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**Character:** Emma Swan, Evil Queen | Regina Mills, Captain Hook | Killian Jones, Baelfire | Neal Cassidy, Henry Mills (Once Upon a Time), Elsa (Once Upon a Time), Snow Queen | Ingrid | Sarah Fisher, Snow White | Mary Margaret Blanchard, Prince Charming | David Nolan  
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**For Love or Money**

by starsthatburn

**Summary**

Emma Swan is deep in debt, working for a boss who hates her, and has just been dumped by a guy who didn't deserve her in the first place. When Regina Mills - millionaire, high-flying art dealer and the most beautiful woman Emma has ever seen - swoops into her life and offers her a world of luxury in exchange for pretending to be her girlfriend, Emma can't possibly say no.

Modern-day AU set in New York. Based on Sarra Manning's 'Unsticky'.
Chapter 1

Author's note:
The amazing cover artwork for this fic, which you can see on the fanfic.net upload and on my tumblr, was made by the incredible powerfulmagics - go and check out her other stuff!!!

I got the main idea for this story from Sarra Manning's Unsticky, which is one of the best books ever written and should definitely be read by everyone. Because of this, I can't take any credit at all for the overarching plot.

I'm English and I know very little about New York, the American college system or how US courts and prisons work (these will come up more in later chapters). I've done my best but please be kind if I've gotten anything wrong!

Chapter one

Emma picked up the book and gently thumbed the hard edge of the cover. It wasn’t one of their best, she had to admit, but there was something about the way the words Zippy Craig were splashed across the glossy paper that would still draw children to it when they rushed past the store window. Maybe that would be enough to make their parents ignore the heavy price tag on the back.

She turned it over in her hands and sighed. She’d worked hard on this one, even though Ingrid has repeatedly tried to stop her from getting involved in it. It didn’t matter how many meetings Emma had been dragged into so that she could take notes for the dumbass author – as far as her boss was concerned, she should stay as far away from the books as possible. Even now that it was finished and sitting brightly in the front window of Barnes & Noble, its cover adorned with drawings done by the illustrator that she had found after drunkenly meeting him at a bar in Chelsea, all she had received from Ingrid was an order to go and make sure that the stores were putting it in front of the new book that had been published by their competitor and not behind it, as they’d promised. Oh, and don’t forget to pick up a coffee on your way back.

Emma pressed her lips together and placed the book back on its pile, then took a photo on her phone to prove to Ingrid that everything was to her liking. Stepping to one side, she let herself drift around to the other side of the new releases table, her eyes flicking over the covers. The store was quiet that afternoon, and there were only three other women in the nearby vicinity. Or there were, until the electric doors on the floor below them swished open and a pair of heavy footsteps began to stomp up the stairs towards her.

She should have heard him coming, but she was distracted by their competitor’s book right at that moment. Ingrid had spent the last month spitting over it, but Emma had to admit that it looked pretty good.

“Hi, love,” a voice said from behind her. She turned and smiled.

“Hey, Killian,” she said. Normally he would lean in and kiss her cheek, but today he didn’t. She assumed he was in a rush, because he looked slightly pink in the face. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” he said, looking down at the book in her hands. “Is this yours?”

“No, I was just stealing ideas,” she said, putting it down. When she glanced back up Killian wasn’t looking at her – his gaze was elsewhere and it seemed weirdly hazy. She frowned, knowing better
than to ask if he’d been drinking but wondering it all the same. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, pulling at his collar. Finally, he looked at her. “And hey – happy birthday.”

It was the flattest Emma had ever felt. She forced a smile. “Thanks. Feels pretty special.”

Killian didn’t acknowledge the comment as he reached into his jacket pocket. It was the middle of June and 98 degrees outside, but he was the type of person to wear a leather jacket come rain or shine. The long necklaces that he insisted on wearing clinked together as he moved.

He produced a crumpled birthday card, which Emma blinked down at. He’d asked to meet her there, in one of Emma’s favourite stores in New York, and she’d naively assumed it was because he wanted to take her out for a late lunch or give her a birthday present or even just to buy her a book because he’d forgotten to get something sooner. But instead she found herself looking down at the wrinkled pink envelope that was clutched in the hand of her boyfriend of almost a year with a creeping sense of disappointment crawling up her limbs. She pressed her lips together.

“Thanks,” she said, taking it from him. She prised it open and found herself faced with a card that she somehow knew he’d purchased from the newsstand at the other end of the block.

Emma,

Happy birthday

From Killian

She blinked. “Wow. It sure is personal, isn’t it?”

“Emma,” Killian suddenly said, his voice higher than normal. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I need to tell you something.”

“Okay,” Emma said, tucking a blonde curl behind her ear. “What’s—”

“I think we should break up.”

Bastard. He couldn’t even wait for her to finish the fucking question.

She froze, the birthday card with its stupid fucking cats on it dangling from one hand. She was certain that someone had just cranked the air conditioning up. “I’m sorry?”

He at least had the decency to look ashamed of himself when he said, “You and me. I don’t think we’re working anymore.”

The store had been quiet before he had arrived, but now it felt deathly silent. Emma could feel at least three sets of eyes on her.

She took a deep breath and forced herself not to yell, “You’re breaking up with me? On my birthday?”

“I wasn’t planning to. I—”

“Here?” Emma snapped, clenching her fists and not caring that the card was getting crushed. “Today?”

“Emma,” Killian said with a hint of a groan in his voice. This obviously wasn’t going how he’d
planned, and she could tell it wouldn’t take much before he was the one yelling back at her. “Come on. Don’t make a scene.”

“Don’t make a scene?” Emma demanded, and now she really was shouting. “You followed me into my happy place so you could break up with me on my fucking birthday, Killian. What am I supposed to do? How did you expect me to react?”

“I really didn’t plan to do this now,” he said, talking quickly and almost at a whisper. If he hoped that Emma was going to match his tone, he would be extremely disappointed. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a while, but the timing was never right. And then I called you here because I just wanted to give you the card but then I saw you and you were just...”

His sentence trailed off into nothing, and Emma felt something start to bubble up inside her like heartburn. “And I was what?”

Killian rolled his eyes. “You just look so distant and moody, and I couldn’t hold it in any longer. This isn’t working, so why drag it out?”

Emma felt herself flinch at his words, and she hated herself for it. “Distant and moody?”

“Will you keep your voice down?” Killian hissed. “This is exactly why I need to end things – nothing is ever good enough for you. You’re impossible to make happy and you have so much baggage I can’t even begin to work through it. I thought you’d be fun to hang out with but it’s just not working out. I need something different.”

To her horror, Emma felt tears pricking at her eyes. She gritted her teeth, forcing them back down. She wasn’t the type of girl who cried – especially not over some dickhead man – and there was no way she was losing any more face today.

“Well, I’m really sorry to disappoint,” she snarled, crossing her arms over her chest. Killian just scoffed back at her.

“You don’t need to sound so butt hurt,” he said. It always jarred with her when he used an Americanism in his lilting English accent, but it wasn’t so much the contradiction as the actual offence of it that made her wince this time. “You weren’t happy either. I’m just doing you a favour.”

“You call this a favour?” she spluttered. “How many times do I need to remind you that it’s my birthday today, you jackass? What part of this was meant to be kind?”

Killian looked around, glaring at the people who were obviously staring over at the scene that was unfolding in the middle of the Barnes & Noble children’s section, and released a puff of air. “Stop making yourself out to be the victim, Emma. You always do this. I know you have a lot of issues but not everything is a big plot against you and your happy ending.”

“I do not have—”

“Save it,” he said, taking a step back. He was done here, evidently, and somehow Emma had come out as the loser yet again. “See you around, Swan. Happy birthday.”

Her stormed off, the weight of this inconvenient task leaving his shoulders, and Emma was left alone with stupid fucking Zippy Craig staring up at her.

Noise in the store finally began to bubble back up again as she stared resolutely down at the multicoloured books. Her hair had tumbled forwards, shielding her face from view, and she took a deep breath, willing some of the humiliation to ebb away from her.
That fucking card was still in her hand. She looked down at it.

*Another banner year.*

She didn’t hear the quick footsteps approaching her. When a hand latched onto her elbow, she jumped.

“Come with me,” a woman’s voice said, pulling her away from the table. “Now.”

For a brief moment, Emma wondered if the store security guard was escorting her out for making a scene. She turned her head to look at the woman who was pulling her along and saw shoulder-length hair that was too dark and glossy to be simply called brown, tan skin, and the most perfectly fitted sleeveless shirt she’d ever seen in her life. A shiny red purse was clamped over one shoulder. She didn’t look like a security guard.

Unable to find her voice or even her feet, Emma let herself being dragged across the floor and down the stairs. She didn’t look round again: her gaze had naturally fallen to the pair of vibrant red heels that were walking along beside her scuffed sneakers, and once it was there, it refused to move. She suddenly felt exhausted, and so she just let this woman take her away – probably to kidnap her, although Emma didn’t care all that much. She smelled nice and her fingers were surprisingly cool against Emma’s bare arm, given the sweltering heat outside. She was also leading her away from the crime scene where the most embarrassing thing to ever happen to Emma had just taken place, and so she was willing to do as she was told for once.

When they reached the main exit, the alarm started beeping. The woman swore and turned back momentarily, taking three books that had been clamped under her arm and tossing them onto the nearest table. Emma glanced over at them: kids’ books, from the *Risk Child* series. Not books from her company, and not very good ones either. In spite of everything, she summoned an eye roll at the murky grey and red cover.

The woman pulled her out into the street and veered sharply to the left, weaving through the crowds of tourists without slowing down. She never let go of Emma’s arm, and it took a few minutes before Emma registered that she could pull herself free if she really tried.

“Hey,” she said, and when the woman didn’t respond, she repeated it a bit louder. “I’m fine now. You can let go of me.”

The woman stopped walking, ignoring the crowds of people who nearly crashed into them, and looked over her shoulder. Emma felt herself choke slightly: she had the darkest, most intense eyes that Emma had ever seen, and her lipstick somehow perfectly matched the red of both her shoes and her purse. As she looked back, her lips pursed thoughtfully, and Emma could tell she was being regarded. She did her best to not shrink underneath her gaze.

“I think,” the woman said, and God, her voice. It was like chocolate and gravel and 60 cigarettes a day. “You need a drink.”

Emma blinked. “It’s three o’clock in the afternoon.”

“True, but if I heard you correctly, it’s also your birthday,” the woman said, and carried on walking down the street. Her fingers were still on Emma’s elbow, but her grip had loosened. Emma fell into step beside her without thinking. “I think you deserve one.”

Emma didn’t even consider arguing with her. It was hard to say whether that was because she’d been totally worn down by the day’s events, or because the woman’s general demeanour was so
intimidating that the thought of saying no to her made her break out in a light sweat. Either way, the grasp on her elbow was more comforting than it was threatening, and so Emma let herself be led along, her birthday card still clamped in one hand.

They found a bar two streets down and the woman held the door open for her. Emma walked slowly inside, still half expecting this to be the part where the kidnapping happened, but instead found that it really was just a bar. Emma was even fairly sure she’d been there before, but after enough tequila, most of these places tended to blur into one. She just hoped this wasn’t one of the places where she’d skipped out on a bar tab and never returned again.

The woman guided her over to a booth and settled down into the seat opposite her. Emma walked slowly inside, still half expecting this to be the part where the kidnapping happened, but instead found that it really was just a bar. Emma was even fairly sure she’d been there before, but after enough tequila, most of these places tended to blur into one. She just hoped this wasn’t one of the places where she’d skipped out on a bar tab and never returned again.

The woman guided her over to a booth and settled down into the seat opposite her. Emma looked up and groaned – face-on, she was even more beautiful. Emma, meanwhile, was sticky from sweat and pink-cheeked from all the drama, and she couldn’t imagine what she must look like sitting opposite her.

Emma was almost certain that this wasn’t a place that had table service, and yet a man with a greying beard and untidy sideburns came hurrying over to take their order within seconds of them sitting down. There was something about the woman’s presence – her rod-straight posture, her constant look of expectation – that Emma imagined always lured people towards her like that.

The woman ordered a glass of merlot and then looked pointedly at Emma.

“Um,” Emma said, shifting awkwardly. “I’m not really supposed to drink during working hours.”

The woman rolled her eyes, and looked back towards the waiter. “She’ll have a scotch.”

Emma stammered, “But—”

“Scotch,” the woman repeated, not taking her eyes away from the man’s face. “Neat.”

He dutifully wandered off. Emma noticed a new redness in his face that she assumed followed this woman around wherever she went.

When she looked back across the booth, she found herself being watched. Toned arms were folded neatly along the edge of the table and dark eyebrows were slightly raised.

“Thanks,” Emma said slowly, although she had no idea what she was thanking her for. “What’s your name?”

She hated herself for how nervous she sounded. The woman smirked, a delicate twitch at the corner of her mouth that told her she found her endearing rather than annoying. She replied in that voice that Emma already couldn’t get enough of. “Regina.”

Emma nodded. “Thanks for rescuing me back there.”

“That’s quite alright,” Regina said, tilting her head. “I suppose I should wish you a happy birthday, but it feels like that would be a bit bittersweet now.”

Emma smiled faintly. “Maybe a little. It wasn’t very happy when I slept through my alarm and got hauled out by my boss in front of the whole office, but by now I just feel like the entire day is trying to shit on me.”

She thought Regina might scold her for swearing, but she laughed. It was an actual laugh, deep and throaty, and Emma felt herself burn up at the sound of it.
“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. Her eyes never left Emma’s face. “The boyfriend. Were you dating for long?”

“Not even a year,” Emma shrugged. “I knew it wasn’t going to last forever, but... you know. I didn’t expect it to end then, or like that.”

Her cheeks pricked at the memory of it and she dropped her gaze, wishing her drink had arrived already so she could distract herself with a bracing gulp.

“Can I be frank?”

Emma lifted her gaze. “For some reason that feels like your default setting.”

“That man,” Regina said, ignoring her, “was a child. He would never have been worthy of you, and this afternoon’s display just proved it.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Emma said slowly. “He could be a million times better than me.”

“He’s not,” Regina said, her voice firm, like there was no room for arguing. “Don’t believe that for a second.”

Emma could feel some of that day’s annoyance bubbling back up inside her. “It’s not really any of your business though, is it?”

“Isn’t it?” Regina asked, lifting her eyebrows. “You weren’t exactly discussing it privately. Don’t give me a front row seat if you don’t want me to comment on the performance.”

“Hey, look,” Emma said at the exact moment that the waiter reappeared with their drinks. He jumped at her tone, skulking away again without a word the second he’d placed them on the table. “You took me out of there for some unknown reason, and that was your decision. I didn’t ask for that and I didn’t ask you to bring me here and I didn’t ask for your opinion. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Who says it has to have something to do with me for me to have an opinion?” Regina asked, sipping her wine. “It was Emma, right?”

Emma blinked. “Sorry?”

“Your name. Emma,” Regina asked, staring levelly. “I think that’s what your gentleman friend was shouting at you from across the children’s section. Is that right?”

“Yes,” Emma said through gritted teeth.

“So, Emma. If I see someone being mistreated, I’m perfectly within my rights to step in. I’m also allowed to ignore it and walk away if I want to. I saw the way he was talking to you and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Not enough to interrupt when he was pointing out my character flaws in front of a dozen strangers, though,” Emma muttered. To her surprise, Regina smirked at her.

“I’m afraid that’s because I can’t walk that fast in these shoes.”

Emma laughed through her nose. She lifted her glass and took a sip of the scotch that she’d promised herself she wouldn’t drink. “You’re definitely an interesting woman.”

“I’ve heard that a few times,” Regina said, bringing her own glass back to her lips. Her gaze was so
steady and calm that Emma could feel herself being taken in by it. Everything Regina did felt like a manipulation of some kind, and it took Emma too long to realise that she was willingly letting it happen to her. When Regina was watching her so intently, it felt oddly like a compliment.

As if she’d heard the thoughts rattling around in her head, Regina’s lips quirked upwards. “Tell me about yourself.”

Emma frowned. “Why?”

“Because I think you might be an interesting person too.”

The words lit a fire in Emma’s stomach. Her gaze automatically dropped as she said, “I’m really not.”

“Try me.”

Emma could never turn down a challenge, and so she felt herself straighten up against the hard back of the booth. “I work in publishing.”

“Doing what?”

“We publish kids’ books,” Emma said, wrapping her fingers around her glass. “I’m assistant to the editor.”

“The boss who yells at you and won’t let you have a drink on a Friday afternoon?”

Emma felt a flicker of a smile cross her face. Regina hadn’t even met her yet, and yet she already had Ingrid down to a T. “That’ll be her.”

“She sounds like a delight,” Regina said. “Do you enjoy your job?”

Shrugging, Emma said, “Usually. I like the work itself, but a change of company would be nice.”

“Why don’t you look somewhere else?”

The long pause that followed her question was not lost on Regina. She narrowed her eyes when Emma eventually answered, “Just never had the chance, I guess.”

“You’ve never had the chance to go on LinkedIn?”

“No,” Emma said flatly, pushing down the panic that was starting to twist through her intestines. Diversion was her best option for getting rid of it. “And what do you do?”

“I work in art,” Regina said, only giving away enough to let Emma know that she was just as important as she suspected.

“You’re an artist?”

“No,” she replied. “I work in art. It’s very different.”

“It doesn’t sound that different to me.”

“One makes money,” Regina said. “The other doesn’t.”

“I see,” Emma said, but she didn’t. All she knew was that Regina’s eyes on her made her feel comfortable and uneasy in equal measure. She took another sip of scotch. “I guess if you’re
wandering around Barnes & Noble at 3pm, you’re either doing really well or not well at all.”

Regina smirked at her again. “That’s quite astute. Which one are you?”

“Definitely the latter,” Emma said. A thought struck her. “How come you were shopping in the kids’ section?”

“I was buying a present.”

Emma snorted. She couldn’t help herself. “You shouldn’t be buying those books you’d picked up for anyone.”

Regina’s eyebrows shot up. For the first time since they’d met, she looked surprised. “No? Why is that?”

“Well, first of all, that publisher doesn’t sign any writers based on talent or artistic merit – they’re notorious for hiring friends of friends or celebrities or sometimes even just people who send in bribes. Second of all, the series you picked up is just no good. There’s no message behind it, no relatable characters, no point to the whole thing. The author has basically admitted that he had a really nonsensical dream when he was seven and is now charging people $12.99 to see it dragged out over 200 pages.”

Regina blinked at her, and Emma sighed.

“Okay, maybe I’m biased,” she admitted. “But I have recommendations that are better.”

“Go on.” It was a challenge, and they both knew Emma wasn’t the type to step back from it.

She reached across to the far side of the table and grabbed a napkin. When she looked back at Regina, she was already holding out a pen for her.

Without thinking, Emma took it and scrawled down the names of five books that were from a similar age bracket to the ones Regina had picked out herself. Two were from her own company, but three were ones she’d picked up on her various trips around the city’s bookstores.

She slid the napkin across the table, where it absorbed a spilled drop of alcohol on its way, and waited for Regina’s verdict. She read the list without expression.

“You’ve read all these?”

“Yeah,” Emma said, trying not to sound defensive. “It’s kind of my job.”

“Do you have children?”

“No,” Emma frowned. “Do you?”

“What drew you into publishing in the first place?” Regina asked, ignoring her question. She was still looking at the list.

“I don’t know,” Emma shrugged, glancing at her watch and wincing. She pulled her glass closer to her and drank half of it without so much as a shudder. “Got to pay the bills somehow.”

When she looked back up, Regina was smiling at her in a way that told Emma she didn’t believe a word of her bullshit. Even so, she said, “I suppose that’s a reason.”

Emma quickly drank the rest of her scotch and ran a hand through her hair. “I’m really sorry, I have
to get going. My cell’s been buzzing for the last four minutes and I’m pretty sure I know who’s calling me.”

It was a lie, but Regina didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, she folded the napkin neatly in half and slipped it into her purse.

“Understandable,” she said, looking back up. Her gaze was intense as she added, “I hope you don’t get in trouble when you return.”

“I’m always in trouble,” Emma replied, tucking her hair behind one ear. She reached into her pocket to fish out some money, but Regina was already waving her off.

“Forget that,” she said. Her wine glass was still mostly full, and it didn’t seem like she planned on leaving any time soon. “My treat.”

Yet again, Emma felt herself blushing. She forced a smile.

“Thanks. That’s nice of you.”

Regina smiled back. “Consider it a birthday present.”

“Do you make a habit of buying total strangers birthday presents?” Emma asked before she could stop herself. She was sitting with her hands clenched in her lap, and she really needed to get up and leave, but for some reason it wasn’t quite happening.

Regina laughed. “I can’t say that I do. Consider yourself to be special.”

That was a word that affection-starved Emma very rarely heard, and it sent a tingle rushing down her spine.

Then her phone really did start vibrating from her pocket. She pulled it out with a sigh.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Of course,” Regina said. She watched as Emma stood up, but didn’t join her. Instead she reached out one hand, waiting for Emma to take it. “It was nice to meet you, Emma.”

Her name was its own sentence, and Emma shivered. Regina’s fingers were cool against hers.

She pulled away abruptly, forcing another smile. “Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Regina waited for a full five seconds before replying, “I don’t doubt it.”

Not knowing how she was supposed to respond to that, Emma gave her a terse nod and headed for the door. The scotch she’d drunk in less than five minutes made her slightly wobbly, but she made sure her step was firm as she walked out onto the street, deliberately not looking back.

Ingrid was nowhere to be seen when she got back to the Caterpillar office, but Emma knew that wouldn’t be the case for long. She slipped in along the side wall, bypassing the bullpen where the subs and art teams sat, and sought out her desk just outside Ingrid glass-walled office. The air conditioning had been broken for weeks and she could feel the dewy city air sliding in through the open windows, but that wasn’t the reason why her cheeks were so hot.

She collapsed into her chair with a heavy sigh and waited for her computer to wake up again. She’d been sitting for barely 10 seconds before a figure appeared at her side.
“Hey,” Elsa said, leaning against the edge of Emma’s desk. Her white-blonde hair hung in a loose braid over one shoulder. “Ingrid’s been looking for you.”

Emma groaned. It was a sound that Elsa had become long used to.

“Of course she has,” Emma said, glancing over at the empty office to her left. “Where is she?”

“Not sure,” Elsa said, picking up Emma’s overused stress ball and tossing it into the air. “She was huffing about having to take a meeting with that pain in the ass agent who won’t speak to anyone except her, but that was a while ago. Maybe she’s gone to get her own coffee.”

There was a pause, and then Emma threw her head back, sighing loudly enough to make half the editorial team look over. “Fuck.”

“She said you would forget.”

“Well, thanks for the reminder,” Emma snapped. It was a testament to their friendship that Elsa didn’t even wince at her tone anymore.

“I didn’t think you needed reminding. You get her coffee five times a day,” Elsa said, her eyes on the ball that she was still tossing in the air. “You have been gone for a while, though. Was there a problem with Zippy Craig?”

“No,” Emma said, looking towards the elevator and wondering whether she could sneak out to Starbucks before Ingrid returned. “It was all fine.”

“Then why do you look so stressed?”

Emma looked up to find Elsa’s pale blue eyes watching her carefully. They’d been working together for two years, having rallied together on Emma’s very first day at Caterpillar Books. Emma had been sitting bolt upright behind her desk, desperately hoping that the phone wouldn’t ring, when Elsa had swept past wearing a glittery sweater that Emma still remembered to this day.

Emma had undoubtedly had a little bit of a crush on her, because her cheeks had stained pink when Elsa had come over to her later that day to ask how she was finding everything. Over time that nervousness had ebbed away into what Emma regarded as a real friendship – one that invariably involved too many tequila shots, bitchy emails about the latest stick up Ingrid’s ass, and just the right amount of space to stop Emma from wanting to run away.

In spite of that respectful distance, Elsa knew Emma and her many different moods better than anyone else did. Now she was eyeing Emma’s fidgeting hands and bitten lips with concern, knowing that Emma never told her what was wrong unless she was asked.

Emma shrugged. “I had a weird afternoon. It was too hot to be traipsing around the city, and then there was a whole thing with this woman...”

“What woman?” Elsa asked. She was still throwing the stress ball, catching it easily without even looking at it, and Emma suddenly wanted to slap it out of her hand. “I thought you were meant to be seeing Killian?”

There was a pause as something clunked down inside Emma’s chest. With her head filled with scotch and thoughts of Regina, she’d completely forgotten about him.

She heard herself laugh out loud. “I did. He dumped me.”
“He what?”

The hurt came creeping back as Emma nodded, trying not to meet Elsa’s gaze. “Yep. He gave me a birthday card, and then he broke up with me. Right in front of our new book.”

Elsa nearly slid off the desk entirely. “What the hell! I hope you didn’t get any blood on Zippy Craig when you punched him?”

Emma laughed, but it was a hollow sound. She felt a hand squeeze her shoulder. “Seriously,” Elsa said, her voice dipping. “That’s completely fucked up. Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure,” Emma said, twirling a pencil between two fingers so she could focus on that instead of having to look up. “I’m definitely not as upset as I should be, but that’s probably because I’m so pissed off.”

“Were you going to marry him?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Doubtful. I’m not sure I’m really the marrying type, though.”

“Well, not with him,” Elsa said. “Shit, Emma. I can’t believe he did that. And on your birthday. What kind of asshole does that? Did he at least have the decency to be screwing somebody else behind your back?”

Emma snorted, her cheeks going red as she remembered Killian’s scathing character assessment of her. “Not that he mentioned. Apparently I’m just too moody for him.”

“I like your moodiness,” Elsa declared, and she said it with such conviction that Emma didn’t register that she should be offended. “Emma, you’re much better off without him. What a dick.”

There was enough venom in her words to make Emma smile again. “He is, isn’t he?”

“How did you leave things?”

“Well,” Emma said, her stomach twisting. “He walked out when I started yelling. I don’t think I gave him the reaction he was hoping for.”

Elsa snorted. “Good. I’m glad. Did you go after him?”

There was a long pause. “No. I got... distracted.”

She didn’t look up, but Emma could sense the cloudiness falling across Elsa’s face. “By what, exactly?”

Red shoes. Red lipstick.

“This woman sort of... kidnapped me.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Maybe that’s the wrong word,” Emma said, talking more to herself than to Elsa. “Maybe she rescued me. I’m not sure. Either way, she came over and took me away and bought me a drink.”

The next pause was longer. Eventually Elsa asked, “Why?”

“I have no idea. I guess she felt sorry for me.”
“Or she had a crush on you.”

Emma snorted loud enough to hurt her sinuses. “Yeah, definitely not.”

“Why not?” Elsa asked. “You’re a catch.”

“Killian doesn’t seem to think so.”

“Killian’s got his head up his own ass,” Elsa snapped. “His opinion doesn’t count for anything. Why wouldn’t this woman be into you?”

“Because. She was...” Emma’s sentence trailed off as she tried and failed to sum up exactly what Regina was. “Sophisticated.”

Elsa’s eyebrows shot up. “Is that code for ‘snobby’?”

“Maybe a little. But she was nice – we talked and she was interested in me, and she helped me forget about Killian for a bit.”

“Was she old?”

“No. Older, though,” Emma said. “In her thirties, probably.”

“Was she hot?”

Emma’s cheeks burned, and Elsa no longer needed an answer.

“Oh dear,” she smirked, crossing her legs. “No wonder you look so distracted.”

“Shut up,” Emma said, grabbing a random collection of invoices and sorting them into a pile. “It’s just hot in here.”

“It’s not that hot,” Elsa said, her voice serene and saying a billion things all at once. Emma glared up at her.

“You’re permanently cold,” she said, eyeing the pale forehead that had never seen a bead of sweat in its life. “Your opinion doesn’t count for anything either.”

Elsa smirked back at her. “Whatever, Em. Are you going to see her again?”

“No,” Emma said way too quickly. “We didn’t exchange numbers. I don’t even know her last name.”

She expected this to make Elsa wilt with disappointment, but if anything it just seemed to bolster her. “If she was actually interested in you, I’m sure that won’t stop her.”

“You’re definitely making a bigger deal out of this than it is,” Emma said, pointedly ignoring the ringing phone on her desk. “She was just being nice, that’s all. Besides, I literally just broke up with someone. Like, within the hour. I’m not interested in anyone else yet.”

Elsa was looking at her with the deadpan expression that Emma knew meant she wasn’t buying a single one of her lies. But before she could pithily sum up how dumb Emma was being, the elevator doors pinged open.

“There you are,” Ingrid bellowed from across the room, not reacting when Elsa toppled off the edge of Emma’s desk. She stormed across the office with her venti soy latte clutched like a weapon in her
hand, her pinned blonde hair remaining perfectly still as she walked. Her eyes were on Emma, unblinking and unforgiving. “Where the hell have you been?”

As Elsa crept away murmuring apologies, Emma steeled herself for only the second-worst thing to happen to her that day. “I’m sorry, Ingrid. The stores were crazy and then there was this whole mess with—”

“When I give you a simple task, I expect you to finish it,” Ingrid cut over her. She reached Emma’s desk and leaned against it, her coffee tilting dangerously over the invoices that Emma had been sorting. “I expect you to return within an hour, and I expect you to have the goddamn coffee that I asked for.”

Emma should have known better than to argue with her by then, but the heat was muddling her brain. Before she could stop herself, she heard her own voice protesting, “I couldn’t do all five stores and Starbucks in an hour. Strand alone is more than—”

“Shut up,” Ingrid snapped. She had long mastered the art of speaking loudly enough that every person in the room could hear her, but low enough to cut through every bone in Emma’s body. “You’re on thin ice as it is, Emma. You’re lucky to be here, and you know it – don’t think I’ve forgotten that just because you’ve finally learned how to use the photocopier.”

She pushed herself away from the desk and stormed into her office. The delicate click that came from her door as it closed was more than a little anticlimactic after the tirade of abuse that had just come out of her mouth.

Emma swallowed down her anger and her embarrassment and went back to her invoices. Seeing Emma getting hauled out in front of the entire room was by no means a rare occurrence in the Caterpillar office, which meant that by now people had at least stopped staring. She could hear the whispered chatter though, and she could feel the tips of her ears heating up. The phone rang again, and this time she picked it up.

There were four letters waiting for Emma when she got home. Her roommate had helpfully left them resting against the vase of flowers in the hall, like the brightly coloured petals would somehow soften the angry red words stamped across the envelopes.

Emma pushed them deep into her backpack and trudged into the kitchen. She found Mary Margaret curled up in a chair, one bare foot dangling below her and her fingers fiddling with her dark pixie cut. Her phone was clamped to her ear, and when Emma entered the room, she held up one finger.

“David, I’ve got to go,” she said, then burst into fresh giggles. “Don’t say that!”

Grimacing, Emma went to the fridge and grabbed a beer. She was due to go back out with Elsa and some of their other work friends in an hour so she could spend the night crawling from barstool to barstool, cursing Killian’s name and decidedly not thinking about the dark-haired woman who’d swooped in to her rescue that day.

Once Mary Margaret had finally managed to say goodbye to her boyfriend, she tossed her cell onto the table and sing-songed, “Emma! Happy birthday!”

Emma forced a smile. “Thanks.”

“Oh,” Mary Margaret said, her joy visibly fading. “Not so happy, maybe?”

“Not exactly,” Emma said, groaning as she settled down in the chair opposite her roommate. “It’s
been a bit of a crappy day.”

“Work problems?”

“Partly,” Emma said, hesitating. She knew she had to tell Mary Margaret about what had happened with Killian, but it was awkward: he and David were old friends, and Mary Margaret had been desperately in love with the idea of the four of them going out on double dates together, even though she and David had been together for a full six months by that point and it still hadn’t happened yet. Killian was in a horrifying rock band – something he thought constituted as a full-time job – and half a year ago Emma had forced Mary Margaret to come with her to one of their performances. She and David had met there, and the giggling hadn’t stopped since.

Emma sighed and came out with it. “Killian dumped me.”

Mary Margaret blinked at her for a second. In her love-addled brain, things like break-ups simply didn’t happen. “Oh, Emma! Are you sure?”

“What?” Emma asked. “Of course I’m sure.”

“Sorry,” Mary Margaret said. “I just... What happened?”

And so Emma repeated the whole sorry tale, her voice flat and tired. Mary Margaret’s eyes grew slowly wider as she listened, and by the time Emma had described Killian storming out the door without her, her hands were pressed over her mouth.

“That’s terrible!” she gasped. “Emma, I had no idea! David never mentioned anything. Maybe Killian just had a touch of cold feet?”

“Supposedly he’s been thinking about me and all my issues for a while,” Emma muttered, picking at the label of her half-empty beer. “Which is really good to know.”

Mary Margaret sighed. “Emma, I’m sure he still loves you.”

“He never loved me,” Emma said. When her roommate tried to correct her, she waved her off. “I’m serious. We never said that to each other - neither of us are that kind of person. We had fun together and I tolerated his band’s crappy music because he was cute and charming and everything, but we weren’t in love. I’m not even surprised he dumped me, I’m just pissed off that he did it so badly.”

“So if he asked you to be his girlfriend again, you would say no?”

“Of course I’d say no,” Emma said. “I do have some pride.”

The flash of uncertainty on her roommate’s face was yet another blow to her confidence.

“Anyway,” Mary Margaret sighed. “I’m really sorry. That’s a really crappy thing to happen on your birthday.”

Emma felt her jaw clench of its own accord. To Mary Margaret, the dumping seemed to be a random event with no instigator behind it – it wasn’t selfish and awful that Killian broke up with her on her birthday; it was merely an unfortunate coincidence.

“Yeah,” Emma said slowly, waiting for her to at least call him a dick. When it didn’t happen, she pushed her chair away from the table. “I should go get changed.”

“Are you still going out tonight?” Mary Margaret asked. “Do you want me to come with you?”
Emma had a flash of remembrance of the last time Mary Margaret had gotten drunk: she’d ended up throwing up spectacularly in their shared bathroom, the contents of her stomach pink and purple from the fruity cocktails she’d been sucking down. Emma couldn’t smell passion fruit now without wanting to hurl.

“You’re okay,” Emma said, backing away. “We’ll only be going to those sports bars that you hate.”

Mary Margaret wrinkled her nose. “I don’t get what your obsession is with those.”

Emma shrugged. “Cheap beer and drunk men for Elsa to flirt with. There’s nothing to hate.”

“If you say so. Try not to get too wasted.”

Emma left the room promising that she wouldn’t, as if her roommate was her mother and not just someone she’d ended up living with after she’d spotted the cute little apartment advertised on Craigslist 18 months ago. Mary Margaret’s father, who was more devoted to her than possibly any father was to his daughter, had bought it for her when she’d moved to the city for college. Even though she didn’t exactly need the extra rent money, she’d obviously been lonely living by herself. Emma’s attic room was tiny, but the rent was cheap and it was a far sight better than the hovels she’d jumped between when she’d first moved to New York. She’d vacated the majority of them after three months at the most, leaving behind a pile of envelopes with her name on and some serious backlog in weekly rent payments.

After she’d climbed the rickety staircase up to her bedroom, Emma tugged that day’s letters out of her bag without looking at them. The box under her bed was starting to overflow, she realised as she pulled it free. She’d have to buy a bigger one.

With a sick feeling squeezing at her stomach, she shoved the envelopes into the box and pushed it back out of sight. The beer she’d drunk had left a foul taste in her mouth.

Downstairs, she could hear Mary Margaret on the phone once more. She was laughing hysterically, even though Emma had met David plenty of times and although he was a good guy, he was nowhere near that funny.

Tumbling back onto her bed, she stared up at the ceiling and listened to the laughter coming from beneath her feet. She had less than an hour left to get ready and go back across town, but she couldn’t force herself to move. Something heavy had settled on her chest.

Mary Margaret’s giggles reminded her of another laugh she’d heard that day. It had been richer and more sincere, and it had made Emma feel like she’d earned it.

Emma closed her eyes and pictured Regina’s face; the way she’d watched Emma so intently while she’d been talking. Her dark eyes had never strayed from Emma’s green ones.

The weight on Emma’s chest felt somehow heavier. She took a breath.
Chapter 2

Emma staggered into work on Monday still trapped in the grips of the worst hangover she’d ever experienced in her life. She’d spent every minute of the weekend either drinking or trying to sleep off the industrial amounts of bourbon she’d consumed, and it had only occurred to her somewhere around 8pm the night before that she actually had a job to go to in the morning.

Elsa, for all her sweet demeanour and princess curls, was a God-awful influence when it came to drinking. She had dragged Emma around SoHo on Friday night, never losing the spring in her step even when Emma could feel her teeth starting to go numb. The following morning, when Emma had woken up upside down in her bed, she already had three texts from Elsa asking if she wanted to go get mimosas. And because Emma liked being drunk far more than she liked being sober, she’d said yes.

Now, as she shuffled across the office clutching two lattes – a soy one for Ingrid and a skinny one with four shots of espresso for herself – she was starting to regret her decision to become friends with her in the first place.

Right on cue, Elsa appeared at her elbow looking as if she hadn’t spent the majority of Saturday night arguing with a doorman about how she definitely was not too wasted to get into his bar. “Morning!”

“Stop,” Emma said, dragging herself towards Ingrid’s office. Elsa followed, because she had no regard for her own personal safety. “I want to die.”

“You can’t seriously feel that bad,” Elsa said, following her into the empty glass room. “You threw up most of it yesterday.”

“And then you made me start drinking again,” Emma pointed out, noticing that her hands were shaking as she placed a coffee on Ingrid’s desk. “How the hell are you so perky?”

Elsa shrugged, her braid tumbling across her shoulder as she moved. “I didn’t drink as much as you.”

“Well, that’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s not,” Elsa said. “You drink so fast you just assume everyone else is keeping up, but I think you managed to work your way through three whisky cokes before I’d even finished my first. Then you move onto something else and so it’s no wonder that all the mixing tips you over the edge.”

Emma tried not to blush. “That’s not true. You just don’t remember how much you drank.”

“I remember your credit card getting declined at the first bar and you offering to show a guy your boobs if he would buy you vodka.”

At least Elsa had the decency to shrink back from Emma’s furious glare. “Don’t mention that to anyone.”

“I won’t,” Elsa said, holding her hands up. “I’m just saying.”

Emma led the way out of Ingrid’s office, unceremoniously dumping her coffee on her own desk. “If my credit card got declined, how did I pay for the rest of the drinks?”

“You used your emergency one,” Elsa said matter-of-factly. “Then you found $20 on the floor, then
you went stealing other people’s.”

*Jesus Christ.* “Okay. That sounds... about right.”

Elsa smirked at her. “You seemed to be having fun, and your mind was finally out of the dark place that Killian had dumped it in. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

She had a point – Emma had spent so much of the weekend slugging back spirits or wrapped around the toilet bowl that she hadn’t had much time to feel sorry for herself about her recent dismissal. “I’m just glad I’m still alive. Or technically, anyway – I’m not feeling like it right now.”

“That’s the attitude I like to hear on a Monday morning.” The new voice swum in from somewhere behind them, and Emma turned with a new kind of sickness plucking at her intestines.

“Ingrid,” she said, forcing a smile. “Good morning.”

Ingrid frowned at her. “It doesn’t look like it’s a good morning. Are you feeling alright?”

“I’m fine,” Emma said, waving off her question. Ingrid might sound concerned, but Emma knew from experience that her boss only hated one thing more than ineptitude, and that was weakness. “It was just a busy weekend. How was yours?”

“Fine,” Ingrid said, shifting her purse from one arm to the other. “Did you remember my coffee this morning?”

Emma didn’t flinch. “It’s on your desk.”

“And did you forget that there is a team meeting at 11?”

“No, I remember.”

“I see,” Ingrid said, her gaze falling from Emma’s tank top to her skinny jeans. “Thank you for dressing up for it, I suppose.”

Emma forced a smile. “Anything for you, Ingrid.”

With a dramatic roll of her eyes, Ingrid swept past her and into her office. The door was barely shut before Emma muttered, “That’s just what I needed this morning.”

Elsa laughed gently. “She kind of has a point, Em. Would it kill you to put on a proper shirt?”

“How is that going to make me better at my job?” Emma asked, collapsing into her chair. “The fact that my arms are on show doesn’t affect my ability to pick up Ingrid’s dry cleaning.”

Elsa wrinkled her nose, but didn’t comment. “I’d better go do some work.”

“You do that,” Emma said, nodding towards the art desk. “I’ll be here, trying to get the room to stop spinning.”

Elsa disappeared with a snort of laughter, and Emma turned to her inbox. She sighed loudly. As assistant to the editor-in-chief, she spent more time than she’d like to admit emailing places on Ingrid’s behalf, trying to get discounted theatre tickets or difficult restaurant bookings or free hotel rooms in Tokyo. Monday morning was usually when all the rejection emails came piling in.

She took a deep breath and started clicking, sifting through the PR trash and the weekly reminders from Ed in web development to please not change the timer setting on the office toaster, because his
bagel gets burned whenever that happens. Emma had a sneaking suspicion that people deliberately turned it up to six every morning just to fuck with him.

Then she stopped scrolling. There was an email at the very bottom of her inbox that had been sent on Friday night, approximately 30 minutes after she had left to go bar-hopping.

*Would you be able to recommend some books that would be suitable for a 10-year-old boy?*

There was no name signed at the bottom, but there was an automatic signature that told her it had come from a place called Rocinante. From a quick Google, Emma found that it was an art gallery just off 10th Avenue.

She frowned. The message had been sent to her own email address, rather than to the generic enquiries account. That had never happened before.

Emma had been working at Caterpillar for two years, and this was the first time anyone had ever asked her for a recommendation of anything. She couldn’t help the little twist of excitement in her stomach as she poised her fingers over the keyboard.

She reeled off a list of titles – all of them published by her own company, because she wasn’t an idiot and there was still a chance that this was Ingrid’s roundabout way of testing her loyalty to the firm. She’d barely hit send before a reply came shooting back to her.

*How do you feel about the Risk Child books?*

Emma groaned. That was the terrible series that Regina had had under her arm just before she’d hauled her out of Barnes & Noble.

Swallowing down the hot feeling in her chest that bubbled up any time she thought about that woman and her dark eyes and dark smile, she replied saying as politely as she could that she wouldn’t recommend them to anybody.

The next reply made her heart leap.

*Because the author admitted that he had a nonsensical dream when he was seven and is now charging people $12.99 to see it dragged out over 200 pages, right?*

Shit. Shit. It was her.

Emma’s hangover seemed to swell by roughly 40 percent as she forced herself to keep breathing, her eyes glued to the words that were a dead repetition of what she had said to Regina on Friday afternoon.

Shit.

She hadn’t told her where she worked – she was certain of that. Although maybe there really was a chance that she’d followed her once she’d left the bar – suddenly her initial thought that she was being kidnapped didn’t seem so crazy anymore.

Emma’s throat was tight as she wrote: *How did you find out where I work?*

Regina’s reply was quick and perfunctory: *There are only three publishing houses within an eight-block radius of Barnes & Noble, and one of them helpfully had your photo and contact details on the website.*
Emma groaned. The photo in question was unbearably perky, the only true indication of just how relieved Emma had been to get that job two years ago, and no matter how hard she begged with HR to take it down from the company’s ‘meet the team’ page, they refused to budge.

Breathing through her nose, Emma typed out a response and then immediately deleted it. Now that she could picture Regina sitting at the other end of the fibre optic connection, her palms felt sweaty. She didn’t want to say anything that might make her sound like an idiot.

So, you’re stalking me?

She hit send, and then she immediately wanted to slap herself. Oh, for fuck’s sake, Swan.

And yet, three minutes later, there was another email waiting in her inbox.

When we met on Friday, I told you that you interested me. My internet stalking shouldn’t come as such a surprise.

Emma blinked. It seemed that Regina was one of those ruthlessly honest people who said exactly what they felt and didn’t feel the slightest bit embarrassed by it. Emma, on the other hand, had two settings when it came to conversation: she either spent hours agonising over what she could say next, or she just blurted out any old shit that popped into her head. The latter usually occurred when she was with someone who intimidated her, and Regina was by far the most intimidating person she’d ever met.

Even now, with the security of her inbox protecting her from saying anything too stupid, Emma felt herself panicking. For the first time ever, she prayed that Ingrid would bark out an order from her office, meaning Emma wouldn’t be able to reply right away no matter how desperately she wanted to. But for once in her life, Ingrid was staying quiet, her head buried somewhere in her computer, and Emma’s fingers started to twitch. It had been two minutes since Regina had emailed her and some stupid, desperate part of her didn’t want to make her wait any longer.

It’s not so much the stalking that comes as a surprise – it’s more the fact that you’re interested in the first place. Or am I just part of a long list of people you’ve kidnapped from bookstores?

Dread began to settle in when five minutes ticked by and no reply came through. Emma frantically clicked the refresh button, then glanced around, hoping that Ed from web development had just cut off the office’s internet access to punish them all for burning his breakfast. Everyone else seemed to be firing off emails without trouble, though. Emma clenched her fists.

10 minutes.

Forcing herself to get back to her own work, Emma reasoned that Regina was obviously a busy person. She probably didn’t have time to sit around emailing complete strangers about children’s book series.

An hour passed, and Emma chose to blame the throbbing in her temples on her hangover. By the time lunch had rolled around, she had a pain in her jaw from clenching her teeth.

She was being ridiculous – she knew that. In fact, her first instinct when Regina’s email had come through should have been to delete it and then probably to call the cops. But there was something about the woman’s intense stare and poised, proud smile that made her come over all uncertain, and now here she was, moping like a teenager because she was feeling ignored.

She refreshed her inbox once more just for good measure. Nothing.
After spending the afternoon traipsing after Ingrid through the maze that was Caterpillar’s floor of the building, carrying a variety of papers and occasionally a cell phone that Ingrid couldn’t possibly hold onto herself, Emma collapsed back in her desk chair. She still had more than an hour to go before she could even think about going home, but her hangover from the morning seemed to have doubled in size since she’d arrived. She groaned, pressing her fingers against her temples, and glanced at her inbox: 46 new emails. None of them from the person she wanted to hear from.

Grabbing the stress ball that spent far too much time in her right hand, she leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. Maybe if she put on her saddest expression she would be able to get Elsa to go and buy her some snacks.

Her office phone started ringing at exactly that moment, and she released a low moan. Grappling for it with her spare hand, she answered with her usual opening line, her eyes closed and her voice rusty.

“Is this Emma Swan speaking?”

“Yeah,” Emma said, reaching out for a pen. “How can I help?”

“Miss Swan, I’m calling from Rocinante,” the woman on the other end said. Her voice was crisp and no-nonsense, and Emma found herself sitting bolt upright, her entire body going cold. How did they get your work number? This is low, even for them. Also, what kind of name is Rocinante?

She was certain she’d heard the word somewhere before, but so many envelopes appeared on her doorstep stamped with various red-lettered warnings and debt collection specialists’ names that that wasn’t altogether surprising.

She swallowed hard. “Excuse me?”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you at work. Is now a good time?”

That threw her off – they weren’t normally so polite when they called.

“Now is... Sorry, who are you?” Emma blurted out, looking around to make sure no one was watching her as she spiralled. She heard the tiniest sigh of impatience from down the line.

“My name is Tamara Davies. I work for Ms Mills.”

“Ms who?”

Another pained sigh. “Regina Mills. The owner of Rocinante.”

A very large, very loud penny finally dropped. “Oh! The art gallery place?”

“Yes, Miss Swan, the art gallery place. So, is now a good time to talk?”

Emma’s panic of 30 seconds earlier had subsided, but was now slowly being replaced by a very different kind of nervous fluttering in her abdomen.

“Now’s fine,” she forced out. “How can I help?”

“Ms Mills would like to arrange a meeting with you,” Tamara said. Emma could hear typing in the background. “Does tomorrow evening suit you?”

“What kind of meeting?” Emma asked, her suspicion all too audible.

“A dinner meeting. What time do you normally finish work?”
Blinking, Emma heard herself say, “Any time between five and nine, to be honest.”

Tamara sighed yet again. “I’ll make the reservation for 7:30. Please do your best to be on time.”

“Be where?” Emma stammered.

“Le Bernardin,” came the stiff reply, followed by more typing. “If you could give me your personal email address, I’ll send you the details.”

Emma reeled it off, wishing her voice would stop shaking, and waited for Tamara to finish typing it out. There was a pause, and then, “Thank you, Miss Swan. The email is on its way, and Ms Mills will see you tomorrow evening. Have a good day.”

There was a click, and then she was gone.

Emma stared down at the phone in her hand like she thought it might burst into flames. She quickly grappled for her cell – sure enough, there was an email waiting for her. It didn’t give her much more information, other than to reassure her that she hadn’t just imagined the last five minutes.

She immediately Googled the restaurant, which sent her flying into what she was sure would be a full 24-hour panic: one quick look at the mostly-seafood menu, which helpfully bore the words “Royal Osetra caviar – $145 supplement per ounce” as its opener, told her that she was already completely out of her depth. 90 percent of her wardrobe was skinny jeans or fake leather jackets, and the remaining 10 percent had come from the clearance rack in H&M. What the hell was she supposed to wear to a place like this?

“What are you looking at?”

Emma leapt in her seat, her heart pounding. She looked around to find Elsa loitering behind her, her eyes on the photo of some unidentifiable fish on the screen in front of her.

“I’m... just getting a reservation for Ingrid,” she stammered, hoping Elsa couldn’t hear the shake in her voice. Elsa raised her eyebrows.

“For when?”

“Tomorrow.”

“One day’s notice, at Le Bernardin?” Elsa shook her head. “Good luck with that.”

“Is that hard?” Emma squeaked.

“Well, I’ve never been there, obviously, but I’m pretty sure you need to join the wait list like six months in advance,” she helpfully supplied before frowning. “Why have you gone so red?”

Shrugging as casually as she could, Emma said, “No reason. Just warm from chasing Ingrid round all afternoon.”

Once she had rushed home that evening, she didn’t bother saying hello to Mary Margaret before she headed up the stairs and into her loft bedroom. Tugging open the doors to her closet, her heart sank. Somehow on the subway ride home, she’d managed to convince herself that her wardrobe wasn’t as dire as she was picturing in her head. Now she was faced with it in all its grubby polyester glory, she wanted to call off the meeting then and there.

Emma didn’t know much about clothes, but she’d known from her very first glance of Regina that
she was rich. The kind of rich where it was easy to colour match a pair of tomato-red Louboutins to a Marc Jacobs purse because you probably had so many variations of each. The kind of rich where your lipstick never smudged, and your immaculately styled hair always fell back into position, no matter how hot and crowded the New York streets were.

The memory of Regina in her perfectly tailored pencil skirt made Emma’s mouth go dry. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again the sight of her own closet was even more disappointing than before.

Emma was late for work the next morning. She had taken a two-mile detour on her commute so she could stop off at Saks Fifth Avenue just as it opened its doors, then had baulked when she realised they seemingly didn’t sell anything with a price tag of less than $100. After examining and then slowly replacing three dresses, she had skulked out the door and headed for Topshop instead.

She bought a tightly fitted black dress that reached just above her knees, holding her breath the entire time the transaction was going through the register. Her first card got declined, but mercifully the second one went through, and so she was free to shuffle into the office with the dress neatly folded inside a paper bag. In her other hand was a separate bag carrying the only pair of scuffed black heels she owned, plus a clutch bag that she’d borrowed from Mary Margaret’s closet that morning and that didn’t match the outfit in the slightest.

Emma hid the bags beneath her desk before Ingrid spotted her, after which she was able to swear on her own life that her subway had broken down and that’s why she was late.

“Fine,” Ingrid said, waving Emma out of her office while rubbing at her own temples. “Go get me a latte. Hurry up.”

She was preoccupied, and Emma realised with a buzz of excitement that a distracted Ingrid might let her go home on time for once. With this in mind, she spent the day on her best behaviour, stacking papers and emailing wannabe bestselling authors at double her usual speed. At five o’clock on the dot, Ingrid swept past her, a pained looked on her face and her blue eyes on the elevator.

Emma froze in her seat, expecting her to turn back with a shouted final demand that would keep her in the office until midnight. But no – it seemed the world was on her side just this once, because Ingrid left the office without even a glance in her direction.

At seven o’clock, Emma strode out of the building with her high shoes already pinching at her toes. She’d had enough time to pin her hair up and apply a dab of lipstick in the staff bathroom, and by the time she’d been ready to leave, the entire floor had been empty.

A mixture of excitement and terror bubbled up in her stomach, and Emma was glad that she hadn’t managed to eat for most of the day. She could feel the anticipation rising like molten lava. Clenching her fists, she headed for the subway, because taking a cab would have been preferable but she hadn’t been able to afford one since before she’d turned 20. The carriage was unbearably stuffy, even in a skimpy dress and with tied-up hair. The sales tag in her dress, which she’d left attached in the hope that she’d be able to return it to Topshop at the weekend, was digging into the space between her shoulder blades.

Then she was hopping out at 7 Avenue station and it was too late for her to turn back or call Tamara with a phoney publishing-world emergency. She looked down at her scruffy shoes and wanted to scream. There was a loose thread hanging from the hem of her new dress, and she tore it off with trembling fingers.
The restaurant stood before her, glittering and too good for her. She could feel tendrils of damp hair slipping loose from their pins, and she suddenly realised she hadn’t checked her lipstick to make sure it wasn’t on her teeth.

The need to turn away and go home gripped her, but all she could think of was Regina’s face, her amused smile, her tan legs and her knowing looks and her ability to make Emma feel even just that tiny bit more special than she actually was.

Her feet led her towards the restaurant just as the clock hit 7:30.
Emma paused at the entrance. The doors were made of glass, but the dim lighting inside meant she couldn’t see a thing. That only made her feel even more like she shouldn’t walk in.

It dawned on her then that she probably wouldn’t be allowed in – she didn’t need to see Le Bernardin’s interior to know what kind of people dined there. She was wearing a stretchy dress from an average Joe store, and it wouldn’t surprise her in the least if she was asked to leave the moment she stepped inside.

But then the door was opening, and the maître d’ was looking at her. She took an apprehensive step forwards.

“Hi,” she said, her voice slow and betraying her uncertainty. “I’m here for—”

“Right this way,” the man said before she’d managed to stammer Regina’s name. Blinking, Emma followed him through the double doors and into the most expensive room she’d ever stepped foot in.

The restaurant was dimly lit and furnished with blacks and soft greys, surrounded on all sides by wood-panelled walls and enormous paintings of the ocean. Emma could smell seafood as she was led through the centre of the room, desperately trying not to trip over her own heels. She’d been hoping the restaurant would offer some respite from the wet heat that was hovering throughout the city, but to no avail – the room was warm, brimming with the smell of crisp wine and freshly cooked food. The single bead of sweat that was rolling down her spine was the only thing able to distract her from the nerves dancing in her empty stomach.

They reached the back of the room and turned a corner, and there was Regina, her head bent over two different smartphones and a pair of glasses perched at the end of her nose. Emma swallowed, a prim smile on her face ready for when Regina looked up at her, but it never happened – Regina was too invested in the iPhone in her left hand and the Pixel in her right to have even registered the presence in front of her.

The man who had led Emma to the table coughed slightly, and she turned her head to see that he’d pulled out the vacant seat for her. She sat down as gracefully as she could, grateful that Regina wasn’t looking at her pink cheeks, and reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

As the maître d’ walked away, Emma swallowed down the lump in her throat. “Hi.”

Finally, Regina glanced up. She didn’t smile, but there was a glimmer in her eye that told Emma she was pleased to see her.

Then she looked down again. “One moment, Miss Swan.”

She carried on typing like no one had interrupted her, and Emma slumped back in her chair. She was aware that she should be disheartened or even annoyed, but the truth was that she was grateful for the extra 30 seconds where she might catch her breath and get herself under control.

She took a deep breath and let herself look around. It was one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city – something she’d learned from frantically reading Trip Advisor reviews for most of her lunch break – and she may as well allow herself to ogle a tiny little bit.
There was a woman in the far corner who looked suspiciously like Natalie Portman, and Emma spent the next two minutes trying to lean as far back in her chair as she could without falling off it. Her temperature had been slowly starting to reduce to a mere boil, but the sight of someone who may have been an Oscar-winning actress had immediately turned her internal thermostat right back up.

Unable to get a good look, Emma sighed and turned back to face Regina. She froze: both of Regina’s phones had been put away, as had her glasses, and she was now regarding Emma with an amused expression that told her she’d been watching her for quite some time.

Emma’s mouth had gone completely dry. When she forced a smile, it felt like her lips were sticking to her teeth. “Hey.”

“Hello to you too,” Regina said, offering her a genuinely warm smile. “You look very nice.”

That was a blatant lie if Emma had ever heard one, but she still flushed with pleasure. “Thanks. So do you.”

Regina shrugged. “I’m afraid I came straight from the office. I didn’t have much time to dress up.”

Emma’s gaze fell to take in her perfectly fitted slip dress. It was dark red with a black belt around the waist. Emma knew without looking under the table that Regina would be wearing another pair of Louboutins to match.

“Your idea of not dressed up is very different to mine.”

Regina laughed softly, then turned her attention to the waiter who had just appeared at her elbow. “I waited before ordering wine because I wasn’t sure what you liked.”

Emma blinked. “What?”

“Wine, Miss Swan,” Regina repeated, nodding to the menu in front of Emma. “Do you have a preference?”

The lengthy pause that followed told her that Emma’s only preference was that the bottle cost less than $20. When she just shook her head, Regina turned to the waiter once more.

“A bottle of chardonnay,” she said, continuing before the waiter could ask his next question. “Californian. I know this is a French restaurant but I really can’t stand a French white.”

It was the kind of needlessly specific thing that never failed to impress someone as shallow as Emma. She nodded her approval like she had any idea what Regina was talking about, then wordlessly handed her wine menu back to the waiter.

“So,” Regina said, turning back to look at her. She had the exact same expression on her face that Emma remembered from the bar – one of faint amusement and genuine interest. “Thank you for agreeing to meet me on such short notice.”

Emma’s smile was wobbly. “I never actually agreed. Your assistant is quite forceful.”

Regina laughed. “That’s precisely why I hired her. Either way, I’m glad she could lure you out.”

When Emma laughed back, it sounded tight and forced, and she wanted to scream at herself. She’d never felt so uncertain before – her entire body was a knot of anticipation, and if she kept letting it show then Regina would go off her as quickly as she had latched on.
“This is a really nice place,” she heard herself say. Regina didn’t seem to mind that she sounded borderline hysterical.

“It is,” she replied. “It’s one of my favourites. I hope you like seafood.”

This time, even she noticed the anxious smile frozen on Emma’s lips.

“Oh,” Regina said. “You don’t?”

“I don’t not like it,” Emma quickly corrected something that hadn’t technically been said. “It’s just a bit intimidating and I guess I wouldn’t normally choose it. But tonight is already a new experience, so a bit of crab on top of it won’t kill me. It might even be good for me.”

Regina laughed again and, God, the noise was already turning into Emma’s favourite sound in the world. The glug of bourbon being poured into a tumbler, the rev of a motorbike, the thud of a new batch of books landing on the office doorstep straight from the printers – all of a sudden, none of them even compared.

“I can help you with the menu,” Regina said, nodding for Emma to open hers. “I’ve had most of the dishes by now, so I know what’s good. And I won’t force any squid on you – that’s probably a bit too much even for an adventurer such as yourself.”

Emma felt her cheeks go pink once more. “Calamari is squid, right? I don’t mind that.”

“Nothing in here comes deep fried and covered in batter, dear, I can assure you of that.” There was a wicked lilt to Regina’s voice that made the muscles between Emma’s legs clench.

The waiter returned with a bottle of wine that probably cost more than Emma earned in a week, and she watched as he presented it to Regina. Regina barely glanced at it, but she did taste it when it was offered to her. Her eyes stayed on Emma the whole time, and as much as Emma wanted to, she couldn’t look away.

When she was clutching a glass of wine the size of a fruit bowl, Emma felt marginally better. She took a deep breath and looked back at the menu that was lying open in front of her. Her stomach took a nosedive when she realised there were no prices.

“You might like the lobster tagliatelle,” Regina said, swirling her wine around in her glass as she spoke. “Unless you don’t like black truffle?”

Emma lifted her eyes and decided it was probably safer to just admit the truth. “I don’t think I’ve ever tried it.”

Regina shrugged. “It’s a bit overrated, but you might enjoy it. How do you feel about crab cakes?”

It was fun, in a weird way, ploughing through the long list of things that Emma was certain she’d never tried before and trying to work out based on the wrinkle in Regina’s nose whether she’d like it or not. Part of her wanted to order the most bold and brazen thing on the menu just to try and impress her. Then the rest of her remembered what had happened that time she’d accidentally ordered a rare hamburger, and she decided against it.

“I think I’ll try the tagliatelle,” she decided, because pasta was surely a safe bet regardless of what they sprinkled on top. “Is it possible to pick off the truffle if I don’t like it?”

“I’m not sure,” Regina said, “but if you really wanted, you could probably ask them to make it without.”
“I’m not going into a Michelin-star restaurant and asking them to start customising my food,” Emma said in a low voice. This, apparently, was the right response, because Regina was smiling at her.

“If you don’t like it, we’ll get you something else,” she said, looking back at her own menu.

Emma couldn’t help but smile back at her, even though she wasn’t looking. “You’re very patient, you know.”

“Because I’m not planning on force-feeding you?”

“You’ve already kidnapped and stalked me. Force-feeding might be your logical next step,” Emma said. After a beat, she added, “I mean it, though. You’re being very understanding of my food ignorance.”

Regina still didn’t look up, and Emma wondered if she’d heard her. Then she realised that she was only pretending to read her menu.

“I’ve had practice,” she eventually said. Her voice was slower than normal, like she didn’t want Emma to miss what she was saying. “My son is a picky eater.”

Emma blinked. “You have a son?”

“I do.”

“Oh,” Emma said, hesitating. “So you’re married?”

She could hear a dull humming in her ears, and it sounded like a prelude to the new world she’d built up inside her own head over the past week coming crashing down around her. Her heart thudded painfully. But then Regina glanced up, not smiling.

“Divorced.”

Emma wasn’t sure whether to take that fact as a good thing or not. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Regina said, and she sounded casual enough that Emma believed her. “We married young, but we got Henry out of it. It wasn’t all bad.”

“How old is he?”

“I assume you mean my son,” Regina asked, flashing her a smile. “He’s 10. I think you might like him – he loves books.”

A flicker of panic crept through Emma’s torso – she couldn’t exactly imagine herself reading bedtime stories to any kid, no matter how attractive their mom was.

“Is your ex looking after him tonight?”

Regina’s gaze lifted once more, and Emma saw something in it that made her stop in her tracks. She wasn’t sure if the glimmer in Regina’s eye was sadness, or whether she was just assessing her – either way, it was gone in a flash.

Before Regina could answer, the waiter appeared to take their order. Regina ordered Emma’s tagliatelle for her, before asking for scallops for herself and adding a side order of steamed vegetables and dauphinoise potatoes, which Emma half suspected was for her benefit in case she didn’t like her own food.
After the waiter disappeared, Regina turned back to Emma with her lips pursed. She took a sip of wine before saying, “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, my ex is looking after Henry tonight,” Regina said. Her voice sounded flat. “Robin has custody of him.”

Emma blinked. “Is that normal? Doesn’t the mother normally get custody?”

As soon as she’d asked it, she realised it was a horrible question. Regina could have any manner of personal issues that meant she couldn’t look after their son, and Emma had wandered into her life, buzzed on three sips of wine, demanding to know the most intimate details of it all. She blushed furiously and opened her mouth to apologise.

“It’s alright,” Regina said, eyeing the mounting horror on her face. “There aren’t any skeletons in my closet. We had joint custody initially, but with my job and all my travelling, it didn’t work out. We decided to shift the balance so Henry could spend more time with his father instead.”

There was something rehearsed about the way Regina said it. It didn’t sound like something she regularly told other people – it more sounded like something she repeatedly told herself.

Emma pressed her lips together, knowing better than to push for more.

“That’s really good of you,” she said instead. “He’s a lucky kid, having parents who can still be civil.”

Regina’s smile had less voltage than normal. “I love my son very much. I’m not going to let him get stuck in the middle of my problems with his father.”

Emma had to wonder what that kind of love felt like. After being dumped by her own parents on the day she’d been born, she’d bounced from foster family to foster family until she’d come to spend the final year of her teens in the warm embrace of the US criminal justice system. Unconditional love – no matter who it came from – wasn’t exactly something she was familiar with.

She thought of Killian and felt her body go cold.

Taking a sip of wine to distract herself, she asked, “How long have you been divorced?”

“Three years,” Regina said. “Give or take.”

“And,” Emma faltered, knowing this question would either break her heart or just make her look like a complete idiot, “are you dating anyone now?”

For a moment, Regina just stared at her. Her dark eyes even fell to look pointedly at where Emma was sitting two feet in front of her. But before Emma had time to start stammering her apologies, Regina said, “I’m not in a relationship at the moment, no.”

Emma choked down another mouthful of wine just to give herself something to do, and it was at that moment that she realised that she was drinking far too quickly on an empty stomach. She hadn’t eaten anything since her half a bagel at breakfast – partly because it was all she could afford this close to payday and partly because she’d been too nervous to force down anything more substantial – and now she could feel the tell-tale signs of her usual descent into drunkenness starting to take over.
She swallowed hard, hoping to suck some feeling back into her numb mouth. Regina watched her the whole time.

“Tell me more about your job.”

Emma looked up with a blank face. “Why?”

“Because I’d like to hear about it,” Regina replied, leaning back in her chair. “Do you not like talking about it?”

“Not really,” Emma mumbled. She had a decent starting job in the publishing industry, and she knew she couldn’t complain – having to fend off angry agents and take her boss’s dog to the groomer once a month weren’t really the worst chores in the world. She did like her job overall. But she was sat in front of a woman who owned an art gallery, who was wearing a designer dress and who was probably all too ready to pity her and her sad life. When Emma’s job paid her less than $30,000 a year, there wasn’t much she could say that wouldn’t be painfully embarrassing in comparison.

Regina was already raising her eyebrows. “Tell me anyway.”

Emma recognised it as a command, and she gritted her teeth. “You could say ‘please’, at least.”

“I never say please,” Regina said, as if this was obvious. “You said last week that you enjoy your job, but you are surprisingly reluctant to talk about it. Do you get to travel?”

Ingrid had taken Emma with her to a book launch in Dublin once, but apparently her over-eagerness in the face of finally travelling abroad had been annoying enough to stop her from ever inviting her anywhere again. “Not really.”

“Do you meet many authors?”

“A few,” Emma said, wrinkling her nose. “I go to a lot of book launches, and sometimes I get to sit in on meetings between authors and the editors.”

“Do you like doing that?”

Emma was starting to feel like she was in a job interview. Her voice had a tremor to it when she said, “Depends on the author. Some of them are total divas.”

“I can imagine,” Regina said with a smile creasing her face. “Artists are exactly the same.”

“What exactly is it that you do?” Emma asked more abruptly than she’d intended. “I know you’re not an artist, but I haven’t managed to work out much more than that. I’m guessing you do something else in addition to owning your own gallery?”

“I do.”

“I’m still not ruling out human trafficker, based on your history of kidnapping.”

Regina chuckled. “Oh, no – it’s much worse than that. I’m an art dealer.”

“To be honest,” Emma sighed, because the giant glass of wine she’d nearly finished was muddling her common sense, “I don’t really know what that means. Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise,” Regina said. She seemed oddly endeared by Emma’s honesty. “I buy art at a low cost, keeping it quiet so that I don’t inadvertently drive the price up. I keep it stored away for a few years while I promote the artist internationally, garnering some interest and increasing their
name recognition. Then I sell the artwork for much more than I paid for it.”

“You can make a living out of that?” Emma asked, knowing just from Regina’s shoes that she was asking a stupid question.

“If you’re good at it, you can,” Regina said. “And I am very, very good at it.”

Emma’s pulse quickened, and she cursed herself. Confidence had long been her biggest weakness – it was probably why she’d gone after Killian and all his cockiness in the first place. Regina’s self-assuredness came from a different place, but it was made of the same stuff, and it made Emma wish she could bury her burning face in her hands.

“How long have you been doing it for?” she asked instead. Regina thoughtfully swirled her wine around her glass.

“I was just starting out when I met Robin,” she said.

“And you’re already a success?” Emma blurted out.

“I did have a head start, to be fair,” Regina said. “My family isn’t exactly poor, and it was easy enough to acquire my first pieces using the inheritance I got when my father died. But apparently I must have a knack for it, because my business took off within a couple of years. I bought the first gallery just before Robin and I separated.”

That was a lot to take in. In the end, Emma settled on asking, “The first gallery?”

“I have three,” Regina said. “New York, Miami and London.”

_Sweet Jesus._ “You must be really rich.”

Emma heard the words come spewing from her mouth like a toddler spitting up, and she recoiled at her own tactlessness. Putting her wine glass back on the table, she stammered, “Fuck. I’m sorry. That just came out.”

“It’s quite alright,” Regina said. “You’re right – I am very rich.”

And there was that confidence again.

Emma was mercifully saved from having to think of a response by the arrival of their food. She exhaled, eyeing their dishes with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

“Is that all you’re having?” Emma asked, looking at Regina’s plate, which contained five scallops and not much else.

Regina gestured to the side of vegetables with her fork. “I’m having some of those too.”

“That’s not very much.”

“I don’t eat a lot,” Regina said. Emma could relate to that, although she suspected their reasons were different: Regina probably ate very little because she was always too busy, whereas Emma’s diet mostly consisted of bananas and ramen because she couldn’t afford anything more substantial.

“Why not?” Emma asked, more to make conversation than anything else. She picked up her own cutlery and started to gingerly twirl some pasta around her fork.

“My personal trainer doubles as an attack dog,” Regina said. “It’s salads and very little else for me
“That doesn’t sound very healthy,” Emma ventured.

“It’s not,” Regina said, shrugging like her health was the least of her problems.

“Do you ever cook?”

“Of course,” Regina said, spearing a scallop. “I love cooking. I always make a ludicrous amount of food whenever it’s Henry turn to stay with me.”

“But do you eat any of it?”

Regina lifted her gaze. Her eyes were full of curiosity when she heard what sounded like genuine concern in Emma’s question, but when she spoke, her voice was flat. “Yes, Miss Swan. I eat plenty.”

There was a pause, and then she nodded towards Emma’s plate. “Speaking of which – how’s your food?”

Emma sensed she was being distracted, and it was an unwelcome change of subject as they went. She’d been putting off trying her food just in case she hated it – or, worse, she immediately slurped it down her dress and made an ass of herself. But with Regina’s question hanging in the air she was forced to lift her fork to her lips.

“It’s good,” she said, trying to decide if she was telling the truth or not. Seafood had never been her favourite, but as far as she could tell, this was nice enough. “Is it the truffles that taste like really old mushrooms?”

Regina chuckled. “Exactly. Are you a convert?”

“Maybe,” Emma said, undecided. “I don’t think I’ll be rushing out to buy them any time soon, but they’re fine.”

“For the past five years, there has been a very tiresome trend for restaurants to add them to every dish on their menus,” Regina said. She spoke very crisply, like she was hoping the chef would hear her and immediately decide to change his ways. “I think for the most part, we should go without. It’s just something people use to pretend they have a sophisticated palate.”

“I’m not going to bother pretending,” Emma said, shovelling more pasta into her mouth because she was only just realising how hungry she actually was. “My palate isn’t sophisticated at all.”

Regina watched her barely chewing her food and laughed through her nose. “I have to say that doesn’t come as much of a surprise.”

Emma paused. The nerves that had finally started to dissipate returned to her in full force, threatening to bring up the half a plate of pasta she’d just wolfed down in the past two minutes. She put her fork down, and it clattered against the plate.

“Why did you invite me here?”

She’d been wondering it for the past two days, but it had taken most of a glass of wine to finally force her to ask it.

Regina didn’t look surprised by the question. Rather, she leaned back in her chair, lifting her own
glass to her lips so she could calmly survey Emma over the rim.

“You interest me,” she said. Emma rolled her eyes.

“That’s not really an answer,” she said. “You’re being cryptic and I’m not sure what you want from me.”

Something unreadable flashed over Regina’s face before she said, “I don’t want anything from you, Miss Swan. I just wanted to spend some time with you. You agreed, so I have to assume the feeling is mutual?”

It wasn’t anything close to an answer. She was deliberately not telling Emma the full truth, and Emma sighed, not wanting to ask whether this was a date for fear of making herself sound like a complete moron. She was drunk, but she wasn’t drunk enough for that.

“Do you regret it now you’ve actually spent time with me?” was what she asked instead. Regina smirked.

“I can’t say that I do,” she said. “You’re certainly one of the most fascinating people I’ve ever met.”

Emma felt herself blushing for the 20th time that night. “I doubt that. You fly all over the world meeting artists and millionaires. I just get coffee.”

“There’s a lot more to you than that, and I think you know it,” Regina said. Her tone left no room for disagreement, but Emma had always had trouble being agreeable.

She snorted. “Hardly.”

Regina narrowed her eyes. Emma got the impression that it was a look that could persuade anyone to do anything she wanted, but having faced down much worse from Ingrid on an hourly basis for the past two years, she was almost immune to it.

“Anyway,” Regina said when Emma didn’t crumple into a ball before her. “What do you want to do from here?”

Emma blinked. “You mean like dessert?”

“No, Emma,” Regina said flatly. “I mean with your life. I assume you don’t want to be someone’s assistant forever.”

“No,” Emma admitted somewhat reluctantly. “I don’t know. I’m pretty sure I want to stay in children’s publishing.”

Regina waited for more, but that was all Emma appeared to be offering. “You haven’t thought about your career path?”

She couldn’t possibly understand just how many hours Emma had spent angstying over that particular topic. “Not in detail. I’m only 27.”

“You’re still somebody’s assistant at the age of 27?”

Emma glared at her. “I graduated college late. And there’s nothing wrong with being someone’s assistant.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it at all, but I still suspect you can do better.”
“I don’t recall asking for your opinion.”

“You didn’t. If I waited for people to ask my opinion then I’d never get anywhere.”

“Did you ever consider that it’s none of your business?” Emma snapped. Regina didn’t even flinch.

“Of course it’s none of my business,” she said. She had long finished her dinner and was now free to watch as Emma struggled with the rest of her pasta. “But that doesn’t stop me.”

“You are quite antagonising, you know.”

“Yes,” Regina said simply. “I get that a lot.”

Emma groaned, going back to her food just so she wouldn’t have to think of another response. She could feel Regina’s eyes burning into her, and she forced herself not to look up.

Just as Regina asked for the check, Emma glanced at her cell phone and realised it was somehow 10:30pm. No matter how provoking Regina could be, their conversation had somehow been both enjoyable and natural, and Emma was shocked to find that three hours had passed almost without her noticing.

She glanced at her wine glass: it was empty again, and she could feel its contents swimming around her head. When she looked back up, Regina was watching her.

“You stare a lot,” Emma commented, courtesy of the half bottle of wine that she really shouldn’t have drunk.

Regina laughed. “I’m observing, not staring.”

“You’re trying to intimidate me,” Emma pointed out, because she knew Regina’s game all too well. Regina shrugged.

“Perhaps,” she admitted, not sounding remotely embarrassed. “Is it working?”

They both knew it was. They also knew Emma would never admit it.

“It takes more than that to intimidate me,” Emma said, and she almost sounded convincing. She hoped Regina couldn’t feel the nervous bouncing of her knees under the table.

The check arrived, and another wave of panic gripped Emma’s throat. She glanced down at her purse, which contained six well-used credit cards that would probably all be rejected. She hadn’t even been able to deliberately order the cheapest thing on the menu due to the complete lack of prices.

She swallowed down the acid that was rising in her chest and reached for her money.

“Put that away,” Regina said at once, opening the book and scribbling her signature at the bottom without reading it. “You’re my guest.”

But Emma had seen the total bill amount, and it looked worryingly like the same amount she paid for rent. She spluttered, “You can’t foot the entire bill.”

“Yes I can,” Regina said, producing a black Amex card and placing it inside the book. Emma
honestly hadn’t known those cards existed outside of movies, and the sight of it made her eyes water. “Put your money away, Emma. I insist.”

Her insisting was perhaps more effective than it should have been, because Emma dropped her purse to the floor with a hollow thud. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Regina replied, gesturing for the waiter to come over. “I had a very pleasant time tonight.”

Pleasant. Emma narrowed her eyes, trying to decide whether this was some kind of dig.

“Me too,” she eventually offered. “Although I may change my mind when I have a raging hangover tomorrow.”

“Let me guess – your boss doesn’t approve of hangovers either.”

“Do any bosses approve of hangovers?”

“I’m sure some more relaxed ones aren’t completely opposed to them.”

“Are you a relaxed boss?” Emma asked.

“Absolutely not,” Regina said without a trace of irony. “My staff are smart enough to hide their hangovers from me, though.”

Emma knew without a doubt that their ability didn’t stem from intelligence – it stemmed from sheer terror. Regina had the kind of natural authority that would make even the boldest person tremble just a little bit.

Emma looked down at her fingers, which were repeatedly tapping against her knees, and took them as a case in point.

“I should probably get you home,” Regina said, making her jump. “I imagine you have an early start tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Emma admitted, but found herself reluctant to move. “I really did enjoy dinner.”

Regina smiled at the sincerity in her tone. “Me too. Thank you for coming out with me – whether you actually agreed to or not.”

Emma let herself be led out of the restaurant like an elderly person, feeling slightly dazed from the wine and the fact that Regina was walking alongside her. When people looked up, they would see them together – and people were looking up, because Regina was the type of person who people just wanted to stare at.

She was a force of nature gliding through the restaurant, and Emma couldn’t help but peer round at her. Regina didn’t look back – she knew she held everyone’s attention, and she was enjoying it. There was a glimmer of a smile on her face.

They stepped outside and Emma nearly sank to her knees in the heat. Wine was clouding the very edges of her skull, and she blinked furiously, trying to work out which direction she’d arrived from and how the hell she was supposed to find her way home again.

“Let me give you a ride.”

Emma’s head snapped up, realising Regina was talking to her. “You’re driving?”
“No, my driver is just coming,” Regina said, looking down at her cell. Emma was glad she couldn’t see that her mouth had just fallen open.

“You have a…?” she started, then fell silent, because of course she did. Regina looked up.

“I do,” she said. “Tell me your address and we can take you straight home.”

That wasn’t an option. Emma lived in a dingy backstreet in the Bronx, resplendent with crumbling brown low-rises and daily visits from the fire department. She loved it, and it suited her, but like hell was she taking Regina there.

“No,” she blurted out. Regina’s eyebrows shot up. “I mean – no, that’s okay. I can get the subway.”

“Emma, don’t be stubborn,” Regina sighed. “It’s late. Just tell me where you live.”

Emma couldn’t help but watch the way her lips moved when she spoke, and she knew there was no way she was ever getting in a car with her. If she was left in an enclosed space with her for the next 15 minutes, who knows what she would do.

“I mean it,” she said, trying to sound firm. “The subway is fine.”

There was a pause as Regina considered her. Emma waited for her to snap at her that she was being a child, then force her into the car that was slowly coming around the corner. But eventually she just shrugged, putting her cell back into her purse. “Suit yourself.”

Emma swallowed through her dry mouth, desperately searching for a way to bring this back. “Thank you again for dinner.”

Regina smiled. “You don’t need to thank me so many times – once will do. Even zero times would be fine.”

“I do have manners, you know,” Emma said, pretending to be outraged because she wanted to hear Regina laugh again. When it worked, her heart melted into a puddle at the bottom of her ribcage.

“This was fun, Emma,” Regina said, hooking her purse over the crook of her elbow. “But I should get going. You’re certain you’re okay getting the subway?”

“I’m fine. Promise.”

“Very well,” Regina said, tilting her head to one side. Then she was stepping forward, and Emma’s entire body was breaking out in a thin sheen of sweat.

Regina leaned into her and kissed her coolly on the cheek, smelling of expensive perfume and shampoo and white wine. Emma felt her eyes flutter closed, not trusting herself to move or exhale in case she broke the spell.

Regina didn’t pull away immediately. She seemed to linger, one hand on Emma’s arm, her face hovering inches away from Emma’s cheek. Emma heard her sharp intake of breath, and a deep shiver ran through her body.

When Regina stepped back, her eyes looked darker. They flicked down to take in Emma’s downturned lips.

“I’ll see you again soon,” she said, and Emma didn’t care that it wasn’t a question. She nodded, watching as Regina walked towards the black car that was waiting for her.
When it drove off, Emma didn’t move. Her stomach was fizzing like an upturned bottle of champagne, and when she glanced down she saw that her fingers were trembling.

She forced down a breath, then turned in the direction of the subway, praying that her shaky legs would be able to carry her the whole way there.
Elsa's face was one of sheer awe as she listened to Emma recount the events of the previous evening.

"Are you sure it wasn't Natalie Portman?"

Emma wrinkled her nose. She was leaning against Elsa's desk, her head resting on her hand. "I didn't get a proper look. She was on the other side of the room."

"You didn't try again on your way out?"

"I was distracted on my way out," Emma said. When Elsa looked at her quizzically, Emma clarified, "Trying not to trip over. I'd had a lot of wine." Her friend didn't need to know that she'd been busy staring at Regina instead.

Elsa slumped back in her chair with a disappointed sigh. "Did you see anyone else famous?"

"I don't think so," Emma said. "Sorry. I was a bit of a mess and couldn't really concentrate on what was going on around me."

Elsa blinked at her. "Why were you a mess? You didn't get wasted and embarrass yourself, did you?"

The way she asked it like it was all too likely made Emma glare.

"No," she said. "It's just the woman. Regina. She's super intimidating and I felt like such an idiot the whole time she was talking to me. I can't even remember half of what I said."

Elsa snorted, reaching out to pick up a pencil and twirl it between two fingers. Her desk was covered in sketches and cover art mock-ups, and the disorganisation was too much even for Emma. "I wouldn't mind feeling like an idiot for a free dinner at Le Bernardin."

She must have seen the defeated look on Emma's face, because she quickly backtracked. "I'm sure you didn't do anything that stupid, though. You were just nervous."

Emma sighed. "To be honest, I kind of feel like she liked the fact that I was nervous."

"Oh really?" Elsa asked, leaning forwards. "In what way?"

"Like..." Emma grasped for the words, her cheeks burning. "She watched me like she found me funny, rather than stupid. And she kept asking questions that she knew might trip me up. And she laughed a lot, but not at me, more like with me, because I was so delightfully lame."

"You are quite lame," Elsa said thoughtfully, ignoring the slap she received against her thigh. "I know you keep saying that this wasn't a date, but it really sounds like it was."

"It wasn't," Emma said, but her voice wasn't as firm as she'd hoped.

"How did she say hello to you?"

"She didn't, really. She was already there and was busy sending emails so I kind of just sat down."

Disappointment clouded Elsa's face. "Oh. How did you say goodbye, then?"
There was a pause as, for the thousandth time that morning, Emma remembered the way Regina had leaned into her. The feeling of her hand on her elbow, the smell of her perfume, the light brush of her lips against her cheek. She swallowed hard.

Elsa's eyes were already glinting. "Oh my god! It was so a date."

"No, it wasn't," Emma backtracked. "Nothing happened. Nothing like that. She kissed me on the cheek and said she'd see me again soon."

"It was a date," Elsa said, her voice firm.

"She didn't even ask me out herself! She got her assistant to do it for her."

"Wow. I aspire to be that level of important one day, getting my assistant to ask out hot girls for me."

"Shut up," Emma said. "It was not a date. She has an ex-husband and a kid - she's probably not even into women."

"Everybody's into women," Elsa said completely matter-of-factly. "And she wouldn't have asked you out if she didn't like you a little bit, even if she's not out the closet yet."

"Or she just wanted to be friends."

"Friends don't deliberately ask personal questions to trip the other person up."

"You do that all the time!"

"Because I'm a horrible person," Elsa said, smirking. "So. Are you going to call her?"

Emma groaned. "No. I don't have her number."

"Oh," Elsa said, deflating. "That sucks. Maybe you can track it down?"

"She's a superrich art dealer. I don't think she leaves her cell number just lying around."

"What's her full name?" Elsa said, rolling her chair closer to her computer, her hands poised over the keyboard.

Emma reluctantly handed over Regina's surname, and before she could stop her Elsa was deep into a Google Images search. Emma already knew from a late-night stalking session that there wasn't much to find, but there were still a few decent photos. Elsa's eyes locked onto one of them, and she released a low whistle.

"Shit," she said. "And you say she's rich too?"

"Yeah," Emma sighed, her eyes on the one photo of Regina that she'd already decided was her favourite. Regina was at a gallery opening, surrounded on all sides by men who were older and taller than her, and yet she somehow stood out as by far the most powerful person in the picture. "She paid for dinner with a black Amex. She didn't even read the total."

"Shit," Elsa repeated. Her eyes hadn't actually left the web page yet. "It was definitely a date, Em."

"It was not--"

"Delivery for Emma Swan?"
Emma's head shot up at the voice that was wafting over from the elevator doors. Her heart bounced in her chest – half excited, half cursing him – when she saw a man clutching a huge bunch of white tulips.

"That's me," she said, ignoring Elsa's smug gaze on the side of her face. When the man handed over the flowers, Emma cradled them like she'd just been given a newborn baby.

"Wow," Elsa said. "No, you're right. It totally wasn't a date."

Emma was too busy grappling for the card to respond to her. When she prised it open, she found a scratchy note that she already knew hadn't been written by Regina herself.

Thank you for a lovely evening.

Elsa peered over her shoulder, holding her breath.

"Don't say anything," Emma said, but Elsa was already cooing.

"Emma, she is so into you."

"She is not. She's just old fashioned."

"And you are just really stupid," Elsa sighed. "I wonder how much these cost?"

"A lot, probably," Emma said, her eyes on the crisp brown paper they'd been wrapped in. It was the kind of detail that was so understated, it screamed money. "I should thank her, right?"

"I thought you didn't have her number?"

"I don't, but I can email her. Is that a terrible idea? Should I leave it?"

Elsa's eyebrows were already lifting at Emma's panic. "Email her. Go."

"Will she find it weird?"

"Probably," Elsa shrugged. "But from what you've told me, she likes the weird shit you do. She'll love this."

Emma was vaguely aware that she was being insulted, but she couldn't summon a comeback. Instead, she scuttled across the office, clutching the tulips to her chest like she was worried someone was about to snatch them away from her.

As she reached her desk, she looked up to find Ingrid watching her from her office. Her eyes were on the flowers, but she didn't say anything.

Emma quickly sat down and placed the flowers to one side. As she waited for her emails to load, her eyes kept getting drawn to white petals.

When her inbox was ready for her, she scanned through them just in case Regina had already contacted her. She hadn't, and it made Emma oddly nervous.

Still, she opened a new message and forced herself to type out a vaguely normal-sounding message.

Thank you for the flowers – they're really beautiful. You didn't have to do that.

She was halfway through all of her other emails when Regina's reply swept into her inbox. You're quite welcome. My assistant picked them.
Emma sat back, frowning. The playful banter that she'd been replaying over and over again in her head for the past 12 hours seemed to have vanished, and she automatically worried that the evening hadn't gone anywhere near as well as she thought it had.

She reached out and started typing a reply anyway.

_Your assistant has good taste_, she wrote, her hands only slightly shaky. _Thank you again for dinner, by the way. I know I keep saying that but I had a really good time. I hope you enjoyed it too._

She sent it before she could tell herself that she was being desperate. Relief coursed through her when Regina's reply came through a few minutes later.

_You do have lovely manners, Miss Swan. You are very welcome, and you don't need to keep thanking me - believe me, I enjoyed it just as much, if not more, than you did._

It was a worrying indication of just what a sucker Emma was for affection: she read those two lines of text and felt herself go hot all over, sheer joy rising up inside her like she was being filled with warm water.

She glanced around the office, making sure no one could see the delighted smile that was curling around her lips, before placing her hands back over the keyboard. _I consider myself a convert to seafood now. Maybe next time I'll even get to try the squid._

She sat back, waiting for the latest response, but nothing came. It barely took 10 minutes for the panic to set back in.

_What a stupid fucking thing to say_, she snapped at herself. _You didn't even like the food that much. She thinks you're a liar. You don't want to try squid. You just tried to push a second date onto her. She thinks you're just talking to her for the free food. She's never going to reply again._

"Emma," a voice suddenly demanded from above her head, and she looked up. She could taste iron in her mouth from where she'd been biting at the inside of her cheek.

Ingrid was peering down at her. "Flowers?"

Emma looked over at them. Their glossy white petals seemed too clean against the rest of her desk.

After a long pause, she said, "They're from a PR firm."

Ingrid's look was deadpan and unimpressed. "Which PR firm is willing to send you a $95 bouquet from Scott's Flowers, exactly?"

"A really nice one?" Emma offered weakly.

Ingrid just rolled her eyes. "Fine. Whoever it is, keep them sweet. Do you have those invoices I asked for?"

"Right here," Emma said, handing over a stack of papers.

"Good. And call my mother to cancel lunch today. I don't have the energy for her right now, but I'd prefer it if you could think up a better excuse than that for me."

"Sure thing," Emma said, her hand already hovering over pre-dial four. Ingrid swept away, her dusky grey sweater clinging to her brittle frame. Emma waited until she was out of earshot before dealing with her mother.
She was just explaining that Ingrid had come down with a hideous cold when her inbox pinged. As soon as Emma saw Regina's name, she bit down on her tongue.

"Ow," she mumbled, pressing it against the roof of her mouth as the woman in her ear continued complaining about yet another cancelled lunch. "I know, Mrs White, I'm sorry. Your daughter sends her apologies too. No, she's not in the office today – she decided to stay at home."

She wanted to open the email, but she forced herself to wait until Ingrid's mother had stopped grumbling. When Emma had finally got her to agree to pencil in another date three weeks from now – one that Emma knew would also end up getting cancelled – she hung up, her tongue throbbing and her cursor already hovering over the message that was waiting for her.

Her breath caught as she read it. **What's your cell number?**

That was it. Emma scrolled down, hoping for more – maybe some reference to her stupid previous email so she would know Regina didn't hate her for it – but there was nothing else aside from the obnoxious art gallery signature.

She swallowed, typing out a one-word reply: **Why?**

She hoped it would make her sound just as casual as Regina, when in reality she knew she probably just sounded surly. Regardless, Regina replied once more after a few minutes: **Because it would be convenient if I could contact you outside the hours of nine to five.**

Emma dutifully replied with her phone number, then sat back and waited for Regina to return the favour with her own. She knew that seeing those 10 digits falling into her inbox like Lego pieces would feel something akin to winning a medal, and she waited for the prize that she was surely about to receive.

It never arrived, and the knot in Emma's chest didn't loosen for the rest of the day.

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Emma didn't hear from Regina again all week. Every day when she got home from work, she collected the envelopes that were waiting for her on the hallway table, scrunched them up in her fist, then went straight up to her room so she could avoid Mary Margaret and David. As much as she loved them, their constant chuckling was really killing her emo vibe, and so she started locking herself away in her bedroom until they finally disappeared into theirs.

Sometimes the sight of the tulips cheered her up. Sometimes it did the opposite. Snowy and pristine, they were by far the prettiest thing in her otherwise bland bedroom, and most of the time looking at them brought a wash of calm over her body. She could lie on her bed and, turning her head to one side, just stare at them for hours. Other times, the very sight of them made her feel sick. They reminded her of the fact that Regina hadn't even chosen them, and hadn't bothered to call since she'd got someone else to send them for her.

On Saturday evening, Emma was sat on her bed with a whisky coke clutched in one hand. Her laptop had been open all day, because she'd promised herself that today would be the day she finally balanced her books. She promised herself this most weekends, and it never actually happened. Instead, she'd spent most of the day with a Word document open, slowly typing out the plan for the children's story she'd had rattling around in her head for a while.

Her phone rang, and she jumped three inches in the air. There was one person she hoped was calling, and many, many people she hoped weren't.

She looked at the screen and realised it was none of the above.
"Hey Elsa," she said, slotting the phone between her ear and her shoulder. She took a sip of her drink and kept typing. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Elsa said. The line crackled, and Emma realised Elsa must be out. "Get changed and come meet me at Mulligan's."

Emma sighed. "I don't really feel like coming out tonight."

"You always say that. Then I persuade you to come anyway, and you end up having a great time. Come on – I'm meeting some people there in 30 minutes and I need you to support me."

"I don't have any money," Emma said. She was a bit hurt when Elsa laughed.

"What else is new?" she said. "Come on, Em. You've been in a shitty mood all week. You need to get out and stop stressing about the art lady."

"I'm not stressing," Emma said, squinting against her headache, which was definitely stress-induced. "I'm just busy."

"Emma," Elsa sighed, and the wheedling tone made Emma's resolve soften slightly. "First round's on me. Please?"

Emma groaned. She'd already had a drink, so she supposed going out for a few more wouldn't kill her. Besides, she was powerless to resist Elsa when she started pleading.

"Fine," she said. "But I'm not getting dressed up, and if you abandon me to start flirting with that greasy guitarist again, I'm leaving."

"Sounds fair. See you soon."

Elsa hung up without saying goodbye, and Emma dragged herself off of her bed.

Once Emma was crammed into a couch built for three people but holding five, she felt weirdly better. There was something therapeutic about ceasing to be mad about one thing and becoming mad about something else instead.

"I hate this place," she said as Elsa sat down next to her, shoving some guy Emma didn't know out of the way. "Why did you choose here?"

"Beer pitchers," Elsa said. Her white-blonde hair was piled up on top of her head in messy coil that put Emma's own curls to shame. At least three people were already watching her longingly. "No other reason needed."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Speaking of which, where's my drink?"

"Right here, ma'am," Elsa said, nudging a glass towards her. "Now cheer up a bit."

"I don't need cheering up. I'm fine."

"You're stewing," Elsa corrected her. "Stop worrying about Regina. She's either playing hard to get, or she's not worth the effort in the first place."

"I'm not worrying about her," Emma muttered into her glass. She didn't need to look round to see the look on Elsa's face.
"Come on, Em. You never get caught up with someone this soon," she said, treading lightly. "You didn't care this much about whether Killian called you when you first started dating."

"Regina and I aren't dating," Emma said. She bit out the words more loudly than she'd intended to, and the people sat on the couch next to her turned to stare. Slightly more quietly, she added, "Look, she just got in my head a bit. I'm trying to forget about her but it's hard."

Elsa just looked at her. "Who says you need to forget about her? She asked for your number – she wouldn't do that if she wasn't interested."

It was something Emma had been hopefully telling herself all week long, but past experience had told her not to cling onto stuff like that too hard. Expecting the worst made way more sense at this stage.

She shrugged, sipping her beer. "I guess. I'm just trying not to get my hopes up."

"Okay," Elsa said, leaning back and surveying the room. "In that case, let's find you someone sexy to fill the time. Who takes your fancy?"

Emma looked around at the room of sweaty twenty-somethings who were all desperately trying to appear relaxed in the 100 percent humidity.

"No one jumps out."

"Come on," Elsa sighed, pointing to a tall guy near the door. "What about him?"

Emma narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm pretty sure I already hooked up with him."

"Really? When?"

"Hard to say," Emma admitted. "I just recognise the broken nose."

Elsa laughed and said, "Alright. What about that group over there? Any takers?"

But Emma's eyes were still on the door, and she had gone quiet. Something had gripped her hard between the lungs.

Killian had sauntered in the room surrounded by a collection of similarly dressed wannabe-rockers, all wearing leather jackets in spite of the heat. His entire band was there, as well as their respective girlfriends, and Emma felt a pang of longing as she remembered being part of that group, no matter how much they'd all pissed her off at the time.

"Ignore him," Elsa hissed, following Emma's stricken gaze. "He's a dick, remember?"

"I know," Emma said quietly, slugging back half her beer. "Did you know he was going to be here?"

"Of course not. I thought he had a gig tonight."

"It probably got cancelled when word got out about how shit they are," Emma muttered. Elsa laughed, delighted that Emma was still capable of cracking a joke.

Killian looked around the room and then, spotting Emma, headed in her direction. Emma shrunk back against the cracked leather.

"Alright, Swan?" he asked, grabbing a stool and tugging it towards their low table. "It's rammed in
here, mind if we join you?"

Emma blinked up at him. He sat down without waiting for a response and grabbed the jug of beer in front of him.

"Excuse me, asshole," Elsa snapped. "Did you pay for that?"

"No," he said, pouring himself a glass. "Did you?"

"Yes, I did, and it's not for you."

"Calm down, love. I'll buy the next one."

They knew for a fact that he wouldn't. Elsa rolled her eyes and looked over at Emma.

Swallowing down her residual embarrassment, Emma said, "Killian, seriously. You can't just help yourself."

"Jesus Christ, what's got into you two?" Killian demanded. His clique had gathered around him by this point, and all of them were sneering at Emma. She sighed, knowing exactly how his version of last week's events must have sounded.

"The last time I saw you it was my birthday, and you'd just dumped me and then stormed out on me," Emma pointed out coldly. "Excuse me for not rolling out the welcome wagon."

Killian snorted. "Still bitter, I see."

"Can you stop showing off just because you're in front of your minions?" Emma snapped. She heard the crack in her voice and fought through it. "You were a real asshole, and now you're acting like nothing happened."

Everyone within a five metre radius was paying attention now, and Emma found herself wishing she'd had more to drink. She reached out for the glass that Killian had just poured himself and snatched it away from him.

"This is mine," she said flatly. "And you can fuck off."

Elsa cackled. "You heard the girl."

Killian was just staring at her, his face clouding over. It was obvious he was wondering why he'd ever dated her in the first place.

Then one of the girls who had been hovering behind him – one Emma thought she hadn't met before, although it was hard to say because they all looked the same – slid a hand over his shoulders.

"Come on, baby," she said, her eyes glued to Emma. They were too big for her sharp face, and they glittered with a challenge. "She isn't worth it."

Emma glared up at the girl who was easily six years younger than her and felt the final unaffected part of her heart finally chip off.

"You're right," Killian drawled, standing up and deliberately knocking the table. The glasses nearest Emma sloshed over, splattering beer against her knees. "She's not."

He turned and wound his arm around the skinny girl's waist, guiding her across to the other side of the bar with his followers in tow. Emma watched them go with a pain plucking at her chest.
"Was that your ex?" the girl to her right asked. Emma leaned forwards and scooped up one of her two glasses.

"Yep," she replied, gulping down the rest of its contents in one go.

"He was a bit of a douchebag," the girl said, and Emma sighed, ready to agree with her. Then she added, "I like his accent, though."

"Sarah, shut up," Elsa snapped. Emma ignored them both, collecting her second drink and finishing that too.

"I'll go buy another pitcher," she said, getting to her wobbly feet.

"You don't have to do that," Elsa said, grabbing her hand. Emma pulled away.

"It's cool," she replied, unsurprised by how flat her voice sounded. She knew she was being reckless drinking so much already, but she felt hot and sad and she didn't care so much.

During the week, she carefully counted pennies and made her own lunches and ignored the pangs of hunger in her stomach so she could tell herself she was making a difference to the hellish situation she'd managed to get her bank account into. Then the weekend rolled around, and one drink turned into 10, and the soft buzz that she got from alcohol reminded her of how nice it was to feel slightly numb to the world. She forgot about the envelopes. She stopped caring about the phone calls.

She staggered to the bar and pulled out her bank card, reasoning that going another $15 into her overdraft hardly mattered at this stage anyway.

She knew the table of people behind her were all talking about her, and so she took her time in going back.

Staggering into the apartment at 4am, Emma cursed the loose rug that Mary Margaret had put in the hallway. She kicked it to one side and shut the front door behind her, hoping the noises just sounded so loud in her head because she'd drunk her bodyweight in liquor and so her brain wasn't functioning properly anymore.

She tiptoed up the stairs to her bedroom and closed the door. Then she sank to the floor.

Part of her hoped she would finally cry now, but it still didn't happen. She hadn't cried in years, not since she'd been a child saying goodbye to yet another foster family because she'd been too loud or too quiet or too messy or too closed off. Eventually crying got boring, and Emma had developed other coping mechanisms – ones that included falling to the bottom of a bottle and waking up feeling so, much worse than before.

She stretched out her legs and considered the beer stains on her jeans. She wasn't entirely sure that they were from tonight.

Then she heard a buzzing sound, and she paused. Once she was sure she wasn't imagining it, she rummaged around in her jeans for her phone.

The screen showed a cell number that she didn't recognise, and she automatically hesitated. Debt collectors normally didn't call at this time, but that didn't mean there wasn't some other kind of bad news waiting at the other end of the line.

She swallowed through the taste of stale beer and answered with a rusty, "Hi?"
"Oh," the voice at the other end said. There was a long pause and a crackle before she heard, "Emma?"

"Yeah," she said, leaning her head back against the door. "Who's this?"

"It's Regina," the voice said, and Emma slapped her spare hand against the floor in surprise. Automatically sitting upright like Regina would be able to see her and scold her for slouching, she stammered out, "Oh! Hi. Hey. You... you called."

There was another long pause, and when Regina spoke, her voice sounded strangely far away. "I did. I wasn't expecting you to pick up – isn't it very late where you are?"

Emma closed her eyes, regretting the last two bourbons more than ever. "It is – I kind of just got home."

Then she registered what Regina had just said, and she asked, "Where are you?"

"I'm in Tokyo," Regina said, because of course she was. Emma couldn't help but roll her eyes. "I've been here since Thursday."

"Is that why I haven't heard from you?" Emma asked, then groaned to herself when she realised how desperate she sounded.

But she could hear Regina's soft chuckle even through the crackly line. "I'm afraid so – it's not been a pleasant trip so far. I just got back to my hotel room after a particularly horrible business dinner."

"When do you come back?"

"Tomorrow, thankfully."

"Cool," Emma said. There was a thick fog in her head that half came from alcohol and half from Regina's voice automatically making Emma's thoughts go muddy, and she fought through it. "I've never been to Tokyo."

It was the stupidest fucking thing she could have said, because of course she hadn't been to Tokyo. But luckily Regina was already responding. "Really? You might like it. It's a wonderful city when you're not being force-fed sashimi by art dealers."

Emma laughed. "Is force-feeding part of the... the art dealer job description?"

"I never actually forced you to eat anything," Regina pointed out. "If I may say so, Miss Swan, you sound a bit drunk."

"Of course I'm a bit drunk," Emma said, glad that she only sounded 'a bit' rather than 'dangerously'. "What else would I have been doing until 4am?"

"Midnight mass?" Regina suggested.

"I don't think so."

"Ah, well then," Regina said. "I suppose drinking is the next best option. Did you have a nice night?"

Emma blinked. It was a weirdly friendly question, and she wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly.
"Did I have a nice night?"

"Yes, Emma – did you have fun?"

"I..." Emma stammered. The truth was no, absolutely not, but she didn't feel like that was the answer Regina was looking for. "It was fine. I didn't really want to go, but I was persuaded."

"Is that how you felt after our dinner date too?"

At once, Emma was spluttering, "No! Of course not. I really enjoyed it."

She could hear Regina laughing. "I was joking, Miss Swan. I was wondering if I could get another 'thank you' out of you."

Emma scowled even though there was no one there to see it. "That was a mean trick. Taking advantage of me in my drunken state."

"Now now," Regina said smoothly. "I would never take advantage of you in your drunken state. No matter how much you asked me to."

Emma paused. That sounded strangely like a sex joke, but she couldn't rely on her brain to be hearing things properly right then. Still, the thought of Regina taking advantage of her in any way at all made her go hot all over, and her head fell back against the door.

"Anyway," Regina said, her voice suddenly lighter. "I suppose I should let you get some sleep."

"I guess," Emma said slowly. She knew without a doubt that she wouldn't be sleeping any time soon.

"We'll speak again soon," Regina said, and yet again Emma noticed that it wasn't a question – it was a fact.

It was then that Emma realised she didn't know why Regina had called in the first place. She opened her mouth to ask, but there was a click. Without saying goodbye, Regina had gone.
For someone who was so anally retentive about every other aspect of her life, Ingrid was surprisingly slobby when it came to her office.

“When is my meeting with accounts?” she asked as Emma collected up all the empty salad boxes and Starbucks cups.

“Three o’clock,” Emma said. The pile of books on Ingrid’s desk seemed to get taller every day, and if Emma didn’t step in to straighten it out once every eight hours then she was certain they would need to call an ambulance. Children’s books might not be especially heavy, but Ingrid’s frame had the flintiness of a woman who hadn’t eaten saturated fat since 2002. Emma didn’t like her chances.

“Push it back to 3:30,” Ingrid said, her eyes on her computer. “And get me a caesar salad. No dressing.”

“Sure,” Emma said, re-stacking a pile of manuscripts. She knew that was her cue to head for the door, but she felt herself pause. “Ingrid?”

“What?”

“Did you have a chance to look at those press releases I wrote yet?”

Ingrid didn’t look up. Emma wasn’t even sure she was listening until she muttered distractedly, “Why did you write a press release?”

“We spoke about it last week – I said I still wanted more writing experience, and you said it wasn’t fair to take the work away from the others who have good degrees from colleges that weren’t built from construction paper and plastic straws,” Emma said flatly, quoting her boss’s words verbatim. Ingrid had seemed very proud of her own wit at the time.

Even now, she managed to crack a smile. “Oh yes, I remember. So how did you end up writing one?”

“I wrote three,” Emma said as patiently as she could. This was the second time they’d had this conversation. “I spoke to Jessica in comms and asked if she wanted me to take any of her work off her hands so I could get some practice. She said yes.”

Finally, Ingrid’s gaze snapped up to look at her. “That girl’s laziness has always been a blight on this company.”

“Well, maybe so,” Emma said, standing firm. “But anyway, I did the press releases without taking the opportunity away from anyone else. I emailed them to you on Friday. Have you had a look at them yet?”

“When would I have had time to do that?” Ingrid asked, gesturing at the chaos around her. “I have better things to do than to check your homework, Emma. Now, go and get my lunch like I asked you to, and if you leave me alone this afternoon then maybe I will find 10 minutes to look through them.”

That was a better response than Emma had been hoping for, and so she nodded enthusiastically. “Sure. Can do. Thank you, Ingrid.”
Ingrid dismissed her with a wave of her hand, and Emma headed for the door. She shot a thumbs up at Elsa as she walked past.

When she returned with the caesar salad, no dressing, and another soy latte because she knew from experience that her boss would need her caffeine fix any minute now, Ingrid was in exactly the same position as before. Emma put her lunch down on the desk.

“Anything else?”

“Could you go out and get me a latte?”

“Already done,” Emma said, gesturing to the cup by her elbow. Ingrid looked over at it, managing to look vaguely impressed for once.

“See, Emma,” she said, going back to her computer. “This is why I can’t have you flitting over to the editorial team – you’re indispensable to me.”

Emma forced a smile. It sounded like a compliment, but she was used to Ingrid’s veiled insults by now. “So you’re saying that if I was worse at my job, I might get a promotion?”

“No, I’m saying that you should stick to what you’re good at,” Ingrid said. “I read one of the press releases while you were gone.”

Emma froze. “And?”

“And it was tolerable,” Ingrid sniffed. ‘Tolerable’ was actually Ingrid-speak for ‘not bad’, so Emma felt herself perk up a little bit. “But your prose is too complicated. If you can say something in 10 words, don’t try and say it in 50.”

It was the only piece of constructive criticism her boss had ever given her, and Emma wasn’t sure how to react to it. “Oh, okay. I can look over them again and try to fix that. I guess I keep thinking about writing in terms of stories, not corporate stuff, so maybe I just—”

“I’m going to get Jessica to redo them,” Ingrid cut over her, not even raising her voice. “She shouldn’t have pawned them off on you anyway. Maybe then you’ll have some time to focus on getting my lunch order right.”

“Your lunch order is right,” Emma said through gritted teeth.

“Then where the hell is the dressing?” Ingrid asked, looking up. “I specifically asked for dressing on the side.”

“You said no dressing,” Emma said, knowing how dangerous it was to argue with her but feeling too angry to care. Besides, even when Ingrid did ask for dressing, she never ate it. 70 calories was 70 too many.

“Get out,” Ingrid snapped, waving in the direction of the door. “And don’t get coffee unless I ask for it in future – this is cold now.”

Trying not to scream, Emma pivoted and marched out of the office. She always hated the safety mechanism on the glass door that meant she couldn’t slam it behind her.

Sitting down at her desk, Emma started aimlessly clicking through her inbox, doing anything she could that would make her look busy instead of annoyed.
Her cell rang and she flinched, like she always did. There was a New York number flashing up on the screen.

Deciding that if it was a creditor then at least she would have someone to yell at, she answered with a brusque, “Yes?”

“Miss Swan, it’s Tamara,” came the immediate reply. Tamara didn’t sound remotely fazed by Emma’s rudeness, and that probably said a lot about what she was used to from her boss. “I hope you don’t mind, Ms Mills gave me your cell number. Is now a good time to talk?”

“It’s fine,” Emma said, holding the phone against her shoulder so she could reply to an email. “How can I help?”

“Regina would like to arrange a meeting with you at her gallery,” Tamara said, and Emma nearly dropped the phone. “Are you free on Saturday morning?”

“Um. That’s not so good for me,” Emma said, knowing full well that she’d be sleeping off a hangover then.

“Saturday afternoon, then,” Tamara said, because apparently she’d trained at the Regina Mills School of Commands, Not Questions. “Let’s say one o’clock. Give me a moment and I will email you the address.”

Emma paused. “Can you tell me what this is about?”

“Regina will see you on Saturday,” Tamara said. In the distance, Emma heard the whoosh of an email being sent. “Thank you, Miss Swan. Have a good week.”

She was gone, and Emma was left feeling more irritated than before.

By Friday evening, Emma was a wreck. She hadn’t heard from Regina or Tamara all week, and she’d nearly cancelled the appointment more than once. Every time, Elsa had been the one darting across the office to snatch her cell phone from her hand.

“You are not bailing out on this meeting,” she’d snapped, putting the phone in her own pocket. “You’ve been moping for weeks because you wanted to see her again. You are going. And you’re not getting this phone back until the end of the day – no one texts you anyway.”

So now Emma found herself perched on a bar stool, her legs swinging beneath her and her stomach churning. Elsa had insisted they go out after work because the alcohol would take her mind off how nervous she was, but so far they were three drinks down apiece and Emma didn’t feel much better at all.

“Cheer up,” Elsa said, nudging another shot towards her. “I thought you had the hots for her?”

Emma glared at her. “I do not.”

“Okay, fine,” Elsa replied, rolling her eyes. “But you liked her. Why are you so scared of seeing her again?”

“Because she is super intimidating,” Emma said, her voice already too loud. “Besides, why did she want to see me in the morning? And why won’t they tell me what this is all about? It sounds a bit suspect. I still haven’t ruled out the serial killer thing.”
“This isn’t *American Psycho,*” Elsa said calmly. “She wants to see you again because she has a crush on you too, and she’s trying to sound casual. The morning thing was probably to throw you off track.”

“That’s a few too many games for me,” Emma said, tossing the shot down her throat. Elsa followed suit. “I want things to be simple. Whatever happened to just asking someone out on a date?”

“But you *totally* don’t have the hots for her,” Elsa said, and Emma’s face burned bright red when she realised what she’d just said. “Look, Em. Just go, be relaxed, be charming, and if you can, get her naked.”

“I’m not getting her naked!” Emma protested.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t even know her.”

“But not because you don’t want to?”

It was a loaded question, and it was obvious Elsa already knew the answer. Emma’s fingers got extra fidgety any time she mentioned Regina, and it was obvious what she really wanted.

Emma sighed. “I need another drink.”

“Agreed,” Elsa said, gesturing to the barman. “I’m going to the bathroom. Can you avoid having a panic attack for five minutes while I’m gone?”

“Probably not,” Emma said. “But let’s see.”

She watched as Elsa swept across the bar, multiple eyes following her.

They’d gone to a different bar this week – another of their favourites, but this one thankfully had air conditioning – and Emma recognised most of the regulars there. No one well enough to actually say hi to, but well enough that she didn’t have to feel uncomfortable waiting by herself.

She wasn’t by herself for long, though. After barely a minute, she felt a hand on her elbow.

“Did you already order me a shot, love?”

She groaned, her eyes on the two glasses that had just been pushed towards her by the barman. “Killian, I mean this in the nicest possible way, but could you please fuck off and leave me alone?”

She wasn’t even slightly surprised when he hoisted himself up onto the seat that Elsa had just vacated.

“I just want to chat.”

“I really don’t want to talk to you,” Emma said, her voice flat. Apparently the mixture of nerves and tequila had turned her into a very morose drunk.

“I get that,” Killian said. Emma rolled her eyes over to look at him. He’d washed his hair, which made a nice change, but otherwise he appeared to be wearing exactly the same outfit as the previous week. “Look, when I saw you in Mulligan’s I was a bit hostile, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that.”

“Well, I don’t know. Your new girlfriend seemed to find it hilarious,” Emma snapped. She managed
to sound annoyed rather than hurt, and she should have just left it there. But, as her boss had already pointed out to her, she had trouble saying things in 10 words when she could say them in 50. “Seriously, Killian? Did you break up with me because she was already in the picture, or did you get over me so quickly that she’s just a new addition to your trophy cabinet?”

“Don’t be like that, Swan,” he said softly, touching her knee. “She was no one. We met up a couple of times and she obviously got it into her head that we were dating, but we’re not. I haven’t seen her since.”

That didn’t make her feel even slightly better. “I’m glad you had a good time making fun of me together, at least.”

“It wasn’t like that. Look, you were pretty smashed too – we were just talking shit to try and best the other. Either way, I’m sorry for being a dick.”

“Last week, or always?”

“Always, probably,” Killian said, throwing her his darkest smile. “You put up with a lot of shit from me that I never really gave you credit for.”

If Emma was being perfectly honest with herself, she would have admitted that he’d put up with an awful lot of shit from her too. He’d been right: she was moody and cold and difficult to please. She needed a lot of space, and she also never said what she really wanted. No wonder everyone ditched her as soon as they spent a few weeks with her.

But she wasn’t being honest with herself, because Killian was giving her something that sounded almost like a real apology and she was going to cling onto it for all she was worth.

“I know I did,” she scoffed, lifting her drink and throwing it down her throat. “People have won the Nobel Peace Prize for less.”

Killian laughed. “Look – we’re not dating anymore, and that sucks. But maybe we can try and be friends?”

There was no way in hell Emma would ever be friends with Killian. She knew too much about him, and she knew that the only person in the world less reliable than him was her.

But she was also tired and jittery and didn’t have the fight left in her to tell him that that was never going to happen, and so she just sighed. “Fine. Friends – if you buy me another drink.”

Killian grinned. “I can do that.”

As he was ordering a bottle of wine for them to share, Emma looked across the room to find Elsa watching her from the corner. She’d found another friend, because Elsa was the kind of person who knew everyone, but as soon as Emma caught her eye, she mouthed, Are you okay?

Emma nodded. She didn’t love the idea of spending the rest of her evening with Killian, but Elsa had been putting up with her moody ass for weeks and she probably deserved a night off. Besides, Emma and Killian had had fun together once. He was cocky and flirty and disorientingly charming, and what Emma needed more than anything in that moment was a distraction.

She gestured for Elsa to keep talking to her friend, and then she turned back to where Killian was pouring out two glasses of the cheapest white wine he’d been able to get his hands on.
Emma wasn’t sure when exactly she realised that she was completely wasted. It might have been the moment that she fell off the barstool trying to retie her sneaker, or it might have been when she’d blearily looked at her phone and realised that it was already 2am. It was more likely, however, the moment she’d found herself locked in the disabled toilet with Killian wrapped around her.

