Pieces of You (Make Me Whole)

by HookedonCS

Summary

Killian Jones had lost his wife one year ago and the pain still had not receded. He looked to find answers in grief counseling. Emma Cassidy, a new member to the group, was dealing with her own recent loss of her spouse. From the moment they meet, there are sparks that are hard to ignore. Uncertain of what either is actually prepared for, their magnetic pull leads them on a rollercoaster of emotions while they each find their way to each other.

Notes

My feelings are so hurt because I accidentally deleted my entire fic!
Starting all over... This is my first AU fic and I'm really nervous and excited about it. Please let me know how you feel about it by leaving a comment, They really help push me to see this thing through!
Killian Jones stood in front of his bathroom mirror, taking inventory of what was presented right in front of him. He didn’t see the shine in the baby blue eyes anymore. Instead, there was a noticeable dullness that seemed to now linger. Not only that, but the lack of sleep was beginning to show underneath. Faint dark lines of tiredness fought with the bags about which one should be more prevalent.

It was time for a shave. The usual scruff of his reddish-tinted beard had taken a wild turn, leaving him a lot bushier than he liked.

He ran a hand over his cheek while exhaling a deep heavy breath. The feeling of the coarse hair on the palm of his hand was also a bit much. He’d have to take care of that.

Killian took a step back to get a full body shot. It was getting late, yet he stood there in nothing but his black dress slacks and black socks. On closer survey, he at least felt positive about his physique. For everything that he knew he was slacking on, he had not lost the sinewy strength of his form. He could still get back into the gym though.

It was time for some kind of change, he knew. His friends had been telling him that for a good month. Even though he was going through the motions of life and recovery, he would need to put forth more than just action.

Those steely blue eyes pierced right back at him, taunting him with memories of a life that seemed so long ago. It was almost enough to push him over the edge, pushing him towards a complete breakdown due to his strong feelings of unhappiness.

His fingers crept slowly over his face, nails suddenly digging into his eye sockets as the urge to scream became almost too great to ignore. But he didn’t scream. Instead, he swallowed the pain that was bubbling up inside him one more time.

Killian’s hands fell away from his face and he stared once again at his reflection in the mirror. He had things to do. He had to ready himself for the day. And yet all he could do was stare at the strange persona before him. The familiar looking setting that was not so familiar. This new setting that he should have had plenty of time to adjust to, but it changed nothing…

The jingle of the cell phone broke the long and desolate silence that was now the norm of the apartment.

Killian gave a cursory glance in the direction of the nondescript ringer that was coming from his bedroom just a room away. By the general time and day he figured who was on the other end. He fought the urge to ignore it so that he could finish dressing. The only thing was that the ringing didn’t stop. It sounded as if it would never stop until he would finally give in.

Walking purposefully back into the bedroom and over to the dresser, his squinted his gaze over the
bright screen and read the name lighting up the screen.

With an internal sigh, he picked up the phone and slid the bar over to answer the call.

“I’m getting ready,” he said tersely, knowing fully well what was coming.

“Oh. Okay.” The voice came out stunted, surprised. “I was just checking up on you. I knew it was about that time. How are you doing, Killian?”

“I am fine,” he murmured as he reached for the wristwatch that had also been sitting on the dresser.

“Well, that’s good.”

“What is it that you want, Ruby?” he asked, tired already of this game they were just beginning. He slapped the watch onto his wrist a little more firmly than need be, waiting for Ruby to answer.

Ruby Lucas, his fiery friend and sometimes foe of about seven years, audibly sighed over the phone.

“I was calling to see if we could get together after your meeting today,” she told him sweetly. “You are going to your meeting today, aren’t you, Killian?”

“It’s Monday, Ruby,” he bit out. “So of course I’m going.” Killian turned towards his bed to retrieve his dress shirt from where it lay on the mattress.

“Well, when it’s over we wanted to know if you had the time to do dinner,” Ruby continued. “We haven’t seen you in a few days and we were honestly starting to get worried about you.”

Killian’s eyes rose up towards the ceiling, trying very hard to not be overly annoyed by the woman on the other end. He understood that this call came from a place of care, even if it was unnecessary. He slowly began to put on the black button-down.

“I just saw you and Victor Thursday night,” he reminded her calmly.

“No, it couldn’t have been Thursday. It seems like a lot longer than that since I’ve been able to wrap my arms around you in a hug and kiss one of those bristly cheeks.”

Killian was unimpressed by her attempts of wooing him.

“Listen, Ruby. I’m not even half-dressed…”

“Ooh, tell me more.”

His eyes closed, silently taking a moment to count at least to five.

“I don’t have long before my meeting starts, and I hate to be late, love.”

“Ok, Killian. I will call you as soon as your meeting is over. Then we can all meet right after.”

“Fine.”

“Hey.” She knew he was in a rush to disconnect the call. “I love you, Killian.”

His gaze was transfixed on the wall in front of him, somewhat caught off guard by Ruby’s sentiment. Seven years he had known the woman. For the past twelve months she and her boyfriend had both become important fixtures in his life. But he didn’t know if at that exact moment he needed those words spilling from her lips.
“Okay, Ruby,” he muttered softly. “I have to go and get ready. Goodbye.”

“Bye, sweetie,” she whispered. Her voice sounded full of aching even from his end.

Killian pressed the button on his phone to end the call. He took a second, staring down at the screen. Seeing the blank and insignificant screen saver was like seeing a metaphor of his life right now: trivial, irrelevant, and inconsequential. Ruby’s words of love could not change that.

That was his life now. It had been that way for an entire year. And nothing, especially some flowery words and a night out would change that. He’d face that fact. When would his friends?

Killian finished getting dressed, completing the outfit with a dark colored necktie and dress shoes. He walked back to the bathroom and took one more look at himself.

“You clean up nicely, my boy,” he told himself with a smile not reaching above the tug of his lips upward. Because it didn’t matter. He was here alone. And he was about to venture out in the world to meet these people who were apparently just like himself. Six months, he thought, and he needed to convince himself that it was worth it.
It was the circle thing that was kind of annoying. The Daily Strength Bereavement support group was not like those he’d seen in the movies or on television. Large groups of people coming together to air their feelings and problems one by one, standing up at the podium with their sob stories. Killian would have liked it if there were rows and rows of seats, a chance to sit close to the door if he ever wanted to just slip out. On the days he was feeling chummier or stressed about getting something off his chest then those days he would have taken a front row seat. The other times he was sure he’d be comfortable somewhere in the middle.

It didn’t work like that. There were never more than eight seats- and sometimes as few as four- that would be filled by the patrons of the Daily Strength bereavement support group. Big and comfy reclining chairs made a small circle so that everything felt close and intimate.

The meetings were held in one of the many rooms of the old renovated building that now housed counselling departments of all sorts. They tried their best. They tried to make all of their members feel as comfortable as possible about the variety of issues that they were facing.

He didn’t always feel comfortable during these meetings. He sometimes asked himself why he still came. Milah had been gone for twelve months now. For the last six, he had religiously come to this meeting place twice a week in hopes of tampering down the emotional guilt of not having her anymore, the helpless feelings of being all alone again, and to deal with the fact that the one person he wanted to spend his life with was gone forever. How much it was actually helping he could not tell. He was a brooding man, just living his life, trying to get by until he no longer had to. He wanted the help, but didn’t know exactly how to receive it.

Killian looked around the room, surveying the small group that was already there. Daily Strength members were a mixed group of both widowers and widows. Some were as religious as he when it came to meetings. Familiar faces every Monday and Wednesday. Some people dwindled in and out, shuffling through their own pain and grief. Occasionally there was a new member. Sometimes they were easy to pick out: the uncertainty in their red-rimmed eyes, not quite knowing what the process was.

He noticed her when the door creaked open slowly, the one new face that had made their group of five now six. It was almost four o’clock, which meant that the grief counselor would be calling them all to take a seat at any moment. The small group was all standing around with Styrofoam cups of either coffee or juice and paper napkins that held either donuts or cookies. He was one of those people, but this woman gave him pause for a moment. “Hello, everyone. Hello. We are going to begin in just a moment. Can everyone please come together and take their seats?”

The neutral-sounding voice came from the grief counselor himself, Archibald Hopper. A sometimes timid-looking man who fit the profile for who Killian thought should run a meeting like this. Perhaps it was the horn-rimmed glasses that he often pushed up and off the bridge of his nose. Perhaps it was the skittish movement of arms and legs as he moved about while looking to placate every single whim. He was supposed to be the facilitator of one’s feelings and needs. His quiet demeanor seemed to attract trust and anonymity of his charges. This was a quality that garnered him a way into the mind and hearts of many people.

Their group was specifically for the loss of a spouse, he thought as he slid over to take a seat, mind once again going on their new member. She looked fairly young. She could not have been no more than 30 years old, making these situations all the harder.
Killian had been 31 when Milah died a year ago. A widower at that age had been devastating. They had been together for eight years with six of those as man and wife. The eight years had not been enough for him. Not even half of his life was over and he was now without her.

From his seat he watched the young woman as she searched for her own seat.

For a second he thought he caught a hint of jade in her eyes. It looked like an interesting shade of green. That color was set off by a creamy pale complexion.

He told himself that it was the unknowing which was attracting him to her. No, that wasn’t the right word. That seemed like too much. It was the unknowing that made her interesting. Her story was probably a compelling one. The way she looked up from her lap for the briefest of moments showed her uneasiness of the situation. *First day, he surmised.*

Her blonde hair laid in waves, cascading down over her shoulders and her back. Milah had been a brunette. *Had been. He himself had not been interested in the fair-haired before. Dark was always a preference. But this woman was so lovely…*

*What the hell am I doing,* he silently screamed at himself. This was going too far. Never had he begun to take apart a woman, breaking down her characteristics in a chart about what he liked and disliked physically since Milah. *It had been about a decade. So what was he just doing?*

The most absurd thing that he noticed was the way she crossed her legs. She was dressed in a simply enough in form-fitting blue jeans and a pair of brown high-heeled ankle boots. Shapely legs that he wondered how he’d missed before she had taken her seat at the circle. The top she wore was another simple choice: a white bulky sweater that still could not completely hide the good figure underneath.

Killian instantly felt overdressed in his black suit and tie getup. For all her unease about - he was sure - the circumstance which brought her here, this beauty was a breath of fresh air with the heady effortlessness she eluded. “*Good afternoon, guys,*” Hopper said, bringing not only the group together, but taking Killian out of his thoughts about the new woman. “*How is everyone doing today?*”

There was a murmur of responses to his question from the small group of four women and two men.

Killian leaned back in his seat, grateful for the sense of clarity and being back on track. He had time to now focus on his grief, time to focus on his wife and her memory. And her smile entered his mind. The beautiful smile that she reserved for him when he made her happy. The press of those lips to his, so soft and warm and full of promise.

His eyes narrowed at his thoughts, because he knew where his mind was going. Milah, lying there in that hospital bed, unable to stop time or fate. She laid there with understanding in her eyes of what this was doing to him. And then she was gone.

“*Milah.*”

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“*Milah.*”

He was sitting directly across from him. The name had slipped out from his lips so very quietly that she was not sure if she had heard correctly. Even if she hadn’t heard correctly, there was definitely a sudden darkness that now replaced the inquisitive face that had been there before.

Maybe it was Emma’s imagination that she had caught the blue-eyed and raven-haired man’s
attention as she sat down across from him. Dressed all in black, eyes cast down at some spot on the floor, he looked a bit intimidating.

She couldn’t help but wonder what his story was. He couldn’t have been much older than she. And he had lost his wife? Sad.

Emma took a quick glance of the rest of the circle. Besides the young widower, there was one other man who was quite older. He looked to be in his sixties. The rest of the members were women of varying ages and looked to be in varying states of grief.

Grief counseling? That’s what her life had become? Yes, she thought internally. Her husband’s death was beginning to eat away at her. She couldn’t get over her guilt of how things had come to a close.

It had been three months since his death. That was such a short time. She had the right to grieve for him. It was the reason why guilt was eating her up that made this difficult to come to terms with.

Her best friend has suggested getting counseling. She’d seen how Emma was distracted from life since Neal’s death. And nobody even really knew the deep-rooted issues Emma was dealing with from her sudden loss.

Can this even work…

“Group, I would like to introduce you to Emma Cassidy.”

The group counselor was presenting her to the rest of the members who, she was certain, were all familiar with one another.

Emma placed a tight smile on her face as she surveyed everyone around her. Her eyes stopped at the man across from her. His gaze was steely on hers. She had the feeling as if he was consuming all of her with that look.

“Emma?”

“Yes?” She turned her attention quickly to the counselor.

His smile was easy, assuring. “As a new member you have the choice to introduce yourself to everyone else at the beginning of the meeting or the choice not to. Some people like to wait and listen to others first and some people like to share.”

Emma’s eyes blinked in secession for a moment. “Um. That’s fine, Mr. Hopper.”

“Oh, everyone just calls me Archie. Please feel free to do the same.”

Emma gave him her polite smile. “Ok, Archie.” She scanned her audience once more. This time, she only gave a mere glance at the man right across from her.

“My name is Emma Cassidy. I am a dental assistant…” She paused, knowing that was not why she was here. “I… recently lost my… husband.” A flash of something terrifying raced through her thoughts. “Neal. He died three months ago… in a building fire. He was a firefighter.” And for that she was so proud. A tiny but real smile graced her lips. “He died a hero, trying to save the lives of a family trapped inside.”

And maybe she said too much too fast. Maybe her friends were wrong. Maybe she wasn’t ready to confront this just yet.
“Um…”

“Emma, it’s nice to have you here with us today,” Archie interject most likely sensing her need to shut down. “This is a safe place where we want you to get whatever you can from your time with us. There is no pressure to share more than you want to. And on those occasions where you want to do nothing but listen in, that is great as well.”

Emma’s exhalation of breath was a bit stunted. She gave a brief nod and a silent thank you to Archie. This was going to be more difficult that she realized. Her eyes raised, only to meet the guarded gaze of the man sitting across from her. It wasn’t just his eyes. It was his whole demeanor than spoke of a shield being drawn up to keep everything out.

Why was she so intrigued by him? Why did her heart race when he looked at her with such mystery?

“Is there anyone who wants to share first?” Archie asked, bringing her back.

Emma looked back up at the counselor. She would try to get out of this meeting as much as possible. God only knew how much she couldn’t do this alone anymore.

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Support groups were interesting things, Killian surmised. They were all categorized into groups to where each member had a similar life tale. Yet those stories were never the same. No one’s experience was anything like his own. And his story was not like anyone else’s. No matter how long someone’s spouse was sick or how sudden the death was, he never connected it to the loss of Milah. No matter how long they’d known each other or how much they shared, it could never compete with his loss.

The meetings were usually about two hours long. Sometimes they ran over to accommodate for the members’ need to share.

“Hi.”

Killian swung around to come in contact with Emma Cassidy.

Up close he could see that those eyes were a beautiful and enchanting color of green.

Emma shrugged. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for your lost.”

“Aye,” Killian acknowledged with a terse nod.

He thought he detected a hint of something sweet in her perfume. He could not place the scent, but it was just as intoxicating…

She returned the nod, but her gaze had turned away from him.

“It’s a lot to take in the first time,” he murmured softly. “I’m… sorry for your lost as well, Emma.”

“Thank you,” she said with a polite smile. “Yes, it is a lot.”

She looked like she wanted to share more, which was throwing Killian off somewhat. Although his degree of participation varied from day to day, he was not much for talk outside of group. And group was now over.

“Ok, I guess I’ll see you next week.” Her hands closed over his arm as she walked past him.
“Goodbye, Killian.”

What stranger does that, he thought as he felt some unnamed sensation coursed over his arm where she touched him. What stranger familiarizes themselves with a person after such a short time?

He was glad the meeting was over. There had been this strange… what? Pull? Attraction?

She’d said next week. So apparently she was just dipping her toes into the pond when it came to the support group. Good.

Why ‘good’?

Because tonight she had been an uncomfortable distraction. Killian’s mind was already reeling from the pain this meeting brought up about Milah. The contrast between the two women was undoubtedly disturbing.

Glancing down at his wristwatch, he thought about Ruby and Victor. The meeting had left him in a grave mood. It was not a time to socialize.

She’d have to understand.
Chapter 3

“About time you got here.”

Killian looked around the booth at his group of friends.

“I got here as soon as I could,” he said with a sigh. “Long day and all that.” He fell down in the booth beside his friend, Robin and across from both Ruby and Victor. “Hello, guys.” With a frown, he grabbed at his necktie, pulling it loose.

“You look awful.” Victor slid a bottle of beer across the table over to him. “We ordered this for you. For a minute we didn’t think you’d make it.”

“It’s the beard, I know.” Killian tipped the bottle in acknowledgement. “Thanks, mate.”

“Hey, you don’t look that bad,” Robin told him with slight push of his shoulder. His grin was huge. “It’s mountain man rugged.”

“Don’t lie to him. He looks worse than awful.” Ruby gave him a once-over glance. “You look like crap.”

“And don’t listen to her,” Victor told him, glancing down at Ruby. “How is it going?”

Killian took a sip of the ice cold beer, the first good thing about his long day. “Everything’s fine. Work is fine, for the BS that it is. And nothing is new.” And his thoughts drifted off to her.

“How about group?” Robin asked softly.

The bottle lifted to his lips once again, almost afraid that Robin was able to track his mind.

“Group is fine,” he muttered.

It wasn’t a week later that she had shown up again, to Killian’s surprise. It was that Wednesday. So either she believed that he was a once-a-week guy or she’d increased her days afterwards.

That was four weeks ago. Every Monday and Wednesday that had passed since then was spent listening to his group mates spill their hearts out about their tribulations.

It was a unique scenario in which to meet someone: to listen to the heartache and pain of losing a spouse. The switch to that was sharing one’s own heartache and pain, being vulnerable to all elements.

Emma—fitting name for the matchless beauty—had lost her husband in a way that was incomparable to that of his loss. Still, it was a hell of a loss.

Why was he thinking of her?

Killian raised an eyebrow at Ruby’s statement. “And I’m just getting off of work,” he told her slowly. “What’s your problem?”

“Why poke a sleeping bear?”

Ruby bumped up against Victor, a tsk leaving her lips. “You.” She turned her attention back to Killian. “You are my problem.” She stuck a pointed finger in his direction. “Just getting off of work?
I can’t believe you’re still there.”
“Ruby.” It was a low muttered warning coming from Victor next to her.
“What?” She shot him a sidelong glance.
“Shut up,” he told her with a shrug.
"Victor, you were right.” Killian’s hand raised towards Ruby. “I’m already having one of those days where nothing seems to be going right and everything is going wrong. I don’t need you, Ruby, in your Ms. Fix It mode.” He raised his bottle to his lips, all the while eying Ruby. Her bright red lips were pursed and her pointed chin raised high.

“So sorry, but too late.”
“What are you talking about?”
Ruby planted her hands firmly on the tabletop and leaned in closer in his direction.
“I can’t believe you’re still working at that place. An account rep, Killian!” She let out a deep dissatisfied breath. “If my BFF was still here you wouldn’t be wasting your life away in some cubicle.”

“Ruby!” Victor’s hand pressed into her chest, pushing her back against the booth. “Killian, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to him for me!” Ruby cried out, pushing his hand away from her. “He knows it’s true”

“Victor, get her under control.”

“I’m not in the mood for this, Ruby,” Killian warned her. The bottle raised to his lips again.

Her eyes cut back to his. “You sit there in that cube forty hours a week. That’s not what Milah wanted for you. What happened to your dreams of opening your own business? What happened to being your own boss? The boat thing, huh?”

Killian laughed mirthlessly. “The boat thing. That dream died along with Milah.”

“God dammit, Ruby! What is your problem?” The blowup came from beside Killian. Robin shook his head vehemently. “Why are you bringing this all up?”

Her gazed narrowed on Robin. “Because.” She quickly turned to Killian. “Your life doesn’t just stop because Milah got sick and died. She was my best friend. I knew her way longer than you did. Yet I understand that life goes on. Why don’t you? You’re too young to give up on life because Milah had cancer and died.”

The sharp intake of breath was involuntary, as well as the strained pained look on his face.

No matter how often or how few the moments of Milah’s illness came up, it was always a painful experience to live through again. No matter how much he spoke about Milah in group, the illness was still a painful word that only rarely passed through his lips.

“Okay, get up Ruby.” Each word from Victor was slow and deliberate as he pushed against her forcefully out of the booth.
She didn’t go easily.

“Milah was my best friend! Victor!” She squirmed all the way out of her seat. He gave her one good push, sending her stumbling from the booth.

“Again, I apologize, Killian.” He quickly stood up to stop Ruby from any further embarrassment.

“Don’t. Apologize. For. Me.” She sidestepped Victor to stand directly in front of Killian. “She was my best friend and she was your wife. Now who is honoring her memory the way she’d want it to be honored? Are you living your life the way she would have wanted you to or am I telling you exactly what you know she would have?” She leaned in closer, anger making her eyes a dark fierce color. “Tell me the truth, Killian.”

“Damn, Ruby.” Victor grabbed her by the arm, pulling her away from the spectacle she had made for all to hear and see.

“I’m not sorry I didn’t tell you. If I had then you wouldn’t have went after your dream, sweetheart. You would have given up that part of your life for me. And you never smiled as big as when you talked about the boating excursion.”

“How about when I talked about my wife and our family? Milah, how could you have kept this from me? Why did you not tell me.” Her eyes went wide, tears clouding them. “There was… nothing that could be done. Killian I found out too late. I just wanted us to be happy as long as we could be. If I had told you then our last months would have been filled with only pain and grief.”

“You don’t know that. And we will never know that because you didn’t trust in me- or in our love- to be strong enough together.”

It broke his heart to have her leave him like this.

And his heart, one year later, was still not mended. He didn’t know what it would take. But Ruby’s outburst had not helped.

“I don’t know what got into her, Killian,” Robin said from beside him.

The pain was bubbling far too close to the edge and he could feel it close to spilling over.

“No big deal,” he assured Robin. He grasped the bottle tightly in his hand and took a long hard drink. “They were best friends. I get it.”

“That wasn’t about Milah.” Robin shook his head. “It was about you.”

Killian tilted his head back to peer at Robin. “Do you think it’s time that I moved on?”

“Hey, you’ll know when you’re ready.”

Killian nodded. “Aye.” He took another sip of the beer.

“But…”

The mischievous looked intrigued him. “What?”

“Well, I did meet this young lady who I thought you would hit it off well with. Gorgeous girl, Killian. She’s tall with brown eyes and wavy brown hair down her back.”
He raised an eyebrow. “And that’s my type?”

Robin smiled knowingly. “Isn’t it? Physically?”

And that gave him pause, because it conjured up thoughts of Emma, who was definitely opposite of Milah. Physically, she was a lot different. He imagined her tongue to be quite different as well from those girls of his past. He imagined a strong spirit versus that of someone timid, even when it was mostly the grief that was shown during group.

“But that’s only if you’re ready man,” Robin said with a shrug.

Killian shook his head. “Not really interested.”

“You said ‘not interested’ but you didn’t say ‘not ready,’” he pointed out. “Sounds promising.”

“I wouldn’t read too much into that.”

“Baby steps, mate.”

Killian stared at the smiling man. “Aye. Just don’t tell Ruby that.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Killian took another sip of his beer, losing himself in his thoughts again.

Robin had described his type. It had not only been Milah, but any girl before her. So why did thoughts of the other woman enter his mind in comparison? It didn’t matter. He wasn’t ready yet anyway. No matter what his friends thought, how could they not realize who Milah was and what that all meant? He wasn’t ready. Not just yet.
“I like the scrubs.”

Emma turned in direction of the English accent that sent a tiny chill through her body.

Killian Jones, in all his gorgeous masculinity, stood in front of her. He was such the brooding type, but she figured it was mostly due to the loss of his wife. She had a feeling that there was a really sweet guy underneath all the pain. Sometimes she could see it in his eyes, if even for the rarest of moments.

“Didn’t have time to go home and change,” she explained with a shrug.

“No matter. You look fetching. Rather cute there, Emma.”

And sometimes she could hear in his voice. Like now. *Only on the rare occasions, she mused, because Killian Jones had just put that guard up again in the space of two seconds.*

Before she could even say thank you, he had walked away from her. Maybe that was okay this time, because she felt the heat creep up in her cheeks and knew they had to be stained some sort of red color.

Really, Emma? Your fellow grief member? But she couldn’t help it. She was attracted to the man even with all those walls up. Damn.

She had joined the Daily Strength Bereavement support group nearly two months ago. And yes, it was a nice sounding board to getting over her grief and the feelings of being at fault. Then again, for the most part, she felt she had a pretty good hold on dealing with Neal’s death. The support group allowed for the hurt to ease some. The guilt? Well, she still had not opened up fully to anyone about why she felt so guilty. Not even her best friend, Mary Margaret, knew the stint of pain in that respect. That was just something that she believed she would have to deal with for a lifetime.

Touching the apples of her cheek in wonderment of what her face looked like, Emma turned to find a seat to ready herself for the meeting.

It was Wednesday, the second day of the week that she had group with Killian. Of course she hadn’t planned it way, but her heart enjoyed the perks of getting to see him twice a week.

The meeting was about to begin. So far there were only four members there. That was the smallest she had seen the group. Still, she took the seat on Killian’s left, leaving empty seats all around them.

She really did wonder if she had to be so obvious. But apparently she did. Killian was kind of oblivious to her strong attraction to him. It only made her feel all the worse about the situation because she knew he still grieved very much for his wife, Milah.

By what he shared with the whole group, Emma got the strong impression that they were very much in love. The first real love of his life. She had died of ovarian cancer. It had happened rather quickly. The pain he felt still seemed so raw after more than a year. That was one of the reasons she didn’t act on those growing feelings. He still hurt.

Sometimes she felt bad that she didn’t feel worse about Neal’s death. Yes, she hated that he was gone. She missed him a lot. But she didn’t mourn his death like others in the group mourned their spouses. She understood why. She knew where their relationship had been going. The reason she
was here in group right now was because of that right there: Neal was dead and she still held on to the guilt of what would have been if he had not played the part of the hero that day.

*It still wouldn’t be as simple as that, she reminded herself. It would have been messy as ever and she knew it. This wasn’t better, but for all that it was she needed to accept the facts.*

“It happens in the blink of an eye, hm?”

“How’s that?” she asked, suddenly meeting those deep blue eyes. He pulled her straight from those negative thoughts into something so good. God, she thought she loved those eyes more than anything else she’d seen of him so far.

“The memories and the hurt,” he said softly. And she saw the flash of that there in his eyes. “It comes back all of a sudden and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

That she could agree with. “Yes.”

Killian turned his attention to the cellphone in his hands.

“Hey!” Emma reached out to touch his arm. She panicked immediately, not knowing what gave her the courage or the gumption to even start this. “Are you free after group?”

“Uh… what? I’m sorry… why?”

The stammer didn’t make her feel any more nervous and humiliated. No, not at all…

“I was thinking we could go get some coffee. And, you know, talk.” Was her face burning red? How could it not be? He seemed so awkward about her idea. “The coffee here is nice and all, but…”

“Um… I don’t know, Emma. I… maybe.” Killian shrugged. “It depends on how group goes. Is… that okay?”

She pulled back and away from him. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

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As the weeks past, he kind of got the feeling that Emma may have liked him in some way. For that reason alone he should have made up an excuse as to why he couldn’t get a drink with her after the meeting. What about the fact that they were in group together and this seemed inappropriate? But he didn’t make up an excuse. He’d gone along with her suggestion.

The fact was that over the past few weeks, Killian could not ignore the fact that Emma had been an interesting person to get to know. Not that he knew much about her. Only what she divulged in group meetings, which were basically about her husband and how she was coping for the past five months.

It was such an odd predicament to be in because he had never put any stock into any woman besides Milah since they began their relationship. He wouldn’t go as far as to say that he wanted her, but any feelings at all were a huge deal. The fact that she invaded his thoughts at all was beyond his understanding.

Which is why this was probably a bad idea. Sitting at the small round table inside the coffee house, Killian felt the strong urge to run. This was all wrong.

He had thought of her on too many occasions- innocent or not- for this to be okay. He had thought
about her hair way too many times in the past two months. He had compared the golden mass in its variety of styles. Sometimes it was a heap of spiraling curls around her face. Other times it looked rather silky as it hung straight down her back. On the rarest occasions- like tonight- she wore it up, showing off the delectable-looking creamy white neck of hers.

Killian honestly did not understand his growing attraction for her. It was quite disturbing. It was also too much.

“Are you okay?” she asked him. Emma’s shoulders scrunched up in a shrug. “You look ready to run.” A single eyebrow raised as she took a sip of her cocoa.

His eyes moved around the room, surveying… nothing in particular. He just didn’t know what to say.

“Was there something in particular that you wanted to talk about, Emma?”

There was a pause. When Killian braved himself to look back at her, she was staring at him.

“I thought that…” Emma shrugged again. “I thought that maybe we could get to know each other outside of group, Killian.”

Killian couldn’t stop himself from squirming in his seat. “Does that defeat the purpose of group therapy?”

“You never talk to anyone that you met from group? In all the months that you’ve been going there?”

“Not socially,” he answered with a shrug. He picked at the Danish that was sitting in front of him. He didn’t take a bite, just focused somewhere besides her.

“Well, if you’d rather not,” she said softly. “That’s fine. I get it. Group is already a place where stress should be relieved. Being friends with members outside of those times could bring that stress out in the world with you.”

Killian looked back at her, meeting her eyes. Her words didn’t ring false, they were instead agreeable to what she believed he wanted to hear.

She was breathtakingly beautiful. So why was that admission making his heart beat so hard and fast that he was sure she could at least see in pounding through his shirt? He’d found women beautiful since Milah had died. He was a man. This was something different though. Something driving his mind crazy because he couldn’t figure it out.

“I’m sorry, Emma,” he told her softly. “To be honest with you, I’m just feeling like I’m in an awkward predicament.”

Emma nodded. “It’s not just the group thing. It’s the ‘girl’ thing as well.”

“Aye,” he conceded with a sigh, because that was a big part of it. “That holds some truth. I’m sorry. Listen, I’m going to take a deep breath and try to relax.” Killian inhaled deeply, closing his eyes because, seriously, he needed a moment. “You seem like a really nice person, Emma. For such an intense support group, there is some lightness that comes into play. And you have that.”

Emma’s gaze fell to the table and a small laugh escaped her mouth.

“How do you even notice anything like that?”
He noticed a lot as of late.

“It’s there,” he told her softly,

Emma looked back at him with a softness in her eyes as well as something else. That look had his heart going crazy again. It was too sincere and too real and too much.

Killian covered his mouth as he cleared his throat soundly. He felt way too vulnerable in the moment. He needed something to stop it. He needed to think of Milah.

So he thought of her smile. The smile she reserved just for him. The smile that he had seen at least a million times within his lifetime with her.

“You’re thinking about her. About Milah.”

He’d never heard her speak his wife’s name. Such an odd occurrence. He had to blink Emma back into focus. And it was her smile, again, that invaded his senses. Soft and sweet.

“What?” He frowned. “Why did you say that?”

Emma pointed at him. “There’s this look that you get when you think of her. It has two parts actually. There’s this faraway gaze- which you just had- and it is followed by this utter look of harshness. Like your thoughts intertwine with reality. You remember that… she’s gone.”

Killian was in awe by her statement. It took him a moment to do anything but look at her.

“Very perceptive,” he murmured. His mind was at odds with itself, not knowing where exactly it wanted to go from that point. Thoughts of Milah were mingling with thoughts of the woman right in front of him. He didn’t want Emma to win.

She tilted her head to the side, looking at him inquisitively.

He wondered what she was thinking, but he also couldn’t escape gazing at the expanse of creamy colored neck that was now exposed.

“I’m sorry, Killian,” she whispered.

He swallowed thickly. “For what?”

Emma shrugged. “For acting as if I know anything about you other than the surface.”

“Not a problem. You were right.” And I, her thought as he picked up the cup of coffee, am in some serious trouble. Because for a moment longer than he could ever imagine it being, Emma Cassidy had ruled over his thoughts in place of Milah. 

Damn.

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Emma glanced down at her phone to look at the time. The meeting had let out nearly two hours prior. She had commandeered Killian’s time for the bulk of it.

“It’s getting pretty late.”

It’s not that she wanted to let him go, because as far as good conversation with, Killian Jones could give it (once he warmed up some). The problem came when Emma saw her growing even more
attached to a man who was clearly not at peace over his wife’s death.

“Aye. I do need to get going.”

As Emma watched Killian stand from his seat and come over to her to help her up, her thoughts ran away from her. This semi and impromptu kind of a date was leaving her with mixed feelings.

She’d never dated since Neal’s death. It hadn’t been that long ago since his passing. Although she would have done it out of respect for him, that wasn’t what stopped her from dating. It was the sheer amount of guilt that kept her lonely and alone.

It was a witness to what effect this mysterious man had on her.

“You’re doing it,” Killian whispered from behind, helping pull out her chair.

Emma stood and looked over her shoulder at him.

“Yeah. But you wouldn’t understand. It’s not the same issue, Killian.”

“We each have our own story,” he agreed with a slight shrug. “

Her body bumped against his as she turned around to face him. It was only by accident, close proximity of him helping her out of her seat. That didn’t matter. It caused those small currents to shoot through every part of her.

“Killian?”

He took a quick step back from her. There was something dark that flashed in his eye as he watched her wordlessly.

“I’m going to be honest here, okay? Can you handle that?”

The other step back he took should have been enough of an answer for her. Emma sighed as she looked up at him.

“I think you know” she admitted, checking his whole demeanor.

Killian was only a few spaces away from her physically, but she could tell that mentally he was nowhere near. Something he was doing on purpose.

“Emma, I…”

No, he wouldn’t be able to handle it, she decided to herself. He isn’t ready.

“It’s okay,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Emma, this was really nice and all that, but I’m really going to have to run.” If not physically, sure as hell mentally and emotionally, she thought with a hidden smirk.

“Yeah, I know. Go ahead. I’m going to go to the restroom first. No need to wait for me. I’ll see you at group next week.”

Killian gave a short nod. “Okay, then.”

Did they just smile and wave, do a handshake, maybe an awkward hug?
No. Killian just back away slowly and gave another nod.

“See you later, Emma.” And then he was gone.

Emma bit her lip as she watched him leave. She wasn’t sure what she should do. Ignore the strong pull that was between them- which he was trying so hard to keep clear of- or keep pushing until they each confronted those feelings?

Either way, Emma thought as she slowly made her way towards the exit, it was going to be up to her to make that decision.
Chapter 5

Killian’s phone buzzed next to him. The text message from Robin read *I’m on my way up. Killian quickly texted back that the door was unlocked.*

He put the phone down on the table beside him and turned his attention back to his laptop. He had known Robin was on his way. When Robin had found out that, on a Wednesday, Killian had been free because he wasn’t going to his meeting, he said he’d be over with a six-pack soon.

“I’m like… really glad that you have a free night and wanna have a beer. Really. But I can’t say that I’m not surprised.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s about time.”

“I thought so.”

“The thing is…”

Killian knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth.

“It’s Wednesday,” Robin pointed out. “You’re supposed to be in group right now. I can’t remember one time that you have missed a meeting since the time you started.”

Killian had nodded himself. “Yeah.”

“Have you?” Robin was quiet for a moment, waiting. “Have you ever missed a meeting before?”

Killian swallowed hard, trying to keep his mind clear from all the clutter that was tempting to build up. “Aye.”

“When was that?” Robin sounded as if he was in disbelief, truly confused by the answer.

“Monday,” Killian murmured.

“Wait a minute. You haven’t been to group all week? You’ve taken a week off from group? You’ve never done that before.”

“Well, things change.” It was the only answer Killian had at the time. He was glad that Robin had left it at that, only saying that he’d be over later.

It had been a whole week. Seven whole days since he’d been at group. Seven whole days since he had seen her. After spending eight months in the routine of having these people in his life with their stories of shared grief, Killian realized how much it had truly meant to him. He needed the atmosphere of that the group allowed him to be in. Being without it was another setback that he was struggling with.

He couldn’t figure out which was affecting him more: was it the loss of the security of group meetings or the fact that he was forcing the repel of the strong attraction and connection he had with some random woman who was not his wife.

There was a void- he wasn’t exactly sure why- that he had to fill. Killian had no answer the first day, but he’d come up with an idea for the next meeting he knew he’d missed.
Killian heard the quick hard knock on his apartment door, followed by it opening.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing much.” Killian watched as Robin walked off with the promised six-pack towards the kitchen with a slight smile on his face.

He turned his attention back to the computer screen, continuing his browse through the Daily Strength website. It wasn’t the same as physically being at group. There were different people and counselors. The atmosphere, which he thought he would have appreciated, was something that was difficult to familiarize himself with.

The Daily Strength bereavement support group also included a chat room where their members could join at any time or day. Some people were more comfortable in this setting. Killian had only needed to be close to group so that he could get his bearings on his life now turning sideways.

