

Emma shook her head, becoming braver. “He told me to stay and I left the playground to follow the ducks. It’s my fault.” She twisted her shirt under the Queen’s gaze.

Regina ‘tsked’, hands on her slender hips. “What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. It was an accident though!” Big eyes pleaded as a little foot stomped.

“Emma—”

“It was so. IT WAS!” The adult shouted as her little side yelled at her to shut up.

“Do not raise your voice to me, young lady. Christmas Eve or not, I will not tolerate disrespect.” Regina spoke softly, but her eyes held warning.

Emma’s ears burned. “I’m TRYING to tell YOU!”

The Queen waited a full beat before striding over to the girl and taking the little hand. “Excuse us Henry.”

Little Emma burst into tears as she was led down the hall, into the guest bedroom they shared, and right into a bare corner. Her big half turned around with crossed arms in defiance when she heard the
door shut and was put right back in place with an unyielding pat to her behind.

“You need some time to calm down and then we will speak.” Regina set the timer on her cell phone and seated herself on the bed to wait. About halfway through Emma’s noisy cries quieted and arms dropped. Right when the timer went off the Queen went and scooped the child up and settled them comfortably on the bed, her back against the headboard with Emma sitting to face her, heart to heart.

“I put you in time out for shouting at me, not because of anything else. You needed a chance to calm down and now that you are I want to hear both sides of what happened.”

“I wanted to see the ducks. I miss them at home and they were at the park.” Little hands toyed with the buttons on Regina’s blouse. “I wanted to touch them and I fell in the water.”

Regina listened to the high tenor, knowing little Emma was speaking first. “Did you hear Henry calling you?”

“Kinda, but I didn’t listen. I wanted the ducks, but they were too far.”

“You know better than to wander off little miss swan. Where was your big side when you were not listening?” Regina now understood what adult Emma meant by an accident.

“I pushed her out cause she pushes me out all the time. It was my turn.”

“Sometimes you have to share with your big side and you cannot always have your way. I told you both this morning to listen to Henry in my absence. You don’t know how to swim. If he hadn’t of seen you fall…” Regina let out a shaky sigh, pulling the girl closer and pressing her lips to a pale cheek as tears fell.

“I’m sorry Gina. I tried to get her to listen.” Emma closed her eyes and felt Regina rest their heads together.

“I’m sure you did, just like she tries to get you to listen to her. You both need to learn how to share and work together.” The Queen had few ideas on how to help with that, but needed more time to work out the details in her mind.
“Please don’t... I know we screwed up. I’m a screw up, it’s my stupid sh—stuff... but we really didn’t mean to not listen or to yell at you.”

“Do not refer to yourself as stupid or a screw up. Last warning.” The Queen pulled back to lock eyes with the blonde. “As for the rest, I’d say the scare you had at the pond and the timeout for your tone are sufficient consequences. I think you both learned a lesson about the importance of listening at present, yes?”

“Yes... we’re sorry.” Emma relaxed and closed her eyes, leaning forward into the Queen, grateful she was understood. More tears soaked the silk beneath her face. Despite the troubles of the day that got her in this very spot, at the moment there was nowhere else she’d rather be.

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Thoughts?

Next time - Christmas Eve dinner, special gifts on Christmas morning, and a whole lot of feels!
A/N- Here is Christmas Eve and Christmas Day! Big reveal next chapter and a turning point for Regina and Emma come New Years Eve in 4 chapters or so. (Tons of little Emma to come) :-) Also, one reader asked for Emma on a sugar high and one for a fish advocate moment - Here you go!

Previously...

“Please don’t... I know we screwed up. I’m a screw up, it’s my stupid sh—stuff... but we really didn’t mean to not listen or to yell at you.”

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Emma twirled in her blue velvet dress as Henry held her hand overhead.

“Did you and Paige get Mom’s present wrapped?”

“Mnhhmm. I like the red paper. I even made a card while she was in the shower.” Little Emma slowed her twirling, becoming dizzy.

“You look like a p—”

“Don’t say princess!” Emma giggled and pulled away from him to flex her non-existent muscles. “I’m like Wonder Woman!”
Henry smirked. “I was going to say a pretty picture.” He caught her and tickled the little blonde’s ribs.

Emma squealed and squirmed away.

“Speaking of pictures.” Regina breezed into the living room wearing a form fitting red long sleeved dress and matching heels with her arm around Paige who was similarly decked out in a backless green one. “We need a family one before we head out for the evening.”

Paige pointed to the living room. “I set up the tripod near the tree. Set the timer Henry?”

Henry blinked picking up his jaw from the floor at the number his wife was sporting and went to turn on the camera.

“I told you he would love it.” The Queen’s eyes sparkled as she turned to a spinning Emma and caught the child mid-twirl. “Time for pictures baby.”

Little Emma shyly posed in front of the adults for a picture. After the flash she jumped in front of them with her arms open. “Wait! We gots to do it like this!” She pushed the women how she wanted them as Henry reset the timer, and finally went to stand between Regina and Henry. “Hold hands and say grilled cheese!”

“Grilled cheese!” They all sang in harmony and laughed after the fact.

Emma was bundled into an extra oversized coat of Paige’s and they all made their way to the Honda and out into the cold night. The girl insisted they sing along to the Christmas music station, her own little voice out of key, but she didn’t care. She was having the time of her life. When she had woken up from falling asleep on the Queen earlier she vowed not to let any dark thoughts invade the rest of the day, it was Christmas Eve and she was determined to enjoy it.

After tipping the valet, insisting since she knew Henry was paying for dinner Regina led Emma behind the married couple and into Davio’s Northern Italian Steakhouse. They were seated at round table near the window and Emma’s eyes grew large at the fancy white napkins folded up like bird wings and more silverware than she knew what to do with in her place setting. Henry ordered a bottle of red wine for the table and looked to brown eyes for what to get Emma.
“What would you like, sweet one?”

Emma, who by now was used to Regina ordering for her, didn’t know what to say. “Ummmm…” She stalled as all eyes landed on her. Flustered she blurted. “Johnny Walker on the rocks.”

The waiter started to scribble automatically, and then jerked his head up, bobbing between the adults and the now pink cheeked child.

The Queen recovered smoothly for all of them. “She will have a Shirley Temple, mostly soda water and light on the grenadine.”

Henry tried not to laugh as he began to go over the specials with Paige.

Regina took a napkin to her lap and helped Emma do the same. “A scotch, Emma… Really?”

“He caught me off guard. Sorry…but not sorry.” She giggled as her nose was gently tapped. Her keeper helped read the menu and Emma finally ended up telling the Queen to order for her, knowing it would be something she would like in the end. Part of her was beginning to enjoy not having to make any decisions. There was a unique freedom in having the mundane parts of life taken care of for her.

“What are you having Regina?” Paige folded her menu and smiled across the table.

“I am thinking of trying the grilled Haddock.”

“What’s Ha-dook” Emma wrinkled her nose at the word.

“Haddock is a white fish, much like cod. You have had it before at Granny’s… Don’t give me that face; you liked it just fine smothered in tartar sauce.”

“But, that was B.J.” Little Emma tried to lose the sour look.
“What do you mean?” Regina took a sip of her wine.

“Before Jasper. Fish are people, too.” It was said in such a serious tone that everyone froze.

Henry covered his mouth with a napkin, afraid he’d spit his wine across the table as his mother nearly did. Paige didn’t fare much better, suddenly interested in the menu again.

“Looks like I am having the beet salad instead.” The Queen said crispy and closed the menu, turning amused eyes on Emma. “If it matters that much to you, we don’t have to have fish again, alright?”

Emma grinned, please with having advocated for her pet and sucked down her Shirley Temple as the adults placed their orders. It was way sweeter than she expected and her eyes popped with glee. The waiter must have missed the Queen’s direction on the grenadine. The sugar hit her system like a drug after a nearly a month of a strictly regulated diet. She’d been given very moderate amounts of sweets and even the cinnamon cookies that Regina made had only a fourth of the sugar of regular cookies.

As Emma bounced in the seat after ten minutes filled with adult conversation, brown eyes studied the fidgeting child then the nearly empty drink. On impulse Regina took a small sip of the Shirley Temple and shuddered as the syrup coated her tongue.

“I want another one please?” Little eyes asked.

Regina raised a brow and shook her head. “You may have milk or water.”

“Bubble water?” Still bouncing as she was given a nod of approval. She’d tried Regina’s preferred drink at Granny’s once and liked how it tickled her nose.

The waiter dropped appetizers at the table and the request for a plain soda water was made along with a comment about the messed drink order.

Emma chatted a million miles a minute about anything and everything for the next half hour as appetizers were eaten. A cracker with Brie was placed on her plate and she nibbled between jumping topics. Henry and Paige were amused to say the least.
“Regina, was Henry ever that animated?” Paige covered her mouth with a hand as Emma’s fingers began to dance on the table appearing to have a dance off between her two hands.

“I made the mistake once of allowing him a soda at this age. I’d never had one myself and I didn’t realize the effect they could have.” She smiled in amusement at the memory of her young son. “He ended up running circles around me the rest of the day. I’d never been so exhausted in my life. Then he crashed and that wasn’t much fun for either of us.” She eyed Emma who was oblivious to the conversation as plates were cleared away and their entrees arrived.

The rest of the meal was pleasant and Emma all, but vibrated with energy. They lingered leisurely after the meal finishing wine and the child slowed down her chatter, yawning even.

“Is it time for dessert yet?” Hopeful to a fault Emma tried to get a treat.

“You’ve had enough sugar my dear, but if we leave soon there is just enough time for a special movie before bed.” She reached a hand out to fluff curls and loved how Emma leaned into the affection like a puppy who liked to be scratched.

Emma was fully amendable to that idea. Once the bill was paid they were quickly on route. As they were walking through the door of the apartment the girl’s energy returned.

Somehow with a lot of patient coaxing, Regina managed to wrestle Emma into the bathroom for a quick wash up and into green PJs before they all settled on the couch to watch the vintage black and white version of A Miracle on 34th Street. Big Emma insisted on popcorn and a full on popcorn fight ensued through the opening credits that had all of them in stitches. They paused the film and made a game of cleaning up, a race to get little hands to help.

As the sugar finally left the child’s body Emma curled up between Regina and Henry, head on the Queen’s lap and feet on the young man’s. For the first time in her life, this one or the other, she felt a sense of wholeness wash through she didn’t know existed. Warm and content, sleepy eyes closed and Emma’s ears caught Fred Gailey’s line.

“Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to.”

She had never been a believer in faith and her common sense had only gotten her so far, but more and more she was finding faith in Regina, and more surprisingly in herself. Feeling her keeper’s fingers run through her hair massaging the scalp, sent tingles through the little body. She fought slumber right up until the end and dropped like a rock.
Regina easily carried the little swan to bed and without waking the child she tucked Emma in with a kiss good night.

Like the previous morning, the little in Emma awoke before her keeper Christmas morning. The girl squirmed out from under the covers and sat up on top of the comforter. She watched the deep breathing next to her and leaned over, putting her nose to nose with the Queen.

“Wake up… wake up….” Emma whispered.

Brown eyes fluttered open and startled for a moment. She returned the smile greeting her and rubbed noses with the giggling child. “Merry Christmas dear heart.”

Almost shyly Emma wiggled down, resting her head against Regina. Warm arms encircled her and they lay together for a few minutes before Emma’s excitement took over.

“Do you think Santa came?” A little whisper opened the silence.

Regina pretended to think. “We should go investigate. Do you think you can help me?” Eager eyes met hers and she laughed, rich and deep. “Scoot. Let me up.”

Emma scampered off the bed and bounced by the door as she waited for Regina to run fingers through her hair and tie on a robe. Her hand was taken and together they walked out into the living room where Henry and Paige waited.

“Woah! He did! He did come for me!” Emma ran to the tree and all but threw herself into a pile of presents. The shiny paper, bows, and many boxes called to everything little inside her, begging to be unwrapped.

The adults exchanged good mornings and Regina took a few pictures of Emma shifting through the presents, before calling the child to the breakfast bar where a buffet style meal was laid out.

Emma reluctantly pulled away from the gifts, but perked up when she saw the Queen scooping berries, eggs, and bacon onto a plate, knowing it was for her. As she tucked into her meal, big eyes took in the people around her; they were all in their PJs, hair tussled, warmth in their eyes and with the easy conversation filled with pockets of laughter, she felt at peace.
The reality of the moment struck to the core. This has been what she had asked a fat stranger in a Santa suit for a week ago at the light festival. But before so too, many years ago in another life dreamed by a broken little girl who had given up hope at finding a family and love.

Emma didn’t realize the conversation had stopped, that she had tears running down her face into her breakfast or the hand that now held her own.

“Emma?”

The woman child turned towards that question. “I…” she trailed off, swallowing the need in her words as Regina answered by lifting her up and excusing them to the bedroom.

Tears slowed as they settled on the bed. Regina plucked a tissue from the nightstand and wiped at the child’s eyes. “What is the matter?”

Emma shook her head, pulling her face away. “It’s not what’s wrong, Gina. It’s what’s right.”

Brown eyes narrowed in confusion. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Taking a breath to calm down, Emma leaned back into her keeper. “You know… What I told the guy at the light festival who played Santa.”

“I don’t know what you told him. I couldn’t hear from where I was when you were on Santa’s lap.” Regina was puzzled at where this was going, only knowing that Emma was seemingly upset at the breakfast bar and was trying to process it.

Emma’s internal lie detector was quiet, and she puzzled over the reality of her wish, a real wish unknown by the Queen, and something she’d really wanted and somehow managed not to screw up. She felt her chin lifted.

“What did you tell him?”
“What I really wanted for Christmas.”

Regina respected the vague answer, only seeking confirmation to one thing. “Did you get what you wanted?”

Emma closed her eyes recalling her exact phrase. ‘I want a Christmas like you read about in a book or see on TV. With the tree, presents, traditions, and... a family who loves me.’

Another wall crumbled. “I think so, but I’m scared of what it means.”

“Sometimes that happens with things we want.” The Queen smoothed tangled curls. “Especially when we don’t want to admit it may be what our heart may truly need.”

Green eyes pondered over those words of wisdom and shifted back to a more open expression. “I wanna open presents now please?”

Regina had hoped big Emma would stick around a bit longer to process, but accepted the shift that took over her charge. “Let’s finish breakfast first sweet one.”

They headed back into the kitchen and quickly finished their meal. Henry broke up the silence by asking Emma about Jasper’s latest adventures and was told about the fish field trip to the kitchen and how Regina saved his life.

“You are quite the hero Mom.” Henry chuckled, missing the depth of his words on brown eyes.

“Yes, well… I think it is time for presents.”

“Finally!” Emma dropped her fork with a clang and ran to the tree.

Henry smirked. “Was I always that excited?”

“You were.” Regina smiled over the rim of her mug at the memory. “You’d practically trample me to death while jumping on my bed to wake me up on Christmas morning, usually at the crack of dawn. At least this one waited until a decent hour.” She nodded her head at the bouncing child.
“I’m waaaaiittiiinnng!” Emma tapped her foot when she had all eyes, hands on her hips, brows raised in perfect imitation of Regina.

Henry and Paige both snorted.

“I do not look like that.” Regina feigned offense.

“Yeah, you do Mom.” Henry grinned, left his stool and scooped up Emma, spinning her around in his arms.

“You get your presents last.” The queen teased and joined them in the living room while Paige handed everyone a gift.

Wrapping paper and bows flew as Emma tore into her loot with abandon. She opened the biggest box first and stuttered over the item from the couple.

“F-for me?”

“All for you Ems.” Paige and Henry chimed together.

Little hands brushed over the box image of the red and yellow two wheeler bike. She had never had a bike of her own before.

“And this to go with it.” Regina handed Emma another wrapped box, satisfied she had made the correct choice upon seeing the girl’s delighted face.

“Sweet!” Emma hugged Regina and the smiling couple. “A bike and a Wonder Woman helmet! Thank you!” Returning eyes to the brunette. “You’ll teach me how?”

“Of course. I taught Henry to ride in a single weekend. I bet you will be a fast learner too.”
More presents followed, smaller useful items like socks, PJs, some books and a few DVDs. Emma also got the latest video game system and a few age appropriate games to go with it. Another prize had her face lit up; a full blown artist kit, complete with paints, brushes, markers, charcoal pencils and paper.

She was also delighted at the couple’s awed expression when they opened the pictures of their guests. Both were framed in dark, simple woods with ivory matting; a cute one of Emma sitting with the ocean back drop and the other of them both on the chaise. Henry immediately went to place both on the side table where they could be seen every day.

The last item from the Queen was her favorite and came in a small simple white box. Big Emma recognized the quality and expense of the item in her hand. It was an adjustable charm bracelet with a tiny silver swan, a fish, and a V-bug, each with a diamond chip that caught the light. Her fingers rubbed the tiny swan and a moment of intense déjà vu crossed her mind. She could have sworn she’d seen that charm before… Shaking that feeling away, Emma’s eyes misted and she held out her wrist.

Regina fastened the bracelet on the tightest ring, adoring how it looked on the little wrist. It was a gift that Emma could grow into and add to through the years in this life or their other one. She was startled as skinny arms nearly choked her in a bear hug.

“Thank you. I love it.” Big Emma squeezed and pulled back suddenly remembering. “I have something for you too.” She wiggled under the tree for her own hidden surprise. Little hands placed a red wrapped box with a black ribbon in her Keeper’s lap.

Regina was taken aback, not expecting such a gesture. She bit her lip and gently untied the binding silk. A heat filled her eyes and chest at the drawn heart on the outside of folded slip of paper. She took her time unfolding and reading the slanted and misspelled print:

-too gina
from emma
(doth of me)

Two stick figures were drawn underneath holding hands. It was a simple and perfectly Emma thing to do. Her eyes then found the necklace tucked into a cotton bed. Three small vertical stones winked at her from a delicate gold chain; their birthstones of amethyst, peridot, and white opal. A deep purple at the pinnacle, with green in the middle, both resting on Emma’s milky rainbow for October.
“Do you like it?” Emma squeaked. She had chosen this gift with the utmost care, drawing the idea from their conversation about the lock box code being their days of birth and Regina telling her they were a family.

Wet brown eyes found green.

“Beyond words Emma. Thank you.” She pulled the little swan in for a hug and a kiss, mouthing the last two words again over the child’s shoulder to Henry and Paige.

A/N – Next Time - Emma learns one way to break the spell, but she doesn’t like it (and it is far from breaking) and Regina’s other price for the spell is revealed in a flashback, it’s a biggie folks.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

A/N - Ok, feels ahead. The flashback was hard to write. I'll update again Tues. or Wed.

Bad news - I am having surgery this week.

Good news - I will be forced to actually chillax and have time to write more. :-) 

Previously...

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“Now I get it.” Emma kicked her legs against the side of the bed in the guest room.

Regina closed the large designer suitcase and zipped it up. “Get what?”

“Why you brought an empty suitcase. So we can take home presents.” Little legs stopped in near panic. “What about my bike and helmet?!”

“Calm down. Henry will ship both to the house after he drops us at the airport. It will be there in a day or two after us.” The brunette knelt beside the bed and tugged on Emma’s lady bug boots before helping the child into another sweater.

“I’m gonna get hot Gina.”

“You can take it off at the airport.” Hands smoothed static curls then moved to straighten the collar.
“Your coat is ruined from the water, and I won’t have you catching a cold.”

“Sorry about that.” Teeth caught in between small lips.

“I don’t care about the coat or the boots from that day.” Regina explained, placing emphasis on her next words as a hand caught a dimpled chin. “They can be replaced. You cannot be.”

Emma smiled internally at that and suddenly had an idea. “Can I have swimming lessons?”

“You may. I plan on enrolling you when we get home.” Regina moved to fold the crocheted baby blanket, having already researched that idea Christmas Eve night after Emma had fallen asleep. “The Rec Center has classes all week, but we will start with twice a week and see how you do.”

Emma nodded, looking forward to gaining some control back in that area. As an adult she had never been a good swimmer, maybe here she could acquire that skill. At the brunette’s gesture, she quietly helped put her belongings into the red rolling bag and wondered her next thought aloud as her keeper’s hands began to work blonde hair into a Fishtail braid.

“What happens if something does happen to me and I die, here in this life I mean?”

The Queen froze, her hands threaded between curls knowing this was more than child’s curiosity. “You will wake up back in our other life.” She forced honestly and her fingers to keep moving even after the next question.

“What if something happens to you?”

“The same. You will wake up.” She tied off the braid, bending now to get on her heels.

“But what about you?” Emma stressed, frustrated at the seemingly evasive answers.

“I would wake up with you. Why are you asking these questions?” They were too morbid for Regina’s liking and after such a close encounter a few days ago she was not happy to revisit that thought; losing Emma.
“I’m just wondering...” She bit her tongue, ashamed at her next thought after the way those loving brown eyes had looked at her in the bath Christmas Eve after the pond incident and the way they mirrored that look now.

“Wondering what?”

“It’s stupid.” She tried to repel, chewing on her earlier question as she shifted across the room to the door.

“What did I tell you about negatively referring to yourself or your ideas as such?” Regina stood to her full height, busying her hands with zipping Emma’s little suitcase.

Shoulders shrugged, but she forced a verbal answer, not wanting a fight. “Not to. I just didn’t want to answer your question.” She hoped an honest answer without sass would be enough.

It wasn’t.

“Come here please.” Regina seated herself on the bed as Emma shuffled over. She took little hands in hers. “I think that is reason enough to answer my earlier question. What caused this train of thought?”

“I know it’s not true, but my head went there… I was wondering if you were really upset that I almost drowned or if you were upset that your-spell-almost-broke.” She spat the last few words out in haste and slammed her eyes shut to avoid the intensity of her keeper’s gaze.

A pause. “Look at me.”

Nothing.

“Right now please.”

A single green eye opened.
“Both eyes… Good girl.” Regina held fast to the squirming little body. “If anything ever were to happen to you, in this life or our other one I would be devastated. I have you tucked up right next to Henry in my heart. You are not expendable. Never doubt that. Do you understand me?”

“I don’t doubt that or your feelings. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you.” Emma covered and fought to keep the whine from her voice, but failed.

“A part of you does, doubt me, or my love for you. That is okay and that is exactly why you didn’t want to tell me.” Regina corrected, ripping the band-aid right off with those words, but her next blew cool air on the wound. “But you know what?”

“What?” A hesitant question.

“I’m glad you did because that is a step towards continuing to build trust between us. You can tell me anything Emma. Trust those words even if you can’t fully trust me yet.” Regina squeezed both hands gently and stood when she heard Henry calling from the hall. “Time to go home. Our chariot waits.”

Emma suddenly leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the Queen’s legs, both sides needing contact. She looked up with a willing smile and offered up the truth in her heart. “Thanks for the best Christmas ever, Gina. We loved everything.” She darted out of the room after that as Henry called again.

Regina brought a hand to her throat, swallowing thickly and fingered the new gold addition that rested at the base. Closing her eyes, she silently confirmed that the other price she’d paid for the spell when she first began crafting it had been well worth that little smile.

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-Flashback… 2 years ago. Christmas Day-

Regina stood at the kitchen door that led to the backyard of the mansion, snug in a grey silk robe with both hands hugging a hot cup of coffee as she looked out at Henry and Paige chasing each other in the fresh snow. The lovebirds were pink cheeked with smiles only for each other. As she sipped the bitter heat, she thought back to another world a life time ago when she had done the same with a young man who had been the love of her life. The beginning of the fuzzy memory was interrupted with the slamming of a kitchen cabinet.
“Opps! Sorry Regina.”

The Queen briefly looked over her shoulder at the Savior pouring a cup of OJ from the fridge. “It’s alright Emma.

“What? No remark about my oafish habits?” Emma smirked and came to stand beside the somber brunette.

“Not today.” Full lips took a long sip. “Rain check?”

Emma frowned in concern. “Always… You okay?”

“I will be, in time.” Regina twisted the ring around her finger in thought before taking a deep breath. “I have something for you that I’d like to give you before the children come in for presents.”

“Children? Regina they’re practically trying to have one of their own, right now.” Emma gestured to the yard at the young adults romping mischievously.

The Queen rolled her eyes and smiled at the jest.

“There’s that smile.” The blonde teased, pulling her long bed head locks into a messy ponytail. She followed the brunette into the living room and they stood across from one another in stark contrast; a bright cotton mess in a yellow T-shirt with red flannel pants and a dark regal in expensive silk.

As Regina rooted around under the tree, Emma eyed the glitter star that crowned the top with fierce want. It didn’t match any of the fancy Christmas décor of the mansion, but it was in the crowning glory one noticed when walking into the room.

“You’ll have your turn at that, I promise. For now…” An olive toned hand pulled a small white box from under the tree with a red card attached. “This is for you.”

Emma took the offered box and bit her lip. “You didn’t have to Regina.” Pale hands slipped the blue
ribbon aside and opened the lid. A bottom lip sucked inwards and she tasted her own salt a moment later as eyes rested on the fine chain with silver swan pendant. There was a tiny diamond chip for the swan’s eye that winked up at her.

Knowing hands reached for the necklace and Regina stepped behind Emma to fasten it around that long neck. “In two years time in our new life your little half will receive its’ mate as a matching set. Until then this will be a reminder.”

“A reminder?” Emma choked out, feeling the soothing coolness resting at her throat as if it had always been there.

“A reminder, hope, faith… call it what you will… of good memories to come. Open the card. That is my other gift to you.”

Trembling fingers roughly tore at the envelope and pulled out a single white card. In the middle, a written note in Regina’s elegant hand:

-Step one is complete-

‘No one saves us but ourselves
and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path.’
-Buddha-
Always,
Regina

P.S.
You must walk the path to heal your past,
but I will be there to hold your hand.

“The spell? You started it?” Hopeful meadow eyes looked up.
“I began with the first ingredient yesterday.” The Queen nearly lost her balance as arms engulfed her in a tight hug. She gently rested her hands on the Savior’s back, fingertips stroking the end of tangled blonde curls.

“This is the best Christmas ever.” Sniffling, Emma pulled back and grabbed her necklace. “I’m going to go clean up. I need a minute.” Feet shuffled to the staircase and before ascending she offered a grin. “Thank you Regina. For everything.”

“You are very welcome dear heart.” Brown eyes watched the blonde go and closed with tears; trying to find an earlier memory from the past of a playful snowy afternoon with a stable boy.

A thick mist blocked the details and more importantly, Daniel’s face.

For the first ingredient, the spell asked for the price of sacrifice up front; memories of true love from the keeper to be, used as fuel for the healing journey of the traveler.

Regina knew she would never again internally hear his voice or see his eyes. His smile or his love looking back within her memory, were lost. There was a new hole in her heart that ached, one the spell promised to fill in time, starting with the love of a little girl in need of a second chance.

A/N - Thoughts?

Next time - Big Emma has a break through and both sides learn ways to control her anger. She also learns to ride a bike. A visit to the pool and little Emma shares something very personal with Regina.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A/N - Feels ahead. Happy Wednesday!

Previously...

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The magic of Christmas wore off a few days after they got home. Emma was moody for reasons she couldn’t explain and had been just difficult enough to earn several warnings. Regina kept them to a schedule as best as the free structure of the week allowed, eating at regular times, the usual errands, and keeping Emma’s night time routine the same. The arrival of the bike box with the helmet and ornaments she’d shipped prior to the trip with the afternoon mail on a blustery and very wet Tuesday was the tipping point.

As requested, Regina put the bike together and fitted the helmet for Emma, even going as far as to let the girl sit and balance on the bike in the warmth of the foyer. Emma begged to take it out front, promising to wear her rain gear if only she could try it out. Big and little half toggled for dominance, but they both wanted the same thing. The downpour of rain made that impossible no matter how the Queen tried to patiently explain it.

“When the rain stops and it dries up I will take you out. It is supposed to stop later tonight and tomorrow you should be able to try your bike fully.” Fingers pinched the bridge of her nose at the shrill whine that followed.

“Noooooo! You promised to teach me.” Emma teetered on the bike in the front entry way, balanced by the training wheels she had reluctantly let Regina add with her jaw clenched against the chin strap of the helmet. A part of her knew she was being unreasonable, but today she felt like pushing especially when her keeper showed an infinite amount of patience.
“I will keep my promise to you, like always dear heart. It is not safe to be out trying to learn right now when it is pouring rain. Tell you what. We can go into the garage and you can peddle back and forth a bit.”

“There’s more room in here.” Emma smacked her socked feet on the tile and pushed forward on the bike, nearly catching the Queen’s foot under the front wheel.

“Emma, in the house is not an option.” Regina’s hand came to rest on the front handlebars, stopping the forward momentum. “We can go into the garage for a little bit and I’ll show you how to pedal or you are done with the bike for the day and we can do something else. What is your choice?

“Don’t wanna do nothing else.” Little Emma furrowed her brows as her big half took over. “I want to ride my bike Gina.”

“I know you do and I know you are excited to learn how and you will when it is safe to be outside to do so. Now, I gave you two choices, which would you like?”

Emma crossed her arms, set her lip, and glared. She wasn’t sure why she was pushing. Part of her wanted a reaction; the other part wondered how far she could push. The line was defined, but she was determined to toe it today.

Regina sighed, her patience beginning to fray. She tried offering another alternative she knew Emma might fancy. “How about we go and make some cookies together? I think there are just enough ingredients for a batch of your favorite cinnamon ones.”

“Bike here now!” Blonde curls shook and she uncrossed arms long enough to try and pry her keeper’s hand from the handle.

A brow rose and the queen switched gears, finished with her attempts to compromise. “Emma you have been skirting a correction for a few days now and this behavior is exactly how to earn one.” She warned and really hoped the girl wouldn’t need a reset, which she sometimes did after one of their deeper heart to hearts and there had been plenty of those over the Christmas weekend.

Emma grunted in return and gave up on the hand. Instead she dug into the tile with her feet, trying to pull back on the bike.
“Stop, you’ll hurt yourself.” Regina used her free arm to gather the child up by the middle off of the bike. Emma whined and kicked out in annoyance, her sharp heel catching the Queen’s shin with a bruising blow. Emma froze for a split second upon impact then completely lost all composure.

With a grumble of pain, Regina breathed through her teeth as she carried the now thrashing girl into the living room. A wave of her hand removed the helmet, just as Emma threw her head backwards, nearly catching the tip of Regina’s chin. With the child in full tantrum mode, a quick maneuver had them both safely on the floor and Emma was once again gently restrained against the brunette.

“Let me go Gina!” Emma hissed and thrashed against the body behind her, knowing she couldn’t get out of the hold on her own. Fighting another trigger, she found the freedom she unconsciously sought in the ability to be as physical as she wanted with her anger because she was safe in those arms.

Regina held firm, pain in her shin pulsing as she repeated the same line she used before about not allowing Emma to hurt herself or others. Except this time she was hurt and knew she needed to enforce another way for the girl to physically let out her anger when emotions got too big. She understood Emma was fighting a trigger, as she was becoming more and more accustomed to the warning signs; the deflection, irritation at small things, sharp facial cues, and short choppy answers. What she didn’t understand was what the trigger was. While the blonde had listed things in the notebook, years ago that might set her off, this wasn’t one that had been revealed.

The thrashing took much longer to cease this time. Both woman and child were exhausted when the stillness crept in, startling their labored breathing. Regina let go of tiny wrists and stood, lifting a passive Emma to her hip. Without a word, she made her way upstairs to the lavender room. She set Emma on the bed and conjured a wet cloth to wipe the sweaty face and tears away. Afterwards she made quick work of stripping the girl down putting her into PJs. The Queen turned down the covers and patted the sheets.

“I don’t wanna sleep.” Little Emma, ever opinionated spit out, but snuggled down under the quilt anyway.

“We are both going to rest for a while.” She curled up on top of the covers, pulling the warm little body close and running her fingers through tangled curls. “I am staying right here with you and we will talk when you wake up.”

“Am I in trouble?” A small murmur through heavy eyes.
“Time to be quiet now, baby.”

They both drifted off.

Emma was first to awaken and sat up in blurry eye wonder. A din of thunder shook the house and she turned anxious eyes on the window. Fat rain slapped the glass and the memory of the afternoon came roaring back. She bit her lip as the Queen stirred.

“I’m sorry ‘bout earlier.” Little Emma tried to open with an apology, figuring that was the best approach based on her big half’s experiences. She watched as the brunette winced while sitting up. Big Emma shifted forward as realization took a sick hold of her gut. “I hurt you Gina?”

“You didn’t mean to and I’m not mad about it. It’s just a bump on my shin.” Regina opened her arms to the girl, hoping the child accepted her invitation. She wasn’t disappointed.

Emma allowed her keeper to hold her, but panic make her shoulders shake. The last time she’d hurt an adult as a kid was not a pleasant experience. She knew with absolute certainty she was safe with Regina, but her stomach turned upside down at the memory. “Gina I think I’m gonna puke…”

Quick feet got them to the bathroom in time. When Emma finished dry heaving into the toilet Regina handed her a cup of water.

“Thanks.” Emma nursed the cool liquid and watched brown eyes watching her.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” Regina took a little hand and they traveled back to the lavender room to the rocker.

“It’s not real, I know that…” She relaxed into the Queen as the rocker worked its’ soothing magic. “One time I accidentally hit a foster parent. We were playing T-ball out back and it was my turn. I swung and let go of the plastic bat. He was really mad. He put me in a closet and I didn’t eat for two days.” She shrugged, chin quivering she looked up. “I know you wouldn’t do that. I just got lost in the memory downstairs when I realized I kicked you and for a minute just now. I’m sorry you got hurt helping me.” Her heart lifted when she felt a kiss on her brow in acknowledgement.
“We need to brainstorm some ways you can let out your anger before you lose full control. I will always help you regain it, if you do, but I want you to start taking more of an active role in honing your temper. I understand you were triggered today, but you were already quite worked up by that point over the bike, which could have been avoided.” A wrist flick conjured a pad of paper and a pen. “We will take turns saying some ideas. I’ll record them and you may choose a symbol to represent each of the items on our list as a visual reminder for you. We will keep the list on the fridge and your desk so we will see it every day. Do you want to go first or second?”

“Second.”

Nodding Regina penned her first thought. They worked back and forth until they had a list of eight different things Emma could do if she started to feel out of control; like counting, punching a pillow, jumping jacks, drawing her feelings, asking for help, throwing ice cubes outside, squeezing play-dough, and talking to Stitchy or Jasper if the person she was mad at was Regina. After Emma had added a visual for each Regina vanished the items away and the copies of the list to the discussed locations.

“Now, talk to me about what got you so worked up about the bike.” She knew already, but wanted to give Emma the chance to give the heated feelings words. She resumed rocking as Emma’s hand played with the stones of the new gold necklace.

“It wasn’t the bike. It was the promise about it. I know I was being stup—irrational about wanting to ride it. Both of us were, but I got hung up on your promise and wanted it to come true right then.” For the first time in this life, she simply told the Queen her feelings without hesitation or half truths. “When I actually had my helmet on and was sitting on my bike that was all that mattered to me and I only saw you in the way of something I wanted and I do what I usually do. I pushed you away because in my anger I thought you were one of them; another person who would break another promise to me.”

Regina was quietly processing Emma’s words, heart swelling with pride as the girl shared her feelings so openly. “I will teach you how to ride your bike, just like I taught you to tie your shoes and to make cinnamon cookies.”

“And to read my flash cards, and to not run from my feelings or people who care about me and what being real is.” Big Emma added to the list with a small smile. “Thank you for teaching me things and for keeping your promises Gina.”

“You are welcome. I always will.”
Emma stilled her hand over the warm stones at the Queen’s throat. “Are you gonna punish me for the tantrum or the bike?”

“No and I never will for triggers. Other tantrums, we will see on a case by case basis. As angry as you were, you did not shout at me or curse. We still need to work on listening when I tell you no about something, but that is not what you need right now.”

“What do I need right now?”

“This.” Quick fingers attacked little ribs. Squeaks and giggles filled the room and her lips found the side of Emma’s cheek and playfully blew a raspberry. Emma turned suddenly gaining the upper hand and blew one of her own. They both erupted in laughter and as that medicine soothed their emotions another torn fragment inside the child moved back into place.

True to her word, the next day Regina had Emma out on the bike right after breakfast in the windy morning sunlight. Emma struggled with the motion of the pedals, but got the hang of it under the Queen’s instruction. After nearly two hours, part of which was a bike safety lesson that had big Emma rolling her eyes, she could balance, brake, and ride in a nearly straight line and a circle. Her only hang up was the training wheels. As if reading her mind, Regina pulled a small hand tool from her pocket and quickly popped the left training wheel off.

“Let’s try it with only one. If you feel unbalanced lean to the right and extra wheel will help. I’m going to let go once I feel you have it, alright?” The Queen stood when she got a nod and helped Emma back on the bike. She hung on to the back seat as she jogged alongside the bike and upon feeling Emma balance she let go.

The girl flew down the side walk and stopped at line between their yard and the neighbors, a clear boundary Regina had emphasized. She turned the bike roughly around and on her own rode back up the main walkway, relying on the extra right wheel for support. Beaming, she hopped off and slammed into her keeper’s legs in a hug. “I did it! Did you see me? I did it by myself!”

“I did and I got plenty of pictures.” Leaning down, the brunette showed Emma the action shots captured with her phone, her favorite a perfect one of Emma’s hair flying behind her with a grin a mile wide on the little face. As the wind whipped their hair around tangling dark and light strands together, Regina shivered. “Next time we will try just two wheels. It’s cold and I have a surprise for you we need to get ready for. Wheel your bike into the garage where I showed you and put away your helmet.”
Emma obediently walked her new favorite toy into the garage and settled her helmet on top of the seat. She fingered the wings that fanned out on either side of the Wonder Woman logo and really felt as if she had flown. Her little side couldn’t wait to show Gabe and maybe one day, ride her bike to school when she was older. Hands stilled over that idea and she felt a rush of heat to her cheeks at that far off future thought of being here that long. Hearing her name from outside of the garage she shook her head, now curious about the promised surprise.

In the house there was a bag sitting on the side table of the main foyer. Regina smiled at the bouncing feet next to her and handed the white bag to grabby hands. “This came with yesterday’s mail and I thought we could go try them out this afternoon. Go ahead and open it.”

Emma tore into it head first and pulled out two wrapped packages. One was a pair of arm floaters and the other was a small inter-tube with a fish design. “For real? We can go today?!” Emma dropped the packages and dove in the bag for the last three items, a red beach towel with her name on it in big block letters, a blue once piece swim suit with a tiny white swan pattern, and a red suit with yellow vertical stripes.

“We may, if you like. Classes don’t start up again until after the break, but I thought we could go play in the pool today so you can get use to the water before hand. The pool is heated and they have a shallow play area with sprayers and a slide you can go in.” Regina accepted the second hug of the day with a grin. “Which suit do you want to wear?”

“Swans and I can do it myself.” Emma added, knowing Regina would ask if she needed help.

“Go put your suit on under your clothes then. There are a pair of rubber sandals in your closet, bring those down with you for while we are in the pool area.” As she spoke she summoned a large designer tote and began rolling up Emma’s new towel to put in with the floats. “Walking feet Emma.” The fast thumping on the stairs slowed. She snapped her fingers, summoning on her own black one piece suit underneath her slacks and sweater.

They had a blast at the Rec Center, which only had a few other people present swimming laps and Emma took to the water like a fish. Regina insisted on being in the shallow end of the big pool the entire time no matter how much big Emma begged to go floating in the deep end. The little girl loved the kid’s water playground and happily played on the splash pad and on the small slide for the better part of an hour. The water was at most a foot and a half deep, but the queen watched her charge like a hawk. There were a few mounted water sprayers that kids could splash each other with and Regina found herself with a mouth full of water when little Emma attacked her without warning.

“Gotcha!”
“We’ll see about that, sweet one.” Feeling playful Regina scooped up water in both hands and splashed the child with it. A full on water fight ensued. They played with abandon and a lighthearted freedom that both sides of Emma had never felt before. As the splash war slowed, little arms found their way around a pair of wet legs and olive toned hands smoothed back wet blonde hair as their eyes met.

“I love you.” Unexpected, simple, and oh so sweet to the ear.

Regina knelt in the water and pulled the child in for a hug. “I love you too, baby.”

A long moment passed as they embraced and the adult in Emma surfaced, pulling back, but not away. “She’s been wanting to tell you herself for a while now.”

The Queen swallowed thickly and found her voice. “Thank you for letting her.”

Emma smiled a bit awkwardly, finally pulling away and changing the subject. “I’m hungry. Lunch at Granny’s?”

“That sounds wonderful. Let’s rinse off and get dressed.”

After a quick lunch they headed home. Emma was allowed to play one of her new video games as Regina took a shower. When she was clean and in a pair of dark relaxed slacks with a long sleeve shirt, she went and pried the child away from the TV into a warm bubble bath.

As Emma washed up she thought back to the morning in the garage, beginning to struggle with the idea of actually having to grow up again ‘Could be way worse than this.’ Emma thought to herself and she cupped a handful of bubbles and blew them across the water, wondering at how long they would be here. It had been a month already and it had felt like a real month. Wherever they were time seemed to move the same. She felt the sprayer wet down her hair and whined, grabbing for it.

“I can do it myself, Gina.”

“There are some things that you need help with for a while yet my dear and this is one of them.” She worked her fingers into Emma’s scalp gently massaging in the shampoo and remembering back to
last week when she had allowed Emma to try washing her hair. Little hands did not have the dexterity yet for the detailed movements.

The girl relaxed into those hands for a moment and on impulse voiced her next thought. “How long?”

“What do you mean?”

“How long until we can go back?” The sprayer returned, rinsing the shampoo and two bottles were held up. Emma pointed to the melon scented conditioner.

“That depends a great deal on a few different things.”

“Tell me.” Emma tried to hide her growing agitation. ‘And while you’re at it, tell me how to break the spell, too.’ She knew the one way they had discussed in the guestroom of Henry’s apartment was not an option she’d willingly explore. There had to be another way.

“Not yet.” Regina left no wiggle room in her answer. Even with little Emma’s admission at the pool, they were a ways off from the discussion about who really wanted this experience and of returning the memories of those conversations of the past. They were getting closer each time either side of Emma willingly shared her feelings or experienced some milestone, though Regina knew not which ones were moving them to the finish line, wherever and whenever that was.

Emma huffed as her hair was rinsed a final time. “Then at least give me a ball park estimate of time? Can you do that?”