“I’ve missed you, Swan,” he murmured in her ear. His breath was hot and smelled like beer.

“Mm,” Emma muttered, trying to ignore what he was saying and focusing instead on kissing him. She didn’t want to be there, and she didn’t want to be doing this, but kissing him was a new kind of mistake and it made a nice change from all the other mistakes she’d been making recently. Maybe regretting this tomorrow would take her mind off of everything else.

“Your ass looks so sexy in these jeans,” he said, his hands sliding down to the waistband. “It seems a shame to take them off.”

Emma pulled away from his mouth. “Wait, what?”

But his hands were already unbuttoning them, and he didn’t seem to register her confusion. He fumbled for his wallet and produced a foil square.

“Get over there,” he said, nodding towards the sink. Even through the fog inside her head, Emma knew she didn’t like the way he was talking to her.

Finally, he saw that she was hesitating. He reached out and stroked her arm. “Come on, Em. For old times’ sake.”

Emma didn’t have such fond memories of those old times anymore. Now she’d had time to get over the break-up, she remembered how Killian was incapable of staying in a job for more than three weeks. How he drank even more than she did and how he loved to make fun of her friends. How he left her high and dry most times they had sex, so she had to wait until he’d disappeared into the bathroom before she could finish herself off.

But a hand was pushing her towards the sink and she was muggy from alcohol, and maybe she missed being touched a little bit. Or maybe she just felt so confused and shitty that doing something that would make her feel even worse seemed like her best option.

She let herself be bent over the sink. She closed her eyes so she didn’t have to look in the mirror.

When Emma eventually managed to peel her eyelids back from her bone-dry eyeballs, she realised that the distant buzzing she’d been able to hear for the past 45 minutes was coming from her phone. She squinted at the time and groaned: she’d slept right through her alarm’s frantic ringing and was due to be across New York and at Regina’s gallery in less than an hour.

She forced herself upright, clutching her stomach. There was a rolling sensation in her abdomen and a dull ache between her legs, but it still took her a moment to remember what she’d done.

The sour taste in her mouth wasn’t the result of all the vomiting she’d done as soon as she’d gotten home. It tasted like shame.

All she wanted to do was lie back down and sleep through the rest of the day, but already the thought of disappointing Regina was too much for her. She considered calling her to reschedule, but the moment Regina paused and said “I see” in that low, drawling voice of hers, she knew she would cave anyway.
It made more sense to drag herself into a scalding hot shower to wash every trace of the previous night off of her. She could vaguely feel bruises on her hipbones, but she didn’t look down. It took most of her energy to stand upright anyway.

She stood in front of her closet wrapped in a towel for the next 10 minutes, wondering what the hell she was supposed to wear. She was fighting the urge to throw up, and yet she still wanted to make an effort for this. Her normal jeans-and-tank-top combo wouldn’t do for an upper-class art gallery in Chelsea, and yet she was only just realising that she didn’t own much else.

She eventually settled for her skinniest pair of skinnies paired with a sleeveless button-down shirt. When she tucked it into the high waistband and added a pair of sunglasses – which doubled as a mask for her pale face – she almost looked stylish.

It was already one o’clock by the time she forced herself out the door. Her phone started ringing as she walked to the subway, but she ignored it. When she’d eventually fought her way across the city, it was closer to two.

The gallery was just as she had imagined it: sleek white walls, with the name Rocinante spelled out in gold above the black door. Inside, it was dark. Emma glanced at the opening hours that were neatly presented in the corner of the window and realised the gallery was closed on Saturdays, and she swallowed down the nausea that was threatening to ruin her only nice outfit.

Then she spotted the intercom, and she pressed her thumb against it before any kind of common sense could talk her out of it. Her palms prickled with sweat as she waited for something to happen.

Through the darkened glass, she saw a figure approaching. Emma quickly pushed her sunglasses on top of her head.

When Regina opened the door, she looked beautiful and she looked mad. “You’re late.”

Emma swallowed. Regina was wearing heels high enough to make her tower over Emma as she wobbled anxiously on the doorstep.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. Her mouth was dry. “I... got lost.”

She could feel Regina’s gaze crawling over her body, taking in the pastiness of her cheeks and the circles under her eyes. A flicker of concern crossed her face. “Did you come straight from a distillery?”

Emma glared back at her. “No. I came from home.”

Regina had evidently been expecting more of a response than that, but Emma was too tired to give it to her. With a sigh, Regina stepped back from the door. “Come in, then. I’ve been working upstairs.”

Emma edged into the room. It was cool and dark, and although she could just about see the paintings that were dotted across the walls, she couldn’t make out any details. But before she could ask what they were, Regina was sweeping past her, heading for the door marked Staff only at the back of the room.

Trailing behind her, Emma let her gaze drop to the curve of Regina’s waist. It was accentuated when she walked, and suddenly her dry mouth was the result of something other than all the bottles of wine she’d ploughed through over the past 18 hours.

Regina led her down a corridor and up a narrow staircase. At the top, they came to a heavy door with a security keypad. Regina tapped in a six-digit code and stepped aside to let Emma go in first.
She found herself in an open-plan room that doubled up as some kind of office and living space. There were two black leather couches facing each other on one side, with a desk just behind them. On the other side of the room was a mini kitchen that looked so immaculate Emma couldn’t imagine Regina had ever used it.

“Do you live here?” Emma heard herself asking, because her mouth was apparently incapable of engaging with her brain whenever Regina was around. She heard a faint laugh as Regina walked past her, headed for the kitchen.

“No, Miss Swan, I don’t,” she said, opening the fridge. “Can I get you a drink?”

Emma asked for a glass of water, because the thought of eating or drinking anything else made her want to dry heave. As Regina went to get it for her, Emma shakily sat down on one of the couches, her knees pressed together and her fingers gripping the edge of the sleek leather.

Regina seemed to glide around the room, and the sight of her made Emma’s head spin all over again. As she approached with the glass, Emma had to remind herself not to stare.

“Thanks,” she said, deliberately avoiding touching her hand as she took it.

Regina sat down on the couch opposite and crossed her legs. Emma hadn’t realised it was possible for someone who was so small to have legs that went on for so many miles.

It was when Regina pulled her iPhone out of her pocket, put it on silent and placed it to one side that Emma realised something strange was happening.

“So,” Regina said, leaning back. “I suppose you’re wondering why you’re here.”

“Kind of,” Emma replied. “I did ask Tamara but she wouldn’t tell me.”

“Yes, sorry about the secrecy. I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“Oh,” Emma said, then swallowed. “Does that mean there is something I should be scared of?”

“Well, I don’t think so. We’ll see if you agree, though,” Regina said, and she was smirking again. Emma shifted position, clutching onto the glass she’d been given like her life depended on it. “First, I think I should tell you in a bit more detail what exactly I do for a living.”

“Didn’t you already tell me?”

“I did, but I left out some details,” Regina said. “Like I said, I am an art dealer. I own three galleries, including this one, and I also have some private art collections that are stored offsite. On the side of that, I represent artists and promote them internationally, and I also invest in artwork for wealthy collectors. I built this business on my own, and I am very proud of it, but it goes without saying that it keeps me very busy. I travel a lot, multiple times a month, and I don’t have time for much of a social life. I don’t date, and I don’t see my family as often as I’d like.”

Emma suspected she was only referring to her son there, but she didn’t interrupt to ask.

“I am very satisfied with my life, Miss Swan,” Regina said, and there was something about the way her eyes were boring into Emma’s that made the sentence feel slightly forced. “But everyone has things that they feel are missing. Just because I’m wealthy doesn’t make me any exception.”

“Sure,” Emma said quietly, not really sure where this was going.
“Tell me a bit more about yourself,” Regina said. Emma blinked at the switch.

“Me? Why?”

“Humour me. Where did you grow up?”

Emma’s face was carefully expressionless as she said, “I was born in Tallahassee. I’ve lived all over since then.”

“Did your parents move around a lot?”

“No,” Emma said flatly. Regina waited for an elaboration, but she wasn’t getting one.

Clearing her throat, Regina continued, “Where did you go to college?”

With a pang of embarrassment, Emma answered, “Westwood.”

“Where is that?”

“LA,” Emma said. After a beat, she added, “It got shut down a couple of years after I graduated.”

“Oh,” Regina said, trying and failing to not look appalled. “And what did you study?”

“English and Journalism.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“What?” Emma asked. “How is that relevant?”

“Answer the question, please,” Regina said coolly. Emma rolled her eyes.

“No, I don’t. You do remember how we met, right?”

“Vividly,” Regina said. “But you’re a beautiful woman and it’s been a couple of weeks since then. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone else had snatched you up already.”

Ignoring the delighted blush that was rising in her face, Emma asked, “Regina, what is this? It’s starting to feel like a weird job interview.”

There was a pause before Regina said, “I suppose it is, in a sense.”

Emma’s mouth snapped shut. Regina was watching her carefully, her eyebrows raised. It was only then, when Emma glanced down, that she noticed Regina’s leg was bouncing.

After a pause, Emma asked, “Sorry?”

“Which part are you struggling with?”

“All of it,” Emma spluttered. “I don’t want to work in an art gallery and I’ve never given you any indication that I do. I don’t know anything about art. And why has this all been so cloak and dagger? I know you’re rich but you can’t be that rich.”

She was rambling, and it wasn’t because she was startled. Not really. It was because disappointment was seeping through her bones like black ink, and she wanted to drop dead on the spot.

She’d thought Regina liked her. She’d thought this was a date.
She dropped her gaze, forcing back the familiar prickling feeling at the backs of her eyes. She wondered how long she had to sit there before she could reasonably say she was leaving.

“Emma,” Regina said, and her voice was beautiful and so soft. She willed Emma to look back up with that one word alone. “It’s not that kind of job.”

“IT’S not?”

“No,” Regina said, and her leg started bouncing more quickly. She took a breath. “Although you don’t like to talk about your work, I can tell that you care a great deal about it. You were swooning over a pile of books the very first time I saw you.”

“I was being loudly dumped the first time you saw me,” Emma corrected her, but Regina was already shaking her head.

“I can assure you, I saw you long before that man arrived,” she said. She didn’t sound embarrassed by it. “He just gave me an excuse to walk over.”

Emma had been shot from emotion to emotion too many times in the past five minutes and she was slightly worried she might get sick from the velocity. She took a deep breath. “Okay – then if it’s not a gallery job, what is it?”

“It’s a little bit more intimate than that,” Regina ventured. “I would like to ask you to be my companion.”

Emma felt her jaw go slack. “Your what?”

“Do you not understand the word, or would you just like me to elaborate on the job description?”

“I know what ‘companion’ means, Regina,” Emma snapped. “I just don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Something about her irritation seemed to amuse Regina. She was nearly smiling when she said, “You would attend events with me, help me organise parties, come to gallery openings with me, among various other things. Sometimes you would keep me company on the weekends, sometimes you would get to travel with me. There would be a lot of different aspects, but I would pay you for all of it.”

“That... that sounds a lot like you want me to be your mistress.”

“Call it whatever you like,” Regina said, waving one hand. “Either way, that’s what I am proposing.”

“But,” Emma stammered, blindly looking around her like she was expecting to find a hidden camera buried in the nearby ficus. “Why?”

“Because I like you, and I think you’d be good at it. I’d like it if I knew that you would be around whenever I needed some assistance, or some attention.”

Emma laughed – she couldn’t help it. “Why the hell would you ever need that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, have you looked at yourself lately? Surely you could get a boyfriend any time you wanted.”

“Of course I could,” Regina said. God, Emma had forgotten how disarming her confidence could be.
“But boyfriends are needy, and useless, and I don’t have time for them. What I need is someone who will be there when I require them, but won’t expect to see me 24/7 or get offended when I tell them to leave me alone.”

“That’s a bit cold, wouldn’t you say?”

“Perhaps. But that’s how I work. If you were interested in becoming my companion—”

“Mistress,” Emma interrupted.

“If you were interested,” Regina continued, glaring, “then that is how it would be.”

Emma fell silent, her tongue suddenly feeling too big for her mouth. There was a question that had crept into her mind the moment Regina had started talking about all this, but she wasn’t sure she had the guts to actually ask it.

Then she saw the way Regina’s lips were twisting and she knew she was waiting for it anyway.

Emma cleared her throat. “Would I have to... sleep with you?”

“*Yes*?”

“Of course. You can’t expect me to have a companion—”

“Mistress.”

“—and not sleep with them. That’s a big part of the deal, Miss Swan.”

Something thick and heavy was filling Emma’s stomach. “But you said you’d be *paying* me. I don’t know what impression I’ve given you, but I’m not the kind of person who takes money for sex.”

“You haven’t given me any such impression,” Regina said, and she sounded genuinely offended. “The payment will be for the job you are doing, and for the time it takes away from your own schedule. The sex will just be an added bonus, let’s say.”

“This is crazy,” Emma spluttered. “And besides – when you met me, I’d just broken up with a dude. How do you even know I’m into women?”

And Regina just looked at her. Her expression was completely passive. “I just do.”

Emma went quiet at once.

“Would you like me to tell you some more about the arrangement?” Regina asked, lifting her chin. “Or would you prefer to leave?”

The fact that she still had the option to run away made Emma feel slightly less nauseous. She nodded. “Fine. Go ahead.”

She was probably mistaken, but she thought Regina looked relieved.

“You won’t need to leave your job,” Regina said. “This will be part-time – several evenings a week and most weekends. It will be a lot of work. There will be travel, and plenty of it. I’ll be paying you, like I said, but I’d prefer it if you didn’t tell anyone that – you can imagine how that would look to outsiders.”
Emma grimaced. She could imagine how it looked to herself too.

“And...” she heard herself mumble. “And, how much...?”

“$10,000,” Regina said.

“What?”

“A month.”

“A what?”

“Emma,” Regina sighed. “I’ve already told you – I am wealthy. Very wealthy. I’m also extremely difficult to be around and not particularly pleasant company. Trust me, it’s a fair price.”

When Emma didn’t respond right away, Regina added, “Besides, with all the travel and black tie events, there will be a lot of expensive clothes to buy, so it’s not as much as it sounds.”

But all Emma could hear was some kind of white noise in the back of her head. $10,000 a month. She thought of the pile of envelopes under her bed, the ones demanding immediate repayment or else legal action would have to be taken. Her heart thudded.

She’d never added up how much she owed. She wasn’t brave enough. But her college debt alone was close to $40,000, and then there were the unpaid court fees and the missed rent and the astronomical interest on a whole series of maxed-out credit cards. There were all the nights out with Elsa buying $50 bottles of whisky because once she had a drink in her hand, she had no regard for her financial situation anymore.

Seven, maybe eight months with Regina would fix all that. She imagined what it would be like to not panic any time her phone rang.

“Emma?”

She looked up. “Huh?”

“Were you listening to me?”

“I...” Emma started. “Sorry, no.”

Regina sighed. “I was just saying that if you agree, you will be free to walk away whenever you decide you’ve had enough, but I must insist on a two-week notice period. I will need to arrange your replacement.”

It was such a cold thing to say, but it made Emma feel strangely better. At least it sounded more like a real job.

Emma took a hearty gulp of water, wincing as it went down. Then she asked, “Why me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why are you asking me? You could get anyone. Literally anyone. Why would you be interested in me when I’m...?”

She didn’t know how to finish that sentence. The truth was that she was nothing – she wasn’t well read, or rich, or even that clever. She was pretty, sure, but so were loads of people. She was just somebody’s assistant – an orphan with a criminal record and a crippling debt problem.
Regina’s face softened. “Because I found you interesting from the moment I saw you. I thought you were beautiful, obviously, but I also saw something else in you that I liked. It’s possible that it was because you were shouting in the face of your ex-boyfriend and that made me think you’d probably be able to handle my mood swings, but I suspect it was more than that.”

Emma didn’t reply, and so Regina continued.

“I also have something to gain from it – I wouldn’t be a very good businesswoman if I didn’t.”

“What’s that?” Emma croaked.

“Social credit,” Regina said bluntly. “There is a wave of up-and-coming New York artists that I would like to cash in on, but it’s hard to crowbar your way into that kind of crowd when you look and sound like I do. If you agreed to this, then I would have a smart, sexy, fresh-faced woman on my arm, and that can stand for a lot in places like this.”

There were too many compliments laced within several layers of illicitness, and it made Emma feel dirty. She swallowed and took a different route.

“Have you ever had one of these arrangements before?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“With a woman?”

“No,” Regina said. “Never with a woman. This is the first time it’s been appropriate.”

At least she was being honest, Emma thought to herself. It was just about the only coherent thought that was managing to form inside her jumbled-up head.

“I really don’t understand, Regina,” she blurted out, the glass shaking between her hands. “Look, clearly I have a crush on you. I haven’t been great at hiding it. You know I would date you if you asked me, so why can’t we just do that? Just go out to these places and forget about the contracts and the conditions and the—”

“No,” Regina interrupted in her calm, quiet voice. “I’m afraid that doesn’t work for me. It’s this way, or no way. I’ll understand if you reject my offer, but if you do, I will just go and find someone else.”

Emma could feel her jaw starting to wobble. This was a mistake – all of it. Coming here in the first place, doing it on a hangover, listening to a single word that had come out of Regina’s mouth after she’d first mentioned her proposition – it was all stupid and reckless, and Emma should have known better.

She stood up abruptly. “I have to go.”

Regina didn’t look particularly surprised. “Okay.”

“I don’t...” Emma started, placing her glass on the coffee table. “I don’t think I can do this.”

They both heard the lack of conviction in her voice. Regina tilted her head to one side, considering her.

“I’ll understand if you decide this isn’t for you,” Regina said. “But I’d like you to think about it.”

“Fine,” Emma said, suddenly too hot and desperate to get out of there. She looked towards the door.
“One week,” Regina said, not getting up. “If I don’t hear from you by next Saturday, I’ll consider that a rejection. I won’t contact you again if that is the case.”

That hit Emma harder than anything. In spite of all this, she couldn’t imagine never hearing from Regina again.

She didn’t reply, because she was certain she was going to throw up. She just nodded and rushed towards the door, yanking it open and flying down the stairs without hitting most of the steps. There was a brief moment at the gallery door when she couldn’t work out how to leave and she groaned, panicked, thinking she would have to go back upstairs and ask Regina for help. But then she found the latch and flicked it open and hurled herself out onto the street, not caring if Regina was watching her from the window as she ran away.
Emma arrived home to find a fresh pile of letters waiting for her. Her bank had suddenly switched from brown envelopes to white ones, like they thought the muted colour scheme was the reason why she wasn’t responding to their irate messages, and the sight of them sent terror shooting through her like spiders crawling up her limbs. She scooped the papers up and ran upstairs, not stopping to say hi to Mary Margaret because she wasn’t sure she would be able to open her mouth without a strangled scream coming out.

Slamming her bedroom door shut behind her, she fell to her knees and tugged the box of bills out from under her bed. Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed the top envelope and tore it open.

$12,865 was the first number she saw. She didn’t even register what it was for. Just below that was a helpful addition: \textit{please note, a $20-a-day late payment fee is in place.}

Her stomach churned as she opened another one. All she saw was the double-digit interest rate she was being charged on that particular card before she groaned and pushed the papers away from her.

After a few minutes of heavy breathing, Emma found herself lying down on the wood floor, her intestines knotting around themselves. She could taste bile rising up in her throat.

She was fucked. She’d always known that. She’d been fucked ever since her parents abandoned her outside a diner in north Florida and she’d landed in the foster system like she was being tossed down a waterslide.

She’d been 16 when she’d gotten tired of it all and decided to hop the fence at her last foster home, burning along on rage and resentment and not much else. She’d been 19 when she’d stolen a bunch of watches from a street vendor and, when she’d been caught, had also been carrying a sizeable amount of pot.

She’d been bad with money from day one, starting on nothing and finishing up with much less, but it was the 13 months she spent in prison that broke her. The fines and the court fees and the bail charges were the very first step on a painfully slippery slope. Without realising it, drinking and smoking became the only things that helped her feel like she could regain her footing again – or they did, until she woke up the next morning with a hangover and a stranger in her bed and another $100 missing from her wallet.

When Emma had been released from prison, she’d been determined to start again. She was done with getting into fights and stealing and crashing on strangers’ couches – there was debt to her name, sure, but she would fix that. She would take evening classes until she’d finished her high school education, and then she would go to college.

Classes were expensive though, and they drained the rest of her money. College was even more so, once she’d finally managed to get accepted.

Westwood College wasn’t a good school – it wasn’t even close to a good school. But it was also on the other side of the country, which was perfect for a girl wanting a fresh start, and it was the only place willing to take a 21-year-old with a shiny new criminal record. When Emma had been accepted, she’d been so scared that they would realise their mistake and reject her again that she’d taken out a dubious credit card and an even more dubious loan to pay the tuition fees upfront. She didn’t know anyone who she could ask about it, and so she didn’t know she’d fucked herself over
until it was far too late.

And now here she was, swimming in papers and too scared to look through them. The debt built every day, and so did her self-loathing.

She’d felt like someone had been chasing her since the day she’d hopped that fence.

Elsa was the only person who knew about any of it, and even she didn’t get the full story. She just assumed Emma was broke like every other Millennial living in Manhattan was, not the kind of broke where an undercover debt collector ended up following her home from work.

Mary Margaret, on the other hand, had no idea. She knew Emma was months behind in rent payments, but she was too polite to mention it. On the first day of every month, she looked up hopefully from her breakfast, expecting Emma to suddenly produce the six months worth of money that she owed her. When it didn’t happen, she never said a word.

Emma arched her back away from the floorboards and groaned. Regina’s voice rattled around inside her head.

_I thought you were beautiful, obviously, but I also saw something else in you that I liked._

Emma couldn’t even consider her offer. She would be totally crazy to.

Except her fingers were already itching at the thought of all those crisp $100 dollar bills piling into her lap every month. The apartment she could rent from them. The places she would travel with them.

And Regina. She would be on Regina’s arm, looking prettier than she’d ever looked in her life, going places she’d never had access to. She’d get to spend time with her, get to _kiss_ her, get to do all sorts of things to her that she’d already clocked up too many hours thinking about over the past few weeks.

_Yeah, but for a cost_, Emma snapped at herself, grappling for her cell phone. _Is it worth being a really expensive whore just so you can look at a pretty face three times a week?_

She didn’t answer that question, because her moral standards had always been low and it was scary to contemplate exactly what else she would do to look at Regina three times a week. Instead, she pulled up Elsa’s number and called her, closing her eyes.

“Get in here,” Elsa said, holding open the door to her apartment and not even blinking at Emma’s frazzled appearance. “I have ice cream.”

Emma had been hungover for long enough that day to know that another drink was the only thing that could make her feel better. “Can I have vodka instead?”

Elsa’s baby blue eyes narrowed. For all her Disney princess looks, she was capable of throwing the filthiest glares when she wanted to. “I’m not giving you alcohol for a while. Not after what happened last night.”

“It was nothing,” Emma muttered, skulking past her and into her apartment.

“It was reckless and stupid. Now sit down, it’s ice cream or nothing.”

Elsa was the only person Emma knew in the city who lived by herself, although it wasn’t exactly by
her own merit. Her dad was an insanely wealthy diplomat back in Denmark, and when Elsa had decided to move to America for college, he’d bought her the one-bed Midtown apartment so she wouldn’t have to slum it in the NYU dorms. Emma rarely went there because she was always worried that the working-class chip on her shoulder would cause her to ‘accidentally’ spill something on the pale Ikea furnishings, but today she was desperate enough to forget about that.

Collapsing onto the deceptively comfortable minimalist couch, she let out a low groan. “Things are so f**ked up.”

“Because of Killian, or Regina?”


“What did you do?”

“For once, nothing,” Emma said, watching as Elsa moved about the kitchen. “It was just not what I was expecting.”

“Was it a date?”

“No.”

“Was it not a date in the same way that your other dates weren’t dates?”

“Elsa,” Emma sighed, tipping her head over the back of the couch. “It really wasn’t a date.”

“Fine,” Elsa said, carrying a tub of Ben & Jerrys and two spoons towards her. “What was it then?”

“It was...” Emma started, then shook her head. “She does like me.”

“Obviously. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that she doesn’t like me like I like her. She doesn’t want to date me – she asked me to be, like, her formal companion at art events.”

She could see the confusion clouding over Elsa’s face as she sat down beside her. “What the hell does that mean?”

Emma paused. This would be hard enough to explain anyway, but all she could think of was how politely Regina had asked her not to tell anyone about the money. Whether she took the offer or not, Emma didn’t think she could ignore that request.

“She doesn’t want to date me,” she said slowly. “She made that very clear. But she does want to see me more. She wants me to come to galleries and parties and dinners with her, and she wants to take me travelling and buy me clothes, I guess, and just kind of...”

“Spoil you?” Elsa asked.

“Sort of. Something like that.”

“Well, fuck. That’s way better than dating.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is! What’s not to like about fancy clothes and private jets?”
“I don’t know. I guess it just feels a bit... dirty.”

Emma sounded genuinely miserable, and Elsa reached out to touch her shoulder.

“Because she’d be buying stuff for you?”

There was a pause before Emma settled on, “...yeah.”

“Emma, she’s mega rich. She can obviously spend her money on whatever she wants. If she wants to buy you things and take you places, then what’s the problem? It’s not like she has to do it.”

“Sure, but what about everything else? Why can’t we just go out on dates like normal people and see if we like each other before all this? She’s already made it perfectly clear that she doesn’t want anything serious out of it. I don’t want to be paraded around black tie events like some kind of show pony, especially when there’s a really good chance that I’ll fuck it up anyway.”

“Shut up,” Elsa said as patiently as she could. “You’ve always complained about how you’re no good at commitment and how no one ever wants to be around you for more than a few weeks. When you and Killian hit six months you nearly had a heart attack.”

Emma glowered at her. “So?”

“So, this sounds pretty perfect for you. You don’t have to worry about where it’s going or whether she’s going to get too clingy – it’s just flirting and sex, and you might also get some decent jewellery out of it. I really don’t see what the problem is.”

It did sound better coming from Elsa’s mouth than it did in her own head. But still, there were some gaping holes in her logic.

“Elsa, I’m in debt,” she said, her voice trembling a bit. “You know that. Should I really be gallivanting off to the Bahamas right now? I should be working harder to get a promotion and finally make enough money to pay off at least some of my student loan. I don’t need something else distracting me.”

“Okay, fine, maybe,” Emma rolled her eyes. “But she’s kind of scary and I barely know her. She might be a real bitch when I finally get to spend some proper time with her.”

Elsa groaned like Emma was trying to argue that the Earth really was flat. “Emma. You don’t know that about anyone before you start dating them. That’s what dating is for.”

“But—”
“Stop trying to talk yourself out of this. The only possible reason you could have given me for why this is a bad idea would be that you only just broke up with Killian and you’re not ready for anything else yet, but you haven’t even mentioned that, which means these are just excuses. If you don’t like her, stop seeing her. It’s really not that hard.”

A pile of money flashed through Emma’s brain, and she said, “Well, it’s a bit harder than you’re making it out to be.”

“Tell me how.”

But Emma couldn’t. Instead, she settled on muttering, “I feel like I’m going to be some kind of trophy wife.”

“There are worse things,” Elsa said as kindly as she could. “Emma, I’ve been bankrolled by my dad my whole life. I have no idea what it’s like to be broke, and I’m not going to pretend I do. But what I do know is that being rich is nicer than being poor, and if some hot woman wants to make life a bit easier for you, you’d be an idiot to tell her no.”

It was the only thing Emma had heard that day that actually made some sense.

Regina stayed true to her word and gave Emma time to think about the offer. She didn’t call all week, and no matter how loud the white noise inside Emma’s head had gotten, she wished that she would.

Elsa had almost convinced her that accepting Regina’s proposal was a good idea, but by the time the weekend ended, Emma had managed to talk herself back out of it again. The dirty feeling that slicked over her pores whenever she thought about the money returned in full force – but so did the slight loosening in her stomach when she imagined being able to go out for dinner and not order the cheapest thing on the menu. Being able to go on vacations and buy new clothes and rent an apartment where she would have more than five square feet of space to herself.

There were too many things to think about, and yet through it all, all she could think about was Regina. About how she wished she would call.

About how if she said no to her offer, she’d never hear from her again.

Maybe it was because of this that on Friday afternoon, when Emma’s phone started buzzing against her desk with *Unknown number* flashing across the screen, she picked up. She didn’t even think about it.

“Hello?” she blurted out, waiting for Regina or even Tamara’s voice to come floating back at her.

“Is this Emma Swan?”

“Yes, who’s this?” Emma asked, glancing around the office. The woman’s voice was crisp and efficient and sounded exactly like someone Regina would hire.

“Ms Swan, I am calling from Malen and Associates debt collection firm. We have been trying to get in contact with you to arrange the repayment of your outstanding loan to the value of—”


“We’ve taken over portions of your debt from other agencies,” the woman said. “Ms Swan, due to the extremely large sum that you owe, we have no choice but to call in the entire amount for
immediate repayment.”

“I’m doing my best,” Emma hissed into the phone. “Look, I can write you a check when I next get paid, but it won’t be for the full amount.”

“We can’t accept that. If we do not receive the full payment in the next 30 days we will be forced to —”

Emma didn’t wait around to hear what they would do to her. She hung up the phone and pushed it away from her, watching as it sailed across her desk and clattered to the office floor.

Clutching hold of the arms of her chair, she took a deep breath. She was certain the room was shrinking around her.

After a few minutes, she glanced up. No one in the main office was looking her way, although she suspected someone must have noticed her throwing her phone to the floor.

Then she turned her head and found Ingrid watching her from her own desk. Her face was expressionless, but it said enough.

Emma snapped her gaze away again, going back to her computer. Her hands were shaking when she placed them on the keyboard.

Emma didn’t go out with Elsa that evening. Instead, she went home and lined up three glasses of bourbon.

Her phone had survived the trip to the office floor, and now it sat in front of her, waiting. Emma drank the first two glasses in quick succession, but savoured the third.

It was nearly midnight, just before her time ran out, when she finally picked up the phone. It wasn’t ringing for long.

“Hello?”

“Regina,” Emma said, and her voice sounded firmer than she’d expected it to. “Are you free to meet tomorrow?”
Chapter 7

It was too warm for her red jacket, but she put it on anyway. There was something about the fake leather that always felt like armour, and Emma needed all the protection she could get today.

She wasn’t hungover, which made a nice change. She had also found time to wash and dry her hair, then style it into fat curls that tumbled down her back. Her skin-tight tank top was white and, if she stood in exactly the right position, showed off the muscles in her stomach.

She was already standing outside Regina’s gallery when the clock hit 2pm. Exactly a week had passed since she’d last pressed on the buzzer.

When Regina appeared on the other side of the glass, Emma could see the confusion on her face. She unlocked the door and immediately asked, “What on Earth are you wearing?”

Emma faltered. She glanced down at her jacket and shrugged. “I like it.”

Regina’s mouth opened and closed, and Emma knew she’d just bitten back a sarcastic comment. “Well, come in,” she said, stepping back. Emma let herself be led up the stairs and into the same room as last time.

As she sat down on the couch, Emma was slightly disappointed by how relaxed Regina was acting. She didn’t seem relieved, or even that pleased to see her again. It was disheartening to know that only one of them had spent the entire week agonising over what Emma’s decision would be.

Regina got Emma a glass of water even though she hadn’t asked for one, then sat down opposite with her legs crossed. Emma forced herself not to look down at them.

“So,” Regina said, folding her hands in her lap. “You’re back. I didn’t scare you off, I take it?”

“No. Not yet,” Emma said. When she swallowed, the sound seemed to ricochet off the walls. “I have some questions.”

A smile flickered across Regina’s face. “Of course. Go ahead.”

Emma took a deep breath, suddenly regretting the jacket. She was sweating, and the plasticky leather was starting to stick to her arms.

“How many times have you done this before?”

Regina didn’t look remotely taken aback by this question. “A handful. I don’t exactly keep records but I would say between four and six.”

“And how long did they last?”

“The longest was around five months,” Regina said. “The shortest was a week.”

Emma blinked. “What did he do wrong?”

“He was useless,” Regina said bluntly. “Next question.”

Reeling, Emma asked, “If I agreed, would our... whatever you want to call it, be exclusive?”
“You mean, would you be allowed to date other people?”

“Well, yeah. But also the same for you.”

“No, neither of us would,” Regina said. Emma looked for any kind of softness in her face, but she found none. “We won’t be in a relationship, but as far as everyone else is concerned, we will be. I’ll introduce you as my girlfriend, and girlfriends shouldn’t be sneaking off on dates with other people. Appearances are important.”

Emma nodded, looking down at her lap. “How long would you want me around for?”

Regina considered the question. “I suppose that depends on how compatible we are. But unless something goes very badly wrong, I’m not planning to dump you by the wayside after two weeks – I would want this to carry on for a good few months. There are a lot of events coming up and a lot of acquisitions that I have my eye on, so it would be preferable to not have to start this all over again in the fall.”

The way Regina spoke like everything was a business deal to her made Emma’s throat ache.

“How much freedom would I have?”

Regina frowned. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, if you tell me to go somewhere, do I have to go no matter what? Am I only allowed to talk to people you want me to talk to? Will I have to follow some kind of script, or a dress code? Will you tell me how I have to wear my hair?”

Her voice got progressively higher as she asked each question, and she could see Regina’s eyebrows rising with it.

“If there is an event, I will expect you to be there,” Regina started off slowly. “If you are dying of gastric flu then I may be willing to make an exception, and if you provide me with a list of pre-booked vacations then I will do my best to work around them. There are certain people who I will definitely want you to talk to, and others who I would prefer you not to, but otherwise you will be free to speak to whomever you like. I haven’t written you a script, but you will be expected to have some common sense regarding what comes out your mouth and how it will make me look. The same goes for what you decide to wear.”

Regina paused before she reached the final point. “And as for your hair, I can’t see myself requesting any changes.” She was eyeing Emma’s curls as she spoke, and it took Emma a moment to realise that she was being complimented.

Emma sat up a bit straighter before she asked her next question, and then her next. Regina answered them all dutifully and, Emma hoped, honestly. The whole thing felt like a business meeting, and the way that Regina was speaking so calmly, so reasonably, was more confusing than it was reassuring.

Then Emma glanced down and realised that Regina’s leg was bouncing again. She was just as nervous as Emma was – she was just far better at hiding it.

“Am I allowed to talk about you to people?” Emma asked.

“Do you mean to the press?”

Regina seemed strangely pleased by this question. “As long as you don’t mention payment, or anything that may implicate me, you can talk about me to your heart’s content. The press, though, is off limits. I imagine they will come sniffing around at some point, and it’s very important that you master the art of replying ‘no comment’ to everything.”

“You could just have me sign a non-disclosure agreement,” Emma said, half-joking. “That would make it a lot easier.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Regina said. “I don’t think you would do anything to hurt my reputation – not on purpose, anyway. And if you did, let’s just say I have enough resources to make life very difficult for you afterwards.”

It was a strange kind of threat, one veiled behind a compliment and several captivating looks. Emma didn’t flinch, but she did feel sweat starting to bead along her palms.

“Then...” Emma started before clearing her throat. “If I said yes. When would it start?”

“Right away,” Regina said. “I would have some kind of basic contract drawn up, just for your peace of mind and to outline all the duties we’ve already discussed, and then your first payment instalment would be sent over immediately.”

Again, that taunting image of stacked banknotes flashed through Emma’s brain. She grimaced at just how morally repugnant she was – she wouldn’t have been surprised if she had dollar symbols rolling through her eyes like a cartoon cash register.

Just as she began gnawing on a thumbnail, Emma asked, “And you’re certain it’s me you want to do this?”

“I am.”

“Do you realise what a bad idea that is? I’m socially awkward and broke and I only own three dresses and I don’t know how to—”

“Emma,” Regina interrupted her gently. “Stop panicking. And stop biting your nails.”

Emma snatched her hand away automatically like she’d been scolded by a schoolteacher.

“I think you have a rather low opinion of yourself,” Regina said. “You’re beautiful, you’re funny, you’ve managed to battle your way into the publishing industry, and you’ve already survived four meetings with me. I’d argue that you’re made for this job.”


“The money is only an issue because you’re making it one. If it really bothers you that much then you can take it and give it all to charity. It makes no difference to me. But you will be doing lots of work for me and losing a lot of your own time, and if I didn’t pay you then I would be doing you a disservice.”

There was the tiniest crack of nervousness jolting through her words, and it made Emma feel inexplicably better. She nodded, clasping her hands together in her lap. Regina watched her without blinking.

“Emma,” she said after a few moments of silence. Emma was chewing on her lip now, frantically trying to piece together every scrap of information that had been handed to her. “Do you have any more questions?”
“I don’t think so.”

“Then I’m afraid I really do need an answer now.”

Emma sighed, leaning back. Her jacket creaked as she moved.

Out the window, Emma could see Manhattan continuing to roll by. The street outside was clean and nowhere near as busy as the rest of the city, and she could just about make out the tops of some perfectly pruned trees.

She was sitting in a multimillion-dollar art gallery in a fake leather jacket that left red marks on her arms, and she was wondering whether or not she should say yes.

“Emma?”

Regina’s voice made her jump, and finally she took a deep breath.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

Of course she would do it. She’d known what her answer would be from the moment Regina had told her what her price was.

Emma’s eyes had squeezed shut, and when she opened them again she was surprised to see that the world had continued on as normal. Nothing was on fire, and Regina wasn’t openly laughing at her. Instead, she said, “Excellent. I’m glad to hear that.”

She didn’t sound especially glad, Emma thought – but then she looked down and saw that her knee had finally stopped bouncing.

Emma’s mouth, meanwhile, had turned to sand. She reached out for her glass of water and gulped half of it down.

“So,” she gasped after finally coming up for air. “What happens next?”

By way of response, Regina stood up and walked over to her desk. She produced a single piece of paper that looked instantly familiar.

“Is that the contract?” Emma asked.

“Yes. I had my lawyer draw one up earlier this week.”

Emma voice was oddly flat as she asked, “You knew I’d say yes?”

She must be even cheaper than she felt – she had a price stamped all over her.

“I hoped you would say yes,” Regina said gently. “Besides, there’s no harm in being prepared, is there?”

“I guess not.”

“Don’t look so disheartened,” Regina said. She sounded much more confident now that Emma had agreed to sign over her life. “This is a mutually beneficial agreement. I just want to give you the chance to go through the fine print.”

Emma took the contract from her and scanned it. It didn’t say anything that sounded particularly suspicious – barely reaching a full page, it covered the basics of Emma’s new salary,
responsibilities, and the two-week notice period that Regina had already mentioned. There was nothing in there about selling her firstborn.

The only thing that jumped out at her was in paragraph three. “The money will be transferred to my bank account?”

“Yes. I assumed that would be easiest.”

The imaginary pile of money that had been sitting in Emma’s head all week was suddenly snatched away by the hands of greedy debt collectors, and she blurted out, “Could I get it in cash instead?”

For anyone else, getting access to ten grand in cash on a monthly basis would have been problematic, if not impossible, but Regina just shrugged. “If you prefer. I can have that part amended.”

She reached out for the contract and made a mark in the margin. Emma watched her, wetting her lips.

“I’ll have the final copy sent over to your office on Monday,” Regina said, putting the cap back on her pen. “Along with your first instalment.”

Emma nodded. “Great.”

Regina sat back, watching her intently. After a moment, she said, “Before you sign this, I feel like I should give you fair warning as to what this is going to be like for you.”

“I thought you’d already done that. Parties and dinners and—”

“No, not that,” Regina said, still carefully observing Emma’s face. “I mean dealing with me. I’ve been told in the past that I can be quite... difficult.”

Emma’s lips twisted wryly. “You’re preaching to the choir.”

“I’m being serious, Emma. If you think that I will always act the way I did at dinner, or at the bar on that first day, you would be wrong.”

“Well, no, obviously not, but—”

“I am very demanding,” Regina continued like Emma hadn’t spoken. “And I am very selfish. If I’m in a bad mood, you will know it. I won’t be polite when I ask you to leave me alone, or stop talking so much, or not drink anymore because you’re being incoherent. If you wear something I deem inappropriate, I will make you go and change. If you are tired and don’t want to come to an important gallery opening, I will have someone drag you there. My world doesn’t stop because you’re not in the right mood, or because we’ve had a fight and your feelings are hurt. Do you understand all that?”

Emma blinked rapidly.

“I... I guess,” she said, then paused. “To be honest, Regina, you’ve just described every single guy I’ve ever dated. You’re just being upfront about your attitude problem.”

Regina smiled briefly. “I’m not kidding.”

“I know you’re not. I get it – you’re important and you have shit to do. I’m meant to be serving a purpose, not getting in the way.”
Emma sounded a little bit too self-deprecating even to her own ears, and Regina sighed.

“You’re not just here to serve a purpose – I really do hope we will enjoy each other’s company, and I think you will get a lot out of this. You’ll make connections and see the world, and maybe you’ll even enjoy the work. I certainly do.”

Emma knew she wouldn’t: she didn’t know anything about art, minus the one paltry class she’d taken and failed at college, and she didn’t care about it very much either. But the travelling sounded exciting, and she did like meeting new people, even if it was just so she could talk about them later.

The most important thing, though, was that she was going to get to do all of this with Regina at her side. That was all she really cared about.

…that, and the cold, hard cash she’d be getting paid for it.

Swallowing down that thought, Emma said more firmly, “I can handle it. In fact, I’ll probably out-grouch you any day of the week.”

Regina smirked back at her. “As long as you don’t do that in public, I’m happy for you to be as needlessly grumpy as you like.”

It was the kind of banter Emma remembered from their dinner date, and it finally helped her relax a bit. Even Regina appeared marginally less tense than normal.

Then their moment was interrupted by the buzzing of her phone. Regina sighed, picking it up from where it was resting on the coffee table.

After scanning her eyes over the message that had just come through, she said, “I’m afraid you need to go.”

Emma blinked. “Oh. Okay.”

“I’ll send over the contract on Monday,” Regina said, her eyes now glued to the phone screen. “Unless there’s anything else?”

“No… No, I don’t think so.”

“Excellent. I take it you can make your own way out.”

Slowly starting to realise that things with Regina would always shoot from 0 to 100 within mere seconds, Emma got to her feet. She wondered what the etiquette was for saying goodbye to your new-employer-cum-future-pretend-girlfriend, and eventually settled on an awkward wave that Regina wasn’t paying attention to. “Bye, then.”

“Goodbye, Miss Swan,” Regina said, still not looking up. “I’ll be in touch about our first event soon.”

“Okay. Cool.”

Emma was purposefully dragging this out, and deep down she knew that was because she didn’t want to leave Regina again so soon. That was ridiculous, of course – she was now as contractually obligated to see her again as one person could ever be, but she still felt uncertain as she walked towards the door.

Regina didn’t say anything else to her before she reached the staircase, and Emma walked back
down to the gallery feeling slightly disappointed. She forced herself to remember the delicious smiles Regina had thrown her way instead; the way she had called her beautiful yet again. The word came so easily from Regina’s mouth, slipping off her tongue like it was so utterly indisputable, and it made Emma feel even warmer under her sticky red jacket.

She peeled off the offending item as she left the gallery. Everything looked exactly the same, even though so much had just been turned upside down, and when she looked down at her phone she was shocked to realise that she’d only been inside for 40 minutes.

She glanced up at the window to see if Regina was looking down at her, but she wasn’t. And so she turned away, trying to suppress the niggling worry that she’d just made a horrible mistake, and headed back home.
Chapter 8

On Monday, Emma found that she’d fallen into a dangerous new habit. It was something she only realised when she went to Google Regina’s name and it came up as one of her most-searched terms.

She ignored that fact and ploughed ahead, even though she knew it was a mostly fruitless exercise. Regina’s online presence was nearly non-existent: while everyone in the art world seemed to know her name, and it sprung up on most critics’ websites like a sprinkle of magic dust, photos of her were minimal. She’d never once given an interview, she managed to avoid the press unless she was cornered for a group photo, and even though she proudly attached her name to her clients like it was a shiny gold star, she otherwise kept herself quiet. It seemed that maintaining an air of mystery was yet another thing she was great at, and Emma had to marvel at the way she used privacy to her advantage: everyone was fascinated by her, and everyone wanted a piece of her. And so, just like that, Regina had positioned herself firmly at the top of her game.

Still, there were a few photos for Emma to look at, and she shamelessly did so most mornings. There was something about the confident pout of Regina’s lips that made her feel ready to take on the world.

Then her work phone started ringing and she frantically closed the window like she was about to get in trouble.

“Hello?”

“Emma, there’s a courier on his way up for you.” She recognised the bored voice as belonging to the receptionist three floors down.

“Okay,” Emma said, finally deciding to wipe her internet history.

“He said he was only allowed to speak to you. He made me describe you to him,” the woman continued. Emma frowned. “Which I thought was a bit weird. Do you have some secret manuscript coming in?”

“Yes,” Emma said, quick as a flash. “I’ll meet him at the elevator. Thanks.”

She put the phone down and hurried across the office, spotting a flash of purple and black uniform through the slowly opening metal doors. “Hey.”

“Emma Swan?” the man asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“That’s me,” she said, looking around and spotting an empty meeting room. “Let’s go in there.”

“You got ID?”

Emma turned back to him and blinked. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid so.”

After rummaging about in her jeans for a second, Emma produced the work ID that she refused to hang anywhere on her body in case someone saw the same perky photo that Regina had tracked down on the Caterpillar website. “Is this good enough?”

He inspected it and nodded, finally allowing her to lead him into the meeting room. Emma
momentarily cursed the office for its obsession with totally clear glass walls: without even looking around, she could tell that Ingrid was watching her from across the room.

As they sat down, the man said, “So, my boss got yelled at for 30 minutes this morning until we agreed to do this.”

If Emma had had any lingering doubts over who this package was from, they were gone now. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“I have to get you to sign the delivery form,” he said before opening his messenger bag and pulling out two envelopes. One was thin, but the other bulged promisingly. Emma was sickened with herself when she felt her mouth start watering. “Then there’s a contract that you need to sign in duplicate so I can deliver it back again. And I can’t leave until you’ve done that.”

He sounded much bitterer than your average Fedex guy, but Emma didn’t care very much about that. Not when her palms were itching, and all she wanted to do was to snatch the packages out of his hands.

Instead of doing that, she signed the proffered form and then calmly took the envelopes from him. Putting the fat one to one side, she prised open the other and pulled out both copies of her contract.

It was a bit distracting to have an angry bike messenger staring at her as she did so, but she forced herself to read through it line by line. As far as she could tell, nothing had changed since she’d read it in Regina’s gallery, except now the promise for cold, hard cash was right there in writing.

She swallowed and signed it, her heart squeezing in a way that made her feel nauseous. She was all too aware of the fact that she was literally signing her life away.

But the thicker envelope was right there, calling to her, and that helped to numb the guilt nicely.

She slid Regina’s copy of the contract back across the table and waited for the courier to slip it in his bag. Finally, he uttered some kind of gruff goodbye and disappeared through the door.

Before Emma could tell herself that she was being stupid for doing this in a glass room where everyone could see her, she grabbed the fat envelope and ripped it open. She stuck her nose inside and immediately choked up as she laid eyes on the crisp notes, whole wads of them, neatly bound together and piled up inside.

And just like that, it was worth it. Maybe she was a morally bankrupt, but she didn’t care: she was holding more than a third of her annual salary in her hands, and there was more to come as long as she could keep a smile on her face and not trip over in front of any foreign ambassadors. She could gladly push down her principles for that.

She’d expected Regina to reappear in her life almost immediately, and so from the moment the Fedex guy left the office, she kept her cell clutched in her hand. But the inevitable call didn’t come, and instead Emma was just left dealing with Elsa’s incessant questions about what her first event was going to be.

“I don’t know,” Emma sighed. “I’ll tell you when she calls.”

“But it’s been days. Don’t you want to go buy some new clothes first?”

“I won’t know what new clothes I need until she tells me where we’re going.”
“It can’t hurt to be prepared, though.”

“Elsa,” Emma said. “Please. I’m begging you. I’m getting enough of this from Ingrid at the moment.”

Because her boss had noticed Emma’s new distractedness immediately, and she didn’t like it one bit. She hated the fact that Emma refused to go anywhere without her phone in her hand when she knew damn well that she wasn’t waiting for an important call from a PR firm.

“Could you stop staring dopily at your inbox for five minutes and call the press office back?” was her favourite line of the week. Usually the press office hadn’t even called in the first place - she just liked to keep Emma on her toes.

By Thursday, Emma was starting to feel nauseous all over again. The money Regina had given her was still stashed in the envelope, untouched and buried beneath her bed because she didn’t trust herself to go near it until she was certain Regina actually wanted her to keep it. The idea that Regina’s silence was stemming from sudden regret over this entire arrangement still seemed very plausible.

But then, on Friday morning, her phone finally rang. She’d been expecting the first call to come from Tamara, and so she was even more flustered when she saw Regina’s name pop up on her screen.

She had to take some deep breaths before she answered. “Hello?”

“Miss Swan,” Regina said, and Emma could tell from the roaring noise in the background that she was storming down a crowded street. “There’s a gallery opening on Tuesday.”

Emma was already learning to not expect greetings from Regina, and so she stammered, “Okay.”

“I’m afraid it’s black tie,” Regina said, “and it will be tedious, but I need you to be there.”

“Sure.”

“Be ready at eight. And send your address to Tamara so I can collect you.”

Panic shot down Emma’s spine like a high-voltage shock, and she heard herself blurt out, “No!”

Regina’s sigh was short and frustrated. “Emma, you need to stop being so polite. It’s far easier for me to collect you than it is for you to bundle yourself onto the subway.”

Politeness had nothing to do with it. Emma knew what her neighbourhood looked like at 8pm, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. She wasn’t entirely sure Regina would escape from it with all her belongings in check.

“I’ll take a cab.”

“You will do no such thing,” Regina snapped. “Tell me your address now. I don’t trust you to send it.”

“But I live way north of the city and—”

“Emma. Your address.”

“I don’t need—”

“I don’t care what you need or don’t need. Now stop being childish, or I’ll just have someone follow
you home from work this evening. Tell me where you live. Now.”

Emma blinked, perhaps a little too concerned that she was being serious about that threat, and fought to think of a valid reason why she couldn’t tell her. Down the line, she could hear Regina’s huff of impatience. Eventually all she could do was cave.

After she rattled off her address, desperately hoping that Regina’s memory wasn’t as good as she obviously thought it was, she said, “I mean it, though. I’m happy to just get a cab.”

“I don’t care,” Regina said simply. “I’ll see you at eight on Tuesday. Don’t be late.”

And then she hung up without saying goodbye, leaving Emma reeling back from her desk like a train had just rushed by.

It took a half hour before she summoned the courage to walk over to Elsa. “She called.”

“And?” Elsa demanded, her voice a squeak of excitement.

“I need to find a black-tie-appropriate dress by Tuesday.”

Elsa raised her eyebrows at Emma’s miserable tone. “Do you want to go shopping?”

“I guess,” Emma sighed. “Unless you have something I can borrow?”

She knew Regina had given her $10,000 for this exact reason, but there was something precious about the bundle of money under her bed. She didn’t want to hack into it until she absolutely had to.

Besides, shopping was her least favourite pastime, and if she could avoid that for another week, she would do her best to.

Elsa wrinkled her nose. “I have that long dress I wore to my sister’s wedding?”

Emma didn’t remember it, but she nodded. “Can I borrow it? I’ll take good care of it.”

“Are you sure it’ll fit?” Elsa asked, looking down at Emma’s chest, which was considerably flatter than her own. “If it’s black tie, it’s probably a good idea to wear something that’s your size.”

“We’re close enough,” Emma said, because she knew that Elsa was right but the terror was rising inside her again. “Please, Elsa. I can’t go shopping like this. I’ll have a panic attack in the dressing room.”

Elsa rolled her eyes and conceded, “Fine. But you need to get it over with eventually.”

“I know that. I’m kind of hoping that we’ll do this event, I’ll fail spectacularly, and she won’t ask me to go anywhere ever again. Then I’ll have saved a lot of money on a new dress.”

“You’re an idiot,” Elsa said, going back to her computer. “Come round tomorrow and bring whatever shoes you plan to wear. If you show up with flats, I will kill you.”

Getting ready for her first event in a tiny shared bathroom was difficult, especially when Mary Margaret was hanging around outside trying to get a glimpse of her in her borrowed dress. Emma hadn’t eaten all day because the nerves were clawing at her stomach like a set of fingernails, and now the dress that had already been slightly too big when she’d tried it on on Saturday was gaping marvellously over her chest. There was only so much that double-sided tape and safety pins could do for her.
The dress was light grey, almost silver, and there was a hint of sparkle in it whenever she moved. If it had had straps, she probably would have been able to get away with wearing the wrong size. But its strapless top kept slipping down, threatening to expose her five-year-old Wonderbra, and the more she looked at herself in the mirror, the more she wanted to cry.

Still, her roommate actually gasped when she finally surfaced. Emma knew the sullen expression on her face was probably ruining whatever effect she’d managed to achieve, but at least she’d gone to the effort of doing her make up properly and curling her hair. It tumbled over her shoulders and, when she carefully positioned it over her chest, she hoped it would hide the inch of exposed skin that her dress was slipping down to reveal.

“Emma, you look beautiful,” Mary Margaret said. She had been curled up on the couch with David, but she peeled herself away from him so she could walk closer. “I’ve never seen you wear eye shadow before.”

“You look great, Em,” David offered. “This must be some fancy first date.”

Emma swallowed, because she hadn’t been able to think up a better excuse for where she was going in a formal dress on a Tuesday evening. “Yeah. I guess she’s kind of old-fashioned.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Mary Margaret cooed. “I can’t wait to hear about it when you get back.”

“I’ll probably be quite late,” Emma said, her eyes drifting towards the clock. She flinched: it was 7:55pm. “Shit. I’ve got to go.”

“Well, have a good time,” Mary Margaret said, holding out her hand so Emma could clutch onto it while she forced herself into the only pair of heels she owned. “I think you look great.”

But Emma could sense her roommate’s eyes on the gaping space where her cleavage was supposed to go, and she grimaced. This was going to be a disaster, she just knew it.

She staggered down the six flights of stairs, because the elevator had been broken ever since she’d moved in, and burst through the doors. She breathed a sigh of relief: the evening was warm and not quite dark yet, and the street was empty. For once in their lives, the bratty kids from the first floor weren’t out crashing into the trashcans on their skateboards.

A sleek black car rolled around the corner at 7:59pm. Emma forced herself to stay still, her hands gripping hold of her purse so that they couldn’t shake, and waited for it to come to a standstill before she approached.

The driver climbed out. He was older than Emma had been expecting, maybe in his fifties, and had dark skin and greying hair.

“Good evening, Miss Swan,” he said as he walked around the car. “Let me.”

He opened the door for her, which was enough to make Emma stagger back a step, before she caught herself and finally slid inside.

Regina was there, watching her, her eyes dark and assessing and her lips not quite smiling.

“Miss Swan.”

It seemed to be her greeting of choice, so Emma didn’t let it faze her as she settled into the seat beside her. “Hey.”
“You look very nice,” Regina said, but her eyes were already on the way that her dress was slipping down. Emma quickly tugged it upwards, knowing that while this was by far the most expensive thing she’d ever worn, Regina was probably already sniffing out the non-designer label.

“Thanks,” Emma said, looking at what Regina was wearing. Her dress was black and reached her mid-calf, and it sucked the air straight out of Emma’s lungs. “Wow. You look amazing.”

Regina couldn’t have missed the sincerity in her voice, but she didn’t react. “You can go now, Sidney,” she called to the driver as he got back in the car.

They pulled away from the kerb, Emma feeling numb with gratitude that Regina hadn’t commented on the neighbourhood. Maybe she’d been too busy scrolling through her emails to notice it.

“So,” Emma said. Her short nails, which she’d forgotten to paint, were tapping against her clutch bag. “Where exactly are we going?”

“A gallery near the trade centre,” Regina said vaguely. “It’s not especially significant as events go but there will be plenty of important people there, so it’s a good chance to introduce you to the circuit.”

Emma swallowed. “Will I have to schmooze?”

“Almost certainly,” Regina said, either not noticing or not caring about Emma’s audible terror. “There will be lots of other dealers there, so it will be good for you to learn who they are and what they do. There will also be a considerable number of new artists who I’m interested in getting to know – if you can strike up a conversation with one of them, I’d be especially grateful.”

“Okay,” Emma said. She heard the shake in her own voice. “But you’ll introduce me to people, right?”

“Of course,” Regina said. Emma had hoped for a reassuring smile, but she didn’t get one. “Another reason why we are doing this now is because I need people to see us together. It will most likely come as a surprise for some, me bringing a woman as my date, and if we create a stir, then that’s all the better.” She paused, taking in Emma’s dress once more. “Maybe I should have asked you to wear something more eye-catching.”

Emma looked down at herself. “Oh.”

“Never mind,” Regina said, waving one hand. “Silver and black, blonde and brunette – it’s a nice colour scheme. I’m sure we’ll draw attention either way.”

She spoke so bluntly, more to herself than to Emma, and it was disarming. Emma didn’t respond because she was certain that she wasn’t expected to.

“I think I should run through the list of dos and don’ts,” Regina said.

“Okay...”

“Be charming,” Regina said at once, pursing her lips like she was wondering if this was even possible. “And be polite, obviously. These people can be quite rude, but you mustn’t let it get to you. If you think someone’s trying to trip you up, don’t try and outsmart them. Not just yet, anyway. I’d rather you didn’t make a scene on your first outing.”

“I wouldn’t make a scene,” Emma protested.
“The first time I met you, you were shouting down a Barnes & Noble,” Regina said thoughtfully. “So I'm pretty sure that you would.”

Emma grumbled to herself, but Regina had already moved onto other things. As she spoke, the car swept over the bridge that would lead them into Manhattan. “I’d also like it if you could hold onto my arm. We want to make it clear that we’re together, not just acquaintances.”

Emma blinked. “You want me to hold onto you?”

“Yes. But not my hand, that’s too much.”

“If someone asks how we met, what do I say?”

“They won’t ask,” Regina said. “These people don’t care about anyone but themselves and their artists.

“But if they do?”

Regina sighed. “Then tell them the truth – we met in a bookstore.”

“Can I tell them when?”

“Yes, you can tell them when,” Regina said, and Emma could hear the exasperation in her voice.

“What if someone asks my opinion on some art?”

“Emma, you’re not even part of the art world. Why would they do that?”

“You just said all they care about is themselves and their artists. Surely talking about art is involved in that.”

“They won’t ask,” Regina said flatly. “Please stop worrying about it. You can talk about whatever you like, just don’t mention contracts or money, please.”

“I wouldn’t do that. I’m not completely stupid.”

“That’s very reassuring,” Regina said, turning to look out the window.

Emma sighed. “Is there anything else?”

“Don’t wander off,” Regina said all too readily. “But also don’t cling onto me like a child. If I tell you to go off on your own, do it, but don’t disappear completely.”

“So, hold onto you, but not too tight, but also go away, but not too far?”

“I never said this would be easy,” Regina said, glancing down at her phone. “Just use your common sense. This is important and I want it to go well.”

“Okay,” Emma said, taking a shaky breath. “But it’s not critical, is it? I can’t mess up a deal you’ve been working on for the past year or anything, right?”

Any normal person would have heard the fear in her voice. They would have reassured her, or at least lied to her. But Regina wasn’t normal.

“Probably not,” she shrugged, still not looking up. “But it’s best not to risk it.”
“Great.”

“Don’t start sulking already. It’ll be fine as long as you stay on your best behaviour.”

“I’ll do my best, Regina,” Emma huffed. “I’m bound to be a bit nervous, though.”

“Don’t be,” Regina said, as if it was just that simple. Although, for someone like her, it probably was.

“Great advice.”

“Emma, you can be quite charming when you want to be,” Regina sighed, like it was physically painful for her to offer this compliment. “Just relax, smile, answer people’s questions, and don’t say anything stupid. If I like you then I’m sure they will too.”

Finally, some of the warmth that Emma was used to feeling whenever Regina was around her came creeping back up her limbs. She smiled weakly.

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

Regina looked up, half bristling, but softened when she saw Emma’s face. “Not especially.”

“Excellent. You hit the nail on the head, in that case.”

Regina chuckled. “We’re almost there. I promise you, it will be fine. Just stick with me, don’t insult the art, and don’t start ranting about your political opinions.”

“Everyone in there’s going to be a Republican, I take it?”

“You’d be correct,” Regina said, pulling a compact out of her purse and quickly checking her make up. It was perfect, and as Emma watched her, she felt a very specific spot between her legs start to throb. “So maybe steer clear of Obamacare.”

Emma snorted. “I can probably handle that, at least.”

“Excellent,” Regina said just as the car began to slow down. Emma looked out the window with sinking dread in her chest. The gallery was enormous and brightly lit - far bigger than Regina’s, but also showier, less sophisticated. It was obvious from the wrinkle in Regina’s nose that she felt exactly the same.

“Come on, then,” she said with a sigh, smoothing down her dress. She finally looked across the car at Emma and saw the shell-shocked look on her face.

There was a pause. Emma watched her mouth open, and she waited for her to finally say something that would make her feel better. All she needed to hear was that she couldn’t mess this up as badly as she was imagining – the worst that could happen was she wasn’t exactly a hit, and they would try again another time. Those soft words coming from Regina’s mouth would calm every frazzled nerve in her body.

Instead, Regina said, “And try not to drink too much either. I’ll start rationing you if I feel like you’re getting out of control.” Then she threw open her door and disappeared out onto the street.

Regina’s arm was cool and surprisingly strong under her hand. That was the one thing Emma forced herself to focus on as she was led through the room, her dress slipping down and her heels skittering on the shiny floor.
People started looking at them right away, but Emma didn’t really mind that. She would have stared too. Instead of panicking about it, she focused on keeping her spine straight, hoping that her lack of smile made her look mysterious rather than sullen. Beside her, Regina was a kind of ethereal being, floating through the room and drawing every single eye towards her as she moved. She wasn’t smiling either, but she didn’t need to.

Emma felt herself being guided towards a group of exclusively white, wealthy-looking men and women in their mid-forties. For a split second, she wondered if she could get away with disentangling herself and running for the door.

“Robert,” Regina said by way of introduction, leaning forwards to air kiss the nearest man. “Janet. This is Emma.”

All eyes fell on her, and Emma froze. The smile that she managed to force onto her face was both painful and unconvincing.

“Hi.”

No one recoiled in horror, but they didn’t exactly look thrilled to see her. Emma spied a waiter approaching and quickly reached out to snatch up two glasses of champagne, convinced that everyone must have noticed her trembling hands when she passed one to Regina.

The conversation moved on around her, and she quickly went from terrified to bored. She remembered then why she’d failed her art history class in college.

“I do admire the way his work has become more conceptual,” Regina was saying, gesturing to one of the nearby paintings. Emma had been so wrapped up in her own fear that she hadn’t even registered that there was art nearby. “But I’m not seeing very much difference between this and the work of every other hopeful on the circuit right now.”

“Be real, Regina,” one of the women laughed. “You’ve always had a knack for purposefully seeing whatever you want to see, but that is pushing it, even for you.”

Emma blinked, certain that Regina wasn’t the type of person to let some woman with a bad perm speak to her like that, but she brushed over it entirely. “Not at all. I know exactly what I see. I’m just not convinced me taking on this project will work for either of us.”

Emma had no idea who or what they were talking about, but she let her eyes drift over to the painting even so. It was a cream-coloured canvas covered in huge, ragged brushstrokes, and from this close it didn’t look like much. But after a moment she realised that, from far away, it was supposed to be a woman’s face.

She rolled her eyes. Fucking artists.

“What do you think?”

She ignored the question, because there was no logical reason why it would have been directed at her, until silence followed. After a moment she snapped her head around to find the entire circle of people watching her expectantly. Regina’s expression was unreadable.

Emma half hoped she would come to her rescue, but instead she just sipped her champagne, waiting with everybody else for her answer.

_Fucker,_ Emma thought. _Right off the bat._
She took a deep breath and said, “Well. I won’t pretend to know very much about it. But don’t you think they’re a bit hard to see?”

The man who had obviously asked the question raised his eyebrows. “They’re paintings, dear. They’re meant to require some contemplation.”

“Yeah, sure,” Emma said, wishing she’d waited five extra minutes before she’d started drinking. “I know people like to sit around scratching their chins while they’re looking at this stuff. But standing this close, I couldn’t even tell what it’s meant to be. You’d have to be on the other side of the room to really appreciate it.”

No one spoke for a second, and Emma was certain someone was about to scream at her to leave. Eventually, the permed woman said, “Well, no one is objecting to you going over there by yourself.”

A chuckle ran through the circle, but before Emma could snap back, she heard Regina’s voice cutting through it. “Emma has a point. How would this work in a private gallery? Can you imagine people politely queuing up against the opposite wall to get a clear view?”

The woman shot an icy look at Emma. “I suppose.”

“I’m sure you’ll find someone better suited to the collection,” Regina continued breezily. Emma felt some pressure starting to pull at her arm, and she realised she was about to be led away. “Come on, Emma. There’s some other people I’d like to introduce you to.”

Emma smiled as politely as she could at the collection of people who looked like they wanted her dead, and then she let Regina pull her away.

“Sorry,” she muttered as soon as they were out of earshot. “I messed that up pretty much right away, didn’t I?”

“Not exactly,” Regina said. They weren’t going to another group of people, as it turned out – instead, Regina had led her towards a different painting, and she was quietly contemplating it. “You were right about the scale. This kind of work would be more effective in a gallery much larger than mine. Besides, that woman is hideous. I would have said no whatever she’d pushed at me.”

She wasn’t being scolded, and that made Emma feel weirdly victorious. She smiled even though Regina wasn’t looking at her.

When Regina continued gazing at the artwork, Emma took a few steps away and allowed herself a moment to look around. People weren’t staring at them anymore, which was a relief, but the room had gotten busier since they’d arrived and she knew that there were plenty more conversations to be had. Regina was important in this world – a whole lot more important than Emma had realised up until that moment – and the truth suddenly dawned on her over just how exhausting this whole thing was going to be.

She swallowed, hitching up her borrowed dress yet again, and made a mental note to add some art theory books to her Amazon basket as soon as she got home. At least if she studied up a bit, maybe she wouldn’t embarrass herself quite so regularly.

And as if they’d heard every single word bouncing around inside her head, someone sidled up to her and quietly asked, “Appreciating the art?”

She jumped and turned to find an older man stood beside her. He walked with a cane and had scraggly grey hair that was way too long for his ageing face, but there was something about the way he stood that told Emma he was a big deal. She took a breath.
“I was just… surveying the room,” she said. Regina heard her voice and snapped her head round to look at her. When she saw who she was talking to, she quickly approached.

“Gold,” she said, kissing the man on one cheek. “This is Emma. Emma, Mr Gold owns the gallery.”

“Oh,” Emma said, realising that this must make him her competitor. She wasn’t sure whether that meant she was supposed to be rude or even more polite. After a pause, she offered a weak, “It’s a beautiful space.”

“Thank you, dearie. I’m certainly fond of it.” Emma didn’t like the way he called her that – it was somehow patronising and manipulative in equal measure. “And you’re here with the illusive Ms Mills, I see.”

Emma glanced over at Regina. “I am. She was kind enough to invite me.”

“Regina, your new girl has some manners,” Gold said. Emma saw the flash of irritation crossing Regina’s face. “Well done.”

Emma knew she was being mocked. She wasn’t entirely sure if it was because of her lower class or her ill-fitting dress or simply because she was a woman, but she recognised the tell-tale signs of someone openly laughing at her all too well.

She glared at him, the single glass of champagne she’d consumed swirling around her empty stomach like a draining plughole. “New girl?”

“Well, yes,” Gold said, not seeming remotely perturbed by her tone. “Did you think the freshness of your lovely little face would be overlooked?”

“Hey, look—”

“Emma,” Regina cut her off, her voice sharp. “I’m going to talk with Gold for a while. Why don’t you go and enjoy the paintings for a bit.”

She was being dismissed. Disappointment swelled up inside her.

Pushing down the rage that was threatening to give her a nosebleed, Emma forced herself to smile as she said, “It was nice to meet you, Mr Gold.” When the man nodded curtly back at her, she turned and headed for the opposite side of the room. Her dress slipped further down with every step.

Deciding to go and find somewhere a bit more private where she could hoik it up a good four inches, she grabbed a new glass of champagne and edged through the open door at the back of the gallery. Sipping as she walked, she came to the bottom of a staircase with a sign reading Roof terrace on the wall beside it.

Emma lifted the skirt of her dress with one hand and started to climb. It was much quieter out here, and when she reached the open door at the top of the stairs, she was overwhelmingly pleased with her decision to leave the gallery behind.

The terrace was small and secluded, with just a few smokers dotted about on the various stone benches. The evening was warm, and even though Emma felt guilty for breaking Regina’s rule of not walking too far away within 15 minutes of arriving, she suddenly felt relaxed for the first time that evening.

Walking over to the only empty bench, she hitched the bodice of her dress as high up as it would go and settled down with her champagne. Her back rested against the brick wall of the neighbouring
building, and if she tilted her head to one side, she could see the trade centre stretching up into the sky from just a few blocks away.

It was perfect for about 10 minutes, and then someone came staggering through the door. He looked around himself for a moment, and when he spotted her, he headed over at once.

“Hi,” he said, and Emma could hear just how many glasses of free champagne he’d slugged back in that one syllable. “Do you have a spare cigarette?”

“Sorry,” Emma said, peering up at him. In the dim light she could make out short, messy hair and a lot of rough stubble. His eyes were narrow and his smile was the best part about him. “Not a smoker.”

The man shrugged and turned away. Emma thought he was leaving again, but instead he was just asking the nearest couple the same question.

When he eventually had a lit cigarette in his hand, he returned to Emma’s bench and sat down next to her.

“I’m Neal,” he said, holding out his spare hand. Emma shook it simply because she was making a second attempt at her promise to Regina that she wouldn’t deliberately piss anyone off on her first night.

“Emma.”

“Have I seen you at one of these things before?”

“Nope. Tonight was my initiation,” Emma said, releasing a deep breath.

“Oh, right! You came with Regina Mills, didn’t you?”

Emma looked round at him. “You know her?”

“Everyone knows Regina,” Neal said a little too conspiratorially. “You’re not exactly her normal type, though.”

“Because of the breasts?” Emma asked before she could help herself. Neal just laughed, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

“Well, sort of,” he admitted. “And people have already had plenty to say about that in the last half hour, don’t worry. But that’s not what I meant.”

“What, then?”

“You just look kind of... normal,” Neal said, gesturing to her slightly slumped posture and her half-empty glass. Emma felt strangely unoffended by this. “Less polished than the others. Granted I’ve only seen her with one or two people before, but they’re usually a bit more intimidating.”

Emma had sort of guessed most of this already. Regina had told her that part of the reason why she’d taken an interest in her in the first place was because she was young and vaguely modish, and she needed to tap into that if she wanted to get her hands on some fresh-faced, up-and-coming new artists. From that, Emma had suspected that Regina’s previous companions hadn’t exactly been hipsters.

Still, knowing that other people had come before her and actually hearing about them were two very
different things, and already Emma didn’t like picturing herself as part of some kind of line-up. Normally her response would be to hit back with some smart remark, or even just to storm off and get more alcohol. But she’d promised to be on her best behaviour tonight, and if she’d already fucked that up by nearly getting into a fight with the gallery owner and then disappearing onto the roof, she could at least be friendly while she was up there.

“And what do you do?” Emma asked, deciding a change of subject was the best option.

“I’m an artist.”

Shit. Maybe he was one of the up-and-coming young painters Regina had mentioned in the first place. Emma looked down at his scruffy jeans, which he’d somehow deemed appropriate for a black tie event, and sighed.

“Is it your show downstairs?”

He chuckled. “You don’t even know whose show you’re at?”

“Can’t say I do,” Emma said. “It’s not yours then?”

“Sadly not,” Neal said, breathing out a large cloud of smoke that made Emma miss the days when she could also find some solace in a packet of Marlboros when the bottom of a whisky bottle wasn’t working out for her. “I’m a bit of a newcomer, just like you. I’ve been crashing these parties for a couple of years, hoping some hotshot agent will snap me up. But no luck so far.”

“I’m pretty new to this, but I get the impression that’s not how it normally works.”

“It’s not,” Neal said cheerfully. “But I get free drinks out of it, and I’ve made some great contacts, so it’s not all bad.”

“Is Regina one of those contacts?”

“Not exactly,” he admitted. “I’ve seen her a lot of times and I’d love her to represent me. But we’ve never spoken.”

Now Emma was actually curious. “Why not?”

“Because look at her,” Neal said, as if Emma needed to. “She’s the best at this. Everyone knows that. She’s scary and great at business and hot and rich. She doesn’t chase people – she doesn’t need to. If she wanted me, she’d have me already.”

“Have you even tried introducing yourself?”

“Can’t say that I have. Hey, why don’t you tell her about me?”

“Tell her what, exactly? I haven’t seen your stuff and I don’t even know your full name.”

“Hmm,” Neal sighed, as if this was all very reasonable but he’d just never considered it. “I guess that’s true. Maybe next time I see her, I’ll say hi.”

“You’re drunk,” Emma pointed out. “I wouldn’t recommend trying that right now.”

“Well, not right now,” Neal said, swaying slightly, which was impressive given that he was sitting down. “In a minute. When I go downstairs.”

Emma laughed, and she started to respond. Then she looked over Neal’s shoulder and realised that
actually, yes, it would be right now. Because Regina was standing by the door, her arms crossed in front of her and her eyes fixed on Emma. From the way she was looking at her, it was obvious she’d been watching for a while.

“Hey,” Emma said way too loudly. She stood up, nearly losing her dress in the process, and took a couple of steps forward. She waited for Neal to register that someone else had joined them – when he turned to look, he nearly fell off the bench.

“Ms Mills,” he stammered, standing up and holding out one hand even though Regina was still roughly 10 feet away. She didn’t walk closer, and his arm fell uselessly back to his side.

“Emma,” Regina said, her voice a lot softer than Emma had been expecting. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“I’m sorry,” Emma said, and she was. She’d miserably failed at her first event, and she hadn’t even had the decency to stick it out. She’d just run off and hidden. “I just needed some fresh air. I was coming back.”

Regina almost looked amused for a second. Then her dark eyes slid back over to Neal, and they narrowed.

“Could you excuse us?”

Neal jumped and immediately headed for the door. Regina didn’t move over as he approached, and he was forced to awkwardly squeeze his bulky frame past her in order to get down the stairs.

Regina approached Emma, walking slowly, and it was then that Emma realised the terrace had emptied out.

“Regina,” she sighed, running a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry. I panicked that I’d ruined everything and then I bailed. I shouldn’t have disappeared. I really was going to come back, though.”

“Until you got distracted,” Regina said, and it wasn’t a question. She didn’t sound angry, which was weird, but her eyes were still darker than Emma remembered. She was only a couple of paces away now, and if Emma didn’t have a brick wall just behind her, she was sure she’d be edging backwards.

“Yeah,” Emma admitted. “I don’t know who he is. He said he’s an artist.”

“Yes,” Regina said, taking another step closer. “I know exactly who he is.”

It was weird – Emma was certain that Regina was shorter than her, but somehow she always managed to tower over her. Now, she looked like a giant, looming over Emma and making the hairs on her arms rise up. Emma swallowed, her body going hot and cold at the same time.

“At your mad at me?” Emma asked. If Regina answered ‘yes’, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to recover from it.

But instead of answering, Regina took a quick step forward and lifted one hand to cup Emma’s cheek. Emma felt herself being pushed backwards, and the second her shoulder blades hit the wall, Regina’s lips came down on hers, kissing her hard and not stopping to let her breathe.

Emma sank into it, every tense muscle in her body loosening under Regina’s touch. Everything about the kiss was as contrary as Regina was: her lips were soft but her teeth were sharp, probing, and her grip managed to be rough and tender all at once. The hand on the side of Emma’s face was gently stroking her cheek and teasing through her curls, but the other was pinned hard against her
waist, holding her back against the wall like she wanted her to be aware that trying to wriggle free was not an option.

When Regina pulled away, her eyes were shadowy. Emma swallowed, breathless, useless, and unable to look away.

“Just because this isn’t technically a relationship,” Regina said, her voice low, as she reached out to wipe a smear of lipstick away from Emma’s lower lip, “doesn’t mean that I’m willing to share you.”

Before Emma could respond, Regina’s fingers were looping around her wrist and she was being tugged away from the wall. They strode across the terrace and down the stairs, and as they re-entered the gallery, Emma expected to be forced back into some more stilted conversation. But instead Regina blazed directly through the centre of the room, not caring that people were watching her, and pulled Emma straight out the front door.
Chapter 9

Emma found herself sitting on a perilously high stool in a bar two streets down from Gold’s gallery. Actually, it was less of a bar and more of a bourgeois drinking cave, but even so – both she and Regina were completely overdressed.

Emma didn’t care all that much, though. Not when Regina was sitting opposite her, her fingers curled around a glass of merlot and her eyes skimming over Emma’s body like she was deciding which part of her she wanted to eat up first.

“You didn’t want to stay at the gallery?” Emma asked. She’d ordered the same wine as Regina because she was trying desperately to appear just as refined as she was, and the heavy liquid was making her voice sound rusty.

That was what she was choosing to blame it on, anyway.

“Not especially,” Regina said, her gaze fixed on Emma’s lips. “It wasn’t the most pleasant evening anyway. Gold was being obnoxious. I’d rather be here with you.”

Something warm bubbled up in Emma’s stomach. “Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Regina said lightly. “I’ve made my interest in you clear, haven’t I?”

“I guess,” Emma said, shifting in her uncomfortable chair. “I just don’t necessarily understand it.”

A small smile twisted at Regina’s lips. “That might be part of why I like you.”

“That makes even less sense.”

“You’ve seen the people I normally socialise with. They’re all self-entitled and rude and they have more money than sense. It’s nice to spend time with someone normal for a change.”

Neal had called her that too. Never had being ordinary sounded like such a compliment.

Emma took a deep breath and said, “I really am sorry for not doing too well tonight. I was kind of thrown off the second we arrived.”

“I know,” Regina said, sipping her wine. It was the exact same colour as her lipstick. “It’s an intimidating environment, but you will get used to it. I promise.” She paused, then added, “Well, you don’t have much choice, anyway.”

Emma laughed. “Very reassuring. Thanks.”

“You seem to want my reassurance quite a lot,” Regina commented. “And you should probably know that you won’t get it very often. You might need to strengthen your backbone if this is going to work for us.”

“I guess,” Emma said, feeling a twinge in her chest.

“Don’t be so sensitive,” Regina replied. She reached out to tap Emma’s hand, and there was a tiny smirk on her face. “All things considered, tonight didn’t go terribly. It was never going to be perfect – given your background and your inexperience, you were always at a bit of a disadvantage.”

“Gee, thanks,” Emma huffed. “I guess your other... companions, they were a bit more refined than I
“You might say that. But I’d rather not talk about them.”

“Can you at least tell me what they did for a living?” Emma asked. “I just need to know what I’m competing against.”

“This isn’t a competition, Emma,” Regina sighed, but Emma could see her wavering. “Fine. Two of them were bankers. One also worked in art, one was a hedge fund manager and one was a professor.”

“And which one was the guy who only lasted a week?” Emma asked, expecting Regina to shut her down. Instead, she saw a mischievous glimmer in her eye.

“The professor,” Regina said. “I was led to believe that dull people are often the most interesting in bed. That turned out to be incorrect.”

Emma felt her cheeks go hot, and she regretted ever asking. “Right.”

“What?” Regina asked, her eyes immediately settling on Emma’s flushed complexion. “Are you jealous that I had very bad sex with someone?”

“No,” Emma snapped, even though she could feel the cold envy creeping down her spine as she imagined Regina in bed with some sweater-vest-wearing man.

And that brought about a whole new problem: would Regina dump her after a week if she was bad in bed too?

Emma had never had any complaints before, but most of her sexual experiences had been drunken fumbles in the bathrooms of nightclubs or on someone else’s couch. Killian had always seemed to enjoy himself, but his standards – and his own skills – were notoriously lax.

Besides, there was also the fact that the last time Emma had been any degree of naked with another woman had been right after she’d come out of prison. It had been good, but seven years was a long time and she was almost certainly out of practice.

She couldn’t explain why she’d been drawn towards men ever since, especially since she usually found women more attractive, but it was what it was. Maybe as her self-esteem had dropped, so had her dating standards.

And yet here she was, with the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen. The stakes were so much higher than she’d ever imagined possible.

She released an unsteady breath. “My job isn’t that interesting either. Does that bode well for me?”

Regina chuckled. “That remains to be seen. So far, that little theory hasn’t exactly played out.”

Emma automatically wondered when she would find out for sure. Maybe Regina was already planning to take her home with her tonight – Emma had shaved every part of her body just in case and now she felt like she was slipping about underneath her dress like a baby dolphin, but, after the trauma of her very first public event, she still couldn’t say she felt 100 percent prepared for what could happen next.

She laughed uneasily. “I guess I’m happy to be your guinea pig.”
“You look more nervous than happy.”

Raising her eyebrows, Emma asked, “Should I assume that you’re always going to say exactly what you’re thinking?”

“Probably,” Regina shrugged. “It disarms people, and that gives me an advantage.”

This made Emma pause momentarily. “Do you think of everything in terms of business?”

“Most things. I’m good at business, and if I want to stay good at it then I have to keep my eyes on the prize, don’t I?”

Her eyes were on Emma at that exact moment, though Emma couldn’t tell if that was intentional.

Before she could ask, a buzzing sound from Regina’s purse cut them both off. Regina sighed. “If that’s Gold asking me if I left because I’m threatened by his talent, I will have to go back there and kill him.”

But as soon as she pulled her phone free, Emma knew it wasn’t him.

“I have to get this,” Regina said, and before Emma could respond, she’d already answered. “Hello? Hi, honey, how are you?”

Emma blinked – Regina’s voice had softened like butter. For a brief moment she felt a jealous throb in her chest, and she wondered if Regina had another ‘companion’, or even just a proper boyfriend. She’d never mentioned one, but Emma had been stupid enough to not even think about asking.

But then she saw the expression on Regina’s face. It was so open, so full of love, and Emma knew it could only be reserved for one person.

“I know, Henry, I haven’t forgotten,” she said, and then that expression started to crumble ever so slightly. She listened for a moment, then sighed. “I remember. Thank you for reminding me. It’s been in my diary for weeks, and I’ll be there just like I promised.”

Another pause, and Emma wondered if she should fake needing the bathroom just so she could give Regina some privacy.

“Of course I will be nice to your father,” Regina said. Her face had darkened now. “I’m always nice to him.”

Emma could hear a muffled disagreement down the other end of the line. Regina was sighing.

“Henry, please don’t repeat things like that,” she said. “I will be there, I promise. Five thirty, right?”

Taking the moment to turn and glance around the room, Emma caught sight of herself in the mirror behind the bar. She saw the drunken flush in her cheeks and the smudge of mascara beneath one eye, and then she saw Regina next to her – sleek, sophisticated and perfect.

And frowning.

“Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow then,” she was saying when Emma turned back. “Goodnight, Henry. I love you.”

Emma saw the minute twitch of her lips as she pulled the phone away from her ear, looking down at the call that had already been ended.
It was the first time since she’d known her that Regina had looked vaguely unsure of herself. Emma cleared her throat and, simply to fill the silence, asked, “Your son?”

“Yes,” Regina said, putting her phone away. After a beat, she added, “It’s his parent-teacher conference tomorrow. He wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to forget it like I did last year.”

“Oh,” Emma said. Regina didn’t strike her as the type of person who forgot anything. “He holds a grudge, I take it.”

Regina smiled briefly. “He does. He gets that from me.”

“But you’re not going to forget tomorrow,” Emma said. “So it’s no big deal. Right?”

The morose expression on Regina’s face told her that it was, actually. “Right.”

“Does he do well in school?”

“Yes, mostly,” Regina said. She paused, examining Emma for a moment, and Emma knew exactly what she was thinking: she was wondering whether she should be telling her anything about him at all. They’d only just met, after all, and this wasn’t a relationship and it never would be. Emma would never meet the kid. Regina obviously cared about her son more than she cared about anything or anyone, and she wasn’t the type of person to open up about him to someone who could very well hurt him.

But still, she just sighed. “He’s a very clever boy. He loves English and science. But he doesn’t have many friends and he doesn’t like being told what to do very much.”

Emma laughed. “He sounds like me.”

“And me, actually,” Regina said, smiling a little more genuinely.

“Do you think he takes after you the most?”

Another pause. “Yes, maybe. But since I stopped seeing him so much, it’s harder to say. I think he’s picked up a lot of his father’s habits since then.”

The thought broke Emma’s heart a tiny bit. “Do you wish you could see him more?”

“Oh of course,” Regina said, taking a slug of wine in a manner that was entirely unlike her. “Our arrangement wasn’t working before, and he deserved more attention than he was getting. But it was never intentional – I hated myself every single time I had to call him to say I wouldn’t be home for dinner, and that the nanny would have to put him to bed again. I missed him then and I miss him even more now.”

“I think you did a good thing,” Emma said, wanting to reach out and touch Regina’s hand but forcing herself not to. “You just tried to give him his best chance.”

Regina laughed softly. “You make it sound so noble. I just didn’t like unsettling him so much. I couldn’t keep disappointing him.”

“I can’t imagine you disappointing anyone.” Emma’s voice was quiet and sincere, and Regina blinked.

“That’s because you’re incredibly young and naive,” Regina said, but she looked grateful. “I’ve disappointed plenty of people. My son is just the one I regret the most.”
Then, all at once, she seemed to realise that she’d told Emma far too much.

She straightened up, and a smile that was obviously rehearsed appeared on her lips. “Anyway. Let’s not talk about that. I want to hear more about your relationship with Captain Guyliner.”

Emma snorted. “Excuse me?”

“The ex-boyfriend,” Regina clarified. “I feel like there’s an interesting story there.”

“Not really,” Emma said. She didn’t want to talk about Killian – not ever, but especially not with Regina – but Regina had just told her something that must have been hard for her. It would be a really dickish thing to do if she refused to say anything in return. “We met in a bar about a year ago, and then there was a lot of flirting and making out in the back of cabs. Then we started dating and… then we stopped.”

That answer didn’t impress Regina. “Did he ask you out first?”

“Technically neither of us did,” Emma said. She could hear how uncertain she sounded. “We just eventually ended up dating, but we never really talked about it. I didn’t call him my boyfriend until we’d been together for about four months.”

Regina looked like she already knew the answer to her next question before she asked it. “And when did he start calling you his girlfriend?”

Emma just looked at her. For a split second it seemed like Regina was going to force her to answer, but eventually she just smiled and tried a new question. “Have you seen him since you broke up?”

*Out of the frying pan.* Emma clenched her jaw. “Yeah, once or twice.”

“Did you talk?”

“…sort of.”

“Was it uncomfortable?”

Emma thought back to the bruises that had been twinging against her hipbones for a week after she’d seen him and grimaced. “I don’t really want to talk about him. He’s an asshole.”

Regina laughed. “So, that’s my son, your ex-boyfriend and all of my past relationships off the table. Do we have anything left?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of something,” Emma said. Normally she would have started to panic that the conversation was about to run dry, but there was something about Regina that told her she always had something to say, or someone to talk about. “How was Tokyo?”

“Tokyo?” Regina asked, blinking. Then, “Oh! That feels like a very long time ago now.”

“Was that the last place you went to?”

“No, I’ve been to San Francisco and Toronto since then,” Regina said, pausing to check she hadn’t forgotten anywhere else. “Like I said, I’m away a lot.”

“Is that why you go quiet for a few days at a time?” Emma asked, because she’d had too much wine and didn’t know when to keep her needy mouth shut.

“Sometimes.”
“Sometimes? Does that mean you’re just playing hard to get the rest of the time?”

Regina’s eyes creased. “Maybe.”

“Right,” Emma huffed, slumping back against her chair a split second before she remembered that her stool didn’t have a back to it. When she nearly toppled off it, Regina burst out laughing.

“Oh dear, Miss Swan,” she said, reaching out to stroke her thumb over Emma’s wrist. Emma knew her pulse must be thundering beneath her touch, and she hoped Regina would just assume it was because of her near-fall. “I do recall asking you not to drink too much.”

“If you want me to stay lucid, you shouldn’t take me to a bar,” Emma pointed out. “Or to any event with free alcohol.”

“That might be a problem in future. Most of the events I go to have free alcohol – maybe you’ll just have to learn to control yourself.”

“Yeah, well. I wouldn’t count on that happening any time soon.”

The look that Regina shot her was dry and unimpressed. “You could try.”

“If all of these events are going to be like tonight’s, trying won’t get me very far.”

“Emma,” Regina snapped, and they were no longer playing around, apparently. “We’ve already discussed this. I expect you to maintain some level of professionalism at these things.”

Emma could feel the colour rising in her cheeks. “I know. I was kidding.”

“I know tonight was intimidating, but you need to get used to these events, and fast. I won’t be lenient forever.”

“I know, Regina,” Emma snapped right back at her. “It was a joke. I’m not an idiot.”

And then, because she’d never been very good at knowing when to quit, she tagged on, “And this is you being lenient?”

Even Ingrid couldn’t glare as coldly as Regina managed to in that moment. “Yes, it is. Perhaps you’d like to see me being heartless.”

“Pretty sure I’ve seen that plenty of times already,” Emma muttered.

“Stop that,” Regina said. “I just got this exact same attitude from my 10-year-old son – stop trying to outdo him.”

Anger was curling up in Emma’s stomach as she asked, “Are you mad about the way he spoke to you, so you’re taking it out on me?”

“No, but even if I was, that’s exactly what you’re here for. You should get used to it.”

Emma inhaled sharply. “That’s what I’m here for?”

She could see from Regina’s eyes that her anger was dissipating as quickly as it had appeared. With a sigh, she picked up her glass and tipped the rest of its contents down her throat. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s good to know.”
“Emma, I told you that this wouldn’t be easy,” Regina said. “And I warned you about my ‘attitude problems’, as you called them.”

“Yeah, but just because you were upfront about something doesn’t mean I’m going to be totally cool with it whenever you do it.”

When Regina didn’t respond, Emma said in a quiet voice that she didn’t even recognise, “I’m not a punching bag, you know.”

She’d half been expecting this to set Regina off all over again, but instead she just gestured to the waiter for another two glasses of wine. “I know.”

“How are you going to get rid of me if I refuse to be one?”

“No, Emma,” Regina snapped. It seemed to be her default tone for everything Emma said. Then, taking a deep breath, she continued in a tight voice, “In fact, I think it might be good for me to be with someone who does exactly that.”

“You mean you want me to argue back?”

“Not especially, no. But maybe it will be beneficial.”

Emma wasn’t entirely sure how she was supposed to respond to that – anything that resembled satisfaction would probably result in Regina pushing her off her chair for real. Instead, she settled for a shrug. “Maybe.”

She was half expecting an apology. She didn’t receive one.

“Let’s move on,” Regina said just as their new glasses of wine appeared. Emma wasn’t a huge fan of red, and she wished she’d had the chance to order something else. “What are you working on at your job at the moment?”

Emma hesitated. She felt like letting Regina change the subject was tantamount to forgiving her for her crappy attitude, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to do that. But at the same time, she preferred talking to arguing – even though she’d found herself enjoying the arguing maybe a little bit too much.

“We’re still doing the press stuff for our last release,” she said. “The one I was checking out when I met you.”

“That sounds exciting. What do you do for that?”

“Mostly just get my boss her lunch and take notes in her meetings,” Emma said slowly. “I’ve been trying to get some editorial experience for a while, and the other week I even managed to write my first set of press releases. But Ingrid wasn’t happy and she passed them back to the girl who should have been doing them.”

“You want editorial experience?” Regina asked. “Do you want to be an editor?”

“Maybe. Or a writer,” Emma admitted somewhat reluctantly. The wine had made her tongue too loose. “It’s never going to happen though.”

“Why not?”

“Because my boss refuses to let it. Ingrid has control over every department, and when I try to make
tracks in one of them, she cuts it off. She might complain about me being a shitty assistant but I always seem to be pretty indispensable whenever she thinks I might leave.”

“Why don’t you?” Regina asked, sipping her wine. “Leave, that is.”

Emma’s chest went tight. There were many, many things she wasn’t comfortable telling Regina about just yet, but her criminal record was definitely number one on the list.

“I struggled to get this job,” she eventually offered. “I was working in a coffee house for a long time because I couldn’t get anything better. I don’t think anyone else would take me.”

“That’s a very defeatist attitude,” Regina said with the confidence of a woman who’d never had to shoplift boxes of instant soup. “You have experience now, even if it’s not in the precise field you want it to be in. Maybe you should try.”

“Regina, I only got this job in the first place because my boss at the coffee shop was Ingrid’s sister. She hooked me up,” Emma admitted. Helga had told Ingrid about Emma’s shady past because she’d had to, but it had still taken her weeks to persuade her that taking Emma on was worth the risk. Even now, two years later, Ingrid liked to mention it as often as she possibly could. “I really doubt I’ll be that lucky again.”

“You won’t know until you try,” Regina said briskly. “If you keep being so afraid of rejection, you’ll never get anywhere.”

It was so very easy for her to say that, but Emma knew she didn’t have a leg to stand on while she refused to tell her the full truth. She forced a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” Regina said. “In the meantime, you should try being more assertive with your boss. You just told me off quite nicely, but I get the impression you don’t speak to her like that.”

“She’d throw my ass to the kerb if I tried,” Emma said, laughing through her nose.

“You just thought I would too, but you did it anyway.”

She had a point there. “True. Maybe you’re just not as scary as her, though.”

“That’s impossible,” Regina said, smiling wryly from behind her wine glass. “No one’s scarier than I am.”

When they staggered out of the bar two hours later, Emma felt like she was floating several inches above the sidewalk. The wine made her head feel thick and muggy, but the feeling of Regina’s arm curved through her own was the thing that was truly inebriating.

“Sidney’s just on his way back,” Regina said. She was squinting down at her cell, and Emma suddenly remembered that she’d been wearing glasses when Emma had arrived at the restaurant on their first date. She felt a whole new rush of fondness for her, and she leaned closer to her shoulder.

After that, she waited, because she was certain that Regina would be expecting her to go home with her and fulfil the other part of their contract. She hitched up her dress once more for good measure.

But then Regina looked over at her and said, “I think it’s late enough, don’t you? I should probably take you back to your apartment so you can get some sleep.”

Even though Emma agreed with her, and could feel a bubble of relief swelling up inside her at the
realisation that she wouldn’t be forced to show off her moves just yet, she felt a little offended by this. She smiled tightly. “Yeah. Probably.”

Regina saw her clouded expression at once. She squeezed her arm. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“All pouty.” Regina said. They had come to a standstill at the edge of the sidewalk, and she lifted one finger to gently prod Emma’s lower lip.

“I don’t pout.”

“I think you’ll find you absolutely do,” Regina said, smirking. “Come on. Get in the car.”

Sidney and his sleek black Mercedes had appeared behind her, and Emma let herself be guided towards it. Her mouth was tingling from where Regina had touched it.

The red wine had obviously mellowed her out, because Regina was surprisingly relaxed as they drove back across the city.

“Are you going to be busy this week?” she asked, sitting less upright than Emma had ever seen her.

“Probably. I tend to get busier as the week goes on,” Emma said. “Are you?”

“Always,” Regina sighed. “I have a shareholder meeting tomorrow. Those are always particularly unenjoyable.”

“I wish I knew more about this stuff,” Emma said, sounding slightly wistful. Regina smiled over at her.

“I can teach you some things,” she said. “It might be helpful in the long run. Or, at the very least, it’ll stop you from getting so bored when I’m talking about them.”

Emma couldn’t imagine ever being bored when Regina was talking to her, but she laughed anyway. “That’s all the incentive I need.”

“Excellent. I’ll consider it a privilege to be able to educate you.”

Maybe she was drunker than she’d realised, because Emma genuinely thought that she could fall in love with the needlessly complicated way Regina spoke. Everything sounded like poetry when it rolled off her tongue.

“Do we have another event lined up?” Emma asked, dreading the answer already.

“Soon,” Regina said. The streets were clear, and they were already sailing towards the Bronx. “I’ll have Tamara email you the details in the morning. I imagine there will be something this weekend.” She paused, then asked, “Or is there something tomorrow?”

“That’s the parent-teacher thing,” Emma gently reminded her, and Regina groaned.

“Well,” she said, turning to look out the window. “It’s a good thing I’ve got an assistant, I guess.” Emma laughed. “You’ve had a lot of wine. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’ve got to be hard on myself, otherwise I wouldn’t get anywhere.” Yet again, Emma caught a glimpse of the inner workings of Regina’s mind: everything was black and white, success or failure,
and if she couldn’t think about something like it was a business transaction, she wasn’t interested in it.

“Do you ever relax?”

Regina turned to face her. “Of course. I’m relaxed right now.”

Emma looked pointedly at her frantically tapping foot. Regina scoffed, forcing it to go still. “I am relaxed.”

“Whatever you say,” Emma said. She could tell that Regina was trying to hide a smile as she looked away again.

Slowly, Emma realised they were approaching her neighbourhood. She hoped it was dark enough that Regina wouldn’t be able to see it properly.

“So,” Emma said, clearing her throat. “Tonight was... fun.”

“Was it?”

“Some of it,” Emma conceded. “The last part. And the... the middle wasn’t so bad.”

She went hot thinking about that kiss on the roof, the way Regina had pushed her so urgently against the wall and refused to let go of her. She hoped she’d get to kiss her again before the night was over, but by the time they were outside Emma’s apartment, Regina was already too busy scrolling through her emails to even look up properly.

“There are definitely a few more events coming up soon,” she murmured, not lifting her gaze. “I’ll have Tamara get in touch with you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Emma said, her throat going dry. The car had stopped and she knew it was her cue to get out, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it when the delicate curve of Regina’s mouth was just a few feet away. “I’ll be better prepared next time.”

Regina smirked, but didn’t look over at her. “I threw you in at the deep end. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

With a sigh, Emma finally unclipped her seatbelt. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

“Yes. Have a good week.”

And that was it. Emma opened the door and slid out, her feet throbbing when they hit the sidewalk. Just as she went to shut the door, Emma hesitated. She took a deep breath and leaned back into the car.

“And, hey,” she said, smiling as brightly as she could. “Good luck at the school thing tomorrow. I’m sure you’ll do great.”

Regina finally looked up, a curious expression on her face. It wasn’t that she didn’t understand what Emma was saying – it was that she didn’t understand why she would want to say it in the first place.

When she didn’t get a response, Emma nodded and pulled away, finally shutting the door. The windows were tinted and she couldn’t see Regina anymore.

Picking up her skirt, she headed for the steps that led up to her building. She half-hoped Regina would be watching her through the window, but then she heard a rev of an engine, and she knew the
car was already driving away.
Chapter 10

The next evening, Emma got home from work and immediately sat down cross-legged on her bedroom floor. The box of envelopes was pulled out in front of her. She'd spent most of the day psyching herself up for this moment – she'd even left work a few minutes early so Ingrid couldn't suddenly decide to keep her behind for three hours and make this whole thing impossible. But now that the time had finally come for her to take the lid off the container, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

She had to look through the letters eventually. She knew that. She had $10,000 to spend and Regina didn't seem intent on dumping her any time soon, so she was finally in a position to make a dent in the stupid decisions she'd made over the past decade. She'd been avoiding going anywhere near those envelopes for some time though, and the thought of finally opening them one by one and seeing the ugly truth of just how much trouble she'd manage to land herself in was enough to make her break out in a sweat.

Taking a breath, she reached out and quickly flicked the lid off the box. It was a band-aid that had needed ripping off for a while.

Where the hell should she start, though? There were dozens of letters in there. Hundreds, probably. The box was starting to overflow and some of the envelopes at the very bottom had been there since before she'd started college. Emma had been ignoring them for so long that it had almost become possible to pretend they'd never existed.

She shakily reached for the closest letter. It was thicker than she would have liked.

Peeling it open, Emma steeled herself for the cacophony of abuse and demands that were about to come flying out at her. She scanned her eyes down the page. She saw the word 'court'. She saw the word 'repossess'.

She immediately shoved the letter back into its envelope and scooted back against the wall, as far away from the box as the confines of her tiny room would allow.

There was a scrap of paper in her pocket and she pulled it free, smoothing it down against her thigh so she could remind herself of the totally feasible action plan she'd laid out:

1. Put the letters in date order
2. Work out who you owe what to
3. Start arranging payments

It was only three tiny steps, but it seemed like a mountain – and she'd already failed before she'd properly started to climb.

Her chest went tight and so, before she could give up entirely and hit the bottle like normal, she decided on a new system: she reached into the box, pulled out three random envelopes, and opened them to see how much she could realistically pay off from her first month's allowance. The amount contained in that handful of paper alone was way too much, more than Regina had given her, and so she tried again. When she was faced with a figure that was slightly more realistic, she grabbed the roll of money she'd tucked away under her mattress and headed to the bank before it closed.

When she got back to the apartment, she went in search of Mary Margaret and thrust six months
worth of rent into her disbelieving hands. Parting with the money made her want to throw up, but the look of utter shock on her roommate's face was somehow worse.

"Where did you get all this from?" she asked, staring down at the notes. They'd been crisp when Emma had got them, but after 10 minutes in her sweaty palms, they were curling at the edges.

"I drained my savings account," Emma lied, hoping Mary Margaret would believe the idea that she could even have a savings account in the first place. Then inspiration struck. "Also, I got another job."

Mary Margaret blinked. "You left Caterpillar?"

"No, it's just a part-time hostessing thing," Emma said, hiding her clammy hands in her pockets. "Evenings and weekends. I might not be around so much for a while, but the pay is pretty good and the tips are even better."

And just like that, within the space of one hour, she was out $6,500. The envelope that Regina had given her was no longer bulging and instead flapped vacantly open at the top. Emma swallowed her panic and forced herself to look on the bright side: she was out of arrears with her roommate. She had finally, finally started to pay off her other debts. She still had over three thousand left with which to buy a few new dresses, and she might even be able to get something for herself in the process. She'd wanted a proper leather jacket for years, after all.

The sick feeling subsided slightly and Emma lay down on her bed, wondering how many months or years it would take before the sensation finally disappeared altogether. She couldn't imagine a life where she didn't dread every single phone call.

And, right on cue, her cell rang. She honest to God nearly screamed.

Scrubbling for it, she saw Tamara's name on the screen and answered with an anxious, "Hello?"

"Miss Swan," Tamara said from down the line. "Apologies for not contacting you sooner, today's been very busy. Regina's asked me to give you the details for an event that is happening this weekend."

"Okay," Emma said, wishing she still smoked so she could still her shaky hands a bit. "Go ahead."

"Do you have a pen and paper?"

"Yeah," Emma lied. She heard Tamara sigh.

"I'll email the details in a moment," she said. "It's a dinner party at Mr Gold's house. I believe you've already met him."

Emma grimaced. "Yeah, I have."

"It's not black tie but it will be smart, and you'll need to be ready at 7:15 on Saturday evening. Sidney will collect you."

Emma nodded even though Tamara couldn't see her. "What does 'smart' mean? What should I wear?"

The pause that followed was long and loaded, and when Tamara eventually said, "Something elegant. Preferably in the right size," Emma wanted to crawl into a hole and die.
She couldn't imagine Regina bitching about her outfit choices to her assistant, which had to mean someone at the party had made a comment. Emma went hot and prickly imagining those superior rich people standing around sneering at her. Regina had told her she'd looked beautiful, but she'd obviously just been an embarrassment.

Emma surprised herself with how quiet her voice was when she said, "Okay. Thanks."

Tamara sighed. "Is there anything else I can help with, Miss Swan?"

"No, thanks. I've got to go."

She hung up without saying goodbye, because everybody always did that to her and it was nice to return the favour for once. Then, swallowing down her thick shame, she called Elsa.

"You need to take me shopping," Emma said when she answered.

"Uh oh," Elsa replied. "You sound super excited about that."

"Please," Emma said. "I made an even bigger ass out of myself last night than I thought and there's a fancy dinner this weekend and I need to look like I know how to dress myself. You have to help me."

"Of course I'll help, don't sound so panicked. We'll go Saturday morning, okay? Do you have money?"

Emma paused before saying, "Regina gave me some to buy something new."

"Ooh," Elsa let out a low whistle. "You've got yourself a real-life sugar daddy."

"Shut up," Emma replied. "And, look, you know I'm going to resist everything you tell me to try on, right?"

"I'm well aware. I'll be as ruthless as possible, and you'll look hot as hell. Promise."

"Can't wait," Emma sighed, catching sight of her despondent face in the mirror. After a day rummaging about organising the storeroom at work, she looked less than her best. "Do you think I should get highlights?"

"Sorry?"

"My hair used to be blonder. Should I do something about it?"

"Jesus, what's this woman done to you?" Elsa asked. "Yes, consider getting highlights. But let's deal with one thing at a time, shall we? I also need to talk to you about getting your eyebrows threaded. I'll see you at work."

"What's wrong with my eyebrows?" Emma asked, but Elsa was already gone. Apparently that was everyone's new way of saying goodbye to her.

As bad as Emma had been expecting their shopping trip to go, it had gone so much worse. She met Elsa on Fifth Avenue on Saturday morning, and she'd wanted to run home again for every minute afterwards.

"Emma, please. Just try it on," Elsa pleaded for the hundredth time that day, holding out a light blue dress with silver beads around the neckline. Emma wrinkled her nose.
"It's not really my style, is it?"

"That's kind of the point," Elsa insisted. "If you want to fit in at these parties, you're going to have to get out of your comfort zone."

"But—"

"God, please shut up. You've rejected everything I've shown you so far and you nearly gave the woman in Macy's a nervous breakdown when she tried to help us. Just take this and try it on. I'll find some other stuff while you're in there."

Emma begrudgingly snatched up the dress and headed for the dressing room. She thought she heard a collective sigh of relief from Elsa and the two sales assistants who'd been dealing with her for the past 20 minutes.

When she reappeared a few minutes later, Elsa was standing by the entrance to the dressing rooms somehow already clutching six more dresses. She took one look at Emma and snapped, "For God's sake, Em, can you at least take your socks off?"

Emma did as she was told before standing awkwardly upright, her hands bunched by her sides. The dress was pretty, sure, but it was also floaty and delicate and absolutely the polar opposite of something that she would choose to wear.

Elsa was already frowning at her. "It looked better on the hanger."

"Oh, jeez, thanks," Emma said, looking down at herself.

"That's not an insult," Elsa said, gesturing for her to take it off. "Sometimes things just do. It's definitely not worth spending $900 on, anyway."

"How much?!" Emma spluttered, turning to try and find the tag that was dangling between her shoulder blades.

Elsa sighed. "We're in a designer store, Emma. How much were you expecting to spend?"

"I don't know – shouldn't we just try somewhere else, in that case?"

"Like where?"

"I don't know... What about the snooty part of Zara?"

"Emma," Elsa snapped. "It's a black tie event attended by millionaires. If you don't wear something made by some dicky French designer, they won't even let you in the door."

"But it's just a dress. How can a dress cost nearly a thousand dollars?"

"Take it off," Elsa said, sounding suddenly exhausted. "Look, I found some other options."

She thrust the pile of clothes towards Emma's chest and then turned away, leaving Emma to wobble back into her cubicle and close the curtain behind her.

After an hour of dead ends and near-tears, Emma came out of the cubicle wearing a fitted strapless dress that reached her knees. It was made from dark teal-coloured fabric, and it gave Emma some kind of curves where normally she had none.

Elsa, who had long collapsed into a chair just outside her cubicle, looked like she might cry. "Get
"But it's not really comfortable," Emma said, because there was some kind of wire bodice beneath the heavy satin fabric and it was already tight around her ribs.

"You'll get used to it – nothing expensive ever is," Elsa said, gesturing for Emma to do a little spin. "Your ass looks great, though."

Emma smirked to herself and said, "I think that's the first time anyone's ever said that." Then, all at once, she remembered Killian muttering those same words to her right before he bent her over a bathroom sink, and she stopped twirling.

"You need new shoes too," Elsa said, "And a purse. All your stuff is hideous, no offence."

"Isn't that all going to get kind of expensive?" Emma asked, already thinking of the rapidly deteriorating pile of money that was stashed in her backpack. The dress she was wearing was made by someone called Diane von Furstenberg and it was already going to set her back $800. "I have shoes."

"You do not. And besides, you have a millionaire funding this."

"Right, but—"

"But nothing. Sophie," Elsa called over her shoulder, because apparently she was on first-name terms with one of the sales assistants now. "What shoes do you have to go with this?"

The woman's eyes lit up, and she ran off to the other side of the store to rustle up some options. As she disappeared, Elsa screamed "And bags!" after her.

When Emma put the dress on again later, she felt the tiniest twinge of excitement in the base of her ribcage. She'd found time to wash her hair that afternoon and, after an hour sat in front of an increasingly frustrating YouTube tutorial, she had managed to pin it up into a twisty chignon that she was terrified was going to disintegrate any time she moved her head. The dress, which was the most expensive thing she'd ever owned by a factor of about 300, was sleek and beautiful and made her look five inches taller. Her ridiculous new heels actually did make her five inches taller.

But when she pieced it all together and finally looked in the mirror, something was missing. She looked like she'd thrown all the right elements onto her body, but there was nothing holding them together. A child could have drawn her with brightly coloured crayons.

She fell flat when she realised it was because the dress simply didn't suit her: she was a tank-top-and-jeans kind of girl, and she always would be. She couldn't believe it had taken her more than a thousand dollars to realise that these types of clothes didn't look right on people like her.

Emma looked at the time and sighed, because it was nearly seven and she'd run out of chances to find anything better. Regina would be there in 15 minutes and she would look at her and sigh and say "Well, you'll do" and then Emma would want to die all over again.

She swallowed down her rising dread and grabbed her make-up bag, determined to make a silk purse out of this sow's ear if it killed her.

A quarter hour later and she was carefully navigating her way down the stairs, unable to move at more than a glacial crawl with her tight dress, towering heels and delicate hairstyle restricting her from all sides of her body. When she reached the lobby, she took one look outside and realised that
Regina's car was already there.

With a horrified squawk, Emma threw the doors open and tottered outside, pushing aside her desire to look sleek and sophisticated and instead aiming for simply not being too late. Sidney stepped out of the car to meet her, and as she garbled her thanks to him, she was already slipping inside.

"Hi, sorry," she said, ducking her precious hair under the roof. "I didn't realise I was running la—"

Then she stopped, because there was a face looking back at her that definitely didn't belong to Regina.

A small boy with dark hair and dark eyes and a curious expression was staring at her from the other side of the backseat. Emma immediately saw some of Regina in the jut of his jaw.

She blinked and said much more abruptly than she'd intended, "Hi?"

There was a laugh from the front seat, and Emma turned to find Regina looking back at her. "Emma, this is my son. Henry, this is Emma."

Emma looked back to find the boy very formally holding out his little hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You too," Emma said, shaking it and then settling back into her seat. "Are you coming out partying with us tonight?"

"I'm afraid not," Regina answered for him from the front of the car. "We're dropping him off at the sitter beforehand."

"That's a shame," Emma said, hesitating before she continued. In spite of the industry she'd chosen to work in, she'd had very little experience of being near children in any capacity. Still, this kid seemed to be more grown up than she was, so she decided she could probably handle it. "You're not a fan of caviar and sushi?"

Henry made a face. "Really not."

"Me either," Emma confided. "Hey, maybe I can come to the sitter with you instead."

Laughing, Henry said, "She makes me eat a lot of broccoli."

"She does? That's gross."

"Yeah," Henry sighed like this was the cruellest fate to have ever befallen a human being. "Besides, I'm only going there because Mom forgot I was meant to be at hers tonight."

An excruciating silence filled the car. Emma glanced up to see that Regina's entire body had gone stiff.

With an awkward cough, Emma asked, "Surely that's on Tamara, isn't it?" There was a long pause.

"I forgot to tell Tamara," Regina eventually said. "But we had a nice day together, didn't we, Henry? And I'll collect you tonight and then tomorrow we're going to the zoo."

"The zoo!" Emma said quickly, trying to sound excited. "That'll be great. Won't it?"

"I guess," Henry shrugged. "If Mom doesn't have to work again."

Another silence. Suddenly Emma felt wistful over the dress-related panic she'd been having 20
Regina's shoulders had slumped, and it hurt Emma to look at them. She glanced up and caught Sidney's eye in the mirror.

Taking a deep breath, Emma leaned towards Henry and said, "I grew up in foster care. You know what that is, right?"

If Regina had been a puppy, her ears would have perked up with interest right at that moment. As it was, she just straightened up slightly. Emma ignored her and focused on her grumpy son.

"I think so," Henry said, wrinkling his nose. "Is that like being adopted?"

"Sort of. It's like the waiting room before you get adopted. Sometimes I was in big houses with other kids and sometimes I went to live with real families for a while."

"That sounds fun," Henry said. "Like boarding school."

Remembering it always made Emma's throat ache, but she smiled. "Kinda. Either way, there were always a load of kids running around while the grown ups tried really hard to be parents, and I can't tell you how many times they forgot about me."

Henry was already giggling. "They did not."

"They so did," Emma replied. "One time I was left wandering round a grocery store for an hour because my new parents had gone home without me. By the time they came back, I had decided they'd left me forever and so I'd already managed to get in trouble for stealing a box of cookies."

She wasn't certain that Regina would appreciate her telling her son about her life of petty crime – or the very PG version of it, anyway – but Henry was laughing outrageously.

"Did you get arrested?"

"Nah, they let me off because I was so adorable," Emma said. "Or maybe because I was only six."

"What else happened?" Henry asked, his earlier moodiness completely forgotten. When Emma glanced towards the front of the car, she could see a tiny smile on Sidney's face. Regina, however, was looking out the window, not saying a word.

"In one foster home, two of the adults would go with all the kids to school every morning to make sure they got there okay. One day they didn't check if they had everyone and I got missed because I was stuck upstairs trying to remember how to tie my shoelaces. They were so mad when they got back and found me."

Henry clapped his hands with glee. "What else, what else?"

And so Emma carried on, reeling off stories that were less painful now that she was trying to make a 10-year-old laugh at them. She told him about the time that a foster family had gone to visit a relative and had gotten 20 miles down the highway before they realised she wasn't in the car. She told him about the time when she'd been waiting alone in the playground for two hours after school because her carer had forgotten to come and collect her. In every instance she missed out the parts where she was sick for days afterwards from standing in the cold for so long, or where a particularly angry foster worker had smacked her across the face with the back of his hand for making him look stupid in front of the store employees. She focused on the whimsical stories, the ridiculous ones, and the ones that would hopefully remind Henry that he shouldn't be so hard on the doting mother he'd been
handed.

By the time they reached the sitter, Henry was pink in the cheeks from laughing. Emma was glad she'd managed to cheer him up, but she was still worried about the silence coming from the front seat.

"Have a good time at your party, Emma," Henry said as he climbed out of the car. There was a huge backpack sitting between his feet and he nearly toppled over as he tried to tug it out after him.

"Thanks, kid. I hope you have a good night too," Emma replied. Regina got out of the car with him, and through the slightly darkened window Emma watched as she walked him up to the front door. A woman opened it, and Regina leaned down to give her son a fierce hug. He didn't return it.

Regina kissed his cheek before she headed back down the stairs. The second her back was turned, Henry scrubbed his face clean.