“What are you doing?” Robin asked from behind him.

Killian turned around. He took the can of beer from his friend’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks, mate.” He popped the top on the can. “I was checking into my group’s website.”

Robin pulled up a chair beside him so that he would have a good view on the computer screen. He raised an eyebrow as he began to scan the page.

“You’re having your meeting online?”

After taking a sip from the can, he placed it down on the table beside him. With a shrug of indifference, “Not really a meeting. I was just checking things out since I wasn’t able to go.”

Robin turned in his direction. “What do you mean you couldn’t go? The tone I got from your texts was that you didn’t need to go to group. If that’s not the case then why didn’t you just go?”

Killian began to close out of the website, feeling unfulfilled by the lack of help he was receiving there.

“Things came up,” he said with a sigh.

“Such as?” Robin asked slowly. “Since you’re basically doing what you would have been doing if you would have physically gone.”

“I’m not doing what I would have been doing,” Killian said irritably. And maybe a little more harshly than he intended to be.

Because he was still thinking about her. No matter how hard he tried, no matter what he tried to put in its place, he was still thinking about Emma.

Robin held out his hand in surrender. “You’re tense. Sorry.”

“I’m a little… out of sorts at the moment,” Killian said in way of an apology. “I’m done though. It didn’t work.”

This whole thing wasn’t going to work. His two worlds were colliding and leaving him upside down in his thoughts and emotions.

“What… is going on with you, Killian?” Robin asked, sounding wary in his approach. “If you feel
like you needed to go to group to get something off your chest then why didn’t you go? Especially when you missed Monday as well. I’m a little confused.”

Killian closed the monitor down on the computer while pushing his chair back away from the table. Grabbing the beer can, he stepped back to take Robin in fully.

“You know why I you’re my best friend?” he said, a quick sudden grin crossing his face. “It’s because you’re a good drinking buddy- a great bar mate. And if that’s all I need then that is fine with you. You don’t push. That’s why I like you.”

Robin’s teeth sunk down into his lip and he slowly shook his head. “Well I think there’s something a little more to it than that. But thanks, mate.” His eyebrows shot up in question. “But as your appointed best friend, I’m a little concerned about you.”

“No need to be.” Killian’s hand ran over his face feeling the need to clear his head. “I’ve been thinking, and I could use your help.”

“With?” he asked with a shrug.

“I’ve been putting too many things off. Look at me.”

Robin smiled as he did a quick overview of his friend.

“I’m ready to get back into the gym.”

His smile spread across his face. “The gym? I wasn’t going to say anything, but that sounds like a good plan. What is up with the change in you?”

The change in him? At that moment all he wanted was some semblance of normalcy. He had to have that before he went crazy. And that had to mean clearing her from all things dealing with him.

Their coffee thing- it wasn’t a date but a coffee thing- had Killian full of nothing but anxiety. Initially. The question left on his mind was what did Emma see in him? Why was she putting any stock into him at all when he was broken? He was broken, and for the most part he like it like that.

“Are you okay?” she had asked him. “You look ready to run.” She’d raised a single eyebrow as she sipped her cocoa.

Emma had been able to read him so well because he remembered feeling the need to jump up right then and there. But things had gotten better. He’d become more comfortable. He had eased into that smile, those eyes, that confident air. Conversation had become easy- once the nervousness had left.

“I kind of fell into it.” Emma giggled at that.

Killian smiled. “How does a person fall into the profession of dental assistant? Does that not take a lot of education?”

She laughed again. “It can depend. Actually, in some states a dentist can take someone from right off the street and train them for the position. It can be about a year. But that would be an entry-level assistant. I’m licensed though.”

“In that case, how did you ‘fall’ into the profession?”

Emma shrugged. “I was the one who knew the dentist and got talked into becoming an assistant. And then urged into making it totally official by getting licensed.”
And he didn’t know the last person who got him to open up just as easily. It wasn’t about Milah? Should it have been about Milah? It wasn’t about the year long struggle of living life as a widower or the days leading up to it. It was only him.

“I’ve been in the States permanently for the past decade or so,” he told her with a smile. “I didn’t know if it would stick or not.”

“Really?” she asked inquisitively. “I love the accent by the way.”

Killian eyes went wide. “Oh, you do? Americans and their love for those rare accents.”

“Are we great?” Emma laughed. “What’s the best thing about Europe, Killian.”

“Oh, that’s easy, love. Being European. America is a nice place to live. The opportunities are amazing. But there’s nothing better than being European.”

Emma’s grin was huge. “Okay. If you say so.”

“My brother and his family is still there,” he told her, fondly reminiscing in the thoughts of his only family. “He’s been trying to get me to come back home for so long now.”

“Then why hasn’t the proud European been back home?” Emma asked. She was leaning in, so engaged in the conversation.

He couldn’t help but take in the innocence of her appeal. So captivating was this woman.

“There’s never been time,” he said softly. “Maybe soon.”

He watched her bite down on her lip and couldn’t contain the smile from breaking across his face.

“Do you want to tell me what this is all about?”

The frown that creased Robin’s brow was deep and worried.

Killian stared straight at his best friend, torn. He was so use to keeping everything all in. Group was a completely different animal. It was about getting issues out that were similar yet different to those others in the group. Sharing this was something different.

Robin slowly stood from his seat, his eyes never leaving Killian’s.

“Spill it, mate. What’s the matter?”

He was asking for Killian to answer a question he had no real answer to. He didn’t know when he had ever felt so at odds over anything that was in his control.

“I... met this girl.”

There was a spark that lit up Robin’s eyes. “All on your own? Killian, that’s awesome!” Then his frown returned. “Isn’t that good news?”

His stomach felt like it was all tied up in knots. He moved back towards the table to set down the can, suddenly feeling sick.

“She’s in group with me.” He eyed Robin suspiciously, waiting for the incredulous look to appear on his face. He wasn’t disappointed.
“The first lady to have ever caught your eye in over a year is someone who you met in your grief counseling group?”

His throat felt like it was closing up on him. He yanked on the collar of his shirt, trying to decrease the feeling.

“It’s not exactly like that,” he told him.

“What does that mean? You like her or not?”

It wasn’t that simple. How could he ask a simplistic question like that when all the issues were starting to brim over?

“And that’s why you’re avoiding group this week.” It was an aha statement.

Killian’s mouth gaped open. “I can’t go back.”

Robin nodded. “But you know you need to because…”

“I’m not ready to leave group and be on my own,” Killian finished for him. “Damn.” He hand balled up into a fist at his side and beat against the closest thing to him- the table. “Goddamn.”

“You didn’t answer me.” Robin noted. “Although by your reaction I really don’t need you to. You like this girl.”

Still feeling the nervous tension, Killian’s fingers rubbed together restlessly.

“She’s been there over two months,” he explained. “She talks about her husband who died in a fire over five months ago, she talks about how she’s dealing with it.”

“And that’s what did it for you, Killian?” Robin sounded confused.

Killian met Robin’s gaze with hesitation. “She asked me to have coffee with her last week. She hasn’t said anything outright, but I know she… likes me. Somewhat.”

“I know you. It’s not just that she likes you. That wouldn’t have changed your feelings after more than a year of grief and celibacy.”

Killian shut his eyes tight. Robin was taking things farther than he wanted to think.

“Hey, what’s her name?”

Killian opened his eyes to see Robin grabbing at his laptop.


“I want to look her up.” He grinned up at Killian. “I’m sure I can find her somewhere on social media.” He then tapped rapidly on the keys.

Killian watch, albeit warily, as his friend only made him more nervous.

“I have a few Facebook accounts. Which one is she?”

Killian peered over Robin’s shoulder as the screen slowly scrolled down.

“Aye. There.”
“This one?” Robin looked over his shoulder, surprise on his face. “She’s not even your type.”

“She’s not like Milah,” he agreed, his gaze transfixed on the profile picture on the screen. A simple selfie of Emma with a bright, sunny, and true smile and those green eyes shining.

Killian sighed, a string of curses leaving his lips as he walked away.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” Robin commented, sounding awestruck. “I see what this is doing to you. So, as your friend, I hope you don’t go into hiding. Give this girl a chance. She’s gorgeous by the way. A year is a long time, Killian.”

Killian turned back to his friend, who looked sincere in what he was saying. He knew his friends worried about him. And rightfully so. They didn’t push- except Ruby- but they all wanted him to recover.

“So go to your meeting, okay?” Robin grinned and patted his friend on the shoulder.

Killian nodded, To what, he wasn’t sure because he had no answer to his internal struggles. But he did have even more to think about.

“Aye.”

“Good.”
Emma looked down at her phone to check the time for the fourth time in the last… ten minutes, she seen. The meeting would begin in less than five minutes. Archie was always punctual with starting the meetings so she knew that it would be very soon that he would be asking for everyone to take their seats.

Killian wasn’t there. This would be his third meeting in a row that he would miss. Emma understood that the world didn’t revolve around her, but she couldn’t even pretend that this wasn’t her fault. He was skipping out on meetings in hopes of avoiding her.

“Hello, everybody.”

Emma walked over to take a seat while Archie went through his greeting routine. Try as she might, she couldn’t focus on anything but her thoughts of Killian.

What could have possibly scared him off? It wasn’t even as if they had kissed! Which she had felt very compelled to do as she sat across from him from that coffee table.

Killian didn’t always share at group. There were times where he was a devout listener instead. There were also those times that he invited his group members in. He shared many times of how much Milah meant to him and the anxiety he felt on their rare occasions since she was gone.

It was like looking into his soul. Emma knew that he was tortured over Milah’s death. That was something that she could understand and empathize with. Although his pain was different from that of her own, she still felt bonded over the brokenness Killian put on himself.

He knew. More than she had believed before that date. Killian knew of her growing feelings for him. Although she had believed herself to be more discreet in her feelings, and him more repressed in feeling anything beyond what he wanted to, he was aware of more.

Emma would have felt worse about it if he didn’t have the inkling that he felt something as well. Now she worried if she had pushed too fast and too far because he was now nowhere to be seen.

“I’m glad that we have all come together again,” Archie said in way of beginning the meeting.

Emma glanced once more at the clock on her phone before she slipped it away in her pocket. She turned her attention, as much as she possibly could, to the matter at hand.

“Our group is rather small today,” Archie continued with a small smile. “Is there anyone who would like to begin? Anyone who would like to share anything about their week or situation?”

The group only included four people. All women tonight, Emma noticed.

She wanted to share. She needed someone who wouldn’t judge her and people who may understand.
She was only worried about the context of her problem.

“Archie?”

Archie turned to face her, smile increasing a bit. His hand reached out in acknowledgement. “Yes, would you like to begin, Emma?”

She fidgeted in her seat as she prepared herself to share. Was it okay to share? Group was a place to share their lives and how they were dealing with the death of their spouse. Her issues were wrapped up in Neal’s death, but extended so far beyond that.

“I’m not really sure how much I want to get into a certain topic,” she told him honestly.

“And that’s okay,” he told her reassuringly. “Whatever you’d like to share is fine. It’s all about what you need and trying to get that.”

Emma took a deep breath. “I know.”

“Oh, one second, Emma.”

From behind her, Emma heard the shutting of the door. Her head swiftly turned in anticipation of what she would find.

“Killian.”

He was dressed in his usual attire. A crisp-looking white dress shirt peeked out from under the dark charcoal cardigan, which all went well with the khaki dress pants. It was those piercing blue eyes and neatly combed jet black hair that was almost too much for her.

His hand went up in a signal of apology. “Sorry for interrupting.”

“We were just getting started,” Archie told him. “We’re happy to have you back, Killian. Please, come join us.”

There was a smattering of welcomes from the group as Killian walked across the room.

Once Archie had begun to call group together, Emma had all but given up on seeing him today. Perhaps she had even given up on seeing him the whole week. She had wondered if he would ever return with her still being there. But here he was.

Her eyes tracked his movements. Would he even look at her?

Yes. He threw a cautious but casual glance her way, before he made the scan of everyone else present. A smile graced his lips in congeniality for the group.

She liked him. God help her, she liked the man who she had spent many hours getting to know intimately in this group setting and who she had only spent one evening together alone. The attraction was palpable, if only he would accept that.

Only half of the eight seats were filled by the members. Both seats on either side of Emma were free. She wondered, in those fleeting fast moments, if he would choose to sit by her or would he actually sit way on the other side of the circle.

Emma held her breath as everything around her, except him, was suspended in time. The moment seemed to last forever as she prepared her heart and head for whatever outcome would come.
Then he was sliding down in the seat to her left.

“Hi.”

And she felt her heart melt at that one-word greeting. She didn’t even care that it was a hurried murmur that wasn’t even accompanied by a glance of acknowledgement. He’d sat down next to her, and if he had taken her hand in his she couldn’t have been any happier.

“Now that we are all together again, Emma, would you like to share?”

Archie had caught her off guard by his question. Her eyes shot up to his, opened wide and left unsettled. He gave her one of those reassuring smiles and a nod of encouragement.

Emma almost glanced over at Killian, but stayed firm in not doing so. How could she speak of what was on her mind not that he was sitting right next to her?

“Um… I just wanted to … acknowledge… my… “ Emma searched for the right words for her sudden cover-up. “Ability to … move forward in a **positive** direction… for what feels like the first time in a very long time. I think I owe a lot of that to … being here.” She put on s tremulous smile for Archie’s benefit. “That’s all for now.”

Archie shrugged. “Are you sure you don’t want to elaborate on that some more, Emma? You look as if you would like to.”

Emma shook her head slowly. “Um, no. Not at this very moment. I’m just… very appreciative.”

She knew it was only her imagination, but she could feel what it would be like to have Killian’s hand ghost over hers, a show of support and maybe something more.

“Well that’s great, Emma. Hopefully we’ll hear more from you today.”

Emma nodded at Archie. “Maybe.”

And from that moment, group continued on to the other members around the circle.

She braved herself for a glance, one quick look. While holding her breath, she turned her head slightly to her left.

Her eyes clashed with the baby blue of his, a look of wonderment soon turned to apologetic as he watched he closely. All she wanted to convey to him in that single moment was that she understood.

Emma didn’t want to turn away from him. It was knowing that she had to that made her turn briefly to her lap. She was going to need to concentrate on the matter at hand: this meeting. That would have to have a conclusion before either one of them would be able to confront the matter she knew had to be on both of their minds.

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“Killian?”

It was her excuse to look at him now because he was going to share with the whole group. Emma turned in her seat so that she would have a better angle to see him.

He hands gradually came together and the fingers steepled under his chin.

“There have been a lot of changes, as of late, in my life,” Killian started, his eyes roaming from
Archie and across the room in a nondescript manner. “I am coming up on fifteen months since….” He paused, looking wounded by the thought of continuing. “My Milah was taken away from me.”

Emma watched him of so carefully for all the signs of grief and hurt she knew he was feeling and working through. Her heart ached for him. She felt the urge to reach out and caress him, to let him know that it was all okay.

“Throughout this time, I know I have been closed off to different parts of my life that I always figured would be… meant only for my wife and I. In losing Milah, I have always considered some parts of my life as being over. That without her, I would no longer even crave the need to form an attachment to… another woman in any sort of way.” He paused, and his eyes searched Archie’s face.

Emma waited on baited breath. What was he going to say? What was Killian thinking? Was this his way of letting her know without actually saying it to her face that he didn’t want anything to do with her?

“And how have you been feeling about that as of late?” Archie pressed since Killian had become quiet.

His leg stretched out and he leaned over, peering directly at Archie in way of confidentiality.

“My friends have pushed me to move on. All in their own way, they have been there, encouraging me to take whatever time I needed, but to know that with Milah’s death, it wasn’t a signaling of my own demise.”

“Good friends can equate to good support,” Archie told him with a small smile.

“Aye, this is true,” Killian murmured.

With a shrug, Archie pressed on. “Killian, are you feeling ready to move on?”

*What is he say to that? Emma wondered, her heart beating this crazy erratic beat. Why is he saying any of this with me beside him? He knows. I know he knows! So why is he torturing me like this?*

Her head bowed in blatant exhaustion of the thoughts crammed in her mind.

“I feel like… I may be heading… towards a path that would allow that.”

She was slow to look up at him. She knew that he would not dare look at her. He was still staring at Archie, but his profile gave her hope. It was actually true.

“And it’s scary as hell,” Killian continued in his confession to Archie. “I don’t know when the last time I was so frightened by… another person.”

“Everything you are feeling is natural, Killian,” Archie assured him. “The one thing to remember is to take it all at your own pace. You’ll know when you are ready. No one else has that ability. Fear comes along with that when you shared such a strong love and life with your wife. In due time, you will figure out what is best for you.”

Emma looked up at Archie to see him smiling at Killian.

She felt a sob bubble inside of her. All she wanted to do was go to him, into his arms, and hold him tight as he held her back.
Is this really happening?

Emma turned to look back at Killian. He was still only a profile at the moment, and yet she felt something from him. Something so true.

Killian.

****

Coming to the meeting today had been a difficult choice for the past five days. Killian was always flipping back and forth on the decision. No matter what advice anyone else had given to him, ultimately it was going to be his own choice in deciding if he was ready or not to only see Emma but also confront not only his feelings but hers as well.

So he had felt this attraction. He understood that it was not something to deny because the fact was that this had never happened to him before. He should trust himself enough to check out what it was all about.

What Killian didn’t want to do was rush things at all. He didn’t want to talk to Emma and have her expect more than he was going to be able to give. That was yet another scary aspect to coming here today. If she wanted too much from him too fast he knew it could possibly backfire on him. He had gone into hiding for far too long. Emma had not deserved that. So he chalked up all his issues and came tonight.

Talking with Archie was a help. He would have rather done it in a one-on-one setting, but that hadn’t been possible. Then, again, by starting the conversation in group allowed for him to initiate the conversation with both Archie and Emma. Two birds, one stone and all…

Archie had spoken the words that he had nearly expected. It was the verbalization that actually helped. Like with Robin, he needed someone to push him in the right direction. Apparently he wouldn’t have been able to do it himself.

Emma although he had not looked at her, he could sense her presence beside him. He knew that she understood his point in coming here today and speaking in front of the group.

With the meeting coming to an end, Killian turned his focus fully onto Emma. The beat of his heart began to drum even louder in his own ears. He wondered how he should play this. It should be him and not her who brought this up officially.

“Hey.”

He watched as the tip of her tongue peeked out of her mouth to wet her bottom lip. Okay, it was true. He was really attracted to this woman. God help him.

Her gaze became totally focused on him. Her eyes transfixed and burning into his.

Is this too much? Killian asked himself, trying to not panic. He wanted to try.

“Hey, yourself,” she answered softly.

Everyone around them was shuffling about, readying themselves to leave for the night. Yet here they sat, unmoving from those original spots because there was so much electricity flowing around them. Did no one else see it?

Emma shrugged lightly. “I’m glad you made it back. I wasn’t sure if you would or not. I mean,
unless you didn’t need to come back.” A nervous smile lit up her face and her eyes went upward, focusing on something close to the ceiling. “I mean, people don’t go through group counseling for the rest of their lives, I know. It’s just that last time you were here.” She sighed as she looked back at him. “It didn’t seem like your last day and all. I’m rambling.” She laughed, her hand moving to cover her mouth. A tinge of pink colored her high cheekbones. Her eyes stayed on him the entire time though. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Killian told her, he himself feeling lighthearted by Emma’s chattering. “Did you… have a good meeting? Was it… productive and helpful for you tonight?”

Emma sighed. “Yes. Very helpful.”

Killian nodded. “That’s good.”

“Um… you had some… pretty big breakthroughs as of late.”

Again, he nodded. “Aye. It’s been a lot to take in as well.”

Emma shook her head. “Well, I’m happy for you. I know it’s been a really long time.”

Thoughts of her were filling his head. He tried not to be fearful of all the things that it entailed to be wrapped up in her in the way he was.

“A long time,” he whispered in answer.

“Hey, guys.”

Killian and Emma both looked up from their seats to see Archie standing in front of them.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he apologized quickly. “We’re going to have to clear out this room really soon. If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sorry. Of course.”

They both began to stand. Emma gathered up her coat and purse and Killian waited as she did so.

“Oh, hey,” Archie said to them. “I will see both of you guys on Wednesday, if all goes well. Good night.” And with a hand up as in a wave, he shuffled on his way.

Killian watched him go, now all of a sudden thrown out of his element. He felt fearful of where to go from this point on. He turned back to Emma to see that she was still watching him, her coat slung over her arm and holding on tight.

“Emma?”

“Yes?”

“If you aren’t busy tonight, would you like to grab a bite to eat or something?”

And she smiled brightly. “I’m not busy tonight. And I would really like that, Killian.”

He nodded again. He felt grateful for not feeling completely sick to his stomach at all that was happening right now. What he did feel was the flutter of something inside of him. But for now he attributed to something positive and not negative.

“Ok. So we should get going.”
Killian let her walk in front of him, and he followed her towards the exit. This was okay. Everything would be good, he told himself.

*It is time for me to move on.*
Chapter 7

“So... back there? Was that all for my benefit?” Emma was close, but she wanted to be closer. God, he had smelled so good. Okay, she knew that her attraction for him had grown tenfold since the meeting. Or maybe she had just allowed herself to believe in the possibility at that point.

“All?” he had asked. He hadn’t stepped back, but she had understood that he was still trying to come to terms with everything.

Emma had given a little shrug, brushing up against him. “Some?”

Killian had smiled. “A lot.”

“Does that mean you’re ready for me to be honest with you?” she had asked softly, looking up into those eyes. Those oh so beautiful blue eyes that had often been haunted by pain from the past. She wanted him to be ready.

“Emma, do you actually realize that I’ve been rather closed off... since Milah died?”

“I realize that,” she had assured him. “And I also realize how big a step you’ve taken tonight.”

“Emma.” He had sounded worried.

“Yes?” Was he going to waver? Was he going to go back before they had the chance to begin?

“I like you.” Killian’s hands had finally wrapped around her waist, pulling her even closer to him. His grip had been tight, as if he was trying to hold onto his sanity and his hold onto her was a link to that.

Emma had smiled, feeling as giddy as a little girl. “I like you, Killian.” She had placed her hands on either of his arms. “I can handle this. Our past lives and all the emotions that have come from them. I like you that much, Killian.”

“And I...” He took in a deep ragged breath. “I want to be able to handle this?” He had stared into her eyes, clearly looking for something. “Are you okay with that? Can you handle everything that we’ve learned about each other in group and a lot more?”

He had no idea how much she wanted just that.

“Yes, I can.”

“Do you mind holding him, Em?”

Emma looked up from wiping down the counter to see Mary Margaret walking towards her with baby Leo in her arms. He was squirming all around with a frown on his cute and round face.

Being pulled away from her thoughts of that night had been bittersweet. She really enjoyed when her mind was filled with thoughts of him. Especially when they were so pleasantly accurate. As of late, they were all pretty nice thoughts...

“It’s almost nap time and I need to warm up his bottle,” Mary Margaret told her as she deposited the baby in her arms with a huff. “Thanks.”
Emma looked down at the ten-month old infant now squirming around in her arms.

“Leo. Hi, Leo.”

He looked up at her and smiled a toothy grin. Getting his attention had stopped the moving and it was replaced by nondescript baby babble.

She absolutely loved Leo. She loved his whole family as if they were her own. But sometimes, like now, it was kind of difficult to be around him so closely. Holding him brought back memories of her own failures in life.

*This could have been my life. It almost was…*

Emma shook her head at the turn her thoughts were trying to take, She held on tighter to the baby as she turned to watched Mary Margaret fish through her diaper bag, emptying out the contents to make up the bottle.

“So David and I are getting a babysitter tomorrow and are going on a night on the town,” Mary Margaret told her excitedly. “How would you like to come?”

Emma looked down at Leo and smiled.

“They’re getting rid of you.”

Her friend laughed from behind her as she shook up the bottle of formula.

“Ok, we’re getting rid of him for the night,” she agreed.

“And there’s no need for me to be a third wheel,” Emma said as she allowed the baby to be slipped out of her arms.

“Third wheel? Emma!”

“You’re getting a babysitter- one of the rarer events for you guys- and you want me to tag along with you?” She sighed. “Enjoy your evening, just the two of you.”

“Maybe we just want to enjoy an adult night out with friends,” Mary Margaret said. “Not some romantic evening. Do you mind if I lay Leo down on the couch while he naps?”

“Not at all.” From where she stood she watched as Mary Margaret did just that.

Emma felt the vibration of her phone from inside her pocket.

“Who is it?” Mary Margaret asked.

“It’s a text.” The smile that popped on her face was instant as the notification came up that it was from him. “From…”

*Hey, Emma. Busy?*

She bit down on her lip, trying to contain the sudden happiness by just those three words.

“Who?”

Emma looked over at Mary Margaret to see that she had a curious look on her face. Most likely because Emma had not answered right away.
“Um… his name is Killian.” She quickly texted back. Not too quick, right? There was nothing wrong with answering right back.

“How’s Killian?” Mary Margaret shook her head. “And why does he have you smiling like that?”

Emma had not divulged any information of him to her friends just yet. She had seen no need to because, to be honest, she knew she had had a thing for him since day one. There was no point in sharing considering the predicament she found herself in. But things had changed now. There was something there.

Taking a deep breath as she stared at Mary Margaret, she answered, “I met this guy, who I really like a lot.”

The stare she received from Mary Margaret was not what she had expected.

“You…” She stood from her seat and her eyebrows knitted together. “You met some guy that you really like?”

Their images mirrored each other because Emma, now in turn, frowned right back at her friend.

“But… what about Neal?”

Emma’s phone vibrated in her hand. Her friend’s question had thrown her for a loop, unsure of where she was going with her line of questioning. She raised the phone to read the new message.

At work, counting down the minutes before I leave. It’s been one of those days again. How are you?

She was beginning to notice how his desk job was an anchor for Killian. He was not in the least bit happy there.

She glanced back at Mary Margaret.

“Neal’s been gone over five months,” she murmured softly.

“And you really think that’s long enough to wait before you start getting excited about some other guy?”

Emma turned her focus back to her phone.

“You do realize that I’d known Neal only four weeks before we got married, right?” She didn’t look back up. Instead, she began typing away on her keyboard.

“Well that’s another reason why you shouldn’t rush into something.”

Emma’s thoughts turned to her husband. She could forgive Mary Margaret’s words of worry because Mary Margaret didn’t know Emma’s secret. She didn’t know what had haunted Emma since the moment she learned of Neal’s death or also the greater pain that soon followed. Neal, he hadn’t deserved to die so young with a good life still ahead of him. He’d died trying to save the lives of others. He had died an honorable man, and she didn’t fault him for that. That didn’t change the reality of what was to come had he not died that day. What it did do was force her into counseling to try to deal with her anguish.

“I’ll never forget Neal,” she told Mary Margaret, “but don’t you think I would know when the time was right to move on?”
Mary Margaret shook her head. “I only want what’s best for you, Emma. You’re my best friend. I worry about you.”

And she didn’t fault her friend for caring so much. “I know.”

The phone vibrated again.

_That’s good. There was only a brief moment, enough time to read the message, before the next one came in. Would you like to get together later?_

And the answer was a resounding “yes.” She wondered how long he had thought about asking before he actually did.

_We could do Netflix and takeout?_

Emma looked back over at Mary Margaret. “I think he’s going to come over after work.”

“He’s coming over here?” The surprise in her voice did not escape Emma. “How long has this been going on?”

She probably didn’t need to know the connection they had to the support group. Not with the reaction she was having to what little she knew already.

“I’ve known him over two months,” Emma answered. “We’ve just now started this timid journey of seeing if we can be more than just friends.”

_Very timid, Emma thought to herself. She was still pondering the absence of even the simplest of kisses after their date together. She knew that he had absolutely no interaction with any woman in any intimate way since Milah. She also knew that he had had no connection whatsoever with another woman in all that time. It still didn’t deter her from wanting him to open up sooner rather than later to the possibility._

“How did you mean it then?” Mary Margaret said. “I take it that this is his idea and not yours, knowing you.”

“Because if it were my idea,” Emma started slowly, her head cocked to the side, “we’d be on our way to the chapel already?” She gave her a mirthless smile. The phone buzzed again. “Am I really that awful, Mary Margaret?”

“I did not mean it like that, Emma.”

“She was still pondering the absence of even the simplest of kisses after their date together. She knew that he had absolutely no interaction with any woman in any intimate way since Milah. She also knew that he had had no connection whatsoever with another woman in all that time. It still didn’t deter her from wanting him to open up sooner rather than later to the possibility.

“I did not mean it like that, Emma.”

_I’ll come over straight from work. Is that fine?_

Emma scanned all the open areas of the apartment. It was pretty much clean, but she wondered if she should take time to do some extra housework.

“How did you mean it then?” she asked, finally focusing on her friend.

“Only that I know you. I can see it in your face and in your body language as you text this guy… Killian… that you seem to really like him. And when you really like a guy you tend to move fast.”

She knew Mary Margaret didn’t mean anything hurtful by her words, but Emma’s thoughts turned quickly to her marriage.

It hadn’t been everything that she had thought it would be or everything she thought it could be. It wasn’t that Neal was a bad guy. It was the mere fact of what Mary Margaret had brought up: she had
known him for such a short time before they had tied the knot. They were getting to know each other at the same time they were learning to share their lives together. She had gotten married for the first time at the age twenty-seven and knew instantly of the mistake she had made. And yet, for more than two years, she had tried. She had tried really hard at being successful. Until the day she had stopped…

Emma wasn’t Mary Margaret. She and Neal had never been her and David. And Emma envied so much of what her friends had. It was true love, no doubt. Sometimes it hurt to see the happiness.

Baby Leo was another stab in the heart. To see how their pair had grown into this beautiful and loving family while she lost everything had been almost too much to handle. Emma had tried very hard to not show it to her friends. It was her burden, not theirs. A burden of sadness and loneliness that she thought she would hold on to for far too long.

She had to fight those feelings of sadness with Mary Margaret watching her at the moment. Her thoughts had turned too sad. She didn’t want that when Killian would be in her home for the first time ever tonight.

Killian.

“Do you enjoy the water?”

Emma had looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’m an avid boater,” Killian had explained, a smile appearing on his face almost immediately. “I absolutely love being out on the open water. I’m looking forward to that time of year again.”

“I really haven’t spent that much time boating. Sorry.” She had smiled up at him. “You never mentioned that in group.”

“Not directly,” he had murmured. “At least not as of late.”

His fingertips had trailed over her palm, just as she had imagined him doing before. This time it had been for real. This time it had felt so right and so nice.

“If I had my way then I would have made a career of it,” he had continued. “Things just didn’t work out that way.”

Emma had wondered what else went with that thought.

“My idea of a fun day that includes water is lying on the beach and gazing out at the scenic view before me.”

“That’s nice as well,” Killian told her with a smile. “But just think of the view from the other side. You’ll love it. I promise.”

“You don’t own your own boat, do you?” she had asked, surprised by even the thought that he was really that serious.

“Aye, I do.” Killian’s smile had spread across his face.

“So are you promising to take me on your boat when the weather breaks?” she had asked softly, her eyes glowed with wonderment. She had not known how to feel about him making any plans that involved her that was in the future tense.
Killian’s fingers had intertwined with her. “Yes. Thinking about it is one of the things that makes the office job bearable. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it as well.”

There was still pain there, but he was easing up and letting her in. And it was amazing to be there in that moment with him…

“Don’t worry, Mary Margaret,” Emma told her softly. Her thoughts still fluttered around the previous day. “It’s different with him.”

****

Killian looked over at the clock sitting on the corner of his desk. Fifty-five minutes and counting…

It wasn’t that today had been any worse than any other day. It was the fact that he was still here in this office, this pit of despair which was now his life. Not that it hadn’t been for a long time now. It still didn’t make it any easier.

With the end of this day, though, there came a special gift. He didn’t know what had gave him the courage to text her near the end of his day. Perhaps it was the fact that conversations with her had always been so easy. Having someone to talk to who didn’t obsess over his personal issues had been a breath of fresh air. His attraction to her only heightened that feeling.

Not busy at all, she had texted back. What’s up?

Ease. Even though the attraction was so strong that it could have been too much, Emma made it easy. And he knew that it was for his benefit. All the more reason why he wanted to give this a real shot.

Well everything has been fine on my end.

Again, it was the way she made him feel at ease. It was the way she handled and carried herself that made him actually yearn for more. And that was the reason why he had quickly texted her back about maybe getting together that evening.

Yes.

It was the moments where Milah invaded his mind and mixed with those thoughts of Emma. Would she have approved? Ruby may have believed so, but Killian wasn’t always for sure.

Why was it so easy to go from the feeling of wonderment of trying something new and commiserating in the pain of the past?

Long and sinewy arms wrap languidly around his neck. Soft kisses make their way across his collarbone, leaving a trail of sparks along their way.

Soft murmurs of everlasting love leaves her lips and funnel into his ear.

His arms close around her waist, bringing her all the closer to him. Loving the scent of her skin, he inhaled the aroma that he cannot get enough of.

Lazy weekend mornings were always the best, with her curled snuggly against his body.

“Can we just stay like this for the rest of the day?” She had looked up at him with a demure smile, hoping against all hope that he would agree.

Her lips fell softly against his, an utterly sweet and loving kiss shared between man and wife.
It was those thoughts that muddled his brain. Thoughts of his sweet Milah. Thoughts of a woman who was no longer there.

And the pain seeped through his entire body in a way that he felt it would never leave. A physical ache that lingered, making him twist and writhe in hopes of finding comfort.

That’s when his future seemed so indeterminate. So unclear of what his life would one day be.

Killian wanted to push those doubts and uncertainties away. He just wasn’t sure how, if at all, it would be possible.
“I’m going to have to give a firm ‘no’ on this one, Emma.” He hoped his tone was enough to get her to believe him and she ignored the grin that was plastered on his face.

Emma’s mouth dropped open as she stared down in her lap at him. “The Notebook is on top of every list of great movies.” Her hands clasped down on either side of his face. “We’re doing movie date night; how could you want to pass it up?”

The Notebook, of all movies, and she was seriously asking why? Killian thought silently to himself. She’s adorable.

“Well, let’s just say that the ending gets me every time and I’m just not up for that tonight.”

“Really?” A raised eyebrow accompanied the skeptical question.

Killian nodded solemnly, puppy dog eyes meeting hers shamelessly. “Aye.”

A slow smile came to Emma’s face, a look of relenting.

“I give up.” She dropped a quick kiss on his forehead. “No Ryan and Rachel.”

His head tilted back and his hands came up to capture her face. She would have moved, but his mouth sought out hers, a soft press of lips against lips in a sweet innocent kiss.

Had he really only discovered this mouth mere days ago? The combination of Emma’s soft and low moan and her fingers dipping at the nape of his neck made him think of how much he had been denying himself.

Killian couldn’t believe how easy it had been to fall into the pace of domesticity with this woman. It had only been two weeks, and yet every day seemed to get better and easier. With their schedules being in sync with one another, it allowed for evenings and weekends together. And they were taking full advantage of that predicament.

He didn’t understand why it has been so easy.

****

When she had opened the door, Killian had seen the nervous excitement in her body language.

“Hey, you made it,” she said softly. She opened the door wider, her arm held out in a gesture to come in. “You didn’t have any problems finding the place, did you?”

Killian’s movements had been slow, each step deliberate as he walked into the apartment. This was another one of those big moments that spoke volumes to where he was headed in his life. He had successfully pushed his thoughts of Milah away from his mind just in time to greet Emma at her door. It hadn’t tampered his nerves completely, but it was a lot better.

“No problem at all,” Killian assured her, turning around to face her.

“Oh, that’s good then.”

Emma had closed and locked the door. Her back leaned against it as her eyes darted off, not quite looking at him.
She had been dressed in an oversized cream-colored sweater and a pair of matching leggings. He absolutely adored her casual attire. He had only been in the apartment a brief moment, and yet seeing her that way and in her own environment had been another easing agent.

Killian watched as she had taken slow steps forward towards him. This was a lot, looking at the woman who he was undeniably attracted to. Her lips parted slightly and he wondered if it was his imagination playing games on him that her eyes were now focused on his own mouth.

Emma had stopped right in front of him.

“The pizza arrived just before you did.”

Did she feel it as well, he had wondered. There had been palpable tension between them. He had wanted to be ready. He had wanted to take her in his arms and feel her soft skin against his and he wanted to finally know what that mouth actually tasted like- he imagined sweet as honey.

“The living room is that way,” she had continued, her arm brushed against him as she pointed behind him.

She had done it on purpose, because even that small contact had shot electric currents throughout his body. On her arm’s return, sliding slowly across his own arm, he caught her by the wrist.

Emma had smiled up at him, but her eyes had a question in them. She had stepped even closer, bringing them chest to chest.

“What?”

But she had known. Killian had been sure that she could feel his heart as surely as he could make out her pulse.

He had dropped her arm to bring his hands to caress her cheeks. He hadn’t planned on this at all. His journey to her door had been full of fright and uncertainty. It had been seeing her that had brought him to this moment, a moment full of need and want of a woman for the first time.