Regina took her time responding, thinking about every possibility carefully trying to give the savior some kind of reliable information. “Anywhere from a few months to years. I really don’t know the answer to that Emma. There is not a set time limit.” She rinsed the suds from blonde hair.

“Then I wanna know how to break the spell other then one of us croaking Gina.” She slapped her hands in the water, inadvertently splashing her keeper’s slacks.

Brown eyes flashed at loosely used death term. “I said no, Emma. Remember what we talked about with listening yesterday.” She reminded and helped the child from the tub.
A foot stomped and whining ensued as she was wrapped in her new favorite swan hooded towel she had gotten for Christmas.

“Enough. Meet me in your bedroom while I clean up in here and go change into your PJs.” Regina sent her off with a light pat to Emma’s behind.

The girl scowled and stalled in the doorway with two white knuckled hands clutching the towel. “Want to know now.”

“I hear you and I understand your feelings quite clearly on the matter. My answer still stands. Do as I ask of you please.” Hands were busily draining the tub and picking up discarded clothing.

“Getting mad at you.” A foot stomped.

“I see that. You can be mad me all you want to. I suggest you follow my directions though and perhaps think about using a strategy we talked about to help you calm down. I put a copy of the list on your desk yesterday. Go take a look after you get in your PJs.”

Another pat, this one firmer finally sent Emma on her way. She changed into a red cotton set and went to her desk to look at the list. She settled on number three that had a stick figure punching a pillow and that’s exactly how the Queen found her five minutes later. Emma’s face was pink from exertion, but she felt much calmer as the only adult in the room settled quietly on the opposite side of the bed. With one more half hearted punch to the abused fluff, the girl crawled across the bedspread and into open arms.

“How do you feel now?”

“Better, but still kinda mad.”

“Do you want to talk more about it?”

“You won’t tell me anything other than I can’t know yet because I’m not ready or that there is no time limit on the spell. That doesn’t help.”
“However, punching your pillow helped you calm down some, yes?”

Emma crinkled her brow. “Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Plenty. There are things you need to learn and controlling your own anger is one of them. Now, it’s been a full day so far and it is time for your nap. Get in.” Regina stood and pulled back the covers. She kissed a pale cheek once Emma was settled. “Get some rest and when you wake up we will do something fun together.”

“Bake cookies?” Little eyes questioned.

“Yes, sweet one. I’ll have everything ready in the kitchen.”

“Love you.” A test.

“I love you too, baby.” A perfect answer.

A/N - Hope you liked this. :-)

Next Time - New Year's Eve, big angst moment with Snowing, a flashback, and big reveal from little Emma.
The Saturday before break ended was New Years Eve and Emma was stoked to be able to stay up past midnight, pending she took a long nap that same evening. There was a local gathering at Granny’s for the countdown and a late night potluck style dinner Regina promised they would go to. It was eight o’clock when Emma woke from a three hour sleep. She felt wide awake and dashed over to Jasper’s tank to feed him dinner, a chore she happily could do herself now. Letting her little side take over, she ran down the hall to the Queen’s room and burst through the cracked ensuite door, startling her keeper who was in the shower.

Regina dropping the vanilla apple body wash bottle as she heard the door hit the wall. Sighing she picked it up and ensured the shower curtain was fully closed, knowing it was Emma’s mini me present since little children often lacked a full understanding of privacy. “Emma, we’ve talked about closed doors. Please knock next time, sweet one.”

“Sorry… you almost done?” Emma sat criss-cross on the rug in front of the sink and opened the bottom cabinets. She found a few different cloth bags and went about exploring.

“Nearly. Did you sleep well?”

“Mmmhmmmm. I had a dream about Ms. Blanchard.”

Regina stilled at that, but quickly resumed moving the foaming cloth across her shoulders. “Oh? What was it about?”

“She was trying to tell big me something, but we couldn’t understand her.”

“Maybe when you dream again you will be able too.” Regina rinsed for a few minutes under the hot spray, finally shutting the water off and reached a hand out for the silk robe on a hook by the shower. Once she was completely covered, she pulled the curtain back and slapped a hand over her mouth at the site on her once white rug.

“What?”
Emma blinked innocently up at wide brown eyes, red signature lipstick a rosy ring around her open mouth and purple eye shadow everywhere, but where it should be.

Rich throaty laughter bubbled up from the Queen’s core and filled the room. She summoned a hand mirror and gave it to the little blonde who cracked a grin at the reflection.

“Opps.”

“Opps is right. Your turn for a bath, sweet one.” Regina vanished the mess and lifted the child to her hip.

Once they were both ready, complete with their new jewelry from Christmas and the Queen’s famous lasagna was wrapped for transport along with Emma’s favorite cinnamon cookies and with Stitchy buckled into the Benz they were on route to Granny’s. Parking was a nightmare and by the time they found a spot and made it inside the diner it was close to nine thirty. Ruby rushed right up to greet them with a hug and offered to set up their potluck items while they got settled on the only pair of barstools left in the room.

Music filled the cracks in between conversations and Emma happily dove into a mixed plate of potluck items the Queen had fixed her. A few kids from her class were there along with Gabe who sided right up next to Emma. Regina met the boy’s father, immediately impressed with the small business owner and his devotion to his only son. She listened as the two children swapped Christmas stories and made plans for Gabe’s birthday party in a few weeks.

By eleven thirty the party was in full swing. Several people were dancing and Emma bounced in her seat as she watched.

“Do you want to dance?” Regina took a sip of soda water, eyeing the child knowingly as the twitching little legs itched to move.

Big eyes found brown. “I don’t know how.”

“I will show you how I taught Henry.”

“They’ll laugh at me.”

“No one would dare, not with me at your side. Come here.” Regina stood and pulled Emma to the middle of the checkered floor. The child shifted nervously side to side as both of her hands were taken. “Step up onto my feet.”

“B-but your shoes…?” Emma glanced down at her purple converse and then at the navy silk closed toed heels, knowing they were expensive and some of Regina’s favorites.

“They are just shoes. You matter much more, sweet one.” She extended her foot and the child carefully stood on it and did the same with the other one. A modern lively song started and they were off stepping in time to the beat. Emma grinned, giggling as they twirled about the room. Ruby and Granny cheered them on and after another song Emma stepped off and wiggled to her booty in complete freedom to a fast paced number. Gabe joined her and the two of them locked hands spinning in circles until she thought she would puke.

Taking a break from the music, Emma returned to her seat, back to the door as it chimed and sucked down the sparkling lemonade she’d been allowed to have.

Regina saw the Charming couple and Neal enter the diner, silently preparing to alert Emma, who surprisingly glanced at the door and went right back to her drink without issue. Little Emma
pretended to give Stitchy a sip from the striped straw as David’s deep voice called for everyone’s attention. Regina fought the urge to roll her eyes, for Emma’s sake, but gave the couple her attention the same as everyone else. Even this version of him screamed entitlement.

“Everyone thank you for your attention! As midnight approaches I’d like to buy you all a round of drinks in celebration of the coming year and in honor of my wife who just told me that we are welcoming a new addition to our family.”

Regina paled, jaw agape.

Emma froze, mid slurp.

Mary-Margret’s high syrupy voice rang out. “I’m 12 weeks along!”

In the midst of cheers and celebratory congratulations, one pair of big of green eyes flooded. While hugs were given and drinks started flowing a Queen and a swan stared at the couple, then each other. In between heartbeats Regina grabbed for Emma who bolted from the stool and into the back room of the diner behind the kitchen and bathrooms. Little fingers twisted a lock with a sickening click and slumped down to the floor in tears.

Regina nearly dislocated her shoulder at the door slamming into her before it locked in her face. Taking a breath, she tried the knob anyway. “Emma? Open the door.”

A strangled sob answered.

“Please let me in baby.” The Queen closed her eyes, allowing her own tears to fall. Of all the things that could happen, go wrong or explode, this took the cake.

They had been so careful, so prepared… but not for this, anything but this.

She tapped the old wood again and was surprised when she heard the lock shift. Easing open the door gently, she saw Emma curled up against the wall, eyes cold and wet. Closing it behind her, she relocked it for privacy and sat down next to the child.

“Don’t call me that.”

Regina winced at the venom in that little voice and was puzzled. “Call you what?”

“Baby.” Emma choked on the word. “I’m not anyone’s b-baby.” Then burst into tears. Quiet strong arms encircled, cradling Emma as the fragile stitches of her mending heart were scrubbed raw. Nothing should hurt this much.

But it did.

Not knowing if what she was about to say was right or even wanted, Regina knew beyond a doubt it was needed. “You are my baby, Emma. Both of you and that will never change.”

A thumb found a mouth and sucked for comfort. After several minutes Emma dropped her hand, grabbing her keeper’s arm in a death grip. “Did you know they were, from before?” Big thoughts raced, trying to remember if there had been signs or some warning, but came up empty.

“No, I would have told you if I knew. She must be expecting in our other life and it transferred here when the spell came into effect.” Relieved, when the fingers digging into her skin relaxed somewhat.

Emma blinked hard. “So when we eventually go back this will happen anyway?” She answered her
own question and went limp against her keeper at the cruelness of reality; both of them. “There’s no escaping it then.” Leaning into the cheek that rested on top of her head, she dared ask the burning question ripping at her throat.

“How wasn’t I enough?”

Quick fingers lifted a dimpled chin. “You are enough. More than enough, Emma.”

Doubt escaped with a sigh. “Then why are they…?”

“I don’t know, but I know that I love you and I will do anything in my power to make sure you are happy and safe. I know you hurt right now and I promise we will work through that hurt together.”

As they sat in the quiet of that promise, the final countdown to midnight rang outside the walls around them. When the cheers and party horns sounded down the hall, burgundy lips found a pale wet cheek and despite the raw claws hooking into her chest, the adult in Emma began to trust in Regina.

Flashback… 2 years ago...

Regina squinted at the fine print in the old spell book as she glanced back and forth between that and the basket of ingredients that was slowly coming together in the crypt. The list was immense and several ingredients had to be interpreted, and were personal, like the one she was currently working on figuring out a symbol for; the age of the spelled individual to be.

“Hey!”

The Queen nearly jumped out of her skin as that loud fluid voice rolled through her senses. “Miss Swan. A more subtle way of announcing yourself would be appreciated.

Emma shrugged, rolling her eyes and went to hop up to sit on the table. Her butt landed with a thud, knocking over several glass vials at the motion. “I’ll get them.” Quick fingers righted the glassware. She then leaned over the book, blocking the candle light from the page. “What are ya working on?”

“I’m working to interpret another ingredient. I need something to represent the age you will be. You still want to be eight, correct?”

“I think so.”

“Emma, you need to be firm on that number.”

“I know, I know. I’ve been thinking a lot about it, but it doesn’t feel right.” Boots kicked against the leg of the table, knocking over the vials again. “Shit. Sorry.”

Regina removed her reading glasses and vanished the glassware away. “Then what number feels accurate?”

“You remember Neal’s birthday party a few weeks ago and how the whole town practically showed up for the cook out in the park?” She waited until the Queen nodded before continuing. “He had a magician, a petting zoo, and a bazillion presents. My parents went all out and he only turned six. I was so jealous, Regina.”

“I imagine you were.”
Emma smiled sadly. “I love Neal, I do, so much and I’m happy my parents have him…”

“But it still hurts.”

“So fucking much!” Boot heels kicked the table hard. She grabbed her swan pendent around her neck, gifted by the Queen and sighed. “He’s cute and squishy and smart and everything I never was. It’s like God has this twisted sense of humor when it comes to me and I never got my turn.”

“You will have your turn soon.”

Emma swallowed down her plea to move up their timeline for the spell and turned her mind away, knowing it wasn’t an option. “What was Henry’s sixth birthday like?”

“It was not a showy event like that, but we took a hooky day from school to go to the beach. He loved to swim. I had him in lessons for a few years by then. We had a picnic lunch and a movie marathon that afternoon. I baked him a dinosaur cake, he was obsessed at the time. Dinner was at Granny’s with a few presents.” Regina smiled fondly at the memory of Henry tearing into his first collector’s edition of a Thor Comic.

“Want to know what I got for my sixth birthday?” Emma hissed and closed her eyes to take a breath. She opened them when she felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I got sent to a new house for telling my foster mom that I wanted a cupcake. She whacked the back of my head so hard I saw cartoon stars and told me to shut my god damn mouth and be grateful I had anything at all. She called my social worker and I was taken that same night.”

“You didn’t deserve that Emma.”

She neither confirmed nor denied that truth, but met brown eyes. “I realized then that the world I lived in wasn’t a fairy tale. There wasn’t a happy ending waiting for me. No one would save me. I had to take care of myself and I turned off my emotions so completely that I don’t know how to turn them back on. From that point on I shut everyone out.”

Regina watched thoughtfully as the blonde wrung her hands. “Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Trust me. Close your eyes.”

Emma glanced at the Queen sideways, eyes skeptical, but closed them as requested.

“I want you to go back in your mind to that day when you asked for that cupcake. Hold that image in your mind. What kind of cupcake was it? What were the colors, the flavor, the toppings? Do you see it?”

Emma licked her lips. “Yeah.” She felt a tingling sensation across her forehead and opened her eyes to gaze upon the cupcake of her dreams resting in Regina’s hand.

“Is this it?”

“Hell yeah! Gimme!” Emma reached to take a bite, only to have it removed from her grasp. “Hey, no fair!”

Regina waved her hand over the cupcake adding a preservation and protection spell. She set it gently in the basket of ingredients before regarding the pouting blonde who was staring daggers at her. With another wrist flick she conjured a replica of the same red velvet cupcake with yellow lemon
icing and rainbow sprinkles, handing it to Emma.

“Thanks.” White teeth tore into it, getting frosting everywhere, but in her mouth.

“Napkin?”

Emma grinned sheepishly, accepting the conjured wipe. She finished her treat, sighing as it settled in her stomach and imagined what that would have felt like 30 years ago; how something as simple as eating a cupcake could bring such joy and she knew then with absolute certainty the age she needed to be. With her bottom lip caught between teeth, she looked at the Queen.

“Six you shall be, Miss Swan.”

And the cupcake was the perfect symbol.

They slept in the next morning and Regina had nothing planned originally, but a day at home getting ready for the week to come. Emma was withdrawn, irritable, and chose to spend time in her room. The brunette insisted she come downstairs for breakfast and after a verbal battle, the girl relented and went right back upstairs afterwards.

The worried Queen checked on her every half hour, wanting to respect Emma’s need for space, but wanting to be available for when the child chose to interact. The two hours Regina had looked in she noted Emma drawing, squeezing play-dough, and talking to her fish; all items to manage her anger that they had put on their list. It was then she decided to give the girl one more half hour of solitude before broaching lunch and some kind of activity outside of the lavender room. As she put the finishing touches on lunch she heard a loud thump from upstairs. She stilled listening and heard it again and again as she hurried upstairs, calling out as she went.

“Emma? Are you—”

“Stupid list!” Emma’s shoe landed against the closet door.

Regina entered the room just as another shoe followed its’ mate.

“STUPID baby!”

“One.” At that word, a little hand hesitated for a split second.

“Stupid ME!” Another missal launched.

“Two.”

Regina approached the girl from the right, finally catching a pair of storming green eyes. She raised a brow when Emma turned towards her with a wrist cocked, ready to throw the last shoe in the pile.

“Three.”

An exasperated huff and finally, recognition of her keeper, not the target who was in her head.

“Four, Emma.”

The shoe dropped and quick breaths started as tears pooled.

Regina knelt in front of the child who was on the verge of a crying fit and took the little hand placing
it over Emma’s heart, beginning to move the hand in slow circles. “Just focus on making the circle with me, sweet one.”

A shaky nod.

“That’s my good girl.” After a minute the pounding slowed. Regina picked up the child to her hip and beginning to pace to room.

“Gina, my head hurts.” Adult Emma rested her forehead against a shoulder.

“You hardly had anything for breakfast, let’s get some food and water into you and see how you feel. If you still have a headache after lunch we can try some medicine.” She ran a hand along Emma’s braids that were still fuzzy from sleep. It was one of the rare mornings she didn’t require Emma to dress before coming done to breakfast, mostly due to the struggle of getting the child to the kitchen to begin with.

Little Emma scowled. “Yucky medicine.”

“Yes it is.” The queen agreed and carried the girl downstairs, setting her down in the kitchen. “Wash your hands please and come sit in the dining room.” She gathered their lunch plates and waited for Emma to join her before taking a bite of her cucumber salad.

Emma picked at the salad, but ate all of the grapes and grilled chicken sandwich. After the food and drink, she did feel better, but that feeling was fleeting when anger crept back in. “I’m done.”

The Queen eyed the child’s plate. “How is your headache?”

“Better.”

“I thought we could play a game or read together. You have been cooped up all day in your room and I’d like to spend some time with you.” Finishing the last bite of salad, she stood to take their plates into the kitchen. Emma trailed behind.

“I just wanna go upstairs and take a nap.” A lame excuse.

Regina set the plates in the sink and immediately went to feel the child’s forehead. “You must be ill if you are willing to take a nap.”

Rolling her eyes and pulling away, Emma shrugged, but didn’t move to leave.

The Queen recognized the understated signal to push back. “I noticed you were using many of the strategies we discussed when I checked in on you this morning. What happened to make you go from those to throwing your shoes?”

“They worked sometimes, but not all the time. They’re stupid anyway.” Arms crossed.

“I also heard that word quite a bit when I came to see what the noise was about.” Her words were not scolding, just matter of fact.

Emma watched as her keeper began to rinse the plates. “You mad about the shoes?”

“No. I was just thinking about how proud I am of you.”

“Why? You hate it when I throw shi—stuff.”

Brows rose at the catch, but settled over a small smile as she loaded the dishwasher. “You tried many
different ways to work out your feelings before you used the shoes. You can always come to me when you feel out of control or for anything else and I will help you. Do you want to talk about who you were thinking about when you were throwing shoes?"

“I hate them. They ruined everything!” The adult half was pushed aside as little Emma took over.

Hands stilled at the shift, getting used to the difference in tenor. “Hate is a strong word and one that can hurt a lot of people. Is there another word you can think of that might be more appropriate for how you feel, sweet one?”

“They’re stupid poop heads and I don’t like them. They hurt big me’s feelings.”

Regina wiped her hands on a dish cloth and came to lean down to be eye level with the agitated child. “They did. I know you are feeling angry and that’s okay. However, when someone hurts our feelings it is not okay to hurt them back. We find different ways to express our hurt; otherwise we are just as at fault as they are. We don’t call people names Emma.”

“I don’t care!” Two feet stomped opposite of each other, frustrated that the person she loved didn’t see it her way. “They are so poop heads!”

“Emma, that is enough. How would you feel if someone said that to you?” The Queen had a sudden moment of déjà vu as she recalled a similar conversation with Henry some fifteen years ago. Even though she silently agreed with little Emma’s assertion, she wouldn’t allow the child to speak hurtfully about or to others and she knew if she didn’t make that message clear, there would be trouble.

“Bad, but…” Arms tightened and the girl scowled at the tile. “They are poo—what I said.”

“I think you need some time to think about what we just talked about little miss swan.” She stood to her full height and pointed to the corner across the way.

With a dramatic sigh, cartoon socked feet shuffled to their familiar place. She was clad in her duck print PJs and twirled a braid in reflection. She was mad at the Charmings, but didn’t want to displease her keeper, the woman who cared for her, and one she had come to love.

Watching the child closely, the brunette waited for the shift that didn’t come. This was the first time she was giving little Emma a consequence for something just the child side had done and it was strikingly different. The arguing and deflecting tactics weren’t present, what she knew to be coping mechanisms of the adult. At the end of six minutes she went over to a now sniffling girl and knelt down, opening her arms as the child flew into them.

“I’m sorry… M-mama.” A whisper stretched to taste the affection for the first time and one barely heard above their heart beats.

Regina closed her eyes at the gift the little one gave her; feeling those arms squeezing tight, the smell of melon conditioner and cinnamon swirling as she imprinted the moment to memory.

“It’s alright baby. I know you will make a better choice next time.”

“I can listen real good and I won’t call names…” Emma bit her lip and leaned back to see wet brown eyes. “Why you crying?” A finger reached to touch a falling tear.

“I’m happy.”

“I make you happy?”
The Queen made sure she had green eyes before speaking. “Both of you bring me a joy I never thought I’d feel again.” She kissed a little cheek, still processing the chosen word.

More and more there was a defined distinction between the two halves in the child body, which meant that the spell was progressing as it should, despite the throwback they’d had yesterday. She wondered then if it really was a throwback or perhaps a much needed push in the right direction. Whatever it was, the waves starting to crash were announcing the storm to come. For now, with their arms entwined and that sweet word filling her heart, Regina felt at peace.

Thoughts? Seriously - I cried writing it. lol

Next time - School starts back up, Little Emma gets revenge on Snow and learns an important lesson, and Regina goes Heel to toe with Snow.
Chapter Notes

A/N - Happy Saturday. Here's a new chapter for you. Also, I am currently 45,000 words ahead of posting right now and am beginning to wind down my writing for this work. Lots of sweet moments, angst, and answers coming.

Previously...

“I make you happy?”

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“Time to get up, up, up!”

Regina groaned as someone way to enthusiastic bounced on her bed. She stretched and turned over to see Emma beaming at her. “Good morning, looks like someone is happy.”

“School today, right?”

Regina raised a brow in surprise. “Yes, it is.”

A glance at the clock showed the alarm was about to go off. She turned the buzzer down and sat up, pulling the child into a hug. “Go wash your face and get dressed. I’ll meet you in the kitchen in fifteen minutes.” Chuckling as Emma skipped out of the room. She was quick to dress, brush her
hair, and put on her makeup. Grabbing a pair of Jimmy Choo heels, she headed to the kitchen to make breakfast, beating little feet by a minute.

“I want cereal please.”

“You need to have some fruit as well. Do you want a banana or strawberries?”

“Banana.”

Regina fixed the request, adding sliced fruit with a sprinkle of cinnamon on top of a bed of granola with milk. She set it in front of the child with a spoon and went about making her own food.

“Can we go to the park today after school? I wanna swing!” Emma took a huge bite of cereal as she watched her keeper mix a Greek yogurt with a bit of granola.

“We’ll have to see Emma.” Taking a sip of coffee, she thought about her schedule.

“Promise?”

“I cannot promise you that we will go today, sweet one. I have a tentative meeting at 3:45. As it is, I’ll pick you up and just make it back to Town Hall on time.”

Emma chewed and dropped the spoon in disappointment. “But you have to!”

“You seem to be forgetting that you are not in charge here.” Regina gently corrected and it seemed to have the desired effect.

“Promise please.” Begging was not beyond the six year old.

“Why is it so important to you?”
Little Emma shrugged and returned to eating. “Just cause.”

"Because why?’’

“When you promise, then stuff happens and it makes us feel better.” Wide eyes found the Queen’s.

“I understand how that would be reassuring to you both. With this request and today, we will have to try. I will not make you a promise I do not intend to keep.”

That answer was sufficient, as Emma nodded and finished breakfast without issue.

Regina kept waiting for big Emma to make an appearance, but it seemed the savior was still feeling passive since yesterday.

On their way out the door a half hour later, the Queen thought that big Emma was making an appearance when she gently reminded about listening to the adults at school and that she expected a good report from Mrs. Gold when she called to check in at lunch time. But, it was all little Emma who stomped a foot in protest.

“You don’t havta call.”

“Oh?” Regina pointed to little feet.

Emma looked down as if scolding her feet to be still.

“I expect you to behave.” Regina held out the new pea coat, a rich forest green one she’d ordered online to replace the ruined red coat.

Arms slid into the silk lined sleeves. “I know, but—”

“No buts Emma. If you feel overwhelmed or angry, use your words and ask for help or to call me. You have a lot of choices besides a tantrum or acting out and we discussed many ideas I know you are capable of using on your own. Do you have questions about any of that?” She leaned down to
“Noooooo.” The whine was shrill.

“Mind your tone, Emma.”

“NO!” Lips tightened and arms crossed defiance in fine form.

The brunette caught the child’s chin, checking the green eyes for the Savior and found the little one challenging instead as if asking for where the line was. “We have talked about telling me no, stomping that foot, and raising your voice. Make a better choice please.” She paused, letting the girl process before asking her question again. “Do you have questions about what I expect from you at school today?”

Stubborn to a fault, just like her adult half, Emma stomped her foot again.

“Emma, this is your last warning.”

“I said NO!” The pitched shout rang in the foyer.

Regina calmly turned the girl by the shoulder and landed a swat to the small behind.

Emma stilled, it didn’t hurt through the thick fabric of the coat, but the warning was enough make her hesitate. Snapping out of the defiant state she’d copied from her big side.

The Queen lifted the child’s chin again, grateful to see remorse there. “You do not shout at Mama or anyone else. Understood?” Choosing to use the endearment the child gifted her with yesterday to affirm they were on the same side and to get her point across. With the spell nearing its peak in blending the two halves of Emma, the little side would become more dominant. Unsure of how long they would be here, months or years, she refused accept less than what the child was capable of.

“Sorry Mama.” Emma leaned in, needing a hug, one that was immediately returned and accompanied with a kiss.
“Good girl. Now, do you understand what I expect from you today?” She felt like a broken record, as adults often did when talking with small children, but wanted the affirmation.

“I’ll be good.”

“You are always good and that is not what I asked. Try again.”

Emma nodded. “I understand what to do and not to do.”

“Alright then, please get your backpack. We are nearly late.”

................................

‘1… 2… 3… 4…’ The little swan silently counted as she watched Mary-Margret talking to a colleague in the hallway. She rolled her eyes as a hand rubbed a stomach with obvious affection as she waited for her class to finish lining up to leave the art room.

So far the day had gone smoothly and Ms. Gold had given the Mayor a good report at lunch. With the end of the day nearing, little Emma was trying to make it to the bell in hopes that the park would be waiting for her. Sighing as the counting helped, she turned her attention back to Ms. Gold, until she noticed Ms. Blanchard walk away leaving the door to the 4th grade classroom wide open.

A little thought wondered mischievously, ‘No calling names, but what if…’ She raised her hand asking to go to the bathroom and waited until the hallway was clear to sneak into the room. A few minutes later she exited to return to class with a most satisfied smile.

The last bell came shortly after and Emma ran right into Regina’s arms, happily sharing about her day as they drove opposite of Town Hall. “To the park? No meeting?” She bounced at the idea.

“No meeting. It was rescheduled for tomorrow.” Smiling that she was able shift her schedule to spend time with Emma. “We will go to the park for a little while, sweet one.”

“Swings! Swings!”
Once they parked and walked to the edge of the playground, Emma bolted for the swings and pumped her legs until she was flying through the air. Regina watched content in the child’s happiness. She looked down briefly when her cell buzzed with a text picture. She squinted at the crude writing on white fabric in the image. The phone rang and she returned her gaze to the swings as she accepted the call.

Emma slowed down and hopped the last foot off the swing as the monkey bars called her name. This was the longest time her big half let her be present without interrupting and she was giddy from the day and a half free from adult thoughts. Twenty minutes later she heard her name and obediently ran over to her keeper.

“Time to go home baby. Did you have fun?”

“Yes! Thank you!” A smile bloomed.

“You are welcome.” Regina led Emma to the car, hating that the joy would soon to be wiped from that face, but she was left with little choice after that phone call.

When they pulled into the drive way, Regina turned around in the seat to look at the child. “When we go inside, I want you to put away your things and start your homework at the dining room table. I will join you in a bit for your flash cards.”

“Okay!” Emma darted from the car with her backpack and shed her things by the door, homework folder tucked under arm as she headed into the dining room. The Queen joined her fifteen minutes later and helped Emma read through the flashcards. The girl was finally getting the hang of blending and the cards now contained short phrases.

“Well done. You did that last set perfectly.”

Smiling at the praise Emma closed her folder and pushed back from the table. “TV now?”

“Later you may, first we need to talk.” Regina reached to pull Emma’s chair over so that the child faced her. “When you were playing at the park, I received a phone call from your school, more specifically from Ms. Rose.”

Emma paled and squirmed under those russet eyes.
“She informed me that you were seen coming out of Ms. Blanchard’s classroom when you had no business being in there. Ms. Blanchard reported that a piece of her property had been vandalized.” She paused at Emma’s scrunched face. “Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

Regina patiently explained. “It means that something belonging to someone was damaged on purpose. In this case, her sweater had a word written on it in marker.”

Shoulders reached small ears. “I wanna go upstairs now.”

“I bet you do, but we are not done talking yet. I want you to tell me what happened today and I will remind you now that we do not lie to each other. I expect the truth from you, sweet one.” She leaned forward, resting her elbow on her knee, hand under chin in wait.

Emma’s pinched face dropped. “I was counting in the hall. She was talking to someone about… you know and they left. I was mad.”

“What made you mad exactly?”

“She was rubbing her tummy and that’s where babies come from. She’s not sorry for hurting big me and I wanted to make her sorry.”

The logic was so straightforward and child like that Regina knew the adult half was innocent. Sighing the Queen leaned back, but kept eye contact. “We discussed name calling yesterday and how it hurts people’s feelings. You had a time out to think about that. What made you think it was okay to write on someone’s property?”

“You said no calling names so I wrote one instead.” Emma explained without tone, but with a glint of mischief.

“Yes, you did write a name on her sweater, one I specifically told you not to say. I think you know that you shouldn’t have written it either, especially on something she wears and other people will see. Is that right?”
Emma shrugged briefly, guilt taking over as she looked away. She moved her chin out of reach from the adult hand and crossed her arms.

“Do you need some think time in the corner before we keep talking?”

Green eyes snapped up. “No thank you.”

A brow rose in wait.

“I know better.” Teeth sucked on a lower lip.

“That’s what I thought. We talked this morning about my expectations for you today about making good choices, using your strategies, and asking for help when you get upset. I’m glad you remembered to try counting. I’m disappointed that you chose to hurt someone’s feelings when you know better than to do that.” She explained in a neutral tone, watching little eyes for signs of understanding.

“I’m in trouble, huh?”

“A little bit, yes.” She opened her arms when tears started falling and helped the girl to sit sideways on her lap.

“I’m sorrryyyy.” Emma sniffled, her hand finding the birthstone necklace she loved to thumb, the motion soothing. Teeth chewed the inside of a cheek as she thought more about what she did. “Are you gonna spank me?” Her big half had earned a few of those and she’d always hidden away during it.

“Normally yes, but not this time.” The brunette shook her head, knowing she needed to explain further so the child understood clearly what the boundaries were just as she’d explained to the adult version early on. “Things like lying, being unsafe, cursing and mistreating yourself or others, will usually result in a correction on some level. For example, when you kept shouting at me this morning after I gave you several warnings and you chose not to listen. Had you continued to make that choice then you would have gotten more than a love tap from me.”
“I don’t like love taps.”

“I know you don’t, but sometimes you need them to remember how to behave. I also know you are sensitive right now especially when it comes to Ms. Blanchard and while I do not approve of your actions today, I do understand them. That being said further actions like this I will not be so lenient with. Do you understand that?”

“Yes Mama.” Nodding and leaning into the Queen, she took one of Regina’s hands and placed theirs palm to palm. There was a quiet strength there that comforted the child and a certainty in follow through that she wasn’t keen to experience, as her adult half had learned. “What’s my cons-ee-qince from you?”

“Consequence. In addition to mine, Ms. Rose thinks taking your recess away tomorrow is enough from the school and I agree. You will spend that time sitting in the front office.”

Emma wrinkled her nose, but wisely did not argue.

“My consequence involves you using your allowance to replace her sweater. It cost $24.00 and by now I would say you have about that in your swan bank—”

“It’s my money though and she ruined everything!” Eyes stormed and legs kicked out. When she felt a hand rubbing her back, feet dropped.

“Let me finish please.” Regina gently tapped Emma’s pursed lips. “I realize how upset you have been since New Year’s Eve and I understand your feelings. You have a right to them.” With that validation she felt the child relax in her arms. “We have been working on different ways to help you sort through them. Because of your hard work with that, I will meet you half way on the sweater. You will pay twelve and I will pay twelve. How does that sound?”

Emma mulled over that offer and settled, knowing it wouldn’t get any better. She stuck out her hand.

“Deal Mama.” She agreed as they shook hands.

“What else do you think we can do to make this better?”
“Maybe say sorry, but I don’t want to talk to her and you said I don’t have to.”

Regina nodded, and absentmindedly rubbed the child’s back again. “What about a letter instead to say you are sorry? I will help you write it, if you like.”

“I can do that.” Emma hated writing, but if her Mama would help it would be ok.

“That’s my girl. Would you like to work on the letter now or after dinner?”

“Now please.”

Together they wrote the apology note. Regina recorded Emma’s words verbatim, correcting grammar as they went. It was simple, but sincere. She had Emma copy the short note, helping to correct flipped letters and punctuation. Something nagged in the back of the Queen’s mind as she watched Emma struggle to finish writing the last word, but she couldn’t place what feeling was as she folded the note and put it in an envelope with the money to pay for the sweater.

Emma was sorry to see the money she worked for come out of the beautiful bank, but felt better knowing it was done with and that her feelings were respected and understood. She watched as the envelope was sealed up and placed in Regina’s purse by the front door.

A foot toed the tile. “Do I have to give it to her myself?”

“I will give it to her, but you will be with me. A simple ‘I’m sorry’ would be a nice thing for you to say, if you want to. Do you think you might want to try that?” She fully intended to honor her promise to Emma as she offered the choice to engage.

The girl frowned thoughtfully. “I wanna think about it… maybe, if you’re with me?”

“Always, sweet one. We are a team.” She leaned to place a kiss on top of blonde curls.

“The bestest team Mama!” Emma threw herself forward, wrapping her arms around with abandon.
Regina’s hands stilled briefly and continued to comb through blonde curls as she felt big Emma return, not with tension, but with something else. Little arms squeezed harder.

“I’m here Gina.”

“I know.”

The woman child briefly smiled at those words. “You always do, don’t you?”

“Hhmmm?” Fingers lifted a pointed chin.

“Know what I need or need to hear. How do you do that?”

“With much practice.” The Queen smiled softly, enjoying the adult eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

A green puzzle wondered at brown warmth. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

“You have and you have not. A lot has happened in the last day and a half. I kept thinking you would present yourself.” Her tone concerned.

“I could have, but I didn’t want to. I needed to let her be for a while.” Emma smirked knowingly as she reflected on the day. “I’m a handful, huh?”

“In the best way, dear heart.”

Arms reached up to be held and Emma was lifted into her rightful place.

“She likes to call you that.” Unable to form the word her little used so freely for their keeper, but she didn’t resent it, not in the least. Her fingers touched each stone on the necklace at the Queen’s throat, liking how it moved and caught the light with each breath. “Do you like it when she does?”
“The more important thing is that she seems to need to and I am honored she chose me.”

‘I’m glad she chose you, too.’ Emma thought, not yet ready to voice that, but she gave hope in the form of a peck to the brunette’s cheek. She followed it up by blowing an obnoxiously loud raspberry, which earned her tickled ribs and a whole lot of giggling.

The next morning little Emma nervously drug her feet up the walkway of the school. She pulled back on the hand that held hers as they neared the front steps.

“Mama, wait.”

“It will be alright Emma. Remember we are a team and I’m right here.” Regina smiled reassuringly and offered a slight squeeze before continuing to move them forward. She navigated through the hall maze to the 4th grade wing and knocked crispy on the open door.

“Madame Mayor, good morning.” Mary-Margret smiled tightly and turned eyes to the fidgeting child who apparently had a vendetta against her. That confused her and she couldn’t place the reason why, still she tried to ease the girl’s obvious tension. “Hi, Emma.”

Regina didn’t allow the child to hide behind her and moved Emma to stand back at her side. She dropped the little hand briefly to reach into her purse for the envelope. “Ms. Blanchard—”

“Mama?” She hesitated when the adults both looked down at her, keeping her eyes only on the Queen’s. “I wanna do it.”

Something warm passed between them and Regina gently rubbed her thumb along a pale cheek silently confirming if Emma was sure. With the briefest of nods from the child, she handed over the white envelope.

Emma fingered the smooth paper and took a breath. “I’m sorry for hurting your feelings Ms. Blanchard and for your sweater. I won’t do it again. Here’s some of my allowance to fix it.” She extended the envelope, careful not to touch the woman’s hand who took it.
Mary-Margret looked from the child to the Mayor with doubt over the girl’s sincerity. “Is there a reason why she did this?”

Regina took a moment to take up Emma’s hand and pull the child close before giving her attention to the teacher. “That is something I discussed with Emma yesterday and not something that needs airing again. She’s been reprimanded and an acknowledgement to her apology would be appreciated.” She specifically eyed the envelope and the fidgeting child at her side, recognizing the skeptical thoughts crossing the pixie featured face.

MM ignored that comment with a lift of her chin. “I think it is if she obviously hates me enough to destroy my things with bratty behavior.” A challenge posed.

Dark eyes blazed and Regina had to school her immediate response before leaning down to the child pushing into her leg. “Baby go and wait on the bench down the hall for me. Stay right there and I’ll join you in just a minute, alright?”

“But Mama…” The girl was getting upset at the tension in the room. She had said sorry, actually said the words and meant them. That was a big deal to her.

“You did everything right and so much more. I’ll be right there.” A kiss and a hand squeeze was enough to get the child to relax enough to listen.

When Emma left she shut the door gently and flipped a complete switch on the school teacher who palced sickly at the eyes that tore through her.

“How dare you imply she is a brat and in front of her no less? I admit her actions were wrong and she has been disciplined for them, of which is strictly between her and I.” Regina took a step forward, towering over the un-charming woman. “Yes, I know about the conversation you had with her on the playground the first day of school. Don’t you ever question her personally again or insult her. I will not tolerate you mistreating her.” She took a breath, knowing this version of MM would miss that double meaning.

“I never mistreated her.”

“You did just a moment ago when she laid bare her heart giving you that envelope and you all but called her a brat without even acknowledging her apology. So yes, Ms. Blanchard you did mistreat Emma.” Regina turned away hand on the door knob before tossing a very Mayor Mills barb over her
shoulder on the way out. “Oh, and she did you a favor with the marker. That sweater was hideous.” She closed the door much more softly than she wanted to and quickly made her way down the hall to where the girl obediently sat.

Emma looked up from playing with her hands. “Are you mad at her? Your face is scrunchy.”

“I’m am upset with her words and actions. I also told her exactly what I think.” Regina sat down and pulled Emma onto her lap. “I am proud of you. That was a very brave thing you did back there.”

“I did good, huh?” Emma smiled, puffing up at the praise.

“Yes, sweet one. So well that I think ice-cream for dessert after dinner is in order.” The queen relaxed some realizing that little Emma had missed the implied meaning behind Mary-Margret’s words in the classroom and the dismissive nature of the woman. She wondered how big Emma was coping with it, but knew now was not time to ask.

“Promise?” Emma snuggled into her keeper as the first bell sounded.

“I promise. Also, how would you like to start your swimming lessons at the Rec Center today after school?”

A beaming smile answered.

:::::::::::::::::::::::::::

A/N - I have always loved a Mama Bear Regina! :-) She was fun to write in this chapter. More of that to come.

Next time - Emma stands up to a bully (reader request) and learns an important difference about something. In a flashback insight on Regina’s decisions on behalf of Emma are revealed. Emma also learns the words to the lullaby she loves to hear the Queen hum.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

A/N - Hope you enjoy this reader request start of the chapter. I gave a slight twist to what was asked.

More little Emma ahead!

Previously...

“I did good, huh?” Emma smiled, puffing up at the praise.

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“Promise?” Emma snuggled into her keeper as the first bell sounded.

“I promise. Also, how would you like to start your swimming lessons at the Rec Center today after school?”

A beaming smile answered.

The next few days went by smoothly with both sides of Emma sharing equal time being present. She loved her swimming lessons at the Rec Center taught by the little mermaid herself. Regina had taken her on Tuesday and again Wednesday after school. Being active seemed to be helping her keep a handle on her temper. Between swimming and riding her bike, now training wheel free, she was looking forward to a quiet afternoon at Town Hall when she was picked up after school.

She sighed and kicked the ball back to Gabe, who passed it to another little girl who had chosen to play with them at recess. Some bigger kids were watching them across the way on the playground and big Emma did not like the way they were looking at Gabe. Their ball was taken by one of the third grade boys, she recognized as a friend of Neal’s.
“Hey! Give it back.” Emma shouted as the group that started to walk away with Gabe’s ball. One she knew he had gotten for Christmas and didn’t mind sharing with his friends, of which these boys were not.

“Emma, it’s ok. I’ll get it back later.” Gabe ran after the blonde who had stopped at the heels of the boys.

The boy who had the ball, Jason McFee, spun to face them and shoved Gabe. “If it isn’t Gabe the babe.”

Emma stepped in front of her friend. “Give the ball back. It’s not yours.”

Another voice Emma recognized joined them. “Jason, I’ve got my soccer ball. Let them have theirs back.” Neal held his up for his friend to see.

To Emma’s surprise Jason tossed the ball hard at Gabe, who fell back on the grass. She helped him up and turned towards the bully with a clenched fist.

“You’re the Mayor’s kid right?”

Emma lifted her chin meeting narrowed eyes. “Yeah… So?”

“Is it true what they say about your Mom?”

Emerald eyes burned, both sets of them, but it was all little Emma who asked. “Who is they?”

Jason tilted his head toward Neal. “His mom.”

“Dude! Shut up. Leave them alone.” Neal pulled on his friend’s arm knowing the boy too well.

Little Emma took the bait. “What did Ms. Blanchard say?”
“That she’s a royal bitch and that you will be just like her when you grow up.”

Emma saw red; on the dirt, on her fist, and dripping down Jason’s nose. One good punch put the bully on his back and she pounced on him as she heard a whistle blowing. She had been busy trying to shove dirt in his mouth when she was pulled off and lifted away.

Numb with adrenaline, she followed a teacher she didn’t know to the principal’s office as the other took Jason to the nurse. Gabe and Neal followed. Each child was interviewed, but Emma refused to speak to anyone. Her hand was cleaned, but didn’t require a bandage. A half hour later she was right where her big half had been several weeks prior across the desk from Ms. Rose with Regina at her side who listened as the principal recounted what the teachers and children had told her.

“Emma, is that what happened?” Regina turned fully to the little girl who had yet to say a word since she arrived.

Shoulders shrugged, but not in defiance.