The edges of Emma's stomach were curling in on themselves when Regina slid into the seat next to her, her cheeks pinched and her lips pursed. She didn't look round as she buckled herself in.

"So," Emma said after two minutes of painful silence. "He's a cute kid. He looks like you."

"Do you think so?" Regina asked, staring straight ahead.

"Yeah. He's got your scowl," Emma said, hoping a lame joke would drag Regina out of her funk. She got a brief flicker of a smile for her efforts.

Emma sighed. "Hey. I'm sorry he gave you such a hard time."

"It's no problem," Regina said in her tightest voice. "That's what children do to their parents."

"Yeah, but—"

"Emma, it's fine," Regina said, finally turning to look at her. Emma heard the message in her voice loud and clear: *don't go there.*

And so Emma nodded and settled back in her seat, wishing that her stomach would stop churning. She turned her head to watch as the city rushed past the window.

"You look beautiful, by the way."

She jumped, looking back across the car. Regina was on her phone, flicking through her emails, and Emma could have been forgiven for thinking she'd imagined the compliment she'd just been given.

"Thanks," Emma said quietly, reaching up to check her hair hadn't fallen down yet. "So do you."

Another brief smile passed across Regina's face, but she didn't respond. Emma went back to looking out the window, letting the rest of the journey pass in silence.

Mr Gold – who either didn't have a first name or had simply gone to painstaking lengths to make sure no one ever used it – lived in a sprawling mansion on Long Island. It was separated from its neighbours by 10 acres of gardens, and when Sidney pulled up to the iron gates, he had to produce an honest to God invitation before he was allowed to drive through.

"This is going to sound stupid," Emma said as they rolled up the long driveway, "but before I met you, I really thought that everyone who worked in art was impoverished."
Regina chuckled. "Only the ones who aren't very good at it."

"And Mr Gold is good, I guess?"

"I suppose," Regina said, checking her lipstick in a compact.

"As good as you?" Emma asked. It was the right question, apparently, because Regina smirked at her.

"No one's as good as me."

Without question, Emma believed her.

They pulled up outside the house and Emma forced herself to climb out of the car without hesitating, because if she took another moment to think about how much she didn't want to go through with this, she would have ended up bribing Sidney to drive her back across Manhattan again. As soon as her heels hit the brick path, she hoisted herself upright and smoothed down her dress, picking off an imaginary fleck of lint so there was one less thing for someone to haul her out for the second she stepped inside.

She looked up to find that Regina was standing four paces away and watching her slightly bemusedly.

"What?"

"I like this very much," Regina said, gesturing to the dress. "Is it Diane von Furstenberg?"

"Yeah. How did you know?" Emma asked, looking down again to check she hadn't left the tag hanging off it.

"I have an eye for quality," Regina said. "You look perfect. Don't act so worried."

"I'm not worried," Emma croaked, which earned her another wry smile from her date. "I just don't want to show you up."

"You won't," Regina said, holding out her arm. Emma wobbled forwards and hooked her own arm through it, only now realising that she was a lot taller than Regina in her new shoes and probably looked like a total idiot gangling along beside her. "I'm not sure who Gold has invited, but it's usually less than 12 people. He likes these things to be intimate. He's also old fashioned, so there won't be any sushi – I can't promise there won't be caviar, though."

Emma grimaced. "I don't know if I like caviar. I don't even know how to eat it."

"Just follow my lead," Regina said, nodding to the man who was waiting on the door as they passed through. God, she sounded so fucking calm. It should have made Emma feel better, but all it did was make her feel even more out of her depth. "I'll introduce you to everyone and after that, you'll be fine. Just try not to get drunk."

It was a little concerning that Regina felt the need to say this any time they went anywhere, especially since Emma always managed to fail at it. She straightened her spine. "I'll do my best."

And she meant it, because she was determined that tonight was going to go better than last time. She almost looked the part, so surely being able to act it would come naturally.

But then a man wearing a dark grey suit threw open the doors to a living room that was bigger than
Emma's entire apartment, and she nearly choked. She tightened her grip on Regina's arm and let herself be led forwards.

"Gold," Regina said, directing her towards their host and letting the stiff air kissing begin all over again. She placed a hand on Emma's back and nudged her forwards. "You remember Emma."

Emma was already thrusting a hand towards him, because there was something entirely creepy about this wizened old man and there was no way she was ready to kiss him yet.

"Of course," Mr Gold said, his soft voice swirling with an accent that was half-English and half-Scottish and already intimidating the crap out of her. He returned her handshake and never took his eyes off of her. "How nice to see you again."

Emma felt sick. Actually, physically sick. But she forced a smile and said, "You too. Your house is beautiful."

The hand that Regina still had pressed against the small of her back squeezed gently, and Emma took that to be a good sign.

"Thank you, dearie. I'm glad it meets your approval." He turned back to Regina and said, "I really need to discuss your new exhibition with you, Regina."

"I'm sure you do," Regina murmured. "There's plenty of time for that, though. For now I think I should introduce Miss Swan to some of your other guests."

"Yes, yes, by all means," Mr Gold said, his cold grey eyes back on Emma once more. "We'll chat at dinner."

Emma only let herself breathe again when they were 10 paces away and headed for a table filled with champagne glasses. "Was that okay?" she muttered out the side of her mouth.

"It was fine," Regina said, handing her a glass. "No conversation with Gold is ever better than that. Drink that, but please don't have anything else until dinner."

Emma wanted to roll her eyes, but she knew Regina was right to restrict her: if it were up to her, she would end up working her way through the entire tray before the hors d'oeuvres had been served.

Emma gripped hold of the glass with one sweaty hand and let herself be guided towards a group of men and women who were loftily chuckling together. She sucked in a breath, straightened her spine, and plastered on the smile that she knew she'd get very used to over the coming months.

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When dinner finally began, Emma found herself positioned between Regina and a softly spoken red-haired man with round glasses. The dining room was enormous, more French chateau than Long Island manor, and when Emma looked down at her lap, she wasn't surprised to see that her hands were shaking.

So she squeezed one of them into a tight fist and used the other to take a sip of her water, because it would have been way too easy to get hammered on the free-flowing chardonnay and she was determined not to let that happen. Regina herself was clutching a glass of merlot, which always seemed to make her laugh a little darker.

"You look a little lost," came a voice from her right. She turned to find the redheaded man looking at her.
He didn't seem the type to openly mock her, so she gave him a wobbly smile. "Just doing my best to not spill anything down myself."

He chuckled. "I'm Archie. You're here with Regina Mills, is that right?"

It made Emma a little nervous that people always referred to her date by her full name. "Yeah, I am. Sorry, I'm a bit new to all this – are you a collector too?"

"Oh, no," he shrugged quite contentedly. "I have nothing to do with any of this – I'm a psychiatrist."

The fact that he was just another unimportant plus one finally helped Emma relax a little.

"That sounds cool," she said. "I took a couple of psych courses in college. Not that I did too well in them, but they were interesting."

"What did you end up doing instead?"

"I work in publishing." It was her go-to line when she wanted her job to sound more impressive than it really was. "It's not as challenging as what you do, I'm guessing, but I love it."

"What kind of publishing?"

"Children's books."

"Really?" Archie asked, and he sounded genuinely interested. "That must be very rewarding."

Normally, Emma played down her work whenever she could – it wasn't cool to go to a bar in Brooklyn and start ruminating over how passionate she was about watercolour illustrations. But she was out of her comfort zone and surrounded by people who lived to impress and be impressed, and so maybe it was time to schmooze a tiny bit.

"Yeah, I guess it is," she said. "I don't get to do as much hands-on work as I'd like, but that's okay for now. Everyone has to pay their dues, right?"

"Absolutely," Archie said. "I can't tell you how many unpaid workshops and painful group sessions I had to do while I was trying to get my doctorate."

Emma laughed. "Well, I don't have one of those. I am on first-name terms with half of Starbucks, though."

A woman across the table suddenly piped up, "You know the CEO of Starbucks?"

_Oh, sweet hell._ "No, no. I meant my local Starbucks. I'm in there a lot getting coffee for my boss."

"Oh, I see," the woman said, pressing her thin lips together. "I have to say, I try to avoid Starbucks wherever I can. For such a big corporation their servers are very slow."

Emma jolted like she'd been electrocuted. "You think so?"

"Absolutely. If I go in on my way to work, I'm often waiting five or 10 minutes for my order."

Emma knew it wasn't her place to shut this woman down. She knew people were already looking at them. But still, she heard herself say, "Well, if you go in in the middle of rush hour and ask for a tall decaf skinny extra hot triple shot cap with no foam, I'm sure it probably will take them a few minutes to get that together."
The woman shot daggers at her just as Archie started laughing. "That's what they're paid to do, dear."

"Sure, but how much do you think they're paid?"

The woman scoffed. "I have no idea."

"Take a guess."

"I really couldn't estimate."

"Well, I worked in a coffee shop for a year, and I ended up on minimum wage doing 12-hour days, every day, sometimes six days a week. I guess they're probably doing the same, or maybe even more, given Starbucks' reputation. I couldn't even pay my rent from that so I'd say whatever work they're doing, they're already working way too hard."

There was a long, painful pause. From the other end of the table, Emma could feel Mr Gold's cold eyes on her.

Then the woman chuckled and said, "Well, if they worked a little harder to get my order right, maybe they wouldn't be on minimum wage anymore."

Emma opened her mouth to let all hell break loose, and for once she couldn't even blame alcohol. She didn't care – she was furious and her younger self was already clawing its way out of her overpriced designer dress, rolling up her sleeves and ready to knock this woman's veneers out of her head.

And then Archie, of all people, scoffed. "That's a terrible attitude to have. Surely as privileged people it's our job to recognise the hard work of others and do whatever we can to support them, even if that's just being patient and giving them a decent tip."

Emma focused her seething glare on the woman, refusing to break eye contact. "Exactly."

Out of nowhere, Regina spoke next. "Have you ever worked for minimum wage, Sandra?"

Emma wasn't surprised when Sandra – because of course her name was fucking Sandra – said, "No, I can't say I have."

"Well then," Regina said, crisp and efficient because she knew the argument had been won. "Perhaps this is one of those instances where you should try keeping your opinions to yourself."

Emma beamed at her, but Regina didn't look back. She already knew she held the entire room's attention.

"Speaking of opinions, Regina," Sandra said, and her face was turning red now. "I'd like to talk to you about your behaviour at Jeremy's exhibition last month."

Emma's eyebrows shot up. She turned her head to find Regina nonchalantly sipping her wine. "Be more specific."

"You know what I'm talking about," Sandra snapped. "When you insulted my taste in acquisitions by saying my latest artist was nothing more than an overpaid finger-painter. Then, 30 minutes later, you were luring him onto your side."

"Oh, yes," Regina nodded. "That."
"Care to explain yourself?"

Regina thought for a moment, then said, "It's a dog-eat-dog world."

"That doesn't excuse you stealing my artists!"

"I'm pretty sure it does," Regina said, and there wasn't even the slightest tremble to her voice. She lifted her chin. "If you were better at your job then he wouldn't have left your contract. I'm just providing a much better deal than you."

"Excuse me?" Sandra demanded, and she was practically spitting. "Regina, in case you hadn't noticed, I was waiting for an apology."

But she continued to wait, because Regina simply looked back at her, her glass cradled in one hand and her eyebrows slightly raised. Emma could feel beads of sweat starting to prickle up on her exposed back.

Eventually, Mr Gold laughed. "Now now, ladies. Let's try and save the dramatics for after dinner, shall we?"

Regina rolled her eyes at him, but Sandra was already screeching, "She's a backstabber!"

"Sandra, please," Regina sighed. "You needn't be so dramatic. I'm sure another overpaid finger-painter will wander into your midst soon enough."

A chuckle ran around the table, and before Sandra could even think about swiping back at her, Regina had turned away, going back to the conversation she'd been having with the man to her left before Emma had interrupted everything with the working-class chip on her shoulder.

Swallowing hard, Emma turned back to Archie. She'd been expecting him to look as shaken as she did, but he was still chuckling.

"Was that my fault?" Emma asked.

"No," he said simply. "These dinners are always punctuated by arguments, and Sandra's been stewing about Regina for the past five weeks. I'm sure it'll happen all over again before we've had dessert."

Emma blinked. "That sounds kind of stressful."

"You'll get used to it," Archie said. He nodded to the wine in front of her. "Have a drink. That helps it go by a lot faster."

Emma paused. "I promised Regina I wouldn't have too much."

"Was that before or after the yelling started?" Archie asked.

"Way before," Emma admitted, but she still hesitated. She left the wine was where it was and instead scooped up her water glass, doing everything she could to stop her hand from trembling.

Regina was still occupied talking to the softly spoken Italian man sitting on her other side, and so Emma dove right into what she hoped was light, breezy small talk. "So, what kind of psychiatrist are you?"

The meal passed slowly, although Emma did find herself enjoying it at times. Archie was interesting
and he didn't talk down to her like everyone else did. She also had a sneaking suspicion that he might be gay, but he didn't bring it up himself and even she knew better than to ask.

The food was more of a problem than the conversation, because it seemed all rich people had some kind of fetish for seafood and Emma was still trying to refine her palate enough to actually enjoy it. But she managed to copy Regina and Archie when they ate so she didn't humiliate herself, and the six courses went down eventually, if not very, very slowly.

Regina had been busy talking to other people for the majority of the meal, and so when everyone got up to move into another room, Emma stayed by Archie's side, talking to him about the different things her company looked for in manuscripts from new authors. It turned out he was a child psychiatrist, which Emma realised could even be useful in the future when they needed a professional opinion at work. It felt like her skin was fizzing when she realised that she'd just made a contact without even thinking about it. The PR people in her office always made networking sound so convoluted.

"You've been busy," a voice purred against her ear, and Emma shivered when she felt a hand sliding round her waist.

She turned to find Regina smiling at her. "So have you."

"All business, dear," Regina said, nodding to Archie as he excused himself. It was the first time Emma had been alone with her since they'd arrived and she was surprised by just how comforting Regina's presence was now that it had returned.

"Apart from the cat fighting," Emma said, and Regina smiled wickedly back at her.

"Oh, poor Sandra. She really thought she could get an apology out of me."

"Couldn't she?"

"No," Regina said flatly. "I don't do apologies. Did you and Dr Hopper get along alright?"

Emma blinked, wondering whether to follow up on that admission, before deciding it probably wasn't worth it.

"Yeah, he was nice," she said, wetting her lips. "Have I done okay? He isn't someone you hate, is he?"

Regina laughed and squeezed Emma's hip. "You've done just fine. Did you see the man I was talking to?"

Emma nodded, spying the older, Italian man who'd been holding her attention all night long. He was standing on the other side of the room, and Archie was just approaching him as she looked.

"That's Marco," Regina said. "He's a sculptor. Very famous, very traditional. He doesn't let anyone represent him, but we all love to try."

Emma was mid-laugh when she saw the way Archie touched his arm. "Oh – they're together?"

"They are."

"Married?"

"Long-term partners," Regina said. Her voice was strangely soft. "I didn't intend for you and Archie
to get along like such a house on fire, but I must say, I'm very pleased that you did. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage in the future.

Emma cleared her throat. "I didn't do that on purpose. I wasn't trying to manipulate him or anything."

"Miss Swan, this entire thing is a game," Regina said. Thin tendrils of hair had begun to escape from Emma's complicated chignon, and she reached out to tuck one of them behind her ear for her. "All anyone is ever thinking about is how they can get ahead in the next round. You and Archie got along well and it's very nice that you didn't have an agenda, but maybe you should think about getting one. You were talking to him so beautifully."

"I was only doing that because the other option was sitting awkwardly by myself," Emma admitted. "Talking to him was the only thing that would stop people thinking I was just there to try and steal the silverware."

For a second, Regina just looked at her. And then she threw her head back and laughed – a real laugh that was rich and unguarded and that Emma hadn't heard before. The sound of it lit her up inside like someone had set off a firework in her chest.

In the middle of the party, not caring who was watching, Regina reached forwards and cupped Emma's face. She pressed a kiss against her lips that was soft enough to make Emma's legs wobble.

"I do love how honest you are," Regina said when she pulled away. Her lipstick had faded slightly and Emma wondered whether it was on her own mouth.

"Thanks," Emma replied, sounding slightly breathless.

"Come on," Regina said, linking their arms together. "Let's go and talk to your new best friend again. It'll really mess with Sandra's head when she sees us chatting with her favourite sculptor."

Emma reached up to remove the pins from her hair as soon as the car pulled away from the kerb. Regina was already knee-deep in her inbox, and the car was quiet.

"Are we picking Henry up first?" Emma asked after a few minutes. She hated interrupting Regina when she was on her phone, but sitting in silence was never particularly enjoyable for her either.

"No," Regina said, her thumb still swiping. "He'll be asleep by now anyway. We'll drop you off at your apartment and then go back to collect him."

Emma nodded: another night where she wasn't expected to stay with Regina, and she was surprised by how disappointed she felt.

She turned to look out the window with her chin resting on her hand. She was exhausted, she realised, so maybe it was a good thing that Regina was intent on taking this side of things slowly. She'd probably fall asleep underneath her if they tried to do anything else.

She closed her eyes for a moment, content to let the soft sound of the radio wash over her.

"The things you were telling Henry on the drive here," Regina suddenly said. Emma jumped, opening her eyes. "Were they true?"

Regina still wasn't looking at her when Emma turned her head, but there was something in her voice that told Emma she wasn't reading any emails either.
"Yeah," Emma said, then paused. "Mostly. I left out a few details."

She saw Regina swallow. "I didn't realise you grew up in foster care."

"I didn't tell you."

Regina nodded. Then, with a breezy sigh, she said, "He seemed to like you. Henry, I mean."

"Do you think so?" Emma asked. She was treading carefully, not wanting to push it, but for some reason she was desperate for this to be true.

"Yes," Regina said, finally locking her phone and dropping it into her lap. After a moment, she added, "A lot more than he likes me at the moment, anyway."

It was the most painfully sad sentence Emma had ever heard, and she reached out to try and touch her hand. "Regina..."

"Sidney," Regina suddenly barked, and Emma snatched her fingers away again. "Could you turn the music down?"

He did so, and Regina picked her phone up once again. "I have to make a call."

She didn't, and they both knew it. But she still dialled a number and began talking rapidly at someone about a temperature-controlled storage unit. Emma went back to quietly watching the city rush by.
“So, to clarify,” Ingrid drawled out from across her vast expanse of desk. “You’re telling me you’re not completely stupid?”

Emma gritted her teeth. She’d barely been at work for three hours and it was already shaping up to be one of the most stereotypically bullshit days of her career.

“No, Ingrid. I’m not.”

“Then do be so kind as to explain why I just received a phone call telling me that my accountant was expecting me at her office an hour ago.”

“She called to reschedule last week, while I was in a meeting with you,” Emma explained as calmly as she could. “She got through to the intern. No one told me.”

“What I’m hearing is that this is all Violet’s fault,” Ingrid said, gesturing to the perky, dark-haired teenager sitting at the desk to the very edge of the bullpen. She’d become a feature in the office two weeks ago and Emma had wanted to bundle her into a trashcan at least four times since then.

“It’s not her fault,” Emma said, picking her words carefully.

“So then it must be yours.”

It took all of Emma’s energy not to whip the file she was holding at Ingrid’s head. “I’ll reschedule for next week.”

“Do that,” Ingrid said, gesturing for her to leave. “And get me a latte. You should also consider teaching Violet how to use the phones properly.”

Clenching her fists, Emma headed for the door. She bypassed her own desk entirely, instead walking into the storage closet where they kept the new releases and shutting the door behind her.

Sliding down to the floor, Emma scraped her fingers through her hair and sat there for a minute. Ingrid had been a bitch since the first day Emma had walked into that office, sure, but recently things seemed to have taken a dramatic turn for the worse. She wasn’t sure she was mentally equipped to deal with it now that she was also battling through Regina’s mood swings two or three times a week.

She leaned her head back against the door and took a breath, hoping that a minute of quiet would finally calm her down.

She was granted about 16 seconds before her phone rang.

Cursing every man and woman ever born, Emma pulled her cell out and answered it. “Hi, Tamara.”

“Do you have a passport?”

Emma blinked. That was not a question she’d been expecting. “Um. Yes.”

“Oh, good,” Tamara said, frantically typing something in the background. “Fast-tracking one would have been really inconvenient. You’re going to London this weekend.”

“What?”
“London, Miss Swan. It’s in England.”

“Yeah, I know where—”

“Ms Mills is paying a visit to her third gallery and she’d like you to accompany her. Will you have any trouble getting the time off work? You’ll fly out on Thursday night and return Monday.”

Emma wrinkled her nose. She usually only took one or two vacation days a year because, in spite of how useless Ingrid said she was, she was always surprisingly reluctant to sign her annual leave forms. But she knew there was only one acceptable answer to Tamara’s question, so she just said, “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Good. The rest will all be arranged for you, but I’ll need you to send me a copy of your passport for the plane ticket. Regina will be hosting a dinner for her shareholders on Friday so please bring appropriate clothing for that.”

Emma groaned to herself: more clothes. Her first month’s pay packet had already shrunk to a measly $2,000 and she’d only had it for two weeks.

“Sure,” Emma said, mentally planning to Google designer outlet stores as soon as she got back to her desk.

“I’ll email you the itinerary once the flight is booked,” Tamara said. “Have a good day.”

Then she was gone, and Emma was left to go skulking back into Ingrid’s office clutching a hastily filled out vacation request.

Her boss looked it over with a look of complete disgust on her face.

“This is very short notice,” she said. Her cold eyes snapped up so they could bore into Emma’s. “Where are you going?”

“Just to visit a friend. From college,” Emma added, because reminding her of the hunk-of-crap college she’d attended always put Ingrid in a good mood.

But it didn’t work this time. Instead, Ingrid was coolly looking over the dates once more. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d have the money to go anywhere with only three days’ notice. Not on your salary.”

There was a weight to her words that made Emma feel nervous, and she decided her best form of defence was to not say anything. Ingrid continued to stare levelly at her, waiting for her to crack, but Emma was more practised at enduring her boss’s icy gaze than she gave her credit for.

After a minute, Ingrid sighed and scribbled her signature on the form. Then she thrust it back across the table with an exasperated, “Get out.”

Regina was already in London, apparently, so Emma found herself being carted off to JFK by herself on Thursday night. Sidney collected her from her apartment, loaded her suitcase into the trunk for her and even let her choose the music from her plush seat in the back of the Mercedes. In spite of how nervous she was at the prospect of flying for seven hours on her own, Emma had to admit that the perks of dating Regina definitely outweighed the negatives.

That was a thought that doubled in intensity when she stumbled up to the British Airways desk and was informed that she’d be travelling in business class. She wasn’t blue-collar enough to actually
squeal with delight, but she definitely felt her heart rate double in speed.

And then she was by herself, wandering around the airport like she couldn’t remember how she’d gotten there. She knew she could use the business class lounge, but part of her was still uncertain over whether they’d even let her in, so instead she walked in and out of the shops for a full half hour while she built up the courage to go and try. It was when she was in the duty free store buying a bottle of water and a buttload of plane snacks that she spotted something she immediately knew she had to buy for Regina.

It was nothing special. It wasn’t even nice – it was a tacky keychain of a red high-heeled shoe, and it reminded Emma of Regina the moment she saw it. She knew Regina would never use it in a million years, and yet she scooped it up and took it to the checkout without hesitating. If nothing else, she wanted to get Regina something to say thank you for taking her on this trip, and given how little she actually knew about her, this would have to do for now.

When she landed in London, it was early afternoon and the sky was grey. She’d been warned by pretty much everyone to expect that for the whole weekend, but the fact did absolutely nothing to lessen her wired mood.

Another driver picked her up from Heathrow. She still hadn’t heard anything at all from Regina, but based on the itinerary she’d received from Tamara she knew vaguely where the hotel was and what time Regina would finally reappear: she had meetings all day, and would be done by around six. That would give Emma plenty of time to unpack, calm down and wait for her arrival.

She wasn’t an idiot – she knew what this weekend would really involve. Sure, there would be the fancy shareholder dinner in one of the many new dresses Emma had panickedly thrown into a Net-a-Porter basket two days earlier, and there would be gallery viewings and cocktail parties and God knows what else. But under all that was the fact that Emma would be sharing Regina’s hotel room, and she would be sharing her bed, and it was only a matter of time before the final part of their contract needed to be fulfilled.

She was aware that she probably should have been dreading it, but there was another reason why she was feeling so buzzed – one that had nothing to do with anxiety or the free-flowing business class champagne. Emma couldn’t take her eyes off Regina no matter what she was wearing, so she could hardly imagine what kind of mess she’d be reduced to when she wasn’t wearing anything at all.

Emma had attempted her very first bikini wax the night before her flight and then had spent half the evening doing sit-ups in her bedroom, like that alone would make the fact that she hadn’t stepped inside a gym in the past six months less obvious. She didn’t own a lot of nice underwear, but she’d packed everything she had and she’d maybe watched a bit too much porn in the name of ‘research’. There were only hours before she and Regina would find themselves alone together in their shared room, and if she wasn’t ready now, she never would be.

Their hotel, Como the Halkin, was located close enough to Buckingham Palace for its royal gardens to count as Emma’s own personal jogging track. The hotel was contained within a grand Georgian townhouse in Belgravia, and when Emma stepped out of the car, her heart plummeted. There was no way in hell she could walk in there.

But after being escorted to the check-in desk by a bellman who had nowhere near as bad teeth as she was led to believe everyone in England would have, Emma was welcomed and given her own key to the Como Suite, which the receptionist cheerily informed her was up in the penthouse. Her luggage had been taken up before she’d even had the chance to turn around and make a grab for it, so she dumbly made her way over to the elevator and just focused on trying to stand up as straight as possible.
When she opened the door to the room, she stopped dead on the threshold. “Oh, for God’s sake.”

The suite was enormous, stretching across the majority of the hotel’s top floor, and was separated into three sprawling rooms: first was the open-plan living and dining area, where there was a bottle of complimentary champagne already laid out for them. A huge white couch ran along the full length of the room, and through the floor-to-ceiling windows just behind it, Emma could see London stretched out just for her.

She sucked in her cheeks and padded across the soft carpet, headed towards the bedroom. She felt weirdly like she was snooping around in someone else’s house, although there were very few signs that Regina had even been there at all: there was a make-up bag sitting on the dresser, but it was zipped shut and Emma made no move to peek inside. The bedroom was roughly the size of the Caterpillar bullpen, and the bed that was located in the very centre had the crispest, whitest sheets she’d ever seen before in her life.

Emma then spent a full five minutes wandering around the bathroom, grazing her fingertips over every black marble surface and softly whispering “What the fuck” to herself every 30 seconds.

Finally, she found herself stood on the terrace gawping out into the distance. It wasn’t as warm as she’d been expecting, in spite of it being the beginning of July, but she was prickling with sweat that stemmed from either nerves or the residual griminess of the plane journey, or possibly both.

Pushing down all the thoughts that were telling her she was being intrusive, Emma slipped into the bathroom and started running the shower. As soon as she stepped under the water, she knew she wouldn’t be leaving again any time soon.

It was a full half hour later when she resurfaced, red in the cheeks from the slightly-too-hot water and wrapped in a towel that was thicker than her winter coat back in New York. She found an even fluffier robe hanging in the closet and slipped it on, moaning happily as it enveloped her skin.

For a moment she just stood there in the middle of the bedroom, towel-drying her hair and gazing out the window. Then she remembered that there was free champagne in the living room. She carefully hung her towel over the heated bathroom rail and made her way to the couch, telling herself she’d just have one glass to calm her nerves, and then she would get dressed and wait for Regina to appear.

Except the moment she sat down on that deliciously squishy sofa, it was impossible for her to get back up again. There was a copy of British Vogue on the coffee table and she picked it up, hoping to gain some kind of insight into what kind of clothes she was meant to have been wearing this whole time, when really she just spent the next hour looking through it and cattily asking herself which of the outfits were actually supposed to look good.

She didn’t notice the time passing, nor her hair drying on its own. She didn’t realise she’d already had two and half glasses of champagne until she felt the warmth building in her cheeks.

Then there were footsteps outside the door. A click, an unlocking sound, and the door opened.

Emma’s head shot up just in time to see Regina walking into the room. She was wearing a sleeveless black shirt tucked into a white pencil skirt, with huge sunglasses on her face in spite of the grey sky outside. Emma froze, watching as she rummaged around in her purse for something, her room key and cell phone clutched in her spare hand. Then she looked up, saw Emma sitting cross-legged on the couch, and jumped like she’d forgotten she would be there.

Emma offered her an awkward smile. “Hey.”
She couldn’t see Regina’s eyes behind her sunglasses, but she suspected they were eyeing up the ridiculous robe she was wearing.

Letting the door swing shut behind her, Regina took another step into the room and asked, “Did you start the champagne without me?”

At once, Emma felt deeply embarrassed and more at home all at once. She leapt up and went to grab another glass. “Sorry – it was a long flight. I needed to loosen up.”

“I’m kidding,” Regina said, moving towards the couch. She sat down with a sigh of relief. “As long as you left me some.”

As Emma poured out a second glass, Regina took her sunglasses off and reached down to remove her painful-looking shoes. Emma walked back across the room and sat down next to her, thrusting the glass forwards. “Here you go.”

Regina took it without thanks. Her eyes were on Emma’s face. “You look very pink-cheeked, Miss Swan.”

Emma could hear the flirtatious tone below her words, and she went even redder. “I had a shower.”

“And a few drinks,” Regina said, but she was laughing.

Emma, suddenly aware that she was completely naked underneath her robe, primly crossed her legs and asked, “How was your day?”

Regina sighed. “It was fine. I do like coming to London, but everyone is so passive aggressive and it makes it really hard to get stuff done quickly.”

“I’ve never been here before,” Emma admitted. “I’ve actually only been outside of America once.”

“Was your flight okay?” Regina asked. “I didn’t even ask if you’re alright with flying.”

“It was fine,” Emma said, then realised how ungrateful she sounded. “Thank you for the business class ticket, by the way – that was really exciting. Probably too exciting.”

Regina smiled back at her. “You don’t need to thank me. You’re doing me a favour by being here, so it’s the least I can do.”

That was a weird way of looking at it, but Emma was happy to act like this vacation wasn’t the most exhilarating thing to have happened to her in the past five years. “I guess.”

“Did Tamara fill you in on our schedule?”

“Sort of,” Emma said. “She mentioned a big scary shareholder dinner tonight, but after that the itinerary went a bit blank.”

“I’m afraid I have lots of meetings tomorrow that I have to attend, so you’ll need to entertain yourself,” Regina said, stretching one arm along the back of the sofa. “But we’ll go for dinner afterwards, and then I’m free on Sunday, so we can spend the day together. I was thinking I’d take you to the gallery, and then we could do all the touristy crap that I’m sure you’re desperate to try.”

Emma was already grinning, not at all embarrassed. “Maybe.”

“I don’t get to do things like that very often,” Regina admitted. “So it might be fun. But no open-top buses, and I’m not eating any fish and chips.”
Emma, for one, was happy to go without some seafood for a day. “Deal.”

The arm that Regina had stretched out along the backrest of the couch reached towards her. Emma froze when she twirled a finger through her damp hair.

“Does this curl naturally?”

“Um. Yeah,” Emma said, reaching up to awkwardly brush some loose strands away from her face. “I think it’s probably going a bit frizzy right now, though.”

“Not especially,” Regina said, her eyes on the tendril that was wrapped around her finger. “You have very beautiful hair. Like a Disney princess.”

Pleasure filled Emma up, and it was frothy and warm like coffee. “I don’t think anyone’s ever compared me to a princess before.”

“I didn’t say the rest of you bore any resemblance,” Regina said, totally deadpan, and Emma burst out laughing. Regina smirked back at her. “You know, I always wanted to be blonde when I was younger.”

Emma looked up at her dark hair - it was glossy and bounced on her shoulders, and it was perfect just the way it was. But instead of blurting that out and completely humiliating herself, she just said, “Brown suits you.”

“Blondes have more fun, though,” Regina pointed out.

“Yeah, except somehow I think you have slightly more fun than I do.”

Regina’s gaze slid down to the low cut of Emma’s robe, which was just barely slipping open. “Well. I do hope so.”

Emma’s insides melted at once. She took another gulp of champagne just to give herself something to do with her hands and then immediately regretted it when she felt the room tilt around her.

Regina’s fingers twirled through her hair once more and Emma shivered, forcing herself to edge backwards on the couch because her blood was already pulsing directly into the space between her thighs and it would have been all too easy to peel off her robe and crawl into Regina’s lap that very second.

Regina saw the movement and smirked, finally pulling her hand away. “I suppose we should get ready. Dinner’s in an hour.”

Emma nodded but didn’t move. Regina’s perfume was invading her nostrils and it smelled so sharp and delicious that Emma suddenly wasn’t sure the champagne was the reason why she felt so drunk.

She tugged her robe more tightly around her and watched as Regina got up, gliding across the room with her shoes dangling from one hand. She was deliberately swaying her hips and Emma knew it, but she was still sucked in by the sight of them. Her ass looked so perfect under that tight white skirt that all she wanted to do was get up and trail after her.

She forced herself to stay where she was, though, and the second Regina disappeared from view she collapsed back against the couch, squeezing her legs together as tightly as she could. She desperately wished she was wearing panties, although she knew that if she was, they would already be sticking to her skin.
The shower started to run, but she stayed where she was for a few more minutes, waiting for the pounding in her chest to subside. There wasn’t a single part of her body that felt like it could sit still when she knew that Regina was naked only next door.
While Regina was in the shower, Emma brushed her hair out and put on some underwear before finally unpacking her suitcase. She felt very strange sliding open the glossy wooden doors and hanging up her dresses next to Regina's – the difference between their clothes was immediately obvious, and she forced down another wave of embarrassment. After the Diane von Furstenberg dress that she'd bought the week before, she hadn't had enough left from her allowance to buy anything anywhere near as nice. She'd have to be much smarter with her money next month.

She snorted to herself, wondering whether she would have believed someone if they'd told her three weeks ago that living off $10,000 a month would be a struggle. It was the stupidest fucking thing she'd ever heard.

She realised then that in spite of the frantic online shopping she'd done, she had no idea what she was planning to wear that evening. The very thought of picking something out made her want to lie face-down on the bed and scream. She pulled out one dress, eyeing it with a mixture of uncertainty and disgust, and then pushed it far back into the closet again. It settled next to her various pairs of skinny jeans and she looked longingly at them, wishing she'd chosen to date someone who lived in a world where women were actually allowed to wear pants to formal occasions.

Instead of selecting a fancy dress that she knew wouldn't suit her no matter what she did, it was far easier to pretend they didn't exist and skulk over to the vanity table. She sat down with a thump, wrapping her robe tighter around her, and pulled out her tatty collection of expired make-up.

Regina reappeared 10 minutes later wrapped in a towel, her hair tied into a short ponytail at the base of her neck. Emma hadn't made much progress in the way of getting ready: she was now just staring at her own face, which was wearing foundation but not much else, wondering what the next step was when she'd only just realised she didn't own any lipstick. The second Regina had stepped back into the room, however, her resolve to get dressed abandoned her entirely.

She could see the muscles in Regina's toned shoulders shifting as she moved. She swept around the room so easily, either not noticing Emma's eyes on her or simply not caring about them, and the mere sight of her dried Emma's mouth out completely. After pausing to untie her hair and shake out its residual flatness, Regina went to the closet and began to rifle through her clothes.

Emma swallowed before asking in a quiet voice, "What are you going to wear?"

Regina pulled out a grey shift dress and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Probably this."

She tugged it free of its hanger and turned, draping it over the bed. There was something so effortless, so confident about the way she did it, and Emma felt her posture slump. A wave of homesickness that she'd never felt before washed over her.

"What about you?" Regina asked, and Emma looked up.

"What about me?"

A flicker of concern crossed Regina's face when she heard the flatness in Emma's voice. "What are you going to wear?"

Emma shrugged, then reached out for her make-up bag and started fiddling around with its contents. She had zero intention of putting any more on, but she needed to do something that would stop her from looking morosely back at Regina's confused reflection.
She heard movement behind her, and when she glanced up, she saw that Regina was looking through the other half of the closet. After a moment, she pulled out a black dress not too dissimilar to the one she'd selected for herself. "How about this?"

Emma just nodded, because it was the easiest thing to do. Regina carefully laid it down on the bed next to her own.

After a pause, she said, "I'm always surprised by the clothes that you buy. It's never what I would have imagined."

*Preaching to the choir*, Emma thought dully.

Regina disappeared back into the bathroom, leaving Emma to half-heartedly prod blusher onto her cheeks. When she returned, Emma dropped the brush she'd been holding.

Regina had gotten rid of her towel and was now standing in her underwear, her back to the mirror. Emma nearly choked at the sight of her, resplendent in a black push-up bra and matching lace panties. Not only was she the most beautiful woman Emma had ever seen in her life, but she was also glowing with confidence, so happy to stroll around like that without even thinking about how Emma might react to it. Emma shrunk down further into her robe and waited for the thumping in her chest to subside.

She watched as Regina bent over the bed, her stomach taut and her arms toned, and picked up the dress. When she'd pulled it on and turned back towards the mirror, Emma was desperately trying to look anywhere else.

Regina approached her, and Emma knew she was onto her. She kept her gaze lowered, her fingers fiddling with the make-up brush that she'd just picked back up, then jumped when she felt a hand curl over her shoulder.

"Do you want some help with that?"

Emma looked up and met Regina's gaze in the mirror. She didn't answer, because she couldn't formulate the words, but that didn't seem to bother Regina. Instead, she grabbed a stool and dragged it towards the vanity, sitting herself down next to Emma and swivelling her so they were face-to-face.

It was an exercise in torture. The mere feeling of Regina's bare knees touching her own made Emma go lightheaded, but then her hands were on her face, gently brushing eye shadow onto her and combing mascara through her lashes. At some point Emma realised that she didn't even recognise the products that were being dusted over her skin – Regina had dug into her own make-up bag and was using her lavish designer products on Emma's unpolished face. Emma swallowed, trying to stay as still as possible, and prayed that her palms would stop sweating soon.

When Regina was finished, Emma expected her to kiss her. She even leaned forwards. But Regina just threw her her usual wry smile and reached out to wipe a smudge of eyeliner from beneath her lashes. Then she got up, putting the chair back where she'd got it from, and called over her shoulder, "You need to get dressed. We're leaving in 15."

The chaos inside Emma's head didn't diminish at dinner. She found herself wedged between Regina and a burly, overconfident man called Raoul in a restaurant that was so dark and tiny it could only be for the very rich or the very poor. The food arrived on giant plates in minuscule portions, and Emma stopped drinking pretty quickly when she realised there wasn't going to be enough food to mop up
the alcohol.

She felt marginally less nervous than she had done at the previous two events, but that was only because she was so distracted. And the reason she was distracted was because Regina wanted her to be.

As the chatter buzzed around the table, Regina lifted her hand and placed it against the back of Emma's neck, slowly rolling her thumb over the gigantic knot between her shoulders. When Emma leaned into it, Regina immediately pulled away, going back to her conversation with the man to her left. At one point she reached down and placed a hand on Emma's thigh, and Emma jumped so abruptly that she banged her knee against the table.

Emma groaned to herself and went back to talking with Raoul, breathing quickly to try and still her heartbeat. She listened to whatever he was saying like it was the most interesting thing in the world because it was far better to focus on that than on the wetness that was gradually pooling between her legs.

Eventually the conversation stopped being so split up between groups of two and three and instead spread across the entire party. Regina and Emma were the only women at a table of 10, but that didn't stop Regina from being the most commanding presence in the room. She often stayed quiet and let other people chat, Emma noticed, but when she calmly stepped in with her own opinion, everyone else stopped to listen, even if she'd cut directly over the top of someone else in order to say it.

Power seemed to radiate from her, and Emma felt another throb of longing.

"The problem with the Turner Prize," someone was saying, "is that it's always been too restrictive. You wouldn't think that was possible for an art prize, but it's true. Their decision to open it up to all ages was the first interesting thing they've done in decades."

"I agree," said another low, humming voice that Emma couldn't quite focus on. Regina's hand had slipped up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, and her entire body shivered. "These artists like to pretend they're bucking the trend, but year after year it's the same old stuff."

"It's Emma, isn't it?" one of the men said, and Emma jumped. She looked up with a breezy smile that she hoped told them she'd been following every word. "You've been quiet on this. As someone who isn't directly involved in art, it would be interesting to hear your opinion."

Emma grimaced. Her opinion was that all modern art looked the same, and that all old art also looked the same but at least it looked like what it was supposed to look like.

But thankfully she knew enough from all her recent Googling to remember that the Turner Prize was a British art award. She wetted her lips, hoping she wasn't ruining the work that Regina had done with her Chanel lipstick.

"Well," she said, not entirely sure where she was planning to go with this. "I think I agree – whenever I see the shortlist, I always wonder whether I've seen those exact works before. They never look particularly new or exciting."

She felt Regina shift beside her, and she knew it was because she was trying not to laugh. Everyone else around the table was nodding thoughtfully, but Regina knew that Emma wouldn't recognise a Turner Prize nominee if they came up and bit her on the ass.

Still, she ploughed on. "But I think the biggest problem is that the shortlist never gets political
enough. I mean, the world is falling to pieces and everyone has something to say about it, but if you
look at the art world, the Turner Prize never goes to anyone who wants to make a statement about
that."

There was a brief silence. Emma could feel herself starting to sweat because, honestly, she had no
idea if that was true – it just sounded like the kind of opinion people had on stuff like this. Besides,
she was pretty sure she'd scanned a *New York Times* article saying the exact same thing when she'd
been making a half-hearted attempt to read some art-related material on her daily commute.

Then Raoul – suddenly Emma's new favourite person in the world – nodded and said, "I completely
agree. They've been going with the safest choice for years. A pickled shark isn't going to change the
world, now is it?"

A murmur of agreement began to spread before someone cut over the top of it with a firm rebuttal.
Emma realised something then that she knew would get her through months and months of boring
dinners just a little bit easier: it didn't actually matter what your opinion was, as long as you said it
with enough conviction. Someone was always going argue with it just because they wanted to sound
like they knew more about it anyway.

"Where the hell did that come from?" a voice muttered in her ear, and Emma turned to find Regina
watching her.

She smiled awkwardly. "I was completely bullshitting. Did it work?"

The look that Regina gave her then was the softest, most delicate thing Emma had ever seen. She felt
like she was being wrapped up in silk.

"It worked wonderfully," Regina said, her eyes falling to Emma's lips. After a pause, she turned
away, going back to the table and leaving Emma feeling more breathless than ever.

Regina placed her hand on the small of Emma's back and guided her towards the car. Emma had
barely drunk anything since they'd arrived at the restaurant, but she felt slightly wobbly. She
suddenly couldn't be certain that it wasn't Regina's touch doing it to her.

The restaurant wasn't too far from the hotel, and the journey was a silent one. Regina had pulled out
her cell phone the second she'd hit the leather seat and now she was scrolling through her emails, as
she always did, her lips moving slightly as she flicked through the dozens of subject lines. The only
difference was that tonight her hand was on Emma's thigh, resting perfectly still against her bare skin.
Emma's breathing got shorter and shorter with every inch the car travelled, and she fought through
the desperate urge to bounce her knees up and down. Clenching her hands in her lap, she looked out
the window and counted to 10. To 20. By the time she reached 50, she still didn't feel any calmer.

Her frantic heartbeat was painful against her ribcage. She wasn't sure she could survive the
anticipation much longer.

When the car pulled up outside the hotel, Regina stepped out without a word. Emma dumbly
followed her. The pinch of Regina's waist was even more pronounced in the dress she was wearing
and Emma went hot all over when she imagined peeling it off of her and grabbing hold of those hips
with her own trembling hands.

They stepped into the empty elevator and Emma braced herself, but nothing happened – Regina just
hit the button for the fifth floor and then stepped back, standing dangerously close to Emma but
deliberately not touching her.
Emma swallowed, unable to stop herself from fidgeting. She reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear, and as she did so, she glanced to her left. She could see a minute smirk on Regina's lips, and her entire body went weak: she was enjoying every single second of this.

The elevator reached their floor and Regina walked out, not bothering to check whether Emma was following her. When she reached their room, she opened the door and headed inside to switch on the lights.

Emma's hand was shaking when she caught the door, then paused to push it shut behind them. She took a breath and turned back to the room.

Regina was there, barely a metre away, her gaze dark and her lips pouted. She looked like a storm getting ready to bear down on her. One quick step forward and they collided, Regina's hands reaching up to cup Emma's face as she pushed her backwards, attacking her mouth with her own and grinning when Emma gasped with surprise and relief.

Regina's entire body pinned Emma against the door as she kissed her, her hands straying from the sides of her face down to her breasts and then to her hips. Emma whimpered into her mouth, her legs shaking as she clutched hold of Regina's waist. She could taste the caramel dessert that Regina had eaten in the restaurant, and she pulled her even tighter against her.

Emma wasn't sure she'd ever been kissed like this before. People had kissed her because they wanted her, or because they desired her, but this was the first time she'd been kissed like someone needed her. She melted into it, her hands sliding up and hooking around the back of Regina's neck, and in a brief flash of clarity she realised that she wasn't surprised Regina kissed like this: she was the most demanding, most determined person Emma had ever met, and there was no way someone as tightly wound as her didn't come completely undone once the lights were dimmed and their clothes were coming off.

Just as Emma thought this, Regina pulled away from her and grabbed hold of her wrist, tugging her towards the bedroom. Emma didn't need to be persuaded – she stumbled along behind her with her body only inches away, like she couldn't bear to be apart from her for more than a second. As soon as they were in the next room, Regina was on top of her again, pushing her hard against the wall and burying her face in her neck. Emma let out a low whining noise that she wasn't sure she'd ever made before, but before she had time to be embarrassed, she felt a hand easing its way beneath the skirt of her dress. Her head thudded back against the wall when Regina's fingers stroked up the inside of her thigh.

"Is this okay?" Regina murmured as she started to nibble on her ear lobe. Emma's arms wound around her neck.

"Yes, yes," she breathed, and at once Regina's hand was cupping her pussy through her panties. The noise that Emma released was more animal than human, and Regina chuckled.

"Have you been thinking about this all night?" she asked.

"All week," Emma said, and she was already wriggling. Regina's fingers were completely still against her, and the feeling was so unsatisfying that she wanted to scream.

"Me too," Regina murmured, catching Emma's mouth with her own once more before adding, "You looked so beautiful in the dress you wore last weekend – it was nearly impossible not to fuck you against one of Gold's paintings."

Emma groaned. "Are you going to fuck me now?"
"Would you like me to?"

She'd barely finished the question before Emma blurted out, "Yes. Please."

Regina slipped her fingers beneath the fabric of Emma's panties and smirked when she felt the wetness that was waiting for her.

"Were you this wet at dinner?"

"Yes," Emma gasped as a finger began to leisurely circle her clit. "It was really distracting."

"I'm all too familiar with your pain," Regina purred, and the thought of Regina being wet like this – wet for her – nearly tipped Emma over the edge right there. She grabbed Regina by the back of her neck and pulled her in for another kiss, biting hard on her lower lip when she felt two fingers slide slowly inside her.

"Oh, fuck." Emma pulled away and murmured the words into Regina's shoulder, her muscles squeezing around her touch. Her high was building impossibly quickly and for a second she felt terrified – she could feel her heart pounding in every frazzled cell of her body, and it was too much, too fast, too overwhelming. But then her limbs were going loose, and fear gave way into the beginnings of bone-melting pleasure. All she wanted was for Regina to pin her harder against that wall and fuck her until her legs gave way completely.

When Regina reached between them and squeezed hard on Emma's breast, somehow seeking out her nipple through her dress, Emma came hard enough that Regina had to use her body to hold her upright. Emma's thighs were trembling as she waited for the stars to stop flashing up in front of her eyes.

Regina laughed as she pulled her fingers free, barely giving Emma a second to catch her breath before she tugged her towards the bed. Through her dizziness, Emma felt herself being pushed towards the centre of the mattress, and as soon as she collapsed back onto it, Regina climbed on top of her, pinning her against the sheets with a wicked smile on her face. Her fingers were sticky as they tightened around Emma's wrists, and the feeling made her pussy throb all over again.

Their dresses were too tight and their shoes were falling off, but Regina had a look of determination in her glittering eyes that told Emma nothing was going to stop her. She leaned in and caught Emma's bottom lip between her teeth, tugging gently and moaning when Emma lifted her head to kiss her back just as urgently.

When Regina let go of her wrists and laid herself down on top of her, Emma snaked her arms around her body and held her tight. Their legs tangled together and Regina automatically rolled her hips forward, grinding her pussy hard against Emma's thigh. Electricity pulsed through Emma's body and she arched her back, more desperate than ever to get closer to Regina's body. She sought out the zipper at the back of her dress and tugged it down, breathing hard when her fingertips skimmed over the hook of her bra.

Emma slid a hand deep inside the fabric and let it glide over Regina's back. She could feel the nodules of her ribcage shifting as she breathed, and it only made her want to dig her fingers in harder.

Then Regina's hand was back at the bottom of Emma's dress, tugging it upwards until it was settled around her hips. Emma's breath caught when those same fingers curled through the waistband of her panties and began to pull them down, only getting them to her mid-thigh before Regina got impatient and slipped her hand between Emma's legs.
Emma could have cried at the way Regina touched her – she traced the edges of her skin slowly, delicately, like she was worried about pushing her too far. She did it for long enough that Emma was left writhing beneath her, her hips bucking up to try and get more contact. When Regina chuckled in her ear, it sent a burst of hot, sharp desire flooding through her.

Regina's fingers slid back inside her, taking their time, before dragging back out again so slowly that all Emma could do was fist her free hand in the sheets and try not to scream. They plunged back in again and Emma didn't open her eyes, because she knew Regina was looking down at her, watching the way her face was contorting and silently pleading for more, and she didn't want to get lost in the sight of her when she was already enjoying being lost in what it felt like to have her inside of her.

Regina pulled her fingers free and began to slowly circle them over Emma's clit, pressing harder any time she went quiet and easing off when her breathy moans became more desperate. Emma could feel the sweat building up beneath her tight dress and she badly wanted to tear it off, but there was no way she was interrupting a single second of this. Regina's hands on her was everything she'd ever wanted and if she disturbed it, her body would never forgive her.

Regina propped herself up on one elbow, using most of her body to pin Emma down, and began to drive her fingers deep inside her, her thumb pressed against her clit. As she fucked her, Emma felt the delicate chain of her silver bracelet glancing off her skin, and that was all it took: the feeling of Regina's fingers buried inside her and the twinge of her jewellery hurting her in just the right way. She came with a cry, her head lifting off the bed, and Regina pushed her back down by pressing a hard kiss against her lips. Her fingers keep moving, slowly curving inside Emma's body, until a third orgasm was drawn out of her with a slow, throbbing intensity.

Emma reached down and pushed Regina's hand away from her, unsurprised by how delicate her pussy felt, and let her eyes snap open. Regina was looking down at her, not smirking for once but definitely looking quite pleased with herself.

Emma exhaled shakily.

"Wow," she said. "You really are good at what you do."

Regina laughed.

"That's one of the best reviews I've ever had," she said, crawling forwards and kissing Emma slowly and deeply. Emma lifted her hands to the loose fabric at the top of Regina's unzipped dress and began to peel it down.

When it reached her chest, Regina pulled away and sat back on her heels, doing the rest of the work by herself. Emma pushed herself up onto her elbows, unable to look away as the rest of Regina's body slowly came into view.

Regina threw the dress to the floor before reaching up to tousle her own hair. It was the sexiest thing Emma had ever seen, and before she could stop herself she was up on her knees, pulling Regina against her and letting her tongue delve deep into her mouth. Regina seemed to purr against her as she held onto the back of her neck, pressing her breasts hard against Emma's. Then the presence of Emma's dress got too infuriating for both of them, and Emma felt herself being pushed away again as two impatient hands started to seek out the zipper.

"Here," Emma breathed, lifting her arm and starting to pull at the metal tab that ran down the side. Regina reached out and snatched it from her. Her impatience would have made Emma laugh if the glint in her eye wasn't so intoxicating.
When the dress was unfastened, Regina reached for the bottom of it and tugged it up over Emma's head. Emma's panties were still located somewhere near the bottom of her thighs and she went to pull them back up again, but Regina slapped her hands away. "Take them off."

The commanding tone sent a tremor shooting down Emma's spine and she did as she was told, peeling them off and letting them drop to the floor. When she sat back up again, Regina's eyes were on her bra. "That too."

Nerves clawed at her, but they weren't strong enough to stop her. Emma reached behind her and unhooked her bra, keeping her eyes on Regina's face as she let it slip to the carpet.

Regina was unashamedly staring at her, her gaze dark and smoky with desire, and it filled Emma with thick reassurance that she hadn't realised she needed. Regina wetted her lips, then reached out for Emma's waist and tugged her back towards her.

They fell back down to the mattress with Emma on top. She pinned Regina against the sheets, sliding her fingers through her dark hair and dipping her tongue deeper into her mouth. She could feel Regina writhing beneath her, her hips lifting to try and meet Emma's, and being the one in charge for the first time since they'd met was intoxicating enough that Emma found herself having to catch her breath all over again.

She slowly moved her hands from the back of Regina's neck down to her wrists, bringing them up to the sides of her head and holding them firm against the sheets. Regina sighed, catching Emma's lip between her teeth, and lifted her hips once more. Emma's cunt was still wet and any time it grazed against Regina's lifted thigh, they both moaned.

Pushing herself upright, Emma straddled Regina's hips and reached underneath her to unhook her bra. As soon as her breasts came into view, Emma had to force back a whimper.

Throwing the bra that probably cost more than her weekly salary over her shoulder, Emma dipped her head and caught one of Regina's nipples in her mouth. At once, a pair of hands slid into her hair, holding her firm against her chest. Regina released a hiss of breath when Emma flicked out her tongue and dragged it over her warm skin, feeling her heart pounding beneath her lips. As her mouth worked, Emma's hand played with the other breast, gently tweaking and teasing until Regina's body felt like it was vibrating.

"Em-ma," she gasped, and the name sounded like a prayer coming from her lips.

Emma took the hint and pulled away, crawling down Regina's body and pressing kisses along every inch of exposed skin as she moved. She paused at the bottom of her ribcage, sucking hard and feeling a throb of pleasure when a dark bruise appeared. Regina's hands were back in her hair, holding her there, and she kept sucking and biting until Regina's sighs descended into a desperate moan.

She moved lower, dragging her nails along after her, until the tip of her nose brushed against the waistband of Regina's panties. She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling weirdly like she'd arrived at the gate to the promised land, and forced herself to pause and take a breath. Then she felt Regina shifting position below her, and she realised she was spreading her legs for her. At once, all her uncertainty was gone.

Curling her fingers through the fabric, Emma slowly pulled the panties away from Regina's body. She felt her skin prickle hot then cold as Regina wriggled, urging her on and silently pleading with her to go faster.
But Emma, for someone who had zero patience in day-to-day life, was determined to do this as slowly as possible. She dipped her head and pressed a kiss against the inside of Regina's thigh, then another, travelling higher and higher before moving across to the other side. Regina groaned and writhed, her hands fisting in the sheets beside her, and Emma grinned to herself, ignoring the frantic pounding in her chest and between her own legs as she moved.

Emma had been expecting Regina to grow impatient eventually. What she hadn't expected, however, was the softly pleading "Emma, please" that suddenly mewed from above her lowered head.

She looked up to find that Regina's chest was rising and falling rapidly with her breathless frustration, and Emma realised then that she'd been right about her: Regina was far too highly strung to not come apart completely when she was beneath the sheets.

And so Emma did exactly what she was hoping for: she pressed her mouth hotly against her cunt, letting her tongue flick out and capture her wetness before dragging it slowly upwards. Regina gasped, lifting her hips automatically, and Emma pushed them back down again. Tightening her arms around Regina's thighs, she shifted closer, letting her eyes flutter shut as she licked and sucked and absorbed every single one of Regina's moans.

When Regina came, she didn't make a noise. Instead, her back arched off the bed and her thighs clamped around Emma's head, her muscles trembling furiously against her ears. Emma looked up and watched the way Regina's head had been thrown back, her mouth open and gasping and her eyes clenched shut. She was always stunning, but right then, she was the most beautiful thing Emma had ever seen.

The second she had come down from her high, Emma started all over again, sliding two of her fingers into her soaked cunt and shivering when Regina wailed into the crook of her arm. One hand slipped into Emma's hair and gripped hard, pulling her face flat against her wet skin. Emma moaned to herself, closing her eyes, and fucked her slowly, firmly, pouring every shred of determination she had into it.

Regina came again, and then again, and Emma only moved from between her legs at all because a hand pushed against her forehead and forced her to. She was grinning as she rolled away, still half-tangled between Regina's thighs with a hand scrunched up in her hair.

"Well," Regina said eventually, sounding breathless. "That was worth the wait."

Emma closed her eyes, laughing to herself. "You only had to wait three dates."

"I've been wanting to fuck you since the moment I saw you in that bookstore," Regina said, and she spoke so matter-of-factly that Emma couldn't help but blush.

"Really?"

"Don't sound so modest," Regina said, her fingers starting to move through Emma's hair. Emma shivered as they scratched against her scalp. "You know how pretty you are."

Emma hesitated before saying, "Maybe. You're still out of my league, though."

Regina laughed before finally disentangling herself from Emma's sprawled limbs. "Don't worry. I'm out of everybody's league."

She climbed off the bed, and Emma was ashamed to realise that she already missed her. As Regina strolled across the room, headed towards the bathroom, Emma couldn't help but roll onto her stomach so she could stare after her. The self-assuredness in her voice and the cockiness of her
completely naked walk lit Emma up inside, and as soon as Regina was gone, she buried her face in the rumpled sheets.

*You are so fucking screwed,* she thought as the bathroom door clicked shut.
Chapter 13

A shiver woke Emma up. She opened her bleary eyes and groaned, feeling the cold breeze from the totally unnecessary air conditioning tickling against her shoulders. Throwing a hand out, she groped around for the covers and realised they had mostly disappeared from her side of the bed. When she looked over her shoulder, she found them all bundled around Regina's greedy body.

"Right," Emma muttered, grabbing hold of a corner and tugging it back towards her. For a second she thought she'd been successful, until she heard a groan of annoyance from beneath the comforter. It started pulling away from her again, and Emma snapped.

"Regina. You have all the covers and I'm freezing."

"Go get a blanket then," Regina mumbled, her face hidden.

"No," Emma said, taking hold of the nearest side and tugging harder. She managed to salvage approximately one quarter of the duvet and clung onto it as tight as possible, right before Regina took it back again.

"You're being a child," Regina grumbled, sounding marginally more awake now.

"You're the one who insisted on having the fucking A/C on and then took all the covers for herself," Emma snapped.

"Don't swear this early in the morning. And don't wake me up again."

"It's not that early."

"It's too early for your dramatics," Regina sighed. A hand slowly appeared from beneath her side of the comforter and grappled for one of the multiple cell phones on her nightstand. Then, "Oh, shit. I'm late."

And just like that, she was up and out of bed. Emma blinked after her, calling out, "I thought it was too early for swearing?"

Regina ignored her and disappeared into the bathroom. Emma used the opportunity to tug the covers towards her and wrap them around her icy body.

Regina reappeared 20 minutes later, the smell of her perfume following her out of the en suite. As she dug around in the closet for an outfit, Emma slowly sat upright, bringing the covers up to her chest to cover her naked body, and rested her arms on top of her knees.

"Are you going to be out all day?" she asked as Regina put on the most perfectly fitted black pants she'd had ever seen.

"Yes," Regina sighed, taking a white shirt off its hanger and pulling it on. Emma slowly sat upright, bringing the covers up to her chest to cover her naked body, and rested her arms on top of her knees. "Will you be alright on your own?"

"I'll be fine," Emma said. "I'll probably go do some exploring. When will you be back?"

"Around six, I imagine," Regina said, grabbing a pair of earrings off the vanity table and walking back to the bed. She sat down on the edge of the mattress and, as she was putting the diamonds in her ears, turned to look at Emma.
She laughed. "You look very well-fucked, Miss Swan."

Emma blushed, lifting a hand to smooth down her knotted hair. "I have no idea why that might be."

Regina shot her a knowing smile. "I might have an inkling."

Warmth pooled in Emma's stomach as she had a very vivid flashback of the night before. She wasn't entirely certain she wouldn't spend most of the morning lying in bed with her hand beneath the sheets, just remembering the way that Regina had moaned her name.

She sucked in her cheeks and let her gaze drop. "Last night was fun."

She was surprised by how soft Regina's voice was when she said, "Yes, it was. I'm glad you're here with me."

"Me too."

"I wish you could come with me now," Regina said, grimacing as she looked at her watch. "It's going to be an incredibly tedious day. But we'll have dinner together tonight, okay?"

"Okay," Emma said, hating herself for the dopey grin that was spreading across her face.

"And if you do go out, are you sure you know where you're going?" Regina asked, gathering up her purse and iPad and multiple smartphones.

"I'm sure I can work it out," Emma said. She didn't have international data on her cell plan so using CityMapper was a no-go, but if she could survive in New York for four years, she was certain she could handle a day in London.

"Do you want to use the driver?"

Emma snorted. "No, that's okay. I'm pretty sure I can handle the subway."

"Fine. Don't call it that, though – you'll have a mob of angry Londoners coming after you."

Emma just grinned back at her. With a sigh, Regina said. "I really have to go."

"Okay. Give them hell."

Regina turned to leave, then hesitated. She walked back towards the bed and leaned forwards, cupping Emma's face and giving her a long kiss that left her lips tingling.

When she pulled away, Emma wrinkled her nose. "I'm really sorry about my breath."

Regina just rolled her eyes.

"You're an idiot, Miss Swan," she said, heading for the door. "I'll see you later."

After trying and failing to get another hour's sleep, Emma had a shower and got dressed. Without Regina around, she felt like she was free to wear her normal clothes again, and yet when she caught sight of her jeans with the faded knees and T-shirts that had been thrown in the laundry one too many times, she hesitated. In the end, she settled for a pair of black jeans that were way too tight and a plain white shirt. It wasn't raining yet, but she suspected it probably would be any minute, so she put a hoodie on underneath her jacket and headed for the door.
After asking the receptionist for directions to the subway station, she walked down the quiet Belgravia street with her hands in her pockets. It was barely warm out, and she had to admit that she was glad – the stifling heat of New York had started to get on her nerves over the past few weeks, and it was nice to not have to worry about being a sweaty mess when she saw Regina again that evening.

Following the receptionist's instructions, she made her way onto the Piccadilly line and ended up in Covent Garden, where she had been told she would find some good designer stores. While Emma still hated shopping, especially when she was by herself, she wanted to get something nice to wear for dinner. Besides, she knew she had to get over her phobia eventually – it wasn't like the art events were going to get any less frequent, especially not now that she was finally finding her feet.

And so she awkwardly walked into Burberry, waiting for the burly security guard to immediately escort her back outside again, and began trailing the tips of her fingers over the delicate rails of clothing. After seeing just three or four price tags, she swallowed hard. Her allowance for the month was already running low, and as much as she wanted to look nice for Regina, she wasn't sure she could justify spending this much on it.

With an embarrassed nod to the sales assistant, she hurried back out and made her way back down the cobbled street.

After briefly considering calling Regina to ask whether Karen Millen was an acceptable store or not, she forced herself to walk inside. She began browsing the rails of clothes, which were expensive enough to make her eyes water but just about affordable based on the money she had left, and picked up a black satin pencil dress that was mercifully on sale. She pondered it, trying to remember whether she'd seen Regina in something like this yet – since she had no idea what she was doing and she couldn't really call Elsa for help every time she walked into a clothes store, she'd decided her best chance at getting this right was to stick to things that she knew ahead of time would be Regina-approved. Right now, that just meant buying stuff that Emma could picture Regina wearing herself.

But then her eye was caught by something else, and she paused. She put the dress back on its rail. There was a mannequin three feet away from her, and it was wearing a beautifully fitted black suit. Underneath the jacket was a shimmering white shirt with a low-cut neckline, and all at once, Emma felt a tight yearning in her stomach. She stepped towards it and reached out timidly for the price tag. But then she stopped herself.

No, the voice in her head said. Don't risk it.

She'd been in Regina's world for three weeks, and she hadn't seen a woman wearing pants to an event yet. That told her as much as she needed to know.

It broke her heart a little bit, but she turned away from the suit and headed back to the dress. She took it into the dressing room, more to make sure that it fitted than to see whether it actually suited her, and bought it without thinking too much.

Once that ordeal was over and done with, Emma spent the rest of her day leisurely walking through the area, trying to avoid doing anything too touristy so she wouldn't ruin her day with Regina tomorrow. The streets were crowded with Saturday shoppers and people pouring in and out of theatres, and Emma briefly wondered whether Regina seemed like the type of person who would like to see Matilda the Musical. She even stopped outside the box office to check whether they had a show on the following day. Then she remembered what her bank account currently looked like and she walked away quietly, clutching her expensive cardboard bag close to her body so no one would dent it as they rushed past.
She fell a little bit in love with London that day. It was like New York only shorter, more compressed, and warmer in sentiment if not in temperature. Although people were just as rude as they were back home, they at least had nicer accents when they called "Excuse me" over their shoulders. The sun was starting to come out for the first time since she'd arrived and for a blissful hour in the middle of the afternoon, she sat on the grass outside City Hall with her hoodie and jacket taken off. Starbucks was just as overpriced and overrated as it was in Manhattan, but she clutched a cup greedily, trying to remember when she had last bought a latte without having to get another for Ingrid as well.

It was nearly five o'clock when she realised she was somewhere near the base of the Shard with zero idea how to get back to the hotel. Holding her Karen Millen bag tighter, Emma rushed down the steps to the nearest Tube station and hoped that the map she found would make everything suddenly clear.

It didn't, but she took a gamble and decided to jump on the next Jubilee line train that was heading west. It wasn't until she'd been on it for 10 minutes that she realised she was heading north on the Northern line.

Swearing to herself, she got off at the next stop and headed up to the main concourse. The stations she'd been into so far had all been small and dingy, just like the ones back home, and she decided it wouldn't take long for her to work out where she'd gone wrong.

But she stepped out at the top of the stairs and found herself in the middle of Kings Cross station, surrounded on all sides by hoards of people rushing for trains or coffees or the Harry Potter gift shop. She froze, clutching her stupid cardboard bag to her stomach, and looked blindly around for something or someone who might help her.

She spotted a sign for an information desk and slowly started walking. It was only then that she realised Kings Cross was the biggest station in the entire fucking world, and she somehow managed to reach the opposite side without finding any kind of desk at all.

Dread started to rise up inside her. She'd only stepped off of American soil once before, and then she'd been accompanied by an entire press team who were loud and impossible to lose. This was the first time she'd ever headed out in a foreign country by herself, and the first thing she'd done was managed to get lost in the middle of a train station.

She saw another sign that told her she could actually get on a train to France if she just walked this way, and that was when she thought she might cry.

Then she felt a buzzing in her pocket and, swallowing down her embarrassment, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Emma, are you on your way back?" Regina's voice swam down the line at her.

"I... sort of," Emma said, moving over to the side of the walkway so that people would stop crashing into her. "Are you in the hotel?"

"Yes – my last meeting finished early so I've been back for a little while. Where are you? It sounds like you're in a ferry terminal."

"I'm..." she started to summon up the most plausible lie possible. Then with a sigh, she came clean. "I'm lost."

Regina paused before asking, "I thought you said you knew where you were going?"
"I did. I was fine on the way out," Emma mumbled. "But then I walked around too much and got on the wrong train and now I'm at Kings Cross and I don't know how to get back."

"You can get the Piccadilly line," Regina said, her voice surprisingly gentle.

"Which way?" Emma asked, and she hated herself even more when she realised she could hear the panic in her own voice.

Regina sighed. "Let me send the driver to come get you."

"I can do this myself, Regina," Emma snapped, then immediately regretted it when Regina went quiet. She swallowed. "I just... I've just never been—"

"Can you see a sign for the British Library?" Regina interrupted her frostily. Her tone had changed just as quickly as Emma's.

Emma looked around, scrubbing at her fizzing nose, and found a signpost. "Yeah."

"Go there. The driver will meet you in 15 minutes."

"But I can—"

"Now."

She hung up, and Emma wasn't surprised. She sounded like a fucking moron, and it wasn't like Regina was contractually obliged to deal with her in the same way that she was.

When she eventually found her way out of the station and towards the library, the car was already waiting for her. The driver threw a wary look at the creases in her forehead, but he didn't say a word as they drove back to the hotel.

She wasn't sure she wanted to go up to the room. Regina had sounded more pissed off than usual on the phone, and Emma didn't want to have to deal with her judgmental tone when she was trying to calm down with a cheap hotel Nespresso.

But the driver was looking expectantly in his rear-view mirror, and so Emma heaved herself out of the car with a sigh. She rode the whole way up to the room wishing that she'd never left to get that stupid fucking dress in the first place.

Regina was at the dining table when she walked in, glasses perched on her nose, her laptop open and a half-empty cup of tea sitting by her elbow. There was a notebook covered in her swooping script to her left and several balls of paper screwed up nearby. She looked up as soon as the door opened.

"Hey," she said, and she didn't sound so pissy anymore. "You made it back okay?"

Emma nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm not really sure what happened."

Regina looked back down at her computer. "We've all been there. It only dawned on me after we hung up that you probably don't have an international data plan."

"No," Emma said, dropping off her Karen Millen bag in the bedroom before heading to the couch. Her head was pounding.

"We should get you one, in that case," Regina said, still tapping away at her keyboard.

"What?"
"For the next time we go abroad. Do you know when your plan expires?"

"Um," Emma said, and now her throat hurt too. "I think it ran out a while ago. I couldn't aff— I never got around to getting a new one."

"I'll ask Tamara to get you something. The iPhone 8 is nice."

"You don't have to do that, Regina," Emma said, and her voice sounded impossibly small.

"I'm not being generous. I just don't want to lose you somewhere at the bottom of the Seine if I ever take you to Paris."

Emma's jaw wobbled, and she didn't reply. The pounding in her head was growing. She leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them, Regina was swivelled in her chair, watching her.

"What?" Emma asked.

"Are you okay?"

The question was soft and laced with genuine concern, and Emma's head snapped back up again in surprise.

"I'm fine," she said slowly. "Just tired. And embarrassed."

"And a bit grumpy," Regina helpfully supplied. Emma glared at her.

"I am not grumpy."

"You are," Regina said, taking her glasses off. "Did you have lunch?"

No. "Yeah."

"You're lying," Regina said, and Emma had no idea how she did that. "Tamara booked our table for eight, but I imagine they'll seat us early if I ask nicely."

"Are you capable of doing that?" Emma asked, yelping when a ball of paper flew towards her head.

"Shut up," Regina said. "Go and get ready."

"You're so bossy," Emma muttered, although the promise of food was already cheering her up. She began to walk across the room, but paused just as she reached the doorway. "Thanks for sending the car, by the way."

"You don't need to thank me for that," Regina said, not looking up from her screen. "You say thank you too much."

"It's polite."

"It's not necessary," Regina replied. "But you are welcome. Now go get ready. I'll be with you in a second."

Emma did as she was told, slipping into the bathroom for a shower. When she resurfaced, wrapped in her favourite fluffy robe, Regina was just walking into the bedroom. She spotted the shopping bag at once.
"You bought clothes?" she asked, her face lighting up. Emma groaned to herself.

"Yeah," she said, awkwardly reaching for the bag. "I wanted something for tonight, but I didn't... I wasn't really sure what to get."

"Let me see," Regina said, perching herself on the edge of the bed. Embarrassment swept over Emma's body like the shower she'd just stepped out of.

"It's nothing," she said, pulling out her purchase. Three weeks ago, this would have been the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen. Now, as she held it up against her body, all she could feel towards it was uncertainty.

Regina considered it, then said, "It's very elegant."

Emma's arms dropped. "You hate it."

"I don't hate it," Regina said. "It's lovely. I'm just surprised you chose it."

"Why?"

"You just have a different style when you're wearing your normal clothes," Regina said, and it was weird, but she almost sounded like she admired that. "But this is perfect, and you'll look beautiful at dinner."

Emma struggled to focus on the compliment, as wonderful as it was. Regina had already seen straight through her attempts to dress the part, and it was technically only date number four.

But she forced on a smile, because if she spent the whole evening sulking then she wouldn't make it to date number five. "Thanks. I hope so."

Regina beamed back at her. "I'll leave you to get ready."

She disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Emma clutching hold of a $200 dress that she was pretty sure she hated.

But then she caught sight of her sullen face in the mirror and shook herself. Snap out of it, Swan.

She was in a foreign city in a fancy hotel room with a beautiful woman, and she was about to be taken out for yet another Michelin-star dinner for free. She needed to get her shit together and stop moping – she was going to get dressed up and go out and have a great time with her fake girlfriend. And, just like that, a fizzle of excitement sparked up inside her stomach.

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Maybe Regina had noticed Emma's distinct lack of enthusiasm over the food she'd been served the previous night, or maybe she just fancied a change – either way, she'd chosen a restaurant that managed to serve normal food in actual, human-sized portions, in a blatant contradiction of its two Michelin stars. Emma dove into a plate of tortellini, making soft moaning sounds while Regina watched her in amusement.

"You're going to get sauce all down your nice dress," she pointed out.

Emma shrugged, struggling to stop herself from leaning directly into her plate. "Someone's got to make the big sacrifices."

Laughing, Regina continued cutting up her sea bass. Emma had spent a solid 10 minutes trying to persuade her to order some carbohydrates, but Regina was somehow even more stubborn than
Emma had given her credit for.

"Just because you were blessed with the natural figure of a baby giraffe doesn't mean we all were," she'd snapped at the time. Now, however, she was sizing up Emma's food with heavily lidded eyes.

"Just try some," Emma said, holding out a piece of pasta on her fork.

"No thank you."

"Regina, please? Don't be so difficult."

"I am the same amount of difficult as I've always been," Regina said, sitting back in her chair like she was trying to get as far away from the fork as possible. "Stop trying to force that onto me."

"Fine," Emma grumbled, putting it into her own mouth. "But you're getting dessert."

Regina smirked at her. "It's cute that you think you can boss me around."

"I can."

"You can try," Regina said. "I doubt you'll ever succeed."

Rolling her eyes, Emma said, "We'll talk about this again when you have the dessert menu in front of you."

A smile flickered across Regina's face as she looked back down at her plate. Emma didn't want to get too ahead of herself, but she thought it might be the happiest she'd seen her so far.

She pulled her chair closer to the table. "Did your meetings go okay today?"

Regina responded with a despondent wave of her fork. "They were fine. I'm just glad it's the weekend now."

"It was already the weekend," Emma pointed out, since it was Saturday. Regina laughed, but it was a humourless sound.

"The weekend is Sunday only," she said. "I don't remember the last time I had a Saturday off."

"You should try it. It's really nice."

"When you're not getting lost in Central London, that is," Regina said cheerfully, and Emma glared at her.

"I don't know if I made it clear earlier, but that's not something I want to re-live any time you need a cheap laugh."

But Regina was already laughing. "Come on, Emma. It's funny, I promise you."

Emma tried to scowl at her, but there was something all too infectious about Regina's dark chuckle. "Shut up."

"Anyway, did I not come to your rescue?" Regina asked, finally pushing her empty plate away from her. "Like the knight in shining armour I am?"

"Technically, your driver rescued me. Is he still here? Maybe I can finish off this date with him instead," Emma said, pretending to look around. When she looked back across the table, Regina's
eyes had narrowed.

"I don't think so."

Emma's face cracked into a gigantic grin. "Are you jealous?" she asked. She recognised the darkness in Regina's gaze from the night she'd caught her talking to Neal on Mr Gold's terrace, and it excited her just as much now as it did then.

Then she felt a hand touch her knee under the table, and she froze.

"Not jealous," Regina said, her fingers gently tracing the patch of skin that disappeared beneath Emma's dress. "Just not willing to share."

"Or even joke about sharing?"

"No," Regina said quite simply. "Maybe I should have mentioned before now that I have no sense of humour."

Emma shook her head, and all at once remembered the object that she'd brought out with her that night.

"Well," she said, grabbing her purse and putting it in her lap. "I have to hope that's not true."

"Why's that?"

"Because I got you a present, and it's so bad that I really need you to find it funny."

Regina's eyebrows shot up. "You got me a present?"

"Don't get too excited," Emma said, fishing around inside for the tacky two-dollar keychain she'd found at JFK. "I just saw it at the airport and it reminded me of you."

She pulled out the tiny plastic shoe and placed it in front of Regina's plate. For a second, Regina just stared at it, her expression flickering. Then her head tipped backwards and she laughed out loud, her shoulders rising up. Her touch left Emma's knee as she scooped the keychain up with both hands.

"Emma," she shook her head. "What on Earth is this supposed to be?"

"You were wearing red Louboutins the day we met."

Regina looked up at her like she'd just declared her undying love in the middle of the restaurant. "You remember?"

"Of course I remember. You made quite an impression."

Regina seemed to be immeasurably pleased by this fact. She looked back down at the keychain with a giant grin on her face.

"It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen," she said happily, putting it in her purse. "I love it."

Emma grinned back at her. "Just the reaction I was hoping for."

"You know, I don't remember the last time someone bought me a present," Regina said, and she sounded so casual about it that Emma thought she'd misheard her.

"Seriously?"
"Well, people buy me things all the time," Regina shrugged, reaching for her wine. "But it's usually just dinner, or something expensive to try and curry favour. It's never a present."

"Seriously?" Emma repeated. "What about on your birthday?"

"My father's dead, my mother sends me a card every year. She doesn't buy presents for any occasion unless I make the effort to go and see her, which I rarely do."

"And Henry?"

Regina's face softened. "Henry made me a bird house at school last year."

"That's cute. Except you live in Manhattan and probably don't have a garden."

"True," Regina said. "But he's 10 and doesn't exactly have disposable income."

"But your ex-husband," Emma said slowly, wary of the line she was treading. "Isn't it kind of his job to help with that?"

There was a long pause. Regina pressed her lips together.

"I suppose it should be, yes."

Emma knew exactly what that meant. "Tell me if I'm crossing a line, but he sounds like a grade A jag-off."

Regina snorted. "That's one way of putting it."

"Did Henry talk to you the way he does now before he went to live with his dad?"

It was a brutal question, and the second she asked it, she knew she shouldn't have. Regina slowly put her glass back down.

"That's none of your business."

"I know it's not. But it's a valid question."

"Emma," Regina said in her most dangerous voice. "We're having a nice time. Please don't ruin it."

Whenever someone said that to her, Emma's automatic reaction was to push back as hard as she could. But for once she decided to just let it lie instead.

"Fine," she said, leaning back in her chair. "I'll stop."

"Thank you," Regina said. She took a breath. "I do want dessert now, though."

At once, Emma was grinning. "Maybe that was my plan all along."

"Oh, Miss Swan. I've only known you for a few weeks, but even I know you're not smart enough for that."

Emma's mouth fell open in mock outrage. "I am so smart!"

"Not the kind of smart I'm talking about. You have no cunning."

"I do too."
"You didn't even want to use your new friendship with Dr Hopper to help me make some connections. You don't have a scheming bone in your body."

"And you do?"

"I am almost entirely made of them. It's why everyone dislikes me so much."

She sounded like she was joking, but Emma suspected there was something else behind it. She remembered Regina's argument with that woman at Gold's dinner party and hesitated.

"People don't dislike you."

"Oh, they do," Regina said. "But that's alright. You can't be worried about pleasing everyone if you want to get ahead."

It was something that Emma had heard her say many times before, but it felt more jarring this time. Still, after Regina's response to her earlier question, it was probably easier not to start interrogating her on it.

The waiter arrived to collect their plates, and before he could even ask the question, Regina said to him, "Dessert menus. Two of them." He walked off with his eyebrows raised, and Emma knew there was a distinct possibility that he was going to spit in their final courses.

When he returned with the menus, Regina buried her nose inside hers. Emma smirked at her from behind her own.

"What are you getting?" Regina asked, and her voice sounded so small and excited that Emma wanted to lean across the table and kiss her right there.

She considered it for a moment before saying, "Maybe the chocolate pot. I'm not even hungry anymore but that sounds dirty as hell."

Regina laughed. "It does. I might get the tarte tatin."

"That's barely a dessert," Emma protested. "You're just ordering fruit."

"Speaking of which, when was the last time you had a vegetable?"

"Don't change the subject," Emma said, because she didn't know the answer to that and she wasn't sure she wanted to think about it. "Why don't you get something a bit more exciting?"

"Because I like tarte tatin, and because I'm already going to be working this off for the rest of the week."

Emma looked down at Regina's tiny waist and frowned. "I think you might have body dysmorphia."

"Don't be so dramatic," Regina said. "If you carry on, then I won't order anything at all."

Emma mimed locking her mouth and throwing a key over her shoulder. Then she had to open it again as soon as the waiter returned.

As they waited for their desserts to arrive, Emma felt Regina's leg bump against hers when she crossed them over. She didn't move it away again, or say sorry – instead, she kept her shin resting against Emma's, watching her with a twist of her lips like she was only doing it because she wanted her to ask her to stop.
The feeling of Regina's skin against hers made Emma go hot and prickly all over, but she didn't react. They kept talking about what touristic sites they planned to visit the next day, until Regina's leg shifted upwards and openly stroked up the side of Emma's.

Emma narrowed her eyes. She was well aware that asking Regina if she knew that it was her leg she was touching would amount to her losing this game, so she stayed quiet. Regina smirked at her. Apparently three glasses of wine was her limit before she became frisky.

Their desserts arrived, and as Emma bent her head over her plate, she felt Regina's leg slip between her own.

"Regina," she said, her cheeks going hot. "Stop that."

"I'm not doing anything."

"Yes you are. Eat your dessert," Emma said, gesturing towards the apple tart that did actually look kind of delicious. When she glanced back up, Regina was watching her levelly, her leg pressed hard against the inside of Emma's thigh. The look in her eye told her that there was only one thing she was interesting in eating up right then.

"Eat that, or I'm sleeping on the couch," Emma said, sounding much firmer than she felt. The corners of Regina's mouth twitched.

"I doubt it's very comfortable."

"No, but at least I won't have to deal with your cover-stealing."

"I do not steal the covers," Regina said, finally digging into her food. Her leg slipped further between Emma's.

"I beg to differ," Emma said right before she sighed around a mouthful of chocolate. "You need to try this."

"I don't eat chocolate," Regina said, glancing up and then smirking. "But I must say, you look very cute with it on your face."

"What? Where?" Emma asked, immediately scrubbing at her cheek. Regina sighed, reaching out a hand.

"Come here."

Emma leaned over the table, and Regina slowly wiped away the dot of chocolate from her skin. It was such a gentle touch that her stomach melted like the dessert sitting in front of her.

Regina looked back at her with dark eyes. She didn't smile. "Do you still want to sleep on the couch?"

They stumbled through the door to their room with their bodies already wrapped around each other. Emma couldn't see where she was going, but she heard the door slam shut behind her as she ricocheted into a wall, her hip banging against plaster. She didn't stop kissing Regina though – the room could have caught fire and she probably wouldn't have been able to.

Regina was peeling her jacket off of her, and Emma wriggled to try and help. It dropped to the floor and then Regina's followed. When Emma slid her hands into Regina's hair, a half-dozen pins fell
Emma thought she was being pushed towards the bedroom, but it was hard to tell when her eyes were squeezed shut and her lips were forced up against Regina's. But then she felt the corner of something cold and leathery against the back of her legs, and she toppled backwards onto the sofa with a squeal.

Regina dove down after her, pinning her against the cushions. Emma giggled between kisses. "Do I really have to sleep here tonight?"

"Absolutely," Regina bit out as she dragged herself away from Emma's mouth. "But we may as well test how comfortable it is first."

Emma wrenched her wrists free from Regina's grip and grabbed the back of her neck, pulling her down for another kiss. Regina's tongue was relentless as it dove into her mouth, and she could hear herself gasping from the feeling of it. She tilted her head back to give her deeper access and felt Regina smirk against her lips.

"I have to say," she murmured, pulling away from Emma's mouth and instead focusing her attention on landing a series of languid kisses along her stretched-out throat. "It seems fine so far."

"Keep kissing me," Emma insisted, sliding her thigh between Regina's legs. "Just to be sure."

Regina didn't need to be told twice. Tangling her fingers in Emma's hair, she abandoned her throat and began to slowly move their lips together again. She'd gone from frenzied to gentle in the space of 10 seconds and it just made Emma feel even more breathless.

She slid her hands around Regina's waist and pulled her down against her, crushing their bodies together. Regina wriggled against her raised thigh, rolling her hips forward and then sighing into Emma's mouth as the pleasure shot through her.

"I could kiss you forever," Emma gasped, pulling away. Regina smiled down at her.

"I wouldn't be opposed to that either," she said, sitting upright. "Although, right now, I'd rather take your panties off."

Emma moaned, lifting her hips so Regina could curl her fingers through the fabric and tug them from her body. As the underwear fell to the floor, Regina lowered herself down between Emma's legs, pushing her dress up over her hips.

"How soundproof do you think this room is?" she asked conversationally, trailing the tips of her fingers over Emma's wet skin. Emma trembled, her hands trying and failing to grab hold of the slippery material of the couch.

"I don't know," she panted, her hips wriggling. Regina grabbed hold of them with both hands and held them down, her stern gaze shooting up to stare Emma into submission.

"Well," she continued when Emma was finally lying still again. Emma's chest was frantically rising and falling, and the feeling that she couldn't catch her breath was only made worse by the tightness of her new dress. All the while, Regina seemed content to simply lie between her legs, waiting for the right moment before she dove in. "I'm certainly interested to find out."

"Regina," Emma moaned, arching her back. She could feel her own wetness trickling down her skin, headed for the couch. "Please."
When Regina laughed, Emma felt it in a sharp burst of air against her pussy. She nearly screamed. She lifted one arm and threw it over her face, trying to hide her desperation from Regina even though it was far, far too late for that.

"Look at me, Emma," Regina commanded, and Emma did so automatically, her eyes wet and wide. But then Regina smiled at her, and it was all worth it.

"Much better," she murmured, and then finally let her mouth drop between Emma's legs. Emma couldn't help the grateful whimper that escaped her as she felt Regina's tongue skimming over her clit, the very tip of it catching her in just the right way as she slid her fingers slowly inside.

Emma had never been noisy in bed before. She'd never had the need to be. But now she felt so frazzled, so breathless and overwhelmed by every single sensation in her stupid body, she couldn't help the whining and panting and moaning noises that were slipping out of her. Regina didn't seem to mind – if anything, they seemed to be spurring her on. Emma could feel the curve of her self-satisfied smirk as she continued to lick and suck, her fingers driving in faster and filling Emma up to within an inch of her sanity.

Sweat was trickling down Emma's back when she came with a loud cry that almost sounded like a howl. Her hips arched off the couch and Regina pushed them back down, not slowing her fingers until a hand reached down and forced them to.

"Shit, shit," Emma gasped, staring up at the ceiling. There was a thick drumming sound in her ears and she couldn't tell if it was coming from her heart or her clit.

Regina fell still, leaning her head against the inside of Emma's thigh. She didn't speak for once – instead, she just watched as Emma tried to catch her breath with her hands opening and closing against the leather couch.

Eventually, Emma lifted her head and blurted out, "Fuck."

The sound of Regina's laugh was even better when it was coming from between her legs. She slowly got to her knees and crawled back on top of Emma, straddling herself directly over her bare cunt.

"Satisfied?" Regina asked. After a pause, she added, "With the couch, I mean."

Emma laughed, placing her hands on top of Regina's thighs. "Yeah. It feels just fine to me."

"Good," Regina said. She began to slowly roll her hips, the fabric of her panties grazing against Emma's pelvis. Emma's laughter stopped. "So does this, incidentally."

Emma nodded, digging her fingers into Regina's legs, as she watched her grinding against her. Her dark hair grazed over her shoulders as she tipped her head back, her hands squeezing Emma's breasts as she picked up speed.

Soft little gasps started to fall from her lips as she rocked, her hips rolling harder against Emma's, and Emma couldn't help but moan along with her. She looked like a queen sitting on top of her, her breaths becoming shorter and quicker, and though she wasn't looking down, it was obvious that she knew she held Emma's undivided attention. She thrived on being the only thing people wanted to look at, and with Emma's green eyes staring, mesmerised and devoted, up at her, her arousal was growing rapidly.

God, Emma wanted to taste it.

She suddenly clamped her hands over Regina's hips, forcing her to stop moving. When her head
tipped forwards once more, dark eyes looking confusedly down at her, Emma said, "Stay where you are."

Then she began to slide down the couch, easing her body underneath Regina's. Regina realised what she was doing at once and raised herself up, giving her more room, until Emma was positioned with her face directly below Regina's pussy.

Regina smirked down at her, her chest rising and falling, and Emma went warm with knowing that she'd done something to impress her. When Emma's hands slid up the backs of her thighs and gently cupped her ass, Regina lowered herself down, pulling her panties to one side.

Emma moaned the second she felt the soaked skin touching her lips. The sticky, smoky taste of her was already her favourite thing on God's green Earth, and she gripped Regina's ass harder, pulling her flat against her face.

Regina gasped, grabbing hold of the couch as Emma's tongue slid inside her, then around her, then through her. Her thighs trembled as her climax started to creep towards her. Emma wanted so desperately to close her eyes and absorb every dark, sensual second of this, but there was no way her body was letting her miss the sight of Regina writhing around on top of her, her hips rolling forwards so she could grind her cunt against Emma's tongue.

She came with a sharp gasp, falling forwards and slapping her hands against the cushions above Emma's head. Emma could feel her thighs quivering against the sides of her face and she never wanted them to stop, so she kept licking, slowly dragging her tongue through Regina's wetness until she cried out.

"Stop, stop," she said, half laughing and half panting, as she shifted backwards. Emma grinned up at her. Regina took one look at the wetness that was shimmering around her lips and groaned, diving forwards to kiss it off of her.

They were both breathless when she pulled back. Emma released a shaky sigh. "Wow."

"Yes," Regina said, reaching out to smooth Emma's hair away from her face. "I agree."

Emma could have stayed there forever, with Regina's wet pussy plastered against the fabric of her dress and her long fingers teasing through her hairline. She laughed and said, "The couch isn't so bad, actually."

Regina smirked back at her. "It's not. But I think I'd still like you to sleep in the bed with me."

"Oh really?"

"Yes," Regina said, climbing off the sofa and pulling her dress back down. She held out a hand. "I think we should probably go there now, actually."

Emma pushed herself up onto her elbows. "Probably."

She took Regina's hand and let herself be pulled into the next room, her thighs wet and sticking together as she moved. She didn't take her eyes off Regina as they walked, because she was missing her already, even though she'd only just stopped touching her.

The second the bedroom door shut behind them, their bodies curled together again. Emma's fingers tangled in Regina's hair and Regina's hands slid around Emma's waist, pulling them impossibly close together as they tumbled towards the bed.
A/N: I've tentatively rejoined the world of Twitter, so if any of you want to follow me (I'll follow you back!), you can find me at @_starthatburn
Chapter 14

As Emma’s last full day in London steamed into view, she found herself in the back of the car being driven to Mayfair. It was a short journey and she’d considered suggesting that they walk there instead, but that seemed like the sort of thing that Regina would find completely reprehensible. Besides, Emma lived in a city where driving was a novelty and even Ubers were too expensive for her unless it was three days after payday, so she allowed herself a minute to sit back and enjoy being couriered around for once.

Regina's London gallery looked almost identical to her New York one. When they pulled up outside, Emma stared up at the sharp golden lettering above the door and smiled, because it was obvious that Regina knew what worked and liked to stick with the things that did.

Emma let herself be guided inside. The interior was also similar to the gallery she'd been in before, although it was smaller and had higher ceilings. Regina flicked on the lights, and Emma realised she was surrounded by pictures of orchids on all sides. They had been created with bright, almost neon paints, and even Emma took a step closer so that she could examine the collection properly.

"Do you like them?" Regina asked, peering over her shoulder.

Emma hesitated. "I think so," she said, because she wasn't going to start bullshitting about her artistic knowledge in front of the one person who would be able to catch her out. "They're nice, but how can you tell if they're any good?"

"You just get an instinct for these things," Regina said.

"Right. It must suck though, when you buy up a collection that you really like and then in a few years you have to sell it off again."

"I try not to think too much about whether I like them or not. If I did, I'd end up hoarding them all. It's more important to see their value than their personal appeal."

"So what value did you see in these?" Emma asked.

"Well. First of all, there had been a trend for very dark, busy paintings when I saw these, so I knew that if I waited long enough, a demand for much brighter works would come back around."

"And what happens if you're wrong?"

"I'm never wrong."

"But if you were?" Emma persisted.

"One of the beautiful things about this trade is that if you wait long enough, certain trends always come back around," Regina said. "So let's say the market for paintings like these didn't open up now, like I suspected it would – it would happen eventually. I'd have to wait a bit longer before I displayed these ones, but I'd end up selling plenty of others in the meantime."

Emma smiled, but something was heavy in her throat. "I guess as long as you've got the money to buy them in the first place, it'll all work out okay."

"Pretty much," Regina said, and once again there were inches and entire worlds separating them. "But with these ones I lucked out, because most of them got sold within a week of the exhibition
opening. We'll keep them on display for another week or two to sell the stragglers, and then we'll move onto something else."

Emma walked away from the painting they'd been discussing and approached another. Regina followed her, staying close to her elbow, and when Emma asked a tentative question about it, Regina was all too happy to answer it for her.

Emma didn't care about art – she wasn't sure she ever would – but she could listen to Regina talk about it all day long. Her voice sounded softer when she spoke about paintings and it was a lovely, vulnerable side to her that she saw so very rarely. She found herself thinking up new questions just so she could listen to it some more.

But eventually, as it usually did, Regina's phone started ringing. She picked it up with a sigh. "John. You'd better have some good news for me."

She walked off then, her voice fading away as she strolled into the back room, and Emma continued walking around by herself. Most of the paintings had 'sold' labels stuck below them, but the two or three that were still up for sale didn't have prices. That told Emma all she needed to know.

She was walking around by herself for some time before she heard the sound of clipped footsteps approaching her again. She turned towards the door, already smiling.

"So," she started. "Now that we're moving onto the touristy stuff – what are the chances of you coming and trying on costumes in the London Dungeon with me?" Then she saw the look of fury that was clouding Regina's face, and her smile dropped again.

"We have to go," Regina snapped, collecting her purse and throwing her phone inside.

"Where?"

"I'm taking you back to the hotel," Regina said, already headed for the front door. "I have something I need to deal with."

"Oh. Can I help?" Emma asked, trotting after her.

"I don't know – can you help me win back a $5 million deal that one of my employees just destroyed?"

Emma nearly crashed into the wall. "$5 million?"

"I didn't stutter, Miss Swan. Now hurry up."

Emma walked through the open door with her cheeks prickling. Regina didn't talk to her again as she locked up the gallery, then stormed over to the waiting car.

The drive was painful and silent, punctuated only by Regina furiously tapping at her phone screen. Eventually Emma couldn't stand it any longer and quietly asked, "How did he lose so much money?"

Regina sighed, a deep and long-suffering sound, and said, "The buyer had all but agreed to buy a collection from us. He'd agreed to $5 million. All John had to do was go over there and get him to sign the damn contract."

Emma swallowed. "But maybe the buyer just changed his mind? It might not be—"
"I don't care what the reasons were, Emma," Regina barked. Emma shrank back in her seat, and that was the last time they spoke on the drive.

As they pulled up outside the hotel, Regina didn't budge. Her eyes were glued to her phone as she said, "I'll be back later. If you go out, please don't get lost again."

It was a low fucking blow even for her, and so Emma climbed out and slammed the door behind her without saying a word. The car was already driving off before she'd even made it to the foyer.

When Emma was back in their silent hotel room, she was bristling with annoyance and resentment and a little bit of shock. It was scary how quickly Regina could snap from joyful and laughing to hissing harsh words down a phone, and Emma was starting to realise just what she'd been talking about in her New York gallery when she'd warned her over what unpleasant company she could be.

But now it was only just lunchtime and Emma was stuck by herself in a soulless hotel room. She knew she could go out, but she didn't want to – not after what had happened yesterday. If she got lost again she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle the humiliation.

So instead she began slowly packing for her flight the next morning, because there was nothing else to do and she had to assume they wouldn't be going out for another romantic dinner before she left. When that was done, she stood aimlessly in the centre of the living room for a while, before settling down in front of the TV so she could try and figure out what everyone's obsession with Downton Abbey was.

Five hours passed by incredibly slowly when she couldn't stop looking at the clock.

She didn't realise her eyes had closed until she heard footsteps approaching the room. Sitting bolt upright, Emma turned the volume down on the TV and rubbed her eyes. When the door opened, her heart sunk a little bit.

Regina was wearing a sour expression that reminded Emma of the time she'd accidentally bought Ingrid a whole milk latte. She didn't look up as she kicked her shoes off, leaving them sprawled across the entranceway.

Taking a breath, Emma said, "Hey."

Regina looked up then, and immediately narrowed her eyes. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

The sun was still up and the room barely counted as being gloomy, but Emma knew when someone simply wanted to pick a fight. She forced a smile. "I fell asleep."

"Well. I'm glad you've been having a relaxing afternoon," Regina scoffed, making her way over to the kitchen table. She dropped her purse on it with a clatter.

Emma didn't want to ask, but she knew that anger was bubbling up inside Regina's tightly wound frame and it needed releasing somehow. "How did it go?"

Regina sighed with the force of a steam engine. "How do you think it went? We couldn't save the contract. I'm out $5 million."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Yes, me too."
"But someone else will buy it, won't they?" Emma asked. She wanted to get up and touch Regina's arm, to try and lure her back into the room, but there was something so brittle about the way she was standing that Emma thought touching her might make her snap. "This sucks, but I bet this happens a lot, doesn't it?"

Even she was shocked by the ferocity of Regina's glare when she turned around. "This is my life, Miss Swan. I have to fix this, not you. Don't start weighing in on things you know nothing about."

"I was trying to be helpful," Emma said. "What do you want me to do, fall to the ground sobbing about how your livelihood is in flames?"

"I don't care what you do. You're no help to me either way."

"Oh, cry me a river," Emma said, her patience running out with the speed of a lightning strike. She stood up so that Regina no longer towered over her. "So you didn't earn some extra money. Big deal. You have plenty of it anyway, and you didn't even lose anything. This time next week someone else will have bought the paintings instead and you'll be sitting in your office feeling pretty fucking pleased with yourself."

"Don't swear at me," Regina spat. "I don't pay you to talk to me like that."

"Tough luck, because that wasn't part of the contract and I can talk to you how I fucking like."

She could see Regina's face darkening, and it was weirdly making her feel better. She'd been on her best behaviour for weeks, working up a stress knot in her stomach worrying over how long it would take for Regina to realise that she'd made a horrible mistake hiring her. Now that they were finally coming to blows, it was much easier to not care anymore.

"You're obnoxious," Regina said, turning away from her and making her way towards the fridge. "Don't speak to me again."

"What, ever?"

"Until I'm damn well ready to listen to you," Regina snapped back at her, grabbing a bottle of champagne that Emma already knew would add an extra $200 to their bill. She didn't bother to find a glass before she stalked towards the bathroom. "And if you wanted to go out and get lost now, I wouldn't be so bothered this time."

"Great idea. Maybe I'll take the driver who you get so pissed off about me talking to," Emma called after her, but it didn't work. Regina was too mad to be jealous, and all she got for her efforts was a door slamming in her face.

Emma collapsed back onto the couch with a strangled groan. Her hands were shaking from anger, and she stuffed them beneath her thighs while she tried to take some deep breaths. From the bathroom, she could hear the bath starting to run. God, she wanted to go into the kitchen and put the hot water on full blast just to piss her off even more.

Instead, she walked out onto the terrace and forced herself to calm down. It took a long time, because she was used to grabbing a bottle of tequila the second she felt her blood pressure starting to rise and she hadn't had the forward thinking to pick up any of that during her disastrous jaunt to Covent Garden the day before.

She leaned against the low brick wall that served as a railing and took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on the sun that was only just beginning to set behind the immaculate trees that lined the street. She decided then that no matter how pissy Regina still was when she finally emerged from the
bathroom, Emma wouldn't let this ruin her weekend. This might be the only time she ever came to London, and she wasn't going to let a toddler in her mid-thirties ruin it for her.

Still, she thought, it would have been nice to go out for dinner on her last night.

When she went back into the living room, it was 45 minutes later and Regina still hadn't reappeared. Emma hadn't had lunch and she was starving, and the thought of going out to a restaurant by herself was too depressing to comprehend. Instead, she sat down with a huff and fished out the room service menu, knowing full well that she had to order Regina something too but desperately wishing that she could leave her to starve instead.

It was probably the knock at the door that lured Regina out of her funk, because when Emma returned to the room carrying a tray laden with food, the bathroom door finally swung open. Emma ignored it, sitting down cross-legged on the couch and tugging a plate into her lap.

Regina wandered out of the bathroom wrapped in a robe with a mostly empty bottle of champagne dangling from her hand. "Did you order dinner?"

"Yes," Emma said, not looking up. She could feel Regina's hesitation, which either meant she was sorry or she was drunk. Either way, Emma was still the winner.

"Did you order for me too?"

"I got us both burgers," Emma said. It was a petty thing to do, but she'd loved every second of it. Even now, she could sense Regina's disgust at the thought of putting something so greasy into her mouth.

Still, she walked slowly towards the couch and sat down, leaving a metre of space between her and Emma. She didn't say thank you as she slowly pulled her plate towards her, regarding the most expensive burger Emma had ever ordered with a lot more suspicion than was strictly necessary.

Emma had been watching TV before the food arrived, which was the only thing stopping them from sitting in complete, unbearable silence. She wanted a drink, but the bottle of champagne sitting at Regina's end of the coffee table barely had a dribble left in it and she wasn't brave enough to just go and help herself from the minibar. So she ate quietly, doing everything she could not to look at Regina, and wondered which one of them would cave first.

She was more surprised than she was pleased when she won.

"This is actually very good," Regina said, staring down at the burger like it had tricked her.

"I know," Emma said, still not looking at her.

Regina sighed. "Don't be pouty."

"I'm not being pouty. I'm eating. And watching TV."

Regina followed her gaze to the television, which was showing a commercial for a hardware store. "Yes, well. I can see why that would need all your concentration."

Finally, Emma glared at her. "Is that how this is going to be? You take your annoyance out on me and storm off, then waltz back in like nothing ever happened?"

Regina was too busy nibbling at a French fry to give her a response. She just shrugged.
"Regina," Emma snapped. "I know you've just thrown back a bottle of Bollinger, but could you try and give me a proper answer?"

"Will you go and get a drink?" Regina sighed.

"Why?"

"You need to calm down."

"You can't get me drunk just so I won't be mad at you anymore."

"I really don't see why not," Regina said, getting up and going to retrieve another bottle from the fridge.

"Because it's manipulative."

"How many times do I have to tell you that that's not an insult?" Regina popped open the bottle and dumped it and two glasses in front of Emma. She returned to her seat, sitting marginally closer than she had been a moment ago, and carried on working through her food.

Emma sighed. "I just don't think it's fair for you to use me as your own personal punching bag and then not even apologise for it."

That was Regina's cue to say sorry, and they both knew it. But instead she just looked at her, considering the sharp downturn in the corners of her mouth. "It was just a fight, Emma. Don't get so caught up in it. I assure you there will be plenty more."

Making a grab for the champagne bottle and pouring herself a much-too-full glass, Emma grumbled, "That's definitely something to look forward to."

"Look," Regina said briskly. "We yelled at each other. I personally feel much better. Don't you?"

She did, but there was absolutely no way she was going to admit that. "No."

"Emma," Regina sighed, drawing out her name like she was trailing a silk scarf through her fingers. "Don't be like that."

"Be like what? The only person in your life who's not willing to put up with you when you're being a bitch?"

She was dangerously close to yelling again, but weirdly Regina didn't seem to mind. She was watching her with the tiniest of smirks on her face, and Emma couldn't tell if it was because she found her anger amusing or slightly impressive.

"No," she said, tilting her head to one side. "Being mad at me when I want us to be friends again."

Emma dumped her half-eaten burger onto the coffee table. "You are impossible, you know that?"

Regina followed suit, abandoning her food and taking a long draught of champagne straight out of the bottle. She didn't break eye contact the whole time.

"I've been told," she said as she pulled the bottle away from her lips again. Once she was done with it, she began to shift down the couch. Her robe was starting to fall open and Emma forced herself not to look down.

"Regina. That's not going to work."
"What isn't?" Regina asked, reaching her side and tucking a curl behind her ear.

"This. I'm mad at you. You can't flirt your way out of it."

But Regina was already leaning into her ear, a wicked smile on her face. "Can you at least let me try?"

Emma shivered. Regina's voice was low and seductive as her hands slid up to rest possessively on Emma's shoulders. When she hooked one around her neck, pulling her closer, Emma didn't resist, although she knew she had every right to.

"Come on," Regina murmured in her ear. "It's our last night together, after all."

Emma squeezed her eyes shut. "I know that."

There was a shift in pressure beside her, and before she could do anything to stop it happening, Regina was crawling into her lap, her hands sliding around the back of her neck.

"You're not going to leave me here alone while you're still mad at me, are you?"

It was another question that Emma recognised as only having one correct answer. She kept her eyes closed, knowing that the mere sight of Regina straddled on top of her would send what little was left of her resolve flying out the window.

"Maybe."

"I think I should persuade you otherwise," Regina said, pressing her mouth against Emma's ear. She smelled of perfume and bubble bath and a little bit like French fries, which was turning Emma on more than it probably should do. She hated herself when she lifted her hands and slipped them beneath Regina's robe to rest on her thighs.

Regina wriggled contentedly on top of her, her mouth working over Emma's ear. "Are you going to miss me this week?"

"No," Emma said, sounding unconvincing even to her own ears.

"Don't lie to me," Regina murmured, and Emma could tell she was smiling. "Tell me the truth."

Her fingers were creeping under the neckline of Emma's shirt, stroking over her shoulders and collarbone. Emma breathed out a deep sigh of resignation.

"...yes."

"I thought so," Regina said, and God, she was almost purring. She rolled her hips once more, settling herself more firmly in Emma's lap, and Emma knew that her robe must be completely open by now. "There's no shame in admitting that."

Emma snorted. "You really are obnoxious."

"I know," Regina replied, catching Emma's earlobe with her teeth. Her hands pulled out from under Emma's shirt and slid down, cupping her breasts just firmly enough to make Emma moan.

When Emma still didn't look up, Regina reached down and grabbed hold of her wrists. She brought them up, placing Emma's hands against her own chest, and when Emma felt bare skin beneath her fingers, her eyes finally snapped open.
Apparently that was all Regina had been waiting for, because the second she had Emma's devoted eyes looking up at her, she dove forwards and kissed her hard. Emma squeezed on her breasts automatically, relishing the gasp she coaxed out of her, and tilted her head back so that Regina's tongue could slide deeper into her mouth.

Regina seemed to pour down onto her as she kissed her, her hair falling forwards and tickling Emma's forehead and cheeks. She held tightly onto her neck, holding her in position, as she rolled her hips forward, dragging her naked body against Emma's abdomen.

All of Emma's earlier fury disappeared when she felt those hands slide downwards and pop open her jeans. She held her breath, then shakily released it when Regina's fingers slid into her underwear.

"Does fighting turn you on, Miss Swan?" Regina muttered against her ear, so proud of herself when she felt just how wet Emma was. Emma groaned, lifting her hips to give Regina better access, and shook her head.

"No?" Regina asked, sliding two fingers excruciatingly slowly inside her. Emma's entire body had gone rigid with anticipation, and she chuckled at the feel of it. "I think you might be lying again."

And Emma was, because yelling at Regina had gotten her blood up and now there was only one thing that could bring it back down again. She trembled beneath her, willing Regina to fuck her harder, but tonight she seemed intent on taking her sweet time.

"I love feeling this," Regina whispered, her smoky voice setting Emma's heart pounding. "You get so beautifully wet for me."

Emma moaned, leaning her forehead against Regina's shoulder. She was trying to hide her face, because Regina's dirty little words did more to her than she'd ever admit out loud, and even now she could feel her cheeks starting to go pink. But Regina knew exactly what she was doing, and what effect she had on other people, and so she kept on going, muttering the most wonderfully filthy things in Emma's ear until was writhing about beneath her, her breathing coming in short, desperate bursts.

"You think I don't know that you're going to spend the rest of your week fantasising about this?" she purred, her spare hand caressing Emma's throat, pressing just hard enough to make her head pound. "Sitting at your desk, wriggling in those tight little jeans of yours, feeling your panties getting soaked as you remember what it felt like to come all over my fingers?"

Emma came right then, crying out with her teeth digging into Regina's bare shoulder and her hands holding her body tight against her. As she caught her breath, Regina pulled her fingers free of her jeans and placed them on Emma's throat instead. She kissed every wet fingerprint she left behind, gently sucking the stickiness off of Emma's skin and moaning at the taste of it. Emma could feel a hickey brewing and she did absolutely nothing to stop it, because the feeling of Regina's lips on her neck was making her breathless and right then all she could think about was how glad she would be to have a mark to remember this by when she was back in New York.

When she had finally crashed back down to Earth, Emma dipped her mouth against Regina's exposed body and started peppering kisses across her naked chest. Regina leaned back to give her more room and sighed happily when Emma caught her nipple in her mouth, lavishing it with her tongue and gently tugging it between her teeth. After a moment, Regina shrugged the robe off of her body and let it fall to the floor, leaving her completely naked in Emma's lap. Emma wrapped her arms around her narrow waist and pulling her closer, lifting her chin so she could catch Regina's mouth. The second Regina wound her arms back around her neck, Emma tugged her hard against her body and slid off the couch entirely. Regina shrieked as Emma got onto her knees and lowered
her down to the floor.

"Don't do that again," Regina gasped as soon as she was safely delivered onto the carpet.

"Why not? I didn't drop you," Emma protested, dipping her head and kissing her throat.

Regina moaned softly. "I know you didn't, but you still startled me."

"I'm really sorry about that," Emma murmured against her skin, sliding lower down her body. "Let me try and make it up to you."

Regina didn't respond, because Emma was already settling down between her legs, busily pressing kisses all over her stomach and ribs. Regina's legs spread further apart, giving her room to crawl further down, and when Emma was lying flat on the carpet, her mouth in line with Regina's cunt, her legs shifted over Emma's shoulders instead. She crossed her ankles against her spine and used them to hold Emma tight against her.

It had only been two days, and yet Emma already knew that her favourite place in the world was lying between Regina's thighs. She made the most un-Regina noises when she felt Emma's tongue swirling over her clit – soft moans and faint little whimpers – and Emma just wanted to drown in all of it. She would have stayed there all night long – all Regina had to do was ask.

But she was barely down there for two minutes before Regina's back started arching up off the carpet, her fingers reaching down to fist in Emma's hair. Maybe it was the champagne or maybe it was the leftover exhilaration from fighting, but her orgasm seems to be creeping up on her with the speed of a tsunami. When she came over Emma's tongue, her desperate howl of pleasure told Emma it had the same force as one, too.

Emma had to slow disentangle herself from Regina's greedy arms and legs so she could sit upright. With a wobbly sigh, she grabbed her glass and drank its contents down in one.

Regina was watching her from the floor, her legs still spread and her chest flushed. She waited until Emma had finished drinking, and then she gestured for her to pass the champagne.

Emma watched as she propped herself up on one elbow, taking a long drink from the bottle. Some part of her wanted to slap it out of her hand just so she could kiss her again.

"So," Regina said eventually. She was smirking. "Do you forgive me now?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "You never actually apologised."

"No, and you should probably stop expecting me to. But you forgive me anyway," Regina said. She waited for Emma to stand up, then held out a hand so she could be pulled up off the floor. "Don't you?"

Regina seemed smaller than normal, naked when Emma was fully clothed, with her hair all messed up at the back. When Emma reached out a hand to tug her forwards, Regina melted into her kiss with a grateful sigh.

"Yes," Emma said, sitting back down on the couch. "But you're still an asshole."

Regina smiled, wrapping herself back up in her robe before joining her on the sofa. As she settled down, she slid her bare legs across Emma's lap. Emma wrapped her fingers around her ankles without thinking.
"Are you going to finish your food?" she asked. Regina shook her head.

"That just satisfied me in a way food never can," she said, and Emma smirked to herself.

"We're two very different people," she replied, reaching over and grabbing the rest of her burger. Regina rolled her eyes when she found her shins being used as Emma's new table, but she didn't complain.

"We are," Regina agreed, lifting the champagne bottle to her lips once more. "I don't necessarily mind that, though."

Emma watched her as she drank. Even without make up, without jewellery, without a cell phone clamped to her ear, she was the more intimidatingly beautiful person she'd ever seen. Her bare feet were inches away from Emma's hands and the alcohol had made her cheeks go pink, and yet Emma still felt herself go breathless just from looking at her.

She laughed to herself and looked back down at her food.

"No," she admitted, her heart clenching. "Neither do I."
Chapter 15

New York felt desperately lonely when Emma was forced to return alone. Regina had seen her off from the hotel room early on Monday morning, her hair messy from a night of too much alcohol and too much sex, and had told Emma that she'd see her at the end of the week sometime. As much as she'd tried to ignore it, Emma had missed her ever since.

So now she was sitting at her desk, trying to pull off a turtleneck in the height of summer in a bid to cover up the multiple hickeys Regina had left on her throat. Ingrid had already snapped at her four times for yawning too much, telling her she wouldn't be allowed to go on vacation ever again if she couldn't manage to sit upright once she got back.

Emma didn't even have jetlag to blame – she was just exhausted from the weekend's many surprises, and the sight of her overflowing inbox hadn't done much to help. She rubbed a hand over her eyes and kept clicking through her emails, forcing herself not to look at the clock because she knew she wouldn't like what it had to tell her.

Then there was a crash as a wheelie chair suddenly careered towards her desk. She jumped in her seat and looked up to find Elsa sitting inches away, her eyes on the stupid collar around her neck.

"Well well well," she said, reaching out with one finger and tugging it down. "We did have a good vacation, didn't we?"

"Shut up," Emma said, slapping her hand away and readjusting the sweater. "It's nothing."

"You have a bite mark behind your ear," Elsa pointed out, and Emma blushed bright red. She started frantically rearranging her curls while Elsa watched.

"So?" Elsa prompted after a moment of silence. "Aren't you going to tell me about it?"

"No," Emma said, going back to her computer.

"Come on." Elsa shifted even closer. "Give me a little something. You had sex, I take it?"

Emma sighed before admitting, "Yes."

"And? How was it?"

"I am not talking about this here."

"No one's listening. It was good, wasn't it?"

Emma's groan was long and painful. Eventually, she caved. "Yes. It was very, very good."

"The best you've had?"

"Probably," Emma ventured, because she couldn't remember most of them so it wasn't really a fair comparison. Having said that, she couldn't believe any man had ever managed to make her cry out with quite the fervour that Regina had. Killian definitely hadn't even come close.

Elsa saw the stain of red in Emma's cheeks and grinned. "Oh, it was that good."

"Go away. I've got stuff to catch up on before Ingrid strings me up in the supply closet."
Elsa laughed and slowly started to roll away. Emma did her best to look industrious as she disappeared, even though her heart was pounding like a jet engine.