A slip of tongue had peeked out of Emma’s mouth. She had let her now free arms slowly make their way up to wrap around his neck, dragging them both closer to each other.

Killian had tried to take the moment all in. He had not known where to take the moment.

“I do want…”

“Killian, will you just do it?” Emma had cut in with a soft whisper. He could feel her slightly bounce up and down on the tips of her toes.

And sometimes he just needed that forceful hand, he realized.

Killian had dropped his mouth over hers. His lips had only ghosted over hers. And then he had heard Emma’s moan- a moan borne before their lips even touched- and then she brought her lips up to his.

It had been a flutter of eyelids that had suddenly felt too heavy to stay lifted, his eyes had closed under their own volition.

A press of lips to lip, soft breathing, a moment to take in all the closeness. And then open mouth allowed for that tasting that he had been so curious about. He had been right. Sweet as honey.
Killian felt her arms tightened around his neck, bringing them both closer. His own hands had needed to touch skin, to feel more of Emma, as his mouth attentively discovered hers.

God, it had been more than a year since he had tasted anything like this. It had not been the same. There had been no comparison actually. He couldn’t have likened this moment to anything else he had ever felt before.

Soft moans, were those his or hers, had rose above them as heads continued to angle in hopes of finding the best access to this new mouth.

Killian had felt the instinctive dip of knees and the finding of her middle to his. The instinctive grind of his body into hers, and the sharp intake of breath from Emma, was what had made him pull back. This was turning into something much more than he had wanted it to. His arms fell to her waist, holding her away from him as he leaned back as much as possible.

That tongue had peeked back out over Emma’s lips, running over them slowly. Her eyes languidly opened and met his.

They had both been breathing a bit heavy as they had taken each other in for a minute.

“Was that…”

“That was nice.”

“I did mean to…”

“I told you to.”

“It’s just…”

“I know.”

“Ok.”

Emma had pulled away from him. She tugged down on her sweater, smoothing out any wrinkles.

“Um… the living room is right through there,” she had told him again, softly. Those eyes had been twinkling up to his. “I’ll grab the box and meet you there.”

Killian had nodded. “Okay.”

****

“I’m going to leave the decision up to you, okay?” Emma said softly, looking down at him. “I’m going to freshen up while you do that.” She smiled and gently pushed him away, trying to get him to move from her lap.

“I was very content like this,” Killian complained playfully with a slight poke of his lip. “I can’t believe you’re going to take that away from me.”

Even if he meant it in a joking way, he was sure that Emma understood how the sentiment and feelings were actually true. It still left him in awe by the amount of ease she gave to him.

“Well, now you have a chance to pick something that you would like to watch,” she reminded him. “Now up.”
Killian did as she had commanded, allowing her to stand from her seat.

“I’ll be right back, so have something picked out.” She smiled at him before she turned to walk toward the back of the apartment.

Killian watched her from where he still stood as she disappeared down the hallway, heading towards where the bathroom and the bedroom were found.

He had spent many evenings in Emma’s apartment. Any yet, strangely enough, he had not ventured anywhere near that part of her home. Chalk it up to his subconscious, he was sure. The back of the apartment held enticements that he didn’t think he was ready for and neither needed any extra temptation.

But maybe…

Heading in the direction that Emma had, Killian thought that it had to have been his subconscious trying to protect him. Things were moving steadily between them. The kisses and caresses had been a big step in which he fully enjoyed. The moans and purrs were just as intoxicating. And yet, Killian hadn’t been sure how to handle more than that. He also knew that Emma seemed to be okay with the pace, even if for his benefit.

He could hear the water running into the sink in the bathroom straight ahead. He turned his attention to the right. Her bedroom door was open ajar. From his spot in the hallway, he could make out one side of the bed.

Killian pushed the door open, listening to the light creak of the hinges as it swung towards the wall.

It wasn’t super girly. The Queen-sized bed was cover by a floral print comforter. Crisp looking white sheets peeked out from underneath. There was the minimum number of pillows allowed on a woman’s bed: four, with pink and white pillowcases.

Killian stepped into the room, surveying the contents. The two laundry baskets of clothing that had a sizeable pile of more scattered clothing beside them, all sat next to each other near a corner. It was more or less of a surprise because he kind of figured her to be less of a neat freak. The front of the apartment had been a good disguise, he thought with a wry smile.

Something else caught Killian’s attention, as he walked further into the bedroom. The scattered array of perfumes bottles, powders, and make-up and lotions set on the dresser in front of him. Although he absolutely loved the femininity of that scene, it was overshadowed for the moment by the single framed photo that was also gathered there.

For all intents and purposes, he wanted to conclude that it was her wedding day. She was dressed in a simple white sundress. Her hair was pulled back into a tight and high ponytail with only wisps of strands falling over her face. Her presumed husband stood with his arm around her. Another casual dresser for one’s wedding day: a crooked navy blue tie hung over a white dress shirt.

Looking at that picture, Killian realized how naked the apartment actually was when it came to mementos of her previous life before grief counseling. Not much could be found that hinted to a marriage. But he could understand that. It could be very difficult to face daily.

He reached for the frame, bringing it closer to examine.

“Yes, that was my wedding day.”

Killian was quick to set the photo back down in its spot. He turned to find Emma walking over to
him. He didn’t know how he had missed the opening of the bathroom or the silent steps into her own bedroom.

“You looked beautiful,” Killian said with a dashing smile.

Emma’s eyebrow rose suspiciously. “We ran straight out and did it.” She shrugged. “Neal asked me to marry him on our one month anniversary, I said yes, and we foolishly ran straight ahead to get the paperwork started. It was done three days later.”

“Whoa, pretty fast there,” Killian murmured, watching as she came to stand right in front of him.

“Don’t I know it?”

His hand came up to caress her cheek softly. He thought he needed to keep looking at her to make sure that Milah didn’t invade the moment. He was so close to thinking about their own courtship, but it was what he found on Emma’s face that tampered any such memories.

“What is it, Emma?”

She was staring back at him, all mirth exited from her face. It was replaced by something that looked like doubt, and a look of uncertainty.

“Neal and I… were married for two years.”

Killian nodded slowly. “I know.”

Emma continued her gaze up at him until she turned her attention to the dresser. A frustrated huff of a sigh left her mouth.

“It was this whirlwind kind of a relationship, you know?”

Again, he nodded, because it sure did seem that way.

Emma looked back at him. “We didn’t really know much about each other. I mean, not like we should have. But it was a fantastic and magical journey as we went through it. All of our spare time was spent together. He taught me a different way of life that I didn’t know about. It was exciting.”

She paused, and Killian wasn’t sure what she was thinking or going through.

“You weren’t happy in your marriage?”

Emma’s eyes went wide and she furiously shook her head. “It wasn’t Neal’s fault. I think he tried very hard to make our marriage work. And I don’t think he ever thought we had any serious problems. I’m sure it looked really nice on the surface. Our friends never saw my issues. They still
There was more, Killian instinctively knew that.

“The thing is, I think we made better friends. We shouldn’t have gotten married. If we would have only waited longer I think we would have seen that. Killian?” She was searching his face. She was debating on what she wanted to share, because this had not came out in group.

What was eating her up inside? Killian wanted to know. He wanted to be there for her. To be everything that she had been for him and more.

Emma swallowed hard as her search continued. “I’ve never told anybody. Not even my friends?”

Killian could feel a lump forming in his own throat. “You don’t have to tell me anything, Emma.”

She shook her head, a frown creased her forehead. All the pain so visible on her face. “I had finally done it,” she told him softly, looking into his eyes. “I knew that things weren’t going to work out between us. I thought it could be civil once everything was over. But our marriage was over. I didn’t want it anymore. I … was going to … do it. I was leaving him.”

Killian tried to keep the shock of what Emma was telling him all in. She was emotional during her tale and he didn’t want to make it worse.

“That morning I had packed all my bags up. My new apartment wasn’t ready quite yet, so I was going to stay at a hotel for a few days. I was almost ready to walk out the door when I got the phone call that afternoon. It was the fire station. It was Neal’s captain who had called. He told me that there had been that building fire and that Neal had went back in to try to save this family that was stuck inside. And he told me how he didn’t make it. He said how sorry he was for me and that I should get down to the hospital as soon as possible.”

Killian grabbed onto her tightly, holding her close. It was all he knew what to do for her. He couldn’t believe that this is what she had been holding onto for all these months.

“So I had to leave everything in the apartment just the way it was. I ran out to go see Neal in the hospital. It was too late. I didn’t want him to die! I loved him. I just couldn’t be married to him anymore.”

Killian could feel the wetness of her cheeks staining his shirt as she cried against him. He held on so tight, feeling her pain and all her confliction.

Damn.

“I’m sorry he died, Emma,” he told her, not knowing how to make it better for her. Emma tried to push away from him, but he held onto her tight.

“No, don’t.” Killian looked around the room, his eyes focusing on the bed some feet away. He lifted Emma easily up, her socked feet leaving the floor, and carried her over to the bed. Holding on tight to her, he leaned to his side to make the fall against the mattress.

Emma was quick to curl into a ball, covering her face with her hands.

“Emma, it’s okay.” Damn. His arms and legs entangled in her, wanted nothing more than to comfort her, to love her.

“I’m okay.” She finally looked up at him, her face still wet. She surveyed their positions, but didn’t
comment on it. “I never told anyone. Not even my best friends. But there was something more.”

*More? Killian’s heart ached painfully for her and didn’t know what else there could be.*

“What was it?” he asked softly, his fingers carding through her hair.

The ball that she was in tightened, but she stared right at him.

“Afterwards,” she whispered, “when the funeral was over and I was trying to deal with all the emotions, I miscarried.”

*Shit.*

“It was from all the stress and grief I was dealing with,” she continued. “I didn’t even know I was pregnant. And it was just more stressful. Because I didn’t have a clue what life would have been like if either one of those tragedies hadn’t happened. I didn’t know what I would have done if I would have found out I was pregnant after leaving Neal. Would I have kept it or aborted the pregnancy? Would I have wanted him to know and be a part of our child’s life? Or what if Neal had died but the pregnancy would have continued. Would I have kept the baby if I had the chance, to give Neal a lifeline now that he was gone? Could I have raised and loved our child in memory of him? Or would I have chosen to not even try?” She exhaled a deep long breath. “I don’t know what my life would have been like. If I hadn’t put out in the cosmic universe that I no longer wanted to be married.”

“You think this was your fault?” Killian asked incredulously, his eyes wide.

Emma shook her head. “It’s a lot to hold onto.”

“Then don’t hold onto it. Let it go, Emma.”

“It’s that simple?” she whispered.

“No, but it’s the reason you are in counseling,” he reminded her. “Come here.” His legs pushed their way between his and his arms unfolded hers.

Emma went willingly, half lying atop him, her head resting on his chest.

“This isn’t how I pictured our first time in my bed,” she whispered against him. He could feel the smile on his chest.

Alleviating some of the serious tone would be nice…

“So you’ve been picturing that, hm?” His scruffy bearded cheek rubbed gently against hers.

Emma shrugged. “This is really nice though.” Her hand slid over his stomach and up his chest. “I can’t believe I told you. I haven’t been able to tell anyone.”

“Does it feel any better?” he asked.

Emma lifted her head to look at him. There was still pain there, he could see it.

“It feels better to not hold it all in. It’s something I need to be honest with because it’s the only way I’m going to heal. I see that now.”

His fingers came up to brush her cheek and her chin. They lightly crossed over her lips, his gaze now focused there.
What was this woman doing to him? He didn’t know, but it felt so honest and so good. He understood they were both dealing with heartache and struggles. But he truly felt, in that moment, that together they had a chance.

“Emma…”

Her forehead dropped to his. “I know.”
“You know why I’m surprised?” Ruby basically crawled over Robin so that she had a better view of Killian in front of her.

Killian tried to ignore the bombardment that he was sure was about to come from his friends.

He turned to face both Ruby and Robin. He shouldn’t have let them in. When he had seen Ruby behind Robin, he should have known right then and there he had trouble on his hands.

“I have a meeting to get to in less than an hour. But apparently you don’t get that I am in the middle of something right now.”

Ruby’s eyebrows shot up, her mouth twisting in a wry smile. “Oh, I absolutely get that you are in the middle of something. And that’s what I’m trying to find out about.”

Killian’s frown turned to the smirking Robin beside her. The dissatisfaction of that look seemed to sober his friend up. Crossing his arms over his chest, he loudly cleared his throat.

“You’ve changed,” he said in way of explaining. “Who hasn’t noticed?” He turned to look back at Ruby. “She has.”

“So you talked?”

“Just so you know, I do approve,” Ruby informed him.

That fact surprised him only a little bit. “Which entitles me to care that you approve?”

“Don’t you want the approval of your friends?” She was inching closer to him. And he didn’t trust that. “Wouldn’t you like to know that Milah’s best friend approves of the one who is taking her place?”

“God damn it, Ruby!”

Killian felt the instant grim set of his lips and the squint of his eyes as they narrowed down at his so-called friend. The hurt was just as swift and immediate. Her words felt like deep-rooted tears through his heart.

“Do you ever think before you open your mouth?” Robin was normally passive when it came to Ruby’s outburst. This time, with a vain throbbing on the side of his head, he looked as if he was ready to strangle her.

“It’s alright.” Killian held up a hand to his friend. “Although you didn’t realize this is what we were going to get when you brought her over here? No worries. Emma is not taking Milah’s place. Not in any regard.” He turned his attention to Ruby, his gaze now steely. “And for you to suggest that only belittles what I shared with my wife. Your best friend.”

The look that they shared between them was full of tension. It was all in Killian’s body language. Hands balling and unballing at his side. The blue of his eyes had turned cold and icy. Ruby, on the other hand, stared right back at him with her mouth slightly open. Hands on hips, she looked completely befuddled.

“Killian, I didn’t mean that you were about to go out and marry her. But for you to deny that your
feelings are inevitably strong for a girl, you’re doing yourself a disservice.”

“You are putting words in his mouth, Ruby,” Robin bit out between clinched teeth. His looked from one friend to another. “You haven’t even met her, and you have no idea what their relationship is like for you to put her on any level whatsoever.”

Killian usually tried his best to ignore his friends when they got into a battle over his life. It was difficult this time because he himself didn’t know what this was or where it was going.

She wasn’t here. Ultimately, that meant that Milah was much more prevalent on his mind. He missed her, yearned for her, and ached so much it almost hurt not to have her in his arms. Having anyone rip that out of his realm of possibility only made him want to die a little more inside. Milah wasn’t easily replaced by anyone. That had included Emma Cassidy.

“I have a meeting to get to,” he informed them once again. “I am no longer going to discuss my relationship, neither in defense of where, why, or how it stands. Understood?”

Ruby’s response was a batting of eyelashes and a simple breezy shrug. “Understood. For now.”

Killian knew her well. For now was about the best answer he could have gotten.

“I want to meet her,” she piped in, a lot quicker than he thought she would.

“Oh course you do.”

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It was one of those nights he felt like he needed to unburden himself. It was one of those nights where group therapy would have been a welcome savior in his life, easing the pain of real life troubles that were the result of losing his wife so long ago. It was also one of those nights that he simply couldn’t unburden himself from all those issues. The silent struggle was twisting his insides in a way that made him practically sick to his stomach.

Emma was sitting beside him, as per usual in their meetings. Her attention was not focused on him. It didn’t matter. As they both listened to the stories of their fellow group mates, he knew that his own troubles would be either understood too well by her or not understood at all. She would take it to be about her. She was a part of his life, and everything in that moment could be misconstrued by her if he spoke.

Killian glanced over at her. She must have noticed it, too, because she turned her head slightly to look back at him. A small smile lit her face. A smile that was meant for him and him alone. There was some slight twinkle in her eye. That twinkle was also marred by some type of questioning. And then she turned her attention back to the meeting at hand.

Emma Cassidy had flipped his world from upside-down to sideways. In her attempt to fix her own life she was also changing his.

He wanted to slip his fingers through hers and hold her close because of it. Who was this woman who helped conflict his heart so easily?

What just happened? How did his heart just do that flip-flop? How did he go from pain and despair over Milah to a feeling of warmth flowing through his entire body over Emma?

It was enough to make him want to burst from him seat and howl out his total frustration of his whole damned life!
Did no one see this?

His fingers gripped at the back of his head, not pulling as tightly as he wanted to. He needed some semblance of rectifying his world.

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There was something wrong, Emma realized that. She could feel it coming off of him in waves. Was it that he was different? Not really different. There was this tension that she could see in his body language. Could no one else see it? The way his fingers scraped at the armrest, the way his chin lifted just millimeters more than usual. She’d seen his eyes when he was in a deep dark space. They weren’t like that now. But there was still a hint of unease and apprehension.

Emma didn’t know what it was. Or maybe she did have an inkling of what was wrong. Maybe she just wanted to ignore the possibility and hope that it would all go away. That he would not fall into some abyss while leaving her somewhere off to the side.

She had shared her secret with him. It had been on a whim, but not something she had taken lightly. In all that time, nobody had known. Mary Margaret had not even known.

Emma had shared with him a part of her soul. The one thing that had brought her to this place and the one thing that had brought them together. She had shared her heartache over losing Neal and their baby. And the way that he was there for her was the exact way that she needed him to be there.

That was another flip of the coin. Emma hadn’t known how anyone would react. She had planned on leaving her husband. She hadn’t discussed it with Neal, hadn’t said how unhappy she was, or how she couldn’t take being in their marriage any longer.

Instead, she was the horrible woman who had packed all her bags and had one foot out the door when she got a life-altering phone call.

She hadn’t wanted pity- something that was understandable by him. She hadn’t wanted the million and one questions of the ins and outs of the before and after. He understood that as well. She didn’t need the constant consoling and looks of worry.

Killian had held her until she didn’t need to be held so tightly. He had laughed and joked with her when she needed it. He let them move on and not linger over the pain and hurt for far longer than she could stand.

Killian had done the near impossible: he had set her free from her burdens. She wanted him to have that same relief.

And he usually did. As of late, their connection was strong and as bonded as ever. Tonight it had been different. Looking at him in that moment, she saw a change back- even if minute. She didn’t mind the brooding Killian of not long before. She only wished that it didn’t mean he would pull back from her…

Because she liked the way she fit in his arms while they lay in her bed. She liked the feel of his firm lips against hers as well as other- yet chaste- places. She liked the feel of his wide shoulders and muscled arms under her hands as she smoothed over them. She wanted to know and not just imagine what it would be like to reach other plateaus in their relationship.

Emma turned her head just so slightly to look at him right then.

Given the chance he could be so closed off. She needed for him to not do that to her. Not now. Not
when that tug between them was so strong.

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“Would you like to go back to my place for a while?”

Her smile was tempting. That sparkle in her eyes as she twisted side to side was almost too much to not give into.

Killian looked down at the phone in his hand. While they had been in group he had received a few different text messages.

*I’m coming over when you get out of your meeting.*

*Why don’t you bring Emma over? I would love to meet her. Don’t you think it’s about time?*

*I’ll be nice!!*

Ruby and her absurd ideas.

“Ahh…” Killian looked back up at Emma. “I can’t.” There was not even a small debate over fulfilling Ruby’s request. No. Not a possibility.

There was only a second of something indistinctive in her eyes before it was replaced by something light.

“Well how about I go back to your place with you?”

The deep in-take of breath was sudden and involuntary. He couldn’t take her back to his place. Not even if Ruby wasn’t coming over. He just could have her there. Not yet.

“I was kidding,” she assured him with a laugh. But there was still something else there, too. “I’ll just… call you later. We’ll get together another time. Okay?”

It was the way she was looking up at him. There was this tinge of something beyond just hopefulness and happiness. It was the growing adoration that was not completely one-sided. Something mutual…

She was close. Close enough to reach out and touch. So he did.

His hands came up to her face- slowly, carefully, so delicate- cradling it between his hands. He watched her eyelashes lower, her eyes closing, and a tiny sigh escaped her lips.

Looking at her, it was so difficult to escape the growing feelings he had for her. Those feelings that, for sure, were growing out of control. What was he going to do? Simple: kiss her.

His lips caressed her in a soft and sweet kiss. A light touch of lips that magnetically attracted them to each other. Her fingertips lightly pressed against his waistband, drumming against his stomach before latching on and bringing him all the closer to her.

There are people around them. The meeting is over and yet there are still a few members still around. That should have been a deterrent, but it wasn’t.

Closer, not yet close enough, but still close. Soft kisses become more passionate. With fingers stretching out and up into the tendrils of hair hanging loosely beside her cheeks.
Why did it always become this passionate thing that was never quelled?

“Um.” He could feel her smile pressed against his lips.

Killian pulled back a bit. “Okay.” He smiled back at her, feeling all too light.

“I’m going to get going,” she whispered, staring up at him.

“Me, too,” he agreed, nodding.

He watched her as she stepped away from him. He watched as she wiggled her fingers in a goodbye. And then she turned around and left.

_Damn._

****

“Archie?”

The man turned around to him. A look of questioning turned in a smile.

“Yes, Killian? What can I do for you?”

Killian swallowed down that lump of something that had formed in his throat.

“I know that the meeting is over, but I was wondering if you had a moment where I could talk to you in private.” He needed this. He was not going to be able to keep those doubts and fears to himself. It was too much flip-flopping. It was too many things that were unresolved in his heart and in his head. He needed help.

Archie’s warm smile grew and he nodded. “Of course, Killian. We can talk in the office. Come with me.”

Killian nodded himself. As he followed Archie out of the meeting room, he felt the tension begin to ebb.

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“Surprise?” It was a question on Ruby’s lips. She stood in the doorway of his apartment, greeting him upon his return.

He really did try to conceal the annoyance she had automatically made him feel.

“Should I be?” Killian pushed past her to enter into his home. His hand was instantly on his tie, yanking and pulling it loose. Why in the hell had he even worn a tie? It was flung across the room, not quite making it to the chair he was aiming for.

He turned to see Ruby wrinkle her nose. “No, you shouldn’t be?” She slowly turned to hang outside the door, looking down either side of the hallway. It wasn’t until she poked back inside the apartment that she turned back to him. “So… where is she? I thought you were bringing this girl back so that I could check her out.”

Killian frowned. “I didn’t. Surprised?”

She smirked at his retort. “Not at all.” She closed the door behind her. “But why? And what’s gotten you in this sour mood? You’re not still upset with me, are you?”
He wasn’t upset with her. But he was sour. He couldn’t deny the inner turmoil building up within him. All he could do was try to ignore the best way possible.

Killian strode through the room, making his way towards the couch.

Ruby was quick to follow behind him. Her steps were light and quick and she reached out for him with grabby fingers. She fell down on the couch beside him, almost on top.

“What the hell, Ruby!” It was practically a shout.

She wasn’t fazed. She only threw him a look of disbelief.

“What the hell, Killian?” she tossed right back at him. Instead of moving off of him, she moved even closer. “If it’s not me then what happened at group tonight to get you like this? According to Robin, you’ve been on cloud nine like never before. At least since Milah got sick.”

Killian ignored the temptation to push her off of him. He knew that he could, and easily since Ruby was a tiny woman. He also knew that she would jump him again just as quickly. So why not skip the middle man?

“Nothing happened in group,” he told her sternly.

“So then this is about her,” she deduced softly. “This Emma.” Ruby poked him in his side with a hard finger. “When are we going to meet her? Apparently you’re only eaten up because of your feelings for her.”

Killian wasn’t sure if he would simplify it even that much.

She raised her eyebrow at his silence. That finger poked again, even harder.

"If I wasn't here then she would be. And all over you."

“No, she wouldn’t.” His head had whipped back to look at his friend. Softer, more calmly, he repeated, “No, she wouldn’t.”

They stared at one another, each trying to read the other one. He knew that he still wore the scowl across his face. He knew that feelings and emotions were building up within him as he was almost ready to explode.

“Why?” It was a whisper from Ruby. Her gaze was intense, lacking the playfulness that was usually so prevalent.

Why? Many reasons…

Killian looked around the room. And it was impossible to ignore. It was everywhere. In the walls, in the furniture, in the knickknacks. For such stark bareness, everything there was still her. For that reason, complications came into play.

Ruby shook her head emphatically. “What?”

Killian blinked at her. But he couldn’t say while watching her. He turned his head, focusing on one of those spots that were most predominant. There were decisions that had to be made. And they were solely up to him.

His swallow was thick, dry from the prospect before him.
“I need a new bed.” For starters. His eyes slanted over at his friend— Milah’s friend.

The look she gave him was one of confusion. Or maybe it dawned on her.

“It’s Milah’s bed,” she murmured. “Has this woman ever been here to your apartment?”

Killian’s eyes darkened on those items around him. He saw her in everything.

“Not yet,” he answered gruffly.

“And… I’m going to guess that… even though you like this woman… this Emma… you still haven’t done the deed.” The smirk returned to Ruby’s face. “Not in all this time. Not because you don’t want to, but because you can’t separate this relationship from your old one.”

He let out an audible and tired breath. “It isn’t easy.”

****

“You wanted this huge bed that takes up practically half of the bedroom,” Killian complained, looking up at her from his seat on the corner of said bed.

“And you wanted the apartment that’s master bedroom was only twice the size of a King-size bed,” Milah countered. She swung her leg over his lap and comfortably sat down. Grabbing his face with her hands, she grinned down at him.

“Mm, point taken, love,” he murmured, staring up at her in amusement. His hands grabbed at her tightly, pulling her body tightly so very closer over his.

“Killian!” His name left her mouth in a gasp and her eyes wide. She batted at his hand to move away. “Stop it.”

There was a lust-filled haze that glossed his eyes. “You started it.” His hand knocked hers away, allowing access once again to her waist. This time, those fingers went inside her waistband to touch bare skin.

“Um… by sitting on your lap?” She bit down on her lip. Her smile was soft and sweet and a sigh of content left her.

“Um… something like that.” Those fingers travelled farther. On a search for absolution and solace that her body always willingly gave.

“Killian.” It was a mock stern warning. Her arms wrapped around his neck, pressing her chest up against his. She lifted her bottom, offering him better access to the spot he craved.

Her head dipped down to his, capturing his lips with hers. An open mouth teased and taunted his. Covering his for a brief moment before moving away. A tiny smile. Then back again. A slip of her tongue entering just at the entrance of his mouth, and then out again. A tilt of her head and back again, just a moment longer than before.

Heat always seemed to rise quickly between the two of them. Trying to keep a clear head as he tried to capture that mouth for longer than an instant, his fingers dipped lower, lower, searching for that elusive spot…

“Killian. Killian.” She laughed, a sultry musical chuckle that turned into a yearning sob. “Don’t… stop. Killian.”
And he didn’t. He couldn’t. He couldn’t get enough of this woman he loved with all of his heart.

“Milah, love.” What she did to his heart was stunning! “I need you.” He was leaning the back, lowering them onto the bed. “See, it’s good for other things, too.”

She smiled down at him. “I’m not complaining.”

“Not now.” He grinned up at her as his fingers did something magical to her entire body.

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“She must really like you,” Ruby said with a sigh.

Shaken from his memories, he turned his frown on her.

Her eyes went wide in explanation to his questioning stare.

“I mean you’ve been seeing her for the past few months and in all that time you have never even invited her over to your apartment or to meet any of your friends. She’s content with going out all the time or spending time back at her place. Even though her husband died and she needed to go into group therapy, she’s still fine with moving on with someone like you- like herself. And she isn’t even sleeping with you.” Ruby peered over his face. “Or is she just as asexual as you are?”

“Ruby,” he warned thickly. His tone should have left no room for her continued line of questioning.

She leaned back away from him, unperturbed by his sternness.

“I’m going to take that as a no then.” A smirk popped quickly onto her face. “She wants you. And you want her.” She vehemently shook her head. “Milah’s been gone for well over a year, Killian. It is okay to move on. She wouldn’t want you living like this! Don’t you know that?” With a scowl on her face, she shoved him in the shoulder hard.

Killian bit the inside of his cheek, trying to keep from doing anything to show his awkwardness on the outside.

“Okay, new tactic,” Ruby said with a huff. She backed away from him, leaning comfortably on the cushion behind her. “Tell me about her.”

His eyes shut tight. This was too much for him. She was asking him to focus on not only Emma, the person, but Emma, the woman who was currently in his life. And Milah was still struggling to be in control of all those thoughts. There were too many emotions swirling around him to either function or focus.

“Ruby…”

“Robin showed me her picture,” she informed him.

One eye opened to survey her expression to that fact.

“Pretty. Different than what I thought your type was. But pretty all the same.”

A flutter of something- maybe pride- circulated through him. “Aye.” It was her shy smile that he thought of, and the cascading waves of blonde hair running down her back.

“What was it, Killian? It had to be something. You’ve looked at absolutely no one since Milah. What was it about her that did it?”
His thoughts of the physical transferred to that of the mental and emotional connection they shared. He thought about how she had walked into that room that first day and how he was immediately drawn to her. He thought about how intrigued he was with her backstory. They weren’t stark contrasts, Emma and Milah, but they were definitely two different women. Both of whom had the ability to affect him and his heart greatly.

“It was… everything.” Because it was. Would Ruby be able to understand that?

Ruby gave another big huff. This time it was accompanied by a roll of her eyes.

“It was…” He looked up towards the ceiling, taking a moment to think. “Some things are easy with her. There’s an understanding because of what we’ve both been through. But it’s not just that. There’s not the constant overthinking of what our pasts are. And that’s okay. It was because of her that I lost that constant need to fixate on Milah. Milah was always there, Ruby. I tried. For a year I tried. It wasn’t easy.”

Her hand reached out to lie on his lap. “I believe you. I know you. So I know how difficult it was to lose her.”

His mouth turned down in a frown. Yes, difficult.

“But… back to Emma.” Her teeth scraped over her bottom lip and her eyes were lit up. “There’s more to tell. What about the fact that there’s a physical attraction? Because without the physical attraction… then who cares? I mean, what’s the point of this relationship?”

His gaze connected with hers. He wasn’t surprised at how she glossed over the other connections in favor of the other connection.

“There’s nothing wrong with the physical side of things. We just haven’t gotten to… certain steps in that department.”

“Because of…” She did a quick glance of the room. “Still being so enthralled by your memories of Milah.” She looked back at him and smiled her sweet smile. “Like I said: she was my best friend, Killian. If anyone understands how you feel about losing her it is me. But like I’ve been constantly hinting at, it’s… time to let go. And if that means packing away some mementos and throwing out a bed then by all means do it.”

“And like I said…”

“Not that simple. So everything isn’t simple. But that part is. Think of it as… time for a change.” Ruby’s placed her hand back over his knee. “I’ve listened to your tale. If you want advice from me- and by all means, take it- then move on, Killian. Get out of this freaking comfort zone you’ve surrounded the both of you in, and introduce the girl to your friends. And even more importantly, do…”

“Ruby!” He didn’t want anything crass falling out of her mouth about him and Emma. She smiled. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Aye.” His eyes fell upon the knickknacks that were clustered around the room, thinking of Milah. Thinking of Emma. He could picture her there. He could imagine mornings where they woke up in each other’s arms and catch a quick bite on the way rushing out the door to separate jobs. He envisioned them laying on the couch here just as they did at her place. He imagined the conversation of your place or mine tonight, because it didn’t matter, only falling asleep next to each other was the important factor.
“Killian?”

“Aye.”

There was a tinge of excitement in her expression as she watched him.

“I knew you could do it. And I’m so happy for you.”

His lips pursed as he let his friends well wishes wash over him.

“Thank you, Ruby.” But it still wasn’t that easy.
“Ms. Lucas?” When the young woman looked up at her from her seat in the waiting room, Emma gave her an easy smile. “How are you today?”

Ms. Lucas, a young woman who was most likely about Emma’s age or a couple of years younger, looked up at her from her seat. There was this sudden glint in her eyes as she looked up at her.

“Oh, I’m doing quite well.” Her eyebrows raised in question. “Emma, is it?”

Emma nodded. “Yes, I am.” She held out her hand for a handshake. “We’re all ready for you in the back. Please, follow me.”

Ruby Lucas stood straight up, but didn’t immediately follow Emma as she stepped back towards the door from which she had come. Instead, she was giving Emma a fully thorough once over from head to toe.

She tried not to frown. She tried not to be unsettled by the way the other woman was looking at her. But it was a little unsettling. It was- checking out her chart- Ruby Lucas’ first visit to Emma’s dentist office. Patients came in with an array of emotions- from calm to nervous wrecks and to everything in between. But it was the way she was being received by this patient that had her a little confused

Because Ruby Lucas did not look either nervous or anxious. It was something else. Emma couldn’t put her finger onto whatever it was.

“Just this way, Ms. Lucas,” she told her again, holding the door open for her.

She was biting down on her lip, but not in some edgy way. And through it all, she was actually smiling at Emma. With a slight raise of her nose in the air, she strolled confidently through the door.

Emma gave a shake of her head as she watched her go, following her on the way back to the examining room

“I see that this is your first visit with us,” Emma said with a quite chipper smile. She looked up from Ruby Lucas’ chart to the woman.

She was seated comfortably enough in the dental chair. As comfortable as one can be, she was sure. And she was still giving her a long once-over.

“Yes, first time,” she finally said.

Emma looked back down at the chart in her hand. She was still a bit confused by the tension now circulating in the room.

“So what has brought you in today?” she asked.

“Well…”

Emma looked back up at her when she had paused.

“I think I chipped my crown.” She opened her mouth and angled her head so that maybe Emma could look inside. “I’m not for sure how I did it, but it feels like something is… different.” Her fingers went to point to the side of her cheek.
“If the crown chipped, did you save any of the pieces that may have fallen out?”

Her eyes slanted over, focusing on something on the side of Emma. “Um… actually no, I didn’t. I mean, I can feel the difference, but I didn’t actually notice when it happened.” “Okay, that’s fine,” Emma assured her. She turned around to grab the stool that was behind her. Pulling it up to closer to where the dentist chair was, she sat down next to her. “I’m just going to get some information from you before Dr. Stevens comes in and examines you.”

Ruby sat up, hinging on the edge of the seat.

“It’s pretty slow here today. I was the only one in the waiting room.”

Not too odd of a conversation started, Emma mused. Still, it was odd.

“It’s almost lunch time so the appointments are staggered in a way to accommodate that,” she said in way of answer.

“Ok, I have to be honest, Emma.”

That caught her off guard.

Ruby shook her head emphatically, those eyes growing wider and wider.

“Didn’t Killian tell you about me?” she asked, sounding a bit offended.

That question froze Emma immediately in her spot. Killian? What did Killian have to do with this— with her?

“Um…” Her head tilted to the side as she watched the other woman, almost agape by confusion. “Excuse me? Killian?”

And the woman shook her head again. “Not even my name?” Her hands flew to her chest. “He never even mentioned my name? Ruby Lucas?”

She was going to say something that would change her life.

“I’m his friend,” she finally informed her, peering hardly right at her. “One of his best friends? Former best friend to his deceased wife, Milah?”

Her confusion only grew by this sudden dawning of information. She was more than caught off guard. She was… knocked from her feet.

Emma’s mouth felt suddenly dry as a hundred thoughts raced through her mind.

Ruby’s smile turned saccharine sweet with big brown doe eyes to match. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this moment.”

“Seriously?”

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Killian’s smile was instant when he watched her breeze through the door. She had almost been late for group- Archie would be calling everyone together any minute. She was still in her scrubs and her hair pulled up in that high ponytail that was common during work hours.

Emma’s eyes connected with his almost as soon as she entered the room. Her smile was small but
completely inviting as she made her way over to where he was.

God, he had missed her. He hadn’t seen her yesterday. The last time was here, at their meeting, two nights ago. That night had been a draining one. Too many emotions over what to do next.

Yesterday had been somewhat better; in some respects. It was Emma that he had missed terribly. It was Emma that he had wanted. It was she who he had wanted to change for and become whole again.

“Hey,” she whispered, that smile growing on her face.

“Good evening, love,” he greeted. His hand went up to smooth over her cool to the touch cheek. “You’re late.”

Emma frowned up at him. “Almost.”

And it made Killian smile. *God, this woman.*

Just then, like clockwork, Archie called for everyone’s attention and for everyone to please be seated.

Once they were settled into their chairs, Killian turned his attention back to Emma.

“Why were you late? What happened?”

Emma only gave him a shrug of indifference. “Running behind at work. Some things came up and it held me back for a little while. Hey!” Her hand reached out to grab at his arm. “I thought you liked seeing me in my scrubs anyway.”

His opposite hand came to rest on top of hers while lying against his arm. “Oh, I do. You look cute as ever, love.”

Her eyes were twinkling. He loved the fact that there was nothing hiding behind that look like the last time he had seen her.

“There’s my sweet talker,” she answered back, giggling.

He wanted to kiss her, right then and there. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms, place her right in his lap, and kiss her until he could get enough of her. But he couldn’t do that. Not here. Not now. But the want to do that did not escape him. It was a huge revelation for him to want her the way that he did.