“You need to use your words and talk to me so I can understand your side. Talk to Mama please.”

“I hit him.” Little green eyes found brown. “He said mean stuff and I got mad. He tried to hurt Gabe and took his ball. Neal told him to stop, but I made him stop instead.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked if it was true what other people say and I asked what people and he said what Ms. Blanchard says and I said what does she say and he said she called you a name and that I would be just like you when I grewed up.” Huffing and blowing her hair off her face, she crossed arms.

Regina blinked, trying to follow the child’s scrambled explanation. “So you hit him when he told you what he had heard Ms. Blanchard say about you and I?”

Emma nodded.

Royal eyes sparked at the idea of the self entitled princess saying anything of the kind when children
could overhear loose lipped comments. While she understood why Emma reacted as she did, the girl had seriously hurt another child. Even if the boy did deserve to be rebuked for his part, that was not Emma’s responsibility. This situation would need delicate hands.

Regina turned back to Ms. Rose. “If I recall there is a no bullying policy and an employee reprimand process regarding appropriate actions while on campus, yes?” She already knew the answer, because she helped write them, but she wanted to be sure of some follow through on the school’s part for the other two people involved.

“Yes, Madame Mayor.” Ms. Rose was sympathetic and upset that her employee’s words had been the cause of the fight between the children. “Jason will receive a consequence and I will be speaking at length with Ms. Blanchard as well and if the conversation Jason heard took place on school campus, she will be written up. But because Emma was physical, she is suspended for the rest of the day.”

Emma paled and uncrossed her arms. “But he was the one who started it Ms. Rose!”

“I realize that Emma and he’s in trouble for that. It was not your place to punch him and violence of any kind results in suspension, normally that is for two days, but this is your first time and I know he provoked you. We will see you tomorrow, but not for the rest of the day.” Ms. Rose explained and turned back to the Mayor. “I had Mrs. Gold gather the rest of her work from today and homework. It’s in her backpack.”

“Thank you for being lenient. I will be discussing this much further with her at home. Come along Emma.” Regina stood with the yellow backpack in one hand and held out the other, which the child reluctantly took. “What do you say to Ms. Rose?”

“I’m sorry for fighting.”

Ms. Rose offered a smile. “Thank you Emma. We will try again tomorrow.”

The girl was led out of the building to the Benz and they carried on as they often did after school by driving to Town Hall, as there were still a few more hours before Regina could sign off for the day. She set Emma up with a snack, school work, and a kiss before going to her desk. After an hour Emma dropped her pencil and wandered over to the big desk where the Queen was busy typing.

“What’cha doing?”
Fingers stilled over the keyboard as attention was given fully to the girl. “I’m working on balancing the town’s treasury report. The school needs funding for a few projects and I’m trying to find them some money to help with that. How is your homework coming along?”

“I’m almost done.” Emma ran a hand along the edge of the desk, testing the sharpness. “Mama?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Come here. I was going to wait until we got home to talk, but if you are ready now we can start.” Regina settled the girl on her lap. “I’m not mad at you. I don’t like your behavior, especially since our last few discussions on making good choices and my expectations of you. What did I tell you about mistreating others and hurting them back when you get angry?”

“Not to, but I had to Mama.”

“You are a good friend to Gabe and I understand you being upset by him being hurt. I also understand your anger at what was said about us. However, you had other options available to you other than choosing to fight.” Regina empathized and was proud that Emma stood up for what she believed in, but she knew from previous conversations with adult Emma in their other life that this instinct to run head first into situations was one on their list to work on taming.

“I was ‘fending us all! Jason deserved it for what he said.”

A hand cupped a chin. “That was not for you to decide, little miss swan. His words were wrong, but so were your actions and because of your choice you are suspended and in trouble with me.” Regina could see the child was confused at that. “Is there a reason you thought you would not be?”

“I was ‘fending Gabe and you and me. He hurt us.” Emma simply repeated her earlier statement.

“I understand why you see it that way and yes, his words hurt your feelings, but that did not give you the right to hurt him back. There are a number of other things you could have done to express yourself and gotten help, like telling him how his words affected you or going to get an adult. You
seriously hurt him Emma. We are lucky his nose isn’t broken.”

“He hurt my hand.” Her face wrinkled at the memory of blood and she felt the back of her right hand kissed.

“Better?” Regina rubbed little knuckles.

A small nod. “I wish his nose was broken.”

Regina sighed. “That’s enough. He was wrong and I’m sure his parents will correct him, just as I will you when we get home.”

Green eyes welled, threatening tears. “But Mama…”

“Do not ‘but Mama’ me. I know you think you were in the right and you can have your feelings, but your actions were not acceptable and are mine to correct.” Regina was matter of fact as she lifted the child off her lap. “Go wrap up your homework please.”

“I don’t waaaannnt a spankinnggg.” Emma moaned.

Regina nodded. “Of course you don’t. We will talk more about it at home. Go finish up.” She sent Emma off with a pat to the plaid skirt.

Emma sourly dragged herself back to the table and finished the math worksheet. The Mayor helped her though the flash cards and she was instructed to put everything away in the backpack. Regina prepped her own belongings as her cell phone rang. She answered and listened as Emma watched from across the room. Her eyes found the child’s as she hung up.

“That was Ms. Rose. She said that Jason heard Ms. Blanchard’s comment about us on school grounds. That means that Ms. Blanchard is in some trouble with your principal.” She kept her face unbiased, while inside she was smiling that there was some justice in their day. “I thought you would like to know.”

Emma gave a small smile, eyes hopeful. “Does that mean I’m not in trouble with you?”
“It doesn’t work like that sweet one.” The Queen got her keys and tied the sash on her jacket.

“I wish it did.”

“I’m sure you do. Get your coat on. It’s time to go home.”

Traffic was light and they turned onto Mifflin Street sooner than the girl would have liked. She put away her things once inside and waited for instructions.

“Go into the study and find your corner. I want you to spend some time thinking about your actions on the playground today. I’m right behind you.”

Emma pouted. “I don’t need the corner.”

“That statement is exactly why you do, young lady. Go on.” Regina hung up her coat and followed the girl into the study a minute later. Satisfied Emma followed instructions; she seated herself on the sofa nearby using the time to think through her next step. Before the spell had taken place she and Emma had discussed different options for handling certain situations and she drew on that memory as she waited for the child’s time out to end.

Flashback… less than 2 years ago.

It was a morning where Emma awoke in the guestroom of the mansion. It was a Saturday and one she and Regina planned to continue working on details for the spell. The ingredients were coming together and they were about halfway ready. She stretched lazily and threw off the covers, noticing for the first time a glass of water and two Tylenol resting on a napkin of the night stand.

‘That's why my mouth feels like sandpaper.’ She thought recalling the one too many glasses of cider she’d consumed last night and rubbed hands briskly across her face.

Downing the tablets and the full glass of water she crossed the room and the hall to the bathroom, a hot shower calling her name. A half hour later, dressed in clean skinny jeans and a red T-shirt from the stash of clothes she kept in the drawer of the dresser for such occasions, she found Regina in the kitchen plating breakfast. Her mouth watered as a steaming cup of coffee was placed in her hand.
“Thanks for this and for the hangover cure you left upstairs.”

“You are welcome. How many would you like?” A perfectly manicured finger pointed to the still crackling turkey bacon.

“Are you gonna to have any?” Emma found a perch on the stool by the counter.

“One piece.”

“Then I will take the rest.”

Regina plated the bacon while smiling knowingly, along with a few pieces of toast. Once her own plate was prepared she sat alongside the blonde. After a few minutes she pulled the notebook over from where she’d been reviewing it earlier while she cooked. The perfectionist in her found it hard to ignore the spelling and grammatical errors from the Savior’s slanted handwriting. Emma was by far intelligent, mostly well spoken and observant so the lack of basic writing skills was a bit of a concern. She knew some about Emma’s schooling, but wondered where along the line the young Emma had fallen through the cracks. Focusing on the present moment, she placed it between them and tapped the top of the page.

“You were a little vague with this entry and I want to review it with you to make sure I understand everything.”

“Ok.” Emma said around the food in her mouth, catching the raised brow, she swallowed before continuing. “What do you want to know?”

“You mentioned here you want both sides of you to be held accountable using whatever methods I see fit. We touched briefly on my views about discipline in our other discussions and I don’t think you realize what you are asking.”

Emma took a longer sip of coffee than she had liquid in the mug, finally swallowing hard. “I know what I’m asking for Regina. It’s just embarrassing to put it on paper.”

“Then let’s talk about it now.”
“Right now?” Emma’s cheeks turned pink.

“This is as good a time as any.”

“Will you start?”

“Sure.” Regina took up the reins as usual, pointing again to the notebook where she’d asked Emma to define two words, which the blonde had given the same definition. “Discipline and punishment are two different things. Discipline is for teaching about self control, about what behaviors are and are not ok. The emphasis is on teaching. I will be in a role of teaching your little side to behave and your big side, as you adjust to the new order of things. This will be a daily occurrence with things like rules, procedures, and routines. It will involve a lot of talking, redirecting and my modeling what I expect of you.”

“I thought they were the same thing. What about punishment then?” Again Emma felt her face heat up.

“Punishment would be reserved for things you know better than to do. Things you have already been taught that we discussed, or your adult half has already learned. Examples of this would be lying, being unsafe or deliberately mistreating people, including yourself.” Regina paused to that soak in as she took a delicate bite of toast.

“Sssssoooooo, can we add a few things to that?” Emma pondered over what she was about to say. “I want to stop cussing and running from my problems. Also, I tend to go head first into everything I do. I want to learn to stop and think about all my options before making a decision.

“Your hero complex?” Full lips teased gently.

Green eyes sparkled back. “So not a complex.”

“We can work on those things. Though, you will not like it at the time.”

“I know, but it will be worth it.” Bacon crunching between teeth brought distraction.
“What kind of punishments would act as a deterrent for you? I imagine this will be more applicable for your big side in the beginning until your little self gains more confidence. Keep in mind you said you wanted equality for both sides of you, so please think this through. We want to avoid triggers.”

“What kind of punishments would act as a deterrent for you? I imagine this will be more applicable for your big side in the beginning until your little self gains more confidence. Keep in mind you said you wanted equality for both sides of you, so please think this through. We want to avoid triggers.”

“Can I just make a list?” She hated writing, but that would be a welcome relief because right now she felt like she was sitting in a sauna.

“You had that option yesterday when I asked you to write about it and here we are discussing it instead.”

“Reginnaaa.” Rolling green eyes found her empty plate. “It’s hard.”

“I know, but you asked me for this and we are going to do this right to the best of our ability. Tell me what you need please.”

“I need you to be patient, but don’t let me walk all over you. I’ll be pissed and stubborn as all hell and I’ll push all your buttons. Start small, like time outs. Just don’t leave me there forever.”

The Queen nodded, expecting nothing less. “What else?”

“Natural consequences when possible, like if I break something have me fix it or pick it up, like the boot mark on the door that one time. You made me clean it up.” Pale hands played with the hem of a t-shirt. “I do well when things are predicatable and I need to know you will do what you say you will do. You’re really good at that anyway.” She offered up a small smile.

“All of those things are very doable.”

“Then we are done talking about it. Sweet, let’s watch a movie.” Emma moved to get off the stool but found her arm caught gently.

“We are not done just yet, sit please.”

A sigh, but compliance followed.
“How do you feel about spanking?”

Emma scrunched her eyes shut. “You know how I feel about it Regina.”

“I’m referring to the context of how it would apply to the parent child relationship we will have. I need to know if that is an appropriate option or not.”

“It is, just keep it simple, predictable and only with your hand. Talk to me about why and hold me after. Don’t do it angry, not that you would.” She glanced apologetically at the Queen and continued. “I will toe the line no matter where you put it, that’s just how I am, but once I know where it is I’ll feel safe.”

“I admit I was worried that it might be something that had been used on you negatively while you were in foster care and I don’t want to do anything that would further hurt you or reverse what we are trying to accomplish.”

“It wasn’t. I was slapped, starved, sent away or locked up somewhere. My little half won’t know the difference and my adult half will hate it, ’cause I won’t know we talked about it, but she’ll need it.”

Regina stood and took their plates around to the sink. “Anything else I should know?”

“Don’t make me a promise you can’t keep.” Emma knew that went without saying, but she wanted to hear the Queen’s usual answer.

“I never do.”

A mischievous smile. “I know.”

Regina opened her eyes feeling sure of her choice.

“Come here to me Emma.”
The child looked over her shoulder and sighed at the adult eyes resting on her. She pulled slow feet along over to the Queen who moved to stand the child between her knees so they could have eye contact.

“Why are we here, sweet one?”

“Cause of Jason.” A lower lip stuck out. Emma had hoped being cute might help her case. She was wrong.

“Do you need another six minutes?”

“Nooooo.” Emma dropped the pout and squirmed. “Here ‘cause I didn’t make a good choice.”

“That is correct. I am not happy with your actions today little miss swan. Punching Jason was not a good choice on your part. We do not mistreat others, even if they mistreat us. We walk away, use our words appropriately or get help if our feelings are hurt.” She paused as Emma shifted from foot to foot. “As I told you earlier, you may have your feelings, they are not wrong, but your actions were. Do you understand that difference?”

Emma nodded, dropping her eyes to the floor. Her chin was lifted gently and her teary eyes met brown.

“Tell Mama, so I know you understand.”

“My feelings are ok, but not what I did with them.”

“Good girl, you were listening.” Regina leaned over and pressed a kiss to the child’s forehead. Leaning back she continued. “You know your big half has been in trouble a few times with me, but you have not and I want to make sure you understand what to expect. In a minute I’m going to put you across my lap and lift your skirt. I am going to spank you with my hand and you can cry all you want. You may not reach back. When we are done I will hold you and we can talk more about your feelings. Do you understand?”

“Yes Mama.” That voice was quiet and accepting. She was moved to her keeper’s right side and lifted to rest over the firm lap. Her upper body was on the couch and her legs were left to dangle. A sniffle escaped as her skirt was lifted and she felt a palm rest against her behind.
“I love you Emma and I will not allow you to behave this way. You are capable of making better choices than you did today and I will help you see that.” Her hand spoke next as Emma began to wiggle and cry. Taking her time with the usual dozen, she watched the child’s breathing and body language closely. She did not spank to cause pain, Emma didn’t need that. She needed loving accountability, reassurance, and a good cry; one she hadn’t had since the incident at New Years.

As the last swat landed the hand stayed, soothing the slight sting as the child’s crying slowed and she was righted in those arms to be held. Emma clung tightly to Regina red faced, snot running freely, having given herself over so completely that she forgot about her discomfort.

“I-I sssoorry Mama.” She blew hard as a tissue was held to her nose.

“I know baby and you are all forgiven. Next time you feel like punching someone what will you do instead?”

“Use m-my words ‘proprately and a-as for help.” She hiccuped and burrowed into the Queen’s shoulder.

“That’s my girl.”

They sat together for a few minutes before Emma pulled back and big eyes found her keeper’s. “Am I your girl, Gina?”

“Do you want to be?”

Lips rolled inward and eyes dropped avoiding that answer. “You made my butt hurt.”

“I did and I think you needed the cry that came with it. Did that help?” Regina tucked hair behind a little ear and wiped at the last tear streak from a pale cheek.

Emma blushed at how well the Queen knew her. She’d been in hiding most the week and it took her little throwing a right hook and earning a correction to bring her fully back out. “It did. I feel… lighter.”
“I have missed you this week and while you are present, I’d like to talk to you about your feelings since New Year’s Eve and why you are having the need to run away inside yourself.”

“I hate them right now. I know you don’t like that word or my little using it, but it’s what I feel.”

Regina nodded, pulling Emma close. “I think from mini you, the word is a bit strong, given her limited experience with them. From you I understand it and I respect your feelings.”

Emma dropped into Regina, grateful those arms were holding her as she broke through another wall or the wall broke her, she wasn’t sure as more tears came. “You are the only one who does and I don’t get it. They should have put me first, they should have held on to me with everything they had, not p-put me in t-that tree.”

Regina closed her eyes as a wrenching cry ripped through Emma. “I know baby.”

“They sent me away, Gina... They s-sent me a-away.” She sobbed, limp with heartbreak. “They ALL sent me away.” Raw, red, and torn she cried in the Queen’s arms.

A coughing fit followed and Regina leaned Emma forward to relieve pressure on the girl’s lungs. “Take a breath for me… That’s it… Do you feel my hand?” She gently rubbed a circle over the child’s heart and began humming, keeping the tune deep in her throat.

A nod and a strangled cough answered. Emma put her ear against her keeper’s chest as the humming calmed the tears. She recognized the tune as one Regina often used when she was upset, but it buzzed richly against her ear as if whispering a secret. Finally, breathing became easier. Her face felt tight, mouth like cotton.

“Gina, promise me.” A plea full of ache.

Regina stopped humming, lips meeting the top of Emma’s damp curls. “What do you want me to promise you baby?”

“Don’t send us away.”
“I promise never, ever to send either of you away. We are a team.”

Little Emma whispered between them. “The bestest team.”

“We are. Here have some water for me.” Regina conjured a bottle and uncapped it. “Small sips.”

Emma carefully took a few swallows and fell back in exhaustion. The shakes set in from the intense crying she had done and she clung to the brunette. The bottle disappeared and she was carried upstairs into the bathroom. Regina set Emma on the mat and ran a warm shallow bath. Quick hands worked the tights and skirt off while Emma tried to help by unbuttoning the shirt, but fingers shook too much. She easily became frustrated and more tears threatened until the Queen took over.

“Thanks.”

“Just relax and let me take care of you.”

The last of the clothing came off and she lifted the girl into the tub. After a quick wash and rinse, Emma followed into the lavender room. Once in fresh PJs big eyes drooped and a yawn followed as they settled into the rocker. It was barely four PM, but Emma was beat.

“Sing to me please.” Emma adored the humming, but wanted words to go with the mystery song she’d heard several times now. Both halves listened as tune left red lips.

‘Baby mine, don’t you cry.
Baby mine, dry your eyes.
Rest your head close to my heart.
Never to part, baby of mine.

Little one, when you play,
Pay no heed what they say.
Let your eyes sparkle and shine,
Never a tear, baby of mine.’
Emma’s lips parted in awe. She had no idea Regina could sing. The words were simple, personal and felt like home. Tears of a different kind fell as the song continued to spiral around her heart.

‘If they knew all about you,

They’d end up loving you, too.

All those same people who scold you,

What they’d give just for the right to hold you.

From your hair down to your little toes,

You’re not much, goodness knows.

But, you’re precious to me,

Sweet as can be, baby of mine.’

By the time the last words faded Emma was fast asleep, wet salt still on cheeks. Regina kissed them away and gently moved them to nest in the bed with the child resting against her. She watched a little chest rise and fall, finally breathing in peace. Exhaustion took her and together they left the waking world for a dreamless sleep.

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*Credit to Song writer Tony Washington*

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A/N - Thoughts?

I just finished writing the second to last scene of this story... Whirlwind to come, but I promise closure and a happy ending for all.

Next Time - Emma avoids school, a run in with the Sheriff, a scare at the pool and a permanent shift takes place. :-}
Chapter Summary

A/N – Some of you have asked about MM and how different she is in this story. Great questions. You guys will probably think the same of David after this chapter. There are a few reasons for that. One being is this is a version of her/him that has not had the trials the originals have had. In this life she and David have been happily married and together since they were kids. She’s bolder than the original in things she says and does. Another being she is that she is pregnant and hormones can make one say and do things out of character. Lastly, this is A/U.

For Snowing fans - There will be more angst between the Charmings and Emma, but closure and much healing for all of them in towards the end. I mean that sincerely… that scene is just beautiful. :-)

Also, I post this on Fan-fiction.net and I have to say there is something extra special about Archive of Our Own readers. You ALL rock and are keeping me going! Thanks for that and your feedback!

Previously...

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“Time to wake up, Emma.”

The child groaned and buried her head under the pillow. “Five more minutes.” Her plea was muffled and a squeal followed as the pillow was lifted away. “Noooo goooo to school!”

Regina sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the blanket down, eyeing the cranky child with a raised brow, noting little Emma was present. “You love school, sweet one. Why don’t you want to go
Emma sat up and tried to pull the blanket back from adult hands without luck. “Let go Mama.” She tried to wiggle backwards when she was caught under arm and lifted to stand next to her keeper.

“Talk to me, baby. What is the matter?” She knew lack of sleep wasn’t it. They’d both napped together yesterday before waking for a simple dinner and she had put Emma back to bed a half hour before the usual bedtime.

“I am staying with you. We both are.” Emma crossed her arms in a pout. After the events of yesterday and her big half’s break down she didn’t want to face the world today. Thinking she would be denied her request she threw in a demand. “You can’t make us go.”

“Uncross those arms, little miss swan.” Regina waited until she was obeyed before continuing. “That is not how you ask me for what you want or need. Try again.”

“We wanna stay with you please.” Emma rubbed the sleep from her eye with a fist.

“That is much better, thank you. I understand you wanting to stay with me. I want you with me too, but you need to go to school to learn new things. Is there another reason you don’t want to go?”

“I don’t wanna see Ms. Blanchard or anyone. I wanna be near you cause you make us feel good. Big me says please Gina. We’ll go Monday and we promise.” Wide eyes begged.

The Queen sighed. While she understood the need behind the request she did not want this to become a pattern for future behavior. “If you come with me today, it is only for today. Come Monday morning I expect you to get up without issue and go to school. You will also need to do your school work and I will have your teacher e-mail it to my office. No whining about it will be accepted. If you can agree to those two things, you may come with me to work.”

Emma nodded eagerly. “I will and I’ll be so good for you Mama.”

“You are always good for me baby.” Regina kissed a little cheek and stood. “Pick out what you want to wear while I hang back up your uniform.”
The girl made a beeline for the closet and selected her favorite forest green dress. Regina helped her into a pair of mustard colored leggings and the new green butterfly pattern boots she'd bought to replace the ruined black pair from Christmas. Blonde hair was pulled halfway up and secured with a barrette.

Breakfast was a simple affair of yogurt and bagels, though Emma begged for waffles with cream, a request the Queen promised for tomorrow. Before they left Emma ran upstairs to grab her Wonder Woman action figure as the brunette e-mailed Ms. Gold for the child’s assignments and called in an absence to the elementary school.

Emma sang happily in the car to the radio on the way to Town Hall and followed the Mayor into the main office. She waved to Ashley and settled on the couch to play with her toy as she waited for her school work to be printed out. Regina explained the directions for the grammar worksheet and Emma got started without protest. The morning flew by and she was finished all her work by lunchtime. She closed her folder and wandered over to the desk where the Mayor was sorting papers.

“I’m done Mama. Can I help you be Mayor?”

“I’ll check your work after lunch, but yes I could use your expert eyes.” She lifted Emma up onto her lap and scooted in towards the desk. “Which color do you prefer for the paint in the new hospital rehabilitation wing? They are nearly finished the construction and I have to pick the color for the inside walls.”

Emma stared at the colors on the paper ranging from soft blues to tans to creams. She pointed to one the color of a Robin’s egg. “This one. It looks like an Easter egg.”

“That is what I thought too. Good choice.”

“I draw a picture now, okay?” Emma wiggled to get down, done with the hard work of being the Mayor of a small town for the day.

Regina laughed and opened her desk drawer to give Emma some paper and markers she kept just for that. “You may. I am going to order us in lunch from Granny’s. Would you like a green salad or fruit with your crab cakes?” Crab was the only seafood little Emma would willingly eat since she had gotten Jasper and she loved Granny’s version. She always chose the protein, but gave choices for sides when appropriate.
“French fries?” Emma set her art supplies on the coffee table and sat on the floor.

“Not one of your choices, sweet one.”

“But it could be Mama?” Looking over her shoulder as she uncapped a red marker.

“Not today.”

“Mmmmm, apple sauce, but smooth, not chunky with cinnamon please?”

“Crab cakes and smooth cinnamon apple sauce it is.” The combination sounded unpleasant, but if Emma would eat it that’s all that mattered.

She’d learned a few weeks ago how much pickier of an eater little Emma was than her adult half. Little Emma loved mashed peas, but wouldn’t eat them if they were round. She’d eat raw cauliflower, but not cooked and cooked broccoli, but not raw. Regina had learned to be even more creative with her cooking when the small one was present, which was more often lately.

After phoning in lunch she went back to her tasks. The interoffice intercom buzzed and Ashley’s voice came on. “Madame Mayor, Sheriff Nolan is here to see you.”

‘Of all days, he picks today.’ Regina thought and glanced at Emma who was coloring away oblivious to the conversation.

She pressed the button to respond. “Just a moment Ashley.” Pushing away from her desk she went over to the sofa and sat near Emma. “Sweet one, I need your eyes and ears for a moment please.

“What’s up Mama?”

“Sheriff Nolan is here and he needs to speak with me. Are you alright to be here or do you want to sit with Ashley outside while we talk?” So far the only run in they had had with David was at the diner at New Years Eve and she knew adult Emma didn’t have as many issues with him as she did with Snow.
“I stay with you. You said I could.” Green eyes furrowed.

“You are and you will, I just want to check in with you to make sure you are comfortable with him being in the room.”

“I don’t have to talk to him?”

“No baby. He is here to talk to me.”

“Then I’m fine.” She turned back to her picture and kept coloring.

Regina returned to her desk and leaned against the front of it, preferring to stand for whatever David wanted as she pressed the intercom again. “Send the Sheriff in please.” The second her finger left the buzzer, the door to her office opened.

“Madame Mayor.” David greeted and strolled into the office.

“Sheriff. What can I do for you today?”

“A few things. Here are the traffic violation reports you asked for last week.” He handed a thin file over and watched as the Mayor shifted though them. “Nothing unusual there and here is the budget report for the station outlining our expenses for the month.”

“Thank you. These seem to be in order.” Brown eyes skimmed the report, noting nothing of concern. “Anything else?”

“Actually, yes.” David scratched the back of his head. “This thing between your kid and my wife needs to stop.”

Regina stood to her full height, which matched David’s in heels. “I will not speak to you about something in which you are not involved Sheriff.” Her tone held warning.
"Your kid obviously has something against my wife and it is making her uncomfortable at work. Could you talk to her about—"

Regina held up her hand and turned towards the sofa. "Emma, go outside and sit with Ashley please."

Green eyes popped up from behind the couch and looked at the now red faced man. He seemed embarrassed and she wondered why. "Do I have to?"

"Yes you do for a minute. I’ll come get you as soon as I’m finished here." She leaned down to accept a hug when Emma came to her.

"Mama why is his face red?" Emma whispered none too quietly.

"Go do as I asked of you and close the door behind you." Regina sent her off with a pat.

Emma sulked out and closed the door most of the way. She didn’t trust the Sheriff alone with her Mama and she decided to listen at the door.

David ran a hand over his face. "I didn’t know she was here or I wouldn’t of—"

"Let me make this perfectly clear right now Sheriff. When it comes to Emma she is off limits unless she chooses to engage with your wife on school campus, which is public property, or even with you. They both have a right to be there and I understand there has been conflict between them, the latest of which was not Emma’s doing." Regina took a step forward. "If Ms. Blanchard wishes to discuss Emma, then she may do so with me. I do not appreciate you coming into my office, my place of work, to discuss a personal issue your wife has."

"Look, I don’t want to get in the middle of this. I’m just trying to help." He held out his hands and remembered what MM had said about the Mayor coming to her classroom with Emma. "And do you really think rewarding your daughter with a hooky day after what she’s been doing is really the best call to stop this grudge she has?"

"Are you questioning my parenting ability?" Red edged her vision, but she kept the mask in place. "You are and I am finished with this conversation. You may leave Sheriff."
“Regina, come on.” David’s voice rose.”You have to admit there is something not right about a six year old having a grudge that results in vandalism and bullying other kids because of something my wife allegedly said.”

The Queen scoffed. “Emma’s behavior is none of your concern and you would do well to mind your tone.” Brown eyes burned. “She is a six year old child; your wife is a fully grown woman. Do the math on who is more responsible for their words. Your own son confirmed what she said, or are you insinuating Neal is a liar? Which, I do not believe he is. He’s a good sweet boy.”

“He is and maybe Emma can learn something from him.” He spun on his heal and headed towards the door. He opened it all the way and nearly rammed into a thoroughly pissed little blonde.

“You were mean to my Mama and that’s not nice.” Emma clenched her fists and stared up.

Regina hurried towards the door and reached around David to pull Emma into the office before the little one lost it on him.

The man wisely stepped aside and unwisely spoke. He pointed at Emma. “That is exactly what I mean.”

“Goodbye Sheriff.” Regina closed the door on David’s face and gave her full attention to the irate child at her feet.

“He was mean, just like Ms. Blanchard. He said not nice stuff and he needs a timeout.” The child huffed and dropped her arms when the Mayor picked her up.

“I agree with you on the time out little swan. What did Mama ask you to do?”

“Go sit with Ashley.” Emma rested her head against the brunette.

“And what else?”
“To shut the door, but—”

“Did you do either of those things?”

“No, but I don’t like how he was when he was here. I don’t like him and he was mean to you.”

Regina returned to her desk and sat with Emma on her lap. “You don’t have to like him, but you do have to listen to me when I ask you to do something. That conversation was not for your ears. What you did is called eavesdropping and that means you listened to something private between other people on purpose when they did not know you were there. Your big half did something similar at Christmas in the hallway when I was speaking with Henry. That is not okay.”

“I’m sorry. Won’t do it again.”

“Alright, I’ll let it go this time.” She lifted a pointed chin. “Do you have any questions about what you heard?”

Blonde curls nodded. “What’s he mean when he said there’s something not right ‘bout me? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you Emma. That is not what he meant and exactly why you should not listen to adult conversations.”

“So what did he mean?”

Regina straightened the barrette in Emma’s hair and fussed with the collar of the green dress. “He was trying to understand why you don’t like Ms. Blanchard.”

“That’s easy Mama.”

“Oh?”

“She doesn’t like you. I can tell even though she pretends to be nice sometimes.”
“It is more complicated than that sweet one, but just because someone doesn’t like me doesn’t make them a bad person or someone you shouldn’t like. It is also not a reason to want to hurt their feelings.”

“I remember and I won’t.”

“Good girl.”

The buzzer sounded again announcing their lunch order. Regina prepped Emma’s food and together they ate on the sofa. After lunch, the Mayor checked over the homework and they did the flash cards. The child refused the offer of a nap claiming she had more sleep than Sleeping Beauty in the last day and settled down to finish her picture. A half hour later she brought the drawing over to the desk.

“Is that for me?” Regina took the offered picture with a smile.

“Yeah, it’s us and Jasper at the pool.” The girl rocked on her heels in thought about the Sheriff’s visit. “Mama?”

“Hmmm?”

“What’s a bitch?”

Brown eyes snapped from the picture to the little face, brows raised in shock. “Excuse me young lady?”

Emma in her curiosity missed the change of tone. “I said, what’s a bit—”

“I heard what you said. Where did you hear that word?” She set the picture on the desk and turned around fully.

The girl frowned at the serious look on the Queen’s face. “It’s what Jason said Ms. Blanchard called
you. Why is it bad?"

Taking a deep breath, Regina pinched the bridge of her nose before looking back to Emma. “It is a name people sometimes use to describe women they don’t like in a negative way. It is unkind and not something you, either of you, are allowed to say.” She softened her tone and pulled Emma in for a hug. “I understand you didn’t know when you asked just now. I do not want to hear you say it again, alright?”

Emma accepted the hug. “We won’t. Are you going to tell Ms. Blanchard’s Mommy so she won’t do it again?”

The Queen bit her lip at that visual and the history behind that question. “That is not my place. My only concern is you, sweet one. Here, I need this folder decorated so it is not so boring. Will you help me with that?”

Little hands took the plain folder and bounced back to the coffee table. “Yes, because we are a team, huh?” She shot a grin over her shoulder.

“The best team.” Regina echoed the words she knew were expected as she thought more about the incident on the playground.

The child had said Jason called her a name and finished with something about Emma being just like her when she grew up. Putting the two insults together made her blood boil and she swallowed down the urge to get the princess on the phone and give her an earful, reminding herself that this version of Snow was not their Snow. Regardless, the word hurt after all they’d been through and reminded her of a time in her life she wished she could forget. There were many lessons learned the hard way and she had no desire to relearn them.

She wouldn’t retaliate because she wasn’t that woman anymore. There was much more at stake worth her energy and time. They were here for Emma. Her eyes found the child playing innocently on the rug. That’s all she needed to slam the door on the bit of darkness trying to creep into her mind.

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The rest of January passed without incident. Little Emma delighted in attending the birthday party of her best friend Gabe a few weeks back and the adult side enjoyed the pleasure of cake and beating the piñata until it exploded with candy much to the glee of all the first graders in attendance. Things at school had settled down and they had not heard much out of the Charming couple. Both halves of Emma had fully blended and mostly took turns being present, though not without conflict. One of which reared up at swimming lessons on a Thursday.
The child’s confidence in the water had grown and she excelled in her age group class. Regina had regularly praised the effort, but not without reminding adult Emma to listen to the teacher. The child side liked to help Ms. Ariel show the other kids different ways to float or move in the water and her adult half often became upset when others did not keep up as quickly as she did.

The queen folded Emma’s discarded uniform as the child adjusted the straps on her red suit with yellow pinstripes. As little bare feet moved off the floor mat she reached out to steady the girl before a slip happened. “Wear your pool shoes Emma, so you don’t fall.”

“Mama, it’s just right there.” The girl pointed to the door of the locker room that led to the pool area.

“What is the rule?” Hands fished shoes out of the tote bag.

“Walking feet.”

“What else?”

“Pool shoes ‘til I sit on the edge to get in the water.” Shoulders dropped, but Emma complied with the request and took the offered red rubber shoes.

“Why do we have that rule?” Regina wanted Emma to understand the reason behind the things she was asked to do. The adult half mostly did, but the little side was still learning.

“So I don’t bust my head open.” Shoes squeaked on the tile of the locker room as they walked toward the pool.

“Have fun today, and—”

“Listen to my teacher. I know Gina.” Big Emma offered a knowing smile.

She accepted a hug before speed walking as much as she knew she could get away with to the water edge. Plucking her butt on the wet concrete, she removed the shoes and set them on the little shelf by
the steps and waited for Ms. Ariel to tell her to come into the shallow water.

The Queen waited until the red haired swim instructor knew Emma was there before heading back to the waiting area. As the class started, she watched with other parents through a viewing window as the children were taken through simple routines to reinforce skills previously taught like floating, treading water and simple strokes. She noticed a new child in the class that Emma seemed to take a liking to.

A half hour into the lesson, Regina observed as the small half animatedly explained something to the new child who struggled to copy the bobbing motion. It was big Emma that took over in frustration and appeared to have it out with the teacher who stepped in between the children. Helpful to a fault was proving to be a down fall. Ms. Ariel said something that had the adult rolling green eyes and shuffling over to the bench along the pool, usually used for kids that needed a break or a chance to calm down if upset.

Regina could tell the two halves were warring. By now she knew the facial expressions for each so well, especially when Emma was conversing internally and this one seemed to be quite the fight. She stood to exit the viewing area to go see what the upset was about.

It took a few minutes to navigate the crowded hall and locker room to the pool area. By the time she carefully stepped into the main pool area, Emma was missing from the bench. Concerned brown eyes scanned the pool and a shrill whistle drew her eyes to the diving board where the adult side of Emma bounced with a determined look.

In pulsing slow motion it happened; the name rolling off Regina’s lips, little feet leaving the board, a swan-ish dive into the deep end, and the lifeguard following from the watch post.

“EMMA!” She dropped her things and ran for the water ready to dive in just as the lifeguard surfaced with a coughing child in tow.

The whole thing was less than a minute from start to finish, but to the shaking brunette it was a lifetime. Fear froze blood until Emma was safely deposited into her arms soaking the tailored suit.

Regina couldn’t speak as she hugged the little body close and felt over for signs of hurt. Finding none and with a clear eyed child gazing back, she switched parent modes on a dime as she set Emma down. Someone handed over Emma’s rubber shoes and after helping the girl into them she offered a nod of thanks to the lifeguard and to Ms. Ariel. She stiffly marched the girl into the locker room after picking up the dropped things.
Emma tried to shrink under the hand that rested on the back of her neck as she struggled to keep up with the fast pace as the reality of her mistake settled in. In the back of the locker room as she came face to face with her keeper who sat on the bench near their assigned locker.

Their eyes locked.

“I can explain Gina.”

“No. You cannot explain why you were on the adult diving board of the deep end of the pool where you are strictly forbidden to swim.” She turned big Emma sideways and gave a crisp spank to a wet bottom.

“Ow!” Emma hissed, face pink with embarrassment as her hand flew back to rub. “Okay, okay, I can’t explain… I messed up.”

Regina raised a brow and watched the girl hop about for a moment. “I don’t even know where to begin with what I just witnessed.”

Little eyes looked up and whined. “But Mama, it was her idea!”

“The only ‘but’ is yours on this bench young lady.” Regina snapped her fingers and pointed to the spot next to her.

Growing teary eyed, Emma obeyed as she watched the large tote come out of the locker and a towel unfold around her shoulders. She was quickly dried and changed into a red track suit she typically wore home from lessons and her coat. Pulled into another fierce hug a moment later, she felt guilt settle in as arms loosened and her keeper’s no nonsense manner was back.

“You will apologize to the lifeguard and Ms. Ariel before we leave.” The Queen led the girl back into the pool area and waited patiently as Emma apologized and thanked them as she had been taught to do. Regina softened again when she saw drooping shoulders approach her.

“Ms. Ariel says I havta’ to sit out the next class. I’m sorry Mama.” A chin trembled before Emma burst into tears. She loved swimming and the idea of not being able to for even one session was too
Regina knelt down and lifted the unhappy child to her hip. As they walked out to the car little arms nearly choked her when she responded. “I see you are very sad about that idea. I also think it is a good consequence for not listening to your teacher when she told you to sit on the bench and you chose to leave it.”

“How do y-you know that part?” A sniffle escaped as little Emma pulled back to set wet eyes on the Queen.

“I watched you from the viewing window as I always do when you have class. You were told to sit out for what appeared to me was being fresh with Ms. Ariel and then you seemed to argue with yourself. At that point I came to see what that was about.” Unlocking the car door, she helped Emma buckle up before getting into the front. “We will talk about this more at home and you can tell me your side.”

“Don’t be mad Mama.” Wide eyes sought brown in the mirror.

“I’m not mad Emma, I was…” Regina took a breath and gave her eyes to the child. “I was terrified when I saw you go under and that took me back to Boston with the pond incident. Right now I’m upset with the choices you both made.” She started the car, blasting the heat for their short drive.

Emma didn’t know what to say to that. Things had been going so well lately and she hadn’t gotten in any real trouble in nearly a month, a record she knew now was broken. The argument she had with her little self was not worth the flash of pain she caused to the eyes that now turned away from her to the road. She found that she cared a great deal about being the cause of that pain trigger and wondered when that had happened.

Was it the first time Regina said she loved her?

During the reading of the Velveteen Rabbit?

Was it when she gifted the birthstone necklace to her keeper?

When she allowed her little side to return that love at the pool?
The moment slammed into the front of her mind; it was New Year’s Eve and the promise that had come from burgundy lips.

“I know that I love you and I will do anything in my power to make sure you are happy and safe. I know you hurt right now and I promise we will work through that hurt together.”

Guilt settled on Emma’s shoulders and she was silent the rest of the drive. When they entered the mansion she was directed to go up to the lavender room to put away her school things and wait on the bed. Big Emma kicked her feet against the side where she sat and genuinely wondered, ‘Why am I fighting so hard for control? Maybe in some weird way I need this…’

Something permanent shifted inside and the effect was jarring.

Little Emma blinked and took a breath as if for the first time. Eyes scanned her room, colors seemed fresh and bright. She looked down at her hands, turning them this way and that. She searched for her adult half, which was there, but willingly stepping back. Little Emma knew she was the one who would control the shifts between them now and the thought made her smile.

A knock sounded at her open door announcing the brunette.

“What happened.”

Regina regarded the wide eyes that looked up at her, studying the body language present. “Did it?” She walked over to the bed and sat down next to Emma, trying to decipher what the girl meant.

“I’m here now Mama. Big me says sorry for today and she knows you are here to help her.”

The tears came suddenly to eyes that saw too much. Regina found little arms around her neck and felt a kiss to her cheek. She struggled to think and remembered this would be the only indication of a time stamp the spell would show them; the halfway mark of what needed to be accomplished. There was a long road ahead and the time they had been here was not an indication of the time left.

“Mama?”
“Yes, baby?”

“Are we still in trouble?”

The Queen thought about that, knowing big Emma had been responsible mostly for the diving board, though the little half was not without blame. “I think since you are here and your big half is not, you and I will talk instead. What happened leading up to the diving board?”

“We fought about Ms. Ariel telling us to sit in time out ‘cause big me was flippy, but I kinda was too.”

“Flippant. I see, so that is why you were on the bench. Who decided to leave the bench to go to the board?”

“Big me, but cause I said we needed to listen and she said she didn’t and she would show everyone she could swim good.”

At that revelation and the lack of the Savior being present, Regina decided to shift course from her original plan. “I think sitting out for a swimming class is enough for you to understand the importance of listening to your teacher and watching your words with the adults who are in charge of you. If there is a next time we will have a different kind of talk. Do you understand?”

“Yes Mama.” Emma let go from the hug and bounced back on the bed.

“It is time for a bath and then homework sweet one.”

“Can we have pizza for dinner?”

In light of their progress, Regina felt celebratory. “I think that can be arranged as long as you have a vegetable with it. Would you like a raw cauliflower with ranch as a side or peppers on your cheese pizza?”
“Peppers, but not green ones only—”

“Yellow ones, I know you well baby.” Finishing for the child and pulling out her cell phone to order as Emma happily went to get her homework.

A/N - Small time jumps of weeks to a month will be common practice between now and the ending - which is still several chapters off. :-) Also, your comments since the last chapter were so sweet! Thank you!

Next Time - It is a certain Queen's birthday & in a flashback Emma is asked a big question and a hint about what happened to her memories is revealed.
A/N - Happy Friday! After this chapter small time jumps from two weeks to a month will be common practice.

Previously...

In light of their progress, Regina felt celebratory. "I think that can be arranged as long as you have a vegetable with it. Would you like a raw cauliflower with ranch as a side or peppers on your cheese pizza?"