She told herself then that she wasn't going to think about Regina for the rest of the day. She had work to do, and she wasn't going to be the type of girl who let everything else slip by the wayside just because she had a little bit of a crush.

That lasted all of five minutes before the mail arrived and a box with the Apple logo on it landed with a clatter onto her desk.

*Oh*, she thought, dragging it towards her with the tip of one finger. *That.*

She'd forgotten about Regina's throwaway promise to buy her a new phone, and now she wasn't entirely sure whether she should open it or not. Her own iPhone was five years old and hadn't had its shattered screen repaired since 2016, and the sight of a shiny new iPhone 8 made her fingers go itchy. But it still felt weird. It felt like a bribe.

Then she rolled her eyes, because why was a cell phone with an international data plan somehow worse than $10,000 in cash every month?

She opened up the box and stared dreamily down at her new favourite thing in the world. Tamara had helpfully included a note telling her that her existing number would transfer across automatically in the next couple of days. She wondered if Regina had told her to do that, too.

Before she could stop herself, she was grabbing her old phone and pulling up Regina's number. It was still only mid-afternoon in London and she knew she'd probably be in a meeting, but she hit the call button without dwelling too much on that fact.

It wasn't ringing for long before Regina picked up with an amused, "This might be the first time you've ever called me, you know."

Emma smiled at once. "The mail just came. I wanted to say thank you."

"What have I told you about saying thank you so much?" Regina asked, but she sounded pleased. "No one will ever respect you if you insist on being so grateful for everything."

"Well, then you're really going to hate what I have to say next," Emma said, ignoring the fact that Elsa was wiggling her eyebrows at her from across the office. "Because I also wanted to thank you for the weekend. I never really said it before I left."

"Oh," Regina replied, and for once she actually sounded lost for words. "That's quite alright. I hope you had a nice time."

And Emma had, even in spite of Regina's toddler tantrums and constant emotional manipulation. It had been one of her best weekends in a while. "I did. I'm really glad I got to go with you."

"Does jetlag bring out your honest side?" Regina asked with a chuckle.

"No," Emma said, then paused. "Possibly. Or maybe I'm just bored and trying to kill the time by talking to you."

"Well, that's charming. I hope your boss isn't tapping your phone calls."

Emma had a brief flash of panic when she realised that wasn't even as unlikely as Regina might think. "Anyway, I hope I'm not interrupting anything."
"No, my last meeting got cancelled. I was just catching up on some work before I meet my trainer."

"You have a personal trainer on multiple continents?"

"Of course I do. And it's a good thing too, since someone force-fed me a 6,000-calorie burger on Sunday."

"There was nothing forced about it. And you were the one who chose to tackle an entire bottle of champagne by yourself," Emma said. After a beat, she added, "Besides, you really need to stop worrying. You look great."

Regina just sniffed. "I should get going."

Evidently that was a topic for another day – or probably never, if Regina's constant subject changing was anything to go by.

"Okay," Emma replied. "You get back on Thursday, right?"

"Yes. There's a brunch on Saturday that I need you to come to."

"Sure," Emma said right away. Then she remembered the envelope of money Regina had given her, now almost entirely empty, and paused. "Is it black tie?"

"No, but dress nicely," Regina said. Emma's heart sank.

"Okay."

"Tamara will email you. I really do have to go now."

She hung up without saying goodbye, but Emma had gotten used to that by now. She put her phone down and stared blankly at her computer screen, wondering how the hell she was supposed to get another outfit together by Saturday with barely five percent of her pay packet left.

She was forced to get creative. Under the guise of needing some slightly classier outfits for her non-existent hostessing job, she asked Mary Margaret if she could borrow some of her vintage dresses. They were designer, and they'd each only been worn once or twice because Mary Margaret never went anywhere, so they were the very best Emma could do until her next envelope of money came in the following week.

Her roommate handed over a pile of five or six dresses, telling her she could keep them since she never wore them anyway, and Emma was able to rush off to a seamstress on her lunch break to get them altered. All she could do was hope the fact that they were pretty and they actually fitted her would be enough to distract people from the fact that they were also not exactly this season's offering.

Sidney came and collected Emma at 11am on Saturday, and Emma was surprised by how nervous she felt about seeing Regina again. When they'd been sharing a hotel room, it had been difficult to feel the standard morning-after awkwardness, but now she'd had nearly a week to mull everything over, she wondered if things would be strange between them.

But she needn't have worried, because the second she slid into the car, Regina said, "You're late." She didn't even look up from her phone.

"I am not," Emma protested.
"It's 11:02," Regina said, looking over at her. Then she frowned. "Is that a vintage Valentino?"

Emma glanced down at the red shift dress that Mary Margaret had gotten as a gift from her rich stepmother when she'd still been trying to buy her affection. "Yeah."

Again, Regina looked slightly confused, but she still nodded. "Fine."

It didn't sound fine, but Sidney was already driving away, so it was too late for her to do anything about it. Emma crossed her legs and waited for Regina to finish sending her email before she asked, "So, where are we going?"

"A pretentious brunch," Regina sighed. "There will be plenty of people I don't like there, but hopefully your friend Dr Hopper will be too. If he is, we'll go over right away."

"What if he's there but the sculptor boyfriend isn't?"

"Why would he be there without Marco?" Regina asked. "That would be like you getting invited without me. Use your brain."

Emma knew she was being scolded, but she still laughed. "Right. Sorry. I'll look out for them."

"Thank you," Regina said. "Do try to be as charmingly working class as possible. I think he liked that last time."

"I'm not working class," Emma snapped, although it was a totally pointless objection since she sure as hell wasn't anything else. Regina just looked at her, eyebrows raised, and didn't comment.

"Will this last all day?" Emma asked eventually.

"No, just a few hours. We'll only stay for two," Regina said. After a beat, she lightly added, "I thought you might like to come to my apartment afterwards."

Emma blinked. "To your home?"

"Yes. Henry will be coming round later, so I understand if you'd prefer not to. But I'd like it."

The fact that the kid was going to be there was far, far down on Emma's list of things to be nervous about. Instead, all she could think about was finally seeing the tangible evidence of just how rich Regina was. Up until now, she'd been able to convince herself that she just owned a few paintings and really liked to buy designer clothes – once they were inside her Upper East Side apartment, it would be far harder to ignore the painful chasm that existed between their lives.

"Sure," she forced out. Her enthusiasm wasn't especially convincing, but Regina still smiled.

"Excellent," she said just as the car began to slow down. "Let's get this thing over with, then."

She led Emma into a breezy, open-plan building that didn't seem to be a gallery or an office or anything in between. There were plenty of ornate vases dotted around, but there was nothing that suggested it was someone's home.

Clinging onto Regina's arm, Emma hissed in her ear, "Does someone live here?"

"Yes," Regina said, waving to someone on the other side of the room but making no move to go and talk to them. "Someone with too much money and no taste."

"It's got a bit of a weird minimalist vibe," Emma said, looking around and spotting a tray of mimosas.
"Is it too early for a drink?"

Regina glanced at her. "Are you sure you need one?"

"I need to loosen up."

"You always seem to need to loosen up," Regina said, and for a second she wasn't focusing on the room. She was narrowing her eyes at Emma, seemingly realising something for the first time. "How often do you drink?"

"Is now really the time for this conversation?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "Fine. But you're only allowed one. And get me one too."

Emma unpeeled herself from Regina's arm and walked over to the table of glasses. On her way back she caught sight of two men she recognised from Gold's dinner party, and she was thrilled when they nodded at her. It had taken a month, but finally she wasn't just the unknown plus one.

The women who were standing with them, however, looked markedly less thrilled by her presence. They were both eyeing her up in a way that Emma hadn't experienced before – it wasn't jealousy, or hatred, or anything in between. It looked strangely like pity.

Something cold dropped inside her ribcage, but she forced herself to ignore it. She returned to Regina, focusing all her attention on not tripping with two very expensive pieces of crystal in her hands. When she arrived, she realised that her date was not alone.

"Emma," Regina said, taking one of the glasses from her and sliding an arm around her waist. Emma had realised by now that she only did that when she was with people she didn't like, and so she put on her biggest smile. "This is Zelena. She's our host today."

Emma held out a hand to the woman in question, who had the vastest orange curls she'd ever seen. When Zelena returned her handshake, her too-wide blue eyes flashed.

"Lovely to meet you," she said with a twang of an English accent. Even in spite of the awkward circumstances, it made Emma weirdly nostalgic for the previous weekend.

But then those slightly manic eyes fell south, taking in Emma's dress. "Is that a Valentino?"

Right away, Emma knew this wasn't a good thing. She looked down at herself and said, "Umm. Yeah."

"2012?"

*Jesus Christ.* These rich people and their encyclopaedic knowledge of designer brands were starting to make her feel like a zoo animal.

"I think so," Emma took a gamble. At once, Zelena's lip curled.

"Well," she said, disdain dripping from that single syllable. "It's good to see that the old dresses aren't going to waste, I suppose."

With that single sentence, Emma suddenly realised why the other women in the room had been watching her. She felt her stomach collapse in on itself: she'd always known she was out of her depth here, but this was the confirmation she needed that everyone else knew it too. She was a fraud – one who hadn't realised that 'vintage' was simply another word for 'second hand'.

"I'm sorry, Zelena," Regina said, taking a hold of Emma's arm. "I don't know where this is coming from."

"Ah," Zelena said, tilting her head to the side. "It's always the people who don't know their way around."

"Yes," Regina said, squeezing Emma's arm. "I think you should stay with me."
She desperately hoped that Regina would step in. She could say anything – anything at all – and it would have made it slightly better. But she stayed quiet, her hand still resting loosely on Emma's hip, and Emma was left to fight her way out of this corner alone.

She forced a smile. "Just doing my bit to support the Chinese sweat shops," she said, and it was the least funny joke she'd ever made, but it was either that or slapping the self-satisfied expression off of Zelena's face.

Zelena just sneered at her – the most patronising, scornful smile Emma had ever been subjected to – before turning back to Regina. "Anyway, I should mingle. We'll catch up soon."

And then she was gone, leaving Emma feeling frozen and angry and, most upsettingly of all, hurt. She went still, hoping Regina would feel the tension below her fingers.

"So, I suppose I don't need to explain why I don't like her," was what Regina actually said. Emma looked over at her, her gaze dull.

"No."

"Ignore her," Regina said, nudging her. She nodded across the room. "Look. There's Archie."

Emma longed to snap at her, because there was no possible way she could be this obtuse: betrayal was written all over her face, and surely it wasn't possible for someone as smart as Regina to not realise it was because she hadn't bothered to stand up for her.

But Regina was looking hopefully at the two men waiting on the other side of the room, and Emma forced back her bitter retort. This was her job now, after all – if she started pouting and yelling any time somebody was mean to her, she wouldn't get to stay by Regina's side for much longer.

So instead she nodded, slipping her arm back through Regina's. She let herself be led across the room in her stupid thrift-store dress, tensing up any time she heard anybody laugh.

"You're quiet," Regina said when they were back in the car. For once, it was Emma who was staring down at her phone, and Regina didn't seem to be a fan of the change.

_Vintage dress was a fucking disaster_, Emma was typing out to Elsa, followed by a long series of emojis with steaming nostrils.

"Am I?" she asked, not looking up. She could feel the confusion on Regina's face from the opposite side of the car.

"Yes," she replied. "Are you going to tell me why?"

She knew damn well why, and Emma shouldn't have to be the one to say it out loud. "Nope."

"Right," Regina sighed, looking out the window. "Are you going to ask me to take you home instead of coming back to mine?"

She desperately wanted to, but now that Regina had said it, it would have seemed petty to agree. So she began scrolling through Facebook instead, shrugging her shoulders. "Nope."

Regina didn't respond because evidently Emma was pissing her off again, and so the rest of the journey passed without either of them saying a word. For once, Emma didn't care. She was glad to have some time to stew.
"God," Emma said, forgetting that she was supposed to be giving Regina the silent treatment. "What do you do when the elevator's broken?"

"Kick up hell," Regina said. Emma could see from the smug expression on her face that she was pleased Emma had been the one to cave first.

Emma just nodded, because there was nothing she could say to that. The elevator in her own building had been broken for two years – one time Mary Margaret had called the building manager to ask him to fix it and he'd pretended he didn't speak English.

The doors pinged open, and Emma found herself in a softly lit corridor with gold and cream carpets. There was a huge console table directly opposite her, groaning under the weight of the biggest vase of lilies she'd ever seen in her life. When she looked around, she realised there were only four doors.

She sighed. "This entire floor is only split into four apartments?"

"Yes," Regina said, walking towards the one marked 108. She paused before admitting. "Although technically it's also the floor above, too."

"It's what?" Emma asked, but then the door was open and she got her answer.

The entranceway was a wide corridor that bent at an angle 10 paces ahead of her. The living room lay to her left, while an open plan kitchen and dining room sprawled out over the space to her right, following the curve of the corridor. In the centre, there was a staircase. Because Regina owned a two-storey penthouse overlooking Central Park, and she was tossing her keys into a bowl like that fact didn't even faze her.

"You..." Emma started, her voice going tight. "You own this place?"

"I do," Regina said, and she didn't even have the decency to sound bashful. "Shall I give you a tour?"

Emma would have rather died, but she nodded and let Regina lead her dumbly through room after room. The kitchen was bigger than her entire home, and behind the dining area was a terrace that looked directly out over the park. The apartment had two bathrooms, one of which was Regina's en suite, and three bedrooms. Regina had her own office next to the dining room, and Henry had a bedroom all set up upstairs.

"What, no private gym?" Emma asked, nearly choking as she tried to unstick the words from her throat.

"No, but there's one on the fourth floor of the building," Regina said, and Emma wanted to slap her.

"Of course there is."

"Does this mean you don't like it?" Regina asked, leading her back down the stairs and into the kitchen. "You sound a bit despondent."

"It's beautiful, Regina," Emma said, approaching the island worktop and perching herself on a stool.
"It's just a lot more than I was expecting."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Well, sort of. It's a pretty brutal reminder of how different our lives are."

"But now this is your life too," Regina said, and it was the stupidest thing she'd ever said. Emma didn't belong in that apartment – she never would, no matter how much money Regina offered to pay her. People like Regina didn't live to budgets or aimlessly Google what declaring yourself bankrupt would actually involve – people like Regina bought multi-storey penthouses and then felt disappointed when they realised they didn't have a pool.

Emma smiled tightly. "I don't think so."

"Well, I do, so you may as well act like it," Regina replied, looking at the clock. "Henry will be here in 10 minutes. Do you still want to stay?"

Emma was torn between wanting to haul ass out of there and never wanting to say goodbye to Regina again. It didn't take long before one side won. "Yes please."

"Good. I'm going to get changed – did you want to borrow some clothes?"

"No, I'm fine." Emma couldn't tell if she was saying it because it was true or because she wanted to punish Regina for earlier by making her look at her ugly-ass dress for as long as possible.

Just as the buzzer sounded, Regina returned to the kitchen dressed in black jeans and a white T-shirt, wearing a long necklace that Emma could tell she would twirl between her fingers whenever she was distracted. She went to answer the door, and a few moments later Henry came trundling in, his enormous backpack hitched high on his shoulders. He blinked when he saw Emma standing there.

"Hey," she said. There was a pause, and she realised he might have forgotten who she was. "It's Emma."

"Hi," he replied, turning to look at his mother as she walked into the room. "Did you forget I was coming again?"

Emma groaned. Off to a great start.

"No," Emma said, not looking at Regina. "She told me you'd be here, but I wanted to hang out and your mom's too nice to tell me to go away. I hope that's okay."

Henry's face flickered at the word 'nice', but he still shrugged, not looking too disgruntled. "It's cool with me. Are you sleeping over?"

Emma and Henry both looked at Regina this time, but she didn't give them any reaction. Emma wetted her lips. "I don't think so. Unless your mom is planning some kind of slumber party that I don't know about."

Regina smiled, but there was no emotion behind it. "Not tonight, no."

Emma turned back to Henry and felt herself flinch. God, the way he looked at Regina. His brow was furrowed, his too-long hair tumbling across it, and he was staring her down like she was solely responsible for destroying his personal happiness. It was painful to watch and Emma didn't know what to do about it, so instead she waited for Regina to take the lead.
Eventually Regina asked her son, "Are you hungry?"

"I guess," Henry shrugged, dropping his backpack onto the kitchen floor. Regina sighed.

"Henry, can you take that up to your room, please?"

"Ugh," was Henry's response, and he turned for the door, dragging the bag along behind him. He rolled his eyes as he walked, and Emma was eternally grateful Regina wasn't able to see it.

When she could hear his footsteps on the stairs, Emma turned back to Regina and said, "Wow."

"Wow what?" Regina asked, not meeting her gaze. She moved over to the fridge and started pulling out some food.

"Just..." Emma said, then hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Regina said, her voice hollow from inside the fridge. "Do you want something to eat?"

Emma was starving, because apparently rich-people brunches didn't involve any actual food, but she didn't answer. "Does he always act like this?"

"Usually," Regina said. "What would you like?"

"Regina, stop thinking about food. When did it start?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Emma sighed. "Why not?"

"Can you keep him company while I'm making him something?" Regina asked, and Emma half suspected she was being punished for asking too many questions. But instead of letting her terror over her first ever bout of babysitting get the better of her, she just nodded.

Henry came crashing back down the stairs a few moments later and, instead of coming back into the kitchen, he walked straight into the living room. He had three books in his arms, and he shut the door behind him.

"Right," Emma muttered, leaving Regina behind her so she could follow him.

Henry was sitting cross-legged on the floor between the couch and the coffee table. His books were stacked next to him, and he didn't look up when the door opened.

"Hey," Emma said, awkwardly holding her dress against her thighs so she could sit down beside him without scarring him for life. "Is it okay if I keep you company?"

"Sure," Henry said, his voice sounding marginally less hostile than it had done two minutes ago.

"What have you got there?"

"Books," Henry said, handing them over to her. When she realised that they'd all been on the list she'd given Regina in the bar, her face broke into a grin.

"Which is your favourite?"

"This one," he said, pointing to the top one. "Do you like to read?"
"I do, as a matter of fact," Emma said. "Has your mom told you what I do for my job?"

Henry shook his head, his shaggy hair flicking into his eyes.

"I work for a company that makes books just like this."

His mouth popped open. "Did you make these ones?"

"These two," Emma said, separating them from the pile. "We have some others that I think you might like, actually."

"Can you get them for me?"

Emma laughed. "You've only met me twice and you're already angling for free stuff?"

Henry grinned, a picture of innocence, and Emma saw then just why Regina was so devoted to him even when he was being an unbearable little shit.

"I'll do my best," Emma said. There was surely no harm in getting on the kid's good side, even if she wasn't technically dating his mom. "Can't promise anything, though."

"Okay," Henry nodded enthusiastically.

"But if I manage to steal some, you have to promise to keep it a secret," Emma said, widening her eyes.

"I will! I won't even tell my mom."

"Well, you can probably tell her," Emma nudged him. "I think we can trust her."

And just like that, his face darkened again. "I don't think so."

"What?" Emma asked, blinking. "Why not?"

"She's evil," Henry said, and the word slipped out so easily that it took a moment for Emma's incredulity to catch up with her.

"Evil?" Emma asked. "That's a bit strong, wouldn't you say?"

"She is," Henry insisted, taking the books back from Emma. "My dad says she's like the Evil Queen in Snow White."

Son of a bitch.

"Oh," Emma responded, her stomach going tight. "He does, does he?"

"Yeah."

"And you agree with that?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

Henry blinked at her. "Why?"

"Yeah. What does she do that's evil?"
At least the kid had the decency to look a bit confused. "A lot of stuff."

"Be specific," Emma said. "If I'm going to hang out with her, maybe I should keep an eye out for these things. In case she tries to give me a poisoned apple or something."

Henry giggled. "She doesn't do anything like that."

Emma was becoming increasingly aware that he didn't know what she did. "Just give me one example, then."

"Okay," Henry said. There was a pause. "She forgets when she's meant to be spending time with me."

"That does suck," Emma conceded. "But it still doesn't sound very evil."

"Don't you think your foster parents were bad for forgetting you?"

"Not really. I think they were busy people who were doing their best, just like your mom is."

Henry looked at her with more suspicion than a 10-year-old should have been able to muster. "Are you her girlfriend?"

Emma felt her cheeks go bright red. "No. Why?"

"Oh. You're acting like you are."

"Well, I'm not. We're just friends," Emma said. After a pause, she asked, "Does your mom ever introduce you to her boyfriends or... or girlfriends?"

She was well aware that she was pushing her luck, but Henry just shook his head.

"Never. I didn't even know she had friends until I met you."

In any other circumstances, Emma's heart would have gone warm at that. But not today.

"That sucks," she said softly. "She must be lonely."

Again, Henry narrowed his eyes at her. "I guess."

He went back to his books then, and Emma stayed with him, listening to him while he talked about the stories and what he liked most about them. After 10 minutes, Regina called them back into the kitchen.

"Mom, did you know that Emma writes books?" Henry asked as he hoisted himself up onto a stool.

"I don't write them," Emma said, leaning against the edge of the counter. "I just work with people who do."

Regina put a sandwich in front of her son. "I did know that. I think it sounds very interesting."

"Me too. I want to do that when I grow up," Henry announced, and Emma grinned at him.

"Any publisher would be lucky to have you, kid."

Then she paused, because Regina had slid a sandwich towards her too. She looked up, frowning.

"You haven't eaten anything today," Regina said, gesturing for her to start. She went and got an
apple for herself.

"What are we going to do this weekend, Mom?" Henry asked through a mouthful of ham and cheese.

"Did you bring any homework?"

"Yeah," Henry sighed. "Math and chemistry."

Emma blinked. "They make kids do chemistry in the fifth grade now?"

"It's a private school," Regina interjected.

"Right. Of course."

"Can't we do it tomorrow?" Henry asked.

"No, honey, we'll do it today. It won't take that long."

Henry groaned, leaning his head on one hand. A sullen expression washed over him with the speed of a tidal wave and Emma felt her whole body go cold at the sight of it.

"Chemistry isn't too bad though, right?" she heard herself ask, because awkward silences had always been her worst enemy. "Blowing things up is pretty cool."

"We don't get to blow anything up."

"Not yet. But I'm sure that's coming up real soon."

"Emma, please stop encouraging my son to become a pyromaniac," Regina called over her shoulder. "Anyway, you said you wanted to see that new Pixar movie, didn't you?"

At once, Henry's face lit up. "We're going?"

"There's a chance that I got us tickets for tomorrow," Regina said. "But you'll only find out once you've finished your homework."

Emma could see the conflict on Henry's face – he obviously wanted to laugh, but he was forcing himself not to. Instead, he just nodded. "Okay."

Then, nothing. Regina turned away, wiping some crumbs off the counter, and even though Emma knew it absolutely wasn't her place, she nudged him.

"Say thank you," she mouthed, and he rolled his eyes at her.

"Thanks, Mom."

Regina didn't turn around, but Emma caught the edges of a weak smile on her face. "You're welcome."

When Henry and Emma had both finished their lunch, Regina swept over to clear the plates away.

"I can do that," Emma said, getting up off her chair. Regina swatted her away.

"You're a guest," she said, stacking them in the dishwasher. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thanks," Emma said, glancing at the clock. She had nowhere else to be and she didn't want to
leave Regina's company just yet, but she was also aware of how little time she got to spend with her son. "I should probably get going."

Henry's expression was one of sheer misery. "But I wanted to talk about more stories with you!"

"We can do that another time. I promise."

"When will I see you again?"

"I think that's up to your mom," Emma said, not turning to Regina just in case she looked like her heart was breaking. "But hopefully soon. Maybe I'll even bring one of those books I told you about."

Henry's eyes widened. "You will?"

"I said I'd try, didn't I?" she said, and he grinned. "But only if you promise to keep it a secret. Your mom will tell me if you don't. Won't you, Regina?"

"I'm not going to tattle on my son to you," Regina said, and Henry laughed.

"I still won't," he promised. "You can trust me."

"Okay," Emma said, hopping off her stool. "Then I'll see what I can do."

She reached out to high-five him as her version of a goodbye, and then he was rushing back into the living room, his books already calling out to him. Regina shook her head to herself before she walked Emma to the front door.

"Does Henry know that you date women?" was the question that came blurting out of Emma's mouth without either of them expecting it.

Regina blinked at her. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"He asked me if I was your girlfriend," Emma said, quickly adding, "I said no."

"Oh," Regina frowned. "There are a few kids in his class with gay parents. I guess he just picked up that it's a normal thing."

"That's good," Emma said, knowing full well how easy it could have been for Henry's dad to turn him against stuff like that too. "He's a good kid, Regina."

"He certainly seems to have taken a shine to you," Regina said. "You don't actually have to steal books from your office for him, though."

"It's not really stealing. There's loads of them lying around and if we don't send them out to magazines or bloggers, they just get thrown in the trash eventually anyway."

"Well. If you get caught, I'm not bailing you out."

Emma laughed. "Fine. I'll bear that in mind."

Silence fell between them, and all of a sudden Emma felt desperately sad. She'd seen the way Regina's face crumpled when Henry snapped at her or disregarded her, and she wasn't sure she could leave if that was just going to carry on with no one left to try and make her laugh again.

Regina saw the change of expression on her face and blinked. "Are you okay?"
Emma wasn't sure how to answer that, so she reached out and pulled Regina towards her. As she kissed her, softly and with as much feeling as she could project into a single brush of her lips, she felt Regina tense up with surprise before slowly melting into it. Her hands rested tentatively on Emma's waist, not quite pulling her closer but also not letting her go.

When Emma pulled away, she knew she didn't have to explain what that was for. Regina was already smiling faintly.

"I'll see you soon?" she asked instead, because she always felt like she needed to check that. Regina's smile grew.

"Yes. Very soon."

It was the biggest vote of confidence Emma could ask for. She left, and though her shoes were cutting into her feet and her dress was still old and embarrassing, she didn't feel quite so low about it anymore – not when she had Regina's beaming smile following her the whole way home.
Chapter 16

It felt like it had been months since Emma had gone out bar-hopping with Elsa, but in truth it had only been a couple of weeks. Still, it was longer than they normally went, and they had plenty to catch up on when they each had a drink in their hands.

"You definitely didn't tell me that you're sleeping with the DJ," Emma said, looking across the room at the guy in question. Elsa had always had terrible taste in men, but this one was on another level.

"It only happened once. I'm just hoping tonight will be occasion number two."

"I assume that's why we're here?"

"Maybe."

"Are you going to leave me here the second he finishes his set?"

"Maybe," Elsa repeated, and she said it with such a sly giggle that Emma couldn't even be mad at her. "We can find you someone to flirt with while I'm gone, though."

"I'm not flirting with anyone tonight," Emma said, swigging her beer.

"Ugh. Don't tell me you have an exclusive relationship with your mistress now."

Emma glared at her. "She's not my mistress. And no, not exactly – I'm just happy with how things are going and I don't want to do anything with anyone else."

"Fine. Then I guess you'll be excused the second DJ Dirtbag gets his hands on me."

Emma looked back at the DJ just to make sure they were talking about the same person. She caught a glimpse of a man bun and a beaky nose and immediately raised her eyebrows.

"Don't be so judgmental," Elsa said, kicking her shin. "He's nice, and he's good in bed."

"If you say so," Emma said.

"Oh, God," Elsa suddenly sighed. "Lord help me, but I think your distraction just walked in."

Emma rolled her eyes. "I told you, I don't want—"

"I think he's following you," Elsa interrupted her, and Emma quickly realised that she sounded angry. Really fucking angry.

Emma turned her head and found Killian on the other side of the room, staring back at her.

She turned back like a shot, her heart sinking. "Oh. Shit."

"Did you tell him we'd be here?"

"Of course not," Emma said. "Why would I do that?"

"I don't know – maybe you two are okay now."

"We had sex in a bathroom sink. Who counts that as 'okay'?"
"Then what the hell is he doing here? Does he have some kind of homing device that only lights up when you've got a drink in your hand?" Elsa asked.

"I have no idea, but at least I've finally learned from my mistakes as far as he's concerned," Emma sighed. Her fingers had started to pick at the label on her beer bottle. "Is he with his band again?"

"Isn't he always?"

_Oh, God._ If there was anything worse than running into Killian, it was running into him when he was surrounded by his posse of wannabe Arctic Monkeys.

"Is he coming over?"

"No, but he's still looking at you," Elsa said. She spotted the trapped look on Emma's face and frowned. "Shit. Are you okay? Should we leave?"

Emma sighed. "No, don't be stupid. You can still get your rocks off."

"But you—"

"It's fine, Elsa," Emma said, hoping she sounded more convincing out loud than she did in her own head. "It'll be okay. I can leave the second your DJ comes over, right?"

"Right," Elsa said slowly. Then she inhaled sharply. "He's coming over now."

"Who? The DJ?"

"No – Killian."

"Fuck."

"Try to smile. Maybe he'll go away."

"Won't he be more likely to go away if I'm not smiling?"

"No. He loves a challenge, remember?"

"Who does?" The voice that had ruined British accents forever wafted over Emma's shoulder. She immediately tensed up.

"The DJ," Elsa said, quick as a flash. "I'm trying to get in his pants."

"Lucky guy," Killian said, sitting down on the spare seat between them both. He turned to Emma, his face passive. "Alright, love?"

"Hey," Emma said, smiling tightly. It was now officially the worst night of her life, and it wasn't even midnight yet. "Funny seeing you here."

"Small world. Or maybe I can just sense when you need me," he said, wiggling his eyebrows. Emma felt her vagina curl up and die.

"Sure."

"How have you been? I haven't seen you around."

"I've been busy," Emma said vaguely.
"I heard you went to London."

"How did you hear that?"

"David told me," Killian said. "Who took you there?"

"Just… a friend."

"I thought you were skint?"

"It was a cheap last-minute thing," Emma said, and God, she wanted this to end. Her gratitude that Killian didn't seem to know about Regina yet vanished when she realised that – in his eyes, at least – she had no valid reason why she wouldn't want to talk to him.

"Do I know this 'friend'?

Elsa had been watching the exchange with a growing look of annoyance on her face. Finally, she interjected, "Why do you care so much? You're the one who broke things off."

As Emma threw her a grateful smile, Killian shrugged. "I'm just curious. We're friends now, right Em?"

"Right…"

"So I'm just showing an interest. No hidden agenda. Promise."

Killian's promises meant fuck all and they all knew it, but Emma just grabbed her beer once more, somehow lacking the energy to argue with him.

It carried on for the next couple of hours. Elsa kept dragging Emma away from him, either to dance or get more drinks or talk to the gross DJ she planned on making out with, but any time there was an inch of space by Emma's elbow, Killian managed to find his way into it. Eventually Emma got tired and gave up trying to shake him off, instead going back to openly insulting him in the hope that he would take the hint and leave of his own accord.

"Do you ever take that jacket off?" she asked, gesturing to the grimy leather that she was certain he would be buried in.

"It's all part of my look, love," he grinned, gesturing to the bar. "Another drink?"

She sighed. "Fine."

The whole thing made her feel sick, like she was somehow cheating on Regina even though that wasn't technically possible. Not that there was any chance in hell she was planning on going near Killian's genitals ever again, but still – she knew exactly what Regina would think if she found out she was there with him.

Still, another beer made its way into her hand and she sucked it back, ignoring the furry taste in her mouth and the slight nausea in her stomach.

"Hey," Killian breathed into her ear. Elsa was off talking to her DJ, laughing exaggeratedly as he showed her how to use some of his equipment, and Emma was left without her wingman to protect her. "Can we talk?"

"Sure," Emma said, not moving from her position where she was surrounded by dozens of witnesses. "What's up?"
"I meant somewhere in private."

Emma felt like cold water had been poured down her spine. "Um. Why?"

"Because I can barely hear you here," Killian said, putting his sweaty palm against her lower back. "Shall we go into the back room?"

"No," Emma blurted out, stepping away from him. "How about we go out front? I could do with some fresh air anyway."

"Alright," Killian said, guiding her towards the door. They got their wrists stamped and settled down in the smoking area, where there were plenty of other people and nearly as much noise as there had been inside.

"So," Killian said, and that seemed to be his entire sentence. Emma smiled tightly.

"So?"

"I wanted to ask you something."

"Shoot," Emma said, looking around in the vague hope that she'd see someone she recognised.

"Emma," Killian sighed, reaching out to touch her arm. "I shouldn't have ended things with you."

Emma looked back at him, frowning. "You mean you shouldn't have done it the way you did?"

"No, I mean I shouldn't have done it at all."

"What?" she asked flatly. "Killian. You can't be serious."

"We were good together," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "We had some really good times. Right?"

"Right…" Emma said, struggling to think of any examples right then.

"And I think I gave up on us too quickly. What do you reckon?"

The truth was, now that Emma had had time to get over the most humiliating break-up of her life, she knew that Killian had been right to do it. They hadn't been well suited and they hadn't had great times or great talks or great sex or great anything. They'd just been sort of friends who'd thrown themselves together because it was easier than being alone.

She sucked in a breath and said, "I think it's a bad idea."

"What is?"

"Us getting back together."

"Oh," Killian said, finally releasing her arm. "But you were upset when I dumped you. And what about what happened the last time we saw each other?"

"I was upset because you humiliated me on my birthday, dumbass," Emma said. "And right, we had sex, but I was drunk and lonely and it was a mistake. It's never going to happen again."

"You sure about that, Swan?" Killian asked softly, reaching out to touch her knee. She pulled away from him.

"You mean you were just using me?"

"Killian," Emma groaned. "It was a two-party mistake. I didn't know you wanted to get back together with me. I'm pretty sure you didn't know that either until you decided it five minutes ago."

There was no doubt in her mind about this, but Killian still glared at her. "So, that's a no, then?"

"It's a hard pass."

"For fuck's sake, Emma, could you at least sugar-coat it a bit?"

Emma looked levelly back at him. She knew she was well within her rights to remind him yet again of the time when he'd dropped her like a newborn hippo in the middle of Barnes & Noble, but if he hadn't got the significance of that by now, maybe he never would.

"I'm sorry," was what she said instead. "But I don't want to date you, or hook up with you, or do anything with you. You wanted to be friends, so we should just be friends."

There was a long, loaded pause, and Emma knew there was every chance he would start yelling at her. But instead he just sighed, running a hand through his greasy hair.

"Fine," he said gruffly, like he didn't care either way. "Friends."

After a moment he stood up, gesturing to the door. "Are you coming back inside?"

"In a minute," Emma said. "Go without me."

He'd walked off before she'd even finished the sentence.

Slouching down in her chair, she let her head tilt back so she could gaze up at the starless sky. Sadness had enveloped her quicker than she'd expected, and it was a deeply unwelcome sensation after weeks of something that felt sort of like happiness. It reminded her that no matter how many fancy brunches she went to or how many designer dresses she squeezed herself into, nothing had changed. She was still the kind of girl who people like Killian wanted to bend over a bathroom sink.

She wondered whether she should go home. She wasn't having fun, and she was certain the night wasn't about to take a sudden turn for the better. All she needed to round it off was for a creditor to call her and start threatening lengthy jail time.

And maybe she had some kind of magical powers, because the second that thought entered her head, her cell began to ring. Gritting her teeth, she pulled it out of her pocket.

It was Regina. Emma's heart leapt, and without the tiniest bit of hesitation or the sense to know that speaking to her while slightly drunk wasn't her smartest idea, she picked up.

"Regina!"

Regina's laugh lit her soul on fire. "No one's ever sounded that happy to hear from me before."

"Oh, right," Emma said, trying to swallow down some of her enthusiasm. "Yeah. Sorry. I was... I was just surprised."

"Where are you?" Regina asked, obviously hearing the roar of chatter in the background. "You didn't get stuck in King's Cross again, did you?"
Emma laughed shortly. "No. I'm outside Slate NY."

"Is that a bar?"

"Yeah," Emma said, glancing towards the main entrance. She sighed. "I came with a friend from work, but it's not the greatest night ever."

Apparently Regina heard the despondency in her voice, because she asked, "Oh dear. Is everything alright?"

"It's fine. I've just had too much to drink, I guess," Emma said, since it was way easier to say that than it was to explain what was actually going on.

"You don't sound that drunk," Regina said slowly. "Do you want to talk?"

Emma blinked. Regina had never sounded so uncertain before.

"I'm okay," she replied. "Anyway, what's up?"

There was a long pause, and Emma wondered if maybe Regina had gone. But then a soft voice asked, "Do you need me to come and get you?"

Emma hesitated. She wasn't exactly in need of rescue, and if she decided to go home then she wouldn't struggle to get there by herself. But she also wanted to see Regina, no matter how late it was or whose hands had been all over her for the past hour.

But before she could answer, a mess of blonde hair and sequins burst out of the bar. "Emma, there you are! I need back up – DJ Dave is challenging me to a dance off."

Emma looked blearily round at Elsa. "His name is Dave?"

"Yes, now come inside. I need you on my team."

"Elsa, I'm on the phone."

"Who are you talking to?"

"I..." Emma started. She could hear Regina waiting. "It doesn't matter."

"Great, then get your ass in here," Elsa said, grabbing hold of her wrist and tugging her off the chair.

"Fuck. Regina," Emma garbled into the phone. "I'm really sorry, I've got to go."

"Okay. But are you sure you're alright?"

But Emma had already ended the call, because she knew if she heard one more kindly word come out of Regina's mouth, she would cave and run straight out of there.

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Apparently when Killian had agreed to be friends, he'd meant that in the 'friends, but I get to put my hands down your pants' kind of way. Emma had barely been back inside for 20 minutes before he was at her side again, sliding an arm around her shoulders and guiding her towards the bar.

Emma tried to shrug him off and turned quickly towards the other side of the room, only to find herself flying out of the frying pan and landing in the fire with a thump: Killian's bandmates had all gathered around, just drunk enough to be willing to talk to her, and when they saw her trying to
make her escape, the laughter began.

"Alright, Em?"

"We haven't seen you around in a while, have you been avoiding us?"

"Now that you and Killian are done, do you feel like giving one of us a try instead?"

Emma groaned, because she'd hated these greasy mope-rockers when she'd been dating their lead guitarist and now that they had broken up, she liked them even less. Still, she didn't want to be the girl with the attitude problem that everyone talked about for the next two weeks, so she forced a smile. "Not particularly. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Is that because you're still hooked on Jones here?"

Killian's arm found its way around her waist again. "She pretends she's not, but I know the truth. She can't resist me."

"I seem to be resisting you just fine right now," Emma said, pushing him away. She looked around the room, hoping to find Elsa, only to spot her doing the dance-off completely solo. While she was throwing herself around to Single Ladies, she was no help.

"Only because you're playing hard to get," Killian murmured in her ear. Emma winced, because there was something about this that didn't feel right – not just because they were making her feel uncomfortable, but because they'd made her feel uncomfortable so quickly.

She pulled back, turning to look him in the eye, and saw that his pupils were blown wide. He was sweating more than usual.

She sighed. "What did you guys take?"

"Nothing much," Killian said cheerfully. "Do you want some?"

"I really don't," Emma said, taking a step back. She'd sworn off drugs since the day her ass had landed in jail, and now just being near them made her hair stand on end.

"Come on. I'll cheer you up a bit."

"I don't need cheering up," Emma said, though she could hear from her voice just how sullen she must look.

"Don't be like that," Killian said, pulling her closer again and pressing his mouth against her ear. "You don't want me to beg, do you?"

"Not really."

"Just try a little."

"No, Killian."

"It won't kill you."

"I said no."

Emma snapped the last word, pushing Killian away from her as hard as her wobbly arms would let her. He staggered backwards, crashing into his bassist, before regaining his footing and glaring back at her.
"Bloody hell, Emma, when did you stop being able to take a joke?"

"I'm leaving," Emma spat out, because her chest was tight and she needed to get out of there right that second. She turned on her heel and moved towards the exit. Then she stopped.

She must have been drunker than she'd realised, because it looked like Regina was standing right in front of her.

Emma wetted her lips and opened her mouth to say something, but her thoughts had turned into a jumble of letters that she couldn't sort apart. Regina – or the apparition of Regina, because that still seemed more likely – took a step towards her. She had her hands in her pockets and her eyes were on Killian.

Emma realised then that it had to be her, because she wasn't capable of imagining someone who looked quite so angry.

When Regina reached her side, she finally pulled her gaze away from Killian and turned to Emma instead. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Emma said, looking behind her. Killian's face was dark, but he was also speechless for once in his life. He looked like a puppy who'd just been yelled at for peeing on the rug. "I was just leaving."

"I'll take you home," Regina said, putting her hand against her back. Emma shivered, and the difference between that touch and Killian's was more pronounced than she could have ever imagined.

Regina shot one more look of seething hatred at Killian and his friends before turning away from them, and Emma nearly laughed at the expression on his face. He looked furious, and he looked terrified. None of the guys surrounding him said a word.

As Emma was leaving, she looked towards the DJ booth and saw Elsa gawping at her. Emma waved her off, letting her know she was okay to go back to her conquest, knowing full well that she'd have a stream of curious messages waiting for her on her phone before she'd even reached the door.

They stepped outside and Emma wasn't entirely surprised to find the Mercedes waiting for them.

"Doesn't Sidney ever sleep?" Emma asked.

"Not if I ask him not to," Regina replied, opening the door for her. Emma slid into the backseat, saying hello to him, and waited for Regina to join her.

For a few moments, they drove in silence. Emma was swallowing down the taste of uneasiness and too much beer, and she wasn't sure what she was meant to say when Regina always berated her any time she dared to say thank you.

But then Regina spoke first. "Was it okay that I came?"

Emma turned to look at her. "Yeah. Of course it was."

She thought her heart broke a little bit when Regina breathed a sigh of relief. "I knew I was being stupid but… you sounded unhappy and I thought something was wrong. I had to make sure."

Emma tried not to smile. "What would you have done if you'd gotten there and I was okay?"
"I would have left again," Regina said, looking out the window. "But I'm glad I didn't do that. That was the ex, wasn't it?"

"It was," Emma said, sighing. "He's... hard to shake off."

"He's also taking a lot of hard drugs," Regina commented, and Emma didn't need to argue with her.

"Anyway," Regina said, taking another steadying breath. "I hope I didn't overstep my mark."

"You didn't. I really was about to leave."

"Where was the friend you went with?"

"She was the one dancing like a circus clown. She's trying to seduce the DJ."

"So she left you by yourself, drunk, while your lecherous ex-boyfriend tried to put his hands all over you?"

Emma wrinkled her nose. "It wasn't like that. Elsa's a good friend, but she's not my babysitter. Besides, she spends most of her nights looking out for me and trying to stop my drink from getting spiked. She's allowed to go and have fun sometimes."

Regina nodded, not looking entirely satisfied by this, and leaned her head back against the leather seat. For a second, Emma just watched her. Then a thought struck her.

"Why are you even up?" she asked. The clock at the front of the car told her it was 2am, and Regina was still fully dressed and wearing a face of make up.

"Client troubles," Regina said flatly. "There's a buyer in Hong Kong who's being difficult. I was trying to make some progress."

Emma smiled. "You work too hard."

"I'm aware of that."

"Why did you call me?" The question slipped out of Emma's mouth without her meaning for it to, and she realised then that she was definitely drunker than she thought.

Regina hesitated before answering. When she spoke, embarrassment slipped through her attempt at a joke. "I suppose I just sensed that you needed rescuing."

Emma smiled tentatively back at her, choosing not to question her further. After all, whether she'd sensed it or not, Regina had been her saviour. There was no way Killian would have let her go without a fight if this tiny, terrifying woman hadn't shown up and threatened to castrate him with her eyes alone.

After a few more minutes, Emma realised that she recognised the street they were on. "Are we going to your place?"

"Yes," Regina said. She didn't ask if that was okay, and Emma found that she didn't care. "I have some work to finish and I feel like you could do with a decent sleep."

Emma just shrugged. As long as she got to stay by Regina's side for a little while longer, she didn't care where they went.

They reached Regina's building and said goodnight to Sidney, and then Regina's hand was on her
back again, guiding her through the foyer.

They rode the elevator in silence, and Emma waited patiently while Regina unlocked the door to her apartment. When they stepped into the kitchen, Emma froze.

The immaculate room she'd spent the previous Saturday in was a mess. Reams of paper were tossed over the island counter, some of them having fluttered to the floor, and there were six empty coffee cups dotted throughout the workspace. Emma spotted a bottle of red wine, which was open and half empty. Her heart squeezed.

She realised then what had been going on: Regina had been working late into the night, and she was stressed and tired and maybe a bit lonely. She'd called Emma because she just wanted to hear her voice.

Emma followed her slowly into the room and watched as she made a beeline straight for the bottle. "Can I get you a glass?"

"Sure," Emma said, perching herself on the stool that sat at a right angle to Regina's. When she was handed a glass, she clutched it between both hands and watched as Regina settled down beside her.

"This isn't going to be very interesting for you, I'm afraid," Regina said, rummaging around under several piles of papers until she found her glasses. "I still have a lot of work to get through."

"That's okay. As long as you don't mind me keeping you company."

Regina shrugged like it didn't bother her either way, but Emma had learned to tell when she was lying by now. So she just settled in, crossing her ankles behind the footrest of her stool and sipping wine as Regina slowly started to work.

"How did the rest of your weekend with Henry go?" Emma said after a while, because she hadn't seen Regina since the previous week.

"It was fine. He enjoyed the movie."

"I managed to steal a book for him," Emma said.

"Already?"

"I'm really adept at petty crime," Emma said, and Regina laughed.

"Good to know."

"Maybe you can read it with him?"

Something indecipherable flickered across Regina's face. "Henry hasn't needed my help reading a book since he was five."

"Sure, but he still might like to hear you read it. You have a great voice."

Regina looked up at her, and she couldn't help the uncertain smile that tweaked at her lips. "I do?"

"Of course. You must know that."

"I can't say that anyone's ever mentioned it before," Regina said, going back to her papers. She looked pleased though, and Emma grinned.
She tried to stay quiet and let Regina get on with her work, but being discreet wasn't her greatest skill even when she was sober. She reached out a hand and snagged a piece of paper, then saw that it was covered in complicated legalese and quickly put it back.

"You can go watch TV or something if you're bored," Regina said.

"I'd rather stay here. I'm just trying not to distract you."

"That might prove difficult," Regina said, glancing up at the dip of her cleavage and smirking in a way that made Emma's bones go soft. Emma wriggled in her seat, desperately trying to ignore how badly she wanted to reach across the counter and kiss the lipstick off of Regina's mouth. A ringing sound interrupted them, and Regina immediately grappled for her cell phone under one of the piles of paper. Leaning on one hand, Emma watched her as she talked.

"No," Regina sighed, moving around some of the mess to try and find something. She had a pen in her right hand, and it was twirling aggressively. Emma spied a notepad and dug it out, going warm when Regina mouthed her thanks at her. "That's not what we agreed. I said I wasn't willing to go below 18."

She began scribbling numbers on the paper as a man chattered down the phone at her.

"I don't care if his wife is mad about it. I'm not selling a whole collection for 15, and if he won't buy it for 18 then I'll gladly find someone else who will."

Emma idly peered at the paper in front of her and counted up the zeros that Regina had written down. She nearly vomited when she realised they weren't talking in thousands. $18 million. She forced down a thick mouthful of wine and willed her palms to stop sweating. If Regina managed to make that sale, even if her commission was only 10 percent, she would have cleared almost $2 million in a single phone call.

A burst of nervous energy shot through her, and suddenly Emma couldn't just sit there and listen anymore. She got up and began to clear up the papers that Regina had dropped, stacking them into a neat pile and leaving them on the nearest stool, before moving over to the granite counter that ran around the back of the room. She put the now-empty bottle of wine in the recycling bin, threw away the cork, and then collected up the coffee mugs that Regina had been drinking from all day. Regina didn't stop her, but she did eye her like she was crazy as she began to wash them up.

The phone call ended five minutes later with a low groan, and when Emma turned around Regina's head was resting on her folded arms. She slowly approached her, then reached out and rubbed a hand over her shoulder.

"Jesus, you're tense."

A muffled laugh came from the cradle of Regina's arms. "I've been tense for 36 years."

Emma paused before asking, "Is that how old you are?"

She was expecting Regina to snap at her for asking stupid questions, but she just nodded.

Emma had been mentally placing her age at around 32, so that took some adjustment. But if she was being completely honest with herself, the extra few years only made her seem even more attractive. "How the hell did you manage to achieve so much by 36?" she asked quietly, and Regina lifted her
"I don't have any friends and I haven't taken a vacation since I was 28," she said, her voice flat. Emma rolled her eyes.

"You're a drama queen," she said. "I can't vouch for the vacation thing, but I'm sure you have friends."

Regina didn't respond, and that told Emma everything she needed to know. She wanted to tell her that she was her friend, but even she knew how pathetic that would sound. Instead, she just said, "Thank you for coming to get me tonight."

For once, Regina didn't tell her to stop being so grateful. She smiled instead. "You're welcome."

Emma pulled out her cell and grimaced at the time. "It's 3am, Regina."

"So?"

"So, it's time to go to bed."

"I have work to do."

"You always have work to do. Who was that on the phone?"

"My Hong Kong sales manager."

"Right. And whose job is it to deal with this difficult sale in Hong Kong?"

There was a long pause before Regina said, "His."

"Exactly. So let him do his job, and go to bed. There will still be work to do in the morning and it will be much less painful if you've had a few hours' sleep."

Regina grumbled, but she was already pulling her glasses off. "That's a terrible attitude."

"Maybe so," Emma said, taking the glasses from her and putting them away inside the case that she'd found behind the sink, for some reason. "But I'm way more stubborn than you are, so don't try and argue with me."

Regina snorted. "You are not more stubborn that I am."

She was getting up off her chair, rubbing her scratchy eyes, and when Emma nudged her towards the door, she walked in that direction without complaint.

They reached the top of the stairs together and Emma hesitated, not sure whether she was supposed to stay over or, if she was, where she was expected to sleep. The couch looked more comfortable than her bed back home, so maybe she'd been presumptuous by walking up the stairs in the first place.

But then Regina turned to see her hovering on the top step and snapped, "Hurry up, Miss Swan. If you want me to go to bed then you have to come with me."

Emma hurried after her, feeling completely out of place the second she stepped over the threshold into her bedroom. The carpet was cream and the walls were duck egg blue, and though the curtains were drawn, Emma knew that behind them was the most spectacular view of Manhattan that you could get without paying $40 to see it from the Top of the Rock.
Regina had already walked towards the vast bed, which was piled high with gold and cream cushions and a knitted throw that Emma already wanted to wrap herself up in for the next eight hours. She watched as Regina sat down on the edge of the mattress, pulling her heels off and wincing at the red marks they'd left behind.

Emma stood awkwardly in front of her, her hands bunched by her sides. Eventually Regina noticed her and nodded towards the bathroom. "Borrow whatever you like. There are spare toothbrushes under the sink."

She did as she was told, because that's all she ever seemed to do when Regina was around, and found herself in the only bathroom in the world that was more beautiful than the one back in London. The walk-in shower had a showerhead the size of a dinner plate, and she yearned to stand under it with the water running so hot that her skin went pink.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror and winced – she looked much drunker than she felt, and her mascara had pooled in sooty clumps beneath her eyes. She immediately made a grab for the cleanser beside the sink, hoping that Regina was tired enough that she wouldn't have noticed her appearance when they were downstairs.

Emma walked back into the bedroom a few minutes later, her hair tied in a loose ponytail, and found Regina lying on the bed still fully clothed. When Emma laughed through her nose, her dark eyes shot open.

"Were you asleep?" Emma asked, slowly approaching her.

"No," Regina said, forcing herself upright. "Did you find everything okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Do you need pyjamas? I have no problem with you sleeping naked, but..." Regina's sentence trailed off as she glanced down at Emma's narrow waist.

Emma rolled her eyes. "I can just wear this shirt."

"I'll find you a new one," Regina said like Emma hadn't spoken at all, and walked over to the dresser. She rummaged around for a moment before producing a faded T-shirt with *The Ramones* printed on it. She tossed it across the room and Emma caught it with one hand, blinking slightly.

"This is yours?"

"Yes," Regina said, brushing past her and heading into the bathroom with no further comment on the matter. Emma laughed, holding the shirt out in front of her so she could examine it properly, before wriggling out of her clothes and pulling it on. It smelled nice, much nicer than anything in her own closet did, and she was glad it was oversized so she could bury herself inside it.

She sat herself down on the very edge of the bed, her hands folded awkwardly in her lap. When Regina reappeared, wearing no make up and a silk nightdress, she felt herself go hot all over.

Regina frowned at her. "Why are you sitting like that?"

"Because I wasn't sure which side you sleep on," Emma explained, standing up and trying to ignore the fact that Regina was openly staring at her bare legs. "Or if you want me to sleep in here at all."

"Don't be an idiot," was Regina's response, gesturing to the far side of the bed. Emma edged towards it, but she still waited for Regina to pull down her side of the covers before she felt like she could do
the same with her own.

"You surprise me sometimes," Regina said, slipping beneath the comforter.

"Why?" Emma asked as she clambered up onto the mattress. For a moment she stayed upright, her legs crossed and her eyes on the woman settling down beside her.

"Because sometimes you're the most assertive person I know," Regina said, reaching up to tousle her hair before she lay down against the pillows. "You're the only person who is happy to snap back at me, and who can get away with it without being grounded. And then, at other times, you go all shy. Like now."

Emma blushed furiously. "I'm sitting in your bed, wearing your clothes, with my bare ass hanging out. I'm allowed to be a little uncomfortable."

"Your ass isn't bare. I can see your panties from here."

Emma grabbed the covers and bundled them up into her lap while Regina chuckled. "You suck."

"I know I do," Regina said, watching as Emma finally settled down next to her. They were both startled when she whimpered out loud.

"Are you okay?" Regina asked, propping herself up on one elbow. Emma was lying down, her face stricken and her hands clutching the comforter against her chin.

"Yeah," she said, sounding slightly flustered. "This is just the comfiest bed I've ever been in."

Regina laughed, shaking her head as she lay back down. "You really are ridiculous."

The room was enveloped in darkness when Regina reached out and flicked off the lamp by her side of the bed. Emma waited quietly for the cover-stealing to begin, but from the soft breathing to her right, it seemed that Regina was already falling asleep.

She looked over to see if she could make out her shape in the darkness, but Regina had been swallowed up. Emma wriggled, letting her aching muscles settle down against the mattress that had been handmade by God, and listened to the near-silence that surrounded her. They were so high above the city that for once in her life, she couldn't even hear it.

So she listened to Regina instead, enjoying the sound of her being completely off guard for once. She slept in a ball on her side, facing away from her, but Emma could feel the warmth radiating from her. She was like the embers in the bottom of a fireplace, still crackling and dangerous but just beginning to cool.

Emma smiled to herself and rolled in the other direction, taking the smell of Regina's shirt with her.
Chapter 17

It was an ache between Emma's legs that woke her up. She forced open one eye and took a moment to remember exactly where she was – the blackout curtains were coating the room in a sepia filter, and for a few seconds she couldn't tell whether she was back in the hotel room in London or not.

But she couldn't be, because there she'd been cold and today she was burning hot. The throbbing between her legs intensified, and when she shifted position she realised there was an arm wrapped around her waist and a body pressed up against her back.

She froze. At some point during the night Regina's hand had slipped under her shirt, and now it was resting just below her breasts. The side of her thumb was grazing gently over her skin. Emma's heart thumped beneath her fingers, obviously having woken up long before the rest of her had.

She had no idea if Regina was awake or not, since she didn't exactly strike Emma as the sleepy-morning-cuddles type. She wasn't making any noise, and Emma could feel her steady breathing against her shoulder – maybe she was only having a dream, and when she woke up she'd be just as flustered as Emma was.

But then her hand flattened against Emma's sternum, tugging her closer. Emma let herself be eased backwards, breathing hard when she felt Regina's breasts crushing against her shoulder blades. For a moment, nothing else happened. Then Emma felt the slow, determined roll of Regina's pelvis against her ass.

As Regina ground herself forward, her hand finally reached round and cupped Emma's breast. Emma gasped into her pillow, feeling her hips automatically thrust backwards. Her blood went hot and started to surge through her veins, pushing along like frosting from a piping bag, and Regina ground against her once more, her mouth pressed hotly against the fabric of Emma's shirt. Her fingers sought out Emma's nipple and gradually pinched. Emma groaned, her heart pounding, wishing she had something to cling onto.

It was only when Regina's hand slid downwards and below the waistband of her panties that Emma finally accepted she must be awake. She moaned slightly louder as Regina's fingers grazed over her skin, and when Regina cupped her pussy, Emma wriggled hard against her touch.

Regina ghosted her mouth over the back of Emma's neck as she fingered her, letting her teeth dig gently into her skin. That only pushed Emma along faster, her hips rolling urgently against her probing fingers. Any time they slipped inside her she whimpered and eventually, as her muscles started to go rigid with frustration and need, she reached down to grab hold of Regina's wrist and force her hand further into her panties. She felt a breath of air against her neck and she knew Regina was laughing, so enjoying the frantic writhing of Emma's body against hers.

When she came, Emma buried her face in her pillow to smother her own cries. Regina ground harder against her ass, drawing out every last scrap of Emma's climax before she finally pulled her hand free.

Emma flipped over at once, not pausing to take in Regina's self-satisfied smile before she kissed it off of her, her hands reaching up to grab hold of the back of her neck. Regina clung onto her waist, pulling their bodies so close together that their legs tangled and their chests crushed against one another.

Emma's hand dropped between them and tugged Regina's nightdress out of her way. The second her
fingers slipped beneath her panties, she moaned, every one of her muscles tightening when she realised how soaked Regina was.

She pushed two fingers inside her and shivered at the noise Regina made. She had fallen back into the pillows, allowing Emma to pin her down against them, and she spread her legs as far as they would go in order to let Emma in closer.

Emma buried herself in Regina's neck as she fucked her, her fingertips skimming over Regina's clit before diving back inside her. Regina arched her back and pushed herself into her touch, her arms trembling as they clung onto Emma's body. As Emma dragged her lips over Regina's clavicle, she felt a full-bodied shiver rush through her.

Regina's hips were jerking against the sheets as Emma brought her up to her peak, and when she came, she hooked an arm around the back of Emma's neck and brought her down towards her, muffling her cries in the jut of her collar bone. Emma kept moving her fingers until she felt Regina's legs snap shut, and then she laughed, holding herself still against Regina's breathless body until she was finally allowed to pull herself free.

She rolled off of Regina and onto her side, pressing a kiss against her shoulder as she landed. Regina stared up at the ceiling, her hair a mess and her chest still heaving up and down as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are you like this every morning?" Emma asked eventually, and Regina laughed.

"Only when I've slept for more than four hours."

"Oh, so I should definitely force you to go to bed when you don't want to then?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "If you enjoy being woken up this way, then I suppose so. But don't you dare start doing it at 8pm."

Emma propped herself up on one elbow and gently kissed Regina's lips. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Regina smiled back at her, all sleepy and just-fucked, and Emma felt a whole new burst of affection for her.

"What are you doing today?" she asked as she fell back onto the pillows.

Regina took a moment to remember what day it was, then sighed. "I have an auction to go to."

"Oh. Am I coming with you?"

"I wasn't going to ask you to."

"Why not?"

"Because they're boring and there's rarely any networking to do."

"Okay," Emma said, pausing to wrinkle her nose. "Can I come anyway?"

"If you really want to," Regina said, but she looked pleased. "Do you have something to wear?"

Coldness crept through Emma's limbs. The answer to that was always no.

"I guess we would have to swing by my place to pick something up."
"That's okay. We have time," Regina said, fumbling around on her nightstand for her phone. When she saw the time, she grimaced. "Just about."

"And what should I...?" Emma started to ask before her sentence wisped away into nothing. Regina looked back at her, recognising the question before it had been vocalised.

"Just wear something smart. It won't be particularly formal."

Emma nodded like this actually meant something to her. "Can I wear my teal dress?"

Based on the look Regina shot her, Emma could have been forgiven for wondering if she'd accidentally asked whether it would be okay for her to wear her high school gym clothes.

"But you've already worn that to an event," Regina said slowly.

"I know," Emma said. She could feel herself going red. "But it's..."

"If you wear it again, people will notice. They're always looking for someone to mock, so try to avoid giving them a reason to settle on you."

"So you only ever buy outfits expecting to wear them once?"

"Usually," Regina said in a complete non-answer. Not for the first time, Emma was totally appalled by how easily people in this world threw money away like it meant absolutely nothing. An $800 designer dress was only good for a single night out, but anything cheaper was good for nothing at all. It was completely fucking ridiculous.

Regina looked at her phone again and sighed. "I'd better go shower."

She got out of bed, her nightdress riding up above her thighs and giving Emma a delicious glimpse of her ass as she walked. Forcing back her angry thoughts about clothes and disposable income, Emma sat up. "Shall I make breakfast or something?"

"I don't have breakfast," Regina said.

"What, ever?"

"Rarely. Not unless I've just trained. But you can go and help yourself to whatever you want."

"Regina, you can't get by without breakfast. You know that's really unhealthy, right?"

"That's something only thin people who can afford the extra calories say," Regina said right before she disappeared into the bathroom. Emma stared after her, disbelief mingling with frustration. She wanted to shout at her to come back, but she still wasn't quite brave enough for that. Instead, she padded downstairs in her stupidly short T-shirt and surveyed the kitchen. It was still a mess from the night before and she wasn't sure she should clean it up any more for fear of disturbing Regina's peculiar filing system, so she just went to the coffee machine and switched it on.

She knew from their stay in London how Regina liked her coffee, so she made two cups and set them down on the kitchen table. When she opened the fridge, she was disappointed but not entirely surprised by how empty it was.

When Regina reappeared 15 minutes later, she took one look at the table and sighed. "Emma."

"The toast is for me," Emma said, already crunching on her second slice. She nodded at the chair opposite her.
Regina walked over a little too quickly. Emma could see the irritation in her step. She looked down at the omelette Emma had made her and gritted her teeth. "I said I didn't want anything."

"I only used egg whites, and I'm not going to let you leave until you've eaten something."

"Oh, you're going to try and keep me here, are you?" Regina laughed. It was a totally empty sound. "I don't want this."

She picked up the plate and started walking towards the trashcan. Emma leapt up at once and snatched the plate out of her hand. "Don't!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's a waste," Emma said, going back to the table. "If you're going to be stubborn then that's fine, but don't be careless as well."

She could feel Regina's eyes on her as she sat back down, cross-legged even though she was at a dining table, and began to cut into the omelette.

"Do you even want that?" Regina asked slowly.

"No."

"Then why are you eating it?"

"I don't like wasting food," Emma said, and her stomach was twisting just from thinking about it. She'd been hungry for long enough in her life to know how to appreciate it when she had a meal in front of her.

Regina sighed. "Don't force yourself."

"You could help me, and then I wouldn't have to."

Regina sat down in front of her with a thump. "You're bullying me into eating."

"Or I'm being gently encouraging."

"Give me that bit there," Regina grumbled. "I won't be able to concentrate later if you spend the entire auction complaining that your stomach hurts."

Emma slid the plate towards her and watched as Regina ate the tiniest bite with a face that suggested she was being tortured. She longed to make a comment, but she knew she'd already won a battle that morning. Now wasn't the time to push it any further.

"I guess I should go and get ready."

"It would help," Regina said, taking another bite. "We need to leave in 10."

"Okay," Emma said, stuffing another forkful in her mouth before getting to her feet with her remaining slice of toast in her hand. She made sure to note how much of the omelette was left before she headed for the stairs.

She longed to make proper use of Regina's amazing shower by staying in there for at least 40 minutes, but she forced herself to dive in and out in less than five. She pulled on her jeans and shirt from the night before and returned to the kitchen, where Regina was leaning against the counter, tapping something into her phone. She didn't look up when Emma reappeared.
"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah," Emma said, looking towards the table. It had been cleared, and her gaze was automatically drawn to the trashcan. "Are we still stopping off at my apartment?"

"Yes, so we'll have to hurry," Regina said, going into the hallway in search of her purse. The second her back was turned, Emma rushed to the trashcan and peered inside. The omelette was in there, the exact same size as it had been when she'd left the room.

She went out into the hall with something sour curdling in her stomach. Regina spotted her and smiled. "Everything okay?"

"Sure," Emma said, forcing back her shoulders. "Let's go."

Regina had wanted to come up to Emma's apartment with her, but after barking "No! You stay here" at her loud enough to wake a sleeping bear, Emma had managed to escape into the building without her following.

She dove towards her closet and began pulling things out, hurling them onto the bed in the hope that she'd find something both beautiful and brand new that she'd miraculously forgotten about. After five minutes her room looked like an outlet mall in the midst of a closing-down sale, and she was nowhere near a solution.

The only thing she could find was a stretchy black dress that she last remembered wearing to a birthday party a year ago. It wasn't any kind of label – in fact, Emma was pretty certain it had come from a thrift store – but it was clean and really, she was only going to an auction. They probably wouldn't see anyone they knew, and if they did, the people there wouldn't care that she was wearing something that had polyester blended into it.

She was wrong on both counts. The second they walked into the auction house, she spotted half a dozen people who she recognised from previous events, including a vast cloud of orange hair that she knew belonged to that heinous bitch Zelena. Emma groaned, tugging her dress further down her thighs, and followed Regina to their seats. She hadn't known what to expect from something like this, but she felt like she'd been brought to a museum.

Soon after the auction started, Emma realised that Regina wasn't even there to bid on anything. She was barely looking at the items up for sale. Instead, she was coolly surveying the room, taking note of the people who were putting their numbers up and those who were staying quiet. The whole thing was painfully boring, and even the fact that she got to sit next to Regina for two hours wasn't enough to make it go by faster. She was certain someone would throw her out if she started playing *Angry Birds* to try and pass the time, so instead she just had to sit, looking interested and pretending not to be completely horrified when someone bid multiple millions of dollars on a fucking vase.

The whole thing finally came to an agonising close, and Emma stood up on legs that were shaking from boredom. Regina smirked at her. "I did warn you."

"I'm never doubting you again," she replied, looping her arm through Regina's as she always did now. It made it easier for Regina to guide her towards the right people without it looking like she was being dragged there against her will.

"Why did you come if you weren't going to buy anything?" Emma asked.

"I need to know who my competition is," Regina said, leading her mercifully towards the exit.

"Who's buying at the moment, and who's not."
"Was it helpful?"

"To an extent. A few people I expected to be here didn't show."

"You're not going to make me come to one of these again, are you?" Emma asked, and Regina couldn't help but laugh.

"You did sign a contract," she said, but she squeezed Emma's arm as she spoke. "Come on, let's get out of here. I would offer to take you for lunch but I imagine you must still be full from eating two people's breakfast."

Emma snorted, following Regina through the door. They so nearly made it.

"Regina!"

Emma recognised the voice and tensed up, only turning around to meet the source of it because she was clamped to Regina's side and didn't have a choice. Zelena stood there, her hair bigger than ever and her arms stretched wide.

Regina let go of Emma and stepped in for a brief hug and an air kiss. Emma didn't get offered either, and she was glad.

"So nice to see you both again," Zelena breathed. "I noticed you didn't buy anything."

"Not today," Regina replied.

"But next time, I hope? I do miss our bidding wars."

Regina smiled tightly. "I'm not sure you can afford another one of those."

Emma forced herself not to laugh, because anything she did to draw attention to herself would amount to begging Zelena to make another comment at her expense. But apparently her silence made no difference, because Zelena was already smiling icily at the pair of them.

"Maybe not. But I suspect you can only afford it because you're saving so much money on your friend's clothing."

She glanced towards Emma, letting her eyes drop heavily over her off-the-rack dress. When Emma squirmed under her gaze, she smirked.

"No label is almost as good as an old label, I suppose," Zelena chirped, and Emma officially wanted to die. She tugged at the fabric, hating it, hating herself, and didn't respond.

Regina opened her mouth and Emma felt her heart lift, waiting for her to finally defend her in front of one of these people. But instead she just said, "We should get going. It was nice to see you as always, Zelena."

She guided Emma out the door and down the steps, almost having to push her towards the car because her legs weren't exactly working by themselves. There was a vile lump in Emma's chest and it felt like it was going to smother her entirely. She hadn't known betrayal could taste as bad as this.

They got into the car and Sidney began driving back uptown. Clenching her jaw, Emma stared resolutely out the window. She couldn't talk because if she opened her mouth she was pretty sure she would scream, and so she burned along in complete silence, the fire scorching the insides of her lungs.
Regina was fine when she was the one who was too busy to talk. She didn't appreciate it when things were suddenly the other way around.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded after three minutes of not receiving any attention.

Emma rolled her eyes to herself. She didn't reply, because what was the point? Regina was a grown-ass woman, and if she couldn't recognise when someone was upset by the age of 36 then maybe there was no fucking hope for her whatsoever.

Regina waited for a solid five seconds before she snapped, "Emma."

"What?" Emma asked, still not looking round.

"Why are you sulking this time?"

"I'm not sulking," Emma said, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd sounded that angry. "You don't get to use that line any time I don't want to talk to you. It doesn't make you the bigger person."

"Well, tell me why you don't want to talk to me and then maybe I can do something about it."

"I should not have to tell you and it's fucking embarrassing that you would ask."

"Emma, you sound like my son when I tell him he can't have dessert."

"Stop talking to me like that," Emma spat, finally turning to look at her. "I'm not a child! You're the one who's been a gigantic pain in my ass, not the other way around, so stop trying to act like I'm at fault."

"Tell me what I did."

"You know what you did! That woman was insulting me to my face – to your face – and you said nothing. You just stood there and let her talk to me like I'm nothing, and we both know what would have happened if I'd snapped back at her: that would have been my fault too. You just let her treat me like shit and it's not the first time it's happened either."

Regina frowned at her. At the front of the car, Emma could see that Sidney's shoulders had gone tense.

"Why does it matter so much?" Regina asked, and she didn't sound angry, which was unusual. She didn't sound sorry either, though. "You don't strike me as the sort of person who cares what people think about her."

Emma groaned – a low, animalistic growling sound – and she finally spat it out because Regina was apparently the stupidest smart person she'd ever met.

"Maybe I didn't before, but this isn't my world and I've been doing everything I can to fit in – to make you proud, and to not show you up or embarrass you. I've been trying really hard to stop everyone from noticing that I don't know how to dress properly. Because I don't – I only owned three dresses before we met and I'm pretty sure they all came from Forever 21. When I agreed to do this thing with you I had no idea what it would involve, and I just assumed I'd buy an outfit a month from the expensive part of Bloomingdales and that would be fine, but that's not it at all and I'm messing it all up because I can't keep up with any of this. I keep trying to dress like someone I'm not, and the worst part is that it's not even convincing anyone."
Finally, Regina looked somewhat taken aback. She glanced down at Emma's polyester dress and asked, "If that's the case, then why do you wear these things? I know some events are black tie but that could mean anything you wanted. You didn't just have to dress like me."

And it suddenly clicked, because Regina had always looked at her outfit choices with some degree of confusion up until now. Emma had just been picking things she thought Regina would approve of, and the reason she'd gravitated towards them in the first place was because Regina already owned something like them. Regina had always been surprised because she'd been expecting her to wear stuff that was more like her.

Emma sighed, leaning back in her seat. "But I have no idea what else I can do. I wear jeans everyday and I don't have any kind of fashion sense beyond that. So I asked my friend Elsa for help and she took me shopping, but we have totally different tastes. She picked out all this glitzy stuff that I hate, but I don't know what I should choose instead because how the hell do I know what everyone else is going to be wearing? I don't know what looks good and what doesn't, so I just have to trust her, but I don't look good because I hate what I'm wearing and I can't wait to get myself out of it again."

Regina actually looked a bit sad at that. "You don't like any of them?"

"I kind of liked the Diane Von Furstenberg one," Emma admitted. "But I wasn't sure it looked good. I was too nervous to appreciate it."

"It looked beautiful, Emma," Regina said, then paused to consider it. "But it still wasn't exactly what I'd call 'you'."

"I don't know what 'me' looks like," Emma mumbled. And there was something else too – the fact that she somehow, even on $10,000 a month, couldn't afford the bare minimum of what might make her blend in with these people. But even she knew that was a weaker excuse than what she'd already blurted out, and so she stayed quiet.

Regina was looking at her in a strange way. She almost looked angry.

"Sidney," she suddenly barked, making Emma jump. "Stop the car."

Sidney pulled over at the side of the road and waited. Regina hadn't taken her eyes off Emma the whole time. "Get out."

Emma blinked. "What?"

But before she could start stammering about why Regina didn't need to kick her out just because she was uncomfortable wearing floaty dresses, she realised Regina was unbuckling her seatbelt and stepping out into traffic.

Emma squawked and went after her. Without even turning to make sure she was being followed, Regina stormed across the street and towards a store that didn't seem to have a name printed outside it. Emma dodged a bike messenger and darted in after her, nearly crashing into her back when Regina came to a standstill in the centre of the store.

There was a moment of silence when Regina simply took a breath, looking around her to get her bearings. Emma stood anxiously behind her, all too aware of the many shop assistants' eyes on her, and hoped Regina would stop being so fucking cryptic soon.

Then she turned, looked Emma dead in her eyes, and said, "I'm going to help you."

Emma's eyebrows shot up. "Okay...?"
"I don't want you to feel uncomfortable any time we go out," Regina said. "You should have told me. I thought you were enjoying getting dressed up and meeting new people."

"The meeting new people bit is okay. Usually," Emma mumbled, because she was putting a big red cross through the whole Zelena experience. "And I do like getting dressed up with you. It's just...

"Not as enjoyable as it should be," Regina said. "I understand."

She turned towards one of the nearby rails and gestured for Emma to follow her.

"What do you like wearing?" she asked, starting to sift through the clothes.

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. I don't mean to fancy parties – I mean anywhere."

Emma swallowed. "I like tank tops, and... I guess I'm not really into dresses, not unless they're really special. I like leather jackets, although I've never owned a real one. And I prefer boots to proper heels but I know I can't wear those to the types of things you have in mind."

"Dr Martens, no," Regina said, pulling out a black shirt and then immediately putting it back. "But I'm sure I can make something work. What else?"

Emma continued reeling off the tentative list of things she knew she didn't hate. As she spoke, Regina ambled around the store, picking up things and usually putting them back again. It didn't even feel like she was listening to what Emma was saying to her, except Emma knew she was: she recognised her concentration face from the night before, when she'd been hunched over her paperwork quietly trying to make sure it was perfect.

After a while Regina summoned a sales assistant and began asking her what they had in stock in this style or that. It was a completely foreign language to Emma and she automatically took a step back, half wondering if she could run for the door without anyone noticing. But then the poor girl was gone, darting around the shop collecting up the items that matched her extremely specific requirements, and Regina was looking at Emma once more.

"You do have a style," she said, which wasn't what Emma had been expecting. "You just don't realise it."

Emma snorted. "I'm not sure that's true."

"Shut up," Regina said coolly, reaching out for a nearby dress. It was white and loose fitting, with a giant bow near the neckline. "Do you like this?"

Wrinkling her nose, Emma said, "Um. Not really."

Regina put the dress back and picked up something else. This dress was black and leather, with a plunging cleavage and a back to match. "How about this?"

Emma nervously wetted her lips. "I..."

"That's a yes," Regina interrupted. "You just don't think it's appropriate. But you like it. Don't you?"

It was almost certainly the nicest thing Emma had seen in a while. "Okay, yeah, I do. But can you imagine me showing up to a gala in that?"

"Why the hell not?" Regina demanded. "You think the people we see there have taste? Emma, don't
be so naive. They just have money. They've paid people to dress them, and those people would put
them in this too if they thought they could wear it anywhere near as well as you could."

Emma felt her cheeks go pink. "You think this would look good on me?"

"Undoubtedly. And everyone else will think so too. They'll be seething with jealousy, in fact."
Regina paused, holding the dress out and examining it more closely. "Actually, I should have got
you something like this a long time ago."

The shop assistant returned with a heap of garments draped over her arms, and Regina immediately
marched towards the dressing rooms. Emma exchanged a look with the girl before they dutifully
followed her.

"Get in there," Regina demanded, shoving Emma towards one of the cubicles before pushing the pile
of clothes at her. "Try on the leather dress first."

The dress did look good, Emma had to admit. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to wear a bra
with it when the neckline and back reached halfway down her torso, but Regina waved off that
minor concern. "You're still in your twenties and you don't need one. You look perfect. Next."

The shop assistant, who was looking more and more terrified as the minutes went on, had also
brought her a selection of black jeans, black leather pants, black shimmery leggings, all of which
Emma thought would have gotten her taken down by a devoted member of the GOP if she'd walked
into a gallery wearing them.

"Don't wear jeans to a gala," Regina called over the curtain as Emma pulled on a strapless black top
that was tighter than her own skin. "But for anything else, these will be just fine."

"Seriously?" Emma called back. "I haven't seen a single woman wearing pants yet."

"Like I said – that's because they have the collective fashion sense of a nunnery. Let me see you."

From behind the barrier, Emma rolled her eyes. "This feels like I'm shopping for the first day of
school with my mom."

"I don't think either of us know what that feels like," Regina said. She was kidding, but it sent a jolt
through Emma's stomach. It was the first time Regina had ever really mentioned her mother, and she
didn't sound particularly fond of her.

"You..." Emma started, no longer looking in the mirror but instead focusing on the curtain that was
separating them. "You do have a mom, right?"

"Yes, Miss Swan. I have a mother."

"You two just don't talk?"

"Now is not the time for this conversation," Regina said crisply. "Now stop stalling and come out
here."

Emma reappeared feeling like an upper-class version of Sandy from Grease, but Regina's eyes
softened the moment she saw her. "Wow."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. But we need a jacket."
"I've got one," the assistant gabbled at once, diving back out into the store. She reappeared a moment later with two blazers that somehow managed to look tailored even though she'd just grabbed them off the rail. One was black and one was white, and Emma only had them on for a second each before Regina decreed that they would be buying both of them.

"Regina..." Emma sighed, thinking about the price tags in all of these items and how she absolutely could not afford them all, even with Regina's monthly allowance helping her.

"Do you like them?" Regina interrupted.

"Yes, but—"

"Do you feel the sexiest you've ever been?"

Pressing her lips together, Emma admitted, "Yeah, maybe."

"Then we are getting them, and you're going to blow everybody's minds. But there's more to try on, so get back in there and stop wasting my time. Melanie, dear, did you manage to find us any shoes?"

She was talking to the assistant again, so Emma disappeared behind the curtain with a groan. Before she took the jacket off, she looked in the mirror for one last second. Her reflection was grinning from ear to ear.

When they were finally done in the dressing room, Regina dumped a pile of 20 items onto the cash desk before disappearing off to look at accessories. She returned with three purses and thrust all of them onto Emma's arms at the same time.

"I'm tired of that grotty little clutch you have," she said by way of explanation, yanking two of the bags back off of her and putting them on the desk with the rest of the clothes. "We're getting those too."

"Regina," Emma said, her voice cracking. The register was flashing up with numbers – $300, $900, $2,000 – and she could feel her chest starting to constrict. "Regina, please. I don't need all this."

"Yes you do."

"But I can't... I can't aff—"

Then she saw that Regina had whipped out her black Amex, and she felt even more nauseous than before. "You're not paying."

"Of course I am."

"Regina!" Emma blurted out, her eyes on the $17,000 total on the register than made her bowels want to fall out of her body. "You can't do that!"

"Don't be so stupid. I'm buying you a present."

"You're buying me a present that costs more than a car."

"Well, I'd get you one of those, but I don't think you really need one in New York."

"Stop missing the point," Emma stammered and, fuck, she could hear something catching in the back of her throat. She took a deep breath. "Regina. This is really kind of you but I can't let you pay for all this. Let me just take one or two things and then—"
Suddenly Regina's hand was below her chin, gently cupping her face while Melanie the sales assistant blinked across the counter at them.

"Emma," Regina said, her voice somehow soft and firm all at once. "I am buying you these, because I enjoy buying things and I'm going to enjoy seeing you wear them."

There was a flash in her eye that implied she was also going to enjoy taking them off of her, but thankfully she didn't say that out loud.

"But—"

"No buts. It's a gift. I'm allowed to buy people gifts with my money if I want to."

Emma swallowed. "I guess."

"And we're not done yet," Regina said, releasing her and going back to the register. "There are plenty of other stores to try."

"You cannot—"

"I can," Regina interrupted with the calmest of voices. "And I will. Plus you don't even have to say thank you, because you know I hate it when you do that."

Emma was shaking when multiple cardboard bags were thrust towards her by Melanie, who looked positively dizzy about the amount of commission she'd just made. Emma clutched onto them like she was expecting someone to snatch them away again once they realised how much she didn't deserve them.

Her jaw was wobbling when Regina returned to her side and asked, "Everything okay?"

Emma nodded. "You really shouldn't have done this. It was way too generous."

"That counts as you saying thank you, you know," Regina said softly, before taking half of the bags from her. "But it wasn't. I hope you like them."

"I love them – really," Emma gabbled. "I just—"

"Stop with the guilt, Miss Swan," Regina sighed, guiding her towards the door. "I can spend my money on whatever I want, and I want to spend it on you."

Emma knew she had a point, and she knew Regina was basically richer than God. $17,000 to her probably felt like $50 to a normal person. She also knew that she was being pathetic, and she should have been deliriously happy about the beautiful clothes that Regina had just bought her for no reason other than to make her happy, and so she stopped in the middle of the open doorway, pulling Regina towards her so she could kiss her gently on the lips.

"Thank you," she said, even though she wasn't supposed to. Regina smiled back at her.

"Stop breaking my rules," she murmured, and they finally left. "Let's go give these to Sidney to look after, then we can try some more stores."

Emma sighed. "You weren't serious?"

"I was. I enjoyed that, didn't you?"

Emma tried to roll her eyes, but the effect was somewhat lessened by the fact that she was laughing.
"No."

"Liar," Regina said. "Now, tell me: how do you feel about suits?"

Emma blinked back at her. Hope grew inside her like someone had sparked a lighter in her chest. "Suits?"

"Yes. I have a feeling you'd look rather spectacular in a tux."

A burst of happiness filled Emma up as she admitted, "I've kind of always wanted one of those."

"Perfect. I know a great store for that," Regina said, leading Emma back towards the car. "Good thing you had a big breakfast – you'll need all your energy for this."
The 22nd-floor apartment was decked out with another butt-load of pretentious art that Emma still didn't care about. She wasn't entirely sure who lived here, because so far 14 different people had effusively greeted them like they were the host, but it was still one of the better parties she'd been made to go to in recent weeks. There was an open bar, for one thing. For another, she'd noticed that afternoon that she was no longer anxious about attending.

Her second month with Regina had passed differently to the first. At some point, the nerves that had woven themselves into the lining of her stomach had calmed down, and now whenever Regina or Tamara told her she needed to be at a charity gala at 8pm, she was ready and excited at 7:55pm.

Part of her thought that Regina seemed different too. Not quite happier, but more satisfied, like her gamble on Emma had finally paid off and now she was content to sit back and reap the rewards. As they wandered around the room that evening, Regina staring thoughtfully at the artwork while Emma snooped around to see who else was there, things felt almost peaceful. People were staring at them, but Emma had gotten used to that now that she knew it wasn't because they were laughing at her.

Her tuxedo jacket was fitted around her waist, nipping in just tightly enough to give the illusion of her having proper curves. Her shirt was white and crisp, freshly ironed by Regina's housekeeper because, in Regina's words, "I don't trust you to know how to operate an iron, nor how to do so without giving yourself second-degree burns." Emma was also wearing a proper tie, black and skinny, which had been the scariest thing in the world when she'd showed up at her first event in it a few weeks ago. No one had mocked her, though, and she knew Regina loved it – if nothing else, it gave her a much easier way of dragging Emma towards her bed once the evening was over.

The black pants Emma was wearing – which were made of some unknown material that looked like wet metal – made her ass look amazing, especially when she was wearing five-inch heels that made her tower over her date. She'd initially thought that maybe Regina wouldn't like the new height difference, but she'd been very, very wrong: the first time Emma had worn the shoes out, Regina had dragged her home early so she could make sure she spent the rest of the night wearing nothing but them. They had the telltale red underside that let everyone in the room know she was one of them, and she'd had to promise herself she wouldn't get too shallow, because the feeling of nearly belonging in a group like this was truly intoxicating.

"What do you think?" Regina asked, and Emma turned back to look at the painting in front of her.

"You're still trying to get an opinion out of me?"

Regina smiled. "Call me a dreamer."

Emma cast a cursory glance over the artwork and shrugged.

"It's fine," she said, going back to looking around the room. "I liked the ones on Thursday better."

"Why?"

"No idea."

"Emma," Regina sighed. "Would it kill you to read one of those books I bought you?"

"I started one," Emma whined, because it was an argument they'd already had 15 times and it never got any less boring. "But learning about expressive brushstrokes isn't going to make me want to bone..."
"You're a philistine," Regina said, but she was forcing back a smile.

"Regina Mills!" a voice suddenly boomed from behind them, and they turned around to find an enormous man looming over them. Emma flinched, because he didn't look happy, but Regina didn't seem particularly fazed.

"Moe," she said coolly, reaching out her hand. When he didn't extend his own to return her handshake, alarm bells started shrieking inside Emma's head.

"You've got some nerve showing up here," he spat.

"Do I?" Regina asked, turning back to the painting she'd been looking at.

"I know what you said to Gold about me."

"That's nice for you."

Emma's fingers were twitching against Regina's arm, and she inwardly begged her to tone down her natural sarcasm just this once. This Moe guy was getting progressively redder in the face and no matter how scary Regina was, she didn't like her chances against him.

"Where do you get off badmouthing me to other collectors?" he demanded, forcing her to turn back around. "What kind of twisted—"

"You're a grown man, and I'm sure you should be able to take a bit of constructive criticism by now."

"You backhanded little snake!" he hurled back at her. A few people in the room had turned towards them with great interest on their faces, although no one seemed quite as shaken by it all as Emma did. She had to suspect that this sort of confrontation happened a lot, although that begged the question as to whether they usually involved Regina or not. "I lost a sale because of you. I think you owe me an apology."

Emma had no idea what Regina had said or done, but an apology seemed like a pretty easy way to get out of this. But instead of offering one, she just lifted her chin and stared the man down.

"Grow up," Regina said coldly. "Focus more on your crumbling business and failed marriage. I'm the least of your problems."

"You little—"

"Hey," Emma snapped, stepping forward. She took a moment to thank God that she was wearing her Louboutins, because they were the only things that could have brought her up to his height. "Why don't you back off?"

He sneered back at her. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who I am isn't important. Let's just focus on the fact that you should leave now."

"I'd listen to her if I were you," Regina piped up from behind her. "She can land a nasty kick with those shoes."

Moe's face was puce, and for a second Emma actually thought he might punch her. She wasn't sure even defending Regina was worth that.
But then he just growled, taking a step back. "I hope you both rot."

"You too, dear," Regina chimed as he walked away, right before Emma turned and slapped her arm. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Did you have to keep antagonising him?"

"Oh, he's a bull of a man. He wouldn't have done anything."

"I'm glad you were willing to take that risk," Emma said, keeping her voice low like that would possibly stop the other people in the room from knowing they were bickering. "Wouldn't it just have been easier to just say sorry?"

"For what?"

"I don't know, whatever you did."

"I don't apologise, even when I've done something wrong," Regina said. She'd gone back to examining the painting, although Emma suspected she was only doing it so she wouldn't have to make eye contact. "Actually, no – especially when I've done something wrong."

Emma paused. Regina had been talking about her aversion to apologies for a while, but it was only now that she was realising it might stem from a little more than just a poor attitude. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am."

"This whole time you've been saying you never apologise, you really meant never?"

"Never ever."

"Why?"

Regina finally looked at her. "I work in a man's world. I have no time to be nice to these people. I'm not going to be timid and polite while everyone else gets ahead of me – can you imagine these pompous men ever saying sorry to one another?"

Emma looked around the room at the swaggering peacocks that Regina was surrounded by day in and day out. "No. Not really."

"Exactly. There's the expectation that I should be all sunshine and daisies just because I'm a woman, but that's not how I operate."

"But don't you feel guilty?" Emma asked.

"The worst that happens is people think I'm rude," Regina said. "And I don't care about that. If I'm rude, then I'm also intimidating, and if I'm intimidating then I have their respect."

Emma considered this for a moment. "I'm pretty sure I've heard you say sorry to Henry, though."

Regina rolled her eyes at that. "I'm not trying to manipulate my son, Emma. Henry is the exception to this rule."

"And what about me?" Emma asked.

Regina smirked and leaned towards her ear. Her hand gently grasped at Emma's tie, using it to tug
her forward. "You're also an exception, because I definitely want to intimidate you."

Emma's entire body shivered. She sounded like a flustered teenager when she said, "Well, it's totally not working."

Regina didn't even laugh, because it was the most pathetic lie either of them had ever heard. Instead, she just dropped her eyes to take in Emma's outfit once more and let out a long, wistful sigh.

Then, just when Emma thought her head was about to explode, Regina stepped back and said, "I'm going to mingle." And then she was gone.

Emma's brain was doing cartwheels inside her skull, but she took a breath and forced herself to see this as a challenge rather than a test. She began to do a slow lap of the apartment by herself, trying to focus on something that she'd learned from all her many nights out with Elsa: if you were anywhere long enough, you'd find someone you knew eventually.

Sure enough, she stepped into a room that was filled with artsy, uncomfortable-looking couches and spotted someone who looked vaguely familiar. He was wearing a ripped T-shirt and paint-splattered jeans, and he was talking to a tall blonde girl who easily made it into the list of the top five prettiest people Emma had ever seen in real life.

Emma paused in the doorway, trying to place the guy's face, and a second later he turned and saw her.

"Hey," he said. "Emma, right?"

"Yeah," she said, slowly stepping towards him. "Remind me how I know you?"

"It's Neal," he said, and at once she remembered where she'd seen his cocky grin before. "From the rooftop that time."

"Right," she said, joining him on the couch. "Is this another party you've crashed?"

"Actually, Natalya invited me to this one," he said, nodding to the blonde girl who didn't even seem to be listening to them. "How have you been? You look great. I wish I could wear a suit that well."

"Thanks," Emma said, reminding herself to sit up straight because Regina had told her on many, many occasions that good posture was almost as powerful as good clothing. "It's been a while. Are you still preying on unsuspecting art collectors?"

"I'm doing my best. Hey, are you here with Regina Mills again?"

"Of course I am. They don't invite me to these things by myself."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm just the arm candy," she said, and he grinned.

"Well. I'm not disagreeing with you there."

Emma rolled her eyes. "So, what have you been up to?"

He paused to slurp back half of his beer before saying, "Not much. I'm working on a new collection, but haven't found anyone who wants to show it yet."

"I would have thought these suckers would be dying to get their hands on your fresh-faced Brooklyn
vibe,” Emma said, and Neal chuckled.

“Well, truth be told, a few people have been interested. But they just weren't the right fit for me.”

“Holding out for something better,” Emma said, nodding. "I get it."

“Are you in the same boat?” he asked, leaning too close to her.

“No,” Emma said flatly. "Definitely not."

“You sure about that? I'd be happy to take you out on a date just to make sure."

"Neal, you're literally sitting with your girlfriend."

The blonde girl suddenly barked with laughter. When she spoke, she had a tantalisingly thick Russian accent. "This little grub is not my boyfriend."

Emma grinned back at her. "Oh, I think I might like you. What are you drinking?"

"This piss Americans call vodka," she murmured, tossing her honey-coloured hair over one shoulder. "You look like a whisky girl."

It was a good thing Emma was already head over heels into Regina, because it would have been all too easy for her to find herself lusting after this goddess instead.

"I'm more of a 'whatever I can get my hands on' kind of girl," Emma admitted. "But whisky is usually top of my list."

"We will go drinking sometime," Natalya said, like that was that. Then she abruptly stood up. "Neal, I am bored. I will go find someone who is more interesting than you."

She disappeared into the next room, her shiny hair swishing behind her. Emma watched her go, laughter tickling her throat.

"Wow," she said to Neal. "You have quite a way with the ladies."

"She's just someone I know from around. I'm aware that she's way out of my league."

"She's out of everyone's league. Is she a model?"

"Obviously. I was hoping we could take down the industry together, but really she just wants to get drunk and flirt with rich men."

Emma snorted into her glass. "She definitely sounds like my kind of girl."

Neal grinned. "Speaking of rich people, how is Ms Mills?"

"She's good," Emma said, ignoring his tone. "Prowling around here somewhere. Are you going to talk to her this time, or are you going to run for the door with your tail between your legs again?"

It was apparently impossible to offend Neal, because he just chuckled. "It remains to be seen. How come she left you on your own?"

"Because I don't actually need adult supervision at all times. She's networking."

"So are you," Neal said, lifting his glass and clinking it against Emma's. "She'll be thrilled."
Just at that moment, Regina walked through the door and spotted Emma on the couch. Emma smiled at her.

"She does look pretty thrilled," she said, and at once Neal jumped in his seat, turning to stare. Regina was approaching, cutting a path through the room like it was the Red Sea, and while Emma was delighted to see her again, Neal looked like he’d forgotten how to breathe.

"Emma," Regina said, swooping down and kissing her cheek. Then she turned towards Neal and raised her eyebrows. "Have we met?"

"Not exactly," Neal said, clearing his throat. "Neal Cassidy."

"Regina Mills," she replied, shaking his hand and then dropping it quickly when she realised how clammy it was. "Emma, darling, where have you been?"

Oh, Christ. Regina had never used that word before, and while Emma was well aware she was just marking her territory, it still made her stomach turn to soup.

"Networking," she said weakly. Regina had made no move to sit down even though there was plenty of space beside her, and so Emma had to peer up at her like she was God. "Neal's an artist."

"Is he?" Regina asked, turning to him. She'd managed to inject some interest into her voice, even though she had told Emma after they’d met him on Gold's rooftop that she already knew exactly who he was. "What kind of artist?"

They quickly descended into boring art talk and Emma sat back to listen. She felt oddly proud, having introduced Regina to another human being whom she actually seemed interested in talking to. She let herself soak it up. Regina had told her all those weeks ago about how she wanted to lure some up-and-coming artists into her clutches, and maybe Emma had actually – however inadvertently – managed to help with that.

Regina still didn't sit down as they talked, but she did move slowly closer to Emma's side. Eventually she was leaning against the outer edge of her thigh, and her hand slipped up to rest on Emma's shoulder. Emma forced herself to remember that it was just a power play – a reminder to Neal exactly who was in charge here, and just who Emma belonged with – but it was a hard thought to cling onto when Regina's fingers were starting to tease through her hair. Emma leaned into her touch and let out the tiniest sigh, and Regina smirked down at her.

When Neal had finished stammering about "finding his style", Regina nodded thoughtfully. "It all sounds very interesting, Mr Cassidy. Perhaps we'll run into each other again."

He recognised that as his cue to leave.

"I hope so," he said, getting to his feet. "I'd better go and find Natalya before she starts stealing the crystal. Good to see you again, Emma."

He trundled off, his shoulders slightly hunched, and Emma waited for the berating to start.

But instead, Regina just sat down next to her. She looked pensive.

"I wasn't flirting with him," Emma said after a minute, because silence was her worst enemy and they both knew it.

Regina smiled vaguely. "I didn't think you were. I'd be interested to know what you think about him, though."
"Seriously? Why?"

"You've spoken to him more than I have, so you must have a better read on him."

Emma wrinkled her nose. "I don't know anything about his art, though."

"Don't worry about that. That's my job. I want to know what you think of him as a person."

"Well, he seems okay. He's a bit cocky, but that's not the worst thing. I've only spoken to him twice though, and both times he just wanted to talk about you."

Regina looked quite smug about that. "He wants me to represent him."

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew. I see him at parties and he's always hovering around hoping to speak to me."

"And do you want to represent him?"

"Maybe," Regina said slowly. "I was at his grad show. It had a lot of potential, but he's gone quiet since then. I'd be interested to see if he's come up with anything good since."

"He said he was working on a new collection," Emma said slowly. "But it might have just been a line."

"I'd like to find out."

"You'd only have to ask. He'd shit his pants to show you."

Regina laughed. "I'm not going to ask anything yet. If he knows I'm interested, he'll stop wanting me. I need to play this game a little longer."

Not for the first time, Emma was struck by just how brilliant Regina actually was. "You are so manipulative."

"I know," Regina said happily. "Will you try and get to know him a little better?"

"Really?"

"Yes. There's something about him that's concerning me, but I'm not sure what it is," Regina said. "Perhaps it's just because he's a little sloppy."

"If you really want to dive into the edgy Brooklyn scene, you should probably get used to that. There won't be any Armani suits for you there."

"True," Regina conceded. "I'm not committing to anything, anyway. But if you wanted to befriend him, I wouldn't be opposed. I would encourage it, in fact."

"I'll do my best," Emma said, touching Regina's knee. "But you're going to have to stop scaring him off every time you see him if you want this to work."

Regina let out her usual contented cackle. "I'm not sure how easy that's going to be, but I'll try."

They headed back into the main party together. Neal seemed to have vanished completely, but it was hard to say for sure when the rest of the room had filled out so much. Still, it didn't take long before
Emma spotted a flash of red hair.

"Oh no," she muttered. Regina blinked at her, then looked around.

"Oh," she sighed. Zelena hadn't seen them yet, but it was only a matter of time. "Just ignore her. She can't possibly have anything to say about what you're wearing, and if she does, who cares? She looks like her dress was made by blind people."

Emma laughed through her nose. "I know. She just gets to me."

"Maybe it's the accent."

"True. She might remind me of Killian."

Zelena spotted them at that very second and immediately began to rush over. Emma bent to one side and muttered in Regina's ear, "Will you stop me if I run for the door?"

"Yes," Regina hissed back, clamping her to her side. "Just be normal for once."

"When am I not normal?"

"You've never been normal in your life. Hello, Zelena."

"Regina, Emma," Zelena said, swooping in to kiss them both. Emma got a full look at her dress and grimaced at the volumes of puffy fabric. Rich people really didn't have taste.

Zelena must have heard that thought as it crept into her mind, because she immediately locked eyes with Emma and blinked with faux surprise. "Emma. Well. You look... different."

"Thanks," Emma said coolly, holding on tighter to Regina's arm. "You look nice too."

'Nice' was the only word she could think of that wouldn't make her actively retch, but evidently it was still the wrong choice. Zelena's eyes flashed.

"Thank you," she said. "Tell me, did these clothes also come from a yard sale, or have you moved onto actual stores now?"

Emma gritted her teeth. "An actual store."

"Oh, wonderful. I'm very pleased for you."

"Thanks for your concern," Emma said flatly, "but don't you think you should concentrate on dressing yourself in something that wasn't smuggled into the country on the back of an alpaca?"

"I beg your pardon?" Zelena threw back at her. "This is a fucking Cavalli."

"Only Russians and hookers wear Cavalli," Emma said. She had no idea if it was true or not, but she'd seen the squiggly logo on Natalya's purse earlier that evening and so it was as good a line as any.

"Shouldn't you really be the one wearing it, then?" Zelena asked, and that was it.

"Look," Emma snapped. "I don't—"

"Zelena," Regina interrupted before she could get any further. Her voice was icy. "I think you should go."
"But I'm having such a lovely chat with your girl," Zelena said. The emphasis on the last word made Emma feel dirtier than ever, and she stepped forward to shut her down once and for all.

"This girl is going to rip a clump of that peppy orange hair out if you don't fuck off," she snarled. She almost didn't recognise her own voice when there was so much venom coursing through it.

"Go," Regina barked, and Emma knew even Zelena wouldn't ignore that tone. She lifted her hands in a 'not my problem' gesture, then backed away into the crowd. At once, Emma felt an iron grip on her elbow. There was a jolt as Regina began to march across the room, dragging her with her.

They found an empty powder room and Regina shoved her inside.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded, shutting the door behind them.

"She was being a bitch," Emma said, her cheeks still burning. "I wasn't going to let her talk to me like that."

"If someone wants to talk to you like that then it's your job to deal with it," Regina snapped. "I don't bring you to these things just so you can make a scene and embarrass me."

"I'm not going to be a doormat for these people. They don't get to treat me like shit just because I'm not as rich as they are," Emma said, crossing her arms over her chest. She felt a glimmer of self-satisfaction when Regina's eyes automatically flicked down to look at the swell of her breasts beneath her shirt, but it was short-lived.

Regina took a step forward, her eyes flashing. When she spoke, her voice was cold enough to make Emma's spine go rigid.

"You are here to keep me company," she said slowly. "To look good on my arm, and to be charming to people I need to win over. I made it perfectly clear that you have to rise above these things."

"What, like how you rose above that guy yelling at you earlier?"

"People can yell at me all they goddamn want," Regina snapped back at her, her vowels clipped with fury. "But you'll notice that I never yelled back."

"You're yelling at me right now!"

"Because you're being a brat. You are never to act like that again, do you understand me?"

Emma scoffed, "Or what?"

"Or I'll drop you faster than you can imagine. Don't test me, Miss Swan."

Emma knew she wasn't bluffing. Regina could get whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and she didn't need grief from Emma when there was always someone more competent waiting in the wings. But right then she didn't care about that, because she was furious and thousands of dollars worth of new clothes obviously hadn't made the slightest fucking difference to how people in this world saw her. She realised then that actually, maybe nothing ever would.

She rolled her eyes and pushed past Regina, headed for the door. "Whatever. I'll just go home, then."

She'd expected Regina to grab her and pull her back, but instead a flat voice from behind her said, "I'm not going to chase after you, you know."

"Because that's another thing you refuse to do, in addition to apologising?" Emma asked, spinning
round to face her once more.

There was a long pause, and Emma couldn't quite read the expression on Regina's face. She thought that maybe it meant she was sorry.

But she was wrong, because Regina was shaking her head.

"We're not dating, Emma," she said coldly, her chin lifted. "You don't matter enough for me to take your side over theirs. You'd do well to remember that before you try throwing another tantrum."

It hurt more than Emma thought it would. Regina was right, of course – Emma wasn't really anything to her. She was her employee, no more and no less, and it didn't matter how hard Emma's heart started pounding whenever she saw Regina's eyes watching her over the dinner table. It didn't mean what she wanted it to – it just meant that Emma was already in too deep and, sooner or later, she was going to get her heart broken.

Right at that second, though, she didn't care all that much. What did her dumb little heart know, anyway? All it had ever done was get her into trouble.

So instead of responding, Emma just yanked open the door and left, finding no comfort at all in the fact that she could feel Regina's gaze burning against the back of her neck as she walked away.
Chapter 19

It was obvious that Regina was really angry, because Emma's phone went silent for the next week. Emma had thought that maybe she would force her into an event every single night just to punish her, but it seemed that instead she'd chosen to sulk.

At first, Emma didn't mind – she was still mad and a little bit hurt, and she could do without Regina's attitude problems for a day or two. But by the following weekend, the silence had begun to get to her. She kept picking up her phone and staring at Regina's number, hoping that sheer will alone would be enough to convince her to call.

Downstairs, she could hear Mary Margaret and David giggling in the living room. It was Saturday afternoon and David had stayed the night, as he did increasingly often nowadays, and Emma hadn't been able to force herself to go down and see them yet because their delighted laughter was making her chest hurt. Instead, she was sitting cross-legged on her bedroom floor, moving all her 'final demand' envelopes from one box to another because they didn't fit into their original crate anymore. It was already a low moment in her life, but then she glanced up at her newly brimming closet and genuinely thought she might cry.

She'd somehow ended up in a position where the contents of that rickety old wardrobe was worth more than every cent she earned in a year, and while its hangers were full, her bank account was still shamefully in the red. She'd considered selling some of her new outfits, but the wastefulness of it made her fingers itch – she'd grown up in houses where she only got one new shirt a year, and to buy a full suit and then toss it away again after only one wear was somehow beyond her. She was convinced she'd be able to make this work – she might be able to get away with wearing plenty of items again if she just waited another couple of weeks.

She told herself it desperately, acid rising up in her throat.

Letters from her bank were coming thick and fast every single day, and although she was already on her third pay packet, she'd barely made a dent in any of her debts. She went sailing into every month with good intentions, wiring a few hundred dollars to the first company that was lucky enough to be sitting in prime position at the very top of the box. But then, before she knew it, she'd bought five new outfits and a pair of shoes. There wasn't much left after all that.

She groaned, shoving the box away from her, because she knew she had no right to complain. But then Mary Margaret and David laughed once more, sounding so comfortable together, and she suddenly felt lonelier than she'd ever felt before in her life.

She briefly considered going downstairs to join them, because it couldn't possibly make her feel worse and it might even make her feel better, but then she heard a buzzing sound from her nightstand. She crawled over and saw that her phone had lit up with Regina's name, and for a split second she considered letting it roll over to voicemail just to make a point.

Then her heart thumped, her hand reached out, and she knew there was no way she was going to do that.

"Hello?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"Emma," a voice chirped back at her, and it sure as hell didn't belong to Regina. "I need your help with a book report."
For a second, Emma just blinked. Then she tentatively asked, "Henry?"

"Yeah, it's me. Will you help me? You know more about stories than anyone and I'm stuck and I want it to be good."

Emma was already trying not to laugh. "Does your mom know you're calling me?"

Henry's silence would have given her her answer, but then she heard a crash in the background followed by, "Henry, did you take my cell phone?"

"Oh, kid," Emma sighed, shaking her head. "I'm sure you don't really need my help."

"I do! Please."

She understood then why people found it impossible to say no to their kids, because she'd only met this one a few times and his wheedling was already making her waver.

"I can't come round if your mom doesn't want me there," she said. Henry groaned, and behind him there were footsteps.

"Henry, give me that."

"But Mom, I'm just asking Emma to—"

"Now."

"That's not fair!"

There was a clatter, and then Emma heard a sigh she recognised all too well. "Emma?"

"Hey," Emma said slowly. She could tell just from those two syllables that Regina really didn't want to speak to her. "Sorry, I... I didn't realise it was him calling."

"It's fine," Regina said, and her voice was far too level. "I hope he didn't bother you."

"He didn't. He just... he said he needed help with a book report?"

"He does, but I'll help him."

"Oh, okay," Emma said, not sure why this was so disappointing to her. "I mean, I'm happy to help if he wants me to. I know you must be busy."

There was a long, loaded pause before Regina asked, "You want to help him?"

"Sure," Emma said. "I mean, whatever. I've got nothing else on today."

She could practically hear Regina rolling her eyes. "Fine. I suppose he did ask for you specifically."

Emma grinned to herself. "What time shall I come over?"

"Whenever. The car's in the shop though, so you'll have to make it here by yourself."

That was a blatant lie if Emma had ever heard one, but she didn't care. "Cool. I'll come over by five then?"

"Fine."
Regina hung up the phone with a decisive click, and before Emma could get offended or start to wonder whether she should go round at all, she had leapt to her feet and kicked the box of bills back under the bed.

Henry barely said hello before he grabbed hold of Emma's wrist and tugged her into the apartment. Emma glanced into the kitchen as they walked by it and found Regina there, standing by the counter drying up a glass. She was facing away from the door, and she deliberately didn't look round as they hurried past.

Emma ground to a halt the second they reached the living room. "Holy hell, kid."

"I know," Henry said, looking solemnly at the mounds of books that were covering every inch of the coffee table. "I couldn't decide and then I got confused."

"Right..." Emma said, stepping closer and lifting one of the books. "How about we start off by getting rid of all the ones I've never heard of? I can't help much if I don't know the story."

"Okay," Henry nodded vigorously. He perched himself on the edge of the couch while Emma got to work sorting through them, ending up with a pile of books that was roughly half its original size but would probably still be taller than Henry if she stacked them all together.

After they'd chosen one that they both liked and started talking through it together, Henry got out his workbook and began to slowly write down the title. He stuck out his tongue a little bit as he did it, and it made Emma's heart melt.

"What have you guys been up to today?" she heard herself asking. Henry kept concentrating on his writing as he answered.

"We went to the grocery store this morning."

"Did you get anything good?"

"We never get anything good. We had a fight about Pop Tarts."

"I love Pop Tarts," Emma said. "The brown sugar cinnamon ones are my favourite."

"Me too!" Henry said. "But I'm only allowed them during school vacations because Mom says they'll make my teeth fall out."

"I mean, she might have a point," Emma said. "Also if you have them too many times, they stop being as good."

"She said that too, but you're both wrong. They're just as good if you eat them every weekend."

"How would you know if you've never done it?"

"Because she makes me eat broccoli every time I see her and that never stops being gross," Henry said. Emma laughed, nudging him hard enough to make him topple sideways.

"I think you might be a bit hard on her, you know," she said after she helped him back upright again.

"I'm not. She's evil."

There was that word again. Any time he said it, Emma had to fight the desire to shake him a little bit.
"I don't think that's true," she said gently.

"It is. I hate her."

Shock hit Emma in the stomach like a fist. "Henry, you don't mean that."

"I do."

"Why do you hate her?"

"Because," Henry said, exasperated, like he shouldn't possibly need to explain this. "She's always busy and she doesn't want me around, and when I'm here she acts like she's missed me but I know she's really just thinking about work and when I'm going to leave again. She doesn't love me – she just pretends to."

It was the saddest fucking thing Emma had ever heard. "Did your dad tell you all of that?"

Henry shrugged. "He's said it, yeah. Because it's true."

Emma felt a sudden pounding behind her eyes. She was certain that if she ever met Regina's ex, no matter what the circumstances were, she would end up punching him square in the jaw.

"Henry," she said, taking a deep breath. She waited until he was looking up at her before she said, "Your mom's a really busy lady, but that doesn't mean she doesn't love you. Whenever I talk to her, she tells me how much she misses you and how excited she is to see you again. She'd see you every day if she could."

"She wouldn't," Henry scoffed. "She used to see me more often and then she gave up on it."

"But don't you think she did that so things would be easier for you? Did you like switching between your parents so often and having to go to a sitter all the time because she had to work?"

"She didn't have to work."

"Yes she did, Henry," Emma said as gently as she could. "You're only a kid so you can't understand this properly, but people have to work. They can't just sit at home all day – especially not when they're as good at their jobs as your mom is."

"How do you know she's good?"

"Uhh, have you seen her apartment?" Emma asked. After a beat, she added, "Where does your dad live?"

"On the other side of the park."

"Is his place nice?"

"Yeah. It's not as big as Mom's apartment, but there's a pool in the basement."

"Right," Emma said. "What does he do for a job?"

"He's a trainer in a gym."

Emma blinked. "He can afford an apartment on the Upper West Side from that?"

Henry didn't know the answer to that, but Emma already did: Robin hadn't bought it. He'd let
someone else buy it for him.

Emma had never asked Regina exactly why she and her husband had gotten divorced because it wasn't any of her business, but maybe she'd just found out on her own. She glanced around at the beautiful, soulless apartment that Regina lived in by herself and felt very sad all of a sudden.

The contract that Regina had forced her to sign suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

"Kid," Emma sighed. "Look. I know it must feel bad when your mom is busy or on the phone or stressed because of work, but she really does love you. And she's not... evil. She wants you to be with your dad because she knows how much you love him, and she doesn't want to get in the way and uproot you all the time. If she's trying so hard to give you a nice life then doesn't that make her good, not bad?"

Henry wrinkled up his nose. Emma saw a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

But then he shrugged and said, "I don't think so. Besides, Dad says she's the reason why they're not married anymore, so that definitely makes her bad."

There was a crashing sound inside Emma's head that sounded like a building collapsing. Maybe it was because of that that she hadn't heard anything from behind her until a voice floated over from the door.

"Emma," it said, and she jumped an inch in the air. She turned to find Regina in the doorway, her face too calm, too expressionless. "Are you going to stay for dinner?"

She said it so quietly. Emma wanted to shrivel up and die right then.

"Um," she ventured. "Is that okay?"

"Fine," Regina said and swept out of the room without another word. Emma groaned, letting her head thump back against the sofa.

"See?" Henry said. "Evil."

Resisting the urge to reach out and knock some sense into him, Emma said, "You really need to stop using that word. Now, are you okay doing some more of your report while I go and help your mom?"

"Sure. Can you ask her if we can have dessert since we have a guest?"

"You're always on the hustle, aren't you?" she said as she clambered to her feet. When she went into the kitchen, she'd been expecting Regina to be bustling around, trying to look industrious. But instead she was standing perfectly still, her back to the door and her hands clinging onto the edge of the counter. Her head was hanging forwards, and Emma couldn't see her face.

It was the first time Emma had been in the same room as her since their fight the weekend before, and she desperately wanted to be mad at her. She was mad at her. But she was also preoccupied staring at the defeated slump of her shoulders, and suddenly that was a lot more important than anything else.

Emma swallowed hard before saying, "Regina?"

"What do you want for dinner?" was Regina's automatic response.
"I don't... I don't care," Emma said, taking a step into the room. "Regina, can we talk about—"

"I can make pasta, but we have that too often," Regina interrupted, opening a cabinet. "Do you like risotto?"

"Can we talk about what just happened?"

"Henry doesn't like mushrooms but I think I can probably sneak a few in without him noticing."

"Regina—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Miss Swan," Regina suddenly snapped, turning round to face her. "Now – pasta or risotto?"

After a painful pause, Emma chose the latter. She watched as Regina turned away, grabbing ingredients at once and not pausing for a second because if she slowed down then she would stop and if she stopped then she would cry. Emma recognised the tactic too well, and it made her chest hurt.

"Can I help with anything?" she asked.

"No."

"Please?"

"I'm fine, Emma. You can go back to Henry."

But it was obvious Henry wasn't the one who needed assistance then, so Emma ignored what she was saying and went over to the dining table, pulling out placemats and coasters and laying them out by the seats that she knew were Regina and Henry's favourites, before tagging one on for herself. She could hear Regina tutting and sighing behind her, but she didn't tell her to go away, which could only be a good sign.

She grabbed two wine glasses and a juice glass for Henry, then laid out the bowls and cutlery with more precision than she'd ever done anything before in her life.

Then she had to stop, because she didn't want to butt in on Regina's furious onion chopping but she also didn't want to just leave again. She glanced around her, trying to find something new to make herself useful with, and when she came up short, she found herself ambling towards the enormous window that was the full height of the room. It had a glass door next to it that would lead her out onto the terrace. The park looked so beautiful below them, and Emma let out a wistful sigh.

"You can go outside if you want," Regina said from behind her, making her jump. Emma hesitated before opening the door, but the second she caught a waft of fresh air, she practically fell out onto the terrace.

She was standing outside for a while before anyone joined her. She didn't even hear the footsteps, but she could somehow tell that Regina was behind her.

She waited until a glass of wine was being held out to her before she turned her head.

"Thanks," she said, taking it and going back to leaning against the railing. Regina matched her pose, her dark hair flicking around her face in the breeze, and Emma had to force herself not to look at her because there was nothing more distracting and more beautiful in the whole world.
After a while, Regina said, "You know, I hardly ever come out here."

"Really?" Emma asked, looking round at her. "I think if I lived with a view like this, I'd never go back inside."

Regina smiled wistfully. "I never really have the time to just stop and look. I'm either too busy working or chasing a child who hates me around the apartment."

It was the first time Regina had said that word out loud, and Emma desperately wanted to convince her that that wasn't true. But now, having finally spoken to Henry about it, she wasn't so sure she could.

"He's a good kid, Regina. He has a really big heart. I think he just..." It was going to be impossible to phrase this. She knew exactly why Henry thought the things he did – he had a big, grown-up voice whispering them in his ear every day. But she couldn't be the person to tell Regina that her ex-husband was the one she should really be speaking to.