Archie was beginning his routine of greeting the members for the night, Killian heard. His attention drew on the timid looking man standing some feet away, listening to his spiel.

“Hey.” Emma had whispered. She tugged on his arm, pulling him towards her.

He offered her his ear, leaning in close so as to not disturb anyone else.

“Something interesting happened at work today,” she continued softly. “I wanted to tell you about it. Okay?”

Killian leaned back enough to look at her. He face now had a pensive look to it, lips pursing and eyes burning into his.

“Aye. I have all the time in the world tonight.”
Emma gestured for him to come closer again.

“Good,” she whispered in his ear. She left an almost nonexistent press of her lips to that spot before moving away.

Killian watched as she settled into her seat, a bit mesmerized by her. Yeah, he really wanted to try as hard as possible to make this work.

****

They had been to the little coffee shop so frequently on the same days and same times that they practically had their own spot. What had changed from their first date more than two months ago was that they now sat next to each other, as cozy as ever, versus across from each other.

“So.” Emma sat the cup of cocoa down on the table in front of her. She turned a bit so that she had a better view of him.

What was she going to say? Killian wasn’t sure. It was hard to read her this time. She didn’t seem distant, so that was a good thing. But she did seem a bit more serious than he would have liked. He just couldn’t tell what it was that was about to spill from her mouth.

“Yes?” he said in way of encouraging her to continue. His hand freely laid over hers on the table. He was waiting for… what? What was she going to say?

Emma laughed and shook her head. Her hand, from underneath his, turned over so that they were now palm against palm.

Her pause was making him nervous. She liked him a lot. They had had an interesting two months together. They had helped heal each other in ways that no other outlets had been possible in doing. But it had been two months. Things were not progressing in a way that she would like. She wanted to end things right then and there.

That was the outcome Killian had come up with as she sat there, smiling a sad smile at him. And would he blame her if she was all too aware of his hang-up on his wife? No, of course not.

“What is it, Emma?” His voice was gruff with emotions he had not realized was bubbling right at the surface.

Her sigh was small, and she once again looked into those eyes. There was a bit of confusion marring her face.

“I… met your friend today,” she told him with a huff.

“My friend?” Killian was left feeling just as confused as she looked.

“She made an appointment with my office for this afternoon,” she continued.

“One second.” He felt the waves of hostility wash over him, because he knew. “She? Are you telling me that Ruby came to your office today? And she did it purposefully to..”

“She said she wanted to finally meet me,” Emma confirmed, nodding her head.

Killian leaned back in his seat. The anger began to seep throughout his body, just thinking about the audacity of Ruby. This time she had gone too far. This time she had stuck her nose in his business where it did not belong. He could forgive a lot when it came to Ruby. It was sort of a prerequisite for
their friendship. But this?

“I’m sorry, Emma,” he told her sincerely. “I’m truly sorry for my supposed friend and her idiotic ideas and actions.” He began patting down his jacket pockets, searching.

“It’s okay,” Emma assured him. “What…. What are you doing?”

Killian found his phone in his inside pocket.

“I’m going to call her,” he answered, trying very hard to control his building anger.

“Killian, don’t.” Emma reached over and placed her hand over his, essentially stopping him from using the phone. “I didn’t tell you so that you’d be angry with her.”

“Which I have every right to be,” he reminded her. “Ruby? She always feels entitled to butt into my life. And this time… Emma, are you seriously okay?”

She looked like she was on a search. Her eyes were roaming all over him.

“It was fine,” she told him. And then she smiled and gave a roll of her eyes. “Once the initial shock wore off.”

She said it, but he still wasn’t sure. Killian placed his phone down on the table in front of him. His fingers tapped lightly on the screen, but his gaze stayed on her.

Ruby had put him in a precarious position. She just couldn’t let him do this on his own. She couldn’t give him the proper time to figure out what he really wanted. Her rash decision, he was afraid, was going to backfire.

“What… did she say?”

Emma’s hands wrapped around her cup of coffee, lifting it slightly off of the table.

“She said that she’s been waiting for you to introduce us to one another for a long time.” She threw him a quick smile before she lifted the cup up to her lips to take a sip of her cocoa. “She said that she was Milah’s best friend and one of your best friends.”

Killian watched her closely. The worry inside of him was growing. Ruby could be a loose cannon. Recently she had come into some powerful information about him. And he didn’t know how trustful she really was with that information.

Emma’s shoulders hunched over, her body compacting into a small package. “So as one of your best friends, you were being on the selfish side by not sharing this thing you have with me. That meant it was her job to take it in her own hands. Which she did.” Her lifted an eyebrow and a shoulder in way of finishing.

Killian didn’t know where to go from there. Emma seemed to have taken the intrusion well.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” he asked her slowly. “I don’t know what I can do about Ruby, but I’ll take care of her if you want me to.”

“I understand where she was coming from.” She shook her head. “Don’t you?”

It didn’t matter where Ruby’s head was at when she went to Emma’s place of work. She had no right.
“She wanted to know who you were and what you were like because of all the time we spend together.”

Emma’s gaze left his face, her attention going somewhere behind him.

“She wanted to know if I am worthy of being there, Killian. If I am the right person to be seeing you through this chapter of your life.” She looked back at him briefly before she peered down at her cup on the table. “I understand because I am in a similar position. It’s nice to have real friends who care that much.”

*What are you thinking, Emma Cassidy?*

“Even when it’s borderline crazy?”

Emma looked back at him and a puff of laughter escaped her mouth.

“I’m trying not to be freaked out about it. You’re not making it easy.”

“I’m going to talk to her,” he assured her firmly. “She knows it. She’s not going to get away with her crazy antics without any consequences.”

Emma smiled into her cup of cocoa, raising it once again to her lips.

“Trust me. She knows.”

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“It’s like I’m the only one who cares, you know?” Ruby Lucas said, her eyes wild with indignation. “We were all friends. I was there when Milah died. We’ve all been there during this… nearly year and a half since she died. So why am I the one who has to get in his face and make him understand that it was time to move on?”

Emma didn’t know what to say to the woman. Ruby had known Killian the whole time during his crisis. Emma had only been there on a personal level for the past two months. And even then they didn’t focus on the pain on their losses.

“Listen, I’m not crazy. I’m just passionate.” She was hanging on the end of her chair, peering and poring herself to Emma. “When I found out about you from our friend Robin, I was excited to know how this thing would go. I’ve been trying to get Killian to move on and find someone else for a while now. And he’s changing. Don’t you see it?”

There was a bond between them, Emma knew.

“Anyway, Emma,” Ruby continued, “the reason why I’m here is to push Killian- in my own way- to keep moving forward. He’s going to be upset that I came here, but he’ll forgive me sooner rather than later. And then hopefully he’ll open up more. Share you with us. Be happy in more aspects than just… well.” She smiled up at her, leaving her thoughts open to interpretation. “And then his can stop doing this back and forth thing.”

This back and forth thing?

“You know what I mean?” She was staring expectantly at Emma.

“I shouldn’t have let you come back home with me,” Emma said at the same time she snuggled even closer to him on the couch. “You have work in the morning and I have work in the morning. Do you
feel tired?"

Killian shook his head. “What I feel is horrible about what I put you through.” He brought his arm to hook under her knees and swooped her legs over his lap.

Emma smiled. “You didn’t do anything. How long are you going to keep being like this?” Her head lay against his shoulder and her eyes closed. She was tired, but she was complacent being in this moment with him.

“She always sticks her nose where it doesn’t belong,” he grumbled in complaint. “Repercussions be damned. So I am entitled to be upset.”

Emma looked up at him.

“The impression she left on me was that she is a good friend and you mean a lot to her. And the impression you left on me is that you’re a softy when it comes to Ruby, so you’ll forgive her.” Emma covered her mouth to hide the small yawn that suddenly escaped her mouth.

“Aw, poor baby. You’re tired.” Killian patted her thigh while giving her a sympathetic grin.

“And you’re not?”

He brought her hand up to his lips, dropping a small kiss there.

“Maybe I should get ready to go.”

She smiled. “Sorry about being so pooped.”

“With a day like you had it’s understandable,” he assured her.

****

The room was encased in darkness, but Emma could make out Killian’s form lying against hers.

They had both fallen asleep, that much she could tell. The time is what she wasn’t sure of.

Carefully, Emma moved forward, watching as Killian’s arms still reached for her. She waited until his head fell back against the back of the couch before she tried to move again.

Feeling around on the coffee table beside the couch, she grasped her cell phone.

3:11

How in the hell had that happened? And was he going to be upset when he found out that they had fallen asleep and he had spent half the night in her apartment? Not outwardly upset, but upset in that soul-sucking, moving-too-fast, I-wasn’t-ready-for-this kind of way?

“Killian?” She whispered it, but her hands shook at his shoulder. “Killian, wake up.”

He began to stir. She saw his eyes open sleepily beside her. “What? What is it, Emma?” He was grabbing for her again, his hands reaching around her waist.

“It’s after three o’clock,” she told him. She was pressing away from him, hoping he’d wake up fully.

“Three o’clock in the morning. We fell asleep. Killian.” She shook his arm wildly.
“Emma?” he murmured. He pulled her closer against his body. His lips pressed against her temple.

“Killian.”

“Go back to sleep,” His arm came around to cradle her head, pulling her down to rest on his shoulder.

Emma stayed there, a bit confused and unnerved by what was happening.

It felt good. It felt right. The only thing that could have made it better was if they were down the hall and in her bed and under the covers. And if Killian had been completely aware of what was going on.

He hadn’t been awake when he said that. How could she fall back asleep and let them continue in this way? What would he think when morning came, along with her senses, and he found them like this?

Emma tried to ease the panic she was feeling. She wanted to be in the moment and just enjoy it the way he was. But she just couldn’t.

Damn. She felt the tears clouding her eyes. Why am I crying?

But she knew why. She was more than worried about this precarious thing that was their relationship. One wrong move and he would seize up. He would give up because there was no other option for his delicate heart.

It was that back and forth thing Ruby had mentioned. It was a balancing act that she wasn’t sure which side she’d find herself on.

Emma held onto him tight, shutting her eyes and staving off anymore tears. Sleep, it would have to come.

****

His neck hurt, Killian realized. He brought his hand up to massage the specific spot. Other than the angle in which he had found himself in for hours, Emma’s couch was rather comfortable.

Emma’s couch. Emma’s living room.

He peeked around the room, noticing how the sunlight filtered in through the windows and brightened the whole place up.

Emma’s apartment. Yep, he had fallen asleep when he had actually meant to get up rather soon and let her get some rest.

Emma.

Her face was pressed into the crook of his neck and she was breathing softly. One hand was splayed across his chest and the other one was on his back.

Damn, what this woman was doing to me.

He hadn’t woken up to the feel of a woman in his arms like this in what seemed like forever. It wasn’t like those times, with Milah. His wife. The love of his life. This was something new and exciting. Did it worry him?
Hell yes! It scared him nearly to death. Because even though he thought of Milah as being the last woman he had held all night long, it was the strong stirrings of something inside him for Emma that had awakened him to the possibilities of having something good in his life again.

Staring down at her as she slept, he wanted life to be what the snapshot of this moment was: Killian and Emma, together and happy. Because when he let her, she made him feel happy.

He didn’t know what time it was but it had to be late. They were going to be late.

“Emma?”

Her head lifted from off his neck and tilted back. Her eyes fluttered open and turned to him.

“Oh, no,” she moaned. “What time is it?” She separated herself from him and turned to reach for her phone on the table beside her.

Killian smiled, watching her stand up and try to get her bearings.

“Good morning.”

She threw him a look over the shoulder, her eyes a bit wide and unsure.

“Good morning. Did you know what time it is?”

“Not exactly.” He stretched his arms out wide, listening to the small pop of bones from his long resting period.

“It’s seven thirty,” Emma informed him. “I’m supposed to be at work at eight. I overslept.” She was gripping the phone tightly in her hands. She stood there a bit awkward, her feet shuffling underneath her while she gave him a look of wonderment and maybe in disbelief.

“I tried… I tried to wake you up last night.” Then she rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Or maybe this morning. However you want to look at it. It was after three. You wouldn’t wake up. Not fully. You said something, but you weren’t really awake.”

Emma didn’t get like this often, the stammer and constant rambling. It was a nervous habit that he had been witness to only a few times. But he found it awfully adorable.

Killian stood up from the couch slowly, his eyes never leaving hers.

“You actually told me to go back to sleep,” Emma continued. Her laugh was full of nervous energy. “I’m sorry. It’s totally my fault. Now I’m going to be late for work and you’re going to be late for work. And this is really awkward because you weren’t planning on staying all night.” And I had the nerve to… drool on your shirt.” He was in arms-length reach of her, and her fingers came up to a spot near his shoulder. “You hadn’t noticed that yet, huh?”

Killian was drawn to the dime-sized wet spot on his shirt.

“No, hadn’t noticed.” He looked back up at her.

Emma’s lips were in a pout, but she was still practically hopping in front of him.

“I’m sorry. For everything. I have to actually run and get ready.” And she was backing away from him. “I know you have to get to work and go home before even doing that. So… you know… I’ll see you later?”
He was walking, too, following her. “Are you putting me out?”

She shook her head, still backing away. “No. I just understand that we both have things to do.”

“Actually, I’m beginning to debate.”

“What?”

“Something has come up,” he told her.

With that, Emma threw her head back and laughed. “What’s come up in the last few minutes that you’ve been awake?”

He was watching her closely. He was watching the way she twirled the cellphone with her fingers from hand to hand. He was watching the miniscule steps she took as she continued to, hopefully, go unnoticed out of the room. He had noticed how hours of sleep on a couch did nothing to diminish her beauty. She was absolutely beautiful. And he paid attention to how his heart did that flutter thing that was just for her.

He wanted…

“Emma, would you mind if I crashed here a little longer than you?” he asked instead of giving her a direct answer to her question. “I’m thinking about calling in to work and taking care of some much needed business.”

She shook her head slowly, her bottom lip poking out curiously. “Um… no. Really? No. I don’t mind at all.”

Killian nodded. “Okay then. Great.”

Emma boldly took a large step backward. “I’m going to hop in the shower really quick, get dressed, and be out of here because, unfortunately, I don’t have the luxury of missing work. Sorry.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

With a final nod and a curious smile, Emma turned around to walk towards the hallway.

He could do this, he told himself after she was gone. He could let her into his heart and take the next step. This impromptu sleepover had been further proof. Because he could have slid ten steps back. He could have felt the need to run straight out of the door while Emma slept unbeknownst to her. But none of that had been true. He hadn’t been panicked, but in awe of the woman lying against him. He hadn’t run, but had wanted nothing more than to stay. He hadn’t taken ten steps back, but saw himself taking this giant leap forward.

So he wasn’t going in to work today. He had a lot of cleaning and rearranging to do at home. And he had a bit of shopping he was starting to look forward to as well.

****

He was just going to take the day off from work. He was just going to hang out at her place for a while.

Emma pulled the brush through her tangled mass of hair punishingly. She was lost in thought. Thinking and craving to know what Killian was thinking.

He had been looking at her when he had asked to stay after she had left. That look was pensive and
on the reserved side. He looked like he had been lost in his own world.

Or maybe she was making things up. Maybe Emma only wanted to see those things in him. But it didn’t matter if she was adding things to the scenario which was only driving her madder. The truth of it was that he had something on his mind. He wouldn’t have decided on a whim to not go to work if there was nothing wrong.

Emma stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. She wanted answers, and she foolishly expected those answers from herself.

What was it? Was he still upset over the fact that she had met his friend? Or was he more upset by the fact that they had stayed all night with each other? Or was it a combination of the two, which should have made her smartly start looking for the reject button to come soon.

The growl that escaped her mouth was full of frustration. She tugged painfully at the long hair once again, feeling justified in her feelings.

She should have tried harder. She should’ve dried her tears, turned on the lights, and forced him out of her apartment. Instead, she had curled up beside him and gave into the feelings on pure bliss of feeling his body against hers at three o’clock in the morning.

And now? Now she would pay.

Emma’s arms fell down to her side. She stared at that reflection, again, for a long moment. Because she knew. She was growing wildly attached to the man. She wanted more. She wanted more for herself and for him. She was doing this at his speed. But what was that getting her? It was about to hurt in impossible ways. She just knew it.

With a sigh, she pulled her hair into a quick and tight ponytail. She gave herself one more once over, finalizing that she was ready for work. Or at least appeared to.

When she made her way back into the living room, the waft of coffee hit her nose. Killian, she could see, was in the kitchen, with a fresh cup sitting in front of him.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked.

“Not as all,” she sighed. “Make yourself comfortable. But I do have to run.”

“Here, take this with you.” He had found her travel mug, she’d seen, and filled it with coffee for her.

“Thanks.” She couldn’t help but smile.

She was going to be late. And yet she didn’t really want to leave.

“I won’t be here for long. Don’t worry,” he told her with a smile. “I have a lot of things I’m going to take care of.”

“It’s no problem,” she told him again. She took a small sip of the coffee from the mug amid was surprised by how well it tasted. With a raised eyebrow she told him, “Good guess.”

Killian only shrugged at that.

She stared at him for just a moment longer. She knew that she could get lost in that gaze.

“I… have to go.”
He nodded. “I know. So go.”

It was her turn to nod. “Ok.” And with that she began to make her way to the door.

“Emma.”

He had been walking with her, finally catching up right at the door.

“Yeah?” she asked softly.

He was smiling as his hand came up to caress her cheek. “Have a good day at work. I’ll see you later.” And then his lips fell over hers, kissing her. Softly, tenderly, truthfully.

Emma held back the certain sob in her throat. She couldn’t read him right now, as her one free hand lay gently against his chest. And she needed to so badly. For her own sanity. When she stepped back away from him, they shared a quick smile between them.

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

There was nothing left to do than to walk
Thursday 6:00pm

Can I ask you a serious question?

Go ahead.

Did you really clean up my apartment instead of going to work?

Not the whole time. I only straightened up the kitchen for you. I’d used some dishes, remember?

And my bedroom?

You had some laundry about. Yes.

But we didn’t even go in there.

I had a hunch about what I would find. Sorry?

I get that tone is a really hard thing to decipher through text messages, but your ‘thanks’ isn’t coming through all that sincere.

I’m sorry, Emma!

Thank you.

Was that for the apology or for being on cleaning duty?

I’m sensing a bit of a neat freak. That was for the apology. I can only imagine what is going on over there at your place.

Stop imagining it.

Maybe one day I will!

Thursday, 10:00pm

Just so you know, Ruby has informed Victor and Robin more about you.

Your friends?

Victor is Ruby’s boyfriend. Have I really never mentioned their names before? And yes, Robin is our friend. My best friend actually.

You’ve forgiven her.

I’m taking care of it. She has a lot of making up to do. To me and you both.

So did I pass inspection?
Ruby doesn’t matter. But just so you know, yeah.

She matters, Killian.

Sounds good.

I only wanted to let you know that. And to say good night.

Thanks for letting me know. Good night.

Good night Emma.

Friday, 12:00pm

How’s your day going?

It could be a lot better. I think I’m ready for a mini vacation. How’s your day at the office?

Apparently not as bad as yours. It’s been all smooth sailing. Did you get everything you needed to get taken care of yesterday?

I’m in the process of that as well.

Sounds promising?

It’s going well.

I’m going for lunch and I was thinking about you.

It’s too bad our offices aren’t any closer. I would love to get out of here for a while.

I would love to see you right now.

What are you doing after work?

I wish I was seeing you! I’ve promised my friends I’d be their third wheel. Mary Margaret and David (because I haven’t shared that bit of information either).

Do they know about me?

A little.

Emma!

Soon.

Are they anything like my friends?

I’ve only met the one. And no one is like Ruby.

Point taken.

I wish I could see you.

Me, too.
Saturday, 9:00pm

I miss you, Emma.

I miss you, too.

I don’t want the next time I see you to be in group.

Then don’t let it be.

I was hoping you’d say that. I’ve been really busy this week, but it wasn’t in vain. I’d like to take you out tomorrow evening, if you’re free.

I was only waiting on you.

There’s still quite some time before boating season begins, but I wanted to go check out my boat. It’s stored at the Harbor Shipyard and Marina. It’ll give you the chance to check out my lady love.

I can’t believe it’s almost that time of year. That sounds terrific. I’d love to!

It won’t be much as of now, but you’ll be able to get an idea of it all. And I had to do some cleaning and rearranging at home.

Surprise, surprise!

Afterwards, I’d love for you to see what I’ve done with the place.

Are you asking me over?

Yes.

She stared at that text for a solid twenty seconds.

Emma didn’t know how to answer Killian’s last text. It had only been a one-word response. A simple answer to a simple enough question from her. But she couldn’t believe it.

They had not seen each other since that morning she left him in her apartment. The morning after they had accidentally spent their first night together. She remembered how worried she’d been that morning. How unsure she was of how he was going to react to their impromptu sleepover. But things had not changed. They had been in touch since then. He had texted her and she had texted him. It had not been a day that had past where they were not in contact. And now he was inviting her over to his place.

In all the time that they had known each other, and in all the time that they had been doing this thing, she had not been over to his place.

His home was the home he had shared with his wife. Emma understood that. She understood how hard he was working to let go. It wasn’t going to happen overnight. And that was fine, because she wanted him to be absolutely sure and not feel pressured by her.

She just hadn’t expected this. Not right now. This was a huge step.

Did Killian know that this was a huge step? Of course he did. He was the one making it.

Her one wish right now would be to see his face as he has asked. Then again, her own face must be
a picture of horrified disbelief.

**OK.**

It was a one-word response to his one-word answer. It was a quick confirmation to his request. And then it was over. Done. Taken care of.

What did it mean? What did he mean?

Emma stared down at the phone in her hand, thinking, wondering. She had to know. To be sure.

She pressed the call button.

And he had immediately picked up. “Emma?”

“Do you know what this means?”

There was a small pause, two seconds and then three. “I know.”

Simple as that. And as Emma let that answer ruminate in her mind, she nodded to herself. “Okay. Good night, Killian.”

“Good night, Emma.”

She removed the phone from her ear and disconnected the call. Hm, he had just left her with a lot to think about.

****

“Here she is.”

Killian was beaming proudly at the boat in front of them. Emma didn’t know what she had expected when they made it to the marina. He had guided her to the enclosed storage boat that had held the boat for the entire winter. She knew he was serious about boating when they had pulled into the Harbor Shipyard and Marina. This was a spot that was always overflowing and crowded by throngs of boaters and beautiful boats of all sizes for the entirety of the season.

“She’s a 2003 Sea Ray 176 SRX,” he continued, looking up at the pleasure boat that sat before them. “Eighteen footer. She was a great buy just three summers ago. Restored her, cleaned her up, put a lot of detail into her from the momen I got her.”

“Plenty of TLC,” Emma commented.

That smiled widened, his head shaking slowly. “Aye, tender loving care for sure.”

Emma smiled over at him. “It’s cute.”

“Cute?” He laughed at that. “She’s a marvel, love.” Taking her hand in his, he began to pull her along. “Come aboard.”

There was a 2-wrung ladder that he flipped over the back of the boat, allowing for easy access inside.

Emma took the steps precariously, each one a little unsteady as she made her way up.

“You’ve lived on the east coast all your life,” Killian said as he followed behind her. “How can you
be so foreign to the magnificent sport?"

She waited until he stood right in front of her. She was impressed by seeing him in his element, even if this was only a precursor to the actual event. They were only in his storage room. She could just imagine what he would be like out on the open water. She saw the passion. And for a second, she was saddened by the fact that instead of living his ultimate dreams by owning his own company, he was actually stuck in his routine office job.

Emma shrugged lightly. “Almost my whole life,” she corrected him. “And living on the east coast doesn’t automatically make us all irrevocable sea enthusiasts.”

There was a glint of playfulness in his eyes while the smirk on his lips stayed small.

“I like your boat, Killian,” she said, twirling from side to side in front of him.

“Thank you.” He placed his hand at her waist, bringing her just an inch or so closer. “But you’ve only seen the exterior of it- the superficial side of it. It will still be weeks before boating season begins. Go ahead and take a seat.”

Emma turned around in the pretty spacious cockpit. Seventeen feet in total, it was roomy. A soft white interior throughout with accents of grey in the carpeted floor and the total of four seats. That was not even including the seat at the helm or beside it.

“Do you mind?” she asked, making her way to the front.

“Not at all.”

Emma took the aforementioned seat at the wheel.

“It has a seven person capacity,” Killian said, taking the seat beside her. “Lots of room considering that it is only eighteen feet. Very comfortable.”

She nodded. “It’s really nice. I thought you would maybe do something bigger. Flashier.” And then she gave him a once-over. “I don’t know why.”

Killian’s hand slid over the top of the seat. He was watching the movement of that hand as it smoothed down across it.

“It took me a while to actually buy it,” he told her. “Milah encouraged me to go ahead and spend the money. It was such a great deal that I couldn’t pass it up.” He looked back up at her and paused for just a moment. “It’s not the type of boat that I wanted to start my company. That wasn’t the point to getting it. I’d never owned my own. This was supposed to be the starter boat.” He smiled, his eyes darted off to admire his prized possession. “If things went well, if we had set aside enough finances to actually start a business, then I would have gone differently.”

And then life had gone and happened, Emma thought to herself. And Milah had died. And you gave up on your dreams.

“So it’s over?” Emma turned in her seat so that she was facing him. She wanted to know where his head was. “Your dreams of owning your own business? Is this always going to just be a hobby and nothing more?”

He was silent. His mouth was only slightly open, agape, and his knee was wavering back and forth.

“Emma…”
“Yes?” Because she didn’t want him to back down. Looking at him, she could see him backing down.

“Right now…” Those eyebrows came together in a slight frown. “It is what it is, Emma. I… can’t look any farther than the day to day on this. I love my boat. I… emphatically deplore my working environment. I don’t know what to say beyond that. It is what it is.”

His stare turned on her. He was looking beyond the physical, that much was obvious.

“You can have more, Killian.”

Sitting a mere foot away from each other, eyes locked on one another, there was a something electrifying between them. It was something that was undefinable, at least by Emma. And it made her a bit nervous to try to put a name to it.

Killian gave a light lift of one of his shoulders.

“I like to think that. Sometimes.”

*****

The long weekend had been worth it. If not seeing Emma for three days would lead to a day like this, then every now and again it could be worth it.

It had begun with a meeting at the harbor. The air still had a bite to it, but he couldn’t wait another weekend to go and check on his boat. He didn’t know what it was going to be like to have another woman there with him. He didn’t know if he was going to fully accept her there the way Milah had once been there. Then again, it seemed like it would be a great indicator if he would be able to do the same thing in his apartment, the place where he and Milah had built a life. And, gratefully, things had gone more than smoothly.

Emma wasn’t boating savvy, but he knew he would be able to change that. And that made him laugh to himself, because it meant that he was thinking long-term when it came to this woman. Could that be possible?

Looking at her as she strolled comfortably enough through his kitchen - nibbling at the last part of an oatmeal raisin cookie in her hand- had told him yes. And he liked the fact that she was not unnerved by the whole scenario. He could be nervous enough for the both of them.

She was here, and he was watching from his spot against the wall as she filled the room up with her. It wasn’t some intrusive and forced-upon situation. In fact, he couldn’t believe how natural it was all feeling.

It was the way her presence brought with her an air of life (he hadn’t noticed the lack of living before). It was the way her scent perfumed the room with her femininity, reminding him of the cluttered dresser with the myriad of perfumes, powders, and lotions. It was the way her voice filled the sometimes hollow walls with something light, and that had been so needed.

“Did you replace or add anything in here?” Emma asked, turning to look over at him. Her steps were slow. She had been half-way across the room and away from him. She was coming closer.

“Not yet.” Killian absently shook his head. Okay, having her here was having an effect on him. “There was only so much I could do. The point wasn’t to actually remove everything and do a complete re-haul. It was more about starting anew and refreshed.”
Emma nodded her head. “I understand.” She stood there, maybe a foot away from him, while she
surveyed her surroundings.

“So far the only thing that I have replaced was the furniture in the living room and some stuff in the
bedroom,” Killian continued. “Actually, it was quite bare in the living room before.” He glanced out
of the kitchen towards the vicinity of the room.

“You have a really nice place here.”

When he turned back to look at her, she had a smile on her face.

“I am not all surprised.”

Killian stood there, watching as she stood right in from of him. This was Emma. This was his
apartment. Home always seemed a little wrong to use in all these months. This was his dwelling. The
place where he woke, got ready for his day, came to when it was all over, and where he slept. Home
was supposed to be more than that. It used to be more than that. But for the longest time this had not
been home.

And Emma was here, awareness painted on her face and in her body language. Yet she was still
allowing him this space to move and feel out the moment.

He should be in more doubt. Looking at her right then and right in this atmosphere, he should have
had more doubt. It shouldn’t be as easy as her standing there and him loving it and him still wanting
everything that his plan of action had said he wanted. He should have had more doubt.

“Killian?” Her hand reached out towards him. She could have touched him. She could have placed
her fingers anywhere on him. Instead, with a slight frown, they hovered over a point at his chest.
“Are you okay?”

She had meant okay with everything- this moment, the significance of it, and what it was leading to.

Killian’s hand came up to hold that hand that was so close to his chest. “I’m okay.”

Emma was searching his face. Her decision to believe him was quick, and she smiled. “Okay.” She
moved then, pressing herself up against him so that she could place an easy kiss to his lips.

He held her hand. He held her close, not yet wanting to let her go. It was a simple press of lips to
lips, and he wanted to keep them there for a just a little while longer. He wanted to breathe her in and
fully comprehend that she was here, with him, and that this was beyond right.

He felt as she moved even closer. Her hand slipped from his and both began to slide up, up his chest
and over his shoulders and to the back of his neck. Mouths never moved. It was something- this
instant- something more.

And Killian knew he wanted everything that this moment was willing to provide him.

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“Why do you wait until the boating season actually begins before you go back out?” Emma turned
her attention away from the setting sun the skyline before them to look at him.

Killian glanced out over the river and the handful of boats that were only enhancing the atmosphere
that the view could give.
“It’s all about the logistics of it all,” he answered with a mere shrug. “I don’t have the ability to have her out throughout the entire year. I’d absolutely love to be able to. But I wouldn’t be able to support the time and the effort of doing that. So I wait until the warmer weather comes and spend as much time as possible out when I can.”

“I’m looking forward to the day you take me out for the first time.” She tugged at the lapels of his coat, giving him a big playful smile. “I’ve never seen you look happier and freer than in this moment. I like it a lot.”

And he did feel free at that moment. Being at the harbor, checking on his boat, and having someone with him.

Someone?

Killian placed his hands at her waist.

“I’m not always dark and stormy.”

“I don’t mind when you are,” she whispered, tightening her grip on him. “It’s just nice when you have something that overpowers that. This…” She sighed, and there was a slight frown on her face. “This isn’t easy. Far from it. So I get it, Killian. The bad has a way of overshadowing and encasing the truth. The brooder is far from being the extent of Killian Jones.”

People wanted to believe that. His friends had wanted him to return to his old self. That wasn’t possible. But with her, with Emma, he saw at least this existing peace of a man no longer tortured by his past.

Emma gave him that.

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“Everything came yesterday,” Killian said, standing in the middle of his bedroom. “I used to have a King-size bed, which was completely unnecessary. I was happy to downsize and give myself more room.”

“What I’ve come to realize is that you have very good taste.” Emma shrugged.

She wondered what the room looked like before. She wondered if it had had this masculine quality to it before. Men didn’t need many accessories when it came to their bedrooms. Only a few simple accents here and there.

The Queen-size bed lay in the middle of the room. It had a mid-century flair and streamlined appeal. The color, she almost wanted to say black, but the wood looked like a deep and rich brown. The comforter that lay atop it was a softer and creamy solid brown and only two pillows lay at the head of the bed.

Sticking with the bare minimum, there was a matching end table beside the bed and a dresser against the opposite wall, both which were that rich dark brown.

It was a man’s man kind of a setup.

With her hands in her pocket, Emma turned around to look at him.

Killian was making his way to the other side of the room, heading towards the night stand and the side of the bed.
“So do you like it?” Emma asked, watching him. “You’ve have one night to enjoy it or get used to it. How do you think you did in making a decision?”

He looked back at her. “I was in desperate need of a change.”

She noticed the quickened heart rate and absolutely hated it.

“I understand.” Because she did. She understood in ways that no one else could or would hope to ever understand.

Watching him as he watched her, her thoughts turned to their phone conversation just a night ago.

“Do you know what this means?”

One. Two. Three. “I know.”

Simple as that. And as Emma let that answer ruminate in her mind, she nodded to herself. “Okay. Good night, Killian.”

“Good night, Emma.”

“All in all, I made the right decision for me.” Killian smiled. “My friends were happy for me. This is way overdue.”

Emma glanced back at the bed. “Was it comfortable last night?”

He turned to look there, too, and his smile grew. “I know it will get even better. First night and all.” With that, he took a seat right on the edge. He smoothed his hand over a large area of the mattress. And then that gaze locked on her.

It threw Emma for a second. Things were progressing in a manner that neither of them could fully deny. That is unless they had wanted to be in complete denial of the electric currents circulating throughout the room.

It was like some magnetic pull that allowed her to walk over to him. Some invisible tug that lead her onto this predetermined destination that was this apartment, this bedroom, and Killian himself.

He was looking up at her from his seat on the bed. Silently, he shifted over to give her access to a spot on the bed next to him.

She only took a brief moment for self-doubt before she sat down. She looked up and smiled at him, liking the firmness, yet give, to the mattress beneath her.

“Feels nice.”

He was still watching her. She read indecisiveness in that look. That look only made her question her own actions. Because this time, she wasn’t going to be able to goad him into making a move. She wasn’t going to initiate him into touching her or kissing her or – dear God- making love to her. She was here in his safe zone. It wasn’t going to be her.

And then he was moving closer, his hand cupping her chin and bringing her mouth up to his. Her eyes closed, the last thing she saw was that beautiful face nearing hers. She felt the firmness of his lips slip over her, softly, cautiously.

She could feel herself melting into that kiss. The feel of his hand holding her face still while the other stroked up and down her arms. It was when the soft moan escaped her throat, and she felt the sudden
drawback from him, that had her pause again.

Emma opened her eyes to see that he was staring down at her.

“Why does anything new always have to be so awkward?” she whispered, her eyes darting across his face. “We don’t have to do anything. Just because you did this… doesn’t mean we have to… do anything.”

Killian pulled back away from her. The sudden withdrawal of heat affecting the rush of cool air that now enveloped her.

“I did this for you,” he admitted, nodding his head. “But not just for you. I did this for me, Emma. I did this for us.” His hand slid over the curve of her hip and up her waist, leaving her a shuddering mess. “It’s been a long time, but never doubt that I want you. All of you. I wouldn’t go this far if I wasn’t serious.”

Okay, so she trusted him. But, she thought as she detached her body from his and stood up from the bed, that is not going to be enough!

“You want me, Killian,” she agreed.

“Emma.” His deep blue eyes had a fiery hue to them as he stared up at her, unmoving.

She took a step backwards, knowing she had to be firm in her position.

“You want me, Killian. But can you handle that?”

He was slow to stand, his eyes travelling the length of her body from head to toe. Emma took another cautious step backwards, but they were still rather close to one another. It made reaching for her all the easier. His hand shot out to grab her at the hip.

She went willingly, but felt cautious nonetheless. Didn’t he understand that in all this time what was developing between them?

“Emma.” It was a soft whisper of her name only before his mouth was swooping down over hers once again. The fingers of one hand fistfed tightly into her hair, bringing her mouth all the closer to his, while his other hand was contrastingly gentle running across her cheekbone. His tongue dipped teasingly in and out of her mouth, drawing silent gasps from her.

Killian pulled back, lowering his forehead against hers while he took in deep breaths.

“I can handle it,” he muttered. “I wouldn’t do this if I couldn’t handle it. I want you. More than I ever thought possible.”

He’d never said those words to her before. She’d seen the desire in him before, but it was always so quick to be dismissed. This time, as she felt his hands grip her bottom firmly and pulling her closer against him, he didn’t shy away from the apparent arousal. Instead, his mouth found hers again, capturing those lips in a searing and drugging kiss.

He was a body of hard muscle. The feel of his middle, while he dipped so that they fit perfectly, felt deliciously hard against her. It made her weak and it made her shudder. She felt the way his hands crept up and under her shirt. Bare skin on bare skin made her bold. Fingers crawled their way up to the nape of his neck, seductively twirling and massaging that spot until his mouth dropped farther and farther down.
This time her name escaped as a growl. That growl only emboldened her need to hear more, to feel more, to have more.

It was a flurry of hands and arms and lips, touching, feeling.

A sudden yank of her body against his as his mouth closed around a spot at her collarbone. A jerk away so that his hands could grab and pull at her shirt instead. Up, up, over her head, and to the floor.

It wasn’t fair, standing there in front of him, exposed. Not when he was still completely dressed. But maybe he thought the same thing, because for the first time he just stood there. The rise of his chest was the only movement he made as he watched her, his arms laying loosely down his sides.