"Peppers, but not green ones only—"

"Yellow ones, I know you well baby." Finishing for the child and pulling out her cell phone to order as Emma happily went to get her homework.

The first of February rolled in with more snow accompanied by biting winds. It was a Saturday and one that Regina had her council meeting from ten to two. Little Emma also knew it was her Mama's birthday and she had been pondering what to do to celebrate for a few days now. A card and flowers had arrived that morning from Henry and Paige. Emma's name had been included on the card, but she wanted to do something just from her. Ruby was babysitting again and the two were coloring a picture on the floor of the living room.

"Ruby, can we go to the store?"

"What for little swan?" The wolf finished shading in a flower on her side of the coloring book as Emma finished the butterfly on hers.

"It's my Mama's birthday and I wanna get her a cake with candles. I made a card already, see?" Little hands dug out a folded piece of paper she'd hidden in the back of her coloring book with a heart drawn on the front with a scrawled MAMA in the middle.

"Awwww, she will love that. We can walk to the diner and get one. Granny made three fresh ones yesterday you can pick from. I don't have a car seat for you though, so driving is out."

Emma bounced to her feet after putting her card safely away and ran to the front door to pull on her boots and coat. Ruby quickly got her things on and sent a text to Regina and Granny letting them know they were leaving the house for a walk to the diner as the girl ran upstairs for something. Emma returned with a fist full of cash from her swan bank and stuffed it in her pocket. They were off.

The diner was full of the usual weekend lunch crowd and Emma happily ran up to hug Granny who waved at them from behind the counter. "Hi, there Emma. I hear it is someone's birthday today."

Green eyes bugged. "You know about it too? Mama's famous huh?" Emma smiled knowingly and reached into her pocket. She deposited a fist full of wrinkled ones and fives. "I'll take the bestest cake
Granny's glasses slipped down her nose in amusement of the girl's request. "I think there is more than enough here for the best cake. I have three choices for you." She pointed to the glass display case. "A vanilla one with lemon icing or a chocolate one with coconut shavings or…" She paused for effect. "A triple chocolate cake with fudge icing. Which would you like?"

Emma's mouth watered at the options. She shook her head to focus on the tough decision. "Mama likes chocolate a lot. She keeps some in a tin on top of the freezer, but I'm not 'posta know that." She whispered that last part.

"HA! Your secret is safe with me. Triple chocolate it is. What would you like written on it?"

Little eyes darted back and forth as she conversed with her big half. "Hmmm, happy birthday and we love you."

Granny tilted her head to the side, "We?"

"Yeppers, it's a joke inside." A little chin turned up in certainty.

Ruby snickered. "You mean inside joke little swan."

"That's what I said... I think." Emma shrugged and busied herself stacking sugar packets as she waited for Granny to write her message on the cake. Ruby helped her build a small tower and they made a game out of who could stack theirs the highest.

Fifteen minutes and $12.00 later they left the dinner with a box and a bag of small candles Granny had thrown in for free. Halfway up Mifflin Street Emma stopped cold in her tracks.

"What's wrong Emma?"

"A present. I need a present Ruby or it's not a birthday!" Green wet eyes stared up. "I forgot and now it's too late!"

"Hey, hey, it is not too late." The she wolf leaned down and pulled Emma into a side hug. "I have an idea. You can make her something. Those are the best gifts. Moms love that stuff." A quivering chin made the young woman's heart melt.

"Make what?" Emma sniffed hard and followed Ruby up the rest of the block as they discussed ideas.

"What about a hand print? I can whip up some salt dough and you can put your hand in it? You have that art set you got from Christmas right? If we hurry we can make, bake, and paint it. It will be ready after you wake up from your nap."

"Yeah! I wanna do that!" Emma jumped up and down, finally running the rest of the way up the walk.

Together they mixed the ingredients for the project and Emma pressed right her hand into the dough. She wrote her name with a toothpick and put her age next to it. Ruby poked a hole at the top for a ribbon and popped it in the oven. They ate lunch while they waited for it to bake and cleaned up the kitchen as the hand print cooled. Emma decided to paint it purple and red with a black ribbon from her hair bow box added as the hanger.

"Thanks Ruby. It came out good."
"It did, little swan."

"Did you hide the cake in the fridge?"

"Yes, in the back on the bottom shelf so you can reach it. Do NOT light the candles though. Just put them on the cake, okay?" Ruby made sure green eyes understood as she finished cleaning up the newspaper she'd put down for the paint. "Let your Mama do that part." Ruby could just see Regina's horrified face if Emma were to get a hold of matches.

"I know." Emma rolled her eyes and yawned as she hopped off the stool and washed her hands at the sink.

"Alright, time for that nap. Let's keep this on the plate and put it on your desk to dry, okay?"

"What if Mama sees?"

"I'm going to wake you up right before she gets home at 2:00 so you can meet her at the door."

Satisfied with that plan Emma followed Ruby upstairs and slipped between the sheets as her drapes were pulled closed. As always, she dropped off quickly. Waking up was harder, an hour later. Groggy, she followed Ruby downstairs dragging her blanket just as the front door opened.

"Hello?" Regina called into the still house as she shed her coat and purse by the door.

"Hi Mama." Emma moseyed over and leaned against the Queen sleepily.

Regina lifted the small girl offering a kiss hello. "Did you just wake up baby?"

"Mmmhhhhmm. I wanted to see you." Emma rested her head on a shoulder.

"I see that." Regina smiled at Ruby as she dug through her purse for cash. "Do you want to go back up to bed for a bit. You seem very sleepy."

Green eyes popped wide open at that. "Nope! I'm up Mama!" To prove it, Emma forced her head up and smiled showing all her teeth and gums.

"I'm convinced sweet one." The Queen handed Ruby the usual amount and thanked her as Emma said goodbye. "How about we watch that movie you've wanted to see?"

"Sing Mama. It's called Sing. Yes please." She wiggled to get down and darted into the living room.

The animated movie music filled the room and Regina found the singing animals quite amusing as she watched Emma dance to the songs. By the time the movie was over she began to contemplate dinner and offered the girl a choice between turkey meatloaf and mashed peas or carrots.

"Carrots Mama and will you make them long. The round ones taste funny." Emma closed one eye and stuck out her tongue as she followed into the kitchen.

"I will cut them how you like. Do you want to help me by washing them with the vegetable brush like I showed you?" Regina tied on an apron and went to go to the fridge, but was stopped by Emma's throwing her arms out in a football block in front of her. She raised a brow in question.

"You can't go in there Mama."

"Oh? How will I make dinner without food from the fridge?"
"Uuummmm... Magic?"

Regina shook her head and reached for the door handle. "Conjured food doesn't taste quite the same sweet one besides, you love cooking with me."

"Wait!" Emma pressed her back harder against the fridge and grabbed the adult's hand. "I needs to do something first and you can't see."

"Is there something in the fridge I should know about Emma?" Wondering if there was mischief about.

"Yeah, but it's not what you think. Can you close your eyes and sit?" Emma pointed to the breakfast stool with begging eyes.

Regina decided to humor the child and sat where she was asked closing her eyes.

"Cover with your hands Mama!" Emma waved in front of the Queen to check and darted off upstairs to get her present and card. She returned more slowly a minute later and carefully set the plate on the counter.

"Emma? What was that noise?"

"Nothing! No peeking!"

"I won't."

Little hands opened the fridge and pulled out the cake box. With a grunt Emma managed to get it upon the counter top. She climbed up on her step stool to open the box and put the pack of candles on the cake.

When everything was ready she hopped off the stool and went to stand by Regina. "Okay! Open says me!"

Regina moved her hands and found hopeful green eyes before turning to look at the counter top. Her eyes became damp at the painted hand print and the slanted writing. Lips rolled inward as tears fell.

"Mama?" A worried voice and a hand reached out. "Do you like it?"

Regina pulled Emma up onto her lap. "I love it baby. I'm crying because I'm happy and I'm surprised in a good way." She hugged Emma close so her meaning would be clear. "How did you do this?"

Emma grinned. "Ruby helped me and both of me gots the cake ourselves. It's from both of us. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" She threw open her arms and started to sing the age old song. At the end she leaned in and popped a kiss on her keeper's cheek. "Now you gotta make a wish and blow out the candles, but pretend 'cause I'm not 'posta use matches."

"Right you are." Her finger tapped a little nose playfully. "I'm not sure what to wish for. I have everything I could possibly want. Will you help me blow them out?"

Emma nodded eagerly and together they blew 'out' the candles. The girl clapped and slid off the lap. "We cook now?"

"Yes, sweet one. Get your apron on." Regina fondly fingered the painted gift, running her hand along the letters. Emma didn't know it, but her gift was nearly identical to the one Henry had gifted her 15 years ago.
"Help Mama please?" The girl held up her red apron.

Quick hands tied the apron and went to the fridge for the carrots. The Queen reminded Emma how to wash the vegetables and watched as the child copied her movements. She answered the ringing cell as she pulled the tin for the meatloaf out of the cabinet.

"Hello Henry… Thank you dear… Yes, it has been a wonderful day." Regina smiled at Emma as Henry sang his own rendition of the traditional song with Paige's voice ringing in alongside him. They chatted for a while and she passed the phone to eager hands when the carrots were finished.

"Guess what Henry? I made a hand print and I painted it red and purple…" Emma rambled on for the better part of a half hour as dinner was put in the oven.

It was a simple evening; dinner, cake and a story before bed. They were reading The Giving Tree and Emma read the words she knew and echoed the repetitive phrases as they rocked in the lavender room.

By far one of the most pleasant birthday's Regina had in a long while. The child was content in her arms and she loved the warmth of the little body, missing when Henry had been this age. She was also grateful she could spend the day with the other most important person in her life, who was now blissfully asleep on her lap.

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-Flashback…Less than two years ago-

"What on earth are you doing to my kitchen?"

Emma spun around coughing as she frantically fanned the stove with a dish cloth where a pot of soup had boiled over onto the gas burner. Smoke began to swirl the room as the tail end of the dish cloth caught fire and the Savior shrieked, dropping it. Before bare feet could stomp the flaming towel on the floor, water soaked the stove and towel with a wave of the Queen's hand. The remnants of the entire soup catastrophe disappeared with another wave and the kitchen was once again pristine.

The blonde squeaked at the raised brow. "I can explain!"

"Sit."

Emma shuffled over to the counter stool and took up her usual perch as the brunette leaned down to inspect the pale bare feet for any burns or blisters. Satisfied nothing was a miss she stood to her full height. "Now, by all means, explain away."

"Oh… Um… I…" Emma shrugged apologetically.

"Allow me dear. You were hungry and instead of waiting for me, as I asked you too, you decided to try the new tomato soup recipe we were supposed to cook together as part of your weekly cooking lessons." She eyed knowingly. "Thinking you could handle the intricacies of the recipe, you went ahead with it and thinking you'd surprise me by having it finished by the time I got to the kitchen you tried cooking it faster by turning up the burner, resulting in scalded soup, smoke, and a fire. Not to mention nearly burning your foot trying to squelch the flame."

Shrugging and red faced to her blonde roots. "That about covers it, yeah."

"We will discuss this more thoroughly later."
"Emma gulped knowing what that implied promise meant."

"For now, I will make lunch while you watch closely." Regina summoned an apron, tying it on as she started to cut fresh ingredients for the soup. "I wanted to speak with you about something else anyway."

"Whatever it is I plead the fifth and I didn't do it." Hands shot up in defense and dropped at that husky chuckle.

"You cannot do both, dear heart, and that is not what I mean." A teasing grin.

"Then what is it?"

Turning her back, diced tomatoes were added to a cream and water mixture in a pot. "You spend lot of time here and you are always welcome." Regina added quickly, knowing where the blonde's mind would immediately go. "I was thinking it would be a good idea if you took one of the guest rooms as your own, seeing as you are here several nights a week and keep some of your things here, anyway. The room would be officially yours, not the guest room. Of course you could come and go as you please, like always."

Emma's jaw dropped and her heart beat faster at the idea of putting down roots. It was a trigger reflex she couldn't help, even after many years in Storybrooke. "I... I think..."

Knowing the Savior's mind like the back of her hand, Regina added the excuse needed for Emma to say yes. "Besides, after the spell, there will be side effects we will need to work through. Being close by in the mansion and being used to that would help with those effects."

Green eyes darted back and forth in thought then settled on those words. "Maybe... yeah. That could work. For the spell, I mean." Lips curled in tightly then relaxed. "I practically live here anyway."

"Then it's settled." A small smile framed burgundy lips as herbs and a splash of red wine were added to the simmering liquid.

Spinning side to side in the chair, Emma leaned elbows on the counter. "So I've been thinking about the whole memory thing and how you're my best friend. I'll be bummed I'll forget that during the spell."

"It will be a necessary evil, for you not to recall anything about these talks or of certain times together, like Christmas or other meaningful experiences. I'll replace them temporarily with other ones, perhaps a friendship with Ruby as a stand in for certain things. Would that work for you?"

"Depends. How will the memory thing work exactly?"

Regina stirred the soup and took a taste before added a sprinkle of black pepper. "The dream catcher will hold your memories. I'll keep it safe until we need to restore your memories in our new life."

Rolling green eyes found the ceiling behind the Queen's back. "I meant with the blank spots of our time together planning the spell, and just everything we do, like this. I feel like we talk about the spell every day."

"Do not roll your eyes at me, Miss Swan."

"How did you... Never mind."
"To answer your question, your memory will resemble Swiss Cheese—"

A scoff interrupted. "I resent that!"

"Let me finish. There will be solid parts like a block of cheese, but holes where those memories were. The missing parts will affect the whole, but not damage or cause it not to function as it should. Day to day memories of this life will be fuzzy, but the things you need to function and reference for everyday use will be available to you."

"Oh… That makes sense. Mmmmmm. Swiss Cheese. You know grilled cheese would be savage with the soup you're making."

That caused the Queen to turn around. "Not as savage as it would have been if you had succeeded in setting my kitchen on fire."

Emma burst with laughter at the brunette's confused face. "Oh Gina… I've got a lot to teach you." Knowing she'd be sharing what the Urban Dictionary was later that day when she schooled the Queen in slang.

"Probably not as much as I have to teach you."

"Yeah, that's like a shit ton more." A goofy smirk met her favorite raised brow. "Grilled cheese please!"

A/N - Hope you enjoyed some much needed fluff. :-)

Next time - Emma has homework woes and there is finally clarity on why both halves struggle with writing. Snow and little Emma have a run in of a different sort and Regina has an important revelation.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

A/N - I uploaded new cover art to ch. 1. Check it out and let me know what you think. :-) That was fun to make. I have also wrote the last scene and the first for the squeal. Looking forward to sharing that when the time comes. Meanwhile enjoy this chapter! Still lots more to come. I am also going to add a pic to this one. :-) let me know your thoughts.

Previously...

Emma burst with laughter at the brunette's confused face. "Oh Gina... I've got a lot to teach you." Knowing she'd be sharing what the Urban Dictionary was later that day when she schooled the Queen in slang.

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As February progressed so did Emma's reading skills. It was as if a light bulb went off and the child was now grasping the concept of blending and decoding more fluidly. Instead of flash cards, small books were coming home with short sentences on each page. Emma groaned at the switch, but soon
found success and enjoyment at reading a 'book' to her keeper.

With the love of reading coming out in the child, there was a slow decline in writing occurring as the content of the school year got harder. Any assignment where Emma had to write more than a few words or a sentence resulted in struggle. With all homework or school related tasks, Regina had an abundance of patience and always made time to support Emma with it every night.

To help make things more fun with writing, Regina started sticker chart on the fridge and with every printing practice sheet or writing assignment the girl completed without a whole lot of fuss she got to put a red fish sticker on the ocean stationary paper. Three in a row earned her a small reward from a shoe box they had decorated to make look like a treasure chest. Regina filled it will sticker packs, stamps, and coupons for things like an extra 15 minutes to stay up, or renting a movie. Emma had earned two rewards so far and needed one more sticker to make the third.

The homework calendar Mrs. Gold sent home kept them on track, so the Queen knew exactly which tasks Emma had to complete each night, which usually resulted in a half hour worth of work if Emma was willing. Tonight the child was not in the mood. Emma had been at the dining room table for fifteen minutes and still refused to put her pencil to the blank writing sheet in front of her.

Regina came out of the kitchen from making dinner, wiping her hands on a dish towel. After explaining the directions and modeling what to do she'd left the girl to the task at hand, but was checking in every five minutes.

She eyed the blank sheet and the stubborn expression on her charge's face. "Emma, do you understand what to do or would you like me to explain again?"

"I know what to do… just don't wanna do it." A lower lip stuck out and Emma sagged in her seat.

"You are one sticker away from picking a prize from your treasure chest." Regina gently reminded and went to sit next to the girl.

"Don't care."

A sigh escaped red lips and she pondered what to do. The girl needed to practice a skill to become proficient, yet she knew big Emma's aversion to school from their other life was playing an unconscious roll. "I think you do care about earning a prize, but I can see you are upset at having to write."

"I don't want to and you can't make me."

Regina frowned at the sassy comment. "Emma you do not to speak to me that way. Try again."

"Hurts my hand and I never get it right." The girl sniffed. "Mrs. Gold or you always hasta fix it."

"That is common when you are learning something new, sweet one. Remember when blending words were hard for you? With practice you are now reading phrases and sentences."

Curls shook back and forth. "It's different and big me says writing is always like this for us. We're not doing it."

A brow rose. "Let's do the first part together and see from there." She re-read the directions and gave Emma a sentence starter to copy from, knowing that sometimes the anxiety of starting a task kept Emma from wanting to complete it. The child had to write three sentences about her favorite animal. Emma immediately chose Jasper.
Regina watched as the child copied 'My favorite animal is...' which looked more like, 'Mi fAviTE anal if...' despite having the printed phrase in front of her. The Queen did not correct Emma's lettering this time, just observed the child's hand grip, posture, and obvious struggle. She praised the effort and offered a second sentence starter, then a third. The process was painful to watch, but Emma completed the task.

That nagging feeling Regina had felt before a few times when she had observed Emma write in both lives returned full force. In her gut she knew something wasn't right. Emma earned her sticker with a prize that night and Regina began researching the concern she had.

The next morning she dropped the child off at school, she made an appointment with Mrs. Gold to discuss Emma's writing only to learn the teacher had similar concerns and had slowly been collecting writing data to meet with the Mayor about. Together they decided to have Emma tested by the school's language specialist.

Little Emma had an inkling that something was going on when she had to sit with a funny man with a timer and notepad to take a test when she should have been in art class. She was annoyed at missing one of her favorite subjects, but tried her best because her Mama asked her to. That same day a two sided word printing sheet was assigned for homework. Little hands stuffed it in the bottom of her back pack at school instead of in her homework folder.

After swimming class and a bath it was homework time. Emma worked diligently on her reading and math. The homework calendar had mentioned the writing sheet, but it wasn't in the folder. When the Queen asked Emma about it the girl quietly shrugged and was excused to her room to play. For five minutes she sat on the floor with a pile of Legos between her legs happily thinking her troubles were over until a knock sounded at the open door.

"Emma, hiding your paper won't make the assignment go away or you any less responsible for completing it." Regina stood in the lavender room after sorting through the child's back pack downstairs with a hand on her hip and the crinkled page in the other.

"I don't want to Mama." A hand slapped against the carpet and tears threatened.

"That aside, there is the issue of lying and you not telling me you knew where your paper was when I asked you downstairs." The brunette crossed the room and sat on the purple bench.

Arms crossed and a pout formed. "I didn't lie."

"Not with words, but a lie by omission, or knowingly not telling me something, is the same in my book." She paused seeing the confusion on the girl's face. "Did it feel wrong to you when I asked you about the writing sheet and you shrugged at me?"

A tentative nod answered.

"That is what I mean."

Emma's eyes widened. "I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry Mama. Don't be mad." She bounced up and went over to hug the Queen.

Regina accepted the hug. "I'm not mad, sweet one. I can see you were unsure about that difference. Lying with words or by not telling me something you should when asked is the same thing. Do you understand that now?"

"Yes Mama."
"Now, you have a printing sheet to do, but we are going to do it together a different way."

Emma frowned skeptically. "How?"

Ten minutes later Emma happily used her finger to write words in a large baking pan filled with brown sugar Regina set her up with at the kitchen counter as dinner was prepared. Green eyes scanned her homework sheet and copied the word list letter by letter. The Queen took a picture of the completed list and emailed it to Mrs. Gold along with a brief note upon completion. Regina knew she would need to be creative with any other writing assignments, at least until there was some direction from the test results on what the next steps were.

By the end of the following week, with the Mayor pulling strings to move the usual timeline for such things along, and with a few other professional opinions sought out, they had a firm idea of what the issue was. Regina now faced the task of explaining it to both sides of Emma and her plan to support what was to come.

On Friday when homework was passed out Emma noticed her paper was different then Gabe's. It was the same assignment, but she only had to write one sentence when Gabe had to write three. Confused, she stuffed it in her homework folder and wondered if it had to do with that test she had to take earlier in the week. Her sour expression grew as she walked out of the school building slowly.

Regina knew immediately something was wrong when Emma didn't run to her per usual. She received a flaccid hug in greeting. "Hello baby. You seem sad."

Emma shrugged and strapped herself into the Benz, refusing to speak. Regina let her be for the moment as they drove home. Usually she was able to finish work earlier on Friday's allowing them time for a fun activity or an outing somewhere. Tonight she knew would not be easy on them with the news she needed to explain to the child and with Emma already moody, that task was beginning to appear daunting.

As she parked the car she tried to break the spell of silence. "Did something happen at school?"

Hips wiggled in the car seat and Emma nodded briefly.

"I see. Let's go have a snack and see if we can fix it together, okay?"

Emma followed her keeper into the kitchen and watched as a veggie dip snack was plated. She ate a few sweet snap peas with ranch as the Queen made hot tea and a decaf version with honey for Emma. When they both had a warm beverage to sip on Regina sat at the counter.

"Why the sad face sweet one?"

"Homework."

"More writing to do?"

A nod and tears. "But mine is different. Gabe hasta write more than me. How come mine's different Mama?"

Regina closed her eyes, silently cursing the brunette teacher who was supposed to wait until next week to introduce modified assignments for Emma. She had wanted the weekend to speak with both sides of the child and to get her used to the idea before any changes happened. As usual someone's incompetence got in the way of her plan. Now she needed to approach this more delicately and from a different angle.
"Do you remember when you told me last week how writing hurts and how it was a different type of struggle for you than reading used to be?"

"Uh-huh." Crunching followed as the hungry girl began to eat.

"Well, I did some research and spoke with your teacher and a few other people about why that might be."

"Is that why I had to take that test with that weirdo man?"

"Emma."

"What? He was. He wrote stuff and kept asking me questions."

Regina sighed and let the remark go. "Yes, we wanted to confirm why you are having difficulty with writing."

Green eyes scrunched in worry. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you." Regina cupped a little chin, making eye contact to be clear on that point.

"Then why, Mama?"

"There is something different about the way your brain talks to your hand when you try to write. Sometimes your brain has a hard time getting the words in your mind down to your hand to make letters and phrases correctly." She waited until she saw understanding in those green pools before continuing. "This is called Dysgraphia and is the reason why both of you have struggled with writing."

Little lips tried the word. "Dis-gre-ia?"

Regina helped sound the word out phonetically until the child could mimic it.

"Is that why my homework is different?" Emma moved off her stool and climbed up onto her Keeper's lap.

"One of the reasons, yes and that is called an accommodation." It was important to her that Emma have the proper vocabulary and understanding for something that would affect her life, both lives from here on out. She had a few ideas on what changes would need to be made to Emma's adult life upon their return and here she would make sure everything was done to support the child's progression. "Your teachers and I are meeting formally with a specialist next week to make a plan to be sure you are able to be successful with writing."

Emma licked her lips, processing everything. Her big side was starting to panic and itched to surface. "Mama, big me needs to talk to you now."

Regina nodded. "I would like to talk to her, too. You and I will continue in a few minutes." As the shift happened she kissed Emma's cheek and held the now wiggling Savior.

"Gina, how is this possible and how come I didn't know before?" Big Emma was in a near panic and ceased her struggles as those arms held her firmly.

"It's alright Emma. Take a breath for me."

A breathy sigh, then another. "That's why it was always hard for me, huh? Why school sucked so
much and why I can never get my thoughts right on paper?" Tears trailed her words and she felt them wiped away.

"I suspect as much dear heart." The Queen remembered back to the writing assignments she'd given Emma before the spell was cast and finally connected the anxiety behind the Savior's dislike for those tasks. When she reflected deeper, she recalled Emma always typed her Sheriff reports and always turned them in late after probably spending much time editing them.

"What do we do? How do we fix it?" Green eyes pleaded for the Queen to make it better.

A smile bloomed inside the brunette at the use of the word 'we'. Big Emma was starting to make the connection that they were, in fact, a team.

"Right now we will make a few adjustments to your assignments at school and you will have more time to complete them. There is a special pencil grip you will use to help your hand not hurt when you write and we will do a few exercises I think you will like to help your brain recognize letters and words through touch."

"What about when we go back?" Big Emma liked the plan for her little side, but wondered how she would cope when the spell broke.

"We will make any adjusts needed to ensure you can act as Sheriff without the added stress of you having to write as much. Perhaps hire a secretary to do reports for the station or an assistant. For now, let's focus on today." Regina shifted the topic back to the present, knowing Emma's tendency to worry about the future. The child seemed to accept that, but soured in her arms.

"I'm not stupid." Defensive arms crossed.

"No you most certainly are not and this has nothing to do with intelligence, just the way the brain fires signals to your body on how to do something." Regina assured and took a sip of her tea. "Do you have any questions about that?"

"The plan you are making with the school, isn't that called something?"

"An IEP or Individualized Education Plan. It's an agreement with the adults who work with you to make sure you receive the accommodations we talked about to help you do your best with writing. That is the only subject it applies to, but you will have accommodations for any writing you do." The Queen patiently explained and lifted Emma off her lap. "Bring your homework folder into the dining room and I'll show you what I mean."

Emma darted off to the foyer returned with her folder just as Regina entered with something in her hand. They sat at the table together and the Queen produced a fat pencil with a funny shaped rubber grip. She showed Emma how to hold it.

"Try writing your name on your paper." Regina instructed and watched as the little hand moved a bit more fluidly on the page. "Do you feel the difference?"

"Yeah, moving the pencil is easier." A big smile was offered up.

"You will use this each time you need to write. There will be one at school and this one is for home. Now, you mentioned your assignment was different than Gabe's. For writing that will be the case from now on. You will have less to write and more time to complete any writing in class.

"Does that mean I won't have homework every night, Gina?" A cheeky smirk flashed and she found her nose gently bopped.
"No, it does not mean that. Nice try." Brown eyes watched the little one returned.

Emma studied the writing page and saw she needed to summarize the story they had read in class that day. She recalled the book and with verbal help getting the first few words on paper she wrote a complete sentence. The Queen wrote the same sentence and Emma compared the two for errors and fixed what she needed to, receiving a kiss for her efforts and a sticker for her chart.

"Mama, big me says thanks for looking out for us."

"Always sweet one. Always."

By the end of the month Emma was used to her pencil grip and the modified assignments. She still struggled with getting the words in her head on paper, but with the accommodations her frustration was manageable. Her IEP goal was to be able to write a short three sentence paragraph in one sitting by the end of the school year without breaks. Fine motor exercises and short structured practice periods were helping to reach this goal.

School as a whole was much better since she'd started in December and while the Charming drama had ceased for a while, it started up again when Mrs. Gold was out sick the last day of the month. The school had been unable to procure a substitute so the teachers took turns covering the first grade classroom when they had a prep period.

Little Emma narrowed her eyes when the fair skinned teacher entered her classroom and felt her tummy knot when she realized it was writing time. Mrs. Blanchard took over for a 3rd grade teacher who had taught the grammar period and took a moment to read the writing lesson plans on the desk. The pixie haired woman scanned the room with a smile to the kids.

Emma did her best to keep up with the lesson and when their assignments were passed out she got started writing about the story they had read. Ms. Blanchard walked the room as the children worked, pointing out errors and helping those who needed it. Emma tried to keep her eyes on the paper, but found the four month pregnant woman walking the rows distracting. She startled when a pen tapped her desk.

"Emma, you should be focused on your assignment, not day dreaming."

"I wasn't dreaming Ms. Blanchard. I was thinking." She scowled at the accusation, but kept her tone polite.

Mary-Margaret picked up the child's paper and saw one sentence scrawled messily across the page when other students had several. "This doesn't look like you were trying your best Emma. I'll get you a new paper so you can start again."

"But that's not how it's supposed to work. My Mama said." She was confused why she was being made to start over when she had spent ten minutes getting that thought out of her head.

The teacher stilled from across the room, misunderstanding the child's confused comment. "You are expected to do the same work as everyone else Emma, regardless of who your parent is."

Green eyes winced, not understanding the last half of the teacher's comment. "I'm trying to do my work. I need my paper to do that... Please." She added the polite word at the end thinking that's what the teacher was waiting for.

A new blank paper was put on her desk and angry tears pooled in her eyes when she saw the writing
sheet she'd been working on put in the recycling bin, hard work tossed away as if it were nothing. Huffing, she went over to the bin to retrieve her paper. Hugging the worksheet she spun around to face the teacher, feeling her big half trying to take over and swallowed that feeling down.

"I wanna call my Mama please. Mrs. Gold lets me."

"You need to go sit down and work Emma."

A hand shot up from the back of the room and Ms. Blanchard moved towards it with a smile. "Yes Gabe?"

The blue eyed boy locked eyes with his friend. "Mrs. Gold does let her Ms. Blanchard."

"I am not Mrs. Gold. Back to your work children." A frown followed that remark.

Emma dishearteningly obeyed, not wanting to get in trouble, but she couldn't find it in her to start over on the writing task. She folded the recovered paper and stuffed it in her pocket before putting her head down on the desk. The bell for lunch offered a reprieve, but heavy hands caught her shoulders stopping her from walking out with the other students. Gabe lingered in the hall watching and was told to move along when he waited for Emma.

The girl wiggled out from under the grip, not liking being touched like that and locked eyes with the adult she was expected to listen to. "I need to go to lunch."

"You need to work on your assignment. You can have lunch in here and recess to do your work." Mary-Margaret pointed to the untouched paper on the desk.

Shoulders slumped and Emma went back to her desk after getting her lunch bag. She took her time eating the egg salad, fruit, and the cookie she had helped make. There was a note in her bag wishing her a good day and that was the only reason she didn't throw the apple in her lunch at Ms. Blanchard's face when the teacher told her to get started for the third time.

By the time the lunch period was over Emma had rewrote her original sentence and an additional one. She was proud of herself for doing more than when she normally did, but it didn't seem to be enough. Ms. Blanchard accepted the paper with a frown as the bell rang and the kids returned from recess. The art teacher, Mr. Henderson, showed up to take the kids to class and Emma immediately went to him asking to call her parent.

Mary-Margaret flushed with annoyance. "I already told her no, Mr. Henderson. She has been in lunch detention with me as a consequence for not doing her writing assignment correctly.

The man looked between the teary child and his clearly angry colleague. "Emma gets to call when she needs to. Mrs. Gold and Mrs. Rose have worked that out with the Mayor."

"I wanna call now please."

"Okay Emma. Let's get everyone to my classroom and you can call."

Ms. Blanchard threw up her hands and stalked out of the room muttering something about spoiled children.

Emma watched her go and suddenly didn't want to call. All eyes were on her and she was embarrassed to be the center of attention and being called spoiled. She knew what that word meant and her feelings were hurt. "Never mind Mr. Henderson. I just wanna do art."
"Are you sure Emma?"

"Yeah… I'm sure."

The rest of the day was a blur and she thankfully didn't see Ms. Blanchard again. When the final bell rang it took all her self control not to cry, but cry she did when she was wrapped up in her Mama's arms in the parking lot.

"Mama I wanna g-go home n-now." Emma whimpered and buried her head in the warmth of the Queen's cashmere scarf.

"Did someone hurt you?" She hugged the child and pulled back to check over for any signs of hurt. She found it in wet red eyes. "What happened today, Emma?"

"You're gonna be mad." Emma was convinced she would be in trouble. "I tried to be good, but I got lunch detention and Mrs. Gold wasn't here and I tried to write good and it wasn't enough and I wanted to call you and she wouldn't let me!"

"Slow down sweet one. Let's start at the beginning." Regina opened the back door of the Benz and sat so she could be eye level with Emma. "What did you get lunch detention for?"

"For not writing good enough. I did my work, I did and she told me I was dreaming and not working and she put it in the recycling bin."

Brows furrowed as she pulled a wet wipe from her purse and gently cleaned Emma up. "You said Mrs. Gold was not here today. Who was your substitute?"

Emma sniffled. "There wasn't one. The other teachers took turns for each class. I tried to write good Mama and she made me stay inside from recess and start over and everyone else got to play, but me."

Brown eyes flashed. "Who is 'she', Emma?"

"Ms. Blanchard. I asked to call you and she said no and even Mr. Henderson told her I get to and she left calling me spoiled."

"Do you know why Mr. Henderson didn't let you call after you told him?" The Queen took a calming breath and rubbed Emma's back.

"He was gonna, but I changed my mind." A boot kicked at the gravel. "Everyone was watching me and I was 'barrassed again."

"Again?"

"Yeah, I was at first when everyone got to go to lunch and she grabbed my shoulders so I couldn't go with Gabe."

Regina saw red and kept it at bay just long enough to ask. "Did she hurt you?"

"Kinda, but not like that." Emma's eyes said enough about the kind of hurt that had been done.

The Mayor stood abruptly and shut the car door, leading Emma back into the school building. She asked the office secretary to keep an eye on the child as she went down the hall to the Principal's office. Heels clicked maddeningly to the door and she knocked brusquely before entering.

"Hello Madame Mayor. What may I do for…?" Mrs. Rose greeted and blanched when she saw the
royally pissed look on the striking brunette's face.

"Ms. Blanchard subbed for a portion of the day when Mrs. Gold was out and apparently ignored Emma's writing accommodations, embarrassed her in front of the class, kept her in for detention based on something she can't help and grabbed her by the shoulders. I want that woman held fully accountable." She blew a steamed breath out of her nose and gracefully sank into the chair opposite the principal, explaining the events further as Emma had told her.

A phone call to Gabe's mom to speak with him and to Mr. Henderson confirmed the details of the Emma's story and gave the principal the evidence she needed to pursue the Mayor's request. "I need to request a hearing with the board if you wish to pursue this fully as you stated. All teachers are under contract and entitled to hearing."

Regina swallowed thickly, her brain coming down from the red rush she'd felt from Emma's story. "Will that result in termination?"

"That would depend on the board's vote." Mrs. Rose folded her hands objectively.

Despite the situation, the Mayor did not want Ms. Blanchard fired, especially if she had any intention of keeping her promise to the Savior before the spell about making sure the Charmings were happy. Being fired when you are expecting a baby would not meet that criteria and Regina had a soft spot for children, especially children of the two idiots who just happened to be related to Emma.

Something else also gave her pause; realization of the fact that she was reacting to the situation as if she was Emma's real mother, as if Emma was her real child and this was their real reality. The difference between keeper and mother figure had begun to blend when the child gifted her with the term and she was finding it challenging to separate the two; it was a fine line to walk and one the healing part of her heart seemed to need.

"I do not want her terminated. I just want Emma to feel safe and comfortable on campus. Please follow through with a meeting with Ms. Blanchard and whatever reprimand, if any, you see fit. That is not my decision." Regina took a deep breath, fighting her anger to keep the mask in place. "I only ask that she will never be left alone with Emma again or used as a substitute in Mrs. Gold's class."

"I will make adjustments to the substitute rotation schedule and inform the necessary personal. I am truly sorry for any discomfort Emma experienced."

Regina stood to leave, but stopped at the door with her classic Mayor Mills stare. "There will not be another situation like this."

"There won't be Madame Mayor. I will call Ms. Blanchard in right now."

With a curt nod, the Queen exited the office and went directly to where Emma sat, lifting the still teary girl to her hip.

"Home now Mama?"

"Yes, baby. We are going home right now." As they exited the office Regina felt a familiar pair of eyes watching them leave and met those of the green eyed teacher full on as the pregnant woman passed them in the corridor. Emma was hidden in the collar of the Queen's leather coat, missing the exchange.

Emma whimpered at the loss of contact when she was buckled into the car seat, but quieted when Regina began singing the lullaby that never failed to soothe her. Once home they went right upstairs to the lavender room and rocked as the girl calmed fully down from the day. Emma seemed to need
to relay the events again and needed assurance she did what was expected of her.

"I tried Mama. See?" A little hand pulled out the folded paper from her skirt pocket and showed her keeper her original writing.

"You did very well, sweet one. I see you spelled your word of the week correctly and remembered to put a capital letter at the beginning of the sentence." She praised specifically and pointed to each on the wrinkled page.

Emma smiled softly and leaned into her keeper. "Big me wanted to say mean stuff to Ms. Blanchard, but I didn't wanna get in trouble with you for bad words, so I didn't let her."

"That was a good choice not to say mean things, though it's okay that your big half is angry. She has a right to be upset." Running a hand up and down Emma's back as she rocked.

"How come Ms. Blanchard was mean to me?"

Regina bit the inside of a cheek in thought wanting to spare Emma hurt feelings, but needing to be honest as well. "I don't think she meant to be Emma." Further thoughts explored other possibilities aloud. "Maybe she truly didn't know about your accommodations or thought she was holding you accountable in some way. Though, she was wrong for a few different reasons, like grabbing your shoulders. There are rules about that."

Little Emma wrinkled her nose. "I didn't like that. It made my tummy feel weird."

"I know."

"Is it like good touch, bad touch?"

"Not quite. Ms. Blanchard didn't physically hurt you and I don't believe she intended to, but her grabbing your shoulders did not make you feel good. You were right to tell me. Do you remember what I said about that rule?" Regina had taken a lot of time to discuss with little Emma that difference. The child had asked about the word molestation on a news channel story about a case in Boston they'd heard on the radio in the car on the way to the airport to go home. While that term and what happened were in no way the same thing she wanted to see what the little one remembered about that chat.

"Look or touch equals tell."

"Correct." Regina gently lifted a dimpled chin. "She was also wrong for giving you detention and for not allowing you to call me."

"She's in trouble again, huh?"

"Possibly with Ms. Rose." She turned Emma fully around to face her so their eyes met. "Ms. Blanchard is not to be alone with you again nor is she allowed to sub in a class you are in. You leave the room or go to another adult if that is ever the case. You will not be in any trouble. Do you understand that?"

"Uh-huh." Fingers found the silver bracelet she wore to school that day, playing with the swan charm.

"Use your words please."

"Yes Mama." Emma looked up. "Big me says okay, too."
"Good girl." She hugged the child close.

"She's glad you 'fended us."

"We are a team, baby."

"The bestest team!"

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A/N - Emma's writing challenge is something many people struggle with and it is hard to diagnose, hence why it went undiscovered while she was in foster care in her first life. Hope you enjoyed and as always I appreciate your thoughts.

Next Time - Emma wants something and doesn't get the response she expects and MM shows up at the mansion.
Chapter 30

Previously...

“Use your words please.”

“Yes Mama.” Emma looked up. “Big me says okay, too.”

“Good girl.” She hugged the child close.

“She’s glad you ‘fended us.”

“We are a team, baby.”

“The bestest team!”

The next day was Friday and the first of March. Mrs. Gold returned to work and Emma had a better day at school, even earning a gold star sticker for reading aloud from her literature book without any errors. The girl put the sticker on her cheek and proudly wore it the rest of the day.

Saturday brought relief for both of them and after waking, they settled into a lazy morning of cooking breakfast together. Emma loved using the measuring cups and spoons. This morning’s request was for apple cinnamon pancakes and she happily dumped ingredients in a big mixing bowl. She had almond flour on her nose and apron as she carefully spooned applesauce into the mixture under the Queen’s eye.

“Can we make them smiley cakes?”
“Yes, get the berries from the fridge please.” Regina whipped the batter and began to ladle mix into a hot pan as the child stood on tip toe to get the berry bowl from the bottom shelf. “Both hands sweet one.” Though her back was to the child, she heard a huff confirming Emma had been using one.

Little hands set the bowl by the sink and hopped up on her stool. As she’d been taught she gently ran each berry under the faucet and had a mixture of blue and red berries ready for the pancake that appeared on a plate. Emma happily decorated the round shape to resemble a big smiley face. A dusting of cinnamon followed and they sat at the counter to enjoy.

“What would you like to do today?” Regina skimmed the front page of the Daily Mirror as she sipped her coffee.

“Mmmmm… Ride my bike and…”

Regina waited for what she knew would come next with a raised brow and a side eyed glance to the child.

“Get my ears pierced.” Emma stuffed a huge bite into her mouth and grinned chipmunk cheeked at her keeper.

“Yes to the bike, no to the ears.”

A fork clattered on the plate. “But Mama! All the girls in my class have them done.”

‘Here it comes.’ Regina thought and listened patiently as the girl gave about a dozen different reasons for why she should have pierced ears, including one about Jasper and Stitchy agreeing she’d look more ‘fisticated’ like Mama if she did. Emma had asked every few days for the last two weeks since finding a pair of diamond studs in the Queen’s jewelry box she couldn’t try on when they had played dress up. Emma had been fixated since.

“…and that’s why I have to have my ears pierced.” Emma picked up her fork and ate another bite satisfied her point had been well made.

“I hear that you want this very much, and as well thought out as your points are, my answer is the same. Your big half did not get her ears pierced until she was ten and I am in agreement that you are too young for that.”
Blonde brows furrowed and the fork dropped again. “Am not too young.”

Regina sighed. “I will compromise with you on clip on earrings, or even some of the magnetic pairs. It’s that or none at all until you are older.”

“Mama, pleeeaaassee?” Emma batted her eyes and clasped her hands together under her chin in a perfect puppy beg.

“No, Emma. I am quite finished with the subject at the moment. Please eat your breakfast.”

At that no nonsense tone, Emma deflated like a popped balloon and with her lower lip in a permanent pout, finished her meal. Five minutes later she cleared her plate and hung around the kitchen as it was tidied up, playing a game of hopscotch on the tiles.