But Regina was already laughing. It was a cold noise that sounded like pebbles being thrown down an empty hallway. "His father tells him this stuff. I know."

"You do?"

"Of course I do. Ever since we split up, he's been quietly drip-feeding Henry all these things about me, and Henry adores him so he has no reason to think he might be lying. And I'm not going to be the one to tell him that – that wouldn't exactly help with the whole 'my mom's an evil villain' train he's riding along on. Besides, Henry's right – I am always too busy and too distracted, and when he's here I'm not really present and then when he's not here I hate myself for not being good enough when he is."

"Regina," Emma sighed, desperately wishing she knew how to fix this. "Please don't hate yourself. You're doing your best."

"That's a feeble excuse," Regina said bitterly. "But I don't know what else I can do. I can't destroy my son's hero, and I can't give up everything I've worked for. All I can do is try and show him how much I love him, but every time I do I can feel him pulling away."

"Have you spoken to Robin?"

"Not about this," Regina said. "Or about much, really. I see him sometimes when one of us is collecting Henry, but it's easier if it's a fast process."

She released a long breath, her eyes still looking out at the park. When she thought Emma wasn't looking, she reached up and quickly scrubbed at her cheek.

"Anyway," she said, pushing herself off the railing. "I should finish dinner."

"Can I help now?"

"No. I'm fine."

She wasn't, and Emma was only just realising how not fine she was. Regina had barely been gone for 10 seconds before Emma went after her, but instead of returning to her side in the kitchen, she blazed straight through the apartment and headed towards the living room.

Henry was sitting where she'd left him, his head buried in his workbook. He was drawing a picture
that didn't look like it had very much to do with his book report.

"Come on, kid," Emma said, holding out a hand. "Let's go and help your mom with the food."

Henry groaned. "She doesn't need my help."

"Sure she does. She's falling apart in there without you." She reached down and took his work away from him. "Come on. We'll bring this with us."

"But I don't want to go in there."

After a pause, Emma crouched down in front of him. The sincerity in her gaze startled him enough to make him inch backwards.

"Henry," she said quietly. "Your mom is a good person, and she loves you. You need to stop being so hard on her. Now give her a chance, and go help her make dinner."

He looked back at her with a dark expression. For a second, Emma thought he was going to flat-out refuse. But then he slowly picked himself up off the floor, groaning the whole time, and dragged himself into the next room like he was being walked to the electric chair.

Henry perched himself at the island without a word, and though Regina did her very best not to comment on his sudden appearance, Emma could sense the excitement in her suddenly loose shoulders. Emma stepped up beside her and stole some ingredients, then returned to the island with a cutting board so she could help both of them simultaneously.

"Are the drawings really part of the book report?" Emma asked as she cut up some garlic.

"Yes," Henry said very firmly. "They make it better."

"Or do you just like drawing more than you like writing boring reports?"

"...that too," he admitted.

"I thought you liked writing book reports?" Regina asked, and Henry just muttered something under his breath by way of response. Emma nudged him.

After heaving out a sigh that seemed to go on for a full minute, Henry said, "I do sometimes. But drawing pictures is more fun."

"Your pictures are always lovely," Regina said. Her back was still turned, but Emma could see the tiny smile on her face. "But I love reading your writing."

"You do?"

"Of course I do. You're very good at it."

When Emma wiggled her eyebrows at him, Henry bumped his foot against her shin. She mimed falling over, clutching her leg in agony, and Regina turned around just in time to see Henry giggling at her. She paused, uncertainty freezing her smile, like she wasn't sure whether she should be happy or sad about this development.

"Regina, come and look at this drawing," Emma said, seeing the doubt on her face. Regina hesitated before walking over, wiping her hands on her apron because Regina was the type of person to wear an apron any time she went within 30 feet of the stove.
She leaned over Henry's shoulder and saw the picture of an elephant that he'd been scribbling. Henry tensed up when she reached out to pull it closer to her, but then she laughed. "Is that Mr Flump?"

"Mr Flump?" Emma asked. "Who the hell is that? He's not in the book, is he?"

But Henry's mouth had dropped open. "I forgot about Mr Flump!"

"Um," Emma waved a hand between them. "Hello? Should I know this guy?"

"I had a toy elephant when I was little," Henry explained. "Do we still have him, Mom?"

"I think so," Regina said. "If he's not at your father's house then he must be in one of the boxes in the guest room."

Henry nearly fell backwards off his chair. "Can I go look?"

Emma saw Regina hesitate, because she knew what her normal answer would be: not until you've finished your homework. But then she just swallowed and said, "Okay. But clean up afterwards."

Henry bolted from the room, whooping to himself as he thundered up the stairs. Emma went back to her garlic chopping without a word.

Regina swept past her, returning to her position at the other counter. She quickly kissed Emma's cheek as she passed. Emma didn't ask what that was for, because she knew – she just kept chopping, her face going pink.

It took Regina twice as long as normal to put Henry to bed that night, because his reunion with Mr Flump had tipped him way over the edge of normal 10-year-old excitement and into full-blown hysteria. When she staggered down the stairs again, she looked like she'd just come back from war.

"That elephant must be stuffed with narcotics," she said, collapsing onto the couch next to Emma. "That's the only possible explanation."

Emma laughed. "Do you have a side business you never told me about?"

"You've caught me. In fact, I can't believe you actually bought it when I told you that art dealing pays this well."

They chuckled in unison, and then Regina shifted towards her, resting her head on Emma's shoulder for a moment. "It was nice having you here tonight."

"Thanks. That risotto was amazing."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"You didn't eat any."

"I had a little," Regina said, referring to the two mouthfuls she'd tried before switching exclusively to salad. Emma rolled her eyes.

"If that's what you want to call it."

Regina pulled away from her shoulder so she could look at her, resting her arm on the back of the couch. "Are you worried about me, Miss Swan?"
She reached out one finger and curled it through Emma's hair as she spoke. Whenever Regina got her flirt on like this it always made Emma feel like her body had been dipped in hot tar.

She quietly answered, "No."

"Hmm," Regina said, leaning forwards and kissing her cheek, then her neck. Emma suppressed a shiver. "I think you're lying to me."

She was – about not being worried, and about acting like she didn't want this. She did, desperately, and it was hurting her to not react. But something else was hurting her too, and it was the memory of how Regina had treated her the week before. She hadn't apologised. She hadn't even called. She'd just started kissing her like nothing had happened, based on the assumption that Emma surely must be over it by now.

_We're not dating, Emma. You don't matter enough for me to take your side over theirs._

Emma flinched. It was an old pain, one that had hooked its way into her heart a couple of decades ago: she'd been staring in the mirror after being sent away by foster family number five, and she'd realised that actually, maybe she'd never matter to anyone.

She pushed Regina away from her. "I should go."

Regina blinked back at her. "What? Why?"

"It's late," Emma said, even though it was barely 9:30pm and if she'd wanted to stay over, there was no way Regina would have told her she couldn't.

Emma got up and ran her hands through her hair, trying to shake the feeling of Regina off of her. Regina stared up at her for a few moments, torn between disappointed and annoyed.

"Emma," she sighed, and Emma knew what was coming next. "You know what you signed up for. I told you I'd be difficult, and mean, and if you're going to get upset and refuse to stay the night every time I say something you don't like, then this isn't going to work."

Emma knew she'd say that. She'd spent all week thinking about how this conversation would go, and she'd been able to hear those exact words in her head.

She looked back at her for a second before quietly replying, "I know you have this 'no apologies' rule. But if you really thought about it, you'd realise that you're also in the wrong here. I shouldn't have yelled at that woman – I'm sorry I did that, I really am, and I promise won't do it again. But you should be sorry too. I'm trying really hard and I introduced you to Neal and I defended you in front of that Moe guy, and you didn't even say thank you. For any of it."

She was expecting Regina to interrupt, but she didn't – she just glowered up at her, something pulling uncertainly at her lower lip.

Emma sighed and continued. "So yeah – maybe we aren't dating. But we're still in a relationship, and relationships have to go both ways. I'm doing my best to make this work, and you should be too – because I did sign up for this, but that doesn't mean I'll forgive you for every crappy thing you do just because you demand it."

Regina blinked. For a split second, Emma thought she was going to concede that maybe she had a point.

But then she just waved a hand through the air. It was her way of telling Emma to get out without
having to taste the words in her mouth.

So Emma left, not saying goodbye, not feeling angry this time but possibly feeling a little bit betrayed. She knew Regina had warned her about all this, and she knew that she'd responded by saying it wouldn't be a problem for someone like her. But maybe at the time she hadn't taken into consideration just how much Regina would make her heart melt whenever she was treating her with the easy kindness that seemed to drip from her on some days. As she'd been taken in by Regina's glimmering brown eyes, she definitely hadn't considered how much the opposite might hurt.
Emma sat slumped over her desk, her head resting on her hand. She had been flicking a pen up the ramp of her notepad and then watching it roll back down again for the past 30 minutes, and she could tell that someone from the comms desk was going to come over and strangle her if she didn't stop soon.

She'd been in a funk ever since Saturday, when she'd left Regina on the sourest note possible. The difference this week, though, was that Regina was no longer giving her the silent treatment — she had called Emma on Sunday morning, and Emma had simply stared down at her vibrating cell phone like she was waiting for it to crack in two and start screaming at her. She knew it was her job to answer those calls, and she knew Regina would be furious when she didn't, but she also knew that if she was forced to go to an exhibition opening on two hours’ notice while pretending that nothing at all had happened the day before, her head would explode. So instead she had just refused to pick up.

Now it was Monday and there were three texts waiting on her home screen. All of them were increasingly snappish, but Emma hadn't managed to talk herself into opening them yet. She was beginning to wonder if this is what it would always be like with Regina: deliriously happy one minute, then screaming at each other about a contract the next.

She sighed and flicked the pen up too high. It toppled off the edge of her desk and onto the floor.

"Shit," she muttered, looking around for someone who was already on their feet and might be willing to pick it up for her. She groaned when she realised that the only person who was nearby, and who was storming towards her at that very second, was Ingrid.

Emma snapped her body into an upright position, but her boss had already noticed her despondent slumping. "Emma. What the hell is the matter with you today?"

It was a different kind of berating to her normal high-pitched shrieks. In comparison, she almost sounded concerned.

"Nothing," Emma said. "Just a bit distracted."

"Well, stop it," was Ingrid's helpful suggestion. "I need you to actually answer the phone if you want to keep your job. And when do you plan on finishing those minutes I asked for?"

"I'm working on them," Emma said, but it was a pathetic response and if Ingrid had leaned over her desk, she would have seen that Emma's computer screen was completely blank.

"Work on them faster," she snapped. But then she bent down and picked the pen up off the floor, placing it back on Emma's notepad.

Emma blinked down at it, but by the time she'd looked up again, Ingrid was gone.

She decided then that she had to snap out of this — not because Ingrid had asked her to, but because her job had already fallen by the wayside in her drive to become the best fake girlfriend in the world, and she really would get fired soon if she wasn't careful. So she pushed the pen and notepad to one side and finally opened up Microsoft Word, hoping that if she typed fast enough she might be able to convince her boss that she'd started on the task when it had first been given to her several hours ago.

She'd been working on it for 30 minutes when she heard footsteps approaching her desk once more. Groaning, she started tapping her keyboard slightly harder.
Ingrid stopped in front of her desk and said nothing, which was even more irritating than being yelled at. Without looking up, Emma snapped, "I'm doing the minutes."

For a second, there was no response. Then a voice that definitely did not belong to Ingrid replied, "That's good to know, but it's not what I was going to ask."

Emma's head shot up so fast that she thought her neck might snap. She would have recognised that voice anywhere, but she still needed a few seconds to confirm that it was in fact Regina standing in front of her, her hands folded and her expression caught halfway between amused and impatient.

Eventually Emma managed to stammer, "You're here."

"I am, yes."

"In my office."

"Correct."

"I..." Emma looked around her. Regina was in her workplace, right in front of her face, looking like she belonged there even though Emma had absolutely no idea how she'd managed to get past the reception desk without a security card. Then again, she was exactly the type of person who could blaze her way into anywhere using her confidence alone. While that was normally incredibly arousing, today it was just infuriating. "I don't understand."

"I came to see you. Why is that so hard to grasp?"

It was undoubtedly the weirdest thing to have happened to Emma in the past few months, and she was struggling to form a proper response. "You just... You shouldn't be here."

"Why not?" Regina asked. "You're not answering my calls, so how else was I meant to get in touch with you?"

"You wait?" Emma hissed, sounding near hysterical. "Maybe there was a reason why I wasn't picking up."

"You could have been dead. It was easier to drop by and make sure than to wait for the obituary to go to print."

"Regina, I—"

"Regina Mills?" another voice blurted out, and suddenly the second weirdest thing to happen in the past few months was taking place right in front of her: Ingrid was standing five feet away, her mouth open, staring at Regina like Beyoncé had just wandered into the office. "Is that you?"

Regina looked back at her, her eyebrows raised. "Do I know you?"

"Ms Mills, I recognise you from *Art in America* magazine," Ingrid gabbled, reaching out to frantically shake her hand. By this point the entire office was watching them, and Emma slouched down in her chair to try and hide her burning face behind her computer screen. "Are you here on an appointment? Please don't mind my assistant, come into my office. Can I get you a coffee? Emma, get Ms Mills a coffee."

"That's quite alright," Regina said, taking a cautious step back from this crazy woman. "It's Miss Swan I'm here to see."
Ingrid made a strange choking sound. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Could you excuse us so I can speak to her alone?"

And just like that, Ingrid was dismissed. After a tense pause, she crept back into her office with heartbreak etched across her face, 30 sets of eyes watching her go.

When their collective gaze shifted back across the room to stare at Emma and Regina once more, Emma swallowed hard. She forced herself to her feet, hoping she wasn't wobbling too visibly, and said, "This way. Now."

The meeting rooms were made of glass and going in there would have been like putting Regina on her own pedestal, so instead Emma guided her towards one of the storage rooms. She shut the door behind them, and when she turned around she found Regina looking down at one of their newly released books with a soft expression on her face.

"Do you think Henry would like this?" she asked.

"Regina," Emma snapped, luring her out of her trance. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"I want to take you out to lunch," Regina said, putting the book back on the shelf.

"What? It's barely 12. And I have work to do, you can't just show up here and kidnap me."

"It's not a kidnap, it's an invitation. There are plenty of witnesses in case you go missing."

"Can you stop making stupid jokes for two seconds?" Emma asked. "I have a job to do. I can't just disappear for hours."

"Will the place fall apart in your absence?"

"No, but that's how the real world works," Emma hissed, and maybe she was feeling more hurt than she'd admitted to herself because even Regina looked a bit taken aback by her tone. "Regina, this is my workplace. You can't just ball in here without telling me and expect me to drop everything for you."

"Your boss didn't seem to mind."

"I mind! This is where I work! How the hell am I supposed to maintain any kind of professionalism when my mistress is randomly showing up to humiliate me in front of all my co-workers?"

There was a strange expression on Regina's face – half confusion, half disappointment. Like maybe she'd never even considered any of that before now.

"Regina," Emma sighed, running her hands through her hair. "I just needed some space. I would have replied to you eventually."

"But when?"

"When I was ready."

Regina just shrugged, the brief flash of uncertainty leaving her as quickly as it had come. "Well, I'm here anyway, so we might as well deal with this right now."

"And what does that involve?"
"I'm taking you out to lunch," Regina repeated. "And I promise I'll have you back before the company can go into liquidation. Although it seems your boss is far too overcome by my charms to mind if it does."

"And what happens when I get back and you're not here to distract her anymore?"

"I can come back and babysit you if you really want. All you have to do is ask."

Emma could feel her nostrils flaring, because it was becoming increasingly obvious that Regina wasn't about to take no for an answer.

"Fine, fine," she groaned. "I'll go to lunch with you. But I'm only going for an hour and I'm not drinking."

Regina smirked at her, having won yet again, and said, "Perfect. Let's go, then."

Rolling her eyes so hard that it made her temples ache, Emma led Regina back out of the closet and across the office. Ingrid was still hovering around near her desk, shuffling through papers in an attempt to look like she wasn't eavesdropping, and as Emma went to collect her backpack, she hoped for the first time in her life that Ingrid was about to tell her she couldn't leave.

Regina put her hand on Emma's elbow and made her keep walking, calling over her shoulder, "I'm borrowing your assistant for a little while. I assume that's alright with you, and there won't be any problems when she returns?"

Ingrid stared longingly after them. "Yes... yes, that's fine."

But Regina wasn't waiting for an answer. Instead, she was already guiding Emma into the elevator, the entire office watching them as the doors slid shut.

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Emma sat with her eyes narrowed and her arms folded, not bothering to open the menu in front of her. Regina was browsing through her own, quietly musing over what she was going to have and what Emma should pick.

"They do truffle mac and cheese," Regina hummed. "You like that, don't you?"

Emma knew she was being humoured, but given that she was glaring across the table with her jaw thrust forwards, maybe it made sense for Regina to treat her like a child who needed luring out of her funk.

"I've had the sea bass here before and it was excellent," Regina continued even though Emma wasn't responding to her. "But I think I'm going to have the chicken. Is it very uncivilised to have something besides wine with that?"

Emma still didn't reply, but she was glad Regina had taken her seriously when she'd said there was no way she was drinking any alcohol that day. Regina didn't glance up at her silence.

"I don't actually remember the last time I just had water with a meal."

"Regina," Emma snapped. "Why are you here?"

Regina didn't respond right away. Instead, she kept scanning the menu, her middle finger tapping against its outer edge. After a minute of quiet, she finally put it back down on the table.

"Well. Two reasons," Regina said, reaching into her purse. "Reason number one is right here."
She pulled out a fat brown envelope that Emma recognised immediately. Her pulse quickened. Regina slid it towards her and she snatched it up without the slightest bit of hesitation, because not only was she poor as hell and back to living off of noodles and apples again, but because if Regina was presenting her with her latest payment then that at least meant she wasn't here to break up with her.

She stuffed the packet in her bag and quickly zipped it up. Then she looked back at Regina, her chin thrust out belligerently as she waited for reason number two.

Regina was already rummaging in her purse for something else. Emma forced herself to stay still, because if she looked even the slightest bit curious then Regina would have officially won.

After a moment, Regina produced a small, flat box. It was wrapped in delicate tissue paper, but underneath that Emma could see a very specific shade of blue that even she recognised.

"Reason number two," Regina said, tapping it. Emma felt her resolve weaken.

"What is that?"

"It's for you. Open it."

Taking a breath, Emma pulled the box towards her and gently removed the paper. She thought she might cry when the Tiffany & Co logo appeared from beneath it.

She sighed. "Regina..."

"Open it, please."

Inside there was a thin silver chain with a small diamond pendant hanging from it. Matching diamond earrings sat above it. Emma didn't need to ask if they were real.

She didn't normally go hard for jewellery of any kind, but this was undoubtedly the prettiest thing she had ever seen in her life. When she tried to swallow, she couldn't because of the enormous lump obstructing her throat.

Still cradling the box between her hands, she looked up. "Why did you get me this?"

Regina wet her lips before answering. "I was unfair to you, and I wanted to get you something to show that I appreciate you."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "Was that an apology?"

"No."

"I think it was."

"Miss Swan, I never said the word 'sorry', therefore it was not an apology. This is a gift, and I would like it if you accepted it."

Emma laughed to herself, looking back down at the diamonds that were glinting even in the dim light of the restaurant. "You could just say you're sorry, you know. It would be a lot cheaper."

"You don't need to be concerned about that."

"Who said I was concerned?"
"Emma," Regina sighed, and there was a catch in her voice that Emma had never heard before. She looked up just in time to see Regina biting her lip. "Just take it. Please."

She was nervous. The realisation hit Emma like a burst of bright light, and she sat back with a surprised blink.

Regina didn't apologise, and she probably never would. Buying people things was the only way she knew how to say sorry without actually forcing out the words.

Emma looked back down at the present and smiled. "They're beautiful. Thank you."

Even though she wasn't looking at her, she saw Regina relax. "You're welcome. Are you going to put them on now?"

"I'm not really sure they go with my look today," Emma said, gesturing down at her white T-shirt and black jeans. "I'll save them for something special."

That seemed to be right answer, because Regina was beaming at her. "Alright then."

Emma finally picked up her menu just in time for the waiter to come over. Regina ordered them both iced tea and the chicken for herself, then looked expectedly at Emma.

"I'll get the mac and cheese," she said, handing the menu to the waiter. She looked back at Regina. "You were right, I do like that."

She'd never seen someone look so pleased with herself before. "Yes. I know."

Their conversation went back to normal far quicker than Emma thought it would. Maybe it was because Regina was the type of person who was easily able to use her charms to smooth things over, or maybe her sort-of-apology had been more effective than either of them had expected. Either way, Emma wondered not for the first time whether she was too much of a pushover when Regina was concerned.

"So, Henry has definitely taken a shine to you," Regina said after their food had arrived.

"He has?"

"He wouldn't stop talking about you on Sunday," Regina said. "That was partly why I called. He wanted you to come to the park with us."

"Oh," Emma said, her heart dropping. "I didn't realise."

"You were mad at me. It's understandable," Regina shrugged. "Anyway, we went and we had a nice time."

"That's great – what did you do?"

"Mostly just walked around. He likes those God-awful pizza pretzels you can get there so I bought him one of those, and that put him in an excellent mood for the rest of the day."

"Food is a good way to anyone's heart," Emma said. "And, for the record, those pizza pretzels are awesome."

"They're disgusting."

"Have you ever had one?"
"No, because I can tell I don't want one. Any food wrapped in aluminium foil is not fit for human consumption."

"Oh, but you gave one to your kid."

Regina narrowed her eyes, even though Emma was grinning.

"Maybe I was just trying to stop him talking about you."

"Sounds reasonable," Emma smirked. "Do you want to try this mac and cheese by the way? It's amazing."

"I'm fine," Regina said, going back to her incredibly bland-looking chicken without even glancing at the forkful of food Emma was offering her. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about, by the way."

"Shoot."

"There's an event in Florida that I have to go to. It's a big art thing that happens every year, and more or less everyone I know will be going. I was hoping you'd be able to take some time off work for it."

Emma swallowed, excitement piquing in her chest. "Is it Art Basel?"

"No, darling, I'm afraid that's not until December," Regina said. The endearment slipped off her tongue like liquid, and Emma looked down at her plate so Regina wouldn't notice her cheeks going pink. She felt Regina hesitate before she asked, "How do you even know about Art Basel?"

Emma shrugged, moving her pasta around on its plate. "I just did some reading."

Regina didn't respond to that, but Emma could sense that she was smiling. "Anyway, it's just a week of parties and events and exhibitions. I'll also need to stop by my third gallery while I'm there to check a few things, but otherwise there will be a lot of networking with a lot of important people, and I normally make a few new deals while I'm there."

"It sounds good. I haven't been to Florida since I was a baby. When is it?"

"All next week."

Emma wrinkled her nose. "I might struggle to get the full week off, but I could try for Wednesday to Friday?"

"Deal," Regina said. She was being so ridiculously lenient now that they'd made up that Emma considered arguing with her more often. "I can come and ask your boss for you, if you like. I doubt she'll say no to me."

Emma knew she was only half joking. "That's alright, thanks. I'll manage it on my own." She paused, and then added, "Then again, if I promise to get her your autograph, maybe she'll sign off the whole week after all."

Regina threw her a wry smile. "If anyone can charm that out of her, it's you, not me."

"You're deluded."

"Maybe. Will you let me know as soon as possible if you can come?"

"Of course," Emma said, and Regina smiled at her so softly that she felt her chest swell. "As soon as
I can."
Chapter 21

Halfway through her long weekend in Miami, Emma felt like she was ready to go into retirement. The events Regina took her to there were nothing like the ones she'd gotten used to in New York – if anything, they were more similar to the places she and Elsa went to after work, and although there were moments of genuine fun to be found, mostly the whole experience just felt greasy.

Emma walked through a party on Friday evening, carefully avoiding the crowd of men doing cocaine off the bar, and sought out Regina. She'd lost her an hour ago when Regina had gotten into a heated debate about the pros and cons of hyperrealism with a group of people Emma didn't know, during which Emma had gone wandering off in search of someone she recognised. She had eventually stumbled across Archie and Marco, who looked even more out of place than she did. They had chatted for a while, but the pair decided to excuse themselves when the hard drugs came out, leaving Emma by herself once more.

She eventually spotted Regina on the terrace and hurried out to meet her. She was alone, which was unlike her, but when Emma got closer she saw that she was typing something into her phone. She looked up when Emma approached.

"There you are," she said, placing a hand on Emma's lower back while continuing to type with the other. "Are you having fun?"

"Yes and no," Emma said, twirling her diamond necklace around her finger. "I think I walked in on someone getting a blowjob in the bathroom."

"Excellent. I hope you took a photo to sell to the press."

"What are you doing out here?" Emma asked, turning and leaning back against the railing so she could look at her properly. Regina wore different clothes here, too – her usual shift dresses and button-down shirts wouldn't fit in with this crowd, and so she had filled the closet in their rented villa with sparkly dresses, tight skirts and pants that did very strange things to Emma's insides. Right that second she was wearing skin-tight skinny jeans and a sleeveless black shirt. She had let her hair dry into its natural curls, something Emma hadn't realised she found disgracefully attractive until she'd seen it that morning, and she was wearing large hoop earrings that made her look like she owned a dive bar in Seattle rather than a billion art galleries across the Northern Hemisphere.

"I just had to send an email. It's hard to concentrate with the music in there," Regina said, still looking down at her phone. She was squinting as she tried to read the tiny print. Whenever she did that, Emma always wanted to lean forward and kiss the wrinkle by her nose.

"You need to wear your glasses more."

"I am not wearing glasses to a function," Regina said.

"Why not? They're on trend."

"I look 10 years older in them. It's never happening."

Emma paused before admitting, "I like you in them, you know."

"Yes, I do," Regina smirked. "You're not very subtle about it."

"I am!"
"You drool like a toddler. But it's flattering, so I can't say that I mind."

Emma glared at her. "Your head is way too big."

Regina already knew that was true, so she didn't respond. "And why are you out here?"

"I saw you, and I wanted to get away from all the cocaine."

Finally putting her phone away, Regina looked up at her and laughed. "You do look a little uncomfortable. Are people behaving themselves?"

"They're fine, and I'm not uncomfortable."

"Well, try and act like that's true. If you look like you're out of place then other people will think you are too."

"Fine. Do you know how much longer we're going to stay here?"

"A while. Maybe stick to water for an hour," Regina said, adjusting her necklace before looking towards the sprawling house. "I'm going back inside. Do you want to come with me?"

"You go. I'll make some friends."

Regina smiled proudly. "You do that."

She kissed her on the cheek, then disappeared inside with her head held high. Emma watched her go, sighing wistfully, before following a few minutes later and making her own way through the crowd.

She was wandering around alone for a while before she spotted Natalya, Neal's Russian model friend who she hadn't seen since they'd briefly met at that party in New York. She was surrounded by a group of women who were all over six feet tall and who probably had the collective earnings of a small country. Normally Emma would have backed away with sweaty palms, but she'd had just the right amount of bourbon to force herself to step towards her.

"Natalya, right?"

Natalya looked down at her from her towering shoes, and for a hideous second she didn't recognise her. Then her eyes lit up and she exclaimed, "It's whisky Emma!"

She tugged her forward, introducing her to the circle of girls in her delightfully thick accent. Emma had been expecting a hostile reception, but one of them spotted the Fendi boots she was wearing before she'd even had a chance to say hi. Regina had bought them for her on the day she'd arrived in Miami, and at the time she'd thought they were ridiculous – now that she had a group of beautiful women cooing over them, however, the purchase didn't seem quite so crazy.

"Emma is friends with Neal," Natalya told them all.

"Not really friends," Emma said. "Just acquaintances. Is he here?"

"Da, I saw him stealing liquor. We did not come together," Natalya explained. "But he will be pleased to see you."

"How do you know him?" one of the other girls asked Emma.

"Oh, we just met at an event in New York."
"Emma is dating the scary lady," Natalya said. Emma laughed out loud.

"Regina isn't scary," she said, but one of the girls was already gasping.

"Regina Mills?" she asked. She had enormous brown eyes that went even wider as she spoke. "I'm here with Moe French. He hates her."

Forcing back bile, Emma asked, "The big guy?" She could remember meeting him all too vividly, and the thought of that beefy, shouty guy standing next to this carbon copy of Gal Gadot made her feel slightly sick.

"Yes," the woman said quite happily. "He's ugly but rich, and he brings me to Miami Beach, so..."

"Right," Emma said dubiously. "Well, Regina is nice really. Although I know she and Moe don't exactly see eye to eye."

The girl shrugged. "He doesn't like many people. But in Regina's case I think he's just intimidated by a woman who does his job better than he does."

"Especially a woman who weighs less than his left leg," one of the other women chimed in, and they all laughed together. It was a weird feeling, being part of a group of girls for once in her life. Emma's heart was pounding, but she had to admit that she liked the newness of it.

"Are you guys all dating art dealers?" Emma asked. They all nodded, except for one woman who was dating an artist instead. Emma had to assume it wasn't one of the impoverished ones. "And... I guess you're all models?"

More agreement, and then someone asked, "What do you do, Emma?"

"I work for a book publisher. We mostly print kids books but we're branching out into slightly older age groups at the moment."

"Do you write them?"

"No, I... I'd like to do that one day, but at the moment I'm still in the 'paying my dues' part of it all."

"I know a few independent editors," the woman who looked like Gal Gadot said. "They're always looking for new stuff, especially now the market is drying up a bit. Whenever you're ready to dive into that, maybe I can put you in touch."

Emma just stared at her. "For real?"

"Sure. Let me get your details," she said, whipping out her phone. She had a glittery J plastered on her phone case and Emma remembered in a flash from the earlier introductions that her name was Jasmine.

"That would be really great," Emma said as she frantically typed her number into her phone. "I mean, I know editors at my company too but my boss has a bit of a monopoly on what I do with my time. I don't think she'd appreciate it if I started sending manuscripts around the office."

"I get it, we've all had a bitch boss before."

"My agent only lets me eat apples and almonds on shoot days," Natalya said, not sounding particularly put out by this fact. "But I look great, so it works out okay."

"Emma," one of the other women suddenly said. "Is Regina taking on new clients at the moment?"
Emma blinked. "Artists or collectors?"

"Collectors. My ex-boyfriend gave me some money when he broke up with me and I've been trying
to decide what to invest it in, because apparently just buying new clothes isn't a sensible long-term
solution," she said, glaring at Jasmine.

"I told her to invest in art," Jasmine explained. "Moe isn't taking on new clients at the moment – not
since his wife is divorcing him for sleeping with me – but I thought maybe Regina might be."

Choosing to ignore this admission about Moe's gross private life, Emma gabbled, "I'm sure she is. I
can put you in touch."

Honestly, she had no idea what Regina's plans were, other than to tap her way into the Brooklyn art
scene. But since that seemed to be happening slower than Emma had thought humanly possible,
maybe it would be a good thing for her to help out wherever else she could. "Regina's got an
amazing eye for these things. She was telling me the other day that she bought a collection five years
ago for $45,000 and now it's up at auction for $2 million."

"Wow," the woman said. "And you think art is a better investment than property?"

"The bottom of the art market is never going to drop out," Emma said, repeating a line she'd heard
Regina say a hundred times over the phone. "People are always going to want shiny paintings to
show off how tasteful they are. Trust me, you want to invest in art."

"Listen to her," Natalya said, swigging back vodka like it was tap water. "My little Emma is very
smart."

By the end of their conversation, Emma had the phone numbers of six models safely plugged into
her phone, three of whom were seriously interested in investing with Regina and three who just
wanted to party with Emma when they got back to New York. Her hands were shaking when the
last girl finally handed her her cell back. She couldn't wait to find Regina and show her what she'd
done.

"Emma Swan!" a voice suddenly bellowed from behind her, and she turned to find Neal charging
towards her like a bull. His cheeks and neck were bright pink from sunburn, and she burst out
laughing as soon as she saw him.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"Miami life," he said cheerfully, gathering her up in a hug. He was just the wrong side of sweaty and
Emma could tell just from his gunky shirt how many hours he'd spent drinking that day. "How are
you?"

"Great. I have a new group of best friends."

"Ladies," Neal said, nodding at the models. "Natalya. I've missed you."

"You are a sticky little liar," Natalya said coolly.

"I missed you a bit," he said before turning back to Emma. "Not as much as I missed Swan here,
though."

"Is that what happened here?" Emma asked, prodding his sunburnt neck and grinning when he
flinched away. "You were lying out in the sun moping about how much you wanted me here?"
The girls all laughed, and so did Neal, because he was the type of person who would go along with anything.

"Absolutely. But now you're here, and everything is great," he said, looking around and spotting a free group of sofas. "Shall we all sit? It will do wonders for my reputation if people see me surrounded by seven gorgeous women."

They all collectively rolled their eyes before following him anyway. Emma managed to snag herself an armchair, leaving everyone else to squish into the couches and loveseats together.

She was sitting there for the next hour, drink in hand and easy laughter flitting between each of them. She realised then that she was having actual, genuine fun for the first time since this crazy arrangement had started, and that thought made her spirits lift even higher.

Then she looked up and saw Regina walking through the door. She paused on the threshold, looking around with her hands clasped in front of her until she spotted Emma sitting towards the back of the room. Emma waved her over and she slowly approached, her eyes on the gaggle of leggy girls, none of whom she knew.

"Everyone, this is Regina," Emma cut over the top of the chatter, reaching out for Regina's hand and pulling her to her side. She listed off everyone else's names while Regina blinked down at them.

"Hello," Regina said, and her voice sounded slightly rusty. When Emma looked up, she saw a trapped expression on her face that had never been there before. She was looking around the circle, wondering where she could sit, and she swallowed hard when she realised there was no space left for her.

Emma leapt up at once. "I'll get some more drinks. Regina, sit."

She pushed her into the armchair and hurried off to the bar, grabbing a tray full of shots and a vodka tonic for Regina because she already knew that she was never going to persuade her to have some tequila. When she returned, Regina was sitting stiff-backed in her chair, but there was interest on her face as she listened to the conversation Natalya was having with one of the other women.

Emma handed out the drinks and then perched herself on the arm of Regina's chair. An arm slipped around her waist at once.

"So, Regina," Jasmine said, and Regina actually flinched beside her. "Emma tells us you bought her those gorgeous Fendi boots."

Regina swallowed. "Yes, I did. They look great on her." There was a pause before she added, "Right?"

It took all of Emma's willpower not to throw herself at her, because she sounded completely unsure of herself and it was the most fucking endearing thing she'd ever witnessed. Reaching down to squeeze Regina's knee, Emma listened to the chorus of "Oh, God yes" and "You have amazing taste, I wish I could get my boyfriend to buy me stuff like that" from around her.

More chatter broke out. It was loud and nonsensical and fuelled by alcohol, and Regina held onto Emma's side like she was careering around a racetrack. After a few minutes Emma felt a finger tapping against her hip, and she bent down to put her ear closer to Regina's mouth.

"No one is listening to one another," Regina muttered.

"I know. That's how it works," Emma said quietly. "You just jump into the parts of conversation you
can hear. If you get lost, just wait until something else comes up 10 seconds later."

"But it's all nonsense," Regina hissed, and Emma squeezed her knee again.

"Yeah, and you should enjoy it. Besides, you should get on their good side. They're interested in you."

Regina immediately tilted her head to look up at her. "Are they?"

"Maybe," Emma said loftily. She wanted to save the revelation that she'd managed to drum up some business on her behalf until they were alone. "Just be nice. Be friendly. Don't talk about modernism."

Regina scoffed. "That's not all I talk about."

"Since I've known you, I've heard you mention it at least 14 times."

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Jasmine asked, making Emma look up. She accidentally caught sight of Neal on the way, and before he could avert his gaze, she saw that his eyes were fixed on the way her hand was resting on Regina's leg.

"Regina's complaining about the vodka they're serving here," Emma said, even though Regina had said no such thing. "I told her to stop being such a snob."

"She is right," Natalya bellowed, just like Emma knew she would. "It is total piss."

Thankfully, Regina did have some unnecessarily strong opinions about spirits that she was able to bring to the table. Emma had learned this the hard way several weeks ago when they'd had a 40-minute argument over the pros and cons of scotch whisky over bourbon.

"People think they can skimp on things like this," Regina said, gesturing with her full drink. "But they're wrong. When I host a party, there won't be any Grey Goose in sight."

"Grey Goose," Natalya practically spat, making some of the other girls flinch away from her. "French garbage. These Westerners think they can outdo us and it is embarrassing."

And they were off. Emma sat back as far as she could on her uncomfortable perch, watching the conversation unfurl before her. Whenever Regina trailed off, Emma would jump in to help her, kicking the discussion along like a crumpled can. It was a change, and a nice one, from how things normally were between them, where Emma stumbled along hoping she wasn't about to trip up and Regina quietly watched her, steering her away whenever she was close to falling completely.

It was sweet, almost, to see Regina like this. Her earrings moved excitedly as she talked. Emma smiled down at her, grateful to witness this side to her for once. Then she looked up to find Neal watching her, not talking to the others. When she caught him staring, he didn't look away.

Emma was exhausted when they finally returned to their home for the week. The villa was an outrageous six-bedroomed mansion that Tamara had definitely not found on Airbnb, with its own pool and a stunning view out over Biscayne Bay. They walked into the foyer and Emma eased off her boots with a groan.

"Well," Regina said, dropping her purse on the console and fishing out her cell phones. "That was definitely an unusual evening."

"I've never heard you get so passionate about the best kind of sushi before," Emma said. Regina
We can never remember which one way around a wall.”}

"You know, I actually did," Emma said as they walked into the kitchen. "It made a change from standing around talking about market forces."

"I did miss that," Regina admitted. "But they were interesting people. How did you meet them?"

"Natalya was with Neal last time I saw him. Hey, I saw you and him talking at one point – do you think you're warming to one another?"

"Maybe," Regina said. "It's hard to say. He seemed distracted. But I'm still interested in him, if you think he's still interested in me."

"He definitely is, he was just playing it cool," Emma said, grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge and handing one to Regina. "You know, if you actually wanted to get him onside, you should consider doing something like this of your own."

"What, having a coke-fuelled blowjob party?"

"No," Emma rolled her eyes. "But a party, yes. In Manhattan. Not one of your stiff gallery things, but an actual party with drinks and dancing and more conversation like tonight. Neal looked way more relaxed today than he's ever been before."

"Do you think so?" Regina asked thoughtfully.

"Your normal events aren't really his vibe," Emma said, leaning back against the counter. "If you threw something like this, he would definitely show. And you'd have a better chance to talk and get a feel for him and his work."

"I've never thrown a party like that before, though."

"Well. I could help."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course," Emma shrugged. "If there's anything I'm good at, it's drinking too much and waking up wishing I'd never been born. I'm sure I can help achieve that on a large scale."

Regina laughed, stepping forward to kiss her cheek. "Your skills never cease to amaze me."

She took a sip of her water, then raised one finger. "What did you mean when you said those women were interested in me?"

"Oh," Emma said, her face immediately going hot. "Well. I'm not sure if you're going to be happy about this or not. I'm hoping you'll think it's a good thing."

Regina's eyebrows lifted expectantly. She waited as Emma fished her phone out of her pocket and drew up the new numbers she'd acquired.

"Some of the girls were talking about investing," Emma said, handing the phone over and watching as Regina frowned down at the screen. "They know you're good at what you do. I said that if they're interested in investing in art, I'd try and get you to take them on as clients."
"The models?" Regina clarified.

"Yeah."

"The extremely wealthy supermodels with more money than sense?"

"They're not stupid," Emma snapped. "But yeah. They have loose cash. They're willing to give it to you."

Regina just stared down at the phone, flicking through the different names. Then she looked up, her mouth half open.

"I don't know what to say."

"Is that a bad kind of speechless?" Emma asked slowly.

"Emma," Regina stammered, not answering her question. "You just got me six potential new clients in one evening. Do you know how difficult that is?"

"They weren't all interested," Emma clarified. "But I said we should swap numbers anyway, just in case they changed their minds or if—"

Regina interrupted her by stepping across the room and kissing her hard. When she pulled away, her hand still resting on Emma's cheek, Emma was blinking wildly, trying to see through stars.

"This is great," Regina said, her voice firm and sincere. "You are great. And if they invest with me, I really will buy you a car."

Emma laughed. "I don't want a car. I was just trying to help. It was kind of an accident, to be honest."

"And what a beautiful accident it was," Regina said, kissing her again. "I'll call them the second we're back in New York. Make sure you invite them to this party we're having."

Emma grinned. "You think you'll actually do it?"

"I think I should listen to your advice more often," Regina said. "So yes. I probably will. But only if you help me, because I have no idea where to start on something like this."

"Deal," Emma said, leaning into her touch.

For a moment they just stood there, Emma enjoying the feeling of Regina's cool fingers against her hot cheek. Then Regina pulled away, seeking out Emma's hand and tugging her away from the counter.

"Where are we going?" Emma asked, stumbling along behind her.

"Upstairs," Regina said. "I think I should show you just how appreciative I am of your marvellous little brain."
Chapter 22

When Regina said she didn't know how to organise a proper party, she really hadn't been kidding.

For weeks after Miami, the idea didn't resurface again. Regina was busy with her new gaggle of supermodel investors, plus a barrage of other events that Emma dutifully attended. She didn't worry too much when the party idea seemed to fall by the wayside, because Regina was busy and it had been a long shot anyway. But then one day in mid-September, Emma received a frantic phone call from her.

"I saw Neal," Regina all but shouted down the phone. "I went to an exhibition of new artists and he was there showing some of his paintings, and I have to have him."

"Okay," Emma said slowly. "Why are you yelling about it?"

"Because other people want him too. We need to act on this," Regina said. "How long will it take you to organise a party?"

"Me?" Emma asked. "I thought I'd just be helping you do it."

"I told you I don't know the first thing about hosting parties for hipsters," Regina said, and she sounded completely hysterical.

"Regina," Emma replied, getting up from her desk and walking into the storage room that had become her second office recently. "You need to calm down. Neal has been interested in you for months; he's not suddenly going to run off with Gold or that Moe guy or anyone. You just need to be chilled about it."

"Okay," Regina said, taking a deep breath. "Fine. Chilled. But I do need your help – can you and Tamara take the lead on this?"

"Sure, whatever," Emma said. "When do you want to do it?"

"Early next month?"

"Three weeks away?" Emma asked dubiously. "That might be a bit too chilled."

"I can't do it any later – then it'll be Halloween, then Thanksgiving, then Christmas, and you do not have any idea what our calendar will look like by then. It will be hell, Emma. It's now or never."

"Well, I'm guessing 'never' isn't really an option. Fine, three weeks should be enough time."

"Good. Because you and Tamara are going to look at venues this weekend."

"What?" Emma asked flatly.

"I've already told her, and she's going to start making appointments this week. Come to my apartment on Saturday morning and she'll take you to see them."

There was absolutely no point arguing with her, so Emma just rolled her eyes. "Fine."

"I'm going to make a start on other details now."

"Regina, please don't start paying for stuff without telling me first," Emma said. "If these edgy artists
receive an embossed invitation through the mail, they will not be coming."

"Well, how else am I supposed to invite them?"

"Through Facebook."

"You cannot be serious."

"Of course I am – it's the 21st century, Grandma. Just trust me on this."

"But—"

"Go back to the stuff you're good at," Emma said, sounding way more confident than she felt. "I'll handle this. And I won't do anything without telling you. Promise."

She could hear Regina's jaw clicking down the line. Eventually she said, "Fine. But everything goes through me first."

"Absolutely, Supreme Leader Mills," Emma said, hoping to coax a laugh out of her. It didn't work.

"I'm going back to my office."

"Alright. I'll see you on Saturday, okay?"

"Yes. At 11. Don't be late," Regina snapped, then hung up. Emma rolled her eyes and went back to her desk.

When she arrived at Regina's apartment on Saturday morning, she immediately wished she could turn around and leave again. The kitchen island had become the hub of Regina's panic once more, and Emma froze as soon as she saw the mounds of paper spilling across the granite surfaces.

"What in the hell?" she blurted out the second she walked through the door. "How have you managed to create this much chaos in three days?"

Regina looked up, her eyes tired behind her glasses. It was only then that Emma noticed someone else was with her: she was tall and black and beautiful, and she was possibly the only person in the world who could match Regina in natural intimidation levels.

"You must be Tamara," Emma said when Regina just groaned and went back to the papers she'd been poring over. Tamara walked over to shake her hand.

"Good to finally meet you."

"You too. What's, uhh," Emma started to ask, then paused. "What's going on here?"

"Well—" Tamara said, and that was as far as she got before Regina slapped her hands down on the counter.

"This is going to be a disaster," she snapped. "Emma. Why did you ever suggest this?"

"Because it's going to work," Emma said. She couldn't be sure of that, but she knew if Regina heard even the faintest wobble of uncertainty in her voice, she would call the whole thing off. "Will you relax? Didn't I promise I'd take care of all this?"

"You can't seriously expect me to leave all of this in your hands."
"It's going to be difficult, sure, but I promise you I can handle it."

"This," Regina said, slapping a piece of paper down in front of her, "is not handling it. What the hell is that?"

Emma looked down at it and saw the emails she'd been exchanging with Tamara and a drinks company over the past couple of days.

"Which part exactly?"

"Who the hell is going to want Long Island iced tea on arrival?"

Emma sighed. "Like, literally everyone?"

"No one I know."

"That's the point, Regina," Emma snapped. "This isn't your crowd, it's mine. It's very unlikely that anyone over the age of 40 is going to show up, and do you know what 20-to-30-year-olds like? They like free cocktails that have a shit ton of alcohol in them."

Regina glared at her. Behind her head, Tamara was watching Emma with her eyebrows raised, like perhaps there was more to her than she'd been expecting.

"No one is going to come to this," Regina said, and she suddenly sounded despondent instead of angry.

Emma stepped closer to her, reaching out to gently remove her glasses from her face. She placed them on the counter, then lifted Regina's chin in one hand until she was forced to meet her gaze.

"Regina," she said slowly. "People will come. I'm going to work really hard on this, I promise you. But you have to let me do this my way, because I know you, and I know you're going to try and sneak scallops onto the food menu when you think I'm not looking."

As Tamara covered her mouth to try and hide her laugh, Emma stared Regina down until she finally caved.

"Fine," she sighed. "Between you and Tamara, maybe you can handle this."

"That's quite the vote of confidence," Emma said, gently cuffing her chin. "Just go back to your own work, okay? I'll call you when I need you. And, God, please stop printing out so many emails. You know that the planet is dying, right?"

Regina laughed through her nose. "I've been told."

"Recycle those," Emma said, circling one finger around the entire counter. "Tamara, are you ready to go?"

Tamara was watching her amusedly. "Yeah, sure."

They left together, Regina yelling out "Do not choose an indoor skate park for the venue" to their turned backs just as they reached the hall. Emma shut the front door without responding, then walked with Tamara to the elevator.

"Well," Tamara said after a moment. "You sound confident."

"Good. I'm glad."
"Me too." There was a pause before Tamara asked, "Are you faking it?"

"Yep."

"Excellent. I thought so."

They spent the day trawling through Manhattan together, darting from venue to venue until they came to a renovated warehouse in the Meatpacking District. Emma took one step inside and sighed happily, looking up at the impossibly high ceiling and the winding metal staircase in the very centre of the room. "This is it."

Beside her, Tamara's lip was curling. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Artsy types love a warehouse rave."

"This is not going to be a rave."

"Not intentionally," Emma said, waving a hand. "But look, we can put the bar over there, right in that space at the back, and the tables and chairs can be dotted through here. Then the food can go over on that side."

"And upstairs?"

"Music," Emma said, checking her phone. "I'm still waiting for a few DJs to get back to me with prices, but they all said they'd bring their own equipment and set it up themselves. The entire top floor can be the makeshift dance floor with another bar to the side."

"A dance floor is fine, but again: no raves," Tamara said.

"Tamara, do I look like I'm secretly raving on the weekends?" Emma asked, glad that she'd chosen to wear one of her patented Regina outfits instead of her usual jeans-and-tank-top combo. Even so, Tamara looked her up and down with doubt written all over her face.

"I also wanted to ask you about your food choices," Tamara said, bringing out her iPad and finding the email Emma had sent her the day before. "Mac and cheese bites and mini chicken skewers?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's not very sophisticated, is it?"

"That's the point," Emma sighed, because it really was like talking to a brick wall with these people. "This isn't some ball at the Guggenheim, this is a chilled out party with a lot of young artists who want to get Regina's magic dust all over them."

Tamara smiled, barely. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"I don't, but it's still going to be great. Is Regina really stressing about it?"

"Ms Mills is... concerned," Tamara admitted reluctantly. "But then again, she usually is. And in spite of all her doubts, I think she does trust you to make this work."

Emma wasn't sure if she felt better or worse after that. Luckily, her ringing phone saved her from having to respond. "Hold on, it's the caterer. Hello?"
Emma spent the majority of the next two weeks on the phone to various DJs, bartenders, caterers and transportation companies, bullying them into giving her sizeable discounts or free bottles of alcohol. This meant she also spent a lot of time at Regina's apartment, because it was easier to coordinate everything from there rather than having to call her every 30 minutes to check a tiny detail.

Before they paid the deposit on the venue, Emma had sent a casual text to Neal: Regina's throwing a big party on October 7. Open bar. Wanna come? There had been a tense half hour when she'd heard absolutely nothing in response. The entire time she was waiting, she could feel Regina's eyes burning into the side of her face, silently but urgently wanting to strangle her. Then her phone buzzed, and Neal had messaged her back: Wouldn't miss it for the world. Can I bring some friends? Regina had taken one look at it and squealed like a little girl.

Ever since then, she seemed to have relaxed ever so slightly, whereas Emma had gone in completely the opposite direction. Ingrid had caught her Googling ideas for party decorations 10 times over the past week, and the shouting and berating had reached a level that Emma hadn't even known existed before then. Even when Emma sent a Facebook invite out to the entire office, including her boss, it didn't seem to make things any better. Elsa, meanwhile, was following Emma around excitedly asking about what she should wear and who would be there and would she finally get to meet Regina face to face, and as much as Emma appreciated the enthusiasm, it also made her more nervous. This could very well be a disaster, and the more she told Regina that it was going to be totally fine, the higher the chance grew of it ruining absolutely everything.

A week before the party, Emma was sitting cross-legged on Regina's couch with her laptop open in front of her. Regina was next to her reading a book, not interrupting Emma's work because she'd done that three times already and been snapped at on every occasion.

Emma had a spreadsheet open in front of her. It had seven different pages, and there were huge chunks of information missing from most of them because it turned out DJs were the worst people in the entire world. So far three had already cancelled on her, so – even though she knew she was scraping the very bottom of the barrel – she'd finally asked Elsa to get her friend DJ Dave to get in contact as soon as humanly possible.

When her phone finally rang, she snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Is this Emma Swan?" the man at the other end asked her.

"Yes, yes, is this Dave?"

"Ms Swan, this is Craig calling from Malen and Associates debt collection. I believe you spoke to my colleague back in July."

Oh, fuck.

"Um," Emma said, glancing at Regina before mumbling, "Yeah, I think so."

"Ms Swan, we've given you several additional months to repay your outstanding debts, but in spite of our best efforts to retrieve this sum, you don't seem to be assisting us with our requests."

"I am!" she blurted out. Regina glanced up at the sudden shrillness of her voice, and Emma pressed the phone closer to her ear. "I've started making repay—I mean, I've started working on all of that."

"Due to the value of this amount, we are being forced to call it in by the end of the month, or—"

Emma cut off the call and quickly blocked the number. The room seemed to have gotten 30 degrees hotter.
"Who was that?" Regina asked. Emma didn't turn to look at her because Regina never believed her when she was lying – she would take one look at her panicked face and drag the truth out of her in a second.

"My boss," Emma mumbled, tossing her phone onto the coffee table. Her hands were shaking, and she knew Regina had seen them. She could feel her frowning.

"Really?" she asked slowly.

"Yeah."

"What did she want?"

"It's not important. I'll deal with it later."

Regina's eyes were burning into the side of her face and Emma inwardly pleaded with her, begged her to let something go just this once. This wasn't the time.

Regina reached out a hand and squeezed her knee. "You need to find a new job."

A sigh of relief escaped Emma's mouth like a train rushing through a tunnel. "Yeah. You're right."

She went back to her computer, holding her hands over the keyboard before she began typing out an email to the venue owner. Regina's eyes stayed on her fingers as they trembled.
Chapter 23

The day of the party was one filled with firsts. It was the first time Emma had ever woken up before Regina. It was the first time Regina had staggered downstairs to find Emma half naked in the kitchen and already yelling into her cell phone. It was the first time Regina had been the one to gently coerce Emma into eating something before she passed out, and it was definitely the first time Emma had ever shrieked in Regina's face, "I don't need to calm down, I'm perfectly calm already."

Regina had curled Emma's hair for her while she'd been bellowing at the caterers down the phone because they had somehow managed to deliver half the food to the wrong address and then refused to go and get it. After sending Sidney on an hour-long trip around town the situation had eventually been fixed, but by 4pm there was a tell-tale pounding behind Emma's eyes and all she really wanted to do was curl up in a ball on Regina's bed and forget this was happening.

An hour later, Emma had moved on from moping and instead was storming around the apartment in a skin-tight leather dress and the highest heels she owned. It was her armour of choice, because she needed all the help she could get that night.

"Emma," Regina said, watching as Emma did lap after lap of her bedroom with her phone clenched so tightly in her hand that the plastic was close to shattering. "I need you to slow down."

"DJ Dave is going to be the fucking death of me," was Emma's response. She finally stopped walking, but it was only so she could type out an angry email to the guy that Elsa was still convinced she was going to marry. "He's now asking if it's okay for him to do his playlist of only songs that have the word 'art' in the title for the first two hours."

Regina was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed only in a bathrobe but wearing eye make-up so dark and dramatic that Emma would have mounted her on sight if it had been any other evening. Her hair was curly and slightly wild, and if Emma had taken a second to stop pacing, she would have told her that she was gorgeous. Breathtaking. The most beautiful woman she'd ever seen.

But she didn't have the mental capacity for that. Instead, she just collapsed onto the stool in front of Regina's vanity and rested her pounding head on her arms.

"Emma," Regina sighed, walking up behind her and sliding her arms around her shoulders. Emma was forced upright, groaning uncomfortably as Regina hugged her against her. "Come on. You know this is going to be great."

"Do I?" Emma asked, looking up at her. "More to the point, do you?"

She'd taken Regina to see the venue three days earlier. She'd been forced to watch as her upper lip had slowly, painfully curled upwards as she stared around at the exposed brickwork, the distressed paint, the ropes of lights that Emma had strung up across every railing and surface in the building. Emma had seen the doubt written across Regina's face like it was splashed there in black paint.

To her credit, she hadn't said a word – she'd just nodded and let her carry on. While that had been kind of her, it also meant the pressure had doubled since.

"I do," Regina said, resting her chin on top of Emma's head. "Take a breath."

Emma did as she was told, focusing on Regina's surprisingly composed reflection. Her horrified expression from Wednesday had somehow subsided into a mere glimmer of doubt, and Emma willed that same serenity to enter her too.
"Why do you look so calm?" she asked.

"Because I know how hard you've worked, and I know it's going to be perfect," Regina said, bending forward and kissing her cheek. "It's not what I would have done, but that's the beauty of it."

"You being so reasonable is only making me feel worse, you know."

"Do you want me to yell at you instead?"

"Maybe. It might help."

Regina laughed. "I'd love to assist, but I'm afraid I can't do that to you. Besides, I actually need your help right now."

Emma sighed. "With what?"

"Helping me pick my outfit."

"Me?"

"Yes – or are you going to let me choose for myself and show up in one of my royal wedding ensembles, as you call them?"

"Oh, hell no," Emma said, pushing Regina away so she could stand up. "Come on. Show me what the options are."

She sat on the edge of the bed as Regina pulled out dress after dress from her closet. Most of them got rejected immediately for being too conservative or for making her look like she was the mayor of a small town in rural Maine, and eventually they were left with a pile of garments that Emma wasn't sure she'd ever seen before.

"Where have you been hiding these?" she asked, picking up a glittery cami with straps that were thin enough to floss with.

"There hasn't been an occasion for them yet," Regina asked. She reached for a dress and held it up. "I'm leaning towards this. What do you think?"

It was black and stretchy, which was a great start. "Try it on."

Regina did as she was told at once, dropping her robe with a smirk. She was wearing a lacy thong and no bra, and when she started to wriggle into the dress, Emma realised she wasn't planning on putting one on at all.

Then the dress was on, and it was all Emma could do not to moan out loud: it was impossibly clingy, its wet-looking fabric showing off every single curve on her body. When Regina gave her a spin, Emma saw that there was no back to it at all. Her mouth went dry.

"Oh."

"What do you think?" Regina asked, looking back at her over her shoulder.

"You were always planning to wear this, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was."

"You're not playing fair."
"I just wanted to distract you for a few minutes. Did it work?"

Emma's eyes were still fixed on her ass, so they both knew the answer to that question before she forced out a wobbly, "Yeah, I think so."

But before she could do anything to act on the sudden throbbing between her legs, her phone started ringing. She ran across the room to grab it from the vanity as Regina rolled her eyes.

"Tamara?"

"Emma. I hate to tell you this, but I'm at the venue and an entire crate of Russian Standard has somehow ended up in New Jersey."

They arrived at the venue an hour before the party was due to start. High tables and chairs had all been set up throughout the ground floor, all made from distressed wood or metal to give off the impression that they'd been dumpster-diving, when really the appearance of having no money had cost them close to $5,000 for one night. The drinks company was setting up bottles of liquor behind the makeshift bar as Emma and Regina arrived, and on the other side of the room were a cluster of long tables that would be filled up with food over the next few hours. Upstairs, Emma could hear the thump thump thump of DJ Dave's sound check.

She took a deep breath and turned to face Regina, gauging her reaction. "Well?"

Regina's eyes were on the trays and trays of cocktails that would be handed out when people started arriving. "I think... it looks very impressive."

"Really?"

"Yes. Although it's colder than I was anticipating."

"It's a warehouse. Anyway, it'll warm up when people arrive. Let me take you upstairs to show you the rest."

They navigated their way up the spiral staircase in their skimpy dresses and heels that threatened to slip through every hole in the metal steps. Dave waved at them from the centre of the dance floor. On the other side of the room was another bar, plus more couches, more tables, more seats. Emma already wanted to collapse down onto one of them.

"Emma, are you up there?" a voice called from downstairs. Emma approached the railing and found Tamara peering up at her. She was wearing a tight white dress and she looked so much like Naomi Campbell that Emma felt herself do a double take.

"What's up?"

"Can I check the guest list with you, please?"

After staggering back down the treacherous staircase that Emma wished she'd thought of before she'd put her heels on, she and Regina met Tamara by the bar and looked over the long list on her iPad.

"That's a lot of people, Emma," Regina said worriedly. She had a point – there were at least 150 people invited, and Emma was well aware most of them would show up with friends.

"It's okay. I've checked capacity six times – even if everyone brings three plus-ones, we'll still be
okay."

"But people won't show up with that many friends, will they?"

"Highly likely. I'll bet you $10 right now that Neal will be the worst culprit."

Regina smirked. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he's arrogant, and he probably suspects he's the guest of honour at this whole thing. He knows he can do what he wants."

"How could he suspect that?"

"Because he's arrogant," Emma repeated. "Look, don't worry about it. Worrying is my job for tonight – you can take over again tomorrow."

Regina just rolled her eyes, letting Emma and Tamara go back to the final details. The caterer arrived with the rest of the food and a line of wait staff trailing behind him, and before Emma knew it, it was 8pm. The doors were open and the music was slowly pumping down the stairs, and there were no guests. Not a single one.

Emma sipped nervously at her ginger ale, which she was drinking because her stomach was in turmoil and she wasn't letting herself have any alcohol until the venue was at least half full. All she could do was wait for Regina's inevitable comment.

"Emma..."

"No one shows up to a good party on time," Emma said at once, not looking at her. Regina was perched on one of the precariously high stools, her legs long and tan and far too distracting for that particular moment. Emma whipped out her cell to make sure none of her own guests had texted to say they weren't coming.

Then, miraculously, she heard movement outside. The door staff were checking a long list of names, which was a good sign. If only one person walked in right then, Emma would have gone outside and hurled herself into the Hudson.

After a few more minutes of name checking, the entirety of the Caterpillar office walked through the door. Elsa was leading the pack, wearing a silver dress that barely covered her ass, while a gaggle of editors, illustrators and assistants tripped in behind her. They all blinked up at the warehouse, and Emma could have cried with gratitude over publishers' complete inability to arrive anywhere fashionably late.

"Hey," she said, bustling over to them and sweeping Elsa up into a tight hug that she knew must have had her blinking in surprise. "I'm so happy to see you."

The group was still filtering through the door, and it was then that Emma realised Ingrid was bringing up the rear. She was wearing her normal work clothes and generally looked far too good for this whole place, and Emma had to wonder why she was there at all. Then she saw the way her boss's face lit up and then went purposefully disinterested as she spotted Regina just behind Emma.

"Everyone, this is Regina," Emma said, stepping back and putting her hand on Regina's arm. "You probably remember her from the time she compromised the office's security system. Regina, this is everyone."

They were all looking at her with interest – most of them taking in her sleek dress and long legs with
wide eyes and thinly veiled hunger – as they murmured their polite greetings.

"It's great to meet you all," Regina said, returning Emma's touch with a stroke against the small of her back. Emma turned to look at her, surprised by how relaxed she sounded, and even she needed a moment to absorb the radiance she was giving off: Regina was dazzling and smoky and gorgeous, and it was no wonder the entire group of newcomers had clumped in the doorway, unable to walk in any further.

"Help yourselves to whatever you want," Emma said, gesturing towards the free bar. The trays of cocktails were being brought over, and that was enough to jolt people into action.

As they filed past her, Elsa stepped aside and squeezed her elbow.

"You look great," she said.

"Thanks. I'm going to puke," Emma said calmly. "Regina – this is Elsa."

"I thought you might be," Regina said. Emma recognised her voice as the one she put on when she needed to charm people, but she really needn't have bothered – Elsa was already looking at her with a glazed expression in her eyes that suggested her panties had just shredded beneath her dress.

Elsa reached out for a handshake, but Regina was already moving forward to kiss her cheek. When she pulled away Elsa was blinking, star struck, and it was just another reminder of how fucking smooth Regina really was.

There was a small cough from behind Elsa's shoulder, and Emma peered around her to see Ingrid waiting there. For the first time ever, she was the smallest presence in the room. As she clutched onto her purse, desperate to be invited into the conversation but too proud to ask, Emma almost felt sorry for her.

"Ingrid, hey," she said, gesturing for her to step forward. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Well. I didn't have anything else on tonight," Ingrid replied, her demeanour as haughty as ever. Her eyes were the only thing giving her away: every three seconds they flicked towards Regina, hoping she was watching her and looking increasingly delighted when she realised that she was.

"You probably remember Regina," Emma said, and Ingrid thrust her own hand forward so quickly that it nearly stabbed both of them.

"Of course I do. Thank you so much for the invitation, Ms Mills, it's such a pleasure to be here."

She looked like her world had ended when Regina returned her handshake instead of kissing her like she had done with Elsa. But then it was brought hastily back together again when Regina said, "I love your jacket. Is that Chanel?"

"It is," Ingrid said, barely breathing. "You have a good eye."

"That I do," Regina said, turning to look at Emma with the faintest of smiles. It hit her like a shot of caramel vodka.

"Come on, Ingrid," Elsa said, hooking her arm through their boss's in a way that only she could get away with. "Let's get a drink inside you. See you in a bit, Em."

Emma watched them go, leaning heavily on Regina's arm.
"Why do you look so stressed?" Regina murmured into her ear.

"I think this is my new default setting," Emma said, glancing towards the door and realizing that more people were arriving. "Don't expect to see a real smile on my face until at least midnight."

Regina raised an eyebrow, full of amusement. "I can think of plenty of ways to make you smile right this second, but I suspect you'd rather I didn't do those in front of your work colleagues."

Emma smiled tightly. "Yeah, maybe save that for later. Jasmine!"

She released Regina's arm and walked towards the door, letting herself be gathered up into a hug by Jasmine, the model she'd met in Miami, who was accompanied by a gaggle of equally tall, beautiful girls.

"Hi, darling," Jasmine said cheerfully. "I'm sorry we're so early, but we've been drinking since lunchtime and the last bar just kicked us out for being too loud."

They didn't look especially raucous, although Emma could see the tell-tale glittery look in one of her friend's eyes that told her they hadn't just been drinking in that bar. Still, guests were guests, and at least a dozen of her colleagues had just seen her getting hugged by a model who'd been in an advertising campaign for Burberry six months ago. That would do wonders for her relationship with Ingrid by the time she got to work on Monday.

The arrivals kept coming – after the models it was mostly people Regina knew, because they were all in their late-30s and were apparently incapable of leaving the house after 9pm. They were the best of her art friends though – the less snobby, slightly more laidback ones, and Emma was delighted to see that Mr Gold and that heinous bitch Zelena were nowhere to be seen, even though Regina had forced her on pain of never having an orgasm again to invite them. Archie and Marco appeared around the same time as Mary Margaret and David, all four of them blinking at the crowd and the graffitied walls and the increasingly loud music. Emma hurried forward and introduced them to each other, and she was relieved to find all four of them still happily talking on two of the sofas when she rushed past an hour later.

Some college friends she had invited on a whim also showed up, which was unexpected but entirely welcome, followed by Natalya, who was back in town shooting a campaign for Russian Vogue. By midnight, the warehouse was throbbing. Nearly the entire guest list had shown up – most of them with uninvited plus-ones, much to Regina's horror – and the cocktails had gone down a storm. Even Regina had had a few, and whenever she kissed Emma's cheek she could smell the tang of sugary cola.

The only problem was that there was still no sign of Neal. Emma could tell that Regina was doing her very best to appear casual about this fact, but there was a muscle in her jaw that kept working away whenever she wasn't talking. Her eyes flicked towards the doors any time there was the slightest degree of movement. By 12:30, her mood had begun to descend.

Just as Emma was contemplating calling him and screaming down the phone until he agreed to show up, he swaggered through the door with a girl on either arm and a crowd of similarly grubby-looking art boys trailing behind him. Emma wasn't sure she'd ever been so pleased to see anyone before.

"Regina," Emma muttered in her ear. She was interrupting her conversation with someone, which was always dangerous, but when she followed it up with "He's here", it didn't matter anymore. Emma saw Regina's entire demeanour change in a split second: her spine got straighter, her eyes filled with intent. She'd been on the charm offensive for hours, and no matter how good she was at that, business mode was where she loved to settle herself. This was what she was made for.
"Bring him over," Regina said, but Emma already knew what she had to do. Regina wouldn’t come with her – she would continue her conversation like nothing had happened, and when Emma managed to lure Neal towards her, she would act surprised to see him at all.

Emma rushed across the room, her feet aching more than she’d ever thought physically possible, and waited for Neal to see her coming. The second he spotted her, he pushed his two girls away from him and wrapped his arms around her. He was warm and clammy, like he’d already been partying for hours, and she only lasted a few seconds before she started trying to disentangle herself.

"My swan song," he murmured in her ear, because apparently that was his new name for her. Emma didn't react, instead pushing him firmly away with a smile plastered on her face.

"Wow," she laughed, raising her eyebrows. "You are trashed."

"Correct," he said, tipping a fake hat. "Is the open bar still very much open?"

"It sure is," Emma said. Regina was somewhere halfway between the entrance and the bar, so it would be easy to 'accidentally' bump into her as they walked by. "Come on, let's go get you guys something."

She led the way across the room, Neal falling easily in step beside her. After a moment, he put his hand on the small of her back. Emma felt her muscles go tight, but for the sake of the dozens of people gathered around them, she forced herself not to push him away.

As they approached the bar, Emma spotted Regina and guided Neal towards her.

"Regina, there you are!" she said, stepping up beside her and kissing her cheek. The guy Regina was talking to – the same one from three minutes earlier – looked at her like she was completely insane.

"Here I am," Regina smiled, feigning surprise when she saw Neal swaying behind her. "Oh, Mr Cassidy. I wasn't sure we were going to see you tonight."

"I could never turn down the opportunity to see either of you, Regina," he said, stepping forward and clumsily kissing her cheek. "It looks like a great party. Thanks for the invite."

"It's not a problem. It was about time I threw something like this. Please, go and get a drink."

And then she turned away, going back to her conversation like she couldn't give less of a shit about Neal’s arrival.

Neal and his gang edged through the crowd and headed for the bar, and Emma went to follow them. A hand suddenly gripped hold of her elbow, pulling her back.

"Ow," Emma said, looking up and expecting Regina to be glaring. Instead, she had on her calmest, politest smile.

"He's hammered."

She said it quietly, and it was the most dangerous voice she possessed.

"I know," Emma sighed. "I guess we should have expected that. There isn't much we can do though, especially not if there's a free bar."

"I suppose," Regina said, sounding distinctly unimpressed. "Can you keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't throw up on any of the sofas? I'll come and find you again soon."
"Sure," Emma said. "Do you need another drink?"

Regina's forced smile became more genuine. "Stop worrying about me."

"Worry about him instead, you mean?"

"Precisely."

"Right," Emma said, sucking up all her mental strength and forcing down the nausea she felt whenever she imagined Neal's clammy hands pawing at her. Just as she was walking off, Regina grabbed her once more.

"It's going beautifully, by the way."

Relief filled Emma up, and she smiled back at her. "Thanks. I'm glad you think so."

Then she rushed off to her official duties, because as much as she wanted to stay by Regina's side with her softly proud eyes boring into her, she could see Neal trying to hop the bar and steal a bottle of vodka.

She found herself upstairs on one of the circles of couches, surrounded on all sides by Neal's loud group of friends. She'd made an effort to talk to all of them, just in case any of them were also edgy up-and-coming artists that Regina might want to snap up one day, but eventually she realised they were all far too coked up to be of any use to her at all. Instead, she turned her attention back to Neal himself, who was always watching her with interest whenever she turned her head.

"It's a great party, Em," he bellowed in her ear. "You should throw these more often."

"I don't think that's going to happen somehow," Emma laughed, crossing her legs just so she could displace the hand that he had put on her knee. "The stress would kill me."

"You look really chill, though," he said, throwing back his drink. "And actually, so did Regina. Which makes a change."

Emma smiled tightly. "She's having a good time. I think she's just impressed I haven't burned the warehouse down yet."

"Why do you hang out with her?" he asked, leaning too close. "I know she's hot and all, but you could get anyone. Isn't she too uptight for you?"

"No, she's not – we have a really good time together. I think you need to stop being so hard on her."

"Oh?" Neal pushed. "Why's that?"

"Well, because you've been saying for months that you want to work with her. She's not going to do that if you keep talking about the stick you think she has up her ass."

"But you think she'll do it if I'm nice?" he asked, and Emma saw the flash of interest in his eye. She shrugged as casually as possible.

"I have no idea. She doesn't talk business with me. I'm just saying this bad boy attitude isn't going to get you anywhere with her."

He laughed again, looking far too pleased with this. "You think I'm a bad boy, Swan Song?"
"I think you think you are," Emma said, ignoring the nickname that she really hoped wasn't going to become a thing between them. "But you're wearing an actual jacket for the first time since I've known you, so my guess is you're hoping to impress her."

"Or maybe I'm just trying to impress you," he said. She forced herself to laugh.

"Impress me by being nice to my girlfriend. Look, she's coming upstairs."

Neal straightened up at once, because no matter what kind of fuckboy vibe he tried so hard to give off, he was terrified of Regina and would have done anything to get close to her. Emma laughed to herself, waiting for Regina to spot her so she could wave her over.

"Get one of your friends to move," Emma told Neal, and at once Neal reached out to smack the arm of the guy sitting in the armchair to his left.

"Dude, get up. Someone needs your seat."

The guy blinked, but did as he was told. When Regina arrived, she sat down in that chair like it was her God-given right.

"How can you hear yourselves think up here?" she asked, gesturing towards DJ Dave, who was throwing himself into a questionable Justin Bieber remix.

"We aren't doing any thinking," Emma said, pouring Regina a glass of champagne from one of the many bottles they had waiting on the table. "How are you doing?"

"Good, although I'm not sure I really need this," Regina said, referring to the glass Emma had pressed into her hand.

"Of course you do," Neal chimed in. "Hey, I bet you're the type of girl who's secretly great at drinking contests, aren't you?"

Regina raised her eyebrows. She glanced over at Emma, who nodded minutely.

"I can't say I've ever been in one," Regina ventured. "But I guess there's no harm in finding out."

Watching Regina trying to drink a glass of champagne as fast as possible – the worst possible choice for a drinking contest – was both adorable and painful. As she flapped her hands in front of her face, trying to get the fizzing in her nose to subside, Emma pressed a fist against her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud.

Neal, however, chuckled happily, dark patches splashed across his shirt from the drink he'd slugged back only slightly more successfully. "Seems I was wrong."

"Seems you were," Regina said, screwing her eyes shut. Emma half suspected she was exaggerating, and she couldn't help but admire her ability to manipulate the male ego even in the most ridiculous of circumstances. "Is this what you get up to when you're not painting?"

"Yeah, and sometimes I do it while painting, too. Gets the creative juices flowing, you know?"

"I imagine," Regina said, crossing her legs with an exaggerated swoop. Neal's gaze fell to watch the movement, and just like that, she had him. "I'd be interested to hear about your other creative processes."

Neal flashed her a grin. "Well. Let me tell you about the time I painted a whole series naked because
I was convinced my clothes were distracting me."

In any other circumstances, Emma knew Regina would shudder with repulsion. Not tonight, though – she leaned forward, her face a picture of interest, and listened to him unroll his story like it was a text handwritten by God.

As Neal rambled on, Emma realised that her work was finally done. The party was a success by anyone's standards: everyone was wasted and either dancing to the DJ's terrible playlist or eating the remains of the wildly popular buffet. She'd accidentally managed to create an ironically grunge vibe, and the hipsters were lapping it up. She leaned her head back against the couch and breathed a sigh of relief, realising then that she didn't have a drink in her hand and hadn't had one yet that evening, but for the first time in her life felt content enough to not need one.

"Emma?"

She shot back upright, going momentarily blind from the force, and after a few blinks realised that Mary Margaret and David were standing in front of her.

"Hey," she gabbled, reaching out a hand and pulling her roommate down in the vacant seat beside her. "Sorry I haven't seen you guys all night. Are you having a good time?"

"We were actually just about to leave," Mary Margaret said, clutching her purse nervously. "It's a little loud for us, you know?"

Behind her, David didn't seem that concerned. But he was the type of guy to say yes just to make her happy, and so Emma shrugged. "That's a shame, but I get you. I'm really glad you managed to come. Hey, did you meet Regina yet?"

Regina's eyes were still on Neal as he harped on about his muses or whatever, but her head tilted with interest when she heard her name.

"No, not yet," Mary Margaret said. "She looks busy though."

"I'm not busy," Regina said, cutting completely over the top of what Neal was saying. He fell silent, looking like he'd bitten through his tongue, as Regina stood up and reached over the table to shake Mary Margaret's hand, then David's. "It's wonderful to finally meet you. Emma talks about you both all the time."

"She does?" Mary Margaret said. Emma's face remained carefully impassive. "She hasn't said very much about you."

Regina raised her eyebrows, and Emma said as casually as she could, "Well, between work and my other job, there hasn't been much time to gossip about you."

"Your other job?" Regina asked, her eyes narrowing as she sat back down.

"The hostessing job," Emma said, thanking the universe that Regina was smart and so probably wouldn't drop her in the shit right about now. "The one I took to earn some extra money. You know."

For a second, it was obvious she didn't. And then Emma's eyebrows flicked up, and Regina dramatically hit her own forehead. "Sorry. I've had far too much to drink. Of course I know – it keeps Emma busy enough that I hardly see her anymore."

David sat down on the arm of the sofa, resting a hand on Mary Margaret's shoulder. "We don't get to
hang out with her so much either. But she's probably happy to get away from us, aren't you, Em?"

Emma grinned. "Absolutely. All the kissing and the happy families is way too much for me. That's the real reason I'm working myself to the bone."

They all laughed – including Neal, weirdly – and Emma settled back in her seat, watching as two very different parts of her life collided like asteroids.

She had to admit that it went better than expected. Mary Margaret and David seemed to settle in, no longer determined to leave and instead content to sit and chat with Emma's new friends. They seemed a bit wary of Neal – perhaps because he was exactly the kind of guy Emma would normally stagger home with and they weren't sure he should be leaning quite so close to her if her girlfriend was sitting right there – but miraculously, their fondness for Regina herself was obvious to the entire circle. Emma couldn't blame them: she was radiant and charming and interesting and beautiful, and it took a special sort of person not to be sucked in by all that.

For a brief moment Regina excused herself, grazing her fingertips over Emma's shoulder as she passed behind the sofa, and while she was gone, Mary Margaret wasted no time in gushing over her.

"Wow, Emma," she said, shaking her head. "No wonder you never sleep in the apartment anymore."

"Really," David agreed, squeezing his girlfriend's shoulder so she wouldn't be threatened by his fervour. She didn't seem to care very much either way. "Wow."

And then Regina was back, a tray of drinks in her hands and a bottle of whisky planted under her arm. She settled the tray on the table, seemingly not caring that half the circle was checking out her ass as she did so, before handing the unopened bottle to Emma.

"What's this for?" Emma asked.

"Because you are sober in a room full of drunk people," Regina said, pressing an empty tumbler into her other hand. "You've done a wonderful job tonight, darling. Enjoy it."

Darling. It was a nickname that had crept up on them, slipping uninvited into everyday use. Even though Emma knew it was largely reserved for making a show in front of groups of people, she couldn't ignore the warmth it ignited in her chest any time it fell from Regina's perfectly pouted lips.

She dropped her gaze, smiling, and unscrewed the cap.

The chatter rumbled on, and eventually Mary Margaret and David really did decide to leave. It was closer to 3am by that point, and Emma escorted them downstairs like they were her parents.

"This was great," Mary Margaret said, delightfully buzzed and pink-cheeked as she hugged her. "I had so much fun."

"Thanks for the invite, Em," David said, bending forward and kissing her cheek. A huge surge of love for both of them rushed through Emma's drunken body.

"And hey," Mary Margaret said, leaning towards her and speaking in a crashingly loud voice that told Emma just how wasted she actually was. "Regina's awesome."

"Isn't she?" Emma asked happily, well aware that she sounded exactly like the type of people she hated the most but too full of whisky and gratitude to stop herself.
"If we're not careful, you'll be moving in with her before we can collect the rent you still owe," Mary Margaret laughed loudly, swaying back and knocking into David's shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her, holding her upright. When he looked back up, Emma had gone very still.

"She's kidding," he said carefully, seeing the shadow that had crossed Emma's face.

Emma knew she was, but she was still right – after her first month with Regina, when she'd been so proud of herself for finally getting out of arrears with her roommate, she'd fallen right back into her old habits, putting her rent at the very bottom of her list of priorities. It had slipped beneath pretty dresses and fancy parties and $100 tips to waiters because Regina didn't have any cash left and had asked her so nicely if she wouldn't mind paying the gratuity after their $500 dinner. Now Emma owed Mary Margaret several thousand dollars once more, and she didn't know what she could say in response that wouldn't sound like she was simply making excuses.

Instead she just nodded, hating herself. "It was really great to see you both. Get home safe."

Mary Margaret, oblivious, tugged at David's arm. They staggered towards the exit, and even over the thumping music Emma heard a cheery "David, I think I might throw up" as they disappeared out the door.

She dragged herself back up the stairs, suddenly exhausted, and for the first time ever seeing Regina didn't perk her up again. She was talking to Neal still, her phone out, and she was jotting down words or numbers or something that Emma knew was probably a huge deal. There was a look of concentration on her dark features that Emma knew only came from real potential.

Emma collapsed back down on the couch with a sigh. Minutes earlier, she'd felt happy and proud of herself and like nothing in the world could possibly touch her. Now some of her long-familiar self-loathing was creeping back up her spine, and she grabbed for her bottle of whisky automatically.

Maybe her throat had gone numb from all the small talk, or maybe she felt so weakened after her conversation with her roommate that all her taste buds had packed up for the night – either way, she slumped back, her legs sprawled out in front of her like some kind of ungainly spider, and she brought the bottle to her lips, letting a good measure slide down her throat without her eyes so much as watering.

"Emma," Neal laughed, clapping his hands. "Are we going back to drinking contests?"

"Definitely not," Emma said, her chest starting to burn. "I'm just playing catch-up."

But Regina was watching her carefully. There was a flicker of concern in her eye, easily visible even though it was buried under waves and waves of pride and admiration, and so Emma put the bottle down again. She didn't want to ruin this now – Regina was happy, happy to be there and happy things were going well, and Emma had to take some comfort in that. She'd done it, after all. She'd been the one who'd actually managed to pull this together.

Still, her generous measure of whisky was just starting to hit her, and she eyed the bathroom in the far corner of the room. Regina had gone back to talking with Neal, and Emma decided that since she'd been manically chattering to people for the past seven hours, it was probably acceptable for her to go and take a moment away from it all.

"Excuse me," she muttered, certain that no one was listening to her anyway, and made her way across the dance floor. She pushed open the bathroom door and practically fell inside, not feeling nauseous exactly but definitely feeling not quite like herself. Everything was soft around the edges, and when she leaned over the sink, grateful that the bathroom was empty, it took her far too long to
realise that she'd put her hand in a puddle of water.

"Shit," she mumbled, reaching out for a paper towel and scrubbing it over her hand. The door opened, and she looked up to find Regina watching her from the other side of the room.

"Hey," Emma said, going back to her hands. The water wasn't water at all, she'd realised, and it was strangely sticky against her skin.

"What are you doing?" Regina asked.

"I got something on my hand. I'm hoping it's schnapps," Emma said, not stopping to think what a stupid idea this was before she lifted her hand and sniffed it. She caught a waft of peach and sighed with relief.

Regina chuckled. Emma's chest caught when she looked up at her reflection again – her eyes were glittering from alcohol and exhilaration, and the way that she was leaning against the doorjamb with her dress all ridden up and so much toned, smooth thigh on show made Emma's whole body go hot.

Then Regina reached behind her and locked the door. There was a split second where Emma wondered just how many drunk, confused girls would go crashing into that as they tried to come in to fix their make-up, but then Regina was striding towards her, dropping her purse on the floor as she walked. Her hands reached out to take hold of Emma's face, and she pulled her into a kiss that was so fierce it took Emma's breath away.

Emma thudded back against the counter and grabbed hold of Regina's waist, pulling her hard against her. Regina's fingers sank into her hair, dismantling the perfect curls she'd created for her hours before, as she dipped her back over the sink. A leg slipped between her thighs and Emma ground forwards at once, not thinking, not caring that she was perched in a sticky puddle or that everything still felt slightly out of focus. Regina's teeth were biting into her lower lip and she could feel a hand reaching down between them to yank up her skirt, and Emma moaned, grateful for the loud music that was still playing outside.

Regina's hand pressed flat against her pussy and Emma's hips canted towards it. Desperation had started coursing through her the second Regina had taken that first step across the room, and it didn't matter that 10 minutes earlier she'd been feeling drunk and morose and a little bit too tired to carry on with the night. Regina was curled around her now, and that was all that mattered.

She slid her hands round to Regina's completely exposed back and dragged her nails down it, not caring that people might see the marks. She wanted them to. She wanted them to see this exquisite woman and know that she belonged – for now, at least – to her.

Regina's fingers crept inside her panties and then Emma was lost, her head thrown backwards and her hands clutching onto Regina's body to stop her from slipping. Someone would try and force the door open every couple of seconds and Regina chuckled in her ear every time it happened. It was all Emma ever needed to be thrown so close to her peak that she couldn't possibly concentrate on anything else, and when Regina's fingers crooked inside her, fucking her hard into the sticky edge of the bathroom sink, Emma came with a cry, not bothering to cover her mouth or hide her tears of gratitude from the woman who was bearing down on top of her.

As soon as she had recovered, she grabbed hold of Regina's hips and switched their positions, pushing Regina up and back until she was sitting on the counter with her legs spread. She leaned back against the mirror, her hair a mess and her eyes dark, and she was grinning, actually grinning, because she could see the desperation and the determination in Emma's face as she kneeled between her legs, pulling her panties to one side and burying her face between them.
As she kissed and licked and sucked, Emma realised she was getting lipstick all over the insides of Regina's thighs, and that thought turned her on more than it should have done. If her left hand wasn't still sticky from spilled alcohol and her right wasn't currently working away at Regina's cunt, she would have reached down between her own legs and drawn another orgasm out of herself in a matter of seconds.

Lifting one leg over Emma's shoulder, Regina slumped back against the mirror and moaned loudly, her hips rolling up against Emma's exploring tongue. Emma twisted her fingers inside her, pressing her tongue hard against her clit, and she came with a relieved whimper that Emma wasn't sure she'd ever heard from her before.

Emma kept driving her fingers inside her, drawing the orgasm out for as long as possible, until Regina finally shuddered and pushed Emma's face away from her. She collapsed further down the mirror with her eyes closed, and no matter how beautiful she was, she looked like a mess. Emma got back to her feet feeling extremely proud of herself.

Regina opened her eyes and laughed. "You look very smug."

"I might be a little," Emma said, bending forwards and kissing her slowly. "Making you moan like that is something I'll never get tired of."

Regina smiled, looking vaguely sleepy, before finally pushing herself off the sink and straightening her clothes. Emma did the same beside her, but she couldn't help notice as she glanced in the mirror that they both looked very much like two people who had just spent the past 15 minutes screwing in a public restroom.

Regina caught her eye and smirked. "Do you think they'll know?"

"Almost definitely," Emma said. "All my lipstick is gone."

Regina reached out and wiped the last trace of it away from the corner of her mouth, surprising Emma with how gentle her touch was, before she lifted her hands and teased away some of the knots in Emma's hair.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Regina said, tilting her head as she considered her. "But I think you need some gum before we go back out there."

And Emma laughed, because this was suddenly the most hysterical situation she'd ever found herself in. Her underwear was bunched uncomfortably against her wet pussy, people kept crashing into the locked door as they tried to casually saunter in, her hands were still sticky – both for completely different reasons – and all the while her fake girlfriend was shaking her head in despair, rummaging through the purse that she'd just collected from the floor. Emma clung to the counter for support as she laughed, tears smudging her painstakingly applied make-up.

"You are ridiculous," Regina said, but she was also chuckling as she handed over the gum.

"And you have huge scratches all down your back," Emma said, still giggling.

"What?" Regina demanded, turning to peer at her back in the mirror. "Oh, for God's sake, Emma."

"Hey, you're the one who seduced me in a bathroom," Emma said, finally calming down enough to go and wash her hands. "You don't exactly have the moral high ground here."

"I always have the moral high ground," Regina said, watching her in the mirror. As soon as Emma was done, Regina held out her hand for her to take. Emma blinked – it was the first time she'd ever
done that.

But she took it without questioning it, because holding hands with Regina was the stuff dreams were made of, and if every single person in that warehouse thought they were really together then that was nothing but a good thing in her eyes. The only thing that could make it better was if they actually were.

Regina smiled at her before finally unlocking the door and stepping outside. A group of women stared back at them, taking in their messy hair and vacant lipstick and slightly rumpled dresses, and for a split second Emma wanted to die.

But then Regina called out, "Sorry about that, please continue as normal" and tugged Emma past them, a wicked grin on her lips, and Emma just laughed with her. She squeezed harder on Regina's hand, letting herself led be towards the circle of people who were already looking towards them as they returned.
Chapter 24

Emma woke up feeling like her eyelids were coated in fine shards of glass. She groaned, unable to open them in case the sunlight permanently blinded her, and rubbed a hand over her face. Her hair was a sticky nest of dried alcohol and wedged-in hairpins, and she realised with a jolt that she was almost naked. The bed sheets were tangled around her bare legs, the fabric grating over her ruined feet like sandpaper, and above that all she had on was her panties.

"Good morning," a voice sing-songed from across the room, and Emma forced open an eye. Regina was sitting at her vanity, her hair wet and her bathrobe slipping off one shoulder. Emma couldn't even bring herself to get turned on by the sight of her.

"What the fuck happened?" she asked, her voice rusty and painful-sounding.

"You got a bit too enthusiastic with that bottle of whisky," Regina said, and the very word made Emma's mouth fill with water. "Then I left for a final lap of the party, and when I returned you and Neal were playing beer pong with shots of sambuca."

"Ugh," Emma groaned, burying her face back in her pillow. The black smudges all over it told her that she hadn't quite managed to take her make-up off before she'd fallen into bed. "How are you so awake?"

"I stopped drinking at two, and I had a vitamin B12 shot this morning. I even went for a run."

"Don't lie to me," Emma said. "You've been up puking for six hours. You're just hiding it."

"Oh, Emma," Regina sighed, although Emma could hear the smug grin in her voice as she approached the bed. "Do you want me to get a shot for you too?"

"Don't say shot," Emma mumbled.

"Fine. But do you want one?"

"No. I want water. And coffee. And something to take the taste of death out of my mouth."

"That'll be the burger you made us stop for at 6am," Regina said.

"I did not."

"Trust me, I had to watch you trying to eat it. I can assure you it definitely happened."

"Where did we go after that?"

"Well," Regina said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and rubbing a circle over Emma's naked back. "You ate most of it sat on the sidewalk because I wouldn't let you in the car with it. Then you started to fall asleep, so between myself, Sidney and a rather large gentleman called Bill – who you then proceeded to tip $50 – we managed to get you into the car. Then Sidney had to carry you from the elevator to the bedroom."

"He carried me?"

"You weren't exactly conscious. I told him to leave you on the couch but he was quite insistent that you should be in a bed."
"Oh, God," Emma groaned, pushing her sweaty hair away from her face. "Please at least tell me he was gone by the time my clothes came off."

"He was," Regina laughed. "The pleasure of undressing you was reserved just for me."

"Regina," Emma sighed, finally pushing herself up onto her elbows and squinting up at her. "I am so, so sorry. No one should ever have to see that. Did I... did I at least not ruin the party too badly?"

"Oh, darling, you far from ruined it. It was an overwhelming success."

"It was?"

"Truly," Regina said, and there was no misreading the smile on her lips. "Everyone had a great time, we racked up a bar bill of nearly thirty grand, and Neal has already emailed me to set up a meeting this week."

That finally woke Emma up from her slump. "He has?"

"He really has," Regina said, and she looked so fucking delighted that Emma would have kissed her if her mouth didn't taste so much like a waste disposal unit. "You did so beautifully."

"I'm glad you think so, because I'm never doing it again."

"Come on. You had a good time, didn't you?"

They both knew she had, because even Emma hadn't drunk enough to forget about the mind-blowing bathroom sex, or the fact that Regina had begrudgingly agreed to dance with her just as DJ Dave was beginning to pack up. Emma had coaxed her onto the dance floor with a remix of Wicked Games, and she'd been surprised and delighted when Regina had wound herself around her, holding her tight against her warm body as the last song came to an end.

"I did," Emma sighed, reaching out to tangle her fingers between Regina's. "It was nice to see you so relaxed for once."

"And it was nice to see you so stressed," Regina said, to which Emma rolled her eyes. "Once you've recovered from this party, I seriously think we should consider organising another one. Everyone enjoyed it and I got a lot of new contacts."

"Organise it yourself," Emma said, her pounding head finally besting her. She flopped back onto the pillow, burying her face in the fabric that smelled disconcertingly like onions and aniseed, and closed her eyes. "I'm officially done. Forever."

Regina just chuckled, hopping off the bed. "I'm going to make some lunch. Did you want anything besides water and coffee and a scrubbing brush?"

Emma just moaned, shaking her head into the pillow, and hoped she might be able to get some more sleep before her eyeballs rolled out of her head. Regina glided past her, bending for a single second to press a kiss against her shoulder. Even then, Emma felt herself go soft from it.

Just as Regina reached the door, she poked her head back into the room and said, "By the way – Neal requested you come with me to this meeting."

Emma let out a noise that sounded like a ship crashing into a harbour. "Not today, I hope?"

"No. Wednesday."
"Fine," Emma sighed. Then, "Why?"

"How should I know? He's obviously taken a liking to you. And given how superbly you reeled him in for me, I'm not about to complain."

Emma paused, remembering new glimpses of the night before: Neal's hand on her knee. His hugs becoming longer and more frequent. His eyes burning into Emma as she drunkenly whirled Regina around the dance floor.

"It's not too much of a liking though, right?" she asked, biting her lip as she waited for Regina's answer. When it didn't come, she dragged her head off the pillow and turned, finding the doorway empty and Regina gone.

She heard clattering from downstairs and sighed, returning to her position deep within the pillow. If anyone was expecting her to haul her ass out of that bed any time before the sun set, they would be sorely disappointed.

The meeting on Wednesday arrived with much fanfare. Emma was due to rush away from her office as quickly as she could come 5pm, and Regina would be waiting for her outside. Sidney would drive them to Neal's studio in Williamsburg, where Neal would give them a private viewing of his latest work and Regina could ask all the many questions that had been filling her up since day one. After that, they would finally get to talk business, and – if everything went to plan – Neal would agree to sign on with Regina as his agent. There was a whole lot riding on this, but Emma was determined that it was going to go perfectly.

Except when it got to 4:55pm and Emma – who was practically crouched behind her desk ready to do a sprint-start – picked up her ringing cell phone, it was obvious things had already fallen apart.

"The meeting's cancelled," Regina snapped, like it was somehow Emma's fault. "He's gone out of town."

Emma groaned. "Oh. And he only told you now?"

"Yes, Emma, obviously. Otherwise I wouldn't be hanging around outside your office like some kind of sex pest."

Emma forced herself not to laugh. "Would you like me to come outside and help with that?"

"No," Regina snapped. "I'm going home. I'll get Tamara to reschedule and tell you when to show up."

She hung up abruptly, and Emma went back to her work. She'd been looking forward to spending the evening with Regina – she'd hoped that if the meeting went well enough, they might go out for dinner and then back to Regina's apartment afterwards. Instead, it seemed that she'd be going back to her home alone, which was increasingly becoming Mary Margaret and David's love nest and so somewhere she really didn't want to spend much time at all.

The next day, Emma received an email from Tamara telling her to be ready for another attempt at the meeting at six o'clock that evening. She met Regina outside her office and they got into the car together. Then, just as Sidney began to pull away from the sidewalk, Emma's phone buzzed. With sickness riding high in her stomach, she had to be the one to show Regina a text that read, *Shit. Sorry, Swan Song – forgot about tonight and have gone out with friends. Can we reschedule for Saturday?* Regina had practically forced her out of the car and driven off without her.
Saturday came, and Emma sent Neal a text an hour before their scheduled meeting to check he was definitely still in the state of New York and wasn't about to come down with a mysterious flu. He responded with a cheery *Still on, can't wait to catch up*, which somehow filled Emma with even less hope than before.

Even so, Regina collected her from her apartment and they travelled to Brooklyn together, tension filling the car. Regina looked like she hadn't slept all week, and she was wearing a tightly fitted black blazer that made Emma half want to shrink away from her and half want to fuck her right there on the backseat.

It had finally started getting colder again, but Emma hadn't worn her red leather jacket yet that fall. She knew Regina would rip it from her and burn it if she so much as laid eyes on it, and so Emma sat anxiously beside her wearing deathly tight Armani jeans and a low-cut white shirt, because she figured maybe her cleavage was the only thing that would persuade Neal to let them into his studio for once.

They arrived at the loft, but just as they went to get out of the car, Regina hesitated with her fingers curled around the door handle. She took a steadying breath.

"Hey," Emma said, touching her knee. "It'll be fine. He's flaky, but he likes you."

It was the first time all week that she'd said the right thing, apparently, because Regina threw her a weak smile. Then she was out of the car, storming up the steps and leaning on the buzzer until Neal let them in. Emma had to chase after her, her high shoes threatening to send her floorwards with every step.

They reached the top floor of the building that was so purposefully grungy that Emma knew it must be expensive, and they knocked. They waited.

They waited for a long time.

Regina banged her fist on the door a second time, and eventually they heard footsteps shuffling towards them. After a solid minute of someone fiddling with the locks on the other side, the door opened and the artistic prodigy himself was looking back at them.

Emma winced. Neal's eyes were puffy and red, his pupils blown wide, and there was paint in his hair that she suspected had been there for a few days. There was a smell around him – sleep and beer and pot – and she didn't need to look at Regina to tell that she was wrinkling her nose.

"Did you forget we were coming?" Regina asked, her voice clipped but not quite pissy just yet, and Neal ran a hand through his hair.

"Of course not," he said. He spotted Emma and grinned. "Hey, Swan Song."

"Neal," Emma replied, because saying anything more would have been dangerous.

"Mr Cassidy," Regina interrupted, and Emma could hear the snap at the back of her throat. "I feel like I shouldn't have to ask this, but just how many drugs are you on right now?"

Neal blinked at her like he was contemplating lying. Then he said, "Only two. Three if you include alcohol."

"Oh, for God's sake," she hissed, turning to Emma. For once she didn't look mad at her – she looked like she was desperately hoping she was the one who would be able to fix this.
Emma stepped towards Neal. "Look, let's get you sobered up. I'll make you some coffee and some toast and maybe you can sleep this off for an hour. Regina can do some work while we wait, and then we can go through the paintings. Okay?"

Regina inhaled deeply, forcing herself to accept these terms, but Neal was already scrunching up his nose. "I don't have any coffee. Or food, actually. But I have a lot of beer if you guys want one."

"We're leaving," Regina said flatly, turning away without another word.

Emma faltered, watching her go, before turning back to Neal with the hardest glare she could summon. "Sort your shit out. She's going to give up on you pretty soon."

"I know," Neal sighed. "Look, why don't you come in by yourself and we can chat?"

"No frigging way. The next time we come here you'd better be wearing a goddamn tux, otherwise I'm going to kill you with my bare hands and then I'll let Regina kill you again after I'm done."

She turned and stormed off, thanking God that she'd mastered the art of walking quickly in heels. Regina was two floors below her already and Emma half expected the car to be gone by the time she reached the street, but she staggered outside to find it waiting for her, Regina looking absolutely furious in the backseat.

Emma tentatively approached the open window. "Am I coming with you?"

"Get in."

She wasn't entirely sure why she was the one who was in trouble, but she did as she was told. The second the door slammed shut, the car started to speed back across the city. Sidney had obviously been told to drive as fast as humanly possible in order to give Emma less time to try and make stilted conversation.

They reached Regina's block and the car slowed. Regina was out of the door before they'd fully stopped.

Emma exchanged a look with Sidney in the mirror before opening her own door and traipsing after her. They rode the elevator in complete silence, Regina too mad to even check her emails. She stared stonily ahead, her jaw working back and forth. Emma longed to reach out and try to soothe it, but she knew precisely what response that would get her.

What she wasn't expecting was what happened when they were finally in Regina's apartment. Emma followed Regina into the hall and paused to shut the front door behind them. When she turned back, Regina was right there, right in her face, not kissing her but standing close enough to.

Emma blinked. "Wha...?"

"Get upstairs," Regina said, her eyes dark. "I want you in my bed right now."

The words sent hot sparks flooding through Emma's body, and she felt them land deep in her groin. She took a breath. "Are you sure?"

"Get. Up. Stairs." Regina bit out the words, pressing her mouth against Emma's ear. "Now."

Emma edged past her and headed for her bedroom, her heart pounding and her pussy already thrumming. There was something inexplicably sexy about Regina when she was furious, and
although Emma knew she should probably see a therapist in order to dissect exactly why that was, that was a problem for another day.

She could hear Regina on the phone downstairs, snapping at Tamara. "I don't care what it takes, just make sure he's ready to see us next week and make sure he's goddamn sober this time." Then silence, followed by footsteps.

Emma waited in the middle of the room, her fingers twitches by her sides, and when Regina stormed in, she didn't even stop to look at her before she forced herself up against her, curling one hand around the back of her neck and pressing the other over her breast. Emma gasped, half from surprise and half from the wave of arousal that rocketed into her, and she let Regina kiss her like she'd been refused access to her mouth for months.

Regina reached between them and unfastened Emma's jacket, hurling it over her shoulder, before wrenching her shirt from her body and then unbuttoning her jeans. Emma let it all happen, didn't even think about asking her to slow down, because Regina was burning hot with fury and need. She needed to take her frustration out on someone, and Emma was more than happy to volunteer if it meant she got these kinds of frantic kisses.

When Emma's jeans were unbuttoned and halfway down her thighs, Regina shoved her towards the bed and finished the job as soon as Emma was lying on her back. Then she walked away, still fully dressed and not saying a word, leaving Emma to prop herself up on her elbows, trying to catch her breath.

Regina rummaged around in the back of her closet for a moment, and when she returned she had a pair of scarves in her hands. She approached the bed and, with just a terse nod of her head, got Emma to shuffle all the way back up to the pillows.

She clambered on top of her and grabbed hold of Emma's wrists.

"Lie here," Regina said, fastening them to the headboard. "Don't talk."

But Emma couldn't talk, because the throbbing between her legs was taking over her entire body and she knew if she opened her mouth, all that would come out would be a faint moan. As if she understood this, Regina swept down and pressed a hard kiss against her lips. Then she was crawling downwards, slipping over her body like water, her nails leaving harsh red trails along Emma's skin as she went. Emma tipped her head back and whimpered as sensation flooded into sensation, the silence in the room beginning to make her head go foggy. Then Regina was between her legs, her mouth attacking her cunt with absolutely none of her usual finesse. It was wet and messy and desperate, and Emma came almost at once, her body shaking and her fingers curling around the scarves that were tying her down as Regina fucked her again and again and again.

Two weeks passed and no meeting with Neal was scheduled. He seemed to have a knack for avoiding Regina's calls, for not being home when she dropped by to try and surprise him, and then for returning with apologies and renewed interest in his voice whenever Regina finally decided to give up and stop contacting him at all. Emma had to hand it to him: he was good. But he was also incredibly fucking infuriating, and she wasn't sure Regina would be able to handle the stress of it all for much longer.

October turned into November, and with it Emma had found herself spending more and more time at Regina's apartment. She told herself it was because it was more convenient, but the reality was that she simply hated being apart from her. Even when she was grumpy and wordless from another day of Neal dodging her calls, the space next to her was still the most comfortable place in the world.
On the rare occasions that Emma did go back to her own apartment to sleep, she found herself avoiding Mary Margaret and David as much as possible. She still owed her roommate money – a lot of it, and the amount was growing every month – and although it never got mentioned, it meant Emma felt a cozy mixture of guilt and anxiety any time she was in the same room as her. The pile of envelopes with her name on, meanwhile, grew every single time she stepped through the door, and whenever she laid eyes on them, all she wanted to do was turn away again and never come back.

She returned home one evening and picked up the stack of letters from the hallway table, forcing them into her backpack. The feeling of them wedged between her fingers made bile rise up in her throat, and it was easier to push them away entirely than it was to try and gauge how many there were or even to think about how they seemed to be coming faster these days, with more urgency and a lot less leniency as the companies writing them finally ran out of patience.

She took one step into the apartment and heard her name being called out from the living room. With a sigh, she paced towards it.

Mary Margaret and David were sitting on the couch together. There was an atmosphere in the air that she couldn't quite read: part of it felt happy, full of excitement, but another part felt tense. They were anxious about something.

She was certain they were going to ask about the money. She had a few thousands dollars of her current pay packet left, but even if she was able to hand all of that over, it wouldn't be enough. Besides, the Christmas season was coming up and Regina had already warned her that their schedule wasn't going to be pretty. She needed to prepare herself for what exactly that would mean in terms of outfits.

"Hey," she forced out, loitering in the doorway. "Everything okay?"

"Everything is great," Mary Margaret said. Emma sank with relief – this probably wasn't an intervention, then. "Will you sit down for a sec?"

"Sure," Emma said, perching herself on the edge of the nearest armchair. She waited.

"So," Mary Margaret said, looking excitedly at her boyfriend. "We have some news."

Emma's entire world crashed down around her ears. "Oh, God. Are you pregnant?"

"What? No, Emma," Mary Margaret said, rolling her eyes. "We're not even married yet."

"What? No, Emma," Mary Margaret said, rolling her eyes. "We're not even married yet."

"Oh," Emma said, then with a gasp asked, "Are you engaged?"

"No," Mary Margaret sighed.

"You're kind of ruining this, Em," David said, but he was chuckling.

"Sorry," Emma said, miming zipping her lips shut. "I'll stop. What's the news?"

After a beat, Mary Margaret said, "We're moving in together!"

"Oh!" Emma said, reaching out to squeeze her knee. "That's great, congratulations! When did you decide that?"

"Last week. We wanted to tell you right away but you're never really around these days."

"I know, I'm sorry," Emma sighed. "Things have been a little crazy. But I'm really happy for you."
When do you think it will happen?"

Another silence, and this one was considerably more awkward. She watched as her roommate exchanged a look with her boyfriend, before slowly saying, "Well. That kind of depends on you, actually."

"Me?"

"We… we'd like to live together here," Mary Margaret said. "As in… you know. Just us."

Emma blinked at them. Finally, the penny dropped. "Oh. Oh. So, you want me to move out?"

"We don't want you to," Mary Margaret hurriedly clarified. "And there is absolutely no rush. But..."

The lack of ending to that sentence said everything.

"I get you," Emma said, forcing a smile. "Hey, look – this is great. Really. Congratulations."

She stood up and gave her roommate a hug, then David. When she pulled away, she hoped they didn't notice the sadness on her face.

"I'll start looking for a new place as soon as I can," she said, running a hand over her hair. "It might take a while, but..."

"No rush," Mary Margaret said, waving her hands in front of her, but she was just being kind. Of course there was a rush – no one wanted their ex-convict ex-roommate loitering around when they were trying to start their first home.

"I promise," Emma said, picking up her backpack and hooking it over one shoulder. "If I have time tonight, I'll even start looking then."

Her roommate's delighted beam nearly broke her. "Thanks, Emma. You really are a great friend."

*I'm the worst fucking friend in the world and we all know it,* Emma thought sullenly. Out loud, she said, "No problem. It's the least I can do."

She left them in their bubble of happiness, taking the stairs two at a time in her haste to get away from it. When she was safely inside her room, she collapsed face-first onto her bed and waited for her heart to stop feeling like it was caught inside a washing machine.

She owed them so much money, and the truly terrifying thing was that she couldn't imagine ever being able to pay them back. And that brought up its own question – if she couldn't afford rent now, how the hell would she afford it in a new place without a Mary Margaret crutch to lean on?

She grabbed her laptop and pulled up the first property website she could find. As she scrolled, her heart sunk lower: $1,800 a month. $1,700 a month, plus bills. $500 per week with a shared bathroom and electricity on a penny meter.

Then, at the bottom of every single listing, the real kicker: *All applicants will be subjected to a full credit check.*

She snapped her laptop shut and pushed it away from her, her heart rate climbing. Everything felt tight – her lungs, her windpipe, the walls of her room, and she curled up in a ball on the bed willing it all to go away.

"You're okay," she said to herself, forcing her voice to be steady. "You're okay."
Even as she said it, she realised how hollow the words were. She wouldn't be able to find a new place to live – not with her abysmal credit score dragging her down, nor with her criminal record marking every application she filled out with a huge red cross. There was only one person who might be able to help her with any of it, but she didn't know the truth about either of those things: Regina was sitting across the city right then in her multimillion-dollar penthouse, and the distance between them was so much more than just a couple of miles as the crow flies.

Emma had known for a while that the only thing getting her by was Regina's money, and because of that fact, she'd grown to hate it more and more. She resented the packages full of cash when they showed up, and she especially hated the way she greedily snatched them up, bringing the notes up to her nose and inhaling the scent of them like they alone would fix every problem she was facing.

Except they were the very reason why she and Regina were so far apart, and they were the reason why they'd never properly be together.

"You're okay," she repeated stubbornly. She wouldn't cry because she didn't do that, but the tightness in her throat told her she wasn't far off.

Downstairs, Mary Margaret and David were laughing, a movie playing in the background.

Upstairs, the whole apartment was closing in. Emma closed her eyes. She was not okay.

_A/N: You can find me on Twitter at @_starsthatburn_!
Chapter 25

Regina's frustration with Neal began to grow into something that gave her a permanent twitch beneath her right eye, and eventually Emma had to put a stop to it.

"Regina," she said, watching as she whipped her cell phone against the couch cushions for the eighth time that evening. "What did he do now?"

"He's cancelled Monday's meeting," Regina spat, picking up her glass of wine and throwing its contents down her throat without so much as a shudder. "That took weeks. Weeks. I nearly got Tamara to stake out his studio."

"He's being a douchebag – why don't you just drop him?" Emma asked.

"Because I want him."

"There are plenty of other artists out there, and most of them would kill to get close to you. Why not just—"

"No," Regina said flatly, rubbing at the marks that her glasses had left on the bridge of her nose. "I want him."

Emma really didn't see the appeal. She never had. But she supposed she was looking at the whole thing from a very different perspective, and Regina probably wasn't interested in how low Neal insisted on wearing his jeans if he was still capable of producing good art while doing so.

The problem, though, was that Emma wasn't convinced he was producing good art. She knew guys like Neal, and she knew what a showboat he was. If he was hiding away, refusing to let Regina step foot inside his workshop, then there must be a reason for that. It was unbearable that Regina simply hadn't realised it yet.

"Regina," Emma said softly, shifting towards her and cupping her cheek. "Can you let me try and help?"

It had been a long week, one where they'd spent nearly every evening at some gala or another. Now that Emma had gotten the hang of not punching people whenever they sneered at her over their wine glasses, she found most of the events kind of boring. The only perk was Regina, who right then was leaning into her touch like Emma was the sole reason she was still awake.

"How?" she asked miserably. Emma stroked her thumb over her cheekbone.

"I'll go and talk to him myself," she said. When Regina raised her eyebrows, she added, "Alone."

"The whole problem here is that we can't schedule a meeting with him."

"I know that. I'm not talking about a formal appointment with you and me and too much power dressing. I'm talking about me going to see him by myself and finding out what the hell his problem is."

She tried not to wince as she thought about the way Neal always watched her, always tried to touch her, always joked about how he'd steal her away from Regina if only she gave him the chance. She didn't want to go there alone. But she knew that there was no way he'd turn down a meeting with her, and if this was the one thing she could do to help Regina, then she would do it.
Regina was eyeing her dubiously. "I'm not sure that's going to work."

"Can you at least let me try? I'll ask him if he wants to grab a drink and I guarantee you he'll say yes. If he doesn't, then it's no problem, right? We're just in the same place as before."

Regina sighed, pulling away from Emma's hand to rub at her eyes once more.

"I suppose."

"I'll text him now. And then I'll put my phone away, and we'll forget about this for now and enjoy an evening with Henry. Okay?"

Regina glanced at the clock. It was Saturday, and Henry was due to arrive for dinner any minute. Normally the prospect perked Regina up immeasurably, but tonight she just looked exhausted.

"Fine," she said, waving her hand. She got to her feet and went to get the next bottle of wine.

Shaking her head, Emma pulled out her cell and quickly typed out a message to Neal, asking if he was free for a drink the following day. Without Regina, she added, hating herself for how it sounded but knowing full well it was the only way she would get him to say yes.

Then she put her phone down again, just like she'd promised. She was determined to get Regina to enjoy this evening without worrying about whether he'd replied or not.

The problem was, the second Regina stepped back into the room, a loud buzz came from the coffee table. They both looked down at Emma's phone.

That sounds great. Come to my studio at 7?

Emma sighed. "He might still cancel."

"He won't," Regina said flatly. "You're right."

"Why do you sound so sad about that?" Emma asked, watching as she poured wine into both of their glasses.

Regina shrugged. "It's me he doesn't want to see. That's a bit of a blow, no matter how much I hate him right now."

"I'll talk to him," Emma reassured her, placing a hand on her knee. "I'll find out what his deal is and see if there's any point to this whole thing. And if there's not, I'll be right here to find you someone better. Okay?"

Regina nodded, looking thoroughly miserable. "Okay. But if he's high again, can you at least punch him in the face for me?"

"I promise," Emma laughed.

"Good," Regina said, and then the door buzzed from downstairs. She got up with a sigh and went to wait for Henry outside the elevator while Emma looked back down at her phone.

A slimy feeling crawled up her spine any time she thought about going to see Neal by herself. But she was doing this for Regina, not for anyone else, and it was perhaps the first time since she'd known her that she felt confident she might actually be able to help her. That was enough to push the doubt away for now.
She heard voices outside and went into the hall. When Henry walked in and saw her there, he didn't look remotely surprised.

"Oh, hey Emma," he said, stepping towards her and hugging her around her waist. Emma and Regina both blinked in surprise.

"Hey, kid," she said. "How are you doing?"

"I got an A for that story you helped me work on," he said, referring to the homework she'd spent a whole day doing with him the last time they'd been together.

"That's great," she said, high-fiving him before nudging him towards the kitchen. "What did your teacher say?"

"She said I have a talent for creative writing," he said happily, dropping his backpack in the doorway. Then, after a beat, "Oh, wait. Let me take this upstairs."

He rushed off with his bag, Regina gaping after him.

"That's the first time he's ever done that without me asking."

"Well, you know what they say," Emma said. "63rd time's the charm."

They settled down at the kitchen island and waited for Henry to come crashing back down the stairs. When he did, he hopped up onto the stool next to Regina's. His mom blinked down at him like she thought he'd made a mistake.

"Anyway, my teacher said it was really good and she thinks I should write more stories in my spare time to get even better," he said happily. "Mom and I are going to the zoo again after school this week so I can write about the monkeys. Are we still going, Mom?"

"We sure are," Regina said, hesitating before reaching out to stroke his hair away from his forehead. She was expecting him to flinch away, but he just carried on beaming. "Emma, did you want to come with us to do some hardcore research?"

Emma grinned. "That's okay. You guys should go and have a nice time together."

"But, the monkeys!" Henry gasped, outraged.

"I see enough monkeys from hanging out with you," she said, and Henry glared at both of them when Regina laughed loudly.

"Whatever," he said, the derision dripping from his mouth making him sound every inch like his mother. "Mom and I will go and we'll send you loads of selfies so you can see what you're missing out on."

"Okay, but make sure you put an arrow above the monkeys or something, just so I don't get you confused," Emma said, and suddenly Henry's scarf was being hurled at her face. She squawked loudly while Regina laughed at the pair of them.

"Regina!" Emma whined after dramatically disentangling herself from the striped fabric. "Your son just assaulted me."

"I'm not entirely sure it wasn't justified," Regina said, getting up from her seat and kissing Henry on the top of his head. He let her, still laughing at Emma's overreaction, and Emma remembered the
very first time she'd met him: he'd climbed out of Regina's car and refused to return his mother's hug. When she'd kissed his cheek, he'd scrubbed it clean.

"See? I'm the victim here," he said, his cheeks pink from giggling. Emma pressed a hand against her chest, acting wounded.

"You are not."

"I am too. Mom, tell her!"

"I'm not getting involved in this. You're both idiots," Regina said from the fridge.

"You can't call me that, I'm your son."

"That's precisely why I'm allowed to call you that. I've had to put up with you for 10 years, after all."

Henry laughed again. Then, distracted by what his mother was doing inside the fridge, he asked, "What's for dinner?"

Regina paused as she pulled out a few things. "I was thinking we could make garlic bread."

Henry and Emma gasped simultaneously.

"I love garlic bread," Emma said.