Emma moved. Her tongue peeked out of her mouth as she moved closer. It was her turn.

Her eyes trailed the path of her fingers running down his chest and his stomach. She could feel the reaction of her body to his, could her stomach tie in knots and the moisture build up in anxious anticipation of even more. This was nice- he felt so good. But she wanted more, she decided, as her hands crept underneath his shirt. The feel of skin on skin making her want to moan.

She stepped even closer, pulling the shirt higher. It took longer because she couldn’t stop the need to trail soft kisses on the new skin that was being revealed.

And she heard the guttural moan leaving his throat. Quickly - it had to be now - she lifted the shirt over his head. His own hand grabbed at the distracting cloth, helping to make the task over and done with.

Bare skin to bare skin, that’s what she needed. Emma threw herself against him, her arms twisted around his neck. She felt the way his hands clasped around her back, pulling her against him. Their mouths became a tangled mess just as their bodies did. Heads angling, searching for the best way to gain more access.

“Emma.”

Suddenly she felt like she was falling- was she falling? They were both falling. With her in his arms, Killian was lowering them both to the bed.

God, his hands were everywhere. Straddling his hips, feeling the hard bulge pulsating right at her center, she felt like her head was swimming. What coherent thought that dared to enter her mind was everything him. His hands, finding the hooks of her bra, undoing them, and letting the straps and cups fall from her body. The feel of his lips and tongue on her neck and cheekbone as he tried to sit halfway up just so that he could reach her.

She wanted to know if he was going crazy the way she was going crazy. She wanted to drive him crazy, too.

“Killian.”

Emma’s hand grabbed at his head, holding onto fistfuls of hair., pulling his head up. Her mouth fell down on his, kissing him hard. Their position, with him now sitting up and her straddling his hips, she grinded down on him. It was soft at first. Circular motions in time with her kiss.

It was Killian’s groan and the way his arm tightened around her waist that pushed her to grind harder, deeper.
“Bloody hell, woman.” He was pulling back, lifting her inches off of him.

Emma wanted to cry out in frustration. Her eyes flew open to his.

“What?”

“You keep doing that and this will be over before we even start,” he grumbled.

It wasn’t a good enough excuse to stop her.

“This is becoming a need, not just a want,” she whispered against his mouth. “I need you.” Her arms twisted back around his neck, pressing herself closer and closer to him.

He pulled her back down, her center meeting his hardness again, making them both shudder.

“I need you, too, Emma.”

And that cry did leave her mouth this time, the pressure and his words too much to ignore.

“I also need this to last more than two minutes,” he told her. Holding her tightly against him, he began to roll them, switching positions.

His mouth trailed wet kisses down the side of her neck, moving languidly lower all down her body.

“Slow, Emma,” he murmured softly.

Her body was quaking. The feel of fingertips, palms, lips, teeth, and tongue all an intoxicating combination all over her body.

“Can you handle that, love?”

Was he mocking her? Maybe not, but it felt like he was mocking her.

She couldn’t control the tremors.

“Yes, I can handle it.”

“Good. Because when I imagined you in my bed for the first time, it wasn’t over in two minutes.”

Emma’s eyes fluttered closed, and she happily gave into his every want, need, and whim.

Chapter End Notes

I am so not a smut writer, so I am hoping that their first time was okay with you guys!!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Huge struggle with this chapter, and it’s a lot shorter than the others. Angsty, for sure.

It was so cliché, and Emma hated that part. She hated that this point in her relationship could be summed up in one of those silly romantic comedy movies or one of those steamy romance novels. But she couldn’t deny it.

She didn’t know what to expect that first time that they were together. It could only be an emotional moment in both of their lives, due to so many contributing factors: the past relationships, their deep-rooted losses, their inability to deal with those losses on their own, the time-frame, their own feelings for each other, and the list could continue to go on and on…

She had imagined something different. She had expected something fast and hard, something to combat all those mounting factors that had brought them to that moment. She had expected bruising kisses and carpet burns between her thighs that hurt but still felt so good. She had expected a flood of frustration mixed with pure need and gratification.

Emma had not expected the truth: she had not expected him to make love to her that first night.

It was the way his mouth ran slowly over every inch of her skin. It was the way his hands guided her to turn around in his arms so he could hold her from behind. His body curving into her as his mouth finds her ear, laving it with kisses as he holds her tight against him.

She was surprised by his tenderness. She loved the feel of his body trembling and quaking over hers while lying in his bed. It was the way he looked into her eyes imploringly, wanting to know what it was she wanted so that he could please her. He had her head swimming as he trailed wet kisses over her body, moving down, further down, all the way down.

It was afterwards, as Emma looked up at him while cuddling snuggly against him, she realized just how cliché her heart was: she had fallen in love with this man!

What would Mary Margaret say? Would she still think it was too soon? Would she doubt that Emma was in any condition to trust her heart when she was still so vulnerable?

It didn’t matter, Emma realized as she closed her eyes and inhale him. This wasn’t like anything she has experienced with any other man, and that included Neal. And it was a bit scary, because even though their night was amazing and she felt something real in Killian, she didn’t know if he was completely ready just quite yet. And that was scary because she didn’t know how to stop the feelings from coming.

Emma Cassidy was in love with Killian Jones! She wanted to celebrate it and rejoice in it. And she wanted him to feel the same.

****

It was odd seeing them together. It was something that Killian had to really think on in terms of being something he wanted.
Emma and Ruby. Did that sound right? Did that look right?

He couldn't help but contemplate these questions in his mind as he sat there, across from the two women, as they smiled and chatted about their new venture.

Emma and Ruby. Ruby and Emma. Just... something to get used to.

It was always Ruby and Milah. Milah and Ruby. An inseparable twosome who had let their men in on their friendship at some point, leaving this bonded and secure friendship between them all. And then Milah had died. She had left Killian alone to keep that friendship together. Ruby and Victor had stayed true to her memory, never letting him drown in despair any more than he could get himself out of.

Milah was gone. And now there was Emma.

Emma.

They had fallen into this... thing. This... domestic thing that had allowed them to spend so much of their free time together. Their work schedules were so in sync with one another that there was a lot of that free time. Even more so than before because it now included all of those sleeping hours as well. They didn't have to be apart from each other. Those hours could be spent intimately getting to know and familiarizing themselves with the other person. Sometimes that was a good thing. Sometimes that allowed for this growth and acceptance and care for someone new and yet known. Sometimes that allowed for appreciation of not only being a part of something again, but also just for that other person. That's when it was nice. Right. Good. But...

But sometimes it was a bad thing. Sometimes it just became too much. The hurt became too much. Because that was the time he was fighting himself for: an acceptance of his new life. It was supposed to be easy. It was supposed to be freeing. He was supposed to be happy all of the time. Because of her. With her. For her.

He wasn't supposed to be haunted by the memories of his wife or her spirit and her desires for him after she had left. He wasn't supposed to feel conflicted and bitter. He wasn't supposed to feel his body burning from indecision and unhappiness when he had everything that he did.

But it didn't change the turmoil he was fighting with every minute of every hour of every day.

“Killian? Killian?” Ruby was staring at him, eyebrows shot up in wariness.

“What?” She had stirred him from his musings and she had the nerve to look at him that way.

“When was the last time you had the boat at full capacity?”

The question caught him off guard. When had the last time he’d taken the boat out full party style?

“I don’t think I have since we first got her,” he said in answer.

“I don’t think so either,” Ruby agreed. She turned back and bumped her shoulder against Emma’s. “This is the perfect time then.”

The smile Emma sent his way was sweet and warm. “I don’t even mind that my first time will be in a group when it means getting all of our friends together.”

“Did he promise to make it just the two of you the first time?”
Emma turned back to Ruby at her question. “I think it was more of a foregone conclusion. First time, you know?”

“Oh, all romantic-like, huh?” Ruby gave that sweet smile to Killian again. “So, is this cool with you guys? I mean, it doesn’t have to be this weekend.”

Killian looked from Ruby to Emma, an expectant expression crossing his face. It should have mattered. He should have had some kind of tie to these decisions.

His thoughts and moods swung all the time. Getting Emma and her friends together with him and his friends sounded great. The realization of the date approaching- with Ruby, Victor, Robin, Emma, her friends David and Mary Margaret, and himself- was beginning to feel a bit overwhelming. Pass-the-paper-bag-this-way overwhelming.

Emma shook her head. “No, it’s fine.” She turned her smile on Ruby. “It’s going to be a lot of fun. My friends are looking forward to it as much as I am.”

Damn the entire situation to hell.

Why was it so easy? And it looked like it was so damned easy between them. Had Ruby been looking to replace the lover Milah had been for him or the best friend she had been to her? Because for all of Ruby’s personality, she didn’t always open up to strangers the way she had opened up to Emma.

The whole damned situation.

“Sounds good.” It was a thick murmur not guided towards either one of them in particular.

His throat felt dry, he noticed as he placed his hand to his neck.

Looking at her now, he knew how happy Emma was. Hip to hip with one of his best friends, he knew how happy the relationship was making her. Not that he believed that she was blind to his indecisiveness. He couldn’t hide it. He tried his best, because he wasn’t always like that. But when it got bad, he didn’t want her to pick up on it or to think it was her.

She looked so happy. He had made her this happy.

So why couldn’t he be as happy as she was?

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“Key.” Sitting in the driver’s seat, Milah’s hand reached out expectantly towards Killian’s.

The laugh that escaped his mouth was instantaneous. Leaning over the seat, he asked, “You think you can drive her?”

Milah stared straight up at him. “You told me you would teach me.”

Killian nodded slowly. “And I will. But we just got her. She’s still docked. I promise to teach you. Once we’re out on the open water.”

It took her a moment to think about that. Finally, she stood up and moved over to the passenger side.

“Fine. I’ll wait.”

Killian hopped quickly over into his rightfully claimed captain’s seat.
It was when they were on their way, pulling out from the dock, that she turned excitedly to him.

“Can you imagine the parties, sweetheart? Just imagine what it will be like! I know that’s not the point of it, but this first boat can be all that and more. Aren’t you excited?” She made him so happy. The company was his idea and his dream, but Milah had been there the entire time, encouraging him and making it her dream as well.

“Yes,” Killian answered simply, letting the scent of the sea and salt fill his nostrils as they took off. “You know what I’m most excited about being able to do today though?”

The wolfish grin should have warned her, and he thought maybe it did when he saw the glint in her eyes.

“For some reason I don’t think it’s the fact that you get to teach.”

His smile grew at the thoughts that she had just conjured up for him.

“After all these years,” he murmured with a mere shrug.

Milah smiled back at him, knowing exactly where his mind had went.

“It’s customary to christen-“

“Did you bring champagne?” she asked, cutting him off.

Killian’s burst of laughter at his wife was contagious, as she broke out into a fit of giggles.

That was Killian Jones’ life with Milah Jones. How had he missed it that day? How had he missed the frailty of her body in the bright summer sun? How had he missed the faint circles beneath her eyes? How had he missed the precarious steps of her movements that day? Had he really been so wrapped up in the boat to where he missed his wife’s signs of illness?

But it wasn’t just that one day. She had been sick for a long time at that point. She had kept it all to herself, in hopes of making his life easier.

Would the pain ever go away? He sat there, now in pain. His heart marred by a loss he had no control over.

And even with the woman he stood across from him, the woman who was currently giving her all to him, it hadn’t taken the pain away.

“I’m getting a drink,” he muttered, moving quickly. He had to get out. Now. That claustrophobic feeling was closing in on him, making it hard to breath. Soon it would be too noticeable to not notice.

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“What is it?” Ruby moved quickly towards him, standing right in his face. “What’s wrong? What are you thinking?”

He wasn’t alone a full minute in the kitchen before the fiery ball that was Ruby had found her way in there as well.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously down on hers, unfazed by the accusatory fierceness in her eyes.

“What are you talking about?”
Ruby was searing into his head and his thoughts with that stare. When she finally reacted, she gave a mirthless laugh.

“You’re going to mess this up.” Her finger pointed straight into his chest. “Do not mess this up. She’s good for you.”

“What are you…?”

“Don’t lie to me!” It came out as a whispered shout. Ruby threw a cautious look over her shoulder. Satisfied that she had not been overheard, she looked back at him. “Don’t lie to me, Killian. You can be happy again.” There was a pained expression that momentarily painted her face. “Be happy. With Emma.”

Killian took in a deep breath and held it until he felt sure enough to talk.

“Emma does make me happy, Ruby.”

“Then why are you holding on so tight?” Her chest practically pressed up against his, not backing down. “Why can’t you let go?”

His eyes went wide at the audacity of the woman in front of him. “What have I done then, Ruby, if not let go of my wife?” He felt the rage beginning to build within him anyway.

Her eyes were only slivers as she watched him. He could see a similar pain building up in her.

“Your deceased wife,” she drilled. “When are you going to accept that fact? Milah…”

His hands shot out and clutched her by the arms, driving her hard away from him. It was an automatic reaction to her constant talking.

“How many times are you going to say that, Ruby?” he shouted. He didn’t care who heard him. He didn’t care that he had pushed her so hard that she was stumbling foot over foot, trying to keep her balance. He just needed Ruby to get it through her thick skull. “How long do I have to listen to your rants about my wife being dead, Ruby? Do you think- honestly think- that a day goes by that I don’t realize that my wife is dead?”

God, how many times could his heart break for her?

Ruby hadn’t let his manhandling faze her in the least bit. Her arms crossed over her chest and her gaze fixed on his.

“And I’m tired of having to continue to say it,” she told him with a determined shake of her head. “But I’m not going to stop until it actually sinks in.” Her steps towards him were just as fearless. “You wouldn’t have put this much time and effort into this woman if she wasn’t capable of being what you need and want in your life. You, Killian, would not have even tried to change for her if you didn’t want to let go of Milah. You, Killian, would not be sleeping with someone if she wasn’t worthy of being the woman at your side. And you, Killian, would not let a woman get so close that she would be able to fall in love with you.”

He saw the buildup in her eyes, saw the fierceness and determination in those eyes. “Don’t do it, Ruby,” he murmured. “Don’t you dare cry for me!” Because if she let even one tear slip down her cheek, he would lose it himself. He was right on the edge of too many emotions and did not want the complete meltdown that was brimming to the top.

“Get your act together, Killian.” She pressed a hard hand into the middle of his chest. “Soon. Or
Emma is not going to stick around for your mess, no matter what she feels about you.”

Without another word, Ruby turned on her heel and stormed out of the kitchen. And she seriously thought it was that easy?

Killian’s hands fisted tightly in the mass of hair atop his head, feeling the urge to scream out all of his frustration.

It was all on him. All on him! And sooner rather than later he was going to reach his breaking point.
Chapter 13

It was one of those days. The type where unburdening his problems would be a much needed welcome. Where unloading with his group mates would allow for a clearing of his head and his heart. Where Archie’s words of wisdom and understanding of his specific problems would cause his strain to ease somewhat.

Since being with Emma, these were always the hardest days. No matter how bad the ache was, Killian always would choose to keep it in. Bury his indecisions deep down inside until he was alone with his issues. No answers came from it, but at least he wasn’t causing anyone else any discomfort at the same time.

He slowly turned his eyes up, searching for the clock on the wall. Keeping things in during the hour and a half that the meeting had been in progress, he had felt the knots tying all the tighter in his chest. If he didn’t do it… It would be another five days before he would even be in the position to do it again.

Killian truly did not believe that he would be able to go another five days of… the indecision and the not knowing what each following day would bring. Would he be happy tomorrow, waking up with Emma wrapped around him and her scent filling he lungs? Or would a dream of Milah- her smile and her laugh and her sparkling eyes- be the thing that drove him from his slumber? He didn’t know. Not knowing would be the death of him. That was if he didn’t clear his conscious tonight.

His eyes locked on Emma on the way back from the clock. Her attention was drawn up at Archie, who was standing in front of the group.

She’d understand. If he wasn’t one hundred percent sure in himself then he wasn’t any good for her. She’d know that. If not right at the moment, then by the end of the experience, she’d know.

No, he wasn’t giving up. That wasn’t the point. It wasn’t a foregone conclusion that Milah was so deeply ingrained in his life that he couldn’t move on. He just needed the help of those here around him.

He wasn’t giving up on her. This wasn’t about giving up on them.

Killian’s eyes slid back over to Emma.

He didn’t have an answer. He needed to have an answer. Answers to those burning questions that were going to be the death of him. She’d understand. His heartbeat was strong. Steady. It was time.

“Archie?” And he felt the ease seeping into his soul.

Archie turned his attention straight towards him.

Pushing his glasses up on his face, he smiled. “Killian, did you have something that you wanted to share?”

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“Archie?”

Emma looked over at Killian as he called Archie to attention. So he was going to share in group. She had seen the need in him. She could tell that something was eating him up from the inside. If he
couldn’t share it with her alone, she was relieved that he was going to at least open up here.

“Killian, did you have something that you wanted to share?” Archie asked.

He was looking right at him, silent. What was he thinking?

Emma was reminded of another time he had shared when she was completely blind to what it was going to pertain to. At that time, it had been his way of letting her know something as well.

“I’ve been trying to get to this point here for quite a while,” Killian started, staring right up at Archie. “I’ve been holding back, in hopes of not… rocking the boat for others. But, honestly, it’s been tearing me up inside, and I just need to get it out. Here. Now. If I don’t…” He shook his head slowly, his eyes falling to the floor.

Archie was moving closer, finding his way to stand right in front of him.

Emma was watching, her mind racing over every single word that had left Killian’s lips.

This was going to be something bad. Was it her? Of course it was her! Holding back because of someone. Holding back because of her.

There was something that he needed to clear up- for himself- that meant not taking Emma into consideration. Why was there such a negative connotation to that statement?

“However you’re ready to talk about it, Killian,” Archie told him. “There is no pressure here. We’re all here to support your needs.”

He looked pensive for it to be good news. If it was something good then he wouldn’t have had any problems sharing it with her already. He looked somewhat tortured.

Really?

“When Milah died, I really thought that that part of my life died with her,” Killian started quietly, looking back up at Archie. “It was a moot point. And even though it was difficult, the reason why it was difficult wasn’t because I thought I’d never find someone who I could ever love again. It was difficult- it is difficult- because, to me, Milah was the one life partner made for me. There was no chance in hell that that fact could be changed.”

“But,” Archie said, taking a step back and truly looking at Killian, “you have shared how over the past few months that you have given yourself the opportunity to at least attempt to move on. And move on in a significant way. You have been in a relationship.”

Emma stared up at Archie, swallowing her moment of self-doubt. Killian’s road was one that he had talked about in group. He had opened himself up to her and the possibility of something serious. They- he and Emma- were something serious. He couldn’t deny that.

But that was the problem, huh?

“It’s nice.”

Emma’s head turned swiftly towards his answer. Nice?

“I didn’t even expect that. And it’s real. Sometimes- the amount of time is significant- I am truly happy and see this life of eternal happiness.”

“Sounds like a preface to something greater.”
Archie was right. Killian had started with the positive, but there was something more. That’s not what had him beside her in his seat feeling the need to unburden himself beyond belief.

His hands were white-knuckling the armrest of his chair and his stare was intensely focused on Archie.

“She doesn’t leave my head. Not for long. No matter what I’m doing, no matter what mood or temperament I am in, she always comes back.”

“Milah,” Archie said with a nod.

Not Emma. No. Milah.

“And it stops you from moving. It leaves you stagnant.”

“I think so,” Killian agreed. “My friends want me to get over it, but… she was my wife.”

“Killian, in all these months,” Archie said with a small shrug of his shoulder, “are you really emotionally and mentally prepared for that? It’s not about forgetting Milah. No one should be asking you to forget Milah. The question becomes if you are able to feel like loving and losing your wife means never fully committing yourself to someone else.”

He had not yet said he loved her. She had not told him that she loved him. She was sure of her feelings for him. She thought she was sure of his feelings for her, even if they were entangled with issues. Was she wrong?

“Sometimes. Sometimes I feel it is possible. And then other times I think it is very impossible. Sometimes I feel like I’m waiting for this to be all over. And then things will be all right in the world. I wake up not knowing what this day will be- who I will be. It feels unfair. Selfish. And sometimes I’d rather not pull others into my messed up world.”

“And then there are people who may feel it is too late to just walk away,” Archie pointed out. “If you feel as if you have made connections- connections that rival that of the one you had with Milah- then don’t believe it will be so easy to push them out of your world.”

Did he want to push her out? Did he want her gone?

No. That didn’t make any sense. That’s not what he had meant at all.

“That sounds… harsh. ‘Rival?’”

“To a man who struggles to let go of his wife. Killian, it is up to you to decide what you want and who you want. Do you fear Milah wouldn’t approve?”

He took a moment to think about that. And it made Emma wonder if Neal would approve of her moving on. Those thoughts spurned a yes, only because he hadn’t known her plans. He hadn’t known that she was leaving. So, of course he would approve of her finding love when he was gone. She didn’t like when her mind turned that way, so she focused back on Killian.

He was staring up at Archie. “Approve? I don’t know.”

How could he not know?

“How can I be sure when she haunts me in the way that she does?”

“So you think it is Milah who haunts you?”
Killian shook his head. “Who else?”

“It could be the pressures that you’re putting on yourself. You may just feel guilty from trying to move on, Killian. But that is another decision that you have to make for yourself. Is it Milah trying to convey to you that your life is better living only on her memory or if it is your dedication to her that subconsciously gives you these feelings and manifests them to her.”

She heard his ragged breath from beside her. Looking at him, Emma could tell that he was still unsure about what he wanted and what he needed to do.

Seriously, how had she missed the gaping holes full of pain? It was because she was in this happy bubble, thinking that he was right there with her. But maybe he wasn’t.

So what did that mean?

He felt haunted. It meant that there was so much more to the man sitting beside her, and yet she wasn’t getting it because he still held on to Milah.

If he didn’t want to let go…

If he couldn’t let go…

Too many ifs…

So many that Emma wondered if this meant it was up to her and her alone to decide her fate and her future.

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“Do you want to talk to me about it?”

It had been too much silence. The whole ride back to his apartment had been way too quiet. It was that awkward kind of silence that was full of tension.

Watching him now, as he paced through the living room, Emma knew that it was all about to come to fruition.

His hands were on his hips, his head hanging down and staring at the carpeted floor he was pacing on. He was actually pacing. It was building up heavily in him. “We talked about it during group, Emma,” was the answer he gave her quietly.

She wanted to throw her hands up in the air. “We didn’t talk about it. You shared with the entire group. So now I want to know if you would like to clarify the situation with me.”

How did she feel? It was a question she had for herself. She felt the nervousness building up in her. It wasn’t because she feared what he would share would impact them. It was about her total need for honesty. Where she thought he had been on the path to being whole with her, it now felt like a façade. Her nervousness stemmed from a place of lies and omissions.

He still wasn’t looking at her. He was still furthering this gap between them.

“It’s not as easy as it should be,” Killian finally said.

Emma’s eyebrows raised. Not in surprise, but in thought and wonder. “Us?” She stepped closer, needing to be near him when they had this conversation. “Look at me.” Because she had been hurt in her life as well. She knew that hurt had softened her rather than hardened her in some ways. She had
lost a bit of her edge when she lost Neal, and lost even more when she lost their baby. But here, in this moment, she felt the need for it.

And finally he looked up at her, meeting her eyes.

There was a harshness there, borne from hurt, she knew.

“I was in love with her, Emma,” he whispered. Those eyes narrowed down on her in pure confusion. “We were together our whole adult life. And she’s been gone for… a very long time now. Doing this is not easy.”

He was hurting. He was thinking of Milah and not thinking of her. The man she stood before, loving so much, was hurting over another woman. So, no, it was not so easy.

“I… I get… it, Killian.”

“You don’t understand,” he muttered, shaking his head. His tone sounded disgusted, and he turned his back to her.

The nerve of this man in front of her!

She grabbed his arm. “I do understand.” With a yank, she forced him back to look at her.

Same pain. Same hurt. Same disgusted face.

“I lost my wife of six years, Emma!” Killian screamed hoarsely.

“I lost my husband!” she screamed backed, exasperated and full of confusion. “Is my pain not measureable to yours because you had more time together?”

“That has nothing to do with it,” he muttered with a vehement shake of his head.

“Then what?” She knew her eyes must have looked wild. She felt out of sorts at the moment, unsure of where he was going with this.

His head quirked, inquiry written all over his face. “Do you really want to go there?”

The confusion was only mounting in her mind as he stood there in disbelief. It was like a taunt. A dare of speaking the truth.

“What?” The incredulity was growing. “Just say it.”

“You lost the man you no longer loved, Emma,” he shouted, throwing the truth right in her face. “You lost the man you were planning on leaving that same day. The only reason you are in grief counseling is because you feel guilty that he died before you had the chance to set your plan in motion.”

It was automatic, the shattering of her heart. The inability to inhale and exhale properly making it difficult to even stand there. Her face, she could feel it, twisted up in pain as if she had physically been hit. But the emotional and verbal beating was by far worse than anything else.

“I can’t believe you just said that to me.” She didn’t know which pain was greater: being presented by something she herself couldn’t admit to or the fact that Killian had spit it in her face.

She stepped back, she stepped away. From Killian.
“Em… Emma. Wait. No. Stop.”

She felt dirty. There was this invisible soil covering her entire body, feeling the need to cleanse herself of the unearthly foulness around her.

He reached out to grab her but to no avail.

“That was out of line, Emma. Emma.”

Her whole body was racked with shudders. And that dirty feeling wouldn’t leave her be.

There were a million thoughts that ran through her mind, but they centered on finding Emma again.

“Fine, Killian,” she whispered quietly, happy that she still had a voice. Another step back when his hand dared to reach out for her again. Her eyes dashed across his face. The regret was there, but it didn’t matter. “I can’t even do this anymore with you. I am done.” With her head held high, she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Emma.”

He didn’t go after her.

It was a hard thing to swallow: the truth. And there was a lot of that to contemplate, she knew. But she didn’t look back. She would not go back.

Reaching out for the door handle, it was a firm hand that opened it. Head held high, tears refusing to fall, Emma walked confidently out of that apartment door, with no plans of ever returning.
Emma took in a deep breath as she listened to the phone ring in her ear. She thought that she could faintly hear the ringing from the other side of the door.

“Hello.”

“Hey… Mary Margaret.” She removed the phone from her ear and quietly cleared her throat.

“Emma?” She heard the confusion laced in her voice.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” She turned away from the door, looking back at her car parked on the curb. “I know it’s kind of late.”

“It’s only late for Leo,” Mary Margaret said singsong voice. “We’re just about to get him ready for bed. But for us, it’s still early.”

“Good,” Emma sighed. “Are you up for some company? I need some company Do you mind if I come over?”

“It feels like I haven’t seen you in ages. Yes, come over.”

“Good, because I’m outside. Just open the door.” Emma pressed the end button on her phone and promptly slid it into her back pocket. With a quick secession of knocks on the door, she stepped back and waited.

It was David who opened the door a few moments later. A look of wonderment was written over his face.

“Surprise, surprise. Emma.” His smile was big and his embrace warm as he brought her into his arms.

For a second she felt herself slip. The feel of being in loving and caring arms- ha, the irony!- was almost her undoing. The way his hand came up to cradle the back of her head, bringing her close to his heart, was the most secure feeling that she could have had.

She had believed she had found that for herself in Killian. Damn, that bubble!

“Come in,” David told her, pulling back just a little. And then he took a moment to look at her. “What’s wrong, Emma?”

Emma shook her head and slid past him and into the house.

“I’m fine.” Her steps were slow and careful. She knew she had to shake the feelings of anxiousness
or she would break down. Emma had already decided she would not break down.

“Where’s Mary Margaret?” she asked, moving into the house and peering around, looking for her best friend.

“She went to put Leo down for the night.”

Emma turned back to look at David, his tone of voice reflecting a bit of worry. When she did, she saw the way he was taking inventory of every inch of her.

“Emma?”

She gave him her biggest and brightest smile. “I’m fine.” Or she would be fine soon enough.

David’s eyes came up to meet hers. His mouth was set in a grim line as he just looked at her.

“No, you’re not.”

Emma’s smile, small and slight, was true this time. Best friends were the best.

“I meant that I will be fine,” she amended.

“Why? What happened?”

It was Mary Margaret’s question. Emma turned around swiftly to see her best friend walking briskly into the room. She was coming straight for Emma with a smile on her face and arms outstretched.

Best friends that were as close and as meaningful as family, that’s what Mary Margaret and David were, Emma thought as she laid her head down on the shorter women’s shoulder.

“What happened, Emma?” she asked again, a firmness in her voice.

This time, pulling back from her, Emma did laugh.


“And what does that supposed to mean?” Mary Margaret shook her head, looking confused.

“Take her in the kitchen, Mary Margaret,” David said from behind them. “Get her a cup of coffee. We can talk in there.”

“It’s too late for coffee,” Emma told them, feeling the instant tug of Mary Margaret’s hand pulling her forward.

“No matter. We’ll find something. And we can talk.”

Emma let her lead them the way to the kitchen, hand in hand.

She couldn’t help but be transfixed by the life she saw in front of her.

Mary Margaret and David had made this beautiful life for themselves. It wasn’t an apartment that they lived in. Their home was a house. A beautiful house filled with memories and trinkets they had made throughout the years. Photos lined the walls of what a perfect life they had before the baby and even more since Leo had joined their family.

Family. A real family. One filled with love, acceptance, compassion, and everything else most
people only dreamed of.

Emma had dreamed of it. She had worked hard to have it. But it was with the wrong person. She had tried with the wrong person, making her life miserable in the process.

If she wanted to be honest with herself then she was going to have to dig deeper. She couldn’t put the blame of an unfulfilled life all on a failed marriage. Was she ready for that?

Emma stopped walking, planting her feet firmly on the carpeted floor.

“I don’t want anything to drink,” she told Mary Margaret, searching her eyes when she looked back at her. She felt an overwhelming sadness for herself and it wasn’t going away.

“Then what do you want, Emma?” Mary Margaret asked softly. “What can I do for you?”

“What do you need, Emma?”

She swallowed hard, looking from one to the other.

“Do you mind if I just spend the night here? I don’t want to go home.”

She didn’t want to go home. Home meant being alone. Home meant fixating on him and his accusations. His accusations meant facing her past. Her past meant Neal and a baby who was never named. The domino effect was far too great. No, she didn’t want to go home.

Mary Margaret and David shared a quick look of concern between them.

It was David who moved first, nodding his head and reaching out for her.

“That’s fine, Emma. The guest bedroom is already ready.”

Perfect people and their perfect families had perfect guestrooms already perfectly made up in their perfect homes…

“I’ll go get some extra blankets and have it all set up for you.” He squeezed her hand firmly before letting it go and walking off to do his task.

“What happened?” Mary Margaret’s face showed a tinge of anger.

Emma smiled at her friend. “I’m sorry, but the boat trip is off. I hope you weren’t looking forward to it too much.”

Mary Margaret’s face seemed to crumble. “Emma? Emma, I’m so sorry.” Her hand came up to caress her cheek. “What happened? Other than your life, that it.”

Emma’s eyes closed, her thoughts turning to what brought her here.

The only reason you are in grief counseling is because you feel guilty that he died before you had the chance to set your plan in motion.

Those were the words she struggled with the most. It was a question that had been pushed so far back in her mind that the instant he said it it had triggered despair in her. Was she guilty? Did she have anything besides guilt that made her burn for Neal? So she wasn’t in love with him anymore at the end. She had finally decided to do something about it. Didn’t that count? Didn’t that alleviate some of the guilt?
Emma looked back at Mary Margaret, the pain so clear in her face as she waited for an answer.

“Two broken souls don’t always come together and mend one another. At least, it isn’t easy.”

****

*Sometimes I feel like I’m waiting for this to be all over. And then things will be all right in the world.*

So… now everything was over. She had said it herself, and with finality. It was all his fault, but at that moment… the situations of Milah and Emma had been too much.

His relationship with Emma was over.

*It was over? Everything that he had done for her… Everything that she had done to him…*

Was everything alright with the world now? It was too early to make that decision as of yet. She’d just left. It would take time to ruminate in his mind.

*Blonde curls that fell loosely through his fingertips.*

He didn’t call her. He didn’t text her. Should he have reached out to her? He had barely tried to stop her when she was only feet away from him and furthering the gap. So how could he do it with miles and miles between them?

*Her fingertips brushing up against his shoulders and down his chest.*

No, Killian still did not reach out for her. Instead, he stripped himself of all those damned confining clothes that bound him, leaving a trail on his path to the bathroom. Shoe, shoe, tie, sock, sock, shirt…

*Green eyes sparkling as she throws her head back, laughing lightly.*

The shower head, set on full body spray, pulsed out a screaming hot stream of water. He wanted the burn to take away some of the edge. He wanted the heat to seep through his pores and take away some of the ache that was beginning to climb through his body.

Killian hadn’t meant to accuse her of feeling guilty over Neal’s death. The whole thing had just slipped out. He had wanted to push her at that point in time. She was poking and he answered back.

*Poking? She just wanted him to be honest and direct with her. He’d known that therapy was going to open up a battle between them. Yet he did it anyway.*

Because he had to! It had been building in him for too long and it wasn’t going to get any better.

Had he expected for her to walk out on him? Well, he hadn’t said those things so that she would leave. But he had said them, so it was an understandable reaction on her part.

Emma had looked broken. He had broken her. She had not been whole in the beginning, and yet he broke her into even smaller pieces.

He couldn’t go after her. He was still in pain himself. Was he happy to be alone?

*Waking up in bed with her feet tangled with his.*

She shouldn’t have come home with him. She should have given him this evening to himself.

It was when he was lying in bed- the bed he had bought for *them*- he stared up at the ceiling.
Clothes were too confining. Even trying to put on a pair of underwear felt too constricting. So he laid there, naked and in deep thought.

“What did I do?” Killian’s hand roamed the empty side of the smaller bed. Just as important, what had she done to him?

He had feared the closeness, and yet craved it at the same time. But now that it was gone- now that she was gone- the loneliness had crept up inside him.

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“Happy anniversary!”

Neal’s smile was infectious, making Emma smile right back at him.

“Happy anniversary to you, too.”

“I have your present,” he told her with his grin growing. He nuzzled up against her, placing a quick peck on her cheek.

“Sounds exciting. Give it to me.”

“Well, first you have to close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

Emma bit down on her lip as she looked him over inquisitively. “It’s small enough to fit in my hand, hmm?”

Neal laughed. He was looking giddier than she had ever known him to be.

“Hold out your hands, Emma, and close your eyes. This will be the biggest one month anniversary gift anyone could ever deserve to receive. Close your eyes.”

With one more quick skeptical look at the man in front of her, Emma sighed and did as he requested. She pressed her hands out in front of her and waited for him to surprise her.

He only took one of her hands in his.

“I love you, Emma.”

She giggled at his declaration. “I love you, too, Neal.”

And then her hand was being turned from palm-up to palm-down. The feel of the rotation made her nervous. It was the feel of the band slipping over her ring finger, slipping into place at the base of finger, which caught her by surprise.

“Neal,” she gasped as her eyes flew open.

He was grinning, pulling her hand around his back and pressing his chest to hers.

“Marry me, Emma,” he said with a slight shrug of his shoulder. “Let me give you the world. It’ll be ours for the taking. Just you and me.”

Her mouth hung open as she just stared at him, mesmerized by the request.

Dazed, she shook her head. “Are you serious?”
“As a heart attack, babe.”

“It’s been a month.”

“The best month of my life. I want it to be this forever kind of a deal.”

Emma stuttered into this smile of disbelief. “You’re serious?”

“I’m serious.”

He was offering her this fairytale. He was offering her this happily ever after. And even though it had only been a month, she wanted it more than she could have ever known.

“What do you say, Emma?” There was a nervousness starting to outshine the hopefulness in his eyes. “Say yes.”

“Yes.” And it was as simple as that.

“I was a mixture of disbelief and relief in that one-word question. His arm wrapped tightly around her waist.

Emma laughed, herself in shock. “Yeah, I’ll marry you, Neal. Now give me my hand back so that I can see how well I came out in this deal.”

Neal placed a quick kiss to her cheek before bringing her left hand back from behind his back.

“It’s not much,” he warned her. “But I couldn’t hold back from asking anyway.”

It was a simple ring. A hand-engraved solitaire engagement right made of yellow gold. It was adorable. And unbelievable. And just for her.

“It may not be the most expensive piece out there, but it’s not the cheapest either,” Neal told her, holding her wrist up as she admired the ring.

“Neal, it’s beautiful!” she assured him.

“Yeah?” His eyes squinted at her while his lip quirked a bit.

“Yeah.” She pulled her arm away from him so that she could wrap them around his neck.

“Emma Swan is going to be Emma Cassidy,” he murmured in her ear. “I like the sound of that.”

Her arm tightened around him, holding him close. “I love the sound of it.”

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There was a scent of morning in the air, Emma noted, sitting up in the bed.

What time was it? Did she oversleep? She was no way near in the condition to go to work today. She’d have to rush home and get ready first, and she was sure there was no time for that.