Regina eyed the child with some concern, knowing it would be another clingy day at best. Since the incident at the school on Thursday, Emma had been tied to her hip wanting to be in the same room at the very least. Wiping her hands on a dish cloth, she was about to suggest a movie when the doorbell rang. Emma trailed as she went to the foyer and looked out the peephole. With a dark sigh at the sight the Queen turned quickly to the child.

“If you come in here now, we will not be the only two in the room,” she warned.

“Emma, go on into the living room and pick out a movie for us to watch later. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“But Mama, my bike?”

“We will in little bit, please wait for me in the living room.”

The girl obeyed half-heartedly, watching over her shoulder as she left the room. Regina made sure little feet were gone from the foyer before she opened the door halfway, just enough to show her body without allowing the occupant on the porch viewing access to her home.

“Madame Mayor.”
“Unless you are here to apologize, we have nothing to say to each other Ms. Blanchard. Good day.” Regina began to close the door.

“Wait!” A pale hand reached out, just shy of catching the handle.

Against her better judgment Regina stalled the door’s journey and eyed the teacher impatiently, raising both brows at the next words.

“I am here to apologize.” Mary-Margaret struggled to keep her tone passive. “If you’ll let me... Please.”

“Are you?” The Queen asked, taking a step forward, further blocking the pixie haired woman from peering into her home.

“May I come in?”

Ignoring the question. “You said you were here to apologize. I’m listening.”

“To Emma. I would like to tell her in person.” Mary-Margaret crossed her arms, uncomfortable at the raw stare she was on the receiving end of.

“She has nothing to say to you and if you have nothing to say to me, we are finished here.”

“Will you ask her if she will just listen? Please Regina?”

At the informal use of her name the Queen gave pause, studying her former step-daughter carefully to gauge what the woman’s motive was. She saw no malice and took a breath to remind herself that everyone deserved a chance to explain themselves. Having been in Snow’s shoes several years prior, she understood the significance of being allowed to apologize for her misdeeds.

“I will ask her. Know if she chooses to come to the door with me, you are not to use this as a stage to make yourself feel better. This is about her and her feelings. Do you understand that?” While she was compassionate, she was not, under any circumstance going to allow Snow to use this opportunity to get passively guilt Emma into a response.
“I do. Yes, thank you.”

“Wait here.” Regina wanted to roll her eyes at the syrupy agreement, but simply nodded and closed the door.

She found Emma in the living room, still rooting around in the movie basket seemingly deciding between two options she’d picked.

“Who was it Mama?”

“Someone who would like a chance to apologize to you, sweet one.” Regina leaned a shoulder against the archway waiting for Emma to look up. “Ms. Blanchard has asked if you would be willing to hear her tell you how sorry she is for last week.”

Green eyes darkened briefly, then puzzled. “She is?”

“Yes, would you like to hear her or would you like me to listen for you?”

“I don’t wanna talk to her.” Emma looked down at her hands.

“You don’t have to speak to her at all or listen to her. That is why I am asking. It is up to you.”

A whisper. “Big me wants to, but… If you’re there… Okay.”

Regina walked a short distance and knelt next to Emma. “Do you want to, sweet one?”

“Not really, but big me needs to Mama.” Little eyes looked older just then and receded.

“That is very brave of you.” Standing, she offered a hand and led the child to the foyer.
Opening the door, Regina stood with Emma tucked into her right side. The child hugged her legs, blonde head resting against her hip. Eyeing the teacher with a raised brow, she nodded consent for the woman to start talking.

“Hi Emma.” The sweet pitch coaxed and received only two hard stares in return. Clearing her throat, MM tried again. “I wanted to tell you I’m sorry for giving you detention on Thursday and for recycling your work. I didn’t realize you struggled more to write than the others. I didn’t know you had such trouble with it or I wouldn’t have had you start over.”

The Queen bit her cheek tasting blood at the stumble, sincere as it was. Of course Snow would inadvertently point out Emma’s differences while attempting to right her wrong doing. “Emma writes as well as any of her peers, Ms. Blanchard, when given the appropriate accommodations to support that.” She stroked Emma’s curls in comfort as the child squeezed her leg.

“Right, accommodations. Of course that’s what I meant.” MM smiled as if she didn’t hear the correction from the Mayor. “I hope things will be better between us Emma. Thank you for listening.” She paused, expecting a response.

The hesitant, but polite nod was offered in acknowledgement with an added breathy. “You’re welcome.” Emma looked up at her keeper asking with her eyes to be dismissed.

“Go on back into the living room baby.”

“I want you with me.”

“I will be right behind you in a moment.” She watched Emma go behind her into the depths of the house before turning back to the woman. “Thank you for apologizing to her. Now that you have said your piece, I will say mine. I want no conflict with you, nor does Emma. I realize you did not physically harm her, but there are rules in place for a reason about physical contact, for your protection as well as hers and you made Emma uncomfortable when you touched her that day.” Speaking up for the little side of Emma who needed a voice.

Snow’s jaw twitched. “I just took her shoulders to stop her from walking away. It’s not like I hit her Madame Mayor.” Her implied meaning was clear.

“There is a big difference between hitting and spanking. That aside, how I choose to correct Emma is not any of your business, nor is it mine how you and David choose to correct Neal.” Tit for tat and
she watched the teacher shift. “It is quite simple Ms. Blanchard; if you ever put a hand on her again without her consent I will pursue action to the nth degree.” Knowing here in this reality, that the law would be on her side.

“Are you threatening me?”

The epitome of cool, a single brow arched. “I do not make threats Ms. Blanchard. I make promises. Now kindly leave us to our Saturday.” The door closed with a soft click and Regina went to find her charge. Emma was curled up on the couch fiddling with a DVD box.

“I picked Lilo and Stitch again for later, but I wanna ride my bike first please.”

Brown eyes took in the slumped form in concern as she sat down. “We will do that, but first I want to know how you, both of you, are feeling?”

A little shrug. “She said sorry, but…” Big eyes looked up. “She insulted me as she did Gina. How fu—messed up is that?”

“Messed up, indeed.” Agreeing with a nod, a hand reached to take the child’s. “I think the important thing is that she realized, on some level, she wronged you and tried, in her own way, to make it better. That does not excuse what she did, just perhaps takes the edge off the pain.”

“It did a little bit. I’m still mad at her, at them and not just about that.” Emma leaned into a strong shoulder.

“You may be mad as long as you need to be dear heart. Sometimes, though, that can be more harmful to us than opening our hearts to forgiveness. Trust me on that one.” Lips found tussled curls. “I have plenty of experience with being angry and if you don’t take time to sort that emotion out, it will feed that pain inside you. It festers and is harder to heal as time passes.”

“I have a lot of anger Gina.” Eyes watered and burned. “There’s too much of it.”

“Maybe it is time to let some of it go.”
Emma considered the gentle suggestion. “Maybe...”

“But not today?”

“Not today. You know me well.” A small smile.

“That I do.” The Queen observed the shift, returning the little swan. “Do you still want to ride your bike or would you like to cuddle in the rocker with a story?”

“Rocker, bike later and Mama?”

“Hhhmmm?”

“You know us both well.”

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Next time - Little Emma has a play date with Gabe and uses a lesson previous learned to make the right choice. Regina wonders at the full circle she had made in regards to her sacrifice. A spring shopping trip provides valuable insight and the Savior realizes something deeper than she knew possible.
A/N- Happy Friday! Reader request chapter for the first half. I hope you enjoy it and the chapter pic. I am dabbling in fan-art. Despite people loving little Emma and Regina, I noticed there are not many pics out there showing that relationship.

Previously...

“But not today?”

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“Rocker, bike later and Mama?”

“Hhhmmm?”

“You know us both well.”

........................................
The Sunday following the apology from MM was a day full of errands and an arranged play date with Gabe at his house. Regina dropped Emma off at noon and picked her up after a few hours in which the Mayor was able to get some self care appointments completed. The girl was full of energy and enjoyed her carefree time with her now best friend.

“Mama, can Gabe come over tomorrow after school?”

Regina glanced in the rear view mirror. “We need to ask his father, but I’m fine with it. You don’t have swimming and we should be able to come right home after school. I would like your homework done first before he comes over, so how about we see if his father can bring him about 4:30?”

“Yes please!” A smile, all teeth shined back.

The rest of the night and next afternoon couldn’t pass soon enough for Emma. Gabe had been to her house a few times before and they usually played in Emma’s room. This time she wanted to show him the new video game she’d gotten as a treat for another good progress report. It had a dragon in it that hunted eggs and rescued other dragons who were trapped.

She bounced in glee as the doorbell rang and as the adults discussed adult things Emma pulled Gabe into the living room where she had her game set up. Within minutes when the Queen came to check on them they were both zoned out in a digital fantasy. Regina snuck a picture from behind of the two blonde heads glued to the TV, and went into the laundry room off of the kitchen to get a few chores done. An hour passed quickly.
“Emma, pause your game please.” Regina stepped into the room with a stack of folded linens in her arms.

Little hands obeyed and two sets of eyes stared up.

“You’ve reached your limit for TV today.” Shaking her head when a pout followed. “Save everything and choose something else to do. Perhaps a board game or coloring.”

Emma, with a bit of reluctance complied and took out her art basket from under the TV as heels left the room. Gabe dove into the basket with her.

“Wow! You have the new Marvel coloring book.” Gabe grinned, thumbing through it. “I saw this at the grocery store last week.”

“Yeah, I got it with my allowance.” Emma said proudly and handed the book to him. “You can color in it if you want to.” Remembering what her Mama said about sharing.

The boy scrunched his face in thought. “Do you have any paper? Maybe we can make our own comic book.”

Emma liked that idea, but frowned slightly. “Will you write the words?”

“Sure! You draw best anyway.” Easy as always, Gabe readily agreed and followed Emma into a room he had never been in before. The formality and quiet of the space hit him, reminded of his father’s office at home.

The girl tugged him along behind her, rolling her eyes. “It’s my Mama’s study. There’s paper in the desk.”

Blue eyes scanned the room in uncertainty. “Can we be in here?”

Small shoulders shrugged, knowing the answer to that, but not willing to forgo their adventure. “We’ll be super fast, like Captain Marvel and Daredevil!”
Quick hands opened the bottom desk drawer where she knew paper and files were kept. She plucked one file at random and scampered out of the room with Gabe at her heels. She quietly closed the door and they spent the next half hour drawing using the back side of the typed pages to plan their comic adventure with themselves as the heroes. At a quarter to six, the doorbell rang and both children moaned.

“Gabe, I believe your father is here.” Regina passed through the living room on her way to the door.

The boy politely thanked the Mayor and hugged Emma before he was swung up on his father’s shoulders. He waved at them as the door closed. Emma wrapped herself around black slacks and looked up.

“I had fun.”

“I am glad to hear that sweet one. It’s nearly time for dinner. Go wash up.” Regina gently straightened the white peter-pan collar on Emma’s red patterned blouse and smiled as the girl darted off, shaking her head.

Brown eyes caught the closed off white door of the study which was never shut unless she was inside. With a knowing sigh she went to the door and opened it, sweeping for any mischief, seeing none she left to catch up with her charge in the kitchen.

“Emma, you know better than to go into my study without me.” Heels paused opposite the sink.

Blonde curls whipped around from washing her hands. Wide eyed at being caught she clumsily accepted the offered cloth to dry her hands and studied the floor intently. Two fingers caught her chin.

“Did you get into anything you shouldn’t of like my desk or files?” The brunette worked more from home more than she had in their other life and many important documents were stored in her study that did not belong in little hands.

“I just gots paper.”
“Got. From where Emma?”

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. “On top the desk.” The sour taste of a lie rolled off her tongue.

The timer on the oven dinged breaking their gaze and Regina moved to check on dinner. After taking the casserole out of the oven, she turned back to the child.

The Queen sighed at the little anxious face staring back. There was a tray of printer paper on her desk the girl could have easily grabbed. Seeing as there was no harm done, she fluffed blonde curls. “Next time you need to ask me. Mama has a lot of important work in there to run the town and we talked about private space a few times.”

“Sorry.”

Regina tilted her head at that short reply. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No.” More bitterness filled the little mouth.

Too simple.

Regina stood to her full height thinking Emma’s answers through as she plated their meal. The child was quiet throughout dinner and the usual chatter was replaced with the sounds of cutlery on china. Clearing her place twenty minutes later little feet made their way upstairs to feed Jasper.

When the last dish was washed, the Queen went to her study and checked the room more thoroughly as doubt invaded. Finding her desk drawer cracked where the town files were kept, she shook her head.

Hands filtered through the drawer and noted the missing hospital reform file for the new rehabilitation wing the town voted to add on last spring. A wave of her hand summoned the file out of thin air and she sighed heavily at the colorful scribbles on the front cover and on all the pages inside. Thankfully they were on the back of the documents and not the front of the signature pages.

Leaving the file on the desk to deal with after her charge she moved towards the door only to spot a
green pair of worried eyes peeking around the corner.

“Emma?”

“I gots… got to tell you something.” The girl stepped into the room, hands bunching the fabric of her skirt.

Regina sat on the sofa and patiently beckoned the girl. “Come here, sweet one.”

A sniffle and feet shuffled forward to the couch. Emma stood across from the Queen, not meeting those eyes. “I-I lied M-mama.” She peeked up through wet lashes. “We wanted paper to make a comic book and I forgot it’s on the desk and I took some from the drawer.”

Reaching across the distance, olive hands pulled Emma closer and took small hands in hers. “I’m not happy about your choice. I do, however, appreciate you telling me the truth on your own. I was just about to come upstairs to speak with you when I found my desk drawer open. You will always be in less trouble with me by being truthful.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are sorry and part of showing that is taking responsibility for your actions and words, which you did by telling me about it. Due to that, I can tell you thought about what you did and realized it was wrong, so you will not be receiving a time out from me. The other part is accepting the consequences of your choices.” Emma squirmed at the ‘c’ word and she continued. “We talked a bit about this before dinner and forgetting that the paper is on my desk is not the issue. The study aside, you went into my desk where you are not allowed to go, and then you lied to me when I questioned you.”

“My tummy felt yucky for doing that.” A pointed tongue poked out.

“That is your body’s way of telling you something is not right. You know better by this point than to go through my things and to lie.” The Queen leaned forward to catch little eyes. “For going into my desk and taking things you shouldn’t it’s early bedtime tonight at 7:30 and for lying to Mama—”

“A love tap?”
“A bit more than that, baby.”

Emma whined and crossed her arms. “But I don’t want a spanking. No one else’s Mama does.”

The brunette nodded in understanding. “I imagine you don’t and I guarantee that is not the case for your friends.” She added, knowing physical punishment was common practice back in the Enchanted Forest. “I am going to put you to bed with a reminder to help you remember to be truthful with me.”

“I don’t need you to.” Big eyes pushed forward and slid back just as quickly.

“You may not, but your little half does. We do not lie to each other, any of us.” Confirming the child’s fate, she stood and took a small hand. “Time for your bath.”

Emma dragged her feet upstairs and was quickly put into the tub. She was allowed to play with her toys, a duck and a boat, for a few minutes as she contemplated her earlier choices. The bubbles she’d asked for popped around her belly. As her thoughts went down the drain fifteen minutes later she was helped out.

“Duck or swan, sweet one?”

“Duck towel.” Small shoulders were wrapped snugly.

“Go into your room, change and wait for me on the bed. I will be right in.” She waved a hand, conjuring a simple lavender nightgown to hand to the child.

Emma obeyed and dressed quickly, fidgeting when the Queen appeared soon after and sat next to her. Without being asked the girl moved to stand in front of her keeper, pouting as she did so.

“Tell me why we are here Emma.”

“Because I went into the drawer and your desk when I’m not ‘posed to and didn’t tell you the truth
when you asked me.” Toes scrunchéd in the carpet.

“Yes, and what happens when you do something you know better than to do so you remember to make different choices in the future?”

“Maaaammmaaa.” A whine at having to say it.

“Emma.”

“A correction from you.” As she spoke hands found her underarms and she was lifted to lay across black slacks. She felt a rush of cool air as her night gown was lifted up.

A sure hand answered once, then twice as the girl squirmed and tears started. Regina kept her usual steady pace, pausing halfway through the set. “Do I have your full attention?”

“Y-yeess.” A snifflé.

“I expect you to be honest with me. If we need to revisit lying again for any reason, the spanking I am giving you will look like a love tap. Do you understand me?” Questioning as a forearm brushed across the sting gently.

“I un’stand M-mama.” Emma kicked her feet up in protest as the hand finished painting her behind a bright pink.

Somewhere between being righted and her clothes being fixed the girl danced while rubbing. Her face was wiped with a warm conjured cloth and Emma’s head was tucked into her favorite spot under the Queen’s chin as she was sootheéd.

“I love you baby. So, so much.” Regina kissed a wet cheek.

“Love y-you. I’ll be better.”

“You are just right the way you are. Sometimes you will make mistakes, like today, and that’s okay.
It’s my responsibility to help you learn from them.”

Teeth sucked a lower lip in as big eyes peered up as the adult half shifted forward. “I keep screwing up, huh Gina?”

A hand caught a chin. “No, you are not. You are doing exactly what you are supposed to do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Being a child; learning, growing, getting into mischief and giving me gray hairs along the way.”

Emma pretended to inspect the Queen’s hairline. “Spotted one… or six.”

“Ha, ha… Clever girl.”

“Wait!” Emma gasped dramatically and pointed. “Are those wrinkles?” Her ribs were attacked and she shrieked, wiggling from the warm lap onto the bed.

Brown eyes found the swan clock and stood to turn down the bed at the flash of 7:26. “Alright, enough games my girl. It is bedtime.”

Yawning, Emma crawled under the covers, lying on her tummy as she was tucked in earlier than usual. “Mama, will you save my comic for me?”

Purple smoke swirled and the scribbled file appeared. Emma watched as the images she drew were magically transferred onto clean paper and the file was as it should be, vanishing back in the safety of the desk.

“I will leave the comic on your desk, sweet one.”

“Thanks Mama.” She mumbled and felt a kiss brush her head and a hand run gently through her hair as heavy lids closed.
Regina spent the rest of the evening working on the scrapbook for Emma, adding pictures from the light festival, the plane ride, Christmas, bike riding and the more recent of the two blondes playing video games. Clever hands worked until midnight stitching a row of lavender buds along the cover. The memory book was filling fast and she was nearly finished with the cover design.

Before bed, she checked on the snoozing swan, loving the way the glow of the nightlight highlighted the sweet face. One she had come to know as well as her own or Henry’s. She wondered then at the full circle she had made with the sacrifice of her memories of Daniel’s death. His demise had been the fuel for her revenge and the whole reason she ended up in a cursed town in Maine, adopted her son, and met the Savior. She tried to recall her true love’s face, but clouds blurred that path. Her eyes found Emma instead and another part of the hole in her heart filled in, whispering promises of more to come. The little girl stirred and settled, as if answering the phantom murmur.

“Rest well my girls.” Blowing a kiss to both the Savior and little swan the Queen retired to her chamber, hoping to dream of the whispers in her heart.

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The last Sunday of March saw a change in the weather, sun where it wasn’t before began to slowly warm patches of the little town and new blades of grass began to bravely poke through the sleepy soil. With the shift of seasons there was also a few for the child. Emma was fully accustomed to her new life and after four months of a solid routine, nurturing accountability and personal growth mixed with a whole lot of love, she felt different. Both halves pondered that as she struggled to fit her foot into her favorite purple converse, ones she had since the second day of arriving home. That word no longer made her tongue fuzzy or her stomach roll.

Frowning at her shoes, little hands tied the laces; they felt tight and pinched her toes. Shrugging, she scampered to her bedroom door where the Queen waited.

“What’s wrong baby?”

“My feet hurt.”

Concerned, Regina knelt and felt the toes gently with her thumb. “Time for new shoes, sweet one. You are growing fast.”

Big green eyes stormed forward. “I don’t want new ones Gina, these are my favorites.” The adult half was careful to keep the whine from her tone.
“I see that this idea upsets you, but you cannot walk around in shoes that do not fit properly.” The Queen stood, already knowing where this was coming from, as she knew all Emma’s faces. “I know they are special to you and we can save them, if you like.”

“Can’t you just stretch them and all my other stuff too?” As it was they were going clothes shopping for a few spring items and basic things Emma was growing out of. Since being in their new life she’d grown almost an inch.

“That would require a lot of energy and magic Emma for all of your things and each individual piece would need to be adjusted differently. Besides, letting go of things and gaining new ones is a part of growing up. You also need cooler clothing for spring. Your sweaters will not be appropriate much longer.”

Little brows tightened. “Just these shoes then, please Mama?”

“Alright, hold still.” With a wave and a tingle the shoes stretched a half inch and widened slightly. Brown eyes watched the delight spread as the girl wiggled her toes freely. Arms wound their way around her legs.

“Do we have to go shopping?” Emma stuck her tongue out at the idea, wrinkling her nose as it was gently tapped.

“We do and perhaps we will have lunch at Granny’s afterwards. Would you like that?”

“French fries?”

“Sweet potato ones and you have a deal.”

“Yes!” The child bounced happily in a circle and pulled on the brunette’s hand. “Let’s go!”

The only stop on the shopping expedition was one of the boutiques in Storybrooke that specialized in children’s clothing. The Mayor parked and at the recent promise of fries Emma happily followed the heels into the bright store. There were a few other parents and children there and as they browsed the racks the girl started to become impatient as shirts, skirts, shorts, and dresses were held up and either
draped across an arm or put back. The shop keeper kindly started a dressing room for them and Emma tried to wander away to look at other items, namely a stuffed animal display, but was immediately called back. Her third escape attempt earned her a warning to stay close.

“But I wanna look now.” Crossed arms and a pouty lip did nothing, but earn a delicately arched brow. “Please.” She threw in, hoping to change the expression on her keeper’s face.

“I appreciate your manners and we will look after you try on one of each of the items. I want to make sure there is a little room for you to grow before it will be warm enough to wear everything.” She explained and led the child into the dressing room.

Emma was moodily complacent, but soon found she liked several of the items picked out including a long yellow dress with cap sleeves and a pair of red shorts with yellow piping with a matching flower top. Regina picked out enough clothing for a full spring wardrobe. She had the child try on a pair of red sandals to check the new size and selected a few more pairs in different colors and styles. The shop keeper took everything up to the front as the two made their way to the stuffed animal display.

“Look at the baby turtle and the froggy! I want them both Mama, please?”

The Queen eyed the toys and the huge pile of clothing across the store. She rarely denied Emma what she asked for if it wasn’t over the top, but knew the importance of not allowing the child everything she wanted.

“If you would like to use your allowance for one, you may, but not both.”

Emma frowned. “But I want both and I want you to get them for me. Please.” She said the magic word knowing that was the least expected.

“I gave you a choice Emma. You may have one if you would like to get it with your own allowance. I am buying you many new things today already.”

“I need those, I want these.” A finger pointed to the display, eyes fixated on the toys.

Regina leaned down to meet the girl’s eyes. “I understand you want both. That was not one of your choices, sweet one.”
“But I want them please!”

The Mayor sighed. “Saying please, especially with that tone, does not mean you will get what you want. You need to make your choice in the next minute or I will decide for you.” She waited patiently as the child thought about it.

While she watched the gears turn in the blonde head a voice across the store caught her attention and she turned towards it, sighing at seeing a very nearly six month pregnant Mary-Margaret and a long faced Neal trailing the woman around the infant section of the store. The woman smiled as she held onesie after onesie up to her round stomach. The Queen’s attention once again found Emma.

“What have you decided baby?”

Stubborn eyes looked back. “Booothhh.”

“I am going to decide for you since you did not pick one of your options. We will be leaving without a toy today.” Taking the girl’s hand, and gently redirected them towards the register. “It is time to go have lunch.”

Emma pulled back on her hand in frustration and stomped her foot. “But I wanna pick now. You’re mean Mama! I pick NOW!”

That loud whine changed the direction in which they walked and the girl puzzled over being led into the dressing room they’d left some minutes before. The door closed and little hips found themselves between Mama’s knees as the brunette sat.

“I gave you choice out there and you chose not to pick one of your options. You will not get everything you want, even when you ask nicely and certainly not when you are disrespectful to me.”

“Sorry.” A pouty huff. She wanted to leave, embarrassed to be told off in the back of the store.

“No, I don’t think you are little miss swan. I buy you a lot of nice things, even things you want when you ask. I will not say yes every time and you need to be respectful when that is the case. I do not appreciate your sass.”
Toes were turned to touch a bare corner and a hand gave a warning pat to stay put when toes tried to step out. Fingers tugged at the bow on the front of a red long sleeved sweater dress as she thought about what was said. Six minutes later she sniffled and turned around to receive a hug from the Queen.

“Do you understand why I put you in time out, little swan?”

“Cause I was a sassy pants.”

Red lips twitched to smile, but remained firm. “That’s right. Your words hurt my feelings earlier.” She was honest wanting to be sure Emma understood that she was not beyond hurt feelings.

Recognition shined in green eyes. “I’m sorry Mama. You’re not a meanie.” Emma leaned fully into the embrace.

“Thank you for your apology. Give me a kiss and let’s be on our way.” She offered a cheek to little lips and stood to go to the register.

The shop keeper gave them an apologetic smile over the shoulders of Mary-Margaret and Neal whom she was currently ringing up. “I’ll be right with you Madame Mayor.”

Regina nodded, in no hurry and noted the stiffness that overtook the teacher. It had been about a month since that afternoon on the porch and they’d run into each other on a few occasions without drama. She felt Emma shift back a step and lean heavily into her hip. A hand offered comfort by rubbing the small back.

“Mom?” Neal caught his mother’s attention and pointed to the display next to the register of fine chocolates in a variety of flavors.

“Sure Neal, whatever you want.” Answered that saccharine voice.

The boy grabbed three different candy bars and added them to the pile being rung up. Emma stared with envy and something else, both halves, as Mary-Margaret paid for the pile of infant clothing and the candy for her son.
Her son… with another child on the way and one left behind almost 38 years ago.

Big thoughts stormed between little ones and the child side spoke up for her other half. “Want one too, please?”

Regina wanted to relent, if not for what she just witnessed. She knew Emma’s big half was feeling jealous, but for her recent lesson to have any effect for the little side she didn’t feel she could give in. Running a thumb along a pale cheek the Queen spoke softly with a compromise. “We have cinnamon cookies at home. You may have one after lunch.”

Emma huffed, but said nothing as she watched Neal begin to unwrap his treat and follow his mom out of the store. She watched with mixed feelings as her new clothes and shoes were rung up, then looked away at her feet.

At that moment Regina added an unexpected box to the pile, something she knew would bring a smile to that little face on a different day after the lesson she was teaching soaked in. She carried the many bags to the car, having Emma press the button on her keys for the trunk. The child was quiet on the drive to Granny’s, but perked up at seeing her favorite waitress and finally getting the promised sweet potato fries with favorite crab cakes.

Once they were home Emma helped to put her new things away and to go through some of the clothing she’d outgrown. She puzzled at why they were being folded neatly in a conjured box on the purple bench. As her fingers tried to mimic the fold the Queen did effortlessly she wondered aloud.

“Why are we folding stuff?”

“So they stay neat and do not wrinkle.” Regina took another blouse from the pile whose sleeves were just too short on the child. “That way the children who get them may wear them right away.”

Little Emma stilled at that. “What other kids?”

“Children who need them, here in Storybrooke or wherever the nuns decide to send them.”

A tongue licked dry lips. “Mama?”
“Yes baby.” Brown eyes met green.

“Thank you for buying me clothes and shoes.”

“My pleasure sweet one.” Regina smiled back, seeing her words from earlier finally settle in as she knew they would. As she folded the last shirt, she watched Emma go to the closet and return with the favored purple shoes that were shed upon their arrival home and added them to the top of the box. “Emma those still fit you.”

“I know, but I have other ones and other kids need them.”

Regina softened at that selfless display. “Let’s donate your red ones instead; the ones that are too tight and I did not stretch for you. When the time comes that your purple ones don’t fit anymore you may donate them if you still want to.”

Little hands exchanged the pairs and went to accept a hug from her keeper. “I did good?”

“Yes, baby. You certainly did.”

The shift bringing the savior forth happened quickly and she found trembling shoulders under hand. She lifted the girl and moved them to the free side of the bench, wondering at the unexpected change.

“Oh, my sweet girl. Where did these tears come from?”

“Gina...” Emma struggled to speak, unsure of where the heat behind her eyes was coming from. Moving so she straddled that warm lap, she rested against the brunette chest to chest, seeking comfort in the familiar arms and rhythm of breathing under her ear. “I-I want you to know...”

Patience filled the room as Regina ran fingers through loose curls and wiped a lone tear from a pale cheek.
“You’re a g-good mom Gina.” Sniffing hard and swallowing the thickness of guilt, she bravely peered upwards, struggling under the weight of her words. “I know I fought you, was mean to you early on, I was horrible, even now sometimes and you… Y-you are still here.”

“You were never mean or horrible. You were scared and in shock when we first arrived here. Rightly so and we’ve come a long way since then.” Flooded brown orbs tried not to spill over as she added certainty. “I will always be here for you.”

“I’m s-sorry for being a brat and fighting you and everything. I-I’m tired of fighting Gina... I’m so tired.” Tears burst forth and washed the soul wound bleeding anew. Emma tried to burrow deeper into the Queen as she sobbed 38 years worth of raw pain through little eyes.

She cried for the child she had been in another life; the wrecked girl the world forgot and failed to notice.

And more for the cherished child she had fought against in this world; the one mending the scattered pieces of her heart.

Tears for the loneliness, the hunger, and the fear; the old memories filling nightmares no one soothed.

Sobs for the love she felt now and knew she never wanted to be without again; the husk of a lullaby spiraling around her heart and brown eyes that knew too much.

Regina knew something deep was purging through the shaking little body she held and could guess at what the tears were, as violent as they were. She knew now was not the time for questions, just comfort.

“You are okay, baby. I’ve got you.”

‘I love you Gina.’ The Savior thought.

As if hearing that vulnerable sentiment the Queen squeezed gently as tears slowed and hiccups took over. Emma wasn’t ready to give those words a voice just yet, but she tried anyway.
“Thank you for loving us… for loving me.”

Burgundy lips returned gratitude to a forehead and rubbed noses with the child staring back.

For the first time all of them felt a piece of themselves mend within that shared moment.

:::::::::::::::

A/N - Hope you liked this one!

Next Time - Easter holiday, complete with egg hunt. A scare for the Charmings causes big Emma to rethink a few things she feels. A flashback with a glimpse of Emma and Regina's life before the spell - which will be revealed in the sequel (not what you are thinking - love plot twists!) and the savior learns what Regina expects from her.
Chapter Notes

A/N - Some angst ahead and feels. :-)

Previously...
‘I love you Gina.’ The Savior thought.

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Little fingers mimicked the shape of letters with the cut pieces of yarn on the floor of the study. Using something other than her special pencil to form letters was a cognitave exercise she did everyday to help her brain recognize the pattern of letters and words. Other times she used play dough or sugar in a pan. Once she had snuck into the Queen’s bathroom and used shaving cream on the tile wall as a way to practice. The whole thing had been such a comedic mess that Regina found herself sitting in the tub with Emma making words before a cream fight ensued and they both became covered in white foam.

A hand on her head gave Emma pause as the Queen squatted down to look at the new word, correcting a backward ‘b’ for the word bunny.

“Is it almost time to go yet? I wanna get the best eggs Mama.”

“Very nearly. Do the last word while I finish this e-mail and then you may have your basket before we go.” She redirected the excited child, pointing to the spelling list for the week.
It was Easter Sunday and Emma had been a bundle of energy all morning, in excitement over the town’s annual egg hunt in the park. Regina always coordinated the whole thing for the children and for the first time Emma would get to partake in the hunt part and both halves of her were pumped. She fluffed the skirt of the red lacy dress she’d been put into with thick black tights and new red ankle boots before making the yarn word.

The Queen finished typing and left the room to return with a yellow basket. Emma jumped up when the brunette sat on the sofa and handed her the promised treat. “Happy Easter baby.”

The girl accepted a hug and tore into the wrapped items. There were stickers, a coloring book, new markers and paint by numbers set. She loved the yellow bunny ear headband and put that on right away. There was a solid chocolate bunny in the middle of the basket and the prize of it all tucked into a tiny box, the same one Regina had grabbed last minute at the clothing boutique last week.

“Are these…? Mama! Thank you!” Emma threw arms around the Queen and jumped about the room waving the box in the air.

“Come here and let me put them on you.” A regal hand reached for the box. “Which color would you like?”

“The yellow ones please.” Emma stood still as the yellow stud magnetic earrings were fastened to her earlobes. She rushed into the foyer and stood on tiptoe to try and see in the mirror by the door, bouncing thrice when she couldn’t. “I – love – them!”

Regina smiled and shook her head at the sight as she pulled on a light jacket over her matching red pant suit and bundled Emma into a thick black cardigan with a red collar.

“We match Mama, but you need bunny ears too.” Emma took hers off in offering.

“Those are yours sweet one.”

“We can share.” That sure little voice wouldn’t relent and giggled when her Mama tried on the yellow ears. “They look better on me, Mama.” Emma reached back for them right away.
“I agree, little swan.” A hand disappeared the contents of the basket save the chocolate bunny to Emma’s room. The bunny appeared on top of the fridge instead for later.

With the empty basket ready to fill with eggs they were quickly on route to the park. They lucked out with parking and got a spot near the pond Emma loved to visit. While they waited for the hunt to start Regina gave Emma a few pieces of bread she kept in the trunk for their weekly visit to feed the ducks while she sat on her usual bench to watch. After a few minutes the park became crowded as families began to arrive. Emma ran over to her holding out the ears and basket.

“Mama, please hold these.” Dropping the furry ears and basket into the Queen’s lap before running back toward the ducks.

Regina stored the items, missing the new occupant on the far side of the long bench.

“She looks happy.”

Hands stilled for a moment at that invasive voice, then finished the task before she offered a response. “She is.”

Mary-Margaret shifted on the hard wood, trying to get comfortable with her protruding stomach. “I wanted to ask you something Madame Mayor, about funding for the school.” She quickly clarified as warning radiated from the brunette.

“Go on.” Relaxing when Emma wasn’t the topic coming from pink lips.

“As you know we are trying to raise money for new playground equipment and I have some ideas for fundraising I would need your approval for.”

Regina sighed. Of course the princess was being nice because she wanted something, but maybe it was genuine. There hadn’t been any upset since the IEP and they had been civil in their encounters since.

“Mama look!” Emma waved from the shore line where she squatted to feed a duckling who braved coming near the excited child holding a morsel of bread.
“I see you, sweet one. Be careful please.” Turning her next words toward the teacher, but not her eyes as the child played along the water’s edge. “I am willing to hear your ideas and even help with them, Ms. Blanchard, but I am off today. Please make an appointment with my secretary next week and we will talk more then.”

“Thank you, I will.” Knowing she was dismissed Mary-Margaret toddled away towards where David and Neal waited at the starting line of the hunt.

Regina called Emma over a few minutes later and gave the child back the basket and ears as they joined the other families. Bouncing feet waited impatiently for the whistle that would release her to the open field littered with colorful eggs.

“I will be right here waiting for you when the second whistle goes off. That means the hunt is over, alright?”

“I know Mama.” Emma smiled up and ran off at the shrill sound. She wove her way around the kids, faster than most her age towards the middle of the field where her adult half knew the best eggs were hidden.

The next half hour was a hunt equivalent to her former bounty ones where no bush or tree was left unturned. Hands and knees muddy, but with a full basket and heart she slowly made her way back towards the starting line with a huge grin.

Red and blue lights swirled in the reflection of Emma’s eyes and her smile left when she saw the doors of the ambulance close on the Charming family. Comforting hands found shoulders as both halves of Emma looked up in question.

“Mama what’s wrong? Big me wants to know now.”

“I will find out for you. I’m not sure of the details yet baby. Ms. Blanchard came out of the restroom looking ill and an ambulance was called right after.”

“We want to go home.” Little hands moved to wipe hands on her dress and were caught with a wet wipe instead. As she was cleaned up she allowed her big half to slip forward. “I’m scared Gina. What if…”
“We shall have to wait and see.” She lifted Emma up, muddy knees hugged her pristine red suit, but she didn’t care, the full basket bumping their legs as she walked to the car.

At home Emma had to be coaxed into a warm bath and to eat lunch, her favorite of grilled cheese in the Queen’s attempt to get the worried child to eat. The full plate was pushed away and Emma rested her head in arms on the dining room table as her keeper wrapped the food for later. She was carried to her room and they rocked together as sleep was fought, which took her a few minutes into the rhythmic motion.

Once the little swan was tucked in for a nap, Regina slipped down the hall to her room and took out her cell. The Sherriff answered on the last ring before voicemail and the Mayor voiced concern to her employee about his family, offering as much paid time off as David needed to support his wife. She learned a few things between the strained voice and sounds of the hospital in the background.

Ending the call after a few minutes, she went into the ensuite for Excedrin, opening the magnetic lock on the small wall cabinet as the migraine that started at the park took over. Grateful the child would be asleep for the duration until the medicine took effect. After changing into relaxed slacks and a blouse, she returned to the lavender room and curled up next to Emma.

A long hour passed, mostly with Regina watching the child dream as eyes darted back and forth between closed lids. Emma awake slowly and adorably sleepy as she always did, burrowing into the warmth of the body next to hers.

“How did you sleep baby?”

“Mmhhmm.”

A chuckle followed that. “Do you think you are ready to eat your lunch?”

“Yeah, I’ll try.”

“That’s my girl. I left clothes on the bench for you. Get dressed and come downstairs.” Regina untangled the child’s limbs from her own and went to warm up the grilled cheese and string beans.

Emma joined her in the kitchen dressed in leggings and a velvet tunic. Teeth devoured the meal. When her hunger was satiated she remembered why she’d been unable to eat in the first place. The
little half allowed the big side to take over.

“Did you find out anything, Gina?”

“I did. Are you still hungry?” When a blonde head shook, she removed the plate to wash. “I called David when you were napping and he said Mary-Margaret was on bed rest at the hospital for a few days. There was some spotting, which apparently is not unusual for her stage of pregnancy, hence the ambulance earlier.”

Anxious eyes begged. “And the baby?”

“Healthy as far as they know. They are both alright.”

Emma sunk with relief into the chair supporting her and again into the arms that lifted her up. She cried as the anxiety left and she was soothed, sniffling as her bottom came to rest on the counter top and a napkin wiped wet eyes.

“I never meant for her to be hurt. I-I didn’t want her to have another baby, but I never wanted anything to happen to them.” As angry as she was for her own reasons at MM, she never desired harm to come to the Charmings.

“This is not your fault, Emma.” More firmly when those blonde curls shook. “Look at me… This was no one’s fault. These things happen. The important thing is they are both alright and will be closely monitored going forward.”

“Gina, will you take me to see her?”

“Yes, of course. We can go this evening when visiting hours are open.” Her lips found a cheek and very gently offered a reminder. “Remember that they may not want visitors or understand why we are there.”

“This is not for them, Gina. It’s for me. I know they don’t know it’s me and that’s okay. If they don’t want us there we can leave, but I need to show I care.”
“Would you like to take some flowers? Snowbells perhaps? If I recall they are her favorite.” Brown eyes watched her little one return.

“Big me says that’s perfect… And Mama, will you help us make a card?”

“Go and get your art box, sweet one.”

Several hours later Prada heels and purple Converse walked side by side down a sterile hallway. Emma clutched a wrapped bouquet of Snowbells in her fist with the card arranged neatly inside. Regina knew the hospital by heart and after checking in with reception they easily found the former princess’ room, which was empty except for the pale figure on the bed who seemed startled upon seeing them.

“Madame Mayor… Emma…What are you doing here?”

Regina smiled softly and glanced down at the child. “We saw the ambulance today and wanted to make sure you were alright.” She gently guided Emma forward and knew the child had once again allowed the Savior to take over.

“These are for you Ms. Blanchard. I hope you both feel better soon.” Simple words were all Emma could get out as she eyed the full stomach with a heart monitor strapped across it. Gently setting the bouquet and card on the side table she stepped back to lean into her keeper.

“Snowbells, how lovely… How did you know they are my favorite?”

“You mentioned it once a long time ago.” Regina failed to add it had been in the Enchanted Forest many years back.

“Thank you, they are beautiful. I’m sorry I’m not up for much more of a visit, but…”

“We understand.” Squeezing that small hand in reassurance. “And we are glad you are alright.” She offered a small genuine smile.

After everything that had happened to them all in their previous life and in this one Regina truly did
not wish the woman harm. Especially since the princess was the reason for the child reaching up to her with grabby hands to be held, which she did.

“Bye Ms. Blanchard.” Little Emma waved over the Queen’s shoulder, finally meeting the matching pair of surprised eyes looking back from the hospital bed. A wave came in return with a smile from the princess.

They passed a confused David in the hall, who was walking towards the room of his wife and future child with a takeout bag in hand. Regina greeted him kindly, but kept walking as Emma’s heels dug into her hips.

Later that night as the girl was tucked into bed after a story and a long cuddle she tried to sort through her big half’s feelings. “Mama, why do big me and Ms. Blanchard not get along?”

Regina sat on the side of the bed bringing the covers up under a chin. “Won’t she tell you, sweet one?”

“She says it doesn’t matter for me to know, but I wanna know.” As much as their minds were shared certain things had been kept private and the little girl was curious.

A nod followed that logic. “Well, it is complicated and really her story to tell.”

“But why?”

“You will have to wait until she is ready to share that with you baby.” No matter how much those green eyes pleaded, she would not betray the trust of the adult half that was keeping certain things quiet.

A yawn and sleepy eyes accepted that answer for now. “Love you Mama.”

“And I you. Sweet dreams.”

With the swan light on Emma dozed off as her Keeper watched through the cracked door of the hallway. A lot of progress had been made that day as she mentally reviewed the list the adult half
wanted to accomplish in this life. One she had committed to memory for easy reference before they made their journey.

-Flashback Less than a year ago...-

An elegant hand moved quickly across the legal pad as Emma spit out thoughts in no particular order. It was late and they were in Regina’s suite across from each other on the sleigh bed. The Savior was sprawled out on her back with head hanging upside down off the side as the regal took notes, preferring to be able to reference them in her own ordered hand rather than the scrawled print.

“And I want to join a club or a sport or something organized like that, but whatever my little half wants... Also, I wanna eat better, not as much junk food. I actually think that messed my brain up as a kid. Oh! and a pet... maybe, if you can tolerate it, like a hamster or a gerbil...”