"Me too! We never get to have it. Can I help?"

"Ooh, me too!"

"Oh, good. Apparently I have two children now," Regina said, blinking at them with vague concern on her face. "But yes, you can help."

Emma nearly fell off her stool in her rush to get across the kitchen. "What can I do?"

"Good God, Emma," Regina laughed. "You'd think that you've never made this before."

An awkward pause followed, and Regina looked blankly at her. "Don't say it."

"Well..."

"Emma, you're 27 years old. You do know how to cook, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Emma protested. "I've been taking care of myself since I was 12 – I'd be pretty screwed if I hadn't learned how to do that by now."

Henry had arrived between them, looking straight up as he watched their conversation.

"But you've never made garlic bread before?"

"Why would I make garlic bread? You can buy it from the store for, like, a dollar."

"Is that your same attitude to all food? When you say 'I know how to cook', do you really mean 'I know how to turn the microwave on for five minutes'?"

Emma slapped her shoulder. "No, I don't mean that."

Henry giggled from between them. "I don't know how to make garlic bread either."
"You're 10," Regina said, nudging him with her hip. "And I've been putting off teaching you because I'm certain you won't want to eat anything else ever again once you know how easy it is."

Her son's eyes lit up. "Will I be allowed to have it every week?"

"Once a month," she said. "The mac and cheese rules apply."

"What are the mac and cheese rules?" Emma asked.

Henry sighed. "When I started living with my dad, he let me have mac and cheese twice a week until Mom yelled at him."

"Excuse me for not wanting you to have a heart attack at 14," Regina muttered.

Henry ignored her, explaining to Emma, "So now I'm only allowed it once a month."

"I have mac and cheese way more than once a month," Emma whispered. "Don't tell her."

"I can hear you," Regina said.

"Can I come and stay with you?" Henry whispered back.

"We can have a mac and cheese slumber party," Emma said. "With garlic bread. We won't tell your mom. She'll never find out."

"You two need to learn how to whisper properly," Regina said, but she was laughing. "Emma, can you please get out from under my feet and go get the bread?"

"What about me?" Henry asked, rising up on his tiptoes so he could see more of the counter. "What can I do?"

"I'm going to show you how to mix up the garlic butter."

Henry's eyes lit up, and he stepped closer to his mom. Emma watched from several feet away, a smile on her lips. She didn't want to interrupt this moment, not when she knew how long it had taken Regina to cautiously arrive at it, and so she stayed away, her arms folded across her chest as she waited for it to be over.

That moment came when Regina saw her watching and said, "Emma. That bread would be good any day now."

She grinned, going back to her one menial task. Regina obviously didn't quite trust Henry with any of the dangerous jobs yet, so while she was helping him to carefully mash butter, garlic and herbs together with a fork, Emma was left in charge of heating the oven and slicing up the baguette.

The whole process took forever, partly because Henry could barely contain his excitement and kept knocking things over, and partly because Emma and Regina got into another argument when Regina caught her trying to sneak grated mozzarella into half the portions. It was a mess and it was loud and it was probably the most at home Emma had ever felt in her life, and even when Regina was snapping at her that their cholesterol levels were going to spiral because of her insistence that every single recipe needed cheese in it, she couldn't help but grin softly, resisting the urge to kiss her.

Once the bickering had stopped and the bread was finally in the oven, Regina said, "Emma, can you make a salad?"

She and Henry groaned at once. "Salad? Why do we need that?"
"You think I'm going to let you two work your way through a whole loaf of bread for dinner?" Regina asked, gently tapping Henry's scrunched up nose. "Think again, kids."

Emma and Henry exchanged long-suffering looks, but Emma did as she was told, throwing the offending item together while Regina helped Henry set the table.

By the time they came to eat, Emma was filled with a kind of happiness that she'd never really felt before. It was warm and bubbling and she thought that if she smiled too widely, it would spill out of her mouth.

Then she noticed what Regina had put on each of their plates: Emma's had four slices of crispy, gooey garlic bread beside a pile of salad, and Henry's had three. Regina's own, however, just had the one. A small one. The rest of her plate was obscured by the mound of salad she'd heaped on for herself, and just like that, Emma's bubble of happiness popped.

"This is so good, Mom," Henry said, crumbs tumbling out of his mouth.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Regina said, but she was smiling. She looked across the table at Emma, asking with her eyes whether she was enjoying it too.

"Is that all you're having?" was her answer. Regina's smile flickered.

"Mom never eats as much as me," Henry interjected, with the pride of a 10-year-old who had no idea why that might be a problem.

"Take some more, Regina," Emma said, nudging the bowl towards her. "Please."

"I'm fine," Regina said, spearing a tomato with her fork. "I had a big lunch."

Emma knew that was a lie, because she'd been with her at lunchtime and then she'd been claiming she'd had a big breakfast. She pressed her lips together.

"Are you sure we can't have this more than once a month?" Henry asked. Regina looked back at him.

"Quite sure. No one will want to go near you if you're a stinky garlic monster, anyway."

Henry grinned. "I don't care about that." "Your classmates will. I'm not going to start home schooling you because you refuse to kick your garlic habit."

Henry was laughing, and the moment for Emma to start getting at Regina over her eating habits was gone. For now, anyway.

She smiled at them both and went back to her own dinner, keeping half an eye on Regina's plate as she navigated her way around the one slice of bread she'd allowed herself.

When the door buzzed several hours later, Henry's face actually fell. He wasn't sleeping over that night because his dad was taking him to see his grandparents the next morning, and so at 8pm on the dot, their visit was over. Henry looked at his mother, silently begging her to let him stay.

It was the first time he'd ever done that, and it broke Emma's heart to watch Regina resist.

"Go and get your backpack," Regina said, kissing the top of his head. "I'll see you for the zoo on
"Tuesday, remember?"

"Right," Henry said, forcing himself to his feet and going in search of his bag. For the brief moment while he was gone, Emma let herself look at Regina, who looked happier than Emma had ever seen her. Something about her normally rigid posture had finally loosened.

"What?" Regina asked, catching her staring.

Emma shrugged. Henry's feet were pounding down the stairs again. "Nothing. You're just cute."

Regina's cheeks turned pink, and she turned away so that Emma wouldn't see her dopey smile. Then Henry was back in the room, and Emma was gathering him up in a hug that was so tight it made him shriek.

"This was fun," she said as she pulled away, holding out a hand for him to slap his own against. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Okay," Henry said. "You need to help me with my monkey story."

"I wouldn't miss it," Emma said.

Regina walked past her, trailing her fingertips over her lower back before she reached her son and slid an arm around his shoulders. "Come on, Henry. I'll take you downstairs."

They left, and Emma was left alone in Regina's living room, her stomach full and her mouth tasting a little too garlicky for comfort. She briefly wondered if she should run upstairs and brush her teeth before Regina got back, but she was cozy on the couch and, besides, Regina would be back any second. It would be weird if Emma had vanished by the time she returned.

Except she was waiting for close to 10 minutes before she heard the elevator doors ping outside. When Regina walked back into the living room, her smile had gone.

"Hey," Emma said, sitting upright. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," Regina said, grabbing her empty wine glass and stalking off to the kitchen. Emma froze, not sure whether she was supposed to follow or not. When Regina eventually returned, her glass was only half full, and Emma suspected she hadn't just filled it up that way.

"Regina," Emma said gently, watching as she collapsed onto the sofa as far away as possible. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. Shall we watch a movie?"

"No," Emma said, edging closer to her. "Talk to me. What happened?"

"Nothing h—"

"Regina, I'm not a moron," Emma said, her voice soft enough to take the sting out of her words. "You were happy when you left. What happened?"

She could see Regina's jaw clenching and unclenching, and it looked painful. Emma held her breath, her fingers resting on Regina's knee and gently tracing a pattern through her jeans, as she waited for her to answer.

Eventually, Regina sighed. "It's nothing."
"Tell me anyway."

"He just... He made a comment."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "Henry did?"

"No! God, no," Regina said, smiling in spite of herself. "He was so well behaved tonight."

"He really was," Emma said, not letting the subject get steered away. "So, Robin said something?"

A long pause, and then, "Yes."

"About what?"

"About the..." Regina started, faltering. Emma had never seen her like this before, unable to formulate her words or even to meet her gaze. "About the food."

"Don't tell me he complained about the smell," Emma said flatly. Regina laughed, but it was obvious she didn't find any part of this funny.

"No. He asked what we ate, and I told him, and he didn't look very happy. And I asked why, in case he'd already given Henry a big lunch and thought it was too much, or I don't know. But he said I should know better than to be eating that junk at my age."

A crashing noise filled Emma's head. For the first time in her life, she truly understood why people said they saw red before they committed a murder.

"He said what?"

"He's right, really," Regina said, and Emma wanted to reach out and shake her.

"Regina! He is not. You're a young woman who looks great and can eat whatever the hell she wants. What is his problem?"

Regina took another sip of her wine. She still wasn't meeting Emma's eye, which was disconcerting, but at least she was talking.

"I don't know. He's always been like this."

Emma paused, remembering what Henry had told her about him. "He works at a gym, right?"

"Yes. That's how we met, actually."

"He was your trainer?"

"A long time ago," Regina said. "It was before my business took off. I decided to try and get in better shape, and I ended up working with him. He was very good, very motivating. He was also strict, which was helpful for me."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "How strict?"

"The normal levels of strict," Regina said, waving her hand in a complete non-answer. "He helped me a lot and made me feel good about myself, and then eventually we started dating. I had my own personal trainer living in my apartment." She laughed emptily.

"That must have been nice," Emma said slowly. "Having someone tell you what you can and can't
She was expecting Regina to snap at her for that, but she just shrugged. "He wasn't very good at switching off."

"So, what happened?"

"Well. My business started getting bigger, and I had less time for training and cooking. I suppose I must have started to let myself go," she said. Emma scoffed with disbelief, but Regina kept talking. "But Robin was there and he motivated me and helped me focus on improving myself."

Emma paused for a long time before she forced out, "Improving yourself?"

"You know what I mean," Regina said. "He took me out running before work, and cooked the meals so I wouldn't end up eating junk food when I got home at 11pm."

"Okay – so, tell me what he would do if you did eat junk food," Emma said. "Say it was the weekend and you were really craving a cheeseburger. What would happen?"

Regina thought about it. "I guess I would tell him I wanted one, and he would tell me to resist it."

"Resist one cheeseburger every couple of months?"

"That's all it takes, you know," Regina said.

"No, it's not," Emma spluttered. "Also, that's all what takes? You've looked in the mirror, right? You do know how great you look?"

"There's always room for improvement," Regina said quite calmly. "Robin helped me work harder – I trained more and I worked more, and I learned to sleep less and eat less in order to get stuff done. It worked, because my business exploded and here I am. You can't get this wealthy by waking up at noon and going out for McDonald's every night."

"Right," Emma said, her voice completely flat. "And was that enough for Robin?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when you were thin and rich and exhausted, was he happy with you?"

Regina's silence answered her question for her. Emma leaned back against the couch, shaking her head.

"Do you like yourself, Regina?" she asked. It sounded like a stupid question, because Regina had the most outrageous self-confidence out of anyone she'd ever known. She knew she was beautiful and she knew the effect she had on any room she walked into. But she also starved herself and refused herself even the tiniest of pleasures. She was convinced everyone hated her, and she wouldn't let herself date anyone unless there was contract protecting her heart from getting broken.

"Of course I like myself," Regina bristled.

"So why does it bother you so much when your ex-husband tells you not to eat bread? Do you know what I'd do if Killian said something like that to me? I'd end him."

Regina chuckled. "I know you would."

"Then why does it matter what Robin thinks?"
"It's not what he thinks that matters so much," Regina rolled her eyes. "It's what everyone thinks. If you told me to stop eating junk, I'd react in exactly the same way."

"But..." Emma said. "That's crazy. You're the most self-assured person I know. You don't care what anyone thinks."

"I don't care if people think I'm rude, or selfish, or any of those things," Regina said. "That's true. But for a long time, my looks were all I had. My mother didn't care much for my personality growing up, but I was attractive and that was almost enough for her. Then my husband seemed to feel the same way. No matter how self-assured I might be... that's still a hard feeling to shake off."

Emma watched her sadly. "Right."

"When I was just starting my company, Robin wasn't happy because I could have been working harder, and then when the business took off and I was too busy to go on date nights with him anymore, he was mad because I'd worked too hard and become better than him. Sometimes you just can't win."

"But..." Emma started, although she had no idea where she was going with that. She was cut off by a despondent wave of Regina's hand.

"Forget about it," Regina said. "It's not important."

"It is important," Emma insisted. "You're a control freak, sure, but it shouldn't extend this far. You shouldn't torture yourself to make yourself feel worthy of happiness."

"I'm not torturing myself."

"Right. You're just starving yourself."

"I am not."

"You eat the bare minimum and only when you know people are watching."

"Why does it matter so much to you?" Regina asked. "I'm fine. Look at me – everything is okay. You don't need to worry about this."

But Emma did, and nothing Regina could say would reassure her.

She hesitated before asking, "Have you ever seen a therapist?"

Regina glared at once. "No, of course not."

"Why's that?"

"Because there's nothing wrong with me."

"There doesn't have to be something wrong with you for you to need therapy. Sometimes people just benefit from having someone to talk to."

There was a pause as Regina rolled her eyes. "Not that it's any of your business, but I don't think therapy is for me."

"I bet a lot of people think that. But it helps."

"You've tried it?"
"Yeah," Emma said, quickly continuing so Regina wouldn't ask more and learn about the court-issued counsellor she'd been forced to see after she'd been released from prison. "And I think it did me some good."

"And what makes you think I need that?"

She was being deliberately difficult, but Emma was more than happy to throw an uncomfortable truth or two at her if it would shock her into listening. "You are incredibly rich, and incredibly lonely, and you have an eating disorder."

Regina nearly choked on her wine. "I do not. Don't be so ridiculous."

"You're obsessive about food and not in a good way."

"I just watch what I eat."

"Every woman watches what she eats. You starve yourself, and then you use your personal trainer as a form of punishment when you think you've failed."

"That's a bit rich coming from the woman with the drinking problem," Regina retorted.

Emma flinched back from her. "Sorry?"

Regina hesitated then, looking a bit ashamed of herself. "I'm just saying."

"Just saying what?"

With a heavy sigh, Regina tried to be a bit more delicate. "You... You drink a lot, Emma. Especially when you're unhappy. And I know I can't really talk, but..."

She trailed off and Emma knew she was supposed to take pity on her, but instead she just raised her eyebrows, waiting for her to finish.

Regina cleared her throat. "The first time you came to my gallery, you were hungover. On our first date, you drank nearly a whole bottle of wine. I always have to remind you not to get drunk when we go to events and... it took me longer than it should have done to realise that maybe it's not normal."

Emma went cold. She'd been dreading having this conversation with Regina for a while, but that was because she'd been expecting her to blow up as soon as Emma questioned her eating habits. What she absolutely hadn't been expecting was an intervention of her own.

"No," she forced out. "This isn't about me. We're talking about you."

"You're deflecting."

"You are."

"Emma, I have just as much right to tell you that I'm worried about you as you do."

"Except you're talking crap. I don't have a problem – sure, I like a drink, but so does everyone, and half the time I'm only drinking because you've just poured me a glass."

Regina raised her eyebrows. "You're really blaming this on me?"

And Emma knew she couldn't – not really. She'd fallen onto whisky long before she'd turned 21,
because being numb to the world was so much easier than forcing herself to remember exactly how much it sucked. Now it was just habit, and it didn't matter that she was mostly happy – there were still too many things niggling at the back of her mind, threatening everything she'd managed to achieve for herself, and without letting herself think about it, she'd chosen alcohol as her special way of suppressing it all.

When she didn't reply, Regina bit her lip. "I'm not saying this to be cruel. I'm saying it because I'm your friend."

Emma smiled, but it was half-hearted. "I know. That's exactly what I was aiming for too before you totally blindsided me."

"That wasn't my intention," Regina said, squeezing her hand. "I've been meaning to mention this for some time, but then you beat me to it with the eating disorder crap."

"It's not crap," Emma insisted. "It's true."

"Just like what I'm saying is."

"Stop trying to turn this around on me," Emma whined. "This isn't a competition as to who's the most fucked up."

Regina surprised her by laughing. "It would be a close call if it were."

"True," Emma smiled with her. "But, I mean it. I'm your friend, and I have to sit with you in restaurants while you order chicken again and again and again. I just think you should consider doing something about it."

"Why?"

"Because you're the most accomplished person I know, but this worries me. I just want to make sure you're okay."

When Regina didn't respond, she quietly added, "I'm not trying to force you to do anything. I'm just saying it might be worth thinking about."

Regina looked like she'd rather die, but she sighed. "If I say I'll consider it, will you drop the issue?"

"For tonight, sure," Emma said. "But not forever. You can't walk over me like you do everyone else."

Regina smirked at her. "That's definitely not true."

"Yes it is," Emma said, determined to stand her ground. "Just think about it. If not for yourself or for me, then for Henry. He'd probably like to have a mother who doesn't end up in rehab aged 40."

It was a cheap shot, but it worked. She could see Regina's brow furrowing.

"Fine," she huffed. "I'll think about it. But I'm not going to talk about it again until I'm ready to, and if you mention this in the next month, I'll fire you."

"I'll give you a week and no more," Emma said, squeezing Regina's knee. Regina scoffed, her face a picture of cold rejection, but her hand slipped on top of Emma's and squeezed it right back.

"Alright," she replied. "Now, can we finally watch some TV without you wittering on in my ear?"
"Sure," Emma said, settling back with her chest feeling tight. The conversation hadn't gone well by anybody's standards, but at least it had happened. Regina's hand was still grazing over hers, and that was probably the best outcome she could have hoped for.

Regina grabbed the remote and started flicking through Netflix. "I don't want to watch any more Orange is the New Black. It always makes you weirdly tense."

Emma smiled, not responding. Instead, she reached down and made a grab for Regina's feet. Regina didn't resist as they were pulled into her lap.

"How about we finally start Breaking Bad?" Regina asked, wriggling her toes as Emma began to rub her feet.

"Pick whatever you want," Emma said. They had vastly different tastes in TV shows, and she'd learned by now that they were never going to agree on anything. "As long as it's not one of your weird subtitled Japanese shows about the war, I'm easy."

Regina smiled to herself, selecting something and sitting back as it loaded. After a beat, she said, "We'll talk about the drinking again when you're ready."

Emma's hands froze on her feet. She swallowed.

"Okay."

She waited for Regina to say something more, but apparently she was done. It was the most strangely tentative gesture from someone who normally loved nothing better than to push things until they broke.

Emma went back to Regina's feet, slowly rubbing her thumbs against the soles. She barely looked at the TV – she had something more important in her hands, and it needed her full attention.
Chapter 26

A/N: I haaaaaate putting spoilers at the start of chapters but I know a lot of you will be mad if I don’t – so, see the line below if you have any triggers.

(If any of you are particularly uncomfortable with things related to sexual assault, I'd recommend skipping the very end of this chapter xx)

Chapter 26

Emma went back to her own apartment on Sunday morning, although she wouldn't be able to call it that for much longer. She was still supposed to be moving out of it, but she was also desperately hunting for a way to actually do that: every scenario she ran through in her head resulted in her crashing in one of the Caterpillar storage rooms for the foreseeable future, or gradually moving all of her possessions into Regina's apartment without her noticing. She was running out of time and running out of options, but on that particular day, she didn't have the room left in her head to panic about it. Instead, she decided to spend some time with Mary Margaret before they finally parted ways, all the while mentally preparing herself for her meeting with Neal that evening.

Something in her gut was warning her that this was a bad idea, but she pushed it aside with a firm voice that repeated for Regina, for Regina until she felt marginally less queasy.

She half hoped Neal would cancel on her just so she could go back to Regina sighing and telling her that he was officially a lost cause, but as the day wore on it became more obvious that that wasn't going to happen. He even texted her at five to tell her how much he was looking forward to seeing her.

So, forcing down the anxiety that was quietly stirring in her chest, she got on the subway and stopped off to buy some beers just before she got to his studio. She wasn't wearing one of her Regina outfits that day, and she realised that it was the first time Neal would see her in her normal clothes. She wondered if that would make a difference – maybe he would have been more receptive to Regina's meeting requests if they'd stopped showing up at his door looking like a pair of judgy lawyers.

At 7:05pm, because she knew Neal wasn't the type of person to be impressed by punctuality, she hit the buzzer for his loft. He let her in right away, and she traipsed up the five flights of stairs with the beers cradled against her chest.

The door was already open when she reached the top floor. Neal was peering through, his face a picture of sheer delight as Emma rounded the corner.

"Hey," she said, approaching him. "This feels different to last time."

Neal just grinned, seemingly unembarrassed by his previous behaviour, and opened his arms for a hug. The smell of paint enveloped her.

"Come in," he said, stepping back and grandly gesturing to the promised land. Emma walked past him, wondering whether she should feel some sense of awe at having finally made it inside. Instead she just blinked, realising for the first time that Neal's workshop was also his apartment. It suddenly became more obvious why he'd been reluctant to let Regina in there.
She looked around at the rolled-up futon, the TV with three different consoles sprawled out in front of it, the tiny kitchen with a stack of plates in the sink. The loft was split in two by a Japanese screen door that was supposed to look edgy but had come off its tracks some time ago. Through the gap in the middle, Emma could see what looked like his studio taking up the majority of the space.

"You live here?" she asked as Neal closed the front door and stepped around her, gathering up dirty mugs as he went.

"Yeah. I got a decent grant that paid for this workshop space, but being an impoverished artist doesn't exactly leave much leftover for rent," he explained. Emma once again looked at his multiple consoles and doubted just how impoverished he was.

"Makes sense," she said, handing him the beers. He took them over to the fridge and opened it to reveal not much at all aside from some Chinese takeout and a carton of milk that Emma suspected had been in there longer than it should have.

"So," Neal said, cracking open two bottles and bringing them back. "Are you ready to see my etchings?"

"You're actually going to show them to me?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

Emma eyed him curiously. She knew that saying "Because I was really starting to doubt that you had a single painting to show" was the wrong move here, so instead she just shrugged.

"I'm just surprised," she said. "It's been a long time coming – I feel like there should be a red ribbon across that room."

"The budget didn't stretch that far," Neal said, nudging her. "Come on."

She followed him through the rickety screen door. There were canvases stacked against all of the walls, most of them facing away from her, and streaks of paint splattered across the exposed floorboards. Huge windows filled the room with natural light, and Emma had to admit that it was actually a pretty nice place to hang out in.

"This is really cool," she said, trailing her fingers over one of the empty easels that were dotted around the room. "I'd live here too if I had the option."

"The invitation is always there," Neal said. Emma smiled tightly back at him. "Come through, my new stuff is down here."

The room narrowed down towards the far end, and along that slightly smaller stretch of space was the spot where Neal obviously did his actual painting. There were wet canvases resting against one wall, dry ones against the other, and on the easel there was something half finished that hurt Emma's throat to look at.

They were all part of the same series, she realised right away, and there were a lot of harsh black lines and splashes of red and brown. For a few moments, she just looked at them, wondering if she was meant to say something insightful to stroke Neal's ego. Then she realised what the shapes were, and she took a step backwards.

"They're women?" she asked.

"Yeah," Neal said, eagerly pulling a canvas away from the wall and gesturing over it with his full
hand. "I got a life model in for a few days so I could sketch out the rough shapes. I wanted the finished pieces to be quite abstract, a bit visceral. What do you think?"

Emma thought that she was going to be sick. There wasn't anything wrong with the paintings, not at first glance. But there was something in the aggressive brush strokes, the red splatters, that made her feel uneasy. They weren't paintings of mutilated women by any stretch, but she had to wonder if that was what Neal had been driving at, however unconsciously.

She swallowed. "What inspired them?"

Neal shrugged, sifting through the paintings and pulling out his favourites. "I wanted to shock people into remembering my name."

"Has..." Emma started, and then paused to swallow. "Has Regina seen these yet?"

"No, she's only seen my earlier stuff. Mostly the work from my grad show, and then right before your big party she came to a show where I was displaying stuff I did a couple of years back but hadn't gotten an exhibition for yet," he said, gesturing behind her. There, Emma found a stack of canvases that were just as abstract but far mellower, their colours reminding her of the dried leaves that littered the paths of Central Park. She sifted through them, and she immediately understood why Regina had taken a liking to them.

She looked back at the new series – the one that Regina had been fighting tooth and nail to get a viewing for – and hesitated.

"Why the sudden change?"

"I guess I had a bit of artist's block," he said. "And a girl broke up with me, and then another one, and this is just what came out when I tried something new."

He paused, then asked, "You hate them, don't you?"

"No," Emma replied, sounding completely unconvincing.

"Art's about causing a reaction," he said, and the uncertainty in Emma's face actually seemed to excite him. "To create a bit of conflict. If you hate it then that means I've done something right."

Emma somehow doubted Regina would feel the same way, but she nodded. "You're the expert. I'm just glad you do actually have new work here – I've been wondering for weeks if maybe you hadn't painted anything at all."

They were slowly walking back into the main apartment. Neal laughed. "Not quite. To be honest, I just haven't been sure these were ready for anyone to see. You're the first person I've let in here."

"Makes sense," Emma said. She took a breath. "So, now that I've seen them, are you finally going to let Regina in? She's really interested in seeing your stuff."

Neal shrugged. "Maybe. Hey, do you want to play some Xbox?"
Emma blinked. *Maybe?* That wasn't the most reassuring answer she'd ever had in her life.

Still, she hadn't played Xbox in years and the idea was kind of appealing. She reached out for the controller. "Gimme."

Neal grinned, handing it over, and they settled down to play a round of *Call of Duty*. Emma kept her beer on the floor by her feet, initially determined not to drink it too quickly so she wouldn't lose focus on why she was there, and then finding herself unable to drink it at all because she got so invested in the game. Neal was better than her, but he struck her as the type of person who sat around doing this most of the day while he was supposed to be painting, so that wasn't entirely surprising.

A thought crept into Emma's head. *Maybe Regina will get one of these in her apartment if I really, really beg...*

That snapped her back to attention, and she casually said, "So, should I tell Regina to try and arrange another meeting this week?"

"Hm?" Neal said. She knew he'd heard her. "Come on, Em, you can play better than this."

Emma rolled her eyes and tried again. "Regina's got meetings lined up with other artists now, so I think you should try and get her in as soon as possible."

She waited, hoping Neal wasn't smart enough to sniff out her lie, but he didn't even seem to register it. "Maybe."

This was even more infuriating than his constant call-dodging, and she gritted her teeth. "Is there a reason why you're brushing her off so badly?"

"Emma, focus on the game, will you?"

She responded by hitting the pause button. When Neal blinked at the screen, she reached out for his controller and slapped it onto the floor.

"Stop avoiding the question."

He glared at her. "You can't come into my apartment and break my Xbox!"

"It's not broken. Stop being a baby," she said, reaching out with her foot and sliding the controller further away from him when he tried to make a grab for it. "Tell me why you're ghosting Regina."

"I'm not ghosting her. I've just been busy."

"Oh, bullshit," Emma scoffed. "You've been avoiding her and cancelling on her for weeks, but the second I suggested meeting up without her, suddenly you're free as a bird. If you have a problem with her then fine, but you don't need to be a dick about it. She's trying really hard."

Neal looked at her curiously. "You think I'm being a dick?"

"Neal, you *know* that you are. Now tell me the truth – should I bother giving her any hope at all when I leave here, or should I tell her you're a lost cause?"

Finally Neal looked like he was taking her seriously. "You think I'm being a dick?"

"Neal, you *know* that you are. Now tell me the truth – should I bother giving her any hope at all when I leave here, or should I tell her you're a lost cause?"

Finally Neal looked like he was taking her seriously. He sighed, slumping back with his beer attached to his lips. "I don't know, Emma. The honest truth is I'm not really sure I can sign with her at all. I was just seeing where this went."

"*What?*" Emma spluttered. "The first time we met, you said that's what you wanted. That's what you
always said you wanted."

"I know. And I do. But the more I've thought about it, the more I realised that Regina wouldn't want me."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Em. You've seen the work in there. I've lost my touch, and she'd know that the second she saw it. She'd walk out of here and never pick up my calls again."

Emma's jaw hardened. "So, what? Your grand plan was to mess her around and make her keep coming when you knew full well you had nothing to offer her?"

"Not exactly," Neal said, running a hand through his hair. "I guess I was kind of... biding my time. If I kept her waiting, I would have a better chance of coming up with something good. And I knew that the longer she was left to wait, the more she'd want me."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Emma scoffed, but Neal just shrugged.

"That's how all women work," he said. She'd never wanted to strangle someone more than she did in that moment.

"You're a really shitty person," she snapped. "You can't mess with her like this."

"Why not? She's not exactly struggling for money. I'm allowed to enjoy the attention when a hot woman keeps pursuing me and trying to butter me up."

"You're allowed to enjoy it," Emma said. "But you're not allowed to manipulate her like this."

"Oh, right," Neal drawled. "Because she never does that to other people."

Emma just glared at him. Whether he was right or not, it wasn't the point – he'd wasted weeks of their lives, and now Emma was the one who was going to have to go home and tell Regina the truth because he would never have the balls to do it himself.

The coldness in her voice surprised even her when she said, "If you thought she wasn't going to be interested in you, the decent thing would have been to at least show her around and let her decide that for herself. I have no idea what she sees in people's work – she might still have liked it. Or she might have seen your potential and given you some time to work on something else."

"You think so?" Neal said, and he had no right to look that hopeful.

"Not anymore, I don't," Emma snapped. "She already suspected you were just wasting her time. I'm not going to lie to her when I see her."

Neal rolled his eyes. "You don't have to be so pure and virtuous about it. Everyone knows that you two aren't really together – Regina has had plenty of 'special friends' before, and they always disappear right after she makes a big new deal. I'm doing you a favour by keeping you around."

That hurt a lot more than it should have done. "My relationship with Regina is none of your business. I'm here to help her, and right now that means telling you to stop being a dick."

Neal laughed. "You know, Em, you're cute when you get angry."

Oh, that did it.
"You're an asshole," Emma said. "I'm not allowed to be rude to people at Regina's fancy parties because she would kill me, but luckily she's not here to see me right now, so I have no problem telling you to go straight to hell."

Neal chuckled yet again, and the urge to beat him to death with an Xbox controller swelled up inside her.

"Swan Song," he said, putting his hand on her knee. "Look, any guy would do the same – I liked Regina's attention, so I had to find a way to keep her interested. And I'm not saying I don't want to work with her, I'm just saying that I need more time. Surely you can understand that."

"Stop trying to get me to relate to you," Emma spat. "People don't get that many shots with Regina, and you've wasted all of yours. She's not going to keep waiting for you."

"She has so far," Neal pointed out. His hand was still on Emma's knee, and he was stroking a thumb over the seam of her jeans. "And you're still here, aren't you?"

Emma glared at him. "Not for long."

She got up to leave, nearly kicking her beer over in the process, and turned towards the door. A hand on her wrist pulled her back, and she toppled back down onto the couch.

"Neal, let go—"

A pair of lips against hers cut her off. Startled, Emma felt herself being forced back against the armrest, the full weight of Neal's body bearing down on her. She wriggled, trying to push him off.

"Neal," she said, wrenching her face free. "I mean it. Back off."

But he was already taking hold of her jaw and pulling it back towards him. His lips were too wet, tasting of beer and the pot he'd been smoking before she arrived, and she felt sick as she squirmed beneath him.

"Get off me!" she snapped, thumping a fist against his chest. He didn't even seem to notice – she was strong, sure, but he was stronger. He was also twice her size, and it was all too easy for him to gather up her wrists in one hand, holding them tight between their bodies.

He tried to slide his tongue into her mouth, but Emma's lips stayed firmly shut and it ended up sluggishly trailing around them. She shuddered, trying to buck him off her. As she moved her hips, she felt the hard outline of his cock against her leg.

Panic started to build in her. He was crushing her against the couch, his full weight on her stomach and her chest, and when she realised that, her mouth shot open so she could try and catch her breath. His tongue slid inside, triumphant and intrusive, and she wondered whether biting down on it was her best option for getting out of there.

Before she could do anything like that, he pulled away from her mouth and buried his face against her neck. He sucked, and she felt an angry hickey rising up on her throat.

"Neal, stop it – I don't want this."

Moaning against her skin, he released her wrists and slid a hand beneath her sweater, his hammy palm closing over one of her breasts.

"Come on, Em," he murmured against her throat. "We both know Regina's only with you because
she's trying to get close to me. She'd want you to fuck me if it meant she got to sell a painting."

Emma pushed the words away before they could burrow into her head and tried harder to slip out from underneath him. Neal read her wriggling as something else entirely and, feeling her hips grinding up against his, grinned. He finally pulled away, sitting back on his knees so he could reach down to take off his shirt.

The second there was some space between them, Emma reached out and slapped him hard across his face. When he ricocheted back in shock, her legs struggled free and she jerked a shin up into his crotch.

The noise that came out of his mouth sounded satisfyingly like a balloon deflating, and he toppled back against the opposite end of the couch, his shirt half pulled up and his hands clamped over his dick. Emma wriggled free, not pausing before her feet hit the floor. Neal didn't have time to say a word to her before she was out the door, leaving it flapping open as she tore down the stairs.

She ran to the subway. Actually ran. People looked at her like she was crazy, but she ignored them as she dodged around other pedestrians and vaulted over piles of disintegrating newspapers. Her phone was buzzing in her pocket and she didn't know whether it was Neal trying to get her to come back or Regina trying to find out how the meeting was going. She couldn't decide which one would be worse.

She didn't think about where she was going as she piled onto the train, and it was only when she reached the Upper East Side that she realised where she'd automatically been running to. She was sweating and out of breath as she came to Regina's building and she blazed through the foyer, ignoring the doorman when he called out after her to check she was okay.

The elevator ride felt like an eternity. She caught sight of herself in the reflective wall – saw her messy hair and the dark purple splotch on her throat – and gritted her teeth. Fury and shock were bubbling up inside her. She refused to cry over this.

She fell out of the elevator and pounded her fist against Regina's door, her stomach somersaulting and her lungs feeling shrunken. She didn't glance down at her hands because she already knew they were shaking. If she was forced to look at them then she really would be crying, and once she started then there was no chance she would be able to stop.

There were footsteps on the other side of the door; the rattle of a lock. And then Regina's face, her beautiful face, was there looking back at her, so surprised and expectant and hopeful.

Then she glanced down. She saw Emma's rumpled clothes and bruised neck and the furious line of her jaw, and she went very, very still.

Her face collapsed and she opened her mouth, ready to ask what happened, before she realised what a pointless question it was. Emma wouldn't be able to answer it anyway.

"Come here," she said instead, and she opened her arms. Emma toppled into them, nearly knocking her over, and held onto her like she was a buoy bobbing through the ocean and the storm around her was just getting worse and worse and worse.

Regina closed the door and guided her into the living room. When they reached the couch, she let Emma curl up against her side, her trembling hands pulling at the sleeves of her sweater as she tried to catch her breath. Her eyes were screwed shut, but she could still tell how angry Regina was. Her body was tense even as she held her close, her touch warm and gentle and her heart pounding maybe just as hard as Emma's was.
After a moment, Emma felt her swallow.

"Emma. Did he...?"

Emma shook her head.

"No," she forced out. There was so much else she wanted to say, but the words were beyond her. In the end, she settled on, "...I thought I wasn't going to be able to stop him."

The crack in her voice was too much for either of them and Regina pulled her closer, pressing Emma's head against her shoulder. The more Emma calmed down, the more she could feel Regina shaking beneath her.
Chapter 27

Emma stayed with Regina for the next few days. The initial shock from what had happened with Neal dissipated fairly quickly, and instead of having shaking hands and near-tears in her eyes, she found herself filled with a burning rage that she wasn't equipped to get rid of by herself. And so she stayed by Regina's side, her hand somehow finding its way into hers whenever their fingers brushed, and Regina never pushed her away. Instead, she got Sidney to drive her to and from work every single day, and when Emma got back to the apartment, Regina was always there waiting for her.

She never apologised for letting Emma go to Neal's place alone, because she didn't do that. But her soft gestures and home-cooked meals and the way she worriedly brushed Emma's hair back from her face whenever she snapped, "I don't want to talk about it" said sorry in all the thousands of ways her mouth was incapable of doing.

Besides, Emma wasn't mad at her. Not even slightly. It had been her own idea to go there, and she'd just been trying to help. Regina hadn't known what would happen, and there was no doubt in Emma's mind that she would have been the first person kicking the door down and dragging Neal off her by his hair if she'd had even the slightest inkling that something might be wrong.

But Emma was still mad, and so she broke one of her first rules of Regina World and found herself wearing her new clothes to work. Until then, they'd been a completely separate part of her wardrobe, reserved for events and dinners and parties and absolutely not for racing around after Ingrid asking her what she wanted for lunch that day. But things were different that week, and maybe Emma felt a little fragile, so she stormed into the office on Monday in her highest heels, with her black pants painfully tight and her white shirt showing just the right amount of cleavage. The fucking hickey was still visible, and she did nothing to cover it up. She wasn't going to hide herself away because of him.

Ingrid had just stared at her from across the office, and that was the first day in two and a half years that she didn't yell at Emma even once. When Emma brought her her third coffee of the day, Ingrid looked up at her with a strange kind of consideration on her face. It was deeply uncomfortable, and Emma wondered if it was a test to see how long she could bear it without crumbling.

She put the coffee down on the desk and forced herself to stand upright. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No…” Ingrid said slowly. "You seem different today."

"Still the same old me," Emma shrugged, but her voice sounded flat. Ingrid's eyes flicked down to the bruise on her throat.

"We haven't spoken much since that party of yours," she said, gesturing to the seat opposite her desk. Emma sat down, keeping her back rod-straight. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you look as industrious as I did that night."

"Yeah, well. It was kind of crazy."

"You were working very hard," Ingrid said coolly.

"Um," Emma swallowed. "I guess. It was a big deal."

"I see. How's the rich girlfriend?"

"Good," Emma replied shortly.
"I noticed that she's not been appearing on so many arty news sites recently. Are you still together?"

"Yes," Emma ventured, knowing that the reason why Regina had slipped from those webpages was because she'd all but shuttered herself away while she'd been trying to lure Neal in. But that was something Emma didn't want to think about, so out loud she said, "She's considering throwing another party after Christmas. Less hipstery this time. You'd be welcome to come."

"Excellent. Emma," Ingrid continued, and it was obvious that, for once, she wasn't interested in Regina. "Is there anything you need to discuss?"

"Not really."

"Are you sure? Because I saw you bellowing at the intern this morning when she got in your way. Poor Violet looked like she was going to have a heart attack."

"She needs to get thicker skin," Emma said, although she had felt badly about that incident the second it was over. She'd bought her a hot chocolate to say sorry and Violet had actually flinched away from her when she'd tried to hand it over.

"Right," Ingrid replied. Her eyes flicked down again. "I never thought I'd hear you say that."

Emma couldn't even get offended, because Ingrid was right to be confused. A few months ago, Emma had been skulking around the office in her five-year-old jeans hoping that simply doing an okay job would be enough to get her through. Since she'd started dating Regina, she'd begun to realise that there was more to it than that: appearances, for one, were something she had finally started working on. The other thing was stopping being such a pushover when it came to Ingrid's stupid demands of her – that had included actually booking some vacation days in order to go on trips to Miami with Regina, and leaving at five like she was contracted to.

She'd never expected doing less work to be the thing to finally garner her some respect.

Ingrid was looking down at her new outfit. "I think this girlfriend is good for you."

Emma blinked. "Okay?"

"Don't mess it up," her boss said, flicking a hand towards the door. Apparently they were done.

Emma got up and headed towards her own desk, trying not to take it too personally when Violet saw her coming and deliberately walked in the opposite direction.

It carried on all week. Emma wore black and kicked ass and yelled at their distribution firm on the phone until the guy at the other end sounded like he was going to cry, and then she stormed out the door at five on the dot. She went back to the Upper East Side and fell into Regina's bed and let her take her mind off of all her troubles with her fingers and her tongue and the obscene words she whispered in her ear.

It worked perfectly until the following Monday, when the hickey had finally faded and Emma was feeling marginally calmer. She still hadn't gone back to Mary Margaret's apartment, though, and so maybe she shouldn't have been surprised when she climbed into the back of the Mercedes after work and found that Regina was already sitting there.

"Hey," Emma said, blinking. Regina smiled, but she didn't take her eyes off her phone. "What are you doing here?"

"I had some errands to run this afternoon, so I thought I'd come pick you up," Regina said, still
typing. "Also, we need to go back to your apartment."

Emma's heart sunk so low that it collided with her stomach. "Oh. Is this your way of telling me that I need to stop crashing at yours?"

"Don't be so stupid," Regina said, and her snappy tone was more encouraging than it probably should have been. "You've just been living in the same five outfits for a week and it's irritating me. We're going to go and get the rest of your clothes."

"Oh," Emma repeated. Somewhere deep in the back of her brain, a voice was telling her that this was too much too fast, but she pushed it aside. Hot, crackling relief was filling her chest at the thought of moving some of her stuff into Regina's apartment, and it didn't matter that they'd only been together for a few months or that they weren't even together really – she knew all of that, and she simply didn't care. "Okay. Sounds good to me."

As they drove across town, Regina tentatively added, "I don't know how long you're planning on staying with me, but I have no plans to ask you to leave. I just... I do realise that you've been through something traumatic, but I don't want you to feel obligated to stay with me even if you're missing your own apartment."

And there was the kicker: Regina still had no idea that Emma's roommate had asked her to move out, because telling her that would mean explaining why she had nowhere else to go. There was a whole host of other unspeakable things that Emma would need to admit as part of that conversation, and so as far as she was concerned, moving into Regina's apartment for the time being was the best possible option.

For her, at least.

She wasn't about to say any of that though, so she just shrugged. "I'm not missing it. Not really. Besides, Mary Margaret and David need their own space."

That seemed to satisfy Regina, because she smiled and gave a curt nod. "Good."

And that, apparently, was that.

They arrived outside Emma's apartment and, just like every other time they'd been there, Regina started to unclip her seatbelt.

"No," Emma blurted out. "You don't need to come in."

But this time Regina just rolled her eyes. "Emma, you can't carry everything by yourself. I'm coming to help you."

"But it will only take me a few minutes!" Emma insisted. Regina had already removed her seatbelt, however, and was reaching for the door handle. "Regina."

"What?" Regina threw back at her. "Emma, I'm not an idiot. You don't live in a mansion; I'm aware of that. I'm also not such a snob that I'm going to recoil in horror when I walk into a perfectly normal apartment."

She had a point. "But..."

"Are you growing marijuana in there?" Regina asked.

"No!"
"Then I'm coming up with you," she said, climbing out of the car. Someone sitting two stoops down wolf whistled at her the second her shoes hit the ground.

Emma considered not moving. Mary Margaret would still be at work, and Regina couldn't very well go bursting into the apartment by herself if Emma didn't tell her which one it was. But then a particularly pissed-off-looking face leaned back into the car and snapped, "Now, Miss Swan" and Emma couldn't put it off any longer.

She climbed out of the car and dragged her feet up the stairs, leading Regina past the eternally broken elevator and up to the top floor. To her credit, Regina didn't seem even slightly fazed by the peeling paint on the walls or the constant smell of Chinese food from the floor below. When Emma opened the front door and led her into her home, she even smiled.

"It's very sweet," she said, sticking her head into the living room. "Do I get a tour?"

"That really won't take long," Emma said, dutifully leading Regina around the four rooms that made up the main floor before taking her up the rickety stairs towards her loft room. She stepped back, letting Regina go in first, and waited for some kind of snobby comment. But after a few moments, Regina just turned back to her and said, "I can see why you prefer my bed. Now, do you have any boxes?"

Emma let out a shaky breath. "Yeah. Or actually, I have a couple of suitcases – give me a second."

She grabbed her rickety desk chair and pulled it over to the closet. As she climbed up, grappling with the luggage that lived on top of it, Regina took a step back and surveyed the rest of the room. Maybe Emma should have noticed that she'd gone quiet. As it was, she only realised that something was wrong when she turned and found Regina standing a few feet away, looking down at the half-open box that was sticking out from underneath the bed.

Emma froze. She'd gotten so used to ignoring the box's toxic presence that she hadn't even seen it when they'd walked in, and now Regina was looking down at it with great interest, her forehead starting to furrow as she saw the words final demand written over and over and over again.

"What's this?" she asked. Emma's chest had gone tight, and she stepped down from the chair before she could fall off it.

She darted towards the box and tried to grab it, but Regina was faster. She picked it up and pulled it out of her way, and it tipped when she dumped it on the bed. Emma watched as the letters came spilling out, handfuls and handfuls of them, all splashed with angry warnings and filled with numbers that would ruin her life if anyone ever saw them.

"Emma," Regina repeated, and her voice had never sounded so cold before. "What is this?"

Emma didn't answer. She couldn't. Every single part of her body had gone somehow solid and wobbly at the same time, and when Regina reached down for one of the envelopes, her hands remarkably steady, Emma couldn't even try and snatch it away from her.

Regina slipped a finger beneath the seal and tore the letter open. As she pulled out its contents, her lips went thin.

"You know," Emma stammered, trying to laugh. "Opening someone else's mail is actually a crime."

"Shut up," Regina snapped at her, and Emma closed her mouth so abruptly that her teeth clacked together. "Sit down."
She did as she was told, because short of running away, there was absolutely nothing else she could do. She sat on the chair and forced herself to watch as Regina scanned the numbers in front of her, then tore open another letter, and another, her face getting darker with every passing, silent second.

Eventually, she took a deep breath.

"Emma," she said. It was her most dangerous voice. "Tell me what these are."

"I…"

"Right now."

There was zero room for arguing, and yet Emma still tried. "It's not important. I'm handling it, and —"

"Emma, if you say one more goddamn word that isn't an explanation of how these letters ended up under your bed, I will walk out of here right now and you'll never see me again. Now tell me what these are."

Emma's jaw wobbled. "I'm… in debt."

"I can see that," Regina said. "How much?"

"I don't know," Emma whispered. Regina's eyes fluttered closed, and when she opened them again, she was the angriest Emma had ever seen her.

"How can you not know?" she demanded. She took a step towards Emma so that she was towering over her, and when Emma flinched, that only seemed to make her madder. "How careless are you that you could have gotten yourself into this mess and not even know the full extent of it?"

"It's not that simple," Emma said, and now that Regina was angry, she was too. "I'm doing my best. I'm making repayments. I'm trying to fix it and it's got nothing to do with you."

"It's got everything to do with me, you stupid girl!" Regina threw back at her. "Or it would, if you'd just had the sense to come to me in the first place."

Emma gritted her teeth. When she suddenly stood up, Regina didn't stagger backwards like she'd hoped she would.

"Regina, I make $28,000 a year," she said. "You know, the same amount you spent in Chanel last week because you couldn't decide which dress you liked best, so you just bought five of them. We come from completely different worlds and I haven't had an ounce of help getting to where I am today, so don't you dare start criticising me when you've had a silver spoon shoved so far into your mouth since the day you were born that I can see the end of it coming out of your ass."

Regina was looking at her with a hurricane of emotions on her face. With all the rage that was swirling about on the surface, it was hard to decipher what exactly she was thinking underneath it. Eventually, she settled on, "You can't only make that much in a year. You work for a New York publisher."

"I can show you my pay checks if you need proof," Emma snapped back at her. The anger on Regina's face got even stormier.

"Don't take that tone with me. It's not my fault that you've ended up in this situation. I can't do
anything about the fact that I earn more than you."

"Oh, that's a fucking understatement. You have more money than God and you hurl it around with so much recklessness that my entire annual salary doesn't even register as an amount to you."

"You want to talk to me about reckless spending?" Regina demanded, thrusting a piece of paper against her chest. "You're the one with multiple debt collectors on her tail. You're the one whose bank account is five-digits overdrawn."

"And you're the one who uses her money to buy people because she can't get them to like her without it," Emma said, and it was the cruellest thing she'd ever said. Regina stepped back, her mouth finally closing, but Emma was already moving on, lashing out at whatever she could because she was hurting so fucking badly that everyone around her might as well be hurting too. "Why do you think I said yes to your stupid arrangement? I was desperate. I had creditors calling me every single day and I'd changed my phone number so many times that my cell company wouldn't let me do it anymore. I would have done anything for a chance of escaping all that, and then you showed up with your rolls of cash and your fucked up social skills and you gave me a way out. Except it hasn't worked, because trying to keep up with you is just making everything worse. And you know what the worst part is? It's that I can't do anything without your money now that I have it, because it's all I've got to hang onto now that I'm being kicked out of my fucking apartment."

Regina had listened to her with a slowly darkening expression. When Emma reached the end of her loud, jolting speech, her nostrils flared.

"You're being what?"

"I'm being kicked out. Mary Margaret and David want to live together, and they don't want to do that with someone who owes them $2,500 in rent."

Regina looked like she was close to screaming when she asked, "How in the hell can you owe them that much money?"

"Because my entire pay check goes into plugging up my haemorrhaging overdraft, Regina," Emma snapped.

"And what about the other $10,000 you get every month?" Regina asked. "Don't tell me – you have a lot of children's books to buy."

Rage filled Emma up like fire, and she genuinely thought she might reach out and slap her. "Do you have any idea how much it costs to match up to your ridiculous standards? We blew nearly twice that amount on our first shopping trip. $10,000 isn't a whole hell of a lot when you can't shop in Gap."

"Oh, cry me a river," Regina scoffed. "It's plenty. And if it's not, you know full well you could ask me for more. When have I ever denied you anything? Are you seriously coming in here trying to act like I'm cheap?"

Emma growled to herself. Regina, of course, was right. But it wasn't as simple as that.

"I couldn't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because if I did, you'd demand to know how I ended up in this situation in the first place, and I can't tell you that either."
Regina rolled her eyes. "I think you mean 'won't'."

"I mean whatever the hell I want to mean," Emma snapped, and she was rapidly losing control of the situation. "I'm doing my best. I've been managing for years. But everything got worse really quickly and fine, maybe I should have asked you for help, but how was I supposed to know what you'd say? You're not my girlfriend – you're always very eager to point that out. As far as I'm concerned we just work together, and bosses don't normally bail their employees out when 10 different creditors are threatening to repossess all of their belongings."

Regina was watching Emma very, very coldly. She thrust her hands into the pockets of her coat like she didn't trust herself not to reach out and throttle her with them.

She looked down at the box once more, and Emma was suddenly certain that she was about to walk out of her life once and for all. To hell with this – Emma hadn't managed to get Neal for her, and now she was trying to drag a whole load of new drama into her pristine apartment. Regina didn't need any of that.

But then she reached down, scooped the letters back into the box, and picked it up with both hands.

"Pack your things," she said. Her voice was terrifyingly flat. "I'll see you outside."

She walked out, Emma's shameful secret clasped against her chest, and Emma was left standing alone in her room with her stomach twisting around and around and around.

She packed slowly, unable to think properly and so throwing the stupidest things that she'd never possibly need into her suitcase. Eventually she realised what she'd done and sighed, pulled them back out and started again. She hadn't appreciated just how many new clothes she'd managed to acquire over the past few months until she was desperately trying to cram them into a single case – in the end, she packed three, hoping that Regina wouldn't see them and scream at her for openly taking advantage of her.

A half hour later, Emma was dragging her bags down to the hall, terrified to leave the apartment in case Regina had driven off after all – or, worse, was waiting for her just like she'd promised. Emma took a last look around her home, suspecting that this would probably be the last time she could call it that, before spotting a folded piece of paper on the kitchen counter. She walked over and opened it: she wasn't entirely surprised to find a check addressed to Mary Margaret Blanchard, to the value of $2,500.

They drove back to Regina's in a bitter silence that crackled and nipped at Emma's skin. The radio wasn't on, which Emma assumed was because Regina had snapped at Sidney to turn that God-awful noise off before she had arrived, and that just made it even worse. When they got to Regina's building, Sidney and the doorman rushed to help carry her bags inside while Regina simply strode off, taking the elevator by herself and leaving Emma to wait for the next one.

Once Emma was inside the apartment, Regina snapped at her from the kitchen that she should go and unpack in the guest room. Emma had never slept in there before, and she sat down heavily on the edge of the bed feeling kind of like her life was over.

After 20 minutes of just sitting and staring at nothing, she received a frantic text from Mary Margaret, demanding to know where her stuff had gone and why there was a check from Regina lying on her kitchen counter. Emma didn't reply to it, because replying would lead to questions and questions would lead to her doing something reckless and self-destructive that she'd only regret later. Instead, she got up and dragged herself towards the closet. It was enormous, built into the wall and filled at
the bottom with boxes and books and all the other stuff Regina couldn't find space for in her mess-free life. The rail was mostly empty, though, and so Emma slowly started to unpack, hanging up her expensive clothes that were newly creased from their cramped journey across town while trying not to let the feeling of complete hopelessness drown her.

After what had happened with Neal, she really thought she might have been able to catch a break. Just for five goddamn minutes.

After that, she waited. Time passed. Regina was downstairs somewhere, and even though it was hours past dinner time and Emma could feel her stomach starting to eat itself, she didn't leave her room. She wasn't ready for what was waiting for her when she did.

Eventually, her phoned buzzed. Can you stop hiding from me and come downstairs?

She dragged herself down the stairs, poking her head into the living room and the kitchen but finding them both empty. That could only mean Regina was waiting in her office, which was the one room Emma hadn't stepped foot in since her first tour of the apartment nearly half a year ago.

She forced down her nerves and walked inside.

Sitting at her desk with piles and piles of neatly stacked envelopes around her, Regina almost looked calm. Her fingers were tapping over the keypad of a calculator, and on the notebook in front of her were scribbled notes. A lot of them.

Emma quietly approached the desk and sat in the chair opposite, waiting to be spoken to. Eventually Regina looked up, and Emma wished that she hadn't.

"I need you to explain this."

Emma swallowed. "I already did."

"No, you did not," Regina said, removing her glasses so that her steely gaze was unobstructed. "You made excuses and you said a lot of very hurtful things. But there was no explanation for any of this."

Emma shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"How much do you need to know?"

"These," Regina said, stabbing at one of the many piles of paper with her pen, "are the statements from your bank. They go back a long time – by my estimation, until you were 18. What I'm interested in is what happened next."

But Emma suspected that at some point over the past couple of hours, she'd managed to work out the answer. There would have been plenty of information on those letters – payments to lawyers, to courthouses, or even just the fact that Emma hadn't used her account once for a grand total of 13 months and six days – to give Regina an inkling of what had happened the year Emma turned 19. And yet, she was asking.

And Emma still wasn't brave enough to tell her.

She looked down, forcing herself to keep breathing.

"No one knows this," she said. "Not even Elsa. Although, I guess Ingrid does, but that's only because HR told her."
"I don't care what or why your boss knows – I want you to tell me," Regina said. "No more lies please, Miss Swan."

Her voice was surprisingly gentle, all things considered. So Emma took a breath.

"I left foster care at 16," she started slowly. "And I travelled around for a while. I crashed at friends' apartments or sometimes with strangers – whatever I could find. I got a bunch of little odd jobs and I didn't have a lot of money, but it was fine. Then I started to fall behind on rent payments, and instead of sticking around to make things right, I'd just bail. Go to another town and start all over again."

She swallowed. Regina didn't interrupt.

"I started spending more on stupid stuff, like drugs and alcohol and... those sorts of things. So that was how it started, I guess. I was never going to be a big saver, but I just stopped caring about what money meant, and if I was in debt with someone then who cared? I could just get on a bus and disappear. I had no one to stick around for."

"Then... I was 19, and I spotted this guy on the street who was selling watches. He was out of his mind on meth and I suddenly thought that I could get away with stealing them – I could sell them myself, earn some extra money, and move on to another place. I knew they were fake, but they'd add up to enough, so... I took them. I got caught right away. I had pot on me, and my name was in the system already for all the other accounts of petty theft and drug possession I'd been charged with before. I got 13 months."

She half hoped Regina would gasp there, or tell her she was sorry, but she didn't react. Her eyes told Emma to keep going.

"When I came out of prison, there were court fees and legal fees and fines and a whole heap of other shit that I had to pay back. I couldn't get any job beyond what the state could find for me, and that was barely enough to cover rent. I realised that if I wanted a chance of getting a good job, like, ever, I had to go to college. So I went to evening classes to finish what I'd missed at high school, and then I started applying to schools."

"And I'm assuming no one would take you," Regina finally interjected. There wasn't much sympathy in her voice.

"No," Emma said. "No one wanted to take a risk on an ex-con with much less than a penny to her name. But eventually, somehow, Westwood accepted my application. I was so excited and so scared that it was a mistake that I said I'd pay for the tuition right then and there. I figured if I did that, they wouldn't kick me out again even if they did find out about my record."

Regina reached across her desk and plucked out a single piece of paper. Even then, Emma recognised the name of the loan company at the top.

"You took out a loan with 30 percent interest," Regina said flatly. "And then you set up a credit card with an interest rate of... that's right, 46 percent, to help pay that back."

Emma swallowed. "I was 20 years old and had no idea what I was doing. I didn't have parents to ask for advice. I just took the first thing I was offered, assuming it was the best I would be able to get."

"And then you forgot about them," Regina said, sifting through the bank statements.

"The letters only started arriving after I graduated," Emma said quietly. "Otherwise maybe I would have realised how bad it was a bit sooner."
That was a lie, and they both knew it. Emma had been fully aware of how dire the situation was – it had just been easier to ignore it and pray that it went away by itself than to actually face up to it. There was a reason why most of those envelopes hadn't been opened.

After throwing her a look that told her she didn't believe a word of what she was saying, Regina said, "Please continue."

"Well," Emma said, her voice shaking. "I worked three jobs while I was at college, but that barely covered my rent and some of my books. My debt got worse. Then I graduated and, surprise surprise, no one wanted to hire me. I had the worst degree in the world and a criminal record that I had to declare any time I applied for anything. I eventually found a job in a coffee shop, but it took a long time to even get that."

Regina already had another piece of paper in her hand, one that showed how, over the course of those months, Emma had spent and spent and spent without a single dollar of income trickling into her account. She didn't comment on it, but she left it dangling between them like an unspoken threat.

Emma cleared her throat and continued. "Then Helga, my boss there, spoke to her sister, who worked at a publishing house. She knew that's what I wanted to do in the long term, and she said she could probably talk Ingrid into hiring me provided I accepted a really low salary and never stole anything from the office. Which I didn't, until Henry started asking for free books." She smiled weakly so it would be obvious that she was kidding, but Regina's face remained stony.

"And since then?" Regina asked. "Your salary is low, I grant you, but what is all this? Why do you spend so much in expensive bars on Friday nights? Why do you pay for $25 bottles of wine on your overdrawn card when you know that your bank will charge you 10 percent interest every time?"

"I..." Emma started. "I didn't actually know that."

"Emma." Regina sounded exasperated and Emma couldn't really blame her. "This is reckless. Even if you weren't drowning in debt, your spending habits would concern me. You don't go grocery shopping for weeks at a time, and then you blow $100 in a single night."

"I know... It's stupid," Emma said. Her voice sounded rusty. "I keep trying really hard all week to be good, to not buy more than I need and to basically live off of ramen, but by the time I get to Friday it's always just like, fuck it. I'm already screwed. I might as well go out and make myself feel better and then worry about the rest tomorrow."

Regina finally looked at her with some kind of sympathy.

"And does that ever work?" she asked.

"No," Emma admitted. "Not really."

Regina sighed, leaning back in her chair. She looked strangely despondent.

"Emma..." she said. "Did you mean what you said? Did you only agree to my arrangement because you needed the money that badly?"

Emma groaned. "No. You know I would have dated you with no incentives whatever."

"But you did need the money."

"Yes, I did. I knew it was a stupid idea, but I thought it couldn't exactly hurt. I'd get to date a beautiful woman and pay off some of my student loan at the same time. I didn't mind selling myself
"You didn't sell yourself for anything," Regina said. She sounded so sad. "You could have told me about this at any time. Really. I would have been mad, obviously, but I also would have tried to help. You shouldn't have gone through all of this alone."

Emma smiled tightly. "I've gone through everything alone. There was no reason why this should have been any different."

Regina just shook her head at that – maybe because she thought Emma was being stupid, or maybe because she was finally realising just how different their lives were. It had taken hundreds of envelopes and God knows how many zeros to make her see it.

"You started paying things off when we met," Regina said after a while, putting her glasses back on. "But you didn't tackle any of the real debts. The loan you took out for college has gone largely untouched – instead, you started paying off tiny amounts on huge piles of growing interest, and then you continued to spend money on those credit cards afterwards. Did you even come up with a plan?"

Emma's silence would have answered that question just fine, but she forced herself to give a proper response. "Not exactly. I just sort of… did a lucky dip."

"I suspected as much," Regina sighed. Her gaze hardened. "Do you really not know how much trouble you're in?"

"No. I don't."

"Don't you want to?"

"No," Emma said twice as quickly, although she knew it wouldn't be as simple as that. "Please, Regina. Knowing the figure isn't going to make me feel better."

"I'm aware that it's not," Regina said, grabbing a fresh sheet of paper and writing out a number. She seemed to be writing for a long time. "But it's the reality of your situation, and you can't keep burying your head in the sand. This needs fixing, and that starts with you accepting what you've managed to do to yourself."

Emma gritted her teeth. Her fingers had curled around the seat of her chair like she was bracing herself for a blow.

"Regina, please," she croaked. "I don't want to do this."

Regina responded by folding the piece of paper in half, then sliding it in front of her.

"Take your time," she said, standing up. "I'm going to go. But you have to read this – I'm not going to let you do anything until you have."

Emma could tell she was waiting for a snappy retort, just to let her know that she was still in there somewhere. But Emma went silent, her eyes on that piece of paper like it was about to attack her. Regina sighed and left the room, shutting the door behind her.

Emma was there for a full hour before she slowly reached out, her fingertips grazing the paper and then flinching away like it had burned them. She took a deep breath.

The number was long. Longer than she'd managed to convince herself it would be. She read all six digits – eight of them, if you included the measly 32 cents tacked on at the end – one by one, slowly
soaking them in, feeling the shame of them in her very pores. It was strange, but once the truth was in front of her and so much worse than she'd ever imagined, her heart finally started to slow.

She sat back in her chair, the paper clutched between her hands. She didn't leave the room until long after Regina had gone to bed.
Chapter 28

Emma had thought that being forced to set up camp into the guest room meant she would at least get to see Regina every morning and every evening. In fact, in the complete clusterfuck that was her life right at that moment, she’d allowed herself to look forward to it a tiny bit. They might be going through the roughest patch to end all rough patches, but bickering with Regina was still far more enjoyable than just talking with anybody else. And so, as she struggled to fall asleep that night, she allowed herself to think that maybe the universe was about to cut her some slack.

It turned out she was wrong, though. She woke up on Tuesday morning expecting to find Regina bustling about in the kitchen, but she was already gone. Her bed was neatly made and there was a note waiting on the kitchen counter: *Call Sidney and he'll take you to work.* When Emma got into the car, Sidney informed her that he would be back again later to collect her at whatever time she needed him.

And so she stumbled into work in a tailored shift dress that was the definition of power dressing, feeling slightly faint from not having eaten dinner or breakfast, or maybe just from everything that had happened over the past 24 hours. Elsa took one look at her and dragged her into their favourite supply closet, and it all spilled out. All of it.

Elsa was less angry than Regina had been, although not by much. But at least she hugged her afterwards.

”*I always knew you had that prison look about you,*” she muttered in her ear. She was trying to make her laugh, but it didn't work. All the muscles in Emma's face had turned solid, and the only expression she could muster that day was a frown that did absolutely nothing to make Violet the intern look less afraid of her.

As Emma furiously typed away at her keyboard, one of her eyes was always on her cell phone. She was waiting for a text, an email, anything at all to come through from Regina, but by lunchtime she was still waiting in silence.

Eventually she scooped it up and called Regina herself. After one and a half rings, she was sent through to voicemail.

Sucking in her cheeks, she put the phone back down on top of her notepad. Then she looked up and nearly jumped out of her fucking chair.

"*Nice dress,*" Ingrid said from her perch on the edge of the desk. Her arms were folded, and she was looking intently at Emma's face. "*Dolce & Gabbana, right?*

"*Ingrid,*" Emma gasped, her hand on her chest. "*Why are you sneaking up on me?*

"*Because you've got a face like a slapped ass and I can't look at it anymore. What's the matter with you?*

"*Nothing,*" Emma said right as her office phone started ringing. She picked it up just to avoid the rest of the conversation, but Ingrid waited patiently where she was.

Don from the mailroom was on the line, helpfully informing her that Ingrid's weekly order of premium green tea had been mistaken for paper samples and so had accidentally been sent to their printing company. Emma didn't realise she was yelling at him until the fog lifted from in front of her eyes, and when it did she found Ingrid still there, still watching her, wondering what the fuck was
"Just fix it," Emma hissed down the line. Don was just stammering his apologies when she slammed the phone down.

"Jesus," Ingrid said, sounding interested. "Who stole your firstborn?"

"He lost your tea shipment," Emma said. Normally this would have instilled apocalyptic rage in her boss, but right then she just looked at Emma like she was completely insane.

"Okay, and?" Ingrid asked. "Do you normally talk to him like that when he loses stuff?"

"He doesn't normally lose stuff, so I wouldn't know," Emma threw back at her, and she realised a split second too late that she'd just snapped at her boss. Even Ingrid looked shocked by it.

"Emma," she said warningly. "You know how I said last week that I sort of admired this new, improved you?"

She hadn't actually said those words, but Emma nodded.

"Well, don't think that I meant you can start acting like me. There's only room for one Ingrid in these halls."

Emma sighed. "I'm sorry – it's just been a rough week."

"It's only Tuesday."

"And that's how bad it's been," Emma said. "I really am sorry. I'll call Don back and apologise."

Ingrid frowned at her, but eventually she nodded. "Fine. You do that."

She hopped off the desk and walked away, but Emma saw her turn back to look at her before she made it into her office.

Sidney picked Emma up from work that evening as promised, but when she got back to the apartment, she found it empty. It felt strange wandering around Regina's home by herself – it didn't matter that Regina had left her her own key that morning, or that Tamara had emailed her the painfully detailed instructions for the alarm keypad. She felt like a burglar as she crept around touching every surface and then gingerly pulling her hand back like she was worried about making things dirty. She wondered if it would always feel like this, before reminding herself that this wasn't permanent. There was no 'always' as far as any of this was concerned.

She went into the kitchen and surveyed the fridge. In the most characteristically Regina way possible, there was almost no food at all aside from some sad-looking vegetables in the crisper. She sighed, unwilling to leave the apartment to go in search of something better, and pulled them all out, roasting them in the oven and then blitzing them into just enough soup for two people. When it was nearly ready, she called Regina again, intending to ask if she was coming home soon. The call was left unanswered, and Emma went to eat in front of the TV alone.

She left a note telling Regina that there was a second bowl in the fridge before she went to bed in the guest room. It was cold and she struggled to fall asleep, which meant she was wide awake when Regina finally came home at 1am.

Emma heard her moving around in the kitchen for a few minutes before she walked upstairs, heading
to her own bed without so much as pausing outside Emma's door. When Emma woke up the following morning, Regina was gone, and so was the note Emma had left her. The soup was still in the fridge.

That day passed in the same way: Emma worked – barely – with her foot jumping up and down so vigorously underneath her desk that her Louboutin kept crashing to the floor. She was filled with so much nervous energy that she started working on another batch of press releases that she'd 'borrowed' from Jessica on the comms desk. It was a fruitless task since Ingrid hadn't asked her to do it, nor did she want her to, but it made Emma feel marginally better – like maybe she still had control over one tiny part of her life, even if she was just practicing her mediocre writing and then sending it back to someone else to take all the credit.

She called Regina at lunchtime, hoping to just check in with her but instead finding herself staring into the soulless void that was her voicemail. At 3pm she got desperate and called Tamara instead, who did pick up, but sounded even less enthused to hear from her than normal.

"I'm sorry, Miss Swan. I don't know where Regina is right now."

"But you've heard from her today, right?"

"I... I have to go. I'm sorry. We'll speak soon."

And then she was gone too, leaving Emma completely and utterly alone.

She got Sidney to stop off at the grocery store on their way home, and he helped her carry the multiple bags of food into the kitchen. He waited patiently as she unpacked them, every now and then holding out items for her to put into the fridge. He didn't say a word unless Emma asked him for something.

"Did you want to stay for dinner?" she eventually blurted out, the silence and the uncertainty finally tipping her over the edge. "I wouldn't mind the company."

In the very hesitant smile he gave her, she realised Regina had already spoken to him: he wasn't to engage with her either.

"I'm afraid I can't tonight, Miss Swan," he said. After that, he left quickly and shut the door behind him.

Normally this would have been the point where Emma grabbed the nearest bottle of clear alcohol and drunk until her eyesight went blurry, but instead she hit the kitchen. She cooked a huge batch of spaghetti, tipping in as many red pepper flakes as she dared because she thought making her mouth catch fire might distract her from the numbness everywhere else. It didn't work, but the food was good, and she left another portion in the fridge beside the uneaten bowl of soup.

She came down in the morning like she was expecting to find out if Santa Claus had visited. This time, though, she wasn't disappointed – the pasta she'd made was gone, and when Emma checked the trashcan there was only the tiniest scraping of food inside. She called that a victory, and even though she hadn't spoken to Regina in three days and the radio silence was starting to give her palpitations, she felt marginally better. She went into work with slightly more spring in her step than the day before.

Maybe it was because of that tiniest of triumphs that she finally made the decision to try and get her life under control. She did it by picking up the phone and, for the first time in 27 years, calling her bank.
She stammered her way through the phone call, telling the operator that she wasn't sure how she was supposed to go about this but that she wanted to arrange a meeting with the bank manager to discuss her steps moving forward. She was put on hold, and there was a long, long pause. Her lunch break came and went as she waited for the incessant elevator music to finally cut out.

Just as she was considering hanging up and starting all over again, the woman returned. "Sorry for the wait. The bank manager is currently unavailable."

Emma looked at the clock on the base unit. "It took you 40 minutes to work that out?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Please try calling back another time."

"Look," Emma said, resting her forehead on one hand. "It's kind of a big deal that I made this call in the first place. Can you please just ask him to call me back later today? It's pretty urgent."

Another long pause, and Emma was certain she could hear muttering in the background. And then, "That won't be possible, I'm afraid. If you could try again later, that would be great."

The rest of the week passed in the same pattern: no Regina. No answered calls. Being dodged by the bank, being dodged by Tamara. Cooking for two, but going to bed alone. Wanting to ask Regina if she enjoyed the food she'd made for her, but being too afraid to go and bother her when she crept into the apartment after midnight.

Emma finally had to accept that Regina was about to end things with her. The signs were all there, and honestly she felt stupid for not letting herself recognise them before now. She'd ghosted enough people to know what it looked like when someone was trying to cut you out of their life, and so she resigned herself to it with a bitter taste in her mouth. Knowing it was futile but having no other choice, she spent her evenings on her phone, searching through apartment listings and trying not to break down when every request she sent out got ignored.

She arrived home on Friday expecting much of the same. She'd stopped off at the store to pick up the ingredients for some fancy chicken dish she'd seen on the Food Network's Instagram, because it looked like exactly the sort of thing Regina would enjoy without hating herself too much for consuming it. But when she elbowed open the front door and edged her way inside, she knew something was different. She heard a voice and nearly dropped the bag.

She hurried towards the kitchen, her shoes skidding on the hallway carpet, and arrived to find Regina and Henry sitting at the dining table. Emma was breathing hard, so desperate and so relieved to see Regina again that she almost forgot to smile back at the 10-year-old who was currently grinning at her.

"Hey kid," she said, finally remembering herself and edging further into the room. She dropped the groceries on the counter, and when she turned back to the table she caught the tail end of Regina's appreciative gaze on her ass.

"Hey," Henry replied. "Mom said you're going to be her new roommate?"

Well, that was unexpected. She glanced at Regina to try and gauge what kind of response she was meant to come up with, but Regina was busy staring down at the homework they'd been working on before Emma had come running in.

"Kind of. Just for a little while," she said, walking closer to them. "Maybe we can finally have that mac and cheese sleepover."
"We can do it tonight!"

"We cannot do it tonight," Regina said, and Henry immediately looked pleadingly up at Emma instead.

"Actually, your mom's right. I didn't know you'd be here so I bought stuff for dinner."

Both of them looked at her suspiciously. She blinked.

"What? I can cook."

"I know you can," Regina said. "It was the biggest shock of my life when I came home to that soup the other night."

Emma could feel herself blushing, because there was a question she'd been burning to ask all week but hadn't had the chance to yet.

"Did you...? I mean, did you—"

"I ate at work on Monday. I didn't know you were going to cook for me," Regina answered. She still wasn't making eye contact. "But I made sure to save my appetite for the rest of the week once I knew you weren't trying to poison me."

"She still could be," Henry pointed out, and Emma gently cuffed his chin.

"Shut up, you. I was about to cook for you too but now I think I'll just let you waste away."

"Noooo," Henry pleaded. "Please, I'm hungry!"

"Well, that's too bad. I don't feed people who are so rude."

Regina was laughing, although she was trying to hide it. "What were you planning to make, Emma?"

"It's this chicken and artichoke thing," she said, going back to the grocery bag and pulling out the ingredients. "But if you had something else planned then I can leave this until tomorrow."

"What do artichokes taste like?" Henry piped up.

"Hard to explain," Emma said. "But before you decide you don't like them without even trying them, let me tell you that there's also going to be a butt-load of mozzarella on top."

He grinned at once, obviously persuaded. Emma tried to exchange a look with Regina – the kind of fond bemusement they always shared over this weird little kid – but Regina quickly looked away from her, going back to the homework.

Emma left them to get on with it and did the cooking herself, hoping that Regina would eventually come and help her but finding herself disappointed. She wasn't being ignored exactly, but there was a definite distance that made her chest tighten. She realised that she hadn't felt the light touch of Regina's fingers against her back for nearly a week, and she was both embarrassed and saddened to realise just how much she missed it.

All through dinner, Henry chatted away excitedly, talking about how great it was going to be for Emma to live there. Emma and Regina both joined in, but they only seemed to talk when it was through Henry. If he fell silent, so did they.
Once dinner was over and Henry was in bed, Emma knew she had to make the effort to bridge the distance between them. She was the one who had made things uncomfortable in the first place, so it was her job to fix it. She just wasn't sure how.

Regina came downstairs from Henry's room and went into the living room. Emma had been loitering in the kitchen, expecting that to be the place Regina would go to next, and was left feeling slightly flustered when she was outmanoeuvred. Still, she sucked up her courage and wandered out into the hall. Regina was sitting on the couch, her glasses on, looking down at her phone. Emma leaned against the doorframe, watching her for a moment.

"Hey," she said eventually. Regina looked up at her.

"Hey yourself," she replied. At least she smiled.

"You've been avoiding me," Emma said quietly. She leaned her temple against the wood, her arms folded across her chest, hoping she looked calmer than she felt.

Regina pulled off her glasses with a sigh. "I haven't. Really. It's just been a very busy week."

Emma walked into the room. She wasn't sure whether she should sit on the couch or not, and she hated that feeling – over the past few months she'd gotten so used to the comfort that came just from being near Regina, even when she was snapping at her or coercing her into flirting with rich old men to try and make a sale. Now there was a wall up around her, and Emma knew she didn't have the right to try and break through it.

She really wanted to, though.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "You must be tired."

"Do I look it?" Regina asked, and Emma was relieved to see that she was smiling again. She did look exhausted, though. Granted, Emma had no idea if she usually got home at 1am when she wasn't around, but she had the niggling feeling that this week had been harder on Regina than usual. Maybe she really had just been too busy to answer her calls.

"A little," Emma said, finally sitting down. She longed to reach out and touch Regina's arm, to try and force some of the old connection between them, but if Regina pulled away from her, she wouldn't have been able to bear it. "Is there anything I can do?"

Regina smiled weakly. "No, but you're sweet to ask. How has your week been?"

"It's been..." Emma wasn't sure how to answer that. She wanted to complain about her bank manager refusing to speak to her, but she wasn't entirely sure Regina would sympathise with that. She wanted to talk about how Ingrid seemed to be warming to her, but she wasn't convinced that was conversation-worthy when most of her boss's new normalcy probably just came from her missing having somebody to yell at. More than anything, Emma wanted to talk about how she hadn't been able to sleep in that big, cold bed upstairs by herself because she longed to be in Regina's instead, but saying something so ungrateful was not the right move here. Besides, if Regina was exhausted, she was probably glad to be sleeping alone.

So instead she just sighed. "It's been okay. I've been worried about you, though."

"Me?" Regina blinked. "Why?"

"You've not really been... anywhere. And I wanted to talk to you," Emma mumbled. God, she knew they needed to have this conversation eventually, but forcing the words out was the most terrifying
thing she'd ever done. "I want to apologise for—"

"Emma," Regina interrupted her wearily. "We shouldn't do this now."

"Why not?"

"Because it's late, and I'm tired, and you don't actually have anything to apologise for."

"But..." Emma started. This wasn't Regina's usual 'please stop apologising, Miss Swan, I really can't bear it' – this sounded like she actually meant it. "I said some really mean things."

"So did I. It's not the end of the world."

"And you've let me stay here with you and I haven't even had a chance to say thank—"

"Emma, please stop," Regina said. Emma had never been interrupted so quietly before. "I think I'm going to do some more work, okay?"

"What?" Emma asked. "It's 9:30 on a Friday night. Can't you take a break?"

"No," Regina said, pushing herself to her feet. "Like I said – it's been a busy week."

She walked off, and Emma was left feeling like her chest had been crushed. But then, just as Regina was passing behind her, she put her hand on Emma's shoulder and very gently squeezed. Emma longed to lean into her touch, but then Regina was gone and the door to her office was clicking softly shut.

Regina had to go out on Saturday, although she wouldn't tell Emma where, so Emma was left to babysit Henry for the day. Her initial terror subsided when he sidled up to her 10 minutes after his mom had left and asked, "Now she's gone, can we make waffles?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "I doubt your mom owns a waffle iron, somehow."

"She does! It's just hidden because she thinks it'll tempt her."

"Or you," Emma corrected, and Henry grinned.

"Maybe. So, can we make them?"

She knew what Regina would say to that suggestion, but the whole point of this was that Regina wasn't there to stop her. Emma and Henry spent the next half hour crashing around in the kitchen, covered in flour and giggling loudly as they struggled to put a decent breakfast together.

In the afternoon, they settled down in Henry's bedroom so they could work on one of his stories. Emma hadn't been in there much, but it was a cute room – the exact type of place she'd wanted to have when she was a kid. The walls were painted blue and there were glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling. His bookshelf was fuller than Emma's own one was, and in the corner of the room he had a little desk where he could write and draw.

He settled himself down there, and Emma sat cross-legged on the floor beside him. "These are some pretty sweet digs, kid."

"What?" he asked, then realised she was talking about his bedroom. "Oh, yeah. I like it."

"Did your mom let you decorate it?"
"She let me choose the colour. Then she got a decorator to come and paint it," he said with just a hint of a huff.

Emma looked down at the picture of Mr Flump that was sitting on his desk and pointed at the scribbled colouring. "Judging by how well you stay inside the lines, I think that might have been a good idea."

Henry reached out and poked her arm. "Don't be mean to me. You're supposed to be babysitting."

"Babysitters are notoriously mean, I'm just fitting the bill," she said, nudging him back. "How are you and your mom getting along, anyway?"

"Fine," Henry shrugged, but Emma noticed at once that some of the venom he might have injected into that word a few months ago had dissipated.

"From my point of view, it looks like you're happier," she probed. "You hug her more often now."

Henry shrugged again. "I guess."

"Henry, you don't have to be ashamed of liking your mom," Emma said. "She's a really cool person. It's okay to be warming to her."

"I know. I just..."

He was rolling a coloured pencil up and down the slanted desk, his lips pressed together. Eventually he sighed.

"I feel bad being nice to her when she's so mean to my dad."

"Oh, kid," Emma said. "I don't think that's true."

"It is. He says it all the time."

"What was the last mean thing he said she did?"

"She got in trouble for making me garlic bread," Henry said, giggling nervously.

"I heard about that. But that wasn't mean, was it? You liked it. So did I."

"Yeah, but..." Henry faltered. His forehead crumpled.

"What else has she done?" Emma pushed. "According to your dad."

Henry looked a bit lost.

"I don't understand a lot of it, Emma," he admitted. When he spoke again, his voice was a near whisper, like he was scared of someone overhearing them. "Whenever I mention my mom, my dad does this thing where he rolls his eyes and laughs and says, 'oh, you mean the Evil Queen'. I used to think it was funny, but now..."

"Not so much, right?" Emma asked softly.

"Yeah. But he wouldn't say bad things about her if they weren't true, right? He wouldn't lie to me."

"I don't think it's about lying. Look, tell me about someone famous you really, really like."
Henry thought for a moment, and then said, "Spongebob."

Emma laughed. "The cartoon?"

"He's funny!"

"Okay, fine, whatever," Emma said, waving a hand. "You like Spongebob. You know who doesn't?"

"Who?"

"Me," Emma said. Henry's mouth opened into an outraged O. "Can't stand him. Every time I hear that whiny little voice, I lose a month from my life expectancy."

"What?" Henry demanded.

"But," Emma continued. "Does me not liking him mean you can't still find him funny?"

"No…"

"Exactly. It just means we have different tastes. Yours are wrong," she said, making Henry glare. "And mine are right."

"Mine are right."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah!"

"Then your opinion about your mom must be right too, huh?"

Henry looked at her like she'd tricked him. "You mean, I can think she's nice even though my dad doesn't?"

"Of course you can. Look, your mom and dad were in love once, and then they weren't anymore and they got divorced and that's really, really sad. But it also means your dad might be a little bit biased."

Henry wrinkled his nose. "Biased?"

"It means he feels strongly in a certain way, and he probably won't change his mind. And maybe that's not his fault – his heart probably got broken when they split up. But lots of couples break up, and it doesn't make everyone evil. It's grown-up stuff, and it's not fair for your dad to push his anger at your mom onto you."

She worried for a moment that this was way too much for a 10-year-old to understand, but Henry was slowly nodding. "I guess that makes sense. He doesn't like my friend Ava either."

"Why not?"

"He says she's a thief. But I think she's funny and I like her."

"You're hanging out with thieves now?"

"She only stole one chocolate bar one time."

"Right," Emma snorted. "Anyway, that's a good example. It's easy to think your parents know best
about everything because they're grown ups, but sometimes – very, very rarely – they might be a little bit wrong. And a smart kid like you should try and think about that when your dad is calling your mom names."

Henry nodded. It was surprisingly firm. "She's not evil, is she?"

"She's really not, Henry. And you know she loves you more than anything."

He nodded again. "Maybe I should make her a card."

Emma's chest twinged. "That's a nice idea. Do you want me to help?"

"No, I want to do it myself," he said, already grabbing at his pile of coloured paper. Something sharp and warm scratched at the back of Emma's throat.

"I'll leave you to it," she said, getting to her feet and gently ruffling his hair. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

He nodded, already too distracted to answer. There was determination in his face that she’d never seen before as he tried to fold the paper perfectly in half.

Emma smiled at him and left the room, heading back down the stairs. She checked her phone, just in case her bank manager had decided to go to work on a Saturday and might finally have deigned to return her calls, but her screen was blank. She pressed her lips together and waited for the light behind the glass to fade.

Regina looked even more tired than usual when she came home that night, and when Henry handed her his card, Emma genuinely thought she might cry. She spent a long time staring down at the scribbled drawing of a queen with a huge smiley face, before she opened her arms and hugged Henry so tightly that he eventually wriggled away from her with a squeal.

As she and Emma sat on the couch together later that evening, a movie playing in the background, Emma could see the relief around her eyes. Regina hadn't mentioned the card again, but she knew Emma was behind it in some way. She'd gently squeezed her hand after Henry had run off.

"Did you go into the gallery today?" Emma asked, making Regina jump.

"Hm?"

"When you went out. Were you at your office?"

"Oh. Yes," Regina said, rubbing her eyes. "Something came up."

"Did you fix it?"

Regina pursed her lips, considering the question. "Almost. I think it should be resolved by Monday."

"That's good," Emma said, and Regina softened at her bright smile.

"How did you and Henry get on today?"

"Oh, fine. He's such a good kid."

"I know," Regina said in her gentlest voice. "I'm glad you and him are getting along so well."
"Doesn't he do that with most people?"

"He doesn't meet many of my friends," Regina admitted. "I'd rather keep him separate from that part of my life."

Emma wasn't sure whether 'that part' simply referred to her job, or whether Regina was talking about the sordid part of her life where she paid people to be near her. Either way, Emma felt kind of pleased with herself.

"I'd be happy to look after him any time. You know – if I'm still around."

Regina didn't respond to that. Emma wasn't sure whether that was a good sign or not.

After a long and uncomfortable pause, Regina sighed. "I should get on with my work."

"Regina," Emma said. "Will you give it a rest? Nothing is important enough to need doing right now."

"I assure you, it is."

"Look – if you'd just rather not hang out with me, I can go up to my room. You can stay here and watch TV and I won't bother you, okay?"

Regina looked genuinely offended by this. "Why wouldn't I want to hang out with you?"

"I... I don't know. Because you've been so busy this week, I just assumed..."

"It's nothing for you to worry about," Regina said. Emma almost believed her. "Like I said, I'm hoping everything will be resolved by Monday."

Emma just nodded, because she still wasn't convinced that she wasn't being lied to. Regina got to her feet and went to leave the room. Emma really wished she'd kiss her before she went.

"Hey, Regina?"

"Mm?"

"Can I borrow your laptop?"

Regina frowned back at her. "Why?"

"I've been looking at apartment listings," Emma explained. "But I forgot to bring my computer when we left my place and it's hard to do it properly on my phone."

"Oh," Regina said. She still looked a little confused, but she gestured to the console table to Emma's right. "It's in there. Help yourself."

She smiled when Emma thanked her, but she still left. Emma rolled her eyes and went in search of the computer, settling down on the couch with it resting on her crossed legs.

She was scrolling through the listings for hours, and it was only when it got to midnight that she realised she'd been hoping that if she stayed there long enough, Regina might come back. When her yawns got longer and more difficult to hold in, she gave up on that idea. She looked at all the tabs she'd optimistically kept open and sighed.

She opened up Regina's emails and created a new message, pasting the 10 or 15 links into there and
sending them to herself. Just as she went to close Outlook again, she paused. Her heart dropped.

*Message from: Neal Cassidy*

*Subject: Meeting*

Son of a *bitch*. Emma's hands twitched, something that was either rage or terror or possibly both brewing up inside her.

The message was several days old, already read and replied to, which meant Regina had been emailing that motherfucker while Emma had been there, sleeping under her roof, so pathetically grateful to be staying there and to be with someone who understood how shaken up she was over what he'd done. She felt sick. She nearly got up so she could find Regina and throw the laptop to the floor at her backstabbing feet.

But instead, she swallowed down her seething hatred and clicked on the message. She didn't feel any guilt for it: all she needed to know was just how angry she was supposed to be before she stormed the hell out of that apartment forever.

She scrolled down to the bottom of the email chain. It was weeks and weeks old, going right back to just after the party and mostly consisting of Regina or Tamara frantically trying to schedule meetings while Neal made excuses and last-minute cancellations. Emma rolled her eyes, no longer feeling bad about any of it, and kept scrolling. The weeks ticked on, and they came closer to the day when Emma had gone round to his studio alone.

Regina's impatience had been growing – Emma could read it between every single letter. Her polite, clipped emails were getting shorter and more unforgiving, and when Neal eventually replied with his apologies or available dates, the irritation didn't seem to lessen.

Then there was a gap. A long one. Emma looked at the dates and realised that she had gone to Neal's apartment two days after Regina's last email. The silence that followed said everything.

And yet, that led her to the new message that had been sitting in Regina's inbox. Neal had emailed her two weeks later, the lack of contact having finally broken him, with his tone suggesting that absolutely nothing had happened.

*Regina,*

*Hey, it's been a while - I hope my disorganisation hasn't finally driven you away! I was wondering if you still wanted to meet? I'm free most evenings next week and would love to show you my stuff. Let me know.*

*Neal*

Emma gritted her teeth. He had more nerve than she'd ever thought possible.

Still, she held onto her anger as she went in search of Regina's reply. The fact that Neal hadn't emailed back again spoke volumes, but she had to know.

She found it buried in Regina's sent folder. She'd written it at midnight.

*Mr Cassidy,*

*I haven't called the police based on the understanding that you are now out of the picture. I would appreciate it if you could refrain from contacting me, Tamara, Emma, or anyone affiliated with me*
ever again.

Rest assured that you will not be getting signed to anyone in New York. Before you assaulted my girlfriend, you should have considered the fact that when I tell people an artist is no good, they listen to me – and, trust me, I have made it abundantly clear to every single one of my contacts that you are no good at all.

If I see you at an event ever again, I'll make sure that it's more than just your career that is over.

Kind regards,

Regina Mills

Emma stared at it a bit longer, her anger ebbing away and slowly being replaced by something that felt an awful lot like shame.

She closed the laptop and carefully put it back where she'd found it.

When she left the living room to go to bed, there was still light pooling out from beneath Regina's office door. Emma paused outside, her fist raised, and she so desperately wanted to knock. She wanted to thank her properly for absolutely everything, and to say sorry in a way that even Regina could understand.

But she could hear the tapping of a keyboard inside, followed by a sigh, and she backed away. Something was twisting and churning inside her, and it hurt.

She crept up the stairs and headed into her bedroom. No matter how high she turned up the thermostat, it always seemed to be cold in there.

She'd been in bed for less than 10 minutes when she heard Regina come upstairs. For a second, her footsteps paused. Emma wondered if she was outside her door, or whether she was just wishing she was. But then those delicate footsteps crept away, and Regina was going down the hall and into her own room. The door clicked shut. The apartment went silent.
Monday came and went. Emma had sincerely hoped Regina was telling the truth when she said everything that had been keeping her so busy would be resolved by then, but that evening Emma had yet again arrived back to an empty apartment, and she had eaten her dinner alone. She didn't stay up late enough to hear Regina get home.

But when Emma called her on Tuesday lunchtime – something she did purely out of habit now, rather than any kind of expectancy – Regina actually picked up. Emma blinked in shock. "Regina?"

"Is everything okay?" Regina asked. Emma could hear people talking in the background.

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just..." Emma faltered, realising she hadn't even had a reason for calling. "I wanted to know if you'd be home for dinner tonight."

Regina sighed, and she sounded genuinely sorry. "No, I don't think so. Things are crazy here today."

"Do you want me to leave something for you?"

"Please. I do love your cooking," Regina said. Emma lit up inside.

"Okay," she said eagerly. "Any preference?"

"Surprise me," Regina replied, and there was a hint of her old, playful self in there. Emma could almost hear her smirking. But then, "I have to go, Emma. I'll speak to you soon."

She hung up quickly, leaving Emma feeling deeply unsatisfied and more than a little confused. They were breaking up. She knew it. After a few more days of silence, Emma even started rehearsing her speech in her head. She was determined to go out with dignity, to not cry or beg Regina to take her back, but she knew it would be hard: this was the first time in her life that she'd ever desperately wanted a relationship to continue, and it wasn't even a proper relationship to begin with.

By Friday, she was spending most of her workday miserably Googling apartments. She had some pathetic idea that if she was even slightly prepared for her inevitable dismissal, it might hurt a bit less. She was slouched over her keyboard and aimlessly clicking her way through listing after listing, knowing full well that it was futile, when Violet slowly approached her desk. She moved like she was trying not to startle a sleeping animal, and yet Emma still jumped when she noticed her loitering.

"Shit," she yelped, making Violet flinch away.

"Sorry," she squeaked. When she thrust out a piece of paper, her hands were shaking. "I just wanted to give you this invoice."

Emma took it, guilt gnawing at her, and watched as she started to rush away.

"Violet," she called out. The intern turned to look at her with terror on her face. When Emma gestured for her to come back, it only grew.

"Did I do it wrong?" she asked.

Emma blinked. "What? Oh, no, don't be ridiculous. It's fine. Sit down for a second, will you?"
Violet found a chair and reluctantly dragged it to the corner of Emma's desk.

"Look," Emma said. "I've been horrible to you ever since you started working here. It hasn't been intentional – I just want you to know that."

Violet blinked at her, looking oddly starstruck. "I thought you hated me."

"Not at all. It's just been a weird few weeks – months, really – and you keep catching me off guard. I've never known anyone to walk as quietly as you," Emma said, and Violet smiled nervously. "I just wanted to apologise. You shouldn't have to creep around feeling scared that I'm going to bite you. I'm not like that, I promise."

"Okay," Violet nodded. She took a deep breath before asking, "Is it true you're dating Regina Mills?"

Emma frowned. "You know her?"

"Not really. But I heard some of the editors talking, so I Googled her. Also, Ingrid won't stop going on about her – I think she's, like, her idol."

Emma snorted. "Well, I won't tell Regina that. Her head's already way too big."

Looking positively delighted that she was sharing a joke with her, Violet breathed, "Really?"

"Yeah, but I kind of like it. I'm a sucker for arrogance," Emma sighed, before remembering that she was talking to an 18-year-old. "You should be smarter than that, though. If you're dating, then make sure you find someone who's nice too."

"I'm not dating yet. I want to concentrate on my career."

"…aren't you still in high school?"

"I graduated in the summer. I'm doing this internship for extra experience before I go to college in September."

Not for the first time, Emma felt a pang of envy for someone who'd managed to get their life on track so much quicker than she had. "That's pretty clever. How much longer are you going to be with us?"

"Just a few more months."

"Well, I'll do my best to stop scaring you in that time," Emma said. "And if I do, try not to take it personally. I think I spent my first two years here feeling exactly like you do now and it was kind of stressful."

Violet smiled. "Okay. Can I yell back at you?"

"Don't push it," Emma said, but she was laughing. "Go on, get back to doing perfect invoices."

Violet skipped off, leaving Emma to sit back in her chair and swivel for a second. She knew Regina had her stupid 'no apologies' rule, but Emma wasn't sure she could ever buy into that herself: she'd spend the past couple of weeks feeling ridiculously tense and snapping at anyone who stumbled into her path, and part of her had started to worry that maybe she was turning into some kind of Regina 2.0. But now that Emma had finally said sorry for being such a terrible bitch to the only person in that office who was lower down on the pecking order than she was, she felt so much better.

While she was riding the wave of doing brave things, Emma picked up her phone and dialled the
number for her bank, which – after Regina's and her favourite pizza place – was now one of only three that she knew off by heart.

The conversation was the same as ever. Please hold. I'm sorry, the manager isn't available. Please call back later.

Emma hung up with a huff, and then her gaze fell onto her list of recent calls. It was only then that she realised she hadn't been called by a creditor in nearly two weeks.

She staggered home at the end of the day ready to drop face-first onto her bed and sleep for the next 14 hours. She hadn't seen Regina since the previous weekend, but she'd slowly gotten used to that. It was like a toothache: no matter how badly it hurt, eventually it just started to fade into the background.

Which is why she dropped her phone and keys to the floor with a shriek when she walked into the apartment and found Regina sitting on the couch, waiting for her.

"Fuck," Emma gasped. "Don't do that!"

"Do what?" Regina asked. She was smiling, but only barely. There were dark circles under her eyes and she had already changed out of her work clothes and into a pair of yoga pants.

"Hide in the shadows like that," Emma said, willing her breathing to slow down. She picked up her dropped belongings and entered the room. "What are you doing home?"

"I finished work early. I wanted to talk to you about something."

_Oh, God. Here it is._ Emma's heart cracked, because she recognised the look on Regina's face all too well – it was a sorry, determined expression that was always followed by something like, "Look, Emma, here's the thing…" Then Emma would spend the next two days watching _The Proposal_ on repeat and eating nothing but Ben & Jerry's before shaking it off and pretending like she'd never cared that much about any of it in the first place.

Except she wasn't so sure she would be able to manage that this time round.

"Okay," Emma said, taking an uncertain step forward. "Should I sit?"

"Please."

Emma sat as far away from Regina as she could, pressing herself stiffly into the corner of the couch. She wished she hadn't worn such tight jeans that day, because they were cutting into her stomach and doing absolutely nothing to make the rolling in her gut go away.

Regina released a long breath. She suddenly looked so much older.

"I know I've been absent for the past two weeks," she said. She was looking at Emma properly for the first time since they'd sat in her office together, and that only made Emma feel more nervous. "There have been a lot of loose ends that needed tying up. I didn't think it would take this long, but I'm finally done."

Emma didn't know heartbreak could feel so much like standing at the very edge of a cliff. She closed her eyes, wishing Regina would just get it over with and finally push.

"Regina, it's okay. I get it. I—"
"I've paid off your debts."

Emma's eyes snapped back open again. Regina wasn't the type of person to do practical jokes, but maybe she'd turned over a new leaf.

"I'm sorry," Emma said slowly. "You've done what?"

Regina smiled weakly. "I think you heard me."

"I need you to say it again."

"Why?"

"Because I'm pretty sure you're kidding, but I need to be certain."

Regina sighed with all her usual impatience, and Emma knew then she was telling the truth. Something jolted in her stomach like a truck had hit her. "I've paid off your debts. It took longer than I expected because there were so many different parties involved, but—"

"Wait," Emma interrupted her, her voice piercing and almost hysterical. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a shit ton of money! And because you didn't have to. What the hell have I done to deserve it?"

Regina was looking at her like she was insane. "You didn't need to deserve it. I just did it because I wanted to."

Emma took a shaky breath. "Regina, I can't let you."

"Well, I suspected you'd say that. That's why I did it without telling you."

"But this is… This is way too much," Emma said, and she was suddenly stammering. She couldn't get the words out quickly enough, and they were crashing into one another in her mouth. "You can't possibly expect me to just say 'okay' and accept this."

"Emma," Regina sighed, the circles under her eyes getting darker. "Listen to me. The amount of money you owed – it was a lot. For you, it was basically life or death. But for me, it's barely anything. I could earn that amount on any given day. You can't seriously have thought I would just sit back and let you struggle with it on your own."

"But… but…" Tears were bubbling up in Emma's throat, and she swallowed them down. "It's too much. It's way too much, Regina."

"For you, maybe. Not for me."

Regina saw the wobble in Emma's jaw then and edged across the couch, reaching out to take her hand. It was the first time they'd touched properly in weeks, and it was that fact that finally tipped Emma over the edge.

"Oh, darling," Regina sighed, wiping away the one stubborn tear that had managed to trickle down Emma's cheek. "Please don't be sad. Everything is fixed now."

"But I don't deserve for it to be fixed. Not just like that. I made this huge fucking mess of my life and it's not right that someone else has walked in and cleaned it up for me."
"You're not being fair to yourself," Regina said. "Your start in life was very different to mine. Do you seriously think I'd be where I am today if I'd grown up in foster care, or in prison? You've done the best with what you have, and I'm very proud of you for that. And true, you've also made some very stupid mistakes, but so has everyone. The difference here was that the only person suffering from your mistakes was you."

"And about 16 loan companies up and down the East Coast," Emma said miserably, but Regina just chuckled.

"They have more than enough money to get by." She stroked Emma's cheek as she said it, and Emma trembled slightly beneath her touch. "And so do I. The only person who needs some help is sat right in front of me."

Emma was swallowing hard, determined not to cry anymore, even though the tender way Regina was looking at her made it nearly impossible not to.

"I really was trying," Emma insisted. "I've been calling my bank for days trying to arrange a meeting. No one wanted to talk to me."

Regina quietly said, "I know. I'm afraid I asked them not to speak to anyone besides me or my accountant while this was getting straightened out."

"You... did?"

"I did. Your account manager was a bit startled by your sudden determination, but I was very proud of you for how hard you were trying."

"Regina," Emma sighed, and her voice stopped just short of being whiny. "You have to stop this."

"Stop what?"

"Being so nice to me. I haven't deserved it. I can't accept any of this."

"Oh, and what are you going to do? Go out and get yourself in another hundred grand of debt just to get back at me?"

Emma glared at her. "No. But I need to pay you back, or something."

"I thought you might say that," Regina said, rolling her eyes like this was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard. She reached towards the coffee table and picked up a piece of paper. "My accountant drew this up for you."

Emma blinked down at it. It was a repayment plan, if you could really call it that: the amount she was supposed to be repaying every month was less than what her new phone bill cost, and that wasn't even something she was paying herself anymore.

When she didn't respond, Regina said, "Now, I should make it clear that I think this is ridiculous. I don't want your money. But if you think it'll make you feel better, then this is what we can do."

"But it'll take me until I'm about 200 to pay you back," Emma said.

"I know. I'm fine with that."

"But... why?" Emma demanded. That was the real problem with all this -- she simply couldn't understand why Regina would even care enough to help her in the first place.
Regina thought about it for a second. "Because you were struggling. And I wanted to make your life easier."

Emma blinked. "And that's it?"

"That's it."

"I don't owe you anything else?"

"Well, you are technically still working for me," Regina said with her favourite wicked smile. "So as long as this doesn't affect your job performance, then no. It's a clean slate."

"But, I just..." Emma hated herself for protesting again, but she'd been weighed down by her debt for too many years. Letting someone else remove it from her shoulders wasn't quite as simple as she once might have thought. "Don't you think you're letting me off too easy?"

Regina gave her that same soft look again, and it made Emma's stomach go heavy. "What part of this has been easy for you exactly, Emma?"

"You know what I mean. Wouldn't it be better to... I don't know. Just make me a spreadsheet to help me repay everyone by myself?"

Regina's eyebrow slowly arched. "You think a spreadsheet would be able to fix this?"

"No. Of course not. But I just feel like I should have to do this on my own."

"And what would that achieve?" Regina asked. "You'd have another 10 years of stress and financial difficulty ahead of you, and you'd probably fall back into your old ways without even meaning to because you still wouldn't be getting the support you need. You might even have to declare yourself bankrupt, and I'm not going to let that happen to you. I have the money that can help, so why shouldn't I use it? I'm not trying to teach you some grand lesson about humility here. I'm just trying to make things better."

It was too fucking surreal, and even in the face of all the things Emma still wanted to say, she found herself grappling around for her phone instead. "If I check my banking app, what will I find?"

"It will probably look the same right now," Regina said. "It will take a few days for all the money to go through the system. But if you check again next week, then you'll find a perfectly healthy balance. No scary red numbers." She paused, then admitted, "Though I'm afraid your credit score may be permanently shot to pieces."

Emma let out a watery laugh. "Yeah, well. I'd kind of resigned myself to that a long time ago."

She wanted to reach out and kiss Regina all over her face. She wanted to curl up in her lap and sob for the next hour, until all those dirty, stressful tears that she'd been holding in for the past 10 years had finally left her. But instead of doing either of those things, she just reached for Regina's hand and squeezed it. She poured all the thanks she could ever express into that touch.

"I owe you literally everything, you know."

Regina smiled back at her. "You're being melodramatic."

"I am not. You've saved my life."

She could tell from the glimmer in Regina's eye that she realised all that and more, but out loud she
just laughed. "I have missed your wild exaggerations, Miss Swan. These past two weeks have been unbearable without you."

"They have?"

"Of course. Especially when you were calling me and I had to keep ignoring you."

"Oh," Emma said, deflating a bit. "Yeah. Why... why did you do that?"

Regina squeezed her hand once more. "Because I didn't want to get you involved in any of this. You've been through enough, and it was about time someone took over. Besides, I was usually arguing with debt collection firms whenever you called – they really are incredibly difficult people to work with." There was a pause, and for a moment she looked slightly sheepish. "I managed to talk them out of a lot of the interest, by the way. That full figure I wrote down for you wasn't what actually got paid."

Emma couldn't help but roll her eyes. Of course Regina could negotiate her way out of that as well.

"You're the craziest person I've ever met," she said, and Regina looked quite proud of that.

"That's definitely not the worst thing that's ever been said about me."

"I know. I've said much worse," Emma mumbled, her cheeks flushing. "Regina... look, everything I said to you when we were in my apartment – I didn't mean it. I was angry and scared and I lashed out and it was a really cheap shot. I'm sorry."

"You know I've already forgiven you," Regina said, pulling Emma close and kissing her forehead. Emma's eyes fluttered closed and she took a deep breath, soaking up the smell that she'd missed so badly. "And another thing – I appreciate that you've been looking for a new apartment, but please don't think I want you to get out of here. You can stay as long as you like."

"I can?"

"Of course. You do make an excellent chicken piccata."

Emma laughed, unable to stay away from her for a moment longer. She shuffled forward and burrowed her face in Regina's neck. Regina slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her even closer.

"Thank you." Emma said it quietly, and Regina knew she wasn't talking about the cooking compliment.

"You're welcome," she replied, her mouth on Emma's hair. "You can relax, okay? I've got you."

Emma nodded, finally daring to let herself believe it.
Chapter 30

The changes that took place over the next few weeks were abrupt and obvious. The first was that the $10,000 pay packets stopped coming: a week after Regina's payment to the bank had been finalised and Emma was officially out of debt for good, they sat down at the kitchen table and Regina produced a different kind of envelope.

"This is for you," Regina said. "I felt like the monthly payments were getting a bit ridiculous, so instead, I'm giving you this."

Emma saw the American Express logo in the top corner and nearly wheezed. "Regina. You can't seriously think I can be trusted with one of these."

"I can, because you're very good at spending your own money but you've always been rather restrained with mine," Regina said, laughing at the awe on Emma's face as she peeled her shiny black Amex card off of the letter.

"This is really mine?"

"Yes, and I'm not setting you a monthly limit, but please do let me know if you plan on buying a tiara or a boat or anything."

"What am I supposed to use it for?" Emma asked with the faintest tremble in her voice.

"Everything. If you buy some lunch, or you need a new dress, or you and Elsa go out partying after work, put it on the card. I don't want you touching your wages anymore."

"At all?"

"No," Regina said, her voice firm. "You're going to save it all. I want you to have a safety net."

"Regina," Emma sighed. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything. It's done." Because everything was just that simple for her, and if Emma tried really hard to believe it, maybe it could be for her too.

The next change came when Emma returned home from work and went up to her bedroom to find every single one of her possessions waiting for her. She blinked at the piles and piles of clothes that were neatly folded and stacked up along the walls, the shoes that had been added to the closet, the rusty old laptop that was sitting on the bed.

"Regina," she bellowed down the stairs. Regina was already on her way up, her eyebrows raised high in amusement.

"Oh, you found them," she said. "I figured Mary Margaret would probably like to have her spare room back, so I got movers to go and collect the rest of your things."

"But I'm supposed to be finding a new apartment."

Regina just shrugged at that, because she rarely acknowledged Emma's desperate assertions that she had to move out at some point. "Well. You might as well have all your stuff in one place while you look."

"How am I supposed to live in here, though?" Emma asked. In Regina's minimalistic decor, there
was very little room to actually put anything.

"I'll buy a dresser," Regina said, placing her hand on Emma's lower back. "Or you could just start sleeping in my room again."

Emma looked round at her so quickly that her neck cricked. "Seriously?"

"Of course. Why not? You were basically living in there before all this happened."

"I know, but there's a big difference between me basically moving in and me actually moving in."

Regina scoffed, her expression suddenly clouding. "Fine, do whatever you want. I was only offering."

It was the cutest possible thing for her to be mad about, and so Emma responded by pushing her back against the doorframe and kissing her until the frown had melted from her face. When they finally broke apart, Emma apologising with a half-smile and a glimmer in her eye, Regina curled a hand through her belt and tugged her down the hall – into what was apparently their bedroom now – and showed her that she'd forgiven her in as many ways as she knew how.

When they got into bed together at night, Emma would always start up her laptop. As Regina sent emails or read a book, Emma would begin scrolling through apartment listings with less and less optimism every day. Usually she gave up after 10 minutes and lay down with a groan, but on the occasions when she lasted longer than that, Regina would usually crawl over to her and close the lid on her behalf. The computer would be put on the nightstand, and then Emma would be dragged down onto the pillows with her.

It was during these weeks that Emma finally started to feel like she had a family. Regina was always there beside her, gently encouraging her or snapping at her to stop being so infuriating, and through every single second of it Emma's chest slowly filled up with something that was a lot more than just happiness. Whenever she lay in bed and felt Regina's fingers pushing her hair away from her face, every inch of her body ached. This was someone who had done so much for her, and yet still asked for nearly nothing in return.

Still, Emma wasn't willing to just sit back and give her that. Instead, she carried on doing the cooking most nights, because she almost always got home before Regina and she knew how happy it made her to walk through the door and find dinner already on the table. She also avoided cooking things that would set Regina off on one of her training binges, because even though Emma thought she was perfect, she knew that Regina disagreed, and maybe she always would. Emma could go without cheese sauces and piles of French fries if it meant Regina didn't feel like she had to scrape most of her own plate into the trash.

But the biggest change was Henry. Regina had gotten a furious phone call from her ex-husband one night, demanding to know why their son was asking if he could stay at Regina's every weekend instead of every other one, and Regina had been too delighted to even consider snapping back at him. She'd simply told him that of course it was okay, and Henry could come over whenever he wanted to during the week as well. Robin had practically hissed as he'd put down the phone, but the deed was done: Henry became a frequent visitor in their apartment, and Regina was overjoyed.

Regina had promised Emma that the weeks leading up to Christmas would be their own personal form of organised hell, but if anything, it was the happiest time of her life. There were events, but fewer of them, because maybe Regina had finally realised that coming home to her son and sort-of-girlfriend was more important than schmoozing with people she hated to begin with. When they did go out, Emma held her hand and walked proudly, wearing a glossy outfit she hadn't had to starve
herself to buy.

"Zelena looks like her head is about to explode," Regina whispered at a dinner in late November, and she was right. Once they’d both decided not to care so much about what other people thought of them, it had gotten much easier to annoy them.

So things were some strange kind of perfect. Any time Emma looked at Regina, she felt herself light up, and she knew what the reason was. She knew what the feeling in her chest was, even though she’d never felt it before.

She also knew she couldn’t say it out loud. Not when Regina had her weird set of rules still in play, and could easily just tell Emma to leave in response.

Instead, Emma was content to curl up by her side and tell her she loved her in a thousand other ways: by making her cups of coffee without her asking, and remembering that she would only drink decaf after five. By picking up Henry after work so the two of them would be waiting for Regina when she got home an hour later. By calling Tamara to reschedule meetings when Regina had accidentally double-booked herself, and by taking Regina out for dinner with her own money, not the black Amex, whenever they had a night off together.

She thought maybe Regina was telling her that she loved her too whenever she kissed her forehead or rubbed her shoulders or bought her little gifts just because she could. But it was impossible to know for certain, because Regina was a cloudy reflection in a mirror and you never saw quite what you wanted to when you looked at her. Emma didn't mind that, though: she liked Regina's blurriness. She liked working out what she was trying to say from the touch of her fingertips and the feeling of her lips at night.

Regina called Emma late on Friday afternoon. "What time are you finishing work today?"

"Five," Emma said, holding her phone against her shoulder. Violet walked over with a coffee for her and she mouthed her thanks. "What's up?"

"Are you going out with Elsa?"

"No, she has another date with her DJ."

"DJ Dave?"

"Unfortunately yes," Emma rolled her eyes. "She's going to laser tag with him."

"Seriously? Laser tag?" Regina asked, then cut herself off. "That's not important. Henry is coming round tonight and I don't think I'm going to be out of this meeting before seven. I've just had to sneak out to call you. Can you take care of him until I arrive?"

"Sure," Emma said. "I'll get Sidney to pick him up on our way back."

"You don't need to do that – his father said he'd bring him round at six."

"Okay. Any dinner preference?"

Regina went silent for a moment, then sighed. "I shouldn't tell you this, but technically he hasn't had mac and cheese for a month."

"Oh!" Emma said, sitting bolt upright in her chair. "That is good news. Do you want some too?"
"No," Regina said flatly.

"Cool. I'm going to make you some anyway."

"Please don't do that, Emma. I won't eat it."

"Fine – then I'll cook it and we can use the leftovers to make mac and cheese balls for lunch tomorrow."

"To make what?" Regina asked, her voice going shrill. "Look, I have to get back to this meeting. Don't do any of that."

"I promise nothing," Emma said. "Bye bye, see you later."

"Emma—"

But Emma had hung up with a cackle. She spent the rest of the afternoon Googling recipes for deep-fried mac and cheese, knowing that even if Regina tried to murder her, it would be worth it for the look on Henry's face.

She got home in time to start the preparations before Henry arrived. By the time the door buzzed, she was in her sweats with her hair scraped back into a bun and she had grated cheese stuck to both of her wrists. She rushed out into the hall and hit the entry button, then cleaned herself up while she waited for Henry to make it upstairs. She heard the footsteps outside and opened the door before he could knock.

She paused. Henry grinned up at her.

"Hey Emma!" he said, stepping forwards and hugging her around her waist. "This is my dad."

A tall man wearing jeans and a khaki-coloured jacket was standing behind him, his hands buried in his pockets. He didn't look as muscly as Emma had been expecting given that he was a fitness instructor – and one with outrageously high standards, apparently – but he had a sturdy look about him that told Emma she would probably lose to him in a bar fight.

She blinked. "Hey. Are you here to see Regina?"

"No – I just wanted to make sure Henry got up here okay," he said in an English accent. Jesus, what was with her and Regina and their choice in skeezy British dudes?

"You don't normally do that," Emma said slowly. "Did Regina tell you it would only be me here?"

"Maybe," Robin said. His eyes were sharp and permanently narrowed, Emma noticed, and he didn't seem to blink very much. "Isn't a father allowed to look out for his son's safety?"

Oh, there were so many unspoken threats in that sentence. Trying not to roll her eyes, Emma looked down at Henry.

"Why don't you go take your stuff upstairs, kid?" she said, holding out her hand so he could slap his own against it. He rushed past her with a grin on his face.

"Bye, Dad!"

"Unpack before you come back downstairs," Emma shouted after him. "I'm not doing it for you after you pass out like last time."
Henry was laughing as he disappeared into his room. She waited until she heard the door close before she turned back to his father.

"So," she said, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing much," Robin said. "I just wanted to finally meet the woman who's been hanging around my son."

"My name's Emma, actually."

"And my son's name is Henry, not 'kid'."

"It's a term of endearment, Robin. Is 'the woman who's been hanging around my son' your one for me?"

Robin glared at her. "I don't think you need me to tell you that there wasn't any endearment in that."

"I guess not," Emma shrugged. "Now, is there anything you actually need, or can I close the door?"

"I want to ask you what the hell you've been saying to my son."

They were finally cutting to the chase, apparently. Emma pretended to think. "You're going to have to be more specific."

"Well, how about the fact that last week we were talking about his mom, and he yelled at me for saying mean things about her?"

Pride swelled up inside her like a tide pool. "Okay. Which part of that is my fault?"

"The part where my 10-year-old son is suddenly giving me attitude," Robin snapped.

"He's an extremely well-behaved little boy," Emma replied. "If he's yelling at you, I'd start thinking about what it was that you said."

"You don't get to lecture me on how I speak to my son."

"I do when you're calling his mother awful names. What was it – the Evil Queen? The Wicked Witch?"

"It's a joke. He knows that."

"He doesn't know that, and now he doesn't just accept it either," Emma said. She was surprised by how calm she sounded when this man was starting to tower over her. "He loves you, but he also loves Regina. I don't know what kind of psychopath wants to try and poison a child against his mother, but I'm not going to apologise for putting a stop to it."