Emma stood up from the bed, scanning the room for where her phone just might be.

She discovered it sitting on the dresser in front of her, already on a charger and battery completely full.

No messages, hm. She tried not to feel any certain type of way about that fact.
And yes, she was going to be late for work.

Emma opened the bedroom door and was hit even more by the wave of breakfast somewhere near. Before she would make her appearance to the family she made a beeline for the bathroom so that she could clean herself up a bit first.

She didn’t know how long she had been in there. She only knew that she needed to have a grasp on her world before she walked out and faced everything else.

She’d doused her face, washing away all the crap from yesterday. She wasn’t prepared for the brief thought of waking up next to Killian and checking for any embarrassing drool like the first night they’d spent together. But there it was. It was soon followed by the thought of what brought her here to her friends’ home. The pain was back.

She wasn’t going to let it stick around. She was going to turn this something negative into a learning experience for herself.

Emma couldn’t deny the fact that she had fallen in love with the man. It hadn’t been the quick and fleeting kind of love affair that she had longed feared it to be. It had been that fear in which had lead her to go at his slow and careful pace. No, Killian was a man she saw herself being true to and happy with and for a very long time.

It was love.

And now… it was over.

She swallowed the lump down in her throat, refusing to dwell on it. She could try to forgive the statement he’d made, because it had opened herself up to recognizing her own flaws. But she could not forgive the man who had made the statement in such a callous and cold manner.

Leaving the bathroom, feeling somewhat stronger than she had when she went in, she held her head high as she walked towards the still yummy smelling breakfast.

It was David she was greeted by in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” she said too brightly, taking his attention away from loading the dishwasher.

His smile for her was small and his eyes once again seemed to do a slow visual check of how she was doing.

“Good morning, Emma.”

“Um… I’m going to have to get out of here. I’m late for work.”

“No, you’re not,” he said with a shake of her head. “Mary Margaret made a judgment called- based on checking up on you throughout the night- and called your office this morning. She let them know that you wouldn’t be coming in today.”

Emma was only slightly put off by that fact. It didn’t completely surprise her, and she was silently trying to put it in perspective.

“And yet… she has already gone about her day, right?”

David nodded. “She’s gone.” He moved away from the counter and made his way over to the kitchen table. He simultaneously pulled out two chairs. “Come sit down and have breakfast.”
It was then that she noticed how her stomach had been reacting to the smell of… the pancakes and scrambled eggs sitting on the table.

“I heard you get up and head to the bathroom,” David explained.

Emma hadn’t had a bite to eat in probably fifteen hours. And everything looked so good.

“Thank you, David,” she told him softly, takin a seat at the table.

He simply nodded as he sat down across from her. But he kept watching her, in that all-consuming way.

She picked up the fork sitting beside her plate.

“Leo?”

“He’s still sleeping.”

She nodded. Looking back down at the food in front of her, her hunger couldn’t outweigh the anxiousness she felt with him watching her.

“What, David?”

He sat back in his chair and offered her a shrug. “Mary Margaret told me why you spent the night. Not that you shared much with her.”

“Were you looking forward to the boat outing as well, David?”

He scoffed at her attempt at humor. “I was looking forward to seeing you happy.”

“I’m…” happy would be a lie. A lie she shouldn’t be able to tell with a straight face. “I’m dealing with everything.” She stuck her fork into the heap of eggs before her.

“What happened?”

Emma looked back up at David to see the imploring and inquisitive stare. She opened her mouth, and then closed it once again. It hadn’t started with Killian. He had brought it to the forefront, but her issues had stemmed from something before him.

David was her friend. He and Mary Margaret were her family. Yet, they didn’t know those huge secrets which made Emma who she was. If there was anything she had learned from group therapy and Killian Jones, it was that if she wanted to move on (and she desperately needed to), she was going to have to confront her demons.

She inhaled a deep and steadying breath.

“I was… pregnant, David,” she started. And maybe that was the wrong way, because the fury that blazed through David’s eyes was instant.

“He got you-“


David drew in closer to her, his hand reaching over the table and placed near hers.
“Emma, I had no idea.”

She shook her head. “No one did.”

David looked truly perplexed, and she understood immediately. How could she not tell anyone, especially Mary Margaret?

“It happened after the funeral,” she said in answer to his silent question. “I didn’t even know until after the fact. So there was no reason to say anything.”

“But… it effected you, Emma.”

“It was a punishment, David,” she said with a shake of her head.

“What does that supposed to mean?”

Emma smiled across at him. Her tale was long and each part connected so peculiarly to the other parts. So she really could continue at any section of her life’s story.

“Do you understand how good you have it, David?” she asked softly. “You, and Mary Margaret, and Leo?”

“I.”

“People spend lifetimes trying to achieve what seems to have come so easily to you.” If she sounded astounded and in awe by that, it was because she was. “And I, for one, am one of those people.”

“Emma…”

“I was leaving Neal.” She’d said it. Staring straight into his eyes, staring with this wonderment of David’s true understanding of what she’d said.

He watched her with pure confusion crossing his face. His eyebrows had drawn together as his eyes cut sharply to hers.

“I was leaving Neal,” she said again, wanting him to understand what she had meant.

“Okay.” Apparently he didn’t know what else to say. “Why, Emma? Why were you going to leave Neal? I thought you two were happy. You looked happy- Neal was a great guy.”

It was a reaction that Emma had expected: why leave Neal when he is a great guy?

“I wasn’t happy,” she shared with him. “It didn’t matter that he was a great guy. There are a lot of nice people in the world. That doesn’t mean pick any one of them on a whim and have a happy and successful marriage.”

David was slow to nod his head in understanding.

“Mary Margaret had basically labeled me a flake when it came to men.”

“Emma, that’s going too far,” David said, quickly defending his wife.

“Is it? She questioned every single relationship. Every single guy. Even Neal.”

“It was a four-week relationship,” he reminded her, pointing a long finger her way. “You don’t think we should have had reservations when you hopped a plane to Vegas to get married?”
“Then why be shocked when I tell you that I was leaving him?”

His eyes darted across her face, looking taken aback by her question. “Like I said, you were married for two years and you both looked happy.”

“I wasn’t happy,” she told him again, wishing that it would sink in.

Emma thought that maybe that time it had been conveyed to David. His expression was one full of empathy for her issues.

“I was finally going to leave him, David,” she continued. “I had failed him and our marriage. I had failed to live up to my own expectations. I… had failed to live up to your and Mary Margaret’s expectations. But I had to try to be happy again.”

“Did you really think—”

“Your opinions matter to me,” she cut in before he could say that they shouldn’t. “I was going to be disappointing people. But I was going to do it anyway. I’d packed, David. I was leaving and going to a hotel when Neal’s captain called me.”

“You were leaving right at that moment?” David asked, his eyes incredulous.

“It nearly killed me. It was like… I put it out there in the universe. Because I chose not to work on my relationship and my problems- because I had chosen to take the easy path- he… he died.”

With a scrape of chair legs against the tiled kitchen floor, David moved closer to her.

“You know that’s not true, Emma.” He pulled her into a bear hug, keeping her close. “Emma, there was nothing that anybody could have done to save Neal in that fire. He went back in there, trying to live up to his character. He died trying to save people. It had nothing to do with you.”

Logistically, it made sense. It was her warped thinking that had lead her into group therapy to cope with her thoughts. And it was Killian’s words that burned in her mind.

*You lost the man you no longer loved, Emma. You lost the man you were planning on leaving that same day. The only reason you are in grief counseling is because you feel guilty that he died before you had the chance to set your plan in motion.*

“He said that is why I am in mourning,” she murmured, moving out of his embrace.

David frowned. “He?”

“Killian,” she clarified. “That’s why I left. He said it, David.” She was looking into his face, but it was a struggle to actually focus. “He mourns for the love of his life while I mourn for a man I had already stopped loving.”

“That bastard had the nerve to say that to you?” And the fury was back. His hand clasped her wrist a bit too tightly.

“He was right.”

In his confusion, David loosened his grip on her.

“I wanted to confront my problems, but I didn’t want to dig deep. So how the hell was I helping myself? How the hell was I supposed to let others help me when I was denying the bigger picture?”
These were questions she was asking herself as well as him.

She saw the visible hard swallow as David continued to watch her.

“Okay. So you weren’t in love with him anymore. It doesn’t change the fact that you loved him. It doesn’t change the fact that you didn’t wish harm on him.”

Emma shook her head. “I didn’t want to lose Neal like that.” She sighed, feeling too many feelings and wanting it to stop for just a moment. A small smile. “Is Mary Margaret going to be angry that I didn’t tell her all of this first?”

David’s smile just as slight. “It’s a great possibility.” He placed his hand over hers. “Emma?”

“Yeah?”

He picked her hand up and held on firmly.

“Do you want me to go over there and beat the crap out of that guy?”

Emma’s smile turned into a giggle which then turned into a burst of laughter. He smiled, too, but she knew he was completely serious.

“No, David. I don’t want you to go and beat Killian up.” Her lips pursed as his image clouded her mind. She understood him. She knew where he was coming from and his state of mind last night. And even if it was over- even though she knew she had to fix herself before she could move on- the feelings hadn’t bled out of her.

“I…” It was true, she knew. “I love him.”

David’s exhale of breath was harsh.

Emma looked over at him with sad eyes.

“Can I just borrow a word from you?”

She smiled and nodded.

“Seriously, Emma?”

And she laughed again.

“My life. When isn’t it a mess?”
He was late, but that was the norm for Killian. In fact, he should have stuck with his first mind and cancelled on this get together with his friends. He’d had a horrendous day at work (talk about the norm), and putting on a happy face just for his friends for hours on end did not sound like something he would be able to do.

They must not have been there long because they were not even seated at a table yet. Instead, he found them hovered around the bar.

It was a ragged intake of breath that he took, standing behind the three of them, before he finally spoke.

“Guys. Hello.”

“Killian.”

Although it was a welcome from the group, his uneasiness came from the look on Ruby’s face. The way he felt her stare, up and down the length of him. He only turned to her briefly before he was quick to look away.

“Killian?”

“How are you, Ruby?” It was easy and natural enough. At least he thought so. But the glance back at her still made him antsy.

What was she seeing?

“What’s wrong? Is something wrong?”

Killian only lifted a shoulder in response. “Another hell of a day at work.” Which was not a lie in the least. That struggle was getting all the more difficult.

“Where’s Emma?” she asked slowly, suspicion written over her face. She disentangled herself from Victor’s arms so that she could get a good and clear look at him.

Not one minute in and she had already brought up Emma? Of course she did.

Killian felt the immediate sickening of his stomach at the mere mentioning of her. It had been days, and the feeling of loss had not tampered down at all. He felt the brooding and loneliness creeping throughout his body, having no answer to fixing it.

“She’s not coming,” he answered.

“She’s not going to be able to make it?” Victor asked. “That’s too bad.” He wrapped his arm around Ruby’s waist, dragging her back against him. “It’s like Ruby has found a new best friend. All she does is rave about the two of you.”

It had been something to rave about. It had been something to be happy about. He knew better than anyone. And he had been the one to destroy it.
The dulling ache in his chest was like a constant throbbing reminder that only got worse when moments like this one arose.

He saw the smile on Ruby’s face, but it looked skeptical. And she was still watching him too closely.

“It’s fine with me that she couldn’t make it.” Robin turned his hand up in a wave at the three of them. “I’m now the odd man out again, with you all coupling up. And the boat trip? Emma’s bringing her married friends? What kind of luck is that for me? She doesn’t have a single girl friend?”

“Aw, Robin!” Ruby batted Victor’s arms away from her, moving to comfort her friend. “We can find you someone, too.” With the first real smile on her lips since he’d gotten there, she moved in close to hang onto him. Her whispered words into his ear were lost on Killian.

God, he should have stuck to his first thought and went straight home. He wasn’t in a jovial or playful mood. Watching all three of his friends, he knew he would have rather been enclosed by the walls of his apartment, alone and trying his best to be unfeeling. That’s what he deserved. Not this communal gathering that imparted the need for him to play a part.

Killian tried to catch the eye of the bartender, desperately in need of the calming factor a bit of alcohol would be able to achieve. He shifted, moving away from the group to reach the front of the bar.

“Bacardi and Coke, tall.”

With a single nod from the bartender, Killian inhaled a deep- and hopefully steadying- breath.

A simple beer would not be the answer to his quest for numbness. He had a taste for something much stronger and longer lasting.

“Rum?”

Killian turned back at Ruby’s question. Her attention was now fully on him as she leaned a hand down in Robin’s lap.

“Would you like one as well, Ruby?” he asked her cordially.

“No.” Her answer had been slow and deliberate, still watching him way too closely. For his comfort, at least.

“Are we going to find a table now?” Robin hopped up from the barstool, shuffling away from the bar. He shared a glance with Victor, who slowly stood from his on seat.

“He ordered *rum* and you’re ready to jump on him?” Victor’s question sounded incredulous even to himself as he laughed in her face.

Killian turned around from them. His eyes tracked the bartender’s hands as he made the drink. Something to concentrate on rather than Ruby’s ability to pick up on something in his attitude change or the ability of Robin and Victor picking up on Ruby’s crazy vibe.

“There’s a table right over there.”

With a nod to the bartender in true gratefulness, Killian picked up his drink. The scent of the dark liquor was intoxicating. The only thing that would have made it better would be having this drink in the solace and quiet of his apartment. Away from… Damn, just away.
“Something is wrong.” Why did she sound so panicked?

Killian turned back around to the group. Ruby looked as panicked as she sounded, eyes wide as she tiptoed in the small amount of space she had between Victor and Robin. It was being done purposefully, keeping her at bay and not going wild—which she had a penchant for.

“Robin’s found a table, so you carry these.” Victor pressed both his and her bottles of beer into her hands, forcing the task on her.

Killian took his first sip from the glass as he watched the calamity of the three before him. It was a bittersweet moment. He blamed the lack of burn on the mix of the drink. The sweetness of the rum should still have the nice quality of heat as it ran down his throat. He’d have to stop and pick up something of quality on the way back to the apartment…

“Well, let’s go then,” Ruby said with a raise of an eyebrow. She threw her arm out. “Lead the way.”

It was another shared look between the men before Robin turned around and led the way. With a glance over his shoulder, his steps were slow as he waited for everyone to catch up.

“And you carry these.” Ruby pressed the bottles right back into Victor’s hands, forcing him into holding them. “I’m your girlfriend, so act like it.”

Killian’s smirk was instant and true. Sometimes friends had the ability to do that. “Anyway, I want to talk to Killian,” she continued sweetly, turning her smile and batting eyelashes on him.

“Ruby?”

She rolled her eyes up at Victor. “Walk. We’re right behind you. And stop watching me like I’m going to do something you disapprove of.”

Killian watched with a wary eye as they began their trek to the table. With Victor lagging behind Robin, he threw a glance back to make sure they’d follow.

Killian took another sip of his drink before pushing himself away from the bar.

“If I tell you I’m not in the mood for your line of questioning, Ruby, will it matter to you?”

“Mmm…” She twisted sided to side, waiting for him to move closer.

He wanted to sidestep her. He wanted to just ignore her prying eyes and her desire to know everything about his relationship.

He winced inwardly at the word. There was nothing left between them. It hurt a hell of a lot more than he could have ever expected.

The sip of rum was not going to be able to do the job, he thought, staring down in the glass of dark liquor.

She grabbed on to his hand as he tried passing by her. Her smile was sweet as ever while looking into his eyes.

“Where’s Emma? I tried calling her earlier today and didn’t get an answer.”

The fact that Ruby had called her made his throat feel constricted. She had been able to do what he had not. He felt like a bastard for that fact. Knowing that Emma had not answered the call only made him feel a bit sicker.
With Ruby pressed to his side, he continued to follow the guys in the direction of their new table.

“Killian, what is it?” There was a tinge of worry in her voice.

He didn’t even look at her. He concentrated on the guys in front of him, only wanting to make it to the table without dwelling on his problems. With Ruby pressed tightly against him, he knew it wasn’t going to happen.

“We had fight,” he finally gave in. He couldn’t have trivialized it any more than with that.

Emma, standing there, looking so hurt and defeated. The image crowded his mind. Watching her walk out the door with her head held high, refusing to show any more pain than she’d already let slip through.

“You had a fight? Oh. What?” A tremulous smile crossed Ruby’s face, looking a bit relieved by the news. “Was it the first time you two had an argument?” Her hand came to rub up and down his arm. “That’s a benchmark, Killian! You made it through your first fight. I was worried it was something else.”

He stopped walking, stopping Ruby right in her tracks. He was peering down in her eyes, trying to gain her attention. Her constant happy chatter would be the death of him.

It was the way he caught her eye. It was the intensity there that had finally got her to pay attention to him.

“What?”

Killian looked away for a moment, seeing Victor and Robin just feet ahead and pulling out seats at their table. Was it conversation for the entire group? Would they care? Did it matter?

He knew the answer to each question was yes. But did that make him want to share or make him believe that he should?

He knew the answer to that question was no.

He turned back to the waiting Ruby. Her eyes wide and questioning once again.

“It was our first fight,” he said with a short nod of his head. “And our last.”

Killian saw the shock turn into surprise and then to pure anger. At each emotional change he felt completely sick to his stomach.

“What did you do?” The question was slow and deliberate. Her hand flew away from his arm and came back as a closed fist, punching him solidly in the chest.

“Ruby!”

Her head turned furiously to Victor. “I told him!” "What now?"

Killian saw the tired exasperation on Victor’s face. Ruby was a handful a lot of the time. He could only imagine how exhausting it must to be the man in her life.

“What did you do?” she nearly screamed again.

It was the pain that he read all over her. It was the sheer disappointment and complete accusation that was all for him that was trying to break him in two. It was because Ruby was right. It had been in
each warning, in each pleading word from her mouth. But had he listened? Had he done what she had told him to: let go and be happy?

Staring at the woman in front of him—his friend who wore *his heart on her sleeve for the world to see—made him ache due to every mistake he had made.*

“Tell me what you did right now, or so help me God, Killian!”

Knowing that nothing was going to dull the ache in his chest, he put the glass up to his lips, draining the contents in in a single gulp. He prayed for the burn, prayed to feel something other than his emotions.

His gaze fell once again on the woman in front of him. He took a step back, moved as far away from her as he could.

“You’re right, Ruby,” he assured her with a nod of his head. “You were always right. It wasn’t going to work out.”

“Is that all you have to say?” She took a step closer, trying to close the gap between them. “You couldn’t stop fixating on Milah long enough to realize what you had with Emma, you stupid idiot!”

“You two are going to do this right here?” Victor came up from behind Killian and went straight to Ruby. “What is the problem?” Holding onto her shoulders, he looked up at Killian. “What?”

“In his screwed up world, Milah’s ghost is more important than Emma. Not *Miliah,* but her ghost!”

But was that true? Being forced in this situation, he didn’t know.

“I tried.” Was anybody going to acknowledge that he had really and truly tried? “And you failed!”

Nothing mattered because he had failed. Damn, he was going to have to get out of there.

“You and Emma broke up?”

“Victor, just shut up.” She waved him off of her, annoyed by the mere presence of him in supposedly their business. “I don’t even need to know the details because I already told you this would happen.” She held her hands out in front of him. Not touching, because maybe she wouldn’t be able to control the urge to do it more than lightly. “Killian, you are going to fix this. I swear to God you are going to make things right. Because, you stupid *stupid idiot, Emma loves you. You are going to let Milah rest in peace with the understanding that you have moved on. You are going to show Emma that everything you’ve done has not been in vain. And your stupid stupid ass is going to be freaking happy!”

She had a lot of nerve to demand anything from him. She had said it like it was a foregone conclusion and as simple as knocking on Emma’s door and into her arms that he could fix everything between them.

Killian’s head swiveled around to check out the damage of Ruby’s outburst. Robin was looking up at the scene from lowered lashes, trying his best to stay out of the entire situation. Killian turned back to see pretty much the same look of dread on Victor’s face. Ruby, herself, looked close to foaming at the mouth, deep inhales of breath and shoulders heaving from her rant.

“Just as I expected…” His arm outstretched, bypassing Ruby and looking at Victor. “Do you mind taking this?”
Victor was slow to accept the now empty glass.

“Killian.”

“I really wasn’t up to this,” he told them, a sudden and out of character smile lifting his lips. “And just like my relationship with… Emma…. I tried and failed. So now I get to go back to my apartment and…”

Do what? Just what he wanted to be: be alone.

“Killian, you don’t have to leave. Do you need to talk about it?”

“Let him go,” Ruby said with a wave of her hand.

Killian couldn’t help but stare into the unaffected and uninterested eyes of Ruby. She was waving him and his issues away like they were nothing.

“All he wants to do is wallow.” Those eyes turned fiery of him. “And you have a lot of that to do before. You. Fix. This.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t care. It was her pushing him to do what he needed to do.

With a final nod to both Victor and Robin, he backed away. No matter what he did, it wasn’t going to be here in this bar.

“I’ll see you guys later.”

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Killian poured another shot of the Cruzan Single Barrel rum, watching close as the dark liquor filled all the way to the top of the glass. Placing the seven-fifty bottle back down on the table right next to his cell phone, he was now able to take the shot in one single gulp.

This is what he had been looking forward to. The alcohol at the bar had been far too tame for what he needed it to do. Cruzan had been much more up to the task of taking away some of the pain from what his life now was. There was the fiery burn coasting down his throat and it felt absolutely perfect.

He closed his eyes as he let the glass slip from his fingers and find its resting spot on the table as well. The alcohol had been having a nice calming factor for his nerves, but it wasn’t able to keep the thoughts of her from running through his mind. Letting his head fall back against the chair, he opened his eyes to stare up at the ceiling.

The pain he felt in his heart had now increased from a dull ache to something sharp and spreading throughout his chest. The rum had only helped in not internalizing the pain so much, but it was still there.

He hadn’t known that it could get this bad. He didn’t know that opening his heart to Emma and letting her slip away would cause this much pain. He didn’t know that pushing her away would leave him as a complete drunken mess with no way out of it.

Or was it just him? Was he just destined to be a failure and to blame all of his loss on some internal being when it was just his fate to be so miserable?

Slowly, feeling the ache of his muscles with every slight movement, Killian sat back up. His eyes fell
back on the table. Shot glass, bottle of rum, cell phone.

He wanted it to be the bottle that drew him. He wanted it to be the pull of the liquor that made him rise to the occasion. But it wasn’t the rum at all.

Killian stared at the phone laying there, taunting him with the promise of... something if he had only the courage to try.

He hadn’t called her when she has walked out on him. He hadn’t so much as texted her one of those days since she’d last been here. The urge to reach out to her was so strong. But it didn’t even matter because the inability to do it was an even heavier weight. He couldn’t do it.

He just couldn’t.

Ruby had expected him to just up and fix things. That’s what she says to him: fix this. Fix what you broke. But...

Killian brought his hand up, slowly, carefully, to the table. He knew there wasn’t, but it felt like some invisible force holding him back from picking up that phone. If he picked it up and dared to call her, it would lead to some catastrophic rain of pain and hurt.

Emma didn’t want him. The way she looked at him had proved that as a fact. By trying to enter her life again would only cause him an insurmountable grief that he didn’t know if he could deal with.

Didn’t he owe it to her?

There was too much around. The bottle and shot glass were distractions that didn’t need to be there. All he wanted to do was concentrate on the phone. If he concentrated on the phone then maybe he could find his way out of the dense fog surrounding his brain.

He pushed the glass and rum back, pushing them way to the other side of the table. It was the phone that had mattered.

Carefully, so very carefully, Killian leaned over the table so that he could be at eyelevel with the one thing in his immediate surroundings that could link him to her. His fingertips hovered for a moment before he finally let them drop over the screen.

Damn, he was drunk. He couldn’t do this in his condition.

He picked the phone up, turning it, flipping it over in his hands.

This was the link to Emma. He so very badly wanted to have a link to her.

He was sorry.

“I’m sorry, Emma.” The mutter was a raspy plea to the woman who could not hear him. If only he’d call her.

Killian unlock the screen saver, quietly debating the entire time as he pulled up her phone number.

Didn’t she deserve his apology? How long was he going to go without apologizing? He wanted more than to just apologize. He wanted her to know how he felt. About her. About them.

God, he had been hurting!

“I’m sorry...Emma.”
Because he was in that place again. He was here alone. And it wasn’t about not have anyone at all. It wasn’t. It was her. He wanted her. And...

Killian stared down at her name and at her phone number. And at that damned call button.

That damned called button that he could not push.

Because she deserved better than a drunken phone call with his pleas of understanding and regret.

The phone dropped down to the table with only a tiny bang. He replaced his now empty hands with the bottle and the glass.

This he could do. This would dull the ache and the pain. And, eventually, like every previous night, sleep would find him. Right there on the kitchen table.

Yes, that is what he could do.

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Killian had been doing group therapy for many many months now. He could count the number of meeting he had missed on one hand in all that time. He could sum up the reasons for his missed days on just one finger alone: Emma Swan. Today had been a battle. To come here after another pained day of work, to wonder and hope that he would see her here, the need to be emotionally okay by either scenario. It had been a battle that he fought to win, no matter what circumstance he came across.

He hadn’t counted on the amount of physical hurt his body would go through when the meeting had started and she had not been there. It wasn’t like those days when she would rush in a little late from an overextended day at work. He didn’t hold out hope that the door would swing open and she would enter, breathless and maybe a little more nervous at the prospect of seeing him there.

Her hair would be pulled up into one of those high ponytails because she would be coming from the office. Her green eyes would be sparkling because she would have spotted him there, in their usual seats and he would be waiting on her. Her smile would be just as dazzling, but she would be hiding it because no matter what they had between them, this was still a place for grief. She would respect that fact and not flaunt that she had found something much more than just help with coping with her husband’s death. She had found…

Did she really love him? Had she really fallen in love with him?

Ruby had said…

Did she know? Had Emma actually said those words to Ruby in confidence?

The truth of it was that Emma was not coming back. It was something he knew instinctively.

He’d had too many chances over these countless days to reach out to her. Every day that past was another day that he had been too much of a coward to face her and everything he had done to her.

She wasn’t here because she was gone…

“You look like you’re in deep thought, Killian,” Archie commented, watching him with an empathetic face. “Would you like to share with the group on how you’re doing this week?”

And Killian stared right back up at him, not knowing what to say. The seat beside him was empty.
Everyone knew who sat there, so it remained as such. And she wasn’t there.

Her absence had triggered something monumental in his soul.

“No, Archie.” It was gruff, sad, and all he had.

Archie understood. He gave a simple nod accompanied with the smallest of smiles.

“Maybe next time.”

Maybe next time his heart would be able to take it. Maybe next time it would have sunk in that the cowardice in him had given up too soon. And then he would continue his mourning correctly.

****

It was no way to get out of there unnoticed. The point would be to at least not disturb his fellow group mates as one opened their heart up for the rest to hear. But he couldn’t wait until the meeting was over. He couldn’t wait one more minute. Because if he waited…

Killian walked briskly to the door and opened it silently. His hand felt around in his pocket, on the search for his phone, at the same time. Waiting was impossible.

In the last twenty-four hours how many times had he done the same thing: pulling out his phone, bringing up her phone number, and then only staring at it?

His heart was racing. The reason why was simple enough: he was going to do it this time. He had to speak to her. He had to at least try.

She didn’t have to forgive him. She didn’t have to take him back. What she did have to do was realize that he had at least tried and reached out to her. He hadn’t given up so easily. He’d fight for her.

The anticipation as each ring sounded in his ear was almost too much. Two… three…

She wasn’t going to answer.

Four…

She’d seen his name and she…

“Hello.”


There was hesitation on her end though. Complete silence.

*Please don’t do this to me. “Killian. Hello.”*

He had never been filled with so much relief. His back fell against the wall behind him, so happy for the support.

“I need to see you- to talk to you, Emma.”


The relief was dissipating all too fast.
“Emma, please. I need to see you. I need to talk to you. Emma. Please.”

He heard the indecision in her sigh. And he couldn’t muster up the confidence that her answer wouldn’t be no.

“Killian-”

“Emma, please.”

Chapter End Notes

Working on chapter 16 has been so much fun! I hope some of the fans of this story really show up and tell me what they think...
Chapter 16

She wasn’t nervous. She should be more nervous. There was an energy surrounding her, but it was this anxious excitement of the fact that she was taking control of her life. She was going to finally be happy!

Emma bit down on her fingernail as she surveyed the living room.

She had four suitcases filled with all of her clothing and trinkets. She hadn’t planned on taking anything that belonged to the both of them together. She was leaving Neal, and she didn’t want to cause any extra grief for him that which came from her leaving. Furniture and appliances and whatever else they shared, he could have them all. Because just as much as she was excited by the prospect of not being tied down in a one-sided marriage anymore (especially when she wasn’t even the one side), she was excited about doing a complete restart of her life. That restart included a new shopping spree, which she had taken into account while saving for the move.

Could this day be any more exciting?

Thinking back on how long it had taken to scrimp and save every dollar and cent without Neal being any wiser to it, she didn’t know how she had done it so quietly. Every day that had passed had been like living a lie. If she had had to make up one more excuse about why that night all she wanted to do was sleep, she would have screamed.

The long shifts that he did on the job were an absolute Godsend. The fact that she could literally go two days without him in the apartment on any given week was the only thing that made the time saving pass peacefully.

Emma looked around her home one last time. Looking at the strict structure- with anything and everything in its place- and thinking of how an apartment and thriving husband did not mean security and happiness in a marriage.

In all honesty, she believed it was in his heart- his capacity to not only love, but to love her. Neal was a good man. So knowing that neither one of them could deliver on the fairytale aspect of their marriage had been a hard pill to swallow.

Looking around the living room, for all its prettiness and perfection, it was only a façade. It would never hold up in comparison to that of Mary Margaret and David’s love, relationship, or marriage. And maybe it was foolish to compare the two, but she hadn’t been able to stop.

Failure was failure, no matter how she looked at it. For that reason, she was going to set things right by getting out of there.

Neal, in the long run, would thank her. He deserved a happily ever after just as much as she did. If they couldn’t give it to one another then it was okay that she was the one pushing them in the direction to finally find it sooner rather than later.

It was going to take her at least two trips, and possibly a third, to get all her bags down to the car. She saved the largest and heaviest bag to pull to the door last. It would be the first one she would take down though.

It was with a happy giggle- she could not believe the day was now upon her- that she took hold of the doorknob.
The pause only came with the ring of the house phone just a room away. That ring had made her heart start beating even faster than it already was.

Emma stopped, looking back towards the living room. If it truly was an important call then it would have come via her cell phone. Not the house phone that they really had no reason to even still own.

It would be the last phone call she would take. She would hurry and take this last call and then she would leave.

Walking quickly back into the living room, only slightly annoyed with herself for turning back (she refused to let it be a sign of indecisiveness because that certainly wasn’t the case), she went over to pick up the receiver.

“Hello.”

“Ah… is this Mrs. Emma Cassidy?”

Emma smiled at that question. That had been another constant thought on her mind: she wouldn’t be Emma Cassidy for too much longer. She could go back to her maiden name. She had always thought that Emma Cassidy had a nice ring to it, but she was ready to let it go.

Ring.

She stared down at her left hand, looking at her wedding band. It would be gone, too. It would be such a lift off of her shoulders and off her mind.

Almost time.

Emma shook her head, knowing she was letting herself be lost in her thoughts.

“Yes, I’m Emma Cassidy.”

“Mrs. Cassidy.” The man on the other end seemed hesitant, and she really didn’t have time for this.

“Yes? Can I help you with something?”

“I’m truly sorry, ma’am. I am Robert Clark. I was... I am captain of...” “You’re Neal’s captain,” Emma cut in, the name coming back to her. She frowned, because his job never called when he was working. Neal had only left this morning for another, thankfully, forty-eight hour shift.

“Yes, Mrs. Cassidy. I am Neal’s captain.”

Emma shook her head. “Neal’s at work, Captain.”

There was a pause on his end, which only made Emma all the more curious.

“Yes... I know.” Another pause. “There was a massive building fire that began over an hour ago, ma’am,” he finally continued. “Neal was one of the firemen who were called in to handle the situation.”

Emma got a really bad feeling by the solemn tone of voice he was using. He had been hesitant in their conversation from the beginning... “Ma’am, your husband went into that building in search of a family. At that time, it is believed that he was then trapped by a falling beam.”

What was he talking about? She knew the severity of the job Neal did. She knew the risks of every day hazards as a firefighter. So... what was he trying to tell her?
“Was Neal hurt in the line of duty?” Her fingers tightened around the phone, waiting for this man to freaking spit out whatever he was trying to tell her.

“Yes, he was.”

She could feel when her heart started pounding all the way in her ears and the moisture gathering in the palm of her hands.

“He was transported to Somerville hospital.” “Is... is he... going to be okay?” He was being so damned cryptic, and you don’t do that to family! He wasn’t giving her much hope. “Neal is okay though, right? He’ll be okay, right?”

Another pause, which only broke her spirit and signaled the tears brimming in her eyes.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Mrs. Cassidy.”

Because that is who she was. She was still Mrs. Neal Cassidy. And they were trying to take that away from her.

“He was pronounced dead on site.”

What in the hell was going on!

The phone dropped from her fingers, making a loud bang as it hit the floor. Her eyes darted back and forth throughout the room while her brain tried to comprehend what had just been told to her.

She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t move. In that brief moment, she felt paralyzed with disbelief. She couldn’t have heard correctly.

It didn’t make sense. What he had said had made no sense. So it wasn’t true. Neal wasn’t…

Neal.

A gasp escaped her mouth and her eyes went wide, trying to blink away those damned tears.

Everything. Everything around her was Neal. Everything that surrounded her in that moment was Neal. So how could he be gone? How could?

She could smell him. His scent was embedded in these walls. She could see him walking through the door, huge grin on his face. So it couldn’t be true.

Emma felt the give of her legs. She felt the way she had crumpled to the floor in that spot right there, but she couldn’t do anything about it.

Her bags were at the door. She was leaving him. But he…

Neal couldn’t be…

Feeling the squeeze of her heart in her chest, Emma shut her eyes tight.

The scream that left her body was blood curdling to even her own ears.

****

She was slightly amused, but only slightly, at the very apparent and attentive glare Mary Margaret was trying to not give her from her end of the couch. Emma could just imagine what was going to
slip out of her lips the moment she wouldn’t be able to hold back any longer.

No matter how each day had past, no matter how many times Emma assured her friends that she was fine, Mary Margaret had a mothering instinct that wanted to work out every issue that pertained to Emma.

She slowly turned her gaze towards Mary Margaret. And, of course, she saw the frown lines that were wrinkling her forehead. Her attention was solely on her.

“What are you thinking?” she asked her with a tiny smile. “Or what is it that you want to know? Spill.”

Mary Margaret’s mouth opened wide, but shut tightly back up. She shook her head as she let out a frustrated sigh.

“Are you sure you’re okay with being done with therapy?” she asked skeptically. “You know you could just as easily find another group if the only reason you’re not going to go is Killian.”

Emma’s smile grew because Mary Margaret was a great friend. She was always looking out for her best interest. Which was another reason, she decided in a fit of sadness, why she chose to keep some things in for so long. Mary Margaret would always play the mom role in Emma’s life. Sometimes she just wanted her to play the best friend role.

She wouldn’t change Mary Margaret for anything in the entire world. She loved their bond. But sometimes it felt as if she had a mother who was exactly the same age as herself. Although Mary Margaret had different life experiences— including a successful marriage and being a terrific mother to an infant— they had the same amount of life experiences. And sometimes— at least it felt like it— Mary Margaret looked at Emma as someone who needed to be taken care of, and it was up to her to do the caring.

Silly familial dynamics!

“I don’t want to go back to group therapy,” Emma said with a shake of her head. “I got everything out of my group that I possibly could.”

Mary Margaret still looked as if she was uncertain by Emma’s attempt at assuring her.

“You know you shouldn’t let what happened between you and Killian deter you from getting the help that you need,” she told her softly. She had wanted to be gentle and empathetic with Emma. And Emma understood that. Although she was soft-spoken, there was a fierceness behind those eyes.

“I’m not, Mary Margaret,” Emma told her firmly.

“Are you sure?” she kept persisting. “You went for months, Emma. Are you really okay with giving it up so suddenly?”

Emma sighed. Mary Margaret wasn’t pushing her to upset her. But it didn’t matter. She didn’t want to have to defend her decisions.

“In the end, I got exactly what I needed to get out of therapy.” She shook her head. “You have to see that. Everything that I’ve accomplished? If it wasn’t for group then I wouldn’t have been able to accept the facts about myself when Neal died or take ownership of all those feelings. And I’d never had shared all of that with you.”
So it wasn’t completely the group. Okay, Killian played a large part in it as well. Another thing about this awakening was accepting the role that each part played.

She had always felt responsible for Neal’s death. From day one, she had to fight the urge of believing that she had put those vibes out there in the universe. If only she hadn’t planned on leaving him. If only she hadn’t packed her bags. If only she had tried harder to make her marriage a success.