“Emma.”

“What do you think about lizards? They are kinda cool or a frog? But no birds—”

“Emma!”

A blonde ponytail whipped up to face the Queen. “Huh?”

“Sit up please the blood rushing to your head is making you more incoherent than usual.” She continued when Emma was sitting crossed legged at the foot. “Now, take a breath and allow me to catch up.”

“Sorry Regina.” Even as she said it, she smirked and tossed a pillow she’d been using as a foot rest at the brunette who threw it right back in jest.

“It’s alright. I know you are excited.”

“That’s an understatement.” Her thoughts traveled somewhere darker then as they often did when they discussed the possibilities of their new life and she felt a knowing hand find hers.
“Do you need a break?”

“No, I’m good.” Emma crawled up to sit next to the Queen at the head, hugging her knees. “I was just thinking that I’ll be working through a lot of anger and I’m worried about how I’ll be towards MM and David or how my little half will feel about Neal or any of it.”

The pen stilled. “I imagine you will feel very raw inside and depending on certain things your little half may even be jealous of Neal.”

“I’m jealous now. That’s another reason why I’m kind of scared. I don’t want to be mean to you or to them. Don’t let me be brat Regina. Once I have my memories back I won’t be alright knowing I made them unhappy.” Teeth chewed a lower lip as the dark glasses were removed and set aside.

“I will not allow that and you know it, but I will also not allow them to mistreat you.”

Emma nodded and sighed. “I just needed to hear you say it again, I guess.”

The Queen eyed the solemn blonde as she wondered her next thought aloud. “Have you ever considered that you are not responsible for their happiness or anyone else’s, but your own?”

Green eyes widened, and then blinked at that actually being a possibility. “I’m the Savior.”

“Try again.”

“But—”

A brow rose.

A whisper followed. “I’m Emma.”

“Exactly my point dear heart.” Regina smiled softly. “And the only person you are responsibly for
“Myself... I know that’s what you say and I want to feel that, I do.”

“We will continue to work on that until you do, starting with ending the negative talk about yourself.”

Emma’s fist pounded a pale thigh so hard the Queen knew it would bruise. She quickly reached a hand out to still that fist from taking another blow. “Do you need a reminder?”

“No.”

Regina didn’t buy it. “Are you sure?”

“No, but... I’ll try to talk about my feelings instead of beating myself up.” She hoped that would be enough to stay those knowing eyes.

“Continue.”

Emma bunched her shoulders up once, dropping them with a sigh. Her fingers found her swan necklace. “What would my parents think? What would everyone think, including Henry, when I tell them I just want to be me, not the Savior, not their lost princess?”

Red lips pursed and an arm drew Emma close. “First of all, Henry doesn’t expect you to be the Savior, not anymore at least. He’s grown and a lot has changed since he was that ten year old boy in Boston on your door step. Secondly, the sooner you understand this, the better off you will be; what other people think of you is none of your business. It’s theirs and theirs alone.”

Green eyes puzzled as those words sank in. “That actually makes a lot of sense.” She rested her head on that strong shoulder.

“You cannot be everything for everyone and it is unfair of anyone who expects it of you.”

“What do you expect from me Regina?” A mischievous spark edged that voice.
“Behave yourself Miss Swan.” Playfully she nudged the blonde back, more seriously she added. “I expect only what you wish to willing give. Nothing more, nothing less.”

And she meant every word.

Next time - Little Emma gets an independent streak and has a fascination with the word 'no', a run in with the Sheriff follows, and Regina reflects briefly on her role.
A/N - I am winding down this story. There are probably 7-9 chapters left, depending on how I decide to chunk it. Sequel currently 25,000 words strong. :-)

Previously...

“You cannot be everything for everyone and it is unfair of anyone who expects it of you.”

“What do you expect from me Regina?” A mischievous spark edged that voice.

“Behave yourself Miss Swan.” Playfully she nudged the blonde back, more seriously she added. “I expect only what you wish to willing give. Nothing more, nothing less.”

And she meant every word.

The middle of April brought warmer weather and thankfully Ms. Blanchard’s recovery with a return to work, much to big Emma’s relief. Both halves of the child still mostly avoided the teacher, but no longer had such anxiety over the woman.

The last few weeks Emma had been on an independent streak and trying to do more and more things on her own. Regina allowed the independence as much as it was safe, but put her foot down on certain things like Emma wanting to cook her own breakfast on the stove last week. There was still a band aid on a little finger from a burn blister. In that situation natural consequences had been enough for the girl not to want to try that feat again, but on many others Emma refused to give up.

“I can do it myself.” The girl dragged a brush through her hair, which had grown a few inches since cutting it in December and pulled hard at a tangle that wouldn’t budge. “Ow!”

“Emma, slow down.” Regina cupped her hand around the little one holding the brush and gently worked the knot from the child’s bed head. She sighed as the brush again got tangled as Emma twisted it when she’d let go. Patiently she helped again.
“Okay Mama, will you do my braid now?” Done with the idea of being independent if it meant a pretty braid.

Quick hands pulled the blonde curls into a French braid with a green bow on the end. “Did you brush your teeth?” Receiving a nod she shooed the child out of the bathroom. “Go and get your shoes on.”

Emma ran to her closet and decided to wear one purple converse and one new blue one, liking the contrast between the two. Grabbing her yellow backpack she met her Mama by the door.

“That is quite the fashion statement, sweet one.”

Little teeth gleamed. “It’s awesome!” She wiggled her toes. “Mama, I wanna ride my bike to school like the other kids. Can I?”

Regina had a ready ‘no’ on her lips, as the solitude of the request not something she was comfortable with, but the little bright face staring up at her caused a compromise. “You are too young to ride all that way on your own, however if you want to ride your bike while I walk with you, you may.”

Feet bounced in a circle around her. “I want to this morning, can we Mama? It’s nice out!”

It was a crisp spring morning and one the Queen wouldn’t mind spending some time in. A quick glance at her watch showed that there was more than enough time for a stroll. She pressed the garage door opener on her key chain and smirked at Emma’s happy squeal.

It was a twenty minute walk to the school and the girl proudly pedaled beside her Keeper. Emma climbed off her bike at each cross walk and pushed the button as she had been taught and waited for the white light to cross. At the school, Regina showed her where the bike racks were kept and how to store her helmet with the conjured bike lock from her purse, a simple number punch one little fingers could operate. With a hug and kiss goodbye Emma went happily into the building.

Most of the day went quickly and Emma couldn’t wait until the final bell so she could ride her bike again. Both halves wanted nothing more than to be outside playing in the sunshine. Spring break was on her mind and she itched for the end of the week to get here so it would start already. She was distracted by that thought most of the afternoon and when it came time for writing a pale hand simply swirled patterns on her assignment.
“Something the matter Emma?” A gentle hand rested on the desk.

“No Mrs. Gold. I just don’t feel like writing.” Green eyes refocused and dropped her pencil.

“Does your hand hurt or do you need help?”

“No and no.”

The teacher knelt down. “Do you want a break for a minute and then we can try again?”

“Nooo…” Emma pouted, throwing her head back in announce. A foot kicked the desk in front of her, earning a scowl from the boy who sat in it.

Belle Gold frowned, something she didn’t often do. “Would calling your Mom help?” Offering what she knew was sometimes a way to help Emma reset her mood.

“No.”

“That’s your choice. I will check back with you in a few minutes. Try to get started please.”

The woman made another lap around the room and returned to see Emma staring out the window with one word written on her paper.

‘No.’

With a sigh she returned to her desk with the child’s assignment and bundled it with a note to the Mayor in an envelope. When the final bell rang and the children were getting their homework folders out of their desks Mrs. Gold returned to Emma and handed her the sealed envelope. The child visibly paled.

“Give this to your Mom, please. I need her to sign it and for you to bring it back tomorrow, alright?”
“Yes Mrs. Gold.” With a sour frown Emma went to her backpack and hurriedly stuffed the note inside and ran out of the building to the bike racks. The sun hitting her face felt amazing and at the sight of her Mama waiting by her bike she grinned.

“How was your day, sweet one?”

“Good. Are we going home?” Emma punched in her bike lock code and popped the lock off.

“I have a meeting back my office first.” The Queen caught the scowl on the little face as she snapped the helmet into place. “Did you have other plans in mind?”

“I wanted to play my dragon game.”

“My meeting runs a bit late, so we will have to see how much time we have when we get home between dinner and your bath.”

As they made their way to Town Hall the girl chatted about spring break and all the things she wanted to do. Upon arriving ten minutes later, Regina was cutting it close to her meeting in the conference room, so she ushered Emma inside and set the child up at the coffee table with a snack as Emma took off her helmet and set it on the couch.

“I need to go to my meeting now baby, but Ashley will check in on you in a little bit. Stay here and work on your homework. If you need help, you may ask Ashley or wait for me, but I want most of it done before you play, alright?”

“Yes Mama.” Emma nodded and crunched on a peanut-butter celery stick. She received a kiss and sighed as she was left to her task.

Grumbling about stupid homework assignments she reached into her backpack for her folder and paled when she realized she forgot it at school. Fingers toyed with the edge of the white envelope she’d also forgotten about in her joy of finally getting out of the brick building. She chewed her lip as she thought about what to do, knowing she was probably already in some trouble for the note in her hand. She was a big girl now and she would be ‘sponsible.
“I can fix this myself.” She muttered, determined to do something about it despite the nagging of her big half telling her to stay put.

Putting the envelope back in her bag she darted out of the office door, thankful the blonde secretary wasn’t at her desk. Mismatched converse ran to her bike and pedaled down the sidewalk from which they had come, blonde braid whipping behind her.

Emma was impatient at each crosswalk, but pressed the button and waited. She realized halfway to the school that she had forgotten her helmet, which she knew she wasn’t to ride without. Pedaling faster, she ditched her bike by the front steps and ran back into the building to the classroom. Her folder was right on her desk where she left it and with a wave to Mrs. Gold after stuffing the folder in her backpack, she ran back to her bike.

By now she was winded and rode slower than she wanted back toward Town Hall. Nearly halfway back she decided to avoid the one light in town that took forever to change. Looking both ways she crossed in the middle of the street between lights. The Sheriff’s cruiser turned the corner and flashed lights with siren briefly to get her to stop as it pulled off to the side of the road.

Emma gulped as the front door opened and Sheriff Nolan stepped out. As the man walked over, a knot in her tummy started to form. She continued to pedal the rest of the way across the street and stopped on the sidewalk at the corner when he whistled at her.

“You are jaywalking little lady. Where is your mother?”

“At Town Hall. I’m going there.” Emma rolled backwards on her bike as he neared.

“You shouldn’t be riding without a helmet.” He stated, concerned the child could get hurt. “Let’s get your bike into the trunk and I’ll take you to her so you can explain yourself.”

“I don’t want to go with you.” Hopping off, she used the bike as a barrier between them, her discomfort at the confrontation increasing.

David stalled his steps as he recognized the stubborn look on the girl’s face and remembering his last encounter with her in the Mayor’s office, decided remind her of his position. “I’m the Sheriff and it’s my job to make sure people are safe in this town and you were not doing that. Now let’s go.”
His chastising tone seemed to startle the child and he easily picked up the bike, starting back to the cruiser thinking the girl would follow.

Converse ran the opposite direction of the Sheriff toward Town Hall. A minute later the cruiser was behind her and Emma ran faster, cutting across the green lawn and looking over her shoulder as the man parked at the base of the path leading inside. She slammed into a pair of tan legs and fell back on her bottom. Tears threatened until familiar hands lifted her up into a hug.

“Are you hurt? Where on earth have you been?”

Regina held tight, heart pounding as she eyed a disgruntled Sheriff walking towards them wheeling the red bike. Ashley had informed her not a minute before that Emma was not in the office and the Mayor stepped outside to see if the girl had been playing out front.

“No, I rode to school, but—”

At those words brown eyes sparked as she set Emma down and stood with her hands on her hips. “The school! You rode—Where is your helmet?” She studied the child and the Sheriff looking for it.

A blue converse kicked grass. “I kinda forgot to wear it.”

Regina took a breath, knowing she needed a chance to calm down before having this conversation.

“Madame Mayor, we need to talk.” David cut in.

“A moment, Sheriff.” Regina kept her eyes on Emma who was now squirming guiltily at her feet. “Go into my office and put yourself in a corner.”

Green eyes glanced at the Sheriff in embarrassment and finally to her parent. “But Mama…”

The Mayor shook her head, visions of the child hurt and bleeding in the middle of the road pulsed behind dark eyes. “Right this minute Emma Swan Mills. Now march.” A firm pat to a pleated skirt followed.
Emma’s nose wrinkled and cheeks pink, darted inside to do as she was told.

The name rolled off Regina’s tongue as if it had always been there and in that moment mixed with worry and love she truly felt like Emma’s mother; not the best friend, or the little half’s Mama, not the Mayor, or even the Queen. When she loved it was always with immeasurable intensity and she knew her heart would no longer house just Henry in the maternal side. The little girl Emma was would forever have a home there. She owned the experience quietly and set it aside to deal with the current pair of blue eyes watching her.

David schooled his face as intense brown eyes found his.

“Thank you for returning her bike, but why do you have it to begin with Sheriff?” Regina crossed her arms in wait.

David explained finding the child cutting across the street and how he tried to get her to come with him in the cruiser by taking the bike. “She’s a stubborn little thing.”

“That she is.” The Mayor agreed adding another check mark for the street to the growing list of things she’d need to speak with Emma about. “However, she has been taught not to go with strangers or people she is uncomfortable with, hence her reluctance with you. Did you consider calling me to come get her or perhaps simply walking behind her to see that she got here safely instead of trying to get her into the cruiser?”

“Well no, but she needs to be reprimanded for cutting into traffic and riding without a helmet. I told her as much.”

The Queen bristled, but kept her cool. “I will speak with her about her actions today and I appreciate you making sure she was out of the street, but you are not to try and parent her.”

David blinked. “I’m the Sheriff, she should have listened—”

“Then start acting like it and do your job the way protocol dictates, which is to contact the parent when a minor is involved once said minor is safe. As soon as Emma was out of the street you should have called me.”
A hand rubbed the back of a scruffy neck. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I suggest you brush up on your training manual Sheriff.” Regina took the bike and wheeled it over to the side of the building as the man stared stupidly at the grass. She knew he was under a lot of stress and returning, she offered her hand to him. “Thank you for seeing her here.”

They shook once, but it was enough.

A minute later, heels clicked into the office and shut the door softly. At the noise Emma pressed her face farther into the corner as adult feet stopped. She heard someone sit on the sofa and bit her lip when that husky voice spoke.

“Come here please.”

Small feet turned around, but didn’t move forward. “But you have your scrunchy face on…”

“Emma.”

One step forward. “And that means I’m in trouble.”

“One…two…”

More steps, but not enough.

“Three…four…”

Finally shoes where they are supposed to be. Green eyes studied her Keeper’s knees as the backpack was slid off her shoulders and set on the floor.

“We have a lot to talk about, starting with why you left the office to go to the school.”
“I forgot my folder and you told me to do my homework and I couldn’t without my homework folder.” The whine escaped before she could catch it.

“You are in trouble with me right now little miss swan. Mind your tone.” Regina placed her hands on little hips to still them. “What made you forget your folder?”

“You’re gonna be mad and I don’t want you mad at me.” Wet eyes found brown as she leaned down to open her backpack. With a quivering chin she placed the envelope in an open hand. She sucked her lip nervously as the paper was unfolded, read, and her writing assignment was held up for viewing.

“I am not happy with your choice not to do your assignment and telling your teacher no, both of which you know better than to do. Mrs. Gold writes that you seemed to not to want to do the assignment, that she offered you a break and help.” Lips pursed at the scowl on the small face, knowing the brunette teacher had made sure all of Emma’s accommodations were followed and sure this was a case of the little swan being defiant.

“She did, but I didn’t feel like it. I wanted to go out to play and I was thinking about break and riding my bike more.”

“I understand how the warm weather is inviting and your excitement about break coming up, however, you are not allowed to tell Mrs. Gold no when she asks you to do an assignment. You also know my expectations of you at school. What are they?”

“To try my best, ask for help, and use my strategies if I’m upset.”

A chin was caught and lifted. “It doesn’t sound like you tried your best and while I realize that happens sometimes when you are not feeling well or upset, neither of those things were the case today.” A manicured finger pointed to the scrawled ‘no’ on the assignment. “This tells me sassy Emma was present.”

“I’m sorry.” A whisper.

“You will do this sheet the way it is supposed to be done with the other homework you have in a bit. Go and get me a pen from my desk please.”
Emma returned with the writing tool and watched as the note was signed and something else written in return. It was resealed in the envelope and her assignment added to her homework folder.

“For telling your teacher no, you will offer her an apology first thing tomorrow. Is that understood?”

“Yes Mama.”

“Now for the rest, I told you this morning you are too young to ride that far without me. You know the boundary rule with the bike and the house. What should you have done instead of riding across town to go and get the folder yourself?”

“Ask you or Ashley.”

“Yes, that would have been the responsible thing to do and don’t think for one moment little swan that I don’t know that was exactly what you were thinking when you left this office.” Taking a breath, she took little hands in hers before continuing. “I had no idea where you were and that scared me. You need to learn to stop and think through the decisions you make. We will continue to work on that. You have shown me that you cannot use your bike responsibly and so you will not have it to use for six days starting today.”

“But Mama… that’s part of spring break!” Tears over flowed and Emma stomped her foot in disappointment, dropping her chin to her chest.

Regina allowed the show of frustration, knowing that was a tough, but necessary consequence for the child. When the tears slowed she lifted that chin again. “That aside, there is the rule about wearing your helmet.” Regina pointed to the cast aside red safety hat at the end of the sofa. “Forgetting is inexcusable and I will not allow you to risk your safety. You also did something else very unsafe when Sheriff Nolan found you. Tell me about that.”

Emma shook her head, still hung up on the bike. She felt herself lifted up and held as she calmed down. “I crossed the street good all the way there. I pressed the button and waited. I didn’t on the way back. I cross the road not on the walk.”

“And why is that dangerous?” A hand rubbed a little back.

“Cause I can get hurt by a car.” A blonde head tucked in under a strong chin.
“Which is another reason your helmet is important, and why Mama is taking your bike away for a while.”

“S-sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I know baby. This is a tough lesson, but one you must learn.” Red lips found a cheek as she sat Emma back so they could see each other. “Your actions and choices were unsafe today. What is your consequence when that is that case?”


“When we get home. Right now I want you to start your homework. It’s getting late and Mama still has some work to do before we may leave.” She opened the folder and had Emma start with the assignment she had refused to do earlier, followed by reading practice and a short grammar sheet.

As they both worked, Emma kept stealing glances at her keeper, big thoughts pressing to be released. Shaking her hand out after writing the last word on verb paper, she went over to and leaned into the side of the Mayor’s chair. Without a word she was lifted up to sit and leaned back, watching as Regina’s name was written on paper after paper. The little one stepped aside for the big.

“Gina?”

“Yes, Emma?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t stop her today.” Green eyes watched that pen drop.

“You are not responsible for your little side’s choices, especially when you do not have control over the shifts any longer.”

“She’s sorry, though.”

“I know, and just as I do for you, I will hold her accountable.”
“Why?” Emma wondered aloud.

“Because I love you.” Regina found confused meadow colored eyes. “And because long ago we made a promise to each other that I fully intend to keep.”

“What promise?” The blonde wracked her brain for what that meant and couldn’t find that memory, yet that didn’t cause her panic.

“To always hold each other accountable. That is all I will say on that for now.” As Emma shifted back, the little girl’s hand found the gold necklace.

“Go home now?”

“Yes, baby. Time to go home.”

They walked in companionable silence. Emma itched to hop on the red seat, but walked her bike alongside her keeper. She was sad to see it tucked away in the garage with her helmet, knowing she wouldn’t see it for another 5 whole days. Once inside, dinner was a quick and easy affair of vegetable spaghetti. After which Emma was told to go up to her room.

Her tummy fluttered as she sat on the bed hugging Stitchy. She wasn’t kept waiting long as stocking covered feet entered the room and softly padded over. Tears started as she was stood up by her Mama’s right knee.

“Why have you earned a correction from me, sweet one?”

“I forgot my helmet and didn’t cross the road the right way.” Emma was lifted up and over the blue pencil skirt. Her own skirt was lifted. Tears fell then, knowing she had really blown it.

“That’s right. Being safe on your bike, wearing your helmet, and listening to me when I tell you to do, or not to do something is important Emma. I must always know where you are, as well. Leaving without permission is not okay.
“I know Mama.” Emma threw a hand back, only to have it grasped gently and held aside.

“No, you do not know or you would not be across my knee right now young lady.”

Regina rested her other hand against a small behind before drawing it back and beginning to teach the needed lesson. The girl’s cries stilled a little more than halfway through as she paused and released the small hand to join its’ mate.

“When you ride your bike, what must you always do?”

“Wear helmet and be safe and with you.” Emma sniffled.

“Yes and what about listening?”

“I have to with you…” She felt that hand leave again. “No more Mama.”

“A bit more, baby.” The Queen finished with attention to the spots where the bottom meets the thigh.

The girl was limp and crying softly at the end, glad to be turned upright and consoled. It had been a long day, but being rid of the guilt that had followed her around that afternoon was freeing. She was exhausted and yawned, wanting nothing more than to snuggle down to sleep with those arms around her.

“Are you mad that I didn’t listen to Sheriff Nolan?” Emma’s nerves settled as she was held tighter.

“Not under the circumstances, no, but that is a fine line we will discuss more tomorrow. For now, he shouldn’t have tried to parent you.”

“Cause that’s your job, huh?”

“More of a pleasure baby, not a job.” Regina shifted to lift the girl up.
“I wanna story and go sleep please.” Emma grabbed onto the brunette’s arm wanting to stay put.

“You need a bath first, sweet one.” At the teary groan that came from little lips and the ones slipping down cheeks she relented. “Just this once you may skip.”

Grateful Emma relaxed and nodded at the next words.

“You need to brush your teeth and wash your face at least.”

Regina stood the girl up and keeping constant contact helped the clingy child undress and change into a night gown. Taking a hand, she led the way to the bathroom and waited while tears were washed away and little teeth were shined up. Upon returning to the lavender room, they rocked and read as usual, their most recent book, Charlotte’s Web, was nearing the end and Emma was captivated with the relationship between the pig and the spider.

A thumb found a mouth and fingers traced the satin ribbon of the white blanket as the voice Regina used for Wilber was spoken.

“Why did you do all this for me?” He asked. “I don’t deserve it. I’ve never done anything for you.”

The child clung as the adult pushed to surface and the Queen’s voice changed tenor again.

“You have been my friend,” replied Charlotte. “That in itself is a tremendous thing.”

“Gina…” Emma struggled to speak as she lost the thumb and looked up at the Queen. “Is that one reason why you did this? The spell…because I was, am your friend?” Her memory whispered at something much deeper she couldn’t grasp as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

Regina placed a colorful book mark the child had made for her between the pages and set the novel aside. “You are much more than my friend, dear heart and right now you are my tired little girl.” She carried the child to bed and tucked the limp bundle in between clean sheets. The seams affixing the child’s place over the hole in her heart next to Henry vanished and it was as if Emma had always been there.

Still fragile, still healing, but nearly whole.

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Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White.

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A/N - Thanks for reading and as always I enjoy your thoughts.

Next time - With some magical assistance Emma finds a way for her big half to share her feelings with MM. A nightmare and the aftermath causes Regina make an important decision that will affect
the time they have left in this world.
Previously...

“Gina…” Emma struggled to speak as she lost the thumb and looked up at the Queen. “Is that one reason why you did this? The spell…because I was, am your friend?” Her memory whispered at something much deeper she couldn’t grasp as she struggled to keep her eyes open.

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Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White

The first Saturday morning of Spring Break dawned early. The Queen padded down the hall at 7:30 AM, her usual time awake on the weekend and eased quietly into the lavender room. Emma was sprawled out across the bed, limbs tangled between sheets and the duvet. As small as she was, the child took up most of the space. Regina gently brushed a finger across a pale cheek and smiled when the sleepy form roused.

“Good morning baby. Time to get up.”

“Saturday Mama, I sleepy.” Green eyes scrunched closed.

“That’s too bad…You’ll miss the arrival of your surprise then.”

“My what?” Both orbs popped open and she sat up rubbing her face.
The doorbell sounded downstairs and the Queen grinned at the puzzled expression coming from her charge. She scooped Emma up and together they descended the staircase. The girl wiggled to get down and rushed to the door, looking up for permission to open it. Receiving a nod, the small hand twisted the knob and threw open the door.

“You’re here!”

“Hey Ems!” Henry grunted as he caught the six year old hurricane that charged him. “Hi Mom, I’ve missed you both so much.” He smiled over tussled blonde curls at brown eyes.

Over a large breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and eggs, Emma learned Henry was just here for the weekend and that Paige couldn’t get away from work. Given the short time the girl was determined to make the most of it. Their day was filled with a video game challenge, baking cookies, lunch at Granny’s, a movie marathon, and a pizza eating contest Emma somehow won.

The end of the day had all three of them sitting in the lavender room on the white bed listening as Henry read a story he had written about an enchanted land with heroes and villains he was considering submitting for publication. As Emma dropped off two pairs of hands gently tucked the blonde in.

The next day was just as full with a trip to the Rec Center in the morning so Emma could show off her swimming skills to Henry and a lunch picnic at the park where they all fed the ducks, though most of the feathered creatures followed Emma around, recognizing her as one of their main food sources. Evening came too soon and after a quick homemade lasagna dinner the cab for Henry arrived. Emma was melancholy to see him go and hugged him tightly as he reassured her he’d visit again soon. When the door closed little arms begged her Mama to be held.

To help ease Henry leaving, Regina kept Emma’s days busy. She still had to go into the office, but took plenty of breaks in the work day to read to and play games with Emma. The evenings were filled with swimming classes and play dates with Gabe. On Tuesday Emma got her bike back and they rode to Town Hall that morning and to the park for the afternoon. That pattern repeated through Thursday and on Friday morning, after the little side had dominated the week big Emma surfaced at breakfast after much internal talk with her little about her needing the day with the Queen.

The brunette nearly dropped the spoon she was using to dish melon into a bowl of cottage cheese for Emma when her name came unexpectedly from those pink lips.

“Emma?”
“It’s me, Gina. I talked mini me into letting me being present today. I need a favor.” A bowl was set in front of her and she tucked into the cold meal.

“Oh, and what is that pray tell?” The Queen sipped her coffee, happy to see both halves of Emma willingly helping each other.

“So you know how MM had been coming to your office once a week to check in with the school fundraising project… Well I was kinda hoping I could talk to her today about some stuff.” Fingers played with the charm bracelet on her wrist.

“Emma, we’ve talked about this.” The reminder was gentle, but firm.

“I know, but I have an idea on how I can talk to her so I can get this stuff off my chest, like it’s really her and she won’t know. Just hear me out.” Big eyes begged, knowing that her prior attempts to get the Queen to let her have an adult conversation with MM had not been thought out.

Her first suggestion weeks back of sending an anonymous letter detailing all the stuff big Emma felt about her previous life was too telling and would do nothing but confuse the teacher and cause possible problems they didn’t need. She knew Regina would be supportive if she could just make the impact less on their current life.

A patient pause. “Go on.”

“I was thinking that you could use your magic to freeze her for a few minutes. She wouldn’t know any time had passed or what I said while frozen.”

Regina nodded, taking in the idea. “And you would be able to tell her exactly how you feel… Are you sure about this? You know this is just a version of her and she will not act differently upon being unfrozen. Will you be okay with that?” She was worried about the aftermath and the effect of Emma spilling her heart with no acknowledgment from the person she did it to.

A shrug. “I don’t know Gina. But I know this is something I need to do to feel better and let go of some of the anger I have in me. You asked me a while ago if I was ready to let some of it go and I wasn’t that day, but I am today.” She found her Keeper’s worried eyes. “Please help me?”
The Queen thought the scenario through from many perspectives and looked for possible weaknesses in the plan. It was doable, even with her limited magic, though only for a few minutes. Anything longer would strain her energy and she’d learned overexertion of power meant she’d be left with a sick headache. There would also be a price, one she wasn’t sure if big Emma was ready to pay. She was torn as the parent to the child half and the Keeper to the adult. Both roles had blended seamlessly for her a week ago and she couldn’t tell the difference anymore.

“There is a price in exposing your heart to her Emma, even if she doesn’t know it and can’t respond. In this life and our other one, you will always have the memory of her non reaction to your words, I feel, you need a reaction to. Telling her your feelings this way may not be the best course of action.”

“I’ll be fine Gina. She can’t hurt me.” Emma fought not to roll her eyes, wanting to be taken seriously.

“I’m not worried about her, I’m worried about you. As far as you have come dear heart, this is quite the undertaking and not something that will immediately heal a wound that runs deep inside of you.”

“I have to try.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Please Gina!” A whine. “It’s my decision to make.” A bare foot kicked the side of the counter.

“No. It is mine in this life.” Brown eyes were firm. “You are my responsibility, both of you.”

“I know, but right now I’m an adult. This is me telling you what I want.”

“I hear you quite clearly. Allow me some time to process your request.” She pointed to the half eaten bowl. “Now, finish your breakfast please.”

Emma sulked, but obeyed. She understood where the Queen was coming from and was grateful she had someone looking out for her best interests. Truly she hadn’t thought about what it would be like to not get a reaction to the anger she felt over the injustice of her early existence; the tree, foster care, the abuse, and… maybe just that last piece would be enough for now and it connected directly to what she was struggling with in her current life.
Taking the last bite of melon she cleared her bowl to the sink and went to stand by the Queen who was finishing the paper and coffee. “I have another idea Gina.”

A brow raised in question.

“Instead of telling her how I feel about everything, what if it was just one thing instead?”

“What is this one thing?”

“You’re right. Telling her exactly how I feel about my other childhood wouldn’t do me any good if I can’t have a response. Any response is better than none… But I need to tell her how I feel about this baby and what I should have told her when she asked me before Neal was born.”

She tried to gauge what the Queen was thinking, a hard feat, so she continued.

“I lied to her when she asked me if it was okay, if I was okay with them having another child when they were pregnant with Neal. Since I found out here again and it hurts here, I want to tell her here… Does that make sense?”

“I think so, yes. You still face the same concern I have about not getting a reaction to your feelings from her.”

“I know, but I have you to help me process it here in a way I won’t have when we return to our other life. My little will take over again when its’ over and Mama will make it better.” It was the first time adult lips spoke that term of endearment and she watched the effect it had on her Keeper.

Regina melted a bit in the chair, Emma had no idea what that hearing that word meant from those lips. “You are absolutely sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“I reserve the right to stop the conversation if I feel the need to or if you begin to speak about other
issues than just the pregnancy.”

An eager nod.

A long pause. “Alright.”

“Alright? Like I can?” Hopeful, Emma bounced.

“Yes.”

“YES! Thank you Gina!”

Arms wrapped around the Queen’s waist and hands traveled through blonde curls.

“Do you still want to ride your bike to the office today?”

“Oh heck yeah!” A gentle bop on the nose made her sneeze and she giggled. Little or not, she loved riding her bike any chance she got.

The rest of the morning passed uneventful, but as the afternoon appointment with Ms. Blanchard drew closer Emma’s stomach began to knot and she questioned whether her decision was still a sound one.

Regina watched closely over the course of the day, offering an ear and a cuddle when Emma seemed to need them.

The girl was coloring on the rug in front of the fire place across from the sofa when MM arrived. An activity she found she liked just as much as when her little half engaged in it, finding the motion of the crayon on paper relaxing. The adults greeted each other and shook hands. MM politely said hello to Emma who said a quiet hi in return. After a half hour of fundraising updates and next steps planned the familiar tingle of magic zapped through the air.

“Emma, come here.”
Regina pushed back from her desk and pulled Emma to stand between her knees. “Are you sure you still want to do this?”

A glance at a frozen MM with her hand on a round belly and mouth agape mid speech confirmed it for her. “Yeah, I do.”

Regina kissed a pale cheek and patted her lap. Emma hopped up and they spun around to face the teacher.

Green eyes looked up. “This is kinda weird Gina. How do I start?”

“Start at the beginning, perhaps with what you really wanted to say when she asked you if you were alright with them having Neal all those years ago.”

Emma nodded, turning back to the teacher. With a deep breath she began.

“I… I lied to you MM and David when I said I was okay with you having Neal. I was happy for you, but my heart hurt.” She struggled to breathe as her throat tightened. “You gave him what I always wanted, and it felt like you were replacing me with him, like I wasn’t e-enough. I still don’t feel like I was enough for you and that fu—really, really sucks.”

Her eyes burned, but she pushed on.

“And now when I’m finally getting to know what Neal must feel like, to be loved like that as a kid, you are going to have another one. This is supposed to be my second chance…Gina said so, not yours... Neal was yours!”

A fist pounded the desk and was gently taken by an olive hand.

“Now you get another perfect addition and part of me is happy for you both. I love my brother and I’ll love this one too, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. It hurts that I’ll never have that with you because you put me in that tree, willingly let me go when you could have fought for me. No one fought for me back then!”
“Emma.” A warning.

“I hate that you always get your way, that you never once let me have mine. Every time it’s my turn you make it about you.”

“Stay focused, Emma.” Regina prompted again as the girl veered the conversation off course into an area they didn’t agree upon.

The girl ignored her Keeper. “And that time you slapped me—”

“Enough.” Regina turned the angry child away from the teacher.

Green eyes blazed and shoulders shook with unsaid words.

“We had an agreement and you went off topic so we are done.” She explained calmly and lifted Emma off her lap with a pat to the red shorts, pointing to the sofa. “Go sit and take some deep breaths for me.”

Emma huffed knowing she blew her one chance, but obeyed. Magic filled the air again and she struggled to keep her mouth shut as the Mayor recapped the last point about the fundraiser before seeing MM out of the office until the following week. The teacher smiled her way and Emma nodded once sharply in return. As soon as that office door closed she jerked up off the couch and stormed towards her Keeper.

“I WASN’T DONE YET!” Emma yelled, chest heaving.

Her tummy tightened when her arm was taken gently and her bottom was popped once opening her eyes to what she had been blind to. Watery anger found the Queen’s calm and as the sting registered so did the realization at what she almost lost to MM; her power, what she struggled to gain back over the last 5 months.

Her legs gave out, body sinking to the floor and she burst into tears like a crumpled doll on the carpet.
Regina picked up the sobbing Savior and paced the room slowly with Emma on her hip, a movement she knew soothed the girl when she was this distraught. After several minutes when the shakes ceased she moved them to the sofa and sat.

“I-I’m sorry I didn’t mean t-to go there. J-Just happened.”

“I know baby.”

“It didn’t feel like I thought…” Arms squeezed tighter. “You were right.” She hid her face in that dark hair and inhaling the scent of vanilla and apples. “You are always right.”

“It’s not about being right, Emma, and I certainly did not want to be on this one.” Pulling the girl back a bit so their eyes could meet, she continued. “Regardless, I’m glad you were able to get a few words out that you needed to say and hopefully that will be enough until you can do this the way you need to when we return to our other life one day. I’ll be there to help you with that when the time comes.”

Emma searched the depths of those brown pools, finally ready to dive into them. “I love you Gina.” A tingle whipped through the little body and she could tell through the Queen’s.

"I love you too, my sweet girl."

More pieces moved into place for both of them; threads of the heart closing and a hole in another filling.

The adult half stayed present the rest of the day, not wanting to be far from her Keeper and through bedtime when she was read to and tucked in. She insisted the Queen sit with her until she fell asleep and asked for the song that brought her small half comfort. Not once did she feel at odds or uncomfortable with the exchange with her adult mind in place. It healed something she couldn’t explain inside and she pondered that as she drifted off.

At midnight a nightmare birthed within the little mind, a familiar defect Emma knew too well. Worse still she was aware she was dreaming and couldn’t do anything to stop the events in the dream scape from unfolding.
She was in her room at the mansion and stood by as her red suitcase was placed on the bed by hands she loved. Her purple shoes were first, then her swan bank and blanket. Jasper was placed in a water bag and put in her little hand. Emma screamed at herself to wake up as her dream self was led to the big white door in the foyer of her home.

Home.

The door opened and down the walk was the same grubby car that always took her away. This time MM and David were in the car waiting and Neal. They laughed and drove off without her. Emma was confused when she was pushed out the door and turned to see it close in her face. No one waited for her. No one wanted her.

No one.

She woke, drenched in sweat and tears, frantically untangling limbs from the blanket and beginning to cry when she wasn’t fast enough. Emma ran to the closet and checked to see that her suitcase was where it should be and then to book shelf where Jasper swam happily and then down the hall to the master bedroom. She body slammed the Queen on the bed, hysterical now as the light came on and she was wrapped up tight.

“Emma, baby, you are trembling. Did you have a bad dream?”

“N-nightmare.” Chin quivering as there was a distinct difference in her mind. She had lived this one or a version of it too many times to count.

“A nightmare then. Do you want to tell me about it?” Regina sat back against the headboard, Emma clutching her like a newborn’s fist on a finger.

“At first MM and David were t-there to take me, but then drove away and the door closed and no one wanted m-me. Y-you sent me away.”
The nightmare became real again and she stiffened in the arms holding her.

“Don’t send me away! I’ll be good—please!” Hysteria took over as the images flooded up from deep in her psyche. She was terrified of those arms leaving, of losing what she just now realized she needed to keep breathing.

Love.

Home.

And Regina was both.

“I won’t ever send you away. I promise Emma. That is not your reality and I will never allow it to be again.”

Emma cried until her eyes swelled and a cool compress was applied. She sat against Regina not moving for hours as waves of fear worked themselves out of her mind. It was nearly dawn when the little body went limp and the Keeper moved Emma flat onto the bed, spooning the hot bundle.

Regina knew today would be the day to return what was once taken. She wasn’t sure how much more time they would be here or what would come once those memories were returned, but at this point she was certain from big Emma’s revelation of love earlier that the Savior was ready for the awareness of their journey.

A little body stirred and settled. Whatever happened, Regina knew it would be an interesting adventure with the little one still in control. Much needed sleep took her as she pulled Emma close.

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A/N - Thoughts?

Next time - Flashback to the night of the spell before they began their journey. Regina returns the Savior's memories from before the spell and Emma gains clarity on several things.
Previously...

Regina knew today would be the day to return what was once taken. She wasn’t sure how much more time they would be here or what would come once those memories were returned, but at this point she was certain from big Emma’s revelation of love earlier that the Savior was ready for the awareness of their journey.

A little body stirred and settled. Whatever happened, Regina knew it would be an interesting adventure with the little one still in control. Much needed sleep took her as she pulled Emma close.

-Flash back… Night of the spell-

“Explain to me why we can’t do this at the same time?” Emma nervously eyed the twin bottles on the table of the study; one yellow and one purple.

Regina took up a twitching pale hand. “I have to secure your memories in the dream catcher first and store it where I will have access to it in our new life along with muting your magic. It will be but a few minutes and you will simply sleep until I drink mine. Once we have both consumed the potions the spell will begin.”

Green eyes became wet puddles. “I’ll miss you. I won’t remember any of this there.”

“You won’t know any different, dear heart and we will be together the whole time.”

“I’m scared.”
“Me too. A little bit anyway.” She felt Emma’s arms around her neck and she returned the embrace. “It will feel like time is moving as it should while we are there, but it will be only a moment here in this world. Last to sleep is first to wake. I will be waiting right here for you when we come back.”

Emma took the offered yellow bottle and uncorked it. “Love you.”

“And I you.”

As the liquid passed through pink lips and down that long neck Emma’s eyes rolled back and she fell forward into the Queen’s waiting arms. Regina settled the limp weight back on the couch and adjusted Emma’s body so she would be comfortable. She waved a hand over the resting blonde, muting the magic within until after they returned from the spell so it did not transfer into their new life. The brunette unclasped the swan necklace and heels went to the desk, returning with the spelled dreamcatcher.

Fingers took a moment to brush a stray strand free from the pale face before running the catcher over the blonde head. It shimmered and fragment after fragment began to web between the woven strands, sticking like droplets to a spider’s web after rain. When the last memory lifted she waved her hand over Emma, replacing what was taken with temporary memories where there were now holes.

She quickly stored the dreamcatcher and necklace where she could get to it in their new life; a spelled truck that acted as a transport between worlds. Taking a minute to think, she gestured above her hand in a circular motion. A tingle radiated through the house from Emma’s room upstairs. She had a feeling the decision she’d just made without the Savior would be needed upon their return and she doubted she’d have enough power to do it then.

The Queen settled back on the chaise and took a pained breath as she poured half of her magic into the little bottle between her fingers. The liquid grew hot then cooled as the last price of the spell was paid by the Keeper to be. Drained in a way she hadn’t felt like since before she had her powers Regina bit her lip, hating the vulnerability that took the magic’s place.

Determined, but shaking hands uncorked the purple bottle. With a silent toast to the Savior she downed the contents; the empty glass fell from relaxed fingers with a sound no one heard, rolling across the carpet.

“But why Mama? I wanna be with you!” Little Emma sulked over her granola and yogurt breakfast as Regina patiently explained the need for the big half to be present for the morning.
“I want you with me too baby and we will get that very soon. You were such a help yesterday to your big side and I’m proud of you for sharing. I need to speak with her for a while though and give something back that belongs to her.”

Little green eyes mulled that over and sighed. “If I let her can we have ice-cream later?”

A brow rose. “We will see, sweet one.”

“Okay… After breakfast you want her?”

“That would be best, yes.”

Emma ate slowly and read her comics. When she could scrape no more from the bowl nor drain a drop from the yellow mug, she cleared her place.

Big eyes opened. “Gina, what’s that?” A finger pointed to the conjured trunk in the middle of the kitchen, purple fumes leaving.

“That is something from our old life. Come stand here.” Regina directed, going to the trunk and opening the clasp. With her back to Emma she put something in her pocket and turned with the dreamcatcher in hand.

“How did—” Eyes bugged and Emma instinctively pulled back as the catcher came closer. “Gina what are you doing?”

“It’s alright Emma. Everything will make a lot more sense in a few minutes, I promise.” The Queen moved in front of the child and placed a soothing hand on the base of Emma’s neck to steady her. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” No hesitation, not after last night.