Robin's eyes flashed. "You're nothing, you know that? You're just another one of Regina's playthings. You'll be out on your ear before you know it."

It was the same thing Neal had said to her weeks ago, and it hurt just as much now as it had then. Emma swallowed down the acidic taste in her mouth and smiled.

"Thanks for the advice, Robin, but I think I'm doing fine. Better than you, anyway. Hey, how's the apartment that your ex-wife had to buy for you?"

It was so satisfying to watch his face turn from red to purple.
"What did she tell you?"

"Absolutely nothing, and that's what makes it even worse. She refuses to say a bad word about you, and yet you'll try and turn her own son against her. It really sheds light on which one of you two is the supposedly 'evil' one."

Robin was finally lost for words, and so Emma took a step back, going into her new home and leaving him flailing on the doorstep.

"You can go now," she said cheerfully, her hand on the door. "And, hey, just a word of warning – if you make any comments about Regina to Henry again, I'll cut off your dick and then mail it back to you."

She slammed the door in his face while he was still processing that. When she turned around, Henry was just coming down the stairs.

"Did you hear any of that?" she asked. Henry frowned.

"No. Why? What happened?"

"I said a bad word," she said, putting her hand on the back of his head and guiding him towards the kitchen. "Something you're not allowed to say for at least another six years."

Henry giggled. "Tell me what it was and I promise I won't say it for eight."

"Nice try, sneaky boy," Emma said, leading him to the counter. "Now. What do you think we're making for dinner tonight?"

It took a second, but suddenly he was grinning from ear to ear. "Mac and cheese!"

"You betcha," Emma said. "I already grated off most of my fingertips doing all the hard work, so the rest should be a breeze. We'll get everything ready before your mom gets home."

"Mom doesn't like mac and cheese," Henry said dubiously. Emma snorted.

"Your mom is a liar," she said, handing him the spoon. "Or maybe she just hasn't tasted mine yet."

Regina came home to find Emma and Henry perched at the kitchen island with huge mounds of pasta on either of their plates. When she walked through the door, they both looked up at her slightly sheepishly.

"Oh, for God's sake," she sighed, dropping her purse on the counter.

"In my defence," Emma said through a mouthful of food, "I thought we would be at least halfway through this before you arrived."

Regina laughed. "That really isn't much of a defence."

She approached them and stooped to give Henry a kiss on his cheek, before turning and doing the same to Emma.

"E-ew," Henry whined, shaking his head at them. "Emma, I always knew you were lying when you said you weren't my mom's girlfriend."

Emma froze. That had been months ago, way before she'd gotten her feet under the table, and she'd
told him they weren't dating because it had been the simplest thing to do. Now though, things were more complicated. She didn't know how she was supposed to respond to that.

Regina didn't seem even slightly put out, though. She just shrugged.

"That's because she was probably trying to keep your nosey little head out of our relationship," she said, ruffling his hair. Henry rolled his eyes, and apparently that was that conversation over and done with. "So, how are my two favourite people? Other than knocking at obesity's door."

"What does that mean?" Henry asked.

"It means 'fat'," Emma interjected.

"We aren't fat."

"Not yet, but it's only a matter of time if Emma keeps feeding you," Regina said, joining them at the island. "Then we'll have to roll you to school because you won't fit in the car anymore."

"Nuh uh," Henry protested. Regina grabbed a spare fork and leaned towards Emma's plate, snagging a mouthful of food while Emma pretended not to notice.

"Yuh huh," Regina insisted. "And we'll have to make you special clothes out of old sheets and things."

"Can we use my Star Wars sheets?" Henry asked, and Regina rolled her eyes, taking another forkful from Emma's plate.

"This isn't supposed to be an appealing scenario, Henry."

"Regina," Emma snapped as she dove into her plate for a third time. "I made extra for you. You don't have to eat mine."

Regina didn't budge, and so Emma got down from her chair with a sigh. As she walked over to the stove to get Regina her own plate, she heard giggling from behind her and turned to find Regina sliding into her seat. "Oh, that's nice. I leave to get you food and you repay me by kicking me out of my chair?"

Regina responded with an impish grin as she tucked into Emma's dinner. Henry sniggered from beside her.

"You two are as bad as each other," Emma said, filling up a new plate and walking towards the seat that Regina had just vacated. It kind of broke her heart, albeit in a good way, to see her like this – her mouth full of pasta, and her son grinning happily right beside her. It was such a change from the way things had been the first time they'd all been in this room together.

"How's the food?" Emma asked, nodding towards the plate that Regina had nearly cleared.

"Disgusting," Regina said happily, reaching out to squeeze Emma's hand.

"Perfect. Then I'll leave it to you to explain to your son why we can't have mac and cheese balls for lunch tomorrow."

"What?!" Henry demanded. "Mo-ooom! Why not?"

Emma dipped her head over her own plate, grinning to herself, as she listened to them bicker. Regina's hand never left hers.
Once Henry had gone to bed, Regina and Emma curled up on the sofa together, Regina lounging back against the armrest while Emma rested her head on her stomach. They were full and content and quiet, and after a while Regina's hands crept into Emma's hair, gently scratching and teasing until Emma was purring beneath her touch.

"I'm so happy Henry has come around," Regina said more to herself than to Emma, and Emma smiled.

"Me too."

She considered telling her about Robin. Regina would probably want to know. She would also almost certainly blow up and drive round there right that second to yell in his face about the things he'd said. She might even yell at Emma for the stuff she'd said back, which Emma wouldn't complain about, since she admittedly had lost her cool a little bit.

But Regina's body felt so warm and relaxed beneath her, and Emma decided not to ruin that. Instead, she nuzzled closer, lifting Regina's shirt up an inch so she could press a kiss against her ribcage.

She felt Regina laugh. "What was that for?"

"Nothing," Emma said, settling back down with her head higher up on Regina's chest. They were watching a Spanish documentary – something that Regina had put on and Emma had been in too good a mood to say no to – and although she was barely focusing on it, Emma felt soft and happy as she watched the images flickering across the screen. "I just like you."

Regina's fingers paused in her hair, and Emma worried that she'd managed to say the wrong thing. But then they started moving again, and Regina said, "I like you, too."

It wasn't exactly love, but maybe it was close enough. Emma snuggled nearer to her, listening to the way Regina's heartbeat quickened as she did so.
As they moved through December, Emma started noticing a surge in the number of gifts Regina bought for her. Emma was usually cooking whenever Regina got home, and when she turned to say hi to her, Regina would be standing in the doorway with a package in her hands and a shit-eating grin that told her just how pleased she was with herself that day.

"Regina," Emma sighed, putting down the wooden spoon. "I told you to stop this."

"I know you did, but I chose not to listen to you," Regina said, walking forward and pressing the gift into Emma's hands. Emma rolled her eyes automatically, ignoring the fact that any time Regina appeared with one of these, her heart lifted up just a little bit higher.

She peeled off the wrapping and found a new cover for her iPhone inside. It was clear plastic with a pattern of dozens of little pastries on the back.

"You really shouldn't have," Emma said, although she was already grabbing her phone and clipping the case onto it.

"I know. But you drop your phone roughly six times a day and I know how much you love bear claws," Regina said. She was beaming as she watched Emma smooth her hand over it. "Do you like it?"

"I love it," Emma said, leaning forward and kissing her cheek. "You're going to run out of ideas for Christmas presents pretty soon, though."

Regina scoffed. "I've had your presents planned for weeks."

"You have?" Emma asked. This was something she'd only just started thinking about, and already she'd run up against a brick wall – what the hell do you buy someone who already owns everything?

"I have, and I don't expect anything in return," Regina said, going over to the stove and stirring the sauce that Emma had abandoned. "Besides, I don't want to be presumptuous and assume you'll be spending Christmas with me."

"Right. Because I have so many other places to go to," Emma said. Hope was filling her up though, because she hadn't wanted to be presumptuous and assume she'd be spending Christmas there either.

"Oh. Well, then," Regina said, tilting her head. She was trying to sound casual. "Would you maybe be open to celebrating with us?"

"I would love to. If you're willing to have me," Emma said. Then, "Wait, who's 'us'?"

"Me and Henry," Regina said. Her fake nonchalance was getting harder to maintain now that a smile was creeping over her face. "He's asked to spend it with me this year."

"He has?" They'd never discussed this before, but Emma could tell from Regina's barely contained joy that it must be a huge deal.

"For the first time since the divorce. His father was furious, but it's official," Regina said, and she looked so damn excited that Emma couldn't help but pull her into a relieved hug.

"That's amazing," she breathed. "And, hey, I won't be offended if you'd rather it was just you two."
Seriously. You must want to spend some time together.”

"Of course I do. But you should be here too," Regina insisted. "It will be my first family Christmas in three years."

Her heart skipping over the word ‘family’, Emma asked, "Who have you celebrated with since then?"
Regina shrugged. "Sometimes friends. Sometimes my mother. Last year I told everyone I had other plans and then I just went to work all day."

It might have been the most heartbreaking thing Emma had ever heard. The thought of Regina sitting in her office alone while the rest of the world drank and celebrated without her was positively awful.

She reached out for Regina's arm and ran her hand down it. "Well, this year is going to totally kick ass. And if you're sure you want me here, then I wouldn't be anywhere else."

This seemed to make Regina happier than anything anyone had ever said to her, because she didn't stop smiling all evening. Emma thought back to the stony-faced woman who'd sat opposite her on the day she'd been kidnapped from Barnes & Noble, quietly regarding her without the faintest trace of emotion. It was harder to remember what she'd looked like then now that a blinding grin seemed to be permanently etched on her face.

Emma continued wearing her Regina clothes to work, because they had brought about another change that she still couldn't get her head around. She wasn't sure if it was the clothes themselves or maybe just how she felt and acted while wearing them, but something had undoubtedly shifted the day she'd stepped into the office wearing towering fuck-me heels and a devilish glower.

One Monday morning in mid-December, she plonked herself down behind her desk wearing a Tiffany & Co necklace – another surprise gift courtesy of Regina and her eternally good mood – and Ingrid actually stopped to stare at her.

"Emma," she said loudly. "Are you wearing something that's made from silver?"

"Yeah," Emma said, fiddling with it. "It's only from Tiffany's, though."

"I don't care if it's from a strip mall. This is the first time I've ever seen you wear jewellery that you didn't make yourself."

Emma frowned at her. "I've never made my own jewellery."

"You could've fooled me. Where did you suddenly get good taste from?"

"Nowhere. Someone else bought it for me," Emma admitted. Oddly, that seemed to impress Ingrid even more. She leaned across Emma's desk and took hold of it with two fingers, her face dangerously close to Emma's as she examined it.

She pulled away, scoffing. "It's only from Tiffany's, she says. Like that's not from their Elsa Peretti collection."

Emma blinked. "Is that good?"

"Yes, Emma, it's good," Ingrid sighed. "It's also not silver – it's platinum. You're wearing $10,000 around your neck."

Emma nearly slipped off her chair as Ingrid stalked off. The second her boss was gone, she opened
up the Tiffany & Co website to check just how good her eye was.

Elsa crept over while she was researching with horrified tears in her eyes.

"Why do you look so shell-shocked?" she asked, perching on the edge of Emma's desk.

"This necklace is worth $9,600," Emma spluttered. Her friend let out a low whistle.

"Where did you get it?"

"Regina."

"As an early Christmas present?"

"No. Just because."

"She bought you a $10,000 necklace just because?"

"Apparently. I had no idea – she just gave it to me over the weekend and said she thought it would look nice on me."

"Emma, oh my God. She must love you a lot."

"She doesn't love me," Emma said, typing frantically just so she wouldn't have to meet Elsa's eye. "It's not like that."

"Oh, because casual flings always pay off people's hundred-grand debts and then buy them platinum jewellery afterwards for good measure."

"It's not like that," Emma insisted, because no matter how she felt about Regina, she knew there was no point in being wistful. Maybe Regina could love her – maybe she already did – but she'd never say it. Not with words, anyway.

"You're in denial," Elsa said flatly. "But you also look happy for once, so maybe denial works for you. You need to hold on to her."

"Believe me, I'm trying," Emma muttered.

Elsa was about to say something else when she spotted Ingrid walking towards the door of her office. She quickly hopped off the desk and rushed back across the room.

"Emma," Ingrid called out from the threshold. "A word."

Emma pushed herself to her feet and walked into her office. Ingrid gestured for her to shut the door behind her.

"I have two things I'd like to talk to you about," she said as Emma sat down opposite her. "First, I had Violet in here on Friday telling me that you two are best friends now."

"She said that?"

"Not in so many words, but she seemed very smitten. What happened there? Last time I looked, you were yelling at her for being on Facebook when she was meant to be calling press offices."

"I stand by that. She was being useless," Emma said, then collected herself. "But we talked and I apologised for being a bit hard on her and now we're cool. She gets me coffee sometimes."
"Isn't that your job?" Ingrid asked.

"I'm your assistant. There's nothing saying she can't be mine."

Ingrid looked almost impressed by that. "Well. You've certainly become more resourceful recently."

"I'm not sure that's true," Emma said, all too aware that her expensive clothes and newfound bad attitude could simply be giving off that impression.

"No, it is," Ingrid said with the serene confidence of someone who'd never been proven wrong before. "You don't let people walk all over you anymore. Myself included. And you've started working smarter – I've never seen you get all your work done and get out of here at five before. You used to be here until eight every night just struggling to get an agent to take your call."

"Well, that's because no one told me that being rude would get you way further than being polite," Emma said, sounding a little defensive even to her own ears. "Anyway, are you complaining about my work getting better?"

"Not at all," Ingrid said, picking up her latte and taking a sip. "It was just an observation. Would you like to know why I've always been so hard on you?"

Emma blinked. Ingrid had never admitted so much out loud before, and now that she was offering an actual explanation, Emma wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"Um. I guess?"

"Do you have any idea how frustrating you can be?" Ingrid asked. Emma immediately started stuttering her defence, but Ingrid carried on before she could formulate a proper sentence. "You shuffle around all day in those terrible jeans and God-awful wifebeaters, not giving a damn about how you present yourself to people. Did you think you would command respect like that?"

"I really don't think what clothes I'm wearing makes a difference to how well I do my job."

"Except it has, hasn't it?" Ingrid asked. "What changed recently? You started taking pride in yourself and demanding that people take you seriously. You stopped being everybody's whipping girl. I'm not saying a pair of Louboutins would make anyone a model employee, but the day you looked in the mirror and realised that you shouldn't be just lying back and taking everybody's shit was the day you finally started being a good assistant."

Emma blinked, heartbroken. "Finally?"

"Yes, finally," Ingrid snapped. "Just because you were doing what your job description required of you did not make you a good employee. You were always too defensive, too pissed off about how I treated you to do anything to change my mind, and most weeks you spent Monday and Tuesday still hungover from the weekend. All that's stopped now, and finally I see someone sitting in front of me who is worthy of having an honest conversation with me."

Deep down in there, Emma suspected a compliment was buried. It was really hard to find it underneath all the sly jabs at her personality, though.

"Thanks, maybe?" Emma said, reaching up to fiddle with her new necklace. Ingrid's eyes snapped down to look at it, and Emma immediately untangled her fingers.

"Do you know why I hired you?"
Emma wrinkled her nose. "Because your sister asked you to."

"Right," Ingrid scoffed. "Because I always do what my sister asks. No, Emma – there was a very specific reason."

She paused for dramatic effect, watching as Emma's face flickered with confusion.

"And… what was that?" Emma asked.

"You've been to prison," Ingrid said bluntly. "You grew up in foster care. Helga painted you as this tough, no-nonsense woman who had fought tooth and nail to make something of herself, and that is why I took a chance on you. I didn't care that you had a criminal record because I wanted someone strong, someone with backbone, to come and assist me and tell me when I was being ridiculous. I could have hired anyone, but I chose you."

Emma could feel her jaw starting to tremble. "But…"

"Except you constantly disappointed me," Ingrid continued. "You weren't what I needed. You skulked around without even making the slightest effort to look like you were happy to be here, and you resented me whenever I dared to ask you to do your job. I had to wait two years for you to finally stand up for yourself, and we both know that I am not a patient person."

Emma's feet scrunched up in their designer pumps. "I don't know what to say."

"Are you in love with this woman?"

That was a bold question from anyone, but from her boss it was downright terrifying. "I... I don't know."

"Yes you do. Why are you pretending you're not sure?"

"It's complicated," Emma said. "Also, is this relevant?"

"I'm not asking as your employer – I'm asking as a friend," Ingrid said, then immediately corrected herself. "Well, not a friend, exactly. But I'm asking as an objective third-party observer."

Emma laughed shortly. "Whether I'm in love with Regina or not isn't important. I'm happy, though. And apparently that's making me better at my job, so I guess it's in everybody's best interest if things stay the way they are."

"That's true. Except they're not going to," Ingrid said. "Which leads me to the second thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Emma heart screeched to a halt so abruptly that it might as well have left tire tracks across her ribs. "Am I being fired?"

"Why would you have escaped firing for two and a half years only for me to do it now?" Ingrid asked. "No, that's not what I wanted to tell you."

She paused once more, and Emma raised her eyebrows. "Okay...?"

"I wanted to tell you that I've been keeping an eye on the press releases you've been writing," Ingrid said. She was sitting perfectly upright in her chair, her arms folded across the top of her desk. She looked like a queen.

Emma froze – she had been writing press releases, but Ingrid wasn't supposed to know about them.
She'd been emailing them to Jessica the comms girl for weeks without mentioning a word of them to anyone else.

"I... haven't been writing any."

"You're a terrible liar. I can see everybody's emails, Emma. Jessica has been giving you work to do and you've been fitting it in around your normal tasks."

Emma opened her mouth, then closed it. She'd already been told that she wasn't getting fired, but she wouldn't put it past Ingrid to be lying just for the drama.

"When I wrote those first ones... you told me I needed to improve my writing style and use fewer words. I wanted to get better before I tried again with you."

"I guessed that, and as much as I don't like the fact that you've been sneaking around behind my back, I admire the go-gettedness," Ingrid said. "And it's worked, by the way. Your style has gotten much better. Also, I appreciate that you've stopped referring to me as 'the Ice Queen' in your internal emails."

Emma blinked. "Oh – Ingrid, I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

"I'm going to let you work with the editorial team one day a week," Ingrid said, and Emma wasn't sure she'd heard her correctly. That didn't sound like a punishment – if anything, it sounded like a promotion.

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. I'm not ready to lose you as my assistant just yet, but on Wednesdays the editorial department has agreed to let you shadow them and work on your writing. If they like you and you work hard, maybe it can become full time."

Emma's mouth actually fell open. "Full time?"

"If you work hard," Ingrid snapped. "Their standards are even higher than mine, so you'll have to prove you're capable of it. They won't waste any time in sending you back to me if you're not up to the task."

"But... who will be your assistant?" Emma stammered.

"Violet seems to have potential, and she's not leaving for college until the summer. She'll take over from you on Wednesdays, and then we'll see what happens next."

"She's already agreed?"

"That's why I spoke to her on Friday. I needed to be sure someone could pick up the slack while you're off working on the next New York Times bestseller."

Tears were pricking at Emma's eyes and she desperately blinked them back. "Ingrid, thank you. You will not regret this."

"I already do a little bit," Ingrid said, but she was smiling. "You can start with editorial this week and see how you get on. Don't think you can try slacking off now, though. If you start forgetting my coffee orders during the rest of the week then I really will fire you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Emma gushed. "Thank you, Ingrid, I'm going to—"
"I don't care," Ingrid said. "You can go."

It was one of her most abrupt dismissals, but Emma wasn't fazed. She floated out of there like there were clouds under her feet.

She wanted to call Regina and tell her the good news, but decided it would be worth the wait if she did it face to face. She rushed home and waited for her to get back, and when Regina walked through the door, Emma charged towards her and hurled herself into her arms.

"Woah," Regina said, staggering back into the door. "Emma. What's happened? Is this a happy hug or a sad hug?"

"Happy," Emma said into her hair. "I got great news today."

"Tell me," Regina said, pushing her away so she could look in her eyes.

"I'm moving to the editorial team at work," she said, and the way Regina's eyes lit up was the second greatest thing to happen to her that day.

"You are? Really?"

"Only one day a week for now," Emma said, bouncing on her feet. "But if I do well then it'll become full time."

"Emma," Regina said, taking hold of her face and kissing her hard. "That's amazing news. You've deserved this for so long."

"Well. I kind of haven't, actually," Emma admitted. "I've been feeling so pissed off about how Ingrid's always treated me, but I realised when we spoke to each other today that it was partly my own fault. I didn't exactly demand respect."

"Does that mean you do now?" Regina asked, leading Emma into the kitchen by her hand.

"I think so. Maybe."

"What changed?"

"Well. Without giving you too much credit, it's probably got something to do with you."

Regina looked far too pleased with herself as they sat down at the island. "How so?"

"All those events you dragged me to definitely gave me some more backbone. And as much as I dislike your mood swings and constant fight-picking, I guess they helped out a bit too."

"You're making me out to be some kind of tyrant," Regina said, though she still looked quite proud of herself. Emma rolled her eyes.

"Like you aren't?"

"I've been nothing but nice to you," Regina protested.

"Oh, as if," Emma said. "You've basically been bullying me for the past half a year. You're lucky I haven't filed an official complaint for workplace harassment."

Regina somehow managed to laugh and look deeply offended all at once.
"You're an idiot. But I am genuinely delighted that this has happened," she said, squeezing Emma's hand. "And it's very sweet of you to try and give me credit, but I can't accept it. This was all you."

"No. It was—"

"Emma," Regina said firmly, stroking a thumb over her palm. "It was you. 100 percent."

Emma faltered, her cheeks colouring. She smiled back at her. "Thank you. Now I just need to not mess it up."

"You won't," Regina said, and it was her most determined voice – one that left no room for doubt or disagreement. "You're going to blow them all away, and this time next year you'll be running the place."

Emma grinned back at her. "That's a bit ambitious, I think."

"If you won't have ambition for yourself, then someone's got to have it for you."

And it was strange, but Emma knew she meant it. In spite of all their stupid fights and ugly silences and the nervous butterflies that, even now, still plucked at Emma's stomach whenever she heard Regina's key in the door, Regina had been her champion since day one. She'd spotted her in that bookstore and known from the off that there was something more to her. Then she'd spent the next six months helping Emma to realise it too.

Emma squeezed back on her hand and said quietly, "Thank you."

Just like she knew she would, Regina smiled and said, "You say thank you too much."

"Sorry."

"You say that too much, too," Regina added, but she leaned forward and kissed Emma's cheek to take away the sting.

A flurry of dinners and parties and black tie galas filled up December like a snow globe. Emma stayed by Regina's side through all of it, inexplicably confident and no longer shrinking into the walls whenever her date had to leave her for a few minutes. She had people of her own now, and whenever Regina vanished, she was sure to find someone else she knew. Archie and Marco could usually be found talking quietly over a glass of red wine, and when she walked over to them, they welcomed her with open arms. The models that Neal had inadvertently introduced her were also around a lot – they were usually dating completely different art dealers every time Emma saw them, and they were the best possible drinking partners for whenever Regina's attention was elsewhere.

In their rare nights off Emma and Regina stayed on the couch, with Regina's feet in Emma's lap and a series playing on the TV. Emma had finally managed to convince her to watch Stranger Things, and by then they were knee-deep in season two. In fact, Regina was so invested in it that she didn't notice her phone ringing.

"Regina," Emma said, tapping her ankle. "Phone."

"Mm," Regina murmured, grappling around for it without taking her eyes off the TV. She didn't look at the caller ID before she answered. "Hello?"

Her expression changed almost immediately. She tugged her feet free from Emma's grip and sat bolt upright, her lips pressed thinly together. "Hello, Mother."
Emma blinked. Regina had mentioned her mom a few times, but never in much detail and rarely with any compassion. However, she’d definitely never had this look of sheer terror on her face before. Her beautifully tan skin had turned the exact shade of a milky coffee.

Emma paused the TV and waited for the call to end. There seemed to be a lot of talking from the other end of the line, interspersed with Regina quietly protesting, "No, Mother, we have plans" and, "We can't do that either, it's too short notice". There was another long, long pause where Regina periodically opened her mouth to try and refuse something, then got cut off before she could even formulate the words.

Then, a long sigh. "Okay. We'll be there."

Emma could hear a disapproving voice swimming back at her. Regina closed her eyes.

"Mother, I said I would come. I'm not going to cancel."

Another pause. Emma squeezed Regina's knee, but she didn't get any response.

"I am not unreliable."

This carried on for a few more minutes before Regina finally hung up the phone. She put it back down on the coffee table with a sigh, her face still paler than it should have been.

"What happened?" Emma asked, squeezing her leg.

"I have to visit my mother for Christmas," Regina said flatly.

"Is that bad?"

"It's not quite on par with world hunger or the Ebola virus, but yes, it's bad," Regina groaned, running her hands through her hair.

"Does this mean our Christmas plans are cancelled?"

"No. She wanted me to come on Christmas Day, but I said no. We're going on the 23rd instead."

After a pause, Emma asked, "We?"

"Well," Regina said. She wasn't making eye contact, which was always alarming. "Me and Henry."

Emma looked flatly back at her. "And…?"

"And nothing."

"Bullshit," Emma snorted. "Did she tell you to bring Robin?"

She waited for Regina to deliver the worst possible blow – that her mother still liked Robin, or still considered him family. Or, worse, that she didn't even know they were divorced. Emma wasn't sure she would be able to cope sitting at home by herself while they were off playing happy families together.

To her immense relief, Regina scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. My mother hated him. She was the only person who was delighted when we got divorced."

"Then… what?"
She thought Regina was about to shrug off her question again, but she paused. Her voice was smaller than normal when she said, "I was hoping you might come with us."

"Me?" Emma blinked. "To Christmas dinner with your mom?"

"Yes," Regina sighed. "She... she wants me there and she wouldn't take no for an answer, but I don't think I can do it alone. Please, Emma. I need you with me."

It was the closest thing to begging that Emma had ever heard from her, and it was chilling to listen to. Regina still wasn't making eye contact, and at some point in the last 30 seconds she had reached out and grabbed hold of the hand that Emma had placed on her knee. She was squeezing it like she needed it for her survival.

"Regina," Emma said warningly. "You know I want to help you out. But we're not even technically dating, right? And I just think it would—"

"I know," Regina blurted out, finally looking up at her. Emma couldn't focus on the tiny piece of her heart that chipped off when Regina didn't tell her she was wrong, they were dating, they'd been dating all this time, because the shimmery look of panic in Regina's eyes needed her attention more. "It might be a stupid idea. But please – come with me."

She didn't need to ask twice. Really, she hadn't even needed to ask once.

"Okay," Emma said softly, rubbing her thumb over the back of Regina's hand. "I'll come."

Regina breathed a sigh of relief, and she leaned forward to kiss Emma hard. "Thank you."

"It's alright," Emma replied. "Are you going to tell me what the deal is with your mom?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you never mention her and then when she calls you, you look like someone's just sent you a bomb threat."

Regina glanced away. "I don't know what to tell you. We just don't see eye to eye."

"Don't tell me you have a disapproving mother."

"Would that be so hard to believe?"

"Of course it would. Look at you," Emma said, gesturing to the perfectly ironed shirt Regina was wearing even though they were slobbed out on the couch. "What's to disapprove of?"

"Plenty, I assure you."

"Give me a for instance."

Regina sighed deeply. "You of all people don't need more reasons not to like me."

"Regina," Emma said, prodding her. "Come on. Tell me."

She wasn't actually expecting Regina to cave, but maybe she'd needed to talk to someone about this for a while.

"She didn't like the fact that I took my inheritance from my father and used it to buy art," she said. It was a closed sentence, and Emma knew she shouldn't ask for more, but being restrained had never
been her forte.

"Why not?"

"Well. She didn't like the fact that he left me a separate inheritance in the first place," Regina said. "She took it as a personal insult. And then, when I refused to invest it, that really got to her."

"Isn't buying art a type of investment, though?" Emma asked, and on any other occasion Regina would have burst with pride over the fact that Emma had actually remembered something she'd taught her.

"It is," was all she said now. "But my mother wouldn't listen to that reasoning. Not even when I came back to see her a few years later several million dollars richer."

"What did she say to that?"

"She scoffed and told me I'd just gotten lucky while gambling. My luck would run out eventually."

"But it didn't."

"Well," Regina said. "Not yet."

"Not ever," Emma replied. "You're the smartest person I know, and I'm well aware that you have a billion bank accounts building up interest in case the bottom falls out of the art market. Unless you suddenly do develop a hardcore gambling problem, I think you're going to be fine."

Regina laughed gently. "This is exactly why I need you to come to dinner. Could you tell all that to my mother?"

"You don't need me to fight your corner," Emma said. "But sure, if you want me to start yelling at her on your behalf, you know that's what I'm best at."

Regina looked half tempted by that. "I'll let you know."

She squeezed Emma's hand again, and then they finally went back to watching the show. Emma couldn't concentrate, though: instead, she was left wondering exactly what this woman must be like – she had to be something pretty terrifying to be able to strike fear into Regina's iron heart so easily.

She wasn't waiting long before she found out. December was so busy that the morning of the 23rd arrived before Emma could fully blink, and before she knew it she was hopping from foot to foot on the sidewalk outside Regina's apartment, waiting for Sidney to arrive.

"It's not that cold," Henry said, but that was easy for him to say: Regina had bundled him up in a hat, scarf and gloves before he'd been allowed to so much as look out of the window. Emma, meanwhile, was wearing a new Burberry coat, which – while it was sleek and so beautiful it made her preen and spin around a bit any time she caught sight of herself in a shop window – wasn't exactly warm.

"If that's true, then give me your scarf," Emma said, pretending to reach out and snatch it. Henry squealed and backed away from her, nearly crashing into Regina as she descended the steps.

"Emma," Regina snapped. "Stop chasing my son around and take this."

She thrust an enormous bunch of flowers into Emma's arms, leaving herself with a bag full of presents. No matter how much she might claim to detest her mother, she still couldn't resist trying to win her over with thoughtful gifts.
Normally Emma might have pointed that out, but Regina had been painfully tense all week and Emma was all too aware what the reason was. She could only hope that stress would disappear when this visit was finally over.

Sidney pulled up in front of them, and from the way he profusely apologised for his lateness Emma suspected he too had noticed Regina's darkening mood over the past few days. He took the flowers and the gifts from them and placed them gingerly in the trunk while Emma and Henry piled into the back of the car. Emma had assumed Regina would climb in the front, but she followed them into the back, squishing Emma into the middle because "I'm not putting my son in that death seat, Miss Swan. What kind of mother do you think I am?"

"Oh, but I'm fine here?" Emma asked, clipping herself in. To her left, she heard Henry giggle.

"Sadly, I suspect so," Regina muttered. The words were lacking their usual friendly twinge to remove some of the bite, and Emma inched back from her.

"Mom," Henry muttered from the other side of the car. "Don't be mean."

Regina just sighed, turning to look out the window.

Emma nudged Henry's arm. "It's fine, kid. I'm made of strong stuff."

"Ms Mills?" Sidney asked from the front of the car. "Can I just check this address is correct?"

Emma glanced at the piece of paper he was holding out. She recognised Regina's swooping handwriting.

"Storybrooke, Maine?"

"Yes," Regina sighed. "That's right, Sidney."

"How long is it going to take us to get there?" Emma asked.

"About five hours."

"Five hours? And we're still going to drive back after dinner?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because there is nothing on this Earth that would make me voluntarily spend a night in my mother's house," Regina said. "Sidney, could you start driving, please?"

And so they left. Henry and Emma were both equally restless, which meant they could at least entertain one another as the hours ticked by. Regina, meanwhile, was firmly attached to her cell phone, trying to get some last-minute deals in before all the offices closed for Christmas. She barely spoke as they sailed down the highway, other than to ask Sidney to turn the music down or to snap at Emma for bouncing her leg too much.

"Are you going to be like this for the whole of dinner too?" Emma eventually asked when they were about an hour away from Storybrooke.

"Like what?" Regina asked.

"All tetchy and impatient," Emma asked. She heard Henry inhaled sharply from beside her because
even he knew that speaking to Regina like that wasn't a good idea, but she powered through, because she'd been stuck in that car for four hours already and maybe she was a bit tetchy and impatient too.

"Stop irritating me and then I'll stop snapping at you."

"I'm not even doing anything! Look, is this all because you don't want to see your mom? Because if it is then maybe you need to man up a bit."

Regina was still glaring down at her phone, but her face contorted into a new kind of annoyance.

"Don't tell me to man up. You've never met her – you have no idea what she's like."

"She is quite scary, Emma," Henry confided in a whisper.

Emma rolled her eyes. "You're both pathetic."

Henry giggled. "I am not!"

"You've been dozing off for the past half hour," Emma pointed out. "You're like a new-born baby."

"Shut up," Henry said, poking her in her ribs.

"Henry, don't tell people to shut up," Regina snapped across the car at him, and he immediately fell back in his seat, his face clouding over.

Well aware that this was her fault, Emma sighed and turned to face her. "Regina. Come on."

"What?"

"Don't be like this. What's up?"

"Nothing's up."

"Regina," Emma said more firmly. "Can you please stop typing for five seconds and just talk to me?"

Tension was brewing in the rest of the car, and Emma knew it was because Sidney and Henry were waiting for Regina to explode. No one talked to her like that, evidently, and Emma was probably lucky that she hadn't been thrown out on the interstate yet.

But Regina just sighed before quietly admitting, "I haven't told her about you."

"What about me?"

"I haven't told her..." Regina started, then swallowed. In the middle of a tightly cramped car was not the best place for this kind of conversation, but she was trapped, and it was her own fault. "She knows I'm bringing someone. She just doesn't know who."

"You mean she doesn't know we're dating?"

Regina shifted uncomfortably. She was still looking at her phone.

"I haven't technically come out to her yet."

It took a moment for Emma to realise what she was talking about. "You mean... she's expecting a
"I suppose," Regina said, trying to sound casual. "I didn't lie. I just didn't tell her certain details."

"Regina!" Emma exploded, not caring when her raised voice made Sidney veer into the next lane. "What the hell? She's expecting some big strapping dude to come waltzing through the door and instead I'm going to show up? How exactly did you think that was going to go down?"

Regina pursed her lips. "Like I said, I didn't lie."

"You lied by omission. Oh my God, no wonder you've been acting so shitty."

"Don't use that language in front of Henry," Regina snapped.

"Why didn't you tell me before now?" Emma asked. She knew exactly why not, but she wanted Regina to admit it.

"Because there wasn't a good time."

"Bullshit. Try again."

"Language, Emma," Regina hissed. "Fine. Because I didn't want to tell you, because I knew you'd be mad."

"I wouldn't be mad if you'd told me before now, you stupid woman," Emma sighed. "I'm not angry that you haven't come out to your mother – I'm angry because you didn't bother to warn me about it until we were 40 miles away from her house."

She was surprised when Regina actually looked slightly guilty. She glanced down at her lap, her jaw thrust forward.

"I know," she said quietly. "I was just... putting it off."

Emma cursed herself, because she knew she had every right to be mad at her, but the despondent look on Regina's face was making it impossible to keep up.

"Regina," she sighed. "This was really, really stupid."

"If it helps, she'll hate you anyway," Regina offered. "The fact that you're a woman will be the least of her problems."

Emma gritted her teeth. "Funnily enough, that doesn't help at all."

Regina finally looked back at her. She gave every appearance of not caring about this, but Emma could see the tell-tale waver in her eyes. There was regret there, even if she'd rather decapitate herself than admit it.

Sighing, Emma glanced at Henry, who was watching them both with worry plucking at his forehead. She sat back with a thump and said to Regina, "We'll discuss this later."

"Fine," Regina shrugged. There was a tremble to that single word.

Emma wished she could turn her head and glare out the window, but when she looked to her left, Henry was still staring back at her.

"What?" she asked.
"I think you're going to do okay with Grandma."

"Why's that?"

"Because you're scarier than she is," he said. Emma weirdly took that as a compliment.

She smoothed her hands over the skirt of her newest dress, which she'd bought because she'd somehow suspected that Cora Mills wouldn't appreciate her repertoire of skin-tight pants and tuxedo jackets, and shrugged. "I'll do my best to ward her off, but if that doesn't work then I'm afraid I'll have to dangle you in front of her as bait."

"You can't do that!"

"I can too. I'm strong enough to pick you up and everything."

"Prove it," Henry demanded, sticking out his chin.

"Oh, sure – the back of a Merc is totally the best place for that."

"When we get there, then."

"Kid, do you really think I'm going to stroll up to the front door of her house dangling her only grandson by his ankles? I'm not a complete idiot."

Henry wiggled his eyebrows at her. "You're just trying to get out of it."

"I am not."

"Are too."

From beside her, Regina released a long sigh. Rubbing a hand over her forehead, she murmured, "I really can't wait until today is over" just loud enough for Emma to hear.

Emma knew that was her cue to quieten down, but instead she just ignored her and continued to mess about with her son. The evening was going to be complete hell whatever happened, so she might as well enjoy herself on the car ride there.

The house they pulled up outside was bigger than Emma had been expecting. Maybe it was because of how Regina's mother obviously hated her daughter's art fortune, but Emma had been expecting Cora to live in a tiny building laced with bitterness and frugality. Instead she found herself faced with a sprawling white house that could almost be described as a mansion, complete with apple trees and rose bushes in the front garden and a grand porch that would easily double as a wedding arch.

Emma sucked in a breath. "This is it?"

"Yes," Regina said. She sounded so morose that it broke Emma's heart. "Please don't let her get to you."

"I won't," Emma said, and for once she actually meant it. No matter what a heinous witch this woman turned out to be, she was still Regina's mother and Emma would do her very best to be polite to her. It was only one evening, after all.

Sidney was sent off to the local diner for a few hours while Regina, Emma and Henry slowly made their way up to the front door. All the lights were on inside, even though Regina had already told Emma that her mother lived there alone.
What looked like physical pain flashed over Regina's face as she rang the bell. Henry reached out for her spare hand and squeezed it.

Emma didn't hear any footsteps approaching, but suddenly the door was open and she was staggering back in the bright light. There was a small woman in front of them, older than Emma had expected but more glamorous than the three of them put together, wearing a dark pantsuit and too much jewellery. Her eyes were narrow, and there was a sharpness to them that Emma recognised from Regina's own face.

"Regina," Cora said, the brightness in her voice contradicting the brittleness of her smile. Emma immediately longed to shrink away from her. "I'd almost sent the sheriff out to look for you."

"There was traffic," Regina said by way of explanation. She looked much smaller than normal.

"A call would have been appreciated," Cora said, holding her arms out. "Aren't you going to give your mother a hug?"

Regina stepped forwards, and Emma was forced to watch the stiffest embrace she'd ever seen in her life.

When Cora pulled back, her eyes were on her grandson.

"Henry," she said, and her voice had warmed slightly. "You've gotten so tall."

"Hi, Grandma," he said, holding out his hand. "Merry Christmas."

"So well-mannered," Cora said, bending down and shaking it. "Are you excited for Santa to come?"

"Yes," Henry said, glancing up at his mother. "I asked him for an aquarium, but Mom said he wouldn't be able to fly with it."

Another weird interaction. Henry was fully aware that Santa wasn't real – Regina had already told Emma that he'd worked that much out when he was six. But here he was, willingly pretending otherwise, and Emma couldn't decide whether that was because he didn't want to offend his grandma by disagreeing with her, or because he was really just that scared of her.

Regina pressed her hand against the back of her son's head. "Like I said, there are regulations when it comes to flying with livestock."

Cora ignored her. Her light brown eyes, which had somehow gotten richer in colour when they'd been passed down to her daughter, had finally snapped onto Emma.

"Now," she said, straightening up. "Who is this?"

All three of them stiffened. Regina took a breath. "This is Emma."

"And Emma is...?" Cora asked. She didn't extend her hand.

"I told you I'd be bringing someone."

"You told me you'd be bringing a date."

"Emma is my date," Regina said. Cora turned to look at her, her gaze going cold, before glancing back at Emma, who was desperately forcing herself to keep smiling.

"It's really nice to meet you, Ms Mills," Emma said, holding out her hand because she couldn't stand
the awkwardness for another second. "Thank you for inviting us."

To her credit, Cora returned her handshake. Her grip was firmer than Emma had been expecting.

For a second, Emma thought this might actually be okay. Cora wasn't yelling – she was almost smiling. Maybe she wasn't as bad as Regina remembered.

But then she ruined it all with a huge sigh that shook her down to her toes. "Oh, Regina. You've always had to be so difficult."

She turned back into her house and gestured for her guests to follow her. The three of them trailed after her, their hearts sinking lower.

Emma found herself seated next to Regina at dinner, with Henry opposite her and Cora sitting across from her daughter. A change had come over Regina the moment she had stepped into that house: her entire body had gone rigid and anxious, like she was permanently waiting for a blow that never seemed to be coming. Emma had never known her to not speak unless spoken to, and the only person who seemed to be comfortable with the shift was Cora.

"Regina, dear, isn't it time for a haircut?" was her opening line as the appetisers were brought out of the kitchen. There was an honest to God waiter serving them, although Emma wasn't sure if he was a permanent feature in the house or just a show of power for the evening. In the kitchen, Emma could hear the bustling sounds of at least three people cooking the dinner that Cora hadn't found the time to make herself.

Regina sighed. "I had it cut two weeks ago."

"Really? So you're choosing to keep it this length?"

Emma could see Regina's fingers fidgeting in her lap, and she knew she was itching to reach up and fiddle with her newly criticised hair. When Emma had met her, her glossy locks had barely reached her shoulders, but recently Regina had been letting it grow slightly longer. It now twisted and curled over her collarbone, and Emma loved it. Cora, it would seem, did not.

"I just… felt like a change," Regina said.

Cora's scoff of derision had the force of a jet taking off. "Each to their own, I suppose."

"I like it," Emma piped up, which she knew was stupid but was also mostly involuntary. Even Henry minutely shook his head at her.

"I'm sure you do, dear," Cora said, her eyes on Emma's own hair, which was making tracks way down her spine and was definitely in need of a proper trim. "Now, Miss Swan. We haven't talked about you yet."

This was inevitable, but Emma still felt her smile freeze on her face. "What do you want to know?"

"What do you do, for instance?"

"I work in publishing. Children's books," she quickly added before Cora could ask.

"At Penguin?"

If anyone else had asked that, Emma would have rolled her eyes and said, "No, because that's not the only children's publisher in existence." But it was Cora, and she'd promised to be on her best
behaviour, so instead she replied, "I work for a company called Caterpillar. It's not that well known, but we have had three New York Times bestsellers this year."

That impressed Cora about as much as Emma's record for the number of jägerbombs drunk in 30 seconds would. That was to say, it didn't.

"I see," Cora said, her lips pressing together. "And is that rewarding for you? Children's books?"

"Yes, it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

Cora smiled thinly. "I'm sure I have no idea."

It was a sly jab to end all sly jabs, but Emma ignored it. "Henry actually reads a lot of our stuff."

"Do you, Henry?"

"Yeah," Henry said, grateful to have a distraction from his salad. "They have this new series about a boy who can do magic and he travels with his sister to—"

"Harry Potter," Cora said flatly.

"It's not Harry Potter," Henry said.

"It sounds the same."

"More than one series can be about a boy who has magical powers," Regina pointed out, but the second her mother's eyes snapped onto her, she fell silent once more.

"It's actually done really well in stores," Emma said. "It's aimed at readers a bit older than Henry, but he's a smart kid so he's already blazing through it."

Henry beamed at her. Cora, meanwhile, was still glaring.

"Is there a lot of money in this, Miss Swan?" Cora asked, and they'd finally reached the heart of the matter. She'd spied Emma's expensive clothes and impractical shoes the second she walked in, and it was obvious that she already knew they hadn't come from Emma's own wages.

Emma straightened her shoulders. "No, not really."

"That's a pity. Luckily you've found someone who is willing to foot your clothing bill."

Regina dropped her fork. "Mother."

"What? Did you buy the Burberry coat for her?" Cora asked, because of course she had a sharp eye for designer labels just like her daughter did.

"Yes, and so what? I can spend my money on whatever, or whomever, I like."

"Don't speak to me like that," Cora snapped at her, and immediately Regina went quiet. Cora turned back to Emma. "Does it bother you, having to rely on my daughter for everything?"

Emma could see Henry's little head snapping back and forth as he watched their exchange like it was a tennis match, but she didn't break eye contact with his grandmother. "I don't rely on her. Your daughter is very generous but she's also vigilant about her money. She wouldn't be doing so well in life if she wasn't."
Cora sniffed. "If you want to call it that."

Emma longed for Regina to bite back, to stand up for herself like she did everywhere else, but the woman beside her had morphed into some kind of child who had obviously been conditioned against talking back to her mother. It made Emma feel nauseous.

"I don't think you can call it anything else," Emma said as firmly as possible without being rude. "But if we're not going to agree, then maybe we should talk about something else."

"Very well," Cora said, another cold smile on her face. "When did you come out to your parents?"

*Oh, sweet fucking hellfire.*

"Mother, that isn't a fair—"

"Be quiet, Regina, I'm taking to Miss Swan," Cora interrupted her daughter's feeble protest. She nodded for Emma to answer.

With a sigh, Emma just decided to come out with it. "I don't have parents. I grew up in the system. I've known that I'm bisexual since I was a teenager but Regina is the first woman I've really dated."

For a second, she thought Cora was impressed by her brutal honesty. But then she turned back to her daughter and said, "You're dating a *foster kid*?"

Regina groaned. "That's hardly a deal breaker."

"What happened to your parents?" Cora demanded, looking back at Emma.

"They abandoned me outside a diner," Emma said flatly. "And they weren't drug addicts, before you ask. I was fine."

"If you say so, dear."

"Mother," Regina snapped, and it was the loudest her voice had gotten all evening. "Please don't be so rude."

"I'm not being rude. We're just having a conversation, aren't we, Emma?"

Emma longed to reach across the table and slap her miserable face, but instead she just smiled tightly. "Sure."

"Precisely. So maybe you should get rid of some of that attitude," Cora said, staring her daughter down.

Regina swallowed. "I'm..."

Emma blinked, knowing without question that an apology had been about to slip from her lips before she'd forced it back. Regina straightened her spine, locking eyes with her mother. "I don't think I have an attitude. Now, let's talk about something else."

"A lot of subject changing is happening this evening," Cora sighed dramatically. "It makes me wonder how you two have anything to talk about."

Bizarrely, Henry came to their rescue. "They actually never stop talking, Grandma."

"Is that so?"
"Yeah – Mom and Dad never used to talk as much as they do."

Cora scoffed, and for the first time that evening it wasn't at her daughter's expense. "I'm not surprised. That man could hardly string a sentence together."

Emma snorted into her drink, and Regina immediately glared at her.

"How is Robin these days?" Cora asked.

"He's fine, as far as I'm aware," Regina said. "He doesn't come by the apartment much anymore."

"Henry? Is he looking after you properly?"

"Yeah, he is," Henry shrugged. "I'm spending more time with Mom now, though."

Finally, Cora paused in her onslaught. "You are?"

"I like her house more. We have better food, plus I get to hang out with her and Emma."

"Better food?" Cora asked slowly. Her gaze slid back towards her daughter, where it settled on her waist. Emma felt her entire body crackle as those light brown eyes narrowed.

"Yeah," Henry said cheerfully, oblivious to the fact that his mother looked like she was going to cry. "And Emma's teaching me to write stories."

"What kind of stories?" Cora asked.

"We're writing one about a bear at the moment," Henry said. "Emma said I'm going to write the Great American Novel."

Cora chuckled. "I'm sure you are. As long as it's not interfering with your schoolwork."

"I get straight As," Henry said. "And my teacher said my writing is getting even better."

Much to her own annoyance, Cora looked slightly pleased. "Well done, Henry. That's very good."

Under the table, Regina grabbed Emma's hand and squeezed.

Because of the five-hour drive back to New York, they couldn't stay too late in Storybrooke. Still, it had been a long day, and it was only seven when Henry started yawning. By seven thirty, he was fast asleep on the couch.

"We should get going," Regina sighed, glancing at her watch. The staff had just cleared away dessert, which she hadn't eaten any of, and Emma had been anxiously waiting for her to say exactly those words for way too long.

"Are you sure? We've barely caught up," Cora said, looking conspiratorially at Emma. "My daughter only comes to see me once every three years, and even then she refuses to stay the night."

And as vile as the evening had been, Emma sort of wished Regina would agree to it. The thought of driving until gone midnight made her ache all over.

"Maybe you could come to New York sometime," Emma suggested. "It would be nice to see you again."
She wanted to puke at her own simpering tones, but they didn't work on someone as iron-willed as Cora.

"But Regina only has one spare room," she said. "Where will I sleep if you're in there?"

It was nearly impossible not to groan. "I sleep in Regina's bed, Ms Mills. I'm sure you've worked out that much."

To her credit, Cora didn't look actively horrified. She did, however, sniff hard enough to close her nostrils entirely, like she was trying to block out any lingering scent of their disgusting gay antics.

"Perhaps. I can't say I'm surprised," Cora sighed. "Regina, dear, I do wish you'd think harder about your decisions. Do you always let people move in with you this quickly?"

Regina swallowed. "Emma needed a place to stay, and we're in a relationship. Why shouldn't she live with me?"

Every time Regina told someone they were dating, Emma's heart grew in size. It didn't matter that it was a lie – maybe the more times she said it, the truer it would become.

"Because you hardly know her."

"You've met her. She's right here. She's a nice person, my son likes her, and she's good for me. What else could you possibly want?"

They both looked expectantly at Cora, who just sighed.

"I just want you to find someone who will treat you properly. That's all."

"Emma does—"

"And besides," Cora interrupted her calmly. "Henry needs a male influence."

"He's got one. His father is still very much in the picture."

"Is he? From the sounds of it, you're slowly pulling them apart."

"Mother," Regina sighed, running her hands through her hair. "You can't have it both ways. You can't hate Robin and wish my son wouldn't live with him but also criticise me for trying to have joint custody."

"When will you learn that I can have it whichever way I like?" Cora asked, smiling coldly. "Regina, I do know what's best for you. This kind of relationship isn't good for you. No offence, dear," she added, speaking to Emma.

"Oh, none taken," Emma gritted out.

"Besides, I've seen you get hurt before. Are you really willing to let it happen again?"

"What are my other options, according to you?" Regina asked. "Never date again?"

"Date someone who won't use you for your money, just like that imbecile of an ex-husband did."

Regina's face went tight at that, but she didn't respond.

"I'm not using her for her money," Emma protested, and Cora shushed her with a single wave of her
"I know you think you're the smartest person alive because you managed to sell a few paintings for a profit, but one day reality will come back to bite you," Cora said, sipping her wine. "I'm just looking out for you."

"No, you're not," Regina snapped, and at once her mother's face darkened.

"Regina," Cora said, her voice sharp. "What have I told you about speaking to me in that tone?"

Regina was a grown woman. A grown-ass 36-year-old woman with a multimillion-dollar fortune and three art galleries to her name. But in the face of her mother, she shut down, her lips going thin. She looked down at her lap.

"I'm..." And there it was again – that almost-apology that Emma had never heard from her before.

Regina had once told her that her refusal to say sorry to anyone came from her need to get ahead in a man's world. And maybe that was true – but maybe there had also been someone in her life who she'd said sorry to too many times. Maybe she'd had to train herself to stop altogether.

Clearing her throat, Regina said, "We really should go."

Cora sighed. "Fine. If you must, then go."

"Come on, Emma," Regina said, getting up and heading straight for the door. Emma dumbly followed her.

"Is Sidney here already?" she murmurmed as they walked towards the front door. Regina shook her head.

"We'll go and meet him at the diner. I just need to get out."

Emma didn't argue, because there was a suffocating atmosphere in that house and she wasn't complaining about escaping from it a few minutes ahead of schedule. They found their coats in the hall and pulled them on, Cora watching them from several paces away with her hands folded in front of her.

"Should I wake Henry up?" she asked. Regina faltered – she'd forgotten about him.

"I've got him," Emma said before either of them could go near him. Hoping she was able to make good on her claim that she was strong enough to carry a 10-year-old, she walked into the living room and scooped him up.

"Mom?" he murmured in her ear.

"It's just me," she whispered. "We're going home. Hold on like a monkey."

He didn't laugh, which meant he really was exhausted. He slid his arms around her neck and his legs around her waist, and Emma hoisted him up, walking cautiously back out into the hall.

The second she reappeared, Cora said, "He hasn't got his coat on."

"We can wrap it around him," Regina said, grabbing it and tucking it around his shoulders.

Her mother sighed, shaking her head. "I do worry about you sometimes, Regina."
"You don't have to. I'm fine." Regina's voice was strangled, and Emma wouldn't have been surprised if a panic attack had been rising inside her. She needed to get her out of there as soon as possible.

"Not to rush things, but this kid is heavier than I expected," Emma said. She managed to remove a hand from Henry's body and hold it out to Cora. "It was nice to meet you, Ms Mills. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Miss Swan," Cora replied somewhat reluctantly. After she shook Emma's hand, she reached out and gently stroked the top of Henry's head.

Then she turned to her daughter. For a second, Emma thought there wasn't going to be any kind of farewell at all. But eventually Cora stepped forward and dryly kissed Regina's cheek, not even using enough pressure to leave a lipstick mark. Emma thought she saw Regina shudder.

"Merry Christmas, Mother," she said, stepping back and opening the door. She was holding a bag of gifts that Cora had given her; it was considerably smaller than the bag she'd brought herself.

And then they were out, walking quicker than was strictly necessary down the frosty path. Emma held tightly onto Henry as she struggled to keep up with the rapid pace. Regina was texting with one hand, obviously telling Sidney that they were on their way, while the other gripped the bag of gifts so tightly that her knuckles had gone white.

"So," Emma asked, trying not to pant. "How well did that go?"

"As well as it ever does," Regina said, not looking around at her. "Did you have a wonderful time?"

"Superb, thank you," Emma said. "Look, it wasn't great, but it's over. And she didn't outright call us a pair of dykes, so that's a success, right?"

Regina laughed emptily. "I suppose."

She finally slowed down. Her breath was clouding around her. "Thank you, Emma."

"For what?"

"For being so..." she sighed. "Understanding. You made that a lot easier for me."

"That's funny," Emma said, hoisting Henry up higher. "I thought I made it a whole hell of a lot worse."

"Definitely not," Regina insisted. She turned to look at her. "Are you okay carrying him?"

"No," Emma admitted. "But I don't give up that easily. Also, I refuse to let him know that I caved."

Regina laughed properly this time, and after the tensest day of Emma's life, it was music to her ears. "You two are a terrible influence on each other."

"So you've said."

They continued walking, and Emma desperately wished she could hold Regina's hand. Instead, she asked, "Did you grow up here?"

"Yes."

"What was it like?"
Regina thought for a second, before saying, "Lonely."

"Why?"

"Because my mother didn't like me having friends – she said it distracted me from my schoolwork. And the kids at school didn't really want to buddy up to the daughter of the wicked witch, anyway."

"I'm guessing that was their name for your mom."

Regina nodded rigidly. "She had a reputation, and I was automatically part of it."

"When did you leave?"

"When I went to college. Mother wanted me to go to Harvard so I would be close to home, but I went to Yale. Those 100 miles might not sound like much, but they were a lifeline for me."

"Seriously? You went to Yale?" Emma asked, although she had no reason to be surprised. Regina smiled at her.

"I did."

"Then what?"

"I moved to New York, and I haven't come back very often since."

Hitching Henry higher on her hip, Emma asked, "When did your dad die?"

"Not long after that. My mother blamed it on me."

"Why?"

"Because I broke his heart by leaving," Regina said flatly.

Emma sighed. "Do you believe that?"

"Not really. My father supported me and was happy with my choices. But it's still not a nice thing to have thrown at you during the wake."

"Regina..." Emma said, and she jumped when Regina sniffed hard, like she was trying to force back tears. "I'm sorry."

"Stop apologising. It's just life."

"Even so. I'm still sorry."

She was expecting another sharply worded comment to be bitten out at her, but Regina just shrugged.

After a pause, Emma thought of something else that had been said at dinner. "How many times did your mom meet Robin?"

She wasn't really expecting Regina to answer that, but maybe the evening had been hard enough on her to crack her open just a bit.

"Not many. She never liked him," Regina said. "She thought he was beneath me, and then once we were married and it was too late for her to turn me off him, she latched onto the idea that he was only
with me for my money."

Emma held Henry tighter against her like she was hoping he would protect her from the answer to her next question. "And was he?"

Another pause. And then, "Not entirely. I'm sure he loved me too. But... I told you how Robin wasn't happy when my business took off? Well, let's just say that his discontent didn't last very long. He got to cut down his hours at the gym and go on expensive vacations and hang out with his friends while I was busy at the gallery. Suddenly the fact that his wife was the breadwinner didn't seem to bother him anymore – not when there was so much bread."

Emma wanted to laugh at Regina's attempt at a joke, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. "You've never told me why you got divorced."

"I know that."

"Do you think you ever will?"

Regina hesitated, her eyes still staring straight ahead as they slowly walked. "It's no big secret. We weren't happy for a long time, but we stayed together because of Henry. But eventually something had to give."

"I'm guessing you were the one who broke up with him."

"I was – he was furious at first, but he seemed to calm down nicely when I agreed to buy him a $1 million apartment."

"And... why did you do that?"

"I told him it was for Henry," Regina said. "But maybe I just wanted to get rid of him, and sometimes money is the easiest way to do that."

Something about that sentence made Emma inhale sharply. She knew she was pushing her luck, but she quietly said, "You shouldn't use money as protection, Regina."

"I know that," Regina replied. "I don't anymore."

And at once, Emma thought of the contract that she'd made her sign – the one that had lured Emma in with promises of luxury and comfort, as long as she behaved herself and kept a safe distance and didn't do anything to hurt Regina's already-damaged heart.

Emma could see Sidney driving towards them, and although there was still so much that needed to be said, she nearly sagged with relief.

"Well. I didn't see eye to eye with your mother on much," Emma admitted, hitching Henry up one more time. "But at least I can agree with her about Robin. You deserved better than him."

A tiny smile crept over Regina's lips, but she didn't respond.

Sidney pulled up alongside them and leapt out of the car, taking Henry from Emma's arms and putting him in the back seat. Regina waited until he was safely strapped in before going round to the other side of the car.

"Hey," Emma said, grabbing her elbow. For the first time that night, she was able to look Regina directly in her eyes. She didn't like what she saw there. "Do you want to sit up front?"
Regina frowned. "Why?"

There were dark circles underneath her eyes, and Emma had to force herself not to reach out and smooth them away with her thumb. "You just look like you could use a break."

She wouldn't have been surprised if Regina had sneered and said, "Henry is my son, Miss Swan, and I will sit with him, if that's alright with you." But evidently the evening had taken more out of her than Emma had realised, because instead she just sagged. She looked five inches shorter than normal.

"Okay," she said, and with one last squeeze on Emma's hand, she slid into the front seat and closed the door. Emma climbed into the back, exhausted but ready to entertain Henry the second he woke up.
Chapter 32

Regina finally switched her phone off when Christmas arrived. It was the first time their relationship hadn't been interrupted by an urgent ringing in nearly six months.

Emma had never experienced a proper family Christmas before – the ones in foster care didn't count, nor did her more recent drunken ones with friends – and so she wasn't entirely sure what to expect. Having said that, she probably should have predicted that the day would start off exactly as it did, which meant she really should have worn pyjamas to bed.

"Ugh! Emma!" Henry screeched as he tumbled through the door to Regina's bedroom. "No one wants to see that!"

She wasn't even naked, to her credit, but her flimsy white tank top and red panties weren't leaving very much to the imagination.

"If your mother would stop stealing the covers, you wouldn't have to," Emma grumbled, grappling around for the comforter and yanking it away from Regina. When she was fully covered, Henry skulked back towards the bed.

"It's Christmas!" he bellowed directly into Regina's face. She barely reacted.

"It's also 6am," she mumbled. "It will still be Christmas in an hour."

"Mo-om," Henry whined. "Come on! Get up!"

"She's right, kid," Emma said, burrowing down beneath the sheets. She knew full well that Regina was only doing this to torment him, so she may as well join in. "Time for some more sleep."

"Noooooo!" Before they could do anything to stop him, he'd climbed up onto the bed and was vigorously shaking the pair of them. "Come on! Time for presents!"

"Keep up the shaking and Santa will take them all back," Regina said. Emma could hear the smirk in her voice.

"He'll take yours back too, then," Henry pointed out, and Regina finally pretended to stir.

"I have presents?"

"Yes!"

"Well, why didn't you say so?" she demanded, bolting upright. "Get out the way, Henry. I need to open all my gifts."

She clambered out of the bed in one swift movement and rushed towards the door. Henry chased after her, giggling wildly between cries of "No, me first!"

Emma was left alone in the bed, blinking to herself and wondering how so much activity could possibly happen before the sun was even up.

After pulling on some sweats and a hoodie, she stumbled down the stairs to find Henry already buried beneath the tree, his butt poking up in the air while Regina watched on with amusement from the couch.
"He gets one present now," Regina explained as Emma perched herself on the armrest. "Then we have breakfast, then we open the rest."

"Okay," Emma said, watching as he sorted through them all to decide which gift would be the lucky one. "How come you do it that way?"

"Because if we have breakfast first, he eats too quickly and nearly chokes himself. But if we do presents first, he refuses to eat breakfast at all because he's too busy playing."

"Smart," Emma said. "I didn't realise Christmas could be such a military operation."

"This one!" Henry suddenly yelped, pulling out a meticulously wrapped gift with his name on. "Emma, are you going to open one now too?"

"I don't know," Emma said, looking back at his mother. "Am I allowed?"

Regina laughed before saying, "You have permission, although this means there won't be as many for you to open later." Emma was already dive-bombing towards the base of the tree, though. She spotted a flat, soft one with her name on and grabbed it, not bothering to sift through the rest like Henry had.

"This one."

"Are you sure?" Regina asked, trying and failing to sound cryptic. "No take backs."

"I'm certain. Are you opening one?"

"I'm 36. I can save myself until after breakfast," Regina said. "Go on. Dig in."

Henry was already inside the paper, frantically tearing at the tape like he wouldn't be able to breathe until he'd removed it. When he discovered a computer game inside, he gave a squawk of delight and immediately asked, "Can I go play it now?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "No, Henry. You know the rules."

"Dad would let me," Henry pouted.

"Your dad isn't here and I know for a fact that he wouldn't, because I already discussed it with him," Regina said. Henry sighed.

"Fine," he conceded. "Emma, what did you get?"

Emma was barely halfway into her gift, but she could see a flash of red from beneath the artisan gift wrap. The unmistakable smell of leather filled her nostrils.

She sucked in a breath and tugged the item free from its wrapping. It was a leather jacket – just like the fake one she already owned that she knew Regina hated so much, but real, real leather, soft and warm and buttery smelling. It tumbled into her lap like a fresh pile of leaves.

"Regina," she said quietly, her voice full of awe. "You really didn't have to."

"I hate that jacket," Regina said, refusing to hide her disgust even now. "But if you really insist on wearing it, then you should at least have the real thing."

Emma's jaw was wobbling without the faintest trace of irony. She held up the jacket in front of her.
"It's beautiful," she sighed.

"It's horrible," Regina said, failing to hide her smile of pleasure. "But I'm glad you like it."

"How is it different to the one you already have?" Henry asked with all the confusion of a child who couldn't understand why anyone would get excited by a present that didn't come with batteries.

"It's just better," Emma said. "Regina, I love it. Thank you so much."

Regina was beaming at her. Curled up on the couch, still wearing her pyjamas and with her hair messy from sleep, Emma couldn't believe how beautiful she looked.

"You're welcome."

Henry was shaking his head.

"It's just a jacket," he said. "Girls are weird."

"We sure are, kid," Emma said, ruffling his hair. He squealed and edged away, nearly crashing into the tree in the process.

"Careful," Regina said, getting up off the couch. "I'm going to make breakfast, if anyone wants to help me."

Henry leapt up at once and sprinted into the kitchen, surprising them both. Emma realised that he was probably just hurrying the process along so he could get to the rest of his presents, but it still gave her the opportunity to sidle up to Regina and kiss her on the cheek.

"Thank you."

Regina actually blushed. "Am I going to get a kiss for every present?"

"Yes, but not until later. We don't want to scar your son."

"I think you already did that this morning," Regina pointed out, gently patting Emma's now-covered ass.

"Shut up. My underwear isn't that traumatising."

"Well, I don't think so, but a 10-year-old boy might disagree. In fact, I sincerely hope he does."

After wolfing down sausages, bacon and eggs at a speed Emma hadn't previously known possible for humans, Henry leapt down from the table and ran back into the living room. Emma and Regina eventually followed, finding him sitting with all the presents sorted into piles. His own was roughly five times the size of the others, but Emma was relieved to see that hers and Regina's were about the same.

"Emma," Regina sighed, as if she hadn't put all the presents under the tree herself and known exactly how many were addressed to her. "You shouldn't have bought so many."

"Neither should you," Emma said. The truth was that this whole ordeal had been terrifying for her – she couldn't in all good conscience buy Christmas presents using Regina's own Amex card, which meant she'd been forced to stick to the amount of money loitering in her own bank account. But there was an even bigger problem to contend with, and that was the fact that she had no idea what to buy a multimillionaire who already had everything she wanted. Regina wasn't the type of person to put
things in her Amazon basket and not hit 'checkout' – if she ever wanted something, she had it delivered by lunchtime the next day.

Even so, Emma was pleased with her work. She'd tracked down several foreign-language documentaries that she knew would bore the teeth out of her head but that Regina would love, along with books that Regina would probably never have time to read. She bought her a pair of ruby earrings that perfectly matched her favourite lipstick, and a scarf that would look beautiful with her favourite coat. It had the added bonus of actually keeping her warm for once, because Regina was a firm believer in taking care of others but never looking after herself, and Emma would be able to rest a little easier knowing that Regina wasn't hurrying around arctic New York in nothing more than a flimsy Dolce & Gabbana pea coat.

Regina, however, blew her out of the water. There was more jewellery, more clothes, and a set of Apple AirPods to stop Emma from always getting tangled up in her normal headphones. Emma had once mentioned that she needed to start jogging again, and so there was a pair of expensive designer sneakers, and she was still complaining about Regina stealing the covers when they slept, so there was a soft new blanket for her to use whenever the duvet was taken away and she didn't have the energy to go crawling after it.

Emma wasn't sure she'd ever been given so many presents in her entire life, and she struggled to blink away her grateful tears. Henry, meanwhile, was oblivious to all of it, because he'd opened a set of personalised notebooks from Emma and was already busy writing his latest story onto the first page.

"Regina, you went way overboard," Emma said.

The smug expression on Regina's face told her that she already knew that, but she didn't care. She'd managed to delight the two closest people to her, and she was feeling pretty pleased with herself about it.

"Maybe," Regina admitted. "So did you, though."

"You're always buying me stuff. I just wanted to return the favour."

"And you did it beautifully," Regina said, surprising Emma with a kiss to her cheek. "I love them all. Thank you."

Emma flushed deep pink. She could have sworn she'd never blushed before in her life before Regina had come along.

"Now," Regina said, getting up off the couch and stretching her arms with a click. "I should go and shower, finally."

"Are you going to get all dressed up?" Emma asked. She knew what the answer would be, since there hadn't been a waking moment in Regina's life when she hadn't been all dressed up, but it still would be good to have some kind of gauge for it.

"Nothing special," Regina said unhelpfully. "No ball gowns."

Emma groaned. "Right."

Regina went upstairs, and Emma shuffled towards Henry.

"Kid. I have a project for you, if I can tear you away from your toys for a while."
"What kind of project?" Henry asked with far too much suspicion in his voice.

"A baking project." At once, his eyes lit up. "I spoke to your mom the other day, and apparently you guys have never made gingerbread houses before?"

"No, never."

"Would you like to?"

"Yes! When?"

"Now. I want to get started while your mom isn't here."

"Why?"

"To surprise her."

"Really?" Henry asked with one eyebrow raised.

"Well," Emma conceded. "Partly. But also because I know she'll yell at me for filling you up with too much sugar, so it's best to get started before she can tell me not to."

Henry was already snickering. "She's going to flip."

"No, she'll love it. Eventually. Probably."

They grinned at one another and then crept into the kitchen, using exaggerated tiptoeing movements and laughing the whole way. Emma rummaged in a low cabinet and dug out the ingredients she'd bought and hidden the week before, and the pair of them got started, moving around the kitchen in their pyjamas as the water ran upstairs.

By the time Regina came back down, the gingerbread had been rolled out and Henry was carefully cutting out Christmas shapes with his tongue poking out from between his teeth. Emma was just sliding the cookie walls into the oven when a voice swam over from the door.

"Oh dear. I leave you two alone for 40 minutes and this is what happens?"

Emma straightened up, smiling sheepishly.

"We wanted to surprise you."

"You wanted to sneak around behind my back," Regina said, not sounding the slightest bit mad. She moved to Henry's side and ruffled his hair. "Those are nice, Henry. Where are they going to go?"

"The front yard."

"This house has reindeer as pets?"

"It's Santa's house," Henry said firmly, cutting out the final shape. "Done! Emma, what happens now? Can I put them in the oven myself?"

"You're already shaking from sneaking too many sprinkles, so definitely not," Emma said, prising the tray out of his hand. She put them in the oven herself, then turned around just in time to catch Regina dipping her finger into the tub of frosting.

"Hey," Emma said, slapping the back of her hand. "That's for Rudolph, not you."
"Rudolph has had more than enough sugar after all the cookies and carrots he got last night."

"He doesn't get the cookies – those are for Santa."

"Oh, you think Santa can eat billions of cookies by himself? Don't be so naive, he has to share at least some of them with his reindeer."

Henry shook his head. "You two are so weird. Can I go back to my games now?"

"Sure," Emma said. "I'll go shower, if we think we can leave your mom in charge of the baking without eating everything."

"I would never," Regina gasped, even though her finger was already back in the frosting. "Go on, get out. I'll make sure the apartment doesn't burn down."

Emma skipped off upstairs, wearing a giant grin that didn't fade for the rest of the day. They created the gingerbread house together, which Henry was terrible at and Regina was surprisingly adept at considering she'd never been near one before. After Henry ate too much of it and nearly made himself sick, he spent a full hour lying on the couch with his head in Emma's lap as Regina moved around the kitchen, getting their now slightly unnecessary dinner ready.

It was, all round, the best day Emma could ever remember having. There was a warm bubble around her, like Regina had taken the blanket she'd bought her and turned it into a permanent cloak. Regina was in her element, surrounded by food and her family and Christmas music, and maybe she got a little drunk from too much mulled wine. She'd scoffed when Emma had produced the bottle, calling it a child's beverage, and then proceeded to drink four glasses. Her lips had turned a darker red than normal.

After eating way too much at dinner, the three of them collapsed on the couch to watch a movie. Henry had gotten 10 new DVDs in his present pile, and he chose Moana for them to all watch together. He was asleep long before they reached Te Fiti.

Emma and Regina took him to bed together, then went back downstairs and continued watching the movie without even discussing switching to something for grown-ups. The fact that they could enjoy it together without saying a word about it was another reason why Emma felt so warm and safe and comfortable.

"Hey," she heard a voice. "Wake up, princess."

After blinking for a few moments, she realised she'd dozed off against Regina's shoulder. The credits were rolling.

Emma smiled to herself. "Sorry. Too much food."

"It's nearly 11. Do you want to go to bed?"

Emma was forcing herself to sit upright. "Yeah, I think so."

"Go upstairs. I'll be there soon," Regina said, switching the TV off. As Emma struggled to her feet and headed for the door, Regina called out, "Don't fall asleep yet."

Emma turned back to look at her. "Why not?"

"Because I still need to thank you for those presents." Regina's voice was casual, and it was exactly
that which made Emma wake right back up again.

"Oh?"

"Wait for me. I'll be there in a minute."

A second wind hit Emma squarely in her chest, and she practically ran up the stairs. Once she was in their bedroom, she peeled off her socks and sweater and quickly brushed her teeth, examining herself in the mirror to make sure she didn't have make-up smeared under her eyes or splatters of red wine on her cheek. Downstairs, she could hear Regina tidying up the kitchen and locking the apartment. When she finally began climbing the stairs, Emma darted back into the bedroom and sat cross-legged on the bed to try and give the impression that she'd been casually waiting there for ages.

Regina took one step into the room and started laughing. "You look a bit breathless. Have you been jogging?"

Emma sighed. "I ran from the bathroom to here, and that was way too much activity on a full stomach."

"You're running to get to me now?" Regina asked, looking even more pleased with herself than she had done all day. "That's good to know."

"I was running to get to bed," Emma said, fooling absolutely no one. "I have no interest in you at all."

Regina raised her eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"Yeah."

"Fine," Regina shrugged, striding towards the bathroom. "So you won't mind going to sleep while I spend some time in here with my vibrator, then?"

Emma's eyes nearly popped out of her head. "Excuse me?"

But Regina had already disappeared into the bathroom with a filthy smirk on her face. She left the door ajar, so Emma couldn't see anything from her position on the bed but could definitely hear the sound of buzzing when it started up a few seconds later.

Her stomach turned to hot, swirling liquid, and Emma leapt to her feet so she could throw open the bathroom door. She found Regina waiting for her, one hip leaning against the sink and her electric toothbrush in her mouth.

"Oh," Emma said. "You suck."

"And you must be absolutely terrible at poker," Regina said, somehow managing to sound articulate around a mouthful of toothpaste. She nodded towards the bedroom. "Go back to bed. Take your clothes off."

Emma sighed happily, because she would never, ever tire of getting ordered around by her. She stumbled backwards, closing the door behind her, and did as she was told. She even managed to hang her clothes up in the closet before she tumbled naked into bed because, no matter how horny and determined Regina was, she would never let piles of clothes on the floor slide.

Emma was waiting below the covers for a while before Regina finally reappeared. She'd been worried she might fall asleep the second her head hit the pillow, but as she'd lain there, her
anticipation had only bubbled up higher. The tips of her fingers were tingling as they tapped impatiently against the covers.

Regina walked back into the room wearing nothing. Nothing at all. Her face was scrubbed clean of make up, and she’d left her clothes and underware somewhere in the bathroom just so she could make a dramatic entrance. As she walked towards the bed, Emma could see just the slightest roundness to her stomach from all the food they’d consumed together that day, and it somehow made her want her even more. Emma pushed herself up onto her elbows, the sheets slipping down and revealing her breasts, and Regina smiled.

"You look like a Renaissance painting," she said as she crawled onto the bed. Emma laughed.

"Not one of those fat, naked cherubs, I hope?"

"Not exactly," Regina said, her voice dropping to a purr. She climbed on top of Emma, slowly pulling the covers down to reveal more of her body. "I was thinking more along the lines of Venus."

A delighted blush swarmed across the entirety of Emma's body. She lay back once more and placed her hands on Regina's bare thighs. "I was a princess earlier, and now I'm a goddess?"

Regina reached out one finger and curled it through a strand of Emma's hair. "I think they're both fitting."

"No one's ever called me either of those before," Emma said quietly. Regina was already looking down at her like she was the most precious thing she'd ever seen before in her life, but at that admission her face took on a whole new level of softness.

"That's because no one has ever appreciated just how wonderful you are," Regina said, dipping her head and capturing Emma's mouth with her own. Emma sighed, letting herself be pressed back into the pillows, and dug her fingers into Regina's legs. When Regina pulled back by an inch, Emma could smell toothpaste and spiced wine on her. "But I do."

"I've never really understood it," Emma admitted.

"You don't need to. Just know that I have excellent taste in everything, including women."

With a soft laugh, Emma lifted her head off the pillows and kissed Regina again. They sunk down into it, Regina slipping beneath the covers to join her and letting her hands explore every inch of Emma's body as they kissed slowly and breathlessly.

Emma curved an arm around Regina's waist and let the other drift up the cradle the back of her head. She slipped her leg between Regina's and soaked up the satisfied moan it coaxed from her.

"Touch me," Regina murmured in her ear. "Please."

Her voice was breathy and needy and Emma was powerless to resist it. She slid a hand down between them and traced the tips of her fingers over Regina's slick skin, knowing that she'd never forget the way it made her whimper. Emma dipped two fingers inside her and held them steady, letting her stretch around them before Regina's hips ground forward, her body taking them deeper of its own accord.

"Emma," she whined, rolling the name around her tongue like it was made of caramel, which was a low blow in itself because she knew full well that Emma couldn't resist it when she did that. Burying her face beneath Regina’s jaw and dragging her tongue along the curve of her throat, Emma finally gave in and slid her fingers further inside, her thumb grazing over Regina's clit in a way that made
her entire body tremble. Regina rolled her hips again, gasping whenever Emma hit that spot inside her that made her toes curl, and clung onto her shoulders like she was afraid of floating away. Emma kept on kissing her neck, leaving tiny bite marks that would disappear by morning, and thrust a third finger inside. She loved the way Regina's breasts crushed up against hers, the way her breathing got quicker and sharper, the way her eyes scrunched shut when she was so deliciously close to reaching her peak.

Fuck, Emma loved all of her, and it was getting increasingly difficult to ignore it. It was in moments like this, when Regina was in her arms, hot and breathless and writhing against her touch, that Emma had to fight the urge to whisper the words in her ear – the words she wasn't allowed to say, not just because she wasn't supposed to feel that way, but because she had signed a contract that all but forbade her from it.

In lieu of saying it out loud, Emma pulled back and kissed her hard, letting her tongue curl hungrily through Regina's mouth. The surprise, or maybe the passion, dragged Regina over the edge, and she came apart in Emma's arms, moaning against Emma's lips with her pussy clenching around her fingers.

She pulled away, gasping. Emma's fingers were still inside her and she made no move to pull them back out again.

"God," she panted, resting her forehead against Emma's for a minute. "Did you really like the jacket that much?"

Emma laughed. "All that and more."

"I should buy you gifts more often, in that case."

"Please don't do that. I'd run out of imaginative ways to make you come after a week."

"Doubtful," Regina said, kissing her cheeks, her forehead, the tip of her nose. "You never fail to surprise me."

Emma felt herself light up with the compliment, right before Regina rolled onto her back and pulled Emma with her, guiding her on top of her and so she could straddle her waist. Her wet pussy stuck to Regina's abdomen, and Emma sighed to herself as she bent down to kiss her once more. Regina's hands crept up and held onto her waist, and Emma wriggled happily, her own hands crawling between them and gently squeezing Regina's breasts.

Regina hummed to herself, her eyes closed and her lips slightly parted as Emma pulled away. Emma stared down at her and took in every tiny detail that she'd come to know and love over the past six months, from the deep scar on Regina's perfectly pouted mouth to the longest, darkest eyelashes she'd ever seen. A new throb of longing barrelled through her, and Emma reached down to grab Regina's wrist.

"Give me this," she said, easing the hand off of her waist and guiding it beneath her body instead. The second the tips of Regina's fingers made contact with her wet skin, Emma let out of a hiss of longing, grinding her hips forward to get more contact.

Regina's eyes were flashing as she looked up at her. The second Emma let go of her wrist, Regina shifted the position of her hand so that all four of her fingers could press flatly against Emma's soaked core. Emma threw her head back, her curls skittering down her spine, and ground harder against them, her nerves feeling shorter and tighter with every wet sound she heard from between her legs.
"Up," Regina suddenly said, and Emma tipped her head forward again, looking quizzically down at her.

"What?"

"Sit up," Regina repeated. "I want to fuck you."

The wet heat between Emma's legs suddenly felt like lava seeping from a volcano, and she did as she was told. Keeping her hands on Regina's breasts, she pushed herself up onto her knees and gave Regina enough space to snake three of her fingers deep inside.

"Oh," Emma moaned, settling herself down on them and rolling her pelvis hard. "Fuck."

Regina didn't say a word, but she twisted her hand again so that her thumb was pressed against Emma's clit. As soon as she felt the new contact, Emma clenched so tightly around Regina's fingers that she thought she might break them.

"Fuck," she blurted out, bending forward, her orgasm creeping towards her as she fucked herself harder on Regina's fingers. She could feel her limbs going loose and her vision going hazy, but through it all there was Regina, her face dark with a delicate twist of a smirk and her spare hand holding on tightly to Emma's thigh.

But Emma wasn't there yet – she was a gasp away from coming, a hair's breadth, and it was a bridge just slightly too far for her to cross by herself. So she reached down for Regina's spare hand and brought it up to her mouth, kissing it across her knuckles and her palm before sliding two of her fingers into her mouth. She heard Regina's sharp intake of breath as she sucked, and that was all it took: the sound of Regina being so mesmerised by her tipped her over the edge, and then Emma was coming, her thighs shaking and her cunt grinding desperately against Regina's hand as she coaxed out everything she could possibly get from it.

She fell sideways onto the bed, her body prickling with sweat, and buried her face in the pillow. The last trace of her orgasm was still tingling through her and she ground her pussy forward against the sheets, not caring that Regina was watching. She _wanted_ her to watch. Emma heard her sigh of longing as she bucked forward again, not entirely sure whether she was trying to drag her climax out for as long as possible or whether she was trying to tame it into submission. All she knew was that Regina was watching her, and it just made her want her even more.

Finally catching her breath, Emma tugged her face free and looked across the bed. Regina was propped up on one elbow, her hand already reaching out to push Emma's sweaty hair away from her face.

"Wow," Emma said, and they both laughed when they heard how shaky her voice was.

"Wow yourself," Regina said, stroking her cheek. "You put on quite a show."

Emma smiled, too satisfied to be embarrassed, and rolled onto her back. Regina followed suit, and just like that, she was too far away.

Emma shuffled towards her, her hands greedy and already reaching out for the woman who was lying barely 10 inches away.

Regina saw her coming and laughed. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I just want to be near you."
"You do?" Regina asked, looking for a trace of irony in Emma's earnest face.

"Mm."

"Well," Regina said, reaching out an arm and sliding it beneath Emma's shoulders. "I guess I can allow that."

She pulled her against the side of her body and kissed the top of her head. "Merry Christmas, Emma."

Emma smiled into her shoulder. "Merry Christmas."

"Did you have a good day?"

"It was perfect," Emma said. "Did you?"

"The best."

She sounded so sincere, and it made Emma's heart go warm. "It must have been so nice for you, having Henry here."

"It was. And you, of course."

She said it so easily, like there was no possible way Emma could think otherwise, and for a moment, Emma paused.

Regina felt the tension in her body at once. "What?"

Propping herself up on one elbow, Emma looked thoughtfully down at her. "Do you mean that?"

"What?"

"That it was good having me here."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason. I've just been thinking..." Her sentence faded, her throat going tight with nerves.

This was stupid – it was reckless and it was going to end terribly. And yet, Emma felt herself sucking in a breath and forcing herself to do it anyway. "I've just been thinking about how much I like spending time with you."

Regina smiled, the relief evident on her face. "I like spending time with you too."

"And I like living with you, and stuff."

"The same goes for you." Regina was looking amused now. "Emma, what are you trying to ask?"

"I'm not asking anything," Emma said. She reached out and trailed a finger down the centre of Regina's chest. "I more wanted to tell you something."

It was then that Regina finally froze. The smile remained on her face, but Emma saw the uncertainty prickling beneath it.

"Oh?"

Emma's chest squeezed. This was stupid. This was so, so stupid.
"You don't have to look so scared," she tried to joke, and Regina's smile quivered.

"I'm not scared," she said. Her hand slipped up to stroke Emma's cheek. "What do you want to tell me?"

*Don't do it. Don't do it.*

"Well. Here's the thing."

There was a pause, and she could hear her heartbeat thundering in her eardrums.

*You signed a fucking contract because she didn't want you to do this.*

"So, the thing is..."

"Emma," Regina interrupted, and her voice was soft enough to hurt. "I really care about you. You know that, right?"

Emma paused. "Um. Yeah."

"Good. Because I wouldn't want you to think otherwise."

*Oh.* Emma suddenly recognised the sensation of being let down gently, and she felt her heart crumple like it had been dropped down an elevator shaft.

She smiled tightly. "Right. Cool."

"And I really did have a wonderful Christmas."

"Okay."

"Did you still want to tell me anything?"

With a smile that was so forced it made her temples throb, Emma said, "No, I think that covers it. I just... I wanted to say that I really care about you too."

She could look at Regina's smile forever. Knowing that there was no love behind it, though, hit her so much harder than she'd thought possible.

Emma edged away from her and settled down against the pillows, lying on her back because she couldn't bring herself to face Regina but she also didn't have the strength to turn away from her. After a beat, Regina rolled over to turn off the lamp, before crawling back to Emma's side and curling up against her.

A hand slipped over her stomach, holding her gently, and Emma wanted to die.

"Goodnight, Emma."

A long pause. And then, "Night, Regina."

"Emma," Mary Margaret gasped, holding the sweater aloft. "It's beautiful. I love it."

David was watching them from the armchair, holding a beer loosely with both hands. Emma had a drink too, but she'd placed it on the coffee table while she and her old roommate exchanged gifts.

"I thought it would suit you," Emma said. It was four days after Christmas, and in the quiet lull
before the New Year kicked off, Emma had finally found time to go and see Mary Margaret and David in what was now their home.

She'd missed them, it turned out. She hadn't noticed because she'd been so busy falling head over heels in love with Regina, and she knew that made her the worst friend in North America. But now she was back with them and everyone was curled up contentedly with bare feet and scrunched-up gift wrap on the floor, she felt a wave of homesickness come over her that she'd never experienced before.

"How was your Christmas?" Emma asked, settling back down with her beer.

"It was wonderful," Mary Margaret sighed wistfully. "We spent Christmas Eve with my family, then Christmas Day with David's. It was everything we wanted."

"That's great. And the evil stepmother behaved?" Emma asked, making Mary Margaret laugh.

"She was fine. She actually took quite a liking to David," Mary Margaret said, rolling her eyes. David shook his head. "She did not."

"She was openly flirting with you."

"Well, can you blame her?"

Mary Margaret scoffed. "Anyway. Aside from that, it was perfect. How was yours?"

"Good," Emma said. "It was just me, Regina and Henry, and we had a great time. Henry's gone back to his dad's now though, so it's finally quietened down a bit. Did you know how loud 10-year-olds are when they've eaten their bodyweight in sugar?"

Mary Margaret, who was a middle school teacher and had been ever since Emma had known her, raised her eyebrows. "Yes, Emma. I do have some idea."

"Sorry," Emma shook her head. "I forgot about that for a moment."

"You do seem a little distracted. Is everything okay?"

"Sure," Emma said way too brightly. When her two friends frowned back at her, she admitted, "Okay, I guess I have some stuff on my mind."

"Want to talk about it?" Mary Margaret asked. David, because he was the one decent man left in the world, took this as his hint to vacate the room. He squeezed Emma's shoulder as he left.

"It's no big deal," Emma said as soon as the door was closed. "It's a Regina thing."

"Of course it's a Regina thing," Mary Margaret said. "Tell me."

"She's..." Emma started, not for the first time realising that it was impossible to explain any of this properly when Mary Margaret still didn't know the full story about their relationship. She sighed. "So, it turns out that I've totally fallen for her."

Mary Margaret's reaction was to clap her hands with sheer delight. "Really?"

"Yeah," Emma said, sounding miserable even to her own ears. "Big time."

"Is that a bad thing?"
"It's a terrible thing."

"Why? Because you've always painted yourself as this closed-hearted orphan and this will totally kill your vibe?"

Emma glared at her. "No. Because she doesn't love me back."

"Oh, I'm sure she does."

"She doesn't, Mary Margaret. On Christmas, I... I was going to tell her how I felt, and she saw what was coming and she totally pushed me off track. It was intentional. She didn't want to hurt me by telling me she doesn't feel the same, so she just stopped me from saying it at all."

For a moment, Mary Margaret looked nonplussed. Then she said, "Sounds like you're the perfect dysfunctional match for one another."

"What do I do?"

"I have no idea. But you can't be certain that she doesn't love you until you actually ask, so you'll have to do that eventually."

"But what if she says she doesn't feel the same way?"

Mary Margaret squeezed her hand. "She might come around eventually. But if she doesn't, then I think you know what happens next."

Emma sighed. She and Regina were on a clock – she'd signed a contract that said as much. She'd been given a notice period and a salary, and this thing couldn't last forever. She knew that.

But when the wages had stopped coming, and Regina's bedroom had become Emma's, Emma had let herself believe that everything else would stop being important too. She saw the way Regina looked at her over dinner, and the way she smiled when Emma kissed her particularly sweetly. They weren't the sorts of things that came from small print and a signature here, here and here.

Even if Regina wasn't in love with her, Emma couldn't imagine things ending between them. It wasn't even about the money anymore – it was about the ache in Emma's chest whenever she imagined not being able to talk to her after a crappy day at work, or thought about Regina holding onto someone else's arm at a gallery opening. Emma's heart had gone flocking to Regina from the moment she'd met her, and the thought of being without her again was too much to bear.

"I can't tell if she actually doesn't love me," Emma admitted slowly, "or whether she's just too scared to admit it."

"Can we assume the latter for the time being?"

"That sounds a bit like denial," Emma said. Mary Margaret shrugged.

"Maybe. But she might just need some time to get used to it. You've only been together six months, right?"

"Right," Emma said, although that made no difference in her eyes. She was pretty sure she'd been in love with Regina since day one.

"So, maybe don't pressure her yet. Be there, be charming, and keep an eye on things. And if you're still really worried, then you can talk."
It all sounded very reasonable until Emma had to imagine getting shot down by Regina entirely.

She smiled tightly. "I'll try."

"Good. And keep me updated – don't be a stranger just because you're living the life of the rich and famous now."

Emma laughed at that. "I'm just trailing along behind the rich and famous, Mary Margaret. I definitely don't count as one of them."

"Not yet," Mary Margaret said with a mischievous grin. "But wait until you marry her."

Emma reached the penthouse and dug around in her pocket for her keys. In her other hand she was clutching the enormous, novelty-sized bottle of Jack Daniels that Mary Margaret had bought her for Christmas. Once she had made her way into the apartment, she placed the bottle on the console and dropped her keys in the bowl beside it. Regina's were there too, although the apartment was quiet. Emma dipped into the kitchen to see if she was there, but found no sign of her. After a beat, she turned and made her way into the living room.

Regina was sitting on the couch, waiting for her in silence. That was the first strange thing Emma noticed. The second was that there was a sealed envelope lying in front of her with nothing written on the front of it.

"Hey," Emma said, pausing in the doorway. "You're not working today?"

"I just got back," Regina said. There was a smile on her face, but it didn't make her eyes crinkle like it usually did. "I managed to wrap things up quicker than expected."

"That's good," Emma said, stepping into the room. It felt weirdly cold considering the thermostat hadn't been touched since September. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine," Regina said. Emma recognised that tight-lipped look.

"No, it's not," she said, sitting down beside her. "What's going on?"

She reached out for Regina's hand and, for a second, Regina squeezed back more tightly than she'd ever done before. She seemed to be holding her breath. Then she put Emma's hand back into her own lap with a gentle push.

"Emma," she said, and it was a voice Emma recognised from galleries, from parties, from arguments with other art dealers in the middle of black tie galas. "The other night, I told you that I care about you. Very much."

"Yeah. I remember."

"And I meant that."

"Okay…" Emma said, uncertain whether she should be scared or excited or both.

"But there's something I need to tell you," Regina said, her gaze falling momentarily to look at the envelope on the coffee table. Emma wanted to follow it, but she couldn't take her eyes off of Regina's face.

"Alright. Go ahead."
Regina visibly steeled herself. Emma had exactly one second to realise that she'd never seen her do that before.

"It's time for our arrangement to come to an end."

Emma blinked. She opened her mouth three separate times before she managed to ask, "...excuse me?"

"We've had a good six months," Regina said, and she was in her stride now. Her confidence was back. "And you've done extremely well in your role. But I think we've both gotten what we can out of this, and it's time for us to go our separate ways."

There was a high-pitched noise in Emma's head that sounded like someone screaming. After a few more moments of silence, all she could do was repeat her question. "Excuse me?"

"You don't need to look so shocked," Regina said, sitting back. "This was never going to last forever."

"But... We..." Emma could hear her voice getting tighter and she knew tears wouldn't be far off if she wasn't careful. She took a breath to try and steady herself. "I celebrated Christmas with you. I moved in with you."

"You got too comfortable," Regina said, and it was the most hurtful thing anyone had ever said to her. "That was partly my fault. I've enjoyed having you around, but I shouldn't have let it get to this stage."

"What stage is that?" Emma asked, and at once they were both remembering what had happened in bed four nights ago. What Emma had been about to say; what Regina had stopped her from admitting.

"You know exactly what stage," Regina said softly.

Emma let herself have a brief moment of thinking that maybe Regina was kidding. It was a weird time for her to have suddenly developed a sense of humour, but it wouldn't be the strangest thing she'd ever done. So she smiled briefly, a laugh catching in her throat, and said, "Regina. Come on. You're not serious."

"Of course I'm serious. Why would I joke about something like this?"

She finally picked up the envelope and thrust it into Emma's hands. When Emma had managed to tear it open, she found herself faced with a short letter that stabbed at her heart with every single word.

_Dear Miss Swan,_

_Please consider this letter an official termination of your employment. As per the conditions of your contract, you will be expected to complete a two-week notice period before you leave the position. Your final day will be on Friday January 12th._

_Yours faithfully,_

_Regina Mills_

The sound that escaped from Emma's throat sounded like someone being choked.
"You're breaking up with me with a letter?"

Regina heaved out an impatient sigh. "This isn't a break-up. This is the end of a contract."

"Bullshit," Emma snapped, because she'd finally gotten over her shock and had launched straight into feeling furious. "This hasn't been a business arrangement for months. The second you paid off my debts and invited me into your home, this has been a relationship, and you know it."

"I know nothing of the sort," Regina threw back at her. "I did you a favour because you're my friend. It's not my fault if you read more into it than that."

"Oh, cut the crap. You can't seriously think I'm that stupid. We're not just friends – you don't talk to anyone the way you talk to me. You can't keep your hands off me and you buy me presents all the time and this means a whole hell of a lot more to you than you're pretending it does."

"Just because I find you attractive doesn't mean I want anything more than companionship," Regina said. It would have hurt if it hadn't been such a filthy lie. "That's what this whole deal was about from the start."

"It began that way, sure. But that's not what it is now."

"If that's the case, then why would I be doing this?" Regina asked coldly. Emma was all too ready to answer that question.

"Because you're scared," she snapped. "You didn't think I'd mean this much to you, but I do. I've met your son, I've met your mother, I've spent Christmas in your house and I've made you open up more than anyone else ever has. You've shown too much vulnerability and now you're putting a stop to it."

Regina was glaring at her, but Emma knew her tells better than she thought. She saw the slight flare of her nostrils, the twitch in her lower lip, and it all told her that she was right.

"You're an idiot," was what Regina said out loud, and it was weird that those words had been an endearment until not too long ago. "You've just gotten your feet too far under the table, and I need you gone."

"Bullshit," Emma repeated, because surely Regina couldn't actually expect her to believe any of this. "You know what I was going to say to you on Christmas night, don't you?"

Another flare of Regina's nostrils. "It's irrelevant. I don't care what you were going to say. All that matters is what I'm saying right now."

"Which is?"

"That you have two weeks left in this apartment, and in my company, and then your time here is done. I'll help you find another home, and I will make sure you're secure, but you're going to have to survive without me from now on."

The reality of the situation was finally starting to dawn on Emma, and she could feel something dark and heavy beginning to crush her chest. Two more weeks, and then no Regina. She might not ever see her again.

She could have burst into tears if she'd really wanted to. But instead, she went ricocheting straight back to being angry, because it was far, far easier.
"You're a fucking coward," she hissed. "I know you think I'm a total moron who has no idea what's going on around her, but I know how you feel about me. I know you tell me stuff that you've never told anyone before. And I know that this has nothing to do with a contract, and if we'd just met in a bar and started dating like normal people, you'd still be trying to end things right now. Because you're scared that you've gotten too attached – that's right, you, not me – and you need to cut me out of your life before it's too late."

"You're deluded."

"And you're an asshole," Emma snapped. "What did you think would happen, anyway? You'd present me with this stupid fucking letter and I'd just quietly walk away?"

She gripped hold of the paper as she spoke, crushing it against her palm. Regina glared down at it.

"I'd hoped you would act like an adult, yes," she responded. "But apparently I forgot who I was dealing with."

"Well, I'm all too happy to remind you. And if you think that I'm going to hang around here for two more weeks while you pack up all my shit and start looking for your next mistress, you're even dumber than I thought."

"If you refuse to serve your notice period, I will take you to court for breach of contract," Regina said. It was her coldest don't-fuck-with-me voice, and Emma knew she was supposed to tremble in fear, but instead she just laughed.

"Get over yourself, Regina. Do you expect me to believe that a court would take this seriously? Do they send many mistresses to jail for refusing to stay prisoner to some heartless woman with more money than sense?" The words were coming thick and fast, and they were crueller than Emma wanted them to be and yet not cruel enough. Regina blinked, but she didn't look upset, and that just made Emma even madder. "Well, trust me – I've already been to prison, and it feels a damn sight more appealing than spending another minute here with you. So screw your lawyers, and screw your stupid fucking contract."

She got up and, as she turned towards the door, Regina hurled after her, "Get back here right now, Miss Swan."

"Bite me," Emma snapped back at her. It wasn't the most dignified of retorts, nor did it make her feel any better, but grabbing the giant bottle of Jack Daniels off the counter, scooping up her keys and slamming the front door so hard that a picture fell off the wall almost did.
Chapter 33

She went to Elsa's. She had nowhere else to go. She showed up at the door and hammered her fist against it, and Elsa took one look at her and let her straight in. She didn't even manage to ask what happened before Emma told her anyway.

"She's an asshole," Emma bit out between sips of bourbon straight from her gigantic bottle. She'd been repeating that mantra over and over for the past half hour, but it wasn't doing anything to lessen the curdling in her stomach.

"She is," Elsa agreed, reaching out for the bottle and taking a swig for herself. "But she's also in denial."

"Is she?" Emma asked, leaning her head back against the couch. "I thought so too, but maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she never liked me the way I thought she did, and now she really is just done with me."

Elsa reached out and sharply slapped her arm.

"Ow! What was that for?" Emma demanded.

"Don't be so whiny. Your heart is breaking, but that doesn't mean you need to feel so sorry for yourself. She obviously loves you too."

Emma scowled at her and snatched the Jack Daniels back. "She dumped me. By letter."

"Maybe she's ending the arrangement because she wants to be with you for real, without a contract."

Emma had already thought of that. It was an idea that had settled in her brain like a bird landing, but it had taken flight again pretty soon afterwards. "She would have just said that. Regina doesn't like playing games. Not with me, anyway."

"Huh," Elsa sighed. "Then she really is an asshole."

"She is."

"What are you going to do?"

"Fucked if I know," Emma groaned. There wasn't enough whisky in the world to make the ache in her chest go away. "I can't stay there for another two weeks, but... I also don't know if I can just leave and never see her again."

"Emma," Elsa said warningly. "What do you think you'll gain from going back there?"

"I'll get to spend time with her," Emma said, all too aware of how pathetic that was. "And I'll get to say goodbye."

"She's not dying, and she doesn't deserve a goodbye. Just say the word and I'll go round there to get your stuff for you – you shouldn't have to see her again."

"But I want to," Emma whined. She was a morose drunk on a good day, but right then she was spiralling into full-blown depression. "I know she's being a bitch and I should hate her and I do, but I also love her and I know she's only pushed me away because she's scared of letting me in for real. Maybe if I go back to her then I can convince her that... ow!"
Elsa had slapped her again, and she didn't look remotely sorry about it. "You're staying here for a few days. You need to cool off."

Emma sighed, relieved – she'd been about to ask that anyway, so it was nice not to have to go begging. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No problem. If I see you lying on my white couch with those ugly-ass boots on, though, I will kick you right back out again."

Emma stayed on the couch in question for the next 12 hours, only moving to go to the bathroom or get another drink. At first, Elsa had tried gently coercing her into getting takeout with her or even just having a shower, but sadness had settled over Emma like night time and she couldn't summon the energy to even consider moving.

Her phone started ringing the following morning. Emma knew it would be Regina, but her heart still clenched when the name flashed up on screen. She considered answering it, until Elsa snatched the phone away from her and put it on the other side of the apartment. It was her way of trying to lure her back to her feet, but it didn't work: Emma just sighed and laid back down, going back to staring up at the ceiling while somewhere in the next room her cell phone buzzed and buzzed and buzzed.

When she finally decided to get up, it was a full day later. She didn't realise it was the morning of New Year's Eve until she heard Elsa on the phone making her plans for that night.

Emma wasn't waiting very long before Elsa crept towards her with an invitation for her to join her.

"I'd rather not, Els," Emma sighed. "I'll just put a damper on your night."

"Right," Elsa said slowly. "Then, do you want me to—?"

"You don't need to stay in with me either. I think a bit of alone time might do me some good."

Elsa pressed her lips together worriedly, but she didn't push it.

She left at 9pm, and Emma finally went to retrieve her phone. The battery was nearly dead and there were 26 missed calls and seven voicemails, all from one person. She sighed, settling down to listen to the messages, and closed her eyes as the voice that she loved and now hated more than any other in the world came crawling out of the phone towards her.

"Emma. I know you're mad at me, but we are still meant to be going to Zelena's New Year's Eve party together. Could you please snap out of your sulk and call me back to let me know if you'll be coming?"

That had been message number one. Typical Regina to not even ask how she was. As the messages continued, though, the tone changed. By number six, Emma could hear the concern.

"It's been two days and I don't even know where you are. Can you at least let me know if you're alive? Or just turn your 'find my friends' back on so I can check you're not stuck in a trash chute somewhere in New Jersey."

Number seven crackled with worry. "Stop ignoring me. Come home."

It should have made Emma feel better, but it didn't. All she wanted to do was curl up against Regina's side and sleep until everything felt slightly less shitty, but that was the one thing she wasn't allowed to do anymore.
She went to the store before it closed and bought a fresh bottle of bourbon. Then she returned to Elsa's apartment and slipped out onto the fire escape, ignoring the icy wind that whipped around her. She was wearing jeans and a thin shirt, nothing more, and the cold made her ache down to her stupid heart, but that was what she wanted. She was hurting already and so hurting a little more suddenly seemed weirdly comforting.

She saw in the New Year alone, curled up in a chair on her friend's balcony with blue lips and a half-empty bottle of Jack.

New Year's Day arrived, Elsa was drowning in a hangover, and it was time for Emma to go. Her friend hadn't asked her to, but Emma knew her permanent misery was creating a dark cloud over the pristine Nordic decor, and so she gathered up her jacket and her cell phone and forced herself to walk to the subway. She'd turned her phone off, because any time Regina called her she felt her resolve weaken.

It was midday, and she hoped that meant Regina would be back at work. She wanted to slip into the apartment, gather up the things she needed for the next few weeks and head straight back out again. She could afford to stay in a hotel for a little while until she found a new place, and then she could send for the rest of her stuff. She'd never have to see Regina again.

Except the second she opened the door to the apartment, she knew she was there. She could smell her, and she could feel the anxiety hissing through the air.

Sighing, Emma forced herself to stand a little taller. She hadn't washed her hair in several days and there were dark circles under her eyes, whereas she knew Regina would look as spellbinding as usual. Emma didn't want to face her like this, but she could already hear footsteps hurrying towards her, and so it seemed like she didn't have much of a choice.

Regina rounded the corner and, when she found Emma standing there, sagged against the wall. Emma wouldn't let herself notice how relieved she looked, because if she focused on that, she'd crumple to the ground crying.

"Emma," Regina said, her hand lifting up and resting against her stomach.

"Hi," Emma said coldly, taking a step forward. Regina flinched like she was expecting some kind of confrontation, but Emma just brushed past her and headed for the stairs. She walked into the guest room without stopping.

She tugged the closet doors open and sighed, faced with the reality of just how much shit she would now need to sort through. She didn't hear the footsteps behind her – or maybe she did, and she just wanted to pretend for a second that there wasn't anyone there watching as her life fell apart.

"Emma," Regina said quietly from the doorway as Emma grabbed a suitcase and crouched to unzip it. "What are you doing?"

"Packing."

"Why?" Her voice was shakier than normal.

"Because I need to move out, remember?"

"Right," Regina said uncertainly. "But not this second. We should talk."

"There really isn't anything to talk about," Emma said, pulling some of her jackets off their hangers
and tipping them into the case. She realised then that she should have started this in Regina's bedroom, since that was where all her day-to-day stuff lived, and with a grunt she picked up the open suitcase and headed for the door.

"Emma..."

"What?" she threw over her shoulder as she headed into the master bedroom. For the first time ever, the bed was unmade. Emma's pyjamas weren't under the pillow where she kept them, but were screwed up in the space where Regina normally slept.

"Please look at me," Regina asked.

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

Emma sighed. "If you actually need an answer to that, you're even dumber than I thought."

She tugged open the closet and started the packing process again, yanking shirt after shirt off their hangers and hurling them towards the case without checking where they were landing. Regina was standing several feet away, and yet Emma could still feel her shifting awkwardly behind her. She knew her body so well by then that she could sense the uneasiness coming off her – she could hear the concern in the way she was breathing.

"I didn't mean for it to happen like this."

It wasn't an apology. It wasn't even a second cousin of an apology. Emma snapped her head round to glare at her and bit out, "I don't care."

"About what?"

"About what you meant to do, or what you want. You dumped me by firing me, and I'm just following your orders, boss. I'll be out of your hair before you know it."

"Emma," Regina groaned, and she sounded marginally more like her normal, impatient self. "Come on. Would you be acting like this if we were just two people who had been dating and I'd told you things weren't working out?"

That was one step too far, even for Emma. She dropped the coat she'd been holding and turned around to face her. "No, Regina, I wouldn't. I would be devastated, but I would have respected your wishes and I would have left. But you didn't break up with me like a normal person – you wrote me a letter of formal fucking dismissal, and you threatened me with legal action if I refused to meet your conditions about it. This whole relationship has never been normal, but the way you ended things was unforgivable. I think you know that, even if you're never, ever going to say sorry for it."

Regina's nostrils were flaring, but it wasn't from anger. If she'd been someone else, she might have apologised right then.

"You knew the conditions from the start," was all she managed to force out.

"Yeah, but the conditions changed when our relationship did. You stopped paying me, remember? So why didn't that stop our arrangement from being valid anymore?"

"I gave you a credit card! And I—"
"I'm not saying this is about the money," Emma interrupted. "I'm not complaining that I stopped getting a salary. What I'm trying to say is that you have the worst double standards about this whole thing. The deal we had has been slowly disintegrating for months, and you didn't mind. Neither did I. We were happy. And then suddenly it's business as usual because you got scared and it was much easier for you to hide behind a bullshit contract than it was to just be honest with me."

"I have been honest with you," Regina said, and it was such a flimsy lie that Emma could have laughed.

"Sure you have," she said, turning back to the closet.

"*Emma*. What do you want me to be honest about?"

"Why have you asked me to leave?"

The pause that followed told her everything she needed to know about just how honest Regina's answer was going to be. "Because it's time for this arrangement to end."

"Because you want us to be together without a contract? Or because you never want to see me again?"

"Neither," Regina said. That single word went straight through Emma's chest. "Because... it's just time. I think you've..."

"Served my purpose?" Emma interjected, because that was exactly what Regina had been about to say before she'd realised how heartless it would sound. "Because I couldn't get Neal for you, and I haven't managed to lure in any other up-and-coming hipsters, so it's time for me to go away and leave you to find someone more effective?"

From the pinched look on Regina's face, Emma could tell this wasn't going the way she'd planned at all. Maybe she'd never expected Emma to be upset in the first place – she was the type of person who no one normally worried about too much, because she could be left in a corner on her own and she would always find a way to entertain herself. Maybe Emma actually was being unreasonable. Except she wasn't, because her heart was broken and she knew Regina's wasn't doing too great either. That fact in itself was what was making Emma so fucking angry.

Regina took a step forward. "Emma, why did you even agree to this arrangement if you were going to get so upset once it was over?"

"You know why," Emma spat. "Because I was broke and I needed the money. Because I had a huge crush on you. Because I didn't plan to like you this much when you're the biggest pain in the ass that I've ever met."

Even then, Regina managed to smile weakly. "Only you can make that sound like an endearment."

"Shut up. You don't get to be cute when I'm so angry at you."

"I'm angry too," Regina said, which was unexpected. "I didn't mean it to end up like this, I promise. I should have ended things sooner, but we both got so comfortable and I guess I... I didn't want you to go just yet."

"So why now?"

She knew the answer to that question already, but she wanted to hear Regina say it. She wanted her
to open her mouth and tell her that she'd gotten scared when she realised Emma was about to tell her that she was in love with her.

"Because we're in too deep," Regina said softly. She reached out to cup her face, but Emma flinched away. "Surely you must know that this can't continue."

"Why not?" Emma demanded. "You know how I feel. You know I'd stay here forever if you asked me to. I don't need a contract, I don't need monthly allowances – I just need you."

Regina smiled sadly. "I told you on day one that I don't work like that. I don't like relationships, and I don't want one."

"Except we're already in one, so it's a little late for that."

"It's not. That's why we're over," Regina said. She sighed. "Can we sit down and talk?"

"I'm fine here."

"You're being stubborn. Just sit with me."

She walked over to the bed without waiting for Emma to refuse again. When she reached it, she seemed to realise that it was still unmade and quickly straightened the sheets, hiding Emma's pyjamas back beneath the pillow. She looked embarrassed as she perched on the edge of the mattress.

Emma groaned and walked over to join her, making sure she left a full foot of space between them when she sat down.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked dully.

"Where have you been, for one?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't matter. I just want to know."

Emma sighed. "I went to a friend's."

"Elsa's?"

"Maybe."

"Did you celebrate New Year's Eve together?"

Emma sniffed hard, because her self-indulgent outing onto Elsa's fire escape had left her with the worst cold known to mankind. "Not exactly."

"Emma, can you please try and have a normal conversation with me?"

"Why? Have you earned one?"

A low growl escaped from Regina's throat as her worry finally gave way to irritation. "Look, you need to stop being a child."

"The beauty of you dumping me is that actually, I don't need to do anything you tell me anymore," Emma pointed out. Regina was glaring at her, but it wasn't as terrifying as it had once been. If anything, it just made her miss her more.
"This doesn't have to be a difficult process. I'll help you find a new apartment. I'm not just going to send you off on your own and never think about you again."

"But you'll never see me again. Right?"

There was another pause that told Emma more than she wanted to know. "I'm sure we'll run into one another."

Three days of not sleeping or eating properly caught up with Emma in that moment, and she fell back onto the bed with a groan. It was easier to blink up at the ceiling than it was to try and meet Regina's eye.

"Regina, this sucks."

She felt Regina shuffle closer to her, although she didn't lie down beside her.

"Why?" She asked the question softly, and it meant she didn't think Emma was overreacting. Not really. She just didn't understand how she could possibly want to stay.

"Because I really don't want to stop seeing you. Couldn't I just move out, but I still get to date you, or I could—"

"It doesn't work like that, Emma."

"Why not? You still haven't given me a proper reason."

"Because I don't want it to."

It was the most honest she'd been so far, and Emma tried to find some comfort in that. "Is that because you don't actually like me that much?"

Regina sighed and joined her on the bed, propping herself up on one elbow so that she still, just like always, had the upper hand.

"That's not the reason at all. I meant what I said at Christmas – I care about you a lot. Too much, probably."

"How can you care about me too much?"

"Because this isn't how this was supposed to go, darling. I wasn't supposed to like you this much, or invite you into my home or consider you to be my best friend. I was supposed to enjoy a few successful months, make some new industry contacts and a lot of money, and then we would part amicably. I've been letting everything slip since you arrived because I don't care about my work anywhere near as much as I care about you."

It was such a bittersweet thing for her to say. Emma pushed herself up onto her elbows, so that their faces were suddenly only inches apart.

"It's not like your business is failing."

"No, but it's not thriving either. Do you know how many events I cancelled in the last two months because I wanted to stay at home with you and Henry instead?"

Emma had no idea, because Regina never told her things like that. She and Regina's art world had always remained surprisingly separate, considering exactly what she'd been brought in to do.
And just like that, she realised maybe Regina had a point. Maybe since the whole Neal thing had blown up, Emma had stopped being Regina's companion and had started being a liability instead.

"But..." she started, sniffing again and hoping Regina didn't think it was because she was about to cry. "What are you going to do? Just never date anyone? Be alone until you retire?"

"Maybe. Would that be so terrible?"

"Yes, Regina. Are you crazy? Don't you think you deserve some kind of happiness?"

"Of course I do," Regina bristled. "But who's to say what will make me happy? My job has been more than enough for me up until now."

"Oh, because you and Henry were getting on so well before I showed up."

"Don't bring him into this," Regina said, her voice going cold. "He has nothing to do with it."

"He does if he's finally gotten closer to you now that you've stopped revolving your life around work and actually started focusing on other things."


"On that note," Emma continued, totally ignoring her. "How do you think he's going to react when I'm suddenly not around anymore? He likes me, you know. Do you think he's going to be happy about it?"

Glaring at her more icily than she'd ever done before, Regina said, "He'll be fine. I'm breaking up with you, not him."

"Oh, and you think he'll see it that way?"

"Be quiet about my son," Regina snapped, and Emma finally went silent. "I know he'll be upset, but he'll understand. Don't use him as a reason why I should stay with you, Emma – that's very low."

She was right, but Emma's heart was aching too much for her to really appreciate it. "I guess."

With a sigh, Regina reached forward and gently pushed some of Emma's lank hair away from her face. This time, Emma didn't flinch.

"Please don't make this harder than it needs to be," Regina said.

Emma's shoulders slumped as she replied, "I don't know if I can promise that. I'm doing my best but I'm so unhappy, Regina. You've really hurt me."

"I know I have. I didn't want to. But you can't convince me to change my mind, and it's not fair of you to try. If we were two people in an ordinary relationship, you wouldn't cling on and beg me to reconsider, would you? You didn't do that with the ex-boyfriend."

"Because I didn't care about him," Emma said. "But I care about you."

Regina's hand was still on her face, and it stroked her cheek so gently that Emma could have burst into tears. "I care about you too. Really. And I will make sure you're okay without me."

She was probably expecting Emma to say thank you then, but it wasn't going to happen. "Okay."

"And I really would like you to stay for the last two weeks," Regina said, immediately continuing...
when Emma tried to protest. "Not because of the contract – you’re right, I shouldn’t have tried to threaten you with lawyers. I just want you to stay because I don’t want to say goodbye so soon."

"Regina,” Emma said, and her voice was almost a whine. "You can't tell me that you want to break up and then immediately say you need more time with me before that. That's not fair."

"I know it's not," Regina admitted, trailing her thumb along Emma's cheekbone. "But I'm rarely fair. And I hope you'll give me this one last chance."

"To do what?" Emma asked miserably.

"To be happy with you," Regina said, no trace of irony in her voice. Emma could have sworn she felt her chest crack in two.

She was exhausted and she was delirious from sadness, and that's what she told herself as she reached out for the back of Regina's neck and pulled her forward. Regina didn't resist. She let herself fall down on top of Emma's body, and they kissed slowly and uncertainly. It was the saddest kiss Emma had ever felt, and yet she never wanted it to end.

She slid her hands up to cup the back of Regina's head and kissed her deeper, her body arching off the bed to get even a millimetre closer to Regina's because now there was an end point, and there was a day approaching when she wouldn't be able to do this anymore. Every kiss would be a countdown and she didn't know if she would forgive herself for not savouring every last one of them.