It took nearly this entire time to lose those feelings of guilt. And it had been Killian’s fiery outburst that had did it.

He, intentionally or not, had forced her to own up to her own issues. Listening to everyone’s own issues during group had not done that. They were not forcing her to admit her own issues. Group had the ability to only reach the surface. She had needed to dig deep if she wanted to be better again.

Because of that, Emma could forgive Killian.

“No, you seem great,” Mary Margaret told her with a shrug. But it didn’t seem believable. There was a hint of doubt in her voice.

“What, Mary Margaret?” Emma was wary because she knew her best friend. She had something right there on the tip of her tongue.

“It’s just…” Her eyebrows lifted as she stared across at Emma. “You’ve spent more time here at our house than you’ve ever did in all these months.”

Emma couldn’t help but blink back her confusion.

“Have I worn out my welcome?” she asked with a slight laugh. She was taken aback by Mary Margaret’s statement.

She had spent more evenings here than at home the past few days. She hadn’t really thought about it much. It had been a given, in her mind, to turn towards friends versus the alternative of being home alone.

Had she been using them as a crutch?

“Oh, of course not, Emma!” Mary Margaret moved from her end of the couch so that she could now sit beside her. She grabbed her hand and placed it in her lap. Her smile was easy and it reached her eyes, genuine through and through.

“You know we love having you here. It’s just… It makes me wonder if you really are accepting all these changes in your life.”

It was the way she massaged her hands with hers. It was the soft smile and the glow in her eyes. It was the surrounding in which she found herself.

“I promise you that I am accepting of everything in my life,” Emma told her friend firmly. And it was the truth. “Has it been an easy road to travel down? No. But I know where I’m headed. There is nothing for you to worry about.”

Mary Margaret was simply watching her, taking it all in. In was a good moment before she finally nodded.

“Okay, Emma. I believe you.”
Emma nodded back. “Well, thanks.”

Mary Margaret leaned back into her seat, her gaze still locked on Emma.

“It’s Monday.”

She knew where her line of talking was leading.

“If this was a bad choice for me then I would feel some type of way about not being there right now.” Emma lifted her hip from out of her seat and reached in her pocket for her cell phone. Checking the time- 5:54PM- she knew where she would usually be. She also knew who she would be with.

It was his eyes that came to her mind in that moment. Bright blue eyes that had opened up and let her in.

She glanced back up at Mary Margaret.

“I don’t feel a certain type of way. I’m more than fine. Considering.” “And I’m trying not to feel a certain type of way about your answer.” Mary Margaret sat back up, and she leaned closer into her. “What time is it?” “Almost six.”

“You want to help me get dinner started? I’d so very appreciate it.”

Emma watched with a smile as Mary Margaret stood up.

“It’s the least that I could do.”

Mary Margaret was already moving when Emma finally stood up to follow her. Her hand was guiding the phone back into her pocket at the same time she felt the vibration.

Her lips pursed at the glance of his name popping up on her screen.

He hadn’t called her in all these days. Of course, she hadn’t reached out to him either. But what reason would she have to do that? There was none at all, because she was damaged. She was on her way to being better, but nonetheless…

Emma swallowed hard. He should be at group. Had he not gone because he thought that she would be there and he was trying to avoid her?

That didn’t make sense because he was now calling her.

“Emma?”

She looked up briefly at Mary Margaret, who had paused.

“Um… a call came in. I’m going to answer this first.”

She saw the questioning look on her face and knew Mary Margaret would have an opinion on Killian calling her and Emma answering that call.

She turned in the opposite direction, still tempted to let him disconnect the call from his end. Any second it would go to her voicemail because of her indecision. Would she regret…

Sliding the bar over to answer the phone after the fourth ring, Emma brought it up to her ear.
“Hello.”

“Emma.” Her name was a sudden rush of air. “Emma, love.”

He sounded relieved. And she felt completely thrown.

Emma hadn’t expected him to call her. She wasn’t upset with him, but she didn’t know what she was supposed to be feeling.

“Killian. Hello.” She rolled her eyes at her own awkwardness.

“I need to see you- to talk to you, Emma.”

*About what? This was over.*

Maybe he only wanted to apologize for what happened. It could have been a part of taking ownership of the issues in his life. Closure.

“Emma, please. I need to see you. I need to talk to you. Emma. Please.”

She sighed. Closure was one thing, but to see him again so soon? She didn’t know…

“Killian-”

“Emma, please.”

Her feelings for him hadn’t changed. She still…

That didn’t matter. What did matter was reaching that place where she was whole again. And he needed that himself.

None of that changed the fact that she still…

“When? When do you want to meet? And where?”

“Are you free now?”

If she left now, what would Mary Margaret say?

“I’m having dinner with my friends. I can’t meet you right now.”

It was Killian’s first pause. Just a moment to think about it.

“Is eight o’clock okay, Emma?”

Hearing her name leave his mouth was trying to do something to her physically. She didn’t want that.

“Where?”

“I could come to you. I can come to your apartment.”

For some reason, Emma didn’t trust the idea if him coming over to her place. She hated the instantaneous thoughts of needing to speed back there to straighten up at least the living room because she knew it was a mess there.

“No, I think I’ll meet you at your place.”
“Are… are you sure?”

Making amends- or at least hearing him out- in the same spot where this all began?


“Good.” And she heard the relief in his voice. “I will see you then.”

_Damn. It was her heart and everything it was feeling._

“Emma?”

She let her eyes close at hearing her name once again.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

Yes, that’s what he wanted to finally tell her.

“I’ll see you then, Killian.” Pulling the phone away from her ear, she quickly ended the phone call. She placed it in her back pocket as she stared out into nothing in particular.

Was she making a mistake? Was she emotionally and mentally capable of coming face with him right now? At hearing his voice, those feelings had flooded back. Not because she wanted them to. It had been out of her control.

She had already forgiven him. Not forgotten, but forgiven. Killian deserved to know that if it would help him on his own journey to becoming whole again.

So she would meet him at his place in a couple of hours. She would be strong and unaffected. She would be what they both needed her to be.

****

Would she be on time or would she be late? In all the minutes leading up to –what time was it now, five minutes until eight –he had been a nervous wreck.

The fact that Emma had conceded to meeting him was astounding. The way she had sounded over the phone was not what he had expected. She wasn’t hostile- and she had all the right to be upset and take her anger out on him. Maybe she was saving it for him when they came face to face. He would deserve that…

Killian pressed his hands against the door. Slowly, he laid his ear against the wood of the door, listening to the other side. There was nothing as of yet.

Emma wasn’t the type of person you could set your watch to, but he wondered if she would be here on time. If she would be here at all.

She could stand him up. She didn’t have to show up. After everything that had went on between them, it was he who owed her. If she didn’t show up…

Killian’s eyes closed and he listened hard for any footsteps walking the hallway.

This was ridiculous. All he could think about was taking her in his arms and apologizing between the hot kisses they would share. Her fingertips getting lost in his hair as she brought him mouth down
closer over hers.

It was ridiculous because there was no chance in hell that that scenario would ever happen.

Damn.

Killian pushed away from the door, cursing the whole damn predicament.

If Emma didn’t accept his apology, if she only wanted to let him see one last time what he had messed up, he didn’t know what he would do. Go down some abyss of sadness.

That night he may have not realized, but it was instantaneous after the fact. And if he had lost her for good…

Well, it would only be what he deserved. But that isn’t what he wanted. What he wanted was everything that she had offered. The entire time, while trying to come to terms with their hurt-filled lives, Emma had offered him something better to look forward to. And it was right at their grasp.

If she didn’t come.

The knock on the door was strong, followed by a stutter and two more light taps against the wood.

Killian hadn’t made it far, but the steps to make it back to the door were quick and without falter.

He mouth felt dry, and he swallows that dryness. It was his imagination, he knew, but he thought he could smell her scent even from there.

****

She didn’t want the butterflies. She didn’t want to be nervous at the thought of him being on the other side of the door. Emma wanted to be strong and determined and confident. She wanted to be the same person that he had recently helped her become.

His opening of the door was instant to her knocking, leaving her no room to ponder more on if she should just turn around and leave.

“Emma, hi.”

And then Killian was standing in the doorway, unmoving. The pair of them, taking each other in as if years had passed, not mere days, since they had seen one another.

Her resolve wanted to fail as she looked at him.

He wasn’t much of a jeans guy, but that was what he was wearing. A pair of straight leg denim jeans that looked too good on him. She could see the peak of white tee underneath the dark blue button down shirt. His feet were bare, and it was a bit disconcerting because of the comfortable aspect of it all. He was dressed for an evening at home.

His eyes were another story. Those deep and rich blue eyes seemed to roam over her, taking in as much of her as she was taking of him.

With a shake of his head, Killian stepped away from the door.

“Come in, please.”

Her steps didn’t falter. Emma walked strongly into the apartment. It reminded her of the way she had
left it all those days ago.

“I’m not going to be able to stay long,” she told him softly. She took a look around the room, the feeling of familiarity hitting her strongly.

“I understand.”

Emma turned back to see him walking towards her. His steps were slow, careful and cautious.

“What did you want to see me about?”

No matter what she felt for him- and she had not expected those feelings to just simply vanish because of his accusations about her- she could tell he wasn’t better. He wasn’t. That was a fact that wouldn’t leave her head.

He was inching closer, his hand turned palm up out at her.

“I wanted to apologize, Emma,” he told her, his eyes sincerely meeting hers. “I needed to apologize for what I said to you… the last time we were together.”

Emma took in a deep breath. She gave him a quick nod of her head.

“That’s partially why I agreed to meet up with you, Killian.” She saw the softening of his face, and she believed it was at the use of his name. She, herself, had not been sure if this moment would have happened either, so she understood. “I wanted to let you know that I forgive you for that.”

He was staring at her, mouth slightly gaped open.

“You forgive me? That easily?”

And he was moving closer still.

Emma wanted to back away some. She didn’t have a plan coming into this meeting, but her intent for meeting him had to be understood.

“I forgive you, Killian,” she assured him softly. “You only said what I had been putting off saying to myself. Aloud, at least. I blamed myself for Neal’s death. I told you that. I went into grief counseling trying to get over that guilt. You were right. It was true.”

She saw him swallow. She saw how his eyes narrowed on her, focusing so closely on her eyes.

“I still had no right to say what I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” she agreed flatly.

Killian bit down on his lip. His eyebrows turned down into a heavy frown as he shook his head.

“The problem comes along from the intent of your words to me,” Emma continued before he had the chance. “You were grieving pretty hard over Milah. Because I was there then you chose to take your feelings out on me. You attacked me.” He was silent as he watched her. That was fine. She didn’t mind letting the words ruminate through his mind. She had more that she had to get off her chest.

“The point is that we were two damaged people coming together. We never had those conversations with one another. Your pain over Milah was your pain. My pain over Neal was my pain. And yes, it was nice having someone not focus on the tragedies of our relationships. But we didn’t have to focus on them. We avoided them instead. What we had in each other could have been a positive outlook
on both ends. But in our personal grief, we only masked them. So how were we supposed to be expected to move on fully?”

Killian’s hand went up over his face, his fingers dragging over his mouth as he continued to watch her.

“You’re minimizing what we have,” he said with a shake of his head.

Emma shook her head quickly in return. “No, I’m not.”

“We aren’t doomed to fail.”

*Present tense, hm.*

“I didn’t say that,” she reminded him. “If we could have opened up to one another about our issues instead of keeping them separate from our relationship, then the argument we had that night wouldn’t have been an argument.”

“How so?” The frown remained permanently on his face.

Emma gave a simple shrug. “It could have been a discussion between the two of us in which would have opened me up to seeing where my issue lie. If it was a conversation between you and I- the way we should have been- then I would have taken it as an aha moment. There would have been no judgment, because it was true. And I would have had you to lean on during that discovery.”

He took another step closer, only a few mere feet away from her.

“You’re saying that things didn’t have to build up the way they did,” he murmured.

“You weren’t over Milah.” She didn’t mean it as a challenge, but it came out that way. “You still wanted her. You had me, but you still wanted Milah.”

“I want you.” His statement left nothing up for interpretation. “Emma, I swear to you. I only want you.” He was leaving himself wide open to her. Right in that moment, she saw the vulnerability.

She gave him a once over, taking all of him in.

She slowly shook her head. “You’re not ready. You only want parts of me. I can’t do that, Killian.”

“That’s not true. I want… I want all of you, Emma.”

Her skepticism only grew, mistrustful. “What’s changed?”

“Without you…” His hands reached out wide in the direction of her. “I’ve suffered more than I thought possible.” He shook his head. “Losing you, Emma, has been… death all over again.”

Her arms came up to fold over her chest, unimpressed by his statement.

“So am I supposed to be a consolation prize?” she asked with a tight laugh. He couldn’t make light of the situation. Things couldn’t be solve that way.

“Oh, bloody *hell, woman.*”

She ignored his muttered curse, unfazed. “Since it’s impossible to be with Milah then you guess you’ll settle for me?” Acknowledging that sentiment to herself hurt because she…

She *loved him.* *Why didn’t he get that?*
Meeting him had been a mistake. A huge mistake that she wished she could take back…

“I didn’t say that.” All of a sudden he was too close. He pulled her by her waist, bringing her that much closer to him.

And all of a sudden she was inhaling his scent. She was wrapped up in steeliness of his arms and the hardness of his chest

He was shaking his head vehemently. “Emma, I did not say that.” His head bowed down, turning silent.

The physical proximity of him to her was a drug that was trying to overpower her. It hadn’t been that long since this had been the norm. But a lot had changed since that last day.

His hands slid across her back, slowly caressing every inch of skin found there. He was inching closer, how much closer could he be?

“What was he doing? His head raised, but he wasn’t looking at her.

Emma’s gaze became transfixed on his lips. He was so close. How dare you, as his rough beard came in contact with her cheek. An infinitely slow brush of skin to skin.

“Emma.” It had become a quiet mantra, her name over and over.

And then his cheek was sliding over. Her eyes fell closed and the sudden and brief feel of his lips to her cheekbone.

God, she had missed this. It felt real and true. If only she could trust that he wanted her and only her for the right reasons. If only she could trust he could be over Milah.

The slide of his fingers spreading wide over her back. Those hands moving forward and roaming over her waist and hips. He was pulling her up and over him.

“Killian.” Emma bit her lip, cursing the gasp of his name leaving her mouth. She braced her hands on his shoulders, wishing she could push away from him.

“Emma.”

The feel of his lips running over her cheek felt almost too good. It was like a magnetic pull, forcing her own mouth to search for his.

Emma’s hands found their way to his face, holding onto either side. She wanted to control the pull, wanted it to not be so strong. His eyes were closed, yet looking so at peace in the moment. She wanted that peace, that assurance.

When Killian’s lips pressed against hers, she felt all the tension seep from her body. She couldn’t stop herself from dissolving into him with utter happiness and contentment.

His mouth was opening on hers, kissing her delicately and infinitely slow. It felt like a promise. Emma heard her own moan, unable to escape the feeling of the possibility of a promised and shared life.

It was too much. It was too soon. With a firm press on his shoulders, she pushed him back and away from her.
She waited until he looked at her.

“You were my first choice,” she whispered, staring directly into his sad and lust-filled eyes. “Why couldn’t I be yours?”

There was a sudden shadow of something dark and stormy that passed over his face, and those arms closed around her even tighter.

It didn’t matter. It couldn’t matter.

“If I can’t be first then I have nothing else to say, Killian.”

She couldn’t let his pain deter her. She wouldn’t let that look of despair push her over that teetering edge.

“Emma.” Her name sounded gruff as he stared into her eyes. Those hands tightened on her hips. “Listen to me.” He let out a harsh blow of air, those hands tightening even more. “I never thought I’d be… capable of letting go of my first love- my Milah. To believe that I could find somebody else. That is… until I met you.”

She could only stare. It was scary, because she believed him. And she didn’t know if she could trust herself to make that decision to trust him and believe him.

“Almost,” Emma whispered softly, “but not quite.”

“Emma, I-”

“Don’t say that!” She knew. “Not here. Not in this moment.”

She saw the frustration in his face before his head dipped down.

“You need to prove it to me, Killian. Show me. Don’t tell me.”

“How do I do that? Emma? How do I show you better than this?” His frustration was mounting, she could tell, as he looked back up at her.

Emma smiled at him, placing her hand up to his cheek softly.

“When you’re ready, you’ll know,” she assured him. “And when it’s right, I’ll know.” She pulled back away from him, gently, letting him ease into accepting it.

“You’re walking out on me again,” Killian murmured.

Emma shook her head. “I’m not going anywhere, Killian. You’ll know exactly where to find me. When you’re ready.”

She hoped it would be soon. He seemed close, so maybe.

It was killing her inside, but she knew that this was the only decision for them.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter was a little difficult because it was written all out of necessity. I think it was the least fun to write and the least enjoyable overall. Why am I mentioning this? Because I hope people stick around to read the rest even if this chapter seem uninteresting.

“Killian?”

He looked up from his desk to see his boss, Tom Watkins, leaning into his cubicle. No matter the size of smile he peered down on him, Killian knew he was not going to like the message he was about to receive.

“Yes?” He sighed inwardly, knowing that there was nothing else for him to do.

“I know you were planning on getting out of here at a decent hour,” Tom said, signaling that there would be a change in plans, “but I received a call from one of your clients. They really need to crunch some numbers with you. And it needs to be today.”

“Today?” Killian turned to look at the clock on his desk. He literally had twenty minutes before this miserable day was supposed to be over. Yet, here he was, getting stuck with a minimum of another hour worth of work.

“Yeah,” Tom answered, sounding saddened himself by the turn of events.

But who was he kidding? Not Killian. It was only his problem to deal with.

“If it was a Monday or a Wednesday, Killian, you know I would have taken care of it for you,” he continued. “You know, if you had one of your meetings to go to. But since it’s not- and the client is insisting on getting the matter straightened out tonight, I was hoping that you’d understand.”

Killian was slow to nod.

“Of course.” It was a murmur. What else could he say? An extended period for a day he just wanted to end. Of course.

With a firm clap of his hand against the wall, Tom smiled.

“Okay then. Someone will let you know when the client gets here.” He looked down at his watch. “It should be fairly soon.”

Killian gave another nod. “Fine.”

Tom smiled. “See you later, Killian.” And then he was gone.

Probably gone and out of the building. Because Tom’s day was coming to an end.

Just like Killian’s was supposed to.
And yet here he was. Doomed to another hour of this damned job. Another hour of crunching numbers and pandering to clients. Trying to make their business venture seem more sound.

Another hour of the life draining back and forth that his job afforded him. God, he didn’t know how he could hate it here anymore than he did right now.

It was the walls. It was the confined space. It was the fact that he spent all these hours stuck in this little cubicle. And now they needed him to extend that time.

Killian leaned back in his chair, pushing his fingers through his hair. His eyes closed, trying to relieve some of the stress he felt riding on his shoulders. Rolling them back, he could feel the built-up tension that was stored there.

What could have made this day better…

Thoughts of Emma crashed through his mind like a freight train, crowding his brain. She was the only thing that could have made this day worth dragging through.

She would greet him with one of her shy smiles…

That thought alone made his heart start pumping faster, feeling the blood race through his body.

She would hug him tight, holding her body against his as the tension washed off in waves. She would ask him about his day. Maybe a roll of her eyes because she knew how unhappy he was to still be there. She wouldn’t press. But maybe she’d ask about him setting goals and maybe start really thinking about starting up his own business. Because that is what he really wanted…

A bite of her lip as she watched him imploringly.

With a groan, Killian leaned farther back in his seat. His day wouldn’t end like that. Because Emma had told him that he wasn’t ready. She had said that he wasn’t ready to be in a committed relationship with her. She had said that he wasn’t over Milah. She had said that he needed to prove to her- show her and not tell her. But she hadn’t said how to show her. She had just said that he would know when he was ready and that she would know when it was right.

It left him with hope. She had not given up on him. She just gave him nondescript instructions on how to get her back. That night, he had not felt hopeful. But by having days to think on it, he realized that there was something in everything that she said.

Killian had believed himself to be ready. So how did he prove it to her?

That was the conundrum.

All he wanted to do was go home to her. So it had not been easy. It had been a really hard path to get to. He had told her- not having Emma in his life those long days had felt like death. Now, knowing that she was in his grasp but not knowing exactly how to bring her fully back to him, he still felt the loss of her.

Seeing her that night, he knew it to be true: he loved Emma. God, it was a bit scarier than hell. Even a bit more when she had stopped him from telling her. She knew what was about to come out of his mouth. But she said it wasn’t the right time to say it.

Killian’s eyes flew open, staring up at the greying and dulling ceiling above him in his cubicle. Part of him wished that his mind had never turned towards her. She was now invading his thoughts and wouldn’t leave him alone. When he had no way to get what he want, it was like pure torture.
He had to figure this out. And soon.

He wanted to say the words she had forbidden him to say. He wanted to hear her say those words back to him.

Emma loved him. He knew it. Knowing it and hearing it were two different things.

He had to fix this. He had to. Without her...

He wasn’t going to be able to do this for too much longer. Not when they both wanted the same thing. He had to figure it out. He had to find out how to show her and not just tell her.

****

“Okay, it’s not the best pick up line, but it’s one that I had at my disposal.” Robin threw Killian a grin as he held out his hands towards him.

Killian could only spare a wary glance his way. “Should I be worried?”

“No, not at all.” The smile disappeared for only a moment before it came back full force. “Well first of all- let me be best friend serious here- how are you doing with the whole Emma thing? Are you coming through this time okay?”

His breath caught in his throat as he stared at Robin. He had not told any of them about how he had reached out to her and...

Well it wasn’t failure. There was just worked to be done. How was he supposed to explain that to his friends?

“I’m getting through it,” he told him thickly.

“Good.” Robin nodded his head. “That’s good.”

With a slight raise of his chin, Killian turned back to the matter at hand.

“What does my… relationship have to do with your ‘best’ pick up line?”

Those eyes seemed to glow. It only made Killian all the more cautious.

“You said relationship! There’s more to the story there, isn’t there? You wouldn’t have said relationship if it was over. If you were trying to get over Emma then you wouldn’t have still called it a relationship right now. Are you two trying to work things out?”

“Robin.” He was going off on some tangent, and it was not time to talk about him and Emma.

“You do realize that Ruby has been avoiding you, right?” he continued. With his chin slightly turned down. Robin shook his head slowly. “She is so upset about the two of you. She’s been quite creative in the name calling. She said she won’t even dare speak to you until you do something about Emma.” He looked back up at Killian and smiled. “So apparently she doesn’t know then.”

“Robin?” Killian loudly cleared his throat, hoping that his friend would get the message. “You were only at the beginning of your story. Pick up line and all…”

“Oh. Right.” His lips pursed as he stared at him, contemplating his next words. “If you’re working things out with Emma, then I don’t know.”
“What?”

Robin placed his hand to his bearded cheek as he watched him. “I was wondering when you’d be ready to take the boat out.” His shoulder lifted in a light shrug. “I met this girl.” A slight toothy smile lit up his face. “She’s only lived here—lived on the eastern boarder for that matter—since this past winter. She’s a mid-western girl. How adorable is that? We were talking and all that when she mentioned she’d never been out on a boat. I mentioned my dear best mate— you, of course. I was hoping that you would consider taking the boat out like you had planned a couple of weekends ago. Have you been out yet?”

Killian turned slightly away from his friend, turning his focus to a particular spot on the wall. There was nothing there. He just needed a moment.

“I’ve been to the harbor,” he murmured. “Detailing and cleaning. Odds and ends here and there. But I haven’t done any boating. There never seems to be any time.”

“What are you doing this weekend?”

*Trying to win Emma back.*

It was the first thought that hit his mind. But he had no way of knowing how to accomplish that task.

She loved him. It was more of a foregone conclusion. He wanted to hear the words fall from her lips. Emma was asking for him to show her and not just tell her. Killian was in the opposite predicament: he needed for her to tell him and not just show him.

*The ins and outs of the differences between men and women.*

It only made him appreciate her words to him. The frustrating part was coming up with the solution to her needs.

Killian turned back around to face Robin. His face looked as hopeful as he had sounded with his question.

“I don’t know what I’m doing this weekend.” It was the only answer he had for him at the moment.

“I haven’t promised her anything yet,” Robin assured him. “I only mentioned that you owned a boat and that the weather will be gorgeous and just perfect for an outing. And I was just thinking that it would probably be good for you, too, you know?”

Killian felt the instantaneous raise of an eyebrow. “By seeing you hook up with some girl at the same time I am without Emma? *That is what I need?*”

Robin’s smile was only a small one.

Killian knew what he was thinking without him saying a thing.

Okay. So it was difficult to keep his thoughts away from Emma. Robin was trying to leave an open invitation of some woman onto his boat when Emma had not even felt a single wisp of her hair being caressed by the breeze of air as they sped across the river. It was Emma who he had envisioned. It was still supposed to be Emma. Because he was not giving up on winning her over.

It was the “how” that he had to figure out.

“You’re missing valuable time right now,” Robin reminded him with a shrug. “You’ve been waiting
for the season to come around, and you’re still not taking advantage of it.”

Killian’s thumb ran slowly and thoughtfully over his lip. “I’m taking advantage of it.”

“Does that mean you’ll consider going out this weekend?” Robin asked, again looking hopeful. “I don’t know how Ruby will feel about it. I’m sure she’ll come around—”

“I can’t this weekend,” Killian cut him off. “I have some maintenance things to take care of.”

“You just said that that’s all you’ve been doing as it is,” Robin reminded him, a frown creasing his brows.

“Yes. And I’m not done,” he answered slowly. He shook his head. “This weekend won’t be any good. Not this weekend.”

It was a moment—just enough time to really look him over—before Robin reacted. “Okay then. Did you want any help with anything? Apparently I’m free.”

There was another shake of his head. ”No. I won’t need any help. I’m kind of looking forward to having some time to clear my mind. Take your new friend out instead.”

Robin smiled. “Whatever I come up with won’t be nearly as impressive as what I suggested to her.”

“No worries, mate,” Kilian murmured, his mind already wandering to more important prospects. “I’m sure you’ll come up with something.”

****

It was like the river had been calling him. That call was so strong that he had to answer it.

Killian hadn’t planned on doing a cruise of the river today. He only expected to finish up on the maintenance of the boat. With the greenlight from the mechanic on the engine, it only left him in feeling all the more confident about the season. His love was in perfect shape, and he could not have been happier about it.

He thought he spotted a new small scratch on the exterior. It hadn’t penetrated through the gelcoat, so that was a positive. It meant that he would be able to sand and buff it out in no time flat.

It was being able to marvel over his beauty that put a proud smile on his face. He hadn’t had a lot to really smile about as the weeks had passed. He was at an all-time low with his working environment. And it wasn’t that it was such an awful job. It allowed Killian to make ends meet—pay the bills and have the chance to enjoy certain recreational aspects in life. But it was ill-suiting to who Killian was. He would never find joy on that side of the business again. It was impossible, and he accepted that as fact.

How long had he known that? A very long time. And he hadn’t done anything about in all that time. So what did that tell him about himself?

He had lost Emma, with little to no idea of how to actually win her back. That was the one point that circled around his head.

_When you’re ready, you’ll know. And when it’s right, I’ll know._

When Killian had called her that day- when he couldn’t possibly wait one more moment to hear her voice even if it turned out to be for the last time- he had believed himself to be ready. He couldn’t
have worked up the courage if that hadn’t been true. But she said that he would know when he was ready. So apparently it wasn’t then?

How completely frustrating!

The one thing in his world that could possibly bring him any joy was that of his boat.

Feeling the motion of the river beneath her had persuaded him to take her out. He hadn’t actually moved her from her dock space in all that time. Today, there had been a strong and intense need to have the wind whipping through his hair and the scent of the body of water filling his lungs. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to find peace in his damned life.

There was only a scarce amount of boats out as far as Killian had traveled. Pushing her to forty miles an hour while whipping through the open water was the first thing that brought a genuine smile to his face. It was everything he had needed. At least it was everything that he was going to get.

Killian had known she was the right fit for him the moment he had seen her. Milah had been even surer than he. It was the financial toll that they were going to incur that had made him pause. But Milah would hear none of it. This was his dream. Even if this boat wasn’t the one that would allow him to start his business- it was far from the type he saw himself using in his dreamed-of excursion company. Instead, the Searay was built for the two of them to finally get their feet wet. It was theirs to take out and enjoy whenever they wanted. They were living near this prime waterfront. They could no longer deny his one singular passion.

Milah had said that this was just the beginning for him- for them. Her smile had been so big as they signed the paperwork. She was nearly bouncing from the pure excitement of their new endeavor.

That thought made Killian smile. Milah had been such a huge supporter of him. They were this well-oiled machine, living their lives for the here and now as well as procuring this beautiful future that they would have. Together.

Killian held the pen hovering over the bill of sales. This was a big commitment. A large investment…

He turned quickly to look at her. “Are you sure about this? Because this is as much as yours as it is mine.”

“Yes, yes.” Milah’s smile was bright as she bounced in her seat beside him. She pressed her hand against his arm. “This is the day we have been waiting for.”

Killian’s hand stilled where it was. His eyes roamed her face, wanting to read her correctly. And he wanted to convey to her what this meant.

“This could be a down payment on a house, Milah,” he reminded her softly. “This money could go towards planting down roots and our future.”

Milah gave a slight shrug and bit down on her lip. “We are planting down roots, Killian. This is the beginning of a new chapter in our lives.”

He watched her closely. He saw the belief in her eyes. This had begun as his dream. But Milah had come aboard and made it their dream.

No matter what she said, this was a big step. And she was taking it with him, hand in hand…

His smile matched hers in excitement and sureness.
“Okay. The boat is ours then.”

Milah’s excitement had been contagious, Killian thought with a smile. But that was so much the norm for them. Together, they had been quite invincible. At least, that was how it felt to them both. They had each other. And because of that, all the other stuff was just going to work itself out.

She had been happy for them that day, he thought again, his smile reaching his eyes with her on his mind. But she had been just as happy for him to be pursuing his goals…

Killian slowed down the boat, bringing her to a near-complete stop. He felt the sudden hitch in his breathing, as if something had caught him off guard. His gaze darted over the horizon as he became lost in his thoughts.

Their life together- all those years- had been so happy and so fulfilling.

*Milah walking down the aisle on her father’s arm had been almost heart-stopping. It had signified the beginning of something amazing.*

It was just another instant thought that made him smile.

They had been truly truly happy. And it was for a good chunk of time that they had this happiness between them. It was nowhere near as long as Killian had wanted it to be. But the time they did spend together…

It had been some really good years. He wouldn’t have traded them in for anything. Killian ran his hands over his hair-roughened cheeks. At the same time, he took notice of the calming and steady beat of his heart.

Over the past couple of weeks, his mind hadn’t been focusing on Milah. That realization struck an off-kilter chord in him. His sudden memories of her now…

He was so used to the pain building up in his chest and spreading evenly throughout every point in his body. Every thought of her had come with heartache. Even the thoughts he used as a focal point-something to keep his mind off of moving forward- came with an edge of pain.

He could imagine her there, right now.

She would have tried to tame those massive curls of thick dark hair with one of those beach head wraps. And, of course, it would be matching whatever two-piece bathing suit she’d have chosen. Maybe yellow with white polka dots. Something that would contrast her now golden skin because of all the sun she was getting. He wouldn’t be able to see her eyes because of the ridiculously large sunglasses she’d have on. But he would be able to see her smile. Her amazing and amused smile.

That thought alone made him… chuckle aloud? He’d actually laughed…

Killian swallowed the large lump that had formed in his throat. Realization of what was happening- what had been happening- was hitting him like a slow freight train. It was about accepting what he was being introduced to.

Seriously, he never saw himself reaching a point where his thoughts of Milah wouldn’t hurt and cause sharp pains throughout his entire body. It was a residual effect of being in love with her and losing her that had caused this to be true.

And yet he stood there…
And the thoughts were good. And he was good.

But…

Killian felt his clutch starting to slip away from him. That wasn’t why he wanted to hold on to Milah. She wasn’t supposed to be diminished to a vehicle to drive his pain and keep him separated from the living.

_Shit._

**Had he…**

When Emma said he wasn’t ready…

Too much information was clashing around in his mind. He was trying to right his life- his feelings and his emotions and his wants and his needs. _Emma._

Killian shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts and to focus. He was heavy with the gas, the boat shooting off again. He took a wide turn, heading back in the direction of the harbor.

_Milah._

She was gone. He had loved her. He still loved her. But…

_Emma. His blonde-haired green-eyed beauty that had turn his world on its side…_  
He loved her. He wanted her. In any and every form imaginable.

And Milah would have been okay by that. She would have been more than okay with that.

_God, she really would be._

His brooding temperament had begun before he had even lost her. He had been so upset by the fact that she’d kept her illness to herself that a part of him had shut down right when he found out. She was leaving him and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. So he hadn’t even tried to listen to her reasoning and her wishes.

_Damn. He was a major screw-up if there ever was one._

But Emma loved him.

She hadn’t said the words yet, but he knew.

Killian wanted to hear the words. He wanted her to say the words. He wanted to hear them slip from her lips at the same time he read it on her face and in her body.

And, damn, she had been right: he knew exactly the moment he had been ready.

They were each going to get what they wanted: Killian was going to show her that he was ready. And Emma was going to tell him.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter! The last part will be an epilogue that I will probably have ready next week. I really enjoyed writing this story. I love that people connected with it as an honest portrayal and that the dialogue and emotions of the characters felt real. Please enjoy and comment back. Hearing from you guys really pushed me to get this far. I may have given up if not for some people.

“Did you need any help with those?”

Emma threw a quick glance back towards the voice asking her the question. She saw that it was one of her neighbors. He lived about… two doors down and across the hall from her.

She turned back to her trunk. The balancing act she was trying to pull off with bags in both hands while she reached for the trunk with the tip of her fingers wasn’t really working. With a huff, she went to just drop all the bags to the ground beside her.

His hands were quick. When she released the bags from around her fingers, her neighbor was there to scoop them up.

He threw her a dazzling smile that was accompanied by a shrug.

“I can help you,” he told her. “I’ll take them upstairs for you.”

“Oh.” She felt a bit caught off guard by his pleasantries. “Um. I…”

“We’re headed the same way,” he cut in as she began to- probably noticeably- turn down his gesture of goodwill. “It’s no problem at all.”

Emma only spared him a moment’s worth of indecisiveness. It was the curse of living in an apartment that wasn’t on ground level or even below. It was the curse of living alone in that predicament when shopping came around. It was one of the reasons she kept things down to a minimum. But today she had been overloaded in packages.

She was still almost tempted to excuse his attempt at neighborly niceness. But he was there. And he was willing.

“Okay,” she said with a single nod of her head. “Thanks.”

The smile shared between them was easy. And Emma chose not to feel any type of way about it. Instead, she reached up and grabbed the lid of the trunk and slammed it shut.

When she turned back around, readying herself for a hopefully not in the least awkward of trips to their floor together, Emma watched as his free hand shot out towards her.

“Russell,” he offered in way of explanation.

Oh, his name. Emma took his outstretched hand in hers.
“I’m Emma.”

He- Russell- had not lived in the complex as long as Emma had. But he had been there for quite a while. She would guess… at least six months? She had seen him around enough- in the hallways and in the parking lot- like today. Although he seemed to wear a congenial smile a lot of the time she had seen him, they had never made it to a first name basis.

She wouldn’t have thought of the name Russell. That seemed too clean cut and maybe a bit dated for him. He had to be at least a few years her junior. A pretty nice looking guy, with a sweep of blond hair falling across his forehead as the rest of the short cut swirled messily across his head. Warm brown eyes matched the warmness in his smile.

Emma was sure he was a total good guy. His quick leap to helping out a neighbor could also qualify for that…

“It’s nice to meet you, Emma.”

She offered him another turn of her mouth upwards. “It’s nice to meet you as well.” Surveying the brightness of the sky before her, Emma sighed. “I’m ready if you are.”

He signaled for her to walk ahead of him. So she did. Her steps were slow at first. As he quickly caught up to match her stride, she sped up a bit.

Was she supposed to make small and light conversation with the neighbor who had chosen to help her with her many bags? It was just an awkward position to be in. Emma hadn’t felt much like chatting and being personable. But how rude could she be?

“So…” She searched her mind for the senseless chatter that apartment neighbors were supposed to make. “How are you liking it here?”

Emma rolled her eyes, annoyed with herself for her lame attempt. She glanced up at him- Russell. Of course he was smiling. Arms filled with her grocery bags, he smiled at her in his good-natured way.

“I like it here a lot,” he answered brightly. “Actually, it’s my first apartment. At least my first apartment that is solely mine.” He shrugged. “I had roommates in college. And a roommate straight out of college. But this is the first time I’ve lived on my own.”

Emma’s eyebrows raised at his little story. She believed she would have been right about him being a few good years younger than herself. Maybe early to mid-twenties.