“Then you are ready to have these back. Hold still.”
“Gina what—”

Images hammered into the little blonde head in a spiral of purple smoke. They swirled, mixing words, sounds, tastes, and touch. Stomach cramping Emma doubled over as thoughts that were missing sorted back into their rightful places; tangled moments fighting for space, shuffling, twirling and then…her voice and Regina’s danced across her brain…

::::

“No one ever did that for me.” She said.

“Did what?”

“Held me.”

::::

“And how did that make you feel?”

“Fine, I guess. I mean it’s not like Ashley really hurt her. Kids need boundaries. I probably wouldn’t have tried half the shit I did as a kid if someone had cared enough to put me in line like that.”

::::

“But that’s just it. I never asked them to. I never asked to be the savior, or a princess, or a foster kid.” She ran a hand through her thick curls and dropped it loudly. “Sometimes I wish I could start over, you know? Before the system beat me to shit... I’d take that chance in a heartbeat.”

“Would you?”

“I like to think I would, but it’s impossible. I mean I wouldn’t trade having Henry in my life for anything, but it’s just nice to imagine something different, even if it can never be real.”
“You have a deal Miss Swan.”

They shook on it, not letting go just yet for the weight of that promise.

She snapped the fingers of her free hand and delightfully handed the Queen a glass of conjured cider before picking up her own. “Cheers to always calling each other on our bullshit!”

Crystal clinked softly.

She sank on to a carved wooden bench across from the Queen, letting her thoughts run. “If we did this, I can’t know that it was my choice. There would be no point going through all of it.”

Brown brows furrowed. “Why ever not?”

“Because I want it too much and everything I’ve ever wanted I’ve royally screwed up.” Tears burned behind emeralds. “Every family I was with gave me back. I liked school for a little while, but I was always moved, I didn’t really graduate. Then there was being homeless, Neal, stealing, jail, giving Henry up, my parents... I fucked up everything I touched. And I’ll fuck this up too, if I want it as much as I do.” She didn’t realize she was crying until warm arms encircled her.

“This is your childhood we are talking about Emma. We get one opportunity to get this right. I am a planner and I do not do anything halfway. It is all in on both our accounts, or we do nothing. What is your choice?”

“All in.” No hesitation and to show her sincerity she picked up the notebook and with pen in hand started writing.
“Can you at least tell me if it is dangerous or harmful to anyone?”

“I can assure you the price of the spell is neither dangerous nor harmful. It is something very personal and one that I am willing to pay. Consider it my gift to you for casting the dark curse and causing you the hurt you experienced in the first place. I’d appreciate your respect to my privacy on the specifics of that right now.”

She winced. “You’ve more than made up for that Regina. Henry and you have bounced back and you guys are closer than ever. Even my parents are okay and with all the times we’ve saved this town from some kind of magical disaster, I’d say the score is even.”

Regina crossed her arms and sighed. “Maybe to everyone else, but my score is not settled with you.”

She took the offered box and bit her lip. “You didn’t have to Regina.” Pale hands slipped the blue ribbon aside and opened the lid. A bottom lip sucked inwards and she tasted her own salt a moment later as eyes rested on the fine chain with silver swan pendant. There was a tiny diamond chip for the swan’s eye that winked up at her.

Knowing hands reached for the necklace and Regina stepped behind her to fasten it around that long neck. “In two years time in our new life your little half will receive its’ mate as a matching set. Until then this will be a reminder.”

“I love Neal, I do, so much and I’m happy my parents have him…”

“But it still hurts.”

“So fucking much!” Boot heels kicked the table hard. She grabbed her swan pendent around her
neck, gifted by the Queen and sighed. “He’s cute and squishy and smart and everything I never was. It’s like God has this twisted sense of humor when it comes to me and I never got my turn.”

“You will have your turn soon.”

:::

“Anything else I should know?”

“Don’t make me a promise you can’t keep.” She knew that went without saying, but she wanted to hear the Queen’s usual answer.

“I never do.”

:::

“Besides, after the spell, there will be side effects we will need to work through. Being close by in the mansion and being used to that, would help with those effects.”

Green eyes darted back and forth in thought then settled on those words. “Maybe…yeah. That could work. For the spell, I mean.” Lips curled in tightly then relaxed. “I practically live here anyway.”

“Then it’s settled.” A small smile hinted at burgundy lips.

:::

“I’m jealous now. That’s another reason why I’m kind of scared. I don’t want to be mean to you or to them. Don’t let me be brat Regina. Once I have my memories back I won’t be alright knowing I made them unhappy.” Teeth chewed a lower lip as the dark glasses were removed and set aside.

“I will not allow that and you know it, but I will also not allow them to mistreat you.”
“I will be waiting right here for you when we come back.”

She took the offered yellow bottle and uncorked it. “Love you.”

“And I you.”

Emma gasped, throwing her head back as her mind became whole. “We’re here. You did it… I… I…”

“Are you alright?” Regina dropped the catcher on the counter and cupped the child’s face with both hands.

“Yeah, I just… It’s a lot.” Hands went automatically to her throat and panicked. “Where is my—”

“I have it right here. Hold up your hair.” Regina pulled the necklace from her pocket and settled the silver she missed seeing around the small neck.

The chain was longer than Emma was used to, but the cool sensation and the comforting weight felt the same. She took a quiet moment to finger it and compare the two swans, the Queen’s gift from years ago finally made sense.

One swan for each half.

“Welcome home.” Regina’s eyes misted.

“I know I didn’t know any differently, but I missed you so much.” Emma threw her arms around her Keeper’s legs.
“I missed you too, dear heart.”

Arms tightened. “So what happens now? Don’t tell me it’s over already?! I’m not done yet!”

Regina lifted Emma to her hip, smoothing the collar of the pretty blue dress. “I know you are not finished. We simply continue on as we have until you experience what you need to.”

“I thought the spell would break when you gave me my memories back and when both sides of me trusted you.” She rested her head against a heart she no longer had a desire to fight.

“Emotions and your past are much more complicated than that. Regardless, it was time to return them to you and honestly I couldn’t wait to have you fully back. I missed my girl.”

“I’m here now.” Their eyes met. “Do I still have to go to school?” Sticking out her tongue with a wink, Emma squealed as she was tickled mercilessly.

“You do. That is part of the experience.” The Queen gifted a raspberry to a little cheek.

“Love you.”

“And, I you.” She felt a wiggling body return against her side.

“This is pretty, Mama.” Little hands played with the new addition around her neck.

“It is, and you must treat it with the same care as you do your bracelet, sweet one.”

“I will… My head feels funny.” A kiss to her forehead followed.

“That will go away soon. It is your big half’s memories settling in.”

Emma silently conversed and beamed up brightly. “She says thank you for everything and that we
deserve ice-cream after lunch.”

“She does?”

“Mnhhhmm!” A knowing nod and more wiggles as she was set down. “And she says hang on to your broomstick ‘cause she’s bbaaaaccckkk!”

‘And I wouldn’t have it any other way.’ Regina thought as she chased the giggling girl with tickle hands out of the kitchen.

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A/N - More chapters to come now that Emma has her memories as we wrap up this part of their journey.

Next Time - Emma finally learns her keeper's full price of the spell that gifted her a do over and little shenanigans take place at the diner as Emma learns what the approach of summer has in store.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

A/N- So I am not a huge fan of social media, but I bit the bullet and got a Tumbler account and posted some Fan Art from this story (what you've seen so far, but in one place). I am new to photo editing, so be gentle, but it's been fun to play with. :-) littleswanlover on Tumber

Previously...

Emma silently conversed and beamed up brightly. "She says thank you for everything and that we deserve ice-cream after lunch."

"She does?"

"Mnhhhmm!" A knowing nod and more wiggles as she was set down. "And she says hang on to your broomstick 'cause she's bbaaaaaccccckkk!"

'And I wouldn't have it any other way.' Regina thought as she chased the giggling girl with tickle hands out of the kitchen.

Emma having her memories back had a profound effect on the both halves. They shared present space more fluidly, each with the ease of a child's mind. The Savior was relishing the experience from both sets of eyes, enjoying the freedom in just being a kid. Her little side was still dominant and in control of the shifts, but willingly allowed the adult half to have time with the Queen.

She stopped thinking so hard about everything and their relationship, now knowing she wanted this experience, was richer. Where the adult half had taken for granted the time spent at the pond, on a warm lap, reading together, or even getting help with homework now seemed precious. The little side enjoyed her big half’s playful nature and they were often in cahoots in a prank or mischief of a kind. Their most recent a game of hide and seek they didn't tell the Queen they were all playing. A frantic hour of searching the house and yard turned up a giggling girl in the tool shed. Emma learned to make sure her Keeper knew when that particular game was being played and Regina remembered what life had been like with the blonde before the spell.

Life was easier until it wasn't.

The first week of May brought turbulence as big Emma began to wonder about what was never answered about the spell; her Keeper's full price. She knew two things, one was the price of the Queen's reservoir of power and the other was something deeply personal Regina had promised she'd share when ready. The second chance they were living had a heavy fee and Emma was determined to figure out what it was and somehow repay the cost.

It was a Thursday evening and they had just gotten home from swimming. Emma was fresh out of bath and finishing her homework at the kitchen counter as Regina cooked, a stuffed chicken breast vegetable combo that smelled of sweet spices. The little half had gladly allowed her adult side to take
over when it came time to do homework.

"Gina, what's this word?" An eraser tapped the page of math problems.

"Let's see... disaggregate. It means to separate or take apart." The regal silently read the directions, shaking her head at the new math children were expected to navigate. "You have to take the numbers apart and create an addition number sentence. Here you have the number 23. You could create many different math problems from that number, like 20 + 3 = 23, or 10 + 10 + 3 = 23."

"Why don't they just say that? Big words suck."

She rolled her eyes and finished the last set of problems with ease. As she closed her folder, she watched Regina taste test the red sauce for the chicken and smiled when she was offered the spoon after. Lips smacked and she gave two thumbs up.

"That good, really?"

"Mmmhhmmm. Hey Gina? I wanna know something."

"What is that, dear heart?" Turning back to the stove to stir the sauce.

"What was the other price you paid?"

Dark eyes misted at the casual slap of a curve ball and refocused on the red simmering liquid. "I'm not ready to discuss that right now. Wash your hands please."

Emma shifted over to the sink. "But I tell you stuff." She ran warm water over her hands and sighed when she was reminded to use soap.

"Yes you do and we share a lot of things between us. This is one that I will share with you when I am ready."

"What would make you ready?" Emma couldn't help pushing as she accepted the offered silverware bundle.

"Time and your respect that this is my decision." The Queen sent the girl into the dining room with a pat and returned to the stove to remove the entrée.

Small feet returned a minute later and stood watching as her food was plated and cut up. "For the record, I do respect your decision, and you Gina." Following heels into the dining room, she took her place and put the napkin on her lap as she'd been taught in both lives. "I just reaaaallllly wanna know."

Eyebrow raised, Regina began to delicately slice the meat on her plate, a silent signal the child knew well.

A full minute of chewing, Emma counted to be sure, before trying again. "Please?"

"Emma, enough. How is your food?"

"Balls to the wall amazing, like always." Cheeky as she dared to be.

"Careful, dear." Gentle chiding between sips of wine. "Though, my cooking has never had the honor of that distinction, thank you."

A fork scraped as the girl scooped sauce onto the chicken. "Soooo... was it something big or small?"
"Emma."

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"No." The Queen sighed.

Big eyes blinked. "Nooooo, like it's not one of those?"

"Just no Emma. Do you remember what I told you about people sometimes not wanting to answer personal questions and that when that is the case, you need to be respectful of their choices?"

"Yeah."

"And why did I say that?"

"Cause they are people too, but you're not a person."

Brows arched in surprise.

Emma quickly pulled her foot from her mouth. "I mean you're more than just a person. You're Gina…like Wonder Woman on steroids, but with way more class and you do it in Fu…F—me heels." She took a proud bite of chicken and chewed with a smirk.

Though amused at the comparison, Regina was not at the modified 'f' word. "Language Emma."

"What? I couldn't do half what you do and certainly not in your heels."

"You have worn my heels before, a few times I might add and willingly."

Teasing edged her tone as she took another sip of wine, enjoying the rich banter she'd missed the last several months as Emma sputtered, milk nearly spraying across the table.

"Correction." A finger shot up to save her pride. "Mini-me has worn your heels and dress up doesn't count."

"You were adorable none the less and I have photo evidence."

"So not fair!" Emma grumbled and stabbed a piece of meat refocusing on her main point. "Just give me a hint, pretty please, about the price."

Dark locks shook. "I already gave you my answer and any more discussion about it will result with your nose in a corner."

Pink pouting lips wrapped around a fork. She kept eating, trying to shift her mind to another topic, but it ate at her like ants on an apple core.

"Can I at least tell you why I wanna know?"

A patient red mouth parted and seeing the sincere plea in green eyes, relented. "Go ahead."

"I wanna know so I can thank you. Whatever you gave up had to of been bigger than just your magic, which was like a shi—a ton by itself. You said it was personal and I just wanna make sure you are okay." Biting her lip in wait as the eyes she loved moved far away for a moment before returning.

"Come here, baby." Regina scooted back and accepted the girl up onto her lap. "I don't mean to be
evasive with you and I appreciate your concern—"

"But…" Emma crossed her arms.

"But nothing." Two fingers lifted a chin. "And I understand your curiosity. I will tell you I gave up this price over two years ago when I first began to craft the spell and I've learned to adapt."

"But something. You shouldn't have had to adapt, not for me." Emma pulled her chin away and thought. 'I'm not worth it.'

"Look at me… There will be no negative self talk." The brunette easily saw through the mask of a pout into that little head. "The rule we have in place for that still applies here. You are worth everything that was paid and more."

"Every what Gina?" Their eyes locked. "Just tell me."

Hesitancy and want rested between them.

"It's me Gina, all of me is here right now. I can handle it." Emma begged; ready to try to return whatever was given or die trying.

A pause from the Queen teetered on a wire, balancing on the need coming from her girl to know.

"This was my choice. You need to accept that here and now. I knew the price before we even started this process and if we were to go back and start over I'd do it all again. Will you accept that?"

"Yeah, I get it. It was your choice; no one made you do it." The blonde nodded.

Teeth nicked an inner cheek. "My memories of Daniel."

Static air.

"Which one?"

A metallic taste flooded Regina's mouth. "All of them."

Panic. "But-but-but you still know who he is, right, like you're talking about him now?"

"Yes, but… his face... all details of those memories are gone." Pain framed her mouth.

Emma sagged as the space between them grew. "That's too much. You paid too much." The rug pulled clean from under her feet. There was no replacing that significance in her Keeper's heart... and it had been done with her happiness in mind. "He was everything to you."

"He was at a time long ago." Regina reached to tuck a curl behind the curve of an ear. "I've grown and changed much since then. I had Henry to help me begin again and now you helping me heal this piece."

Emerald clouds darkened threatening rain. "You shouldn't have done that Gina." Fists clenched and another biting thought came. 'Not for me."

"It was my decision to make Emma. The price was freely given. You asked me and I am being honest with you as I always have been."

Now frustrated that she had said anything before she was ready. She owned that decision and would not blame the Savior for it. Though, the blonde's anger about it, strummed a red cord.
Emma wiggled off that lap needing space and crossed the room.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm done eating."

She felt sick with disbelief over what the Queen assured she was worth. Old coping mechanisms pulled her mind and body away from the brunette. In her gut she knew Regina had exposed a wound only at her insistence and she wanted nothing more than to press a hand over the blood flow, but her own self doubt prevented that motion. Feet stilled automatically at her Keeper's voice.

"You have not been excused." Expected words that kept the tie between them, reminding the girl of their rules, and the underlying meaning of why they had them.

Out of respect and habits that had become deeply ingrained Emma returned to her seat and picked up the fork, finishing her dinner over the next few minutes. The fork hit the table with a thud when she was done. Pushing back as she always did when upset, needing the Queen to show her where the line was again. One firm, but loving look from the across the table was all it took for the anxiety she felt to ease up.

"May I be excused, please?" Still defensive, but trying.

"Emma… We should—"

"Please Gina?"

Resigned for the moment. "Clear your place, then." Eyes found the clock as small hands gathered dishes to leave. "It's getting late. Brush your teeth. I'll be up to tuck you in shortly."

The girl hurried upstairs, scrubbed her teeth with half a heart, and dove under the covers as liquid dripped down cheeks like running wax when a candle burns too bright. Salt mixed with peppermint in her mouth and after a few minutes sobs rang in the room. In a bright blur the weight of the blankets lifted and a new weight settled along her front. Emma buried her wet little face into clean red cotton and a heart beat steadily near her ear. They laid together in the quiet of their own thoughts.

One ached to accept the truth from one who never lied.

The other pondered how to cross the space stuck between them.

A green bridge appeared.

"Are y-you really okay Gina?"

Dark eyes welled. "I'm getting there." Regina eased down under the covers. "Every day is a bit better than the one before."

"Baby steps." A soothing echo learned from her Keeper.

"For both of us."

"I'm sorry I forced you to tell me. I should have quit when you told me too."

"It was my choice to tell you. I didn't have to right then."

"But you did… Why?"
"You seemed in need of knowing."

Emma propped up on an elbow, wiping her eyes. "You always put me first and I reacted like an ass when you told me what you sacrificed for me."

"Language." A hand found a bottom to pat under the duvet.

Rubbing and a small watery smirk at the gentle correction followed. "Really Gina? I'm trying to own up here." Serious eyes took over. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you for your apology." Whispering as little lips pecked her cheek.

Emma was still upset over the price paid on her behalf, but content in the arms that held her. As she snuggled down vowing to find a way to repay the gift, their lullaby sang by the Queen reached the ache inside their hearts enough that dreams soon came for both of them.

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The taste of summer filled Emma's mouth and the promise of freedom soon to come dripped down a pointed chin, caught by napkin. She fussed at having her sticky face wiped and slid back in the booth at Granny's where she'd been allowed a small chocolate ice-cream cone after lunch on a Saturday afternoon. The red vinyl stuck to her thighs as the heat of May rushed in the diner door with new customers.

There were only a few weeks of school left and Emma was excited for the stretch of time free from homework, books, and routine. In her little mind she saw lazy days of sleeping in until noon, swimming at the Rec Center, playing video games, picnics, riding her bike, and maybe a trip somewhere fun. She forgot one important detail; her Mama was the Mayor and a Queen. She was also Regina who did not have an unplanned bone in her body.

"How do you feel about the day camps I mentioned?" Regina cast a side glance at her chocolate faced girl as she finished a salad. "There is an art one I think you would really enjoy."

A shrug and a lick to catch a drip. "I don't know."

"Well, you have plenty of choices and some time to think about them." Smiling at the wide eyes looking up at her.

"I wanna play a lot. Big me says we want un-struct-ured time… What's that mean?"

"It means without a schedule or a plan."

"Oh… That doesn't sound good."

Emma finished her cone as her big half internally shared the benefits of said unstructured time, but the little half was done entertaining the idea.

"Mama, tell her to stop. She keeps poking my brain." The girl whispered and accepted the wet wipe to clean her hands.

"Let me speak with her for a moment."

"She says no cause she'll make you get your scrunchy face on."

"She is not allowed to tell me no and neither are you, sweet one."
At the reminder the adult half was allowed to step forward. "I don't want to go to camp. I want to have fun and not be in a routine."

"I understand that and tell me, how has that worked out for you in the past?"

A twitch. "Perfect cause I could do what I wanted."

"And?"

Rolling green eyes. "And that's not the point of being here or how we work." She slumped in the booth. Her eyes found the brochures for camps on the table, catching the price of the one she actually wanted to go to. A hot wave of guilt washed through.

Regina caught Emma's chin for one last wipe with a napkin, noting the clouds in green eyes. "You need a routine and there will be plenty of fun and freedom woven in, I promise."

Little shoulders relaxed at the last two words. "But they are really expensive."

"That is nothing you need to be concerned with."

"But I am concerned. You spend a ton on me as it is."

Regina took a small hand and massaged the white knuckles. "What is our rule on that?"

"What's yours is mine and mine is yours." An echo from another life.

A manicured finger tapped a colorful paint splashed cover. "The art camp is three days a week, same as school hours. You would still have swimming in the evenings and time with me at Town Hall on days in between, or Ruby could sit for you if—"

"No, I want to be with you."

"Then you will be. I have more flexibility in my schedule during the summer and I plan on taking a few long weekends so we may travel or just hang out, as you like to put it."

"What about bedtime? Can I stay up later?"

"We shall see."

A huff. "That always means no."

A familiar voice interrupted them. "Will there be anything else Regina?"

"No thank you Ruby, just the check please."

The she wolf tilted her head at a sour faced Emma. "Hey, how was the ice cream little swan?"


"What's up?" The red head began to stack the empty plates.

"Hypothetically articulating, don't you believe someone who is technically mature enough should be able maintain their autonomy to stay up as belatedly as they fancy?"

Ruby's jaw dropped as her eyes found the Mayor's.

"New vocabulary words. She's a sponge at this age." The Mayor covered efficiently, raising a brow
at the giggling girl next to her when the waitress left.

"What?" Emma shrugged innocently as she dared. "I'm a sponge."

"A naughty one with an early bedtime tonight." Teasing as she opened her purse.

"Awwww, come on. It was funny!"

They slid out of the booth as money was left on the table when the check dropped. Emma took her Keeper's hand as they walked home, thoughts of the fun summer ahead dancing through her mind.

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Next time - Emma celebrates Mama's Day and learns what her Keeper means by follow through.

After that four chapters left, then the epilogue... If you have enjoyed this story and have not had a chance to comment, please consider doing so, no matter what your thoughts. Authors live for feedback and we invest a lot of time into crafting tales to share. Those that have left Kudos and comments, THANK YOU! This journey had been amazing and I'm grateful to have been able to share this with you all.

:-) Cheers!
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

A/N - Thank you to those that have shared your thoughts about this story with me. I am amazed at the many different things this means to people and what each of you gets out of it. :-) Enjoy!

Previously...

"What?" Emma shrugged innocently as she dared. "I'm a sponge."

"A naughty one with an early bedtime tonight." Teasing as she opened her purse.

"Awwwww, come on. It was funny!"

They slid out of the booth as money was left on the table when the check dropped. Emma took her Keeper's hand as they walked home, thoughts of the fun summer ahead dancing through her mind.

The next morning the child Emma was awoke to beeping coming from her swan clock. She'd finally figured out how to set the alarm on it and wanted to be up extra early in order to have the surprise she was planning ready by the time her Mama woke up. Little feet darted to the closet and got dressed in her favorite red shorts and flower t-shirt, red socks followed. After brushing her hair and putting on her yellow headband with matching magnetic earrings she hurried downstairs with the card and drawing she'd made at school.

Emma made quick work of propping up the card and gift in her Mama's spot. The paper from the front mail slot followed. She used her stool to retrieve the mug Regina fancied for coffee and set in under the Keurig, but didn't dare press the heat button to brew. Little hands pulled out a bowl from the fridge and spoon, scooping fruit salad onto a plate with a croissant from the bread box. It was as close as she could come to 'cooking' breakfast. As she cleaned up her mess she realized that something was missing.

"Flowers! I gots to get flowers!" She grinned mischievously as an idea came, ignoring her big half's words of warning.

Dragging her stool over to the back porch door, she undid the lock and ran across the grass to the hedge that separated their lawn from cranky Nurse Ratched next door. The woman always shouted at her to stay off the front lawn when she played with her ball too close, and had the yappy dog that never shut up when Emma rode past on her bike.

There across the way were the Nurse's prized lilacs and daffodils. She liked the idea of purple and yellow flowers and ducked under the hedge to pluck a few, more than a few actually. With full arms she scampered back home and worked to arrange the flowers in a vase with water, which she hid in the bottom of the pantry for a surprise later. Just as she was closing the cabinet door she heard a gasp behind her.

Regina covered her mouth at the display of her favorite breakfast and the card with a scrawled 'Haply
"Mamas dae!' on it. At the arms wrapping around her legs she looked down with a smile.

"Happy Mama's day Mama! I made you breakfast, but I didn't cook it hot and your mug is ready for coffee and can I press the button now?" Emma hopped with hope.

"Good morning baby, you certainly have been busy." Regina scooped up the child and walked over to the Keurig and allowed Emma to press the brew button.

The girl wiggled and leaned over to point at the gift. "Looky at what I made." As her bottom met the counter top she pulled the drawing over. "That's you and me Mama, and watch this."

Little fingers traced the faces side by side and went to open the envelope that had been glued under the colorful depictions. Inside were many different hats that attached to the top of each head through a little slot like a paper doll would wear. Emma made a show of putting hat after hat on the drawing of Regina's head and there was a story for each one.

"The nurse hat is for when you putted a band-aid on my knee when I fell from my bike, and the fire fighter hat is from when you saved Jasper from the disposal and the police hate is for when I get in trouble sometimes and you help me be better and…" On it went until there were no hats left. "I like it this way the best though."

Regina's struggled for words, emotions stuck in her throat as she stared at the empty heads side by side. "Oh?"

"Yeah, you don't need a special hat to be our Mama."

"Thank you, baby."

"Mama we eat now? I'm starving!" Emma used her stool to slide off the counter. Together they ate the croissant and fruit and shared the parts of the paper they each liked.

After several minutes once her emotions settled the Queen noticed a smudge of dirt on the girl's cheek and went to wipe it with a napkin.

"Mama!"

"Hold still Emma. How did you manage to get dirt on your cheek at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning?"

"Oh yeah! I have a surprise for you!" Emma pulled away and went to the cabinet, returning with a large vase full of yellow and purple flowers. "Do you like them?"

Shocked that the arrangement was nearly bigger than Emma with the tall branches sticking out of her largest vase Regina quickly moved to take it from the struggling girl, placing the arrangement on top of the counter. Chunks of dirt floated in the bottom of the crystal and the Queen had an inkling her Emma had been into some mischief that morning. She turned with a question on her lips just as a knock thundered through the house.

"Uh oh." Emma squeaked and hid behind that grey robe.

"Uh oh?" Regina moved towards the door as little anxious feet followed. "Emma?"

"You like them right Mama?"

"They are beautiful baby, but where did you—"
The knocking came harder.

Emma stalled in the middle of the foyer, twisting the collar of her shirt as the door opened and a pink faced Nurse Ratched immediately lit into the Mayor.

"Your little rascal—"

"My rascal has a name, Ms. Ratched." A hand on her hip, the Queen squared off.

The nurse pointed a knobby finger at the child. "She stole from me."

"Emma knows better than to steal."

"Mama…"

At that affection Regina looked over her shoulder and saw guilty green eyes. With a sigh and turning back to the Nurse, one damning grass stained red sock was held up. The Queen put the puzzle together; the dirt smudge, the sock, and the flowers. She crooked a finger, a silent signal for Emma to come forward.

One little bare foot toed the tile as the Queen knelt down to be eye level. The heat poured off the Nurse and flooded the foyer around them.

"I have a pretty good idea where those beautiful flowers came from, but I want to hear it from you, sweet one."

Emma gave a side glance at the Nurse and sucked a lower lip. "I needed to give you flowers for Mama's day and I liked that they were purple and yellow. Those are our colors."

"As thoughtful as your gift was, those flowers were not yours to give." The last thing Regina wanted to do was scold or discipline, not after their sweet morning, but she would if her child needed direction.

"I just borrowed them." Emma whined as she pulled back and her chin was caught.

"Taking something that doesn't belong to you without the owner's permission is stealing Emma. You know that and you owe Ms. Ratched an apology." Standing, Regina turned the child towards their neighbor.

Emma struggled to spit the words out, unable to get the images of the yelling cranky Nurse out of her mind. Hands gently squeezed her shoulders, another silent reminder. "Sorry about your dumb flowers."

"Emma Swan Mills."

A foot stomp earned Emma a sharp look. "But Mama she's MEAN all the time!" Eyes stubbornly looked straight up and ignored the warning pat to the seat of her shorts.

"My study, find your corner please."

"But—"

"Now Emma."

Tight jawed, the girl stalked heavily away.
Regina turned back to their neighbor and assured that the situation would never happen again. The Nurse left less than happy. Closing the door, the brunette ran hands briskly over her face to ease the tension and sighed when she heard a steady banging coming from across the way in the depths of her office. She found Emma sitting in her desk chair spinning side to side, thumping the head rest into the wall with the movement.

"I gave you an instruction Emma. You are to be time out, not in my chair." Patient despite the glare she was getting.

More defiant thumping.

Slipper covered feet moved to the desk and pulled the child up who decided then and there to become dead weight. The Queen put Emma to the face corner, but the girl immediately stepped out when she walked back across the room.

"No." Arms crossing, Emma huffed.

"I see that you are upset with me and you need a few minutes to calm down. I will start your timer when you are standing where I put you."

"No!" A challenge covered by anger over her actions that spoiled the morning.

"Do you want to talk before your time out?" Offering a chance to speak if that's what the child needed first.

"Noooooo!"

A sigh. "Enough. You do not tell me no. That is not how we work."

Regina calmly went and escorted the girl back to the corner, staying close in case those little feet moved again, which they did. They played the back and forth game three times with an added 'no' from little lips each time.

"Emma you may serve your time out before we speak with or without a little reminder to accompany it. That choice is yours. Step out of this corner again and I will put you right across my lap."

Regina refused to allow the pattern to continue knowing this was sometimes how Emma tested her. As close as the little half and her had grown there were still hints of uncertainty on just how committed the Queen was to her role.

The child heeded the warning for all of thirty seconds before turning to look with narrowed eyes at her Keeper who sat on the chaise. One socked foot took a daring step out, then two.

"Come here then."

Emma froze and hopped back quickly, hesitant to move again when a regal finger pointed to the floor by grey slippers.

"I don't want to."

But the look Emma was getting made her feet obey. Tears threatened as the reality of her mistake took hold and she tried to still the hands that went to her waist as she was pulled across those familiar knees.

"No Mama!"
"You know the rules in our home Emma and you know me well enough that I will always follow through with what I say I will do. I do not appreciate your attitude or disrespect when I tell you to do something."

Emma's tummy tightened when a hand came down in a firm pat across her shorts. She gave a kick and stilled when that same hand simply rested on her behind for a moment.

Regina shook her head seeing her girl was deciding to be stubborn.

One more pat finally coaxed a brain to start working. "I'm sorry! I'll do my time out."

Regina paused, glad two were sufficient to make her point and break Emma out of whatever near sighted head space the child had been in. She righted the sniffling girl and offered a hug before standing with a compliant hand in hers.

"Let's go."

The girl was walked back to the corner and stood facing the wall. Her body buzzed with warmth both from the swats and from her actions. She'd been a brat and on day when she shouldn't of been. Cries started small then became noisy ones. As soon as she heard the chime of release from the cell timer she ran into open arms, grateful they were there to hold her.

"Are you ready to speak nicely and listen to Mama?"

Sniffling Emma rubbed her eyes with a fist. "Yeah, I'm sorry I said no."

"Thank you for your apology, I think you also owe one to Ms. Ratched and we will take care of that when we are finished here." Regina ran a hand through blonde curls and straightened the headband. "Tell me about this morning and the flowers."

"I wanted to get you something nice and 'membered that there were flowers next door. They are our colors, too. So I borrowed…took some." She corrected when she caught an expectant brow. "I didn't think about it like you said. I didn't mean to steal them." Looking up through wet lashes at her Keeper.

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness this morning and I was very surprised by your sweet gifts. That aside, we've talked about Ms. Ratched's yard a few times and her flowers which you have taken once before."

Recalling the incident last month where Emma had 'borrowed' the little white flowers that grew along the front fence of the Nurse's yard for a mud cake she'd wanted to decorate. They had talked at length about personal property and Emma had been warned to stay out of the Nurse's yard repeatedly.

"And you went outside of the house without my knowing, which you know better than to do."

"I havta ask."

"Yes, you do. I know you feel Ms. Ratched is stern, but she is really rather lonely Emma and her garden brings her a lot of joy." Regina knew from the sometimes friendly conversations she'd had with the woman over the hedge as they traded gardening tips as Emma played nearby. "I think her feelings may have been hurt a few times today; when her flowers disappeared from her yard and when you called her mean."

"She is sometimes though." A pout.
"You may have your feelings, but your actions are mine to right and no matter how well your intentions you were, you know better than to leave the house without asking, go into our neighbor's yard and to take something that doesn't belong to you."

Summarizing and hugging the girl close when tears ran down little cheeks. She truly hated the idea of punishing today, but knew both sides of the blonde needed her to follow through.

"I'm sorry though."

"You can show me that over the next few afternoons when you are helping me in our backyard by weeding the flower beds. It seems you need an appreciation for the time and work that goes into nurturing growing things. That will help you not to be quick about plucking flowers other hands have tended."

Emma wrinkled her nose at the thought. She liked watering and even planting, but weeding was boring and took forever. As her actions sunk in and she was kissed, both sides of her finally knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that her Keeper would follow through every single time with intensity and heart that only Regina possessed. Hints about the value of her own self worth seeped in from her big half and little Emma struggled to push them back.

"I didn't mean to be bad."

Regina cupped a cheek. "You are not bad, never ever. You did not make some good choices today and I know you will make better ones next time. You are a very loving girl and you have a big heart. How do you think we can make this better with Ms. Ratched?"

"I need to say sorry and maybe do something nice for her. I can draw a good picture and take the flowers back, too."

"That sounds like a wonderful plan, baby. You may work on that in the living room while I change and then we will walk over so you may apologize."

Emma squeezed one more hug out of the Queen and went to make her picture. Regina followed after a few minutes of quiet reflection she always took after Emma spent any time over her lap and headed upstairs. A half hour later they both stood hand in hand on Nurse Ratched's porch. The tall knobby woman answered and Emma tried to keep her ground as she offered up the vase of flowers she'd taken.

"I'm sorry I took these from you. I thought I was doing something nice for my Mama, but she taught me it was something that hurt your feelings. I'm sorry too for calling you mean and here is a picture I made. It's you and your dog in your pretty garden." Offering up her drawing to well worked hands.

The old Nurse softened at the picture and with a small wink to the Mayor she leaned down to better look at the child. "You know, my dog's name is Wilber and he sometimes needs a friend to play with. Maybe you two can play while your Mama and I talk about gardening sometime."

"I know a Wilber too, but he's a pig and a spider saved him and they are best friends. Mama? Can I please?"

"Yes, baby." To the Nurse. "That is very kind of you and I would actually love to pick your brain about Hyacinths."

A smile offered. "We'll do that. Until then here you go Emma." The woman took a single daffodil and lilac, handing both stems to the little girl.
"Wow, really? Thank you!" Emma beamed at the unexpected gift.

The Mayor also gave her thanks and they both turned to leave.

"Oh, and Emma? If you ever need flowers again for your Mama, just ask." A grin cracked across that weathered face.

"I will!" She waved and skipped happily home with the flowers clutched gently in her fist.

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Hope you liked it. Three longer chapters left... then the epilogue before the sequel begins!

Next Time - July 4th beach day, -angst-not telling- & closure with this version of the Charmings. :-}
Chapter Notes

A/N - Some angst ahead, but a happy ending for this chapter. Closure for Emma with this version of the Charmings. The sequel will address adult Emma processing more deeply with Snowing. For now, enjoy. Fan-art at the end. :-) 

Previously...

“Wow, really? Thank you!” Emma beamed at the unexpected gift.

The Mayor also gave her thanks and they both turned to leave.

“Oh, and Emma? If you ever need flowers again for your Mama, just ask.” A grin cracked across that weathered face.

“I will!” She waved and skipped happily home with the flowers clutched gently in her fist.

Yucky sunscreen!

“Hold still Emma.”

“Grooooosssss!” The girl squealed as the white cold liquid was rubbed into her legs. “It looks like a seagull pooped on me Mama!”

Regina wrinkled her nose at the visual, continuing to make sure every pale inch of exposed skin was covered in SPF. Little limbs slicked through her hands and Emma about had a cow when her face was tended to; only relenting when her Keeper made a comment about sunscreen being like battle paint Marvel heroes might wear. The blonde tried to wiggle away once the bottle was capped, but was caught to sit on the beach towel under the umbrella.
“You need to wait ten minutes for it to soak in before you may go play.” The Queen patiently explained and began pulling out Emma’s beach toys from the tote; a yellow bucket and shovel set.

It was a sticky July 4th afternoon and they had decided to brave the crowded waterfront of town before the evening fireworks. Everyone seemed to be there including the Charmings who camped out a few towels over, which they had more than made peace with, as Regina was reminded when Emma waved at them. She smiled when that wave was returned by all members.

After the office incident with Emma sharing her feelings from the past about the baby, both halves of the child seemed to turn a leaf over, the pain of the heart no longer as deep. Towards the end of the school year little Emma had even offered to help the teacher carry items in the parking lot one day when Regina had picked her up at seeing the heavily pregnant woman struggle with a box. Emma had even played with Neal at the park a few times, resulting in a small friendship there.

“I wanna build the biggest castle and Mama you can be the Queen.” Emma flopped back on the red towel with her name stretched across the middle, tracing the wave pattern on the belly of her new stars and stripes swimsuit.

“That's very generous of you baby.” Tucking her hair behind an ear and adjusting the white paper flower Emma had made her that morning to make sure it stayed pinned in place.

“I know.” Emma sat up. “Has it been ten minutes yet?”

“Not quite.”

A huff and a little nose twitched as a familiar smell wafted though. “Mama can we get a hotdog later”

Regina dipped her designer sunglasses to follow where the child pointed to a concession stand across the beach near the restrooms. Her stomach rolled at the thought of consuming processed mystery meat, but the girl's eagerness was not easily ignored. There was a cooler of healthy snacks she had brought along, but bringing a smile to Emma’s face today won out.

“Sure we can.”

“Yes!” Little feet bounced up and crept towards the sun line at the edge of her towel. She squatted
“Chips too?”

“There are sides in the cooler here we can have with it.”

“But chips are part of the full experience Mama.” Misquoting her Keeper. “That’d be like eating pizza without cheese. You just don’t.” She stuck her tongue out at the very idea.

Regina laughed at that comparison, waving the girl to her. “Come here Emma. We’ll see about the chips later.” Hands held up a white t-shirt and a yellow sun hat that made the child groan as she was dressed. “Do you want to build your castle first or go swimming?”

“Can we wave jump?” Remembering their trip to the beach for the first time last month when school had let out. Emma had been wary of the vastness of the ocean, but bobbing in the waves and shallow water attached to the hip of her Keeper had cured that fear quickly.

Regina grinned in answer and stood to undo her sarong. Kicking off her sandals she took up the child’s hand and led them to the water line. She watched as Emma wiggled feet in the wet sand and loved the musical laughter the came from pink lips when they waded a bit deeper.

“Ready? Here comes one. Bend your knees.”

Emma all, but squatted in the water in front of the Queen as both of her hands were held and bounced high over the small wave that crashed into her Keeper’s knees. The cold water lapped at her toes as it passed. They wave jumped for a while before the girl was ready to build her castle. Two sets of hands worked damp sand and pebbles into molds over the course of an hour, decorating the tower with bits of shells and seaweed. Emma found a little stick and a leaf to make a flag to go on top. She tolerated her picture taken next to the castle and clutched her stomach when it roared.

They had the promised hotdogs for lunch, splitting a bag of chips and veggie slices from the cooler. Emma even caught a cat nap under the shade of their umbrella. By late afternoon it was time to pack up and head home for dinner and a quick clean up before returning to the pier for the firework show. Despite rinsing the sand from her suit and feet using the shower at the beach front Emma managed to track a bucket of sand into the back of the Benz, skin beginning to itch from the dried salt water. When they rolled into the drive way she spotted their neighbor out watering the lawn.

“Mama can I go give Ms. Ratched one of my shells?” After the flower debacle, Emma had made fast friends with their older neighbor and her pooch.
Regina pulled the parking brake and moved sunglasses to the top of her head. “Yes, but remember not to run up to Wilber and startle him.” The dog was sweet, but older with hearing not as sharp as it used to be.

Emma bolted from the car and cut across the grass, not bothering to use the sidewalk. She slowed as she approached the Nurse, waving the shell up high as Wilbur started his happy yapping. “Look what I found today!”

The knobby woman turned, but kept the hose on her flowers, smiling at the child she had grown to like. She waved to the Mayor who approached as she accepted the shell. “This is such a pretty gift from the sea. Thank you.”

Wilbur ran over and rolled on his belly for scratches from little hands. “Welcome and guess what? I made a sand castle and we wave jumped. I ate a hotdog for lunch and even Mama ate one even though she thinks they taste like—”

“Emma, let Ms. Ratched get back to her watering.” Looking down at the lively girl who rolled into her feet with the dog in arms.

Two sets of eyes looked up into brown and Emma mimicked the pooch, sticking out her tongue to pant playfully. Both adults laughed and Regina lifted her girl up as the dog wiggled free to run the length of the yard. A blonde head came to rest against a tan shoulder. They said goodbye and the Queen moved toward the house.

“Can we get a dog?”

“No, baby. Jasper keeps you plenty entertained.” Regina rolled her eyes over a little head at the question that had been asked weekly since Mother’s day.

“But Wilber needs a friend and Jasper can’t run and play with him.”

“He has a friend in you. One pet is enough for now.” Scales in their home was one thing, fur was completely off limits.
“For now, like we can have another one later?” Hopeful eyes and a smile to match. “Big me says Jasper needs a brother… and a sister, an aunt, an uncle, and—”

“Jasper has us and we are enough, sweet one.”

Emma took the hint and dropped the subject. She was set down by the car and helped take in their beach things to the garage. The girl was given the task of shaking out the towels in the lawn as Regina rid the umbrella and cooler of sand. Together the finished the chore quickly, Emma was ushered into a bath after and the Queen into a relaxing shower as the child played on the floor of the master suite.

As the time drew closer to go to the firework show, Emma bounced off the walls in her excitement. Dinner was cold chicken salad and watermelon. The girl ate two huge slices, pink juice dripping down her chin. It had been a perfect day in her mind and the best part yet to come. Darkness came by the time they got back to the waterfront and found a small spot along the back row of the crowded grassy lawn to lay a blanket.

The child happily sat criss-cross in front of her Mama as she stared up into the clear sky, gasping when a brilliant pop splashed a rainbow of colors into the night. Loud music began as accompaniment to the sparkles of a flag, flowers, stars and one Emma was sure looked kind of like...

Meadow eyes looked back. “Was that…?”