Regina straddled Emma's thighs and pulled her upright for a moment so she could remove her jacket. Emma let her do so without struggle, her grip immediately returning to Regina's neck as they tumbled back down to the sheets. The kisses stopped being gentle and became harder, more urgent, as Emma coiled her body around Regina's and silently begged her to not let go.

Emma hated herself. She was being a pushover. She should have grabbed the suitcase and headed for the door. But she had Regina in her arms and, in less than two weeks, she never would again. She wasn't brave enough to deprive herself of any of this – not when Regina's mouth was the only thing in the world that could put everything right again, even though it had been the very thing to ruin it all when it had allowed the most heart-breaking words Emma had ever heard to come spilling out.

Regina was as good as her word, and she found Emma a new apartment within a week. Tamara blocked out an entire day to drag her around various viewings, and Emma had chosen the final one simply because she was tired and she didn't care all that much about it anyway.

She hadn't asked about how much it would cost her, because she knew that wouldn't be a problem: Regina was buying it for her, just like she'd bought Robin off years earlier. Emma could have protested, but that would have been stupid, because there wasn't a realtor in North America who would have gone near her and her abysmal credit score without Regina's pile of cash waiting in the wings. If Emma ever truly wanted to make a clean break, she needed this. She needed Regina's money to get away from Regina's money, and she hated that fact more and more every single goddamn day.

Still, the apartment was nice and small and close enough to where Elsa lived that she wouldn't feel too alone every single weekend. It was also far away from Regina's place, which Emma wasn't entirely sure was unintentional. She already had a sneaking suspicion that the locks and alarm code would be changed the second she moved out.
She should have been angry. She was angry. But her rage had subsided into a quiet kind of sadness, and instead of shouting and slamming doors and posting bitchy things about Regina on Facebook, all she could bring herself to do was slink closer to her side.

The second Regina got home from work every day, Emma threw herself into her arms. Regina didn't seem to mind – on the contrary, she was usually waiting for her. Dinner went neglected as they stumbled up the stairs together – or, in some cases, straight towards the nearest wall. Emma made Regina come hard and fast, and then she tried not to cry when Regina returned the favour.

Conversation wasn't the same. When they finally went and had dinner, Emma pushed her food around her plate while Regina scrolled through her emails. It was like the early days except not as good, because the excited fizzing in Emma's stomach had been replaced by gut-wrenching misery and there was nothing she could do to get rid of it. Staying for those final two weeks had been her worst idea, but like hell was she strong enough to bail before she'd squeezed every last second of time out of it.

"How's work going?" Regina asked one evening. They were halfway through their countdown, and the sale had just gone through on Emma's new apartment. Emma didn't question how it had all happened so quickly when she knew she wouldn't like the answer.

"Fine," she said, not lifting her eyes. Her puttanesca had been moved around so much that it had started to resemble a car crash. "I like the editorial team. Ingrid's still snooping over my shoulder all day long, but she hasn't thrown anything at me recently."

"Do you think she'll let you move across permanently?"

"Maybe," Emma said. Quite honestly, she hadn't thought that far ahead. "We'll see, I guess."

Regina swallowed before responding. "Good."

She wouldn't be around to find out. It didn't really matter.

They cleared up in silence, then Regina would go to her office to finish off some work while Emma hit the couch and killed a few hours on Netflix. When she eventually got lonely and went to bed, Regina would follow. There was rarely even a pause.

One night, Emma sat cross-legged on the bed, her hair tied back and her phone in her hand. She'd been caught in an email chain between Tamara and the movers for most of the day, and she'd been deliberately avoiding looking through it. Down the hall, the guest room was piled high with boxes that they would start collecting in two days.

She'd been there for five minutes when the door opened and Regina strode in, still dressed and clutching three smartphones. She dropped them all on the nightstand and then stood still, her arms folded over her chest, waiting for Emma's attention. As soon as she looked up, Regina said, "Come here."

Emma glanced down at the three feet of mattress that separated them. "Where?"

"Here," Regina said, nodding to the space directly in front of her.

It was an odd request, but Emma recognised the tone in her voice. It was the one that made her insides melt and her fingers start to tingle. She put her own phone to one side and crawled forward.

The second she was kneeling in front of Regina, two hands reached out and grabbed her by the back of her head, pulling her into a deep, burning kiss. Emma's breath escaped her, and she clutched onto
Regina's waist to steady herself. She'd noticed this change occurring in Regina over the past week. Every single time she kissed her, she was bossier and so much more demanding than the time before.

She dipped Emma back over the bed, clasping her by the base of her skull and holding her firm. But Emma still felt too far away from her, and when she snaked her arms around Regina's hips and pulled her closer, Regina wasted no time in tumbling down onto the mattress after her.

She reached into Emma's pyjamas bottoms and found her already wet and ready for her, because she usually was nowadays. Her body also seemed to know that this was coming to an end, and it wasn't willing to waste any time either. Regina moaned with approval, pinning Emma against the sheets with the full length of her body as she plunged her fingers inside. Emma's eyes stayed open so she could watch Regina watching her, and as her body wriggled and arched and clenched, she saw the smirk on Regina's face that she knew she would miss forever.

Emma wound her arms around Regina's neck and held on tight, digging her nails into her skin as she came with a cry that was almost a sob. Regina chuckled, kissing her neck, breathing in the smell of her, and then she was moving and it was time for round two. Everything was faster now, indisputable in its urgency, and Emma barely noticed her pants being tugged from her body before a dark head was between her legs, tormenting her with long, leisurely licks that made her toes curl.

Emma tangled her fingers through Regina's silky hair and held her tight, arcing her body up towards her mouth. She couldn't breathe, and she didn't want to. She wanted to drown in this and not remember anything that followed.

She should have been ashamed of the way she cried out Regina's name when she came. She moaned it like it was the last word she was ever going to say. But Regina didn't seem to care – instead, she lay down for a moment with her forehead resting against the inside of Emma's thigh, breathing heavily and pressing soft kisses against Emma's skin.

Emma recovered enough to reach down and pull Regina up towards her, kissing her deeply and licking the taste of herself off her lips. Regina moaned, curling her tongue through Emma's mouth, as Emma reached down between them and grabbed the bottom of her dress, tugging it high enough to expose her wet panties. Normally she would tease her, stroke her, make her beg, but not anymore – she didn't have the time left. Instead she pulled her underwear to one side and dragged her fingers over Regina's slick skin, shivering at the feel of her. Regina growled in her ear, letting her know that she was somehow still moving too slowly, and then Emma was inside her, filling her up as far as her desperate fingers would allow.

Regina writhed against her, her pelvis grinding forward to take her deeper. Emma couldn't help but moan as she felt Regina's muscles tightening around her fingers, and she worked harder, eager to coax Regina towards her orgasm as fast as possible so that it would be time to start all over again.

It carried on for hours. Days, really. The final week wore on and they woke up, went to work, drifted through the movements that they were required to do, and then stumbled home and into bed with one another. Emma felt like she'd been swept up in a storm, and it was stopping her from looking at the clock or the calendar or anything except Regina. Anything that would remind her of what was coming next.

She stood in the kitchen staring at nothing. She'd cooked a hundred meals in this room, but she was suddenly struggling to remember anything about them. Upstairs, the guest room closet was empty again. Regina's bedroom was back to its old, soulless self. The fridge didn't have any food in it because Emma had stopped cooking meals for them to reheat, and in her hand was the key that she'd been asked to give back.
Regina was lurking in her office. She was trying to avoid saying goodbye.

The U-Haul truck had left an hour ago, and Emma guessed that most of her boxes were probably inside her new apartment already. Sidney was waiting downstairs. It was time for her to go, and yet she carried on standing there, her eyes on the tiled wall opposite but not exactly seeing it and a key digging grooves into the palm of her hand.

She sighed, saying one last goodbye to the apartment where she thought she might have found her home, and headed for the front door. Before she called out Regina's name, she tossed her key into the bowl, just in case she couldn't force herself to hand it over.

Then she stopped. She looked properly.

She'd stood in that exact spot countless times, but she'd never actually looked before. Or maybe she had, and something had changed since then.

She slowly reached out for the other set of keys that was sitting inside the bowl and held them aloft. She wanted to be certain she was seeing it right before she broke down and completely lost her mind.

There was a tacky plastic keychain hanging between Regina's apartment and office keys. Emma recognised it at once. She remembered standing in JFK with her heart pounding and a bottle of Evian under her arm, spotting that keychain and instantly picturing the way Regina had stormed towards her in her towering Louboutins that first day in Barnes & Noble. She remembered giving it to her at dinner and watching the way Regina's face cracked into a grin over how ugly it was.

She couldn't pinpoint exactly when it happened. All she knew was that one moment, she was just looking down at those keys with her eyes wide and her heart going still. The next, she was crying. She was crying like she hadn't cried in years.

Apparently her body had forgotten what it felt like to really sob its heart out and was enjoying getting reacquainted with the sensation, because Emma felt herself slide to the floor with huge, painful sobs bursting from her lips. The fucking keychain was still dangling from her hand as she cried and cried, finally feeling the full brunt of just how broken her heart was.

What felt like a million miles away, a door opened and then Regina was hurrying towards her, her face stricken and her lip caught between her teeth. "Emma?"

Emma stayed where she was, a snivelling mess on the floor. She couldn't remember ever sobbing like that before – not when Killian had left, not when she'd been running away from Neal's apartment, not when the judge had read out her sentence and she'd been taken away from the world for a year. She cried like her life had finally caught up with her, and it was all the fault of a stupid fucking shoe.

"Emma," Regina said, crouching down next to her and reaching out a hand. "What's happened? Are you okay?"

The question sparked up a red-hot haze around Emma's shaking body and, without thinking, she lifted the keys and threw them directly at Regina's chest. Regina fell backwards, tipping off her shoes and hitting the carpet with a thud, but Emma couldn't bring herself to laugh. She just kept on sobbing.

"Emma," Regina repeated. She tossed the keys to one side, maybe not even realising they were hers, and reached out for Emma's arm. "Talk to me. What's wrong?"

In a way, Emma was surprised she'd managed to resist saying it for so long. She'd nearly made it out
"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice wet and crackling and barely understandable. She sniffed up a huge wave of tears and gritted her teeth. "What's wrong is I'm in love with you, you stupid fucking idiot. And I know you love me too. You do. I know it."

Regina looked shocked. She looked scared. "Emma…"

"Stop saying that," Emma cut over her. "Just tell me you love me too."

"You know I can't tell you that."

"Why not?" Emma demanded. She sounded like a child, but she didn't care anymore. She wasn't going to leave that house without Regina finally growing some balls and telling her the truth.

"Because…" Regina started, then faltered. She'd been about to say because it's not true, but she couldn't. She may be heartless, but she was no liar. "Because I can't. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It matters to me!" Emma said, wiping her sleeve over her wet face and not caring when Regina flinched in disgust at the shiny trail that clung to the fabric. "I know this wasn't part of our stupid contract, but I fell in love with you anyway and you can't keep pretending that you don't feel the same. I know you better than anyone and I know you love me too."

Regina's jaw was trembling, and she gritted her teeth to try and stop it. Her hand was still resting on Emma's wrist.

"I…" she started, then swallowed. For a split second, Emma thought she was going to be brave enough to say it.

But then an expression that Emma recognised all too well clouded her face. Regina straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Emma," she said. There wasn't even the slightest shake to her voice anymore. "But that doesn't mean you should stay. You got too attached, and now it's time for you to leave."

Another sob ricocheted through Emma's body. The final piece of her heart chipped off.

Her eyes were stinging and she could barely see, but she forced herself to get off the floor and walk towards the door. She didn't turn back. She didn't say goodbye.

She was proud of herself for not crying again until she was in the back of the car. Pressing her wet sleeve hard against her face, she turned and stared blindly out the window, wondering how it was possible to feel your heart shattering when it had already been so completely broken to begin with.
Chapter 34

Everything was awful. Emma had turned into one of those girls who had no food in her fridge and moped around with lank hair and dark circles under her eyes. She hadn't unpacked her boxes because everything in them still smelled of Regina's house, and she'd gone back to wearing her grimy old clothes to work because she couldn't bring herself to dig through her packed-up life until she found something better. Piles and piles of couture dresses lay in vacuum-sealed bags in her living room, because she didn't have a guest room in her new apartment and there was no way she was ready to let them near the bedroom where she was being forced to sleep alone.

The only piece of furniture in the whole apartment was a bed, because she hadn't realised that getting thrown out by her girlfriend would also mean taking a trip to Ikea, and she didn't have the energy or the mental strength to do that yet. Instead, she'd begged her old bed off of Mary Margaret and promised to return it as soon as she'd gotten her life back together. Except it had already been two weeks and that was nowhere close to happening yet.

Slumped behind her desk with a big hole in her heart, Emma knew she wasn't getting transferred to the editorial team any time soon. Whatever good work she'd done during the past month had been undone by her sullen face and rapidly shrinking waistline. She wore long sleeves all the time because she was so cold inside and out, and judging by the way people kept looking at her, she was pretty certain that someone on the subs desk had started a rumour that she must be self-harming. She spent most of her days waiting for someone from HR to come over for a 'private talk'.

"Emma," Elsa sighed halfway through week three, when she couldn't physically stand it anymore. She'd rolled over in her office chair and Emma hadn't even reacted to her bumping into the desk. "Come on. You need to cheer up."

"I know," Emma replied. "I'm trying."

"Are you?" Elsa asked cautiously. "You've been wearing the same shirt for three days."

Emma looked down at herself and realised from the oatmeal stain at the bottom that she might be right. "Oh. Yeah."

"Do you want to go out on Friday?"

"Not really," Emma admitted. Elsa immediately fixed her with her hardest look.

"Elsa..."

"It's been nearly three weeks and you need to get out of the house. Come on, we'll get drunk and complain about our love lives. Did I tell you that DJ Dave cheated on me?"

Emma longed to be sympathetic, but Elsa and her DJ hadn't even been dating. They'd slept together a few times and done a butt load of coke, but that had been about it.

"No, you didn't," she forced out. "I'm sorry – are you okay?"

Elsa rolled her eyes. "That wasn't even semi convincing, but thanks for trying. Seriously, let's go out on Friday and have a good time and maybe find some hotties for you to distract yourself with."
"You're going to regret suggesting that when I spend the whole night drinking tequila and complaining."

"I know, but it's better than you sitting at home by yourself drinking tequila and complaining," Elsa pointed out. "Come on, it's what friends are for. I just want you to know that I'm here for you."

Emma swallowed hard, because ever since the floodgates had opened while she'd been sat on Regina's hallway floor, tears kept threatening to spring up at the most inconvenient of moments. Two days earlier she'd found herself bawling her eyes out over an allergy commercial.

"Thank you," she choked out. Elsa blinked when she started sniffing. "I really appreciate that."

"Don't get all weepy on me now," Elsa said, but she reached out and squeezed Emma's shoulder. "You'll be alright. It'll just take some time."

Emma nodded, not trusting herself to respond.

Elsa rolled herself across to her own desk, and Emma went back to staring at her inbox. She couldn't decide whether it was simply because she was being less proactive than normal, but everything seemed so much quieter these days. Her phone never rang, but that was because Regina was gone and so were all of Emma's debtors. She also had less work to do, because when she'd been rushing off at five every day to head to the latest gallery opening, she'd started handing off some of her other assistant tasks to Violet. Apparently she was breezing through them, because now there was very little left for Emma to do herself.

Her inbox refused to offer her any kind of distraction from the pounding in her head, so she leaned back in her chair and sighed.

"Emma!" A voice suddenly bellowed from across the room, causing her to leap three inches out of her seat. She looked up to find Ingrid beckoning her from her office, the sourest expression from her known repertoire plastered on her face.

Fuck.

Emma got to her feet and grabbed a pad of paper so she could dutifully take notes while her boss gave her what would probably be the biggest ass kicking of her career.

Skulking into the office that she so rarely got called into anymore, she tentatively asked, "Yes?"

"Close the door," Ingrid replied. She was typing furiously and didn't look up.

Emma did as she was told before slowly approaching her designated seat. Sitting as upright as possible, she placed her notepad in her lap and waited. Ingrid kept on typing.

After a painfully long pause, she looked up.

"Emma," she said. There was no other part to her sentence, and Emma frowned.

"Ingrid?"

"How are you holding up?"

At once, Emma could feel another prickling of tears that had to be forced back through sheer iron will. "How… What?"

"I'm not an idiot. I know what's happened. I didn't want to fuss around you because you look like
you're carrying several strains of infectious disease right now, but I can't look at your miserable face for another second. So tell me how you are."

That was more like it. The sharp bite of her words even made Emma feel slightly better.

She put down her pen. "Do you want the honest answer, or are you just trying to get me to snap out of it?" It was a true testament to how far their relationship had come when Ingrid didn't immediately throw a book at her.

"Let's try the honest answer for now, and I'll stop you if I find it unbearable."

Emma smiled weakly. "I feel like shit."

"When did you break up?"

"Three weeks ago on Friday," Emma said, then corrected herself. "Well, that was the last time I saw her. Technically she gave me notice of our break-up two weeks before that."

Ingrid blinked. "She gave you notice?"

"She's all about business," Emma said flatly.

"Well," Ingrid said. "That's… worse than I was expecting. No wonder you look like such a mess."

"Oh, thanks a lot."

"Come on. Who are you kidding? I'm starting to miss the early days of when you worked here – you were always hungover, but at least you were somewhat clean."

Emma slumped miserably in her chair. "I've never been like this before – it's never taken me more than a weekend to get over a relationship. I always used to see girls crying over their ex-boyfriends and wish they'd just grow a pair, but now I've turned into them and I don't know how to make it go away."

"I do," Ingrid said, and for half a second Emma believed her.

"Really?"

"Yes," Ingrid said, reaching for two mugs that Emma hoped were clean and placing them in front of her. Then she rummaged in the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a brand of expensive scotch that Emma recognised from Regina's own liquor cabinet.

"It's 11:30 in the morning," Emma said as Ingrid poured out two cups. Her boss didn't seem to care very much.

"You need it," she said, handing one to Emma. "And so do I if I'm going to listen to this without complaint."

Emma was still struggling to believe that she was willing to listen to it at all. "I don't care if you complain. Someone needs to tell me to get over myself."

"Don't speak too soon," Ingrid said, lifting her mug in a toast and taking a sip. "Tell me everything."

And so, against all her good sense, Emma launched into the sorry tale of how Regina had broken her heart by way of contract termination. Until then Ingrid hadn't known the full gory details of their arrangement, although she'd definitely gotten an inkling that there was a lot of money involved when
Emma had started parading around the office in platinum necklaces and Fendi boots. Her eyebrows shot up when Emma mentioned the contract and Regina's half-hearted attempt at threatening to sue her, but otherwise she remained fairly quiet. It was unnerving to say the least.

"And now she's sent me on my way, and I have this stupid empty apartment that I can't afford to buy any furniture for and I'm stuck with a pile of dresses that I'll never wear again, and everything reminds me of her and I'm so angry because this whole thing was totally fucking pointless. She loves me back but she's so stubborn to admit it, so now I'm alone and she's probably already found herself a new companion who actually knows the difference between impressionism and pointillism and doesn't fall over at public events. And I want to hate her but I can't, because she's the first person I've ever loved and I really don't know how I'm supposed to survive without her."

Ingrid was watching her curiously as she ground to a halt. She almost looked concerned.

"She really did a number on you."

Emma scoffed, taking a long drink of her scotch. "You're telling me."

"I'll be honest, Emma – I have no idea if she loves you or not. She sounds like a typically emotionally stunted millionaire who doesn't know what the hell she's doing aside from trying to get as rich as possible. Maybe what her mother said about you only being with her for her money actually scared her, and that's the reason she asked you to leave."

It was possible, Emma had to admit, although it didn't explain why Regina had only started to go off her a week after that. "Maybe. To be honest, I don't really care what her reasons were. None of them are good enough when I know she's just trying to protect herself."

"And why aren't you trying to protect yourself?" Ingrid asked, surprising her.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why are you sitting around looking sad and refusing to eat and not taking care of yourself anymore? She dumped you and your heart is broken – I get that. You need some time to adjust – I get that too. But it's been weeks and you're tougher than this. I think you're not willing to move on because you're still hoping she'll change her mind."

Emma pouted. "She might."

"It seems unlikely. She had plenty of time to tell you to stay when you were still in her apartment," Ingrid said bluntly, and Emma suddenly regretted telling her that she didn't mind her complaining. "She's made her decision and you have to live with that. Get your life back on track and find happiness without her. You were doing so well until this happened – don't let her ruin it."

"But I don't know where to start," Emma said miserably. Ingrid rolled her eyes.

"You can start by unpacking the boxes that are lying around your apartment. If stuff reminds you too much of her, sell it. You need money for furniture, don't you? So sell the Gucci dresses and Louboutins that you're never going to wear again and buy a goddamn couch."

Emma blinked. "But—"

"But you don't want to," Ingrid interrupted. "Yes, I know. You also don't want to open the boxes up at all, and you didn't want to leave her, and you don't want to go out with your friends anymore, and you don't want to be here right now. Tough. You need to suck it up and take charge of your life again. Sometimes that involves doing things you don't really feel like doing."
Emma could feel her jaw wobbling and she begged it to stop. "It's easier said than done."

"I managed it," Ingrid said. "I was engaged to a man for a year and then one day, he just didn't want to be with me anymore. He took off with his things and two weeks later he was living with my sister Gerda."

"What?" Emma blinked at her. She hadn't known that Ingrid had a second sister. Helga certainly hadn't mentioned her.

"We don't talk about her," Ingrid read Emma's thoughts and waved a hand dismissively. "The point is that my heart got broken too, but I didn't lie about crying for months. I got up and I worked my way to the head of a successful publishing firm. I went out and found good-looking men to screw on the weekends, knowing that if eventually one of them turns out to be a keeper then that's great, but it's also not necessary. You don't need her to complete you, Emma. You're fine just the way you are."

Emma's chest was hurting more than it had done all month, and yet it was a good kind of pain. It felt like her heart was desperately trying to tape itself back together.

"I kind of want to hug you," she admitted.

"Please don't," Ingrid said. "You've worked hard to earn my respect, and you've fought your way into the editorial team. Don't mess it up now. They want to take you on full time, you know."

"They do?" Emma asked, her voice cracking.

"Yes, but only if you get your act together," Ingrid said. "I'm willing to lose my assistant to them if I really have to, but I'm not handing you over like this. So buck up, go drinking with Elsa, and don't catch chlamydia because you were too sad to make any of your conquests wear a condom. I will not give you the time off to go see a doctor if that happens."

How the fuck did they get here? Emma stared across the desk at her, her chest filling up with something she barely recognised, and remembered how things had been six months ago – the yelling, the constant undermining, the whining and thinking that none of it was her own fault. Everything was on its head now, and Emma couldn't believe she could be so grateful for a piece of harshly worded advice dished out to her by the boss that she'd hated for so long.

"Thank you, Ingrid," she said quietly. "You're right. I need to get myself together. I promise I'll try."

"Good. Come and talk to me again if you need some more tough love," Ingrid said, reaching out and taking the empty mug from her. "Now get out of my office, and please don't wear that outfit again tomorrow. I really can't look at it again."

Emma somehow managed to carry Ingrid's words with her for the rest of the day, and when she got back home – if you could really call her soulless new apartment 'home' – she didn't just lie down on the bed and stare up at the ceiling until 11pm. Instead, she took a deep breath and headed into the living room. There were at least 20 boxes waiting for her.

She rolled up her sleeves and grabbed the first one. It was heavy – shoes, she realised – and she carried it into the bedroom. She lined up her old boots along the bottom of her closet, then carefully regarded all the new pairs she'd gained since she'd met Regina. After a long pause, she pulled out the sneakers that she'd received for Christmas and the black Louboutins that made her feel like she could single-handedly rule the world, and the rest stayed in the box. She found a marker pen so she could scrawl 'to sell' on the side.
The same happened with nearly all her new dresses – she kept the vaguely practical ones that she could wear out or to work, but anything that reached the floor or required a special kind of bra to make it stay on her body was laid carefully on her bed in its plastic sheath. Her suits and shirts all stayed, because they'd become her favourite things to wear in the whole world and she still loved the way people looked at her when she strode past in a pair of tight leather pants. They were all carefully hung up, and suddenly that was eight boxes done. She let out a breath and returned to the living room.

It took her most of the evening to decide what was staying and what was going. She didn't even get around to unpacking the majority of it, but the boxes made their way into the relevant rooms, and then Emma decided she could deal with the rest tomorrow. It was progress, anyway, and she had to be proud of herself – after all, it was all about the small victories right then.

When she had a huge pile of designer clothes and shoes on her bed, Emma grabbed her laptop and began searching for someone who might buy them from her. She found a woman who owned a second-hand designer store in Queens and arranged for her to come by at the weekend to give her a price for everything. After all that, Emma was exhausted. She carefully moved the clothes back into their bags and boxes and pushed them to the edge of the room so she could finally collapse onto the bed and close her eyes.

There was one thing left, however, and it made her pause.

It was the red jacket. Not her tacky old one that Ingrid was minutes away from actively barring from the office, but the soft new one that had lit up Emma's entire Christmas.

She stepped closer to it and gingerly lifted it to her nose. It didn't smell of Regina's apartment. She guessed that was one of the benefits of leather.

Even so, she climbed onto the bed and lay down with it clutched against her chest, breathing heavily as she imagined Regina going into a store and hunting down this exact jacket just for her. The time and attention she'd put into it. She somehow knew that it hadn't been a Tamara task – Regina had gone out and found this herself. There was detail in it that only she could achieve.

Why would she do that if all she wanted was for Emma to leave?

The jacket wasn't getting sold. There was no way Emma could part with it. Especially not now that it was crumpled against her chest, the leather compressing beneath her greedy fingertips as her incessant, lonely tears stained the collar.
Chapter 35

A/N: Based on past chapters, I think I should include a warning for this one. Nothing terrible happens, but if you were uncomfortable with previous Neal/Killian storylines, then you should probably bear that in mind for this chapter.

Following Ingrid's advice and Elsa's gently bullying demands, Emma let herself be dragged straight to a bar from the office door on Friday night. It was early enough for them to be able to grab a table, and as soon as they settled in, Elsa ordered a row of shots.

"I'm not encouraging this," she clarified as she lined them up along the table. "But you're miserable, and if there's any chance that getting drunk will make you feel better, then I'm going to allow it."

Emma just sighed. She felt heavy and grey. "What happens if I drink too much and get into a fight with the DJ?"

"Then I'll back you up just this once," Elsa said, lifting her first glass in a toast. "And if it just makes you sadder then I'll take you home and hold your hair while you puke. Whatever happens, I've got you."

Emma didn't have the energy to argue with her, so she tipped the first three shots down her throat without so much as a shudder. Elsa followed suit, and by the time other people started arriving, they were both pleasantly buzzed.

"You'll find someone better, you know," Elsa said, gesturing too aggressively with her gin and tonic.

"No, I won't," Emma said. She didn't sound morose, which made a nice change, but her heart still hurt whenever she thought about how true that sentence was. "Regina was perfect. And she was amazing in bed."

"So are lots of people."

"No one I've been with."

"Not even Killian?"

"Especially not Killian. He's like, the complete opposite end of the scale," Emma said, sighing. "Regina could do this thing where she made me come just by kissing my neck and playing with my nipples."

Elsa snorted into her drink. "We've officially reached over-sharing levels of drunk. That's an improvement."

Emma sighed again, slumping further down in her chair and knocking her knee on their table in the process. "Do you think she's already sleeping with someone else?"

"Probably not, if she's as heartbroken as you are," Elsa said carefully. "Do you think if you slept with someone, it would make you feel better?"

"I have no idea," Emma shrugged clumsily. "It's worth a shot, though."

"Okay – who do you like the look of?"
Staring blearily around the packed room, Emma tried to find someone, man or woman, who made her palms tingle even just a tiny bit. She was near-blind from tequila already though, and her search was mostly fruitless.

"I can't see anyone from here. Maybe I should just wait until someone comes over to me and then take the very first person who offers."

"What if they're a total dog?"

"Then I should stop being so fussy," Emma declared. "That could be where I'm going wrong."

Elsa laughed. "Look, if you can't see anyone from where you are, then you know what the answer is."

"What?"

"Let's get up and mingle."

Emma looked down at the whisky coke that had been brought to her two minutes earlier. "But my drink is full."

"Bring it with you, then. You can drink and dance at the same time."

It was way, way too early for dancing, but that wasn't what Emma was focusing on. Instead, she lifted her glass to her lips and sunk its entire contents. The alcohol burned its way down to her stomach, and when she looked back up, Elsa was eyeing her worriedly.

"What?"

"Why did you do that?" Elsa asked.

"I didn't want to spill it." That was a lie, and they both knew it. Emma was just sad, and when she was sad, she got self-destructive.

Elsa sighed. "Fine. But no more for you for a while."

They stood up and began to walk towards the empty dance floor. Emma immediately stumbled to one side.

"Shit," she mumbled as she nearly crashed into someone else's table. "Sorry."

Elsa was looking at her from five feet away. "You're a mess, Em."

"It's all your fault if I am."

"How?!"

"You brought me here."

"I really don't think I can take all the credit for this," Elsa sighed, gesturing to Emma's current sorry state. "But you feel a bit better, right?"

Emma thought about it. "I guess so. My memory is worse, anyway."

"That's good enough for me," Elsa said before leading her across the room.
People were staring at them as they hit the dance floor, and not in a good way. Emma’s limbs were working independently from the rest of her body and she was going to be very disappointed if she was actually expecting someone to come over and sweep her off her feet.

The only sweeping that happened occurred when her foot skidded through a puddle on the floor – one that she suspected she’d probably spilled there herself a half hour earlier – and she immediately slipped over.

Before she could hit the floor, though, someone reached out and grabbed her hand. She felt the jolt of it right through her shoulder, but she hadn't landed on her ass and at least that was something.

She looked up to thank the person who'd saved her and found herself face to face with Killian.

"Oh," she groaned, staggering back to her feet. "It's you."

"Glad I caught you," he grinned. "Does this make me your knight in shining armour?"

"Not exactly," Emma said. "I don't see a big noble horse anywhere."

"You are completely smashed, Swan," he said, stepping closer to her. "Isn't it kind of early, even for you?"

Emma glared at him. "I'm celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"Freedom," Elsa declared as she rushed to her side. "Friendship."

"Can I get in on that celebration? We're friends, after all."

"Of course we are, buddy," Emma said, her voice deadpan. "Except the last time I saw you, you were on E and tried to grope me like 10 times."

"Can you blame me?" he asked, completely unperturbed by her tone. "Let me get you a drink."

"Fuck off, Killian," Elsa said, trying to steer Emma away from him.

"Hey, now," he insisted. "How are you supposed to celebrate sober?"

"She is not sober."

"Stop being so hard on her," Killian said. He turned back to Emma with his most winning smile. "JD and coke, right?"

"I'll buy it," Elsa insisted, but Killian was already striding towards the bar.

"Stop glaring, love, I'll get you something too," he called back at Elsa.

Emma had watched the entire interaction with bleary eyes and a head that couldn't really register what was going on. When she turned back to Elsa, though, even she could tell that she didn't look happy.

"What's wrong?"

Elsa stared levelly at her. "Just to clarify: when I told you to get drunk and have sex with a pretty man, I did not mean him."
"I'm not going to have sex with him."

"Good. Because you remember how he treated you last time, right?" Elsa asked. "Just because you feel like shit doesn't meant you should automatically try and make yourself feel even worse."

But Emma's foggy head couldn't follow her logic, and all she could think about was how badly she wanted another whisky. "You're so pretty, Elsa."

Her friend just rolled her eyes. "Thanks, but you're not having sex with me either."

"I'm really good at it."

"Not right now, you're not," Elsa said, steering her away from the puddle on the floor before she could hurt herself again. "Stay away from Killian, okay? He's only after one thing and you're not exactly in the mindset to tell him no."

Emma pouted. "I don't even like him. Why would I have sex with him?"

"Because that's what you do when you're drunk and sad. Just don't go there again."

It all sounded completely ridiculous, because Emma didn't like Killian and she never had. He was slimy and creepy and rude and she was pretty sure he still didn't have a proper job.

He was also, however, walking towards her with a double JD in his hand, and that was enough to make her grin at him. "Thank you so much."

"Anything for my favourite girl," he said, handing over Elsa's gin and tonic with a lot less flourish.

The rest of his band arrived soon enough, and within 30 minutes the seven of them were crammed onto two sofas with another row of shots lined up on the table between them. Emma was squeezed between Killian and the bassist, whose name she could never remember, while Elsa was on the couch opposite amusing herself by flirting with the other three. She kept glancing across at Emma to check she was okay, but Emma was oblivious to her. She was five shots and four whiskeys down, and she was finally starting to feel good.

"You've washed your hair!" she blurted out, peering up at Killian's dark locks and trying to work out whether it was just the lighting that was making it look less grimy than usual.

"Thanks for noticing," he laughed. He was pressed right up against her with his hand on her knee. She'd already pushed it off a few times, but she'd since giving up trying again. "You know, I hoped I'd see you tonight."

"How do you always end up in the same bar as me?" she asked.

"Fate?"

"Bullshit."

"Okay, fine. You're still set up on my 'find your friends' thing. Sometimes when we can't decide which bar to go to, I just see which one you're at instead."

Even through the thick haze inside Emma's head, she knew that didn't sound okay.

"Wait. So you've been following me?"

"It's only happened once or twice. You haven't been out properly in months."
Emma wriggled in her seat. "Yeah. Well. I've been busy."

Killian was watching her closely, and he seemed to be trying to work something out. After a minute, he said, "David told me that you broke up with that rich lady."

"Oh. How did you know I was dating 'that rich lady' in the first place?"

"Also David," Killian said, and Emma was going to kill him next time she went round to Mary Margaret's. "I'm sorry about it. It sounds like it really sucked."

He couldn't begin to understand how much it sucked. As far as Killian was concerned, Emma had simply been dumped after a six-month relationship – that was even less time than he had been with her. He probably understood exactly where Regina was coming from.

Still, he actually sounded sympathetic, and Emma was a sucker for compassion right then. "You have no idea. I didn't know heartbreak could hurt this much."

"You weren't this forlorn after we broke up, then?" he asked, trying to sound charming.

Maybe Emma should have sugar-coated it, but instead she just said, "No. Not really."

"Oh," he said with an awkward laugh. "Great, thanks."

Emma slumped back against the couch and began sucking down her latest drink. "You're not seeing anyone else, then?"

"Not right now. I guess I haven't met anyone who compares to you."

It was such a terrible line, and Emma rolled her eyes. "I know I keep going on about this, but you do remember that you dumped me, right?"

"Yeah, but I already told you that that was a mistake. I tried to get back together with you months ago, but then that woman showed up at the bar and took you away."

Emma still had very fond memories of that night. "Oh, right. She did, didn't she?"

"Were you two together then?" he asked. When Emma nodded, he said, "Why didn't you just tell me that?"

"Because it was none of your business, and I didn't think it would make any difference to you anyway."

"Hmm. Maybe you have a point," he said, leering at her in a way that she'd never liked very much. "I guess I'm never going to stop chasing you, am I?"

"You have to take a break at some point," Emma responded. "You'll just get tired otherwise."

"Of you? Never."

It was supposed to be cheeky and alluring, but it just made Emma feel dirty. She tried to edge away from him but the guy sat to her right was squished up too hard against her, and Killian's grip on her knee seemed to get tighter any time he felt her moving.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked. Emma wrinkled her nose.

"Not really."
"Come on, it'll be fun," he said, grabbing her hand and yanking her off the couch. She staggered forward, the room immediately starting to spin around her.

"Woah, woah, wait," she said, pulling herself out of his grip. She pressed a hand over her eyes. "I am drunk."

"Me too. Let's be drunk together."

"Emma?" Elsa's voice suddenly piped up from behind her. Emma turned to find her standing nearby, her hand reaching out to steady her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just wasted," Emma tried to laugh. "How much have I had?"

"Too much. I think I should get you home."

"No, no," Emma said, tugging her arm away when Elsa tried to touch it. "I'm okay. I'll just stick to water for a while."

"Are you sure?" Elsa asked. Her eyes were sliding across to where Killian was waiting at the edge of the dance floor. "Do you want me to get rid of him?"

The answer was yes – it was always yes. She wanted Killian to go away and she wanted Elsa to take her home and she wanted to cry all of this bullshit out of her system until she finally felt better. But there was a haze floating over the top of all that, and it was an impenetrable cloud of fuck, I just don't care anymore.

"I'm okay. Thanks, though," was what she said out loud. Elsa eyed her worriedly. "Are you alright with the other guys?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'll probably take the drummer home," Elsa said in the casual way that Emma had always loved. "I'll be keeping an eye on you though, okay? Wave if you need me."

"Sure," Emma said, and then warm fingers were on her wrist and Killian was there, yanking her away from Elsa without a word. Elsa's untrusting eyes watched them go, but then Emma was swallowed up by the crowd and she couldn't focus on looking back at her anymore.

Killian slid his arms around her and before she could adjust her position or swallow down some of her nausea, they were dancing together. She wasn't sure they'd ever done that before – before they'd gotten together, Killian had been too preoccupied with trying to look cool and enigmatic to ever do something as lame as dance. By the time they were dating, the thrill of the chase had worn off and he simply didn't want to.

But now he had her drunk and pliable in his arms, and it was easy enough to guide her through the crowd as the music thumped around them. Everything was blurry, and it took Emma a while to notice that one of his hands was on her ass. She tried to wriggle free but he pulled her closer, handing her a drink that had appeared from God knows where.

"Whose is this?" she asked.

"Yours," he said, pushing it into her hand. "Well, technically it's that guy over there's. But it's yours now."

"I really don't need it," Emma said, trying to hand it back. He refused to take it.

"Drink it, Emma. Stop trying to make me mad," he said, grinning down at her. She rolled her eyes
and kept hold of it, deliberately not taking a sip, and while one of her hands was busy, his returned to her body.

Every now and then she caught a glimpse of Elsa peering at them through the crowd, and she tried to wave, but she kept losing sight of her before she could send the message to her arm that it needed to lift up.

"Stop worrying about her," Killian murmured in her ear. "Focus on me."

Emma deposited the still-full glass on the nearest surface when he wasn't paying attention, and when she turned back around, Killian's arms snaked around her, pulling her flush against his body. She could feel the bulge in his pants and she could smell sweat and beer on him.

She shuddered. She felt sick.

Killian felt her tremble and misread the movement as something else entirely. He leaned towards her with a smirk.

"Do you want to get out of here?" he asked. His lips were wet against her ear, and before she could answer, he was pulling her by the wrist.

"No, wait," Emma mumbled, her tongue feeling too big for her mouth. All of her drinks were catching up with her at once and she was suddenly certain that she was going to puke. "I need Elsa."

"I'll take care of you. Come on, let's go back to mine."

"But—"

And then his lips were on hers, cutting her off. It took Emma a moment to decide whether to push him away or just let it happen.

She was tired, and she was sad, and so she only struggled for a second before opting for the latter. She held onto his shoulders just so she wouldn't crash to the ground while his tongue probed against her lips. Eventually she gave up resisting and let it slip inside.

In a hot, sticky burst of recollection, she realised just how different his kisses were to Regina's – there was no passion. No urgency. No delicate moaning or tingling fingertips. Killian kissed like he was trying to get a job done, and Emma was well aware that right then, that job was her.

She could taste all the beer he'd drunk that night and it wasn't doing anything to help the growing nausea in her stomach, but then he was pulling her through the room, headed for the exit with his hand clamped around her wrist. Emma looked blearily around, trying to find Elsa in the crowd, but there were too many people.

"Killian," she forced out, her words feeling fat and leaden. "Stop."

"Come on," he repeated, pulling her harder.

She yanked back on his arm and he finally turned to look at her. "I don't want to come with you."

"Sure you do," Killian said, slipping an arm around her waist and trying a new tactic. "I'll make it worth your while."

He wouldn't, because he never had. All he'd ever done was use her and make her feel worthless, and right then she was feeling about as worthless as she ever wanted to feel again.
"No," she said, stepping back and nearly tripping over her own feet in the process.

"Emma, come on," Killian sighed. He caught her elbow and pulled her towards the door. "I'll just get you home, then. No funny business."

"I don't want to go anywhere with you."

"Emma, Jesus Christ. What's the matter with you?"

It was the same old tone that he always used. Why are you sulking, Swan? What have I done this time?

Her legs were heavy and her mouth was filling with water and she needed to get away from him. Six months ago, she would have stumbled into this mistake all too readily, just because she was feeling sorry for herself and thought that having another reason to be miserable was all that someone like her deserved. And sure, maybe she wasn't worth that much, but right at that second – right around the time she decided that being miserable without Regina was bad enough, but being miserable in Killian's bed would be way, way worse – she realised that some things just weren't worth it. She'd never get better again if she kept allowing people to treat her like she didn't deserve to.

Maybe the most incredible woman in the world had dumped her by the wayside and broken her heart, but that didn't mean Emma had to keep on letting it get broken.

Killian's hand was pressed sweatily against the small of her back and he was still trying to guide her towards the door. Rage filled her up like her chest had caught fire and she yanked herself away from him.

"Get off me," she snapped. "I said no. I'm always saying no to you – why won't you listen?"

"Emma, calm down," Killian rolled his eyes. "I'm just kidding. Besides, you've never had a problem doing stuff before. Why—"

"Before," Emma spat, and she was definitely too drunk for this because the words were flying out of her mouth like rain. "Not now. And 'before' you emotionally blackmailed me into fucking you in a sink – I didn't want to go anywhere near you then either. I'm sick of you treating me like this, Killian. I'm not nothing. Why does everyone think they can get away with acting like I am?"

Killian was looking at her like she was insane, and she finally thought that she'd gotten the message across. For a second, he even looked sorry.

But then he scoffed and reached out for her arm once more. "Let's talk about this outside. You need to chill out."

"No. I need to go home."

"You can still go home with me if you stop getting hysterical."

Emma genuinely thought she might scream. She opened her mouth to call him every name under the sun – to tell him to get the fuck off her and never, ever come near her again – but before she could, a blur of blonde hair and sequinned fabric was darting in front of her. A fist landed squarely against Hook's scowling face with a thumping noise that sounded like a sack of flour being dropped to the floor.

Killian staggered backwards and crashed into the wall, his legs collapsing comically beneath him.
"She said no," Elsa bellowed down at him, her fist still clenched. "How many times does it need to be said before it gets into that thick skull?"

Killian just blinked up at her, looking slightly dazed. The bouncers had seen the commotion and were rushing over, but Elsa was too busy turning towards Emma to notice them.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm..." Emma started, glancing down at Killian again. No one was helping him off the floor, and he was staring down at his cupped hand in shock. "Elsa, he's bleeding."

"Good," Elsa snapped, grabbing Emma's arm and tugging her towards her. "Did he do anything to you?"

"He... kissed me," Emma said, and at once Elsa was spinning back around again.

"Oh, you are dead—"

"Elsa," Emma stammered, grabbing her arm and pulling her back. "It's fine. Just leave it."

"It's not fine! I could see you saying no to him from the other side of the fucking room and yet he still didn't seem to register it."

"She kissed me back!" Killian protested from the floor, and at once Elsa was advancing on him again.

"I always knew I hated you, you slimy little—"

"That's enough," one of the bouncers cut in. He stuck a meaty arm out to stop Elsa from hurling herself at him. "Time to go."

"Are you kidding me?"

"You're making a scene, princess."

"Of course I'm making a fucking scene. That asshole was going to rape my friend."

"Elsa," Emma grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Can we not throw that word around, please?"

"Be quiet," Elsa snapped back at her. "I'll be coming to you in a moment."

She continued arguing with the bouncer for the next five minutes, her finger gesturing towards Killian with a violent stabbing motion as he eventually struggled up off the floor. There was still blood trickling down from one nostril and his hair was a sweaty mess, and for a brief moment Emma actually felt sorry for him.

But that moment came to an abrupt end when he sneered at the pair of them. "She doesn't need you to defend her, Elsa – she was up for a bit of fun until you came bursting in."

At once, Elsa was launching herself back towards him. She got caught by the bouncer at the last second and before she knew it, they were being escorted outside. Killian was shoved out the door at the same time as them, and he skulked off into a cab by himself before Elsa could break anything else on his body.

"Wow," Emma said shakily, watching him go. "That was—"
But Elsa was turning to look at her, her eyes fierce and unforgiving. "What's the matter with you?"

Swallowing hard, Emma said, "Nothing."

"What were you thinking?"

"I... I guess I wasn't really."

"I could have guessed that much," Elsa said, rolling her eyes. She abruptly reached forward, pulling Emma into a hug that was tight enough to make her ribs hurt. "You need to stop doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Self-destructing any time stuff goes wrong," Elsa said, pushing her away and looking her dead in the eye. "Are you going to be like this from now on? Trailing after people who are only going to hurt you just because you think you deserve it?"

Emma could feel her jaw wobbling as she said, "No, of course not. I just drunk too much and I—"

"You did it on purpose. You wanted something bad to happen," Elsa interrupted, hugging her again to soften the blow. "But at least this time you had the good sense to tell him to back off before anything else could go wrong."

Against all odds, Emma felt herself lifting her arms so she could hug Elsa back. "I know. I'm sorry."

Ignoring the crowds of people trying to push their way past them, they held each other for another minute. Emma still felt wobbly and hazy and she wasn't entirely sure that her need to puke had fully gone away, but Elsa's arms were making her feel a bit more secure at long last.

"Thanks for kicking his ass," Emma mumbled into her hair. Elsa laughed sharply.

"I've been wanting to do that for a while," she said. She pushed Emma away and cupped her chin. "Look, I'm happy to look out for you while you're getting this whole Regina thing out of your system. But at some point you need to stop punishing yourself for what happened between you two, and you need to remember that you're an amazing, kickass girl who deserved so much better. Would you have even considered kissing Killian a month ago?"

Emma sighed. "No."

"Right. And I know that's because you were with Regina and you were happy, but it was also because you'd finally started realising your own worth. That hasn't gone anywhere, okay? It's hiding for now, but it'll come back if you just let it."

Emma's nose had started fizzing again, and she flared her nostrils to try and get it to go away. "Stop saying nice things to me when I don't deserve it."

Elsa sighed, linking their arms together so she could finally guide them away from the bar. "Of course you deserve it, dumbass. You're just really, really stupid."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you home. I think you've had enough excitement for one night."

"What about your drummer?"

"No drumming for me tonight," Elsa said, leading her towards a cab. "I need to get you home safe.
I'm not above confiscating your phone right now either."

Emma rolled her eyes, but she couldn't honestly say she would have minded that. It was about time she had someone keeping an eye on her and her stupid fucking decisions.

They slipped into the cab together and Emma squeezed Elsa's hand. "Sorry for ruining your night."

"You didn't," Elsa said, squeezing back. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"Yeah," Emma said, looking out the window as they pulled away from the curb. She hardly ever sat in cars anymore now that Regina and her Mercedes had driven out of her life forever, and even that thought managed to make her heart thump sadly. "Me too."

The designer clothing lady showed up at Emma's apartment at precisely 1pm the next day. Tanya was a tiny lady in her mid-fifties, and she was wearing more blue eye shadow than Emma had ever seen on one person before.

Emma had put all the dresses, shoes and purses back on her bed, and Tanya slowly began to pick through them, her eyebrows lifting any time she saw something she really wanted.

"Good taste," she commented, looking down at the black ballgown Emma had worn to her very last event with Regina before Christmas.

"Thanks," Emma said dully. "Someone else picked most of them out."

"Rich boyfriend?" Tanya asked.

"Something like that."

Tanya continued to sift through the pile, discarding a couple of items that Emma had managed to snag or scuff, before agreeing to purchase everything else. She quoted Emma an amount that she knew was barely 30 percent of what she had originally paid but still added up to a hell of a lot of money, and Emma took it. She watched as Tanya counted out the notes with hands that were considerably steadier than her own.

Just as Tanya was leaving, loaded up with boxes and positively giddy from her haul, she spotted the red leather jacket that was hanging on the outside of Emma's closet. She grimaced.

"You didn't want me to take that as well, did you?"

The disgust on her face was unnecessary, quite frankly, but Emma didn't have the energy to get offended by anything anymore. "No. That one's staying with me."

"Oh, thank goodness," Tanya said, trotting down the stairs. "Bye bye now, darling."

Emma watched from the window as someone drove off with the past six months of her life packed up in the back of a truck. As soon as she was gone, Emma grabbed her phone and called Elsa.

"Have you heard from Killian yet today?"

Emma nodded, wrapping her arms around herself. "Three texts."

"Asshole," Elsa spat. The stupid water taxi they were on was chugging along slowly and the icy wind was starting to make both of their ears ache. "I really will rip his dick off the next time I see
"I don't think that's necessary. He won't be using it for a while anyway – not now that he's cockblocked himself with that nice black eye."

Elsa chuckled. "My hand really hurts, actually."

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry. Was it worth it, though?"

"Absolutely. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Ikea was looming on the horizon and Tanya's money was burning a hole in her pocket. When they finally arrived, Emma felt a jolt of nervousness in her stomach.

She leapt off the boat like it was sinking.

"Come on," she said, false cheeriness ringing through her words. "Let's do this."

Elsa followed her cautiously. "You okay?"

"Sure. I'm just excited to finally get a couch."

Elsa's eyebrows rose, because she knew she was being lied to. She didn't say a word, though – she just quietly followed Emma towards the store and listened to her hysteria like it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Do you think I should get a futon?" Emma gabbled as they walked through the doors. "Do normal people still own futons? What if I have someone stay over? I should get a futon, right? What do you think?"

Emma realised after about five minutes that she had never talked this much before in her life – not even when she'd accidentally taken ecstasy thinking it was aspirin and then had ended up falling asleep in the back room of a club once it had worn off. Elsa's eyebrows kept flicking up as another chain of nonsense dribbled from her mouth, but she didn't comment on it. She let Emma continue to talk about bookshelves until her voice went rusty.

Because Emma felt sadder than she'd ever felt before, and miraculously it was only about 60 percent because of Regina: now she had her stupid fucking near-mistake with Killian to hold onto, and it was making her entire body ache. If she didn't talk, she would think about it. If she thought about it, she would start crying in the middle of the Ikea marketplace.

And apparently Elsa was the best friend she could ever hope for, because she helped her pick out a couch, a table and chairs, a new bed and some actual kitchenware without so much as a murmur of complaint. She even helped Emma argue with the guy on the delivery desk for a full half hour until he agreed to reduce the ridiculous cost of next-day shipping, and then helped her carry all the smaller items home.

She stayed for dinner that night, and between the corny movie they watched and the pizza they ate sitting on Emma's living room floor, Emma started to feel like maybe she could get better. She was laughing again, at any rate. The ache in her heart wasn't so bad when she was listening to her best friend telling a story about her clumsy-ass sister falling off a horse.

But Elsa was gone the next day, and Emma had to spend her Sunday alone waiting for her new furniture to be delivered. When it arrived, it somehow made the place look even smaller. Emma slowly ambled around the living room, looking at the odd items that were scattered across the wood
floors, wondering why they looked like they'd been dropped there from a great height. She couldn't keep looking at them, so she headed for the kitchen, deciding to rearrange her new cutlery organiser just to give herself something to do.

As she walked through the door, she spotted the bottle of Jack Daniels sitting beside the microwave. It was half-empty and she'd already managed to lose the cap somewhere.

She reached out for it with a sigh, her chest aching and her heart feeling a little resigned. She lifted the bottle to her face and sniffed.

It would have been all too easy to tip her head back and drink until her numbness at least went a little fuzzy, but something stopped her. There was water in her mouth and something hard knotting in the base of her throat.

She stepped towards the sink and emptied the bottle down the drain. When it was all gone, she rinsed the bottle out and left it drying with the vague idea that she could buy some flowers to fill it with. That might at least brighten her soulless apartment up a bit.

After organising the cutlery like she'd planned, Emma shuffled back into the living room and sat down on the still-plastic-wrapped couch. She listened to the way it crinkled beneath her, and suddenly she wasn't so sure that she was going to be okay after all.

The week was a grey one. Emma went to work, tried her hardest not to think about what a shitheap her life had turned into, and went home again. She'd eventually managed to piece her furniture together, and by Tuesday she'd even talked herself into starting to cook proper meals again. But after a few days the novelty had worn off, and she went back to her old ways: pyjamas on, a jar of peanut butter in one hand, a spoon in the other.

She plopped herself down on the couch on Friday night and tried not to think too much about the fact that she'd automatically put on a foreign-language documentary. She told herself it was okay as long as she was barely concentrating on it.

She was just rooting around in the bottom of the peanut butter jar when there was a knock at the door. She groaned. There was a very good chance that it was Killian waiting on the other side – he'd been texting most of the week wondering why she wasn't speaking to him, and as her silence had worn on, his irritation had only grown. But the knock wasn't as loud and obnoxious as she would have expected from him, and so she forced herself to put down the jar and shuffle over to the door. Maybe the family living below her had finally had enough of the sounds of crying and dramatic French shouting coming from her apartment and had come upstairs to stage an intervention over it.

She tugged open the door and froze. She must have been more exhausted than she'd realised, because apparently she was flat-out hallucinating.

"Hi," Regina said. She spoke so casually that for a second Emma had to remind herself that a whole month and the most painful break-up of her life still separated them. "Is now a bad time?"
Chapter 36

She'd gotten thinner – that was the first thing Emma noticed. Regina's cheekbones had always been pronounced enough to sharpen a knife on, but now her face was verging on gaunt. Even beneath her buttoned coat, Emma could see that the imaginary weight that had been bothering her since the day she'd hit puberty was long gone.

Emma so badly wanted her to look terrible, but she didn't. She was paler than before and she somehow also looked three inches shorter, but her eternally intimidating presence still lingered around her just like her rich perfume did. Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her black pea coat, and Emma knew her well enough by then to know that it was because she was nervous.

Emma, meanwhile, was wearing her pyjamas, her hair was tied up in a messy bun, and she was pretty sure she must have peanut butter around her mouth. She rubbed the back of her hand over it just in case, all the while begging her heart to stop pounding.

"Regina," she said. No matter how much she'd thought it, she hadn't said that name in a while. It tasted strange. "What are you doing here?"

Regina was peering over her shoulder, taking in the mostly unfurnished apartment and its already-drawn curtains. It was warm, at least, and Emma had gotten out of the habit of leaving her dirty clothes lying all over the floor, but nonetheless – it was pathetic. The sorry fucking state of how she was living told Regina everything that Emma herself wouldn't about just how badly she was doing.

"I wanted to…" Regina started, before realising that she was still staring at the apartment and shaking herself back to reality. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Well. Thanks for calling first, I guess."

"I didn't think you'd want to hear from me."

"You're right. I wouldn't have," Emma said. "So, what? You came over anyway? Does what you want matter so much more than anything else that you decided to just show up even though you knew full well I wouldn't be happy to see you?"

Once, Regina's eyes might have flashed at that. Now she just pursed her lips. "No. I told myself I shouldn't. But…"

She was being too timid, and it was already getting on Emma's nerves. "Could you get to the point, please?"

"Can I come in?"

"No," Emma said flatly. "Luckily for me, I don't have to do what you want anymore. So if you have something to say, say it from the doorstep. Then you can leave."

Of all the times Emma had imagined this scenario in her head – and there had been plenty of them – her voice had never sounded so cold. Usually Regina showed up at her door and Emma just shut it in her face, although there had been many occasions when Regina had fallen to the ground begging for forgiveness, her 'no apologies' rule be damned. In those scenarios, Emma had usually forgiven her, because in that world of imaginary reconciliation, Emma was the bigger and better person, not Regina.
Sometimes Emma imagined other things. When it was really late – late enough for the sky to be turning from black to navy blue and her eyes to be itching from exhaustion – she would imagine Regina not saying anything at all. Instead, she would just back Emma up against the door and kiss her hard enough to tell her everything she wasn't brave enough to say out loud. Whenever Emma imagined that, her hand would slide down beneath the covers and into her panties, and she would writhe beneath the sheets with Regina's name on her lips. When she came, it never satisfied her. It only seemed to empty her out entirely.

Never in any of those scenarios had Regina looked so unsure of herself.

Right then, she was wetting her lips. She wasn't wearing lipstick. "Please, Emma. I just want to talk."

Emma groaned, her eyes rolling back in her head, and as much as she hated herself for it, she felt herself taking a step backwards. She could never resist Regina when her voice went all soft like that.

Regina stepped past her and walked into the living room. Her eyes settled on the French documentary that was playing on Netflix, and Emma rushed over to pause it.

"I didn't put that on," she said too quickly. "It was that… auto-play thing."

Regina nodded. "Of course."

"Do you want a drink, or…?" Emma asked, though she had no idea why she was offering. Regina shook her head.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

Emma had already gotten a 'please' and a 'thank you' out of her, which had to mean something was seriously wrong. She gestured for Regina to sit down before rushing into the kitchen to hide the peanut butter away.

After quickly checking her reflection in the shiny surface of the toaster, Emma took a breath deep enough to make her lungs feel raw and stepped back into the living room. Regina was perched on the edge of the couch, still wearing her coat and sitting bolt upright.

"So," Emma said, walking towards her. When she sat down, it was as far down the other end of the sofa as possible. "You want to talk."

"I do," Regina said. Her knees were bouncing. "You look… well."

It was a blatant lie to end all lies. Emma's skin had turned a murky shade of grey, like she hadn't been exposed to sunlight in the past month, and she'd barely eaten anything apart from her late-night peanut butter binges since she'd walked out of Regina's apartment four weeks ago. She made a point of not looking in the mirror when she climbed out of the shower, but sometimes she couldn't help but catch a glimpse of the new sharpness to her collarbone and shoulder blades.

"Thanks," was what she said out loud. When Regina didn't continue, she asked, "Is that all you came to say?"

"No. Emma, I…" Regina trailed off, and her hesitation made something inside Emma snap.

"Regina. It's Friday night, and you've come barging in here wanting something from me," she said. "Could you just cut to the chase?"

The look Regina threw her was an odd one. It was a messy hybrid of intimidation and
disappointment, and it didn't suit her.

"I'm trying. I just need a bit of—"

"You always need something. I'm tired of being the one to give it to you," Emma said. "Say what you came to say, or leave. It doesn't make any difference to me."

Regina looked at her with so much sadness on her face that Emma felt her blackened heart crack. "It doesn't?"

"No," Emma responded as firmly as she could. "It doesn't."

There was a wobble to Regina's jaw that normally would have destroyed Emma's resolve entirely, but not tonight. Tonight she was tired and crabby and more than a little heartbroken, and so she crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

Regina eventually straightened up and said, "I need to talk to you about something."

"Yeah, I got that."

"I need to ask… I need to ask how you've been doing."

"Oh, fucking spectacular," Emma drawled. "Look around you, Regina. You're looking at someone who's living the life of her dreams."

"What I meant was, how have you been doing since—"

"Since you kicked me out of your apartment and I thought I was never going to see you again?"

"Emma," Regina bit out, and finally there was some of her old self in her voice. "Can you stop being so difficult for five minutes and let me speak?"

"No, actually, I can't. Because it wasn't true, or because it was a really bitchy thing to do when I was already as close to rock bottom as it's physically possible for someone to get?"

"...both," Regina said awkwardly. "I didn't deal with any of this very well. You have to know that I didn't want it to turn out this way."

Her heart was pounding, and it was because she'd never been particularly good at lying. She was happy to see Regina again – every single cell in her body had missed her desperately and even now, even with how badly she was hurting, it was really difficult not to crawl towards her on the couch and bury her head in her lap and just sleep away some of the pain.

Regina, at least, looked slightly repentant. "I know. I shouldn't have said that."

"Because it wasn't true, or because it was a really bitchy thing to do when I was already as close to rock bottom as it's physically possible for someone to get?"

"...both," Regina said awkwardly. "I didn't deal with any of this very well. You have to know that I didn't want it to turn out this way."

Emma was surprised by just how quickly the rage blossomed inside her. It felt like someone had switched the gas on and then thrown a lit match haphazardly in the direction of her chest.

"I don't know that, actually," she spat. "Because you broke my heart about 15 times in the space of two weeks and then you told me to leave and never come back. You haven't called or let me know you were sorry or even just that you were thinking about me – you just bought me off with this
apartment and then you left me to deal with everything all on my own."

"Emma—"

"No," Emma interrupted her. She rubbed a hand over her face. "You know what? You should go. I don't think I want to listen to any of this."

"What?" Regina stammered. "Why not?"

"Because you don't get to walk in here after a month of silence and try to assuage your own guilt. It doesn't work like that. I'm not doing great, but I've been getting better, and if you stay here any longer then I'll start to convince myself that you've changed."

"And what if I have changed?" Regina asked. Emma just scoffed.

"That's not possible."

"Emma—"

"You need to leave," Emma said, standing up and heading for the door. "I don't want to hear it."

"Emma…"

"Go, Regina."

There was a sharp intake of breath from behind her, and then Regina blurted out, "I'm sorry."

Emma stopped in her tracks. She hadn't even reached the door. She knew her voice would tremble, but she forced herself to ask, "What did you say?"

"I said I'm sorry," Regina said. When Emma turned to stare at her, she couldn't believe how small she looked.

"You…" Emma started, shaking her head. "You don't apologise."

"No."

"Not ever."

"No, I don't."

"Then why…?"

"Because I owe you that much. I've treated you horribly, and you deserved better, and I'm sorry for all of it. I know you don't want to see me, but I had to come here and tell you that."

"But…" Emma stammered. She'd never been so completely speechless before in her life. She couldn't even finish that sentence, and so instead she just walked back over to the couch.

"I've been an idiot," Regina said as Emma sat back down. She was biting down on her lip between each sentence, and Emma could see from the faint scars that she'd been doing that a lot recently. "And you were right."

"Right about what?"

"Everything, annoyingly," Regina said. She tried to smile, but Emma didn't return it. "I was…
scared. Really scared. I got comfortable having you in my life and I was so happy for you to be there, but suddenly I realised that it couldn't carry on. I was too attached to you and it was easier to push you out than it was to wait for you to decide you didn't want to be with me anymore in a few months from now."

Emma blinked at her. "That is so fucking selfish."

"I know," Regina said miserably. "I've always had a problem with that."

"So, what? Are you saying that you regret telling me to leave?"

"Yes. I… Look. You know me better than anyone. You know I close myself off when I'm feeling too vulnerable."

"I already told you that. And you told me I was wrong," Emma said bitterly.

"Because I hated you for knowing me so well, and I hated myself for letting you know me so well."

"And why would it have been so hard for you to just admit that in the first place?" Emma asked. "Instead of acting like I'd done something wrong and telling me I'd overstayed my welcome, why couldn't you just be honest and tell me you were scared?"

Regina was gritting her teeth, and it was obvious that even now, the idea of admitting something that would make her sound so weak made her want to curl up and die. "You know why."

"Yeah, because you're emotionally stunted and you've somehow decided that being alone is easier than depending on someone else," Emma said with a roll of her eyes. "But you're still here now, finally being honest about it."

"Because I miss you," Regina said softly. "I thought once you'd left, I would just get over you and go back to the way I was before. But you got under my skin, and that's never happened before. I haven't stopped thinking about you since the day you left."

Emma had been waiting a whole month to hear those exact words, but instead of making her feel better, they just sent her rage bubbling right back up again.

"I saw Killian again, you know," she spat out, and the way Regina recoiled was the first thing to ease the ache in her chest in a full month.

"You… did?"

"Yep. A week ago. We went out drinking and we danced and we had a lot of fun together."

She was missing out a few key details, but that was because she wanted to be cruel. She wanted Regina to hurt as much as she did.

Except the slight wetness in Regina's eyes only made her feel a whole lot worse. She watched with a lump in her throat as Regina glanced away from her, blinking hard. "That's... Are you back together?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"No. But you can forgive me for asking."

Emma sighed. "No, we're not together. I was sad and I was being stupid because I needed someone to distract me."
Regina nodded to herself. "I can relate to that."

Shock jolted through Emma's chest like lightning and she immediately wanted to cry a little bit. "Have you...?"

"No," Regina said. "There hasn't been anybody else."

"What have you been doing since I left?"

"Working, mostly," Regina said. "And spending time with Henry."

"How is he?" Emma asked, and they both heard her voice softening slightly.

"He's fine. He misses you, but he's being very grown up about it. He comes round every weekend and always asks me to make garlic bread with him."

Emma smiled in spite of herself. "He's a good kid."

"He is. I'm so grateful to have him back in my life," Regina said, taking a deep breath. "Emma... I owe you so much and I've treated you so badly. That apology was well overdue."

"You don't owe me anything," Emma said, because it was true. Sure, Regina had broken her heart and made her feel worthless, but plenty of people had done that. Regina had also paid off all her debts and bought her an apartment and shown her real, unconditional kindness for the first time in her life. She also might have shown her what real love was like, although the jury was still out on that one. "But I would be interested in hearing why the apology only came now."

"What do you mean?"

"It's been a month," Emma said. "What happened to suddenly make you realise you needed to say sorry?"

A strange expression came over Regina's face. It almost looked like it contained some humour.

"That's actually to do with Henry too," she said. Then she paused. "Well. That and the fact that I saw Robin again for the first time in a while."

Hot, sticky jealousy crept up Emma's limbs as she asked, "Oh?"

"He said that you two had met before Christmas. When I told him we'd broken up, he informed me that you threatened to castrate him if he was ever mean about me again."

Emma didn't want to smile, but she couldn't help it. "I stand by that."

Regina smiled back at her. It was tentative and soft. "And I'm grateful. He wasn't very happy, mind you, but I've stopped caring so much about that."

When Emma didn't respond, Regina reached down for her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. As she handed it over, Emma caught a glimpse of Henry's unmistakable scrawl.

"What's this?"

"It's a creative writing project Henry had to do at school," Regina explained. "The topic was 'home'."

Emma opened up the paper and spotted a series of animal drawings that had zero relevance to the topic in question. She laughed through her nose.
"Typical Henry."

Regina just smiled in response, so Emma crossed her legs and began to read.

_I have two homes, because my mom and dad aren't married anymore. My dad's apartment has a pool in the basement, which is really cool, and I used to like living there more. But now I like my mom's house more, and when someone asks me where my home is, I think of that._

Emma sighed. "Oh."

"Keep going," Regina said. It was the kind of gentle command that Emma had gotten so used to over the past year, and she complied without thinking about it.

_For a while I didn't talk to my mom very much, but now I love her a lot. She makes me laugh and she tells me stories all the time, and when I ask her if we can go to the zoo she usually says yes. I feel bad for being mean to her before, but she says she forgives me because that's what you do when you love someone._

My mom's friend Emma used to live in our house too. She was really nice. She told me that Mom talks about me a lot when I'm not around, and that she misses me all the time and she wishes I could always live with her, but she's really great at her job as an art collector and she can't give that up. Emma also told me that my mom doesn't want to take me away from my dad, and that made me realise that my mom's a good person, because my dad does sometimes try and take me away from my mom. When I'm in his house, I miss my mom but I'm not really allowed to talk about her. When I'm in my mom's house, I miss my dad but I can talk about him whenever I like as long as I'm saying something nice.

Emma doesn't live with us anymore and I miss her, and I think my mom does too. She's not as happy anymore. I still like being at home with her, but sometimes I wish Emma was back because Mom used to laugh more when she was there. It felt like we had a proper family again and I miss that.

_I love my home because my mom is always there to give me hugs and tell me she loves me. Emma used to help me with my writing but now she's gone, Mom and I do it together. She's not as good at it and she can't think up funny names for characters like Emma could, but I like doing it with her. She always tells me she's proud of me, and when she says that it makes me feel all warm and happy._

_I always feel like that when I'm with her, and that's why I think my home isn't a place – it's a person. My mom is my home, and she always was, even when I didn't want her to be._

Emma swallowed. There were three gold stars stuck to the bottom of the page and a _Well done!_ written in swooping red pen.

"Does this mean you're only here because you want me to help Henry think of character names again?"

Regina laughed. She took the paper back and placed it carefully inside her purse.

"No," she said. She took a breath, finally saying the thing that she'd been trying to force out since she'd arrived at the door. "I'm here because I miss you. I want you to come back."

The entire time she'd been sitting there, Emma had been half-anticipating and half-dreading that exact sentence. She closed her eyes.

"Regina. Come on."
"I mean it. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, and I miss you every day. I was an idiot and I shouldn't have treated you this way and I just hope you can forgive me so we can start again."

She was speaking urgently, like this was the only time she'd be brave enough to get the words out and she didn't want to run out of time. Emma kept her eyes closed because she couldn't look at her when she was being sincere like that.

"That's not fair," she said quietly. "You can't hurt me like you did and then come crawling back expecting forgiveness. Not when I'd started to move on."

"Had you?" Regina asked, and Emma finally looked at her.

"Not yet," she said. "But I was trying."

"Emma, I will do whatever it takes. I mean it," Regina said, her words coming even faster. "Whatever you want. If you want to stay living here and start dating again, I'll do it. If you want to move right back in with me and pretend that nothing ever happened, I'll do that too. I'm just... I'm so sad and I miss you and I read what Henry wrote and it just made me realise how stupid I'd been. We were so happy and everything was simple and then I had to go and complicate it because I'd gotten so used to not having anyone, not needing anyone, when that was actually just bullshit. I deliberately closed myself off years ago because it was easier than getting rejected again – first my mother decided she didn't love me, then my husband, then my own son, and so I threw myself into my work and pretended that, fine, if no one needs me then I don't need anyone either. Except I needed you and when I realised that, I couldn't handle it. It's hard to need someone when you've spent so long telling everyone you're fine on your own."

Emma recognised that feeling all too well, but she refused to empathise with it.

"And so you want me back," she said flatly.

"Yes, I do."

"Just like that."

"Well. Not—"

"And what happens when it's another six months from now and you get scared all over again?" Emma asked. "Are you going to kick me out again, then come back when you've calmed down?"

"It won't happen again," Regina said firmly.

"That isn't a promise you can make, Regina. People break up."

"I know they do. But I shouldn't have broken up with you." Regina's voice was suddenly shrill, and Emma knew this wasn't going how she'd planned – the situation was getting out of control, and Regina was rapidly beginning to realise that Emma might still say no to her. "I mean it – whatever you want, I'll do it. If you want more money, or... or another contract that signs over—"

"Wait," Emma interrupted, lifting one hand. "Wait. You seriously think you can buy me back into your life?"

Regina looked genuinely confused when she said, "...no?"

"Regina, for fuck's sake!" Emma blurted out. She'd never wanted to strangle someone so badly in her life. "This isn't about your money! I told you I loved you and I didn't do that because I was
hoping to hang onto all my Marc Jacobs purses. I don't give a shit about how rich you are – you
could go bankrupt tomorrow and I'd still love you. But I sure as hell won't be signing any contracts
again – that was where this whole thing got fucked up in the first place."

"But... I needed it," Regina said quietly. "I wouldn't have let you in in the first place if you hadn't
signed. It gave us security."

"Because you knew you could get rid of me at any moment if you really wanted to?"

She'd been expecting Regina to deny it, but she just deflated.

"Yes," she said. "I told you from day one that I don't like relationships. I was married for eight years
and when that ended, I realised that my husband hadn't loved me all that much to begin with. He
liked my money, though, and he liked all the stuff that pretending to love me could get him. When
you signed the contract, it meant we wouldn't have that problem, and that's the only reason I allowed
you further in. And I don't regret it," she added before Emma could protest. "I don't regret a second
of it. But I was still terrified the day I woke up and realised you'd met my son, you'd met my mother,
and you'd seen every tiny, ugly part of me that I've ever hated. You told me to go see a therapist for
my food issues and I didn't even try to destroy you like I would have done if anyone else had
suggested it, and that was because I trusted you and cared about you. And when I realised that, I got
scared and had to put a stop to it."

"But why couldn't you have just told me that?" Emma asked softly. "We could have talked about it.
We could have stopped all of this."

"I'm not very good at being honest about my feelings," Regina admitted, and Emma was sent roaring
back to the night in bed when she'd tried to tell her that she loved her. Rather than listen, Regina had
slashed through the conversation with something that meant Emma would never be brave enough to
say it again. "My reflex is to close up and push other people away, and I thought it was working just
fine until I realised that was exactly how I nearly lost my son. You brought him back for me, and
then I lost you instead."

"You didn't lose me," Emma said. "You told me to go. It's different."

"I know. I know it is," Regina sighed, and Emma could see that she was longing to reach out and
grab her hand. "I should have talked to you about it, but that would have involved showing you even
more vulnerability. I couldn't do that. If I let you in any further then it would hurt all the more when
you left."

Emma sighed. "You know how I've always called you manipulative, and you love to act like it's a
compliment?"

Regina swallowed. Her eyes were big and wide and dark. "Yes?"

"This is exactly why it's not," Emma said. "You can't force other people into moulds that you've
created because it's easier than facing your own feelings. You can't break my heart just to protect
your own."

"Except I broke mine too," Regina pointed out quietly. "If that makes a difference."

"It doesn't. It just makes you even stupider."

"But now I'm trying to give us a fresh start. And I'll give you anything you want – I mean it. Name it
and it's yours."
"You aren't getting this, are you?" Emma groaned. Against all her good sense, she shuffled forwards and took hold of Regina's hand. She was startled by how desperately Regina squeezed back. "I don't want anything from you. I just want you. And if I can't have you for free, then I don't want you at all."

"You've got me for free!" Regina protested, but Emma shook her head.

"No, I don't. Your mother warned you not to date someone who only wanted you for your money, and it wasn't until she said it that I realised that's exactly what you think. You've been through that once before, and so now you think that no one could ever love you for anything else. So you dumped me and then bought me an apartment to try and make it better, and you knew I couldn't say no because it was literally a choice between that or homelessness. You paid off my debts, which is still the best thing anyone in the world will ever do for me, but I'm always going to owe you something for that, no matter what you say. Your money hangs over us and even though of course I love it, I think it closes you off. There's a reason why your first instinct just now was to offer me a new contract."

"But... what can I do? I'm always going to have money, unless something really terrible happens, and I have to try and protect that."

"I know you do. I'm not saying you should be stupid about it. I'm saying that you should stop thinking the worst of everyone, including yourself, and you should believe that someone could love you without it."

"You wouldn't have dated me in the first place if it wasn't for my money."

"Yes I would," Emma snapped. "The first time you called me to your gallery, you suggested this arrangement and I asked why we couldn't just date like normal people. I didn't want a contract or a salary. Sure, I said yes because I knew the money would help me out, but that's not why I said yes. I did it because I fell for you on day one and I would have done anything to get to see you again."

"But you never said—"

"Yes I did," Emma interrupted her. "I told you all this, but you just assumed I was lying. You have this totally warped view of yourself where you think no one could possibly love you because you're so mean and angry and fat, apparently, even though you weigh 100 pounds soaking wet, and that's why you pushed me away. You think you're cold and heartless and you don't need anything or anyone, and that's exactly why I can't come back to you – because I have zero reason to believe that things will change."

Regina's head snapped up. "What? You're not coming back?"

"No, Regina. I'm not."

"Why not?"

Emma groaned, pulling her hand free from Regina's grip. "I just told you. Because we'll get back together, I'll let myself get comfortable again, and then in two or three or seven months, you'll panic and push me out again."

"I won't!"

"Give me a break. I know you better than anyone – that's exactly what you'll do."

There was something shimmering in Regina's eyes and Emma forced herself not to weaken at the
sight of it.

"Emma…" she said quietly. She looked so small. "Please. It took so much for me to come here."

"I know it did," Emma said. "And I'm really grateful that you said sorry. That means a lot. But you hurt me, and I'm pretty sure you'll hurt me again if I forgive you now. I'm not sure it's possible for you to be with someone for real until you fix all the issues you have with yourself."

"I don't have any issues with myself," Regina said, but her voice was lacking its usual snap.

Emma didn't have the energy left to list off all of Regina's problems: she hated herself. She didn't eat properly and she punished herself whenever she did. She closed herself off and toughened herself up, and then she wondered why no one wanted to come near her. Then, when someone did, the first thing she did was tell them to leave again.

Besides, Emma herself wasn't exactly a picnic. Two broken people couldn't magically mend one another just because their jagged edges very nearly lined up.

"Do you love me, Regina?" Emma asked. Regina blinked, leaning back half an inch like she needed more room to absorb the question.

"Do I…?"

"Do you love me?" Emma repeated flatly. She knew the answer – she'd known it for a while. Even when Regina had looked coldly down at her on the hallway floor and told her to get out, she'd known what the answer really was.

She also knew what the answer would be right then.

"I…" Regina started, glancing toward the door. When she opened her mouth, Emma's chest jolted.

But Regina just shook herself, dusting off the same old issues and tightening them around her body like armour.

"I can't say that, Emma."

"You couldn't say 'I'm sorry' until 10 minutes ago," Emma pointed out. "And I know what the truth is anyway."

"Then why do you need to hear it?" Regina asked desperately.

With a sigh, Emma reached out to squeeze her hand one last time. "Because I need to know that you've gotten better. But I'm not sure you have."

"But—"

"I love you," Emma said quietly, the words cracking in her chest. "And I think I always will. But you need to go."

"What? Why?"

"Because you hurt me, and I need to learn how to get better. You do, too."

Regina was looking at her like she'd just snatched away her entire world. "Emma, please. I need you to be the bigger person here."
It would have been so, so easy to reach out and hold her and agree to be exactly that. Every part of Emma's body wanted to.

"But that's exactly what I need from you too," Emma said softly. "Please, Regina. I need you to go before you convince me to do something I'll regret."

And after opening and closing her mouth four more times, desperately trying to think of the words that would convince Emma to stay with her, Regina got up. She clutched her purse to her stomach and nodded.

There were three words she could have said that might have fixed things. But Regina's heart was frightened and it was black, and she wasn't brave enough to say them. Maybe she never would be.

"Take care of yourself," was what she said instead.

"You too."

And then Regina was gone. The door clicked shut behind her. Emma stayed on the couch with her legs crossed and her hand still tingling from where Regina's had been in it.
Chapter 37

The next three months passed in a haze. The ache in Emma's chest eventually began to subside, although she couldn't pretend it had fully gone away just yet. Sometimes whole days would go by without her noticing it, but then she would see something – a flash of red lipstick, a pair of impractically high heels – and a sad little thump beneath her ribs would remind her why she wasn't quite okay again yet.

She cut her hair, even though Elsa warned her not to until she was certain it wasn't some kind of self-mutilation. Emma had ignored her and walked into the office one Monday morning with it suddenly swinging above her shoulders, and her friend had just sighed. She refused to admit that it looked good because that would have involved encouraging Emma's self-destructive behaviour, and that was increasingly dangerous when she was only one bad day away from getting an angsty tattoo on her forearm.

"Thank God for that," was what Ingrid said when she passed by her desk. "I was getting so sick of looking at those rat tails all day long."

Emma glared back at her. "My hair was never ratty."

"You looked like a Disney princess after a particularly long bachelorette party," Ingrid informed her. "This is much better. You're an actual grown up at last."

Then she'd kept walking, going into her office and not shouting for Emma to get her a coffee because Emma didn't have to do that anymore. After a month of forcing herself not to think about Regina or wonder why she wasn't calling or wish that she would, Emma had finally proven herself worthy of being a member of the editorial team, and had been transferred there full-time as a junior editor. Violet, meanwhile, had turned out to be a better assistant than Emma had ever been – she actually wanted to take Ingrid's notes, for one thing, and she didn't constantly disappear for long lunches that really involved her sleeping off a hangover in the break room.

Really, things should have been good. Emma finally had a job she enjoyed, as well as her own apartment and a totally healthy bank balance. Her promotion had come with a raise, albeit a small one, and she'd managed to buy enough furniture to make her new house feel like a real home. She didn't have rent or a mortgage to pay, thanks to the person who she wasn't allowed to think about, and so for the first time in her life she actually possessed a savings account. It was looking good, too. So maybe Ingrid was right – maybe she was a grown up at last. Maybe the whole Regina incident had been the sort of character-building origin story that would only lead to bigger and better things for her.

Except there was a hole in her chest that never seemed to fill up, and Emma was exhausted from ignoring it. She started working out again because going to a gym and beating the crap out of a punching bag was a much healthier way of channelling her sadness than her preferred method of drinking until she passed out, but her newly sculpted arms and toned stomach did very little to make her feel better about herself.

She'd also started dating again, but never with women. She told herself that that was one step too far, but in reality she knew that no woman could ever match up to the one who'd broken her heart. It was unlikely that any man could either, but at least they were unlikely to look like her or smell like her or wear the same fuck-me heels that made Emma's palms go sweaty.

So she went out on a few dates. Most of the time she took the guy back to her apartment afterwards,
because she preferred bad sex to sleeping alone, and then she gave him a fake number and never saw
him again. Whenever she and Elsa went out on a Friday night, Emma made sure she found a stranger
to curl herself around in the back room. She had a kind of half-idea that if she slept with enough
people, the depression would eventually be fucked out of her. In reality, all she ended up with was a
very low opinion of herself and a shitty reputation in the drug store where she went to get her Plan B.

After three full months of this, she made a point of not going out one weekend. She told herself it
was because she'd had one too many near misses with the herpes virus by then and she didn't want to
push her luck, but in reality she was just tired. She missed staying at home on the weekends and
listening to someone softly telling her about their week.

"You know, it almost looks like someone with taste lives here now," Elsa said. She had gone round
to check on Emma when she'd turned down a night of clubbing that Saturday, and was lounging
back on the couch peering around her at the various items that Emma had accumulated in her living
room.

"Gee, thanks," Emma said, tucking her newly short hair behind her ear. She was only just starting to
realise that cutting it the same length as Regina's was a mistake, because now even the simplest of
gestures reminded her of her. She shook the thought out of her head. "Maybe in six months it'll
finally be convincing."

"I wouldn't count on it. What the hell is that?" Elsa demanded, using her beer to gesture to the
knitted blanket that was thrown over the chair in the corner.

"I found it in a thrift store," Emma said. It was white with a purple ribbon threaded through the
edges, and it matched absolutely nothing else in her apartment. "I thought it was kind of cute."

"You thought wrong. It's a shame you don't have a fireplace in here so we could burn it at once."

"There's a stove," Emma shrugged, then reached out to grab Elsa's ankle when she immediately tried
to get up. "I'm kidding."

"Don't ever tempt me with arson when there's an ugly-ass throw involved," Elsa said, settling back
and swigging her beer. After a beat, she commented lightly, "You're still not drinking, I see."

"No, I'm not."

"You don't sound very pleased about that."

Emma sighed. "It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge deal," Elsa insisted. "How's it been going?"

"...okay. It's been hard. But I finally realised that I drink too much when I'm trying to ignore my
problems, and I needed to put a stop to that."

"Well," Elsa smiled back at her. "I think that's some good progress right there. Well done."

Emma just shrugged. She didn't feel very worthy of congratulation.

"What problems are you trying to ignore, though? You're over Regina now, right?" Elsa asked.
When Emma didn't respond, she repeated, "Right?"

"I don't know," Emma sighed. "Maybe. Or, no, not really. I don't think about her so much but I
definitely still miss her."
"But you had that date with that really cute doctor last week," Elsa said. "What was his name?"

"Whale," Emma said flatly.

"Ew, seriously?"

"Yeah. It's his last name, but I think he gets off on people calling him it because it reminds him of how he saves lives for a living." Emma said. After a pause, she added, "He asked me to call him 'doctor' in bed."

"Emma," Elsa sighed. "You've got to stop putting out on the first date. No wonder you can't get any second ones."

"Excuse me, but the reason I don't have second dates is because I refuse to give out my number and then I kick the guy out of my apartment as soon as the sun has risen. No one is complaining about my skills in the bedroom, trust me."

"That's what everyone thinks," Elsa pointed out.

"Sure, but when I went out with that Walsh guy, he came in like 40 seconds and then had to run home with his tail between his legs. I was, I quote, 'too hot to hold it in'."

Elsa snorted with laughter. "That's quite the compliment. I guess I can forgive you for not wanting to see him again, although I can't vouch for the rest."

"The rest were all… fine. Nothing special. We talked and we danced and we had sex and then we said goodbye. I never wanted any of them to hang around."

Frowning, Elsa said, "Then maybe you're right. Maybe you aren't over her yet."

"I will be eventually," Emma said. "It's just going to take some time. She was… special."

"Yeah," Elsa admitted. "Hot and rich and good in bed. That's a tough triple threat to score."

"Yeah. Anyway," Emma said, waving a hand through the air. "Let's not talk about her. Tell me about the guy you're seeing."

"Well," Elsa said, immediately shimmying forward with an excited grin. "He's called August and he's a bartender and he has a motorbike. He goes upstate every weekend to drive around the woods there and he said he's going to take me next Saturday."

Internally, Emma thought that sounded like the beginning of a horror movie about a serial killer and his too-pretty-for-her-own-good victim. But she knew she was probably only thinking that because she was single and resentful, so she smiled. "That's great. How did you meet him?"

"Three weeks ago when you and I went to Kirby's and I lost you because you were locked in the back room with that guy who sold fridges for a living—"

"Yeah, okay," Emma said, quickly waving a hand. "Maybe let's skip over that part."

"Anyway, I couldn't find you so I went to the bar to ask if anyone had seen you, and August was working. He said he'd only seen one beautiful blonde that night and she was standing right in front of him."

Her cheeks had turned pink, and it would have taken someone a whole lot more heartless than Emma to not be happy for her. "He sounds amazing. But if you do go racing off into the woods with him,
please send me your location every 30 minutes."

Elsa was beaming. "Deal."

Elsa left eventually, leaving Emma to deal with her first solo Saturday night in three months. It turned out she’d managed to work her way through every foreign-language documentary Netflix had to offer, and although she now knew far more than she’d like to admit about the Korean War, she couldn’t say she felt any better for it. Usually the movies just sent her to sleep while she was still lying on the couch. More often than not, she had weird dreams that were painted with angry brushstrokes while she slept.

She turned the TV off and lay down against the cushions. Her upstairs neighbours seemed to run some kind of nightly salsa class from the comfort of their living room, but apparently even they had gone out that evening. Everything felt very quiet as Emma lay there with her eyes on the ceiling, her hands folded on her stomach.

She heard a buzzing from her phone and sighed, assuming Elsa had left something there and needed to rush back round to get it. In fact, if she came back, maybe Emma could convince her to stay the night. She’d pass it off as not wanting her to walk home by herself, although really she just needed someone to talk to so she wouldn’t go crazy talking to herself.

She grappled around on the floor for her phone and lifted it up. Then she blinked. She sat upright.

*Incoming call from: Regina*

Shock hit her like a train and she nearly dropped the phone altogether. She’d never managed to assign a picture to Regina's contact because she always used to slap the phone out of Emma's hand any time she tried to take a photo of her, but even through the plain black screen that was flashing up at her, Emma could sense Regina nervously waiting for her to pick up. This wasn't a butt dial or Henry calling her on his mother's behalf again – this was the real deal. She just knew it.

She was so panicked by that fact that she didn't manage to answer before it rang out. Her screen went dark once more, and when she tapped the home button it helpfully informed her that she had one missed call.

"Shit," she muttered. She knew she had absolutely no reason to pick up that call, and Regina must have known that too. It had been months since they’d last spoken, and surely that could only be a good thing. Emma shouldn't care that right then Regina must be staring despondently down at her phone, her lips pressed together, hating herself for making the call in the first place and hating Emma even more for not being kind enough to answer it.

Emma groaned and rolled her eyes. "For *fuck's sake.*"

She hit the 'return call' button. She held her breath.

"Hello?"

*Oh, God.* The sound of her voice snaking down the line, so fucking *hopeful* with just those two syllables, made Emma's entire body go hot. She fell back down on the couch and closed her eyes.

"Regina," she said, her voice catching slightly. She cleared her throat. "Hey. Sorry, I… uh. I missed your call."

She thought she heard Regina smile. "That's okay. Thank you for calling me back."
"No problem," Emma said. There was a long pause before she asked, "So, what's up?"

"Oh. Well. I..." Regina faltered. Emma could practically hear her biting her lip. "I'm sure you probably have plans tonight. But I was wondering if... if maybe I could see you."

Emma's eyes narrowed. "See me?"

"Not a date," Regina quickly clarified. "I just wanted to talk to you about something, and I didn't think dropping by your apartment again would be a good idea."

That soundly weirdly considerate coming from her, and it made Emma frown. "Why do you want to talk to me?"

"I've..." Regina started to say something, then stopped herself. "Emma, look. If you don't want to speak to me then I understand, but I would really like to see you. This isn't something I want to discuss over the phone."

"You're not pregnant with my kid, are you?" Emma asked, and her eyes actually watered when Regina chuckled back at her.

"No. I think you're safe."

"Cool. I mean... anyway," Emma said, pressing her knuckles against her forehead. "When did you want to meet?"

"Well, I'm free right now. But it's Saturday night, so I'm guessing you're not."

If Emma had been smarter or less in love with the woman on the other end of the line, she would have pretended that was exactly the case. But instead she heard herself say, "I don't have any plans. I'm free too."

"Oh," Regina said, sounding pleased. "Would you... Did you want to come to my place?"

She didn't. She so didn't. Except she was already responding. "Sure. I'll head over now."

"I can send Sidney to get you."

"That's okay, Regina. I have gotten used to riding the subway again."

"Okay," Regina said, and yet again Emma could hear the smile in her voice. "Thank you. I'll see you soon?"

"Yeah. See you soon."

Emma hung up without saying goodbye. The second the call was over, her panic set in.

"Oh no," she muttered, getting to her feet and starting to pace around the apartment. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

This was a terrible idea. Regina couldn't possibly have anything good to say to her – in fact, Emma was probably being summoned because Henry was engaging in classic cry-for-help behaviour and had submitted an erotic story for his creative writing class. Emma knew that seeing Regina wouldn't help anything – in fact, this would almost certainly make everything worse.

And yet she was already diving into her closet, pulling out her tightest dark blue jeans and a black sweater. She switched on her curling iron to warm up while she applied some make-up, and then
styled her hair into the short curls that had become her new signature look since her princess locks had been hacked off.

_I hope she likes the shorter hair_, Emma thought to herself, then immediately wanted to smack herself.

"It doesn't matter what she likes," she snapped, hoping that if she said it out loud it would harden her resolve. "You're going to go round for 10 minutes, listen to what she has to say, and then you're going to leave. The end."

Why she found herself putting on perfume, she had no idea.

"Emma," Regina said as she opened the door, because that was her favourite kind of greeting. 'Hello' and 'hi' meant nothing when you could use the person's name and let them know just how important they were to you.

"Hey," Emma replied, her thumbs looped into her pockets to stop her from awkwardly waving.

Over the past three months, Regina hadn't regained any of the weight she'd lost since she'd shown up at Emma's door. She hadn't lost any more either, which Emma had to take as a positive thing. Otherwise she looked much the same: tentative smile, perfect make-up, just a hint of a shadow puddling beneath her eyes.

She also looked nervous. Her fingers were tapping against the edge of the door.

"Thank you for coming," she said, taking a step back. "Do you want to go through to the living room while I get us something to drink?"

"Sure. Just water for me," Emma said, walking into the apartment that still managed to smell like home.

She could feel Regina's curious expression on the side of her face way before she asked, "…really?"

"Yeah. I've, uh… been steering clear of alcohol recently," Emma shrugged.

Regina raised her eyebrows, but she didn't question why that might be. She gestured for Emma to go into the living room before disappearing into the kitchen.

When she returned with a glass of water in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, Emma was sitting bolt upright in what used to be her spot on the sofa.

"You've cut your hair," Regina said as she sat down. Emma immediately reached up to fiddle with it.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm still getting used to it."

"I like it. It looks very sophisticated," Regina said, and Emma despised herself for how warm those words made her feel.

Emma didn't say thank you, because she'd been telling herself for the entire ride over that she wasn't going to give Regina the upper hand no matter what. Instead, she just nodded and sat back. Regina's eyes automatically flicked down to watch as she crossed her legs.

"So," Emma said after a silence that was just long enough to be uncomfortable. "It's been a while."

"It has," Regina said, clasping her hands together. "Thank you for coming. I really thought you were
going to say no."

Still hating herself for being such a fucking sucker when it came to Regina, Emma smiled tightly. "I was curious."

"Well. I hope I won't disappoint," Regina said. Emma expected some kind of explanation to come next, but Regina just fell silent again.

After a few moments, Emma cleared her throat. "Regina. I know I said I didn't have any plans tonight, but that doesn't mean I wanted to just sit here in silence."

"Right," Regina said, nodding. "So. I wanted to tell you something."

"I got that when you called."

"Of course," Regina took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she was about to say. "Here it is: I'm in therapy."

Emma's eyebrows shot up. That was not what she'd been expecting. "You are?"

Regina nodded, and for the first time since Emma had met her, she actually looked nervous. "You asked me a long time ago if I'd ever consider it. At the time I thought it was ridiculous, but after we spoke back in February, I started to realise that maybe you had a point."

"Wow. Regina, that's… really great," Emma said, and it nearly broke her heart all over again to see how relieved Regina looked. "How's it going?"

"Good, I think," Regina said. She reached out for her coffee to try and hide her trembling hands. "At first it was difficult to adjust. I'd gotten used to not telling anyone anything that could make me look… weak. But it's been a few months now and I think I'm seeing the benefits."

"What do you talk about?"

"A lot of things. My work, my mother. My food issues," Regina admitted somewhat reluctantly. Then she took a breath and said, "And you."

"Me?"

"I'm afraid she's been subjected to the sorry tale of how I drove you away far too many times," Regina said with a sad smile. Emma hesitantly returned it.

"I'm really happy to hear that you're seeing someone," she said. "But… you know that doesn't fix everything, right?"

"I do," Regina sighed. "But I'm trying. Really. You told me that you wanted to try and get better, and I'm doing the same."

"Well, that's great. Has she said anything useful so far?"

Regina hesitated. "She had some comments on the way I conduct my business arrangements."

"I'm going to assume you're not talking about your board meetings," Emma said dryly.

"No. Emma…” Regina faltered. Her fingers were wrapped tightly around her mug even though Emma knew it must have been burning her. "I found a new companion."
Emma blinked. She should have been expecting this to happen at some point, but that didn't stop the news from crushing her heart like it was caught between two rocks. "Oh."

"His name's Graham," Regina said, carefully watching Emma's face. "I met him at one of Zelena's God-awful parties."

"Right," Emma said, gritting her teeth so that her jaw couldn't tremble. She took a breath and wondered how long she reasonably had to stay there before she would be allowed to walk out and cry. "And how long... How long have you...?"

"Well. You see, that's the thing," Regina admitted. "It lasted two weeks. He was perfectly nice and he already had a few useful industry contacts, but I couldn't go through with it. He asked if he could stay over here one night and I just told him to get out."

Emma wasn't sure whether she was supposed to be pleased about this or not. "Oh."

"I told my therapist about it and she looked like she wanted to strangle me. She asked me why I'd gone down that route again, after everything that had happened with you, and I told her it was because that was the only kind of relationship I enjoyed. So she called me an idiot and said that the only relationship I've ever enjoyed was the one I had with you, and by breaking up with you for a ridiculous reason and then starting the same cycle all over again, I was either being naive and thinking that I could stop myself from getting hurt again, or I was looking to punish myself for hurting you in the first place."

Emma laughed weakly. "She actually called you an idiot?"

"She has a very no-nonsense approach to therapy," Regina said. "I think you'd like her."

"Maybe I should go see her too," Emma said. When Regina smiled back at her, it felt like no time at all had passed between them.

But then Emma had to ruin it all by asking, "Why did you find someone else?" Her voice cracked as she spoke, and Regina's face immediately softened with regret.

"Because I was trying to move on," she said. "I kept missing you and it was torture, so I thought that if I went back to my old ways and found an attractive man to distract me, things might get better."

"Did they?"

Regina just looked at her. "I already told you it only lasted two weeks. What do you think?"

Emma should have been happy to hear that, but she wasn't sure that was an emotion she could summon anymore. All she could imagine was Regina sitting alone, miserably wishing someone was there to hold her, and it hurt her heart. She wished she could reach out and touch her.

"What do you want from me?" she asked. Regina was watching her worriedly, like she'd been waiting for that question since Emma had walked through the door.

"I want your forgiveness." The sentence had the kind of grim determination beneath it that told Emma she'd been rehearsing this for days.

"Forgiveness for what?"

"For everything. For luring you into my life with the promise of making things better for you when really I just made everything worse. For uprooting you and bringing you into my home because I
was selfish and lonely, and then kicking you out again because I was selfish and scared."

"Regina," Emma sighed. "You're being too hard on yourself. You also paid off my—"

"Also, for trying to buy you," Regina continued like Emma hadn't said a word. "For using my money as a way to get to your heart and then acting like you were the worse person for it. But mostly for the way I treated you towards the end – you were right. I should have talked to you and told you how I was feeling. Maybe we could have worked through this together."

Emma blinked at her for a moment. "Wow. Therapy really suits you."

Offering her a weak smile, Regina replied, "You know I hate to say this, but you were right. I've needed this for a while."

"I'm right a lot, actually," Emma said. "People just always assume I'm talking crap for some reason."

"Maybe I only believe you now because you've got proper grown-up hair."

Emma automatically reached up to twirl a strand of it around her finger, and Regina looked at it with so much longing that it was nearly impossible not reach out and hug her.

"If I tell you that I forgive you," Emma asked quietly, "What then? Do we finally part ways for good, and you can feel better about yourself knowing that I'm not mad at you anymore?"

"Not quite," Regina said. "Because, as is typical of me, I also want something else from you."

"That sounds about right," Emma said, rolling her eyes and only half joking. "What is it? Do you need a creative writing tutor for Henry?"

Regina laughed. "No, although he would leap at the chance."

"What, then?"

The pause that followed should have told Emma everything.

"I want you back," Regina said. Emma was all too ready to sigh and shake her head, but Regina was already cutting over the top of her. "Listen to me, Emma, please. I want to be with you. And I mean without contracts, without the promise of money, without forcing you to go to events every night or getting furious at you any time you're too busy. You can move into my apartment and make mac and cheese every night for the rest of our lives if you want – I don't care. I just want you back – no bribes, and no conditions."

"But…" Emma said, forcing herself to remain steady because it would have been all too easy to cave. "Why? We've been through all this. We broke up. There was a reason for that."

"The reason was that I was an idiot, and I was scared, and I hurt you because it was the easiest thing to do. But I'm working on myself, and I'm trying to be the person you deserve. And I can't promise that I won't ever hurt you again because, well, you know me too well for that. You'd never believe me. But I can promise to try harder, and to listen to you better, and to fight for you even when things get tough. I can promise not to run away again."

There was a roaring in Emma's head that sounded like a fire. It was getting harder to breathe.

"Therapy can't have changed you that much," she said slowly.

"It hasn't. I'm still the same old me," Regina said, gesturing down at herself with a little less self-
loathing than Emma had come to get used to. "But I suppose I'm more self-aware now, and I'm trying to be less of an asshole."

"And is that supposed to be enough?" Emma asked. "Am I supposed to just go, 'oh, you broke my heart and made me think I'd never be able to fall in love again, but as long as you're sorry then I guess it's cool'?"

Regina sighed. "You know, this is exactly why I never used to apologise to anyone."

"Just because you said sorry doesn't automatically mean people have to forgive you. You do know that, right?"

"Yes, of course I know that," Regina snapped, and Emma felt an overwhelming surge of relief when she heard the tone of her voice shift. She'd missed many things about Regina, but their constant bickering was by far the most unexpected. "I fully understand why you might not want to come back to me. But I'm still allowed to ask, aren't I? Do you think I could live with myself if I didn't try?"

Regina had always had a flair for the dramatic, and right then it warmed Emma all the way down to her broken little heart.

"I get that," she said quietly. "But… I'm not sure that it's enough."

Something that was either anger or despair flashed in Regina's eyes, and she bit out, "It's not enough? It's not enough that nothing is right for me anymore, and that I'm begging, actually begging, for you to give me another chance?"

Emma could only look back at her, and Regina must have seen something that looked like pity on her face, because she finally snapped.

"Fine," she said, slamming her mug back down on the table so hard that it splashed coffee onto the carpet. "That's just great. If me being in love with you isn't enough for you, then I guess you're even more stubborn than I thought."

Everything in the apartment suddenly went very still. A tremor took hold of Emma's body and threatened to topple her to the floor.

"You're…" she started, but her voice cracked. She swallowed and tried again. "You're what?"

For a second, Regina looked just as irritated as before. Then the realisation dawned over her and she went pale.

"I…" She cleared her throat. "Nothing. It's not important."

"You're in love with me?" Emma demanded.

"Emma, it's not—"

"Since when?"

"Does that really matter?"

"Of course it matters. Since when?"

There was a tell-tale dark flush in Regina's cheeks that meant she was both embarrassed and annoyed. "Don't sound so surprised. You must have known."
"Yes, Regina, I knew – but you also refused to say it for months. I'm allowed to be a little shocked that you've finally grown some balls and blurted it out."

"Don't talk about balls right now," Regina snapped, and it was impossible for Emma not to laugh at her when she was being so self-righteous. "And stop giggling! This is a serious conversation!"

"I know, I know," Emma said, pressing a hand over her mouth. "It's just… ridiculous. This whole thing is so stupid."

"Well, I'm glad you think so," Regina glared at her.

"Regina, stop pouting. Tell me – since when?"

With a sigh that shook her entire body, Regina said, "Since day one, you idiot."

"Oh, I'm the idiot here?"

"Of course you are! I fell for you the second I saw you arguing with that stupid wannabe-rockstar in Barnes & Noble. Why the hell else do you think I took you out for a drink and then wouldn't stop calling you? Do you think I do that with strangers on a daily basis because I'm just such a kind person at heart?"

"I've never suspected you were a kind person at heart," Emma said, totally deadpan. Regina's cheeks flushed even darker.

"Is this supposed to make me happy I told you?"

"You've barely told me anything yet."

"What else do you need to hear?" Regina all but exploded, and Emma could see that she was bordering on collapsing under her humiliation. "I fell in love with you, and I ignored it because I didn't have the time or the inclination to be in love with someone. I kept assuming you would just leave because I was never very nice to you, but you got closer and closer and I loved it, and I kept ignoring the fact that you were making me happier than I'd ever been in my life because the second I acknowledged it, I would be screwed. Then you tried to tell me you loved me and everything went to hell anyway."

"How did it go to hell?" Emma asked, and for some reason the giggles were building up inside her again. This whole thing was completely fucking absurd, and suddenly she wasn't sure it mattered how much Regina had hurt her – under it all, she was just an idiot. An idiot in love who had been too stubborn to admit it to herself.

"You know how. Because I was a coward and told you to leave when I should have just said that I love you too."

"But now you're suddenly willing to tell me?"

"Yes, because I've been without you for four months and I'm miserable and absolutely nothing is worth this," Regina said. "I was ashamed because you saw how I acted around my mother, and how you had to take care of me afterwards, but being without you isn't somehow better than being humiliated by that."

"Regina," Emma sighed. "Why are you so stupidly fucking stubborn? You could have just said."

"I know," Regina said, suddenly reaching out to grab hold of Emma's hand. "I could have. I should
have. But I've never been in love before – not like I am with you – and I handled it terribly. There are a hundred things I could have done differently and I wish I had, but it's too late for that now. All I can do is apologise and tell you I love you, and hope that you'll be braver than I've been."

It sounded like Regina was talking to her from down a very long tunnel. Emma's head had gone soft and foggy, and there was only one thing she could concentrate on.

"You're in love with me," she said, sounding dazed. Maybe the more she repeated it, the more it would make sense. "You're in love with me."

Regina looked like she was going to snap at her again, but then she saw the dreamy expression on Emma's face and it just made her chuckle. "Yes, although I have no idea why."

Her gentle laugh curled its way through Emma's chest and before she could stop herself, Emma was giggling all over again. "You're in love with me."

Regina joined in, although it was obvious that she didn't even know what she was laughing at. "You're not taking this seriously."

Because Emma was clutching her stomach with her free hand, and tears that were half from laughter and half from stupid relief were rolling down her cheeks. "You are such an idiot."

"I know."

"I can't believe you did all this. We could have been together this whole time. We could have been happy."

"I know," Regina repeated, and she so badly wanted to sound mournful and sincere, but the giggles had taken hold of both of them and all she could do was choke out another, "I really am sorry."

"Say it again."

"I'm sorry."

"Not that – the other thing."

Regina smiled and squeezed her hand once more. "I'm in love with you, Emma. Even though you're a moron and you drive me absolutely crazy."

Emma sniggered and wiped her eyes. "It helps that you're just as dumb as I am, though."

"It does."

"Say it again."

"Emma…"

"Just once more. Please."

Regina edged towards her, and for a second Emma thought she was going to kiss her. She felt her entire body lean toward her of its own accord, but Regina just looked deep into her eyes, no longer laughing. "I love you, Emma, and I'm sorry for hurting you. I want to be with you for real, and I would like it if you could forgive me, but I won't force you into it. This is your decision."

There was hope in her face, though. Hope that made Emma's brain melt into a pool at the base of her skull.
She reached out without thinking and pulled Regina forward, kissing her hard, peppering her lips all over her mouth and cheeks and forehead. She felt Regina's entire body relax, her relief puffing out of her like a wisp of smoke, and Emma's own chest loosened slightly with it.

"I'm not being a pushover," Emma muttered, pulling away from Regina's mouth by an inch.

"I know that," Regina said, but her eyes had already fluttered closed. Her hands were squeezing hold of Emma's waist, but she didn't move to kiss her back. She didn't trust herself to do that yet.

"I just really, really missed you," Emma clarified.

"I really missed you too," Regina sighed. She paused before admitting, "I've had walls up around me for so long, and only someone as wily and ridiculous as you could have chipped your way through them. I don't know how you managed to make yourself such a comfortable presence in my life, but I do know that I'll never stop loving you, Emma. Trying to ignore it only meant that you got hurt, and I won't ever forgive myself for that."

Emma let out a sound that was half a laugh and half a bubble of relief bursting. She dipped her head and caught Regina's mouth again, and this time she felt her finally starting to kiss back.

Her hands slid into Regina's hair, remembering in intense detail the thousands of times she'd kissed her like this and how wonderful it was to feel her leaning into it again. Regina's fingernails were digging into the small of her back, and it was like they'd finally scratched an itch that had been bugging Emma for months.

She could feel the happiness brewing up inside her, but there was something niggling at the back of her mind. She pulled away from the kiss so abruptly that she caught Regina's blink of disappointment.

"If you do any of this again," Emma said, brushing Regina's hair away from her face, "I'll take that Camille Henrot painting you love so much and I'll throw it off the balcony."

Regina smiled softly. "I won't. I promise."

"Cross your heart?" Emma demanded, and Regina threw her the soppiest, happiest grin Emma had ever seen in her life. She realised then that she didn't even need an answer.

"Cross my heart," Regina said anyway, and Emma believed her. She didn't feel even the faintest shred of doubt.

She crawled forwards and buried herself in Regina's neck, not kissing her anymore but just holding her because she'd missed being cradled by Regina's arms more than anything. Regina immediately pulled her closer, hooking Emma's legs over her own until she was curled up in her lap, and she held her tight. When she pressed a kiss against Emma's forehead, everything somehow felt right again.

"I missed you," Emma sighed against her shoulder, and she felt Regina's chest swell beneath her.

"I missed you too, darling," she said. "And I'm never letting you go again."
Chapter 38

Epilogue

Regina's hand was in hers, because that's where it usually was nowadays. Even though Regina had promised that she wouldn't expect her to go to events anymore, Emma still found herself following her to most of them – not because Regina would have minded if she'd said no, but because Emma would have missed her while she was gone.

Besides, Emma knew everyone now. Regina's people were her people, and she didn't have to feel a sick sense of dread whenever she walked into a gallery. If Zelena or Moe were there then she would do her best to avoid them, but otherwise she was content to float. Regina would always be on the other side of the room shooting her a delighted smile whenever she looked for her, anyway.

Right at that moment, though, they were standing together with their fingers interlocked. It would have been a beautiful moment if Regina hadn't been distracted by a painting that was giving Emma a headache.

"It's really ugly," she whispered, and Regina rolled her eyes.

"Be quiet."

"You're not seriously going to spend money on that, are you?"

"I'm considering it. The more you say you hate it, the more tempted I am." Regina had a wicked smile on her face, and Emma had to resist the urge to barge her into the flimsy canvas.

"As long as I never have to see it again, I guess."

"Actually, I was thinking of hanging it up in my bedroom."

Emma took a horrified step back. The painting was made up of sludgy browns and the kind of greys that always reminded her of expired meat, and she knew Regina was bluffing about wanting it. She also knew, however, that she was stubborn enough to buy it just to spite her, no matter how hideous it was.

"I'll never, ever come round again if you do."

"You wouldn't be able to stay away from the under-floor heating for long," Regina said. Annoyingly, she was right.

Emma hadn't moved back in with Regina again. Taking things slower this time round seemed like the smarter option – and besides, she had her own apartment now. An apartment that was small and cosy and felt weirdly like the home she'd been searching for her entire life. She had a bed with enough blankets and duvets piled up on top of it that even Regina couldn't manage to steal them all when she deigned to sleep over, and by coercing Elsa into helping her with promises of pizza and beer, Emma had even managed to decorate the place without getting too much magnolia paint on the floorboards.

On the wall above her bed was a single picture. Its wooden frame was painted yellow, and on the piece of paper that was contained inside, there were six digits scribbled in black ink – eight, if you counted the pennies. Emma looked up at them at the start of every day, and they reminded her of just how far she'd come.
Six months had passed since they'd fallen back into one another's arms on Regina's couch, and Emma loved the fact that she could divide her week between her two homes – her own, and Regina's. It was coming up to Christmas again, and Emma couldn't wait to build gingerbread houses with Regina and her son in a couple of weeks.

Even if Regina was being a total pain in her ass and thoughtfully looking at that painting like it was growing on her more and more with every second.

Emma groaned to herself and turned to survey the room, immediately spotting Natalya on the other side of the gallery. She was dating a rich Russian art dealer – one who Regina also hated – which meant she was usually at the events that Emma found herself stumbling into. That was a great development, because whenever Regina got lured into a conversation about whether cubism was making a comeback or not, Emma could sneak off onto the terrace with a glass of champagne and laugh with Natalya over all the self-important people who were hovering in the next room.

Right at that moment she was decked out in Cavalli and too many diamonds, and she was clinging onto the arm of the billionaire who was 30 years older than her but actually seemed to make her pretty happy. Emma waved, and she waved back.

"You're distracted," Regina commented.

"Because you said we'd only be here an hour," Emma replied, turning back to her.

"You should know by now that I'm always lying when I say that."

"Right, but we still have dinner reservations."

"We do?" Regina asked. Then she remembered. "Oh, right. With Elsa and the biker boyfriend."

"August," Emma corrected. "We're supposed to be meeting them in 45 minutes."

"Plenty of time for me to buy this painting then," Regina smirked, but when Emma just rolled her eyes in response, she conceded, "Fine. No painting. But I really do want to redecorate my apartment in the New Year, so it would be helpful if you would tell me which paintings you do like."

"Whenever I try to, you tell me I have the taste of a child."

"You should be perfectly equipped to help Henry with his room, then."

Emma nudged her, then added, "He's not even a kid anymore. He's growing up so fast."

"You're telling me," Regina sighed. "It's great that he's at my place so often now, but I really didn't realise how many game consoles would end up cluttering up my living room as a result."

"Stop buying them, then?" Emma suggested.

"Oh, right. Like that's an option."

Emma grinned. "I know you secretly play Uncharted with him, by the way."

Regina bristled at once. "I do not."

"I've seen the saved games. Henry's smart, but he isn't clever enough to play two-player by himself."

"It must have been you," Regina scoffed. "Your memory is terrible, after all."
"You're a liar," Emma muttered in her ear, and Regina blushed. Emma loved it when she did that.

"Okay, fine. Sometimes we play together after he's done his homework. But don't tell his father – I promised him Henry would only go near the PS4 on the weekends during his weeks with me."

Emma sniggered. "Fine. It'll be really hard for me to keep secrets from Robin, but I'll do my best."

Finally, Regina was walking away from the worst painting Emma had ever seen in her life. She stroked her thumb over the back of Emma's hand. "Do you want to leave? We can get a drink before dinner."

"Are you trying to get yourself drunk so that mine and August's conversations about bikes won't be so bad?"

"Yes," Regina said flatly. "Please take a little pity on me."

"Fine," Emma said, like this was such a huge hardship. "I'm only having one, though. I have a meeting with the other editors tomorrow and I don't want to have hangover brain."

"Such a responsible adult," Regina said, kissing her cheek. They slipped out of the gallery without saying goodbye to anyone and began to slowly amble in the direction of the restaurant. The city was glowing, and there was the faintest dusting of snow on the parked cars that lined the streets. Emma huddled closer to Regina's side as they walked.

"How much would you hate me if I bought you that painting for Christmas?" Regina suddenly asked, and Emma forced herself not to shove her into oncoming traffic.

"I would literally burn it," she said. "It reminded me of weeks-old road kill."

"It was an abstract painting, Emma."

"Well, clearly my eye for art is better than yours, because I know what I saw in it. You should try taking a leaf out of my book."

Regina smirked. "I have so much to learn from you."

"You really do," Emma replied. "Hey, do we have a therapy session this week?"

"This week is just for me," Regina said, quickly checking the calendar on her phone. "Our joint session is next Thursday."

"That'll be a nice treat right before Christmas," Emma joked, and Regina nudged her.

"Don't worry – I'll take it easy on you."

"Good. Because if you start complaining about the amount of sugar I fed Henry last year, I'll walk out."

She felt Regina's grip on her hand tighten. "I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Emma sighed and squeezed back. "Fine. But I'll withhold sex for a week."

"Don't do that either."

"I've laid down my terms, Ms Mills. It's up to you to meet them."
Regina shook her head, laughing to herself.

"I like going to therapy with you, you know," she admitted.

"You do?"

"Yes. Even when we get all argumentative, I like knowing that we're still going to leave together." It was the kind of soul-baringly honest thing that Regina never would have admitted a few months ago, and it made Emma's heart skip. "I like the fact that you're sticking with me. Even now."

"Through everything," Emma said, like it was the easiest thing in the world. Which it was, really.

She didn't need to look at Regina to know that she was smiling. "I love you."

"I love you too. But we should walk faster before one of us freezes to death."

"Agreed," Regina said, increasing their pace. She squeezed harder on Emma's hand. "You'll stay at mine tonight, right?"

Emma smiled back at her. She didn't even need to ask.

"Absolutely."

THE END

/Edit: If you are interested in getting yourself a printed copy of this fic, you can find all the downloadable files and printing instructions in this Dropbox. This isn't an official publication and I won't make any money from this, but a lot of people requested it, so feel free to make your own!

A/N: Guys, what a JOURNEY this has been. I never imagined people would fall in love with this story as hard as they did – hopefully that's still the case now that it's finished. I hope I did the ending justice for you all!

Thank you so much for all your lovely comments and tweets and general love – the past few months have been incredible. For those of you who haven't already seen on Twitter (@_starsthatburn_), I am already working on some new stuff (namely, I'm finally succumbing to my favourite trope in the world and doing a student/teacher college AU!) so I'll be back with more writing very soon.

It's also worth noting for those of you who haven't seen: I used to exclusively use fanfic.net for my fics, which means there's loads of stories posted over there that I can't easily move to AO3. If you fancy reading them then you can find them here.

I honestly love every single one of you – thanks so much forever xxx

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!