Reaching the entrance to the complex, Emma opened the door so that Russell could enter first. He was continuing on with his story. A very talkative and friendly sort was this guy.

And it could have been a nice distraction: the friendly and helpful nice guy who lived down the hall from her.

It wasn’t distraction enough.

She could feel her thoughts drifting. Drifting towards the fact that she was going home to an empty and lonely apartment. Had it really been just weeks ago that she had been on cloud nine? Had it been only weeks ago since she’d been happier than… God, what other comparable time did she have for it?
No matter how much she internalized the fact that one man could not be the key to her total happiness, it didn’t lessen the fact that she missed Killian. Losing him did not mean her life was over or that she had nothing left. What it did mean was that life was a little less fulfilling by not having him at her side.

It didn’t mean forever, she reminded herself while she tried to ignore the ache filling her chest. There was still a chance. If Killian was able to fix the broken parts of himself. It was a must! They each had to be whole separately before coming back together. He had to be over Milah. Emma had to come first. She had been able to accept her issues. She was able to acknowledge what she deserved and that she couldn’t settle for less.

The possibility of them having a happy life together was a reality. It wasn’t borne from silly fairytale-like dreams and wishes like she had been prone to do before. Their life could be built on a strong foundation of hard work, dedication, and love…

God, she hated when her thoughts went that way. Killian had been close the last time she had seen him. But what if he never made it to the final step? What if a part of him would never be able to let her in because of Milah?

“How about you?” Russell had asked.

“Yeah, I do,” she answered with a smile.

Taking the steps that would lead to her apartment, she sighed inwardly. She didn’t mind when her thoughts drifted towards him, but sometimes it would be nice to control it. And right now, if she had her way, she wouldn’t be thinking about Killian Jones.

“You stay here alone, too?” Russell had asked.

They’d only be in each other’s presence for a few more seconds. And she was glad for the slight interruption.

“Yeah, I do,” she answered with a smile.

Russell returned her smile. “It’s not quite the single’s mingle that I thought it would be. But the price was right, so what can I say?”

That made Emma giggle.

“Yes, that is what you were looking for?” She shook her head. “No, there’s a healthy mix of all kinds here.”

His smile grew even bigger. With a slight lift of his shoulder, he confided, “It could have been a nice bonus feature.”

He was a cute kid, Emma thought with a silent laugh.

They took the rest of the stairs in a comfortable silence, shoulder to shoulder. Her smile never left her face because, just for a moment, things were easy.

It was when she reached the top of her floor that she had a momentary slip. Were her eyes deceiving her? Because…

She drank in his profile. He had been staring down at the phone in his hand. That is until their steps
had caught his attention. And then he was looking at her.

For a second, Killian’s blue gaze struck straight into her eyes and right into her heart. Until he turned his focus to what was beside her. There was a definite stutter in her heart as she contemplated many things in that brief moment.

What was he doing here?

It was possible that her phone had been on silent and that she had missed a phone call or text by him. She just didn’t believe that was the case.

What was he thinking?

That was the bigger question because his eyes had turned into little slits as he looked at the scene before him.

Emma turned to look at Russell from beside her. He was looking from Killian to herself, most likely feeling the instant tension that now consumed the hallway. Killian was standing in front of her door, so he had to know that he was waiting on her.

“Um…” Her steps were slow, leaving Russell where he stood. Or maybe it was the continuous stare from Killian that had frozen him.

“What are you doing here, Killian?” she finally asked. She was only mere feet from him now.

It was then that he turned to her.

“I needed to talk to you,” he answered grimly.

Emma only spared another second on him. Then she turned her attention back to Russell.

“Um, thanks so much for the help, Russell,” she told him with a shrug. “I think… you can pass the bags to Killian and he’ll take them in.”

“Are you sure?”

She threw a wary glance back at Killian, who was now slow to move towards Russell.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

They past each other while he went for the bags and she went to open the door.

“Oh, right. Russell, this is my… friend, Killian. Killian, this is my neighbor, Russell.” She looked back at the exchange of bags and once-overs from the two men. With her mind racing, she turned around to finally open her door.

“I’ll see you around, Emma.”

“Thanks again- for the help.” Emma watched as her neighbor went along on his way down the aisle.

With that part of awkwardness all squared away, she waited for Killian to walk past her and inside the apartment.

She was very much still confused by his presence. After closing the door behind herself, she quickly felt inside her pocket for her phone.
No missed calls or text messages. So apparently he had decided to just pop up.

Emma could hear him in the kitchen. The bags landing on the counter a little louder than need be. At least, that’s what she thought.

“Killian?” she called, hopefully loud enough for him to hear.

“Yes?”

Well he was calm enough.

With an inner sigh, Emma pushed away from the door and headed towards the kitchen where she knew he was.

She was again caught by another unexpected feeling when she saw him. He was unloading the groceries from the bags. Even the small scowl on his face didn’t stop her heart from flooding with feelings.

It was the domesticity of it all. This was something- even in its most simplest of forms- that would make her completely happy: coming home together and unloading groceries from the grocery bags. It would be just the perfect time for them to grab out the pots and pans and share in the duties of making dinner together.

Yes, that was where her mind had drifted off to. But that wasn’t what was happening right now.

Instead, Killian had come over to her apartment unannounced. He had come over during a time where they were not even talking to each other. So what had brought him here today?

Emma pulled out a chair and sat down. His back was to her, but she never took her eyes off of him.

“So?” she asked with a big huff.

Killian was quick to turn around and face her. There was still a bit of pent-up frustration there.

Her eyes went wide. “What?”

“Were you going to invite that guy in?”

“Were you two…”

He was going to leave it up to her to make her own interpretation to the end of that question.

“Seriously, Killian?”

Those brows slammed together. “You said you wanted to give me time. That I wasn’t over Milah. That I’d know when I was ready. And you’d know when it was right.” His hand flew out towards her. “But are you…” His breath came out in a frustrated sigh. “Were you two…”

“No!” Emma screamed in answer. “Russell is… a… a little boy! God, he’s just my neighbor.” She stood back up, feeling the instant need to be at the same level as him. “Are you serious right now?”

Standing right in front on one another, Emma saw the anxiousness that was eating away from him.

It wasn’t that Killian was angry. She smiled at the dawning of new information. The way he chewed
on his bottom lip as he continued staring at her. That frown now a permanent fixture on his face.

No, he wasn’t angry. He was jealous.

*And maybe that was a little bit adorable, she thought with a tiny smile.*

God, she had missed him!

*Why was he here?*

“You said…”

“And I meant it.”

“He was only helping you with your bags?”

“Yes.” Emma looked up at the ceiling, needing a moment to get her bearings. “Are we really fighting about this right now?”

Killian cleared his throat loudly. “Not anymore.”

She turned her attention back fully on him. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do, because the crash of eyes on eyes was almost too powerful. “What are you doing here?”

The last night they were together she had used up a lot of stored strength to not cave in to him. She hadn’t known to prepare for this onslaught of feelings. He had an unfair advantage.

“I needed to talk to you,” he told her softly. “I wanted to talk to you in person. And I couldn’t wait any longer. And I also didn’t want to give you the chance to turn me down.”

God, he looked so earnest in his need. Another chance to soften her resolve in being strong.

“Killian…”

“I wanted to show you, Emma.”

It got her heart to start beating at a ridiculous rate.

*Was he really ready?*

God, maybe he was. Or maybe it was wishful thinking because of how much she missed him and wanted him back. But he looked ready.

“Killian, are you-“

“I want to show you, Emma.”

She watched him closely. She wanted to trust him, yet she was so fearful of going too fast.

‘Okay,” she finally told him with a nod.

It was the first smile she’d seen on his face.

“I’m taking you to the harbor. So go and get ready. I’ll put the groceries up for you.”

There should have been more hesitation from her. “Mm… Okay.” Emma was slow to move. “I’ll go grab some stuff and be right back.”
“Emma.” That smile disappeared, and he was staring keenly at her. Maybe it was the desperate need to be close. The need to be intimately closer than either was letting them be. “I’ll be right here waiting for you.” Her answer was a nod. She didn’t trust herself to be there any longer, so she quickly and quietly made her exit from the kitchen.

If she couldn’t handle the tension and want now, she wondered how she was expected to do so when they were at the harbor.

Walking back towards her bedroom, Emma silently hoped and prayed that Killian was truly ready.

****

“Hey!”

Killian glanced over at her from beside him. “Yeah?”

Emma couldn’t contain the smile on her face as the air whipped over her face, splaying her hair in every direction.

“This is a lot of fun,” she told him.

Killian laughed. “I knew you would adore it.”

Just then, the boat gained another notch in speed, bringing them well over what she had expected him to push them to.

“Hold on, love,” Killian called to her from over the roar of the engine. “I’m going to show you what she can really do.”

He seemed to be a speed hog, Emma noted to herself. So she held on tight to her seat as the boat did some crazy U-turn while still gaining speed.

Emma had to catch the scream from leaping out of her mouth. She had never experienced anything like what he was showing her. Killian was in his element. Even though he had brought her here before while he fawned over his precious boat, she would not have taken him for the daredevil slash speed demon that he was proving to be.

It was exciting, feeling her hair whip across her face and down her back. A part of her had wished she had worn her hair up. But there was a different part that was happy about the feeling of freedom it was allowing her.

Emma glanced over at Killian. This was his domain- his home. The grin was huge as he zigzagged his way through the navigation of the waters. This is what he wanted to do with his life. He didn’t want to spend his days trapped in a cubicle. He wanted to be free, not bound. Seeing him in his element- seeing what this boat and what this river was doing to his spirit right before her eyes was simply amazing.

Is this what he wanted to show her? Did he want her to see how happy he was now?

He didn’t say he wanted to tell her anything. Just show her. And a part of her wished this moment wasn’t happening under these strained condition.

Killian, like this, is what she wanted more than anything. Killian, happy, and them side by side.

Grabbing the flying hair that was going around her head, Emma turned to look back at the rippling
waves that they were creating behind them. She watched as the zipped across the river, leaving everything else far behind.

It felt befitting. It felt like a metaphor for her.

He hadn’t said enough, and it was now worrying Emma.

So, it was perfect. Of course she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the sight around her. She wanted it all. And she could no longer trust the niggling feeling that he had come because he was ready. Not when he had not made any attempt to mention the issue in the whole time they had been together today.

****

“When are we turning back around?”

Emma had broken the momentary silence that they had found themselves in.

Killian turned to look at her. She only spared him a look from beside her through lowered lashes.

“So… ready to go now?”

That earned him a smile. “We’ve been out here a while now.” One eyebrow raised. “This was nice and all. But… Killian…”

He wanted to reach out and touch her. He didn’t want to be this close to Emma and not be able to touch her. Which meant he had to open up to her.

That had been the sole reason of going to her. The sole purpose of bringing her here. And he had been too weak to tell her everything that he brought her here to say.

“If I’m not going to share the reason why I came to see you today then why are we still out here? Is that what you want to know?”

Emma leaned back in her seat, her eyes twinkling as she looked him over.

“Well… yeah. Exactly.”

It was Killian’s turn to smile. God, the time that they had been apart felt like a lifetime.

“I… missed you a lot, Emma,” he told her softly. When her reaction to that was to turn away from him, he felt as if he had failed. “I had a lot to think about since we last talk. Just like you said I would.”

“Yeah?”

She wasn’t offering him a lot in that moment. But that was okay. This was about him proving to her. As long as she was here to listen, that was all that mattered.

“Do you like it?”

Emma turned back to look at him inquiringly.

“The boat?” Killian clarified. “I’ve envisioned you here with me many times since we met. I was hoping that you enjoyed it as much as I had hoped.”

Emma looked around at the vast expanse of open water and the many boats of varying sizes.
“You know I’m not much of a water person,” she reminded him lightly. “But this has been a gorgeous experience. Just like you had promised it would be.”

She was holding back. She was keeping as much as possible in because she didn’t want to give in to him or her possible feelings. So it was going to have to be up to him to fix this. And this was the only chance he was going to have.

“Stand up.” As he told her to do so, he was doing the same.

Emma looked up at him in surprise. “Why?” Even if she sounded a bit hesitant in her question, she took his pre-offered hand and let him pull her up and out of her seat.

It was an instantaneous jolt of energy that shot through his fingertips and throughout his entire body. He wondered if she had felt the same thing that she did.

“Emma.” He wanted her to meet his eyes. To look right at him. And when she did look at him, there was defiance in that gaze.

“This was wrong, Killian.” She sounded firm and completely resolute in what she had said. “I’m ready to go home now. Will you please take me back?”

Her statement threw him off somewhat. It was her strong resolve. Emma was not going to give him any free reign on this.

“Not yet, Emma,” he whispered softly. His hands came up to hold on to both arms, sliding down to capture her wrist.

There was a slight pull back from Emma, but not enough to move away from him.

“This boat reminds me a lot of Milah,” Killian began, staring intently into her eyes. He saw the shadow of something drawn there.

“Killian.”

“There’s a lot more. Emma, hear me out.”

Emma closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. She seemed more on edge than ever before.

Even if there was a part of her that didn’t want to do this right now, he knew that she would concede to it.

“Come sit up in the bow with me,” he said as he already pulled her back that way with him.

“What was wrong with sitting at the helm?” she asked as they passed by those seats.

Killian turned to look back at her. “We weren’t close enough. We need to be closer than that when I show you.”

Emma stared up at him. Her only action as he walked with her to the bow was to blink up at him. And she promptly plopped down in her seat when they stood right in front of it.

In the bow, the two seats lined the opposite walls of the boat. They were each made so that the person could put their feet up and relaxed. When Emma sat down and looked up at him, Killian sat down right beside her. He was right: the seat that was built for one, but could hold two, brought them intimately close to one another.
“Emma.”

She was fidgeting—her fingers sifting through her hair, her legs shifting and sliding over one another. She was trying to put whatever kind of space between them that was possible—scooting over into the corner of the seat.

“Emma?” he asked again, because he saw her trying to protect herself and shut him out.

Her eyes met his suddenly, clear and questioning. “Yeah?”

She loved him—God, he knew she loved him—but she was guarding herself. Protecting herself from anything he could do to her.

It wasn’t all from his own doing, Killian knew that. But part of it had been. So he understood her need to be safe. Even if it was from him.

It didn’t change his need to open up to her. It only fueled him to be honest with her.

Killian took her hand, now resting in her lap, into his. She was still watching him closely. Which was a good thing.

“I love you, Emma.” It was a soft declaration that was pure and honest. “I love you so much, Emma. So much that I never realized that it was possible.”

She didn’t slip her hand out from under his. She was watching him, her foot tapping lightly on the floor, but her eyes not leaving his face.

He wanted her to acknowledge what he had said to her. Her silence only triggered his own insecurities. This had to work. But what if it didn’t…

Finally, with a sigh and a shake of her head, “I specifically told you not to do this, Killian. I told you.”

“You said not until I’m ready.”

“Show me that you’re ready!” It was then that her hand was yanked from his. Her eyes, wide and wild, took every part of him in.

It was her not wanting him to be ready. It was her not wanting to accept the fact.

“Let me.” Killian grabbed both hands this time. “Emma, let me. I know you. You’re not even open to the thought because I started this by mentioning Milah.”

That earned him a laugh. “You know me?”

His eyes squinted down on hers. “I know you, Emma.”

There was a moment of silence then. A battle of wills and wants and understanding.

It was Emma who backed down first. A drop of her head with a small sigh.

“Show me,” she whispered.

“My way?”

She slid her gaze back to him. “Your way.”
It wasn’t the response that he wanted from her. If he had had more time to think about it, though, it probably would have been one of the scenarios he would have come up with possibly having.

Emma had on one of her best poker faces. Killian wanted to believe he knew what was going on behind those eyes. He wanted to believe that right behind the façade was her waiting for him to pull through. It was also possible that she really did want him to turn the boat around so that she could just escape him.

It had to be now. And she had to hear him out so that he could show her. Killian let go of her hands. He wanted it to be her decision to stay and not only at his urging.

“Milah was the love of my life,” he began, watching her closely as he began his tale. “It was always easy with her. From the moment we met, I knew she was the one I wanted to spend my life with. After about two years, we decided to make it official. We got married.”

Emma lifted her head and turned herself in her seat more comfortably. She was looking right at him, but stayed silent.

“In those six years of our marriage, we created this beautiful life together. She wasn’t the woman who was behind the successful man. She was right there at my side. She pushed me to be a better person. Not that there was much wrong with me.” He smiled softly, hoping that she would, too.

“The point is that she made me stronger. I believed in myself because she was there to let me know that I was worth it.

“I was the same thing to her. She was a sweet and caring woman who tried to be the best at whatever she did. There wasn’t much that she wasn’t successful in. And, together, we became this well-oiled machine that carved out one hell of a life together.”

Emma’s mouth opened slightly. There was a slight pause- either thinking of or rejecting something to say. And then, “I know, Killian.”

That need to continue hit him hard, because he didn’t want her to be sad. There was a point to his tale- a significant one.

“Her death was probably all the more hard to deal with because she didn’t tell me, Emma. Milah knew for months that she had ovarian cancer. I didn’t find out until she was admitted into the hospital after she’d had an episode. We bought this boat, she let me believe that we had a lifetime of love together. She went into the hospital that day and never came home again. And she never shared with me- her partner in life- that this was going to happen. She said she didn’t want the end of her life to be filled with sacrifices of actually living. So she didn’t tell me.”

There was pain written over her face. He didn’t want her to pity him. Far from it.

“I loved Milah with all of my heart. I loved my wife so very damn much. And I always will. We were supposed to be this forever kind of thing. That meant she wasn’t supposed to die. Not then. Not at that point in our lives. Letting her go was a very difficult thing that I had to do. It wasn’t an instantaneous thing, as you know. I couldn’t do it on my own. It took all of my strength and my conviction. It took my friends. It took months and months of counseling. And… it took… it took you, Emma.”

He waited. For her to say something. To have a reaction to what he was saying to her.

All Emma did was stare at him. Her mouth stayed closed and that sadness never left her face.

It still wasn’t enough. His words weren’t enough for her to understand. And it was now becoming a
scary thought that she wouldn’t be able to take him back.

“Emma.” It came out gruffer than Killian would have liked. There was a mixture of too many countless emotions rolling around inside him that his eyes began to sting.

“Emma, I need you to realize something and to accept it,” he whispered huskily.

Her head tilted back as she looked at him sorrowfully. “What’s that, Killian?”

He felt a pain in his heart and knew that ache was for her.

“I need you to accept the fact that I will always love Milah. I need you to accept the fact that I will always love my first wife. But that doesn’t mean that I love you, Emma, any less. Emma…”

Watching the turn of her eyes from something painful to something softer, he continued. “I promise you that I couldn’t love you any more than I do right now.”

Killian’s chin fell to his chest and his eyes closed. It was difficult to continue because he didn’t know if he was getting through to her. Which meant that he was a failure. This was all he had. And none of it had mattered to her.

He heard her deep sigh from above him, and it tore into another piece of his heart.

“Killian.”

Fingertips met his cheek, and she was bringing his face back up. There were tears glistening her eyes, but a tiny smile lifting her lips.

“I love you, too, Killian.” She shook her head, those blonde strands falling over her shoulders in a way he didn’t know he could ever get enough of. “I love you.”

And it was Emma whose hand smooth over his cheek as she moved slowly closer.

Her name was a whisper on his lips before they met hers. And that meeting of lips to lips did something magnificent to his heart.

A moment. He needed just a moment longer to watch her before he could close his eyes. Killian’s fingers slipped though the softness of her hair, pulling her closer as he watched the ease and pleasure just in those eyelids.

Her fingers planted at the nape of his neck, drawing a shuddered breath from him and the instantaneous closing of his eyes.

The kiss was infinitely slow- lips and tongue slipping and sliding into each other. Their hands and fingers were appendages to those kisses, exploring a body that had been closed off to them for far too long.

“Emma.”

God. He wanted more. He just needed more than the kiss. Not just the physical, but everything. To know that this was true.

How was this possible?

“Killian.” His name escaped her mouth as a whimper.

Their bodies entangled one another- legs wrapped in legs, arms around waists and backs. But they
pulled back to look at one another.

“I love you.”

“I love you.”

It didn’t hurt to say or to admit. It was the overwhelming fact that it was being acknowledged and accepted.

“God, I want you so bad.” His lips opened against her neck, his tongue finding a delicious and sweet spot there. “I missed you so damn much.”

“We can’t… ah… we can’t do this here.” Emma pushed at his shoulder.

He wanted to stay there, laving and loving every inch of skin that he had been away from. But he listened to her point.

“There are people all around,” Emma added, staring up at him. Her hands never left his body. She was caressing his shoulders, and then she was moving to his chest. Slow and languid.

“Let’s get the hell out of here then.” Killian pulled her up at the same time as he stood.

“Okay.”

He smiled at her, because there had been no hesitation. She was his. For the first time, Emma was truly his.

So he stopped and turned around to face her.

Her smile was small. “What?”

“You make me happy, Emma,” he told her, watching her closely because God dammit it was the truth. “I can’t help the fact that parts of my life make me so unhappy. I can’t change the fact that you are one part of my life that makes it a lot easier to get up in the morning—when we are together that is.”

Emma hid her smile with a bite of her lip, and he absolutely adored it.

“I was in love with Milah—deeply and truly in love with her. But that doesn’t take away from the amount of love I have for you now. It only lets me know the capacity of love I can give you now and in the future.”

She was watching him so closely, listening so intently. And this time there had been no shadow of doubt. There was a definite love shining back at him, and he knew he was blessed.

“This is almost too much for me,” Emma whispered to him. “You’re everything that I never knew I could have, Killian.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and placed little butterfly kisses to every available part of his face.

Killian held onto her tightly, not wanting to let go of this dream.

“Emma?”

“Yes?” She pulled back just a little bit.

He watched her, and knew that everything he had said was true. He was a lucky man to have found
true love twice in his lifetime.

“You were never second to Milah. And I need you to know that.”

She looked surprised, and that expression softened. Arms tightened around his neck and she seemed to have faded into him.

“What you are is my second chance at getting this right.”

Maybe she was overwhelmed. Maybe she just wanted to let it sink in. Maybe she wanted to make sure that he was telling her the truth. Emma stood there, arms around his neck, and she was taking everything that was Killian in.

Everything he had said was true. The thought of life without her did not bode well to his health. In fact, he’d had too much time to feel the effects of being a complete ass during this time.

“I think I have it right this time,” Emma finally commented. “I love you, Killian. And it’s for all the right reasons and none of the wrong ones.” Her hands came to smooth over his shoulders and down to his chest. “It took some time to get to this point. I wasn’t sure if I would. Not with my track record.”

“Emma-“

“I found you.” There was a bit of awe in her voice.

And Killian had understood.

“Two broken people didn’t always have the chance to become whole again,” she reminded him. “I wanted to be whole for so long. And I thought I was. That I’d finally made it.”

“You are whole, Emma.”

“It took you,” she said with a shake of her head, “It took pieces of you to fill in those tiny gaps.”

The more he thought on that the more he agreed. Yes, it had taken pieces of her to fill in those gaps and make him whole. Without her…

He didn’t want to find out what that was like anymore.

“I love you, Emma.” It was a whispered vow. A promise of forever.

“I love you, too, Killian.” And it was a fierce promise- true to its core.

And it would be that way for a lifetime.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

A/N: Epilogues are usually short, right? Thanks to everyone who has read my story. It is finally over!
Oh, can you spot the possible sequel in there somewhere? I began this by thinking it would be an easy transition, but it turned out to be more vague.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What do you think about this one?”

Emma watched him swing his tie around his neck as he moved towards her.

She passed him the phone so that he could scroll through the pictures himself. Then she waited expectantly for some kind of reaction.

His frown told her everything that she needed to know.

“The room sizes look too small, huh?” she asked with a nod of her head.

Killian turned his attention fully back to her. “Is that singly my opinion or do you agree? Do you think that I’m being too particular?”

Emma shrugged. “Not at all. This is going to be our home. We can be as picky as we want. Especially since there is no rush.”

“Oh, no rush at all,” Killian drawled, sharing a dazzling smile with her.

No, no rush. But it was thrilling to just think about. They had been apartment hunting for the past few weeks because … it just seemed right. It wasn’t too soon. They weren’t rushing into anything. They were going to live together. And they were going to be even happier.

“We have a lot of options,” he prompted her. “There is no reason why we can’t extend our price range. Taking into account both of our incomes, there is no reason why we can’t add to it if nothing seems to be working.”

It did something to her heart, because this was all that she wanted. Ha, when did Emma Cassidy become so damned domesticated?

“That’s true,” she whispered in agreement. She took hold of the ends of his tie and began to tie it for him.

“And we’re not bound into the requirement of two bedrooms,” Killian continued on in his fact checking. “We could do a one-bedroom. It’s what you have now.”

Emma’s hands stopped immediately, her eyes finding his. For just a moment, all she did watch him.

“I want two bedrooms.”
And he was trying his best to read her.

“Do you know how uncomfortable a couch can be when you do an overnight stay at someone’s home?” Emma finished with his tie, paying very close attention to each detail as she went along.

“I never had an issue with yours,” Killian murmured. “I find your couch to be very comfortable.”

“Well, on the nights that I’m particularly furious with you and put you out of our bed, I would like to know that you have a place to lay your head better than the couch.”

“You say that now…”

Emma smiled, refusing to let her mind drift off…

“Emma-“

Because it would be so easy to start imagining…

Her phone rang from inside of his hand, putting a hold on their conversation.

“It’s Ruby,” Killian said, looking down at it in his hand.

Emma accepted her phone that he reached out to her.

“Don’t… let her distract you,” he told her firmly. “We don’t have that much time.”

She knew of their plans and of the time. “Hello.”

“I have exciting news.” Ruby didn’t have time for formalities like ‘hello.’ She was off and running. “So I need to see you.”

“I can’t do anything right now. Killian and I have some important business to do.”

“But this is important,” Ruby insisted. “And I know of your plans. I won’t keep you long.”

Emma threw Killian a sidelong glance as he walked away, finishing up on dressing for the evening. He’d think she was crazy to listen to Ruby.

“I’ve found the perfect place,” she said, her voice all sing-song and tempting. “You have to come look at it.”

“Ruby-“

“I’m on my way,” Ruby continued happily. “So just be ready.”

“I’m ready now because we were leaving soon, Ruby.”

“Even more perfect. See you in a minute.”

And then the call was disconnected. Emma stared down at the phone in her hand while in disbelief. She didn’t know how cut out she was for Killian’s best friend. She was a ball of energy that was not always easy to keep up with.

“I’m going to have to meet you there.”

When Emma looked up, she saw that Killian was staring at her.
“You want to go separately?”

Emma shrugged. “Something’s come up. Ruby said it’s really important. So I’m going to just meet you there.”

“You’re going to be late,” Killian concluded with a shake of his head.

“I’m never late,” she countered with a tiny smile. “Listen, I’m completely dressed and ready to go. I’ve been waiting on you to get ready. So I’m going to make this quick run with Ruby. And then I’ll meet you there.”

Killian shook his head. “I’ll meet you there then.” He moved closer so that he could wrap his arm around her waist. “And you are accustomed to being late.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Maybe.” And then she smiled up at him. “I’m sure she’ll be here any second. So I’m going to get out of here.”

“I’ll see you there then,” he said on a sigh.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be late.”

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Being at the Daily Strength Bereavement support group center was a bittersweet moment. Her life had changed when she came to this place. And it would never be the same. Those thoughts only made her wonder how Killian was processing being back after all these weeks himself.

She can only hear murmurs from outside of the room. But it’s his voice. She knows that it is Killian who is addressing the group. Which means she is late.

Well, she never claimed to be perfect!

Emma pressed her hand to the door to the room and listened for a moment longer. She had never been this late to a meeting before. Was it okay to try to slip in unnoticed by the group? Especially when she would only be there as a guest and not a group member. The door didn’t creak. Maybe it would be possible.

She turned the handle slowly in her hand and only peeked through.

And he is there, standing strong as his voice fills the room with his tale.

She knows that he sees her in that very instant. He is facing her anyway, and his eyes lock on her. Just for a second. But in that second, in that brief glance, her heart fills with love for a man who loves her just as strongly. And then he goes back into his tale. His tale which crosses hers and then weaves together so perfectly.

“My story is completely different from that of anyone in this room right now,” she listens to him tell the group.

Emma isn’t sure where he had been in his story. She didn’t know if she had switched his thoughts to another topic. With her back pressed to the door, she watched the man who had changed her life as he spoke.

“It is difficult to say honestly that my story is the worst of them all. I just know how I felt when I lost Milah. I only know of how my life felt as if it were completely over, and how deep inside all I
wanted to do was stay in this abyss by myself until the day my life came to an end.”

And it had been a total abyss of long suffering and bitterness. Emma could smile at that now, because they were both in such good places in their lives, independently as well as together.

And that was amazing!

She chose then to move. Emma walked slowly and quietly towards the circle of chairs that were full. Except for the one. It would have been his seat.

She catches Archie’s attention before he opens his mouth to announce her. With a shake of her head, she stops him from interrupting Killian in his moment.

“It took a lot of soul-searching on my end to come out of that place. It took the help of many others in my life to make that change possible. It took opening myself up to the possibilities of what my life could continue to be.”

Emma felt her heart do this weird flip-flop thing. Watching Killian express to a group of strangers on how his journey had been impacted by a multitude of circumstances gave her an amazing feeling.

“I am here to let you know that your life is in your hands. The amount of time it takes to move on will be up to you. I spent two evenings a week for many many months here in this room. I found solace in being with others who could understand my pain, even if it was only at a minimum level. It was a breath that I needed. It was a breath that I lived for. A coping mechanism that was as much a part of my life as anything else. And it was a day by day process where I could never know what was to come. And that was okay.

‘That being said, never feel as if what your experiences are in this situation are the wrong experiences. If there are people who you feel as if are a part of your real-world life who will never understand, remember that there may come a day when that changes. When you’re ready, you’ll know it. And those people who have been there the entire time waiting for you to get to this spot in your life will still be there.”

Killian was speaking from his heart. He wanted to convey to those who were on that spectrum of pain that they had found themselves on previously. And to share how good it could be when you found yourself off of that spectrum.

Emma heard the short and soft grunt from next to her, which tried to break her euphoric feelings as she watched Killian. She turned her head to her neighbor who was sitting beside her.

The woman sat with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she stared from lowered lashes up at Killian.

The muttered phrase that came next was lost on Emma.

“Excuse me?” She couldn’t stop herself from prying the dark-haired dark-eyed brooding woman from beside her.

Maybe it was her demeanor, as she raised a manicured eyebrow at Emma, which reminded her of the man that should have been holding their attention.

Her perfectly done up face scrunched up at Emma.

“She didn’t come here to have someone tell me of how… now they are in a blissful state after losing their spouse,” she said crisply as that eyebrow raised even higher.
Emma took her position in. The rigidity of her arms as well as her back, sitting there more than a bit annoyed. A flutter of her eyelids accompanied another breath of air leaving her body as she turned her attention back to the front.

Just as she didn’t need the success story of a former member, Emma was sure she didn’t need another former member trying to prove to her that happy endings were more than a one in a million occurrence.

It was as if she was looking in a mirror. Like a time portal, because she was seeing not only her past but Killian’s past as well. And it made Emma appreciate her life all the more. “I’m sorry.” It had slipped out. All the worse, it had slipped out painfully broken.

The woman turned swiftly back to Emma. Her frown was prominent and a little more than scary. There was pain there, and it broke Emma’s heart a bit more.

A mirthless smile. “Was that for my loss?” It was a haughty question full of sarcasm.

“I’m sorry,” Emma said again. And she was quick to turn back towards the front.

If anyone knew that happiness was something you worked for and had to be maintained, it was Emma. Her neighbor would have to figure out her own path to being fulfilled and happy again.

Emma looked up at Killian and found his gaze once again locked on her.

She smiled, because it had not always been easy. But in this moment, all that hard work had paid off. She couldn’t have been happier than he made her right in this moment.

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“You were late.”

Emma’s smile is infectious, and it makes him smile, too. Killian wrapped his hand around her hip and pulled her into him. A quick kiss- because that’s how he needed to greet her every time that came together. It didn’t matter that they were in close proximity of the strangers he’d tried to reach, the meeting now at a close.

“I was late,” Emma murmured in concession. Her fingers found their way to trail up into his hair, leaving a tingling sensation wherever she touched. “It was Ruby’s fault,” she said matter-of-factly.

That smile turned into a grin as he stared down into her face.

“Yeah?”

Killian looked about the room. About eight strangers, all dealing with different stages of grief. He had tried to reach them. To let them know what he was now experiencing wasn’t only a dream, but a true possibility for them as well. As much as he came to this place with the hopes of helping others, it was about himself first and foremost. And it felt so good to tell the world that he was happy in his life again. It might not have meant anything to them, but it did a lot for him.

“She wanted to show me this apartment she found,” Emma continued.

That drew Killian’s attention back to her.

It was pure joy that he found there in her eyes.

“It’s the one then.” Not a question, because he could tell that it was now a foregone conclusion in
Emma’s eyes.

She nodded. “It’s the one.”

Killian’s eyebrow lifted in question. “Pictures?”

“Ruby sent me the link to the website,” she said with a smirk, pulling her phone from her pocket.

Although she wasn’t jumping up and down, Killian could read the excitement all over her. And when she held up the phone for him to take, the excitement spilled over. The first picture in the gallery surprised him a bit.

“A house?”

“It’s an apartment,” Emma corrected him. “It’s a triple-decker. The apartment that is available is on the third floor.” And her eyes lit up even more. “I mean, a ground floor apartment has its perks. But so does being on the top level.” They were dancing- her eyes were dancing. And sparkling.

Killian smiled, wondering what Emma considered the perks to be. He scrolled through the gallery of photos.

“The kitchen is huge.”

“All the rooms are nice size.” Emma moved closer so that she could peer at the screen as well. “It’s has two bedrooms and one bath with a bonus room that can be a bedroom or office space. It’s on Burrell Street- a nice area that is right in the middle of the city. There’s new carpeting, a back porch and deck, it’s freshly painted and ready for move-in. It’s almost perfect.”

“And you think we can handle the cost?” Killian asked her, seeing that it was beyond their original budget plan.

Emma shrugged. “I agree with what you said earlier. Together, it would be no problem.”

And she had made him smile again, because the “together” remark was what brought them here tonight. “Together.” It had a nice ring to it. It felt good and right.

“So… what do you think?” she asked him softly. “You want to go check it out?”

“Our maybe home?” Killian asked lightly.

Her smile was the reaction that he wanted and expected. Ease and a sense of peace.

“Yeah.” Emma rolled her eyes up. “Maybe. Our home.”

Killian dropped her phone back in her hands. He placed his now free hands to the sides of her face, holding her still so that he could capture her lips with his.

God, so many concepts had been foreign to him before she had come into his life. Everything he had said to the group had been true: he hadn’t expected this gift to come into his life. Especially at the time that she did.

This was it. Killian’s chance at forever again. It had almost slipped away. And then it was back again. Never to be taken for granted again.

“Three bedrooms?” he asked inquisitively, his hand grabbing at her waist to bring her even closer. Emma rolled her eyes again and sighed. “Two bedrooms and an office space.”
“That’s not too much space for just the two of us?”

“You said you wanted large room and not you’re complaining about too much space?” Emma asked, affronted with her eyes going wide. Her arms went to loop around his neck and she offered him a smile.

“I was only wondering what we would do with all that space,” Killian said with a laugh.

“Mm… I can think of a couple of things,” Emma murmured softly.

They hadn’t talked about it yet. They never got beyond the fact that this was a forever kind of a thing for the both of them. But they never said…

Maybe it was a foregone conclusion. Maybe it was only a matter of time before they took those steps.

He had a fulfilling life before with Milah. But there were milestones that they had not had the chance to meet together.

Looking at Emma’s smile, he knew. Yeah, marriage was a foregone conclusion. And then…

A daughter with her mother’s green eyes and silky blonde hair would be his undoing. And he would love to be undone that way. Or a son with his darker features with a mix of Emma’s will and determination.

Okay, neither had said it, but he could see it in her eyes.

“Are you ready to go, love?” Killian asked her softly.

Emma nodded. “I’m so ready. Since we’re in two cars, I’m going to stop by my apartment and pick up a few things. I’ll meet you back at your place. Killian nodded. “Ok then.”

With that, they began to walk hand in hand towards the door.

“See, this is one of the drawbacks of still living separately,” Killian pointed out, wishing that there didn’t have to be this pause in them being together tonight. “Yeah, well.” Emma smiled up at him. “We have all the time in the world. It’ll be soon anyway.”

A lifetime.

Forever.

Together.

Killian loved the sound of that.

Chapter End Notes

This was my first ever multi-chapter fic. I’ve gotten some great feedback overall. Please, don’t stop now!:) Even if you read this story months after the original posting. Let me know what you thought of the story overall now that it’s completely over.

I appreciate all of my readers. This was an awesome experience to share with you guys!
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!