“A swan? Yes it was baby. Being Mayor has a few perks.” Regina had to shout over the noise. The toothy grin made the extra expense and planning of that surprise well worth it. Halfway through the show she felt Emma wiggling more than normal and leaned down to be near a little ear.

“Are you alright?”

“I havta go to the bathroom, but I don’t wanna miss this.”

“The bathroom is just there, come on I’ll take you.”

“I wanna see this first.”
“Emma it’s not good to hold it.” Remembering the near accident the child almost had at the town fair a few weeks ago when Emma had been having way too much fun on the rides to bother with the bathroom.

“Okay, but I can go myself…please?” She stood up and pointed to the restroom, near yelling to be heard over the loud cracks in the sky. The music and roar of the crowd was deafening.

The Queen debated, but relented seeing it wasn’t that far away. “You have three minutes until I come get you.” Holding up three fingers to make her meaning clear and shaking her head as the child scampered off.

Emma wove her way through a few families and entered the public bathroom. Relief came when she finally released her bladder. She squeaked when the stalls vibrated suddenly and she wondered if it was from the booming of the fireworks station they were close too. Another thump, smaller, followed after she flushed the toilet. She was making her way to the sink when she thought she heard a moan in between the claps outside. Nervously, she squatted down and peered under the row of stalls, going white at the matching pair of eyes staring back before they closed in the handicapped one. Red sandals flew out of the bathroom weaving between people and lawn chairs.

Regina caught the distraught child who tripped into her arms at the blanket’s edge and tried to make sense of the tears, babbling, and finger pointing. Emma pulled the Queen into the restroom, to the very last stall, the locked door opened with purple smoke in haste, and 911 was immediately dialed as Regina sank down to cradle the dark haired woman in her lap. Precious life water began to pool between the unconscious legs.

“Emma run, get David. He’s a few rows over from here.”

“Mama…” Petrified little eyes met russet.

“I need you to be a big girl. Run now!”

The child bolted and magic filled the little room as Regina did what she could to slow the effects of birth, feeling her strength leaving at rapid speed with the complexities she was no longer used to wielding. She channeled some into stopping the blood flow from the gash on the side of Mary-Margaret’s head, the split V of magic a further drain. Feeling light headed and sick, but determined she slowed the amount to a fine hair of a stream, and then nothing when color started to return to cheeks and eyes fluttered.
But it was enough.

Barely, until David came rushing in with the paramedics on his heels. Emma teetered on the periphery of the room, crouching in the corner out of the way. Her eyes were too big and watchful, unable to hear anything, but her breathing that pounded shallow and quick in her throat. She caught her Keeper’s form slide into another corner out of the way of medical hands beginning to rescue two lives. Heavy brown eyes met green and closed as pain flushed tan skin.

Between the radio calls and sirens, the stretcher and tears, Emma found her way to Regina’s side. The Queen used the little shoulder and the rail attached to the stall wall to help her stand, legs weak from the exertion. A call to Ruby gained them a ride to the hospital where the Queen recovered in a waiting room chair as little feet wore a loop in the carpet pacing. As soon as Regina had asked her to be a ‘big girl’ the little one stepped aside for the Savior and it was the adult half that found David, and leaving Neal with friends nearby, dragged the man toward the flashing lights.

As Regina sipped water from the cooler Emma had handed over upon request she processed what had just happened, shivering at the close call and at what that loss would have cost all of them. The brief rest and fluid helped clear the fog from her brain, which beat against the inside of her skull. Rubbing her face and temples brought some relief. A stifled cry drew her attention back to Emma and she opened arms to accept the shaking child who surfaced and sucked fingers beginning to weep at her knee.

“Come here, baby. You did so well. Mama is proud of you.” Whispering her love against damp curls.

“I gots scared.” Snot rolled down a lip and a wet cough followed.

“It’s okay to be scared and even so, you did exactly what I asked of you my brave girl.” A kiss followed after wiping Emma’s nose with a tissue from her purse. Someone clearing a throat brought both their tired eyes up.

“Madame Mayor, Emma…” David’s voice was tight, and his eyes red, but his smile hinted at good news. “May I?” A Gesture to the chair next to them and gaining a nod he sat, eyes on the crying child clinging to the brunette.

“How are they?” Regina asked what Emma couldn’t just then.
“They are doing okay. The slip she had in the bathroom caused a mild concussion when she hit her head. If Emma hadn’t of found her and you hadn’t of called…” David took a breath and found the child’s eyes. “You both saved her life and our baby’s. I… We are so grateful.” Tears washed blue sky.

Emma reached out a hand, took the man’s into her own and squeezed. “Can I see them? Please?” A murmur begged from adult lips.

“The doctor is cleaning them up, but yes, both of you are welcome. I’ll come get you when they are ready.” The Sheriff stood and a hesitant hand hovered above the child’s head. Catching the warmth in the Mayor’s expression he settled it gently on the soft hair in thanks.

A few hours passed and the girl dozed on the Queen’s lap, both catching a small nap between checking on each other. Finally David appeared to escort them back to the hospital room. Regina carried Emma, moving slowly down the hall. The adult half became present when they entered the quiet space. Matching green eyes met across the room and MM smiled in welcome. The bundle in the white blanket squirmed in pale arms, a stark contrast to the flushed face and red spotted bandage on a forehead. Neal came to stand near his father and mirrored a smile back at them.

“Regina, Emma… I can’t thank you enough for what you did tonight.” MM started and paused as the blonde wiggled down from the Mayor’s hip and wandered over to the bed.

“Are you both really okay?”

“We really are, thanks to one incredible girl I know and her Mother.” Grateful eyes found brown and the two women nodded knowingly towards each other before both of them returned to the girl.

Regina marveled at how, once again, Emma had brought them all together by simply doing what Emma does best; saving people or their hearts in her own case. She knew the girl resented being the Savior, the weight of that title too much at times, but here and now, Emma was just being Emma. The beauty of the revelation welled in her eyes as the child was introduced to her new sibling.

Little fingers gently brushed the softest cheek she’d ever felt. “A boy or a girl?”

“A little girl.”
Emma processed that and found her voice again. “What’s her name?”

“Emilina, after the ones who helped save her life.”

Meadows grew dewy at the gift. “She’s pretty and so small.”

“Would you like to hold her? Your Mom would need to help you.”

Regina stepped forward and settled in a chair with Emma on her lap. David handed the little bundle to two sets of arms. As the new born cooed and the children gazed upon each other Emma felt her heart skip a beat. The same love she’d felt upon holding Neal for the first time in her other life hit all over again as she took in her new sister. This little love was the one she’d been jealous of, this sweet new soul, and the reasons why didn’t matter anymore.

She was reminded that even if she had never gotten what her siblings would from her parents, they were no less deserving of love than she. The green eyed monster that was jealously left then and she knew the question of her worth wasn’t one that needed asking anymore. The answer filled the room and resounded warmly against her back.

Too soon it was time to hand the baby back and Emma sleepily said goodbye. David graciously gave them a ride home. Emma was tucked into the Queen’s bed that night, back curled up against her Keeper as the second to last stitch secured the walls of her heart nearly closed. She felt the threads pulling and realized with a slight panic that their time here was decreasing. A hand massaging her scalp brought comfort with the arm that pulled her close. The sandman visited and little eyes dropped, hoping for more time within an hourglass that went one way.
Thoughts? Hope you liked this wrap up for them. :-)  

Next Time - Emma wants to try something new and Regina isn't sold on the idea. The Queen struggles with the fact that the spell will eventually break, and little Emma has anxiety about the start of a new school year.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

A/N - Sighs... one more chapter after this then the epilogue. I'll post both next week some time. Enjoy this and the holiday weekend! Fan art for chapter at the end.

Previously...

Too soon it was time to hand the baby back and Emma sleepily said goodbye. David graciously gave them a ride home. Emma was tucked into the Queen's bed that night, back curled up against her Keeper as the second to last stitch secured the walls of her heart nearly closed. She felt the threads pulling and realized with a slight panic that their time here was decreasing. A hand massaging her scalp brought comfort with the arm that pulled her close. The sandman visited and little eyes dropped, hoping for more time within an hourglass that went one way.

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On a blistering hot Wednesday afternoon in August Regina rolled the Benz in front of the parent pickup spot of the Art Camp down town. It was hosted out of a historic building, with each room dedicated to a different art type. She laughed at seeing Emma's pale face pressed up against the inside glass of the waiting area and the excitement at being released. The blonde whirlwind sped towards the back seat and threw open the car door starting to babble about her day. The Queen greeted the child between breaths and pulled out into traffic as Emma jumped from topic to topic.

"Mama can I have a bounce house for my birthday? Gabe says they are super fun and I have never been in one."

"A bounce house? Perhaps. You do know that is over two months away, baby."

"Yeah, but you like to plan stuff so I'm helping you plan." Emma traced fingers in a spiral on the glass. "Can I take kung pow?"

"Kung pow? You mean Kung-Fu. Where did you get that idea?" Immediately disliking what she considered a contact sport.

"There were pictures at the board in the office and I asked someone what it said and thought it sounded fun. You get to wear a unicorn, but I'm not sure how that works and kick stuff and get good at 'fending people."

"Uniform is what you mean, sweet one and I thought you loved swimming. You are the best in your age group and nearly ready to join the Fine Fin Swim team. That's all you have talked about the last few weeks." There was pride in her voice and she was a little concerned with Emma's habit of not seeing things or tasks through.

"But that was then and this is now." A head fell back in exasperation and little hands shot up. "Stay with me people." Quoting what she heard her Mama say at Town Hall yesterday in a meeting. She giggled at the brow raised in the rear view mirror. "So can I?"

"I don't know Emma. I need some time to think about it and research a bit."
"I wanna though… please?"

"We shall see."

"Mama that means no and you said you'd search and think first." Crossed arms and a lower lip stuck out.

"Careful little swan, a bird could build a nest on that lip." Chuckling as it retreated.

"What kind of bird?"

"It's an expression baby."

"Oh. Can we please get Chinese tonight? I want Kung-Fu Chicken."

Regina agreed to the request, not bothering to correct the child a third time, though not without negotiating a side of cooked broccoli. She continued to think about the child's request throughout the evening and when asked again at bed time, she gave the same answer.

Keeping her word about the research later after Emma was asleep, she read about the pros and cons of the sport, not fully convinced either way. Further inquiries led her to Storybrooke's Martial Arts Studio owned by none other than the famed Mulan. Parents were welcome to shadow a class with their child as a way to try it without committing. She signed them up for the first shadowing option of watching a children's class the next day after work. Depending on how things went they could do the second option of having Emma participate in a class.

Running the plan by the little girl in the morning and being clear that this was a trial, not a yes, Emma was ecstatic over the idea. Four o'clock couldn't roll around fast enough and the child dragged Regina into the studio upon arrival. After checking in, they settled in the viewing area.

The hour long class was highly structured in a way that was unexpected. The focus was on the accuracy of movements, repetition and student inter-dependency. There was even a portion of the class dedicated to breathing exercises that all of the wiggling 6-8 year olds gave their full attention to. Mulan ran a tight ship and Regina appreciated the example being made to the children. She was nearly sold on the idea until the partner exercise portion. Kids were paired up and halfway through a child missed the hand pad their partner was holding and gave the girl a bloody nose.

While her Keeper was horrified, Emma was riveted and turned with a huge grin, bouncing in her seat.

Mulan greeted them after the class and Regina listened to what she expected to be a sales pitch, but found only facts presented about the benefits she'd read about the previous night.

"Self discipline and management are the focal points of our teaching." Mulan offered and pointed to the class agenda. "Each lesson is connected to the next and students are grouped by ability. If Emma were to start with us she would need to commit to twice a week in our Koi group, basically our white sash for kids."

"I like fish." Emma remembered the fish name referenced from a cartoon. "I have a fish named Jasper but he's more of a people person." Emma chimed happily, liking the idea of being in a group.

The Queen rested a hand on the back of the child's head in acknowledgement and eyed the course schedule, seeing that technically Emma could do both swimming and Kung-Fu, but that left little room for anything else in their week. She'd never liked the idea of over scheduling children and knew that was not an option based just on Emma's temperament alone. It would be one or the other
and right now she did not like the idea of the child missing swimming.

"I'm concerned about the physical contact. The majority of the class I feel Emma would benefit from, but I admit I am hung up on the possibility of her being hurt."

"But I'm tough Mama." Emma tried to flex her arms.

"I know you are baby, but that is not what I mean. Have a seat over in the waiting area for me please." Regina stepped into the small office, keeping an eye on the child across the room through the open door.

"I hear you and that has been the concern of every parent whose child we teach. There is always that possibility, as you observed today, as there is in every sport. You mentioned Emma is in swimming, which has its own risks."

"Even so, I am also reluctant to have her learn methods of attacking people."

"Stopping an attack is more of our focus. Defense and stopping a threat before it becomes a threat." The dark eyed beauty clarified. "The breathing exercises help the children learn to be present in their surroundings and aware of what is happening around them. The precision you observed teaches self discipline and we do not allow the children to play fight. Every exercise serves a purpose and that is always made clear before instruction happens."

Regina sighed, still conflicted.

"Bring her in, same time tomorrow to try a class. Watch her and see if you still feel the same way."

"Would she need the uniform beforehand?"

"We have loners for these classes. Arrive fifteen minutes prior. By the look of her…" Mulan sized Emma up across the way. "She appears to be an extra small. I can have a uniform ready for her, if you like?"

The Queen paused, watching the girl eagerly eyeing the children moving in unison across the red mats. "We'll be here. Thank you." As she stepped out, Emma rushed at her legs.

"Mama can I?"

"We will come and you may try one class tomorrow. I am not saying yes, right now."

"But you're not saying no! This is awesome!" Grinning and showing the new gap where her front tooth used to be.

"There are still your swimming lessons to consider and if I do agree to this and that is a big if, what to do about that. Let's go home. Mama needs some time to think."

Emma lost a bit of her sparkle, but skipped to the car anyway. She wisely left the subject alone as she worked on reading a story aloud while Regina cooked. Even being summer, the Queen had the girl complete a little reading, writing, and math during the week in order to keep skills sharp and ready for second grade.

After dinner, Emma went upstairs to get ready for bed and Regina found her fifteen minutes later trying to mimic the kicking motion from the class earlier. The girl had put a pillow up against the headboard and stood in the middle of the bed practicing the kick. A little foot missed and toes cracked against the wood frame. Emma fell back on her bottom hugging her foot and howled.
A few minutes of cuddles and massaging the throbbing foot calmed tears and Regina settled back against the headboard as Emma scowled at it from her lap.

"Are you allowed to stand on your bed or play fight like that?"

A snuffle. "Nooooo."

"And why is that, little swan?"

"Cause the bed bites, but Mama I was just playing." Whining as her chin was caught.

"When you should have been getting ready for bed." Red lips kissed a cheek. "I'm glad your foot feels better. I do not want you trying to copy movements you have not been taught properly and certainly not while standing on your bed. While Kung-Fu is fun, it is not a game. Understood?" This is exactly what she'd been worried about.

"Yes Mama. Bedtime?"

"Soon, yes. We have just enough time for a few pages of our book. Get your PJs on." Regina set the child on the floor with a gentle pat towards the dresser.

The next afternoon Emma was just as excited to go to the studio after camp. She was extra attentive when Regina explained the expectations about following instructions and listening; wanting to show that she took seriously their conversation from the night prior. The borrowed white tunic, pants, and sash almost fit, but the sleeves had to be rolled up a bit and she liked that bare feet were a requirement.

Regina appeared composed as she watched the class start and Emma wiggle on the mat in the group stretch exercises, but inside nerves were fraying. She was surprised to feel that ease up over the course of the class and focused on observing Emma's body language. Better coordinated than most, but the girl was the smallest in the group.

The edge of the plastic seat cut into the Queen's perfect thighs as she watched Emma paired with a much taller girl. A movement for the same kick as yesterday was explained and modeled, its purpose to stop an opponent from advancing forward. Emma struggled to get her foot up to the hand pad, but kept trying and when the girls traded Regina understood the reason behind the pairing. Where Emma stretched to meet the hand pad, the taller girl bent to reach it; a balance between high and low achieved as well as learning to work together. Refined features relaxed for the rest of the class and as Emma changed back into her yellow sun dress, the instructor approached.

"So Madame Mayor, will Emma be joining our Koi class?" Mulan drew the brunette's attention as she watched the child start to walk back over from the bathroom.

"I need a bit more time to consider her schedule, but you definitely put my mind more at ease today. Thank you for having us. I will let you know soon."

"Mama! Did you see me?" Emma accepted her sandals back, still confused about the rule of no shoes past the waiting area.

"I watched you the whole time, sweet one. Did you have fun?"

"Mmmhhhmmmm. Can we come back next week?"

"We will talk about it at home. I'm still considering a few things."
"But I did good and I like it!" Pouting and confused at the given reason.

"You did wonderfully and I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." She re-directed the girl's attention with a nod toward the waiting instructor. "Say thank you. It is time to go."

Emma politely thanked Mulan and they headed home where the girl went right up to her room to tell Jasper all about the class. Regina knocked ten minutes later as the girl finished regaling the events of the epic battle she'd fought in class to the lone fish who flicked his tail in response.

"Jasper says he thinks I should go to Kung-Fu again."

"He does?"

"Yep, did you think about it yet?" Anxious eyes watched the Queen sigh and sit on the bench at the foot of the bed.

"Some, though we need to speak more before I make a decision. Come sit with me." A pat to the bench had the child take a perch. "I'm concerned about you not continuing swimming if I decide to allow you to begin Kung-Fu. You've come a long way in swimming since January, though you are not quite proficient yet."

"What's pro-fish-it?"

"Proficient means skilled or like an expert in something. You still need more practice with swimming and I am not comfortable with you stopping classes to begin something else entirely."

Emma picked at the tail of a braid. "I can do both." She cast up knowing eyes, testing that idea.

"Both would be too much with school starting in two weeks. That will be a big change to your schedule and I don't want you to be stressed or have too many commitments at one time."

"I can to do both Mama." A stubborn tone took over, edging on sassy.

"Not fully, no. The swimming team requires one extra practice a week in addition to the current two you already take. Kung-Fu requires two classes and that would mean you would have lessons every day after school and I am not okay with that."

"How come? I'm gonna be seven soon."

"That may be, and I hear that you want to do both. I am willing to compromise with you a bit on a trial basis. How would you feel about only going to swimming once a week, not the team practice, but a regular lesson and trying Kung-Fu two days a week?"

"Yes! Please I wanna do that!" Emma jumped up, using her Keeper's knee to balance.

"You would have to keep up your grades and do your homework like always." The brunette stressed that importance.

An eager chin bobbed.

"Alright, we will give Kung-Fu a try." She nearly lost her balance as little arms choked her.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"Remember it's a trial, Emma. That means we shall see how this goes."
"I know, but this time we'll see means yes Mama, you'll see! Can we cook now? I'm hungry." Stomach growling after the exercise session.

Regina laughed and scooped up the child and headed for the stairs, a feat, not quite as easy as it once was, despite Emma's small frame. "I believe I have the makings for someone's favorite dish."

"Grilled cheese?"

"Grilled vegetables, lots of green ones."

"Noooooooo! Mama you're teasing me!" A pointy tongue poked out.

"Am I?" Heels hit tile downstairs.

"Unhuh, I can tell."

"You do need a vegetable though, mashed peas or salad?"

"Peas please."

That little giggle filled the shell of her ear and Regina's breath caught. How many more times would she get to hear that laugh, feel these little arms around her neck, or hold this child with her hands? Nostalgic already for the life she was living, knowing it couldn't last forever. She paused in the kitchen doorway with Emma resting on her hip, holding tighter.

"Mama?"

"Yes baby?" Russet mixed with meadow.

"Big me says it'll be okay."

Regina rolled lips inward as a tear broached. "I know it will." She kissed that pale cheek, lingering as a hot trail burned down her own and she wiped it away before little eyes could see.

Later that night after she tucked Emma into bed she returned to her bedroom and conjured the magic trunk she'd used to store the dream catcher among other effects she had brought to this life. One by one she began to tether the original items she'd brought in it back to the trunk so that when the spell ended the items would be transported with them back to their original life. The items stayed where they were for the moment, simply glowing as an invisible string connected each object to the next and back to the spelled crate. Beginning with her lock box which housed all of the drawings and cards Emma had made for her, then on to the memory book she'd finished last week, and her birthstone necklace. The silent Queen made her way around the house looking for mementos to take back with them; Emma's mosaic and hand print cast among them. The study was visited and she tethered the photos of them she'd had framed on the mantle.

Finally she found herself standing in the middle of Emma's bedroom and waved her hand over the fish tank with Jasper, Stitchy and Wonder Woman, the art kit, the purple converse Emma now wore everyday that had to been stretched to fit again just a few weeks ago, and the baby blanket clutched in a small fist. Regina knelt by the bed and watched the child sleeping peacefully, gently tethering the swan necklace and bracelet the girl now only took off for baths.

Leaving with a tender kiss after a half hour of simply watching the little chest rise and fall, she knew the shift back home would be hard on them both when it occurred and she felt it closing in more every day, but it was worth the healing taking place in their hearts. She sat on the lounger in her room and took some much needed time to think and just feel. Those little arms, that giggle, and smile
would be missed and heart sore for just another moment of each. Hands didn't brush away the tears that fell. Regina felt each hot one roll and drip from her chin, catching the salt orbs in an open palm; precious memories.

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Nearly two weeks later on the Friday before school started Emma chatted happily to Regina about her most recent class as they drove from the Martial Arts Studio to the store.

"And Ms. Mulan said we had to breathe from deep in our tummies, but I wasn't sure how 'cause I was still full from lunch and I burped, but said 'cuse me and everyone laughed."

"I'm glad you remembered to say that." The Queen shook her head at the animated girl in the rear view mirror.

"Mmmhmmm I did. Mama, where are we going?"

"To get your new school supplies, remember? I told you when you woke from your nap earlier."

"Oh." Emma scrunched her nose and continued to look out the window, not liking the idea very much. "I can just use my stuff from last year and 'sides I don't wanna go to school again."

"Your things from last year are worn out baby and I understand you not wanting to go back yet. Summer went by fast, but you will have so much fun learning new things and seeing all your friends again. You and Gabe will in the same class and you can start fresh with everyone else." Knowing that starting last December had been hard on the child.

"I still don't want to." Arms crossed, feet twitching to kick out in displeasure.

"I can see that little swan." Validating that statement as she parked, Regina coaxed a reluctant child out of the car and into the store. "Sometimes we have to do things we do not like, simply because they need doing. Would you like to be my helper and read the list?"

"No…thank you." Remembering her manners after a hand squeeze.

Answer aside, the Queen saw from the way Emma was dragging and the slack wrist in her hand that this was going to be one of those trips. She slowed her pace, to allow little feet to keep up, but the deliberate snail pace beside her was not going to do either of them any favors. With a knowing sigh, she got a cart and lifted Emma up.

The girl whined shrilly at being put in the cart seat and the black designer purse was put next to her. More so too as she was buckled in, when she preferred to walk. This also put her face to face with her parent whom she did not wish to engage with at the moment as they made their way to the back to school display across the store. Normally she liked riding, the high view allowing better access to look at the things around her and be close to her Mama. But she was mad at Mama right now and remembering that, brought both heels back hard against the cart, vibrating the metal. She was hushed with a simple look and an acknowledging hand tap to her calf, stilling further protests of that nature. Frustrated at not getting her way and anxious over something she didn't have words for she tried to jerk her legs back up through the slots that held her captive, causing that cart to wobble off balance.

"Emma stop. You will hurt yourself." Regina gave pause mid step to readjust the squirming child.

"I waaaanna waaaalk." The whine came again and green eyes narrowed at the firm look coming from her Keeper.
"I hear you, though that is not one of your choices right now. You may help me with the list and by putting things in the cart or you may simply sit. Though, your tone needs to change please."

"But Maaammmmaa!"

"Emma enough. That was your warning and I will not tell you again."

"Humph! Stupid cart and stupid school stuff!" Crossed arms and a sour glare radiated, a little heel couldn't help but kick once more.

Regina veered off into an empty aisle. "Uncross those arms and sit up properly." She waited for Emma to obey and took a chin in hand as little eyes avoided hers. "Look at me please."

"Maaammmmmmaa."

"Right now little miss swan."

That got her attention and green eyes zipped upwards.

"Do we need to go back to the car for a chat before we continue in the store?"

The adult half behind those green eyes was allowed to shift forward for a moment. "You wouldn't… would you?"

Regina turned the cart around and began walking back towards the entrance when little hands grabbed hers. Heels halted.

"We're sorry."

"That's better and to answer your question just ask Henry about the tantrum of 2007."

"You remember the year?"

"It was a year of testing and pushing limits. He was very headstrong, much like someone else I know." The Queen smiled fondly at the girl and the child took over again, the adult receding. "I know you are un-happy about school and presently about riding in the cart. However, I expect you to speak without tone and to be respectful."

"Sorry Mama. Sassy me is gone now."

"Oh, do not try and blame your big half, sweet one. I know you well." Lips hinted at a smile.

Emma grinned and accepted a kiss. "I'm sassy and sweet, huh?"

"Yes, baby. Now are you ready to pick out your school things?" Heels turned and moved toward the school aisle.

Teeth bit a lip. "Will you help me? I've never done it before."

"I see. Is this part of what had you upset earlier?"

A nod. "I don't wanna not be with you, too." Tears bloomed, but didn't fall.

"Well, we still have the whole weekend yet." Those words seemed to help some, but not enough. "I have an idea. How about once during the school week going forward we have a lunch together? I will pick you up and we will have a picnic. You'd miss recess that day, but—"
"I wanna do that!" Emma bounced as much as the seat she was in allowed as they turned onto the school supply aisle.

"Then it is a date, sweet one."

"Our date Mama. I'm ready to pick out my stuff now. Can I get a Wonder Woman backpack?"

"If they have one, yes, otherwise I will have to order that for you." Regina pulled a list from her purse and handed it to Emma. "What do you need, baby?"

Little eyes skimmed the list in thought, but big ones found her Keeper as the adult came forward once more with a different take to that question. "I need this to not end."

The cart stopped and two hands cupped pale cheeks. Longing in green eyes skipped a beat in her heart. There was no promise she could make that would prevent them from going back to their original reality. Though, the quiet kiss she gave said enough about a different sort of guarantee; about what they had come to be for each other and how that would still be there, in some way, upon their return home.

"What do you need baby?"

"I need this not to end."

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Any guesses as to how this comes together? :-)

Next Time - Both half's of Emma come to a final realization and Regina comes to one of her own. One question with one answer changes their lives forever.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

A/N - And here we are..... *sighs* I also posted a new story called Darkness Is Not Black- SwanQueen with teeth (read disclaimer on it) Totally separate work and darker than what you are used to from me. Check it out if that's your thing.

Previously...

“I need this to not end.”

_The cart stopped and two hands cupped pale cheeks. Longing in green eyes skipped a beat in her heart. There was no promise she could make that would prevent them from going back to their original reality. Though, the quiet kiss she gave said enough about a different sort of guarantee; about what they had come to be for each other and how that would still be there, in some way, upon their return home._

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“Why can’t I stay with you?” Emma pouted in the back seat of the Mercedes as the Queen parked in front of the school.

“Emma, we’ve been over this, Friday, last night, and again this morning. You have to go to school, that’s the rule.” Regina was sympathetic to a point with the child not wanting summer to end. It had been a busy one and their time together had been special.

“Then make a new rule Mama.”

The Queen undid her seat belt and turned around to face back. “It doesn’t work that way sweet one.”

“Has too cause I’m NOT going.” Crocodile tears threatened complete with a chin wobble.

“Emma Swan Mills do not start with me. I have been more than patient with you this morning. You are going to school and you will have a wonderful time, like always. I do not want to hear anymore whining about it. Am I understood?” Determined to stop the budding tantrum before it started, Regina was kind but no nonsense.

With a hard sniff and a sigh, shoulders dropped. “Yes Mama.”
“Good choice. Let’s go.”

Emma got out of the car, adjusting her new Wonder Woman backpack that her Keeper had special ordered online with rush shipping. She nervously tugged on her pressed school blouse, not missing it’s presence over the summer months as she dragged her feet up the main walk. Regina paused by the front steps and reached to straighten the girl’s collar.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Emma brightened a bit. “What?”

“I know you have been nervous about moving up a grade and about your new teacher. I’ve known for a little while, but thought it would be a nice surprise for your first day. I learned that Mrs. Gold will be looping up with your class. That means that she will be your 2nd grade teacher.”

“Really! AWESOME!” Emma jumped, throwing herself at the Queen.

“Would you like me to walk you to your classroom?”

“Yes, please.” Eager for as much time left with her Mama as possible.

Together they found the familiar room and Mrs. Gold greeted them at the door.

“You look a bit like another little blonde I know.” Belle Gold teased in welcome.

“Silly Mrs. Gold. It’s me Emma.”

“Awww yes Emma! How was your summer?” She asked accepting a hug.

“Fun! I went to art camp, the beach, and we went swimming and I am taking Kung-Fu, but Mama doesn’t like it as much as me, and I had to do yucky school work and I can read bigger words and I
met Ms. Blanchard’s new baby and her name is Emilina ‘cause we helped when she was born.”

“Wow! You were a busy bee.” Belle gave the Mayor a knowing smile.

“Yep!” Pink lips agreed and green eyes found the Queen’s. “And Mama, I’m not nervous anymore. You can go to work now."

Regina ran a hand through loose curls, shaking her head at the sudden confidence bursting from a child who had clung to her in tears for a half hour upon waking that same morning when realizing it was the first day of school.

“I hope you have a wonderful day, dear heart. I’ll pick you up for our lunch date at 11:30. Give me a kiss.” She leaned over to receive a peck and heartstrings tugged as little feet scampered into the classroom in excitement, that flutter hitting her more and more often as of late.

In the room Emma found Gabe and claimed a spot in the front row next to him after a hug. The first day went smooth compared to her previous start last December. Big Emma took pleasure in not being the new kid, never having started a new school year at the same school before. The both enjoyed the day very much. She still hated the hour devoted to writing instruction, but found that the practice she had done over the summer made starting assignments easier than last year. The picnic in the park was the icing to her cupcake and Emma loved the mid day lunch date with her Mama. The afternoon was spent on Social Studies and the girl’s favorite class, Art. By the end of the day she was wiped.

For homework a show and tell was assigned to help the students get to know each other better. They each had to explain what family meant to them and bring items that represented their explanation in a brown paper bag which was given out to tuck into their folders. Emma pondered how to go about completing that assignment when there was her other half to consider.

The bell released her from worry and she ran to meet her Keeper. Emma told all about her day on the way to Kung-Fu and channeled her attention into the lesson. Home brought the familiar routine of homework and the worry returned full force as she sat at the kitchen counter with the open folder as the Queen went about prepping dinner.

After several minutes of staring at the assignment and arguing with her inner adult, Emma pushed the folder away. “I can’t do this Mama.”
“Let me see, sweet one.” Quick eyes scanned the assignment description and moved back to the irritated child. “What about it has you so frustrated?”

A finger pointed to the first step. “Big me is upset but won’t say why and we both havta agree cause I havta share in class tomorrow.”

“I see. Let’s start with your definition and then I would like to speak with your big half. What does family mean to you?” She set the makings for a salad on the counter and rounded it to sit next to Emma.

“That’s easy. Family is like home, with you, Jasper, Stitchy and Henry and Paige all in a big heart. Like when I’m scared and you hold me and when we play and laugh. It’s all the good feelings Mama.” Emma put her arms out wide to show her meaning and then wrapped her arms around her Keeper.

“Thank you for sharing that with me baby.” Touched at how far they had come in the ten months they had been here Regina returned the hug and kissed that pale cheek. She took up a pencil to write out what Emma said. “Now it is your big half’s turn.”

Emma shifted allowing the adult to take over. Big eyes welled with tears pulling back from the hug, and anger seeped into her voice. “This is a stupid assignment Gina!”

“Why are you upset exactly?” Regina asked softly and rubbed Emma’s back gently.

“It’s asking me to define my family and I’m…I can’t do that and make everyone happy.” Fingers picked at her plaid skirt.

Memories of times past crept in; being abandoned, returned, feelings of uncertainty and fear. Then there was being alone, found, and the conflict over that fact. These mixed with new ones; being cared for, held accountable, routine, friends, holidays, talks, laughter, and affection. There are so many feelings of love and safety pushing against the darkness beginning to swirl inside. Emma didn’t know what to do with any of it.

“Read this for me out loud.” The Queen pointed to one sentence on the assignment.

“Gina I don’t need to. I know what it says.” Deflecting.
A firm finger tapped the paper in wait.

Green eyes wanted to roll, but knew better. “Explain what family means to you.”

“There are two very important words there; to you. That means this is not about making other people happy and that is not your job, in any life.” They had spent countless hours on this topic in their other life and she knew Emma was working though a trigger at the moment, one they established healthy coping mechanisms to deal with.

“But I’m the Sav—”


“I’m Emma…”

“And Emma, how do you define family?” She pushed just enough to give her girl pause, not wanting her to shut down, but to think. Regina recognized this was an important moment and one she would need to be the guide for.

“I… I don’t know.” Green eyes found the floor and a foot kicked the counter.

“I think you do. There is a distinction between that and not wanting to acknowledge something.” A patient, gentle tugging of the reins by an experienced hand.


Regina pursed her lips at words she knew to be untrue, said only to fill the silence, and she waited a few minutes to allow the girl a private moment to think. It was important that Emma was coaxed along in a precise manner like a thirsty filly to a wild stream to drink; the bridle couldn’t be too tight or loose.
This was their dance; their ebb and flow, their give and take. They were like clearly defined lines on the paper of life. Regina a great circle defining the perimeter and Emma ran right through the middle in great swoops and dives with vibrant patterns; free to roam, but contained within boundaries that would always hold firm. Regina eased her hand to the back of a small neck, massaging gently and Emma pushed into her for comfort, finally sitting up.

“Try again for me please.”

“No, Gina.”

“Not an option.” A brow rose.

“Nope then.” Stubborn words trying to hide a wounded heart.

The Queen stood and took Emma’s hand. “You need a moment to remember our rule about telling me no.” She would allow more time if that’s what was needed, but in a way that reinforced the lines of their relationship, ones they’d defined together.

“I remember. I just don’t like it.” Grumbling, Emma followed heels to the other side of the kitchen and slouched, resting her forehead against the wall with a sigh.

“That is not how I taught you stand.”

At the warning, Emma straightened up and lifted her head. She spent the first minute counting how many different ways she could say no, before thoughts shifted to why she was looking at a bare white wall. Phrases to explain that what family meant to her were stuck in a little throat; no, they were being held back by the past. Emma knew then that Regina already understood that. She had been gifted time to brave the idea of giving her feelings a voice. How the Queen could read her so well sent a shiver down her spine; she finally had someone who understood the patterns she moved in.

Emma turned before time was up and met the brunette’s eyes. “It meant fear. To me family meant fear and rejection for too many years.” Little shoulders began to shake in releasing the power those words held over her.

Regina approached with certainty and knelt down. Taking pale hands, she provided the nurturing
presence of this reality they had come to share. “That’s my brave girl.”

“Am I?” Asking for what she needed to hear when the answer already held her tight.

“You are my girl.”

‘My girl.’ Emma thought. ‘Isn’t that what I’ve always wanted…needed? To let myself belong entirely to someone who loves me?’

The Queen leaned back, taking in the pensive little face. “Emma?”

Sniffing as the deepest hurt of her heart lay exposed, hoping to be done with it, but knowing she wasn’t yet. Emma wet her lips to try again. “Please Gina…” A plea to pull the last hook out.

“And now what does family mean to you?”

Words choked her, but little feet moved, tugging the Queen into the study to the mantle of the fireplace. She pointed to a framed picture resting there.

Burgundy lips parted, and then closed swallowing. Regina gently touched the frame as the ends of the broken circle she was, joined. “Us?”

“Is that okay?”

The blonde stared hard at the small portrait of them taken all those months ago when she didn’t know she wanted this experience nor the price paid for her happiness. She belonged to Regina and in that beautiful clarity she needed Regina to belong to her. Hopeful that when she braved the eyes she knew were watching that the answer she finally realized she needed with every cell in her body would be there.

“Emma, look at me.”

Breath caught, raw eyes shined upwards through a tangle of wild blonde curls and met her match in
dark mirrors.

“Always and forever.”

The room vibrated and darkened at the edges. Emma lost her footing and shrieked, throwing herself into Regina, teeth clenching as the final broken piece of her heart tried to shift into place. Sweat began at temples and her skin burned with it as she fought the threads tightening the hole inside.

“Gina! I’m not done yet. Make it stop!” A sob escaped through teeth as the world they knew began to fall away as tunnel vision blinded her.

“I’ve got you Emma. It’s okay. Don’t fight it.” Unwavering, even in the eye of the storm.

“Mama!” The little girl pushed through one last time clutching the flesh of her Keeper’s back.

Regina winced as small sharp nails cut through fabric of more than just her shirt. “I’m right here, baby, always. Mama has you.” Her stomach rolled, vertigo taking her balance as knees slammed into the shattering floor. Her arms shook with adrenaline around that little body as purple smoke swirled around them, stealing them away from a place they come to call home.

Together they spiraled through space and time; breathing as one. Emma tried to scream her outrage and fear, but no sound came. She finally had what she needed and felt the reality that took to achieve it dissolve within that selfless moment of her Keeper’s acceptance and her realization of what family had come to mean to both parts of her heart.

The frail stitches stretched and warped as the inner child fought the fusion trying to happen with the adult inside their shared body. Two halves blurred together, no longer separate, but not quite whole. A stubborn mind pulled back and a thread snapped just as they lost consciousness.

:::::::::::: STAY TUNED FOR EPILOGUE IN CH. 41 ::::::::::

A/N - Sooooooo, thoughts? :-}
Previously...

The frail stitches stretched and warped as the inner child fought the fusion trying to happen with the adult inside their shared body. Two halves blurred together, no longer separate, but not quite whole. A stubborn mind pulled back and a thread snapped just as they lost consciousness...

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Epilogue…Present day Storybrooke…
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Brown eyes opened, dilating in the harsh light and at a flash of movement on the floor. Regina became aware of what had happened, as a little glass bottle with a drop of purple liquid clinging inside rolled to a stop across the rug of her study. A moment was all it had taken in time; a blink of an eye in this life to live another so rich and full.

They were home again.

Regina bolted upright and moved across the room, reaching Emma just as the green eyes fluttered open. Those adult eyes filled with unspeakable realization. "Oh, Emma."

"No, no, no, noooooo! Gina!"

Sobs cut the air as Emma curled into the Queen, her adult body foreign in those arms after ten months in their other life. She naturally reached out internally for her second half, feeling strange when the familiar echo didn't answer back. Instead her voice bounced around in her brain, but that voice was somehow both the little girl's and her own; finally absolute. Something felt off, but also really right.

Her skin tingled with that thought.

Panic slammed against the walls of her mind as Emma felt her body warming. Limbs pulled into
themselves until the arms around her fit again. She held out her hands, little fingers wiggling within long sleeves that flopped about. Looking up into Regina's shocked face confirmed what had happened.

"This wasn't in the book." As glad as the Queen was to behold that little face, this was their real life and in it Emma was supposed to have her adult body. The book had listed possible side effects, but this was not one of them.

"That's reassuring, thanks." Emma sniffed, grateful when a conjured tissue was offered. "And here I was looking forward to finally reaching the sink again Mama." She froze as that word fizzled out between them, dropping the tissue when the tingle came again and she grew, clothing fitting again as it should. "Well… this will be interesting to explain at work next week." Humor failing as teeth chewed a pink lip.

Their eyes locked knowingly.

"Gina, what does this mean?" Emma leaned automatically into the Queen, relaxing a bit as arms pulled her close.

"I don't know yet. I love you and we will figure this out, like always."

"You said that to me once before, or something like it. In the diner on New Year's Eve, remember?"

"I do."

"Promise?"

"I promise. We will work through this together… as a family."

That word, though she'd used it freely enough in either life now meant so much more with Emma's claim on her. They had found each other years ago in the messiness of their present life and again under the spell of an alternate reality; two souls in disarray, each seeking to belong to someone that meant home.
Their real life was about to get complicated, but it had never been simple. Not for them; Regina and Emma, the Mayor and the Sheriff, the Queen and the Savior, or Mama and her sweet little swan.

::::::::::::::: Stay Tuned For the sequel called 'Home Again' :::::::::::::::::

A/N - Wow! What a journey! Thank you for seeing me through this. Your comments & kudos have kept me going.

Sequel chapter one soon to be posted – check out end of post for sneak peek of the cover art. A unique non-sexual SwanQueen pairing will be the focus, but not what you think – by now you know I don't reveal everything upfront. There are many relationships in this world that are intimate without being romantic or even sexual that are beautifully fulfilling for people.

I plan on showing you one.

For some of you, I know our journey ends here, for others the sequel will have much more adult Emma and Regina with the shrinking happening in between and causing all sorts of interesting issues, awkward conversations, fluff and angst erupting in their life.

How will Emma explain this to the real Snow and David, or Henry, the town and how will they handle random visits of a little savior who is very much an adult? Why is the shrinking happening to begin with? How will Snow's hidden pregnancy affect Emma in their real life? What does this mean for the little family Emma has claimed for herself? There is also the spell, who created it and why? And then there's Regina at the center of it all… How is the Queen coping with this change and maybe a little loss, too? How do they redefine their life when other people are trying to do that for them?

Care to join me for that adventure?
~LittleSwanLover~
Home Again
by
LittleSwanLover
Authors note

Chapter Summary

Authors note on new story you might like if you enjoyed The Do Over.

For readers of the do over specifically I have a new story for you that you might like along the lines of what started this trilogy.

I just released chapter one this morning. It's called - Of Daughters & Mothers

Synopsis: Regina & Snow White, both at their most vulnerable, must learn to work together to heal the broken past between them in a most unconventional way. Will they survive each other and learn how to forgive or remain trapped in their worst nightmare? Set mid S.2 right at the death of Cora. Her mother’s last words, “You would have been enough,” begins a journey back in time to a cursed Storybrooke, before Henry, where Regina awakens to find the woman who killed her Mother, now a child she is responsible for. But is all really as it seems?
Of Daughters & Mothers

By LittleSwanLover

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!